

BLOOD & COVENANT

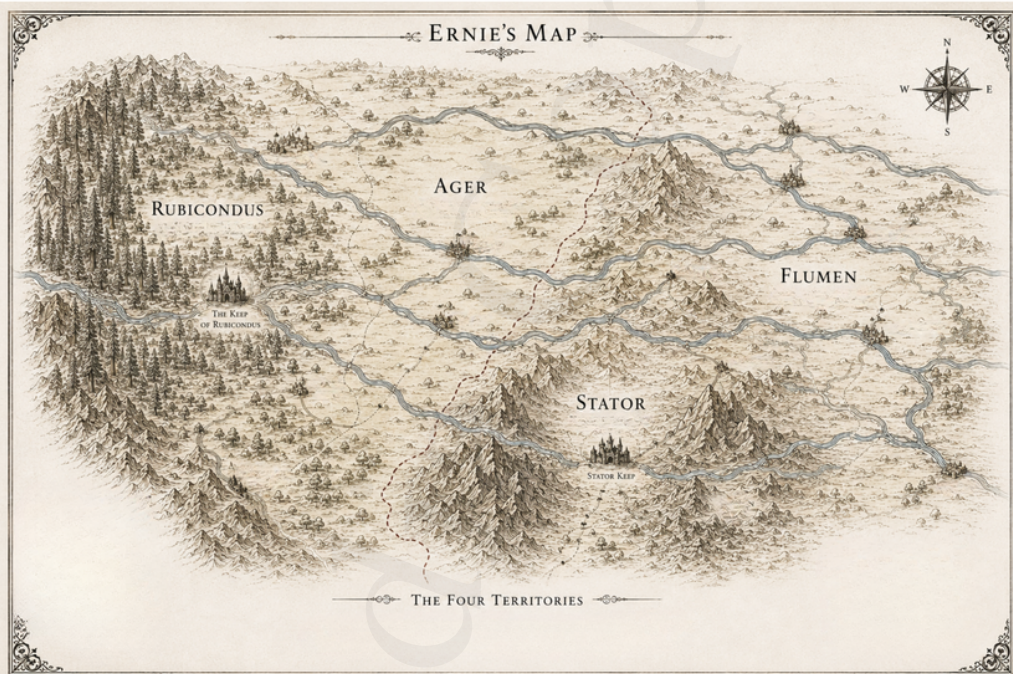
ASCENSION

BOOK ONE

A. Standing

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Blood & Covenant



Book One: Ascension

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Book 1

Chapter One

“Again,” Luna looked to the royal wax seal, a golden color of the sacred redwood, Princess Kaelis of Rubicondus’ personal seal was made from the sap.

Shaking her head as she placed it into the basket, her dislike of the situation plain on her older face, she, in silence and with grace, put up her hand, patience already spent in far too much generosity within the princess's royal chambers.

She smoothly walked to the large, darkened wood door with iron hinges against the tapestried wall of previous royals. She stopped.

“That will be all, I presume, until I come to dress you. The tapestry will be removed. Lateo is moving in next door, so the doors to your chambers are now connected. This is a permanent change, Princess.”

“I will try not to burden you or the attendants who come,” Kaelis spoke softly as she sat in front of the mirror.

Her face had aged over the last year; she was young, but somehow older.

“Bathe before doing your hair, Your Highness, do not use magic... I mean this as a traditional bath, or I will scrub you down myself as though you were a pup, thus, bathe. Again!” In a huff of finality and rejection of her current state. Luna knocked, and the Watch outside opened the door and let her out. Then a massive bolted lock went back into place behind her after it had closed.

Not saying anything, Luna simply smiled as though the three Watchers had always been there and nothing was out of the ordinary. However, it was a ward-and-wolf lockdown. The princess had again found trouble; this time, it was not being so easily forgiven. Looking down at the addressee of the letter, Blood Prince Fides Stator of Stator Territory, she moved a handkerchief over the parchment so prying eyes would not leer.

Less spoken, the better, was an old werewolf motto, one of many she held familiar like a favored prayer. A witch princess in such consistent private contact with a Lycan prince of another land was inappropriate at best, concerning on several fronts when examined in the worst, which Luna did not burden her mind with today. Plotting was had, and it was not her business to know what it was; simply obey should such things need passing along.

Gliding down the corridor as she went, several of the staff bowed their heads to her in courtesy. Although not a member of the royal family, of Covenant nor Blood, she was endeared to the witches and wizards in service, which granted her a kind of respect not often shown to the Attendant.

She was more of a godmother to Kaelis than anything else. The Covenant Queen had died in childbirth. Still, Kaelis was destined to be the next great queen, Luna scoffed as she thought of the letter.

Destiny could be wrought with bad decisions, and she suspected whatever trouble Kaelis had found on the Stator border that left her under lock and guard was revealed within the parchment. Putting it out of her mind. She stopped at an open window.

They had recently opened the Keep; usually, such places were barred and closed with wood and iron during the winters. She took a deep breath of the sweet, tea-scented air outside, inbound with warm winds. As far as serving the witches went, Luna had made her choice long ago as a young midwife to the then-Covenant Queen. Once she had laid eyes on Kaelis, nothing prevented her heart from bonding.

Stepping into the main hall, she was very pleased to see the decorations coming along for the upcoming visit and holiday. The Red Moon ceremony was spectacular every year; this one, in particular, was being held in the Rubicondus territory. Wolves from across the different territories would travel by pack or prowl to the gates and edges of the wood.

“Divinely splendid,” she said of one of the paintings of a former Lycan King. “Argnus the Third.”

“Correct, Attendant,” said the Historian of the Keep. “Good eye, mind you have always had one.”

“You were an ever-clever teacher since I was a girl,” Luna reminded him of their older age, telling the attending guards to hoist it slightly higher.

“Did you know Argnus was one of the few Blood Kings to live outside of the Keep? That is why there is a forest in the background, not the traditional stone. Something he wanted clear about his legacy, long after he had departed, so to speak,” the historian began.

Luna stopped and gazed upon the art. It was, in fact, painted on the far edge near the last meadow before the river. “And did he rule successfully?”

“Oh, very,” the historian assured her with tenacity. “One of our finest, a great warrior with a kind heart.”

“Always the best of us, I suppose,” Luna said about werewolf traits.

“Too rare and few, but no one asks me,” the historian smirked and saw her laugh quietly, not daring to do so aloud, as such a gesture could be taken as mocking the royal family from her simple mind. However, no one would question the historian’s loyalty.

Without him, little would be known about any people, not just their own; he alone had the right to judge the times with fairness and accountability, along with those living in them.

She patted him on the back as she continued through the day, which was full of tasks. The most pressing was to get the letter out of her basket.

Quietly, and yet with haste, she decided to take the side corridor mostly frequented by staff. It had been a gift in many ways. The former Prince of the Wolves had used it for decades as his own corridor, and so when he passed, and his younger brother became Acting Blood Prince, he gave it to the staff, that they might use it, and with gratitude, they did.

Luna was surprised on this day to see the Blood Prince, Artur, walking down it with unnatural speed, causing the staff to quickly pull themselves and their packages, cleaning supplies, and carts to one side or the other. She glanced toward him compassionately; she could assume he must be in great haste if he was using the corridor. It had only happened twice before, both times when he was very late for an urgent matter.

As he passed, he smiled at her and continued to speak with his own Attendant, an older wolf named Howel. They spoke in hushed tones, ignoring any items that seemed out of place.

He was a kind prince, worked well with Kaelis, and the Rubicondus territory looked forward to their future rulers as Covenant and Blood of the Keep.

Long had it been talked about since their childhoods, and many great gestures of love and kindness had been shared between them as future rulers towards their people. 'The best to come in a long time,' the historian had said on more than one occasion.

Luna brushed her soft, white-blond curls. Although she wore a long braid down her back when not working, she always wore braids and a bun on duty so people would know. She was never able to get the smaller curls to grow longer; they would spring out, as they had since she was a little girl.

Back when she dreamed of being someone of importance in the Keep, pleased she was each day as her life turned out. Future Attendant to the Queen, knowing her place and duty, she was going to be glad to get rid of the parchment, and was the first of many formal tasks that still lay ahead of her.

She finally reached the door for the Watch guards, and one of them leaned over and opened it for her. She politely accepted the gesture of welcome and continued forward. Smiling as she came into the room, the uniforms of armor were worn, oil and metal hung in the air.

The smell of wolves filled her senses, and even her eyes shone a bright golden haze for a moment. She walked toward the Master of Duty. There was a flush she had not expected that day; it thrilled her for a moment.

Chapter Two

“Again,” the Master of Duty said dryly as she handed him the parchment addressed to Prince Fides of Stator. “They will start to think we like them if she continues to write him so often.”

“I suppose they might,” Luna admitted, rather disgusted with herself on the matter. “And what is it to us if they do?” she questioned him on the matter while reminding him of his place.

“Not much,” he admitted thoughtfully and covered the parchment with another one.

This time, sealing it with his own wax, he addressed it to the royal family of the territory rather than the prince himself, as was his right to secure the passage of the parcel.

Putting it onto the pile that had been building in the Collector’s basket.

“Follow it to the river with my own eyes to make sure it leaves the shore,” he had said a thousand times while conducting the duty.

“I will be off then,” Luna said, turning around and smiling. “It smells like a den in here. Let the maids in, or I will make you do it yourselves, the old-fashioned way, until I am satisfied.”

“Oh, and wouldn’t want that, would we, boys? An Attendant cleaning,” the Master of Duties raised his voice, and suddenly all the men looked up, then to Luna, giving a look of fear. A great flurry of cleaning and clanking armor began as she walked out, and the door was waiting to be closed behind her.

“I expect the use of soap and water, not friends and waves of hand,” Luna said to them in a tone of Elder so none would question the authority of Attendant or Wolf. She had lived a long time, and the castle needed to be pristine.

After all, several royal families and honored guests from various territories were coming the next week, and they would need to send items. Next on her list was the witches' kitchens and spell towers. “Soap and water,” she said softly as she walked down the hall.

It was several letters later, when the Master of Duties added it to the basket of Collection, that he picked it up and dumped it into the leather satchel he would then carry to the docks. He watched the parchment he had sealed fall in among the others, and he gave a sigh.

The King of the Covenant had asked that he not let any royal mail pass from the princess; however, the Master of Duties was loyal to no one royal, but had the duty of being loyal to them all. If the princess was old enough to marry, to fight alongside him should need arise, she was old enough to send her own parchments, he had decided the first time he disobeyed the request.

Still, he thought, hoisting the satchel onto his broad shoulders, she had never gotten in trouble such as this before.

He had three wolves guarding her door, with orders to chain and detain her by any means necessary, and several more posted outside in case she decided to go anywhere.

It was unlike any punishment he had seen in his day, from Covenant or Blood King.

He knew enough to know he didn't want to know any more. A Stator border patrol member had been killed, the princess had been crossing the border at a strange and early hour without a pass or escort. A wolf, unknown and rogue, had intervened when he saw a witch being threatened.

It had become clear over the days and conversations that he had been wandering, as he often was known to do, seen a witch with wolves about to strike, and had intervened. It did not matter, Master of Duties sighed, that lad sealed his fate when he saved her life.

The castle staff was in as much of a hustle and bustle as they had ever been with the Red Moon ceremony approaching. The traffic had required him to add more guards and checkpoints not only within the castle but also in the town and surrounding villages.

The towns' inns were already bursting with newcomers, and several royal contingents had arrived, creating a more crowded wood than he preferred this close to the Keep.

No one had been allowed vacation or festivities when it came to his men; he needed every set of hands and ears he could find.

Too much trouble for such an open space, he decided as he walked toward the kitchen. The Master of Duties for the Covenant Corvan, had agreed, and so it was in stride, Blood took days and Covenant took nights. Always one of them on duty and mixed shifts of both witches and wolves, not preferred but necessary due to all of the comings and goings of both.

The cook, Everest, a very talented witch, had asked him to stop by before leaving with the day's parchment, something she wanted delivered, or brought back, he presumed, of her traditional requests.

All easier done when you were a Master of Duties. Few questioned the barrels or the bricks, as she had told him. He did not even question them, and when he was much younger, he regretted asking several times.

The only time he ever had to face the royal family outside of duty or a ceremonial award. It was not his business, the comings and goings of the kitchens, but it was his business that they could come and go as needed with efficiency demanding the Royal protocol.

“It’s a cake,” Everest said of the box. “For the Flumen Keeper’s daughter. It is her birthday, and she loves the cherry jubilee more so than any child I have ever met. She ate so much of it on her 7th birthday, she burst, and yet, the next year she asked for it again.” Everest said, her eyes shining brightly, like any witch’s do when she is brewing and stewing. “Of course, I spoil her every year. Not so young now, that is at least the twentieth cake I have baked her.”

The Master of Duties gave a nod. “I will deliver it to the Flumen Keeper myself, along with the parchments. Anything you need sent?”

“Not today, just greetings and all my love.” Everest began walking away. “Come by later; we have some lamb that you must try before I put it away for tomorrow’s feast.”

“Indeed, you can count on my stomach’s prompt arrival,” he smiled and put the cake carefully into the other end of the satchel. It was a decent walk from the kitchen, across the Keep grounds where new recruits were training.

That is when the Master of Duties first spotted him, the werewolf they called Lateo, the “supposed” newest member of the Blood King lineage, at the request of the Covenant King.

Lateo saved the princess, and in doing so the Covenant King wanted him named her guard. An honor that can only belong to the Blood King royal family member.

A new Blood hadn't been had in nearly a century, and the last time it was more ceremonial than truly an introduction. He watched as the young man fought off four different attacks, and still four more came, then four more, Prince Artur, leaving nothing of his will and training coming in with each attack, and calling for more.

Howel, his attendant, had parchment and quill in hand, watching and writing as he always did. Nothing about being a Blood royal was easy. Artur had, in fact, endured this same training, no sleep, relentless attacks, no one speaking, all people dismissing, anger and hatred were likely following Lateo through the halls, and he was being asked to give up every freedom he had known. He was, in many ways, a slave now; some wolves would always see it as such, while others would say he made dreams come true.

However, something had happened; even the Master of Duties was unsure as to what it was.

The King of the Covenant had demanded that Lateo become the Princess's royal guard, and she was not allowed out until it was done.

So the trials and testing had begun in such ferocity, which hadn't been done in over a hundred years, and even then not to the level at which Lateo was being tested.

It was not his place, he decided, even as Blood Master of Duties, to question the business of becoming Blood; it was a very nasty process. As he continued walking toward the gates, his men waved him through with a nod. Still, Lateo's loss would not be forgotten by him or many others; the lad had given his freedom to serve the Keep, a bond of brotherhood, not just blood, was between them now.

Another boss meant little to him regarding his duties, such as they were. It meant a lot to the wolves of the woods that one of their own was being asked to hold power in the Keep.

It gave them hopes and dreams, such thoughts wolves shouldn't have about changes that need not be. Things didn't change under the Blood family, maybe in other territories, but not in Rubicondus . Nothing changed here, he thought with pride in his duty and defense of his land.

The town was filled with noise and commotion. He recognized several new faces and flashes of youth, both in magical barriers and humans alike. The Red Moon Ceremony was attracting people from all over, and he counted the newcomers so far, over 39 new faces today. He realized more guards would need to be added to secure the presence and prevent anyone from thinking this was a land of less authority than they were accustomed to. As a group of children ran by him, one stopped and smiled.

“Happy Red Moon Ceremony almost day,” she squealed with delight, and her wolf ears popped out of her human head. He bowed.

“Almost, but not quite,” he told her for the day later this week. Glad celebration enticed the old and young alike; he carried the satchel toward the outside of the town gate, where again his guards let him through.

It was here, on the outside of the town, that he could change forms, and so he stood for a moment. With a simple buckle, the satchel would be carried across his back in wolf-form, his armor and clothes folding into a magical cuff all the Watch wore, blessed by the Covenant so they would never be bare in their human form.

Then he could arrive in a few minutes. I had best not with the cake, he decided, for the slow and human path was wide and well-trod in dirt and muck, as his boot sank into the soft brown gush, always something for the cook.

It was nearly an hour that the Master of Duties had been walking toward the Flumen Keeper, much slowed by the traffic of people flowing into the town and surrounding village areas. Such ceremonies took place only every few years; still, they were always disruptive.

What was a much faster journey, even on foot, had been stalled. He aided a cart out of a rut, and then waited for the guard to arrive to take his report about how the roads needed to be gone over with small stone, river sand, and Ager dirt to ensure safer travel.

Then there was a dispute, a cart tipped over, both carrying similar loads, and so both were paid for their carts, and all goods were just carried into the city to be given to the castle cooks.

It was these melodrama's of heightened emotion and simple solution that made the work tedious for both him and his men. He would give them several feasts and ales in order to reassure them that their work was appreciated after the last of the travelers had left the borders of their land.

It was closer to three hours before he made it to the Flumen Keeper. "I am glad you waited."

"I only just lit the arrival lantern; the rivers are crowded places to be." Getting out of the small boat, he took the Master of Duties's satchel. Opening, he began to sort the mail into the baskets of other letters. He looked to his seal and the royal address. "Again?"

"Is it our place to ask?" Master of Duties replied and handed him a birthday cake. "I am pleased to give you Everest cake for your daughter's birthday."

“She remembers every year,” The Flumen Keeper put the letter into his personal pouch and took the cake with a nod. “She gives us cookies as well, lovely woman. If she could handle a life on the water I would have married her after my Bonni died.”

“Well, I would have to kill you then for trying to sabotage the royal family by stealing the Keeps cook,” Master of Duties only half-joked and gave a wink that was more warning.

Chapter Three

The Flumen were river folk. They kept mostly to the water and the docks. Occasionally, they were seen in towns or settlements, but for the most part, if you wanted a Flumen for any form of parchment or delivery outside your territory, you went to the rivers.

The Flumen did not ask where they were. They read it, above in the stars, along the shore water pressed and yielded, and beneath them in the quiet language of the current.

Nephi, Flumen of the Rubicondus territory, was not a proud man, but he was wise in the ways of the river. On clear nights, he used the stars; constellations gave him direction and timing, though never speed.

For speed, he listened to the way the river touched the shore, how it played with reeds and rocks, the sound it left to tell him how fast or slow it flowed. He could hear when bends were coming, when rapids waited ahead, even when the laps of water changed and grew more urgent with the wind.

You could learn the five Great Rivers so well that even in dense fog, the sound of the shore from a distance could guide you.

Nephi thought of Everest as he guided his boat and lantern through the darkness. She was always smiling when she saw him. They had taken holidays together, sometimes with his daughter, sometimes without. Among wolves, a threat could be a gesture of kindness, but Nephi was a wizard, and still, there was always the way of Blood that bent lands and laws. He believed the Master of Duties' death threat.

Among the Flumen, Covenant and Blood were spoken of as two Queens, filthy and violent, unkind to the people in many regards. Perhaps responsible for the signs of blight whispered about along the waters, if the rumors were true.

Deep down, Nephi would have to give up the river to live a life with Everest. His daughter was grown now, rising through the ranks of the Keep just as he had as a lad. At last, he reached the dark, looming dock.

Pulling the boat in, he handed a Stator guard a bag of mail.

“I also have a priority,” Nephi said casually.

