

UNBROKEN

Sarah Hawke

Copyright © 2015 Sarah Hawke

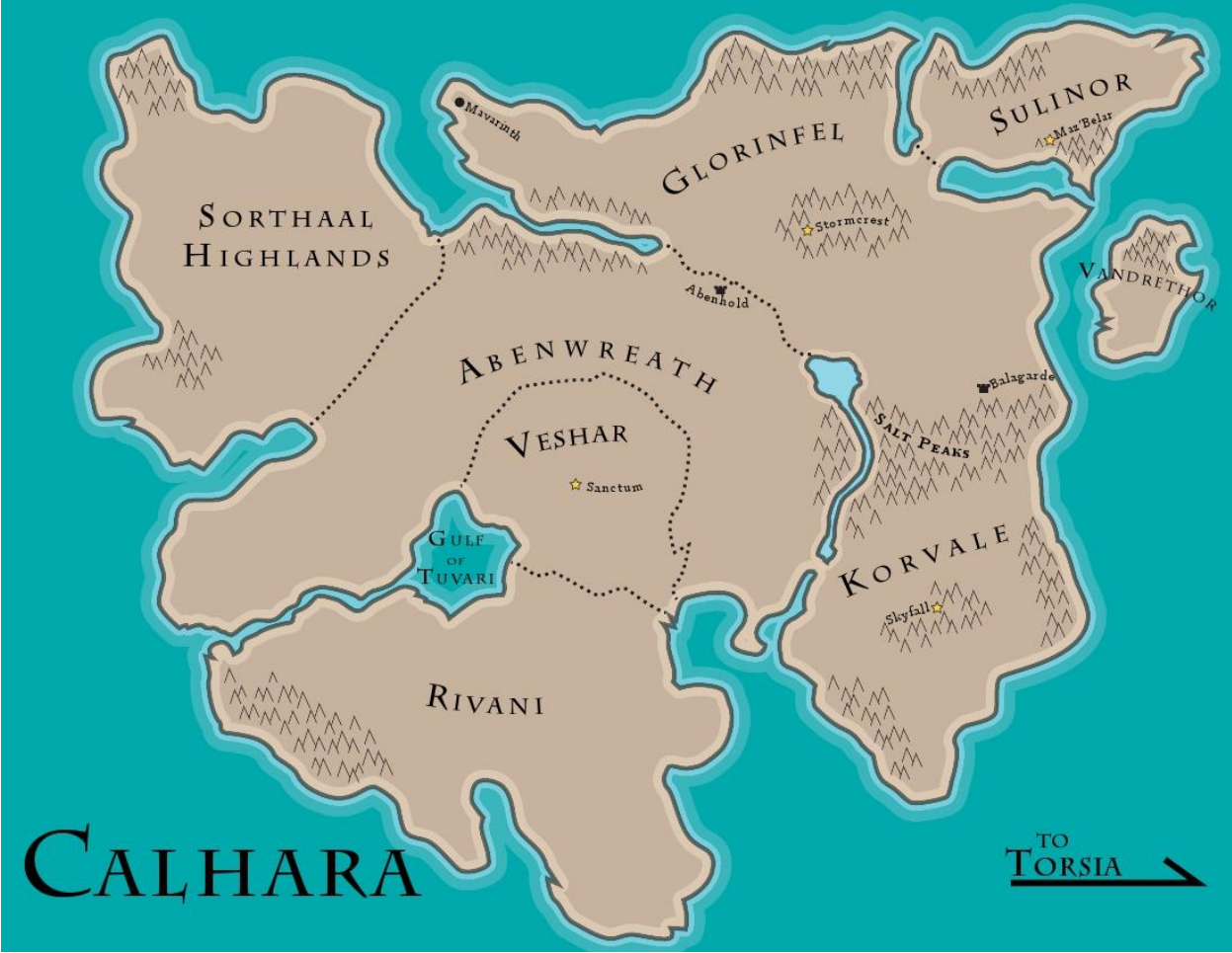
Published by Jade Fantasy

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or used fictitiously.

All rights reserved.

Content Warning

This dark erotic fantasy novel contains adult content. If you are offended by adult language, themes of bondage/submission, or group sex, then you probably shouldn't read this book. Consider yourself warned!



Chapter One: The General's Tent

“You’d better go ahead and bite down, girl. I guarantee this is going to hurt.”

Antione Torelius, High General of the Imperial Legion, unleashed a sadistic chortle as he slid his cock further into my ass. I didn’t cry out or whimper. With the Aether coursing through me, my body was resilient enough to endure his assault...and even it weren’t, I had already wormed into his mind and convinced him that he was being far more aggressive than he actually was. From his point of view, he had been ravaging me with his thick member for almost an hour while his other two *avenari* slaves watched from their knees. In reality, his stubby cock had only been inside me for a few minutes, and I was reasonably certain I could make him spill his seed in an instant. I would have done so already if not for the Imperial soldier watching us.

“Not many other slaves would have demonstrated such loyalty,” Legate Maxos commented. He was standing at the side of the tent, his arms folded across his chest as he watched his superior have his way with me. “She could have left her guardian to bleed out in the woods, but she didn’t.”

“Not every elf is an ungrateful wretch,” Torelius replied, slapping my ass so hard it stung. “Isn’t that right, cunt?”

“Yes, Master,” I mumbled through my gag.

The general chuckled as he squeezed his thick hands around my waist and settled into a comfortable rhythm. I couldn’t move even if I’d wanted to; my wrists and ankles were shackled together behind me, and the cushion he’d bent me over was so stiff it was practically crushing my sternum.

“Sometimes it’s important to remember why we fight,” Torelius said through clenched teeth. “The Gods put us on this world to civilize the lesser races. And that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“It’s a pity we can’t just breed them out,” Legate Maxos said. “We would have been rid of them a generation ago.”

“Nonsense. I consider it yet another gift from the Gods—and further proof these barbarians were meant to serve us.”

Torelius groaned in delight, and I could feel his cock swelling in anticipation of a climax. To help him along, I sobbed into my gag and wriggled in discomfort. He actually *wanted* me to struggle; the first few times he’d taken me after I’d stumbled into the Imperial camp, I’d put up a show of resistance and he’d climaxed inside me almost immediately.

“No blood,” Maxos commented. “I’m surprised.”

“I’ve given her plenty of practice over the past few days,” Torelius replied giddily. “That’s the difference between an *avenari* and a whore. Half the fun is breaking her in before you sell her off.”

The legate snorted derisively. “You don’t think Kristoff will be upset?”

“I don’t give a fuck what Kristoff thinks. Neither does anyone else these days. If he’s smart, he’ll get down on his knees and thank me for returning her to him at all.”

“Considering his attitude towards the Legion, I doubt he’ll even speak to you. Frankly, I don’t understand why you aren’t planning on keeping her.”

“Because unlike most of the Grand Dukes, I still have a sense of honor.” Torelius grunted again as his thrusting intensified, and he grabbed onto my hair and wrenched my head backwards as he spent himself deep inside my bowels. I whimpered before he leaned down and placed his mouth at my ear. “What do you say, cunt?”

“Thank you, Master,” I told him, though again my words were unintelligible.

“Loyal *and* appreciative,” Maxos commented. “At least Kristoff teaches his slaves proper protocol.”

Torelius held himself inside me for a few more seconds before he finally pulled away and stood. The other two *avenari* immediately crawled over to him. One began cleaning his cock with a damp cloth while the other retrieved his flowing red robe and gently placed it over his shoulders.

“If you’re really so intent on relinquishing her,” Maxos said, “you should at least share her with some of the other officers first. Kristoff will be even more upset...but isn’t that the point?”

Torelius burst into a throaty laugh as one of the *avenari* handed him a bottle of liquor from the stash near his bed. Half the homes in Sanctum were smaller than the inside of his command tent; I couldn’t even imagine how many slaves he must have brought with him just to lug his personal effects from battlefield to battlefield. If nothing else, spending a week alongside a regiment of legionnaires had completely altered my perspective on the soldiers of the Empire...

“That’s the third time you’ve suggested that today,” Torelius commented. “If you want her for yourself, there’s no shame in asking.”

Maxos looked down upon me with all the contempt of a man who had just stepped in a pile of dung. “I’m perfectly content to leave her with you, General. But you did promise me one of the others.”

“So I did.” Torelius took another swig from his bottle before he glanced between the other two women. His eyes eventually settled on one kneeling in front of him. “Take her. She’s yours for this evening.”

“I prefer blonds.”

The general laughed again. It was every bit as disgusting as the last time. “Fine. I suppose I do owe you one at this point.” He gestured to the blond *avenari*, and she immediately shuffled over to Maxos. He grabbed her leash and yanked her in close before he cupped his hands around her naked breasts.

“How fresh is she?”

“Nineteen and eager to please. She was a gift from Duchess Zarene, if you can believe it. I should probably send her something in exchange one of these days. I’ve been hoping we could capture one of the dark elf males for her. Zarene has always enjoyed a challenge.” Torelius grunted and waved his hand. “In any event, if you’re in a sharing mood and any of your men wish to partake, you have my permission.”

Maxos ran his hand through the slave girl’s long hair. “How many, sir? The unit’s been out here for months...”

Torelius smiled toothily. “What do you think, girl? How many cocks can you take in one night? Five? Ten? Fifty?”

“As...as many as you desire, my lord,” she stammered.

I closed my eyes and bit down so hard on the gag I was surprised it didn’t break. If I had been here alone, I might have risked channeling the Aether and bursting myself free. I could have burned down the tent and roasted both of these men to ash before the rest of the soldiers overwhelmed me. Even the Tel Bator channelers in the camp wouldn’t have been able to extinguish the flames in time.

But I *wasn’t* here alone. Larric was still recovering in the healer’s tent, and any disobedience on my part would threaten his safety. If they so much as suspected that he was

harboring a renegade Unbound, they would drag him before the Covenant priests and have him flayed alive. They needed to believe that he was an innocent servant of Duke Kristoff just like I'd told them. So far the deception was working perfectly, and we were scheduled to arrive in Sanctum sometime tomorrow. I just needed to bite my lip and ignore their humiliations a bit longer...

"We'll see how the evening goes, then," Legate Maxos said after a moment. Gripping the girl's leash more tightly, he nodded one last time to Torelius before he dragged her out of the tent.

"You're both lucky he's not interested in brunettes," the general commented between swigs of his liquor. "I am a much more compassionate master, I assure you."

He chuckled to himself again as the *avenari* kneeling in front of him finished washing him. Her fingers curled around his flaccid member as she slowly and dutifully massaged it back to life.

I closed my eyes and let out a deep, calming breath. When our raft had drifted into an Imperial war camp following the brief battle at Lakewatch, I had told the legionnaires that we'd been ambushed by Faedari rebels. They hadn't required much convincing. By that point, the Covenant had already found the charred bodies of the Inquisitor and his men. They had also found the dead Faedari near the water, which all but confirmed my story. The very idea of an Unbound *avenari* was so absurd I doubted they'd ever considered me a threat.

Mercifully, the Legion healers had been able to stabilize Larric quickly, and two days later we'd been sent to a major Imperial encampment farther north in the Wreath. The soldiers had handed us over to High General Torelius, who had just finished his inspection of the front lines. Now, the better part of a week later, we had finally reentered Veshar and were nearly back to the Imperial capital.

Larric still hadn't regained consciousness, but it was nothing short of a miracle that both of us were still alive. I had been repeating that to myself over and over all week in the hopes it would help me endure Torelius's company. It hadn't worked yet, and I had a feeling it never would.

"You know, you still haven't told me what you were doing in the Vale," Torelius commented after a moment. "I find it curious that Kristoff would send the captain of his guard and his favorite slave to meet with Duke Darkstone. They've never gotten along particularly well."

I mumbled into my gag, and he chuckled and gestured towards me. The other *avenari* crawled over and unfastened the leather straps holding the device in place. Once it popped free, she quickly shuffled back and continued stroking him.

"Master Kristoff sent us to Skyfall as part of a diplomatic entourage," I said, choosing my words carefully.

"To what end?" Torelius asked.

"I...I do not know, my lord. I was not privy to their conversations."

He grunted derisively and shook his head. His cock had finally begun to stiffen at his *avenari*'s touch, and he pushed her hands aside and grabbed the back of her head. She dutifully parted her lips and took him deep into her mouth.

"I'm surprised," he said, his voice strained. "Last I heard, you've fucked half the nobles in Sanctum. You sure you weren't under the table sucking someone off during any of their meetings?"

"N-no, my lord," I assured him.

“So you’re even more worthless than I thought. Why I am not surprised?”

I closed my eyes as he gripped his *avenari*’s head more tightly and began pumping in and out of her throat. I allowed the Aether to flow through me, and I reached out and brushed against his thoughts. Now that I wasn’t being observed directly, I could probably pierce his mind without fear of repercussions. Torelius was a soldier, not a channeler, and he had no defense my magic. I could command him to shut up and stand silently in the corner. I could compel him to lie down on his bed and retire for the evening. I could probably even cripple his ability to feel pleasure and leave his cock as wilted as a dead rose for the night, but as amusing as the thought was I feared he might take out his anger on the other *avenari*.

Besides, direct manipulation remained difficult without physical contact, and I decided it still wasn’t worth the risk. Not with Larric still in jeopardy. Not with Master Kristoff still unaware of everything that had happened.

“If I had to guess, your master is more desperate for support than ever,” Torelius said breathily. “He realizes that no one gives a damn about him now that he has lost most of his land. He was probably begging Darkstone to give him soldiers.”

If you only knew the truth, I thought to myself. With Duke Darkstone and the Emperor secretly supporting the vaeyn—at least for now—there was good chance that Torelius and his men would end up dead before all of this was over. A few months ago, I would have been horrified at the thought. But now...

Now I could imagine a vaeyn shadow knight slipping into the general’s tent and lopping his head from his shoulders. And a part of me was delighted by the prospect.

“Darkstone’s a cunning old codger, but he’s always been loyal to the Legion,” Torelius said. “His eldest daughter is a legate in the Fourth Army, did you know that?”

“I believe he mentioned it at one point, my lord.”

“She’s a smart girl. Good with a sword, even better at whipping young conscripts into shape. And she has such marvelous tits, too—something you start to appreciate after spending so much time around elf cunts.”

His *avenari* began pleading for air as he thrust deeper and deeper into her throat, but Torelius didn’t seem to care. Eventually he grabbed the base of her skull and held her in place even as her fingers clawed at the back of his legs in desperation.

“I heard Darkstone’s new wife is so young she could be his second daughter,” he went on. “I bet she has nice tits too...but the old man probably still fucked you at least once, didn’t he?”

I grit my teeth and nodded. I could feel the *avenari*’s desperation, and I started pressing deeper into Tiselius’s mind in case I needed to stop him... “Yes, my lord.”

“Figures. What about his son, Varyl? I’ve heard he’s quite the little spoiled shit.”

“I served him as well, my lord,” I lied. My memory flashed back to my brief encounter with the young lord. I had ultimately taken control of Varyl’s senses and overwhelmed his perceptions. He’d spent the entire evening living in a fantasy world while his physical body writhed around on the floor. Perhaps it was time that Torelius shared the same fate...

“Well, soon enough you’ll be able to say you’ve tasted the seed of every noble family in the Empire,” Torelius said, finally shoving his *avenari* away. She flopped backwards on the floor and gasped for breath. He chuckled derisively, then knelt down behind me and placed his swollen cock at my nether entrance. “I’m sure your ancestors would be proud.”

Chapter Two: Broken Loyalties

After the fall of Stormcrest, the sight of Sanctum's impenetrable walls had filled me with relief. The soldiers and watchtowers had represented safety and stability, and I'd been confident that no matter how hard the vaeyn fought or what dark magic they conjured, they would never be able to harm us again. I had curled into Master Kristoff's arms like a toddler seeking solace from the monsters in her closet, and he had soothed me with assurances that one day we would be able to return home.

Now, everything was different. The vaeyn no longer seemed so terrifying, and Sanctum's walls no longer seemed so sturdy. The presence of thousands of auxiliary soldiers and hundreds of legionnaires no longer comforted me. At best, I saw them as hapless men and women doomed to die in defense of a society that cared nothing for them. At worst, they were nascent versions of General Torelius just waiting to abuse their power and delight in their own decadence...

Back in Skyfall, I had seen a dark but righteous rage behind the eyes of Larric and Karethys. I hadn't fully understood it at the time, but after spending several days with Duke Darkstone and his son—and then several weeks with Torelius and his officers—I think I finally did.

The Empire wasn't just walls and soldiers. It was injustice and suffering. It was death and oppression, not just of my people but of so many others. The vaeyn and the Faedari wanted to destroy it.

And for the first time in my life, I think I did too.

"Civilization at last," Torelius whispered as the carriage finally rolled through Sanctum's main gate. "I've had enough of the wildlands for a decade."

"We'll need to return soon, General," Legate Maxos told him. "Assuming the Emperor approves your new offensive."

"Lucian will heed my counsel, as always. But I don't need to be on the front lines to oversee our progress directly—that's what *you* are for."

Maxos grunted but remained silent. I tried my best to ignore them and stare out the window instead. I was shackled to the seat opposite the men along with his other *avenari* slaves. All three of us were bound in a similar manner—we could barely move our arms or legs, and he'd even gone out of his way to seal our mouths with the most uncomfortable gags he owned. I was a bit surprised he hadn't gone so far as to blindfold us...

Eventually we approached Master Kristoff's estate in the Royal Quarter, and I closed my eyes and whispered a silent prayer to any god that happened to be listening. As nervous as I was about trying to hide the truth about Karethys and the Faedari from Master Kristoff, anything was better than spending another minute with Torelius. And the thought of sleeping in my own bed again almost brought me to tears....

"Are you actually going to give him what he wants?" Maxos asked as the carriage came to a stop just inside the gate.

"We'll see how grateful he is first," Torelius replied with a grunt. He flashed me a dark smile as he stepped out of the carriage and closed the door behind him. I had to lean back slightly, but from this angle I could see Master Kristoff striding across the courtyard with a pair of his house guards. Even from this distance, my keen faeyn ears allowed me to overhear them without any trouble.

"Welcome back to Sanctum, General," Master Kristoff said. He didn't bow or even nod. "I heard you have something that belongs to me."

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Your Excellency,” Torelius sneered. “I must admit, you look a bit...out of sorts.”

Kristoff’s eyes were so cold I actually had to repress a shiver. The two men had never gotten along, I knew, and the total collapse of the Imperial Legion in Glorinfel had only soured their relationship further. Kristoff blamed Emperor Lucian for the war, but he blamed Torelius for the incompetence of the men and women fighting it.

“Where are my soldiers, Antione?” Kristoff demanded. “Where is my property?”

The general snorted. “I don’t know why I expected you to be more gracious. After all, you’ve never truly appreciated the contributions of the Legion or its stewards. Perhaps that’s why your men were routed so thoroughly at Stormcrest. Never underestimate the importance of morale.”

Even without telepathy, I could feel Master seething from here. He had never concealed his contempt for Torelius, not even in the presence of the other Grand Dukes or High Generals. If his plans to overthrow Emperor Lucian ever came to fruition, one of his first decrees would be to string up Torelius and everyone who served with him.

“Curiously, your slave seems to appreciate you much more than your soldiers,” the general went on. “Like I said in my missive, she brought your guard-captain to one of our camps on the border of the Wreath. If she’d waited any longer, he would be dead.”

“But you’re certain he’ll survive?”

“Nothing in life is certain, Your Excellency. But my healers believe he’ll recover as long as he wakes soon. If not...”

“What about Elara?”

Torelius chuckled softly. “You even call her by name, how charming. She served me well—so well that I intend to keep her as payment.”

“Unacceptable. You will return her immediately.”

I couldn’t actually see the general’s face from this angle, but I could perfectly visualize the smug grin on his fat lips. “I knew I shouldn’t have expected gratitude from you. You’ve never appreciated the contributions of the High Generals.”

“I will the instant any of you actually contribute anything,” Kristoff replied tartly.

Torelius took a step forward. “If you ever want to see your precious castle again, I suggest you change your attitude, Your Excellency. I’m the one Lucian trusts—I’m the one who determines when and where the Legion will strike.”

“And you’re doing such a wonderful job of it so far.” Kristoff glanced over to the carriage and caught my eye. “Return my property. *Now.*”

For a moment, I feared Torelius might actually refuse. According to Imperial law, the High Generals were appointed by the Grand Dukes and not the Emperor, which meant that Kristoff could theoretically have Torelius demoted, especially with the aid of Duke Arland or Duchess Farrow. In principle, of course, politics were almost always more important than the law, and Master Kristoff was in a weaker position than half the landed gentry. Torelius could probably refuse and drag this out for some time...

“Look at Kristoff squirm,” Maxos whispered next to me. “Pathetic. You must have gotten tired of fucking a broken man.”

I couldn’t respond with the gag in my mouth, but he wasn’t actually interested in my opinion anyway. I closed my eyes and swallowed, wishing once again that I’d had the courage to kill Torelius and his lackeys when I’d had the chance. I could have engulfed them in flame just

like the Inquisitor outside Lakewatch, and it would have been worth watching them burn even if the Tel Bator channelers had killed me just a few moments later...

"Perhaps a compromise is in order," Torelius said eventually. "I propose an exchange: you can choose any one of my other girls, but I wish to keep yours for a bit longer. I'm not finished with her just yet."

"No," Kristoff replied. "Hand her over, and you'll be duly compensated."

"Compensated with what? Coin you no longer possess?"

"You'd rather I involve the magistrate? Or the rest of the Quorum?"

"I would, actually," Torelius said. "I'd love to see you explain to them why one pitiful elf cunt is worth so much trouble. What's so special about her, Gabriel? Why do you protect her?"

"She's mine," Kristoff declared, his voice so cold it sent another shiver down my spine. "This is your last chance, Antione. Hand her over."

Again, I found myself wondering if Torelius would actually refuse. The man's pettiness knew no bounds, and he was right that none of the other nobles would understand why a Grand Duke would make such a fuss over a single slave, even a trained *avenari*.

"Very well," Torelius said. "As a loyal servant of the Empire, I respect the property of my hallowed peers. You will find she is unharmed...more or less."

