

Chapter 81

“Ms. Alessia, what is mother doing?”

I glanced down towards the child before looking back at the Empress. It's scary how much they look alike, though I don't think she has noticed yet. “She is leading a construction project to expand the domain.” I rested my beloved pole ax against my shoulder and crossed my arms as I stood under a tree. I was far enough away that I wouldn't be noticed by anyone, but close enough that I could get to my Empress in the blink of an eye.

Nyx scrunched her face as she stared at her mother. “I don't understand why she would do such menial labor when she has an army of servants at her beck and call.”

I shook my head, feeling a bit exasperated by her mindset. It's amazing how far away she was from her mother's mindset. “That's how she has always been. She wouldn't ask of us, something that she wouldn't be willing to do herself.”

The little girl shook her head slightly. “I don't understand.”

I reached out and patted Nyx's head, eliciting a purr from her. “One day you will. Anyway, come along, let's go visit the rest of the domain.”

“Okay!” She jumped up and tried to rush ahead of me.

But I reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her back. “No, stay next to me.”

She groaned and stamped her foot on the ground in response. “Why! I wish to run around and play!”

“Because there are many dangers that exist out there, and if anything were to happen to you, your mother would have my head,” I told her as I pulled her back into step beside me.

Her gaze flickered from me, back to the woods as she processed the words. “But I'm a dragon! I can protect myself!”

“It doesn't matter. You know what the Empress said, don't you?”

A sigh of defeat escaped from her lips. “Fine. I'll listen, but only if you hold my hand.” As she spoke, she reached her little hand up.

Such a needy child. I took her hand as we walked down one of the small paths that I made some neophytes make as we cut through the forest. Chirps filled the air along with the sound of various squirrels shuffling through the undergrowth. The fog today was thinner than it usually was and gave the forest a more ethereal look as it clung to the trees.

Nyx was apparently enjoying herself as she looked around. "Ms. Alessia, what is that?" She asked as she pointed towards a few of the rodents that were scampering around the ground. Their fur was torn and blood was congealed around open bite marks.

The animals, noticing us, scurried over. "These little guys are called squirrels. They live in the forest and don't really interact with anyone." I told her as I placed my poleaxe against a tree and squatted down, petting one gently on its head.

Nyx followed suit and reached out towards the closest of the rodents. The squirrel sniffed her hand before it stood on its hind legs, allowing her to pet it. A soft smile crossed her face, and I felt a strange feeling in my chest. The way she smiled reminded me much of how the Empress smiled, something she does less of lately, on top of wearing that mask now.

"Ms. Alessia, may I keep it?" Nyx's voice tore me from my thoughts and I looked down at the little girl. Her face was locked in a pout as she held the little squirrel up for me to see.

"No sadly, your mother has far too many animals in the royal area as it is."

Her face dropped a bit as she set the squirrel down and it quickly scampered off with its family. "Okay."

"There, there, don't be sad. There are plenty of pets in the royal area for you to play with. Your mother even has a pack of wolves!" I told her as I rubbed my hand against her black hair.

The little girl perked up almost instantly at my words and the attention that she was getting. "Can we go visit them next?"

"Not yet. I want to finish showing you around the domain. Then we can go back and you can play with them." I stood up and grabbed my poleaxe and glanced around the forest. So far, it was clear, there were no signs of the invaders. Just a few of the dark wraiths and phantoms from Amari's assassin division lurking nearby. Though by judging how Nyx was acting, she hadn't noticed them yet, which was good. Without saying a single word, I met the gaze of one of the dark wraiths, who quickly nodded its head as it vanished back into the shadows.

"I will agree to those terms then Ms. Alessia." She replied as she dusted off her skirt and reached her little hand up to me.

I nodded my head as I took her hand and walked in the stronghold's direction. I might as well let her meet all who serve her mother.

We broke through the final tree line. The outline of the stronghold was hardly visible through the thick layer of fog that choked out much of the light. A dozen of the empire's soldiers stood near the entrance of the secret path, which I would normally forbid, but in the interest of the princesses' safety, it was something I will tolerate. At the behest of the detachment stood a centurion, who wielded two swords. His sickly flesh was dark, and a small splattering of slime caught what little light that the fog didn't consume.

"Al...I...lessia.. W..elcome.." The centurion crossed his arm over his chest and struggled to finish the salute.

"Thank you," I replied as I strode out of the forest and quickly assessed our surroundings. My dark wraiths have spread out, creating a large perimeter around us, and the phantoms were close behind. The roads were empty, barring the troops as they were returning from patrols, or leaving the stronghold.

"Ms. Alessia, who are they?" Nyx's small voice tore my gaze away from the area.