“Again?” the guard asked, boredom heavy in his voice. “Look, I don’t know what exchange you have going on, and the docks don’t want to know. Do us a favor next time, cut us in, at least pay us to listen to your bragging.”

Nephi laughed. That was just like a Stator, to believe something was going on because it was what they would do.

“I will remember that,” he said. “Perhaps I’ll bring fruit next time.”

“We’re missing the Red Moon Ceremony,” the guard muttered. “Another border squirmish. Stator’s always rattled for war.”

Nephi only shrugged. The Flumen hadn’t known war in over a thousand years, and he had no intention of inviting one now, not even in conversation would his grey hair and beard be found whispering the rumors he heard.

He walked into the main guardhouse. Inside, the air was sharp and dry, stone walls holding the cold as the river never did. He shivered, crossing to the fire and warming his hands while the Captain worked through a stack of papers.

Rubbing his palms together, Nephi again thought of Everest.

This could be his life if he chose it: a warm fire, a full belly, and a settled heart.

The Captain cleared his throat.

“I have a priority,” Nephi said. “Hand delivery only, as you understand.”

The Stator Captain Tane, whose dark short hair and beard matched his mood as he sighed and drew a black dagger, slicing the seal cleanly. He paused when he saw the princess’s mark and handwriting, addressed to the Blood Prince Fides.

“Again?”

“It is not our duty to ask,” Nephi said simply, the answer he had been given. “Nor our right to question.”

The captain resealed the parchment beneath another, pressed the Black Stator seal into wax, and marked it: Royal Family - Blood Prince Fides Stator - Rubicondus . He placed it into a black leather satchel.

“It will arrive by late morning,” he said. “Should they ask,” he smirked, knowing Rubicondus always did. “That is all. You may go, Flumen. Stator has no time for chatter or gossip.”

Nephi approved. That, at least, rang true.

He had nearly reached the door when a guard burst in, glaring.

“GET OUT!”

Nephi picked up his pace as the door slammed behind him.

Dramatic people, the Stator, witches and wolves alike.

“Another breach on the border,” a guard said.

“You’ll be detained for a few hours. We searched your ship while you were inside. Found the cake. You wouldn’t pass a checkpoint with that.”

“Certainly not,” Nephi said calmly. “It’s for my daughter’s birthday. The woman I plan to ask to marry me baked it.”

He didn’t look back to see if the cake was intact. Sabers were already rattling along the road and now the river.

“I do have a nice brandy we can share while we wait,” Nephi added, lowering his voice. “Since you didn’t find it.”

The guard called over a friend and handed the cake back unmarred.

Nephi watched the Guard Captain come down the stairs with the satchel across his back. Even from the great distance where Nephi sat sipping his brandy, the captain disappeared in black smoke, and a large wolf stood where the man had been.

He would have to run it to the gates of the Stator capital himself. No small feat, if it were to arrive by morning.

“He must be rather fast?” Nephi asked the last part of his thought out loud.

“Who, Captain Tane?” the guard said. “Yes. Fastest wolf in all the territories. To his credit, he’s raced every king willing to race him. In all four territories, he never turns down an invitation from the smallest to the oldest; he has even beaten Master Swede several times, and the Rubicondus Blood King, for all his greatness, he is not as fast as Tane, nor is he Stator.

The Flumen Queens, not so much, I hear they don't care for the sport. Still, a fearsome Captain. I wouldn't cross him. Wouldn't want more than one of these on duty either." He raised his brandy.

"Let's the docks earn a fair wage and not interfere too much," Said his friend. "When he does, he bites, but do your job right, and he throws you some good coin."

Nephi took another sip, then screwed the lid onto his flask. He didn't need the trouble that would come from drinking too much, either; he had decisions to make. The guard smiled and kicked the anchor into the boat.

"He won't care that you've left," the guard said. "Just don't move farther south tonight. I'll send a runner to the river tower, let them know you've permission to pass back to the North. Don't wander or veer. Go home to that woman, save the cake for tomorrow."

Nephi smiled and accepted it as it was. The cake could wait. Not having to spend another minute with Stator in such a mood was a priceless gift.

“I’ll remember the fruit next time,” Nephi said. “I know it’s valuable.”

“You know the kind we like,” the guard replied. “Just like the cake.”

“Indeed. Just like.”

Pushing off, Nephi turned the lantern up bright and chose the slowest current as he moved North. After all, a runner was a wolf, and one never truly knew their speed, certainly not something he wished to test tonight.

For the first time that day, the river was quiet. Within a brisk forty-five minutes, Nephi returned to his departure point; it had taken him five times that to travel, and the current was with him earlier. He readied his passes into the Keep and patted the ring tucked safely in his vest pocket. Setting the lantern onto his walking stick, he struck out on foot and was surprised by how many people were traveling at night.

A guard cart passed, and knowing him well, they offered him a ride as the Keep's deliveries were a priority.

Thanks to that kindness, he reached the Keep kitchens quickly, though he had to show his seal and kitchen pass several times.

There were more guards on duty than he had ever seen, and he wasn't certain he would have passed the checkpoints had he not arrived by Watcher cart. The lines through the village and town were long, and they were held up by inspection.

Inside the kitchen, he saw the Master of Duties, Demetrie and Everest.

She came to him and kissed him softly. "Let me make you a plate. Will you be staying on land this evening?"

Removing his cap and glancing nervously toward the Master of Duties, who was eating something that smelled like braised lamb. "Looks like I might be making a permanent move."

"Whatever do you mean, dear?" Everest asked, smiling as she began dishing him small portions of this and that.

“I think it might be time I give up the ways of the river,” Nephi said, sitting beside the Master of Duties, who said nothing and continued eating. “There was another border breach tonight, South against the Stator. The river is getting more crowded, and I’m not as young as I once was.”

“Oh, you’re too hard on yourself, fall weather does that,” she said, sliding him a plate of bread, vegetables, braised lamb, and a large cup of ale. “Eat, and you’ll feel young again by morning.”

“Too bad the Keep has no need for a Flumen,” Nephi quipped.

The Master of Duties shrugged, “Ah, but we do. We need someone to quietly plan parchment routes. You’re a trusted wizard. Should you ever want the position, I’d insist it be yours. We need vetted people. Land and river routes are a priority, and we lack the knowledge to train wolves to run them. Many roles are waiting here, should you want them.”

Nephi pulled the ring from his pocket and looked at Everest.

“Should I want them?” he asked her.

Tears sprang to her eyes. “Oh yes. Yes, you should.”

She ran to him, and she took the ring. As they embraced, the Master of Duties smiled.

“Good choice, Flumen.”

Tears filled Nephi’s eyes as he held her openly for the first time. Drawing her close, he slid the ring onto her finger.

“Then to the land I shall live,” he said softly, “and to the Rubicondus Keep I shall vow.”

“I’ll tell the Covenant tonight,” Everest said happily. “He’ll be thrilled. I speak often about you, and he needs some good news,” She hurried off to show the other women her ring.

The Master of Duties patted Nephi on the back, smiling. It was a threat well spent, and he knew from experience that not all were.

Chapter Four

Artur glared at Kaelis skeptically. He hated it when Howel was right.

The Blood Prince had known her since birth; she was four days older than him. Closer than best friends, they had always been, King and Queen in every regard to one another.

“It is not proper. Not acceptable, Kaelis,” he said firmly. “Not your lands, not your suspicions to act upon.”

“If I were Queen, it would not be questioned.”

“You are not, nor am I, King. In fact, we are both far from it. Further now than ever with this incident.”

“I understand he is afraid. A blight would be... mean,” she paused. “It would mean someone in Stator is summoning necromancy, likely with help from the Flumen Covenant.”

“You shouldn’t say it aloud. Any of it, not even here,” Artur warned seriously.

“Lands have been hunted for less. It always leads to killings, justified and not. Always. I want this to stop. We can discuss it after the Red Moon Ceremony. It is important to our people, especially the wolves, and we need no theatrics.” He took her hand gently. “Then I will tell the Blood King what you saw.”

“Promise, for the people,” Kaelis said, abandoning the other plans she had been considering. “With your full support?”

“Yes. Unyielding, as my father would demand. He will take this seriously; that is the problem. He will go to war with this Kaelis.”

“It needs to be.”

“Carefully and seriously do not always bring the same measure of inquiry and damage,” Artur said quietly, as Howel had told him many times growing up. “He is a wolf with Stator scars. He would press this to war if, he will not wait for why or reason. I know you do not want that to be your legacy, no why and no reason.”

“I would prefer it not be,” Kaelis replied firmly, so he understood the role he might be called to play. “But if they are, and Blight is, then it will be what it will be.”

“If they are, then we will,” he promised. “Now, other business. Lateo.”

“I heard,” she said, sitting on her bed with a sigh and pointing to the now polished wooden doors that went from floor to ceiling. “I noticed there is no lock on either side,” false surprise oozing from her voice as she had done as a girl; it always meant she felt things slipping beyond her control.

Artur counted silently, three, two, one, and watched as she flung herself backward onto the bed, arms spread, and began to complain.

“I didn’t even ask for this,” she said honestly.

He crossed the room and dropped beside her, his armor causing the bed to bounce and lift her slightly. She smiled despite herself.

“He does seem likable, though.”

“He is being considered as a possible Blood King,” Artur replied.

“Likability matters far less than skill and the ability to assert domain.”

“He is not King.”

“I know,” Artur said evenly. “I may need to pursue something because of this opportunity, and so therefore, Kaelis he will be one day.”

“No.” Kaelis’s eyes filled with tears. She knew exactly what he meant and would not allow it. “You have made a thousand vows to rule beside me, in Blood and Covenant. These are our people.”

“If you are right, if proof is found, then for the sake of the war ahead, I will have to accept.”

She closed her eyes.

Tears fell, but she understood. The Ager territory’s Blood King was dying, weaker by the day, with no heir; his heart had chosen to love and marry a fellow, and not seek another’s son.

They ruled as Blood King and Queen of the Covenant, the prairie lands bordering the Flumen, Rubicondus , and Stator. Both had asked Artur to take the Blood Crown. He would lose his claim to Rubicondus , and so he had never answered.

Still, both Blood and the Covenant of Rubicondus had repeatedly urged him, speaking of peace and a prize if he accepted, perhaps even joining their territory later, when the Covenant Queen was tired or replaced.

“He will be a good King, Lateo,” Artur said softly. “He doesn’t know it yet. He has the endless fight needed to rule. He makes sound choices, he is not cruel, and he could be. He proved it when he protected you at the cost of his life, and several times over these last few days, fighting, even tired and angry. He is not cruel, and he thinks rationally after battles. I have tested him with many battles and even more questions afterward. He did not know who you were, nor how Blood would respond. He is worthy of the honor to be a King by test and Blood now.”

“That may be,” Kaelis said, “but he doesn’t know me. We didn’t grow up together. I don’t love him as my brother, and he is not my King.”

“You will learn, as will I, to love him,” Artur said, sitting up with a faint smile. “Besides, this week, your only concern is earning permission to leave your room. I’ll put in a good word.”

“Next week we discover whether I am right,” she replied quietly, “and in doing so, we may lose a King I know and gain war at the same time.”

“You already gained one,” Artur said. “Don’t forget that my father favors war and Lateo is heir.”

“How could I forget? You keep reminding me.”

He laughed. It was a conversation they would have many times yet to come, but she stopped crying sooner this time. That counted for something, Artur decided, as he rose and quietly left the room.

Chapter Five

Artur continued down the royal corridor. The redwood beams against the stone floor had been polished recently and shone far brighter than usual. He had much to consider, with guests, reports arriving, thus little time. At least one worry had eased for now.

The necromancers, Howel had been right, that is what it was all about. The sneaking out, the unwillingness to give answers, and her silence led to a wolf's death and the creation of a Blood Prince in their own territory.

The Stator envoy would arrive soon. The Blood Queen of Stator was a fat, vile woman no one liked. She was dim-witted, drunk, ate, and stank. She slung insults like slobber. Artur disliked her especially, as he grew older, she made no secret of trying to marry him by barter, bribe, or purchase, as she liked to say.

Nothing was redeemable about her except her son, Fides. How she had managed to produce such a fine heir was a mystery; much rumor about him being stolen was always rife, but no facts were found. The Blood King had joked more than once that had Artur been born a girl, he would have insisted on a marriage between Prince Fides Stator and herself.

However, as Artur was born a man, no such arrangement could be forced.

It had been the last time the Blood Queen of Stator visited, in fact, as Artur's heart reminded him of the incident. He sighed.

His father, his King, was not a kind or gentle man. He was sound and good, if not wise, steady in heart and mind. Still, being forced to take on a nineteen-year-old rogue as a son because the Covenant demanded him as a guard had tested his patience and worn away at his loyalty.

Rogues or runts, as they were called, were unknown bloodlines distrusted and often ostracized, no matter what territory they came from. Now one was to be a prince.

What power did he truly have if he could not decide who entered or left his own bloodline, as his father had pointed out to him the night the arrangement was made, without his true consent to the matter?

Now, Lateo would hold a privileged position within the royal line. Should he choose to have children, they would have rights to rule.

All of it was happening during the busiest time of the year. As Artur walked the corridors, he noted how uncommon and uncomfortable the crowds had become. Royal envoys had arrived, and many new faces were unfamiliar with the side entrances and lesser routes, which were busier than ever. It was for the Red Moon Ceremony, and it was, in truth, the most beautiful.

“Sir,” the Master of Duties approached. “We have a Stator problem.”

“Already?” Artur asked with patience but not surprise. “They’ve barely arrived.”

“My Prince, their gamblers and whores arrived early this morning, and we’ve had trouble ever since. Our territory.”

Artur raised a hand softly.

“Our territory is hosting guests,” Artur said quietly. “Nothing underage. Nothing non-consensual. No murder.” He looked directly at him. “Repeat it back to me.”

The Master of Duties straightened, recognizing the lesson from childhood training of the young prince that he had given him, and said the same thing. The Prince tapped his ear, just as he once had to the lad.

“Nothing underage. Nothing non-consensual. No murder,” he repeated. “Sir... that leaves black sand, and we don’t need the problems it brings.”

“The Stator gamble. They drug. They whore,” Artur said evenly as his Master had to him. “It’s near religious to their culture, Demetre.”

He used his name, rare now, but deliberate.

“I know we run a clean town. Our villages are safe from trolls and trollop alike. But we have guests. Provide them an area where they may be themselves, and ensure they do not leave it.”

Demetre was considering a compromise he could work with.

“Understood,” he said firmly, a small smile forming. “Thank you, Artur.”

The Prince inclined his head, returning hearing his own name with the same ease. "It was a good impression of you."

"Spot on from my younger days and older wisdoms at the time," Demetre admitted with a hint of pride that the Blood Prince had, in fact, paid such keen attention that he could mimic it years later.

Artur was climbing the steps towards the Blood family tower when he spotted Luna. "She has promised no theatrics. Can you join me in letting her out?"

Luna asked, "What kind of promise?"

"Nothing until after the ceremony has passed."

"That is some promise you got out of her! 3 days! I am not sure it will convince anyone," Luna reminded him that this was the Covenant Kings doing, not his own. "I saw to your room and the family tower; it is clean now, should you decide to entertain there for an evening."

"We would be a den without you, you are all the castle's mother," he said softly, kissed her cheek and continued upwards. "Do try."

“Yes, yes, I will try,” Luna said with no conviction in her voice. It was yet another burden she, in fact, did not want to carry.

“Lateo’s quarters are done. When he is ready, he can leave that cupboard you have him in.”

“Is the uniform and armor as I specified?”

“Yes,” she called up the stairs, proud of her prince for providing equal to his own for the new Blood Prince. Despite the Blood Kings' reservations, it was widely discussed among the staff that Lateo had, in fact, stayed up without complaint for several days and, with great success, completed the trials; he was the best fighter among them, equal to Artur.

Being found and being named were not the same thing, and neither had to do with belonging. Luna sighed. A Rogue in the castle, with no former loyalty, nothing known about his parents; he was found on the shore and raised by the Wise Wolf on the edge of the Redwood. Such a legacy now belonged to all wolves; it gave her a hallowed honor to live and serve in such a historic opportunity.

“One more thing,” Artur mentioned. “Where is my father?”

“In the King's office, I will be there shortly, so plan an escape, else I make you lift and shine,” she warned him firmly about his strong arms and her intentions towards the space.

“I shall make great haste or even greater delay, it is unknown which,” he said, and then ran down the stairs past her at such speed that she had to lean against the wall for a moment, and laughed, as he hadn't done since being a young child. She shook her head. Some things don't change, she decided honestly.

Chapter Six

Lateo spat blood onto the stone wash basin and sighed, even the Keep water was colder than the rivers he was used to bathing in. Regret and remorse poured over him still as he cringed to his weathered and beaten hands. Violence was not a sport he enjoyed; it was one he endured with Mastery. Dipping his head and face into the water basin, he screamed loudly, unaware of anyone walking into the room. He was startled.

“What now,” he hissed to the guard, feeling someone enter the room, his eyes glowed golden but his tone was not lethal.

“Now you meet with the Two Kings,” Watch replied unfazed by his mood. “As you are, such a state it is runt,” he mocked him, with dripping wet hair and a shirt covered in blood stains. Then he threateningly reached for his sword as though to slay, should haste not be made, a gesture and threat Lateo had learned to largely ignore at this point.

The Watch motioned for him to walk faster, kicking him with a bit of force, as he smiled slightly. Lateo groaned and took up a jog. He was old enough to know he had lost his freedoms and ways.

No whim would ever find him again; he was, in fact, a slave, a keeper of sorts. To a princess no less. He was tall for his age, much broader and bigger than the others. Raised by the oldest and wisest among the wolves, it was why his patience endured during the three days of no sleep and endless trials.

He looked older, but he wasn't until you learned of his soul. Lateo thought of that, no matter what had been done to him, his soul had remained unchanged. He was Lateo, and that was not taken from him, so all was not lost.

“You know they test you, because this is the way all are tested,” the Covenant King gave him a smile. “All.”

Lateo said nothing on the matter; it was a statement, and they did not always need a reply. The Covenant King walked closer raising his hand, Lateo felt the magic wash over him.

The bruises and deep aches began to ease, and soon even the throbbing of his head had subsided, the pain in his heel dulled. After several minutes many circles walked around him, and the Covenant King's own light pouring in, Lateo felt normal again.

“Tonight I wish you to escort the princess to three key events, first we will have the arrival of several guests, then a dinner, and finally to the Lighting of the Torches ceremony. If at any time,” the Covenant King stared at him with all seriousness in his blue eyes.

“You feel she cannot be trusted to maintain this location, you may seize her with as many guards as you like and drag her by force and chain to her chambers, where you will promptly lock the doors, they are magically reinforced as are the windows and balcony, all adjoining rooms warded and wolves on guard. We will wait for yet another event to try and trust her.”

It was an honor to guard the royal family for any of Lycan decent. Lateo respected above all things; he represented many wolves in the matter, no longer just himself. He was to be a royal, and this meant he spoke with the packs within their territory, setting his own feelings aside on all matters of the moment; he maintained eye contact and spoke firmly.

“I understand.”

“I have concerns,” the king continued, pacing the room and looking to Lateo, whom he treated as a Prince yet watched respond as a simple soldier.

