The Domino Empress

by Zireza

Summary

Staggered by the Outsider’s warning that a powerful witch plots to steal her throne, Empress Emily Kaldwin must face her worst fears… Losing her throne, losing her father – and perhaps even losing her heart, for the black-eyed bastard has taken an interest in her. All who fall beneath the Outsider’s black gaze descend into madness, so she has learned from her father, the Royal Protector, but when the Outsider offers her his Mark, Emily soon realizes she wants more than his magic, she wants *him*.
Part 1: Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

It’s the day before Empress Jessamine's remembrance ceremony. Fifteen years ago, Emily's mother was assassinated, her world torn apart. Tensions are high in the Empire. The Crown Killer has been murdering Emily's outspoken rivals. Some are pointing fingers at her Royal Protector, the legendary Corvo Attano. With Emily's lover, Wyman, departing for Morley, Emily holds her best friend close, the beautiful Rosemary MacKenzie, her favorite court musician and once-lover. Emily knows she’ll need her family and friends more than ever if she’s going to make it through the next two days...

(The story roughly follows the events of Dishonored 2.)

Chapter Notes

Spoiler-Free Comments About the Fanfic:

"I'm so in love with this amazingly insane story. I love the twists you've put into it. Keep writing! I want to see how it plays out between Emily and The Outsider" - IsabellaSanguine (FFnet)

"I'm literally looking every day for a new chapter... Thanks for writing such an amazing fanfiction, i'm looking forward to the next chapter!" - Belle from Switzerland (FFnet)

"Holy fuck, your writing is impeccable. I adore the way you describe things!" - Skeleton_Rings (AOO)

"Holy shit wow. I am 1000% down for this ride, and wait with bated breath for more. Everything about this story is interesting and beautiful!" - broomclosetkink (AOO)

"After the first chapter I said 'Now pace yourself so you have something to be going on with.' Then blew through it all in 3 days. This is superbly written and a good alternate take on the games story so far." - MadamaButterfly (AOO)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Domino Empress

A Dishonored Fanfiction by Zireza

Please Read & Review!

Part I

In the Eye of the Hurricane
Chapter 1

17th day of the Month of Earth, 1852

I heard a soft knock at the door. It was Coral with my morning tea. I watched her set down the silver tray at the foot of my bed and march to the windows, flinging aside the heavy drapes until sunlight flooded my royal chambers. I groaned and sunk back beneath my blankets.

“Now, now, Your Majesty,” Coral said, her fists on her hips. “It’s too fine a day to be moping about. Your young man will be back in no time, you’ll see.”

I reached for Wyman, but his side of the bed was cold and empty. We had already said our goodbyes.

A long, delicious goodbye. I felt for the slippery ache between my legs and sighed.

“Four months, Coral,” I moaned, sinking further beneath the blankets. “We’ll have never been apart that long.”

“Oh, four months, is it?” a new voice teased. “What an eternity!” I looked over to find my friend rolling her eyes as she pranced through the door. Rosemary blew me a playful kiss then took up her customary spot at the harp beside my bed.

I laughed as she plucked an overly sad tune, giving me her big blue eyes.

Coral ignored the silly wallowing, plumping the pillows at my back as though coaxing a turtle to emerge from its shell. In true turtle fashion, I slowly obliged, emerging from my blankets to sit somewhat regally I suppose, upright and forward.

I tried to smooth my hair, but instead found Rosemary snickering at my vain attempt.

“I see you gave our dear Wyman a night to remember,” Rosemary observed, grinning ear to ear as she drank in the sight of me on my messy bed. Undoubtedly, it all screamed sex.

I threw a pillow at her. “If you keep playing that Void-forsaken dirge, I will throw you out of my palace!”

“Oh, stop it!”

Her giggles rang like chimes and I couldn’t help but smile.

Rosemary looked beautiful in the sunlight, with her back straight and her fingers poised over the harp strings. Her hair glowed like spun gold down her back, and at her throat she wore the emerald choker I’d given her last year in the Month of Seeds. It’d been a gift, just as she was a gift to me—a ‘cultural gift’ to be exact: from the Isle of Morley where poets and musicians were as coveted as prized jewels. The Queen of Morley had sent her to me from her court in Wynnedown.

Rosemary MacKenzie was my favorite court musician.

And a horrible tease.

“Do you see what I have to put up with?” I put to Coral as she served the Bristol green.
“She’ll be the death of you,” the old chambermaid grumbled.

“What else did you bring me, Coral?”

I eyed the silver tray at the foot of my bed, spotting breakfast—a shiny red apple and plump grapes on the vine—and a neatly folded letter with a long-stemmed red rose placed over it. My heart quickened. “Is that—”

“Aye. Left it at your door like the bloody romantic fool he is.”

The old chambermaid stoked the fire until it burned merrily. The hearth’s white stone gleamed in the morning sun, reflecting the royal blue of my grand bed. A long line of ruling emperors and empresses had gazed into those flames, contemplating one crisis after another. And here I am, lovesick over a man. I felt foolish pining after Wyman, but he was the first suitor I could honestly see myself marrying. Too many men of the aristocracy were hopelessly conceited, or so prim and proper I could die of boredom. Wyman made me laugh.

“The Void save us! He’s too romantic,” Rosemary sighed dramatically, wiping her brow and pretending to faint.

But at the last second she fell towards the silver tray and snatched up the red apple, spinning in a circle with it held between her breasts. She exclaimed, “Your Morley Red!”

I choked into my tea as she threw it at me. The apple bounced and rolled down my chest, coming to a rest between my legs. Rosemary cried, “Ah, the man knows where he belongs!”

“You wicked girl,” I laughed, but—just for her—I rubbed the apple’s skin against my leg and made a show of taking a big, juicy bite. She understood.


He loved when I called him that. Unlike his blonde kinsman, Wyman’s hair was decidedly red, a shade so bright and orangey that—along with his freckles—made him look adorably fire-kissed.

“Don’t make me wait!” I laughed as Rosemary dangled the letter from her fingers.

“Is it poetry, do you think?” Rosemary sighed dreamily.

“Read it,” I commanded, taking another bite. I had a fierce appetite (mostly after last night), but just as tempting were Wyman’s parting words, no doubt bittersweet. Coral grumbled and rolled her eyes, but I caught the shadow of a smile as she turned to poke the embers once more. The fire battled the infamous twin daggers of damp and cold that always seemed to permeate Dunwall Tower.

Rosemary dramatically cleared her throat and stood ramrod straight as though orating before Parliament. She delicately unfolded the letter and spoke Wyman’s words, her voice as sweet as honey. “Emily,” she began.

Emily. Not Empress. Not Your Highness. *Just me.* The intimacy sent a shiver down my spine.

I closed my eyes.

“I didn’t want to wake you this morning, but you’ll forgive me since we must have said goodbye a hundred times last night. And the only chance I get to see you with your hair all whichever way is while you’re asleep.”
I bit my lip, remembering the feel of Wyman’s fingers digging through my hair, his mouth trailing hot, wet kisses up my neck.

“As soon as the sun rises, you’ll put on your Empress face. It makes me happy that I know your real face, the one that laughs at our silly rhymes.”

*My Empress face.*

My armor. Not many knew, but I would think of my mother, the late Empress Jessamine, and mirror that side of her that had been cold and calculative—when she had to be. Not for the first time, I wondered if Mother would have approved of Wyman. It was one thing to enjoy bedding the man and quite another to wed him. My mother had never married, and so a part of me feared taking such a drastic step.

If I was a common girl, no one would care one whit who I married…

But I was Empress, ruler of four nations, and the hungry wolves circling my throne cared very much indeed who I married. I heard the whispers. Tainted blood, they said, because my father was a foreigner—and worse, a commoner. A nobody. My detractors claimed the Empire would fall into ruin if I failed to marry Gristol nobility, that I needed to purify the bloodline, to return House Kaldwin to its roots.

To be sure, a few aristocrats were openly agreeable over the rumors of my dalliance with Wyman. They talked of the Morley Insurrection, of old wounds that needed mending.

But Wyman was no Prince of Morley. He was the seventh son in an offshoot branch of minor nobility, third cousin to the Queen of Morley, a foreign monarchy beneath my boot. In Gristol, such things mattered. Class divisions were as stark as black and white. But in Morley, I’d learned, such social constructs were more often doors not walls. Poets, musicians, writers—all the brilliant and creative minds Morley produced were eagerly plucked from every rung of society, high or low. While Wyman was praised for his poetry and held in high regard in Morley, the opposite was true in Gristol.

But I didn’t care. If anything, it made me laugh. What dagger looks I caught! Pure jealousy and wounded pride as the men of Gristol nobility suffered my clear preference for Wyman’s company. It’s not that I paraded our budding relationship before them—my mother had been equally circumspect about her love life in public—but gossip and rumor thrived in Dunwall, the capital city of political intrigue.

“Silly rhymes, indeed,” Coral grumbled under her breath. “He calls himself a poet, but all I hear is a cat mewing at the moon.”

“Senile old bat!” Rosemary laughed. “Wyman’s poetry is to die for. Wouldn’t you agree, Your Highness?”

I opened my eyes, scowling at her. “Keep going, Rosemary. Surely there’s more.”

Wyman had written me plenty of long letters before, each one tucked away with the other treasures I kept in my safe room.

It was then I saw my father.

He was silently watching me with his arms crossed, his shoulder pressed to the wall of the long hall beyond my immediate bedroom.
He had entered like a ghost, so quiet I hadn’t heard a thing. *Hidden like a secret, quiet like a sunset.* His dark gaze met mine and I smiled faintly. I gave no indication to the others that I had seen him. I enjoyed the feeling that we were alone—and, yet, *not.*

Of all the people in my life, he held a special place in my heart. I didn’t have to wonder if he loved me—proof was measured in days, for every day that I ruled as Empress was another day he had made possible.

I was alive because of him.

His face was lined with age and his beard was sprinkled with misty gray, but his dark brown eyes gleamed bright and youthful, testament to the excellent physical shape he maintained as my Royal Protector. He carried his special folding sword at his belt and hidden throughout his person were other sophisticated weaponry and gadgets invisible to the untrained eye. He was always close at hand, safeguarding my life with his own.

Yesterday, the scheduling secretary had tried to slot him in for dinner at his request, but I had brushed it off, preferring to spend the evening with Wyman before he left for Morley. I’d promised to make it up to him, but I knew my father was upset with me.

With today’s launch of the *ISS Jessamine Kaldwin* and tomorrow’s remembrance ceremony, we would need each other more than ever.

Rosemary continued with the letter, unaware of my father’s discrete entrance. Her voice reached a high, wailing pitch, dramatically wallowing in Wyman’s despondency. “I don’t want to go back to Morley, but I’m needed there. It’ll be four months before we can see each other again. I’ll miss you!”

My father began to loudly slow clap and both Rosemary and Coral jumped in fright, spinning towards the sound.

“Lord Corvo!” Rosemary exclaimed, her round cheeks blushing quite becomingly. She had a terrible crush on my father, much to my amusement, but he responded to her, as always, with cool dispassion. He walked past her (I swear, he unconsciously swaggered everywhere he went), swiping Wyman’s letter from her yielding hands and then stood towering beside my bed, looking down at his only child with *that* look. Yes, the one I dreaded the most: tough love—wells of it just pouring from his dark eyes. He couldn’t play and smile and laugh with me like Rosemary did. *Because.* Because he was on a mission to save me, to protect me. My enemies were drawing closer and I had to be ready, not bedraggled and ‘distracted by courtly love,’ as my father so often put it.

And he came like a dark storm on the horizon, bearing bad news.

“Her Highness has no time for love letters,” he said, flipping the morning’s newspaper unto my bed. Still, he held out Wyman’s letter for my taking, his head lolled to one side in long-suffering patience. I snatched it, scowling, but in truth I was gripped by fear and helplessness. The newspaper could only mean one thing, promising bad news indeed. I didn’t want to face it—not yet, not until I had properly put on my Empress face. I was still in bed, an utter mess, with sex on my mind like a blissful dream I never wanted to wake from. My cheeks burned. I hated when my father made me feel like a child, but he was right. *Bloody right.*

I had an empire to lead. A throne to keep.

“Coral, warm my bath,” I ordered. Not the most legendary way to start the day, but first things first. “Not too hot, please.”
The Void knew I was hot enough. I felt angry. Angry at myself. Angry at the world for being so unfair. Last night now felt as distant as the stars. I had dared to dream of nothing but girlish things, of kisses stolen in the night, of Wyman’s breath on my neck and his hands on my breasts, of him moving inside me, whispering in my ear. I liked that, wanted that, but now I had to turn my attention to less… pleasant things.

I glanced at Rosemary, the girl still staring like a fool at my father. “Rosemary, darling, please give us a moment.”

She bowed her blonde head. “Of course, Your Highness,” she said quietly, reflecting the sudden shift of mood in my royal chambers. But as she passed the silver tray, she gracefully picked up the long-stemmed red rose and brought it to her nose, smiling at me with secretive eyes, reminding me that love should never be forsaken. It was worth fighting for.

Now alone with Father, I fixed my troubled gaze on Wyman’s letter—there was more to read and I wanted to read it—but the treasure of his words felt somehow dimmed. I put it aside.

I glanced up at Father.

“Who was it this time?”

“Ichabod Boyle.”

Corvo turned away towards the fireplace. He leaned against the mantle, quietly watching the flames.

A deadweight of dread sank into my belly as I stared at his back. Another critic of my throne, dead. A year ago, I’d passed an unpopular decree on whale oil rationing, and from there it seemed everything had begun to unravel.

Whales were being hunted to extinction—an inconvenient truth for the upper class whose luxurious lifestyle was largely powered by the miracle fuel. Even if it meant exorbitant prices, I wanted sustainable practices put in place to reverse declining whale populations around the Isles and more humane methods employed in slaughterhouses. My father had told me stories of what he’d seen during the Rat Plague, of unimaginable suffering endured by the magnificent beasts.

But Ichabod Boyle vehemently disagreed. He founded an Anti-Rationing Club to protest my decree and openly criticized my rule. As a Boyle, his name alone carried weight and many were listening.

“He fits the pattern,” Corvo said over his shoulder as I forced myself to read the dreadful words put to ink, words that would be read in every corner of my Empire, damning me and mine for another murder we didn’t commit.

‘Crown Killer Strikes Again! Dunwall Citizens express shock and fear as yet another outspoken critic of Empress Emily Kaldwin has met with a violent demise. The latest victim is none other than Ichabod Boyle, notable entrepreneur and supporter of the arts.

Boyle recently wrote an opinion piece harshly criticizing the Empress for what he called her “slipshod style of governance” and her “willful neglect of duties.” Authorities are convinced the Crown Killer is the culprit, given the gruesome details left at the crime scene.

As her Majesty’s most outspoken adversaries fall one by one to this notorious assassin, we boldly ask: Is it now the duty of the Royal Protector to murder all who dare criticize the Throne?’

I didn’t often lose my temper.
“As the Crown Killer grows bolder, so does the Dunwall Courier,” I hissed, crumbling the paper in my fists.

“Emily—”

He snatched it from me and fed it to the flames.

“Emily,” he said again, in a calmer voice, but I would not look at him. I watched the pages curl and burn, but it did nothing to assuage my anger. I buried my face in my hands. I could scream.

“It’s pointless, Father! How do we possibly defend ourselves in the court of public opinion without looking even more guilty than we already do?”

“Emily, look at me.”

I sighed and forced myself to obey. Could he see that I was on the verge of crying? Did he see how weak I felt? Did my enemies?

“I could execute everyone around you,” he said, straight-faced. “That would solve the problem.”

I cracked a smile.

Dark humor, but a part of him serious. Just the two of us against the world.

“If only I was that kind of Empress,” I said. “But, truly, Father, what are we to do?”

He sighed. “I’ve a mind to sail south and tear Karnaca to pieces looking for answers.”

For months now he’d been trying to piece together the Crown Killer’s origin and movements. My father was Royal Protector and Royal Spymaster, and his informants spread throughout the Empire were all pointing south to Karnaca, the capital city of Serkonos—his distant homeland.

But my Royal Protector would never leave my side, not after what had happened to my mother.

“Your Highness, the bath is ready,” Coral announced.

Welcoming the intrusion, I gave her a grateful nod. “Thank you, Coral. I’ll be right there.” She left us alone. I gave my father a troubled look, but promised little more than, “We’ll talk again soon.”

“As you wish,” he said and forthwith departed, taking with him his dark mood, but not the dread he left behind.

The wolves draw closer.

With a long, melodramatic sigh, I peeled away the heavy bedcovers and forced myself to get out of bed—a struggle on more days than I cared to admit.

I tried not to think of Wyman doing the same thing that morning. I missed his easy smile.

The Tyvian rugs were soft beneath my feet and the wooden floors charmingly creaked with age. I thought of running. I wanted to escape the Tower, to jump from rooftop to rooftop, free from the chains of court.

Perhaps tonight.

I walked down the long hallway, passing the closet to my left. The door was open, but Rosemary
was not inside. I found her instead in the large room at the end of the hall, tossing rose petals into my bath. She saw me and immediately stood, bowing her head. She asked softly and with such concern it made my heart ache, “Shall I play for you, Empress?”

What would I do without her?


“Ah, I know just the thing.”

She picked up the Serkonan guitar resting on a pile of neatly folded towels (she often played music while I bathed) and sat on the little stool next to my enormous claw-foot tub.

I swirled the bathwater with my toe before settling in with a contented sigh.

“One of yours?” I asked her. She was a master at her craft, composing music like one breathes. Nearly every week she had a new piece to share.

“One of ours,” she said with a devious grin, diving into the melody. I recognized it immediately; we’d written the bawdy lyrics together, laughing so hard the entire palace had thought we’d gone mad. We called the song The Empress with No Pants based on an unfortunate incident that had occurred in my study. How I’d kept a straight face in front of Erick Plainstow, my dour-faced scheduling secretary, while Wyman was hiding beneath my desk with my pants around my ankles and his fingers curling inside me, I’ll never know.

Just thinking about it made me blush—and ache for him.

The adoring way he crushed his lips against the bare skin of my leg, stifling his helpless laughter beneath the desk, all the while making me want to drag him out and jump on top of him. He was a passionate man, always laughing. Always loving.

“Thank you, Rosemary,” I said as she strummed the last note. “You have no idea how much I needed that.”

“I’m not done with you yet,” she teased. “Allow me.”

“If you like.”

She scrubbed my back with a soft sea sponge as I gazed out the window at the dreary gray sky. She helped me with my hair, too, untangling my ridiculous, post-coital knots with a whalebone comb. I didn’t mind; her touch was as sweet as her voice. Was it strange that my favorite court musician served me in this way? Perhaps to an outsider, but I trusted Rosemary with all my heart. She was my friend. My best friend. An advisor to the Empress, if you will. A close and cherished confidante who was with me nearly all day, every day.

Half-way through my bath, Coral returned with another tray fresh-laden with pomegranate seeds wrapped in lettuce leaves and sticky-sweet Bastillian figs. They reminded me of Wyman, of us lounging in bed as he fed me by hand, his fingers teasing my mouth.

“Four months,” I groaned.

Rosemary’s eyes reflected my misery. She said, taking my hand as I rose and stepped out of the bath, dripping wet, “Aye, Your Highness, a dreadful thing to contemplate, but Wyman is sure to write often from Morley.”
She paused, suddenly hesitant.

“And you’ll have me. If you wish it.”

At one time, I had wished it very much indeed. Had acted upon it. Rosemary was my first. I’d learned how to love with lips and tongue, our fingers inside each other. Sweet memories, now. It’d been easy to trust her in that way, to learn the secrets of the bedroom with someone far more experienced than I.

In truth I’d been uneasy and conflicted about sensuality before I’d met her. They called it deviancy in Gristol, a temptation of the flesh that corrupted the soul. The Abbey of the Everyman, the state religion, warned against promiscuity and lustful living. The Seven Strictures spoke of Wanton Flesh, of the ‘depredations of uncontrolled desires’ that led to misery.

But Rosemary, a native of Morley (like Wyman), had taught me that love was sacred in all its myriad forms—that there was no shame in what we did, only beauty—and that the Isle of Morley held very different customs around sexuality and love. They were open, and Rosemary opened me.

But when my interest in Wyman had begun to grow, I’d decided to break it off with Rosemary. I loved her, but it had turned into a sisterly love, as strange as that may sound, even to me. I still wanted her in my life, but no longer in that way. In truth, I was just more attracted to men, and Wyman in particular.

Maybe it’s his poetry, I thought with an inward laugh. He has bewitched me with words.

Rosemary was more than understanding. Her reaction made me feel like an Empress like no other time in my life.

She didn’t reject me or guilt me or yell at me for loving Wyman; she simply accepted my decision as the way things had to be. She knew one day I would have to marry and give birth to an heir.

But she had pushed for one concession: to still be with me—just for the sex—if Wyman agreed, of course, or even to try a threesome.

The offer didn’t shock me. There was precedence for such loose behavior among royalty. History was riddled with Emperors who took mistresses and Empresses who bore children outside of marriage—myself being an example. My mother and father had never married, though the love they had for each other was undeniable.

But I’d told her no.

Gazing into Rosemary’s bright blue eyes, innocent in their love and honesty, I prayed she wouldn’t take my rejection too hard. Rosemary and I were best friends, yes, but Wyman owned my heart. I couldn’t just have sex. It had to be more.

“I will always cherish our love, dear Rosemary, but those days are over.”

She responded with a coy smile. “I have four months to change your mind.” She patted me dry with a plush towel from head to toe, then kneeling before me, she paused to blow on the dampness between my legs.

“Dress your naked Empress,” I commanded with a laugh, lifting her with a finger under the chin until she was standing before me. I kissed her on the lips before she bounded away towards the closet.
She liked to pretend I had her wrapped around my little finger, but it was probably the other way around. I shook my head, smiling, and went to sit at my vanity to look at myself. My eyes were a rich forest-brown, like my father’s, and lined with thick black lashes. My skin, like porcelain, was clear and healthful, shining with youth and vitality. My hair was black as a raven’s wing and—ugh…

Could use some help.

“Should I wear a wig?” I asked Rosemary when she returned with my pant suit draped over her arm.

“What, and have it fly off at the docks and into the river?”

I laughed, meeting her eyes in the mirror as she came to stand behind me. She threaded her capable fingers through my hair. “I’ll make do, Your Highness.”

She did more than that. She made me look like an Empress, as beautiful and regal as my mother’s profile stamped on old coin. She swept up my hair like a nautilus shell with widening spirals. My eyelids she darkened with kohl and my lips she reddened with carmine. “I swear, Emily,” she said, grinning proudly at her work. “What would you do without me?”

“I had the same thought.”

The pant suit came last. Rosemary knew what today meant and what I always wore on my mother’s anniversary.

A high collar in beige satin. A breast-length cape. Ornate clasps held the doublet beneath, accentuating my narrow waist. Silk cuffs, again in beige. The pants were loose, but only because I had grown more lean and muscular over the last few months. Stress had increasingly become the impetus behind my desire to escape, either to the rooftops in the dark of night or down at the abandoned waterfront to train with Father.

The suit’s fabric was enchanted black, like the color of spilled red wine in certain light.

It was my mother’s look, the pant suit she’d worn on the day of her assassination, the fabric mended where Daud’s blade had pierced her chest.

But instead of spilled wine, it was the color of blood I imagined sinking into the fabric. It disturbed me. It disturbed others. I was wearing my dead mother’s clothes, yes, but for me it was a way to keep her alive, always in my heart.

“Is it well?” Rosemary asked, adjusting my collar one last time. I stared at my reflection, the ghost of my mother staring back.

“Yes.”

Rosemary opened the door to the outside world. “Your council awaits, Your Highness.”

I put on my Empress face.
Chapter End Notes

This story can also be found on FanFiction.net where I first published Chapter 1 back in May 2017. I'm determined and excited to write this baby to the end. I hope you'll join me chapter to chapter. Thank you!
Part 1: Chapter 2

Part I continued

"In the Eye of the Hurricane"

Chapter 2

My father’s face was the first I saw outside my royal chambers. He was leaning against the banister with his arms crossed, speaking with Lord Wainwright, my navy advisor. The elderly gentleman was a retired general and overseeing today’s celebrated launch of the ISS Jessamine Kaldwin.

Walls of countless books lined the shelves from floor to ceiling, illuminated by a massive chandelier dangling in the center of the two-story chamber. Below I could hear the soft mumble of dignitaries, advisors, and other luminaries invited to my private reception for today’s festivities. The lucky few. The rest were in the Formal Reception Hall, the mammoth chamber at the front of the palace far below.

Lord Wainwright turned towards me expectantly. He would be my first appointment for the day.

“Empress, you look well,” he said cheerfully, his cigar-stained fingers resting over his bulging belly. How he’d managed to fit into his old navy coat after all these years was beyond me.

“How you’d managed to fit into his old navy coat after all these years was beyond me.

“Thank you, General,” I said, my eyes flickering towards the sudden commotion below. I stepped next to my father and leaned over the banister, causing many below to raise their heads and, upon seeing me, immediately bow.

All except Advisor Leonora Helmswater, the source of the raucous noise. She was red in the face and shouting, her arm restrained by Captain Mayhew who looked none too pleased with the break in decorum.

“Damn your appointment book, Mister Plainstow!” Leonora cried. “The Empress must see me and now!”

“Your uncouth behavior will not be tolerated, Madam!” Erick Plainstow bumbled, out of sorts and clearly insulted as she rudely flapped a copy of the Dunwall Courier in his face.

I glanced at my father and we shared a look. The Crown Killer. Ichabod Boyle.

Corvo changed how close he was standing next to me, his demeanor at once possessive and threatening to all those who watched from below. It was a show of unity. Of strength. Now, more than ever, we had to visibly stand together, especially on a day like today.

I projected my voice below with cold authority. “Advisor Helmswater.”

She stopped struggling and lifted her eyes to where my father and I were standing together, far above her. For a tense moment, she held our gazes, her beady eyes defiant and accusing, but then she broke away and bowed her head. In the silence (for the reception chamber had become deadly quiet), I looked to Alexi and nodded. “Bring her to my study, Captain.”

Sighing, I pushed away from the banister and took the old general’s hands. “I’m sorry, General. We must delay our meeting.”
“It won’t be long,” Corvo promised, his eyes dark and simmering with annoyance. This was not the first time Advisor Helmswater had become hysterical over what she’d read in the paper—but this was the first time it had become so damn public! It was another omen, to be sure. The Crown Killer’s body count was rising and I feared what damage it would do to my throne when it reached a crescendo.

I turned to Rosemary, waiting silent behind me, and touched her shoulder. “My darling MacKenzie, will you play for Lord Wainwright while he waits?”

“It would be my honor, Your Highness,” she said with a deep curtsy. She gave Lord Wainwright a coy smile, snuggling his arm as she escorted him to the adjacent chamber. A lounge area awaited him where he could sit comfortably and partake of refreshments while Rosemary entertained him with music. Her sweet (and, yes, flirtatious) disposition often saved me from embarrassing social conundrums.

With that settled, my Royal Protector escorted me into my study, performing a routine check for intruders by opening a window and checking the stone ledge outside. It was wide enough to hold nimble feet—I should know; I’d used it many times before.

I would lock myself in my study, feigning important business, then sneak out the window and make the windy, perilous trip to my royal bedchambers. There, Wyman would anxiously wait for me, and as soon as he saw my shadow cross in front of the light, he’d reach out and pull me inside, kissing me deliriously.

“Your father is going to kill me! What if you fell?” he had gasped that first time as we tumbled into bed.

“I never fall,” I’d said, kissing him harder. “Except for you.”

“Is that the best you’ve got?”

I smiled at the memory—but daydreaming was a luxury I could ill afford. I took to my desk, clearing a mental space for the verbal beating I was sure to get from Advisor Helmswater. The old bat could be unhinged, but she’d been a long-time trusted advisor under my mother’s reign, and so I hated to part with her.

“Don’t let her get under your skin,” my father uttered softly, his hand casually resting on the pommel of his sword as he slouched against the corner of my desk.

I nodded absently, my gaze turning towards the window. The skies were clearing, swaths of cheery blue fighting the morning gray. I wondered what Wyman was doing at that exact moment.

Probably retching into the sea, I thought with a tender smile. My Morley Red was no sailor.

Coral had been through. She’d left a silver tray of dark crusty bread and softened butter. I tore off a piece and tried to enjoy it, but it was hard going down. I had lost my appetite.

The worn, leathered surface of my desk was cluttered with correspondence, both loose papers and messy bundles of letters and envelopes tied together with blue ribbon. Wrinkled financial broadsheets were tucked under law books, and a large magnifying glass sat atop a priceless map embossed in gold. Scribbles of black ink stained the wood in places, though whether it was my own careless doing or Mother’s I had no idea.

I liked to imagine it was her touch. In many ways, I still felt like everything belonged to her. Fifteen years had not erased the memory of my seven-year-old-self invading her study with childish antics:
playing under her desk, bouncing on the sofa, and spinning the globe until she laughed and dropped whatever she was doing to hug me fiercely, calling me her naughty little girl.

“Emily…”

Corvo had seen the look on my face.

“Your Highness, I must protest! This is most unusual,” Erick Plainstow cried from the hallway, breaking off whatever my father had been about to say. My agitated scheduling secretary could barely make it to the door before it was slammed in his face.

Advisor Helmswater looked quite pleased with herself as she stormed towards my desk, waving that stupid newspaper.

“You’ll forgive me, Empress, but that sniveling gutsnipe you call your secretary is a disgrace to his profession,” she said, slapping the paper down on my desk so brusquely it upended my royal stamp. Her wrinkly, gaunt face looked tired, but there was fire in her eyes. “How can I advise you if I never see you?!”

I smiled tightly. “It’s a special day, Leonora. Everyone is quite busy with the launch preparations.”

The door swung open again and Captain Mayhew leaned inside, one hand gripping the doorknob, the other suggestively on her long sword. Her always-serious mien brooked no rudeness directed at me or my father. “Your Highness, shall I remove Advisor Hel—”

“It’s fine, Alexi,” Lord Corvo said, his voice a deep rumble. He knew the old woman was no true threat. Let her bluster and complain; it gave us insight into the kind of reaction the news was having on the aristocracy. I could already see the ripples of horror and suspicion spreading like poison throughout my Empire.

Captain Mayhew curtly nodded and backed out, closing the door. I wished I could leave, too. In fact, I wish my mother was still Empress, I thought, not for the first time.

“Finally,” Leonora grumbled, taking a soggy handkerchief from her breast pocket and sniffling into it. She glared at me, her nose bright red, and snapped, “Is there anything you wish to tell me, Majesty?”

I blinked. “Pardon?”

“We face yet another murder and I cannot remain silent on this matter!” she said, casting her accusing eyes back and forth between my father and I, so fast I imagined her beady eyes rolling right out of her skull unto the floor—an amusing thought I kept to myself, my Empress face held firmly in place.

She turned in circles as though speaking before an invisible audience, suspicion glazing her every word. “Strange, is it not, that all of the victims have openly opposed you! If not strange, then oh so very convenient.”

I wanted to throttle her scrawny neck.

My father turned slightly, catching my eye. Stay calm, he radiated. I took a deep breath, steadying my gaze on his face, willing my anger to subside.

He’s a good man, I thought. He didn’t deserve to be smeared in the papers.
But he was used to it. Fifteen years ago, he’d endured worse. Framed for my mother’s assassination and my subsequent kidnapping, it had taken sheer determination, extraordinary skill—and a father’s love—to dig himself out of that dark pit, to clear his name and restore my rightful heritage to the throne.

“What have you nothing to say?” Leonora blurted.

My father spoke first, so calmly you might think he was discussing the weather. “That’s only what the rabble-rousers want you to think. The pattern holds no mystery, Advisor, and their motive is clear. They seek to undermine my daughter’s throne by ruining her credibility.”

“You ruin her credibility, Lord Protector! The papers say you’re the Crown Killer!”

She was quite hysterical now, pointing a long bony finger at my father. I wanted to break it in half.

She faced me then, pleading with outstretched hands as though I was the Child Empress again, totally unprepared for the rule I had tragically inherited. “Majesty, please listen to me. How can I be an advisor to you if you don’t include me in these most sensitive of endeavors?”

“I’m not—”

“Silencing your detractors is not the answer. If your mother knew—” She gasped in horror, pressing the handkerchief to her lips. I kneaded my forehead, sharing another look with my father behind my hand. Leonora certainly had a flair for the dramatic. She said, “Your father loves you, anyone can see that, but these gruesome assassinations are a misguided effort to protect you. You must command him to stop!”

I almost laughed.

Truly.

Instead I held tight to my Empress face, projecting dignity with all my strength. “Leonora, such conspiracy theories are unfounded. The Royal Protector is not the Crown Killer, and I can assure you, we will find this sadistic monster”—I glanced at my father, ice in my gaze—“and make him pay.”

I pushed away from my desk, leaning back in my chair. “That will be all, Advisor Helmswater.”

Her lower lip quivered.

I thought she meant to argue further, but she bowed and turned away with downcast eyes. At the door, though, she couldn’t help herself. She turned back and cried, “Empress, don’t leave me out in the cold! I fear your reign will be a short one if you do nothing.”

Thus, was Leonora’s dramatic exit.

“She’s gone bloody mad,” I grumbled under my breath.

At the door, Erick Plainstow waited for instruction. I sighed and waved my hand. “Bring the General.”

“Your Highness,” he acknowledged with a bow, departing.

In a sour mood, I moved from my desk to the credenza with the whiskey, pouring myself a small glass. I swung it back, staring up at the enormous oil painting. It pictured the Hounds Pit Pub, the
secret headquarters of the Loyalist Conspiracy during the time of the Rat Plague. After my father had rescued me from my kidnappers, I’d been safely ensconced within under the watchful eye of Callista Curnow, my solemn-eyed friend and eventual governess.

I missed her terribly.

No, more than that, I missed those times.

Not the terror and uncertainty, of course—and even then Corvo had had it much worse. I’d been just a small child, barely understanding the turmoil surrounding me. I’d only known my mother was dead and I couldn’t go home.

But in that hurricane, Corvo became my calm center, taking the time to listen to me chatter incessantly about my art drawings, or just holding my hand when I felt scared or alone.

Feelings of love and home are never more powerful than when they are threatened, I thought.

“She’s right,” Corvo said unexpectedly. I turned towards him, watching as he scratched his bearded chin. He only did that when he was angry with himself.

“What?”

He scowled. “About doing nothing.”

“But your spies,” I said, spreading my hands in confusion. “We have been looking for the Crown Killer.”

“It’s not enough,” he said, curling away from the desk to look out the window. “The conspiracy is too thick. I can’t see into it, not when I’m here in Dunwall.”

I stepped beside him at the window, taking in the grand view of Wrenhaven River. I could see the USS Jessamine Kaldwin, maneuvering close to the waterfront. Crowds of well-wishers would be clogging the streets to catch a glimpse of their beautiful Empress and her glorious entourage—at least, that’s how I wished to imagine it. In truth, there would probably be riots and unrest throughout the capital. More and more people were afraid of the Crown Killer and of speaking out against my father and I. Times were hard and getting harder.

“Then sail to Karnaca, Father,” I said, my voice softening. I knew he feared greatly for my safety, but I had a strong retinue of elite guards protecting me night and day. And he had been teaching me swordplay and back alley fighting for years now. I could protect myself. “I will be safe, here, with Captain Mayhew. You trust her, don’t you?”

“It’s not that,” he said, too sharply, looking away.

I knew. It was because of Mother.

Fifteen years ago, she had sent him away on a diplomatic mission to request aid from the other Isles in finding a cure for the Rat Plague ravaging Dunwall, only to return two days early to find himself utterly blind to the danger that had awaited him. He was her Royal Protector, but on that fateful day he had failed to stop an assassin’s blade. Right in front of my eyes, my mother had been murdered and my ten-year-old self kidnapped by those who meant to use me as a pawn in their play for power.

In the end, Corvo had hunted each traitor down and took his revenge, cutting their conspiracy to pieces.
But it had cost him.

Even now he hid the Outsider’s Mark, a burn on the back of his hand covered with black leather wrappings. It would always be a stain on his soul, a supernatural connection to the Void that had become both gift and curse. My father knew it would eventually eat his sanity and he’d fall into madness, the price to pay for such unnatural power.

But he had done it all for me—accepted the Outsider’s Mark—so that I would be where I was today.

“You can’t always be there to protect me,” I whispered, my throat burning from the whiskey. “One day…” One day you’ll be gone, either dead like Mother or lost to madness.

I feared which was worse.

My father grimaced, flexing the hand marked by the Outsider. He said, meeting my eyes, “I’ll think on it, Emily.”

“Good,” I said, a simultaneous surge of fear and excitement blazing through my blood. I struggled to understand it. These past fifteen years, I had never truly been alone before. My father was always close by, protecting me from untold dangers. What would my days be like without his constant shadow? It was frightening to think of, but in a strange way I yearned for it. I would always love my father and appreciate all he’d done for me, but there was a part of me that needed to do something on my own. To take charge of my destiny and forge my own path.

I was twenty-five years old. If not now, then when?

Lord Wainwright entered my study, laughing heartily as Rosemary clung to his arm. She was bright-eyed and beautiful, and knew exactly how to lighten the mood.

My father and I turned away from the window and faced our new guest. I smiled politely at the general. “I hope your wait wasn’t too long?”

“Guffaw! Time has no meaning when you’re caught in a dream,” he said, patting Rosemary’s hands where they rested on his fat arm. “Thank you, my dear.”

“It was my pleasure,” she said coyly. To me, she curtsied. “Your Highness.”

And as she turned away, her eyes flickered towards my father, but he had already moved on, resting once more at the edge of my desk, slouching casually. She was always seeking his attention and he was always denying her. After breaking up with me, Rosemary had noticeably turned her affections on my father. I still wasn’t sure how I felt about that—beyond amusement, of course, and maybe a little bewilderment considering how hopeless it looked for her. My father was not a man to be trifled with, especially when it came to matters of the heart. As far as I knew, Lord Corvo had never taken a mistress after my mother died, and anytime I had even hinted that he should move on, he’d shut me down with a weary look.

“This again?”

“It’s been fifteen years, Father. I want you to be happy.”

“Stop, Em.”

“But—”

“Stop.”
I had stopped asking, but not thinking about it. The question was always who? Who would be good for him? Certainly not Rosemary who was far too childish and whimsical for him, bless her heart. No, it would have to be someone he greatly respected, someone strong of will and… well… capable, perhaps. He respected strong, confident women—was not my mother the ideal in that regard?

Captain Mayhew, I wondered. Now there was a genuine friendship stretching back many years, but she was always so bloody serious and I couldn’t imagine them flirting with each other. Perhaps Callista, my old governess, then. But that ship had sailed—literally. Six months ago, she’d left Dunwall and taken to the high seas aboard the Topaz Hunter, following her lifelong dream of journeying by sea. She would be gone for many years, the whaling ship navigating a circuitous route in and around the Isles with adventure as much as wind in her sails. I could imagine my father next to her, plying the strong seas together, but he was chained to me as my Royal Protector.

*It could never be,* I thought, feeling guilty.

“Is ought amiss, Empress?” the old general asked, his smile faltering.

“No, no,” I said, mentally shaking myself. “Please, sit with me, General.” I led him to the plush sofa near the window where we could talk quietly together and enjoy a gentle breeze. “Tell me, my lord, how did the shakedown cruise go? I haven’t heard.”

“Ah, the boys have been testing her for weeks now, Your Highness, and not one mishap. She’s performing with flying colors!” He slapped his knee, his eyes shining with pride. “Jessamine will be the finest ship in the Royal Fleet.”

“I’m grateful, General, and my mother, she would be honored, greatly honored.”

“Long live the Empress,” he said, lowering his gaze in customary sadness.

“Long live the Empress,” Corvo repeated, glancing at me like they weren’t just empty words.

I cleared my throat, straightening my back. “Now about that ship launch protocol…”

I hated when grief spilled out into the open. The Empire had lost an Empress, but I had lost a mother.

The anniversary of her assassination came every year, but tomorrow it’d be even worse. All my advisors wanted a more lavish remembrance ceremony with hundreds of invited guests pouring in from the Isles. Fifteen years, they said, as if the number itself was somehow special. I preferred the opposite, to mourn in private at my mother’s rose-covered grave with my father beside me—and even then I knew he’d return later, alone.

Both of us dreaded the 18th day of the Month of Earth.

“Eh, yes, yes. Of course, Your Highness,” Lord Wainwright said, wobbling his enormous belly as he tried shifting the satin pillow behind his back. “On the platform, we’ll have a sacrificial bottle of King Street Brandy tied to a long tether that you will release to swing out against the hull.”

“For good luck,” I said. Sailors were a superstitious lot.

“Yes, Your Highness. Next, you’ll speak to the assembled crowd. What you say during the ceremony is, of course, up to you, but here are some ideas intended to serve as food for thought.” He dug his fingers into his coat pocket and removed a folded slip of paper, handing it to me.

I silently read the list, squinting at his terrible cursive. *May a brisk wind hurry you to shores near,*
far, and fair. Or, *May you shelter your crew from the perils of the terrible Ocean.* And, of course, *May you always sail for Gristol, true of heart, and homeward bound.*

“I like the last one,” I said, handing off the list to my father. He rose and took it, reading the choices for himself. “Though to be inclusive of the other Isles, I might go for the first instead.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty. They are only suggestions. Traditions, really,” the general said.

“And traditions should be respected,” I said, smiling as sweetly as I could with my Empress face.

“Say all three if it pleases you,” Corvo said, returning the list. He crossed his arms, his biceps bulging beneath his black coat. “What about security, Lord Wainwright? I have Captain Mayhew in charge of crowd control along the carriage route, but no one’s responded to my inquiry about who’s guarding the platform.”

“Jessamine’s loyal crew, Lord Corvo!” he said with an eagerness I found comforting. “And each of them handpicked to serve on the Empress’s flagship. A rare honor, indeed!” He patted my leg. “Trust me when I say, Majesty, you’ll be well-protected. Well-protected!”

I glanced up at my father, scrutinizing whether he was satisfied with this arrangement or not. With the Crown Killer growing bolder, my security was paramount.

“I want to see the crew manifest,” Corvo said after a pause. “*Before* the carriage procession.”

“Forthwith!” Lord Wainwright exclaimed, struggling to rise with his mighty girth. I quickly stood, lending a helping hand. “Thank you, Majesty. Now if you’ll join me, Lord Protector…”

Together they made for the door, but my father turned back, his eyes steady on my face. “I’ll have Captain Mayhew escort you to the carriage when the time comes.”

“I’ll be ready,” I said. “Thank you, Father.”

As soon as the door opened, Erick Plainstow popped in, his sizable appointment book splayed across his hands. “Your Majesty, we are behind schedule! Lady Burtzlaff is next—I’ve set up a private lounge with tea—and then we have the Meet & Greet down in Reception before we head to the carriage train.”

“Of course,” I said, sighing. “I’m coming.”
Part 1: Chapter 3

Part I continued

"In the Eye of the Hurricane"

Chapter 3

“Oh, how quaint! Is this a new carriage?” Rosemary asked, climbing inside and sitting on the plush, velvety pillows next to me.

The guard closed the carriage door, blocking out the raucous noise from the streets. I sighed in relief, grateful to be away from all the lords and ladies crowded inside Dunwall Tower.

“Indeed,” I said, tugging at the fingers of my satin gloves until they slipped off. I’d grown terribly self-conscious of my hands since ascending to the throne as a young girl. Wearing gloves alleviated my anxiety somewhat. Genteel manners meant I had to put up with my hands being constantly kissed, held reverently, and examined by those who graced my palace. I had toadies aplenty in my royal court, men and women with honeyed tongues, masters of empty flattery. They put me on a pedestal in hopes I might return the favor.

“But they went a tad overboard with the royal blue, don’t you think?” Rosemary teased, mischievous sparkles in her eyes. “Every surface is drowning in it! Couldn’t they have picked something less bloody blue?”

“By ‘bloody blue’ do you mean purple?” I teased back.

Ever since she’d come to Dunwall, Rosemary had taken up our penchant for saying ‘bloody’ this, ‘bloody’ that. I thought it cute.

“I wish!”

The inside of the carriage reflected the mighty wealth and prestige of the Empire of the Isles accumulated since the War of the Four Crowns. Every inch was covered in only the finest of fabrics, luxurious to the touch and finely embroidered with the royal insignia of House Kaldwin And, yes, all blue. Royal blue.

The outside was far less ostentatious, even forbidding. The steel carriage sported a drab, gray coating and utilitarian look, trumpeting the mechanical marvel of its electric-powered rails. The track could connect us to nearly every district in the capital, but today’s parade would only pass through those which had recovered best after the Rat Plague.

Despite my best efforts, many districts were a mere shadow of their former glory days, such as the Rudshore Financial District, now called the Flooded District. My father had seen it at its utter worst—bloated, decaying bodies, infected by the Rat Plague, had been dumped side by side with the living, the wretched poor of the city who’d been specifically targeted by then-Lord Regent Hiram Burrows. His ‘final solution’ for eradicating poverty was simply to eradicate the poor themselves.

A heartless man, I thought. I was glad to watch him die.

“Don’t you think, Your Highness?”
I blinked at her. “What? Oh, yes. Quite overboard, but that’s the Treasury for you. They’ve spared no expense for today’s festivities. After the launch ceremony, they’ll be a lavish dinner party in the Rose Gardens. Erick is calling it the Sunset Regalia.”

I looked through a row of tiny glass windows. The City Watch was mulling about, pushing back onlookers from the tracks if they got too close.

“The Sunset Regalia? I can’t wait,” Rosemary said, feverish with excitement. “Everyone will be gossiping about it for weeks!”

“Contain yourself,” I said dryly. “It’s not the Boyle’s annual Masquerade Ball.”

“It’s close enough!”

“At least I could get out of the Masquerade,” I grumbled under my breath, for it was tradition for the Imperial family to receive the first invitation and then respectfully decline. In my younger years, I hated the fact that I was forced to miss the biggest, most famous party of the year, but after Corvo had told me about ‘The Last Boyle Party’—for one of the Boyle sisters, at least—I wasn’t so sour after that.

“What was that?” Rosemary asked, still smiling.

“Nothing.”

“I can’t believe Wyman wouldn’t wait a day or two before leaving. Look at all he’s missing!”

“He has important business in Morley.”

“The family farm, I know, but you’d think his father would let him off the hook this year, of all years. He’s the paramour of the Empress! How can he even think about leaving your side to pick some silly apples?”

“Those silly apples feed my people,” I said, tugging a strand of her long blonde hair. She liked to wear it down all the time, a strange Morley fashion when all the respectable ladies of Gristol wore their hair up, as was proper. “Besides, he had delayed far too long already. Storm season is fast approaching, and you know how he hates sailing.”

The poor man turned green.

“Hmph,” she said, unconvinced.

“He’ll be back. Besides, I have you,” I said, squeezing her hand. I had formally requested her company as my Guest of Honor. With all the expected mayhem and revelry, I wanted to make sure the guards kept us together.

I didn’t want to face the day alone.

My foul mood could only be assuaged by her smile. As much as her constant cheerfulness sometimes grated on my nerves, I knew I was better with her than without.

“How was tea with Lady Burtzlaff?” Rosemary asked, neatening her dress until it spilled gracefully over her legs. Morley had strange ideals for women’s fashion, too. I rarely wore dresses, preferring my full-calf leather boots tucked over pants.

“Productive,” I said.
The noblewoman was married to a retired senator who still held influence in Parliament, and their son had died in service to the Crown many years ago. I had made it a point to maintain these old bonds, for they were the strongest.

During the Rat Plague, the Burtzlaffs had secretly supported the Loyalist Conspiracy at great personal risk. Discovery meant imprisonment or even deportation to plague-ridden districts, a death sentence. While my father’s actions had dealt the killing blow against the traitorous Hiram Burrows (by exposing his corruption and, later, personally performing his lawful execution), it was Dunwall’s loyal who picked up the pieces and embraced their new Child Empress with open arms.

“Sounds productive and boring,” Rosemary said, rolling her eyes. “Lady Burtzlaff talks about nothing but her Safe Shoes. Safe Shoes this, Safe Shoes that! Her millions and millions of ‘intelligently-made’ Safe Shoes!”

I laughed, shaking my head—as Lady Burtzlaff had indeed mentioned her Safe Shoes. “She offered me a pair, but I told her they didn’t make me feel safe. The heel was too high.”

Rosemary doubled over, giggling hysterically just as Captain Mayhew swung open the carriage door.

Alexi gave Rosemary a dirty look—their personalities were polar opposites—and sternly reported, “We’re ready to commence, Your Highness.”

“Very good, Captain,” I said, quelling my laughter and giving Rosemary a mock-admonishing look. Bad girl.

Rosemary beamed at me with a coy smile, giving me what I could only describe as her bedroom eyes—just to tease back, of course. The Captain signaled to the operator and suddenly the carriage train roared to life, screeching and moaning as it moved along the sky-high tracks. Well, we weren’t yet that high, but in some districts the civil engineers had pointedly reserved the city streets below for slower pedestrian traffic, reserving the ‘second floor’ for the fast-moving trains.

As we began to edge away from the palace, Captain Mayhew slipped all the way inside, securing the door and sitting opposite of Rosemary and I.

She looked dashing in her full regalia uniform, her burnished red hair tucked under her officer’s hat. As Captain of the City Watch, she held the honorary duty of personally accompanying me on the parade route, as was tradition. While such honor might seemingly impinge on the Royal Protector’s duties, it instead signified the great trust my father had placed in her.

“The parade route will make several stops, Your Highness,” Captain Mayhew said. “We’ll open the canopy hatch so you can stand and wave at the people below.”

“Ah, how fun!” Rosemary exclaimed, bouncing in her seat and patting my arm in excitement. “Oh, we should have brought sweet treats to throw at them!”

“We’re in a train with twelve other carriages fore and aft, Your Highness,” Alexi said, her eyes focused on the traffic below, scanning for danger. Her calm and serious mien lied in stark contrast to Rosemary’s bubbling demeanor. “Half contain your Elite Guard, not counting the ones assigned to the streets, balconies, and rooftops. The remaining carriages are reserved for the revelers.” She looked at Rosemary, then, and added, “I think they’re throwing coins, not fruit.”

“And Corvo?” I asked. My father had disappeared with Lord Wainwright, my navy advisor. It was nearly high noon and I hadn’t seen him for hours.
“At the platform by now, I would assume,” the Captain said, unconcerned. “He told me he wanted to personally inspect the security measures put in place before your arrival.”

“Which will be?” I asked, trying not to sound impatient.

While I enjoyed the great spectacle of a royal parade, I tired easily of all the formal waving and incessant smiling. I much preferred social balls and bashes where I could talk to people face-to-face.

Or at least find a room to hide in.

“Two, maybe three hours at most,” Captain Mayhew said, her hard mien finally cracking with compassion. “We’ll move the trains quickly, Your Highness.”

“Oh, I could never tire of a good parade,” Rosemary said, bucking her legs like a foal in the newness of spring.

“We know,” I said sourly, but I smiled at her all the same.

As the trains moved along, I twisted the signet ring around my finger and thought about Wyman. He would be at sea for several weeks, for the Isle of Morley was far to the north in colder waters. Once the remembrance ceremony was over with tomorrow, I meant to pen him a note, maybe even include a little painting to make it special. I loved painting almost as much as training with Father. Plus, I knew creating art was something Wyman loved about me.

He’d promised to take me to see his childhood home in Morley one day so I could ‘paint with color’—one of his crueler jokes as he believed Dunwall was all ‘dreary grays and browns, ugly to the core,’ as he put it. I’d been to Wynnedown, the capital of Morley, only once before as a child with my mother and Corvo.

It was so long ago that all I really remembered was vibrant, colorful flowers in fields of rolling green. No wonder Rosemary, Morley-born, was sick of all the royal blues here in Dunwall. It was the only cheerful color we had.

“I hear there’s a story between you two,” Rosemary said coyly, breaking the silence.

I looked over at her in question.

“About a carriage…” she hinted with a smile as if it was obvious since we were in fact sitting in one.

“It was long ago,” Captain Mayhew said, offering nothing more.

“I want to hear the story,” Rosemary said, a playful pester in her tone. “You know how these legends become—the truth so twisted up, one can hardly believe it!” When neither of us spoke, she squeezed my hand. “What really happened that day, Your Highness?”

I looked to her, shaking my head. “So you can put it to song, dear Rosemary?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps.”

I studied her eyes, blue and brilliant, and realized in an instant that that was not why she was asking. The truth came to me so suddenly I almost laughed. She was asking because of her girlish obsession with my father. Because she had no idea how to earn Lord Corvo’s trust like Captain Mayhew obviously had, thanks to that terrifying day in the carriage.

I shuddered to think of it. That day was a nightmare. But since I loved Rosemary, I obliged her
curiosity.

“We were just girls,” I said, cocking my head as I looked to the Captain, remembering her younger days. A bittersweet fondness filled my heart. *The days pass too fast,* I thought. “I was only fourteen and Alexi was not much older. Sixteen, was it?”

“Almost eighteen, Your Highness,” Captain Mayhew said, half-listening, her attention dutifully on the parade.

“That’s right,” I said, remembering. “You weren’t yet old enough for the Watch.”

I was proud of Alexi. She had built for herself an exemplary career. At eighteen, she had joined the Dunwall City Watch (handpicked as they all are) and just ten years later, she’d made First Lieutenant. Not long after, I had personally promoted her to the rank of Captain at my father’s urging.

Alexi and I had been friends for a long time—well, distant friends, now, for Alexi had put up a professional wall between us after becoming Captain. We respected and trusted one another implicitly, but our friendship was quite unlike the one I had with Rosemary. For one, we had never slept together, and two, I wasn’t even sure that we had ever gossiped before. Alexi was always a straight arrow, dutiful and serious.

“We’re all so close in age!” Rosemary remarked, her eyebrows lifting. “You somehow seem much older, Captain.”

A lesser woman might have taken offense, but Alexi just nodded once and said nothing. *She’s an old soul in a young body,* I thought. It was part of why I thought she’d make a good match for my father, despite their age differences. My father was born in 1798 near the turn of the century, making him fifty-four years old. Sometimes I felt I had to remind myself as he looked younger than that. It was the Outsider’s Mark, I believed, granting him strength and vitality beyond his years.

“How did you two meet?” Rosemary asked me.

“Through Callista.”

I’d been a lonely girl with few friends my own age and suffered a wild, ill-mannered streak that Callista was always trying to beat back with lessons on proper etiquette. By introducing us, Callista had hoped a bit of Alexi’s serious demeanor would rub off on me.

“We would play together in the Rose Gardens,” I said.

“You—*play*?” Rosemary exclaimed, staring at the Captain in comical disbelief.

“With wooden swords, yes,” Alexi snorted, a little smile rising at the corner of her lips.

“Both of us were little fighters at a young age,” I said with an impish grin. “And good thing, too, else we might not have survived that day.”

I looked out the window, my belly tightening.

“Was it dreadful?” Rosemary asked in a hushed breath, her eyes wide.

“Yes,” I said, watching the people below. “It was only the fourth year after the Rat Plague and the city was still reeling in the aftershock. Our carriage was ambushed by a gang of extremists known as the Regenters. They tried for years to delay Burrows’ execution, and when that failed, they tried to
push their ideology through propaganda and street protests. They believed in the Lord Regent’s vision of total control, that the Emperor or Empress should have absolute power, instead of how it is today with Parliament limiting authority. The Regenters wanted a tyrant. They believed it would make the Empire stronger.”

I had studied the politics for many years and still it baffled me. Parliament was a consequence of bloody tyrants, ripping away control to protect the people disempowered and subjugated. I had never wanted absolute control.

*Because when everything goes wrong, it’s your bloody fault,* I thought.

“Where was Lord Corvo during this ambush?” Rosemary asked, getting to the heart of the matter.

“Too far away to help,” Alexi said, “but only because that was part of their nefarious plan. They delayed the Royal Protector with tricks.”

I almost smiled at the defensiveness in her voice. My father was my Royal Protector, and in some ways, I felt like the Captain was his. She was fiercely protective of him. I could tell it galled her that lines were being drawn between him and the Crown Killer.

“We quickly realized they had us trapped and cut off from rescue,” I said, taking a deep breath. Recounting the tale too easily brought back all the memories of blood and smoke. I’d been so young and had barely begun to train with Father. “I was paralyzed with fear. I didn’t know what I was doing, Rosemary. I just knew I had to fight. They were firing pistols at us, and one even threw a grenade.”

Rosemary covered her mouth, sucking in a sharp breath. “But, Captain Mayhew, did you pick it up and throw it back? This is the part people talk about that I can hardly believe!”

“I did,” Alexi said.

“She saved my life,” I said.

“We saved each other,” Alexi said, respect welling from her dark green eyes. “You may have been paralyzed with fear—at first—but as soon as you saw that man drop down from the gate behind me, you didn’t hesitate. You yanked free the closest thing you could find to a weapon—a railway brace—and beat the man senseless with it.”

“By the Void,” Rosemary gasped, looking queasy.

“Now you know the truth,” I said with a tight smile. I wasn’t proud of almost beating a man to death, but I was proud of saving my friend.

It had become a turning point in both our lives.

Alexi had basked in the admiration of her heroic actions, accepting the commission of the City Watch while I’d had the uncomfortable task of deciding what to do with the captured Regenters. In the end, I had refused to have them executed for their crimes, even with half the city howling for blood and revenge.

All because of my father. He had taught me to always look for a nonlethal resolution—not because the wicked deserve mercy, but because they deserve punishment.

When a man dies, he dies; all becomes Void.
But if a man lives with what he has done, if he suffers… then there is true recompense for the innocent. There is justice.

“As we speak, the Regenters are rotting in Coldridge Prison,” Captain Mayhew said with satisfaction, her chin held high. “Every day they have to live with their guilt.”

“But what of forgiveness?” Rosemary asked in a small voice.

I held her gaze, unblinking. “If they show true remorse, then I allow them a swift execution.”

But in truth I rarely granted it. True remorse was the sweetest life sentence of all. *Just ask Daud,* I thought. My father swore to the Void and back, my mother’s assassin was suffering a hell worse than Coldridge Prison as he lived the remaining years of his life in exile, plagued by the man he saw in the mirror.
Half-way through the parade, my father returned. The canopy was up, and I was waving and smiling to the crowds with Rosemary at my side when I spotted him. He was dark against the blue sky, one man in a crowd suddenly leaping from a second-story balcony unto one of the carriages in my train. Even with the sky-high tracks, it was a daring jump, at least a story high.

I leaned over and touched Captain Mayhew’s arm, for she was facing the wrong way to see it. She turned, alert and direct in her gaze. “Your Majesty?”

“My Royal Protector,” I said loudly to be heard over the cheering crowds. Her dark green eyes lifted in surprise and together we watched as Lord Corvo took each carriage at a time, leaping until he settled into ours, graceful like a bird descending upon its nest.

“Oh!” Rosemary exclaimed, dazzled.

“My lord! I thought you were to be guarding the platform,” the Captain said, leaning close to his ear.

“Change of plans,” he said evenly. His first glance was at me, dispassionately assessing that I was well and unharmed. Beads of sweat clung to his brow. He sunk to the cushions below, threading his fingers through his dark brown hair. He wore it long for a man, the ends curling against his neck.

I nodded at the Captain and she closed the canopy, sealing us in privacy and blessed quiet. The cacophony of the crowd was like an undulating wave, rolling between deafening applause and hushed murmurs. Caught between happiness and fear, I thought. My people loved me––of that I was sure––but they were afraid of the Crown Killer and the city was beleaguered by troubles. I’d sat through dozens of council meetings about rising unemployment, struggling businesses, and overcrowded soup kitchens.

But it was different seeing it up close.

I could smile. I could wave. But the forced cheer taxed my endurance when my eyes drifted over the crowds, finding the hollow gaze of an orphan, half-naked and dirty, or the outstretched hands of an old beggar, so thin he looked like the walking dead.

All that suffering and the aristocracy still had the nerve to constantly needle me about whale oil restrictions hampering their extravagant lifestyles.

“Our extravagant lifestyle, Emily,” Wyman had once said, daring to open my eyes. I had come to him, grumbling about my day, and he had pulled me into his arms and whispered a rhyme that had stayed with me the whole night. “Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey / Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.”
“How shall we then fix this broken land?” I’d asked, kissing the tip of his freckled nose. “Where so many have so little and so few have so much?”

His smile had been sad. “A wise man once said, ‘So distribution should undo excess, and each man have enough’.”

“Is private altruism not enough?” I’d asked, feeling uncomfortable. “Must I force the Boyle’s of the world to give up some of their wealth?”

“Why not, Emily? The Boyle fortune is obscene.”

It made me wonder… Mother, what did you see when you looked down from your palace at the city suffering below you? I was only ten years old when she died, too young to have the kind of conversations I so desperately wanted, now that I was Empress.

Mostly, I felt helpless. What can one woman do, even an Empress? The forces behind abject poverty and unchecked greed were difficult to fathom, harder to control.

Now, with my father’s long absence and sudden return, I felt that loss of control deeply. Some days I wished he would seize the throne and rule in my stead, or just take me away from Dunwall to live a secret life up in the mountains. You can’t run away from your problems, Emily, I told myself, feeling foolish—but this time of year always put foolish thoughts in my head.

The carriage felt cramped with the four of us now seated inside. Rosemary was beside me, clinging to my arm and openly staring at my father. He sat opposite of us, next to the Captain. I almost smiled to see the two of them together, wearing near identical expressions of serious aloofness.

But my father’s eyes held dark secrets, a disquiet that shriveled my courage. He knows something, I thought. I reached across and touched his knee, forcing him to look at me. “What happened, Father? You’ve been gone for hours.”

“Well?”

He only briefly met my gaze before looking out the carriage windows. He seemed faraway.

“Is that a rhetorical question?” I snapped. “I have reason to worry, as you well know.”

“I’m never far from you, Emily. You know that.”

He’s thinking about leaving, I suddenly realized.

Had today been a test of sorts? To gage whether I was safe in the Captain’s care? To see if I could handle feeling alone, even if I hadn’t been truly? If he meant to sail to Karnaca, I would have to get used to his absent shadow.

I took a deep breath, determined to show him I could handle myself, that I wasn’t afraid. “No matter,” I said, aloof. “The parade is going splendidly so far.”

I added, straight-faced, “Hardly any murders.”

“Your Highness!” Rosemary blurted, half-laughing.

In truth, I wasn’t sure. With the City Watch patrolling the parade route, people were on their best behavior, joyful and adoring, but when the coin began to fall like glinting rain, tossed from the
carriages above, the crowds went berserk. They shoved at each other like dogs fighting over a bone. I wasn’t sure that someone hadn’t died in the scuffle.

Captain Mayhew frowned. “Empress, if I thought for an instant you were in danger, I—”

“Of course,” I said, rudely interrupting her, my eyes boring into my father. “I’m waiting for my report, Lord Protector.”

The ghost of a smile crossed my father’s lips. *I remind him of Mother,* I realized.

Corvo leaned back, casual and unconcerned. “I concluded my business with Lord Wainwright. The general spoke truly. The security measures at the platform are well in place. Since then, I’ve been watching your progress. I’ve decided to divert the tracks up ahead. We’re skipping the roundabout in the Drapers Ward District. We’ll finish up at the Old Waterfront, then continue over Kaldwin’s Bridge. We’ll end the parade, as planned, in the Old Port District.”

“Why skip the Drapers Ward?” I asked. “I thought the streets were safe again, the shops reopened.”

“One of my Eyes caught wind of a street protest. I don’t want you anywhere near there in case it tips into a full-scale riot.”

The Eyes were my father’s elite spies, an elaborate network of shadow informants who reported directly to him. They operated above the law, independent from the City Watch.

*But they have a blind spot,* I thought. The Crown Killer was evidence of that.

“But the gangs are back?” Alexi asked, her eyes flaring with annoyance. As Captain of the City Watch, she regularly received reports of criminal activity. The Drapers Ward, in particular, had a long, bloody history of lawlessness, especially during the Rat Plague, but that was fifteen years ago—now it was not unusual for law-abiding citizens to fight back by taking to the streets in protest, confident in the City Watch’s protection.

But like poverty, gangs were difficult to eradicate. In this I followed my father’s advice, seeking a delicate balance to put the warring gangs on even ground, lest their turf wars overrun a specific district. At present, the Hatters and Dead Eels were the two most infamous gangs operating within Dunwall. My father’s undercover Eyes clandestinely monitored their activities.

The gangs ran Black Markets, employing many a pirate along Wrenhaven River.

“No,” Corvo said. “They’re protesting the City Watch. They claim all the *accidental* killings in their district are no accident. They say it’s Lieutenant Mortimer Ramsey and the men from his squad, wringing people for coin, then killing them if they don’t pay up.”

“What?” Captain Mayhew gasped. “Do these protestors have proof? This isn’t the first time the City Watch has been unfairly targeted by disgruntled citizens.”

She was quick to defend one of her own, which didn’t surprise me. Lieutenant Ramsey was her First Officer, the highest-ranking officer under her command. If the accusations were true, it reflected poorly on her.

But the guilt ultimately fell on me. “I personally appointed Ramsey,” I pointed out, feeling sick.

“I’ll look into it,” Corvo promised.

“And not jump to conclusions,” the Captain said, nodding with resolve, but clearly troubled by the
The remainder of the parade floated by like a dream.

I felt like I was trapped in one of those little music boxes Anton Sokolov had made for me as a child. A little dancer would pop out when I opened the lid, spinning to the tune of *Princess of the Spirit Wood*, an old folk song you’d hear in the back country of Tyvia. As the trains moved from district to district, the Captain would crank open the canopy and I would pop out of my box, waving and smiling to the crowds, then descend once more into the darkness and quiet below, before popping back out again.

Rosemary liked it; I could see it on her face.

She pointed out the *good* to me. The jolly fat mothers with their rosy-cheeked babes held high. The young girls holding hands and playing hopscotch in the streets. The sailors playing dice and laughing at their good fortune. *It’s not all darkness and turmoil*, her blue eyes said without words as she squeezed my hand, giving me the courage to make it through.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I whispered, thinking of Wyman. I wasn’t exactly… *angry* that he left. I understood *why*.

But it was hard to think reasonably when I felt so alone, crushed by the emotions this time of year always brought up in me.

“So am I,” Rosemary whispered back. “My life is beautiful because of you.” She loved living in the palace with me. She told me every day. Sometimes it was hard to believe we had only known each other for three years. Our friendship felt much stronger, *older*. As if we had a bond that surpassed time.

When the parade passed over Kaldwin’s Bridge, I couldn’t help but think of my grandfather, Emperor Euhorn, who had commissioned the bridge long ago. It was a symbolic monument of unity, bridging Wrenhaven River and linking the north and south shores of the city. Today’s launch of the *USS Jessamine Kaldwin* would, by the same token, be remembered for all time as a celebrated symbol of the Empire’s vast reach and unshakeable unity.

Idealistic, I know.

But was it not part of my function as Empress to spread the glory of the Empire? If I couldn’t believe it, how could I expect others to believe it? *To die for it?*

In that moment, I couldn’t help but steal a glance at my father. He saw Kaldwin’s Bridge in a darker light.

During the Rat Plague, people had used it to commit suicide.

At last, our train rumbled to a stop, reaching the docks. The Old Port District proudly housed the Hounds Pit Pub, the old headquarters of the Loyalist Conspiracy, now turned into a historical monument open to the public. The surrounding area had been built up in recent years, businesses drawn by the tourism. With Dunwall Tower across the river as eye candy, the rich and powerful were snatching up real estate close to the waterfront. In some circles, they were calling it the *New Estate District*.

Horns began to sound, signaling my triumphant arrival. Rosemary smiled at me. “Good luck, Your Highness!”
She knew I hated making speeches.

The Captain exited first, swinging open the carriage door and formally standing aside.

My Royal Protector went next. He took my hand in his and escorted me out of the carriage. The crowds cheered madly as we walked, hand in hand, with heads held high towards the ceremonial platform. The Royal Navy in all its glory was on full display. My chest swelled with pride to see such proud tradition honored in the long and tidy rows of elite sailors standing at attention. They wore royal blue, their uniforms crisp and clean, with satin white gloves and navy hats.

Flags were foisted high, flapping in the brisk wind, and I could hear the squawking of seagulls in the distance as they flew over the waters.

Up close, the USS Jessamine Kaldwin took my breath away.

She was a magnificent ship, an engineering marvel co-powered by steam and whale oil. She was moored close to the docks, making her steel-framed wooden hull appear enormous. Against that polished grain, I smashed a sacrificial bottle of King Street Brandy for good luck. I looked forward to reading about her maiden voyage for I knew my Navy generals would keep me well-updated in her travels. She will protect my shores, I thought, like a mother protects her children.

The cheering fell to hushed whispers as I took the stage, standing amidst the generals of my fleet who commanded the high seas. Each of them had known my mother, and not a few of them had tears in their eyes to see their Young Empress honoring the strong bond between the monarchy and the men and women who served the Empire, near and far.

The Grand Admiral of the Royal Fleet and Supreme Commander of the Combined Armies of the Empire, Sir Edward Slattery, stepped forward. He announced, his back rigid, “Her Imperial Highness, the Empress Emily Drexel Lela Kaldwin, the First of Her Name.”

I’d had a speech prepared, but like so often in moments like these, I found I could only speak from the heart.

“Thank you, Admiral. Thank you all for sharing this momentous day with me,” I began. My voice would be carried forth across Dunwall, blaring from the bell-shaped streetspeakers hanging across every major intersection. It would also be recorded by audiogram and sent to the four corners of the Empire of the Isles so that every citizen could hear my words.

I glanced across the way at Rosemary standing by the carriage train, her sweet eyes encouraging me.

And I glanced at my father below the stage, his eyes reflecting the look I’d made in the mirror, earlier, when I’d seen the ghost of my mother looking back at me.

A sadness tempered with pride.

I was dressed in my mother’s pant suit worn on the day of her assassination.

Today, I would remember her life, not her death.

“Good people of the Empire,” I said, loud and clear. “Today we celebrate the launch of the Royal Navy’s newest and greatest flagship, the USS Jessamine Kaldwin. Her namesake is…”

I lost my voice for a moment. I came back stronger.

“Is my mother, the late Empress Jessamine Kaldwin, as you well know. I would like to tell her story,
to honor her as I know she would be greatly honored… to see her name written so proudly on the hull of this great ship…”

My voice echoed. I swallowed hard, blinking against the sunlight dancing off the river’s soft waves. I could see across Wrenhaven River to Dunwall Tower, a gray-stoned palace of forbidding height nestled against the water’s rocky edge.

Few citizens had ever entered its walls, though they lived in its shadow.

I wanted to tell them the story of the woman who had once lived there. The story of Jessamine. Just Jessamine. Not an untouchable, all-mighty Empress, but an ordinary person just like them, thrust into extraordinary circumstances by the lottery of birth. Born under rare stars, my mother once told me. That’s what it meant to be born a Kaldwin.

“Jessamine’s story begins at her birth. We all know her father was Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin and her mother Empress Lela Beatrix. She was the only child, crowned at age twenty when her father died.”

I made a self-deprecating smile. “No doubt you’ve all read this in the history books.”

Too late, I realized, many in the empire couldn’t read. Illiteracy was an unfortunate epidemic throughout the Isles.

I took a deep breath. You can do this, Emily, I told myself.

“But it’s what the history books don’t tell you that I wish to relate this day. About Jessamine. About my mother. She believed in alleviating the suffering of her people. She believed in a just and compassionate rule. Her beliefs sometimes blinded her, I know, but her heart was pure.”

Pure… Pure…

I took a deep breath. “Her heart lives on… in all of us…”

Below the echo of my voice, I suddenly heard laughter in my ear, a dark chuckling that rumbled like thunder.

But when I paused, listening for it again, it was gone.

I glanced at my father, noticing his Outsider’s Mark burning right through the leather wrappings. Burning bright! I paled, fearing his secret was revealed to all, but when I blinked and looked again, it was as if nothing had happened. My father stood silent, watching with dark eyes.

Her heart lives on…

It echoed in my mind, shouting across the waves as I saw the water break and the giant head of a whale pierce the air, its plume of water exploding into the sky then falling like rain across Wrenhaven River.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Notes:

~Wyman's poetry is, of course, not his own. I took "Ill fares a land…” from Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774) and "So distribution should undo excess…”(King Lear, Act 4, Scene 1) from William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

~ The pseudo-military ranks of the City Watch are a bit confusing, mostly when you consider that Mortimer Ramsey is considered a "Captain" in the game. I decided to put him lower in rank than Captain Alexi Mayhew, and go with the idea that there is only one Captain of the City Watch, commanding all those below. Hence, in my story, Mortimer Ramsey is a Lieutenant (and "First Officer", above all other Lieutenants). Below Lieutenants will be First Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, Corporal, Patrolman, and lastly Cadet.

~Responding to michiev's comment (from FF.net)... Yes, I did indeed name Sir Edward Slattery after John Slattery, the real-life voice actor for Havelock from the first Dishonored. I was researching Havelock's story background, and realizing I needed a name for my new Grand Admiral, I decided "Slattery" sounded very Dishonored-esque and went with it! But I picked Edward instead of John since using someone's entire real-life name seemed a bit too creepy. (Sorry to any Edward Slattery's out there – googling it actually brings up an old bishop, haha).
After the speech, the Royal Protector and I were given a formal tour of the USS Jessamine Kaldwin by the Grand Admiral himself.

I’d appointed Sir Edward Slattery to the position after many years of leaving the Royal Navy’s highest office unfilled due to… trust issues, I suppose you could say.

Farley Havelock, the Great Betrayer—as the history books now called him—had appointed himself Grand Admiral after my father had successfully neutralized Hiram Burrows and all his allies. It’d been a terrible blow to the Loyalist Conspiracy, its greatest moment of victory turned to ash. Havelock had betrayed us all for power. He’d meant to rule as Grand Admiral and Lord Regent, commander of the seas and of land, of everything.

He had poisoned my father, leaving him for dead, and then had ‘rescued’ me by retreating to the formidable fortress atop Kingsparrow Island.

But my father had lived (thanks to Samuel Beechworth diluting the poison) and knowing the Royal Protector would not stop until I was freed, Havelock had crumbled beneath the weight of his guilt and extreme paranoia.

He had committed suicide.

I had dreams, still, of taking my father’s hand as he helped me board Samuel’s skiff, taking us away from Kingsparrow Island. I had looked back at that mighty fortress, stark against the stormy gray skies, and seen a man falling, falling…

Goodbye, Grand Admiral.

“I look forward to the tour, Admiral,” I said as Sir Edward Slattery led my father and I across the gangplank stretched between the platform and the ship.

He knew I didn’t like indulging his full title, given my past, and was smart enough not to press me on it.

“The men, too, Your Highness,” he said, not missing a step. “They’ve toiled long hours to get her ready. The Jessamine has never looked better. Scrubbed, waxed, oiled—every surface polished to perfection!”

He showed us the bridge first, an overwhelming display of gadgets and gizmos that centrally controlled the warship. The Admiral took particular pride in demonstrating her incredible firepower. He had us stand aside as he ordered his men to discharge the starboard turrets.

The long-tubed missiles (containing highly pressurized whale oil) were ejected from the ship at dizzying speeds to explode over Wrenhaven River in a thunderous blast that turned the water a bright, unearthly blue for several ship-lengths in either direction.
“The brighter the blue, the more intense the blast,” the Admiral said, his eyes shining.

“I see,” I said, amused.

_Quite enjoying himself, I see._ The Admiral beamed, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“The Jessamine is armed with torpedo armaments, as well, Your Highness, for stealth attacks underwater. I’d be happy to demonstrate—”

“Oh! No, no, I’m sure we can do without. Let us not waste anymore whale oil, Admiral.” I politely smiled, though—forgive me—my tone had been rather cheeky.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “The Royal Navy, of course, greatly appreciates Parliament’s continued support for excluding the military from any whale oil rationing, and for providing us the purest grades.”

I bit the inside of my cheek and turned a glance at my father. Corvo caught my look and smirked. A _sweetly delivered threat from the Admiral, was it?_  

I couldn’t blame him. I had indeed tried to cut back on the military’s supply of whale oil, sparking an intense backlash in Parliament. The Admiral well knew I would try again. But not yet, not while the Crown Killer shook at the foundations of my throne like a fault line, threatening an earthquake that would rip the Empire apart.

I couldn’t risk upsetting the Navy.

“Oh, of course, Admiral,” I said, forcing a smile. “We understand the tremendous… _need_ of the Royal Fleet, to protect our great shores.”

But the whales were disappearing.

At its heyday, Slaughterhouse Row processed dozens of whales a month, their massive bodies hauled and sliced, lifted and drained, tormented and sacrificed on the altar of human greed. The river would run red with blood as though an artery of Mother Earth herself had been cut, her life’s blood leaking out until only a shriveled husk of bones remained.

I didn’t _want_ to deny the Royal Navy her means of power, but the reality of the emptying seas required unpopular decrees on whale oil rationing, at least until the whale populations recovered or an acceptable alternative could be found to power our way of life sustainably.

_One day you will hate me, Admiral_, I thought, imagining us staring each other down in the halls of Parliament.

But not today.

“Ah, splendid,” the Admiral said, stretching out his arm. “If you’ll head this way, I’d love to show you the engine room. The _Jessamine_ can easily outrun and outmaneuver any ship in the Isles. She is truly a marvel of the modern age.”

“Excellent, Sir Slattery,” I said, stealing one last look over my shoulder at the river before we headed below deck.

The whale sighting weighed heavily on my heart.

At first, I had feared no one else had seen it—that it’d been as imaginary as the sound of dark
laughter in my ear—but others in the crowd had shouted and pointed, cheering wildly. ‘A good omen!’ they cried. ‘A good omen!’

My heart had dropped. *No, a bad omen.* As excitement rippled through the crowd, I had taken a moment to pause and recover my wits, closing my eyes and focusing on the sound of my beating heart until it drowned out the Outsider’s voice.

Yes, the *Outsider*.

It was him. It had to be. He had laughed, taunting me with secrets half-revealed.

I knew it must be him because I remembered *that* feeling. Cold. An icy shiver down my spine like winter’s kiss.

I’d felt it once before, long ago.

When I had looked up again, every eye was on the river, searching for another glimpse of the whale, but I knew it was gone. *Back to the Void.*

All eyes except my father’s.

Corvo had almost stepped forward, his mouth opening in alarm, but I had stopped him with a sharp glance and continued my speech. Now, for the life of me, I couldn’t remember what I’d said. Something about fair shores and a terrible Ocean and always being homeward bound.

I hoped I hadn’t disappointed Lord Wainwright too much.

Now with the tour dragging on, I could feel my father’s impatience. His dark eyes caught mine, inquisitive and concerned. I desperately wanted to tell him all that had happened, but now was not safe. *We had* to be alone. No exceptions, lest our conversation be overheard. Talk of the Outsider was severely taboo. We risked offending the Abbey of the Everyman if my father was caught a heretic. The most fanatical of Overseers would regard his Outsider’s Mark as a death sentence if discovered.

Thus, I held my tongue, patiently following the Admiral.

Below deck we toured the engine room, a clanking and clamoring space that made me feel uncharacteristically claustrophobic. When I would train with Father, he would sometimes force me into small spaces to inure me against panic.

Walking through the engine room, I realized it wasn’t the darkness of a small space that frightened me, but the sound of it. Here, that fear was magnified, for the engines made a terrible racket, pressing in on all sides.

I was glad to leave it behind.

The Admiral brought us next to the brig which had the unfortunate happenstance (for future prisoners) of being up against the engine room. *A torment of sound,* I thought, wondering if being sent to Coldridge Prison was preferable.

Next, we toured the galley, a far more pleasant experience. A rich aroma of garlic and fish stew bubbled up from the stoves, reminding me of home. My stomach grumbled. Erick Plainstow, my scheduling secretary, had planned for an exquisite dinner party in the Rose Gardens upon my return. He was calling the event the Sunset Regalia. *Because when you’re an Empress, every dinner is a bloody event.*
We moved on.

The sick bay was neatly organized and well fit to deal with ailing or injured sailors. We popped our heads into the living quarters, rows of hammocks offering respite, and toured the saloon where men could relax and unwind. It was empty, with most of the crew above deck, guarding the parade’s grand finale.

The Captain’s cabin was last up on the tour.

It was a large, sumptuous chamber in the forecastle of the ship. Sunlight streamed through wide windows, illuminating the fancy, aristocratic appeal of the furniture and decor. An older man wearing a brown ascot cap sat at a glossy desk near the windows.

He looked out of place.

His clothes were a dull, patchy brown of lesser quality than the rich fabrics surrounding him. He was pouring over what looked like maps or diagrams, and when we entered, he put down his magnifying glass and stood.

“Are you the Captain?” I asked.

“Dear Spirits, no,” he said, blushing furiously and bowing—more than once and quite awkwardly. I sometimes elicited such reactions when people met Royalty up close for the first time.

The Admiral told me, “Your Highness, this is Mister Alistair Fletcher, the master architect of the USS Jessamine Kaldwin. He’s here to give the ship one final inspection before her maiden voyage.”

“An honor to meet you,” I said, trying to hide my surprise. “You’ve done a great service to the Crown.”

“The honor is mine, ‘Highness. Your Highness,” he stammered, then, mortified, he snatched the cap from his head and smiled sheepishly, wringing the cap in his hands so tightly I feared it would never fit his head again. His dark hair was greasy and unkempt, and he looked like he hadn’t slept for days, but his brown eyes were shining with passion and birdlike alertness.

I recognized that look.

Was he an eccentric? My experience with Anton Sokolov and Piero Joplin had shown me the inexplicable link between genius minds and strange personal habits.

“Please, let there be no formality between us,” I said, trying to put him at ease. “I do hope you’ll be at the Sunset Regalia, later?”

When he just stared at me, I looked to the Admiral. “Do tell me he was invited!”

“Eh, it must have been overlooked, Your Highness,” Sir Slattery said, having the decency to look embarrassed.

“Well, easily correctable,” I said, smiling at the master architect. “We’re throwing a little party this evening at Dunwall Tower in honor of the launch. Please, I would feel so honored if you came.”

Little party was, of course, my surpassing modesty.

Given the guest list—nobles, nobles, and more nobles—the eccentric shipwright would be a welcome addition. I was tired of the same old toadies kissing up to me, and with Wyman gone, I
knew I’d be battling a great horde of young men vying for my attention, seeking an opening. I could use the distraction.

“Yes, yes, thank you,” he said, almost whispering. “I… my d-daughter…”

It took a moment before I realized. “Oh, yes, your daughter would be invited, too, of course,” I said, smiling encouragingly. “What’s her name?”

“Philippa Fletcher, but we just call her Ph-Philly. We’re a father-daughter team,” he said with simple pride. “Just like you and the Royal Protector. Well, maybe n-not. I mean, we own Fletcher and Daughter, not entire i-i-islands.” His nervousness was making him stammer. “Philly’s just sailed in from Ka-karnaca to be here for the launch. Our business began there, you know.”

“I didn’t know.”

My eyes flew to my father. Karnaca. I smiled warmly at the shipwright. “Mister Fletcher, we would love to meet your daughter and hear all the news and gossip coming out of Karnaca.” I felt dirty digging the old man for information, but some things only a local would know. My father and I would never turn away possible leads on the Crown Killer. The murders had begun in Karnaca, after all.

“The only thing coming out of Karnaca are damn bloodflies,” the Admiral blurted, and quite heatedly. An awkward silence ensued as the master architect physically backed away from the Admiral.

“How bad?”

It was my father’s voice, speaking up out of nowhere. My attention snapped to him, alerted by the deadly calm in his voice.

It was a serious question.

“How…bad?” Fletcher hesitantly repeated, clearly unsure whether my father was asking him or the Admiral.

“Yes. How bad are the bloodflies this year, Mister Fletcher?”

Lord Corvo took more care to sound polite. He had scared the old man without meaning, too, I knew. (Not unusual, truth be told. Many found my father intimidating).

“Uh, quite bad,” Fletcher said, wringing his cap. “Parts of the city are under qu-quarantine. The nests, they… they lay eggs in people’s b-bodies.” He looked at me, pleading. “I’m sorry, Your Highness. It’s no t-t-talk for polite company,” he stammered. “Trust me when I say, you never want to see a swarm of hungry bloodflies up close.”

Again, silence.

I stared at my father, confused as to why he cared about bloodflies in Karnaca. We’d been informed of the infestation, of course. I had several unanswered letters from the Tyvian Trade Commissioner in my study, hounding me for more port inspectors, sea patrols, and straight-out compensation for the losses they’d taken. Freight from the Isle of Serkonos, bound for Tyvia, were routinely set upon by pirates or spoiled by bloodflies.

A bloody nuisance, either way.
“Thank you for the information, Master Architect. It’s more useful than you know,” Corvo said.

Then, surprising me further, my father respectfully bowed in the Serkonan manner, between one
countryman to another. It was a sweeping bow, far more chivalrous than the rigid, curt bow of
Gristol tradition. I loved when my father did that—sometimes it was easy to forget his heritage,
living as long as we have in Gristol.

Corvo then withdrew a square-shaped token with his likeness imprinted on it and gave it to the man.

“Show this at the gates or they won’t let you in. The Sunset Regalia is invitation only.”

“Thank you, Royal Protector,” Fletcher said, cradling the token in his hands like it was a prized
jewel. In many ways, it was. Lord Corvo did not often grant such access to the palace. Only the
most honored and trusted guests received them, and rarely.

I smiled at the master architect and he smiled back.

Corvo cleared his throat. “For now, Grand Admiral, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to take a moment
with the Empress. Alone.”

The Admiral’s eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. “Of course, Lord Protector.” He nodded at the
architect and together they left the Captain’s cabin, solidly closing the door.

But even with it closed, the risk was too high. There are no secrets on ships, I thought, wondering if
the Admiral was, even now, shamelessly pressing his ear up against the door.

“Take my hand,” Corvo said.

“Now?”

My heart hammered in my ears as memories of the whale sighting and the Outsider’s voice returned
full-force, as if it was happening all over again. Yes, now, I thought. I had to tell him.

I swallowed hard and reached for his right hand. His sword hand. His left—marked by the
Outsider—was for magic.

He clasped our fingers tightly together.

“Don’t let go,” he said.

Or the magic would fail and I would be pushed out of his time. It was the Outsider’s gift, such
power. My father could Bend Time, slow it down to a crawl for a short duration. He lifted his
sorcery hand, his fingers curling towards his face, bent at each joint as though caught in a terrible
riktus of pain.

Whispers from the Void encircled us. An unintelligible sound to me, but perhaps had meaning to
him.

The air seemed to thicken into molten glass, twisted and turned as though under a glassblower’s
breath.

Caught in the in-between, my father had wrested time itself, creating an arcane sanctuary where we
could safely talk. He never took such actions lightly. Bend Time was a powerful spell, meant to tip
the scales in his favor during violent confrontations.

He could stop time in that split-second after a pistol was fired, the bullet frozen in its path. If he
wanted, he could reposition the man himself, unfreeze time, and effectively kill the man with his own bullet. Or he could simply snatch the bullet from thin air, taking it out of play. He could trespass a heavily guarded room without detection, right under their noses, or he could choke them all out before a man could sneeze.

Everything was his to manipulate, to sabotage, to control.

And for us, it meant we could talk freely without fear of being understood. An observer might hear noise, like unto voices, but it would be unintelligible—an entire, lengthy conversation squeezed into a pinprick of time.

“I can hold it for a few minutes,” Corvo reminded me, his sword hand grasping my own, his sorcery hand still raised and holding the spell. “What happened during the speech?”

“What of the bloodflies?”

“You first.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, scrambling for words, for him to understand. What I say next will change everything. My father had warned me long ago to tell him at once if the Outsider ever tried to contact me again. During the Rat Plague, when I was just ten years old, I’d had a terrible bout of nightmares while sleeping in the broken tower outside the Hounds Pit Pub.

I would wake screaming and clawing at my own skin, that cold, icy shiver running down my spine.

Corvo had found a bone charm under my pillow. It’d been my first—and only—taste of the Outsider.

Until now.

Corvo had taken the bone charm away, angry that someone had tried to curse me.

Now I had to somehow explain the living nightmare that had afflicted me during the speech. “It started with laughter,” I said. “No one else could hear it. And your Mark, I saw it burning. I was terrified others would see it, but it just…” I shook my head. “It was like it never happened. But the whale—that happened, didn’t it?”

“It did. You know it did. What of the Outsider? Did he speak to you? Did you see him?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes. No.”

“Tell me.”

“I heard the Outsider’s voice. He repeated what I had said during the speech, over and over, like… like he was letting me in on a joke, a twisted joke at my expense.”

“What did he repeat exactly?”

I stared into my father’s dark brown eyes, terrified by what I saw. He looked ready to snap, as though he already knew the answer to his own question, and that the answer, once spoken out loud, would be like a cold blade to the gut, slicing him to his core.

I didn’t want to say it.

“Her heart lives on.”
It was a whisper, but it seemed to affect him like a battering ram. In the aftershock, my father almost dropped my hand, but I squeezed with all my strength, holding us together.

*Don’t let go.*

Tears welled in my eyes as the truth screamed from his.

“What does it mean? Father, please tell me!” I turned angry. “You know what it means! Is my mother… alive?”

He couldn’t talk, couldn’t hold my gaze.

But then he took a deep, shuddering breath. His voice sounded strangled. “The Heart,” he said, agony in his eyes.

“What heart?”

“Emily, it was… oh, gods.”

“Tell me!”

“It was an artifact of the Void, given to me by the Outsider.” His voice steadied as the words rolled out of him, like it was freeing him. “He told me, ‘With this heart, you will hear many secrets,’ and that it was ‘the heart of a living thing.’ No one else could see it. It appeared out of thin air when I reached for it, and it disappeared back into the Void each time I was done.”

“What do you mean ‘each time’?”

He wouldn’t look at me.

“Father!”

“I thought it was a useful tool.”

He twisted the word *tool* into something cruel. I could tell it hurt him to say it.

“But it was your mother’s spirit, Emily,” he said, despair bursting in the darkness of his eyes. “Somehow, someway, she’s trapped inside that thing, that mechanical monstrosity of flesh and glass and gears.”

I’d been holding my breath. I forced myself to breathe deeply, to stay calm.

“Where is it now?”

“In the Void? I don’t know.” He shook his head, his shoulders slumped. “After the Rat Plague, I couldn’t reach for it anymore. Sometimes I can still hear her voice in my dreams, but…”

His voice cracked.

“But I can’t save her.”

We shared the next few precious seconds in silent horror, alone and afraid with our own thoughts.

I hated him.

Hated him for keeping such secrets. She was my *mother!* I deserved to know! And I hated him for
using her like that, if it really was her… With the Outsider involved, I didn’t know what to think. I glanced at my father. *How can I blame him?* The black-eyed bastard tricked him.

I let my anger subside.

Fall.

I saw his hand begin to tremble. We didn’t have much time.

“Why would the Outsider target me?” I asked. “Has he taken an interest in me for some reason?”

“I can’t say that he has, Emily. You had no idea about the Heart; it was a secret gift to me.” After a pause, he reluctantly added, “But maybe the Outsider wanted to see if I would tell you the truth of it or not. He likes watching how people react to things.”

“Then why now?”

“Jessamine’s anniversary? Who can say,” he snorted in disgust. “No one can know the Outsider’s mind. That’s why you must resist his attempts to seduce you, Emily. Turn away. There’s only madness at the end of that road.”

At the end of his road.

It was why he was so adamant that I tell him if the Outsider ever tried to contact me. He didn’t want me to end up like him, trading my sanity for unnatural powers.

“I’ve seen what happens to people who try to chase after that dark dream,” he said. “That vision of his face looking down at you with interest. They obsess and obsess. Most of the time, the Outsider just ignores them. He only Marks a chosen few. Seven? Eight? No more than ten walk in this world with his Mark, Emily. Don’t let one of them be you.”

Time was up.

“Wait,” I said. “Don’t unravel the spell just yet.”

I nodded towards the door.

“I want to see,” I said, forcing a smile. My skin felt tight, the river of my drying tears cracking.

In the darkness of his eyes, I saw tenderness emerge. “As you wish, Empress,” he said, “but make it quick.”

Hand in hand, we crossed the Captain’s cabin, and I opened the door. The Admiral was indeed behaving badly. His body was frozen in place, leaning forward with his ear turned towards the now-open door. If my father let go of the spell, he would fall forward, flat on his face.

Without ado, I reached out with my free hand and undid the zipper at the crotch of his pants.

My father just shook his head at me.

“Well, he *did* threaten me,” I said.

“Hmm.”

I closed the door and together we returned to the middle of the room. My father unraveled the spell, uncurling his fingers and lowering his hand. As the world quickened, snapping back into place, I felt
only a momentary disorientation. Our hands parted. I wiped the sweat on my pants and said, “You still owe me. The bloodflies?”

“Later,” he promised.

“What did you think of the tour?”

“Thorough.”

We waited a few more minutes, disappointing the Admiral, no doubt, since neither of us spoke. I flipped idly through the books on the Captain’s desk while my father picked up a wooden carving of a whale figurine, turning it in his hands.

I felt drained, torn to pieces over what my father had told me about the Heart, and I knew he must be equally suffering. Perhaps more. Guilt for using the Heart, for profaning Jessamine’s memory, for making me hate him—he’d seen the look in my eyes.

At last I could take no more. I nodded at Corvo and he swung open the door. The Admiral acted surprised to be standing there.

“Ah! So soon?”

“We only needed a minute,” the Royal Protector said. A second, I thought.

“Where is Mister Fletcher?” I asked, noting his absence.

“He excused himself to fetch his daughter. They’ll be eager to see the palace,” the Admiral replied, smiling tightly. He knew he’d been caught out.

“And you?” I asked politely. “Will you be joining us at the party, Sir Slattery?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Wearing that?”

“Your Highness?”

I didn’t answer, just walked right past his shoulder towards the exit, my face held high in perfect dignity.

Behind me, I heard the Royal Protector lean in and whisper, “Best zip up your fly, then, Admiral.”
The Rose Gardens spilled out their beauty over the tiered walkways and terraces leading up to the palace. Stately bushes of the red and white variety flowered in charming profusion, their silky petals reflecting the orangey glow of the evening sky.

The Sunset Regalia awaited.

Merry laughter and the soft clinking of silver and glass floated like sweet music through the air, accompanying the sound of violin and piano as I strolled through the gardens with Rosemary at my side. My Royal Protector was a few paces behind, talking quietly with Captain Mayhew.

“All the young lords are vying for your attention,” Rosemary said with a grin. She leaned close, clutching my arm, her golden hair shimmering in the sunlight. “Do you even see how many bold looks you’re getting, Your Highness?”

“You’ll have to describe them, dear Rosemary, because I’m not looking.”

I didn’t care to play this game tonight. Memory of the Outsider’s voice was like an anchor tied around my heart, dragging me down. Only the thought of staying strong for my father’s sake kept my head above water.

“All very well,” Rosemary said. “If only to give Wyman a full report when he returns. He’ll want to know who to punch in the face.”

I snorted. “Wyman? The man’s a poet, not a fighter.”

“Oh, dear me. How could I forget?” she snickered. “He’d ask for a duel of words, not swords. The poet warrior.”

I smiled despite myself, shaking my head.

“What would impress you, I wonder?” Rosemary said, staring up into the sky as if all my hopes and dreams were written in the heavens. Clouds stretched as far as the eye could see in layers of red and orange, silhouetting Dunwall Tower in unearthly beauty. “If you’d never met Wyman, what kind of man would now be catching your eye?”

We stopped in our tracks as if surveying the manly prospects spread out before us like a banquet.

“A red-haired poet with a dreamy look in his eye,” I said, flat-toned.

“Oh, indeed, Your Highness!” Rosemary giggled.

The party swirled with grace and cheer around us, the lords and ladies of Bristol nobility dressed at their finest.
I could name every face.

These were the influencers of high society: the senators whose voices filled the halls of Parliament and the business owners, both old and new money, who oiled the gears of industry, catapulting Gristol above all others.

Dunwall’s nobles were, of course, in thick attendance, having the least far to travel, but I also spotted city goers from Potterstead and Poolwick, and even farther north, Driscol, Old Lamprow, and even Redmoor. The outlying nations of the Empire were represented, too, but in far fewer numbers. Of their names I was less sure, but Erick Plainstow would be close to hand if I wished it, whispering a forgotten name in my ear during introductions. The Sunset Regalia was as much a diplomatic exercise as it was a celebration of the USS Jessamine Kaldwin.

Of Tyvia, the cold, far north, I spotted but one noble: the Princess Katya of Dabokva, a pale, red-nosed woman in a heavy, fur-lined robe. Tyvia was once ruled by Princes, but no longer. While her title was merely a cultural remnant, with no true power, she was married to a councilman of the Presidium, an ear away from the High Judges who ruled Tyvia.

I made a mental note to speak with her, as time would be short. I imagined she would be sailing south after tomorrow’s remembrance ceremony, to Karnaca, to visit her father. The genius Anton Sokolov had eight or nine children running around the Isles, and she was one of them.

“Your Highness, this way,” Coral said, finding us in the crowd. I’d requested a private table for two upon our arrival, tired and hungry. We hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

She led us to a little table nestled in the shadow of a tall grove of thorny-stemmed roses, softly illuminated by candlelight. We stood to the side as Coral clapped her hands and immediately a train of servants marched through, arranging plate after plate on the table. Hot delicacies from the look of it. Glazed ham sliced into juicy slivers, flaky blackened trout and candied pears. She’d even brought that crusty pigeon pie I loved so much. “Thank you, Coral,” I said as she poured two generous glasses of red wine before departing, leaving the bottle.

Rosemary pulled out the cast iron chair for me and remarked, “A lonely feast.”

“Not for long,” I said dryly. “Erick would never forgive me if I didn’t do my rounds, as he says. The man never stops—every moment of my life planned out.”

I scowled, then realizing I’d made her crestfallen, I took her hand and pulled her into the chair next to mine.

“I’m sorry, Rosemary. My sour mood has no place in an evening quite so beautiful,” I said, beseeching her blue eyes. “Please forgive me, I’m having a trying day.”

“Just promise you’ll dance with me,” she said, a cute pout on her face. “I am still your Guest of Honor, aren’t I?”

“Yes! Yes, of course. We’ll dance, I promise,” I said, smiling sweetly at her.

We took to our food, eating richly.

I didn’t like keeping secrets from Rosemary. She was my best friend, but there was no way I could tell her about my father’s Mark or the Outsider.

My father stayed within sight, keeping close company with Captain Mayhew. The two of them watched the partygoers like hawks, occasionally picking at the silver trays of food and drink that
circulated on the arms of tireless servants.

As we ate, I couldn’t help but notice the young men Rosemary had pointed out, if only because their antics grew more amusing the more wine I drank.

*They look like peacocks,* I thought. “Such gallant lords,” I muttered, stabbing my pigeon pie. “How can I resist?”

Prancing around, pecking at the edges of my personal space.

All of them trying to catch my eye and be invited closer. I had a circle of protection around me that no man dared cross. My father, yes, but my Elite Guard, too. They all acted as gatekeepers, only allowing a guest to draw near if I allowed it with the flick of my hand or some other encouraging signal.

Rosemary giggled into her wine cup.

“Oh! There’s Dougal,” she exclaimed, her blue eyes lighting up. “And look, he finally brought his wife. Her first visit to Gristol, Your Highness!”

“Kin of yours?” I asked, poking at the bits of candied pears still left swimming on my plate. Rosemary was a MacKenzie, a common surname of Morley.

“Distant kin. The Clan of Caulkenny has many branches, Your Highness. He’s a Walsh, not a MacKenzie. May I…?”

“You needn’t ask, my dearest,” I said, shooing her away with a small smile. “Greet your countrymen, Rosemary. And feel free to invite them to my private reception tomorrow morning. I would love to make introductions.”

Rosemary gasped, her hands clasped over her heart. “An honor, Your Highness! Thank you!”

I watched her hurry off, an unexpected ache of loneliness squeezing my heart when I saw the welcome she received. The Morleys were a boisterous lot, easily taken to drinking and dancing, huddling close to the court musicians, but when they saw Rosemary, they became even louder, laughing and exclaiming with joy. I soon lost sight of her completely, her blonde head disappearing into a sea of fair-headed men and women.

Such a large family, but me… *I only have my father.*

I looked up at Corvo with tenderness and regret. Always regret. His dark hair shadowed his face as he leaned close to Captain Mayhew, talking quietly.

*Thick as thieves, those two,* I thought with a little smile.

My father turned his eyes on me, noticing my long stare. He nodded at the Captain. As she melted away into the crowds, he came and stood by my table. I reached for the Tyvian Red, but my father covered the wine cup with his hand.

“Drowning in wine won’t drown out his voice, Emily,” he said. “I would know.”

I avoided his gaze. *Would the Outsider always be between us?* I said, a tad sour, “Have you ever seen me drunk, Father? You know I wouldn’t.”

Callista may have thought I’d been far too undisciplined and willful as a child, but I’d grown into a
proper little Empress. *Always doing what was expected of me.*

But what now? What instructions could Callista give me for dealing with tricksters and liars?

My father dropped to one knee, crouching beside my chair. It was the look in his eyes that undid me. A single tear escaped my control, streaking down my cheek as he gently nipped my chin and forced me to hold his gaze.

He said, “I’m sorry I never told you about the Heart, Emily. I should have, but I was ashamed.”

“Don’t speak of it,” I said, forcing a smile. *Not here.* Not with so many ears. Still, I felt like we were alone in the crowd, sharing our grief in a dark pool of memory where no light could enter.

Even after all these years…

“I miss her,” I said.

“I know. I do, too.”

I cleared my throat, dabbing my errant tear with a soft napkin.

My father stood and turned sharply, reacting to a sudden upheaval in the crowd’s soft rumble. His hand went to the pommel of his sword; waiting, watching.

I saw a man boldly approach, surrounded by hushed and furtive whispers.

I didn’t recognize his face. He was middle-aged, dark of hair and eyes, and Serkonan from the look of him. The southern isles were famous for their tropical beauty, inspiring a culture seeped in bright, colorful fabrics, light to the touch. The man wore a long, flowing cape of satin yellow and gold trim, with a loose-fitting vest and pants in flamboyant orange and red. *He looks like a bloody sunset,* I thought.

But it was his feet that drew the eye.

They were polished wood, clanking on the cobbled stones. At first, I thought they were sculpted shoes (some strange, new fashion), but when I saw exposed wires and the coppery gleam of rotating gears at the ankle joints, I realized he had no feet at all, but for the genius of some tinker’s workshop!

*Anton Sokolov’s work?*

He halted at a respectable distance, but his grin had already crossed the line, daring me to *not* let him draw closer. His dark eyes glimmered as he bowed low in the Serkonan manner, a lavish sweep of his cape.

“Your Majesty, I am Lord Cosimo Abele, younger brother of the Grand Duke of Serkonos, the Duke Luca Abele.”

He straightened, poised at the edge of his words as they echoed across the terrace gardens. Somehow, night had fallen without my awareness, color seeping out of the world. The roses looked almost black but for a silvery sheen in the moonlight. The stars themselves seemed to grant Lord Cosimo an unearthly halo as he stood before me. As brother of the Duke, he would be immensely rich, immensely powerful—and immensely conceited, that much was clear. I could taste it in his stare as he awaited my word.

I glanced at my father and nodded. He formally stood behind my chair as I waved the man forward.
“Be welcome, Lord Cosimo,” I said. “Please, join me at my table.”

“I think I shall! You have my undying gratitude.”

He bowed again, grandly, then swept himself into the chair, delivering a frosty, direct look at my Royal Protector as though sizing him up. I noted the ceremonial sword at his belt, a gilded thing that would splinter in two if tested against my father’s metal.

Coral darted through, taking away dirty dishes and pouring two cups of fresh wine. I studied him all the while, noticing the similarities to the Duke in the bones of his face: the weight of his brow, the square of his jaw; even the slight hump on the bridge of his nose looked like the Duke’s.

None of it explained the unfamiliarity of the man sitting before me. I said, “Lord Cosimo.”

He slid his frosty gaze away from my father and looked at me. “Empress.”

There was something all too forward in his gaze.

“Forgive my lapse in memory, Lord Cosimo, but I don’t recall the Duke having a brother.”

He smiled, revealing a set of gold-capped canines, top and bottom. Creepy, I thought.

“I do,” my father said, an edge to his voice that only the foolish disregarded. “Cosimo the Fool.”

The man’s eyes twisted into something cruel and broken for a moment, then disappeared into forced joviality, a smile that the most talented toadie in my court would find impressive.

“I didn’t think you would recognize me, Attano. It’s been so long. My father spoke highly of you, right up until the moment he died. My whole life I’ve heard endless tales of your great heroism and swordsmanship.” He sounded bitter as he glared up at my father, behind me. “He once said the ancient music of the Sword-Singers themselves flowed through your veins that day.”

Sword-Singers? My knowledge of ancient Serkonan mythology was rusty at best, but of the day he spoke of, I had no doubt.

The Blade Verbena.

It was a prestigious sword-dueling festival, and every year it drew thousands of contenders across the Isles. Peasant, noble, it mattered not; the sword made every man an equal.

At the age of fifteen, my father had ruthlessly fought up the ranks of the Blade Verbena, surprising everyone with his final victory. He was just a nobody from Karnaca, a street rat with no family but the gang he ran with. He cut purse strings and if the price was right, cut hamstrings, maiming men for life.

“Back then, I was just a coin toss away from becoming a cutthroat, Emily,” he’d once told me as we stood together like avenging ghosts in the early morning hours before Hiram Burrows’ lawful execution. Make no mistake, my father had blood on his hands—his long history serving the aristocracy—but it was her blood, my mother’s blood, that seemed to weigh most heavily on him. “If it hadn’t been for the Blade Verbena, I might have been the one hired to kill Jessamine.”

I remembered closing my hands around his as he held his sword, kneeling on the cold, damp stones of Coldridge Prison. He’d taken Burrows’ life that morning for conspiring against the Crown, but of Daud—the assassin who’d stuck cold steel into my mother’s chest—he had let go. Let live.
The Outsider had brought them together, a fated cross of blades in the Flooded District. But of that story, my father said little. Only that he’d seen a reflection of himself in Daud’s eyes, of how his life could have gone if he hadn’t won the Blade Verbena.

Winning had vaulted Corvo out of the shackles of crime and poverty. He’d served in the Grand Serkonan Guard beneath the Duke’s watchful eye, earning his admiration and respect. For two years, my father proved his great worth, rising against rogue city states and pirate bands off Serkonan waters, even venturing as far as the Pyandonea Archipelago.

In time, the Duke, the late Theodanis Abele, decided to send Corvo to Dunwall as a gift. A cultural gift. *Like Rosemary is a cultural gift to me from the Queen of Morley*, I thought.

Once in Dunwall, Corvo’s reputation only soared higher beneath Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin. He became the first Royal Protector of foreign blood, hand-picked by then-Princess Jessamine herself.

*No wonder his eyes boil with jealousy*, I thought, watching Lord Cosimo glare at my father. Two-times Royal Protector, and he forgotten. A Duke’s brother, and yet I had no idea of his existence.

“What is it you want, Lord Cosimo?” I asked, with little patience. I didn’t appreciate his outright hostility towards my father, and I didn’t like the look he was giving me. Men shot me lustful looks all the time—I was young, unmarried, and an Empress—but his was smoldering with wicked obsession.

*He thinks he can dominate me*, I thought, caught between amusement and disgust.

“The better question is how,” my father said. “How are you here like this? Cosimo the Fool was a drooling idiot, incapable of coherent sentences. The court jester.”

“The court jester?” I repeated, confused.

“Daughter, you’ve never heard of the Duke’s younger brother, Cosimo, because his family hid him in shame. He was born a dimwit.”

“Is this true?” I demanded.

Lord Cosimo smiled, and in that twist of the lips, I caught a hint of madness. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Explain yourself.”

He had a terrifying grin plastered to his face. “Oh, it’s a sad tale indeed. Do you really want to hear it? Ah, well… My father tried for years to cure my stupidity. Leeches, you see. It all began with leeches, Your Majesty. Black and slimy. Disgusting creatures! They got fat on my blood but could not drain the illness in my head. So sad. Sad, sad, sad. When that didn’t work, they decided to hang me upside down for days at a time… I don’t remember much about those times. The headaches drove me quite mad, you see. Oh, don’t look away Empress. I’m getting to the best part. Father let our court physician drill a tiny hole through my skull to scoop out a nugget of my brain.”

He leaned forward and tapped his skull with one finger, showing me where, embellishing his story like it was all macabre theatre. I felt my father’s hand come to rest on my shoulder, and I reached for it, holding deathly still.

“But when that didn’t work—how sad for me, yes?—my father threw me to the Overseers of the Abbey, praying their holy fires would clarify my mind.” It was then Lord Cosimo’s dark eyes rose to my father’s, seething with hatred. “When they put the flames to the soles of my feet, did you even
flinch, Attano?”

I wanted to turn in my chair, to look up at my father in silent question. *You were there?*

But Cosimo did not stop. Hatred and jealousy burned from his eyes. “Oh, how the Duke loved you. Entrusting you with the care of his idiot son.” His eyes snapped back to me. “But not every day, no. That would be too tiresome, a waste of Corvo’s obvious skill. No, I was left in the dark, locked away for my own good. Wasn’t that what Father said, *dear brother*?”

I felt the squeeze at my shoulder, my father’s hand hot through the fabric, but he said nothing.

Cosimo’s gold-capped, toothy smile returned.

“So now you know my family’s dirty, little secret, Your Majesty. Perhaps everyone does now.” He spread his hands, indicating the elegant party swirling around us in merry laughter and hushed whispers. I couldn’t deny there’d be eavesdroppers.

I felt pity for him, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I wasn’t getting the full story. My father had always spoken of the late Duke Theodanis with respect—even love. The Duke had been like a father to Corvo, his own father having died when he was very young. (My Serkonan grandfather had been a poor lumberjack, tragically killed in a workplace accident.) In light of Corvo’s glowing account, I couldn’t believe such a man would treat his son with such neglect and cruelty, especially if he was different than normal boys.

Still, the hurt and anger in Lord Cosimo’s eyes looked real enough. I didn’t know what to say. Corvo’s voice, however, held no such pity or hesitation—only suspicion.

“How were you cured?”

The Serkonan lord looked delighted to answer. “Why, the Grand Inventor Kirin Jindosh, of course!” He lifted his foot, proudly showing off the clockwork oddity, twisting it this way and that way, even wiggling one of its tiny wooden toes. “He gave me new feet—and a new mind.”

“A new mind?”

Corvo’s voice was flat, utterly incredulous.

“Oh, yes, it’s true! Jindosh invented a very special machine, you see. He calls it electroshock therapy. I don’t know how it works. I only know I woke up a new man.”

He looked at me intensely.

“For the first time in my life, Your Majesty, I understood. Not everything. I had to relearn language—or perhaps, learn it for the very first time. Can you imagine what that felt like for me? To be given such a gift? Suddenly, my life wasn’t so sad.” He smiled, flashing a glimpse of those gold-capped canines. “Perhaps, one day, Your Majesty, you will witness the marvel of the machine.”

The air seemed to freeze as nothing more was said.

“A long, strange tale, Lord Cosimo,” I said. “But, still, I must ask… What is it you want?”

This brought a sly smile to his lips.

He didn’t answer right away, instead allowing his dark eyes to dip to my cleavage, a lustful spark
that was hard to miss.

“I wanted to meet you in person before tomorrow’s… events,” he said. I heard my father step forward sharply, his sword rattling in warning, but Cosimo only eased back in his chair and crossed his arms as if bored.

“And to bring sad tidings,” he sighed. “My brother, the Duke Luca Abele, has been regrettably delayed. His ship will not be arriving until late tomorrow morning. I come in my brother’s stead to offer my heartfelt apologies for his missing the parade and tonight’s humble celebrations.”

“Delayed?

“Storms.” He shrugged. “But, I promise you, the Duke is eager to pay his condolences, to you and your father, and at Empress Jessamine’s final resting place.” His eyes floated past us to the marble-pillared gazebo in the distance. It stood forlorn in the night, off-limits to the party. Tomorrow it would be opened up to well-wishers and mourners, as was tradition.

“Thank you for the news, Lord Cosimo. You may go,” I said, nodding at him in dismissal.

“Your Majesty.” He stood, gathering his cape for another sweeping bow. As he straightened, he beamed at me, practically licking his lips. “I look forward to seeing you again. Tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow,” I said, forcing a smile.

“And you, Royal Protector,” he said with that false smile of his. “When I read in the papers that you were the Crown Killer, I thought to myself, this cannot be. Not Corvo Attano, the great hero of the Blade Verbena.” His eyes darkened and his smile slithered into a sneer. “But to see you now… I can’t help but wonder if you are, for every time I but look at your daughter, you have murder in your eyes.”

“Watch yourself, Lord Cosimo,” my father hissed in a dark voice. “That new tongue of yours is liable to get you killed.”

“Exactly my point,” he said in a slow drawl. His eyes flashed to me. “Do keep your dog on a leash, Empress. The Grand Duke of Serkonos would be most displeased if he found, come morning, his little baby brother strung up by his entrails like poor Ichabod Boyle.”

I heard a gasp from the crowd. He let it hang there for a few seconds, then finally tore his dark eyes away and departed, and at his passing I found I could breathe again.

I pushed back my chair and stood in a rush, knocking over my wine glass. It crashed to the stones, spilling red everywhere. Coral swooped in with a towel, mopping up and picking at the sharp slivers of glass.

“Oh, Coral, I’m so sorry,” I said, kneeling beside her, but she just smiled and pushed my hands away.

“No need, Your Highness. It’s all right, you’ll see. Go on, now. Enjoy the party, dear.”

I rose on trembling knees and turned towards the shadowed dark where my father stood. It was getting late. And cold. I shivered as I looked up at his face, lit by candlelight. I could tell he wanted to explain his side of the story, to wash away any doubt Lord Cosimo may have planted in my head.

“Emily…”
“He’s still a bloody fool.”

Chapter End Notes

According to Dishonored lore, Duke Luca had a younger brother named Radanis. I may or may not weave that brother's fate (an interesting death) into my story. For now, my made-up Lord Cosimo is the Duke's only younger brother.

The brief mention of the Pyandonea Archipelago will be important later. This is not Dishonored lore. I pulled the name from Elder Scrolls.
Rosemary returned, eager for a dance. She came tumbling into my presence, caught up in laughter, her rosy cheeks as round as apples. “Your Highness!” She pulled at my arm. “Come! You promised we would dance, remember?”

I yanked my arm back. “Rosemary, I—”

“What is it?” She suddenly stopped, her face paling. “Has somebody hurt you?”

“No, I—”

Erick Plainstow, my scheduling secretary, made his fated appearance with that damn appointment book. “If you’re done with dinner, Your Highness, I insist we look to our guests. The Princess Katya of Dabokva eagerly requests a private audience, as does His Grace Prince Finbar O’Brien of Wynnedown, the Queen of Morley’s own son.”

“I know who he is.” I scowled. I received nigh unto three marriage proposals a week from him.

“Erick!” Rosemary snapped. “You can tell them the Empress is currently indisposed.” Her blue eyes were fired up like fireflies against the black of night. She snatched my hand and led me on a wild dash through the crowd. Our abrupt departure upended a chair and knocked over a servant, his silver tray clamoring to the ground as fruit went flying in all directions.

Rosemary’s laughter caught on the wind, and I couldn’t help but smile as we weaved through the crowd like children at play, squeezing between lords and ladies who exclaimed in fright as we passed, hand in hand. A few decorous guests tried to bow, but we were long gone, diving into the darkness between two great hedges of green, laughing so hard we could barely breathe.

“Did you see Lady Burtzlaff’s face?” Rosemary wheezed, tears in her eyes.

I tugged her blonde hair, unable to stop laughing. “You silly rat! She’s like to have a heart attack.”

“She needs a little excitement in her life!”

I shook my head and grinned. “You’re trouble.”

Together we took to our knees and peeked through the bushes, four eyes in the dark. Our heavy breathing and intermittent bursts of helpless giggles waned into a steady calm as we watched the crowd from our hiding place. We’ve tumbled into the Hedge Maze, I realized, orientating myself to Dunwall Tower on my right.

The palace blocked out the stars, a towering mass of crenellated parapets, higher than any structure in Dunwall. In the whole world, really. Only the Clocktower in the Estate District came close.

“Do you think we set Lord Corvo on a merry chase?” Rosemary asked, grinning ear to ear.

“Hardly,” I snorted. “He’s probably behind us right now.”
Rosemary gasped, looking behind her, but when she saw only darkness, she giggled and jostled my arm. “You horrible tease!”

I doubted my father could ever lose me in a crowd. His Outsider’s Mark granted him Dark Vision, a spell to see through obstructions whether it be darkness or walls. But like all arcane gifts there were limits, and it was entirely possible I’d shaken off my constant guard.

At least, for the moment.

The Rose Gardens swelled with guests, the heart of the party, but as night deepened into twilight, the Sunset Regalia spilled over its bounds. Before us was a wide expanse of barren ground taken over by dancing, encircled by impromptu Morley musicians striking up a lively tune. Servants scrambled to illuminate the festivities, barrel-rolling cumbersome steel drums into place which they then uprighted, filled with debris and lit on fire.

I watched the flames from the dark. The ground felt cold beneath my knees. Rosemary scooted closer.

I glanced at her with a wry smile. “What are you doing, Rosemary?”

She took my face into her warm hands and kissed the tip of my nose. From there, she dropped a kiss on my lips. I felt her tongue dart into my mouth before I pushed away, but not before brushing the back of her knuckles with a kiss. I held her hands, keeping her at bay. I whispered, amused. “Are you trying to seduce me, dear Rosemary?”

“I have four months, remember?” she said with that devious little grin of hers. “But, no, Your Highness. I’m saving you. Back there… you had that look.”

“What look?”

She shook her head. “That look you make…” She lowered her eyes. “When you wish in your heart you weren’t Empress.”

I swallowed hard. “It was just…”

Lord Cosimo.

He’d unsettled me, those dark eyes roving over my body. He wanted me, but not in a kind way, like Wyman did. No, he wanted me like the men that frequented the Golden Cat wanted whores.

“It’s been difficult, Rosemary. The Crown Killer and—”

She shushed me with a finger pressed against my lips. “Don’t, Emily. You don’t need to explain, and I won’t pretend to understand the pressure you’re under. Only you, and your mother before you, could know what it’s like. Just know that I love you. You’re my best friend.”

“And you mine,” I said, squeezing her hands. “Shall we have that dance now?”

I expected her to bounce to her feet in excitement, but she looked suddenly distracted, her eyes drawn to the dancing crowd.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“I made a promise. He’s waiting. Yes, he’s waited so long. I made a promise to introduce you to him.” She urgently scanned the crowd. “But where did he go?”
“Where did who go?”

I was stunned by the intensity in her eyes. She looked utterly fixated on something, her mouth slightly open. “Rosemary,” I said. “Who are you looking for?”

“Looking for him.”

“A relative of yours?”

“Nooo, Your Highness. The Prince of Pandyssia.”

I blinked.

What?

I’d never heard of such a thing. The Pandyssian Continent was uncivilized, a vast, teeming jungle filled with danger and infested with strange creatures.

There were no cities, let alone princes.

Nothing good came out of that untamed wilderness. Hiram Burrows had all but confessed to intentionally spreading the Rat Plague by releasing swarms of infected Pandyssian bull rats into Dunwall’s city sewers.

How he had obtained the rats remained a mystery to me, mostly considering the vast distances separating the Isles from the Pandyssian Continent. Perhaps it was a pirate. Half of my childhood was spent reading countless adventure books about intrepid explorers venturing into the unknown. My grandfather, Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin, had sanctioned several expeditions into Pandyssia, but each had fallen to ruin, disappearing into the mists or returning far fewer in number, the voyagers fevered with disease, starved to the bone, and crazed in the eyes with strange tales on their tongues.

They spoke of primitives living in the jungles, of subhuman barbarians who worshipped the Outsider.

“You know,” Rosemary said, “he said the most peculiar thing to me.”

“What?”

“I almost don’t want to tell you—it’s so ridiculous!” She absently fingered the emerald choker around her neck.

“Well, now you have to tell me!”

She frowned, visibly reluctant.

But then she suddenly exclaimed, “There he is!” Her blue eyes widened in excitement and she pulled at my arm. “We must go! I made a promise.”

“Rosemary, what…”

I searched the crowd, but nothing looked out of the ordinary. The same old faces. “Who are you talking about?” I snapped. I was getting impatient.

“I’ll show you,” she said, leading me out of the bushes into the light. We crossed the distance, hand in hand. It was then I noticed my father and instantly I felt a blossom of heat explode over my cheeks as our eyes met.
Maybe I _had_ drunk too much wine.

Corvo slowly shook his head at me, annoyed at my childish antics, running away like that. I shrugged my shoulders and nodded back. _Okay, you’ve found me. What’s the problem?_ He just crossed his arms, idly leaning back against a tree.

He remained outside the swirling throng of people dancing and laughing, seemingly content to observe his wayward daughter from afar.

Rosemary, oblivious to all but her destination, pulled me deeper into the dancing crowd, wading past swinging arms and thrusting legs. I felt as though I was being swept into a rushing tide, an undertow of dread pushing me faster and faster.

My hand slipped.

Rosemary disappeared into the swarm of bodies, my last glimpse being of her hair caught in the wind, trailing behind her in curls of gold. I was struck by how beautiful it seemed, as if I was caught in a dream. I was alone, surrounded by the lords and ladies of the Isles as they danced unceasing. Their laughter rang in my ear as they spun in an ever-widening circle around me, their backs turned to me so that I could see no face among them.

_The eye of the hurricane._

One man stood alone with me in that widened circle, dancers swirling at the edges. His back was turned like the others, but as I stood there, frozen in place, I saw him slowly begin to turn. His head first, as though he’d suddenly heard a distant sound, but then fully, he twisted towards me until we stood staring at one another, there in that strange circle.

He looked quite ordinary.

I didn’t know what I expected. My heart was racing, evidence that perhaps I’d expected an exotic looking man. What would a Pandyssian Prince even look like? Barbarian eyes, perhaps, rabid and confused as he confronted the strangeness of civilization.

But he was unremarkable. His hair was dark, a black sheen with subtle hints of the deepest blue. He wore it short, with longer strands swept across his forehead. His skin was pale, untouched by the sun, and his eyes were a leaden gray.

His expression was equally colorless.

He was dressed in a handsome, high-collared suit, a black fabric that, if circumstances were different, would lead me to believe he was the son of a minor noble.

But we were caught, snared in the trap that was each other’s eyes, strung together with the outside world swirling around us. _This_ was no ordinary circumstance. Nowhere near it.

I broke the silence, forcing a calm into my voice that I did not feel. “Who are you?”

His head tilted as he regarded me with those eyes. There was something wrong, there. They looked… painted, as if the shadows and highlights of his pupils were hiding a flat surface. Something dead and cold.

“What did your little whore call me?” He spoke slowly, unhurried. “A Prince of Pandyssia, was it? Not one of my favorites.”
My heart turned to stone. “Rosemary’s not a whore.”

“Rosemary’s not Rosemary. Ask her yourself, Emily Kaldwin.” He drew closer, one slow step at a time. “Ask her what the Outsider whispered in her ear…”

Outsider… Outsider…

Time seemed to stop. Then the man—the Outsider, the Dream Whisperer, the Heretic of heretics, the Black Sorcerer, the Great Leviathan, that Spirit of the Deep—extended his hand as though he meant to take mine. I was paralyzed, afraid to move, but then I saw my hand begin to rise… He took it, bowing low to drop a gentle kiss across the back of my hand.

Countless men had done the same in my court room, but this felt different. It wasn’t polite courtesy, feigned or otherwise; it felt like romantic devotion. His fingers were cold, and his eyes were closed, the inky black of his lashes pressed against his pale cheek.

I stared at the back of my hand as he lifted away from the kiss, his thumb rubbing across my skin. The back of my hand was milky white, devoid of the Outsider’s Mark. For a heartbeat, I feared he had Marked me without my consent, but no…

It had been like that for Corvo. The Outsider had Marked him in Coldridge Prison without asking.

“How will you spend your last night as Empress of the Isles? Will you run, taking to the rooftops as you always do, watching the world burn from the shadows as you dream of a different life… or will you lock yourself away in your tower, pretending everything’s not really falling down all around you…”

He strained like a child at the edge of his seat, watching my face with disturbing intensity.

“No,” I whispered. Then louder, “No. The future is veiled, even for you.”

My voice was calm, but my hands were shaking. I pressed them flat against my legs to steady them.

I held my chin up. “My father says the Outsider cannot know the future.”

His reply was a long silence, his black gaze unwavering. This is how he seduces men and women unto madness, I thought. His gleaming black eyes were the most beautiful, haunting thing I had ever seen—I didn’t want him to stop looking at me, and yet the desire tore at me like wicked claws.
I must remember Father’s warning.

At last, he spoke.

“Your father... a friend from the bad old days.”

He grinned crookedly. It gave him a lopsided appearance, with one side of his lips higher than the other. *Almost human,* I thought, and shuddered. *He’s a god in human form. Not really one of us.* In the next instant, he lost his grin, his lips flattening into cold serenity.

“Corvo’s right,” he said, speaking slowly. *Always* speaking slowly. He seemed to savor each word as it was sent out into the world. “I can’t predict the future with absolute certainty. That’s why your choices are so fascinating to me. But I see the players and I see the game. My advice to you?...”

He edged closer. “Know when to panic.”

I gasped, buckling beneath the onslaught of too many questions, all of them terrifying, none of them made any better by the fact that the Outsider was *watching* me react, watching me struggle, watching how I could barely breathe, barely stand, barely function... How could this happen? Why? *When?* And what could I do to stop it?

He tilted his head like a curious bird.

“Be honest, Your Imperial Majesty,” he said in a mocking tone. “Do you *really* deserve any of this? Half the city can see the lights from the party, and they dream of the delights within the palace gates. I wonder... What will *your* dreams be like tonight? Will you even be able to sleep?”

I felt pulled into his eyes, dark pools of hunger, watching, waiting. I held my breath as he lifted one hand to my cheek, his cold fingers lingering...

Then he was gone, his body fracturing into a swirling black river of sharp, jagged edges, like a black mirror exploding into a million tiny pieces, each a reflection of the Void.

I swayed on my feet, every ounce of my being screaming into the emptiness he left behind.

*How will you spend your last night as Empress?*

It was an effort to keep standing.

I felt heavy and disoriented, the outside world shifting back into focus. The faceless dancers were gone, replaced by people I knew, familiar faces of the aristocracy. Senators and businessmen... Lords and ladies... I saw Mister Alistair Fletcher, the master architect. He was dancing with his daughter, Philly, and when they whirled past me, hand in hand, their eyes met mine, openly puzzled.

I stared back, but truly saw nothing.

My vision seemed to blur as the dancing crowd faded back into anonymity once more. I stared into the empty space where the Outsider had been.

*Gone.*

“Your Highness! Your Highness?”

It seemed faraway.

Rosemary’s blue eyes swam in my vision. She cupped my face with her hands. “By the Void,
you’re freezing!” She pulled me towards her, wrapping one arm around my waist. I couldn’t help but stare at her as she led me out of the dancing crowd, whispers in our wake.

Ask her yourself, said a dark voice in my ear.

I stumbled, dragging her to a stop. Her eyes snapped to mine, clouded in confusion. “Rosemary,” I said in a strangled voice. It was hard to say her name, not knowing if it was truly hers. “What did that strange man say to you?”

She frowned, looking confused. “Oh! You mean… Yes, of course. He danced with me, but he wouldn’t tell me his name. I thought he looked rather sad.”

“You called him a Prince of Pandyssia. Why?”

The Outsider had many names, but that… I’d never heard it before, and it frightened me that Rosemary had chosen it.

“Did I?” Her blue eyes sailed past my face. “I don’t recall, Your Highness.”

“What do you remember?”

She erupted in laughter, a little bubbling sound that oddly cut short when her entire face suddenly stilled. She stared at me, her eyes bulging. “He lied and made up this ridiculous story! I told him, quite harshly, that he shouldn’t go around saying such things. The Overseers have taken people away for less.”

“What did he say?” I demanded, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her.

She looked frightened. “Ow, Emily!”

“Tell me!”

“Okay.” She leaned close and whispered in my ear, “He told me I was a powerful witch, but the jealous sisters in my coven cursed me so that I would forget myself.” She leaned back and giggled, rolling her eyes. “I told you—utterly ridiculous!”

No.

I crumbled inside.

“He was dark and handsome, though, wasn’t he?” she said, her eyes dreamy.

I turned away and headed unerringly towards the tree where I had last seen my father. It was a desperate lurch forward. I didn’t know what else to do, where else to go.

Rosemary scrambled after me, a bright shadow at my side, but I couldn’t face her. “Please,” I said, not looking at her. “Return to the party. We’ll speak later.”

“But our dance… You promised!”

Her voice sounded small and innocent. I’m hurting her, I thought, crushed by it. I spared her a guilty glance, but it turned to fear in my heart. A cursed witch. She has forgotten herself. How could I ever trust her?

“Please,” I said, mustering all my strength for that single word.
I didn’t wait for a response. I left her there and went to my father. I found him at the tree, exactly as before. He was idly leaning back, his arms crossed, looking out at the party with those dark brown eyes, unconcerned.

*He’d felt nothing.*

It almost took my breath away. I thought, perhaps, he would have sensed it… the Outsider’s nearness…

But I knew it was a shock to him when his eyes finally turned on me, noticing my approach.

What he saw on my face… *Oh gods…*

He rushed to me and I collapsed in his arms, burying my face against his shoulder.
“Father?”

“I’m here.” The answer came at once, gruff against my hair as he held me in his arms. “You’re safe.”

I took a deep, shuddering breath and pushed away as he made a grab for my hand. “He didn’t do it,” I insisted as he roughly caught me in his grip.

But he had to see it for himself.

Corvo’s thumb brushed over the pale skin on the back of my hand, too close an echo of the Outsider’s touch in the exact same spot. I snatched my hand back, my composure shattering against the memory of the Outsider’s cold lips pressed against my skin, his head bowed low over my hand.

I glared at my father as he sighed in relief. No, it’s not over! Don’t think it’s over!

I wanted to scream at him. I may have returned from the Outsider’s visit unmarked, but if his words were true, I was in great danger. My last night as Empress! Over and over it shrieked in my head like a hawk’s piercing cry.

“Please.”

It was all I needed to say.

Corvo got me out of there. I could feel the curious stares and hear the shocked whispers as my Royal Protector escorted me away from the party. The Sunset Regalia continued unabated, even as my long retinue of Elite Guards followed me inside Dunwall Tower. The double doors closed behind us with a heavy thud.

I stared straight ahead at the enormous Reception Hall, wondering if my eyes were seeing their last, the palace as it now stood… Every sight seemed precious. The grand cascade of marble stairs, branching in two; black and white floor tiles, glossed to a high sheen by tireless servants; the dark grain of the wooden walls, exquisitely carved in striking patterns; and the soft echo of footsteps and murmurs as pleasantry and grace rebounded from every surface…

It was home.

Some people found it hard to think of the palace that way, steeped in formality as it often was, but to me it was my home. My mother’s home. My father’s. I would fight for it to my dying breath. Dunwall Tower was more than a place; it was a symbol—the Empire’s enduring seat of power, enfolded in Gristol’s great capital for centuries. To know its history was to glimpse the calamity and chaos that had struck the Empire at various times. It gave the palace a unique, disjointed feel; it was
both eternal and changeable.

Destroyed and built up again, over and over. Would my reign be any different?

“Take me to my throne room,” I commanded. In my ear, I could hear the Outsider’s voice, taunting me. Will you run, taking to the rooftops… or lock yourself away in your tower…

Corvo gestured to the Elite Guard, instructing them to stay below while we parted ways, moving towards the elevator on our right. As the iron-gated doors clanked open, I stepped inside first.

I asked, “Where’s Captain Mayhew?”

I thought of having Alexi double the guard tonight, but what if that was the wrong move? What if that only tipped off my enemies?

My father punched the button for the highest floor with his fist, harder than he had to. I could only imagine what he was thinking. First, the Outsider’s voice during my speech, mocking my mother’s memory by revealing the Heart, and now a personal visit from the Outsider!

These things don’t happen in ordinary times, I thought. In dread, I wondered what was coming.

I felt like I was balanced at the edge of a precipice, lured to the edge by the Outsider’s seductive black gaze.

He wanted me to fall.

As the elevator doors slammed shut and we began to rise, Corvo avoided my gaze. “I sent the Captain to the Drapers Ward. She’s looking into Ramsey and his squad to ascertain if the allegations against them ring true. She was adamant that I let her do it personally.”

I blinked at him. I’d forgotten about Ramsey. I pinched the bridge of my nose in concentration. “Right, the parade,” I said. We’d skipped the Drapers Ward because of possible riots. If the citizens’ claims of extortion and murder were true, Lieutenant Mortimer Ramsey would be disgraced, and he and his men locked up in Coldridge Prison until their trial.

“I put Eyes on it, too,” Corvo said, “but time is short. The Lieutenant is apparently scheduled to be in the Throne Room tomorrow when the Duke of Serkonos arrives. Personally requested by the Duke.”

“They go back?”

Several City Watch officers were ex-Navy, experienced soldiers with long histories serving abroad. I knew many of them crossed paths in the south with the Grand Serkonan Guard, networking with the Duke’s men to further their careers.

But Ramsey was old blood. I remembered reading his dossier when I’d been asked by Alexi to consider his appointment to First Lieutenant. He was the son of Gristol nobility, but his family’s fortune was long gone. Gambling debts, from what I’d heard. Still, it was possible his prestigious family ties were the reason he was close to the Duke.

“I don’t know,” my father snapped.

He finally looked at me, his eyes vast oceans of concern and turmoil. “Don’t worry about Ramsey. Worry about what just happened.”
“I assure you, Father, I’m not taking it lightly. I almost had a nervous breakdown in front of half the party. If you hadn’t been there…”

I ran a shaky hand across my forehead, feeling like one of those stupid girls that liked fainting in my throne room, believing it fashionable to be such fragile flowers.

“Emily…”

I sighed. “Please, Father, I just… I want to tell you everything, and I will, but… I’m just… I can’t. Not yet. I’m still in shock, I suppose.” My thoughts drifted to Rosemary, her eyes caught in the light, shining like a summer’s sky. *A witch. How can she be a witch?* We had made love in my royal chambers, kissing and tumbling like nothing else mattered.

Until Wyman.

But even then she’d never been a mystery to me. She was just Rosemary.

“I get that,” Corvo said, his voice tight. “I remember how it felt. The Outsider rarely shows himself to anyone and when he does it’s not something you easily forget. I know it’s hard to talk about, but—”

My lower lip quivered.

Corvo stopped himself, seeing the look on my face. He sighed. “I’m just glad he didn’t force it on you.”

I stared at the floor. “Me, too,” I whispered, if only because it would destroy him. I glanced up at him, curious. “Father… why did he?” His eyes were dark, shadowed by secrets. “Why did he Mark you without your consent?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I leaned my back against the elevator walls and took a deep breath, trying to calm down. I tilted my head back and stared at the ceiling. I didn’t think Corvo would say more, but he did.

“Maybe because he knew I would have said yes.”

I gasped. “Said yes?”

“I was rock bottom, Emily. Desperate doesn’t even come close. I couldn’t have escaped Coldridge that night without it. His Mark, it… it gave me a second chance at life.”

“But the price—” I blurted, upset.

“I know.”

He lifted my hand and planted a kiss on the back of my fingers. That, too, was disturbing, an echo of his kiss. The Outsider’s. His black shadow touched my every thought, my every sight. How could I ever rid myself of him?

“Don’t worry about me, Em. You’re all that matters now. Just tell me everything the Outsider said, and we’ll figure out what he’s playing at.”

*Playing with you,* I thought.

If the Outsider had been interested in me, I reasoned, he would have Marked me. *But I’m nothing to*
him. Just a throwaway pawn in whatever elaborate game he was playing with Corvo. The Outsider was obviously fascinated by my father. I hated it. I didn’t want to end up like Mother, another gaping wound in Corvo’s heart, just so the Outsider could watch how my father dealt with it. The sadistic, voyeuristic quality to the Outsider made me sick. *He should be ugly, not beautiful,* I thought.

The elevator doors clanked open, depositing us unto an open-aired courtyard. This part of the palace was cordoned off from the bulk of the chambers below, for security. The throne room, and my royal chambers beyond, were only accessible via the elevator or the pulley system at the outer wall. The pulley lifted bulky furniture or construction equipment, sometimes even heavy turrets for the battlements, but occasionally it was put to use in conveying large parties of people and carriages during throne room ceremonies, such as tomorrow’s.

I saw the usual guards on duty, patrolling the courtyard and battlements in groups of two. A few were off-duty, leaning casually over the side to watch the Sunset Regalia far below, smoking and chatting amongst themselves. I couldn’t blame them. It was a beautiful night despite the chill, and the view was breathtaking. Dunwall Tower sat atop an ancient cliff, commanding a bird’s eye view of the city below. The river sparkled like an emerald necklace in the distance, reflecting the glow of city lights.

Corporal Dial met us at the doors to the throne room, bowing curtly. He looked surprised to see us, no doubt expecting we’d be at the party for longer. Leaving early was unusual.

“Corporal,” my father said, “Captain Mayhew is away on other business. I need you to take charge of tonight’s security detail. I want the throne room cleared, and the royal chambers. No one in, no one out. Keep a small detail at the elevators. If the Captain returns early, let her in.”

“Yes, sir,” Corporal Dial said, clicking his heels together in salute. We followed him inside the throne room as he barked orders at the Elite Guard and the servants, rushing everyone out with the swoop of his bulky arm.

“Very good, Corporal.” Corvo said as the last of the servants scurried through the door. Corporal Dial nodded and firmly shut the massive doors to the throne room, his face grim.

We were alone.

“We should talk in your safe room,” my father said. I saw his sorcery hand rise as he used *Dark Vision* to double check that everyone had cleared out.

“No,” I said.

We were in the middle of the vaulted chamber. It looked different. The servants had been preparing for tomorrow’s remembrance ceremony, setting up decorations while I’d been gone. Fragrant rose vines climbed gold-capped trellises in long rows, flanking either side of the hall leading up to the raised dais.

I stared at the throne chair, envisioning my mother seated upon it, looking down at me with infinite compassion... The enduring calm of her green eyes, lit from within... *How did you do it, Mother? How did you always keep it together?* So calm, so regal, the height of Gristol composure.

*Unlike me.* I too often wore my heart on my sleeve; I knew it. Corvo once said it was my Serkonan side, a passion in the blood.
A *taint* in my blood, if you read the papers.

The people of Gristol were wary of foreigners. My detractors viewed my mixed heritage as just another reason to criticize my throne. The worst, though, came in a responding argument from a so-called supporter of the Crown, written in the Dunwall Courier just last month. The noblewoman claimed that since Empress Jessamine had never married, nor officially declared Corvo Attano the father, there was a ‘good chance’ I was indeed of pure Gristol blood.

As if that made everything better.

Politicking dictated that it was better to believe I had been fathered by a *Gristol* man, even if that implied my mother had cheated on her foreign lover by doing so. It made me sick to see the truth warped into something more palatable to the aristocracy.

*What lies will they tell themselves tomorrow if I lose my throne, or worse, my life?*

I climbed the steps to the throne. Behind the chair, hanging on the wall, were two crossed blades. They were ceremonial, of course. Dull edges and gilded hilts.

But they would suffice.

I took them down, one by one, and walked to the edge of the steps. I threw one at my father, catching his eye. He looked intrigued, and maybe slightly amused.

Corvo caught the blade, flipping it in his hand with long accustomed ease. He had not lost his edge since the Blade Verbena. If anything, his skill had only grown, refined with age.

He was the best swordsman in all the Isles. Far better than me. He’d been training me in secret for years—had started on my fourteenth birthday—but I didn’t have his strength or his reach.

He’d taught me *survival*.

Not by brute force, but to use my wits. Outsmarting the enemy. Setting up encounters, planning escapes, and if I had to fight, putting every advantage into my corner that I could.

But most of all, believing in myself.

“Does the Outsider ever lie, Father?” I asked, pointing the tip of my sword at him and taking a combat stance. I was naturally left-handed, but Corvo had taught me to use a sword in both hands. In combat, though, he said to always favor the right. A left-handed swordsman was made vulnerable by the chest’s anatomy, the heart side turned towards the enemy.

“Yes,” he said, mirroring my stance. “Like any man.”

He had his own weapon, of course. Corvo always kept his special folding sword at his belt. Light, retractable, and razor sharp, it was crafted by the genius Piero Joplin during the Rat Plague. There was none like it.

But he would only draw it in my presence if I was truly in danger.

I watched his eyes like he’d taught me. We circled one another, drifting away from the throne towards the center of the chamber. I loved our mock swordplay. Training was the best way I knew to control my emotions, to narrow my focus to one sole purpose. Survival.

“But the Outsider is neither all good, nor all evil,” Corvo said, thrusting his blade towards my right
shoulder. A minor engagement. I deflected, the clashing sound echoing in the large chamber. I readied for his main attack.

He feinted a downward thrust, and I angled my blade, but didn’t take the bait. “The Outsider said tonight will be my last as Empress,” I said as casually as I could.

We often talked this way, trying to distract the other with something outrageous spoken out loud. It wasn’t so much a game as learning to ignore an opponent’s taunts, to not become distracted. Between us, though, it was usually something silly or derogatory, eliciting laughter or feigned outrage. Rarely would it make a dent in my father’s concentration.

But this time it did. And it didn’t just make a dent; it hit him like dynamite blasting off a cliff face.

I strongly advanced, attacking in a fury, using everything he had taught me, fighting for every inch of steel crashing against his. The Outsider said tonight will be my last as Empress. If Corvo’s head was a bell, I’d rung it loud and clear. He lost his concentration in that split-second—I saw it in his eyes—but he recovered quickly, parrying my onslaught and forcing me back so ruthlessly that I was, within seconds, pinned against a column with his blade at my throat.

“What?” he breathed.

A single word, but a mountain of disbelief and despair.

Corvo lowered his blade, his gaze pinning me in place. I was breathing heavily, but not from physical exertion. No, it was him. It was the Outsider making me this way. It was the memory of his black eyes. Of his cold touch. How could I repeat, word for word, what the Outsider had said without falling to my knees?

But I had to try. My father was Royal Protector; he had to know; I had to tell him. I tried. My words spilled out in rush, almost indecipherable, even to my ears.

“He wonders if I’ll run away to the rooftops like I always do, or if I’ll just stay in my tower till the very end. He says I should learn when to panic, and that maybe I don’t deserve what I have–ha–”

That was as far as I got.

I crumbled in my father’s arms, our swords crashing to the floor. I buried my face in his shoulder like I had before, but this time without abandon. I was no longer afraid of countless eyes watching me, judging me.

I totally lost it.

I cried and cried, tears spilling down my cheeks in hot rivers, and I hated that I was crying. It was against everything I had ever learned about being an Empress. Never show your true feelings, Callista would say or I’d be eaten alive by my enemies. I must be cold and calculative like Mother.

But I couldn’t help it, and more than anything I wanted my father’s comfort, for him to tell me everything was going to be okay, that I was his little girl and he wouldn’t let anyone hurt me.

Corvo pushed me off, fiercely holding my face in his hands, forcing me to look at him, to stop crying and listen.

“It’s not set in stone, Emily. You hear me? If trouble does finally come, you’re ready to fight. You’re stronger than you think.” He pulled me back into his embrace, pressing me to his chest and kissing the top of my head. “You’re stronger than you think.”
We stayed like that for a time. I felt safe in his arms. Truly safe. I stopped crying and just listened to his heart beating.

He eventually stepped away. I gathered myself and tried not to feel embarrassed about crying so hard. He said, “You should try to get some sleep, Em. Whatever comes tomorrow, we have to be ready. We will be ready.”

“What do you think will come? Is there a secret army at my door? Are one of the Isles in rebellion?”

My own voice frightened me. I sounded hysterical, like a frightened little girl. Is that who you are, Emily? Why can’t I act like Mother? I felt ashamed.

I turned my back on him, shuddering. “I’m blind.”

Just like he was blind that day in the gazebo when Daud and his Whalers had come for my mother.

“I won’t lie to you,” Corvo said. “If the Outsider is warning us, then there might not be much we can do. Other than react. He wants to see what we’ll do.” He tipped my chin up with his fingers, looking at me eye to eye, giving me courage. “Remember the bloodflies?”

I nodded, mumbling, “Mhm.”

During the tour of the Jessamine, Mister Fletcher had warned us that they were bad in Karnaca. Corvo explained, “I had a feeling then, that something like this might be coming. The Outsider drawing close to watch. Forces convalescing in the south…” He looked away, contemplative. “I made a choice during the party. I was ready to sail south, to Karnaca, to leave you here with Alexi, but now…” He shook his head. “I won’t leave you. We’re stronger when we stick together.”

I smiled weakly. “We are.” I wiped my cheek, my drying tears feeling heavy on my cheek. “But the bloodflies, what do you think they mean?”

“The same as rat infestations during the Rat Plague. Chaos rising, and black magic increasing in power. Blood flies are a little more specific, though. They’re associated with witches. That might be important.”

I balked, thinking of Rosemary.

My father narrowed his eyes at me. “Did the Outsider say anything else?”

I hesitated. If I tell him Rosemary’s a witch, he’ll throw her out of the palace. Was I ready to make that choice? To ruin her life?

But was it ruining a life, or saving one? Possibly mine.

“Nothing else,” I said. A lie.

And to cover it, I sighed heavily and said, “How can I even think of sleeping? I feel like a tight rope about to snap.”

Corvo studied my face, saying nothing. He bent over and picked up the two swords from the floor. He held one out in offering, the hilt side beckoning. “Then we’ll fight,” he said, “until you feel ready.”

He knows, I thought. He knows I’m lying, but like the good father he is, he’s giving me space to
decide when to tell him the truth. The whole truth.

I took the blade.

Chapter End Notes

~ Just one more chapter, then we're off to Part II: A Long Day in Dunwall. (As if this day isn't the longest ever, lol).
An ember broke in the white-stoned hearth with a muffled crack. I watched the dying flames from the comfort of my bed, stretched out on my stomach with my chin propped up between my hands. I couldn’t sleep.

The room was quiet and still. Moonlight streamed through the open windows, illuminating my royal chambers in ghostly serenity. The heavy drapes lightly fluttered in the breeze like a sigh in the night. I’d opened the windows after Father let me alone, our training in the throne room concluded.

He’d told me to get some sleep, that fatigue was as deadly as any sword, but every time I closed my eyes, I saw the Outsider’s seductive black gaze.

I felt lost in the dark, waiting for tomorrow, my heart caught in that in between, those silent hours when the world seemed to hold its breath.

I rolled unto my back, groaning with a mix of pleasure and pain. My body hurt, a languishing ache in the muscles—my sword arm especially—but I felt good, too. A boneless peace. My fingers dipped listlessly between my legs as I thought about Wyman’s soft lips on my neck, his body on top of me, filling me.

Only last night we’d been in each other’s arms, but now he was gone.

I felt so alone. Father had essentially sequestered me in the tower, sending everyone away, both my guard and my servants.

Locked up, after all, I thought bitterly. There’s your answer, Outsider.

But I knew Corvo did it to protect me, not knowing who to trust. Even now, he slept on the floor outside my door. I didn’t have to worry about his comfort. My father wasn’t exactly suited to palace life. Goose feathered pillows. Silky bedsheets. He accepted these things because it was forced upon him, but I knew he could as easily sleep in the dust of the streets. He’d come up from that, and a part of him had never left. I could see it in his eyes, the way he’d sometimes frown when a visiting dignitary complained about the temperature of her tea or said something snide in front of a servant like they were invisible.

My father seemed to inhabit two worlds, the high society life of a Royal Protector, shielding royalty from the dangers of the outside world, and the shadowy life of a man who had peered too often into the darkest pits of society and knew his own hands could create as much violence, or more.

Normally, Corvo slept in his own bed. The Royal Protector had graciously appointed chambers in the main palace below the rooftop courtyard. From his bedroom balcony, he could view the entire Reception Hall below. It used to belong to then-Lord Regent Hiram Burrows who’d kept the room a pale, deathly white, but now it was like the rest of Dunwall Tower: warm wooden tones and royal blues and deep forest greens…
Ah, color. On sleepless nights, I would sometimes take to my easel, comforted by the sounds of brush against canvas. For the last few weeks I’d been secretly painting a portrait, the canvas hidden away in my safe room, but I’d not touched it for days, allowing the oils to dry.

*Perhaps that’s what I need. Something to do.*

Sighing, I forced myself out of bed, as there was no sense in trying. I was wide awake. My feet were bare. I had wrapped myself in a satin robe after peeling away the sweaty layers of my mother’s paint suit. The precious garment was draped over a chair for Coral to take for washing.

I wondered what the old chambermaid was doing and what she thought of my strange isolation. She acted so motherly towards me and I knew she’d be worried, having become accustomed to serving my every need. No doubt Erick had already explained away my abrupt departure to everyone at the party, falling back on his usual line this time of year: ‘Yes, yes, a most difficult time for the family. The Empress mourns her mother, deeply.’

But, tonight, I mourned my future.

“My last night as Empress.”

My voice sounded small and quiet, but I needed to say it out loud… to make it real.

“Empress…”

I didn’t know how to be anyone else.

“Empress,” I said again. I felt like a ghost, haunting my own chambers. “Empress of foolishness!” What good was any of this doing? I almost wished the Outsider hadn’t warned me; all this waiting was bloody torture.

Cold wind swept into my chambers, hollowing eerily. I tucked my hands under my armpits and crossed to the window. Far below, Dunwall sparkled in the night, a thousand lights from the city crowding the river. “This is my city,” I said, strength bursting inside my heart. “I am Empress Emily Drexel Lela Kaldwin. If I lose my throne, I will take it back.”

I shut the window and turned away, ony to face what I’d been trying so hard not to look at.

The harp in the corner.

_Rosemary_, I thought with a wounded sigh. The harp had known no other touch but hers. _How many times had she plucked those strings, comforting me in my darkest hours?_ Only three years ago, the Queen of Morley had sent her to me as a cultural gift, and since then her voice, her laughter, her music, her dancing, her everything had been flooding Dunwall Tower with light and joy.

She was more to me than a prized court musician—I always thought of her as my best friend. But what was she now? With just _one word_ the Outsider had taken that all away from me…

_Witch!_

I ran my fingers over the harp strings, a flat joyless sound. I’d lied to Father about what the Outsider had said. It’d been a gut reaction, protecting Rosemary despite everything. I felt sick to my stomach thinking about it.

I’d never lied to him before.
I wrapped around my bed, closing the window on the other side. The silence became overpowering, then. No more wind, nor the sound of passing ships along the river, their fog horns dull and droning against the night. No more birds, though at this late hour, they rarely made sound. They nested in the cracks and ledges of Dunwall Tower, pecking at bugs and fluttering their wings, their songs reserved for morning light.

I sat at the edge of my bed, my head bowed. In the moonlight, I saw a slip of white tucked beneath my pillow. Wyman’s letter, I realized, my heart leaping. I snatched it up, remembering I’d left it half-read. I pictured Wyman scribbling the words, the look on his face as he poured his heart out with ink. He was a poet; words were his lifeblood.

I found where Rosemary had left off. ‘It’ll be four months before we can see each other again. I’ll miss you.’

I paused. Those four months had taken on a new meaning for me. It wasn’t just about Wyman being gone, about braving those four months alone, a desert of distance between us. Now it was pure terror and uncertainty. In four months, I could be dead. Or exiled, or imprisoned. I had no idea. I took a deep, shuddering breath, and read on.

‘And yes, I’ll bring you some white leaf tobacco for your hookah. (Lord Corvo, if you’re reading this letter per your Royal Protector functions, know that I am joking and perfectly aware that white leaf tobacco is forbidden in Gristol.)

Take care, my daring Emily, don’t go falling from a rooftop. I love you.

—Wyman.’

A single tear trickled down my cheek and fell free, blotting the paper in my hands. “Be safe, my love,” I whispered, grateful for small mercies, for Wyman would be far from danger tomorrow.

I folded the letter and wiped my cheek with the back of my hand. I would save it with the others in my safe room. Yes, I had to keep it safe. This letter was important. It could be my last… I pushed that terrifying thought away and crossed to the tall bookshelf beside the white-stoned hearth.

It was a secret door. I curled my hand into a fist, pressing the signet ring of my middle finger flat against the specialized key lock. It made a pleasant clicking sound as the entire bookshelf grumbled, opening a doorway.

Anton Sokolov had created the locking mechanism towards the end of my mother’s reign. She’d worn the signet ring, but at her death it became mine. Only one other signet ring existed in the world and it belonged to the Royal Protector.

It was more than a safe room to me.

After the Rat Plague, I’d spent so many nights here, comforted by the windowless walls and the light shining down from above. When I was younger, I called it my secret fort. Corvo and I would build tents (blankets draped over chairs) and spend the night reading adventurous tales about sword fighting and whale hunting. Later, I’d converted it into a studio of sorts. My painting easel was here, along with my training gear: my crossbow and pistol, various healing elixirs and, of course, books. Endless books. Corvo was always making me read about sword fighting tactics and survival skills, which we’d try out later for ourselves down at the abandoned waterfront.

The safe room, of course, still maintained its original purpose. It had food rations, a bed, a toilet, electricity, and running water.
Best of all, the space didn’t feel cramped. It had tall walls and a glass ceiling to allow natural sunlight during the day and moonlight by night. The chamber itself was rectangular, with two smaller rooms, side by side, along the right-side wall when you first entered from the bedroom; I called them cubbyholes.

There was a hidden door in the furthest cubbyhole leading down into what we called Jessamine’s Inner Chamber, a secret only known to the royal family.

And there was the door that led out to an abandoned section of the palace. I took that route to reach the rooftops.

*My escape.*

I itched to leave the palace, but with Corvo nearby, I decided against it. I had already lied to him; sneaking out on this night of all nights would only incur his wrath, and so I left the secret door open behind me. I didn’t want him to worry.

An electrical light above the doorway flickered to life as I entered, illuminating what I considered my painter’s nook. The upper level of my saferoom was a little cramped right when you got through the door, crammed as it was with a large, free-standing easel, an old steamer trunk piled high with pigments, mixing palettes, paint brushes, and cleaning piles. And, of course, the couch, the perfect place to sit and contemplate my latest creation. In this case, *her.*

My mother’s face stared back at me.

I’d been painting a formal portrait of her for weeks, preparing it for tomorrow’s remembrance ceremony.

It was a secret project—only Wyman and Rosemary knew about it. They were the only two I had ever invited into my safe room; its very existence was meant to be a guarded secret. Father, of late, had avoided disturbing me when I sought privacy in my safe room, understanding my need to be alone with my friends, and so he’d never seen the painting.

The portrait was *too* formal.

Oh, I had tried to fix it. For days I had slaved over the canvas, trying to remedy the cold lines in my mother’s face, the aloofness in her green eyes, but still she stood before me, regal and perfect. It was *Empress* Jessamine at the height of her power, standing with one hand on her hip, her gaze impersonal and distant.

I hated it.

Everytime I looked at it, I felt an overwhelming urge to destroy the painting, to take the blackest pigment I could find and smear it all over the canvas in wide, brutal strokes. *This* wasn’t Mother. She liked to have her hair down. And her smile… I’d tried to paint it over and over, but it was as though my brush couldn’t curve up her lips.

She frowned in perpetual sadness. *Lost in the Void.*

But I’d only just found out about the Heart… *had a part of me always known?*

“I should stick to landscapes. I’m better at those,” I growled, turning away. The raised platform led down a few steps to the center of the safe room. There were books strewn on the floor, pages flipped open. No, not discarded. Not mishandled. These were my musings, my way of thinking and creating. I didn’t like sitting in one place when I read. I moved with the light as it streamed
through the windows far above.

I tucked Wyman’s letter into a little drawer along the back wall. We’d only been together for a year (and only sexually active since the Month of Seeds), but he’d written me dozens of love letters. The drawers were getting full.

With that done, I collapsed on the bed in the little cubbyhole with the toilet and faucet. Not the most romantic arrangement, but the other cubbyhole was crowded with treasure. Solid gold, mostly, and old sculptures and dusty books.

The bed wasn’t even that comfortable: just a mattress on a wooden platform with too-thin sheets and too-flat pillows. But it felt safe. I was surrounded by my childhood. I had started drawing and painting at a young age, and during the Rat Plague, it had helped me express my feelings. Some were bright, others dark. The drawings meant a lot to me. I even had a toy-sized wooden skiff carved by Samuel Beechworth, and a little doll in a Morley dress that Callista had given me.

And I had an audiograph machine.

Some of the recordings were of Rosemary’s music (Gristol harp or Serkonan guitar). I even had a silly recording of Wyman’s laughter when he recited a bawdy rhyme he’d written about my ‘voluptuous bosom’ and ‘secret pearl.’ He’d gotten very good at finding my so-called ‘secret pearl,’ swirling it with his tongue until I begged him to take me hard and fast.

But the punch card now fitted into the audiograph was one I would only play once a year, and had every year since Mother’s death.

I reached over and hit play, then fell back on the bed, closing my eyes.

It was my mother’s voice.

‘Emily, my daughter, I know that one day you’ll be all grown up, and I wonder what you’ll remember of these years. Will you recall your time as a child with fondness? Or were there too many caretakers, formal dinners and lessons about boring old history? Maybe the precious hours we spent together will shine brighter—time captured now and then with your mother and with Corvo, who was always close to my heart.

I hope the season of rats and plague will be nothing more than a passing shadow on your early memories. A crisis come and passed, weathered by your mother and her advisors.

You’ll sit on the throne someday, and will do well I hope. It’s a tricky life, full of responsibility and peril. It was not your choice to be the daughter of an Empress, but I believe you’ll rise to the challenge.

Stay good-hearted, Emily. Keep drawing and telling stories. And only share your power with those you truly trust.’

I felt raw, like an open wound that had just scabbed over. Easily broken.

Somehow, sleep came for me…. and I dreamed.

I was in the broken tower outside the Hounds Pit Pub, wrapped up in Callista’s arms. We were gazing out the open door, watching the waves break against the distant rocky shore where Dunwall Tower stood, dark and forbidding. I stared at those gray walls in the misty distance, wishing with all my heart that I could go home…
That Mother would still be there, waiting for me.

‘You can’t go back. Your mother’s dead. Corvo’s dead. They’re all dead!’ It was the nasty old Regent’s voice. He was looking down his hawkish nose at me, sneering in disgust, but in the next instant, his head rolled off his shoulders in a spray of blood.