"These are your mother's soldiers. They protect these lands." I told her as I patted her head.

She pressed herself as close to me as she could. Her eyes were wide as she looked around at the various soldiers that surrounded us. "They are scary." For a moment, her usual attitude vanished and was replaced with that of a scared child.

"Worry, not little one. These soldiers will give their lives to protect you." Usually, I would have never brought her this far out, but a lot of the invaders are busy fighting over one of the checkpoints, so we had some time before they were roaming again. Besides, it's not like they had a chance against me.

She remained quiet while she clung onto my pants leg as we made our way towards the stronghold. The soldiers surrounded us in a tight circle, shielding Nyx from view as we marched. I glanced through the throng of soldiers and took in the area until I noticed a small puff of a dark flame coming from one of the dark wraiths. I nodded my head as I placed my hand on Nyx's shoulder. "Hey, if we hurry to the stronghold, I'll talk your mother into giving you some head pats later," I whispered quietly as I tried to coax the child into moving a little faster.

"That sounds wonderful!" She perked up slightly, and she moved a little faster than before. The soldiers around me picked up the pace, as I looked back at the dark wraith that sent the single and gave it the single that it's been waiting for.

The wraith melted into the shadows as I turned my head and glanced at the large doors that were coming into view. The two soldiers that stood at attention there quickly spun on their heels and pressed their hands into the large doors. As the doors swung open, the deep sound of metal scraping against itself filled the air, barely drowning out the shrill sound of an invader getting cut down.

Unfortunately for me, the sound of the door opening didn't quite have the desired effect. "Ms. Alessia, what was that?"

"Just an animal," I told her as I patted her shoulder and pushed her further into the stronghold. As we walked in, the soldiers broke away, as we made our way towards the central building. The training grounds were busy as a full platoon was there training. The pyregrounds had a few soldiers there, building a new foundation, as carts of the fallen were being brought in. Handfuls

of soldiers were out patrolling the walls, while another platoon was near the breach of the wall, ready to strike.

The princess's eyes were wide as she looked around, clearly amazed at what she was seeing. "Wow, this place is wonderful!"

"That it is Nyx, that it is," I told her as I walked up the staircase and propped open the door for her. A few warrant officers were in the lobby, though doing what I wasn't sure. Sometimes the unawakened could be strange. They would stand around, lost in their memories. Other times, they would act out their last moments, struggling to find a way out. However, those would receive the Empress's peace, as they were quietly ushered back to rest.

We walked past the three warrant officers that were in the lobby and descended further into the building. Originally, I would come by here to check on the captain and the lieutenant to see how well they were faring while they were dealing with the invaders. But my job still had to be done, even if I had to take off the princess while doing it.

Chapter 82

I stood behind the door that led to the stronghold's war room. Nyx stood beside me, her little hand clasped firmly between mine. I rapped my fingers across its surface quickly, and a deep voice answered a second later. "Enter."

I pushed the door open and stepped into the dimly lit room. Dim candles hung from rusted metal sconces that were attached to the various pillars that enshrined the war table. Tattered yellow paper lay strewn across the table, but a single large map dominated it but was barely illuminated by the faint yellow light that struggled to fill the room. Seated at the circular table was Rikard. His fingers crossed, and his milky white eyes faded as he stared off into the distance.

"Ah.. Alessia, I didn't...expect to see you so soon. It's a pleasure to see you once more." He turned his head up towards me as he dropped his hands. His voice was faint, and his words seemed to be distracted.

"It is my pleasure, captain. I am here taking the princess on a tour of the domain." I told him as I stepped into the room and gestured Nyx forward.

The captain straightened up as fast as he could. "Princess? Forgive me Alessia, I hadn't realized that she was paying a visit." His eyes were still clouded, as he seemed to gaze beyond us.

The poor man, he was still caught in whatever life he thought he lived, unable to see what was truly happening before him. "All is well, captain. How are things going on the war front?" I asked as I crossed the small distance between us and the table. Nyx scampered along behind me, though she was still pressed against my leg.

"Ms. Alessia, what is he saying?" She asked as she looked up at me.

"He said he wasn't expecting to see you," I told her as I pressed my finger to my lips, hoping that she would get the message. Thankfully, it seemed to stick and she pursed her lips and nodded her little head.

"The invaders haven't really struck at the stronghold. They have been prodding the outpost, and have even taken two of them." Rikard replied as he leaned against the table and looked over the map. "I fear they are preparing for a massive invasion."

Ah, there it is, While Rikard can react to the invaders well. He just hasn't seemed to realize that the life he knew is gone. "Worry not captain, if any large force were to invade, we would react appropriately."

