

DEFY THE SUN

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FLECK

Swoon READS

SWOON READS
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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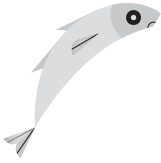
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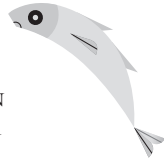
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FOR WADE—
BECAUSE YOU HATE FICTION
BUT LOVE ME SO MUCH YOU
READ MY BOOKS.
AD ASTRA.





CHAPTER 1

VEDA

It's been minutes.
Hours.

A day maybe.

Since I lay at the foot of the Coliseum altar, as all the world crumbled down around me.

Everything hurts.

My eyes are swollen.

My jaw is on fire.

My body broken.

My heart? It's not much more than a shell of something resembling a heart at this point. I do know it continues to beat because everything has its own throbbing pulse. Each thump pains me more than the one before.

My mind? A blur. Strange snippets of memories and nightmarish images haunt me day and night. I can't begin to pull reality from fantasy from dream.

All of that and the best I can do—the only thing keeping me sane—is run my tongue along the jagged tooth in my mouth. The one Arlen cracked with his boot.

It's sharp. Pricks my tongue with the point of a thorn. Draws a bit of blood.

It's a different sort of pain than the throbbing. It's the kind that stings up into my ears and reminds me I'm alive.

I'm alive.

I didn't die like Raevald wanted. I ruined his big finale. It's the only thing that almost, barely pulls the corners of my mouth upward.

My Offering was stalled by my fighting, then slowed by Nico, and ultimately hijacked by the Night.

The Night . . . my dear people.

The same ones who left me on the bloodstained gravel of the Coliseum floor as they dragged Nico away.

With an arrow through his back.

A different pain consumes me now. The worst kind. It's the one that has no cure. No amount of adjustment or consoling will quell it. This pain reaches from my toes to the top of my head and then down into the very deepest depths of my being.

But I can't get lost in those depths. Not now. Not anytime soon.

It's futile, but I try to shake my head. Toss the thoughts, the terrible pain out because if I dwell too much on Nico . . . that arrow . . . I'll fall down a horribly dark hole. I'm already surrounded by enough darkness—I can't take any more.

I have no idea where I am.

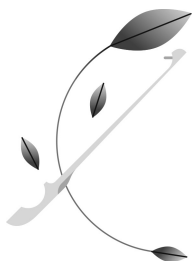
Possibly hell.

The ends of the earth where all is darkness.

I do know one thing: I will not die here.

I'm certain Raevald isn't too far away, and I refuse to give *him* the satisfaction of my death.





CHAPTER 2

VEDA



Days pass.
Some wounds heal.

I gain a semblance of time and space and realize where I am, how much time has passed.

Twelve days ago, Nico lay in my arms bleeding.

Dying.

An unforgiving arrow stuck out his back.

The Coliseum, all of Bellona, crashing down around us.

A mere twelve sunrises ago my hands were in his, and then they weren't.

Eleven days ago I woke up on fire.

I'm still surrounded by darkness, but instead of hiding behind the safety of swollen eyes, the black space squeezing in on me is now reality. Drowning and ever present.

The prison floor is cold and callous. Forever damp and smells a mix of mildew and straw. There's no window. Not even bars. No fresh air or sunlight or moonlight.

Nothing but four walls, a door, a small grate in the ground, and a single lamp. It's lit what I assume to be each morning and burns for six hours give or take. Once it goes out, the only light in my world comes in unpredictable flickers from a crack underneath the cell door. The space—a few

inches tall—is just wide enough for a meager tray of food to slide under. Twice daily—morning and night—I’m fed. Once daily—midday, I’ve convinced myself—I’m allowed to bathe. The time of day is arbitrary, I know this, but I’ve lost all concept of night and day. So even if I’m wrong, thinking there’s some structure to the endless hours brings me a stitch of comfort.

And every once in a while a cold gust snakes under that crack in the door. Then something—what I’ve come to refer to as *Death’s shadow*—shuffles its way across the floor in front of my cell like a broom. It clicks and swishes, breathes a deep sigh, and disappears as mysteriously as it arrived. I’m convinced it’s either the ghost of someone who met their untimely and gory end down here or, more likely, Death himself checking to see if I’m ready to take a journey.

The cell door unlocks. Creeps open.

Instinctively I scramble to the side, push my body against the equally cold, damp wall.

I don’t want to meet Death just yet.

A dim bucket attached to the same Imperi soldier who’s tended me since I awoke from darkness comes into view. All shadows, bright lights framing her form from behind, she enters like a dark apparition. The guard sets the bucket on the ground beside me. Cold water overwhelmingly scented of lemon and pine sloshes over the side.

When the dark silhouette turns to leave, I ask her the same thing I asked yesterday and the day before.

“What’s your name?” Gingerly, unsure of her reaction, I crawl forward just enough so the light from the hallway shines across my face. I need her to see me as human. As a girl and not a traitor. As a person and not the evil that is the Night.

But she stays still. Eyes on the door.

As I do every meeting, I give her a small measure of myself. “Each year, on the Night of Reckoning, I used to bake a loaf of sunrise bread for me and my grandfather. I’d layer the middle with candied lemons so when we



cut into it there was a lovely ribbon of bright yellow.” For the first time in forever, a smile makes its way to my face. It sends a wave of pain across my jaw but it’s no matter, because the memory is too sweet to spoil with agony. “Poppy would always try to gobble it all up in one sitting, but when he couldn’t, we’d cut it into slices and share it with the neighbors. Of course, not before he’d dig into it and pull several candied lemons out, hide them in a cupboard. Such a sneak. But he loved those sticky lemon slices.”

I expect her to ignore me, tuck her short, dark hair back behind her ear, and leave and lock the door behind her as she always does. But today she’s stopped. Stayed long enough to actually let me finish my story. This afternoon, she’s paused momentarily in her automatic actions. Halfway to the door, her back to me, she looks over her shoulder.

I chance moving an inch closer, making eye contact.

The soldier—an officer, I notice for the first time, or maybe she’s only now wearing her red sash—stares. There’s hate and anger in the way her eyes set on mine, unblinking, narrowed. But then, as she scans me up and down, her expression wavers. Softens for the briefest of moments. Curiosity? Pity? I can’t be sure.

“Your name?” I plead as if the slightest communication will somehow satiate me. “Please?”

She straightens her posture, lifting her chin slightly, adjusting her crimson sash. “Down here a bucket of clean, soapy water is worth its weight in gold.” She shakes her head as if disgusted. By my presence or the conditions I’m not quite sure. “Consider yourself lucky. The High Regent gave special orders for *you*. He wants you healthy and strong so you can face your punishment properly.” She lowers her gaze as if speaking to the bucket now. “Wash up.”

She then nods like she and the bucket have made an agreement and leaves without another look or word.

Damn it. I pushed too far. Got too greedy by asking her name. One step forward, two steps back.

It’s become my battle march, and it’s infuriatingly useless.



The thick, metal lock bolts shut with the sort of finality I've come to expect.

I glare at the door.

They want me healthy so I can die with dignity? I release a snort under my breath. As if that's some sort of consolation or comfort. Not that that's the point either. They'd never wish anything close to dignity for me. Not unless they're about to strip it away for the sake of cruelty.

Because I'm the enemy. Possibly their most prized prisoner, short of arresting the Sindaco himself, of course.

But that officer . . .

I can't quite figure her out. I've not had any contact save my meals—what I can only describe as pig slop, one step above fish bait—and my baths. It's then and only then she graces me with her company—a total of one to three minutes each time (I spent one full day counting the seconds, marking the minutes and then the hours with a hunk of gravel I found on the floor).

She'll return, but she won't say a word, only pick up the items, be sure I ate and cleaned myself. It's my job to put everything back where it was left. If I don't replace the tray or bucket respectively, I won't see my next meal or bath. And despite the bitter mash and grimy water and the cold silence of an Imperi soldier, I've found it's better than nothing at all.

I can tell by the way the lantern hanging in my cell dims that it's quickly drying out of oil and that, once again, I'll be locked in darkness.