My father’s masked face rose up behind him in the shadows. The Masked Felon. Death incarnate as blood dripped from his sword… ‘Corvo!’ my dream-self screamed into the darkness.

But I was standing alone on a beach with a glass bottle in my fist. Inside was a little note, rolled up tight. ‘Corvo, I am very sad. They say that you’re dead like Mother, but I’m going to put this note in a bottle and throw it into the river because I do not believe them. Living here is strange. I do not like it, so please come for me if you can.’ I was back at the Golden Cat, then, where they kept me hostage.

I knew from the smell.

Stale sweat mixed with cigar smoke, and the lingering sourness of men’s seed, spilled over red velvet. I saw the Pendleton Twins with a prostitute between them, using her roughly as they pulled back her head by the hair. The black makeup around her eyes was flooded by tears, smearing across her cheeks like raven’s wings. Then, suddenly, as dreams are wont to do, it wasn’t the Pendleton Twins anymore. It was Lord Cosimo, the Duke’s younger brother, mounting her from behind, but his dark eyes were on me, roving over my body.

He leered at me and said, ‘You’re next, Empress.’

I startled awake, gasping, “No!”

“Your Highness?”

I scrambled to my feet, my heart pounding. It was Rosemary’s voice, calling in whispered urgency from the doorway. I peeked out the cubbyhole, my eyes wide with shock. She stood there alone, looking frightened, but when her blue eyes saw mine, she lit up with hope. I pitched forward, moving towards the center of the room. “How did you get past my father?”

I stole a glance to my right, noting the pistol on the scratched wood of the workshop bench.

She paled, then. “Oh, Emily, it’s been the most awful night. Please… hear me out.”

She stayed where she was, sensing my distrust. She stood on the raised platform near my mother’s portrait, her blonde hair turned pale in the moonlight. She wore a lacy red dress, the same from the party. She looked beautiful, as ever.

“Your father’s all right,” she said, her head turning towards the door. “He’s sleeping. I…”

She hesitated, her blue eyes flickering.

“I Blinked from one side of the hallway to the other, so that I wouldn’t get too close to him. I then used your study, the ledge outside… I… I came in through your bedroom window, Emily.”

The words hung in the air.

I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t want to believe it. I felt sick to my stomach, caught between the urge to fight or flee.
Blinking was black magic, something my father could do. It was teleportation, shifting from one point to another without traversing the physical space between—all in the blink of an eye.

I asked in a tight voice, “Then you remember? You know you’re a witch?”

She shook her head. “No. I mean, yes, I think I might be a witch, but I can’t remember. Not with any clarity.” She nervously twisted her fingers. “I’m sorry, Your Highness. I keep jumbling this all up.”

“Just start at the beginning.”

She took a deep breath. “That strange man from the party, the Prince of Pandyssia, what he said about the curse… I… I couldn’t believe it was real—it sounded so ridiculous! But when you left the party early with that look on your face, I realized you believed it, and then… then I started doubting myself.”

I stared at her. It was Rosemary, the same beautiful face, the same trusting blue eyes, but there was confusion and fear lingering in the shadow of her eyes.

I believed her.

“Go on,” I said.

“I don’t know what it means to forget myself,” she said with an obvious attempt to laugh, to capture the lightheartedness she seemed to always imbue, but it fell flat. “I have memories of home… of family. I remember living in Morley and being invited to play in the Queen’s court in Wynnedown. But…”

“But what?”

It came out sharp. Impatient.

“But before that, my childhood… Emily, there are gaps—”

“Gaps?!”

“Yes, gaps. Holes in my memory.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Don’t look at me that way. I’m sorry, Emily! I don’t remember forgetting.” She looked miserable, her eyes falling to the floor. “But I suppose that’s on purpose.”

I silently stewed, gnawing in indecision. Rosemary seemed to forget I was there. Her blue eyes went faraway. She mumbled, “I have dreams, sometimes… There’s a broken mansion in a swamp, and mist everywhere. It’s all so magical looking, like something from a fairytale. I played in the gardens. I can feel moss between my toes, and sometimes I’d climb the trees. We braided flowers in our hair.”

“We?”

She looked at me. “My sisters.”

Sisters of a witch coven, I realized with a shudder. “You lived in this mansion with your sisters?”

“I think so.” She frowned. “Emily, you have to believe me. I never believed those dreams were
anything but a strange fantasy. They terrified me! I just… let them go. I focused on my life with you, here in the palace, my music… I love it here, Your Highness. I’m happy with my life and who I am now. What does it matter who I once was? That girl is gone. Forgotten.”

I shook my head, feeling sick. “Not so forgotten. You said you Blinked, Rosemary. That’s black magic.”

Her lower lip trembled, her blue eyes filling with tears. “I’m scared, Emily.”

I forced myself to stay calm. Her tears could be a trick. “You Blinked. How? How did you know what to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think, Rosemary.”

She grunted in frustration. “It just came to me!” She fisted her hair and looked beyond me. “It’s like when I’m playing music on the harp or guitar. I just… I feel it, Emily! It comes so naturally to me. I play with my heart. I don’t even have to think about it.”

“Muscle memory?”

“I suppose,” she said, but she was shaking her head. “It was like it knew me, like something had come alive in my heart and told me what to do. It burned away the fog. I could see again.”

“It?”

“My magic. It’s alive.”

As she spoke, her eyes became emblazoned with flame, but only for a heartbeat. The next instant, I doubted if I had really seen anything, it was so fast, and yet I couldn’t deny the alarm bells ringing in my head, telling me to be wary. The Outsider hadn’t just called her a witch; he’d said a powerful witch. For the first time, I thought I’d caught a glimpse of her true power.

Rosemary waited for my reply.

I crossed my arms and gave her an even stare. “I’ve seen you naked many times. You’re not Marked by the Outsider. How can you use sorcery?”

That made her blush. “I don’t know. Perhaps I’m still… connected to the sisters that cursed me somehow.”

“Perhaps.”

All witches shared an arcane bond, according to Father. All it took was for one or two powerful witches in the center, Marked by the Outsider, and their power flowed down into the others in the coven. But I thought that only worked if the witches were all loyal. If Rosemary was cursed, didn’t that signify an outcast witch?

“You’re trying to make sense of it, I know,” Rosemary said gently. “I am, too.”

I didn’t take my eyes off her.

I wished I could ask Corvo what to do—he’d encountered a powerful witch from his time as a fugitive during the Rat Plague. Granny Rags, they called her.
Corvo had killed her.

“What do you want?” I asked, stone cold.

“I came to pledge my fealty, Empress,” she said solemnly. “If I am a witch, then I’m your witch.”

She knelt and bowed her head, holding still.

It shocked me. She had made herself vulnerable. Was it true submission or a trap? My mother’s words came back to me: ‘Only share your power with those you truly trust.’

And Father’s: ‘Only those you trust can betray you.’

I made a choice.

I expected her to struggle, but she went limp in my arms, surrendering to the chokehold. As her breath came in little gasps, I whispered in her ear, “I’m sorry, Rosemary, but I can’t trust you. Not until I know more.”

I carried her to the bed, laying her down and sitting beside her to cradle her head in my lap. “I’m so sorry,” I cried. I felt like I had lost my best friend.

My hands were shaking as I felt along her lacy dress, searching for weapons, for anything that might prove she’d meant me harm.

I felt something. In disbelief, I pulled out a small square-shaped token with my father’s likeness imprinted on it. I’d last seen one earlier today—aboard the Jessamine. Corvo had given Mister Fletcher a token as a means of access to the Sunset Regalia since he had no formal invitation.

I exclaimed, laughter mixed with tears, “Devious, beautiful girl! Did you steal it from Mister Fletcher during the party? Is this how you got past all the guards?”

She had explained how she got past my father—sorcery—but not how she had made it past dozens of Elite Guards with orders not to let anyone up the elevators to the Throne Room, besides the Captain. Perhaps the Royal Protector’s token had turned enough heads to allow her through.

She was, after all, my constant companion. My Guest of Honor, my clear confidant. Everyone in the palace knew who she was. Why wouldn’t they let her through?

I hid the token in a drawer, if only to hide it from Father, and left the safe room, carefully carrying out my mother’s portrait for tomorrow’s ceremony. I propped it against the wall near my bed.

“I have to lock you away, Rosemary,” I whispered as I sealed the secret door, the bookshelf returning to its original position with an audible click and groan. If she was a true threat, I had effectively neutralized it, at least for tomorrow.

I went to my bed and stuffed two pillows under my arms, then dragged off the top blanket, walking to the door with it trailing behind me. Corvo had already opened it, no doubt hearing the secret door rumble for a second time.

He blinked at me wearily. “Emily?”

“Don’t get up.” I threw the blanket on the ground outside the door, and the pillows. “I can’t sleep.”

He yawned and slouched against the wall, taking me into his arms as we dropped to the floor. I snuggled against his chest and closed my eyes, my fears dissolving into the sound of his beating
heart. I was his little girl. Nothing bad was going to happen.
I woke the next morning to the sound of birds singing sweetly outside my window.

A cool river’s breeze caressed my skin, gentle and relaxing. I realized I was lying on my back with my blankets tucked under my arms. I sat up, yawning.

Captain Mayhew was sitting at the marble table at the foot of my bed, pouring over something. Reports, looked like. Her burnished red hair glistened in the light like a mane of fire, and her captain’s hat was laying on the table next to a silver tray fresh laden with tea and dark bread, loosely wrapped in a white napkin to keep it warm.

“Where’s Father?” I asked, rubbing my eyes. “How did I get here?”

“Your Majesty! You’re awake,” she said, looking up. She frowned at me. “Lord Corvo carried you to the bed. I found you two sleeping on the floor this morning.”

“You needn’t sound so shocked, Alexi.”

I swung my legs out and groaned. My muscles ached from last night’s sword training in the throne room.

“You’re an Empress. You’re not supposed to be sleeping on floors,” she said, her serious mien flickering to concern. “I understand it was a difficult night for you. For both of you. I’m sorry, Your Majesty.” She stood up and held the ends of the silver tray. “Do you want breakfast?”

“I want to know where my father is.”

“He left to get washed up in his own quarters, but he let Coral up the elevator. She’s warming your bath as we speak.”

“Oh.” I could use a hot bath, I thought, rolling my aching shoulder. My skin felt clammy, too—dried sweat—but my hunger seemed more pressing. “I take it he’s still sequestering me in the Tower?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

I waved my hand and Alexi brought around the silver tray, placing it on my lap. I sat at the edge of the bed, gazing out the window at the birds. The little sparrows dove close, inspecting prospects. From our past encounters, I knew a few were brave enough to land on an outstretched hand, but most were too skittish and would only peck at the trail of breadcrumbs I’d sometimes leave along the windowsill.

As I watched the birds, I tore off a chunk of dark bread and listened to the Captain as I ate. She was saying, “…Protector left orders for me to look after you until he returns. I only got back this morning
from the Drapers Ward. Forgive me for saying it, Your Majesty, but the whole palace seems… well… confused. No one knows what’s going on.”

I tore off another chunk, grinding and spreading the crumbs along the windowsill, even as the wind blew them away.

I smiled as a daring sparrow snatched up a runaway crumb, flying away with his treasure.

“My Majesty…”

I turned away from the window and saw the question in her eyes. “Corvo didn’t explain why,” I said flatly. I uncovered the tea and took a slow sip. *Normalcy*, I thought. *Every moment fleeting. Will today be tomorrow’s dream?*

“No really, no,” the Captain said, “but I trust him.”

“I know you do.” I put down the tea and took her hand, giving her my full attention. “Alexi, Father has his Eyes, as you know. Last night, his spies picked up… *rumors* of something bad planned for today. We don’t know what, and we don’t know when exactly, but it’s coming.”

It was the best explanation I could give her. Not the whole truth—who would believe the Outsider himself was the source of these so-called rumors?

“Something bad,” Alexi repeated, her eyes narrowing. “An assassination attempt?”

I looked towards the wall where last night I had propped up my mother’s portrait, that is, before locking Rosemary in the safe room. I shuddered at the very real possibility that I would die today, pierced through the chest by an assassin’s blade, just like Mother.

*That* would surely end my reign.

“Maybe,” I said, staring into my mother’s face, her painted eyes offering no counsel. “It’d be… poetic. Empress Jessamine’s daughter killed at the anniversary of *her* assassination.”

The Captain scowled. “Not poetic. Sickening.”

But I saw the blood drain from her face. “Though it *does* sound like something the Crown Killer would do. He’s twisted in the head—a sadistic butcher. He’d do it just for the spectacle.”

She’d seen the Crown Killer’s handiwork up close. As Captain of the City Watch, she had unfettered access to the murder scenes. But not all the victims were in Dunwall—only the most recent, like Ichabod Boyle. It was as Corvo said, the murders first started in Karnaca, to the south.

The Captain shook her head. “But everyone targeted has been your enemy. Does Lord Corvo actually think the Crown Killer is coming for *you?*”

“We have no idea what’s coming.” I put aside the silver tray, suddenly losing my appetite. “I best get cleaned up now. I still have a remembrance ceremony to get through.”

“And you *will,*” the Captain said, touching my arm. Her eyes were deadly serious. “I would die before I’d let anything happen to you, Emily. The Royal Protector, too. If anyone can stop the Crown Killer, it’s him.”

“Thank you, Alexi,” I said, drawing strength from her words.

With a curt nod, the Captain returned to the marble table and went back to her reports. I spotted the
seal of the City Watch stamped on its pages. Probably Drapers Ward business, I thought, but I didn’t care to ask for details about what she’d found about Ramsey last night. It didn’t seem important compared to the danger that lied ahead of me.

As I crossed the room, though, I glanced a second time at Mother’s portrait.

I paused. “Alexi?”

“Hmm?” she said, half-listening.

“Did Father notice the painting?”

Of course, he’d noticed, I thought. Question was, what did he think?

Alexi stared at the painting as if suddenly realizing it was not a normal fixture in my royal bedchambers. “Oh! Yes, he… he said he’d let Erick know.” She twisted in her chair to look at me. Her smile was sad. “We’ll find a good place for it in the throne room, Your Majesty.”

Corvo doesn’t understand why I hid it from him, I thought. Or maybe he understands too well.

I nodded and turned away, crossing the long hallway to the bathroom. On my left was the wardrobe, and on the other side of that wall was the safe room.

By now, Rosemary would be awake.

I could only imagine the look on her face when she opened her eyes and realized I’d imprisoned her in my safe room. She could scream all she liked; no one would hear. But I didn’t think she would. She had knelt before me, had sworn fealty to me. If she meant it—and that was a big IF—then the smart thing for her to do was to be patient.

I would deal with her when I had more facts on my side.

I found Coral on her knees beside the tub, swirling fragrant oils into the water. “Good morning, Coral,” I said, disrobing. “Did you see the pant suit I left out for you? You’ll take care of it, won’t you?” There was a catch in my voice. “It was my mother’s…”

“Majesty, are you all right?” Coral asked, climbing to her feet. Her eyes were smothered with worry. What would become of the things I left behind? Would anyone care that a little eleven-year-old girl had worn her mother’s clothes, just to feel close to her again?

It’d been too big, but now I was a woman grown. Everyone said I was a spinning image of my mother.

But my eyes were Corvo’s.

“It’s just the anniversary,” I said, forcing a smile. “A sad day, but I’ll get through it.”

Like I always do.

“Brave girl,” Coral said, her eyes so motherly.

I stepped naked into the teeming bathwater; it smelled strongly of lavender, a fragrance my mother had loved. Coral remembered, I thought. She’d been one of my mother’s chambermaids, long ago. “Thank you, Coral,” I said.

For the unspoken gift.
I dipped beneath the water until it sloshed against my shoulders. I sighed, my aching muscles melting into the heat. Coral smiled tenderly and made for the door.

“Oh,” she said, forgetting herself.

She slipped out the morning’s paper from her apron pocket. I couldn’t help but leer at it. Yesterday’s news had been Ichabod’s murder, front and center. I dreaded what the Dunwall Courier had in store for me today… and what tomorrow’s front page might say? ‘EMPRESS SLAIN!!!’, perhaps?

“It’s nothing as terrible as yesterday’s,” Coral promised, handing it to me.

“Small mercies,” I said dryly. I held the paper above the water.

“Oh, shall I call for Rosemary? I haven’t seen her yet. Didn’t she want to play for you?”

I stared at her.

‘No, Coral. Rosemary can’t come out to play because I’ve locked her up for being a witch.’ But instead I said, “Yes, I mean no, it’s fine. I let her go to visit with family. They’ve come very far from Morley.” I sweetened the lie with a smile. “You may go.”

“Majesty,” she said, closing the door behind her.

I took a deep, shuddering breath. Lies upon more lies… It festered the soul.

“Everything’s going to be okay, Emily,” I told myself as I unfolded the Dunwall Courier. It was eerie. Just another day, in some respects. The morning paper. The bath. Breakfast. When do we get to the part where I’m no longer Empress?

I read the front page, the edges bleeding gray as they got too close to the water. ‘Dunwall Anticipates Sad Anniversary. Today marks the Fifteen Year Anniversary of the assassination of Empress Jessamine Kaldwin, taken from us far too soon by deadly conspirators.

The yearly remembrance will include a private ceremony to be held within Dunwall Tower, which will host distinguished guests from all corners of the Empire. Young Empress Emily is expected to recall fond memories of her mother, and to address the people of Dunwall directly via street speaker.

Business owners throughout Dunwall say they have received an influx of visitors in preparation for this day of mourning, and are providing food, lodging, and all manner of items and services during their stay.’

“At least someone’s happy,” I mumbled. Profit to be made, as always. I flipped the paper aside (it slapped hard against the floor tiles) and held my breath, sinking beneath the water.

I buried myself in silence and heat.

It was a joyless bath. I scrubbed my skin with a sea sponge and rid my hair of oil and grime. I towed myself dry, wincing with a swollen heart when I recalled yesterday’s bath—Rosemary’s flirtatious laughter as she knelt before me and blew between my legs, teasing me.

Were all witches masters of seduction? I wondered, sitting at my vanity and going through the motions. I fought my wet hair, combing through stubborn tangles, all the while staring at myself in the mirror like I was slowly going mad. I towel-squeezed the strands as best as I could, then
wrapped a white towel around my body and stepped out towards my wardrobe.

“What to wear, what to wear,” I mumbled down the hallway. *Not a bloody dress.* I hated dresses. *Why did Rosemary like them so much? Was that a witch thing?*

“No, a Morley thing,” I said, shaking my head. I paused, noticing Alexi was gone.

I craned my neck. “Captain?”

A mild spike of fear hit the back of my throat. *It’s probably nothing.* I went left, leaning against the door that led out of my bedroom and listened for voices.

When I stepped back, hearing nothing, I turned towards my bed and saw him.

The Outsider was lounging in the center of my bed, his legs casually crossed and his hands clasped over his chest. His black eyes glowed like orbs of onyx, sucking the light out of the room. My bedroom had been aglow with morning sunlight, but now the air was chilled, and a damp grayness permeated every surface.

I felt like I was inside a storm cloud that had suddenly struck lightning into my heart.

“Outsider,” I breathed, frozen in shock.

“Good morning, Empress. Or should I say, *bad* morning?”

He sounded amused, his mouth relaxed into a lazy grin. He was dressed as before: a high-collared black suit with glossy boots to match. I felt a ridiculous surge of annoyance that he was lying on my bed with his shoes on.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked me.

I scowled. “You know the answer to that. You watched me, didn’t you?”

“Helplessly.” He cocked his head, smirking. “Come, Empress. Join me on your imperial bed. Let’s… talk.”

My eyes shot to the bed and instantly I thought of sex. It was hard not to. His black eyes were sultry. Seductive. I was mortified! He was the Outsider. Surely, *he* knew that I knew he could unravel me with a single look.

I took one step closer, then another. I forced myself to stop. “Where’s Alexi?”

He sighed in exaggerated slowness as if bored with my question.

“Frightened, little sparrow—don’t be afraid. The good Captain hasn’t moved an inch.”

He disappeared in a swirling black river, like a mirror exploding, then reappeared the next instant, leaning over my bare shoulder from behind, his cold fingers gliding under my hair. He swept the strands away from my ear, baring my neck. I turned my head towards him, drawn like a magnet, as rain began to pound in heavy sheets around us.

The rain startled me almost as much as his touch.

It felt *real,* as if a waterfall had suddenly opened up above us. A thick mist rose from below, obscuring all view of my bedroom walls. I felt his breath hot against my ear as he leaned over me like a crashing wave. His breath was cold, like the deepest and darkest depths of the ocean.
He whispered, “Don’t you see her?” Gods, his voice was pure sex. Was he hot or cold? I felt it both, and it was agonizing to untangle. With the heat, I wanted relief, a cold touch, but in that frozen spell, I wanted warmth, for him to be near. What was he doing to me?

The gray mist parted and I saw a ghostly image of the Captain sitting at the foot of my bed, still pouring over her reports. Her blue uniform looked distorted by the black rain that moved in unnatural spirals around her. She wasn’t reacting to our voices or the Outsider’s presence. It was like our first encounter during the Sunset Regalia; we seemed to be standing outside of time itself.

“Where are we?” I whispered.

Was this the Void?

Father had once tried to describe it. The Outsider had visited his dreams during the Rat Plague, pulling him into the Void. The Void was the Outsider’s domain and the source of all magic in the world. Corvo had described a shadowy world, sharp and cold, but fluid like a dream.

“Not where, when,” the Outsider said. “We are still inside your bedroom, but time has… drifted.”

He circled me, then, like a shark. I felt naked beneath his gaze, wrapped in nothing but a towel, the bare skin of my arms turned to goosebumps in the cold. His stare set my nerves on fire. I couldn’t stop looking at him.

I watched his black eyes for where they watched, but it was hard to tell. The black was all encompassing; he had no pupils. He simply swallowed me whole, ensnaring me with his seductive gaze. Black rain continued to pound in heavy sheets around us, but we remained within, untouched but for a cold gray mist that dampened my skin.

The sound of the rain was deafening, but when the Outsider spoke, his voice seemed to drink power from it, silencing all else.

“You surprise me, Emily.”

“Do I?” I said, my heart hammering in my ears. I tried to sound nonchalant to retain a modicum of power, but every pore in my body was drenched in nervous energy.

I liked that I had surprised him. I wanted to feel special. For him to keep looking at me.

His lips twisted into a mischievous grin. “You do. Taking Rosemary into your own hands… Lying to your father… Tsk, tsk. I’m surprised you could do that. Has your father not been the most loyal man in your life?”

He paced in front me, back and forth, the curtain of black rain shadowing his movements.

He paused, then, and with a gleam in his eye that scared me, he said, “I wonder, though… What would Corvo do if he knew a witch was locked inside his daughter’s safe room?”

This line of questioning clearly fascinated him.

“Don’t you dare tell him!” I snapped without thinking.

I understood that he was a god and far more powerful than me, that perhaps I should have been more careful around him, but I was also Empress, and used to giving orders and having them obeyed. The Outsider disappeared again, jagged edges swirling into the emptiness he left behind.
I turned to look, expecting him to reappear at any second over my shoulder… No? Behind me, then?

But nothing happened.

I watched… I listened… My breathing sounded overly loud, indisputable evidence of how riled up he’d made me. I felt abandoned. Alone.

*But the water has eyes, I thought. Black eyes.*

I spoke into the silence. “You can’t tell him,” I said in a quieter voice, looking around me into the glistening rain, searching for his face, that pale mask of serenity, his lips curving into a grin that seemed to hold all the secrets of the world.

“Please,” I said, shivering in the cold. “It’s my story to tell.”

“Your story?” The Outsider’s voice came from everywhere, yet nowhere. He sounded amused. “Yes.”

I was getting annoyed he was toying with me by not showing his face. “My father explained how it works,” I said. “How you work.”

“Tell me, Emily Kaldwin,” his disembodied voice taunted. “Tell me how I work.”

The detached amusement in his voice only goaded me further, setting my temper on fire. *How dare he toy with my life? With my father’s life!* What I said next was scornful, I knew, but I couldn’t hold it back. Too much heartache was connected to the Outsider’s so-called gifts.

My mother’s Heart…

My father’s Mark, a looming curse, ever shadowing his future…

Everyone touched by the Outsider eventually succumbed to madness; it was just a matter of time, and some faster than others. That’s what Corvo had always taught me.

I spun in slow circles, guardedly watching the rain, unsure where he might suddenly reappear, and said, “You find people who interest you, people whose choices are like ripples in a pond, at the center of everything. You watch them. Watch what they do with the powers you grant them. They’re like… books on a shelf that you take down to amuse yourself, wondering as you flip each page: *What happens next?***

He emerged from the black curtain of rain, dripping wet, his black hair plastered to his pale skin. Black dewdrops clung to his eyelashes as his black gaze snatched me like a claw.

I felt pulled into him.

It felt like an attack, how easily he drew me in, how easily he made me *want* him. His seductive gaze was a weapon. I didn’t know what to do—this was a battle I had never prepared for. I followed my instincts and grabbed his hands in retaliation, to force contact between us that was *me* pulling on *him*.

His hands had been clasped together, held in perfect serenity, but when I touched him, viciously pulling him towards me, he recoiled like I had burned him. His face contorted in… not exactly pain, but not pleasure either. He seemed mostly disturbed, like I had disrupted his game and broken his
rules.

I held tight, not letting go.

It was like fire touching ice, but who was fire and who was ice, I didn’t know. “Tell me!” I demanded. “Who is trying to break me? How do I lose my throne? By an army? By an assassin? By what?”

His answer was slow and fierce, each word a shattering thunder.

“By... a... witch!”

He yanked me towards him, pulling me into the black curtain of rain. I tried to scream, but I lost my breath. An ocean of water slammed into me from all sides. I was surrounded—no up, no down, just the eerie darkness of an alien world. The sudden inundation ceased and I floated peacefully, a strange voyager with eyes wide open in breathless astonishment.

I heard their songs first.

The whales.

Their eerie vocalizations vibrated across the Deep, rippling with haunting sorrow. I saw two massive bodies emerge from the gloom, their soulful eyes reflecting beams of light that filtered down from above, distorted into ghostly waves as the water displaced at their passing. I could have cried at the beauty of it, but I was already floating in an ocean of tears.

I had no breath to speak as the Outsider appeared before me, the whales passing behind him, their songs echoing into the darkness beyond.

His black hair floated above his head, swaying like seaweed, and his black eyes were Leviathan.

He held out his hand and this time I took it gently. We began to rise, joined together, higher and higher. The water broke, blue sky flashing overhead. I felt something smooth and slippery beneath my bare feet. I gasped in wonderment, sucking in sweet air as we stood on the back of a whale, its plume exploding into the sky, spraying us with foam. I laughed, my heart swelling with unspeakable joy.

I felt the Outsider’s eyes on me, but this time I didn’t flinch or struggle against the allure when I met his fathomless gaze. He’s beautiful, I thought. He doesn’t just hear the whale songs, he breathes them. His face was a serene mask, a cold, inhuman echo of the Deep, but his smile…

It held a flicker of warmth. Could it be true? Was he more than perilous seduction? Could he be someone I could trust?

I squeezed his hand. “Will you help me?” I whispered. My voice sounded small and insignificant, caught between the endless ocean and the endless sky.

His lips curved higher, his eyes drifting away from my face to gaze out across the sparkling, unearthly waves. “What is your throne to me? To them?”

He formally clasped his hands behind his back. “They bleed rivers and you do nothing.”

I didn’t expect that. It sounded political, like he was judging me as a ruler. A bad one at that. Like I didn’t care about the suffering in the world. The whales aren’t my only responsibility, I fumed, about to scream at him, but when I opened my mouth, I found I couldn’t speak. Excuses, that’s all I had.
I could scream that I cared—but was it only because the whales were disappearing? When they were plentiful, did I care they were suffering? I could get defensive and say I’d decreed whale oil rationing, but what was one year of scaling back when I’d been reigning for fifteen?

Too little, too late.

Whale oil was the lifeblood of industry, of progress. *We gain so much, but what do we lose?*

The Outsider’s black gaze shifted eerily, watching me struggle. I couldn’t defend myself, not now; I had no heart for it. I gazed out over the water, drinking it all in. I marveled at the whale *alive* beneath my feet, so massive it carried us like a ship riding the waves. It felt unreal. *A waking dream.*

“Can I stay here forever?”

“Your story is waiting, Emily. What happens next is up to you. It is as you say: your choices are ripples in a pond.” His gaze looked out over the waters. “Not a pond, an ocean.”

I followed his gaze, reminded of something. “My father once told me: ‘*Our choices always matter to someone, somewhere.*’ He said you told him that, in a dream.”

The Outsider’s smile was suddenly so tight and false, I couldn’t make sense of it. “That was… an echo of another’s voice,” he said, oddly reluctant, as if I had compelled him to answer somehow. “The ones I Mark, we’re all connected through the Void… Even if they can’t all feel it, I can.”

*The ones I Mark…*

I felt my heart suddenly pounce in terror, afraid he was going to offer *me* the Mark, or force it on me like he had Father. I didn’t think I had the strength to refuse him, not after *this,* but the Outsider remained silent, watching the waves. The warmth I had felt between us had bled away beneath my fear of being Marked. I wanted nothing more than to be gone from this place—and with *something* to show for it.

I tried one last time.

“Please. At least tell me if Rosemary is the witch you speak of.”

“No.”

“No, you won’t tell me, or no, she’s not the wi—”

A black river swirled around me, carrying me away in the blink of an eye. I was back, standing in the bright hallway of my royal chambers, the morning light streaming through the open windows. A sparrow landed on the windowsill, tilting his head curiously at me, gazing with one beady eye.

It flew away in the next instant.

“Your Majesty?”

I saw the Captain standing, her chair pushed back. She was staring at me in puzzlement. “Should I call for Coral?”

“What?”

She nodded at my legs. I was dripping wet, puddles of water pooled at my feet. My hair was drenched, stuck to my face, and my skin was clammy cold. I touched my face.
“I… no,” I softly said. I felt empty. I turned towards the bathroom, but then I paused and twisted back. “Captain, do you know why the whales are dying?”

“The… whales, Your Majesty?”

I said nothing, just padded back to the bathroom, a trail of wet footprints behind me.
My teeth chattered. I rubbed up and down my arms and bent over to do my legs. The towel grew heavy, sopping wet, and I let it fall to the floor. Turning, I caught my reflection in the mirror.

I stared at myself as if pondering a stranger. *Those eyes have seen the Deep, I thought, and these ears have heard the whale songs echoing in the dark.* I shivered, my elbows pressed close to my sides. I stood naked, my nipples erect and my skin raised with goosebumps.

“Who are you without your throne, Emily?” I asked my reflection. “And why does the Outsider have to be so damn cold all the time?”

I vigorously chafed my arms, trying to warm myself, thinking it might be nice if Coral warmed me another bath, but as I turned my head towards my shoulder, breathing deeply with my nose pressed to my soft skin, I realized I didn’t want to let it go.

Not yet.

Not *him*. My skin smelled like the Ocean, and if I closed my eyes, I could still feel the slippery whale beneath my feet and the Outsider’s gaze upon me… Dark and cold, yes, but seductive, too.

*Always seductive. Is he a god of magic or of lust?*

I couldn’t ask my father that! I’d die of embarrassment!

When Father had warned me about the Outsider’s allure, I hadn’t thought he meant it in a sensual manner. Did the Outsider act the same way with Corvo?!

The thought made me feel uncomfortable. I didn’t think my father was attracted to men, but I wasn’t sure, having never asked. There were just some things we never talked about.

I picked up the whalebone comb resting on my vanity, turning it in my hands. *Carved from the body of a whale, once alive and free.* I combed it through my hair, the strands wet and dark. Dark like the Outsider’s black hair swaying in the ocean’s pull…

I heard a muffled knock and gasped, startled out of my reverie.

“Stop with your foolishness, Emily,” I hissed at my reflection. “Just because you like the way he looks at you, doesn’t mean he’s not a black-eyed bastard. He’s *playing* with you—making you go crazy.”

Sufficiently riled up and angry—the only way to get the Outsider out of my head, apparently—I grabbed a fresh towel and wrapped it around my torso. I opened the door a crack and peered down the hallway.

Captain Mayhew stood at the door to my chambers. My Royal Protector appeared at the threshold, a
dark shadow. They talked with their heads bowed together, too quiet for me to hear.

I wondered what Father meant to do. Would he dare cancel the remembrance ceremony?

Hundreds of invited guests were pouring in from all corners of the Empire. I could only imagine their shock and suspicion if they were told to turn around and go home.

Today marked fifteen years since Empress Jessamine’s assassination, and I knew the Treasury had spared no expense in arranging a massive celebration to honor my mother’s reign.

Chants of ‘Long Live the Empress!’ would shake the very ground. Canceling the ceremony was unthinkable. It would be taken as a sign of weakness. An insult to the Empire. Empress Jessamine’s memory would be dishonored.

But what else could Father do? I bit my lip with worry.

I exited the bathroom and hovered at the door to my wardrobe, waiting for Father to look up and notice me. Their conversation had wandered out into the hallway. They were leaning against the bannister with arms crossed, their faces grim and bodies silhouetted by the bright chandelier behind them.

I nervously twisted the signet ring around my finger, thinking about Rosemary.

I would tell Corvo about the Outsider’s second visit—he should know the true threat would come from a nameless witch, but I still wanted to hold onto my lie about Rosemary. True, it was a terrible risk to take as it was still very possible she was that nameless witch…

But my heart says no, I realized. But am I just being foolish? Far too trusting?

Just like Mother…

Her whole-hearted trust in Hiram Burrows, her Royal Spymaster at the time, had ultimately led to her death. It was he who had hired Daud, the Knife of Dunwall, to carry out his treachery.

Corvo’s dark eyes flickered towards me, and when I nodded at him, he frowned and stood up all the way, pushing away from the bannister. “Just one moment, Alexi,” I heard him say, touching her arm as he passed. He entered my bedchambers and quietly closed the door behind him.

“What happened?” he asked softly. “Alexi said you started mumbling about dying whales. You scared her.”

I reached out and took his sword hand in mine, expectantly looking up at him. His skin felt pleasantly warm. “Again?” he asked, his dark eyes hardening.

I just silently nodded, my heart racing.

Yes, the Outsider has visited me again, Father—and that thought terrified me. Corvo had once said the Outsider’s visits during the Rat Plague had been relatively rare, only in his dreams or at secret shrines. He had never once mentioned hearing whale songs echoing in the Deep or riding the back of a whale.

“Your hand—”

“No Mark,” I said, showing him the back of my hand, the skin milky white. Virgin still.

Funny I should think of it that way, I thought.
“I was going to say your hand is freezing,” Corvo said, scowling a little.

I watched Corvo *Bend Time*. His fingers curled towards his face, bending at each joint as if caught in a terrible rictus of pain. Whispers from the Void encircled us as the spell took hold. The light distorted as time slowed to a crawl. I felt like I was trapped inside a glass jar, twisted and warped at every angle.

We would be able to talk freely now. The Captain would hear nothing.

My father was direct and to the point. “Why are you so cold? Did the Outsider take you into the Void?”

“No, he just appeared to me *here,*” I said, leaving out the bed part. “Father, the Outsider said it’ll be a witch. I’ll lose my throne to a witch.”

“What witch?”

“He won’t say.” My jaw irked. “The Outsider enjoys being cryptic.”

“You can count on it,” he said. “And a witch doesn’t surprise me, not after the bloodflies.” He crossed his arms. “I can handle a witch, but where there is a witch, there is a coven.”

I shook my head. “He just said witch, not witches.”

His look soured. “The Outsider is not trying to *help* us, Emily. He’s taunting us with half-baked information, trickling it down to amuse himself as we run around trying to interpret what it means. Everything he says must be taken with a grain of salt.”

“But he didn’t have to say anything. A vague warning is better than no warning.” I couldn’t believe I was defending him. The Outsider’s enigmatic nature was driving me crazy, but I *wanted* to see the good in him.

Corvo growled, “Not if it leaves you feeling helpless—and distracted by nonsense. What was that about the whales?”

I shivered. I was still wrapped in a towel, the smell of the Ocean lingering on my skin. I’d been… faraway. Not in the Void, but *elsewhere*. How else to explain floating in the Deep with the whales? It’d felt so real, even though I had no idea how I didn’t drown! Somehow, the Outsider had kept me safe.

It gave me an idea. “Father, when you *Blink*, where do you actually go?”

When he just blinked at me, I bit my lip and tried again. “You move instantaneously from point A to point B, but where are you in between?”

“Emily, what does it matt—”

“Please, just think about it.”

He sighed in exasperation. “I don’t know. I guess the traversals are through the Void. I feel cold when I *Blink*, but I’m not actually aware of being in the Void. It’s too fast.”

“Through the Void,” I mumbled under my breath, looking away in thought. *Yes*… I looked back at him and pressed our conjoined hands against my cheek. “I’m cold because I think the Outsider *Blinked* me into the Deep. I was actually there!”
He scowled. “Unlikely. How—”

“One moment, I was in my bedroom, the next, I was floating in the Ocean with the whales. I saw them, Father. They were as real as you and me! They were singing. Oh, gods, it was beautiful! And then… then we were holding hands and riding the back of a whale. The Outsider he… he showed me something amazing, didn’t he?”

“Emily—”

I knew I sounded entranced, but I couldn’t help it. I thought of the Outsider’s smile, that hint of warmth like an unexpected treasure. I whispered, “He’s… warm, Father.”

My father looked ready to snap. “Warm? What, like happy?”

I cocked my head, considering.

“Human,” I finally decided. The word came from my heart. I wanted to think of the Outsider as a man, and not some alien god. Who could love a god and expect to be equals? No. But a man…

My father viciously swore under his breath, his dark brown eyes riveted on me, glinting with fury.

“What?” I breathed, startled.

“You’re slipping into obsession, plain as day.”

“No,” I protested, smiling wide.

“You can’t see it.”

“Can’t see what?”

“What he’s done to you. I’ll kill the black-eyed bastard.”

“Father!” I laughed. “He can’t die. And you’re wrong; I’m not obsessed, merely wondering—”

“It’s just a matter of time, now. He’s obviously taken an interest in you.” He squeezed my hand, his eyes hard and intent on my face. “Promise me you’ll say no when he tries to Mark you. Don’t let him have you.”

“He won’t,” I said, my voice turning hoarse. “He doesn’t want me.”

Twice now he has come to me, but it was always Corvo’s reaction he seemed to be truly interested in. I thought of the Outsider’s words, echoing in mocking tones, ‘What would Corvo do if he knew a witch was locked inside his daughter’s safe room?’

“Please, let me go now,” I said, feeling angry. I didn’t want to admit it, but I was jealous of Father. Jealous of how the Outsider was interested in him, not me. “I still have to get dressed. I’m too cold to be standing around half-naked.”

He snorted in frustration. “Don’t be stubborn. Not about this.”

“Fine, I promise. Happy now?” I incessantly held his gaze, not once blinking.

He didn’t look happy.

I wagged our clasped hands. “Now break the spell, or I will.” If I let go, I’d slip out of his time.
“It’s not about being happy, it’s about keeping you safe,” he growled, serious as ever. He lowered his sorcery hand, unraveling the spell. Time kicked back to normal, making my head spin. He said, “I have to go downstairs now, but I’ll have Alexi watch over you while you finish up.”

“Is the ceremony still going to happen?”

“Yes, but I’ll be limiting attendance. Erick will just have to get used to it.”

“He’s angry?”

“Judge for yourself,” Corvo said, wandering away from me towards my bed. “He called me a nonsensical, over-protective idiot”—I smiled a little at that—“for pushing his staff out the door last night. They’re scrambling to get everything set up for the ceremony. You want me to take that?”

My mother’s portrait.

I swallowed hard, my hands wringing in the folds of my towel. I came to stand by his shoulder as we stared down at the painting, the morning light casting shadows across its mottled surface where the paint was thicker. “I’m sorry I never told you,” I said, feeling awkward. “I just… I hate it.”

“What do you mean? She looks beautiful.”

“She looks cold. That’s not how we remember her, is it?” My heart shattered with sadness as I looked up at him. “She was happy once, wasn’t she?”

“You were her whole world, Emily. She’d be proud of you. I’m proud of you. Don’t ever forget it.”

He kissed the top of my head, then leaned over and grabbed the canvas with one hand along the back wooden frame. I watched him carefully walk out the door with it (the canvas was quite tall, but so, too, was my father). He paused to speak with the Captain who’d been waiting—only a moment or two—outside in the hallway.

“Such a tender father-daughter moment,” the Outsider said, suddenly appearing in a swirl of black mirrors, glinting like rain. He was leaning against the tall bookshelf beside the white-stoned hearth, the secret door to my safe room.

His arms were casually crossed as he watched me with those black eyes.

My hands flew to my chest in fright, my heart thumping in my ears. “Do you have to keep doing that?!”

I was gasping, looking around me in expectation…

But nothing happened. The air did not chill, nor the light distort. Time seemed to be moving normally. I could hear my father’s voice out in the hallway. I whispered hesitantly, “Are we really here? In actual normal time?”

His lips twitched into a half-smile.

He’s bloody amused again.

“What?” I snapped with a scowl. “My father is standing right out there!” I vaguely pointed towards the hallway behind me. “Can he hear us?”

A part of me wanted my father to intervene, to rescue me, but another part of me wanted to be
exactly where I was—beneath the Outsider’s gaze.

“No one can see or hear me unless I wish it,” he said, lazily pushing away from the bookshelf. I watched his body, the way he carried himself. He was confident in his skin—if that’s how it worked. I didn’t know if the Outsider was truly corporeal or if his touch was just an illusion. He looked the same. The high-collared black suit and glossy boots. The dark bluish-black hair and pale skin. And those dark inhuman eyes watching me.

It was strange seeing him in… well, natural sunlight. He didn’t seem to belong; the natural world didn’t fit him. He was magic; he was other. I wondered if he could die. What was the Outsider? An immortal spirit of the Void or something else…

I wanted to know. I wanted to know everything there was to know about him.

“My father wants to kill you, you know,” I said without thinking. I should have thought twice before saying such things, but a part of me wanted to shock him.

I wanted to see his reaction, to break down his walls until I discovered the truth behind those black, mysterious eyes.

“Oh, now I remember why I so enjoyed watching Corvo all those years ago… Shame he’s been so boring since the Rat Plague ended.”

Boring?! The insufferable bastard! How dare he suggest…

“We’re both boring,” I said flatly. “You should just leave us alone.”

The Outsider smiled. “Oh?”

I stammered, “FATHER wants you to leave me alone.”

“And what do you want, Empress?”

His smile unnerved me; all at once, it felt too intense.

What do I want?

A reaction, I thought. I needed to know. How deeply was he interested in me? Or was I nothing to him? Just a fascinating connection to Corvo in his eyes?

His footsteps were slow and measured as he walked up to me—no more than four steps, but it felt like a long time.

He crooked one finger under my chin and lifted my gaze to his. His touch felt like death, corpse-cold, and I could not stop the shudder that went through my body.

“Your father has wanted to kill a great many people, especially during the Rat Plague, but he didn’t,” he said in a dark whisper, “because of you.”

His finger dropped from my chin, but the cold lingered.

“All those years ago with your little girl eyes gazing up at him, he only wanted you to see a loving father, not a cold-blooded killer. That’s what he is, deep down.”

He stepped closer, his black eyes enveloping me, and I gasped, stepping back.
“No he’s not…” I breathed, trembling, but the Outsider spoke over me, his voice lowering to an intimate whisper, his eyes flashing with a vivacity that made me believe he was enjoying our little conversation, the way it made me breathless, the way he was making my heart pound with equal desire and disgust.

“It’s there,” he said, “deep inside him, a darkness in his soul that hates all the world for taking Jessamine away from him. He would spill blood in the thousands if he could get her back…”

I let my breath go in a shudder—I’d not realized I’d been holding it—and tried to fathom all that he said, but it was too much heartache. Why would he say something so cruel about my father? And why must it always be about Corvo?!

I turned his original question back on him, in anger and tears. “What do you want, Outsider?!”

“Answers, Emily, same as you. I want answers to my questions.” His black eyes traced the tears that ran down my cheeks in silent rivers. “I wonder… what would your father do if he lost you? Would he finally snap?”

“You bastard,” I whispered, my voice hollow. Does he not care if I live or die?

“Accept my Mark, Emily Kaldwin,” he said, his voice caught at the edge of arousal, at once breathy and urgent. How could he do this now?! He went on, oblivious to my terror, “Accept what your father never had.”

I saw desire in his eyes. He wanted to Mark me, to own me.

He reached for me, his hand running down the back of my arm to take my hand, his thumb rubbing against the racing pulse in my wrist. His touch was cold, but it was gentle, like a lover’s caress.

“Don’t you see?” he whispered. “Corvo was powerless when Daud came for his sweet Jessamine. Daud had the Mark, but your father didn’t—not until later after months of torture in Coldridge Prison. It was then I noticed him, his heart filled with such dark thoughts. Revenge, mostly, but also guilt. Crushing guilt.”

“Stop,” I begged. I snatched my hand away, not trusting myself. “I don’t want to see.”

I took my head in my hands, like I had a crushing headache, and forced my gaze away from his. It felt like torture, breaking that eye contact, his allure so strong.

He disappeared in a swirling black river, his disembodied voice echoing in my ear, “Think about it, Empress.”

It was a dagger to the heart, a mocking promise that soon I would no longer have that title.

I stumbled backwards, falling on my bed to sit at the corner in frozen shock. I tried to imagine what would have happened if Corvo had indeed had the Mark when Daud had come for my mother like an angel of death…

Would she still be alive?

At least it would have been a fair fight! He could have protected her from Daud’s sorcery! I felt so angry and hurt. Losing my mother fifteen years ago was hard enough, but now to endure this! The endless What Ifs were always the hardest part of letting go, of healing. And now the Outsider was offering me the Mark, enticing me with the suggestion that I was being offered a gift that even Corvo would have accepted in a heartbeat if it meant saving my mother’s life!
He was offering the answer to the ultimate What If.

In a desperate lurch, I withdrew to my wardrobe and slammed the door shut. I leaned back against the door, breathing heavily as panic and fear raced through my veins.

The closet was dark.

A little electrical lamp sat forlorn on the back shelf. It took a while before I felt calm again, my breath coming short, my vision blurring. I focused on the light, staring at it like it was a lighthouse in an ocean, each wave of panic rising and falling.

_What if accepting the Mark changed everything?_

Maybe the witch would be no match for us if both my father and I were Marked, a deadly duo of arcane powers.

_But who’s the damn witch!?_

“Damn your eyes, Rosemary,” I growled in frustration. “I don’t know what to do.”

That lie haunted me still. I was afraid that if I told Corvo the truth about Rosemary, he’d kill her. Despite everything, I loved her too much to take that risk. Yesterday, I’d been afraid that my father would merely exile her from the palace if he found out, but now—after what the Outsider had said about the darkness inside him—I was not so sure…

Corvo wasn’t exactly the forgiving type, and if he thought he was protecting me, he’d kill her in a heartbeat.

_If she betrays me, I thought, I will just kill her myself._

I took a deep breath, my eyes drifting over the giant wall of open shelving, each row displaying neatly folded clothing, all the way up to the ceiling. Pants and vests, socks and shirts. Fine coats on hangers, and velvet-lined boxes brimming with jewels. Diamonds lumped with sapphires, emeralds, and rubies. It was a treasure trove of fine fabrics and priceless jewelry.

_Fit for an Empress._

I dressed in silence.

I slipped on form-fitting black pants, tucked under full-calf leather boots, and a leather vest, solid gray. It was sharply slanted, split in the front with diagonal silver buttons. My hands trembled as I fastened them one by one. Over this I shrugged on my long coat; it was tailored for a tight, yet flexible fit, especially in the arms and shoulders. The interior liner was a dark purple, and the outer a dark blue, almost black. The collar was high, as was fashionable, and trimmed with gold thread.

I felt warmer… more in command. _I can do this. Just have to get through hair and makeup, ugh…_ This would not be easy without Rosemary. I left the closet, noting the Captain’s presence out in the hallway, guarding the door.

I wondered how my Royal Protector would change his plans to accommodate a threat from a witch. _How does one prepare for that?_

In my bathroom, I sat at my vanity, digging through ointment bottles, perfume sprays, and inky pigments. My eyes I did first. I drew a wing, black as a raven, at the corner of each eye, and smoked up my eyelids with dabs of kohl. My lips, too, were easy enough, a touch of carmine to
redden them.

But my hair was a monster I could not tame. I battled with it, trying again and again, and failing each time. *How did Rosemary do it?* Yesterday, she’d swept it up like a perfect nautilus shell, framing my face with graceful tendrils.

All I seemed to be able to do was get my damn signet ring stuck in my hair!

I twisted off the large ring and slammed it against the vanity’s marbletop, swearing profusely. *Try again,* I scowled, glaring at myself in the vanity. I heard the bathroom door creak open, but didn’t look, my eyes fixated on my unruly hair as I raised my arms above my head and tried twisting the locks into a half-way decent bun.

Captain Mayhew’s voice was polite, yet urging. “Are you… almost ready, Your Majesty?”

“Do I look ready?” I snapped.

I covered my face with my hands and huffed loudly as my troublesome hair fell to my shoulders in a soft wave. After an awkward silence, the Captain asked hesitantly, “No Rosemary this morning?”

I cleared my throat and looked up at her. *Another lie.*

“She’s… her relatives are here from Morley. Clan of Caulkenny, or some such. She’s spending time with them.”

“I see,” the Captain said. She stepped inside the bathroom, her leather boots creaking. “May I, Your Majesty?”

“What? *You?*”

She stood behind me, gazing into my eyes through the mirror with serious aloofness. “I inspect the City Watch officers under my command for proper wear of uniform and insignia, Your Majesty. That includes women’s hair. I can do a neat bun for you—if you’d permit, of course.”

“I permit!”

I sat up straight in my chair. I was more than ready for her capable hands. She gathered up my hair, pulling at my scalp.

I felt horrible. “I’m sorry for snapping at you, Alexi.”

“Please, don’t apologize. If your father’s Eyes are right about those rumors, *we* have every right to feel shaken up. I feel just as nervous as you are.”

“You—nervous?”

“Hiding it,” Alexi said, her eyes flickering to mine in the mirror with a small smile.

But then her face turned serious again. “I have hundreds of men and women under my command. If we’re attacked today, how many of them will die?” She lowered her gaze to my hair, wrested in her hands. “I feel responsible for each life. I have to be strong—for them—for you.”

*She puts me to shame,* I thought. She was Captain of the City Watch, but I was Empress. I didn’t have hundreds, I had *millions* beneath me, citizens of the Empire who depended on the stability of the Crown and the rule of law. The promise of peace. *I cannot fail them,* I thought.
The neat bun held in place. It was side-sweeping, long tendrils of my hair curved across my forehead. Rather stylish, all things considered. I smiled up at the Captain. “Thank you, Alexi. You’ve done a wonderful job.”

She picked up the signet ring from the vanity and placed it in the palm of my hand, folding my fingers over it. “There, you’re ready now.”

Am I?

Truly, I stood at the brink, a chasm of change before me. I had to face it, as Alexi said, *for them*, for the people who depended on me. *Every decision I make will ripple across the Empire—had the Outsider not warned me it was so?*

I slipped on the signet ring and stood, squaring my shoulders. I gave the Captain a sharp nod. “I’m ready, Captain. Lead the way.”
Part 2: Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part II continued

"A Long Day in Dunwall"

Chapter 12

The Throne Room was alive.

I followed the Captain up the steps to the throne, the hustle and bustle of ceremonial preparations continuing apace with only a few servants pausing to quickly curtsy or bow in my direction.

Last night, the long hall had been bedecked with gold-capped trellis covered in roses, but now dozens of servants were setting up enormous braided bouquets of Empire Blue butterfly bushes to dangle over the roses. Their flower petals quivered as they hung from the ceiling, cascading downwards like graceful waterfalls, perfuming the air.

A young servant girl smiled shyly at me as she carried a large vase filled with long-stemmed roses towards the platform, positioning it on the floor next to an empty glass display. Her eyes were crystal blue and with her blonde curls tucked under her white maid’s bonnet, she reminded me of Rosemary.

Towards the center of the hall, I saw Erick Plainstow, my dour-faced scheduling secretary. He was directing the frenzied activity like an orchestra conductor, his hands dashing this way and that way as he watched with a keen eye. He shouted orders at servants and chastised guards who got in the way.

He was in his element. “Everything must be perfect,” he kept shouting, clapping his hands. “Hurry, now, hurry! We’re behind schedule.”

He’d planned the Sunset Regalia, and now the remembrance ceremony was equally his to worry over the details. I could see he was making up for last night’s unexpected delay with gusto.

He didn’t keep me out of his crosshairs either.

Erick approached the throne, his assistant handing him his appointment book on cue. “Your Imperial Majesty, shall we go over the speech one more time?”

“As you like,” I said with a sigh.

“That’s far enough,” the Captain snapped, stepping in front of me to block the way. Erick paused at the bottom of the steps, bristling in annoyance. The Captain stood firm. “No one gets close to the Empress. Not even you.”

“As you wish,” Erick said, withdrawing a loose paper from his book and handing it to the Captain, who then handed it to me. It was the speech for today’s ceremony, written in elegant script. He added, “Your Highness, the Tyvian Princess, Katya of Dabokva, is still urgently requesting a private audience. If you remember, she was quite adamant during last night’s party. Also, His Grace Prince Finbar O’Brien of Wynn—”
“No one’s getting a private audience today,” the Captain interrupted, matter-of-factly. “Royal Protector’s orders.”

Erick sighed in long-suffering patience. “Very well.”

He turned aside, jumping after two servants who were handling my mother’s portrait. “Be careful, now!” he shouted as they slid the canvas into the glass display.

I looked to the Captain. “What else has my father ordered?”

“He said to…”

Sunlight flooded the long hall as the main doors flung open.

I saw my father at the threshold, his figure dark against the sky. I could see storm clouds collecting in the distance, graying the morning blue. He stood with Lieutenant Mortimer Ramsey, the City Watch officer he’d sent the Captain to investigate last night. Ramsey’s silver hair glistened, caught by the sun’s rays as he gestured at someone beyond the door.

“I see you cleared Ramsey.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Alexi said, her gaze narrowing down the hall at the two men, towering above all others. My father stood six-foot-four, taller than most men, and Ramsey, too. The way they guarded the door, I wondered that anyone menacing at all could get through.

Alexi reported, “I found no evidence of his direct involvement with the Drapers Ward murders.”

“But his squad?”

She grimaced. “Unfortunately, two below his command will be put to trial. I made the arrests last night and put the paperwork through just this morning. Sergeants, the both of them.”

“I see.” I lightly touched her arm. “And I’m glad, Alexi. To have such a high-ranking officer disgraced would have been a wrenching betrayal for both you and me.” I’d appointed Ramsey to First Lieutenant, but Alexi had pushed for it, recommending him personally.

It was behind us now.

The Captain leaned closer and crossed her arms. “As for your father’s orders, he said to look out for a strange woman. I never imagined the Crown Killer would be female. It feels wrong. Only a man could be so cruel.”

Father took my lie and ran with it, I realized.

That morning I’d told the Captain we were under grave threat, per secret intelligence gleaned by the Royal Spymaster’s Eyes (and not the Outsider). The Captain was under the impression the Crown Killer was going to try and assassinate me…

“You’re wrong,” I said, looking away. “A woman can be equally cruel.”

And that woman will be a witch.

The Captain shrugged. “The Dunwall Courier has been accusing Lord Corvo of being the Crown Killer for so long, it’s hard to think of him being a her.”

“I see your point.”
I turned towards my throne chair. Normally, I didn’t give it much thought, but if the Outsider’s warning had done anything, it’d made me more reflective of my life and the things I took for granted. It was a beautiful chair, symbolic in design. Its curves were modern, a triangular flair with a pointed back, its edges flaring downwards in a long swoop down each arm.

The metal frame was silver, but the seat itself was red leather, upholstered in the shape of a bivalve seashell. Exquisite metalworking adorned the center of its pointed back, embossed in high relief. It showed a four-pointed compass, similar in design to my signet ring, representing the Empire’s vast reach into every known corner of the civilized world.

I sat down and faced the hall, watching the coming and goings of servants as they completed their final touches. I watched with a strange sense of foreboding.

It was almost time.

The young girl with the blonde hair and blue eyes was sweeping the floor, clearing the aisle of flower petals that had shaken free. Elite guardsmen stood in the shadows behind the columns, these being the Captain’s most trusted officers, and at the main doors, I saw my father wave through a musician, a renowned violinist all the way from Fraeport, a northern city of Morley. Erick then directed him to a corner where he could play his violin in readiness for the main event.

I returned to the speech, meanwhile, the paper in my hands trembling slightly.

The lines seemed to blur. The more I read, the more I realized I was just reading the same sentence over and over again.

“Your Majesty,” the Captain said, breaking my concentration (or lack thereof). “The High Overseer has arrived.”

I looked up with interest, straightening in my chair. “Thank you, Alexi.”

High Overseer Yul Khulan was at the main doors, talking with Lord Corvo. They weren’t exactly friends, but I knew they respected one another on a personal level.

My father had called him kind, once.

But the Mark of the Outsider would always put Corvo at secret odds with the Overseers whose mission in life was to eradicate all supernatural influence in the world. Other than Khulan, I was pretty sure my father dreaded any interaction with the Abbey, his feelings towards them hovering between apathy and disgust, if not downright hatred. The Overseers had brutal practices within their religious sect, bordering on child abuse.

But I, too, personally liked Khulan.

When I was younger (the unprepared Child Empress, if you will), the High Overseer had aided me with matters of state, a voice of wisdom in my ear. I’d grown fond of his strange accent, for he was, like my father, a foreigner. He hailed from Wei-Ghon, a distant city on a small chain of islands northwest of Tyvia.

He looked exotic to my eyes as well. His eyes were sharply slanted, like the shape of almonds, and he had a wide, flat nose and high, prominent cheekbones.

“I once corrupted a lowly Overseer.”

It was the Outsider’s voice, sounding rather wistful.
I gasped, but it was a little sound, immediately lost in the bustle of the throne room. With a cold, sapping wind, the Outsider appeared with his hand casually resting on the arm of my throne chair, standing beside me. Good grief, how many times was he just going to appear out of nowhere?!

I felt like a helpless creature beneath a magnifying glass with no privacy or escape.

“A heretic in their midst,” he continued like it was normal to be speaking to me thus, with no care for his intrusion. “An Overseer hiding the Mark on his hand, even as that same hand slew men for hiding bone charms in the floorboards.”

No one reacted to the Outsider’s voice or his presence. We were alone in a crowd of people.

“He was good at hiding it,” he said. “The Overseer and his secret heresy. The hypocrisy. I took my time with him… Savored it.”

I said nothing, glaring straight ahead.

The Outsider moved out of my peripheral vision to stand in front of me. Now he comes to savor me, I thought, my stomach clenching, my heart beating faster. I tried to keep glaring straight ahead, to ignore him, but his eyes were like dark anchors, dragging me into the unknown.

I looked at him.

I fell into him.

There was no other way to describe what it felt like to be sitting there, captured by the Outsider’s interest, captured by own desire crashing against his.

I wanted him. I wanted him to leave. I wanted him to stay.

He began to pace as he spoke, back and forth in front of me, his hands clasped behind his back. “A few years later, he became High Overseer…”

I could barely focus, barely breathe—

He stopped pacing suddenly. He bent at the waist, leaning over me like I was an unruly child caught in the act of not listening.

“You see, my dear,” he said with a crooked grin. “Francis Perry accepted my Mark because he wanted to walk with the Outsider in his dreams, to understand his enemy. Do you want to understand me, Emily?”

Yes, I thought, and I hated myself for it. I’m like a child playing with fire. He will burn me in the end.

I wanted to speak, to throw the full force of my Empress face behind my words, to be bold and confident, to shout ‘Are you my enemy?!’ but I was afraid to engage him. Afraid of where it might lead. If he offered me his Mark again, I feared I would be too weak to resist him, that I’d break my promise to my father. I couldn’t do that. I mustn’t. I loved him too much to put him through that pain.

And so I said nothing.

But I held his gaze—why? Perhaps because I was unwilling to look away (as if doing so would signal defeat or weakness), but more likely it was because I couldn’t look away.
He was too captivating to ignore.

Either way, it felt like a test of wills. The Empress. The Outsider. Neither of us breaking the stare. I felt like I was in Parliament, meeting a querulous Senator eye for eye, neither of us willing to yield.

The Outsider’s lips twitched in amusement. He was enjoying this little game. I projected, ‘Go away’ with all my strength, glaring at him with all the intensity I could muster.

“Are you okay, Your Majesty?” Alexi asked. It broke my concentration. I looked away from the Outsider to stare blankly at the Captain.

“What?”

“You’re breathing heavily.”

“Such concern,” the Outsider said, smiling wickedly at the Captain. Only I could hear him.

I shot to my feet. “I just need some air,” I said, panic rising. I turned my back on the Outsider and faced the Captain to my right. A cheap move, but I had to do something. “Captain, can we go outside for a few minutes, or does Lord Corvo plan to keep me glued to my throne?”

Her brow furrowed. “We can find out.”

I didn’t look to see if the Outsider followed.

As we headed down the aisle, I saw the High Overseer step past my father’s outstretched arm and enter the throne room. His gaze immediately met mine as we were, at that point, walking towards each other. He bowed his head in greeting, and I forced a smile in return.

Khulan wore a resplendent black robe with a broad red and white stripe down the middle. His arms were covered up to the elbows in leathery red gloves, and at his belt he carried an ornate sword. Draped over his right arm, a long golden chain gently swung back and forth at his every movement, an incense holder weighted at the bottom.

He would be officiating today’s remembrance ceremony, providing a religious backdrop that bespoke years of close affiliation between the Crown and the Abbey of the Everyman.

For all his kindness and loyalty, I wondered what High Overseer Khulan would do if he knew my Royal Protector had the Mark of the Outsider—and if he knew the truth about his predecessor. During the Rat Plague, Corvo had burned Thaddeus Campbell’s face with the Heretic’s Brand for allying with the traitorous Hiram Burrows, essentially nullifying his considerable power over the Abbey.

“One of my favorite moments,” the Outsider said, whispering in my ear. “Sometimes, when your father closes his eyes, he can still smell the burning flesh.”

“How wonderful,” I said, stabbing a dark glance at the Outsider at my shoulder before sliding my gaze away towards the High Overseer. We were standing toe to toe now. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Khulan. Welcome.”

I hoped my smile didn’t look too fake. The Outsider is reading my every thought, I thought, then hated myself for thinking that damn thought! Get out of my head!

“And you, Empress,” Khulan warmly replied, bowing his head. “Still beautiful as ever, outshining all others.”
“You’re too kind.”

“As always you have my heartfelt condolences. Your mother was a beacon of light in a dark and treacherous time for the Empire. I only wish I could have known her in person. Alas, I admired her from afar.”

“Thank you, Khulan. She would have welcomed your wise counsel and true friendship.”

He smiled then. “And I have a bit of a surprise for you.”

“Oh?”

I followed his gaze as he raised his arm towards the main doors. At the threshold appeared a slim woman dressed in a long, flowing robe of the deepest red, like freshly spilled blood. She had the longest hair I had ever seen on a woman. It spilled down her back in silver waves, nearly to the floor.

But what was most astonishing was her face. Across her eyes she wore a thick red ribbon, blinding her, yet she seemed to walk as one confident in her gait, seeing her true path.

“Well, that…?” the Captain blurted, then stopped herself, no doubt realizing it was impolite to interrupt a conversation between the Empress and High Overseer.

But I, too, felt her astonishment.

“One of the Blind Sisters?” I asked, looking to Khulan, but he had already left my side for the moment, moving to intercept the woman as though she did need help navigating the aisle.

Momentarily alone with me, the Captain whispered furtively, “I can’t believe one is here. Aren’t they hermits?”

“They’re oracles. They… prophesize.”

Supposedly. Father said they were more like scholars, reading and writing history books and political philosophies. The Sisters of the Oracular Order were intensely reclusive and secretive, acting as a guiding hand for the Abbey of the Everyman, the female counterpart to the all-male Overseers.

The Captain’s face suddenly paled. “She’s a woman.”

“Yes, I see that.”

“No, a woman.”

I felt my heart skip a beat as I realized what she meant. The Captain and I stared in dread as the High Overseer escorted the Blind Sister towards us. The perfect cover, I thought. Suddenly, the world froze.

The noise, the murmurs, the violin in the corner—all of it ceased. At first, I thought Corvo had used Bend Time to manipulate time, but we were not holding hands, and he—like everyone else around me—stood frozen like a statue.

The Outsider’s footsteps seemed extraordinarily loud in that dead silence.

It was he who had frozen time.
The Outsider circled the Blind Sister, her body frozen in place with the High Overseer’s helping hand on her arm. His black eyes surveyed the red-robed woman up and down with interest, then turned to me with an expression on his face that I could only describe as intensely entertained.

“Do you really think she’s the witch? A Blind Sister of the Abbey?”

He laughed then. Roared in laughter. I could only stare at him in shock. He sounded so human.

But then his laugh began to irritate me when he didn’t stop. It’s not funny! He was making me feel stupid and embarrassed! I clenched my fists, about to break my own silence with choice words, but then suddenly he Blinked. I felt his arms encircle me from behind like a blast of winter cold at my back.

I felt his hands slip around my waist, pulling me against his chest. It was a lover’s embrace, and the shock of feeling his arms around me moved me to melt around him like water over ice. I bent my neck, inviting his lips closer.

The action was as involuntary as shivers. I couldn’t stop myself.

He whispered in my ear, “How blasphemous of you to think so, Empress. Tsk, tsk. The Blind Sister is devout.”

“Like your lowly Overseer?”

I forced myself out of his cold embrace, spinning around to face him. He was smiling at me, mocking me, my every thought laid bare, no matter how ridiculous.

“She could be the witch,” I hissed defensively. “She has access, for one. She got past my father, didn’t she?”

I slowed my breathing and forced a deadly calm into my voice. This was it. Maybe I could stop it. Maybe I could keep my throne past tonight.

“Is she the witch? Tell me.”

The Outsider paced back and forth in front of me, his body pointing this way and that way, but always his head facing me, his black eyes watching with interest. “Is she a threat? Yes, but not in the way you imagine. A clever witch whispers in her ear from afar, corrupting her dreams with lies.”

“A clever witch? How many Void-bedamned witches are against me?”

“Enough to fill the halls of your palace. They will dance as it burns.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. I struggled to speak, my voice lowering to a throaty whisper. “These witches… they corrupt the Blind Sister’s dreams?”

“Yes.”

“Not you?”

His smile widened. “No.”

I glanced at the Blind Sister, feeling an overwhelming urge to rip the red ribbon from her eyes, to expose what secrets lied beneath.

“What lies?” I asked. “You said—”
“Lies bordering on obscene. Lies about a certain Fugue Feast where wrong becomes right, a father plundering his daughter in the darkness of the Empress’s safe room—”

“Stop. I’ve heard it before.”

My detractors cooked up disgusting lies about my father and I all the time. Incest was just one of their favorites.

I stared at the Blind Sister. “Why is she here?” I demanded. “Why has she come?”

“A genuine prophecy. She sees blood…” His voice drifted as he looked around him at all the frozen people in my throne room. “A lot of people are going to die. The odds are… not good.”

“If that’s true, why would the Blind Sister put herself in danger by being here?”

“Why does anyone? Reward.” He smiled coldly. “She hopes all the bloodshed will provide a convenient distraction as she slips deeper into the palace, searching for signs of corruption. She’s extremely convinced she’ll find it.”

“She’ll find none,” I said. “My father is always careful.”

“It’s not him,” the Outsider said. “Worship of me has seeped into the cracks and crannies of your palace, Empress. Your guards… your servants… the zealous worship in secret.”

“The Abbey’s problem, not mine. My people may worship freely, as they wish.”

But if the Blind Sister meant to destroy ties between the Crown and the Abbey, it would weaken my reign considerably.

“A noble sentiment,” the Outsider said in mocking tones.

I sighed heavily, back to square one. “She’s not the witch.”

“No.”

“Who then?” I asked, exasperated, knowing in my heart it was useless. The Outsider was not interested in helping me.

He tilted his head at me in scrutiny.

“Who? If two witches watch two watches, then which witch watch which watch?”

I glared at him. “Are you always this annoying?”

He laughed.

The Outsider was enjoying his little game. He didn’t seem to care that I was in danger. No, the danger enticed him. Interested him. This was life or death.

He stepped closer. “You want to know who? Accept my Mark and I’ll tell you.”

The laughter was gone from his eyes; he looked utterly serious now, with no trace of mockery.

I closed my eyes, shutting him out. “I promised my father I wouldn’t.”

“Your father understands too little,” the Outsider hissed. “Maybe I should better inform him.”
I snapped my eyes open and suddenly the world leapt to life. The frozen statues became people again, breathing and moving and talking, resuming their lives as if nothing untoward had happened. The High Overseer pulled the Blind Sister towards me so fast I felt whiplashed. It was all happening too fast.

Khulan smiled and said, “Empress, may I present Sister Maria Somonos of Cullero, daughter of Sister Dalia Somonos…”

Whatever else was said was lost to the roaring in my ears as my gaze moved away from the Blind Sister to the throne room doors behind her.

My father stood silhouetted against the light of the morning sky, his head turning towards the Outsider who stood at his shoulder. The Outsider’s black eyes stared at me across the long hall, even as he whispered in my father’s ear.

It was the smile on his face that curdled my blood.

I had to give my father credit. Fifteen years had passed, a desert of silence, my father not once seeing the Outsider since the Rat Plague—and yet there he was, now, beside him, whispering in his ear—and Corvo didn’t even flinch.

As if in slow motion, I saw my father’s eyes begin to harden in fury as the Outsider’s words slammed home. Eyes honed on me. Mad at me.

“Bloody bastard!” I growled under my breath. What in the Void did he just tell Corvo?

The High Overseer jerked backwards. “I say! Are you…”

Corvo stormed towards me, his dark eyes obliterating all else. I saw only him. He grabbed me roughly by the arm, propelling me towards the back of the throne.

“Give us a moment,” he said to everyone, to no one. I’d never seen him so angry. “Captain, guard the door.”

“Yes, Lord Protector,” I heard the Captain say, her voice faraway as Corvo busted into my private reception and slammed the glass door behind us.

I stumbled towards the center of the room, flinging around to face him.

He stood very still. “You lied to me.”

I lost my breath. Rosemary.

His face was a mask of anguish. “How can I protect you when you lie to me, Emily?”

He balled his hand into a tight fist and Blinked away. I knew where he was going and why. I looked up, feeling sick. He was crouched on top of the bannister, climbing over towards my bedroom door.

“She’s not the witch!”

But I knew it was too late.

I scrambled as fast as I could, barging into the next room. Coral was inside, dusting a painting. She
yelped in fright as I ran past her. I dove towards the marble stairs, taking them five at a time, lunging upwards until my lungs burned and my heart felt like it would burst! I ran down the long hall towards my bedroom door, already flung open at Corvo’s passing.

I expected the safe room to be opened, too, but instead I saw my father, his back to me, standing shock-still in the middle of my bedchambers. The Outsider was casually leaning against the bookshelf with his arms crossed, effectively blocking the secret passageway.

I gasped in relief, doubling over with my hands braced on my knees, trying to catch my breath. It was hard; I was so angry. I straightened, at last, and glared at the Outsider with every once of outrage I could muster. “You meddling bastard!”

My father stepped back, turning so that he could see the both of us, the Outsider on his left, his daughter to his right.

We could all see each other.

“An interesting dynamic,” the Outsider remarked with a lopsided grin. “You know, I’ve never Marked a father and his daughter before. I’m enticed to see what happens next.”


“She’s not the witch!” I cried. I knew it with all my heart. Rosemary was my best friend. She was my witch.

My father’s face turned cold, but his eyes were smoldering fire. “You don’t know that, Emily.”

“I do,” I said, pleading. “She wouldn’t hurt me.”

He shook his head, swearing under his breath. When he looked at me again, he said in a strained voice, “You lie to yourself.”

The Outsider pushed away from the bookshelf and slowly paced back and forth between my father and I.

“Interesting. She lies to him, he lies to her, round and round it goes…” He paused in front of me, cocking his head in fascination. “You don’t think so? He lied to you about your mother’s Heart, didn’t he?”

“I told her,” Corvo snapped defensively.

“After the fact,” the Outsider corrected, turning his head towards my father, but remaining in front of me like a cold shadow. “But still surprising, dear Corvo. I always thought you’d take that shame to the grave, old man.”

Such a callous reminder of my mother’s Heart, her spirit trapped in the Void, hardened my heart. I wanted to slap the Outsider’s face as hard as I could, but I was afraid he wouldn’t even feel it. He’s not human at all, I thought. Everything I thought I saw in him was a lie.

I saw a flicker of recognition in the Outsider’s black gaze as he stared at me, reading my thoughts. The Void watches from within—everyone knew that, but it was disturbing watching it unfold in front of my eyes.

What I saw flickering in the depths of his soulless eyes… Maybe I had hurt him, after all.
The Outsider’s lips curved into a smile, but it seemed forced.

“Do you think me cruel, Empress?”

“Yes.”

“But I was the perfect gentleman when we first met. I kissed your hand.”

“You called Rosemary a whore!”

“And a witch.”

“She’s not a whore; she’s an artist. Lovemaking is just another talent she has, like music.”

The Outsider glanced at Corvo. “Is she always this naïve?” He then snapped back to me. “Do you think when she touches you, it’s love?”

“You know nothing,” I said, lifting my chin in defiance. “You’re as empty as your eyes.”

My answer made him smile—a sad wraith of a thing. It struck me, how raw and open it was.

I couldn’t read his thoughts, but in that instant, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that for the Outsider there was a vast chasm between what he knew and what he’d felt for himself.

Like hard lessons in life, some things could only be truly learned by experiencing it firsthand.

I stared into his eyes, not breathing, waiting for his reaction.

He brushed my cheek with the back of his fingers, so softly it felt like a lover’s caress, but the biting cold of his hand twisted it into something cruel. I heard Corvo hiss his objection. The Outsider seemed amused by my father’s reaction—for Corvo could threaten and intimidate, but in truth do nothing, for Corvo’s own sorcery came from the Void, and the Outsider was its master.

The Outsider whispered, “I wonder… what do you love, Emily? Your throne? Your dear Rosemary? Your soft Wyman?”

“Leave her alone,” Corvo rumbled like dark thunder, inviting rage just beneath the surface.

It was a dangerous game my father played with the Outsider, and I began to wonder if it wasn’t as unevenly matched as I’d first believed. There was a long history between them I could scarce imagine.

“Yes. You think it yourself, old man,” the Outsider snorted in derision, his hand slipping away from my cheek. I gasped, seared by the cold he left behind. He glanced at me and smirked. “Sorry to say, Empress, but dear old Daddy doesn’t approve of Wyman. He thinks he’s a pansy.”

The Outsider disappeared in a flurry of black rain, reappearing at Corvo’s shoulder. “Soft Wyman can’t protect your daughter, Corvo. But then again, can you?”

The Outsider was at my father’s side, but he stared at me across the room, drawing Corvo’s eye until they both stared at me—clearly imagining me dead, the both of them.

My father’s face paled; the Outsider just smiled in that chilling way of his.

“Need I even say it, Corvo? You lost an Empress once, and now you’re losing another.”
I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move…

“Emily made me wonder what difference it would have made if I’d Marked you earlier, Corvo. If you’d been ready for Daud when he came for your sweet Jessamine. I offered the Mark to Emily, to give her the chance you never had, but she continues to resist me. In fact, warning her seems to be having no discernible effect. You’re both barreling towards your doom. Interesting, isn’t it?”

My father and I stared at each other, a cold silence stretching across the emptiness he left behind.

Chapter End Notes

~The "clever witch" etc. is a foreshadowing of Breanna Ashworth and the Oraculum.

~As always thanks for reading.

~Next up - Delilah. Lucky Chapter 13.
Part 2: Chapter 13

Part II continued

“A Long Day in Dunwall”

Chapter 13

The Outsider’s horrifying words echoed in my heart like a kettledrum, pounding and pounding. I couldn’t think. I felt helpless, careening out of control towards an end I could see but not stop. I turned towards the way out, a flee response exploding in my chest.

Corvo appeared in front of me, Blinking, a cold snap of wind encasing him in blue. I stumbled back as he just stood there, blocking the door.

“Wait,” he said.

I opened my mouth, then closed it. For what? It was all falling apart and we could do nothing! I pushed forward, but as I swung past him, he roughly grabbed my arm.

“I said wait!”

“Let go of me! I’m going back!”

He tightened his grip, hurting me. “What, to the throne room?” He said it like it was the stupidest idea he’d ever heard.

“Yes, damn you!” I said, yanking my arm back. We silently glared at one another. “What else can we do?”

Corvo didn’t respond right away; I watched his eyes search my face, then harden. He crossed his arms over his chest and calmly said, “We can cancel the ceremony. Lock down the palace.”

"No! We can't do that!"

"We can. We will."

“No! What I will do is go down there and say my stupid speech and smile at all the people and sit on my precious throne while YOU”—I grabbed the hilt of his folding sword, yanking in brutal anger, pulling and pushing so fiercely he uncrossed his arms to steady himself on his feet—“will draw your sword and stab whatever witch we find through the heart! You will kill her.”

Yes, kill.

I refused to let my father deal with this situation nonlethally, like he normally preferred.

Fear filled my heart. Let there be no hesitation. The secret witch was coming—was probably already here. If we had but one chance to get this right…

I pushed him aside, storming out the door, but in the hallway, I turned back, feeling sick, my stomach twisted in knots.

I said, my breath catching, “And you will leave Rosemary alone.”
“No.” His eyes were savage. He stretched his arm back, pointing towards the safe room. “She could have information. Critical intel.”

I hesitated, doubt creeping inside me like a worm.

His voice softened. “Your love for her is blinding you, Em. Let me interrogate her.”

_Torture her._ Would my father do that? His eyes were stone cold, holding the promise of a man who’d do anything to protect the ones he loved.

“No,” I said, putting on my Empress face. “You will not. That’s an order, Royal Protector. We will take our chances and return to the Throne Room.”

This time I watched _him_ hesitate.

It felt like an eternity—watching him consider what to do with me. Uneasiness like a long thread stitched through my skin. I felt a chilling cold creep down my spine. _Sorcery_, I suddenly realized. Time was _his_ to manipulate. In the blink of an eye, he could have already gone into the safe room, tortured Rosemary for information, and then returned to me.

Anger boiled up, choking my words. “Did you just—”

“She’s gone,” he said, lowering his sorcery hand.

“What?”

He stepped closer, in my face. “Rosemary’s gone. She’s no longer in your safe room. You still trust her?”

He was livid. _Justified_, his eyes radiated.

I stared at him, speechless. I couldn’t believe it. How could Rosemary escape without either of our signet rings? It was impossible! Was Corvo lying? But why…

Corvo swept right past me without meeting my eyes. He said with thundering finality, “We cancel the ceremony.”

“We can’t,” I cried, staggering after him down the hallway. “People will think—”

“I don’t give a damn what people think,” he said, suddenly snapping around to face me. For the second time, I stumbled into him, but this time his hand flew to my neck. His fingers dug into my flesh, lightly squeezing. He glowered at me as he held me in a choking grip. He snarled, “Give me a reason not to lock _you_ in the safe room, Your Majesty.”

I grabbed his arm with both hands and yanked downwards as hard as I could. “You will not!”

He released his hand. I fell back, gasping for breath. I knew Corvo could easily choke me out in an instant. If he used his powers, I wouldn’t even see it coming.

“I don’t give a damn what people think,” he said, suddenly snapping around to face me. For the second time, I stumbled into him, but this time his hand flew to my neck. His fingers dug into my flesh, lightly squeezing. He glowered at me as he held me in a choking grip. He snarled, “Give me a reason not to lock _you_ in the safe room, Your Majesty.”

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“Is this your idea of protecting me?” I spat, trembling with so much rage and shock that I could barely talk. “Just sling me over your shoulder and—”

“You’re not thinking straight,” he said in grating tones, but he shook his head, his calm façade crumbling as fear sparked in his eyes. _Fear of losing me._ He pulled me by the shoulders into his embrace, crushing me against his chest. I wanted to push away in anger. Anger that he couldn’t protect me. Anger that I couldn’t protect myself.
But then I wrapped my arms around him as tightly as I could. He was my father. He was the only one I could wholly trust.

“I’m sorry, Emily,” he said, his breath hot on the top of my head. “What the Outsider said…” He gently pushed us apart. Tears blurred my vision, streaking down my cheeks as I gazed up at him. “Wyman is a good man.”

“You’re worried about that?”

“I don’t want anger to be the last thing between us. I know how you feel about him.” My father’s dark eyes softened, his lips curling. “I don’t always think he’s a pansy.”

“Don’t lie, Father,” I said, an impossible laugh bursting free through my tears as he smiled at me. It was a rare sight seeing that smile.

I sniffled, shaking my head. “I know it’s your job to disapprove of every man who courts me.”

_They are night and day_, I thought. Corvo was carved by shadows, a man now in the winter of his life. He had lived through so much tragedy and bloodshed, yet still he remained a _man_, an honorable man. Wyman was soft compared to that. He knew nothing of darkness.

My Morley Red. He was a farmer’s son, had been taught poetry and prose, and was living his bright, young life between the green fields of his homeland and the luxuries of Dunwall’s royal court, having been invited only by virtue of his distant kinship with the Queen of Morley. If not for that, we would never have even met.

Corvo rubbed my tears away with a gentle thumb. “It’s my job to keep you safe. I promised Jessamine I’d protect you when she…” His eyes clouded, remembering past shadows. “When she died in my arms.”

I could see steel forming in his heart, hardening his resolve to keep me safe. The Outsider had claimed there was darkness in his soul, that he hated all the world for taking Jessamine away from him. But there was light, too. I could see it in his eyes.

_I_ was his light.

I took a deep breath, a calm acceptance filling my heart. “We cancel the ceremony.”

We moved together, taking the marble steps down a level. I saw Coral cowering in the darkened lounge beneath the stairs, afraid to meet our eyes. She was trying to look invisible, busying herself with dusting the silver.

I had no idea what she’d overheard, but it couldn’t have been good. I looked to Father, but he just shook his head at me. Coral was loyal. She’d say nothing of what she’d overheard, and with the Outsider’s earlier presence, it was difficult to gauge what exactly she _had_ heard.

Still, I hated to leave her like that.

As we passed into the next room, Captain Mayhew spied us through the glass door and hurriedly entered, her expression locked in confusion and unease.

“Lord Corvo! Empress Emily. What’s happened?” She closed the door securely behind her and whispered, “Have you learned who the Crown Killer is?”
“Captain Mayhew,” Corvo said, his voice commanding. “Take two of your most trusted men and go upstairs. I need you to guard the safe room door. If it opens, you run. Come and find me.”

“Father!” I interjected just as the Captain said, “Yes, Lord Protector.” As the Captain turned back to the throne room to gather her men, I demanded, “But why guard the door? You said yourself Rosemary is gone.”

He shot me an annoyed look. “The back door, Emily. Your safe room is a way out and in. She might come back. Only the Void knows what she’s capable of.”

“If that’s true, how is Alexi going to stop her?”

“She’s not. That’s why I told her to run and come find me.” His voice turned gruff, laced with irritation as he narrowed his eyes at me. “If you don’t like risking the Captain’s life, then you should have told me the truth yesterday.”

“I’m sorry!”

“I’m sorry for not pushing you,” he growled. “I had a feeling you were lying about something, but I let it go. I told myself I should just wait for you to tell me on your own, but clearly that was a fuckin’ mistake.”

I winced beneath his biting tone. I remembered all too well. Last night, in the throne room when we had sparred… I suddenly wished I could go back in time, to force answers out of Rosemary before I’d rendered her unconscious. “No more mistakes,” I said.

I eyed the glass door, suddenly reluctant.

My father stood shoulder to shoulder with me. “You ready?” he asked.

I gave him a dubious look out of the corner of my eye.

The glass door reopened as the Captain returned with two brawny officers in tow. Lieutenant Fraser and Corporal Wentworth. They marched passed us, nodding brusquely as they headed upstairs. In the next instant, the glass door banged open again, depositing a very irate Erick Plainstow into our midst.

He said, wringing his hands, “Where have you been? The Duke has arrived!”

“We’re canceling the ceremony,” the Royal Protector said, striding headlong towards the throne room, not looking back.

Erick looked faint. “What?!”

I grabbed his arm before he could chase after my father and get in the way. “Erick, would you please look after Coral? She’s in the next room. She needs someone to calm her down.”

“Calm her down?”

I put an edge into my voice. “Yes.”

I turned away, following my father into the throne room, dreading every step.

I closed the door behind me, catching sight of Erick through the glass. He looked ghostly pale, his eyes as round as coins. A lot of people are going to die echoed in my ears, the Outsider’s words like a snake coiling around my heart. “Damn you, Outsider,” I whispered under my breath.
Music filled the Throne Room, a violin’s sweet, yet somber notes reverberating across the hall. Nobles were thronged at the edges, murmuring in anticipation, their faces caught up in wonder. There were so many I could barely catch sight of my Elite Guard in the shadows behind the columns.

Thick bouquets of blue flowers further obscured my view. *Who let all these people in?*

“The Duke’s clockwork soldiers!” a noble cried in amazement.

“Oh, my! I can’t wait to see them up close,” a shrilly woman exclaimed, fanning her face with an expensive pearl fan.

“Just you wait, my dear,” a pompous man replied. “A year from now, it’ll be all the rage! Every reputable household will have a clockwork soldier. Mark my words.”

“I’d replace my entire household guard in an instant if I could afford it. Lazy buffoons!” she said, peeling off in laughter.

In a daze, I climbed the steps to the throne and stood beside my father. He was scowling, his dark eyes fixated on all the revelry, watching as the Duke’s grand procession approached through the open doors. It was all happening too fast.

“The Duke has arrived!” another voice cried out in joy.

“About time,” a woman huffed.

Lieutenant Ramsey meandered up the steps to stand near me, his weathered face a picture of utter calm, if not boredom. He acted as though nothing was amiss. He announced, loudly, “All hail Her Imperial Majesty, Emily Kaldwin!”

A few faces looked in my direction and bowed, but most were pivoted on the Duke’s procession as it marched down the long aisle towards the throne with triumphant applause. Ramsey grandly announced, “Your Highness, may I present His Grace Luca Abele, Grand Duke of Serkonos!”

He added, less enthusiastically, “And his brother, the Lord Cosimo Abele.”

I sat down. In truth, I probably fell into my throne chair, every muscle in my body turned to water.

“We cannot stop it,” I breathed.

*Too late.*

Leading the procession were two clockwork soldiers, towering above every man in the throne room as they clanked down the aisle. I couldn’t keep my eyes off them. *Fearless obedience,* I thought as I stared in fascination. Their bird-like heads were carved of polished wood with enormous gaping holes where rounded eyes blazed forth in electrical light, forward and back.

They had razor sharp blades for arms, two on each slender limb, glinting silver. They were alive, all spinning gears and humming electromagnetic energy.

Watching them, I was reminded of the Sunset Regalia when Lord Cosimo had propped up his clockwork foot, proudly showing off what the Grand Inventor Kirin Jindosh had done for him. His prosthetic feet paled in comparison to the engineering marvels now before me: artificial men brought to life. They moved of their own volition.
“What is this, Ramsey?” Corvo growled, turning a dark look on the Lieutenant. “I didn’t authorize those things.”

Ramsey said nothing. I looked up at him in bewilderment. His face was passive, but his eyes held secrets. The Throne Room doors slammed shut with an echoing boom. I gasped, fidgeting in my chair, my stomach clenched tightly. I glanced up at my father, but he appeared calm. Wary. I tried to mirror him, to be strong. Would he still cancel the ceremony? What was going on?

In synchronized fashion, the two clockworks soldiers halted before the throne, stepping backwards to face each other. Together they raised their bladed arms to full extension above their heads, forming a salute above the Duke of Serkonos as he walked beneath, his dark eyes shining.

Arrogance bled from his every pore. I’d thought Lord Cosimo was bad; this man was far worse. He devoured me with a single glance, reaching across the distance between us with undisguised impudence in his eyes.

“Your Imperial Majesty and Royal Protector Corvo Attano, a native of our homeland,” the Duke said. “Serkonos offers condolences on this sorrowful day, and gifts to remind you of our nation, the rising star on the southern horizon.”

The clockwork soldiers lowered their arms as the Duke of Serkonos knelt before me on one knee. Even that felt condescending.

He was a heavyset man with broad shoulders and a rounded gut, richly dressed in a vanilla coat with mulberry pants. We’d met before in years past, but our encounters were typically infrequent and ceremonial. He ruled the Isle of Serkonos from afar, sending Gristol riches from its silver mines as tribute, and stacks of gold bars in payment for taxes levied by the Crown. The south made my Empire rich, and in return, I allowed their government a measure of independence. I stayed out of their affairs.

I wore my Empress face like a shield. “We thank you, Your Grace.”

As he slowly stood, I lifted my gaze to watch the crowd. I saw High Overseer Khulan in the far back near the doors, glowering at the Duke’s procession with distaste and unease. The Blind Sister was nowhere to be seen.

The Duke’s Grand Guard had also carried in a narrow carriage by hand, a plush contraption in red velvet. I couldn’t see who was inside, but leaning casually against it was the Duke’s brother, the Lord Cosimo Abele. He was dressed far less flamboyantly than last night’s party. Instead of wild colors, he was dressed in a rose-vanilla coat with shiny black leather pants. His pompous demeanor, though, was ever his raiment of choice.

His dark eyes glittered as our eyes met. He lowered his chin in a curt bow, grinning at me with thinly veiled lust burning in his eyes. I thought of my disturbing dream last night and shuddered.

The Duke said, “Save your thanks, for now I give you the greatest gift of all: family.”

It took my breath away. Family?

He turned his back on me, spreading out his arms towards the red carriage in grand welcoming. He proudly announced—with no fear: “I present the lost sister of Jessamine Kaldwin. Your rightful Empress, Delilah Kaldwin.”

Treasonous words. Right there in my Throne Room. Even with the Outsider’s warning, it felt like a
slap to the face, a shocking betrayal.

The crowd reacted, a wave of shocked gasps commingling with excited whispers. *For and against.*

“Impossible,” Corvo hissed.

I looked to him, whispering fiercely, “My mother had a sister?”

My father sneered at this question, his face turning ashen gray. Neither of us had expected this.

I stared in breathless astonishment as a tall, graceful woman stepped down from the velvety carriage as though expecting all the world to bow to her. *The witch.* There was no doubt. She held her head high and her back straight, bending her arms outwards as though welcoming us to her majestic presence.

She approached me fearlessly. “My dearest niece. Hello.” Her voice rang sweet.

“It’s not true!” Corvo shouted, but his voice was drowned in the crowd’s furor.

Nothing stopped her approach. As she neared, I tried to catch hints of my mother’s look in her face. Were they sisters? Her black hair was cropped short and her eyes were a brilliant blue, not a soft green like my mother’s.

She boldly took the steps to my throne, directly towards my father. I couldn’t believe she would do that. Lord Corvo’s exploits during the Rat Plague were legendary, and even though I knew he wasn’t the Crown Killer, most people easily believed it—and feared him greatly. She did not.

She said, her voice echoing eerily, “My father was Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin, and Jessamine was my younger sister.”

She sounded amused that she had to explain herself.

But she did.

*Choreographed,* I thought. Every moment falling into place. I felt like a helpless spectator, entrapped by her haughty voice.

And that voice… It was as hauntingly seductive as the Outsider’s voice, an echo of the Void chilling each word. She was obviously a witch of great power.

She went on, “At the time of her death I wasn’t ready to make myself known to you and I was forced to leave Dunwall… But now I’m home.” Delilah spread out her arms, facing the crowd in celebration of her announcement.

“This is my home,” I said, my heart thumping in my ears with alarming cadence, rising faster and faster.

She turned to face me, then, her cold blue eyes flashing in captivated excitement. *Like one who has waited so long for this moment.* Dark red roses shimmered at her breast, pinned to the collar of her pant suit. She wore a pelt of long feathers over her shoulders, black as a raven’s wing. She was a thin woman, her bones sharp on her pale, angled face. Her eyes were lined with black, reminding me of the Outsider.

She, too, seemed inhumanly cold.

“Little sparrow, blackened by bad memories,” she said. “I’m here to relieve you of your crown. My
father’s promise, whispered in secret so long ago, is now fulfilled.”

“Watch your tongue,” Corvo said. “Emily Kaldwin is the daughter of Empress Jessamine Kaldwin.”

Disdain flooded her eyes as she turned to face my father dead on, approaching him with hips swaying. She coyly lifted her hand to my father’s cheek. “Oh, Royal Protector—”

My father slapped her hand away, glowering down at her. He was easily a head taller. She seemed so weak and thin compared to his bulky muscle, but her gaze was defiant.

Delilah was fearless.

She laughed, her lips curling in scorn. “Look at you. An old crow protecting his little sparrow. How naïve to think you could get away with these murders. Living in my palace has protected you, but that’s over.” She glared at me with spiteful venom, then turned away, facing the hushed crowd. “Here me, all of you, your rightful Empress has returned!”

She stepped down from my throne as the clockwork soldiers suddenly spurred to life, spinning towards me. The Duke shouted triumphantly, “All hail the Empress Delilah, First of her name!”

The Duke’s Grand Guard drew their swords, the ringing sound of metal echoing over the gasps and applause of those in the crowd.

“Arrest Emily Kaldwin and her father for the Crown Killer murders!” the Duke shouted, impudent rage in his eyes. Lord Cosimo licked his lips, staring at me.

“What!?” I shrieked, straightening in my throne chair, panic seizing my heart. How dare he shout commands in my throne room!

I heard screams and the sickening wet crunch of metal piercing flesh and bone, but all seemed to fade away as my focus narrowed to my immediate vicinity. Three guards—my own men from my Elite Guard!—took the platform with swords drawn. Their menacing eyes snapped towards the Royal Protector.

In a flash of glinting metal, my father drew his folding sword. It fully extended in a blur of slicing motion as Corvo protectively hovered in front of me, crouching slightly. It was a shock to see my father draw his sword. I was truly in mortal danger.

A pause. I felt like the whole world held its breath as Corvo eyed the three men stepping cautiously closer, like wolves sniffing out its prey. Traitors, I thought.

In the next instant, all was blood.

I saw my father raise his sorcery hand, manipulating time. In the blink of an eye, the man to my left was spurring blood from his gaping neck, his hands clutching at empty air as his severed head bounced to the floor. My father was behind the middle man now, wrenching his sword from the man’s chest as he crumbled dead at my feet. The man on my right—I didn’t even see him fall. He was lying in a pool of his own blood, his neck slashed with spurting blood gushing across the carpet runner.

So much blood…

My father’s dark eyes met mine for an instant, a world of stricken terror and regret, then he turned away, again raising his sorcery hand as he Blinked. He shot like an arrow towards Delilah, one moment before me, the next across the room grasping her by the neck, a trail of blue mist behind
him.

I jumped to my feet, feverishly watching as he pierced his sword through her chest. *True aim, right through the heart,* I thought with relief.

But suddenly black tendrils sprang from the ground, twisting and tightening around Corvo’s body. He was trapped! Delilah’s sorcery!

“Father!” I screamed.

Corvo was fast disappearing into the black folds of that malignant vine. I lunged towards him, but I snapped unexpectedly backwards, my hand caught on something.

I looked back in astonishment as Ramsey roughly pulled me towards him.

I glared into his eyes. *Traitorous dog!*

As hard as I could, I punched him in the jaw. I had to get away! Father needed my help! Ramsey’s head flew back from the blow, but he recovered quickly, backhanding me with a brutal fist, sending me sprawling towards Delilah’s feet.

Pain splintered across my face, an agony of whitewashed stars in my vision. I was on hands and knees, and looking up, I saw my father’s sword buried hilt-deep in Delilah’s chest. She smiled down at me, her blue eyes sparkling like sapphires.

I watched in horror as she slowly pulled the sword from her chest, the length of its metal turned black with her blood. *How can she not be dead?*

Her voice dripped with tender malevolence. “Your sword cannot still my heart.”

The black vines writhed and quivered as if alive, a red light pulsating from within its inky black tendrils. Corvo was trapped, but his sorcery hand emerged as if yanked free by an invisible force.

Delilah tilted her head in scrutiny of the Outsider’s Mark—it glowed bright white and ghostly blue, burning right through his black leather wrappings. “Why, Corvo Attano,” she said coyly. “How handsome you are for a man of your age, and how long have you hidden the Mark of the Outsider? I expect it’s a wonderful story—with an even better ending now that I’m here.”

She reached out and pulled my father’s hand towards her with sorcery, a white, misty light stretching between them. In the next instant, the Outsider’s Mark disappeared, snatched from his skin as if it never was.

I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Stolen.

*But how could she do that?* The Void was the source of all magic in the world, and the Outsider controlled who was given the Mark. How could she wield Outsider-like power?

Delilah callously slapped her hand in the air with sorcery. The vines untangled in a blur, throwing my father towards the ground. I caught him by the shoulder, grunting beneath his weight. I cupped his cheek as he gasped in pain, his dark eyes meeting mine in disbelief. Above his head, I watched as Delilah flung my father’s sword across the room. Lieutenant Ramsey caught it, glaring down at us.
I staggered to my feet and felt my father do the same. We stood surrounded by our enemies, our backs to each other.

That moment, for me, held echoes of my mother’s assassination. I was back in that gazebo, watching helplessly as Daud viciously backhanded my mother across the face, then grabbed her by the neck, pushing her stumbling back. As he plunged his sword through her chest, she had cried out, “Corvo!”

But it was too late.

Once again I felt that absolute powerlessness as horrific events unfolded before my eyes. People died around me, their curdling screams piercing the air as they fell. Blood streaked across the floors. I saw the young girl. Her blue eyes were closed forever, her blonde curls tangled up in fallen roses. Her white maid’s bonnet was drenched in blood.

I didn’t even know her name.

I turned towards my father as I heard his breath catch. He was lunging forward, but Delilah cried out, “I will cast you in cold marble!”

Suddenly, my father’s body was encased in stone, a foul gray poison that began at his feet then rose slithering to his head. He became a gruesome statue, desperately reaching for Delilah with outstretched arms, his face frozen in a grimace.

“No!” I screamed, plunging my hands towards her neck, but I was flung backwards by a cold windblast from Delilah’s sorcery hand, slamming me to the ground on my back. I lost my breath, the wind knocked out of me. She knelt beside me, running cold fingers through my hair as my lungs convulsed, choking for air.

She smiled coldly. “Sweet girl. Over time, you’ll come to love me. Perhaps, someday, you’ll see me as the mother you lost.”

Never, I swore, my eyes burning.

She rose and towered over me. “But until then you’ll be kept out of trouble.” She nodded at the Lieutenant.

Ramsey leaned over me, looking smug. “I’ll secure the royal chambers. Then I’ll bring Lady Emily to Coldridge Prison.”

Delilah looked pleased. “The Duke was right to trust in you, Captain Ramsey. More rewards are in your future, I think.” She turned away, lost from view.

I gasped, my breath returning in agonizing gulps of air. I was helpless on my back, the smell of blood overwhelming my senses, sickening me. Looking up at Ramsey, I saw the Duke’s brother appear at his shoulder.

“My turn?” Lord Cosimo asked, leering down at me.

“I’ll lock her upstairs for you,” Ramsey said, “but her ring is mine like we planned.”

His boot came down hard against my head, and all was lost to darkness.
Part 2: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Rape Trigger Warning

Part II continued

“A Long Day in Dunwall”

Chapter 14

I plunged in and out of consciousness. The dark was quiet and calm and sweet, but the light, when it returned, was lancing pain in my head. I saw little. Glimpses of wood and candlelight. The twinkle of silver. Ramsey was dragging me, my limp body barely held above the floor. I thought I felt his arm at my waist, but sensation itself flickered in and out of existence. I drifted…

Ramsey’s voice came to me in snatches, grating against my ear. “…see, my father lost it all when I was a boy… now I wear this uniform and send… to patrol the Rose Gardens instead of drinking with the men from the Shooting Club.”

I felt his arm slip away. I fell hard, wooden planks coming up sharply. My hands smacked the ground, pain shooting up my arms. I stared at my signet ring, trying to pierce the fog drowning me in waves of light and dark.

“Empress Emily! What hap… Lieutenant?”

I forced my head up, assailed by fear as I realized that was the Captain’s voice!

Alexi, run!

I tried to scream, but nothing came out.

“Sorry, but there can only be one Captain,” Ramsey said with mocking regret. “That’s me now.”

He reached for her, his hand gripping her shoulder. With the other, he stabbed Alexi through the gut, a rapid upwards thrust that shattered my heart.

“No!” I cried, but my voice sounded distant and weak.

Alexi fell forward on the sword, leaning against the fatal blow, but Ramsey callously pushed her back. Blood spurted from her mouth as she crumbled to the floor.

He inspected the sword, dripping with blood. “So that’s the Royal Protector’s fancy weapon…” He snorted in derision. “What kind of sword folds in half?”

He threw it aside, but as it rattled on the floor I only had eyes for Captain Mayhew. _My friend dying, bleeding out in front of me._ It didn’t seem real. I couldn’t get a grip. Darkness swamped my vision. I drifted in and out… My legs seemed to swirl, my boots dragging against the wood. I couldn’t
think, the black fog swallowing me whole…

When consciousness returned, I was inside my study, slouched on the floor with my back against the wall. I couldn’t feel my legs, but I saw them sprawled out in front of me. *Get up!* I screamed at myself, but a wave of nausea struck me.

Ramsey was crouched in front of me.

I tried to look into his eyes, but the effort made me dizzy. I just glared at his hands. I slowly realized he was holding my signet ring between his fingers. It gleamed with a metallic sheen, catching the morning light from the window behind me. It hurt my eyes. I realized Ramsey was talking. It was hard to concentrate on what he was saying.

“...Elite Tower Guard… last resort, a safe room… enough gold to buy a good-sized island.”

He flipped the signet ring in his hand like a sailor’s lucky coin toss. I tried to lift myself with my hands, but I felt heavy and disoriented. My eyes fluttered to Ramsey’s face, his silver hair glinting in the light, making me blink rapidly.

He was saying, “…and they say that *this* ring is one of only two keys to exist.” He stood up, then, crossing to the door behind him. His voice became distant as waves of vertigo battered my skull. “She’s all yours now, Lord Cosimo. Don’t take too long. I need help moving the gold.”

The Duke’s brother hovered at the door, a dark shadow to my eyes. “You’ll get your gold, Captain. Now leave us alone. Don’t you know it’s rude to keep an Empress waiting?”

Ramsey laughed as Lord Cosimo entered the room. The Serkonan turned his back and locked the door. The key made a metal scraping sound; it seemed overly loud.

*Get up, Emily!*

I felt outside myself. I was panting and grunting, but the sound of my own breathing seemed faraway. I watched him slowly turn away from the door and approach me.


His wooden feet hammered the floors.

He crouched before me like Ramsey had, but unlike him he didn’t keep his distance. Cosimo forced his knees between my legs and crawled over me like an animal, sniffing me as he moved up my body to finally crowd my face with his. When he pulled back slightly, I could see the dark of his eyes glittering with lust.

“I have to admit, *Empress*, I’m a little disappointed,” he said in a mocking whisper.

I could feel the heat of his breath on my face; it made me want to vomit. Terror rose in my belly at his every word.

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s not your fault. It’s Corvo’s. Your legendary Royal Protector. Your beloved father. Maybe Delilah’s fault, too. I didn’t think she would turn Corvo into stone—that was surprising. You see, I thought for sure you’d both be carted off to prison for a little while. That is, before your trial and executions.”

He took his time.
He threaded his fingers through my hair, softly at first, like a lover, but then he tore the silver pins from my hair like the act itself was meant to shame an Empress.

I never went in public with my hair down.

My hair fell to my shoulders, a warmth against my neck. He rubbed the silky strands between his fingers and laughed as I tried to turn my head away. It was too much. I felt only the barest twitch of response. My body felt weak, paralyzed, and the pressure behind my eyes was stabbing hot iron.

I was afraid I’d pass out, but a dark corner of my mind wondered if that’d be a mercy.

“But then Corvo’s full of surprises, isn’t he? The Mark of the Outsider! My, oh, my…” He made a *tsk, tsk* sound. “Surprised I know what that is? Delilah told us—my brother and I. She loves us, you see. We fuck her on a regular basis.”

He said this like he was bragging, but then he sighed in long suffering patience, like *that* wasn’t the point.

“Alas, Delilah was forced to turn Corvo into stone. The Mark made him truly dangerous. He’d already escaped from Coldridge once. Who was to say he couldn’t do it again?”

He let my hair slip from his fingers, mocking regret pouring from his dark eyes.

“Hence, my disappointment. He’s all turned to stone and now he can’t watch. You see, I wanted the legendary Corvo Attano to watch with eyes wide open as I took his daughter before him over and over and… over.”

I cried out, my voice sounding weak and faraway as he nosed his face beneath my hair and began to bite and suck on my neck. Stars exploded in my vision as I tried to fight back, to push him off me with hands that felt too weak, too disconnected, like they belonged to another body.

Darkness hit me like a sledgehammer… When I came back, Lord Cosimo was leaning back on his wooden heels, digging into the folds of his coat.

“Ramsey hit you harder than I thought,” he said, cocking his head at me in scrutiny. “A nasty concussion looks like.”

He withdrew a glass vial, holding it up against the light. Red liquid sloshed within. *Sokolov’s Elixir*, I realized dimly. He lifted my chin, pouring the elixir into my mouth.

“Don’t want you passing out again,” he said. “What’s the fun if you don’t feel anything?”

He licked his lips, his eyes grazing over the marks he’d, no doubt, left behind on my neck. When his eyes moved lower to my breasts, his touch followed. He squeezed a handful, then rubbed my nipple with his thumb over my clothes.

“I’ll kill you,” I gruffly growled, sputtering in small chokes as the liquid burned down my throat. Was it not enough that I lose my throne? That innocents be massacred around me? Must I also endure rape by this wicked man?

And the Outsider… That black-eyed bastard! *Had he known this might happen? Why didn’t he warn me?*

Cosimo laughed softly, tipping the vial, but only so far. He poured half of it on the floor, the red liquid bleeding into the carpet. “That’s enough, Empress. I prefer a woman with some fight left in
her.” He smiled at me, enjoying the disgust and anger on my face. “I’d be a fool to underestimate Corvo’s daughter.”

You already have, I thought. I could feel the potion rushing through my veins like fire, shredding the darkness. He smiled at me, his gold-capped canines winking in the light as he roughly yanked me away from the wall unto my back.

My head smacked the ground, spreading stars in my vision. In the next instant, he straddled me, his weight over my hips. He grabbed my hands, forcing them above my head as he nipped at the curve of my breasts.

But with Sokolov’s Elixir, I realized I could move again. Sensation flooded my body.

My father taught me what to do. I bucked upwards with my hips as hard as I could, my legs doing the heavy lifting. He lost his balance, reeling to the side, the pressure on my hands letting up. With my hands free, I suddenly had a fighting chance. I took it. By now we were both grunting, fighting for purchase. A calculated push under his chin with the heel of my palm sent his head and shoulders reeling away from me. It was enough. I wrested free of his weight, sliding out from beneath him to a half-sitting position.

He tried to laugh, surprised by my escape and delighted I was giving him a hard time, his dark eyes gleaming with arousal—a fact further supported by the bulge in his leather pants—but his pleasure was cut short as I snatched a handful of his long hair and threw his head back, using both hands to shove as hard as I could against the closest object I could find.

I aimed for the metal leg of the display case, but missed. His hair was too greasy and my hands slipped. Instead, the standing globe spun violently as Cosimo’s head smacked against it. He crumbled to the floor, moaning in pain.

That works, too. I staggered to my feet, a wave of vertigo crashing into me.

I grabbed the candelabra sitting on the coffee table, holding it upside down like a weapon and swung it at him. He blocked my clumsy blow with a raised arm, his lips locked in a grimace.

“You fucking bitch!” he snarled as the candelabra scattered across the floor, out of reach. His dark eyes were incensed with rage. He was twisted on the floor, blood trickling from his cut lip.

I kicked him as hard as I could in the meat of his calf muscle, buckling his knees. Keep your attacker down, I thought, remembering my father’s voice as we trained at the waterfront. It was all analytical now, my mind shelving the rage and the fear as I focused on what I needed to do to keep my assailant down and off balance.

Cosimo held out his hands, trying to brace himself as he fell to the floor. He has no idea. I’ve already won. I grabbed a wooden foot, yanking his leg out from under him. In a vicious twist, it broke free. He cried out in pain.

I could see his stump, swollen red. There were strange metallic devices implanted in the skin. Where the prosthetic foot connected, I realized. I raised the wooden foot over my head and watched as his eyes widened.

He was staring up at me in horror. It felt good. Too good. I screamed as I forced it down over his head, aligning it just right. The stunning blow made a wet cracking sound. He slumped over, lying still on the floor. How dare you touch me! I am the Empress!

Adrenaline pumped through my veins and a wild rage filled my heart. I screamed again, raising the
wooden foot above my head, yeaming to pummel his skull into pulp.

But my screams turned to sobs, and the wooden foot fell from my hands, clanking and rolling to a stop on the floor. Visions of blood slashed across my mind’s eye, a nightmare relived.

My father, turned to stone. Alexi, a sword slicing through her gut. And Delilah, her cold blue eyes drinking in my fear and shock and enjoying every second of it.

And I thought of my mother, and who I wanted to be.

With a deep, shuddering breath, I crouched beside the Duke’s brother, flipping him by the round of his shoulder unto his back. I fingered the pulse at his neck. He was alive.

“Just a nasty concussion, Lord Cosimo.”

I dug through his coat, finding yet another red vial. Good. I popped the lid and threw it back. It burned my throat the whole way down, but it was the only way I could flush the dizziness from my head in a hurry.

“I have to get out of here,” I whispered, wiping the tears from my eyes. “I have to help Father.”

A full dose of Sokolov’s Elixir seemed to help. I had ringing in my ears, but I felt less nauseous. I fumbled through his coat and pants, searching for weapons. Surprisingly, he had none, not even a hidden dagger, but I did find the key to unlock my study. How many men did Ramsey have with him? And how long before they came back, looking for Lord Cosimo?

I glared at the Serkonan. His bloody lip was swollen, his mouth slack. “What shall I do with you?” Cosimo the Fool.

I held my breath, thinking, then stood up and grabbed his wayward foot from the floor. It was badly dented where I’d cracked it against his skull. I opened the window and flung it out towards the river. It fell a long way, bouncing against the rocks below. I twisted the other from his foot, and sent it sailing out the window.

“You walked into my throne room, Lord Cosimo Abele,” I said, towering above him. “Now you’ll leave on hands and knees. When I take back my crown, you’ll never stand in my throne room again.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Get through this. I crouched next to the door, pressing my hands flat against the wood, and peered through the keyhole.

I saw two men, neither of them Ramsey. One had his back to me, but the other was facing forward. Corporal Dial, I realized, my body quivering in wrath. Another traitorous dog. Just last night my father had entrusted him with the Tower’s security detail in Captain Mayhew’s absence! How many had turned? How many of my guards had Delilah and the Duke sunk their claws into?

I heard their voices, muffled by the door between us. Corporal Dial was saying, “…just asking. Maybe I should check on them. I heard weird noises, like loud—”

“C’mon, the creep is just enjoying himself. You just worry about the gold.”

“Yeah, well, Ramsey better know what he’s doing. I’m still not convinced there’s a safe room. My wife says it’s just a legend. No one’s actually seen it. Not even the—”
“It’s real and so is the gold. Ramsey will find it. Now do your damn job. I’ll be downstairs. I saw that old chambermaid polishing some silver. It’ll fetch a nice price. If you see anything good, throw it in the carriage.”

“I know,” the Corporal scowled. The men separated, and I pulled back, standing away from the door.

_Coral_, I thought, my heart shattering. _Did they kill her too?

I climbed out the window, hugging the ledge. It was a trip I’d made dozens of times in the past, sneaking out to my bechambers for a romantic tryst with Wyman, but now it felt utterly foreign and terrifying. It was so windy! And even with Sokolov’s Elixir, I felt dizzy and unsure of my balance.

The potion wasn’t instant magic. Eventually, I’d need rest and time to recover. Even now I felt a steady throb in my head, promising a killer headache to come. The potion had medicinal effects, but mostly it fired up the body’s immune response. The genius Anton created it during the Rat Plague to combat Weeper symptoms. Eventually a cure _was_ found—with the help of Anton Sokolov’s rival, Piero Joplin, the same man who had crafted Corvo’s infamous black mask and his unique folding sword.

The wind howled in my ears. I didn’t look down.

The window to my bedchambers was open. I climbed through, immensely relieved _that_ was over. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkened room.

It became a slow revelation of horror. Lieutenant Fraser and Corporal Wentworth were dead on the floor, their blood ghastly streaks against the blue carpets.

Then I saw the Captain.

She was further down the hallway, slumped against the wall. I rushed to her, crossing the distance with soft feet, careful not to make too much noise. My bedchamber’s double doors were compromised. One hung partly open, the other broken, smashed on the floor.

She’d left a bloody trail.

“Alexi,” I cried in a desperate whisper, crouching before her. I couldn’t believe she was still alive after what I’d seen.

“I can’t believe Ramsey’s a traitor,” she said, grimacing in pain as I took her hands. They were freezing, her lips turning blue with blood smeared across her chin. She didn’t have much time.

“Alexi, I’m so sorry,” I said, squeezing her hands.

“What… happened?” she asked, struggling to speak.

“There’s a coup underway. The conspirators used the Crown Killer murders against me.”

“Where’s the Royal Protector?” The concern in her voice broke my heart.

“He’s… they have him, Alexi.”

_But I’m going to get him back_, I swore to myself.

With a trembling hand, she lifted my father’s sword, offering it to me. Somehow, she had dragged it with her. I couldn’t believe she’d had the strength. But that was just Alexi, my bedrock.
“You’ve got to get out of the Tower,” she gasped. “Through your safe room.”

It was her last breath. Her eyes glazed over, her head falling forward in death.

“Alexi…” My hand clutched the sword, slipping it from her grasp. “Goodbye, old friend.”

Ramsey was a fool to discard it, I thought, staring at the sword in my hand. The sword gave me strength just knowing it was my father’s. One day, I’ll hand it back to him, and everything will be okay.

But Alexi was right. I needed to escape, and my safe room was my best bet. But Ramsey had my signet ring, and I had no idea how many men were with him. It was do or die. I cannot fail, I thought, for my father’s sake.

I glanced at Alexi, her head bowed. Her red hair glistened in the late morning light, a beautiful red. And for the sake of my friends.

I took a deep breath and squeezed the hilt of my father’s sword. Now. I stepped through the broken door. Corporal Dial was facing the bookshelf, unaware of my presence. I crept closer, so close I could see the pulse of his jugular thumping at his neck.

He was completely alone and at my mercy.

Corvo had been given the Mark of the Outsider. At its heart, it was essentially and simply power over others. He could have slashed and hacked his way through the Rat Plague, but he didn’t. He chose to spare life where he could and took his revenge in ways that felt more… personal. Even righteous.

Now it was my turn.

I’d been betrayed, and some might say these men deserved death—but how could I ever look my father in the eye if I left a bloody trail behind me? How could I honor my mother’s memory if I became everything she despised?

I grabbed Corporal Dial from behind, my right arm snaking around his meaty neck, his chin caught in the crook of my elbow. I added pressure to the back of his neck to keep him from head-butting me. I pulled back with my shoulders, the squeeze tightening. The Corporal grimaced and shifted on his feet, trying to throw me off, but I was counting down and he was getting weaker. In four seconds, he slumped in my arms, unconscious.

Perfect, I thought. Father would be proud.

I caught him before he slumped to the ground, laying him back against the bookshelf. He was a big man, heavily muscled (as many of my Elite Guards were), but I wasn’t about to hide his body. Speed was more important than total secrecy right now. I leaned over the bannister. I could see the other guard in the chamber below, the man Corporal Dial had been talking to. He was casually picking through the room, picking up silver cups and popping fresh grapes into his mouth. It felt like an intrusion; an enemy in my house.

I saw Coral.

My hands tightened on the bannister, trembling in rage and grief. She was dead, sprawled on the floor with her neck slit open like a slaughtered animal, blood everywhere. I turned away and crossed into the next chamber. I saw no one. I took the marble stairs down and found Erick at the bottom. His blood was spattered on the wall from a vicious stab wound to the chest and his dour face was
pale, locked in death’s grimace. I picked up his appointment book, his blood soaking the pages.


I took a crouching position, sneaking closer to the chamber with the second guard. He had moved to the wall with the gem map. He was leaning against it, trying to pry loose one of the gems with a slim dagger. It was the red ruby affixed to the south, representing Karnaca, the capital city of the Isle of Serkonos.

Figures, I thought sourly.

This man was larger, his neck thick like a tree trunk. One mistake and I’m dead. I had to take the chokehold strong, fast, and accurate. A man his size could easily overpower me if I lost control for even a second.

I spared a quick glance through the glass door leading out to the throne room. I could be spotted at this angle. I had to act fast.

I went for his neck, snaking my arm—

Shit! The gem map betrayed me. Too late, I saw my reflection in the metallic surface and the guard’s eyes, catching mine in shock. He grunted, diving downwards into a crouch. I pounced backwards and brought my sword up by reflex, angling it across my body as he twisted towards me. His sword was sheathed at his belt. Too late for him!

But he tried anyway.

He got the hilt halfway up before I landed a hit to his throat, using my hand instead of my sword. The man stumbled backwards, making choking noises. I swung around him, snaking my arms around his neck before he had a chance to recover. I counted six seconds before he dropped. I was breathing heavily, trembling from the near fatal mistake.

I glared at the gem map—at that fat red ruby. That’s what Karnaca had always meant to me.

“I’m coming for you,” I said. Where else? The Crown Killer’s bloody trail had begun in Karnaca. I must go there if I wished to uncover the secrets of the conspiracy that had toppled my throne.

But first I had to escape Dunwall!

I turned away, gingerly stepping around Coral’s body. Killing innocents. It was revolting!

“Your reign’s off to a grand start, Delilah,” I growled under my breath as I flattened against the wall next to the door leading out to the throne room. I tried to peer through the glass without being spotted.

It was hard to see anything.

The door was in the back, shadowed by huge columns that flanked the long aisle. I counted five… no, six men, including Ramsey. Too many to take on at once, I thought, fear rising.

Unless…

I didn’t want to think it, but there it was. Unless I went for kills, not chokeholds. Lethal takedowns, I thought, squeezing the hilt of my sword. Did I have no choice?

I glowered at Ramsey, the tallest of the men, his silver hair gleaming. I had to get that ring back!
I cracked the door open an inch, listening intently.

“We’ll use the carriage to get the gold out as planned,” Ramsey was saying. “With the throne room doors blocked off for now, we should have the time we need. Just stay here and stall anyone who comes by. I’ll be back when I’ve located the safe room.”

One of the guards said, “We’ll cover for you if anyone from the Duke’s party returns.” I didn’t recognize his face, but he was one of mine—a traitor, but still mine. He wore the uniform of the Elite Tower Guard. In fact, it didn’t appear any of the Duke’s men from the Grand Serkonan Guard were present in the throne room. These men were all Ramsey’s dogs. Did the Duke even know his Captain was already sneaking behind his back, raiding the royal reserves for his own personal gain?

“Astounding,” I muttered.

Another guard spoke up. “This is exciting! Everything’s changing.”

Ramsey chuckled, a haughty edge to his voice that surprised me. I knew he was old blood (his aristocratic family having lost its luster in recent years due to bankruptcy), but I’d never caught him acting like a priggish noble before. Now I see his true self. A man corrupted by greed, rotten to his core.

“Yes, the natural order is reasserting itself,” he boasted. “The Ramsey’s once hosted the King and Queen of Morley, did you know that? I spent my childhood playing with the Buntings and the Boyles, the cream of society.”

“And very soon you’ll be back at the top, Captain.”

“Where I belong.”

As Ramsey separated from the group, I slipped back. He was tall and strong, like my father. If I fail another chokehold grab, I might not be so lucky this time. I glanced at the guard slumped near the gem map. No time to move him. I’d have to do it here, in this room. I hurried to the right, hiding in the shadows of a servant’s closet. There were no doors; it was just a cordoned-off area where the palace staff kept various supplies. I smelled tea and crumpets. I tucked back as far as I could, listening for Ramsey’s footsteps.

He opened the door and took three steps into the room before he noticed.

“What?” he gasped, hurrying to the unconscious guard. I floated away from the closet, sneaking behind him in a crouch. I knew I might have the same problem with the gem map’s reflection, but Ramsey was looking down at the man.

As he bent over, feeling for a pulse, I kicked him as hard as I could in the calf muscle, crumbling his leg.

He fell to his knees. I grabbed his neck in a chokehold, counting down. One... two... His silver hair smelled like flowery pomade, suspiciously female. He was grabbing at my arms, trying to tear at me, but his body went limp at three.

He fell forward on top of the other guard. I rolled him over, digging through his pockets.

*My signet ring.*

Seeing it. Holding it. I could cry. “This won’t leave my hand again,” I promised as I slipped the ring around the middle finger of my left hand. *Where it belongs.*
I glanced down at Ramsey.

“I know where you belong, too.”

He felt like twice my body weight. I dragged him across the floors by the arms towards the marble stairs. I had to gently reposition Erick’s body to make room for Ramsey at the bottom.

I took each step one at a time, dragging Delilah’s precious Captain up the stairs, then all the way down the hallway to my bedchambers. It was bloody hard work. At the bookshelf, I dropped his arms, breathing heavily from exertion. My head was throbbing and sweat beaded my brow.

I pressed my signet ring flat against the lock. It made a pleasant clicking noise as the mechanism engaged, winding the bookshelf open with a noisy grumble.

I stared into Rosemary’s face.
Part 2: Chapter 15

Part II continued

“A Long Day in Dunwall”

Chapter 15

Rosemary had fire in her eyes.

I could tell she was angry with me, and frightened, but if I had any doubt about her loyalty, it disappeared the instant I saw the look in her eyes. She gaped at the dead men on the floor, their blood slashed across the carpets.

She sputtered, “Is that—are they…”

She grabbed the wall with one hand as if fearing she might fall. I knew that feeling. Delilah had yanked the carpet out from under me, my whole world turned upside down.

But not everything.

I drank in the sight of her, hope bursting in my heart. Her shock seemed genuine and I grabbed unto it like a lifeline, unafraid to trust her once more. She cried, “Void and stars, what’s happened? What’s going on?” She stamped her foot in frustration. “Why are you smiling at me, Emily?!”

I made a choking sound, half-laugh, half-sob. “Because Father was wrong.”

I pulled her by the shoulders into a fierce embrace, holding fast to what felt like my very last friend in the world.

She was stiff in my arms.

I kissed her on the cheek and stood back, releasing her. “I’m sorry about last night. I should have accepted your pledge of fealty. You were never the witch. I see that now.”

She looked stunned. It took a moment for her to respond. When she did, she sounded angry and hurt. “I don’t even know where to start, Emily! How could you—” Her eyes darted to the floor. “What the—! Why is Lieutenant Mortimer Ramsey snoring on the floor?!”

“He betrayed me.” I toed his ribs with my boot. “Heavy bastard.” I was still pouring sweat from dragging his ass all the way upstairs.

“Betrayed you?”

“Yes. There’s a coup underway and I’m being blamed for the Crown Killer murders. A witch named Delilah has seized the throne. Dunwall’s not safe anymore.”

“Did you say witch?”

“A bad witch,” I said, grunting noisily as I lugged Ramsey’s body into the safe room and tried to hoist him off the floor, my hands wedged under his armpits. “Help me, Rosemary. We need to hurry.”

Time was against us.
“Are you taking him hostage?” she asked, grabbing a leg. We lifted him together, draping his body across the couch. I stuffed a pillow under his head and tucked one arm over his chest; the other kept falling towards the floor. His head lolled to one side, his mouth slack and slightly open. I glared at his face. How could you do it? Why did you betray me?

“He’s a prisoner of his own making,” I told her. “Ramsey’s getting exactly what he wants: the Imperial Suite atop Dunwall Tower.” I smoothed his silvery hair away from his wrinkled forehead and crouched, whispering into his ear, “Enjoy the rations and well water, Ramsey, sleeping next to a fortune. You’ll be freed when I take back my throne, and then you’ll enjoy the creature comforts of Coldridge Prison.”

I stepped past him, noticing Rosemary looked a bit panicked. “I can’t believe this is happening,” Rosemary cried. “Maybe this is just a bad dream.”

I turned back and gently held her by the shoulders. “It’s not. Rosemary, look at me. We’re in this together. We have to stay calm and think ahead.”

And outsmart Delilah.

Her blue eyes searched my face. “Emily, did you think me the bad witch?”

“Yes and no. Rosemary…”

All the frustration and fear stemming from the Outsider’s so-called warning flooded my heart. I hated him for knowingly casting doubt on Rosemary. What had been the point? I struggled to decide how much to tell her. She’s my best friend. Didn’t she deserve to know the truth?

“Rosemary, that strange man at the party last night… that was the Outsider. That’s why I believed what he said about you. You’re a witch, cursed by jealous sisters to forget you are a witch, but the witch? No. It was always Delilah. Not you. The Outsider tricked me.”

“He’s not a Trickster!”

“What?” I didn’t understand her sudden anger.

“The Prince of Pandyssia. He sees things differently.” She was pouting.

“Why do you insist on calling him that?”

“Because he’s royalty. Like you.” A dreamy look crossed her face. “Oh, Emily, he danced with me again. He said I was beautiful and he complimented my emerald.”

She touched the emerald choker at her neck, the gift I’d given her when Wyman and I had become lovers and Rosemary no longer invited to my bed. It’d been a token of my love and appreciation for her. And a goodbye.

“When did this happen?” I demanded with an unexpected stab of jealousy.

“It was just a daydream.”

“When?”

She cowered beneath my tone. “This morning. After I woke up.” Her blue eyes flickered and she stepped forward, taking my hands. “Please don’t be angry with me. I couldn’t stand it—”

I felt uncomfortable. “Stop. It’s over now. I trust you.”
“What are we going to do?” Her fingers rolled over my signet ring. “We should lock ourselves in, wait for help!”

“There is no help. They’re killing everyone loyal to me. Alexi’s dead! And Coral, and Erick, and the Void only knows how many others. It’s a bloodbath out there. All we can do is run and come back to fight another day.”

I slipped deeper into my safe room towards the workbench. I kept my training gear, here. Pistol. Cossbow. I often carried them down to the waterfront for target practice.

“I don’t understand,” Rosemary said, chasing after me. “Where’s the Royal Protector? Corvo would never—”

“Delilah turned him into stone.”

“What?”

“He stabbed her through the heart, but she didn’t die.”

“How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.”

I checked my pistol—it was loaded (each bullet had a trace of whale oil, a glowing blue stripe along its metal casing), and slid it into my belt holster. Like my father’s folding sword, it’d be my last resort. The crossbow though…

I wavered, my hand floating over a selection of bolts. I had steel ones.

Deadly.

I can’t go there, I told myself. Father had taught me better than that. ‘Sow no chaos,’ he’d say, and so I snatched up five sleep darts instead, loading them into the crossbow cartridge with a steady hand. There was something comforting about the process; I’d done it so many times before.

But I had never used my crossbow against human targets before. I tried not to dwell on that. I grabbed a hair tie to undo the mess Lord Cosimo had made. As I twisted up my hair into a messy bun, I stole a glance at Rosemary. She was nervously wringing her hands in the folds of her dress, the lacy finery crumbled from sleep. It was the same dress she’d worn to the party last night.

It was also a bright conspicuous red.

“How did my father not see you, Rosemary?” I asked her. Corvo had used Bend Time to check—there would literally be no time for her to react and hide (with sorcery?) if she’d been in the safe room.

She shook her head in confusion. “See me when?” Her eyes flew to my neck, exposed now with my hair up. “Are those bite marks, Your Highness?”

“Corvo checked the safe room this morning. You weren’t there—here,” I said, batting her hand away as she tried to touch my neck. “Stop. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Those are hickies!” Her eyes grew heated. “Not even Wyman would dare mark you like that. Did somebody assault you?”
I almost laughed (Wyman had left a mark or two during sex before), but I said, flat-toned, “I’m fine. He didn’t get very far.”

She clenched her fists.

“Who, Emily?”

“Lord Cosimo Abele, the Duke’s younger brother. They’re all connected to Delilah. Now tell me about the safe room. How did my father not see you?”

She pouted. “Don’t yell at me, Emily. How could I possibly escape without your signet ring?”

“I’m not yelling. Did you hide yourself with magic?”

Her eyes grew large. “How would I know how to do that?”

“You figured out how to Blink, didn’t you?”

It was how she’d gotten past my father last night. He’d been sleeping at my door, but she teleported across the hallway, snuck into my study, and took the ledge to my bedroom window. At that point, Corvo still had the Mark; she shouldn’t have been able to trick him, but she did.

“Did you figure out any other spells?” I asked warily. She’d been locked away in my safe room for hours.

“What? No! I didn’t do anything but cry and worry and think.” Her voice softened, “And dream.”

I sucked in a breath. “The Outsider. That’s it! You said you daydreamed of him this morning!”

She scowled. “Yeah, so?”

“So when Corvo searched the room, maybe you really were gone, Blinked into the Void!” I frowned. “Or somewhere faraway…”

Again, I felt a surge of jealousy, like it hurt to imagine the Outsider giving her special attention. A part of me screamed from faraway, a warning. Where was this jealousy coming from and why did it hurt so badly?

“I suppose so,” Rosemary said with a shrug. “Though I don’t recall where I was. All I saw was him.” Her blue eyes turned dreamy again, annoying the hell out of me. Why is she so obsessed with the Outsider?

I heard a dark chuckling and swatted at my ear, like it was an annoying bug.

I turned away from her, trying to bloody think!

“What is it, Emily?”

“All of this! It implies…”

What does it imply?

I glared at her. “Your dream implies the Outsider hid you for a reason. The question is what reason? Why didn’t the Outsider want Corvo to find you?” I knew I sounded accusing.

Rosemary looked timid. “Find me for what?”
“Interrogation. Corvo thought you were the witch.”

Her eyes bulged. “Emily, your father doesn’t interrogate people; he tortures them.”

“That’s a lie.” Sometimes. Mostly.

I paced back and forth, thinking out loud and ignoring her for the moment. “Why would the Outsider care if Rosemary was interrogated or not? He knew she wasn’t the witch…” I stopped pacing and stared at her. “If Corvo found you, all it would really do is incapacitate you. Take you out of the game.”

“Is that a nice way of saying he’d kill me?” She had turned visibly pale, like she might faint.

I felt guilty then. I said in a softer tone, “I wouldn’t have let him.”

“We’re talking about Corvo. You couldn’t have stopped him.” She swallowed hard and said, “But this is all just conjecture, isn’t it? What does it matter? I’m here now. Safe.”

“Exactly. For what?”

I had to believe there was a purpose behind all this, that the Outsider was sending me another cryptic message. If he wasn’t a Trickster like Rosemary claimed, then I had to trust him. My eyes meandered down her face, soft and beautiful, to the emerald choker around her neck.

“You’re a gift, Rosemary.”

I lightly touched the emerald at her throat. “We just need to figure out why you’re here, and not out there, dead, like Coral. And Alexi and Erick. The Outsider kept you safe so that when the time came…”

“I’d know what to do?”

I lit up. “Yes! Trust your instincts, Rosemary! Just like you did before when you Blinked. You said it was like playing music, remember?”

“Yes, but—”

“But what?” I shook her by the shoulders. “You’re a powerful witch, Rosemary! The Outsider said so. He didn’t just call you a witch; he said a powerful witch. Delilah obviously is, too, but maybe…” I shook her harder. “Maybe you can break her spell! Maybe you have the power to turn my father back! You said it yourself last night: you’re my witch. Maybe I can use your magic against hers!”

I grabbed her hand, pulling her towards the door.

“We have to hurry,” I said excitedly. “Ramsey had his men bar the door so they’d have time to loot my safe room. Who knows when the Duke will be back? I counted five men. I have five sleep darts, but it’s possible I’ll miss so we have to be ready…”

My voice drifted away when I realized something was wrong. Rosemary looked pale as a sheet. She yanked her hand away and just stood there, trembling like a leaf.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You’re scaring me.”
I gave her a penetrating look. “I can’t just leave my father trapped in stone.” When she hesitated, I said, softer, “Please, at least try, Rosemary. If not for my sake, then his.”

She flexed her sorcery hand, staring at it like it belonged to someone else. I had never seen her so afraid. She whispered, “I don’t want to be a witch. I just want to be plain old Rosemary. A court musician.”

“You’ve been far more than that for a long time,” I said, tenderly cupping her cheek. “And you’ve never been plain or old!” When again she hesitated, I darkened my voice. “At the party, you said you loved me.”

“Don’t use that against me, Emily.”

But it worked. She stepped back and took a deep breath. “All right, I’ll do it—I’ll try—but not for you. For Corvo. I know you think it’s just a silly crush, but he’s more than that to me.” Her lower lip quivered. “I have feelings for him. I can’t explain it.”

“He barely talks to you.”

“He’s the quiet type,” she said defensively.

“You don’t know him at all.”

She sighed heavily, her eyes pleading. “Please, let’s just do this before I lose my nerve.”

“Okay, good. Now listen carefully. I’ll knock out the guards with this,” I said, raising my crossbow. “If it doesn’t work, we run back to the safe room and take to the streets. We have to get out of Dunwall one way or another, with or without my father. Do you understand?”

I wasn’t sure if I was telling her or myself. The thought of leaving my father behind was making me physically sick.

“Are you insane? How can you take on five guards?” Rosemary cried. “They’re trained killers!”

“Trust me, Rosemary. Corvo’s been secretly training me for years. I’m a good shot.”

“What? Really? You can shoot a crossbow?”

“Yes.”

In truth, I was better with a crossbow than a sword. Father preferred I use ranged weapons. Less risk—in theory.

“But you’re so delicate!”

I scowled. “Am I?”

‘You’re not a porcelain doll, Emily,’ my father would say in the early years of my training. ‘Don’t think I’ll go easy on you. You’re here to learn how to fight.’

“Come on, you’ll see.”

I nodded towards the door, and she followed me out of the safe room. I quieted my steps, in case some of the guards had wandered upstairs looking for Ramsey.

“Silent from here on out,” I whispered as we came to the bedchamber doors. Rosemary nodded, her
eyes falling over Captain Mayhew. She crouched in front of her, closing her glassy eyes with two gentle fingers. The shock of so many dead had numbed me. I felt nothing looking down at Alexi; only the raw impulse of action. I wanted to do something, to no longer continue onwards as a helpless spectator to bloodshed.

I held my crossbow ready. “Let’s go,” I mouthed.

We crept into the hallway. Rosemary’s fancy dress rustled with each movement, painfully loud. *Fuck, I should have made her change into pants*, I thought, but there was no time. That bright conspicuous red would do her no favors either.

I paused, leaning over the bannister, listening for voices. I could hear the men in the throne room, but their voices sounded muffled and faraway. I nodded at her, and together we made our way downstairs. Rosemary stared at Erick, turning a shade of green. I pulled her by the arm into the next chamber. When she saw Coral, she let out a squeak.

I shot her an angry look. Was she trying to get us killed?

“I’m leaving you here,” I quietly hissed.

She nodded frantically, clamping a hand over her mouth.

I left her crouching by the grandfather clock, then snuck to the glass door. It had been left open. I peered through, spying three guards standing idly near the red carriage (that Delilah had arrived in, and that Ramsey had apparently planned to use to transport the gold out of the palace). The other two were up against the throne room doors, listening for the Duke’s men.

These were Ramsey’s men, City Watch officers from outside the Palace District. They all looked bored.

*Good*, I thought. Father had taught me that distraction was a powerful tool.

But it was dark, and the angle and distance were not ideal. I had to get closer.

I timed my movements, waiting for their heads to turn away before sneaking up the steps to the throne platform. The three guards my father had killed were still lying where they’d fallen; one had no head.

I ducked behind my throne chair, toppled on its side. I had a better view, now. Father was on my right, a stone statue sticking out like a sore thumb. Then again, everything looked out of sorts.

Dead bodies flanked the aisle, their fancy clothes rent to pieces and bloodied. The Empire Blue butterfly bushes were hacked and battered, crumpled petals on the floor. I could see the exact spot where Corvo had stuck Delilah with his sword. The carpet runner was stained with black blood.

I pressed my forehead against the back of the throne chair, the metal cool against my skin. I envisioned the green glass bottles we typically used during target practice, and the way it felt to take aim and fire. The men were larger targets. *I can do this*.

The tranquilizer would take approximately five to ten seconds to take effect (or even longer depending on a man’s size or natural resistance), and those precious few seconds could easily feel like an eternity. In battle, the line between life and death could be crossed in a heartbeat.

I glanced at my mother’s painted portrait. The glass display was shattered and the canvas had toppled out, but it was upright and face-forward. A dead guard was leaning his back against it.
Another slain for his loyalty to me.

“Grant me the strength I need, Mother,” I whispered, staring into her cold green eyes.

In a crouching position, I stepped around the throne chair, widening my stance. I was naturally left-handed; the crossbow felt secure in my grip as I took aim. My vision narrowed on the three men by the carriage, spread out and open to attack. Plunk. Plunk. Plack!

The third bolt missed! It hit the carriage, exploding in a spray of green liquid. The sound startled the men out of their boredom. The man I missed swore, jumping backwards. “Holy shit!”

They drew their swords faster than I anticipated, shouting at one another.

“There! By the throne!”

“Get her!”

He ran towards me just as the other clutched his arm, finally noticing the sleep dart stuck through his uniform. He yanked it out, but it was too late.

The injection had been immediate. The countdown had started.

They ran together towards me, swords raised above their heads, but I ignored them, focusing on the third man—the one I had missed. He ducked behind the carriage, shouting at the other two men by the door.

“Flank the aisle!”

“It’s the Empress!”

“How’d she get out? Where’s Ramsey?”

I ran to the shadowed corner near the glass door and hugged a column, using it for cover. Three guards, two bolts left. Not good, Emily!

I peeked the corner. The two sleep-darted guards running towards me suddenly crumbled, falling to their faces like dominos, one after the other as the tranquilizer kicked in. Better than they deserve. I flipped to the other side of the column, checking for the others. In the dark behind the columns, one of the flankers ran towards me, a beeline shot. Easy. I let loose another dart.

It struck him in the leg, but I calculated he would reach me before it took effect. I drew my sword, the metal ringing as the blade sliced open, fully extending.

Our blades locked, but I threw him off with a forward lunge. He stumbled backwards, falling on his back with an audible Oof!

I spun to my left, movement flashing in my peripheral vision. Too close! The sword carved the air an inch where my head had been, slashing in a silver blur. The next instant, his friend joined him, swinging at me in a wild arc. They were panicking. I dove backwards, but my crossbow got hit.

In a stinging blow, it flew from my hands, clattering across the floor, out of reach. By then, the third man—scrambling up to his feet—joined his two comrades as they surrounded me, closing in like a pack of hungry wolves.

“Ramsey betrayed you,” I said, trying to shock them, stall them, anything! I couldn’t give up. Not yet! I kept them at bay with my sword angled across my body. I said, “He’s keeping the gold for
himself. He’s already gone.”

They hesitated, eyeing each other.

“What she talkin’ ‘bout?” one asked.

“You lyin’, bitch?”

I growled, “The safe room has two doors, idiots!”

Father always said to watch their eyes. Still, it was hard to focus with three swords pointed at me. I lied, “Ramsey took the gold and left using the back entrance. He’s playing you for fools.”

The flanking guard I’d hit with the dart slumped to the floor, so suddenly it startled the others. He snored at their feet. He was a big guy; the sleep dart had taken a long time.

Only two left now! I could have cheered. Two left standing between my father and I!

“You’re lying, bitch!” The guard’s eyes darkened with murderous rage. “I’m going to end your reign, Empress. I’m going to gut you like a—”

The guard next to him suddenly turned into him, driving the length of his blade into the man’s liver. Astonished, the man gurgled blood, staring in shock and excruciating pain.

“Peter?” he choked. Agony stretched across his face as his fingers trembled over the bleeding wound, the blade buried to the hilt. Slowly, he toppled over, dead.

I was just as astonished. I stared at this Peter, utterly speechless. Did he just murder his friend? He had a blank look on his face, but then he began to warp. One moment, a man, the next, a blur of sliding flesh, like looking at someone through water, the planes of their face shifting with light.

He fell forward, his face exploding with emotion. Anger and fear and revulsion. He clutched his stomach, vomiting onto the floor. Behind him, Rosemary suddenly appeared as if cast out from his body. Literally.

“What the—” I grabbed her arm. She looked ready to topple over, too. “Did you just possess him?”

“I had to,” she gasped. “They were going to kill you! They had you cornered!”

“You killed him!”

“I lost control. I’m sorry,” Rosemary cried.

Peter wailed, vomit clinging to his chin. His eyes were dark pools of agony. “What did you make me do?!”

“I’m sorry!” Rosemary cried harder.

I growled in frustration, grabbing Peter around the neck, locking him in a chokehold. “Don’t fight it,” I whispered into his ear. I held my breath, disgusted by the smell of vomit on him. He slumped to the ground, unconscious.

In the silence that followed, I lifted my gaze to Rosemary’s face, my fists clenching. I wanted to scream at her, to tell her she shouldn’t have intervened, that what I had just witnessed was utterly inexcusable! But the truth was… I had no idea what might have happened if she hadn’t intervened.
Maybe I’d be the one with blood on my hands.

Rosemary didn’t move. She stood frozen in place, staring down at the dead man.

Human **fucking** possession!

Unbelievable…

Corvo had the ability to possess rats, but he rarely did so. He said it made him feel strange in his own body afterwards, even lost, like opening a door and finding yourself in the wrong room. The Outsider had eventually granted him magic to possess humans—a far more difficult spell—but he’d told me he had never used it. Corvo had seemed conflicted when I’d asked him why. ‘I just… I won’t cross that line. There’s something wrong about controlling a man’s body. That’s all he has. It’s all we ever have.’

Rosemary had just crossed that line and killed a man. She’d said she’d ‘lost control’—but of her magic or herself?

I’d seen bloodlust before. Peter’s face had been as blank as a white canvas when he’d stabbed his friend to death, but what of the witch possessing him beneath—what did her face look like when the blade had sliced through his flesh?

“I can’t do this,” Rosemary said, panic-stricken.

My heart jumped into my throat. “You have to try, Rosemary!” I roughly yanked her arm, forcing her to look at me and not the dead man on the floor. “You’re trying for Corvo, remember? He needs our help! Look at him. **Look at him, Rosemary!**”

Her blue eyes moved, blurred with tears, to my father’s cold-stone face.

“Please,” I pleaded. “We don’t have much time.”

“Yes… Yes, okay,” she said in a small voice. “I’ll do it.”

I let her go. She stood very still, a quiet look of determination on her face. I searched for my crossbow. I found it resting against Lady Burtzlaff’s leg. She stared vacantly at the ceiling, the light gone from her eyes.

A thunderous boom echoed in the throne room, the great doors shaking violently. *Boom. Boom. Boom.*

“No! It’s the Duke’s men, Rosemary! We have to hurry. They’re trying to break down the door.”

Her hand was resting against Corvo’s marbled cheek. She turned her head towards me, her blue eyes suddenly flaring red, like a struck match.

“I know what to do,” she said, “but you won’t like it.”
“Someone has to take his place,” Rosemary said, her fingers on Corvo’s stone-veined cheek. “A mirror curse is the only way to reverse the spell.”

“Use me.”

“No. Don’t be a fool, Emily.”

What in the Void had gotten into her? She never used to talk to me that way. Behind us, the great doors to the throne room shuddered violently. From the sound of it, the Duke’s men had procured a battering ram.

I said, “There’s no time to argue! I will take his place.”

I trusted Corvo with my life, and even without the Outsider’s Mark, I knew he would never stop until he found a way to take Delilah down.

“Emily, no. We can use one of the guards. They don’t have to be conscious for it to work, only alive.”

“Then do Ramsey.” I was prepared to lock him away in my safe room, but a prison of stone flesh was just as well for the traitorous dog.

“As you wish, Majesty.”

I smacked my forehead. “I moved him upstairs! Don’t tell me I have to——”

“He’s fine where he is,” Rosemary assured me. “His name alone will bind him to the curse.”

“Thank the Void!”

“Our names have power in the Void,” she said, and I looked at her, a creepy feeling moving up my spine. A powerful witch would know, wouldn’t she?

I flinched as another jarring impact hit the doors, rattling the thick wooden beam Ramsey’s men had used to brace the door so they’d have time to loot my safe room.

The beam looked ready to snap.

“The doors won’t hold for long! Do what you need to do!”

Rosemary scowled. “It’s not a simple snap of the fingers! I need time.”

I shook my head, my eyes widening. “We’ve got five, maybe six minutes, tops.”

She began to pace back and forth, muttering to herself. I stared at her with growing impatience. For a whole minute, I waited. Nothing. She was doing nothing!
“Really?” I blurted out. “I thought you knew what you were doing!” When she just ignored me, I shouted, “Rosemary!”

“Void and stars, Emily, let me think!” She looked pained. “A mirror curse! I know we need to use a mirror curse, but the incantation… it’s fuzzy…” She squeezed her eyes shut, rapping a fist against her forehead. “Was it pig’s placenta? No, no, that doesn’t sound right. The full moon… no… yes, the drowned sailor, his thigh bone! But only at half crescent tide. No, no, no… Think, Rosemary, think! What was it?”

The red glow had faded from her eyes, but it was still disturbing to look at her when she was rambling on and on about pig’s placenta and a drowned sailor’s thigh bone! Witches were nasty business.

“A prince’s finger!” Rosemary suddenly exclaimed with a victorious smile. “That’s it!”

“That’s what?”

My belly tightened. Did she really say a prince’s finger?

“A rare ingredient, I know, but we’re in a throne room, yes? It’s possible one of the nobles was a prince!”

The way she said ingredient made my stomach turn. I thought about what Corvo had said about Granny Rags. During the Rat Plague, the old hag had tried to boil Slackjaw in a witch’s brew.

As the notorious crime boss of the Bottle Street Gang, Slackjaw had more blood on his hands than most, yet Corvo hadn’t hesitated to save the man’s life. Some things were just too revolting to contemplate.

“I need a prince’s finger for the incantation,” Rosemary stressed. “Nothing else will do.”

“Just a finger?” I made a face.

“I told you, you wouldn’t like it. Be thankful it’s not something worse.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Like pig’s placenta?”

“The finger, Your Highness.”

Right, I thought. No time to get squeamish.

I gazed blankly at one of the slain nobles, thinking. Then it came to me. I remembered Erick twice mentioning Katya, a Princess of Tyvia, and then His Grace Prince Finbar O’Brien of Wynnedown, a Prince of Morley. Both had requested a private audience, but Father had prohibited it. It was possible they were here, among the dead.

“Prince Finbar…” I said, glancing at Rosemary. “He might be here.”

She said nothing, her eyes caught in grief. I knew she and the Prince had become friends in recent months. In all honesty, I thought the relationship rather contrived—for I suspected the Prince was only using her to get to me.

Still, she seemed to honestly like him.

I scurried to the closest cadaver that was not dressed in a guard’s uniform and turned the noble over to inspect his face.
“Help me look!” I said, raising my voice to be heard over the booming racket at the doors. Rosemary approached a nobleman crumbled against a broken chair, his neck slit open.

She held a trembling hand over her mouth, gasping. “It’s Bernard Chross!”

“Keep looking!”

Body to body, we frantically searched the dead, the innocent slain for their loyalty to the Crown. Gerald Yellowstone. Gunther Moray. Thomas Baxter. Harold Painsley. That was just the men. I found Calpurnia Winslow, white as a sheet, draped over her niece, Jocasta, and Harold’s wife Claire, a ghastly wound slashed across her chest.

“Lady Burtzlaff,” Rosemary cried out in misery, holding the woman’s head in her lap. “Poor Beverly.”

Such senseless killing!

“I’ll make this right, I swear it,” I said. “Delilah and the Duke will pay for what they’ve done here today.” I was close to the doors, now. The banging was so loud, I feared the Duke’s men would barge through at any second.

Please, not yet, I prayed.

I glanced at the man sprawled facedown near the doors. I turned him over and gasped. “It’s Finbar! Rosemary, I found him! Come here!”

Relief and regret flooded my heart. Relief that the prince was here, that we apparently had what we needed for the spell, but regret, too—regret that we needed him at all.

Rosemary rushed to my side and knelt beside the fallen prince, his resplendent purple suit spattered with blood. “It’s him,” she cried, making a low keening sound in her throat. “Void and stars, it’s him!”

She touched the prince’s bloodied lips, then snatched her hand away, biting her clenched fist in grief. Prince Finbar was her countryman, maybe even a distant relative given how large and complex the Morley clans were known to be.

“I’m sorry, Rosemary,” I said, touching her arm.

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “A part of me had hoped he wasn’t here… even if it meant leaving Corvo behind.”

I understood.

“This will not go unanswered, I promise. Delilah made a grave mistake murdering the Queen’s only son. He is not just a prince, he’s the Crown Prince. The Isle of Morley will rebel. They will fight for me, and I will fight for them.”

Rosemary smiled weakly at me and nodded her head. She leaned over the prince’s body and twisted off his heavy ring. It was banded with royal emblems, the deep grooves crusted with his blood. She pocketed the ring and said, “We should find a way to send word to the Queen before Delilah spreads lies about what happened here today.”

“I will. Rosemary…”
Time was ticking.

She raised her head, tears in her eyes, and looked me straight in the eye. “The middle finger of his left hand. Cut it off at the knuckle.”


I stared at the prince’s death mask, his face twisted in agony. How many times had he tried to woo me? He’d proposed more times than I could count… Truth be told, I never particularly liked the man. Prince Finbar was everything about the aristocracy I hated: pompous, self-serving… *No friend of mine, but maybe he didn’t deserve to die so senselessly, nor be dismembered for a witch’s spell.*

I withdrew my father’s sword, but kept it partly folded so it handled more like a dagger. I lifted the prince’s finger away from his other digits and sliced it off above the knuckle in one clean stroke. I handed it to Rosemary and bit the inside of my cheek, holding back bile.

“Please tell me that’s all you needed.”

She held the bloody tip between her fingertips like a pincer, inspecting it warily as it dripped unto the floor.

“I’m sorry, Emily, but we also need the caster’s blood. You told me Corvo stabbed Delilah through the heart, but she didn’t die—but tell me this—*did she bleed?’”

“Yes,” I said, climbing to my feet. “And I’ll make her bleed again.”

I showed her where it happened, Delilah’s black blood staining the carpet runner. Rosemary knelt, inspecting the strange substance.

I asked, morbidly curious, “Why is it black?”

“I don’t know, but it’s definitely blood.” She dipped her finger, rubbing the blood between her finger and thumb. “It’s sticky. Like tree sap.”

“ Weird.”

“I need to draw the mirror curse in Delilah’s blood using *this.*” She held up the Prince’s finger. “Once I start the incantation, I won’t be able to respond to you. Don’t try to talk to me or interfere in any way, understood?”

I nodded, frightened. *Dear gods, what are we about to do…*

I stood back, giving her room. I eyed the door. How many of the Duke’s men were outside? If they broke through the doors, Rosemary and I would have no choice but to run back to the safe room without my father.

“Please let this work,” I whispered, sending a prayer out into the Hungry Cosmos. I wasn’t religious (in terms of devotion to the Abbey—an inevitability when Corvo is one’s father), but I considered myself spiritual.

Right now, I needed to believe that Corvo was not meant to stay trapped in stone forever, that everything was working towards a purpose. *Surely the Outsider has a guiding hand in all this,* I thought. *Rosemary is a gift, made for this moment.*

I watched her draw on the floor, her brows furrowed in deep concentration. She held the Prince’s
finger like a paintbrush and swirled it in Delilah’s blood. At first, I thought she was just wetting the fingertip, like dipping a feathered quill in an inkwell, but within seconds of each stroke, a bright blue line magically appeared beneath the tip.

The strange blue lines glowed with unearthly luminescence. *It looks like whale oil,* I realized, utterly amazed.

I stared in fascination as she moved the Prince’s finger in swirling motions, drawing intricate symbols—first, on the ground, and then moving upwards into the air, she painted as if against an invisible canvas. The symbols drawn in the air hung motionless, glowing brightly. It was beautiful. The symbols reminded me of the Outsider’s Mark on my father’s hand, circular and jagged.

*It’s a written language. The language of the Void.*

Rosemary began to chant under her breath. I strained to pick out the words, so faint was her voice. It sounded like a poem, a ghostly refrain repeated over and over. “…harden the heart, soft flesh be withered. Poison his blood, red veins to gray. Harden the heart…” Between the lines, she chanted something unintelligible, but I caught ‘Mortimer Ramsey’ once.

I was listening so intently, I failed to realize the pounding at the door had ceased. Only when Rosemary suddenly stopped chanting did I notice the utter and complete silence.

I gasped in horror, glancing at the doors in disbelief. What was happening? The Duke’s men had no reason to give up!

But the shuddering blows had come to an abrupt end. The doors were still. *That’s not good…*

Rosemary began to hum, low and droning. I tore my gaze away from the doors, watching as the bright blue symbols began to shimmer in the air, swirling in circles around the Prince’s finger held high in Rosemary’s grasp. She opened her palm, releasing the dismembered finger to hover weightlessly in the air in the center of the drawn circles.

She looked at me then, her eyes turning red. They glowed like magma, two orbs of fire.

Her skin turned black, like the color of soot. It crackled and split, rivers of pulsating fire spreading down her skin like the veins of a volcano, exploding from the top, running downwards. It reminded me of the malignant vine Delilah had brought forth with sorcery to ensnare my father before stealing his Mark. The black vines had coiled around his body, pulsating with that same red light.

Rosemary stretched out her hand towards me in invitation. “Take my hand.”

Her voice sounded strange. There was an overlapping resonance to her words, like three Rosemarys were speaking at once. “Take my hand,” she said again, more insistent, her red eyes flaring.

I did. She led me to my father, his petrified body sculpted by sorcery. I wondered if he was conscious of his captivity, being able to see and hear, or if all was darkness.

“Like this,” she said, laying my palm against Corvo’s marbled cheek, her own hand resting on top of mine. Her skin felt hot to the touch, and below, Corvo felt cold. It was a strange sensation, caught between the two extremes.

She began to hum again and then it happened. My father’s cheek became flesh, the gray stone melting away.

It was slow to spread.
Soft flesh awakened beneath my palm, moving outwards to my father’s nose and lips, but when the tide reached his eyes, it stopped. Rosemary still hummed, but her voice sounded strained.

*Something’s wrong.*

I stared into my father’s eyes, two stony surfaces flat and gray like lost islands in an ocean of warm flesh.

“I can’t,” Rosemary suddenly gasped. The strange soot-color of her skin began to fade, returning to normal. Her red eyes, too, were transforming back to blue like daybreak bursting in her eyes.


“The mirror curse isn’t taking. I’m not strong enough!” She fell back, gasping, releasing her hand. “I’m sorry, Emily. Delilah’s magic is too powerful.”

“Try again!”

I kept my hand pressed to my father’s cheek, refusing to let go.

“I can’t, Emily!”

The doors exploded.

The noise was deafening. Rosemary screamed. The bright blue blast of shattered wood surged towards us, so violently I realized the Duke’s men had used cannisters of whale oil to blow the doors. No wonder there had been a lapse in banging as the men maneuvered the cannisters into place.

The Duke’s men poured through the smoldering gap, shouting in rage with swords drawn. Towering above them, I caught the metallic gleam of clockwork soldiers, white lights beaming from their bird-like heads.

“Back to the safe room!” Rosemary squealed.

*No!*

I whipped back to my father and flattened my palm against his cheek, willing the spell to work, for the gray poison of stone flesh to wither away beneath my hand. *No, not yet! We can’t leave yet! This wasn’t supposed to happen!*

Rosemary screamed at me and the Duke’s men shouted in battle rage, but their voices faded away in the dull roar that filled my ears, forgotten in the eerie calm that followed.

All became quiet.

A rush of cold air spread over my skin, and I knew without looking that the Outsider stood beside me. I watched as his hand covered mine, large and masculine. In his presence the air became as cold as winter’s night.

My gaze slowly drifted from his hand, up the length of his black-coat-covered arm, to his face, pale as moonlight. His black eyes were on me, expansive as the night sky, yet shimmering faintly with ghostly blue light.

*A reflection*, I realized. Though whether his eyes reflected the blue glow of the symbols Rosemary had drawn, still hovering weightless in the air, or the blue glow of the whale oil explosion, I didn’t
know. All I knew was that he was here, and that time was frozen.

Time was mine.

I felt anger towards him, so much anger. His warning had been no warning at all; Delilah was immortal. Corvo and I couldn’t have done anything but run. And Rosemary? How wrong could one person be? She couldn’t be a gift from the Outsider if my father remained trapped in stone! And Cosimo… Damn the black-eyed bastard! Why hadn’t he warned me? Was I just supposed to let that slide?

“Have you come to gloat?” I asked, the bitter taste of betrayal on my tongue.

“No,” he said, his voice pure seduction in my ear. “To help you.”

“Help me?!?”

I couldn’t believe it. Another lie. Another trick! What game was he playing now?

“Not convinced? How ‘bout this?” He slipped his arm around my waist and turned me to face him. Our hands, as one, slipped away from Corvo’s cheek. I wondered if my father’s stone eyes could see us, if he was burning with rage just to see us together again. I was burning in rage!

“I’ve come to help myself,” he explained, his hands fitting around my waist like they belonged there, holding me in place. “It just so happens it’ll help you, too, Empress. Delilah is not just your problem.”

The Outsider’s black-eyed gaze became my whole world. All at once, I craved his interest like it was a burning thirst, and yet I despaired that he held such sway over me.

How dare he touch me! I felt trapped. Used! Strung along. Manipulated!

But what he said… it sounded… honest.

That didn’t make it any easier to bear. I thought of Lord Cosimo’s hands on me and hardened my heart. The Outsider had a lot to answer for!

“Helping yourself, are you? Predictable,” I hurled at him. An insult for a god whose very existence revolved around dissecting people who weren’t predictable, people who surprised him, who interested him, as if humans could be nothing more than a source of amusement and endless fascination. To seduce his captivated victims as if it meant nothing to him. To manipulate them as he saw fit—or not at all. He could sit back and watch the chaos unfold if he wished. Was it not so for countless generations as he watched from the Void?

“Help yourself all you want,” I hissed. “I’m not interested.”