Chuckling under his breath, Maxos abruptly pushed open the carriage door and grabbed my leash. My ankles were bound so tightly I could barely walk, and I nearly collapsed face-first to the ground as he dragged me forward. But thankfully I managed to keep my balance, and Master Kristoff's eyes lit up when he saw that I was all right.

"What about my guard-captain?" he asked.

"Ah, yes." Torelius made a gesture with his hand, and several of his other soldiers escorted Larric's stretcher towards the mansion. "A weaker man would have already died. His Inquisitor training must be keeping him alive."

The jab was clearly intended to annoy Master Kristoff and reveal that Torelius knew about Larric's past. It just as clearly didn't have any discernable effect.

"Thank you, General," Kristoff said. "That will be all."

Torelius smiled thinly. "Just remember that you owe me a favor, Gabriel. And I always collect on my debts."

He signaled to his men, and without any further theatrics he stepped back into his carriage and rode away. Several of the house servants rushed up to take Larric inside the mansion while Master Kristoff turned his attention to me.

"Merciful Triad," he breathed, cupping his hands around my chin and removing my gag. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, my lord," I breathed.

He started at me for several long seconds, his eyes boring into mine. I had imagined this moment dozens of times during the journey from the Wreath, and I genuinely hadn't known how he would react. After the bandit attack near the Infintium, I had naively expected him to be joyous. Instead he'd been relieved but cold; mere moments later he'd offered my body to Larric in exchange for protection such a valuable investment. Looking back, that moment more than any other had finally shattered any illusions I'd harbored about his true affection for me. I wasn't his lover or his partner—I was a tool. And tools could easily be discarded once they had served their purpose...

"Thirty men," he said, his mouth twisting like he was chewing nails. "I send thirty men to protect you and still they weren't enough."

“We reached Skyfall safety,” I told him. “But on the return—”

“I know,” he interrupted. His hands squeezed at my shoulders, but he didn’t unclasp my wrists or remove my collar. “I received a missive from Baron Vilmark of Reskin the day after you disappeared. He found half your guards in the tavern and the other half dead outside of town. His men tried to pursue but lost your trail.”

I bit down on my lower lip, wondering what specifics Master Kristoff had already learned. I knew I needed to choose my words carefully. “We were attacked by Faedari rebels and forced to flee,” I explained. “Larric and I barely escaped. He thought we’d be safer moving quickly down the road rather than returning to town. We made it into the Wreath before they caught up with us.”

Kristoff’s cheek twitched slightly. “How did they even know you were there?”

“I-I don’t know, my lord,” I lied. “Duke Darkstone gave Larric a vaeyn prisoner as a gift. The attackers seemed more interested in freeing her than anything.”

Kristoff glanced back over his shoulder to the door where the servants had carried Larric inside. “You should have left him to die in woods.”

I blinked in confusion. “My lord?”

“I grow tired of failure,” he said, his jaw clenched. “All around me, those I trust with vital tasks prove their incompetence time and time again. It’s maddening.” He sucked in a deep breath and finally swiveled his head back around to face me. “I already asked Baron Vilmark to hang the surviving guards. Thankfully, most of them were slaves.”

I opened my mouth to reply but remained silent. Watching Larric cut down his fellow house guards in front of me had been difficult enough, but now our escape had cost even more lives. The slave soldiers, human and orc alike, had been born into servitude just as I had...

“What about Darkstone?” Kristoff asked. “I’ve received no envoys or missives from Skyfall since you left. Were you able to slip into his mind? Did you convince him to send troops?”

“N-not exactly, Master,” I stammered.

“What do you mean, ‘not exactly?’ Did he agree to join the Quorum or not?”

His tone was so cold, so venomous, that I struggled not to cower in fear. I had seen him angry before, but never with me...and never like this. What had happened in the weeks since we’d left? What had changed so dramatically?

“I wasn’t able to enter his mind,” I rasped. “His magic was too strong.”

“So you gave up? You learned *nothing*?”

“No, I...he tried to penetrate my mind as well. He wanted to learn about you and your plans.”

“Did he succeed?”

“No, my lord. I blocked him out, but I thought it was too risky to try and charm him.” I forced myself to swallow again. “There’s more you need to know. Duke Darkstone has made a secret pact with the vaeyn. There was already a shadow knight at Skyfall when we arrived.”

Kristoff’s entire body froze in place. “What?”

“Apparently Darkstone had been negotiating with the dark elves for some time. He promised to aid them in overthrowing the Covenant, ending slavery through the Empire...and even killing the Emperor.”

This time, Master Kristoff was the one who couldn’t find his voice. His eyes flickered between confusion and rage. Out of habit, I was tempted to try and share everything with him

telepathically...but in this case I knew that wasn't an option. I couldn't take the risk that he'd learn the truth about Larric or the Faedari.

"Darkstone isn't planning on honoring his agreement," I went on. "But he believes the vaeyn can be useful allies in the short term. He wants their help to overthrow Emperor Lucian and weaken the Covenant, but when the time is right he plans to use the chaos and take the throne for himself. If you aid him, he pledged to restore all your lands and liberate Stormcrest."

Kristoff released his grip on my arms and paced off to the side. "That fool," he spat. "He has no idea what he's doing. He has no idea who he's dealing with!"

"He seemed confident."

"Of course he's confident! The Vale is shielded by mountains on all sides. The rest of the Empire could burn to ashes while he sits there smirking on his bloody throne."

I watched in silence for a moment as he continued stomping back and forth. "Larric can tell you more when he awakens," I said. "He was present for all the negotiations."

Kristoff's head abruptly whipped back around. "You weren't there with him?"

"I-I wasn't usually allowed in the room, Master. As I said, Duke Darkstone was able to block my intrusions and—"

"I sent you there with one goal, Elara," Kristoff interrupted as he stepped back in front of me. "I told you to get me Darkstone's support by any means necessary."

"I'm sorry, Master. I did everything I could, I swear!"

His eyes continued boring into me for several long, uncomfortable moments. "Did you?" he asked, placing his hands on my shoulders again. "Did you really?"

"Yes, Master!" I pleaded. "Please...please, forgive me."

"Then show me what happened," he said, shifting his hands up to cup my cheeks. "All of it."

The Aether surged between us, and he thrust into my mind. Whether out of submissive habit or raw shock, I wasn't prepared to resist him. I unwittingly shared everything I'd learned about Darkstone, including the details of his bizarre orgy and my telepathic manipulation of his son, Varyl. Memory by memory, he relived every second of my experience in Skyfall...

But there were some things I absolutely needed to conceal. Larric's knowledge of my condition, his relationship with Karethys and the Faedari...if Master Kristoff learned the truth, I didn't know what would happen. But Larric would almost certainly never wake up again...

"You're holding back," Kristoff whispered. "Why?"

"I don't know what you mean, Master. I—"

"Don't lie to me," he snapped. "Never lie to me!"

With that, he reared back and slapped me across the face so hard I toppled over. For a few seconds, my brain couldn't even accept what had just happened...but then the pain burned across my cheek and I knew it was real. Kristoff had never struck me before. He had never hurt me at all except as part of a greater lesson. Until this instant, I didn't even think he was capable of such a thing...

"You disappoint me, Elara," he breathed, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. "I expected more. I expected *better*."

I couldn't have replied even if I'd wanted to. Tears blurred my vision and sobs choked my throat.

"It's my fault, I suppose," Kristoff murmured. "After all your accomplishments, I assumed you were ready for a greater challenge. I assumed you'd be able to handle yourself even without my supervision. Obviously, I was mistaken."

He balled one of his hands into a fist, and I feared he might strike me again...but then he grabbed my leash and roughly hoisted me back to my feet. He pulled on the leather so hard it began to choke me, and he brought his free hand up to my cheek.

“Show me everything,” he demanded. “Now!”

He sliced through my mental barriers so forcefully, so completely, I could have sworn he’d just hammered a nail through my forehead. My mouth dropped open and I cried out in equal parts fear and pain. I could feel him probing around searching for the truth, and images of Larric and Karethys suddenly flashed in my mind...

“*What?*” he gasped, his voice hoarse. “What the hell is going—?”

Kristoff froze in place, and the words died on his lips. His body began convulsing like he’d just been struck by lightning. His fingers clawed into my cheek hard enough to draw blood, and he threw his head back as if he might scream...

And then suddenly, inexplicably, I had control. Not just over his mind, but over his whole body. My consciousness had become intertwined with his...and I could do absolutely anything I wanted.

I have no idea how long I stood there frozen in place, but eventually I realized what was happening. Like an expert swordsman, I had parried his attacks out of sheer mental muscle memory, and my mind had performed a masterful riposte. Master Kristoff had taught me almost everything I knew about telepathy and the Aether in general, but he wasn’t Unbound. He had limits. He had weaknesses.

I did not.

I gasped and sucked in a deep breath. We were still standing outside in the middle of the estate courtyard, but mercifully no one else was nearby. The guards were far enough away that it probably just looked like he was holding onto my face. With my wrists and ankles shackled, I would have appeared completely helpless.

But I wasn’t. In a very real sense, I never would be again. The Aether was a far more powerful weapon than chains or swords. It could kill as well as control. I could have made Kristoff kneel at my shackled feet. I could have even made him set me free. But instead I forced myself to take a calming breath and consider my next few actions very carefully...

You can’t escape without Larric, I reminded myself. *If you leave him here, he’ll be as doomed as if you’d left him bleeding out at Lakewatch. You have to hold on until he wakes up.*

Biting down on my lip, I slowly but surely relaxed my control over Master’s mind. Despite the voraciousness of his attack, he still hadn’t learned anything particularly threatening. All he’d seen was Larric and Karethys speaking, and all he knew for certain was that they’d been acquainted before Skyfall. By itself, that knowledge probably wasn’t dangerous...and it would give me the leverage I needed to let him believe he’d at least learned something I’d previously been holding back.

“Shit,” Kristoff hissed as he abruptly pulled away. He blinked in rapid succession as his consciousness slowly reasserted itself. After a few more seconds of confusion, he glanced back up at me and shook his head.

“Master, I’m sorry,” I blubbered. I could feel the tears stinging my eyes and wetting my cheeks. “I did everything I could. Please...”

“I know you did,” Kristoff said, straightening his back and composing himself. For an instant, I could see a faint glimmer of the man I remembered from Glorinfel—the man who had treated me more like his partner than his slave. “Like I said, it’s my fault. I should have known you weren’t prepared for a task like this. I should have prepared you better.”

He swore again and glanced around the courtyard to see if anyone was watching. “The situation in Sanctum has deteriorated rapidly. I need the armies of the Vale now more than ever. But if Darkstone won’t help us...” His eyes lost their focus for a moment, but eventually they fixated back upon me. “There may still be a way you can make this up to me. But perhaps I need to approach your training differently.”

“I will do anything for you, Master,” I lied. “Please, give me another chance.”

His hand touched my cheek, and he smiled so faintly it was almost imperceptible. My tears intermingled with the blood and started to sting.

“You’ll get it,” he said, leaning in to kiss me. His lips were colder than the iron shackles around my wrists. “I promise.”

Chapter Three: Unexpected Allies

The instant I reentered the mansion, one of the house servants grabbed my leash and escorted me to the bath. They removed my restraints and set to scrubbing me, but as much I normally enjoyed the cleansing soaps and hot water on my skin, this time my mind refused to settle. All I could think about was Larric and the choice I'd made to bring him here.

Had it all been a horrible mistake? Should I have taken my chances with my own limited healing magic and tried to nurse him back to health? Should I have tried to find another way to contact the Faedari?

They were all meaningless questions at this point, of course. The reality was that we were back here in Sanctum, and for better or worse we were going to have to live with my decision. I just needed to find a way to speak with him when he awakened. I needed to warn him that Kristoff knew about his relationship with the vaeyn...

After the servants gave a long bath and extensive preening, the house tailor and quasi-mistress, Sharela, appeared to fit me into a simple gown. If she was at all pleased that I'd returned, she certainly didn't show it. She was as curt and callous as ever. Once I was dressed, she led me back to my bedchambers and practically shoved me inside. She locked the door behind me, and I closed my eyes and let out a deep breath—

"Hello. You must be Elara."

I must have hopped an entire foot off the ground. Another faeyn woman was sitting at the desk on the right-hand side of the room. When I gasped in surprise, she immediately leapt to her feet and waved her hands apologetically.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I-I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right," I soothed, clutching at my chest. "I, uh...I wasn't expecting anyone to be in here."

"Gods, I should have known. Master probably didn't have a chance to tell you." She smiled pleasantly and lowered her head. "My name is Astanya. I'm so happy to finally meet you."

I reflexively smiled back. "What, um..." I paused and studied the room. The small office and library on the right seemed undisturbed, but she had clearly been using the living space on the left for several days. The linens had been changed, and some new clothes were hanging inside the armoire. "What are you doing here?"

"Master purchased me at auction two weeks ago," Astanya explained, her voice filled with unmistakable pride. "He said you might need a bit of time to adjust. I can't believe a Grand Duke had only one *avenari* serving him. You must be very skilled."

I blinked in confusion. Master Kristoff owned many other slaves, of course, but most of them were laborers or soldiers. The thought of him purchasing another *avenari*...I had never even considered the possibility until this moment.

"I've been fortunate," I murmured. "Times have been difficult since we fled Stormcrest."

"I can't even imagine. All those horrible savages climbing over the walls..."

I nodded absently and tried to pull myself together. So far, returning home hadn't been anything like I'd expected. It seemed impossible that so much had changed in such a short period of time...

"You must be exhausted from your trip," Astanya said into the pause. "Master said he sent you to Skyfall to entertain Grand Duke Darkstone."

"He did, yes."

“What was it like? I’ve heard so much about the Vale, but until recently I’d never left Rivani.”

“It was...intense,” I managed. “So much has happened I’m still trying to sort everything out.”

“I’m so sorry, I don’t mean to overwhelm you,” Astanya apologized. “There’s a pot of tea on the fire. Would you like some?”

I pursed my lips and glanced around the room again. This must have been some kind of test. Master Kristoff couldn’t have possibly replaced me so soon. Whatever else I might have been to him, I was still his *avenari*. He’d never even implied that he might need another...

“No, thank you,” I said, forcing another smile. “I think I’ll just lie down for a while.”

“Of course, please. Master said he’d summon me soon anyway. You’ll have plenty of peace and quiet.”

Astanya smiled again and returned to the desk. I kept watching her even as I stumbled over to the bed. She was slightly shorter than me with shoulder-length, braided blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. Her silver-blue sari was decidedly Rivani in design, and judging from her tanned skin she’d spent a great deal of time outdoors. She was so pretty I had a hard time believing her former master would have wasted her on labor work, but stranger things had happened.

All in all, none of her traits were particularly rare or shocking...except for the fact there was no tattoo on her bare navel. Like me, she was still ripe...which meant she should have been worth a fortune.

A fortune Master Kristoff no longer possessed.

“I still can’t get over how much space he gives us,” Astanya said once she sat back down at the desk. “And all these books! I don’t know why he’d waste them in the slave’s quarters.”

I shifted my eyes to the desk. She had opened a single book, the *Elmare Nostra*, an incredibly long and detailed history of the “Rebirth” following the Godswar well over two thousand years ago. According to Master Kristoff, it was widely considered a seminal tome among modern historians. This particular copy hadn’t even been translated—it was written in faeyn.

“You can read our tongue?” I asked, not bothering to hide my surprise.

“Oh...no,” Astanya replied sheepishly. Her cheeks flushed slightly. “But I enjoy the illustrations. Old maps, people...I know it’s a bit silly.”

“I don’t think it’s silly at all,” I told her. “It’s one of my favorites. I believe Master has a translated copy here somewhere if you’d prefer.”

She turned and looked at me, confused. I was about to ask why when the truth belatedly hit me. Her problem wasn’t that she couldn’t read faeyn—she couldn’t read *anything*.

I almost slapped myself in the face. Of course she couldn’t read; I was one of very few faeyn in the Empire who’d been privileged enough to learn the Imperial tongue, let alone the language of my people. I felt my cheeks flush in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, I...” I took a deep breath and shook my head. “I wasn’t trying to—”

“It’s all right,” Astanya soothed. “I hope I serve him well enough that he’ll teach me one day.”

I sank down onto the bed as sudden welling of rage rose up inside me. I wasn’t sure why this of all things triggered it, given all the harsher injustices I’d just witnessed and endured in the Imperial camp on the way here. But for some reason looking upon this sweet woman—a woman who could have easily been me if not for the grace of the gods—made me want to go back in

time and do everything I could to find the Faedari rebels. It made me want to burn down this whole bloody mansion and half of Sanctum along with it.

Astanya turned back to her book, and somewhere in her blue eyes I saw a reflection of myself. She was cheerful and eager-to-please. She had probably been delivered from a far worse master, and she was genuinely enthused to serve someone who treated her with a modicum of respect. She would spread her legs or swallow his seed or do anything else he asked, and afterwards she would gladly thank him for the privilege...

“Are you certain you’re all right?” she asked. “I didn’t upset you, did I?”

“No, not at all,” I assured her, forcing a smile. “I was just thinking...perhaps if I spoke to him, Master Kristoff would allow me to teach you.”

Astanya smiled at me again. It was incredibly infectious—I could see why Master Kristoff would want her. The thought made me even angrier.

“I would enjoy that very much,” she said. “Though I’m not sure I’d be a good student...”

I started to respond, but before the words could escape my lips the door abruptly opened and one of the house guards burst inside. He tossed a quick glance at me, then turned and faced Astanya. “Master Kristoff wishes to see you now.”

“Of course,” she said, leaping to her feet and straightening her sari. Before she left, she flashed me one last smile. “It was wonderful meeting you, Elara. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The guard shut the door behind her, and I was finally alone. I closed my eyes and tried to let the anger seep out of me, but it didn’t work. All I could imagine was Astanya kneeling before Master Kristoff. Just a few months ago, the thought would have filled me jealousy—and he undoubtedly assumed it still would. But right now it just made my rage simmer into a boil.

The hours passed slowly, though by the time the clock struck midnight I’d finally allowed my body to melt into the pillows and relax. Until that moment, I hadn’t realized just how much I had missed my own bed—or *any* bed, for that matter. Torelius had mostly forced me to sleep on the hard ground, sometimes without any blankets...

Once I was certain Astanya wouldn’t be returning for the evening, I slid off the bed and approached the door. The guard had locked it again, and short of setting the wood aflame I had no means of opening it myself. But when I closed my eyes and stretched out with the Aether, I could sense another guard outside perhaps thirty feet away down the corridor.

I knew that trying to manipulate him would be dangerous. After today, I couldn’t even imagine how Master Kristoff would react if he caught me. But I also knew that I had to warn Larric about what was going on, otherwise all the rest of our secrets were in jeopardy. So rather than lie back down and hope for the best, I banged my fist against the wood.

“Please, I need help. Is someone out there?”

The guard, apparently half-asleep judging from his abrupt emotional shift, quickly raced over. “What’s going on?”

“I fell and cut myself,” I lied. “Please, I-I need to see one of the healers.”

I heard him swear under his breath and mutter several slurs against elves as he fiddled for his keys. Once the door opened, he leaned his head inside and frowned at me. “What the hell are you—?”

Before he could move away, I reached out and touched his cheek. His mind was weak and easy to pierce; within a few short seconds I had all but taken control of his entire body. Wiping his memories of the past few seconds was just as trivial.

If anyone asks, I’m asleep in my chambers, I told him. Now return to your post and await my return.

He half-nodded, half-blubbered a reply, and once he'd returned to his perch by the wall I shut and locked the door. Now I just needed to reach Larric and pray to whatever gods were listening that I could find a way to wake him...

Swallowing heavily, I turned and flit across the estate in my bare feet. With the aid of the Aether, I had no trouble avoiding the rest of the house guards or the few servants who were still awake. I avoided the temptation to try and touch Master Kristoff's mind just in case he sensed my intrusion and realized what I was doing. Instead I headed straight down into the basement where he practiced his channeling techniques...and just as I suspected, Larric's body was there waiting for me.

I plucked the only lit glowstone from the wall and approached. He looked roughly the same as he had for the past several days—pale, gaunt, and generally sickly. Judging from the various empty tinctures along the wall, the local apothecaries had tried waking him to no avail. I wondered how long Master Kristoff would bother keeping this up. The instant he stopped using healing magic, Larric would dehydrate and eventually starve...

That's why you're going to wake him now, I told myself. He saved your life more than once. It's time to return the favor.

I set the glowstone down next to him and placed my right hand upon his bare chest. I knew almost nothing about healing magic—Master Kristoff had only taught me the very basics. But no one had taught me *anything* about conjuring fire, either, and I'd figured that out on my own. Perhaps if I was desperate enough, perhaps if I wanted it enough, the secrets of the Aether would just come to me...

After the first few minutes of trying, my hopes began to fade. After several minutes more, it was gone entirely. I could stand here by Larric's side all night and not accomplish anything, and I scolded myself for even making the attempt. The tears flowed so easily I couldn't stop them if I tried. So I didn't.

It wasn't until much later, long after my eyes had dried and I'd finally stopped whimpering, that I realized I was approaching this the wrong way. If the Imperial healers hadn't been able to wake him, then an untrained channeler like myself didn't have a prayer in the Void. But there was another option. Maybe it wasn't his body that required healing—maybe it was his mind.

Closing my eyes, I slid my hand from his chest up to his clammy forehead. I knew from experience that he had one of the most disciplined minds I'd ever touched, almost certainly as a side-effect from his training as a Covenant Inquisitor. I also knew that many of his mental barriers remained intact even while he was unconscious, as I'd learned when I'd tried to communicate with him following our battle outside Lakewatch. But now, weeks later, the vast majority of them had finally begun to erode...and after spending a few minutes pushing against them, they collapsed entirely.

Larric, I called out. Larric, it's me. Please, I need you. Wake up!

I couldn't hear his voice or communicate with him directly, but I could sense...*something*. His consciousness was there, buried beneath a mental fog so thick I could scarcely feel anything on the other side. I pushed harder, deeper, until his mental dam suddenly burst. A flood of images and memories washed over me so quickly I couldn't breathe...

But it was all there. *He* was all there, bared naked before me. I could feel his hopes and fears. I could feel his pleasure and pain. I could feel his love for the people of the Empire despite their flaws. I could feel his love for Karethys despite the fact they'd been kept apart. I could feel his passion for the Faedari cause and his fears that he would fail them.

