

Scrolls of the Forsaken

From the Scrolls of the Forsaken...

Summer 828

Since those first weeks of unending torment, I have practiced my letters, a skill I need when intercepting correspondence, seeking vessels for feeding, and coordinating armies. And if I am honest with myself, I am uncertain how else to track the days or measure our efforts. As time stretches on, I worry my memories will begin to fade. So it is in these scrolls and through these reflections I find a sliver of sanity. For I cannot sleep. When I close my eyes, I see my family lit with flames. Food tastes like ash on my tongue. And I have not fed the bloodlust in days. I cannot. I will not if it means desecrating my vow to my wife, even if her words haunt me daily. I promised to never forget her; to never forget who I am and what I fight for. And I will not, no matter what it costs me in this hellish life.

-S

Summer 828

I killed an innocent man today. It was not my intention, but the thirst was too strong. In witnessing the toll my defiance has taken on the Darkborn, I gave in to the need to feed. Though I tell myself I did it to release my friends from my pain and hunger, it was out of weakness and desperation to feel something other than anguish as well. But in allowing the monster to surface, I took a man's life. A man with a family. A man with a whole life ahead of him, gone in mere moments. No matter how many times Olga has cleaned the stains of blood off the study floor, it remains, remnants only I can see, that I cannot take my eyes away from. This cannot be my life. I must find another way.

-S

Winter 828

If the Darkborn could kill me, I think they might. My erratic feeding has taken its toll on the brotherhood. I know I am selfish, for my pain is theirs, and yet, I cannot bring myself to feed and fuck as they do, even if it means innocent life must be sacrificed to sate me. Something prevents it in my very core and as much as I want to give in and put us all out of our misery, I cannot. I have never loathed this life so much as I do now. It is misery. It is pain. And it is never ending.

-S

Seer

Seer

I drop my quill, rubbing uselessly at the throb in my temple.

The drums have been pounding since dawn, their rhythm echoing off the stone walls of Rockhavn like a war cry to the gods. Through the grimy window of the abandoned cooper's shop, I watch maidens dance around the bonfires in the square, their faces painted with ash and ochre for the Feast of Hel, a remembrance day of those they've lost carried over to her realm.

Everyone laughs, dark clothes decorated with inky raven feathers and adorned in head wreaths of dried roses, symbols of those who have moved on to their final resting place. Men and women screw in forgotten corners, their face paints and masks provoking boldness.

I sneer. Irony has never tasted so bitter—everyone celebrating the goddess who watches over their dead, the goddess who cursed me to this existence where I hide in shadows, fighting the very nature she branded into my flesh.

The scent of roasting meat and spilled mead permeates the air, but that's not what makes my fangs ache. Every heartbeat in the square calls to me like a siren song. Three hundred souls, their blood singing with wine and revelry, utterly defenseless. The monster in me purrs at the thought.

I press my forehead against the cool stone wall and squeeze my eyes shut.

I know I should feed with Thorne, Arless, and Lucian back at the keep—that I could rid myself of this constant gnawing hunger with a willing vessel.

A woman shrieks in the crowd outside, intoxicated and full of life. Her cheeks are flush, her heart beats loud and strong, rushing with excitement. Should I wish to feed on the crowd of pumping hearts, my feet would carry me faster than a human could comprehend. A dozen would be dead in mere minutes. And yet, despite my anguish, I can't bring myself to truly release—to

satisfy my body and my hunger. I've tried—gods, have I tried. For hours I've considered returning to the keep. But no matter how much I tell my feet to move, they will not. It's as if I am physically incapable of fucking and feeding the way the rest of the Darkborn do, and I don't know what will come of me if I can't. What will happen to all of us?

Growling, I punch the stone. If I gave into the hunger right now, I would be sated for a time, at least. The villagers already fear me. What is another few dimming heartbeats?

I look up as the drumbeat shifts. The celebration has quieted, not stopped entirely, but muted like someone has drawn a curtain over the revelry. Through the window, a caravan emerges from the evening mist. Three covered wagons pulled by horses that seem too calm for the supernatural tension crackling in the air. But it's not the wagons or horses that give me pause.

A middle-aged woman sits on the lead wagon's bench, reins loose in her hands, dark hair streaming behind her like smoke. Even at this distance, power radiates from her in waves that make my runes tingle beneath my skin. The villagers part before her caravan without being asked, their eyes wide and unfocused.

Then she turns.

Her gaze finds mine through the dirty glass. Can she see me the way my keen Darkborn vision notices every inch of her? Or does she only sense me? Regardless, her eyes are ancient, knowing, and touched by something far older than the stones beneath our feet.

She has been touched by something otherworldly and familiar. The woman has been touched by the gods.

A cold smile curves her lips as she inclines her head in greeting, never breaking eye contact. The caravan continues through the square toward the inn, but her gaze lingers on my window until the very last moment.

My hands clench into fists. Every instinct hums with curiosity, and beneath that, stirs a desperate, foolish hope.

By the time the moon has climbed to its peak, I can no longer ignore the way the mist whispers my name, calling me since the woman disappeared into the mist.

Most of the villagers have stumbled home or sleep where they fell as I pull my hood over my head and step into the night. The cobblestones are slick with spilled ale and rain that threatens but never quite falls. My boots make no sound as I navigate the winding streets, but I feel eyes on me nonetheless. Footsteps hurry away down a side alley. Even drunk and celebrating, the humans sense what I am—predator walking among prey.

A young woman, the paint smeared on her face, peers at me from a longhouse doorway, her face pale in the moonlight. Our eyes meet for a heartbeat before an older woman slams the door shut, rattling the frame. The scent of their fear is cloying.

Monster, they whisper when they think I can't hear. *Great warriors. Salvation. Hope.* They want nothing more than to believe the initial rumors, no doubt spread by Hel herself. But we have only proven the villagers' tormentors thus far.

The stone circle sits on a hill overlooking the village, seven ancient monoliths that predate memory. Perhaps their significance is why Hel chose Rockhavn to suffer our existence.

Wind howls between the stones, carrying the scent of rain and something else—herbs, smoke, and that otherworldly presence that makes my skin crawl with recognition.

The woman from the cart stands in the center of the circle, her dark robes whipping around her. No longer the simple traveler—now she looks like what she truly is. Power clings to

her like a second skin, a glowing, but dark aura I've never seen, with Darkborn eyes nor human. A murder of ravens sits atop the smooth stones, and I know Hel has brought her to me.

When the robed woman turns to face me, her eyes reflect moonlight like a cat, but I know she was born human, even if she is something else now.

"Sylas Von Wolfsson." Her voice carries despite the wind, rich and warm as honey mead. "The Wolf who hungers but will not feed."

I stop at the edge of the circle, every muscle coiled tight. "You know who I am. But I have not had the pleasure."

"Yes, I know what you are." She takes a step closer, and I catch the scent that's been nagging at me since I saw her in the street—the incense of home. Mountain thistle, earth, cedar, and woodsmoke. My heartbeat pounds with fury. "Where have you been?"

"More importantly," the woman says, her voice smooth as silk. "I know what you're fighting."

"Then you know why you should not come closer," I growl. "Now tell me why you smell of my home. Tell me why you are here."

Her laugh is like silver bells in the darkness. "Oh, child. You think I fear you might drain me dry?" Another step, and now I can see the strange symbols tattooed along her throat, pulsing faintly with their own light. "I have walked in Hel's realm and returned. I have spoken with gods and lived to tell the tale. Your hunger is nothing compared to what I have faced."

"My hunger has killed innocent people." The words scrape my throat raw. "Good people who deserved better than a monster's thirst."

"And that guilt is eating you alive." She's close enough now that I could reach out and touch her, I could choke the life from her with fury, yet my hunger itself remains calm. No

bloodlust. No aching fangs. Just... peace. "You cannot find balance, and you will not fuck, so you starve yourself, hoping to find absolution, while your friends suffer your pain through the bond." The truth hits like a physical blow as she circles me, her footsteps clacking on the ancient stone. "I know many things, Wolf. I know you see your wife's face in every human woman try to feed from, and you cannot see the answer through the hunger. But I have one for you. One that will keep your conscience clear and your hunger ebbed, for now, at least. One that even your wife would—"

"Don't," I growl. "Do *not* speak of her."

"Why not? She is dead and yet she fills every room and thought. I know you believe honoring her memory means denying yourself any peace. And I know you have *tried* to push past it but fail, as if through the insatiable hunger and bloodlust your new self requires something different than the others for release. Milla would want you to find a way to live. She told you so herself."