“I think you are,” he said, soft like a whisper, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

Ah, those lips…

They were dark. Bruised. Like someone had hurt him. It was oddly beautiful, myriad shades of purples and blues, with blossoms of green and yellow.

His lips hadn’t been like that before. “What happened to your mouth?”

“Ah, you finally noticed,” he replied with a smirk.
“Don’t play with me, Outsider.”

*But I might as well be playing right into his hands,* I thought as I felt his hands tighten around my waist, pulling me against him. Closer. He was taller than me, and I had to look up if I wanted to continue glaring at him—and I did—but then I saw his lips angling towards mine, his head tilting…

*He’s trying to kiss me!*

“What are you doing?” I demanded, twisting away at the last second, giving him my cheek.

Cold lips traced across my cheek to my ear in a shivering trail. He whispered, his lips against my ear lobe as he spoke, “I want to kiss you, Emily; to erase the shadow of Delilah’s lips on mine. She gave me the kiss of death.”

I pushed back, reeling in shock and throbbing with jealousy and hatred towards Delilah. *She* kissed him?! The bitch! I stammered, “B-but you’re the Outsider! You can’t die.”

“I can. I have. How do you think I became the Outsider?”

I searched his eyes, but it was like looking for answers in the night sky. Every star was a mystery.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “You’re not dead.”

“I was once human, like you. That died long ago.”

A silence stretched between us. *Was he speaking truth or lies? It made no sense.*

“I don’t believe you. The Overseers have been preaching about you since—since forever! You’re an outsider—an other—a thing. Not human. Not one of us. The entire religious order would be in an uproar if it were not so!”

“I imagine so,” he said, his lips pursing in amusement, but then his lips flattened like he was putting on a different mask. A different emotion. A different face. He could say he’d once been human, but it was hard to see it now.

He stepped closer, his body language suggesting he wasn’t quite giving up on his desire to kiss me. His hand came out, very gently, to touch my neck. I gasped. His icy touch was fire.

“I am older than the Abbey. I have watched from the Void for thousands of years. I saw the first spark, the idea that became the belief, that became the religion.”

“Then why didn’t you snuff out that spark? Didn’t you also see that the Abbey would become a thorn in your backside?”

His hand lightly gripped my neck; somehow it felt threatening and sensual all at once. “The Abbey is no threat.”

My eyes narrowed. “You like the way they paint you, don’t you? Every insult and jab is a feather in your cap.”

His eyebrow lifted in a very human gesture of surprise, but he said nothing, only smiled.

“And Delilah?” I goaded further, turning us back in an ugly direction where my anger and rage needed to be slaked, for him to know I blamed *him* for all that had happened. “Did you have an interesting day watching Delilah turn my father into stone? Is that another feather in your stupid cap?!”
The Outsider looked at Corvo, his hand falling away from my neck as if he was distracted by what he saw. I tried not to feel jealous. Half of my father’s face was flesh, freed by Rosemary, but his eyes were still trapped, hardened with stone.

“Delilah stole his Mark,” I spat, all accusation. I considered that squarely his fault.

“She did far more than that…”

His voice was a half-whisper, teetering at the edge of awe. His black eyes traced over my father’s outline as if searching for a fault line. “His flesh can be freed from stone, but Delilah has done something to him. Splintered his mind. Only Corvo can pick up the pieces now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He’s gone mad, Emily.”

“What? No!”

The Outsider’s Mark was a stain on my father’s soul, a supernatural connection to the Void that was both gift and curse. I’d known for a long time that one day it would claim his sanity—but I never thought it would come so soon!

“This is your fault!”

I lashed out, striking at the Outsider’s face, but he caught my hands and responded with his own violence, spinning me around so that my back was pinned against his chest. He was too strong and I couldn’t fight him! I lashed out with words as I struggled against him.

“How could you?! You weak bastard! How could you let that evil witch steal my father’s Mark? It was your gift, Outsider! What kind of god of sorcery are you if you can’t even—”

“I told you. Delilah is not just your problem,” he said, his voice rough against my ear. “Feel me.”

What?

I stopped struggling. My back felt like it was on fire, pressed against him, his arms around me, so tight I felt like I could go limp and not fall. I felt his cheek as he pressed our faces close together. He felt warm. For so long he’d been the embodiment of the Deep, the cold, the dark emptiness that threatened to consume my world, but now…

I slowly turned to face him like I was seeing his face for the first time. I whispered, “What did she do to you?”

“The kiss of death.”

I shook my head. “What does that mean?”

“It means I underestimated her. It means my interest in her backfired.”

I almost laughed. Serves him right. But for a heartbeat, I saw it on his face, a glimpse of the mortal man beneath. His mask crumbling. His vulnerability like a shadow. Call it human. Call it fire burning ice.

He was afraid.

I frowned. “How did she…”
“Delilah found the source of my power. She is using it to destroy my hold over the Void.”

“How can she do that?!”

And how in the Void was I going to take back my throne if she had that kind of power, to unseat the Outsider?! I knew she was immortal—she survived a sword to the heart—but now this?!

“How is a tangled web of lies and truth. A chain of events. A ripple in the pond. A broken man’s redemption. Not long after your mother was assassinated, one of my Marked captured Delilah. He killed her mortal body and trapped her spirit in the Void using her own painting. Up until that point, I’d been alone in the Void. Alone for…” He looked torn. “Her presence was an unexpected intrusion. I did not welcome it.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “But she grew on you…”

He smiled faintly. “That’s one way to put it. The more she took, the less I became.” His voice became oddly strained; he struggled to speak through his anger. “She is… a part of me, now, and I don’t like it.”

Not just anger, I thought. Bitterness… as if Delilah had betrayed him. How close had they been in the Void?

He shook his head. “Did she do it to me or did I do it to myself? I don’t know… she… makes things difficult to see.”

He looked so lost. I watched his face as he spoke, and something inside me yearned to comfort him.

“She tricked you?”

He nodded. “It’s fascinating.”

He glanced at my father as if his stone prison was a piece of art that Delilah had sculpted.

He looked amazed. “Again and again, she has done the impossible, like none other before her. She has burned away what once was. She has destroyed the man you once knew. She has done the same to me. She will do it again to the whole world. Burn it away and plant her vision in its stead.”

I gaped at him. “Hold on. You think her destroying you is fascinating?”

He turned the full force of his black eyes on me. “I don’t need your pity, Empress. I need your help, and you need mine.”

His eyes felt like a weapon, like it was the only way he knew to get what he wanted. To take my help. To seduce me to do his bidding. To kiss me and hold me like I was clay in his hands. He wasn’t interested in me for me. No, he needed me because of Delilah, because she was somehow twisted up in both our fates.


Foolish girl, I thought. Did you think the Outsider’s seduction was something more?

I let him wash over me. These horrible feeling were nothing new; over and over, I’d felt jealous and used and manipulated, and I was tired of it. I gazed into his black eyes and just accepted the fact that I couldn’t look away, that my reaction was normal.

Everyone goes mad, I thought. I just need to resist and get the job done. I need to find a way to get
my throne back, and my father. The Outsider was just one more mountain to climb.

I took a deep breath.

“Delilah is our common enemy,” I said, trying not to sound duplicitous. “I agree we should… help each other.”

I took a step back, not liking the look on his face. How could he accuse me of being pragmatic? Sometimes I forgot he could read my mind. How can he blame me for wanting to protect myself, my heart? I stammered, “My father, to start. You must help him.”

He said nothing.

I glared at him. “Are you listening? You must free him from stone. My father is important. He can help us. Surely, you see that? Delilah did. Why else would she steal his Mark? She’s afraid of him.”

“Corvo is important, but not as important as you. He was central to the Rat Plague, but this new crisis is yours, Empress. I have seen it. Delilah stole something from you. From me. She took an important game piece off the board once she realized Corvo had the Mark. That is all.”

“My father is not a game piece!”

My outrage made him smirk.

“You rule nations—or you did before losing your throne. How many times have you stood in your War Room, hovering like a goddess over that great map of the Isles, maneuvering your toy pieces—”

“Not toys! Warships. Envoys.”

“Ah, yes. All so very important. Where are they now?” He stepped closer. “I see the players and I see the game. Do you remember, Emily?”

He took my hand and kissed it—like he had that first time we met—and rubbed his thumb over my virgin skin as if his black eyes could already see the Mark he wanted to place there. He said, “Delilah stole Corvo away from me, but I still have you.”

“I’m not yours!”

I flushed hotly and snatched my hand away. Not yet, his black eyes promised.

“You’re terrible at this,” I said, lifting my chin. “A modicum of respect, that’s all I ask. If we are to be allies—”

“Ah, allies. Yes, let’s talk about those. What has the coup taught you, Emily? How many of your so-called friends stabbed you in the back? Not very good at judging, are you? Or trusting.” He tapped his bruised lips. “Would you rather be feared or loved? Now that’s a question I love to ask.”

I turned away. Enough. I’d had enough!

Behind me, the Outsider spoke, raising his voice in annoyance. “Do you want Corvo freed or not?”

I swung back. “Of course, I do!”

His smile widened.
My belly tightened in anger. “Are you blackmailing me now? The Outsider’s Mark on my hand in exchange for my father’s freedom, is that it?”

His voice was calm. “I would that you accept my Mark willingly, Emily, or not at all.”

*I can’t,* I thought. *I made a promise.*

“Ah, a prisoner to an impossible promise. Break it and be free.”

“No.”

“Look at him. He won’t know.”

“No! Stop changing the subject! Free my father!”

“Corvo will become a burden to you if freed from stone. His madness will be… murderous at times. It is more advantageous to leave him be.” He added after a long pause, “For now.”

“What do you mean—*murderous*?”

“The father you knew is lost. I told you once before; there’s a darkness in Corvo’s soul. Delilah has forced it to the surface. That man… Corvo the Black… he will not exercise restraint with your enemies. He’d sooner drown the world in blood and cast the Empire into chaos if it meant restoring you to your throne.”

I didn’t believe him. *I couldn’t.* There was just one thing I needed to know.

“Will he hurt me?”

“Never,” he said at once.

“Then do it.”

“As you wish, Emily.”

I glanced sharply at him, startled by what sounded like surrender of all things, like the Outsider was as helpless as me on some level. He had granted my wish so quickly.

*Or perhaps the Outsider just wants Corvo back,* I thought sourly. Despite the risk. *Because* of the risk. The black-eyed bastard loved when the stakes were high. *Father was right,* I thought. The Outsider was neither all good nor all evil, and that made him dangerous. He could claim to be my ally—to have common ground with me for a time—but I was not immune to betrayal, nor his perilous seduction.

*His weapon.*

“Give me your hand, Emily,” he said. I thought of the Sunset Regalia, of him bending low to kiss the back of my hand. Then, like now, I couldn’t stop myself from raising my hand to let him capture me. His touch was like nothing in this world. It was power and weakness, neither whole without the other.

He placed our hands over my father’s stone-veined cheek, and in that instant of connecting flesh, the spell was broken. Corvo’s flesh awakened like a rushing river beneath our hands, spreading outwards to dissolve the stony gray.

Corvo gasped, sucking in air. His dark brown eyes rolled in confusion, then shot to my face in
concern. Concern *for me*. That was the last glimpse of the father I knew. His eyes glazed over, the pupils turning pitch black and the whites of his eyes going bloodshot. It terrified me.

They were mad eyes, utterly soulless.

*Corvo the Black.*

The Outsider touched the center of Corvo’s forehead with two fingers. It made him slump to the ground like a ragdoll.

“What? No!” I fell to my knees, trying to hold him, but he was limp in my arms. I tested the pulse at his neck. *Alive, but unconscious.* I glared up at the Outsider. “What was that for? What have you done to my father?”

“I read his mind. Corvo saw Rosemary behind you. His first thought was that he was going to enjoy strangling the life out of her. He doesn’t trust her.”

“Should *I* trust her?”

“You need her. You can’t carry Corvo out of here without her help. Get to the Black Pony Pub.” He leaned closer, touching my cheek with the back of his hand. “I will be watching.”

I could see in his eyes he still wanted that kiss from me, but he disappeared in a flurry of black rain, the Void glinting in broken pieces as time reemerged from slumber. The Duke’s men charged towards us, unfrozen. I screamed at Rosemary. She ran towards me. I grabbed her hand in a death grip, my other hand clutching Corvo’s limp hand. We were all connected.

“*Blink!***” I screamed.
Part 2: Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part II continued

“A Long Day in Dunwall”

Chapter 17

With hands linked, Rosemary’s spell jumped us from point to point in a maddening blur. First, the glass door, then, the second floor bannister. An awkward landing almost had Corvo slipping from my grasp, his unconscious body precariously balanced over the second-story drop, but Rosemary jumped to the next point, straight through the broken doors into my bedroom hallway. After two more jumps to turn the corner (we couldn’t Blink through walls, after all), we found ourselves at safety’s threshold.

“I can’t do another!” Rosemary cried, gasping for breath. She fell forward into the safe room, collapsing on the couch.

The empty couch.

“Where’s Ramsey?!”

When she just shook her head at me, her face deathly pale, I let it go, turning my attention to our more immediate problem.

I could hear the Duke’s men charging after us, running and shouting as they chased after our sorcery-aided escape. We didn’t have much time. I pulled my father into the safe room with my hands wedged under his armpits, his long legs dragging against the floor. I unceremoniously let go once he was all the way inside, cringing as his head hit the floor, then scrambled towards the door, inserting my signet ring into the locking mechanism with adrenaline-fueled precision.

The bookshelf rumbled to a close, sealing us inside. Gasping in relief, I leaned forward, pressing my forehead against the wood. I was safe—but for how long?

I spun around, hearing Rosemary whimper in shock. She slid down from the couch and sat alongside my father’s prostrate body. “How?” she gasped, touching his face as if she couldn’t believe it was flesh and not stone. She looked up at me. “I don’t understand. How is he free, Emily? My mirror curse failed!”

“The Outsider,” I said. “He freed Corvo.”

Her mouth fell open.

I knelt beside her and gently touched her arm. Beads of sweat clung to her brow and her skin was deathly pale. “Can you Blink us again?”

Corvo had told me his powers relied on mana, a well of sorcery connected to the Void that only time or mana-infused elixirs could refill. I feared she was drained, not just from the spastic Blinking, but from the mirror curse as well.
"I need a few minutes," she admitted. She looked down at my father, her eyes filled with confusion and concern. "Why isn’t he waking up?"

"It’s for the best. My father’s not... himself right now. I’ll explain later. Just rest."

On my knees, I checked Corvo for weapons, methodically sifting through the folds of his jacket and along his belt. I had always thought of his Outsider’s Mark as his greatest weapon, and his folding sword to boot, but as my Royal Protector, he, of course, carried an assortment of lethal and nonlethal options.

I counted three stun mines, two razor mines, and a sticky grenade, and for his crossbow, ten steel bolts and five tranquilizer darts. The crossbow I kept hitched to his belt. It was identical to mine and I doubted Rosemary could make use of it, not with her hands full Blinking and holding Corvo’s hand while doing it.

I left the lethal gear—the razor mines, the grenades, and steel bolts—in a scattered pile on the couch. The rest I meant to take with me. The stun mines I hitched to the inside of my coat on little carrying hooks, their round metallic casings softly clinking against each other.

Rosemary was awestruck. "Corvo taught you how to use all that stuff?"

I nodded grimly.

As for the sleep darts... I stared at the green liquid in thought. The Outsider had rendered Corvo unconscious, but for how long? If my father truly was Corvo the Black—a murderously insane over-protective father (how does one deal with that?!)—I couldn’t take the risk.

I jabbed him with one of the darts, the needle disappearing into the meat of his arm.

Rosemary flinched beside me. I looked up at her and said, "It’ll be very bad if he wakes up."

"Why?

"Rest, Rosemary," I commanded with my Empress face. "We’re not going anywhere if you can’t Blink us."

But she was too agitated to rest. She shot to her feet, following me as I bounced down the steps to my workbench.

I unhitched my crossbow and loaded the sleep darts. I had a full clip now—five—since I only used four, earlier, to clear the throne room. It was important to keep track of such things. Who knew how bad it’d get out there?

"Blink us where?" Rosemary asked, nigh unto hysterical. "Emily, I don’t like this!"

I turned sharply, bracing her by the arm as she swayed on her feet. "Sit down!" I said, pushing her into the cubbyhole.

She plopped down on the bed and grabbed my hands, staring up at me with pleading eyes. "Emily, I don’t understand. Why can’t Lord Corvo protect us?"

"We have to protect him." I squeezed her hands. "Everything will be okay. The Outsider is watching over us. We just have to get to the Black Pony Pub."

"What’s at the Black Pony Pub?"
“A way out of Dunwall,” I said with more conviction than I felt. The Outsider hadn’t given specifics—of course.

I returned to the workbench, gathering my thoughts. Only five sleep darts. Five against how many? The streets were probably swarming with guards, both the Duke’s men from Serkonos and the turncoats of the City Watch who had soaked up Ramsey’s lofty promises.

They were probably already barricading the Tower District, hunting for us.

Luckily, the Pub was not far. Maybe a ship is waiting for us. I remembered the old brick building; it was right up against the water. I’d visited it once with Wyman when he had first come to Dunwall, eager to tour the capital’s more… seedy offerings. He liked rubbing shoulders with the common folk, getting a feel for the city beyond the gilded palace.

I grabbed a rucksack from the workbench, debating what to bring with me. I flipped the latch of an old gun case. Long shut, it creaked upon opening, revealing my father’s mask from the time of the Rat Plague. I shivered, recalling too many blood-soaked dreams of the Masked Felon.

He’s gone mad, Emily…

The Outsider’s voice haunted my mind. It was just one of many horrible and shocking things he’d said to me. And he had tried to kiss me! It all sat in a hard lump in my belly, undigested.

I didn’t know how to deal with it, other than to keep moving. I shoved the mask into the rucksack and hurried back to Rosemary, dropping the bag on the bed beside her. I rummaged through the drawers beside the bed, pulling out whatever I found: pants, shirts, coats, underwear. It was a mess.

“Change your clothes,” I ordered, throwing socks at her. Something ought to fit. She was slightly shorter than me, but we were both lean around the waist. “You can’t wear a bright red dress and expect not to be seen.”

She pouted. “But I love this dress…”

“Rosemary!”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

She tugged out of the lacy dress, her long blonde hair curling against her bare shoulders. She stood up on slender legs, unfolding a pair of pants to see how they fell against her leg height. I turned away, pretending I didn’t see her stuff the red dress in the rucksack.

I headed towards the other cubbyhole. When I turned the corner, I shrieked in fright.

“Outsider’s ass!” I stepped around the man-sized statue, peering at his stony face in disbelief. Locked in stone. “Well, that solves that mystery.”

“What are you talking about?” Rosemary rushed to my side, hopping with one foot as she tugged on a pair of black pants. “Void and stars! How in the world did Ramsey get all the way over here?!”

“Maybe your spell was interrupted long enough for him to awaken. Either way, I suspect the Outsider finished the job.” I knocked on Ramsey’s stone head with my knuckles. “An ironic pose, isn’t it?”

Mortimer Ramsey, turned to stone, was greedily reaching towards my gold. He’d opened up both of my Winslow safes instead of fleeing the safe room. Not that it would have made any difference, but
still… It was just another confirmation that what I’d done to him was justified.

“I almost feel bad for him,” Rosemary said.

“Don’t. Finish dressing.”

She resumed digging through my spare clothes, no doubt realizing that whatever she picked out would be it for a while.

The comforts of the palace would soon be long behind us.

I maneuvered around Ramsey’s outstretched arms, reaching for a single bar of gold. The rest of the imperial reserves were too heavy to take with us, and wouldn’t directly help us anyway. I knew Delilah couldn’t be defeated with huge, costly armies. I needed to unravel the secret of her immortality from within the conspiracy that had toppled my throne, and that meant getting close-up and personal.

I tucked the gold bar inside the rucksack, noticing that Rosemary had snuck in a few more things. I spotted a whale bone comb and…

“What’s this?” I asked, pulling out Samuel’s little wooden boat.

Rosemary’s head popped out of a black woolen shirt; it looked too big on her. “For good luck, Your Highness,” she scowled, pushing the little boat back into the bag. “You said Samuel saved your father’s life, once. That matters. They’re like talismans, imbued with power…” She reached for Mrs. Pilsen, my little black-haired doll in a Morley dress.

“Don’t!” I shouted, suddenly near tears. I snatched the doll and put it back on the shelf, my eyes drifting over the drawings I’d made as a little girl during the Rat Plague. “I’m going to come back,” I whispered. “All of this will be mine again.”

“Just the boat, then.”

She tugged on my spare boots and swung the rucksack over her shoulder, clearly planning to be in charge of it during our escape. With her ability to Blink Corvo along, I began to wonder if she really was a gift, just not in the way I had first imagined…

“Ready?” I asked her.

Dread stirred in her eyes. “I’m scared, Emily.”

“We stick together. We can do this.”

“How are you so calm?”

“I’m not. I’m scared, too. But Father taught me there’s no shame in being afraid. We have to be strong. Let’s go.”

“Alright, Emily. I’ll Blink Corvo to the door.”

I fitted my signet ring into the lock at the back door. Beyond lied an abandoned section of the palace, a route I’d taken numerous times to secretly train at the waterfront with Father. Rosemary had never seen it.

She Blinked Corvo the door. He was slumped against her knee, their hands linked. “It’s easier if I stay low to the ground,” she explained with a grimace. “With Corvo unable to stand, it’s… well, it’s
awkward.”

“I’m sorry, Rosemary, and I appreciate everything you’re doing for me. Is it less tiring to Blink without me?”

She nodded, biting her lip.

“Then only Blink with Corvo for now, but don’t go on ahead without me. Let me check the area first, and wait for my ‘all clear’ signal. Got it?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Corvo’s eyes were closed; he looked like he was sleeping. A vision of innocence, I thought.

I couldn’t believe he would wake up as anyone other than the father I knew. How could he be someone bad?

I went first, passing discarded furniture and spider-webbed shelves with dusty, old books. At the corner, I checked the long hallway beyond, drinking in the quiet serenity of a space long left in the dark. The windows were boarded up, and through the narrow slits, sunlight drew slanting patterns against the ratty walls, the cobwebs shimmering silver in the light.

I waved at Rosemary. She Blinkeded to the corner and waited in a crouching position as I returned to the safe room door and used my signet ring one last time, locking it behind us.

“This hallway is creepy,” Rosemary announced.

“I rather like it.”

Of all the rooms in my palace, I liked the secrets the best. The hidden rooms. The forgotten tunnels. They made me feel safe. They made me feel special. For few had wandered these darkened passageways.

“Who are they?” Rosemary asked, staring queerly at an old Sokolov painting of Custis, Morgan, and the Postulate Child—the last being the infamous loyalist, Treavor Pendleton, of course. All three were Pendletons, one of the first founding families of Dunwall who had made their fortunes exploiting slave mines.

“That’s a story for Corvo to tell,” I said. The sleep dart would keep him knocked out for hours, but I had a strange feeling he’d wake up early. “Remember: me first, then you follow when I give the—”

“All clear. Yes, I know,” Rosemary sighed.

“We’ll be very high up, so don’t rush. Take your time. Find your footing. You have Corvo to think about when you pick your landings. Don’t Blink unless you have room for both of you. I don’t want my father slipping from a rooftop.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“We’ll talk about that later.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your black magic,” I said, shaking my head. “You only found out you were a witch yesterday, and already you’ve remembered so much. You possessed a man!”
“I lost control of the spell. I don’t have it all figured out!”

“That’s why I’m just saying…” I sighed heavily when I realized I was only making her more upset. “I’m sorry, just… be careful out there, okay?”

“I’m doing the best I can, Your Highness,” she snapped. She never spoke to me that way. It was a sign of just how nervous and frightened she was. We were truly alone, without the security and protection that so often we took for granted. Not just my father, the Royal Protector, and not just the near-constant presence of the Elite Guard, it was the whole city! It wasn’t home anymore; it was danger.

I softened my voice. “I know it feels like everything just changed, but—”

“Everything did change, and the sooner you change it back, the happier I’ll be,” she said, obstinate in her direct gaze. “Go.”

I nodded silently. *Fair enough.*

I walked the length of the hallway alone, checking the shadows. I didn’t think we’d get ambushed here, but my father had always cautioned me to expect the worst. At the door leading out to a lonely balcony, I waved at Rosemary. She looked small, a dark silhouette with ghostly pale hair in the distance. The next instant, she was crouching beside me, larger than life, a cold chill surrounding her in a distinctively red cloud.

Corvo was slumped against her leg, with her hand wrapped around his, like a leash.

I unhitched the latch at the door and stepped out into the wide, open world, the morning sky swathed in stormy gray. The city sprawled below us, rooftops like stepping stones receding into the distance. With another prompting wave, Rosemary joined me at the broken railing as we drank in the view of Wrenhaven River.

I pointed. “There’s the Black Pony Pub.”

“It’s so close!”

“Yes. Sort of. But there’s no safe way down this side. We have to go around. Go right.” I mirrored my words, turning north, away from the river. The rooftops cascaded downwards towards the old armory. I could see the path in my mind’s eye. We’d have to hit the streets. The rooftops were too precariously slanted to risk Rosemary’s *Blinking* with Corvo. One person might be able to balance it, but not two.

I jumped down to the first rooftop, swinging over the balcony and landing on solid feet. It felt good to be moving, my body charged with excitement. I looked up at Rosemary. Her blue eyes were wide with shock.

I said, “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of heights.”

“She’s not afraid of heights,” came an amused voice behind me. I almost lost my footing, swinging towards the unexpected visitor. The Outsider stood on the roof, looking completely at ease. The rooftop was downward-sloping enough that we stood eye-to-eye for once. He normally stood taller than me.

“You trying to get me killed?!” I shrieked as I spread my arms wide, recovering my balance.

“Quite the contrary.” His black eyes were on Rosemary, a small smile hovering on his bruised lips.
I felt jealous. He said, too fondly for my tastes, “Hello, Rosemary MacKenzie. Enjoy the Pub.”

Her blue eyes were adoring as she gazed back at him. I had the unmistakable flashback of my father’s voice, telling me all witches worshipped the Outsider. Utterly worshipped. I could see it now, plain as day on her face. I hated it.

He bowed his head, and in the next instant, Rosemary disappeared in flurry of black rain.

And Corvo, too!


“I Blinked them to the Black Pony Pub,” the Outsider said, sounding smug. “There, they can safely await your arrival and relax a bit. I hear Old Pattie’s Gristol Cider is to die for.”

“You asshole!”

“Really, Empress, that’s uncalled for.”

“If you can bloody do that, why in the Void wouldn’t you Blink me, too?!” I thought of Rosemary’s adoring eyes, fixated on him. I mockingly spat, “I’m sorry. Do I need to worship you before I get the golden treatment?!”

“It’d be a start.”

“Not happening.”

“I was joking. You know what I want.”

“That’s not happening either.”

I was literally shaking in anger, and the fact that he was just standing there, with that little stupid smile on his face only made me angrier. I might as well be screaming into the wind. He looked as serene as a mountain lake. And me… well… I was the pebble dropped in the middle of it. He had to watch the ripples expand.

I opened my mouth to protest further, but the way his black eyes gleamed as he tilted his head at me in scrutiny, stole my breath away. The liquid night of his eyes ensnared me.

“Tell me, Empress,” he said, tightening the noose. “Did you enjoy Ramsey’s fate?”

I didn’t expect that.

I couldn’t answer right away; I was too angry. Too caught off guard. Too hopelessly fixated on his black eyes…

Wind gusted over his face, ruffling his black hair and for a moment obscuring his eyes. I tore my gaze away and forced myself to consider his question, to play his stupid game, to think of Ramsey, that traitorous dog…

I realized I felt… vindicated.

“Yes,” I said, glaring at him. “Yes, I enjoyed his fate. He betrayed me.”

“A greedy man, was it?” He looked away from me—I could breathe again—and stared contemplatively over the city of Dunwall. “Greed for gold.”
“Something like that.”

What was he getting at?

“A tenth of the gold you store in your safe room could have saved his family. Or a little piece of paper with your signature. Or a word or two in the right places.”

“Are you saying it’s my fault?”

“Isn’t it? Ramsey believed he had to save himself because you wouldn’t lift a finger. It made Ramsey ripe for the picking. The Duke reeled him in like a fat fish, and when the Duke had Ramsey, he soon had Ramsey’s men. It took three years to turn each man to his cause, one by one.”

The wind picked up around us, the stormy skies delivering a promise of rain to come. The Outsider began pacing the roof as if it was a normal place to be having a conversation. To be ripping me apart word by word.

“Hinting. Promising. One slip and Ramsey knew the whole thing would fall apart, but it never did, Empress. Don’t you see? Your Royal Spymaster failed you. Corvo failed you. His Eyes saw nothing. The truth is, Delilah and the Duke would never have taken the throne without their inside man: Ramsey.”

My heart sank beneath his icy revelation. A vast-laid conspiracy, yet Corvo and his spy network had failed to detect the rot from within the City Watch.

“Nothing to say, Empress?”

“I believe you.”

“What?”

“I believe you!”

“I don’t care if you do. That’s beside the point. What matters is why. Why did it happen? Perhaps living in the palace made Corvo soft. He relied on his spies instead of himself. What’s your excuse, Empress? What were you doing during those long three years when Ramsey was plotting behind your back?”

I shivered as a gust of wind swept over my skin, rattling the folding sword at my belt. I was clutching the hilt in a death grip.

The Outsider stepped closer.

“You remember, don’t you? I do. Three… long… years. I watched you, Emily. Watched you daydream through council meetings. Watched you hating everything you had to read, everything you had to sign. So much toil behind a desk. Ruling through an army of bureaucrats… My favorite? Smirking at Wyman across the halls of Parliament when you thought no one was looking. But someone was looking…”

“I get it,” I said through clenched teeth. “I’m a horrible Empress. I deserve to be thrown face-down in the mud—is that what you want to hear?!”

He brushed his fingers against my cheek, creating an icy trail down my throat before finally resting over my thumping heart. I was breathing hard, now, the swell of my breast rising and falling against his palm.
An impossible laugh escaped my lips. A broken laugh.

“Or maybe I should feel flattered. How long have you been watching me, Outsider? Three years? Or longer?”

He smiled faintly. “Long enough to see you were just waiting for your next chance to be free of Dunwall Tower.” He gestured towards the sprawling city, to the rooftops I loved so much. “Well, now you’re free…”

Then he pushed me over the edge.

Chapter End Notes

If you quietly follow Ramsey up to the safe room, he has some interesting things to say about his motives for betraying Emily.

"All this wealth, wasted on the Kaldwin girl and her father, a foreigner. If the girl - oh, sorry. Her Imperial Majesty - had not ignored me at Butler's Change of Ceremony, if she'd bothered to keep her appointments, I might have finally restored the family to its proper station. My idiot father notwithstanding. A tenth of this money could have saved my family. Or a little piece of paper with her signature. Or a word or two in the right places. But no, I had to save myself. Three years turning each man to our cause, one by one. Hinting. Promising. One slip and the whole thing falls apart. But blood will tell. Ramsey blood."
I screamed as the rooftop fell out from under me. I lost all sense of up and down, a cold sapping wind buffeting me from all sides. Wind howled in my ears. I was falling into a black sky!

Falling down into the sky!

Sharp, jagged edges flew past me at dizzying speeds like a black mirror exploding. I scrambled for purchase, clawing desperately at everything and anything, but I kept falling and falling and falling…

There was nothing. I was lost, descending into chaos…

In that cold darkness, a strong hand snatched mine. I saw the Outsider above me, pulling me towards him.

I never saw a more beautiful sight.

“Don’t go falling from a rooftop, Empress,” he said with a lopsided grin. I gripped his hand with all my strength, hating and loving him all at once.

“I didn’t fall, you pushed me!”

His black eyes became my sole focus. I clung to him like I was drowning. He lifted me from the chaos, pulling me out of that black tide, shadows swirling around my body like eddies in a raging river. His presence above me felt like an anchor, something strong and stable against an avalanche of chaos.

He gently set me down. Out of nowhere, a floating island appeared beneath my feet.

The Outsider’s hand felt warm against mine. The only thing warm; all else was chilling cold.

“You pushed me,” I said again, but it was a whisper, with no anger or accusation.

“And came to no harm,” he said, just as softly.

I reluctantly released his hand and the warmth that went with it. That warmth scared me—for did it not mean Delilah’s powers were growing? The Outsider was losing his control over the Void thanks to her. I couldn’t believe it. He was the Outsider, a god, the black eyes watching from the shadows, often felt but rarely seen. He was the enigma within the enigma, the black hole at the center of the universe. He was nothing and everything.

And wanting him was like wanting eternal life.

It sounded like a good idea—on the surface—but even I could see I couldn’t go on like this forever.

Now look what he has done.
I stood on an island of slate, each slanted stone meandering off into the unknowable distance. We were floating in a black sea with other such islands, like mirror reflections, shadows hiding shadows. It felt dreamlike, but I knew in my heart that this was the birthplace of all things. The womb of life.

“The Void is the beginning and the end,” I said, surprised to hear my own voice. I hadn’t meant to speak out loud. I shot the Outsider a heated look, fearful he had put words into my mouth. “How do I know that? *Feel* that?”

“The Void spoke through you,” the Outsider said, his features serene.

“Through me?”

“The Void has many secrets. Why it chooses to divulge them is another.”

“You mean *you* choose!”

No more secrets! No more cryptic games! I wanted him to speak plainly for once. How could anything happen in the Void without his say-so?

I glared at him as he hesitated, his black eyes glimmering as though caught in a dancing reflection of moonlight.

But there was no moon. There was no sky. The Void slowly drifted around us, lazy currents that tugged and pulled at floating objects that constantly shifted, even changed form. I saw a rocky island morph into a waterfall, the cascading swell of frothy water disappearing into nothingness.

“No,” he said. “I am… separate.”

The Void was captivating, but him most of all. No matter where I looked, I felt drawn to him, pulled back into his dark eyes. There was no Void without him; he was its center, the black hole that sucked all else into it.

He seemed different here. More fluid and less corporal, the lines of his body appearing hazy as if he was *Blinking* in and out of existence faster than the eye could see.

“But…”

My breath slipped away as I saw a whale emerge from the gloom, twisting its massive body to pin one beady eye upon me. It floated serenely past the Outsider, drifting an incalculable distance behind him like a fantastic backdrop on a painting I could never hope to create. It was too extraordinary, its beauty impossible to capture.

I heard whale song and remembered the Deep, a damp chill in my bones. All at once I felt small and vulnerable. *Who am I to question the Outsider? To seek to understand him?*

“I am their voice,” the Outsider said. “Their chosen voice.”

The Leviathan disappeared back into the gloom, but I saw its lingering shadow descend on the Outsider’s head like a halo.

“They are afraid,” he said. The Void swirled around us, constantly shifting.

“Afraid of what?”

“Delilah.”
He said no more. Time felt meaningless; there was no rush to speak, only to share each moment as it passed, the Void changing form around us like a dream shifting focus.

“Her voice is drowning out mine,” the Outsider offered slowly, darkly, like mist wreathed in shadow. “The whales did not choose her. They are afraid.”

“But you are a god.” My voice sounded small.

“I am separate,” he said again. “The more she takes, the less I become.”

It was an echo of his words in the throne room. ‘I share the Void with her, now. She is… a part of me, and I don’t like it.’

I shuddered at the memory, staring into his eyes. They were soulless, their inky black depths like twin maelstroms. I couldn’t imagine him as anything else; he was the Outsider. How could he be anything else? How could he be less?

He looked away, as if he couldn’t bear to read my thoughts. He said, “Her kiss of death has changed everything…”

“I don’t understand.”

How could the Outsider die? He was the god of sorcery! Countless people had worshiped him throughout the ages. He was feared and revered. I felt afraid to ask what was in my heart, but the Void pulled my fears out into the open. I couldn’t hold my tongue.

“Why have you brought me here?”

“The same reason I carried you into the Deep.”

Memories of riding the back of a whale surfaced in my mind like bright sunlight, filling my heart with peace and exhilaration.

“What reason is that?” I asked in a breathy whisper. I felt like I was caught inside him, drowning in his unknowable eyes.

“Selfish reasons.”

His voice was little more than a whisper. He traced a warm finger down my cheek and gently tugged my bottom lip before his hand fell away. “You piqued my interest, Emily. I wanted to see you… and I wanted you to see me.”

“I still can’t see you… not really.”

I no more understood him than the sparrow at my window, looking for a crumb. How could that sparrow ever understand anything more than instinct? And my instincts told me that the Outsider was dangerous, that he was stringing me along for his own purposes.

Obsession and madness—these were his tools—not love.

His lips twisted. “You still resist me. Why?”

“Why?” I gaped at his smile. “Where should I start? Why did you abandon me on a bloody rooftop?!?”

“You’re upset,” he stated, as if curious.
“Yes!” I shouted, anger sparking like wildfire. “How can that possibly be surprising to you? Do you not understand that I am surrounded by people who want to kill me? Dunwall is not safe! You said you needed my help and yet you Blink away my father and Rosemary to safety and leave me behind, all because of what exactly? Because it’s apparently my fault that Mortimer Ramsey turned his coat?!”

Aflame with anger, I turned away, glaring into the Void. I couldn’t stand to look at him.

But his silence gnawed at my nerves. *What a child I am!* I felt foolish for letting my temper get the best of me. *Was I an Empress or a foolish little girl?*

I felt his hand on my arm, gently turning me back to face him. He swam in my vision like a ghostly mirage.

“You make it very difficult,” I said with an aching voice.

“Difficult?” he repeated—as if that was all he could do—just mirror me like every movement I made was a part of him, like we were moving as one.

“Difficult to help you when you treat me like this,” I responded quite crossly. “Like you don’t care if you hurt me or not.” I felt mortified the instant I’d realized what I’d said.

How could I just let that go? Make myself so vulnerable?!

The Void pulled me apart, revealing my most private, innermost thoughts like I was an open book.

In those pages he would find the truth: I wanted him, and I hated him for it, because it felt one-sided. It felt false. *He’s put me under a spell,* I thought. *Or I’m slowly going mad.* I felt desperate. His seductive black gaze was inescapable, a powerful lure that felt like a thousand suns blazing into my heart.

I was desperate to learn how deeply he was ‘interested’ in me. A vast ocean or a shallow lake? Was I just a tool for him to use against Delilah, or could there be something more between us?

His fingers threaded through my hair, each black strand floating in the air as if swaying in water. Around us, the environment shifted again. A trick of the light perhaps, but it felt so real. We were standing, now, on a slanted rooftop—just like the one outside the royal palace—but instead of the sprawling city of Dunwall, I saw stormy gray skies in all directions.

I could almost imagine it was real if not for the fact that the world had an edge, beyond which was pure darkness.

“I care more than you know,” the Outsider said, like twisting a knife. He sounded bitter. “Delilah has changed me. *Is* changing me. Her presence in the Void has created fault lines, cracks… She’s shaken my foundation.”

His voice became oddly hoarse. I held my breath, listening closely.

“Empress. Emily… Things that I thought would never change *have* changed. I… I feel things that were once… I haven’t always cared, but I do now.”

I wanted to kiss him, to shield his vulnerability and hold him close. His bruised lips twisted into a frown as he watched me hesitate.

“You’re afraid of wanting me,” he said.

*Of wanting you too badly,* I thought. *Of falling into madness.*
“If there’s any madness, it’s what I feel for you,” the Outsider said, an ache in his voice as he read my thoughts. I blushed furiously, but he kept going, “Empress, I’m not who I was before I saw you. Before…”

Before Delilah changed him, I thought, doubt creeping up my spine like a chill. Was it possible the Outsider had never felt… this before? Whatever this was…

It’s just last, I told myself. Don’t fall for it.

But I didn’t want to push him away, not yet. He was opening up to me. This vulnerability, this need… It was intoxicating.

I drank him in… his dark eyes, his porcelain-pale face, the breadth of his shoulders and the tender curve of his lips. He watched me, too, but at times his black gaze would alight over the darkening clouds. The scent of rain was curiously in the air, heavy in my lungs. I didn’t think the Void had a smell, yet there it was, filling me.

“You want answers, Emily,” he rumbled like thunder, “but not all answers are mine to give.”

Bitterness filled my mouth. “You could try harder.”

He smiled mirthlessly.

I scowled. “I meant try harder to explain yourself.” Not try harder to seduce me.

“Explain what?”

He sounded patient.

I crossed my arms. “Alright. You could start with the Black Pony Pub. Why did you Blink them and not me?”

“Everything is a game of risk, Empress. What do you think your chances were of getting to the Pub alive? Especially with Corvo’s… unfortunate condition slowing you down? I’ll tell you: not good. Even with Rosemary’s assistance, it was too risky.” He narrowed his eyes at me, two black slits in a pale face. “So I made a choice.”

“That doesn’t explain why you chose them and not me! How’s that the least amount of risk?!”

“Emily, let me explain, will you? The simple truth is…”

“Yes?”

He looked away and huffed. “I couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t?!”

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“I only had enough power to Blink two people, not three.”

“What do you mean enough power?”

“My powers are growing increasingly unstable.” He lifted his hand, the same one he’d used to
‘catch’ my fall into the Void. “You felt the warmth, didn’t you?”

I had, but that was beside the point.

“Warm. Cold. I can’t keep track! I’m a fool for trying to understand you.”

I can’t decipher the undecipherable.

A white-bricked chimney suddenly shot up behind me. He caged me between his long arms, placing his hands on the chimney wall on either side of my head. I glared at him as he leaned into me, his gleaming black eyes a greater jail than his arms. Clearly, his powers were still incredible, bending the Void to his will.

He whispered into the small space between us, “Don’t push me away, Emily. We need each other more than you know.”

The air between us seemed to rumble and electrify, like I was caught at the edge of an approaching storm.

“Is that how you see it? Tell me, Outsider, why do we need each other?”

This should be good, I thought sarcastically.

He tightened his jaw, irritation lining his pale face. “Delilah stealing your throne was just a petty revenge—”

“Revenge for what?”

“Perhaps one day she will tell you why,” the Outsider said, the curve of his bruised lips telling me he knew why, but was keeping such secrets to himself. He raised a finger and poked my nose like I was an unruly child. “But know this: Delilah is playing the long game.” I slapped his finger away. “Her eyes are set on a much greater prize.”

I scoffed, “What prize is greater than the throne?”

“Have you learned nothing? What is greater than your little throne? Life itself. Delilah wants to paint the world as it should be. In her eyes, anyway.” He angled towards my neck with slightly parted lips as if he meant to kiss me, but his mouth hovered above my skin, just out of reach. I felt like he was twisting me up on purpose, seducing me unto madness for whatever game he was playing with me. He whispered over my skin, “It would mean the end of the world as you know it, and the birth of another.”

Like a slippery fish, I ducked beneath the cage of his arms and shot upright a solid distance away. “Why do you do that?”

I was shaking.

He lazily pushed himself off the wall and turned towards me. “Do what, Emily?”

“That!”

My heart hammered in my chest.

“Oh?”

“We can’t even have a civil conversation without you…” I swallowed hard, my cheeks flaming.
“Without you trying to seduce me. You don’t have to. I’m not…”

I’m not going to accept your Mark, I almost said, but I lost my breath as he Blinked away, reappearing at my shoulder. Again, I moved away from him.

“Stop toying with me,” I begged. “We can be allies without this ridiculous song and dance. I don’t appreciate nor want your empty flattery.”

“Flattery?” he repeated with the hint of a smirk.

“Flirting,” I tried again. “Your empty flirting. You will stop doing that—that thing you do!” I sputtered, feeling hotly embarrassed. I looked down, gathering my composure. In the next instant, I raised my chin and gave him my Empress face. “If we are to be allies, you will treat me with respect.”

He closed the distance between us like it was nothing, his warm hand brushing against my cheek as his fingers dug into my hair. I couldn’t help but turn into his touch; the startling warmth was like a magnet.

“Do you realize how few I Mark?”

His deep voice was like the rumble of thunder as my lips thoughtlessly pressed against the inside of his hand.

Just one kiss, my lips against the inside of his palm, but my father’s voice rose up between us, urging me to stop. ‘I’ve seen what happens to people who try to chase after that dark dream,’ Corvo had said. ‘That vision of his face looking down at you with interest. They obsess and obsess. Most of the time, the Outsider just ignores them. He only Marks a chosen few. Seven? Eight? No more than ten walk in the world with his Mark, Emily. Don’t let one of them be you.’

I backed away, out of his reach. We stood apart, the Void careening around us.

“Why did you stop?” the Outsider asked, looking at his hand.

“You know why.”

I felt a compulsion when I looked at him. A compulsion to break down his walls, to discover who he was behind those dark, mysterious eyes. But who could truly know the Outsider? Was this desire to understand him—to get close to him—the reason why people went insane?

Surely, this compulsion was his malicious doing and not my own heart deciding on its own. I didn’t care if Delilah had changed him or not—I refused to be caught in the middle.

I lifted my chin. “Do not touch me again,” I said, a touch imperially, like an Empress commanding her subject, but my voice had quavered.

“As you wish, Empress,” he said, picking up on my tone. His face was a mask of serenity like unto still waters, but the black pools of his eyes churned like a tempest. I had the strangest feeling that my efforts to distance myself from him was only pulling me closer.

He cocked his head at me.

“It’s not my doing, you know,” he said rather casually. Too casually. He seemed to be restraining himself, but he couldn’t help leaning forward a little, enveloping me with his stare. It wasn’t physical contact, but the effect was nearly the same. My heart was beating like the wings of a sparrow.
He went on, “I am not the reason for the madness you so fear.”

“Oh?” I snorted in disbelief.

“Oh, yes. You’ve seen it countless times in your royal court. Narcissism. Greed. All the deplorable depths mankind can reach. If the ones I Mark go mad, it’s their own doing, not mine. They reach too far into the Void in their vain quest for power.”

He idly curled his fingers, staring at his nails. He even sighed. “It’s boring, really.”

“How sad for you.”

“After they succumb to their own hubris, I do not find them interesting at all.”

I stiffened in rage. “Are you saying it’s my father’s fault he’s gone mad, then?”

“That was Delilah’s doing,” the Outsider replied with a little heat of his own. “She has splintered his mind. Not me.” He shook his head. “And Corvo was never on the road to madness, despite what he believed.”

“What are you talking about? Everyone—”

“Not everyone goes mad. Only those who reach too far into the Void, like I said. They want power and that want destroys them. The Void takes its due. But Corvo? Your father is the proverbial diamond in the rough. He has never sought power for its own sake. That has protected him.”

Silence.

I erupted in disbelief and anger.

“Why didn’t you tell him?! Why would you let my father go on believing he’d eventually go insane?”

“He never asked.”

His answer floored me. I clenched my fists. “Not good enough!”

Like my mother’s Heart, it was impossible for me to separate feelings of loss, regret, and anger from the idea of my father’s Mark, of him eventually losing his sanity… And now to find out it was all a misunderstanding…

“The Void protects itself,” the Outsider said. He was as calm as ever, even half-smiling. “As can you. You are more like your father than you know.”

I steamed in anger, breathing loudly. “I know what you’re doing,” I finally said through gritted teeth.

He smiled slyly. “Do you?”

I’d made a promise to my father that I wouldn’t accept his Mark—but it was apparently based on a lie: Corvo’s fear that I would one day end up like him, lost to madness.

But now… now the Outsider had given me a way out of that promise. He was nudging me along like a hapless victim.

“Don’t be illogical, Empress. Your chances against Delilah are vastly improved if you are Marked.
Hence, *my* chances. Do you not see our fates are one?*

*Logic!* He was going to bring logic into this?! There was no logic, only need and desire. He clasped his hands behind his back, as if it was the only way to keep my command to not touch me.

“You must learn the secret of Delilah’s immortality, for both our sakes,” the Outsider said. “Make no mistake, a very dangerous road lies before you. Will you place your trust in flesh and steel alone? You need me and I need you. There is nothing to be afraid of, my dear.”

I laughed in despair. “Except losing my mind.”

He didn’t answer right away. The Void tumbled around us. I watched his face. Every piece of him was beautiful.

And dangerous.

“What do you need to hear from me, Emily Kaldwin? You’re fascinating. You’ve somehow convinced yourself I don’t want you. I do. A thousand times over, I do.”

“You’re either lying or you have a very twisted understanding of what it means to want someone—”

“—to love someone.”

I laughed again. “You’re a fool. It’s lust, not love. Love is…”

I thought of Wyman, my heart aching with regret. *Love is madness,* crept into my thoughts unbidden.

*Love is madness,* I thought again, gazing into his dark eyes. I whispered, “You’ve put me under some kind of spell. Seducing me to get what you want.”

“No spell, but your own power to interest me, Emily. *You* have caught me. You don’t see it because you’re afraid, but you must learn to trust me. If you do not, the world as we know it will pass into the Void, gone forever, and another will emerge. *Delilah’s world.* One where you and I are quite… obsolete, I’d imagine. She would not paint it any other way.”

I shook my head. “How can she have so much power over you?”

It frightened me to my core because *that* kind of power was what I was up against. If Delilah could throw the Outsider into disarray, what hope did I have as a mere mortal?

“That is what you must find out,” he said. “I have told you enough.”

“Enough?!” I choked, livid.

“Yes, and for reasons you can’t understand, or won’t. You have a great deal to learn, Empress.”

“Then why me?”

“You know why. Delilah. She has disturbed a balance that has existed for four thousand years. I am… *compensating.*”

“You’re four thousand years old?”

“Accept my Mark, Emily, and you’ll learn so much more,” he said, running his fingers down my arm to take my hand. The sorcery hand. It was in complete violation of my order not to touch me, but I
didn’t feel anger, only desire.

A shiver sang through my body as he bent low over my hand and pressed his cold lips to my skin. It was like the first time we had met; he had kissed my hand. Just like that, he had me. I couldn’t break free.

“Isn’t that what you want. To know me?” he said, rising to look at me, his hand still holding mine.

“Yes, but…” I couldn’t do this anymore. I felt like I was at the end of my rope, about to peel off into the darkness. “But what do you want?”

His face hardened. “You to accept.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m not a thing to be used by you, then thrown away and discarded as soon as you lose interest. You only want me now because you need me.”

“Is the need of one man for one woman so wrong?”

“You’re not a man.”

He reacted like I had slapped him. I felt horrible and regretted my words, but it was the Void—it pulled my thoughts out into the open. As much as I wanted to hide the truth from myself, the Outsider was more god than man. There could never be anything between us. I could never understand him.

And how could I love that?

“What I am… is willing. Give me a chance, Emily.”

“I don’t want your Mark…”

His face twisted into displeasure.

“Unless you also accept mine.”

I couldn’t believe it. What was I saying? He didn’t move. I didn’t move. We stood there staring at each other.

He asked, very carefully, “What do you mean?”

My heart began to race.

“We make a promise, you and I. Open up to me. As much as you can. If I become yours, then you must also become mine. No more secrets. No more mysteries.”

I didn’t know how else to put it, or if it was even possible… but I had to try.

“Let me in,” I finished with my last gasp.

It was a plea. A plea for sanity.

The words spun into the Void as the Outsider silently regarded me with those black shimmering eyes.

“I’m not quite sure how to let you in,” he said like a confession, his breath quickening in arousal as he flippantly added, “Without also making you go mad.”
The Void spun around me as whale song echoed in the unknowable distance.

“Are you willing to take that risk, Emily Kaldwin?”

I stared at my virgin hand, the skin creamy white, my hand in his. “Yes,” I said, a hot tear running down my cheek. I couldn’t say no. *I’m sorry, Father.* He sighed expansively, a ripple of pleasure that sunk into my bones as he Marked me.

It burned from the inside.

“Now you’re mine,” he said, “and I am yours.”
I’d seen—in full—the Mark of the Outsider on the back of my father’s hand before. He always kept it hidden, but one night, down at the waterfront, I had asked to see it. I’d been curious.

Corvo had given me a sober look, his dark eyes shielded. At first, I’d thought he meant to refuse me, but then he had slowly obliged, unwinding the black leather wrappings and holding out his hand, balled into a fist, for my inspection.

I remembered thinking it was eerily beautiful. The Mark of the Outsider, inky black against his skin, had waves of jagged lines bursting in a circular pattern, each ring the size of a large coin, reminiscent of a star.

It felt strange, now, to see that same Mark on my hand.

I can’t believe I said Yes, I thought, dread circling my heart like a vulture. Am I ready for this? For him?

I looked up from my Mark to the Outsider’s face; he was a picture of contentment. “My gifts are yours to do with as you please,” he said, unhurried. “But it is dangerous to release them all at once. For now, all I will grant you is Far Reach.”

“I understand.” My father had gone through a similar transition period, slowly growing into his powers. “But what is Far Reach? Does Father have something like it?”

He smiled softly at me.

“Indeed. Think of it as a variation of Corvo’s Blink.” He cupped my elbow, then traced cold fingers down my arm. I shivered at his touch, his fingers threading through mine as he lifted my sorcery hand to demonstrate. “It’s similar, but works differently. Think of your power as a grappling hook, pulling you towards your target along an arcane tether. It’s an arch, not a straight line.”

“A curve?” I breathed.

“Yes.” He shifted behind my shoulder, whispering into my ear. “Like this.”

He molded my hand in his, bending me to his purpose. Whereas Corvo made a fist to use his Blink, I was made to hold a different pose, one that felt more elegant. Even feminine. Maybe wicked, too, I
thought, suppressing a grin.

I felt like a witch.

My fingers were bent at the knuckles, facing downwards like a long-legged spider. My wrist was bent sharply, reminding me of a single act I had done a thousand times before: offering the back of my hand for another to kiss in allegiance to the Crown.

“Then what?” I whispered feverishly. I wondered if Father had felt this same excitement upon first trying out his newfound powers.

“Look for a target and pull yourself towards it,” the Outsider instructed, stepping away to look at me like I was a piece of art he was critiquing. I felt like a sculpture, standing utterly still, afraid to move. Only my quickened breath revealed the lie. We stood on a clay-tiled rooftop, surrounded by mists and endless sky, and farther still, the Void careened around us, constantly changing form. One or two whales in the gloom seemed to be spectating from afar.

“Do you see the tether?” the Outsider inquired, circling me with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Tether?” I repeated uncertainly.

“Try the top of a chimney stack,” he said, patiently. “Your mind pinpoints the target and your will casts the spell. There is no trick to it. Only instinct.”

I thought of Rosemary, her sweet voice echoing in my mind. ‘When I called my magic, the need of it burning in my heart, it just... came to me. Does that make sense, Your Highness?’

I directed my gaze to a lonely chimney in the distance. The Outsider had made several to rise from nothing, forming them at will in the Void. I aligned my sorcery hand towards it, thinking I might like to go there. A thread of magic appeared, extending from my hand to snake across the distance in shimmering purple waves. At the ‘end’ of this thread, I saw the target snagged, the edge of the chimney illuminated in what looked like rising purple flames, but when I looked away and moved my hand, the end travelled to find another target: more often the ground, but sometimes the edge of a different chimney.

“Oh!” I exclaimed, fascinated. “And how do I—ohh!!”

The arcane tether catapulted me towards the chimney at a dizzying speed as time slowed around me, but I landed softly at the edge as though I’d just taken a single, small step to reach it. How peculiar! The purple tether disintegrated into black whispery waves, the magic spent.

“It doesn’t feel like Corvo’s Blink,” I remarked, pressing a hand to my lurching stomach. I had Blinked with him before—terrifying moments when he’d saved me from various assassination attempts throughout my life, grabbing me around the waist or taking hold of my hand to physically remove me from harm. Corvo’s Blink had felt like a cold wind sinking into my bones, encasing me in blue light. Rosemary’s teleportation spell was similar, but it felt darker, warmer, and... red, I decided, thinking back on it.

“Do the colors mean something?” I asked.

The Outsider Blinked to stand below me in a swirl of black rain. I stared down at him from my heightened perch, wondering if Blink was the wrong word to describe his teleportation.

And his color was definitely black.
“Your Far Reach is purple—purple for royalty, of course,” he said, then after a pause, “Empress.”

His tone held playful sarcasm. The sting was still there, but it felt inviting. He wants me to bite back, I thought, wide-eyed.

“Actually,” I said, lifting my chin imperiously, “my royal color is blue.” The royal emblem of House Kaldwin depicted two majestic golden swans over blue waters, a crown between them. I’d always thought it looked like an ancient amphora, its handles being the swans’ necks on either side.

He smiled at me, his pale face reflecting the Void like moonlight. “Blue is for night skies and the endless Ocean, for the serenity of still waters and the solitude of the soul. Purple is for royalty, for magic and divine mystery, and for the Sage of the Diviners.”

“Sage of the Diviners?”

“A Pandyssian flower,” he said distractedly, his black eyes flickering. “It has purple petals—very toxic—but when crushed and diluted with milk, it can be safely ingested. It produces visions in fact. My… my mother had used it.”

I sucked in a breath. “Your… mother?”

“She was a Seer,” he said flatly. “Long ago.”

He’s opening up to me. I said to let me in and he’s trying, I thought with growing hope.

“You were once human,” I prompted. “You… died.”

“Yes.”

When he gave nothing more, I pushed. “And?”

“And at my death, I became the Outsider, like every Outsider before me, each a sacrifice.” His revelation came with a hollow face. His voice crept slowly—as if he’d rarely revealed such things before and it felt strange on his tongue. “Delilah is disrupting the divine cycle. She was not chosen to be the next Outsider.”

The next Outsider?


I stared at him, and he stared at me. I could see he did not want to continue down this line of questioning.

“You’re their chosen voice,” I said, trying a different avenue. When he simply nodded, I furrowed my brow. I knelt, sitting at the edge of the chimney with my legs dangling over the side. I asked, “But if you died long ago, how can you become human again?”

“The next Outsider?”

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“Rebirth,” he said, his gaze drifting. “When the end has come, some Outsiders choose to return to the Hungry Cosmos, to die, but others choose to return to world of the living. The whales gift them the breath of life and sculpt their bones from the salt of the Deep. They become human again.”

I was speechless, wondering how many Outsiders had come before him and how many had chosen death over rebirth. After godhood, what fulfillment could be gained from living as a mere mortal again? Humanity must seem disappointing to a god, I thought. It’s a wonder he finds anyone interesting at all.
“Emily,” the Outsider said, breaking my reverie.

“Yes?”

I felt the Void shift. The chimney I rested upon began to sink and the rooftops began to rise. As we drew closer together in height, he reached for me. I slipped from the chimney’s edge, falling to stand between his arms.

“I want you to understand. The end is coming for me very soon. I can feel it.”

He placed firm hands on my shoulders as if trying to comfort me. I felt a stab of fear, the unknown barreling towards me. What will happen to him? What will happen to me? Will I be able to rely on my sorcery without him?

One hand moved from my shoulder to my cheek, warmth heavy against my skin. “Yes,” he answered, reading my thoughts. “Your powers will continue to grow, but you must find ancient runes to strengthen your connection to the Void.”

Runes were like bone charms. They bore the Outsider’s marks, the language of the Void etched into whale bone. Corvo had shown me ones before; he would use them to magnify his sorcery. They’d been more plentiful during the Rat Plague, but over the years he’d sometimes find them washed up along the shore near our abandoned waterfront, sticky with mud.

The Abbey considered them heretical and arrested people for trading them on the black markets.

“Stay out of Delilah’s clutches—until you are ready to face her,” the Outsider warned. “She has stolen Corvo’s Mark. She can do the same to you, if you let her.”

“I won’t.” I swallowed hard. “When… how much time do you have… before the end? Is this because… because she kissed you?”

“Yes,” he said.

He released me and turned his back, staring into the Void. My eyes wandered over the curve of his skull, the blue-black of his hair and the pale tips of his ears, poking out like two mushrooms in a field of grass. He was a well-shaped man with a strong back and slender bones. He must have died young, I thought, in the prime of his youth.

At last, he spoke, his back still turned to me. “Delilah has found the Genesis Altar, that ancient and secret corner of the Void where I first became the Outsider four thousand years ago. It is the source of my power, and my doom.”

He turned to face me, his black eyes churning like twin maelstroms.

“When the end comes for me, I will not choose death. I will not return to the Hungry Cosmos. I had always meant to at the end of my cycle, but Delilah has taken that which does not belong to her. She was not chosen. I will be reborn, and one day, I will be chosen again. The divine cycle will be restored.”

I let his words wash over me. Like a storm, it blew me to the four corners before I felt settled enough to respond.

“We have that in common,” I said, carefully. “We will take back that which is ours.”

He nodded at me, and in the next instant, a mighty gulf rose up to separate us, the rooftops breaking
in two.

Through the mist, the Outsider called out to me, “Try Pulling me towards you, Emily.”

“What?!”

For an instant, I had feared Delilah had somehow ripped us apart, but even with the great chasm between us, I saw that he was calm.

“It’s another facet of your power,” he called, amusement carried across the chasm. “The arcane tether works in the opposite direction, pulling objects towards you, but at greater mana cost. You may find it useful. Try it.”

“You want me to Pull you?”

I felt nervous.

How was it even possible? The Outsider didn’t seem fully corporal; our bodies could touch, but I wasn’t entirely convinced he was real. Was he a spirit or a physical part of the Void? Was the Void an actual place or a dream world?

“I’ll hold myself together for you,” he said, that dry humor still intact. “Do it.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Bloody mindreading! He’s amused that I’m not even sure he’s real. I took the pose he had taught me, bending my sorcery hand into a crouching spider and aimed at him. The arcane tether’s purple tendrils snagged on his body in brilliant illumination.

I Pulled. He flew towards me like a slingshot. I gasped, not expecting the speed of the spring-back.

I caught him clumsily, the arcane tether disintegrating into black shadows. We fell against each other, and whether I was holding him, or he was holding me, I couldn’t tell. We were suddenly close, like dancers pressed up against each other, our arms around each other.

“Corvo’s Blink can’t do that,” I gasped, stating the obvious, not knowing what else to say. A moment ago, he had been so far away, but now he was so close. His face hovered near mine, bruised lips dangerously close.

I heard his breath catch.

“No,” he said, holding me tight, his hands around me. “I crafted Far Reach just for you, and made it a reflection of what I see when I look at you.”

I blinked softly at him. “When you look at me….”

“You tether your heart to things in this world you believe define you—your throne, your father, your precious Wyman. You fling yourself at them like you’re afraid to know who you are without them.”

“What?! I fling myself at Wyman?” I roughly pushed out of his arms and scowled at him, deeply offended. “What, like a cheap whore?”

“Your words, not mine, Empress.”

“I don’t understand what’s so negative about tethering my heart. I’m not afraid to love people in this life, and yes, even my throne—my people, the good people of the Empire.”

“You imply negativity. I am simply opening your eyes to the truth.”
“You and your bloody truth! What, like Ramsey being my fault was somehow the truth?!”

“Yes.”

“I see things differently.”

“I see more. I am the Outsider,” he said, stepping closer, his black eyes intense. I was angry. I was stubborn. I was horribly naïve. All this I saw reflected in his eyes. “I can’t help but wonder, Emily… What happens when the tether snaps? You’ve lost your throne. You’ve lost your father to madness. What happens when you lose Wyman, too?”

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Did Delilah—” I gasped, unable to even complete the thought. “No! Wyman’s alive. He has to be!”

If the witch knew what Wyman was to me, he’d make a valuable hostage. She wouldn’t kill him!

“Don’t worry, Empress. Your paramour is safely bound for Morley,” he said, sounding annoyed. “And it’s not Delilah that has severed that tether; it’s you.”

“What?”

“Do you remember how you once felt about Rosemary?” he asked, circling me like a shark. “You invited her into your bed. Into your heart. But when you became intimate with Wyman, you cast her aside. You wanted Wyman’s touch and no other.”

“Get to the point.”

“Now you want me, not him,” the Outsider said, catching me in the black trap that was his eyes. I felt heat pour into my cheeks. “Wyman has no chance.” He pulled me into his arms. “He never did, not after you saw me. And I saw you.”

“Wyman is a good man.”

I was trembling. I dropped my gaze from his black eyes to his sensual lips, all bruised and purple and black. *Forgive me, Wyman,* I thought. *I cannot look away.*

“What interests me,” the Outsider said in a husky whisper, “is who you are without your throne…” He pulled me closer. “Without your father…” He lowered his head, tilting towards my mouth. I held my breath as I saw his eyes close. “Without Wyman…” Then he kissed me.

I shuddered at the contact, my eyes shuttering like I was slipping into a dream. He felt warm and tender and when his lips parted, breaking apart my control, I tasted the ocean, the salt and brine of crashing waves against my tongue.

When the kiss began to deepen, my heart about to burst, I flattened my hands against his chest and pushed him away. Our lips pulled apart with a wet, sucking sound, my chest heaving with gasping breaths.

“And who are you without your tethers?” I shot like an arrow, piercing the drunken look on his pale face. He wanted to keep kissing me, and I wanted to keep kissing him, but I was hurt that his accusations always seemed to go one way. “You want to open my eyes? What about you? Who are you without your precious Void to reign over? Without your Outsider powers? Who will you be when you wake up a new man? A human?”
I’d drawn blood. I could see it on his face. His dark eyes wavered, his mouth thinly stretched into a grimace.

“You’re ready,” he said emotionlessly. “Use *Far Reach* to reach the Black Pony Pub, and be careful, Empress. Delilah knows you have escaped. She will be looking for you.”

I regretted my harsh words. “Wait! Are you… when will I see you again?”

His dark eyes flashed. “When I’m a *new man*,” he said, taunting me with my own words.

But his eyes became sorrowful as he looked beyond me to the endless gloom. “Look for me in the waves,” he whispered. “The whales will bring me to you.”

In a swirl of black magic, he sent me back to the world of the living. The Void fell away and I was alone.

I stared at the Outsider’s Mark on the back of my hand, then pressed it to my lips, closing my eyes. Tears welled at the edges. I sniffed, smiling up at the cloudy sky, heavy with the promise of rain. “You want to know who I am without my tethers?” I whispered, half-laughing, half-sobbing. “I’m as lost as you.”

Chapter End Notes

In Dishonored lore, the Outsider was an orphan. The brief comment about his mother being a Seer will be explained later...
I picked my way from rooftop to rooftop. The air was thick with the scent of rain. *A storm is coming,* I thought.

Distant screams carried on the wind. The Throne Room Massacre was just the beginning, I knew. Delilah and the Duke would move quickly to secure Dunwall, slaughtering anyone openly loyal to me. For their sakes, I hoped my allies would go into hiding and await my return. Fighting now—so unprepared and unorganized—was certain death.

As I descended, the sounds of the street became louder. I could hear foot traffic below, and the mechanical roar of moving trains. I followed the rooftops as far as I could, jumping down, down, down… until I came upon a watchtower overlooking the servants’ entrance to the palace meant for deliveries and other unofficial business. Maze-like streets spilled out from the palace gates, crowded with tall, stately buildings both commercial and residential.

Years of escaping the Tower meant I knew the Palace District like the back of my hand. The Black Pony Pub was not far, and with *Far Reach* within my grasp, I was optimistic I might not even need to touch the streets to get there!

“The rooftops are mine,” I whispered into the wind.

I breathed in, soaking up Dunwall like it was a part of me. The rooftops had always been my escape—now more than ever. Wyman had tenderly written: ‘*Take care, my daring Emily, don’t go falling from a rooftop,*’ but what he didn’t know was how safe the rooftops made me feel.

I dropped to a crouch at the stone wall dividing one level of the watchtower from another. I peered over the edge, spying a single guard below. His face was ashen, his Watch uniform spattered with blood. An airborne takedown came to mind—and with it, fond memories of my father laughing at the waterfront when I’d tried to pounce on him unawares, but promptly missed and went sailing over his head, shrieking like a banshee.

But Corvo had been a patient teacher, pushing me to try again until I felt comfortable approaching an enemy from any angle, especially above. The force of gravity lent strength to my attack, a boon when I was often physically smaller and weaker than my mostly-male targets.

Like a cat, I climbed on top of the wall, quiet and quick, and prepared to launch myself at the guard, but I hesitated as I traced the slump of his shoulders, his face outlined in grief.

And guilt.

I watched him hang his head, his brawny arms braced against a desk. When his shoulders began to shake, I knew he was crying.

I jumped down behind him, landing hard. The sound snapped him like a whip; he spun towards me, his eyes widening in alarm. He knew who I was and what I was doing—I saw it on his face as we stared at one another in silence.
His eyes begged forgiveness. *How many are like him?* Caught up in treason, brother against brother—I knew it was like that in the Watch. Captain Mayhew had nurtured comradery in her ranks. Ramsey would have ordered his men to slay anyone loyal to Alexi, to *me*. How else to take the city?

This man had blood on his hands.

He seemed to come to a decision. He ripped the badge of the City Watch from his arm and took off his helmet. “Escape quickly, Your Majesty, before it’s too late.”

He turned his back in surrender; he would do nothing to stop me. *It’s too late for him. Whether inside Coldridge Prison or not, remorse will eat him alive.*

I left him alone, edging towards the crenellated overlook. This part of the watchtower gave me a bird’s eye view of Horseferry Boulevard, cobbled streets now choked with shouting guards. They saddled up to the officer in charge, a subdued murmur rolling over their ranks as they realized something was wrong.

“Listen up! I have bad news,” the officer announced. “Ramsey’s missing.”

*Damn right, he’s missing.* The traitorous dog was turned to stone in my safe room.

Cries of distress answered him, and angry demands for an explanation, but the officer just continued, “The former Empress and her Royal Protector have apparently fled the Tower. We’ve got to find them. That’s it. You’ve got your orders. Spread out and find the fugitives!”

He turned away, but then looked back and said, in a quieter tone of voice, “We’re in this with the Duke of Serkonos, sink or swim. There’s no way to turn back now.”

The corpses in the streets underlined *why*. Not just guards, but civilians, too. Men, women, and children. Their blood painted the cobbles.

The guards scattered, drawing their swords, but one tarried near the officer. “Sir, what about the Blind Sister? She’s still tied up in the armory,” he said, scratching the back of his head. “Should we inform—”

“No, the Kaldwin girl is our priority now, and her murderous father, the Crown Killer. Forget about the red bitch for now. We’ll deal with her later.”

“As you say, sir,” he said, nodding and hurrying away. I watched him disappear into the old armory, a thick steel door slamming behind him.

*They captured a Blind Sister?*

High Overseer Khulan had tried to introduce her to me in the throne room—she was Sister Maria Somonos of Cullero, daughter of Sister Dalia Somonos, if I recalled correctly—but Corvo had stormed me away before I could trade one word with her.

It was the Outsider’s assertion that she had nefarious purposes for being in the palace to begin with. She had foreseen Delilah’s coup, and so intended to use the resulting mayhem to infiltrate the palace, searching for signs of corruption. She was convinced my father and I were hiding something heretical. *That* made her dangerous. I needed the Abbey of the Everyman on my side, including its strange and reclusive Blind Sisters of the Oracular Order.

Freeing her might turn her to my side.
Or at least give me the chance to see if she found anything damaging before getting caught. I doubted my father would keep runes or bone charms hidden in the palace, but I had to be sure. When it came to heresy, such things were life and death. I didn’t need my father and I hunted down by religious fanatics in addition to Delilah and the Duke!

Corvo was always careful, I reassured myself. If he had runes to hide, he’d do it at the waterfront, not the palace. And using the runes to magnify his sorcery destroyed the ancient relics in the process. There would be nothing left to find.

I stared at the armory in indecision.

Khulan would want me to save her, if I could. I hoped he had made it out of the city. When Rosemary and I had searched the dead in the throne room, he’d been noticeably absent. Somehow, the High Overseer had escaped Delilah’s initial assault.

I had to believe he was still loyal to me. That bending the knee to an outright witch would be grossly sacrilegious to him. He’ll fight for me. I could see it no other way.

“To the armory, then,” I whispered.

The stone building was flat and low; I could see a trapdoor on the roof. I posed my sorcery hand, aligning the arcane tether, then flung myself across the gap. A split second of terrifying speed, my stomach lurching, and then all was still. I found myself crouched beside the trapdoor.

“Well, that’s useful. Thank you, Outsider,” I said, glancing at my hand—but the Mark posed a problem, I realized. I had nothing to hide it, no black leather wrappings like Corvo.

I needed to keep my magic a secret, now that I was out into the world. What was I going to do? The trapdoor made a grating sound as I pried it loose from its stone tomb.

 Damn thing hasn't been opened in ages. I unhitched my crossbow and aimed it down the opening. A curious face peered up at me a moment later. I could barely see his eyes beneath his helmet’s brim. His mouth fell open to see me.

“Hello,” I said, shooting him with a sleep dart. The needle stuck in his shoulder. “How many of you are down there?”

“What the—” he gasped, plucking out the emptied needle.

I deftly lowered myself through the opening, landing softly beside him. With a quick glance around me, I sighed, “Just you, I see. Where’s the Blind Sister?”

“Don’t m-move!” he slurred, clumsily reaching for his sword. The dart was working through his system. As he swayed on his feet, I grabbed him, aligning his body to fall against a chair. He slumped forward, his face hitting the desk. In the next instant, he was snoring.

I turned in circles. Is she not here? Careful of the windows—hordes of guards were outside on the streets—I searched the old armory. It was a small space, really. One door led out to Horseferry Boulevard and another to Coldridge Canal. I found a dirty rag, at least, on one of the shelves. I wrapped it around my hand, hiding the Mark of the Outsider.

The rag felt like the dirtiest thing I had ever worn, but it would suffice. Looking down, I noticed a large blue metal container on the ground, its lid in a locked position. It was hard not noticing it, but I didn’t actually think the guards would be cruel enough to squeeze a woman inside.
I was wrong. They were.

Inside, the Blind Sister was curled up in a fetal position, her blood-red dress wrinkled and torn. Someone had taken her long silver hair and looped it around her head several times, gagging her.

But her eerie blindfold they had kept intact, a thick red ribbon across her eyes. I didn’t have to see her eyes to know she was terrified. I pulled at the silvery strands caught in her mouth until she gasped, sucking in air.

“It’s okay, Sister Maria. I’m getting you out of here,” I said, helping her sit up in the container. I reached behind her back and loosened the ties around her wrists, freeing her.

She flinched at my touch, blindly turning her head towards my voice. “Empress Emily Kaldwin.” Her voice shook. “You’re alive?”

I leaned back sharply, staring at her red ribbon, right where her eyes should be. Can she see me? Or had she merely recognized my voice?

“Yes…” I said uneasily. “I’ve come to rescue you.”

“But there was so much blood,” she mumbled absently. “I saw. So much blood.”

The fact that she had foreseen the Throne Room Massacre and yet had done nothing to warn anyone—not even Khulan, it seemed—did not sit well with me. I clenched my fists, seething in anger, but I kept it bottled tight. I wasn’t here to judge her.

“You’re hurt,” I said through clenched teeth. “Let me help you stand up.”

“You’re not here to help me,” she said, awkwardly balancing on hands and knees. She inelegantly got her legs out from under her and stood, tripping on her long red dress. I slowly rose, matching her progress.

“I am,” I insisted. “It’s not safe for you here. Delilah—the witch—she’ll kill you. She has no love for the Abbey or its Sisters. You must escape and rejoin the High Overseer. I believe Khulan made it out alive, but I’m not sure.”

“You’re not here to help me,” she said again. She straightened her hair. It fell in long silvery waves against her back. “You’ve come to see if I completed my mission. If I found proof of your father’s corruption.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. This was a bad idea, I thought, staring at her eerie red ribbon.

“Did they hit you on the head, Sister Maria? It’s Delilah you should be suspicious of. Ask Khulan. He saw with his own eyes what happened inside the throne room. Delilah is a witch, an agent of the Outsider.”

“And what are you?”

“Your rightful Empress.”

I swear I could feel the Mark burning brightly, as if there was neither dirty rag nor blindfold obscuring it from her eyes.

“And as your rightful Empress, I will end Delilah’s reign with the Abbey’s support.”

The Blind Sister stepped aggressively forward and hissed, “A heretic fighting a heretic. We’re all
Doomed.”

Dumbstruck, I just stared at her. She cocked her head at me, her plump red lips twisting into a self-satisfied smirk. “I thought my mission failed,” she said. “Until now.”

She lashed out, snatching my sorcery hand and tearing away the dirty rag. “Unhand me!” I said, startled by her exacting grip. I tried to pull back, but she held on tight.

“I see,” she whispered fiercely.

She threw me back, shoving my hand away as though it disgusted her. “But you’re right about one thing, Empress. Delilah has no love for the Abbey. She would burn it to the ground if she could, and dance in the flames…”

There was a catch in her voice—something disbelieving and reluctant—as she added, “But I… I don’t see that hatred in you.”

I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself. *I can still salvage this,* I thought. *In her eyes, I need only be the best of two bad choices.* I firmly said in my best Parliament voice, “The Abbey is a faithful ally of the Crown. It always has been.”

The Blind Sister turned her head as if glancing at the door leading out to Coldridge Canal. She seemed suddenly hesitant as she faced me again.

We stood in silence, considering one another.

“I see my escape,” she finally said. “I… owe you for that.”

*A begrudging confession.* I said, “Then repay me by helping Khulan. Shore up the Abbey against Delilah.”

“I will repay you, Empress Emily Kaldwin, with a prophecy.”

I gaped in surprise as she lifted her hands to untie the thick red ribbon. She revealed to me her eyes, two orbs of brilliance, radiating light. Ironically, they reminded me of the Outsider’s eyes. Both lacked pupils, but where his were fully black, hers were fully white.

Dread wormed up my spine as she stared at me with those glowing eyes. I feared her prophecy. But I couldn’t look away. She was a vision of beauty. Her light-filled eyes and her silvery hair… Her red dress and her red lips… I felt captivated, drowning in her knowing eyes.

“I see… I see the death of the Outsider,” she whispered.

*Nothing scary about that,* I thought, trying to stay calm. The kiss of death upon the Outsider’s lips… I already knew Delilah had found a way to kill him—but I believed the Outsider would be reborn. ‘Look for me in the waves,’ he’d said. ‘The whales will bring me to you.’

But her prophecy continued, a dark whisper from her lips. “He will die before this very night is through.”

I swallowed hard. ‘Very soon,’ the Outsider had said. I wondered if the Blind Sister would rejoice.

She spoke again. “I see… I see you have escaped rape the first time. You will not the second.”

I battled to contain my reaction. I wanted to scratch out her eyes, to make them bleed and pour and
cry rivers of red, but I was frozen in shock. Lord Cosimo had tried to rape me in my study. *How could she know that?* All this oracle nonsense was hard to believe, but now… What if it was a true prophecy? *Who* was going to rape me? I couldn’t believe it.

“You’re lying,” I hissed, but the Blind Sister did not react—neither to my words nor her own, painful utterances delivered so emotionlessly.

“And I see… I see a two-faced witch. One loves you. The other does not. Both will be there at the end.”

*Rosemary* slammed into my thoughts like a punch to the gut. Who else? The Outsider had said she’d been cursed by witches to forget who she once was. I didn’t have to guess which side of her did not love me—the side she had forgotten. Her dark past, hidden by sorcery.

The Blind Sister crumbled.

I trembled like I had been torn in two. All I could do was watch the Blind Sister collect herself from the floor. She calmly replaced her thick red ribbon, drawing it across her eyes. She opened the door to Coldridge Canal, pausing at the threshold.

“I will not see you again,” she said, then slipped away, her long red dress floating around her ankles.

I felt numb. I told myself to move.

I picked up the dirty rag from the floor and wrapped it around my hand, staring at the Mark until it disappeared beneath the folds. The Blind Sister had made her escape; now I must make mine. I couldn’t just wallow in misery and fear at her prophecy. *I will ask the Outsider if it’s true,* I thought.

“When I see him again,” I whispered. “*I will* see him again.”

I left the way I came: through the trap door. From the armory roof, I glanced down Horseferry Boulevard. Guards were mulling about, thick as molasses. It was too dangerous to take the streets. I tried to align my arcane tether along a nearby rooftop (above Doctor Galvani’s lab—I hoped the old man was out of town), but the tether was too short. I couldn’t reach it.

“Damnit, Emily, stop shaking,” I barked in frustration. No matter how hard I tried to push away the Blind Sister’s prophecy from my thoughts, it remained—the sight of her glowing eyes blazing into me. I forced myself to think of my father instead, his dark eyes watching me from behind our crossed swords.

*‘Focus, Emily,’* I heard my father’s voice, an echo of happier times. *‘Live inside the moment. Let your focus be as keen as your blade.’*

I took a deep breath and steadied my hand, but still the arcane tether failed to snag, its long purple threads whispery in the dying light. The clouds had darkened, and I heard the deep rumble of thunder in the distance. *The bushes, then.* I flung myself from the old armory towards a thick green patch hugging the cobbled street. I landed softly, the bushes trembling at my passing.

“What was that?! a guard exclaimed, nearly jumping out of his boots. “I thought I saw something.”

I held my breath, ducking for cover. My heart raced as I listened. His friend hiccupped beside him. “Ehh… just a rat, you taffer.”

“If it was a rat, it was a big one,” he replied, walking on, their footsteps fading.
I let out my breath, shaking my head. I used *Far Reach* again, tethering to a rocky ledge. A guard was patrolling it, but his back was turned as I quickly snuck into a stone-walled underpass, crosscutting several stairwell apartment entrances above me. I followed it south until it came to an end with a metal dumpster and some wooden boxes stacked up along a half wall.

I could hear the guards above me, their boots heavy against the cobbles as they patrolled the streets. I heard a gunshot pop in the distance and a woman screaming. I scanned above me, eager to escape the lower ground. *I'll be much safer if I could just find…*

*There.* My arcane tether caught a broad copper pipe two stories up, stretching along a back alley to my right. Purple threads faded to black as I flung towards it, landing in a crouching position. I sighed in relief, looking down at all the oblivious guards. *Easy now. Not out of the woods yet.*

I followed the copper pipe into the alley, shadows deepening. A metal catwalk offered a discrete entrance into Boyle Industries. It was a household name, representing a conglomerate of wealthy investors who dabbled in art patronage, as well as politics (such as the Anti-Rationing Club) on behalf of the aristocracy. The actual building contained a small art gallery for prospective investors.

I knew *who* was inside.

Ichabod Boyle.

‘Strung up by his entrails’ as Lord Cosimo so elegantly put it at the Sunset Regalia. The sickening churn in my belly told me I had no desire poking around a gruesome murder scene. *But it might help me find the Crown Killer.* Delilah and the Duke had used the sadistic butcher to orchestrate my downfall. I had to see where the clues led. Karnaca, Father believed. But could I learn anything more?

I dismounted the copper pipe and climbed leg-over-leg over the catwalk railing. Crouching at the door, I peered through the keyhole, spying a single guard leaning against a bannister. His back was turned. I quietly slipped inside, not bothering to unhitch my crossbow. *Why waste a dart when a chokehold would suffice?* He fell unconscious in four seconds. I leaned over the bannister, spotting two more guards below—which I had already heard their voices as soon as I’d came in. The art gallery was large with marble-tiled floors; it gave sound the propensity to echo.

And I saw *him.*

Ichabod Boyle’s bloodied corpse was nailed to a large easel like a morbid art exhibit, an enormous floodlight illuminating the Crown Killer’s handiwork. Seeing it in person only solidified my belief that the Crown Killer must be brought to justice. He must pay for this most heinous of crimes.

Ichabod was no friend of mine, but neither did he deserve to be butchered in his own art gallery.

I spotted a piece of paper beside him. Curious, I tried *Pulling* it towards me, extending purple threads around it like grasping arcane fingers. I waited until the guards’ backs were turned, then flung it towards me. The paper flew like the wind, flapping wildly before I could catch it.

“What was that?” a guard asked, spooked.

I moved away from the bannister, sinking into the shadows.

“I don’t know. Go check it out.”

I scanned the paper. It was an eyewitness statement. A drunk eyewitness, given the *couple of ales*
purported, and one with voyeuristic tendencies. He thought he’d heard ‘moaning and furniture creaking’—what, was the Crown Killer aroused by slaughtering people?—and had tried to take a peek through a window. He saw ‘someone wearing a hooded cloak’ and that ‘he was eating up Mr. Boyle’s guts.’

Unpleasant business. I discarded the letter. Nothing new. Nothing that my father hadn’t already learned through his Eyes. As Royal Spymaster and Royal Protector, he’d been hunting the Crown Killer for months. How was I to succeed where he had failed?

I unhitched my crossbow and toed the unconscious guard on the floor. I didn’t want his body found; it would raise alarms. I dragged his body between two desks and covered him with an old blanket, the kind that artists used to drape over paintings to keep them dust-free while in storage.

I wasn’t sure if the guard would mosey on up to the second level, but I had to be ready. Past a glass door, I discovered a stairwell, a huge wall of books, and a writing desk. I took up a position so that anyone climbing the stairs would have their back turned to me.

I heard a man grumbling to himself. The guard had his sword drawn as he took the stairs. I shot a sleep dart into his upper back, the needle sinking through his Watch uniform.

He slapped at the back of his neck as though the sting of the dart had felt like a nasty bug bite. He shivered, his back twitching.

“This place gives me the creeps. Why do I always get the worst guard duty? Watching a corpse. What if the Crown Killer comes back?”

At the top of the stairs, he stumbled, his knees buckling. He tried to catch himself on the bannister, but he fell to the carpet, snoring. I’d have to hide his body, too.

Distracted, I turned my attention to the desk. A prolific writer, it seemed. The typewriter had mounds of papers around it. Curious. The bold writing was illuminated by a wall of large windows overlooking the street, one pane cracked open. I could hear running footsteps below.

And the streetspeaker.

It blared over the city, a static crackling behind the human voice. “Attention Dunwall citizens. Today on this sad anniversary, we mourn the tragic slaying of our beloved Empress Jessamine…”

I paused, listening to the shouting guard below. “Get that thing turned off! … Attention Dunwall citizens! As of today, Delilah Kaldwin is our new Empress. All hail Delilah, first of her name! … Furthermore, Corvo Attano and Emily Kaldwin are now wanted for treason. Any of you found harboring the traitors will be fined and arrested! … People of Dunwall, stay in your homes! You’re advised to stay indoors during this time of unrest!”

People of Dunwall, I thought, closing my eyes in grief. I’m sorry.

I searched the desk for more. It felt strange rifling through someone’s private correspondence, but the entire building was a murder scene, was it not?

What I found… I couldn’t believe it; I had to read it twice. And quickly. The guard below would soon wonder where his friend had disappeared off to. I had to hide his body, but I couldn’t move… My eyes fixated…

Letters of treason.
Outright talk about ‘turning public opinion against Emily Kaldwin’ by pushing editorials for the Dunwall Courier. I found, ‘Lady Brambly is calling hers BASTARD DAUGHTER, Nathan Bettenbridge is calling his PROSECUTION FOR CORVO ATTANO, and Boyle is writing, SHOULD PARLIAMENT RULE? A MODEST PROPOSAL…’

Propaganda. Lies. Anger sparked in my chest, a fiery hatred for Delilah and the Duke’s clever scheme. “Ignite dissent, then use the Crown Killer to murder my enemies, making me look guilty,” I growled, stuffing the treasonous letters into my coat.

I glared out the window. Across the street, the sign for the Dunwall Courier hung from the building’s facade. An invitation, if I ever saw one, I thought.

Revenge suited my mood.
I landed on the third-story balcony of the Dunwall Courier, the purple vestiges of *Far Reach* disintegrating behind me. The building proudly faced Horseferry Boulevard, making it one of the Palace District’s most recognizable addresses. The newspaper was highly lauded throughout the Empire, not just in the capital.

I was closer than ever to the Black Pony Pub—I could see its roof from where I stood—but I wasn’t ready to leave just yet.

*Unfinished business,* I thought. Paying a visit to the Dunwall Courier was long overdue. *I should have dealt with the paper sooner, long before Delilah’s coup.*

A soft, drizzling rain began to fall as I crossed the steel-railed balcony to a large glass door. It was locked. I pulled two silver pins from my hair and knelt, inspecting the lock. *Simple.* I picked it and entered the building, a rumble of thunder behind me as I closed the door.

It was quiet inside.

Organized chaos came to mind. The space was crowded with several wooden desks, loose papers and books everywhere. I saw inkpots and stamps, newspaper clippings and half-eaten apples, ashtrays and cigars. Scissors and twine were left on top of four-foot stacks of today’s edition, the edges crisp and clean. Older stacks rotted in the corners, the newspapers browned and wrinkled.

The space had a feeling of being recently occupied, like someone had just stepped out for a moment to get some fresh air. Delilah’s coup, however, told a different story. *Family men have run home to their wives and children,* I thought. Businesses and residences all over the city would be shuttering their windows and doors, locking tight for the riots to come. The only ones risking the streets would be looters and gangsters.

Without Ramsey, I wondered how long before Delilah and the Duke lost control of the City Watch. The city will descend into anarchy. *How easily we fall off the edge…*

To my left was a luxurious couch, and beyond a small private office for the editor-in-chief. The desk was large and elegant, something I’d easily see in the palace. Expensive, in other words. I rummaged through various letters, scanning for anything related to what I’d already found at Boyle Industries.

A bowl of apples caught my eye. I took a red one from the bowl, thinking of Wyman and his long hair, of threading my fingers through his fiery mane.

*My Morley Red.*
Sadness and guilt engulfed me.

Two days ago, I could have imagined myself married to the man, that our love would have been strong enough to withstand the objections from Parliament and every highborn toady with an outspoken opinion about his lowborn status.

But now…

Now, it was difficult to believe how much things had changed, and so quickly! Two days ago, I had been Empress. Two days ago, I had ne’er before seen the Outsider.

I put back the red apple, and instead picked a green one. I bit into the fruit, slowly chewing as I flipped through paper after papers. I had little appetite, but the sour taste helped me concentrate.

“Nothing,” I growled.

I tossed the apple’s core in a trash bin beside the desk. My gaze lingered, noticing a crumpled letter beneath the core. I fished it out, smoothing the wrinkles against my thigh.

It was old—dated nearly six weeks ago—but when I spotted the words ‘Crown Killer’ I caught my breath. I read, ‘Kent, Don’t take it personally, but I’m not publishing your story about clockwork soldiers down in Karnaca. I’m not questioning your sources or your writing, but some moonstruck maestro making marionettes in his basement isn’t exactly news.

I’ve done some research on this Kirin Jindosh fellow, and apparently he’s a laughingstock among his peers. He was driven out of the Academy of Natural Philosophy years ago, so he’s hardly a credible threat. Until one of his inventions actually kills someone, he’s not worthy of our ink.

You should focus on the Crown Killer instead. If the Imperial family really is ordering those murders, I want us to be the ones who expose it.’ It was signed, Simon, Editor-in-Chief.

“Well, Simon,” I said, “that moonstruck maestro has actually killed someone with his inventions. A whole lot of someones.”

The Duke of Serkonos had brought two of Kirin’s clockwork soldiers into my throne room, slaughtering my allies. It didn’t escape my notice that perhaps this Grand Inventor was far more dangerous than he seemed. He has clear ties to the Abele family, I thought as Lord Cosimo’s prosthetic feet also came to mind.

As for the mention of the Crown Killer in the letter… I was surprised to find how innocuous it all sounded, as if the Courier’s lead editor had every intention of finding out the truth instead of smearing my father’s name without proof.

Could it be I had misjudged?

Suddenly, I heard a door bang open, followed by disgruntled male voices. I dropped the letter and slid along the office wall to stay quiet and out of sight.

They had entered from the back. Two of them, from the sound of it.

My hand hovered over my crossbow. I had three sleep darts left.

“I’m not leaving until you print it, Printer,” a man spat, followed by what sounded like a vicious shove. Hands slapping furniture. A chair being dragged out.
“That’s not how the Courier works,” came the trembling reply. “You can’t expect me—”

“Enough mouth. Start typing. Special Edition. Empress Delilah Kaldwin, rightful heir to the throne, has taken power in Dunwall. The usurper, Emily Attano, and her murderous Protector have been arrested.”

His dictation dripped in smug authority.

“I’m not printing that. Get. Out.”

“Emily Attano, is it?” I growled under my breath. History is written by the victors, Callista Curnow once taught me.

I peeked the corner. The bully wore a City Watch uniform—not surprising. One of Ramsey’s men, I figured. He was brawny with muscular arms and a square jaw, his thin lips set in a sneer. In contrast, the threatened Courier man was thin and soft around the jaw, his lower lip quivering. He wore a stylish suit, but it looked dirty, as if he’d stumbled into a dark alley and found himself set upon by brutes.

His spectacles were broken; I could see the crack in the lens from where I crouched, watching from the shadows.

The guard had forced him into a chair, a menacing hand on his shoulder. “You have until tomorrow to print it,” he said. “You better get started, Simon.”

Simon, the Editor-in-Chief?!

He flinched as the guard picked up a typewriter and slammed it down in front of him, violently rattling the mechanical parts. The printer winced.

*The man cares more about his typewriter than his life,* I thought in bewilderment.

After a heavy pause, I heard typing, but it sounded half-hearted. The guard meandered away from the desk, picking up one of the many cigars strewn about. The office was littered with them, as if the Courier moonlighted as an upper class saloon.

The printer made a show of typing, but his eyes betrayed him. He watched the City Watchman like a cornered animal.

“Don’t make a pig’s ear out of this, Printer,” the guard muttered. He sniffed the cigar, long and slow, the roll pressed under his nose. He used a bloodied gold lighter from his pocket. Yes, gold. *Looter.* He took a drag, staring up at the ceiling as he blew out smoke. “It’s business as usual. No different than the time I gave you the scoop on the Crown Killer.”

*That* caught my attention.

The printer stopped typing, his face turning red. “Half of which couldn’t be verified,” he snapped, clearly against his better judgement. His eyes widened in fear as the guard stepped closer, glaring down at him.

“You got something to say, fancy pants?” he goaded, blowing smoke into Simon’s face.

The printer coughed, waving a hand in front of his face as the guard just laughed. Simon said, “There’s no proof that the sadistic butcher has any connection to the royal family. I never should have printed that name. Crown Killer is a lie!”
His angry bravado faltered as the guard snatched a handful of his hair and yanked his head back to the side, exposing his cheek to a fast approaching cigar, the tip smoldering.

I leapt forward out of my hiding place, but neither man saw me, absorbed as they were.

“Never took you for a fool, Simon,” the guard hissed into the man’s ear as the printer screamed in his grasp, the cigar tip burning his flesh. “Do I need to explain how this works?”

“Let him go!” I shouted, raising my crossbow. I was sickened by how quickly the guard had resorted to torture. I could have intervened sooner, but a part of me couldn’t help but feel as though Simon deserved such harsh treatment, as if his small role in Delilah’s coup meant I owed him nothing, not even human compassion.

*What kind of monstrous thinking is that, Emily? If the man had been coerced, how was that his fault?*

The guard’s eyes snapped to mine. He made an animalistic, growling noise, then shoved the whimpering man towards the desk. Simon smacked his head against the typewriter as he fell forward. I let loose a dart, but it missed, careening off the ashtray the guard had raised. *Good reflexes,* I thought, my eyes widening. I wasn’t dealing with an ordinary City Watchman. Ex-Navy, I guessed. He carried himself like a veteran soldier. He didn’t charge me mindlessly with sword raised. Instead his eyes charted a thorough course over my body and face, dawning with recognition.

He grabbed the printer from behind, withdrawing a concealed dagger and putting it to Simon’s throat.

“Surrender to arrest or he dies,” he said. “That is what you care about, isn’t it, Your Royal Highness? The precious lives of your loyal citizens? Hu-huh.”

His laugh was mocking.

“Loyal?” I said with a sarcastic laugh of my own. “I can’t say the Dunwall Courier has been especially loyal. It’s been a thorn in my side I’d rather pluck out.”

After it had accused my father of being the Crown Killer, I’d wanted to feed the paper to the flames, to watch the entire edifice burn in revenge for the lies the Dunwall Courier had planted in the hearts of my citizens…

*But how can I pin that all on Simon?* I wondered, sparing a glance for the terrified man beneath the dagger.

“Forgive me, my Empress!” Simon cried. “I allowed myself to be coerced.”

“Shut up, Printer,” the guard snapped, pressing the flat of his dagger deeper against his throat. “The people of Bristol have a new Empress, and in the morning, they’ll have to find a new printer, too.”

*He’s going to do it,* I realized. *He’s going to slit the man’s throat right in front of me.*

I lashed out with my magic, wrapping my arcane tether around the dagger. It flung towards me in a flurry of purple light and flashing silver, the dagger flipping end over end until it landed seamlessly in my hand.

“ Outsider’s crooked cock!” the guard swore, unsheathing his long sword and pointing it at me.
The tip wavered. He looked shocked and appalled, but I had no time to second guess my decision to use my powers in front of him. His eyes hardened and his hand stilled. He held the sword with true aim, at my heart. “You should know I’ve killed a witch before,” he said, low and menacing. “I caught her down by the river, performing dark rituals over a cat’s corpse.” “I’m not a witch,” I said.

A heretic fighting a heretic, filled my ears, the Blind Sister’s voice mocking my lie.

I threw the dagger at his sword arm—to disable, not kill. The point sunk into the bulging meat of his bicep, but he pulled the dagger out and grinned like a maniac. I exchanged my crossbow for my sword as he lunged at me, his greater reach slicing into my defending arc with alarming ease.

He hissed, “I cut out the witch’s eyes and threw her into the river, but you… you I’ll just deliver to the new Empress.”

I parried his strikes, our swords flashing as we danced around a maze of desks and chairs. Papers went flying, shredded midair as they caught in the path of his angry swings. Simon scrambled for cover, cowering beneath the desk.

“Empress Delilah will make me Captain of the City Watch when I throw your corpse at her feet!”

“The position is certainly open,” I said. “Ramsey didn’t get very far. I made sure of that.”

Confidence swelled in my blood. How easy to disarm him… It felt like child’s play, this magic the Outsider had given me. I caught his sword as it hurled towards me, wrapped in purple tendrils that faded to black as the magic expired.

It was exhilarating, this kind of power at my fingertips. Thus disarmed, the guard fell over himself backing away, fear raging in his eyes. I liked the feel of two swords in my hands. I was naturally left-handed, a fact I didn’t always get to enjoy.

I crisscrossed the swords in front of me in a furious dance of metal, an outright display of prowess. Intimidation cuts like a sword if you do it right, Corvo had once said. Make them piss their pants and run like hell, and your battle’s won. But I had caught the guard before he could run, locking my two swords in a cross beneath his chin. One slice and his neck would be severed.

“Run back to Delilah if you so wish,” I growled. “I will not stop you. But if you ever threaten Simon again, I will have your eyes and throw you into the river.”

I let him slowly back away, lowering my swords as I saw surrender surface in his eyes. “Cursed witch!” he snarled, barging out of the room. I watched him go in puzzlement.

Does he not know that Delilah is a witch?

Clearly, not many had met her in person. They’ve fallen for her lies, I thought, and somehow, I must bring them the truth.

Simon peeked out from beneath the desk, his eyes shining with fear. “Stand up,” I commanded with a heavy sigh, sheathing my father’s folding sword while discarding the guard’s, resting it tip-down against a desk. It felt good knowing I had Corvo’s blade to protect me. In a way, he will always be with me, no matter what, I thought. By teaching me how to protect myself, he’s protected me for life.

Simon trembled as he stood, grasping the desk as though it were a crutch. His cheek was badly burned, a single red crater that would leave a nasty scar.
“I will not hurt you,” I said, softening my voice. “Are you the Courier’s lead editor?”

He pushed his broken spectacles up his nose. “I meant what I said,” he nervously insisted. “Please forgive me, Your Majesty. It was irresponsible of me to invent the name ‘Crown Killer’ without evidence. I allowed myself to be coerced.”

“What’s done is done,” I said, “but you should know my father had nothing to do with the killings, nor did I order them.”

“I see that now. Forgive me, please! I was coerced!”

*He thinks I will slice off his head for treason*, I realized. Vengeful Empress, indeed. I couldn’t deny he’d been most likely coerced, given what I had just witnessed, but the fact remained I still felt incredible, vindictive anger about how easily Delilah had used the Dunwall Courier against me.

But his eyes were desperate, and I believed he felt truly remorseful.

“I forgive you, Simon. You weren’t the only one fooled.”

I moved to the couch and sat down in an attempt to diffuse the tension. Simon let out a long-winded sigh.

“But forgiveness is not my father’s specialty,” I said sharply, watching his eyes shoot towards my face. I crossed my legs, looking up at him expectantly.

“What can I do?” Simon asked, his face paling. “Allow me to prove my loyalty, Empress,” he pleaded, falling to his knees. “Please, I will do anything!”

“Your willingness to do anything for anyone that threatens you is part of the problem,” I said in annoyance. “Where is your integrity? You *are* the Dunwall Courier. Your loyalty should be to the people of the Empire! To be an objective voice of truth and reason.”

“I know,” he said, sounding miserable and shaking his head.

“Get up, Simon.”

“I will make it right,” he promised, rising to his feet. “The people of the Empire are loyal to you, and I’m going to publish an essay every day to make sure they remember it. Not one more criticism will be leveled against your Crown, Empress.”

“I appreciate the support, but that’s not what I meant. It’s *okay* to criticize the Crown, even foment a rebellion if that’s what the people need—in order to be heard. I will defend the people’s freedom of speech.”

He looked marveled. “You are your mother’s daughter.”

I smiled sadly. “Yes, and like Empress Jessamine, I want the people to feel they have a voice, even if I don’t always agree with what they have to say. The point is, the Courier is a way I can *listen*.”

I stood up, approaching him with stern eyes.

“But what’s *not* okay is falsely accusing my father, Corvo Attano, of being the Crown Killer. The Opinions section of your paper is *not* due process. If there is compelling evidence, he should be put to trial by the laws of our land, not convicted in a court of public opinion.”

Simon looked tearful. “I’m sorry. I was too hasty in condemning him.” And his condemnation had
cracked open the door for Delilah to ‘lawfully’ arrest my father and I for the Crown Killer murders.

“Yes,” I sighed. “And secondly, if you feel threatened to publish things against your will, you should have gone to the authorities.”

“But he was the Watch!” Simon cried, pointing at the door, the guard long gone. “I had no one else to turn to. And I heard Ramsey was killing people in the streets for defying him and his men. I was afraid.”

The Drapers Ward murders, I realized, my heart sinking.

“Which is why I forgive you, Simon,” I admitted uncomfortably. “The Watch was corrupted from the inside thanks to Ramsey. I… that was partly my fault, and I apologize.”

I thought of the Outsider, then. You were right. I should have taken more responsibility for his betrayal. The people of the Empire depended on me for their safety and security, to ensure law and order was there when they needed it the most.

“When I take back my throne, I promise you things will be different,” I said, a gentle hand on his shoulder. “You’ll be able to rely on the City Watch once more.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Simon breathed. “You can count on me. Know that the Dunwall Courier stands behind you. I won’t ask you what your plans are, but for the sake of our great city and the Empire itself, I hope you succeed.”

Me, too. “As for what else you might have seen…” I said, glancing at him knowingly. My magic. “I ask only that you keep it to yourself, Simon. For the Empire’s sake.”

I didn’t need the Dunwall Courier accusing me of witchcraft. If anything, I needed Delilah accused!

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Simon bowed. “You have my utmost discretion.”

What else could I do? If I didn’t take his word, I’d have to kill him and that I was unwilling to do.

I nodded. “Good, and stay safe, Simon.”

I returned to the balcony, a crack of lightning splitting the sky as thunder rumbled like the belly of a hungry beast. Rain began to fall in heavy sheets as my eyes found the Black Pony Pub, a dark, two-story brick building shrouded in mists along the river’s edge.

I picked my way from rooftop to rooftop, relying on the Outsider’s arcane gift of Far Reach to safely carry me through the storm. The Outsider had told me to get to the Pub. For what, I had no idea, though I suspected his plan involved a ship to take me to Karnaca, the birthplace of Delilah’s treachery, for it was there the Crown Killer murders had first begun.

But what ship?

Along the watery horizon, I spotted the USS Jessamine Kaldwin, a lone ship as far as the eye could see. A blockade, I feared. Which meant Delilah had corrupted the Royal Fleet as surely as she had the City Watch. But Delilah had corrupted the City Watch using the Duke’s connections to Mortimer Ramsey. What inside man could she possibly have in the Navy?

“Please don’t let it be Sir Edward Slattery,” I prayed as rain drenched my hair and my clothes. Like tears, I thought. The Throne Room Massacre was never far from my thoughts.
Nor the Outsider’s kiss.

The rain reminded me of his lips against mine, of salt and ocean and thunder. The Blind Sister had foretold his death. *He will die before this night is through.* I looked to the waves, dark beneath the stormy sky, and dreamed of his eyes, black pools of shadowy night drawing me closer and closer until I felt carried beneath the waves, drowning in the Deep.

“Where are you?” I whispered.

I heard no answer but thunder rolling across the sky as lightening flooded Dunwall in eerie light, flashing so brightly I saw vivid red streaks of blood far below, the streets pouring their burden into the river.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I slightly altered Simon’s letter to Kent from what it says in the game. A "moonstruck maestro making marionettes..." You see why I couldn't help myself, right?
Part 2: Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part II continued

“A Long Day in Dunwall”

Chapter 22

I didn’t like the odds at the front door. Too many guards. I crossed the roof to the back of the building and leaned over the edge, inspecting below. The Pub had a patio overlooking the river, replete with bar and stools for patrons to enjoy the view.

It was shoddy as establishments went. The Black Pony Pub once attracted the upper class (easy enough in the Palace District), but over time it had slumped in reputation as the working class had ventured in from the docks.

*I wouldn’t be surprised if smugglers had a foothold behind the Pub.*

It was a thought more fully corroborated when I spotted two men wearing the infamous round hats of the Hatter Gang—but they looked dead, or unconscious, their bodies dragged under a table slapped together with rickety old wood.

Crude weapons rested near their motionless hands, iron pipes from the looks of it.

I stayed where I was, watching, waiting, checking the area for signs of movement. I feared their unknown assailants were nearby, but it was hard to see. The rain wasn’t letting up.

It poured in heavy sheets, cascading down the roof in torrents around my leather boots. I was drenched from head to toe with my hair plastered to my face. My clothes were heavy and cold against my skin.

I was eager to slip inside the Pub, to finally be reunited with my father. I’d stabbed him earlier with a sleep dart for fear he might awaken and try to kill Rosemary again. I hadn’t actually witnessed him trying to kill her, but the Outsider had insisted his madness was murderous.

*He’s Corvo the Black now.*

What that meant, exactly, I was afraid to learn. The Outsider had freed him from stone—but not his mind. ‘Delilah has done something to him,’ the Outsider had said. ‘He’s gone mad, Emily.’

I missed him.

I wanted to tell my father about Alexi. I wanted to tell him about Ramsey. And I wanted to tell him about the Mark on my hand. I had broken a promise to him and I needed to explain… The sleep dart would most likely last through the night. I didn’t expect to be able to converse with my father until morning, if I could at all…

*How does one converse with a madman?*

I just wanted to curl up in my bed, to feel dry and warm and safe, but, of course, that was just wishful thinking, the same wishful thinking that had broken my heart fifteen years ago when all I had
wanted to do was go home and find Mother there, waiting for me.

Just like then, the truth was difficult to accept. *Delilah will be sleeping in my bed tonight.*

I was done waiting. I dropped from the roof to the stone patio below, softening my landing with *Far Reach.* I scurried to the Hatters, my head bent low against the rain.

Dead. Their necks were slit.

*The rain must have washed away their blood,* I thought, glancing at the river shadowed in mist. I couldn’t even see the *USS Jessamine Kaldwin* anymore; the Navy’s flagship was swallowed by the storm.

“Empress Emily?”

I turned sharply, startled to find I was being watched.

A giant of a man stood beneath a stone overhang, sheltered from the rain. A black iron gate swung open behind him and I saw Rosemary emerge from the Pub’s basement level, its width carved into the rocks. Two stories of brick faced the street. I hadn’t even realized there *was* a basement level!

She clutched the tall man’s arm as she peered around him, the blue of her eyes shining like sapphires. “Oh, Emily. You’re finally here!”

“We’ve been expecting you, Your Highness,” the man called through the rain. I didn’t recognize his face. He wore dock workers’ clothes, stained breeches with suspenders over a bare chest. He crossed his muscular arms, grinning at me as I joined them beneath the overhang.

Rosemary grabbed my elbow, snuggling close to me. “I was afraid you were hurt. What took you so long?”

I ignored her for a moment, craning my neck at the very tall stranger. “Who are you?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but Rosemary shot up, bouncing on her toes. “Oh! This is Dougal, Your Highness! Dougal Walsh of the Clan of Caulkenny. I pointed him out to you last night at the party. Do you remember? You promised to invite my Morley relatives up to your private reception before the remembrance ceremony—”

“But at the last minute, Lord Corvo limited attendance,” the man supplied, “and we never got past the palace gates.”

“Fortunately!” Rosemary cried, pressing a hand over her heart. “Else you’d be dead like all the other poor souls we left behind in the throne room. What a ghastly sight that was!”

I blinked up at the man, noting his blonde hair and blue eyes without surprise. Most Morley men were fair-headed, fair-eyed, and tall, but even he was a giant among his own countrymen.

“Yes, I remember.” *Vaguely.* A feeling of tiredness came over me. “Rosemary, where’s my father?”

“Inside. Come.”

I followed them into the basement. It was damp, the space open to the elements with iron-barred arches instead of glass windows. The floors were dirty. Canvas-wrapped cargo made up most of the space. My father was resting across one of the shorter and wider containers, his hands neatly folded
across his chest.

I rushed to his side and gently touched his cheek with the back of my curled fingers. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was steady and slow. He looked peaceful.

“Father, I’m here,” I whispered, tears blurring my eyes.

Dougal Walsh said, “Empress Emily, you should know I am one of Lord Corvo’s Eyes. You can trust me. I am sworn to your service.”

“He spies on the Queen of Morley for you,” Rosemary added with a little grin, clearly romanticizing the idea.

A spy? I searched his face, asking, “What will we do with a drunken whaler?”

His reply was confident and swift. “Hoorah, and up she rises, so early in the morning.” The sea shanty served as a pass phrase Father had made me memorize in order to identify Eyes within his spy network, if I ever needed to.

Well, I needed to.

I sighed in relief at his correct answer, but I was unsettled. “How is it that Rosemary knows you’re a spy?” I asked him, my tone rather accusing. It seemed a breach of confidentiality that she would know, relative or not.

“Retract your claws, Emily,” Rosemary said. “Dougal had no choice in the matter. I drew the secret out of him with a Glamour spell.”

“What?”

I didn’t know what was more astonishing: Rosemary’s heated reply, talk of a Glamour spell—whatever that was—or Dougal’s reaction, which was to say no reaction at all. His face remained oddly placid.

Rosemary snapped, like all the stress of the last few hours had finally reached a boiling point, “Emily, really! You entrusted me with the life of your father. I was all alone. Afraid. I had no idea where you were and suddenly my distant cousin shows up to help me?” She turned her blue eyes on Dougal, her voice lowering to a whisper. “I had to be sure I could trust him. You think you know someone, but…” She shuddered, then smiled brightly. “But a little Glamour did the trick!”

“Glamour?”

“Oh, yes.” Rosemary smirked, clearly pleased with herself. “That’s why he looks blank in the face. The spell has made him unaware of what exactly he revealed to me and why it should matter. In time, he’ll forget completely.”

My mouth fell open.

“Rosemary, that kind of magic is…is…”

Powerful. Too powerful? Dangerous? Terrifying? All of these things in my head and yet I blurted out, “Promise me you will never use it against me.”

She froze, staring at me.

“Promise me, Rosemary!”
“Of course, I promise! But there’s no need to get all worked up about it. Besides, it doesn’t always work and you have to be very specific. It’s not as scary as it sounds, believe me, although…” Her eyes wavered.

“Although, what?”

“I’ve been wondering… What kind of curse was used against me? To make me forget myself? Not a Glamour spell, obviously, but maybe something like it. Illusion magic.”

Illusion magic? How far down did her knowledge go? And who was she at the bottom?

“Perhaps, it’s best you never learn,” I said with a shudder, remembering the Blind Sister’s prophecy about a two-faced witch. ‘One loves you. The other does not. Both will be there at the end.’

I said, “Some things are best left in the past.”

Rosemary didn’t reply. I glanced at Dougal, unnerved by the empty look on his face. It was like we were talking in front of someone totally blind and deaf.

“He’ll snap out of it,” Rosemary offered. “Just ask him a safe question.”

I leaned into him slightly, looking up. “Dougal, how did you know to come here?”

The Black Pony Pub had been the Outsider’s idea.

“I didn’t.” Dougal shrugged, his face coming to life. “Once I realized there was a coup underway, I sent my kinsmen downriver. I stayed behind to see if I could be of some help. My duty is to the Crown.”

“I don’t believe it was merely chance that he found us,” Rosemary said, shooting me a knowing glance. “Our… friend surely guided his footsteps.”

The Outsider.

Dougal shrugged again, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind his ear. “I did what I could, which is to say not much at all, unfortunately. It’s chaos out there. The City Watch can’t be trusted. Turncoats from the looks of it, and the Duke’s men from Serkonos are backing them up. Rumors are flying that you’re dead,” he said, meeting my eye, “and the Royal Protector, too, but then I saw him.”

We all glanced at my father.

Dougal explained, “When I ran into the Pub to escape a checkpoint, I saw Rosemary with Lord Corvo. She had him tucked into a back corner, but it was clear to me he was in danger of being recognized. Rosemary refused to leave the Pub, but I managed to convince her to at least hide him in the basement.”

He gave Rosemary an affectionate look. “She can be very stubborn. Just like her mother.”

This time, Rosemary gave him a blank look, but I didn’t have time to wonder. Dougal said, looking down at Corvo, “I haven’t been able to rouse him. I think he’s been drugged.”

“A sleep dart,” I muttered absently.

“I told you.” Rosemary scowled up at him.
“Who would have guessed?” Dougal said, shaking his head. “I’ve never seen the Lord Protector like this.”

_Vulnerable_, I filled in. What if someone _had_ recognized my father and slipped away to tell my enemies? We had to leave, and soon. “You did good,” I sighed. “Both of you. Thank you.”

“Now that you’re here we can leave,” Rosemary said with a shiver, hugging herself. “The Princess says there’s a ship. She can get us out of Dunwall.”

“Princess?”

“She’s in the back, resting,” Rosemary said, pulling on my arm. She tugged me around a load of cargo and through a narrow passageway. Dougal followed close behind, his footsteps heavy and sure. It opened into a workbench area with a shabby-looking mattress on the floor. A pale, red-nosed woman in a heavy, fur-lined robe was resting on her side, her arms wrapped around her large, protruding belly.

She was pregnant, much to my astonishment. Her robe had concealed the bulge when I had last seen her—that being at the Sunset Regalia yesterday evening, though only from afar.

Her pale blue eyes fixed on me. She grimaced as she righted herself, sitting up in the bed.

“Princess Katya?!” I breathed.

She was the last person I expected to see. Princess Katya of Dabokva, to be precise. What in the Void was she doing here of all places, on a dirty mattress in a dank basement?

“Your Majesty! You’re alive,” the Princess sighed in a delicate, soft voice. “When Rosemary told me that you were coming, I was afraid to believe it. I thought all hope was lost.”

Rosemary knelt by her side and squeezed her hand. “Tell the Empress what you told me.”

A disquiet filled my heart as the Princess looked up at me, her face solemn. The paleness of her skin was contrasted by her fraying black hair. She looked like a mad ghost. Her pale blue eyes appeared almost gray in the dim light of the basement. She locked eyes with me, so full in the face I was uncomfortably reminded of the Blind Sister’s white-eyed stare. I couldn’t look away and I knew whatever I heard next would be difficult to hear.

“I tried to warn you of the coup,” she said, “but I was turned away at the palace gates. The guards told me that the Royal Protector had disallowed all private audiences with the Empress. It was my second attempt. The first had been at the Sunset Regalia.”

Silence hung like a noose.

“But again, you’d been turned away,” I said, my heart sinking like a stone. “And I left the party early.”

_Because of the Outsider._

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” the Princess said. “I tried to reach you, I swear it. To warn you. I’m so, so sorry.”

Rosemary reached out and squeezed my hand so that the three of us were linked in our sorrow and regret, but I pulled away in anger. _All of this could have been avoided?!_ Dougal hovered nearby, a gentle giant with his head bowed, giving me space.
“Tell me everything,” I ordered.

“I was just the messenger,” Princess Katya said. “It was Captain Meagan Foster who found me.” Her voice cracked, almost a laugh. “I’m not sure how. She has her ways, I suppose.”

“I don’t know that name,” I said with a frown.

“She’s the Captain of the Dreadful Wale. A pirate ship, if you ask me. I saw her moored at the docks. Meagan came into the Pub for a drink. I’d been renting a room on the second floor for the last few days. Like everyone else, I was in town for the ceremony, and I… well, I think she overheard me talking about my father, the great Anton Sokolov.”

Katya smirked—or smiled—it was difficult to tell. Clearly, there was tension, there. Anton Sokolov had eight or nine children running around the Isles (all from different women from what I’d heard) and I rather imagined none of them believed him a terribly good father. It’s not that I thought the old man cared more about his inventions than his offspring, but that he so easily fell into his work, becoming obsessed by it.

“That’s when she approached me,” she went on. “Meagan told me she needed my help, that my father had been kidnapped by the Crown Killer in retaliation for discovering Delilah’s treachery, and that we needed to warn the Royal Protector before it was too late. I was in shock, to put it mildly.”

As am I, I thought, reeling in the wake of her words.

I turned away, giving them my back. My hands flew to my mouth and I held my breath. Too late. Everything that could have gone wrong, had gone wrong. I forced myself to move, to breathe. I paced back and forth, anger rising in my belly.

Useless spies! A single eccentric old man had put all my father’s Eyes to shame.

Anton Sokolov was many things. Head of the Academy of Natural Philosophy. Scientist and inventor. Painter and sculptor. He had traveled widely and wrote plenty. He was a man before his time. He’d been Royal Physician during my mother’s reign, then mine, including Royal Tutor, until he retired a few years ago, settling to the south near Karnaca, a city known for its warmer climate. Clearly, he’d not been idle in his retirement. Spying of all things. If the situation wasn’t so dire, I’d laugh.

I stopped pacing, demanding more. “Then what?”

“Then I agreed to help,” the Princess said with a shrug, gently rubbing her pregnant belly. “Meagan thought my chances were good. I had an invitation to the Sunset Regalia and I was a Princess of Tyvia. Surely, I could get close enough to the Royal Protector, or you, to deliver her warning.” She winced. “I’m sorry—”

“It’s not your fault,” I snapped. If anything, it’s the Outsider’s fault. He could have told me. He could have made a real difference instead of making my head spin with dire and vague warnings about Rosemary and witches and dying whales!

I felt betrayed.

“Where is this Meagan Foster now?” I asked, choked by anger. If she had a ship, then I wanted to leave right now.

Princess Katya replied, “Close, I hope. We parted ways before the Sunset Regalia. She bid me good luck and told me she would bring the Dreadful Wale close to shore every day for three days at
sunset. She wants to speak with the Lord Protector in person.”

“She’ll be speaking with me.”

The Princess stressed, “Three days, Your Majesty. After that, if she hears nothing, she will consider her mission failed and return to Karnaca. She is desperate to find Anton. The Crown Killer kidnapped him, not outright killed him. It must mean he’s still alive!”

Alive, yes… but, perhaps, wishing he was dead…

I had no illusions about what kind of monster the Crown Killer was. I’d seen proof enough in the twisted, gory remains of Ichabod Boyle.

“Then we look for her at sunset,” I said, “and finally escape Dunwall.”

“I will come with you,” the Princess said, as if it was ever in doubt. “I left Tyvia to bring my father home. I want my child to have a grandfather.”

Clearly, she wasn’t asking for my permission, and I had no cause to deny her. Firstly, the Dreadful Wale wasn’t even my ship, and, secondly, she had tried to warn me of the coup. “Princess Katya,” I said, crouching before her, “I will do my best to help you find your father. It’s the least I can do.”

And hunting down the Crown Killer was exactly why I needed a ship to take me south in the first place. If I was to bring Delilah down and retake my throne, I needed to unravel the mystery of her immortality.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“It’s decided then,” Rosemary said, looking pleased. “Rest, Princess. Your baby needs you to be strong.”

As Katya gratefully returned to her original position, curling up on her side, Rosemary gave me her big blue eyes, full of concern. “Your Highness, you’re soaked through to the bone. Let’s get you dried up and something to eat. We have a few hours yet, before sunset.”

That was true enough. As much as I wanted to leave right now, we had to wait for rescue.

“I’ll keep watch,” Dougal offered, heading out with a nod.

I allowed Rosemary to lead me back to my father. She pulled up a chair so I could sit beside him, then handed me a towel. Patting myself dry was the best I could do without stripping off my clothes, and that I was unwilling to risk, not when we were in danger of discovery. Hidden as we were, Dunwall was not safe.

I patted the coarse towel across my face and squeezed my hair, all the while watching my father as he softly snored.

I felt strangely peaceful, all things considered.

It was still raining hard, a wet pounding on the stones that soothed my nerves. I tried closing my eyes and just letting go for a moment. All my worries, all my fears… I concentrated on the sound of the rain and each inhale and exhale from my father’s mouth. I heard Rosemary move to stand behind me. She dug her fingers into my shoulders, kneading tense muscles. I groaned, falling deeper into a relaxed state.
“Are you going to tell me what happened?” she softly asked.

“What happened?” I blankly repeated, almost in a slur.

“After the Outsider,” she prompted, her voice sweet and unpresumptuous. “Where did you two go?”

It was a loaded question, far more than she realized, perhaps. So much had happened. The Void. Accepting the Mark. The Outsider’s kiss. And then the Blind Sister’s prophecy, a shadow over the future. How could I share it with her when I was still struggling to face it myself?

And how could I share it with someone I could not fully trust? I loved Rosemary, but I’d be a fool not to heed the warning signs.

When I didn’t respond, Rosemary stopped kneading and turned away, digging through something nearby. “There’s bread and some vegetable soup. Still warm.”

I turned my head slightly. “All right.”

Not once in my life had it felt strange to be served by another. I never cooked for myself, nor cleaned. Palace life had been easy.

And, yet, when Rosemary handed me a chunk of bread and a bowl of soup, I felt suddenly awkward. “You don’t have to…”

“I want to.”

I tried the soup, tipping the bowl into my mouth as there was an obvious lack of spoons. Another first for me. It was good, though the broth was far less rich than I was used to. I figured it was from the Pub upstairs. I was hungry enough to eat it all. The warmth felt good in my belly.

“I’ll give you some alone time with your father,” she said, heading towards the back. “I’ll be with the Princess.”

“You like her,” I said, twisting in my chair to watch her go.

She paused and smiled at me. “I do. She’s… I’ve never met anyone like her. She’s from Tyvia. It’s a wintry, mountainous climate, yes? Harsh, cold… and yet… she’s warm and…”

“And pregnant.”

Rosemary laughed. “Yes. I admit I enjoy being around pregnant women. There’s a life inside them, a beauty that shines from within. It gives me such hope…” Her blue eyes flickered. “I never told you this, Your Highness, but…” She took a deep breath. “But after you started sleeping with Wyman, I would sometimes dream that you were pregnant. I liked imaging what it’d be like.”

“Being pregnant?”

“Raising your child,” she said, shaking her head with an embarrassed smile. “Like how Callista helped to raise you after your mother died.” Her eyes held such tenderness it made my heart ache. “I can’t imagine my life without you in it, Emily. If I ask difficult questions, it’s because I don’t want you to feel alone. I’m here for you.”

She said nothing more and turned away. I let go of the breath I’d been holding and took my father’s hand, squeezing gently.

“One loves me. The other does not,” I told him, his face reposed in deep sleep. I listened to the rain
and held tight.

Chapter End Notes

Glamour spells (and by extension Illusion magic) isn't in Dishonored lore, as far as I know. I'm pulling on Elder Scrolls influence, mainly the "College of Illusion" spells (like "Charm") from Morrowind, where you have the morally dubious ability to alter the perceptions and thoughts of people. Manipulating them, in other words, to do or see things against their will or understanding.
The storm broke before sunset. I joined Dougal beneath the overhang, and together we watched the world transform from gray to gold. The peeking sun dissipated the thick mist blanketing the river until the air tasted crisp and clean. Where once there was shadow, light emerged in prismatic colors, painting the rolling clouds in varied and brilliant hues of orange and yellow.

The evening’s sunlight danced over the waves, revealing the depth of our danger. The blockade was still in effect. River traffic was forced away from the shores, isolating Dunwall. Isolating me. Delilah and the Duke were trying to trap me within the city.

Dougal shared my dismay at the sight. We had watched the storm blow itself out in comfortable silence, the rain softening to a gentle drizzle as thunder rumbled ever more distantly, but when we both spotted the lone ship on the horizon—the **USS Jessamine Kaldwin**—we met each other’s eyes with the full weight of dread behind us.

“How do you suppose Captain Foster will slip through the blockade?”

“No idea, Your Highness,” Dougal said as we stood shoulder to shoulder.

“Did she not mention it?”

“I don’t know. Meagan only met with the Princess. Not Rosemary. Not me. If it were me, I would have asked her more questions. Not just about the escape plan, but about her. We know next to nothing about this mysterious Sea Captain.”

“You don’t trust her?”

“I’m an Eye. It’s in my job description to be suspicious.” He stared at the waves, their crests glimmering like jewels. “But I don’t blame the Captain for leaving. I saw the City Watch clearing the docks. Seizing vessels. Anyone close to shore was at risk of being boarded. Meagan had to pull back.”

“A smart move on Delilah’s part,” I muttered.

Dougal grunted in agreement. “Even so, the Princess had a feeling the **Dreadful Wale** was a pirate ship. It’s possible Captain Foster knows a thing or two about sneaking through a blockade.”

I could appreciate his rosy outlook, but I feared it would not be so easy. “That’s the **Jessamine,**” I said, nodding at the lone ship. “She’s the Navy’s newest flagship, a warship built for speed. Nothing can outrun her.”

“Is she still yours?”

“Unlikely. Before our tour yesterday, my father had picked through her crew manifest. He had believed them all loyal to me, but now…” I shook my head, anger beating within my breast. “After the City Watch, I can’t put it past Delilah that she hasn’t also found a way to corrupt my Navy from
within.”

“But—”

I faced him dead on, cutting off his reply. “The point is, I don’t see us getting very far if the Jessamine is on our tail. She was built to dominate the seas.”

Dougal’s eyes wavered. “Forgive me for saying it, Your Highness, but I will feel a lot better when Lord Corvo gets back on his feet. An Empress without her Royal Protector is a frightening prospect.”

I couldn’t disagree, there.

During the Morley Insurrection, Empress Larisa Olaskir had been assassinated. The shocking, violent death spurred the creation of the Royal Protector position. He (or she, though thus far all Royal Protectors have been male) was far more than a hand-chosen, trusted bodyguard. They were important court figures by virtue of their sheer proximity to the monarch they constantly safeguarded.

With no heirs, Empress Larisa Olaskir was the last of her House. My golden-haired grandfather, Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin, had stepped up to seize the Crown, ushering in an age of prosperity and innovation—that is, after a tumultuous period of transition involving several assassinations. The Emperor’s Royal Protector became a necessity in that kind of political climate. My current situation, no less necessary.

I glanced behind me through the black iron gate. Within my father slept, oblivious to the perils surrounding us. I said, “But like as not, Lord Corvo needs our protection now.”

Dougal followed my worried gaze. “Your Highness,” he began, bowing his head formally. He was so tall it felt like a mountain bearing down on me. “I will do everything within my power to protect you and your father. For me, it’s… personal.”

“Personal?”

“The Clan of Caulkenny fought against the Crown during the Morley Insurrection. I can’t erase the past, but I can stand beside you now.” His eyes went distant, looking out across the waves. “Redemption, Your Highness. I wish only to restore my family’s honor.”

“I treasure your loyalty, Dougal Walsh. Yours is a name I won’t soon forget.”

It felt good knowing not everyone had turned against me, though it sometimes felt that way, surrounded as I was by my enemies with no escape in sight. The sun was setting, and yet there was no sign of rescue.

We turned together, hearing footsteps approaching from behind. The Princess emerged from the basement, her enormous belly protruding from the folds of her heavy, fur-lined robe. “Oh,” she exhaled in breathless wonder, her pale blue eyes fixated on the horizon. “What a beautiful sunset.”

Rosemary appeared at her side, her face knit with worry. “Nothing yet, Emily?”

I silently shook my head.

Dougal gave me a troubled look. “Your Highness, if Meagan fails to break the blockade, do we risk waiting another day?”

*Three days,* Meagan had said. Then she’d consider her mission failed and return to Karnaca on her
own. But we’ll be dead in one if we can’t escape the city, I thought. The longer we stayed, the greater our chances of being discovered.

“If Meagan fails to break the blockade, we’re doomed,” Rosemary said. “What hope do we have? We’re stranded!”

“We have that,” Dougal said, pointing further down the docks. “The Hatters’ barge.”

A flat-bottom boat was moored in a swell of shallow water, surrounded by riverbank weeds. Her hull was weathered wood and black iron plates, sturdy enough to transport heavy goods. A smuggler’s barge, I realized.

“I inspected her earlier,” Dougal said, grim-faced. “She’s seaworthy, and if we dump the cargo overboard, we can move faster through the water.” When I gave him a skeptical look, he shrugged. “It’s better than nothing, Your Highness. It’s my opinion that waiting past sunset is suicide. The city’s crawling with the Duke’s men. They’ll find us.”

“You can’t be serious! That thing will never make it all the way to Karnaca!” Rosemary squealed. “We’ll get blown out of the water.” She ignored Dougal and went straight to me. “We should wait for the Captain, Emily. She promised to come at sunset!”

“It’s already sunset. She’s not here,” Dougal interjected. “Your Highness, the longer we wait—”

“I’ve already made my decision,” I said, ending all discussion. “We will wait.”

The Outsider led me to the Black Pony Pub for a reason, I thought. This is where we’ll be saved. And I believed it—damn it all, I believed it!—despite being boiling mad at the black-eyed deity.

No, more than that, I felt betrayed.

Princess Katya’s heart-wrenching revelation had punched holes in the trust I had placed in the Outsider by accepting his Mark. How could I ever trust him again?

How is it that he can so easily build me up, then tear me down? What was wrong with me, that I would risk my own sanity for just one more kiss?

I stared up at the blazing sky and wondered.

We waited.

The sunset turned from gold to pink to purple. We watched the clouds roll and sift, spears of dancing light piercing the sky.

“A sunset after a storm. What can be more beautiful?” the Princess remarked in a hushed whisper, gently rubbing her belly.

“It is beautiful, but I would rather enjoy it from the deck of the Dreadful Wale,” Rosemary said. “What if the Captain is dead or captured? What will we do?”

She took my hand, fretting. My Marked hand, wrapped in a dirty rag. I knew she only sought comfort, but I couldn’t help but pull away. I felt her eyes follow me as I not-so-inconspicuously tucked my sorcery hand under my arm. I wasn’t ready to reveal the Outsider’s Mark to her.

“Are you hurt?” she whispered with her chin tucked low, as though we were sharing a secret.
“I’m fine,” I said, shivering in the evening’s chill. “It’s just a small wound.” I stubbornly stared straight ahead at the river, avoiding her gaze. *A lie, but not far from the truth.* I was so angry at the Outsider, his Mark felt like a bloody wound.

“That rag is filthy. Let me fix you a cleaner wrap,” Rosemary offered.

“It’s fine, I told you.”

I turned to Dougal, quickly changing the subject. “What happened with those Hatters? I found them dead, their throats slit.”

Dougal frowned. “They caught us carrying Lord Corvo down to the basement. I was forced to kill them out of fear they might reveal our location.” His blue eyes flickered. “I know Lord Corvo prefers we operate nonlethally, but… I panicked, Your Highness. It’s difficult to act decently with so much at stake.”

“You did the right thing, Cousin,” Rosemary said, touching his arm. “Everyone knows the Hatters are murderous thugs. They deserve to die. I don’t know why you allow them to operate within your city, Emily. You should let the City Watch kill them on sight.”

Dougal’s eyebrow raised. “How is—”

“Rosemary,” I butted in, “Why don’t you take the Princess back inside. We’ll call for you if we see anything. Meanwhile, Dougal and I will inspect the Hatters’ barge.”

“We will?” Dougal blinked.

“Might as well prepare all our options,” I said grimly.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Rosemary said, deflated, her sorry gaze peeking one last time at the barren river. She took the Princess back inside, a helping hand on the woman’s elbow. With the sun setting, the basement seemed darker than ever.

“Lead the way,” I commanded wearily.

As we walked together, side by side, Dougal said, “I’m sorry, Your Highness. I can’t imagine the nightmare you’re going through.”

“The 18th day of the Month of Earth. A cursed day if ever there was one,” I muttered. Halfway across the stone patio, I looked back at the Black Pony Pub and traced a critical eye over the nearby brick warehouses hugging the docks, insulating us from prying eyes.

“It’s a good spot,” I remarked. “Private.”


“Seems likely, though I’m surprised they would operate so close to the Tower.”

We picked our way across the docks. The river level was unseasonably low, and so we were able to cross an expanse of rocky shore to where the barge was moored by a long rope tied to a wooden post. Seagulls cried in the distance, flying above the river. We boarded the barge, Dougal hoisting me over the side with a strong arm, his muscles rippling. Inside it was much like I expected: boxes upon boxes of contraband. The Hatters had piled it high along the sides, leaving a narrow passageway to reach the boat controls. The cockpit had a simple cot for sleeping, but not much else.
“It’ll be a tight fit, even with the cargo thrown overboard,” I said. We had five people to worry about.

Dougal grabbed a crate of copper wires. “I was thinking… I sent my kinsmen downriver. We’ve a good ship. A whaling ship called The Churner. If Meagan fails to break through the blockade, maybe we can take this rickety old barge and meet up with them.”

I threw an unmarked box over the side. It floated buoyantly, drifting away as I tossed another box into the river. “It’s a good backup plan, Dougal, but I don’t want to give up just yet. Meagan’s out there, somewhere.” I glanced at the setting sun, purple clouds chasing across the sky.

We worked efficiently, tossing one box after another. Some were labeled; most were not.

I didn’t much care what we were throwing out, but Dougal got curious.

“Jellied ox tongue,” he commented, lifting a cargo lid. He looked reluctant as he tossed it over. When I gave him a funny look, he smiled sheepishly. “A Morley delicacy.”

After a contemplative pause, I blurted, “The Festival of Churners? Is that what your ship is named after?”

It was a native holiday, from what I recalled. The people of Morley were as passionate about their food as their love of music and poetry. Wyman once told me butter churning and cheese making were practically sports in Morley, their annual competitions as widely recognized as the esteemed Blade Verbena in Serkonos.

“Aye. She can’t outrun the Jessamine, but I’d wager the Churner has better food,” he boasted playfully. “My wife is the galley chef.”

I could see the pride in his eyes. I smiled at him, but a thought came over me, turning my cheer to apprehension. I asked, trying to sound casual, “Speaking of family, how long have you known Rosemary, Dougal? Did you grow up together?”

He didn’t answer right away. We were almost finished. Only a few of the heavier crates were left. We manhandled them together, tossing the cargo overboard with grunts and gasps. It was hard work and I was soon sweating.

“Everyone in the Clan of Caulkenny is proud of Rosemary, you know,” he said, wiping his brow. “The Empress’s favorite court musician. It’s a great honor, especially among my people.”

“It’s been an honor having her,” I said, looking away. Perhaps in more ways than one. She’d been my first lover, before Wyman.

Three years ago, the Queen of Morley had given her to me as cultural gift in the same fashion that the late Duke of Serkonos, Theodanis Abele, gave Corvo—their greatest swordsman—to Emperor Euhorn. It wasn’t until later that my mother hand-picked him to be her Royal Protector. At the time, it came across as a reckless decision, spurred by a rebellious teenager. Sixteen-year-old Jessamine had chosen a foreigner. How scandalous! I smiled every time I recounted the story.

Dougal said, “It was the Queen of Morley who first recognized Rosemary’s talent. She played in her court in Wynnedown for many years. That’s where I first met her, introduced through family.” He caught my bemused smile. “We’re all family, I know,” he said, rolling his eyes, “but the Morley Clans are quite large and complex. I didn’t really know her before then. She had an unusual upbringing, from what I’d heard.”
“Oh?” I asked, my belly tightening. “Rosemary doesn’t often talk about her past. You mentioned her mother earlier…”

There was just one huge box left. We sat on it together, taking a breather. Dougal corrected, “Her stepmother.”

He looked out across the river, his demeanor turning pleasantly conversational. “Rosemary came to Morley with her father when she was, oh… eleven, maybe twelve years old. It’s hard to remember the details. Fifteen years ago, let’s say.”

I listened with rapt attention, my throat going dry. I knew Rosemary and I were close in age, but now it felt oddly portentous. Fifteen years ago, I’d been ten years old and had just lost my mother to an assassin’s blade. Rosemary had apparently only been one or two years older than me—and starting a new life, from what it sounded like.


“No, she was born somewhere in Gristol. It’s her father that’s Morley-born,” Dougal said, staring at his callused hands as he bent over with his elbows across his knees. “I’m not sure who her real mother is. Rosemary never talks of her, or her life before Wynnedown. Her father is Roger MacKenzie, a distant uncle of mine. About ten years ago, Roger married Jennicor of the Clan of Alba, but they never had children. That’s why Rosemary is so special to them. Jennicor loves Rosemary like she’s her own.”

“And Roger MacKenzie? Does he ever speak of his old life in Gristol?”

“Not much,” Dougal said with a shrug. “He was a painter’s apprentice. Or sculptor’s. I can’t remember whose exactly.” He frowned. “But my wife did hear a strange rumor once. You know how women talk…”

“What did she hear?” I whispered, afraid all at once.

Dougal straightened, his blue eyes meeting mine with a look that unnerved me. “She overheard talk about Roger. He was awful drunk one night, said he lost his heart to a witch.” Dougal looked uncomfortable. “It’s not something people should talk about, Overseers and all.”

I sat in frozen silence, my heart hammering in my ears. Roger lost his heart to a witch? Did that mean… That meant… Rosemary was the daughter of a witch. Witch. A witch’s daughter. Whose witch? Which witch watched which watch? Isn’t that right, Outsider? Was this truth or more lies to untangle?

Dougal said, “You know, before I became an Eye, I never once thought witches could be real. But now… You’d be amazed at what I’ve seen over the years. It’s all the crazy cultists who worship the Outsider that scare me the most. Blood and sacrifice. Bones and dark whispers. It’s scary how obsessed they become. I’d call the Overseers on them, but Lord Corvo told us explicitly to stay out of it. I’m fine with that. I’ve no great love for Overseers either.”

I felt dizzy. “Dougal, I…”

He stood up. “If you don’t mind me saying, Highness, it’s gettin’ dark. We’ll need your decision soon. To stay or go.”

When I could find no words, he offered gently, “How about we finish up this last one?”

I nodded numbly, helping him hoist the unwieldy box. It made a great splashing sound as it hit the
water. I watched it bob up and down, joining its mates in a long line sailing down the river, dark silhouettes in the evening’s dying light.

*Meagan’s not coming,* I thought. *Something’s wrong.*

“Let’s get everyone onboard,” I said firmly. A hard choice, but I was used to making hard choices.

*That’s what Empresses do.*

I went on, “We’ll wait for nightfall, then make for the Churner. With luck, we’ll find the Dreadful Wale downriver.”

“A good plan,” Dougal said, sighing in relief. “I’ll get the women, and I can carry your father.”

I had no doubt. Dougal was a giant among men.

“I’ll wait here,” I said, falling into a stupefied calm. *Roger said he lost his heart to a witch.* I still couldn’t believe what I’d heard.

If Rosemary was indeed born of a witch, what did that mean? I desperately wished I could speak to Father. He’d once told me that Daud was the son of witch. I’d always thought he’d meant it as a derogatory insult, like calling your enemy a *son of a bitch,* but now I wasn’t so sure. Was there power in being such a child?

Daud had grown up to become the world’s greatest assassin. A legend. Was Rosemary’s full potential just as fearsome?

I didn’t have long to wait. Rosemary emerged from the basement first, carrying the rucksack we’d packed together whilst in the safe room. The Princess had a fancy striped suitcase, but Rosemary took it from her as they crossed the docks towards me. With Katya’s delicate condition, they had to walk slowly.

Dougal followed, my father’s black-clothed figure folded over his shoulder. *An Eye carrying his Royal Spymaster,* I thought, an impossible laugh bursting from my lips.

I felt so emotionally drained from everything, I could barely get a grip on my feelings.

It was a bit tricky getting them all onboard. It was decided Lord Corvo should be handled first. It took a lot of shifting and grunting to get him up from Dougal’s arms into mine. In the mad shuffle, I caught Rosemary’s eye. I knew what she was thinking, that her *Blink* could have made the job a lot easier, but I sternly shook my head at her. She had already used an Illusion spell against Dougal, but he didn’t know—that was the point. I didn’t want any more complications, and after getting to know Dougal better, I felt even worse for what Rosemary had done to him.

I set Father down on the single cot in the cockpit, folding his hands across his chest, then went back to help the Princess. She was far more difficult to bring aboard since we had to be extremely careful of her belly, not to bump or twist her ungently.

There was shelving near the cockpit, low enough to sit on. The metal was cold and hard, but it was better than sitting on the damp floorboards. It was there the Princess took a seat as I went on to help Rosemary, then Dougal, up from the rocky shore.

“Are we really giving up on the Captain?” Rosemary asked, nervously staring at the barge like it might fall apart at any second.
It was dark and cold by the river, hardly comforting.

“‘It’s too dangerous to wait, Rosmeary,’” I said. “‘Meagan tried to warn my father, but maybe she didn’t know how close Delilah was to seizing my throne. Back then, three days may have sounded reasonable to her to wait, but now there’s a blockade…’” I shook my head, nervous energy coursing through my veins. “Dougal has kinsman downriver. A faster, better ship than this barge. We’ll try to find them, or the Dreadful Wale. We’ll know more once we’re downriver.”

Dougal smiled at me, exuding confidence and hope. He said, “That’s right. We can do this. We just need to wait until it gets a bit darker so there’s less chance we’ll be spotted from shore. Let’s try to rest up, meanwhile. Could be we have a long night ahead of us.”

The Princess weakly smiled. She looked tired. Rosemary took a seat next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “She’s freezing, Dougal. We forgot the blankets.”

“I’ll go,” he sighed, rubbing the back of his head.

“I’ll keep watch,” I said, my teeth chattering. I was cold, too, with my damp clothes and night falling. The sweat I’d worked up from tossing the cargo was now cold against my neck. As he hurried away, I faced the river.

It curved like an emerald necklace, disappearing around a bend to the west where it eventually flowed into the terrible Ocean. I was on the north side of the city. Across the river to the south I saw a vague outline of the Hounds Pit Pub and that broken tower, shadowed by dusk. Dark memories, yet somehow joyful, too.

A fond memory surfaced of my father escorting me out of the skiff after he’d rescued me from the Golden Cat, his hand gracefully extending as he helped me ashore. All the terror I’d felt inside had melted away when I had looked up into his loving eyes, his scary mask removed. I was his Princess. His little girl. I didn’t have to be afraid anymore.

The visage of the broken tower seemed to blur as I looked away. I stared at the USS Jessamine Kaldwin, my eyes hardening.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” I whispered. It felt like a betrayal that Delilah would steal her from me, my great flagship, my mother’s namesake.

The more I stared, the more I realized the Jessamine seemed oddly close to the broken tower, as if sniffing around for trouble.

Delilah knows my history, I thought. If she thinks I will find safe haven at the Hounds Pit Pub, she’s gravely mistaken. My father wanted it burned to the ground, but I had listened to Parliament and had it turned into a museum, a historical monument to remember the good and the bad. Not all Loyalists had been corrupted by Havelock’s treachery. Still, I’d not stepped one foot inside it after leaving it all behind fifteen years ago.

I couldn’t go back.

It was bad enough I still dreamed of it.

I tore my gaze away, following a seagull as it drifted on a lazy current in the wind, heading downriver.

It was then I noticed the lights.
It began like a mirage, a hazy floating speck of light in the distance. Dusk had deepened, muting the colors of the world into blues and grays and greens, and upon that dark canvas, pinpricks of light emerged from the river’s bend.

I clutched the rail, leaning over the side of the barge, straining to see through the gloom.

The lights were ships. *Dozens* of ships!

But as they neared, sailing upriver, I realized they weren’t flying Navy colors. “Look!” I gasped. “Rosemary! Katya! Come see!”

They stirred from their seats, joining me at the stern. I heard Dougal return, running across the docks at breakneck speed. He climbed aboard with a mighty leap, rushing to our side, the blankets discarded, forgotten at his feet in the excitement of realizing something was happening.

“They’re pirate ships,” I said in amazement. It was dark, but the moon and stars reflected over the waters, illuminating their flags. They were black with a white handprint.

“Pirates?!” Rosemary exclaimed in disbelief. “You mean *Meagan’s* pirates?”

“Maybe,” the Princess laughed.

“They’re breaking the blockade,” Dougal exclaimed. “They’re swarming the shores *en masse!* I’ve never seen so many!”

The river was thronged with ships of all shapes and sizes. I even spotted a whaling ship, though her great harness was empty of a catch. I wondered if it was the *Churner*.

“The *Jessamine* can’t stop them all,” I said, amazed by the strategy. “Was this the Captain’s idea?”

“It must be.” Dougal grinned ear to ear. He whooped in delight, then crushed Rosemary in a fierce embrace.

“There it is!” the Princess exclaimed, pointing with her whole arm. “That’s the *Dreadful Wale*. I recognize her shape from yesterday. It’s so dark, but… I… I think I can see the name spelled out on her engine plate. Do you see, Your Majesty?”

We all leaned over the side of the barge, peering through the dusky darkness at the wave of ships sailing upriver. They were scattering, plunging closer to the northern shoreline, but one ship was pulling away from the others, heading straight for us.

“It’s her,” I said, gasping.

I saw it as the ship turned, each letter emblazoned with moonlight. *The Dreadful Wale*.

In the next instant, the sky flashed a brilliant blue, like earth-shattering lightning. Whale oil exploded in a thunderous blast, and for a stone-cold instant, night was day. The shock stunned us, nearly blowing us back.

“A direct hit,” Dougal said, hoarsely.

I saw it, a distant pirate ship sinking beneath the waves as the *Jessamine* swooped in like a bird of prey, spewing death from her starboard turrets.

Like a beehive disturbed, the pirate ships careened towards the intruder, trying to box her in even as the *Jessamine* punched holes through their makeshift barricade with incredible firepower, lighting up
the sky and turning the water ghostly blue.

But not the *Dreadful Wale*.

She was turned away from the swarm, using the distraction to plunge closer to shore, her bow parting the waves.

Rosemary, Dougal, the Princess—they all looked to me, their eyes wide and staring.

“Dougal, start the engines. Let’s meet her half-way,” I said, my voice oddly serene, even as booming explosions echoed across the water. “The *Jessamine* can’t stop us all.”

It was a prayer.
A Quick Recap: Delilah has seized the throne, and now Emily is on the run for her life. Corvo has lost his Mark – and his mind (becoming “Corvo the Black”) – but thankfully the Outsider was able to free him from stone. He is still unconscious, drugged by a sleep dart. Meanwhile, Emily, Rosemary (a witch “cursed to forget herself”), Princess Katya (Sokolov’s pregnant daughter from Tyvia), and Dougal Walsh (an Eye – i.e. one of Corvo’s spies) are racing towards the Dreadful Wale aboard a smugglers’ barge they found near the Black Pony Pub. The USS Jessamine is under attack by a group of pirates, giving them their only hope of escape…

As for the Outsider, his power over the Void is slipping away, thanks to Delilah’s schemes. The Blind Sister foretold his death, but he promised Emily he will return (“rebirth” as a human). He has Marked Emily, and kissed her, but she feels betrayed by him after the Princess recounted her story of failure, of being unable to warn Emily of the coup. Despite this, Emily feels a strong, maddening attraction to the Outsider. She can’t resist him, and with Delilah’s mysterious immortality, he may be her only hope of taking back her throne…

Chapter Notes

Captain Meagan Foster has both her arms/hands, and both her eyes. This deviation from canon is on purpose, and will be explained in later chapters.

Part III continued

“The Dreadful Wale”

Chapter 24

The barge raced towards the Dreadful Wale. Rosemary clung to my waist as we skipped across the waves, the river rippling in the moonlight.

The wind lashed against my face, whipping my hair into a frenzy. I could barely breathe for fear of what I saw.

In the distance, the USS Jessamine Kaldwin rocked beneath the brunt of whale oil projectiles discharged from her starboard turrets, thunderous volleys echoing across Wrenhaven River, punching deadly holes into the swarm of pirate ships charging the warship like wild beasts.

But there were too many, and even the Jessamine looked outmatched. The royal flagship was like a prideful lioness, fierce in her own right, but suddenly set upon by a pack of rangy hyenas. Even the strongest and biggest could be overwhelmed by weaker opponents, if they had the numbers.
But the *Jessamine* didn’t give up.

Bright blue flames blanketed the river as exploding wood and agonizing screams pierced the air. It was impossible to look away. I saw men jump from their splintered and burning ships. They thrashed in the water as gunfire bled over them like rain, shot from the crew of the *Jessamine*.

How many were dying to procure my escape? I couldn’t fathom it, neither why nor how it was I apparently had the support of pirates and industrial whalers, yet could find no loyal man aboard my own flagship!

*No longer ‘my own,’* I thought bitterly.

It felt like a cold knife to the gut. How could I lose something so pivotal to the Empire? The Royal Navy *was* the Empire, her pride and her power… How could they betray me?

And where was the rest of the Royal Fleet? Was the *Jessamine* alone in her betrayal, or did I have allies among the Navy? Were my allies retreating, going into hiding, or were they simply unaware of the coup? The Royal Fleet was spread out over vast distances, and so it was entirely possible Delilah’s rot hadn’t spread further than the *Jessamine*.

“We’re coming in too hot,” Dougal yelled from the cockpit. “Hold on!”

I clutched the rail deck as the barge lurched, the engines thrown into reverse. The barge made an awful thudding noise as the engines stalled. Momentum carried us forward.

I looked back at my father. He remained knocked out cold from the sleep dart and I feared he would roll right off the cot unto the floor! Rosemary caught my worried look. She cried, “I’ll watch him, Your Highness! Don’t worry!”

“Dougal, we have to get aboard that ship!” I shouted over the noise as Rosemary stumbled towards the cockpit, the barge lurching beneath our feet.

The raging sea battle was a convenient distraction, but for how long? We had to escape while the *Jessamine* was thus occupied!

“Brace for impact!” Dougal cried.

At the wheel, he sharply pivoted us side by side with the looming *Dreadful Wale*. The barge crashed alongside it, metal screeching against metal. The Princess screamed in fright, a hand over her pregnant belly as cold river water splashed over the deck.

“We hit too hard!” Dougal shouted as he swung his long legs over Rosemary, her body crouched low next to my father, holding him in place. “We’re taking on water!”

The barge was sinking, the rickety old floorboards streaming with water. Beside us, the *Dreadful Wale* plowed onwards, large and stalwart. Crashing into the pirate ship had barely budged her course. The strong river currents were pushing us apart!

Engineless, floundering… Dougal did what he could. He wound the mooring line around his arm, readying his throw to secure us to the ship. But how? No one was present to catch the rope from the other side. The *Dreadful Wale* was dark and quiet, like a thief in the night. Where was the crew? I strained to catch sight of any movement, but the upper decks were eerily barren.

*A ghost ship,* I thought, shuddering in the cold.
My eyes drifted up the stern. Three stratified levels towered towards the night sky, encapsulating the engines bulging in a rainbow-shape above the main deck. Suddenly, far above, a door banged open and a woman emerged from the bridge.

Her skin was so dark I could barely see her against the night sky. Our eyes locked. The whites of her eyes were like stars, shining with the promise of rescue.

“Captain Foster?” I called.

She didn’t respond. Instead, I watched her swing over the railing and nimbly jump down from deck to deck until she was leaning over the rail, gauging the distance between our two vessels. It was too far, especially considering we had a very pregnant woman and an unconscious man aboard. Both would have to be carried.

But not too far that I couldn’t see her better, now.

Her moonlit face was a mask of remarkable calm—despite the raging sea battle exploding in the distance. Her calm demeanor reminded me of Alexi Mayhew, and all at once I felt a stab of grief. As her eyes fell over our motley group, I caught a shimmer of relief as she finally recognized ‘the Empress’… I could barely stomach the word now. I didn’t feel like one. Not just because of Delilah’s coup, but because I felt like a miserable, drowned rat.

Ankle-deep in water, we were all miserable. Cold, wet, scared out of our minds, and desperate. So very desperate. In the distance, the Jessamine roared in fury, whale oil explosions lighting the sky. The screams of the dying carried over the waves.

“Lady Emily!” the Captain called.

“The barge is sinking!”

Stating the obvious, perhaps, but there was no time for polite introductions.

Captain Foster grimaced, her dark brown eyes stalling over Dougal. “Throw the rope!”

In answer, the muscles of his bare chest and arms flexed as Dougal tossed it across the water. The moor line flew in the air like a wild serpent before the Captain deftly caught it. She pulled tight with both hands, securing the rope to a docking ring, then jumped over the main rail to a shelf of lower compartments running the length of the ship near the waterline.

Cargo hold access, I realized. Square-shaped hatches provided several entry points to the belly of the ship. It’d be perfect for us since then we wouldn’t have to climb up over our heads to reach the main deck.

The Captain grunted noisily, pulling one of the hatches open and pulling a wooden gangplank up from the dark interior. With Dougal’s help, she was able to position it between the two ships. A precarious proposition, I thought, staring at the gangplank as it wobbled and wavered.

Crouching beside the hatch, the Captain waved at me, beckoning me forward. “Take my hand, Lady Emily!”

“My father first!” I yelled back.

I could barely stay on my feet as the barge roiled like a bucking horse. The Dreadful Wale was dragging us along, pulling the sinking barge like flotsam by the moor line. I dove on the gangplank, holding it in place on our end as the Captain steadied hers.
“One at a time,” Meagan barked, but Dougal was already moving, river water splashing against his legs.

My gentle giant. I felt eternally grateful for his help. Corvo was a tall man, and heavily muscled for his age, but even then Dougal carried him like he weighed no more than a sack of potatoes. He balanced him over his left shoulder and carried him to the edge. I held my breath as he took the gangplank one quaking step at a time, crossing to where the Captain waited, her dark eyes shielded.

I could only imagine what was running through her head to see the Royal Protector thus: unconscious—maybe even seriously injured for all she knew—but instead of hammering us with questions, the Captain helped Dougal get my father to safety. There would be plenty of time for talk later—if we survived.

As Dougal and my father disappeared through the hatch into the cabins below the waterline, I turned my attention to Rosemary and the Princess. Rosemary hugged the rucksack close to her chest, shivering violently.

Beside her, the Tyvian Princess was as pale as moonlight, the curls of her black hair so wet they hung like drooping teardrops. She looked lost in her fur-lined robes.

“My suitcase, Your Majesty…” She hesitated, clearly too embarrassed to ask.

“I’ll get it,” I reassured her. I found her fancy striped suitcase submerged near the cockpit, weighed down by the blankets we’d carried aboard earlier. They were sodden and heavy, and most likely the only reason her belongings hadn’t floated away by now.

Rosemary took the suitcase from my grasp as Dougal returned, crossing the perilous gangplank once more. He couldn’t pick up and carry the Princess like he had Lord Corvo, not with her pregnant belly, round and protruding. I dove back on the gangplank, holding it steady as Dougal gripped the Princess around her elbows, guiding her across. She made it, and I found I could breathe easier.

I watched the Princess squeeze the Captain’s hands in passing. “Thank you for coming back, Meagan.”

“Katya,” the Captain nodded.

As Dougal helped the Princess descend through the hatch, the Captain turned her dark eyes on Rosemary and I.

We were the last two.

“You first, Rosemary,” I said, gently pushing her in front of me. Her long blonde hair was pasted to her back in wet tangles. Water lapped against our legs, the barge sinking beneath us.

Time seemed to slow—not like Corvo’s magic—just the trick of the mind under extreme stress, perhaps. I wanted to get aboard the Dreadful Wale, to feel safe, but I knew that feeling would be fleeting. There was nothing safe about being pursued by the Jessamine. Nothing safe about running for our lives.

Rosemary took the gangplank one shaky step at a time, the rucksack and suitcase balanced in each arm. On the other side, the Captain waited patiently, crouching by the hatch door.

The light was dim, and Meagan’s skin was already so dark it was hard to see her face, but I caught her expression in the split second before she hid it behind impassive eyes. Recognition. She knew Rosemary, and not only that, she was horrified to see her. Absolutely horrified.
Like seeing a ghost.

Rosemary gave no indication she had seen the Captain’s reaction, or even recognized her in return. They acted like complete strangers. I watched Rosemary descend into the ship through the hatch, slipping past the Captain without a word.

The Captain’s dark eyes slid to mine, her stare as blank as parchment. *Hiding secrets.*

I warily climbed up the rail to the gangplank. With no one to hold it steady on the barge-end, the wood rattled beneath my feet. *It won’t hold,* I thought. *I’m going to fall!*

On instinct, I raised my sorcery hand, curling my fingers into the downward-spider pose the Outsider had taught me in the Void. The arcane tether stretched out over the water in purple tendrils, snagging the edge of the *Dreadful Wale.*

I flung myself across the gap, landing softly beside the Captain. Behind me, I heard the crash of the gangplank as it hit the water. No less jarring was the look on the Captain’s face.

I had used my powers in front of her.

Reckless, I knew. My hand burned with the Outsider’s Mark, reminding me of my father who had tirelessly hid his Mark from the world before losing it to Delilah. The Abbey would have killed him for it, branding him a heretic. He had kept the secret for *years,* yet here I was, barely a full day into it and already three—no, *four* people had learned my secret. First the Blind Sister (who I greatly feared would tell others in the Abbey), then Simon the Printer (who had promised to keep my secret), one of Ramsey’s men in the City Watch (a witch-murderer, no less), and finally Captain Meagan Foster.

I felt foolish, but what else could I have done? The Blind Sister’s uncanny sight had seen right through me. ‘*A heretic fighting a heretic. We’re all doomed,*’ I not-so-fondly recalled. And Simon would be dead if I hadn’t used my sorcery to disarm the City Watchman. He’d seen my magic, but not the Mark itself.

In fact, most people had never even heard of the Mark! Everyone knew about magic, but few had seen or even believed it was real. The Mark was something only religious fanatics were taught to look for, and because the Outsider Marked so few, rarely were people able to recognize it for what it was.