Along with his fears that he would fail me.

I balked at the realization and nearly lost my connection entirely. But when I dove in deeper, I could see how much he cared. A terrible guilt had been gnawing at him ever since Master Kristoff had bought me at market. He had wanted to free me, but he knew he couldn't. He had to maintain his cover as a Faedari agent in the hopes he could learn vital intelligence about Kristoff and the rest of the Imperial Court.

It wasn't until he'd learned I was Unbound that everything had changed. He'd acted like he hated me, but in truth he was just testing me...and myself. He hadn't known what to do until the events at Skyfall had forced his hand...

Larric, I repeated, reaching as deep as I could into his subconscious mind. *Larric, please wake up. WAKE UP!*

His body twitched so violently it actually knocked me backwards. I had to blink several times before my eyes refocused on reality, almost like I had just awakened from a deep dream too..

"Elara..."

I smiled and leaned forward as he attempted to sit up. Some of the color had returned to his face, though he still looked incredibly weak. "It's all right," I soothed. "We're safe. Just stay still."

His eyes darted about the room, and I could tell he was having trouble figuring out where we were. He'd smacked the glowstone off the stretcher, and without it his human vision was practically worthless.

"We're in Sanctum," I said, retrieving the stone. "We're back in Kristoff's estate."

"What?" he gasped, bolting upright. "Why would you—?"

"Please, don't move," I implored him. I placed my hand on his sternum and tried to push him back down. "You've been unconscious for almost three weeks. Do you recall what happened?"

A dozen different expressions flickered across his face before he finally swallowed and let out a deep breath. "Yes. We were outside Lakewatch and we were attacked."

"A Covenant Inquisitor found us. He killed the Faedari and nearly killed you. I barely managed to get you on the raft and escape."

Larric blinked in disbelief. "What?"

"It will be easier to show you," I said, offering him my hand.

He stared at me blankly for a moment, and I could tell he was desperately trying to come to grips with reality. But eventually he nodded and took my hand...at which point I pushed back into his mind and showed him everything that had happened since—the ambush, my counterattack, our trip down the river and back to Sanctum. In the span of a few heartbeats, I shared several weeks' worth of memories...and by the time I had finished, all he could do was swear under his breath.

"Merciful Triad..."

"I know it's not what you wanted, but I didn't know what else to do," I whispered apologetically. "You were dying, and the Imperials were the only ones who could help you."

He slumped back on the bed, and his eyes lost focus as they stared up at the ceiling. I stood quietly at his side while he tried to process what I'd shown him. Had our positions been reversed, I probably would have sat there for an hour trying to fit everything together. But if I'd learned anything about Larric these past few months, it was that he was capable of handling anything, especially the unexpected.

“You should have left me and searched for other Faedari,” he said after a moment. “They had a camp nearby—they would have found you eventually.”

I shook my head. “I couldn’t just let you die.”

Larric sighed and closed his eyes. “Of course you could. You don’t owe me anything, Elara.”

“I owe you *everything*. You’ve saved my life time and again.”

“After allowing Kristoff to ruin it. You should have saved yourself.”

I could feel the guilt pouring off of him, and I placed my hand upon his chest again. “I saved you, and it was my decision. I don’t regret it.”

Larric shook his head, but after a few seconds he touched my hand and squeezed my fingers. I squeezed back.

“I don’t know what to do now,” I admitted. “Master Kristoff is...*different*. He was furious that we failed.”

“The more desperate he gets, the more unhinged he’ll become,” Larric replied. “Without the armies of the Vale, he won’t have enough soldiers to challenge Emperor Lucian. He’s impotent and he knows it.”

“And now he knows about you and Karethys,” I rasped, shaking my head. “I didn’t want to tell him, but he knew I was holding back. I had to give him something or he might have—”

“It’s all right,” Larric soothed, squeezing my fingers again. “He already knew the Covenant excommunicated me for cooperating with a vaeyn. He just didn’t know her name or any of the specific details.”

I pursed my lips. “You don’t think he’ll be upset?”

“Of course he’ll be upset. All his grand schemes are slowly falling apart.” Larric sighed and leaned up again. He glanced down as if he’d only just realized our hands were still linked, and he quickly relaxed his grip and pulled away. “He, um...he won’t be able to do anything.”

I grinned coyly at his discomfort. He obviously wasn’t used to appearing vulnerable; he wasn’t used to showing any kind of emotion at all.

“So Kristoff knows Darkstone made a pact with the vaeyn to try and destabilize Sanctum and throw the Covenant into chaos,” Larric went on, clearing his throat. “But he doesn’t know any details about Karethys or that Emperor Lucian is apparently an Unbound.”

I nodded. “I have no idea what he’ll do now. I doubt he’ll be able to convince the other Grand Dukes to ally with the vaeyn, even temporarily. And there’s no way any of them will agree to make Darkstone the new Emperor.”

“No, definitely not.” Larric let out a deep breath as his eyes flicked back and forth in thought. “Kristoff could stick with the Quorum and hope there’s enough chaos at some point that they can strike, or he could abandon Arland and Farrow and ally with Darkstone instead.”

“Arland especially has already taken great risks to help him,” I said. “If Master Kristoff turns against him, I can’t imagine what would happen.”

“Bloodshed. Backstabbing. Just another day in the Imperial Court.” Larric grumbled in the back of his throat. “No, Kristoff only has one real option here—he’ll have to wait and see who makes the next move.”

“Do you think the vaeyn will actually attack the city?”

“I don’t know. I have no way to contact Karethys. Not as long as we’re trapped here in Sanctum.” Larric turned and looked at me. “We need to get out of here. We need to find a way back to the Faedari.”

I glanced away and closed my eyes. Six months ago, the mere mention of the Faedari rebels was enough to terrify me. I saw them as murderers and traitors. Even as recently as Lakewatch I had still harbored plenty of doubts about joining them. I would never have met with their operatives if I'd been alone.

But now, just a few weeks later, everything had changed. I was legitimately angry rather than just confused or anxious. My hands trembled in rage when I thought about the mistreatment of my people, but I wasn't content to just lie around and seethe. I actually wanted to do something about it. The only lingering question was what.

"I could try to sneak us out of the estate," I whispered. "But you're still weak and need rest."

Larric grunted in discomfort as he tried to stretch his muscles. "Even if I were healthy, we couldn't just walk out the door. And there's no way we can leave Sanctum without help. I'll need to try and contact one of the rebel operatives in the city."

"You know where they are?"

"Not specifically, but I know how to get them a message." Larric sighed and locked his eyes on me again. "It might take a few days or even weeks. We'll need to hold tight until then."

"I understand," I whispered. "I wish there had been another way to save you, but—"

"Don't blame yourself," he said, grabbing my hand and squeezing it once more. "For anything."

I smiled down at him. All my lingering regrets about returning to Sanctum evaporated when he smiled back.

"I should get back to my quarters," I whispered.

"Right," Larric agreed. He released my hand and glanced away, but even in the dim light I caught the slightest flush of color in his cheeks. "I'll wait a few hours before I call the guards and let them know I'm awake. Kristoff will want to speak with me right away."

I nodded. "No doubt."

"It might be difficult for us to meet in private, but I'll let you know if and when I contact the rebels. Just... just take care of yourself in the meantime."

"I will," I promised. I placed my hand on his shoulder one last time, but he didn't turn and look. A part of me was glad. If he had smiled at me again, I might not have been able to force myself to walk away...

I made it all the way back to my chambers before I allowed myself to pause and breathe normally. I hadn't been this relieved in a long time. As bizarre as sounded, Larric was the only person in the world I knew I could trust...

Sighing, I slipped under the covers and closed my eyes. The lingering echoes of his touch tickled across my flesh until I finally fell asleep.

Chapter Four: The Plan

I slept as deeply as I had in months, and no one disturbed me until well after dawn. I awakened with a start to the smell of fresh bread, and when I rolled over I saw Astanya sitting at the desk with a small plate of biscuits and fruit.

“Good morning,” she said, flashing me a wide smile. “I would have woken you earlier but you seemed so peaceful. Besides, I figured you could use the rest after your trip.”

I wiped the fog from my eyes and nodded. I had needed the rest—badly. “I did, thank you,” I told her, smiling back. “I can’t believe I didn’t hear you come in...”

“I tried to be quiet,” she said, offering me the plate. “Master Kristoff said he wouldn’t call for you before noon.”

“Ah.” I bit into a piece of fruit. It was surprisingly difficult not to throw manners to the wind and gorge myself. I’d barely eaten anything on the trip to Sanctum. General Torelius rarely fed his slaves more than once a day, apparently, even his *avenari*.

“You’ll be happy to know that Captain Larric finally regained consciousness sometime last night,” Astanya informed me. “One of the servants came to wake Master Kristoff just before dawn.”

“Thank the Triad,” I breathed. “Will he be all right?”

“Master Kristoff seemed to think so, but he sent me back here once they started talking.”

I nodded and did my best to appear relieved. It wasn’t difficult—the hard part was concealing my growing anxiety. If Master Kristoff didn’t believe Larric, or if he overreacted and used his magic to discern the truth...

Larric can take care of himself. Right now, you just need to bide your time and be patient. There’s nothing else you can do for him.

The mental scolding didn’t really help, but I kept at it anyway. I needed to be calm and collected whenever Master Kristoff summoned me again, otherwise our plan would crumble before it even began. He could never learn the truth about Karethys or the Faedari. Just like he could never learn that I was finally willing to betray him.

“You were brave to save him,” Astanya said after a moment. “I don’t know if I could have done the same. I would have been so scared...”

“I just did what I had to,” I told her, hoping she didn’t press for details. “I knew the healers could save him.”

She smiled again and stood. “Well, I should draw a bath. I was waiting for you to get up first.”

She rifled through the wardrobe as I ate, and I watched as she selected another outfit. As strange as it felt to suddenly be sharing my once private quarters, it felt even stranger to imagine Master Kristoff spending an entire evening with another woman. I could smell the sex upon her, but just like before the thought didn’t make me jealous—it made me angry.

Astanya departed a few moments later, and I used the privacy to reach out to the Aether and calm my nerves. I felt like a different person whenever its power was coursing through me, even when I wasn’t channeling with any specific purpose. It was almost like sliding into a warm bath of pure magic.

I was more or less composed by the time Astanya returned, and we spent the next several hours in idle conversation. As much as the lingering territorial part of me wanted to resent her, I didn’t. The more I spoke with her, the more I liked her. And the rage inside me continued to swell.

Master Kristoff summoned me just after noon, and the house guards escorted me to the estate's large conference chamber. I half-expected them to bind my wrists and attach one of the slave collars, but they didn't. They simply dropped me off inside the room and then sealed the double doors behind me.

"You've already heard the good news about Larric, I trust," Kristoff said from behind his desk. He was busy writing something and didn't look up.

"Astanya told me, yes. He will recover, then?"

"It's difficult to say," Kristoff replied noncommittally. When the heartbeats passed by and he didn't elaborate, I was tempted to press him on the issue...but then he abruptly set down his quill and stood. "I spoke to him about Skyfall and Darkstone. We even had a nice little conversation about his secret dark elf fetish."

I didn't reply. At this point, I figured the less information I volunteered, the better.

"The Covenant exiled him for daring to work with a heretic, even one who was helping him hunt down a warlock." Kristoff scoffed. "I never thought anything of it at the time. In fact, I hired him as quickly as possible knowing he would be desperate. And I never regretted that decision until now."

"If not for Larric, the bandits outside the Infintium would have killed me," I said. "And he's the only reason I survived Korvale. He was wounded in my defense."

Master Kristoff studied me for a few moments before he finally beckoned for me over. My thoughts flashed back to the last day before our caravan had departed. He had taken me roughly right here on the edge of his desk, and he'd even shared a new channeling technique with me. Ever since then, my telepathy had been much stronger. I wondered distantly if it was a side effect of the experience.

"This vaeyn shadow knight, Karethys," Master Kristoff said, "I doubt it's a coincidence that she was the one the Matriarch sent to negotiate with Darkstone."

I shrugged. "I do not know, Master."

"You never spoke with her?"

"Only briefly."

"Then I assume you also never had the chance to penetrate her mind and learn anything."

"No, Master, I'm sorry," I told him. He seemed much calmer than when I first arrived, but I could still feel the rage boiling inside him.

"It's probably for the best," he said after a moment. He signaled for me to sit on the desk, and I obeyed without hesitation. His traced his fingers across my bare knee and down my calf. "Shadow knights are powerful channelers, and there's a good chance she would have noticed your intrusion. I'm more concerned that Larric learned so little. At least *you* have an excuse for your failure."

"I'm sure he did his best, my lord. He was just as taken aback as you that Duke Darkstone would be willing to cooperate with the vaeyn."

Kristoff eyed me curiously, the corner of his mouth curling into a half smile. "I'm surprised you're willing to defend him so readily. He's never treated you particularly well."

I shrugged again and opened my legs a bit wider for him. "As I said, I owe him my life."

"Indeed. Still..." He leaned forward and placed a hand on each of my knees. "You're loyal by nature, I think. The Covenant tells us that elves naturally derive pleasure from servitude, but I've always been skeptical of that claim. You are a unique gem, Elara. Beautiful, loyal, submissive...you're everything an elf should be."

“You honor me, my lord,” I whispered. He stood, and I leaned backwards in anticipation of him lifting my feet onto his shoulders and taking me—

But then he abruptly pushed my legs back together and paced halfway across the room.

“It’s precisely because you are so loyal,” he went on, casually pouring himself a glass of brandy, “that I plan to give you a chance to atone for your failure in the Vale. Despite everything that’s happened, I still have an opportunity to turn this situation to my advantage.”

My brow furrowed as I twisted around to face him. I had no idea what else he thought I could accomplish. I’d already convinced Duke Arland to become his ally, along with the artificers in the Infintium and many of the other nobles in Sanctum. Darkstone was simply out of our reach, and neither Duchess Farrow nor Duchess Zarene would be interested in receiving me...

“The political situation has changed since you left,” Kristoff explained as he pivoted back around and took a sip from his glass. “Duke Arland and his wife have consolidated their forces at Sorthaal’s southern border. They could march across the Wreath and lay siege to Sanctum in a week, possibly less. As you can imagine, this provocation hasn’t gone unnoticed by the Legion or the Covenant. They put more and more pressure on Arland by the day, and he, in turn, puts more pressure upon me.”

“But he can’t simply order his men to attack without help.”

“No, they would be slaughtered and everyone knows it. Duchess Farrow thought he was a fool for responding to my call for aid so quickly, but apparently your ministrations were even more effective than I anticipated—both Arland and Luriel have been steadfast allies.”

He took a second, longer sip as his eyes glazed over. “If she’d had her way, Farrow would have continued dragging her feet until Darkstone was fully committed and marching across the Vale. But apparently time finally caught up with her.”

I frowned in confusion. “My lord?”

“She’s dead,” Kristoff said. “A week after you left she took ill, and a few days later she passed in her sleep.”

“Merciful Triad,” I whispered. I had no particular love for Duchess Farrow, especially considering I’d only seen her in person twice. But my mind immediately started spinning theories about who could have been involved in her death. The vaeyn? Emperor Lucian? Someone else?”

“Her son, Bolvir, is now Grand Duke of the Wreath,” Kristoff said. “He’s naïve and foolish, but he does understand that the Empire cannot survive with Lucian on the throne. He’s sided with me in the Quorum, and he’s already begun consolidating his mother’s armies and resources. With the three of us united, we can place considerably more pressure on the Emperor and the Hierophant.”

“But they still won’t call off the war,” I whispered. “And they won’t dedicate the Legion the liberating Glorinfel.”

“No, of course not. Which means that for the moment, we’re stuck in something of a stalemate. We can’t make a move without Darkstone, but the Emperor and Zarene can’t make a move on us without triggering an all-out civil war.”

“Then what will you do?” I asked, genuinely curious about what he had planned. “If you accept Duke Darkstone’s offer, he promised to convince the vaeyn to abandon Glorinfel.”

“A promise he has no intention of keeping, and even if he did I don’t particularly care,” Kristoff nearly spat. “No, there’s no point in allying with Darkstone now. Larric told me all about this ‘treaty’ he signed with the vaeyn. The Quorum will never agree to it. If they even

whispered about working with the dark elves, the Covenant would dispatch Inquisitors to hunt them down. The Empire would descend into civil war overnight.”

My thoughts flashed back to Karethys and Larric speaking about her people’s ultimate objective. The vaeyn wanted to see an Imperial civil war, of course; it was the only way they could ever win. But she’d also suggested that Emperor Lucian seemed to want the same thing...

“The only sensible course of action is to turn Darkstone’s plan on its head,” Kristoff went on after he swigged down the final gulp of his liquor. “He believes he can sit back behind his mountains and play all sides against the middle. But I think he underestimates the fervor of the Covenant—and possibly the ruthlessness of our young Emperor.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand, my lord.”

Kristoff smiled and set the empty glass down on the desk next to me. “I’m going to tell Lucian about Darkstone’s plan—all of it, in great detail. And I won’t stop with him. By the end of the month, every bard and gossip and town crier in the Empire will be whispering about the Vale’s treachery. The public will *demand* that Lucian take action.”

“Even though the Legion continues to lose ground to the vaeyn?” I asked.

“It won’t matter. Like I said, Amond underestimates the pettiness of the Hierophant and her Inquisitors. He doesn’t believe they’ll go after him in the middle of a war, but he’s wrong. And once they do, the Emperor’s forces will be split. The Quorum will finally have its chance to strike.”

I nodded. “In other words, just because Darkstone won’t support you directly doesn’t mean you can’t still make use of his power.”

Kristoff smiled at me. “I’m glad you’ve learned something, at least. Politics, like war, are a fluid thing. With careful manipulation, nearly any obstacle can be transformed into an advantage.”

I smiled back, but there was no emotion behind it. Everything he’d just said made perfect sense...except for the fact he only knew part of the story. He had no idea that the vaeyn were working with the Faedari—and he certainly had no idea that the Emperor might have been, too.

“All of which brings me back to you.” Kristoff placed his hands upon my knees again. “Your redemption will be difficult but gratifying. If you succeed, you may very well save the entire Empire.”

“Your wish is my command, Master. What do you desire of me?”

“It’s simple,” he said, leaning in so close our lips nearly touched. “I want you to fuck the Emperor.”

My breath caught in my throat. I sat there, thoroughly bewildered, as Master Kristoff chuckled and paced away again. By the time he broke the long silence, he had already poured himself a second glass.

“I know it’s not what you expected,” he said, grinning. “A few months ago, I was convinced it would never come to this. I assumed I could corner Lucian without ever engaging him directly. But like I said, politics are a fluid thing. We must learn to adapt if we are to survive.”

“Master?” I rasped.

“Lucian won’t be nearly as vulnerable a target as Arland or the artificers or any of the lesser nobles,” Kristoff went on. “He’s always been a difficult man to read and an even more

difficult man to impress. He rarely meets with anyone outside of the Covenant, and my spies tell me he doesn't own a single *avenari*."

"Why?"

"I'm not certain, but I suspect it's because he despises your people just like his father did. Of course, that never stopped Rikus from accumulating a harem the size of a village..." Kristoff flicked his hand contemptuously. "In any event, Lucian seems to prefer humans, especially young noblewomen. At the start of every month, he brings in several unmarried girls from across the Empire and essentially locks them inside the palace. By the time he returns them to their parents, nearly all of them are ripe with child."

I struggled to repress the sudden wave of nausea rising in my stomach. "He doesn't wed them?"

"No, and it's quite the scandal in the Imperial Court. Evidently the Covenant has spent a fortune trying to cover it up, and one of my spies in the palace said that the Hierophant herself secretly slipped priests into the palace so they could place a spell upon the women and prevent pregnancy. Apparently it hasn't been effective—many of the women are happy to carry the Emperor's child."

I shook my head in disgust when he wasn't looking. "But why?"

"Because their families have everything to gain. Think about it: if a family's daughter gives birth to a child of the emperor, they gain a tremendous amount of political leverage. The Covenant could cover up a few bastard children easily enough—in fact I'm sure they've done just that for a long time. But ten children? Twenty? Dozens?" Kristoff shook his head. "In a few years, the political chaos would tear the Empire apart."

I frowned and glanced away. Was that Lucian's plan? To cripple the Imperial Court with scandal? If so, it didn't make any sense. The Empire was already on the verge of a civil war, and there had to be a hundred better ways for him to destroy the Covenant if that really was his goal. No, this sounded more like the sick fetish of a powerful man than a grand political scheme.

I closed my eyes and bit down on my bottom lip. I had seen and endured many injustices since our move to Sanctum, but this particular abuse turned my stomach. I wasn't completely sure why, given that I'd witnessed worse during my few days in Skyfall. And on a personal level, I had just spent the better part of two weeks being degraded and humiliated by General Torelius. I had plenty of rage inside me without worrying about the Emperor impregnating random noblewomen.

Still, there was something particularly disturbing about it. Perhaps I was surprised because Lucian was ostensibly on the side of the Faedari. Was Karethys wrong about him? Was there something else going on that I wasn't aware of?

"In any event, the point is that Lucian won't be like any other challenge you've faced," Kristoff said. "Arland wanted you on your knees ten seconds after you met him, and I've no doubt that Bolvir would happily fuck you for hours given the chance. But Lucian will be different. You'll have to seduce him. You'll have to convince that you're more than just a random slave."

He gulped down his second glass of brandy and sauntered back over to me. "And you will, won't you?"

"I...I will do my best, Master," I whispered.

"Your best won't be enough. I overestimated your abilities with Darkstone. I will not make that same mistake again." Kristoff eyed me up and down. "We'll continue your training this evening. Sharela will dress you appropriately."

I nodded slowly. "I understand, Master."

"No, you don't," he said, his smile fading. "But you will. Now go."

He glanced away and returned to his drink. I stared at his back for a moment, a hundred lingering questions dying on my lips, before I finally hopped off his desk and left the room. The house guard standing outside silently escorted me back to my chambers. I followed in a stupefied daze, wondering what in the name of the Triad I was going to do next...

"Back already?" Astanya asked when the door opened and I slipped inside. She was sipping at some tea and repairing the stitches on an old dress.

"He wanted to talk to me about Captain Larric," I lied. My thoughts were so scattered I really wished I could be alone for a while. But apparently I wasn't going to get that opportunity very often anymore.