He paused for a second as he reached out a metal-clad hand and looked at the map. "Of course. I will hold the fort if that day comes. It is as the Empress demands." His gaze seemed to stretch once more, and I knew I was losing him again. But that was alright, perhaps I should let him do his job.

But as I stepped back with Nyx, attempting to usher her away quietly, the sound of wings rapidly beating filled the air, as one of the courier pigeons appeared from a hole in the ceiling. The small bird released what sounded like a hybrid between a squawk and a groan. Its beady white eyes greedily drank in what little of the light that managed to radiate through the room. It landed on the table, and hopped over to me, and presented a small piece of paper that was rolled up tightly.

Curious, I reached out and quickly undid the seal.

To whom this may concern,

The adventurer known as Redrick has returned. The Empress, however, has informed me she is busy with a project and has named me the prime minister in her absence. In an hour, we will meet at the stronghold and hold a small meeting with Redrick and his delegation. Alessia, please attend, since you are the most directly tied to the Empress. Also, she has noted that while you are protecting her daughter; she wants her daughter to learn about how to live in this domain. Her words were, "Keep her safe, and teach her what you can." She has also noted that once she is finished with what she is working on, she wishes to speak with you about a few topics.

Regards,

Kharon

My eyes quickly skimmed the page, and I felt a twinge of emotion in my chest. Redrick, the man that started all this and dared drag my lady into this mess. I clenched the paper and felt a fire

billowed in my chest as the memories resurfaced of that day, along with all the emotion that I felt. That man caused her pain, and I hated him. He nearly took her away from me.

"Alessia, you are frightening me." The child's voice cracked the veil of anger that had settled around me, and I quickly released it when I saw her staring up at me. Her brilliant emerald eyes had small beads of water that were quickly forming on the sides, which caused me to pause.

"No no, I'm sorry. I just saw something I didn't like was all." I squatted down and made eye contact with her. "But your mother just told me she wants me to teach you to act like a princess."

The fear in her eyes was still prevalent, but she seemed to have a good reaction to that. "R..really?" She asked as she sniffled and wiped away the tears that were running down her face.

"Yes really! Some people are coming to visit, and your mother wants me to teach you how to interact with them. With that being said, you will also get to meet one of your mother's closest confidants." I told her as I reached out and gave her head another pat. "I'm also sorry for scaring you, I didn't mean to."

"It's okay Ms. Alessia. I know you didn't mean it." She told me as she reached forward and threw her arms around me. I stood there, shocked at the display. Before I tentatively reached out and returned her hug in kind. "So you are going to teach me how to be a princess?" She asked as pulled away from me.

"Yes. This time, however, I need you to be quiet and watch how Kharon and I talk to the envoys. Then one day, as you get better, then you can do it too." I told her as I stood up.

"I understand Ms. Alessia, I will do my best." The little girl looked as if she were about to explode from the happiness that seemed to be flooding every inch of her veins.

"Good girl," I told her as I gave her head a pat and stood up to face the captain once more.

"Captain Rikard. I apologize for bothering you once more."

The captain shifted his gaze from the map and towards me. "Oh, Alessia, I didn't expect to see you so soon." He told me as he stood up from his chair, his body struggling to salute me.

"I've come here to inform you that a few envoys will arrive soon, headed by Lord Kharon. We wish to use your office for a short time, while we finish negotiations."

"Of course. As the Empress demands." His eyes seemed to clear up slightly, and his words become more focused as he shambled over. "But, who is the young lady that stands next to you?"

As the captain approached us, Nyx quickly darted behind my leg. "This is the princess of Asteria."

"The princess?..." His words trailed off once more as his eyes glazed over. He stood there, as still as a statue, until he moved once more. "Oh, the princess! Welcome to my stronghold." He told her as he tried to bow his body. His armor creaked, and the sound of various bones popping filled the air. "You are as beautiful as your mother."

Nyx shifted her glance from the captain to me. "What did he say?"

"He welcomes you here and says that you are as beautiful as your mother."

Her skin flushed slightly and shook her head. "No, Mother is the most beautiful woman, I couldn't hope to compare."

Rikard straightened himself out as Nyx's words seemingly fell on deaf ears. His eyes still seemed to be slightly glazed over, but he seemed more lucid than he did a few short minutes ago. "I will dispatch a platoon to lord Kharon and escort them here. The roads as of late have been filled with bandits, and there have been sightings of foreign troops."

"Do what you can, Rikard. If you need my support, please let me know."

"I could never ask the right hand of the Empress for anything. I will make do with what I have." Rikard told me as he limped over to the table, and sat back down. "As soon as lieutenant Flint returns, I will send a detachment out."