I move without thinking, pinning the Seer against the nearest monolith with my forearm across her throat. She should be gasping, afraid, struggling. I should smell her fear—relish it. Instead, she smiles.

"There's the wolf," she murmurs. "But notice—no hunger. No fangs. No desperate need to taste my blood."

She's right. Even in my rage, my body remains calm. Whatever power she wields, it dampens the bloodthirsty beast inside me.

I release her and step back. "You are more than a Seer," I say, staring at the ethereal glow around her. That my own wife was a seer—that this woman comes to me now of all days—has my palms sweating and my thoughts spinning.

“Some call me a Seer, yes. Just like your wife was. Some call me a witch. To you, however, I am merely someone who can help.” She straightens her robes and lifts her head as if I hadn’t just threatened her life. “The gods have not abandoned you, Sylas. You have always had a different path from the others.”

“And what path is that?” I can’t deny the burgeoning hope that this woman truly can help me, for all our sakes.

The seer’s smile is mysterious, holding secrets I’m not sure I want to know. “One where you can feed without killing. Where you can maintain your strength without betraying your conscience.” She pauses, letting the words sink in. “Where you can be the leader your people need without destroying yourself in the process.”

The wind dies to nothing. Even the perched ravens seem to hold their breath, leaving us in perfect silence.

“What would you have me do?”

“I will come to you tomorrow at sunset,” she finally says. “I will show you how to endure this curse without losing what remains of your soul.”

And with that, the Seer walks past me toward the village, pausing only when she reaches the edge of the circle.

“One more thing, Wolf.” Her voice drifts to me in the still air, I can practically see it coiling closer like a wisp of smoke. “The path I offer comes with its own price. Consider well if you’re willing to pay it.”

“What price?” I growl again, but the Seer is gone in a blink, leaving me alone with the ancient stones and the first real hope I’ve felt since fire took my family from me.

Above, the moon reaches its peak, casting long shadows between the monoliths. Somewhere in the distance, an owl calls—a lonely sound that echoes the hollowness in my chest. What price? I rub my hand over my face and peer down at the sleeping village. As is everything in this cursed existence, it's ominous, and I know I won't like it. But for the first time in months, that hollowness doesn't feel like it might consume me. *Sunset*, I think. I'll have my answer at sunset. And for once, the thought of tomorrow doesn't fill me with helpless doom.

Scrolls of the Forsaken 2

From the Scrolls of the Forsaken...

Winter 828

I have found a way to endure the hunger, keep my strength, and spare innocent life as well as my conscience. Through her riddles and vagueness—her knowledge of the future she keeps close to her breast—the Seer has helped me find balance, and in turn, she has helped all of us find a sense of peace. For I now have a vessel, one I have no wish to fuck, that I can feed from regularly to keep the blood-thirst in check, and spare the others my moods and hunger pains as well. It is a simple solution, one I can see so clearly now above the haze of hunger. And while there is a price, it is one I am willing to pay if it means the others can find peace. And for the first time in many moons, my future in this body doesn't feel as bleak. In fact, for the first time, I have hope. And it could not have come at a better time.

In Soothlund, the infamous warlord Barron the Butcher King crusades in the name of his false god, Krosses. He and his Torchkeepers are ravaging the entire southern continent and it's only a matter of time before he overthrows the empire, taking it as its own. When that happens, Nordlund will be next, if we cannot stop him.

If there was ever a time to rally our people and build our armies, it is now. But we must master ourselves first, if we are to save our people.

-S

Summer 829

It has been one winter since we woke as Darkborn. In the first days, we tried to fight the creatures living within us. But in the months' passed, we have learned to embrace the darkness instead of shun it. We push our limits, reveling in how fast we can run, how high we can jump, and how unstoppable we are at the pinnacle of our strength. We discovered Thorne's primordial tracking skills, his sense of smell the most potent. Arless is easily the fastest, her agility far superior to any of ours. And as for Lucian, of course, he has always been the strongest Nordman I've ever known. Though, I'm not sure we can ever be called Nordmen again. We are Darkborn now.

Despite our growing pains, we found a rhythm in this shadowed fold between life and death. For the first time since our rebirth, I believe we feel as Hel intended—her immortal instruments of fury and death. Seeing what we can achieve together makes the task ahead more promising as we continue to build an army to have at our backs.

But every ounce of strength and control comes at a cost. A cost that requires daily replenishing, especially in battle. And while the others thrive in their new skin, it is a cost that weighs on me daily, the price the Seer said I would have to pay for a semblance of peace. And in turn, through our preternatural connection, my deficiencies weigh on the others as well. ~~Again~~. Still.

Arless claims my self control is what makes me the leader, but my control teeters daily. My feedings scratch an itch, but my skin is always crawling. My hunger never sated—always begging for more with every beat of my cold, dead heart. It is all I can do to keep myself in check. But I do.

For the memory of my family.

For the honorable man I used to be.

If I cannot seek justice in their name, it is I who becomes the monster.

Vampires. Those are the whispers spread throughout Barron the Butcher's ranks after we raided a Torchkeeper camp months ago. The four of us ambushed three hordes and two scouting parties who dared visit our shores, preventing them from advancing west toward the Winksyn Woods, where men, women, and children do not seek penance from Krasses, the false God of Penance and Light. We know far too well what follows protestations. Barron's forces have massacred and tortured hundreds in Soothlund's pagan sanctuaries and peaceful lands. Nordlund will be no different if we cannot stop them.

And our latest victory has not gone unnoticed. When we returned to the keep after months of learning the land with our new senses, the village did not stare and whisper with fear, but with a quiet reverence. A respect. I might go so far as to say that word of our victories has turned into loyalty at last. They leave us gifts on a full moon, which they are convinced we are born from, since our strength and victories rise with the moon. Virgins, livestock, jars of blood. No matter how many times we tell them to cease, the gifts appear, so we have stopped saying anything at all. They place it at the altar erected in our recent absence. The altar of the Darkborn King. I cringe at the sight of it, but Arless insists I accept the moniker and show gratitude.

-Sylas Von Wolfsson

Summer 833

It has taken weeks, not months, for our enemy to whisper about the dark ones roving the land, capturing innocents. Soothlunders fear us, for we grow stronger by the day, our minds and bodies in tune with one another in a way we never expected. With Hel's power coursing through our veins, we are connected, and at night, when the runes are their most powerful and the bloodlust the most insatiable, we feel that in each other, too.

Perhaps that was part of Hel's plan all along, to bind us together in the most fearsome way, so our senses alone would drive us to do her bidding. But with each passing moon, we hone our skills more, wielding our acute senses to our will, becoming unstoppable. We have left battlefields drenched in the enemy's blood. We have ravaged their camps the closer they dare encroach, leaving nothing behind when it suits us. That is the power of the Darkborn. We are the night. We are the vengeance and wrath of those unjustly slain. We are the villagers who cannot fight for themselves and our names are feared throughout the kingdom. Soon, the Torchkeepers will be no more.

-Sylas Von Wolfsson, Wolf of the Darkborn Army

Summer 834

We have amassed an army greater than anything the North has ever seen. Shieldmaidens and warriors from all over the land come to fight with the Darkborn army. While their instinct is to fear us, their respect and thirst for vengeance outweigh their nature. They want to fight the evil that continues to spread across Nordlund, consuming the weak, the unprotected, and the misguided. My hope to conquer this remains. Our enemy is torn between disbelief that we exist and curiosity, and both will get them killed.

-Sylas Von Wolfsson, Wolf of the Darkborn Army

Winter 838

The years weigh heavy. This life is unnatural. Some days I don't know myself. I don't recognize the man I have become—a creature who lives by day but stalks the night. Who feeds on blood—who would lose my mind in the thirsty haze without it.

The feeling was indescribable at first—addicting and impossible to ignore. The raw power that hums in my body and sings through my veins on the onslaught feels tainted, and yet, I cannot live without it. The others have given in to all of their base needs, and though I have yet to fully embrace the darkness inside of me, I pay the price for it every day. I can feel their hunger, just as I can feel when it's sated, different from mine. Always different—incomplete. I yearn to feel like a purring cat of content. Meanwhile, my lack of satisfaction unsettles them. But bound to them as a Darkborn or not, I will not be swayed.