"I know he's ecstatic that you both survived. He's lost so much recently...I can't imagine how hard it must be for him to suffer like this."

Astanya glanced back down to her needle and thread, and I felt my face scrunch in reflexive disgust. Not at her, of course, but at the words she'd spoken. She meant what she said—she really did feel for Master Kristoff's "suffering." Just like me, she had fully embraced her submission. I had no doubt that she'd even convinced herself to draw pleasure from serving him.

"He's always been strong," I whispered. "I'm sure he'll find a way to get through this."

"Now that you're back, we can help him together," Astanya said, flashing me another smile. "Perhaps we'll get a chance tonight. He said he had something special planned."

"I, uh...I suppose we'll see, won't we?"

I sat back down on the bed and tried to force my mind to settle. Astanya engaged me in conversation every now and then, but thankfully she didn't seem like the type of person who was bothered by extended silence. I used every spare moment to try and figure out just what in the void I was going to do next.

On the surface, allowing Master Kristoff to hand me over to the Emperor seemed like a terrible mistake. The part of me that regretted returning to Sanctum in the first place was now practically ordering me to flee the city and return to the Faedari as soon as possible. But another part—a growing part, strangely enough—argued that this was an opportunity I simply couldn't afford to pass up. Not for Master Kristoff, necessarily, but for me. What if Karethys didn't know as much about Lucian as she thought? What if I could discover information that was valuable to my people?

My people...

Just a few months ago, I never would have used that phrase. But sitting here now, looking at Astanya, I was more convinced than ever that I needed to find a way to contact the Faedari rebels again. But even if Larric could make that happen, I would be far more valuable to them if I possessed intimate information on Emperor Lucian.

I closed my eyes and sank back into the cushions on the bed. No matter what path I chose here, the bottom line was that I needed to speak with Larric again as soon as possible. Unfortunately, if Master Kristoff had a new training regimen in mind, I probably wouldn't get another opportunity tonight or perhaps even the night after that. I needed to figure out a way to leave this room without alerting Astanya or any of the house guards...

By the time I'd finally concocted a semi-plausible plan, the problem was solved for me. One of the guards arrived with orders to take Astanya to the bath and the tailor, and I knew from experience that meant she'd be gone for at least an hour, possible more. I waited a few minutes

after she'd departed, and once I was convinced she wouldn't return I reached out to the Aether and repeated my memory-altering performance from last night. The lone guard in the hall was a different man, but he proved every bit as easy to charm—as were all the others on my path to the barracks. By the time I arrived, I had woven false memories into minds of four different men. I felt rather like a ghost flitting across the estate.

Larric was alone in his room when I arrived. He already looked much better than he had last night. The color had returned to his skin, and he seemed to be moving more or less normally as he paced back and forth between the fireplace and his desk. I considered knocking on the door, but rather than make any more unnecessary noise I simply pulled it open and darted inside instead.

“Elara,” he gasped, his hand instinctively reaching for a sword that wasn't there. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“No one spotted me, don't worry,” I assured him. “I know I can't stay long, but I needed to speak with you.”

Larric let out a deep breath and relaxed his muscles. “Kristoff is furious about Darkstone, far more than I expected. And apparently Duchess Farrow died while we were—”

“I know,” I interrupted. “He told me what happened, and he's come up with a new plan.”

“That was fast. Last night he seemed more interested in screaming and assigning blame than anything else.”

“He believes he can turn the Emperor and the Covenant against Darkstone. He seems to think that will give his Quorum the distraction they need to strike even without additional help.”

“Because a three-way war wasn't enough?” Larric grunted and sat down. “His sanity has been waning for months, but at this point he's completely unhinged. I'm not even sure I *want* to know what he has planned.”

I clasped my fingers together and swallowed heavily. “He wants to send me into the Imperial Palace.”

Larric's brow furrowed. “What? Why?”

“Because he believes I can seduce Emperor Lucian and learn his true plans.”

“Merciful Triad,” Larric breathed. He rubbed his fingers against his temples. “Well, that settles it, then. We need to get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Last night you seemed to think that would be difficult.”

“It will. The Faedari don't have a permanent base of operations in Sanctum—it's far too dangerous. Contacting them will take time. I haven't even written a missive yet, let alone delivered it.”

“Master Kristoff plans to start training me again tonight,” I told him. “I have a feeling he'll want to send me within the next couple of days.”

Larric's cheek twitched. “Then we'll have to do this ourselves. Somehow...” He paced over towards the small window on the opposite edge of the room. Several of the house guards were outside training. “You made it all the way here in broad daylight without anyone noticing you?”

I nodded. “It wasn't difficult. I just have to touch their minds and wipe away their recent memories.”

He hissed softly between his teeth. “Now you understand why the Covenant is so fearful of the Unbound...” He paused for a moment before he shook his head again. “Slipping out of estate is one thing, but actually leaving the city is quite another. You won't be able to charm the Inquisitors watching the gates, and there's no way in the void we can fight through them all.”

“Then maybe I should meet Lucian.”

Larric glanced back over his shoulder. “You’re not serious.”

“Karethys said he was an ally,” I reminded him. “She said he hates the Covenant as much as anyone.”

“She also said she didn’t trust him,” Larric countered. “Just because he’s Unbound doesn’t mean he’s on our side. He’s never officially allied with the Faedari or the vaeyn—he was just leaking them information to cause a civil war.”

I held my eyes on the fireplace for a moment before I turned back to him. “If all that’s true, then shouldn’t we learn more about him? Shouldn’t we figure out what side he’s really on?”

“I would love to, but not like this. It’s not worth the risk—you’re too important.”

Larric turned and glanced back out the window, but I couldn’t bring myself to look away from him. I could hear the raw emotion in his voice. He wasn’t just making a cold tactical calculation here; he was truly worried that something might happen to me. And I wasn’t sure how to respond.

For the last few years, I had believed that Master Kristoff felt the same way. He genuinely seemed to care about me, and over time I had come to care for him. It wasn’t until recently that I’d finally realized it was all just an illusion. Kristoff saw me as a tool, not a person; he saw me as his slave, not his lover. He had manipulated me, and in a disturbing way I had gladly allowed myself to be deceived.

But now...now it was like everything I’d ever known had been turned upside down. Suddenly Kristoff’s true agenda had become clear, and I found myself looking upon the entire world differently, including Larric. He wasn’t the cold, elf-hating former Inquisitor I’d believed him to be. He was a Faedari agent fighting to destroy a corrupt Empire from within. And for reasons I doubted I’d ever understand, he actually *did* care about me.

“Whatever time I spend at the palace will give you an opportunity to find us a way out,” I whispered into the silence. “Who knows, maybe Lucian really is on our side. Maybe he’ll help us.”

Larric’s shoulders sagged as he pivoted around. “I wouldn’t count on it. Remember, this is the same man who assassinated his own father. And if even a fraction of the rumors about his personal life are true...”

“Do you think Karethys is making a mistake cooperating with him?”

“I think Karethys is doing what she believes is best for her people. I don’t blame her for that, but sometimes desperate people make hasty decisions that will haunt them later.”

I studied him for moment. “You almost sound like you don’t trust her, either.”

“She is a loyal shadow knight serving the Matriarch Queen,” Larric said. “Her duty to Sulinor and the vaeyn always come first.”

I detected the faintest trace of resentment in his voice along with the obvious affection. I almost wanted to ask him if he loved her, but I couldn’t summon the courage. It was probably for the best.

“Do you know anything else about the Emperor?” I asked instead. “Something you haven’t told me?”

“I have suspicions, if that’s what you mean,” Larric said. “But I don’t actually know Lucian at all—almost no one does. That alone gives me pause. He could be completely insane.”

“All the more reason to learn more about him, just in case.”

Larric dragged a hand through his short hair and sighed. “Elara—”

“You just said there’s no way out of Sanctum,” I interrupted. “So let me do this. Let me see if Lucian really can be our ally. Imagine what it would mean for the rebels.”

He stared at me for a long moment, his pale blue eyes narrowed in confusion. “What’s the really about?”

“What do you mean?”

“You seem determined to do this despite the danger. Why?”

I took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of his bed. I’d been asking myself this same question all day, and I still didn’t have a particularly good answer. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “I just...I feel like I need to.”

“Because Kristoff wants you to? You don’t owe him anything.”

“I know, and that’s not why.” I pursed my lips as my thoughts flickered to Astanya and Torelius’s *avenari* and all the other elves I’d watched suffer over the past month. “If the Faedari are going to have any chance, they need as much information as they can get. I’d feel useless showing up at their doorstep without anything to offer.”

“They’ll take you in in a heartbeat.”

“Because I’m Unbound? There are thousands of other faeyn in this city who need their help.”

“That’s part of it, yes,” Larric conceded. “There aren’t many Unbound faeyn left in the world, and the Covenant controls every other channeler in the Empire. You would be an invaluable asset.”

“Master Kristoff believes that, too.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Larric insisted. “The rebels won’t force you to do anything. You’ll be free to make your own decisions.”

I met his eyes again. I could only imagine how valuable an Unbound—*any* Unbound—would be to a magic-starved group like the Faedari. They undoubtedly had to steal Imperial supplies just to feed their soldiers and heal their wounded, and they could never seriously threaten the Empire without channelers of their own. I sincerely doubted that their leadership would be willing to marginalize someone like me.

Still, the thought didn’t bother me nearly as much as it had just a few weeks ago. I wasn’t a soldier and never would be, but that didn’t matter. I could help in many other ways...and maybe I saw this as a good starting point.

“Then I’ll make my own decision now,” I told him. “I’ll play Kristoff’s game and meet with Lucian. In the meantime, you’ll figure out a way to get us out of Sanctum.”

Larric continued studying me, his face unreadable. “You’ve changed.”

“I know,” I murmured. “I had to.”

He paced over in front of me, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “It happened fast, but I suppose it always does,” he said. “For me it was that mission in the north with Karethys. When I saw what the vaeyn what were really like—what I saw what *she* was really like—I wasn’t able to look at anything the same way again. Sometimes all it takes is recognizing one lie to make the truth seem so clear.”

I nodded slowly. The silence between us only broke when he belatedly realized he’d rested his hand upon my knee. He awkwardly jerked away and pivoted back around to stare out the window.

“I’ll try to get a message out,” he said, clearing his throat. “If we’re lucky, someone will get back to us in the next few days.”

“The Green Gala is five days away,” I replied. The skin on my leg tingled like his fingers had been charged with electricity. “I suspect that’s when he’ll take me to the palace.”

“I doubt the rebels can organize an escape by then, but it’s possible.” His head tilted back and forth as he stretched his neck. “If not...”

“If not, I’ll manage.” I uncrossed my legs and stood. The tingling didn’t go away; it rippled up my thighs and across my hips. “You should get some rest. I’ll try and check on you again before I leave.”

He nodded but didn’t turn. “Just be careful. Speaking with me is risky, for both of us.”

“I know.”

There were a dozen other things I wanted to say and a hundred other feelings I wanted to sort out. But I knew this wasn’t time, and so instead I slipped out of room and crept back to my chambers. Whatever Master Kristoff had prepared for me tonight, I intended to be ready for it.

Chapter Five: Guilt and Envy

Just like I'd anticipated, Astanya wasn't there I returned. I used the solitude to relax and mentally prepare myself for whatever trials were ahead. When she hadn't come back by nightfall, however, I started to wonder what was going on. Eventually I stretched out with my telepathy until I found her, and as far as I could tell she was already with Master Kristoff...

Before I could learn anything else, Sharela appeared at my door and beckoned me to follow her to the dressing room. Her two servants stripped me naked the instant I was inside. After giving me a hard scrubbing, one set to braiding my hair while the other applied makeup. By the time they were finished, I was a perfect little *avenari* doll.

"Arms out," Mistress Sharela ordered as she finally returned with my outfit for the evening. The top was a string halter with golden tassels that covered my breasts but little else, while the bottom was a flowing, see-through skirt that was far too long—or was, before I stepped into the matching shoes. Master Kristoff typically preferred me barefoot while I was in the estate, but like most men he also enjoyed the shape of my slender calves when I wore heels.

Sharela seemed about as interested in the fitting process as a chef who'd prepared the same dish a thousand times before. She had been so consistently cold since Kristoff had purchased me that I actually wondered where she'd come from. Had she always worked with the Kristoff family? Had she been horribly mistreated over the years? Did she have personal grudge against the faeyn or was she merely embittered by her years of service?

A few months ago, none of those questions would have even occurred to me—or if they had, I wouldn't have truly cared about the answer. But now I was genuinely curious. I wanted to see the tapestry of her life unfold. I wanted to understand how living in the Empire could corrupt a peasant as easily as a duke. I wanted to understand each and every injustice, no matter how large or small.

I could have gotten the answers from Sharela easily enough. An untrained mind was an open book, as it were, and I had no doubt that I could explore most of her memories without physical contact. I could probably even alter her perception of me and transform her into the sweetest woman I'd ever met.

But I didn't. I wasn't entirely sure why.

The entire grooming process took the better part of an hour. Once I was "ready," Sharela handed me back to the guard. He escorted me across the estate to Kristoff's bedchamber, and as I walked my thoughts flashed back to all the previous times I'd made this journey. I used to get excited at the prospect of serving him. Just imagining my lips or quim bringing him pleasure had been enough to make my skin tingle and my toes curl.

A small part of me still felt that way. For all his failings—failings I noticed more with each passing day—Master Kristoff wasn't General Torelius. He wasn't Aemond or Varyl Darkstone, either. He had provided me with freedoms and opportunities that no other man in the Empire would have considered. I owed much of my growth as an individual and nearly all of my growth as a channeler to his generosity. No matter what happened over the next few days, I told myself I needed to remember that.

"Elara is ready, Your Excellency," the guard said after he wrapped his knuckles against the door.

"Good," Master Kristoff replied. His voice was strained and almost breathless. "Send her in."

The guard opened the door. I slinked inside, fully expecting him to be waiting for me on his bed—

And my mouth immediately dropped open.

In the years since Master Kristoff had purchased me at market, I had only seen him take another woman twice, and both had been before he'd discovered my powers and started training me as a real *avenari*. I had trouble imagining him with a human noblewoman, let alone another elf slave...and yet here he was right in front of me, thrusting furiously into Astanya with the vigor of man half his age.

She was bent over his desk, her ankles shackled to the wooden legs and her wrists bound tightly behind her back. Her leash had been looped through a buckle on the far side, effectively pinning her cheek against the wood...not that she would have been able to move her head anyway, considering how tightly his left hand was holding her down. She was looking right at me, and her blue eyes glittering in ecstasy.

"Come here," he ordered between labored breaths. He pointed at the Talishite rug just a few feet away from him. "Get on your knees."

I obeyed out of pure reflex as my mind continued reeling. Once I'd been still for a few moments, Kristoff resumed his frantic thrusting. He tugged on Astanya's leash with his right hand, effectively choking her like he'd done so many times with me.

"Who am I?" he asked, leaning his lips down to her ear.

"You are Gabriel Kristoff," she gasped, "Grand Duke of Glorinfel."

"What am I?"

"You are my master."

He smiled tightly as he buried his cock to the hilt. "Who are you?"

"I am no one."

"What are you?"

"I am your slave, Master," she managed, her voice barely a croak as he tugged her leash even harder. "I am your loyal elf cunt."

"Yes, you are," he said. "Now take your reward."

Kristoff threw back his head as he spent himself inside her. Astanya gasped in delight even as she struggled for breath. Her eyes closed and her back arched as a climax washed over her, and I knew from experience that she wasn't feigning. I could feel his magic coursing through her, enhancing her pleasure and conditioning her to enjoy submission. He had done exactly the same thing with me not so long ago. I could still remember whimpering in terror as he penetrated me for the first time...but I could also remember the waves of ecstasy wash over me as he reached into my mind and broke my resistance.

"Thank you, Master," Astanya whispered. "Please...take me again."

Kristoff grunted as he leaned up and slipped out of her. He allowed himself a moment to catch his breath before he released his hold on her leash and pulled it free of the buckle so she could stand again. Once she was upright, he spun her around to face him. He leaned in and kissed her deeply, and I watched as his seed slowly trickled down her thighs.

"Later, my dear," he said, smiling. "Retire to the antechamber. I will call for you when I'm ready again."

"Yes, my lord," Astanya replied obediently. She flashed me a coy smile, then sauntered across the room and vanished into the adjacent chamber.

"Such a marvelous girl," he said. "Young and eager to please."

He grunted again before he shuffled over in front of me. I didn't need to read his mind to know what he wanted; I leaned forward and took his rapidly-wilting cock into my mouth. The taste of his seed was so familiar it was almost comforting.

"She was a gift, if you can believe it," Kristoff said. He gave me a few more seconds to clean him off before he pulled away and paced over to one of the wall cabinets. "A noble from Rivani sent her along with his regards. I immediately assumed she was a spy, of course. Duchess Zarene steadfastly supports the Covenant, and she was the one who hired mercenaries to capture you outside the Infintium."

I nodded idly and as I cleaned my lips with my tongue. "I remember. You recognized the leather in their armor."

"Cured thacedon hide. It's almost impossible to find outside the Basin." He smiled approvingly as he poured himself a drink. I couldn't help but notice the size of the glass and the number of empty bottles in the cabinet. Master Kristoff had always enjoyed his liquor, but his consumption seemed like it had increased fivefold since I'd returned. "Zarene knew I was assembling the Quorum, and she knew that you were one of my most vital tools. She failed to take you away, and I assumed that Astanya was her ironic riposte."

My eyes flicked over to the antechamber door. "But you don't believe that anymore?"

"No. I pierced her mind and rummaged around for the truth. She's exactly what she seems." Kristoff took a sip from the glass and winced as it burned on its way down. "Apparently the noble who sent her was hoping to gain the Quorum's favor. Zarene detests him, and so he wanted to throw his lot in with the rest of us."

"An interesting coincidence," I murmured.

"Sometimes fortuitous things actually do happen, even in Sanctum." He stared back down at me. "Astanya kept me company while you were gone. And she will continue to do so until you prove yourself to me again."

"My lord?" I asked.

Kristoff smiled and ran his fingers through my hair. "I know you're upset, my dear. I can feel it inside you. You had a rough time in the Vale, and now you've returned to find that I've replaced you."

"I... I just want to make you happy, Master."

"I know," he whispered. "And you will... the moment you complete your mission in the Imperial Palace."

I didn't gasp or inhale sharply, but an epiphany struck me nonetheless. I finally understood why Astanya was really here. I finally understood why he'd locked me in my chambers and disrupted my normal routine. I finally understood why he'd wanted me to watch him fuck another woman.

Control.

The realization dislodged an old memory from the deep recesses of my mind. Master Kristoff had been speaking with one of his friends in Stormcrest before the fall, and I'd overheard them from the next room. Kristoff had reminded his friends that there were many ways to ensure obedience among his slaves. There were millions of them across the Empire, far too many to fit with specialized enchanted collars. Most slaves could be brought in line with threats or intimidation, he'd argued, but with *avenari* in particular he recommended a different approach.

You have to break them, body and soul, he'd said. With the females especially, you need to convince them that you are their protector. Once they see you as their savior, they will beg you to crawl between their legs.

That was what this was about. Kristoff feared that his control over me might have been waning, and he knew how difficult it would be to seduce Emperor Lucian and acquire the information he wanted. But instead of whipping or intimidating me like one of his thuggish peers, he had decided to use guilt. I knew from experience how effective the tactic could be, because he'd been completely right all those years ago. He had broken me, body and soul. And I had begged for him to crawl between my legs almost every night, just like Astanya did now.

"I know you're terrified," Kristoff said into the silence as he slowly paced around behind me. "I know you're not convinced you can do this. Lucian will be a challenge unlike anything you've faced before."

"I will make you proud, Master," I whispered. "I swear."

"I've no doubt that you'll try. I'm just not convinced you have it in you to succeed." He placed his hands upon my shoulders and crouched down so his head rested atop mine. "And I'm not sure you appreciate the risk I'm taking in giving you another chance."

I frowned. "Master?"

"Thus far, we've managed to keep your true identity hidden. Even Darkstone didn't realize that you were a fellow channeler. But sooner or later, that secret will come out. I've known that from the beginning."

He slowly and gently pulled my brown hair back. The pale skin on my neckline was practically glowing in the mirror.

"Once that day comes, I'm dead," Kristoff told me. "A dozen Inquisitors will show up at my door, and I'll be dragged to the gallows in a heartbeat...or worse."

"That won't happen," I assured him. "I'm always very careful."

"I know you are, but still..." He smiled into the mirror, and the warmth of his breath made my skin crawl. "Zarene knew you were important, and she's hundreds of miles away. Torelius knows too, and he was almost willing to steal you just to find out why. Eventually, someone will press hard enough and figure out what's really going on."

I heard the faint scraping of steel on leather, and a moment later his right hand appeared in front of me holding a knife. It took every ounce of willpower I could muster to remain still.

"My father always told me that it's vital to press your advantage," Kristoff whispered, "but it's equally important to know when to cut your losses."

His left hand abruptly clutched my hair, and his right pressed the cold steel against my throat. For a split second I feared he might go through with it. My body completely locked up, and I stared into the mirror and watched my green eyes widen in terror...

"You really would let me do it, wouldn't you?" he asked, his lips resting near my ear.

"I am yours, Master," I mumbled. "Now and forever."

Kristoff smiled as he looked at us in the mirror, and he pressed the knife against me hard enough that a small trickle of blood ran down the length of my neck and between my breasts. "I'm glad to hear it," he said. "I care about you, Elara. I always have. I want to protect you, but I need to be certain that you understand the risks. I need you understand what's at stake."

"I do, my lord," I assured him. "I'm so sorry I failed you."

"I know you are. That's why you're still here." He stared at us for another few seconds before he finally grunted and tossed the knife aside. "Just remember your place and your purpose, and nothing will stand against us."

He kissed my cheek before he stood and returned to his drink. The instant he was facing the other direction, I closed my eyes and let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. The terror shuddered through my body actually sickened me; fear was precisely the response he was hoping to evoke. And now that I could see the truth so clearly, I remembered all the other times he'd tried something similar—albeit less drastic—to ensure my obedience. This was bondage of the mind rather than the body, and it was every bit as effective.