I stiffened at that and glanced at Nyx. I didn't want her to be around someone like Flint. "Thank you, Rikard, if you need anything else, I will be in your office. Thank you for your help." I told him, as I gave him the customary bow.

"Of course, Alessia. It is as the Empress demands." He replied, as his eyes slowly glazed over once more. I rested my hand on Nyx's shoulder as this time I was in a bit of a rush to get her away from here. But sadly as I reached out to open the door, it swung on its own, revealing the large skeletal form of the Lieutenant.

"Alessia." The skeleton nodded his head towards me.

I narrowed my eyes at him and pushed Nyx through the door. "Flint," I replied as I kept walking, not wanting to get drawn into a conversation with him. Especially not with her nearby. He was far too reckless, and bloodthirsty, and he would prove to be a bad influence on her. Even if the Empress trained with him from time to time, I refuse to allow such a vile being to influence Nyx.

Chapter 83

“Okay, Nyx, I need you to sit here and not say anything. Just watch okay?” I told her as I pulled one chair towards the desk, so I could stand behind her.

The little girl nodded her little head. “I understand, Ms. Alessia. I want to be the best princess I can be.” The little girl nodded her head as she sat down and adjusted her skirt and turned her nose upwards.

“If you want to be the best princess, then do as your mother does.” I reached out and adjusted her bow and gave her another soft pat on her head.

She hummed thoughtfully and scrunched her face up. “I see. Mother is an empress after all. I thank you for your help.” She dropped her head and affixed me with her emerald eyes that seem to glitter like a pair of vibrant jewels. She really looked like her mother. Though there were a few differences, like her face was a little rounder, and her hair was as dark as night.

I nodded and walked over to the wall, leaning against. My pole axe was well within my hands reach. “Do you like the domain so far?”

She bobbed her head quickly and kicked her feet. “I do. It’s all rather quaint. Everyone seems pleasant enough. At least the ones that I can understand.”

“Don’t feel bad. Your mother doesn’t understand most of them either.”

“She doesn’t!?” Nyx’s eyes went wide, and she looked as if her world had just come crashing down around her.

“Not at all. She only really talks to myself, or Kharon when he is around.” I shrugged. I didn’t really feel much on the matter. While she may be oblivious at times, she still treats us well. Though it wasn’t like anyone in the domain would rebel against her.

“Can you teach me how to talk to everyone?” She pouted her lips and kicked her feet a little quicker as she leaned forward.

“I wish I could, but how we speak to each other isn’t something that can really be taught. Though in time, you may pick up on a few things here and there.” I crossed my arms and glanced around the room once more, making sure that all of my dark wraiths and phantoms were in position. Especially in the shadows of the chairs that were positioned in front of the desk. If anyone had any funny ideas, they would get eviscerated on the spot, or they would buy me enough time to get Nyx to safety. But I hope it won’t come to that.

“That’s not fair.” She huffed at me and crossed her arms.

As soon as I went to retort, however, I heard a rap on the door. I grabbed my poleaxe and walked over to Nyx. “Enter.” The door swung open, quietly groaning on its hinges. The influx of air into the room caused the dying candles that lined the room to flicker. Gazing at us from the darkness was the familiar set of crimson red eyes.

To my side, I could hear Nyx gasp, and then a small hand graze against my own. I took her hand as Kharon strode into the room. His hood was up, and his face was shrouded in an abyssal darkness that only seemed to grow darker each time I saw him. "Lady Alessia, greetings." He gave me a small bow and then glanced over to my left. "Ah, princess, it is good to see you." He gave her an even bigger bow. Yet I could feel the start of a mental message as it prodded my head. *'What did Calixa do this time?'*

'I haven't the slightest idea . I'm just as surprised as you are.' My eyes instinctively went behind Kharon as I glanced at the forms behind him. The first that I noticed was Redrick. The blasted man who dragged my Empress into this mess. Rage built in my chest, but I held it back. Partially because I knew it was unbecoming of me. The rest was because I didn't want to see that look of disappointment in her eyes if I screwed this up. The mere thought alone filled me with an emotion that I wasn't sure I had a name for.

He wore a red tunic with golden lace down the seams, and his head of red hair ran wild around him. His trousers seemed to be made of some unknown material that shimmered in the light. Excessive and not likely to hold a weapon, though I wasn't all that concerned about it. I could easily crush him in a fight. As I was checking him out, trying to locate any spot where a weapon could be hidden, I felt another message form in my mind.

'The girl looks like a smaller version of her.' Kharon's mental voice tore my attention away from what I was doing. I sent him a mental nod in response. She very much did.