Ignorance hid the Mark as surely as any wrapping. But the shock on the Captain’s face was not born of ignorance. *She’s no stranger to sorcery,* I thought, glancing into her dark eyes.

*It’s not the magic itself that has shocked her,* I thought, like it did Simon the Printer. *It’s the wielder.* It’s not every day you find out your Empress is a secret heretic.

“You have the Mark of the Outsider?” the Captain asked in a low voice, her face suffusing with deadly calm.

The dirty rag obscured the Mark, but I raised my hand nonetheless, picturing the eerie black marks burned into my skin. It still felt strange. New. I wasn’t used to it.

I slowly replied, “The Outsider and I… we are… *allies* against Delilah.”

“Strange bedfellows,” the Captain said, a dark eyebrow rising. *You have no idea,* I thought wryly.

The Captain’s face turned cold as she glanced towards the dark underbelly of the ship. “Is that also
why Rosemary is with you? Did she tell you a pretty lie about being on your side?”

My heart leapt. “What?”

She shook her head at me. “You don’t know, do you?”

I felt sick. “Know what?”

Her dark lips were set in a grimace. “That was Rosemary MacKenzie, daughter of Roger MacKenzie and…’ Her black eyes flickered with dark memories. “Delilah Copperspoon.”

The daughter of a witch.

The river rippled in the moonlight, the Dreadful Wale gliding along its waves. I felt like the barge beside her, slowly sinking into dark waters, never to be seen again, an undertow of dread pulling me down, down...

The Captain took my shocked silence as confirmation I’d had no idea. Her eyes were dark and insistent. “We should throw her back. Let the river take her.”

“What? Throw her overboard?”

The Captain’s dark eyes were incredulous. “Yes. She is the daughter of your enemy. Why would—”

“No! You think you know her, but you don’t. Rosemary is under my protection. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get the hell out of Dunwall.”

I felt numb. Broken.

I moved past her, slipping through the hatch. The underbelly of the ship smelled of warm wood and old metal. The cabin was dark and quiet, the sounds of the river muted behind thick walls. Even the thunderous whale oil explosions sounded further away.

My eyes adjusted quickly. The large, rectangular cabin was packed with canvas-wrapped cargo and wooden boxes. An assortment of glass bottles clinked softly as I climbed over them to reach the door. Behind me, Captain Foster closed and locked the square-lidded hatch above her.

She wouldn’t meet my eyes as I waited by the door.

“We should get underway while the Jessamine is still distracted,” the Captain said, her leather boots striking the wooden floorboards in confident strides.

“The pirate ships attacking the Jessamine, are they yours?” I asked, following close behind.

“Yes and no.”

What did that mean? My line of thought instantly derailed when I spotted Rosemary. She stood with the Princess at the end of a long, narrow hallway, a pair of closed doors behind them. They were huddled close together like shivering ducklings.

It felt like a punch to the gut to see Rosemary’s big blue eyes. Why didn’t I notice it before? I thought, berating myself for being so blind. Her sapphire eyes shone with the same blue intensity as Delilah’s in the throne room.

And her golden hair…
When Delilah had claimed to be my mother’s sister, born of Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin (also golden-haired), I couldn’t believe it. I told myself it must be lies, a wild grab for legitimacy, but now I felt lost and utterly stunned.

If Rosemary was Delilah’s daughter, that meant Rosemary and I were cousins!

The Princess smiled weakly at the Captain. Even Rosemary looked relieved to see us, unaware of Meagan’s shattering revelation. I noticed how Meagan stood back, keeping distance between herself and witch-spawn.

“Thank you again, Meagan,” the Princess said. “We owe you our lives.”

“Not if I can’t get us out of here,” she said, her eyes meeting mine. “Let’s get to the bridge.”

“Wait, please! The Princess needs to lie down,” Rosemary pleaded. “She’s with child! Where can we go?”

The Captain schooled her features well. Her face was a stone wall. She nodded at the double doors. “Through there. Anton’s quarters are at the bow of the ship.”

“Stay with her, Rosemary,” I said as gently as possible. “I’ll come by to check on you both later.”

And to talk. Did Rosemary know she was Delilah’s daughter? She’d been cursed to forget herself, and while she had regained some ability to cast spells, she’d never once mentioned any newfound insight into her past.

Rosemary nodded, anxiety written all over her face. “Yes, Your Highness.”

She senses my distrust, I realized. How could she not? After what had happened last night in the safe room, Rosemary had tasted my distrust before, and knew its confusion and bitterness all too well.

As Rosemary and the Princess turned away, I saw Dougal standing in an open doorway. Behind him, I spotted my father resting on a simple bed, still unconscious. I didn’t expect him to wake until morning. The Captain waited for me, pausing on a metal staircase as Dougal addressed me with a quick bow.

“Your Highness?”

With Lord Corvo thus indisposed, Dougal had taken it upon himself to act as my royal bodyguard. As an Eye, I considered him more than capable.

“Stay with him,” I softly commanded. “I’ll be back. We’re going to the bridge to assess the situation.”

“Aye. I won’t leave him.”

“Good,” I said, stealing a glance at Meagan. “We’re not out of the woods yet.”

“This way, Lady Emily,” the Captain said with a touch of impatience.

We took three flights of stairs to reach the bridge. Large forward-facing windows crowned a swath of mechanical instruments controlling the ship. A small bed fit in one corner—Meagan’s, clearly—next to a bedside table with personal belongings. A journal. A plate of fruit. Did she live on the ship alone? Had it been just her and Anton Sokolov before the Crown Killer kidnapped the old
The Captain worked the controls. I could feel the ship’s engines roar to life. We were picking up speed, but it still felt too slow. “We can’t outrun the Jessamine,” I said, joining her at the windows. “Tell me the pirate ships weren’t the only part of the plan to get us out of here.”

We stood shoulder to shoulder, staring into the open river before us, the waves dark but for flashes of eerie blue light. The whale oil explosions were dying down, becoming less frequent. *Either the Jessamine is running out of ordnance or she’s sunk all the poor bastards and has fewer targets,* I thought sourly.

“I’m afraid so, Lady Emily.”

“There must be something else we can do.”

“It was always a long shot,” the Captain said. “If we can clear the river and reach the Ocean, maybe we can lose the Jessamine by morning.”

“Maybe?”

I stormed out the bridge unto the open-aired deck and gripped the rails, staring into the distance where the sea battle was dying. The ‘pirate horde’ was nothing more than a smattering of burning ships, half-sunk beneath the waves. Smoke hovered above the water, and through the haze I spotted the Jessamine, seemingly stronger than ever. We were moving away, the flagship receding from sight around the river’s bend, but for how long?

The Captain joined me, bending over the rail to rest on her forearms. That remarkable calm returned, reminding me of Alexi. She said, “The Ocean is a big place. I know a few deserted islands and smugglers’ coves we can hide in. The Jessamine won’t know where to look first, and her superior speed won’t mean a damn thing if we play our cards right. They’ll be swimming in circles by the time we reach Karnaca.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

I felt helpless.

I wanted to believe her, but… I’d toured the Jessamine in person, had seen up close how fearsome and advanced the warship truly was. The underwater torpedo armaments were a government secret, and the ship was installed with sonar machinery (an invention spearheaded by Piero Joplin after studying whale vocalizations).

We could run, but I didn’t think we’d get very far. Eventually, the Jessamine would catch us. My eyes lowered to the waves, the emerald river shadowing secret depths. *Outsider,* I prayed, *If you’re still alive… if you’re still out there, please… help us.*

The Blind Sister’s prophecy had foretold his death—that it would happen *this* night. I felt cold and lonely, my damp clothes clinging to my skin. Would I feel his death? Would I recognize the exact moment when the Void lost its god? Its chosen voice?

The Captain spoke into the uneasy silence. “Lady Emily, you should rest. Get dry and warm.”

I shivered, watching the Jessamine fade behind us, engulfed by the haze of smoke rising above the waters. Even the light of the moon seemed to fade, the world falling into unending darkness.
What more could we do?

“I’ll be with my father,” I sighed, acquiescing. “Captain Foster, I…”

I wanted to command her like an Empress, to tell her to get me immediately if the Jessamine returned. To command her to leave Rosemary alone. To make her spill all the secrets I saw hidden deep within her eyes…

But I felt bone-weary to my core, lost to the horrendous events of the last two days…

“Thank you,” I simply said.

The Captain studied my face. She went back to the bridge and dug under her bed, pulling out dry clothes and a soft towel. I felt hollow as she handed them to me. The last time I’d borrowed clothes, I’d been ten years old, kidnapped from the palace during the Rat Plague.

Her dark eyes held a flicker of sympathy. “It’ll pass… the shock.”

After a wordless shudder rippled through my body, I forced out the one question I feared. “How do you know her?”

I didn’t need to say who.

Meagan looked away. “A long story.”

*And not one she’s inclined to share. Not without my trust.* The Captain sighed heavily, acknowledging my frustration. She reluctantly admitted, “It’s been a long time, Emily. Another life.”

“How long?” I demanded in a shaky murmur.

The Captain’s jaw irked, but she continued, her voice flat and emotionless. “More than fifteen years ago. Rosemary was just a child, a little witchling. Obviously, she looks a lot older than I last remembered, but some things never change, do they? She still has her father’s look and her mother’s eyes…”

She added stonily, stepping closer, “And her mother’s black heart. You endanger us all by allowing her to stay.”

“That’s for me to decide.”

“As you say, Empress,” she said, bowing slightly, but her voice was hollow and her gaze stubborn.

*She has no love for the aristocracy,* I thought. She was the Captain of the Dreadful Wale—and her life. Why should she obey me? We were uneasy allies, the fragile thread of Anton Sokolov connecting us for a short time.

I left her on the bridge, returning to my father’s small cabin. I touched Dougal’s arm by the door.

“Don’t let Captain Foster meet with Rosemary alone. Keep them separated.”

His eyes were fraught with concern, but he didn’t question my orders. “Yes, Your Majesty. Good night.”

“Good night.” I closed the door behind me. Dougal would stand guard outside in the hallway. I felt safer for his presence.
I heard my father snoring on the bed. He looked peaceful in the dim lantern’s light. *A comforting illusion.* There would be little peace when he finally awoke, I knew. The Outsider said Delilah had shattered his mind, plunging him into madness.

I turned my back, bending over to untie my boots. I undressed, my body aching from exhaustion. It was hard peeling off the layers, but eventually my wet clothes pooled on the floor. I wanted to hang them to dry, but even that felt like too difficult a chore.

A large, white-washed metal desk sat opposite the bed. On it, I set down my crossbow, pistol, and my father’s folding sword. *That I would never leave discarded on the floor.* I toweled off and slipped into Meagan’s clothes. They were a good fit. Dry and warm, I felt much better. Human again. My father was still in his clothes, of course, having passed the day, fortunately, without getting too damp.

Dougal had piled blankets on top of him. He looked as snug as a bug. I touched his face, tenderly tucking astrand of his long dark hair behind an ear.

“*We’ll make it, Father,*” I whispered. “*I won’t give up.*”

The bed was small, but there was room for two if you didn’t mind teetering on the edge. I stayed above the blankets, content to lie next to him, to listen to his steady breathing.

I curled on my side, leaning against him, my left hand resting against his arm. I had removed the dirty rag, letting it fall to the floor. The Outsider’s Mark stared back at me as if it was alive, drawing me into a dark embrace.

*Sleep,* it said. *Dream.*

I closed my eyes and surrendered to the darkness.
Part 3: Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Part III continued

“The Dreadful Wale”

Chapter 25

The Void felt different. Warmer. Even brighter. The Outsider was still alive—I could feel it—but his black star was fading beneath Delilah’s bright ascension.

I stood alone in a garden of black roses.

The garden appeared to be floating in a black sea of other gardens, each sprung from gray rock. A silvery sheen blanketed the roses like kisses of moonlight.

But there was no moon. There were no stars. The Void spun around me like molten glass, flowing from one shape to another. Steps formed at my feet, beckoning me forward along a grassy path. The grass was a brilliant green, a shock of color against shifting shades of gray.

I followed the path.

Time had no meaning. I just walked on and on, the roses at my feet shimmering like black jewels.

I picked one.

I watched the rose wither in my hand, its soft petals curling in on itself until only a pinch of black ash remained in the center of my palm. I lifted it to my mouth and blew. The ashes danced in unnatural spirals, forming a lifelike scene of revelry in my opened palm. Tiny, faceless dancers formed a ring around two figures. A man and a woman. He held the woman’s hand in his, bowing low over it with a gentle kiss. When he rose, his eyes were like black diamonds.

But it was the woman’s eyes I felt drawn to. Bright eyes, a spark of madness within. My eyes.

I gasped, clenching my hand into a fist. The miniature scene vanished in a whoosh of black magic, like a mirror exploding into jagged pieces, each a reflection of the Void. I closed my eyes, pressing my fist against my racing heart. Like a ghost whispering in my ear, I heard the distant sounds of merry laughter and the soft clinking of silver and glass. Memories of home, of the Rose Gardens in evening’s light… The Sunset Regalia. Had it only been yesterday? It felt like a lifetime ago.

I heard soft footsteps behind me and opened my eyes.

“My dearest niece.”

I turned to face her. Delilah.

She was bathed in moonlight, her pale skin like porcelain. Her blue eyes were like ice, a chilling seduction so reminiscent of the Outsider’s black-eyed gaze. She smiled knowingly at me, as if we were sharing a secret.

She looked the same. Thin and graceful. A haunting beauty. She wore a dark pant suit with a pelt
of long feathers over her gaunt shoulders. Dark red roses framed a low bodice, exposing her cleavage. Again, as in the throne room, her makeup was strong, thick black lines circling her eyes.

She looked intensely satisfied to see me, like a cat with a mouse trapped beneath its paws.

“Surprised I can pull you into this place?” she asked, a charming smirk on her glossy black lips.

I said nothing, putting on my Empress face. My armor.

When the Outsider had ‘caught’ me falling from a rooftop, lifting me into the Void, I had quickly learned how loosely my thoughts were secured. I’d been an open book, my thoughts laid bare beneath the Outsider’s gaze. Did Delilah now have that same power to read minds?

*If she does, the war is lost before it’s even begun.* And so I remained silent, watching, waiting…

A throne chair appeared out of thin air. The garden of black roses shifted around it, as if it was the center of the Void. It looked like mine, the throne I’d lost, but it was wreathed in black vines, pulsating with red light.

Delilah traced a finger along those poisonous vines, smiling coyly at me. The black vines slithered and writhed around her finger, like a pet seeking affection.

“Little sparrow, how far you have flown,” she said, her voice dripping with malicious sweetness. “Do you really think you can escape Dunwall? Escape me?”

*Does she know I’m here on the river, racing towards the Ocean?* I held her gaze with all my strength, giving nothing away. Not one flinch. Her cold blue eyes dropped to my sorcery hand, the Mark of the Outsider burned into my skin.

“How unexpected! I see now I should have cast you into marble, and not your dear Royal Protector… I stole one Mark only to have it replaced by another. Interesting.”

Alarm rose in my breast and I sucked in a breath unwittingly. Can she steal my Mark, here in this place?

If she could, she would have done it already, I decided. I tried to relax, but my heart felt like a pounding kettledrum.

“Does it please you to know you were his last?” she asked, her black lips curling in scorn.

His last Mark.

*Wake up, Emily,* I thought desperately. The Outsider was sometimes called the Dream Whisperer. If I could somehow force myself awake, could I escape the Void? Escape her?

When I remained silent, Delilah gracefully crossed her legs and leaned back in the chair, staring intently at my face as if trying to read my thoughts. She looked majestic in the Void, a dark shimmer to her body that magnified her sorcery. She was a powerful witch; I could feel it in every pore of my body, rushing through my blood. I had the Outsider’s gift, but I was an apprentice, just learning my powers.

Before me was a master.

The more I looked at her, the more I saw my mother. I’d spent weeks painting my mother’s portrait for the remembrance ceremony, learning her every curve, her every line. Jessamine and Delilah
didn’t look like sisters—not outright—but there was a subtle similarity in the bones of the face.

“How?!”

I couldn’t stop myself, even knowing the question revealed the crack in my armor. If Delilah was family, my mother’s sister, how could she betray our shared blood? I would have welcomed her with open arms, if only she had bowed to me.

Delilah smiled. “Ah, so the sparrow does have a voice.”

“How?” I said again, annoyed she was toying with me. “Why did you do it? So you can have your petty revenge?”

I used the Outsider’s words, his explanation for why Delilah had stolen my throne. Revenge for what, I had no idea.

I instantly saw it was just the tip of the iceberg. Delilah’s eyes were icy pools of hunger.

This time, Delilah remained silent.

I shook my head in disgust. “How can you call yourself my aunt?”

“Your half-aunt, actually.” She shrugged like it was an amusing, but irrelevant irony. “Emperor Euhorn was a horny old goat. I am a bastard.”

She leaned forward in the chair, nailing me with her icy blue gaze. “Just like you.”

It was a slap to the face. Bastard daughter. How many times had I heard that whispered in the halls of Parliament? Tainted blood. Smears in the Dunwall Courier. Pressure to marry Gristol nobility. It was all because Empress Jessamine gave birth to a half-Serkonan baby out of wedlock.

Delilah smirked. “A sore subject, I see.”

“You have no right to the throne,” I shot back, glaring at her with all the hatred and rage I’d been holding back. The Throne Room Massacre. The innocents slain in the streets. It was all her fault!

“I have every right!”

Her voice struck like lightning, the Void flashing with arcs of brilliant energy. In the next instant, she Blinked away from the throne chair in a haze of red light, appearing beside me in a swirl of snaking, black tendrils. She whispered in my ear, her breath like hot coals, “No fate but what we make for ourselves.”

I recoiled from her.

She paints the world as she wants it to be.

I stammered, “The line of succession—”

She smiled. “You are no more ‘legitimate’ than I. Your mother was an Empress. My father was an Emperor. The fact is, Emily, I am older than you.”

“The rules of Parliament make it quite clear—”

“Foolish brat. You bore me.” Her tone was at once dismissive and disdainful. She turned away from me and I bristled as I glared at her back. She took a seat and from the throne she smiled at me.
A viper’s smile. “Go ahead. Take back your throne if you can, little niece.”

“I will.”

An elegant eyebrow rose. “So confident. Do you know something I don’t?” Her gaze flickered down to my Mark. “Is it the Outsider? Do you think he has helped you?”

She bubbled into sweet laughter.

“Oh, Emily! I’ve known the Outsider far longer than you. He only Marked you to make the game more interesting.” Her laughter died, simmering into deadly disquiet. “It’s too bad he won’t see how it ends.”

I paled. “You gave him the kiss of death.”

“Noticed that, did you?” She ran a finger over her plump lips, moaning slightly. “Mhm… his black lips, bruised to perfection.” Her eyelids fluttered. “That kiss, it was… ecstasy.”

I looked away, hating her.

I remembered a different kiss.

He had tasted like the ocean, the salt and brine of crashing waves against my tongue. I felt a chill run up my spine at the memory, the ghost of his dark lips against mine.

*When will I see you again?*

*His dark eyes flashed.* ‘*When I’m a new man…’*

‘*Look for me in the waves,’ he whispered. ‘The whales will bring me to you.*’

I stared into the Void, remembering… aching…

The Void careened around me, flowing between light and dark. I couldn’t help but notice how empty it felt. Quiet. No whale song. No *whales*. Not one magnificent beast emerged from the gloom to roll one beady eye upon me. The Outsider had said the whales were afraid of Delilah, that they didn’t choose her. *She is not welcome here*, I thought.

I took what hope that gave me and held tight.

When I looked back at Delilah, I found her glaring at me, a spiteful venom that marred her beauty. Her eyes bored into me like she was trying to break me apart. I realized she hadn’t just pulled me into the Void to taunt me.

She wanted something.

“Did the Outsider show you his crooked cock?”

Her question was blunt. Cruel.

“What?” I breathed.

“No?” she mocked. “Not yet?”

She prowled around me like a tiger, circling her prey. “The Outsider is a master of seduction. He entices like one breathes. Did he hound you like a bitch in heat, pressing you to accept his Mark?
Or did he just *take* you and Mark you without your consent?"

She snatched my sorcery hand, forcing me to look at the Mark side by side with hers. They were the same.

I tried to pull back, but she held me in a death grip. She snarled, “See how he *loves* us both. He cannot help himself. His arousal is all that matters.”

I finally broke free. I stumbled backwards, clutching my hands to my chest and breathing hard.

Delilah looked sick. She whispered hoarsely, “He has no care for us. We are no more to him than interesting diversions. *Whores.*”

*She’s been used,* I thought. *Badly.*

Though whether by men in this life or the Outsider, I did not know.

But the moment passed.

Delilah straightened her back and held her head high once more. “It does not matter. He is dying. The Outsider will return to the Hungry Cosmos. Ash to ash. Dust to dust. We will feel it together, you and I.”

“His death,” I whispered. It was foretold.

She lifted her blue eyes as if searching the Void. “Soon.”

“And afterwards?” I choked in anger. “Will you be the new Outsider?”

She laughed. “No, and I never wanted to be.” Her eyes flashed in righteous anger. “When the Outsider dies, the world will thank me for it.”

Doubt reared its ugly head. *Would* the world be better off without him? The Abbey certainly thought so.

“But magic—”

“Will still exist,” Delilah said, shaking her head. Her condescending tone was getting on my nerves. “The Void does not *need* an Outsider.”

*But the divine cycle,* I thought, remembering what the Outsider had revealed to me. He’d said Delilah had found the Genesis Altar, the source of his power, and his doom; it was where he first became the Outsider. He’d been a human before that, one chosen by the whales to ascend to godhood. He’d not been the first; there had been other Outsiders. He had explained how each Outsider was given a choice at the end of their cycle: return to the Hungry Cosmos (eternal oblivion) or rejoin the living and be reborn as a human. Was it possible Delilah knew nothing of this?

I felt a surge of anticipation and hope. *His rebirth is a secret,* I thought. A secret the Outsider had entrusted *me* with, not her.

I met Delilah’s eyes.

Fearlessly.

For the first time, I felt like I had a weapon against her. *Secret knowledge.*
“You couldn’t be the Outsider if you tried, Delilah,” I said. “You’re nothing but a parasite, draining his power like a black-bellied leech.”

Delilah smiled coldly at my insolence.

“It’s time,” she said.

She turned her back to me. The long feathers of her pelt fluttered as if touched by wind, but the Void seemed to hang motionless, oddly so.

The Void stopped.

The black sea spun no more, the floating islands frozen in time. Inside the garden where I stood, the black roses began to wither, thousands of petals curling into death’s repose. The green grass shriveled to ash and sunk into the gray stones. All became black. All became nothing.

Delilah disappeared in a haze of red light.

I was alone.

But I heard her voice, a haunting echo in my ears. “He’s dead, little sparrow. Gone forever.”

The darkness pressed in on all sides. I struggled against the panic. Delilah went on, “Whatever trick you think you have up your sleeve, let me assure you... It’s a lie. The Outsider is your weakness, not your strength.”

Her voice reverberated. Over and over, it sunk into my bones. *Your weakness, not your strength. Your weakness...*

“Wake up, Emily!” Delilah’s voice taunted.

*Wake up.*

“Wake up!”

I shot forward, nearly jumping out of bed. I was furiously gasping, trying to catch my breath. My heart felt like it would burst. I groaned in pain, clutching my head, a massive headache throbbing behind my eyes. My skin was slick with sweat and I felt like I was going to vomit.

The lantern’s dim light cast strange shadows over the bed. I glanced at my father lying next to me. His eyes were open.

“Father?”

I held my breath, afraid to move, afraid to see what he had become. *Corvo the Black.* The Outsider had freed him from stone, but not his mind. He’d said Corvo had gone mad, that Delilah’s spell had awakened a monster deep within, shattering the man he’d once been. ‘There’s a darkness in Corvo’s soul,’ the Outsider had said. ‘He’d sooner drown the world in blood, and cast the Empire into chaos if it meant restoring you to your throne.’

I trembled to see him. His eyes looked inhuman. Corvo’s once-warm brown eyes were gone. Pitch black pupils stared back at me, the whites of his eyes grotesquely bloodshot.

“Wake up,” he whispered. “It’s just a bad dream.”
I froze, lost in his eyes.

“Father?”

I couldn’t believe it. I’d been so afraid of this moment, that I would find him reduced to a blathering idiot, incapable of coherent speech, yet here he was, looking at me like I was crazy.

“Where are we, Emily?” He curled upwards, pushing the blankets off his chest. “What ship is this?”

The little cabin had no porthole windows, but the swaying of the ship and the sounds of the river were unmistakable.

“The Dreadful Wale,” I said between gasps of pain. I gripped my head as the headache throbbed in waves. I felt my father gently rub my arms, trying to comfort me. He used to do that when I was a little girl, frightened by nightmares when I’d slept in the broken tower outside the Hounds Pit Pub.

I forced myself to look into his eyes as he tucked a stray hair behind my ear. “What’s wrong, Em? You never get headaches this bad.”

“Concussion,” I grunted.

I’d known it would eventually come back to haunt me. Sokolov’s Elixir had only been a temporary measure. Not only would the pain return, but the bruises, too. From the look on my father’s face, he’d found them. He turned my face with his fingers, tipping me to the left and to the right as he inspected Ramsey’s handiwork. He’d slugged me hard in the throne room, kicking me in the head when I was down, and then later Lord Cosimo… Well, I didn’t want to think about that.

And if my father saw the hickies on my neck, he’d put two and two together.

“What happened?” he asked, a deep growl in his throat that scared me. Corvo was no longer turned to stone, but his expression was just as hard. A deadly calm spread over his face. He wants to know who hurt me so he can hurt them back. Hurt them bad.

I turned away from his touch, looking down at my hands. It was too difficult staring into his eyes; they were beyond disturbing. I slipped my sorcery hand beneath the blanket, afraid to reveal the Mark. I wasn’t ready to feel his wrath directed at me. He’d been so adamant that I reject the Outsider.

“Please,” I whimpered. I was too tired, too hurt, too upset to even attempt to explain everything that had happened since he lost consciousness. “We’re safe,” I managed, at least giving him that. “For now.”

Corvo sighed heavily and dug through his coat, opening a secret pocket I’d not noticed before. He withdrew a tiny glass vial of Sokolov’s Elixir. “You need rest,” he said, “and you can’t rest if your head is killing you. Drink this.”

I was in too much pain to refuse. I took the vial with a shaky hand and swallowed the red liquid in one gulp. I shuddered as it burned down my throat. With that done, I leaned against him, resting my head against his chest as he wrapped his strong arms around me. I didn’t care if he was Corvo the Black. He was my father and I felt safe in his arms.

A gulf of extreme exhaustion opened before me and I fell inside, drifting off…
An indeterminable time later, I felt his hot breath on top of my head, sinking into my hair. He softly asked, “Do you hear that?”

“Wha…”

“Her voice.”

I heard nothing more, the sweet oblivion of sleep taking me.

Chapter End Notes

I awoke to the terrible realization that my head still hurt. Not as bad as last night, but still I was in pain. I pushed off the covers and sat up, groggily rubbing my eyes and feeling totally out of sorts. My neck felt stiff.

Father was gone.

It took a moment for that to sink in. When it did, I jumped out of bed like I was on fire.

“Damnit, Emily!”

I spun in ridiculous circles, shock rippling like goosebumps, the shock of waking up in an unfamiliar place and the cold reality of remembering why. Delilah. Father. The bloody Outsider! Everything was turned upside down, and nothing would be right again until I reclaimed my throne. Went home. I took several deep breaths, trying to calm down, to think through this horrible headache. What time was it? How long had I slept?

I half-expected to hear the Clocktower of Dunwall chiming the hours, but I figured by now the capital city was far behind us. The Dreadful Wale felt like it was moving at a steady clip, the engines softly roaring over the sound of the waves.

Fear hit me. What about the Jessamine? Had we put enough distance between us? I needed to find out; I couldn’t stay here, spinning in useless circles.

The cabin looked different. Someone had picked up my clothes from the floor. They were spread out to dry over brassy rum barrels and a utility sink. Last night, the Sea Captain had let me borrow a few things: black slacks and a loose-fitting, long-sleeved blouse I was comfortable in, for now.

I found my boots under the desk. With a sigh, I leaned over to lace up my boots, the worn leather tightening around my calf muscles. My raven-black hair fell forward, so tangled and matted I barely recognized it as mine. I tucked what I could behind my ears, forcing away wistful thoughts of my enormous claw-foot tub. It was hard not to mourn the loss of my luxurious life when the idea of a hot bath sounded like heaven.

Be grateful you made it through the night, I told myself. My vanity can wait. My bladder, however, could not. I used the chamber pot in the corner and washed up at the utility sink, moving my long coat—still damp—to hang-dry over the desk chair instead.

I froze, noticing my father’s folding sword was missing from the white-washed planes of the desk. That can’t be good. I clipped my crossbow to my belt and shoved through the door to the hallway outside.

Dougal was gone.
I tried to reassure myself. *Everything’s fine*. Father would most likely have seen Dougal first thing upon exiting the cabin, and as one of his Eyes, would have provided his Royal Spymaster with a report of everything he’d seen and heard since the coup. Question was, where did they go after speaking?

I felt like I was retracing the steps of a madman, dreading what I’d discover at the end. My father had *seemed* fine, that is, in what little time we’d had together, but there was no mistaking the insidious, inhuman look to his eyes. I was afraid he would hurt himself—or others—if I didn’t keep an eye on him. I couldn’t forget the Outsider’s warning. ‘*Corvo will become a burden to you if freed from stone. His madness will be... murderous at times.*’ I’d taken the risk of freeing him anyhow, unable to even contemplate leaving Corvo behind.

“*I’m over here, Em,*” I heard to my right, a softly spoken voice unmistakably my father’s.

The calm tenor of his voice dashed all my fears and I felt less afraid. Silly, even. How could I have ever doubted him? He was always the strongest.

He was up a level in the lookout between the metal staircases, a band of windows wrapping in a half circle. A pleasant morning glow warmed the wooden floors, sunlight slanting through the windows. He looked *regal*, a remnant of the palace life we’d left behind. His dark coat was fitted over broad shoulders, casually opened to reveal his formal waistcoat beneath.

The tailoring was exquisite, of course. We’d had nothing but the best. *Now look at us.* Running away on an old pirate ship.

Corvo was leaning against the window-pane on one shoulder, turning his head to look out at the endless blue sky where it met the watery horizon. If I’d my painting easel with me, I might call it a suitable pose for a portrait. *Quiet reflection,* I’d name it.

*But rage not far beneath,* I mused. Like a kettle at the cusp of boiling…

Now that I’d found him, I didn’t know what to say.

I hesitantly came up beside him and touched the sword at his belt. “You took it back.”

“I’m still your Royal Protector.”

He wouldn’t look at me.

I felt the tension between us, and the great well of self-hatred and anguish he was trying to hide.

Eventually, he spoke, his voice strained to the point of breaking. “But maybe you have the right of it, Emily. Make I shouldn’t have taken it back. I failed my duty. *Again.*”

The shame in his voice nearly broke me. I touched his arm. “Don’t say that,” I said, tenderness and anger tangling in my throat, but he lashed out, his blood-crazed eyes burning a stake through my heart.

“Don’t pretend this isn’t my fault. All of this!”

He jerked away from my touch, glaring out the window. I watched his face and could have cried at what I saw.

“Don’t put all of this all on you,” I said, swallowing the angry lump in my throat. “I won’t have it.”
“You don’t get it. I always expected an enemy we could put down with a sword. Soldiers, spies, assassins. Instead we got something else, something beyond the pale—beyond the natural world. Instead we got hit by someone like me.”

I shuddered at his words.

Like Daud, I thought. The shadow of the master assassin was always there, haunting my father’s eyes. The life Daud had taken that day in the gazebo hadn’t been just my mother’s; my father had died that day, too, in his heart. I could only imagine how many cold nights Corvo had kneeled in that gazebo, year after year, promising Jessamine that he wouldn’t let it happen again, that he would be stronger next time. And yet… it had happened. Was my father doomed to repeat the same mistakes? No, I could never think that. Corvo was a living hero. He’d saved me more times than I could count. I could never give up on him, even when he was like this, especially when he was like this. A broken man.

His eyes found mine again. What had Delilah done to him? His black-pupilled eyes were inhuman beads of cold calculation and rabid alertness… I caught my breath, realizing… Rat eyes.

Hungry for blood. Crazed, like during the Rat Plague, thousands of beady eyes glinting in the dark of the alleyways. The whites of my father’s eyes were bloodshot. I’d been hoping that, at least, would fade, but still he looked… sick.

His voice grated. “With that kind of power and after all these years, how is it possible I never once crossed paths with her?”

Delilah.

He bowed his head, a veil of dark hair obscuring his face. I brushed it back, and Father looked up at me, searching my eyes. Since the moment Delilah proclaimed her return, seizing my throne, I’d been reeling in shock and horror, trying to stay one step ahead, trying to escape with my life. From Corvo’s perspective, perhaps it had been even worse. He’d been rendered unconscious, completely vulnerable, not just by Delilah’s sorcery, casting him inert, but by the Outsider’s magic, and later, by my own sleep dart. No wonder he feels helpless and consumed with guilt, I thought. Not once has he been able to fight back.

For a man like Corvo, what could be worse than feeling powerless? I had to be careful. I gently asked, “What do you remember, Father?”

His jaw tightened. “She stole my Mark.” He clenched his fist, the knuckles going white, but then he released it with a heavy sigh. “Though maybe that was a blessing in disguise. The Outsider’s madness can’t touch me now. I’m free.”

I could cry at the absurdity of it.

“No, Father. You have it wrong. That’s not how it works!” I grabbed his arm, willing him to listen. “The Outsider told me the truth. He said not everyone goes mad, only those who reach too far into the Void. You never did! You were always safe.”

I asked, “Then what about Delilah? How has she retained her sanity? Has she not done exactly that—reached too far into the Void? So far into the Void she has unseated the Outsider himself…"

“No.” Corvo’s face turned stone cold. “He lied to you and you fell for it. I told you, he’d—”
He cut me off with a murderous glance. “I saw your hand, Emily!” His rat eyes were beads of dark anger. “I promise you this. I will kill the Outsider for Marking you. He’ll pay for what he’s done to you. To us.”


That caused a tremor in his stone-cold expression, but he recovered quickly, his tone no less fierce. “Not dead enough. You still have his Mark.”

He looked away towards the endless Ocean, murder in his eyes. I followed his gaze, stricken by fear. The Outsider will come back as human, I thought. He’ll be vulnerable, and I’ll have to protect him. Somehow, someway, I had to convince my father not to kill the Outsider. He must understand! The Outsider was only trying to help us defeat Delilah, our common enemy. I had no idea when the Outsider would be reborn, but I had to believe it would be soon, that he wouldn’t make me wait for long.

“Here.”

I looked at him, startled by the softness in his voice. I watched him unravel the black leather wrappings that had once hid his Mark from the world. “Hold out your hand,” he said.

I watched his face as he wrapped my sorcery hand. This was now my burden to bear, I saw, the Mark disappearing beneath the black folds.

When it was done, he met my gaze, saying, “Don’t let anyone see it. I don’t trust anyone on this Void-forsaken ship.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Not even Dougal, your own Eye?”

“To a point,” he replied icily. Too late, anyhow, I thought sourly. The Captain already knew.

Corvo leaned back against the window, sunlight glinting so fiercely off his hair that I spotted a rare streak of silver. His beard had turned years ago, black sprinkled with gray, but the hair on his head had remained eerily untouched, full-bodied and dark. I’d always wondered if his unusual vitality (at his age) was due to the Outsider’s Mark, some arcane mystery granting him a measure of youthfulness in the winter of his life.

But, now, with his Mark stolen, I wondered if that would change. He’ll be the brooding old man on the outside as he is on the inside, I thought with a little smile. For all that had happened, and despite my father’s uncanny… complications, I was happy he was here with me. That we were together.

I asked with a faint smile, “Where is Dougal anyway?”

“I found him falling asleep in his boots,” he said, looking back towards my cabin door. “I relieved him of duty, told him to get some shuteye.”

“Did you ask—”

“Yes, but I didn’t get much out of him. Too dead tired. He said the City Watch was divided.”

inside man and…”

A stab of grief hit me, and I hesitated.

“What else?” Corvo asked, eyeing me.

“Father, it’s… Alexi’s dead.”

Dark memories of blood and her lifeless eyes came back to me. My friend was gone. Father’s, too. Corvo and Alexi had been close; he’d trusted her, and that said something.

His eyes narrowed. “How?”

“Ramsey killed her.”

“Then I’ll kill him, too.”

I choked back a mirthless laugh. “There’s no need. Ramsey has gotten exactly what he deserves. The Outsider turned him to stone in my safe—”

“He’s alive?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then it’s not good enough. Try to understand, Emily. The old ways of thinking are dead. Delilah has changed the game. We adapt or we die, simple as that.” He grabbed my shoulders, jerking me once, and hard, like he was trying to wake me up from a deep slumber. “No more mercy! No more non-lethal resolutions like I’ve always taught you.” He said it like it was bile in his mouth. “It was weakness, all of it!”

He pulled his sword and extended it to full length, the metal whirring in a slicing motion. He held it parallel between us, sunlight glinting off its deadly edge.

“We play by the rules of the sword, now,” he said in a hushed whisper, like the words were sacred.

No.

I pushed his sword hand down. “Delilah is immortal, Father. You said it yourself—you always expected an enemy we could put down with a sword—but now we can’t. Killing isn’t how we get through this.”

He jerked away from my touch, lifting the sword once more.

“Revenge, measured in blood, is the only way we get through this. We kill everyone around Delilah—everyone she loves—and somewhere in that miasma of blood and death, we’ll find the secret to her immortality and crush her with it. Destroy every, last living tie she has to this world.”

I thought of Rosemary, my heart breaking. Was she not exactly that—a living tie? Barely a day into our escape and already Father wanted to kill the Outsider and everyone involved with Delilah’s coup. Rosemary will be next, I thought. He’ll want to kill her, too.

How am I going to hold him back?

I pushed down the panic rising in my throat. “You’re wrong,” I said. I fumbled for a different topic. “Tell me, have you… have you met the Sea Captain yet?”
“Earlier, yes.”

“And?”

“And I don’t trust her. She’s hiding something.”

The fact that Meagan Foster had recognized Rosemary from her past—more than fifteen years ago, to be precise—when Rosemary was just another witch among witches—then, yes, I bloody well knew the Captain was hiding something! We’re all hiding something, I thought with a scowl. “I don’t entirely trust her either,” I admitted, “but she’s gotten us out of Dunwall, and she has critical information about the Crown Killer.”

“What she has,” Corvo hissed, “is a ship. We won’t need her after a point.”

“You can’t kill her, too!”

“Now you’re just being childish! I’m trying to protect you, Emily. Why can’t you see that?”

He sounded truly angry with me.

“Because this isn’t you!”

“Exactly. The old me failed you again and again. It’s time I accepted that.” His voice cracked with emotion and he looked away, his beady eyes dark pools of shame.

I loved him too much to see him suffer.

“No, no. It’s not your fault, Father. Delilah… everything that’s happened… it’s bigger than us. We’re nothing more than seashells getting swept away by the tide.”

“I don’t need your pretty metaphors. This is war, now.” He sheathed his sword in a seamless motion, fully in control, fully lethal. “We do things my way.”

“No! Why won’t you listen? Sowing chaos is not the answer.”

“No, you listen. I’m not just your Royal Protector, I’m your father. I know what’s best for you.”

“Oh, you know what’s best for me? I’m the bloody Empress!”

“Don’t get cheeky with me, nagfish.”

My mouth fell open.

I hadn’t heard that nickname in years. Not since I was a little girl, nagging him day in and day out to please, please, please train me to be a great swordfighter like him. He knew I hated that nickname. Hated hagfish, too. Every time the Royal Cook served a plate of pickled redjawed hagfish eyes, I’d squirm in my seat. When Wyman had learned of my curious aversion, he’d jokingly put hagfish eyes in my winecup one night. I don’t know how our relationship survived that, but it did. And, somehow, I’ll survive you, too, Father.

“Don’t call me that,” I fumed, angry that he would twist our memories like that. The nickname was a joke, but it had never been cruel.

“You’re too soft,” he said, his rat eyes glimmering like a crawling foulness over my skin. When I just stood there—hurt and angry and upset—he shook his head and touched my shoulder, turning me away from the windows. “Alright, alright, enough. Let’s forget we argued and get some breakfast.”
I pulled back. “I’m not hungry.”

He snorted, “I don’t believe that. Come on, Em. Let’s see what the Captain has cooked up in the galley. She mentioned turtle stew.”

He headed down the staircase without me, making me feel like a stubborn, silly child for not following. From the sun, I judged it was nearly high noon. I’d slept far longer than I intended—but, clearly, I’d needed it. Getting rid of my horrible headache meant I needed more rest and, yes, food. My stomach growled, attesting to the lack of it.

“I don’t want turtle stew,” I whined, thinking about that delicious pigeon pie from the Sunset Regalia. Maybe I was hungry. Starving, actually. I shot my father a dirty look (not that he could see it) and called after him, “What else did you discuss with the Captain?”

No doubt he wanted to take over the reins of the Crown Killer investigation. If he expected me to withdraw to a safe, little corner of the Dreadful Wale while he rampaged and bloodied the city of Karnaca in murderous glee, he was gravely mistaken!

This wasn’t the Rat Plague—he didn’t have to go it alone. I was going to be a part of this whether he liked it or not. (And speaking of which, Corvo had chosen not to bathe Dunwall in blood during that crisis: non-lethal had been his righteous fury, his saving grace. To see him discard it, now, for weakness was devastating beyond belief.)

He paused half-way down the hallway, looking back at me as I caught up to him. “Captain Foster promised us a quick tour of the Dreadful Wale, and an intelligence briefing to go over everything she and Sokolov learned about the Crown Killer and how it all connects to Delilah and the Duke. Breakfast, first, though.”

Not one day out of the palace and already I had people taking charge of my day. I scowled. “You sound like Erick with his damn appointment book.” At my father’s hesitant look, I added, “He didn’t make it.”

I’d last seen my dour-faced scheduling secretary in a pool of his own blood.

“And Coral?” he asked, knowing the old chambermaid had been like a second mother to me.

“Her, neither,” I said as we paused before the double doors at the end of the hallway. A stone of dread sunk into my belly when I realized who he was going to ask about next…

His eyes were cold. “And Rosemary?”

The last time Corvo had seen her, it’d been for a split second after the Outsider had turned him back into flesh. The Outsider had rendered him unconscious, claiming my father’s first thought had been to kill Rosemary with his bare hands around her throat. Not much later, I’d stuck him with a sleep dart, afraid he would wake up before I was ready to deal with him. I may never be ready, I thought.

I asked, cautious as ever, “Father, do you remember what happened after Delilah stole your Mark?”

He grimaced, clearly not liking where this was going. “She used her black magic on me. I felt it crawling over my skin until… until I didn’t feel anything. I was just… gone.”

“And after that?”

“A cold touch. I saw you and the Outsider and—fucking Void.”
Rage kindled in his eyes. He suddenly blinked, looking tensely around him like a wild animal with its fur up.

“Is she here? Did you take Rosemary with you?” The disbelief in his voice was palpable.

“We wouldn’t have escaped without her!” I cried defensively. He looked antsy, like he wanted to lash out at something. Hit something. *Kill* something. “Promise me you won’t hurt her,” I demanded.

Corvo got in my face, standing tall as he glared down at me. “We’re not doing this again,” he growled.

“I’m not—”

“Only this time, it’s worse. More lies. More self-deception! How much closer are you going to let her get before you realize she’s a threat, Emily? When she’s up against your back with a knife to your throat?”

I swallowed hard, trying to formulate a response when the double doors swung open. It startled both of us. We fell back as the Captain appeared. Her face was grim and unamused, like the last thing she needed was the Empress and her Royal Protector arguing on *her* ship.

She crossed her arms. “Breakfast is getting cold.”
Part 3: Chapter 27

Part III continued

“The Dreadful Wale”

Chapter 27

I never had turtle stew for breakfast before, not to mention turtle stew laced with this much whiskey.

I coughed into the bowl, refusing to lift my eyes from the murky liquid. I held my spoon in one hand and a chunk of bread in the other. For now, that’s all I needed. I was too angry to look at Father.

He was slurping down his own meal on the opposite side of the table. The wood smelled faintly of turpentine, the slabs roughened and deeply gouged in places. The square-shaped table was more like a workbench than a dining table.

The centerpiece—if you could call it that—was a taxidermy display of a yellow-crowned Pandyssian black bird with a fiery red-orange belly. ‘RHINO GONOlek’ was inscribed beneath. It reminded me of Anton Sokolov. I smiled to myself. Damn natural philosophers with their exotic treasures…

The Captain was another centerpiece, no less exotic.

She sat at the edge of the table between my father and I, casually perched with one leg up on a wooden stool. She seemed contemplative. Gloomy, even.

*There is far more to her than meets the eye,* I mused. She was as quiet as the bird, staring into nothing. She struck a match and lit her pipe, seemingly content to draw her peace one puff at a time.

The scent of tobacco filled the air, not entirely unpleasant. It reminded me of Wyman, of lazy afternoons in the Rose Gardens with our favorite hookah.

And it reminded me of Anton. The old man would puff away on his pipe, leaning over my shoulder to check my work, grunting in approval as I solved a difficult equation, stacks of textbooks surrounding me like a fortress. I loved it. Loved learning. Mathematics and art history, geography and politics, natural science and alchemy. Sokolov had overseen my education in the Tower before his retirement, fashioning me into one of the most well-educated monarchs in history. Who else could boast of having the Anton Sokolov as one of their personal tutors?

Few indeed.

But Anton was a bit of heavy drinker, too, and had an ill temper. That habit he’d clearly kept alive aboard the Dreadful Wale. There were empty bottles of King Street Brandy in the back corner—where Dougal now slept.

My Morley giant was stretched haphazardly over a cloth-draped couch, his long legs dangled over the arm rest, right next to an overturned crate with cards and dice.

The sound of his loud snoring was oddly calming, a break from the awkward silence between the three of us at the table. I ate my breakfast and listened to the endless lapping of the waves against the hull and the gentle roaring of the ship’s engines. It all folded over me, creating a cocoon of peace, of purpose. We had this time together, now, to plan our next move, to pause as we gathered our strength. To lick our wounds and come back stronger. Anton Sokolov was depending on us. He’d
been kidnapped by the Crown Killer, and by finding him we could finally, perhaps, begin to unravel Delilah’s schemes.

I glanced at Meagan’s back where she was hunched over, seated at the edge of the table. She was facing a large, free-standing blackboard, so huge it stretched wider than the table. Behind it was a deep trove of cargo.

Her whole ship was packed with a dizzying array of stuff. Brassy rum barrels and bottles of alcohol with faded labels… Stamped wooden boxes of Gristol green tea and Pratchett jellied eels in rounded tins… Not just a smuggler’s payload either; it was Anton’s stuff, too. All his workshop gizmos and gadgets, inventions made of greased metal, copper wires and tinted glass, his stone grinders and heavy-duty vises and clamps. His painting supplies. Easel and canvas. Brushes and palettes. The reek of turpentine and oily paints…

All of it was dizzying. We were inside the largest part of the ship’s underbelly: the cargo hold. The ceiling itself was actually a multi-sectional door capable of opening to the main deck for loading. For now, we were shuttered inside: dark, quiet, and safe.

I stood up, taking my bowl with me to look closer at… well… at everything.

I meandered near the blackboard, walking as I ate, my eyes drifting over what must have taken months to assemble. The blackboard was a collage of newspaper clippings, notated maps, hand-written notes, and silver plate photographs. The conspiracy’s deep web, I realized, with Delilah as the black spider in the middle, weaving her treachery.

Photographs of Delilah and the Duke were side by side, a red string linking them from nail to nail. The Grand Duke of Serkonos, the Duke Luca Abele was, in turn, connected to Lieutenant Mortimer Ramsey below. Shocking! Sokolov, my bloody genius. He had discovered what all my father’s spies and informants had failed to see—the Duke’s inside man.

But there was more.

Ramsey, in turn, was connected by string to a sepia-toned photograph of Commander Kittredge of the Wrenhaven River Patrol, and next to him, a black and white portrait of Corporal Jameson Curnow of the City Watch.

I knew them both. Jameson, cousin to my old governess Callista, was also the son of Geoff Curnow, the old Captain of the City Watch during my mother’s reign, before Alexi Mayhew. I couldn’t believe Jameson would betray me! His own father had been a close friend of Corvo’s during the Rat Plague, but he died not long after. Died a hero, fighting the Regenter extremists.

Did Jameson blame me for that? After Ramsey’s betrayal, I couldn’t deny the possibility of more turncoats in the most unlikely of places. Commander Kittredge, though, was less surprising.

I had never liked his cold, hollow eyes.

I dipped into my bowl, scraping the last of my stew with my spoon. I was still hungry.

“Lady Emily,” Meagan said, pushing off the table. “There’s more in the galley.”

Her dark eyes stared into mine. We barely knew each other, but I understood that look. She wanted to speak with me, alone. I flicked my eyes over my father, still digging into his breakfast.

“I could use seconds,” I said, heading as casually as I could towards the galley in the back. A long stovetop and boiler made up half the space, with bottled wine stacked in cardboard boxes along the
tiled floor. The shelves were lined with fresh fruit, mostly Serkonan bananas and Bastillian figs. Several loaves of Saggunto flatbread were on the counter, next to green olives and a block of cheese. I scooped up a dark bottle of Rivera fig wine, pretending to be interested as the Captain stood by the stove, slowly stirring a huge vat of simmering turtle stew.

She puffed smoke, the long pipe drooping from the corner of her lips. I stole a glance at Corvo. His rat eyes followed us, but he stayed where he was at the table, appearing watchful—but not overly concerned.

“What’s wrong with the Royal Protector?” Meagan whispered with lips barely moving, not looking at me. “His eyes…”

Ah…

Perhaps I had been foolish to think no one would notice.

“Delilah’s sorcery,” I whispered back, replacing the wine and running my fingers over a dozen little Padilla pear sodas. “He’s… not himself.”

“Is he going to be a problem?”

I couldn’t answer that. A burden or an asset? All I knew was that Corvo was my father and I couldn’t allow any harm to come to him. I popped an olive into my mouth and fiddled with the cheese cutter, trying to skim off a slice. Meagan whipped around to face me, handing me a fresh bowl of stew before I could finish. The block of cheese was harder than I was used to. In the palace, we mostly ate soft Morley cheeses.

Her face was hard. Clearly, she wouldn’t take silence for an answer.

“I don’t know,” I said in aggravation. I didn’t like being pushed.

“And Rosemary?”

I fumed in silence, my hackles already riled up by Corvo on that subject.

Meagan scowled, her patience withering. “The danger she represents is real. You saw the blackboard. If it were me, I’d have a little red string connecting Delilah to her daughter. Rosemary’s on their side, not ours.”

“We don’t know that,” I hissed under my breath. The Blind Sister’s prophecy echoed in my mind: ‘I see a two-faced witch. One loves you. The other does not. Both will be there at the end.’ I was caught between despair and hope.

And I choose hope.

I didn’t want to give up on Rosemary. Just like I didn’t want to give up on my father! I had to believe there was something inside them both worth saving. I refused to believe Corvo was lost forever, his mind splintered by Delilah’s black magic.

He can break free, just like Rosemary. I loved them both too much to just give up, to let their dark sides win…

“Why take the risk?” Meagan asked.

“Because—”
I looked over her shoulder, noticing a door in the back swing open. Out poured Rosemary and the Princess.

They looked well-rested and in good cheer, all things considered. Corvo’s back suddenly stiffened. He slowly lowered his spoon, freeing his hands. No… I clumsily discarded my bowl on the counter, barely registering the feel of hot liquid streaming over my fingers.

I hurried back into the room, watching in horror as Corvo casually freed the hilt of his sword, sweeping his coat lapel to the side. Oblivious, Rosemary was helping the Princess to the table, pulling out a chair to make room for her hugely pregnant belly. (I guessed she was in her third trimester, only a few weeks away from her due date. It astonished me she would take the risk of traveling in such a state, but her father was very important to her. The Tyvian Princess wanted Anton Sokolov to return to his homeland, to be a grandfather to her child.)

Now happily settled in, Katya heaved a grateful sigh and smiled at me, bowing her head in greeting. “Your Majesty. Good morning.”

I froze. It seemed a strange thing to say on this morning of all mornings. Meanwhile, Rosemary’s face broke out into an astonished smile as she glanced at Corvo, seated in dark silence beside the Princess.

“Lord Protector!” she exclaimed, though whether in shock or happiness it was hard to say. Very few knew the Outsider had freed him from stone. No doubt Rosemary thought his very presence was a miracle. Her own spell to break Delilah’s magic had failed.

But at least she tried, I remembered. She had made a solemn vow to be my witch.

Her big blue eyes darted away from Corvo towards me, standing on the opposite side of the table. Her hands flew up to her mouth, stifling a laugh. “Void and stars, your hair!”

I frowned, my train of thought instantly derailed. Did I look that bad? I ran fingers through my hair. Growing up in the Imperial Court meant I had people constantly looking at me, judging me. Most days I was past it, but at times I felt terribly self-conscious.

“We could all use a bath,” the Princess interceded as if coming to my royal defense. “Frankly, I’m just glad we’re still alive. What a terrible day we went through.”

“Yes, terrible,” Rosemary said, her eyes downcast. She sounded different, her body tensing. She was standing behind the Princess, her hands resting on the woman’s shoulders, her whole body frozen like a rabbit with the scent of danger in its nostrils.

Corvo jerked back from the table, his bar stool dragging loudly against the floor.

“Father,” I choked as he stood up.

He didn’t look at me, just stood towering over the table, towering over us all like a mighty shadow, a man’s strength. He turned towards Rosemary and glided his fingers up her arm, so gracefully it looked like a dancer’s move, something meant to elicit a lover’s gasp…

But to me it looked like a venomous strike from a snake, coiling around her arm.

Rosemary’s mouth fell open in shock and desire. I knew she wanted Corvo’s touch, had dreamed of him in her bed. After losing me to Wyman, her crush on Lord Corvo had only intensified in the past few months. Her innocent blue gaze flickered up to his face, so full of yearning and doubt, but then her eyes found his and I watched the horror break across her face as Corvo’s unnatural rat eyes
pierced her with vile hatred.

His fingers wrapped around her throat, pulling her away from the Princess with a vicious yank.

It all happened so quick. He dragged her across the floor and pulled her close to his chest, trapping her beneath his arm as he flicked his folding sword to dagger length and held it against her throat.

Just like that, Rosemary’s life hung in the balance.

“Emily!” Rosemary cried, her chin raised in a vain attempt to pull away. Naked fear sparked in her eyes. I lunged towards them but came to a sudden halt, as if suddenly finding myself teetering at the edge of a precipice.

“Stop!” I cried, “If you love me, stop!”

Corvo hesitated, glancing at me. A heartbeat––that’s all I had. I knew he would have done it already. Murder was screaming from every pore of his body, pleading for blood.

I held his gaze, drinking his anger, drinking his rage, forcing him to look at me, to see himself reflected in my eyes. To see I didn’t want this. “Let her go,” I pleaded.

I thought about using Far Reach to pull Rosemary into my grasp, or to snatch the weapon from Corvo’s hand, but I feared his reflexes were too sharp. Even disarmed by magic, he could easily snap her neck with one vicious twist. Corvo had lost his Mark, but not his natural acumen for fighting, for killing. It was foolish to underestimate my father. Like Rosemary, I was at his mercy.

Luckily, he wanted to talk.

“Dougal told me what you said,” Corvo said, boring into me with those vile rat eyes. “You ordered him to keep Rosemary and the Captain apart, to not let them be alone together.” His eyes flashed with mocking surprise. “I wonder why that would be? What’s so dangerous about sweet, little Rosemary? Care to tell us what you know, Empress?”

“He’s right,” the Captain said, stepping past my shoulder to stand near the blackboard, closer to Corvo.

As if taking sides, I realized, feeling sick.

The Captain went on, “Lord Protector, I’ll tell you what I told the Empress—”

“Meagan, don’t!”

She didn’t spare me a glance. “We’re all here to stop Delilah, and that there is Delilah’s own daughter. I recognized her from a long time ago when I had… business dealings with Delilah’s coven.”

I squeezed my fists. This can’t be happening.

“It’s not like me to drudge up the past, but this was too dangerous to ignore,” the Captain plowed onwards, unyielding, her dark eyes rigid. “We’d be fools to spring the trap. We are all in danger.”

“No,” I moaned, my eyes fixated on the dagger in Corvo’s hand. His grip was steady.

“Given Delilah’s remarkable ability to outmaneuver her enemies, clearly”—Meagan shot me a fighting glance—“we cannot take the risk. Rosemary is a threat. We need to act.”
“No,” I tried again, but it felt like no one was listening. Only Rosemary seemed to notice my existence. She was staring at me in pleading agony.

“She’s a weapon, whether the girl knows it or not,” the Captain said, crossing her arms. “We should decide what to do, right here, right now. In light of the Empress’s… strong feelings, I suggest we offload the girl the first chance we get. An island. Another ship.” She shrugged. “Somewhere faraway where she won’t be a danger to our plans.”

“Sensible, Captain,” Corvo mocked, his rat eyes narrowing, “but I’d like to solve this problem without it coming back to bite us in the ass. I suggest we kill her.”

He said it like his suggestion was the only vote that mattered.

Rosemary let out a gasp-ridden squeal as Corvo’s blade sunk deeper into her skin. I saw bright-red blood burst from her neck in a single stream. Just a prick, but it felt like my own throat had been slit open!

“No! I command you to stop! I am the Empress of the Isles. You will obey me, Royal Protector!”

My heart was hammering. I heard the Princess scream in the background; my vision had tunneled. I focused only on Corvo’s blade pressed against Rosemary’s flesh. I could see the pulse in her neck, beating in a fury, and there, too, around her neck, the emerald choker I’d given her, the white ribbon stained with her blood.

“The Royal Protector is above the law.” Corvo’s voice seemed faraway. “Deeds committed that even the Emperor or Empress is not aware of—in order to protect. Always to protect, Emily!”

His voice lashed like a whip.

“If you love me, you will stop,” I pleaded, my voice a desperate whisper. I didn’t know what else to do. Love was the only path I knew, the only way I saw to get through to him.

“Wait,” Meagan said, alarmed, as if murder on her ship was suddenly an affront to her sensibilities. “We ca—”

“Wait for what?” Corvo sneered. “You have signed her death warrant, Captain.” His rat eyes flicked over me, hardened with fury. “How could you keep this secret from me, Emily? Delilah’s daughter? That is far worse than I ever imagined.”

Dougal appeared, a looming shadow at the corner of my eye. The commotion must have wakened him. Drowsiness faded from his eyes as cold reality came rushing in, the horrific scene unveiling before him.

Royal Protector turned Royal Executioner.

Dougal stood tall. Taller, even, than my father, but my gentle giant stood back, gently raising his hands as though trying to calm a spooked horse.

“There’s another way, Lord Corvo,” Dougal said.

“Stand down, Agent Walsh,” my father ordered. He twisted to face him, sensing a new threat. Rosemary cried out, twisting with him, the blood dripping down her neck.

Dougal took a respectful step back.
“We take her hostage,” he said, his voice calm. “If Rosemary truly is Delilah’s child, she’s valuable.”

“I agree,” the Captain said. “Delilah couldn’t have known I’d be here to recognize her daughter from way back when. If Rosemary is some sort of secret agent, a mole in the Imperial Court, we can use that against her.”

“This is ridiculous,” I snapped. “Rosemary is not a spy! Two days ago, she didn’t even know she was a witch!”

Meagan shook her head. “There’s magic at work here. Black magic. We must assume the worst.”

“What do you say, Lord Corvo?” Dougal asked, gentle and strong. “A hostage to use against Delilah?”

I stared at my father. I didn’t like the idea, but it was better than watching a dagger slide across Rosemary’s throat.

Corvo made a growling noise, but acquiesced. “Very good, Agent Walsh.” He lowered his weapon and flicked it back into the scabbard at his belt.

But his hand remained fastened around Rosemary’s throat.

“Do you have a brig, Captain?” Corvo asked.

“Not quite,” she said, her jaw tight. “But the engine room might work. Anton jerry-rigged a jail cell for an after-party dinner guest one night.”

At Corvo’s raised brows, she added dryly, “Modus operandi. Sokolov didn’t discover Delilah’s schemes banging away at his workbench. No, he mingled with the Duke’s inner circle. For months, he’d been invited to aristocratic parties all over Karnaca. Sokolov’s reputation got his foot through the door and his genius kicked it wide open. He saw what the Duke was trying to hide.”

“You interrogated people here?” I blurted.

“Only the one time,” the Captain said, glancing at me. “I fear it was our first mistake. After that, the Crown Killer found us. Anton was kidnapped, and not knowing what else to do I made for Dunwall. Truth is, we should have sailed north weeks ago, but…” She scowled. “But Anton is a stubborn fool and was afraid we didn’t have enough to be taken seriously.” She looked apologetically at Corvo. “He wanted to contact you directly when we had ‘solid’ proof, not just gossip and heresy whispered by drunk nobles.”

“If that’s true, then maybe Sokolov is getting exactly what he deserves,” Corvo growled. “I have no use for fools.”

I paled. Even the Princess looked horrified.

The Captain merely flicked her dark eyes to mine, like she was deserving of ridicule. “Lady Emily, I’m sorry we didn’t come sooner. Anton, he… he was proud of his work. An old man with countless accomplishments, but he wanted more. He wanted to be a hero. To do good. To find the silver bullet that would upend the conspiracy.”

“Did he?” I breathed.

She shrugged. “Close enough if the Duke sent the Crown Killer to silence him.”
The Princess made a gasping sigh, bereaved in her heart. “Please,” she cried, “All of you. Just find him. Find my father and end this nightmare.”

Corvo released Rosemary. He roughly shoved her towards Dougal. “Take her back to Sokolov’s quarters and keep watch. Captain, with me. I want to see this brig of yours before I decide anything.”

“The engines are this way, Lord Protector,” she said, leading my father out of the cargo hold.

As Corvo brushed past me, he grabbed my upper arm, yanking me towards him. “And you, stay away from her.”

“Let me go,” I hissed.

He held tight. “If I can’t trust you to follow a simple order, I’ll take the Captain’s suggestion and offload you somewhere faraway. Delilah can’t hurt you if you’re marooned on a nameless island. Remember that.”

Not waiting for my response, he shoved me away and continued down the hall, disappearing around a stairwell.

Angry, I stared after him, rubbing my arm; he’d hurt me. Bastard. I marched towards the bow of the ship towards Anton’s quarters. The door was open with Dougal standing beside it.

Inside, I could see Rosemary crying on the bed. When I tried to pass through, Dougal put his arm up, blocking the doorway.

I glared up into his blue eyes. He seemed sorry. “Please, Your Highness. The Royal Protector—”

“—is an ass. Let me through.”

When he didn’t budge, I snarled, “Look at her! Your own family.” I lowered my voice to a hissing whisper. “She just found out she’s Delilah’s daughter. Have some compassion.”

Dougal’s eyes flickered towards the opposite end of the cargo hold where Corvo had disappeared. He sighed heavily. “Make it quick, Your Highness.”

I pushed through, rushing to Rosemary. She was crying into a pillow, but hearing me enter, she reached out and hugged me fiercely, crying against my hair.

I gently pushed her off, taking her face into my hands.

“It’s not true,” she cried, hiccupping. “It can’t be.”

I dried her tears with my thumbs and swept back her long blonde hair, exposing her neck. The bleeding had stopped, the little cut a bright red gash against her pale skin. Her emerald shone brilliant and beautiful, the stone set in a silver filigree with a white ribbon looping through the intricate metal handiwork. I touched the emerald, remembering the day I’d given it to her, the smile breaking across her face like sunshine through clouds.

“I’m sorry he hurt you. Oh, Rosemary, I love you. Don’t ever forget that.”

She searched my eyes. “How can you still love me? If Delilah is truly my mother, that means—”

“That means we’re cousins. Naughty cousins.”
Rosemary laughed at my smirk. “Emily! It’s not funny.”

“We didn’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “And I have to laugh, else I’d cry.”

We’d been lovers, once, but those days were behind us. I loved her like a sister, now. In my heart, she was still just Rosemary, my best friend, and not the unknown two-faced witch of prophecy. Her I never wanted to meet.

Rosemary sniffled loudly, the last of her tears under control. She chuckled, an impossible grin splitting her face. “I always knew incest ran in royal families. Such scandal!”

I smiled, but in truth it hit too close to home. How many of my detractors had accused my father and I of incest during the Fugue Feast? Too many, that’s what. The Opinion pages of the Dunwall Courier had been filled with their drivel.

“I don’t care what people think,” I said, lightly tugging her hair. “We know we didn’t mean any wrong by it.”

“But it is wrong,” Rosemary said. Her smile faded, solemnity spreading across her face. “All of this, it’s all wrong. Corvo… Meagan… they’re the ones who are right. I am a threat.”

She leapt to her feet. “Just look.”

She went to the corner where Sokolov had apparently ran one of his scientific experiments—a large glass display—and inside were dozens of hungry bloodflies, buzzing loudly.

Their dark red wings were the length of a human hand.

By reputation they were vicious killers, capable of stinging and biting so ferociously that—together, in a buzzing hoard—they could pick up an entire man and drag him away to their nests.

They were native to Serkonos, and as such, Father had told me a story or two about ‘bad years’ he’d seen as a young boy growing up in Karnaca. Corpses would become incubators for eggs, hatchlings bursting from chest cavities in gory nodules of mucus and blood.

The Abbey insisted they were heretical creatures, purveyors of evil that reflected Karnaca’s sins. The Overseers preached the return of good morals to reduce the bloodfly populations. Corvo rarely agreed with the Abbey, but in this he’d said they were right. Bloodflies were signs of chaos rising. Of witches. Just like the infected rat swarms during the Rat Plague, bloodflies were a symptom of corruption. Bloodflies loved witches…

And they loved Rosemary.

She opened the glass display, just a crack, and slid her hand through, but instead of attacking her, the bloodflies danced around her fingers, their bellies burning bright with a red light.

I felt my throat dry up at the sight. “We already know you’re a witch,” I said, wanting her to stop, to close the display and come back to me on the bed.

“It’s not that,” she said, cocking her head with a faint smile. “The bloodflies, I hear them.”

I paused, glancing at Dougal, but he was turned away, giving us privacy. I didn’t think he was listening.

“What do they say?” I asked, afraid all at once.
“Come home, they whisper, over and over,” she said, pulling her hand back and closing the glass door. A single bloodfly clung to her hand, its needle-like legs wrapped around her finger. She stared at the little winged creature in childlike fascination. “What will they whisper tomorrow?”

Her blue eyes lifted to mine. “What if it really is Delilah? Speaking through them, I mean. What if it’s as Meagan says… What if I am a spy? So deeply embedded I don’t even know I’m a spy, and these bloodflies are her messengers.”

“But the curse—”


She was close to me. Close enough to kill.

“I love you, Emily,” she said, “but who ‘I’ am might change.”

She flicked the bloodfly, sending it sprawling to the floor. As it fluttered its wings, trying to get up, she stamped it with her foot. Dead.

Dougal poked his head in. “They’re coming.”

“Go, Emily,” Rosemary softly commanded. “Don’t make your father angrier than he already is. You need him and he needs you.”

I pinched back tears and fled the room.

I took a seat at the table, hugging myself. I glanced at the Princess, but her gaze went right through me. Her pale blue eyes were lost in shock as she absently rubbed her belly, as if the child in her womb was the only sane thing left in this world.

Corvo returned with the Captain, his dark imposing figure striding past me towards Anton’s quarters. Rosemary went willingly.

I watched them go in silence, a storm of emotions in my heart. When Corvo returned from the makeshift brig, he joined me at the table and finished his breakfast. He looked smugly pleased. It made me so angry. So angry. I felt helpless… I realized I was breathing heavy.

Princess Katya bowed her head again. “Your Majesty.” She retired to Anton’s quarters, saying she was tired. As for Dougal, he mumbled something about ‘needing air’ and went up deck.

The Captain relit her pipe, unconcerned. I watched the smoke rise in lazy spirals.

I could forgive my father for almost murdering Rosemary—he was twisted in the head, made into Corvo the Black against his will—but her? What made the Captain so blameless? How could we point fingers at Rosemary and not back at her? After what she’d said…

“Meagan Foster,” I said. Even her name sounded like a deception. A lie. I gave her the hardest eyes I had. “Tell me how you know Delilah and her witches…”

I slowly stood up, the Mark of the Outsider burning bright on my hand.

“And this time, don’t leave anything out.”

I watched her take another long drag from the pipe, her dark eyes lidded. She looked dead in the eyes, like I’d struck a nerve that had long since gone numb.

I moved around the table to stand in front of her, crossing my arms over my chest. I had no intention of giving up.

“What kind of business?”

The Captain adjusted her weight, balancing at the edge of the table with her leg hoisted up on a stool. She leaned over her raised knee, taking the pipe from her lips and looking up at me.

It was the most honest look she had ever given me. Her dark eyes were bleak. Empty.

“The kind that ends in betrayal. And loss.” She slid her eyes away. “I made a pact with Delilah that never should have happened. A long… long time ago.”

I glared at the Captain, but I felt my anger recede beneath the desolation I saw in her eyes. I hated her for almost getting Rosemary killed, and I knew she was hiding something, but as I studied her face, I realized I couldn’t push her too far. She had already gone over the edge.

She was dead… lying somewhere at the bottom of the deepest, darkest pit.

“What did you do?” I whispered even knowing she wouldn’t tell me. She was a closed door.

I saw Corvo out of the corner of my eye. He was wiping his mouth with a napkin. He shoved away his bowl and rose from the table.

It was then I saw her flinch.

Barely a muscle, but the faint lines at the corner of her eyes twitched. Meagan was afraid of Corvo.

Was it his rat eyes? Or something in her past? My father didn’t know her, and yet… did she know him?

“Lady Emily,” she said, somehow still projecting calm. “Any connection I once had with Delilah is gone. It’s of no use to us now. We don’t break her through me.” She pointed at the blackboard with her pipe. “We break her through that. One ally at a time. One day at a time.”

Her eyes drifted. “That’s what Anton used to say.”

Corvo tilted his head, edging closer. He said, “Yet Sokolov’s not here—very… very strange.”

I glanced at him, surprised at the catch in his voice. His rat eyes glittered, focused on the Captain as she took another drag from her pipe. Her hand shook.
“Tell me, Captain,” he said. “How is it the Crown Killer kidnapped Anton Sokolov and yet did nothing to you? Not even a—ah—” He cleared his throat, coughing once. “A scratch?”

The Captain blew out smoke, eyeing Corvo uneasily.

“IT took Anton through the hatch above his room,” she said quietly. “I was looking down from the bridge when it happened…” She clenched her jaw. “Look, all I saw was a shadow. A hooded figure. It moved fast.”

“A fast shad—”

He coughed again. I stared at my father, watching his throat bob as he swallowed, and noticed with alarm that he was suddenly very pale.

“Father?” I cried out in sudden urgency, reaching for his arm. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he said, but his breathing was fast and sweat shone on his brow. “I’m… more… I’m fi—”

He stopped, suddenly gasping and leaning heavily towards the Captain. She jerked backwards, her hands knocking over the glass whiskey tumblers on the table. Two chimed together, a high-pitched ringing sound that set my skin on fire. Corvo fell over the Captain, barely holding himself above her as her back hit the table in a jarring thump, his arms braced against the wood on either side of her. Trapping her.

He choked, coughed over her, coughed even harder, but finally brought his head up, gulping for air. The Captain was frozen beneath him, her mouth slightly open, the fallen pipe resting on her chest, rising and falling with each rapid breath. She was terrified.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded, my nerves frayed as I tried thumping his back. “What in the Void are you choking on?”

“Nothing,” he gasped, finding his voice in shocking clarity.

He suddenly seemed fine. And not just fine, perfectly in control. I fell back, confused, as he braced his weight on one arm, the other hand flipping out his sword in one seamless motion, the metal slicing in a silver blur. He held the deadly edge against Meagan’s throat.

“Just choking on the Captain’s bullshit,” he said.

My mouth fell open. “What the…”

“Don’t you see it, Emily,” he rumbled like dark thunder as the Captain did nothing but stare at Corvo with eyes a hundred miles deep. “She wants us to believe she’s just a sea captain… A smuggler… An unlikely spy for the Crown.” He snorted in amusement, the blade at her throat. “Is that what you are, Foster? An old man’s friend?”

He laughed. There was nothing funny about the look in his eyes.

“Get off of her!” I screamed. For Void’s sake, I didn’t want Corvo to kill her!

If I could just keep Corvo’s hands clean, perhaps I could break the madness in his eyes…

Corvo twisted the blade, bringing the point to her eye. Just the one. He held it so close that if the Captain didn’t hold her breath, the sharpened tip would pierce right through her retina. He could gouge out her eyeball in a heartbeat.
He whispered into the frozen space between them, “My naïve daughter is willing to wait, to see if she can break down your walls and find the truth beneath, but me? I have no such patience. What are you hiding? Shall I pluck it out of you?”

“Father!”

“Don’t look at her. Look at me,” Corvo said, the point of his blade unwavering. “Answer me, Meagan. You have no escape.”

“All I have is this ship,” the Captain hissed between clenched teeth, a remarkable calm suffusing her features. “I left my old life behind years ago… but if I have to pay for that right here, right now”—she sucked in her breath—“so be it.”

“Stop this,” I croaked.

But Corvo ignored me. “Your right eye, Meagan. Or would you prefer—”

The Mark of the Outsider burned as I snagged my arcane tether around Corvo’s folding sword. Purple tendrils wrapped around the metal, flinging it towards me in the blink of an eye. I caught it, the hilt slapping with a satisfying leathery sound against my palm. Whispy black tendrils dissipated like smoke above fire, the magic spent.

His hand emptied, Corvo turned his head to look at me, his lips curling in scorn. “Are you an idiot?”

I winced—that hurt—but I stiffened my lip and gestured with my chin towards the Captain. “She already knew I had the Mark.” I flipped his folding sword, tucking it away at my belt and gave him my Empress face. “Let her up, Father, or I’ll use my powers on you.”

In the Void, the Outsider had personally shown me how to wrap Far Reach around a body, flinging it towards me. I hated the idea of using it against Corvo (as if it’d be degrading somehow), but I would if he didn’t back down.

*Murder for breakfast, torture for lunch!* Was this how it was going to be? A constant struggle, day by day, hour by hour, just to keep his hands clean?

“Mmhm,” Corvo hummed with a faint laugh. He uncurled from the Captain, her body flat against the table with her knees slightly bent. *Like a rat playing dead.* He picked up the pipe from her chest and slipped it back between her loose lips. He smiled cruelly at her. “Just like her mother, isn’t she? Too stubborn for her own good.”

I sighed in relief as he backed away. The Captain didn’t look as relieved. She curled into a sitting position and bounced shakily to her feet, shooting me a grim look.

“Go,” I told her.

Meagan muttered, rubbing her right eye, “I’ll be on the bridge.”

As she made a quick exit, I glared at Corvo and patted his sword at my belt. “I’m keeping this for now.”

The smile hadn’t left his face. “If you like.”

The sound of the Captain’s footsteps had gone up, but now I heard heavier footsteps coming down. Dougal banged through the double doors. “Your Highness! Ships spotted on the horizon. Come
quick!"

My heart seized up. “The Jessamine? Did they find us?”

I knew it was just a matter of time! The flagship was built for speed. Nothing could outrun her.

“I can’t tell. Too far, ‘Highness.’

I hurried after Dougal, my boots pounding against the floor as we raced up the stairwell. My father was not far behind, a quiet footfall. He never made much sound, even running. He was always like a breathing shadow.

Blue sky flashed overhead. Brightness and wind rushed into my ears, hitting me like an avalanche as we left behind the darker, quieter interior. I squinted, raising my hand to shield my eyes.

Captain Foster was already on the main deck, evidently switching plans. We joined her at the rail at the stern of the ship.

We were sailing south at a quick clip, the waves choppy in the ship’s wake as we made a beeline for Karnaca. At least that’s what I thought. Earlier, the Captain had made it sound like she was willing to veer off course if we were forced to evade capture, but as yet there’d been no sign of the Jessamine, nor any sign of pursuit—until now.

The horizon was lonely, just water meeting sky in all directions—except to the north, a dark necklace like black pearls stretching towards us.

I counted four ships.

Meagan handed me a long-tubed eyepiece, a coppery contraption that Anton had no doubt invented in his sleep. I peered through the glass, amazed by the incredible magnification. The ships were so far and yet I could make out their flags, briskly flapping in the wind.

“They’re flying Morley colors,” I announced, praying that was a good sign.

“And yours,” the Captain said beside me. “The House of Kaldwin.” Golden swans over blue waters. I saw it, and my heart leapt with joy.

I passed around the eyepiece. Corvo looked, but said nothing, his rat eyes narrowing in suspicion. At Dougal’s turn, he whooped in excitement. “Your Highness, I recognize one of the ships. That one on the left! It’s the Churner! My wife!”

“Your wife’s a ship?” Corvo cracked.

“She’s on the ship,” I corrected, annoyed. I turned to Dougal. “She’s the galley chef, right?” He had mentioned her when we’d been moored on the smugglers’ barge outside the Black Pony Pub.

A smile beamed from Dougal’s face. “Aye.” He sighed in happiness and relief. “Eileen made it out, thank the gods. I sent them downriver, but I feared…”

He leaned against the rail, gripping it with two hands squeezing tight, his face growing pale.

I gently touched his back. “She made it, Dougal.”

Many ships hadn’t. The Jessamine had destroyed dozens of pirate ships during our escape, shattering them into fiery pieces in thunderous whale oil explosions.
“How’d they find us?” Corvo asked, not sharing Dougal’s excitement.

Dougal shrugged.

“I don’t know either, but I’m maneuvering to intercept,” the Captain said, jogging away towards the bridge.

Dougal held unto the eyepiece, frequently checking through the lenses as if the mere act of looking would bring his wife closer. But the four ships were aways; I estimated we had a good half hour before we were within shouting distance.

The _Dreadful Wale_ began to slow and turn, the Captain bringing us about. Corvo tugged on my arm, moving me further down the rail, away from Dougal. I was angry at him, but every time I caught his rat eyes looking down at me, those pitch-black pupils surrounded by bloodshot veins, I felt my heart teeter at the edge of rage—and love. I wanted to _save_ him.

And I wanted to hurt Delilah for putting him through this, for warping his soul into a monster.

“I’m sorry,” he said, the wind carrying his murmur. “I shouldn’t have called you an idiot.”

For a moment I couldn’t speak, not expecting an apology. I squeezed his hand where it rested on the rail.

“I forgive you.”

_I forgive you for everything_, I thought. _It’s not really you_. This—what I saw—it was a nightmare trapped in a man’s body.

He looked out over the waves.

“Never use your powers lightly, Emily. What you did back there…” He shook his head. “You’re connected to the Void, now, and every time you tap into it, the Void takes a little from you in return. You don’t feel it now, but you will.”

“I’m not using my powers lightly,” I said defensively. I prevented bloodshed.

“And don’t over-rely on your magic. Remember what I taught you about stealth and—”

“Are you serious?” We had trained together for _years_. He knew exactly what I was capable of.

An impossible grin lit his face. His dark hair blew in the wind, partially covering his face as he pointedly looked down at my waist. Confused, I, too, looked down and… _Sigh_. Discovered the folding sword missing from my belt.

“Did you—”

He held his coat lapel to the side, showing me the hilt of his sword, safely where it apparently belonged.

I smiled at him. In that moment, it almost felt like the world was right again and he was the father I knew and loved, the father that had crossed blades with me down at the abandoned waterfront, shouting at me to keep my guard up.

I crossed my arms. “When?”

“The stairs. A stampede of wild horses could have run by and you wouldn’t have noticed.”
I shook my head, grinning. “I thought we were under attack.” Then more serious, “Delilah took the Jessamine, Father. She stole my flagship.”

I watched the waves, remembering the Void and Delilah’s haunting voice: ‘Little sparrow, how far you have flown... Do you really think you can escape Dunwall? Escape me?’

I shuddered. “She’s looking for us.” I met his eyes. “She’s going to find us.”

Corvo nodded at the approaching ships. “And them? You trust Morley not to betray our location?”

_He’s thinking of the Morley Insurrection_, I realized. Could we trust our northern neighbors?

“Delilah massacred everyone in that throne room, including Prince Finbar, the Queen of Morley’s own son and heir. She’ll help us.”

“If the Queen knows,” Corvo warned. “It’s only been one day, Emily. She probably doesn’t know about the coup yet, or she’s been lied to and has been turned against us.”

“I know. That’s why I must send word as soon as possible. These ships... it’s a boon, Father. For once, the winds are shifting in our favor. I will write to the Queen and tell her what has happened. I have the Prince’s ring by way of proof.”

We said nothing more. Together we watched the four ships approach, closer and closer. Dougal disappeared below deck, to inform the Princess, I assumed. The Captain in her bridge sounded the ship’s horn, a long wailing pitch that eerily matched the ship’s name. A dreadful wail, indeed.

Thinking of the Captain, I reluctantly broke the comfortable silence between us. “Father... why did you try to take her eye?”

He slowly blinked, seemingly mesmerized by the water and the waves.

I spoke louder like he hadn’t heard me, though I stood right next to him. “Father. You once told me torture never works. So why did you—”

“It doesn’t,” he said softly; distracted, not looking at me. “Mostly on people like her. Torture won’t break her because she’s already broken. You saw it, didn’t you?”

I swallowed hard, my throat going dry. “Then why?”

“To protect you.”

He faced me, then. His face was soft, but his eyes were pits of death. “I can’t prove she’s lying about who she really is,” he said, “but I can feel it. She’s dangerous.”

_Like you_, I thought. I smiled sadly and tousled his hair, sweeping his bangs over his forehead to shadow his eyes. “Don’t scare our new friends.”

“Look who’s talking. Your hair looks like a sparrow’s nest.” He snorted at my vain attempt to smooth it out.

I scowled. “You still haven’t answered my question. Not really.”

He sighed. “I wasn’t trying to torture the Captain.”

“Oh? Could’ve fooled me.”
“I know what I’m doing, Em. I was digging.”

“For what?”

“She’s afraid of me. She knows me. Somehow, someway, she *knows* me.”

I shrugged, feeling uneasy. “Sokolov. He must have told her about you.”

He shook his head. “It’s more than that. I feel it. When I find out what she’s hiding, she’s going to regret the day she ever pulled us from the river.”

The ships had arrived, the largest of the Morley vessels pulling alongside the *Dreadful Wale*. We crowded at the rail, the Captain and Dougal joining us in greeting the newcomers.

Lord Corvo stood formally at my side, the Royal Protector once more.

“Ho!” a sailor shouted. “Have you the Imperial Majesty safely aboard? Has she survived the treacherous coup?!?”

“That she has!” I shouted back, a smile breaking over my face as a dozen sailors formed a line, formally bowing and standing at attention. A few struggled with a long gangplank, flopping it between our ships. A noble procession marched across, a man in a resplendent purple suit at the fore.

His smile reached ear to ear as he came to stand before me. He bowed his head, taking my proffered hand and kissing my signet ring.

Sunlight glinted off his dark red hair, swept gracefully across his forehead.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “I hear I’ve been brutally massacred in your throne room.”

“Prince Finbar…”

I somehow managed to breathe his name, not believing it. I remembered cutting off his finger. The middle finger right above the knuckle to be exact. *Void and stars!* *No wonder Rosemary’s spell had failed,* I thought. *We didn’t have the ring of a bloody Prince!*

“How did…”

“A body double, of course. You don’t have one?” He bowed respectfully in Corvo’s direction. “Lord Protector. I am immensely pleased to find you alive as well.”

“How did you find us?” Corvo asked—in not the most welcoming voice. If the Prince noticed my father’s eyes were a bit *off,* he did not show it.

The Prince smiled sheepishly. “Ah, of course. We have a genius to thank for that.” He gestured impatiently towards his ship. “Shall we? We have much to discuss and I’m *repeatedly* told”—his purple eyes flared in annoyance—“that we don’t have much time.”

The Prince stood aside, revealing none other than Mister Fletcher, the master architect of the *Jessamine*. He was still wringing that brown ascot cap in his hands, looking so anxious I thought he might faint.

“Your Majesty,” he stammered. “The *Jessamine* is c-coming.”
Part 3: Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Part III continued

“The Dreadful Wale”

Chapter 29

His Grace Prince Finbar O’Brien of Wynnedown, the Queen of Morley’s own son and heir, had arrived on a pleasure barge with a small army aboard, his gaudy golden ship flanked by two austere warships for protection.

The Churner, an iron-black whaling ship, was the fourth ship and though it flew Morley flags, I did not believe it was originally part of the Prince’s entourage. The men and women aboard were poor whale hunters, dressed in tattered, sea-stained clothing with hardened faces. They were civilians whereas the Prince and his ships were under the Queen of Morley.

Dougal spotted his wife at the rail of the Churner—a little blonde woman in an apron—and waved to her, but their happy reunion would have to wait. The Royal Protector had ordered all the ships to fall back beyond shouting distance.

Corvo insisted we would have our meeting, here, on the Dreadful Wale.

At first, the Prince could only laugh. “Forgive me, Lord Protector, but won’t Her Majesty be more comfortable on my ship?”

Patronizing arrogance bled into his question as he eyed Meagan’s ship like it was beneath him.

“Her Majesty’s safety is all I care about.” There was a cold edge to my father’s voice. “I don’t know the men on your ship, Prince Finbar.”

I realized Corvo feared being outnumbered if the unthinkable happened. My Royal Protector was a great swordsman—some even claimed he was on par with the ancient Sword-Singers of Serkonos—but there was no disguising the fact that, without his Mark, his ability to protect me was markedly diminished.

“As you wish, Lord Protector,” the Prince said, “but I should like to build a reception worthy of the Empress of the Isles! Allow my servants to bring aboard a few things.”

“A few things?” I repeated, intrigued.

“To illustrate Morley’s continued allegiance to the Crown. As a representative of the Queen, I can assure you, Morley has no desire to be fair weather friends. We are with you, Empress, through thick and thin.”

Touched by the sentiment, I smiled at the Prince. He was a handsome man with dark purple eyes and bronzy red hair.

And he bloody well knows it, I thought. The Prince radiated charm, a sultry confidence that turned the eye.
“I don’t see the harm,” I said, glancing at Corvo in deference. I would leave the final decision up to him. I watched Corvo grind his jaw in reluctance, but he, too, yielded, nodding at the Prince.

So it was—with great pomp and circumstance—the Crown Prince of Morley readied our meeting aboard the Dreadful Wale by directing a great train of servants to and fro as they carried by hand—across a treacherous gangplank—all that we would need and more.

It didn’t take long.

The servants worked with tireless efficiency as if the Prince often carried his palace as he willed, springing luxuries from the dirt. Within minutes, Foster’s main deck hosted a majestic space as if one of the rooms in the Tower had literally been picked up and foisted upon the Dreadful Wale.

It was a great deal of furniture.

Three sumptuous sofas, so velvety red they reminded me of the Golden Cat. Two priceless blue-gold Tyvian carpets. And one ridiculously ostentatious throne chair with a high back. They positioned the furniture around a large table, which the servants then piled high with letters and correspondence, golden candelabras, and heaping silver plates of food and drink.

All of it surrounded one massive map in the middle.

A War Room, I mused, the map reminding me of one similar in my Tower wherein my generals and I would often congregate in times of crisis.

Not until the last servant had poured the wine and returned to the pleasure barge did Prince Finbar gesture broadly, offering me a seat at, of course, the curious throne chair. The entire ensemble looked painfully out of place against the worn, salt-stained planks of the Dreadful Wale.

And yet… it felt right.

This was my world. The trappings of royalty. I had lost my throne—its physical manifestation in the Tower—but my inner throne was still mine.

I was Emily Drexel Lela Kaldwin the First, Empress of the Isles. I stepped onto the carpet. It sank softly beneath my feet.

“You didn’t have to,” I told the Prince, suddenly feeling quite sheepish. I was terribly underdressed. The clothes I’d borrowed from Meagan were far less refined than my own still drying in the cabin below.

Not to mention my hair looks a fright. The Prince might be the height of politeness, but even he had trouble keeping his purple-eyed gaze from drifting upwards to my unruly locks. I hadn’t had time to bathe properly.

Even more aggravating, the Prince’s own hair seemed impervious to wind. His hair was neatly oil-slicked, fashionably arranged in a noticeably different style than his tragically deceased body double.

The hair, the eyes, the personality… Void and stars, I had but one conclusion: I had ne’er before met the real Prince. While the facial resemblance was striking, his body double had been blue-eyed and considerably more pompous and irritating, pestering me with marriage proposals on a near weekly basis. I should like to have an explanation for the deception, I thought, but I would hold my tongue for now.

We had urgent business.
The *USS Jessamine Kaldwin*.

Intermittent gusts of wind blew over the main deck, ruffling the giant map spread over the table. The servants had weighed down the corners with heavy figurines, each sculpted in the shape of an apple. The Morleys were proud of their apple farms; they stretched back generations. It was said the first King of Morley had an apple for a heart and when he died, a great tree sprung from his grave—the Great Tree of Wynnedown—which still stands to this day, gnarled and unearthly tall in the center of their capital. It was a lovely bedtime story Callista had read me long ago, in the broken tower.

I took a seat and the rest followed.

Prince Finbar took up an entire sofa, spreading his arms wide over the wavy, gold-trimmed backrest. He looked at me with a lazy smile on his face, enjoying the great spectacle he had brought forth. Mister Alistair Fletcher, the master architect, hesitantly sat down on a different sofa with his daughter, Philly. They huddled close together, holding hands as they stared at everything around them with a mixture of anxiety and discomfort.

The last sofa was occupied by Princess Katya of Dabokva, lost in her fur-lined robes. The Prince apparently already knew her and had welcomed her with a chaste kiss on the cheek, for Tyvia and Morley were old allies. While her title of Princess was merely a cultural remnant, with no true power, she was married to a councilmen of the Presidium, an ear away from the High Judges who ruled Tyvia.

The Prince, however, was a royal with true power.

As the only son and heir of the Queen of Morley, he would one day rule the Isle of Morley—in my name. *That is, when I take back what is mine*, I thought.

The rest remained standing. The Royal Protector stood beside my makeshift throne, his hand casually resting on the pommel of his sword. He was like a shadow, dark and quiet. Dougal, my Morley giant, towered behind the Princess while Meagan stood even further back, leaning against the rail with her arms crossed, looking particularly sour to find her ship taken over by the Prince’s extravagant belongings.

“I suppose we should let Mister Fletcher go first,” the Prince ventured, reaching for a glass of Tyvian Red. “He’s in a terrible state of worry, ever since he came to me, begging for asylum.” He smiled at Philly over the rim of his glass. “Him and his lovely daughter.”

Philly blushed, her shy brown eyes glued to the carpet. Mister Fletcher nervously twisted his cap, nodding over and over.

“Asylum?” I asked. “Mister Flet—”

“Highness, I swear I did what I co-cou-could,” the master architect stammered, his brow beaded with sweat. “It was aw-awful what they did. I told the cuh-cuh commander I’ll have no part of it. No part.”

“Wine, Majesty?” the Prince offered, smiling pleasantly at me. I jabbed him an irritated look. He poured me a glass nonetheless.

“And a commander who?” I demanded, turning to the master architect, but he was too afraid to answer, his eyes wide and fear-specked. His daughter Philly squeezed his hand and faced me, a brave look on her face.
She was trying to be strong, for her father’s sake. “Forgive my father, please, Your Highness. He stammers terribly when he’s nervous.”

“It’s all right, Philly. Just start at the beginning.”

She took a deep breath. “We were aboard the *Jessamine* when the coup happened. It was a bloodbath. Brother against brother. Half the crew were loyal to the Grand Admiral—to you—and the other half to Delilah.” She shuddered, looking sick. “I’m sorry, Your Highness, but your men were all taken by surprise. They… they had no chance.”

“Dead,” Mister Fletcher cried. “All dead.”

Outwardly, I maintained control, though inside I wept and raged. My proud men. Slaughtered for *me*. Philly did not look away, her eyes sorrowful and horror-stricken. To have witnessed such a thing… More than one hundred men of the Navy’s finest had manned the *Jessamine*. Undoubtedly, the fighting had been vicious and bloody.

Mister Fletcher squeezed his daughter’s hand, whispering something I couldn’t hear. Philly hurriedly added, “Right, but not Sir Edward Slattery. We believe that because of his rank, he was taken prisoner instead. He could still be alive.”

I swallowed hard, praying it was so. The last time I’d seen the Grand Admiral, he’d given my father and I a grand tour of the *Jessamine* after the parade. It’s where I’d first met Mister Fletcher, later inviting him to the Sunset Regalia.

It seemed like a long time ago.

I gripped the arms of my chair, the polished grain smooth beneath my fingers. “Who now commands the flagship?”

*Who betrayed me?*

“Commander Kittredge of the Wrenhaven River Patrol,” the Prince said, leisurely sipping and swirling his wine. “Delilah elevated *him* to Grand Admiral.”

I glanced at Captain Foster, sharing a dark look. Commander Kittredge had been one of the faces on her blackboard. *Too late*, I thought miserably. *The traitor has already played his part.*

Even worse, the Prince’s implication hit home; it *had* been my choice to elevate Sir Edward Slattery to Grand Admiral over other candidates—like Commander Kittredge of the Wrenhaven River Patrol. *Did he betray me because I passed him by?*

Feeling heartsick, I reached for a glass of wine, but Corvo suddenly snapped forward and pushed my hand away.

Startled, the Prince said, “Is something wrong—oh, that’s right! No Royal Taster.” He looked around the table. “Well, would anyone like to step up to the task? I’d offer to do it myself, as I have a great fondness for wine”—he laughed—“but I fear that is not good enough for our great Royal Protector.”

My father simply said, “Agent Walsh.”

Dougal nodded at Corvo. Grim-faced, he moved around the table and took up the wine glass. We all watched in silence as he swung back a mouthful, and when he didn’t appear to froth at the mouth or die on the spot, Corvo conceded, allowing Dougal to hand the cup to me. I held it like it was
poison, suddenly not thirsty. And yet it was obviously safe.

I stared at the Prince, taking a slow sip. It was delicious; Tyvian Red was unabashedly my favorite. Did he know that? How much had his body double told him about me?

His purple eyes glimmered like amethysts, watching me. “I can assure you, Empress. Poison would not be my first choice.” He sounded almost bored.

“Oh? What would be?” I asked, mirroring his bored tone.

He shook his head and smiled, slicking back his hair. “I am many things—but not a coward. If Morley meant to betray you to Delilah, I would not be here now, offering my hospitality and friendship.”

“Of course,” I said, a cold knot forming in my stomach. I put the wine down, not trusting myself to hold the cup steady. “And I appreciate your… patience. Times are… interesting.”

“Too interesting for me,” the Prince smiled, wiggling his eyebrows. “I plan to return to Morley post haste. The Fletchers have requested asylum and I mean to grant it. I extend the same courtesy to you, Empress. The Queen of Morley would welcome you with open arms.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. I have no doubt. The elderly monarch would love for me to be in her debt.

In recent years, the Isle of Serkonos had risen in power and wealth, driven by incredible gains in silver mining and windmill technology, whereas Morley had stagnated. Poetry, music, and food could only get them so far. Not only that, but the elite of Gristol often retired to the warmer south, taking with them their wealth and invaluable social ties.

No one went north. No one but poor farmers looking for fertile land or poor whalers looking for elusive beasts.

And so the Queen of Morley had courted my favor for years, even sending me Rosemary, a cultural gift. Did the Queen know her gift was poisoned?

Either way, I dared not take the low hanging fruit.

“I appreciate the offer, Prince Finbar,” I said, “but my destiny lies south if I am to defeat Delilah.”

“But you would be safe,” he stressed. His purple eyes flicked upwards to my father. “Is that not your single mind, Lord Protector? To keep the Empress of the Isles out of harm’s way?”

I didn’t wait for my father to answer. I blurted, “Of course, but—”

“But you are in terrible danger,” the Prince said, gesturing towards the Fletchers. “Please, Your Royal Highness. Hear the rest of their story, then decide.”

I leaned back in my chair. “Very well.”

All heads turned towards them. The Serkonan master twisted his cap and looked at his daughter, heartbreak in his eyes.

“They… it was…” Philly struggled to continue, all color leeching from her face. I realized, then, what she was trying to say. No…

“Did they…?” I started, but found myself equally tongue-tied.
Rape hit too close to home after Lord Cosimo’s attempt in my study. And the Blind Sister’s prophecy didn’t help.

Philly wouldn’t look at me.

The Prince poured himself more wine and relaxed against the sofa. He took up the spotlight and said, rather conversationally, “The Commander took poor Philly hostage, threatening to kill her if Mister Fletcher didn’t cooperate. They wanted him alive to help repair the Jessamine. Apparently, the flagship took considerable damage during the pirate attack.”

“Good,” Captain Foster muttered, glowering in the back.

The Prince raised his wine cup towards me as though offering a toast, a handsome grin on his face. “An interesting tactic using vagabonds and whalers, Your Majesty.”

“I have the Captain to thank for that,” I said, nodding towards Meagan. Again, she met my gaze, but this time the Captain’s eyes were dark with secrets. I still had no idea how she organized the pirate attack—and I suddenly realized that perhaps I didn’t want to know.

“So how did you two get away?” I asked the Fletchers.

“Sabotage,” Mister Fletcher said, his eyes bright. “No one quite knows the Jessamine like I do. I designed her. Every piece of her is a part of me.”

He looked away, tears welling in his eyes.

Philly squeezed her father’s hand. She took a deep breath and said, “We stole the Jessamine’s skiff. Their only skiff. With the engines sabotaged, they were unable to follow us. We sailed downriver and found others like us, others trying to escape the coup.”

Dougal spoke up, “That’s how you came upon the Churner?”

“Yes, kind sir,” Philly said, nodding shyly. “Then during the night, we spotted the Prince’s ships. We knew Morley was our best hope!”

“That’s when they told me their sad story,” the Prince said. “I knew at once I had to try and find you, Empress. Mister Fletcher insisted you were only a day’s travel from Dunwall—that there was still time to warn you. Mister Fletcher believes Commander Kittredge knows you’re heading south, to Karnaca, and specifically on the Dreadful Wale. Your ship was noticed.”

I gaped at him, frozen in shock.

Philly spoke up, her voice high-pitched, tinged with fear, “My father has given you a head start, Your Majesty. Two or three days. That’s how long he thinks you have until the Jessamine is operational again.”

“They’re coming,” the master architect mumbled, rocking back and forth. “They’re c-coming.”

I glanced up at my father in dread. I was speechless.

But Corvo’s rat eyes looked distant. Distracted.

“That is why I suggest you leave the Dreadful Wale as soon as possible, Your Majesty,” the Prince said, raising a finger as he held his glass, gesturing like we were at a dinner party, discussing the latest gossip. “I can bring you north. I would be more than happy to. My warships will protect you
on our journey, and with the Jessamine heading south and us moving north—yes, well… You can see why I believe we’ll be in Wynnedown before you even know it.”

I straightened in my chair, suddenly uncomfortable. “It’s not a matter of choice, Prince Finbar. To sail north is to concede defeat.”

“But Morley can help you. We have good men—”

“All the armies in the world can’t help me. Delilah is no ordinary usurper.”

The Prince gave me a shuttered look, his purple eyes glimmering. “Is it true she’s a witch?”

“Yes.” I twisted in my seat and touched my father’s arm. “The Royal Protector put a sword through her heart, but she did not die. She is protected by black magic.”

The Prince put down his wine, for once looking deeply unsettled. “I see.”

He glanced out over the water, towards the Churner.

“Whalers are a superstitious lot,” he said, in a quieter tone. “My men tell me they are spreading rumors that Dunwall Tower has been overrun by women dressed in black vines and poisonous flowers. Even now, they say, dark rituals are being performed over the dead, and Overseers are nowhere to be found.”

“I believe High Overseer Khulan survived,” I said with more confidence than I felt. “He will fight Delilah’s evil pestilence.”

“Still, Dunwall has fallen…”

By the Void, to hear it spoken out loud…

“And with Dunwall,” the Prince went on, “Delilah now has Coldridge Prison to lock up her enemies too valuable to kill outright. I fear that is where Sir Edward Slattery is likely residing. The point is, Your Majesty, it pains me to see you like this, with so few allies and resources. Why not come with me and—”

“Thank you, Prince Finbar, but—”

The Prince stood, a gracious smile on his face. “Please, just think it over, Empress. My offer still stands. In the meantime, I am willing to delay for a few hours, but…” He shrugged, spreading his hands in apology. “I will be sailing north by sundown, with or without you. For now, enjoy this banquet”—he shot Dougal an amused look (my newly appointed Royal Taster it seemed)—“and the letters, papers, maps… All of it is yours, Your Majesty. It represents just a taste of what Morley has to offer.”

I stared at him, mildly shocked that he would stand up before I had officially ended the meeting. He was breaking royal etiquette. Was he that arrogant?

Or scared, I thought, glancing at the Fletchers.

They stood and bowed, eager to return to the Prince’s ship. Eager to sail north. With the Duke’s involvement in Delilah’s coup, Serkonos was not safe for them anymore.

Captain Foster approached the pair, talking quietly in a corner. Meanwhile, Princess Katya remained seated, though she looked tired enough to want to lie down. She’d been gravely silent during the
entire exchange, her gaze worried and thoughtful. I knew all she cared about was finding Sokolov and returning to Tyvia with her newborn. With her advanced pregnancy, I feared she would have her baby aboard the Dreadful Wale.

With the meeting thus dispersed, Dougal came around and picked up one of the letters on the table. “Intelligence reports?”


I interrupted, “Did you say whale sightings?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Let me show you.”

I rose, joining him at the table’s edge. I half-expected Corvo to jump between us, but when I glanced back at him, my father still looked distracted. His rat eyes were utterly fixated on the Ocean’s waves. What in the Void…

“Here, Your Majesty,” the Prince said, snatching my attention by taking my hand and placing my fingers over a span of waters to the southeast, about half-way between the Isles of Gristol and Serkonos. “Everyone knows the whales typically prefer the colder waters of the north, but lately they’ve been spotted migrating south for some strange reason.”

“Yes, strange,” I said, tensing slightly as the Prince turned into me, shifting his body closer. His purple eyes were sultry as he spoke softly, nearer to my face than he’d ever been before. “I wish to apologize for my body double, Your Majesty.”

“Oh?”

“I heard he was… insistent. All those marriage proposals.” He attempted an embarrassed laugh, but he sounded more annoyed than anything. “I can assure you, that was my mother’s doing.”

“Yes?” I asked dryly.

“Yes, well, she has machinations like any ambitious woman. She desperately wants to see me wed, preferably to you, but I fear I’d make a terrible husband. Absolutely terrible.” His voice dropped to a whisper as he glanced over his shoulder at Corvo—but I had a feeling my father wasn’t even looking. “In truth, I am a restless man with little on my mind but good wine, sparkling seas, and beautiful, round women.”

I coughed. “Round women?”

Across the table, Dougal spit out his wine, overhearing us. He’d been picking at the silver plates of food, testing the Prince’s banquet.

But the Prince paid Dougal no mind; he seemed only concerned about Corvo. He’s intimidated by him, I realized. Corvo had that effect.

Lucky for the Prince, my father was distracted.

“Mmhm.” The Prince continued with his whispering, smiling conspiratorially at me. “I am only twenty-eight and already I have more bastards than Sokolov.”

“Do you have a point, Prince Finbar?”
“I’m just being honest.” He smiled handsomely. “We both know what it’s like—the royal courts of the world. We have spent our entire lives being harassed by toadies: people who kiss us on one cheek, but slap the other. Or worse. Back-stabbers. Traitors. I know this thing with Delilah is frightful, but it’s not surprising. No, not surprising at all. When you have power, everyone else wants it, too.”

I couldn’t disagree with him there.

He shook his head, laughing softly. “And so I’ve asked myself: Is it worth it? I’d rather enjoy the simpler things in life, far away from the brutal politics of the royal court. That’s why I employed a body double. He dealt with all the ugliness. The political maneuverings. The jealous vipers. With that in mind, I have a humble request, Your Majesty.”

“What?” I asked flatly.

“When you write to the Queen, tell her you accept my marriage proposal, but we must delay the nuptials given the current crisis. Not a commitment—we will both know the truth. Just a pretty lie to get her off my back.”

“Are you serious?” I didn’t know whether to feel outraged or amused or just plain dumbfounded.

“Yes. It will stop the Queen’s incessant badgering. All I want is to be left alone, to sail the Ocean, drowning myself in good wine and good women. Won’t you help me?”

“Why should I?”

“Because I can see it in your eyes—you have no intention of sailing north with me—and a few weeks hence, when I’m standing alone in front of my dear old mother, explaining how I was brutally massacred in your throne room—”

“Your body double. Not you.”

“It won’t matter to the Queen. Her precious son could have been murdered,” he said, feigning outrage, but in the next instant his eyes softened. “Because of what Delilah did, the Queen will stand by your side, make Morley your ally, but if you give her hope, if you make her believe we are to be wed…” He shook his head, grinning. “She will do far more than that. She will move the Void itself to help you win back your throne.”

“And what happens when I don’t marry you? What happens when the dust settles and I refuse to honor my word? I would be disgraced.”

“Then we start a scandal. We show the world that Prince Finbar is nothing but a drunkard and a cheat. The Empress of the Isles could never marry such a man.”

“Why would you willingly tarnish your good name?”

The Prince smirked. “Not in Morley. No offense, Your Majesty, but in my experience, Gristol is full of uptight prudes. In Morley, we are open with our sexuality. My many mistresses are expected of a Prince.” He smiled grandly. “And future King.”

I crossed my arms, unconvinced. “Are you really this afraid of your own mother? Why not just tell her you don’t want to marry me?”

“Marry anyone,” he corrected, but in the next breath he gave me a deadpan stare. “And you haven’t met my mother. If you did, you’d be running for the hills just like me.”
“I have met her,” I said, knitting my brow in confusion. When the Prince just continued smiling, I faltered. “Another body double?”

“What can I say? The O’Brien Dynasty is incredibly paranoid.” This time, the Prince sounded astonished. “Do you really not have a body double yourself, Your Majesty?”

“There’s been no need.”

I glanced at Corvo. Before the Royal Protector position had been created, body doubles had been quite common among the ruling families, but because of Corvo’s Mark, he’d been more than capable of protecting me—and just me. Occasionally, Lord Corvo employed decoys that looked like me (from a distance), but the young women were not impersonating me for months or years (like Prince Finbar had obviously used his body double for).

My train of thought derailed when I realized Corvo was still looking out over the waves, totally ignoring me. Something was wrong.

“So what do you say?” the Prince asked with an edge of impatience. I was right. He was afraid of the Jessamine. We all were.

There was not much time.

“I can’t,” I sighed heavily. “If I write to the Queen that I have accepted your marriage proposal, then Wyman will think the worst of me.”

What do you care of Wyman’s feelings? A dark part of me thought. You have already cast him aside for your mad obsession with the Outsider.

“Wyman who?” The Prince blinked.

I rolled my eyes. “Your distant relative. Wyman Lancaster.”

“Right. That fellow,” the Prince said, tapping his chin. “A charming young man. You two are…” He lifted his voice in question.

“Yes.”

“No matter. I will simply tell Wyman the truth. He’ll know it’s just a ploy, I promise.”

I shook my head. “Prince Finbar, I’m sorry, but I don’t see how this helps me. I cherish the Queen’s help, but in truth her efforts are a drop in the Ocean. Delilah is immortal. I must find my own way back to the throne.” I crossed my arms, giving him my Empress face. “And you must find a way to speak honestly with your mother.”

The Prince searched my face, his dark purple eyes heavy with disappointment—and respect. “Well, it was worth a try.”

But he smiled, nonetheless. “And I wish you luck. Truly. This business with Delilah is obscene.”

He bowed respectfully, kissing my signet ring one last time.

“Thank you, Finbar.” Despite it all, he seemed like a good man.

The Prince took another drink from the table, swirling the wine contemplatively. He said, “To our one life. May we live it well.”
“One life,” I repeated, glancing at Corvo who had suddenly turned towards me, his rat eyes alert and filled with unimaginable joy. “What is it?” I asked, my heart dropping.

“Jessamine,” he said. “She’s back.”

The Prince, Dougal—we all turned like frightened children towards the Ocean, looking out across the waves. But it was only us… I saw the Prince’s ships and the Churner… Each swaying against the blue horizon.

I realized, then, what he’d meant. Why he had been so distracted—as if hearing voices.

My mother was back, The Heart echoing in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

I finally gave Wyman a last name. This could be the only time you see it though, haha.
Chapter 30

I took the stairs to the engine room, a lantern swinging from my hand. It was dark and damp. I saw rats scurrying in the corners.

The bulk of the space was occupied by machinery, all metal pipes, bolted joints, and concentric glass dials. The engines were humming and clanking, but the sound was relatively soft, droning in the background.

My focus was on Rosemary.

I found the brig my father had locked her up inside; it was a U-shaped compartment near a wall of black electrical cabinets. They sporadically sparked, illuminating the small, windowless space in eerie blue light. Hearing footsteps, Rosemary rolled away from the metal bulkhead she’d been facing, lying on a cot.

Corvo had given her a thin blanket, but not much else. She had a candle on a stool and a chamber pot in the corner.

It was sad.

“Emily!” she exclaimed, her blue eyes lighting up.

She rose from the cot and stood at the iron bars, peeking through as I motioned to Dougal by the stairs. He followed me down, balancing a large crate between his arms.

“Over here, Dougal,” I said, reaching for the crate. “Unlock the door.”

He gave me an unhappy look—not the first of the night.

I snapped, “We can’t fit everything through the iron bars.”

“What’s going on?” Rosemary asked, a twinge of alarm in her voice as she watched Dougal hand me the crate with some reluctance. He fit a key into the padlock and swung open the lopsided iron gate. It made a horrible creaking noise, the whole contraption jerry-rigged from spare parts.

I marched inside and hung the lantern on a hook, then planted the wooden crate on her bed. Dougal waited by the door, leaning against the iron frame with his arms crossed.

Rosemary knit her brow. “Does Lord Corvo know you’re here?”
“Lord Corvo is resting,” I said, shooting Dougal a look over my shoulder to stay quiet on the matter.

Rosemary didn’t notice. She stood next to me, pawing through the crate like she couldn’t believe her eyes. She made a sweet, gasping sound, her eyes swelling with tears as she pulled out an exquisite Serkonan guitar. There was also a Gristol violin, various journals with plenty of blank pages, writing utensils, and clothing I’d dug through earlier, mostly sure they would fit her. I arranged them on her bed, then flipped the crate upside down on the riveted metal floor. At least, then, she could maybe use it like a bedside table.

Rosemary held the guitar, trembling in happiness. “Where did you find all this?”

“They’re gifts from Prince Finbar,” I said, sighing with weariness. “Rosemary, a lot has happened since you’ve been locked away.”

Prince Finbar? But he’s dead. We cut off his—”

I tugged her down to the bed to sit beside me. She looked bewildered. I touched the emerald choker around her neck, the ribbon stained with her blood.

“Sshh, Rosemary. Look, I’m sorry. I hate the thought of you down here all alone, but Corvo refused to let me send you back to Morley with the Prince. You’re still his hostage.”

I hushed her with a finger to the lips, her mouth opening in confusion. “The Finbar we found dead in the throne room was his body double. The real Prince has visited us—and left—but not before bestowing us with a few gifts for our voyage south.” I glanced at the musical instruments. “I figured you’d like to compose music. I’m not sure what else you could do to pass the time.”

“Thank you, Emily,” she said, tears streaking down her rosy cheeks. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to mine. I tasted her tears and when I felt her lips part, her tongue gently sliding into my mouth, I pushed away.

Rosemary smiled sadly and looked down. “I’m sorry. I’ve been terribly lonely.”

I felt my heart drop. The Rosemary I knew and loved was a creature of light and laughter. How many evenings had we passed together in the Tower, curled up on floor cushions, a fire blazing in the hearth? She would sing songs for me, play for me, and when Wyman joined my life, Rosemary would sit with her head between her hands, gazing dreamily at us together.

I stood up, blinking back tears.

“Well,” I said, unable to meet her eyes. “Hopefully, these gifts will help.”

I glanced at Dougal. He was rubbing the back of his head, looking away in a slightly embarrassed fashion. I went out and Dougal locked the gate behind us.

I paused, looking back through the iron bars. She looked beautiful, the sadness in her eyes only increasing her loveliness. I said, swallowing a knot in my throat, “Eileen will take your clothes for washing and clean out your chamber pot.”

“Eileen?” Her face lit up with surprise as she looked towards Dougal. “Your wife is here?”

He leaned against the bars with one hand held over his head, bent at the elbow. “Aye. I wanted her safe in Morley, but you know how stubborn she can be. She said if I’m to risk my life for the Empress, she would, too.”
“I’m happy for you, Dougal,” Rosemary said. “It’s good to have someone close.”

We left her.

Up a level, I paused in the hallway and looked back at Dougal. “Take the night and be with your wife.”

“But Corvo—”

“I don’t need a constant guard. Rosemary is locked away and I highly doubt Captain Foster is a secret assassin intent on killing me in the middle of the night. Go on,” I urged, smiling at him, like it was no big deal.

Dougal glanced at my cabin door behind which Corvo was sleeping. He drew a deep breath, sounding tortured. “I don’t know. If he finds out…”

“He probably won’t notice. You saw how he was.” I softened my voice. “Please. I need some time alone, Dougal.”

“Aye, Your Highness.”

I watched him reluctantly go. He disappeared into the larger cabin across the hallway. It was still packed with cargo, but the Captain had made room, clearing things out to be sold later down the line. There was a bed in there now.

I saw Eileen through the crack of the door, right before it closed. Dougal had his hand on her breast, his face closing in as she reached for him.

I turned away, sighing.

I went up to the main deck. The night was dark and pleasant and calm, clouds drifting in swaths of blue and black. The Prince’s War Room was still situated in the middle of Meagan’s ship like an eye sore, mismatched with its surroundings. I’d spent the afternoon at that table, drafting letters for the Prince to take north. One for the Queen, explaining what had happened and Delilah’s role in the ‘intended murder’ of her son. I’d wanted to give back the Prince’s ring (the one we’d taken from his body double’s corpse), but Prince Finbar said to keep it—in case I changed my mind about his marriage proposal.

I intended to sell it first thing.

Another letter was for the parents of Captain Alexi Mayhew to inform them of their daughter’s honorable death in the line of duty. Corvo had signed it—in a rare moment of lucidity. The Prince promised to reroute the letter west as the Mayhew family now lived in Redmoor, a city on Gristol’s rocky northern shore, after moving from Potterstead some years back.

And, lastly, a letter for Wyman.

That I had struggled with, crumbling page after page in my fist. Eventually, I decided on sweet and short, urging him to stay in Morley, to stay safe. I didn’t think he was stupid enough to come after me, but he loved me. Who knew how that would cloud his judgment?

It was ending the letter that tore my heart to pieces. Try as I might, I couldn’t write I love you. I should have wanted to—he would expect it, us having exchanged the words many times—but the more I stared at the page, the more I felt like a traitor.
And a fool.

I’d signed it, Your Loving Empress, and quickly folded it out of sight and sealed the letter.

The Prince had left at sundown, offering one last gift, bittersweet. He’d already given us so much: food, blankets, clothing and ammunition, even a little gold. I had promised to repay his generosity in full when I regained my hold over the Treasury.

Prince Finbar had only laughed.

“What are the riches of the world next to a woman’s round, warm ass?” He’d squeezed the rumps of the two women giggling in his arms, and I found I could only shake my head and smile helplessly.

But his purple eyes had turned serious. “Everything I’ve given you… they are gifts, my beautiful, sad Empress. I do not expect repayment.”

I didn’t know who the women were, but the Prince eyed them like they were treasure. He disappeared into his pleasure barge, and that was the last I saw him.

The final gift turned out to be the little skiff the Fletchers had stolen from the Jessamine. The Fletchers insisted. Philly called it poetic justice. The Captain certainly seemed pleased; she had the rigging for it, and with the skiff’s engines running on whale oil, it would save us time and labor instead of relying on a manual rowboat for excursions ashore.

Mister Fletcher had tears in his eyes when we finally parted.

“Save my ship,” he’d whispered. “It was meant for you. Empress Jessamine’s daughter.” He had also handed me the keys to his shipwright office in Karnaca, encouraging me to loot the contents of his safe if it helped bring Delilah down.

Coin would help, I knew. We would need more supplies once we reached Karnaca. It was a two-week voyage from Dunwall—if we made a beeline for it—but with the Fletchers’ warning that the Jessamine was on to us, we dared not head south.

For now, we were heading southeast towards a spatter of whale sightings that the Prince had circled on the giant map.

The Captain thought I was crazy, but she went along with it. She’d said she knew a few islands that way, hidden coves used by pirates and smugglers.

But I had no intention of hiding. I was hunting.

Hunting whales. Well, not so much whales as what the whales meant. The Outsider would be reborn as a human. That was his plan. I had to find him. Now outside on the main deck, I had found the Captain.

I was surprised to see her. It was late; I thought she’d be up in her bridge, sleeping. It’d been a long day.

But she was awake, leisurely smoking her pipe and resting sideways on the ostentatious throne chair with her legs kicked out over the arm rest.

She looked like a vagabond queen. I couldn’t help but smile at her, stifling a laugh.
She frowned. “What?”

“Just surprised you chose that chair,” I said, taking a seat along one of the sumptuous sofas the Prince had been kind enough to leave behind. The War Room wasn’t going anywhere. “It’s the least comfortable.”

“As it should be,” she murmured, blowing out smoke. “No ruler should sit comfortably on their thrones.”

“Right. To prevent dictatorships,” I said, remembering the sentiment somewhere in my political studies with Sokolov. I yawned, my eyes going heavy.

But it was a beautiful night and I wanted to watch the stars as we sailed beneath the immense sky, the sound of the waves and wind in my ears. I rested on the sofa, staring up at the sky.

I heard the throne chair creak. The Captain had gotten to her feet. “Good night, Lady Emily.”

She moved away, her footfalls so quiet it reminded me of my father. She was a shadow in the night.

“Why do you call me that?” I asked quietly. I didn’t look at her, my eyes far above. The stars were peeking through the clouds. After a drawn-out silence, I muttered with a smirk, “Lady Emily.”

I didn’t think she would answer me. Was she gone? But her voice came from the stillness.

“Would you rather I call you something else?” She sounded tired.

I sat up, resting on my elbow. I looked her in the eye and said, “How about just Emily?” When she just stared at me with those dark secretive eyes, I went back to how I was, looking up at the sky. “I know you hate the aristocracy, but not all of us are like—”

I paused. I was going to say ‘like Prince Finbar,’ but it suddenly seemed unfair.

The Captain’s voice was tight. “I’ve no love for aristocrats, it’s true, and I know you’re not all the same, but… I lost someone.”

I held my breath, just listening. I didn’t think she wanted me to look at her. There was something in her voice, a catch that spoke of an old wound that had never truly healed, festering in her soul. She had rage.

“The Duke, he…” The anger in her voice faded to anguish. “I don’t want to talk about it. Good night, Emily.”

Her footsteps faded; disappeared. After that, I didn’t think much, just repositioned one of the couch pillows under my head and closed my eyes, listening to the waves…

I awoke in the Void.

_Not again._

My gut clenched. As much as I hated Delilah, she struck me with pure, unadulterated fear.

It was different than the fear I’d felt that day in the gazebo when Daud had killed my mother in front of me. That was helplessness. Shock. Strangely enough, I hadn’t feared for my own life; a childish naiveté, perhaps. And it was different than the throne room—I’d feared for my father’s life in that sickening moment when Delilah’s black vines had twisted around his body, not my own life.
But now…

Now the fear was a cancer in my soul, an obsession; it was the agony of constantly thinking about death. My death. For how could anyone not fear an enemy like Delilah to the depths of their soul?

Immortal.

She was immortal and I was not.

I couldn’t get it out of my head. It was the agony of watching Corvo’s cold blade slide outwards from her chest, slick with black blood, then impossibly, beautifully, her smile above it, blue eyes glittering like sapphires. The memories I relived only to die again and again in her eyes.

The Void spun like the night sky I dreamed under, stars and moonlight and clouds swirling around me, then suddenly disappearing, reforming, over and over until I was standing inside my bedroom back at the Tower.

It all looked so real.

My beautiful bed. Gods, how I wanted to cozy up beneath those blankets and disappear forever. I saw Rosemary’s harp in the corner—it gleamed in the unearthly light of the Void, impossibly beautiful—and a fire roared in the white-stone hearth.

Before the fire, two dogs were lying with their heads on their paws, softly snoring.

Witch dogs.

They misted, their bone-coats exuding a strange mixture of smoke and moisture. A necromancer’s trick. The dogs were dead, their bones animated by black magic. I clenched my fists and held my breath, afraid to wake them.

“Homesick, Emily?”

I turned towards Delilah’s taunting voice. Her sweet voice. She dripped seduction, pulling me towards her.

I froze in shock, seeing her.

She was naked. From head to toe, she was completely undressed and yet her legs were modestly crossed—perhaps she was the two-faced witch, I thought; the duplicitous bitch. She was smiling at me. On either side of her was a young witch. They, too, were naked. They were dark-eyed and dark-haired, with flowers entwined in their hair like crowns. The younger witches undulated like snakes, writhing back and forth, moaning like the whores from the Golden Cat, strange sounds I’d first heard as a young girl being held hostage in the brothel’s attic.

Their fingers traced the creamy flesh of Delilah’s breasts, then fled lower across her stomach. They smiled at me, moaning louder, watching, giggling. The dogs whined in their sleep, the fire crackling in the hearth.

Wake up, Emily.

But I couldn’t. The Void was my prison.

I couldn’t escape what I saw. Every time I tried shifting my gaze, the Void would shift with me. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw. Delilah was in control. What did she want? Why was she
showing me this?

She uncrossed her legs, her piercing blue eyes not once moving from my face. She had no shame. The witches’ fingers wriggled like snakes down her stomach to the swollen mound between her legs. She opened herself to them, their fingers curling inside of her, moving with urgency. Delilah began to moan louder than the witches pleasing her, eyes shuttering, lips quivering…

I watched because I couldn’t not watch. Rage boiled and curled inside my gut. Rage and disgust and the traitorous heat of knowing exactly how good that felt, fingers moving inside me. Faster and harder. Rosemary. Wyman. Different times, but both on that bed—MY BED. I wanted to kill Delilah.

I wanted to—

Delilah’s climax came like a waterfall breaking over its highest point. The Void shuddered, light flickering in the bedroom I had once called my own. I was panting by then, anger and desire thrashing inside me.

But I felt relief.

Relief that it was over. Sickened. Spent. The bed I had longed to curl up inside was soiled between her legs, wetness damping the blankets in a stream. I had never seen a woman do that before. She had climaxed like a man, spurring her wetness into the world instead of keeping it deep inside, a woman’s secret place.

Delilah sighed heavily in contentment, her face shining in the throes of post-orgasm. She smiled at me, biting her lip.

“Do you feel humiliated, Empress? We have just dirtied your imperial bed.”

I couldn’t speak. At first. My body trembled with rage. I said with no equivocation, “You humiliate yourself.”

Her smile turned coy. She enfolded her arms around the shoulders of the witches at her side. She hugged them to her breasts as they nuzzled her like contented cats, writhing against her. Their skin gleamed with sweat, dark hair curling against their pale faces.

Delilah kissed one of them on the forehead. “I don’t think she enjoyed it, Lucinda.”

The witch grinned. “Maybe we’re not her type.” Her voice was girlish and biting.

In a swirl of black rain, the Void changed form in the blink of an eye. I was suddenly inside my safe room, facing the cubbyhole with my little bed. 

The one with the too-flat pillows and black and white striped blankets.

The one where Wyman and I had first made love.

Tears threatened. Memory rose up like a specter, haunting me. We’d shared a post-coital cigar, blowing smoke at the ceiling, watching it disappear, forgotten, as we sank into a kiss.

He’d said ‘I love you’ in the same breath I had caught in my mouth, devouring him like I could never get enough. Delilah ripped the memory from me and made a new one. She was naked, still. She was on her side, resting on the bed, her arm folded possessively over—Father?

I gasped, my skin lighting on fire as I saw Corvo’s face, reposed in deep sleep. His eyes were
closed, black lashes against his sun-kissed skin. He was clothed in black and dressed so formally it was like a slap to the face to see Delilah lying naked beside him.

*How dare she*, I raged. She didn’t belong with him. I forced myself to take deep breaths. *It’s not real. None of this is real. She can’t hurt me.*

Delilah’s icy blue eyes glittered like sapphires. She curled her lips and pouted at me.

“Maybe Daddy’s your type?”

She leaned over Corvo’s body, her hands running up his barreled chest to wrap around his neck. She turned his head towards her by the chin and looked at his face, slack with sleep.

“Tell me, Emily. Is it true what they say? A certain Fugue Feast not long ago… an Empress and her Royal Protector, secretly rutting in the safe room…”

“Stop this,” I hissed through gritted teeth. I couldn’t move. She had me like I was just an *eye* in the Void, helplessly watching events unfold.

Delilah didn’t stop. She danced her fingers down Corvo’s chest, down to his crotch, and there rubbing against him until a bulge began to rise beneath his pants. My breathing sounded loud in my ears as she kept rubbing. I felt faint with anger and *hurt*. Like this was worse than any sword she could have plunged into me. Worse than any attack she could make in the real world.

“This isn’t real,” I shouted into the Void. *This can’t be real. Father is safe on the Dreadful Wale.*

I cried. I fell into desperation.

Delilah just smiled.

“I stole his Mark. Your father is mine, now. We are connected through the Void.”

Corvo’s eyes opened. He blinked softly at her, a smile forming on his lips. Delilah fell into him, moaning into his mouth as they kissed. Corvo’s hands found her breasts, squeezing and kneading.

“It’s not Corvo,” I said, my voice trembling. “He would never do that.”

Delilah pulled away from the sensual kiss, looking up at me with a sneer. “He would if he saw Jessamine instead of me… How easy to trick him! Look at his eyes, Emily. He’s lost inside her. His dead wife. Did you know they secretly married?” She dug her fingers into his long, dark hair as he nipped at her neck, kissing and sucking. “I rather enjoyed that memory.”

I felt like the Void had fallen out from under me.

“You’re lying,” I said.

She laughed.

“Surely, you’ve seen by now his… distraction,” she said, rolling her head back as Corvo left a wet trail of kisses up her neck. “I’ve broken him. His mind will only get worse, shattering into so many lost pieces you won’t be able to find him unless you follow the *blood* he leaves behind, dripping from the tip of his sword.”

She kissed him passionately then, biting and sucking on his bottom lip before pulling away and glaring at me with spiteful venom.
“Corvo’s soul is dark and beautiful. Jessamine never deserved him! I am making him into what he is meant to be.”

“You fucking bitch.”

Delilah moaned, closing her eyes. “There it is. Rage so sweet I can taste it. Good…”

She rose from the bed, callously discarding my father like he was nothing. He fell from her grasp, untangled from her heat, his eyes closing once more into deep slumber.

Delilah stood before me, naked and graceful and powerful and oh so alive I felt like the Void had disappeared and there was nothing but her in the entire universe.

“Come back to Dunwall, Emily, and I promise you: I will let you live—you and your precious Corvo.” She leaned into me, her breath soft against my ear as she whispered, “Come back to Dunwall and I will make you into what you’re meant to be…”

The Void crashed around her words and I awoke in the next breath, wanting to die.
Every inch of my body exploded with fire. A clot of rage and fear and shock hit the center of my chest, and a burning sensation rippled down my arms. In some strange corner of my mind, I told myself I was having a panic attack.

On my hands and knees, I rode it out, shaking and crying. I stared at the flower design on the blue-gold Tyvian carpet, forcing myself to trace its lines, to let that pattern become my entire being.

I focused on my breathing. *Breathe in... breathe out... breathe in... breathe out...*

It passed. I couldn’t say *when*.

I found myself in a tight kneeling position on the floor, my forehead pressed to the carpet. It felt wet. Wet with my tears. I rolled my head backwards, gasping for air through my gaping mouth, my nose runny and blocked.

I stared up at the night sky. The endless stars. The clouds had disappeared as if they’d never been. I felt a cool breeze and the tight feeling of drying tears on my cheeks. I wanted to splash cold water on my face. I wanted to go home. I wanted to cut Delilah into so many little pieces that she became nothing more than fish food for the sharks of Gristol Bay.

“That’s a good idea,” I told myself. It was a reason to get up. A reason to keep going.

But I felt weak. Powerless. I leaned against the couch and pushed up with all my strength. Forced myself to *get up*. The sight of Corvo’s fingers digging into Delilah’s breasts and his mouth desperate against hers was burned into my brain. In a way, I still felt like I was there, trapped inside the Void. I couldn’t let it go. Couldn’t erase what I’d seen.

I stumbled across the deck.

I didn’t know where I was going until I was already there. The cargo hold, dimly lit. I vaguely realized Princess Katya was at the table, engrossed in a book while absently nibbling on a banana. She gasped in surprise to see me, but I ignored her.

I stumbled into the kitchen and bent over the sink. Falling over it, more like. I ran the faucet, splashing cold water on my face again and again. I forced myself to breathe. *Just breathe.* The shocking cold water felt good.

I must have been like that for a long time because I suddenly felt a warm, gentle hand on my back. I whirled around like someone had attacked me.

The Princess was a vision of concern. “Your Majesty?”

I was breathing heavily. I looked away and turned off the faucet, staring at a stain on the wall.

“I’m fine. It was just had a bad nightmare.”
“Sit down, Emily. Let me make you some tea.”

There was something motherly in her voice. It reminded me of Coral.

I didn’t argue. I sat at the table and picked at a splinter in the wood, and I listened to the domestic noises coming from the kitchen. Pots banging. Water from the faucet. Boiling, bubbling. The delicious sound of water being poured into a little cup and the delicate sound of a metal spoon stirring in a few clumps of sugar. It calmed me. Centered me. The Princess set down the tea in front of me and returned to her banana and her book.

I leaned forward and inhaled the fragrance. It was a herbal infusion. Chamomile from Poolwick. Or maybe Old Lamprov.

I looked up at her. “Thank you, Katya.” Then, after a pause, “Why are you up at this late hour?”

It was the dead of night. There was a stillness in the air as the ship rode the waves; the interior of the ship felt dark and sleepy. The Princess smiled dreamily and rubbed her belly. “It’s the little one. She kicks like a Tyvian blood ox.”

“She?”

“I think so. After four boys, I certainly hope so.” She smiled fondly. “I’m thinking of naming her Antonia.”

**After Anton, no doubt.**

I wondered how the old man would react to his daughter’s plea that he return to Tyvia. I knew he hadn’t been back for nearly sixty years! Sokolov had been stricken with wanderlust at a young age, leaving his homeland behind as a young teenager to explore Pandysia. His lifelong adventure had stretched from Gristol’s Academy of Natural Philosophy to the Imperial Court. Would a man like that ever settle down? He had retired to the south, but even then he’d found mystery and drama, uncovering a vast laid conspiracy.

But maybe circling back to his cold, frozen homeland will entice him after all. *There’s nothing like coming home after being away for so long*… Was it not bittersweet? Everything familiar and yet so different… It had been that way for me when Corvo had finally defeated my enemies and I had returned to the Tower, the Child Empress.

“Antonia,” I said, trying it out. “A pretty name. Though it sounds rather Serkonan.”

The Princess laughed. “Perhaps. But she’ll be the first Tyvian born outside of her homeland in generations—at least in my family—so maybe something exotic fits her after all.”

I drank my tea and hummed in agreement. After a pause, I delicately put it, “Forgive me, but I’m surprised your husband agreed to you sailing south in such a delicate state.”

“Oh, he didn’t. I left without his blessing.”

“Oh?”

“I’m Tyvian, Your Majesty,” she said, pursing her lips in amusement. “Our so-called ‘independent streak’ is far worse than you think.” She leaned forward slightly and whispered fiercely, “My husband and I sleep in separate bedrooms.”

I choked on my tea and grinned at her. “Scandalous.”
My parents had slept in different wings of the palace, I wanted to say, but the double doors suddenly banged open and in came Lord Corvo, stumbling across the room to fall into the stool next to mine.

“Another one?” the Princess remarked, her eyebrows rising. “This far out, it must be the terrible Ocean, a curse from the Deep.” She raised her banana. “Or my banana. Sailors say it’s bad luck having them aboard.”

I stared at Corvo. “I don’t think it’s your banana, Princess.”

His rat eyes crawled over me through thick, unruly hair as he took notice that he wasn’t alone. He smelled like strong whiskey.

“Are you drunk?” I asked, my mouth falling open in shock. Corvo enjoyed a drink now and then—as I did—but I’d never seen him abuse strong spirits. As Royal Protector, he was sworn to protect me and fat chance of that if he couldn’t see straight!

“Dead drunk,” Corvo slurred. “Preferably dead.”

“I’d best make more tea,” the Princess sighed, rising from the table. As she skirted past me, she muttered, “Laced with Sokolov’s Elixir.”

To sober up the bloody Royal Protector!

I shot Corvo an angry look, but he was lost inside his inner demons, the alcohol just a symptom of a battle raging deeper inside that was festering his soul, twisting him into Corvo the Black. His behavior over the last twenty-four hours had only deteriorated, becoming more erratic and disturbing.

I couldn’t stomach the thought, but a part of me wondered if I’d made a terrible mistake bringing him along. At least turned into stone, he would have been kept out of trouble!

No, I scolded myself. Delilah would have used him against me. Rosemary was our hostage and Father would have been Delilah’s. And so I was grateful he was here, but utterly sickened by the sight of him falling apart. How could he have let himself get this drunk?

Why now?

I felt the blood drain from my face. I tugged his arm, forcing him to look at me. “Father, were you in the Void—just now? Did Delilah”—I made an angry, strangled sound—“touch you?”

“What?”

His glassy eyes were confused and irritated. “What in the black Void are you talking about, Em?”

The Princess returned. “Here. My own special concoction. A real Tyvian kick! Sobers men right up.” She handed me the cup. “Best make sure he drinks it all, Your Majesty. It’s not the most pleasant going down.”

“You hear that?” I said, glaring at him. “Drink all of it.”

He seemed oddly amiable, all things considered. He reached for the cup, but I didn’t trust his aim. I helped him bring it to his lips. He swung it back, choking and sputtering as I watched his throat bob. It was done.

He slammed the cup down, making a disgusted face. “What the hell is that?”
“You don’t want to know,” the Princess said. She touched my shoulder. “Good night, Your Majesty.” She leaned forward and whispered, “Be gentle with him.”

I cracked a despairing smile over my shoulder at her. “No promises.”

The elixir-laced concoction had worked its magic. The glassy look in Corvo’s eyes began to fade, though the whites of his eyes were still bloodshot.

Delilah’s curse was not so easily cured.

I didn’t push him, just sat in silence sipping my tea, grateful for my own feelings of cleansing, the last tremors of my panic attack vanishing from my tired limbs like mist beneath sunlight.

I recognized the moment Corvo found his wits. He looked around him in confusion like he couldn’t remember how he’d got there. “Feeling more yourself?” I put to him dryly.

What did that even mean anymore? *Who* was my father?

Corvo the Black was just a punch in the dark, an elusive target… Who knew what that *really* meant? How could a man soaked in murder and bloody revenge *not* be twisted into something far darker?

He didn’t respond to my question. For a moment, I thought he might be falling asleep at the table, but when I glanced at his rat eyes, I saw rabid alertness beneath shaggy, unruly hair.

“We’re going the wrong way,” he muttered darkly.

I frowned at him. “The wrong way?”

“Why are we chasing *whales*, Emily?” he asked like it was the stupidest idea he’d ever heard. “Karnaca is to the south. We’re wasting time.”

“You heard the Fletchers. The *Jessamine* is coming. We must divert our course anyway. *Lose* them—”

“You can’t *lose* them. Commander Kittredge knows we mean to hit Karnaca. We should have taken one of the Prince’s warships. Staying on the *Dreadful Wale* was a mistake.” His rat eyes glinted with anger and disgust. “Now we’re stuck.” He looked away, muttering, “And waiting to die.”

I understood his pessimism. If the *Jessamine* caught up to us, we’d be boarded by overwhelming numbers and hacked to pieces. It was possible my father and I would be taken alive and dragged back to Dunwall for a sham trial, but not *all* of us. They would surely slaughter Dougal and his wife, even a pregnant Princess Katya. There was no human decency in Delilah’s war. She had made that clear with the innocents slain in the streets of Dunwall, both women and children.

He spat, “Do I need to protect you from *yourself*? Next time, let *me* make the final decisions.”

“You couldn’t,” I spat back. “You’ve been—”

I shook my head. What was the point? In a few minutes, he’d go back to his crazy talk and I’d barely be able to converse with him again. His current lucidity was a rare gem. Clearly, he had no recollection of what had just transpired during Prince Finbar’s visit, during which he couldn’t have made a decision if he tried!

Yet, somehow, he knew we were sailing southeast… It’s like his mental faculties were still *there*, just
torn in the rage of a storm only he could feel. He’d said Jessamine was back, that The Heart was in his fist, but no one else could hear it. Had that driven him to the whiskey? He’d seemed so elated upon hearing Jessamine’s voice again, but it was manic. The high before the crash…

“Or do you not need me anymore?”

Corvo sounded miserable. I glanced at him in anguish. He stared at his hands wrapped around the empty teacup.

The desolation on his face was heartbreaking. I choked back a cry and grabbed his arm. “I need you more than ever,” I said. “Delilah pulled me into the Void.”

Somehow, it came out like an accusation.

I hadn’t meant to—it was unfair to blame him—but he was my Royal Protector and I felt so hurt, so lost. I didn’t feel protected.

Corvo slowly turned his head to look at me. Really look at me. “Shit, Em,” he said, twisting in his seat and pulling me into his arms.

I pressed my face against his shoulder as he petted my hair. I felt stiff like a corpse, my teeth bared in a ghastly grimace as I strained not to cry. I was done with crying. Anger was all I had left. “I’m going to kill her,” I growled into his shoulder.

He snorted against my hair. “Not if I beat you to it.”

He gently pushed me away, taking my face into his big hands. “I’ll make her pay. I promise.”

He kissed my forehead and let me go. I scooted my stool closer, settling against him, leaning shoulder to shoulder. He absently poked at the empty teacup, sending it spinning across the table. He admitted, “But I’m not sure how I can stop her from doing that, Em. Pulling you into the Void, I mean. That’s an Outsider’s power. Nothing can stop it.”

“Not a bone charm? Or a rune?”

I wondered if Rosemary might know.

“I don’t know.” He gave me a horrified look. “Does this mean Delilah is the new Outsider? You told me the black-eyed bastard is dead. Does that mean—”

“No, it’s not like that,” I said, waving my hand. “She’s just a leech. A parasite. Somehow, Delilah found a way to syphon the Outsider’s power from the Genesis Altar—that’s where he was created. Made into a god. The real Outsider is going to come back from the dead. He wants Delilah gone and his place in the Void restored.”

I looked up to find Corvo listening carefully, his rat eyes watching my face.

“Father, please trust me in this. You have to understand: the Outsider can help us kill Delilah. We need him. When he comes back, you have to promise me you won’t kill the Outsider.”

He tipped his hand, touching the back of mine. “He gave you the Mark. I’ll never forgive him for that.”

He stopped my heated reply with a hard look. “But… I’m willing to concede he might be useful…”

“He is! He can help us.”
He gave me a dubious look. “When is he ’coming back’?”

It was unheard of for the Outsider to die, let alone come back from the dead.

“I don’t know. He said the whales will bring him to me.”

“That explains the friggin’ whales,” Corvo muttered under his breath. He glowered at the blackboard. “Either way, the black-eyed bastard had better hurry up. We have business in Karnaca.”

He knocked back his stool and stood, his broad back set in a grim line as he inspected the blackboard.

He asked over his shoulder, “You’ve seen the Captain’s plans for breaking into Addermire?”

I joined him at the blackboard, crossing my arms. Foster had pinned up a map of the Theodanis District, named after the old Duke of Serkonos. Every time I passed the damn thing, I couldn’t help but wonder if the Crown Killer was actually there, in a rundown sanitarium on its own private island south of the docks.

Theodanis was a waterfront district, with several access points across the bay.

“Mhm. The Captain’s worried about the Watchtower,” I said. “I am, too. No way to get close undetected.” Those things could launch whale-oil missiles at five hundred yards with pinpoint accuracy.

Corvo jabbed the map with his finger. “The carriage line is the only way in.” He stepped sideways along the blackboard and suddenly ripped off a black-and-white photograph, crumbling it in his fist and tossing it away like garbage.

“Was that Curnow?” I blurted.

“He shouldn’t be on the board. Jameson Curnow is my spy. I sent him to Karnaca two months ago—in my place. I was trying to investigate without leaving your side. He’s one of my best.”

“I didn’t know he was an Eye!”

“A man of his talent and you thought he was just a Corporal in the City Watch? I recruited him years ago, not long after his father died. I trust him implicitly.” He added, more quietly, “Like I did Alexi.”

I winced, fresh grief spilling over. Barely two days had passed since her death, her body cooling in the Tower—or worse. I hated to think what Delilah was doing with the dead. I hoped to bury my friends properly when I returned, but who knew what would be left of them? It was heartbreaking.

I cleared my throat, glancing back at the map. “Where is Jameson now? Can he help us?”

“Not sure. His last report mentioned the Dust District. Once we hit the streets, I’ll try to run a message through the last remaining Eye I trust in Karnaca—minus Curnow, that is.” His rat eyes drifted towards the silvergraph portraits of Mortimer Ramsey and Commander Kittredge. “Can’t trust anyone else. Everywhere you turn, traitors at our back.”

“Run through who?”

Despite it all, I couldn’t help but smile at him a little, despite the seriousness of our conversation.
This was my father. The professional. The man who knew how to tear a conspiracy apart brick by brick because he’d done it before—during the Rat Plague.

I was proud of him. He didn’t seem distracted or… or drunk. He was focused. Alert. Was the worst over?

“Through Lucia Pastor, the head of the Shindaery Peak Miners’ Family Committee. She’s not a trained spy like Curnow. She’s more of a loose informant. It’s unconventional, but she’ll have her ear to the ground.” He paused, eyeing me. The ends of his mouth lifted slightly. “What?”

He had caught me smiling at him. I shyly poked his arm. “Just glad you’re back. For a while there…”

He’d been distracted. Gone. Lost.

He frowned at me. “You mean Jessamine,” he said, looking away. “She’s back.”

“I know.” You were repeating it for bloody hours on end during the Prince’s visit, I thought. Mumbling like a madman.

But now he seemed sane. Lucid.

He held my gaze. “I don’t just hear her voice, Em. The Heart is more than it used to be. I see her. She’s the most real to me than she’s ever been. It’s like… I have her back.”

I felt a chill up my spine. “What do you mean?”

“Her spirit—her soul—whatever you want to call it. It’s trapped inside The Heart. She’s afraid. And confused. I see it on her face.” His rat eyes drifted away.

“Do you see her now?”

“No. When I see her… I can’t do anything. I don’t want to do anything. I’m just… I’m lost inside that moment with her.” He sighed. “It’s all we have left.”

“Can you… touch her?”

I was afraid that Delilah was somehow tricking my father into seeing Jessamine when in truth it was her, like in the safe room. I couldn’t help but dread the possibility. How else to explain the coincidence of The Heart returning now after fifteen years of silence?

Corvo gave me a vulnerable look. I didn’t know how else to describe it. It was like I’d shot him in the heart and asked how it felt.

“No, I can’t touch her, Emily. She’s a spirit. A phantom. A ghost lingering well past her time. I want to free her, but I don’t know how. Being with her is the least I can do after failing her. She’s lonely and afraid.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He looked pained. “Jessamine and I… we’re together, but at the same time we’ve never been further apart.”

“You’re strong, Father. You’re the strongest man I know. You’ll get through this.”
I had to believe that, for both our sakes.

Tears welled in his dark eyes. Impossible tears. He brushed them away like he’d felt something foreign crawling over his skin, acting more surprised and irritated than anything. Corvo, the Masked Felon of the Rat Plague. Corvo, the Fugitive. The Avenging Angel. Corvo, the Royal Protector. He never cried. The man before me was far deeper, the shadow beneath the shadow. The one crying in the dark, his hands covered in the blood of his beloved. Daud had killed her and Corvo couldn’t stop it. Couldn’t protect her.

Seeing Jessamine was bringing it all back. Unearthing graves that had long been buried.

I looked away, giving him privacy. Dignity. I wasn’t foolish enough to believe that men never cried, but I also wanted him to feel strong. Still in control. He could rise above this.

But somehow the question still rolled out of me. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever get the courage to ask…

“Father, did you secretly marry Mother?”

He blinked at me like I was a long way off. “What?”

“Did you marry her? In secret?”

“Where’d you hear that?” He sounded tired.

“Delilah.”

He sighed, running fingers through his dark hair. “We had a moment, Emily. A special moment. But was there a priest from the Abbey? An officiator? Any witnesses? No. It was just us. Jessamine wanted it that way. Look, your mother wanted to marry me, but she was foolish enough to fear Parliament. They all hated me. I was a foreigner and a poor man’s get. It’s the same people, now, who ridicule you over Wyman. Who pressure you into marrying Gristol nobility. Who shame you into thinking you’re not good enough unless the man you marry is like them.”

His rat eyes flared.

“After we kill Delilah, we’re going to cleanse Parliament of its aristocratic vipers. The whole poisonous nest of them.”

He clenched his fists, laughing harshly to himself.

“You can believe half of them are already groveling before Delilah, kissing the ground she walks on.” He nodded his head as if agreeing with himself, his reasons for revenge, his justifications for bloodshed. “We’ll see who’s still walking when I’m done with them.”

Just like that Corvo the Black reared his ugly head, murder thundering from his eyes.

“And then what?” I demanded. “Build a new Parliament over their corpses?”

“We don’t need a Parliament.”

“Spoken like a true Regenter,” I hissed. “Hiram Burrows would be so proud.”

Time slowed.

I knew in that split-second before Corvo raised his hand in anger that I’d gone too far. Burrows had ordered my mother’s execution. Burrows had stood over my father’s broken, tortured body in Coldridge Prison, tightening his shackles as Morris Sullivan, the Royal Interrogator, came at him
with pliers. They’d ripped off his fingernails, one by one. For six months they had made his life a living hell, trying to extract a confession. *Why’d you kill the Empress, Corvo?* A Royal Protector murdering his own charge—it was an outrageous lie.

And I had spit it back in his face. Corvo had never, *ever* struck me in anger before. I winced, shrinking back as I saw his hand lash out to strike me hard across the face.

But the blow never fell.

An icy cold wind shot through my body like lightning. I knew *that* feeling. The Void. Corvo was frozen. Literally frozen in place. He was leaning forward, his hand raised in anger—about to strike his own daughter…

And over his shoulder, I saw the Outsider, his black eyes gleaming like the night itself, a hundred million stars and galaxies spiraling into the unknown.

His lips—healed, no longer bruised—grinned at me like we were evil conspirators.

“Hello, Emily. I see things are as interesting as ever between you two. I’d ask what I missed, but I fear my news is more urgent.”

He waved his hand at me. “You might want to stand back, my dear.”

Speechless, I stumbled two steps back.

With another flick of his hand, time resumed. Corvo swung and missed, flailing forward as his target unexpectedly appeared out of range. I had hoped to see a flash of regret in his eyes—*how dare he hit me!*—but his face contorted in bone-jarring shock as he saw the Outsider step around him to settle comfortably at my side.

*Close* to my side. The Outsider radiated pure cold, and a blue-tinged glow outlined his body in eerie luminescence.

Definitely not human.

Corvo scowled. “I knew it was too good to be true. You’re not dead, Outsider.”

“Observant as ever, dear Corvo.” The Outsider turned his black eyes on me. “Emily, something went wrong.”

“I’d say.”

“I tried to come back sooner, but I had a difficult time simply figuring out *where* I was. To be precise: I’m *still* there.”

“You’re not making any goddamn sense,” Corvo growled. “Like always.”

The Outsider slid his Void gaze between us. “I died. I came back—or rather, never left.” He shrugged. “There’s two of me, now. Though even *that* might not be the correct explanation since *one* of me doesn’t even know who *me* is. I’ve been split in two. A Great Schism.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, meeting his gaze.

There was something off, there. I used to drown in his eyes, totally losing myself in his seductive gaze. *Obsessing* over him. But now it felt different.
He was different.

He looked the same. A black suit, glossy boots. The same dark hair and fathomless black eyes…but he seemed to hover above the ground. A ghost. A spirit. A cold chill. I reached for him, but my hand slipped through him.

We could no longer touch one another. The intense obsession I’d once felt for him was simply…gone.

“What went wrong?” I asked him.

The Outsider looked at me like what he saw in my face was destroying him from the inside. When I had tried to touch him—and failed—he had visibly paled, looking more ghostlike than ever. He said, “The whales couldn’t find my name. Somehow, Delilah stole it. Without my name, my soul cannot be freed from the Void. The spirit you see before you is but a shadow of the Outsider-that-was. His soul is trapped within The Ritual Hold, the center of the Void. That is one of me. I am its manifestation in the real world.”

He flickered like a ghost losing its grip on the waking world.

“The second me is indeed human—”

Corvo interrupted angrily, “Are we really going to keep listening to this nonsense? Em—”

“Sshh! Let him finish,” I demanded. I looked at the Outsider. “Go on.”

The Outsider said, “The whales created him. He’s human again. They gifted him the breath of life and sculpted his bones from the salt of the Deep. But he is not me. Or rather, he is me—but from before…” He looked contemplative. “Before I was sacrificed and became a god.”

I felt like my head was spinning.

“So this other you—he’s human, you say? He’s you from four thousand years ago? Before you became the Outsider?”

“Exactly that.”

“I have to sit down.”

I stumbled towards the table. Corvo remained standing, his rat eyes caught between outright suspicion and hatred. Corvo looked at me, gesturing obscenely at the Outsider. “This is supposed to be helping us?”

The Outsider glanced at his ghostlike hands. “It’s not ideal, I’ll grant you. Delilah continues to surpass all expectations. However, I should note that I am not dead. Her attempt to kill me has been thwarted, however strangely.”

Corvo and I shared a look. I glanced at the Outsider and frowned. “Where’s your human self, then? How come he’s not here with you?”

His face lit up. “I’m glad you care to ask, Emily. For a moment there, I thought you’d forgotten our…connection. I have not forgotten how deeply the Outsider felt about you. You interested him above all others. Above all sanity.”

“But you are the Outsider, aren’t you?”
“I am. As much as I can be.”

“A cryptic answer. It must be you.”

“I’m glad you think so. Losing me completely would have been hard on you.”

“I see your vanity is still intact,” I said, helplessly smiling.

“And my feelings for you. Your smile makes me—”

“Enough!” Corvo growled. “I don’t need to hear gushing innuendo between you two. I heard enough lovesick ‘poetry’ from Wyman.”

“Father!”

The Outsider grinned.

“Ignore him.” I scowled. “My Royal Protector hasn’t been himself.”

The Outsider crossed his arms and appraised Corvo with a skeptical eye. “I told you to reconsider before breaking him from stone, Emily. Has he murdered anyone yet?”

“How about I start with you?” Corvo growled.

“Alas, I am but a shade upon this world,” the Outsider said, lifting his hands in apology. “Untouchable and forlorn is me. I wield but a fraction of my former power. In fact, the only reason I am even able to appear before you right here, right now, is because the cheerful Captain keeps a particularly ancient and powerful bone charm in her secret room.”

“Her secret room?” I blurted.

“Where?” Corvo asked.

“There,” the Outsider said, nodding towards the back of the cargo hold.

*There’s a secret room behind the blackboard?*

Corvo tried the door, but it was locked. When he resorted to slamming his shoulder against it, the Outsider said, all nonchalant, “I wouldn’t if I were you.” He glanced at me and winked. “You know what they say about skeletons in the closet.”

The door wouldn’t budge. Corvo returned, looking miffed. I said, “I’ll ask Meagan about it.” I glanced at the Outsider. “I take it this bone charm is the only way to contact you right now?”

“Exactly right, my dear. Though once you reach Karnaca, there’ll be other options. An Outsider shrine will work just fine. Delilah holds no sway over my worshippers, especially the overzealous ones.”

“Good. The less we see of you, the better,” Corvo grumbled.

The Outsider looked fascinated. “Why the hostility, dear Corvo?”

“You Marked my daughter!” He squeezed the hilt of his sword like he wanted to hack him to pieces. “I won’t just find a way to free you from the Void. I’ll stab you right through your black, evil eyes and kill you—for good.”
“Only the Knife that slit my throat four thousand years ago could accomplish such a feat.”

“Don’t tell him that,” I blurted. “He’ll try!”

The Outsider glanced at me in amusement. “The Knife is safely hidden.” He turned away from Corvo as if suddenly bored with my father’s murderous rage. “My dear Emily, again your compassion draws me in like a helpless fool. I am eternally ashamed that I cannot be the man you deserve.”

I tried not to make a face.

*My, my, how the tables have turned.* It was shockingly clear to me that I no longer felt hopelessly entranced by him. The burning desire was gone, the thirst-like obsession dissipated like mist beneath sunlight.

I had a clear head and a clear heart.

Don’t get me wrong. I still felt attracted to him, but it wasn’t like the sensation of falling off a cliff or losing myself. I was free to explore my feelings towards him.

I thought about his human counterpart. How strange to think of the possibilities… Who was he before he became the Outsider? What was he like before he became a god?

I said, “Speaking of man… where can we find your, uh… second half? Is that the right word? What do we even call him—you? I mean, the human you.”

I sighed in frustration. *Void, this is confusing.*

“A good question. He knows no name. *That* is the crux of the problem,” the Outsider said. “A name in the Void holds incredible power. By stealing it, Delilah has crippled my ability to restore the divine cycle. My human self will be completely unaware—and vulnerable. Imagine waking up four thousand years into the future with no notion of what has transpired.”

“So he’ll have severe amnesia?”

“Not precisely. How can he forget what has never happened? He’ll remember his own humble origins. He’s eighteen years old. He’ll have strong memories of family, of his village. In modern day terms, he is an ancient Pandysian. Beyond that, I cannot say. My mind is not as… far-reaching as it once was.”

I stared at him, speechless.

Corvo crossed his arms, looking unimpressed. “He won’t speak the common tongue, then. What good is a barbarian boy who can’t even communicate with us? How is he supposed to help us kill Delilah?”

“*How* you ask? I have already told Emily in the Void… our fates are one. Together we can defeat Delilah—the greatest threat of our time. If either of you could see Delilah as I do…” He shook his head and smiled. “She is transcendent. She is Death Reincarnate. She is—”

“—going to suffer a brutal, agonizing death,” Corvo finished. He dismissively walked through the Outsider, cutting right through his ghostly form to plant a kiss on my forehead. “Goodnight, Em. Excuse me for not staying up, but I can’t listen to anymore of this drivel. I’m done.”

I tried smiling at him, but I felt dazed. The Outsider’s unexpected presence in my life was shocking
enough, but now the *schism*…

“Hold on,” the Outsider said.

Corvo turned back, his rat eyes wary. The Outsider gestured in the air and another Emily appeared. Another *me*.

I leapt from the table, startled out of my skin. The Doppelgänger proceeded to punch Corvo—hard—right in the nose. Blood spurted from his nostrils as he stumbled backwards, his expression all shock and outrage. In the next instant, the strange Emily disappeared in a swish of black magic.

“Your newest power, Emily,” the Outsider said, shooting me a delighted grin. “Do you like it?” His black eyes snapped towards Corvo. *“That’s for trying to hit the Empress.”*
Part 4: Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Warning: Disturbing references to rape, non-explicit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 32

20th day of the Month of Earth, 1852

We watched the dawn arise, the Outsider and I. Yellows and oranges and reds chased across the sky, reflecting in rippling glory over blue waters. I watched the Outsider’s face, his black eyes fixated on the Ocean’s waves. His ghostly form flickered in and out, a tenuous hold on the waking world.

“Does it all seem different to you?” I asked him. We stood together at the bow of the ship. The wind ruffled my hair, black tendrils dancing in front of my eyes.

I noticed the Outsider remained untouched by the wind. Untouchable.

It broke my heart that I could no longer feel his cold fingers run over skin… and yet… had that desire ever been truly my own? The Outsider’s power was somehow diminished—his soul trapped in the center of the Void, his name lost—and with it, his seductive powers had also waned.

It was as if a spell had been broken.

I could breathe again in his presence. I could look into his liquid black eyes and not feel like I was drowning. In some ways it felt good—freeing—but in other ways it felt like a crushing loss.

My worst fears had come true.

A part of my attraction to him had been supernatural—a lust formed by black magic itself—and now I was reeling in the aftershock, realizing that the Outsider had tricked me.

I told myself what I didn’t want to hear. That he had Marked me because he needed me, because there was a game and I was his most important game piece. He had seen me at the center of the pond, my choices cascading in ripples into a future he desired, where Delilah’s power over him was destroyed.

How could I live with that? I didn’t want that. I wanted him.

Desire of my heart, I thought, born not of lust, but of feelings grounded in tenderness and trust. I wanted to believe there could be more between us. Something built not on trickery or lies, but true
attraction, true feelings, true *everything*.

Was that even possible with a creature such as him? The king of mischief. The prince of deceit. He who saw that special spark between two people not as a precious gift, but as a tool, something to be manipulated and used for his selfish ends.

The Outsider had been *created*, sacrificed into a god… Who knew how the Void had shaped him? Changed him? I wanted to meet his human counterpart, if only to see the man he was *before* the Void had sunk its claws into him.

Four thousand years could change a man.

The Outsider grimaced. “Different? Oh, yes. For one thing, I can no longer read your thoughts, Emily. I am pathetically blind. Imagine having the eyes of a god… So much was crystal clear, but now… Now I see only what I *remember* seeing… The broken glimpses of the past and the wild hopes of the future…”

His black eyes fell over me, searching my face.

“But if there’s one memory that shines the brightest—it’s you. He was—I am—interested in you. *Intensely* interested, Emily.”

“You mean I was *intensely* under your spell.” It was hard not to sound bitter, or accusing, but…

“Emily…”

I shook my head and waved my hand. “You are what you are. Please don’t apologize.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because I can’t read your mind.”

“And that bothers you, doesn’t it?” I smirked. “You know, I rather like this *new* you.”

“I don’t.”