“Now that that's settled,” Kristoff said, downing the rest of his glass, “it's time to focus on the task at hand. Like I told you earlier, Emperor Lucian will pose a new challenge for you. Every other noble you've dealt with already wanted to stick their cock in you. Lucian will be ambivalent at best or outright hostile at worst. You'll have to convince him that you're worth his time.”

I swallowed heavily and forced myself to glance away from the mirror. The thin stream of blood on my pale skin was oddly memorizing. “As long as I can get close to him, I shouldn't have a problem. He's not a channeler.”

“You can't afford to treat magic as a crutch. After Korvale, this should be even more obvious. Before you can do anything, he needs to desire you. He needs to *yearn* for you.”

Kristoff grunted softly. “There's an old saying: ‘the greatest desire is that which is denied.’ A man like Lucian has never been denied anything, which will make you all the more irresistible to him.”

I shook my head. “How can I deny him? He's the Emperor.”

“First you need to understand what's like to want something and not get it. Tonight will be that demonstration.” He glanced back over his shoulder and snapped his fingers. “Astanya?”

The antechamber door opened, and the other woman stepped back into the room almost immediately. She had obviously cleaned up some, though her dress was still in shambles. Her eyeshadow and lipstick remained smeared as well, which I knew from experience was something Master Kristoff—and many other Sanctum nobles—seemed to love.

“My lord?” she prompted.

“Come here,” he beckoned. “Get on your knees.”

Astanya glanced between me and the discarded knife as she sauntered across the room. I could see the concern flicker across her face, but the moment she sank to her knees in front of him an eager smile lit up her face. She coiled her fingers around his cock and gently kissed the tip.

“I'm grateful to serve, Master,” she proclaimed. “How do you wish to have me?”

“We'll see where the night takes us,” Kristoff said, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes.

And so I watched. I watched as another woman brought his cock back to life with her tongue and mouth. I watched as he threw her onto her back and took her as forcefully as I'd ever seen. I watched as he kissed her lips while he spent himself deep inside her.

Every motion, every action, was designed to inspire envy...but instead they only summoned rage. Astanya spent much of the night shackled to the desk or bed or even floor, but those weren't the bonds keeping her in place. The mental restraints were just as real and just as powerful. I made a promise to myself that before I fled this place with Larric, I would find a way to break them.

No matter the cost.

Chapter Six: Castigation

The next three days were an indecipherable blur of sex, castigation, and self-reflection. Master Kristoff continued trying to instruct me in the art of “longing desire,” mostly by forcing me to watch him take Astanya in nearly every way imaginable. She spent almost every minute of every evening on her back or her knees, and by the time he was finished with her she would either be filled with or covered by his seed. He never allowed me to touch him or myself during any of the festivities. Release, he insisted, would only be allowed once I’d proven myself and earned his favor once more.

Still, that didn’t stop him from making me an active participant in every exercise. He would often bind us together so that I could feel her body’s undulations as he ravaged her. Before she swallowed his cock, he would place us back-to-back and tie our arms together; before he took her ass, he would restrain me beneath her so I could watch him vanish into her folds. Once he even had her recline in my arms while he hoisted her ankles atop his shoulders and pounded into her.

He kept her with him each night after he dismissed me. I was always tempted to sneak away and visit Larric while the rest of the mansion slept, but I didn’t take the risk until the third night. When I arrived, we avoided having another argument about my plans to meet with Lucian, though I see the lingering worry in his eyes. He promised to continue trying to contact the Faedari, though so far he hadn’t been successful. I prayed he would get lucky by the time I returned.

On the fourth day, Master Kristoff made final preparations for us to attend the annual Green Gala marking the start of spring. I spent most of the morning and afternoon with Sharela as she fit me into several potential new gowns, but by evening I was escorted back to his room so he could select his favorite.

“The party won’t be anywhere as large as the Winter Gala,” Kristoff said as he circled around me and evaluated the first outfit. “All the noble families from Sanctum will attend, of course, but I’m not sure about anyone else. The death of Duchess Farrow will keep most nobles from the Wreath away, and obviously Darkstone and Zarene will stay home. I’m not even sure they’ll send any proxies.”

I lifted my arms to the side as Sharela tightened my corset. Evidently Lucian was fond of this particular design. “You don’t think they’ll send spies?” I asked.

“Everyone in attendance will be a spy in one form or another,” he said with a grunt. “You know that by now.”

I nodded but remained silent. I was tempted to complain that I could hardly breathe, but of course that was the whole point of the outfit. The only real question was whether I’d be wearing cuffs and/or a gag.

Once Master Kristoff was satisfied, he shoed Sharela away and closed the door behind her. “Emperor Lucian rarely socializes with anyone in a public setting, as I’m sure you noticed at the Winter Gala,” he said. “But I plan to confront him on his throne just before dinner. I will offer you as a gift without pretense and make certain that all nearby parties—including the spies of our rivals—overhear my offer.”

“You’re already worried that they’re suspicious of me,” I pointed out. “Won’t they react if they believe you’re trying to manipulate the Emperor?”

Kristoff grinned. "I'm counting on it. At the very least, Darkstone and Zarene will be confused, and with luck I'll be able to use that against them at some point. It's vital to keep your enemies off-balance at all times."

I nodded absently. "What if the Emperor refuses your gift? You said he has no use for *avenari*."

"He might at first, but I'll insist. It's possible that he'll dismiss you to the kitchen or the like as a sign that he's not interested, so you'll just need to play along until you have the opportunity to speak with him. Whenever that happens, you *must* be ready to pounce."

"I will," I promised.

"I know," Kristoff said, placing his hand on my cheek. "Now return to your room and get some rest."

"Of course, Master."

I was halfway to the door before he spoke up. "Oh, and tell Astanya that I'm ready for her again. Make certain she's wearing her sapphire gown."

The words were meant to be a final dagger in my back, but I merely turned and smiled pleasantly. "Yes, my lord. Good night."

I spent the rest of the evening alone in my chambers. With Astanya gone, I took the opportunity to practice some channeling techniques, including conjuring small bursts of fire. Thus far, all my experience with overtly dangerous magic had been reflexive rather than trained. Outside the Infintium and then again at Lakewatch, the flames had simply materialized in my hands. I couldn't consciously explain how I'd done it; the techniques seemed almost innate. Master Kristoff had always focused his lessons on subtler spells, for obvious reasons, but I started to wonder if he'd been holding me back. What if my powers could evolve beyond telepathy? What if I could harness the destructive forces of magic like the Legion's Tel Bator channelers?

I wasn't convinced I actually wanted to know the answer, but for tonight I was content to let my imagination bloom. The Aether had a way of soothing my mind that nothing else could hope to match, and I allowed its warmth to course through me for hours until the clocks struck midnight. At that point I knew I should have tried to get some sleep in preparation for the gala, but instead I decided to make one last trip to see Larric.

Despite the late hour, he was standing in the estate courtyard practicing with a sword when I arrived. He didn't notice me as I slipped through the shadows, and I actually paused to watch him for a few minutes before I announced my presence. He darted back and forth across the stone, blade in hand, almost like he was dancing rather than fencing. His movements were shockingly graceful and oddly mesmerizing. I probably shouldn't have been so surprised, considering how I'd seen him scythe through other warriors twice his size. But he'd projected such an imperious personality for so long that I sometimes forgot he was a completely different person...

He eventually stopped and returned his sword to the weapon rack. He retrieved his crumpled-up tunic and wiped off his face, and once he moved beneath one of the hanging lanterns I noticed that his skin had returned to its normal color. A few days of food and rest had obviously done wonders for him.

I managed to catch his attention just before he reentered his quarters in the guardhouse. He glanced about to make certain no was watching, then quickly gestured inside.

"I was hoping you'd come by again," he said, shutting and locking the door behind him. "I wanted one last chance to convince you that this is a mistake."

“You won’t,” I said. “Not unless you have an escape plan ready.”

Larric sighed and tossed his tunic across the room. The lights in here were dim, but I could still see the beads of sweat glistening on his bare shoulders and back. If his muscles had atrophied at all during his injury-induced slumber, they certainly didn’t show it. The view reminded me of Skyfall where I’d watched him take Duke Darkstone’s young wife on the floor right in front of me...

“I haven’t heard from the rebels yet,” he said. “And I haven’t come up with any other way to get out of here. Kristoff’s men keep a close eye on me—it’s even riskier for you to visit than before.”

“If they spot me, they won’t remember it a few seconds later,” I told him. “Has he given you any new orders? Did he say whether or not you were going to accompany us to the gala?”

“He’s barely spoken to me at all. And when he did, he made sure to express his disappointment. He doesn’t just blame me for our failure to recruit Darkstone. Now that he knows about Karethys...well, he sees me differently. He may never trust me as his bodyguard again.”

I crossed my arms and bit down on my bottom lip. The only reason I’d slipped that information was because I didn’t believe it would be harmful. Evidently I’d been mistaken.

“He has no proof of anything.”

“That hardly matters,” Larric murmured. “I went from being his infallible Guard-Captain to an unknown variable practically overnight. I wouldn’t be surprised if he releases me altogether.”

“Then what would we do?”

“Not much would change, honestly. I can find us a way out of here regardless.” He shook his head. “I always knew this would happen eventually. If anything, I’ve kept this position longer than I expected. The rebels figured I’d last a few months at most.”

I watched him pensively as he applied a poultice to his left arm. Healing magic had long since closed his flesh, but some of his muscles must have still ached. Swinging a sword around probably hadn’t helped.

“I never asked, but...did someone assign you as Master Kristoff’s bodyguard or was this all your idea?”

“Information is the most valuable currency,” Larric said. “That’s true everywhere, as far as I can tell, and I knew that having access to a Grand Duke would be a huge boon for the rebels. Kristoff was the most accessible, and I was confident get in close.”

I nodded pensively. The Faedari rebels had been little more than specters haunting the Empire for most of my life. Most people considered them thieves at best and mass murderers at worst. Imperial and Covenant officials demonized them at every opportunity, and I’d grown up assuming they killed slaves as often as soldiers.

I knew differently now, but I still had very little concept of what the rebels actually *did* on a daily basis. And I had absolutely no idea how they were organized or who was in charge...

“Do the Faedari have a leader?” I whispered. “Someone you report to?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Larric said, wincing when he removed the poultice. “The group operates in small, scattered cells so no one individual can compromise everything. Otherwise a Tel Bator channeler could read a prisoner’s mind and learn everything in a heartbeat. Several early cells were snuffed out just like that.”

“If they don’t communicate, then how can they organize?”

“They communicate, just not directly. Those rebels we met outside Lakewatch wouldn’t have known anything about what was going on in Sanctum, but they would have been able to put us on the right trail. It’s...well, it’s a little hard to explain, and you shouldn’t stay here long.”

“You’re right,” I whispered, glancing over to the window. “I just wanted to check in before I left. I don’t know what to expect or what might happen.”

Larric turned back around to face me. “You really don’t have to go through with this,” he reminded me. “I can figure something else out.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assured him, smiling.

As usual, his expression was difficult to read. I desperately wanted to peek into his thoughts, even for just a second.

“I’ve passed a lot of information to the rebels over the years,” Larric said. “But getting you to them is the only thing that really matters.”

I frowned. “I’m not that important. Just because I’m Unbound doesn’t mean—”

“Being Unbound has nothing to do with it,” he interrupted. “You’re just...” He trailed off and sighed. “You don’t deserve this life. You never did.”

“Does anyone?”

“No. I guess that’s the point, isn’t it?”

On impulse, I reached out and touched his cheek. A year ago, I would have been terrified that he’d break my arm. Even a few months ago, I would have been scared that he’d strike me or otherwise humiliate me. But today I knew I was safe. Today I could appreciate the sensation of his stubble against my palm. Today I could enjoy the warmth of the smile peeking through his stoic façade.

Today I could summon the courage to lean forward and kiss him.

I couldn’t explain why I did it. One moment we were looking at one another, and in the next I was standing on my tiptoes and pressing my lips against his. For a few awkward heartbeats I thought he might push me away as his hands curled around my waist, but then his fingers squeezed and his mouth parted...

I couldn’t tell if we embraced for five seconds or five hours. The world faded into the Void like a forgotten dream. My rage at the treatment of my people, my concern about meeting the Emperor, even my anxiety about an unknown future—they all melted away. All I cared about was our kiss and the inexplicable electricity coursing through me.

Eventually Larric did push me away, but his hands were so soft and his movements were so gentle he almost seemed like a different person. We stared at each other for a long, breathless moment before he abruptly turned away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was...you should get back before someone notices you’re gone.”

“I know,” I murmured. He was right, of course...but I didn’t care. I still wasn’t sure what had just happened. All I knew was that I would have given almost anything for it to happen again.

I slipped out the door without saying another word. My thoughts were still a scattered haze by the time I reached my bedchambers; I couldn’t even remember the details of the journey when I tried. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, but it didn’t help. I put some water on the fire and made some tea, but that didn’t help either. I hadn’t been this addled since the night Stormcrest had fallen.

When I finally slid into bed and closed my eyes, all I could see was Larric’s face. Yet again my memories flashed back to Skyfall and the night I’d caught him with Karethys. I could

perfectly visualize their taught bodies wrapping around each other. At the time, I'd been so confused and awe-stricken that I'd barely noticed the strange feeling in my gut. But when I'd seen and overheard them a second time, the feeling had returned.

For a while I thought it was simple envy. A part of me had wanted to be her, and not just because she was so strong and confident and darkly beautiful. The way Larric had brought her such obvious pleasure, the way his movements had been as much about her as him... I had never seen anything like it before. They had been more than just partners—they had been equals. And I desperately wanted to experience that for myself.

But then I'd watched him with Duchess Cassandra at the party, and I'd realized my feelings went beyond mere envy. I didn't just resent the way he took her—I resented the fact he was in a position to take her at all. For the first time in my life, I had actually been jealous of another woman. I had wanted Larric Aresi for myself.

None of it made any sense, of course. Even at this very moment I barely knew anything about him. He had transitioned from monster to savior in the span of a few hours, and I still wasn't completely sure if I should trust him or the Faedari. But this had nothing to do with logic or sensibility.

It had everything to do with the bizarre and inexplicable realization that I might have been in love with him.

The thought crashed back and forth through my mind like an emotional battering ram. I tried to control my breathing and focus, but my body refused to cooperate. My heartbeat thundered in my ears and my skin tingled like I'd just conjured a current of electricity. Even channeling the Aether didn't help. If anything, it made the problem worse. My mind stretched out across the estate all the way to the barracks, and if I concentrated I could actually feel him at the fringes of my consciousness...

And then the bedroom door abruptly opened. I hopped at least a foot off the sheets and had to stifle a scream with my hand. Astanya popped into the room, her hand over her chest as she looked at my apologetically.

"Merciful Triad," she breathed. "I'm sorry—I didn't meant to wake you."

"You didn't," I managed, forcing a smile. "I just... I wasn't expecting anyone."

She smiled back as she shut the door. Even in the dim candlelight, I could see how disheveled she looked. Her dress was practically in tatters, and several patches of her skin were red from bindings. I hadn't expected her back tonight, but Master Kristoff had obviously returned her as one final reminder that this mission was my only chance to claw back into his good graces.

"You must be nervous," Astanya whispered as she tiptoed over to her bed. "I would be. I can't even imagine walking into the palace, let alone looking upon the Emperor..."

"I'm trying not to think about it," I lied.

"Master wouldn't be taking you with him if he didn't believe in you. He knows how skilled you are."

I frowned as I slumped backwards, hoping the shadows would conceal my expression. How much had Kristoff actually shared with Astanya? There was no way he would have told her that I was Unbound.

"I, uh... I haven't had the chance to apologize," she went on before I could put my confusion into words. "I know it's been strange having me here, and I hoped you weren't upset that Master has been spending so much time with me."

“You don’t need to be sorry,” I told her, and meant it. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Astanya sat down on the edge of her bed. I couldn’t quite make out her face, but I could see the silhouette of her long blond hair spilling across her shoulders. “I just...I know he hasn’t been treating you well the past few days.”

“He just wants me to be focused so I can impress the Imperial Court.” I snorted softly. “If anything, I was worried about you. You don’t seem like you’ve gotten much sleep.”

“Almost none,” she said, chuckling coyly. “I’m so grateful he purchased me. It’s so much nicer here than in Rivani...”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” I soothed. “Master had always been loyal to those who serve him well.”

The candlelight glinted off her smile as she removed her jewelry and curled under the sheets. She seemed genuinely happy, but more than ever I found myself wanting to try and smuggle her out of here once Larric contacted the Faedari. There were thousands of other faeyn in the city and I knew we couldn’t free them all...but the thought of leaving her behind with Master Kristoff made my stomach turn. He was already different than the man who’d purchased me, and each failure was nudging him farther and farther over the edge. How would he treat her once he realized I’d betrayed him? After his reaction to the news in Korvale, I could easily envision him taking his rage out on his servants...

I closed my eyes again and let out a long, slow breath. I couldn’t afford to worry about Astanya right now, and I definitely couldn’t afford to think about Larric. My date with Emperor Lucian was only a few hours away, and I had a feeling it was going to change everything.

One way or another.

Chapter Seven: The Green Gala

While the Imperial Court hosted innumerable smaller gatherings and parties throughout the year, there were only four official seasonal galas the nobility was expected to attend. Having experienced the Winter Gala for the first time myself just a few months ago, I assumed I had a vague idea of what to expect when we arrived at the palace this time. I was wrong.

The courtyard and adjacent streets were still filled to the brim with the Covenant's Inquisitors and the Emperor's Praetorian, but the palace itself seemed almost empty. At a glance, I doubted even half the invited nobles were in attendance. I didn't see any banners from Glorinfel or Korvale or Sorthaal, and even the attendees from the Basin and the Wreath were relatively sparse. Almost everyone here was a native of Veshar, which meant they already lived in Sanctum. It also meant that I already knew most of them, given how vigorously Master Kristoff had deployed me after I'd successfully seduced Duke Arland.

Still, the decorations in and around the palace were truly impressive. I had never seen so many flowers—both native and imported—outside of a greenhouse, and delicate vine-patterns stretched across the walls and even stairwells. Nearly all the paintings and sculptures represented the "Rebirth," an era of restoration following the first Godswar over a millennia ago, though naturally they all seemed to imply that humans had rebuilt the world rather than the faeyn. Most of the history books in Master Kristoff's archive argued the exact opposite.

More staggering was the raw number of slaves in display both in the courtyard and inside the entry foyer. They weren't just elves and orcs, either—some of the nobles had brought chagari and groll all the way from Torsia. The Green Gala had evolved into one of the primary slave-trading events, due in no small part due to the Covenant's insistence that it should also herald the start of "breeding season." Owners would seek healthy, virile males to couple with their young females, all under the supervision of the Hierophant and her Inquisitors. Those that weren't chosen for whatever reason were often sterilized and thrown back on the market at a fraction of the price.

I did my best to suppress my disgust and focus on the task at hand. Sharela had fitted me into the leather corset and accompanying skirt, and just like I'd expected Master Kristoff had shackled my wrists behind my back. He hadn't bothered with a gag, though he had ordered me to don a festive half-mask that covered my face from the nose up. I noticed that many of the other *avenari* were dressed in a similar manner, mostly as a means of distinguishing them from those that were actively up for sale. I didn't bother asking why this particular tradition had taken hold; I suspected I didn't want to know the answer.

"Chin up, eyes down," Master Kristoff scolded as we strode through one of the numerous wide, winding hallways curling around the Grand Ballroom. "If anyone makes an offer to purchase you, just follow my lead."

"Yes, Master," I replied obediently.

We passed two large chambers on either side of the corridor, and even with my eyes lowered I still caught a glimpse of the activities inside. Both were filled with lesser nobles attempting to sell off their *avenari*. The left chamber was filled mostly by men who were laughing and drinking while their female slaves shuffled around on the floor fellating them. The right chamber was filled mostly by noblewomen who were also drinking and laughing while they evaluated the flaccid cocks of their male slaves.

Eventually Master Kristoff stopped to talk with some of his peers, nearly of whom made an offer to purchase me. The magical seeds of loyalty I'd planted in their minds months several

months ago had fully bloomed. They remembered my visit to their estates as vividly as if they'd just taken me last night, and they were desperate to repeat the experience. Even more importantly—at least as far as Kristoff was concerned—they were willing to continue ceding to his requests for supplies and soldiers in the hopes they could stay in his good graces.

Only one of his contacts remained stubbornly neutral, and so Master Kristoff decided to give him another sample. I dropped to my knees and swallowed the man's cock, and by the time his seed filled my throat I had already reached into his mind and wrapped him around my proverbial finger. We left him standing in one of the side rooms, breathless and considerably poorer.

An hour before the main feast was scheduled to begin, one of the Emperor's Praetorians stomped through the crowd and approached Master Kristoff. The man's heavy, black-red armor and matching cape was purely ceremonial, but when he drew close I could tell that his massive halberd was not. The axe-blade atop the staff glinted hungrily in the sparkling ballroom lights.

"His Supreme Majesty is prepared to meet you now," the man announced. His deep, gruff voice perfectly matched his wide frame.

"Excellent," Master Kristoff said. "Where shall we—"

"Follow me."

The Praetorian turned on a heel and marched towards one of the giant spiraling staircases leading to the palace's upper levels. Master Kristoff probably should have been annoyed at the treatment; no one, not even one of the Emperor's personal guards, had the right to speak so dismissively to a Grand Duke. But making a scene here would only prevent him from getting what he wanted, and so instead he grumbled softly under his breath and tugged on my leash as he followed.

There were still a handful of nobles gathered on the wide balcony overlooking the ballroom floor. Most of them were the more military-minded families who were less interested in slaves than in the ongoing war. I spotted several Legion officers I recognized from my return trip from the Wreath, including Torelius's second-in-command, Legate Maxos. He didn't seem to notice me, thankfully, but when the Praetorian stopped us at the center of the gold carpet I spotted the fat general himself waddling towards us.

"Hello, Gabriel," Torelius said, a sardonic smirk smeared across his lips. "I didn't think you'd make an appearance tonight."

"At this point you should be quite accustomed to being wrong," Kristoff replied tartly.

The general chuckled, though I could hear the quiet menace in every breath. "Here for the auction, then? Don't tell me you're finally ready to sell this cunt after all the trouble I went through to bring her back to you."