Behind Redrick was the older gentleman I remember being named Gunther. I had no quarrels with the man. He seemed like he had a good head on his shoulders. The way he carried himself reminded me of the legionaries. He was confident and proud. Clearly, in his younger years, he was a soldier, and that alone garnered my respect. There can be no better honor than to dedicate yourself to a cause greater than yourself.

He was wearing the same armor that I first saw him in. The scratches that adorned the grey leather cuirass seemed to grow in number and looked to be like they were polished over. Perhaps momentos, or battle honors. Some people have strange customs, but who was I to judge? I gave him a once over, trying to see where any weapons could be stashed away, but as I was doing it, our eyes met, and he gave me a nod. It was slight, and almost unperceivable even to me, but it was still there nonetheless. He was far too honorable for that, at least that is what I could glimmer from his eyes.

I returned the gesture to him and took stock of the last person who entered the room. He was an average-sized man, or what I would consider average since he stood in between Gunther and Redrick in size. His hair was short, yet it was long enough for him to style it in a swept-back look. His eyes were blue, with small flakes of black, and he seemed to look over the room, glancing at all the corners and crevices. Overall, he seemed to be unremarkable, which put me on edge. It was a little too plain, especially with the clothes he was wearing. A simple black shirt, matched by a pair of black trousers that seemed to hang off his form. Even though he oozed an aura that screamed nondescript, I was still cautious.

“Lady Alessia, it is a pleasure to see you once more.” Redrick’s voice broke the silence, and my eyes shot back to him.

“Greetings Redrick,” I replied professionally and clenched my poleaxe all the tighter.

His eyes fell on the child next to me. “May I ask who this is?” Clearly, the sight of Nyx surprised him. But I didn’t blame him. When I first saw her, I was shocked as well. But now, the little one has grown on me.

I glanced down at her from the corner of my eye and saw that she was as still as a statue. She was clearly uncomfortable with the situation. I squeezed her hand under the table, and I could see some of the tension melt off of her body. “This is Princess Nyx. She is here to watch the proceedings.”

Redrick closed his eyes and nodded his head once. A sight that I now understood to be an attempt at recollection. At least, that’s what I would assume it to be. The Empress would do the same thing from time to time especially when she was writing. “I understand. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Princess Nyx.” His eyes darted towards me, making sure that I was happy with the title.

I nodded my head, and he cleared his throat. “Princess, you may call me Redrick. As for my companions, this is Gunther Aculeo.” The man gestured towards Gunther, who gave the princess a nod. He didn’t seem as resentful as he used to, though I assumed that was due in part to her mostly human appearance. “And this is Cato Regulus. He will serve as an ambassador for Corinthia.”

“I do hope we can build a strong future relationship,” Cato spoke to us as he bowed. His words dripped with faux sweetness, as he ended his bow with a flourish. It was excessive if you asked me, but I suppose that was the semantics of political discussion. It was something that I didn’t quite enjoy, and would much rather leave for Kharon.

“Thank you for the introductions. I am Kharon, the ferryman. But I am also the prime minister of Asteria. I will be your direct conduit to the Empress of these lands. The lady seated across from you all is the land’s princess. Finally, the lady standing to her left is Alessia, the captain of the Empress’s guard.” Kharon gestured as he spoke to the living beings across from us. The more he spoke, the more that I realized that this wasn’t for me. It all seemed so redundant and flowery. I much rather be out and about training, and being near my lady’s side. But I will bear this for now.

Redrick gestured for everyone to take a seat. “Thank you for entertaining us today, Lord Kharon. I come bearing news from the outside world, along with our return on the contract.”

Chapter 84

For what felt like an eternity, there were pointless words spoken between Kharon and Redrick. Mostly revolving around what was going to be brought into the domain and how. I toned most of it out, at least until he presented a small bag that had glittering clear stones embedded into the khaki colored leather. A small band of twine was wrapped around a radiant blue gem that sat in the center of the triangular flap.

“This is a gift from me to the Empress. Contained within is a bottle of Savarian red wine, a bundle of coins, and a few other things that I hope she will enjoy.” Redrick sat forward and placed the bag onto the table and slid it over to Kharon.

The skeleton reached out and took the bag, which quickly vanished into the recess of his black cloak. “I will pass on the message to her. As for the next batch of goods, we will have that delivered to you within a few days.”

“That sounds splendid. How about the housing provision that we discussed earlier?” Redrick asked as he sat back and crossed his legs.

“We are currently working on that. The lady is currently working on clearing a path towards the next town over. Once it is finished, we will gift you a residency there.” The skeleton sat forward and laced his gloved fingers together.