I'd find it poetic, maybe even humorous, if I wasn't being driven mad by it. How, not too long ago, it was the night, the outside world after sunset, I feared. Anything indoors, light or dark, prison or home, meant safety.

Now, I'd do anything to be out there instead of in here.

The monsters live indoors.

Among us.

I'M NOT IN the prison below the Coliseum, of that I'm confident.

This one is quiet, as if I'm the only one down here. Or, at least, there



are very few of us. Maybe high-level prisoners? Ones they know others might try to get to, either to free us or kill us themselves.

I'm also fairly confident I'm underground, and I can't help but wonder: If I were strategic, might I figure out where in Bellona I am? Dig my way to one of the Night's tunnels? Get home?

Impossible, of course.

But I've got lots of time to muse and pray. Make wishes I know won't come true. Especially here in total blackness where my eyes play cruel tricks on my brain. Where shadows become ax-slinging executioners and the breeze that intermittently sneaks in tickles over my shoulders like mice skittering across my skin.

Sometimes I lie down next to the door and peek through the crack. There's never anything to see. Just a stone hallway. An hourglass on a small empty table. The soft flicker of light.

I now crave light like I used to crave sunrise flowers and candied lemons, Nico's dimple, Poppy's speckled hands, Dorian's sheepish grin. My goodness, how simple life seemed when sneaking around for mud beetles before morning bells was the scandal of the day.

Try as I might to avoid it, I think the words, see the unavoidable images and memories because everything's all wrong now. Poppy's gone, Nico might be dead, Dorian's fate is unknown, and I'm set to be executed any day now.

Even the sunrise flowers are long wilted and the mud beetles are hibernating from the harsh winter cold. There are no lemons to be candied.

It's silly, but somehow it's that last thought that sets my eyes watering and my nose stinging.

I'M CURLED UP in the corner, knees pulled to my chest, arms wrapped round my legs for warmth. My clothing's tattered, and there's not a blanket or scrap to warm me in sight.

No matter.



Everything down here is forever damp. The stone, the wood, my bare feet, even the thick fabric of my Night uniform jacket is always just wet to the touch. Enough to be torturous. Not enough to cause deathly illness.

I'm about to doze off for the I-don't-know-how-many-eth time when the *tap-tap* of heavy footsteps snaps me out of it. I sit straight up. On edge. Because those aren't the usual officer's boots. Hers make more of a *clap-clap* sound.

No, these are dressier. Fancier. Somehow harsher. Like a quick slice of a blade on stone.

If Death wore boots would he wear softer-soled ones like the officer's or have handcrafted wooden soles more like . . .

The unmistakable glow of a swinging lantern sends light beams to sway underneath my cell door.

I stand. Pad across the space to the far corner. Force my body flush with the wall.

A key jingles. The bolt squeals, then clicks. The door creaks open.

A thin sliver of light filters right down my face. I hold my hand over my brow as if gazing into the sun, squint to shield my sight but still try my damndest to make out who's entering.

Three taps of his boots, three steps inside my cell, is all it takes.

"Miss Adeline."

Raevald.

"My adviser told me not to bother . . . that you aren't worth my time, but . . ." He tilts his head downward, sets his dark eyes straight on mine. "I couldn't resist. I had to see for myself. Be sure we did it. And indeed we did. Finally we trapped the girl who keeps getting away." He nods. Smugly. Like he's oh-so-satisfied at the sight of me in a cage.

I force my eyes to focus through the still-blinding light, glare across the cramped, dark space.

He sneers. "I know it's only been a couple of weeks, but you've changed since we last spoke."



"Being kept like a wild animal will do that to a person." My voice is raspy, my throat so very dry. But the low tone works right now because it matches my loathing for the man.

He nods, shuts the door behind him, takes a few steps closer. "I suppose it would . . . Assuming the person wasn't wild to begin with."

Of course he knew it'd set me off, and, of course, I rise to the occasion by rushing right for him. Bare feet on stone. What I mean to be a quick, unexpected sprint is more a wobbly hop. I manage to shove his chest when, with one strong hand, he clasps my neck, bringing me to the ground.

Then he laughs. The bastard laughs like he's just heard the world's funniest joke. Perhaps that's what I am to him.

Just as the room begins spinning and stars burst before my eyes, he relents. I crumple to the floor.

"Tut, tut, tut . . .," he chides, holding the lamp right over my head so it shines down like a single ray of moonlight. "So tough. So strong. I hear they call you Lunalette? Bringer of revolution for the Night." Raevald releases another hearty laugh, gazing down at me. "Any minute now, yes? The Lunalette will rise!" He turns his mouth up into a wide simper.

"You're just pissed I've been right under your nose all these years. A Basso girl . . . The true heir . . . And you had *no* idea." I singsong the last part. Hell, maybe I have gone a bit wild.

He could kill me. I know this, and he probably will. But he's waiting for something, or I'd be dead by now. And while he waits for his perfect moment, I'm going to be sure to say all I need to say. For Poppy and Nico and Dorian. The Night. For my mother. For all those Basso who never had a chance. "You're *nothing* without the Night," I hiss.

Again he laughs. "Oh really?" He takes a small step back, hangs his lantern over the handle of the door, folds his arms across his chest. "Let's hear it then. How so?"

I sit up taller, don't dare take my eyes off him. Don't even think of blinking. "Without the version of the Night you've created, there's no fear.



And without fear, Bellonians will see through you, see deep down how powerless you are, and they'll turn on you." I struggle but manage to stand, take a step forward. "And that scares the shit out of you."

If what I said or my piercing stare affects him in any way, he doesn't show it. Instead, he completely ignores it.

"When your father was a child"—he smooths his red sash, utterly disinterested, as if he's talking about the weather outside—"he loved telling stories too. Always had an overactive imagination, head in the clouds. I should have known he'd be a lost cause as heir." He nods, smiles to himself, like there's some unspoken meaning there. "My son, your father, was never fit for this family or to be High Regent. I didn't see it coming—for that, I blame myself. But he made the choice. By betraying his class, his position, his god, and his family's legacy . . . for nothing. He relinquished everything. I'll never understand it."

"You'll never understand why he wanted peace for Basso? A better life for those in constant torment?"

"I'll never understand risking so much for so little." That's honest. "My son is no more. It was better he died than betray his Sun-given fate. I couldn't have him killed, but I did the second-best thing: I changed his story. Vincent Raevald was murdered by the Night, it's as true as the Sun rises each morning. That is his legacy. And I'll spend the rest of my days avenging his honor."

"Punishing those he chose—Basso, the Night—above being your heir, more like?"

He shrugs. "Depends who you ask. But only some opinions matter, and that, *Lunalette*, is true power." Turning toward the door, Raevald lifts the lantern back up, then glances over his shoulder.

"Speaking of power and heirs, here's a story for you to ponder, Veda." He opens the door but turns to face me, his body blocking the light of the hallway so he's just one large, dark silhouette. A blockade between this cell and freedom. But just when I'm happy I can't see his evil features, he lifts the lamp before his face. Leans forward for effect. "You will be sacrificed



in a most spectacular fashion. An Offering fit only for the Savior to the Night."

It's faint. Barely there, but I swear I see a shadow quickly move across the hall behind him. And I'm going to make sure whoever it is hears some of Raevald's truths.

"But why?" I say. "Why kill your granddaughter? Your own flesh and blood and the true heir to Bellona?" I inch forward. Work up a bit of emotion in my voice. "Isn't there some sort of deal we could make? A truce? Surely I have something you might need?" My eyes actually well up with tears. It's from hunger. Exhaustion. Fear. It has nothing to do with my grandfather. "We can work together. Fix everything that's gone wrong. We're family..." I swallow hard to force the word from my mouth. "Grandfather." It comes out along with a bit of warm bile in the back of my throat.

I've likely gone mad. It's possible that shadow was in my imagination, but I pray it's my guard. Of course I know trying to negotiate with Raevald is as good as making a deal with the devil himself.

But if I can only get that guard on my side...

If she could hear the High Regent say something—anything—that causes her doubt or, hell, even pity toward me, it will be worth it.