The Outsider fell into a moody silence. I felt bad for teasing him, but damn it all! He deserved a little discomfort after what he put me through… I glared out over the Ocean. How did I ever believe that I could fall in love with the Outsider and have my feelings returned? I felt foolish, but also—crazily enough—*lucky*. I would never, *ever* forget what it felt like to fall into his kiss.

“You don’t because you like holding all the cards,” I said. “I can’t read your mind. Now it’s fair.”

“It’s crippling.”

“It’s just being human.”

He said nothing.

After a time, I ventured, “I don’t really understand this Schism thing. Your former powers may be gone, or broken, or however you want to put it, but you’re still *you*.”

“I am less. I am a manifestation of the Outsider-that-was. His soul is trapped in the Void, and that soul has been torn in two. The Great—”
“—Schism. I know. I just meant…” My stomach twisted in knots; I could barely stand to look at him.

“What is it, Emily?”

I sighed. “What about your human side? Does this mean he’ll have only half a soul? Or no soul?”

When he didn’t respond right away, I forced myself to look at him. A wraith-like smile split his face as he regarded me with those bottomless black eyes. He said, “This idea of a human me interests you more than the real me.”


“Understandable. You have never glimpsed the immortal eyes of the Dead God. Therein is true sight. True clarity. All the Outsiders that have ever been are reflections of the Dead God, the All-Knowing, the All-Encompassing, the Beginning and the End.”

The Outsider stepped into me, and though I could not feel his touch, I felt his cold, the endless chill of the Deep.

“Imagine your life as a limitless source of possibilities,” he said, mirroring my movements as I turned my hand experimentally. His ghostly hand ran through my fingers, an eerie glow illuminating my skin. “Each possibility is a different you… an infinite string of What Ifs stretching into multiple futures, forking at pivotal moments in your life.”

“Different how?”

“What if your mother had never died? Or what if Corvo had burned through the Rat Plague, murdering everyone in his way? What kind of person would you now be? Emily the Vengeful? That Emily exists in a different future, a different timeline—but that person is still you. That person is whole. They have a soul.”

I look at him. Through him. His ghostly body distorted the Ocean’s waves behind him. I shuddered as his eyes met mine. Even devoid of his once-great seductive powers, I could still feel awe at the impossible beauty he inhabited, a twilight world of Void and Ocean.

His voice alone pulled me in. It was as beautiful as ever.

He said, “So it is with my human self, my broken ‘half’ as you say. He is broken only because he should not exist in our timeline. But he is whole—a man with a soul—but a man who died before ever becoming the Outsider. His new life is a second chance.”

“I want to meet him.”

“I told you. Three days,” the Outsider said, glancing over the horizon. “Tempest Island lies to the southeast. We will find it, and you will find him.”

I gripped the railing. “I’m afraid. How will I even communicate with him? You called him an ancient Pandyssian. That means his language went extinct four thousand years ago…”

Far above, I heard the door to the bridge swing open. The Captain emerged, stretching her arms and rolling her neck. She leaned over the rail and lit her pipe, looking down at me—only me. I waved, beckoning her to come closer.
The Captain frowned, but went back inside to take the stairs. I glanced at the Outsider. “I take it she can’t see you?”

“No. Would you like her to?”

“Better not. What I’m about to ask her will be shocking enough.”

The Outsider and I turned towards the Captain as she joined me at the rail.

“You’re up early,” Meagan remarked, her dark eyes steady.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

Corvo had eventually retired to his cabin after nursing his bloody nose, but I couldn’t even think about going to bed. I’d wanted the Outsider all to myself.

“Meagan, do you remember when I told you the Outsider was my ally?”

“I do,” she said, her eyebrows rising slightly.

“Well, my ally has returned—and he has a critical mission for us. I will show you on the map what he showed me. There’s an island we must reach. But before that, I need you to go downstairs into your secret room and fetch the bone charm you keep hidden there. We need it.”

I watched her face transform, shock and distrust blowing her pupils wide. “My secret room… you know…?”

“Whatever else your secret room hides, the Outsider did not tell me. Please, Meagan. I care only about the bone charm. Best fetch it before my father awakens. He is far more curious about your secret room than I.”

That got her moving.

I knew she had secrets, but unlike my father I was more interested in gaining her trust than ripping apart her dark past by brute force. I wanted her to invite me in; I didn’t want to barge in uninvited. That was the difference.

After she left, I faced the Outsider. “I’m sorry. What were we talking about?”

“Ancient Pandyssians. His language barrier does present a problem, but…” He sighed. “Let me think on it, Emily. I’m sure I can find a solution given time. Speaking of which, the bone charm will eventually burn itself out. There is a limited amount of time we can converse. Even now, I feel the urge to return to the Void. The pull is overwhelming.”

He seemed to be fading, flickering in and out as the sun rose in the sky, as if he was more solidly a creature of the night and would disappear come morning.

I stared at him with rising alarm. “So soon?”

“Think of the bone charm as a candle. Coming to you is like burning that candle from both ends. The longer I stay in your world, the faster it burns. I should go. It’s wiser to save the bone charm for future encounters. Once you reach Karnaca, this problem will be alleviated somewhat by Outsider shrines. Until then, I suggest we be conservative with our time together.”

“But I have so many questions! You can’t leave.”
He lifted his ghostly hand to my cheek. A biting cold dug into my skin, but of his touch, skin to skin, I felt nothing. Nothing but the memory of how it once felt between us.

He looked sad. “One question, then I will go.”

I hardened my heart. “Delilah. She’s pulling me into the Void every time I sleep. It’s like a nightmare I can’t escape. What can I do? How can I stop her?”

His black eyes wavered. “A protective sigil will work, but it requires special inks with arcane properties, and the sigil must be drawn into your skin with exacting care. I know of only one such artist in Karnaca who could accomplish such a feat. When you arrive, I will help you find Mindy Blanchard.”

“But that’s weeks away! How am I to get through her torture, night after night?”

I was begging for relief. The thought of even spending one more night pulled into the Void was unbearable.

“I’m sorry, Emily, but that’s all I can give you. Now I must go…” He smiled sadly at me, the dawn’s fiery colors reflecting on his pale face. “Stay strong, my dear. I’ll see you on Tempest Island.” He disappeared in a shower of black rain, dancing spirals like cold reflections of dying light.

His sudden absence was too much to bear. I stumbled towards the War Room, falling into one of the Prince’s sumptuous sofas and leaning over my knees with my head between my hands. I felt nauseous.

Hearing footsteps, I glanced up. The Royal Protector stood over me, his dark figure blocking out the rising sun. His nose was badly bruised. Black and green blotches spread over his cheeks. It didn’t look pretty.

“I’m sorry—”

“It wasn’t you,” he shot irritably. “It was him.”

Ironically, it was me. Well, another me. After Corvo had gone to bed, the Outsider had elaborated on what else I could do with my Doppelgänger, both lethal and nonlethally. With a blush, I remembered him saying, ‘I would recommend using her as a distraction. You are certainly that, my dear.’

The Outsider had gone on to explain another new power of mine: Dark Vision. My father had received the same supernatural gift and so I understood it well, in theory. It meant I could see in the dark and through some obstructions, like walls.

Corvo frowned at me. “You look tired. I take it you didn’t even try to get some sleep last night?”

“With Delilah haunting my dreams, it’s not really an option,” I said wearily, rubbing my face.

His rat eyes circled the deck. “Where is he?”

“Gone for now.”

I stood up and leaned against the table. “The Outsider showed me where to go… where we’ll find the Pandyssian. Come look, Father.” I moved one of the apple-shaped paperweights out of the way as Corvo slouched at the edge of the table and looked down at the map. I finger-tapped a scattering of islands to the southeast, not far from where the Prince had circled a few whale sightings.
“Here. He calls it Tempest Island. It’s this one. The smallest one. There’s a deep fissure in the cliff-face somewhere along the island’s north-side. It leads into a deep cavern beneath the island. The Outsider says I have to go down there—alone.”

“No fucking way,” Corvo instantly retorted, hard-eyed.

“Yes fucking way,” I shot back with a tired laugh. I touched his arm, forcing him to look at me. “I’ll be fine, Father. This is my plan. My willingness to accept the Outsider’s help. I can do this.”

“It’s coercion. He’s telling you what to do and you’re doing it because you think you have no other choice. He’s playing a bigger game, Emily. Never forget you’re just a pawn. We all are.”

I soured at his words. “You’re not listening.”

I heard footsteps. We turned to face the approaching Captain. She handed me the bone charm, her face grim.

“Here. It’s all yours. Can’t say it ever brought me luck.”

She looked relieved to be giving it away, almost as if the bone charm conjured bad memories for her. Her dark eyes shot towards the Royal Protector, startled to find his face swollen with bruising, but after Corvo’s terrifying performance in the cargo hold, his blade about to pluck her eye out, she wasn’t about to ask uncomfortable questions.

In my hands, the bone charm seemed to hum with magic, a crackling blue glow barely perceptible along its roughened edges. The charm was carved from whale bone, two stick-like bones knotted together at the center to form an X-shape.

I tucked it into my pant trouser and smiled at the Captain. “Thank you. And now the other thing…”

“No,” Corvo interjected. “We’re not moving on to the other thing until we talk about that.”

He crossed his arms and faced the Captain. “What’s this about your secret room?”

“There’s nothing to see,” I said, touching his arms and gently forcing them to his sides, to relax. “The Captain just needs to hide her black market goods like any smuggler. Bone charms are illegal, as you know.”

The Captain returned Corvo’s stony glare.

“Moving on,” I said, turning towards the map and making room for Meagan at my side, opposite of Corvo. “This is Tempest Island.” I tapped the small marking on the map. “Do you know it, Captain?”

It was technically part of a larger group of islands to the east called the Pyandonea Archipelago, though Tempest Island was at its western-most fringe. I remembered studying it briefly with Sokolov. Many whaling ships had disappeared into the Mists of Pyandonea. Sokolov called it the ‘first step’ in reaching the elusive Pandysian Continent.

That was even further east, beyond the map. It was so far, ships were lucky to reach it within a year of travel!

And even luckier if they returned. Dark things lied beyond the Ocean, and beneath it.

The Captain inhaled a long drag from her pipe as she contemplated the map. She blew out smoke and looked up at me, her eyes hollow. “Smugglers know to avoid it. No one goes there. They say
it’s haunted. They call the island Black Sand.”

“Black sand?”

“If you sail out far enough, towards Pandyssia, sometimes you find islands with pink sand, or sand so white it looks like fallen stars, but there…” She shook her head. “That island is cursed. There’s a reason the sand is black. They say it’s the charred remains of countless Pandyssians, burned alive ages ago. They say the Pyandonea Archipelago broke off from the Pandyssian Continent in an ancient cataclysm of fire and brimstone.”

She took another drag, her face barren of emotion.

“I never cared for old stories and superstitions, but this… It’s a bad place. You can feel it.” She reached over and pointed at a nearby island. “That is Glory Point. A smuggler’s cove. I know it well. It’s the closest I’ve ever been to Black Sand. If you mean to reach this Tempest Island, we can be there in three days.”

I nodded and glanced at my father. “That’s what the Outsider said. Three days.”

Corvo didn’t look pleased. “Tell me again why this is a good idea?”

I ignored his salty tone and looked to the Captain with my Empress face. “Set a course, Captain. We’re picking up a young man on that island. He’s going to help us defeat Delilah.”

Meagan looked between my father and I, her eyes shielded, but she yielded without question and returned to the bridge.

I felt the Dreadful Wale change course. We were still going southeast, but even minute changes to our angled vector would mean the difference between overshooting our target or not, three days hence. Still, even knowing where we were going, I felt as though uncertainty—as much as hope—was plotting our course.

I spent the next three days in a repetitious cycle. The days were kind and the nights were cruel.

Each night, without fail, Delilah pulled me into the Void and each morning, I awoke bleary-eyed and restless. She was wearing me down. Of those nightly visits, I chose not to elaborate when Father asked. The dark shadows beneath my eyes was all he needed to know. She was hurting me.

Not physical pain, though at times she could make me feel unbearably nauseous, sending me sprawling into the Void as if I was being thrown off a cliff into the sea. At other times she would terrify me by coming at me with a knife, slashing at my throat.

I would see blood and feel the cold blade, but every night I woke up, untouched, unharmed. Sweat-soaked and trembling, I still woke up. Alive.

I kept going.

Knowing it was just an illusion helped me get through it, night after night, but the torture itself became more creative as Delilah adapted to my efforts to resist her.

She began humiliating me with increasingly perverted sexual fantasies after observing how badly I took it.

She used Corvo a lot. His look-a-like. I refused to believe it was really him. It was an illusion like everything else.
But Delilah had found my weakness and plundered it. Every night I endured the awful sounds and sights of Corvo fucking Delilah—or fucking me. Another me, like the Doppelgänger, though there was no way for Delilah to know the Outsider had given me that power.

I watched because I couldn’t not watch and I listened because I couldn’t not listen. Of the two, the sounds were the worse. I was never meant to hear those groans, those cries from my father’s lips. Each night when I awoke from the Void, I would rage and cry into my pillow, nearly ripping it in half.

And Delilah used the gazebo.

She forced me to watch my mother’s murder over and over. Then bored with that, Delilah had the idea to replace Daud with Corvo. Jessamine would scream, ‘Corvo!’ as he pierced her heart with his blade. She even painted the scene, a bloody paintbrush in her hand as if memorializing the moment on canvas.

She told me the painting was hanging above my bed in the Tower—in the real world, though I didn’t know if that was true. I doubted her every word.

It got worse. Delilah then decided the fantasy should involve Daud forcing himself on Jessamine before killing her, or after; it didn’t matter to Delilah, only that I felt helpless to stop her. I watched my mother’s assassin grunt over her body as my father screamed in agony, held back by two laughing Whalers.

The gazebo echoed with screams night after night. My mother’s screams. My screams. It all mingled and bled. It wasn’t enough for Delilah. Little Emily was next. My ten-year-old self. What sick and twisted mind could imagine such a thing and bring it to life? Could show it to me with a cold smile and ask me if I wanted more? Delilah drank my fear and disgust and hatred like it was sweet wine.

I hated her more than Daud. Never in my life had I ever wanted someone’s death like I wanted hers.

And I wanted her to feel it. I wanted to torture her as horrifically as she was torturing me, but not in the Void. I wanted to hurt her in the real world, to make the bruises last, the scars deeper, the pain linger…

Eventually, I tried not sleeping at all.

By the time Tempest Island rose from mists, I was a ghost of my former self. Sleep-deprived. Angry. Broken. I had never felt more alone.

My father had endured six months of torture in Coldridge Prison. This was my turn, now, night after night in Delilah’s prison. I felt like I had fallen into evil itself, somewhere so dark, so deep no one could ever reach me, not even my father. I couldn’t bear to tell him the truth of what I’d seen in the Void.

The dark secrets in that gazebo were for no human ear. I would take that horror to the grave.

But I told Corvo the Outsider could help me—once we reached Karnaca. As soon as we hit the streets, I meant to find this Mindy Blanchard and get the protective sigil tattoo to stop Delilah from haunting my dreams.

“You might not last until then,” Corvo said, his rat eyes drowning in agony. He hated to see me like this. He hated that he was powerless to stop it. He knew I was holding back the worst of it.
When I looked in the mirror, I barely recognized myself.

Eileen had poured me a hot bath—a luxury when each bucket of water had to be heated on the stove—but the young woman did it out of compassion. Everyone aboard the ship followed me with worried eyes. The bath helped. It was my first since the Tower.

Sitting there, scrubbing away grime and filth… Who could scrub away the filth in my head? The images burned into my brain of incest, murder, and child rape? I began to feel ashamed.

And then I felt nothing at all.

After the bath, the Princess pleated my hair into an elaborate braid. “You’re the Empress of the Isles, Emily,” Katya said. “Whatever you’ve seen, whatever you’ve done… You are good. You have your mother’s heart.”

I looked at her without seeing. I closed my eyes and imagined Delilah’s blood running down my face, into my mouth.

Corvo even let me see Rosemary.

It was then I realized how much he feared for me. Rosemary played for me on the violin, the harmonious notes echoing in the engine room like heaven brought low. I cried without tears into her embrace, my face lost in her long, blonde hair. I was too empty for tears.

Finally, it was time.

Tempest Island was surrounded by shores too shallow for the Dreadful Wale. Instead, we used the skiff.

Just my father and I.

I ordered everyone else to stay aboard the Dreadful Wale, even my Royal Protector, but he argued against it until I surrendered. He would let me go into the cave alone—per the Outsider’s instructions—but he would wait for me on the shore.

Corvo steered the skiff, the one stolen from the Jessamine. Of that fearsome flagship, we’d seen nothing on the horizon, but with the Fletchers’ warning, it was a constant source of worry.

We rode to the north side of the island over choppy waves. Huge cliffs reached for the sky like jagged black gems, and below were vast stretches of shoreline, glimmering with endless black sand. It reminded me of the Outsider’s gaze, and for a moment I felt hope. The wind felt good on my face.

Tempest Island was a land of barren beauty. When I dug my toes into the black sand and walked towards the great fissure in the cliffs, I felt drawn to it like a moth to the flame.

Corvo called out to me, his voice coarse with anguish. “Emily!”

I turned back, almost forgetting he was there. The wind lashed against my face, a cold biting kiss.

“I love you,” he said. “Come back to me.”

“I will, Father.” I tried smiling at him, but the black sand was blinding, a thousand black diamonds glittering in the light. “I love you, too.”

I left him there on the beach and climbed into the dark cave, the roar of the Ocean’s waves echoing against the obsidian rock.
Somewhere in that yawning darkness was the human Outsider. I was afraid. The dark felt heavy. Strange. This was no ordinary cave. The weight of the Void crashed against it; I could feel it on my skin, chilling me to the bone.

But after Delilah… I took another step. And another.

I knew darkness.

Chapter End Notes

For Tempest Island, I’m picturing Iceland’s black sand beaches. Also, 'Tempest Island' and the 'Mists of Pyandonea' namedrops are from Elder Scrolls lore, not Dishonored.
I’m making up the ancient Pandyssian language. If any part translates into real-life words or names, it’s totally coincidental. Also, Dishonored lore is really vague about Pandyssia, so I’m fleshing out the backstory using Elder Scrolls lore (games like Skyrim and Elder Scrolls Online).

Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 33

23rd day of the Month of Earth, 1852

The bone charm burned against my ribs. Eileen had stitched it to the inside of my coat. Beneath Dark Vision, the bone charm appeared to glow with a fiery white light. The surrounding cave was not as distinct; it melted into plays of shadow.

Even with supernatural vision, I was fumbling blindly, my fingers running over smooth rock, like glass. The deeper I descended, the narrower the passageway and the colder it felt.

I had never seen the bone charm blaze so brightly before. I whispered, “Outsider? Is that you?”

My voice echoed eerily in the yawning darkness. The cavern was not silent. I could hear the Ocean’s waves like an undulating current below the grinding gravel sounds emanating from the rock itself, like mountains shifting.

And yet there was a profound stillness, a hush in the air that spoke of a sacred place.

“I’m here, Emily,” the Outsider said, his voice suddenly resounding from all directions.

I turned in a full circle. “I can’t see you.”

“Look with your natural eyes, my dear.”

With the wave of my sorcery hand, like brushing away an invisible canvas, I deactivated my Dark Vision. In the resulting pitch black, I saw a faint blue glow begin to emerge from the rock itself. His outline illuminated the obsidian cave.

The volcanic glass was as smooth and reflective as a mirror, and so to my eyes, it appeared as though many Outsiders were emerging from the black stone.

Hundreds of black eyes surrounded me. I reached for him, but my fingers danced through his ghostly body, each one I tried.
“Which one is you?” I asked.

“All of them. None of them.”

His haunting voice echoed in melancholy waves. It reminded me of the whales, their large eyes rounding on me as their massive bodies emerged from the gloom of the Deep.

It was hard to breathe. The air was thin and cold. “How deep does the cavern go?”

“Deep into the earth, through a crack in the Void. The First Outsider was created in the chasm below, his mortal body sacrificed on the Genesis Altar.”

“Your Genesis Altar?”

The Outsider smiled sadly, a hundred lips reflecting in obsidian glass. “In a way. The Genesis Altar is part of the Void, its beating heart, its seat of power. It manifests in the waking world in different places. Different times.”

“Who was the First Outsider?”

I felt intensely curious, and humbled. I knew I was experiencing a rare gift. An opportunity unlike any before me.

“The First Outsider was chosen by the whales long ago, before the rise of Man. He came from an elven race called the Maormer who lived on the great island of Aldmeris. They were essentially Sea Elves with translucent skin like lipid jelly and eyes of the purest white. One among them was born different than the others; his eyes were of the purest black. He foresaw the destruction of Aldmeris, that it would collapse into the Ocean and disappear beneath the waves. Those that followed him lived, and those that chose to remain died. His people would wander the Pandyssian Continent for thousands of years, and when he became the First Outsider, he watched them from the Void. His people called him King Orgnum, the Undying.”

The Outsider’s story was more outlandish than anything I had ever heard from Anton Sokolov about his adventures into the wilds of Pandysia.

And yet… I believed it. Explorers had barely pierced into the unknown jungles of that uncivilized continent. Who knew what fantastical beings were lurking in that untamed wilderness, swallowed by time?

“The Maormer were not human?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around the strangest detail. What were elves? “Where are they now?”

The Outsider’s black eyes were bottomless, glimmering by the light of his body, an eerie blue luminescence.

“Gone. The ancient Pandyssians wiped them out. The Maormer were creatures of water and wind. They broke against the land-dwellers, the Men with sharp tools and even sharper minds.”

I was stunned. An entire race massacred.

The Outsider continued, serene as ever, “Only one Pandyssian tribe welcomed the Sea Elves. They interbred with them, and over many generations those humans with Maormer blood became royalty among the tribe.”

The Outsider stretched out his arm, pointing deeper into the obsidian cavern. “The ancient
Pandyssian you will find at the bottom of this cave was born of that tribe. He is a Prince of Pandyssia, a human with an ancient bloodline leading back to King Orgnum, the Undying.”

I sucked in a breath, remembering Rosemary’s words during the Sunset Regalia. *A Prince of Pandyssia…* How had she known?

“Is that why the whales chose him—chose *you*—to be the next Outsider? Because of royal blood?”

“I don’t know.”

“What *do* you know?”

“Exactly twelve Outsiders have existed between King Orgnum and myself. I am the thirteenth. Most divine cycles only last a few hundred years, *not* *thousands*. I don’t know why some cycles are shorter or longer than others. The Outsiders simply hear the call of the whales, that it’s time to return to the Hungry Cosmos or to be reborn, to live one final life. I don’t know why I was chosen. Why *any* are chosen. The whales keep their secrets…”

The Outsider’s ghostly form flickered in and out. I felt the bone charm’s heat begin to wane.

“Go…” he whispered, melting back into the obsidian rock. I gasped and flung my hands over the volcanic glass, but he was gone. Darkness enveloped me once more.

I waved my sorcery hand, casting *Dark Vision* to light the way. My path became clear, an outline of jagged stones cut deep into the earth leading down, down, down…

I followed where it led.

The way was not easy or straight. At times I had to climb over rocky obstructions, through narrow slits and around sharp bends. When the cavern walls pressed in on me from all sides, my breath stirring loose dirt to run in little streams down the rock-face, I felt the irrational fear that, perhaps, the walls were *moving* and I was going to be crushed to death.

But I slipped through and finally found myself deposited into a large, cavernous chamber.

I smelled it before I saw it. The salty Ocean, a tange of brine and seaweed. And I heard it before I saw it. The sound of water lapping against stone. The air was still cold, but it was moist and thick. I took deep breaths, my head thrown back in relief. I felt *alive*, my lungs sucking in sweet air.

The cavern was beyond enormous. I couldn’t even see how high it went, the ceiling lost to darkness.

In the center of the mammoth chamber was a great pool of water. It was so large, I figured *three* whaling ships could fit inside it. Beneath *Dark Vision*, the great pool of water appeared blacker than the cavern walls around it, a void of space that seemed to negate life itself. I waved my hand, dispelling *Dark Vision*, and saw with my natural eyes.

I gasped. It glowed from within, the water a bright blue like the sheen of whale oil.

I walked to the water’s edge and fell to my knees. I had never dipped my hand in whale oil before. I supposed it must be thick and viscous, coming from the body of a whale.

But when my fingers dipped in the pool of water, I was surprised to find it, well… *watery*. It glowed like whale oil, but it ran through my fingers, cold and shimmering.

My touch had upset the calm pool.
Ripples cascaded in outward spirals from the point of disturbance below my fingertips. I held my
breath, watching the ripples expand into the furthest reaches of the pool. It was beautiful and
somehow… lonely. I felt a prickle at the back of my neck, a crackle of electrical energy hovering
above the water and moving towards me. *Into* me. I climbed to my feet and slowly backed away,
one silent step at a time.

Suddenly, the water broke.

It sluiced in mighty channels over the form of a whale’s head emerging from the luminescent water.
My heart thumped in my ears at the unexpected visitor. It was massive, the breadth of its jaw
stretching wider than ten men standing shoulder to shoulder.

The whale’s body was too big to breach the entire surface of the pool. Only its head emerged to
greet me, rolling sideways to look at me through one large, melancholy eye. I froze beneath its gaze,
staring in wonder and fear. It was mind-boggling to realize how massive the whale truly was. It was
larger than any whale I had ever seen brought in by a whaling ship.

It was truly a Leviathan from the Deep.

“Howdy,” I said breathlessly.

The whale moved again, angling its pointy mouth towards me and opening its mighty jaw. Water
rushed into its mouth over its prickly plates of baleen. A massive tongue lurched forward, expelling
the form of a young man.

In a gush of water and white foam, he tumbled over the rocks at my feet, his naked body curling into
a fetal position.

I stared at him in foolish wonder, my mouth gaping open. He was wet and trembling, and with the
way the water rippled, fantastic patterns glowed over his pale skin in eerie blue.

With its charge complete, the whale sunk beneath the rippling surface of the pool, disappearing into
unknown depths.

I had no idea how a cavernous pool of water could be connected to the Ocean, and yet… It was as if
the Deep itself had leaked into the world. In that moment, our two worlds, alien to each other, had
connected, the gap bridged between whale and human.

The ancient Pandyssian crawled to his hands and knees, coughing up water over the stones. The
muscles of his arms were slender and taunt, and I saw a long white scar, shaped like a shooting star,
on the back of his shoulder. *How peculiar.* I realized I had thought of his body as virginal, as
though the whales had created him perfect and pure, but his sinewy body outlined the echoes of his
ancient past. I spotted another scar, eclipse-shaped, along his ribcage and as he turned…

I sucked in a sharp breath as he looked up at me with wide green eyes. It was disconcerting to see
the Outsider’s face with human eyes.

There was a softness, there, that the Outsider lacked. His skin was as pale, but there was a radiance
about him. A trace of innocence. Less aged by time, perhaps, and yet… Had the Outsider not been
ageless? Looking at his human self, I realized four thousand years had given the Outsider an edge, a
cold shadow beneath the eyes that I did not see in the face of the trembling man before me.

He seemed young. Too young. *Eighteen years old,* the Outsider had said. Barely a man.

His black hair was soaked and matted against his skull. He looked cold. I shrugged out of my coat
and approached him with a gentle smile, trying to drape the coat over his bare shoulders.

He scampered backwards on hands and feet like a startled rabbit, scurrying towards the pool of water.

His bright green eyes were utterly terrified.

A scream caught in my throat as he stumbled over the pool’s edge, the smooth obsidian rock slick and wet, but in that split-second before his body crashed into the water, the pool disappeared. Gone. Just like that the glowing blue water blinked out of existence as if it had never been.

Darkness, eternal and void, stretched over the cavern.

I heard the Pandyssian hit the ground, collapsing in the space where the pool had once been. He made a grunting noise, half wild, like he really was a barbarian, but in the next breath, he spoke, his voice dark and coarse—under control.

“Khesh moira?”

Khesh what? I couldn’t understand a word, but I smiled at his voice. He sounded like the Outsider.

I gestured in the air, activating my Dark Vision to look at him through the pitch black. He was in a warrior’s crouch, close to the ground, tentatively sweeping the air in front of him with his hands. Dark Vision had a way of obscuring his nakedness. I could see his body in sharp outline, but his features were blurred in an orangey glow.

I tugged my coat back on, less concerned about his modesty. It seemed strange (but maybe not surprising) that he was naked. Truly born into this world, a reincarnation of the Outsider before he became the Outsider.

He was an ancient Pandyssian with no idea where he was or how he got there. And me—I had no idea what he thought I was. I could be a goddess of the underworld for all he knew. And now he was thrown into pitch black darkness. Scared out of his mind. I had to tread carefully.

“I won’t hurt you,” I said, making my voice sound gentle and calm. “My name’s Emily.”

I knew he couldn’t understand me, but I hoped he could at least recognize the friendliness in my voice. Surely human emotion surpassed language barriers.

His head snapped towards my voice, his eyes blindly looking towards me. He backed away, moving deeper into the cavern.

I scowled. I should have brought a sleep dart. Not the kindest welcome, but I had no idea what to do if I couldn’t get him out of here! I had entered the cavern without any weapons. Without any plans. I was riding the winds of fate, determined to play out the Outsider’s assertion that we needed each other to defeat Delilah.

“A little help, Outsider,” I whispered.

The bone charm burned and the Outsider manifested as a cold shadow at my back. I felt him lean over my shoulder, his chilling breath tickling my ear. “Patience, Emily. The man thinks he’s dead and that this is the underworld.”

“And me its goddess?” I snorted. “You’re sure you can’t read my mind?”
“I wish,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “But, no, he doesn’t think you are a goddess. In his mind, there are no gods but The One True God, the Satakal, a kind of divine sea serpent, but with an elven head. They adopted it from the Maormer religion, long ago.”

The Pandyssian crawled further way, blindly feeling the stones beneath him.

“Now’s really not the time for a history lesson,” I said, trying to glare at the Outsider, but he was choosing to appear as a body-less shadow. I felt his chill like a cloak.

“As you wish. Khesh moira... It means ‘Am I dead?’”

“You can understand him?! Why didn’t you say so?!” I spun towards his voice only to find utter darkness.

“It’s my mother tongue. Of course, I can,” the disembodied voice replied. “But you can’t expect me to play interpreter for long. The bone charm is nearing its fiery end.”

“Why don’t you show yourself?”

“I’d rather not scare the boy to death, Emily. Look at him. He’s just been born and the world is frightening and dark. I think it’s best he neither sees nor hears me. At least, not yet.”

“Fair enough,” I mumbled, staring at the Pandyssian with growing concern and alarm. “How in the Void am I going to get him out of the cave? I can’t drag him out.”

“Try ‘Daku’—it means ‘Come’. Or ‘Semu deenik.’ Take my hand.”

“You’re far too amused,” I shot back, but his chilling shadow faded. He was gone. “It’s not funny,” I grumbled under my breath. I took a tentative step towards the Pandyssian.

He was cowering in the dark, caught between the urge to fight or flee. His head was cocked as if he was listening intently and trying to understand what this strange woman was whispering in the dark. In the utter and complete darkness, I knew his sense of sound must be acutely sharpened.

And his instincts. If he was to leave this cave, he had to trust me. To take my hand and let me lead him out. I was the only one who could see the way.

I got as close as I dared. Even with his sharp hearing, I had a feeling I was far closer than he expected.

He jumped slightly when I spoke.


I held out my hand. Of course, he couldn’t see it, but I willed him to sense it. I felt a connection between us. His face, lit in the featureless glow of Dark Vision, blindly turned towards my voice.

I couldn’t read his face. We are both blind, I thought. Dark Vision was allowing me to see in the dark, but there were obvious trade-offs. I couldn’t see him clearly; everything had an indistinct, orangey glow.

The ancient Pandyssia whispered, his voice increasingly desperate, “Khesh moira? Khesh moira?”

Am I dead? Am I dead?

The gazebo flashed before my eyes. Screams in my ears. I saw myself as a ten-year-old girl,
pleading for him to stop, for Daud to get off of me, but the more I cried, the harder he went. Shame welled from the empty places Delilah had carved, and I knew I wanted to die.

Am I dead?

No. Not yet. This life is still mine. Take it back. Don’t let Delilah win. What shame? You’ve done nothing wrong.

“Semu deenik,” I whispered, my voice choked with tears.

Take my hand.

Maybe it was my voice, soft like a woman, or maybe it was the tears. The Pandyssian hesitated, but then his hand began to rise, reaching out through the darkness.

I sighed in relief and happiness. Like he had given me a gift. I took his hand, holding firmly. His skin was wet and cold, but there was an underlying warmth. A fire. Human.


I pulled on his hand, gently. He allowed himself to be lifted off the ground. He stood tall before me. Taller than me. He was a well-shaped man, his outline emanating with wiry strength and a warrior’s grace. The Outsider had called him a Prince of Pandyssia, but there was nothing about him that spoke of a soft life. He’s lived before modern conveniences, I thought. He had probably endured a great deal of physical hardship.

I led him out of the cavernous chamber. Hand in hand, he followed.

It might sound silly to an outsider, but we bonded in that obsidian cavern below Tempest Island. In the darkness, he had to trust me, and I had to trust him.

He didn’t fight me or try to hurt me. Maybe I should have been afraid of him—Father had always warned me that fear turned men unpredictable—but he accepted my lead and didn’t flinch when I touched him. He didn’t pull away when I led him through the darkest of twists and turns.

But some parts of the passage were too tight and narrow to keep our hands linked. Instead he followed my voice.

At other times I had to press his head down to keep him from bumping against unseen rock formations above, jutting sharply like daggers. I was glad for my coat. I was back in my clothes from the palace, the fabric fine and protective. His bare skin was not so fortunate. The obsidian was like volcanic glass and just as sharp. He hissed in pain when a scratch against it drew blood.

I paused in our climbing, looking back at him as his hand clamped over the deep cut on his arm. He leaned back against the cavern wall, his breath shallow in the cold, thin air. The thick, moist air of the chasm below was long behind us. The going was slow and hard, climbing upwards through the earth.

I pulled a silk handkerchief from my coat. I’d found the pretty pattern among the things Prince Finbar had left us, gifts for our journey south.

I stepped close to him. By now, he was less jumpy. After holding hands, it was almost like I was real to him, and not a strange phantom in the dark.

But when I slipped the handkerchief under his arm and tried to tie a knot to stop the bleeding, his free
hand unexpectedly whipped around towards my mouth.

Towards my breathing.

He found my lips with his fingers. His touch fumbled across my chin, down my neck, and pressed against the pulse beating beneath my skin. He said, his voice a pleading whisper, “Fæ moira pash kull?”

The bone charm burned and I heard the Outsider whisper in my ear like a cold wind, “How can a dead man bleed?”

I tied the knot and gently peeled his fingers back from my neck. I held his hand. Our journey through the dark made it feel right that we not let go of one another for long.

“Daku,” I said.

We carried on, climbing through darkness.

The Outsider whispered in my ear, “The bone charm is almost depleted, Emily. I’m sorry I cannot be of more service in translating.”

“We need a solution,” I whispered back. The Pandyssian could hear my voice, but not the Outsider’s. I wondered if he thought I was crazy.

The Outsider sounded hesitant. “I have thought of something… But you might not like it.”

I fingered the bone charm stitched inside my coat. The heat had lessened, barely warm now. “Tell me.”

“I could Mark him.”

“What? Mark yourself?”

The Pandyssian made a startled hmph? noise, confused at the sudden agitation in my voice.

I squeezed his hand. He waited. I could feel his eyes on me through the dark.

“Indeed,” the Outsider said with a detached fascination so reminiscent of his former self. “The Mark imbues magical powers, and—it could be argued—language itself is magic. It’s what separates us from the rest of Creation, a mystery of higher consciousness. To see as an Outsider is to understand all tongues, all thoughts. I have watched thousands of generations live and die. Languages come and go, but I have understood each one. My mother tongue died out four thousand years ago, but still I understand you.”

“So if you Mark him… he will understand the common tongue?”

“I think so.”

“Then do it. What’s the problem?”

“Delilah.”

I sighed heavily. “Explain.”

“The Mark is a connection to the Void. It’s how she is pulling you into the Void when you sleep. The same might happen to him if I Mark him.”
I felt sick. “She could torture him, then.” Like she was doing to me every godawful night.

“Perhaps,” the Outsider said, “but I am optimistic. She can’t pull what she doesn’t know exists. I can’t be sure, Emily, but I believe Delilah is unaware that I am still alive. She believes the kiss of death was final.”

I nodded. It seemed that way to me, too. Delilah had not once mentioned the Outsider since declaring him dead on that horrible night.

“I suppose the benefits outweigh the risks… But wait to Mark him. I want to get out of this cave first.”

“As you wish, Emily.”

The Outsider vanished.

I grunted as I clamored over a high ledge and leaned over to help the Pandyssian up, but he was already feeling for the edge. He deftly pulled himself up, lithe and quick like a cat. I dumbly froze as I felt his hand reach for me, firm and sure.

With the ledge taken, I could hear the roar of the Ocean’s waves. The faint outline of natural sunlight hit the rocks, reflecting off the smooth obsidian glass. I waved my sorcery hand and removed the orangey glow of *Dark Vision*. My eyes adjusted quickly. We were close to the end, now, the cavernous space opening to blue sky through a deep fissure in the cliff-face.

I realized the Pandyssian was looking at me, his own eyes rapidly adjusting. His green eyes glimmered like emeralds, reflecting the light filtering through the crevice above.

He didn’t smile, and his face was serious and grim, but there was something insistent in the way he was looking at me.


This time it was him pulling on my hand, leading me out of the darkness.
“Outsider’s balls,” Corvo swore, taking one good look at us as we exited the cave. “You could’ve warned me. I would’ve brought clothes for the damn kid.”

He directed this heated jab at the Outsider who was floating above the black sand like a ghost, his face plastered with fascination and amusement.

“It’s nothing you haven’t already seen, dear Corvo,” the Outsider said with a sly grin. What did that mean?

“Spare me,” Corvo growled.

He tugged out of his black coat and harshly threw it at the Pandyssian who was gaping at everything around him like the newborn he was. He reacted to the object flying at him by stumbling backwards and falling on his rump, though in truth he looked more startled by Corvo. My father’s rat eyes were beady and bloodshot beneath his shaggy, black hair, and his face was still grotesquely swollen and bruised around his nose where my Doppelgänger had punched him.

The weapons bristling at his belt probably didn’t help either. The Pandyssian stared at Corvo like he was a demon from the underworld, his green eyes bulging in fear.

“Stand back, Corvo. I’m going to Mark him,” the Outsider said, a distinctive catch in his voice. He was excited.

“What?!” Corvo blurted.

I dove in front of the Pandyssian. “No, both of you stand back! You’re scaring him.”

Corvo looked away towards the Ocean, shaking his head and spitting into the sand as the Outsider just hovered in place, watching with his black eyes. The Pandyssian didn’t look in his direction; the Outsider was still invisible to him.

I huffed—a long, angry sigh in case the two idiots didn’t realize how insensitive they were being—and protectively crouched near the Pandyssian. He had bent his knees towards his chest, leaning over to look at his feet. His green eyes were fixated on his pale toes as they sunk into the black sand.

It was oddly charming. How easily we overlook the wonders of life… His eyes darted over me as I moved closer. Afraid. Tentative. But then he relaxed.

He knew my touch, my voice.

He trusted me because of the cave, because we had pulled through that darkness together. He needs time, I decided. A moment to breathe. I crossed my legs under me and sat with him. The black
sand felt good, warm, absorbing the sun’s rays. After the cold cavern, it felt good to thread my fingers through it.

I felt his eyes on me.

I didn’t stare back. It almost felt like I was giving him silent invitation, that it was okay to wonder and gawk—at me, at everything. He was new to this world and so… different. It made me feel excited—just being in his presence—as if I could try to look through his eyes and see something totally unexpected.

I felt excited to be alive with him.

I cupped a handful of sand, watching the way it glimmered like black diamonds as it slipped through my fingers. Meagan had called the island haunted, but I didn’t think so. It was beautiful in its own way. A black gem in the Ocean. Captivating like…

When I peeked a glance at him, I realized he was looking at me. Really looking at me. The cave had been dark, so dark, but now, in full sunlight, he could plainly see how different I was from him, from his people, his village…

Even his time, though that realization would come later. No one guesses they’ve been flung four thousand years into the future. Eventually, he would have questions and not everything would make sense, probably not for a long time, but I meant to be there for him when he asked.

Watching his face, I could tell what startled him the most because his eyes would hang on it, unable to look away before finally darting to the next strange thing.

First, it was my coat. My designer coat. It was the height of Gristol fashion (to be fair, I set fashion in the city), but it was also highly flexible and protective. I could fight in it. He gaped at it, his lips wordlessly moving. Then it was my full-calf leather boots. He stared at them like it was unnatural to be anything but barefooted. Last of all, the pearls in my hair. After my bath, Princess Katya had done up my hair in the Tyvian fashion, braiding my raven-black hair close to my scalp, from the crown of my head into a high ponytail, the ends left loose to dance in the wind. But it was also her idea to make use of the more extravagant gifts from Prince Finbar and weave strings of white pearls into my braids, each pearl plucked from a river krust.

I couldn’t say why it would fascinate the Pandyssian, but he seemed to take some meaning from it, as though the pearls were more than pearls. It was oddly hypnotic trying to guess what he was thinking, watching his green eyes for hints of human emotion that transcended language. We were two worlds colliding. The old and the new.

When his emerald eyes finally met mine, I tried a small smile. I didn’t want to overdo it (I figured too much friendly could come across as suspicious). I scooted closer. My knees dug into the black sand beside him, so close I could touch him.

It was a testament to how far we had come together that he would even let me get that close.

His eyes danced over my face. “Khesh leera,” he softly said.

He took my hand and pressed it against his bare chest, right over his heart. I could feel it thumping wildly. Behind me, the Outsider translated, “I am alive.”

I couldn’t break his gaze. His green eyes were riveted on me. I turned my head slightly and asked the Outsider, “What is the word for Yes?”
“Emily, if you would allow me to Mark him, we can skip the song and dance,” the Outsider said, his voice raised with impatience. “There isn’t much time. The bone charm is—”

“I know, just”—I shot the Outsider an annoyed look over my shoulder—“wait. Please.”

I could practically hear Corvo’s jaw grinding.

“This is your fault, you know that, right?” my father said, his angry voice angled towards the Outsider. “It’s bad enough she fell for you and your black eyes, but now she’s going all soft for your human…”

“Why, dear Corvo, you sound jealous,” the Outsider replied, more than a little charmed.

I glanced at my father, standing as dark and cold as the obsidian cliffs behind him. He looked made for the island, all shadows and dark places. Corvo had been surprisingly lucid over the last three days, ever since we started racing towards Tempest Island, but when the island emerged from the mists, he became prone to sudden outbursts of anger and irritation.

He wasn’t mumbling like a madman, thankfully, just… always on edge. I felt guilty, of course. It’s me, I thought. He sees the brutal weight of Delilah’s nightly visits in the Void and feels powerless to stop it.

But I couldn’t help but wonder if it was more than that. His connection to the Heart was difficult to understand. His link with Jessamine was turning his moods wildly unpredictable.

“Father, enough,” I snapped. “You’re scaring the Pandyssian.”

“He should be scared.”

I scowled and tried to forgive him. I couldn’t forget the look in his rat eyes right before I’d turned away and entered the cave. He’d been terrified I wouldn’t come back out again, that the darkness would swallow me whole.

I wanted that Corvo back.

The one that said I love you instead of making me feel like I was doing something wrong. Doing something stupid. Like if he didn’t protect me from myself I’d end up six feet under next to my mother. Corvo didn’t trust the Outsider—and even less my decision to forge my path with his, no matter how twisted the path became, Schism or not.

At the end of that path, I saw Delilah defeated. I was afraid that all Corvo saw was his daughter lost to the Outsider.

“Emily,” my father said. “You going to let me in on why the Outsider wants to Mark”—he choked in disgusted laughter—“himself?”

“He thinks it’ll give him the ability to speak the common tongue,” I said, glancing between the Outsider and the ancient Pandyssian. It was disconcerting bouncing from one face to the other—the same, but different. Eyes of inhuman black to innocent green.

“It’s a good plan,” the Outsider chimed in defensively.

“Except for Delilah.” I told my father, “If he has the Mark, she could pull him into the Void.”

“Then wait until Karnaca—when we find that tattoo artist to stop her,” Corvo reasoned.
“I’m not sure he can wait,” I murmured, looking into the Pandyssian’s eyes, their depths full of curiosity and fear and wonder. “Two weeks is a long time to be unable to communicate properly.”

“I know I can’t wait,” the Outsider said. “The bone charm, Emily.”

“One second.” I reached for Corvo’s discarded coat and dragged it across the sand. I’d been far too eager offering him my coat in the cavern. The Pandyssian’s shoulders were too broad. Corvo’s coat seemed too big, but at least he’d have room to move—and it was a man’s coat. That was important to me.

The Pandyssian watched my face as I lifted his hand and poked it through the arm opening so he’d get the idea. What did he normally wear? Primitive clothing could mean anything from a loincloth to bone-vests and feathers. There were children’s books depicting Pandyssian barbarians, but that was all conjecture, and most of it racist. The Empire taught its people that we were the civilized folk while everyone else ran around barely clothed, barely fed.

I could laugh.

The ancient Pandyssian before me was hale-bodied, strong like a warrior and lean like a jungle cat. Intelligence lied behind his eyes. Yes, confusion, there, too, and wonder…and solemnity. He was quiet as he watched me, his eyes falling over my hands as I worked the coat over him.

I balanced on my knees, moving around him to draw the coat over his back to reach for his other arm. My gaze fell over the white scar on his back shoulder. The shooting star…Up close, it looked even more beautiful. I had assumed it was a battle scar, but now I could see it looked purposefully made.

Tiny, round scars—perfect circles—were raised in a dot-like pattern along his skin. It was the kind of pattern that if you moved further away, the dots seemed to merge into one form. An optical illusion. Clever, I thought. I remembered seeing another along his ribs, lower down—an eclipse-shaped scar. What did the they mean? I watched the shooting star disappear as his shoulders flexed and he shrugged into the coat. It was done. I stood up and offered him my hand.

His green eyes were alive.

He took my hand and stood beside me. The coat was long enough to cover his privates, but in the gusty wind, the coat lapels were flapping like a bird around his legs. He didn’t seem to care.

He seemed to be in a state of numbing shock, but at the same time heightened awareness. He was simply living in the moment—in all its strange glory.

The Outsider drew near, his ghostly body flickering. I looked up into his black eyes. “Are you sure this is a good idea? What if the Mark…changes him?” I glanced at the ancient Pandyssian. “How do we know it won’t hurt him somehow?”

The Pandyssian curiously met my gaze, his lips slightly parted.

The Outsider said, “It’s true I’ve never done this before and I’m not entirely sure what consequences it will have, but how can we not give him the ability to communicate in his new world? His old world is gone. Four thousand years gone. If he’s to make a new life, he needs this.”

When I hesitated, the Outsider softly added, “I’m doing this to myself, in a way. Is it not my choice? My decision?”

He held out his hand, waiting. An eerie blue luminescence outlined his fingers, glowing like whale
I looked at the Pandyssian one last time, then nodded my head. “Alright, do it.”

The Pandyssian’s hand was still held in mine. He let me lift it towards the Outsider, but all he saw was water and sky and black sand. Nothing and no one, but me beside him. I knew it because he was calm. Accepting of my lead. Trusting.

The Outsider’s glowing hand reached for him.

I knew in that split-second of first contact, the Pandyssian’s hand falling over the Outsider’s palm, that something was wrong.

There was a charge between them, a dark electricity that crackled like a storm in the Void. In that moment, the Outsider was no longer invisible to him and the Pandyssian suddenly found himself staring face-to-face with himself—but not himself—a ghostly being with eyes of purest black, two orbs of onyx with no iris or humanity to them, sucking all light from the world.

He screamed and fell back, twisting in the sand, all flailing arms and legs, before bolting to his feet and dashing across the black sand, running as hard as he could away from us.

Corvo burst into laughter.

“Why’d you scare him?!?” I shot at the Outsider accusingly.

“I didn’t”—he shot back; then less confidently—“mean to…”

I grumbled something, noises tangled in my throat, and dashed after the Pandyssian, my leather boots kicking up sand behind me in a pat, pat, pat sound.

“Emily!” my father called, annoyed. “Just let him run it out. It’s not like he can go anywhere.”

I ignored him, practically feeling the dagger look he must have thrown at the Outsider, another ‘This is your fault.’

My target was fast. The black coat furiously flapped in the wind as the Pandyssian ran like a bat out of hell, his round pale cheeks flashing beneath the coat.

Corvo’s right, I thought, distracted—and quite enjoying the view. I was going soft for him.

By the Void, he’s fast, I thought, my legs pumping, my lungs burning. The distance between us was not getting any closer. He was a natural runner. I ran as hard as I could after him, but I knew I’d never catch up unless he wanted me to.

The black sand seemed to go on forever, a massive stretch of shoreline surrounding the island’s towering obsidian cliffs. He ran and ran and ran, clearly with no idea where he was going, only that it was away from us, as far away as his long legs could carry him. At first, I thought he meant to angle towards the cliffs, but then he just stopped.

Just like that he was dead in the sand, his legs buckling beneath him. He fell to his knees as the Outsider appeared before him in a swirl of black magic.

I was too far away to see the Mark get burned into his skin, but I heard his terrified cry.

The Outsider had callously snatched his hand before tossing him back. The Pandyssian, on his knees, curled over, panting and groaning. It wasn’t just the hard breathing from running; it was the
vocalizations of a man trying to express incredible fear, incredible shock.

I couldn’t see his face, his back to me.

In the next instant, the Outsider Blinked back to the Void in a shower of black rain. I felt something hot against my ribs and when I reached inside my coat, the bone charm crumbled to ash in my fingers. Gone.

“That’s it,” I whispered, my gut clenching in fear. “We’re on our own, now… Until Karnaca.”

When I looked back up, the Pandyssian wasn’t moving. He had straightened his back, but he was still on his knees, still not facing me. I closed the distance between us, staring at his back.

In the last several feet, I slowed to a walk, then stopped as if there was an invisible ocean between us.

“Can you understand me?” I asked.

I held my breath, waiting for his answer like I was dangling at the edge of a cliff.

I saw him turn his head. Just a quarter turn. The wind ruffled through his black hair, fast drying in the sun. It hadn’t been too long since he’d been ejected from a whale, the Ocean spilling over him. Maybe I was asking for too much.

When he didn’t speak, I tried again. “My name’s Emily Kaldwin. I’m—”

I paused. It didn’t seem right to boast that I was the Empress of the Isles when he didn’t even know what that meant.

“I’m…” Where to even start? “I’m sorry if he hurt you.”

I watched his head lower as he inspected the Mark on his hand. It was the strangest sensation, my own Mark tingling as if being near another Marked was somehow… special.

I remembered the first time I looked down at my Mark, unable to believe I had actually said Yes. How much harder must it be for him? Forced on him, and not even knowing what it meant…

“It burns,” he said.

I made a gasping sound, unable to believe it. It worked. I understood him!

“Yes,” I said, my heart thundering in my ears.

He slowly picked himself up and turned to face me, Corvo’s coat flying open with all the world to look at him. He could be standing naked for all he seemed to care. He stared at me with wide green eyes, totally absorbed by my face.

“Emily Kaldwin,” he repeated like it was foreign on his tongue. It was.

“Yes,” I said. My voice trembled.

“I’m…” He looked down, his dark brows knitted in confusion. “I can’t remember my name.”

He looked up at me in anticipation as if I might tell him his name, but when I just stared at him, mute, he looked back down at his hand.
“Here,” he said. He held out his hand, palm-down in a fist, showing me the Mark. “My name.”

“The Mark is your name?” I asked, not understanding.

“Mark?” he repeated, uncertain.

His emerald eyes suddenly filled with purpose as he crouched and began to draw in the black sand, his finger precisely and knowingly drawing the Mark larger than life—perfect—every line, every curve—as if he knew it by heart. He said, pointing at the drawing in the sand, “My father drew my name on the day of my birth in the sands of the House of Satakal. ‘Today a Prince is born,’ he declared, ‘And his name shall be…’ Shall be…”

He hesitated. “Shall be what?”

He sat back, balancing on his heels as he silently considered the Mark he had drawn in the sand. It was as though he was trying to pull a name from it. A single word.

He said, quieter this time, “I can’t see it.” He looked up at me. “Why can’t I see it, Emily Kaldwin?”

“I… I don’t know.”

He suddenly slashed at the drawing with his hands, erasing it forever. “I have no name,” he declared, rising to his feet. His eyes were lost in doubt and clouded by anger.

“You do,” I said. “It’s just been stolen.”

How could I explain Delilah? It was too soon. I reached for his hand and he let me take it.

My thumb brushed against his Mark. He looked down at my touch, blinking softly. “A name is forever,” he said with a barely perceptible shake of the head. “If I lose my name, I lose myself.”

“No. We will find your name. I promise.”

We’ll steal it back from the evil witch, I thought.

His green eyes flickered. He was listening, just not believing. I could see the conflict in his eyes. He unconsciously brought his hand to rest over the wound on his arm. The coat covered it, but the silk handkerchief had been soaked with his blood.

How can a dead man bleed?

He looked up at me, his face paling. “Mark,” he said, fixating on the word I had given the burn on his hand. “I saw…” His gaze drifted towards where the Outsider had been. “Was that my Amonkalahira?”

“You amon what?”

“Amonkalahira,” he said again, more insistent.

I frowned. Whatever it was, the word had no modern day translation. “I don’t understand. Try using different words.” I bit my lip. “Explain as if to a child.”

Maybe it meant ‘evil twin’? Or ‘shadow’?

He squinted, looking out over the waves. “Amonkalahira. Sacred destiny.”
This time, it was *me* who felt the blood drain from my face. “What do you mean?”

“The Hooded Ones. The Priests of Satakal. They held the Knife above me. I am the Sacrifice. I will wake up and see through the eyes of King Orgnum, the Undying. It is my sacred destiny. *Amon—*”

Tears welled in his eyes, streaking down his impassive face. He was utterly emotionless, but for the tears.

“But I do not see,” he said bleakly.

I grabbed his hand, squeezing, forcing him to look at me. “You make your own destiny, now. This is *your* life. A new beginning. You are…”

I smiled, the thought coming to me as though whispered in my ear… But the Outsider was gone. It was just us.

“*Whaleborn,*” I said. “You are Whaleborn.”

It was intense, how he was looking at me. Like I had opened a door he had thought long sealed. *Or maybe it’s just what you want him to think,* I thought, barely understanding the way his green eyes shifted, listening, but perhaps not fully understanding.

Some things could never be translated. Only learned.

*Lived.*

“Emily Kaldwin,” he said.

I waited, hanging on his intake of breath as he considered his words. He looked at our hands held together.

“When a man loses his shadow,” he said, “they say he is gone. He is *vuneek.*”

At my confused look, he tried again, “Empty seahorse.”

“Seahorse?”

When he just grunted, shaking his head, I tried to just think about it. *An empty vessel,* I decided. “You mean a man with no purpose?”

*A man broken by life. By loss.*

He solemnly nodded. “Yes.” His face twitched in empathy, as if feeling that loss. “But what of the man who loses his name… What is he?”

“He is one who doesn’t give up. He finds his name,” I said, holding tight. “We’ll find it together.”

He smiled faintly, bringing up my hand to rest once more against his beating heart. “Through the darkness.”

*Through the darkness,* I silently agreed, falling into his green eyes. *Fuck,* it was hard not to. It was the Outsider all over again.

From a great distance, I suddenly realized my father was shouting. I turned my head, distracted.
Disoriented. Corvo was shouting.

“Emily!”

It was like a splash of cold water. I’d been so absorbed in the Pandyssian, the world falling away as we’d talked, that I hadn’t noticed. Now it all came crashing back.

I looked down the beach, the wind gusting in furious bursts. The skies were blue, but clouds were forming on the horizon in patches of gray. The waves were choppy, frothy bubbles running over black sand.

I saw Corvo running, his sword drawn. It flashed in the sun, brilliant, blinding.

I began to move. Didn’t even think about it, just started running towards him. It was then I noticed the others.

A long rowboat had skidded to shore. Armored men were jumping out, dragging it away from the lapping waves and running towards my father. I counted eight, no, ten men. Two broke off, heading towards me.

It was then I noticed the Jessamine. My beautiful flagship, her polished wooden hull gleaming in the sun.

They’d found us.

Chapter End Notes

LOL at the ‘evil twin’ - couldn’t help myself. Oh, and ‘Amonkalahira’ is a weird mashup/butchering of lore from Mass Effect (Thane Krios anyone?) :)
Part 4: Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Warning: Blood and extreme violence. Threats of a sexual nature and groping.

Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 35

We had left the Dreadful Wale on the south side of the island, in deeper waters, taking the skiff around the shallow bends to the north where the Outsider had said the cavern would be, and so it was only the Jessamine I saw, a blight on the horizon, a nightmare come too soon.

“Emily Kaldwin?”

This time it was the Pandyssian calling my name. I could hear him running after me, getting closer, louder.

He grabbed me roughly by the arm, swinging me to a stop.

“Run!” I shrieked, shoving him back towards the cliffs. “Just run!” Gods, he was half-naked. Unarmed. He’d be slaughtered!

When he just stared at me, his green eyes struck with confusion and fear, I shoved him again, harder.

“Run, damn you!”

He ran.

In a sudden daze, a heartbeat of sound, his feet pounding the sand, I stared at his back, my father’s coat flapping in the wind. I patted my own coat in denial, palms running flat over nothing. I’d left everything behind on the Dreadful Wale. My crossbow, my pistol! Even my stun mines.

All I had was my magic.

I heard men shouting and the clash of steel. It seemed far away.

The wind picked up, rushing in my ears like the Void itself spun around me. My Mark burned. I could feel dark energy pulsing through my hand. I threw my arcane tether as far as it could go, catapulting myself across the beach.

Still too far. Father!

The two men who had broken off from the main group were running towards me, but when they saw my arcane leap, they slowed, glancing at each other in disbelief. It gave me a few precious seconds to look away.

Across the distance by the water, Corvo had already engaged the others. My heart felt like it would
burst, watching that deadly dance as his sword sliced through flesh, lopping off a head in a spray of blood before twisting into the next swing, driving his sword through an eye.

The man fell screaming, clutching his face. Another stab and he wasn’t screaming at all.

Corvo was a black shadow and his sword a silver blur as he cut through each wave of attack. He handled his sword like it was a part of him. Controlled twists. Controlled throws. When his hand left the handle, it always came back exactly where he knew it’d be, his sword moving from angle to angle. Blood slick. He fed his sword like it was alive, a murderous beast whose hunger was only slaked by Death.

Four bodies lay motionless on the black sand behind him as he slashed and weaved and parried incoming blows. He cut down two more, red blood squirting from severed limbs, when I heard a pistol discharge. Corvo went flying back, caught in the shoulder.

“No!” I screamed as the gunshot reverberated off the cliffs, scattering a colony of seagulls.

I tore my eyes away when I realized I was two seconds from being overrun, the two men crashing towards me like a tidal wave.

My Far Reach sprang forward. I wrapped arcane fingers around the sword of the largest attacker. He was screaming like a banshee, his sword raised above his head as he bore down on me. The sword flung from his hand, whipping end over end as it sailed through the air, the hilt landing with an audible smack against my palm.

I slashed in a defending arc and he stumbled backwards, falling on his rump.

I threw my Doppelgänger into the sand behind the second man still armed with a sword. The other Emily snaked an arm around his neck and viciously choked him out, faster than I ever could. He dropped to the black sand, unconscious. The Outsider had taught me how to switch my Doppelgänger into lethal or nonlethal mode. Even in the throes of blood-pounding terror, the decision to spare life—if I could—had come easily because of my father, because of what he had taught me.

Even if Corvo the Black thought it was a mistake, thought it weakness. Even knowing Corvo had already taken life on the beach. I could only pray he was still alive. I couldn’t spare a glance, not when my remaining attacker was still in play.

Disarmed and panicking, he was crawling backwards on his hands and feet, his eyes fixated on the sword in my hand like he still couldn’t believe it. He twisted sharply, lunging to his feet away from me, but collided face-first into my Doppelgänger’s fist.

She punched him square in the nose and as he flailed backwards, I snaked my arm around his neck, breaking his fall. I proceeded to choke him out, less quickly than her.

“Don’t give me that look,” I said, the other Emily staring with vacant eyes. She disappeared in a swirling black mist, the magic spent, and a few seconds later, the man finally dropped, snoring loudly. It was done.

I rounded in desperation, looking for my father at last. Was he still alive? Dear gods, he’d been shot! He’d been shot! Alive! But my relief was short-lived.

They had disarmed him. Surrounded him. He was on his knees, trying to climb to his feet, when
one of the men—there were only two left—brought up his arm, aiming his pistol at my father’s head execution-style.

I could have died in that moment.

But the other man pushed down on his arm, stopping him. He was shouting, pointing across the water.

Two men left.

But it didn’t matter. The Jessamine was sending another boat. I saw it. The rowboat had another ten men aboard, five on each side as they manned the oars, racing towards the shoreline.

Plenty more where that came from. The flagship was easily manned by over a hundred men.

My father and I couldn’t stop them all.

But he would try.

It was a mistake, lowering the pistol. They had kicked away his sword, but it was another mistake to believe he needed it.

He lunged upwards with incredible speed, timing the moment of their distraction as they looked towards the water at the incoming boat. He threw a handful of sand to blind the eyes, then like a snake striking, Corvo barreled into the man with his good shoulder. He’d been lowering his pistol, looking away, but suddenly he was sprawled on his back, Corvo on top of him, pounding the living shit out of his face.

I was already moving, leaping with Far Reach into their immediate vicinity, my boots sinking in wet sand.

Close enough to be sprayed with blood by Corvo’s flying fists.

The other man—closing in on Corvo, shocked by the sight of his comrade getting pummeled into the ground—was arching his sword, shouting, but I wrapped purple tendrils around his entire body. I screamed, the Mark burning, as I yanked him towards me, the effort making me dizzy. Sick. Weak. I was burning through too much mana; I could feel it like a damp blanket, suffocating, draining.

His body flew like a rag doll, soon to be a spit on my sword, but I lowered the blade and let him fall to the ground at my feet. He choked and wheezed, the wind knocked out of him.

I stamped my foot against his temple, knocking him out cold, then wiped the wet feeling from my cheek, glancing at my hand.

Blood.

Corvo was bashing the man’s face into a meaty pulp with his fists. I couldn’t take it. I threw down the sword and grabbed his arm, viciously pulling him off.

“Stop it! He’s fucking dead!”

He fell over me and we twisted in the sand. Corvo was breathing hard, his rat eyes lost in rage, his fists caked with gore. I pushed him off me and grabbed his face, screaming at him.

“It’s me! It’s Emily! Father, it’s me. I’m here.”
I started crying as I felt his arms hold me tight. I pushed away, desperate to inspect his injuries.

“Your shoulder,” I cried. He was bleeding, his waistcoat covered in blood. Not just his. He sat up, grunting in pain, and I pushed him forward a little, checking his back. “There’s an exit wound. We need to put pressure on it. Father, are you listening?”

“I’m sorry, Emily.”

His voice was dark. Cold. We climbed to our feet, his body angled in front of me. Protecting me. Even wounded, bleeding out, always protecting me.

We silently watched the second rowboat come ashore, the nightmare unraveling in the only direction it could.

Capture.

Surrender was our only option—it always had been since the moment I saw the Jessamine. They’d sail us back to Dunwall and throw us at Delilah’s feet.

The men from the rowboat approached with weapons drawn. Swords and pistols. They formed a half-circle around us, a good twenty feet to spare, warily watching us, bristling with nervous energy. What picture did we make? Standing in the middle of that sprawl of bodies, the waves slowly pushing them further up the shoreline as we stood together, father and daughter, Empress and Royal Protector, waiting, watching, blood pooled around our feet in streaks of red.

Corvo did look like a demon from the underworld, I thought, thinking of the ancient Pandyssian. My eyes drifted over the black sands towards the obsidian cliffs, stark against the sky, but I couldn’t see him anywhere. He was gone.

But it didn’t feel like victory or hope. Where could he go? Even the Dreadful Wale was in danger, now that the Jessamine had caught up to us. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.

One of the men stepped forward from the half-circle. He was taller than the rest and wearing the bright red uniform of a Lieutenant officer in the Royal Navy. He shouted, “Surrender, in the name of Empress Delilah Kaldwin! Come willingly and Commander Kittredge promises you will be treated with respect. Fight us…” His eyes raked over my body, slow and suggestive. “…and we will make your journey back to Dunwall very interesting, won’t we, boys?”

A low chuckle roiled over their ranks.

Corvo waited until it died out, chuckles turning into uneasy murmurs, and then long stares.

He finally spoke.

“We surrender.”

Corvo spat into the sand, glaring at each face. Each a traitor. Thanks to the Fletchers’ eyewitness, we knew what they’d done. Slaughtered every man loyal to the Crown, and no doubt filled the vacancies with men from the Wrenhaven River Patrol, loyal to Kittredge. Not the Navy’s finest, but still trained sailors. Still dangerous.

“A pity,” the Lieutenant mocked, winking at me. I wanted to gouge out his offending eye. He turned away, sighing with boredom. “Alright, fun’s over. Jennywood. Peters. Get our skiff back. The rest of you load up our dead.”
“That one’s still alive,” I said as the men scattered.

The Lieutenant turned on me as if surprised I would dare speak. He looked at the man I had knocked out, a nasty footprint of my boot imprinted across his face like a brand. I added, “And those two.” He followed my gaze, further down the shoreline.

He sneered. “How kind of you.”

I saw faces go white. I figured it was at least likely a few had seen my magic from the ship, though given the distance, it was also likely they had no idea what they’d seen. Far Reach was quick, faster than the blink of an eye, and my Doppelgänger only lasted a few breaths. I wasn’t strong enough to hold the magic for long.

The Lieutenant stretched out his arm. “This way,” he beckoned with a cold smile. When he turned his back, I caught my father’s dark look. The fool had isolated himself from his men, and he held that pistol like it was an accessory piece, like he was just an aristocrat who enjoyed dueling for show.

I caught Corvo’s arm, making eye contact. “Don’t.”

Corvo said nothing.

The Lieutenant might be a fool, but we were still vastly outnumbered.

We climbed aboard as the Lieutenant trained his pistol on us. The boat rocked as Corvo and I settled along the narrow bench towards the bow, across from the Lieutenant. He was smiling in that creepy way of his, at once smug and overtly demeaning, like he wanted to show my father exactly what he was thinking when he looked at me.

“Come here, Lady Attano,” the Lieutenant said, cocking his head at me. A loaded command. I knew what would happen when he got me under his hand. He was facing Corvo for a reason.

He patted the bench beside him with his free hand, the other lazily training his pistol on my father. I obediently rose and took the seat beside him. Just get through this, I told myself with gritted teeth. It was a short trip back to the Jessamine, and that gave me hope. The men were making quick work of the dead, tossing them aboard the other rowboat alongside their weapons, both swords and pistols from the dead. I couldn’t tell if my father’s folding sword was among the collection. The skiff was already riding the waves back to the Jessamine, its property once more.

Two men joined our boat, sitting behind the Lieutenant and I. “We’re ready to put out, sir,” one reported.

“Aren’t we all,” the Lieutenant drawled, his hand snaking under my hair to rest against the back of my neck. “I’d like to put out on her.”

I stared into my father’s eyes, willing him to stay calm, to not make it worse. I sat very still, my elbows tucked close to my ribs and my hands pressed close together between my thighs. The Lieutenant’s hand was warm on my neck, and sweaty. Maybe he wasn’t as unafraid of Corvo as he wanted us to think.

We shoved away from the shore, the gritty sand raking against the bottom of the boat, then sliding into the watery swell. We rode the tide out towards the Jessamine.

“What’d you think, Pax?” the Lieutenant asked.

“Aye, she’s a pretty one, sir,” a man’s voice replied from behind, followed by a soft chuckle. I
stiffened as I felt a hand slip around me from behind to fondle a breast, squeezing over my coat before falling away. “Ripe for the picking. Like sweet, little Philly.”

His words nauseated me. *Gods, poor Philly.*

The Lieutenant sneered. “Ha! That Fletcher girl was a downright *dog* compared to this majestic beauty. Look at her face, her soft skin, her glowing eyes…” He yanked my neck, pushing me towards his face and coarsely rubbing his cheek against mine, his stubble grating against my skin. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” he asked, his eyes burning into my father’s.

A nervous voice spoke up behind me. “Uh, Lieutenant…”

It took a moment for the Lieutenant to respond, so intensely was he staring at my father, goading him to strike. His voice was flat and annoyed. “What?”

“Uhh… you know he’s the Crown Killer, right? You think, maybe…” I could practically hear him swallowing in fear. “…maybe you should let her go… I mean, look at his eyes. Have you ever seen anything like it? He’s like to kill you with his bare hands.”

“Aye,” the man—the chuckler—said, his voice significantly quieter. Sober. Afraid. This was the fear of countless in the Empire who had read about the Crown Killer’s sadistic butchery and feared they might be next.

“Shut up, both of you,” the Lieutenant snapped. “The brute heard what I said about Commander Kittredge’s promise. Didn’t you, Lord Protector? Play nice and we play nice, all respectful-like, but kill any more of our men and I fuck your daughter’s asshole until she bleeds.”

Rage curdled in my belly, and for a terrifying moment I feared Corvo would strike, but his rat eyes held steady on my face.

The Lieutenant asked, “How many did he kill, Pax?”

He knew the answer. He was just trying to intimidate us, but with the weight of his sweaty hand against my neck, I felt his nervousness and knew Corvo saw it reflected in my eyes. *We can get through this. Don’t stoop to his level. Don’t play his game, Father.*

Pax said, “Seven good men.”

The Lieutenant whistled. “Shameful. The Commander will want a reckoning.” His voice darkened. “As will I,” he said, turning into me to press a wet kiss against my cheek.

I grunted in disgust, but he roughly pushed me towards my father by the neck, freeing me. I scrambled to the bench, glancing at Corvo’s gunshot wound. I could practically *feel* him growing weaker, losing blood. It was just the rage keeping him upright as he glared at the Lieutenant. I tried to stay strong, for his sake, but I watched with bleak eyes as the flagship drew closer.

The nightmare was only beginning.

We docked with the *Jessamine*, the smaller crafts rising above the waves on an elaborate pulley system of ropes and locking gears. Commander Kittredge—an older man with a gaunt face and hollow eyes—watched the proceedings from his high perch.

We were dragged before him alongside the seven men Corvo had slain, their bodies laid out beside us on the deck with blankets covering their bodies in respect. The three survivors (the ones I had knocked out instead of killed) were on stretchers, being attended to by a female physician.
Corvo swayed on his feet.

“He needs medical attention!” This I directed at the Commander, imploring him with my Empress face.

He threw it back at me. “Why aren’t they on their knees, Lieutenant?”

“My mistake, sir,” the Lieutenant said. He dug a thumb into Corvo’s wound. My father barely held back a scream as he fell to his knees beside me.

“Stop it! We have surrendered!” I cried.

A heavy hand clamped down on my shoulder from behind, pushing me to my knees. *Humiliation, was it? Fools!*

I glared up at the Commander as he leisurely descended, his hands clasped behind his back. The entire crew was quiet as the Commander strolled to a stop before Corvo.

He made a show of bending over to look more closely at his face. My father was taking deep breaths, his skin disturbingly pale. It made the blotchy, black-and-green bruises around his nose that much more grotesque.

“What a vile creature,” Commander Kittredge said. “Where are the Overseers when you need them? Such eyes…”

“He’s the Crown Killer alright,” the Lieutenant said. “He massacred our men—*seven* good men.”

“I see that,” the Commander replied, moving on to me. I looked him square in the eye, burning with hatred. “And look at this. The Child Empress.” His lips formed into a thin smile. “I accept your surrender. Empress Delilah Kaldwin will be pleased. Most pleased.”

Delilah *fucking* Kaldwin. No. *Never.* She was an imposter. A usurper. The blood we shared was poisoned. She called herself my aunt, but it meant nothing but betrayal.

She would die Delilah Copperspoon.

The Commander intently watched my face. “Lieutenant, bring us about. Let’s revisit the *south* side of the island. As I recall, we left a ship there… floundering.”

I held my glare steady on his face, refusing to look away, but at his words, I blanched in sickening horror. *No, no, no.*

His gaunt face twitched as he stretched a macabre smile.

“Theyir engines took a direct hit, you see. An underwater torpedo.” He slid his hollow eyes over my father. “You have killed seven of my best men, Lord Protector. Seems only fair that I launch seven missiles at the *Dreadful Wale.* I was going to leave them alone, but… fair is fair.”

He lifted his head, bringing a bony finger to tap against his lips as if in deep contemplation. “Tell me, Lieutenant… How many missiles do you think a ship like *that* can take?”

The Lieutenant pulled a thin dagger from his boot, picking the dirt from beneath his nails. “Oh, one or two.”

The Commander walked away, his hollow-eyed gaze reaching across the waves. “Commence firing once we are in range.”
“With pleasure, sir.”
Chapter Summary

As chapters go, this one is pretty climatic as Emily and her father deal with the threat of the Jessamine, which I've been building up for several chapters. It's a long one. I hope you enjoy it and please let me know what you think below!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 36

Corvo’s head was bowed, the wings of his hair hiding everything but his nose. He was on his knees beside me, swaying with the loss of blood from his gunshot wound.

He had withdrawn somewhere I couldn’t follow, a dark place inside his head.

He was mumbling beneath his breath; incoherent, delirious, though whether it was the Heart in his ears, driving him mad, or the loss of blood, I couldn’t say. Maybe both. His arms were slack at his sides, but he was clenching and unclenching his fists, his fingers stained with the blood he had shed, the lives he had taken.

“Please,” I tried again, beseeching the Commander. “He needs medical attention.”

But Commander Kittredge was ignoring me. He leisurely paced back and forth near the starboard turrets, his hands clasped behind his back as the Jessamine, likewise, took her sweet time heading south. I watched the obsidian cliffs in the distance as we rode the shallow bends to deeper waters, wrapping around the jutting eastern end of the island.

I couldn’t yet see the Dreadful Wale, but I had no doubt it was there, waiting for us.

Waiting to feel the Commander’s wrath.

I glanced at the Lieutenant. He had his leg propped up on a barrel, his hands busy with that slim dagger of his, picking the dirt beneath his nails. He watched Corvo and I, but mostly me. He seemed to be enjoying my fear, the bastard.

I swung like a pendulum between shock and horror, the lowest point dropping me into a numbing center of denial. I didn’t want to believe I was actually here, captured, hopeless, watching my father bleed out on the deck as the traitorous crew laughed and jeered, throwing out lewd suggestions to their gaunt, hollow-eyed Commander.

“Let us have a taste, Commander!” one jeered, rubbing his crotch.

“Aye! Little Johnny wants to be the new Royal Taster!”
“Not so little anymore!” another hooted.

Their peals of laughter turned the Commander’s attention on us. When his hollow eyes met mine, I cried, “Please!”

“Please, I’ll do anything!” a crewman wailed in mockery to ripples of laughter. A few had taken to gesturing obscenely at me, darting their tongues between their fingers while others were grabbing a friend, bending him over and pretending to thrust into his backside with exaggerated groans and grunts.

I ignored them. Traitorous dogs! The crew could mock me all they liked; I’d endured worse beneath Delilah.

Commander Kittredge extended his incessant pacing, back and forth, back and forth, to include the area in front of me. Each time he passed me, I looked up at him in desperate plea. I didn’t care if I had to beg for my father’s life. Empress or not, I would beg. “Commander, please! He’s bleeding out!”

“Let him bleed,” a crewman jeered. “He killed my brother!”

“Crown Killer scum! He deserves to die,” another jeered to murmuring agreement.

“No!” I shouted. “Crew of the Jessamine, listen well. You will all die if Corvo dies, for he is Delilah’s prize. Your new Empress will blame the crew if anything happens to him.” I glared up at the Commander, my heart thundering. “If you value your life, do not let my father die. Corvo is hers to do with as she pleases.”

The threat felt real enough to me, knowing Delilah. She wanted Corvo, not just for him, but for me.

After the dark intimacies of the Void, Delilah knew exactly how much she could hurt me by using my father… How much pain she could inflict by twisting and degrading and abusing the bond between us—even if it was just an illusion. The Void made it seem real.

Commander Kittredge stopped a moment, considering me, his head cocked to the side. I held my breath, every second feeling like forever, and when the Commander finally moved again, I didn’t know whether to celebrate or cry. He rested a wrinkled old hand on the Lieutenant’s shoulder before moving to stand at the rail, watching the barren island slide past.

The Jessamine could move faster, but clearly he wanted to prolong the torturous wait.

At the Commander’s silent touch, the Lieutenant lazily pushed off the barrel with a lopsided grin, tucking his slim dagger back into his boot. He swaggered across the deck and crouched before me, cocking his head.

“You don’t shut up, do you? Well, lucky you. We have one of those fancy court physicians aboard,” he said in a low voice, gripping my face with cruel fingers and forcibly turning my head to look at the female physician attending the unconscious men on stretchers.

“Doctor Toksvig,” he supplied.

Hearing her name, the woman turned, looking at me through round wire spectacles. I stared at her in disbelief. She’d trained under Sokolov. I remembered her smiling sweetly at me every time we passed in the halls of the palace.

She wore a long white dress with a stiff collar, her gray hair tucked into a white skullcap. What in
the Void was she doing aboard the Jessamine? The mystery was further deepened by the iron manacles around her wrists, and yet no chain between them.

* A prisoner like me, * I realized, but with a job to do.

The Lieutenant crouched to whisper in my ear. “She can save your father, but…”

He leaned back so our eyes could meet, so I could see the lust in his eyes.

“There’s a price.”

He squeezed my jaw in a painful grip, pushing out my lips as he leaned forward and kissed me, forcing his tongue into my mouth. I pushed him back with my fists against his chest, then slapped him hard across the face. As hard as I could! But on my knees, it was awkward, the blow too soft.

His head rolled to the side, my handprint reddening his cheek. He just grinned at me. The watching crewmen laughed and snickered.

“She’s a feisty one!”

“Royal blood runs hot!”

I froze, caught in that moment of terrifying stillness, watching for movement, afraid of what might come next. I thought about using magic—just grabbing my father’s hand and leaping over the edge with *Far Reach,* to let the Ocean take us.

But that wouldn’t stop the Jessamine. She’d blow the Dreadful Wale to smithereens and hunt us down until we were nothing but bloated corpses carried to shore by the waves.

The Lieutenant rose to his feet, chuckling to himself, his eyes sliding towards Corvo like every action was meant to hurt him, not me. But my father didn’t appear to be aware of what was happening. His head was bowed, his face hidden beneath dark hair. Blood seeped through his dark clothes, staining the hardwood beneath his knees. It broke my heart.

The Lieutenant smiled at my desperation. “For a kiss, I’ll give you the doctor’s tender touch,” he said, sweeping his arm and pointing at the court physician. “Come quickly, Doctor. Give us a taste of your wonderful bedside manner.”

Doctor Toksvig came forward, her eyes downcast, avoiding my gaze. She was all business, evaluating her patient from front to back and muttering to herself. She readjusted her wire spectacles several times—a nervous tic—and finally said, “A clean shot, through and through. The bullet missed bone and artery, else he’d not be standing.”

“He’s not standing, Doc,” the Lieutenant said, winking at me.

“He appears to have succumbed to delirium,” she added, her lips twitching. She was very nervous, I realized, but hiding it behind that clinical detachment so important to her profession. “Furthermore, the amount of blood loss is… troubling. He needs immediate medical attention.”

“Please, Doctor Toksvig,” I pleaded in a whisper. “Help him.”

But she stood back, her eyes downcast. At that moment, she looked less like a doctor and more like a frail old woman.

Your father is dying. What will you offer in return for the doctor’s immediate…” He licked his lips. “… medical… attention.” His eyes dropped to my lips, then back up to my eyes with a salacious grin. “Another kiss?”

His eyes were hungry.

He wanted to see how far I would go, how deeply I would degrade myself in front of an audience to save my father. The humiliation aroused him. The soft lick of the lips. The darting tongue. He could barely contain himself as he stared down at the pleasing sight I made: The Empress of the Isles prostrate before him. On her knees. Begging. Pleading. *How low will you go,* his hungry eyes gleamed. What would the Empress do to save her father? The crew’s lewd gesturing and catcalling only fed his excitement, adding to the spectacle before him.

The Lieutenant patiently waited for my reply, a smile on his face. I felt faint, the heat of the sun glaring down on me, the crew jeering, the ship swaying beneath my knees as we rode the waves.

“A kiss,” I finally said, spitting out the word. “*After* the doctor stops the bleeding.”

“A real kiss,” he insisted, smiling wider.

“A real kiss,” I repeated, feeling sick.

The Lieutenant looked towards the Commander who silently nodded in approval. I gaped in surprise, not expecting him to be part of this disgusting pact, but I should have known…

He was the man in charge, the one who had encouraged rape aboard his ship *like it was a tool.* I knew because of the Fletchers.

Commander Kittredge had dangled Philly in front of her father, using her to get what he wanted. He’d taken her hostage with threats of far worse if the master architect refused to help repair the damage taken during the pirate attack. In the end, the Fletchers had managed to sabotage the ship and escape, but the Commander had broken his word.

*HAD BROKEN HIS PROMISE,* I thought, screaming at myself.

Screaming at myself to wake up, to realize I was in more danger, *now,* than I had ever been along the black sands of Tempest Island. Mister Fletcher had sabotaged the ship *in secret.* The Commander had had no idea what he’d done until he was already gone, sailing away on the stolen skiff with his daughter.

That meant Philly had been raped *during* the repairs when Kittredge should have been keeping his promise to do no harm to his daughter in exchange for his help. *His promises mean nothing,* I told myself as my silent screams disappeared into a black hole of helplessness. The Commander’s promise—to treat my father and I with respect if we surrendered without resistance—was a bald-faced lie.

It was a long trip back to Dunwall.

The Lieutenant nodded at the royal physician. “Go ahead,” he said, but his eyes were on me, lit with anticipation.

Doctor Toksvig addressed my father’s exit wound first, pouring a vial of Sokolov’s Elixir into the gaping hole. Oral ingestion was most effective, but applied directly to the wound, it would at least act as a clotting agent and stop the bleeding. It would do nothing to restore the blood he had lost or wake him from his strange stupor. Corvo was still mumbling like a madman.
“Now the kiss,” the Lieutenant said, almost breathless, as he grabbed my arm, yanking me to my feet and hungrily angling towards my mouth.

“Hold on,” the Commander interrupted, his voice dull and unpresumptuous, as though he was simply calling for a delay in dinner service. “What is that?”

He pointed across the water towards the island.

For a heartbeat, the Lieutenant’s mouth crowded my face, reeking of onions, but then he reluctantly relaxed his grip and turned away. I could breathe again. I darted my eyes over the crewmen’s heads to the black sands in the distance. Standing now, I could see better. The seagulls were flying above the obsidian cliffs, squawking in annoyance at our intrusion. The island was used to its loneliness, its isolation.

But it was the sight of the ancient Pandyssian running along the beach that caught my attention in a thrill of excitement and fear. He was running south—running so fast he was keeping up with the Jessamine, more or less.

“Uh, sir… He appears to have no pants,” one of the crew observed to much laughter.

“One of yours?” the Commander dryly asked, his gaunt face turning towards me in question.

“Maybe he’s a royal concubine!” another hooted.

I said nothing, my heart furiously pounding, my eyes glued to the Pandyssian. At this distance, he was a black bird, Corvo’s coat flapping in the wind. *What in the Void was he doing?*

“Strange,” the Commander said, unsatisfied with this new development. He raised a hand at the men manning the starboard turrets. “Jennywood, fire a warning shot across his”—gaunt lips twitching—“bow.”

“Aye, sir,” the sailor grinned.

I lunged forward, a scream caught in my throat, but the Lieutenant painfully gripped my arms, holding me back. Within seconds, the missile dropped into the tube and shot out with a *BANG!* The projectile whistled as it careened towards its target, then exploded in the waves with a thunderous blast, painting the water bright blue. The Pandyssian was close enough to get knocked off his feet by the shock wave.

After a few tense moments, I saw him get back up and start running again, running south, though moving further inland away from the water’s edge.

“Persistent fellow,” the Commander remarked. He lifted his hand again to order another attack.

“Stop it!” I cried.

The Commander scowled. “Lieutenant York, I imagine a thorough kiss would shut her up.”

Lieutenant York, so-addressed, took it as a command. “With pleasure, sir,” he said, bearing down on me. I kicked upwards and kneed him in the balls. *Almost.* Like me, he had moved instinctively fast, clenching his legs together and pushing me back.

My hand latched onto his. I pried his fingers loose and twisted his wrist until I heard a snapping sound. He screamed in pain, falling back—all of this happening in mere seconds. He shot me a wild look, half-angered, half-aroused.
It was then I noticed the doctor.

She had an empty vial of Sokolov’s Elixir in hand, a second vial. Her eyes were flaring with nervous energy, and I suddenly realized why. She had poured the vial into Corvo’s mouth during the distraction—the Pandyssian, the missile blast, me attacking the Lieutenant, the perfect distraction—and now my father’s throat was working to swallow the restorative.

He made an animalistic, growling sound, shaking his head from side to side. The Lieutenant’s eyes shot towards Corvo in naked fear.

Corvo lunged to a crouching position on his feet, his pants soaked from kneeling in his own blood. *The beast awakens!* He flung his head back, whipping his hair out of his eyes as he made a grab for the Lieutenant’s boot. He was fast. A second later, I saw the slim dagger in my father’s hand as he sliced towards the Lieutenant, but the traitor managed to cut towards my father and block his thrust with his forearm.

Lieutenant York smiled at his successful block, clearly enjoying the idea that he could take on the Royal Protector and *win*.

Corvo smiled back. “Here’s your kiss, asshole.”

Corvo squeezed the trigger, blasting off the Lieutenant’s face at point-blank range.

I didn’t even *see* the pistol in his other hand until it had already discharged, the sound shattering my ears. I had no idea *when* Corvo had pulled the pistol from the Lieutenant’s holster, but he was clearly paying for it now. The man collapsed, blown back by the force of the blast, his face *gone*, a chunky, red mess where his nose and mouth had been.

Corvo flipped the pistol, smoothly adjusting his grip, and swung in front of me, protecting me, aiming his smoking weapon, cocked and ready, at the astonished crew. Everyone was staring at us, bodies tense, ready to attack but holding back, waiting for the Commander’s orders.

His hollow eyes lowered over his Lieutenant, sprawled on the deck in a widening pool of blood. He noticeably grimaced, but—given the circumstances—seemed underwhelmed. He ignored Corvo and the pistol aimed at him, and instead strolled towards a giant *thing* wrapped in canvas.

He grabbed the corner of the canvas and pulled, unveiling the statue beneath.

A statue of Delilah.

I gasped, startled by the lifelike stone. It was black—obsidian black like the cliffs of Tempest Island—and *moving*. Somehow, Delilah was using her black magic to possess the stone, seeing through its eyes. *Speaking.*

“What is it, Commander Kittredge?” the Delilah-statue asked in a haughty, impatient tone. “Have you found them yet?”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” the Commander replied, his hands clasped behind his back. “Lady Emily and the Crown Killer are in my custody.” His eyes lowered. “However, I humbly ask your permission to cut off Lord Corvo’s hand or inflict some other punishment.” His eyes lifted, sparking with interest. “Castration, perhaps? He has now killed *eight* of my men.”

The statue was not facing us.

I watched in horror as it twisted its head to look directly behind it, an inhuman angle, those cold
obsidian eyes glaring straight at my father, then straight at me.

I took a step back, shuddering.

“I see,” it simply said in Delilah’s voice. After a long pause, she said, “Not castration. I rather like those parts of him. Don’t you agree, little niece?”

Corvo fired at the statue. The bullet ricocheted, blasting away chunks of its nose before landing in someone’s thigh. The crewman screamed, falling to the ground.

“Then may I take his hand?” the Commander returned, continuing their conversation as if nothing had happened. “Both hands?” he revised, shooting an annoyed glance at Corvo as the wounded crewman kept screaming.

Doctor Toksvig looked like she wanted to run over and help, but she was too afraid to move, the empty vial clamped in her shaking hands. For a tense moment, the Delilah-statue just stared at us in silence, its head unnaturally turned to face us. Nose-less. It was horrifying. A nightmare’s gaze.

She said, “What about the Dreadful Wale? Surely, the lives of its crew is punishment enough—for now. The poor, insane Child Empress has so few allies these days.”

“We intend to destroy it, Your Excellency,” the Commander said, “but it’s unclear how many are aboard.” He looked agitated. “Please, consider my request. Let me take his hand.” He stared at the statue, his face going hard. “Eight of my men, Empress. Need I say more?”

“A tragedy,” the Delilah-statue agreed.

“For you,” I interrupted, stepping forward. I glared at the statue like it was just the two of us. I didn’t need to deal with the Commander; he was Delilah’s puppet.

Corvo readjusted, stepping closer to my shoulder from behind, his pistol aimed at anyone and everyone.

I said in a low menacing tone, “Don’t you know who’s aboard that ship, Delilah?”

“Oh?” the Delilah-statue asked, faintly amused.

“Em,” Corvo whispered in warning, but I knew it was my only chance to save my friends. I had to take the risk.

“Your daughter!” I shouted, eyes raging. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?” I let that sink in for all of three seconds before I shouted, “Rosemary MacKenzie, you fucking witch! If you destroy the ship, you destroy her. Are you willing to shed your daughter’s blood, Delilah?”

I had no idea what to expect.

No idea if Delilah already knew that Rosemary was with me or not. No idea if she knew that I knew that Rosemary was her daughter. No idea if Delilah even cared about her daughter. All of it was up in the air. Conjecture. Secrets. Lies.

Only her reaction remained to be seen.

The dark obsidian masked her expression. The cold volcanic glass was emotionless, unmoving.

With a terrible grinding noise, the head of the statue slowly turned back to its front position. She ordered, “Commander Kittredge, destroy the Dreadful Wale. No survivors. You may take Corvo’s
right hand. His sword hand. Nothing else.”

“As you command, Your Excellency,” he said with a deep bow, looking pleased.

The statue froze, lifeless, rendered inert once more. I stared at it in shock, my stomach turned to knots. The world froze, nobody moving, everyone staring, nobody willing to take that first step.

But the Jessamine was still moving, the waters breaking against the ship. We rounded the island and suddenly the Dreadful Wale appeared, dead in the water, sinking, the lower decks taking on water from the underwater torpedo that had grounded her.

I realized it was possible Rosemary was already dead, drowned in her makeshift brig in the engine room.

“Commander,” the Jennywood man bravely spoke up in the strained silence, his hands at the controls of the starboard turrets. “Should I fire at the ship or the boy?”

The Commander looked momentarily lost. He blinked. “What?”

“The naked kid,” he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “He’s still runnin’ along the beach. Or he was. He’s drawing something in the sand, now. Look.”

As heads turned to look, including the Commander’s, I whispered, “Father…”

I didn’t know what to do.

I felt faint. Sick. We were outnumbered. Outgunned. At least fifty men—angry men—were in evidence, not counting the crew most likely below deck.

“Stay close,” Corvo simply replied in a low rumble. I saw the pistol waver. The elixir had helped, but he was still far too weak. Running on fumes.

“Let the imbecile draw in the sand,” Commander Kittredge decided. “What do we care? Jennywood, fire one missile at the Dreadful Wale. One for Lieutenant York.” The Commander turned to glare fearlessly at Corvo with his hollow eyes. “One by one, the Crown Killer will pay for the carnage he has wrought. Your hand, last of all. Enjoy it while you can, Lord Protector. That pistol will be the last thing your fingers feel.”

I could cast my Doppelgänger, but that would still be only three against too many.

Corvo didn’t even have his sword. It was lying somewhere in a pile of other swords, taken from the beach.

Hopeless.

Jennywood sent off another missile in a blinding strike. I flinched as it hit the Dreadful Wale at the stern of the ship, blasting a smoking hole through its rounded engine plate. I couldn’t see anyone aboard. Meagan. Dougal. His wife, Eileen. The Princess, pregnant. No Rosemary, either. I didn’t know if that was a good thing. Maybe they had abandoned the ship somehow.

But that was poor solace.

No survivors, Delilah had said. Even if they’d jumped ship beforehand, they couldn’t have gone very far. We were out in the middle of nowhere.

“Very good, Specialist,” the Commander praised, his hollow eyes moving over my father as he
ticked the count. “Number two. For Specialist Hamm.”

“Thank you, sir. Yes, sir,” Jennywood said, loading another missile into the ejection tube.

I couldn’t take it. Couldn’t watch.

With a cry, I turned into my father, burying my face in his shoulder. Corvo wrapped an arm around me, pressing a hand to the back of my head, his other still holding the pistol, raised at our enemies. I could smell blood, the sharp scent of burnt copper, his gunshot wound a ghastly sight.

I backed away slightly, afraid of hurting him. I lifted my eyes to look over his shoulder at the waves. The endless Ocean.

It was then I noticed the dark shadow.


“Father!”

Corvo turned around just as the shadow broke, bursting from the Ocean. The sea beast looked like a thing from legend. A monster from the Deep! It was taller than the Clocktower of Dunwall as it rose from the waves and crashed over the Jessamine like the flagship was just a toy.

Long tentacles slapped against the deck with shattering force, crushing bodies and splintering wood. Men screamed for their mothers. I lost all sense of up and down as the deck shifted and Corvo and I began to slide across the wet wood.

The Jessamine lifted from the water, tumbling and tossing. Wind shrieked in my ears. I grabbed for my father’s hand and held tight. In the chaos, I glimpsed strange patterns as the sea beast thrashed and mauled with massive tentacles, its skin dotted with patches of color and prickly scales. Blue and green and yellow, blurred by the spray of churning water. The tentacles were attached to a massive face in the middle—if you could call it that. Maybe it was just a mouth. A million tiny teeth around a gaping hole.

I saw that mouth descend over a screaming Commander. In the next heartbeat, he was gone.

Somehow, Corvo kept hold of me. I realized we were being pressed firmly together, a slimy tentacle wrapping around our bodies, tightening so hard I couldn’t breathe.

We were lifted in the air, the blue sky reeling overhead. I saw the Jessamine far below, being dragged into the ocean by the monster, and then, suddenly, I saw black sand and obsidian cliffs chasing across the sky. I felt like I was flying. Falling.

The monster relaxed its grip and I could breathe again. Scream again. And scream I did as I felt its slimy tentacle slip away, back into the waves. I was on my hands and knees. Corvo was beside me, coughing up water. I stared at the shiny black granules of sand between my fingers, my heart hammering, my body shaking.

I looked up.

The ancient Pandyssian was floating naked above the ground in the middle of something he had drawn in the sand. Each elaborate marking was fiercely glowing, illuminating the sand in eerie blue light. I stared at his face, at his sea-changing eyes.
“Em,” Corvo croaked, tugging my arm. “Look.”

The sea beast roiled over the *Jessamine*, sinking back into the Ocean with its treasure clutched between its curling tentacles. The crewmen were all drowning, dying, dead. *Gone.* I looked at Corvo, and we shared a look that had no comparison. I’d never seen my father so utterly shocked.

Together we looked back at the Pandyssian.

He was descending in a gracious fall, his feet lightly touching the ground. The sea-changing mist disappeared from his eyes. He looked at me, eyes shimmering like emeralds, a smile trying to climb his face, but then he collapsed. He crumpled to the sand like the wind had blown away his strength.

I ran to him, falling to my knees, my passage destroying the strange symbols he had drawn in the sand. The light was gone, the magic ceased. I held his head in my lap and felt for a pulse, two fingers pressed against his neck.

“He’s alive!” I cried. *Khesh leera. Khesh leera!* “Oh, gods!”

I was crying.

Corvo reached across the sand for his discarded coat and gently covered the Pandyssian’s body. The effort cost him. He was grunting in pain, but I understood why he did it. Respect. Gratitude. We were alive because of him!

“Oh, gods, thank you,” I cried, leaning down and kissing the Pandyssian’s forehead. He felt cold. Was he dead? *Please, don’t let it be so…*

Corvo had nothing left. He let out a long-winded sigh and spread out his legs, falling to his back. He looked up at the sky. There was something terrifying about that look.

“Father,” I cried, torn apart. He was in pain and too tired to fight it. Blood seeped from his wound. I grabbed his hand and he squeezed it back, closing his eyes.

That simple squeeze meant everything to me.

He was holding on. In the distance, we heard the low wailing pitch of a horn sounding. *The Dreadful Wale.*

“Meagan! They’re alive,” I gasped, swelling in happiness and relief. It was all too much.

Too much to hope for.

Yet we were alive. *Free.*

Tears ran down my cheeks as I laughed and cried. I squeezed my father’s hand again. “Don’t you fucking die on me! You hear me? Stay with me, Father!”

His dark eyes lifted, squinting at the bright sky; fighting to stay conscious. I looked down. The Pandyssian’s head was in my lap, his eyes closed. His eyelashes were inky black against his pale cheeks. He looked peaceful, like he was dreaming. I delicately touched his pale cheek with the back of my knuckles.

“I won’t,” Corvo said, cracking a weak smile as his eyes closed once more, tears welling in silvery curves along his lash line. “Jessamine would kill me.”
Chapter End Notes

About the sea monster. I took this idea from two sources in Dishonored 2. One is during the Kirin Jindosh mission when you first explore his mansion. In that first room, there's a huge statue that looks like an octopus with horns. If you hover over it, it's called a "Deep Rift Watcher" and if a High-Chaos Emily clicks on it, she says, "If I had eight arms, I could choke eight men at a time." Also, if you explore the second balcony of the Royal Conservatory (Breanna Ashworth mission), there's a painting called 'Serkonan Legends, Old Sea Beast'. Here's a link to view it: http://dishonored.wikia.com/wiki/File:Painting_Concept_art.jpg
Overall, yeah, it's pretty convenient (plot-wise) that a huge monster sunk the Jessamine, but it ties in really nicely with the Pandyssian's Maormer magic (more on that in future chapters).
Doctor Toksvig is also from Dishonored ("The Corroded Man" novel).
Part 4: Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Using the Spector Club (Death of the Outsider) as an example, I’m leaning on the idea that “sanguine infusions” are evidence of blood transfusion technology in Dishonored. In this steampunk universe, there’s no plastic (if you think of an IV bag, for example), but I suppose “rubber tubing” might be a believable alternative to plastic (as natural rubber is harvested from rubber trees! Who knew?). But let’s say no one knows about blood types, so I’m making up a “universal donor” type magic-blood called “Piero’s Plasma” (playing off “Piero’s Spiritual Remedy” for mana replenishment) since I’m kind of bored with just using “Sokolov’s Remedy” for everything! (lol).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 37

The Pandyssian woke with a start, his whole body jerking as he twisted in the sand. It scared me half to death! His head turned towards my crotch, his nose dipping between my thighs. I gasped and felt my cheeks flush. The heat of his breath sent my mind places I wasn’t ready to go as he grunted something unintelligible, panic-choked and wild with fear.

“It’s me! It’s Emily. You’re safe,” I said, patting his shoulder awkwardly.

His hands clawed into the sand on either side of my hips, like he was trying to dig himself an escape route, but upon hearing my voice he suddenly stilled and lifted his head.

“Emily?”

He rolled off my lap, his silken black hair falling over his eyes, his muscles taunt and straining as my father’s black coat slipped away from his body like a blanket that had suddenly become too hot, too suffocating.

“Yes, it’s Emily. You’re safe.”

He looked up at me with wide, disoriented eyes, like he had just woken from a dream and couldn’t tell what was real.

“Yes,” he said again, but it didn’t sound like a question. He was calming himself down.

“Yes,” I answered, too breathy.

I was just as startled as he was, my heart pounding, my eyes glued to his face. My crotch burning. I’d been lost in the moment, just watching the waves in a strange bliss, a feeling of great calm suffusing over my limbs like a numbing salve. I hadn’t tried to move or think. I’d just sat there on
the beach, quiet, *breathing*, watching the rise and fall of my father’s chest and absently stroking the Pandyssian’s hair, waiting for the rowboat. For rescue. Meagan and Dougal were coming, riding the glistening waves to shore.

I’d felt almost pleasantly lethargic—having not gotten much sleep over the last few nights, thanks to Delilah—but the Pandyssian’s rude awakening had jolted me out of my reverie of sand, wind, and water, and straight into his eyes.

He had that look on his face again, like his first instinct was to run, and it only intensified when his green eyes darted over my father. The Pandyssian scrambled away from me, staying low, half-sitting on his heels. He was naked, but having never seen him fully dressed, it seemed oddly normal.

I was careful not to make any sudden movements. “Please don’t go,” I said. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Is he dead?”

For a moment, I just stared at him, uncomprehending. He tilted his head, scrutinizing my father in a manner so reminiscent of the Outsider that I had to shake myself.

“What?” I blurted.

“Look. The sand is drinking his blood.”

Like a lightning bolt, I scurried across the sand on hands and knees and shook Corvo’s arm, yelling, “Wake up, Father! Wake up! Oh, gods…” His jaw was slack and his breathing had turned shallow. When?! *Foolish, Emily!* I berated myself for letting myself drift off into la, la land. I threaded my fingers through the sand at his side, the black granules sticky with dark blood. He was losing too much blood!

“No, no, no, no,” I cried in a delirious panic. I slapped his cheek several times and when he groaned in response I exhaled in relief, fear caught in my throat. “Void, thank you! He’s still alive…”

But his eyes wouldn’t open, and his skin felt clammy and cold. I lifted the round of his shoulder to check the exit wound on his back, but it was still fully clotted, thanks to Doctor Toksvig’s application of Sokolov’s Elixir.

_How was he still losing so much blood?!

In the distance, I heard the gritty sound of wood grinding against rough sand as the rowboat came ashore. “Meagan!” I screamed. “Hurry!”

She raced towards me, the faster of the two as Dougal was weighed down by a heavy crate clutched between his arms. At their rapid approach, the Pandyssian tensed up, but at that point I didn’t care if he ran or stayed.

“He’s losing blood!” I shouted as Meagan reached us. “He’s been shot!”

Her dark eyes were calm as she pushed me aside. “Move, Emily. I got this.”

I slid over, half-falling, sitting further down with my hand pressed to Father’s leg, afraid that if I didn’t hold on he would slip away. I watched his face with my fist balled against my mouth, my teeth biting down hard. *Oh, gods, please don’t take my father away from me!* I distantly felt a warm hand on my back, the Pandysian silently crouched beside me at Corvo’s feet.

He was staying by my side, after all.
“Right here,” the Captain ordered as Dougal reached us. He dropped the heavy crate and listened to her steady instructions.

Meagan worked efficiently, grabbing medical supplies from the crate and calmly giving Dougal orders. Do this, do that. Dougal set up a tall wire stand; it held a little metal cage at the top into which he placed a glass cylinder and poured liquid from a purple-glazed triangular bottle.

Meanwhile, Meagan cut away the cloth from Corvo’s arm with a dagger, slashing quickly and accurately. As she looked for a vein in his arm, I rubbed Corvo’s leg, my eyes willing his chest to rise and fall. He was barely breathing, his face deathly pale beneath the spatter of blood.

Dougal slapped his Royal Spymaster across the face several times until his rat eyes blinked rapidly. “Stay with us, Corvo,” he said, urgent and loud, as Meagan brought a sharp, hollow needle to his arm and slid into a visible blue vein along his inner elbow.

With the line set, Meagan threaded her fingers along the rubber tubing and checked the seal that connected it to the glass cylinder hanging above Corvo’s head on the wire stand. A dark blue liquid sloshed inside: Piero’s Plasma.

I watched it run through the rubber tubing, straight into Corvo’s veins.

“Try it now,” Meagan said, nodding at Dougal. She fell back with a heavy sigh, wiping her dark brow.

With a grim nod, Dougal leaned over my father, a giant blocking the sun. He cradled the back of my father’s head with his giant hand and poured a red vial of Sokolov’s Elixir into his slack mouth.

Corvo was beyond Sokolov’s Elixir—too close to the edge to pull back without a blood transfusion, but now that Piero’s Plasma was pumping through his veins, he had a real chance… Doctor Toksvig had said no arteries were hit, but Corvo was crashing too fast, too hard for something not to be terribly wrong.

The last bit of elixir spilled over his lips.

Corvo sputtered, choking, as he pushed Dougal’s hand away with a weak swat.

“Get off me,” he gruffly growled, wincing in pain as his head fell back, his breath coming fast. He was tensing up, alarmed by the four of us crowding around him.

“I’m here,” I said, squeezing his leg, trying to calm him, but his rat eyes were drowned in confusion. When he fought to sit up, Dougal pressed down on his good shoulder.

“Don’t try to move, Lord Corvo,” Dougal said in that gentle, calm voice of his.

Rat eyes, pitch black and bloodshot, rolled back as Corvo crashed again, losing consciousness. The blotchy bruises around his nose were vividly contrasted against his deathly pale skin.

“Meagan!” I cried. “It’s not working!”

She whipped forward with her dagger. She’d already used it to cut away the arm of his waistcoat, but now she was pulling at the entire thing. “Quick! Help me get this off. Are you sure it was just the gunshot wound, Emily?”

I felt sick, staring wide-eyed at her. “I… I don’t know.”
The fabric ripped in loud tears as we clawed at the fabric, exposing his chest and the defined muscles of his abdomen. *There.* My hand shot to my mouth as I let go a desperate cry, seeing the gaping slit of a deep sword wound on his left side beneath the ribs.

It was pumping thick, red blood into the sand.

A great shuddering cry wracked my chest, and for a moment I lost myself in the Pandyssian’s arms. I had turned into him without thinking, and I’d felt his arms come around me. I looked up at his face, his green eyes caught between empathy and detached fascination as he stared at my father and all that was happening. I imagined it was all very strange to him.

“Emily,” he whispered, like it was meant to comfort me.

I turned back to look at my father, to stay strong.

Dougal popped the cork of another elixir and poured the red liquid into the newfound wound, to seal it shut.

“Emily,” Meagan said, pulling on my arm. “Sit closer to him. Let him see and hear you. It’ll help him pull through.”

“I’m here, Father. Don’t leave me.”

She handed me a damp washcloth. I wiped at the blood on his abdomen, gently cleaning the area as tears began to cloud my vision. I blinked them away, watching the elixir slowly interrupt the pulsing flow until the wound no longer seeped. *It must have happened on the beach,* I thought, when he had engaged the first boarding party.

“I had no idea…”

“Don’t blame yourself. He’s good at hiding his wounds,” Meagan quietly said, and when I glanced at her, she was watching the tears streak down my face like it meant something to her. She said, frowning slightly, “Plus, when you’re in that battle rage… it’s hard to feel *anything.*”

“Please…”

Hope, whisper thin… I held my breath, praying I would see some flicker of strength return to my father’s face. He looked so pale, so cold…

Slowly… surely… his breath steadied.

I held his limp, bloody hand in my lap, watching his eyelids flutter open. Dougal moved back and the sun fell across Corvo’s face, his skin flushing with warmth. He looked better.

I beamed at him as his rat eyes fell over my face. “Welcome back, Father;” I said, squeezing his hand.

“Em,” he breathed.

“How do you feel?” I asked, gently dotting his brow with the damp washcloth.

“How do I look?” Corvo croaked.

I opened my mouth to reply, but Dougal blurted, grinning ear to ear, “You won’t be winning any beauty pageants with *that* face, sir.”
“Fuck you, Dougal,” Corvo grunted as he tried to sit up again, but I pushed him back down.
“What’s this?” he asked, looking at his arm connected to the drip.

“Piero’s Plasma,” I said, fussing with the damp washcloth. “And the reason you’re still alive—thanks to the Captain’s quick thinking.”

I gave her an appreciative look.

“Meagan,” I said, shaking my head, “I can’t tell you how thankful I am—”

“Don’t,” she said, avoiding my gaze, her dark eyes haunted by secrets. There was something in her face that said it was never enough, that some things could never be forgiven.

But she looked genuinely relieved, too, and it surprised me. A part of me couldn’t believe Meagan had room in her heart for compassion after how cruelly Corvo had treated her, almost gouging her eye out in a rage of suspicion.

“Besides…” Meagan said, climbing to her feet and brushing sand off her legs. “You should be thanking him, not me.”

Him was obvious enough.

All of us turned to look at the ancient Pandyssian at Corvo’s feet, looking as exotic and strange as any man could be crouching mother-naked beneath the sun. His face was grim and serious, but when he realized we were all staring at him, he jerked back a little, his eyes blinking rapidly.

He slowly stood up and looked directly to me for answers. “Emily Kaldwin?”

“It’s fine, we’re just…”

I let out a shaky sigh and glanced out over the waves, fear and awe still lingering in my chest. I looked back at him.

“You saved us,” I said. “We owe you our lives.”

“Aye,” Dougal softly agreed, his blue eyes solemn.

“He saved us alright,” Meagan said in a darker tone, “but we’re marooned on this island. The Dreadful Wale is dead in the water. We’re not going anywhere.”


“Everyone’s fine,” the Captain assured me. “Just a little rattled.”

I sighed in relief. I’d feared the worst.

“I want to sit up,” Corvo blurted, a painfully vulnerable look on his face, one I’d never seen before. He feels weak, I realized. Weak from blood loss. Flat on his back. All of it was hitting Corvo right where it hurt the most: his ability to protect me.

“It’s best if you lie still, Lord Protector,” Meagan said. “You need rest.”

“None of us can rest,” Corvo snapped. “As you just made abundantly clear, we’re stuck here—and Delilah knows exactly where we are now. She’ll send more ships.”

I interjected, “Which is exactly why you need to rest! You’re no good to me like this.”
He scowled. “I can rest with a better view. Help me sit up.”

“You stubborn, little…” I grabbed his discarded coat and rolled it up, stuffing it underneath his head like a pillow, but he said, “No, Emily. Give my coat back to the damn kid. He’s indecent.”

I gave an aggravated huff and threw the rolled-up coat at the Pandyssian—this time he caught it when it flew at him—and turned back to find Dougal dragging out a blanket from the heavy crate. We positioned it beneath Corvo’s head to his liking. I didn’t know why I was so angry. Maybe it was that vulnerable look on my father’s face. Maybe it was that I had almost lost him. Mostly, it was hating the fact that everything seemed to boil down to whether he felt like he was protecting me enough.

 Didn’t he see that it was my turn to protect him? And I had failed! He had almost bled to death because I hadn’t noticed his sword wound! I was angry with myself.

“There!” I snapped, scowling at the smirk on Corvo’s face. “Happy now?”

“No.”

“View not good enough?”

I glared at his face as he glared back. Dougal broke the tension between us with a gentle touch on my arm. “Highness, look,” he said.

We all looked.

The waves…

I didn’t think we’d ever see it again, but there it was, the wreckage of the **Jessamine**. The flagship had disappeared, dragged beneath the waves by the sea monster, but now I saw pieces of it surfacing like flotsam, pushed to shore by the high tide. Pieces of wood, mostly. Broken furniture. Tangled netting.

And bodies.

“You don’t have to look at that,” I said in a rush.

“I want to,” Corvo said. “Every last traitor on that ship deserved what they got.”

“Not all of them were traitors,” I said bleakly, thinking of the doctor.

“I have to bury them,” the Pandyssian suddenly said, his green eyes falling over me. He held Corvo’s coat in his hands like he didn’t know what to do with it. “I must, or the **Angra Mazul** will return. It’s too dangerous to rouse her again. She must sleep.”

“**Angra Mazul**?” I repeated, startled by the foreign word. The sea beast was a **what**?

I glanced at the coat, distracted, his body naked behind what little it covered as he held it close to his groin. Had he forgotten how to wear the coat? I took it from his yielding hands.

He watched me flap the coat, shaking out the black sand, with wide eyes.

“**Angra Mazul**?” I asked again.

He made a face and waved his arms in the air like a crazy person. Was he trying to imitate the coat? I stared at him, struck dumb, but then…
Oh, sea monster! His arms were tentacles!

Laughter bubbled up from my chest and I couldn’t help but smile at him. It seemed to catch him. His eyes flickered, and he almost smiled back, his solemn face cracking. He was taking this sea monster business seriously.

I shook my head, feeling silly. “No, I meant what do the words mean? Try other words, remember?”

He frowned.

I held open the coat and he obediently poked his arms through the sleeve holes. He looked down at my hands as I tugged the coat over his shoulders and did up one button, the act somehow mesmerizing him. At the second button, my hand slipped.

“Deep Rift Watcher,” he said, our eyes locked.

“Deep… what?”

“Deep Rift Watcher.”

I felt a shudder run through me, the ghost of that slimy tentacle around my body, squeezing so tight I couldn’t breathe, and then the sensation of falling, the world spinning around me…

“She watches from the edge of all things,” the Pandyssian said in a brooding voice that reminded me of the Outsider. “She sleeps in underwater volcanoes and burns without fire. She is the… the twin.” He struggled to translate, shaking his head. “Dark twin of the whales.” His eyes lifted to mine, intensely solemn. “It is dangerous to rouse her.”

“But you did,” I said, breathlessly. “How—”

“I have to bury them.”

He sharply turned away and ran along the shoreline, away from us.

I watched him go. Watched him tackle his self-appointed duty with singular purpose. He was barefoot in the waves, pulling bodies by the arms to drier ground. Beneath the over-sized coat, his long muscular legs were soon covered in black wet sand from the knees down as he shuffled back and forth between waves and drier sand. Dark twin indeed, I thought.

“Emily,” Corvo said.

I turned reluctantly to look down at my father, his rat eyes following my long stare with fatherly disapproval. “Can we get back to the Captain or do you want to gawk at the naked young man for another ten minutes?”

Ten minutes seemed a cruel exaggeration. I wanted to hit him, my cheeks burning. Instead I glanced at Meagan and Dougal and apologized. “I’m sorry.”

Dougal rubbed the back of his head. “Don’t be,” he put in quick. “It’s hard not to stare, aye? He’s a strange lad.”

Meagan frowned. “It’s fine. I’m sure the threat is real if he feels the need to… Who is he again?”

I glanced at my father, unsure how to respond. Revealing that he was the human Outsider, a reincarnation of himself from four thousand years ago before he was sacrificed and became a god
seemed a little too much—and I didn’t want to jeopardize the Pandyssian if the Captain or anyone else had some secret hatred of the Outsider. A lot of people were taught to hate him, thanks to the Abbey. Corvo’s hatred was trouble enough.

And as a human, the Pandyssian was vulnerable. I needed to tread carefully.

“He’s a barbarian,” Corvo muttered under his breath. “A savage freak of nature.”

“He’s Whaleborn,” I said, louder. “A special kind of wizard. He’s going to help us defeat Delilah.”

“I knew it,” Dougal blurted, a grin rising on his face. “That sea beast came straight out of legend!” He pointed across the sand. “I swear, that boy has magic. Real magic!”

Having never seen anyone use the Mark before, Dougal was, of course, expecting us all to marvel at the idea of real magic.

But I marveled all the same.

“It was amazing,” I said, staring at the Pandyssian once more. I had never seen magic like his. Somehow, he had called forth the beast from the Deep to attack our enemies.

He saved us.

A part of me still couldn’t believe it, like it was too hard to accept the fact that the Jessamine was truly gone.

“So his name is Whaleborn?” Meagan asked, skeptical as ever.

“He doesn’t know his real name,” I said. “Delilah stole it. It’s why we can trust him, Meagan. He’ll help us.”

“Trust is asking too much,” Corvo growled. “Captain, how soon can we get off this Void-forsaken rock?”

Distracted, I crouched in the sand beside him, checking the plasma drip. His color was good, but he was still a gruesome sight, covered in blood—most not his own—with his waistcoat and undershirt in tatters, his chest laid bare.

He looked half-wild himself.

As the Captain answered Corvo, I dug through the heavy crate, finding a small metal bucket. Dougal caught my eye and ran off with it to grab water. Meanwhile, the Captain was saying, “…her back is broken. There’s a hole in the bilge, and by the rate of water flooding the engine room, I estimate she’ll be completely underwater by nightfall. We’re not going anywhere.”

Completely underwater?!

I glanced up at her, alarmed and fearful all at once. Her eyes were bleak. We really were marooned!

After sinking the Jessamine, I’d thought nothing could stop us, but now…

“What about your water pump?” Corvo asked, all business. He had served on warships as a youth, rising against pirate bands off Serkonan waters for the late Duke Theodanis. He’d seen his fair share of shipwrecks and knew a thing or two about surviving one. It made me proud.

Meagan scowled. “Sokolov tinkered with it before getting himself kidnapped.”
“You can’t fix it?”

“Maybe, but…”

“But what?” Corvo demanded in a low growl. He didn’t want her to sugarcoat the truth.

“But that second attack hit us hard, blasted right thru the rotator’s protective plating. Even if we pump the water out faster than it’s going in, I’m not sure if the engines can take the load. Look, I just need to go back and see what I can do.”

Dougal returned with the filled water bucket. I’d almost forgotten. I took it with a small, thankful smile and dipped the bloody washcloth inside, twisting and rinsing. How hard was it to fix water pumps?

The Captain looked at Dougal. “I could use your help again. Everyone needs to get off the ship. We have to assume it’s going down. Take whatever you can and bring the women ashore.”

“What can I do?” I asked, my heart racing.

“Help set up camp,” Meagan said with a shrug, glancing at the black sand, the obsidian cliffs… “Looks like we’re spending the night here on this cursed island.”

“Captain,” Corvo called, just as she was turning away. “Grab some pants. For the kid.”

“Right. Pants.”

The two headed back, going for the manual rowboat that would take them back to the Dreadful Wale.

Corvo caught my look. “What?” he snapped. “Emily, if you’re going to spend a significant amount of time with the human Outsider, I’d prefer it if he was wearing pants.”

I looked away, throwing my hair into the wind to cover my face, but too late, Corvo let out a choking laugh. “I’ve never seen you blush so hard, Em.”

“It’s bad enough you embarrass me in front of them,” I hissed. “I wasn’t gawking at him.”

Corvo’s eyes were steady. “You were.”

“I wasn’t!”

I slapped the wet washcloth against his chest, vigorously rubbing away streaks of blood.

“Ow! Take it easy.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, going softer. I gave him a hurt, angry look. “Why didn’t you tell me you got stabbed?”

He looked away. “This isn’t my first time getting shot—or stabbed. I had other things to worry about.” He looked back at me. “Like you.”

He loves me, I thought, but he struck fear and disgust into my heart. An unpleasant memory surfaced of the Lieutenant’s face exploding, the pistol fired at point-blank range. So much blood. And the men on the beach… I’d never seen my father take so much life—and so ruthlessly. Corvo the Black was merciless, a butcher of men. If he loved me, didn’t he see that I hated the work of his hands?
We said nothing after that.

It was a lot of blood. The water in the bucket ran red by the time I got most of it off his hands and chest. I went for his face last, scrubbing and wiping, but the blood just wouldn’t come off—it was stained into his soul! Tears threatened—

“Enough,” Corvo said, swatting me away. “You’re going to rip my skin off.”

I broke off, gasping in relief. “I can’t get it all—I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

I slopped the washcloth against the side of the pail and stared off into the distance, at the water and sky. After a time, I looked back at him. “Father,” I broached hesitantly. “Why didn’t she care?”

“She?”

He blinked at me, the sun in his eyes, and shifted slightly, grimacing in pain. Piero’s Plasma was working its magic, running through his veins, but his wounds were still raw.

“Delilah,” I said, staring into the bloody water. “She was willing to destroy the ship—kill her own daughter! How could she do that? Maybe Meagan is wrong about her. Maybe she’s not Delilah’s daughter.”

“Or maybe Delilah is an evil, psycho bitch who cares more about hurting you than letting you use her own daughter against her. If Rosemary is Delilah’s daughter—which I suspect is true—then that’s a weakness. One Delilah was willing to sacrifice.”

I swallowed hard, looking out over the waves.

“A weakness… I can’t believe anyone could think that way about their own child,” I whispered hoarsely, feeling sick. “Am I yours?”

“My what?”

“Your weakness,” I said, suddenly angry again.

He made a face. “I’m not Delilah. I would never—”

When he saw my tears, he grabbed my hand. “You’re my strength, Emily. I would never hurt you to get to her. How could you ever think that?”

Because you’re Corvo the Black, I thought, and the craving for blood was burned into the shadow of his eyes. He loved me, but how far was he willing to go to protect me? He had no moral line. Where was mine? How could I let him murder and maim in my name?

“Look,” he said, his gaze softening. “Why don’t you go help the Pandyssian and let me rest. I’m sure you two can have loads of romantic, fun times together pulling corpses from the water.”

“You’re an ass.”

He grabbed the washcloth, draping it over his forehead and closing his eyes. “You were totally gawking.”
The made-up "Angra Mazul" is meant to play off the real-life Zoroastrianism religion, specifically the Angra Mainyu, a destructive spirit, the evil twin of Ahura Mawzda (benevolence and wisdom). So I guess in the Dishonored dichotomy, the (good) Whales are Ahura Mawzda and the (bad) Deep Rift Watchers are Angra Mainyu. I’m not sure I’m entirely convinced, though, that the Whales are purely “good” with their connection to the Outsider and the Void, these being neutral. Just throwing some ideas out there…
You know how in the Indiana Jones movies, that famous fedora hat always comes back to him no matter what? He’ll even risk his own life to make sure he never loses it! Well, I’m SO SORRY, but there’s no way I’m letting Corvo’s sword be lost forever! (lol). Please forgive the extreme implausibility of it miraculously showing up, along with skiff (another hard one to sell) in the wreckage of the Jessamine. Sorry, not sorry.

Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 38

I took my boots off. Despite the encroaching high tide, the black sand seemed endless, a shoreline hugging the obsidian cliffs like a shimmering necklace of black diamonds.

The sand felt good between my toes.

The island’s barren beauty made me wonder about other islands. How many were out there? Untouched… Pristine… Places where, for a moment, I could forget that I was a monarch on the run, deposed by a coup d’etat, and could simply exist—right here, right now—alive in this moment.

To simply be.

I’d almost lost Corvo, my last remaining parent. I’d seen a legend come to life, risen from the Deep, all tentacles and teeth. I’d seen the most powerful warship in existence smashed to smithereens, sunk beneath the waves… After all that, after the wonder of the great Leviathan in the cave beneath the island and the hope I’d felt when the ancient Pandyssian had taken my hand in the darkness… it seemed enough to simply be.

I rolled up my pants and walked into the waves, just far enough to feel the water lap against my knees. It was painfully cold, but I liked it. Everything felt new. I splashed water on my face and neck. I’d washed Corvo, but what about me? Blood had a penchant for getting everywhere. My long coat was badly stained, and blood was crusted beneath my fingernails.

I watched the waves as it carried away the blood, but not the memory of those it once belonged to.

So many dead.

We’d struck a mighty blow against my enemies by sinking the Jessamine, but everyone aboard had died. The men I’d vainly tried to save by knocking unconscious had died. The innocent doctor with shackles around her wrists who had tried to help my father and I had paid with her life.

I feared what their deaths would do to the fabric of the world, that fragile balance between order and chaos.

Dunwall had teetered on the edge of ruin during the Rat Plague. Corvo could have pushed her over,
drowning the city in blood, but instead his choices had brought her back from the edge into prosperity and renewal. I wanted that ending, that bloodless victory when I finally toppled Delilah and restored my rightful place as Empress…

But I feared I was losing control, pushed too far unto a darker path on my journey back to the throne. The truth was, I wanted to kill Delilah. I wanted her blood. How much more blood would be spilled to slake that dark dream? And by who? Corvo the Black? The Whaleborn? My allies. My responsibility. My choices.

*The ripples in the pond, Outsider.*

I missed him. I could admit that, despite everything… I hated that I wouldn’t be able to see his black eyes again until Karnaca. I apparently needed a shrine or a rune to call him from the Void.

*Why do I miss him when he’s right here?*

A broken smile crossed my face as I looked further down the beach.

*Well, a different him.* The Pandyssian. Whaleborn. The man with no name. The man who, on his first day born four thousand years in the future, had already witnessed so much chaos and death.

*Caused so much chaos and death.*

My father had killed eight men, but the Pandyssian had taken ten times that many. He’d saved us—but at great cost. Did he feel that burden? How could he not, pulling at the dead, bringing their bodies to shore?

I slowly walked towards him, my feet sinking into wet sand, the high tide lapping against my legs. I knew I was stalling. I was nervous. There was so much to explain, none of it easy. And it was awkward. Like talking to a stranger and yet feeling like you already knew them.

The Pandyssian was the Outsider, and yet he wasn’t. He wore a familiar face, a god’s, immortal, but his eyes were as human as mine. What had those eyes seen? How was he not at the edge of turmoil? He’d called himself the Sacrifice, had said ‘they held the Knife above me.’ What must it be like to wake up, here, after seeing all that? I couldn’t imagine what he thought of this world—the black sands and the *Jessamine* (a modern marvel) and my rat-eyed father and my Morley giant and the Captain with her ability to pull a man back from the brink of death with magic-blood—and me.

What did he think of me?!

I’d been the hand in the darkness, leading him out of the cave. He trusted me, and he had protected me by calling forth the beast from the Deep to crush my enemies. Why? Was it some strange lingering effect from the Schism? Like a piece of him had shared the Outsider’s concern for me… The same Outsider who had frozen time to stop Corvo from hitting me?

An Outsider who protected me.

Or was it empathy? Or self-preservation? The *Jessamine* had attacked him directly: that missile hitting the beach in warning. These doubts and more churned in my head as I neared the Pandyssian, getting closer and closer.

I couldn’t stall for long.

He had eleven bodies so far, further inland, arranged side-by-side like a mass grave, and was pulling on the arm of a twelfth when he paused in the waves.
His back was turned, but he sensed my approach. I clenched my fist, the Mark singing in my blood. I wondered if he felt it, too, that burning sensation, a tingling aura that intensified the closer I moved to him.

He turned to face me, his eyes glinting so warily that I stopped in my tracks, afraid to move any closer lest he bolt away. He still seemed so jumpy, precariously balanced between the urge to fight or flee. For a heartbeat, he stared at me like I was a stranger, but then the wariness fled his eyes and he returned to his grisly task, pulling on the arm of a dead man. No, dead woman. Her white dress clung to her frail body, soaked through, exposing her sagging breasts.

“Doctor Toksvig!” I cried, slapping through the waves. She was face-down, her gray hair spilling over the water like a fan, her white skullcap long gone.

“Do not touch,” the Pandyssian blurted in warning, wrenching the old woman away from my reaching grasp. “The dead belong to the Angra Mazul.”

I stopped short, breathing hard, my heart torn by regret. The old woman was innocent!

I met his eyes, grief-stricken. “I knew her. She’s not like the others!” I nodded angrily at the dead men along the beach. The traitors. “She’s not like them. She was loyal.”

His green eyes wavered. “I’m sorry, Emily Kaldwin…” His voice hardened. “But you must not touch.”

“Why?”

“Because this is my burden,” he said, his voice cracking. He lifted Doctor Toksvig from the water, her body slumped over his shoulder, his strong arms holding her in place. He looked at me sorrowfully. “I did this. I roused the beast from slumber.”

His eyes warred between guilt and relief—for dead men he didn’t know—for a war he had no clue about. He didn’t know Delilah. Didn’t know I was an Empress who had lost her throne. Didn’t know a great many things.

But he knew death, and he knew he had caused it.

He didn’t recoil from the dead or what he had done. When I looked in his eyes, I saw guilt—and relief for being alive in the end to feel that guilt.

The Pandyssian carried the doctor to shore and I followed. He gently laid her next to the others, folding her hands over her chest and smoothing her hair away from her face.

The doctor stared with vacant eyes.

I shivered violently and knelt in the sand, a respectful distance away, my gaze falling across that long line of bodies. Considering how many had died, it was a small selection.

“She is the last,” the Pandyssian said, rising to his feet and looking back at the waves. “The rest are claimed.”

Only debris scattered the shore. Broken pieces of what had once been the greatest ship in the Royal Fleet.

I watched him draw in the sand, sitting on his heels, his brow furrowed in concentration. The markings he made flowed and shimmered in eerie blue light, forming an intricate design at the feet of
the dead. It reminded me of sheet music. The island’s dark beauty accentuating his.

When he was done, the bodies, as one, sunk into the earth, the sand swallowing them whole. They were gone. The shimmering light died, the drawing in the sand no more than a faint outline in the sun’s shadow. I stared at that empty space—for how long I did not know.

His shadow fell over me, the Mark burning hotter than it had ever been. I looked up at him.

He held out his hand. His sorcery hand.

I took it and he pulled me up—but not softly like I had expected. Instead, he yanked me towards him, powerfully gripping our hands together, the Marks burning as one. His hand was bare, the Mark starkly visible, but mine was hidden beneath black leather wrappings. He couldn’t yet know that I had it, too, but he felt it. I could see it in his eyes.

Those eyes pulled me closer as surely as his hand, their emerald depths swollen with confusion and need, and that lingering awe that had not left his face since exiting that dark cavern below Tempest Island.

“What are we?” he asked, barely a whisper.

“Marked,” I said, breathless against him.

He was hurting me, crushing my fingers in a tight grip, but then he suddenly released me, his face flashing with wide-eyed disbelief. “You hold my name?” he blurted, so incredulous and hurt, like he couldn’t believe I had something so unalterably his. Something he had lost!

Did he think I had stolen his name?

“It’s called the Mark of the Outsider,” I hurriedly explained, unwinding the leather to reveal the Mark on my hand. Side by side with his, it was the same. “Your name is a symbol of divine favor. It means we can draw magic from the Void.”

“Whose divine favor?”

“Yours.”

Terror rippled through him. “My Amonkalahira—is that—”

He couldn’t continue. He looked sick.

“Yes,” I said, “but we call him the Outsider. He watches from the Void, watches with his black eyes.” I wrapped my hand, uncomfortable with it exposed. “I know you have a lot of questions. Frankly, I’m surprised you haven’t hammered me with more questions, but I’ll do my best to answer them. I’m here for you.”

He was shaking his head, fear and anger and confusion building until I thought he might burst.

“You said my name was stolen. Now, you wear my name?”

“Your name was stolen by a witch.”

“A witch?!”

_Damnit, I shouldn’t have mentioned the witch._

“We’ll get your name back, I promise.” I was trying to calm him down, but I felt like I was pushing
him over a cliff. I scrambled, “I’m sorry—”

“Dead men dream,” he said, rolling his head back and looking at me with a slightly crazed look. I wondered if he felt trapped in that dark cave again, if he believed this strange new world really was the underworld. His afterlife.

“You’re not dead,” I said, clutching his arm where he’d been cut open by sharp volcanic glass. “Dead men don’t bleed, remember?”

He winced, the wound too fresh, and shook his head, refusing to believe me. I ran my palms down the length of his arms and took his hands in mine. “You’re not dreaming, either,” I said. “This is real.”

I hated to see him so afraid and confused, and so angry at me, like I had done this to him. His confusion at seeing the Mark on my hand had thrown him off kilter. Did he still trust me?

“It can’t be real,” he hoarsely replied. “I have prayed in the House of Satakal my entire life. I have sat at the feet of the Hooded Ones and learned the ancient secrets of the Maormer, but I have never been able to do that.”

He jerked his head towards the Ocean where the sea monster had crashed over the Jessamine, pulling it beneath the waves. I was speechless.

“You say nothing?”

I tried to think of something plausible. “Maybe it was the Mark. Maybe it amplified your magic somehow.” What else could it be? Hadn’t the Outsider warned me that he’d never done this before, that there might be unforeseen consequences?

He growled at my words, pulling on my hands like he wanted to go, but not knowing where.

I let myself be pulled, following his panic-stricken tugging as he moved a few steps, only to stop short and look back at me like I might show him the way.

“If this is real, Emily Kaldwin, then take me home,” he said, his eyes solemn and searching. “I want to go home.”

Then the question I’d been dreading fell from his lips.

“Where is my home?”

I twisted out of his grasp and turned away, holding myself against the chill. How do I tell a man that his family and everyone he has ever loved is dead and gone? That he can’t go back? Sunlight battled thick, dark clouds, tossing the world between bright sunlight and gloomy shade. I followed the watery horizon, trying to find the words.

He stepped around me, facing me. It was the Outsider’s face, but vulnerable human eyes. I couldn’t lie to him.

“It’s not where,” I finally said. “It’s when.”

I took a deep breath and said, “You died four thousand years ago. You can’t go home because your home is gone.”

He listened, but I saw his eyes shudder like a door had closed. He didn’t believe me. He didn’t
want to believe me. He said, “No… No! This is not my sacred destiny!”

“It’s your new life,” I said, pleading for him to understand, to accept reality.

His eyes turned angry. “I shouldn’t be here! I can’t be here. This… life is an abomination!”

He ran away, bolting across the sand.

I let him go, tears welling in my eyes. The wind sharply gusted, whipping the ends of my ponytail. I covered my mouth with trembling hands, feeling terrible. Did I say too much? The wrong thing? I hated hurting him, but what else could I do? Lie? He had seen the awful truth when the Outsider had looked down on him with black eyes, burning the Mark into his hand. Eventually, he would understand what it all meant. Eventually, he would understand that he had nowhere to go.

I watched him run.

Run nowhere.

I turned away, walking the beach, trying to push him out of my mind. I understood his need to run, to get away. Had I not done the same exact thing when I used to escape the Tower at night, running along the rooftops?

I followed the water’s edge towards a spattering of rocks. This side of the island was different than the north, the shoreline curving with jutting rock formations that arched like rainbows over the water. It was breathtakingly beautiful. I spotted a ring of stones that had grabbed pieces of the Jessamine like a watery vortex, the wreckage all bunched up in one tangled-up mass in the middle. I climbed closer to see if anything might be salvageable.

The largest pieces looked surprisingly intact. Balancing at the edge of a large stone, I realized it was the skiff—the actual skiff the Fletchers had stolen from the Jessamine—but it was capsized! The wooden hull was scratched up, but it looked seaworthy. How was I going to get it out of there? It wasn’t exactly massive—for a skiff—but it weighed too much for one woman to pull alone.

But one woman with magic? I bit my lip in concentration, trying to snag my arcane tether around the bulky object.

Maybe I could fling it towards me…

My scream turned to laughter as the skiff went flying in the air, twisting madly like a giant hand had tossed a coin. I ducked as it sailed over my head, landing in a big splash, right-side up, in the water rushing to shore as the tide moved in with a big crashing wave. I used Far Reach again, leaping inside the skiff before it got away, the tide rushing back out.

I dove over the controls, mumbling, “Please still be working, please still be working…” The small engine roared to life and I laughed. Yes! Maybe this can help us.

I had to tell the Captain.

The skiff wasn’t exactly an ocean-faring vessel, but it was powered by whale oil. It could go much further and faster than Meagan’s manual rowboat.

I maneuvered the vessel until I was pointed towards the Dreadful Wale, then hit the throttle once I drifted into deeper waters. The skiff raced across the waves, the wind in my face. It felt good. I looked down, feeling something wedged under my foot. In disbelief, I grabbed the hilt, flicking out my father’s folding sword in one practiced motion, the length of the blade unraveling in a silver blur.
“Outsider in the Void,” I breathed, utterly shocked. I took it as a good omen and folded it back, sliding the sword into my belt holster. I felt whole again, strangely enough.

I found two more swords under the bench (weapons from the men that had died on the beach, I assumed), and felt grateful. Stranded on the island, we had nothing but what we could find.

Half-way to the Dreadful Wale, I spotted Dougal returning on his second round-trip, the rowboat weighed down with cargo, along with Eileen and the Princess. Rosemary was noticeably absent. I drifted side-by-side with him as we passed.

“Your Highness!” Dougal cried, grinning ear to ear. “I see you found the skiff!”

“And recovered my father’s sword.”

“And here I thought the sea monster was going to use it as a fancy toothpick.”

Eileen elbowed him hard, then gave me a sweet, heartening look. “Your Highness,” she said. “We are so pleased Lord Corvo pulled through. My husband told me how close it had been.”

“Thank you,” I said, glancing over the shoreline where Corvo was resting like a beached seal, warming bare-chested in the sun. I nodded at the Princess and smiled at them. “I’m glad you all made it.” I leaned under the bench and pulled out one of the swords, handing it to Dougal, hilt-first. He accepted it with a grim face. “Just in case,” I said. “See you back onshore. I’m going to speak with the Captain.”

“Your Highness,” Dougal nodded. “I’ll be back for another trip to grab Rosemary and whatever else I can fit.” He gripped the oars and pulled away in a mighty stroke.

I docked with the Dreadful Wale, disturbed by how high the water lapped against its metal hull. The square hatches we had used on that first night we’d boarded were completely underwater. I climbed over the railing, glancing at the smoldering hole the missile had left in the protective plating. It didn’t look pretty.

I headed inside and down the stairwell, confronted by the out-of-place sounds of water inside the ship. It had a strangely echoing quality. Emergency lights were flickering in the dark.

Meagan was inside the engine room, waist-deep in cold water and swearing profusely as she tried turning a gigantic red-colored valve. “Can I help?” I asked, wading through the water to reach her.

She looked at me, wiping her brow. “On three,” she said, moving to the side to make room for me. “One, two, three!” She grunted noisily as we budged the stubborn valve until it released, spinning wildly in a rush of water through the connecting pipe.

She wiped her brow, sighing. “There. The pressure should stabilize, now.”

Her dark eyes panned over me. “What’s with the grin?”

“I found the skiff, Meagan. There’s almost a full tank of whale oil left in her. I was thinking we could use it to get off the island.”

“Not all of us,” Meagan said, wading through the water to inspect a chugging machine further back.

She suddenly looked at me, her dark eyes flickering.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, holding my arms above the water. I wasn’t happy about getting
my pants soaked through again, but after a day like today, discomfort was inevitable.

“Glory Point,” she said hesitantly.

“The smugglers’ cove?”

“It’s far, but not too far if we keep the skiff light. Just one person.” Her eyes steadied. “Emily, I should be the one to go. I know people there who can quickly repair the Dreadful Wale and stay quiet about it.”

“But what about the water pump? Did you get it working?”

“I did. I thought Anton broke the damn thing but turns out his tinkering made it better. It’ll keep the ship afloat until I get back.” She waded towards the stairwell and I followed. “I can hire a ship to tow us back to Glory Point. All sorts of ships typically dock there. Whalers. Pirates. For the right coin, they’ll do it with no questions asked.”

“Sounds like our best chance. Take whatever gold the Prince gave us—whatever you need,” I said, pausing on the stairwell as she turned back to look at me with worried eyes. “What? This is good news, Meagan. I’m glad your ship has a chance, now. I’m sorry it got this bad.”

“Me, too,” she said, lowering her gaze to hide the look in her eyes. Maybe she didn’t want me to see how important the ship was to her. “Alright. I’ll gather what I need and leave first thing. I should be back by morning with the tow ship.”

“Good luck.”

“And Emily?”

“Yes?”

“You’ll find Rosemary in my secret room,” she said, clearly hating the word, but going along with it for brevity’s sake. She handed me a key. “Dougal felt we had to keep her locked up during the attack and the brig was flooding so…”

“I’ll get her,” I said, accepting the key with a lump in my throat. “Thank you.”

“The water pump might still fail. Don’t spend the night here,” she warned. “I don’t envy you—the island is haunted—but right now it’s safer for everyone to make camp.”

It’s not haunted, I thought. It’s just close to the Void, two worlds overlapping in a dark cavern beneath the island.

“I understand. Thank you, Meagan. We’ll see you in the morning.”

As she walked away, I felt the sting of unease. I was putting a lot of trust in her. If she didn’t come back, eventually Delilah would. The witch knew where we were, now. I could only pray that she’d been totally blindsided, that never in her wildest dreams would she have thought the Jessamine would fail her and so hadn’t prepared a contingency plan. Delilah would have to scramble, and any ships she’d eventually send would be significantly slower.

Delilah wouldn’t give up. That was the point.

I had to get used to the feeling of always being on the run, of looking behind me in fear and apprehension. Until I reclaimed my throne and destroyed her, Delilah would always be a threat.
I entered the cargo bay, startled by the mess. Everything looked out of sorts, like Dougal and the others had packed in a hurry. I went to Sokolov’s old quarters and found the rucksack I remembered seeing stuffed in a corner. Inside I found my father’s Mask from the time of the Rat Plague, Samuel’s little toy skiff, a whalebone comb, and Rosemary’s bright red party dress from the Sunset Regalia. I went back to the small cabin where my father usually slept, grabbing the weapons I’d unwisely left behind. My crossbow. The pistol. Extra ammo for both went inside the rucksack, and the stun mines.

Now, it was just Rosemary to grab.

Standing at the door to the secret room, I heard music. A sad violin. I fitted the key and turned the lock, slowly opening the door. At the movement, the music ceased.

“Emily!” She dove into my arms, hugging me fiercely. “I thought you were dead! I thought we were all as good as dead!”

“Are you okay?” I asked, backing away to look at her. Her clothes were damp and her hair was a frightful mess. “Did you almost drown?”

“Yes, but I had the idea to possess one of the rats! They’re all over the engine room, you know, and when one floated between the bars into my brig, I grabbed its tail and entered its little body. Oh, Emily, they’re amazing swimmers!”

“That was good thinking.”

“I kept the rat,” she said, opening one of the desk drawers—the tiny room only had a desk, chair, and audiogram machine. She exclaimed in delight as a white, little rat looked up at us, its little nose twitching. She scooped it up into her palm and nuzzled it against her cheek.

I was astonished. “You want to keep the rat?”

“Why not? I’m alive because of her.” She gave me a curious look. “Emily, I heard Dougal talking about a sea monster, of all things. What in the Void is going on out there?”

“I’ll tell you on the way.”

I waited for her to grab the violin, but I found myself hesitating at the threshold. The room looked picked clean.

“What is it, Emily?”

“Did you see Meagan take anything out of this room before they locked you up in here?”

Rosemary absently stroked the little rat’s head, thinking. The creature looked like it was dozing in her hand, utterly contented. “Yes, actually. A wicked-looking sword. Oh, and a punch card for the audiogram machine. I saw her tuck it away inside her jacket.”

“Really?”

She studied my face with big, blue eyes. “Do you think it’s a secret recording of something horrible? I can try to steal it for you, if you want.” She nosed the little rat, making a cute face. “I can use Little Lucinda. We can crawl straight up into Meagan’s jacket and grab it!”

“Lucinda?” I blurted, my heart jumping. “You named the rat Lucinda?”
“Yes. I remembered it from somewhere. Why?”

I thought of the writhing witch in Delilah’s arms, pleasing her on the bed in the Void. Dark-hair, dark-eyed. Mocking me. Laughing at me. Moaning like a whore as her face flushed.

Delilah had called her Lucinda.

“Pick a different name,” I said coldly, widening the door and pointing for her to go in front.

I wasn’t giving her my back.
The smell of food drew him back. The Pandyssian was like a lone wolf, edging closer to our circle of light with gleaming, hungry eyes, but afraid to join us around the campfire.

We had a big fire going, fed by pieces of the *Jessamine*. The wood crackled and spit, and above the fire, Eileen had an iron cauldron bubbling with fish stew. I was standing next to her, accepting a generous ladle into my bowl, when I heard the easy murmur of our camp dwindle into silence, eyes turning outwards to watch the Pandyssian’s wary approach.

I lost all awareness of what I was doing—my eyes fixated on his face as he held the coat tighter against the chill, the wind ruffling his black hair. My heart swelled at the sight of him. He’d been missing for hours.

The sun was setting, red blazes of cloud and sky stretching over the dark obsidian cliffs, the black sands swallowing the dying light. The scent of an approaching storm was in the air, heavy and charged, but as yet the threatening clouds held their burden, rolling thunder-less across the sky.

“Empress, your father is calling you.”

It was Eileen’s voice. For a moment, I just stared blankly at her face.

“Your Highness?” she said with an overly bright smile, wiping her hands on her apron. I glanced down, suddenly remembering my bowl. It was filled, the surface shimmering with spicy oil.

The little Morley woman turned away from me as Dougal fell over her like a rockslide down a mountain, thrusting an empty bowl into her hands as he hugged her from behind and kissed the top of her head. She barely reached the center of his chest, their heights quite disparate.

But she smiled up at him, enjoying his weighty affections. She filled his bowl and said, “Best bring it to the boy so he knows he’s welcome.” She gave the fish stew one final stir before tapping the metal spoon against the rim and setting it down on the rocks below. That bowl was for him?

I blurted, “I could—”

“Emily.”

My protestations cut short, I reluctantly turned towards my father, belatedly realizing it wasn’t the first time he’d called me.

His rat eyes were laced with annoyance. “Let Dougal handle it.”

“But—”

“Sit down.”

Corvo motioned to the spot beside him; he was seated on pale driftwood, bleached from the sun. I obeyed—to a point. I set down my bowl on the driftwood and sat in the sand, my legs splayed
sideways. I gave him a hard look when he just glared down at me.

“He trusts me. I should be the one to—”

“Oh, he trusts you, does he?” Corvo scoffed, jabbing into his stew. “He doesn’t know you. He barely knows himself.”

Corvo had his knees spread wide, his bowl balanced between his hands as he ate with a hearty appetite that made believe he was past the worst of it. He was disconnected from the drip, free to move around again, though his injuries would need gentle care and time to heal. Piero’s Plasma had replaced the blood he’d lost and Sokolov’s Elixir had filled his wounds, sealing them without the need for stitches, but his dark mood was as troublesome as ever. What could cure that but the reversal of whatever foul spell Delilah had cast over him?

“He knows me,” I muttered under my breath, staring across the fire as Dougal snatched a pair of pants from cargo laboriously hauled from the Dreadful Wale to ease our night on Tempest Island. Our supplies included feather pillows and wool blankets spread over the sand in lumpy waves. Canvas tents waited to be pitched in case it rained.

Dougal left our circle of light with said pants and steaming bowl of fish stew.

I watched the Pandysüian shrink back in the wake of such a giant man striding towards him, but Dougal was anything but frightening if you gave him a chance.

He was a gentle giant.

Dougal spoke softly—what I couldn’t hear exactly—as he handed over the pants and patiently waited, his free hand holding up the stew like a promised reward for dressing.

To my astonishment, the Pandysüian didn’t run. He must be very hungry, I thought. I was suddenly very thankful the island was so barren; no fresh water, no easy sources of food—if the Pandysüian wanted to live, he needed us.

A part of him wants to live, I told myself, cheering for his courage, for the part of him that was rising above his anger and resentment.

‘I shouldn’t be here!’

His voice echoed in my mind, stirring the memory of his face contorted in disgust and denial. He’d called his new life an abomination. The miracle of his reincarnation was an affront to his Amonkalahirà, his sacred destiny. His death had been a Sacrifice, but for what?

He was supposed to become the Outsider—in a different life, he had—but not this one.

Not this life.

Thrust four thousand years into the future, he was wading into uncharted waters, totally unprepared for a life he never could have imagined in a world he had no knowledge of.

His people, a forgotten tribe of Pandysüia with ancient blood ties to the Maormer, were gone. He was alone.

Except for us.

Strangers in the sand. Foreigners with strange customs. He could speak the common tongue, thanks
to the Mark, but that didn’t mean he belonged.

With Dougal towering over him, seven feet of muscle and brawn, the Pandyssian looked small, lost inside my father’s oversized coat, his pale legs poking out like wiry tree stumps. His hungry eyes burned—that was the last I saw of his face. The Morley giant moved in front of him, blocking my view as the Pandyssian fumbled with the pants, clearly unsure what to do.

“Friggin’ barbarians,” Corvo mumbled under his breath.

“Give him a chance,” I retorted, meanwhile staring at Dougal’s back, still blocking my view. I glimpsed a poking leg with cloth flopping at the end.

Corvo snorted in derision at my suggestion.

I snapped, “He’s not stupid; he’s just different. He’s not used to how things are. When was the last time you thought about our modern conveniences? Our way of life? Things are changing fast. Half the time I don’t know what is going on.”

When Corvo just shook his head, returning to his bowl, I glared at him. “You know, I thought you had an ounce of respect for him after we found ourselves on the beach—rescued! That sea monster was his doing.”

“I’m grateful, Emily,” he said, glaring back at me with rat eyes that made me waver where his didn’t. He was steadfast in his hatred for the Outsider. “But that doesn’t mean I trust him—or your reasons for bringing him into this.”

I broke the stare, too angry to look at him.

He nudged my leg with his foot, forcing me to look back at him. “Emily, I don’t think he’s stupid. I think he’s lost. That makes him unpredictable. Dangerous. That kid is the Outsider. Don’t believe for a second that the Void corrupted him. He corrupted the Void.”

“What? You’re making that up. You don’t know—”

Dougal moved, striding back towards our campfire. I snapped my eyes over the Pandyssian, drinking in the sight of him clothed for the first time. He walked funny. He was a few steps behind Dougal, rolling an awkward gait like he was unused to the feeling of trousers hiking up between his legs. I stared from ankle to crotch, up the narrow slip of his bare chest visible through the open coat, to his face, lit by the campfire’s flames.

The Outsider’s face with human eyes. It still made me gasp and do a double take.

He held his bowl of stew with two hands, close to his chest like he was afraid someone might take it away.

Dougal returned to his wife, leaving the Pandyssian with the uncomfortable task of deciding where he should sit down.

I was, of course, in one spot with my father. Opposite of us, Dougal and Eileen had a lumpy blanket spread over the sand, but as yet neither were occupying it. Eileen was an industrious sort, always busy with her hands, helpful and watchful like a good servant. Her blonde hair was pasted to her sweaty brow as she carried two bowls to Princess Katya and Rosemary.

The two had resumed their friendship as if nothing untoward had happened. The Princess didn’t seem to care that she was laughing and smiling with Delilah’s daughter and Rosemary, in turn, acted
like she didn’t feel the dagger looks my father shot her whenever his rat eyes had cause to check on his hostage.

My Royal Protector was unhappy with Rosemary’s presence, but allowed for it on the condition that, once night fell, Rosemary would be returned to the Dreadful Wale and locked up in Meagan’s secret room. He didn’t care if the ship might sink—those were his terms. Rosemary had accepted it, avoiding my father’s hateful eyes as she tenderly stroked her little white rat.

Missy (newly named) was enjoying a bit of carrot, nibbling her treat in Rosemary’s lap.

So it was that Rosemary sat in the sands while the Princess sat sideways on a hammock, the long cloth tied between two wooden stakes. She was bundled up in her fur-lined robes, looking quite pleased to be on solid ground again. She was easily the happiest in our group, sharing her delight at our good fortune—the Jessamine destroyed—and the unexpected good news that Meagan could save the Dreadful Wale by seeking help in nearby Glory Point. The Princess felt we were one step closer to rescuing her father, Anton Sokolov, and setting the world to right.

The Princess’ good mood had infected our small camp in little waves of happy smiles and light banter—everyone except Corvo—and even I couldn’t help but feel lighter of heart.

“It’s the brush with death,” Princess Katya had said, rubbing her pregnant belly. “We remember to truly live before it’s all gone.”

Truly, it was the shock of surviving, the high from looking Death in the face and coming out the other end. We were riding the coattails of exhilaration—but I couldn’t help but fear that future moment when our fingers would slip and reality would come crashing back. We’d destroyed the Jessamine, but Delilah was still out there and she knew exactly where we were. It was dangerous lingering on Tempest Island, but we had little choice. Until Meagan returned with a tow ship, the Dreadful Wale was dead in the water.

As the Princess accepted the bowl from Eileen with a thankful smile, I eyed Rosemary with a creeping sense of unease.

The beautiful witchling seemed more interested in the Pandyssian’s unexpected arrival than Eileen’s offer of fish stew. Eileen was forced to place the bowl on the sand as Rosemary was too absorbed in staring at the Pandyssian to hold out a hand. She gaped in wonder at him, her eyes choked with worshipful adoration. Clearly, she recognized his face as the Outsider’s.

I looked to the Pandyssian as he hesitated at the edge of our circle of light, grasping for a place he might belong.

I held my breath as his eyes skirted from face to face before landing on me. Staying on me. An anchor of familiarity. I leapt to my feet—ignoring Corvo’s annoyed outburst—and headed to the piece of driftwood in an unoccupied space where we might sit alone together, my insistent eyes offering the only encouragement he needed. The Pandyssian followed me and sat down on the wood beside me, his eyes darting towards my father—if only because Corvo was openly glaring at him.

Rosemary reacted to this development by shooting to her feet like she wanted to join us. The white rat tumbled from her lap and ran towards her stew on the ground, lifting its front paws to pull itself over the rim and investigate with a twitching nose.

But before Rosemary could take one step forward, Corvo suddenly boomed, “Don’t you fucking test me, Witch-spawn!”
His angry voice silenced the entire camp, drawing eyes to his face.

Corvo was standing, a dark silhouette against the setting sun, his fists clenched at his sides. His rat eyes bored into her. He said, “You’re still my hostage and this”—he pointed at the campfire—“is more than you deserve.”

He glanced sharply at Dougal. “Agent Walsh, she either stays down or she goes back to the ship.”

“Yes, Lord Corvo,” Dougal said with a grim face, stepping towards Rosemary, but there was no need. She had sat back down, cowering beneath Corvo’s withering stare. Her face was as pale as death, but I couldn’t find it in my heart to feel sorry for her. I didn’t like the way she had looked at the Pandyssian.

He wasn’t a thing to be worshipped.

Princess Katya put a comforting hand on her shoulder, but Rosemary didn’t seem to feel it. She scooped up her little white rat and cuddled it against her cheek, staring fearfully at Corvo like he was a monster.

Satisfied, my father sat back down on the piece of driftwood. I noticed he was hiding a grimace, his hand clutched to his side over the nasty sword wound. He was still bare-chested, his waistcoat too tattered to salvage. A tiny bit of blood had seeped from the corner of his wound.

Alarmed, I blurted, “You should lie down, Father. All this moving and shouting is not good for you.”

“I’m fine.”

You’re not fine, you stubborn fool.

I glanced at the Pandyssian. He looked torn between the urge to devour his meal or stare openly at my father. Right now, the stare was winning—if only out of instinctual fear that Corvo might turn that rage on him.

“He won’t hurt you,” I said, lightly touching his arm to grab his attention. I won’t let him.

He turned his head to look at me, his emerald eyes searching my face. “Is he really your father?”

He sounded incredulous, like I couldn’t possibly have come from a man with such inhuman eyes. Corvo had the beady-eyed stare of a plague rat, hungry for blood in the dark alleyways of a rotting Dunwall.

“Yes, he’s my father,” I said, looking back at Corvo as if through the Pandyssian’s eyes. That demon from the underworld is my blood. I took a spoonful of stew, absently chewing. “You can call him Corvo or”—I hesitated, unsure how to explain my father’s court title when I hadn’t yet told him I was an Empress—“Lord Protector. That’s fine, too.”

“A father protects his daughter,” the Pandyssian stated—like this was fact—and though not entirely reassured, he was hungry enough to finally ignore my father’s dark stare and dig into his bowl by bringing the wooden rim up to his mouth and slurp it down at a ravenous pace. The rest of us were using spoons, but he didn’t seem to notice or care.

Eileen stood up on cue, moving to take his empty bowl as soon as it came away from his mouth. He hungrily stared after her as she refilled his bowl at the cauldron and returned it, only to watch him devour a second helping as though he might like a third.
Eileen was delighted by his appetite. “I take it you like my cooking, young master…?”

I realized she was looking for a name, but the Pandyssian just smiled back at her, awkwardly mirroring her expression.

“Everyone does, love,” Dougal said as Eileen waited for an answer that I knew would never come. “You’re the best cook in the Isles.”

Eileen blushed and allowed herself to be grabbed around the waist and pulled unto his lap. She looked so small against him as he gave his wife a chaste kiss on the lips.

The Pandyssian paused, watching this meeting of lips with wide-eyed perplexity. Did his people not kiss?

According to Anton Sokolov, romantic kissing wasn’t a universal human behavior; some cultures didn’t do it. I thought it sad. Unbidden, my eyes fell to his lips. I recalled Delilah’s kiss of death, the bruises that had blemished the Outsider’s lips in black and blue and green. The Pandyssian’s were pale and parched. Surrounded by ocean, the only drinking water available was from the Dreadful Wale.

“Are you thirsty?” I asked him, quickly lowering my gaze. I didn’t want him catching me staring at his lips. Thankfully, he was busy with his meal.

He made an indeterminate noise which I took for a Yes. I glanced at Eileen—the only command I needed to give—and she brought over a canteen of water.

“Empress,” she said in deference, handing me the canteen. I passed it to his hands, our fingers touching.

He gave me an odd, searching look, his brows furrowing at the mention of ‘Empress.’

The Princess suddenly spoke up, dragging our eyes away from each other. “I know. Why don’t we tell some stories around the fire,” she suggested, curls of dark jet framing her smile. “It’s turning into a beautiful night. A hint of rain, perhaps, but I think we can hold off the gods of thunder with an interesting story or two. How about it? Anyone want to go first?”

At first, no one responded, but I knew Rosemary would jump at the chance. I glanced at her, watching her face light up like fireworks. She loved to sing and dance, and after being locked up for so long, I imagined she was itching to play for an audience.

“I can start us off with a song,” Rosemary said, reaching for her violin. She rose to her knees (glancing at Corvo that this was permitted; it was) and brought up the exquisite instrument to nestle beneath her chin, her body moving like she’d been born with a violin between her hands.

The white rat curled in the sand between her knees, dozing peacefully with her belly full.

Rosemary’s eyes met mine across the flames. “I wrote this melody for you, Empress, though I haven’t yet found the words to accompany it.”

In the Tower, Rosemary had played for me countless times, writing new songs nearly every week. I knew she often ‘found’ melodies first, and then later wrote lyrics based on what she felt the music was ‘telling her.’ I suddenly wondered if such melodies were echoes of her secretive past, pieces of music only half-remembered.

It was painful to listen to her music, now, the warmth of our friendship crushed beneath suspicion
and lies. I could find no solace in her song, the feeling made worse when I realized the Pandyssian was watching her performance open-mouthed, enraptured by the sounds of the violin.

I was jealous, the ugly emotion making me wish Rosemary would hurry up and finish already.

She finally did. The Princess clapped, and Eileen, too, but the rest of us were silent. The Pandyssian watched the clapping with consternation. Another strange custom.

“Lovely, Rosemary,” the Princess said. “A perfect start. Who’s next?” She gave Corvo a daring look. “Lord Protector? I’m sure you have an interesting story or two.”

Dougal snorted, covering his mouth.

“None for polite company,” Corvo dryly responded.

I looked at him, an ache in my heart. He still hadn’t told me the entirety of what had happened during the Rat Plague. Over the last fifteen years, I’d learned bits and pieces, a shallow gray that barely hinted at the darkness beneath. He had saved lives, bloodlessly reaping revenge on his enemies, but that didn’t mean he’d escaped unscathed.