Already, I was growing bored once more, and if I felt that, then there was no telling how the child must felt right now. I cast a quick glance down and saw that the little girl was trying to keep her eyes open. I guess all the new and exciting stuff must have worn her out. But at least she was trying to stay awake. Perhaps I should take her back so she can rest.

“Perfect. I think that covers all of us for now. The rest we can discuss once the next batch of goods has been finished. Now, I believe Cato wishes to speak to you.” The red head gestured toward the other man.

His eyes flickered between myself, and Nyx before they finally settled on Kharon. “Thank you Sir. Redrick.” The man cleared his throat. “I am here on behalf of King Aurelius, to ascertain the domain’s intentions, and to see if I can broker a deal between us. However, I wasn’t expecting to see such guile.”

Kharon focused on Cato, his burning red eyes flicking as if the flames that gave them life were stirring into full blast as he regarded the man. “Tell me Cato, what is it that your king desires?”

Cato’s eyes glazed softly as Kharon’s voice took a more magical undertone. “King Aurelius seeks to hold back Velcrest, and to rout out the nobility that do not hold any sort of loyalty to our country. Every day allegiances are changing, and new kingdoms are rising from the dust of the old. The times are changing, and we fear what is to come.”

“Ah, well, Lady Asteria has made it clear that she doesn’t wish to be involved in anyone’s affairs, for Asteria is her first priority. However, even though that may be the case, we may still enter certain pacts that may benefit us both, albeit, indirectly.” The skeleton’s voice rolled through the air like a soft tide. The magical nature of his words was but a soft edge that seemed to grow duller with each passing second.

“We wish to make an exclusive weapons deal and a nonaggression pact. There are far too many hounds out for blood, and we especially wish to avoid a war with an undead faction.” The glaze that had overtaken Cato’s eyes faded as fast as the magic that filled the air.

“Worry not, Lady Asteria has no desire to wage war on the outside, so we will happily agree to a non aggression pact. As for a weapons deal, publicly, it’s an offer we will have to decline, since it would put us on a specific side. However, privately, it’s an offer that we will happily take as long as you deliver the raw materials for it. Each exchange will be made privately, in a secure location.”

Cato nodded his head as he sat forward in his chair. “That would be wise, yes. Many nobles are clamoring for the removal of this domain, but just as many are curious. We’ve never met a domain before that so openly deals in negotiations. While my power comes directly from the king, I still have to tread a careful line, for now at least.”

“Ah. Worry not Sir Cato. Any deal we make can be filed away on a private level, and will be honored.” As Kharon spoke, I felt something brush against my arm. I glanced down and saw that Nyx had lost her battle with sleep, and had passed out. I let go of her hand and placed my hand on her head, and looked around.

Cato was still stuck in a fierce deliberation with Kharon as the negotiations went forward. However, Redrick smirked as he looked at me, no doubt amused by the fact that I seemed to have a caring side to me. Gunther, seemed slightly amused at the fact that the princess had passed out during a meeting. But I didn’t care, really. Out of everyone in this domain, she and her mother are the only ones who slept.

‘Lord Kharon, I will take my leave now. The princess has fallen asleep, so it’s for the best that I get her home.’ I pushed my words through our mental link, as I shifted my pole arm and picked Nyx up, “Forgive me, but I must take my leave now.”

‘Ah yes, it’s easy to forget about mortal necessities. I will keep you up to date about what has transpired here.’

Cato glanced up towards me, his eyes locked onto Nyx and his features softened a bit. “I understand. Tell Empress Asteria that I send my regards, and to thank her for sparing some time today.”

“Of course.” I replied as I positioned Nyx in a way that I could carry both her in one arm, and my pole axe in the other.

“Farewell Alessia,” Redrick spoke up, and I glanced at him. The disdain that I felt for him boiled under the surface, but I held it back. It was the right thing to do.

“Farewell Redrick, Gunther.” I gave them both a nod as I headed out of the office. Nyx mumbled something in her sleep as she adjusted herself and wrapped her arms around my neck. *‘I’ll leave a few dark wraiths for you, just in case something happens.’*

I received a mental nod in return as I walked out of the office. All but two of the dark wraiths flooded out of the room and quickly circled around us in the shadows. The phantoms lurked a little further away, ever vigilant for anything that would be a threat to us. Perhaps I shouldn’t have used the child as an excuse to get out of the meeting, but it was dreadfully boring. Diplomacy really isn’t my thing, and I trust Kharon enough to leave him on his own. As I walked down the hall, I couldn’t help but hope the trip back went just as smooth.

