

THE IMMORTAL SAGA

SCARLETT IRONFANG

# A kiss of fate

A Novella

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by

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*My bounty is as boundless as the sea,  
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,  
The more I have, for both are infinite.*

*- William Shakespeare*



Celavron (Cerebrene)

Kordia

Kingsbury

EQUILON

TANGARIS

AREGON (Arvenon)

Murias

Moren

THE GULF OF GRAVENLOW

Mutzen

Mara

Zueburg

The Delvost Island of Igh

The Woods of Zelen

VANTHESIA

ISOUVIEN

Arantha

ARSHEC (Achopois)

River Aegina

Astria

Appley

THE ARIAN SEA

South Warren

Theos

Coeus

The Broken Isles

River Endor

NEISA (North)

The Black Woods

LYCANTH

LUCAONIA (Lyros)

Duan

Themissa

Jedborough

THE ATLANTIAN SEA

NEISA

ATLANTIS

Ceto's Circle

Thessa (Beachcastle)

Doscidovia

# ( PROLOGUE )

*A*n Empire shattered by the raging winds of time. The great Kingdoms of Granterra fallen to ruin. The mighty commanders of old usurped by the corrupt and self-seeking. Beings of wisdom supplanted by craven flatterers. Everything he had built for Aria, withering into the husk of glory that once was.

“Hail, Lord Vorigan!”

The members of the High Council rose and inclined their heads in reverence as the Emperor made his way toward the ornate dais, flanked by two of the Imperial Guard—the dreaded sentinels of Aregon.

He adjusted his cape and lowered himself into the dark marble throne. The scales of his blood red armor glinted in the dull sunlight seeping through the immense crystal window behind the dais.

Ah! If only these fools knew of their impending fate. If only he could make them all understand. If the beings they worshiped as ‘gods’ ever returned, it would mean the end of the mortal world.

The envoys and warlords settled into the stone chairs set against the curving wall.

Vorigan leaned forward, hiding his distaste behind a mask of indifference. He held no love for the two-faced councilors before him. They had no true master, but their greed and fear. They preyed on weakness, like the lowly scavengers they were. No matter how he desired to sink his fangs into each of their necks, they were still important pieces with a role to play in reclaiming Granterra.

The silence reigned for a moment, before Hadrian Willmont, the warlord of Turahn spoke. “We have failed to capture the Atlantian, your highness,” he said. “He is one of the first six. Ca...Capturing him will be difficult without cooperation from the Imperial Guard.” His gaze remained focused on the foot of the throne.

The Emperor frowned, his steel enclosed fingers steadily tapping the armrest. The accursed Atlantian was testing his patience. He had to be eliminated. If there was one thing Vorigan detested above all else, it was self-righteous renegades disrupting his plans for the greater good.

The Envoy from Lycaonia, Julian Le Cordier, cleared his throat. “He speaks truly, your grace. The Atlantian cannot be underestimated.”

He paled as Vorigan’s gaze pierced his gray eyes. He brushed aside a lock of hair. “We have already lost three of our best trackers, and one was a lieutenant to the first pack.”

The council hall broke into whispers and murmurs.

The Emperor studied his countenance. He often wondered why the Lycan King had made this inexperienced half-human his envoy. He had an eloquent tongue and a cunning mind, but he was no true leader.



Maybe that was his intent.

The noisy babel faltered when Orion Ironfang stood, drawing many looks of wonderment and indignation. His stone cold features betrayed no fear of death or doom, as befitted a scion of Argent. “Pardon my impertinence, sire. But this is no time to be conferring about a lone Atlantian. There are more important matters to be discussed.”

Julian tilted his head. “Matters of more import?”

Orion directed a dark glance at the Lycaonian Envoy, his blue eyes inscrutable. “Indeed.”

“What might those be?” Vorigan’s voice cut through the hall like a blade of ice.

“I was referring to the Resistance, your grace.” He turned his gaze to the throne. “It seems they have become more active. I hoped the High Council would take this threat seriously.”

Vorigan exhaled in exasperation. Those fools from the Resistance were plotting their own end. They had all forgotten the terror the Vyohreisian had wrought on Granterra ten thousand years ago. They were blind to the tragedy that awaited them if he failed.

If only they could understand. He held no ill will toward them, but if they hindered his efforts to unify Granterra and prepare it for the Great War, he would be left with no other choice.

“The Vampire Lord is right,” Irwen said, addressing her fellow councilors. “We sense their presence even in the depths of Tangarís.”

Vorigan found her cold green eyes. “I hear there have



been more rebellions in Celavrón.”

The Envoy to the Queen of Tangaris raised her chin. “The elvanór are unhappy with the Empire’s interference in the internal matters of Celavrón. Many have deserted our cities and allied with the-”

Vorigan held up his gauntleted hand. “Does Queen Ványa share that dissatisfaction?” he asked, a cold glint in his eyes.

The elf maiden’s ethereal features remained without expression, betrayed only by the nails digging into her palm. “Certainly not, Lord Vorigan,” Irwen replied in a flat tone. “Our only desire is peace between all races of Aria.”

“Excellent.” He placed his palm on the marble armrest. “Then our goals are aligned.” He had to keep an eye on them now that Aries had begun making his move. Even though Ványa was not foolish enough to underestimate him, she would not hesitate at the prospect of driving a dagger into his back. An alliance between the Resistance and Tangaris would certainly prove troublesome.

“What do you intend to do with the Resistance, Your Grace?” Orion asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Vorigan’s face twisted in a grimace. “It seems I have condoned their insolence for too long.”

The councilors murmured their agreement

“We have to act quickly, Your Grace,” Julian said. “It will pose a greater threat if the Atlantian were to make contact with the Resistance. He has powerful allies within the Atlantian Council.”

Vorigan rested his chin on a gauntleted fist. Though

the Atlantian pest was not an immediate threat to his plan, he could not sit back either, not if he wanted to unite the continent under his scepter. He would need the entirety of Granterra behind him if they were to succeed. These matters had to be dealt with care.

“Very well.” He lifted his head. “Stonearm and Iowen shall lead the forces at South Warren and root the Resistance from Aria. As for the Atlantian, it is unlikely any of your soldiers are competent enough to find him. I will have one of my own take care of that menace.”

He would not spare any more troops, not for this foolish infighting. There were more important things to be done.

A loud thump reverberated through the chamber, and the heavy doors opened with a faint creak.

The councilors frowned at the guard standing on the threshold.

“What is it?” Vorigan scowled.

“A messenger from Valenta pleads an audience, your grace. He claims the matter to be dire.”

“Send him in.”

The guard bowed and retreated.

A masked messenger, garbed in a dark cloak, walked past the guard. He retrieved a scroll from his sleeve and bent his knee before the throne.

“A missive to the Emperor of Aria.”

Eydis Drabek of the Imperial Guard stepped forward and took the scroll from him. She examined it, running a hand over the rolled paper. Satisfied, she offered it to the

Emperor.

Vorigan broke the seal and unrolled the scroll.

A sketch of a red haired woman covered half the parchment, followed by a few sentences in Sintican script. His eyes narrowed into slits as he deciphered the message, the tendons in his neck tightening with each line.

A snarl emanated from his lungs as he rose, pupils aflame. The scroll slipped from his gauntlet and rolled across the dais. He recognized that hair all too well, but it was inconceivable. He had wiped out all of them for *his* treachery.

Vorigan's old wounds flared under his armor. If Ilirion had not betrayed them, they would have been able to rid the Vyohreisian once and for all. Ten thousand years later, she still cast her shadow of terror on Granterra, all because Ilirion had failed to acknowledge the noble cause and had sided with the enemy.

The councilors shifted uneasily in their seats, alarmed by his reaction.

He took a deep breath and forced himself back into the throne. "Eydis."

The member of the Imperial Guard sauntered toward the messenger and circled him, her hand tracing his shoulder. Her wide lips parted in a provocative smile. "Tell me, my love. Who was it that sent you?" she asked in dulcet tones, her voice sweet and sharp like roses and thorns.

He stared at the floor, refusing to meet her eyes. "N...No! I cannot..."

Eydis placed her palms on either side of his head. She leaned in, as if to kiss him. "Revien déseviet tuo," she

whispered, her breath caressing his lips.

Eydis gazed into his eyes, as if glimpsing through his thoughts and secrets. His eyes rolled into his skull, and his expression turned blank as a stone wall.

The High Council turned still, eyes fixed on the unusual spectacle unfolding before them. Vorigan sensed their fear, and it amused him. No matter how hardened many of them were, mystery of the unknown wrought terror in their hearts.

Eydis released her grip, and the masked messenger collapsed to the ground. “Take him to the dungeons,” she said. “I shall attend to him later.”

The guard rushed to follow her orders.

She turned her gaze to the Emperor and inclined her head. “I was unable to find the source, your grace. His memory was erased, but for a strange message.”

Vorigan raised his eyebrows.

“Adân yadakar Ilirwyn,” Eydis said.

Julian’s eyes widened. “Ancient Eitheonian.”

The elf maiden, Irwen, rose from her seat, drawn to the scroll lying near the dais. She picked the scroll and ran her delicate fingers across the feeble letters. “A forewarning.”

Vorigan’s brow furrowed.

“Ingien.” Eydis pointed at the elf.

Irwen jumped back in alarm as the scroll burst into flames. She threw a venomous glare at the sorceress and returned to her seat, lips pressed into a thin line.

The less they knew, the better. He had to take care of it personally. Ilirion’s descendants were the only ones who

knew where she was hidden. She, the one who had taken it all from him, the one who had brought ruin to Aria. The very thought of her made his blood boil with rage.

*I will make certain you rot to nothingness, Vjobreisian.*

Vorigan cleared his thoughts and faced the High Council. “Prepare your troops to move against Valenta and Maera. I have squandered enough time on diplomacy. Leave the Resistance to the Imperial Guard.”

Granterra had to become one.

“As you command, your grace,” Julian said, and the others bowed in agreement, knowing enough to keep their curiosity in check.

The Emperor gestured at Lucien.

The Captain of the Imperial Guard stepped forward to address the High Council. “The Council meet stands adjourned,” he announced. “You may return to your respective quarters.”

The warlords and envoys rose from their seats and strode out of the chamber, relief evident on their faces.

“Summon the rest of the Imperial Guard,” Vorigan ordered. The matter with the Resistance could wait. He had to find the descendant quickly and quietly before *they* did, or there would be consequences—consequences he was not ready to face.

Lucien inclined his head. “As you wish, my lord.”



# (I)

**D**ark clouds drifted across the evening sky, drawing a veil of shadows over the ancient city of Argent. Thick mist rolled up the slopes and obscured the gigantic walls that stretched around the great capital. A mild breeze rustled through the forest on its outskirts, whispering dark secrets to the unheeding conifers and pines.

On a low hill near the northern wall, loomed a castle of gray stone, abode to Lord Lucien Ironfang, Captain of the Emperor's Imperial Guard. The castle's spires cast bleak shadows over the surrounding orchards and meadows, like fingers of darkness clawing toward the horizon.