It would take time, I suppose, the King thought for a moment. I did ruin his life, as many say, he admitted to himself.

“Well-founded Concerns. Of course, we have not heard from Stator, but we can be confident we will, and it will include demands and apologies. None of which I expect you to deal with, of course, you did what anyone loyal to their territory would do, you protected the princess and future Covenant Queen.”

Nodding Lateo remembered the choice well; had he known the full extent of his own imprisonment for it, he would have made a different one. Time passed, and no returns were allowed; he didn't know what he would do, but a different choice would have been made.

“It delighted me to discover that Swede was your acting father and guardian, the wisest of all. It gives me confidence in your abilities. Of course, as he was my mentor growing up, I am inviting him once again to be advisor to the Royal court.

Of which you, as of this evening, are now a rightful member,”
The King walked over with a Blood Prince broach.

“I know you would prefer this come from the Blood King;
however, he refused, as your presence here was my demand alone.
I welcome you to the family with Artur’s blessing and the Blood
King's acceptance of a second son.”

“Artur blessed this,” Lateo was in disbelief.

The man who had beaten him more than any other man, he who
had threatened, interrogated, maimed, and even Lateo shuddered.

Forgiveness wouldn’t come soon for that either. Everything was
healed now his fangs in his wolf form had returned, and he could
feel he was whole again, to have them pulled out by Artur’s man
form no less. There was a hate for Artur in him, a hate that Lateo
would not easily forgive.

“He does, and more so than his father and my friend. However,
Lateo, I believe you will be the best guard for her and for our
territory. You are a solution with a sound mind in both matters.
Swede would not have raised a fool.

The Blood King has not forgiven him either for tutoring me more thoroughly in our youth.” The Covenant King smiled; he did love bragging about that.

“So this brings him no joy and much memory, still from this day forward, they are your only family, Lateo. You have a father, a brother and a friend, that is all you enter this legacy with as Lycan and the Covenant Princess, whatever she may turn out to be to you, burden or sister, I don’t know. It is legacy, we steer it with our minds before our hearts and into our hands. You will be with her, raise her in our Master's ways, and she will need them. I have done what I can, but she refused many lessons, time and patience among them.”

A lack of joy was something Lateo could relate to as the Covenant King pressed a broach into his torn shirt. There was a lightness to the weight of the object and heaviness to its destiny.

“Your new quarters are ready, and I have given you the room next to Kaelis, becoming of a prince and worthy of your new rank.

Welcome, Blood Prince Lateo,” the King extended his hand and then surprised him as he took it and pulled him into a hug, giving him several pats on the back.

“As many guards as you need,” the king said and waved a hand. The guards stood at attention now as Lateo left, saluting as he walked by. This was different, not the rough passing and hidden punches he had been enduring. Looking down to the broach, he growled and left the room without a thank you or mention of the assignment; it was the most princely thing he could do in his mind.

The Covenant King sighed; the entire matter had caused him great worry and concern, something Kaelis traditionally did not do. She was pressing and investigating into what did not fit her time nor his needs. Questions that he didn’t want answers to, theories that brought worry of blight and other omens of necromancy.

He watched the door open, and Luna walk in, “Ah and how is my daughter?”

“She might have to be scrubbed down like a pup. I am sending in the maids. This is unacceptable cleanliness,” she ran her hand over a dusty bookshelf and frowned.

“However, she will remain far within the Keep and not wander the town or grounds, of that I am sure, until after the Red Moon Ceremony,” Luna said with a huff and closed the door, remembering Artur had asked her for this effort.

In a fit of fury, the King cast a cleansing storm so that all the notes and papers would return to their origins. As he did, the maids walked through the door, and he found himself escorted out of his own royal office. He scribbled a note to the Blood King and looked around in worry as he left the parade of people who traditionally were not allowed this deep into the Keep.

It took several hours to have the drapes taken down and replaced, the floors and walls scrubbed, the chairs repaired, and the desks cleared. Carpets were taken out and beaten, then brought back in, much sweeping and many bins of papers were crumpled and burned.

Chapter Seven

It was not until after nightfall that the Blood King could re-enter, and when he did, he cringed. Last time it had been made this clean, many things were never found again, and so, in a historic move, the Blood King went to the Covenant King and asked why all of his own items were in order.

Then he had the concept of a return spell explained, and that it required special paper and ink, none of which he used. It was in that moment that he had changed history; every book, note, parchment, every paper was changed, translated, redrawn on this special parchment with special ink. It had taken a year, and now it stood here as the moment of truth.

Going to his desk, he saw a hurried note:

I caste the spell. I hope it got everything. Luna came in on a rampage.

-CK

Opening his drawer, he sighed in relief as he saw his parchments and other items neatly stacked, all in the same order he had left them. It was a wave and rush; nothing was going to be as terrible as three years ago, when there was admittedly an odor that came from one of the carpets, which had seen a brutal killing.

The odor did, in fact, spread through the castle, and Luna had rolled up her own sleeves and cleaned the scent of the crime from the room. She had made a rather deep insistence of the event, and it was a memory the Blood King was not fond of.

Nor were the memories he had made over the last few days. Red Moons were never his astrological season; he disliked them as both wolf and man. Sitting down, he began to write out his needs from the Covenant Master of Duties Corvan, who was now on duty.

Things were always uncovered, truths had burdens created and buried. It was as he was ending this task and about to engage another that his son Artur came in. "Father, I can sense from here your displeasure?"

"Are you not concerned that your Kinghood can be contested by a rogue no less?"

"I am not father, Kaelis and I have always been led to rule together, and that doesn't change now. Nor does it hinder possible futures. He is your son now, and you may not speak of him in such a way, not to me or others."

“What certainty do you have of that destiny you speak so convincingly of? Have you decided to become a King of Agers today?”

“Time and vow, bind her and I not you and not land.”

“But not love.”

“You think she fancies this new prince? Father, they are a bane to each other, and we should do our best not to make it worse.

Giving them something to rally against would not suit our needs now or in the future, especially if it were to rally against us. Now stop, I shall not ask you again on this matter of my brother, if he is King one day, let it be long after you or perhaps even I have died and lived, you control what he will say and speak about us, with your thoughts and your actions towards him now.”

“I suppose that is very true, and one of the many reasons you will make a wise king one day.”

“One of many.” Artur set Lateo’s wolf fangs down. “I did it as a man, as history demands we do now make him a crown and sword, of his own powers.

Give it to him as his father, whom he has not had. We are his only family, to be. He was a rogue. Do not waste this on your pride, as he is now Blood. Do not make me speak and act in a manner unfitting of my enduring love and belief in you.”

“His trials are over, he is family now. As with family, we will all have to make him feel welcome. I understand this,” taking the fangs, the Blood Kings' own memories came up, it had happened to him as well, it happened to all of them.

It hurt in ways and pain that those not of wolf form can ever understand. Still, they would be forged into magical objects for him. Objects that allowed him to become a King. Artur was glad they had resolved this sooner, not later, after damage was done.

“I know, and I have made sacrifices inside and out. He has fine robes and armor. I made sure he knew it was from me, his brother. I will leave you to make your own gestures to your new son.”

“I prefer he find me as a king than a father if I must be one, he is a man, so hopefully he has no needs in such things.”

Artur listened to his father, who was not the hope he wanted to spring from his soul. He would give this relationship time. His father's concerns about power were great and many.

“What was she doing, do you know, did you ask?”

“I do not know, and I did ask. She will not tell me,” Artur lied to him for the sake of not starting a war.

“A Stator border guard is killed. The hour was close to 3 before the sun rose. Why was she there?”

“I do not know, I have suspicions and regrets.”

“Why did she not state her station and why regrets?”

“I suspect it was the rumor coming from the human tribes of the Blight. I have regrets because she did ask me to go, and I refused.”

“As you should, two of you in this mess would not be better.”

“They would not have circled her if I had been there.”

“Or they would have attacked from the shadows. You never know, Stators are not allies, nor friends. They are cursed and would take great glee in killing off both kings' heirs.”

“Father,” Artur listened to a lot from his father, but not his prejudice that fed into paranoia.

The Blood King frowned, “Find out why that is not a request, it is an inquiry!”

Artur looked to him, “If that is all, I have pressing matters.”

“For now, that is all for now, as it was not completed to begin with. She tells you all, so I know she has told you this, and you are not telling me.”

“And it may never be any different than it is today,” Artur said of his relationship to his Queen. “Father, she is a woman and a witch; both tend to keep their secrets.”

“Indeed,” his father grumbled. “Try.”

“Yes, and you as well with Lateo.”

Chapter Eight

It was as the sun rose that Captain Tane was walking down the Stator Keep's hallways toward his Blood Prince's quarters. He hated this order above all other orders.

The personal delivery of items to the royal family always unnerved him. It gave him access to places wherever they were. It left him feeling that no one asked why he was there, and this did not sit well with him as someone who took security seriously.

His presence in this arrangement violated many of the Keep's trusted oaths of safety.

Still, Tane had orders, and if there was one thing Stator was known for, it was loyalty to their Royal Family. Knocking, he was surprised when the Prince opened the door himself.

Prince Fides of Stator Blood was a spitting image of his father, who had died soon after his birth.

The former Blood King was met with tragic murder, not discussed, but well known among the Stator Keep family and staff.

Prince closed the door behind Tane. He opened the parchment he sealed and then handed Fides the parchment sealed with the golden sap of Princess Kaelis. He gazed towards Captain Tane, a man he had known since boyhood, a brother in all ways but blood. Even that, soon, would change. Setting the thought aside.

“Thank you, Tane. That must have been a long run.”

“Nothing sleep won’t cure,” Tane replied. He suspected he might be asked to run back with a reply, so he stayed standing.

“Anything else?”

Fides ran a hand through his dark brown hair that gathered at his shoulders. His eyes flashed bright white as he smiled.

“Yes. I already had a room prepared for you. I need you to gather the historians. I am researching several matters, such as blight, necromancy laws, farming cycles, harvest moons, and any correlating myth, magic, or lore that may accompany them.

As this is a formal royal inquiry, the historians will bring trunks of books, maps, and their traditional odds and ends, filling carts and taking time. Take a unit with you. And stay, for the inquiry. You are very talented at questions and timelines; your notes are poetry on a page with their neatness.” Fides gave a soft order and compliment towards his interrogation techniques.

“Stay, sir?” Tane was being asked to write things down about history, with everything he had going on. “I’m running a border guard. We had another breach last night. Nothing as serious as the death earlier this week, but still...”

“It is an order,” Fides said calmly, not truly giving concern to the Captain's other duties, as he had decided on this one having most importance.

“Of course, sir,” Tane replied, standing straighter. “Both historians?”

“Yes,” Fides confirmed. “And whatever they wish to bring.” He handed Tane a parchment listing the topics. “Bring it back and then burn the order list. With the King and Queen away, this must remain among brothers.”

“Understood.”

The subjects alone were enough to stir controversy, names and practices not spoken aloud in over five hundred years, when the last necromancy hunts took place. Whether those hunts had been justice or zealotry, history itself seemed uncertain.

“Rubicondus has named a new Prince,” Fides said, opening Kaelis’s letter. It began with an account of the border guard’s death and detailed the most recent locations of suspected Blight. Three sites in Stator had reported blackened grass and soil turned to dark tar. “It was the rogue from the other night, the one who killed the Lieutenant I dislike, a favor more than a pity.”

“I suppose we won’t be exacting revenge, then.”

“We cannot,” Fides replied. “Didn’t you attend some of those old wolf fighting camps?” he asked. “I recall you mentioning the lad on a couple of your summers. I missed several when I was sick as a boy.”

“I did,” Tane said. “All my summers in a row. He is known as the Wise Wolf’s son.”

A terror he could track, hunt and fight. Speech seemed his only weakness. Silence carries its own superiority, I suppose.”

Fides accepted the Lieutenant’s death was a loss, though not to him. He had disliked the man since discovering his black-market dealings. Stator’s black powder problem had flowed through the Lieutenant’s hands, and he had taken his cuts freely.

“I suppose that means we’ll need another Blood Prince to maintain rank,” Fides said dryly. “You fancy a rise in power anytime soon?”

“Definitely not,” Tane’s disgust clear in his voice as he shut the door behind him, dismissing himself and the matter rather firmly.

Fides laughed. Tane could refuse now, but both the Covenant King and the Blood Queen had already decided that Captain Caleb Tane was to become Keep family. Groomed for decades, his purpose was finally nearing.

Alone again, even in his thoughts, Fides returned to Kaelis’s letter.

It was the Stator Covenant King's guards who had been in the area, she wrote, and the closest proof she could offer was a strip of leather smeared with black residue, stuck to her boot and now attached to the bottom of the parchment.

He sat on the edge of his bed and looked out over the river. It was busy; Stator's people were moving north toward the Red Moon Ceremony. It would be lavish, of that he was certain. As always, two royals ruled from the Keep, so he and the Covenant King's son remained behind. Lehi.

Fides counted himself fortunate; he could not stand his aunt and disliked the Covenant King nearly as much, if not more, as his suspicion was growing.

Reading further, he heard Kaelis's concern clearly in her words:

Elements are being hidden. I couldn't get close enough, but the air smelled tangy, like sour fruit. It was warmer there, far too warm for fall, and a thick fog curled unnaturally around the area. It sounds foolish, but it felt alone, as if the land itself was holding its breath. I cannot explain it; there was no happiness or light there.

Fides grasped no more than she did. These signs could be warnings or spells meant to ward off ruins or ancient sites. Still, the last line unsettled him. He had felt it himself once: blackened grass, soil turned to tar. Those places were now forbidden under Covenant order.

Though a prince, he was not the King. His aunt had seen no reason for him to wander there again. In some ways, he welcomed the restriction. Her grating voice and violent whims had become too familiar. Whenever she traveled, rare as it was, he made quiet trips to the dungeons to release those she had forgotten. He would do so again later. Her obesity over the past year had become a stench. He had ordered her to bathe more than once, with no improvement. She could no longer transform bright red hair framing a piggish face. Fides was grateful he was nothing like her, inside or out. He would learn what he could, then send Tane back with a reply.

“Might have him deliver it personally,” he muttered. “All this traffic, and he deserves a night out, to meet Kaelis in person, may sway him to our cause.”

A knock came at the door. Lehi’s voice followed.

“I see Tane is in a mood,” Lehi said as he entered, smiling. “You had him run here.”

“Yes,” Fides replied quietly. He folded the letter and tucked it into his pocket as though it were a casual note. “I’m summoning the historians.”

“It’s been years since you’ve done that,” Lehi said with a hearty laugh and flash of memory. “What are we learning? Shall I visit the kitchen and cellar? With the Queen away, more is available. Father’s been hiding much from her.”

“As he should,” Fides scoffed. “Perhaps we can hide the very air she breathes someday, if that isn’t considered sedition.”

Lehi laughed softly. “Would you want to be King with him?”

“No,” Fides answered. “I’d rather wait for you to rise. I don’t have the luxuries we dreamed of as boys, however.” He paused. “She could just as easily choke on a bone, asleep with food in her bed.”

“Father ordered no revival if that happens,” Lehi still smiling, though he wasn’t joking.

“As he should,” Fides agreed.

“You didn’t call Tane from his post just to fetch historians,” Lehi said. “So what are you truly doing?”

“Waiting for you to fetch from the kitchen and cellar,” Fides replied dryly.

Lehi confirmed. “Secrets kept are secrets held,” invoking the Stator way. Legacy alone did not keep Stator in power; silence did.

“You are going to join us for the historians, aren’t you?” Fides asked. “It has been some time, and we are all alone for the week, plus Caleb is the official interrogator and note taker.”

“May I come with you on the dungeon walk?” Lehi negotiated for his friend's sister's release.

“Indeed. Tane should as well; he knows the business better than both of us. I mentioned him becoming a brother today.”

“Did he take it well?”

“No.”

“Nor will he when the time comes.”

“Yes, but we cannot have one Blood Prince when they have two.”

“Ager has none.”

“Yes, and look how we speak of them when everyone is around,”

Fides warned, watching Lehi sigh with a pleased smile at the situation.

“He has the blessing of both crowns.”

“Yet with no will of his own, our lights like all Keep lights never dim, we have no peace.” Lehi turned toward the door.

“I’ll be in the private reserve. Don’t start without me. I’d be bored not hearing the two of them argue and prattle through history as if it were alive and well.”

“I wouldn’t dream of excluding you,” Fides smirked. “Or the food and drinks.”

The reserves had not been opened in over a decade; there were fine meats and wines stored there. He found himself looking forward to the historians more than expected.

When the door closed, Fides drew the Princess's letter from his pocket and leaned against the open window. The river was usually calm, with only a few boats, a patrol or two. Today, there was no peace inside himself and Stator.

It was crowded like his own thoughts. Patrols lining the shores, taxes, barter, and bribes being conducted openly, he assumed with ease. Dark furs lined his walls and floors to keep the warmth in, and piled upon his bed were linens and fur mixed. He should have his Attendant in, he decided, looking around, he had left clothes and armor scattered from different rides.

He was busy and had been busy, looking as well.

There was no one he trusted fully besides Lehi, Tane, and Kaelis. Even his guards had proven disloyal when forced to choose between his interests and his aunt's. Lehi had joked about her death since they were boys; the jokes had grown dangerously close to suggestion the longer she lived.

To rule as King alongside the Covenant would be a dangerous gamble. His aunt had made it work only because the Covenant King had chosen her. She was not even a blood sister, only one by marriage.

Fides had been days old when his father disappeared, likely by murder rather than myth, though no proof was offered. He could have challenged her at thirteen, but he had never found reason enough to do so.

Until now.

Blight would mean necromancy. Necromancy would mean war, not just now, but into the future. The war against it, the war fueled by it, the war to end it. Not a future he wanted for himself or his people, he decided honestly, of the times.

Stator, still had ancient dark sights, and the land had been growing dim in some way. Even the people talked about it, the sun and strange ash that would fall in the far west hills. He had ridden there to see himself, and as he walked over to the table with the fire and caldron, the test would not be ready for some time. He sighed. Blight was a terrible curse.

It rotted land, birthed vicious creatures from lore and myth once used to terrify children. It drove wolves' eyes red, witches' and wizards' eyes black. It compelled kidnapping and murder, the creation of living slaves bound to another's will, long past death.

There was no reason to build such a force unless war was coming. Even then, it was a curse upon a people and a land that could not be controlled or ended with ease once it grew. It would unite the territories against whoever dared use the ancient ruins. He walked back to his window, and he remembered the valley being brighter as a child, the water shining blue, not white and grey.

The northern and western territories had destroyed their old temples, burned foundations, shattered stones, and thrown them into the deepest rivers, and it was said that great light poured up from their grounds and even into their trees. Fides had visited, and what was said was very true. Stator had merely declared theirs forbidden. Forbidden places could still be reached. Time had a way of making old mistakes feel distant and harmless. Fides knew better.

The Ager Queen was pregnant. Their Blood King was dying. It was known they had asked Rubicondus for Artur to take the crown, and it was equally known that no answer had been given.

Now, Rubicondus had two Blood Princes. Artur could give Ager heirs, save their line from extinction and provide a fair reason for the Stator invasion to stop.

That would leave the rogue to inherit someday, though not soon. The Blood King of Rubicondus was strong, healthy, and still young enough to father more sons if he wished. A Blight would only hasten such choices towards war.