Raevald lifts the lantern to his face so every feature is both exaggerated and blurred. Through clenched teeth he says, "You are no granddaughter of mine. Traitor. Basso. *Filth*. Just like your mother. And that truth—that we have any ties—will die with you. Sink to the bottom of the Great Sea and rot." He reaches into his breast pocket, tosses something at me, slams the door, and locks the bolt.

The item is small, metal. It clicks and clanks before it slides across the floor. I'm not focusing on what he said, the man speaks in lies and half-truths. But I can't not search the darkness for what it was he so carelessly threw at me.

My knees are bare where my pants are long worn through, but I don't care. My skin scrapes and cuts against the cruel stone floor as I crawl along



my cell, being sure to cover each and every knob and crevice. I begin in the place I believe it bounced, only to move back toward the middle of the room until, finally, the tips of my fingers bump something small: a smooth, round disk.

The item gripped in my fist, I move quick as I can on all fours toward the crack underneath the door.

There, under the dim, golden flicker of the corridor light, I see it.

The thing I once feared more than anything.

An Imperi medallion: on one side, embossed in all its glory, shines the sun; on the other, the name, *Veda Adeline*.

It hits me.

I already knew it, but there's something about seeing it. Holding the coin in my hand. It makes it real.

I punch the door.

Stand and kick the thing until my toes and heels match my sliced-up knees.

"I hate you!" I scream, then melt back onto the floor. Hot, hopeless tears stream down my face. "I hate you," I sob.

I'm about to punch the door again when the *clap-clap* of boots quickly approaches.

I clutch the coin in my hand, ready to throw it at Raevald should he reenter. It's heavy and could do a bit of damage if aimed correctly.

I stand up. The door unlocks.

Not daring even the shallowest of breaths, I wait.

The door flings open, then shuts again.

Whoever it is, we're in this cell. In the dark. Together.

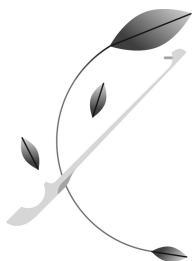
I listen.

Quick breathing, followed by a hushed, "Hello?"

The Imperi officer.

Thank the Moon.





CHAPTER 3

NICO



“Nico?”

My eyes are lead. I can’t imagine any circumstance where I’d be able to pry them open.

“Nico?”

Eyes still welded shut, I try lifting my neck.

No good. If my eyes are leaden, my head’s a pile of bricks.

I sense someone’s standing next to me. He sits and must have a lantern with him, because there’s the slightest illumination on the other side of my eyelids. The air is cool. Musty. I attempt lifting my arm.

No. Definitely not. A pained whine leaves my mouth as white-hot fire shoots from my shoulder blade straight through to my collarbone and back again.

“Shit—” I don’t mean to say it out loud, but the stab of pain jogs my memory, and images come piling back like a blizzard in the dead of night. I force my eyes open.

“Hey, man.” Dorian leans over me.

I want to punch him, but I can’t. I want to sit up, but that’s impossible. I search the room.

I’m in a cave.

Quickly noting my surroundings, I see a mural, one door, a curtain

hanging from the ceiling, a wooden stump with a canteen on it, and . . . I allow my fingers to feel beneath me . . . I'm lying on some kind of soft rug.

I glare back at Dorian.

"How much do you remember?" he asks.

"Enough." My stomach turns over and sinks simultaneously. I remember the Offering, Veda's head against the altar, an arrow in my back, Veda's eyes on mine, being dragged away. An explosion. Darkness. And waking up down here. "Is she . . ."

Dorian's sight veers from me to the floor. "We don't think so."

"Don't *think* so?"

He only shakes his head. "We're doing everything we can. *Everything*."

"Do more." I manage to lift my head, probably not enough for him to notice.

Dorian nods. And the way his eyes harden and his shoulders tense, it's plain to see he means it.

THREE DAYS PASS.

I've started marking them on the wall with a hunk of charcoal. Three single lines stand sentry to where I sleep like sad fence posts. But it feels less like I'm counting how long I've been down here and more like how many sleeps I've endured since I last saw Veda breathing.

"She's not who you think she is." Dorian's gnawing a sliver of dried, salted meat. It seems he's been assigned to me. At least until I heal. He's here between missions, during meals.

I'm finally able to sit up. Eat almost like normal. I take a bite of an apple, which is somehow both under ripened and bruised. I glare across the room at him. "I believe I know her pretty well."

He quirks an eyebrow. Like he has some grand news that's going to blow me right over.

We've been doing this thing where we both want control of the situation. Clearly, he's in control on several levels, there's no debating that.



But I'm fully aware they must need something from me or I'd be dead by now.

And he's fully aware I know this.

"Here." He hands me a fresh cup of tea. "You're gonna want this—it has a great way of both numbing and clarifying all at once."

I take a tentative sip.

Because, all right, Veda has definitely surprised me more than once the past few weeks.

But what exactly is he referring to? Her connection to the Night? What happened that evening she showed up at my house? What is Dorian's relationship with her?

I take another not-so-tentative sip.

"Veda's more than just a member of the Night. She's . . . special."

"Okay . . ."

"Well, more than special. That mural—" He gestures toward the mural of the Sun and moon painted on the cave wall. "It's not just art or something nice to look at. It's a story. Veda's story."

I stop mid-drink, looking at him over the rim of the metal cup.

He pauses. Takes a minute to knead the heels of his hands into his eyes, rake his fingers through his hair.

I set the cup on the ground. Stare. Impatiently wait for him to get on with it.

"I've been trying to figure out the easiest way to explain it. It's sort of a lot. I don't want to overwhelm you. Especially—"

"My Sun, just say it!"

This sets him off like I hope it will. He stands. Begins pacing across the cramped space. "Veda's the Sindaco's daughter. The Sindaco is Raeveld's long-lost and believed-to-be-dead son." I open my mouth to argue, tell him he's got it all wrong, but he continues before I can get a word out. "She's also this"—he marches toward the mural and points at the star that's shoved between the moon and the Sun—"Lunalette."

"Luna *what*?"



“Lunalette. It’s an ancient legend of ours. That one day a girl who is born of both the Moon and sun, one with a star marked upon her heart, will lead the Night to revolution against the Imperi.”

My jaw has gone slack, my brain spins in several different directions, and that pain in my back rears up on account of every muscle in my body tensing. “Let me get this straight . . .” I attempt sitting straighter but have to suck a deep breath in when my injury reminds me not to with an angry jolt. “Veda—*my Veda*—” Dorian’s eyes dart to mine. “Is the High Regent’s . . . granddaughter?” Dorian nods. My brain continues spinning. “That makes her . . .” I shake my head. “No . . .”

“Yes. The true heir of Bellona.”

I’m speechless. All this time . . . and I had no idea. “Did she know?”

“No. Well, she didn’t find out until I brought her down here. The truth slowly surfaced.” My stomach suddenly drops, which must show on my face, because he adds, “I’m sure she planned to tell you.”

I nod. “We haven’t seen much of each other since.” But then I remember. That last night we saw each other . . . What had she said that made me smile? She had two things, maybe a third, to tell me? But she didn’t get the chance. “My Sun.”

“Pretty much.”

“She should be heir. By lineage. By the laws of Bellona.” I’m nearly shouting.

“Well”—Dorian laughs under his breath—“I mean, it’s not like she’d be welcomed. We’re pretty sure Raevald had already put two and two together when he planned to have her executed. Not exactly a long-lost granddaughter’s welcome.”

“No . . . of course not. Had he known any earlier, the High Regent would have had her killed for simply sullyng his name. The family line tainted.”

He crosses his arms. “You Dogio really take the whole ‘keep it in the family’ thing seriously, eh?”



"Not all of us," I say through gritted teeth. Then something else occurs to me. "What about Veda's mother?"

"One of us. A spy. Killed by the Imperi not too long after Veda's birth."

I shake my head. If Raevald knows that's the case, that Veda's mother was not only Basso but a member of the Night, it is a miracle Veda's alive . . . assuming she still is. I force a deep breath, quickly move on. "And the other part?" I ask. "The . . . Lunalette?"

Dorian looks me up and down. "You think you can walk a few steps with my help?"