If anything, the bloodless route had been more ruthless, justice disguised as mercy. I wondered how Corvo the Black had forgotten this—how his twisted mind could crave blood and death so stubbornly that he wanted nothing less, the temptation of prolonged suffering weighed against the satisfaction of taking life in a rage of bloodlust, to pile up the bodies, innocent or otherwise, and stand at the top.

“I have a story.”

I glanced sharply at the Pandyssian, surprised he had spoken up. The traces of timidity had fled his face, and he looked less like the lone wolf that had hesitantly entered our circle of light and more like the man who had taken my hand in the darkness, confidently leading me out of the cave beneath Tempest Island.

“Excellent,” the Princess said with an encouraging smile. “We’d love to hear it.”

The Pandyssian’s lips twitched into a half-smile. “It’s about a rat.”

As if by magic, the white rat at Rosemary’s feet uncurled from its sleeping position and scampered across the sand, jumping right into his ready palm. Rosemary made an alarmed sound, almost jerking to her feet, but my father’s sharp glance held her down.

Rosemary’s blue eyes pivoted from the rat to the Pandyssian in wonder. “She likes you.”

He smiled, raising his hand with its little passenger. The rat jumped to his shoulder and scurried up his neck, little nails digging through his hair. The rat proudly twitched its nose as it balanced on hind legs before sitting down on the Pandyssian’s head, quite content with its new perch.

“What a peculiar rat!” the Princess exclaimed.

His smile faded and silence stretched around our campfire. Emerald eyes stared into flames.

He began his story with a slightly dazed look, like a part of him still couldn’t believe this was real. One foot in the past, the other forging into unknown territory. Forging bravely, I thought, giving him my full attention.
“Thousands of years ago, a little elven boy was born with eyes of the purest black. He was different than the others, for all Maormer were born with eyes of the purest white. The people were afraid of him and killed his mother and father, lest they breed another abomination, but the child was not killed, instead thrown to the streets to be mocked and scorned for the rest of his days. Why, you ask? Why not grant the child a merciful death? Because his parents had hid him for years. He was ten years old when he was found out. He had tricked his parents, they believed, and now must pay the price for their deaths. Their blood was on his hands, they said, not theirs.

“For many years he wandered the darkest alleyways of the most ancient of cities, knowing only fear and loneliness. He slept in the gutter and his only friend was a white rat that he kept in the tattered folds of his robe.

“One dark night, when the moon eclipsed the sun and a shooting star graced the heavens, he found a puddle of water and fell to his knees, leaning over to drink his fill. It was then he saw his reflection, eyes of the purest black dancing in the water. Those eyes were redemption, for his belly filled with water and his heart with courage. Why, you ask? Because those eyes held secrets, and for the first time in his life, he saw the truth of who he was.

“When next his tormenters came to hurt him in the night, he called forth a swarm of rats to devour them. Over and over, the rats obeyed his command, feasting in the alleyways, turning his enemies into gnawed, little bones that cracked when he walked over them.

“At night, he dreamed. He saw the Great City of Aldmeris fall into the sea, the waters of the Angra Mazul crashing against stone. The Maormer were creatures of water and wind; they should not be building cities of stone and wood. He told this to the elders, but they would not listen. Those that followed him lived, and those that stayed behind were fed upon by rats. They swarmed the city in massive numbers, like a tidal wave of Death until nothing remained.

“But one rat survived. The white rat. His first friend. His only friend. People followed him out of the city before its destruction, but they did so out of fear, not love.

“Only the rat loved him, and as they wandered the jungles of Pandyssia, homeless, but alive, the white rat grew hungry, a Sacrifice required. There was only one way to slake the rat’s thirst, to feed his belly. The elven boy with black eyes let his little friend bite his finger. In that moment, the plague of poison swept through his veins until he laid dying, writhing in agony, blood weeping from his eyes as the rat feasted on his flesh.

“Only with his death did the people love him. They called him King Orgnum, the Undying, and he watched them from the Void. Watched with his black eyes. He thanked the little white rat for allowing him a taste of love in his short life, and a taste of living without fear and loneliness.”

With that, the Pandyssian ended his story abruptly, picking the white rat from his head and letting it go. It scurried across the sands and returned to Rosemary’s hands. She scooped up the rat and held it against her cheek, her blue eyes caught between bewilderment and awe.

The Princess clapped—more out of politeness than anything. Everyone looked quite stunned.

I glanced uneasily at Corvo, wondering if he was thinking what I was thinking.

The story was eerily familiar.

It sounded like a remaking of a tale first told in the aftermath of the Rat Plague to explain how the plague first started. People blamed the Outsider, and the Overseers spread the tale that it was his fault. Over time, the tale twisted into more fanciful versions such as The Lonely Rat Boy, The Hand
that Feeds.

(In reality, I knew Hiram Burrows had released swarms of infected Pandyssian bull rats into the city to ‘cure poverty,’ believing he could contain the rats lest they pour into wealthier districts. His reckless arrogance doomed thousands.)

The similarities were stark, but so were the differences. In the Dunwall tale, the Outsider had found the orphaned boy in the alleyway, granting him powers to destroy his tormentors with swarms of infected rats. One of his own rats had indeed bitten the boy, and before he died—in agony—he thanked the Outsider for giving him the gift of living without fear, if only for a short while.

I’d always hated that part. Such agony and fear, and yet to thank the Outsider… It was twisted love.

I shivered in the night, glancing at the Pandyssian. *But his story can’t be a remaking,* I thought. He had lived four thousand years *before* the Rat Plague…

“Where did you learn the story?” I asked.

He turned his head to look at me, his green eyes flooded with sadness. “My mother… she was a Seer. She saw into our past—my people’s past.” He splayed his palm, touching his wrist, the blue veins translucent against his pale skin. “The blood of King Orgnum, the Undying, flows through my veins. He was the First Sacrifice.”

*The First Outsider,* I thought.

I recalled the Outsider relating the tale in the sacred cavern below Tempest Island when he’d first told me about the Maormer and the destruction of Aldmeris.

The Pandyssian lifted his eyes, somber and fire-flecked, half his face shadowed by the fall of night.

“And she saw into the future.”

My heart raced as I chewed over the implications, the bowl of fish stew lying cold in my hands, uneaten. His story of the Rat Boy, of the elven child with black eyes who became the First Outsider, was itself a twisted prophecy of the Rat Plague *four thousand years* before it happened.

It was disturbing to say the least.

“I think that’s enough for one night,” Corvo said, glaring at the Pandyssian like he wanted to call forth his own swarm of rats to eat him alive. Strangely enough, that had been one of the powers the Outsider had granted Corvo long ago.

*Rat Swarm.*

I didn’t much care to wonder if Corvo had ever used it. The point was, the Outsider had granted it.

*The Outsider’s gifts are both virtue and vice,* I thought. Looking at the Pandyssian, his life granted by the whales, the Outsider’s dying wish, I wondered which was he.
Chapter Notes

Surprise! This chapter breaks POV. I love writing Emily in First Person, but the story needs a wider angle for where I want it to go. For these POV breaks, I’ll use Third Person to keep the distinction. The main story is still Emily’s, but other events are happening without her awareness.

Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 40

Meagan reached Glory Point at sundown. The smugglers’ cove was bustling in the dying light, the docks crawling with contraband and illicit goods. As black markets went, Glory Point was smaller than most, but its prime location—the middle of nowhere along the western fringe of the Pyandonea Archipelago—made the island particularly attractive to buyers and sellers with an impulse towards privacy.

She docked the skiff along the ratty pier, taking note of the other ships in the vicinity. A handful were too small—sleek pirate ships made for speed—but there was an iron-black whaling ship that looked promising. It already had a catch, a live whale suspended in a giant harness, but Meagan thought—for the right price—it would make a small detour to tow the Dreadful Wale back to Glory Point. The Empress had given her gold, but Meagan knew it wasn’t enough. Pirate promises didn’t come cheap.

She needed help.

And the man to help her… Well, that was another reason Meagan knew she had to come alone.

Meagan disembarked, flipping a coin at a docker to keep an eye on her skiff as she headed into the mountain.

Literally into.

Glory Point was deceivingly large, its belly hidden in the folds of a mountain where water ran through a cleft to open into a cavernous space where the black market conducted most of its clandestine activities. Inside, wooden structures were built above the water, connected by a maze of bridges. Higher up, tunnels had been dug through the rock, leading to secretive dwellings further inside the island.

It was to one of these tunnels that Meagan went, pausing at the entrance when a lookout held out his hand, giving her a mouthful. “Cap’n? What’d you doin’ back? The boss ain’t gonna be happy.”

“The boss ain’t never happy.”

The pirate gave her a toothless grin. “He’s up there, if you want to test your luck.”
“I will.” She tried to step past him, but he held out a hand, dangling a black sack in front of her.

“You know the drill.”

Meagan scowled and shoved her head into it. The old man led her into the tunnel system, and though she was blinded she knew exactly where to go. Left. Left. Right… She’d memorized the route the last time she was here. He even tried spinning her at one point, but the sound of crashing waves and squawking seagulls told her what her eyes couldn’t.

She was finally in his chamber.

The old pirate snatched the black sack from her head and left them alone. Meagan squinted, adjusting to the flood of light. The cavernous chamber was hollowed out from the cliff-face, one side open to the elements. The setting sun was nearly lost behind rolling storm clouds, and in the distance Meagan could pick out a faint outline where Tempest Island should be.

Rocky walls sheltered the single inhabitant from rain and wind. He had a bed in a deep groove, like a coffin slotted into the rock wall with a simple pillow and blanket. A broken mirror leaned against the rock. The rest of the space was empty but for a burn barrel and a desk made of wood. An audiogram machine sat in one corner and Daud on the other.

He was slumped against the desk with his arms crossed, his biceps bulging beneath his chalky blue coat. He looked at her with impassive, flint-gray eyes before moving away from the desk to stand in front of the burn barrel. He warmed his hands, the flames illuminating the prominent scar on the right side of his face.

He stared into the flames. “I thought I told you I never wanted to see you again.”

His voice was deep and resonant, and held the power to throw Meagan deep into her past, so far back she felt like she was Billie again, standing before the master assassin at his beck and call.

She’d been his enforcer. Daud’s right hand.

*His favorite*, Thomas would tease when jealousy roiled through the Whalers, especially among the newest recruits. It meant nothing, now. Just dark memories at the bottom of Meagan’s heart, her new life built over the ashes.

She said, “I need your help.”

“Again?”

The question came out flat with no hint of surprise. Meagan tried to hide her irritation. Accepting handouts was against her nature. She’d fought tooth and nail for what was hers. It was partly why Daud had chosen her, raising her from the squalor of the streets and honing her into one of his deadliest assassins.

“Delilah turned out to be a greater threat than we predicted,” she said. “She’s immortal.”

He didn’t respond right away. She was used to the long pauses. Daud was not a man to be rushed.

“Did Corvo make it out?” he rasped in grating tones dangerously close to curiosity.

“And the Empress. Thanks to your pirate ships, we got out of Dunwall, but an unexpected mutiny aboard the *Jessamine* turned the flagship against us. We’ve been on the run for days.”
Daud whistled. “Then I’m surprised you’re not dead.”

“I am, too, but Emily has unique allies. I’ve never seen anyone like him, this whaleborn. He sunk the flagship with… I don’t know, a Possession spell or something. He controlled an sea monster, I shit you not.” She snorted in disbelief. “It was… Void, you’d have to be there to believe it, Daud. It was—”

Realizing she was rambling, she cut herself short and glared out over the Ocean.

“Point is, the Dreadful Wale is dead in the water. I need a tow and a fix.”

He lifted his steely eyes, fixing her with a direct look beneath a heavy brow furrowed in incredulity. “Whaleborn?”

She shrugged. “Some kid. Gives me the creeps.”

His voice lowered to a deadly cadence. “The pirate attack was supposed to be my only involvement, Meagan. I’m out.” He turned away from the burn barrel and faced the Ocean. “Let Corvo handle Delilah.”

He was dismissing her. Meagan couldn’t let that happen.

“Daud,” she said, lurching forward. “Please listen to me.” A step closer. Two. Three. Not too close. More than time divided them. Her betrayal was a deep chasm that could never be bridged.

He had let her go, let her live.

Exiled from the only home she’d ever known, she never thought to see him again, but Delilah’s rise to power had thrown their neatly separated lives into uncertain and begrudging cooperation. He couldn’t just dismiss her like this was the end!

“You can’t just walk away,” Meagan said. “Delilah will try to kill you. She won’t ever forget you tried to kill her.”

“I did kill her,” he lashed out, turning back to face her, his eyes flashing in the firelight. “I put a sword through her heart and trapped her spirit in the Void.”

And so doing, saved the Empress, Meagan thought.

Fifteen years ago, the witch had tried to possess the Child Empress, to impersonate Emily and thereby seize the throne. Only Daud’s intervention had crushed the Brigmore witches and foiled their plans. With Empress Jessamine’s blood on his hands, that mission had been Daud’s only hope of redemption—and even, then, it wasn’t enough.

She could see it in his eyes. She could see it in the broken mirror lying against the wall. Daud was drowning in self-hatred, lost inside a mistake he could never take back.

“More reason to help us,” Meagan said in a quiet, careful voice. Daud’s inner demons were not to be taken lightly.

“It’s us, now, is it?”

“Delilah escaped the Void.”

“I told you. Let Corvo handle it.”
“He can’t. Delilah did something to him. He’s changed. One minute, he’s mumbling like a madman, and the next he’s a loose cannon. He almost took my fucking eye! He’s no qualms with shedding blood—not anymore.”

A stunned look crossed his face. They both knew the Royal Protector was not normally the killing type, not unless he had to, or if it was lawful like Hiram Burrows’ execution.

The old Corvo had rather have his targets suffer, Meagan thought.

Corvo was the only man she knew who could beat Daud. Their blades had crossed in the Flooded District, but instead of killing him, Corvo had taken his revenge by exiling Daud from the Isles, forcing him to live with his guilt. Adrift, never to return home… Daud had disappeared, abandoning the Whalers and sailing east. For ten years, Meagan searched for him and found only shadows, until Anton Sokolov.

When the old man realized what Delilah was planning, Meagan knew it would attract Daud’s attention. He would only be found when he wanted to be found, and news of Delilah’s schemes brought master and assassin together, at last. She knew Daud felt responsible for the witch, a lingering guilt that could never be assuaged.

His choices mattered.

Meagan felt awful for tapping into that guilt, but she needed Daud’s help! With Corvo at the fringe of sanity, unpredictable and dangerous, and with Emily’s inexperience and youthful impulsiveness, Meagan had her doubts about whether Anton could be freed from the Crown Killer.

That cranky old bastard was the closest thing Meagan had to family after Daud had abandoned her, and if she had to risk Daud’s wrath to free him, so be it.

Daud fell silent.

He pulled a pack of Dunwall Stripe from his coat pocket and shook a couple free—one cigarette for his mouth, the other slipped behind his ear for later. He moved to a rocky perch and sat down, lifting his knee to bend over it, his silvery hair catching the light. He threw the pack at her as he went for his lighter.

Meagan caught the pack, her stomach clenching, her lips almost betraying a smile.

Seeing Daud again was pulling too many emotions out into the open, making her feel again. Things she had tried for years to bury, building a life on top of the ruin she’d become.

He lit his cigarette and took an unhurried drag, the silence between them feeling almost comfortable—like old times.

Meagan cautiously moved closer, accepting the lighter from his hand. Up close, Daud looked tired. Time had not done him any favors. His body was still dense, a manly figure of hidden strength and catlike reflexes, but his face was marked by shadows and aged with relentless guilt. Almost against her will, Meagan’s eyes dropped to the Mark of the Outsider on his hand. His Arcane Bond had granted her incredible powers long ago, like every Whaler held by Daud’s trust, but now the Mark she’d once proudly worn was gone, evidence of the trust she had shattered, a bond broken by betrayal.

She knew Daud had closed off his Arcane Bond—mostly for fear that Corvo would learn of his location. Even here in pirate country, the lookouts he hired were nothing like the Whalers he had once fostered long ago. If he had connections, now, they were bought with coin, not trust.
Daud wasn’t sharing his powers with anyone anymore. He was alone; that was part of Corvo’s punishment, too.

Meagan slipped out a cigarette and placed the pack on his desk, noting the presence of a rolled-up, ancient-looking scroll next to an audiogram machine. That’s weird. She lit the cigarette and returned the lighter to Daud’s reaching hand. They smoked together in silence, watching the Ocean and fitful clouds. The sun slipped beneath the horizon, the world sinking into darkness.

He finally spoke.

“I’ll arrange the tow and the fix.” He turned his head, the cigarette bobbing as his lips moved.

“What else?”

She blew out smoke. “I need a favor.” She flicked the ash with one finger. “I’d do it myself, but it’s too risky. Magic is involved.”

And she needed magic to fight magic.

“What favor?” Daud asked without a trace of curiosity, his deep voice rising like bubbles from a swamp. He didn’t like being asked favors.

“I need you to take care of Delilah’s daughter. Remember her?”

“How could I forget.” The cigarette hung from the corner of his lips, cultivating ash.

“Emily is being stupid trusting her. It’s not really her fault. Rosemary has put her under a Glamour spell. That’s my theory, anyway. I need her gone.”

“I don’t kill anymore,” Daud said, flicking the stub of his cigarette over the rocky edge and standing up straight. He gave her a tired look. “Thought you knew that.”

“I’m not asking for it to go that far. If I wanted Rosemary dead, I would have let Corvo do it. He already tried—but his Eye convinced him to take her hostage instead. Corvo’s dragging her along like a cat with a mouse instead of dumping her somewhere faraway where she won’t be a problem. I need you to kidnap her and do just that. Make her disappear. With your Mark, her magic won’t be an issue.”

Meagan took a long hit and stared at Daud through the curling smoke rising in front of her face. He wasn’t saying anything.

Not a good sign.

She added, trying to ignore her racing heart, “She’s Delilah’s daughter, Daud. Surely, you can understand just how concerned I am about the extent of her magic abilities. I wouldn’t ask this favor unless I was——”

“I know.”

She held her breath and waited, studying Daud’s face but ultimately no closer to guessing his answer. He was a stone wall.

“When?” he landed on.

A relieved sigh slipped her lips. “Whenever. She’s on the Dreadful Wale. When we dock, you can——”
“I won’t be here when you return,” he said, glancing at the scroll on his desk. “As it turns out, I have interests in Karnaca. I’ll handle your problem there.”

“Uhh, thank you, Daud… though I was hoping for something sooner.”

“Too bad. And don’t expect any more favors. If Corvo really is as you say, I pity Delilah. Immortal or not, he’ll find a way to kill her. You don’t need me.”

unexpectedly, his mark flared as he wrapped arcane fingers around the sword at her belt, pulling it towards him.

“I was giving it back!” Meagan snapped, flushing hotly, annoyed he hadn’t waited for her to give it back. “I was waiting for the right time to tell you…”

His face shifted like rocks smashing together, sparking fire, as he held up the sword in disbelief. “You found my blade?”

“Actually, Thomas found it. He said it didn’t feel right letting it rot away in the Flooded District.”

“Thomas always was a sentimental fool, but you… thought you had more sense.” His voice was scornful and his eyes hard. “You should have let it rot.”

But Daud didn’t give it back. He held the blade, his finger testing its edge. Still sharp. The echo of countless assassinations ran red along its silver.

His voice turned contemplative. Slow.

“After Jessamine, I vowed to never kill again.” He drove steely eyes into her. “I mean to break that vow—to kill one last time.” He reverently laid the sword on the desk. “But my sword won’t work.”

Meagan frowned in confusion. What did he mean? She felt like she had no right to ask what he was planning. A part of her was amazed he had agreed to anything. He sure as hell wasn’t doing it for her. Was he saying he would kill help Delilah, after all?

She flicked the cigarette stub over the rocky ledge and realized there was nothing left to say. Nothing left to do but leave. She stared at Daud’s face, reluctance freezing her bones. When he said nothing, offering no explanation for her obvious confusion, she turned away.

That’s it, then.

Half-way to the tunnel, she heard his voice behind her, like stones grinding, “You’re walking a dangerous line, Billie. If Corvo finds out who you are…”

He left the possibility hanging like a noose.

“Why risk it?” he asked, a genuine streak of curiosity mingled with perplexity.

But not concern. Meagan wondered if he regretted letting her live all those years ago. Calling her Billie just twisted the knife.

She didn’t look back. “The same reason you hunted the Brigmore witches.”

Silence.

Get out, Billie. While you still can.
But she turned around to face him, a thought crossing her mind. “When you’re ready to go after Rosemary, be careful of Emily. She has the Mark, now. She’s likely to try and stop you. I think she believes she can save Rosemary.”

“The Outsider was stupid enough to actually Mark Corvo’s daughter?” A deep chuckle rumbled up from his chest like a volcano. “Maybe I’ll find an ally in Corvo, after all. I’m going to kill the Outsider, Billie. With this.”

He lifted the scroll and unraveled it with one, sharp snap of the wrist. Meagan stared at the ancient drawing of a jagged, Void-corrupted blade, her throat going dry. She lifted her eyes to his face, her breath catching. He was being serious.

“Kill a god?” she blurted, her jaw hanging loose. “That’s who you plan to break your vow for?”

“The Knife made him,” he said, darkly. “It can undo him.”

“Daud…” she said uneasily, not liking this one bit.

“He’s the reason for all the chaos. If anyone deserves death, it’s him.”

“I’m not disputing that. I hate the black-eyed bastard like everyone else, but… Emily.”

“What about her?”

“She believes the Outsider is her ally.”

“Marking her doesn’t mean—”

“I know. I’m just—you taught us to follow our instincts. Well, my instincts are telling me Delilah’s little immortality trick is somehow connected to the Outsider, and he has apparently been in contact with Emily. I’ll try to find out more, but maybe we can use the Empress to flush out the Outsider. In the end, we might be able to kill two birds with one stone. Delilah and the Outsider. For all we know, they’re plotting together from the Void.”

Daud nodded at her—like he trusted her instincts. It made Meagan’s heart swell. She almost smiled at him.

“Good. Stay on it,” he said. “I’ll contact you in Karnaca once I deal with Rosemary.” He nodded at the tunnel like he was dismissing her.

She slipped a “Yes, Daud,” for old times’ sake, barely believing her own voice. She quickly turned away lest she betray her emotions and walked towards the exit.

But, again, he stopped her with a question.

“The Dreadful Wale?”

His voice hinted at amusement—and something else she didn’t dare name. This time, Meagan didn’t turn around or give him an answer. He already knew. Farewell, Daud.
I couldn’t sleep.

In the deepest twilight hour, Tempest Island sharpened into quiet clarity, a stillness in the night that made the island’s barren beauty more pronounced, almost spiritual. I felt a charge in the air I couldn’t explain, a pulsating wave that seemed to bend and shimmer around the Outsider’s human counterpart as though his mere presence was a gravitational center.

Sometime during the night, he had moved away from us. I didn’t see when, but I felt the emptiness he left behind.

Our campfire had died, wisps of smoke rising from the ashes at the barest hint of wind. I was on my back, watching the stars emerge like each pinprick of light was a secret only revealed in the ribbons of black carved out like knife thrusts against the rolling, heavy clouds. Even pulled by the lull of breaking waves and wrapped in a warm blanket, sleep eluded me. I thought, at first, it was Delilah—the fear of being pulled into the Void—but then I realized it was mostly him.

It was his first night. I didn’t think he could sleep either. I pushed the blanket away and glanced around the camp as if my eyes needed proof of what my heart had already felt.

That’s when I knew. The Pandyssian was missing.

The Tyvian Princess was snoring like a bloodox in her hammock, fast asleep. She’d given Rosemary a kiss on the cheek before Dougal had taken her back to the ship, locking her away in Meagan’s secret room.

My Morley giant was rolled up on his side, his tiny wife lost somewhere under his blanket. They’d made love when the others had fallen asleep (believing me, too) but I’d heard the rustle of blankets and skin, and the little stifled gasps as they tried to keep quiet beneath the stars. I didn’t mind. If anything, it reminded me of home, of walking past a room in the palace I’d thought unoccupied, only to peek inside upon hearing strange noises to find a guard’s bare ass pumping away over one of the maids, her legs wrapped around him. Sometimes they got away with it; mostly, they didn’t.

My Royal Protector had little use for loose guards, and while he didn’t fire them, getting reassigned to somewhere outside the Palace District was pretty much a demotion for an Elite Guard. It’s not that Corvo was heartless—likely he’d done the same with my own mother in the palace, making love somewhere far riskier than her royal bedchambers—but Corvo was first and foremost my Royal Protector, and the offending guards were supposed to be on duty, not rutting through the entire palace staff with their pants around their ankles.

I glanced at my father. Lord Corvo was resting on his good side, rolled away from the camp, the heavy blanket covering his bare chest but for one muscular arm. By his steady breathing, he sounded fast asleep. After taking such near-fatal injuries, I imagined the rest was doing him some
I crept further out of my blanket, holding my breath. Corvo didn’t stir.

I was barefoot. The sand squeezed between my toes as I crept away from the camp towards the east, following the shoreline as cold waves splashed my ankles, back and forth, back and forth, like the breath and sigh of something alive.

It was dark—so dark I thought about using Dark Vision, but I didn’t need to. I felt the Pandyssian before I saw him, the Mark guiding me towards him.

The sorcery that bound us felt like it was woven into the island itself, bringing us together. I found him sitting in the sand, wrapped up in a blanket, the tail end fanning out behind him like a cape. He had his knees pulled up to his chest, his muscular arms resting loosely around his legs with his hands clasped together, completing the circle.

He looked contemplative. He was watching the waves, lost inside whatever thoughts were circling inside his head. I figured he felt the Mark burning—that he knew I was close—but he didn’t react to my presence until I was standing almost right on top of him. It scared him.

“Emily Kaldwin?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you felt me coming.”

He lowered his eyes to my Mark, hidden beneath the black leather wrappings, and blinked rapidly as if dispelling a reverie. “I did, I was just…” He looked back at the waves. “Thinking without words.”

“Oh.” A strange thing to say, I thought. How does one think without words?

He pushed himself over an inch or two, as if there wasn’t a huge expanse of sand I could occupy beside him. “Sit here. It’s warm if you sit right here.”

“Right here?”

“Right here.”

As if I needed an excuse to want to sit next to him. I sat close and looked at him. “And why is that?”

“It runs like a river of lava below the island, warming the sands in narrow channels.”

“What does?”

“Closer,” he said, tugging me closer, so close our sides were touching. “Do you feel it? The fire below?”

I bit my lip in a helpless smile. “A little, maybe?” The black sand felt warm, but I couldn’t tell if it was just because of his body heat from sitting there before me.

He reached across his knees and took my sorcery hand. I held my breath as he threaded his fingers through mine and pressed our hands tightly together, our Marks burning as one.

I glanced at his face, the moonlight bathing the curve of his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. He was beautifully carved. Created. I remembered what the Outsider had said, that the whales had gifted him the breath of life and sculpted his bones from the salt of the Deep. Bone charms and runes were carved from whalebone; I wondered what inherent powers he had to be made of such, as if the
Ocean itself was a part of him, an echo in the bone.

Our Marks began to glow with a shimmering blue light, and from that source of power like a doorway into the Void, I saw Tempest Island transform around us, my eyes suddenly aware of the unseen, the invisible, the hidden… Narrow channels of blue light appeared beneath our feet like shooting stars exploding from the cavern below the obsidian cliffs, and above it, I felt a fiery warmth flood my body.

His emerald eyes caught mine and I laughed, riveted by the ‘I told you so’ look in his eyes, barely believing a facial expression so modern could, in fact, have deeper roots. It was like the cave, only better. We weren’t afraid of the dark. The night was ours.

How long we held hands, I couldn’t tell. Our Marks burned; the world burned. The channels of light flickered and fled, and all became cold, like a rose shedding its last petal. Tempest Island held its secrets once more.

For a time, we sat in comfortable silence, but I grew chill and wondered how he could stand the cold. I squeezed his hand, nodding at our Marks. “This island… what we saw… how was it so warm when the Void—the source of magic—is so cold?”

He showed me his hand, flipping it palm-side-up, then down. “Night and day,” he explained. “Cold and hot. The Void can be both extremes, but always at different points in time.”

“What does that mean?”

I’d never known the Void to be anything but cold.

But then I thought of the Outsider, that he was neither all good nor all evil, and so perhaps it made sense.

“Think of it like a body temperature,” he said. “The Void has moods.”

I shook my head. “You’re personifying the Void. Might as well say the Outsider is moody. That would make more sense.” I added, grumbling under my breath, “I would know.”

I felt him searching my face, questioning.

“I’ve been there. The Void is like a mirror. It reflects the Outsider; it conforms to his every will, and every time I’m there, it’s bloody cold.”

He looked stunned. “You’ve been to the Void?”

Was it awe or apprehension in his eyes? Maybe both. I nodded and pulled my knees tighter to my chest, staring at my toes. Though with Delilah, the Void had felt a little warmer, I remembered.

The Pandyssian frowned. “Then the Hooded Ones would say this world is imbalanced.”

“That’s one way to describe it.” The wind picked up, my raven-black hair floating in front of my face. “Have you been to the Void?”

“Once.” He pushed his feet into the sand until they were lost below the ankles. “I was in a trance, praying for days in the House of Satakal when…” He frowned. “I woke up in the Void and saw my Amonkalahira for the first time. His black eyes, like the stories of old. I lost all fear… my doubts. I felt free.”
“That… sounds better than what happens to me in the Void.” I wasn’t about to tell him about Delilah; that shit caused nightmares. “So was it cold?”

“Like the grave, Emily Kaldwin. Mother said it had to be—that the Void was only reacting to my presence. How else to balance the fire in my belly?”

“You have a temper?”

“A hunger.”

He looked suddenly glum. No doubt his mother had told him that, too, and his mother was four thousand years dead. We lapsed into silence again. There were so many things I wanted to ask him, but I was afraid to push him too hard, too fast. Still, it was hard not to speak. I liked talking with him.

“You don’t have to keep calling me Emily Kaldwin, you know. Just Emily is fine. Kaldwin is my family name. My mother was Jessamine Kaldwin.”

“She was an Empress, too?” He said the word like it was foreign on his tongue.

I looked away. “Yes.” I looked back at him. “Do you know what that word means?”

He broke his toes from beneath the sand, a little earthquake. “Queen?”

I stretched my legs out and tucked my hands beneath my thighs, trying to accept the fact that there was no polite way to brag about this.

“Higher. I rule queens.”

He made a strange sound, something caught between disbelief and unease. I moved my hands, swinging my lower body away from him to create room in the sand between us. I began to draw the shape of Gristol, the Isle’s outline. I knew every curve. Every major city and seaside port.

“An Emperor or Empress rules an Empire. The heart of the Empire is here, in the City of Dunwall,” I said, making a little hole in the sand within Gristol’s eastern borders and tracing a little ribbon to represent Wrenhaven River.

“Dunwall is a city?” he asked, looking shocked.

“Yes.”

“Like the Great City of Aldmeris?”

“Well, no… not exactly.”

I frowned, thinking about his story around the campfire. Wasn’t that city destroyed in an ancient cataclysm?

“Go on,” he said, but his impatience didn’t feel rude, only eager. He wanted to learn more.

I drew more islands—the major ones—to the north. “Here’s the Isle of Morley, and here, the Kingdom of Tyvia, both vassal states of the Empire.” I drew another to the south. “This is the Jewel of the South, the Isle of Serkonos. As Empress of the Isles, I rule them all. Karnaca is the capital of Serkonos. It’s where my enemies first plotted against me. The traitorous witch that stole your name also seized my throne. I seek her weakness. To take back what is mine.”
He poked his finger into the dot I’d made for Dunwall. “Where is my home?”

I couldn’t meet his eyes; the question broke my heart. “Pandyssia lies to the far east. It would be…”

I made a grunting noise, climbing to my feet and walking a few steps away to draw a huge outline in the sand. Sokolov had taught me that the Isles were pitifully small compared to the uncivilized supercontinent of Pandyssia, and very far away.

“Somewhere here.”

His face paled in the moonlight. Home was, indeed, very far away. And not just distance. Time.

“And where are we now?” he asked.

I returned to the spot near him, frowning in concentration. The Pyandonea Archipelago was a jagged collection of islands, but actually quite close to the major Isles, slotting between Gristol and Serkonos like a jigsaw puzzle. We were probably only ten days’ travel from Karnaca. I drew the archipelago as best I could, but I knew it wasn’t accurate, given that the Mists often swamped the islands, confusing the landscape.

“Right now, we’re along the western fringe. Tempest Island.” I drew another island to the west. “We’ll be here tomorrow. Glory Point. Captain Meagan Foster is getting help so we can repair our ship as quickly as possible. After that, we’re sailing to Karnaca.”

I lifted my finger away, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. He has no say. Where did he want to go?

What if stealing back his name from Delilah meant less to him than sailing east—returning home—even if that home was just an ancient ruin?

“Will you come with me?” I asked softly. It seemed important that I hear it from him.

I was leaning on my left arm, bent at the wrist, my sorcery hand splayed flat over the sand. He bent closer, his finger tracing over my Mark, invisible beneath the wrappings, but not to the arcane sensation that linked us.

He traced over my Mark as confidently as I’d traced the border of Gristol. “I will,” he said.

I stared at his heavy leashes, his eyes lowered as he traced my Mark like he was drawing in the sand. The sensation was warm and tingly, and highly distracting.

“This… witch. She stole your throne. She stole my name.” He looked up, emerald eyes in a face bathed by moonlight. “I lost my sacred destiny, but maybe… maybe this life…” He frowned, looking away, a tumble of emotions on his face. “Maybe there’s another reason I’m here. A different destiny.”

I looked down at our hands. “I’m not sure I believe in destiny.” Then thinking of the Blind Sister, I added scornfully, “Destiny from prophecy. It implies the future is written in stone, that our choices make no real difference in the end. I don’t believe that. Every choice matters.”

“Especially choices made by powerful women, Empress,” he said, a half-smile on his face. It looked almost shy.

“And, you, Whaleborn.”

Both of us would change the world; I knew it.
“This world has never seen one such as you. Your choices have already changed the course of history. You sank the Jessamine with an impossible sea monster. You saved me from certain death. The witch—Delilah—she wants nothing less than my death. She will try again to kill me.”

“Delilah,” he said after a pause, tasting the name of our common enemy.

“You should pick a name,” I said on impulse. It didn’t seem right to call him the Pandyssian all the time. Certainly, not the barbarian like my father preferred.

“For yourself,” I added when he looked at me funny.

I pulled my legs back in and tried not to suck in a startled breath when he scooted closer, ruining the map I’d drawn in the sand. It was definitely not the move of a shy young man.

“Until you get back your real name, of course,” I stammered. The wind picked up and I shivered.

He didn’t ask if I was cold; he simply tugged the blanket over his shoulders to drape around me, sharing his warmth. I pulled on the edge of the blanket and snuggled closer. He was too close for me to look at his face without turning my head at an awkward angle, so I tried to relax and just stare at the Ocean, the stars and moon illuminating the crest of each wave in a pattern that rivaled the diamond-glitter of the black sands around us.

“I don’t know what name to pick.”

“I could call you ‘Prince’. You are that, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

I sighed. “But it’s not a name.”

“No.”

“Well, what about the name of your father?”

“King Ulondil.” But the name brought a grimace. “I’d rather not. My father’s name was written in the sands of the House of Satakal. It is sacred.”

He sounded almost condescending about it, and I couldn’t help but laugh a little. “Then a brother?”

His silence spoke volumes.

I felt his body shift against mine, like I was pulling on a thread that made him squirm. He finally said, “I suppose there might be… honor in choosing my brother’s name. He… he was my twin, but he was born without a heartbeat. Strangled by the birth cord.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

I was the only child and had often dreamed of what it must be like to have a brother or a sister. But losing a twin? I couldn’t imagine his pain.

“Father was angry at Satakal. He would not write a name in the sands, but Mother… She whispered a name when we buried him in the reeds. Prince Loki.”

“Loki,” I breathed. “I like it. What does it mean?”
“To break.”

Without warning he fell back, stretching his legs out. I caught his eyes staring up at the sky, his face darkened by memories of people long dead. With the movement, the blanket pulled away from my shoulders and I followed him, lying back, our shoulders side by side in the sand, the blanket bunched up like an awkward body pillow beneath us.

“Then Loki, it is?”

He turned his head to look at me, but I kept my eyes on the night sky, enjoying the sensation of his full attention. It was similar to the Outsider’s gaze, something magnetic and far too alluring. My heart was racing. This was dangerous territory, and I didn’t understand why I wanted it so badly. We barely knew each other.

“Yes. Loki.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him turn back to look up at the sky. “Maybe I am my brother. Living the life he never had…”

_Living the life you never had_, I thought, thinking of the Outsider. He’d been sacrificed so young…

I moved my hand, reaching blindly for his. He threaded our fingers together when he felt my touch, as if this shared moment underneath the night sky _was_ no different than the darkness of the cave, that we needed each other to find our way through, to find the morning light. The night flowed and I realized he was falling asleep, his eyes growing heavy and his breathing slowing to gentle waves, matching the cadence of the Ocean.

I was not so easily swayed.

_Delilah._

But fear lost to fatigue. When next I opened my eyes, I knew I was in the Void.

She was sitting in my throne chair, her legs crossed in feminine modesty, but the space around us rippled eerily, like we were underwater, the light distorted.

“Well done, little sparrow,” she said, malicious sweetness dripping from her black lips.

I didn’t need to ask what she meant.

“I thought so,” I said.

Her statue appeared, like the one I’d seen on the _Jessamine_, but it was toppled sideways as if resting on the bottom of the Ocean. The volcanic glass shimmered, and I thought I saw a reflection of a slithering tentacle, the _Angra Mazul_ coveting its prize.

She leaned forward, her breasts straining against the red roses of her décolletage. “Commander Kittredge was obviously a fool. How did you best him?”

“A father’s love can move mountains.”

_Better she believe it was Corvo’s doing_, I thought. The Outsider’s secret was woven in my heart. Delilah didn’t know he was still alive, or that he’d been torn in two, a Schism that had resulted in a human reincarnation.

Delilah laughed at my lie (was it so unbelievable?), and I felt a surge of fear. _She’ll make tonight even worse_. What disgusting scenario was she cooking up behind her cold blue eyes?
“I don’t think so, Emily.”

“Get on with it, Witch,” I spat. She’d hurt me—badly—with her perverted fantasies in the gazebo, but after a real victory at last, I felt rejuvenated. We had destroyed the Jessamine, and that had hurt her! I need only endure until Karnaca, I thought. Then I could get the protective sigil tattoo to block her forever from my dreams.

She unraveled her long legs and strode towards me. “Do you think me heartless, little niece?”

She put a hand on her hip and pouted at me in feigned sadness.

I snorted, thinking of Rosemary. “You would let your own daughter die for your selfish desires. If you do have a heart, it’s as black as the Void.”

Her eyes lit up. “Do you care for her?”

I frowned. “Rosemary?”

Delilah smiled, watching my face. “You think her innocent, don’t you? Interesting.” She seemed surprised, if not a little pleased. “And here I thought you believed her untrustworthy, as if I placed her in your court like some sleeper assassin.”

“Did you?”

“Not me.”

“You lie.”

Delilah gracefully wove her hand and a witchling appeared. A little Rosemary. A girl with bright blue eyes and long blonde hair, her cherubic face gazing up at her mother in innocent love. She looked no more than ten. The Void made it seem real.

Delilah tenderly cupped her hand around the child’s face, but her eyes were slivers of ice as she considered her offspring.

“No lie. I lost Rosemary a long time ago. If she’s become a weapon, she’s not mine.”

“What? Then whose?”

“Tell me how you sunk the Jessamine and I’ll tell you,” she said, maneuvering closer like a venom strike.

“Never.”

I stepped away, but it was of no use. She controlled my every glance, the Void careening around me in shapes she desired. She made little Rosemary disappear, and in her stead, my naked father appeared, his head rolled back in abandon as an equally naked Daud worked his mouth around him, the master assassin on his knees. A flood of anger and disgust filled my heart.

“There’s something really wrong with you, Delilah.”

“You don’t like it?” she asked in mock surprise, an elegant eyebrow arching. “But this happened.” She looked away from me, cocking her head as she studied the pair. “Against all odds, they fell in love.”

“You lie again.”
“Do I? I didn’t say it happened in this life. Tapping into the Void has shown me glimpses of the Outsider’s true power. He saw possibilities, each thread weaving into different futures. This is one. Corvo and Daud are more alike than you know. Is it so strange that they would be drawn to each other?”

I was stunned.

Seeing different futures sounded plausible, given what the Outsider had told me, but that didn’t mean I wanted to witness every possibility.

“I don’t care to see it,” I said, seething in fury. “If there is love between them—in some other timeline—than you have twisted it into something perverse. Now you tell me, Delilah. How many timelines do you see with my boot on your neck? With my sword at your throat?”

“None.” She smiled, turning a playful eye. “Which is why I’ll let you have your little victory. Well done, Emily, but the loss of the Jessamine means nothing to me. I am forever. Immortal. Your war is already lost.”

The Corvo look-a-like made a groaning sound, his whole body jerking as he came inside Daud’s mouth. There were tears in his eyes.

“That good?” Daud asked, his voice resonating across the Void.

But then they disappeared, fading away into darkness.

“The Empire itself will crumble,” Delilah said as she turned away to sit back on the throne. “Perhaps in a few thousand years, I will build another. You will be nothing but a pile of bones, forgotten by time.” She waved her hand, dismissing me like an unruly subject. “Go back to your little life. Sleep as if you are not already dying.”

Sleep, of course, was her twisting the knife.

I awoke in the shadowed dark, hot tears streaking down my cheeks. I must have woken the Pandyssian because I felt him move, leaning up on an elbow to look at me. He didn’t say anything, just gently tugged the blankets out from beneath us and covered our bodies, sealing us in warmth.

He lifted his arm and I fitted myself beneath it, my cheek resting against his chest. The coat smelled like my father. I tried not to think what Corvo would do if he caught us like this, but it felt too good to pull away.

“Loki?” I asked, after a time.

“Hmhm?” He was half-dozing.

“Being an Empress is not always fun.”

I felt the smile on his lips as he leaned over in the dark, pressing a flat kiss over the bridge of my nose.

“What was that for?” I whispered. Not that I’m complaining.

I rolled my head back into the curve of his shoulder, staring up at his face in profile as he blinked sleepily at the sky. I was charmed by his first attempt to kiss me, arising out of what felt like a simple desire to comfort me.
He whispered back, “I saw the giant do it.”

I made a small laughing sound, remembering the chaste kiss around the campfire, but Dougal had landed on Eileen’s lips.

“You missed,” I teased.

“Missed what?”

I closed my eyes. “Nevermind. It was perfect.”

Chapter End Notes

I had no idea what to call the Pandyssian. I fought with a bunch of names, trying out "Markus" (a play on The Mark) and names chosen by other fanfic writers (like "Issac"), but I decided to go with Loki, the Trickster god of Norse mythology because, why not? I like it. Do you like it?

Also, the little scene with Corvo and Daud was inspired by a wonderful fanfic by EdgeLaur called "Meet Me in the Void". Go read it, it's great!
I shot awake, my heart racing, with no notion of what had startled me out of my dreamless sleep. A headful of hair went flying around my face like the sea monster’s tentacles. I brought a hand up, groggily realizing my braids had come undone…

“What the…?”

All that painstaking work unraveled… Yesterday, before I’d ventured unto Tempest Island, the Tyvian Princess had woven dozens of pearls into my hair with each braid. No way the wind could have undone that! The braids had been tight.

I was left with a wavy, poofy mess and only one culprit. Loki! Why in the Void would he undo my hair and steal my pearls?

I looked up to find Eileen crossing the sands towards me, a cup of tea in hand. She frowned at my heated look. “Do you not want tea, Your Highness? I can make coffee—”

“No,” I said, sitting up straighter with a yawn. “I’m just…” I blinked wearily at the morning sun. Delilah had left me alone, but still I felt tired. Fatigue was woven into my bones.

I glanced at the indentation in the sand beside me. Loki was gone. I dug my hands into my hair like I might scream. I felt hurt; like nothing was worse than waking up alone, mostly when night after night Delilah would…

I realized Eileen was staring at me. “Tea is fine,” I mumbled, then after a pause, I blurted, upset, “He didn’t wake me.”

Eileen stared blankly at me for all of two seconds before smiling knowingly at me. “Ah. Did you and the Prince…?”

“No, of course not,” I fumbled, suddenly realizing she thought I had a terrible case of post-coital bedhead.

Eileen stared blankly at me for all of two seconds before smiling knowingly at me. “Ah. Did you and the Prince…?”

“No, of course not,” I fumbled, suddenly realizing she thought I had a terrible case of post-coital bedhead.

Eileen blushed, her eyes downcast in that subservient manner so often drilled into the lower classes. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pried—”

“Please, don’t apologize,” I said, a heat entering my own cheeks at the idea of Loki and I doing more than just sleeping under the same blanket. I accepted the cup of tea from her hand and took a sip, trying to hide my embarrassment. The warmth was exactly what I needed.

The morning was cold and windy, the skies completely gray and overcast, promising rain. I missed
Loki’s warmth. I’d slept in his arms, comforted by the weight of his arm around me and the steady beating of his heart beneath my ear. It’d all felt so simple. Safe.

At least until morning, I thought, suddenly thankful that Eileen had woken me up instead of Father. I couldn’t imagine the trouble we’d be in if he’d caught me waking up with the human Outsider, mostly with my hair looking like this.

“Did Father notice?” I asked her, trying not to sound utterly terrified.

“I don’t think so. Prince Loki was awake before me—and I’m always up at the crack of dawn. He helped me rekindle the fire so I could start breakfast.” She stood up, her hands patting her apron. “He’s a helpful young man, isn’t he?”

“He is…” I yawned again. I was glad the Pandyssian had told her his new name; Prince Loki fit him nicely. “I’m glad he helped you out, Eileen.”

“Aye,” she said. “Then after that, he just left. Starting running—”

I irritably turned my head into the wind to get my hair out of my face. “Something scare him?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Morning exercise, I expect,” she said, her blue eyes glancing down the shoreline, but in the next instant she smiled brightly, as if the Prince’s disappearance was no concern at all. “Lord Corvo’s still dozing. I expect he’s waiting to take breakfast with you. Will you come?”

“Very well,” I said, trying to smooth my hair, but the wind had other plans. “I just need a moment to wash up.”

“Your Highness,” she said with a nod.

She gathered up my blanket and returned to camp while I headed to the water. Low tide had pushed the waves further out, stretching the beach into a minefield of seashells. I found several I liked, holding them in my hand like little treasures.

The water was very cold. I splashed a handful over my hair in a vain attempt to batten the worst of it. As I approached the camp, I noticed my father’s dark eyes running over me like hot coals. He’d noticed. The suspicion was palpable.

I ignored him, plopping down on the sand near my discarded belongings. I methodically armed myself, clipping my crossbow to my belt and sheathing my father’s miraculously-recovered folding sword. I dug through my rucksack, searching for that whalebone comb, but with my father’s eyes boring into me, I gave up—I’d gone way past calling attention to myself. A comb wasn’t going to fix anything.

Eileen came over and served my father and I a plate of eggs and toasted bread. Princess Katya and Dougal were already eating, the two looking quite cheery despite the plummeting weather. Thunder rumbled distantly and Dougal commented, “We best pack up before it rains, aye? Get back to the Dreadful Wale… The Captain should be back soon.”

No one replied.

I glanced at Father, not liking the way he was practically glaring at his food.

“I’ll help,” I said, winning a small smile from Dougal.

After a silent and awkward breakfast, the disassembly began. I helped the Princess with the
blankets, each of us taking two corners and folding them between us, moving together and apart as each square was made. I’d only ever seen servants do it, so it was oddly fun trying it out myself.

Dougal handled the brunt of it, loading our things unto the skiff. Soon our little camp was nothing more than a ring of stones and ash in the black sand. Throughout it all, my father sat stonily in silence, nursing his wounded side.

I grabbed my boots and sat down on the weathered driftwood beside him.

“How do you feel?” I asked, glancing at his sword wound, a streak of dried blood blotting one corner.

“Like I want my coat back,” Corvo growled like he had a severe case of the morning grouch. His skin was raised in goosebumps. Mother used to say his Serkonan blood craved the tropics; he hated cold weather.

“I’ll ask Loki,” I promised with a smile, suddenly remembering Mother’s face, how she would laugh and kiss Father on the cheek every time she told the story of his First Snow. He’d never felt winter’s kiss until coming to Dunwall, and their first kiss had been during the Month of Ice. She would laugh, saying Corvo’s lips were so blue she feared she’d find him frozen alive in the Rose Gardens one day.

“Loki?” Corvo repeated, brows raised. Obviously, not everyone had learned his new name.

“Yes, Loki. I like it. Prince Loki.”

“Prince of what? Of naked barbarians and—”

“Of Pandyssia! King Orgnum—”

“You believed that rat tale?”

I shook my head. There was no point arguing when he was like this. I stuffed my foot into my boot and felt something hard at the bottom, like a loose rock, but when I shook it out, I gaped at the white pearl resting in my hand like it was the strangest thing I’d ever seen.

“What’s that?”

“One of my pearls,” I gasped in astonishment. I’d had about two dozen in my hair. Did Loki place this in my boot to find? I wiped the silly smile from my face when I noticed my father was glaring at me. “It’s nothing.”

“Uh huh.”

I absently rubbed the smooth pearl between my fingers. Where was Loki, anyway? I wanted to see him, to talk to him, to feel him, but the shoreline was empty. If he’d gone running for exercise, shouldn’t he be back by now? He knew we were eventually leaving! Maybe he’d gotten lost, or hurt?

I gnawed my lower lip in worry.

Father and I were alone, now, the others having boarded the skiff, taking the first trip back to the ship.

The isolation was suddenly like a dam bursting. Father turned on me.
“I’m not stupid, Emily. I’m not going to sit back and let you invite a viper into your bed. Did you sleep with him?”

The question was so sudden, so frank, that for a moment, I just gaped at him in bewilderment. A light drizzle began to fall, but the rain did little to cool the angry heat pouring into my cheeks.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Like hell it’s not.”

“And viper?” I spat, increasingly offended by his tone. “He’s not like that.”

“Seducing is what the Outsider does. His tool—”

“Loki’s not like that.”

“Yet.”

I huffed in aggravation. “I didn’t sleep with him, so you can stop looking at me like I’m a whore!”

I shoved both feet into my boots and stood up. Corvo followed, faster than I would have believed given his injury. He grabbed a snatchful of my unruly hair and flung it back like that was all the evidence he needed.

“Right.”

“Don’t touch me,” I snarled, turning my back and stalking away towards the water, fully intent on waiting alone for Dougal to return with the skiff.

The rain picked up, the drizzle transforming into a steady downpour. *Great! Just what I needed!*

“You need to stay focused, Emily,” he called after me as lightning split the sky, making me jerk. I felt like I was trapped on the island with a lunatic! *How dare he treat me like this?*

He spat, “Now’s not the time to chase after sex when we have a job to do. Thought you learned that after Wyman.”

I spun around, livid. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

His arms were slack at his sides, but his fists were clenching and unclenching. Through the pouring rain, he looked like a half-mad savage, his bare chest heaving, marked with visible scars and bloodied wounds.

“It means you were too busy riding Wyman’s cock instead of noticing the witch plotting behind your back.”

In a fury, I hurled him bodily towards me with *Far Reach* and plowed a fist into his jaw. He staggered back, but his face didn’t register surprise, or even anger. His rat eyes were smoldering, but it was the darkness of shame. I realized he *wanted* me to hit him.

He was goading me!

“What the fuck,” I hissed, breathing hard. I couldn’t believe he would speak to me that way, so incredibly vulgar, and I couldn’t believe I had actually hit him. *Not once in my life had I ever intentionally hurt him!* Sure, we had a few slips during practice, but nothing like this.
What was happening to us?!

We stared at one another through the deafening rain, both of us breathing hard. Angry. Heavy droplets ran off the tip of Corvo’s nose. I wanted to hit him again when his mouth opened, like I knew exactly where this was going and I didn’t want to hear it.

I staggered backwards. “Don’t you dare tell me you’re just trying to protect me!”

His voice was a wreck. “I’m your father, Emily. We share the same blood, the same passions. I know what it’s like. I felt it with Jessamine.”

I froze, broken into pieces. “Felt what?” I could barely hear myself above the pounding rain.

I flinched as he held my face in his hands, touching me like I might wash away in the rain if he didn’t hold on tight.

“Love that strikes like a lightning bolt, clutching your heart as irrevocably as Death, that becomes the lodestar by which you steer the rest of your life.” He gritted his teeth, his eyes blazing. “I don’t want that for you, Emily, because it can make your life a paradise—or it can destroy you utterly.”

“How can you say that?” Tears met the rain, streaking down my cheeks in hot rivers. “Are you saying you wished you had never fallen in love with my mother?”

Wasn’t the worst kind of heartache still outweighed by the happy times they’d shared together?

But as the years pushed on, the days of heartache beginning to outnumber the days of joy…

*He’s never moved on. Never let go.*

When he said nothing to change my obvious conclusion, I angrily shook my head and pulled away. “It’s not you speaking. It’s Delilah. She’s cursed you with evil thoughts!”

“Listen to me.”

“No!”

Fear struck my heart when I saw the look in his eyes. It was like he needed me, like I was as the closest thing to Jessamine he’d ever get. Like I was the reason he had never moved on, had never let go. “No, no, no,” I cried in a panic, swatting his hands away. “Let me go!”

He stopped. Backed away.

I suddenly heard shouting from far away. The rain had lessened. I glanced behind me at the waves. Dougal was waving from the skiff, ready to pick us up and take us back to the *Dreadful Wale*, but the waves were getting choppy. He was struggling to come ashore.

I looked back at my father. “Leave me alone,” I said in a hollow voice.

But he had nowhere to go, and Dougal wasn’t quite ready to pick us up. I stuffed my hands into my coat pockets, bracing against the wind. My eyes stung. I felt something. I lifted two little pearls from my pockets, one on each side. *Loki.* He’d hidden more for me to find!

First, in my boot. Now, in my jacket. I held the pearls in a death grip and stuffed my fists back into my pockets, smiling to myself.

I met Father’s eyes, if only because I felt his disapproval.
“That’s it, then, is it? You’re going to be stubborn about this? You’re going to totally ignore everything we know about the Outsider for a pretty boy with green eyes? He’s using you, Emily. You’re falling for him. Just look at you. I know because I’ve made the same mistakes. I fell for Jessamine so hard, so fast, I denied it for months, telling myself it was just an infatuation. You two might not have done it last night, but you sure as hell wasted no time sleeping with him.”

I ignored the scorn in his voice. In fact, I felt rather empty. His rage, his scorn, all if it was passing right through me. He couldn’t hurt me; not if I didn’t let him.

“It’d felt right,” I simply said.

“I know, but that doesn’t mean that it is.”

“Are you saying my mother wasn’t right for you?”

“Maybe I wasn’t right for her. Maybe if I’d just kept my goddamn hands off her, she wouldn’t have looked twice at me. She would’ve named someone else her Royal Protector. Maybe that someone else could’ve protected her that day in the gazebo.” His voice broke. “Maybe she’d still be alive—”

“Stop it! You’re not my mother’s mistake!”

*Because if he was, what did that make me?*

I ran towards the skiff, rushing into the water, heedless of the stinging cold. I dragged myself over the side of the skiff, taking hold of Dougal’s helping hand, and sat beside my Morley giant.

“I’m sorry, Empress. I didn’t want for you to get soaked!”

“It’s fine, Dougal.”

I avoided his gaze as Dougal pushed to shore, rowing madly. Corvo couldn’t swim out to us, not with his wound.

“Where’s the boy?” Dougal shouted over the rain.

I shook my head. I had no idea where the Pandyssian was. I shivered violently, cold and wet. The rain was swallowing the entire island. *Loki!* I clenched the pearls in my fist, trying to concentrate on the Mark, to feel it burn, to tap into its power and draw Loki towards me like we were tethered together.

But all I felt was the Ocean, as vast and unreachable as the stars. I let go of the pearls and stared stubbornly at nothing. *I’m not infatuated,* I told myself as Dougal handled dragging the skiff to shore, then helping Corvo aboard.

He, thankfully, had nothing more to say, especially in front of Dougal.

We rode the choppy waves back to the *Dreadful Wale* and disembarked while Dougal handled the rigging, lifting the skiff out of the water by the pulley into its docking berth along the port-side rail. The pirate ship was still dangerously low, but the water pump had done its job, keeping her afloat while we waited for the Captain to return. With the way it was raining so hard, I figured we wouldn’t see the tow ship until it was almost on top of us, emerging from the gray gloom like a specter.

I hurried below deck, out of the rain.
Eileen set about finding Lord Corvo a dry shirt while I hid myself away in the little cabin, slamming the door shut behind me. I paced back and forth like a madwoman, pulling off my coat, about to hang it to dry, only to turn right back around, angrily shoving my arms back into the coat and racing up the stairs, pushing back out into the rain.

By now, I was utterly drenched, my hair plastered to my face. I was freezing and miserable and feeling utterly lost. I glanced down at my hand balled into a fist, my heart thundering in my ears even as lightning split the sky, the storm clouds rumbling overhead.

My Mark was burning.

“Loki?” I cried out, leaning over the rail to fall right into his green eyes as he looked up at me from below.

I could barely believe what I saw.

He looked like he was mounting a horse, his legs straddling something dark and scaly beneath him, writhing in the water.

The waves were rough, lapping against him, but he looked calm and collected, his hands twisted around some strange creature’s frilly upper fins like they were horse reins. The rain pounded in sheets, but I could clearly hear his voice like he was standing right next to me.

“There’s a dying whale, Emily,” he said. “Help me free her.”

His words made no more sense than the writhing beast beneath him, but when he held out his hand, reaching towards me, I climbed over the railing and jumped into the water without hesitation. I hit the water.

The cold was shocking. A snake-like head twisted in the waves to look at me, its inhuman eye unblinking. I lost my breath, stunned and afraid; I had no idea how large the creature was, the dark water masking its true size. I thrashed in the waves, suddenly disoriented. Water filled my nose.

In that cold darkness, a strong hand snatched mine. It was like my first tumble into the Void when I’d seen the Outsider above me, his black eyes reaching through the chaos. Don’t go falling from a rooftop, Empress.

The water parted and I saw Loki above me, pulling me towards him. I climbed the scaly creature like it was a lifeboat, sprawling over its back until, somehow, I righted myself in front of Loki, swinging a leg over one side like I was, indeed, mounting a horse.

The size was right, the creature’s rounded body making a comfortable saddle. A wild grin slashed across my face as I felt the sea serpent—for it seemed like a long snake—writhe in the water, and yet keep us above the water line.

The waves crashed against our knees, and sometimes against our waists, but no higher. My heart sang! Loki’s arms came around me, pressing me to his chest and holding us tightly together.

“I got you,” he murmured into my ear. I felt a thrill course through my body as we sped away from the Dreadful Wale into the rain-soaked mists.

Growing up, I’d had my fair share of horseback riding lessons as any aristocrat would, but I never thought myself terribly talented at it. Over the years, I’d really only ridden horses when visiting the countryside. When it came to the streets of Dunwall, Father preferred we travel by armored carriage, not horses.
As we rode the waves on the sea horse (or sea snake?), I felt like I was learning all over again. Loki’s thighs shifted and pressed as he guided the creature.

He was obviously a natural horseman—or whatever you wanted to call it. He had loosened his hold somewhat, his hands resting on my waist or occasionally flighting over my thigh. At one point, he leaned around me, reaching for the frilly fins and roping them closer into my hands. I laughed, startled by the feel of the silky strands running through my fingers.

I looked at him over my shoulder, glancing a flash of teeth as he smiled.

“Loki, did you steal my pearls?”

He didn’t respond with words, instead moving closer to nip my ear with a graze of teeth. At that point, I figured even the creature could feel my shiver.

The rain poured over us, lightning and thunder filling the sky.

“What’s this about the whale?” I eventually asked. I wasn’t sure how far out we’d ridden. The Ocean seemed endless through the stormy mists.

“I felt her song,” he said, leaning his head forward over my shoulder so I could hear him through the downpour. “She’s close.”

*He* was close.

In the cold rain, slick against my skin, soaking through my clothes, his contrasting warmth and the feel of his body, solid behind me, became my whole world, his every touch a sensation to linger over. He wasn’t shy with the placement of his hands, and I suspected he was holding me tighter than necessary to keep me safely mounted on the strange creature.

I didn’t mind.

A few more waves, the crest and fall of blue and green, and a great iron-black whaling ship suddenly emerged from the gloom, an enormous, big-bellied whale suspended in a cruel harness above the deck. Growing up in Dunwall, I’d seen countless like it along Wrenhaven River, the captured whales destined for slaughterhouses. There, the whales would be harvested for their whale oil. *Alive.*

The whale oil’s potency required the beating heart, and so whales suffered in agony until they finally died. I never felt more ashamed.

It was also, clearly, Meagan’s tow ship. *That* presented a problem. I could see her at the bow of the ship, her dark outline leaning over the rail.

“Loki, hold on,” I said, tensing up.

His thighs shifted and the sea horse slowed, churning water, holding us in place. We hadn’t yet been spotted, the mists heavier along the waterline, like a blanket.

I felt conflicted. I wanted to save the whale, to free it as Loki wanted, but the whaling crew would surely fight back, their income threatened—not to mention we *needed* them to tow Meagan’s ship. If we were going to do this, we had to do it right.

Loki felt my hesitation; I knew by the way he had suddenly stilled, waiting on bated breath.
I made a choice. I placed my sorcery hand over his, the Marks burning as one. It was a promise.

“They’ll try to stop us. We need to be sneaky,” I said, turning my head to speak over my shoulder, but my eyes were peeled on the ship, watching for movement. “We don’t need to get any closer. My arcane tether can span the distance.”

“Thank you, Emily,” he murmured against the curve of my ear, his breath hot and tickling. That simple thank you made my heart burst with happiness, that he would acknowledge the choice I’d made—to help despite the risk.

I wanted to help, but the suffering whale wasn’t the main reason. He was.

Holding his hand, I used Far Reach to propel us across the water. We landed on top of the rail along the ship’s port side, and together we scrambled into the shadow of the whale’s belly.

No one saw us.

“You okay?” I whispered, looking back at him only to find his pupils blown wide.

“Yeah,” he gasped, his free hand bracing against the whale’s belly like his legs were suddenly wobbly. “Your magic is… interesting.”

“You can probably teleport, too,” I whispered, squeezing his hand, but there was no time for lessons. “And your magic is interesting.”

Every day, I was learning just how interesting.

I glanced above me, hearing the whale make a long, groaning sound, rumbling the air in melancholy waves. I rested my hand against her skin; she felt rubbery and cold, and her sadness filled the Pandyssian’s eyes, like the majestic creature was somehow connected to him. As the human Outsider, I didn’t doubt it for one second.

“How do we free her, Emily?” he asked, his emerald eyes sick with worry.

“I don’t know.”

I hadn’t exactly jumped into this with a plan. Literally.

“Look!” he suddenly blurted.

I glanced down, stifling a gasp as a little white rat poked its head out of my coat’s breast pocket.

“A stowaway,” the Pandyssian said with a grin. “It’s her. The one who played music last night.”

“Rosemary?” I gasped, staring at the rat like the witch was going to jump out of its rodent skin. I glanced at Loki. “Are you sure?”

How could he tell? It’s like his magic allowed him to see things otherwise hidden in our world.

“Yes. The one with two faces,” Loki said, almost absently, as he scanned the vicinity, keeping an eye out for the whaling crew.

“Two faces…”

I could feel the blood drain from my face. The nonchalant way he said it only fueled the eeriness.
“One is young and beautiful, the other, old and beautiful—in her own way,” he said solemnly. “Though she’s quite insane.”

What the…

I grabbed the squirming white rat and pulled it out of my pocket, giving it a stern look—and feeling quite ridiculous doing so.

“Rosemary, if that’s you, come out at once,” I ordered in fierce whisper. In a whirlwind of black magic and pulsing red light, Rosemary appeared, the rat landing in her hand. It sniffed her skin with its little nose, whiskers twitching.

Rosemary smiled at me with bright blue eyes. “I’m sorry, Emily, but I was going stir crazy in that little room, and there was a vent along the floor, so I—”

I clamped a heavy hand over her mouth. “Not right now! I can’t believe you tagged along, Rosemary. What were you thinking?”

“I’m an adventurous sort,” she protested, her attention turning towards the Pandyssian with no little reluctance. Her cherubic face lit up with wonder and adoration. “Outsider,” she breathed.

“Be quiet,” I hissed.

“What are we doing?” she whispered conspiratorially, a smile pasted on her face as she leaned closer between us, her hand resting on the Pandyssian’s shoulder. I didn’t like that one bit.

“Freeing the whale,” Loki said.

Rosemary accepted this like it was the most natural thing in the world, registering neither surprise nor disinclination. In fact, she seemed positively glowing, staring at the human Outsider like she would say Yes if he asked her to tear the heart from her chest.

I felt an urge to throw her overboard.

“We need a distraction,” I said through gritted teeth, trying to stay focused on our impromptu mission. “Or the entire crew is going to get very angry.”

“Oh, well, why didn’t you say so?” Rosemary said, stepping out from beneath the whale into the rain. I couldn’t tell in the distorted light, but I swore the emerald around her neck burned just as fiercely as her eyes for a split second, red light striking like a match as she raised her sorcery hand.

The white rat rode her free hand, an avid spectator to the sudden shouting from all directions. I met Loki’s eyes, staring at him like the world had just turned upside down.

“This should be interesting,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: Part of Corvo’s dialogue was adapted directly from Daughter of the Forest by Juliet Marillier (Tor Books, published 2000): (one of my favorite book quotes). “You
know not, yet, the sort of love that strikes like a lightning bolt; that clutches hold of you by the heart, as irrevocably as death; that becomes the lodestar by which you steer the rest of your life. I would not wish such a love on anyone, man or woman, for it can make your life a paradise, or it can destroy you utterly.”
Every time Loki said something was interesting, I had just one thought: *his Outsider is coming out again.* It was like the black-eyed deity was as relevant a trait as his human eyes, shining like emeralds as he watched the scene unfold in utter fascination.

“Bring us higher,” he said, tugging my hand.

He’d caught on to the fact that, if we were linked, my magic could envelop him in its effects. He, too, had the Mark, but it was unclear what powers stemmed from the Outsider’s direct influence. He clearly had his *own* power. Maormer magic had risen the sea monster from the Deep to crush the *Jessamine,* and I suspected it also had something to do with the sea serpent we’d just ridden to reach the whaling ship.

He was intimately bonded with the Ocean and its denizens.

“This way,” I said, leading him out of the shadow of the whale. I snagged my arcane tether above, purple tendrils roping through the rain to propel us on top of the whale.

We landed on top of its back, commanding a bird’s eye view of the entire deck.

Loki looked nauseated, but not as bad as his first time riding my *Far Reach* power.

A grin stretched across my face as I felt the whale beneath me. The flashback was intense, the memory of the Outsider pulling me into the Deep, an ocean of tears and whalesong enfolding me, and then that final plunge into blue sky in a spray of seafoam as we rode the back of a whale through the waves.

I wished I’d left my boots off for this adventure. Loki had the right of it, I saw. Unlike me, he was barefoot, his toes splayed wide over the rubbery whale skin as he crouched and leaned over the side, looking below.

I shadowed him, enjoying the casual way he reached for me when I ducked beside him. Our hands had parted after the inky black vestiges of *Far Reach* had dissipated, and while he didn’t reach for my hand again, I liked the way he was keeping me close, his fingers curling over my shoulder as he glanced at me in wide-eyed excitement.

“What is she doing?” he whispered.
Rosemary was below, stirring the hornet’s nest by walking out towards the bow of the ship where most of the whalers were congregated around Meagan. Her long, blonde hair was pasted down her back in wet tresses.

Both her hands were raised.

The right held the white rat and the left her Mark-less sorcery hand, waving in a delicate arc above her head. She was casting magic, her eyes blazing with red light.

“It’s a Glamour spell,” I whispered in amazement as the shouting, agitated whalers began to quiet down and simply walk away. It’s like they were forgetting they had just seen a witch and had decided they had better things to do.

Everyone except the Captain.

Meagan glared at Rosemary like she wanted to kill her. My father had certainly tried, and I’d not forgotten Meagan’s involvement in that horrible showdown, my father’s blade pressed to Rosemary’s neck. Only Dougal’s gentle nature had calmed my father down, at least long enough to accept his suggestion that we take Rosemary hostage instead.

“It’s working,” Loki breathed. He excitedly pulled on my arm, yanking my eyes away from the Captain. “But the spell won’t last forever. We have to hur––Emily?”

The sound of ringing metal pierced the air as Meagan freed twin daggers from her belt and spun them in her hands. She took up a defensive stance, but lightning-fast aggression was clearly implied if Rosemary did anything remotely hostile—which I considered likely at this point.

I had no idea why the Glamour spell hadn’t worked on the Captain, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to wait around for Rosemary to try Plan B.

No one had died and I meant to keep it that way.

I shot to a standing position, half-aware of the Pandyssian moving away from me as I wrapped arcane fingers around Meagan’s twin daggers and Pulled. Rain bounced off the metal as the daggers flew towards me, whipping end over end.

I’d never tried pulling two objects towards me simultaneously before. The hilt of one dagger hit my palm, securely caught, but the second I had to snatch out of the air. Time seemed to slow in the process, like this second eventuality was under Far Reach’s domain. I smiled, feeling like I was finally settling into my powers—like they were a part of me.

The shock on Meagan’s face was almost as good.

“Stand down!” I shouted.

“What’s going on?” the Captain demanded. She threw her hands up, annoyed she’d been disarmed, and backed away from Rosemary like she was afraid of the witch. She grabbed a whaler by the arm, but he looked at her with indifference, even after she slapped him hard across the face like she was trying to wake him up. As the Captain realized the entire crew was under a witch’s spell, her face darkened with fury.

“Emily,” she shouted up at me, whale groans echoing across the deck. “Your witch’s party trick is jeopardizing the Dreadful Wale. I cannot allow—”

“I’m sorry, Meagan,” I said, truly sincere, “but the whale must be freed.”
“The whale? This is about the whale?”

She was livid and incredulous all at once, her normally impassive face completely undone.

“Don’t hurt them,” Rosemary cried, cupping the reddened cheek of the whaler Meagan had hit. “Captain, I promise you, they will remain unharmed. The Empress asked for a distraction and I gave her one.” She turned her blue eyes upwards, pinning me. “Emily, the spell’s window is rapidly fading. I’ve made the whalers forget they have a catch, but if they awaken and find they do have a whale, I may not be able to repeat the lie.”

“Thank you, Rosemary,” I said, my heart seizing up, caught between opposing currents. I loved her for making this rescue possible and I hated her for the face I couldn’t see.

“Does the Royal Protector know you’re doing this?!?” the Captain shouted—clearly expecting the threat would dissuade me if it meant invoking Corvo’s ire—but I ignored her.

Father can’t stop me, I thought. After his embarrassing tirade on the beach, I meant it more ways than one.

“The Empress has all the protection she needs!” Rosemary declared, flouncing a particularly snobby look at the Captain. “The Outsider is with her!”

I cringed, but thankfully the Captain seemed to take this metaphorically. (Like most people, I doubted Meagan had ever seen the Outsider and surely did not recognize the Pandyssian).

The Captain crossed her arms, giving attitude. “Well, then, maybe she can tell the Outsider to keep his hairy balls out of my business. This whaling ship is supposed to be towing us back to Glory Point, not dumping whales back into the ocean on a ridiculous whim!”

I’d heard enough. If they wanted to yell at each other in the rain, so be it. The Captain’s animosity towards Rosemary really wasn’t surprising. She hated her for being Delilah’s daughter. Feared her. But watching Meagan become undone was surprising. She’d always been so calm. So impassive. Dead eyes. Something about witnessing Rosemary go into attack mode had really pushed her buttons. Glamour wasn’t exactly benign magic; it was manipulation, an attack on the mind.

Outside the Black Pony Pub, I’d made Rosemary promise to never use Glamor against me. I wondered if I’d even know if she had. Or ever had. We’d been friends for three long years. Who knew what I’d ‘forgotten’?

“Daku,” I heard behind me. *Come.*

*Loki.*

I turned away from the edge as water sluiced down the whale’s side like a waterfall. It was slippery. I stumbled, off-kilter for a heartbeat, but the Pandyssian was there, grabbing me like he’d never left my side.

“Daku,” he said again, his green eyes flooded with worry for the suffering whale beneath our feet. We had to hurry.

I slipped him one of the twin daggers. “Let’s use these to cut the harness. There’s no time to operate the crane.”

I’d seen how they did it at the slaughterhouses, unloading the massive whales with industrial-strength
It was a slow and cumbersome process, and not one we had time for. The whale rescue would have to be a tad ungraceful.

We separated, moving to opposite sides of the whale. I had the tail end, Loki the head. I found one of the rings holding up the harness and began sawing away at where the reinforced fabric looped around the metal. One by one, the rings flopped in the air as the weight lifted off it, like cutting away a curtain from a shower rod.

I glanced over my shoulder when I felt the whale begin to tilt like a mountain slide at the cusp of breaking.

A metallic cranking noise erupted below, screeching noisily. I realized Meagan was actually helping instead of arguing, frantically working an iron-rusted valve along the port-side. She was slowly raising a flat bridge-like metal platform. If we timed it right, we could snap the harness and let the whale roll down the platform like a slide, straight into the water!

“This is extremely dangerous!” the Captain shouted as if reading my mind. “If the whale gets stuck on the slide, its weight will capsize the entire friggin’ ship!”

“Then we won’t let it get stuck!” I shouted back. Maybe the rain will keep it slick enough, I thought, sawing away with the dagger, trying to keep my feet under me as the whale shifted, sloping downwards.

I told myself that I was just balancing on a particularly steep rooftop, that I’d done this countless times before jumping rooftop to rooftop, rain pounding over Dunwall, the roof tiles slick, precarious… “I can do this,” I chanted to myself, “I can do this.”

“Hold up, boy!” I looked over my shoulder, realizing the Captain was yelling at the Pandyssian. “You need to cut the final straps together or the whale will fall too far on one side. Balance the weight!”

Through the heart-pounding furor wracking my brain, I realized what she was saying. Already, Loki had cut faster than me, his side almost done. I resumed sawing with the dagger, feeling his anxious eyes on my back as he waited for me to catch up. Finally, I did, the whale teetering on the edge of release.

“Remember, together!” Meagan cried.

Her commanding voice was oddly reassuring. I didn’t think we could have gotten this far without Rosemary, and now, suddenly I felt the same about the dark and mysterious Captain.

Across the blue-gray length of the whale, Loki met my eyes, intensely focused. I had my dagger in place, ready to make the final strike, my heart thundering in my ears. Behind him, I saw the towering cliffs of Tempest Island emerge from the mists, and against that black canvas, the Dreadful Wale came into view. The crew aboard the tow ship may have been under a spell, indifferent to the whale about to crash over the side like a meatball rolling off a dinner plate unto the floor, but they were fully aware of the job they came to do. They buzzed around the deck, prepping the tow lines and slowing their approach speed.

“Now!” Meagan shouted.

I slashed, cutting free the final ring holding up my side of the whale, praying Loki was doing the same to his.

One hundred tons of whale flesh hit the platform, rolling like an avalanche, totaling knocking me off
my feet. Big, big meatball! This was not a good idea! Every alarm was going off in my head, shouting at me to get AWAY before I was crushed to death.

I caught sight of the whale’s tail; it thrashed in the air like the beast was angry or scared—probably both—and worse I realized I was two seconds from going over the side of the ship with the whale!

I could use *Far Reach* to catapult to safety, but what about Loki?!

Time seemed to slow as I stretched my arcane tether towards the head of the whale and launched myself beside the Pandysssian. The catapult was sloppy (the ‘target’ moving) and I found myself flailing wildly, wrenching an arm around Loki’s body as we tumbled towards the choppy seas, sliding against the whale’s body on our backs, its skin slick with rainwater.

We smacked the water’s surface hard, and instantly I felt like I was being pushed to the bottom of the ocean floor at tremendous speeds, plunged into darkness and plummeted by massive waves blasting away from the whale’s point of entry. In the thrashing chaos, I found my head suddenly above water, the waves scooping me up—I could barely believe it, not realizing I’d been even close to the surface.

I gasped for air, hearing screams and tortured metal. The whaling ship was rocking in the waves, almost capsizing as Meagan had feared, but at the last second it seemed to stabilize, the iron-black hull righting itself with a metal-screeching shudder.

“Loki!” I screamed, coughing and spitting out water.

I felt fingers wrap around my ankle and suddenly I was yanked underwater. Moving fast like I was caught in an undertow. I tried clawing at the water, but I was helpless.

I gasped again, choking in delirious panic as air entered my lungs. It took a moment for me to realize I was on all fours, my hands pressed against something slippery, my knees making indents in whale blubber. I pushed up, scrambling to my feet in shock.

I staggered like a drunkard as the whale rode the waves, my hands gripping Loki’s arm like he was the only solid thing in the world. We were standing on the whale’s back, the Ocean sprawled out in front of us like endless possibilities, the horizon soaked in secretive mists. Behind us, the ships were fast receding as the whale swam for its freedom.

I stared at Loki, drinking him in. He was grinning foolishly at me. Dark, green seaweed was tangled in his hair, and rain was pouring down his face in rivers.

*We did it!*  

I jumped on him, crushing him in an ecstatic embrace. We fell, tangled, on the back of the whale, laughing and crying. I was cold, drenched to the bone and shaking like a leaf, but somehow I had never felt happier.

He was pinned beneath me, my father’s coat completely soaked through, each side flapping apart by the rough waves spilling over the whale’s back. I could see his bare chest heaving, his heart pounding. His eyes were mine when I slowly dragged my gaze up his chest to his face. *Mine.* The world gone; it was just the two of us.

I wanted to kiss him, kiss every part of him, but I rolled off his body, the waves breaking us apart. The whale was swimming close to the surface, but the storm made it difficult to stay on the whale’s back without some attention to balance.
“She’s happy,” Loki said, breaking the rain-drenched silence, his fingers running over the whale’s skin like a caress. “She’s going home, Emily.”

There was something melancholy in the way he said home.

“I’m glad,” I said, glancing down at his hand, almost feeling jealous that he would touch her so tenderly.

I frowned, noticing for the first time strange patterns stretching over the whale’s skin. Circles. Hundreds of them. Imprinted on the whale’s back, barely visible. “What are these?” I asked, running my finger along one circle.

“Battle scars,” he said, finding a circle of his own to trace. “They’re marks from a giant squid.” His eyes turned playful. “Where it latched on with its suckers.”

This he demonstrated by lunging over me, his hands pushing against my shoulders. I’d been in a crouching position, balanced on my heels, but his surprise attack flopped me on my back. I started giggling as I realized what he was doing—pretending to be the squid by biting at my neck.

Little, playful bites, all teeth and no tongue.

“Those aren’t suckers!” I gasped and giggled, losing my breath as he continued the assault, pinning my hands low against my stomach, my head rolled to the side.

“Breathe, Empress!” he laughed, his breath hot against my neck.

“It’s too much teeth!”

I waited for him to get the idea—that I wanted him to press his whole mouth over me, to press soft lips and tongue against my skin and suck, but he was all hard teeth, grazing my skin in a terribly ticklish manner. I couldn’t stop laughing.

“You’re a terrible squid,” I declared.

Loki doesn’t kiss, I thought. He bites.

“Well, I’m out of my element,” he said in a quieter tone that suggested his giggles had transformed into something else, something calculating, almost sultry. Mischievous. I widened my eyes, looking up at him, his black hair flattened against his skull as water pounded from above. In the next instant, he grabbed me and rolled us off the whale into the ocean.

My girlish scream ripped the air, but I sucked in a lungful of breath, anticipating the crash of waves pulling us under. We plunged into the cold depths and tangled beneath the water, eventually diving towards the surface, gasping air.

He was like a playful sea otter, clearly having more fun than I as he swam around me, diving up and under, his hands latching onto my waist or arms in little dive attacks. I grabbed at him, laughing, but I was secretly annoyed each time he got away. He was quick. A natural swimmer.

“Not fair,” I laughed, finally claiming victory by pouncing over his entire upper body, wrapping my arms around his neck and gripping his waist with my legs, attaching to him like a barnacle.

“I have boots on,” I explained as I felt him calm down, our heads held close together, a shelter from the rain. “It makes me heavy and slow.”
“The squid wins this time, Empress,” he murmured into my ear, right before a wave crashed over us.

Somehow, we stayed connected, but as I came up for air, gasping, I felt the sting of nervous energy. We were completely at the mercy of the waves. I clung to him all the harder.

He felt my fear. “I got you,” he said, all seriousness.

His eyes clouded with gray mist as he turned his head to look out over the water in the direction we had come. It was the same sea-changing look I’d seen in his eyes when he had floated naked above the sand, gripped in the spell to raise the sea monster from the Deep. I realized it was like Rosemary’s red-pulsating fire that sparked in her eyes whenever she used her sorcery.

“Magic?” I breathed against him.

“Just calling my sea mount,” he said, his eyes turning back to normal, emerald-clear. “She hasn’t left yet.”

Another she, I noticed. Even the Angra Mazul had been female.

“Yet?” I asked, an eyebrow rising.

“I don’t own her, nor does my magic command her. She came out of curiosity and only obeys if she wants to.”

“So you have to entice her to do as you please?” I teased.

Something far too perplexing crossed his face, the mystery only deepening when he reshuffled me, his arms jerking a little, pushing me further up so that when he leaned forward, his mouth was at my collarbone.

Again, the teeth.

I tried not to roll my eyes back, a shudder running through me. He had to know what this was doing to me.

I was freezing—the water was so cold—but he was making me feel hot with every touch, every glance…

Over his bowed head, I caught a glimpse of the whale in the distance, breaching the surface before diving below. Goodbye, friend. I looked down, feeling Loki’s teeth pull away. He’d grazed along my collarbone, but with no further to go his mouth had finally rested on the curve of my shoulder.

He slowly looked up at me, his soft lips disappearing from my skin. I shivered.

What are we doing? Latched onto each other in the middle of the rain, legs churning to keep afloat, the ocean tossing us around… an echo of what I felt inside as his eyes held me.

He twisted in the water, breaking the stare. I slipped further down his chest, following the direction of his gaze. The Dreadful Wale was barely visible through the rain-soaked mists, a phantom over the water next to the hulking mass of iron-black drawing closer to secure the tow lines.

I didn’t want to go back. Not yet.

I leaned back a little, straightening my elbows somewhat, my hands clamped behind his neck as I tried to get a better look at his face, to see if he was feeling what I was feeling.
The urge to kiss him was overwhelming.

But so was the fear that I was moving too fast. That locking lips might actually scare him. Playful flirting was one thing. Actually sticking my tongue in his mouth another. What if it freaks him out? But then I laughed at myself for worrying so hard. Actually worrying. He was an ancient Pandysssian and I had no clue what his people’s customs were around intimacy. What he expected… What his boundaries were…

But he is flirting with me, I decided, glancing into his eyes.

Four thousand years be damned. I was pretty sure I was right about that.

He was definitely interested in me in that way.

He held me tight, quietly holding my stare as we waited. I realized there was something unpleasant in the way he kept glancing at the Dreadful Wale. Something cold. Wary. I realized he didn’t want to go back any more than I did.

For me, it was my father.

Having to confront the look on his face when I returned… I knew my little adventure would just confirm his fears that I was falling too fast, too hard for the human Outsider. Plus, freeing the whale had been dangerous—and downright stupid if it had actually interfered with the tow job. (Delilah knew we were on Tempest Island; we had to get out of here). Corvo will be angry, I thought. Angrier.

But for Loki… what did going back mean to him?

“Loki,” I softly whispered, his eyes returning to my face once more. No matter how many times he looked at the Dreadful Wale, he always came back to me. “What’s wrong?”

“The black ship…” he said, his voice sounding strangled. “Why did they take her away from her home? Why would men hurt her like that?”

The whale.

“Oh.” I blinked, realizing he’d been glaring at the whaling ship and not the Dreadful Wale. I hesitated, tensing up in his arms. “It’s… complicated, Loki.”

My answer made it worse.

He wouldn’t look at me.

“She’s here,” he said, his voice sounding stiff, but I had already felt the silky frill of the sea serpent gliding past my leg.

I let go of him, watching Loki climb over its scaly back like he had done it a million times before. This time, when he held out a reaching arm, I swung up behind him.

I saddled the writhing creature and settled against Loki’s back, pressing my thighs against his. I wrapped my arms around him, slipping my hand beneath his coat to feel his wet skin beneath.

The hard muscles of his abdomen clenched beneath my fingers. I hadn’t meant to be so forward, but after forcing myself not to kiss him, I couldn’t just let him go without something acknowledging the charge in the air between us.
And I wanted to force his mind away from the dark things in this world, the blood and death, the suffering of whales… I’d lived in Dunwall my entire life. I was Corvo’s daughter. I knew just how dark the world could be.

His hand reached inside the coat, clasping over mine—as if holding my hand hostage. “Are they hunted for food?” he asked harshly, his former playfulness gone.

“Loki…”

It was torture. Must I say it out loud? I leaned my head against his back and closed my eyes.

“Theyir whale oil powers our cities. Our technology.” Not wholly, but close enough that if the whales did completely disappear, we’d be knocked back a few decades in modern advancements.

“They are creatures of Satakal,” he hissed in what I could only describe as righteous fury. “It is wrong.”

“Then maybe that’s why you’re here,” I shot back. “Your precious destiny.” I didn’t mean to sound so bitter, but the thought of any culture sacrificing an innocent young man for whatever religion made my stomach turn in revulsion. “Maybe you were reborn to save all the whales.”

And destroy us in the process.

I couldn’t imagine the Empire without whale oil, though obviously there’d been a simpler time when it wasn’t around. But even if the Empire survived the loss, the monarchy wouldn’t. The Crown would be blamed. I would be doomed.

“Maybe, Emily Kaldwin,” he said, biting back.

But not in the way I liked.

I felt his thighs squeeze, the creature writhing, and we sped towards the Dreadful Wale. He was angry, his muscles tense, but when I tried pulling my hand away—my instincts telling me that now wasn’t the time to let my hands wander, as much as I wanted to—he unexpectedly curled his fingers around mine, signaling he didn’t want me to stop touching him.

I took a deep breath in relief, like maybe I needed that signal more than I realized.

My eyes were still closed, my forehead pressed to his back. He felt so warm. His skin was clammy and cold, wet from the rain, but the core beneath was hot iron, solid and strong. My fingers dug into the little valleys between his mound-like abdominal muscles, but I moved neither up nor down.

For now, it was simply enough to feel the fire in his belly and know that I was, in part, a reason for it.

Chapter End Notes
P.S. Sorry for the meatball humor. Once it got into the draft, I just couldn’t take it out.

Also, I have no idea how one would actually free a whale from a harness like that without a twenty-man crew, a forklift, and maybe a helicopter. This is what is so fun about writing. You can just make stuff up and somehow it comes out realistic (lol) - hopefully.
Chapter Notes

When you throw two cultures together, there’s bound to be some misunderstandings.


Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 44

We rode up in the choppy wake of the *Dreadful Wale*, the ship already being towed behind the much larger whaling ship. After giving the sea serpent an affectionate rub, Loki took my hand, expecting me to catapult us over the rail with *Far Reach*, but instead I rested my chin on his shoulder and smiled at him.

“Why don’t you try it, Loki? You have the Mark.”

I was pretty sure the Outsider would have been generous with *himself*, so to speak. He’d Marked the ancient Pandyssian so he could speak the common tongue, but why stop there?

My encouraging smile was met with a stupefied look. “I don’t know how,” he said, raising his sorcery hand to stare at the Mark like it might whisper secrets in his ear.

I curled his hand into a fist.

“You can do it,” I murmured. “Just look for a target and pull yourself towards it.” It was an echo of the Outsider’s instruction in the Void when he’d first taught me how to use *Far Reach*. I couldn’t help but grin a little; *what goes around, comes around*.

But the Outsider had also said he’d made *Far Reach* just for me. If the Pandyssian could teleport, I figured his spell would be more like Corvo’s *Blink*; hence, the fist.

“Try snagging the rail,” I said, watching his face in profile as he looked up at the ship. He bit his bottom lip in concentration, a little quirk I’d never seen the Outsider do. It was somehow sad, like the Outsider had lost, bit by bit, pieces of his humanity over the thousands of years he’d lorded over the Void.

“Do you see anything?”

His mouth parted slightly, issuing a tiny gasp. “A blue glowing ball…”

“That’s it,” I said excitedly. “Now, *Blink!*”

I hugged him from behind, my hands sliding over the muscled planes of his belly under my father’s oversized coat. In truth, I only needed to be *connected* to him to become enveloped by the teleportation spell. Holding hands was one way, but unnecessary. I could recall a few terrifying
assassination attempts when Corvo had grabbed me around the waist to Blink me away to safety.

When nothing happened, I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“It disappeared. You—distracted me.”

“Did I?”

A helpless grin split my face as I saw his ears go pink, but my teasing only doubled his efforts. He tightened his fist and bit his lip like it might actually hurt. A cold sap of wind encased us, the air rippling with eerie Void whispers, then suddenly we were falling over the rail, the deck coming up fast.

I laughed as we fell in an ungraceful heap, all tangled legs and sharp elbows. He shined a smile that would make the sun jealous.

“Let’s do it again!”

“No, Loki!”

A scolding that would have convinced no one, my giggles betraying the lie.

He Blinked spastically around the entire ship’s perimeter, following the rail like it was a racetrack. I squeezed him for all I was worth, dying of laughter, my stomach doing somersaults with each traversal through the Void. He was exhausting his mana fast, and when he finally reached his limit, it was like the weight of a freight train ramming me against the deck.

We collapsed right where we’d started—at the stern of the ship. He rolled onto his back, breathing hard like he had just run a marathon, his gasps of laughter shaking my body where I was draped over him like a throw rug.

I could feel the pounding rain against my back as I lifted off his chest, meeting his bright eyes. “Loki, you fiendish—”

The look on his face was enough to seize my heart.

Mischief glimmered in his eyes, and something else, something as primal and pure as the need for survival, a sexual instinct as old as time. He wanted me—and more than that, he saw I wanted him. It felt good. It felt right. Fearless. Like maybe our bodies could lead the way when our minds were too afraid to wonder how or why two strangers in the rain could feel so connected.

We were, after all, so different.

“You’re shaking,” he said, his hands reaching inside my coat this time, fitting around my waist like they belonged there.

“I’m fr-freezing.” I stammered with a ridiculous smile, my teeth chattering and my voice far too breathless—as if I’d forgotten what it felt like to be on top of a man. I wanted him to warm me up and if I had to exaggerate just how cold I was… well, I was cold, actually. My head felt a little groggy.

“Your Blink is c-cold,” I added with a playful pout.

“Oh, so it’s my fault?” he grinned, bearing teeth.

“And the fact that I’m wet,” I poured on, hot and accusing. “You d-dunked me in the ocean, Loki!”
It sounded angry, but I enjoyed the anger, the way it gave me confidence to push into him a little, rolling my hips in case he missed the fact that he was, indeed, making me wet.

His fingers tightened around my waist, his eyes betraying the barest hint of fear. I frowned. Was I moving too fast?

“I suppose the rain is my fault, too?” he asked, sounding as twisted up as I felt.

His voice was met with a peal of thunder, opening the sky in a deluge of rain that made it impossible for him to keep his eyes open, flat on his back as he was. I leaned over him like my body might serve as a cave to shelter him, my hair falling forward in heavy curtains, my arms braced on either side of his head.

“It could be,” I murmured.

“It is,” he murmured back—a comment I thought strange since it sounded so serious, but I pushed it back, focusing on the feel of his body beneath mine.

The closeness of our bodies set something off—maybe the heat of contact, the freezing rain making us shiver and writhe in our wet, uncomfortable clothes, urging the sweet contact of flesh against flesh, seeking warmth from the only place it could be found—inside us.

“Emily,” he gasped as I rolled into him again, feeling him rock hard beneath me, his clothes pasted slick against his body, at once a barrier and nothing else, his rain-drenched pants hugging his skin in a way that left little to the imagination.

The fear in his eyes evaporated with the crack of lightning and the roll of thunder. He seemed to draw confidence from the storm, like it was a reflection of the Ocean’s power misting in his eyes. I vaguely realized he had cast some spell—his Maormer magic visibly changing his eyes—but what for I had no clue, my thoughts completely draining away in the rain when I saw him finally break.

He was forceful, the heat of his hand wrapping around my neck as he curled his upper body forward, bracing his weight with his other arm held behind him like a chapel buttress. His body looked sacred to me. With his groin pinned beneath me, my legs straddling him, he strained towards me with all the force of an upside-down waterfall like I’d seen in the Void.

His mouth went for my neck.

This time there was no trace of teeth. He licked me, his tongue running hot and soft, and broad. It wasn’t like a wet kiss, all darting tongue and soft lips; no, he was literally licking me in a straight line from bottom to top, like lapping a stream of sap from a maple tree, only in the storm, the sap was rainwater streaming down my skin. When he reached my ear, he blew into it for several long seconds, further disorientating me.

I froze, unsure how to react.

This was not what I had expected. Almost guiltily, I thought about Wyman. My Morley Red was a master of foreplay, his tantalizing kisses driving me up the wall, especially when he went for the neck. But Loki’s lick up my neck and subsequent blow in the ear felt less like foreplay and more like a strange ritual, especially when he did it again with no variation in position.

He licked me like there was an invisible line he had to trace up my neck, then top off with a tickle of wind in my ear. Alarm bells screamed in my head, like maybe I should listen to my very good advice about taking things slow.
“Loki, what…”

I trailed off when his hand sank from my neck to fumble at the slanted, silvery buttons along my leather vest. *That* I understood. He was trying to undress me.

A thrill shot through me like a lightning bolt, and all at once taking things slow went straight out the window!

I didn’t think he could do it one-handed, but I decided against helping, suddenly charmed by the determined look on his face as he tried to unravel the divine mystery of buttons. It was terribly cute. He’d clearly never seen such things before and was having a hard time of it, the wet fabric making his task even more frustrating. As he worked, I ran my hands over his bare stomach, soaking in the feel of his straining muscles, clenching and jerking as he tried to keep his upper body curled upright with my hips grinding against him.

“Be still, *Nymphaea,*” he commanded.

His querulous tone amused me, contrasted as it was against the nervous flicker in his eyes, their emerald depths swirling with stormy mist.

I wanted to ask about his magic, but instead I landed on the unfamiliar word, tasting it.

“*Nymphaea?*”

It sounded pretty.

“Water lily,” he translated absently, picking at the top button with growing frustration.

*Mhm.* I tried to be still, but it was hard to behave myself. I vaguely recalled the tropical Pandysian flower in Sokolov’s taxidermy journals. It was a kind of flowering pod that floated on the surface of the water—and very beautiful. He’d brought back a few specimens and sold them to rare flower breeders; they were very popular in Serkonos.

“What about water lilies?” I asked with a widening grin. Any question that made his ears go pink was a reward in itself.

“You know,” he huffed, avoiding my eyes.

“I do?”

I watched his face, the careful concentration morphing into impatience as he literally tore off the top button on my vest, the fine threads making a horrible ripping sound.

“Loki!” I exclaimed, flinging myself back to inspect the damage, my outburst mixed with shock and laughter—and maybe a little outrage—my expensive clothes torn, the button bouncing away, lost forever. “That’s not how you do it!”

He made a grumbling noise, like he didn’t care one whit about my button, and followed me with his mouth like it was unacceptable that I try to move away. I rocked backwards and balanced on my knees, tugging at the second button with stiff, cold fingers as his teeth raked across my collarbone, his freed-up hands pushing the flaps of my coat aside.

*Back to the teeth, huh?*

He had climbed to his feet to get at me, deciding last second to just settle on his knees like me, our
bodies upright and swaying against each other with each pull and tug of hands and mouth.

“Watch,” I commanded in a panting noise, showing him how to twist the long, diagonal buttons through their holes. Rain was streaking down his face, dripping from his long, dark lashes as he obediently lowered his eyes to focus on my hands.

Gods, he was beautiful. If I’m the lily, I thought, he’s the water beneath me. I felt acutely aware of his every tremble, his every touch; it rippled through me. I could see my reflection in his misty eyes.

“Now, you do it,” I whispered, shivering violently, though whether it was the cold rain or his hot touch, I could no longer tell. One by one, he undid the buttons until my vest hung open, fluttering in the stormy wind.

The rain poured between my exposed breasts and down my belly, the freezing cold hardening my nipples into little pink pearls, begging for the heat of his mouth. Instead he straightened his back, closed his eyes and clasped his hands together as if in prayer of all things!

He began to chant something in ancient Pandyssian, so fast I couldn’t pick out the words. I stared at him like he’d gone crazy. What was he doing? He leaned his head to my right, licking up my neck to blow in my ear, and then moving to my left, he did the same thing on the other side.

The same ritual, I thought, my belly clenching, torn between desire and confusion. His breathing noticeably slowed as the chanting became more focused. I’d seen Overseers like that, lost inside their prayers when they recited the Seven Strictures on their knees, candle flames illuminating etched bronze tablets.

I wanted to stop this strange madness, but when he grabbed my arms and forced them back, I felt my body’s response like the ritual itself had demanded my obedience.

He held my arms pinned behind me, forcing out my chest. I instinctively arched my back, my breasts spilling forward like eager supplicants.

His eyes were still closed as his mouth blindly felt for a nipple, wet lips and tongue running hot over my water-slick skin. A raw noise escaped my lips. Rain sluiced off my nipples like a water fountain, and I quickly realized he wasn’t so much kissing me as drinking rainwater off my skin.

It was a strange sensation, at once disconcerting and erotic.

His mouth opening and closing, his tongue working to guide streams of water into his mouth, his lips sucking over my hard nipples. He drank like he was dying of thirst. And he was gentle; so, so gentle. His hands were bracing hard against my arms, but his mouth was soft and worshipful.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I didn’t give a fuck if this was some weird, ancient Pandyssian ritual. I wanted him.

I spared a guilty glance around us before making my move, half-expecting to see my father rounding the corner to tear us apart in a wild rage, but we were alone in the pouring rain. Worse, the stern of the ship gave one the illusion of privacy as the large engine plate blocked all view of the rest of the ship.

I felt like a nervous teenager all over again, afraid to be caught out by my overprotective father. There was a reason I’d never had sex until Rosemary and Wyman came along in my early twenties. With threats of what he’d do if he caught me without a chaperon, Lord Corvo had only yielded when I’d flung his hypocrisy back in his face, reminding him how young Mother had been when he had pursued her, secretly, behind the backs of the entire royal court.
“Loki,” I gasped, fighting his handhold until I broke free. “I want you.” I fisted my hand in his hair, pulling him into a kiss, my other hand pressing over his hardness below.

Which act had shocked him more I couldn’t tell.

He made a desperate noise against my mouth, pushing us apart. Instantly, the rain ceased.

I stared at him, my breath coming short and fast. His eyes had snapped open, the misty depths parting as quickly as the storm clouds above until I saw only emerald-clear green eyes, marked by confusion and wild fear.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, barely able to speak. I lifted my hand, feeling for the rain, but it was gone. Fucking Void, he could control the weather? “Did you…?”

I didn’t understand, and I didn’t know where to start.

“You…” he struggled, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

A nasty chill iced over me when he refused to look at me, his eyes avoiding my breasts like he was intensely embarrassed, as if he’d suddenly forgotten he was boldly sucking at them only a moment ago. It made no sense.

“Done what?” I demanded.

He narrowed his eyes. “Interrupted the spell,” he said like it was obvious. He climbed to his feet and gripped the rail like he had to steady himself.

I scrambled after him, doing up the buttons on my vest and covering myself. “What spell? Loki?!”

He didn’t respond, his body tensing. He had that look, like he was about to bolt and run away forever. This is exactly why you should have gone slow, Emily. Stupid, stupid.

“Loki, listen,” I said, trying to sound calm. I stood beside him but was careful not to touch him. “I think we might have had a big misunderstanding, but I want to understand. Tell me—”

“You defiled a sacred act! The spell of sovah ib sorcha is holy.”

The fuck?

“I… I didn’t know. I’m not from your time, Loki.” I softened my voice. “Please…” I bit my lip, trying to figure it out. “Does the spell have something to do with your religion?”

“Religion?” he repeated, not understanding the modern terminology, his curious eyes reluctantly meeting mine.

“Your belief in Satakal,” I said slowly. “Your god.”

“Oh.” He looked away. “Yes.”

“And?”

“And you defiled the spell. A Nymphaea is a Priestess of Satakal. One of his wives. So holy and pure that only the Sacrifice may drink from her…” Heat poured into his cheeks.

“Breasts?” I supplied bluntly.
The look on his face was all the answer I needed.

I gaped at him. *He goes around drinking water from women’s breasts? But if it’s only a religious act, why is he blushing like a virgin?*

“I don’t get it. You think I’m a Priestess of Satakal?”

“You know you are,” he snapped, his eyes darkening with wounded pride as if he believed I had intentionally embarrassed him.

“I’m not!”

“The pearls,” he shot back accusingly, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a handful. They spilled over his hand and bounced over the deck, scattering in all directions. “Only a wife of Satakal may wear them. They represent the purity of the water lilies.”

Wow. *That explains…*

I felt like I was reeling. I had to stem the tide.

“Loki,” I said carefully, “I’m not a wife of Satakal. I’m nobody’s wife. I’m the Empress of the Isles, and my people do not worship your god. The *old* ways are gone. Your world is gone. Four thousand years gone. I’m sorry, but I didn’t know what you were doing. I thought—”

This time *I* blushed and looked away, but he didn’t pivot on that. “Are you saying my God is dead?” he fumed.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Maybe Satakal is still with us, just… worshipped under a different name.”

I could see him consider this, his eyes wandering, his jaw grinding. I risked a small touch, resting my hand over where his gripped the rail, his knuckles going white.

He didn’t flinch. “You looked at me like one of them,” he quietly said, not meeting my eyes, but staring at my hand touching his. “The priestesses, they… liked me.”

*I bet.*

The Sacrifice was central to their religion, it seemed. Who knew what strange rituals and special attention he had received growing up?

“I…”

I wanted to tell him I liked him too, but I was afraid to make things worse. *You’ve royally screwed up, Emily,* I told myself, feeling glum—and aching. I still wanted him, badly. I felt keyed up, my body thrumming in the afterglow of his touch.

“I didn’t mean to cause confusion,” I finally said, feeling lame. I couldn’t look at him.

“Well, maybe we can be confused together.”

I looked up at him, surprised to find a playful smile on his lips. He was trying to lighten the mood, I realized, or at least make me feel better about making such a mess of things.

“I think we can handle that,” I said, smiling back. We stood together at the rail, just watching the waves. After a time, I asked, pretending to be nonchalant, “So… are *all* your religious rituals so
sexual?”

What else had he done with these *Nymphaea* girls? I couldn’t help but feel a little jealous, even if they were long dead. If they were all water lilies, they must have been very beautiful.

His green eyes darted over my face, his ears going pink again. “Sexual?” he blurted. “No, it’s… they…” He shook his head. “The ritual of *Sovah ib Sorcha* is not sexual.”

I caught his eye, the look on my face saying it all.

He muttered, “Okay, it never felt sexual until I tried it out on you.”

“Then *that* should have told you I wasn’t a Priestess of Satakal.”

“I wasn’t thinking.”

“What *were* you thinking?” My smile widened. “You blush like a virgin, Loki,” I teased.

He turned his back to the rail and leaned against it, facing me. *Looking* at me. No matter how many times it happened, his eyes were instantly capable of making my heart race. I was freezing, my teeth chattering, my clothes a sodden mess against my skin, but all the discomfort in the world seemed to melt away when he looked at me like *that*.

“Well, *Emily,*” he said in a biting tone like he was annoyed by my teasing, but playing along to salvage his male pride, “The Sacrifice is a virgin.”

I looked away. *Damn.* That meant the Outsider was a virgin, too; when he died, at least. *That explains a lot,* I thought. When I looked back at him, he still looked annoyed—and terribly riled up.

I felt bad.

Wyman had often accused me of being a terrible tease, especially when I couldn’t keep my hands off him. Merciless teasing was just part of how I liked flirting with men, but probably wasn’t helping things.

“I’m sorry. I should just stop talking.”

“No… I like it,” he said, giving me a bold look that practically stopped my heart. “Half the things you say put my stomach in knots and the other half makes me want to go back home where things used to make sense.”

“It’ll get easier,” I said, frowning at the ache in his voice. I didn’t think the loss of his home and family would *ever* heal—I could relate, having lost my mother—but I knew talking about it helped. “We just need to be open with each other, Loki. Keep talking. Keep asking questions. If I do something you don’t understand or that makes you uncomfortable, you have to let me know, and vice versa. Agreed?”

He listened, his eyes going solemn. “Agreed,” he said. “Do you have questions right now?”

*I want you. Do you want me?*

I forced that down. “What was the spell for?”

He nodded at the sky. “The rain.”

“You can control the weather?”
“No,” he said, making a face. “Maormer magic can only coax storms into becoming more intense. *Sovah ib Sorcha* is a kind of fertility ritual; it’s used to create great floods to nurture our crops and for the timing of seasons. We have many spells and rituals. To make the sun come up every morning. To help women in childbirth. To watch over our warriors in battle. To give men strong erections to seed—”

“Really?” I interrupted, barely suppressing a grin. “Your culture sounds very interesting.”

“Do your priests not do the same?” he asked, looking horrified. “What is your religion?”

I thought of the Overseers and shuddered. “Let’s just say they are sexually repressed. Men aren’t getting erections from them. It’s….” I shrugged. “Order fighting chaos, I guess.”

“Hmm,” he murmured. “The Hooded Ones would agree, except for the ’sexually repressed’ part. That sounds unnatural.”

“So says the virgin,” I teased. “Why weren’t you allowed to have sex?”

He blinked at me.

“Wrong question?” I asked, frowning.

He shook his head. “Just not used to women making me feel bad about it. My entire life, I’ve been praised and prepared as the Sacrifice. The virginity was for the purity of the Sacrifice. Before now, I never saw it as….”

He trailed off, biting his bottom lip.

“As what?” I softly asked.

“As something that no longer applies to me.”

*He’s realizing he’s no longer the Sacrifice, I thought, that his old life is gone, and he can be someone else now, do things he’s never done before.*

When he fell into a brooding silence, I asked, “Why did you connect me with a fertility ritual?”

“Your pearls…”

“And licking breasts is really involved in this ritual?”

He stared at the deck, his foot pushing around the stray pearls. “When it’s time for the flood, all the priestesses gather in the weeds along the riverbank. I… anoint them until the rain begins to pour in sheets and the weeds sway with rising waters—stop it!”

He broke off, laughing. “You make me feel foolish, Emily. Stop smiling! This ritual is serious. It’s important to my people.” But of course, he was having trouble not smiling, too.

I hurriedly wiped the ridiculous smile from my face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean…”

When he’d said *anoint*, my mind immediately conjured a picture of him worshipfully sucking all their breasts. (Most teenage boys would probably agree he had the best job in the world, minus the dying in a sacrifice part). Still, I could admit there was something primal about it.

Close to the earth.
I said, “It really does sound beautiful, Loki. The rain and helping crops grow… Like what you did was important.”

“It was.”

“I know.”

“I liked it.”

“I see that.”

His eyes fell longingly over my neck. “Sovah ib sorcha.” The ancient words slipped from his lips like a reverent prayer. “It means water and wind.” He unexpectedly turned towards me and traced a finger up my neck. “Water,” he murmured, and leaning into me, he blew lightly into my ear. “And wind.”

I tried not to shudder, but it was impossible.

“Well,” I swallowed hard, “You just let me know if you want to make it rain again.”

His eyes fell to my lips. He leaned closer, his eyes almost closing, my breath catching—but then the ship began to wail, the horn blown from the bridge. We broke apart, backing away from each other in startled surprise.

We looked at each other and laughed.

“Maybe that’s the dinner bell,” I smirked. “You hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Maybe we should go inside.” I cracked a huge smile. “You know, before we have another misunderstanding and I defile your religion again.”

He smiled back, shaking his head. “Now I understand why your father’s eyes are so angry.”
This is *the* controversial chapter. I’ve gotten harsh criticism for this one (on here and FF dot net).

If you’re a new reader, this chapter might not come as a surprise to you if you’ve been reading between the lines. “Unreliable narrator” and all that. Emily is blind. She doesn’t see how her relationship with her father is borderline creepy. He’s not just “overprotective” – there’s something crossing a line between them and she’s been denying that reality for awhile now. (Chapter 42 comes to mind). What Delilah did to Corvo is just a part of it. (I tried to explain more in chapter notes in Chapter 48).

That said, I’ve taken a lot of heat for writing this chapter. I get that it’s pretty fucked up and the fact that it disturbs people makes me feel proud as a writer that I actually caused such a visceral reaction. It is, after all, just words on paper.

But just in case: please use your own judgement. If rape triggers you, do not read.

Part IV continued

“Schism”

Chapter 45

With the rain gone, Tempest Island was no longer shrouded in mist. Loki hesitated at the rail, watching the island fall away even as his smile did the same. I glanced over the stark obsidian cliffs, wondering if I’d ever see its black sands again. *It’s his birthplace*, I thought; now and forever, it would always be special.

I gently touched his arm. “You ready to go in?” I shivered violently. “I don’t mean to rrr-rush you, but I’m fr-freezing.”

He turned to look at me, a flash of guilt crossing his face. He put his arms around me and rubbed my shoulders. “I’m sorry for dunking you in the ocean.”

“N-n-no, you’re not,” I said, smiling up at him. “We had f-fun.”

I felt so happy that he wasn’t afraid to touch me again, even after our little ‘misunderstanding’. He smiled back, seemingly amused by my helpless teeth chatter, and leaned forward to plant a flat kiss on top of my nose.

“That’s the s-second time you’ve k-kissed me on the nose, Loki.”

“Are you counting?”

“Yes.”

I watched his eyes drift down to my lips, then fall further to my chest. With my top button ripped
away, I had more cleavage on display than I was used to (court fashion being rather conservative), and my sodden vest was only completing the picture of what lied beneath. Which he’s already seen, Emily, I told myself, my heart beating faster.

“Satakal save me,” Loki whispered, his eyes tearing away from the shape of my nipples through the wet fabric. He knelt and began picking up the pearls he had spilled across the deck like he had to busy his hands or risk grabbing me.

His ears turned pink as I watched him.

I knelt beside him and helped gather a pearl or two. “Save you from what?” I softly teased. I probably shouldn’t have—his body language was clear enough—but we had promised to be open with each other and not hesitate to ask questions.

He fingered one of the pearls, too embarrassed to look at me.

But he eventually did.

His green eyes were direct. The embarrassment was still there, but he wanted answers, too. “You’re not one of the Nymphaea—I know that now—but why are you…?” He bit his lip.

“Acting like one?” I asked, brows raised. These women would flirt with him? “But I thought the rituals you performed were not sexual. That’s what you said.”

He rolled a few pearls in his palm before pocketing them and rising to his feet. “The Hooded Ones made sure they were not sexual, but… I didn’t always follow the rules.”

“Oh huh.”

“The Nymphaea were very beautiful. Like you.” He said this without looking me in the eye. “So it’s hard for me to… break the association… when I look at you…” His eyes flickered over my cleavage.

I crossed my arms over my chest, suppressing a perplexed grin. “I see. Well, then… I won’t wear pearls around you anymore. Will that help?”

I didn’t want it to help.

“It’s more than that. You look at me like—”

He broke off, sounding frustrated.

“Loki…”

“I don’t know what I’m doing—who I am anymore,” he said, finally looking me in the eye. “And yet there’s this feeling I get from you… like you know who I am. Like we’ve known each other for a long time. How can that be?”

The Outsider.

I could have cried with the look in his eyes. Lost. Lonely. He had been thrown into a new world and was desperate for answers.

“I have that same f-feeling. Like you know who I am, Loki.” Deep down, inside my heart. I held myself, shivering against the cold. “You should know… when I look at you… I-I’m having trouble b-breaking an association, too.”
He waited patiently for me to continue, a puzzled look on his face.

“Your amonkalahira, Loki.”

The ancient word meant ‘sacred destiny’, and for the Sacrifice it meant becoming the Outsider. I knew he understood that the black-eyed deity who’d Marked him was him—a different him—but still him.

“The Outsider,” I continued, shivering. “He… he seduced me. With m-magic. He… he made me want him very b-badly.”

“And I have his face,” he said with solemn green eyes, understanding blooming over his pale features. Then after a pause, “Why did he seduce you?”

“I’m still trying to figure that out,” I said dryly, though the closest answer was probably, and simply: Delilah. He’d seduced me because he’d seen I was his best game piece against her—but that was an uncomfortable ‘truth’ that I only half-believed. I wanted to hold on to the faint possibility that the Outsider had seduced me for me.

I sighed. “Look, there’s a lot I don’t understand about the Outsider. He’s very… secretive and enigmatic and…” I stared at Loki’s face, imagining his green eyes turning black, and shuddered. “…alluring in a maddening way.”

“Why?” Loki asked.

“Because the Outsider is neither all good nor all evil. He’s just a reflection of the Void, and the Void itself is a kind of… entrapment. He can’t help but be seductive.” I thought of the Outsider’s zealous worshippers. “A lot of people lose their damn minds trying to pique the Outsider’s interest. I guess I’m just lucky.”

Loki made a face. “Lucky?”

“That I haven’t lost my mind. Father would probably argue that I already have, but that’s ironic because he—”

I broke off, feeling strange and almost nauseous. “What is it?” Loki asked, rubbing my shoulders again, but softly—for comfort rather than heat.

I suddenly felt very tired.

“Delilah did something to my father. Turned him mad in a frighteningly subtle way. Sometimes he loses himself in memories of my mother…” I wasn’t sure how to tell Loki about the Heart. My mother’s spirit was trapped inside it and for reasons I couldn’t explain, only my father could see and hear her. It was making him go mad, or rather making it worse, what Delilah had done to him in the throne room… “Sometimes Corvo seems fine, but he’s not really the same person. It’s not obvious—”
“His eyes,” Loki interrupted, shaking his head.

“Yes, okay, that’s obvious, but I mean his soul. His heart. His everything used to be wrapped up in this idea that he could find a way to deal with the evils of life by avoiding bloodshed. Instead, Delilah’s twisted his mind, made him desire blood, desire chaos, desire…” I almost said me and stopped myself. Where had that come from? I stammered, “H-he’s always wanted revenge for things, but now he believes the ends justify the means.”

“And you don’t.”

“No.” I thought of Delilah. “Most of the time.” I sighed. “And if I can avoid killing people to retake my throne, I will.”

*My choices matter. The ripples in the pond.*

I turned quiet after that. I didn’t like thinking about all the people who had died aboard the *Jessamine.* The death of Doctor Toksvig would haunt me for the rest of my days.

“Let’s go inside,” Loki said, reading my mood and gently pulling on my arm. “You look half frozen to death and you’re barely shivering anymore. That’s a bad sign.”

“Probably,” I mumbled, feeling drowsy. As we headed around the engine plate towards the belly of the ship, I leaned clumsily against him. “I want to lie down,” I said in a voice that seemed faraway.

Something in his eyes fired up in alarm. He swung me up, the underside of my knees jostling against the muscles of his arm as he carried me inside at a rapid pace. I tried smiling at him but I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

“Emily! Emily, wake up,” he said in a too-loud voice. I wanted him to shut up so I could go to sleep. I curled my arm around his neck, holding tight as he bounded down the stairs. I wanted to snuggle against his chest and go to sleep in his arms. I didn’t care if Delilah pulled me into the Void; I just wanted to let go.

He banged through the double doors and stopped short in the middle of the cargo bay. “Help! She has the ice sickness!”

I heard the scramble of feet and scraping chairs, and then my father’s voice, swearing profusely. “Fucking Void—Eileen!”

“I’ll warm the bath,” she cried, running steps fading. *Why was everyone panicking?* A warm bath sounded nice, but I wanted my bed first.

I felt a warm hand on my cheek and found my father’s face above me, his rat eyes churning. “Hypothermia,” he growled. “What the fuck did you do?”

This question he spat at Loki.

“We saved a whale, Father,” I said dreamily, trying to cup my father’s cheek, but I was awkwardly pulled from Loki’s arms and slung over my father’s broad shoulder. I giggled, feeling like a drunken sack of potatoes as he carried me into Sokolov’s quarters and deposited me unto the bed.

I saw the Princess loom over his shoulder, her eyes worried. “We need to warm her slowly.”

“I know,” Corvo snapped.
“Her wet clothes must come off,” she said, trying to move around him, her hands reaching for my arm.

“I know!” he shouted, and I winced.

“Don’t be angry, F-father. Where’s Loki?” I curled upwards as they struggled to peel off my sodden coat.

“Her speech is slurring,” the Princess stated.

“I fucking know,” Corvo said, quieter, tugging on my pants. He sounded almost afraid. My father—afraid. I couldn’t make sense of it. I didn’t like him pulling on my pants. I tried to kick him in the face, but my legs felt too heavy.

“Go away! I want to sleep,” I cried. “I’m tired. Go away…”

“Keep her talking,” the Princess said, an urgency in her voice that I didn’t understand.

“What happened here?” Corvo demanded, noticing the missing button as his fingers plied apart my torn vest, but the Princess just scowled and cried, “For Void’s sake, not now!”

With the vest gone, my hands instinctively cupped and squeezed my breasts together; it felt comforting. I thought of Loki’s mouth on my nipples and grinned at what felt like our first dirty, little secret. When Corvo leaned back, I stared at my bare legs, not remembering where my pants went, and then his fingers were curling over the laced hem of my underwear, dragging them down. I didn’t understand. It must be a joke. “So naughty, Father! You should be ashamed!” My body began shivering violently.

“That’s good,” the Princess announced. “She’s warming up, but she needs more or we’re going to lose her.”

She gave my father a look.

“I know,” Corvo said again, but this I know sounded demure. Hesitant, even. “Body heat,” he said matter-of-factly, pulling his shirt over his head and taking off his pants.

He smothered me with towels, drying my skin, and then got into bed with me, piling blankets on top of us. The weight of them made me feel sleepy, but I wanted to know where Loki was. I couldn’t rest until I knew he was okay. The murder in my father’s eyes was making me afraid for him.

“Where’s Loki?” I cried softly, shivering against him, his arms wrapped around my bare shoulders.

Corvo radiated pure heat; survival instinct had me moving closer, flesh against flesh. I felt safe with my father; his nearness had always been a comfort to me, and with the panic around me, confusing me, it felt even more comforting to have my father close.

“Fuck, she’s an ice cube,” Corvo said, hissing like he almost couldn’t bear to touch me. I felt sorry, like it was my fault.

The Tyvian Princess sat at the edge of the bed and squeezed a towel around locks of my dripping-wet hair. “Prince Loki is getting dry and warm, Your Majesty,” she said. “Just like you. Everything will be okay.”

“Katya, see where Eileen is with the bath,” Corvo ordered. “Every second matters.”
“It’ll take time to heat up,” the Princess said, her pale blue eyes consumed with worry. “I’ll get some tea,” she said, rising to her feet with a hand over her pregnant belly. “Drinking something hot will help.”

She left the room and closed the door behind her, leaving us alone.

“Stay awake, Emily. Tell me about the whale,” Corvo said stiffly, kissing the top of my head and holding me tight.

“We saved it,” I said, my teeth chattering. My skin suddenly felt like it was on fire, but I was freezing. It hurt bad; tears began to sting my eyes.

“What do you mean?” He sounded angry and confused.

“What do you mean ‘what do I mean’?” I shot back irritably, poking his bare chest with my finger. “The t-tow ship had a whale and Loki wanted to f-free her, so we did.”

“How? You’ve been here the whole time. Stop that,” he growled, snatching my finger and holding it still like I was a troublesome child.

“What? No, I haven’t. Rosemary helped us and we—”

“Rosemary did what?” He cut himself off with a fierce, growling sound that sent prickles of fear up my spine. He hates Rosemary, I thought. Rosemary is in danger!

“I don’t know where she is,” I cried, suddenly consumed with that thought above all others. I treat her so badly! How could I have just left her on that towing ship?! A sting of guilt hit the back of my throat. She had hitched a ride in my pocket by possessing her little white rat, but after the whale hit the platform, I’d lost all track of her. What if the crew had hurt her? What if her spell had somehow backfired?

“Fucking witch! She hid you all from me,” Corvo spat under his breath like he was trying to work out what had happened, each second making him angrier and angrier. “I didn’t know you were gone…”

I looked up at him, nervously twisting the blanket in my hands. “Don’t hurt her. Please. Rosemary helped us free the whale. And Meagan, too. The Captain’s not so bad.”

“The fuck? Meagan’s involved, too?” Corvo looked like he wanted to rip someone’s head off.

“What’s wrong?”

I was having trouble concentrating on his face; my head felt like it was drowning in a cold fog.

His voice was harsh and accusing. “I didn’t realize you were gone, Emily. You can’t just run off like that!”

I smiled softly. “I wasn’t alone. I was with Loki. We swam in the ocean.”

“Fucking Pandysian. He’s the reason why you’re freezing to death! I’m going to kill him,” he said in that voice. The Avenging Angel of my nightmares, blood dripping from his sword.

He’s going to do it. He’s going to kill Loki, I thought in terror.

“No!” I tried hitting him and the bed shook, beating against the wall with a metallic ring.
“Goddamnit, Emily, stop it!”

He hissed in pain as my elbow connected with the wound below his ribs. “Promise me you won’t kill Loki,” I cried, terrified by Corvo’s death glare, his rat eyes gleaming. I struggled against him, trying to get my arms free, to hit him until he yielded. “Promise me!”

“Stop it,” he growled, awkwardly fighting me off.

I realized he was afraid to touch me, his hands trying to hold back my flailing arms, but when his knuckles brushed against the curve of my breasts, he suddenly loosened his hold like I had burned him.

After that he let me hit him.

I pounded my fists against his bare chest, but I felt weak. He said, taking my blows, “This has to stop, Emily. Your constant defiance. Recklessness! You’re nearly frozen to death because of him. I’m trying to protect you. Stop it! Control yourself.”

“You control yourself!”

“Calm. Down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I growled, hating my weakness, knowing he barely felt my punches. My father was a force of nature; nothing moved him. If I wanted him to feel it, I had to use words.

I glared at him. “If you kill Loki, I’ll hate you forever.”

“I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do.” I laughed in his face. I took in, with satisfaction, the bruising along his jawline where I’d punched him earlier, and wished I could sock him again, but harder.

I managed to elbow him again, incensing him further. His face rippled with pain as the sword wound reopened, blood seeping from the corners.

I wanted to hurt him. “I’m safer with Loki than with you,” I hissed. “You can’t stop us.”

That hit home.

It was like a damn breaking. A rush of violence poured over me as he twisted my body with a brutal yank, forcing my back against his chest and looping an arm around my neck, the other painfully gripping my arm.

He leaned over my shoulder, hissing into my ear. “Don’t fight me, Jessamine.”

What?

“If I have to protect you from yourself, I will,” he growled in a low hiss, making my heart pound in a panic as I felt his hand move from my arm to grip my breast. His calloused fingers dug into soft flesh.

It was then I realized how naked we were. How vulnerable I was. I was frozen in shock, and the world seemed to move faster than I could comprehend, my mind still caught on Jessamine, screaming from faraway. I felt like I was falling, my head locked in his arm. I couldn’t move. His teeth dug into my shoulder and suddenly I felt him push into me from behind, an avalanche of pure heat. Fire raging. There was a heartbeat of resistance, silky hardness caught at the entrance, but his
desperate moan in my ear dispelled the tension. I vaguely realized it was too easy as he slid deeper, my body already aroused and wet from Loki. No. I squeezed my eyes shut as he moved inside me, lost inside my mother. “Jessamine,” he groaned against my ear like an echo from the Void. It became a nightmare of sounds, his gasps matching the ones I’d heard in the Void, thanks to Delilah. I moved with him, taking him deeper, afraid that if I didn’t, it would hurt. It was over in seconds, a final wrenching gasp that jerked his whole body. He pulsed his release inside of me and I convulsed around him, the treacherous orgasm flooding into my toes. I’d been so keyed up, wanting Loki so badly, my body had tipped over that edge in a way beyond my control. I’d been silent, terrified, but the unexpected orgasm tore me apart; I buried my face against his arm and gasped.

Warmth flooded my body, life-saving warmth. “That’s it, love. Come for me again.” I heard his voice from faraway. Stop. Please, stop. I felt hot fingers move down from my breast to circle my center until I shattered again. The second orgasm took me over the edge into seething self-hatred; it broke me. Maybe I could have moved away, maybe I could have done something, but I’d pushed against him and spread my legs, my fingers threading over his as he’d pleasured me in slick strokes, making me totally lose my damn mind, our hands beneath the blankets like a secret. It was wrong. It was happening. Pain seared my skin like I was too warm. He finally slid out. Sated. Soft. It was over and I was left with the ashes.

Clarity crashed over me in a sickening wave. I wanted to die. I glanced at him over my shoulder, tears stinging my eyes. He fell back with a heavy sigh, loosening his hold on me and closing his eyes. His dark hair fell over his face, a tender smile on his lips. “I love you, Jessamine.”

His tender, oblivious smile was like a knife to the gut.

He fell into mumbles I could barely hear. “Don’t leave me,” he cried over and over. “Don’t leave me.” That was the last I could understand, his mumbles turning incoherent. Lost.

I was shaking violently. I climbed out of the bed, dragging a blanket with me to cover my nakedness. I ran into a corner and vomited. I felt thick wetness slide down my inner thigh from between my legs.

I heard the door open. “Majesty?”

I felt a hand on my back and flinched. “What happened?” the Princess softly asked.

I stared at my vomit.

“I got sick,” I muttered. I glanced at Corvo on the bed, his back turned to me. “Katya, my father… he…” I clenched my fists until it hurt. “He’s fallen into one of his episodes again.”

The Princess nodded knowingly. We’d all seen Corvo descend into incoherence, mumbling like a madman. Hallucinating. There was nothing anyone could do but wait for him to awaken from it, like from a dream.

“She doesn’t understand. Doesn’t know. Nobody can know. It’s wrong. What we did was wrong. I felt overwhelming shame. I wanted to die. Please let me die! But I followed her out of the room, and I kept going. My skin burned like it was on fire, but I felt as cold as ice. I wrapped the blanket around me as tight as it would go. Outside in the cargo bay, I saw Loki at the table, dressed in dry, clean clothes. He looked up at me with worried green eyes beneath a mop of wet black hair.
He shot to his feet. “Emily!”

I couldn’t face him. I covered my mouth like I might puke again.

“She’s going to be okay,” the Princess said. “Just stay back, Prince Loki. Give her room.”

“She’s crying,” Loki said harshly, like he wanted answers right fucking now. “Why is she crying!”

A space had been cleared behind the blackboard and a curtain drawn. I sank into the waiting tub, taking Eileen’s hand. My legs felt so unsteady, so weak. My body trembled as the warm water sloshed against my skin.

“Emily?” His voice called from beyond the curtain.

“Not now, Prince Loki!” the Princess called.

Eileen was all business. “I’ll slowly increase the temperature, Empress. I’ve got more pots boiling on the stove.” She crouched beside the copper tub to swirl the water, testing its warmth. The little Morley woman glanced up at the Princess, who nodded.

I heard Katya’s voice from faraway. “Give her some privacy, Prince Loki. Come on. Let’s go up-deck. We can eat together on the bridge. Dougal would probably like some company.” Their voices and footsteps faded away.

Silence pervaded.

I drew my knees up, the water sloshing around my legs in pleasant ripples of sound. I wanted to sink beneath the little ripples and never come up. “Why are you crying, sweetheart?” Eileen asked, trying to offer me a cup of steaming tea, but I felt too nauseous to drink. “Does it hurt terribly? Did I make the water too hot?”

I gave her a blank look. “I need a sponge. Please.”

Her brow wrinkled in worry, but she quickly obeyed and got me a seasponge. I scrubbed my skin vigorously, trying to erase my father’s touch. When I looked at the sponge, there was blood.

“Eileen,” I said. “Lord Corvo’s wound opened again. Can you… attend to it?”

She bowed her head. “Yes, Your Highness.”

She let me alone, the curtain swishing behind her. I held my face in my hands and cried. I felt something cold brush against my fingers, like a chill wind. I’m freezing to death, I told myself, but when I opened my eyes, I saw my mother, her sad smile shining in ghostly luminescence.

“I’m here, Emily, my daughter. My beautiful daughter,” she said, hovering above me like a dream.

“No! Please, no. I didn’t want her to see me like this. How could this be happening? After so long, wishing to see her again, why now? Why like this? It was too much heartache.

“Darling, I love you,” she said. “It’s not your fault. You did nothing wrong. Delilah has pushed your father into a dark place. He needs you more than ever. Help him, Emily. Don’t let him become everything I despise. Save him.”
“No! I hate him!”

Incredible anger and revulsion and rage bubbled up inside me. *How could she even ask me that?* I wanted to rip off my skin. I wanted to kill Delilah with my bare hands. All I saw was red as my mother’s spirit faded, her Heart breaking into pieces between my hands. I hadn’t realized I had reached for her until she was gone. I fell to my knees, the water sloshing over the side of the tub in a violent gush, and cried.

A line had been crossed, and I could never go back.
Part 5: Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Another POV break. As always, anytime it’s not Emily, I’m using 3rd person. Thanks for reading and be sure to comment! I love hearing from you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part V

Broken

Chapter 46

Eileen hurried. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. The Empress had a mild case of hypothermia but a severe case of... How could Eileen put into words what she’d seen on Emily’s face? The young monarch was doing her best to hide her feelings, but Eileen knew better.

Something was wrong.

Eileen had seen her fair share of hypothermia victims. She’d grown up on whaling ships, and cooking in the galley meant she was often the first person called in to serve hot broth to frozen men. Exposure to frigid water was unavoidable when hunting whales, not to mention ravaging storms could leave a crew soaked for days.

Hypothermia was a tricky bitch. Symptoms were often gradual, a slow slide into confusion and lethargy until victims just lied down and died. Some people exhibited risky behavior as their thinking became confused—which, given Emily’s strange declaration that she’d ‘saved a whale’, Eileen wondered if that was exactly what had happened.

Eileen hoped the Empress would recover swiftly. She’d grown fond of the deposed monarch.

Emily was vain and stubborn, it was true, and far too clingy when it came to her father, but Eileen saw the good, too. If she was clingy, it was because her father was all she had left, poor girl, and if she was vain and stubborn it was tempered by empathy and a wisdom beyond her years. Emily had been forged in the fires of upheaval during the Rat Plague and rooted in the soil of renewal during the aftermath. Eileen believed she was her grandfather’s heir in spirit and name, an agent of change and progress.

Lofty thoughts for a commoner, but Eileen was anything but common. She could have sailed away with Prince Finbar and returned to Morley to wait out the current crisis in safety, but Eileen wanted to help. Ever since she was a little girl, she’d always been singled out as the most dutiful child, selflessly serving with industrious fortitude and compassion. She couldn’t just let her husband risk his life while she sat back and did nothing! No, she had to make a difference, too, even if that difference was just making sure the Empress was well fed—and warm.

Eileen had only been on the Dreadful Wale for less than a week, but every day she wanted to serve the Crown. She was loyal to the Empress.
And right now that loyalty meant serving the Royal Protector. Even suffering from hypothermia, the Empress had thought of her father first and had asked Eileen to check on Lord Corvo. He’d taken a near-fatal wound below the ribs from a sword thrust and, at times, it seeped blood if he wasn’t careful.

Despite his cruel eyes, Eileen had developed a fondness for the Royal Protector, too. He clearly loved his daughter, and while his over-protectiveness was sometimes puzzling (surely he understood it would only drive her away?), he had a way of exuding strength and confidence just by being in a room. It made Eileen feel optimistic about their chances of getting through this alive.

But she was under no illusions how difficult it would be. Getting missile attacked by the Jessamine had made it chillingly clear just how dangerous it was to remain at the Empress’ side.

But remain she would.

As soon as she got done with Corvo. Eileen barged into Sokolov’s quarters with a potion to reseal his bleeding wound. She was momentarily taken aback by the smell of vomit. Someone had gotten sick in the corner.

She ignored it for the moment. First things first. Eileen went to the bed and touched his blanketed shoulder only to find Lord Corvo rolling towards her with his features locked in dream-like repose. He was hallucinating again.

Eileen’s heart swelled with pity and fear. She had never believed in witchcraft until meeting Corvo.

Her husband, a royal spy, was tightlipped about what he’d seen in the darker corners of the world, but Eileen had heard stories, outlandish things about witches and the Outsider, stories that would make your head turn, but the Royal Protector was different. He was a living, breathing curse, a witch’s foul doing!

It was like there was a door opening and closing on his sanity. Most of the time, he seemed fine, the noble embodiment of Protector and Father, but at other times, Eileen wondered why in the Void they had locked up Rosemary but not him.

She gingerly peeled the blanket away from his shoulder and chest, afraid to ‘waken’ him. While he’d never exhibited violent behavior during one of his mumbling episodes, they were disturbing enough that Eileen took special care to appear harmless just in case.

She gasped, smelling sex as soon as the blanket rolled back. The hair on the back of her neck prickled, her instincts shouting that something was wrong. Corvo’s skin was beaded with sweat and his normally Serkonan-dark skin was flushed in the neck, like the afterglow of sex.

Her hands shook as she tipped the vial of Sokolov’s Elixir over his reopened wound until the trickling blood clotted. She was done. She had no reason to linger, but…

Eileen hesitated.

Slowly, unnervingly, she slowly moved the blanket further down, exposing his groin. She hadn’t expected him to be totally naked. Warming a victim of hypothermia with skin-to-skin contact was an acceptable, often life-saving method—even if a bit awkward between family members—but Eileen knew Corvo would do anything to save his daughter. But this… Corvo wasn’t just naked, he was sated. Eileen saw the wetness on his shaft, glimmering in damning reality, and coupled with the smell of sex… He molested his daughter, Eileen told herself in shock and horror, and in that moment, the Morley woman understood with frightening clarity just what that look on Emily’s face
had been.

She’d been raped.

Emily was traumatized. Confused. Hurt. Afraid. And alone. Eileen wanted to kick herself. How had she not realized it before? It was so obvious. Of course, it wasn’t just the pain and confusion of recovering from unexpected hypothermia; her father had violated her. How had Princess Kayta not seen anything?

Eileen had a hand to her mouth, barely breathing, her eyes darting to Corvo’s face, but he looked without seeing, his mind clearly elsewhere. Did he know…? It was horrifying. Did the Lord Protector even know what he’d done?

She threw the blanket back into its original position, feeling like she was covering up a crime, and fled the room in a blind panic. What should she do? What could she do?

She stared at the curtain in doubt and indecision, then slipped inside to double check the Empress, to solidify in her mind that she wasn’t crazy, that she had actually seen what she’d seen. The Empress, violated by her own Royal Protector. Her father. It was unthinkable.

Emily’s skin was pink, rubbed raw by the sponge. Of course, Eileen thought, her heart breaking. She was trying to wipe away his touch.

Emily turned her head, her lovely dark eyes moistened by tears. “Oh, Eileen. There you are. I’m ready for another pot,” she said, shivering in the bath. “The water feels too cold.”

Eileen held back a choked cry, agonized by the fact that the Empress was trying to hide her feelings, even now… Eileen hurried away to the galley and carried one of the boiling pots back to the tub. She introduced the hot water slowly, and the Empress relaxed into it, finally dropping the cursed sponge and releasing some of the tension in her shoulders.

When Emily closed her eyes, leaning back against the tub’s curved headrest, Eileen found the courage to blurt out, “Highness, did Lord Corvo force himself on you?”

Emily stiffened, her eyes darting over Eileen’s face before looking away. “No,” she said in a little voice.

“Sweetheart, you know it’s not your fault if he—”

Her face hardened, her infamous ‘Empress face’ sliding into place like impervious armor. “Enough. You may take your duties elsewhere, Eileen.”

She was dismissing her.

“Yes, Highness.” Eileen fled the cargo bay and hurried up the steps to the bridge, her hands wringing in her apron. Katya and Loki were sitting on Meagan’s bed, eating a snack, while Dougal stood at the helm. With the Captain arranging the tow job aboard the whaling ship, Dougal had taken over navigation duties. They’d probably reach the smugglers’ cove by sundown; a few hours yet.

“What is it?” the Princess asked, the first to recognize what Eileen could only imagine was an utterly stunned and horrified look on her face.

Eileen was two seconds from blurt out ‘The Empress has been raped!’ but she hesitated, glancing at the strange Pandyssian.
The Prince shot to his feet. “Is Emily getting worse?”

Dougal caught his wife’s look. “Loki, why don’t you give us a few moments, aye? Go below.”

“But stay away from the Empress,” Eileen warned. At his hurt look, she added more gently, “Just for now. She’s still warming in the bath and requires privacy.”

Loki nodded and reluctantly left the bridge, disappearing down the stairs. Dougal held Eileen to his chest, his comforting arms encircling her for a quick hug. “Now tell us,” he said, stepping back to give her room to breathe. She felt light-headed.

Eileen took a deep breath and said, “I think Lord Corvo just raped the Empress.”

“What?” the Princess gasped, her eyes widening in disbelief. Dougal, however, instantly believed her. His blue eyes were steady. “What did you find?” he calmly asked.

She explained with unflinching detail.

“Oh, gods,” the Princess whispered when she was done. Her face flickered with guilt. “I shouldn’t have pushed him to help. He didn’t need to be there, I could have… Oh, gods, what have I done? I practically ordered him to take off his clothes and get in bed with her. And I closed the door. Oh, gods, I shouldn’t have closed the door. I should have stayed with her!”

“Don’t blame yourself, Katya. Lord Corvo was trying to save his daughter’s life,” Dougal said, shaking his head. “He must have… fell into confusion when he was… holding her.”

“Fell into confusion?” the Princess hissed in disgust. Her eyes burned with anger. “Are you implying the Royal Protector accidentally raped his daughter?”

“I’m saying all of us have seen it. Lord Corvo is not always in his right mind,” Dougal calmly replied. “I’m not pardoning what he did to her, but we also can’t turn a blind eye to what is obviously a complicated situation.”

“We need to keep the Empress safe,” Eileen said fiercely. “That’s all I know.”

“What do we do?” the Princess fretted. “If we try to keep Corvo away from her, we all know what will happen…”

Dougal frowned. “There’s still a few sleep darts left in the Empress’ crossbow. Maybe we can keep him sedated until we get to Glory Point.”

“Then what?” the Princess demanded, near hysterical.

“One step at a time. For now, we can’t let Lord Corvo be alone with her again,” Dougal said. “Let’s go.”

Grim-faced, Dougal led the way and the Princess and Eileen followed. Descending the stairs, Eileen spied Prince Loki through the window. He was outside at the rail, gazing out over the water.

She didn’t have to see his face to know he was worried.

Downstairs, Eileen nearly stumbled against her husband’s back when he suddenly stopped short, the cargo bay doors swinging open. She sucked in a shaky breath, her heart hammering as she realized they were too late.

Dougal glanced back at his wife, his blue eyes silently screaming Be Careful.
Using a sleep dart was, now, out of the question. Lord Corvo was awake.

He was leaning all casual and devil-may-care against the blackboard, nursing a cup of tea as he flipped through the Captain’s hand-written notes on Addermire. He was barefoot and dressed only in black pants, his folding sword conspicuously belted to his side. His bare chest and arms were heavily muscled and scarred, reminding Eileen just how dangerous this man was, how many battles he had won. His exploits during the Rat Plague were legendary.

Corvo glanced up, his rat eyes wary but otherwise calm. “Agent,” he said and Dougal nodded back. His gaze slid to Eileen. “How is she?”

Eileen swallowed hard. She wanted to accuse him of rape, to scream at him until her lungs burned, but she lowered her eyes and mumbled, “I’ll check on her, my lord.”

She felt a touch on her back, her husband’s large hand giving her the briefest of comfort and courage, then she was timidly stalking past the Lord Protector and behind the blackboard, the curtain hurriedly pushed aside.

The Empress was wrapping herself in a towel, standing beside the tub. “My fingers were pruning,” she said, answering Eileen’s confused gasp. “I’d like to get dry now. Fetch me something to wear, if you please.”

Eileen found herself stupefied, like Emily had no right to pretend, to act as if she wasn’t totally falling apart.

But Eileen obeyed.

That was her life’s toil. To obey. Wordlessly, Eileen sifted through the ‘gifts’ Prince Finbar had left them before departing for Morley. Most were tagged to be sold in Karnaca (or sooner, in Glory Point, if they could) since the Prince had mainly left a small fortune in jewelry to be sold for coin, but there were also pragmatic items like clothing, blankets, and food supplies. Eileen found a suitable sweater, a heavy cotton and wool blend to keep the Empress warm, and a few other pieces.

She helped the Empress dress, being careful not to touch her, instead only handing her each item one at a time. There were several layers, including a hooded long coat and fuzzy scarf, and by the end of it, Emily looked ready to face a Tyvian blizzard.

There was something in the way Emily wrapped herself in layer after layer that made Eileen want to cry. The Empress was trying to hide more than her feelings. She was trying to hide her body. Her damp hair was frizzy and tangled, but for once, the Empress paid it no mind, simply pushing it back as she pulled the hood up and sank deeper inside, like she felt safer in the shadows that covered her face.

At the curtain, Eileen felt an urgent need to warn her. “The Lord Protector is awake,” she whispered.

“I know.”

Emily turned away, going out first. Eileen followed, meeting Dougal’s eyes across the room with rising trepidation.

Lord Corvo glanced at Emily and smirked—she looked almost comical in her heavy winter gear—but otherwise seemed unconcerned as his daughter took a seat on the couch in the back corner where a gaming table was laid out with dice and cards. Eileen thought she might like to rest, but that was another heartbreaking problem. Delilah was somehow afflicting her dreams and the poor girl had
barely slept since escaping Dunwall.

Dougal drew closer, casually placing himself between the Lord Protector and the Empress.

He, too, had a weapon, one of the swords Emily had recovered from the wreck of the _Jessamine_. Eileen screamed a silent prayer that Dougal wouldn’t need to use it against his own Royal Spymaster.

Eileen went to the galley and poured two cups of tea, her hands shaking. She served Princess Katya and tentatively offered the other to Emily. This time she accepted. As Emily’s hand reached for the cup, she whispered, “Eileen, where is Loki?”

Eileen realized she’d been too afraid to ask in front of her father. “On the main deck,” she whispered back. “Safe,” she added.

Emily nodded, but said nothing more. She picked up the deck of cards and shuffled them, her face going blank as she seemed to stare at nothing. Lost inside her thick, warm clothes and deeply hooded, the Empress was nearly inscrutable.

When Eileen turned back, Lord Corvo turned his rat eyes on her and dipped his head closer as she passed. “Make sure she eats something,” he ordered. “She looks pale.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Eileen hated it, but busying herself in the kitchen was exactly what she needed. She let her mind go and just focused on preparing a warm meal for the Empress—for everyone—while comforted by the knowledge that Dougal would stay close to protect the young monarch. By the time she had several bowls ready, the Empress was playing a card game with Dougal, the Princess, and even Loki, who had hesitantly come down to join them. Conversation was kept light as Dougal patiently explained the rules of the card game to the Pandyssian. Katya occasionally spoke, clarifying an obscure point here and there.

Both the Empress and Loki kept silent.

But Eileen saw Loki’s eyes fixated on the Empress, his worried glances flitting between Emily and her father.

Lord Corvo, meanwhile, stayed near the blackboard, studying what they were all here to do: defeat Delilah one step at a time.

Eileen served the meal, taking care to give Emily a hefty portion, but she wouldn’t eat, not until Loki encouraged her with a gentle smile. Afterwards, they resumed their game. They played several hands, the Empress getting up only once for a bathroom break, the Princess ‘lending a helping hand’ by staying outside her door.

Eileen could read the guilt on the Princess’ face.

The entire situation was beyond tragic. Absolutely horrifying. If it had happened in the palace, if these were normal times, Eileen had no doubt Parliament would have gotten involved, maybe even the Abbey. Corvo would be jailed, or worse. _Put on an executioner’s block_, Eileen thought.

An hour before sunset, they reached Glory Point. The tow ship maneuvered the _Dreadful Wale_ into port and the Captain came aboard with several whalers (who would be fixing the ship as quickly as possible)—and Rosemary.
Eileen knew her disappearance had troubled Dougal greatly, who felt he had let Corvo down by letting her get away. Her husband took his employment as an Eye very seriously.

When Rosemary joined them, a hush fell over the cargo bay. The Empress stared at Rosemary with guilty eyes, silent in her back corner.

“Where is it?” Lord Corvo asked darkly, stepping in front of her as Rosemary near-instinctively tried to rush to Emily’s side. Eileen easily recognized they’d once been best friends, that Rosemary knew Emily was in trouble at one glance.

But Rosemary could do nothing.

She stared up at Corvo with big blue eyes. “I’m sorry for the deception,” she said, her voice wavering, “but the Empress asked for my help to free the whale.”

Corvo crossed his arms, his voice lowering to a deadly hiss. “You are my hostage, not my daughter’s playmate. You follow my rules. My orders.”

After a pause, he said, dark-eyed, “Now where is it?”


“Give me the rat.”

He held out his hand.

Rosemary’s bottom lip trembled. She glanced at Emily for help, but the Empress remained frozen in place, the hood shadowing most of her face but for her lips, held in a grimace.

A tear trickled down Rosemary’s cheek as she slowly plucked the little white rat from its hiding place between her breasts and placed the creature in Corvo’s waiting hand.

Its little legs beat helplessly in the air as Corvo twisted its neck in one sharp motion.

“Next time, it’s your neck,” he said, dropping the corpse in her cupped hands. He jerked his head towards the secret room. “Get back in there.”

Eileen felt sick. She stared at the floor as Lord Corvo locked the door and pocketed the key.

“Dougal,” he said, “Purchase a mouser if they’ve got them here in Glory Point.” He leaned back against the blackboard, returning to his studies, but added in a casual mumble, “And after the cat kills all the rats, kill the cat. She can possess anything that moves. Remember that.”

“Aye, sir,” Dougal replied, rubbing the back of his head.

Eileen ended up disposing of the dead rat after Dougal managed to sweet talk Rosemary into letting it go. Her crying could be heard from beyond the secret room’s door.

An hour later, the Captain stopped by, informing the Royal Protector of the repair timeline and what kind of services were available along the docks and further inland. Tomorrow morning, they planned to do some trading (since the repairs would take a day or two). Everyone would get a chance to stretch their legs and visit Glory Point. Eileen knew staying aboard the Dreadful Wale would be uncomfortable during the repairs—it’d be loud, for one, and with the whaling crew coming and going (mainly accessing the engine room), the Captain thought it wise they hide the items on the blackboard and anything related to their mission.
Dougal aided Corvo in this endeavor, nailing a canvas to stretch over the blackboard and boxing up various notes, journals, and maps to be hidden behind the blackboard. They did the same for everything in the ‘War Room’ on the main deck, boxing Prince Finbar’s contributions and rolling up the gigantic map.

As they worked, coming and going, the Empress remained safely cocooned between Princess Katya and Prince Loki, playing cards and dice. Eileen had never seen the Empress interested in such games and knew she was probably still in a state of shock.

Meanwhile, Eileen busied herself cleaning up Sokolov’s quarters.

She felt sick re-entering the room, and not just from the smell of vomit, but she rolled up her sleeves and got to work. She ripped the sheets from the bed to take for washing and collected Emily’s discarded clothes on the floor to add to the laundry pile. She smiled, holding back tears when she found a handful of pretty seashells in the Empress’ coat pockets, and a few loose pearls. She didn’t know when, but she meant to put them somewhere the Empress would find them—and could hopefully remember a happier time.

Before leaving, Eileen dug under the mattress, exclaiming in relief when she found a crude bonecharm carved with symbols of broken shafts of wheat and different phases of the moon. It was a common method of birth control in the Isles, and knowing Sokolov’s reputation as a womanizer, Eileen wasn’t surprised to find he’d had one under his bed.

“Thank you, Sokolov, you dirty bastard,” she whispered, kissing the bonecharm before stuffing it back under the mattress. It meant, most likely, Lord Corvo had not impregnated his daughter.

Meanwhile, the Captain disappeared again only to return with a wary look on her face, holding a missive.

They all watched as Lord Corvo broke the seal and read the contents, his rat eyes narrowing in suspicion and unease. “It’s an invitation,” he said. “Addressed to the ‘Rightful Empress and Her Royal Protector.’” He glared at the Captain. “Someone knows we’re here.”

“Impossible,” the Captain scowled. “I was more than discrete.”

“Not discrete enough.”

“Invitation to what?” Dougal asked, leaning over Corvo’s shoulder to peer at the letter. With his unusual height, Dougal was the only one who could.

“A masquerade—tonight—at the Brisby Estate…”

Lord Corvo furrowed his brow, his rat eyes churning. He suddenly laughed out loud.

“Fucking Brisby,” he said as everyone stared at him like he’d gone crazy.

“Brisby?” Dougal repeated, brow raised.

“Lord Timothy Brisby. Fifteen years ago, I did him a little favor,” Corvo said with a smirk. “I helped him kidnap Waverley Boyle during their annual masquerade.” He glanced at Emily as if expecting her to share in his memories, but she didn’t appear to be looking, let alone listening. “Lord Brisby was obsessed with her. He stole her away that night with my help. Where? No idea. I only knew it’d be faraway, somewhere Lady Boyle would never again taste freedom or happiness.”

“Yes. Traitors, the both of them.” Lord Corvo waved the missive, an excited grin growing on his face. “This is a challenge. If Lady Boyle is actually here on Glory Point, she wants revenge.”

“It’s a trap,” the Captain stated.

“I’m going,” Corvo said, steadfast and dark-eyed. “This is my chance to set things right, to do what I should have done fifteen years ago. I’m going to kill Waverley Boyle.”

“I will go, too,” Emily suddenly said, standing up from the couch and pulling back her hood. Her eyes were stone.

Corvo snorted, turning his back on her. “No.”

“Yes. You are still wounded. And the invitation is for both of us. It’s too dangerous for you to go alone.”

“Then I’ll take Dougal,” Corvo said, looking dismissively at his daughter over his shoulder.

“No,” the Empress said, stone-faced. “If this masquerade is truly being hosted by a Boyle—however, exiled or disgraced—it’ll be crawling with guards, and the Captain’s right. It’s most likely a trap. I’m coming with you.”

Eileen shot Dougal a desperate glance. *Stop this!* She can’t go alone with her father to this masquerade! *And why in the Void would she want to?!

Corvo sighed heavily, scratching his whiskery chin in irritation. He glanced at the Captain. “You know anything about this Brisby Estate? My spies never found them after they disappeared that night.”

The Captain snorted. “If Glory Point is actually hiding the Brisby Estate, it must be the best kept secret on the island because I’ve never heard of it.” She held out her hand. “Let me see the missive.” Corvo handed it to her. She scanned the contents, frowning over the seal. “Huh. This is The Whorehouse symbol.”

“Whorehouse?” Corvo asked, sounding dubious.

“It’s what the locals call it. Never been there myself. The north side of the island has a rundown… mansion, I suppose you could say. It’s got a reputation.” Her eyebrow crooked up at Corvo. “Not a good one.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“Could be it’s been a cover for years. Not sure why they would go through the bother.” Meagan shrugged. “Glory Point is already underground, so to speak.”

Corvo nodded. “Brisby could have wanted to go the extra mile. The last thing he wanted was for me to find him. It’s possible he’s running this Whorehouse—”

“Or Lady Boyle,” Dougal interjected. “However distasteful her abduction, we can’t assume Lady Boyle is still Lord Brisby’s hostage.”

“Agreed. She always was a manipulative bitch,” Corvo said. “Meagan, can you take me north in the skiff?”

“Yes,” the Captain said.
“Us north,” Emily corrected. “I’m going with you, whether you like it or not.”

Lord Corvo glared at his daughter. “This is my mistake to correct, not yours.”

No, this can’t be happening, Eileen cried in her heart. The last thing the Empress needed was to walk into a bloody whorehouse of all things!

“None of you should go. It’s a trap!” Meagan said, throwing up her hands. “Lady Boyle would just love to capture you both and give you to Delilah. Everything she lost, she’d get back. The Boyle’s are even richer than the Kaldwins.” She glanced at Emily. “No offense.”

“None taken,” the Empress said.

“She has a point,” Dougal said, eyeing his Royal Spymaster. “Are you sure it’s worth the risk going in there, Lord Corvo?”

“Yes, Agent Walsh,” Corvo replied testily, like he didn’t appreciate having his orders questioned. “Hiram Burrows hired Daud to murder Jessamine with Waverley’s money.” He glanced at his daughter, his eyes going distant. “A long time ago, I thought I set things right—made her pay—but she’s alive and it’s not good enough.”

His voice was darkness itself, a chasm of hatred deeper than the oceans.

He added, “You can come, Emily, but only if you stay out of my way.”

“Fine,” Emily spat. The Empress turned towards her. “We’ll need costumes, Eileen. Can you help?”

NO!

“Yes, Your Highness,” she meekly replied.

It took a few minutes of scrambling, but they were finally ready to go. Corvo was dressed in a black suit, his face covered by the Mask of the Felon from the time of the Rat Plague. Eileen shuddered, thinking she had never seen anything more frightening than him. He took his folding sword and crossbow.

Emily wore a red dress she had scrounged from her rucksack, a wrinkled thing Eileen had to iron. Eileen hated it—the dress was far too revealing, accentuating the Empress’ every curve. Emily strapped a pistol to her upper thigh beneath the dress, but was otherwise unarmed. Her face she covered with a simple eye mask, colored in red to match the dress, one of the stranger things Eileen found in Prince Finbar’s donated collection.

“Why are you doing this, Empress?” Eileen whispered after she tied the eye mask and finished combing her hair.

She looked beautiful in that red dress. Loki stared at her as she joined her father on the main deck, the stars shining overhead in abundance. A sharp, cold clarity ignited the air.

“I have to save my father,” she said, her eyes as cold as the night sky.

Eileen watched helplessly as Meagan steered the skiff away from the Dreadful Wale, her two passengers sitting side by side.

“A crow and his little sparrow,” Loki unexpectedly said. “We can’t let them go on alone.”
Dougal turned to stare at the Pandyssian. “Corvo’s orders—”

“Fuck Corvo’s orders,” Loki spat. The way he said it, it was clearly not a word he was used to saying. He had a foreigner’s tongue, Eileen knew, but he was learning.

Loki’s voice broke, his anger shifting to anguish. “I don’t know why, but Emily is hurting. I’m going after them.”

Eileen glared at Dougal.

“Okay, I’m going, too,” Dougal sighed.

“You’ll need costumes,” Eileen fretted.

“There’s no time, love,” Dougal said, leaning in to give her a kiss on the top of her head. “Plus, I’m a spy, remember? Trained in the arts of infiltration.” He gave her a brave grin. “We’ll just knock out one of the partygoers, steal their costumes and invitations—”

Eileen cut him off with a kiss, laughter caught with tears. “Come back alive, Mister Spy. That’s an order.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”

“We’ll do whatever it takes,” Loki said, his solemn eyes glowing like emeralds. There was something familiar about his face, but Eileen could never pinpoint what it was.

They took the manual rowboat, the night swallowing them whole. Eileen’s prayers rode the waves, her hand landing over her racing heart.

Chapter End Notes

A special apology to MadamaButterfly about the little rat. I remember you mentioning they were one of your fav animals.
Chapter Notes

Warning: sex and drugs

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part V continued

“Broken”

Chapter 47

“Is this a masquerade or a drunken pirate orgy?” I asked, standing in the middle of the dilapidated foyer.

“Disgusting animals.” Corvo sneered at the two men fucking a woman on the spiral staircase. I supposed she came as a black cat, but her costume was crunched up around her waist, her breasts bouncing and her ass hanging out for the men to take both ends. They weren’t the only ones. The entire foyer was crowded with people in various states of undress, the fornicating revelry spilling out into other rooms from what I could see.

I didn’t want to see—or hear—but I’d been trained by my father to observe and tactically evaluate my surroundings for possible threats.

No one had asked for our invitations at the door and, once further inside, we’d identified only one guard—and he was passed out in the corner with a bottle in his hand. Alcohol was flowing freely, as well as what looked like white leaf tobacco, a potent (and illegal) drug that pretty much explained why half the partygoers looked stoned off their asses.

It was also loud. More than one audiogram was playing music, but each had a different punch card. It was a cacophony of chaos underpinning the sound of people laughing and singing drunkenly, and over that, sex sounds, everything from moaning, groaning, gasping and grunting, and screaming ‘Yes! Yes! Give it to me!’ like the best paid whore in the Golden Cat.

“Nice costume, sexy,” said a woman with swaying hips as she strutted past my father with a cigarette between her lips. She was holding hands with another woman—they were both topless, wearing white ballerina skirts—who winked at Corvo and girlishly cooed, “Ohhh. Scary mask.”

As they wandered away, giggling together as they clamored over a couple fucking on the floor—two men dressed like Overseers—Corvo grabbed my arm and led me towards the staircase. “Let’s get to higher ground.”

I stiffened beneath his touch, but I didn’t expect him to understand why.

The landing above the spiral staircase was rotted badly, in some places exposing huge gaps through which we could view below. Corvo leaned against the bannister, looking down.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” I said, shuddering in relief when he finally released my arm.
“What?”

“Lean on that. This whole place is falling apart,” I said. “If I’d known everyone was just going to take off their costumes, I wouldn’t have worn a dress.” I hated dresses. I hated being here.

“Pay attention,” Corvo hissed from behind his mask. “Not everything is as it seems. Something’s off.”

“People are getting off. This place is exactly as the Captain described. A whorehouse. Maybe the invitation was a joke.”

“No. Someone knows who we are.”

He moved away from the bannister and crossed the upper level like it was a maze, circumventing the gaps and leading me through several abandoned rooms (it appeared the party was restricted to the first floor, which I thought wise given the rotted flooring) until we found ourselves overlooking a grand ballroom with dirty, cracked windows and peeling walls. Several over-sized and gawdy crystal chandeliers hung from above.

In the center of the ballroom, a space had been cleared for a duel, in this case between a woman dressed like a witch with flowers and vines wrapped around her body and a man in an Overseer’s mask—the rest of him butt naked.