A young woman, fair as the winter snow, strolled through the melancholic gardens. Flowing locks of raven hair framed a lovely face with amber eyes; fathomless pools of shadowed light and gold. Her delicate hands brushed the pale roses as she savored their sweet fragrance.

She winced, and a tender smile blossomed on her lips. She ran a palm over the bulge of her belly. "Hush, little one," she crooned. "I love you so much."

A breeze wafted across the meadow, sending a gentle wave through the sea of grass.

She stiffened.

Her eyes darted around the yard, searching for the source of disturbance.

“Ayana, my love.”

She relaxed, the smile returning to her face. “Lucien?”

A cold hand wrapped around her waist, and a soft breath caressed the back of her neck.

“As beautiful as ever,” Lucien said, his voice a soft murmur in her ear. “Have you been well?”

Her heart leapt at the sound of his voice. How she had missed him.

“Not so well without you,” Ayana replied, a flush creeping up her cheeks as she placed her hand upon his.

“I am sorry,” he whispered.

She turned in his arms and pecked him on the lips. “You have been away for too long,” she said in a reproachful tone.

Lucien traced a finger along her jawline and brushed a blowing strand behind her ear. A masked sadness flickered behind his countenance. “It is all I can do to keep them in check.”

Ayana stared into his deep blue eyes, her chest tightening at his clouded expression. “What troubles you, my lord?”

Lucien looked over her head and whispered, “It can wait.” He took her hand, a faint smile pulling at the corner of his lips. “Let us get you inside. It is cold out here.”

Ayana placed his hand on her shoulder and leaned into his chest. They walked toward the castle, wrapped in



each other's arms.

All was well, or so Ayana believed.



## (II)

**L**ucien stood beside the open window, gazing at the purple sky. The silver orb of a moon peeked through the sullen clouds, drenching the marble floor in its pale luminance.

Ayana shifted on her bed, drawing his attention. Her dark hair was spread around her delicate face, a few strands of red standing out from the rest. Her countenance was serene and calm, free of worries.

If only he could run away with her to a place afar, a place without fear...

Lucien tensed, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. A growl emanated from his lungs.

His gaze flicked to the sky as a dark shadow zipped beyond the clouds, too big and too fast for a bird. His hand instinctively flew to his weaponless belt, but the strange presence vanished as soon as it had appeared.

Had he imagined it?

“Lucien?”

His eyes flew back to his wife.

Ayana sat against the headboard of her bed, sheets pulled up to her chest and eyes groping in the semi-darkness. His exclamation must have roused her.

He let the moon bathe him in its light. "It's me."

Her eyes lit up when they found him, her lovely smile jerking his wild heart. An icy pang of remorse pierced through the warmth as he beheld the innocent glow on her face. He hated to bring back her past, not when it gave her nothing but pain. But he had no choice. She had to know the truth.

Her smile wavered. "You seem troubled. What is it?"

"There is something I need to tell you, Ayana." He watched her carefully. "I cannot keep it from you any longer."

She raised her eyebrows.

He walked over and perched on her bed. "You are in danger," he said. "That which we feared most has come to pass."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Emperor Vorigan," Lucien replied. "He has ordered the Imperial Guard to track down the last survivors of Ilirion's bloodline."

A shallow breath escaped her lungs. "He knows?"

Lucien nodded. "He received a forewarning from Sinticus, maybe a ploy to waver his advance into the east. However, his paranoia won't let him stop until every one of Ilirion's descendants are dead."

Ayana's hand darted to her abdomen as realization of his words crashed upon her. Her wide amber eyes snapped up to his. "Even our child?"

His heart ached at the anguish in her eyes. He lowered his head. "The child carries your blood."

"What have I done..." Ayana mumbled, her face

crumpling in pain as moisture gathered in her eyes. Her arms folded protectively around her stomach.

“It is not your fault,” Lucien said, almost sharply. “We still have time.” His voice softened as he cupped her face and brushed away a sliding tear. “They are not aware of your whereabouts.”

“But they will find me, Lucien,” she said. “They always do.”

Lucien took her hands and stroked her fingers. “We will take precautions. I will make certain they do not lay a finger on you or our child,” he said. “Do you trust me?”

A cool breeze washed into the chamber, carrying with it, a scent of crushed pine and mild honey. She lifted his palm and placed it on her cheek. “With my life.” A hint of a smile returned to her face.

“Then there is nothing for you to be afraid of,” Lucien said. He pulled her into a hug, cradling her head on his shoulder. “I love you,” he whispered, caressing her crimson streaked hair. He had to protect her, no matter what the price. She was not meant for this harsh world. “I will keep you safe. I promise.”



# ( III )

Ayana's eyes wandered across the dawning sky as she lounged on the balcony. Unyielding clouds entombed the world in their harsh clutches, a thousand shades of gray painted on the heavenly canvas.

Servants milled about the grounds, some laboring in the orchards, some tending to the stables. A few miles to the west, the Black Citadel rose toward the sky, surrounded by snow covered rooftops that glimmered under the morning sun. Argent, a city that even the winter god Isei Ilvi could not make any more gloomier.

It was almost four weeks since Lucien had told her about the Emperor's decree. It wouldn't be long before they tracked her down.

They had come for her once before, and if not for Lucien...

She pushed away the memory, before it brought back more unpleasant ones.

Ayana turned her gaze to the far horizon.

Years back, during the winter eves spent sitting by the crackling fires with her tribe, Keîn Zâka had often narrated tales of an ancient goddess that had come to their great

continent. With her cruel generals, she had laid waste to a hundred empires and slaughtered a thousand kings. Until one day, the generals had turned on her.

“They sealed Bia Ilvia in a crypt,” Keîn Záká had said, the shadows dancing on his face. “Before they could put an end to her for good, one of the generals stole away the crypt. Ilirion was his name. The others did not take kindly to his betrayal. They cut him into nine pieces and tossed him into the sea. They searched for the crypt, but never found it.” He had thrown a block of wood into the fire, making sparks fly. “Bia Ilvia will come to reclaim our great continent once again, awakened by the progeny of her one loyal general.”

Several years after, on that terrible day, a dying Keîn Záká had told her the truth about her lineage.

She wasn’t one of them.

Her blood mother had brought her to Isouvien from their razed home in Valenta. The Emperor’s assassins had slaughtered the last of their family, believing them to be Ilirion’s descendants, but her mother had somehow managed to escape with the infant Ayana. She had delivered her into the care of the Azerian tribe before drawing her last breath.

Ayana brushed a rogue tear.

Death followed her everywhere she went...

She drew back from the ornate balustrade as a raging gale battered the castle tower, carrying the first droplets of rain. Despite her fur-lined gown, the spiteful wind pressed against her exposed skin like countless piercing needles of ice and fire.

Ayana held no fondness for winters, especially when

the colorless snow covered the beautiful orchards, meadows, and gardens, hiding the myriad of colors in their pale embrace.

“Lord Lucien has returned from the Citadel, my lady.”

Ayana glanced over her shoulder and smiled. “Thank you, Iezabel.” The stewardess held open the crystal door as she entered her living quarters. “Please, take me to him.”

“No need.” Lucien rose from his seat near the fireplace, the dancing glow reflected by his long hair of purest white.

“Excuse me, my lord, my lady.” Iezabel bowed and took her leave.

Ayana crossed the distance between them and took his hand.

“How are you feeling?” Lucien asked, his voice layered with concern.

“Better than usual,” Ayana said, although it was a lie. Her body had started rebelling ever since her third month. Her back was killing her, not to mention the cramped muscles, but he did not need to know that. He had enough on his mind without having to worry about her trivial discomforts.

“I presume things did not go well with your brother?” she asked, noting the distress in his eyes.

“Orion is reluctant to defy the Emperor. He is no different from my father,” Lucien said, a bitter tone in his voice.

“What happened?” Ayana asked, noticing the fear behind his eyes; fear for her.



Lucien closed his eyes. “Eydis has sent the vlarik to Argent. I do not know for how long Orion will keep them in the dark.”

Ayana felt a tug in her chest. She took a deep breath. “Alas, our time is short then.”

“As long as our child is safe, it matters not.”

Their eyes met, and she saw a churning abyss of despair in those blue orbs. No matter how she had prepared for this moment, the pain of parting drove into her like a corroded blade, numbing her mind and senses. She loathed to leave it all behind, to deny her child a normal and happy life, and most of all, to part with her beloved.

Ayana blinked through the tears. “I am sorry I brought this upon you.”

Lucien lifted her chin. “Do not blame yourself, Ayana. I chose my path with my own free will, and I would do it all over again. Do not worry, this will all be over soon.”

Her brow furrowed in anxiety. “What are you planning, Lucien?” When he did not reply, she exhaled. “Whatever it is, please be careful.”

“I will.”

“Don’t take long.” She looked into his eyes. “I will be waiting.”

A smile flickered on his lips.

“I shall come for you as soon as my work here is done. I promise,” he said. “I have to make certain they do not come after you.” His countenance wavered as he let go of her hand.

Ayana wiped her eyes and hardened her resolve. If

not for herself, she had to do it for their child.

“Orion has agreed to lend me a unit from father's Royal Guard,” Lucien told her. “They will be here for you at dawn.”

“No, not an entire unit. It will draw too much attention. Iezabel shall accompany me.” Iezabel was the only one she could count on besides Lucien, and she was better than any armed escort.

“But in your condition? A carriage would do you no harm.”

Ayana frowned, vexed by his skepticism. “You know I am not as weak as I look.” Even if not for her misplaced pride, taking to the roads was too risky, and she would have a better time evading the Empire without a fancy carriage.

A faint smile played on his lips. “In that case, it is time I returned this blade.” He unbelted his sword along with its scabbard and handed it to her.

A moonstone adorned its pommel, and a blood red sunstone glinted on its cross-guard. Buried memories flitted through her mind as she clasped the wire bound hilt. “Zivnâr,” she whispered.

“But I cannot,” she said, her hand trembling as she looked up at him. The last time she had gripped that sword was when the accursed vlarik had massacred her tribe and burned her village.

“It is yours,” Lucien said. “You will need it to keep our child from harm.” He moved closer and lightly caressed her swollen belly. His eyes shone with such devout adoration, he would go to any lengths to protect the new life growing

within her.

Ayana placed her free hand on top of his, a smile of contentment on her face. How she wished this moment would last longer, but she knew her fate would not deem it so.

Lucien pulled her into a gentle embrace and kissed her hair. “Please, be safe,” he whispered.

“I will.” Ayana did not let go, the sword dropping to the floor as she held him tighter, loath to part. She breathed into his chest, warm tears silently streaming down her cheeks.



# ( IV )

Ayana set out at the break of dawn, escorted by Iezabel and the two loyal vyáha from the Royal Guard.

It was the third day of Kilayel, first month of winter. The seasons had little control over Vanthesia's weather during the day. The incessant rainfall showed no sign of subsiding and raged on, prodded by the freezing winds that howled and screamed like frenzied wraiths.