-Sylas Von Wolfsson, Wolf of the Darkborn Army

Winter 841

The slaughter continues. There is no end in sight. For every army Barron the Butcher sends in Krosses' name, we eradicate, only for another to arrive on our shores, knowing us and understanding our battle tactics more completely. Innocent people's blood stains the snow, and anger and resentment stews throughout the North. The Torchkeepers struggle in the harsh Winter Lands, but it is not enough to deter the generals who have only become more hungry for pagan blood than ever. In the wake of our resistance, the Torchkeepers have resorted to not only killing,

but torturing those who will not be cleansed as an example of what awaits those who resist what Krosses requires. He may be a false god used by a greedy, power hungry warlord, but he seems to grow in power with every moon. Where are our gods in this? How can they allow their people to suffer? The northern lands are vast and Barron the Butcher's army advances tenfold. Until we know where their stronghold is in the south, all we can do is prepare for more advancement while the gods remain infuriatingly silent.

-Sylas Von Wolfsson, Wolf of the Darkborn Army

Winter 843

Rage is all that fills me anymore, so I have made it my single mission to find and eradicate the Butcher's newest general, Blackhorn. His armies have proven equipped to fight and succeed in our lands of late. It is his missionaries who come not only with books, but with swords and arrows. Unlike the others who simply followed orders, Blackhorn breathes battle. His every move is calculated and strategic. He is a man of patience and a patient man in the throes of war is a dangerous man.

My spies tell me he has studied every account he could find of our kind, studied every battle the Nordmen have ever won, and that converted pagans support him. It is how he uses our strategies against us.

Whether it is my senses warning me, or my instinct, this man will ruin me. But until that day comes, I will make him suffer as our people suffer, and I mean to blot him out before he can do

worse. For General Blackhorn has not yet seen all the Darkborn are capable of, though he soon will.

-Sylas Von Wolfsson, Wolf of the Darkborn Army

Winter 845

It is as I feared. We may be revered by many, but we are hated and feared by others, and Blackhorn has used that to his advantage. He has spies everywhere. Some of our own men turned against us.

Lucian intercepted correspondence today, headed for a ship sailing to the Summer Lands. It was addressed to General Blackhorn, giving away our numbers and locations along the southern shores of our continent where our armies protect those most vulnerable.

I have patiently waited for Blackhorn to make a false move, but even now, something feels off. He is clever, and this oversight could be a trap. Nonetheless, he is at a disadvantage too. For now, we know the location of his stronghold and that he obtains a treasure he is certain will change the tide of this war, whatever it may be.

To kill a snake you must remove its head, and that is what I mean to do. And so, the letter giving our numbers and locations away still sails with the ship heading for the Glass Shores on the morrow, and the letter will continue to Swindfell as if nothing is amiss. Only now, the Darkborn knows where Blackhorn is, and part of our army will be directly behind his returning ship.

Knowing Blackhorn remains in the lands along the Mesanin Strait between Soothlund and Nordlund, protected by Swindfell's high cliffs, we will sail to the general. Because what are protective cliffs to the Darkborn army? We will meet him in his territory, and decapitate the serpent, once and for all.

-Sylas Von Wolfsson, Wolf of the Darkborn Army

Winter 845

We have found Blackhorn, and while there is no doubt he knows of our arrival after today, he is not ready for the hell the Darkborn will unleash this night. His keep is only three hundred strong, and while they outnumber us by nearly a hundred men, it is nothing we haven't conquered before. Especially as the bulk of his army sails north where he expected we'd remained.

Tonight, I vow to suck the life from Blackhorn and show the south what the Darkborn army is capable of, lest they forget.

-Sylas Von Wolfsson, Wolf of the Darkborn Army

Plans

Episode 3

Sylas

“What else do we know about Blackhorn?” Imara, commander of the Sage Land shieldmaidens, asks, bracing her fists on her hips.

“That his fortress is cliff side, making it nearly impenetrable from all sides but one,” Arless answers. “And if the rumors are to be believed,” she continues, “Blackhorn possesses something important, a treasure of sorts. Something that could change the tide of this war, and we cannot let him have it.”

Thorne grins from his wide-legged stance by the fire. “Aye, and he needs this win.” Thorne glances around the war table. “I hear some of his troops deserted once they heard we’d arrived. He can’t afford to lose to us, or he’ll have no army in his own lands left at his disposal.”

“Or the Butcher King will simply enslave more of his people to fight for him and his generals,” Imara mutters. “All in the name of his *god*.”

“Forgive me, my lord,” Olaff cuts in, and he meets my gaze. “If you know of Blackhorn’s whereabouts, is it not better to kill him where he sleeps and be done with it?” He twists his dark mustache thoughtfully.

I’m about to answer when Arless snorts. “Where’s the fun in that? Besides,” she **leans back against the wall**, sounding bored. “If we kill Blackhorn in his sleep, what’s to stop Barron the Butcher from advancing Blackhorn’s soldiers without him?”

“The gods have granted us a mercy,” I add. “It never snows in the southlands. We have the advantage and must use it to weaken their numbers.”

“Especially,” Arless adds, “since the rest of their army sails north.”

“So,” I continue, “We do this tonight. His soldiers are at a disadvantage. We have no idea how long the snow will last, and without it, they know this land far better than we do.”

“Precisely,” Imara grits out. “Respectfully, my lord,” she continues, as if the moniker causes her physical pain. A servant refills the commander’s ale cup. “You forget we are not . . . like the Darkborn.” She peers around the circle of human *hersir* commanders. “We cannot see in darkness. Not if we are to *win*.” Her red hair is braided back, away from her face. The scar on her cheek is a constant reminder of the price she has paid to be here, and the *only* reason the shieldmaiden has offered her warriors and skill to our cause.

“What? Are you frightened?” Thorne taunts, his arms crossed over his chest where he leans against a tent pole. “You can stay close to me, if you like. I’ll keep you safe.” His eyebrows dance and Imara’s glare narrows on him.

“You forget, Commander,” I tell her carefully, “that we will know the numbers standing against us and where they hide long before they know we have arrived.” I nod to the map of the forestlands sprawled west of Glass Shores Harbor. “And that is why we attack on a full moon, and why we will use flaming arrows.”

“So they will see us coming a mile away,” she spits.

“Only when it’s too late to do anything about it,” Arless counters, but her mind is clearly elsewhere as she admires the servant girl refilling the rest of the war council’s cups.

Imara rests her fists on the table and leans in. “You may be immortal, my lords,” she says pointedly, “but your warriors are mortals who bleed and die. You are risking a great deal by putting your entire army at the same disadvantage as the southerners. Meanwhile, their numbers encroach on our people in the north.”

“I hear you, Imara,” I say patiently, and while I understand her bitterness toward us, it begins to wear thin. “However, day or night, raining or snow-bound, this is war. Men and women will die. It is to *your* advantage that the four of us—”

“And Moose,” Thorne adds cheekily, flipping a wood pick between his teeth with a cocky grin.

It’s an effort not to roll my eyes every time he goads a reaction from Imara.

“It is to your advantage,” I continue, glaring at him, “that the four of us are as strong as we can be, and that is at night. And that Blackhorn’s men who outnumber us are at the greatest disadvantages possible.”

Imara stares down at the soot-drawn cliffs and fortress on the map.

“When we have slain him,” I say earnestly, “the Darkborn will head north again and meet the Torchkeepers at our shores. They have been fighting for three winters. They are depleted and in need of more men. The Darkborn will waylay them while we wait for the rest of our army to follow, if we must.” Understanding Imara’s concerns is one thing, but our entire purpose is to crush these armies, and it must start with tearing the viper’s head from the body.

“Then, my lords,” Imara grits out again. “I have preparations to tend to.” She dips her head hastily and turns. “You know where to find me.” Then she strides out of the tent.

“She’s pleasant,” Arless mutters.

I glance at Arless across the table, then at Lucian beside her. As always, he’s fixated on the map, tapping his finger against his leg, quiet, though he’s already seven steps ahead. Then I look at Thorne. He immediately averts his gaze, and I refocus on the rest of our commanders. “Are there any other questions?”

Tatem and Henlock shake their heads, but Olaff, a jarl from the Iklund clans to the north of Qisp Keep, eyes the map closely. “We can use the forest cover to our advantage,” he muses. “It’s General Blackhorn’s stronghold I worry about. With two of its walls facing the sea, they have a significant advantage should he make his way behind them.”

I meet Olaff's gaze. "You leave Blackhorn to us," I say calmly.

