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“Just slit its fucking throat already.”

The piglet squeals in Lyra's grip, an impossibly shrill and needling sound like a blade drawn across glass. I'd slit its throat myself just to stop the noise, but this is Lyra's Rite. I passed my own five years ago, and I certainly didn't spill snot while doing it. I took one look into the piglet's cute little beady eyes, drew my blood into a blade, and lopped off its head. We ate Penny that very night. She tasted delicious.

But little Lyra squeals a pitch higher than the pig. Tears leak out her pretty red eyes as the iron dagger trembles between her fingers. And I'm forced to bear it all, standing outside the abandoned farmhouse we call home, shivering in the moonlit frost of a too-short summer, listening to the screech of girl and pig. If I close my eyes, I can't tell the difference.

Renju tells me that the children are our future. If little Lyra is all we have to offer, then we have no future. Not that we ever did. Our future ended the night the Bedanian flesh-flayers came, the Night of the Many Fingers. We stopped counting time after.

I know what Renju would do. He'd crouch low to meet Lyra's eyes—as if they stood on equal ground—maybe even rest a hand on her shoulder, and in that silk-soft voice of his, tell her that it'll be alright. He'd recount his own Rite, how he also cried, and how he passed in the end. Some story about remembering the reason we have these Rites, and how he must live and act for more than himself. He has an entire nation to shoulder. An entire people to survive for.

And somewhere between these most blatant lies, he would convince her to just kill the damn pig. Because truth is, little Lyra, the pig is the easy part. It's the human that's hard.

I crouch low, the wild grass prickling my ankles, and meet Lyra's eyes. My crimson to her scarlet. Such pretty soft eyes she has. It's my job to make them as hard as mine. And I know just the lie. But that's Renju's way. He would give her the easy lie. I give her the hard truth.

Blood seeps out my wrist and twists itself into a lance coiled at the base. “Do you know what this is?” I ask.

Lyra takes one look at the coiled point. “Hemomancy.”

“That's right. The birthright of our people, the Bladed Blood, but we don't practice it anymore. Why?”

She knows the answer. She's recited the answer many times before. I've made her. Drilled it into her. After every push-up. After every punch. After every time I've slapped her across the cheek and then made her stand again so I could kick her in the stomach.

She says it again. "Because of the Bedanian pigs."

"That's right," I say, pointing my edge at one such pig. "We were pigs to them and so now they are pigs to us. If you think killing a pig is hard, then wait until they fight back. Wait until they beg for their lives. Just so you'll turn your back. Just so they can put the dagger in. The truth is, Lyra, we kill pigs here. I'm a killer. Kaiga is a killer. Renju is a killer. Are you?"

Those soft scarlet eyes harden into mine. The knife steadies in her grip. The piglet squeals even more fervently, the touch of metal death upon its throat. It wrestles itself from Lyra's grip but the girl holds on. She sucks in a breath. She tenses her arm.

That's right. A swipe more is all it will take. A soldier made!

"But Vessa says that hemomancy is more than just knives in our veins," she says, her knife-hand slacking.

"Vessa," I spit, the name a curse. My older sister, *she's* the knife in *my* veins. "When did you speak with Vessa?"

The girl looks away, abashed, as if suddenly remembering that this was supposed to be a secret. A bit late for that, Lyra.

"When?" I demand.

"She came by yesterday with the shipment of food. Renju invited her in."

"Did he now?" I stand, my anger jittering through my blood-lance. "He never even mentioned. I would've loved to say hi." It would be our first word in two years.

"Sasha, I'm sorry," she says, lowering her knife. "Am I in trouble?"

"Trouble?" I put on a fresh smile. I'm told that such a thing makes my face jagged. Not like my sister who doesn't have a single edge on her. Or in her. I'm edges only.

My coiled lance unleashes. It springs straight into the piglet's head, shattering its skull and splattering Lyra with its brains. At last, sweet silence. From pig and girl both. Lyra stands there, unable to even utter.

"You fail, Lyra."

The girl closes her eyes and recoils away, waiting for the punishment. A slap across the face. A punch in the gut. Maybe even me chasing her until she collapses.

But I only release my hemomancy. The blood falls to the earth in jagged edges. Knife or blood, it's all the same to me. It must be for Lyra as well, but I know it never will. My sister claims another from my sheathe and so there's no point in sharpening her any further.

“Leave, Lyra,” I say. “And I mean forever. Renju has no use for you. Next you see my sister, tell her these words exactly: another soldier becomes a slave.”

I crush grass underfoot as I stomp my way home. Home is a small derelict ranch. There's the main house, of course, a single-story lodge of logs stacked on top of each other until they made walls. Renju, Kaiga, and I live there. Everyone else lives in the places where they kept the pigs, large warehouse areas carpeted by hay and dirt. Little Lyra lives there—or she used to—and so too does six of her peers. All equally as useless.

But that's our future, according to Renju at least, these sniveling snot-nosed brats with bleeding hearts. They love to bleed so much, why not let Bedania bleed them dry? If it were up to my dear sister, all of us would be.

I barge through the front door. The floorboards creak beneath my steps. When I'm like this, even wood knows to bend beneath my weight. Renju sits at the living room table, a shaky wooden thing, as he inks blood onto parchment. A wave of his hand, a couple drops of his blood, and crimson words seep themselves into a letter.

He wears a simple tunic, but even a tunic on him looks regal. It must. He's the last prince of Hyonia, the one they couldn't kill. His wavy dark hair falls loose around his shoulders. Muscles ripple beneath his arms as he writes his many letters.