Their horses plodded along the snow covered road, wisps of condensation trailing behind them. The resin-coated saddlebags sagged with supplies and rations they had packed for the journey. The rain cloak enclosing Ayana's sleek turquoise dress and the woolen scarf wrapped around her neck did little to shield her from the frigid cold.

Several leagues along the road, they diverted to a beaten game trail passing through the Woods of Zelian—the great forest surrounding Argent's walls. The trees on either side swayed and creaked like rotten skeletons, laid to waste by the warring tempests. Snakelike streams and rivulets gorged a mighty river that charged through the woods, a brute force of nature battling against the rocks and boulders in its path.

“River Risetta,” Iezabel said. “We'll follow its course.”

She gave Ayana a questioning glance. “It will guide us to Theos.”

Ayana nodded. “As you say.”

They followed the treacherous trail as it meandered with the river. The monotonous crunch of iron shod hooves on ice pulled Ayana into a trance-like lull. Her breath came in short bursts of white vapor, swirling and twisting into wispy clouds.

She pulled the cloak taut and wrapped her quivering arms around her chest, hoping for mercy from the ruthless Isei Ilvi.

“Well, if this rain isn’t a nuisance,” Iezabel muttered, tugging the hood down to her brow.

The dark line of trees slowly faded into the horizon behind them. Their winding path led them through steep ravines and treacherous swamps, impeding their pace. Days passed as their horses trudged on, fighting the fury of nature. The short breaks in between barely rejuvenated their strength.

On the sixteenth day of Kilayel, around dusk, they came across a small fishing village, a cluster of brown buildings on the western banks of Lake Westria. Its water shimmered like an endless pane of glass, quiet as a crypt and dark as the sky.

Ayana pulled on the reins near a grassy knoll. Lush, beautiful, and moistened land surrounded the secluded settlement, most of it cultivated into wheat fields and vegetable patches. White smoke rose from the chimneys, weaving silvery trails toward the sky.

“It is better if we keep out of the village,” Iezabel

said. “What do you think, my lady?”

“I am thinking of a hot bath and a soft bed,” Ayana answered. “I smell like a stray canine.”

Iezabel sighed. She glanced around the countryside, before pointing at a belt of trees that rimmed the lake. “We’ll set up camp near that shore. It is well hidden by the beech-maples.”

“I am certain it is very cozy too,” Ayana muttered.

Iezabel urged her horse forward. “Yes, the dense canopy will protect us from the rain and snow. It’s good enough to spend the night.”

Ayana sighed, shaking her head in exasperation. She dug her heels and guided her horse toward the shore.

They dismounted by the wooded bank, feet crunching on the snow covered ground. They led their steeds to a small clearing between a clump of trees where the snow lay sparse. Knotted branches arched overhead, thickly layered with lucid flakes.

“Fill the waterskins and water the horses,” Iezabel told the vyáha. “I’ll try and gather some information from the village.”

Ayana stifled a groan as she slumped down beneath a low branched beech, her stiff muscles protesting the movement. She massaged her swollen ankles, trying to ignore the lingering ache.

Her stomach rumbled like a small avalanche of stones, attracting a pitying look from Iezabel.

“I’ll get you some food on the way back.” With that, she disappeared between the trees.

The two vyáha unsaddled the horses and picketed them nearby. One of them kindled a small fire and went to collect water from a nearby stream, while the other pitched a tent beneath a giant oak.

A shiver ran down her spine as a bitter gust blasted through the clearing, nearly dousing the flames with its icy explosion.

Ayana's involuntary gasp attracted a worried glance from one of the vyáha. He retrieved a woolen blanket from a saddlebag and handed it to her.

She wrapped it around her shoulders, grateful for its comfort. "T...Thank you."

As if the irksome ailments of pregnancy were not enough, she had to deal with the wrath of the winter god.

Her stomach grumbled again, reminding her she had not eaten since noon. She grabbed a waterskin from her bag and took a long swig, hoping it would quell the pang of hunger until Iezabel came back with her food.

She tilted her neck and stared at the canopy, eyes following the rare silvery wafers that made it through the maze of green.

The west wind sighed among the boughs, its breath soft and soothing. Beyond the canopy, the skies changed from bruised black to dark blue as night approached. A lone star sparkled in the twilight expanse, tiny dot of shimmering white in the gaping emptiness.

As she gazed at the dark heavens, her lips began to move, humming the words that formed in her mind.



*Bright as a moon, the star shines on,  
Boughs in the wind, and clouds it borne,  
Dusk or dawn, time moves on,  
Through the darkest night, and the brightest morn.*

*May it be winter or autumn fawn,  
Through midnight shadows and the hills unworn,  
On a pale white horse she rides on,  
To the reapers haunt a soul forsworn.*

Ayana's voice faded into silence as the silvery speck of light disappeared behind a rogue cloud.

She sighed and turned back to the burning coals. Sparks flew into the air as one of the vyáha fed another log to the dying fire. She pulled the cloak taut around her, the reflected flames glimmering in her eyes.

A gloomy darkness had enveloped the countryside when Iezabel returned; a shadow detaching itself from the murky woods.

Ayana's face brightened when she saw the wrapped parcel in her hand. But her smile wavered at the anxious frown on Iezabel's face.

“What is it?”

“The villagers speak of soldiers and masked men questioning about a red haired woman,” Iezabel replied, brushing off the snow on her hood. “We can't linger here for long.”

Ayana twirled a dark lock with her forefinger. “Is it that conspicuous?”

“The dye won’t last. Not in this snow.” Iezabel handed her the package and strolled toward the tethered horses. She scratched behind their ears and fed them sugar lumps from a small pack. “We can’t be too careful.”

Ayana unwrapped the leaves covering her food.

She let out a moan as the heavenly aroma hit her nose. A steaming chop of lamb, grilled breast of a turkey, roasted potatoes, and steamed spinach.

“I hope I am allowed to finish my food before we leave?” Ayana asked, digging into the meat.

Iezabel frowned. “Yes, and you need rest.” She gave her an overall glance. “You’re frail enough as it is.”

She tossed a bone over her shoulder. “Why, thank you.”

Iezabel ignored her. “We’ll start at sunrise.”

“Hmm.” Ayana nodded, burying her teeth into a roasted potato.



# (V)

**M**orning dawned bleak and gloomy, flooding the sky with dark, bruised clouds. Ayana sighed and tugged her hood as the skies began to weep. The serene lake shivered, its calm broken by the first droplets.

She missed the sunlight sometimes. It had been so many years since she had felt its warmth on her skin.

Iezabel rode beside her, flowing gracefully with the movement of her horse. The contours of her face revealed no emotion, and the coal-black eyes remained fixed on the trail.

“Iezabel? Is everything alright?”

“I feel like crushing her skull with my own hands.” She gritted her teeth, barely paying her heed. “She has given us enough grief to last a lifetime.”

Ayana flinched. “Not the most subtle way to end a life.” She gave her a perplexed look. “Who is the unfortunate one?”

“That infernal witch Eydis from the Imperial Guard,” Iezabel replied, seething in her saddle. “She is the reason for everything. She always has been.”

“Hmm.”

Iezabel gave her a long look. “I’m grateful, my lady.”  
Something stirred in her eyes.

Ayana frowned. “What for?”

“For letting me escort you.”

“Who else would I want by my side when the *infernal witch* comes for me?” Ayana grinned.

Iezabel returned the smile and turned her eyes toward the horizon.

Ayana understood her anger toward the sorceress. Iezabel’s past was not so different from her own. She had lost her comrades to the vlarik during the incursion of Isouvien. Their current plight was the last straw to the fire within her.

Their progress was slow, since they could not move faster than a steady trot; not in her condition. They continued along the lake shore, traversing the carpet of sand and pebbles, often adorned with clumps of crocuses and tangles of honeysuckle. Ayana breathed in the intoxicating fragrance of nature—the scent of blooming shrubs mixed with the smell of wet grass.

Around midday, the frigid winds returned, each gust imparting the sheets of rain with deathly coldness. A shiver traveled down Ayana’s spine as winter’s frosty nails bit into her skin, pulling her into its stark embrace.

The steeds snorted their irritation, sensing the change in atmosphere.

“Isei Ilvi returns to torment us again.”

Iezabel sighed. “So he does.”

“Are we going the right way?” Ayana asked. The lake shore stretched as far as her eyes could see.

“How long has it been since you last glimpsed a map of Aria?” Her eyes narrowed.

Ayana laughed. “Forgive me, Iezabel.”

A sudden pang shot through her abdomen as she shifted in her saddle, forcing a gasp through her clenched jaw. The shock racked through her core and she almost slid off the horse when Iezabel’s firm hand closed around her arm.

The vyáha rushed toward them, but Iezabel waved them off. She helped Ayana dismount her saddle and led her to the shelter of a huge hornbeam.

Iezabel’s concerned face floated before her eyes. She uncorked a waterskin and handed it to her. “What happened?”

Ayana wanted to shout that very question at her body. She shrugged instead, chugging the cool water to the trickling drops. It brought back some feeling in her limbs.

“A moment of weakness,” she managed to say. “I am fine now.”

Unconvinced, Iezabel insisted she rest for some time, ignoring all of her protests. It was almost half an hour before they were back on their way. The landscape began to change—cedars and pines giving way to rocky hillocks, before stunted oaks and devons sprouted from the grass covered ground as they entered the Woodlands of Kilkrei. They traveled for the remainder of the day, taking very short breaks in between.

At dusk, a mighty roar filled the air—the roar of Kil falls, where the lake plunged down the mossy cliffs into the ravine below. The air hummed like a swarm of bees as the

tumbling water saturated it with a pale mist. As their horses trudged on, trees materialized from the fog and rain like ghouls around them, before disappearing again into the smoky whiteness.

Ayana barely kept awake as the rocking motion of her horse tried to pull her into a dizzy lull. The saddle dug into her bruised thighs. She ached all over, and her nose stung from the stench of the drenched horses. How she longed for a hot bath, and the snug fireside couches in the castle, and the warm beds...anything to alleviate the torturous hurts and throbs wrecking her body... anything to escape this hellish rain.

“It’s getting dark, my lady,” Iezabel said as the rainfall subsided to a drizzle. “We’ll make the descent tomorrow.”

Ayana nodded, too exhausted to answer.

They set up camp some distance away from the falls, so as to escape its thunderous din.

Ayana stared at the winter sky, scarce except for the pale silver crescent of the great moon. Even the hunter and the phoenix had fled the black expanse—or maybe the endless void had swallowed them.

She shot Iezabel a furtive glance. She felt a twinge of guilt for bringing her, not that her beloved stewardess would have it any other way. But was she repaying Iezabel’s kindness by putting her in harm’s way? She had never thought of it that way.

Iezabel must have felt her gaze, for she turned her head and smiled. Ayana returned the gesture, warmth spreading through her chest. She scoffed at herself. Iezabel

would have accompanied her one way or the other. They weren't just companions. They were family.

The vyáha set about preparing her food.