Olaff's eyebrow raises. "I'm not sure I want to know." He shakes his head, his eyes flicking to my mouth like he might see my fangs, and nods to the others. "I need rest if we're to set out at dusk. Commanders." He nods his farewell and strides away from the table and out of the tent. The other two take their leave and follow. Arless, Thorne, Lucian, and I stand around the table alone.

Arless runs her tongue over her lips as she watches the servant clear the cups from the table, and when the girl catches Arless staring, a shy smile parts her lips.

"Is there anything else, my lord?" the servant asks, and with a sigh, I shake my head. The servant dips in a small curtsy and leaves with her tray in hand.

"I need to fuck and feed," Arless says with a weighty exhale. "No one bother me for at least an hour." She strides around me. "Make that two." Then she disappears out of the tent, hot on the servant's heels.

Lucian remains silent as he swallows his irritation. At first, Arless said things like that to get a rise out of him. Now, I fear she is moving on, and Lucian remains fixed in the standoff that has existed between them since we were younger.

"When are you two going to pound it out and get on with this *thing* between you?" Thorne quips. "We've literally died and come back to life and you're still exactly where you were a lifetime ago."

Lucian glares at him, but I feel his surge of loss and longing as he marches around the table.

"I'm serious. What even happened? Neither of you have told me," Thorne calls after him, and Lucian stalks out of the tent in answer.

I meet Thorne's gaze.

"Don't look at me like that," he says innocently. Though he's anything but. "You want to know as badly as I do. They've been in love with each other their whole lives, and yet they hate each other more than ever. It makes no damn sense."

"That is not my concern."

Thorne rubs Moose's head as he looks curiously up at us from beside the fire. As a hellhound in a mastiff's skin, I wonder if the fire makes him feel more at home.

"Well?" Thorne prompts. "Let's hear it."

"I know Imara is the only woman in camp who will not lay with you, brother—"

"Not this again." Thorne groans.

"But you push her too far. One day, she will grow tired of your games and pull her shieldmaidens from our army, and that loss would be detrimental and solely on you." I give him a pointed look. "We need them."

"She won't leave the Darkborn," Thorne says haughtily, and he plops into a leatherback chair by the fire. "You know what the Torchkeepers did to her father and sister because they would not convert. She wants justice as much as the rest of us."

"Not if she hates us more than she hates them," I warn. "We are a means to an end for her. Imara has no loyalty to us—the sight of us alone makes her sick." Pain flickers in my brother's eyes, but it disappears quickly. "If you are not careful, Thorne," I say quietly, "you will push her even further away."

I don't know what it is about Imara that Thorne is drawn to, but I feel his pull to her. It's visceral and impossible to ignore. And she wants nothing to do with him. A Darkborn—an abomination and another reason the people of the Winter Lands are divided. Zealous

Torchkeepers or blood-thirsty monsters—we are all the same to Nordmen like her who only want peace. My heart, at least what's left of it, aches for such a sentiment, because I once felt that way too.

Finally, Thorne nods, and his attention shifts to the fire as I turn to leave. Moose jumps to his feet, loping after me.

“You need to feed,” Thorne whispers.

The thought alone makes my body sing with bloodlust, and I run my hand over my face, exhaling a heavy breath. Not because I am physically tired, but because I am eternally exhausted. “I will,” I promise. “There is something I must do first.” And with that, I pull the tent flap aside and step out into the frozen woods.

Though camp is quieter than usual with everything covered in snow, the afternoon is bright and confuses my senses. Warriors rest to prepare for what lies ahead. Their death. Their glory. It will be a bloodbath, regardless. Fires burn in pits, warriors sharpening their weapons, murmuring in stilted conversation as heaviness hangs in the air.

My bearskin cape tugs in the wind as I make my way toward my tent, but I am not warmed by it so much as I'm comfortable with the weight of it on my back. One of only a few things that makes me feel like my old self; that makes me feel human.

Moose trots alongside me, sniffing the ground and his tail wagging.

Moans of pleasure fill Arless's tent as we pass. The servant girl's blood smells like sweet honey scenting the air. It makes me hard and hungry, so I walk faster.

Thorne is right. I need to feed so I will be at my strongest when the sun sinks low, and the sky darkens. I've grown used to feeding now, a cursory and necessary act, but even if it helps, I am still never sated. Not entirely. We all know why, but I've lost so much of myself to the

darkness, I refuse to lose what little is left. Besides, I've tried. No matter how many solstices my wife has been gone. No matter how much her memory fades; it's all I can do to hold onto myself. To remember why I am doing any of this at all.

I smell my vessel awaiting me in my tent, and can hear the calm melodic sound of a human heartbeat. Pulling the flap back, I peer inside. Tru's long black hair and back are to me, tanned skin flickering with the torch light within. "I will return," I say.

Tru's sharp profile shifts slightly in my direction.

"There is something I must do first."

"Yes, my lord." His voice is quiet. Patient.

Knowing he is there calms me and gives me solace for what I am about to do next.

Swallowing thickly, I pass between Thorne's tent and my own, heading for the edge of the clearing. "Here," I say, and Moose sniffs the snow-dusted ground before he finds an acceptable location. Using his massive paws, he digs. He licks his chops, making quick work of the frozen ground.

When Moose deems the hole is large enough, he pauses, looks up at me, and I crouch beside him. My heart squeezes in my chest as I stare at the unpacked earth. In the silence, I can still hear Letty laughing in the fields back home with Moose as they search for rabbit burrows. I can still feel the sun on my face and the sound of my name on Milla's lips as she calls me into the house for supper after a long day with the plow. I know Moose remembers it too, and no matter how many holes we've dug, no matter how many winters have passed, this moment is when I feel most human. When I remember Syllas Von Wolfson, the man, and I can scantily remember what it felt like to be him.

Moose pants with exertion, and sliding my hand inside my cloak, I pull out the pouch of wildflower seeds tucked in my trousers.

Moose sniffs the pouch with a whimper and I hold it over the upturned soil, sprinkling a few seeds into the hole. “For you, hummingbird,” I whisper. I can’t help the crack in my voice, and I don’t care to try. Instead, I allow the pain to fill me. I allow their memory to fuel me for the battle to come. To remember *why* I do this.

I don’t know how long I stare at the hole, but finally, Moose licks my face, stirring my thoughts. “I know,” I mutter and tuck the pouch back into my pants before covering the hole with the loose earth. “We’re going.”

Rising to my feet, I exhale a final whispered prayer to the memory of my family and turn back to my tent. I’m nearly there when the runes on my body heat and a familiar tingle unfurls through me.

Moose stands stalk-still and we peer into the treeline, knowing she is in there. Whatever her tidings, Hel’s presence is rarely a good thing. Moose whimpers happily as he races ahead of me, disappearing into the trees.

“The Wolf is weak,” Hel muses. “You have not yet fed.” Her voice is a purr as I step through the pinewoods. Hel stands in warrior garb, ravens on the branches around her, cast in the muted light filtering through the leafless treetops. She rubs Moose’s head where he stands to her waist, and yet he is only a quarter of his natural size.

Two horses flank each side of her, impervious to the giant mastiff at their feet. All of them are massive—visions of white, which surprises me—and their manes flutter in the breeze as they stand excitedly, snorting and nickering, as if they are waiting for something.

“What is this?” I walk toward the steed whose gaze is fixed on me. The pink around her nose is freckled and her eyes are a piercing blue. She paws at the forest floor as I draw closer and rest my palm on her neck to soothe her. “You bring us horses?” I say, confounded. “Unless they are hellhounds in horse’s skin, they will not help us win this battle.” I stroke the steed’s neck, the warmth and pulse of her life giving me unexpected comfort.

“They are for what comes after,” Hel offers. “Her name is Sleipnira.”

I can’t help my furrowed brow. “And what, exactly, comes next?” I look at the four animals again with fresh eyes. Powerful the gods may be, but they do nothing without reason.

Hel stares impatiently at me, unanswering. *Figures.*

Sleipnira nudges my arm, her eyes closing as she leans into me like we’re old friends. I rub my hand over her forelock, her white mane cascading forward as she lowers her head in fealty to me.

“*Call me Nira,*” her soul says to mine.

“I like it.” It’s a bond unlike any other, different even from what I have with Moose, and for the first time in so long, a joyful warmth washes over me.

“She was made for you,” Hel explains. “It is why you feel bonded to her already. She is the queen of horses, the fastest and most powerful. And this,” Hel continues as the horse beside Nira lifts his head higher. He’s white with pale gray spots over his face and shoulders. “This is Hati, made for Arless. He is stubborn and determined, just as she is.” My lips curve in a smile as I stroke his face before moving onto the others. “This male,” I say, seeing something different in his eyes, something cunning and curious. “He is for Lucian.” I’m not sure how I know, but somehow, I do.

