

LXXIII

The Middle Ring was full of unattended food stalls and shops and houses, with panicking wives and daughters and working women scrambling to figure out where all the men were going.

The sound of a thousand footfalls flowed behind the pair as they simply walked their way through the most heavily-guarded gate in Lillebrünnr, reaching the heart of the city, the Centrum, where the Lords and Ladies of the rich and indulgent aristocratic families resided.

Upon the threshold of this spotless and opulent heart, the Sovereign halted and his enslaved men all stopped as well, the pause rippling down the uncountable rows of his army.

He was still holding on to Ciana's hand and with their fingers intertwined, he pointed towards the palaces and mansions of Lillebrünnr's Centrum, and said to horde of mindless serfs of his enthralling mask:

"People of Lillebrünnr. You have endured decades of torture by the few who declared themselves your rulers. Now it is your time to rise up against their tyranny and reclaim what should have been yours by right."

"People of Lillebrünnr, rebel against your Lords and Ladies!"

As though every foot of the thousands of mind-slaved men moved in synchronicity, the army flowed past them. Each face was adorned by a gleeful grin, lustful smile, or content expression, as though this was what they had always wanted.

In truth, it was simply that Belamouranthyne's aura and magic reworked their minds into believing that what they were told was what they most dearly wished for, and in this way it would seem to them that her commands were a gift to them. It was sickening to see, but it was also a sort of total power that made Ciana feel she had become a Goddess whenever she wore the mask. As Iskandarr took off the Elphin Mask, he grinned in a way that made her think he felt the same way.

As she looked into his terrible and beautiful eyes, the first scream rent the air. She turned towards the source, just in time to see a mob of smiling men tearing a woman to shreds with their bare hands, reducing her to scraps in mere moments, before they left behind the grisly bits and continued their carnage deeper into the Centrum.

Iskandarr flung out his arms to encompass the world around them.

"Are you not pleased, Mother?" he asked.

"You did this for me?"

"Of course! You've always wanted to see this city in ruins, have you not?"

"I have... but how would you know?"

The wind seemed to vanish from sails for a moment and he frowned at her, as though she was killing the mood. *"Father told me when I asked about your past. But that doesn't matter! Indulge in the carnage with me! Behold the power that I wield!"*

Ciana was struck mute by the revelation that Jakob had somehow set Iskandarr upon this city by revealing her memories and feelings about the place. She did not fight back against his insistence that they tour the ongoing uprising and let the Sovereign take her by the hand as they walked into the Centrum of Lillebrünnr.

Her hooves dragged as her mind spiralled with the repeated question, over-and-over: *Why?*

Why would Jakob know about my past and about her deepest feelings?

Why would Iskandarr wish to gift me such a gruesome desire made reality?

Why?

When she finally worked up the willpower to ask Iskandarr this, she blinked in surprised at the realisation that they were standing on the balcony of the biggest estate in the city, while the enslaved men rampaged below, the corpses of the aristocrats either paraded around in gleeful celebration or torn to such tiny pieces that they were unrecognisable as humans. None were spared of the rich lineages: men, women, adolescents, and children. All were offered up on the altar of righteousness fuelled by the Enthralling Daemon's honeyed and all-powerful words.

Iskandarr released his grip on her hand, then said in a tone she had never before heard him use:

"Mother. I have one more gift for you."

"I... this is too much... Iskandarr... Why are you doing this?"

"Why? I am doing this for your sake."

Before she could protest, he put the heel of his palm against her forehead. He had gotten so tall, standing nearly at the same height as Heskel, but it was not until now that Ciana truly noticed. In her mind she still saw him as the boy she had carried in her arms and nurtured as an infant.

In Chthonic, he said, *"My name is Iskandarr. My title of Sovereign was granted to me by the will of the Absolutes. I invoke my gifted title and demand an undue sacrifice returned. Nharlla, O Disfigured One, Everchanging and never static, return to this daughter of two realms that which you deliberately stole from her to divert the River of Fate. I am Sovereign and my title holds power. My will shall not be denied."*

There was a pause in the flow of time, as a wrong was righted. In the grand scheme of things it was an insignificant thing, but, nonetheless, the ripples of the change forever altered the flow of Fate and changed the events of the future.

Ciana felt as though a sledgehammer had slammed into her brain, but, as the pain faded from her soul, she recognised the weight of the *thing* that had been returned to her.

As she looked Iskandarr in his eyes, her own let tears of despair flow freely. She had lost her *one chance* to gain her wish. A wish she had carried for herself and for her entire species. The realisation of that loss was profound and devastating.

In a single movement, she took a step up onto the balcony railing, before letting herself fall to the ground below.

When Iskandarr found her, he wore an expression she had never before seen on his face. In a way, seeing it made her happy, despite knowing that she was the cause of it.

Ciana's body was broken and twisted, but yet she was alive, despite her intentions.

But then she realised the true scope of her gift and curse.

She had been made undefeatable. In more ways than one.