A stream tinkled nearby, filling the air with its soothing music. The snowfall had stopped, replaced by a cool breeze that stirred the boughs overhead.

Ayana thanked Isei Ilvi for his fleeting mercy and prayed for his prolonged grace.

The flames threw a shower of sparks into the air—a minuscule sprinkle of burning stardust. Ayana waited with barely subdued impatience as the rabbit stew simmered and spread its rich aroma across the clearing. Mixed with the odor of grilled meat, it took all her will to contain her hunger.

Iezabel handed her a bowl of steaming stew and a wide leaf laden with boiled carrots. “Here, my lady.”

Ayana eagerly accepted the food, wasting no time to dig in. “What about you? Are you not thirsty?”

“Now that you mention it.” Iezabel unclasped a steel flask from her belt and took a sip. “I am.”

Ayana raised her eyebrows.

She grinned, revealing her fangs. “Reindeer.”

“Of course it is.” Ayana shuddered.

She ate in silence. Though a bit undercooked, the meat was fairly warm, a comfort in the bone chilling climate.

Iezabel rose to her feet and went over to the horses, brushing their mane and whispering into their ears. They immediately recognized her and nuzzled at her face.

A few spans later, dinner was over and Iezabel helped Ayana to her tent. “Sleep well, my lady.”



“Thank you, Iezabel.”

She snuggled into her blankets, waiting for the warmth to creep in. The night remained silent, except for the faint buzz of crickets and the crackle of flames. Claws of loneliness clutched at her chest as she lay there, all alone. Her hand instinctively moved to her stomach. She gingerly pressed her belly and began to hum a soft Azerian lullaby from her childhood.

Ayana gasped as a nudge bumped against her hand, all her woes washing away in a wave of tender love. Her face broke into a beautiful smile of contentment—a smile to light up the darkest of nights. “I love you too, little one. More than you know.”



## (VI)

It was the fortieth night of Kilayel. Under the shelter of a tall pine, Ayana's horse stood like a statue on a grassy pedestal as she surveyed her twilight surroundings. Her eyes swept across the frothing ford and the wooded slope on the opposite bank of River Endor. A cool breeze whispered and rustled through the leaves like a host of lost souls.

"The Ford of Arnoth," Iezabel commented, urging her steed toward the shallow waters. "We are crossing into Lycanth."

Ayana followed, the two vyáha bringing up the rear. The water swirled around the stones and pebbles, tinkling the melody of nature, disturbed only by the splash and clatter of hooves. Icy vapors rose from the river and weaved into a blanket of mist over its surface. The cold tendrils seeped through her clothes, sending sharp tingles along her skin. She braced herself as her white steed heaved and pulled itself onto the rugged bank.

Dry land at last.

It seldom rained in Lycanth. The clouds that veiled the Vanthesian skies during the day did not extend beyond the Endor.

The two vyáha of the Royal Guard pulled on the reins and stopped their steeds. “We have to turn back, Lady Ayana,” one of them said. “It will be dawn soon. Sirena’s cloak will not protect us from Zhurog in the land of wolves.”

She nodded. If sunlight touched the pure-blooded vampyres, it would burn their skin and incinerate their flesh. “You have my gratitude-”

“On guard!” Iezabel’s voice reached them moments before a dark figure dropped to the ground, mere paces in front of Ayana.

She froze, wide eyes fixed on the creature before her—the burned, shadowy mess of a face under that dark tattered hood, and from that roiling darkness, its fiery eyes blazing like molten coal. Fear clutched her heart, turning her insides into liquid. She had seen them once before; on the day her village had burned to the ground.

The vlarik drew its sword, the blade of which was darker than that of Zivnâr. Before Iezabel or her guards could react, two more appeared on either side, detaching themselves from the murky foliage astride their steeds.

Ayana dug her heels into her horse’s flanks, but to no avail. It had turned to stone for all its movement.

She dismounted and edged away from the creature, a trembling hand reaching for the hilt.

“We meet again, Ayana of Iliria,” it said in a voice as smooth as velvet. “Our master sends his regards.”

“No.” It could not be the same one... It could not be...

Ayana’s breath caught in her lungs as the traumatic

memories flooded her mind—the bloody standard bearing the dreaded insignia of a crow with an eyeball in its beak, the screams that filled the air as they slaughtered the villagers in cold blood, Keîn Záká reaching for her with a black blade protruding from his chest, and the hooded shadow with eyes of flame standing over his corpse.

The creature pointed with its sword, the tip aimed at her heart. “Your time has co-”

Iezabel’s sleek blade shot out from its mouth like a tongue of steel, a moment before her spiked boot connected with the vlarik’s back.

The dead juniper at the water’s edge groaned under the impact as the creature smashed into its trunk and tumbled to the ground amidst a shower of dessicated branches.

The two vyáha leaped off their steeds and drew their swords. Menacing growls resonated through their helms as they hurled themselves upon the dark creatures, blades tearing through the air like silver lightning.

The black steeds reared in terror, almost throwing off their riders. But the vlarik were quick. With one fluid movement, they were standing on the ground, gloved fists clenched around the hilt of their naked blades as they countered the deadly blows.

The first vlarik was back on its feet, dark blood pouring from its mouth. “We cannot be killed, but by our maker,” all three said in unison.

“We’ll see about that.” Iezabel flicked her sword, shaking off the dark fluid from the blade.

Ayana retreated toward the water, her mind still in

turmoil. Zivnâr hung limp in her hand, its tip tracing a furrow in the ground. She had to get away from them. She had to...

She froze when her eyes fell upon the fourth vlarik. It stood on the opposite bank, garbed in its cloak of darkness. “Iezabel,” she murmured, fear coiling at her heart.

The creature stepped into the freezing water and walked toward her—an accursed wraith of the night.

Ayana shrank back as terror once again wrapped her in its inescapable embrace. She managed to unclench her teeth, but all that came out was a whimper. “Lucien.”

That was when she felt it—the smallest nudge, driving away her darkest fears like the dawning sun. Her hand flew to her abdomen.

*I will protect you.*

She gripped the hilt of Zivnâr, the black veil of helplessness lifting from her eyes. That monster had killed Keîn Zâka. It had burned her village. It had murdered her friends. It had left Iezabel for dead. And now it meant harm for her little one.

The looming vlarik stopped before her, those fire filled pits boring into her skull.

Ayana stood her ground, letting that one image envelop her mind—the dark creature standing over Keîn Zâka's corpse, its blade dripping with his blood.

Hatred and vengeance flowed through her veins as Ayana gripped Zivnâr with both hands and swung. A jarring shock zipped through her arm as the vlarik's sword caught her blade with a resounding peal.

“Watch out!” Iezabel's voice rang out through the

darkness.

Ayana deflected its sword and ducked, moment before a steel blade buried itself between the creature's eyes.

It grunted in annoyance, its hand reaching out to remove Iezabel's dagger from its face. That was all the distraction she needed. Ayana concentrated all her anger into that one thrust and plunged Zivnâr into the vlarik's chest.

A wicked laugh erupted from the churning blackness of its mouth as iron fingers closed around her neck. "You cannot kill me with a weapon as pathetic as you, Flame Hair."

Ayana yanked at her sword, but it would not budge. To her astonishment, the sunstone on Zivnâr's cross-guard glowed like a burning chunk of coal. The creature stiffened and let out a bloodcurdling scream as veins of molten flame slithered along the blade and into its mutilated body, incinerating it from within.

"Agh!" A sharp pang lanced through her core.

She slumped on the grass, Zivnâr dropping beside her. A metallic taste hit her tongue and she coughed, spraying the grass with blood. She steadied herself, trying to hold on to her fading consciousness.

"My lady!" Iezabel rushed to her side.

Her fallen adversary dragged itself behind her, its severed stumps leaving a trail of black blood in its wake.

Iezabel picked Zivnâr and drove it through the back of its skull, pinning it to the ground. The creature disintegrated into a pile of smoldering embers.

She tossed the sword to one of the vyáha. "Kill them!"

The vlarik gave one look at the smoking ashes that were their companions and bolted into the surrounding darkness, the vyáha in hot pursuit. Iezabel grabbed a water-skin from the saddle hook and rushed toward Ayana. She knelt beside her and cradled her shivering form.

“It’s going to be alright, my lady,” she whispered, wiping the blood from her chin. She uncorked the water-skin and held it to her lips. “It’s going to be alright.”

Ayana took a few sips and let out a shuddering breath. “What is happening to me, Iezabel?”



## (VII)

Lezabel's keen eyes swept around the clearing as she paced the camp, alert for any sign of intruders. The woods remained unusually calm, except for the faint watery murmur of Endor. She brushed off the snow on her hood and shoulders, cursing the skies. The cold did not affect her much, but her sodden clothes did annoy her, what with the icy condensation crawling down her skin.

She had never seen Ayana more frightened and traumatized than she had been in the presence of those accursed creatures. The vyáha had taken care of the runaway vlarik before returning to Argent, but that did not mean the threat was past them. In fact, Ayana was in more danger than ever. How those creatures had found them was still a mystery to her.

Lezabel rushed forward as Ayana emerged from her tent, stumbling on her feet as she tried to stuff them into a pair of fur lined boots. She helped her into them and forced her into a warm cloak, before wrapping a scarf around her neck.

Ayana might be tougher than most humans, but even she wasn't immune to the ailments of pregnancy. To make it



worse, she was due in less than two months.

As she brushed back the loose strands from Ayana's forehead, Iezabel noticed a pale sheen on her cheeks, the dark circles under her eyes standing out in stark contrast to her countenance. Their long and arduous journey had begun to take its toll on her. Even with her inhuman recuperation, she couldn't afford to be on the run for long.

"Come, my lady. Your food is ready."

"Iezabel," Ayana whispered, her face acquiring an agitated look as she pointed over her head. "Do you see that?"

Iezabel's hands grabbed the hilt of her sword as she pivoted on her feet, eyes roving the woods and sky. Her fingers tightened when she spotted it—a thin column of smoke rising from the tree tops far south. "In the name of Avnán!"

Ayana's voice trembled. "Do you think it is them?"

Iezabel shook her head. "Vlarik don't need a fire. Could be soldiers from Aregon."

Her eyes swept the southern edge of the clearing. She shifted toward the soft crunch of dry leaves, fingers closing around the leather bound grip of her blade.

The foliage parted, and five men, all armed with bows and long swords, strode into the clearing. Clad in brown outfits, they blended well with the surroundings, making it difficult to spot them from afar. All of them wore masks and hoods.

Iezabel slipped out of her cloak and let it cascade to the ground, revealing the leather armor underneath. She

extended her senses, trying to feel her adversaries. Sweet alluring scent, warm blood, and a steady heartbeat.

Humans.

Not worth their consideration, but she wasn't taking any chances, not when it came to Ayana.

She hissed under her breath and crouched, ready to pounce. If they laid one finger on Ayana...

One of them removed his mask, making a sign of truce with his hand. The others lowered their weapons and took a step back. "We mean you no harm, Ayana of Iliria. You have my word."