It took a few hours, but eventually we made it back to the office. Most of the honor guard were in the training areas, with very few left in the main lobby. But the ones that guarded this place were amongst the best that I could offer. As I strode through the lobby, the honor guard that were dubbed as the blade masters noticed me, and cracked off into a salute. I nodded at them as Nyx adjusted herself in my arms and mumbled something else quietly. The girl slept like a rock.

I weaved my way through the labyrinth underground and came to the door of the empress’s office. Posted outside were two spirits who had been tutored by Amari and myself to create a unique type of praetorian known as the Palatine Guard. At the moment, these were the only two, but they were fearsome warriors. Meticulously trained in assassination and frontline combat, these two were the cream of the crop, and hopefully soon, I can organize an entire platoon, at least when I get the troops for it.

The two nodded at me, and opened up the door. As I walked through, I saw my Lady sitting on a chair. The mask she wore obscured her face, but her eyes screamed exhaustion. “Greetings Empress.” I bowed as well as I could, careful to not wake the child.

She lazily glanced over at me, “Oh, Alessia, hello. How was your trip?” As she spoke, a yawn punctuated her words.

As I went to reply, Nyx stirred and quickly jumped out of my arms. “Mother! I’ve missed you so!” She ran across the ground and threw herself into the empress’s arms. She stiffened slightly as her child wrapped her arms around her neck.

Eventually she caved and returned the gesture. “Hello there Nyx, how was your day?” Lady Asteria seemed a little uncomfortable at the sudden onslaught of affection.

“It was perfectly splendid! Ms. Alessia and I explored the area! She showed me these little creatures, called squirrels, that were this big!” As Nyx spoke she gestured wildly, and the empress focused on her daughter. Nodding her head and listening to her speak.

Now that I think about it, she doesn't really ever talk about her parents. Whenever she does, it seems like sadness is the dominant emotion. There was still so much that I didn't know about her, and yet I found myself wanting to know more about her. Yet the idea scared me, as it filled me with emotion that I have long since forgotten. Why was I like this?

Chapter 85

"Mother, does Mr. Kharon scare you as well?" Nyx's face hung low as she curled into my lap. I ran my fingers through her hair as I fought the swell of emotions that seemed to dominate my being. It was so strange to have someone treat me like this. In all of my years, I never once thought I would be a mother, but here I was. There was so much that terrified me, and a lot of things that haunted me since childhood. I was worried that I would turn out like my parents, and that was something that I refused to do.

"No. He is a very kind man." I told her as I patted her head before wrapping my arms around her.

"His eyes scared me. They raged like a fire, and he looked like a demon emerging from the darkness."

I couldn't help but chuckle at the way she described him. Kharon was much like a grandfather, more than anything else. "Don't worry, Kharon is one of the nicest people you will ever meet. In fact, he was the first person I met here, and he has helped me through a lot."

"Ms. Alessia said the same thing. But I am still unsure about him." She yawned as she nestled herself more into my lap. "Mother, I'm tired."

"Poor thing." I cooed softly as I kept running my fingers through her soft silk like hair. "Would you like to go to bed?"

"Mhm." She murmured softly as I glanced up at Alessia. Her arms were crossed, and she was leaning against the wall. She seemed like she was lost in her own thoughts, so I would come back to her later. I wrapped my arms around Nyx and picked her up and carried her over to my bed, since I didn't have a room for her yet.

The little girl giggled as I hefted her up in to the air, and I felt a warmth that spread through my chest with each pulse. Was this how my mom felt when I was younger? The thought sent a cruel knife through my heart, as I realized just how much I missed my parents. I wanted to make everything right and see them again.

I pushed open the door to my bedroom and gently tickled Nyx, causing her to release a new batch of giggles as she struggled to get away. "Mother, stop right this instant!" She cackled like a madwoman as I brought her over to my bed and laid her down.

She took a few heaving breaths as I tucked her in. "Will you lay with me for a while?" She gazed up at me, her eyes wide, and her lips stuck in a pout.

To be honest, I really didn't because I had things I needed to do, but I also needed to make sure that she stayed happy. I refuse to put her through what I went through. "Of course."

She scooted over for me and I slid under the blanket. Nyx quickly threw her arms around me as I tried to position the blanket over the both of us. Once we were both comfortable, she tugged on my arm and laid her head on it and stared up at me. "Mother, why do you wear that mask?"

I reached up and ran my fingers across the smooth metallic surface. "There is no real reason right now. I have it so the people outside of Asteria don't see my face. Other than that, I just forget that it's on most days." I reached my hand up and quickly pulled it off.

Nyx stared up at me for a short time, her eyes drinking in my features with a greed. "Mother, you are beautiful."

I chuckled quietly, unsure of how to handle the compliment. It's not very often that I get called that. "Thank you Nyx. I'm glad you think so."