"I have a long overdue appointment with Lucian. I believe it's finally time we got serious about the future of the Empire."

Torelius snorted so loudly I was surprised he didn't choke on his drink. "Your allies are conspicuously absent tonight. Do you really believe His Majesty will give a damn what you have to say?"

"If he cares about preserving his throne, then yes," Kristoff said matter-of-factly. "It's long past time has given some real advice. The sycophants of the Imperial Court have done enough damage, don't you think?"

Even without glancing upwards, I could envision the rage rippling across the general's face. "I can't decide whether you're brave or foolish," Torelius said. "Your little whore won't help you here. I don't know why you even—"

He cut himself off when the massive double doors at the end of carpet abruptly swung open. A small entourage of Praetorians—six on each side—marched forward and spread out along opposite sides of the carpet. Behind them strode the Emperor himself.

I had only seen Lucian Patravian in person once, back at the Winter Gala. Even then, I'd been shocked by his physical appearance. I'd expected him to be overweight like Torelius, but instead he'd more closely resembled a taller, more muscular version of Larric. Looking upon again now, nothing had changed.

Lucian stood at least six and a half feet tall, enough to make him tower over all but a few of his Praetorian. His arms, left bare by a sleeveless leather breastplate, were thicker than my legs, and his crimson cloak was woven from the finest Numenese silks. While shorter hair was the current fashion for men of the Imperial gentry, Lucian kept his long. Braided blond locks dangled all the way down to his shoulders like one of the fabled Asgardian warriors I'd seen in ancient Torsian paintings.

"Your Majesty," Master Kristoff said with a deep formal bow. I kept my eyes fastened upon the floor and remained still. "It's been far too long."

"That's certainly debatable," Lucian replied. His tenor voice was vaguely melodic and tinged with amusement. "You never spoke those words to my father. I know the two of you never quite got along."

Kristoff chuckled pleasantly. "We never quite saw eye-to-eye, it's true."

"He hated you—and your father, in fact. Even when I was a boy, I never understood why he left you in power."

An awkward pause settled over the balcony and the small pockets of nearby nobles, and I saw Master Kristoff's feet shuffled slightly inside his boots. He had expected Lucian to be a bit standoffish, just like he was with everyone...but he definitely hadn't anticipated such open hostility.

"Well, I suppose neither of us can truly speak for our fathers," Kristoff said eventually. "Perhaps we should concentrate upon our relationship instead."

Lucian snorted. "We don't have a relationship, Gabriel. And we're never going to, not since you decided to raise an army against me."

If I didn't know better, I would have thought that one of the Tel Bator channelers had suddenly conjured a blizzard and lowered the temperature of the atrium by half. The awkward silence between the nobles became downright suffocating, and out of the corner of my eye I spotted several of them slowly creeping away. With everyone so distracted, I probably could have reached out to the Aether without being noticed, but I knew it wasn't worth the risk with so many Inquisitors around.

"I'm not certain what you're referring to, Your Majesty," Master Kristoff replied eventually. "My armies in Glorinfel were destroyed when the dark elves poured out from the depths of Sulinor. Thousands were captured, and they're still waiting for your Legion to rescue them."

Lucian shook his head. "Your allies aren't here with you tonight. You won't engender any sympathy by playing the victim." He paused and turned. With my eyes down, I could see his distorted reflection in the tiles as he swept his eyes across the balcony. All nobles who were subtly scurrying away abruptly froze in place. "Your men died because the Triad willed it. They were regrettable but necessary sacrifices on the Empire's path to salvation."

Master Kristoff stirred in place again, clearly taken off guard. “They died because of the Legion’s incompetence, not the will of the gods. High General Torelius knew Stormcrest would be the vaeyn’s first target, and yet he refused to send reinforcements no matter—”

“The gods do not make mistakes, Gabriel,” Lucian replied matter-of-factly. “Stormcrest never would have fallen to the heretics if we hadn’t angered the Triad with our inaction. For decades we’ve allowed the vaeyn infestation to fester right beneath our feet. We cannot tolerate their sacrilege any longer.”

Another silence fell across the balcony. If not for the bards playing in the ballroom below, I probably could have made out the individual heartbeats of each of the nearby nobles. Master Kristoff’s body remained still, but his grip on my leash had tightened enough that my collar was making it more and more difficult to breathe...

“I have never been opposed to confronting the vaeyn, Your Majesty,” Kristoff said eventually. “But the gods will not win this war for us. We need competent commanders and a sound strategy.”

Lucian crept forward a step. “What we need is unity—unity that you and your allies have threatened.” He abruptly turned towards Torelius. “General: feel free to tell everyone what your scouts have discovered.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Torelius said, not bothering to conceal his smug satisfaction. “There are nearly ten thousand slave soldiers assembled at the border of Sorthaal and another five thousand just across the river in the Wreath. They are led by Duke Arland’s personal commanders and have refused to cooperate with Legion officers.”

“Perhaps the fall of Glorinfel taught Duke Arland and Duchess Farrow the folly of trusting the Legion to defend their homes,” Kristoff suggested bitterly. “You still haven’t been able to stop the vaeyn advance. Some have even suggested that a dark elf assassin was responsible for Farrow’s death!”

The nearby gasps were audible, if only just. I wasn’t sure if the nobles were shocked at the accusation or the fact Master Kristoff was defending himself so forcefully. In the history of the Imperial Court, I doubted that more than a handful of people had ever stood up to the Emperor in public, not even the Grand Dukes.

“There’s no point in playing games, Gabriel,” Torelius snarled. “Your ‘Quorum’ is directly threatening the sanctity of the Covenant and the safety of the Empire. You should all be strung up in the gallows and—”

Lucian lifted his hand and silenced the other man. “That’s enough, General. Leave us.”

Torelius frowned and turned. He opened his mouth as if to protest but then clearly thought the better of it. “As you wish, Your Majesty.”

The general strode off the balcony down to the ballroom, and several of the other nobles tried to use his exit as cover for their own. But Lucian held them in place with pointed glares. He clearly wanted an audience for this, and Master Kristoff, for all his cunning, had just as clearly walked into a trap.

“Unlike my father, I have little patience for pleasantries and even less for disobedience,” the Emperor said. “The Kristoff family has been a vital part of Imperial politics for generations. I’ve no wish to throw that away. We are living through an era of great instability, and the people can only handle so much change.”

He stepped in so close to Master Kristoff I thought he might actually strike him. “But there is something you must understand, Gabriel,” Lucian went on. “The only reason you are still

alive is because I wish it. The only reason you still have a place to live is because I wish it. All of that could change in a single heartbeat.”

Venom dripped from his every word, and I genuinely had no idea how Master Kristoff would respond. But he didn't back down. Instead he threw his head back and laughed.

“If you want to skip the politics, I'm more than happy to oblige,” he growled. “Let's be completely honest, shall we? The vaeyn are winning this war—a war that *you* started. Now the provinces are allying against you. Sorthaal and the Wreath have already slipped through your fingers, and Korvale will be next. Arland and Farrow are just the first. Darkstone won't support you, and the Legion cannot afford to fight a two-front war with the vaeyn and the Vale. Your position isn't nearly as strong as you believe.”

Lucian's eyes narrowed fractionally, but eventually his lips curled into a tight smile. “My father might have loathed yours, but he did respect his ambition. Just as I respect yours.” He grunted and paced away a few steps, his fingers tapping the pommel of his ceremonial sword. “But you have overplayed your hand, Gabriel. The Hierophant and her Covenant have declared this a holy war. The Triad demands that we purge Calhara of the vaeyn heretics. There will be no retreat, no surrender, and no negotiation. Until the Matriarch Queen kneels before me, there can never be peace.”

“How many thousands of Imperial soldiers are you willing to sacrifice for that to happen?” Kristoff asked. “How many of our people must die before you admit your mistake?”

“The loyal dead live forever in the Triad's grace. No price is too great when eternity is the reward.” Lucian's smile widened. “I understand why you are afraid, but the gods demand sacrifices of us all. You must have faith.”

Master Kristoff's lip twitched in disgust, but even with his thoughts clouded by rage and frustration he wasn't willing to blaspheme in public. Spatting with the Emperor was bad enough, but openly speaking out against the Covenant was something else entirely.

“I will permit you to keep your land and your property, such as they are,” Lucian said. “I will even allow you to keep your title for the time being. In exchange, you will speak with your allies and convince them to abandon this foolish crusade. They will turn their armies upon our enemies, and if the Triad wills it you see your homeland liberated in the summer campaign.”

“And if I refuse?”

The Emperor chuckled. “I am the Sword of the Covenant and the Rightful Heir of Sanctus Veshar. The gods themselves have chosen me to rule. To deny my will is to covet oblivion.”

“Even you cannot afford to fight all of us at once.”

“I will stand against anyone and everyone who threatens my great Empire,” Lucian said. “I'm giving you a choice, Gabriel. You can either join me and share in the spoils of our victory...or you can die irrelevant and alone.”

Master Kristoff's grip tightened again, and I actually had to adjust my neck to breathe normally. No one seemed to notice or care.

“I will speak with the others,” Kristoff said. I didn't need to rely on telepathy to know he was lying. “Perhaps I can still convince them to see reason.”

“I certainly hope so, for their sakes,” Lucian replied evenly. “Now leave my palace and be gone from me sight. You will not see me again until you are successful.”

Kristoff remained in place for several seconds, and I wondered if despite everything that had happened he might still offer me as a gift. If not, I had no idea what would happen. Larric obviously wouldn't have been able to organize an escape yet. What would Master Kristoff do

with me? Would he blame me for this failure somehow? Would he finally snap and kill me like he'd threatened the other night? When I closed my eyes, I could actually feel the cold steel dragging across my throat...

"Good day, Your Majesty," Kristoff said with a shallow nod. "Enjoy the celebration."

He jerked my leash so hard I nearly tripped as he pivoted on a heel and strode away. We were halfway back to the stairwell when the Emperor spoke up again.

"One last thing, Gabriel," he said. "Your *avenari*—you intended to offer her as a gift, I assume."

Kristoff stopped and glanced back over his shoulder. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"I see. You should know by now that I have little use for elven whores."

"Elara isn't like other faeyn," Kristoff said. "General Torelius can attest to that."

"He already has." Lucian took a few steps forward. "So have many others in my court—enough that I'm genuinely curious what makes this particular cunt so special."

Kristoff smiled thinly and held out my leash. "Then I gladly loan her to you so you can decide for yourself. The Sword of the Covenant deserves nothing less."

I kept my eyes lowered even as I inhaled sharply. Had Master Kristoff been planning for this reaction all along? I knew he was a skilled actor and manipulator, but his frustration had seemed so perfectly authentic...

"Such a generous offer," Lucian said, stopping just a few inches in front of me. "But I'm afraid I must decline."

Kristoff hesitated for a moment before he lowered his hand. "Your Majesty?"

"I have no interest in borrowing a used slave from anyone. This is my Empire—and she, like all her heretical kin, are already mine by divine right."

Lucian lifted his chin, and a second later one of his Praetorians stomped over and wrenched my leash from Kristoff's grip. He scowled as if he wanted to protest, but the Emperor lifted his hand and demanded silence.

"Remember my offer, Gabriel," Lucian said. "Succeed, and perhaps I'll return your slaves as well as your land."

I glanced up for a fraction of a second just to see Master Kristoff's face. His jaw was clenched in impotent rage, but when he met my eyes I saw the faintest glimmer of recognition. Despite the public embarrassment, he had gotten exactly what he'd wanted. I was in the Emperor's hands, and just as importantly Lucian believed he had won. This was truly a master stroke, whether Kristoff had planned it or not.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Kristoff said. With a final half-bow, he turned and stormed off.

"The feast will begin soon," Lucian announced into the silence. "Everyone should move to the ballroom."

The nobles, already eager to leave, quickly turned and followed in Kristoff's wake. Thirty seconds later, only the Emperor and his guardsmen remained.

"I must commend you, sire," the Praetorian holding my leash smirked. "I've never seen Kristoff so humiliated."

"Humiliated men are often the most dangerous," Lucian replied soberly. "I want eyes on his mansion at all times. If anyone leaves or enters, I wish to know about it."

"It shall be done, sire." The Praetorian jerked my leash hard enough I yelped. "What about this one? Shall I deliver her to your quarters?"

"I have no interest in *avenari*. Not even this one."

“But you said—”

“She’s here because Kristoff values her,” Lucian explained. “He needs to remember his place.”

The Praetorian chuckled softly. “Shall I take her to the barracks then? My men will gladly find out what makes her so special.”

“No, not yet. Strip her down, put her in the stocks, and stick her in one of the viewing suites. I’ll decide what to do with her later.”

“As you wish, sire.”

With a contemptuous snort, the Praetorian half-pulled, half-dragged me through the double doors and into the private section of the palace. He choked up on my leash so high it wrenched my neck to the side, but he seemed more amused than concerned. My vision was so spotty by the time we crossed the corridor that I couldn’t have retracted our steps even if I’d wanted to.

The guard left me in the hands of two elderly faeyn slaves. They were almost certainly old enough to remember the fall of Sorthaal and the subjugation of our people...

I never had the chance to ask. On the Praetorian’s orders, they stripped me naked and stuck my head and hands into a pillory facing the bizarre wall-sized window on the far side of the room. The other side of the glass was dark enough that I couldn’t make anything out, and before I could ask one of them fed a long, phallic gag down my throat. They departed in silence a few moments later.

Once the door closed behind them, I closed my eyes and tried to focus on breathing through my nose. This wasn’t how I’d envisioned my first meeting with Lucian, but it sounded like he did plan on speaking with me at some point. That meant I’d get at least one opportunity to find out if Karethys had been right about him. If he really was a secret ally of the Faedari, he wouldn’t mistreat me or send me away. If he wasn’t...

Well, if he wasn’t then I needed to be prepared to do whatever was necessary to seduce him. This wasn’t like Korvale or the Infintium or Duke Arland’s estate. Imperial law wouldn’t protect me here. Master Kristoff and Larric couldn’t save me here. I was completely and utterly alone.

Distantly, I wondered if that was why I’d insisted on coming here in the first place. Perhaps all I really wanted was an opportunity to prove myself. Or perhaps I was just a fool.

Either way, I would find out soon enough.

Chapter Eight: The Emperor's New Slave

Hours passed in darkness. The suite was so well insulated I couldn't hear a peep from the party just a few hundred feet away, and eventually I stretched out through the Aether to see if I could sense anything. I didn't want to reach too far, given the presence of so many Inquisitors, but I could feel the general shifts in mood from the partygoers. At first, most were anxious and a bit weary, but as the night progressed their collective mood started to improve. I allowed myself to practice focusing on specific individuals as an alternative to focusing upon my stiffening muscles and general discomfort.

The gala had mostly wound down by the time someone reactivated the glowstones, but the light, strangely enough, didn't emanate from behind me—it came from the other side of the window. After I blinked away the sudden afterimage, I realized I was looking down upon an enormous, elaborate bedchamber. It was at least three times the size of Master Kristoff's, and the bed at the center was probably large enough to accommodate a half dozen people. Seven other windows were festooned around the room in a circle, though I couldn't actually see into any of them particularly well. This must have been what Lucian meant when he called this a “viewing room.” I had never seen anything quite like it.

I was still boggling at the design when the bedchamber door opened and Emperor Lucian strode inside. Behind him were three human women—all young and dressed for the gala. I remembered what Master Kristoff had told me about Lucian's alleged penchant for young noblewomen, and it didn't take long for him to prove that everything I'd heard was true.

The women fawned over him with a zeal that would have made most *avenari* jealous. As a group, they slowly and seductively stripped him of his breastplate and cloak. He tore open one woman's dress and began suckling at her breasts while another sank to the carpet and worked his cock free. They descended upon the bed mere moments later, and the orgy that followed was every bit as raw and bestial as anything I'd witnessed in Korvale.

Lucian took each of the women at least once over the next several hours, and he always made it a point to spill as deeply inside them as possible. During his downtime, the women entertained each other while he watched, and I found myself wondering if they'd even known each other beforehand. By the time his almost superhuman recovery finally floundered, I swore I could actually smell the sex through the glass. They all passed out in an intermingled heap, and the glowstones dimmed not long after.

At some point I managed to fall asleep despite my restraints, though the rest was fitful and confused. When morning finally came, I started to wonder how long Lucian might keep me in here to watch him. Once it was bright enough to see again, however, I realized that while the noblewomen were still sprawled across the bed, the Emperor himself was gone. The door to my suite opened not long after, and loud, booted footfalls echoed through the room.

“Well, well,” a familiar voice said. “I wondered what Lucian had done with you.”

I closed my eyes and bit down on the gag as General Torelius walked up behind me. It never occurred to me that he might actually stay in the palace. I reached out to the Aether and channeled its power through me just in case he decided to touch me again. I didn't even care about the risks at this point—there was no way in the void I was going to put up with him again, not even in the seat of Imperial power...

“I saw your master flee the gala with his tail tucked between his legs,” Torelius said, slapping my ass hard enough I actually yelped. “What a waste. All that fuss to get you back only to lose you a few days later.”

He chortled giddily. The pillory prevented me from turning around, but I could see the outline of his reflection in the glass as he sauntered over to the armoire a few yards away. I couldn't tell what was inside from this angle, but he perused the shelves with obvious glee.

"I sold all three of my girls last night," he went on. "Two of them went for almost double what I paid last year. The breeders are desperate for ripe stock this season. It's a shame Lucian didn't put you right back on the market—can you imagine Gabriel's face when some slack-jawed, inbred shit from the Wreath ended up buying you? I'd pay a thousand coins to see that."

He finally retrieved something from the shelf. I only realized it was a scourge when he uncoiled the short leather strands with a sharp *crack*.

"Lucian promised me a new girl by morning, but frankly this is so much better," Torelius sneered. "I wasn't finished with you, not by a long shot. Perhaps this will finally give me the opportunity to learn why Gabriel thinks you're so bloody special..."

He lashed my left thigh. I closed my eyes and bit down again, but it still felt like he'd poured liquid fire on my skin. He directed a second lash at my other hip and a third at the small of my back.

"I assume Gabriel took you at least once after your return," the general taunted. When I didn't respond, he lashed the whip across my ass. "That was a question, cunt! Answer me."

I garbled something unintelligible into the gag, which only made him laugh harder. After a few more strokes, he shuffled forward close enough that he could unfasten the straps holding the phallus in place.

"I'm surprised you haven't learned to speak with a cock in your mouth yet," Torelius chided. "Then again, I doubt Kristoff's wilted little stem gave you much practice..."

I gasped for air as he pulled the phallus from my mouth and tossed it upon the floor. My throat was so parched I couldn't even swallow.

"Relax, I'll give you something to wet those lips soon enough," he snickered. "Now answer my question: did Gabriel fuck you after I dropped you off?"

"Yes, my lord," I managed through clenched teeth. I called upon the Aether to dull the pain, but it was still distracting enough I wasn't sure if I could pierce his mind unless he actually touched me. My only other option was to try and destroy the pillory and break myself free, but I'd never attempted anything like that before...

"How many times?"

"My lord?"

The whip cracked across my lower back. "It's a simple question," he growled. "How many times did he fuck you?"

I pressed my eyes shut. The real answer was zero, of course, but I knew that's not what he wanted to hear. So instead I thought of Astanya. "Over a dozen times, my lord."

"Really? How pathetic. He probably couldn't even afford a replacement while you were gone, and Triad knows he could seduce a real woman to save his life." Torelius slowly dragged the leather tails across my upper back. "You can learn a great deal about a man by the way he treats his whores. Tell me: where does he leave his seed when he's finished with you?"

"Inside me, my lord."

"Never upon those perky tits of yours?"

"Sometimes."

Torelius grunted as he dragged the tails across my bare quim. "What about your pretty little lips and cheeks?"

"Rarely, my lord."

“Well, then I think it’s time you were properly marked by a real man,” he said. “But first I want you to describe everything Gabriel did to you in perfect detail.”

“What?”

He cracked the whip across my back. “You really are dull, aren’t you? It’s not complicated. Tell me the first thing he did to you. Did he shove his cock down your throat? Did he bend you over his desk and take your ass?”

My eyes fluttered open as I channeled the Aether to my fingertips. “He took me upon his bed, my lord.”

“That’s a lie—even Gabriel isn’t that boring.” Torelius grunted contemptuously, I heard him fiddle with the buckle on his belt. “I want details. I want to know exactly how you debased yourself like the worthless whore you are!”

He raised the scourge to strike me again, and I prepared to unleash a blast of energy to shatter my restraints—

“General Torelius,” a harsh female voice called from the hallway.

“I’m occupied,” he growled back. “If you have a message, give it to me—”

“That slave is the Emperor’s property,” the woman interrupted. Her reflection was difficult to make out, but I could tell she was wearing the black-red armor of a Praetorian. “You were never given permission to touch her.”

“You *dare*?” Torelius hissed. “I am the High General of the Imperial Legion!”

“His Majesty’s servants have already arranged entertainment for you at breakfast,” the Praetorian told him calmly. “Two fresh girls are already waiting for you downstairs.”

The general grumbled something under his breath and tossed the scourge aside. “I demand an audience with your master as soon as possible.”

“I will pass your message along, sir.”

After slapping my ass a final time, Torelius stormed out of the room like a petulant child. I let out a deep breath and released my hold on the Aether. I couldn’t believe I was actually grateful for the intervention of a Praetorian...

“His Majesty apologizes for your treatment last night,” the woman said as she stepped up behind me and unlocked my restraints. “But the deception was necessary to quell the concerns of the nobility. He cannot be seen treating one of your people without scorn, especially not during a public event.”

She helped me stand up and offered me a robe. I gently slipped it on, wondering what in the void was going on. The fact that the woman’s face was completely concealed by her helmet didn’t make reading her any easier.

“Please,” she implored, “follow me.”

She escorted me back into the hall and led me back through the long, pristine corridors. They were even emptier than last night—I didn’t spot anyone aside from a few other Praetorian. Eventually she nudged me towards a silver-plated door, and when she pushed it open my mouth nearly fell to the floor.