Fides himself had long been promised to a Flumen Blood princess. She was pleasant enough, but opposed the marriage as he did, both with strong reasons, namely their age disparity. His aunt's response to his refusal was revulsion, followed by suggestions of horrific coercion to get her way.

Fides was many things, but he would not violate himself or another, so he always said no.

The Covenant King had proposed a spell, love, absolute and unquestionable. Fides rejected that idea as well and never gave consent, so the idea was dismissed, and then he had it forbidden.

He did not wish to live in Flumen lands, nor to bind a river wanderer to stone. An alliance was needed, yes, and marriage might still come, but not through force, magic, or ambition, certainly not through him. Perhaps his children, should he have any, might be more suitable in age.

The Flumen Blood Queen was fierce and hostile. She had visited once and nearly killed his aunt, an interruption many regretted. As a child, Fides had wished she could kidnap him and raise him anywhere but Stator.

He outgrew that wish when he discovered how truly awful she was to her people.

What he could not outgrow was suspicion. If necromancy was stirring, he believed the Covenant King of Stator was involved. All three blight sites lie within their borders. Not accidents, they each bordered the other territories; it was a premeditated invasion.

It had been Stator Covenant guards Kaelis encountered that night, guards willing to kill to preserve secrecy for the war they were launching. A civil war would be disastrous, especially under blight.

In ancient times, during crises such as these, a dictator would choose a wolf or wizard to rule as Emperor, until the danger passed, then relinquish power, sometimes for more than one territory.

So the legends said.

Fides would learn how much of that was truth, and how much was fiction, before the day was done, as Tane's voice carried through the door.

“Your Majesty, the historians, Lehi, and I are ready to begin.”

Chapter Nine

Tane had always disliked duties that felt like fetch-and-carry as a Captain. As he ran through the wild, frost-tipped grasses bent beneath his stride, the scent of pine sap clung to the cold autumn air. Three books of notes were kept within the messenger bag that was strapped tight against him for Princess Kaelis's eyes only.

Tane had spent the last two days listening to a heated historical argument about the Blight, the who, how, why, and when, debated with such fury and passion that each observer had taken to journaling the proceedings. Ink-stained fingers and sleepless eyes had marked the seriousness of it all. Included among the notes was a long letter sealed by Fides.

When the red-barked trees of Rubicondus began to rise higher and thicker, their canopies filtering light into copper shafts, he slowed and shifted back into human form.

Gravel pressed beneath his boots as he approached the carved redwood gates banded in iron. He had to be a man to pass through the magical border, and so it was in full uniform that he appeared.

“Captain Caleb Tane, envoy of Blood Prince Fides of Stator,” he announced, slightly winded in a way his wolf form would never have been.

The guard stepped forward, red-haired and broad, “Caleb Tane. Still the fastest runner in the four territories?”

“Trevor Tannum,” Caleb said, shock clear in his voice. “You grew to be the size of the trees you guard. By the old gods, man, who blessed you?”

They laughed and embraced Trevor, now towering over Tane by a good head or more. They had been teen pups the last time they’d seen one another, Tane always protecting Trevor, who was often called ‘runt’, if only because their names began with the same letter he used to tell him as he took on his fights.

“I’ve a wife now,” Trevor said proudly. “She’s made me tall and fat. Two little pups. My sister finally married, though she still moans it wasn’t to you.” He laughed, and a sparkle appeared around his green eyes of happiness at seeing his friend.

Tane laughed as well, remembering the girl who had followed them everywhere. She was annoying, and he was certain whoever she married, she would now annoy him as well.

“Well, tell her I’m not married and have no pups to my name. Best she found happiness,” Caleb replied, accepting a flask of water. It always tasted better in Rubicondus. He took a deep breath. And then another very long drink. “Can I fill up my canteen while I am here?”

“Yes, sir, travel’s rough today,” Trevor said, motioning toward the road where wagons and livestock crowded the approach. “Best wait. We’ve got a Watch cart coming; they can get you in faster. We’ve our own Flumen now. Master Nephi. First day of training done. Fine addition to Rubicondus, he is riding back and this takes you into the Keep much faster.”

“I’ll wait,” Caleb agreed to the offer. “Never did well with lines. I’ve had dealings with Nephi, that’s partly why I’m here. We couldn’t find him, and he’s our most trusted for Royal Mail.”

“He fell in love with a witch here, cozy life in the Keep now, soon to be married.”

“Seems to be the way,” Tane said warmly. “Tell me their names. How old? We’ve time, catch me up on the great life you have led.”

The Watch cart arrived sometime later, wheels rattling over packed earth. Caleb waved goodbye and climbed aboard. He had been well fed and kept warm with both fire and tale as he waited

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The ride toward the Keep passed beneath banners snapping in a sharp wind. Villagers crowded the outer roads, vendors shouting, smoke rising from roasting pits. The Red Moon hung pale in the daylight sky, waiting for nightfall.

“Never thought I’d miss you,” Captain Tane joked as he sat beside Nephi. “How’s the land treating you?”

“Life of land and love suits me,” Nephi replied quietly.

“But if the Flumen ask, I have died. We cannot have Queens in fury over my heart’s choices, lest they think it pride, not love and send someone to kill me.”

Tane would speak nothing of it.

The cart rolled past long lines and checkpoints where iron bells chimed with each inspection. The Keep rose from soft earth and great tree foundations layered into the hillside, redwood beams framing tall windows. Patrols lined the approach; it was respectable in both intimation and presentation.

Nephi led him to the Master of Duties' office. The interior smelled faintly of cedar oil and fresh bread. Floors were polished; nothing felt neglected. Tane noted how much Stator slacked in such matters.

Demetri narrowed his eyes at him. "I must notify both your King and Queen of your arrival. As this is royal business, you will be placed upstairs and assigned a guide consider it a guard."

"I won't attend the ceremony or wonder," Tane replied. "Send food to the room. I intend to sleep and not cause you more trouble than my arrival has."

"You will bathe," Demetri said flatly. "And wash your armor. When did you leave?"

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“Slowing down.”

“Took a cart to avoid disturbing your checkpoints.”

“Fair enough. Ethor will guide you.”

Security through the halls was meticulous, guards posted at measured intervals, spears upright, armor polished. Tapestries of previous Blood Moons lined each of the major halls above the staircases, stretching so vast that Tane found himself turning around to look at them. He was fond of history and the detail to art.

“Have you ever been to Rubicondus?” Ethor asked Tane, as he was a guide, not just a guard.

“No, yes, the territory, but no, not the Keep.” Tane spoke honestly to him, the grandeur impressive.

“Would you like a tour?” Ethor asked him, and Tane nodded.

“To the art parts,” Tane said, honestly wishing he had showered but not wanting to stop looking.

“Over here we have the east courtyard, your room overlooks this area, the view in the background is the Solly River, it runs towards the sea in one direction, and the Black Priest mountains in the other,” Ethor said, and Tane took in the view. “If you follow up the east wing, you can begin to see the forest of Stator.”

“You can not,” Tane said, having just run that distance today. Ethor stepped back, and the guards pulled the curtains. The window was carved into the wall, and he was indeed high enough to see the Stator forest. “I apologize.”

“From the west balcony,” he crossed a major bridge inside between two tapestries that pulled back. “You can see Ager meadow.”

Tane looked, and indeed, you could, in the distance, see the glowing waves of unending grain. He was so high up that it changed his perception and the way he understood the size of things. Ethor took his elbow, moved him a little to the left, and then turned him around.

“Art,” Ethor said, and Tane could see that the staircase was a massive dragon that wound around the entire inside of the castle. All of it is beautiful and glistening wood. He had walked it, climbed the back and tail.

“You are a spectacular guide,” Tane said. “I will mention it in my report.”

“Thank you. If we descend what is known as the neck of the dragon, we come to the south wing, which belongs to the Two Kings and leads us to the West wing. Here we entertain many, and there is not much art.”

“Don’t need to see it,” Tane said honestly. “Which leaves the East Wing, where you said I was staying, and could see the courtyard.”

“Yes,” Ethor smiled, glad the Captain had listened.

Nothing went unwatched, mixed Watch of both magical and Lycan, some in forms of human, and some in forms of wolf and smoke.

The room assigned to him was unmistakably royal: a massive carved bed, writing desk, low table and chairs, and a sitting chamber leading to a small firelit library. Shelves of poetry lined the walls. Beyond that lay the bathing chamber.

Steam rose in slow curls beneath vaulted stone ceilings. Unseen pipes fed clear water continuously into a sunken pool large enough to wade into. Oil lamps burned softly, scenting the air with lavender and mint.

Tane undressed and stepped into the water. Heat sank into his muscles. Fresh water flowed steadily, carrying away grime from the road.

He floated and sighed as he bathed, it was with well-scented soaps and oils, the water pulling the dirt away, and fresh hot water flowing in for a long time. Tane finally floated and closed his eyes in a restful peace of being clean.

“And your wolf form?” Luna’s voice cut through the steam. He startled.

She stood at the edge of the pool, arms folded.

“I followed the stench from the hall.”

His eyes flashed, but before he could answer, she shifted, white and grey fur bursting through the steam. She surged forward and forced him beneath the water until instinct took over, and he shifted as well.

Wolf met wolf for a moment before she climbed out, and her human form produced soap and a brush, then scrubbed his snout until he sneezed in her human form, and he couldn't fight her grip strength upon his muzzle and neck.

“Filthy as a lowly commoner, and they call you Captain?” she scolded, scrubbing behind his ears with remarkable strength.

He growled low but endured. She was older; tribunals were not worth the explanation, he could tell by her tone, strength, and most importantly, her smell. No violence could be had; he would simply have to be bathed.

She lifted his leg and scrubbed meticulously. “Do you even bathe in wolf form? Or assume no one can scent you?”

He sank deeper into the hot water. It felt too good to argue as she washed his sides and back.

Nearly an hour later, she snapped her fingers.

“Dry by the fire. Completely dry. The Princess is unworthy of the stench Stator brought into this castle. I mean it, no turning until the wolf has had time to let the clean sink in, Captain Tane.”

Chapter Ten

Tane did not know how much time had passed when he heard his Covenant King's voice.

“My dearest Captain. I rarely see you in your natural form. How you've grown.”

The Covenant King of Stator stood near the firelight, shadows stretching behind him. Tane startled awake, unsure of what time or day it was.

The king scratched behind Tane's ear, and Tane's leg thumped involuntarily.

He laughed in spite of himself as it had not been done since he was a very young pup. He and the King would go hunting and have other adventures that, Tane assumed, they grew out of.

“I hear the historians are in a fury,” the King spoke lightly. “They have each written demanding more be said, and that they be allowed to defend themselves further.”

Tane huffed away, not turning human.

“You were always destined for royalty,” the King continued, sitting before him on the floor. “The process is horrific, I know, as are the endless and tedious problems. I am not to tell you, but it involves violent assault on your true form. I need it. Endure it, for me.”

The firelight flickered against the King’s face. Tane shook his head no and rested it on his front paws, then gave a sigh and looked away.

“I know,” the King said softly, leaning his weight against him, and he gave him a hug as he had done when he was a boy.

“It is necessary, Caleb. The Queen died in her sleep last evening, we are hushed about it, we don’t need Rubicondus having troubles they have nothing to do with. She choked on a bone, as history will say. I think it was the soft mattress that killed her as she died sinking into her own obesity, strangling the breath out of herself; we may never know. Still, I want no war to come of it, except the ones we might choose to start.”

Tane sat upright, towering over him.

“Fides needs you. Blood needs you, the Keep needs you. I need you.”

The King lifted a hand. Wolf armor formed over Tane’s body in a shimmer of magic, dark metal fitted perfectly. It was obsidian and some of the finest he ever made. He was pleased with himself; his use of magic had grown truly powerful over the last few years, and this work was proof that his efforts were paying off manyfold.

“Serve with me, son.”

Tane licked the King’s hand. There was a faint sour taste, like rotted fruit. Tane stilled, and shifted back into human form, it tasted like the shoelace. “If you insist, Your Majesty.”

Tane placed his fist over his heart and saluted the moon visible through the tall window.

“Then we are even. My debt is paid. I will undergo the rites upon returning. As violent as they may be.”

“I am pleased,” the King spoke honestly of the matter.

“As am I, to have a father again.”

The King hugged him, then left as the door closed softly. The fire crackled low in the hearth, embers shifting and settling. Morning light filtered through the tall glass panes, pale and thin, carrying the faint copper tint of the Red Moon’s passing.

Outside, the river moved steadily, swollen from ceremony traffic, its surface broken by patrol skiffs returning to their usual routes. Tane stood alone in the quiet. The view was sweeping; he was so high up in the clouds, he was used to traveling below them. Travel did not seem that tedious; it was wondrous magic. The golden glow was one of his favorite parts of the summers he had spent in the far woods as a boy.

The chamber still held the warmth of the fire and the faint scent of oil from the polished floors. Beneath it, barely noticeable now, lingered the sour trace he could not unlearn.

He had tasted it. Smelled it. The very description of necromancy he had spent days studying in ink-stained rooms thick with dust and argument. He could not shake it; the answer was known, and Tane would not ask any more questions.

He began to pace, boots silent against the woven rugs. From the window, he saw the courtyard below, servants clearing the remnants of lantern frames, guards rotating shifts, banners hanging heavier now that the celebration had ended. The Red Moon was gone from the sky, replaced by a washed sun-drenched morning.

He had slept through it, and it had been a good sleep.

Looking down at the robes he had changed into when he shifted forms. They carried the scent of oils. He stripped them off and returned to the bathing chamber. The pool still held warmth, steam rising in slow ribbons toward the vaulted ceiling. Fresh robes and polished armor waited on the carved bench. The leather gleamed in the light; gold embossing traced the edges like quiet authority. He had been too filthy before to notice, hadn't shone so well in years.

His mind drifted back to the news of the Blood Queen. There would be no mourning banners raised in Stator, no songs written. Her legacy had been weight and hate, not wisdom.

Fides was King now, or would be when the news reached him. It was not what his friend wanted. Not while the Covenant King still stood. Had Lehi been King, it would be different, but his father was another matter.

Tane sank deeper into the water until it reached his jaw. The something hummed faintly as fresh heat fed the pool. Outside, somewhere distant, a horn sounded to mark the changing of watch.

He had sensed and smelled on the king's hand. Yet he had no proof beyond his own tongue and memory. That would never be enough, not for him, and not for anyone else. He closed his eyes, not for a civil war in Stator.

A prince of a ruined land was a curse, Tane had the truth to a depth history rarely survived.

He glanced out the window when he heard a great clatter outside. There was the largest black stallion he had ever seen, standing in the cobbled courtyard below with fierce blue eyes that reflected the pale morning light. Stable hands scattered, guards shouted, and his hooves struck sparks against stone. Tane stared as he wrapped a towel around his waist loosely and looked out the window, mesmerized once more.

Wolves couldn't ride horses, but he had always wondered what it would be like.

The stallion reared on its hind legs, towering over the men attempting to control it. It was by far the largest of stallions, a male he noticed. It shook its head, posing in this way and that, never breaking eye contact with Tane at the window.

Tane was only pulled away from the spectacle by loud voices outside the main door. He turned in time to see Princess Kaelis of Rubicondus walk in without a knock, he looked at the towel then to her and back to the stallion. The tall doors swung open behind her, letting in a draft of cool air and the distant smell of trampled grass and horse.

“It’s you,” she said, surprised, looking at Captain Tane, a man she had never seen or met before. “You must have arrived last night. Who are you?”

“As I was trying to say,” the guard stepped in quickly, slightly out of breath from hurrying down the corridor. “This is Captain Tane of Stator.”

“My apologies for not knocking. I just wanted to see who the Stallion of the Redwood had picked. Apparently, it’s you,” Princess Kaelis said with grace and charm as she walked toward him.

Her bright eyes and pale blond hair caught the light from the tall windows, and her clothing was far less regal and far more soldierly in all regards, leather fitted for movement, sleeves rolled slightly, boots worn from riding and an afternoon of sweating.

Tane glanced back at the stallion, which was still staring up at him from below and the woman who was standing very close to him now looking down.

“That is a spectacular gift, Princess. Shall we proceed with the reading after I get dressed?” Tane was pleased and cold, at this point.

The guards acknowledged and left the room, closing the heavy door behind them with a muted thud. He could hear them chiding her.

“It is not acceptable, and your father shall know.”

“His privacy is our security, and you have violated that.”

“He is my guest, as Princess with my delivery, and I wanted to know. Even if it meant walking into a stranger's bathroom. Once in a hundred or two years, a Stallion comes from beyond the great redwood and chooses a rider.”

“And you can see that from this window, and wait to ask, until he comes out clothed.”

Chapter Eleven

With a thud of the door, Tane snickered and went to get dressed. He had not been told much about the princess, but he was getting a good picture of why Fides and Lehi said he would like her. He did.

“It must be bad,” she said, looking to Tane as he emerged. This was the first time the Prince of Stator had sent someone rather than a sealed letter.

Tane smiled and handed her the letter, his black shirt hanging loosely over his leather pants. She looked down at his bare feet. It was brief, the letter that was, stating too much information had been recorded, and so it needed to be brought in person and translated; all but Tane had terrible penmanship. She scoffed at that and laughed. Tane was the translator because he could read all of their handwriting. She opened the books. Indeed, they appeared like foreign scrawl of ink pressed hard into parchment, margins crowded. Then Tane opened his own, and it was as perfect as a scroll of old, letters even and disciplined.

“A translator. I am grateful. I assume you understand the depth of the problem and the investigation.”

She crossed her arms and carried the books into the adjoining study. The chamber was lined with tall shelves, maps pinned along one wall, and a long wooden table scarred from years of use. She waved her hand, and an opal-colored shield shimmered into place around them, distorting the air slightly like heat above stone.

Tane shifted uncomfortably; he disliked magic being used around him.

“Privacy is utmost,” she explained. “This stops our sound and leaves only a dull murmur should someone listen.”

Tane knew the kind of magic; he understood it very well, but had simply never seen it used so casually or openly.

She lay down on the couch near the window and opened his book first.

“So how did this information come about?” she asked.

Tane stood against the wall, still glancing occasionally toward the courtyard where stable hands attempted to coax the stallion away with fruit, oats, and a very fine filly. The horse continued to resist, hooves striking impatiently against stone as he searched for Tane.

He gave a grin back at the Princess's comfort, forgetting her question. Her legs were crossed now, posture relaxed but eyes attentive, boots on the couch, she was as untamed as the Stallion below, who found Tane's eyes, both with things to attend to. The horse relented and munched some fruit as he smelled the filly.

She repeated more slowly, "So how did this information come about?"

"Oh," Tane gave, a small laugh escaping at the flood of memories. "Fides called in the twins. They are Stator's historians."

"Famed," she interrupted. "Twins, each with one eye, who can read anything they find."

"Yes. We spent a few evenings listening to them argue all the points of." He hesitated. Saying the word in front of her was incriminating knowledge out loud. To a stranger.

“Necromancy,” she said firmly, standing. The opal barrier shimmered faintly as she moved. “So these three books are all we know as a people upon this land.”

“Yes. And it includes what the humans know as well,” Tane added.