"My legs are fine. Walking isn't the problem, it's the getting-up part that makes me want to stab someone."

"Good thing you don't have any weapons then."

An airy laugh that surprises us both sneaks out of my mouth. "Indeed."

I agree to the help, and it takes us an excruciating amount of time to get me from sitting to standing, but I do it. No way I'd have been able to get there without his help. No idea how I'll ever sit back down, but I'll worry about that later.

My eyes sting from the pain—my back and chest are nothing but daggers. But I'm walking. Slowly. One foot in front of the other, each labored step a pile of needles traveling straight up my spine and to my injury. My muscles are weak, my senses dizzy from lack of movement and that damn tea. But I'm moving.

Dorian takes me out of the cave I've been in the past three days and helps me down a short distance through a tunnel. He pauses as we pass one particular cave entrance, the sign outside reads: SOLDIERS. But he keeps going, and I don't ask.

"There are other prisoners down here, yes?" I ask, and he nods. "Where?"

"There aren't many . . . Only a few Imperi soldiers we've captured during battles. They're on the other side of the Lower. In caves that have doors and locks."



“Why am I not there too?”

He eyes me like I should know the answer. And maybe I do. “You know you’re valuable. You’re a prisoner, but with . . . perks, I guess.”

Ah, yes. I know they need me. Or, at least, would like to have my support, the heir’s support. I’m about to press him further when he abruptly stops in front of a pile of candles. Above the candles is a photo. Her photo. Mementos. Letters. Countless blessings and prayers. All for “The Lunalette.” When I glance at Dorian, I catch more candles, more altars, a string of them lining the length of the tunnel . . . all for Veda, the Lunalette.

I want to drop to my knees, but the screaming in my back prevents it.

Instead, I focus in on one blessing in particular: a tiny glass fish. Then I spot another. And another.

And I know. Despite the jealousy, the envy burning its way between my ribs that Dorian was able to know Veda differently. In an entirely new light. Far beyond anything I’ve known. I shove all of that down. Now is not the time.

Because in this moment I know . . . he wants to find her, bring her back safe and sound as much as I do.

And that makes him my greatest ally down here.

FIVE HASH MARKS.

I’m feeling stronger, and for the first time I actually walk with Dorian to the cave where everyone eats.

The way there is fine—I’m more energized than I’ve felt since getting hurt, thrilled to be out of that tiny cave. It’s so exciting, I don’t even mind terribly that my hands are bound. I get it. I’m the enemy in their eyes. But I can’t worry over that because I’m so thrilled I can walk farther than the length of the tunnel outside my cave now.

My bliss is short lived.

Halfway through eating, my injury begins lightly throbbing. By the walk back, I’m having to use Dorian’s shoulder as a crutch. This tiny cave is a welcome sight.



The man waiting for me inside it is not.

The Sindaco stands quietly staring at the Sun and moon mural. When I enter, he turns and faces me.

“Ah, Nico! So glad to see you up and about.” He’s overly enthusiastic, clasping his hands in front of him.

“Thank you, sir. The walk there was much easier than the walk back.” Dorian helps me inside and unties my wrists. I make my way to the mat, sit down.

Striding to the stump that serves as a tabletop, the Sindaco pours a glass of water, hands it to me.

“Thank you,” I say.

He nods. “Dorian, you can carry on with your duties; I’ll keep Nico company for a few minutes and then let him rest.”

“Yes, sir.” Dorian gives his leader a lingering stare as he leaves but walks out without a word.

“Nico,” the Sindaco starts, moving the pitcher to the floor and taking a seat on the stump. “I need to apologize.”

“For what? You saved my life.”

“My soldiers did, yes. The nurse performed expert surgery.” His stare is piercing and doesn’t waver when he scuffs his short, graying hair with his hands. “I’m so very thrilled you’re alive and well. But that’s not what I’m referring to.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I mean to say, I need to apologize for . . .” He eyes the rope that formerly wrapped my wrists. “For that. If there was some other way, I’d see to it. For now, though, I have to show my people I’m not allowing you to come down here and take over or do as you please. While both Dorian and I and several others know you’re an ally, many refuse to see the heir of Bellona, future head of the Imperi—our enemy—as such.”

“I understand. I mean”—I give him a pointed look—“I don’t like being tied up, but I know why you feel the need to keep up such a charade.” I can’t help dig into the man a little. He’s not anyone I trust at the moment.



"Besides," I go on, my frustration getting the best of me, "Dorian's not too much of a brute about it." I shrug, but by the seriousness of his expression, it's clear my sarcasm is lost on him.

"I'm happy to hear that—that you understand. Although I'll be sure to commend Dorian on not being too harsh." I can't help but laugh under my breath, because there are times he lets me tie them myself and there are times he can be a total ass about it. "I also need to apologize for not coming sooner. First, to check on you, to introduce myself properly. But also to ask something of you." I lift my eyebrows at this information. "As if you haven't given enough, I know." He holds his hands up. "Just try to hear me out?"

"Of course."

"After what happened in the Coliseum . . . Veda nearly being executed, Raevald clearly testing you and then seeing with his own eyes how close you two still are . . . it's unlikely he'll be asking you back as heir."

I breathe a long sigh, notice my shoulders have slumped forward. I mean, I never really wanted the job, but something about knowing I've let so many people down throws my stomach into a steaming, swirling mess. "You're probably right."

"Dorian explained my past to you, yes?" I nod. "Good. Well, my father, the High Regent, doesn't take disloyalty lightly. Which brings me to my request." I stare, not blinking. I cannot begin to fathom what he could possibly ask of me that would require him to personally come to my cave while I'm still injured. "If you can't be heir of Bellona, please consider joining the Night. In a position of power, of course."

"What?"

"Like I said, I know Raevald. He is most definitely cold and brutal, evil in his own right, but he also happens to be an outstanding judge of character. Both good and bad, depending on what he's looking for. He can pick the great ones, and he's been known to choose the greatly horrible ones. But all of his greatest leaders have three things in common: loyalty, charisma, and a commanding presence. We need leaders here in the Night. Especially in this time of war. Please, Nico, will you join us?"



"I . . . What about Veda? Isn't she this Lunalette? Your legend?"

"Yes. Veda holds her own place. She is the muse of the Night. Our inspiration for a better world. But you—you could be our voice. Our battle cry."

"And Dorian?" Who is already his right-hand man.

"Dorian's a soldier." He clasps his hands in front of his waist and nods. "One of my best. And an expert at mission planning and rallying troop morale. I need him on the battlefield and behind the scenes. Besides . . ." He pulls his eyebrows down, lowers his tone. "While he's brilliant, Dorian is far too hotheaded and impulsive to lead in the way I'm seeking."

Join the Night . . . Veda had asked me to join once. When I said no she nearly drugged me. And then Dorian nearly drugged me. I instantly look to the Sindaco's hands, his pockets. Is there a syringe hiding beneath the shadows?

Though, I suppose, I'm here now, no point in forcing me to get anywhere.

I don't know what to say.

It would be the easy thing to join. I could go on missions and fight for Veda in the best way possible. Gain revenge on those who nearly killed her.

But my parents.

My duty.

"Please, Nico. We need you." And the way the Sindaco pleads, it's almost like he needs me to agree right here and now. Like he needs this too much. I can't help but wonder if there's something else pushing this sudden urgency.

"Why do you need to know right now?" I ask.

This seems to take him aback. "I . . . No. No rush. I mean, I'll leave the agreement here for you to mull over."

"Agreement?"

"Merely a formality. A treaty of sorts."

"Treaty?"

I stand, hold out my hand. Reluctantly, he gives me the thick paper.



Staring down at the words, hastily written out and then sealed with an official-looking stamp, it is indeed a treaty. Between the Night and the heir of Bellona.

“I thought you said I wasn’t heir of Bellona anymore.”

“Nico . . . it’s just for show. If the people of the Night and the people of Bellona both see you—heir of Bellona as far as they’re concerned—have officially taken the side of the Night, it would quite literally turn the tide of the war.”

“Yes, I understand that, but it’s deceptive. I refuse to deceive anyone, Night or Bellonian.”