Long brown hair framed his face, the shadow of his cheekbones merging with the faint stubble along his jaw. Iezabel scanned his gray eyes, but couldn't detect any hostility. She pointed her dagger at him. "Are you the leader?"

The stranger inclined his head. "Zelroth Blackwood of the Resistance, Captain of the Fifth Company, Southern Command."

Iezabel scoffed. "Rebels."

"What do you want?" Ayana asked, her hand on the pommel of Zivnâr.

"The Imperial Guard is on the move," he said. "They know who you are. It won't be long before they find you." He paused for a moment for his words to sink in. "We want you to come with us."

Iezabel's eyes narrowed. "You consider us fools."

"We don't have much time," Zelroth said. "They are coming for Lady Ayana. They know she is headed to Telos."

She stiffened. That explained the vlarik. They had not

found them by chance after all. She growled in frustration, nails biting into the hilt of her dagger. “How do you know that? How do *they* know that?” There was no way they could’ve known about their destination...

“Eydis,” Zelroth answered. “The witch’s eyes and ears extend far and wide. She knows where you’re going, and so does the Emperor and rest of the Imperial Guard.”

Iezabel swore.

Of course it was her. If only she could get her hands on that vile snake. She clenched her fists and glared at the rebels, barely able to contain her rage. If she sensed one hint of deception from them...

“I have nothing to do with the Resistance,” Ayana stated. “Why would you want to help me?”

Zelroth shook his head. “We know as much as you do, maybe even less.” He sighed at her questioning look. “We received our orders on the day before, halfway through our assignment. I’m not ranked high enough to know the specifics, but you were important enough for the Commander to give up on a convoy of weapons and supplies. He probably wants you alive for the same reason the Empire wants you dead.”

Iezabel hid her relief. At least he did not know *everything*. She would hate to silence them all, especially in front of Lady Ayana. She did not trust them or their organization. It still troubled her how easily these men had found them. If the Resistance knew about Ayana, then the Empire definitely knew more.

“Will you come with us?” Zelroth asked. “We can

offer you sanctuary from the Imperial Guard.”

Ayana turned to her. “What do you think, Iezabel?” she whispered. “Can we trust them?”

“Of course we can’t.” Iezabel threw her an incredulous look. “It might be a trap.”

“Or maybe it is not,” Ayana said, careful to keep her voice down. “They certainly think of me as a potential ally. Besides, Lucien cannot hold off the Imperial Guard for too long. We might need their assistance.”

Iezabel gave her a searching glance. She saw the pain and guilt in her eyes—guilt at the prospect of leaving her husband at the mercy of the Empire. But he could take care of himself. She needed to worry about her own wellbeing.

She hated to admit it, but she wasn’t in a position to defend Ayana if one of the Imperial Guard showed up. They had survived the vlarik only because of Zivnâr.

“Perhaps you are right,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean I trust them. It is your decision to make. I’ll always have your back no matter what.”

Ayana nodded. “I know you will.”

She turned her gaze to the rebels.

Zelroth raised his eyebrows. “Well?”

“Where is this sanctuary of yours?”

Zelroth considered her for a moment before answering. “Our hideout lies in Jedborough. It is many leagues from the town, well hidden in the folds of Arroin.”

Iezabel nodded once, confirming the honesty of his answer. Whatever his Commander’s intentions, Zelroth was telling the truth, or at least he thought he was.

Ayana smiled. “I apologize for our rudeness,” she said, inclining her head. “We cannot be too careful with strangers.”

Iezabel sheathed her dagger. “Remember, Captain. If any of you step within three yards of Lady Ayana, I’ll gut you like a trout.”

Zelroth inclined his head, an uncertain smile on his lips. “We’ll keep that in mind.”



## ( VIII )

**I**t took almost two hours for Zelroth and his company to reach their camp. The sun had reached the apex when the labyrinth of trees parted to reveal a large clearing littered with tents and half doused fires. Most of his unit lazed and grovelled in the grass, scattered about like victims of a windstorm.

Zalmer and Cain stood beside the tethered steeds.

“Welcome back, Captain.” Cain straightened. “I see you succeeded.”

Zelroth sighed. “You can say that.” He jumped down from his saddle and gestured at one of the unconscious men. “What’s wrong with these fools?”

“The ‘crates of weapons’ from North Warren turned out to be barrels of ale from Appleby,” Cain said, a wide grin plastered on his face.

“I don’t think their condition will improve any time soon.” Zalmer sighed. “Just our luck these spineless newbies got assigned to our unit.”

“As if my pride hasn’t been dragged through the dirt already,” Zelroth muttered, trying not to clench his jaw.

“We didn’t think you’d return this soon, Captain, or

we would've dumped them in a brook." Cain exchanged a smirk with Zalmer.

Zelroth glanced warily in Ayana's direction. "Be careful around them," he said in a lowered voice. "Especially the short-haired brunette."

"You don't need to tell me twice, Captain," Zalmer replied.

"Wake these slobbering idiots," Zelroth said, his annoyance brimming to the surface. "The Commander doesn't tolerate tardiness. I'm in enough trouble as it is."

"Yes, Captain." Cain strode around, shouting at his companions and kicking them awake. Most of them grumbled unintelligibly and rolled over.

Zelroth waited impatiently as the sober ones gathered around him, awaiting his orders. He sent three of them to scout their path and the others to stow the tents and prepare the horses.

"Where are they headed?" asked a sharp voice behind him.

Zelroth whipped around and saw Ayana's escort staring down at him. Such posture and grace. She was no ordinary aide.

And her steed was as noiseless as a stalking predator!

"Lookouts," Zelroth replied, steadying his nerves. "We have to keep an eye out for the Empire's patrols."

She gave a nonchalant nod, throwing a worried glance at Ayana, who was conversing with one of his men. He saw doubt and distaste in her eyes as she scanned the clearing.

The lifeless morons were still rolling around on the

ground.

What remained of his pride evaporated with a scornful sniff from the aide. Perhaps bringing them to the camp hadn't been such a good idea after all.

Her black horse shuffled its hooves and flicked its tail, nostrils flaring as it tasted the heavy air.

"Magnificent beast," Zelroth commented, gesturing at the thoroughbred. Anything to distract her from the pitiful state of his unit. "What's his name?"

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Stormrider."

The horse shook its mane, a nervous snicker vibrating through its muzzle.

She tensed, eyes darting toward the trees.

Zelroth followed her gaze, moments before a masked man rode into the clearing.

The newcomer jumped down from his saddle and strode toward him, brown cloak almost trailing on the ground. His wary eyes cast a brief glance at the aide before turning to him.

"Captain," he acknowledged.

Zelroth recognized that voice. "Halvin! How did you find us?"

"I might as well have been tracking a rampaging boar," he replied. "Never mind that. There are more pressing matters. Iowen Ilimoira of the Imperial Guard was sighted at Caarn. I heard she joined forces with a company of soldiers from North Warren." He jerked his chin at Lady Ayana. "She's in danger."

"In that case, we can't stay in one place for long,"



Zelroth replied. “Head to Theos. I want a false trail leading to the port of Duan. You know what to do.”

Halvin gave a curt nod before climbing back onto his saddle.

Without a backward glance, he took off at a trot into the green depths. The thudding hoof-beats gradually faded as the underbrush closed around him.

Lady Ayana’s aide raised an eyebrow. “Who was it?”

“One of our spies from North Warren,” Zelroth answered, looking up at her. “We have to leave now. Inform your mistress. Iowen is one adversary we need to avoid at all costs.”



# (IX)

Ayana swayed to the rhythm of her snowy steed as it trotted along the wooded trail. Zelroth and three of his men rode at the lead, followed by Iezabel. The others brought up the rear in a frivolous and disorderly manner.

The towering trees basked in the bright glow of noon, their skeletal arms grasping at each other. The crunch of dried leaves under the iron shod hooves was often drowned out by the raucous babble of voices that permeated the air. Iezabel's clenched jaw kept twitching as she threw frequent glares at the noisy rebels.

One of Zelroth's men, whom Ayana assumed was his lieutenant, noticed the look of disdain on Iezabel's face and chuckled. "Most of them are new recruits," he said. "It usually takes at least one battle for them to fall in line."

She braced herself as Iezabel's features twisted in outrage. "And your Commander saw it fit to send a pack of unruly misfits to escort Lady Ayana?"

Ayana bit down on her lower lip when she caught his expression. If he ever regretted opening his mouth, it must have been now. Before he made the situation worse, Zelroth

intervened. “Pardon us, Madame Iezabel. Our unit was nearest to your location. We had little choice in this matter.”

Iezabel pursed her lips and turned her gaze to the horizon.

Ayana had no complaints. Traveling with this lot was undeniably better than having a group of stiff-necks breathing down her back. But she knew enough not to share that particular thought with Iezabel.

Their course took them through several grasslands. Ayana hummed to herself as the cold winds of winter caressed her face. Her back still ached, but not more than usual. Dry ground stretched around her, free of snow and rainwater. Though glad to be free of the rainfall, she was unable to shake the uneasiness of being in unfamiliar territory.

Her chest tightened at the thought of home, of Lucien. She wondered what he was up to. If they knew about her, he was in danger. He might get ousted from the Imperial Guard for protecting and hiding her.

“He can take care of himself,” Iezabel said, as if reading her mind.

“It is my fault.” Ayana’s voice broke. “All I have ever given him is trouble.”

“You’re hunted without reason. You think that’s your fault?” Iezabel questioned. “Don’t beat yourself up for things you cannot control,” she said sternly. “They can’t accuse him as long as you don’t fall into their hands.”

Ayana stared at the snowy mane of her horse with a downcast expression. There was truth in her words. Lucien

would not want her to worry about him. He had done his part, and now it was her turn. After all, she had promised Lucien to protect their child.

“I suppose you are right,” she murmured.

It was nearly dusk when the grasslands finally gave way to the rugged woodlands of Lycanth. Unlike the northern forests, here the trees grew far apart on rough, uneven land. The wind blew back toward east, weaving through the stunted yews. A strange haunted aura permeated the air, an invisible force of nature resisting intruders and invaders.

Zelroth’s men mostly kept to themselves, occasionally throwing wary glances in Iezabel’s direction. Ayana saw no harm in socializing with them, but she did not want to irritate Iezabel. Even after almost a week, she eyed them with suspicion and contempt.

“Why do you give them a cold shoulder?” Ayana asked. “They have not been unkind to us.”

“And you already trust them.” Her eyes narrowed in exasperation. “You are in no condition to defend yourself, my lady, so please stay on your guard. Not everyone is as they appear.”

“You are too uptight, Iezabel.”

“I have to be,” she said through her teeth. “You’ve always been too careless.”

The company halted at a signal from Zelroth. “We can’t go any further today. It’s already dark, and I sense a storm ahead.”

Ayana peered through the gaps in the canopy. A black

mass of coalescing thunderclouds had gathered on the horizon, slowly unfurling their dark mantle across the heavens. They churned like depraved wraiths in the pits of hell, resonating the air with stagnant energy. The blades of grass swayed in the surging wind, dancing to the raging rhythm of nature.