“As a Captain of Stator, have you seen or sensed any signs of necromancy?” she asked, looking at him squarely. It was an intense gesture, could taunt as war in Lycan culture. As she stepped forward with her right foot, he recognized it for what it was: a challenge. She knew his culture well as both Lycan and Stator.

“I have not. Nor did I look, less so know what to look for until now,” he lied with effortless ease and great occlumency.

She slowly backed away, nodding. Some witches could see memories and sense lies. No rumor nor report had mentioned she had either ability, still he did hope he practiced hiding thoughts and words in his mind under mist and cloud.

“It is not treason, Captain Tane, to look and find darkness that could end our world and has tried before to do just that.”

Tane was aware of the gravity of the situation and his own growing paranoia. “I agree. Shall we start on the translation?” he said, holding up Fides’ book.

She self-confessed. “Luna said she had to bathe you the old-fashioned way. I know what that is like as a human; she forbade me from using magic to be clean. I cannot imagine what it is like as a Lycan,” she added softly, smoothing over the tension she had created. “They tell me it took a full hour.”

“Hadh’t happened since I was a pup,” he joked.

“So clearly needed,” her eyes shone with a brightness he had not seen before, and he laughed at himself, knowing how very true it was.

Chapter Twelve

Tane watched them fight and scream like children, a display of irritation that would never be permitted at any age in Stator.

Voices echoed through the stone corridor, smoke from overturned braziers curling toward the vaulted ceiling. Guards stood stiff along the walls, pretending not to see the spectacle between royalty.

Smoke rose thicker, and Tane shifted into his wolf form, circling Lateo and the princess. His massive paws struck the stone floor with controlled weight, claws clicking once before settling.

“Silence, children,” he said sharply.

Not all wolves could speak. The ability marked lineage, discipline, and Alpha standing, one worthy of royalty. His voice in wolf form carried low and resonant, vibrating through the chamber.

“I shall escort the princess should she leave the keep.” He turned to Lateo, growling. “You will go to the Black Priests. Seek Tara in the name of Tane. She is my friend and will help us understand. Take the books with you.

I will return the princess to your custody, and she will not leave my sight until you have returned.”

He stepped toward her, massive shoulders rolling with deliberate menace.

“She will not leave the Keep unless my eyes are upon her every breath, should she care to wander in the forest for a walk,” he growled low, pressing her backward until her shoulders nearly touched the cold stone wall. Smoke rolled over him once again, and the wolf dissolved into the man. “Agreed?:

“I agree to these terms, Captain Tane, and thank you for your devotion and safety.”

“I will return in three days,” Lateo said, knowing she kept her word when she gave it, saluting him, finding the arrangement more than satisfactory and being without the bane of his royal existence, it would be out of sight, a relief. The princess made nothing easy. “The entirety of the Keeps Watch is at your command to maintain her here. It may take them all, she is cunning even for her kind, not out of sight.”

The princess scoffed and rolled her eyes as he walked out the door, heavy boots fading down the hall.

“So now I am your prisoner,” she said, walking past Tane and giving him a two-handed shove.

He caught her fingertips in his on his chest. It was an aggressive shove of dismissal; her Lycan was flawless in so many of the old ways. “We go to the site and determine what it is, now that we know what to test for. We take some people with us, but few, only wolves.”

He released her hands, and her eyes brightened. “And he won’t know because he is gone,” she said with relief. “You are Stator.” Both were important tasks, and forgiveness before permission was a Stator trait.

“You lied.”

“I threatened with a gesture,” Tane corrected calmly. “I am a Lycan of honor, and you shall not leave my sight when we leave the Keep. I have experienced your understanding of our ways. Do not ruin my word with your action.”

“I will not, Captain Tane. Thank you for the opportunity to look within Stator rather than on my own.”

“Fewer people will die this way,” he said quietly. A third motivation, neither of them named fully, was to be alone.

She sighed. “For now. Not in the end, if what we read is true. Then we have three locations where possible ceremonies have taken place, and plenty have already died.”

“Possible,” he assured her. “This could be just a spot of blight, a one-off, so to speak. They do happen.”

She accepted that it was true. She tapped the books stacked on the heavy oak table, their spines dark against the torchlight. She sensed two things deeply that were not so: Tane was keeping things from her, and so was her historian, as all he could find for her inquiry was a few fairy tales.

“I do like you,” she admitted to Tane.

“I love my horse,” Tane told her honestly. “Shall we go for a ride on the grounds?”

She started to run. “I will race you, no magic nor tail.”

Tane jumped out the window towards the stables, and she was out the door and down the stairs. He enjoyed playing with her; she was funny in a way that women usually annoyed him. It was her seriousness that he decided, as he came up towards Luke, he liked the most.

“I won, I know you understand how happy that makes me.”

Luke shook his head as waiting at the end of the barn was the princess, already saddled.

“I am used to winning,” she said to him with a smile. “And I am faster than you. Good thing mages don’t count, isn’t it, Tane?”

Luke looked to Tane and stepped out of the stall by himself.

Chapter Thirteen

As the Rubicondus Blood and Covenant King looked out the window of their office, they could see the wild blond hair of Kaelis. She usually won her races, but this new Stallion, Luke, was indeed from the Deeper Redwood.

“I have him siring as many as possible,” the Covenant King told Seth as he watched his friend's eyes narrow upon Captain Tane.

“I remember that boy from the camps; he was fierce and well respected. Artur talked of him several times that summer. Now here he is, playing with her. On what business does he need a royal room? His Queen has died, surely his own Blood King must need him right now,” the Blood King glared as he could see them both smiling. “IS SHE TO MARRY STATOR?” It came in a shout that startled the Covenant King despite his calm nature.

“I do not know,” his friend replied honestly about his daughter. “I am not sure I wish to know. If I may be perfectly clear, I asked the Master of Duties to cut the communication; loyalty is not mine to demand in such situations. And retribution would be hers to grant someday, when I pass.”

“Don’t speak of such things.”

“Well, we all pass Seth.”

The Blood King glanced away as the two figures faded with rapid speed into the distance. She was still losing.

“I still am being excluded by them. The manor, which the Stator Covenant King did not even once mention, was the way the Blood Queen was found dead without a whisper of ill doing.”

“Perhaps they know we have no ill intentions, and for once, they didn’t make anything up. Have you considered that?”

“They are Stator, they know of nothing but ill intentions. Even now, one of the most cunning among them rides our grounds. The guards discuss her introduction to him, in nearly no clothing. Now he is as close to her as Lateo even in room.”

The Covenant King sighed and went to his desk, where he sat down and poured himself a drink. He had known Seth his entire life; they had grown up together as boys and remained friends even now as Kings and men.

He was a prejudice man, and it came from hate. Taking a drink, he looked to his friend, who was looking out of the window. He waved his hand and started a fire.

Seth had gone to the Ager borders when they were both newly crowned, and there he warred against Stator, who had started violent rows on both field and land. He had come back different, not just bitter and angrier, but more paranoid, as though all kindness had drained from him concerning the matter of Stator.

“We both know what it is; nothing would cause her to act in such reckless ways. It is her obsession with blight,” he watched as Seth turned his attention to him and poured another drink as his friend walked closer. “She is convinced there are signs and has been for sometime now. She gets these ideas from her human friends, of course, who wouldn’t know blight from fog should they be walking through it.”

Seth took the drink that was offered and narrowed his eyes. “Is she right?”

As both a man and King Seth had learned, Kaelis was often right. Her hunches were very well founded; his eyes narrowed to slits.

“I don’t know, but if she is, I am telling you now in confidence, I will be stepping down. I will not be King during such times, with a princess who is eagerly bringing them on.”

“To bring on a blight is a crime unspeakable; she has not nor would she ever do so, finding one is a sacred duty, and a right she is obligated to uphold as are you and I.”

“I suppose if you say so, finding one is just as bad in my view as both man and King.”

“It would mean war, it would mean Stator and likely that wretched Flumen Queen had decided to conduct the unspeakable.”

“Human rumors,” the Covenant King said flatly on the matter and was not interested in what may or may not be true when it came to human thoughts.

His daughter Kaelis was the Queen of All, as he said many times before. She cared for the plants and trees, the humans and wolves, all with equal grace and care.

It had been humbling and wondrous to behold when she was young. All who knew her ruled better for knowing her. However, this last year, she had been seeking something that should not be sought. Information.

“I would prefer you rise rather than step down.”

“She is ruthless regarding this matter. I have had to bar and ward her into her room; she will not stop losing her guard. Lockdown such as this has not been seen in close to seven hundred years.”

“I know, I overheard Howel explaining to Artur the severity of the circumstances of her protection. I hope history does not show you both unwise and unjust in doing so.”

“It is hardly seemly, and I must say, as her father, I find no comfort in my near-perfect example of a daughter being present at a royal guard murder, and the murmur of human superstition. This is painful for me.”

“Which tribe of humans said it. Was it the Ghost Wolf she is so fond of, or some other class of human?”

“That I do not know, but I suspect him; he has always been meddlesome.”

“It is said he is haunted by a Ghost himself, the last great Blood King of Stator.”

“It is said he smokes too many plants and eats too many mushrooms as he sells them as well.”

Seth laughed; he could not disagree with those facts. A good business the lad ran, picking plants and selling them alongside dried mushrooms.

Seth never dismissed the humans as many did; he found them to be wise in many ways, whereas the family of the Keep was not.

As they stayed inside, the humans wandered through all the lands and saw each year the changes and things that were happening. He relied on their intelligence and observation skills in more ways than one.

Hearing the sound of pounding hooves, both men peered over the window. They had picked up speed now, Kaelis' face determined and focused. With Luke sprinting into the lead, Tane, in his wolf form, racing beside him.

“They are always the most magnificent beasts,” Seth admitted, having wished he could ride horses. Few wolves ever got the privilege.

“I expect at least six foals so far, more if he stays the next few days.”

“How did we raise such silent and cunning children. Here we are with the most power in Rubicondus, debating and guessing the fate of our kingdom's future by our children's silence. While the answer walks through the halls of the Keep, and rides across the lawn. How devious did we make them? I must ask, is it near failing?”

“I have asked that question many times myself; they are to rule, and so secrets are theirs to keep.”

“Indeed, since they were young, they had a loyalty to one another. Artur will take the crown in Ager; you have decided the future bloodline of my family. I do not like nor appreciate it, and in that sense, I will be glad if you step down, a fitting end to your decisions.”

The Covenant King listened to the slights and tone of his friend with patience. “I trust no one else to follow her and keep her out of trouble, no one but Lateo.”

“My blood, you made him my Blood prince. Luna is not Blood.”

“I made him what he needed to be for when she is Queen.”

“My Blood,” Seth growled deep, and his eyes flashed a golden color. “You deserve the fall,” he said, setting down the glass on his friend's desk. “You deserve the loss of the crown.”

“You would miss me terribly, and be destroyed by her lack of patience on matters that concern your pride, I take care in.”

“Why him?”

“He is the Master's son,” patience oozed from his tone as though this was an obvious decision. “No one deserves it more, not really. You can count on his fairness, on his wisdom. Swede deserves his chosen son to be Blood, and to belong to the Keep, where such wisdom should have always belonged.”

Seth sighed. None of that was untrue, and he often forgot that about Lateo. Orphaned, yes, but raised by the best among them.

“You're right, she would endlessly irritate me,” Seth smiled, went back to looking out the window. “I would like it if there were a good war with Stator.”

“Artur is right your rather cruel about the matter regarding Lateo.”

“I don't like raising children, not even grown children.”

“You are a wonderful father, to both kin and kingdom.”

“That is an obligation, not joy, as you find it to be.”

Sitting down, he looked to his friend and the man he had ruled with. “I don’t want to be remembered for this, and she is fighting for it to be so. I hope you win, Seth.”

Seth turned away from him and said nothing. An end to his reign would be decided at a different time and place.

“You have drank to much.”

“I have not,” he assured the Blood King of his choices.

Chapter Fourteen

It had taken a day's hard run for Lateo to reach the uppermost ridge of the redwood mountains. The trees there were ancient, trunks wider than watchtowers, bark darkened by centuries of wind and snow. The air thinned as he climbed, cold biting into lungs and fur alike.

At the mouth of a cavern carved into the mountain's black stone stood a guard dressed entirely in black cloak, boots and gloves, with only pale eyes visible beneath the hood.

A long spear rested upright in the snow beside him.

"I seek Tara. Tane has sent me. I am Blood Prince Lateo of Rubicondus."

The guard did not move.

"I said," Lateos growled, his wolf form rising to full height, breath steaming in the frozen air.

The guard sighed and glanced behind him into the cave's dark mouth, then shrugged.

Lateos lunged. He did not reach the threshold. Something unseen struck him with crushing force, and he found himself sliding on his back across packed snow and ice, claws scraping uselessly. He stopped mere inches from the cliff's edge, where the mountain dropped into cloud and nothingness.

He stood, shook the snow from his fur, and trotted to the side of the cave where a fire pit had been carved into the rock, large enough for wolves to rest in, and it was being prepared and lit. Black stones ringed it, etched faintly with sigils worn by weather and time. He lay down in the snow, tail curling around his flank, but already feeling warmer.

He had heard of the Black Priests. The stories said they were neither witch nor wolf but something older, keepers of the silence between territories. When necromancy hunts had burned across the lands nine hundred years ago, it was the Black Priests who had decided which ruins were destroyed and which were sealed. They guarded the mountains where ancient rites had once been performed. They did not answer to crown, Blood, nor Covenant something older because they were the strongest and the wisest, always watching. They answered to balance.

It was said they buried their dead standing upright, facing the sunrise. They could walk between shadows and command the snow itself to harden like stone. If you heard chanting within these caves, you should leave immediately and never speak of it.

What was said, and what was true, Lateo had learned often did not mean the same thing.

Lateo watched the black-robed sentinel as snow began to fall again, thick and silent. The fire was warm now, and he was comfortable. He suspected what he had heard was true; no one, not even a fellow wolf, had the kind of strength the guard had shown him. If Tara was truly Tane's friend, then the world was far more complicated than he had believed when it came to Sator. It was not until sunrise, after he had slept long and deeply in the warmth of the fire, that any progress was made upon his task.

A smaller figure appeared, and Lateo shifted into his human form.

"Tara?"

Chapter Fifteen

“Indeed. Tane has never sent a friend before. Is the world ending, perhaps? Necromancy?” Tara’s voice was mythic, uncertain in its age. He looked at her bronzed skin and glowing tattoos. She was beautiful, then he scowled at the guard, who moved aside.

“Yes,” Lateo answered simply.

She smiled slowly and guided him inside. Symbols from the crown of her bald head down either side of her face and neck. Lateo was impressed. He could read only a few of the markings, and all of them carried a warning.

“We have been watching. You may tell your Princess and Tane that. Closely. We know who brings the darkness. It is not yet reason enough for us to leave our caves.” She slowed.

“However... it is not nothing.”

She reached toward a pile and handed him one of the grey cloaks they wore with a nod. This one bore no markings. Lateo accepted the gesture and pulled it around his shoulders, surprised at how well it fit.

“Keep it,” she said. “It will be more useful than you think.”

It was a great kindness to gift a wolf clothing. He ran his fingers along the soft, warm grey wool. It would sit well beneath his royal leather, hidden. “Thank you.”

“You are Blood Prince,” she said evenly. “You come in a dark era, when prophecy stirs. We all do what we can so that some may survive what comes.”

“You said you know of the necromancy but cannot act. Why?”

“A vow of one hundred souls was the bargain struck with those below. It is over a thousand years old. Ancient Lycans and witches agreed that one hundred souls must be lost before we intervene. Not enough to claim the mountains, but enough to prove refusal to handle the problem. We are only at thirty-nine souls now.”

She continued patiently explaining, “That is not nearly enough. Still, as more power is sought, more souls will be demanded. If the rocks read true, it will be our time again.”

“Then know this,” Lateo said firmly.

“All princes and princesses of both Rubicondus and Stator stand behind you, born and blooded alike.”

“It is of little comfort,” she replied. “And it is your failure that concerns us, not your newfound unity.”

“Our failure?” Lateo stopped. Firelight shifted along the dark corridor walls. “We are trying to stop it.”

“Are you?” she asked calmly. “From where we stand, you are studying it. Watching it. Doing very little to end it.”

Lateo exhaled. “We are hunting it. Tane sent me to ask questions. Perhaps answers the historians have forgotten.”

“Such as how one creates a blight. And how it may be undone.”

“Yes. Such as that exactly.”

She turned left, then right, silently guiding him through the tunnels until they reached a round wooden door. She pushed it open. Inside was a home, brightly lit, holding a bold, wide-open, yet warm invitation.

She took both cloaks from him, the grey gift and the royal leather, setting them aside. The chairs and tables were carved from wood and stone, softened with the smoothest cushions Lateo had ever touched. He pressed one lightly then hugged it, and smelled deeply.

Tara watched him take in the space. She prepared tea and laid out vegetables, sauces, fruits, nuts, cheese, and dried meats. She avoided meat herself, but kept her stores varied for guests.

Lateo studied the walls.

Paintings of grey-cloaked figures climbing mountains. Others crossing prairie lands. Their faces never shown, only hoods raised. One wall displayed ceremonial weapons; another, training versions carved from wood. Armor lay stacked nearby, forged from a seamless, shining material he had never seen. No stitching. No joints.

He ran his hand across it. Smooth. Cold. Intricately etched.

The bedroom beyond was framed by four carved tree-posts, layered in blankets and pillows of many colors.

“It is far greater than my quarters,” he said quietly. “Mine holds no trace of me. I shall change that. In case you ever visit.”

“Shall we?” she gestured to the table. “Tea and conversation. You asked how a blight is made, and how it is removed.”

They sat, and Lateo gave all his concentration to listening.

“You see,” she began, pouring fruit and honey tea, “it requires more than one witch or wizard. Three to begin. Always in threes. Three a human. A witch or wizard. A Lycan. The ratios continue in their ceremonies; they sacrifice one of each in numbers of three, six, nine and twelve. The numbers may rise into the thousands as rituals grow.”

Lateo stiffened. They had been searching for one practitioner, not thinking a wolf and a human would aid such madness, or that they had already been doing so. They knew even less now than before, despite somehow knowing more.

“How is it undone?”

“You sacrifice them. At the site of creation, if possible, thus undoing the blight itself. At least one of the creators must fall there; it is best if all 3 do, as each is connected to a site of power. Otherwise, you must destroy all that rose in response. Harpies, goblins and necromancers themselves. Blight spreads, it is seeking a dark and close friend in the eternal end. That which is born from blight is near unspeakable even to my kind. Each reach for power demands more life. It does not end cleanly or swiftly, but rather resembles a war, then suddenly falls to ash and history.”

Lateo sipped the tea. Warmth settled through him. For the first time in weeks, he felt he was somewhere by choice, around someone he was enjoying getting to know. His life had been filled with so many changes. He checked around her quarters once more, then back to her with a smile.

Leaning back, he thought about what she had said. He tasted the jerky, smoked sweet wood layered with spice and nearly closed his eyes, it was so good. His senses heightened with pleasure, not spellcraft. He swallowed carefully.

“You have more questions,” she prompted.

“Yes. Why was Stator allowed to keep their ancient sites if you know that is where the Blight comes from, and where it has to be destroyed, why was it not?”