“I see.” The disappointment on his face shows in his eyes, but the way his jaw tenses would suggest something more. Anger. “I apologize; this maybe wasn’t such a great idea after all.”

“Probably not.” This really angers him because he turns on his heels and leaves without another word.

I realize, reading over the treaty again, that the apple might not fall too far from the tree. Despite the fact that the Sindaco defected his position as heir to Bellona, for better or worse, it’s clear that he was influenced by the High Regent.

The Sindaco is most certainly his father’s son.

It just so happens that they’re enemies.

TWELVE HASH MARKS.

I go to sleep staring at them, wondering what went wrong, how I got here. How it’s possible so much time’s swallowed me up. And I greet the next day by adding another.

Like cruel scars, the charcoal marks stain the wall. A constant reminder of the early days I spent down here in and out of consciousness. Wounded and alone, I laid useless and bleeding in a makeshift hospital bed. After that, well, it’s not been any better. Not much more productive other than the grand, lined art adorning these walls the Sindaco and Dorian keep reminding me *isn’t prison, not really*.



Yet when I look around this cave all I see is confinement and time lost. Days spent not knowing whether Veda's alive or dead. Not being able to do a damn thing about it.

Twelve days and eleven nights in limbo.

I'm not in a cell—they keep reminding me of that—but I'm not any less confined than if I were in the cold, dank prison below the Coliseum. Still underground. Always under someone's watchful eye. Dirty. Tired. And the food's shit.

But who am I to complain?

My eyes find the ceiling where dimming lamplight flickers, licking the rock, giving it the look of being on fire. Thirteen days ago I'd have said the thought was preposterous. Completely outlandish.

Twelve days later, I've no doubt fires rage on the other side of that stone ceiling of mine.

War. Death. Chaos.

It's hell up there too.

I AWAKEN AS I have the past few days: to a small offering of fresh blueberry muffins and Bronwyn. It startled me the first day, but I've gotten used to her early morning visits and moreover, the muffins keep getting better and better.

She claims if Veda were here, she would have asked Bronwyn to look after me.

Of course, I can't begin to argue with that.

"I think I've got it this time," she says, smile bright as she shoves the basket toward me.

"I think you had it three batches ago." I take one out from under the linen. It's still warm. As I bite into it, the blueberries bursting with perfect sweet-bitter pops, she stares expectantly. "All right . . . You win. This batch is far superior."

"Yes!"

I glance across the muffin at her. "Why are you doing this anyway?"



Not only do they function in a far more advanced way down here than I ever imagined, they've discovered ways to grow food without the Sun. Raevald would call it blasphemy. I'm not sure what to call it, short of miraculous.

"Um . . . Why am I being nice to you or working so hard on this muffin recipe?"

"Well, I meant the muffins, but now that you mention it . . ."

She gives a light laugh. "Any friend of Veda's is a friend of mine." She tips the basket forward so I can take another. I do. "And I love to bake and Veda loves my treats, so I want to have the perfect blueberry muffin ready for her when she returns." She gives an even bigger smile.

"Fair enough, but—"

"Nico—" Dorian intrudes as he always does, then helps himself to a couple of muffins.

"Hey!" Bronwyn snatches one back. "One per person." But she sends a scandalous smile my way before she leaves because she always gives me two.

I sit up more fully, fish the nub of charcoal from my pocket, draw another hash mark—thirteen days.

I look across the cave at him. "Is that how you woo all of the ladies?"

"She's not a lady, she's my sister." He shrugs. "You coming? The chickens finally laid eggs." He waggles his eyebrows, and, as if in answer, my stomach growls.

I've really given it my best effort to hate the guy. Sometimes I succeed. But most of the time, he's not all that bad.

"Yeah," I say, standing up but jerking to a halt midway. My far-from-healed wound screams from my back and clear through my ribs that I best lie back down. Ignoring it, I stand tall, sucking a deep breath in while scrubbing my face and hair with the palms of my hands.

Everyone down here has been waiting for the chickens to lay eggs, the delay having something to do with acclimating to the environment underground, the lack of sunlight.



I throw on my tunic and lace up my boots, walk over to the door where Dorian stands like a tall, lanky blockade.

"You know the drill," he says, staring back at me, a hint of humor in his voice. As if I think today would be any different than yesterday.

Still, I shake my head, sigh loudly. "It's not like I can go anywhere. I don't know my way . . . I'm outnumbered . . . Each step I take sends an angry jolt up my spine . . ."

"All true."

"But?"

"But . . ."

"Sindaco's orders," I say, unimpressed.

Dorian and I, we've got this routine down. We've spent a lot of time together, begun finishing each other's sentences.

He lifts an eyebrow. "It's less for you and more for them." Dorian motions toward the door to a crowd of invisible Night members. The ones who still might fear me and my cruel Dogio-Imperi ways.

I stiffen my jaw. Nod once. I suppose I can't really blame them.

Wrists pressed together, I hold my hands out so Dorian can cuff them with rope. It's more for show than anything, he reminds me. I'm not exactly a welcome figure down here, despite how the Sindaco—even without my signature on his treaty—has been trying to spin that I'm now on the Night's side. Despite that, the greater whole of the Night is weary of my presence, concerned I'm a spy for the Imperi.

Little do they know, never again will I call myself Imperi. Not after Veda . . .

Never.

But honestly, I'm not loving the Sindaco either. Where I'm sitting, no one's winning right now. There are no sides.

Well, that's not exactly true. I'm on Veda's side. Full stop.

Though, if my being tied up makes them feel safer, so be it. If I run, I won't get far without use of my hands. There's that, I guess.

Hands bound, I follow Dorian through the zigzagging caves. There



are small groups of Night members behind us, some in front, most everyone headed to the much-anticipated egg breakfast. Separate conversations echo against the walls, blend and bleed into others. But I don't listen or try to make out the talk from the regular dripping of damp and scampering of mud beetles. I'm focusing ahead to where several times a day I get to see Veda's image.

It's a copy of the photo I've seen a hundred times in her house. Her and Poppy. It's been a couple of years since it was taken, but she looks the same.

Actually, she does and she doesn't. It's Veda, hair bright as the Sun rising on the horizon, splash of freckles covering the bridge of her nose, hand clutched around a fishing pole. Poppy's been cut out save his right hand resting on her shoulder. She'd kick the whole thing over if she knew they'd cut him out. I smile to myself. That fire of hers is definitely there—still there—but knowing now what I know, looking back on the last couple of times I saw her, the Veda I grew up with is long gone. She's seen too much.

Sun knows all she's seen by now.

I skid to a stop before the altar. Dorian walks several paces before realizing I'm not behind him.

He swears. "Again?"

"Just . . . give me a minute." It's the kind of picture where the person in it somehow stares right into your soul. Even though I pass it by a few times a day, the first glimpse each morning catches me. Forces me to take pause.

He swears a second time, making his way back to me. And despite his annoyance, he stops too, stares at the photo just as I am. There's an awkward silence when we realize we're both missing her, pining and yearning to know where she is, if she's all right, dead or alive . . . But before anything is mentioned or the moment stretches out too long, we move on.

More and more altars materialize each morning, and the existing memorials gather more blessings. It's like a children's story . . . As if the altars are visited overnight by fairies who leave magical treasures for the Lunalette. My Veda . . . the one who could punch me in the arm, make my



eyes water with pain one minute and have my heart racing with one swift touch of her hand the next. Not only is she daughter of the Sindaco, blood-heir to Bellona, she's this larger-than-life presence down here. A goddess to rival the Sun and moon both.

I leave Veda's photo, surrounded in candles, enshrined with trinkets and various underground gems. I won't linger. It's only a matter of time until we pass another.

And we do. Then another. Until we reach the large cavern where everyone eats.

I assume our usual spot on a bench against the wall, and, without a word, Dorian continues on to get our food.

The place is more crowded than usual. The whole of the Night is here for the egg feast. Which wouldn't be so horrible except their numbers are steadily growing. A handful of new Basso recruits lines the walls. They've been coming down in trickles, some to join the fight, others looking for refuge for fear of the Imperi.