The room was twice times the size of Master Kristoff’s bedchamber and probably five times as ostentatious. On my left was an enormous marble tub filled with steaming hot water. Straight ahead of me was an antique table and sitting area with baskets full of fresh fruit. On my right was an open wardrobe with enough clothing to outfit half the noblewomen in Glorinfel. The outfits ranged from practical to elegant to seductive, and a cursory glance revealed that almost all the fabric had been imported from wealthy Torsian nations. Even more impressively, I could feel

a faint Aetheric aura emanating from nearly every dress—they were probably enchanted to contract or expand to perfectly fit the wearer.

“His Supreme Majesty was certain you’d appreciate a hot bath,” the Praetorian said. “When you’re finished, feel free to wear anything you like. I’ll be outside when you’re ready.”

She started to leave, but I managed to pull my eyes away from the wardrobe and turn before she closed the door. “I don’t understand,” I whispered. “What does he want from me?”

“Only your attention,” she told me. “He has wanted to meet you for some time, and he hopes his hospitality will convince you that he is not your enemy. Now please, indulge yourself.”

Before I could think of another question, she closed the door behind her. I stood in place for long moment, wondering if all of this was just a particularly vivid dream. But once my brain started functioning again, I pivoted back around and forced myself to evaluate the situation. This might have been some kind of test—the Emperor could have easily been watching me from behind one of the many mirrors. But if he was, I had no idea what he hoped to gain. The more likely explanation was that Karethys had been telling the truth about the Lucian’s loyalties. Perhaps he really was sympathetic to the Faedari. If so, this could have been his first attempt to prove it to me.

Either way, I decided not to waste this opportunity worrying about it. Tossing my robe aside, I stepped over to the bath and held my hand above the tub. The heat felt so good I immediately flung my legs over the edge and melted into the water. Within seconds I was completely renewed. My entire body tingled from toe to chin, and my mind felt more at ease than when I practiced one Master Kristoff’s meditation techniques. I could have stayed here for hours without batting an eyelash.

The secret was the enchanted gemstones embedded in the marble. Without them, the water couldn’t stay this warm for long. They were in high demand among the nobility, but they were so ludicrously decadent and expensive that only the Grand Dukes and a handful of others could possibly afford them. Master Kristoff had owned a few, but he’d been forced to leave them behind when we had abandoned Stormcrest. I had forgotten just how much I missed this.

Eventually I convinced myself I should probably move, in no small part due to the increasingly insistent rumbles in my stomach. I wrapped myself in a towel and picked some fruit off the table as I perused all the dresses and gowns in the wardrobe. Sharela probably would have passed-out just looking at them, and I had a feeling that most of the noblewomen in Sanctum would have paid a fortune just to swap places with me for an hour. Some would have gone so far as to deem a slave’s presence around such finery as sacrilege. The thought actually made me smile.

My skin was completely dry by the time I settled on an outfit. Rather than picking something purely elegant or purely seductive, I chose one of the turquoise saris woven from a mix of Numenese and Talishite silk. It was clearly designed for a taller human woman, but the instant I clasped the belt the enchantment within triggered. I watched in the mirror as the cloth molded around my slender figure. The skirt dangled just below my knees, while the top left my arms and navel bare.

I wondered distantly if Sharela would have made the same choice. For the last several years she had dressed me almost every day, especially when Master Kristoff had anything interesting planned. Ripe faeyn females were so valuable they almost always displayed their tattoo-free stomachs, and I was tempted to reconsider my choice just to make a point. But the bottom line was I that I liked my appearance, and it was strangely satisfying to make the decision for myself even if the end result was the same.

I granted myself another five minutes to finish a last piece of fruit before I reopened the door. The Praetorian was still waiting outside.

"I'm ready," I said. "Where are we going?"

"His Supreme Majesty wishes to meet you in the Cartarium," she replied. "Please, follow me."

We wound through several more corridors and two flights of stairs before we reached the palace's uppermost level. A massive, wall-length window provided a startling view of Sanctum. The Aetherium, the Grand Temple of Veshar, the Legion Citadel—they were all visible from here, along with dozens of other important buildings. By decree of Lucian's father, Rikus, no structure in the city could rise higher than the palace, and after seeing this I could understand why.

Across from the window was another silver-plated door, and the Praetorian gestured inside. "The Emperor will be along shortly."

I nodded and crept forward. The chamber was completely dark at first, but the glowstone sconces lit up once I actually stepped inside. The walls were covered in paintings and sculptures, at least half of which predated the Empire by centuries, but the floor itself was completely devoid of furniture. The stone tiles were painted, however, and after a few moments I realized it wasn't just another mural or random pattern—it was an enormous map of Calhara.

The scale was truly staggering. Landmarks, cities, towns, even villages...everything was there, down to the smallest detail. But the longer I studied it, the more I realized that some of those details weren't accurate. The provincial borders were completely missing...

"For almost twenty years, this room served as my father's ever-growing harem," the Emperor's tenor voice echoed across the chamber. "He brought in slaves from every region in the world. Crell and Solarian, Yamatan and Talishite, human and elf...he was never particularly discerning. If the gods consider variety a vice, then my father is surely rotting in the blackest part of the Void."

I glanced back over my shoulder as Lucian strode through the doorway. His crimson cape billowed behind him, and he had donned his sleeveless leather breastplate and matching greaves. Out of pure reflex, I dropped to a knee and lowered my head. Slaves weren't even supposed to look upon him, let alone make any sort of eye contact.

"I ordered the renovation even before my official coronation," Lucian went on. "It took the laborers almost four months to complete construction, and the Artificers needed another two to add the final touches. But the results speak for themselves, wouldn't you agree?"

"I..." I stumbled in an attempt to find my voice. The serenity I'd found in the bath just minutes earlier evaporated the instant I saw him. "It is quite magnificent, Your Majesty."

He grunted softly. "Few of my slaves have ever seen the Cartarium. Fewer still understand its purpose. But I suspect you might be the exception."

I remained silent as he paced around me. I had no idea what to say or how to react. Back in Master Kristoff's mansion, I'd planned out a dozen different strategies for approaching this conversation. As intimidating as the Emperor was, I had managed just fine with other powerful men like the Grand Dukes. But now that I was actually here, I felt completely unprepared. Lucian was one of the youngest members of the Imperial Court, yet he projected an aura of power unlike anything I'd ever experienced...

"That was a question, in case I was unclear," Lucian said mildly. "Do you understand what this is?"

I swept my eyes across the floor. "It is a map of the Empire, Your Majesty."

“A child could have told me that much. Surely you can do better.” He approached close enough to me that I could see his boots, and I could feel the weight of his glare upon me when I didn’t respond. “I’m disappointed, Elara. A mutual friend said you possessed remarkable inner strength, and in my experience she is rarely mistaken.”

I swallowed and bit down on my lower lip. He couldn’t have offered me a stronger cue, and this was my chance to take it.

“You have spoken with Lady Karethys,” I whispered as I slowly tilted my chin upwards. It was a testament to the power of my *avenari* training that forcing myself to make eye contact was so difficult. But when I did, Lucian merely smiled and offered me his hand.

“She told me all about your ‘negotiations’ with Duke Darkstone in the Vale,” he said, slipping his fingers into mine. “She also told me the truth about you—a truth I had already suspected for some time.”

“Your Majesty?”

His smile widened. “Kneeling is a sign of submission...but our kind should never submit to anyone. Rise.”

After releasing a final calming breath, I slowly rose to my feet. His hand was incredibly warm, and I was certain he could feel me trembling.

“Most slaves who dare look upon their Emperor are punished,” Lucian said. “But as I said, our kind can never be slaves. Not to the Covenant, not to Empire, and especially not to the Aether. We are Unbound—our will is made reality.”

I was tempted to continue feigning ignorance. I was even more tempted to outright deny him. But resistance was obviously pointless. If he planned to turn me over to the Covenant, he didn’t need my confession to do it. He was their chosen avatar.

“She told me about you,” I whispered. “Not directly, but I overheard her speaking with my...erm...handler.”

“You mean the Faedari operative posing as the bodyguard of one of the Grand Dukes,” Lucian said. “Yes, I know all about Larric as well. Karethys is quite fond of him, and she doesn’t express that sentiment towards many humans. Particularly males.”

He chuckled softly and lifted my other hand in his. He studied me for a long moment, but for one of the few times in my life I knew I wasn’t being appraised for my beauty. His eyes seemed to be looking *through* me rather than at me.

“Karethys told you about my abilities?” I asked softly.

“No,” Lucian said. “She doesn’t know the truth, or at least she didn’t until we last spoke. But I had my suspicions before Kristoff dispatched you into the Vale. When my spies first informed me that he was using his new *avenari* to gain support from the rest of the Quorum, I assumed he was plotting something. But when Arland and the Artificers and others joined him so rapidly, I knew there was more going on. Your master is a fraction as clever as he believes, and he has never been a particularly shrewd negotiator.”

“And you didn’t wish to stop him?”

“Why would I? He’s doing exactly what I want.”

My brow furrowed. “Karethys said you secretly wished to start a civil war between the provinces and destroy the Covenant in the process.”

“What I want is to save this world from the fools who control it,” Lucian said flatly. “The Covenant is the locus of their power. Without it, the Empire as we know could not exist.”

“But you’re the Emperor. You can already do anything you wish.”

“If only that were true,” he murmured. “I’m sure Gabriel taught you enough about politics to realize that no one man, not even me, can truly control the Empire. There are many factions vying for power—the gentry, the Legion, the Covenant, even the Artificers—and coalitions are only maintained by tenuous promises and even more tenuous threats of violence. I am going to change that.”

My eyes drifted back down to the map below our feet. “That’s what this is,” I whispered. “Your vision of an Empire without borders, without provinces.”

“It’s the *beginning* of my vision,” Lucian clarified. “Once the Covenant is destroyed and the old coalitions crumble, there will no longer be a need for borders or provinces or Grand Dukes. We won’t even need a Legion.”

I wandered over Stormcrest on the map and glanced back up to him. “That’s why you’re doing this? To consolidate power?”

He snorted and shook his head. “You misunderstand, Elara. I am not a petty duke seeking a larger duchy. I—*we*—are Unbound. The Covenant preaches that we are heretics who deserve death, but we both know that’s a lie. They fear us because they cannot control us. It is a lesson repeated time and time again throughout the ages.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve no idea what Kristoff taught you about history, but Calhara was very different place a few centuries ago,” Lucian said as he sauntered over to the Sorthaal Highlands on the map. “The world was still recovering from the Second Godswar where Unbound channelers in Torsia rose up against their chains. The devastation was widespread and brutal. Millions died in the fighting. Entire cultures were changed forever.”

He paused and gestured down. “Your people still ruled Sorthaal, and they worshipped a long dead goddess named Anvira. But most of their channelers were Unbound. Just like the vaeyn, they were never afraid to harness the power the Aether had gifted them. Their civilization thrived while human kingdoms rose and fell across the world.”

“Until Sanctus Veshar destroyed it,” I whispered. “I have read the stories.”

“What you’ve read is almost certainly nonsense,” Lucian grumbled. “In the modern world, the power of the Aether can only be channeled by two types of people: the Unbound and those given access to the Godstone by the Covenant. Your former master is one of the Bound, as is Duke Darkstone. Their power was gifted to them by the Covenant and can be stripped away at any moment.”

I nodded slowly. “But they have no way to control us. That’s why the Inquisitors are so intent on hunting us down.”

“Precisely. It’s a simple enough truth, I know, but so many in this city refuse to see it...” He snorted softly shook his head. “The real question that no one dares ask is *why* the Godstone is capable of creating channelers. Where does its power come from? How can the Covenant control it so easily?”

“The stone contains the souls of the Triad,” I said. “The gods grant power to those they deem worthy.”

“Those are the words inscribed in the Levinthian and parroted by the Hierophant,” Lucian said. “The truth is more complex.”

He opened his right hand and conjured a small ball of blue flame into his palm. “What if I told you that Sanctus Veshar and his allies weren’t really gods?” he asked softly. “What if I told you that they, like many before them, were merely extremely powerful Unbound?”

“I...I don’t know,” I murmured. “Why would you believe that?”

“Because I have read books besides the Levinthian. I have studied histories beyond those contained in the library of the Paravel Divintium. The vaeyn are a source of great wisdom for those willing to listen, and they know the truth far better than any Covenant priest.”

Lucian snapped his hand shut and extinguished the flame. “In the ancient past, a handful of Unbound humans discovered that they could imbue their supplicants with a fraction of their power, allowing them to channel the Aether. Over time, these Unbound essentially became living gods. They ruled the world, and their followers slaughtered one another in their name.”

My eyes narrowed in confusion. I had never heard anything like this before, but I didn’t sense any overt deception from him. Of course that only meant he *believed* what he was saying. He still could have been wrong.

“Sanctus Veshar was one of those Unbound,” Lucian went on. “So were the other members of the Triad, most likely. They forged our Empire, and before they died they infused the Godstone with their power. They knew that their worshippers could use it as a leash to control all future channelers—except other Unbound. For that, they created the Covenant.”

I frowned in thought. “To demonize us, you mean.”

“Yes. What better way to control potential rivals than to brand them as heretics? They believed the rage of the masses would keep us from ever rising up and destroying what they had created.”

I shook my head and closed my eyes. This all sounded so ludicrous I didn’t even know how to respond. Still, I couldn’t deny that a part of me found it fascinating. And it did make a twisted kind of sense...

“Why are you telling me all of this?” I asked.

“Because I want you to understand my vision of the future,” Lucian said. “I want you to understand the ramifications. Our people are more than just innate channelers, Elara.”

He smiled and placed his hands upon my shoulders. “We are living gods—and it is long past time we reclaimed what is rightfully ours.”

Chapter Nine: Vision of the Future

I stood there in silence for several seconds, wondering if Lucian was mad or merely delusional. His words went beyond idle rumination; they were downright sacrilege. The Levinthian was crystal clear on the subject of the Aether: it was a dangerous force that could only be harnessed by those loyal to the Triad. These “Bound” channelers swore fealty to the Hierophant, and their power could be stripped at any time if they disobeyed. The Inquisitors, the Tel Bator, the nobles who dabbled in magic—they were all Bound to the Godstone, and through it the Covenant.

Master Kristoff begrudged their control. He had spoken of it often while he’d trained me, and I had no doubt that many others felt the same way. Duke Darkstone would likely have his abilities severed the instant he formerly declared the Vale’s independence, and so would every other channeler in his court. The price of dissent was so steep it had held the Empire together for generations. Part of the reason Kristoff had wanted to gather such a large army was because he knew the Quorum’s forces would be at a tremendous disadvantage without magic of their own.

Still, none of that contradicted Lucian’s story. If anything, it made his words sound even more plausible. The Covenant’s war against the Unbound was as political as it was religious, and Larric had told me that one of the reason they hated elves so much was that we were more likely to be born Unbound. That was why the rules for faeyn breeding were so stringently enforced...

“I understand it’s a lot to take in,” Lucian said into the silence. “It took me years to uncover the truth and nearly as long to accept it. Then I met Karethys and everything changed.”

I glanced back up to him. “How did the Emperor meet a vaeyn?”

“It wasn’t long after your friend Larric encountered her and was exiled from the Covenant. When I heard the reports, I knew the Inquisitors were lying and decided to investigate myself.” He chuckled softly. “She could have killed me quite easily. I had only just started to unlock my powers, and I had no idea what a shadow knight was really capable of. But thankfully she realized I was the Emperor’s son, and she suspected I would be far more useful as a hostage than a corpse. Once she learned I was Unbound...well, everything else just fell neatly into place.”

I suddenly wished Larric were here. I had the feeling he didn’t know Karethys quite as well as he thought...or at least, he didn’t know everything she’d been up to. I made a mental note to ask him about it later.

“The two of you plotted out a way to trigger a civil war,” I whispered. “And you’ve been working together ever since.”

“Not always directly, but yes,” Lucian confirmed. “The vaeyn are fearsome but not prolific. She knew they could never survive an offensive war against the combined might of the Empire. If the provinces were set against each other, however, they could do a tremendous amount of damage in a short amount of time...as you have seen first-hand.”

I nodded absently. At this point, the fall of Stormcrest seemed like a lifetime ago. I had almost been a completely different person. When I thought back to the days just after Master Kristoff had purchased me, the memories almost seemed like they belonged to someone else...

“So you fed them enough information that could conquer most of Glorinfel,” I whispered. “You knew it would drive Master Kristoff back to Sanctum and cripple the nobility’s trust in the Legion.”

“Indeed,” he said, gesturing down to the border between Sulinor and Glorinfel. “We knew that Stormcrest was the ideal target. The Kristoff family has always had a strained

relationship with the High Generals, and I suspected I could use him to create a rift between Torelius and the Grand Dukes. Still, I would be lying if I claimed I'd expected things to proceed so smoothly. I assumed the Legion would need to suffer many more defeats before Gabriel could muster the Quorum." He grinned. "I never counted upon you."

I wasn't entirely sure why, but his approving gaze made me feel more vulnerable than if I'd been naked on my knees in front of him. I hugged my arms across my chest, but it didn't help.

"How long did you expect it to take?" I asked quietly.

"A year, at least," Lucian said. "Several seemed far more likely. The vaeyn are tremendously patient, you understand—one of the many advantages of living so long. Karethys knew I was young, and she was content to wait decades for our scheme to unfold, if necessary. We made a number of contingency plans just in case Gabriel wasn't as malleable as we hoped."

I thought back to Master Kristoff's comments about Lucian's fetish for young noblewomen and the hedonistic display I'd witnessed last night. "Children," I whispered. "You planned to birth as many Unbound children as you could."

He chuckled softly and clasped his hands behind his back. "Once again you impress me—though I do apologize for last night's performance. Placing you in the stocks was necessary to keep up appearances in front of the court. Still, I hope you found the view...compelling."

"Master Kristoff said the Covenant was worried about your offspring," I said. "But they don't know that you're Unbound."

"No. But Unbound or not, imagine the political chaos if dozens of noblewomen suddenly gave birth to the Emperor's offspring." Lucian snickered. "The Imperial Court would devour itself. The entire social hierarchy of the Empire could collapse."

"Surely someone here has noticed what you're doing."

"Of course they have. The priests have been attempting to shield my 'guests' with an Aetheric enchantment to prevent pregnancy, and under normal circumstances they would succeed."

"But you're Unbound, so you can dispel the enchantment," I reasoned. Considering all the other injustices I witnessed on daily basis, it seemed silly to worry about young noblewomen who were clearly grateful for the opportunity to bed their Emperor. But for whatever reason, my stomach still churned in disgust.

"In a few months, the palace will be beset with claims of new heirs," Lucian said. "In year, it will be drowned by them. And if any of my children happen to be Unbound...well, all the better."

I pursed my lips. "What about the women? Do they know the priests are trying to shield them?"

"Of course not. They would resist if they did. You need to understand where they're coming from: the girls and their families are desperate for status in the court. They crave my attention and yearn for my seed." Lucian smiled. "Though I admit...I quite enjoy giving it to them."

I glanced away and tried to conceal my growing unease. His plan made sense, of course, and he was probably correct about the damage it would cause in the long-term. But thinking about it made me feel sick nonetheless.

"I still don't understand exactly what you want," I said after a moment. "An Empire where the Unbound don't fear the Covenant?"

“I want an Empire *without* the Covenant,” Lucian said. “The Hierophant preaches that humans are the true stewards of this world, but we both know that’s nonsense. Chagari, elf, orc, human—it doesn’t matter. The only true power is the Aether, and those of us that can wield it must take our rightful place as its rulers.”

A cold shiver slowly wormed its way down my spine. There was no mistaking the veiled menace in his words. “What about everyone else?”

He studied me for several seconds before he chuckled again. “You’ve lived in servitude all your life. You’ve been degraded and humiliated almost every day...yet you’re actually worried about the people who’ve held your leash for so long?”

“I don’t wish to hurt anyone,” I stammered.

“You hurt those bandits outside the Infintium,” he pointed out. “You hurt the Inquisitor who tried to capture you near Lakewatch.”

I felt my cheek twitch. I knew I shouldn’t been surprised that he knew so much, but the shiver in my spine transformed into a full-blown shudder.

“Don’t mistake my meaning—you absolutely did the right thing,” Lucian added. “If anything, you’ve shown remarkable restraint. You could have murdered your master months ago. Gabriel is a competent channeler, but he’s not Unbound.”

“Master Kristoff has done a great deal for me,” I said. “He taught me to read, he taught me how to control my magic...he could have given me over to the Covenant at any time, but he didn’t.”

“Only because he believed you were useful to him. Don’t mistake self-interest for charity.” Lucian grunted and shook his head. “I understand why you still feel some degree of loyalty to him. He’s conditioned you to serve him, body and soul. That’s a leash you must learn to break for yourself.”

He paused for a moment and eyed me up and down again. “What I’m offering you is a chance for true freedom, Elara. A life without collar or leash or scorn. From here at my side, you can help me shape the future of the Empire...and the future of our people.”

“You don’t even know me,” I whispered.

“I know what you are, and that’s enough,” Lucian said. “The Levinthian tells us that it is humanity’s divine right to subjugate the lesser species. It says that the strong should naturally rule over the weak. There’s truth in those words, but strength has nothing to do with race and everything to do with *blood*. The Aether is part of us both, and there is no stronger bond in the entire world.” He slowly paced towards me. “Together we can learn to channel magic just like the Triad. Together we can empower armies of loyal followers and bring true, lasting stability to Calhara and beyond!”

When I continued recoiling from him, he stopped and smiled. “Perhaps what you really need is a demonstration.”

Lucian gestured back towards the chamber door, and the Aether stirred as he pulled them with telekinetic force. The female Praetorian on the other side turned to look, and he bade her to join us with a wave of his hand.

“Since the dawn the Empire the Praetorian Guards have protected the Veshari Emperor from all threats,” Lucian said. “Their training is every bit as brutal as that of the Inquisitors, possibly more so. They willingly eschew virtually every pleasure of the flesh, and they are taught to resist telepathic manipulation. They are incorruptible and indomitable.”

The woman took up a position next to him and stopped. Lucian acknowledged her with a nod.

“The Covenant believes they are kept ‘pure’ because they are never subjected to the temptations of the Aether,” he said. “I disagree.”

On cue, the Praetorian lifted her hand and conjured sparks of Aether power to her palm. I gasped and backpedaled out of pure reflex. I knew she wasn’t bound to the Godstone, otherwise the Covenant would have already know about Lucian’s true power. Which meant that either she was also Unbound....