It felt like they were back in Vanthesia.

“How long till we reach Jedborough?” Iezabel asked.

“Less than a week, if all goes well,” Zelroth replied as he led them to a rock outcropping near the forest fringe. The great monolith loomed above the sea of green, a bulwark against the frenzied winds.

Ayana watched as Zelroth’s men kindled a fire and prepared food from their sack of supplies. Some went to gather more firewood for the night, while others set a pot of stew over the fire and fried lumps of seasoned meat on spits.

Iezabel pitched their tent a little farther from the rebel camp.

“I’ll be back in a while,” she said, patting the flask at her waist.

Ayana nodded.

“Watch yourself,” she said, before slipping into the shadows.

Ayana found Captain Zelroth perched on a fallen tree, gazing at the flames with a distant look in his eyes. She walked over and gingerly lowered herself onto the parched trunk.

He did not seem to notice her.

“How long have you been with the Resistance?” she

asked casually.

Zelroth's eyes jerked to her face, startled from his reverie. He turned his gaze back to the flames before answering. "Since I lost my family to the Empire's soldiers." He closed his eyes and sighed. "Twenty years have passed."

"I am sorry," she murmured.

"My daughter. I lost her during the lycan rebellions." He entwined his fingers and pressed them to the bridge of his nose. "The renegades had set their camp near the village. When the Empire's soldiers arrived, they did not differentiate villager from outsider. They killed innocents and insurgents alike without mercy."

Ayana wondered what he saw as he stared into the flames. One could only imagine how terrible it must be for him to have lost his only child. She sniffed, hastily brushing her damp eyes with the heel of her hand.

"Within days, my wife gave in to her sorrow and illness." A bitter tone crept into his voice. "They were torn from me," he whispered.

A deep sorrow stirred in his stormy eyes. She continued to gaze at his still form, unable to express her pity. He had lost almost everything that anchored him to this world. A blade of empathy stabbed her heart as his expression flitted through sadness, agony, and regret.

He sighed. "My sister and I joined the Resistance soon after."

The fire crackled, throwing a flurry of sparks into the air. The rebels continued their merriment, shouting and laughing, oblivious to their captain's grief. Their mindless

banter, which until now, a noise in the background, stood out in contrast to the awkward silence.

Zelroth started. “I apologize, Lady Ayana,” he said, as if he had just awakened. “I did not mean to bother you.”

“It is alright,” she said. “Pain and sorrow are meant to be shared.” She gave him a gentle smile. “I hope you find your peace.”

“You are too kind, my lady.” He rose to his feet and bowed. “If there is anything you need, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Ayana nodded, watching him disappear into the surrounding maze of darkness.

She turned her attention to the rebels, a lump forming in her throat. Now she understood why they chose to fight, even though they were not meant for war. It was all in their eyes, hidden behind the superficial smiles—the consuming anguish, the thirst for vengeance, and a manic hunger to rejoin their loved ones.

Her gaze drooped to the dancing flames.

The stew simmered, spreading a rich aroma across the small glade.

By the time it was ready, Iezabel had returned from her hunt. As expected, she did not allow Ayana to touch anything until she had forced one of the rebels to taste a portion of her share.

Ayana rolled her eyes. “Satisfied?”

“Can’t be too careful,” Iezabel said.

Ayana had not consumed food as spicy as this since her childhood with the Azerian tribes. The meat, though

exquisite, made her taste buds scream in agony. Even the fried potatoes tasted pretty good, though she had to empty a full waterskin after.

She barely finished eating when the wind picked up, howling and tearing at the leaves. Cold mist saturated the air as sheets of rain pelted against the leafy roof overhead. Even the dense canopy did not provide enough cover from the hissing tears of the woeful sky.

“It’s supposed to be winter,” Iezabel muttered. “I’d rather endure the snow.”

Branched lightning lanced and flickered through the heaving blackness, great veins of light forged into forked weapons of destruction.

She winced as a peal of thunder lashed through the clouds, shaking the very ground with its resonating whip. The steeds neighed and pawed at the ground, tugging at their restraints.

“Goodnight, Iezabel.”

Ayana ducked inside her tent before the stinging rain drenched her clothes. Gusts of wind battered at the trees, which groaned under the onslaught. Only the rocky outcrop protected the tents as they strained on their pegs.

A gasp escaped her lips, before it turned into a giggle as she rested her hand protectively on her belly. “I love you too, little one.”

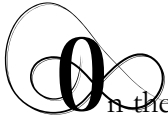
The gods of nature were slow to appease and continued their assault till past midnight, before they advanced to conquer the eastern skies in their rumbling chariots.



Ayana breathed a sigh of relief and slipped into an uneasy slumber.



# (Y)



On the forty-eighth day of Kilayel, the hills of Jedborough came into view. Ayana inhaled the cool breeze as it kissed her face, breathing in its sublime essence. The sun hid behind the rocky mounds, peeking through the gray fangs of the valley. A sweet fragrance of wild orchids hung in the air, luring them into the beyond—the Vale of Arroin.

They had traveled for many leagues after their last break. The soreness in her thighs had worsened, and her limbs felt heavy as lead. A ringing buzz echoed in her ears, slowly pounding into her skull. She yearned for the journey to end. Though Zelroth had promised they would reach the base within a few days, it felt like weeks had passed since then.

On either side, the indomitable cliffs loomed, mysterious and quiet as a tomb. Ayana gazed at the rough-hewn crags with a sense of awe. Sly tentacles of mist fumbled at the protruding knees of the cliffs, searching for a dark crevice to crawl into.

A shallow river wound through the valley, fed by the weeping waterfalls that poured from the gashes along the rugged flanks. The cold winds tugged at the frothing curtains, moaning and sighing in despair.

Their steeds plodded on, hooves clacking on the loose pebbles, a forlorn music in the vale of shadows. Miles turned into leagues as they rode on, tiny specks in the giant bowl of nature.

Ayana gazed at the golden-hued sky on the horizon. Her mind wandered to the capital. How was Lucien doing? Had they figured out his connection to her? The Emperor would not accuse Lucien of treason and risk the Ironfang allegiance, but then again, Lucien was not on good terms with his father, Orpheus.

“Are you alright, my lady?”

Ayana nodded. “Yes, only my head feels a little heavy.”

“You need proper rest,” Iezabel said, her eyes filled with concern. “Anyway, I talked to the captain. He says it won’t be long before we reach their hideout.”

“Hmm.”

The shadows grew longer and darker, enveloping the sky and ground in a veil of dusk. As they advanced through the desolate folds, howls of lament pierced through the trees—a requiem to fallen kin. The sound sent icy prickles along her arms, making her stuff them into the folds of her cloak.

Their path spanned for miles as it winded, rose, and fell, until they mounted a rise and gazed over the trees below them.

“Is that it?” Ayana asked, her eyes widening.

Zelroth nodded. “We are almost there.”

Some distance ahead jutted a great stone wall, a mass of solid shadow stretching from one cliff to another. Heavy

mist clung to the ground, obscuring and crawling up the ruined ramparts. The fort was ancient, a hundred years old, or maybe a thousand. Large vines and creepers encroached the battlements, mottled fingers of Elyzia trying to pull down the mighty creation of mortals.

Three gigantic stone statues rose from the darkness where the towers would be, the battlements on level with their knees. Untouched by time and nature, all three wore ornate crowns, with long hair cascading down their shoulders. Their hands clutched the hilt of their swords, the points planted between their feet.

The details were etched with perfection, missing not even the lines on their faces or the intricate pattern on their armors. All three bore a different crest on their breastplates, partially hidden in the gloom of dusk. On all three crowns was engraved a single mark, a trident similar to that on the Atlantian crest.

Ayana's breath caught in her lungs when her eyes rested on one of their swords. It bore an uncanny resemblance to Zivnâr, the sword strapped to her side.

"Who are they?" Ayana asked. The one holding Zivnâr had to be *him*, but she did not recognize the other two sculptures.

"No one knows," Zelroth replied. "This stronghold is older than the Empire itself. We chose it as our temporary base since it's well hidden and easily defended. There are many others like this across Aria, all of them falling into ruin, remnants of a long forgotten time."

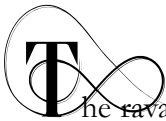
"The sword," Iezabel whispered. She pointed at the

nearest statue, her eyes wide with awe. “Is that...?”

Ayana nodded. “Ilirion, the fallen general.”



# (XI)



The ravaged gates gaped wide open, a doorway to the city of fallen kings. The full moon shone bright in the midnight sky, bathing the ruins with its pale radiance. Ayana saw no sentinels along the parapet. The high buildings, once rearing in their glory, lay broken, damned by their makers. An eerie silence enveloped the ancient remains, as if waiting in anticipation for their arrival.

“I don’t sense a living thing in this desolation,” Iezabel’s voice pierced through the gloom.

Zelroth chuckled. “Patience, Madame Iezabel.”

They continued along the cobbled path, the clacking hooves too loud against the flagstones. Ancient oaks and other strange trees reared over them, pulling and tearing into the foundations of the forsaken city in an attempt to reclaim their territory. A strange odor hung in the air—of mildew and dead soil.

Ayana almost jumped out of her skin when a soundless shadow passed behind one of the dark windows. “What was that?”

Iezabel drew her dagger, her eyes sweeping across the bleak alleyways.

“Must be the watchers,” Zelroth said. “Don’t pay them heed.”

“I’m beginning to question our choice,” Iezabel muttered, sheathing her blade.

They followed the main street, making a turn near a cracked fountain. The swirling fog seemed to gather at its base—snakes of mist slithering toward the sculpted crest. Numerous weather-worn pillars leaned on either side, barely supported by the knotted vines that moored them to their caved-in structures.

An hour later, they reached the last building along the crumbling avenue. Across a gentle slope strewn with primeval yews loomed a great cliff, its face carved into two giant pillars supporting an ornate arch. The sanguine moon cast the ancient edifice into an other-worldly contrast, a glowing tribute to the carvers of old.

“This was once a temple to the gods,” Zelroth said. “The only structure in this city which remains undamaged.”

“Remained,” Iezabel said. “Certainly you rebels have defiled it by now.”

Zelroth raised his eyebrows. “You believe in the gods?”

“Belief and faith are two different things.”

He shrugged. “Faith was never my strong suit.” His lips pulled up at her look of annoyance. “Unfortunately, the truth of the yester-era is veiled from us, otherwise we would have known for certain.”

Ayana did believe in them, the Algilad as they were called by the Azerians. A chill crept down her spine as Keîn

Záka's tales rushed through her mind—bloody sagas of betrayals, uprisings and exiles. *Pray to them, and they will grant you good fortune*, he had told her. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind. “Sometimes ignorance is better than knowledge.”

Zelroth chuckled. “That might be true.”

He spurred his horse toward the cliff and they followed.

A brisk wind swept across the grassy expanse, licking it with an icy caress.