I don't know where they're coming from, but apparently word of mouth that the Night aren't the flesh-eating monsters we all thought is slowly spreading. Not nearly as fast as the Sindaco and Dorian would like, but every so often a scout group of Night soldiers will check for refugees, bring any waiting down to the Lower. They've been gathering and hiding under the shadow of the Crag—a small section of land the Night now claims. Their first piece of Bellonian soil ever.

Once the Basso are vetted, they can join or support the Night. From what I've seen, no one's been turned away.

As far as I know, we've yet to get any Dogio or Imperi deserters, and I can't imagine it'll be happening anytime soon.

I lean back against the wall, then startle when Dorian drops a bowl of food in my lap. A clump of fried eggs and slice of crumbly bread. He's already scarfing his down, his enjoyment palpable. With more mouths to feed, food's on ration. The satisfaction of semi-full bellies fills the large cave.



It's strange, considering the state of things above, to be surrounded by so much excitement. Over eggs.

Small victories, I suppose.

I glance back down the line of new Basso.

A few stare right back, probably wondering what the hell I'm doing down here, eating the Night's eggs, my hands tied with rope. Their once-heir.

It's futile, but I search among them for familiar faces, strain to see one face in particular.

But I know I won't find her here.

Right as I'm tumbling down a painful slew of memories I hear a word. An unfamiliar term. *Settlings*. Then another Night member repeats the word. *Settlings*. Soon, I hear it popping up in several conversations.

And something about the word . . . It both piques my interest and sets my nerves on edge.

I follow one of the loudest voices to find it's a group of Night members answering questions from a couple of new recruits. I strain my ears, try to make out what they're saying while not being obvious to Dorian.

He glances toward me.

And I hear: "... First ceremony's tonight. One of the Imperi soldiers captured will pay."

Dorian and I make direct eye contact.

"PAY FOR WHAT?" I ask as we swiftly walk back to the cave that serves as my prison cell. After talk of the *Settlings* grew even more, Dorian grabbed me by the wrists, said something about being late for his briefing, and practically sprinted out of the cavern. "Dorian?"

He doesn't look at me. "I was going to tell you after the briefing. After I got more information." He's trying to make it sound like it's maybe not as big a deal as it sounds.

"I want to go with you."

"Out of the question."



"I'll stand in the back. Be completely quiet. No one will even know I'm there."

"Nope. I'm not risking my neck so you can eavesdrop." He shakes his head. "Besides, I can think of ten Night members off the top of my head who'd love to punch your teeth in, and if you get hurt on my watch, it's my neck yet again."

I shake my head and huff. "My Sun, Dorian, then at least give me something to go on here. What do you know? What did he mean by an Imperi soldier 'is going to pay'? Pay for what? How?"

I don't think it's intentional, but when he abruptly stops we're standing right in front of one of the Lunalette memorials. He throws his hands up like he's asking me to calm down. Which I don't.

"Okay," he says. "All I know is from looking over the Sindaco's notes this morning in preparation for the briefing. It would seem everyone got the same notes. They're usually confidential and not discussed before the meeting, but apparently that was too hard for some people."

I lean against the nearest cave wall, exhaustion suddenly taking over. "They seem excited about it for some reason."

His eyes dart to mine. "It's the Sindaco's version of the Offering," he spits out, like he doesn't know how else to say it.

"What?" I heard him, but . . . "You're not serious?"

He nods. "You cannot repeat this."

"Like I have anyone to repeat it to."

Dorian raises an eyebrow like, *true*. "The Settlings will be a series of ceremonies: a sort of vengeance for the Offerings. A settling of terms, of unjust crimes committed against Basso and Night members. In short, one by one, the Imperi soldiers we've captured will be executed." He shakes his head, but I can't quite figure out how he feels about it. "That's all I know."

We begin walking again, and I'm working this new information over in my head when I realize I'm grinding my teeth and Dorian is side-eyeing me. "What?" I ask.

"I don't agree with it," he says. "Not completely."



“Not . . . completely?”

“The Offerings were wrong. Tainted to meet Raevald’s and the Imperi’s agenda. But . . .” He stares ahead but narrows his eyes. “This isn’t the way to go about rectifying those wrongs.”

“Can you talk him out of it?”

Dorian releases a long, drawn-out sigh. “I don’t know.”

And I believe him, decide to stop grilling him until after the briefing when he has more information.

I change the subject. “How *are* things going up there?”

I’m not sure he realizes it, but he speeds up a few steps ahead of me. Not looking back, he says, “It’s hell. That’s how it’s going up there.”

Well, that I already knew.

He goes on, “If it’s not death you see, it’s fire or hunger, fences or soldiers.” Dorian turns to look at me, suddenly appearing years beyond his age—the toll of two weeks of war already showing in his eyes. “And she’s up there somewhere . . . Stuck in the middle of it all . . .” Shaking his head in disgust or hopelessness or I don’t know what, he turns back around and continues walking. I follow. “But I think we might have gotten a lead.”

I stop. “You’re just now telling me this?”

“It might not be anything.”

“Or it could be everything.”

“I refuse to get my hopes up.” He motions to the cave entrance ahead. “Come on.” I don’t move. “If you want to find anything more out, I have to go to the briefing. And before I can go to the briefing I have to make sure you’re back in the cave.” He flashes a facetiously toothy grin.

My hand itches to smack that infuriating grin off his face.

But I enter the cave. What else am I going to do? If the information they found brings us even one inch closer to Veda, it’ll be worth the pacing I do as I wait.

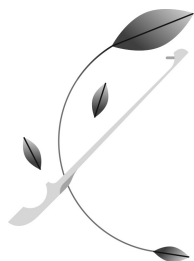
Dorian unties my hands and heads out, but not before we share a mutual look of something between trepidation and hope over the possible information he’s going to gain. About the Settlings. About Veda.



We don't discuss Veda. Not in detail. We rarely speak her name, yet somehow she comes up daily.

And of course, I know it's chaos up there—the High Regent wouldn't have it any other way—but stuck down here, among the murals and altars, caves and tunnels, nothing to tell day from night from the end of the world, it could be heaven or hell up on Bellona and I wouldn't know the difference.





CHAPTER 4

VEDA



The Imperi guard's tone isn't threatening. Still commanding, though. I'm clutching the gold medallion in my fist in case she makes a move to attack me.

But I really don't think that's why she's here.

"Hello?" she whispers again, more urgent this time.

I step to the side, put some distance between us. Then, "Yes?"

She swears under her breath. "You're right there?"

"I am."

She lights a single match and sets a small candle ablaze.

I stare at her from the corner of my eyes. She catches my stare, then keeps her sight straight ahead. "I . . . I heard what the High Regent said. About you being his . . ." The word trails off like she's thinking. She can take all the time in the world; I'm so relieved she heard our conversation. I lean in slightly. Raise my eyebrows waiting on her to finish her sentence. "His . . ." She speaks more forcefully now. "Granddaughter. Is it true? And his son is . . . My Sun, it can't be . . ." It's like she's in shock, and I suppose I can't blame her. It took me a while to come around too. "I'm . . ." She shakes her head. "It's just so hard to believe. I'm even doubting my own ears because I cannot imagine how the High Regent could speak of his own son in such a way. So cold and uncaring."

"I think I know a very different Raevald than you." I'd laugh if I had it in me.

I swear her face has gone paler since she entered. The candle in her grip shakes under the slight quiver of her hand.

I risk a step closer. "Are you all right?"

The guard snaps out of it, gains her composure, and seems to remember who she is and who I am. Why we're both here. She takes a large step back, widening the distance I tried to bridge.

"What I came here to say is—it can't be true. I must have heard him wrong." She meets my eyes with hers, making a point to zero in on my hand holding the medallion. I lean my body against the wall. Slowly slide down it until I'm sitting on the floor. "But . . .," she adds, still staring at me, "I'm going to investigate further."

The officer sort of nods to herself. Then she opens the door, blows the candle out, and leaves, bolting it shut again.

I'll take it.