“He is Hugin. Clever and strong.” The deep gray around his mouth and eyes match the gray streaks in his mane and tail. “And she is Frey.” Frey licks at my clothes and nudges my cape like she’s looking for treats. “Sneaky but loyal and faster than lightning. She and Thorne will do well together.”

I run my fingers through her mane, shaggy and white, and the longest of all the horses. “If it is food you seek, clever one, you will not find it with me.” Frey looks at me with boredom, and I surprise myself with a chuckle. “And the price we pay for such gifts?” I ask, never forgetting everything comes at a cost.

Hel rubs Hugin’s face, but the goddess’s eyes never stray from me. “When you have won this battle,” she says evenly, “you and Lucian will ride for Finfjord while the others return to Rockhavn.”

We’ve never been parted as Darkborn, and the idea of it unsettles me. “Why would only the two of us stay in the south? What’s in Finfjord?”

“You will know soon enough,” Hel says. “But you must go alone, so as not to draw attention to yourselves.” Her gaze bores into me. “It is *imperative* you go, Syllas, if you are to win the battles that lie ahead. Ask for a man called Koldis when you arrive.” Hel nods toward camp. “Now, go.” The horses start a lazy walk away from her. “Feed,” she tells me. “Prepare yourself for battle. It’s uncertain how long this storm might last.” There’s a smile in her voice, though her features give nothing away.

Turning her words over in my mind, I walk shoulder to shoulder with Nira through the trees.

“Tonight, the threads of Fate begin to unravel, Sylas.” Despite my senses, Hel’s voice barely reaches my ears, and I stop short. When I turn to look at her, however, the goddess is already gone.

Tru

Pulling the tent flap back, I stare inside. Tru sits by the fire, watching its flames as he waits for me. He's regal and lithe. Not built like a warrior, but something fragile, something beautiful—pure and untouched by this heathenish world. Only, there is nothing further from the truth because, as my vessel, Tru is the fuel that keeps the bloodlust at bay and this war raging between the lands.

Stepping inside, I notice the wine jug on the table beside him is full; I can smell the fermented fruit permeating the air, settled and untouched.

“You have been waiting for so long,” I say quietly, unclasping my cloak. “Yet you do not drink.” The noise from camp is muffled as the tent swishes closed behind me. “You know I wish for you to be comfortable when I feed.” Draping my furs over the seat at my drafting table, I watch him, thoughtful, and remove my leather jerkin next.

Tru peers over his shoulder at me. His long dark lashes descend with a bashful blink, and he offers me a hint of a smile. “I know you dislike the taste of anything in my blood,” he says easily.

I've never found a male so enticing, nor one so calming. And I crave the euphoria of my teeth sunk into his skin and the peace that will follow. My body hardens, the bloodlust filling each of my veins with desire and anticipation. Everything about today—about being here on the southern shore—leaves me restless.

Pulling my tunic off so it doesn't stain it with blood, I drop it where I stand.

Tru's gaze shifts up my body before it meets my eyes. I see it in his expression and smell it pouring out of him in waves—a potent, unequivocal desire, and it makes my cock rock-hard and my body greedily awaits what it's about to receive. That Tru gains some pleasure out of the lonely existence as my vessel gives me a small sense of comfort.

Stepping around him, I crouch in front of the male, feeling the fire against my bare back. Every muscle in my body is coiled and buzzing with need, but I am slow and gentle because it is Tru, and I would never hurt him. Never break him. And I yearn for that thread of control as much as I need to feed from him, putting everything in an intricate but sustainable balance.

I don't know what it is about this human, but the softness in his eyes calms the disquiet that has always accompanied feeding time.

His amber-colored eyes shift over my face and a strange sadness furrows his brow ever so slightly. I frown.

Reaching up, I cup the side of his face. Caring this way about a man doesn't feel like a broken vow because it will never be what it was with Milla. Instead, it is a means for survival. A friendship as deep as I have with the Darkborn, if a bit different, for my vessel and I are forever tied together in the most intimate way.

Tru's blood runs through my body. It feeds the hungry depths of me, giving me life. His essence is my own, filling all of my senses. So Tru's desire thrums through me as much as his heartache. "What troubles you this night?" I whisper.

He glances away. "You will go to war again." He peers down at the hem of his tunic. "You say you cannot die," he continues, "and perhaps that is true, but you feel pain. You *always* feel pain, and I hate that for you."

"As do the other Darkborn, yet you do not worry about them? About Thorne?" I tease him, hoping to lift the heavy moment.

Tru scoffs. "It might do Thorne some good to fear for his life once in a while," he grumbles.

I smile in agreement, but Tru's features harden and he tugs his tunic off his slender shoulder, and pulls out his arm to feed me. "They will come for you soon," he says in a clipped tone. "You should feed."

Was it only a dozen winters ago I was on the brink of madness, unable to satisfy my hunger? Now, I crouch in front of a man, concerned his feelings for me are too strong after so long together, because they can never be reciprocated the way he wishes them to be, even if I care for him in a way I cannot put into words. What sort of cruel existence is that for him?

"Come to the bed." Rising to my feet, I take his hand.

"My lord?" Tru peers up at me, confusion wild in his gaze since I have never fed from him in my bed. But tonight feels fragile, like we're in a delicate embrace that needs care and comfort.

"You will need sleep afterward," I explain. Gently, I tug him to his feet and lead him to the raised pallet of furs. His heartbeat races and the sound of his pulse pounds in my ears like a war drum. "We have a long journey ahead of us," I add.

Tru blinks at me as I pull the furs back so he can lie down.

"A journey?"

"Yes. We travel with Lucian to Finfjord after the battle. So, I command you to stay in this bed, Tru," I say more forcefully. "You will be warmer here. You will be safe. Am I understood?"

Nodding, Tru lays back against the goose down pillow, swallowing thickly as I pull up a stool beside the bed. His cheeks redden and his musk fills the tent.

Laying his bare arm on the furs, our gazes linger on one another before I clear my throat. "Thank you for your offering."

"Yes, my lord." It's a croak and locking eyes with Tru, I lift his arm.

There is no way around the intimacy of feeding. I have never fed from his neck, nor will I, but the scent of his skin threatens to chip away at my resolve. The feel of his warm arm in my chilly hands burns like fire in my palm, awakening every coiled, overwrought inch of my body in need of release. I learned long ago to embrace the longing as much as what's left of my soul will allow. And this is it.

Running my nose along the vein in his arm, I inhale and lick the tender flesh in the crook of his elbow, and suck the soft skin before sinking my fangs into the supple flesh.

Tru moans, and my cock twitches. My heart thuds with power as I drag his blood deeper into my mouth. It coats my tongue and throat as it seeps into my ravenous body. It's intoxicating and only remotely do I feel Tru's body shift.

I suck harder, groaning as the warmth of him fills every inch of me. It enlivens each sense as heated velvet wraps around the coldest parts of me, making my body hum, flaring with an almost painful vitality that needs release.

With only my hand to pacify my sex for so many winters, coming is never enough, and in the throes of bloodlust is no exception. Tru's arousal courses through me, thick and tantalizing in his blood. I smell it. Taste it. Feel it tingling against my skin.

I need to fuck. But I won't.

I *want* to. But I never do.

I never *will*.

I physically *can't*.

"Let go, my lord," Tru whispers. His hand skims over my knee and down my thigh, and my body pulses, vibrating and begging for release as I thrust my bulging cock into his palm, irate by this impossible situation I grow tired of navigating.

“I wish you to feel no pain.” He squeezes my cock through my pants, a jolt of pure, feral thirst rushing through me. Tru strokes me harder, grips me firmer, and the friction worsens the desire, and I growl with yearning at the pleasure-pain. It’s all I can do to keep the monster at bay and refrain from mounting him, claiming Tru as mine in every possible way. It’s all I can do to prevent myself from letting go completely, and I know he won’t survive it.

I am someone else’s. The thought is assaulting, grating over my skin and blaring painfully through my head, plaguing me as always. My stomach churns, physically sours, and I start to feel sick. *Fuck!*

I snarl in frustration, grabbing Tru’s hand, still coaxing my cock, and tear it away with bruising pressure. He tries to pull his wrist from my grip, and I growl in warning, taking his blood deeper, sucking harder to barely satisfy the growing hunger. My mind prickles with agitation, my thoughts eroded with a need that will never be fulfilled.