“Flumen and Stator refused, Ager and Rubicondus insisted and thus destroyed the foul magic beneath them. Golden light does not fully touch those lands as it does the Ager and the Redwood, as you call them. Magic is harder even for the Phalians in these places. Sharper. Less obedient in the Flumen and Stator territories, always lurking and seeking darkness, remains ever seeking, as the saying goes.”

That was true; even their forests and waters were simply darker. There was a bright abundance, unnatural, coming from the land and plants in Ager and Rubicondus. An era of Golden light was upon them for over a thousand years, and it showed.

“We suspect one person,” Lateo continued. “The Covenant King of Stator. His need for control. His rapid aging. It took Fides and Princess Kaelis eight months to find the sites and investigate the blackened grass. Still no proof it is him, outside his royal guard is protecting it to the death.”

“As I said,” Tara replied dryly. “Much looking. Very little doing.”

“We are unsure how to proceed. That is why I am here. We don’t know what to do, but we have found it.”

She picked up a small date and chewed softly and swallowed, “We cannot step beyond our laws. Not until one hundred souls are taken.”

“It is Stator,” Lateo pressed. “They could justify your presence; it is Rubicondus they can come up with an ancient, forgotten ceremony to honor an allegiance we should openly be supporting once again, though perhaps long forgotten by many. Ager as well could join us.”

“They cannot,” she said. “Although we may have spies who watch and learn, we cannot participate in your world, Blood Prince. We have many laws. We keep restraint upon our power, which, as you know, is considerable.”

“He didn’t break a sweat,” Lateo said of the guard outside the entrance. “I didn’t see him move. Not even a breath out of place as I was flung farther than I knew I could fly.

The fire was kind, and the sleep much needed as is this food, I am remiss not to say thank you and how impressive it all was sooner.”

Tara said nothing for a long while.

He had offered to have Tane or Fides lie for her. That could work, with a royal seal and a very cunning excuse; it was not doing nothing. Still, it was not what she wanted, which was to hunt the necromancers down. Nor was she content to remain locked away doing quests of lore as she was now.

Taking a deep breath, she looked to Lateo. “Your bloodline is old, but you seem ill-equipped toward this negotiation as a royal.”

“I am not of an old bloodline,” Lateo corrected her. “I am of no bloodline.”

She seemed genuinely surprised by this and sniffed him several times. Standing, she stepped closer and inhaled again deeply. She smelled like smoke and oil, and Lateo took in a deeper breath as she passed him.

“Do I need to bathe?” he asked seriously. He had run and slept; perhaps it was unpleasant.

“You are Stator,” she said, studying him. His scent, his height, his jaw, his hair, those eyes had been painted a thousand times by her people in red and black blood, “Royal Stator.”

“I am not,” he assured her, honestly, his blood was weird, but it wasn’t royal and different Lycans bleed different colors. Tara was confused for a moment, but she measured his sincerity and decided perhaps she was uncovering a secret not meant to be spoken.

“Very well, if you insist,” she said, touching his shoulder as she passed. He didn’t flinch.

“We have hot springs. I can show you later if allowed, they are magic for sore muscles and raising mental awareness.” She began removing one of her outer robes as she walked into another chamber of the cave and motioned for him to follow her. It was then Prince Lateo realized he had been brought in the back door and was now walking out the front one she held open.

Chapter Sixteen

Before Lateo were sweeping rows of rising doors and courtyard walls. Feast covered tables lined the open spaces, and marbled pools held flowing water that fell from openings carved into the stone above. Greenery and sudden warmth filled his senses; the scent of exotic plants overwhelmed him, the heat was not stifling but thick and heavy in a way he had never known, and it was moist.

Lateo had read about jungles, but had never stood inside anything that might resemble one. It was as though day was shining, but he knew not from where. His breath caught in the warm air, and he smiled. It was new. She was new. And for the first time in several weeks, Lateo was enjoying new things: being a Blood Prince had privileges, and seeing the inside of the Black Priests' mountain was a very satisfying experience. He had grown up happy. Something about the last three weeks of his life had pressed that happiness beneath the surface, but it was moving forward now as he did through the door.

He used to think about fields and rivers all day, paths to run faster, new moves to try against his Old Master, arts of cooking and medicine to learn, discovery of hidden places to nap in his wolf form. None of that mattered now. Little of it had prepared him for what he was doing.

Politics. A skill Lateo had never needed to practice, and Swede had not educated him on.

Each summer, the young wolves of the territories came to his Master's house, and for three months, he would spar among them, live beside them, share his food and his Master. Few were known to him in sense of friends or care, but his power now resonated louder than he had the heart to examine. Tara.

She had power, though Lateo did not know what kind. It poured from her copper skin like molten lava in the dark desert of Stator. It was the power he wished he had carried in presence and silence a long time ago. Fewer would test him. Words would be chosen more carefully; he had already chosen his with care around her.

He wondered, briefly, whether power was allowed to ask power such questions.

He was startled when he found a massive man before him, a scent of ancient wolf rising from him. It was so old that even as Lateo drew a deeper breath in his shadow, he could not name it.

Ancient, he supposed. Like the deeper redwood trees older than the mountains.

“Unkind thing to think, son,” the Blood King of the Mountains smiled. “I am not that old. A few hundred years at best. Fewer at worst, I suppose. No matter.” His gaze shifted. “What are you doing here, Tara?”

Tara’s father, who had seen the young prince’s thoughts, a gesture she had not mentioned they could do, as she rather enjoyed his thoughts of home and her.

That question could be taken two ways: her presence here, as she was meant to be elsewhere, on a lore quest. And her presence with Lateo, as though she had convinced him to come, granted her agency if he had agreed to what her father called her ‘overstated paranoia.’

“Well, Princess?” King Terra sighed and crossed his arms, watching her avoid the answer.

“I was away,” she said calmly. “Then a runner informed me that Prince Lateo of Rubicondus was at the back entrance, awaiting me personally to bring him in on the word of my friend Tane. So I returned and did just that. Fed him quickly. We are in the process of walking toward you.”

She closed the door behind her with a smile. The King narrowed his eyes as he watched her disapprovingly.

“I will go seek the answer to your question, Father,” she added softly, bowing before stepping back, closing the door. It was, in fact, an honest answer; she had returned immediately for a new prince who had reached out to her personally, and he appreciated her not lying to him about it.

The King turned back to Lateo with a broad smile. “I am overjoyed on all the days for you to arrive.

The answer to a prophecy arriving at such a moment as the sky is eclipsed after a blood moon is indeed splendid. Shall we proceed, son?"

"Son?" Lateo blinked in confusion.

"I smell who you are, The Forbidden Stator, and I must say from my sense of you, splendid is the day you became a prince of a foreign land. Auspicious in fact, prophetic. You see," the King stopped and wondered how much Lateo may have known. He glanced back at his daughter's door and then began to walk with Lateo through the Royal courtyard. "All Blood are my sons. I am the last of the first War Wolves, that size, you have sometimes 4500% larger than our ancestors. In my day, wolves truly were pups, not even Lycan. Now I didn't see the last war; I'm a few hundred years shy of that."

"Ancient," Lateo said aloud, realizing he was between 700 and 800 years old.

"I only have a few of their powers, not enough to claim to be the same in being. More ruin than anything.

759 is not ancient, it is not young, so you see all Blood is my son,” he stopped and put his hands on his upper arm in a gesture of family, not friend. “I am proud of you, Stator. You have grown wise and patient. This is unlike your kind, it is rare.”

Lateo frowned. People here kept saying that.

“Now you come with me, and we walk into prophecy.”

“How old is Princess Tara?” Lateo was thinking she was in her early twenties.

“Older than she should be for her behavior recently,” the King said of his favorite daughter. “You need not worry about her; she will be questing for quite some time.”

“Maybe I will run into her again,” Lateo said with a smile. He had liked her more than he wanted to admit, not just as a power; she was beautiful.

“You may,” the King said, consenting to the interaction.

He realized Lateo lacked the subtlety to understand the conversation they were having, royal but very uneducated, which made him able to blend. Yet, he would build as well, the King acknowledged to himself.

“You know prophecy swirls around us. Today is a very important day, the last of the First Wolves, and the forbidden son of Stator, on voting day, no less, everyone is here.”

“In what way, what do you mean by vote?” Lateo asked, recalling around the room the King's mention of it before. As they entered a Royal chamber, Lateo felt very underdressed in the grey robe.

The King led him to the center of the room with rows of seating so high that Lateo had never seen a true colosseum before. These were the ancients who had built the Keeps. He had no idea the Black Priests had so much myth about them; it was near whisper at this point, but far more of them than he knew existed.

“Please step here,” the King pointed to a golden plate on the ground.

Lateo did, and the room gasped. He looked to the woman who appeared on his right and the man he recognized as the last Blood King of Stator on his left. His eyes widened as the King began to speak; so Lateo listened to the legend of himself unfold among a world of silent strangers.

“Prophecy is present among us. I bring you the Blood Prince of Rubicondus, the foretold Son of Stator that would reign from the Great Northern Wood. Why are you here, prince?” the King asked with confidence, trusting in prophecy even more than free will in the moment which it presented itself.

“We are tracking Necromancy, we need your aid in destroying its hold upon our lands. I come on behalf of all the Princes and the Princess of Stator and Rubicondus.”

The King agreed; it was more than he could dream of, and he was glad Tara was not here to see her plan unfold so well. She needed to learn to be more humble. Perhaps chasing a river down a mountain would aid her in this task, perhaps only make her worse. The King sighed as the murmuring died down.

“So it was foretold.”

The room was whispers that flowed higher than the sun in the sky. So many whispers made Lateo feel uncomfortable.

“Who is the woman?” Lateo asked the King as quietly as he could.

“The Last Queen of the Flumen Covenant, her sister killed her at the birth of her son, who was said to be a 1 in a thousand, the son of the Blood King of Stator, her killer now has the throne,” the King told him, holding everything except the thinnest of truth back, still he held back.

“My mother was a Covenant Queen,” Lateo looked to her for the first time, finally knowing who she was.

He could finally see himself now, as he was between them; he could see where his face and hands came from. It was a powerful moment; this place brought them upon him, showing his line. It was not rogue; he was Swede's grandson.

“Help us,” Lateo said honestly to the whispers of his task and why he was there.

“Help us destroy all that is left, in every land we stand with the Princes of Stator, all of them. We will war with you, but don’t leave us when aid is required. We are your children, are we not?” Lateo asked them as the whispers quieted, and many sat, and several clearly agreed.

The King needed not say anything; the prophecy had said the Stator of the North Wood would come and ask for help not once or even twice, but three times. During a lunar eclipse, after the sky ran red with a blood moon, the last of the first wolves would hear his plea and agree.

So the prophecy had been true, though the Stator had no war upon his door, he would start such a war that the Great Mountains would shake and tremble with it, no wood would be safe for the time of the second Dark Age would begin for them all, when such a man came to them in peace seeking war.

Looking at Lateo, he was not disappointed in the lack of treachery and cruelty that led to it. He did not seize the crown; it was thrust upon him unknowingly.

Prophecy doesn't have to be miserable, the King thought to himself as he marveled around to the High Council, as all of their fears appeared and yet none of them was true.

"So as it was foretold," the Spokesman rang out in the empty colosseum, and the faces sneered, others shook their head no and gave jeers of 'no' that were loudly heard. "So it will be that we give you aid."

"Thank you," Lateo bowed as he had been taught, and the crowd seemed to whisper even louder, and new shouts came.

"So it has begun," the King calmly spoke to Lateo, seeking to remove him from the spectacle he naturally created. The Stator would bow before them, and they would know he was The One.

Tara was the one foretold to aid him, the son and daughter of 1000 tries were destined to lead them into the Age of Light. However, the darkness was upon them, and what they needed to overcome it had presented itself.

The great kings of old would die, and the King suspected that meant himself.

It was all as time had said it would be, prophecy was ever moving and always present, he reminded himself.

“Let us go dine with our own,” the King said, patting Lateo on the back and leading him back down the hallway. “When we come back, the council will have decided how much help, when and where, let them decide and bribe amongst themselves.”

Chapter Seventeen

Lateo stopped walking, and so the King stopped as well; the procession waited. Lateo's eyes had fallen upon a map. You could see the four territories and the five great rivers, but there was so much more. Massive mountains lined the edges of what was just a large piece of land, among many other larger pieces. He reached out and could not comprehend at first. "This is real?"

"It is."

"You do not need to worry past the mountains. The seas are filled with the most dangerous and vile of monsters; others even boil. Those lands have their own burdens and worries, and they will not seek out yours. They mean nothing to us who live here. I am sure they have their own Lycans and witches, but worry not about them. Only Parhana is your home. That is what this land is called in the ancient tongue, Parhana."

“Parhana,” Lateo said, shaking his head. He stepped back and looked around.

“Territories seem so small when you look at them,” he saw dozens of lands, some bigger, some smaller, different shapes and types. Lateo took a long moment to examine each one, and the King would correctly pronounce them when his hands ran over them.

“Shall we continue towards the dining hall?” The King offered his arm, pointing in the direction he wanted the young prince to go after he stepped back.

Lateo looked behind him.

The procession had stopped, and all were waiting, not walking in front of him or the King. He followed him in quiet repose, glancing back at the map several times. He saw heads leaning together, and although he could pick up murmuring, he heard no words he could manage to understand.

“You seemed to read my thoughts earlier when we first met. I was thinking about the scent of your age.”

“You think rather loudly and in great color; it is an undisciplined mind that is so easily available.”

“How would I become disciplined and unavailable?” Lateo asked him honestly, and the king put an arm around his shoulder. “That will take time together, but I can gladly teach it to you should you wish to master the art of Occlumency. Tane was a great student; I am confident you can be even greater.”

“I do wish to master this, and likely other arts you have I perhaps do not know or understand.”

“Very un-Stator of you, I must say you remind me of the Great King Ghost, his curiosity had him spend many decades among our people and mountains, we still talk about him near daily.”

Chapter Eighteen

Tane smiled at the Princess as she added more wood she had gathered and chopped to the fire. He knew she was an adept; she could have magicked the flame, but she did not.

Instead, she toiled and insisted on doing so, refusing to allow Tane to help. She put herbs on all the wooden pieces, and soon a fire lit, but the smell he had never known was sweet and bright; no magic was used, still it was magic to him.

He understood she was human in ways witches and wizards were traditionally not. The only time he smelled such fires was when the humans were traveling, and never so close as to scent them in their beginnings. Shaking his head, knowing what they were going to find, he still said nothing of the sort to her regarding what he already knew, it was the Covenant King of Stator.

“Do you suspect we will make it back to the castle in time to meet him?” Tane asked her.

“Does it matter?” she asked seriously, as figures approached. Tane recognized the footsteps of humans.

“It is Ghost Wolf. His tribe is sacred to us and always welcome around a Rubicondus fire. I placed special herbs to call him and let him know I was here.”

“You interact with humans?” Tane said, surprised, having never considered the idea, humans were nomadic tribes, people.

They strictly stuck to the same routes they had for a thousand years, one hundred kilometers this way or that, but never more or less. Never so close they could warm themselves around a witch or Lycan’s fire. He stiffened, their smell offensive and their lack of clothing bothersome in the temperatures. Painted white over their bodies, their long hair and loincloths marked what he gathered was a uniform, spears in their hands.

“You don’t,” she winked at him, knowing he was racist about many things, and should recover kindness in its place. As she gave an example to him, Kaelis spoke some strange language that resembled nothing in a modern tongue, and the approaching humans responded in kind and sat around the fire. Several of them made ape and animal sounds as they settled, laughing as they saw Tane’s nose wrinkle.

“Knock it off,” Kaelis said to them, teasing him for thinking they were strange. “This is the fastest wolf of our time, legend does you honor by being here, for he has won in every territory against every wolf that would summon him to run.”

She was informing them of the seriousness of the situation, and so their human Prince, Ghost Wolf of Human, raised his hand.

They stopped and became serious by nature. Kaelis was rarely serious among them, so friendship was always found when they saw her.

To see her in Stator, so far away and yet close to them, with only a Stator Captain and no royal guard, had been a delight, and curiosity at the same time.

A human had spotted them; he ran to Ghost Wolf to tell him the news, and so he had been traveling most of the day to see them and to find her fire.

His party began to undo pouches of meat and fruit, in quiet nods and respect shown in their ways, and Kaelis smiled. “Thank you.”

“It is our honor to be among the Fastest of the Wolves,” Ghost Wolf said in the Stator tongue.

Humans spoke all four territories’ native languages, and the common language among them, plus their own. An adaptable and intelligent species, content to wander in peace through the woods in great meditation and prayer.

So it was with this Ghost tribe, at least; perhaps not all humans were the same, Tane considered, having not met any others. These Ghosts were rumored and legend for as long as Stator had been.

“It is my honor to meet you all as well. Rare do we of Stator get to be so close.”

“I hear we smell,” Ghost Wolf said, tossing him some smoked meat.

“It could be said,” Tane agreed, slowly getting used to the sweat- and earth-filled scent. “A unique scent.”

“Why are you here, Kaelis of Covenant?” Ghost Wolf asked her.

“Why venture so far from home, with a stranger no less? I could have taken you, had you asked, walked you through the wonders of three lands you may have missed while you rode here.”

Kaelis was patient with his flirting, and she did enjoy it, as he had shown her many great sights known only to humans, waterfalls and sunsets throughout their friendship.

Ghost Wolf moved with the arch of the land well and loved her more than he could love any woman. He cut into a deep red passion fruit and handed her half. She shook her head no, raising it as though it were a toast. He took a bite; his eyes carried the same hunger he had the last time he had seen her.

Tane narrowed his eyes. It was no way to look at a princess, he decided, and cleared his throat.

“We are investigating the grass and the dirt.” Tane drew Ghost Wolf’s attention and watched them all look to him seriously as Ghost Wolf swallowed the bite he had taken.

“You wanna go thata way,” Ghost Wolf said, his accent suddenly foreign as he pointed up the side of the hill. “Thata way, and keep walken. Three large trees. You will come to whatta seek. Do not touch it. Do not smell it. It will rot your mind and wither your soul. You disappear, poof, vanish, and are gone no more,” his strange accent and cadence different than when he spoke to Kaelis.

Kaelis looked to him. “Vanish how?”

“I do not know. These ways are foreign even to our old ones. Soul is gone, the name is no more, the freedom broken. They walk towards something different and do not walk like men or women. They limp like broken monsters towards a task.”

Tane was taken aback. It sounded like a child’s myth or lore. He watched Kaelis, who was absorbing every word, and so took the moment seriously.

“I will not go with you there. I will wait by your fire if you wish,” he said to Kaelis with a smile and leaned closer to her. “You always build the most beautiful flames, the brightest lights, and the sweetest smell. It is magic in our ways, you know.”

“It is not,” she said, having gathered and chopped the wood herself, knowing no magic went into it. “It is just your way.”

“It is,” he said, taking another bite. He smiled at Tane. “It is strange, no? A Stator Captain and a Rubicondus Princess. Strange and unheard of traveling among the human parts.”

Tane rolled his eyes. He did not need gossip about Stator. Each time one of their wolves or witches met with them, there were centuries’ worth of talk. He frowned, thinking of the old rumors he had heard growing up.

“You need not speak of us here.”