She nodded her head, and she closed her eyes, and we both fell into silence. The warmth of her body radiated from her in waves, washing over me. It wasn't unpleasant, but it was something that I wasn't used to. I laid there for a while, and stared up at my ceiling, trying to figure out what my life was coming to. Here I was, laying in bed with my familiar, who was acting more like a daughter than anything else. I talked to a god, not too long ago, and I have an army at my beck and call. Not to mention I was an empress, at least by my design.

If I was anyone else, I feel like this would be my peak, but I wasn't satisfied yet. I wanted more. No, I needed more. I would claw my way to the heavens to get what I wanted. I will keep expanding Asteria. I will keep expanding my armies, and creating beautiful cities. The world will know my name.

But those thoughts seemed alien to me. I recognized the mental voice as my own, but it felt like there was something more there. Something that sat in the back of my mind, pushing me forward, it whispered to me, telling me that there was more power for me to take as my own. All I had to do was tame it. Break it, and form it to my will. The more that I pondered on the thought, the more I wanted to do it. This was my land, and my people, and I will do everything I can for them. My eyes grew heavy, as rhythmic breaths of my daughter lured me into sleep. I yawned and rolled over and wrapped my arms around her. Perhaps this wasn't so bad at all. It would take some getting used to.

When I woke up, I forced myself to sit up straight. My body felt beyond well reset, and the exhaustion that had plagued me throughout the day yesterday had long since vanished. This was the best that I have slept in quite a long time. I glanced around the room and saw that Nyx had vanished, but the sounds of childish giggling from my office told me that she was still close by. I rubbed away the remnants of exhaustion that hung around my eyes and stood up. I

stretched for a bit, cracking a few of my joints, and causing a gentle burn to envelop my body. Once I was finished, I went to see what Nyx was up to.

When I walked into my office, I saw that Nyx was playing the wolves who had returned. Grim had a small scar that crossed his face, just under his eye that trailed to his muzzle. One that looked fresh, and it seemed like he was missing two of his pack mates. Poor guy.

Nyx, however, didn't seem to notice, and was busy rolling around with one of the smaller ones. While the wolf seemed to have a solid fifty kilograms on her, she seemed to hold her own. I rested against the wall, and watched her for a bit, let her have her fun.

After a little while, she finally noticed me, and shot up like a bullet. "Mother!" She screamed as she rushed over to me and threw her arms around my legs. Once again, I was surprised by her sudden onslaught of affection, but I quickly recovered and rubbed her head.

"Hello Nyx, did you sleep well?" I asked, as I decoupled from her.

"Yes mother, I did." She told me as she scampered around the room, and towards a chair.

I followed suit, and went to my desk, pulling out a piece of paper, and looking at the message that Kharon had sent me while I was passed out.

Mistress,

Redrick had stopped by, and brought a gift for you, as well as payment. I told him that the next shipment would be ready in a few days for him to take back. There was also an ambassador for a kingdom known as Corinthia. We have brokered a trade deal between us and the kingdom, though it's a bit more secretive. The only stuff that we need to do for them is to create weapons and ship them off. In return, we will receive raw materials, and I even secured a few books you may find interesting and useful! I will be by later to drop off his gift, and further discuss the negotiations.

Kharon

I read the paper, and nodded my head. Good, With that trade deal, I can double the output of resources. Perhaps I could build mines and then use it as leverage for later, on top of bringing in my own resources. Though I would have to figure out if it would cost less essence just to convert it, or actually go through the manual process of smelting. Which if that was the case, then I would have to find someone who was familiar with the process, cause I had no idea what to do for that.

As for books, those would come in handy. I could actually field a mage corp, which would both be beneficiary and help expand my army a bit. Not to mention I could start getting Nyx trained to protect herself. Hell, if even one of those books contained information on how to smelt, or item creation by hand, I would be in such a wonderful spot..

“Mother, what are you thinking about?” Nyx’s voice chased away my train of thought and I looked over at her.

“Just trying to figure out how to tackle the day,there's a lot I have to do and balance.” I replied as I planned out the next portion of the resources to trade. I recently created a new concrete mixture, which required a bunch of trial and error. At first I had no idea what I needed to do to make something like that. I knew for sure that I needed gravel, sand water, but after that I knew I didn’t have limestone, or anything like that. But what I had on hand was a bunch of bone powder, which I assumed was close enough to what I needed. Though I tried to ignore where the powder came from.

“So you have to work today?” Nyx asked as she kicked her feet and pouted once more.

“Sadly yes. I need to keep working if I want this domain to stay together. Besides, I have to start training once more and I want you to join me.