“My lord?” Thorne’s voice is low and cautious as it carries in from outside, and the pulsing need to fuck recedes only slightly. I unhinge my mouth from Tru’s arm, gaze locked on his. Whatever my expression, Tru’s eyes widen slightly with terror.

“Sylas—”

“Give me a fucking moment!” I roar. When my nostrils flare, Tru exhales and tugs both his arms from my grasp.

Twigs snap as Thorne steps away from my tent, and I run my hand over my face and down my mouth, wiping the blood away. My body is a tempest over a calm sea—mildly sated and yet vibrating with raw energy I’m desperate to expel.

“Never do that again,” I grind out as I squeeze my eyes shut. I palm the ache in my pants, willing my body’s impulses away. The lingering need hurts like hell, and with no time for release, I tell myself it is fuel for tonight’s battle.

Forcing my eyes open again, I look at Tru. “Do you understand?” My voice is ragged.

He nods, licking his dry lips nervously. “Apologies, my lord. I only wanted to—”

“Help.” I shake my head. “You mustn’t.”

His chest rises and falls and I know I’ve hurt him, or perhaps frightened him, but I cannot allow that again. “You say you do not want to hurt me,” I explain, softening my voice. “But whatever this curse—” I shake my head. “Breaking my vow physically hurts me, more than any blade in my chest ever could.”

Tru blinks at me.

“Do you understand?”

Again, he nods, and this time, I think he truly does.

Rising to my feet, I adjust my throbbing cock with a groan. My body is so hard with power it I think my muscles might finally snap.

Ready to kill and maim and wreak havoc on Blackhorn, I take Tru’s arm, lick the blood from his wounds so they will close, and pull the furs that have fallen off him over his body once more. “Stay and sleep. Tonight, I kill Blackhorn and everything he holds dear.”

Blackhorn

For sixteen winters, the melodic sound of agony and crunching bone has been my lullaby. I've learned to appreciate the earsplitting sound of metal against metal. To distinguish the smell of fear and blood amidst the cacophony of death filling the night, and the battle has only just begun.

As our army descends on Blackhorn's Soothlund army, my wife's face is all I can see, and my daughter's screams in her final moments are all I hear. The scent of their burning bodies fills my nose, and red-hot, all-consuming rage envelops me, enlivening my senses until my entire body is vibrating with unrestrained power.

This is what fuels me, and I welcome nights like this when evil gets retribution and I can bask in the glory of Hel coursing through the runes on my skin. Her vengeance hardens my heart. Her endless power fortifies my body, feeding my fury until the monster in me takes control, maiming every enemy in my crosshairs. Even the creatures of the forest, saber tooth and wildfang alike, give us a wide berth.

Bodies collide into bodies as Blackhorn's soldiers lift their swords on the other side of the horde, their reactions sloppy as the night shadows play tricks on them, and the knowledge they fight against the Darkborn keeps them skiddish.

But try as they might, they will not win. Not this lot, and not tonight. Their poison-tipped arrows and saber tooth spiked axes may slow some of us down, but for every Nordman the southerners have slain, the brotherhood will seek retribution. For the innocent daughters and sons the Soothlunders have taken from us. For the wives and sisters slain—*no one* with southern blood is safe. Especially not Blackhorn.

"Having fun yet?" Thorne winks at me, blood spattered across his face and matting his red hair into thick ropes that drip crimson. I don't need the arrow flames to know his eyes are lit with

greedy hunger as he lifts his war hammer and cracks it between the eyes of the enemy. “I think Ari has killed more than me.” He grunts with frustration and pulls his hammer back. “But do not fret, brother. I will not let her win. It goes against my every nature.”

Swing. Crack. Grunt. The sound of seeping blood soothes my ears, and the sweat mixing with blood on my skin feels like a homecoming.

“Good,” I say dryly, grunting with another clip of my axe against hardened wildfang hide, nearly thick as steel. “Imagine my concern.” I swing again with a roar, the soldier collapsing to a heap of twitching limbs at my feet. Their red capes pool around them, matted with blood and grime; I can’t tell where the capes begin and the carnage ends.

Each swing is effortless, and as I tear my fangs through a man’s neck, wetting my tongue as the life gurgles out of him, my body hums with more energy. More power.

“We can’t even stop to enjoy it,” Thorne mutters. “Such a waste.”

I sneer as I continue carving my way through the sea of mindless soldiers who fight for a false, cruel god, toward the General’s circle of defense. Blackhorn swings his battle axe, lodging it between a Nordman’s neck and shoulder, oblivious to his commander’s barking order like frightened pups.

Stay close to the General!

Keep the horde away from the fortress!

Eyes on the heathens!

Through a swing and thwack, I glance in his direction. Blackhorn’s movements are practiced, and each kill is made with a smirk and unnerving ease. And as the breeze carries Blackhorn’s scent to me, I detect no fear.

I laugh. *Challenge accepted.*

The General's hubris may be the only crack in his armor, but it will be the death of him; tonight, *he* is my only true target, and he is as human as the rest of them.

Lucian roars a battle cry in the distance.

Moose snarls in the melee behind me as he moves with our northern armies across the snowy clearing.

I don't need to look back to know Moose is no longer a mastiff; the enormous snarling hellhound fights beside the human army, tearing the enemy limb from limb. While Moose was terrifying to the Nordmen at first, his presence gives the warriors courage in battle.

Swing. Crack. Thunk.

Soon, the snow no longer glimmers in the moonlight, stained dark and crimson, and while many of our men and women have fallen, Blackhorn's meager numbers, having gathered at a moment's notice when we came ashore, litter the ground in masses.

"Tonight, the threads of Fate begin to unravel." Hel's words press me faster. Adrenaline rushes through my veins and pounds in my ears, and I swing harder, gaining ground on Blackhorn.

Peering through the flailing limbs and clinking weapons, my gaze sharpens on him. His offensive red banner snaps in the wind behind him. His chest heaves with exhaustion, though his expression gives nothing away. It's fierce and determined. He stalls where he stands and peers around, his commanders falling back into the cover of the treeline behind them.

As I slay three more of Blackhorn's men, our eyes connect.

"You!" I roar, pointing my axe at the general. He snarls. I grin. *You cannot hide from me*, I think as I inhale the night air, stepping closer. I've thinned the hordes. Now, I seek my prey.

“The General has a hard-on for you,” Thorne jests, and pulls his weapon from a soldier’s side. “I can practically smell it.”

If not for the men calling him to retreat, Blackhorn would meet me here and now. The murderous glint in his eye is bright and eager.

“The diamond! Think of the north, General!”

Blackhorn’s eyebrow twitches, and grudgingly, he turns for the trees. *Yes, yes. Run for your precious treasure.*

The instant I feel the vibration of retreating horse hooves over the forest floor, I laugh again.

Thorne does the same. “He thinks his horse can outrun us. That he is safe behind his walls.”

“And now we know he plans to claim the north,” I muse. We knew he would come, eventually. But to mention it in the heat of battle means it’s more important to him than I realized. And perhaps closer than I thought.

We glance back at Blackhorn’s decimated army. What’s left of our own warriors catch their breath as the southerners still breathing fall back.

“Ari!” I call. “Take the cliffs with Lucian.”

“On it!” she grits out, loosing a flaming arrow. It hisses through the night, lodging into the eye socket of her target, setting his body ablaze.

Thorne and I break into a jog. My body still radiates power, the promise of Blackhorn’s blood fueling my every movement; this is the night I’ve waited four winters for. “Blackhorn would not retreat to the fortress unless he has a plan,” I say, barely raising my voice. “Or, he’s desperate.” For the hundredth time, I wonder what treasure he hides behind those walls.

“Oh, I have no doubt,” Thorne replies, and his voice is a familiar rumble to my ears, easily detected despite our chase.

I block out the waning cries of death behind us, ignore the dry blood cracking on my face, and welcome the burn of the runes along my skin, focusing instead on the retreating mare’s heavy breaths in the chilly night air. She senses us, her primal senses know to fear us more than the bite of Blackhorn’s heels in her sides, and the chase only intensifies the bloodlust. Tru’s blood, amplifying my senses, grows faint after hours in battle, and the Darkborn side of me grows thirsty with only mere snacks along the way.

Twigs snap under hurried hoofbeats.