“How'd things go?” he says with a knowing smirk.

“My sister?” I demand. “You let my *sister* inside?”

His hand pauses, the blood-spill stopped. As easily as it stopped, it continues as he moves onto the next letter. “What am I to do? Your sister was appointed by the Council Elders as our official liaison. Apparently, she's quite well-liked.”

“The Council Elders are bunch of back-broken fools who would suck on Bedanian teat for a drop of milk.”

Renju laughs at the imagery. I swipe his stack of letters off the table and scatter them across the floor. It wasn't a joke.

“Careful, Sasha,” he says, slowly standing to tower over me. “Between us, there's only one prince here.”

“Then why does my *prince* cow to these blood-thin old men?”

He motions around—to the walls, the furniture, the bread and drink and medicine. “These blood-thin old men make sure that we do not starve. They are the hand that feeds.”

“The hand that barely feeds. Some stale bread and a shit farmhouse tucked away in the outskirts of the city does not make a master. You belong in the palace!”

"An army of flesh-flayers say different."

"Renju!"

He backhands me across the face. I stumble back a step. Something in my jaw doesn't fit right after. I click it back into place. And when I look back up, I see Renju at his most beautiful. His eyes cut in like the slash of a sword, his crimson irises the blood drawn from the blade. And his face, carved from such a sword—the angles hard, the skin smooth, and shape precise.

Sometimes, I forget that he holds as much anger as me. Sometimes, I need to coax it out just to make sure that it's still there. Well, here it is.

He jabs a finger at my nose. "You need not remind me of what I've lost. The blood remembers."

"The blood remembers," I agree. "Then tomorrow is still on? Vessa didn't figure us out? She didn't convince you otherwise?"

He sighs, releasing his anger. A more graceful release than I could ever manage. Something needs to break for me to calm. But that's why he's a prince and me a blade. He picks up the letter he was last working on and hands it to me.

I read its first two words, and it's all I need to read. "Hyonia lives."

"Tomorrow, these will be sent out to every Hyonian faction that still survives. By the time they receive, they'll know why I wrote them."

I nod and collect the letters I scattered. "Do you think they'll fight?"

"Not immediately. Every conquered city has its own district for Hyonians. Every district will have their own Council Elders who are just as old and just as blood-thin as ours. To them, Hyonia is already lost. They just want to survive as Bedanians now."

"*Bedanians*," I spit. "How dare they forget their own names."

"Do not fault them. Their worries are not of maps and legacy. It is this," he says, tearing off a chunk of bread to show me. "Even then, they give us better bread than they eat. Lesser men would have sold us out already. Simply housing us was a great risk."

"It's their responsibility as Hyonians. Our country needs warriors and all we have are cowards." I slam his letters back onto the table. Form it into a neat little stack, and then slam it down again. If it wasn't my prince's blood inking these words, I'd have shredded them.

"Well, tonight, you'll take smuggle me into the city to deliver my letters to these cowards. Hopefully, we'll make warriors of them yet."

A great embarrassment that our prince must plead for blades. Our blood is blades. Vessa claims that hemomancy is more than just knives in our veins? What a cute little concept if blades didn't rule the fucking world. It does, and somehow, we have inherited none of it. Because of men like the Council Elders. Because of women like my sister.

We are born blades. This entire world should be ours.

"I take it Lyra failed," Renju says.

"She couldn't kill the pig," I spit. "My sister told her that hemomancy is not all knives."

"Good on Rupert then. He survives another day."

"Well..."

He laughs. "Then at least we'll have bacon tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," I say, a tightness in my chest. I grasp my heart to keep it from beating out of my body.

His eyes turn a darker shade than mine. Dark as fresh-spilt blood. "Tomorrow, we'll remind Hyonia of who we are. But most importantly, we'll remind Bedania."

"To Bedania, it'll be a declaration of war."

"To *us*, it will be a declaration of war."

He grabs my hand and pulls me close. My body pressed against his, and his against mine. A breath held between us. A flame kindled around us, burning hot. I do not let myself be consumed. Rather, I shelter from it. I focus on the pain along my cheek, the bruises soon to knot. Four of them in the pattern of Renju's knuckles.

He is a prince and I am not. Best I remember that.

But times like this, he makes it so hard to. His thumb traces the crimson cuts along my wrist. Cuts and scars are the price of hemomancy. Already, the blood's clotted. A scab's formed. He scratches it off so he may see his sword unsheathed, admire the crimson of its edges, and taste its metallic flavor. A kiss.

That's Renju, hard and soft within the same breath. Hate to love as fast as the candle goes. Hard in his discipline and tender in the moments after. This is the man who can use me as I'm meant to be—a blade. My blood upon his lips, he promises me this with a single word.

"Tomorrow."

I feel a pressure below, a current that cannot be dammed, a wanting. A part of me that wants so desperately to believe in fairy tales and happy endings. Every little girl wants to be a princess. But my childish dreams died when my parents did. Now, I only have this—tomorrow.

“Tomorrow,” I repeat. “Tomorrow, we kill them all.”

“Or they kill us all.”

That’s what I needed to hear. Everything I’ve held back unleashes. I would bear any punch for that, for bruises are easy to bear. It’s the ones inside I cannot, the anger and frustration and hatred all knotting together into a lump that cannot be stomachached. With a hand on my waist, Renju twists them into something singular, primal.

And as he twists one knot, he undoes another. The rope around my pants falls. I let it. After tomorrow, there will either be Bedanians or there will be Hyonians. No more middle ground. We fight to the bitter end.

I’ll fuck to that.