I LIE ON my back, *tap-tap-tapping* the golden Offering medallion against the stone floor so it begins to make a song. A sad sort of melody composed only of scratches and clicks. If it wasn't me doing the composing I'd probably kill whoever was forcing me to listen to such nonsense. But I'm finding it quite soothing.

The new noise breaks the monotony.

Parts the darkness closing in like a fresh breeze through thick fog.

Helps me think.

Because there's much to consider.

Despite there being so much I can't escape coming back to Nico . . .

Always to Nico . . .

Could Nico's arrow wound have killed him? My stomach turns over what little contents it holds at the thought, the memory of so much blood. How there was so much it soaked his shirt and stained my hands. The way he kept begging me to go and how each word pained him.

The look in his eyes when they dragged him away: shocked, angry, eyes unwavering, set on mine as he called my name.



The Night—all black, hooded—surrounded him, pulled him by the arms as he screamed in pain. They were just coming back for me when I was taken away by the Imperi.

But they took Nico first, didn't they?

They took him first.

The Sindaco knows Nico's value.

My one saving grace is knowing the Sindaco wouldn't touch a hair on Nico's head, much less execute or torture him.

But Nico's wound . . . His wound was severe.

No. Stop.

I shift my focus to the officer. My guard. She wasn't happy with how Raevald spoke of his estranged and assumed-dead son. So much so she came back to tell me. It's not at all lost on me the risk she took in sneaking down here and listening to my conversation with the High Regent. Then again to give me that small message. And one she's not even convinced of.

But something the High Regent said, or the way he said it, really hit a nerve.

At least we've got that in common. I can work with that. If there's even the tiniest of cracks there, I'll find it. Gain her confidence. I've no choice. But I'll have to be careful, extremely cautious. Take my time because it's delicate. She has to trust me.

On some strange level her change in manner reminded me of Nico.

Because in here, surrounded by darkness and unknowns, it always comes back to Nico.

How, when I'd suffered an especially horrible blow at the hands of Arlen or one of the soldiers guarding the Hole, he'd insist not all Dogio are cruel. That not all Dogio and Imperi see Basso as less than.

I'd always shove the sentiment aside, explain that he and only he was different. A complete fluke in the order of things. That I wouldn't believe it until I saw it myself.

"Damn it," I whisper, rolling my eyes. I run my thumb over the cold medallion in an arc back and forth, the smoothness comforting.



If Nico were here, he'd say, "Well, Veda? You finally saw it with your own two eyes. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"All right," I'd say, annoyed he knows me so well but not giving him the satisfaction of hearing me admit it. He'd smile knowingly, flash his dimple, completely sure of how it leaves me defenseless. Then I'd look into his dark eyes. Try my best to be defiant yet fail miserably. All I'd be able to get out is, "*I know . . .*" Because I'd still refuse to say he's right.

Yes, Nico, I know . . .

Ad astra.

AT SOME POINT the clicking of my own personal Offering medallion lulls me to sleep. I awaken to the scraping of a metal tray on the stone floor—a far cry from the masterpiece I composed with nothing but the side of a coin earlier.

Instantly, my senses alert me. Bread. And not the stale, moldy version I'm normally tossed. This is real bread. Somewhat fresh bread. The kind we always drooled over in the baskets outside the bakery but never could afford.

An untimely snack. I know it's untimely because it's been too short a time since my first meal and not long enough after my pail of cold soapy water.

Whoever left it is already gone.

I lift the roll from the tray, hug it between my palms. Just there, on the underside of the crust, it's warm.

Warmth . . . something I've longed desperately for and forgotten existed. I tear the bread open and am instantly bombarded with steam.

I'm honestly not sure whether to stuff it in my mouth at once, savor each crumb one by one, or smother my face between the two sides and bask in its warm, delicious glory while it lasts.

I allow the briefest of pauses, then take a huge bite.

And another.

As I simultaneously stuff it in my mouth, savor each crumb, and bask in its glory, I bump the tray with my foot. A couple of somethings shuffle; one item rolls across the metal.



Reaching down, I find what can only be a candle and a match.

Could it be? Could the guard have gifted me warm bread and light?

I remove the treasures, then I push the tray back under the door. Leaning down, I peer through the small space and out into the hallway. No one.

I move to the far corner of the cell and light the candle. After being in the dark so long the brightness is temporarily blinding, but once I can mostly see through the blur of my eyes adjusting, I look at the only thing I have: the medallion.

“My Moon.”

It's different than the ones Poppy and I used to get through the mail slot of our front door. This one is more ornate. The lettering of my name is larger, bolder. I flip it over. Beneath the new and improved sun insignia is another name: *By order of High Regent Raevald*.

If they've gone to such lengths to improve the Offering medallion, what pray tell could they be planning for the ceremony?

I do not intend to find out.

My only hope is that guard.

And she brought me fresh bread and a candle as if she feels some compassion for me. It's a small gesture, yet so much more than I ever would have imagined.

And I need any and all small gestures.

Even if it's from an Imperi guard.

Especially if it's from an Imperi guard.

ONE STEP FORWARD, two steps back.

That's what it's like getting to know the enemy. Trying to open up while at the same time staying guarded.

I've attempted to humanize myself by sharing things like stories of my childhood, fishing, adding items to my Sun altar. Forget building trust, I'm just trying to be relatable here.

But how can I be relatable to a person who sees me as a monster?



It's a fine line.

Because opening myself up weakens me.

And this could be a trap.

It could always be a trap.

I stare at the Imperi officer over a single candle, the black damp of my cell closing in on us. It's the same candle she left with the fresh bread only moments ago. But instead of returning and taking my tray, leaving without a word, this time, she stayed.

"I remember you," she starts, eyes set on mine. "That day at the Offering when your grandfather was sacrificed. Then again when you were supposed to be executed." She glances away, like she has memories of that day she'd rather not share. Did someone she loved get hurt in the battle? Possibly at the hands of the Night? That will make this harder for sure. So much must have happened during the invasion, as a result of the explosion. And I don't doubt Raevald pinned all he could on the Night, whether true or not.

And knowing him . . . mostly not.

"I do remember you," she repeats, the four words so potentially loaded with doubt and hate or interest and compassion. Which is it? I could flip a coin, because she's not giving me any indication.

The soldier has short, near-black hair that curls like two hooks at her jaw. She's taken off her red Imperi officer's sash and turned her uniform jacket inside out, I suppose to not be seen? Regardless of the reason, I wouldn't know she's the enemy on first glance. The fact she's wearing all black ironically makes her look more a member of the Night.

But she most definitely is not my ally. And it's clear she's not saying any more. Not a shred for me to go on. No, this guard doesn't plan to open up to me.

I'm going to have to do the exposing.

Move beyond simply being relatable and work toward the building of trust. Dig deeper.

And it won't be easy.



What was it Dorian said what feels like ages ago? You have to give trust to receive it?

I edge forward a few inches. “My grandfather—my real grandfather”—the flame flickers with my words and we share a glance—“the man who raised me—was everything. My whole world started and ended with him.” Briefly, I consider mentioning Nico, but the knot in my gut tells me it’s too soon for that. I can’t chance his safety by revealing where his loyalties truly lie. “He wasn’t chosen for that Offering in the traditional way, and he certainly did not volunteer.” The candle, the guard’s features, blur under the slick of tears welling in my eyes. I fight to keep them from falling. “My grandfather—Poppy, I called him—was executed as a punishment and warning to me, to anyone else who might question the Imperi. It was a message from Raevald himself.” She looks away, but her dark eyes once again meet mine. “The punishment was for returning from the Night unscathed—I ruined the myth he’d spun about them being evil torturers, placed a tiny crack in his narrative. And the warning was to keep me from doing it again. To halt whatever grand ideas might’ve been playing in my mind about who the Night really are and how Raevald and the Imperi were involved.”

“And did he know?” The guard’s stare is piercing, her hair framing her face like a black hood. “Did the High Regent know you were his granddaughter then?”

“I don’t think so.”

She’s watching me. Observing. Taking in any hints I might be lying because she’s also wary it’s a trap.

We’re not so different, her and I.

How do I get her to see that?