Ayana wondered if this city belonged to that bygone era, if her unremembered ancestor once sat on its throne.

The captain stopped his horse near the cliff and announced his arrival to the archway of stone. “It is I, Zelroth Blackwood, Captain of the Fifth Unit.”

A man clad in a dark leather armor stepped out of the shadows and surveyed them. “Welcome back, Captain.”

He turned and placed his hand on the wall and muttered, “Venta.”

With a great rumbling noise, the stone wall parted at the center and the two halves swung inward, letting a pale glow spill out from within—a smoldering maw of some frozen primordial beast.

Zelroth jumped down from his saddle and walked up to the armored man. “Send word to the Commander. She is here.”

He nodded, before disappearing behind the door.

“May I escort you inside?” Zelroth asked. “Your horses will be sheltered and fed in our stables.”



Ayana nodded and dismounted from her steed.

Iezabel unpacked the saddlebags before handing over the reins to Zelroth's men.

As they entered the threshold, the great doors slid shut behind them, a low thud reverberating through the bowels of stone.



## (XII)

Ayana squinted until her eyes adjusted to the bright glow. They had entered a circular entrance chamber with many doorways branching off in different directions. Sentinels garbed in steel armor loomed beside each entrance, gauntleted fists clenched around their sleek halberds.

She stepped forward, eyes wide with awe. An elaborate hallway extended before her, illuminated by large bronze braziers along the stone wall. Brilliant flames danced on burning coals, swaying and flickering to their own crackly rhythm. The smooth polished floor reflected the high vaulted ceiling above, an expanse of milky white marble flecked with delicate veins of gray.

“I’ll take my leave, Lady Ayana.” Zelroth inclined his head. “The Commander will be here any span.”

Ayana nodded. “Thank you, Captain.”

He and his men marched into one of the doorways, their cloaks trailing behind them.

At the far end of the hallway stood an ornate altar, bare and unadorned, atop which loomed a giant sculpture of a female deity. The trident in her hand was raised in silent defiance against the lords of the sky.

High cheekbones and arched eyebrows enhanced her fierce beauty. A sapphire encrusted circlet held her flaxen tresses as they cascaded down her shoulders in a tumble of flowing marble. A steel and gold battle armor enclosed her sleek figure, with the familiar crest of a trident emblazoned on her chest.

The sculpture was identical to the bronze statues that graced the temples of Azerian tribes. As she gazed at those cold gray eyes, Keîn Zâka's tales echoed through her mind. It was the likeness of Bia Ilvia, the very goddess whom she was supposed to awaken.

She sighed. *Are you even real?*

“Welcome to my base, Lady Ayana.”

She tore her gaze from the altar and fixed it on the hulking man who had appeared from one of the doorways.

Dark crescent brows arched over his eyes, with angular cheekbones carved down to a prominent jaw, all beneath a dome of close cropped hair. The exuberant smile on his lips radiated indomitable spirit and energy. His weathered features and keen intelligent eyes spoke of many years of experience on the battlefield. He wore a purple cape over his broad shoulders, a steel plated leather armor underneath.

Iezabel moved closer to her side, eyes narrowed into slits, hand on the pommel of her dagger.

The man inclined his head. “Cornelius Hunt, Base Commander.” His deep voice resonated with power and authority.

Ayana curtsied in return. “It is a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he replied, his lips pulling wider. “I hope your journey was a pleasant one?”

She shrugged, a half-smile on her lips. “As pleasant as it could be.”

His countenance immediately turned apologetic. “Ah, how discourteous of me! We can discuss these matters on the morrow. You must be tired.” Not waiting for an answer, he turned to one of the pages behind him. “Escort our guests to their quarters.”

“As you bid, my lord.”

The Commander gave her a slight bow. “Have a pleasant night, Lady Ayana.”

“You too, Commander.”

Accompanied by Iezabel, Ayana followed the page as he led them through one of the doorways. Surprisingly, it opened into a wide passage with more doors on either side.

“Something tells me this wasn’t a part of this temple,” Iezabel said, her disapproving gaze scanning the smooth stone walls.

“Madame Zelrine said it was remade during the great rebellion,” the page replied, “for people like us to hide from evil soldiers.”

Ayana’s eyes narrowed as she studied his scrawny form. His dimpled face had barely lost its baby fat; a boy too young to be a page. “How old are you?”

“Twelve years.”

“What are you doing in a revolutionary base?”

“Madame Zelrine brought me here.” He slowed his strut. “I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Oh.” From what she had gleaned from Zelroth’s men, almost everyone in this base had lost their families and homes. “I am sorry.”

“Here.” He stopped before an ornate door at the end of the passage.

He gave her a curt bow and ambled back to the entrance chamber.

Ayana turned the overwrought silver handle and walked into a richly furnished bedchamber. A crystal chandelier hung from the elaborate ceiling, the wide space filled with its warm radiance. The chamber itself was bigger than she had anticipated, with an attached bathing chamber and a separate lavatory. Apart from a large bed that occupied most of the space, a couple of ornate chairs sat near a circular table in one corner and a huge wardrobe occupied another.

“It is not at all as I expected.”

Iezabel closed the door and dumped the bags near the wooden cabinet. “Now sleep all you want.”

Ayana unbelted her sword and placed it on the bed. “First, I need a bath.”

“As you wish, my lady,” Iezabel said, lips quivering at her exhilaration. “You must be hungry. I’ll have them bring over some food.”

Ayana nodded, giving her an eager smile. “That would be nice.”

She dug into her pack and grabbed a fresh set of underclothes, a towel, and her favorite soap, before sauntering into the bath. She hung her garments and glanced around, the

fragrance of crushed blossoms heavy in the air. She smiled in contentment, breathing in the divine scent.

A large bubbled pool occupied most of the floor, made from the same myriad of tiles that formed a wonderful mosaic beneath her feet. It reflected the dim glow from the intricate candle holders jutting from the turquoise-blue walls.

Ayana undressed and slipped into the alluring pool. The water frothed and foamed like a hot spring surrounded by lilies and roses. The cocoon of scented liquid enveloped her in its embrace, tendrils of ecstasy seeping into her very pores. It was so calm and comforting, she could stay here all night, away from the world that meant her harm.

She closed her eyes and submerged, staying under till her lungs hurt. She slowly extended her arms and rose to the surface, letting the warm water soothe and relax her aching muscles.

*It's been so long.*



## ( XIII )

Ayana woke to the sound of Iezabel's voice, eyes heavy with sleep. Her body throbbed all over, and even shifting her muscles caused her agony.

Instead of relieving the ache, her slumber had elevated it further.

She rolled over and pulled a pillow over her head.

"Your breakfast is ready, Lady Ayana." Iezabel's voice sounded beside her.

"Hmm."

She did not feel like getting up. It took all her will to push aside the covers and climb to her feet.

She almost stumbled on the plush sheepskin carpet, but Iezabel grasped her hand.

"I'm tired."

"I know." Iezabel helped her toward the lavatory. "But the Commander might call on you anytime. You have to be ready."

She released her grip and half-closed the door behind her.

Ayana walked over to the marble basin and gazed into the clear liquid. A haggard face stared back at her, dark circles

under a pair of slightly sunken eyes. The black dye had worn off, and her hair gleamed wine red. She sighed and splashed some cold water on her face.

Her eyes darted around the small chamber.

Iezabel had stocked the granite shelves with her favored toiletries.

It did not take long for her to brush her teeth and tend to her other needs. She grabbed a robe from the corner dresser and slipped it over her nightgown.

“You look better,” Iezabel said as Ayana collapsed into one of the chairs.

“Better than I feel,” she muttered. “Did the Commander send for me?”

Iezabel took a seat beside her. “Not yet.”

Ayana scanned the food on the table. Platters of meat, sausages, boiled potatoes, bread, soft cheese, a bowl of porridge, a dish of vegetables, a jug of pineapple juice, and a pitcher of clear water.

“Eat.” Iezabel said. “I had it checked for poison.”

“I hope not on the boy.”

“No.” She averted her eyes. “I had the cook do the honors.”

Ayana sighed, piling some meat and vegetables onto her plate. She ate in silence, particularly enjoying the wine soaked slice of pork—quite tangy and scrumptious.

It had been weeks since she had consumed proper food.

Iezabel smiled. “Is it that good?” She poured some juice into a glass mug and handed it to her.



Ayana nodded, taking a sip. Her fork stabbed into another sausage, taking it to her mouth. A sigh of satisfaction slipped through her lips as the tender meat melted into a myriad of savory flavors on her tongue.

“You rarely allow me to eat what I want,” Ayana said between bites. When Iezabel remained silent, she asked, “I hope you do not regret coming here?”

“On the contrary, I’m glad the rebels found us,” Iezabel said, her eyes darting to her swollen belly. “You can’t afford to be on the run. Not now.”

Ayana took a sip from the glass. “Now you trust them, huh?”

Iezabel glared at her. “I don’t,” she said. “But as long as we have a common enemy, we can count them as allies.”



## ( XIV )

Ayana found herself in front of the ancient altar, admiring the peculiar marble sculpture. A string of strange runes adorned the circular pedestal. She ran her hand along the engravings, tracing the intricate grooves and patterns. There was something about it that enthralled her, like a phantom whisper of a lost soul.

Iezabel had gone out hunting, after insisting that Ayana remain in her room until she returned. It was days since she last fed, and this enclosed cavern full of humans was not helping either. One of the suspicious rebel guards had tried to stop her from leaving the temple, but changed his mind when Iezabel threatened to bleed him instead.

“Magnificent, isn’t she?”

Ayana started. “Commander.” She inclined her head. “What a pleasant surprise!”

His obsidian eyes twinkled as his lips parted in a cordial smile. He had a certain wild aura about him, like a beast confined in too small a cage. He exuded such an air of authority, she wondered if anyone dared question him twice.

“The Immortal Kalypso, daughter of the sea,” Cornelius said, gesturing at the sculpture. “She is considered a guardian deity in Atlantis.” He paused. “But there are many myths and legends surrounding her, each different than the

other.”

Ayana raised her eyebrows. “You are an Atlantian?”

Cornelius shrugged. “I was.”

“What happened?”

“I made a mistake.” He studied the altar, his eyes acquiring a faraway look. “After I was exiled to Aria, I joined a group of mercenaries.” He gave her a rueful smile. “Between raiding the Empire’s supplies and assassinating warlords, it wasn’t long before I ended up in the Resistance.”

A man searching for redemption in the wrong direction. What kind of blasphemous crime had he committed to be thrown out of his own country? He certainly seemed like a man who knew what consequences his actions might bring. How much did he really know about her?

“The giant statues outside the city. You know who they are?”

Cornelius’ obsidian eyes narrowed. “Why do you ask?”

Ayana shrugged, trying to keep an impassive expression. “Curiosity.”

“They were the high kings who once ruled the greatest empires on Elyzia.” Cornelius hesitated. “According to our historians, they are named Lord Acyrion of Abaddon, Lord Hyperion of Eos, and Lord Ilirion of Eitheon. They were Kalypso’s greatest generals.”