Blackhorn’s battle axe clanks against his stirrups and his muffled commands urge the mare onward as the rumble of our army makes its way through the woods behind us. It’s the thrum of frantic bodies within the fortress, however, that makes me smile; my powers may be diminishing as I exude so much energy, but there will be plenty for us to drink.

“The general!” someone shouts from the turrets.

“Is that . . . Vampires?”

“Over there—the heathen army approaches!”

“The heathens approach! The heathens approach!”

“Ready the battlements!”

“Hold the line!”

Blackhorn barely makes it through the gate, the red and gold banners snapping in the wind, before the grate lowers behind him. Thorne and I run harder, my thighs burning as I launch onto the stone wall and scale toward the top.

“Don’t let them reach the top!” An arrow pierces my shoulder, slowing me for a single moment before I gain momentum again. Another lodges in my side, and I hiss in pain as I break it off, but I don’t falter this time.

Despite the arrow in his leg, Thorne grins, as if it is all a game, and our strong, agile fingers and the toes of our boots find purchase in the crevices of the stones with ease.

In the distance, the waves crash against the cliff, and I wonder if Arless and Lucian are close. I have little time for that thought and pull an archer on the rampart over the edge the instant he’s within reach, followed by the guard with the long sword who takes his place.

Something . . . foreign catches my nose. Inhaling at the top, I sort through the onslaught of scents within the fortress, searching out my target. Soot tangles with steel and leather, nervous sweat with the coppery tinge of blood. Manure and damp hay. Overly-ripe fruit. And . . . a scent reminiscent of fresh snow or morning dew. Crisp. Pure. It is wholly out of place among the stench of fear and decay.

I shake off the distraction as Thorne vaults over the stone wall, landing catlike on the battlement. He dispatches the guards instantly. They grunt, and their meaty bodies hit the ground with a thud.

I follow a heartbeat later. “Find his diamond,” I tell him. “I’ll hunt for Blackhorn.”

Two more soldiers charge toward us, blades drawn. I surge forward in a blur, dodging their clumsy sword thrusts and swinging axes. My hands latch onto their throats, lifting them off their feet as if they weigh nothing. The guards kick and gurgle, but their struggles are laughably futile. I hand one to Thorne to feed from and when my hand is free, I twist, snapping the neck of the other and tossing his body aside. I’m saving my thirst for Blackhorn only.

Lucian and Ari are here; I feel them like they are my other selves.

A streak of white catches my attention as Lucian moves like lightning as he fights a handful of soldiers below. The creak and groan of the gate opening once more echoes above their cries.

“Could you two be any slower?” Arless drops from the shadows above, landing in a silent crouch, her dark leathers blending with the night. She juts her chin over her shoulder. “The gate is open.”

Lucian lands on the turret beside us with a graceful thud, giant, blood-coated war axe in hand. His preternatural white hair, though pulled away from his face, is wild and glints in the torchlight. His beard is red, having recently fed, and though we are still stronger than every human here, our strength is dwindling. But I will not feed, not yet.

“Thorne. Lucian. Clear the walls for our army. Leave no one alive. When our warriors arrive, find Blackhorn’s precious diamond.”

Thorne flashes a wolfish grin, teeth gleaming in the moonlight. “With pleasure.”

“Ari,” I say, meeting her gaze. “You’re with me.”

Lucian nods and stalks off without a word, his hulking silhouette vanishing into darkness.

Arless falls into step beside me as we ghost across the ramparts.

Below, soldiers mill about the courtyard in agitated clumps, some armed and armored, others scampering away. They know death has come for them tonight. Fear hangs thick in the air, spiking with each distant scream as Lucian and Thorne butcher enemy comrades, feeding on those they wish along the way.

“What is that?” Arless asks as that same foreign, tantalizing scent from before wafts through the miasma of terror, tugging at my senses. It feels like it’s calling to me.

I inhale again, my eyes fluttering shut. Lilacs and honey, new parchment and crisp apples . . .

“Sylas?”

I blink, burying the strange instinct to find the source. When I meet Arless’s gaze, the fire-red shining through her amber irises is all the reminder I need that she feels whatever strange pull the scent has on me. Perhaps on *all* of us. I clear my throat. “Let’s move.”

We drop into the courtyard, startling a cluster of guards. I draw my axe, winding my wrist as I swing the blade at an advancing soldier. Too close to use her bow, Arless twirls her twin daggers and bares her fangs in a feral smile. We dart between the soldiers like shadows of death. I lose myself to the graceful rhythm of combat, my axe blade flashing crimson as it cleaves through flesh and bone and sinew. Men scream. Blood sprays. Limbs fall like dead leaves in an autumn wind.

And in a few breaths, they are no more.

Our army finally arrives, pouring into the courtyard like a dark tide, consuming everything in its path. Moose lopez in the fortress with them. His eyes find me instantly, and the hellhound trots toward us.

I glimpse Thorne, gore-spattered and grinning, swinging his hammer in mighty arcs. Lucian roars, splitting a man in half from crown to navel with a single blow.

Arless, Moose, and I make our way through the carnage, and I breathe the copper-rich air in deep, searching for Blackhorn. I detect him, but it’s faint compared to the floral, crisp scent that’s stronger than all the rest. It’s off-putting and intoxicating, and it makes me uneasy when all I want is to find the general.

“He would have retreated to the great hall,” Arless guesses as she cleans her daggers on a dead man’s vest. And that’s when I smell him—putrid and vile and reeking of blood, sweat, and, *finally*, fear.

“No.” I tilt my head, listening harder. I peer at the cobblestone beneath our feet. “He’s running like a mangy rat.”

“Coward,” Arless spits, eyes narrowed. “Tunnels?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” We stalk toward the scent of old rot and mold, where I assume Blackhorn’s dungeons are located. Into the bowels of the fortress we go, following the growing scent of Blackhorn’s sweat and desperation mixed among that maddening hint of . . .

I growl and stride faster, hyper-focused on Blackhorn’s frantic heartbeat.

Moose lopes beside me, his hellhound form nearly brushing the stone ceiling of the narrow tunnels as we descend.

I nearly bend to fit inside, my shoulders brushing the rough walls with each menacing stride.

Finally, we emerge into a dimly lit chamber, casks of wine and preserved foodstuffs lining the walls—supplies for a lengthy siege. And there, around the next bend, is Blackhorn. His armor is gore-spattered, his footsteps quick.

“Going somewhere, General?” My voice is deceptively mild, but my body hums at the promise of his blood.

Blackhorn stops in his tracks. He laughs. “You think you have won, heathen?” he seethes, and the general spins, sword rasping from its sheath.

Moose growls. Arless hisses and takes a defensive stance beside me.

In the guttering torchlight, Blackhorn's eyes are wide and wild above the deep, muck-stained lines in his cheeks and crusted beard. "You have only slowed him down."

"And killed you," I reply. "Which was my goal all along."

"You haven't killed me yet, *vampire*." With a self-satisfied grin, Blackhorn takes a defensive stance, as if he could fend me off.

With a grin of my own, I stalk forward, Moose hanging back with Arless.

Blackhorn swings strong and true despite his exhaustion. I catch his blade with my hand, feeling nothing more than a pinch, and wrench it from his grasp, tossing it aside with a clatter. The general staggers back, pressing himself against the unyielding stone.

"Barron will avenge me," he gasps out.

"No," I promise, "he won't. You're no more than a pawn." I seize Blackhorn by the throat, lifting him off his feet. His hands tear ineffectually at my wrist and fingers. "Tell me about the diamond," I command, squeezing harder. "The treasure you hold."

"I'll tell you . . . nothing, heathen . . . filth." He bares his teeth in a taunting grin. "And when Barron . . . has his treasure, it will be . . . the end of you."

My eyes narrow on him.

"Your forces . . . will be nothing to his."

I tighten my grip, feeling Blackhorn's throat convulse beneath my fingers. "What is it?" I shake him like a rag doll. "Gold? Weapons?"

Blackhorn, unwaveringly stubborn, tries to laugh. "More valuable . . ." As he gasps for breath, I know this man would rather die than tell me. So be it, but not before I play with him a bit.

With a roar, I fling him across the room. "Hungry, Ari?" I offer. "I'm happy to share."

Blackhorn hits the wall, shouting in pain as he crumples to the floor, his limbs askew.

“I thought you’d never a—”

A section of the stone pivots behind Blackhorn’s body with a grinding rasp. A secret door opening. I look at Arless.

“I’ll admit, it’s a good hiding spot,” she says and lifts her shoulder.