“Wait . . .,” she says, slowly moving away from me. “How would the High Regent and the Imperi be involved with the Night?” Confusion covers her face, because of course it does. She’s not ready to hear that Raevald’s been framing the Night by ordering his troops to kidnap and execute Basso—much less believe it.



"Just that . . ." But my mind's suddenly blank because it is the truth. I'm not sure if it's the lack of sleep or absence of human interaction, but I blurt it out, desperate for her to help me. To believe I'm not the enemy. "It wasn't the Night who were taking Basso, but the Imperi commanded by Raevald. All of the stories about the Night are made up. A fear tactic to keep Bellonians loyal to the Imperi." The minute the last word leaves my lips I regret it. Too much too quick. *Damn it, Veda.*

She picks up the candle. Stands and backs away.

"I was told you're cunning. That you'll lie to get what you want." Her eyes cascade over to me. "I swore to keep your location secret at all costs. To capture or kill you if you try to escape, because having you dead is better than having you on the loose. Earlier . . . even though I heard the High Regent's words . . . maybe I didn't hear all of it. Maybe I heard wrong. I don't know, but I can't—" Her sentence breaks off as she turns to go. "I can't do this."

She leaves and locks the door behind her.

I fall onto my back and stare at the darkness around me.

I feel sorry for myself for a good ten minutes.

Then I sit up. Force my body to stand.

If I can't count on her and I don't see the Night storming this place anytime soon, I'm going to have to get out of here myself. I don't know how or when, but it's not happening in my current state. I don't have the strength to make it down the hallway much less across Bellona.

I start slowly by walking the perimeter of my cell. I'm out of breath after a measly five times around the square room.

I lose hope as quickly as I gained it.

Leaning against the cool stone wall, I slide down to the floor. Sit a few minutes. Wallow in the fatigue that's so quickly taken over my mind and body. The realization that I might not escape this place. The place where my jaw still stings from Arlen's boot despite the fact that it's been nearly two weeks.



My nose stings from anger, tears I refuse to allow to surface. I resist the urge to punch the wall because I know it won't do me any good to set my knuckles stinging too.

Then I get back up. Walk seven laps. This time faster.

AT SOME POINT, as I'm fantasizing about fresh pools of crystal-clear water and being able to drink to my heart's content, I fall asleep. But I'm awoken with a jolt to the door flying open and clicking shut.

A match strikes.

The same candle that left in the guard's hand is once again before me, along with the same guard who is clearly distressed; her face red, cheeks streaked with angry tears and dirt.

I sit up, fearing the worst. "What's wrong?"

My question must surprise her because she does a double take like she's making sure she busted into the correct cell.

"You need my help getting out of here?" she asks, all business.

Is she kidding? If she is, it's a very cruel joke.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Just answer the question."

"Yes" is all I say, but there are about a hundred questions and doubts spinning around my head. Is this a trap? Did Raevald put her up to this? Are they going to let me think I'm getting out and then catch me escaping? Take me right to the Coliseum in a glorious spectacle? Raevald does love a bit of drama.

The guard sits down across from me again, sets her mouth in a soft line, then swallows hard. "My sister was taken by the Night during the battle yesterday." The officer breaks her tough façade. She squeezes her eyes shut, breathes deep, then opens them again. "I have to find her, bring her home." Her jaw hardens. "And you're going to help me."

"Of course I will. If you can get me out of here I can get you to the Lower and find your sister. I promise." Her eyes dart to mine at *promise*. "I'm so sorry this happened." I hope she senses my genuine concern, how



much I truly want to help her and not just because there's something in it for me. I also hope she can't hear the quaver of doubt in my voice, how I'm still fearful this could be a trick.

But I've got nothing to lose. If I stay, I'll be executed. If this is a trap, I'll still be executed, but maybe—maybe—I could actually escape first.

And if she's being honest? We'll both be at risk but also both have something to gain.

Again, I hear Nico . . . *Basso . . . Dogío . . . We're no different.*

"My name's Imilia—Imi." She sticks her hand out to shake.

I take her hand in both of mine, shake it gently. "Nice to meet you, Imi."

She nods, glances over her shoulder. "I have to go check on a couple of things. Here—" She pulls a small glass bottle from her jacket pocket, tips it my way. "It's broth, for strength. I'll be back as soon as possible."

She rushes off.

Locks the door.

But leaves the candle.

HOURS LATER AND under the glow of a fresh candle, Imi tucks her hair behind her ears, and I can see her face better than before. She's around my age, give or take a year or two. She has thick, dark eyelashes shadowing a kind but intense gaze.

She takes a breath. "I'm just not sure . . ." She takes a deeper breath. Nods. "I want to trust you." The urgency in her words, the speed at which she's speaking makes me both anxious and excited to get going. I can tell she's ready to break out of this place and find her sister right now but is forcing restraint so we do it right. "We have to trust each other if we're going to make it out of here alive."

There will be no room for error.

"How do you imagine we're going to get out of here, much less make our way to the Lower? I'm wanted, and you're an Imperi officer. It's not like we can just stroll out of prison and hop down a den."



She clears the emotion from her throat. "Right. Well, first off, you're not in prison; you're under the Imperi Palace."

My eyes go wide. "What? Are you joking?"

She shakes her head, expression dead serious. "It's not great but better than if you were in the prison under the Coliseum. At least we don't have to worry about finding our way across the Great Sea."

"That's true." At least one of us is seeing the positive. Though she's yet to mention the surely hundreds of ways we can have our necks sliced open breaking out of Imperi Palace.

"I've been thinking"—she lowers her voice to just above a whisper—"staking the palace out with fresh eyes while doing my rounds . . . I've come up with a loose plan."

"Okay, good." I'm leaning forward, my hair nearly catching on the flame. If I were sitting in a chair I'd be on the edge of my seat.

Imi catches my eyes. "You'll play the part of Basso thief, and I'll be the arresting officer who's taking you to the real prison."

"You've thought this through. But . . . Imi, I'm not just any Basso thief."

"Not at all. Your face is literally plastered all over Bellona right now."

"Right." Perfect.

"First and foremost, it's imperative we find a way to get you out of here undetected. Some sort of a diversion. And not a small one." I nod. "And we can disguise you. Cut your hair. I'll sneak in some different clothes."

"Okay . . . This is good." But my mouth is inexplicably dry.

"Once we get you out, we'll have a window of one hour, give or take, depending on the time of day, before someone notices you're gone. An additional twenty minutes before they notice I'm gone. And another fifteen until they put two and two together and sound the alarm on the both of us."

I shake my head because I'm just not sure . . . There are so many holes . . . And it's unbelievably complicated. Also . . . "Only one hour before someone notices I'm gone? But sometimes I go half a day without you coming by. I'm not checked on that often."



Imi glances at her hourglass. "You are. Every hour on the hour." She blows the candle out. Then she rushes to the farthest corner of my cell.

I stare at the space under the door.

That cool gust hits me like it seems to every so often, and, as if by clockwork, *Death's Shadow* quietly shuffles past. It almost sounds like someone's sweeping. It's gone as fast as it came, ghost it is.

Before the goose bumps running up and down my arms have a chance to disappear, Imi's back before me, striking a match and lighting the candle. "I don't think they sensed me." She eyes the door. "But it's not me they're concerned with."

"They?"

"The dogs. They track your scent. Make sure you're alive and in your cell."

"Dogs?"

"Well, evil beasts, more like, but yeah. When I'm not here, they check on you hourly. A handler lets them in through the side door, they sniff, then leave again. If anything is amiss they let out a horrid howl."

Evil beasts . . . Death . . . I wasn't so far off. And the side door . . . "Does the side door lead outside?"

She nods, raising her eyebrows as if confirming what I said was exactly what she's thinking. "It won't be easy. The palace is surrounded by high fences, guards, the works. But if they're distracted enough . . ."

We both pause in momentary thought, because what kind of diversion would be enough to distract the Imperi Palace guards? I could set the cell on fire, but that would do more harm than good and bring the guards straight to us. I could break into the palace, kidnap Raevald, march him to the top of the Crag and make him jump. Satisfying as that would be, it's impractical and impossible and won't get me any closer to the Lower.

I stand up.

Start walking laps.

There must be something.