“Surrender, temptress of the heart!” the ‘Overseer’ shouted to delirious laughter, onlookers crowded round as the two stood opposite each other with pistols drawn and cocked.

“Nay! Put down thy pistol!” the ‘witch’ cackled, “for I’d rather be pierced by thy wicked sword!”

The man wiggled his hips, flopping around his ‘sword’ to great laughter and catcalls. “Heretic!” he shouted. “I and all my men will pound your witchy cunts until Dunwall is freed!”

“I’d like to see you try!”

The ‘witch’ discharged her gun and I jumped at the loud *pop pop pop*, but the bullets were rubber pellets and while they left a nasty bruise on the man’s chest, he was otherwise unharmed. In retaliation—and obviously the point of their strange roleplaying—the Overseer charged the witch, rolled her unto all fours and took her from behind. He was soon joined by other Overseers mounting other witches. It was the strangest orgy I had ever seen.

“I take it the High Overseer is going to lead a charge against Delilah and her witches to oust her from Dunwall Tower,” Corvo said in a dry voice.

I closed my eyes, grinding my teeth. *Really?* After a heavy sigh, I faced him. “Can we leave, now, or do you want to divine more prophecies?”

“I told you not to come,” he said. “Go back to Meagan. She’s waiting with the skiff.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

*I came for you,* I thought, glaring at his horrible mask, that inhuman skeleton of metal and shadows. I hadn’t seen him wear it since the Rat Plague and it was tearing me to pieces. *I came to save you, Father, to stop you from murdering Lady Boyle. To do as my mother asks and keep you from becoming a monster.* I didn’t want to. I hated him for what he did to me, but in the hours since the rape, the shock had turned to guilt then turned to anger, not just towards him—towards *me.* I’d been weak. Stupid. Blind. If Corvo fell into one of his episodes again and couldn’t differentiate me from
my mother—everyone said I was a spinning image of her—then it was my fault for letting him get too close, for putting myself in such a vulnerable position. Never again. I must be smarter. Stronger. Incapacitate him. Choke him out. Sleep dart him. Fight. Use my Doppelgänger if I had to, like some freak replacement.

No, it’s not your fault. It wasn’t, a part of me screamed and cried and raged, but I couldn’t feel past the shame and guilt.

I felt weak. Even now I tried not to tremble at his closeness, a taste of bile seizing the back of my throat. He had turned into me, his hand lighting on my bare arm. I was wearing Rosemary’s lacy red dress that she’d worn to the Sunset Regalia, a fancy piece that vaguely resembled a Blind Sister’s red gown—that was the costume idea, though admittedly shoddy compared to the elaborate, creative getups people spent months designing for the annual Masquerade Ball at the Boyle mansion in Dunwall.

“I told you not to get in my way, Emily,” he murmured against my hair as he leaned towards my ear. I froze. Goddamnit, I can’t do this. I wanted to run away. I wanted to return to the safety of the skiff and tell my father to go fuck himself. If he wanted to stain his soul with Lady Boyle’s murder, then so be it. How were his sins my responsibility? How could Mother put this on me? It was unfair. It was disgusting. It was… Don’t be a weakling, don’t be stupid.

I glanced down at the crossbow at his belt.

It was technically mine—Corvo had lost his during the Jessamine attack—and it was loaded with sleep darts. I’ll knock him out, I thought, winding my free hand towards the crossbow, my fingers brushing against the metal clip. I’ll drag his ass back to the ship and lock him up like he locked up Rosemary.

“Don’t even think about it,” Corvo rumbled, tightening his grip on my arm until it hurt and snatching my thieving hand in his fist, but when I made a gasping sound, he released me and swept away, looping a path around a wrecked grand piano towards a narrow staircase that led down to the ballroom.

I chased after him, fearful he might disappear around the corner. Even without the Mark, my father had the uncanny ability to stealth his way through nearly every kind of environment. I passed the grand piano, wincing with homesickness (I had several in the palace), and practically ran towards the narrow staircase that led down to the ballroom.

I chased after him, fearful he might disappear around the corner. Even without the Mark, my father had the uncanny ability to stealth his way through nearly every kind of environment. I passed the grand piano, wincing with homesickness (I had several in the palace), and practically ran towards the narrow staircase. I was determined to end this, one way or another. Either I stopped him from murdering Lady Boyle (if she was even here, I had my doubts) or I would find a way to knock him unconscious and take him prisoner before he hurt himself or others—before he hurt me.

Before he hurt me again, I thought, tears welling in my eyes, obscuring my vision. I could still feel the ache between my legs, his teeth digging into my shoulder…

I stumbled, tripping over the stupid dress on the last step as the staircase spilled out over the ballroom. I landed awkwardly, falling over two men, nearly knocking them over.

The taller of the two scowled at me, but his eyes lit up as his eyes raked over my body. His friend whistled. “Cap’n’s got what you need, sweet darlin’,” he slurred, his eyes glazed and his breath reeking of alcohol.
Normally, I would have reacted with one of dozens of escape moves Corvo had taught me for close quarters combat, but when the man’s hand squeezed around my breast, groping me, his toothy grin swimming in front of my face, I shut down, falling, falling… It was the same feeling right before Corvo had… I couldn’t move as the man swung me in a circle, laughing drunkenly.

He slopped his wet mouth all over my neck. I couldn’t breathe.

I heard men jeering. Smiling and groaning, laughing and moaning. I was surrounded as the pirate veered sideways, our entwined bodies sucked into what felt like a vortex of men all reaching for me at once.

The circle broke in a blur.

Corvo wrenched the man’s arm from my waist and broke it in a brutal twist, a wet crunching sound immediately followed by a piercing scream. As the drunkard stumbled backwards, Corvo dug into his shoulder, holding him momentarily still before socking him in the face with a fist, a jaw-breaking punch that sent him reeling to the ground, his eyes folding back in his head as he passed out.

“Get the fuck away from her. All of you,” Corvo growled, his black mask glinting in the light of the chandeliers.

At first there was only stunned silence, faces turning to look at the unexpected violence, but then there was screaming and scrambling for the exits, bodies rushing and falling over each other in a wild panic. Some of them, at least. Others were too stoned or drunk to care, merely laughing hysterically, while others continued fucking in narrow-focused zeal—nothing would stop them.

The other men in the circle too stupid to run found Corvo’s fists. At least he hasn’t drawn his sword, I thought numbly, watching my father beat a man within an inch of his life, his body tumbling to the ground, his face so red and puffy I couldn’t see his eyes.

Corvo had three bodies on the ground, moaning in pain, when somebody suddenly roared, “Enough!”

Corvo, breathing loudly, his chest heaving, his fists bleeding, stepped away, angling his body in front of me as the crowds parted and three real pirates approached us, brandishing the only real weapons we’d seen all night.

But instead of attacking us like I’d expected, the pirate (did he run security for the Whorehouse?) put up his hands and eyed Corvo uneasily.

“Hey, man, we don’t want any trouble. You take that outside.”

Not security, I decided. Lady Boyle’s household guards would never act so forgiving. They’d shoot you on sight and dump your body over the manor walls.

My father didn’t reply, instead cocking his head at them.

One of the pirates smirked, a burning cigarette hanging from the corner of his lips. He shrugged, chuckling, “Damn. Would ya look at this guy.” He took a drag, blowing smoke. “Whad’ya supposed to be? The infamous Masked Felon?”

His friends snorted and laughed as they surveyed my father up and down.

I sucked in a breath, recognizing the purposeful pause before Corvo quietly replied, “No. A decapitation artist. Want to see me work?”
“Father…” I whispered.

The man scowled, pinching his cigarette and tossing it to the ground before grinding it with a vicious twist of his boot. He wrenched forward, but two of his friends held him back, their faces plastered with fear. “Don’t, man!”

“No, do,” Corvo taunted.

“Please. This, here, is just your neighborly, friendly whorehouse,” one anxious-looking pirate said, trying to smile at Corvo and I. “Just move along. We don’t want any bruisers.”

“Only lovers,” a woman coyly cooed, wrapping her arms around a scowling pirate. He dragged his glare away from Corvo and cupped the woman’s ass, pushing her against him. “That’s right, baby,” he said, grinning down at her.

“Where’s Lady Boyle and Lord Brisby?” Corvo demanded in a low hiss. His patience was wearing thin.

This time it wasn’t a chuckle. The pirates flat out roared in laughter, the sound crumbling to chokes and nervous throat clearing when Corvo just stood there, quietly glaring.

The pirate paled. “Where they’ve always been.”

He pointed over his shoulder towards the west wing of the mansion.

I didn’t like his answer; it crept up my neck like a cold chill.

Corvo roughly took my arm, ‘escorting’ me out of the crowd. It parted for us. We exited the ballroom, following a darkened hallway, the sounds of the party disappearing behind us the further we went. The mansion creaked and groaned around us, cobwebs floating whisper-thin over frosted windows.

“How’d you let them get the drop on you?” Corvo asked in a hard, disbelieving voice. “I’ve seen you take on men twice their size and double their numbers in your practice bouts with the Elite Guard.”

“I… panicked.” I hugged my arms, tucking them close to my body as he stopped, looking back at me.

“What?”

“I panicked!”

He looked baffled by my anger. I was on the verge of tears.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked, to which I snorted a mirthless laugh. You, I thought. He stabbed a finger towards the window. “The world out there isn’t going to wait for you to get your shit together, Em. We’re going up against Delilah and her goons.” He turned his back, stalking down the hallway. “You can’t panic.”

I glared at his back. “We’re not going after Delilah,” I spat. “Last I checked, we’re chasing after your revenge fantasy.”

He stopped again, turning back to face me, half the mask steeped in shadow. “You done?” When I didn’t respond, he jerked his head. “Come on.”
I followed.

The hallway led into a throne-like room with cathedral-height walls. The ceiling stretched high overhead, but it was full of holes, the peeking night sky dotted with bright stars. At the center of the large chamber was a grand structure of marble and wood, and above it, two bodies hung from nooses.

The sound of rope slowly creaking echoed across the chamber. The macabre cadavers smiled down at us, their desiccated bones glowing by the light of the candles below.

We stood silent before them.

A cold wind whistled eerily through the broken ceiling, shafts of moonlight falling over my father. I looked at him, his masked face held utterly still, like death.

“Is that…?”

“It’s them,” Corvo said.

I glanced uneasily at the female, her long gray hair running dry and brittle against the bones of her ribcage, her body loosely covered with tattered rags. The other hanging corpse was male, his bones covered by sea-stained velvet, his face partially covered by a strange mask. It looked like a freakish rat with whiskers.

“They’ve been dead for a long time,” I said. I felt relieved; my father couldn’t kill what was already dead.

Corvo sighed. “But if that’s them, who wrote the missive? Who invited us?”

“I did.”

This new voice came from behind the structure of marble and wood.

He stepped into the moonlight, a satisfied grin twisting his face as he watched with black eyes, twin pools of darkness. His body was outlined in bluish luminescence, a ghostly tremor that reflected the candelight below, soft yellow clashing against cold blue. It was mesmerizing.

“Outsider?!” I gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Emily,” he said. “You look beautiful in that dress. Absolutely stunning.”

“Answer her. What are you doing here?” Corvo demanded, pushing up his mask to rest against the top of his head. His dark hair framed a penetrating scowl. “Was this you?”

He tore out the missive from his coat, flapping it in the air before chucking it at the Outsider.

The letter floated right through him. The Outsider was still untouchable.

“Indeed. I apologize for the deception, but it was necessary. My powers are not what they used to be. I had to get… creative. There is but one Outsider shrine on Glory Point and you’re looking at it. I had to devise a way to get you here.”

His black-eyed gaze fell over the two corpses hanging from the structure of marble and wood: gallows turned shrine.

“Lady Boyle and Lord Brisby served nicely in that regard,” he added. “I knew their presence would
pique your interest, Corvo, given your history.”

“It’s really them?” I blurted.

“Yes,” the Outsider said, clasping his hands behind his back. “It’s an interesting tale if you’d like to hear it—”

“Enough with the song and dance,” Corvo said. “We’re here. You’ve lured us in, Outsider. What do you want?”

“Ah, well,” he said with a tight smile, “I had thought we all wouldn’t see each other again until Karnaca, but… a problem has reared its ugly head and I couldn’t ignore it.” His black eyes fell over me. “Watching is one thing; not acting quite another.”

My heart beat faster. “What are you talking about?”

The Outsider began to slowly pace back and forth. “The Void, Emily. I used to watch from the Void for thousands of years, but after the Schism I’ve found myself pathetically blind, unable to see as I once did.”

He stopped, looking back at me in a contemplative manner.

“I’ve since tried a few tricks to see just how badly I’ve been damaged. I cannot read minds like I used to, nor peer into the future, but I can glimpse the present from time to time.” He glanced at Corvo. “Shadows in the dark, really.”

“What is this—a pity session?” Corvo scoffed. “Get to the point, Outsider. If there’s a problem, tell us. Are we in danger? Have you learned something new about Delilah’s plans?”

The Outsider’s ghostly face suddenly rippled with disgust and rage. I took a step back, startled.

“You are the danger, Corvo. I freed you from stone at Emily’s fervent request, knowing you’d most likely become a terrible burden. I am not pleased to know I was right—but not in the way I expected. Your body count has been surprisingly low. No, I’m more concerned with the fact that you cannot tell the difference, it appears, between your dead wife and your own daughter.”

Corvo’s look was dismissive. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“I speak the truth.”

“You speak lies and half-truths. That is your way,” Corvo said, his rat eyes glowing with a rage of his own, a burning hatred that made me glad the Outsider was untouchable. “I’m not a danger to her, I’m her protection. I’m the Royal Protector and she is my charge. I’d kill for her. I’d die for her.”

The Outsider shook his head, staring in fascination at my father. “I know you would, but the danger remains. Take now, for instance. Your mission to kill Lady Waverley Boyle has nothing to do with Delilah—has nothing to do with Emily’s throne. This is a personal vendetta, and you’re risking your life and hers to get your revenge. What if this whorehouse had been crawling with guards?”

“They’d be dead,” Corvo growled, clenching the hilt of his sword. “Anyone that would harm her would be dead.”

“Your mind has twisted into something dark, dear Corvo. I admit, it’s fascinating.” Something eerily nostalgic traced over his face. “Do you remember the Tower, Corvo? Fifteen years ago, I saw
what an impressive sight you made on your way to face the Lord Regent. Do you remember what I asked you?”

The Outsider leaned forward with bated breath.

Corvo shifted uneasily. I stared at him, my whole body frozen in place, just listening with my heart in my throat.

“You asked…” His voice became very quiet. “You asked me how it would end.”

The Outsider smiled. “Do you remember my exact words?”

Of course, he did. I saw it on his face.

And I saw that when Corvo spoke the words, he believed this, too, was another trap.

“How will you end his reign, by blood or by truth?”

“You chose the truth. Will you choose it again? Do you wish to hear the truth, dear Corvo, even knowing it will hurt?” His black eyes fell over me. “It will hurt more than any sword you have ever taken. More than any bullet wound. Perhaps even worse than how it felt to hold your dying lover in your arms.”

I couldn’t believe it, but Corvo paled. His body trembled, though whether it was fear or rage I couldn’t tell.

“Tell me, you black-eyed bastard.”

The Outsider blinked softly. I realized he didn’t relish this confrontation.

“You raped Emily. You thought it was Jessamine in your arms, but it wasn’t. You should have known. It will never be Jessamine. I’m sorry, but she’s gone, Corvo, and you have hurt the one person I cannot stand to see hurt ever again. You are a danger to Emily, now and forever, until and if your mind is put to right again.”

Corvo’s face twisted in disgust. “What kind of sick fuck do you take me for? I did no such thing.”

“You did,” the Outsider said. His eyes softened over me. “I saw it. I’m sorry, Emily.”

Corvo looked stunned. “No,” he said, but even I could tell he was fighting against a current that was pushing him further and further away, an undertow of dread churning in his rat eyes. He looked at me, his face openly vulnerable. “No,” he said again. “Emily would have told me if I had… hurt her.”

Tears welled in my eyes.

“Would she?” the Outsider asked, cocking his head. “She’s terrified of you.”

Corvo stared at me, the truth written on my face.

A wrenching gasp tore from his chest as he looked away from my face, breathing hard, his bloodied fists clenching. He couldn’t look at me. Couldn’t look at anyone.

He fell to his knees.

And froze like that. Time stopped. The Outsider met my tear-streaked gaze and said, “Now we
decide what to do with him.”

“Don’t kill him,” I said in a hollow voice.

“Of course not. I would never… but something must be done. I meant what I said. I can no longer watch from the sidelines; I must act.” He paced back and forth in front of his shrine. “Trouble is, I’m not entirely sure what to do.” He paused, turning to look at me over the ghostly outline of his shoulder. “Unless…”

“What?”

“I can lock him up, Emily.”

“What?”

“In the Void.”

“No.” I frowned. “You can do that?”

“Yes. It’s not ideal, grant you, but it would solve our little Corvo problem.” He tapped a finger against his lips in thought. “But there are risks. Grave risks. Anything caught in the Void is potentially discoverable by Delilah.” He looked earnestly at me. “I promise you. If Delilah finds him, I will cast him out of the Void before she sinks her claws into him.”

“This is crazy.”

I stared at Corvo, frozen on his knees.

“It’ll work. Trust me, Emily.”

“But… will I be able to visit him?”

“Yes. At any of my shrines, you can reach me, and where I am, he will be.”

“But how? How can someone actually live in the Void? When Delilah pulls me into the Void, she can’t physically hurt me. Believe me, she would if she could. Lucky for me, I’m not really there. It’s all mind games.”

The Outsider drew closer until I felt his chill against my skin. He lowered his voice, and I saw something seductive in his gaze. “Ah, but that’s the thing about Delilah. She is an imposter. I’m the real thing.”

I shuddered, drowning in his black eyes. “You can do it? Even… damaged as you are?”

“For you, I will do anything. I will imprison Corvo in the Void. He won’t be able to hurt you.”

Somehow, I remembered to breathe. I shook my head. “But what about food and water?”

“Time moves differently in the Void. He’ll never grow hungry. Never thirsty. He’ll be, for all intents and purposes, utterly ageless. Like me.” His ghostly hand hovered near my cheek, sending prickles of ice across my skin—it was the closest we could get to touching. He whispered fervently, “Please, Emily. Allow me to protect you.”

I glanced at Corvo then closed my eyes. “Alright.” I took a deep breath. “But only because I see no other choice.” Then, more hesitant, “Should I say goodbye?”
The Outsider grimaced. “I don’t think it wise. He may believe the truth that he’s a rapist, but that
doesn’t mean he believes he can’t protect you. He *burns* to protect you. He will not like being
locked away in the Void, Emily.”

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t think so.”

I felt numb.

I moved and crouched in front of my father. I took his folding sword and the crossbow, holding
them tight. The stupid dress didn’t have a belt to clip them on. Lastly, I took his mask, softly pulling
it from his head, his long hair shuffling at the movement. I leaned in and kissed his bruised cheek,
tears streaking down my face. *Goodbye, Father.*

I knew the goodbye wasn’t forever. But I was letting him go, and I didn’t how to feel.

I looked up to find the Outsider staring at me in fascination. “He violated you, yet you still love
him. Why?”

I turned my back. “Take him.”

A cold shadow fell over the chamber, the candlelight suddenly sparking in intensity, then all was
wind and breaking waves, a storm of sound in my ear. When I looked back, Corvo was gone, and
the Outsider, too.

I stood for a long time, alone in that chamber…

I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, and Loki’s hesitant voice.

“Emily?”

I turned to look at him, my heart swelling at the sight of his green eyes. “He’s gone,” I whispered.

I lost the strength to stand alone. Loki dove forward, grabbing me around the waist. I leaned against
him.

Dougal stared wide-eyed. “Lord Corvo’s dead?”

“No. The Outsider took him into the Void. He can’t hurt me—*anyone* anymore.” I glanced at the
Outsider’s shrine. “One day, I’ll free my father. I’ll save him.”

*But not today.*

Loki and Dougal just stared at me in shock. I blinked at them, trying to clear my head. “Why aren’t
you waiting back on the *Dreadful Wale*? Did something happen?”

“I thought you were in danger,” Loki said, his eyes clouded with so much concern that it was clear to
me he *still* thought I was in danger. *He has no idea what Corvo has done to me,* I thought. I could
never tell him. I was too ashamed.

I gave him a flippant answer, avoiding his eyes. “These crazy people are the ones in danger. Corvo
knocked out a few. Broke some bones.”

“We saw,” Dougal said wryly. “It’s how we knew we were going the right way.”

“That’s not all we saw,” Loki added.
When I glanced at him in question, the tips of his ears turned red. *Ahh.* The orgies, no doubt. “Well, there’s a first time for everything, isn’t there,” I said with no particular care either way. I felt tired.

“She’s get out of here,” Dougal said. “I promised my wife I’d return in one piece. If she finds out we’ve been wading neck-deep through fuckery and fornication, I’m a dead man.”

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Chapter End Notes

That 'dead man' joke is for all the concerned comments I got about Dougal last chapter. You guys crack me up. Do you think I go around dreaming up ways to kill off my characters? :D :D Okay, maybe sometimes.

Fun fact: Madame Marie Tussaud was described as a “decapitation artist” in the late 1700s. She made wax death masks of executed prisoners. She had a thing for dead heads. But with Corvo, I tried a different connotation, hehe.
Loki stopped short. “What are they doing?”

I felt numb. I just wanted to get back to the skiff and get out of this hellhole, but short of pushing him out of the way, I had to either keep going or look. I looked. At the moment I was sheltered between them, Loki at my front, Dougal at my back, our path hugging the wall of a second-story ledge that had almost completely lost its flooring, the chamber below visible through the jagged wreck of rotting wood.

Dougal had insisted we try to find another route instead of backtracking through the ballroom, complaining about ‘his eyes burning’ if he was forced to see all that Overseer-on-witch action again, so we’d ventured into parts of the whorehouse we hadn’t yet seen. This included, apparently, a small theatre with a stage.

We were right above it and, looking down, I could directly see into the open-top fish tank that was the focal point of the stage. Around it, a boisterous crowd had gathered, each person taking hands until they formed a human chain winding across the stage like a meandering river.

The closest man to the fish tank—a fat man in a velvet suit—was clapping his hands in gleeful anticipation. “Take a firm grip, everyone! Let’s try to break the record!”

“The record is thirty-two!” a woman exclaimed. “We need one more!” She looked to the crowd below the stage, onlookers too afraid to join in the fun, apparently. “Come on, Harry!” she laughed, singling one out. “It’ll be fun!”

“That’s right! We could all use a little stimulation,” another laughed, red-faced and quite amused by his own joke.

“Come on, Harry!” the woman harangued. “Be our number thirty-three already!” The snaking end of the human chain—a man with a drunken smile on his face—waved his free hand about, reaching for Harry, but still he seemed reluctant.

The woman teased, “Harry! Don’t tell me you have a weak heart! Get up here!”

As laughter rang out in the theatre, I glanced closer at the fish tank, confirming my fears that this was one of those electric eel demonstrations. It’d been a mania in Dunwall some years back, a party trick where contests were held to see how many people—linked together—could be felled at once by a single electric eel.

High voltage would course through the human chain, instantly dropping men and women to writhe on the floor like landed fish, utterly spastic. I’d outlawed the practice when people started dying of heart attacks. It didn’t happen all the time. Most merely reported shortness of breath and dizziness, sometimes chest pains. A few lucky ones reported remarkable euphoria and that alone kept the
practice going.

Judging by the look on Loki’s face, he’d spotted the eel.

He wasn’t happy.

The fish tank it was being held in was pitifully small, and the water so cloudy I was amazed the eel could breathe. It was thrashing about in an angry fashion, or at least, what I thought might be anger. It was hard to tell, not having spent a great deal of time thinking about electric eels.

It was an ugly thing with a blunt head, small glassy eyes, and a snake-like body (easily eight feet long) with an anal fin that fluttered like a delicate ribbon. The only thing ‘pretty’ about it was the color of its skin, a grayish hue with metallic hints of coppery brown, patterned like polka-dots.

But Loki stared at the eel like it was beautiful.

“She’s a creature of Satakal,” he said, glancing at me with solemn eyes. “Like the whales.”

I shared a look with Dougal over my shoulder. Both of us knew where this was going. I leaned closer to Loki, noticing the tension in his body.

“You need to free her?”

“Please,” Loki whispered, his green eyes consumed with a vast empathy I was only beginning to realize must encompass every darn creature that lived in the water, whether it be the ocean, river, or lake. It was strange to me, but… charming.

Loki had a good heart.

“All right,” I breathed, my heart swelling with momentary bliss (it felt good deciding to help another, even if it was just an ugly eel), but a second later I found myself staring blankly at the fish tank. I shot Loki a bewildered look. “How?”

His smile grew. “We wait. The only distraction we need is about to happen.”

“He has a point,” Dougal dryly conceded.

Harry had yielded. We watched him reluctantly climb the stage and join the human chain, his pale brow beaded with sweat. The fat man in velvet—heading the procession—raised his free hand and shouted, “For the record! On a count of three, ladies and gentlemen! One. Two. THREE!”

He plunged his free hand into the water, grasping the lashing creature. A split second later, he was violently flung back, and with him the entire human chain. Their joined hands sprung apart as they fell, their muscles contorting. The record-breakers (for it did appear all thirty-three had fallen at once) writhed on the floor, limbs flailing, mouths opening and closing like fish out of water. None of them were breathing; it was just the sound of beating and thrashing, of flesh against wood.

The ecstatic screams would come later.

“Let’s go,” Loki said, signaling with his hand. The stage had a few ropes hanging from the ceiling, long-ago equipment for props, I imagined. We used the ropes to quickly drop down from the ledge, landing near the fish tank.

It was not so easy in a dress. The skirt ballooned, exposing the pistol strapped to my thigh.

“She has a gun!” someone screamed as my feet hit the ground.
“Shit. Hurry, Loki,” I said, sparing a glance at the Pandyssian as he reached into the fish tank. The stage was sprawling with bodies, but a few were climbing to their feet, clapping each other on the backs and exclaiming in excitement and congratulations. Further down the theatre, off the stage, a few onlookers were noticeably alarmed, pointing at us.

“Careful. It’s going to zap you, Loki!” I cried, snapping my attention to Loki at the tank. The electric eel was lashing wildly, its blunt head caught in Loki’s hand like a muzzle.

How was he not getting electrocuted?

My shock and worry evaporated when Loki turned to face me, his green eyes misted. Magic, I thought with relief. He was using his Maormer magic to somehow sidestep the creature’s natural electrical stimuli. Sokolov would love to see how that worked.

“Stop them!” someone shouted in delirious panic. “They’re stealing Mr. Prickles!”

I almost laughed. Mr. Prickles? Really? I turned into Dougal as he held his coat open, allowing me to snatch my crossbow in one graceful motion and level it over the crowd. “Actually, it’s a girl,” I said, “and Mrs. Prickles is coming with us.”

“Stay back and no one gets hurt,” Dougal added in that booming, yet calming voice he had, his hand suggestively positioned over his sheathed sword. He had another (my father’s folding sword) strapped to his belt, along with my father’s mask that I’d asked him to carry for me, but I didn’t think we’d need to use our weapons. The neighborly, friendly whorehouse was full of lovers, not bruisers, as I recalled with a smirk.

“Emily,” Loki called from behind. “Help me carry her.”

I glanced at Dougal. “I got this,” he assured me, keeping a wary eye on the crowd. His height alone seemed to be doing the trick; no one wanted to fight a giant.

I ran towards Loki, nearly jumping at the sight of the eel’s head coming straight at me. Loki had it pulled halfway out of the tank, its graceful tail batting at the water like it was just as shocked and uncomfortable as I was.

“Loki, this is crazy!”

I giggled despite myself, for a blessed moment letting go, the day’s horrible events washing over me, the hurt and heartbreak draining away as I allowed myself to just focus on one thing: figuring out how to balance an eight-foot electric eel in one hand with a crossbow in the other.

“She can’t bend as tightly as a snake so I can’t wrap her around me,” Loki said, maneuvering the eel between us like a ropework master. “We’ll need to carry her together.” He paused, checking on me like he’d suddenly realized I wasn’t as confident about this rescue as he was. “You got her?”

“It’s slimy!”

I tried not to make a disgusted face (for Loki’s sake), but its creepy small eyes were looking at me. I caught Loki’s eyes across the eel’s body undulating between us and didn’t appreciate the grin plastered to his face right about then.

“I can’t do this, Loki.”

“You can. You’re doing great,” he said, his grin widening.
“Oh, gods!”

It was squirming!

“Time to go,” Dougal quipped, picking up the slack in the middle, though the eel really wasn’t that heavy. I figured he was more concerned I might drop it; I was beginning to feel nauseous and probably looked it.

We hurriedly crossed the stage, stepping between and over the record-breakers. Most, I was glad to see, had recovered, which at the moment simply meant ‘recalled how to breathe.’ They were clutching their chests, pink in the face, and smiling at each other like they had just survived something extraordinary.

Only the fat man in the velvet suit seemed put together enough to realize we were escaping with his precious eel. “No! Disglorious thieves!”

“Disglorious? Is that even a word?” I asked.

“His brain’s a bit fried, I’m afraid,” Dougal said, matching my silly grin.

We look absolutely ridiculous, I thought, imagining the sight we three must make, running offstage with the eel.

We dropped from the stage and waded through the crowd, and anyone entertaining a fight were quickly dissuaded by a rough shove from Dougal.

“Get back!”

The giant barely touched them and they flung backwards, his hand against their chests. A few were trying to grab at Loki, not the eel, their hands snatching fistfuls of his coat. I didn’t realize why until I saw the look on their faces: pure, unadulterated lust. We were in a whorehouse, after all, and a few clearly wanted him.

Loki kicked them away with his foot, shuffling an awkward dance as he maintained his grip on the thrashing eel.

“Hurry. She needs water to breathe,” Loki said as we burst through the doors into the chilly night air.

I heard the sound of crashing waves and almost stumbled, my mind swept back to that cathedral-like chamber, the Outsider’s black eyes falling over me… It would solve our little Corvo problem. Gods, it felt so callous. I lowered my eyes to the ground as we picked a path down the rocky steps towards the shoreline. Did I do the right thing by just letting him go like that? A part of me felt guilty, like I had just thrown my father to the dogs, and another part of me felt sickened by my guilt. Gods, I’m so f**ked up. I didn’t want to think about it, any of it.

My dressy shoes sunk into sand, then flattened out as we hit wetter beach. This area of the shoreline was closer and our best chance at dumping the eel before it died of asphyxiation.

There were rickety docks, too, stretched between rocky cliffs that curled around the mansion. Access by boat was the only way in. Meagan had the skiff down-a-ways, hiding in darker waters beyond the reach of the dock lights.

At the water’s edge, I angled the eel’s head towards its freedom. A little push from all of us and it was gone, the thin ruffle of its fin disappearing into the moonlit waves.

Behind me, I could hear Dougal and Loki breathing fast. “Wow, that was a rush,” Dougal said with
a laugh.

“She’s free. Thank you,” Loki said, smiling just as big.

We freed a whale in the morning, I thought, and an eel by night. I wanted to laugh, but I wanted to cry, too. What we did... It was good. It’d been a great day in that respect, a wonderful day with Loki, and yet... Today was also, without a doubt, the worst day of my life.

Dougal said, “I’ll go get Meagan. See if she can bring the skiff around. I have to get our rowboat, too.” Another pause. “Your Highness?”

I couldn’t look away from the waves. I reached up with a trembling hand and tore the eye mask from my face. The red, glittery fabric was wet with tears.

“I’ll watch her,” Loki quietly said.

I heard Dougal fiddle with his belt, and Loki’s voice again. He sounded hesitant, maybe even embarrassed. “Thanks, but I don’t know how to use it.”

“She does. Just keep her safe, aye? In case someone comes out lookin’ for the eel.”

Dougal’s footsteps receded. Somewhere in that numb haze, I felt Loki pull me away from the water, gently tugging my arm. I fell back, sitting in drier sand. He sat cross-legged beside me, my father’s folding sword draped across his knees. I felt his concerned gaze, but I kept my eyes on the waves. If I focused just right, the sound drowned out Corvo’s groans, the feel of his... I squeezed my eyes shut.

I only snapped them open again when I heard the folding sword slice open. But he did it wrong; the metallic ring was off. I gasped in alarm, firmly gripping his hand over the hilt before he hurt himself.

“Don’t,” I breathed. His green eyes shot to my face. “You’ll slice your fingers off,” I said more gently.

“I’ve never seen it up close,” Loki said, watching me slice open the sword in a silver blur, blowing out the sand, then refolding it. I would have to give it a good cleaning, later on. Any debris caught between its moving parts would ruin the sword.

Loki commented, “The rock is so hard... and shiny.”

I smiled at the way he said shiny. His curiosity was endearing, but the rock?

“What rock?” I asked. When he just leaned over and tapped the blade, I said, “Ohhh, you mean the metal alloy...” Father had once rudely referred to him as a Stone Age barbarian. Metallurgy probably hadn’t been invented yet, in his time. I explained, “The sword is made from silver and steel, forged together in great heat.”

“Oh,” Loki said, but I couldn’t tell if he understood what that meant either. He remained close, his body angled and leaning towards me, our arms pressed together. I felt sheltered.

“What are your weapons made of, Loki?”

He cupped a handful of sand and poured it over my knee. I had my legs stretched out, the stupid dress making it too awkward to sit cross-legged. He quietly said, “My people were divinely chosen. The Maormer taught us their magic. How to draw in the sand. How to cast spells. Only savages used rocks and sticks to fight. We only feared them because there were so many and my people so
few."

“Did you ever fight these savages?” I asked, my interest piqued. He’d been the Sacrifice in his culture, but had his role ever ventured into some sort of warrior class?

“Yes. I killed my first savage when I was thirteen.”

So young. I watched him cup another handful of sand and pour it over my knees. Unlike Tempest Island, the sand of Glory Point was a golden brown. His eyes went distant and I thought he must be thinking of home. Melancholy rippled over his face like waves. Gods, he was so beautiful, even in his sorrow.

My eyes dropped to his lips, but his face seemed to blur as my thoughts drifted to my own sorrow. I absently moved the sword out of his reach, letting it drop to the sand beside me. There was only one person in the world who could make that blade sing, truly sing, and he… he’s in the Void, I thought with a squeeze that tore at my insides.

If the Outsider could watch me from the Void—could my Father, now, too? Was he at this very moment glaring down at me? Hating me for locking him away? Hating himself? He’d fallen to his knees in what seemed like abject shame when he had learned the truth.

I felt fingers.

Loki’s hand slipped up my dress. I felt him tug the pistol strapped to my thigh. “Can I?” he softly asked, watching my face.

“Can you what?” I asked. His hand felt hot. I couldn’t decide if I was angry at him for touching me there. Mostly, I was surprised I hadn’t immediately moved away.

“Try it.”

I stared at his face. “You want to shoot my gun? Right now?”

“Bad time?”

I blurted out a laugh. “Might be.” I shook my head. “First my sword, and now my gun? It’s the middle of the night and I’m… tired.”

He freed his hand from beneath my dress and I shivered, the heat of his hand slipping away. I almost wanted him to put it back. “As you wish,” he surrendered, “but tomorrow, the Empress will teach me how to shoot.”

“Aye, aye, my prince,” I promised with a sleepy smile as he shrugged out of his coat and draped it over my shoulders.

I relaxed against him, watching the water. What was taking Dougal so long? The night sky shed stars over the waves, shimmers of light dancing along the crests of the crashing tide.

“Loki,” I said, feeling sleepy.

“Hmm?”

“You shouldn’t go around sticking hands up girls’ dresses.”

“Why?”
“Why?” I blinked up at him, but I snorted in laughter when I caught his mischievous grin.

“Not just any girl,” he retorted. Then with a shrug, “I wanted to feel your gun. Its metal alloys.”

Now I knew he was toying with me. The modern words rolled awkwardly off his tongue, making it even more funny.

“Oh, really?”

I bit my lip, fighting back a ridiculous smile. I shifted my weight, rolling my hip and slowly pulling up the slip of my dress until my pistol was exposed. His eyes flickered down. When he looked back up, his eyes locked on mine, I drew the gun, twirling it with my finger along the trigger guard in an elaborate spin that my father would have rolled his eyes at. Showy nonsense, he’d say. But it had the effect I was going for. Loki jerked back, his eyes widening, and he practically jumped when I cocked the hammer. “Feeling the gun is actually a good teaching point,” I said. “You don’t just shoot it. You make it a part of you.”

“Is it magic?” Loki asked. He sounded amazed at what I could do.

“No. Just a lot of practice. Almost anyone can learn how to do it.”

“I want to learn.” Something in his voice made me look closer at him. He was being fervently honest. “I want to learn so I can protect you. This world… its weapons are beyond anything I’ve ever seen. I’m like the savages throwing rocks. I can’t compete.”

I gaped at him. “You’re joking, right? Loki, your magic is like nothing I’ve ever seen! That sea monster—”

“Is not something I can just whip out during a fight,” Loki cut in with a scowl.

He took my hand. I watched him move it down to slowly holster the pistol at my thigh strap. It slid in place, my thumb releasing the hammer in a pleasant clicking sound. His thumb brushed lightly over the tender skin of my inner thigh and then he fell back, not touching me but for his eyes, holding me like he’d meant every word.

“Just promise to teach me, Emily. No one could ever replace your father, but… if I can, I want to be your royal protector one day.”

I was speechless. So much passed through my head in that split second. The Royal Protector isn’t just a bodyguard. Parliament would never approve. My father’s coming back. One day. But in the end, I just squeezed his hand.

He wants to protect me.

“I feel safe with you, Loki,” I said in a small whisper.

We heard the skiff, an engine roar drawing closer, barely visible, like a smuggler in the night. “They’re coming,” I said, breaking his grip. Loki climbed to his feet and helped me stand.

His coat around my shoulders fluttered in the breeze. It was a cold night, and after my brush with hypothermia I just wanted to keep warm.

Dougal helped us clamor aboard. He’d tied the manual rowboat to the back of the skiff, and soon we were flying across the water, away from the shore to hug the cliffs towards the southwest where the Dreadful Wale was docked in a repair berth.
I glanced at Dougal. “Did you…”

“He told me,” Meagan said stonily, her dark eyes swallowed by her swarthy skin. “Maybe it was for the best, but…”

Her grimace said it all. She avoided my gaze, piloting the skiff with one hand on the engine throttle.

“You think we lost a powerful ally,” I quietly said.

“We’ll do fine without Lord Corvo,” Dougal said, speaking up for me. “He trained his daughter well.”

“It’s not just that,” Meagan said, narrowing her eyes at me. She didn’t raise her voice, but she had a way of lashing her words, making them sound angry and intense. “It’s the Outsider—how much you rely on him. How can you trust him? You gave him your father. Why?”

“You saw how he was,” Dougal said.

“I saw a man who’d do anything to take back his daughter’s throne. To keep her safe,” Meagan said. “We could have controlled him. Directed his rage.”

Dougal hissed under his breath. I had a feeling he knew about the rape—if only because of Eileen. I’d tried to hide it from her, but that was a joke. I’d fallen apart in front of her. She knew. It all meant that Dougal understood why I had to lock away my father—but Meagan? No. She has no idea what my father did to me. How could she? She’d been aboard the whaling ship.

“It’s done,” I said, closing the discussion. “Corvo’s gone and we’re all safer for it. Be glad you still have your eye, Meagan.”

She met my glare. In truth I was surprised she wanted Corvo as an ally. Wasn’t she terrified of him? Or maybe just more terrified of Delilah…

Thankfully, the Captain didn’t press, and we returned to the Dreadful Wale. The ship was crawling with whalers repairing the ship as fast as they could. Meagan explained they would be working overnight and that things would be loud, all the hammering and banging as they fixed the engine room and whatever was broken with the rotator.

I didn’t care. I didn’t expect to be able to sleep well anyway. Until I found that tattoo artist in Karnaca to ink the protective sigil to ward my dreams, I couldn’t block Delilah from pulling me into the Void.

Eileen had a cup of hot tea waiting for me, and fresh clothes in my little cabin. I bid everyone goodnight and slammed the door behind me. I was so ready for this day to be over.

I drank the tea, sitting at the edge of the bed. It was hard to think of this little cabin as mine since Father had more often slept in it. Now it’s all mine. The Princess had Sokolov’s quarters. Eileen and her husband were sharing the bigger (storage) room across the hall while Captain Foster slept in the bridge. Rosemary was locked in Meagan’s secret room and Loki, I assumed, would sleep on the couches near the gaming table. Or maybe on the couches in the War Room? I was too tired to care.

I slipped out of the red dress and climbed into layer after layer of clothing, then buried myself in the blankets. I felt warm, too warm honestly, but I sank into the bed and closed my eyes, pure exhaustion—mental and physical—pulling me under.

The whaler’s constant hammering and banging droned in my ear…
I awoke in the Void.

Delilah cocked her head at me, staring at me for all of two seconds before saying, “You seem different. Did something happen?”

A cruel smile twisted her face. She sat on my throne, her legs gracefully crossed. Two witch dogs slept at her feet, their bone-coats misting.

I softly blinked, too tired, too shattered, too numb to care what she said or did to me. “I’ve discovered there are worse things than losing my throne, Aunt Delilah.”

Her cold blue eyes watched me closely. A hint of something shared passed like a storm over her face. She slowly stood and circled me, her eyes grazing over the tension in my body. I almost felt like she could see the fingerprints Corvo had left on my body. Perhaps, even, the mark of him inside me.

“Survival,” Delilah said, pausing in front of me, a black nail dragging along my cheek. She couldn’t draw blood, but I could feel the chill, like the Void was funneled through her. “At any cost. That’s what I told myself when I first opened my legs for a man…”

I paled, my heart racing. She’s only guessing, I told myself. Trying to pick me apart. She might sense something of a… sexual nature had hurt me, but…

“I whored myself out to survive,” Delilah said in a voice that spoke of pain and misery—and a hatred that had blackened her heart. “I was worthless. Exiled from the palace. My mother thrown out like garbage. The only thing I had was my cunt.” She spat the word. “I begged and fucked and starved and cried. Then one night, the Outsider found me.” A feral grin laced her face. “He saw me.”

“Congratulations.”

“I hated Jessamine because I was a whore and she wasn’t. That I had to beg and she didn’t. That she could fuck the man she loved while I had to fuck for coin.”

Jealous bitch. How was that my mother’s fault?

Her lips were suddenly at my ear, pouring sweet malice. The Void shifted impossibly fast, obeying her fantasy. “The worse, though, was always the men who took without paying…”

Rape. There it was; the knife in my heart. She’d found it.

She stepped back, a satisfied smirk on her pale face, the dark makeup circling her eyes making me think she really did look like a whore from the Golden Cat. “Tell me, sweet Emily,” she whispered, “have you learned the price of survival?”

She asked the question again and again, demonstrating in vivid detail exactly what she meant, the Void… obeying… her… every… fantasy.
Electric eel parties *were* actually a thing in London in the late 1700s. It's crazy. Google it!

I also have a long rant I wanted to post here (it was mainly in response to a comment I got on Fanfiction.net):

Hey everyone, I want to say I respect everyone’s right to an opinion, especially when it revolves around the sensitive subject of RAPE. With that in mind… I left multiple trigger warnings about rape. Please do not read my fanfic if rape triggers you.

I like comments, even ones I read and I’m like “Say what?” An anonymous commenter doesn’t like rape used as a “plot device” and insists I could have used “murder” instead if the whole point was to lock away Corvo in the Void. I get it. Rape is a touchy subject, but I don’t consider it taboo or somehow immune to being “used” in fiction.

Writing, in a nutshell, is crafting high stakes. Rape does that, especially when it’s a trusted father figure who has protected Emily her entire life, and since I have a female protagonist, and since sexual violence is a common threat for some women, I wanted to go there, to “break her”, to make the worst happen and see her fight to get back up. Claiming that I only used it as a “plot device” to get rid of Corvo totally ignores the emotional impact on Emily. Character growth and progression, etc.

And about the rape itself, it wasn’t just thrown in for “shock value”. Anytime Corvo had one of his “episodes” I made it clear he was “mumbling like a madman” and that he was seeing Jessamine, that it was connected to the Heart. I turned what is considered a good thing (the Heart, Emily’s mother) into a weapon by making the psychotic episodes explicitly about Jessamine and nothing to do with murder. Corvo’s “murderous side” was only apparent when he was lucid and rational (in his own mind). If Corvo murdered anyone, he was murdering people he considered threats to Emily. If instead he was going around murdering innocents (like Eileen), then, yes, I could maybe see that as a reason why Emily would want Corvo locked away in the Void, but I wanted to avoid Corvo turning into a stereotypical “bad guy” with no redeeming qualities.

I want the reader to feel conflicted about him. He loves his daughter, would kill for her, die for her, would protect her, but he’s also a danger to her in a way he can’t control. Both Emily and Corvo are Delilah’s victims. That doesn’t forgive the rape. It’s so fucking twisted and I love it.

I also think Corvo murdering innocents (like Eileen) would come across as too comical and eye-rolling, and wouldn’t have had the same impact as incest/rape. If Corvo murders someone, he’s doing it because he believes it’s right – and therefore, justifiable, enough that Emily might easily forgive it. (Like she did with the eight men from the Jessamine – who Emily couldn’t save anyway). Rape though? How could Emily easily forgive that? It’s higher stakes.

And overall, this is a romance between Emily and the Outsider/Loki. Sex can be a destructive force (as in rape), but it’s also a healing one. One of my favorite novels (Outlander by Diana Gabaldon) has a heterosexual man being raped by another man, a sadist, in the last quarter of the book, a climax of pain, humiliation and anguish, followed by the most redemptive, beautiful chapters I’ve ever read about healing and love in the aftermath of rape, not just for the rape victim, but in the heart of someone who loves that rape victim, his wife who helped them fight out of that darkness.

That said, it’s up to you to read the story or not. I can’t promise there won’t be more
sexual violence going forward.
Part 5: Chapter 49

Part V continued

“Broken”

Chapter 49

25th day of the Month of Earth, 1852

“I think I’m going crazy, Eileen,” I said, only half-joking.

She’d found me on the floor, sitting with my back to the bed, looking up at her with desperate eyes. I hated that bed. It was a torture device. Until I reached Karnaca, I was at Delilah’s mercy.

“Do you think it’s humanly possible not to sleep for ten days straight?” I asked her, hugging my knees closer to my chest.

Eileen knelt beside me, her heart pouring into her eyes. “Highness. Emily. You don’t have to be the strong one. Not today. Let us take care of you. All of us are here for you.”


“Can you stand?”

“I think so.” She helped me to my feet. It felt strange taking her hand—she was so petite and I towered above her, but today I felt like the smaller one. As I lifted on shaky legs, I felt something wet run down my inner thighs in a stream. “O-oh,” I stammered, noticing a smear of blood on the floor where I’d sat.

“Are you hurt?” Eileen asked, her blue eyes following the red river up my thighs until recognition slammed home. I was utterly floored.

“My period,” I gasped, lifting the hem of my nightgown. I wasn’t wearing pants, only underwear beneath. The lacy panties were completely sodden, a bright red patch at the crotch. I laughed awkwardly. “Wow. I feel like I’m twelve again.”

I couldn’t remember the last time it’d taken me by surprise. Usually, I could feel it coming on for days before I started bleeding. But I’ve been under extreme stress, I told myself.

“Don’t be embarrassed. We’re both women and seen it all,” Eileen said, all businesslike. She gathered up the blankets and stained bedsheets for washing, and the layers of clothing I had peeled off in the night, feeling too hot and suffocating. She paused at the door. “I’ll come straight back with tampons and coffee. Do you get bad cramps? Do you want a heating pad?” Her offer came with a gentle smile.

I shook my head. “No need, thank you.” I felt dizzy—frayed nerves, most likely, or perhaps a lingering symptom of the concussion I had suffered nearly a week ago. A pleasant thought pushed through the fog. “We actually have coffee?”

I normally preferred tea, but the thought of something stronger sounded wonderful.

“And dark chocolate,” Eileen said.
“You spoil me,” I said as she slipped through the door with a warm smile, her blue eyes shining. The sound of hammering and banging amplified then muffled as the door opened and closed behind her (the ship repairs were ongoing).

Alone again, I screamed into my fist until I felt too dizzy, gasping for air. I wanted to collapse into a tiny ball and cry, but I suddenly noticed something on my desk. A neat row of seashells. Each was unique. Shape, size, color. Swirling ridges. Patterned lines. Gritty and pearly. They were beautiful. They were mine. I’d picked them from the black sands of Tempest Island just last morning.

I found my favorite.

It was cerulean blue and shaped like a nautilus shell. Callista, my old governess, called them moon snails because of their tiny, moon-shaped eyes at the center or ‘start’ of each spiral.

Its spiral pattern spoke of the continuity of life, our paths ever unfolding, and the snail spoke of the slow passage of time. Just hold on, I told myself, rubbing the shell’s pearly surface between my fingers. Hold on until Karnaca.

I touched my face, the tips of my fingers outlining the tight smile like I had cause to wonder how it came about. I felt disconnected from myself. Separate. Lost, maybe, like I was wearing someone else’s face. Delilah had pushed too deep and I’d compensated by burying more of myself into a place she could not touch. That was the theory, anyway. I just knew I felt numb and… tired.

I desperately wanted to sleep without dreaming, to fall into an oblivion where nothing could hurt me, a womb of warmth and darkness, but instead I was being pushed out into the world each time Delilah released me from the Void. My body could sleep, but not my mind, and it was slowly eating away at my strength and sanity.

“Why do we need to sleep anyway,” I grumbled. Maybe Meagan had stimulants aboard the ship. Maybe I could artificially keep myself awake until Karnaca. I was desperate enough to try anything at this point.

Eileen returned. She was tireless and her can-do attitude felt like a lifeline I could hold on to. She dumped a whole bunch of stuff (blanket, sheets, clothing) on the bed and handed me a box of tampons. That I was eager to attend to first before I bled all over the place. Leave it to Sokolov to invent the tampon. I inserted it, trying to pretend I wasn’t thinking about the last thing that had been up there, but there was no fighting the tears that spilled down my cheeks. ‘I love you, Jessamine,’ he’d whispered, but there had been nothing tender in the way Corvo had taken me, forcing himself into me so quickly and wholly.

It had felt like desperation, like he’d needed to claim me—her—with his body and soul before the woman he loved slipped away.

At the utility sink, I wet a rag to scrub at the bloodied skin along my inner thighs. By the time I was cleaned up and dressed (in simple black slacks and a loose sweater that hung off one shoulder), Eileen had finished making the bed.

She sat at the crisp edge with her hands clasped together and a patient look on her face.

“IT’s good you got your period, Emily,” she said. “Now we know for sure that he didn’t…”

“…impregnate me,” I finished, sitting beside her on the bed. I stared at her clasped hands.

My words made her gasp in relief. Relief that I had finally admitted to the rape.
“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, so gently it hurt.

I began to wonder if some of Dougal’s gentleness came from her. She wasn’t pushing and yet I felt utterly sure that if I did talk about it, I could trust her with my feelings. I wasn’t just an Empress, a noble for her to serve. I was a woman, like her.

And maybe a friend, I thought, glancing into her Morley blue eyes.

I tore my gaze away. “Would you like some coffee, Eileen?”

The question startled her, but she gave a polite, “Yes, please,” as I moved to the desk where she had laid out a serving tray with a tall coffee pot and chunks of dark chocolate. There was only one mug, but I figured I could use one of the whiskey tumblers on the desk—leftover from Corvo’s night of drinking, if I had to guess. I rubbed the glass clean with my shirt and poured myself some coffee, reserving the proper mug for her.

Eileen smiled at the courtesy, though she looked rather stunned that I wanted to drink coffee with her at all. She’d been a servant all her life (I could tell) and not used to such informality between our classes.

We sat at the edge of the bed, enjoying the coffee and the silence until I broke it with a quiet voice, gathering my thoughts. “I do want to talk about it.” I swirled the coffee, staring at the dark liquid. “But I’m still… what he did… Eileen, I…”

When I hesitated, she put a reassuring hand on my leg. “What he did was wrong.”

“I know… but I still feel…”

“Guilty?”

I nodded silently, fighting back tears when I saw the look in her eyes. I took a deep breath and forced a smile. “Can I be candid with you?”

“Of course, you can, sweetheart.”

I stared at the floor. “Wyman and I… when we made love sometimes I couldn’t orgasm. Well, most of the time. Wyman said it wasn’t anything to be ashamed of, that some women just couldn’t get there through vaginal sex.” I gave her a sheepish smile. “Trust me, Wyman found other ways.”

His tongue, his fingers… All of it sent me through the roof. He was an exceptionally skilled lover and when he did give me orgasm through penetration, it’d been amazing.

Eileen smiled patiently. “I know what you mean. Go on.”

“I… I’m not sure I can do this.”

“You can. It’s alright, Emily.”

She grabbed my hand and held it firmly. I stammered, “When Corvo… when my father—”

I cleared my throat and tried again, the words rushing out of me before I lost my courage. “He made me orgasm, Eileen. And I mean fast. Twice. Vaginally—the kind I hardly ever…and then the second time…” I felt like I was going to throw up. “I remember feeling like my body betrayed me. How could I? How could I orgasm if it was rape?”

The question came out twisted and angry. I hated myself. I felt so ashamed.
Eileen shook her head, compassion in her eyes. “It was against your will. That’s all that matters.” She furrowed her brow in determination. “Let me be candid with you, Emily. You know my husband.”

“Yes, of course…” I said, confused.

“I know he wouldn’t mind if I told you—if it helped you get through this—so I’ll just come right out and say it. Dougal was raped by a teenaged girl in Wynnedown. A little girl, barely larger than me. She slipped a drug into his drink and tied him up, and when we took her to court, do you know what the magistrate said? That a man cannot be raped.”

“What?”

“Yes. A man cannot be raped, he said. That because my husband had an erection, he ‘allowed’ her to use his body. That it counted as permission. That because the girl was so small, he could have ‘easily’ overpowered her if he didn’t want to have sex. That because she was so small, she ‘probably’ reminded him of me and so he wanted it. That’s what he said. That’s why the court refused to punish the girl.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“I agree,” Eileen said. “Erection or not—a body’s betrayal or not—we are human. Our bodies have natural reactions to sexual stimuli. Orgasming during rape doesn’t mean you wanted the rape. It’s just another sick way to blame the victim.”

Eileen took a deep, steadying breath, her eyes going soft with compassion and hurt. I couldn’t believe she was telling me this; what a horrible thing to bear.

“Dougal suffered from guilt for a long time. And wounded pride. He couldn’t believe a little girl had been able to do that to him, but she was a whaler and worked the ropes and knew how to tie an intricate knot he couldn’t escape.”

I shook my head. So awful.

Eileen squeezed my hand. “Emily, sweetheart, the point is, you shouldn’t blame yourself for orgasming.” This time, tears welled in her eyes. “Don’t ever feel ashamed.”

We hugged each other, and I felt like a burden had lifted. We smiled at each other and wiped our tears.

“I’m sorry you and Dougal had to go through that,” I said, sipping my coffee. I felt less tired. Hopeful, even. Maybe she was right. Maybe I didn’t have to carry around all this guilt for something I couldn’t control.

“We got through it,” Eileen said, cradling her coffee mug. “We love each other very much.”

“I’m glad, and as soon as I get my throne back I’ll make that whaler bitch pay for what she did. The Queen of Morley will hear from me about her so-called courts.” I moved from the bed to try some of the chocolate and turned back to find a stunned look on Eileen’s face.

“Th-thank you,” she stammered. “I never thought we’d get justice for what happened.”

There was a knock at the door and Dougal popped his head in. Speak of the devil. “Sorry to interrupt, Your Highness, but Rosemary’s makin’ a fuss about breakfast and I can’t find the key.”
“Shit,” I said, smacking my forehead. I stared wide-eyed at Dougal. “I forgot to take the key from
Corvo.”

“Does Meagan have a spare?” Eileen asked.

“I’ll check,” Dougal said, backing out.

“Gods, I’m an idiot. If we can’t get her out, I’ll have to find a rat to push through the damn vents so
she can get herself out.” Once the repairs were finished on the ship, I wanted to move Rosemary
back into the engine room brig; it was more humane than that tiny secret room.

“Did she really possess that poor, little rat Corvo killed?” Eileen asked, her face paling.

“She’s a witch. She can possess people, too. I saw it,” I said absently, remembering. *In the throne
room.* She’d made a guard kill his friend.

I stood up, leaving the coffee on the tray. “I need to talk to the Captain, too. Excuse me, Eileen.”

At the door, I hesitated. “Oh, and thank you.”

“No, thank you, Your Highness. For opening up to me. If you ever need to talk, I’m here…”

I left with a smile. Dougal was already in the bridge, talking to the Captain. She was shaking her
head, and when her dark eyes slid to mine, she said to both of us, “There’s only the one key.”

“Then what do we do?” Dougal asked.

“Possession,” I said at the same time Meagan said, “Blow up the door.”

I glared at her. “Rosemary would be killed if you tried that.”

“I was kidding,” the Captain said, her dark eyes lidded. “She’s still our valuable hostage, right?” It
came out mocking.

“She was Corvo’s hostage,” Dougal pointed out, “and now Corvo is gone.”

“But not the threat she represents,” Meagan hissed.

“She stays onboard,” I said, glaring at her. “We’re not going to abandon her on Glory Point if that’s
what you’re vaguely getting at?”

“I’m not vaguely getting at anything. If you want to drag her to Karnaca, fine—by—me.” She said
each word slow and sharp, like a dagger point.

I studied her face, but she was a wall of hidden secrets—as usual. “Meagan, I meant to ask…
Yesterday morning aboard the whaling ship, when Rosemary distracted all those whalers, you
weren’t affected by her Glamour spell. Why?”

The Captain opened her jacket, showing me the eclipse-shaped bonecharm knitted inside,
shimmering darkly. “Witch’s Bane. Glamour or Possession can’t be used against me.”

“No shit,” Dougal whistled. Anything having to do with the occult made his eyes go wide. “We
should all have one of those, shouldn’t we?”

“It is craftable,” Meagan admitted, “but it won’t be easy. We’d need raw whalebone, and the
crafting spell itself is difficult to master. I corrupted several bonecharms before I got it right.”
“Do they sell raw whalebone here?” I asked. Glory Point was a smugglers’ market. Bonecharms and the like were relatively common in black markets since the Overseers confiscated such items.

“I can look,” Dougal offered with a shrug. “Eileen and I plan to hit the markets after breakfast. She wants to restock our fresh food supplies. Do you want to come with us, Your Highness?”

I quickly shook my head. “No. I should stay out of sight. My face is too easily recognizable.”

Plus, a part of me still wanted to burrow under a rock. Talking with Eileen had helped me immeasurably, but I still felt numb to the core. I needed to rest—as best I could without resting, irony be damned. “Dougal, if you find stimulants at the market, pick me up a few, will you?”

“Stimulants? What, like drugs?”

“Yes,” I pleaded.

“No,” the Captain stepped in. “It’s too dangerous. That shit can kill you.”

“You’re not the one getting tortured every time you fall asleep!” I turned around, giving them my back as I collected myself, taking deep breaths. I could just feel the look Dougal and Meagan passed one another. At last, I turned back. “The Outsider can help me once I reach Karnaca, but until then…”

“I’ll get us there as fast as possible,” the Captain promised, compassion lighting the darkness of her eyes, but there was a cold edge to her voice. “The repairs will only take a few more hours. Early afternoon at the latest. Then we’ll be on our way.”


She nodded. “Give or take. A fortunate storm blowing west could push us faster—”

“Loki!” Meagan jumped at my shout. I clutched Dougal’s arm. “Find him! Bring him here!”

“Aye, Your Highness,” Dougal said, shooting down the stairs at a gallop.

Meagan looked sour. She wasn’t often startled that badly. She crossed her arms and leaned back against the cockpit controls. “What are you thinking, Emily?”

“His magic,” I said, glancing at the cloudy sky through the windows. “He can’t control the weather, but he can make storms more intense.”

“He can do what? Emily, you called him Whaleborn. What exactly does that mean? I saw the Mark on his hand—”

“Digging for information?” I gave her a stone cold stare. “If you want some of my secrets, Captain, you have to relinquish some of yours.”

When Dougal returned with Loki in tow, they found the Captain and I silently glaring at each other. I broke away first, glancing at Loki, the Mark on my hand burning at his nearness.

“Emily?” he asked, his voice soft, his eyes confused.

I told him my idea and asked if he could somehow push the Dreadful Wale using a storm so we could reach Karnaca faster, that Delilah was hurting me, turning my dreams into nightmares and pulling me into the Void each time I tried to sleep, but that the Outsider had found a way to stop her in Karnaca.
“Do you understand? Can you do it?” I asked, catching my breath in anticipation. If this didn’t work, Void-be-damned, I was going to put myself into a friggin’ coma with drugs up the wazoo!

“I can,” he said, his warm hands folding over my shoulders with a reassuring squeeze, “If there’s a storm.”

“Then pray for a storm,” I said, shuddering. “All of you.”

“Aye, aye,” Dougal said solemnly, like that command was as important and sincere as any I had ever given him.

Loki kept his eyes on mine, steady and sure. “The smell of rain is in the air, and all I need is a little rain to ignite the spell. It’ll work, Emily. Trust me.” He bit his bottom lip. “I’ll need somewhere quiet to meditate first, though. To prepare. Brewing a real storm is no easy task and directing its rage even harder.”

“And dangerous, I take it,” Meagan said. She stepped forward in a menacing manner, glaring at the Whaleborn. “Don’t break my ship.”

Loki leaned back, but only a hair, his green eyes unwavering. “It’s a risk,” he said. I felt his touch; he took my hand, holding me as his eyes remained on the Captain. “But I have reason to try my best.”

I squeezed back, smiling faintly at him.

Dougal cut in, his gentle manner diffusing the tension between the Captain and the Pandyssian. “Prince Loki, if you need somewhere quiet to meditate, try Sokolov’s quarters. It’s furthest away from the repairs.” All that hammering and banging. He sighed, “I’m going to head down now. Grab a bite to eat, then hit the markets with Eileen, but…” He gave me his big blue eyes, worried but forthright. “Majesty, I feel it necessary to point out that someone should be guarding you at all times, at least until we leave Glory Point. We’ve a lot of strangers onboard and I won’t be here.”

“I will,” Loki said immediately. “I’ll guard her.”

Dougal gave him a gentle smile. “You’ve a good heart, laddie, but you’ve told me yourself—you don’t know how to use a sword.”

“Or a pistol,” I said, giving Loki a little grin. I hadn’t forgotten he’d wanted a ‘lesson’, but I feared that would have to wait for now. Loki mirrored my grin, but his eyes fell sharply over Dougal in the next instant.

“I can protect her,” Loki said, bristling slightly.

“He’ll stay with me,” I said, settling it. The only other choice was Meagan and I didn’t want to be around her at the moment. I was angry at her for what she’d said last night on the skiff. She’d wanted to control Corvo, to ‘direct his rage’—how in the Void did she think that could even happen? It’d be like trying to control a tornado!

I gave Loki’s hand a squeeze, tugging him towards the stairwell. “Besides, I don’t need a guard right now. I need a rat-catcher. Will you help me find a rat, Loki?”

“A rat?” I liked the way his lips twitched as confusion, yet curiosity, rippled over his face.

“Rosemary’s trapped in the secret room.”
“Let her stay trapped,” the Captain said, following us down the stairwell. I stopped short and she glared at me. “Once the workers are done with repairs, we’ll move her to the brig. Then she can eat her damn breakfast.”

She pushed past us, disappearing towards the engine room. I knew she wanted to keep a close eye on the repairs. Dougal gave us an apologetic smile as he, too, passed us on the stairwell, heading down to the cargo hold.

“It’s just us, then,” I said, giving Loki a smile, but it felt forced. “Maybe we should have our lesson right now. Nothing like shooting a gun for stress relief.”

“You don’t trust the Captain,” he stated, though it seemed to partially be a question why.

“I don’t know her, Loki. She came out of nowhere. Promised to help me find the Crown Killer—the beginning of the trail to take down Delilah. My father didn’t trust her either.”

“Your father didn’t trust anybody.”

“No,” I said, too quiet.

His emerald eyes flooded with concern. “Let’s take the skiff. Get away from here for a few hours.”

“What?”

“The ship’s too loud to meditate properly. We can take the skiff out to the waves. The Ocean will help me concentrate, and I’m sure Eileen will give us plenty of food and drink to take with us.” A mischievous smile curled his lips. “And you can bring your gun.”

I took more than that. A half hour later, Loki and I were sailing away from the Dreadful Wale on the skiff, my belt hitched with my father’s folding sword, just in case. We waved to Dougal and Eileen at the docks. The Morley woman had given us a picnic basket of goodies—which made me blush, our little outing feeling more like a date than a desperate ploy for peace and quiet.

“Where to?” I asked, trying not to show my nervousness.

I was Empress of the bloody Isles for Void’s sake! And yet being alone with Loki was turning my knees to water. I was at the helm, my hand on the throttle.

“Go… and go and go until we hear only wind and waves,” he said, closing his eyes and turning his face into the salty breeze. I watched his dark hair fly and flap, tousled strands playing across his face. He looked strangely serene, a point of calm in the windy gale.

I didn’t doubt for one moment that he could make a storm rage.

When we reached a good distance, I cut the engines and let us drift. I stared at Loki, watching him sit with his eyes closed, our bodies rhythmically bobbing up and down in the waves. The skiff gently creaked. Was he already meditating? Didn’t he want to eat first? I was starving; I hadn’t had anything but coffee and chocolate.

“Loki?”

When he didn’t respond, I moved into a crouch, swapping one bench for another, dropping next to him like a feather descending, quiet and light. He didn’t move, his eyes closed. I was so close I could hear his gentle breathing.
I felt the Mark begin to burn. Stronger. I gasped, lifting my hand. Loki opened his eyes and threaded his fingers through mine, our Marks burning as one. “I think you were right,” he whispered.

“About what?”

He pulled my hand into his lap to rest against the warmth of his leg, cradling my hand in his. “What you said before, about the Angra Mazul. The sea monster. I think the Mark is somehow amplifying my Maormer magic.” His green eyes lifted to the clouds. “I think I can incite a storm without rain.”

“That’s… amazing?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling in amusement. “If the Hooded Ones could see me now, they’d weep with jealousy.”

“Ah.” My eyes dropped to our clasped hands in his lap. “So does this mean you don’t need my help to make it rain?”

It was a cheeky shot, hinting at our little ‘misunderstanding’… His ears turned pink, a clear indication he’d caught my meaning, but instead of timidly backing away, he lifted my chin with a finger until we were staring eye to eye.

“Why did you cry last night, Emily?”

I moved away, backing up to sit on the bench opposite of him. “It’s not…” With Eileen, I could talk about it, but Loki? Dear gods, I couldn’t bear it! I glared at the waves, but when I dared a glance at Loki, he looked hurt.

I took a deep breath and said, “My father hurt me.”

He said nothing, simply waited for me to continue.

“Delilah, she…”

I felt like I was being torn in two. My lips were parted, and I realized I was breathing shallow. It was just too awful and disgusting to talk about, and most of all I was afraid it would drive him away. Eileen may have helped me push through the guilt, but I was still embarrassed. Humiliated. Jessamine or not, his will or not, Corvo had dishonored me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice shaking. “I can’t do this right now.”

I tried to turn away, to hide my face, but Loki reached for me.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, wincing at the threat of tears in my eyes. He wrapped an arm around me and held me closer. I tucked my head against his chest, my hair floating in front of my face as the wind picked up.

“I’ll get us to Karnaca as fast as I can, I promise,” he said, his breath hot against my hair. “I’ll make the biggest storm you’ve ever seen. I’ll carry you in the arms of wind and water and waves, but first…”

I pulled away, finding sincere green eyes as I glanced up at him, blinking softly.

“First what?” I breathed.

“You have to tell me which direction to blow.” His face cracked into a little smile as he whispered,
“Because I have *no idea* where Karnaca is.”
Chapter Notes

For this chapter, we’re jumping into Loki’s perspective. I’m relying a bit more on Elder Scrolls lore to build up his back story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part V continued

“Broken”

Chapter 50

Loki closed his eyes and there it was, right there, as he watched the darkness, the morning sun bathing his vision in red behind his eyelids, burning in sparks of yellow and orange, he saw the memory unfold and imagined himself on the stone altar, cold at his back, so cold, and above him the Knife he couldn’t escape, descending, moving closer, the Hooded Ones watching as the Sacrifice held his breath. Did they know he was afraid? It shamed him. He shouldn’t have been afraid, and yet he was—even now—as he relived the memory and felt the blade against the tender skin of his neck. But then what? No sacrificial blood spilled. No sacred destiny fulfilled. His life stolen and replaced with another, a rebirth he never asked for.

Every day since the moment Emily Kaldwin had reached for him through the dark, he’d relived it. Touched it. Turned it over in his mind until it was sharper than any thorn, drawing blood, piercing him like the Knife hadn’t. That was the heaviest burden. For years he’d prepared, trained, and followed the teachings of the Hooded Ones to make of himself the perfect Sacrifice, pure of body and mind, but in his moment of glory, he’d been stripped of his destiny and his name.

It wasn’t guilt. Guilt is what you feel when you have done something wrong. What Loki felt was shame.

He was what was wrong.

Four Thousand Years Ago

An unnatural cold blanketed the world. The whales sung their songs in reverse and snow fell over the jungle. It was time.

He felt it deep in his bones, the call of the Void.

They waited for him in the dark around the stone altar, forming a half-circle standing shoulder to shoulder. The chanting began slow and deep, half-heard above the deafening roar of icy water pouring like lifeblood over the mountain. By daybreak, the chanting reached a crescendo, a pulsating unified chorus that echoed loudly across sacred shores.
His belly tightened. *Free your heart from fear.* He followed. They emerged from the dark cavern; it echoed whalesong as a conch seashell echoes the ocean when brought to the ear. In his cupped hands he carried a bird’s nest made of thorny vines, and within lied a single briarheart, its blood-red petals stiff with cold.

It beat between his fingers.

Nearly blinded by the piercing white of sunlit snow, he lowered his green eyes and relied on sound to help guide him towards the altar. The ice glade was at once deathly still and full of noises: the howling wind rustling between the coconut trees and water, ever rushing, foamed and bubbled at the end of its falling course, breaking the ice that dared to turn summer’s paradise into winter’s barren embrace.

The Void was leaking into the world.

Snow crunched beneath his bare feet in stark contrast to the heavy and wet-sounding footsteps he followed. His mother, a hagraven for many years now, left a trail of bird feet in the snow, a webbed and three-pronged imprint. Long feathers sprouted from her hunched back, oily and black as tar, and upon them he saw tiny droplets of thawing snow, sparkling in the sunlight like pearls of the *Nymphaea*. She was not a Priestess of Satakal—she was more. She was a Seer.

What little was not covered by bird feathers showed the raised bumps of gooseflesh, gray and mottled with age, concealed beneath shifting layers of ancient Maormer silk, picked up by the wind to flutter around her like so many wings. He thought her beautiful.

His father’s heart beat in his hands. *Fear not, my son,* it whispered. *For it is time. The whales have chosen.*

The Hooded Ones stood like stone statues, unmoving, silent. They watched him approach from the darkness of their eyes. Thirteen of them. His mother went to stand with her coven—three hagravens, all sisters, his mother and two aunts—to take up their place at the head of the altar. They would catch his blood when he entered the Void and fulfilled his sacred destiny. *Amonkalahira.*

Around the altar, the Hooded Ones chanted, and beyond them in a larger circle was his family. His seven sisters. His five brothers. He felt their pride like a warm cloak, melting his fears.

But when his back touched the altar and the starry sky reeled overhead—night’s stars in daybreak’s gaze—he felt the Void slip away like a dream, his father’s heart dissolving into black ash, and as the Knife appeared above him, Void-shifting, he knew he had lied—to everyone—to the Hooded Ones, to his family. To *himself.*

It wasn’t his time, and he was afraid.

**Now**

Loki opened his eyes and there she was, watching him with eyes that made him forget his shame. The echo of her sweet voice filled his heart… ‘*You make your own destiny, now. This is your life. A new beginning.*’

He made *her* his destiny.

To protect her. To shelter her. To love her.
Where before his destiny had been sacred, now it was secret. He caged his feelings for he was afraid she would see his affections as desperation, latching onto her when he barely knew her—or her world. It scared him. It confused him. The world had shifted and he’d lost his footing, but like the darkness of the cavern, she had found his hand and guided him towards the light. How could he not love her?

And she fascinated him in ways he never thought possible. She was unlike any woman he’d ever known.

“Loki,” she said, his borrowed name on her lips, drawing him out of his reverie. “Do you want to try a piece of chocolate?”

So far he’d tried ‘coffee’ and had to endure her laughter when he’d spit it out over the side of the skiff in disgust. But he loved her laugh and the way her eyes danced whenever he returned her laugh with his own. He’d told her the Mark amplified his magic, but what he hadn’t said was that she amplified him.

Her every smile he wanted to mirror. Her every hurt he wanted to make his own. He felt larger than life around her. He wanted to experience things he’d never experienced before—*with* her and *because* of her.

Even if that just meant trying chocolate for the first time.

He accepted the dark chunk from her hand and bit into it. The flood of new sensations on his tongue was unimportant to him compared to the pleasure of watching her watching him. She was holding her breath, her lips slightly parted as she waited for him to give her some account of what he thought.

He understood that he was as new to her as she was to him, and that his ‘ancient’ past shrouded him in some mystery. He liked her gentle prodding as she slowly tried to unravel him, to learn who he was.

He was learning, too. Not just about her. About himself. *Loki*. As if he really *was* inhabiting his twin’s body, the brother he’d never known, the stillborn forsaken by fate, suddenly allowed to live again through him.

To his surprise, chocolate was amazing. “Satakal save me. Mhmm… it’s really good.”

Emily beamed. “I knew you’d like it, but it’s more of a dessert than a proper breakfast.” She dug through the basket Eileen had given them, both for breakfast and lunch since they’d planned to be gone most of the day. She fished something out, but hesitated, looking up at him with her beautiful, sad eyes. “Are you hungry or do you want to meditate some more?”

He didn’t correct her. He *would* meditate eventually, but what she’d seen had been him lost in memory. At times, lost in shame. Meditation was different; he would clear his mind and focus only on observing his mind, strengthening the mental pathways that he’d need to tap into the Void to ignite the storm.

She’d promised to point his way, to reveal Karnaca’s true direction using a compass when the time came—whatever a ‘compass’ was, he had no idea. Like almost everything else in this new world, it sounded exotic, terrifying, and amazing all at once.

“Yes—hungry,” he said. He was hungry for a lot of things.

She looked away and he wondered if it was because he had the Outsider’s face.
As she dug through the basket, handing him strange food items to try, his eyes drifted over her in stolen glances. The reflection of the sea in her eyes… The sun glinting off her raven-black hair… He loved when she wore it down, and the way the wind made a mess of it, curling strands around her face… The way her sweater hung loose, the soft skin of her shoulder exposed. His hungry eyes traced a slow crawl up the curve of her neck to—

She’d caught him staring, and the too-familiar rush of heat poured into his ears.

As if sparing his feelings, she quickly handed him something new. “Here, try this. A vegetable quiche.”

As their fingers brushed together, he said, “It’s a family curse.”

“What is?”

He tapped his burning ears and smiled sheepishly.

“Ohh…”

Her reaction was worth his discomfort. He liked the way she tried to stifle a grin as if she was embarrassed for him and was trying to retain a measure of decorum to spare his feelings—and yet the wicked grin flashing in her eyes told a different story: She liked teasing him.

He liked it, too.

He liked that she was as quick to laugh as she was to cry. He’d never seen such a fascinating dichotomy before. She was at once strong, yet weak, at once, hard yet soft. An Empress and yet simply a woman.

“Do tell,” she said as they bit into the vegetable quiche.

“I have Maormer blood in my veins. Such heritage has certain quirks… The Maormer were sea elves with very expressive ears, prone to blushing—it’s all in our ancient stories, quite a few funny ones actually. Their ears were very long and pointed as well,” he explained, gesturing with his hands to show how far out their ears protruded. “My ears aren’t as pronounced, but they blush something awful, and there’s a pointy tip—”

“What? Really?” Her dark eyes shot to Loki’s ears with unbridled curiosity. “May I see?”

He felt a kick to his gut as she reached for him, her hand hesitating by the side of his head as she waited for the permission he barely remembered to grant with a quick nod of his head, a battered noise caught in his throat.

His hair was long enough to cover the tips of his ears—but not his infernal blushing! He hated it…

He held perfectly still as her fingers threaded through his hair. She had joined him on the bench, her hip pressed against his. Her smile caught in the corner of his eye as she leaned closer. He was pleased that looking apparently meant touching.

Her fingers traced a delicate line over the tip of his ears.

She exhaled in fascination, her hot breath tickling the side of his face. “It’s so slight, but there’s a definite point. How strange!” Her exclamation was immediately followed by an apology. “I-I mean, it’s cute,” she stammered. “You shouldn’t feel embarrassed by it, Loki.”
“I’m not,” he said, then without thinking, he decimated the short distance between them and kissed her abruptly on the lips.

He couldn’t stop himself.

She felt soft and warm, but he pulled back, wanting more to look at her face, to see if she liked it. Kissing on the lips was as strange and exotic as chocolate. Mothers kissed babies. Fathers kissed daughters before giving them away to be wed. Never on the lips. Mouths were for eating and drinking. Lovers’ biting was the closest his people came to romantic kissing.

Emily’s eyes were open.

“What was that for?” she asked in a whisper that rocked his body like the waves beneath them.

“Are only married people allowed to kiss?” he asked, thinking of Dougal and Eileen.

She smiled. “No…”

Emily moved back in, brushing her lips against his in a much slower, tantalizing fashion, a wetness tickling his skin as she angled against his mouth with parted lips.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered.

“Why?”

“You’ll see…”

He squeezed his eyes shut, and in his blindness, sensation seemed to double and he fell into the kiss like she had pulled him into the Ocean. He felt her in his blood, as clear and sweet as the call of the waves, and when he felt her tongue push gently into his mouth, he let her in and tasted her back.

When they pulled away in unison, seeking air he’d forgotten to breathe, he said, “You taste like chocolate.”

She smiled, a pretty flush reddening her cheeks. Not embarrassment, he knew, but happiness. Her hands somehow found a gentle resting place against his arms. He didn’t know what to do with his hands; they were sweating, that much he knew.

“You taste like the ocean,” she said.

“I do?”

The question came out far more surprised than he liked. He could handle her knowing he was inexperienced—he’d already told her he was a virgin—but he hated the idea of stumbling around like a newborn colt. Awkwardness was not something he relished. He wanted to prove he was a fast learner.

“Yes,” she murmured, her eyes softening in that telltale manner as she moved in for another kiss. She wanted him. He remembered her telling him so. Vividly. It terrified him and excited him all at once because he wasn’t sure if it was him she wanted or the Outsider.

Her hand found a new home, fingers sliding under the curve of his head, a thumb digging into the soft flesh behind his ear. She held him steady as the taste of her overwhelmed him. She became his whole world; nothing else mattered. He discovered a rhythm. Waves. An ebb and flow, joining and parting, tongues touching and disappearing as he breathed her in, each indulgent kiss sinking him
deeper and deeper inside of her. He lost himself.

It was hard coming back.

She broke the kiss in a hard grip, forcing away the hands he hadn’t realized he’d moved to her neck. He felt drunk as he blinked at her, the sun burning his eyes as he opened them, trying to focus on her face.

“You learn how to kiss very well, Loki,” she said, breathlessly. “Too well.”

He watched her move to the bench opposite him and compose herself, running shaky hands through her hair and straightening her sweater.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked, terrified he might have somehow hurt her. What did he know about her people and her world? Practically nothing! And her father had obviously hurt her badly—how, he didn’t know—and he hated to add to that pain through his ignorance.

“No, of course not,” she said. “I’m…” Her eyes glinted with panic before receding into dark depths. “I’m ready to show you how to shoot, if you want.”

She pulled her gun, avoiding his eyes.

He cocked his head at her—and saw the shiver run through her when she finally met his eyes. Interesting. “No. I want to kiss you again.”

“No,” she said, but her eyes said Yes.

“Why?”

“Watch,” she commanded, ignoring his question. “This might one day save your life.”

She held up the gun, pointing out the names of each piece like it was a puzzle. Front sight. Muzzle. Slide. Ejection port. Rear sight. Hammer. Trigger and trigger guard. Magazine release. Hand grip. “Safety,” she finished, pointing at the last bit, her face hardening. “On. Off. Do you see? The safety must be off or the gun won’t fire. And number one tip: always handle the gun as if it’s loaded. It’s not a toy…”

He was staring again.

She blushed a little—the faintest red in her neck—and her eyes flickered up to his then away to the gun. Her voice was stern. “Now show me you learned something. Name each part.”

He took the gun, momentarily surprised by the weight. She showed him how to wrap his hand around the grip and how to position his fingers—never on the trigger until he was ready to fire. The gun felt good… Dangerous. He could see the attraction.

“Front sight… muzzle…”

One by one, he pointed out the gun’s anatomy until she was satisfied. She was a good instructor—serious, dutiful—but he caught the distraction in her eye whenever he glanced at her. He couldn’t take it anymore. He slid the gun into her holster (safety on, he knew it was safe) and dug his hand into her hair, holding her still so she couldn’t look away, not this time.

“When do I get to learn your parts?” he asked, giving her that mischievous look she seemed to love so much.
“Gods, Loki,” she gasped, pulling him closer, “How are you so innocent and devilish at the same time? It’s driving me crazy…” He kissed her slowly and she moaned against his lips as his tongue tasted her.

Her moan intensified his need and bolstered his courage.

“Mouth. Lips. Tongue,” he whispered. One by one, piece by piece, but all the same. All her. He wanted more.

Somewhere in the wet mess of their mouths, he felt her hands press against his chest, breaking them apart.

“Emily…” he sighed into her hair, his eyes still closed. By Satakal, the taste of her was driving him mad. How could she not feel it too? How could she not want him as badly as he wanted her?

“Loki,” she said, but when he glanced down at her, he caught his breath to find the look in her eyes so raw it hurt. “I… I think we should finish eating. And you need to meditate. We need that storm.”

Like an idiot, he realized too late. Her father. Of course. It was too soon.

“You’re right,” he quickly said, moving back to give her space. “I’m sorry if I was… if I’m too much right now, Emily—”

“It’s alright, Loki. It’s just… so much has happened and I have a lot on my mind right now.”

He squeezed her hand. “Me, too. Everything is…” He shook his head in wonder at the world around him. “It’s a lot to take in.” He took a deep breath and gazed out over the waves, then looked back at her to give her his full attention and sincerity. “Just know I’m ready when you are.”

He could wait.

After all, a part of him felt as though he’d already waited four thousand years. At least at the end of this new destiny he didn’t see death. He saw life.

Chapter End Notes

A shorter chapter than most, but I hoped you enjoyed it nonetheless! I can’t believe I finally hit 50 chapters and 200k words! Thank you for getting this far with me. See you next chapter :)
Part V continued

“Broken”

Chapter 51

I watched his eyes. They misted like the storm raging around us, his irises constricting in rings, shadow-shifting in waves of gray, but his pupils went deeper and darker than I had ever seen, oceanic depths of blackness unending...

Never before had Loki looked so utterly like the Outsider.

He fed the storm with the Ocean, pulling up the waves to the heavens as lightning and thunder rained down. The wind felt like a hand pushing us across the waters. Loki stood in the circle he had drawn, glimmering streaks of blue luminescence, like whale oil, outlining the spell he had cast over the Dreadful Wale.

We were the eye of the storm.

It was breathtaking, watching from the inside, as the hurricane formed a wall of wind and water around our ship, and yet we moved with it, the storm incessantly turning like an arcane wheel. His spell lasted for hours, but in the darkness of early morning, nightfall nearly breaking, the storm blew itself out.

We had reached Karnaca.

26th day of the Month of Earth, 1852

“How is he?”

I looked up at the door to find Dougal popping his head in. “Sleeping,” I said. Loki’s head was resting on my lap, my fingers threading through his hair. He was exhausted; the spell had taken a lot out of him.

Dougal’s blue eyes were tender on the boy. I knew the feeling. All of us who had watched him were forever changed. He’d done the impossible. When the storm had dissipated and I’d seen that first glimpse of towering mountains in the distance, my heart had swelled with unspeakable relief. The Isle of Serkonos rose from the morning mists, and I remember watching from the rail and wishing Father had been there with me to see it.

It was his homeland.

“Aye,” Dougal said, speaking softly so as not to disturb Loki’s well-deserved rest. “Meagan’s ready with the skiff when you are.”

“I’ll be right there.”

He nodded his head and bowed out.
I stalled a moment, agonizing over leaving Loki. He looked so peaceful. After the spell had ended, he’d collapsed on the deck, unconscious, and Dougal had carried him into my little cabin. It didn’t seem right to put him anywhere else, mostly since I had no intention of sleeping again until my dreams were finally protected from Delilah.

I leaned over to press a soft kiss against his lips. He sighed in his sleep.

“Damn,” I whispered, gazing at him.

I trailed my fingers around the curve of his ear, a faint smile pursing my lips as I felt for that elusive point at the tip of his ear. It still shocked me that he would have something so… so alien in his blood, an inhuman trait that he could trace back to the Maormer. As if I needed more proof he was special, I thought, shaking my head with a silent laugh.

“You make it very hard to let go, Loki,” I whispered.

I gently slid out from under his head and tucked the blankets over him, my eyes catching on the pulse at his neck, the steady drum of life. His long eyelashes curved against his pale cheek and his mouth was slightly parted, those lips having already driven me to pure distraction when he’d kissed me on the skiff like he had never doubted for one moment that he could not only learn how to kiss, but also teach me something deeper in return: he loved me. I’d felt it in the way he had looked at me, patience filling his eyes instead of anger when I had pulled away from his hungry kisses.

In truth, it scared me. Was it love—or obsession?

I was no stranger to infatuation. I remembered what it felt like to fall into the Outsider’s black eyes, and before that, it was with Wyman. It was that live-wire connection when his eyes would meet mine across a room. It was the need to talk to him, just to hear him speak, and the need to find little ways to touch him, even if it was just a brush of fingers.

Wyman had waited months before telling me he loved me, but I’d felt it far sooner—mostly when we’d made love, slowly, his lips making me a hot, fuckable mess beneath him, but, later, I’d felt it most in the way he would sigh in relief as he simply held me in his arms after a long absence.

I tried to imagine how desperately Wyman would have pressed his body against mine if Delilah’s coup had never happened and he had returned after being away in Morley for four months like he’d planned. But by now, he’d no doubt heard of the coup, but had yet to receive my letter and would be sick with worry. I had no idea how he would change his plans. I prayed he would stay safe in Morley…

I turned away from Loki and closed my eyes, my throat tightening with guilt. Wyman. I knew Loki’s patience was born out of realizing I’d been hurt by my father, but what he didn’t know was that it wasn’t just Corvo…

It was Wyman, too.

Was that another secret I had to keep from Loki? How could I explain where I stood with Wyman when I didn’t understand it myself? I thought I loved my Morley Red, but writing it down on paper—on that darn letter—had proved impossible after the whirlwind of feelings the Outsider had stirred in me.

I sighed heavily and moved to the desk, donning my weapons: my father’s folding sword (which I’d taken the time to clean properly) and my crossbow, pistol, and stun mines. I was wearing my good clothes, too—the outfit and long coat I’d worn when I escaped from the palace with my trusty leather
boots.

It felt good to feel in control again, like I had finally reached a milestone and could actually do something about Delilah’s power over me. We’d struck a blow against her by sinking the Jessamine and now I was well on my way to defanging her again.

But first I had to find the Outsider.

He had promised to help me contact Mindy Blanchard, the only person in Karnaca capable of inking the protective sigil tattoo to his specifications. I couldn’t wait to meet her and would pay any price for her help… I just hoped it wasn’t too steep.

But I’m an Empress, I thought. I could bloody well negotiate with the best of them.

I met up with Dougal in the hallway, taking note of his dock workers’ clothes to blend in—as much as a seven-foot man of muscle and brawn could ‘blend in.’ My father hadn’t recruited him to work in the shadows; he was meant to be seen and his specialty was in gathering intel through relationships he built up over time with everyday people whose eyes and ears he could draw upon, making connections across wide angles whereas each individual person only saw through their narrow cone of vision.

However, since Karnaca was as foreign to him as it was to me, his immediate usefulness as a spy was somewhat limited. For now, I had tasked him with breaking into the Fletchers’ shipwright office and grabbing what he could out of their safe. It wasn’t breaking in, per se, as Mister Alistair Fletcher had given us his key, but I wanted to keep a low profile.

We only had an hour before daybreak and then the seaside docks would be crawling with locals, no doubt suspicious of strangers, and so the Dreadful Wale would remain our base of operations. But having come this far, I wasn’t about to wait for the cover of darkness to get what we needed. Eileen had helped with that, sewing a silk handkerchief to fit my face. It would expose my eyes and little else. Perhaps it was overkill—I didn’t think anyone would recognize me this far south outside of Dunwall. To most citizens, I was just a face on a poster, an idealized version of myself that even I didn’t recognize at times. But Delilah knew we’d hit the streets of Karnaca sooner or later. We had to be careful…

“Don’t stick around the office,” I said as we took the stairs together, side by side. “Once you have the goods, find the nearest black market and sell what you can.” I’d given him a list to memorize of things we needed. More sleep darts, mainly, but also raw whalebone, elixirs, and, most importantly, information about the Addermire carriage line.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, giving me a sideways grin.

“You’re in a good mood,” I said, playfully punching his arm as we reached the main deck. He held the door open for me.

“Just glad we made it to Karnaca in one piece. That storm was something else.”

“And?”

“And I love the excitement of new cities… new missions,” he said, laughing like I had pulled his hair to drag it out of him. “One doesn’t join Corvo’s Eyes if you don’t have a lust for danger, aye? We’re not here to tickle Delilah’s funny bone.” We paused at the rail, looking across the city-sprawl of Karnaca in the distance, a thousand lights hugging the mountain as it curved around the bay. “Somewhere out there is her weakness and we’ll find it.”
“Damn right, we will. Thank you, Dougal, and good luck.” This was where we parted. He would take the manual row boat while Meagan and I took the skiff. Both of us would land in the Theodanis District, close to the Campo Seta dockyards, but I wanted our arrivals to be staggered to draw less attention.

I found Meagan waiting for me.

Ever since the storm, she’d looked more tense than usual. As the pulley system slowly lowered the skiff, I watched her face and finally said, “If you have something to say, say it.”

I was in no mood for games.

She had brought her pipe with her. She took a long drag, puffing smoke as she monitored the rigging, keeping us balanced as the skiff descended. She avoided my gaze until we hit the water, then her eyes were fire on me, hot and accusing. “Fine. I’m concerned that miraculous storm of yours did more damage than good.”

I frowned. “What’d you mean?”

“It was a massive hurricane, Emily, barreling a path between Glory Point and Karnaca. Did you even consider the collateral damage? There’s dozens of little islands between here and there. People’s homes, not to mention ships en route—”

“Someone you know?”

“Actually, yes,” Meagan said, her face hardening into an impassive wall. “I was supposed to meet up with a… friend in Karnaca. I asked him to help with a little problem.” She laughed mirthlessly. “But I never in a million years expected that I would arrive before him. He’s shipwrecked for all I know. Maybe even dead…”

“He was in the path of the storm?”

“Yes.”

She hit the throttle and we raced across the waves.

“What friend and what problem?” I asked, shouting over the sound of the engine, yet knowing I’d get more cryptic bullshit from her. When she put on that face—dead as stone and secretive eyes—I knew the gulf between us could never be bridged.

I ignored her.

When she docked the skiff, pulling up to an old stone pier, she leaned back against the cockpit controls, sucking on her pipe. “I’ll wait for you here. Don’t get killed.”

I stood up, stepping close to her as I disembarked. I growled in a low voice, “Deception makes for poor allies, Foster.”

She glared past my shoulder.

I almost turned away, scowling in disgust, but she spoke, her dark eyes flickering over mine in the closest thing I had ever seen to raw honesty in her gaze. “What friend is my friend—from a long time ago. I trust him, and while I would never expect you to, it won’t matter because he’ll be in and out before you even notice. And what problem? Well, let’s just say we all have our blind spots. I’m doing what I can to protect you—to protect our mission. Believe that.”
I wanted to, but sometimes I caught a glimpse, just a tiny glimpse, of sharp metals and shadows in her eyes, and I realized I was scared shitless of her.

Maybe I shouldn’t want to break down her walls. Maybe her secrets were better left in the dark.

“I’m trying to, Meagan.” I walked away, pulling up the silk handkerchief to conceal my face.

Daybreak was rolling over the sky, awakening the colors of Karnaca into a vibrancy I had never before experienced, especially not in Dunwall where muted browns and grays was the palette of choice. Here, the buildings were salt-stained by the sea, washed-out and cracked by the intense Serkonon sun, and yet still had more color than I was used to. Blues and yellows, even reds and pinks… Tropical flowers gushed from numerous windowsills, adding to the charming effect of a seaside metropolitan district with a markedly southern taste.

And it was warm. Bloody warm.

 Barely any sun to speak of and already I wished I had left my long coat behind.

But what really got my blood boiling was the banner. I spotted it almost immediately, the black-and-white portrait of Delilah, her face uplifted, a sundial behind her head like a halo, displayed so prominently and proudly from a stately blue building, tall and narrow, overlooking the dockyards as if greetings newcomers like myself, reminding me of the new world order.

I wanted to burn it to the ground. ‘Her Majesty Delilah Kaldwin,’ it read, ‘All Hail the New Empress.’

“Hail my ass,” I grumbled.

I followed the stone pier to the streets, sidestepping the whale refuse and fish offal. The sheer redness of that bloody stream made it stand out like an eye sore as it followed a winding course before dumping into the ocean in a hazy red cloud that polluted the water.

But it was familiar. Dunwall, too, ran red. Whale blood. Fish guts. These were the sights and smells of the Empire’s coastal cities.

I was glad Loki wasn’t here to see it.

There were a handful of people out and about, even at this early hour. Working class folk. Fishermen. Lumberjacks. I saw a sour-looking barmaid who stared at me with hollow eyes. I didn’t spot any officers of the Grand Guard and considered myself lucky as I ducked into an abandoned alleyway and crouched beside a dumpster that stank of rotted fish.

I pulled out my map, double-checking the names scrawled in the margins. Amadeo Monte. Vigentino Street. Dougal had spotted the crucial intel in one of the reports Prince Finbar had left behind as a gift. Apparently, the Queen of Morley had developed a keen interest in Outsider shrines and had sent out her spies to locate them without the Abbey’s interference. One had. It was my best bet to contact the Outsider. I refolded the map and tucked it back into my coat.

I was close.

I followed the alleyway to a small fish market nestled inside a three-way intersection, the surrounding buildings high enough to shadow the empty stalls. It was too early for the marketplace to be open, and I slipped through unseen.

A stately row of tall apartment buildings crowded the stone walkway, affording a beautiful view of
the bay. I hesitated beneath a second-story balcony. I heard voices, male, slightly muffled like from behind a mask. And banging, like furniture being tossed across the room. *Shit.* I used *Far Reach* to get a closer look via the balcony, no door to speak of once I climbed over the iron-black railing.

*Please don’t tell me the Overseers decided to conduct a search for heretical artifacts on this day of all days…*

My fears were confirmed. The apartment was indeed being ransacked by Overseers—two of them—from the sound of it. I crossed from the balcony to the bedroom, peering around the wall into the living room.

“I can smell the stench of the Void,” the Overseer grumbled as he ripped books from a shelf. “There is something perverse in this place.”

Like most Warfare Overseers, he was incredibly broad-shouldered and muscled, his body trained from a young age to kill heretics. He had a pistol and a sword. I thought about using my sleep darts, but I spotted an innocent-looking alarm clock next to the couch. I unhooked one of my stun mines and planted it on the clock-face, setting the alarm before returning to the bedroom, the Overseer’s back turned the whole time.

“Dig deep, Brother. Remember that the profane seeks to hide itself,” the Overseer said. When the alarm rang in shrilly tones, piercing the air, he shouted, “I smell heresy!”

“What is it, Brother!?”

“The alarm—”

“The Abbey doesn’t train fools. We know someone is here!”

They drew closer. I smirked as the sound of electrical discharge split the air and the Overseers shrieked in unison. I turned the corner and watched them fall, writhing on the ground until they lost consciousness.

“Thanks for the alarm trick, Father,” I murmured, stepping over their bodies. The Outsider shrine was inside a small bathroom—strange—but I ignored it for now, quickly checking the rest of the apartment. A long hallway led to a kitchen and dining room. The apartment owner, Amadeo Monte, had rigged the front door with a trap, but it had clearly failed to keep the Overseers away.

*They’ve probably taken him in for questioning,* I thought. Poor bastard.

I returned to the living room, pausing to kneel in the hallway where the Overseers had dug up one of the floorboards, uncovering a bonecharm. *Mine, now.* Nearby was a desk, cluttered with drawings that caught my eye, being an artist myself.

A large parchment entitled ‘Mindy’s Tattoos’ displayed a ‘Left Arm’ and ‘Right Arm’ picture of said-tattoos.

Mindy *Blanchard?*

I was hoping she’d be somewhere close, but this could mean she was *really* close! Karnaca was a big city. She could be anywhere…

I frowned at the ‘Right Arm’ picture—‘HOWLERS,’ it read. *Damnit.* Mindy was in the Howler gang? That didn’t bode well… Captain Alexi Mayhew had kept me informed of the most powerful gangs operating within the Empire, and the Howler gang was on that list.
I entered the bathroom.

There were candles everywhere, and it smelled of warm wax. The altar itself was all sharp angles and splintered wood. A marble table topped with purple fabric held an offering of two runes, the whalebones singing in my ear.

I lowered the handkerchief to free my face and glanced at the huge painting propped against the wall like an offering to a god. It was a portrait of the Outsider, and damn creepy. The coldness pouring from his black eyes was palpable, and the painter had made him look old, like scorn itself had aged him.

But on second glance, the Outsider appeared regal, too. It was in his hands, the way he was clasping them together, elegance in his bony fingers. Huh.

“Can’t say I like it either,” a voice said from behind me. The Outsider’s cold chill spread over my back like an embrace.

“No one can do you justice,” I said, turning to face him with a hint of a smile.

“Affectionate,” he said, eyebrows rising. “I like it.”

His presence filled me, his black eyes floating in front of my face like twin abysses. “I need you,” I said. “Tell me how to find Mindy Blanchard.”

“And here I was hoping you needed me for me.”

“Don’t tease me, Outsider,” I said, my heart clenching. “Delilah is torturing me. You said—”

“You didn’t bring the boy?”

His question was followed by a sharp exit from the bathroom. (I was hoping we weren’t stuck in the cramped space, not knowing how far out he could appear from his shrine). I joined him in the living room as he gazed out the balcony, the dawn’s slanted rays shining magnificently over his ghostly blue outline.

He ignored the unconscious Overseers crumbled like ragdolls on the floor.

“No,” I said, frowning. “He’s resting. He’s the reason we’re here so soon.”

“I know. I felt the storm in the Void. It… prickled.” He turned his black eyes on me, straightening his back as he clasped his hands behind him. “I should like for you to bring him to me, Emily. When you can, of course. I will wait.”

It made me uneasy. “Why?” I asked.

He tilted his head at me in scrutiny. “If you had the chance to impart wisdom to your younger self, wouldn’t you do so?”

“Impart wisdom,” I repeated, hard-eyed. I didn’t like the sound of that.

“Think I’ll corrupt him?” he asked, a tangle of cynicism and amusement in his voice.

I reached for him, and though he was untouchable, I let my hand hover around his ghostly arm. His face transformed, going very still and watchful as I looked up at him, his black eyes growing hungry.

I recognized that look from Loki.
“Trust in yourself,” I quietly said. “He’ll find his way.”

He nodded, but his unease was not quite dispelled. “I still want to talk to the boy.”

_The boy._ “We call him Loki, now.”

The Outsider reacted like I had slapped him. His mouth fell open in shock. Even his skin turned a shade paler, and he was already very pale. “Loki,” he said in a shattered whisper. “He chose to call himself _Loki_?”

“Yes. Are you…okay with that?”

“My twin,” he choked.

“I know,” I said, pained with grief. “He told me. I think a part of him believes he’s somehow living the life his brother never had.”

“I see.” He turned away, as if hiding his face from me. “We will not talk of this anymore.”

I bit my lip, chewing in worry. I stared at the Outsider’s back, his coat gracefully spilled over his shoulders. “May I see my father?”

“He will not. Learning what he did to you has broken him. He is not ready to face you.” A tear streaked down my cheek, open-eyed.

“I mean, from the Void… Can he watch me like you watch me?”

“When he asks, I sometimes let him have a glimpse of you, but my powers are vastly limited, Emily. I cannot watch as closely as I once did before Delilah gave me the kiss of death, nor can I give your father the assurance he craves that you are alive and well. He is… infuriating at times.” His face twisted into something almost fond. “Even so, I admit I am enjoying his company in the Void.”

“Less lonely?”

“Indeed.”

“Is Delilah still unaware that you are alive?”

“It would appear so. Come.”

He beckoned with his hand and I took it, ‘holding’ onto him as we returned to the small bathroom. He gestured towards the two runes. “Take them and unlock your newest power, my gift to you. Master crafting. While some people—like Meagan—can follow primitive rituals to craft bonecharms, the art of arcane bone-inscription lies deeper. To you I give the secret knowledge to craft without worry of corruption and the added benefit of synergy. Your runes and bonecharms will be far more powerful than anything Meagan can provide you.”

“I take it you saw that little conversation I had with her?” I asked, stunned.

“A glimpse. I suggest you create your own version of Witch’s Bane as soon as possible.”

“Why won’t you just tell me?” I growled savagely. “If this is about Rosemary—”
“It is and I can’t,” he said, his cold shadow descending over me as he leaned closer. “I have lost too much of myself to see what danger lies behind her secrets. I’m sorry, Emily. I only know you must take the Blind Sister’s prophecy to heart.”

“You knew about that?” I asked, his black stare so intense I felt like I was being hollowed out alive.

It wasn’t just about the two-faced witch...

I spat, nearly losing my voice, “You knew I was going to be raped?”

“Yes. But not by who.”

“Right. Well, lucky me. At least the Blind Sister was kind enough to warn me.”

“Emily—”

“No!”

“Never in a million years would I have thought it’d be Corvo. The man I knew—we knew would never—”

“Stop! Please stop! Just tell me how to find Mindy!” My chest felt tight. I could barely breathe.

His voice was cold and calm. “She’s behind the black market as we speak. Be careful, Empress. She is curious and utterly ruthless when it comes to feeding her little hobby. When she asks for a dead body, say yes.”

“What black market?”

“You’ll find it. Just follow the running man.” His body disappeared in a rain of black shadows, but his voice lingered in my ear. “And Emily… welcome to the edge of the world.”

Chapter End Notes

I can’t tell you how happy I am that we’ve finally hit the Karnaca chapters! Woof, what a relief. I apologize if Loki’s ability to get them there in one day instead of ten came across as a little far-fetched, but whatever. Spending ten days cooped up on a ship sounded boring, plus – drumroll, please – we’re at 200k+ words so it’s about freakin’ time! Lol. Thanks for reading and drop me a comment!
Part 5: Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part V continued

“Broken”

Chapter 52

“Just follow the running man, he says. Right. The running man. Void forbid the Outsider should speak plainly f—”

I had one leg over the balcony railing when I caught movement below. “I told you what would happen if you reported me, Rapollo,” a guard jeered. “I warned you!”

There were three of them. Two guards (in blue uniforms, of common rank in the Grand Guard) and one terrified-looking civilian whose off-balance arm-wheeling had caught my eye when the jeering guard shoved him towards a flickering Wall of Light.

Amadeo’s apartment hugged the waterfront, buffered by a winding stone patio that spilled over an area reserved for windmill operations, its snaking red-hot cable powering the Wall of Light. The Grand Guard had set up the deadly barrier to restrict access to the Canal Square beyond.

Such security measures were expected, but easily bypassed. Case in point: Amadeo’s apartment. It backed into the Canal Square.

What I didn’t expect to find was the Wall of Light being used against the populace.

The civilian begged for his life. “Please! You gave me no choice!”

One more shove and he’d be vaporized in a heartbeat.

“How? It’s too late for that, Rapollo,” the guard jeered as they slowly ganged up on him, his fellow guard snickering as the terrified man backed up as far as he could, the Wall of Light crackling with deadly promise.

There was little time to react.

I could try to reach the windmill and cut off the power, disabling the Wall of Light, but the lever was not facing in my direction and—fuck it—I’d missed the third guard, guarding the windmill. He moved into view after pissing in a bush, zipping up his fly and casually slouching against the stone palisade, watching the scene below like he didn’t give two shits about murder. Was this what Karnaca had fallen to? People dying in the streets? The city’s protection turned against its own people?

Sleep darts would be too slow, and my angle was bad. There was no time for a graceful rescue. I used Far Reach to jump, unseen, behind the slouching guard. I shoved him over the stone palisade into the fish market below, his screams ripping the air. I brought up my pistol in the next instant, firing a shot across the marketplace to hit the streetspeaker dangling over the empty stalls.

All of it was noisy—the guard screaming and crashing below, the pistol discharging with a
thunderous blast, the bullet hitting dead-on in a snapping shriek, and the subsequent crash as the streetspeaker hit the ground in a spray of tortured metal.

It was enough.

The civilian ran for his life as the two guards spun around to face the source of the gunfire, but I’d already moved, snagging my arcane tether to catapult across the marketplace onto a second-story balcony. The civilian’s desperate footsteps pounded the cobbled stones as he ran down a dark alleyway, and watching his back, I was struck by one incredulous thought…

*Follow the running man!*

I spared a glance at the guards. The one I’d sent flailing over the palisade was alive, but judging from his screams had broken a bone or two. The other two were wildly looking about, their swords drawn. Shrapnel from the streetspeaker had bloodied their exposed arms. I cast my (non-lethal) Doppelgänger out into the open, letting them take a few whacks at it as I slipped away to follow the running man.

The darkened alleyway stank of fish. I used the balconies, zigzagging across to keep the running man in sight as he practically fell over himself to get away. I was glad my distraction had worked, that I’d saved him, but it’d been too close. My heart was pounding and I felt almost dizzy. I’d taken a huge risk intervening like that, but the instinct to do something, to not just sit back and let a man be murdered in front of my eyes had overridden all other thought.

The running man stopped running.

He collapsed on a stone stairwell, peering around the corner with a deathly pale face, and then fell back to hang his head between his knees and dig shaky fingers through his dark hair.

On the wall next to him, standing out like a beacon against the stones in faded black paint, was a handprint. *The black market.* I snorted, shaking my head in wonder. *Thank you, Outsider.* I was on the roof of a bright blue building, tucked inside blessedly cool shadows cast by several nearby buildings.

The morning sun blazed over Karnaca, intensifying my desire to shrug out of my coat. It was getting hot.

A woman shared the rooftop with me, but she was oblivious to my presence, her back turned as she smoked a cigarette. Below I spotted a streetside grill and two rickety picnic tables. A pleasant aroma drifted upwards, battling the stink of fish. A few dirty-aproned workers were gutting them in the alleyway, sawing fish tails and skimming scales as they sang a diddly whaler’s tune.

“…Now the rats on the deck, nippin’ my feet / And the holes in my rags, stealin’ my heat / These bowls of brown soup, with scarcely no meat / Make me dream nightly of my sunny old street…”

Smiling faintly, I turned away, drawn by the sound of a blaring streetspeaker on the opposite side of the roof, facing the bay. I idly listened, running a hand over my pistol to check the chamber before sliding it back into my holster.

“Fellow Serkonans,” a female voice blared, “In the Duke's absence, I have the following announcement. New restrictions are now in place due to the political assassinations conducted in the name of the former Empress, Emily Kaldwin, and carried out by the former Royal Protector, Corvo Attano. The Grand Serkonan Guard will be stopping and questioning all foreigners on the streets of Karnaca. Compliance is mandatory. Travel between districts is restricted to those carrying the
appropriate permits. Any attempt to hinder the Grand Guard in their enforcement duties will be met with the exercise of force."

The streets were busier, a lively bustle welcoming ‘just another day’ in Karnaca, as if ‘political assassinations’ were of no concern to the everyday citizen. In many ways, perhaps it wasn’t. The coup hadn’t stopped traders from pouring over the docks, haggling over prices. Burly men handled cargo. And Meagan’s skiff was just another boat come dockside, the buzzing crowd paying it no mind.

It helped that the Grand Guard had let the docks alone, seemingly piling their numbers further inland.

I checked over my shoulder. Still good. I wiped my sweaty brow, glancing over the shining bay towards the Dreadful Wale. Loki had devised a spell to conceal the pirate ship. Even now, all I saw was a misty haze where the ship should be, like heat over a desert. He’d said it was permanent for as long as the spell was etched into the ‘sand’ of the deck, that he didn’t need to be present for it to work. First, the storm, then that. I felt overwhelmed with gratitude, that we were lucky enough to have him on our side. His Maormer magic was proving exceptionally useful.

The streetspeaker droned on above the busy streets. “Fellow Serkonans, this year’s bloodfly concern is the most severe in recent memory. If you encounter a nest or an infested corpse, do not disturb it. Any attempt to practice the funeral rites of the Abbey of the Everyman will be punished severely…”

I wondered if the bloodflies liked the heat. No doubt it was turning corpses into sticky sweet feasts, perfect breeding grounds for their dewy pale eggs. I hadn’t yet seen them, but I could hear their feral buzzing in the background like a ghost-insect crawling up my neck. I felt itchy.

It felt strange being in a new city, but a part of me wanted to soak it all in, despite the danger and the awful reasons I was here in the first place.

“Twenty coins an hour?!” a man shrieked, grabbing my attention. “That is highway robbery and you know it!”

“Like I said, sir, the beautiful specimen you see before you is at peak ripeness. You won’t get a better deal,” the man drawled in that bored, yet snarky tone all businessmen seemed to own. “Twenty coins per hour, but if you do a full eight, I’ll give you a discount of five coins.”

“Fine. Eight hours.”

_The man must be desperate_, I thought. In Dunwall, I’d seen it done for a third of the price.

The pair stood before a dead whale, its bloated body slabbed like raw meat across a steep incline, half its tail in the rank water, bloodied by the juices oozing from its corpse. Several man-sized holes had been cut into its fat belly and it was into one of these that the customer, after paying, climbed into—with much grunting and wiggling, with no apparent concern for his fine clothes—until he was just a head poking out of the decaying whale intestine.

For eight hours, he’d stay like that, his achy joints suffusing with warmth and the soupy cocktail of chemicals reeking from the whale corpse, a veritable ‘cure’ for arthritis. So they said; I wasn’t so sure. Sokolov once told me he’d tried for his achy bones and had been pleasantly surprised.

I didn’t know how one didn’t pass out from the fumes.

It wasn’t a blue whale like the great Leviathan I’d seen in the dark cavern beneath Tempest Island. No, the ‘beautiful specimen’ below was a smaller species of whale with a large set of teeth that looked disturbingly similar to human molars. Between those teeth, I spotted a rune, but the thought
of making a detour to grab it rankled my belly. I was slowly realizing Loki’s concern for the creatures of the sea had rubbed off on me, and what had once seemed like an everyday occurrence (though admittedly rare as only the upper classes could afford such a ‘cure’) was now chaffing at my sensibilities.

*What a rotten lot we are*, I thought.

I turned away, focusing on my mission. Mindy. She was behind the black market, the Outsider had said, but getting there meant investigating the streets below. I was high up enough that I’d need to use *Far Reach* again, and with the woman sharing the rooftop patio with me, I didn’t want her to witness my black magic and start screaming for the Abbey.

I snuck behind her, choked her out, left her body in the shade, then snaked across the alleyway with the black whispers of magic disintegrating behind me.

The feral buzzing of bloodflies grew stronger.

One of the buildings was under quarantine, but a window had been left opened, a dead body hanging half-way out of it like a morbid warning. Nearby, a group was arguing over whether or not to ‘chance it’—clearly, a stupid idea—but not to rob the place like I first assumed, but simply to *go home*. Apparently, they lived somewhere in Canal Square and that nasty bloodfly-infested apartment was a way there.

The Wall of Light was dividing families, carving up a city already divided by bloodfly quarantines.

I snuck past them, unnoticed, their heated argument blinding them to everything around them.

I hoped they decided not to do it.

Karnaca hugged the bay along a rugged coastline, which meant its buildings and streets were of varying level and height. I rather liked it; Dunwall felt flat and boring next to Karnaca’s sunny, maze-like streets.

I found another black handprint.

I placed my hand over it as I came to a black iron gate, wedged between two buildings beneath a deep overhang. The sound of the ocean and the city muffled behind me as I curled my fingers around the iron bars and peeked through.

It was a dead end, a ‘lost’ space formed by the rear of several buildings whose fronts, no doubt, sported a more pleasant view. It was also dark.

“I unlocked the gate,” a gravelly voice called from within. A smoker’s voice.

I stole through the gate, closing it behind me as the heavy scent of a Cullero cigar overwhelmed the lingering stench of rotting fish. *Pricey*. I approached the woman lounging all casual on a grungy sofa stuffed against a brick wall.

She watched me with heavy-lidded eyes, her fat cigar pinched between pale, bony fingers as smoke lazily curled around her weathered face. There was something masculine in the line of her jaw, but she wore her bleach-blonde hair like a woman, and her hips were slim. She was slim all over, really. She had no breasts to speak of, her leather vest tight across her flat chest, exposing a plethora of tattoos inked over her arms and chest.

“Mindy Blanchard?” I asked. The tattoos spoke for themselves, but I had to be sure.
“Where’s the dark-haired boy?”

“What?”

_How could she know about Loki?_

Her pale eyes blinked slowly at me like she was stoned. She had her ankles crossed, her long legs resting off the sofa like wooden crutches. Only her hand moved, languidly drawing the cigar to her lips, then falling back to flick ash.

She watched the curling smoke.

“I had a dream,” she said in that gravelly, languid voice of hers. She poked the cigar at me. “You were in it, and that boy. That’s why I came, even after Paolo laughed at me.” I was veiled, only my eyes showing, but she stared at me like she knew who I was. “Do you think it was the Outsider?”

“A dangerous question.”

“That’s all I ever have. Dangerous questions…” She sucked a drag and rolled her eyes away like the brick wall was as interesting as my face. “The Outsider can lick my balls for all I care. I’ll not worship anyone but myself and anything but Paolo’s cock, but you…” Her eyes crawled over my body, her head cocking to the side like she was trying to check out my ass. “Magic has its uses, doesn’t it? There’s power in the right kind of tattoo. I’ll ink your sweet ass—and the boy’s—for a price.”

I felt the Outsider’s hand all over this deal and tried not to shudder. It was true. Loki needed the protective sigil tattoo as much as I did. Anyone with the Mark could be pulled into the Void by Delilah. The fact that she hadn’t pulled Loki meant she was probably unaware that the Outsider had survived the kiss of death.

“What price?”

“I need a body. Don’t worry. He’s already dead.”

“Where?”

“The Overseers are holding him at their outpost in Canal Square. Bring me the body. I’ll be waiting in the basement below the dentist’s office near the singer’s market. You can’t miss it.”

_That’s it?_ It seemed too low a price for the hungry gleam in her eyes. She wanted something more, I could feel it, but she merely lifted her pale eyes to my face, waiting for my reply like she didn’t care one way or the other. _Or already knew I’d say yes._

“You have a deal.”

“Good. Don’t forget to bring the boy.”

I gave her a sharp look. _Bring the boy._ There was a strange resonance to it, like the Outsider had spoken through her as surely as he’d spoken through her dream.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Of course.”

She rose from the couch on stiff legs, snuffing out the cigar on the sole of her boot. She ignored my long stare, moving to the iron gate, but before she slipped through, I called, “Who’s the body?”

She smiled, exposing a row of yellowed teeth. “Amadeo Monte. One of the Outsider’s fancy boys.
Poor bastard lost his shirt in a card game. That was the beginning of the end for him.”

She left it at that, disappearing around the corner. I sighed heavily and loosened my shoulders, suddenly realizing how tensely I’d been holding myself.

“Highness?”

I jumped at the deep, male voice, swinging around to find Dougal’s head poking out of a second-story window.

“Don’t call me that,” I said, putting a hand over my thumping heart and scowling up at him.

“Sorry.”

“I’m coming up. We need to talk.”

“There’s a way around,” he said, nodding at the window to his right, above the iron gate.

“Wait inside,” I ordered. I didn’t want him to see my sorcery.

Perhaps it was a moot point (Dougal was utterly trustworthy in my eyes), but for now I didn’t want to complicate the situation. Dougal already had a bit of hero-worship going on with Loki because of his ‘wizardly’ skills.

Dougal popped back inside and I waited a few seconds before using Far Reach to land on a jutting pipe lining the brick wall. I crawled through the window and joined Dougal down the hallway. He was leaning against a cluttered writing desk, his clothes dripping wet and his hair slicked back.

At my questioning look, he said, “It’s safe. No one home.”

“No. Why are you wet?”

“Oh. Took a swim,” he said, smiling faintly as he crossed his brawny arms. “Overheard talk of an overturned cargo ship. Found a cache of goodies. The black market restocked whatever else I couldn’t find, paid for by Fletcher gold. He had a sweet sum in that safe of his.”

“Good. What else?”

“Talked to a beggar. A few others… The city’s on edge. The bloodflies are bad this year, and people say if the Howlers don’t get you, the Grand Guard will. There’s a bounty on your head, and Corvo’s. Dead or alive.” He watched me lower my handkerchief, freeing my face, then unexpectedly smiled at me. “Good news, though. Found a recipe for Serkonan fish dumplings.”

I smiled back. “Eileen will like that.”

“It’s for me,” he said, feigning offense. “I make a mean dumpling.”

I laughed. “Okay, master spy.”

He unfolded his arms and sighed melodramatically, but his heavy brow furrowed. “As for the carriage station, the locals say it’s off-limits and heavily guarded. No one’s been getting into Addermire, lately. It’s like the place is under quarantine.” He shrugged. “I need more time to investigate.”

“Hold off on that. I need you to get back to the ship and grab Loki.” I pulled out my map and traced over Canal Square until I spotted the Overseer’s outpost and Mindy’s likely dental office to the
north. “This is our rendezvous point. Bring Loki.” I hesitated, glancing up into his blue eyes. “And Meagan.”

“You sure?”

I nodded. “I’ll need backup on this one.”

“Aye.” He moved to rummage through his rucksack, pulling out a few sleep darts and elixirs. I slipped them into my coat with thanks. When I recovered my face with the handkerchief, he gave me an odd look. “What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing, just…” He seemed embarrassed, maybe even upset.

“What, Dougal?”

“The bounty posters out there… They’re using a picture of Corvo masked from the time of the Rat Plague. Like he’s a criminal all over again. A fugitive.”

“And, now, I am, too… Dougal, is that why you’re upset?”

“Aye. It’s not right. The Duke’s slander. His lies—”

“It’s politics.”

He shook his head. “You shouldn’t have to hide your face, Empress. It’s wrong.”

“It was never about the mask—that’s what Corvo used to say. He wasn’t hiding himself. He was exposing others. Uncovering their masks. Their lies.”

“That sounds like Corvo, all right.”

I smiled tightly. “I’ll meet you at the rendezvous point.” I showed him the map one last time. “There’s a Wall of Light at this intersection, but you can pass through here.” I singled out Amadeo’s apartment. “But be careful. I stirred up trouble in the marketplace.”

“Like father, like daughter.”

“Hmp.”

He pointed at the bloodfly-infested building I’d noticed earlier, poking his finger at the map. “I might try here, then. That beggar said there’s a way through.”

“Be careful,” I warned. “Bloodflies are dangerous.”

“Between Loki and Meagan, I think we can handle it.” Dougal said with a wry smile. “Loki will just blast the buggers with wind and water, and Meagan will call hellfire from her eyes.”

I shook my head, bubbling with laughter. “What about you? What’s your secret power?”

He scoffed, straightening his back, stretching seven feet of muscle and brawn. “That’s easy. Mean dumplings.”

“I should have guessed.”
Chapter End Notes

About people sitting INSIDE whales in man-sized holes... Check out this YouTube video called "Morbid Minute - Decomposed Whale Cure"... Can we call it inspirational or what?! Lol. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2Cg5k534oE

Oh, and I read on a wiki that Mindy is a trans person, according to the game developers. So I'm writing under the assumption that she identifies as female, but has male anatomy.
Part 5: Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

POV: The first part of this chapter is Lucia Pastor, and the second half is back into Emily’s head.

Part V continued

“Broken”

Chapter 53

Lucia Pastor barged into the physician’s office. “You can’t leave, Lorenzo. The people of Karnaca need you!”

He scowled at the woman as she grabbed his luggage, yanking it out of his hand. The suitcase bounced to the floor, bursting open in a flurry of rumpled clothes and worn books. “Outsider’s ass, Lucia!”

She glowered down at him as he groaned, bending old knees to gather up his things and stuff them back into the suitcase. She spat, “So that’s it, huh? You’re going to take your precious ticket to Wynnedown and turn your back on your patients? Look at me, Lorenzo!”

“Void, woman! You know I tried,” he growled, pushing his spectacles up his nose and reluctantly meeting her eyes.

Lucia knew he’d tried. When Addermire had closed, Lorenzo had tried his best to take on their bloodfly cases. He even took out an advertisement in the Karnaca Gazette, and Lucia had donated funds from the Shindaery Peak Miners’ Family Committee to help set up his clinic in Canal Square. And come they did. Sometimes with cases so advanced, bloodfly larvae bursting through inflamed skin, and yet Doctor Lorenzo hadn’t turned them away. At first. When she’d heard he’d closed down his clinic, Lucia had taken the first train down from the Dust District. She had to convince him to stay.

“Lorenzo,” Lucia pleaded. “If you leave, the people of this district will have no one. No one. The bloodfly situation is only getting worse—”

“Which is exactly why I have to leave,” he said, wiping a hand across his weary face. “This whole dreadful business has become a danger to me. If I can’t protect my own health, how can I cure others?”

“Cure others?” Lucia practically screeched, making Lorenzo wince. “Is that what you want? To treat scurvy and chilblains in Morley instead of helping people survive, here, in your own country?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I want! What a relief it will be to treat scurvy and chilblains after all these hideous infections! The bloodflies are out of control and you know it. The Duke is doing nothing while we toil—and for what?” He glanced at the dead woman on his examination table, her chest flayed open where bloodfly hatchlings had eaten through her guts to escape. “These poor people are going to die no matter what I do.” He looked at her with sorry eyes. “Karnaca is at the brink of
ruin. I’ll not stay to watch her fall.”

*Gods, the torture in his voice…* Lucia didn’t know if she wanted to hit him or hug him.

She knew what it felt like to buckle beneath the weight of so much grief and helplessness, but the widow steeled her heart. Too many people were depending on her to stay strong.

The city was desperate.

Bloodfly infestations were growing at an alarming pace and the Duke’s attempt to contain the situation by smoke-flashing buildings put into quarantine was barely holding back the red tide. The Duke’s *hypocritical* attempt. Bloodflies were flourishing with each execution sanctioned by the Duke and carried out by the Grand Guard. And despite the rumors that the Crown Killer had left Karnaca for Dunwall, the city continued to suffocate beneath a sense of doom happily preached by the Overseers, the only ones seemingly pleased by the worsening situation as the faithful swarmed their enclaves for promises of absolution and relief.

Lucia hated the Abbey, how they feasted on the poor and the weak when things got bad. And things were *really* bad. Far worse than she had ever seen growing up in Karnaca. She was Serkonan through and through, and it galled her how people like Lorenzo—who had so much to give—could just walk away.

Lucia had grown up in the well-off Palace District, but she’d married ‘low’ (against her mother’s wishes), taking a miner to husband. *The love of her life.* But he’d died in the Duke’s precious silver mines, and ever since then, she’d dedicated her life to helping others less fortunate.

Lorenzo clutched his suitcase in a white fist, glaring at her as she blocked the door. She couldn’t let him get away so easily. “What about Addermire?” she demanded.

“What about it?” he asked, impatiently glancing at his pocket watch. “Please. I can’t miss my train.”

“Just hear me out, Lorenzo. Everyone knows Doctor Hypatia is working on a cure. Join her at Addermire!” She stepped forward, clutching his arm. “Can’t you do that much?”

“Void, Lucia. You know as well as I that no one has seen or heard from Alexandria for over four months! She’s probably dead! It’s too dangerous working around the infected. Now let me go!” He roughly pushed past her, knocking her aside. As she fell against the counter, several glass beakers crashed to the tiled floor in a shrieking chorus.

“Coward!” she spat after him, glaring at his back as he disappeared around the corner. She hissed into her hand, “Fool!”

Now what was she to do?

She flung open a window, the suffocating heat driving her mad as the noon day sun baked the city. Across the street, the Karnaca Enclave glowed with its stoic white stone. The Overseers were sermonizing in front of the stately building, pulling quite a crowd of curious onlookers. Normally, she’d mumble under her breath about Void-forsaken Overseers and turn away, but she paused at the window as the sermon drifted up to her ears.

“If it’s true that a witch now sits on the throne in Dunwall,” he was saying, “and that the Duke of Serkonos is in her thrall, as is whispered in parlors and alehouses across the Empire, do not doubt we will verify this claim and we will act. Smoke will billow, fires will lick the stones of Dunwall Tower, and at the end of it all the Abbey will stand in the ashes.”
It scared her, this talk of witches and war.

She slammed the window shut at the same time she heard something behind her, a female grunting sound followed by a thudding noise. She spun around, gasping in fright to realize she wasn’t alone. Lorenzo’s clinic was on the small side, and with his examination table already occupied by a dead body, the intruder had apparently found it appropriate to slam her dead body on a bare countertop.

The corpse slumped off her shoulder as the mysterious woman stepped back to look at Lucia behind a silk handkerchief with dark brown eyes. Many people covered their faces, nowadays, due to the dust of the mines blowing down from the mountain, so it didn’t frighten Lucia that the woman was hiding her face.

“This clinic is closed!” Lucia barked, stepping closer to look at the dead man she’d brought in, but a cursory glance showed no signs of bloodfly larvae. Desperate people would sometimes bring their loved ones into the clinic with infections so advanced, they literally died on the table before Doctor Lorenzo could see them.

Lucia didn’t recognize the dead man, though he looked Serkonan. His chest and arms were riddled with tattoos, and his face was badly bruised like he’d been beaten. She figured it was the woman’s husband, but the intruder didn’t look upset, merely inquisitive as she glanced around the clinic like she was looking for something.

Lucia grabbed a blue-tinged vial of Addermire’s Solution and gave it to her. “Here. Take it. Void knows Lorenzo doesn’t care. It’s not a cure, but it’ll help stave off infection.” She glanced at the dead man. “I’m sorry about your husband, but there’s nothing to be done. He’s dead.”

“He’s not my husband.”

Lucia stared at the woman. Her dark coat was exquisite, and while her demeanor didn’t exactly scream noble, her posh accent was clearly foreign. From Dunwall, if she had to guess. “Who are you?” she demanded, her temper already frayed from Lorenzo’s regrettable departure.

“Are you Lucia Pastor?”

“Yes. And you are?”

That a complete stranger would know her name didn’t bother her. Many people knew about her charity work. Lucia Pastor was practically a household name in Karnaca.

The young woman cocked her head. “What will we do with a drunken whaler?”

Lucia froze. That was the last thing she’d expected. She breathlessly stammered the appropriate reply, “Ho-hoorah, and up she rises, so early in the morning.” Her eyes widened. “Are you with the Royal Spymaster?”

Lucia’s entanglement with the Lord Protector’s spy network was unconventional at best, only made within the last three years when she’d been approached by the Crown for intel regarding the Duke’s silver mines. Rather mundane, all things considered, though at one point she’d been asked a very interesting question…

Where is Aramis Stilton?

The so-called ‘baron of the mines’ had disappeared three years ago, a mystery Lucia knew nothing about. She hadn’t expected to be contacted again after that failure, and had lost no sleep over it, truth be told.
For Void’s sake, she wasn’t a spy!

Her heart belonged to the miners and their poor families, not the obscenely rich aristocrats in faraway Dunwall. The only reason she’d agreed to provide information in the first place was for the money, which Lucia funneled straight into the Miners’ Family Committee.

Lucia’s mouth dropped open when the woman pulled down her handkerchief and said, “You could say that.”

“Emily Kaldwin?!”

Lucia couldn’t believe she was standing right in front of the Empress! Up close, Lucia was struck by her beauty. The Empress had the dark eyes and hair of a native Serkonan, but her paler Gristolian skin gave her a radiant look. The woman was like a portrait brought to life, as if she’d just walked out of her own banner—now taken down, replaced by Delilah’s face plastered all over the city. It was no secret the Duke had sent his hound dogs after her. The Grand Guard was out in force, making everyone’s life a living hell. Lucia had half a mind to turn her in for the sizable bounty (to fund the coffers of the Committee, of course), but with the Royal Spymaster’s secret phrase passing her lips, she felt a tiny thrill of excitement.

Maybe the Crown needed her, after all, and—damn her mother—Lucia liked feeling needed, no matter who was doing the needing.

“In the flesh,” the aristocrat said, rather flippantly considering she was on the run for her life. She leaned against the countertop and crossed her arms. “I overheard you talking about Addermire. What can you tell me about it?”

Lucia gaped at her. What was she doing in Karnaca, and why ask about Addermire? Lucia wasn’t one for military strategy or political maneuvering, but wouldn’t the Empress be better served heading north? Lucia had heard rumors that Morley and Tyvia were a breath away from attacking Serkonos outright as traitors to the Crown.

War was in the air like a sickening cloud of death, a pall over the city…

The Empress softened her gaze. “Lucia, any insights you can offer me might mean the difference between life and death for many people. I have reasons to believe the Crown Killer is linked to Addermire.”

Lucia felt a familiar stab of fear at mention of the Crown Killer. That sadistic butcher had painted Karnaca in blood for months, dealing pain that would last generations. She’d read in the papers that the legendary Royal Protector Corvo Attano was most likely the Crown Killer, but she never believed it.

He was a hero of Serkonos! The people of Karnaca loved Corvo. They hadn’t forgotten that he was one of them: Corvo was born and raised in Karnaca.

“Linked how?” the widow asked.

The Empress said, “You mentioned the alchemist, Hypatia. It’s possible the killer was one of her patients. Addermire treats mental cases, does it not?”

“Yes, but Alexandria would have told me if she was afraid of one of her patients. The Crown Killer is deranged! If he was one of hers, surely the doctor would be dead!”

The Empress considered this with narrowed eyes. “Alexandria… You’re friends?”
“Of a sort. We both care for the miners. Hypatia’s dedicated her life to treating their ills while I have tried to lift their families from poverty—to fund soup kitchens and childcare programs.” She smiled fondly. “As Alex would say, she treats their bodies and I treat their souls.”

“So you’ve been inside Addermire?”

“Yes, I’ve been inside, back when it was still open.” She shrugged. “Many of Hypatia’s patients were admitted because of me. I brought them to her. The special cases. The poorest of the poor.” She shook her head, sighing. “But the Duke closed Addermire months ago, supposedly because the doctor needed to concentrate on refining her Solution, to cure advanced cases of bloodfly infection, but…”

“But what?”

Lucia shuddered, hugging herself. “But others say she’s a prisoner, that Hypatia already made the cure and the Duke is hoarding it for himself and his rich circle of cronies.”

“You don’t believe it.”

“Not one word. The Alexandria I know would never keep the cure from those who needed it most. Even if she was a prisoner, she’d find a way to get the cure out there.”

The Empress slowly nodded. “This helps…” She glided away from the countertop to rifle through Lorenzo’s notes. She ripped away a clean sheet of paper and slapped a pen over it. “Draw me a map of Addermire. Whatever you can remember.”

Lucia did her best, but it had been months since she’d been back there. The Addermire Institute was an enormous complex in various states of disrepair. She knew it was Hypatia’s dream to one day restore the place to its former glory.

Lucia handed her the scrawled map and added, “You might try Alexandria’s apartment for more information. She lives across from the carriage station, right above the Winslow shop.”

She watched the Empress fold away the map inside her coat. “Thank you, Lucia. Just one more question. Do you know a Jameson Curnow?”

“Curnow? No, I don’t think…”

“It’s possible he’s going under an alias. He’s another of my father’s spies, and he’s operating out of the Dust District so I thought you might know him. Your headquarters are there, aren’t they?”

Lucia shook her head. “Yes, but no, that name doesn’t ring a bell.” At the Empress’ frown, she eagerly jumped on, “But if you have a sketch, I might recognize him.”

“It’s worth a shot. Can you wait here? I’ll have one of my men deliver a picture for you to look at some time today.”

Lucia thought it strange. If the Empress was in Karnaca, surely her father, the Royal Protector, was too and could find his own damn spy! She stammered, “I’ll w-wait, of course, Your Majesty.”

“Good. I’ll send my man as soon as possible. He’ll be… tall.” She took a deep sigh and pulled at the dead body on the counter. “I should go.”

“What are you doing with that corpse anyway?” Lucia blurted in bewilderment as the Empress slung the dead weight over her shoulder and grunted.
She pulled the handkerchief back over her face. “Delivery.”

I left the body in a dumpster near the dentist’s office. I’d arrived too early, and with no sign of Dougal or the others, I decided to take a detour and check out Doctor Hypatia’s apartment.

That the Crown Killer might be one of her patients had been scrawled in the margins of Sokolov’s notes on Addermire, but Meagan had dismissed it as conjecture.

Was it not all conjecture?

I wiped my sweaty brow, yearning to tug out of my coat and be free of this oppressive heat. Karnaca was an oven and rank with the most torturous of smells the deeper I went. Rotting fish. Garbage left to rot in the streets. The coppery scent of blood and the maggot stench of bloodfly husks… Only the perfume of tropical flowers made it semi-bearable.

Even the wind was of little relief, as it carried the chalky tang of dust that made my eyes water.

There was a food market outside the dentist’s office doing brisk business. I exchanged small coin for two ripe bananas and a glossy apple and took my feast into an abandoned stairwell beneath the railway, its train cars leading further inland. I sat on the steps, relaxing in the shade away from the others—who paid me no mind—and listened to the street performers as I ate. They played a catchy tune, but as I listened to the verses, I felt my attention gather like a storm.

Their song was about me.

“…They say Emily was born to wear a crown on her head / But all her young life, some wanted her dead / She ascended too soon, or that's what they said / And 'fore too long, the streets would run red…”

“…A coup, a coup! What is it to you? / A feast or a famine, a nail or a screw? / A Duke from the south, a vile witches brew / A coup, a coup! What is it to you?…”

The song ate at me, the verses stuck in my head. The walls of Dunwall, did they help her at all? No. She trusted her allies, played into their hands. Yes. Void, yes.

“…A mystical woman, Delilah she's called / Claimed rights to the throne, and the Duke she enthralled / Some called it magic and some called it fate / Did she do it for love, did she do it for hate?…”

Did she do it for love or did she do it for hate?

Did it matter? I wanted her dead.

I swallowed the last of the apple and discarded the banana peels in an overflowing trash bin. I took a swig from my water canteen as I peered around the stoned archway of the railway underbelly. A fancy, garden-strewn boulevard divided the looming carriage station, teeming with officers of the Grand Guard, from the stately row of apartment buildings and high-class shops below. Away from the docks, this part of the Theodanis District had a more affluent feel compared to the rank squalor of Canal Square.

For one, there were no executions on display.
Down by the fetid canal, when I’d used Amadeo’s apartment to reach the rooftops surrounding the Overseer’s outpost, I’d spotted three of them, strung up on wooden posts, their hands tied behind their backs and their heads hung low. Two men and a woman. They’d been shot—for what, I had no clue. It was murder in the streets: executions, not fair trial and sentencing.

The Duke had given the Grand Guard free reign of the city, and the way I heard it, the bastards made up new laws and taxes on the spot, harassing people and executing those who put up a fight. It was totally corrupt. Totally heartbreaking.

I needed to put a stop to it. It was my duty as Empress.

But I couldn’t. Not today. Not everyone. There were too many. The Grand Guard were thick like ants, crawling all over the carriage station—even on its roof—like they bloody well knew it stood in the way of Addermire.

I backed away, saving Hypatia’s apartment for another time. Or perhaps Dougal can check up on it, I thought. Having an extra pair of eyes and ears helped immensely.

I returned to the dumpster with the body and wedged myself between it and the rocky outcrop dead-ending the street, taking care to watch for who was watching me. Mostly no one. Other than a few jealous stares at my fine clothes or nervous glances at my weapons, I was left alone. Too many people had their own problems to worry about.

I pulled a crumpled letter from my coat. I’d grabbed it from the Overseer’s outpost, skimming it quickly to gage its importance before stuffing it in my coat. I hadn’t lingered. I’d went in, sleep-darted my way through, and grabbed the body Mindy wanted from the interrogation room and got out. Fast, quick, clean. No deaths, no witnesses. Ghost.

Now with the time, I read the letter. Thoroughly. It was an unsent letter, and it was mine. Truth be told, this spy business was fun. There were no lies, just the plain written truth.

‘Esteemed High Overseer Khulan,’ it flowed in elegant script, ‘I hope you’re in good health, and not too nostalgic for Wei-Gon, which I’m told is striking this time of year. Forgive my stream of letters, but our problems in Serkonos are significant, and any insights you can offer me would be most welcome.

Duke Luca Abele is a travesty, openly disdainful of the Abbey, and yet I must maintain relations with him for the welfare of this nation. You’ve been called a unifier, something the Abbey greatly needed after the horrors of the Rat Plague, and so your guidance would be of value.

Under the Duke, the streets here are overrun with cutthroats. Paolo and his Howler gang grow bolder every day. I urgently request more Overseers from White Cliff to replace our losses.

Lastly, my recent correspondence with our Oracular Sisters has been deeply troubling. Their responses have arrived after marked delay, and their recent proclamations possess… an unusual cadence.

Yours in faith, Vice Overseer Liam Byrne.’

My hand shook as I read that last bit. The Oracular Sisters. All I could think of was Sister Maria Somonos of Cullero, the very Blind Sister who had prophesied the two-faced witch, the Outsider’s death, and… forget it. I brutally crumpled the letter in my fist and stuffed it back into my coat pocket.

If that bitch told the Abbey I had the Mark of the Outsider, by the Void… Was that what was so
troubling? I’d been hoping the clear signs of Delilah’s black sorcery would turn the Abbey’s eye on her not me, not to mention the Duke’s reputation for whoring and gluttony would soil any alliance between Delilah and the Abbey. That, at least, seemed to be going in my favor.

I waited and kept a watchful eye.

Soon I spotted Dougal, so tall he was easily spotted in a crowd, and discretely made eye contact across the market. A giant tooth hung over the dentist’s office, its owner, one Amalia Assur, apparently long gone.

The office was abandoned, but one of the windows around the back was broken into. There were subterranean stairs leading into a dark basement, but I wasn’t yet ready to face Mindy Blanchard, not without coordinating with my team first.

**Team, or maybe family,** I thought, my heart swelling at the sight of my brawny Morley giant and starry-eyed prince, his pale face stricken with wonder as he absorbed his first real taste of modern civilization. I was even happy to see Meagan, her fierce gaze wary and watchful. We quietly crowded inside the dentist’s office, and after using **Dark Vision** to double check the room (for, maybe, a homeless person who may have claimed the place, or even a listening device like an audiogram machine), I nodded at the others. “We can talk freely,” I said, “Just not too loud. Did you run into any trouble with the bloodflies?”

“Oh, a wee bit,” Dougal said with a grin, his cheeks mucked with bloodfly guts, the red smears making it look like he was almost blushing.

“What happened?”

Dougal nodded at Meagan, and she said, “We found a Nest Keeper. The infection did something to his head. Brain damage or…” She scowled. “Or maybe black magic. He was protecting the nests.”

I gaped at her. I’d never heard of such a thing, and oddly enough, it reminded me of the Weepers from the time of the Rat Plague. They’d once been human, but the plague had turned them into monsters. “Did you kill it?”

“No, we just let it alone. Made our way through,” Meagan said. “Emily, what’s going on? Dougal said you needed backup.”

“I don’t trust Mindy, the tattoo artist. She’s with the Howlers and she’s… well… she’s curious about what I’m asking her to do. She suspects the tattoos aren’t normal tattoos, that it’s linked to the Outsider. Both Loki and I need them, so to put it plainly, we need a bodyguard. I need you to watch out for more Howlers in case she decides to do something stupid.”

“Fair enough,” Meagan said.

“What about me?” Dougal asked.

“I need you to go back to the ship,” I said, smiling sheepishly when he scoffed. “I know, again, but this time to grab that portrait of Jameson Curnow from the blackboard. I met Lucia Pastor and I want to see if she can identify another of my father’s spies. Maybe Curnow can help us out with the Dust District. We need to know what he’s gleaned from all his time in Karnaca.” I dug into my coat and pulled out the area map, showing him where to find Lucia. “Can you do that?”

“Aye. And after?”
“Return to the *Dreadful Wale*. We shouldn’t leave Eileen and Katya undefended for long, mostly with Rosemary in the brig.”

“About that…” Dougal said, awkwardly rubbing the back of his head.

Dread sank into my belly. “What happened?”

“She’s missing,” Meagan hissed, her dark eyes alighting over my face.

“*Missing*?”

“Yes. I told you she was dangerous. She must have possessed one of the rats… Got out. She could be anywhere in the city by now!” Her face hardened. “Maybe Corvo was right. Maybe we should have killed her. Void knows what trouble she’s up to.”

*Damnit, Rosemary.* I felt betrayed.

I glanced at Loki. He’d been silent throughout, but I’d felt his solemn green eyes on me, ever present. He looked tired—like he hadn’t rested enough after the storm—but there was excitement there, too, and wonder. Always wonder. Everything was new to him.

I faced him. “Loki, can you… *feel* where she is?”

I couldn’t help but remember how he’d seen her two faces, his eerie words coming back to me… ‘*One is young and beautiful, the other old and beautiful—in her own way. Though she’s quite insane.*’

Loki frowned, blinking sleepily at me, his voice languid and tired. “A part of her has never left. She is… she has taken a part of you, Emily, and you have a part of her.”
“Your ass belongs to me,” Mindy drawled. “At least for the next two hours.”

“Two hours? That’s it?”

She looked at me and shrugged. “The tattoo is only the size of a coin. Won’t take long.” She glanced at Loki and winked. “Unless you’re a squirmer.”

The Howler in the back coughed into his hand.

“Shut up, Paolo,” Mindy flung over her shoulder.

“I didn’t say shit.”

Paolo was seated at the edge of a striped red couch with his knees spread, wood shavings flinging up from his hands as he whittled something with a small knife.

I was surprised the big man himself had shown up. The leader of the Howler gang.

He looked Serkonan, dark of hair and eyes, with a dangerous look about him. Feral, if I had to choose a word. His ears were prominent, and something in the turn of his face reminded me of a rat as he idly glanced up and met my eyes across the room.

He looked relaxed, too relaxed, like that in itself was a message. A warning. He wasn’t afraid of me, or Meagan’s brooding gaze in the corner.

Why had he come?

He was a wanted man. Vice Overseer Liam Byrne clearly wanted him dead if he’d been writing to the High Overseer for help. Paolo and his gang were bleeding the Abbey dry, and if the Overseers down the friggin’ street found him with me, I’d be right smack-dab in the middle of a turf war.

“No one else is coming,” Paolo said, looking down at his work. His hands were large, and it was hard to see what exactly he was carving. “So you can relax, sweetheart.”

Cocky bastard.

“Let’s just get this over with,” I said, glancing at Meagan. She gave me a barely perceptible nod of the head. She’d keep an eye on Paolo from the door.

The basement only had the one access point, minus the cellar window. I felt trapped.

At least it was cooler down here.

What a relief after the heat of the streets… But it was also dark, and even with the candlelight and weak sunlight from the dirty window, the corners of the brick-walled basement were lost to shadows. The floor was compacted dirt, and Mindy had dug a shallow grave, asking us to drop
Amadeo’s corpse into it when we had first arrived.

I felt bad for the poor guy.

Beaten to death by Overseers, then stolen and stuffed into a dumpster before finally ending up in a hole with Mindy’s hands all over him. It was horrible and undignified.

Mindy lit a fat Cullero cigar, her yellowed teeth clamping down on it as she freed her hands and fussed with the dead body.

Amadeo’s corpse had been dusted by the Overseers to ward against bloodflies, a powdery substance that left a whitish film on his skin and clothes. She rolled him unto his stomach and cut his shirt down the middle, exposing the skin of his back tattooed with a giant bloodfly, its wings spread wide like it was pinned down on a dissection table.

“He’s an artist, did you know?” Mindy murmured, her finger tracing the tattoo almost reverently. “He drew advertisements, mostly, and portraits for obituaries in the Karnaca Gazette. But this he drew for the alchemist. For Hypatia. She needed a logo for her Solution, so she hired Amadeo Monte.”

I squinted at the tattoo. Now that she mentioned it, it did look a lot like the posters I’d seen in Karnaca advertising Addermire’s Solution. The two sets of wings were the same, spidery and dark, but the long body in between was different. The posters depicted a glass vial (implying the elixir was alchemically tied to bloodflies) whereas Amadeo’s tattoo had a cross-shaped bonecharm in place of the bloodfly’s elongated torso.

Did that mean something?

Mindy looked up at me, her pale eyes clouded by smoke as she savored the cigar, her thin body crouched beside the corpse. “It was his last job, but he didn’t know that. He just knew his pockets were lined. Made lots of money off commission for that bloodfly. Lost it all in dice at the Crone’s Hand Saloon. Lost his shirt.”

There was nothing wistful in her tone, or kind. If anything, there was an edge to her voice, a dark aura that made me take a step back. “That’s when you saw it,” I said, realizing… “Why is this tattoo so important to you?”

She smirked. “Why do you think the Overseers wanted him?”

*Because of the Outsider’s shrine in his apartment.* I said, “They must have believed he worshipped the Outsider. That he was some kind of… witch.”

“He is—was—but only so far. He was the practical sort.” She looked down at the corpse. “We had that in common, didn’t we, Amadeo?” She choked a laugh, a throaty sound like she smoked too much. “Bastard found a cure. A *real* cure. Kept the bloodflies away, and even people already infested stood a chance if they got his tattoo.” Her finger traced a dark wing. “The right kind of tattoo has power. The markings come from the Void. From the Outsider.”

I stared at her in shock. Was she actually suggesting…

“Are you saying that tattoo can actually protect people from the bloodfly infection?” I swore under my breath when Mindy just smiled. I said, pointing at Amadeo’s tattoo, “If that came from the Outsider, then the ‘cure’ came with a catch.”

Paolo laughed.
Mindy glared at him.

He leaned back, spreading his arms wide against the backrest, the wooden figurine balled in his fist. It was small, whatever it was. “You know she’s right, Mindy. You can study that tattoo all you like, but if you try to ink that on yourself, you’ll end up like ‘ole Monty boy.” His dark eyes flicked over the corpse. “Outta luck.”

She set her jaw.

“No harm addin’ to my collection,” she drawled. And with that she slid a knife forward and began slicing off Amadeo’s skin.

_Ugh, gross. Did she have to…?_ Bile stung the back of my throat and I almost brought up a hand to cover my mouth, but my face was already covered by the silk handkerchief. I wasn’t about to reveal my identity to the two Howlers.

Mindy carved away the tattoo until it stretched like a canvas between her hands, and Paolo went back to whittling at his wood, but he paused and looked up at her when she hung the flayed skin over a clothesline.

“Every sorry bastard who got his tattoo died,” Paolo said, leaning over his knees, wood shavings flying. “Just not of bloodflies. Those blood suckers wouldn’t even touch their corpses, and they love corpses.” A dark smile twitched at his lips.

I glanced at Meagan. She had moved closer to the door, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed, her ear cocked towards the stairwell, listening for movement. Loki stood beside me, but so silent I’d almost forgotten he was there. The tiredness had not left his face, and I felt a sting of guilt for pushing him out of bed when he deserved rest. The storm he’d created to bring us to Karnaca echoed in his eyes, a churning mist that I could _almost_ see when the light hit him just right.

I wanted to get this over with so we could both finally rest.

The thought of no longer being pulled into the Void by Delilah was heaven. Pure heaven.

“All right, Mindy, I got you your corpse,” I said, stepping forward like I meant business. “Time to hold up your end of the bargain.”

She didn’t look at me. She took the cigar from her mouth, crushed it against her heel and let it drop into Amadeo’s grave. She said, “For the journey home, friend. Maybe there’s more luck for you on the other side.” She flipped him over, grunting noisily, the effort almost too much for her. She was small, all skin and bones herself. She wiped her brow and looked up at Loki. “Hand me that syringe, will you?”

He was closest to the metal tray on the operating stand. Beside it was a reclining chair, all rusted and fabric-torn, like someone had dragged it down from the abandoned dentist’s office. Loki didn’t know what a syringe _was_. I picked it out from the line of instruments on display—Mindy’s electric needle-pen and ink mixers, mostly—and handed it to him with a nod.

His green eyes were wary as he slowly approached Mindy and held out the syringe for her taking…

Mindy snatched his wrist and turned his hand, inspecting the Outsider’s Mark… _No! No, she couldn’t see it! Then how…?_ Loki had wrapped his hand, like me! I had made him promise to cover the Mark before he ever left the _Dreadful Wale_.

Then why was she grinning up at him with hunger in her eyes, like she could see it?
He wrenched his hand away and fell back.

“She won’t hurt you, boy,” Paolo said. “She’s just curious.”

My heart was racing as I grabbed Loki’s arm, trying to keep him away from her hungry eyes. He looked jostled, but he squeezed my hand, trying to reassure me. Together, we stared at Mindy. With syringe in hand, she stabbed Amadeo in the heart and drew blood. What the… I cringed, feeling sick when I realized where she was going with that bloody sample… Gods, no…

She squirted the dead man’s arterial blood into her inks. That was going in me, my skin, our skin. I glanced sideways at Loki, suddenly realizing we were still holding hands, that he hadn’t let me go. Mindy’s face was hidden behind the fall of her streaky-blonde hair, but when she was done mixing, she whipped her head up and smiled wide, catching our disgust in the net of her curiosity and reeling us in.

“Fun, huh?” She sniffed the mixture. “Just following the Outsider’s recipe. He taught me in a dream. Told me what to do.”

I’d been wondering about that. The Outsider had said Mindy Blanchard was the only one in Karnaca who could wrestle the special formula required to ink the protective sigil tattoo, but from what it seemed like, now was Mindy’s first time actually doing it.

I stared at the ink, glimmering thickly, a dark blood-red, and swallowed a lump in the back of my throat.

Pigment coaxed from blood.

“They say the Outsider whispers in our dreams,” Mindy said as she prepped her needle-pen, fiddling with the intricate parts, the little levers and screws. “Last night, I dreamed of a whale with a bright blue star for an eye. It was beautiful, and comforting somehow, like it was watching over me. I felt special, and enchanted all at once. Like I was different person. Mindy doesn’t give a fuck about the Outsider—but in my dream, it was as if the Outsider had put me under a spell and I was someone else. Someone who wanted him. It’s silly, but I thought… maybe, just maybe, the Outsider was interested in me for me…”

I listened, my gut clenching. I knew what that was like. Wishing, yearning. Interested in me for me. How many times had I dreamed of that very thing?

Mindy chuckled, her grainy voice filling the basement with eerie echoes, like the Outsider was here, listening in from the Void. “But when the star-eyed whale whispered in my ear, I realized the dream wasn’t for me. It was for you.” Her pale blue eyes shot to my face, all hunger and madness, then slid to Loki’s, all envy and yearning. “And you, boy. The Outsider told me what to do, and I couldn’t say no. Why? Was it because he put me under a spell? No. I resisted. I remembered who I was.”

She looked away, shuddering, but then her pale blue eyes returned to my face, cold as ice.

“I couldn’t say no because the Outsider himself promised me compensation,” Mindy hissed.

“And it pays to have an edge,” Paolo spoke up, as if finishing her thought.

The way she’d said compensation made my skin crawl. What in the Void had the Outsider promised her? Surely it went beyond the corpse lying in that dismal hole…

She held the needle-pen, primed and ready, like a gun. “Now who wants to go first?” She glanced
between Loki and I.

“Ladies first,” Paolo said.

But Loki shot forward. “I will.”

The determination on his face made me feel like he was acting out a part, like he was appointing himself the Royal Taster and would risk drinking from the proverbial poisoned cup to save my life by giving his. But the tattoo was life-saving, wasn’t it? I had to get it, or risk going insane.

“Lay on your stomach, pants down,” Mindy instructed as she switched on a flood lamp over the operation chair. The harsh illumination made it seem more like an interrogation chair. She cranked a lever to flatten it out like a bed and gave Loki a brazen smile, all yellow teeth. “Time to bare your ass cheek, kid. The tattoo only goes one place. Lucky you.”

Loki’s eyes flicked in my direction, terribly self-conscious for a moment before his face hardened and he undid his belt buckle and dropped his pants. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Paolo’s sordid glance as Loki climbed over the chair to rest on his belly, his pale butt cheeks rising like two perfectly round—no, not looking. I tried to keep calm as Paolo dragged his eyes away from Loki and looked up at me like he was trying to figure me out.

Figure us out.

“So… are you two a couple?” Mindy asked conversationally as she put a hand to Loki’s ass cheek, finding her spot to begin. Loki turned his head, resting against his arm, but he couldn’t see what Mindy was doing.

His shoulders were tense.

I had the uncanny feeling that Paolo and Mindy were of one mind. “Why do you ask?” I said after a drawn-out pause that felt way too dangerous given the company.

“You both have the same tattoo on your hand. Kinda sweet.” She shrugged and smiled like it really was romantic, but it felt like a slap to the face. Our Marked hands were covered. Mindy started inking, her brow furrowed in concentration. “I saw it in my dream,” she drawled. “Him. You. Your hands. Your faces. Paolo and I know who you are, Empress.”

Meagan drew her sword, the ringing metal sending chills up my spine. I went for mine, too, but Paolo shot to his feet with hands raised.

“We don’t want a fight,” he calmly said, gesturing with his hands for Meagan to lower her weapon. She didn’t.

Instead he focused on me. “Listen.”

Mindy paused in her inking, but her hand was firm on Loki’s backside. He didn’t move. An amused smile split her face. “Kicked the bloodfly nest, did I?”


But he looked away, looked to me and me alone, his dark eyes going serious. “I’m not your enemy. Yes, I know you’re the real Empress—Delilah can go fuck herself—and you know I’m Paolo, leader of the Howlers. There’s no war between us. My war is with the Overseers and the Duke. Always has been. They’re choking the life out of Karnaca, and I’m trying to stop them. To beat
them.

“What do you want with me, Paolo?” I asked, unwilling to jump on his train without more information. I'd be a fool to forget he was the linchpin of a criminal organization. It was hard to pick sides when both were found wanting.

“It pays to have an edge,” he said, like that was everything.

He held up the little wood carving. “This is for you.” He threw it at me and I caught it. I turned it in my hands. It was a ferocious dog. He quietly explained, “It’s a wolfhound. The Overseers raise them from birth.”

“I’m familiar.” What do ‘Seer wolfhounds have to do with anything?

Paolo said, “They have no fear. It’s been bred out of them. They know only cruelty and hunger.”

He pointed at the figurine, his voice turning scornful. “That’s your Abbey. That’s your state religion. The Overseers have all their humanity bred out of them, and now they’re nothing but vicious animals. Tell me, Empress, why has the Crown supported them for so long? Wouldn’t the Empire be stronger without their superstitious nonsense?”

_Father would think so_, I thought, even before… Corvo the Black would want to burn the Abbey to the ground.

“I…”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew some people took comfort from the Seven Strictures. The Abbey had always been a long-time supporter of the Crown, stretching back generations. It felt wrong to naysay them.

“I have let them be, it’s true,” I finally said, twisting the figurine in my hand. “Out of tradition, mainly. People have a right to express their religion. I will not take that away from them.”

Paolo softly snorted. “Express their religion?—yes—be oppressed by maniacal nutjobs?—no. I _love_ Karnaca.” He pressed his hands over his heart. “I love my country. That’s why I’m here. People say I’m the kind of man who can get things done. All I want is for you to _consider_ what I can do for you. We’re on the same side, Empress. You might think you’re dirtying your hands talkin’ to me, but…” He gestured at the little dog. “Who’s the real evil here?”

He turned towards the door, looking at me over his shoulder, and at Mindy, who was watching him with pride in her eyes. “I’ll let you finish up with your tattoos.” His dark eyes were earnest. “But if you’re interested in more of what I have to say, Empress, I’ll be at the Crone’s Hand in the Dust District.”

Meagan glared at him as he passed her on his way out. I could tell she didn’t believe one word out of his mouth.

_Maybe I shouldn’t either._ Paolo was the leader of the Howler gang, not the founder of the Shindaery Peak Miners’ Family Committee, for Void’s sake.

Still…

I glanced at the dog carving in my hand.

I was a heretic.
The Abbey would always be against me, now, if they knew… I pocketed the dog and returned to the operating table. I glared at Mindy, who was watching me with a half-smile on her face.

“You said two hours. Get to it,” I said.

She flipped on her needle-pen and it whirred to life. If it hurt, Loki didn’t make a sound. I took a seat on a stool, dragging it closer to Loki. I watched the tattoo come to life over his pale skin.

It was beautiful. It was blood-red.

The protective sigil tattoo was the shape of a small coin, perfectly round. It looked like a sea serpent devouring its own tail. *An ouroborus*—an ancient Tyvian word, meaning ‘tail’ and ‘devouring’ from what Sokolov had taught me. It often symbolized introspection, the eternal return or cyclicality of life, the sense of something constantly recreating itself.

Endless creation and destruction: literally, life and death.

In the center of the ouroborus was a single, black eye. I thought of the Outsider and shuddered. Loki almost fell asleep. Mindy had to shake him by the shoulder to get him up. He blinked softly at me, then climbed off the chair and pulled up his pants. As he did so, his shirt got caught, raising up and revealing the scarring of the eclipse-shaped mark he had along his ribcage. I knew he had another white scar, shaped like a shooting star, somewhere on his back shoulder.

I caught Mindy staring at the little discovery before Loki’s shirt covered it.

“So what’s your compensation?” I asked her. What had the Outsider promised her for tattooing us?

She twitched a smile and picked up her cigar. “Come to the Crone’s Hand and maybe you’ll find out.” She lit her cigar. “Smoke break. I just need five minutes, then I’ll do you.”

“Fine.”