In two steps, I wrench the door fully open, immediately accosted by the unnerving scent that’s been taunting me since climbing the fortress wall, and I nearly stumble.

Nostrils flaring, I gape into the small chamber utterly confused. Huddled on a bed in the corner, staring at me with luminous, fearless eyes, is a girl no more than twelve or thirteen years old.

Warmth floods my body, my muscles tightening with need, and my heartbeat quickens. I think of Letty and I stumble back again, terrified and sickened by my body’s reaction to the girl’s scent. She’s a *child*.

Covering my nose, I look at Arless as she hauls Blackhorn to his feet.

“This is your diamond?” I snap. I don’t know how I know it, but I do.

Blackhorn’s eyes harden on me in warning. “If you take her,” he grits out, wincing as if it hurts to breathe. “Barron will find her. He will tear down the world for her.”

Scowling, my gaze shifts to the girl again. To her braided, light hair pulled away from freckled, sun-kissed cheeks, and her big blue eyes blinking between us. Despite my size and blood-soaked appearance, her gaze betrays no hint of revulsion when she looks at me.

Some long-dormant impulse stirs, fierce and feral, and a maelstrom of confusion, and some unnameable emotion I dare not examine too closely, floods my senses. It’s the need to

protect, to possess, to keep this creature safe from Barron. It wars with the ever-present bloodlust and, with my strength waning, there is little I can do to ignore the vile urges pulsing through me.

The monster inside me needs feeding if I'm going to control it.

I wrench my eyes away, fixing Blackhorn with a murderous glare, my restraint tattered.

He laughs. "You've already lost, vampire. You just don't know it yet."

And with those words, I unleash the monster, practically tearing his windpipe from his throat as I sink my teeth into Blackhorn's neck, reveling in the feel of his viscous blood, fervid against my tongue, and the harmonious sounds of his gargled screams.

Leore

“Sy . . .” Arless’s voice is distant in my feeding frenzy as I relish the warm nourishment that floods my system, strengthening every fiber of my body. It awakens every nerve-ending, leaving me buzzing with unsated need.

Arless clears her throat, and as I toss Blackhorn’s body aside, her eyes flick to the chamber behind me. The world comes into focus again, and my head snaps in that direction. The girl’s eyes are wide and terrified, finally, and her chest rises and falls so fast, I’m surprised she’s not screaming or sobbing with fear. Her nostrils flare, and with each heavy breath she takes, my instincts growl with need. Still.

Fuck.

With a whimper, Moose transforms into a mastiff again, and tail wagging, he trots over to the girl. Her mouth opens and closes in shock. She doesn’t shy away when he licks her face, as I expect, and I sense her heart rate easing a little, which brings me an unexpected sliver of peace. But her smell is pure chaos to my senses.

Unable to stand her proximity, I barrel down the corridor, needing as much distance as possible. “Keep her away from me, Arless!” I shout.

I hear her tell the girl to stay with Moose, and Arless jogs after me. “What the hell is going on?” she rasps.

I squeeze my eyes shut, focusing on one step at a time as the urge to go back recedes. “I don’t know, but she is a problem.” I spin and meet Arless’s concerned gaze. “You feel that, right? You sense what I sense?”

Arless studies me. Her eyes trail over my body, her lips pursing. “I smell her, Sy, but your reaction—” She shakes her head and glances down the corridor toward the chamber. “That’s unexpected.”

I straighten, confused. Disgusted. Horrified.

“I feel *your* need, but . . . I don’t have the same pull.”

We blink at one another as heavy footsteps approach. “Ah, you found the diamond first, I see,” Thorne drawls. He and Lucian stop behind me, assessing Blackhorn’s body in a heap down the corridor. “We missed the finale.”

Lucian lifts his nose slightly, drawing in a deep breath, and Thorne seems to register the strangeness in the air at the same time.

“You smell that, right?” I ask, clenching my hands into fists. “The girl?”

“Girl?” Thorne nods, smiling as he takes me in from head to toe. “I haven’t seen you get worked up for a woman since—”

“Not a woman,” Arless warns as I growl in irritation. “*Girl*.”

As if she knows we’re talking about her, Blackhorn’s *treasure* steps out of her chamber and into the corridor.

Thorne and Lucian both straighten beside me, and when they look at me, their brows furrow. “That’s . . . unnerving.” Thorne says.

I curse under my breath, and the instant I inhale, I regret it. Her scent fills my lungs like a drug. I push past Thorne, needing to remove myself from the girl’s presence if I’m to keep my sanity.

“Are—” Her voice stops me mid-step. The girl clears her throat at the other end of the corridor. “Are you going to kill me, sell me, or take me home?” It’s a command, her bravado masking her fear.

“Where is your home?” Thorne asks carefully. “Who are you to Blackhorn?”

“My home is Highmark, in the Frail Valley—”

“Frail Valley?” Arless rasps. “The high seat of the southern empire.” She looks at me, shaking her head.

“Are you,” Throne starts. “Are you Princess Leore of Soothlund?”

The girl’s shoulders straighten and her chin lifts ever so slightly, just as a princess’s would. She doesn’t dignify us with an answer. “You are the heathens preventing the false king from taking the north.” Not a question, but a statement.

Arless scoffs. “We *heathens* just saved you from whatever fate Blackhorn had in store for you.”

“To marry the false king,” the princess says coolly. There’s an apprehension in her tone, uncertain if she should trust us. She shouldn’t. Not me, at least. And yet, the thought of her in the mere presence of Barron the Butcher sends a murderous jolt through me.

“Fuck!” I shout, and spinning on my heels, I stride out of the tunnel.

Only when I am above ground, inhaling slightly fresher air, does my mind begin to clear. My body still thrums with a rabid, dangerous energy.

“What jest is this!” I shout up into the sky, chest heaving as I try to catch my breath. I pace, quelling the need to kill something. “What have you done to me?” I mutter, knowing Hel can hear me. I stalk across the courtyard, stepping over and around bodies, vaguely noting Imara and her shieldmaidens helping our injured on the eastern wall.

Arless jogs behind me. “My lord—”

“Not now,” I growl and continue through the gates, needing to get the hell away from the fortress.

“Sylas!” she calls, and she’s beside me instantly, her stride nearly matching mine as I stalk farther away. “Sy!” She grabs my arm.

“What?” I bark and spin around. “Can’t you see? I need to get away from here. This—” I gesture between me and the fortress—to the girl. “This isn’t natural. It’s not right.”

“None of this is natural,” Arless reminds me. “None of this is right. And I know you’re struggling. I understand. But . . . she is not a mere human. She is the princess of the entire southern empire and her entire family is dead, thanks to Blackhorn. What do you want us to do with her?”

“Keep her safe,” I say instantly. “Put her somewhere no one can get to her. She’s your charge now.”

Arless says nothing, understanding the weight of such a task, one I cannot help her bear, even if I wanted to.

The world is eerily silent without the sound of battle, and as I turn, ready to head deeper into the forest, Arless exhales. “Sylas.” It’s a plea, so I pause. “Why does it sound like you are leaving?”

I peer at her over my shoulder. “Because I am. Lucian and I head farther south in search of a man called Koldis.”

The crusted grime on her face cracks as her frown deepens. “You mean, the four of us—”

I shake my head. “You and Thorne stay here, raise more armies. Train. Figure out what to do about the princess.”

There’s a sadness in Arless’s gaze, already mourning our absence. The four of us have not been separated since our change. We have not had to exist apart.

“This is Hel’s order,” she confirms.

I nod. “Koldis is necessary for whatever comes next. That is all I know.”

Arless crosses his arms over her chest. “Of course it is. Damn cryptic bit—” An angry gust of frigid wind whips over us and Arless rolls her eyes. “Bitch,” she finishes more quietly.

I nearly smile. “Tell Lucian to meet me at the forge for fresh weapons. We leave at first light.”

Arless’s mouth draws down in the corner, and finally, she nods. “Thorne and I will manage things here. When the army has all their plunder, we’ll sail home.”

I dip my chin. “Be careful, Ari,” I murmur. We don’t know how our powers work when we aren’t together. But Hel would not separate us if it was a detriment.

“How long will you be gone?”

Instinct tells me it will not be a short trip. “As long as it takes.”

We stare at each other in silent understanding before Arless nods and takes a step back. “Safe travels, brother.”

And with that, she’s gone in a flash, and I am alone with thoughts I do not want and more uncertainty than I’ve ever felt about our future.