“We humans, we are not so cunning as your kind. We do not keep secrets. Our lives are not so long we can afford to have them,” Ghost Wolf said, putting his hand on his heart and bowing his head in the form of a promise.

“We have met the fastest of the wolves. It is my honor to carry such legend and lore back to my people. We need not speak of the dark spots. Less known of them, the better, but Kaelis is loved among us, a Ghost Princess of our tribe.”

“Indeed,” Tane agreed to the terms of the situation and saw Kaelis frown at him.

She did that often with Tane, too; it meant later she would explain when he failed to ask her about it and would.

Looking at the jerky and back, Tane gave a deep smile, “This is very good. May I ask for another?”

Ghost Wolf untied a small pouch from his belt. He tossed it to Tane.

“You should come seek us out. We can do a market for you. I am a human of many markets.”

Tane opened the bag. It held different dried meats. “I could use my own market,” he admitted to the offer of smuggling and watched as Ghost Wolf gave a hand gesture that affirmed it. The Great Market of Tane must be built.

“Thank you.”

“Friends,” Ghost Wolf said, as though he had solved Kaelis’

problem that Tane had created by not liking him.

“You would,” Kaelis said to them both and smirked. Ghost Wolf was having a very different conversation with her than Tane at the same time; it was a showing off of cunning, and usually she enjoyed the display of wit.

This time, however, it was Tane, and she didn’t like him making a quiet fool of him.

Then she thought of the Stator market; she had read about the chaos they brought over the Red Moon Ceremony.

Stator, could simply have an honest market; that would be fewer bribes, fewer of this way of things. They had a market based on privilege, bribes, and secrecy. The Rubicondus had an economy based on human trade with many different tribes, and was transparent about all of them.

“Yes,” Ghost Wolf answered her accusation and finished off the red passion fruit before tossing the pit into the fire for good luck. “I am funny, so it is.”

Tane liked them, and the longer he chewed, the more he realized an alliance with the Ghosts would be advantageous as a Blood Prince. He could flood the market with new foods and spices.

This would be a step towards winning his loyalty with the people, his people of Stator. The thought sank in for a few moments. He looked to Kaelis and spoke deeply in a kind tone that Ghost Wolf recognized as passion. "Thank you for introducing me to your friends."

Kaeli's eyes glistened, "They are your friends as well, Tane."

"I see now," Ghost Wolf sighed.

He had wanted to be of romantic interest to her since they first met several years ago. She never took him seriously; he noticed she had not bitten into her fruit, so he took it from her.

"I shall continue as I have before," he said, and his camp erupted into laughter. It was the same as saying he should have to pleasure himself on the matter later, as she would not, so the roar was great among their warriors as to the position he found himself in.

Kaelis said nothing; she just shook her head and stood up, putting more wood on the fire. She did not have time for romance; she never had. She learned the signs of it being offered, Luna and others were constantly coaching her on the ways of Lycans, humans, and her own kin. Still, as she sat down again, and her eyes fell to Tane, he was unreasonably handsome. He looked at her with curiosity, something Kaelis valued above all else in the living.

Her mind drifted back to him standing in the window, sunlight streaming in over his wet body as he held a towel. He was obsessed with Luke; the word 'love' was not even enough to describe his adoration for his Stallion, for a foreigner to take such honor and understand it with such sacred care.

Kaelis watched as he quietly talked to the human next to him, showing him his leather gloves and handing another his flask.

“You think loudly says the Great Wolf King,” Ghost had moved quietly next to Kaelis. “You think on old wars he says, of times men were not kin. Even ghosts can see your thinking.”

“I do,” Kaelis replied. It was always strange having a ghost talk to her; she knew, as did anyone who met Ghost Wolf, he was indeed haunted by the Greatest of Stators Blood Kings. The soul of the king lived, somehow, and had chosen a human to connect through.

“He laughs, he says you will sway this way and that only to end up right where you are, and yet you are worried you will go somewhere.”

“Where am I exactly,” she asked him and Ghost Wolf laughed loudly surprising the quieter camp.

“You are with friends,” he said in a tone louder than the conversation they were having. “That is where you shall end as well. Fewer of us, and more of us will be, but we will be.”

Kaelis took that as she won't die, but that doesn't mean war, and the blight was not upon them. She stood and bowed to Ghost Wolf, “It was a miss to not keep with tradition.”

He stood and bowed back, “Princess.”

“Great Blood King,” she said with humbled honor. Tane watched her, then the two sat down.

The human had a strange mist and wind about him; it was unnatural, Tane was certain. He had heard the rumor; everyone in Stator had. It was a rumor, not based on mythic fact, but on human mischief. Not being a man who believed in ghosts, Tane realized for the first time, did not mean that ghosts did not exist.

It was said that the Great Blood King spent too much time in Black Priest Mountains, and when he died, his soul could not move on. He had learned too much and always been spotted standing in the woods or walking down a hallway.

It became a myth. Until a few summers ago, when a human prince had said, "The Ghost Wolf came to him," and now he walked with him as man and friend, he had not been seen since. Stator thought he simply used the legend to gain power successfully.

His mind wandered back to his and Kaelis' conversation as they rode through Ager that day on their way to the Stator forest.

“I had heard about it and went to meet him, so I traveled to take back something that was his.”

“So you just believed this human right away?”

“Yes, he had sent a runner to request an item. Neither this item nor this location was known to anyone, not even the historian in the Keep. When we followed the directions, it was at the location, and the item was as described. So we retrieved it, and I brought it to him. We have been friends since.”

The fields of Ager had been smooth to ride over, and the meadow bright and filled with a spring warmth; the day had been beautiful.

Tane had looked at her, golden hair matching the sun-dried grass of the vast meadow. Flowers around them, and time it was pleasant..

“What was it he wanted?”

“A toy, he had lost in boyhood and simply forgotten to get back. A ball, leather-bound and well-kept, wrapped in an old cloth that prevented time from touching it. A child’s treasure.”

“Just the ball, he did not ask for the magic cloth.”

“I did not keep what was not mine to keep,” Kaelis said of the Stator tradition that she only gave him what he had exactly spoken of.

“Shame that can change a kingdom's power forever,” Tane said to her, disappointed in the fact that she gave such a powerful object to humans.

He was considering making a raid for it, but no such thing had been done with the Ghost Tribe.

Even among humans, they were considered the very best of their kind, the wisest of all; myths and lore spoke deeply into the four territories.

So Ghost Wolf had not seemed too unfamiliar to their path.

That is all they had said on the matter as their conversation wandered to the pond nearby and rested themselves and the horses.

Tane's eyes scanned the fire at her, then met hers. She never pulled away; it always made him curious. What was she looking for? Her mind was turning; she was bright and clever. He wished they were alone like last night; they had been closer then, and the fire smaller. He watched her yawn again and give a soft smile.

Tane leaned back and pulled up his large, heavy cloak, then opened it to his clean cape, "Come here," he said to her.

The humans in the crowd all let out an "oooooo."

Standing up, Kaelis smiled and came towards him. Last night, he had wrapped his arm around her, and she had leaned her head against his shoulder and slept, warm and close to him. She sat on the ground and curled herself up as she had the night before; his heavy cloak fell over her quietly as he breathed in her scent.

Ghost Wolf tossed the second pit of the passion fruit into the fire, and several of his men softly chuckled.

Underneath the cloak, Tane wrapped his other arm around her, and she nuzzled closer to his neck. Closing his eyes, he sighed. The humans could stay or go; he didn't care, as they both drifted off to sleep. It had been nearly two days for him, and his heart rate slowed dramatically at the warmth and scent of her. Even his wolf was tired.

Ghost Wolf stood up.

"They shall end up friends as they are now, be patient," The Great King spoke with wise knowing. "She does not love only Stator, and he only loves Stator."

"You have reminded me many times, Great King, she was never mine to love, and her love always belonged to someone else, long before I met her."

"I remind you, because it is true."

Ghost Wolf and his men began to silently move out, leaving several pouches of treasures in a fine, large shoulder sack for Tane, but taking the gloves and canteen with them.

Chapter Nineteen

“I have never been summoned by a Lycan who was not a Royal.”
The Blood King of Rubicondus turned to his old schoolmaster,
Swede.

“In many ways, that is still true. I am the lost King of Stator.
Listen so you understand the weight of history upon all of us.”
Swede narrowed his eyes and pointed to a chair next to his own.

“I am the one who fled after the Halfmoon Slaughter, which I led
against my son for marrying the incumbent, Covenant Queen of
Flumen, on her coronation day this happened. The next night, my
son had beaten me in battle, and sore I left, I came to shore here.
Nine moons later, my grandson Lateo was born, and my territory
was overthrown with the Civil War of the People, a fat, useless
Queen made Blood and the slow but steady rise of my other
grandsons.”

The Blood King knew; it was a recent and treacherous episode in
Stator's history. He understood the last civil war well. He had
thought the king and heirs were killed; rumor had abounded of
Fides, but nothing was truly known, so he had been told. This
was making many pieces fall into place for him, so he sat down
quietly and listened as he would to any king who spoke.

The Covenant King had known some of this for over two decades now; Swede was his close mentor in many things, including leadership.

Swede had taught him to be generous and willing to compromise for what was best for all the people. So, as his brother and counterpart in rule discovered the truth about the world he thought he knew so well, the Covenant King remained still and silent, knowing his every move was being watched for surprise, and he would bare honestly and show none.

It came down to things that the Covenant King wondered if his Blood would forgive, for knowingly forcing a prophecy of darkness in the hope of daylight.

It was not going to be a secret now. It was going to be choices, and he was only half of them; there were so many more choices the Blood King would not discover until much later.

“So you see, this situation claims more heirs than you knew,” Swede explained of Tane.

“Time of Emperor,” The Blood King stood up in rage. “You want me to accept this? Your word for it? Bleed. Prove to me you are the King of Lost Stator. Prove to me you, the wisest of us all, were still this foolish and hopeful. Prove it!” he roared, his wolf voice filling the room.

Standing, Swede lifted his sleeve and sighed. If that were all, it would take to convince the Blood King of the truth; it was simple enough. Cutting into his veins, the red-and-black blood mix of Royal Stator poured out after several minutes had passed, and the Blood King took a step back.

“How could you?” the Blood King seethed to the Covenant.

“Arrogance, I suppose,” Swede replied as the Covenant King healed him.

“Do not pretend prophecy revolved around the fate of your pride.” The Covenant King smiled at his friend. “It does not, nor does it mine; it is just the time we are in.”

“It shall damn us, ruin us. It was avoidable, you could have killed him, and it would not have been a time at all.”

“Twas not my right to kill my kin,” Swede replied honestly, wrapping his arm seriously around the Blood King for a moment.

“It was not avoidable. I tried. I gave up an entire territory to try to raise a war against my son's heart, which I lost, and he was killed later on. Still, Lateo was born, so then I raised him ignorant and rogue to make sure. Now here we are.” He took his arm off; he could not escape his own defeat and had tried, thus making him wise.

“It is too dramatic for forgiveness,” the Blood King continued, speaking of them making lore. “And you knew, Covenant, and still you doubt your daughter, you lock her up in historic shame for what you know prophecy has proclaimed as true?”

“I did not know about Lateo being his blood; that is a surprise. I did know that Swede was the former King of Stator, as did your father and mine, who were kings when they decided to let him stay. Immigration to a new land, as you know, is quite difficult, more in Rubicondus than Stator.”

The Blood King paced now, hands behind his back, his eyes narrowing as he looked back and forth between the two men in the room.

He did not want to ask why they had not told him; it went back decades between the three of them. Swede had always chosen Covenant, even as a Lycan.

He always taught them more, spent four months with their youth and only three with the Lycans. He had always favored witchcraft, and it was said he slept with them as well, though the Blood King faulted no wolf for that privilege.

“So is he one of the one in a thousand tries that is destined to come twice before the darkness descends?”

“He is,” Swede said without apology.

His son had, in fact, loved a Flumen Covenant Queen and while it was rare for them to have children, it was possible. One in every thousand, legend would say.

He had fallen in order to stop a dark age from coming, warred against his own blood, and caused civil war to erupt among the people.

Deep down, Swede accepted the blight was because he had not stayed, he had not ruled, he had not killed his kin and moved on, King.

“And he is where now?” the Blood King demanded. “With the Black Priest, forbidden,” he seethed to the ways of even royalty visiting them without decree from both Blood and Covenant. “Sent by a Stator Captain from my understanding, with no care to our laws or decrees as Kings.”

Swede and the King of the Covenant looked to one another.

They, as well, were thrown back to the Blood King’s childhood; the same tone and storm of emotion would be displayed, with sharper facts given.

Neither would answer a question; the Blood King appreciated their silence and honesty in the matter.

“I see,” he scoffed and walked over to the dark fireplace.

He glared at the Covenant, who waved his hand, and roaring flames filled the hearth with deep light, magic fires where his favorite, the way the heat curled and moved forward with more ferocity than nature's burn would present. He always loved to the painting hanging above of him and the Covenant King young in ways and reign.

Walking over to the nearby table, he poured himself a brandy and loudly put the glass lid back onto the decanter in a way that made clear he was not offering and did not wish to be disturbed while thinking. He leaned against the fireplace with one hand and began to take several long drinks.

This changed everything. Was their army enough? The Dark Ages caused famine. Humans would die out. Trees could grow sick, rivers weaken and dry. Did Rubicondus have what it needed to survive such a fateful age?

“I tried to stop it,” Swede told him of raising Lateo. “In as many ways as I could without killing kin.”

“Yet did you? It was not Ager you ran to,” the Blood King spat.

“It was the land of his foretold.”

Swede knew this was going to be the hardest part to swallow for the Rubicondus Blood King.

“If you recall, I had warred with them quietly and Flumen, so there would have been no safety there for either of us in Ager as well.”

“It was one of many failing decisions you made. My father warned me about you. Yet he sent me to you every summer, despite your abysmal failures in life and legacy, I see why you favor the Covenant King more than me now; he, too, is a failure.”

“That is not necessary,” the Covenant King stepped between them. “I have avoided the Blight. I have punished my daughter into a history that will be remembered because of this time when I kept her locked under ward and wolf, I live with this shame. Now that we know all, we cannot fail; it was unintentional. I did not know Lateo was his grandson. If these are the signs in the times, the tapestry is woven.”

“You knew he was a fallen King and you used to say so as boys, taunting me even then with secrets, I see,” the Blood King seethed once more and drank the rest of the glass.

Seth walked over and set it down.

“I ought to leave you with your prince and retire. Let Artur go to the meadows and move on with the legacy of history rather than carry this burden of ruin and knowing.”

“It is not preferred that you would not want to miss the war, you are made for war, it is your happiest days when you wake with battle to conduct. I have seen it,” Swede said, holding to his belief that this Blood King was the finest in his line.

He would not say so, but reasonableness could often overcome, even in youth. He sighed instead and pointed to the decanter and glass. “If you are finished, I would like one.”

The Blood King chuckled, then turned around and made his old master a drink.

Walking over to him, Swede was sitting on the ledge of the chair between the back and the thick arm, resting on the edge like it was the same throne he had walked away from casually.

Seth would love a war with Stator to turn the soft and meek population of Rubicondus into a well-honed fighting force. He had great dreams but thought them kings and centuries away in all regards.

“Your Majesty.”

Swede heard him mumble as he handed him the glass and chuckled with a nod.

“Sire,” Swede replied with a pat on the shoulder. It was a long-kept secret, one bound to come out.

Swede carried many shadows about that night and time. Some about how it came about. How Lateo’s mother ran to the Rubicondus, had been chased down the river by the Stator Covenant King, how she begged him in her dying breath to take his grandson, then swam out casting a final spell to the awaiting army and was slaughtered on the water before his eyes.

He took a long drink. Yes, many details that would never make it to the surface would change too many times, and there were too many memories.

Still, revenge came in its own time, and the clock was ticking closer towards Swedes becoming a reality against the Flumen.

Chapter Twenty

Kaelis sat upon his lap as the sun rose, fully dressed but closer than she had ever been to him in many ways.

“It could be chaos or clean Tane.”

“Clean is best, and Luna would insist.” he leaned his lips up towards her, and she leaned down and kissed him.

It wasn't her first kiss or his, it was their's an he pulled her towards him closer, she kissed him harder. He believed her; he was following her to start a war.

She kissed his cheek softly, then pulled back. She wanted to lick his jaw and kiss down his neck; all of that would require time. He stopped his hands on her waist and smiled, nodding and pulling himself back with a deep breath of shared restraint.

“Taken,” Tane told her of their intimacies should anyone ask, it Lycan for only with one another would they lie, and she whispered back.

“Taken.”

“They are going to think,” he stopped for a moment as her scent left his mind and his role returned. “They are going to think I knew I would be a prince and made this action. I did not; I made this action because you are Kaelis, and I am Tane.”

Kaelis stood and realized what he meant, and she stepped back and gave a bow. “I had no idea Blood Prince was to be.” She kissed his cheek. “Thank you for telling me.”

Tane watched with a wave of her hand as the fire was gone. She looked around for his gloves as his hands now felt the bitter frost of the morning cold.

He frowned and looked to the human sack full of goods. “Little stealing sukazas.”

Laughing softly, she took his hand and cast a warmth spell with her own. Tane felt warm, bath warm. “It will last through the cold morning and wear off before the afternoon sun is fully risen.”

“You never ask,” Tane said of the way she used magic on him.

“In Rubicondus I do not need to ask to comfort. Like you lifting something heavy, I should not have to ask a Lycan for strength, and you should not have to ask for warmth when my friends so clearly stole from you.”

“No, you legally have to ask before any spell is cast, and explain the entire process of what it will do and how it will end in Stator.”

“What is the punishment for not?” she asked, getting up on her horse, Knight. She watched him mount Luke and sneer.

“We kill you,” he said with a nod to their ways, and she was shocked. “Rumors of Stator are true, especially the wolves' freedom.”

“I am never asking you, Tane,” she said with a queen's confidence, “I am a Covenant Rubicondus Princess, and I delight in the care of wolves, humans, and my own kind alike.”

“I will get accustomed to it with you then,” he told her of the matter, enjoying the warmth he had on such a cold morning. It was unnatural, it felt magical and calming. “Your care that is.”

“Did Luke tell you to say that it sounds like his sort of charming?” she teased him and rode faster towards the three trees Ghost Wolf had told them of last night.

“No, I was wise before him,” Tane answered after her, and Luke gained great speed passing them and pressing up to the crest of the ridge, then down the other side.

Through a land of twisted branches and trees, it grew in spirals and angles. A strange place indeed, Stator seemed to Kalies. She had traveled the main roads; this was the first time she had been allowed into the wood.

It was dark, and the earth was cold. It was strange for her, nothing glowing, a lack of light and great shadow surrounded them.

“Why do you not let in the light with Stator?”

“I am asking myself that right now, and plan on letting it. It didn’t used to be this dark,” he explained to her honestly.

“The shadow is increasing. When I was a boy, you could wander without bending, and much light climbed through. This growth is unnatural,” he pointed to how the trees had jetted out as though to block the light from the sun intentionally.

“I wonder if it is because of blight or something else?”

“I am confident Lateo will come back with the answers Fides seeks, and then I can return with your letter for him.”

“And become a Blood Prince to Blood King Fides.”