“Where can I take a piss?” Loki asked. He looked so tired. He scratched the back of his head (a mannerism picked up from Dougal?), his black hair looking a bit tousled.

“Back there,” Mindy said, glancing over her shoulder. “Don’t let the company scare you.”

The company turned out to be dead Overseers. Two of them. After Loki had relieved himself, I’d gone back there to do the same and found the dead bodies crumpled against the wall across from a cold oven. When I peeked inside the iron doors, the bottom was clumped with ash and bits of bone. The Howlers weren’t kidding around.

I peed in a corner and changed my tampon, burying it in the dirt. Before I left, I touched one of the Overseers, removing his inhuman mask to look at his face. He was just a kid. Sixteen, maybe. Hardly any younger than Loki. Was this Paolo’s idea of justice?

When I returned, Loki was resting on the striped red couch, zonking out. Guilt flickered across his eyes when heard me approach. I knew he felt like he needed to protect me. “Just rest, it’s okay,” I said softly, kneeling in front of him and briefly touching his knee. I glanced up at Meagan. “The Captain’s got our back.”

I stood up and approached the chair.
“Now that’s a royal ass,” Mindy drawled as I crawled over the chair and rested on my belly. I glared at her over my shoulder, feeling indecent and exposed as she added with a snaking grin, “I never tattooed an Empress before.”

“A dream come true,” I mumbled, facing forward and resting my chin on my hands. I thought about her dream, of that whale with a blue star for an eye, and wondered. I gasped, wincing as I felt the first bite of the needle.

Mindy just laughed.

It was a long hour.

To get through the pain (it really wasn’t that bad, just uncomfortable), I thought about all the delicious, angry things I wanted to say to the Outsider the next time we found a shrine. *Black-eyed bastard!* It was clearly his fault. Why in the Void was I wearing this damn handkerchief when the Outsider was apparently going around revealing who I was to criminal ganglords? *Star-eyed whale, my ass…*

“Ow,” I jumped, flinching as Mindy slapped my butt (the ‘good’ side that didn’t hurt). My right butt cheek felt like it was flaming. I turned on her, hot with rage. *How dare she slap an Empress?!*

“You’re done,” she said, lazily slipping her cigar between her lips and smirking at me behind pale eyes. “And you’re welcome.”
Meagan led me into the shadows, taking up a spot where we could speak quietly together. She rested her back against the brick wall of the abandoned dentist’s office and crossed her arms. The heat of the streets rose in waves, like a mirage, where sunlight warmed the crackled stones. She spoke softly, wary of the small crowd gathered across the marketplace.

“We need to find Rosemary,” she said. “Her escape has complicated matters. She knows too much. Addermire should wait.”

“And Sokolov? What if he can’t wait?”

Meagan grimaced. “I know, but what good are we if we walk into a trap? Rosemary knows Addermire is our one good lead. She knows we’re coming.”

“That’s assuming a lot,” I said, shaking my head. “We have no idea what’s going on inside Rosemary’s head. She’s a two-faced witch—she could be both for and against us…” I watched Meagan smirk, my belly tightening in anger. “She only wants to see the bad, not the good.” “Look, I share your concern, I do, but finding her is easier said than done. You said yourself she could be anywhere in the city by now. I think it’s best if we just go ahead with our plans, and if I find a shrine in Addermire, I can ask the Outsider. Maybe he can help us find her.”

Meagan pushed away from the wall and paced a few steps, restless and wary. “I don’t like this…”

“Risk is part of the job. If the Crown Killer really is linked to Addermire, if this is the beginning of the trail, then it doesn’t matter if Rosemary knows or not, or if she tries to interfere or not—we go in no matter what. We fight back, starting now. Waiting is out of the question.”

Addermire.

It was a curse on my tongue. Since the very first moment I’d seen that pearly edifice glinting in the sun, a veritable fortress of glass and steel and stone, on its own private island, I’d wanted to steal inside and uncover its secrets. Today. I meant to rest for a few hours, to let the hottest hours of the day pass by in lazy solitude, then reach the carriage station before sundown. With luck, I’d be done by nightfall.

I put a hand on her shoulder, to stop her pacing. “There’s a few hours, yet, before I’ll need you. Do what you can to find her, then meet me at Addermire like we planned. I’ll have the Watchtower disabled by then. How’s that?”

She grated her jaw, her dark eyes boring into the dirt as she scuffed her boot against the broken cobbles. Over her shoulder, across the marketplace, I saw a young mother in rags as she handed her little boy a single coin. His face was dirty and his clothes unkempt, but he smiled so big, as wide as the sky, and with shining self-importance, he scurried across the street to flip the coin into an opened guitar case where street performers were smiling back at him, strumming their music. They were dirt poor, that family, but even they had charity. It shocked me, these Serkonans. Meagan was watching
my face as I turned back, that is, what little she could see above the handkerchief.

She said, “Okay. I’ll follow your lead.” She took two steps away from me, then paused, looking over her shoulder at the basement steps where Loki was resting. “What about him? Want me to take him back to the ship first?”

I sighed. “It’s probably for the best. He’s too tired.”

As if aware we were talking about him, Loki made a groaning sound, his green eyes fluttering open with some difficulty. He was slumped against the steps’ outer wall, his body angled so that he was resting on only one butt cheek. I understood that problem.

We’d both be sore for a day or two, Mindy had warned before shooing us out with instructions to keep the tattoo clean and ‘airy’ if we could, to let it breathe. Easier said than done, considering its location. I had choice words for the Outsider about that, too. Why did his protective sigil have to go on our asses of all places? I couldn’t wait to see the smirk on his face when I asked, bastard.

“No, no… I need to stay with Emily,” Loki said, blinking up at me. He got to his feet, yawning so widely he reminded me of a lion. “She shouldn’t be left alone.”

Meagan slid her dark eyes over me and shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

I should have sent him back. I should have. But an idea came to me and I couldn’t let it go. “I’ll take him. I think I know where we can rest up for a few hours.”

Loki came to stand in front of me, swaying slightly on his feet. Again, I saw the echo of the storm in his eyes, a churning mist over emerald depths. It was as if a part of him was still caught in the spell, latched onto the winds and the rain that had pushed us across unfathomable distances to reach Karnaca.

Meagan nodded grimly. “Then I’ll meet you both later, and good luck.”

“You, too,” I said as she walked away, disappearing around the corner as we watched from the shadows.

Loki turned his head to look at me, bringing up a fist to stifle another yawn. “This place feels like home,” he said, surprising me. He bumped shoulders with me, swaying, as his eyes wandered, looking out across the marketplace and the tall buildings that lined the square, a profusion of tropical flowers bursting from nearly every window box. The vibrant colors were dazzling to the eye, so unlike the drab Dunwall I’d left behind.

I held him, gripping his arm as he swayed on his feet. “Really? Why?”

I imagined his home—lost to the ages—as something primitive. In the sand. On a beach. Maybe near a mountain. Something close to the earth and sea, not caged by an urban city’s cold, hard stone.

“The warmth,” he said, breathing deeply and closing his eyes. “And the taste of salt in the air. The sound of the waves. We are close to the Ocean. I can hear it beneath the sounds of…” He looked confused. “…all these people, their cries…” He looked at me and frowned. “They are suffering.”

My people are suffering.

“I know,” I whispered. The Duke was draining the city of its wealth, greedily gathering all that was good and pure, and returning only filth and poverty to those below him.
But I thought, too, of the boy with the big smile and held onto hope. I tugged on his arm. “Daku.”

Come.

At the sound of his mother tongue, he smiled faintly. “Daku,” he repeated, like he had to keep the memories of home sharp in his mind.

He followed me out of the shadows. We skirted the street performers, ducked beneath an archway, and took a stone stairwell up a level. The railway was abandoned, the train cars laden with cargo. The smell of lumber and grease filled my nostrils through the handkerchief. We were alone.

“Where are we going?” he asked as I crouched near a pile of lumber and peered at the busy plaza below with the fancy garden intersecting the boulevard, the carriage station on one side and various high-end shops and apartment buildings on the other. I spotted the Winslow Safe storefront that Lucia had mentioned, a few window-shoppers meandering outside, but the apartments above soared towards the sky in stately rows, and I wasn’t sure which was Hypatia’s.

I took his hand, pulling him down beside me, but instead of crouching, he folded into a cross-legged position and sat down. He winced as his newly-tattooed arse, no doubt, made itself known again. A little leaning relieved that problem.

“Where are we going?” he asked again. Sweat beaded on his brow. He, too, wore a coat too warm for this weather.

“Hypatia’s apartment,” I whispered.

I glanced up at the Grand Guard patrolling the roof of the carriage station, unhappy with our odds. Even with Far Reach, the line of apartment balconies facing the street (as convenient as they now looked) were risky business in bright sunlight. We’d been seen. I sighed in frustration and sat down next to him, kicking my legs out to stretch them. “I was hoping we could kill two birds with one stone. The alchemist has apparently gone missing, so that means no one’s home. We can break into her apartment to investigate and get some sleep. I need to rest up for a few hours before we head into Addermire.”

He gave me a lopsided grin, his eyes drunk, at the edge of slumber. “Only barbarians kill birds with stones.”

I squeezed his arm, forcing him to look at me, to read the concern in my eyes. “Loki, are you sure you’re okay? This tiredness… Are you sure it’s just the aftereffects of the spell? Maybe I should take you back to the ship…”

He scowled, his brow furrowing. He said, his voice laced with frustration, like he was too tired to control it, “I’m not leaving you, Emily. You need me for this mission. I need to be there when… when…” He blinked up at the sky and winced as sunlight danced over his face. “When she comes. When she comes back…”

“What?” I took a fistful of his shirt, right over his heart, and pulled him closer. “When she comes back? You mean Rosemary?”

He frowned. “I think so. The Outsider, he whispered in my dream… He said I would find her. That I would see her.”

I let go of his shirt and turned away with a huff, crouching again to peer around the lumber.

First Mindy, now Loki?
The carriage station was crawling with guards. Damnit. I felt his yawn tickle my ear as he leaned over from behind and rested his chin on my shoulder. “What is it?” he asked sleepily, his hands tugging at my coat until I sat back down next to him. “Why are you so angry?”

I said, drawing my knees up and trying not to sound too jealous, “Why is everyone else getting whispers from the Void? Dreams of the Outsider? Everyone but me?”

“I think he’s put a spell on you,” he said in a voice that made me wonder if he was sleepwalking, or sleep talking in this case.

“What?”

“It’s why you’re jealous for no good reason,” he said, his speech slightly slurred. “The Outsider wants you. And Delilah has held your dreams captive, has she not? Maybe he couldn’t, but now … maybe you’re free, now, to see your own whale with a blue star for an eye.” He said this rather jokingly, like it was a fanciful dream and not a terrifying nightmare as the Overseers preached it, when the Outsider had cause to ‘corrupt’ one’s dreams.

“Hmm,” I said, unconvinced.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to see the Outsider that way, like appearing in the guise of a whale made him seem unreal and less of a man—but more of a god, in a way.

I turned to look at him. “Is that really what you saw? The same thing as Mindy?”

He looked down, threading through the sandy grit between the iron tracks with his fingers. He drew the outline of a big-bellied whale. “I saw a whale in the night sky. Many stars, many eyes, but only that one blue star, shining brighter than the others, looking down at me. I heard whispers in my ear, and laughter, but it was…” He frowned. “Distorted, like light passing through water.”

I matched his frown. “He’s trying to speak to you. The next time I find a shrine, he told me to bring you.” To impart wisdom on his younger self, I thought cynically. I didn’t like it then, and I didn’t like it now.

He looked south towards the bay, as if neither carriage station nor rock obstructed his view. “Addermire has a shrine. We’ll see him soon.” His eyes shifted to my face, lighting up. “I have an idea about them.” He nodded towards the guards crawling over the carriage station. “They can’t see us if it rains hard enough.”

“No. You’re still recovering from your last spell, Loki, and you can barely stay awake. It scares me. Please, just do as I say. We can take the balconies. We just have to time it right and only go when their backs are turned.”

“Okay,” he surrendered in a sleepy murmur, taking my hand. He knew how my Far Reach worked. He could Blink, too, but I feared he was too tired for that.

I smiled at his easy trust, and did what I could, keeping us low to the ground and moving quickly. Many of the residents had furniture and planters set out on the balconies, which I used for cover. When the guards grew too thick, their eyes covering too many angles, I flung us into a darkened alleyway between the buildings, Far Reach softening our landing in whispery swirls of purple and black.

It led behind the Winslow Safe shop. I meant to bypass it and head up the stairs towards the apartments above, but Loki tugged on my sleeve. “There’s a key,” he said dreamily. “I see a key.”
My eyes widened. “Are you telling me the Outsider knew I’d check out Hypatia’s apartment?”

“He sees… possibilities.”

*You see,* I thought, watching his eyes, the swirl of mist over glowing emeralds. There was magic in his gaze as he tumbled between wakefulness and sleep, between here and now, and the shadowy whispers of a dream faraway. I wondered if the Outsider was, even now, speaking through him to help me.

I didn’t like it.

Loki wasn’t a *conduit.* He was a person in his own right, and deserved autonomy. *His own life.* I swallowed my anger. There was, indeed, much to say when I saw the Outsider again.

I left him in the hallway as I snuck into the back of the shop and looked around. The shopkeeper was in the front, busy with a broom. I found a brass key resting over a handwritten letter and stole away, back into the hallway. I leaned against the wall with Loki beside me as I quickly skimmed the letter.

“It’s from Hypatia. No date. She left her key with the shopkeeper. He’s her friend. Wanted him to water her plants.” I tucked the letter in my coat and frowned. “She’s passionate about her work. Rarely home. What in the Void happened to her?”

Loki just stared at me, reflecting my confusion.

I held up the brass key. “Let’s find out.”

We didn’t know *which* door, so we tried each one, floor by floor. It turned out she was at the top. The alchemist had the best apartment in the building, with high walls and elaborate crown molding. We turned the key, went inside, and locked the door behind us.

There were dead plants in the foyer. Loki touched them, a subtle wince screwing his features, like this, too, was suffering.

“She’s been gone a long time,” he said in a hushed murmur, but then he looked distracted as he watched me pull down my handkerchief, his eyes wandering over my lips, as if seeing them again was a gift.

I looked away.

“The shopkeeper must have given up on watering them when she didn’t return,” I said, already moving into the hallway beyond. The foyer, or ‘front’ of the apartment was actually the back, dark and cool with tiled floors, but the long wooden hallway led towards light and warmth, and the familiar sounds of a busy city street. Her apartment wasn’t sealed up like a tomb, like I had expected; instead, it was almost as if the alchemist had just stepped out for a moment, to enjoy the breeze from the balcony.

Shuttered doors, tall and narrow, flanked an opened doorway, letting in wind and sunlight. It was beautiful.

I stood in that slant of sunlight as it set the entire grand room into clarity. She was not here. We were alone. But she had left behind a little of herself…

I saw it in her work, in the laboratory counters along a back wall, piled high with glass beakers and syringes, with Bunsen burners and metal prongs, and a dissected bloodfly next to a scribbled
notebook. She had a single cot in that area, like even in her sleep she only thought of her work. It meant something to her. Something good. She was a healer, they said.

Another wall had a large desk and an audiogram machine. There was a punch card fitted into the slot. I hit play and listened to the alchemist’s voice as I riffled through the things on her desk. She had a strange, taxidermic bloodfly husk, preserved in blood-red amber.

She sounded sweet and thoughtful.

“I spend less and less time here at my apartment, but my work at Addermire demands it. After the horrible failures of my first serum, I’m more determined than ever to help the miners. It’s not my say how hard the Duke and his cronies drive the workers, but until he sees reason, I’ll do what I can to make their lives better, and to provide comfort to their families—with the help of like-minded crusaders, like Lucia Pastor. It’s my obsession, our work and the impact it will have on the least privileged people in Karnaca. Studying the original plague elixirs, which Sokolov kindly granted me access to, I feel I’m close to something.”

When the recording ended with a sharp static sound, I looked for Loki. He was in the hallway, staring up at a large oil painting of a middle-aged woman. She had pale skin and dark eyes, a solemn face nearly swallowed by shadows.

I recognized Sokolov’s style. Meagan had mentioned the old man had known her well, that they’d been friends of a sort, respecting one another on a professional level.

“Is that her?”

“I think so,” he said, frowning slightly. “She… she reminds me of Rosemary.”

I didn’t see how. They were night and day. Rosemary was rosy-cheeked and blonde, blue-eyed and fair, while Alexandria Hypatia was … I stared at the portrait and shuddered. She was soft, beginning to wrinkle, but there was a hardness in her sideways gaze, an echo of the clinical detachment she needed as a physician, someone who dealt with death every day, at knife’s edge when she dissected cadavers.

I’d seen the same look in Sokolov’s eyes.

I tugged on his coat. “Daku.”

He removed his coat, folding it over his arm. I had the same idea. Even with the breeze, it was too hot to be wearing clothes more suited for Gristol’s chillier climate. I took both our coats and draped them over a fancy couch.

“There’s a cot back there,” I said, kicking off my boots. “Or you can sleep on the couch, if you like. We should rest while we still can. We leave before sundown.” Our new surroundings seemed to brighten his eyes; he looked more alert, suddenly. He carefully removed his boots, and then pants, undoing his belt with practiced ease. The boy who had fuddled with buttons was long gone.

“What are you doing?” I asked, slightly alarmed.

“Airing it out,” he said, straight-faced, as he rounded his tattoo towards me. I grabbed a pillow from the couch and chucked it at him; it bounced off his butt, and we laughed. “It’s too hot for pants,” he said, more seriously. “My people do not wear so many layers, Emily. It’s not good for one’s constitution.”

“Oh, really,” I said dryly. A likely story.
His pants fell to the ground, pooling around his feet. He pushed the pants aside and picked up the pillow, holding it over his groin. He had underwear on, of course, but I suddenly found it impossible to look at him. I imagined Loki wouldn’t be so confident if he hadn’t also been sleepy-drunk. I sat down on the couch and stared out the balcony towards the blue sky, watching the dark outlines of elite guards pacing back and forth over the roof of the carriage station.

He sat down beside me, and for a time, we shared our silence. He was gripping the pillow, watching the sky, too, but then I felt his gaze and I forced myself to look over at him.

He was frowning, a strange look on his face. “When I told you about Rosemary, about how a part of her has never left, that she has taken a part of you, and you have a part of her—I see it, now, more clearly.”

“What?” I breathed.

My heart was racing as I watched his eyes, focused on my hand with the Mark. It was wrapped in black leather, but the signet ring on my middle finger was clearly visible. He gently took my hand and rested it over the pillow on his lap. “It’s this,” he said, touching the ring. “She’s imbued it with… with a piece of herself. It’s hard to explain.”

“She put a spell on me?”

“Yes… no… It’s difficult to explain. Your ring, this piece of metal… it’s like a cameo,” he said, struggling to find the right words. “A piece of her spirit. If you destroy this ring, you destroy a part of what keeps her linked to this world.”

I lifted my hand to my heart. “I have a piece of her, then.” I sucked in a shaky breath. “Then what part of me does she have? Can she destroy a piece of me?”

The thought terrified me.

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

I smiled mirthlessly. “We can break each other… What if this is the other’s doing? The witch inside her,” I said, twisting the signet ring round and round. He grabbed my hand, seizing my fear and holding it back.

His eyes were steady.

“I won’t let either of them hurt you, Emily. It’s what I’m here for,” he said and leaned over and kissed me. It was gentle and sweet, with only a hint of a deeper ardor beneath, but enough to make my eyes close and my breath vanish. When he pulled away, he said, very softly, “Now we sleep—and you dream.”

I paled, thinking of Delilah.

“Good dreams,” he corrected, squeezing my hand.

I swallowed hard. “I guess now we can find out if this tattoo thing really works.”

Neither of us moved to claim either the cot or the couch. I couldn’t even think of resting, not after that kiss, but with the sounds of the street and the harsh voices of the Grand Guard calling to each other as they passed in their patrols, I knew Addermire was close, our mission was close, and I had to be ready. I sighed and said, “Okay, you take the sofa. I’ll take the cot.”
“Your wish is my command, O Mighty Empress.”

I made a face. “Don’t make me hit you with the pillow again.” I stood up and walked around the sofa, fully aware that his eyes were on my posterior the whole time. “Yes, it still bloody hurts,” I threw over my shoulder, as if that had been that reason for his long staring.

“You should air it out.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a comedian, Loki.”

“Ah, well, Court Jester is my fallback if Royal Protector doesn’t work out.”

I laughed despite myself, then gave him an exaggerated scowl. “I can keep my tattoo clean and dry inside my pants, thank you.”

“I’m just thinking of your comfort. It’s hot in here. You’ll feel better with your pants off,” he said, moving the pillow from his crotch to slap against the couch, beating it once to make an indent for his head as he stretched out, looking quite pleased in his underwear.

“Oh huh.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Oh, I know you’re thinking of my royal ass, and I’m thinking we should both get some sleep before this devolves any further.” I threw myself, stomach-down, on the cot, and closed my eyes, wondering how in the Void I was going to wipe this stupid grin off my face.
Part 5: Chapter 56

Part V continued

“Broken”

Chapter 56

I dreamed. I didn’t see a whale with a blue star for an eye, but I felt the Outsider’s presence, like a shadow over the water. On waking, I remembered only bits and pieces, images mostly, like strokes of a brush, a painting half-revealed. A red dress. A dance. A black rose crumbling to ash… Other images were sharper, frozen in time, like some fragile creature preserved in amber. Myself. Loki. We were lying on the rocks together at the water’s edge, resting on our stomachs. I saw myself leaning over that edge, trailing my fingers across the moonlit surface and watching the water ripple beneath my touch.

Loki pulled me back from the edge, and when I turned to look at him, his emerald eyes misted and churned like a storm, then turned black. Blacker than any shadow. Black, like the cold, dead eyes of the Outsider himself.

Thus I awoke, shuddering and weeping, breathing in ragged gulps with my hands covering my face and my knees drawn up to my chest.

I felt cold.

I swung off the bed and planted my feet on the ground, trying to find my inner balance, a calm center to focus the mind. The evening’s glowing rays, sharply slanted, illuminated Hypatia’s grand room. It was nearing sundown and I knew I had to be ready. It was time. I had my sword, my crossbow, my pistol. I pulled on my boots, and when I reached for my coat draped over the sofa, I saw Loki. He was fast asleep, and his face was peaceful. I hated to wake him, but I believed what he’d said about needing to come with me, that the Outsider had told him he would find Rosemary, that he would ‘see’ her.

I feared what that meant for our mission.

But I gave him a few more minutes. Down the hallway, I used the bathroom, flipping on the electrical light. I changed my tampon, wishing I didn’t have my period. It made me feel sluggish at times and slower to react—and that could get me killed. I splashed cold water on my face at the faucet and looked at myself in the mirror. There were dark shadows under my eyes. Delilah’s grasp on my dreams had taken their toll, but now I was freed. I’d slept and not been pulled into the Void.

It felt good, gave me courage, but I knew I needed more sleep, more rest, to return to the natural rhythms of the body. I remembered my father’s warning, that fatigue could cut deeper than any sword, and so I knew after Addermire I must rest, truly rest, and not grab mere snatches of fitful sleep.

But could I? Until I returned to Dunwall and slept in my own bed, would I ever feel truly peaceful?

Back in the hallway, I noticed Loki stirring on the couch. His hair was sticking up in a million places and he was scratching his head as he yawned widely. He needed a shave; the hint of black stubble made him look rough around the edges. *On second thought, I kinda like it.* He looked better, a lot better. The mist was gone from his eyes, the green depths clear and radiant.
The wind had picked up while we’d slept. A few dry leaves were scattered over the black-and-white tiles. I watched him pad bare-foot—in his underwear no less—to pick up one of the leaves, golden-red. He twirled it between his fingers and stared out the opened doorway.

“There’s less guards,” he said in softer tones, like the effect of sleep had dampened the world, making it necessary that we tread lightly from here on out. There was an acute stillness in the air, despite the wind, a sense of balancing along an edge… I thought of my dream, how he’d pulled me back, and I came to stand beside him.

“Changing of the guards, perhaps,” I said, pleased by what I saw. The roof of the carriage station looked less like a swarming anthill and more like something we could easily trespass. I sighed. “We should drink, eat something light, then go.”

A fitful gust took his leaf; it fluttered away, born of wind. He nodded at me, padding off to the bathroom with his pants flipped over his shoulder. I stared at the strong lines of his back and pulled out my water canteen. I drank thirstily, parched from sleep, then pulled at my coat to slip out the snacks Eileen had packed for us—a pouch of rolled oats, puffed rice, and dried fruit.

I sat on the couch and ate, crossing one leg under me to hoist my tattoo-side up slightly higher; less pressure that way.

Loki returned, sopping wet, like he’d dunked his whole head under the faucet. It made me chirp in laughter. He sat down next to me and grabbed from the pouch, eating from his cupped hand like nothing was amiss. At least he’d put his pants back on. As if finally acknowledging the amused look on my face, he squeezed his hair in fistfuls, dripping water down his neck.

“Feeling better?” I asked.

“Cooler, yes,” he responded, munching happily (who didn’t like Eileen’s cooking?). “Can I see the dog?”

“What?”

“The carving Paolo made for you.”

“Oh.”

I handed it over. The carving made me uneasy.

As Loki inspected the finer details, turning the wolfhound in his hand, I felt a chill at the back of my neck. I fiddled with my signet ring and asked, “Is it imbued with magic, like my ring?”

He didn’t answer right away, and in the silence, my thoughts churned, restless. I could destroy a piece of Rosemary by destroying the ring, but would I? She was my friend—the good witch, at least—and the signet ring was my only way to access my safe room back at the Tower—I might need it again. Rosemary had chosen well, to use my signet ring, I thought. It bound me to it as surely as her magic. I could not destroy it without losing a great deal.

At last, Loki answered. “No,” he said, frowning slightly. “I don’t feel that, just… I see what Paolo wanted you to see.”

I stared at him, unsettled by how much he sounded like the Outsider, sometimes. “About evil, you mean?” I asked.

“Yes.” He seemed suddenly reluctant. “Emily… is it true about your religion? Is it… evil?”
The thought clearly disturbed him.

“Not my religion.”

“Your Empire’s, then,” he said with a shrug, like it was beside the point. “Does Paolo have the truth of it?”

I shot to my feet and moved away, coming to stand before a model of a Pandyssian creature, crocodile-like, as if it was suddenly very interesting and required my scrutiny up close.

I felt his eyes boring into my back.

“Emily, explain to me what the Abbey believes. What god do the Overseers worship?”

He really wanted to do this now?

I sighed heavily. “No gods. They abhor anything supernatural.”

“But?”

“But… people are attached to the idea of forces greater than us. Gods, we say, without understanding how or why. There’s no evidence of them, none but the shadow of the Void and the Outsider’s whispers. The Abbey believes it’s unnatural and wrong, that our world will one day be consumed by this darkness, that one day we will look up into the night sky and see no stars. No stars… A cold, dark death of the universe. A true void.”

I turned and faced him, knowing what I said next would be difficult to hear. It was difficult to say.

“The Abbey threatens nonbelievers with visions of eternal torment: to be caught forever in the Void, a hapless plaything of the Outsider, who they paint as something of a devil: a ‘Whale Satan’ who has no interest in human happiness, only pain and suffering in this life and the next.”

A shadow crossed his face. “Am I like that?” He choked, “I mean him?”

“Yes and no. Is it not so for all of us?” I looked at the wolfhound in his hand. “Paolo made some very good points, but it’s not so black and white. The Abbey has done good and bad in the world.”

I sighed, thinking of all the innocent children the Abbey had indoctrinated, the blood on their hands… “And, yes, maybe more bad than good, but how can I rip away my people’s religion without ripping away their hearts in the process? They have lived too long with the Abbey’s pretty promises and soothing lies. They believe it.”

And belief was not so easily crushed, even with reason and truth. Such was the nefarious nature of belief.

“What lies?” Loki asked.

“The peace of non-existence.”

I spat out the words, hearing it too often on the tongues of preachy Overseers, self-righteous and bellowing.

“The Abbey implants fear in people, the fear of eternal torment in the Void, and then they offer salvation—if people but devout their lives to the Seven Strictures and pay tithes to the Abbey. It’s a promise of non-existence when they die, a way to avoid pain and suffering by simply not feeling anything at all. It has… resonance. When people suffer for so long in their miserable lives, they
want it to end, Loki. They want relief.”

I thought of my meditation teacher from Wei-Gon, one of many royal tutors I’d had growing up.

“It’s hard to know when we’re happy, isn’t it? We question ourselves. *Am I really happy?* But when we are unhappy, when we feel pain, there is no doubt. *No doubt,* and it consumes us. Agony is all we ever truly know *for sure,* when all else could be an illusion, when true happiness seems fleeting… That’s why the Abbey’s vision of eternal torment is so effective, so terrifying. If I take away the Abbey, who then will save them?”

Loki had stood up, coming to me in slow steps as he listened to my speech. Tears had formed in his eyes, but his face was hard as stone. Impassive. He looked like a rain-soaked god; his hair, his eyes… “Satakal,” he breathed.

I didn’t realize, for a moment, that he meant it in answer. *Who then save them?*

I touched his face, my fingers wet with his tears. He gently took my hand and lowered it.

“Satakal is the One True God,” he murmured. “It has been written in the sands. I have told you, before, of my destiny… of what I lost. But what of *your* destiny? *Our* destiny. Are we not linked? Do we not feel this pull between us?”

He clasped our hands tightly together and placed them over my heart.

“Perhaps Satakal has brought us together—over impossible eons, the folding of time—to burn the Abbey to the ground, and in the ashes, to grow a new religion. *New* to you. Old to me.” His voice was passionate, and so confident, but…

I shook my head.

“The one true religion?” I knew I sounded mocking, but his words sounded too much like the Abbey’s dogma. I looked into his eyes, desperate to understand. “How can you believe Satakal has anything to do with what Delilah did? *She’s* the reason the Outsider died and why he asked the whales for reincarnation. *She’s* the reason why you’re here, Loki. *She’s* real. I can’t say the same for Satakal.”

His hand slipped to cup tightly around my butt, the side with the tattoo. “I believe because of what I saw the moment Mindy brought the Outsider’s tattoo to life on your skin. It’s a sea serpent devouring its tail… *That* is how ‘Satakal’ is painted in our holy caves, how the ancient Maormers wrote down the name of God. Emily, don’t you see? We have been divinely chosen to bring *His* light into the Empire. *Satakal save us.*”

He drew me closer, *reverently* one might say, and pressed me against him with both his hands around me, cupping my butt and holding me against his hard groin. Tidal waves of desire rolled through my body.

“This is crazy, Loki,” I said, but he crushed my breathy words with his lips, angling to kiss me full on the mouth.

In our joining, he dropped the little dog, and the sound made me start. I jerked away from him and scrambled for the only excuse I had.

“I’m not ready.”

It was partly a lie. It’s true; what my father did to me was a nightmare not easily forgotten or
forgiven, but my desperate need for space had more to do with the lie I felt in Loki’s declaration. *He’s desperate for a destiny he can cling to,* I thought. *A proud destiny,* something that could rival the loss of not becoming the Outsider, the *Amonkalahira,* the chosen of his people.

In that light, was it at all surprising that he would grasp an answer seeped in religion?

Was it not *all* religion? The Outsider. The Void, and magic itself. Even Delilah’s immortality! It was mystical and enigmatic, and I couldn’t deny there was a part I had to play in it—ripples in the pond, but did those ripples really mean burning the Abbey to the ground? How could I make that choice when it sounded like something my father—Corvo the Black, at least—would rejoice in?

“We don’t have much time,” I said. “We have to go. Our mission…”

I reached for my coat, but Loki stopped me, almost angrily. His eyes were insistent, pleading. “I see the evil in this world. All the suffering. The whales dying. Emily, listen. Satakal can make your Empire whole again. Can make you whole again.”

My voice came out savage and tear-stricken. *“Why? Because I’m broken?”* 

I snatched my coat and put it on in angry jerks of sleeve and shoulder. *Gods,* this was worse than all the *guilt-tripping shit* the Overseers had burned into my brain as a teenager, when Callista had forced me to go to their holy enclaves after Fugue Feast. *I’m not broken,* I told myself. *I’ve just been hurt badly, but I’ll heal. I’ll fucking heal.* I stood before the balcony, stiff and cold. It took a moment before I could speak.

“We’ll use the roof and the lamp posts. We can use our powers to get across.”

He answered with silence.

But then I heard the soft ruffle of fabric as he, too, put his coat on. “And the guards?” he asked coolly. “How will we get past them?”

I pointed at the woman in a red uniform patrolling the rightmost side of the roof. “I’ll sleep dart her. Make a path for us. See the other two near the glass ceiling? They can only see her when she nears the edge. If I sleep dart her further back, they’ll never know she’s down. We just have to worry about him.” I pointed to the officer watching the streets, close to the lamp posts. “But he turns his back every few minutes when that other guard comes around. They talk.”

I could see it from here. *Blabber mouths, like most guards.* My father said the truly elite guards were those quiet in the shadows, not out in the light following predictable patterns.

Loki asked, “What if you sleep dart her and she falls off the roof and dies?”

“Unlikely.” I unclipped my crossbow and lifted it, but he pushed down on my arm.

“Wait. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I said.” His eyes were the green of swollen rivers, reflecting the light of the setting sun, shadowed by darkening clouds. Gusts of rain-scented wind ruffled his black hair, the ends dripping wet. “I don’t think you’re broken, Emily. I think you’re beautiful.”

*Everything passes.*

“We should go, Loki,” I said as his eyes poured patience. To me, that was a better apology.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

He looked around the room, grabbing the pouch of food and tucking it inside his coat. The
wolfhound he picked up from the floor. I had no wish to keep Paolo’s gift.

Nor did he, apparently.

In a shocking whoosh of fire, he set the wolfhound ablaze in his hand—a blue fire that consumed the wood, charring it black before bursting into ash. The palm of his hand remained untouched as he held up the ashes, showing me what he had done. *Burn the Abbey to the ground*, his eyes said.

“How…?”

The utterance was whisper-thin from my lips. How did he do that? I thought his power was only wind and water… *For how could the Ocean and the whales, ever know fire?*

He rubbed his fingers together, the wind swirling the ash that fell from his hand. “Satakal’s power,” he said. “The circle of life and death, unending. Creation and destruction. The ancient Maormers taught my people the way of water *and* fire, so that we would be whole.”

“You’re full of surprises, Prince Loki.” He smiled at that. “But I’d rather you not turn our enemies into ash.” *Especially Overseers,* I thought. I didn’t need a holy war on my hands. “Don’t turn Addermire into a graveyard. It could be that the people there are innocent, that they have no connection to the Crown Killer.”

“And if they do?”

“Even so, I have no desire to punish, for Delilah is the root of their evil. *She* should be punished.”

He nodded. “As the Captain said, I’ll follow your lead.”

“Good.”

It was a tricky shot. The distance. The wind. I held my crossbow and felt for the right moment, deep in my bones, a shadow of my father’s voice in my ear as if he was training me all over again at the abandoned waterfront. It worked. The sleep dart shot across the plaza to hit her in the arm. She clutched it and fell, rolling out of sight and landing somewhere on the other side of the slanted roof. *Hopefully, not falling to her death,* I thought, glancing at Loki.

“We should *Blink* together,” he said, grabbing my hand as we crouched unto the balcony. “One by one just means two trips, doubling our chances of detection.” He brought my hand up to his mouth and kissed the back of my fingers. “Your *Far Reach* makes my stomach hurl. Let me handle this one.”

I looked at his mouth.

“As you wish, O Mighty Prince.”

He grinned at that. “And Prince Loki wants you to hold on tight and not let go. Can you do that?” He looked at the lamp post, then back at me, his smile fading as his eyes went solemn. “Don’t let go.” He squeezed my hand. “You’re my light in the darkness, Emily.”

*He sounds like Wyman,* I thought. *Poetry on his lips.*

But I read his words as another apology. Perhaps he was afraid his talk of Satakal and burning the Abbey to the ground had scared me, that he’d revealed too much of himself. He was so young, after all, and inexperienced. Forced to walk the ‘pure’ path of the Chosen, he’d never been allowed to do the things lovers did. I was his first kiss and he wanted more, so much more. I’d felt it when he had
pressed his body against mine. He was afraid of my rejection, that maybe his belief that Satakal had brought us together was not my belief.

“I trust you,” I simply said, pulling the handkerchief over my face. “Let’s do this.”

Loki’s _Blink_ felt like my father’s, cold and blue. When the officer turned his back, magic hopped us from balcony to lamp post to roof, all in less than a blink of the eye. It was done. We were safe. We moved low in a crouch, silent-footed, to where the sleep-darted guard had fallen. She had rolled off to a lower part of the roof, her body covered with a blanket of leaves.

I checked her pulse and nodded at him. _Alive_. But she’d have a bruise or two.

We could see the carriage. A lone carriage. Its mere absence would ring an alarm. How were we to do this?

“A convenient distraction would be nice, right about now,” I grumbled after we moved closer, using a balcony along an adjacent building. I spotted two guards, plus the ones visible beyond the Wall of Light, and the red-uniformed officer near the second floor window.

All he had to do was turn his head and he’d see us.

Loki followed my train of thought and _Blinked_ us directly over the carriage, out of his direct line of sight, on the curved-wooden trellis covering the immediate boarding area. Abandoned luggage lay everywhere, like several people had waited to enter Addermire only to be violently turned away.

Our convenient distraction came with a whistle. A Morley tune. He was a worker dressed in overalls, the straps running down his bare chest. He carried a toolbox with a heavy wrench at his belt. “Evenin’, fellas,” he said.

“You got papers?” one guard snapped.

“Fresh from upstairs. Here to do maintenance on the track.”

“Let him go,” the other guard whined. “He fixed the rails last week. Damn thing keeps breakin’ down. Piece o’ shit.”

“She’s a lady. You just gotta treat her right,” the worker said as Loki and I heard the sound of the carriage door squeak open and shut. I grabbed his hand. We had to go, _now_, before the carriage got too far down the tracks, over the water!

Loki timed it perfectly, _Blinking_ us on the roof of the carriage as it sped away. I spared a glance at the carriage station—the two guards were looking away—and with the wind shrieking in my ears, the waves glistening below us, I swung over the edge and dove into the carriage through the windowless door, Loki doing the same on the other side.

Our entry, surprisingly, didn’t scare the worker witless as I’d expected. He was resting against the plushy seat, whistling a tune, but when he saw us he calmly met my eyes and said, “Compliments of the Howlers. Paolo wants you to know you have friends in high places. This carriage is out of order, for maintenance.”

In other words, we didn’t have to worry about Addermire calling for backup from the station if things went south. The carriage was on a one-way ticket.

A convenient distraction, indeed.
“I appreciate Paolo’s help, but I didn’t ask for it,” I said, hard-eyed. How in the Void did Paolo know we’d hit Addermire? He’d clearly sent his Howlers to watch us… Was this another secret the Outsider had let slip in a dream? Bloody bastard!

I didn’t mind the help, but all this help came at a price! The Howlers didn’t do anything for free, like any gang.

The worker—Howler—smiled.

“Paolo wants to remind you that you have safe passage in the Dust District. He waits for you at the Crone’s Hand, at your leisure. He hopes you’ll come soon.” His eyes slid to Loki. “Both of you.”

The carriage came to a roaring stop, sliding into Addermire’s berth with a tremble and a jerk. The damn thing probably did need maintenance. Loki and I hopped off, leaving the Howler to do… well, wait from the looks of it. I thought about knocking him out, but it seemed he had orders from his boss not to interfere further. He tipped his hat forward, covering his eyes like he was settling in for a long nap.

Addermire loomed large. Loki stood staring at the massive stone walls, slightly greened with age, algae-bloomed and bathed in the light of the stormy sky. I felt a shudder run through me as he turned his green eyes on me and said, “You once said this is a place of healing. It’s not.”

“You see something?”

“The Crown Killer is here.”
“How do you know?” I asked, but he was no longer looking at me. He had picked up a brittle brown leaf from the ground and was twisting the stem, gazing out over the waves as they crashed against the rocks, the walls of Addermire rising above in dismal gray and green. “Loki…”

He pressed a hand to the side of his head like he’d suddenly been stabbed with a headache. It scared me. I touched his shoulder, gently turning him towards me.

His eyes were filled with bitterness. “I’d like to think my new life is my own,” he said, “but I feel the Outsider’s black eyes in my skull. I see things. Things I don’t understand. Something dark is here. Something that feeds on blood and fear.”

His words filled me with dread.

Was the Crown Killer no longer a man? Had it turned into a beast? A monster? The murders had been gruesome, animal-like, bodies torn apart; eaten, even. What but a monster could do that?

I believed in monsters. Had not the Rat Plague turned men into Weepers? And what of the Nest Keepers deep in the infested hearts of quarantine, their bodies and minds corrupted by Bloodfly Fever? Perhaps therein lied the truth of how a possible patient of Dr. Hypatia could become such a vile creature…

But as I held Loki’s troubled gaze and looked deeply into his emerald green eyes, I realized there was only one monster I feared above all others: the black beneath, the Outsider.

Perhaps ‘monster’ was too harsh; too black and white. I did not believe the Outsider was evil, but some of what he had done in the past, his long influence over the world, could be construed as mischief, or worse. In his defense, perhaps one might call it ‘balance’, tipping the scales between order and chaos…

But what kind of influence was the Outsider trying to exert over his human counterpart and did he have the right to do so? I ran my hand down Loki’s arm, wanting to comfort him, to tell him he wasn’t alone, to help him fight the darkness in his eyes.

Your life is your own, I wanted to say, but we both knew the Outsider’s influence was both gift and curse.

Through Loki, the Outsider was warning us to be vigilant, for the Crown Killer was close… but also, perhaps, the Outsider was discovering a new way of being. Again and again, Loki’s eerie ability to see, to peer into a face (like Rosemary’s) or a place, and see what others couldn’t was clearly connected to the Void, to the Outsider himself, like an arcane umbilical cord created by the Schism from which flowed two lives from one, like a fork in a river. Who was to say which river flowed more strongly, and in which direction?
At the heart of it, were they different men? Had four thousand years lording over the Void irrevocably changed the nature of the man who had died on that stone altar?

*Could I love one but not the other?*

If Loki could see the storm of my thoughts, he gave no outward sign. His face was barren. He pointed towards the rocks that wrapped around the island to our left. “We should follow the rocks,” he said in a small voice, for Addermire was a place where one felt safer speaking in hushed tones. A formidable barrier, and yet the rocky cliffs looked passable in spots.

If there were guards watching the perimeter, we did not see them. Perhaps they felt Addermire’s natural fortifications would deter any trespassers. Reaching the rocks meant navigating past the main entrance, a grand causeway that spilled around a derelict water fountain, dead fish floating among filth. The plaza’s stones were covered in dead leaves that rustled in the wind, scattered over abandoned luggage.

The character of the place was that of stark loneliness, shrouded in mystery, like dropping a stone into a dark well and finding only silence in return. What do the shadows hide and how deep must we go to uncover its secrets?

Signs of neglect were everywhere; the once-grand sanitarium was now a place of death and decay. I vowed to myself, when this was all over, to restore Addermire to its highest potential, a place of light and healing, to give the chief alchemist, Hypatia, all that she needed and more. Lucia Pastor believed her friend was here, perhaps imprisoned if the rumors about the Duke were true (that he was hoarding her Solution for himself and his cronies), and so I prayed for all our sakes that I would find the alchemist alive and well. The people of Serkonos needed the good doctor, not just to fight the Bloodfly Fever, but to be on their side, an advocate for the poor and the suffering.

We jumped the stone balustrade and scrambled over the rocks, keeping low. The rocky cliff was buffeted by crashing waves, spraying mist on our faces as we followed the rocks as far as we could, using magic wherever too precarious to trust our footing alone. The walls were high and forbidding with no point of access but for a single round window, opened to the elements. A garbage chute, I realized, as I stepped gingerly over the putrid refuse spattering the rocks. It was too far to reach without magic and so I knew it was most likely not guarded. Hand in hand, Loki *Blinked* us through into the cool darkness within.

It reeked of fish. Several small sharks were hanging upside down, oozing blood, fish hooks driven through their tails; below, the metal-grated floor was slippery. If Loki paled, I did not see it, though I knew such slaughter of marine creatures disturbed him (and yet he’d eaten Eileen’s fish stew, so perhaps it was more about how we treated what we ate, rather than total aversion).

I moved towards the light and found a large kitchen beyond. Two chefs occupied the space, preparing a late dinner from the looks of it. We snuck past them into a hallway. Dark. Quiet. I felt on edge. Tongues of decaying wallpaper drooped over dusty credenzas, their drawer doors lopsided or missing entirely. Old chairs were stacked in a corner alongside a table with broken legs. The floor was so badly deteriorated, ceramic tiles were little more than piles of rubble between stretches of rat poop and dead leaves.

I tried to imagine the place in its heyday and instead found myself envisioning what horrid changes were happening *back home*, in Dunwall. Would this be my Tower? Left to rot in loneliness and despair as Delilah’s darkness spread over the city?

Loki saw my frown and moved ahead of me, peering through the glass door at the end of the hallway as if he wanted to be the shield between me and whatever darkness lay beyond. *Something*
dark is here. Something that feeds on blood and fear. I snuck up behind him to look over his shoulder.

“Dining area,” I whispered. “I count three guards.” Eating at a table; they’d be easy to slip past.

“No, four.”

He pushed me against the wall, deeper into the shadows as a guard came past out of nowhere, patrolling the outer rim of the dining area apparently. I sucked in a surprised gasp, more from feeling Loki’s weight against me. We held our breath, but the guard did not mind the glass door.

Instead he meandered near a piano, restlessly hitting a few keys before moving on. He was armed with a sword, and his uniform was Grand Guard. That the Duke’s men were here was oddly reassuring. If our theory was correct, that the Duke was using the Crown Killer, orchestrating the murders to implicate my father and I as an excuse for the coup, it made sense why his men would be here, guarding their secret.

“The piano,” I whispered, and Loki nodded.

I softly opened the glass door lest it creak too loudly, and we slithered through. Loki’s Blink did the rest. There wasn’t much time to find our next position. Crouched beneath the piano, I caught a glimpse of the eating guards, their voices bored, then blurred, the sounds of silverware and glass like a faraway chime, then it was gone, and we were at the other end of the dining hall, silent and dark, hugging a low wall with the cold, blue vestige of Loki’s magic fading beneath the warmth of his hand. He kept me close, shielded with a strong arm across my back as we crouched together, peering into the next room.

A main hallway of sorts. I heard the distinctive crackle of a Wall of Light, more voices echoing, dogs barking, and the disturbing flutter of bloodfly wings; the creatures were caught in a glass cage like a museum exhibit, as if Addermire was proud of the research supposedly going on inside its walls. But how? All this decay, all these guards; how could a doctor expect to work in these conditions? It seemed to me the doctor no longer had patients, for it felt like we were trespassing a prison, not a hospital.

An elevator screeched.

Loki and I scurried out of sight, finding cover beneath a stairwell crowded with broken furniture and rolls of torn carpet. A pair of glass doors shed pale light, a courtyard beyond. The bell dinged and a guard exited the elevator, his footsteps receding. I looked up. The windows above the glass door stretched several floors, an incredible view for those who fancied the stairs instead of the elevator.

We need neither.

Loki caught my look. Our eyes were never far from each other, our stealthy passage requiring some skill in working together without words; moving together, moving silently.

He nodded, glancing up. The chandeliers. Large enough to take our weight, if we moved fast. He raised his eyebrows. How far up? I held up four fingers. We needed to find Hypatia, and that meant finding her office for clues. A place like this, I expected it’d be near the top, for she was the chief alchemist.

He nodded again, his bearing at once calm and watchful.

I liked that he worked well under pressure, that I could trust him. He wasn’t panicking as both of us picked up what sounded like several guards near the Wall of Light, dividing us from the main
entryway beyond. We were surrounded by enemies with only the tools of shadow and silence to mask our presence, and yet Loki was as cool as a cucumber.

I unclipped my crossbow, just in case; we’d have to climb the chandeliers blind. I mouthed ‘go’ and Loki Blinked us up, using the broken railing along the wrapping stairwell as a half-way point. One more Blink. Higher up, I caught my breath as we spotted two guards playing dice on the stairs, but their eyes were lowered, distracted. Up, I silently urged with my eyes.

Loki Blinked us twice more. Light poured from cathedral-like windows, cloudy with age. That incredible view was apparently hard to view. The chandelier gently rocked, bereft of our weight, as we took up a silent crouch behind the elevator shaft, hearing voices. Loki held up two fingers; two guards.

They were conversing, but we’d caught the tail end of their conversation; they were parting, and swiftly. “…just make sure she stays where we want her. Hypatia never leaves Addermire. Remember that.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard said, sounding miffed. A door opened, letting in wind and the scent of rain. He leaves, the other remains. A red uniform. Snatches of sound, like popping grapes into his mouth as we move closer. His back is turned. The sign beside the door indicated we’d found the right place. Hypatia’s Office.

I signaled at Loki. I got this. I stepped out, just far enough to snag my arcane tether behind the guard and traverse. I choked him out, and in those few seconds I watched Loki cross to the larger glass door, checking for the other guard lest he return or be too close. He shook his head at me as the guard sagged heavily in my arms, the fight drained out of him, a vine of grapes clutched in his hand. Loki helped me drag his body into a dark corner where he’d be difficult to spot from the elevator.

Together, then, we entered Hypatia’s office, but Loki stayed by the door to keep watch, his body flattened against the wall, his head turned. The office looked clean and structurally sound; a miracle, considering what we’d seen thus far.

I looped around a large desk, noticing the doctor’s prestigious awards and proud credentials on the wall, behind glass. It caught my eye, for it spoke of her genius and compassion; meeting her would be an honor. Few women held such occupations at the highest levels.

‘The Grand Medal of Merit is awarded by His Eminence the Duke of Serkonos, Theodanis Abele, to Alexandria Hypatia for her sustained and ingenious contributions to the field of Natural Philosophy and its medical applications, on the 12th Day of the Month of Earth, 1847.’

‘By Decree of the Academy of Natural Philosophy / Ratified by the Convocation of Etiology / Stamped with the Approval of the Alchemical Council and Validated by the Chamber of Smoke and Iron: Alexandria Hypatia has Successfully Completed All Requirements, including the Trials of Mineralogy and the Four Forgotten Scrutinies / Which Hereby Confers Upon Her the Title of DOCTOR of MEDICINE; issued in Dunwall, 8th Day of the Month of Seeds, 1838.’

“What’s wrong?” Loki asked, noticing my long stare at what I silently read.

“No, just…” I looked up at him in confusion. “Somehow the pieces don’t fit. How does a doctor of such repute get dragged into the Duke’s schemes? If the Crown Killer really is her patient, as I suspect, why didn’t she try to stop him? All doctors pledge to do no harm.”

How could she choose the Duke—politics—over her professional vows? A profession she clearly
cared about?

I shook my head. “I need to find her patient records.” Better yet, find her.

I rifled through her desk, but I only found two letters of interest, and a key.

Loki kept a keen eye through the glass door, but glanced at me several times as I skimmed the letters. “What do they say?” he asked.

I moved closer to him so we could keep our voices down.

“One’s from a journalist, months ago. Wren Mancini from the Karnaca Gazette, demanding updates on the doctor’s progress for a cure, but this one…this one is interesting.”

I poked the letter, showing him the official seal. “It’s from the Duke himself, see?”

I looked up into his eyes, finding them intensely focused on my face; it was distracting, the green of his eyes so brilliant and…

I refocused with difficulty, choosing to read the letter out loud as I slowly paced the office back and forth. Each exclamation I spoke with a sarcastic twist. It was hard not to. The Duke was an utter buffoon.

“My marvelous Alexandria Hypatia! Or do those closest to you call you Alex? How valuable you are to me! To Serkonos! What would we do without one of our most prominent Natural Philosophers? It keeps me awake at night, worrying for your safety. What if some incurable wretch attacks you? Or what if exposure to your own work, those hideous maladies, proves fatal to you? Where would we be then? Who would we turn to? So you see, that is why I have arranged for the Grand Guard to keep an eye on you in Addermire. For now, indulge me. As your Duke, I recognize your value, and I am committed to keeping you safe. Most warmly, Luca.”

I stopped pacing, and Loki and I shared a look. “Well, that sounds terribly ominous,” I muttered.

“What kind of man is the Duke?” Loki asked.

“Arrogant. Ambitious. He doesn’t do anything from the kindness of his heart.” I let the letter fall and sighed heavily. “The rumor must be true. The Duke’s keeping Hypatia here, under guard, but why?” I lifted the key. “What do you suppose this opens?”

I searched Loki’s face, in case he was ‘seeing’ anything, but he grimly shook his head.

I turned around, reeling for answers, then noticed the audiogram machine on a credenza beneath the window. I hit play, lowering the volume nob. It was the doctor’s voice.

“The blackouts are worse, and my dreams have taken a turn toward the disturbing. Even rest alludes me.”

Her voice trembled. How could this be the same doctor we’d heard in the grand apartment, so full of confidence and hope? I glanced sharply at Loki, a strange look crossing his face like a shadow.

“The Duke seemed overly protective at first, but increasingly I’ve become a prisoner in my own lab. The soldiers stationed here leave me alone, but even then I feel like I’m being watched—”

Loki violently flung the glass door open, running out into the hallway and down the stairs.

I ran after him, my heart pounding, unable to think what or who, just knowing I needed to catch up.
Damn, he was fast. It was like chasing the wind.

“It’s her!” Loki shouted, uncaring who might overhear him, recklessly so, as he leapt off the stairs and crashed against a sealed door, shaking it violently, the glass rattling loudly. Above the door it read ‘Recuperation Room’, and within I saw a thick morass of buzzing bloodflies, thousands of them. Hordes! If Addermire had a black heart, this was it.

I grabbed his shoulder, forcing him out of the way. “Move, Loki! Let me try the key.” My hand trembled. “Who did you see?”

The key clicked in place. It was right; all of this was right. We were meant to go this way, like the shadows were pulling us in. I glanced up at him, frightened by the pallor of his face and the confusion in his eyes. Who did you see?

“Rosemary. I saw her hair, blonde curls—” he choked, unable to say more. He reached with his hand as if he still saw the curls, but at the edge of his vision.

“How can that be?” For how can she escape through a locked door?

“I don’t know.”

A terrible grinding noise greeted the clicking of the lock as the key slowly turned. I wasn’t sure if I had turned it.

I glanced behind us, but it appeared our desperate chase down the stairwell had passed unnoticed. Still, it was dangerous to linger… We quickly slipped inside and locked the door behind us, our ragged breath simultaneously lost in the feral buzzing.

The infestation was the worst I had ever seen.

Traversing the room would be a terrible risk, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that we had to, that we were being led in this direction—but led by whom? The Outsider? Rosemary? Could she do such a thing?

We hovered at the edge of the buzzing nests, watching, calculating… The bloodflies were a greater threat than any guard we had seen thus far. “I have incendiary bolts, but not enough,” I said. Loki glanced down, watching me swap out the sleep darts, trading green for blue. Each incendiary bolt held a trace of whale oil and could light a man in a consuming blaze within seconds, but the fire itself would not spread far from the target. It was not a pleasant way to die.

I raised my crossbow, but Loki put a hand on my arm, stopping me. He looked through the haze of bloodflies, his green eyes flickering. “Wait. I see her,” he whispered, “dancing with the bloodflies, at the edge…”

But when I looked, I did not see.

Nests sprouted from the ceiling, on the floor, attached to walls, swarming with bloodflies that moved like a black wind. I saw medical beds beneath the gory slime, oozing with blood and maggots, webbed with nest material, and there, too, dead bodies, their chest cavities cradling glossy bloodfly eggs.

Some corpses were charred as if smoke and fire had vainly been applied to root out the infestation. Loki crouched next to one such corpse, trailing a finger over its charred bones to stir the ashes. He said, “I can try something.”
“But what about Rosemary? The Outsider said you would see her!” I pointed vaguely. “Was that her? Shouldn’t we go that way?”

He looked at me with a sideways glance. “We’re exactly where we need to be.”

He drew strange symbols in the ash, like it was sand on a beach though the ash was thin and whispery in comparison, his touch causing particles to float in the air, illuminated by blue fire that drifted up like smoke from his fingertips. In that blue heat, the bloodflies closest to us began to burn, their nests disintegrating into ash as the arcane fire grew and expanded, wrapping around the large room in a blaze.

The fire burned quickly, and soon it was I lifted my hand, particles of ash falling like feathery rain against my palm. I walked hesitantly to the charred nest before me, and within I found a rune, the whalebone inscribed with dark inscriptions I could not decipher, and yet the sight of them held deep meaning. *I’m yours*, it said.

I felt Loki at my shoulder. Despite the fire, the rune was cold to the touch, and wet, as though the salty film of the Ocean still clung to its surface. I cradled the rune in one hand, the other tracing fingertips against the rough edges of the markings, almost reverently. Why was this here? Where had it come from?

Loki pressed his hand over mine, tracing the symbols inscribed beneath. Its true meaning was his to reveal. He whispered, “In all chaos, there is a Hungry Cosmos / In all disorder, a secret order / In all Oceans, a song / For life has a melody, a rhythm of notes which becomes your existence once played in harmony with Satakal’s plan.”

It left me breathless. I looked up at him, startled to find a faint smile on his lips. He softly asked, “Did the Outsider not tell you what these are for?”

“It’s a rune,” I said, swallowing hard. “To strengthen my connection to the Void.”

“It’s more than that.”

_Satakal’s plan._ I saw destiny in his eyes. He wanted me to believe, like him.

I tucked the rune inside my coat.

Suddenly, we heard an eerie howling noise, our eyes snapping across the charred wasteland of nest and bloodfly husks to a door in the distance. It sounded inhuman.

Then a second noise; a scream. A _girl_ screaming. I knew that voice. Rosemary! I lunged towards the door, but Loki grabbed my arm in a painful grip, and when I spun towards him, his face was a mask of fear and dread.

“Go quietly,” he hissed, “We must use the shadows, Emily.”

“Right. R-right, of course,” I stammered, feeling foolish. I felt sick. _What was I thinking, to just barge in there? Father would never have made such an amateur move._ What if—

“It’s okay,” I heard Loki gently say, as if from a distance. “She has put a spell on you. You can’t help but want to protect her.”

“No,” I said, pretending not to hear. I couldn’t hear. _She needs me_, I thought. _She’s in danger._ The screams had stopped, but I heard shrilly echoes in my ear. “Come on! I know what I’m doing.”
We hurried, silent-footed, to the door and slipped into the dark chamber beyond.

It was a two-story chamber, and we were on the uppermost level. It gave me a safe feeling, as though we could peer over the edge and not be seen. *Looking down into that dark well; how far would the pebble drop?* We crept to the wooden bannister, our hands clutched to the posts, our noses wedged between the narrow spaces, our gazes fixed below.

It was a laboratory of death. The stench was nauseating. I imagined the tiled floors had once been white, but now they were streaked with all manner of blood and filth.

An iron cage hung from the ceiling in the middle of the chamber, and within Rosemary was crammed with her knees drawn up tight. She was dressed in rags, and her hair was dirty and tangled, her pale skin smeared with dirt. She was crying.

I couldn’t help it. I broke our silence, shooting to my feet. Loki was too slow. I felt him exhale violently, pulling me towards him as I shrieked, “*Rosemary?!*”

She heard me. Perhaps all of Addermire did.

The cage tossed back and forth as she tried to stand up, but it was too low and she could only bend at the waist, her head twisting towards me at an awkward angle. Through the iron bars, I saw her blue eyes shining, rabid with fear. She screamed, “Oh, gods, Emily! Run!”

It was then I saw the shadow by the counter, a woman turning towards the commotion. Her face was dark, *so dark,* and in that pit her eyes glowed yellow, fierce yellow, feral with blood lust.

A grin rose on her face as those eyes drifted up to meet mine far above her. Her sharp teeth were smeared with blood, and that face. *That face!* “Doctor Hypatia?” I breathed, the shock of it nearly buckling my knees. Loki kept a firm grip on my arm.

She cocked her head at me and cackled. “Sorry, Empress. The good doctor’s not home. She’s gone for the day.” She laughed harder. “It’s just Grim Alex keeping the lights on, now.”

Chapter End Notes

Part of the made-up rune 'translation' I adapted from one of my favorite lines from *Battlestar Galatica* (the remake): "Life has a melody, Gaius. A rhythm of notes which become your existence once played in harmony with God’s plan.”
“You kidnapped Rosemary?!” I gripped the railing, my knuckles turning white.

“I did, I did, and what a pretty bird she makes!” Grim Alex swung the cage, laughing, as Rosemary tumbled inside, clutching the iron bars, whimpering and crying.

Fear raced through my veins. “You snuck aboard the Dreadful Wale?”

Grim Alex grinned. “And almost ate the pregnant lady, but your pretty bird told me she would come quietly if I didn’t—so I agreed. ‘Don’t make a mess,’ Delilah said.”

She laughed again. I stared at the hideous gleam in her eyes, at the stoop of her shoulders, the hunch of her back; even her fingers had claws. Her laugh was throaty, half-human, half-beast, gurgling as though she had blood caught in her throat.

All at once, she stopped laughing.

“Come down from there.”

Her voice was quiet yet playful, with a razor bite beneath.

I didn’t move. “What do you want with her?” The question was cold.

“Mhm, mhmm, hmmm,” she moan-laughed with her lips pursed in amusement. In her yellow eyes, I saw a reflection of all the blood she had spilled. She’d painted a red path through Karnaca and Dunwall for months. But unlike her victims, Rosemary’s alive, I thought, surely for a purpose?

I felt Loki at my shoulder, hovering like a silent shadow. He had released the painful grip on my arm, but I felt his breath against my ear. “Keep her talking,” he whispered.

“Why have you kidnapped her?” I demanded from my second-story perch, grateful for the distance between us. Those claws have torn grown men apart.

Grim Alex made a tsk, tsk, tsk sound. She smiled up at me. “Talking instead of running? You should have listened to the pretty bird.” She licked her lips with a bloodied tongue. “All this excitement makes me hungry, and I need meat. Sweet meat.”

Rosemary cried in a ragged breath, “Go, Emily! Just go! She’s taken Sokolov to Jindosh—at his mansion. You don’t need to stay any longer. Please, go!”

I held on to her every word. Sokolov. Jindosh. But even then they seemed to slip through my fingers. I had to save Rosemary! Why wasn’t she fighting back? Was Grim Alex immune to her Glamour?

Grim Alex made a mockery of Rosemary’s voice. She whined in a high-pitched shriek, “Go, just go!” Her face was restless, almost twitching, but when she looked up at me, she said in a darker, quieter tone, “Yes, go, Empress. Go and wait for me at the grand inventor’s madhouse. After all,
we’ll all be there soon. The doctor needs to make a house call.”

She laughed again, in fits, almost choking in glee. There was a darkness over her. *A creature of the pit, so dark, so deep.* The pieces began to click together.

“She’s taking Rosemary to Jindosh,” I whispered beneath my breath. *But why?*

Grim Alex swung open the iron cage and yanked Rosemary out by the hair. Rosemary screamed, falling to her knees as Grim Alex dragged her by the hair across the bloody, filthy floor like a ragdoll. *Fight back, Rosemary! Why wouldn’t she—*

I saw a man in the periphery, slinking closer behind the Crown Killer’s back. He held a syringe in his hand, ready to strike. *What the?*

*Keep her talking,* Loki had said. Where was he? I realized Loki had moved. I was alone at the railing.

“What does Jindosh want with Rosemary?” I demanded, keeping my voice level and stern.

“Still talking?” Grim Alex observed as if this was a source of delicious amusement. She looked at Rosemary, then, as she tied a rope around Rosemary’s hands. “I’m not used to them talking, only screaming.”

Rosemary just whimpered in reply, her pale face streaked with tears. Grim Alex turned her feral, yellow eyes on me and said, “If only you’d talked instead of ran after Delilah introduced herself to you, and so kindly. Do you not love your own family? Do you not see how much you are like her? You could be at the Tower right now, sipping wine and dining on Overseer flesh. Huhuhehe...” Her disturbing laughter fell quiet. “Your aunt loves you, child.” She looked at Rosemary. “Loves you both. Delilah ordered me to kidnap you, little witch, to take you to see her dear friend Jindosh. ’Maybe his marvelous machine will work,’ she says. Maybe he can drive the evil witch from your head. Won’t that be a trick?!”

Grim Alex grinned at me, her teeth wet with blood. “Your auntie just wants her daughter back. Can you blame her?”

*His machine...* I thought of the Duke’s brother, Cosimo the Fool, and wondered. Was it possible? Could the grand inventor’s electrotherapy somehow separate the two witches—could somehow *free* Rosemary?

“You lie,” I spat. “Delilah would never take such risks, even for her own daughter. On the *Jessamine*—”

“The *Jessamine* sank, and how bittersweet it was for Delilah. She knew it meant her daughter lived, that she had to try and get her back.”

Hope warred with horror as I stared down at the Crown Killer. The man with the syringe was poised at her back, the needle inches from her exposed neck…

Grim Alex turned as though swatting a fly, pushing the man and his syringe away as though he was merely a nuisance. Her hand had moved so fast, and with such strength I heard his bones break in a sickening crunch as he flew back and crashed against the counter.

“Oh, Vasco, my love,” she purred over his panting screams. “How I’ve longed to take you apart, to roll in the mess.” She dove to a crouch, grabbing him by the face and so roughly I thought she might snap his neck. “How I yearn to rut against your slippery skull, to drive myself against your red
She rubbed herself against his leg as he trembled beneath her. “Alexandria,” he cried in a desperate plea.

“My cold, dry sister is sleeping; what ignorant bliss, and how sad she will be to find you like this, broken…” She petted his brow, cooing softly. She’ll kill him, I thought.

But Vasco was still breathing as she pulled away and snatched Rosemary by the hair. “Alas, I must go. Goodbye, my sweet Vasco.” Her eyes shot towards me. “Don’t take too long, Empress. Jindosh and I will be waiting, and I’m very, very hungry.”

“‘Come, little witch,’” Grim Alex said. “We have a boat to catch.”

She yanked Rosemary to her feet and threw her over her hunched back, and with that the Crown Killer executed a mighty leap, so inhuman I wondered if she had the Mark, for surely no one could move as she did—but of magic I saw no trace. No black whispers, no chilling cold. How? Was it a bonecharm? Had the good doctor been corrupted by some powerful talisman from the Void?

*Did the Outsider do this to her?* The thought terrified me.

Loki appeared beneath her, grabbing at her ankles as she leapt. Yes, stop her Loki! I used *Far Reach* to chase them, swooping down from above, but as I slid across the tiles, blood slippery beneath my boots, I found Loki around the corner, alone, bending over his knees and breathing hard.

“She went through the window. They’re gone,” Loki said, raggedly. “I tried. Satakal, I tried.”

It was then I saw a drawing on the ground, painted in the blood and the filth, but the arcane markings were cut into pieces as though the Crown Killer had torn them away at her passing. When I looked up, I saw the claw mark she had left behind on his face, a bleeding red gash across his cheek, running vertical to the eye. I gasped, terrified by how close the Crown Killer had come to blinding him.

“A trapping spell… I couldn’t finish it in time,” he said, as if I still cared about the damn drawing on the ground. I couldn’t stand that he’d been hurt.

“Shut up and come here,” I said in a shaking voice. I led him to one of the utility sinks and ran the water. As he washed the blood and filth from his hands, I yanked the handkerchief from my face and reached into my coat for an elixir. I poured it over the handkerchief and dabbed the gash on his face, staunching the blood flow. It was a nasty cut.

“Hold this,” I said.

He held the handkerchief against his face, watching as I hurried to the window. If there was a boat, I did not see it. The Watchtower was in operation, I saw, and guards were milling about by the docks, totally unconcerned. They had seen nothing of the Crown Killer’s escape with Rosemary.

I came back to him. “You’re right, they’re gone. The guards didn’t see a damn thing.”

“We know where they went.”

I scowled. “Jindosh. Delilah’s ‘dear friend,’ the bastard.”
Loki turned off the faucet, standing very still. I touched the handkerchief. Gently, I said, “Let me see.”

He winced as I took the handkerchief away, our fingers lightly touching. “It’s not too deep,” I said, inspecting the wound. Sokolov’s Elixir had sealed it nicely. “I don’t think it will scar.”

His eyes went distant, looking through me. “How can something move that quick, Emily? One moment, I had her around the ankle, the next, she was lashed around me. Was that thing really Doctor Hypatia?”

“Yes,” came a croaking reply.

Loki and I peered through the gap in the wall at the man slumped against at the counter. Pain made his face pale and sweaty. I’d forgotten about him, the poor man. I took another elixir from my coat and poured it into his mouth.

He looked up at me with grateful eyes. “I can’t feel my legs,” he said.

She broke his back, I thought, pity flooding my heart. So many victims of the Crown Killer… “Who are you?” I asked.

He struggled to speak, his voice raspy and pain-laced. “My name is Doctor Vasco Morelli. I’m Doctor Hypatia’s assistant, and her friend. What has happened to her is not her fault. Please, you must help her.”

“What do you mean it’s not her fault? Tell us everything.”

“She doesn’t know the monster she has become,” he said, his dark eyes watering with pain and deep emotion. “It’s always there, riding along in her mind. Takes over and puts Alexandria to sleep. The Duke uses her. Sends her out on diabolical assignments.”

“How? How does it take over?”

“The serum.” I saw thick blood leak from the corners of his mouth. “One of her bloodfly experiments gone wrong. She didn’t mean to…” He was fading away. “It’s too late for me, but maybe you can still save her. She’s a good person.”

He loves her, I thought.

“What can we do?” Loki asked, solemn-faced.

Vasco’s dark eyes fell from Loki to the syringe on the ground. Loki picked it up, slowly turning it in his hands.

“The counter-serum,” Vasco said with his dying breath.

Loki felt for the pulse at his neck and shook his head at me. I stared blankly at the dead doctor, feeling foolish—and guilty. Why hadn’t I tried to save him? But it was like my legs had turned to jelly the instant the Crown Killer had dug her fist into Rosemary’s hair. I’d only wanted to keep Rosemary alive, to not make the hostage situation worse. So I’d kept out of it. Let Vasco die. Forgotten about him.

Loki was quiet. The room felt suffocating. Eerie. Countless victims echoed from every surface of the bloody laboratory. I saw other corpses, some with limbs hacked off. Rusty saws, dripping with blood. Pincers. A torturer’s playground.
“We should do it,” Loki said, lifting the syringe. “Save her.”

I stared at him, my mouth falling open.


He frowned. “She didn’t know.”

“How can she not know? After all this time, surrounded by all this, how could she not even suspect?” I glared at him. “She fucking knew.”

“We don’t know that, and it’s a cursed thing to ignore a dying man’s wish. Vasco’s spirit will haunt us if we don’t try.”

“Superstitious nonsense.” I glared at him. “But if you want to talk about ghosts, fine then. Take a walk down the dark alleyways of Dunwall where the Crown Killer’s victims are said to still be screaming and crying every night.”

He sighed. “Let’s at least look around. Find more clues, then decide.”

I’m not changing my mind, I thought angrily. The Crown Killer deserves death.

And I didn’t want to stay. We knew where Sokolov was, and if the Crown Killer was bringing Rosemary to Jindosh’s mansion, then that meant I had a second chance—to kill that evil bitch for good. I’d make the doctor pay for every murder, every gruesome, horrifying murder.

But I stayed for Loki’s sake, for the curiosity I saw in his eyes. So many unanswered questions. We dug through that monster’s lair, and I was sickened by every sight.

She’d nailed fingers to the walls.

Loki searched with me, periodically dabbing the gash on his face with the handkerchief. We found proof of the Duke’s involvement. A letter against a map, pinned by a knife. Each word fueled my rage and shock as I read it out loud—to Loki. So he’d understand why we couldn’t let her live.

The letter was from the Duke, and unlike the pretty words we’d read before, this one rang with truth. Damning truth.

“Dear friend, the dock captain just sent word that he spotted Sokolov. Knows his habits. Says Sokolov buys whale blood by the gallon, to make pigments apparently. See, you seem to share some interests with the old genius, so why don’t you go and invite him over like we said? The sooner, the better. I trust you’ll be able to follow his scent. Keep him safe in Addermire. Don’t hurt him, or he’ll be useless for our plans. If you’re hungry though, the dock captain has served his purpose, and his second in command recently did me a favor. Yours truly, Luca.”

“Still think she deserves mercy?” I put to Loki, but he just gave me a sour look.

He turned away from me, facing an audiogram machine and hit play. I heard the Duke’s arrogant voice pour forth in static tones. “You did well finding Anton Sokolov, my friend. The old man is with Kirin Jindosh, who is prying him apart, secret by secret. With such knowledge, who knows what wonders Jindosh will reveal in future days?! But it’s time for you to come out once again. Time to play. Delilah and I have need of your… special talents. The good doctor’s due for a trip to Dunwall because Ichabod Boyle is next on the list. Make haste and make this one messy. Give the newspapers something to write about, and give the people of the Empire fodder for their
nightmares."

Every discovery was a nail in the coffin. Her coffin. I can’t let her live…

Loki took me by the shoulders. I realized I was trembling in rage. “Okay, no more,” he said. “Don’t look anymore. We’re done here.”

He took the syringe, held it up. “I’ll just destroy it.”

“Wait,” I said, my voice barely audible. He searched my face. “Maybe… maybe you’re right, Loki.”

He gave me an incredulous look, but his face blurred as I stared at the wall behind him where the Crown Killer had arranged her bloody souvenirs. Fingers, mostly. And hunks of flesh I couldn’t identify. But hair, too. Hair twined in colorful ribbons. Blonde hair. “Is the Crown Killer truly any different than Rosemary? Than my father?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s two different people inside their heads. The dark and the light. I want to save my father. I want to save Rosemary. How can I not save the doctor when it’s this easy?” I glanced at the syringe in his hand. If only there was a magical injection for my father; then he wouldn’t have to be locked away in the Void.

I took a deep breath. “We’ll administer the counter-serum when we find her again, at Jindosh’s mansion.”

Loki capped the syringe and tucked it safely away into his coat, and then took both his hands and cupped my face.

“You would do that?” he whispered. I couldn’t answer. Too much hate and rage simmered beneath the surface, but I loved my father, and I loved Rosemary, and I couldn’t get the idea out of my head that if I abandoned the good doctor, if I killed her in payment for the Crown Killer’s many sins, then I was also abandoning my father to Corvo the Black, and abandoning Rosemary to the hateful witch inside of her.

Loki kissed my forehead and pressed a hand behind my head, pushing me to his chest. I hugged him.

“I want to get out of here,” I said.

He gently pulled us apart and looked down at me with a wry smile. “Did you forget?”

I pouted. No.

“The Outsider is waiting for us,” he said.

Loki led the way, for he said he saw the shrine’s location burning brightly in his eyes. We retraced our steps, back to Hypatia’s office, but at the glass doors, we went outside and quickly dispatched the single guard, tucking his unconscious body behind broken patio furniture.

We were high up and the winds howled. The evening sky stretched stormy hues of purple and blue and gray across the horizon. This part of Addermire had once been grand, fit for aristocrats and others with the coin to pay for special treatment. On this level, it was a spa of sorts, a relaxation resort for aristocrats with troubled minds and ailments that went beyond the physical, to the mental.
We found beautiful rooms—still grand in their sad, neglected way. Most of them were bedrooms with grand views of the bay. It must have been peaceful, to keep the doors open and let in the wind and the sunshine, to hear the crashing waves against the rocks far below.

We were walking down a long hallway, peeking into rooms, when Loki stopped before a closed door. “He’s in here,” he said in a hushed whisper.

I glanced into his green eyes, troubled by his sudden reluctance. I’d not forgotten his reaction when he’d first seen the Outsider’s black eyes. The terror. I stepped in front of him and slowly opened the door, and there he was, those black eyes.

The Outsider was leaning against his own shrine, the jagged wood framing his body like a throne. He had his arms crossed and his pale face looked bored. “Took you long enough,” he snapped.

But his black eyes jumped from my face to Loki’s with an altogether different expression. “My, my. Looks different from the outside.”

He cocked his head, scrutinizing Loki as if he was a piece of art. Loki touched the red gash on his face, almost self-consciously.

“Gives you a nice edge,” the Outsider decided at length. “A roughened, sexy look, don’t you think, my dear?” He winked at me. “And the stubble!” The Outsider rubbed a hand across his own cheek. “Alas, I can never grow a beard. Always baby-bottom smooth.”

I scowled. “Is this the wisdom you wanted to convey? What do you want, Outsider? The Crown Killer is Doctor Alexandria Hypatia, though I’m guessing you already knew that. Kirin Jindosh is our next step, and unless you have mind-blowing insight about that, I suggest you back the fuck off—”

“Emily…” Loki started, but Outsider just smiled again.

“She’s not one for games,” he said to Loki, then facing me, he cocked his head in fascination and said, “Empress, your choices astound me. You’ve chosen to save the good doctor—in good time—but not for her sake. No, not hers. For his. Your father’s. I almost let Corvo see that, for it was your love for him that put you on that path, but… no, he’s not… he’s not ready to be a part of the world again. He’s quite shut himself in. Your father’s a very private man.”

I froze at mention of my father.

“I’ll not ask to see him, I told myself. I was in no mood for it, my heart wracked by the shock and horror of what I’d seen in that bloody laboratory.

The Outsider moved away from the shrine, pacing back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back. “Yes, a very interesting choice, Emily. The Crown Killer’s story is one of the few I wait for, holding it in my mouth to savor the taste.”

I noticed Loki staring at the Outsider, himself a bit fascinated by what he saw.

It was disconcerting. I moved away and took a deep breath. The little room had three doors: one to the hallway, left open behind Loki and I, and a second door, closed, leading to an adjacent bedroom perhaps (for the room we were in seemed more like an aristocrat’s waiting room, with no bed in sight), and a final door that led outside. It was in front of that door the Outsider stood, his ghostly outline silhouetted by the darkening sky.

He said, turning his back to us to gaze outside, “I so enjoy watching history warp as words pass from
the lips of one to the ears of another. Imperfectly formed, half understood, poorly remembered. In the years to come, the story of the Crown Killer will be twisted and bent, hammered like soft metal. By some accounts, a monster that had to be put down. By others, a victim of treachery, preserved, because in the end you found another way, Empress.” He turned his head to look over his shoulder. “That little syringe in your pocket, Loki. It holds salvation, doesn’t it?”

Loki frowned.

“Salvation’s too strong a word,” I said. “A second chance, maybe. Hypatia could still betray me—and if she does, I’ll kill her then.”

But for now I just wanted her to be the good doctor, to help the people of Karnaca. Serkonos needed her medical expertise more than it needed her rotting in a prison cell—or a grave.

The Outsider turned his black eyes on me, a wry smile painting his lips. “Indeed. But you’ll always remember the truth, won’t you, Emily?”

I glared at the Outsider.

In the heavy silence, Loki hesitantly asked, looking between us, “What truth?”

The Outsider bowed in my direction with a slight nod of the head, as if he was ceding this answer to me, his black eyes intensely interested in what I had to say.

And I did. I answered.

But I couldn’t meet the Outsider’s eyes, or even Loki’s. I stared bleakly out the opened door, at the sky. “That there’s a killer in all of us, Loki. There’s a killer in all of us.”
Part 6: Chapter 59

The Outsider leaned back against the shrine and crossed his arms. His black eyes swallowed the room, his ghostly face watching with interest, almost incapable of deciding which of us he wanted to look at the most.

Loki was at the opened door, leaning against the frame on one shoulder with his arms crossed, his posture not so different. They were like twins. The wind ruffled his black hair, and in the dying light, the red gash on his face looked stark against his pale skin.

I stood between them. The room felt charged, ripe with electricity. A storm was gathering over Addermire.

"Rosemary has put a spell over Emily," Loki broached, concern writ large in his green eyes—these being directed, with no little accusation towards the Outsider. "Why haven’t you done anything?"

The Outsider’s lips twitched. “I can’t. Not now, as I am.” He shrugged, glancing at me. “Besides, it has little ill effect. The spell but gives her a great desire to protect Rosemary, to love her like family.”

“She is my family,” I snapped, clenching the hilt of my sword. “We’re cousins.”

“You see?” the Outsider said, glancing at Loki with an amused snort. “Fiercely protective.”

Loki frowned. “It’s not a joke. A witch’s spell is hardly trifling.”

I twisted the signet ring on my finger and glared at the floor. It’s not a spell, I thought. How can I not love Rosemary? She is my best friend and has been for a long time. I lifted my eyes to find the Outsider watching me. He said, turning his head towards Loki as if speaking directly to him, but his black eyes remained on me, unable to look away, “The more she loves, the more she forgets what danger resides in Rosemary’s eyes; the witch that patiently watches from within… watches—and waits.”

“Waits for what?” Loki asked sharply.

“To strike. To have her revenge. She’s waited a long time.” The Outsider tilted his head at me like a curious bird inspecting a choice morsel. “Emily?”

He was calling me like I wasn’t listening, like my attention had scattered with the wind. Maybe it had. Maybe all this talk about Rosemary was making my stomach clench, my throat tight. I glared
at him and found I had not removed my hand from the hilt of my sword. It felt hot in my palm.

“What do you want?” I asked in little more than a whisper.

He pushed away from the shrine. His hand came out, very gently, towards my cheek, but I moved back a little, just out of reach. Not that he can touch me, I thought. After the Schism, the Outsider had become untouchable, his dark outline silhouetted by a ghostly blue luminescence that clung to him, as if the Void would not yield its chilly embrace. His soul was a prisoner in the Ritual Hold, the center of the Void; his name stolen.

By pulling away, I had hurt him. I saw it before he masked his emotions, reverting to that eerie calm with the barest hint of mischief around the corners of his mouth. But I saw it. Saw what his black eyes shadowed. What he hid behind his walls. A deep, stark loneliness. Why now? Why here? Why must I see what breaks my heart?

Why, when I have tried so hard to close off my heart after the Schism when I’d looked into his black eyes and found I could breathe again, that his seductive power had been broken?

I’d wanted to break down his walls, and now seeing this… He’s fit for a place like this, I thought. Addermire’s haunting beauty painted a lonely picture, one of long neglect.

“Tell us,” Loki suddenly said.

I glanced at him, startled out of my reverie, confused by the look on his face as he glared at the Outsider.

“Tell us what?” I asked, looking back and forth between them. There was a tension, there.

“He knows,” Loki simply said, unfolding his arms and coming to stand beside me. He tapped his temple. “You were too long in my skull, Outsider. I saw. Addermire holds a secret far darker than the Crown Killer—”

“Darker?” I asked.

“About Rosemary,” Loki said, his eyes accusing and disdainful. “Why keep such a secret unless it is to do harm? Tell us, Outsider. Tell us who the other witch is.”

The Outsider gave a faint smile. “Perceptive, Loki, but I’m not surprised. Your bones were sculpted from the salt of the Deep, and whalesong echoes in your blood. One day, you will see farther than me, farther than I ever could.”

My head spun. “Hold on! Are you saying… but you told me you didn’t know.” I looked at the Outsider in hurt and confusion. “You told me that you couldn’t see Rosemary’s secret, that you couldn’t bloody see anything like you once did!”

“He lied,” Loki said.

“No, not a lie. I didn’t know… at the time.”

“But now you do?!” I was practically shouting at the Outsider. “Well, great! Just perfect! When were you going to tell me?”

“I’m telling you now,” he said, glancing at Loki with irritation. “I had a dream, Emily. That is partly how the whales speak to me. They told me Rosemary’s secret.”

I hissed, “Then tell me, if you care so much. The secret of the two-faced witch has plagued me for
too long.”

The Outsider stepped forward, his expression no less fierce. “Yes, it’s quite the secret, isn’t it? Not one I’m inclined to reveal without something given in return.”

My jaw dropped.

“Satakal,” Loki swore.

I said, very quietly, almost too angry to speak, “Are we not allies? Why would you not give this information freely?”

The Outsider gave me a tight, cold look that I could only translate as honesty. Brutal honesty. The kind that gave no illusions about a darker personality beneath, the kind that wanted. That craved. A man who had been left too long in the dark and, now, wanted to have what had long been denied to him.

“It’s jealousy, you see.” His black eyes slid towards Loki. “I’ve tasted freedom in Loki’s eyes. His life is his own, and as much as I enjoy tagging along, this fact remains.” His voice became very intense. “He is a very real part of this world and I’m not. He can touch it and be touched.”

I froze as something altogether ravenous churned in the black abyss of his eyes. Loki saw it, too. The tip of his ears turned slightly pink. Alarm bells began to ring in my head.

I said, trying to sound calm, but my voice wavered ever so slightly, “What are you suggesting?”

The Outsider’s voice became hoarse. “I like to watch.”

Thunder rumbled distantly, and I heard rain beyond the open door hitting the stones.

“Better yet, to feel,” he said in a softer tone. “I’ve since learned my connection to Loki is somewhat—unique. I can feel what he feels.”

“And?” My question came out sharper than I wanted. My heart was hammering in my ears.

But the Outsider didn’t answer. We stood staring at one another. I heard Loki’s voice in my ear, almost from faraway.

“He wants to feel you, Emily.” Then a heavy pause. “Through me.”

There was a deep silence after this, the kind that makes one hear every creak, every sigh as Addermire breathed in the storm; creaking wood, the patter of rain against dry leaves, even the faint nibbling of rats and scratching nails; all were sounds that seemed to only come out when you are trying so desperately to pretend you didn’t just hear what had been spoken out loud so recklessly, poured from the confines of an aching heart.

The Outsider filled the silence with his footsteps. He went to the door that was closed and stopped, looking back at Loki in expectation.

Loki stared blankly for a moment, then went to the door and swung it open.

It was a bedroom. With a bed. A soft bed. A lovely bed. Oh, gods. I stared at the clean, rose-covered blanket as though I was walking into a dream. Or maybe a nightmare. I had entered the room without thinking, and at the bedside I picked up one of the long-stemmed black roses strewn over the pillows. Who had lain these here? I glanced back at the Outsider. He was standing at the
threshold, watching me, and Loki was behind him, his body darkened by the Outsider’s shadow.

I watched Loki step through him, so that for a moment it was as if they were one. Loki’s green eyes swirled with black stars.

Loki shivered, Void-chilled, as he entered the room. He went to a different door and silently looked out; it was open to the elements, and I could hear the rain and the thunder. The little bedroom felt otherworldly, like a piece of Addermire had been carved away and was floating in its own loneliness and despair.

I felt utterly alone with these two men. I stared at Loki’s back for a moment, then dragged my eyes away to look at the Outsider where he waited patiently.

He said, very softly, “Will you do this for me?”

*Will you take my loneliness*, his black eyes asked, *and fill my empty heart?*

But the moment I opened my mouth, he kept going. “Will you do it for Rosemary’s secret?”

The love I felt in my heart dashed to pieces. I felt sick, choked by anger and stung pride. “Why make it a *bargain*?” I spat the word. “Why drag Rosemary into this? Why not—”

I looked away, feeling hurt and angry. *Why cheapen this moment if he really wants…*

I squeezed my eyes shut and just let it out, as foolish as it sounded. “What makes you think I don’t want to feel you, too? That you have to *bribe* me with secrets?”

Loki exhaled a dark chuckle. “Because Rosemary isn’t the only one who has ever put a spell on you.” He glared at the Outsider. “Do you regret *toying* with her? Do you not see she deserves so much better than you?”

The Outsider took this criticism unflinching. After all, it was like watching an inner dialogue, a man battling his demons. “I cannot help what I am,” he said, so softly I strained to hear. “What I have become. What the Void has done to me. Four thousand years is a long time, Loki. Be grateful this burden has passed you.”

Loki paled and looked away, his mouth going very tight.

The Outsider looked at me. “That spell is broken. You know it already. If you… *desire* me, it’s of your own heart.”

“That’s not the point,” I said. “You *lied* to me. Made me believe…”

I numbly returned the black rose to the bed and sat at the edge. The mattress creaked beneath my weight. I stared at my boots, at the faint hint of bloody footprints I’d left on the wooden floors, dragged in from the Crown Killer’s lair.

I said, without looking at either of them, “And I’m not the only one you should be asking.”

*It’s wrong*, I thought, *wrong for the Outsider to use Loki without his consent, as though he were simply a garment to shrug on and off.*

I watched Loki out of the corner of my eye as he picked up a storm-ridden leaf that had drifted too close to the door. He twisted it restlessly in his fingers with the tiniest bit of nervous energy, like he was trying to hold himself back, for my sake. Trying to look calm and composed. *Solemn.*
“His answer is obvious,” the Outsider said with a smirk that twisted his lips.

“I want to hear him say it,” I said, harshly, a part of me hating the Outsider for making this awkward—but everything between Loki and I always seemed to go that way. I had only to remember our first time on the Dreadful Wale, with his lips wrapped around my nipples, drinking the rainwater that had spilled down my breasts, and then each kiss afterwards, happening so fast, so readily, as if we both knew what we wanted, but were afraid to make something more out of it unless there was some bulwark of deep meaning built up around it to shield our hearts—for is love not giving someone our greatest vulnerability? And how could we love, when we barely knew each other? Loki was still discovering himself, born anew into a life he hadn’t asked for, and I, well… I had the storm of Delilah’s treachery to deal with, and the loss of my father—and worse, what he did—I knew I would never be the same when I finally returned to Dunwall.

The Outsider waited. I waited.

I listened to the storm, how it strengthened as night fell. It was only a few hours until midnight, and the rain pounded in sheets outside the door. Standing too close, Loki was getting wet, but he didn’t move, not for a long time. It was a strange storm; through the clouds I could see snatches of black, star-lit sky where the clouds broke, and the moon, glowing like an otherworldly specter. I sat frozen on the bed, holding the black rose.

At last, he spoke.

“I’ll do it,” Loki said in a different voice, so different it might have been another man’s. “I’ll do it if she wants to.”

My heart knew his answer before he spoke. I stared at the delicate rose, the petals so black they looked steeped in a midnight blush, traces of dark blue and dark purple. What do any of us truly have? All we have is this moment in time. The beautiful rose. The dead, brittle leaf.

I stood up and unbuckled my belt, placing my sword on the nightstand, and my crossbow. The pistol. I traced a finger along its cold metal, remembering. When do I get to learn your parts? That mischievous spark seemed to be in hiding tonight. Loki was staring at me with barely restrained nervousness, his body tense.

I felt the Outsider’s eyes on me as I crossed to the door where Loki stood, half bathed in gusts of rain. His coat was soaked on one side. I reached for him, and pulled him towards the center of the room with the lightest touch. His emerald eyes watched my face as I slowly peeled back his coat and let it fall heavily to the floor. I went for the buttons on his undershirt next, taking my time moving down, slowly unplucking each one.

His arms came around my shoulders, sheltering me. He kissed me, gently. Every sound we made echoed against the rain; the rustle of fabric, the wet sounds coming from our mouths, the inhale and exhale of breath that suddenly seemed so precious, so fleeting. We are alive, I thought, and we have this moment together.

I felt the Outsider’s eyes on my back. “Turn around, Emily,” he quietly said.

I didn’t do it, not until the last button.

Loki’s shirt hung open, his pale chest gleaming in the strange light pouring through the open door, the yellowish cast of dim lanterns along the stone balustrade that flickered in the rain, and softer, the cool blue shafts of moonlight. I glanced up to find what looked like an apology in Loki’s eyes, and something more, something as hungry as the black eyes I knew were behind me, patiently waiting.
I slowly turned.

Loki’s hands followed, tugging on my coat to discard on the floor. He was behind me, now, as I faced the Outsider. Loki’s hands wrapped around me, fingers undoing buttons on my vest with far less patience than I had done him. His hands were shaking. I stared into the Outsider’s black eyes as Loki tore away the vest and grabbed needily at my breasts, his hot mouth coming down to suck at my neck as he held me from behind, an arm slipping around my waist to pull me against him. His restraint was breaking.

I bent my neck to the side, remembering a time when it’d been the Outsider’s cold breath against my skin, crashing like a wave against me. He, too, remembered. I saw it. Loki and I, we might have been strangling him with the look on the Outsider’s face.

Loki felt the tension. His lips on my neck became softer, kisses lighter, and the hands on my breasts moved lower to feel at the waistband of my pants. I saw the Outsider’s black eyes move from my face to over my shoulder, where Loki watched. I couldn’t imagine what was passing between them.

*Why so cold?* I wondered, my eyes tracing the hard edge of the Outsider’s jaw, the tense, thin set of his mouth. I wanted to warm him, to fill him with the heat building between Loki and I.

My fingers bumped against Loki’s as I helped him along with renewed urgency, undoing the zipper and shrugging the fabric lower. Loki’s hands fell around my hips, possessive and wanting, as I bent over to kick out of my boots and step out of my pant legs. Only my underwear remained, lacy things that the Outsider flicked his eyes over. *Ah, not so cold.* I twitched a smile and slowly turned, moving back into Loki’s arms so that we faced one another again. I slipped my hands into the opening of his shirt, running fingers over his broad chest. His thumping heart. Our mouths angled towards one another, but not touching, simply breathing each other in like fumes.

Loki exhaled against me, his head moving to hang over my shoulder as his hands gripped the curves of my bottom, then slowly found their way over my underwater, pulling them down. I winced slightly as the fabric ran over my newly-inked tattoo. I looked sharply over my shoulder at the Outsider, glaring in remembered outrage. *Why there? Why our asses of all places?* But the Outsider had nothing to say, his black eyes simply watching as I fully discarded that last bit of fabric to stand naked in Loki’s arms.

I knew my body had a certain appeal. Long bouts of training, sword and stealth, had not entirely eliminated softer curves. I had a flat stomach and muscled arms and legs, but the shape of my hips and the weight of my breasts carried a womanly suppleness that had not shed beneath the hard exercise I had put myself through, week after week. But what did the Outsider think of my body, he who had seen countless women? *Dare I wonder,* I laughed to myself, for what woman doesn’t dream of a man who looks beyond the physical, to the heart beneath? What was it about me that he wanted?

Loki jealously pulled me back, like he couldn’t stand that I would look at the Outsider for too long. He turned me back with a kiss on my ear, then felt for my lips. His kisses fell like rain against my face, like he had to taste every part of me. I kept my mouth open, seeking his warmth as he eventually settled those lips in one place, moving against me in hungry urgency. The heat of his breath was like nothing in this world. This time it was me that tore at his clothes, my sheer nakedness somehow acting like an electric current, desire coursing through me, reminding me that, *yes, this is what our bodies are for.*

His shirt fell to the ground, and when my fingers tugged at his pants, I felt an icy chill at my back and looked up to find Loki’s face had changed.
He held very still, his green eyes focused on my face, but I knew he felt the Outsider’s gaze, that the black-eyed deity was very close behind me, no longer content with just watching it appeared. I heard a distant thunderclap and shivered as lightning lit the bedroom a few heartbeats later.

I felt the Outsider’s cold sigh against the side of my face, like a caress. “On your knees, Empress.”

A sting of something unpleasant ran through me, his icy request hinting at a power play I wasn’t accustomed to, as a monarch who always got her way. *Figures, he of all people would like that, to exert his dominance over me.* But the sting faded as I saw the almost drunken look in Loki’s eyes; it was pulling me under, desire thundering in my veins. I felt *his* thrill, *his* sudden catch of breath as Loki reacted to the Outsider’s words, and it, in turn, moved me to do as the Outsider wanted, but with a desire all my own. On my knees sounded just fine.

I moved down Loki’s body and settled on my knees, my hands running up his thighs to grasp at his belt. “Good girl,” the Outsider murmured, but if he’d meant to dominate me, he was vastly mistaken. I had more power than ever on my knees, for Loki was looking down at me like I was his to command. I could do as I pleased.

His pants came off easy enough, and his boots. I bundled the pants and pushed it under my knees to soften the floor. Judging by the look on his face, I didn’t think I’d be getting up anytime soon, and I wanted to be as comfortable as possible.

Now it was just his underwear, and this caused a little shyness on Loki’s part. I glanced up to find *this is really happening* written all over his face in a panic and delight that, perhaps, every virgin must feel as the big reveal drew closer. *Big* being the apt word. Loki’s hardness was straining beneath the fabric, his thigh muscles clenching and unclenching as he fought to stand still.

But he was quivering, his entire body tensing in ripples of jerking movement as I finally put him out of his misery and dragged away that last bit of clothing. With an audible gulp, he stepped out of his underwear, pooled at his feet, and (unconsciously perhaps) his hands came down to cover himself, however ineffectually.

The Outsider chose that moment to ungraciously laugh—not long, thankfully; just a snort, really, but it was enough to make Loki look up and glare at him. I wiped the smile from my face and fancied a long look, gently taking his hands and nudging them aside. Loki took this with stiff endurance, like a soldier suddenly called to attention and must be made to stand utterly still and emotionless. It only made it harder. There was an honest streak of *fun* in enjoying that first look, to not rush through it, a teasing curiosity that I remembered well when I’d gotten my first good look at Wyman in all his naked glory.

Him being the first man I had ever seen, I’d, of course, taken my time. Wyman, too, had enjoyed it, taking my hands to feel him when I’d just stood there, staring like a besotted fool.

They were vastly different, it had to be said. Wyman had red hair that he kept trimmed back, neatly manicured around his wide girth. With Loki, he was wild, the bristly dark hair almost blue in the shafts of moonlight that had come to enlighten my *comparison* analysis—which the Outsider didn’t seem to appreciate.

“Bigger than Wyman, I daresay,” the Outsider growled as he moved to the bed and sat down as if he wanted front row seats to what was about to happen.

He had said he could *feel* through Loki, and so I wondered if the Outsider felt the sudden jolt of suspicion—so unmistakable in those green eyes—as Loki looked between the Outsider and I and frowned slightly.
Wyman? Who’s Wyman?”

“A lucky fool,” the Outsider said at the same time I said, “A friend.” I glared at the Outsider. Now isn’t the time… I looked back at Loki, trying to erase every modicum of emotion from my face. “We can talk about it later, if you want. It’s… complicated.”

Loki had nothing to say to this, his mouth caught open in a breathless fashion when he suddenly felt my breath against him. I imagined he was simply trying to absorb the sight of me between his legs, on my knees, with nothing but a few inches between my mouth and his straining, growing need.

The Outsider’s thoughts must have been running along the same direction because he said, with a filthy streak of command in his tone, “Take down your hair.”

“Bossy, aren’t you?” I snapped.

The Outsider just smiled at me, teasing in his own dark way as he held my direct gaze. There’s was nothing to hide now; Loki and I were both naked in front of him. “I just know what I like, unlike our boy here who doesn’t yet know what he likes.”

“I think that’s for him to decide.”

And there’s nothing wrong with being new at something, I thought. In fact, I rather thought male virginity was vastly underrated. I was enjoying Loki’s raw reactions.

The Outsider bowed his head as if acquiescing, but not for Loki’s sake, instead only to appease me so I’d get on with it. I was getting annoyed and wanted to bite back. “Tell me. How is it you know what you like, Outsider? You died a virgin.”

“And I made up for it a thousand times over. I was not always so untouchable.”

I balked. “Thousands?”

“You’re a few centuries too late to be jealous, Emily.”

“He’s exaggerating,” Loki said.

The Outsider just smiled.

I smiled in return, meeting his challenge. “Well, then. Maybe I should make this worth waiting centuries for then.” I let Loki’s hands go and reached for the silver pins in my hair. The bun fell apart, my hair falling in graceful waves against my shoulders.

Loki stared at me, sick with desire, but clearly unsure what to do with his hands.

“Sit down, boy, before you fall over,” the Outsider said.

“Being an ass wasn’t part of the bargain,” I said. “A little kindness towards—yourself would go a long way.”

“It’s okay, Emily,” Loki said, catching the break in my voice, full of hurt and anger. He gave me a joking smile, like enduring the Outsider’s presence was just another mission, like Addermire, something we both knew we didn’t have to face alone; we had each other. He took a position at the far end of the bed, away from the black-eyed deity who sat poised on the edge, leaning over with his body angled towards me, watching. Always watching.

I bit my lip, forcing my eyes away from the Outsider, forcing myself not to care. If he wanted to
wear that cold mask on his face, so be it. I wasn’t in the mood to try and decipher his strange behavior. *Not that I ever could*. He was being cruel and demanding, and I wasn’t entirely convinced the Outsider was *feeling* anything, other than perhaps impatience.

Loki’s legs dangled over the side of the bed. He was nervously bouncing one foot, and when I gently touched his knee, he spread them apart, watching me settle in between his long legs with wide green eyes. He clutched the bed’s iron frame, knuckles turning white, as I ran my hands up his thighs and gave him an investigative squeeze. He was hard already, but those first few strokes had him throbbing beneath my hands, his breath coming more raggedly as he leaned back slightly, as if unable to keep himself upright.

“Fuck,” Loki gasped.

“Discovered a new vocabulary, I see,” the Outsider commented.

He felt silken beneath my stroking fingers, and so hot, a burning sensation that I wanted to melt into.

“He usually goes with *Satakal*,” I said, very softly, with an amused grin I shared with Loki alone.

Loki had his eyes glue to my working hands, but he glanced up at me, and said, near breathless, “*Satakal, save me.*”

“That’s more like it,” the Outsider said, but he might not as well have spoken. Loki and I were in our own world.

Loki didn’t look away, so I didn’t either. Holding that eye contact was intensely erotic. I felt his need harden and grow, heat pouring into my hands. It was the Outsider who broke the spell, simply by shifting closer on the bed. I glanced at him, not entirely surprised by the flash in his eyes, the jealousy he quickly buried beneath cold, black eyes.

“*Emily,*” Loki gasped, his hand moving over my hand over *him*, increasing in pace. I ran my eyes over his body. His skin was so delicate, nearly translucent at the crease of his groin, tiny blue veins visible beneath. He was so, so beautiful.

I sat up on my knees, drawing closer. “Show me how you like it,” I whispered as Loki’s hand came away to touch, feather-light, the fall of my hair.

“Your mouth,” the Outsider cut in, almost cynically. His face was unreadable. *Did he feel nothing?* If he was connected to Loki and felt what he felt, why wasn’t he falling apart? Was his control that good? *Or am I that bad?* I thought, less kindly towards myself. I looked down at my stroking fingers in a new light. It didn’t take much skill, honestly, to touch a man this way. But a mouth…

_That could be an art form._

*Or homage to a god,* I thought, glancing at the Outsider.

That first lick was enough to rip away what control Loki desperately held on to. He gasped, his hand jerking against the bedframe to find a tighter grip just as my lips found a tighter grip around him. I moved slowly, tasting him at length, and only paused to look at the Outsider when he suddenly changed positions. His ghostly body didn’t cause the mattress to creak or shift as Loki’s now did, but the Outsider’s presence was real enough. *I see the players and I see the game,* he’d once said, but glancing up into his black eyes, I wondered if this was the most dangerous game we had ever played.

I saw the moment he took Loki.
It was like a headache; Loki moved the hand tangled in my hair to the side of his head and began to
gasp even louder, twisted by pleasure and pain.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“He’s fine,” the Outsider said as he shifted closer to Loki, leaning slightly into him.

“It’s just really cold,” Loki grunted. He let his head go and threaded his fingers through my hair,
pushing back strands that had fallen forward as I bent over his lap. “I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

“You feel amazing,” he said as one thumb gently rubbed over my bottom lip. I moved over him,
stroking and sucking, wanting him to feel this—for them both to feel this—because even with Loki’s
little gasps of pleasure, his breath coming shorter and shorter, the Outsider’s sudden silence was even
more tantalizing now that I knew he had let himself feel. I want to break him. I wanted the god to
unravel beneath my touch, beneath my mouth; I wanted his calm control to shatter, for all his walls to
tumble down.

Loki gasped as I took him as deep as I could, his hand finding a tighter grip in my hair. It was then I
found it difficult to ignore my own desire. I was trying to work with some skill (Wyman certainly
thought I was good at this; I enjoyed challenging myself to see how much of him I could take
without gagging), but as Loki became more vocal, his hands winding under my hair, holding it away
from my face, I found it harder and harder not to moan against him, the sucking becoming a bit
sloppier until I couldn’t help but stop completely. I moved back, wanting to look at his face, to see
the desire that coasted between us like crashing waves.

It was then I saw the Outsider had moved again—into him. The length of Loki’s body was bathed in
blue luminescence, casting his pale skin with an eerie glow.

But it was his eyes that made me catch my breath.

I had looked up, expecting to find Loki’s brilliant green eyes, only to see them distorted, shifting with
black shadows as the Outsider’s body melded with his, like he had to subsume him. It wasn’t the
best feeling looking into those eyes; in truth, I didn’t know what to feel. Disgust, maybe, or shame?
What am I doing? How could I do this to Loki? The Outsider was thrusting Loki aside, thrusting
into my hand. “Loki…” I managed, but he pushed my head back down as if saying I had better
things to do with my mouth than question whether or not Loki was okay with sharing me. I
squeezed my eyes shut and planted my hands on his thighs, my lips growing numb and cold with
each stroke. The Outsider was close. Loki spilled into my mouth with a ragged gasp, and I looked
up to watch his face contort. He buckled unto his elbows, falling back in the same instant the
Outsider fell forward.

Watching them, I sat back on my heels, the Outsider peeling away from Loki like shedding skin.

In a calm, cold manner, the Outsider stood over me. “Give her something for the mess, Loki.”

It felt like a slap to the face.

Loki could barely move, let alone speak, in the throes of post-orgasm. His heavy breathing filled the
room, and outside the door, the rain continued to pour. I felt empty, Loki’s seed dribbling from my
lips as I held a hand to catch it. I felt used; like both Loki and I had been used, but for what?

Finally catching his breath, Loki slumped off the bed to the floor beside me where I was kneeling,
looking up at the Outsider with cold disdain, our clothes scattered haphazardly around us.
The Outsider stared back, the eye contact overwhelmingly hostile. *What the fuck?*

Loki dug through his coat and pulled out the handkerchief, bloody from the gash on his face. He didn’t seem happy about using it, but did nonetheless, gently wiping around my mouth and chin. I ignored the embarrassed look in his eyes.

“Was it everything you hoped for?” I asked, glaring up at the Outsider.

The Outsider didn’t deign to reply, his black eyes shielded. I began to doubt if I had ever seen loneliness there. Loki looked between us, his arms folded around his knees as he drew them up to his chest as if protecting himself. I felt exposed, vulnerable; I wanted to put my clothes back on.

The Outsider broke eye contact, and I felt a small victory.

He watched the storm for a long moment, then said, “You’ll find Rosemary’s secret in the basement, and *that* you’ll need to break into. The elevator crashing down five floors should do the trick.” He smiled mirthlessly and turned away, exiting the small room. I stared after him, too angry and shocked to speak. Just like that he was going to *leave*?!

Loki eventually got up and looked.

He came back into the room, standing naked in front of me with no shyness. “He’s gone.”

I felt my heart racing, and it wasn’t with desire. No, this was anger. “He’s never truly gone,” I mumbled under my breath. “He’s always watching.”

Loki knelt beside me, conspicuously not touching me. “I’m sorry.” He couldn’t look at me.

“Forget him,” I snapped.

But neither of us seemed capable of forgetting. Not the Outsider, and certainly not what had just happened. Not with both of us stark naked, thrumming with desire far from sated. I wanted so much more. The rain sheltered our thoughts, and for a while, we didn’t move. It seemed too difficult to get up, to put back the pieces the Outsider had torn apart.

“It’s not you, it’s him,” Loki said after a time.

I looked at him, confused by the self-hatred I saw in his eyes. *By him* I hope you don’t mean yourself,* I said, sternly, with a touch on his knee. *Loki, you’re not destined to become him. Don’t think it for a moment.*

He winced slightly, looking down at his feet, his arms more tightly drawn around his knees. “He hurts others, but… I think it’s himself he hurts the most. He hates always being on the outside, looking in.”

“And feeling through you isn’t good enough,” I added, wondering if it was true.

Loki met my eyes. *Or maybe too good. You and me… there’s no place for him here, not really.*

The softness of his eyes melted my heart. I reached a hand to settle beneath his chin, turning him towards me. I kissed him, very softly, and ran a tongue over his lip to show him how I felt. *Let the Outsider have his games. This was real.* He trembled and his knees parted, his body relaxing, unfolding. I slipped my other hand between his knees to hold him, to feel that lovely heat once more. Yes, I wanted so much more.
He gasped against my mouth, pulling back slightly. “I taste myself on you, it’s… are you sure you’re okay with what just happened?” I stopped groping him, realizing he was trying to be painfully serious for a moment. “Emily, what about you? Don’t you want me to…”

“Yes,” I breathed, smiling slightly. He smiled back, looking shy, but I said, louder, letting him hear my disappointment, “but I have my period, and if we… it’d be messy.”

“Oh.”

I kissed him softly. “Later.”

“You promise?”

His hand found my breasts again, his lips moving down my neck. “Yes,” I said, with some difficulty.

“And without him?”

“I’d like to see him try and stop us.”

Loki laughed against my skin, crushing his lips against my skin. A crack of thunder and a bolt of lightning broke us apart. I forced myself to disentangle from him. He felt so good, but we were in Addermire, and it wasn’t safe to linger, even in parts of the building that seemed long abandoned.

“We should go,” I said. “The basement.”

Loki sobered as we quickly dressed. At the door, before we left, he took my hand. Together, his eyes radiated. Whatever Rosemary’s secret was, we’d face it together.
We found the elevator’s maintenance chute up-a-ways, between the buildings, and Blinked through the narrow opening. There was standing room once you crawled inside. Loki helped me to my feet, but when he tried letting go his hand, I held tighter, jerking him closer. He looked at me in surprise, his confused frown suddenly morphing into a shy smile as he let me reel him in for a kiss. Only then did I let him go.

His eyes were still closed when I pulled back.

“Watch and learn,” I said when he finally came to, blinking softly at me. I smacked a round, red button and the elevator rails began to shake and grind, hauling the elevator up the dark shaft. The noise wasn’t so bad yet.

He lifted an eyebrow. “You’ve crashed elevators before?”

“When I was sixteen. Corvo was so mad at me.”

He grinned. “What happened?”

“Did you know my royal bedchambers are cut off from the rest of the palace? There’s really only the one elevator to reach the top, from the inside…” It became too noisy to speak, and so we waited for the elevator to come to a grumbling stop. Loki leaned against a small worktable, pushing aside a greasy wrench and misshapen copper wires.

His eyes wandered, lost in thought.

At last, the elevator reached the apex. I meant to continue with my tale, but he blurted, “Sometimes I forget you’re an Empress.”

I didn’t know what to say. How could he forget what he truly didn’t understand? He had never seen me sitting on the throne or surrounded by my court. The mightiest Empire in all the world surely meant nothing to him when all he had ever seen was a city on the brink of ruin and the Dreadful Wale with our motley group. A mysterious Captain; a gentle giant and his industrious wife; a pregnant princess; a witch we could not trust, and yet who I loved like a sister. And my father, a demon locked away in the Void. Surely all that made a confusing picture.

I was an Empress without her Empire.

“What do you mean?” I finally asked.

He frowned. “You asked if I knew your royal bedchambers were cut off from the rest of the palace. Of course, I don’t. What man does? You’re an Empress and that means—surely it’s not so different…” He looked torn. “Are you promised to some King? Do you—have someone waiting for you at home?”
The catch in his voice was almost too much to bear. *Wyman’s not a King,* I wanted to say, *and I don’t love him.* Or at least, *I think* I don’t love him. It was hard to understand where all the pieces had fallen after the coup. And the Outsider… But Wyman was waiting for me. He thought…

Loki took my hesitation as answer enough. His face was downcast and he wouldn’t look at me.

I dropped to a crouch and touched his knee, forcing him to look at me. He did and earnestly, like reading the truth in my eyes was very important to him. “I don’t regret what we did, Loki,” I said, “not for a moment, and like I said before, it’s complicated. Wyman and I, we were lovers before the coup.”

Loki picked up the subtle difference, his eyes flaring. “*Were* lovers?”

“The coup changed everything. Wyman is… It’s fair to say I don’t know what we are now.”

Loki took my answer with quiet consideration, his eyes searching my face. He quietly asked, “Does this man believe you are still lovers?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he?” His tone was sharp. “Why is he not here by your side, protecting you? What kind of man leaves you in your direst need?”

“He’s not a warrior. It’s for the best he is gone. Far away from Delilah.”

Loki looked stunned. “Not a warrior? Why would you… Does he wield magic like you?”

I smiled faintly. “Not unless you count poetry as magic.”

"I don't know this word. What is 'poetry'"?

"Well... words, like you might sing in a song... expressing your feelings... it's hard to explain."

“Fine, but how does he think to protect you with *words?*” He shot to his feet and held my arm. “A suitable husband is one that can protect you.”

I backed away, laughing, feeling oddly embarrassed. His fierce tone had startled me, and we were veering into territory that made me uncomfortable. “*Husband?* Who said anything—we aren’t promised to each other. We didn’t… Parliament was always nagging me about marriage, but I kept putting it off. Father was quite fine with that, and I am in no great hurry to have children.” I shrugged. “Wyman and I were taking it slow.”

“You’re getting upset. I’m sorry.”

I dug my fingers into my palm, trying to calm my breathing.

But it was hard—because even though I’d backed off, he felt very near. Our bodies spoke to one another; I felt his tension like it was my own, coiled so tight, and deeper still, I felt our Marks burning as one.

It was easy to forget that burning, as if drowned by other sensations, but like a beating heart, I had only to listen closely and it would be there, fierce as an undying flame. I gently took his Marked hand, and he, too, seemed to understand.

*Everything has changed.* He had a past; I had a past. Both were left behind. His, *four thousand years* behind. Mine, cut off from the moment Delilah stole my throne. Now, our futures were left
for us to discover, to make.

I didn’t know if Wyman was part of that future. I just knew what I wanted now. Some things were as simple as that, and as complicated.

“I want you, Loki,” I said.

It seemed right that we would kiss. We were tongue deep when Loki pulled away with a breathless gasp. “I can’t—you don’t—fuck, Emily, I want you so badly.” With visible effort, he pushed away and wiped his mouth with his hand. “Tell me about the elevator...why you crashed it.”

I bit my lip and laughed at myself. He’s right. We’ll never get out of Addermire at this rate. Touching his body was like grasping a live wire. It was hard to let go.

He slouched against the worktable and absently itched the red gash on his face, the claw mark the Crown Killer had left behind. “Don’t touch it,” I said. “It’s still healing.”

“It itches something fierce.”

“Eileen can make a poultice when we get back.”

I leaned against the brick wall and surveyed the elevator at a glance. I saw where to cut the lines; it would be easy.

The hardest part was always after.

Loki looked up at me expectantly.

“Like I said, I was sixteen at the time. It was the first night of a long and terrible Fugue Feast, and I was angry at Father for not letting me go. Up until that point, I thought I’d been so clever, escaping from the Tower using my safe room. I thought I’d been alone, night after night, enjoying the taste of freedom as I roamed Dunwall’s rooftops.” I snorted. “But Father was there—had always been there—watching me in secret, keeping me safe, making sure I didn’t fall or do something foolish.”

Loki smiled, nodding his head.

“But that night, as soon as I stepped out, Father was waiting for me, right there on the rooftop. I was so shocked. He told me it was too dangerous to leave, that the Oracular Sisters had predicted a Fugue Feast darker than most, to last many long nights until chaos came into order. So it goes every year. The unholy Fugue Feast turns men into monsters.”

Loki looked baffled. “How so?”

I shrugged. “Not literally. Not like—”

_Hypatia._

“It’s about letting go of the rules, of inhibitions and society’s chains. The world is turned upside down. Monsters and mayhem, but freedom, too. For me, it meant no royal court. No boring, old politicians that constantly nagged and plotted and schemed. No law books and endless history lessons. The Fugue Feast is a time like no other. It exists _outside_ of time. Its days are marked on no calendar, and only the Abbey can proclaim its end.”

That part astonished him. “The Abbey?” He frowned. “I’d like to know more about this Fugue Feast, that I might pray to Satakal for wisdom.”
Because he wants to burn the Abbey to the ground and institute his own religion, I thought. And if he did that, who would proclaim the Fugue Feast’s end?

He continued, “But go on, Emily.”

I crossed my arms. “The Blind Sisters were right. It was a dark Fugue Feast. Many people disappeared without a trace. Babies were stolen, replaced with changelings. Some people grew extra fingers and toes, and others saw faces in the water and drowned. A lucky few found their loved ones again, at the next Fugue Feast. They just walked up, right out of the river, with no memory of where they’d been for an entire year.”

Loki nodded knowingly, his eyes solemn. I’d thought he wouldn’t believe me, but perhaps such mystical happenstances weren’t so strange to him.

I looked at my hands. At the ground. “Corvo was right to stop me. He kept me safe in the Tower.”

“So why crash the elevator?”

“My own little Fugue Feast. Rebellion against the rules. I didn’t understand the danger I was in. I didn’t understand why Father wouldn’t let me go. Most Fugue Feasts are harmless enough, in their own way. Murders are actually quite rare. Most people just want a good fist fight. Air out old grudges, that sort of thing. Others just want to do things they don’t normally do. Drink too much. Have sex with strangers. Me, I just wanted adventure, something not contained in my perfectly ordered life in the palace.”

Loki and I shared a smile.

I went on, “But that particular Fugue Feast was far from harmless, and I was too stubborn to see it. All I knew was how trapped I felt. I was missing all the fun, and it was all my father’s fault. So I cut the elevator lines. I remembered watching it fall and thinking how freeing it looked, but then it crashed with an awful noise and I knew I was in trouble.”

Loki grinned, shaking his head.

I smiled back, blushing hotly. The whole thing really was childish.

“What happened afterwards?”

I tucked a stray hair behind my ear. “Nobles and dignitaries and ambassadors, all of them were trapped in the throne room for hours, and they all hated each other.” I laughed, though it really wasn’t funny. “There’s a way to get them down, out along the walls, but it’s slow and somewhat dangerous. Many of the guests were drunk and almost fell to their deaths. It became a ‘diplomatic embarrassment.’ But the people, I think they forgave me. It was Fugue Feast, after all.”

I looked up at Loki, and he was watching me. “And your father? What did he do?”

“He didn’t hide anymore. That was the worst punishment of all. By then, Fugue Feast was long over, and I was back on the rooftops at night, but Corvo no longer gave me the pretense of privacy. He blatantly followed me. It made me so mad, so I attacked him in my anger. Up until that point, it’d all been mock swordplay, but now I was actually trying to draw blood. He had his powers—there was no way I could actually catch him—but I tried.” I snorted. “By the Void, I bloody tried, night after night. I realized he was teaching me. He showed me my anger wasn’t a tool, but a hinderance.”

“Did he ever stop? Following you, I mean.”
“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I want to say yes, for some nights I looked and looked, and could never find him. It became a game of sorts, trying to hunt him down, to find him in the shadows, but—that’s where he lived, and I could never…”

I trailed off, my voice becoming quite small and tear-choked.

“I never truly lost the feeling he was always there, keeping me safe.”

I fell silent. The thought of my father locked away in the Void twisted my heart. It was one thing to be watched, like a plaything of the Outsider, and quite another to be watched over, by an overprotective father, especially one that might have much to pay for.

Loki came to me and put his hands on my shoulders. “It’s hard, but even I can see his rules were never meant to confine you, but to free you. He’s kept you safe and taught you how to protect yourself.”

“I know,” I said in a softer voice, my every sense attuned to the warmth of his hands.

I thought of after, of returning to the Dreadful Wale. I wanted to fall asleep in his arms.

But first things first. I took a deep breath and smiled as Loki unveiled a devious grin. He glanced at the elevator. “Ready to crash another one?”

“Yes and no.”

“You’re nervous.”

“The noise alone will raise an alarm, Loki. Every guard in Addermire will hear it.”

He shook his head. “It’s a risk we have to take.”

“I know. Stand back, Loki. I’d use my pistol, but I don’t want to chance the ricochet.”

In one smooth motion, I unfolded my sword in a silver blur and swung in a wide arc. The rail lines made a violent *twang* sound, and a heartbeat later the elevator dropped like a rock.

Loki rushed to my shoulder, and together we leaned over the edge, watching it fall. Far below, a plume of dirt and debris exploded upwards with a shuddering rumble.

We heard men shouting, echoing through the shaft. “Let’s go,” I said, “but separately. The platforms are too narrow to stand together.” I put away my sword to free my hands and felt his touch on my lower back.

It was like a beacon of fire, and all I wanted to do was push him against the wall and kiss him.

“Don’t fall,” he said, his eyes searching for mine.

I’d been avoiding his gaze, trying to focus, but in truth my thoughts were embarrassingly more on him than the mission before us. We’d infiltrated Addermire in total stealth, but now we’d burned that bridge. How could an elevator crashing five stories not be seen as sabotage? Yes, I understood the danger we were in, that I had to focus, and that this was finally my chance to learn Rosemary’s secret, but Loki’s body was like a flame in the dark.

I realized what had happened in that bedroom was just the beginning, a creeping brush of flames that would soon consume my entire being, if I let it.
He’d said don’t fall, but maybe it was already too late.

“Follow my lead,” I said, praying he didn’t hear the waver in my voice.

As Loki and I descended the elevator shaft, quietly and carefully, aided by magic, I found myself counting the days until my period ended, and wondering how soon we must chase after the Crown Killer. Surely breaking into Jindosh’s mansion to rescue Sokolov and recapture Rosemary required planning—a few days at least. It was torture, if I had to wait for… I cursed my period. Sometimes being a girl was the worst thing in the world, bloody hell… My ruminations ended abruptly as the sounds of men arguing came into sharp focus.

Loki and I settled on parallel platforms, pausing our descent.

With a creaking rattle, the guards had managed to force open the doors on the first level and were shining flashlights up into the gloom.

But the elevator shaft was choked with dust and debris, and it was too dark for them to see us. We crouched like gargoyles, stoic and silent. Dust had settled over Loki’s hair, coating him in a gray film, like he really had turned to stone.

Loki caught my long stare and smiled with a teasing grin, his pearly white teeth gleaming unnaturally bright in the darkness. Focus, Emily, he seemed to be saying, teasing the fact that both of us seemed easily distracted by the other.

I slowly shook my head at him. You’ll pay for that later.

His grin widened. I sure hope so.

Several guards were in a shouting match, confusion mounting until a Captain Ramirez was called in, and the chaotic scene was put to rights. It was determined, we overheard, that the elevator (which had a long history of being in serious disrepair, much like the rest of Addermire) had suffered a freakish break due to the storm, and that their lone janitor, one Joe Hamilton, would look at it first thing in the morning, after his interrogation. Nothing would interfere with that, for Captain Ramirez seemed keen on this mysterious interrogation. Loki and I eyed each other, but soon we had nothing but relief to relate. The guards were leaving.

Captain Ramirez ordered, “Back to work. That means you, too, Mikkos. Remember, shift change is at midnight. Miss the boat and you get another shift, without pay.”

We heard dragging of feet and much grumbling.

“Man, nothing exciting ever happens around here.”

“What’d you call that?”

“I call that Joe’s fault. If he hadn’t been roaming the halls at night, hunting imaginary monsters, maybe he’d have prevented this accident. I took that elevator not more than two hours ago! I could have died!”

“Aww, no sense cryin’ and hollerin’. Yer fine—”

“Shut up.”

“And Joe’s no miracle worker,” another said. “No one can keep this place from falling apart and makin’ you go crazy. Of course, he’s crazy! He’s been here the longest, longer than Hypatia
“Sssh, you idiot. You know we mustn’t speak of her, not unless you want to be interrogated by the Cap’n. Fuckin’ idiots…”

We waited a few more minutes after their voices faded, just to be sure.

I went first, picking a path through the broken shafts of wood to slip through the elevator hatch. I gasped, plunging waist deep into cold water. The basement was flooded. I grimly waded forward, squeezing past the iron-gated doors and pushing aside pieces of wood floating on the rippling surface of the water.

Loki splashed behind me, following me into the large room beyond. A *Lost & Found* sign hung askew from the ceiling, and the brick walls were covered in pale green lichen. I had expected utter darkness. Instead, a huge floodlight illuminated the basement.

“Strange.”

“What is?” Loki asked, coming up very close behind me. He didn’t seem affected by cold water. I was already shivering and holding my arms above the water.

“The basement was boarded off. No one should be down here, but the light…”

A cold wind snatched my breath. Suddenly, the water froze in blue, icy trails emanating from the floodlight, accompanied by strange sounds, like icebergs shifting, and the fresh smell of a cold mountain lake. Loki pushed in front of me, but the exploding veins of freezing water narrowed and eventually tapered off, disappearing into the water lapping around us. The freezing bite did not reach us.

Still, I shivered violently.

We stared at the floodlight, and in front of that harsh beam, the Outsider’s dark silhouette appeared, so stark I could not see his face, but it was him. The high-collared suit. The hair and the ears in perfect outline. He slowly moved away from the floodlight, breaking the thin ice, little islands of blue chunks floating away from him.

What was *he* doing here? And so soon after…

Loki recovered his senses first. He pushed me to higher ground, out of the water to our left where stairs led to another area of the basement. The space was narrow, enclosed by towering shelves packed with an odd assortment of items long relinquished by their owners, whether by accident or on purpose.

Given how long Addermire had stood on its lonely island, it appeared *Lost & Found* had become more lost than found.

I felt stiff and cold, my clothes soaked through. Loki remained close so that I could feel his radiating warmth in the cold, damp air. It smelled like mildew, close to the shelves.

Together we watched the Outsider join us, out of the water. His face was turned towards the light, making plain his lopsided grin, so full of mischief and excitement.

No doubt, dark secrets like Rosemary’s were few and far between.

“Surprised to see me?” he asked with an arresting smile, his black eyes tracing over the shelves like
he could identify each stray possession and the story behind it.

With no obvious shrine in view, I went for the second best explanation. “A b-bone charm?”

My teeth were chattering.

His first visit after the Schism, he’d appeared to me on the Dreadful Wale with only Meagan’s powerful bone charm to light the way.

“Close, Emily,” the Outsider said. “A rune.”

He spoke in that eerily calm manner of his, like he was in no great hurry to part with the secret that had brought us all down here in such uncomfortable proximity. He smiled again. “The rune is older than I, hearkening back to an age before Man. Quite a thing to lose, isn’t it?”

His black eyes drifted lower, over my chattering teeth, then slid towards Loki. “You’d best hold her close, boy. She might succumb to the ice sickness again, and we saw how tragic that turned out. Emily’s quite sensitive to the cold.”

“Unlike you, with your black heart,” I hissed, stung by his words, at the callous reminder of my bout of hypothermia that had led to… I turned towards Loki’s chest, hugging my arms.

Loki did end up folding one arm around my shoulders, holding me close, but it felt stiff, like every touch made in front of the Outsider’s gaze was stealing our warmth.

Loki glared at the Outsider. “Have you come to guide us towards the secret? Because if not, I’ll be happy to send you on your way.” He’d found the rune in question, burning in ember tones on a dusty old shelf, covered in cobwebs, and had picked it up, holding the singing whalebone up in the air like he would dash it to pieces upon the ground in true Overseer fashion.

Yes, singing. I felt the rune’s power flood through the room, and behind the Outsider, I saw the water ripple away from us.

“Loki,” I breathed, my voice shaking. “Give it to me.”

He looked at me in confusion, then at the rune.

Dashing it to pieces was out of the question. I didn’t think such a powerful relic could be destroyed, not unless it was used. When my father strengthened his connection to the Void, the runes he’d used were consumed in the process. I wondered how it would feel to use this rune.

I slowly reached for the rune in my coat pocket, the one Loki had translated in the Recuperation Room. It made me shiver to remember. For life has a melody, a rhythm of notes which becomes your existence once played in harmony with Satakal’s plan. The rune was cold in my hand, and damp, its pale surface gritted with sand. I reached for the rune in Loki’s hand, and knew their difference.

His was hot to the touch and joyously singing, whereas the other was quiet, almost… weeping, if I had to pick a word.

“What does it mean? Why is…”

My question fell breathless from my lips as the Outsider moved towards me, not touching—no, never touching—but I felt him help me—if pushing someone off a cliff might be construed as helpful.
I fell a long way and crashed into the darkest of waters, but when I emerged, I felt the bond strengthen, the Void a little closer. I stared at the Mark on my hand, burning so bright, so blue, like a star had exploded within me. It was only then, when the starlight had faded, that I realized my hands were empty.

Both runes were gone, utterly consumed.

I looked up at the Outsider. He looked content. “Good girl,” he murmured.

A shudder went through me. Loki scowled, clearly reminded when last the Outsider had used such words.

Loki harshly said, “Unlocking a rune’s power is dangerous. Throwing her in like that was crudely done. Have you forgotten the Ancient Ways?”

“The Hooded Ones are dead and gone, Loki. But, no, I haven’t forgotten. How could we ever forget?”

“Stop it,” I said, cutting between them.

“Are you hurt?” Loki asked me, his emerald eyes flooded with concern. “Those runes held incredible power.”

“Indeed,” the Outsider said. “They complimented each other well. Many runes exist in the world; their power emanates like threads of fire or ice, the balance of things. From time to time, they tangle and mesh into stronger rope. A stronger connection.” He slid his shadowy eyes over me. “Emily is not hurt. In fact, she’s far from it. Emily. My dear. You’ll find your arcane tether can reach farther, your Doppelgänger exist longer. All your powers will benefit in time.”

“Thank you,” I found myself saying, quite overwhelmed.

“You’re too kind,” the Outsider said with a devilish grin that suggested I was being too kind. Far too kind.

I scowled. “How are you still here? The rune…”

“Is gone, yes, but its power lingers in the world, at least for a little while.” The Outsider serenely clasped his hands behind his back. “That is what has happened to Rosemary. She has been possessed by a witch that is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes.”

A pause. “Who?”

He smiled down at me. “Who do you think? Granny Rags. Corvo killed her during the Rat Plague.”

“I know,” I snapped. Granny Rags?! I felt blown away. “But how could she…? I don’t understand. Father told me he destroyed her cameo. That stupid necklace, or something. It was the only thing keeping her alive. How can Rosemary be possessed by a dead witch?”

“Granny Rags is dead, but pieces of her remain. They linger. Some are lost; others found. Take Paolo of the Howlers, for instance. What if I told you he could not die? Not unless he was already
killed twice in one day. Third time’s a charm, isn’t it?”

“I’d say that explains a lot,” I said, my head reeling. No wonder he was such a cocky bastard when I first met him. *He’s near invincible!*

The Outsider nodded. “It does. His power is thanks to Granny Rags. A piece of her, rather. A very *specific* piece of her. He has her Marked hand.”

“Her hand?” I almost choked out the word. “You’re telling me the leader of the Howlers is secretly carrying around a witch’s severed hand? Her *actual* hand?”

The Outsider’s lips twitched. “Yes. There’s a strong grip in those dead fingers. Never doubt Granny Rags chose him. He has a part to play in her little revenge fantasy.”

I ran a shaking hand through my hair. “This is crazy. What about Rosemary, then? Last I checked, she wasn’t carrying around a severed head! How is Granny Rags controlling her?”

“The answer to that question is why we are here. Look behind you.”

Dumbfounded, I turned towards the dusty shelf behind me, my eyes crossing momentarily with Loki’s. He didn’t like this one bit. His mouth was set in a hard line and his eyes held a deep disquiet.

I didn’t know what I was looking for. A bar of gold caught my eye, and below that, an old journal bound in leather. I felt drawn to it. I opened it and read the inside leaf. “Vera Moray? Why does that name sound familiar? Who was she?”

“Granny Rags, before she became Granny Rags. The witch inside her didn’t begin to grow in power until after she left the shores of Pandyssia. An ill-fated voyage, that was.”

“The witch *inside her*? Are you saying Vera Moray was, in turn, possessed?”

“By something she brought back from Pandyssia, yes,” the Outsider said. “A dark spirit, if you will. That spirit is part of why Granny Rags has survived death. I can stand here and tell you Rosemary has been possessed by Granny Rags, but that is not the entire truth, Emily. When I Marked Vera Moray many years ago, I gave her an Arcane Bond that allowed her to share her powers with *one* apprentice. Over the years, she had many apprentices, one after the other. Rosemary was her last. When Granny Rags died, that apprenticeship bond became a conduit, a doorway into her mind. Delilah tried to disrupt the dark spirit’s Possession, but she failed. She lost her daughter.”

*Gods.* For a moment, I almost felt bad for Delilah.

Loki suddenly spoke up, quiet and hesitant. “The dark spirit came from Pandyssia?!”

The Outsider inclined his head. “Yes. Vera Moray was the daughter of a wealthy aristocrat and forced into an unhappy marriage. Her husband was restless, with ambitions that crossed the Ocean. He explored the western fringe of Pandyssia, dragging along his reluctant wife, and discovered a remarkable cave. That is where the spirit came from.” The Outsider smirked at Loki. “Does that bother you?”

“What are you suggesting?” I asked, disliking the heated look between them.

The Outsider said, “Loki fears the dark spirit is one of his ancestors. They buried their dead in sacred caves.”
“Our ancestors,” Loki corrected with a callous bite. “And what does bother me is that you don’t seem to understand what bothers me. Do you not remember who you used to be? Has that man been utterly lost?”

The Outsider said nothing. I wish he would. The silence between them was uncomfortable to watch. “Well, is it?” I butted in. When they both looked at me in confusion, I rolled my eyes and said, “Is the dark spirit one of your ancestors?”

“I don’t know,” Loki said at the same time the Outsider said, “I don’t care.”

“Right.” I ran my fingers over the journal. “Was Vera Moray a patient of Addermire?”

“Yes. Long ago,” the Outsider said, serene once more. Loki stood dark and brooding. “She secretly killed her husband on the return route from Pandyssia, and exhibited strange behavior ever since. Her father forced her to seek help, but she faked her recovery to escape Addermire. This madness, too, has lingered. The witch inside Rosemary is quite insane, and hungry for revenge. A dangerous combination.”

“Revenge for what?”

Loki said, “Corvo killed her.”

“A good guess, but it’s more than that, Loki.” His black eyes wavered. “Madness. Obsession. Granny Rags became intensely jealous of anyone I had ever Marked. She made it her mission to hunt them down and cut off their hands. Daud escaped her. Corvo escaped her. Delilah escaped her. That was the hardest for her to bear, for Delilah was…” The Outsider looked away, suddenly reluctant.

“What?!”

“Delilah interested me above all others. Above all sanity.” He suddenly made a face, for when he spoke, I spoke, matching his words, word for word. She interested me above all others. Above all sanity.

I said, scowling, “Yes, I’ve heard it all before. It seems to be a pattern with you.”

The Outsider stiffened his back. The blue luminescence hugging his outline flickered in annoyance. Perhaps with me. Perhaps with himself.

“That aside, now that you are Marked, Emily, Granny Rags will undoubtedly want to do more than just cut off your hand. She wishes for your death, and Corvo’s, and Delilah’s. Anyone in her way will do. Her jealousy. Her rage. The dark spirit driving her insane—all of her is waiting to strike, and when she does, Rosemary will be powerless to stop it. Granny Rags knows of Delilah’s immortality. It could be she is playing along for that reason, waiting for the very same secret you seek to unravel, Emily. The secret to Delilah’s immortality.”

The Outsider began to fade.

I clutched the leather journal to my chest. “Wait! Surely, there’s more. What of Rosemary’s memory loss? When did she become Granny Rags’ apprentice? What about Wynnedown and her father? Why—”

“Questions for later,” the Outsider said with a smile that flickered and fled. “The rune-that-lingers lingers no more. Farewell, Emily, until next time.” His black eyes slid over Loki. “Keep her warm, boy. The nights are cold out over the water.”
“I will,” he said, hard eyes flashing fierce.

The Outsider had one last smile, cold and somehow sad, and then he was gone.
First off, if you've taken the time to comment, thank you! Your insight and encouragement is everything. I'm back. I was gone for longer than I expected or wanted. I have not abandoned this fanfic. I have so much more I want to write! I hope you enjoy this chapter and look forward to more. Thank you.

Part VI continued

"The Killer in All of Us"

Chapter 61

The whales were trapped under the ice. Corvo would walk over them from one end of the cave to the other. They were singing. The melody was haunting and beautiful and sad and lonely and every ‘day’—time had no measure—Corvo wondered how they could live as they lived. The black water held no sustenance for them, and with the ice unbreakable, they could not breach the surface to breathe. No food. No air. They weren’t living.

But they weren’t dying either.

Like him, the whales were simply existing. Timeless. Unchanging. The whales were trapped beneath the ice, and so, too, was Corvo. The ice of the Void. The cavern. It spanned in all directions, a misty haze obscuring the distance. The farther Corvo walked, the further it went. That, too, was endless. There was no escape. No matter how far or in what direction, he always ended back at the center. The heart of the Ritual Hold. That’s what the Outsider called his prison.

Even knowing he was walking in circles, Corvo walked.

And walked.

He did a lot of thinking while walking. A lot of not thinking, truth be told. Some things he shut out. Shut in. There was a dark place in his heart he kept the things he could not bear to bring to light. Not here, not now. Not with him watching his every move.

The Outsider was the heart of the Ritual Hold. Literally, its heart.

It was a strange prison that held the Outsider. His body was cocooned in tendrils of shifting black, as if the magic of the Void was leeching its power from him, or into him, and a film of silver encased his skin like cut-glass. Strangest of all, he appeared to be sleeping.

His eyes were closed.

Corvo would stare at him for hours—what little he could see, for the shifting black was like a protective barrier, constantly moving. Corvo wondered if he would ever awaken. His breathing was slow and steady. He looked like Loki. The same age. The same face. He was naked like the day
Loki had emerged from the cavern on Tempest Island.

But it was not Loki. It was the real Pandyssian. Or rather, the first.

The one who had died, who had become the Outsider. The one who had been so brutally sacrificed four thousand years ago. Corvo could see where his throat had been slit. A smiling neck, the Royal Executioner would say. Corvo wanted to make him smile again.

Here was the Outsider whose name had been stolen by Delilah and torn apart by the Schism. The one whose shattered soul was now tormenting him night and day.

The Outsider seemed amused that Corvo would stop and stare at his sleeping body. Even in this place, the Outsider was an apparition, detached from his true body, ghostly, untouchable, seemingly unable to leave the Ritual Hold unless summoned to the waking world by his own shrine or some other magic.

He would watch Corvo with black eyes and smile slightly.

“I’m glad for the barrier,” he had said once. “I don’t need to read your thoughts to know you want to wrap those hands around my neck. I’m sorry for keeping you here, but you know why.”

I do. I wish I didn’t.

Corvo thought it, but did not say it. He hadn’t said one word since arriving. Since waking. Perhaps he was sleeping in the real world and this was all an illusion. A trick of Delilah’s.

Maybe the Outsider is sleeping and all the world is his dream.

It was a shame Emily had taken his sword. He wondered if he could break through that protective barrier and kill the Outsider for good. Perhaps, then, he would be free.

And he had other reasons for wanting him dead.

Corvo’s heart was full of anger. Rage. A desire for vengeance as endless as the mists around him, and as intangible. Sometimes he wondered where his rage came from. Had it always been this intense? This consuming? It was hunger. Unquenchable. Undeniable. He could see that clearly now, in the Void, where his body never thirsted nor hungered. This hunger was different. Deeper. He wanted blood. He wanted his enemies to die by his own hand, up close and personal.

No mercy. Just carnage and the sweet silence of death, to look at his enemies defeated forever. His heart desired this above all else. It made him restless. Made him angry and quiet in the face of being denied that which he so desperately desired.

Trapped in the Void, cut off from his vengeance—it was torture. It was maddening. He had endured so much in Coldridge Prison. This was worse. What was the pain of the body compared to the pain of the soul?

His heart had been at peace once. Long ago. Sometimes, beneath the ice, he saw her in the water. Her soft green eyes reminded him of a gentler time, a warmth so great it had suffused into his every bone… Her touch had erased so much pain and loneliness in his life and had filled him with joy and purpose.

Blessed purpose. Protecting her, and protecting the family they’d become once Emily had been born.
But now all he felt was endless cold, and the memories of Jessamine were an unwelcome reminder of how far he had fallen, and how much he had to beg forgiveness for.

He would if he could, but her Heart was gone, and he found himself forgetting what she sounded like, what she looked like… Even in the water, he couldn’t see her face, not clearly. She disappeared into the inky black water, and of the empty spaces she left behind in his heart, rage came to fill it up.

Red rage. Blood behind the eyes.

He saw nothing else. For hours? Days? What did it matter? Time had no meaning and Corvo was adrift.

A few times, the Outsider tried to engage him in conversation, but Corvo did not relent. There was nothing to say. Nothing to be. ‘Royal Protector’ was a tragic joke, better left to the ashes. He had failed Jessamine. Had failed Emily. He couldn’t protect her. He would have killed himself, but that, too, was no escape.

The Ritual Hold was filling up.

Perhaps it was some strange effect of the Great Schism—a theory the Outsider put forward in an effort to draw Corvo into a debate—but whatever the cause, the souls of the dead were becoming trapped, one by one, in the Void. They began appearing in vast numbers, their bodies springing up from the mists like phantoms, hovering above the ice.

Corvo walked among them, endlessly it seemed.

They could not speak nor move, but they seemed oddly alive, somehow still attached to their bodies. Souls trapped. Death was no escape, not for them. Not for him. He found the elderly and the young. He found soldiers and mothers with babes still clutched in their arms. Some he could tell what had killed them. Nooses around the neck. Bloodfly infestations. Old age. Fire. Others the Outsider would put in a word, walking with Corvo through the crop of ghosts. Poison. Drowning. Suffocation. That one accidentally. That one by murder. The Outsider could still see in otherworldly ways. Corvo did not question how or why.

Some didn’t even look like they were from the Isles. They had strange faces and even stranger clothes.

All had their eyes open, but they seemed not to see. They were ghosts, lingering with no apparent purpose.

“What do they want? Revenge?” Corvo asked, speaking up for the first time since the accursed whorehouse at Glory Point when he had been pulled into the Void against his will. “Why don’t they move on? This is no place for them.”

The Outsider tilted his head at him in fascination. “I didn’t know you believed in an afterlife, Corvo.”

“I don’t,” he growled. “I like knowing my enemies are dead and gone forever, but this…” He shook his head. “It’s like they’re waiting for something.”

“Not everyone desires revenge like you, Corvo,” the Outsider said, his own ghostly form hovering above the ice. “Perhaps some of these people do harbor terrible regrets or want to see their murderers brought to justice, but that can’t be the reason for their predicament. I have never seen this before. The Void is imbalanced. I am torn in two. It can’t be a coincidence.”
“Kill yourself. Free them from pain. Release their souls from the Void.”

“Who says they are in pain?”

“Who says they’re not?” Corvo glanced at one of the dead children, her eyes wide, unsearching. “You don’t know what she’s feeling.”

“True, but I am powerless to intercede and my death may or may not make a difference.”

“You should try anyway,” Corvo said with growing animosity.

The Outsider’s lips twitched. “I am heartened by your desire to help these people, Corvo, but I cannot kill myself. I’m four thousand years old. Don’t you think I’ve tried?”

His voice echoed. *I’ve tried?… I’ve tried?…*

Black eyes glanced at his true body, trapped in that eerie cocoon at the heart of the Ritual Hold. Corvo could swear he saw fear reflected in those black depths, and that fear nourished him. Corvo wanted the Outsider’s blood, to kill him for being at the top when all else beneath had crumbled. For Delilah and the coup. For Jessamine. Gods, for Emily.

It wasn’t all the black-eyed bastard’s fault, but it would be a start, wouldn’t it?

“You… are… terrifying, Corvo,” the Outsider said in that slow, unhurried manner of his. Their eyes met. Held. *He hasn’t changed,* Corvo thought. He saw the same Outsider from the time of the Rat Plague. A god utterly fascinated by him. Utterly wrrenched with his own existence and needing others to live out his life vicariously. Wasn’t that what this was all about? The Outsider trapped here for centuries while out there the world lived on without him. He influenced the world, but wasn’t truly a part of it. The Outsider continued, but his voice shook ever so slightly, “Seeing you like this… the Void has accentuated your madness. What Delilah did to you—”

Corvo looked away dismissively.

“She did nothing but finish what you started, Outsider.”

“Oh?”

Corvo’s temper flared.

“Rats in the cradle. Ashes and smoke. Don’t you remember? At every turn during the Rat Plague, you goaded and tempted and watched me struggle to rein in my bloodlust, and I did, for Emily, for Jess”—his voice cracked—“for the man I wanted them to see. But that’s not who I need to be. Jessamine’s dead and Emily is…”

His voice twisted in fury and shame; he could barely speak, but his heart was exploding and he needed to get it out, for somebody to listen, even if it was just the Void-forsaken Outsider.

“…she’s hurt,” he somehow managed, “and I failed them because I didn’t listen, didn’t see, didn’t let go of my pride. I was Corvo the Weak. Corvo the—”

“You’re right. You didn’t see. Not like I did,” the Outsider said. “You were the pebble in the pond, dear Corvo, and from the Void I saw what you could not. You spared the lives of your enemies, it’s true, but that was not weakness. By sparing their lives, by finding a different path to avenge the wrongs that had been done to you, you saved the Empire, Corvo. You helped your people flourish. You sowed order, not chaos. To this day, your choices have rippled through time, building not
breaking. Your choices mattered.”

Corvo turned away.

He didn’t care about the Empire. The way he saw it, it’d been a bad bargain—Jessamine’s life for theirs. He could never forgive himself for that. He’d take it all back in an instant. Every decision. Every ripple in the Outsider’s fucking pond. But he couldn’t take it back, and all he had was his rage. He’d burn every city in the Isles, turn them to ash. Let Delilah have her mountain of smoke and ruin. Better yet, he wanted to bury her inside of it. He would make Dunwall a graveyard.

They didn’t speak again until the storm.

It rattled the Void like no other. What a strange thing to experience from the inside. The cavern shook, the air pulsed, the ice cracked like thunder, so loud it jolted his entire body. Corvo watched the splitting ice, expecting the entire thing to buckle and drown him for good, but the splits froze over and the storm passed and all was quiet again.

Corvo wanted answers.

“What in the Void was that?” He had waded through the sea of ghosts, almost grabbing the Outsider by the shoulder to yank him around, but his hand slipped through his luminescent form.

“My other self,” the Outsider said in awe. “He has used his Maormer powers to spawn a hurricane.”

“What?! In the real world and we felt it here?”

“It prickled, didn’t it?”

“Is Emily hurt? Let me see her!”

“The Pandyssian has carried the Dreadful Wale to Karnaca. Emily will see me soon.” He sounded breathy. “She must bring him to me. I must impart wisdom to—”

“Shut up, and show me she’s not hurt! You can do that, can’t you?” He felt sick. If anything happened to Emily, if that barbarian boy—the Outsider suddenly stepped forward with a pained expression on his pale face.

“Calm down, Corvo. Yes, I can show you,” he said, “but that is all I am willing to do. The Empress cannot be allowed to see you like this. I will not add to her pain.”

“Just show me.”

He instantly regretted it. Seeing Emily again was like a knife to the gut. The Outsider had cut a circle in the ice and together they had peered into the water. Before he looked away, tears stinging his eyes, he’d seen her. Perfect. Beautiful. Standing at the bow of the ship with the Bay of Karnaca unfolding before her like shimmering jewels in the early morning light.

“It’s fortunate the boy was able to cut off two weeks from their journey. Emily is at her breaking point. She cannot sleep—”

“Help her sleep again.”

“I will.”

Red behind the eyes. Corvo saw Delilah, his sword at her throat, her blood running down his fingers. It was better for her that he didn’t know what she was doing to Emily in the Void, pulling
her in night after night, because if he did, he’d do more than slit her throat. Corvo clenched his fists and stormed away, creating his own little hurricane as he thrashed through the ghosts of the dead. He ran until his lungs burned. He ran until the visions of Delilah disappeared. He slipped on the ice and fell. The pain felt good. He was alive. He didn’t belong here. He had to get out! He was on his hands and knees, staring through the ice into the black water beneath. The whales sang their sad songs; he could feel the vibration through the ice.

Look, they seemed to say. Look and see who has died.

Frowning, Corvo rose from his hands and knees and followed the whale. It swam beneath the ice like a slow-moving giant. This way. This way.

Corvo followed, for how long he couldn’t tell. None of the ghosts of the dead reacted to his presence. He walked right through them.

Here, it sang. Look and see. Will you weep?

The mists parted and Corvo found but one soul, flickering in and out like his body was only a trick of the light. He didn’t hover above the ice like the others. Instead, he was seated on a ledge jutting from the cavern wall. His head was bowed over his knee and a Marked hand covered his face.

The Void was cold, but in that instant Corvo froze like Death itself had whispered in his ear. A gift.

But…

Wasn’t this what he wanted? To see his most hated enemy dead to the world?

But not dead enough.

And Corvo had rather have been the one to do it. He felt… disappointed.

Daud lifted his head and flint gray eyes narrowed in on him in shock, then confusion. Their meeting was so unexpected, so extraordinary, Corvo could barely contain his own reaction. He found himself taking a step back. It was bad enough the ice was sometimes so reflective that Corvo could see himself in it. With Daud, there was no looking away.

Daud’s eyes trailed over the mists. “The Void,” Daud said, his voice like gravel. “I remember that endless cold.”

Corvo watched him clench his fist, the Mark burning bright for a heartbeat. The jealousy surprised him but there it was, springing from his chest. Corvo missed the incredible power he’d once had at his fingertips. He would do anything to get it back.

Delilah had stolen his Mark; he would make her pay for that, too.

Corvo realized Daud was watching him closely. Wary eyes. The assassin covered the Mark with his other hand. Corvo noticed his clothes looked strange: torn, even wet. Daud’s face gave nothing away.

“Where is he?” Daud asked, his eyes as hard as stone.

It took a moment for Corvo to realize who he meant. He’d been staring. The assassin’s eyes had always been a colorless gray, but now his flickering form made them seem icy blue in certain light. “The Outsider didn’t pull you into the Void,” Corvo eventually said. “You’re here because you’re dead.”
Daud burst into laughter—and Corvo a moment later. They laughed until they wheezed until they cried. Corvo couldn’t stop. His greatest enemy was dead. The man who had taken Jessamine’s life was finally dead. DEAD. DEAD. DEAD. Daud’s heavy brow furrowed and his eyes widened and his laughter died down into something strained and awkward as Corvo continued laughing. It rose from his chest in peals he couldn’t stop. He fought for breath and somehow found his voice again.

“You’re dead, Daud.”

“But not all the way dead?”

“I’ll find a way to correct that.”

“Ouch.”

Corvo was still smiling. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I was on a ship en route to Karnaca,” Daud said. “A freakish storm rose up out of nowhere.” He rubbed the back of his head. “I must have blacked out.”

“Oh, you did more than that,” Corvo said. He had walked around the master assassin and was now admiring a nasty gash on the back of his head. He whistled as Daud turned around in disbelief. “Looks like something hit you. The ship falling apart, yes? All that wind and rain. I’m guessing you fell overboard and drowned. How do your lungs feel?”

Daud rubbed his chest. It was several moments before he said, “I’m not craving any cigarettes. I must be dead.”

Now he looked alarmed. Serious. His ghostly form flickered in and out; Corvo found it mesmerizing. He could stare at Daud’s dead body all day. Maybe not dead dead, but there was no way Corvo wasn’t going to squeeze every last drop of satisfaction from this unexpected encounter.

“You’re dead,” Corvo said, this time savoring the moment a little longer, a little harder. He watched Daud stare into the mists, at the ice and the black water beneath. Whalesong echoed. It wasn’t exactly the first sight people expected after dying. He’d told the Outsider he didn’t believe in an afterlife, but that wasn’t entirely true. Maybe the Void was the closest anyone would ever get to life after death.

After a time, he told Corvo, “Drowning’s not bad. There’s worse ways to go.”

“A shame I couldn’t pick out a more interesting death for you.”

This came out like a hiss.

“Are you dead, too, Corvo?” Daud asked, his voice darkening. “Because I can’t imagine this being a bad dream, even for me. I’m here. You’re here. Why the Void? Is this my penance? To be trapped here with you until the end of time?”

Corvo smirked. “Oh, I’m quite alive, Daud, feeling great, actually. If you’re like the others, I can’t touch you, but… you understand I have to try?” When Daud just frowned, Corvo threw a fist at Daud’s jaw. It went right through him. Corvo shrugged. “Worth a try.”

Daud wore a scowl that said it all.

The Outsider returned. He’d been in the real world at a shrine somewhere in Karnaca, meeting with
Emily. He looked distracted and barely glanced at Corvo, but then his black eyes moved over his shoulder and found Daud. He froze.

"Daud?"

"He’s dead," Corvo announced. The Outsider’s mouth fell open.

"Dead?"

"Looks that way," Daud grumbled. He shuffled from one foot to the other, his steely eyes glancing around at the other ghosts. "Why aren’t they moving or talking? It’s creepy."

"So says the walking dead guy."

The Outsider seemed not be listening. In fact, he looked quite lost. "But I didn’t feel it…” He looked suddenly angry, even accusing. "I should have felt it!"

Daud looked puzzled. "What makes me different from them?" He clenched his fist. "Is it the Mark? Is that why I’m awake and they aren’t?"

"This is unacceptable," the Outsider snarled. "You can’t be dead!"

"Blame yourself," Corvo said. "Your pretty boy killed him with that storm. He drowned."

"Pretty what?" Daud blurted.

"An accident," the Outsider insisted, like he was defending Loki—himself—whatever. "I swear it. Daud, I would never interfere in that way."

"Accident?" Daud said at the same time Corvo sarcastically jabbed, "He doesn’t directly kill or hurt people. He just sets off the dominos that allows it to happen or not."

The Outsider glared at Corvo. "I don’t need a morality lesson from you."

Daud had enough. "What the fuck is going on? What game are you playing, Outsider?"

"Why does everyone assume I’m playing a game?!!"

Both Daud and Corvo stared deadpan at the Outsider who then proceeded to huff and throw up his hands. When he turned his back, Daud came to stand beside Corvo. He mumbled under his breath, "How long have you been here with him?"

"I don’t know. Why?"

"Might explain a few things." He crossed his arms. "If I’m dead and you’re not, why haven’t you left?"

Corvo sighed. "Things are a little complicated around here, Daud."

"Corvo is my prisoner," the Outsider said, turning back to face them. "He is trapped here against his will, for his own protection, and Emily’s. The Empress is searching for ways to defeat Delilah. Meanwhile, I am helping as best I can from the Void. The witch stole my name and my power. She does not know I survived her assassination attempt."

"How did she do it?" Daud asked. Corvo glanced at him. There was more to that question than Daud was letting on.
“Do what?”

“Try to kill you.”

“A kiss.”

The Outsider began pacing back and forth, talking to himself. “Daud’s death puts us all at risk. Daud has the Mark. She’ll feel it in the Void. It’s like a magnet. I’ve remained hidden since the Schism, but I can’t hide the fact that I’m still alive forever. Eventually, Delilah will realize…” His black eyes snapped towards Daud. “I will take back your Mark.”

Daud had taken news of his death quite well, but this… Corvo saw what he tried to hide. Daud lowered his gaze, his Marked hand drifting up towards his heart.

“Do what you must,” Daud said grimly. “A dead man has need of nothing.”

Corvo looked away as the Outsider raised his hand, a thread of white magic weaving towards Daud. The sight of it brought back bad memories of the Throne Room. Delilah had stolen Corvo’s Mark; he didn’t want to watch it done to another.

Corvo wandered the Ritual Hold. He walked the ice. The whales swam beneath, singing their sad songs. Daud and Corvo avoided each other. Time passed. The Outsider left again, this time for his shrine in Addermire. Before he left, Corvo cornered him.

“Don’t tell her,” Corvo said. “About Daud.”

The Outsider frowned. “Why? Doesn’t she deserve to know?”

Corvo was insistent. “I should be the one to tell her. Promise me, Outsider.”

“I promise. When exactly do you plan on telling her?”

Corvo knew he had to face his daughter, eventually. “Not yet,” he said.

In a flurry of black rain, the Outsider disappeared. He’d been clutching a posy of black roses.

Daud and Corvo were alone again. If the ghosts of the dead were listening, they did not show it. Daud approached him for the first time since losing his Mark, his hardened face set with something Corvo had never seen before. Corvo tensed. “What do you want, assassin?” he asked unkindly. He was in no mood to dig up the past, and that was all they had between them. A dark, wretched past.

“I was wrong.”

Corvo held his breath.

“About what I said,” Daud said. “A dead man does have need of something.” He looked Corvo in the eye. He was dead serious. “I can’t hurt him. There’s nothing I can do. Only you can kill him. Delilah tried a kiss. I have something better.”

Corvo felt his heart race. “You’re talking about killing the Outsider.”

Daud told him about the Knife. About where he suspected it might be. It wouldn’t be easy. And there was a very real possibility that even holding the Knife could be deadly, but Daud thought it worth the risk. “You can probably use it to kill Delilah, too,” Daud said. “The Knife is a piece of the Void. Who knows its true power? It made the Outsider, Corvo. It made a god.”
Corvo listened and debated, and together Daud and Corvo crafted a plan to obtain the Knife—all of it was contingent on Corvo finding a way to escape the Void—but, all in all, Daud looked pleased, even relaxed. *His heart will be at peace when the Outsider is dead,* Corvo thought.

But in exchange for the death of the Outsider and maybe even Delilah’s, too, Corvo was willing to pay that price.

But he couldn’t stop himself from asking. “Why?”

The question echoed throughout the Ritual Hold. The Outsider had been gone a long time. He wondered what was happening at Addermire. He feared Emily was in danger. It made his desire to find the Knife more urgent.

“They are entrusting me with your mission? If you hadn’t died… you would have found the Knife, Daud. I know you would have, no matter how difficult, no matter the cost. You might even have used it on me after taking out the Outsider. Was he really going to be your last target?”

Daud smiled faintly. “Yes.” He spoke barely above a whisper. “And I wouldn’t have killed you, Corvo. You know why. We fought and I lost. You could have killed me, but you didn’t. Maybe you regret that now. Your heart certainly seems full of rage, but know this—if you had killed me that day in the Flooded District, Delilah would have taken Emily’s throne years earlier. She tried to possess your daughter. I stopped her.

“But you asked why, Corvo. Why am I entrusting you with the Knife? Why am I hoping you will succeed where I have failed…” His gray eyes drifted over the sleeping body of the Outsider, encased, cocooned, protected. Corvo found himself unable to speak; he could only watch and listen as Daud’s heart bled out before him.

“We are all made by the things that are taken from us,” Daud said. “You lost Jessamine. I lost the man I could have been. The Outsider made me into the killer I became, the deadliest assassin the world had ever seen.” He glanced at his barren hand, the Mark gone. There were tears in his eyes. “And what does a killer do? He kills. The Outsider reaps what he sows.”

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