Or Lucian was right. Her power was coming from him.

“If you concentrate,” Lucian said, “you’ll see the tether stretching between us.”

My eyes flicked over to the Praetorian woman as I reached out to the Aether. I could feel its power swirling around her, but I wasn’t certain what he meant by a “tether.” She seemed identical to every other channeler I’d met.

“Here,” Lucian prompted, offering me his hand. “Let me show you.”

I reached out and touched his skin. A piece of his mind cracked opened, and I inhaled sharply as a deluge of thoughts and emotions washed over me. The tether he mentioned materialized in the air almost like a ghostly tendril grasping out through the Aether. Lucian was like a fountain of magic showering his power upon anyone he wished...

I withdrew my hand. I could feel prickles in my skin even as I backed away. After a few more seconds the Praetorian stopped channeling, but Aetheric energy continued crackling around the Cartarium like we were standing amidst a great thunderstorm.

“I believe she’s seen enough,” Lucian said, smiling. The Praetorians nodded, then returned to her watchful perch outside the chamber.

“It seems...impossible,” I whispered.

“I know. I thought the same for a while. Karethys told me that only a handful of Unbound ever master the technique, but I wouldn’t be at all surprised if you were one of them.”

I let out a deep breath and bit down on my lower lip. The tingling sensation had only now started to fade. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you’ve bent half the nobles in this city to your will in the span of a few short months,” Lucian said. “Because Gabriel sees you as the ultimate political weapon. He’s not wrong. The Covenant is right to fear us.”

His smile widened as he stepped closer to me. “Consider again what I’m offering you, Elara. You will have power far beyond any of people who’ve ever controlled you. The people of the Empire will stop seeing you as an elf or a slave—they will see you as a *goddess*.”

I hugged my arms together again. This was all happening so quickly. I didn’t know what to think, and I definitely didn’t know what to *do*.

“And if I refuse?” I asked.

Lucian shrugged. “Then I will return you to your former master. If you would prefer to kneel rather than rule, there’s nothing I can do for you.”

“But I know your plans. I know your secret.”

“A secret no one will believe coming from the lips of an elf,” he said flatly. “The instant you leave this palace, your voice loses all value. I am the only one in the Empire who can protect you.”

I swallowed the anxious lump rising in my throat. “What about the Faedari rebels?”

Lucian grunted derisively. “They can’t help you. They can’t teach you how to control your power; they can’t grant you a place in the corridors of power. I understand why you might have some affection for them, but you need to be realistic. They’re a thorn in the side of my rivals, nothing more. If you really want to help them, you’ll join me in destroying the Covenant.

You could even empower some of them as your servants as you wish. You could restore the dignity of your people one loyal supplicant at a time.”

I paced across the outline of Sorthaal. “Somehow I doubt that’s what they would want.”

“It doesn’t matter. They don’t matter.” Lucian sighed. “I understand that you’re overwhelmed right now, Elara, but soon enough you’ll realize what’s truly at stake. The Aether itself must have given you this power for a reason. There’s no turning away from destiny.”

My eyes flicked back over to meet his. I couldn’t bring myself to trust him yet, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. The world he described, the vision he had just laid out... I didn’t want anything to do with it. I honestly wasn’t sure *what* I was anymore, but I knew I wasn’t a leader—and I certainly wasn’t a goddess.

Still, despite the lingering knots in the pit of my stomach, I reminded myself that I had learned even more than I’d hoped. I had confirmed that the Emperor was Unbound, and I knew precisely what he was up to. The fact that nothing had gone the way I’d anticipated didn’t make a difference. I just needed to get back to Larric and tell him everything...

“I need time,” I whispered. “You’ve given me a great deal to consider.”

“You’re welcome to stay as long you like,” Lucian said. “And don’t worry—I’ll make sure Torelius doesn’t bother you again. My Praetorian can conceal you from the other nobles. You’re free to do anything you wish as long as you stay beneath my wing.”

“His Majesty is most generous.”

He flicked his hand to the side. “You don’t need to call me that. Emperor, *avenari*...the Aether cares nothing for titles. All that matters is we can both hear its clarion call. It binds us together in a way no one else could possibly understand.”

I nodded slowly. “Still, I...I think I would prefer to return to Master Kristoff. At least for a while.”

Lucian studied me in silence for several long moments. “If that is your wish,” he said. “Just remember that I won’t be able to protect you—and recognize that my offer will not last forever.”

The threat in his voice was veiled but unmistakable, but at this point I didn’t really care. I needed to speak with Larric, and bringing him back to the palace with me would only entrap us both. Besides, I had a feeling he wouldn’t be any more receptive to the Emperor’s “vision” than I was...

“I understand,” I murmured.

“Then I’ll summon a carriage for you immediately,” Lucian said. “I’ve no doubt that Gabriel will be delighted by your swift return.”

“I know he will,” I agreed. “And I won’t tell him anything.”

Lucian smiled faintly. From the glimmer in his eyes, I suspected he knew exactly what I was planning. He simply didn’t care. He wasn’t disappointed in the least—on the contrary, he was supremely confident that I would regret my decision and return in short order.

“I’ve never met anyone quite like you, Elara,” he said, touching my shoulders again. I felt a rush of energy as the Aether crackled between us. “There’s so much we can teach other. I hope you’ll join me soon.”

I smiled back. “You won’t have to wait long for my answer. I promise.”

Chapter Ten: The Duke of Nothing

The female Praetorian escorted me outside the palace less than an hour later. We maneuvered through a series of hidden passages that allowed us to completely avoid the rest of the palace guards and servants along the way. They were so pristine I assumed Lucian had ordered their construction shortly after he'd taken the throne, and he probably wanted to prove that he could hide me from the prying eyes of the gentry. But that wasn't the part of his plan that concerned me. I had no doubts about his competence—if anything, I was more worried because of it. His cunning made it all the more likely that his terrifying vision of the future might actually come to pass...

Once the Praetorian helped me inside the carriage, I closed my eyes and began mentally rehearsing how I would explain all of this to Larric. Calling it “overwhelming” was a tremendous understatement. I had just learned a score of secrets, any one of which could literally tear the Empire apart overnight if they were whispered into the right ears. I wondered what the Faedari would do with this information, if anything. I wondered if Karethys and the vaeyn actually knew the full depth of Lucian's scheme.

I wondered if they believed he was as mad as I did.

I was still completely flustered by the time we arrived at the estate, but I took a deep breath and forced myself to relax in preparation of what was to come. One of the house guards rushed towards me after I stepped out of the carriage. I couldn't tell if he was more surprised by my presence or the fact I wasn't wearing a collar or leash.

“By the bloody void,” he rasped, eyeing me up and down. “Where is your collar?”

“The Emperor removed it,” I told him. I saw no point in lying.

The man's brow furrowed in confusion. He was obviously more worried about protocol than he was about me running off—none of the men here had ever seen me as a threat. “Well, His Excellency will be pleased to see you,” the man said as he grabbed my wrist. “This way.”

“No.”

He froze in place, so stunned he couldn't even speak. It had probably never occurred to him that I would ever refuse a command.

“Take me to the barracks,” I ordered, reaching out to the Aether and penetrating his mind. I was tempted to command him to stand here and wait for me, but with the other gate guard's observing us I knew I needed to be a bit more subtle. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he mumbled. “Yes, of course.”

He led over to Larric's quarters without further fuss. After he released his grip on my arm, I glanced around the courtyard one last time before I cracked open the door and slipped into the room.

It was empty.

I hissed between my teeth. He must have been inside the mansion meeting with Master Kristoff. Hopefully that meant the two of them were back on decent terms. Larric would probably have a much easier time reaching his rebel contacts without anyone looking over his shoulder...

“Captain Aresi is gone.”

I whipped my head back around to the doorway. The charmed guard was standing there, his face still blank.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Where is he?”

“The Inquisitors took him away.”

My stomach dropped so hard I nearly lost my balance. “*What?*”

“He and Duke Kristoff began arguing after the Green Gala last night,” the guard said. “He ordered the captain restrained and sent a runner to the temple. A squad of Inquisitors arrived a few minutes later.”

“But...” My voice died as my throat turned to stone. A tremor rippled through my body and caused my knees to wobble. I wanted to argue and protest, but when I rummaged through the guard’s memories I could see he was telling the truth. He hadn’t been close enough to the confrontation to hear anything, but he’d watched from a distance as Master Kristoff and Larric had screamed at each other. Eventually Kristoff had called for the guards, and they’d swarmed over Larric in a group. Strangely, he hadn’t fought back.

“I need to speak with the master,” I breathed. “Take me to him.”

The guard nodded helpfully. “Of course.”

He led me through the mansion straight towards the conference chamber. My mind conjured up dozens of terrifying scenarios about what the Covenant had already done to Larric, but I forced myself to stay calm and wait until I had all the details. Once we arrived, I ordered the guard back to his post and waited until he was out of sight. I knew I should have taken a few more seconds to compose myself and decide precisely what I wanted to say, but I was too anxious to wait. Biting down on my lower lip, I pushed open the door and strode inside.

“Elara?” Master Kristoff breathed from behind his desk. “How the...? Merciful Triad, what the hell are you doing here?”

“The Emperor released me,” I said, closing the door and creeping farther inside.

“So soon?” he gasped. “What happened? What did you learn?”

“First you need to tell me what happened to Larric,” I demanded. “The guard outside said you turned him over to the Covenant.”

Kristoff blinked in surprise. I had never spoken to him so forcefully before, and he was clearly taken aback. “What did you just say?”

“Where is Larric?” I repeated. “Did you really call the Inquisitors on him?”

For a moment his expression was so blank I thought the guard might have actually been mistaken about what had happened. But after a few more seconds Kristoff finally grunted and leaned back in his chair.

“So I was right after all. Of course...”

“Right about what?” I asked. “Where is he?”

Kristoff started directly at me as he folded his arms across his chest. “Larric is gone. And he won’t be coming back.”

“Why?” I breathed, my hands balling into fists. “Why would you give him to the Covenant?”

“Because he betrayed me. And so did you.”

My heart stopped mid-beat. “What?”

Kristoff snorted softly and shook his head. He no longer looked surprised or confused in the slightest—on the contrary, he looked like a man who’d just had an epiphany. “I knew Larric was lying about what happened in the Vale,” he whispered. “I knew there was more going on than a random bandit attack that left nearly a dozen trained soldiers dead. He learned the truth about you, didn’t he? He learned that you were Unbound.”

My first instinct was to deny it, but when I opened my mouth my voice refused to cooperate.

“If any other man had realized what you were, he would have immediately turned you over to the Covenant,” Kristoff went on. “He would have turned me in, too...but Larric didn’t do either. Now why do you think that is?”

When I didn’t respond, Kristoff snorted again and stood. “Your memories told me that Larric knew this vaeyn shadow knight before he met her again at Skyfall. He brushed her off as an ‘acquaintance of circumstance,’ but I knew he was lying. He respected her. He *cared* for her. Despite years of fevered insistence that he loathed elves, the truth is that he’s an *aeynshok*, isn’t he? He secretly loves your kind.”

Kristoff swiveled around the side of his desk as his eyes narrowed dangerously. “I think he also cares about *you*—and after he saved you at the Infintium, you started caring for him too, didn’t you? Why else would you drag his half-dead body to an Imperial camp? Why else would you be so concerned for his health after he arrived?” He shook his head again and snickered. “Why else would you have risked sneaking out of your chambers to meet with him in the middle of the night?”

I forced myself to swallow. “I-I...”

“I can’t believe that you of all people would grow so overconfident,” Kristoff said, shaking his head. “Did you really believe you could conceal your movements from me? I taught you everything, Elara. I am your master!”

“My lord,” I mumbled out of reflex. “I have never—”

In a single smooth motion, Kristoff lunged forward and backhanded me across the face. I crumpled to the floor like an empty sack. Tears burned in my eyes and blood streamed in my mouth.

“How else have you betrayed me, I wonder?” Kristoff growled as he loomed over me. “What other secrets have you been keeping from me?”

He grabbed the collar of my dress and jerked me upwards so rapidly something in my neck popped. I flailed at him with my left hand, but he easily grabbed my wrist and wrenched it hard behind my back.

“All this time I was wrong about you,” Kristoff spat into my ear. “I thought you were loyal. I thought you appreciated all the freedoms I’ve given you. Without me, the Covenant would have burned you in a pit years ago. Without me, you’d be another useless, illiterate whore!”

With a vicious growl, he shoved me forward and bent me over his desk. I tried to wriggle free from his grasp, but I was no match for his strength. Soon both of my hands were pinned behind my back as his full weight pressed down upon me.

“You’re going to tell me everything you’ve been hiding from me, starting with whatever happened in palace last night,” Kristoff hissed. “Why did the Emperor let you go? What did you say to him?”

“M-master, please—”

“Tell me!” he demanded. “You betrayed me again, didn’t you? That’s the only reason he would have let you go. You must have told him everything about my plans!”

“I swear, I didn’t tell him anything.”

He lifted me up and slammed me against the table hard enough that it knocked the breath from my lungs. “You treacherous cunt,” he snarled. “I shouldn’t trust a word that comes from your mouth. Why would I when I could just tear the truth from your memories?”

Kristoff thrust into my mind. My meager defenses crumpled in an instant, and I shrieked in terror as he brutally and indiscriminately pilfered through my most intimate thoughts. In the

span of a single heartbeat, everything was laid bare before him—Larric’s relationship with Karethys, the truth of what had happened at Lakewatch, even my growing sympathies for the Faedari rebels. I couldn’t mentally block him out or physically throw him off.

But as Emperor Lucian had reminded me, I was still Unbound. And that meant I was never truly helpless.

Calling out to the Aether, I unleashed a dissonant telepathic scream. Normally Master Kristoff’s defenses would have absorbed the brunt of the blast, but with our minds joined so completely he had relaxed his own mental barriers. The scream hit him like a truncheon across the face, and he cried out in shock and stumbled backwards. The instant his grip on my wrists faltered, I flipped around on the desk and extended my palms towards him. The Aether burned around me, and my hands erupted in a geyser of magical flame.

The bandits outside the Infintium hadn’t stood a chance against such power. Even the Inquisitor at Lakewatch hadn’t been able to defend himself against such a potent surprise attack. But whatever else he might have been, Master Kristoff was still an experienced channeler. Even as he staggered backwards he erected a shimmering, protective disc in front of him that harmlessly directed the flames aside.

“Impossible...” he breathed when my assault finally faltered. His eyes widened in horror behind his Aetheric shield. “I never taught you...how could you have learned that technique?”

In between frantic gasps for breath, I bit down on my lip and unleashed another assault. Once again the flaming torrent failed to penetrate his barrier, but this time the residual splash ignited portions of the carpet and ceiling. By the time I finally collapsed backwards in exhaustion a choking cloud of smoke had begun filling the air.

“Triad forgive me,” Kristoff stammered. “I should have known you couldn’t be controlled. I should have killed you at the first sign of disobedience!”

He lunged forward and grabbed me by the throat. I tried to fight him off, but I was too weak. I tried to conjure another burst of flame, but I was too exhausted. I was completely helpless...and I knew I was going to die.

“You were supposed to be my weapon!” he roared as he flung me off the desk and held me in the air. “You were supposed to be my vengeance! You are a slave! And I am your master!”

His grip tightened until I couldn’t breathe. I continued flailing helplessly at his arm as I slowly asphyxiated...

And then door behind us abruptly burst open. A red haze clouded my vision, but I caught a glimpse of a lone figure striding forward into the room, a heavy crossbow in hand. At first I assumed it was one of the guards coming to rescue Kristoff from the spreading fire...but then I recognized the slender frame and long blonde hair.

“Astanya?” Kristoff gasped. “What are you—?”

Before he could finish the sentence, Astanya lifted the weapon and fired. The pressure on my neck suddenly released, and I collapsed to the floor in a gasping heap. I coughed and clutched at my throat as I watched Master Kristoff frantically try to regain his balance despite the bolt jutting out of his shoulder.

“You stupid bitch!” he growled. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

His hands crackled with magic, and he pointed at her as if he were about to blast her to cinders—

But he was already too late. Astanya charged across the room with the speed and fury of a lightning bolt, and just before she reached him she twisted her body sideways and kicked him squarely in the chest. He flew backwards and crashed into his desk hard enough to scatter its

contents across the floor. He wheezed in pain and attempted to recover, but when he tried to stand Astanya flipped behind him and kicked out the back of his knees.

“*Lle n’harwa aeyn au!*”

Before I could move—before I even realized what was happening—she wrenched back his head and promptly slit his throat.

My mouth dropped open in a silent scream as he toppled to the floor. In between breathless gurgles Master Kristoff glanced up at me one last time, eyes wide in horror, before he collapsed into a pool of his own blood.

“We must leave,” Astanya said, tossing the knife aside. She strode over and offered me her hand. “Come on.”

“What...” I breathed, trembling. “How?”

“The Faedari have been watching you for some time, *Netharine*. I will explain later, but right now I need to get you to safety.”

My head continued shaking, but she didn’t give me time to think. She grabbed my hand and hoisted me to my feet with surprising strength. I barely even recognized her—this wasn’t the same meek, fragile woman I’d shared a room with. She moved with the unwavering, fluid grace of a hardened warrior.

“You’re free, Elara,” Astanya told me, her blue eyes were warm and determined all at once. “No human will ever give you orders again.”

I coughed again as the smoke filled my nostrils, and I glanced down to Master Kristoff’s unmoving body. He was staring off into the nothingness, his face permanently frozen in terror.

He hadn’t been wrong earlier. He was the only reason I’d evaded the Covenant. He was the only reason I’d learned to control my abilities. He had given me everything, and in return I had betrayed him.

And yet looking down upon his corpse, I didn’t feel even the slightest pang of guilt.

“We need to leave,” Astanya repeated. “We have to get out of Sanctum before they catch us.”

“The Covenant took Larric,” I whispered. “I can’t leave without him.”

“We won’t,” she vowed, smiling and squeezing my hand. “You have my word.”

To Be Concluded

The Elf Slave Series will conclude with *Unleashed*.

If you are interested in more hardcore fantasy erotica, you may enjoy my **Dark Elf Fantasies** series starting with *Web of the Spider Queen*.

This series takes place in the world of Obsidian, a dark fantasy universe based on the wonderful **Godswar Saga** by Jennifer Vale (used with permission!). I highly recommend you check out her books, starting with *Ascendancy*.

For updates about new releases, subscribe to the Sarah Hawke Fan Newsletter by sending an email to **hawkenovels@gmail.com** with the subject line "Subscribe." You can also support me on Patreon at: <https://www.patreon.com/hawkenovels>

APPENDIX

~DRAMATIS PERSONAE~

The House of Kristoff

Elara: Faeyn female, *avenari* slave

Gabriel Kristoff: human male, Grand Duke of Glorinfel

Larric Aresi: human male, Kristoff's bodyguard

Astanya: Faeyn female, *avenari* slave

The Imperial Court

Lucian Patravian III: human male, Emperor of the Veshari Empire

General Antoine Torelius: human male, High General of the Imperial Legion

Legate Maxos: human male, adjutant to General Torelius

~THE IMPERIAL PROVINCES~

Abenwreath: Also known as “the Wreath,” Abenwreath curls around the central province of Veshar and is known for its vast fields and farms.

Glorinfel: Once the ancestral home of the near-extinct dwarves, Glorinfel is a snowy, mountainous region in northeast Calhara.

Korvale: Also known as “the Vale,” Korvale is a fiercely independent province almost completely isolated from the rest of the Empire by vast mountain ranges.

Rivani: A warm, tropical province, Rivani is the center of power for the Covenant and the most important trade center in the Empire.

Sorthaal: Once the ancestral home of the Faeyn, Sorthaal is a sprawling mass of forests and hills known for its natural beauty.

Veshar: The central province of Calhara is home to Sanctum, the imperial capital and the home of the Emperor and the Imperial Legion.

~TERMS~

Aeynshok: slang for “elf-lover,” considered a grave insult

Artificers: the lowest caste of Bound channelers who create enchanted armor and weapons for the Legion.

Bound: The vast majority of channelers in the Empire are granted their powers in a Covenant ritual that binds them to the “Godstone,” a crystal said to house the souls of the Triad. Through the stone, these “Bound” channelers are able to touch and manipulate the Aether, but the Covenant is capable of severing this connection at any time.

Calhara: The second largest continent in the world of Obsidian, Calhara is under near total control of the Veshari Empire.

Channeler: The all-purpose name for someone who has the ability to manipulate the Aether.

Covenant: The central religious organization in the Empire. They control and regulate the use of the Aether.

Faeyn: the name for the fair-skinned elves who once ruled most of Calhara. The seat of their empire was Sorthaal, now an imperial province.

Hierophant: The highest-ranking priest in the Covenant. Her power rivals that of the Emperor.

Inquisitors: The chief enforcers of the Covenant. The Inquisitors' primary purpose is to root out and destroy Unbound.

Levinthian: The holy text of the Covenant.

Numen: A large country within Torsia known for its fine silks and berries. The Numense reject the rule of the Triad and instead worship their immortal leader known only as the "Shadow King" to outsiders.

Sanctus Veshar: The founder of the Empire and conqueror of Calhara. The Covenant preaches that Veshar ascended to godhood along with his wife and his top lieutenant. Together they make up the Triad.

Sorthaal Highlands: The ancient home of the Faeyn, now an imperial province under the rule of Duke Darian Arland.

Sulinor: The home of the Vaeyn located in the far northeastern corner of Calhara.

Talisham: A country located in the scorching desert region of Torsia and ruled by a powerful theocracy under the leadership of the Pah.

Tel Bator: Legion soldiers trained to channel the Aether.

Unbound: A few rare individuals are born with the ability to channel Aether without being bonded to the Godstone. They are known as Unbound, and they are hunted and executed by the Covenant whenever they are found. Elves of all ethnicities are slightly more likely than humans to possess this ability, and it is incredibly rare in the other sentient races.

Vaeyn: the name for the gray-skinned elves of Sulinor. They are among the last free elves in the entire world, and the Covenant has long branded them demon-worshippers and heretics.

About the Author

Sarah Hawke is a thirty-something aspiring spinster with two cats, a horse, and a car that can technically still get her from place to place. She loves the cold, hates the heat, and desperately watches anything made by Joss Whedon for fear it will get cancelled.