Tane stopped and thought about that, “I am not sure why they chose me, I can see now, it was planned long before I was aware of it.”

“So it is with Stator no.”

He chuckled, pressing forward, “So it is.”

Chapter Twenty One

Lateo stood next to King Terra, facing the long, cold run back to Rubicondus. “I see why the Great King spent so much time here.”

“My son, you are always welcome, prophecy does you good legend here as it did him in many ways.”

Transforming Lateo began to run down the path into the snow, and the King stood there until he was out of sight.

Terra looked to the guard. “152 years old and you slid him to the edge, I hear Jagger.”

“Ya, I was disappointed to, heavy and good grip that one. Shame is on me for missing the extra point, not getting him off the ledge to the pile of snow below.”

The king laughed and walked back inside his procession, waiting for him. In many ways, he led a tedious life. Time had made it more interesting this past day.

“Sire, the river to the east is still overflowing.”

The cave was well lit, and he turned into the side entrance and began walking past the royal court's home doors.

“Let nature overflow.”

“Sire,” the attendant said to him honestly. “It is forming a new lake. In Stator.”

The king stopped and studied the map. That was a strange route for a river to take. “Send Tara, she is to negotiate with the mountain.”

“She will be excited about that, thank you sire, thank you.”

Delivering good news was one of his favorite tasks, along with any that let him leave the mountain.

The king walked on through a garden pass and over a bridge with water running beneath it, and yet another voice found him. It had been nice having Lateo here. Silence followed them; the weight of history, always respected, brought great silence, even among his kind.

“Sire,” the voice spoke a second time, interrupting his thoughts at a higher pitch.

He stopped and looked to the law writer, stepping forward three paces to where the water was louder between them.

“This will not do,” he said, handing the king the agreement he had written up himself between him and Lateo over dinner. “It’s blood binding, sir. With a Stator.”

“With a Blood Prince of the Rubicondus.”

“Barely not a Stator legend speaking honestly, sire.”

“Barely,” the King replied with force, and the law writer took a step back and lowered his head with a sigh. “Blood’s been spilled upon that parchment; it is done and agreed upon, and now it is law.”

“So this will act as your historical record, am I to understand you correctly?” the law writer asked him honestly, and the King, turning around, began to walk to the other side of the bridge with a gruff, he said. “Yes.”

“It leaves us open to mercenary behavior, sire,” he began to tell him of the terms as the King continued to walk away. “By law, now we have to give them a combat priest for every death, he mentioned this at dinner, and now we have to do it.”

“YES,” The King shouted to him across the bridge and over the water, in a tone that said, *step not closer*.

The king walked on as he listened to the worst possible outcomes for every one of his sentences from other members of his procession.

Finally, after no reply, the law writer passed down a hallway, and he clutched the parchment of a few words and great deeds.

He would have to transcribe it, then send a runner to Rubicondus to make the official declaration through documentation.

A scrolled agreement that had not been seen in over a thousand years. Since the last Blight, he shook his head and sighed as it was so vague and so completely damning to their own kind. He ran his hands through his silver hair and walked into the law cavern where his friend sat.

“Nope,” Usip replied, “if it hasn’t changed, we will not put it on record.”

“It stands,” the law writer said softly and set it on the desk, leaving the room as Usip bent over the historically bad idea.

It said too much in few words, his father and grandfather were on the council and had cautioned him at breakfast this morning, the dangers of such open-ended friendship in legal writing.

Historically, unnecessary conversation took place on paper, in Blood. The rumors would be unending as Usip stood up. He hated this document. First contact with anyone outside the mountain in a thousand years.

Binding a King's oath to a prince's intentions and needs over time. It read like a whim and held armies at its beckon call. Rubicondus was indeed a land of light; they were young-ones. Underdeveloped, living in the old because they had nothing better in their time. Lateo had proven this over and over through his ignorance of their ways and of the most basic skills and knowledge.

It was giving a child and an ancient army, and Usip groaned out loud, a sound not heard in hundreds of years rang in the cavern, and they knew, the King had decided war with the young ones was upon them, and they were doomed in its destruction.

Usip sat back down. He wanted to get the object off his desk as soon as possible.

Pulling out his seal of Legecy, he pressed it to the parchment, and it was no longer an order; it was obedience that the law demanded.

Chapter Twenty Two

Nephi laughed loudly as one of the wolves fell into the water.

“Well, it was a good idea, I see why you tried it.”

Watching him swim back to shore and turn into a man again, he climbed down from the tree.

“The branches have thickness and bend,” he explained, pointing to the canopy. “In Rubicondus, you have firm tree limbs, and they can hold you far over the river with no bend. Agre does not. So you have to approach the land, waters, and even the trees differently. One thing that doesn’t change is the stars you see them the same as wolf and man, I am told. Let them be something you hold important, like the air and water that both bodies need. I am just an old wizard seems to me it is wise to test which works wear.”

Nephi patted the young man on the shoulder, making sure the others found a deep lesson in the one's mistake.

“So meet back here tonight, and we will do some river charting, test your eyes against the stars as wolves, not just men.”

“Yes, Master Nephi,” they said in unison, gathering their items and climbing down from the trees around them, about thirty in all. Smart, these wolves took to the rivers in a way that made him wonder if they had a connection in the past.

He had decided to teach them and the witches and wizards separately. Two different sets of gifted students, each with their own challenges and metaphors.

“Master Nephi,” a guard said, walking up and handing him parchment.

“Thank you,” taking it, Nephi looked at the handwriting he had not seen since he was a young man. He stopped for a moment and closed his eyes; it was the Covenant Queen of Flumen summoning him to questioning. Sighing, there was no avoiding it now.

He had been foolish to think he could just disappear from the river and life. “I think we need to go on a field trip, further out.

Write to my wife,” Nephi told the guard. “Tell her, I love her.”

The recruits watched the guard.

“Sir,” he said, confused.

“Move out, through the banks with no tracks or sound,” he said to them, each stepping into a depth where footsteps would not be detected and heading towards the great river, and within moments, they disappeared from sight and sound.

The guard named Ethor stood there, wrote on a piece of paper, "Master Nephi loves you," then put it in an envelope and shook his head. He had been a royal dispatcher for three years.

Young in the profession when you consider someone like the Master of Duties. He had run from one end of all for kingdoms to the other.

Always with others' notes, messages, things the Keep did not want intercepted, which could happen when traveling abroad. He couldn't disappear like that, and had good need and use of it for several years now.

Ethor turned into a wolf and was running, contemplating what he would have to do to gain entry into Master Nephis's classroom, when he ran across the new Blood Prince, Lateo, running.

He joined him in formation, and after a few hours, several other wolves joined in. As the prince led the way, his size and speed were setting new standards for training. He turned sharper and hunted through the soft rises and dips for even more speed, gaining on them by leaps and great bounds several times, causing other wolves to crash or fall over. Still, the majority pressed on and stayed with him.

Keeping up with him was not just a pleasure; it was a workout. So, unto the castle gates, several dozen wolves had joined in racing up the fields, each maintaining their v-pack formation, moving closer and further apart in unison to increase and decrease their speed.

It made those Flumen on the river stop, and gape with awe as their eyes hunted through the trees a great wall of wolves. They had not seen such a formation of Rubicondus wolves in all of their time as Flumen.

As they left the bank and wandered towards the field outside the castle, those leaving the ceremony on the main road stopped and stared with great awe and wonder, reaching the gate with enormous speed as the straight fields and hard earth grew steeper, the ground shaking with their speed. It had never been seen by Ager or Stator before. Never felt as it did now shaking through their carts and bones, the wolves of Rubicondus.

The prince changed and walked through in human form, saying nothing to anyone; he passed through the gates with a nod.

The other wolves each went their own way. Some had joined just to run with the new Blood Prince, some had dispatches and messages, each with their own motivation, but the people stared and talked for several moments before they continued walking.

Ethor changed into his man body; the lines inside were far shorter, and the traditional guards were back on duty. Things were slowing down and going back to normal.

Walking towards the back of the Keep, he found the kitchens and Everest, whom he handed a note to.

Her hands began to tremble, and she looked up at him with sad eyes, rushing to catch her collapsing form of tears. He sighed. This job, he thought to himself as he set her upon a stool and walked out of the kitchen, her heaving sobs onto the large wooden table echoing behind him.

Luna had been gathering items for the families' quarters when she heard Everest and walked over. Everest stood up and dried her eyes. "Luna, are your needs met?"

"Are yours met is real the question?"

"Of course, attendant," she slid the note into her apron and walked back to the stove, where she began to fuss over things in quieter sobs.

Luna was not going to pry publicly; clearly, her presence unsettled things. Still, she was on her way out of the kitchen when she saw Blood Prince Lateo finally return to the Keep.

He stopped.

“Where is she?” Lateo asked Luna as she handed him some warm cookies from a large basket. He bit into them, his voice softened, “Wise one, Luna and good day.”

“Well, you are her Royal Guard,” Luna replied flatly, pretending to be disappointed.

“In the castle,” he sighed and reached into the basket, where she smacked his hand away, and he laughed at her.

She handed him three more. “With Captain Tane, in her room.”

Lateo shrugged to her as though this was not news, “well that is where I left them, should anyone ask, at least she obeyed.”

“Nice of you to wander off and not tell us,” she shook her head, dismissing things she wanted nothing to do with. “Impractical spectacle of choices she has been making lately.”

Luna sighed and thought about how Kaelis and Tane had looked at each other over a formal dinner last night, with 23 people, and they only looked at each other.

“Thousands of words spoken between silence,” one had said.

“Clearly, there is no other power in the room,” another added.

“Choices were made,” Lateo was eating the last cookie with a smile and interrupting whatever thoughts she had turned to dwelling on.

Walking towards his own room for a long bath first. Closing the door, he decided he liked the red and orange coloring with hints of blue that Tara’s royal quarters had. It was the rising sun in the mountains' colors.

He would add blankets and pillows, large carpets, more light and a sitting room, even finding paintings of great mountains and anyone with a grey cloak. The sitting room would be where he hung his weapons and had sparring matches. As he walked towards his bath, he got undressed and thought about Tara.

He had not been given much time alone, even less to think; the last few days had been sunk in learning. He rubbed his arms with soap, gazed into the fire and rinsed himself off.

The castle had perks, he decided, resting his forearms on the ledge and his feet still unable to touch the bottom. The mountain springs were never this deep or as clean. Sinking, he let the warmth overcome him.

Chapter Twenty Three

Word ran through the Keep and took only till dawn to reach the words of Blood King Fides chamber. He smiled, Fides thought about his best friend, and he took no time in finding the pleasures Rubicondus had to offer him.

That was the sign he needed; he might not have all the details, but the truth was coming with Tane's return. For now, he must have found great agreement in things; it had been a full week, and he had not yet sent word of his return, his rumored passions for the princess were even discussed among the human and their Ghost Wolf.

Fides wanted Tane brought to power because it would allow them to start a true civil war if needed. He didn't know the Covenant Kings' reach into the ranks allowed him to keep his secrets, including necromancy, as all men where there men, Fides was finding out one question at a time. Not revealing intentions, just practicing occlumency a rare trait for wolves, but royalty often breed them.

Rumors of kissing in the hallway, of seeing spending waking and sleeping moments, had reached him of Tane and Princess Kaelis, as the reports detailed about their romance.

He owed Lehi a fine bottle for winning that bet. Fides had thought it would take longer; Lehi had said it would take one meeting, Tane had a type, and so did Kaelis.

“Neither of them are a shy person,” he had said, placing an expensive bottle down as his bet.

He turned to the door and sighed, “Bring the next one in.”

The vetting process had been intense, and Fides was surprised to see the Covenant King moving towards him.

“I can answer any questions you have about any part of Stator. Why are you frightening the guards as though some secrets exist between us?” he said kindly and closed the door behind him. “We are brothers now in land and all things.”

Fides couldn’t mention what he suspected. “What things would that be concerning loyalty and land. Secret dispatches, elite units, human experiments.”

“Those are not experiments, that is a magical ritual and old Covenant business. It is an agreement between the Flumen and us, let it be a good agreement.”

“They are not your humans. Wolves are always next in these matters.”

“We would never, you would devour us, and even I know this is true,” he said of the restraint wolves had to rule with the wizards and witches at all. Two chomps and such a presence would be gone. Balance had been found still, murder happened in the lowest and highest places of the lands.

Fides had no reason not to give in to this right now; he had nothing but suspicion. “I want Lehi to witness Tane's rights.”

“Seems fitting the honor is ours to be invited for this, and I know he will gladly accept. Now, can you stop terrorizing the guards?”

“I am just getting to know them.”

The Covenant King knew Fides was young in mind, old in Blood. He didn't want any of that coming to the surface, so he smiled.

“Well, consider food and drink then, as well as loyalty checks, breed paranoia, so they should be avoided.”

“I will,” Fides said, not considering it for a moment and wanting that paranoia to fester.

“Next.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Kaelis fumed in wrath, “I will be Queen by nightfall.”

Artur sat between Tane and Lateo, his head in his hands, his thoughts heavy.

“You promised,” Kaelis said to him as she leaned against the fire.

“I have not said no,” Artur pointed out, his innocence against her tone of accusation. “I am not enthusiastic. War is here, and the Captain of the Stator Guard is in our planning room. My father has wanted this for a quarter of a century: to unite the Bloods and turn on Stator Covenant, which starts the first official Blood and Covenant war in Rubicondus history. One of us needs to feel the weight of what we have decided. History declared me the burden of it.”

“To be fair, he is to be crowned Blood Prince upon his return; he is not just some Captain of the Guard. I do care, that is why I will be queen, that is why we will go to war, that is why we must bring the light to Stator.”

Tane groaned quietly. There was a better way to have mentioned that. He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Sister,” Artur said to her patiently. “War causes loss and should never be rushed; we have so much to prepare for. And our people. Ager people.”

“I am going to your father. I am telling him what I know, and he or we will go to my father, and see if he stands against the Blight or tries to remain ignorant of its gain and does nothing as the Black Priests accuse us of doing. Lateo describes in his report.”

Lateo did not like being brought into their dispute or into conversations about power.

“By tonight I will be Queen,” she said, and left the room, taking the stack of reports with her that had been bound into books. She handed them to a guard and said firmly, “Follow me. And no one else near me.”

It was with that order that, as the men came out of her room, they found themselves followed, and one guard said.

“We are to prevent your future contact with her until a time by which she says you may see her again or she seeks you out,” he said, the last part to Tane.

Artur groaned. It was her favorite order of the guards, and she had used it since they were kids. Whenever she was mad, she would keep them away from her. By royal decree, they could not come into what she considered her space.

There was little he could do. He was not against her, but to involve his father, who would war with the Stator on a whim, was dangerous to build wrath and fury in war.

“We are taking sides in what will be a Blood and Covenant civil war in Stator,” Howel said to Artur plainly.

“You better,” Tane replied firmly, and disliked his Taken giving such an order. “I am returning to Stator. Do you have anything to say to the Blood King, princes?”

The three of them walked toward another hallway.

Tane fumed inside, and it was a fuming that only love could bring on. He normally would not care about the whims of a royal.

She had banished him from her presence until she chose a time otherwise. Silently, he waited in a room filled with parchment maps and reports spread across long tables, for the princes' messages were being written out.

He looked at this report and that for useful intelligence, but it was all things he already understood about them.

He would send her a message by not taking one back, and that could be where they were left. Nodding, he placed the two letters in his leather running pouch and walked out of the Keep without a word.

“Luke!” he shouted. Within moments, Luke came at a fast run, and Tane slid on top of him smoothly.

“To Stator Keep.”

Luke began to run faster, and the guards scrambled to get out of the way. From a window, Kaelis saw him leave and knew she had made a mistake. She had not considered him, or them, as she gave the order, and it would cost her some of his forgiveness.

“I love you, Tane!” she shouted in the voice of storm and wind, a spell so great that it washed over an image of them embracing in the skies, a painting unfolding with her voice ringing his name seven times.

Even Luke slowed, and Tane turned toward the sound as everyone around him stopped as well, with the great wind carrying the message farther each time until the two figures kissed. Then the sky faded back into the blue sunny day. Tane laughed. She had said it seven times, indicating that she was Taken.

“Yah,” he said to Luke, who broke into a run again.

Kaelis continued up the steps. It would get her some forgiveness, perhaps not all, but enough. His heart should not be left sore from her hands.

Chapter Twenty Five

Climbing the steps, she saw the Blood King sitting on the edge of a chair, reading something. She had not interrupted him in years.

Sighing, she considered her crown. "I dismiss everyone," she said aloud, and the guards left.

Seth looked up to her, startled; he had just seen her love for Tane stretch across the sky of Rubicondus; it was a very powerful and beautiful spell. He had heard of it but never watched it in sound and moving art before.

"Is it impossible to put down?" Kaelis asked him seriously as she walked towards him with the books of reports.

"It is a plot to put a Stator on our throne, and it is completed and was successful in many ways."

"I have heard," she said of Lateo's birth-line.

Lateo had told them all when he arrived, even Tane was startled, but showed less skepticism than Artur.

“Do you have time for other plots to put me on the throne this evening?”

The Blood King set down the book of reports he was reading and took the one she offered him without a word. Opening to the first page, he began to read about the reports on the Blight, including her own and what happened the night the royal guard of Stator was killed by Lateo.

In silence, he kept reading until she handed him the second book and a drink.

“You should have come to me with this. I would have aided and protected you and our people.”

He took both and then continued reading, reminded for a moment of them as different times and people.

He continued to understand the refusal of the Covenant King to acknowledge the signs and symptoms that she had presented over the last several months, and her detailed reports went into the many attempts she had made to her father. Shaking his head now, he growled. This time, the room shook slightly before he stopped.

Kaelis waited patiently and was there to hand him the third book, written in Lateo's hand, with a very fine penmanship. It detailed his last three days in the Black Priest mountains and all he had learned regarding the Blight therein.

The Blood King noted he would have to compliment him on his human hand; it was a true art to write like a royal, and he had done so very well. Master Swede, he thought to himself with a sigh, as to the way things were and why. Finishing his drink and the book, he stood up and looked over to her.

"My Queen," he said with a deep and solemn formality, and gave her the one bow he would give her in acknowledgment of her succession to the throne, in both her lifetime and his.

History only allowed one between them, and she had given hers long ago, in equal privacy and divulging of secrets.

“You have been warning him for four or five moons, have you not? Now the ancients accuse us of allowing it to fester.”

“Indeed, my King.”

Kaelis spoke quietly, almost in a whisper, and the Blood King came over to her.

“Let me have the pleasure of dethroning him,” he whispered back, as though a secret were held between them for the moments before it happened. “Please, let it be my words he remembers.”

“So history says it was you,” Kaelis agreed, and would wait for the news of her throning to reach her, spoken in an equal whisper to him.

The Blood King would not kill him, but betrayal had now taken root between them, with secrets.

She wondered if their friendship would survive as Kings and men. Knowing her father and his kindness by nature, she suspected his anger would fall at her feet more than his friend's.

“Do leave him as our King Father.”

“Generous.”

“He is kind and wise, although ignorant at times; he deserves the honor to still rule in some ways and raise our people.”

“Agreed,” the Blood King smiled as she sat down, and took up the King's Report he had been reading when she came in. “My Queen.”