Her hunch was right...

“Why do their likenesses loom in this hidden city? Did they truly exist?”

Cornelius chuckled. “No one knows. Very little can be

found about them in the ancient scripts,” he said. “Their origins trace back to the shrouded era.”

“It seems the world is full of mysteries.”

“It is.” His eyes strayed to the goddess.

Cornelius returned his gaze to her. “I hope you had a pleasant night.”

Ayana nodded, still deep in thought. If he did not know who she was, then why had he brought her here?

“Tell me something, Commander.” she said. “Why am I here?”

A puzzled look enveloped his face. “What do you mean?”

“Why is the Resistance helping me? We have a common enemy. But that is not reason enough to harbor a fugitive. The entire Imperial Guard is after me.”

Cornelius clasped his hands behind his back. “The order came from the headquarters,” he said, watching her carefully. “They said you were crucial for our victory. They refused to disclose anything else. They are the only ones who know why, and maybe you.”

Ayana shook her head, her gaze on the floor. “I have been hunted all my life.” If he did not know about her history, it was better if she kept it that way. “All I want is for my child to be safe.”

Cornelius nodded, a small smile pulling at the corner of his lips. “We all have secrets, and we have our reasons to keep them.”

Ayana tried to keep the flush out of her cheeks. She could not be more terrible at lying.

He fished out a timepiece from his pocket and gave it a brief glance. “Ah, time flies like a frenzied falcon.” He inclined his head. “I’ll have to take my leave, Lady Ayana. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

She returned the gesture. “I am grateful, Commander.”

Ayana watched as he turned on his heel, heavy footsteps echoing across the marble hall. The purple cape streaked behind him, before dissolving into the shadows of a dark doorway.



# (XV)



The flickering braziers on the walls cast a dim glow across the council chamber, adding more depression to the woe-begotten room. An oval table rested in the middle of the lusterless marble floor, surrounded by high backed wooden chairs, some occupied, and some waiting to be occupied.

Cornelius awaited the captains, his patience waning every second. No matter how many times he threatened them, they always ran late. To make it worse, they never failed to come up with excuses—to the extent he had stopped asking altogether. He adjusted his purple cape and gazed at the ceiling, trying to ease his restlessness.

The colorful expanse portrayed some ancient conquerer. His frowning face screamed a silent battle cry, his sword raised in challenge. His flagship loomed behind him, the tranquil waves hugging its unmoving hull. All around him, his men were frozen mid charge, their snarling faces hidden behind their iron helms, eyes blazing with an excited frenzy.

His gaze swiveled to the door as Zelroth walked in with his sister. They had the same pointed nose and storm-gray eyes, but completely different personalities. Even though they annoyed him to the bone, he couldn't deny those two

were the best captains in his command.

Three more entered the room and took their seats.

As soon as all ten captains had settled in, Cornelius leaned forward. He studied their faces, even as they tried to avoid his gaze. Some of them looked curious, a few bored, and others furious, eager to voice their opinions. He already knew what they had on their mind.

Cornelius sighed. "I'm grateful you were kind enough to join me. Now, let us begin."

The assembled Captains waited for him to continue.

"Before we discuss the matters at hand, I have some disturbing news," Cornelius said. They shifted in their seats, their interests piqued. "The lycan troops have begun their march toward Acantha, and the vyzek division is preparing a siege on Kingsbury. Vorigan has convinced the Council that their objective is to crush the Resistance and prevent an enemy incursion from Maera." He paused for a moment, making certain he still had their attention.

"I'm quite sure the entirety of Aria knows that," Zelrine said. He sensed her urge to roll her eyes.

*Arrogant little twerp.*

Cornelius continued, "I also recently received some odd tidings from one of my sources. A few weeks back, Admiral Viktor Saroven of the Imperial Navy clashed with Eustace Teague, Pirate Lord of the Broken Isles."

He watched as their expressions shifted from stolid indifference to unfeigned astonishment. Barely a breath passed through their lips as the captains waited in anticipation.

Clearly, this was unexpected.

“Of course, the Pirate Lord had to abandon his base and retreat,” Cornelius continued. “This did not occur far from the archipelago.”

Zelrine stared at the table, deep in thought. “To think that the Pirate Lord drew back in his own territory.”

“What are you trying to say?” Zelroth asked, his eyes fixed on Cornelius.

“The Admiral was leading a fleet of five hundred ships, each carrying a contingent of one hundred soldiers, all prepared for war,” answered the Commander.

Quinn waved his hand and scoffed. “That is not possible. The Broken Isles are more beggarly than the slums in Turahn. The Empire would have to spend more on weapons and supplies than they can make from those islands in a thousand years.”

“That is why I said it was odd,” Cornelius said, making it sound like he was talking to an idiot. “What does the Empire want in those waters? Why the sudden interest in some meager islands? Something about this doesn’t bode well.”

“What do you want us to do, Commander?” Garret asked.

“I want you to take more caution and keep your senses sharp. I have already sent word to Lord Aries. Whatever they are up to, it won’t spell good for us.” He tapped his fingers, waiting for the murmurs to subside. “Anyway, how went your assignments?”

Zelrine spoke first. “We lost five men, and six were



injured. We succeeded in freeing the captives, but many fell in the crossfire. I escorted the survivors to Grenn Hold.”

“Good work, Captain. Considering the events, we are fortunate you were able to save that many,” Cornelius said. “And the injured?”

“In the infirmary,” she answered. “They’ll recover in a couple of weeks.”

Cornelius turned to the one sitting third on his left. “Cravon?”

The Captain stared dejectedly at the table, refusing to meet their eyes. “They had already taken over the village by the time we reached there. Zaros Wolfheim of the Imperial Guard was with them. We had no choice but to turn back.”

The Commander gave him a nod. “There was nothing you could have done.”

“I failed.” Cravon growled. “I turned tail like a coward.”

Zelrine cut in. “It was Zaros, you fool. None of us can face him. At least, you saved us the trouble of searching for your mangled corpses.”

Cornelius sighed. “Is there anything else?”

Hamer leaned forward. “The Lycan troops will reach Acantha within three weeks,” he said. “Once it is vanquished, they’ll continue to Brytos. We won’t have a better chance than this. We should retake the southern territories while we can.”

“He is right, Commander,” Mayne said. “But we are running out of supplies. And it is becoming more difficult to raid the Empire’s convoys now that they’ve doubled the escorts.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I need more men,” he said, “and more weapons.”

“I can’t do that.” Cornelius straightened, carefully studying their faces. “As most of you are aware, an important refugee has been given sanctuary at this base as per the orders of the Commander-General. We are to concentrate on strengthening our defenses. Our main priority is ensuring her safety.”

A few captains tensed in their seats.

“For how long?” Gravier asked.

“Till the Commander-General says otherwise.” He understood their discontent, but Lady Ayana was clearly a valuable asset to the Resistance. “The Empire wants her dead for some reason. If Vorigan sees her as a threat, she might prove an important asset to us.”

“I heard she came from Argent, where almost everyone sings Vorigan’s praises,” Zelrine said, brushing back a lock of brown hair. “Are you certain she is not some kind of a spy or saboteur?”

Cornelius sighed. “We are the ones who brought her here, Captain,” he said. “The Commander-General’s orders are clear. To make her safety our utmost priority.”

“We are cooped up with a turned one in our midst,” Saylor said. “Who is to ensure *our* safety?”

Zelroth frowned. “Iezabel can be trusted. I traveled with her for more than a week,” he said. “She is here only to protect Lady Ayana. I can vouch for her.”

“Who are we protecting her from?” Quinn asked. “The Empire’s soldiers? The vlarik? Or the Imperial Guard?”

From what I heard, she has all of them looking for her.”

Kizan rose from his seat, slamming his thick hands on the table. “We were not informed about this at all. We can’t have her here, not when the Imperial Guard is looking for her. She endangers us all.”

Cornelius ignored his outraged expression and turned to Zelrine. “Captain, please refresh my memory. What was my title again?”

An amused grin tugged at her full lips as she drawled. “Commander for the Southern Base of the Resistance.”

Cornelius raised his eyebrows, his eyes fixed on Kizan. “You were saying, Captain?”

A purple shade crept up his cheeks as he choked on his objection. He suppressed a snarl, hands clenched into fists, and slumped back into his seat. Cornelius knew it was a bad idea to provoke him, but he wasn’t in the best of moods.

“The matter is not up for discussion,” he said, a hard edge creeping into his voice. “If any of you have a problem, take it to the headquarters. As long as you are in my base, you are to follow my orders.”

Some of them inclined their heads, while others failed to hide their anger. It did not bother him in the least. He had the power to replace any of them at his whim. They would do better to remember that.

Cornelius continued. “They will send more men from the headquarters. She is to be kept here until they ensure a safe passage to Atlantis.”

“What makes you think she’ll be safe there?” Zelroth asked. “This all seems too questionable, Commander. They

are not too fond of Arians as you well know, especially those from Argent.”

“She was neither born in Argent, Captain, nor is she an Arian,” Cornelius said. “She will be under the protection of the Atlantian Council. That I can assure you.”

“What do you want us to do?” Zelrine asked.

“We must increase the number of watchers around the valley. Zelrine, you will guard Lady Ayana at all times. Quinn and Gravier are to overlook the completion of the evacuation tunnels. Zelroth is in charge of our armory and will manage the import of weapons. And our food supplies need to be restocked while we’re at it. Mayne will take care of that. As for the rest of you, I want ballistae and mortars on the outer wall, and do something about the damned gate.”

The Captains inclined their heads, though not too happy about it.

“As you wish, Commander,” Zelrine muttered.

“I want reports coming in from the morrow,” Cornelius said. He waved at the door. “You are free to leave.”



## ( XVI )

**A**n agonizing scream rent through the infirmary chamber as Ayana arched her back, twisting and turning on the crumpled sheets. Her hands clenched the sides of the mattress, a terrible moan escaping her lips. Black spots danced before her eyes as icy blades of pain stabbed into her stomach.

She wanted it to end—the pain which made spans seem like hours, and hours seem like days. She felt nothing else but the agony with no end.

Iezabel dabbed at her sweat bathed forehead with a wet cloth, brushing the red wisps of hair from her face. She hated to see Ayana in such pain, helpless to do anything but watch. Those tormented eyes wrenched at her heart. She looked so frail and delicate.

She grasped her hand. “I’m here, my lady.”

The room was hidden in a semi-gloom, for Zelrine had put out most of the candles. There stood two beds other than the one occupied by Ayana, both empty. A metal tinged odor hung in the air—that of blood and sweat.

It was the twenty fourth day of Nuarel, the last month of winter. Many things had changed around the base.

The rebels had started stockpiling weapons and laying traps all around the valley, as if they were preparing for something, but Iezabel knew not what it was.

It had happened in the fallen city.

Lady Ayana was exploring the ruins, trying to find clues of her ancestor. Iezabel was by her side as usual, along with their escort, Captain Zelrine. The morning had been cold, yet beautiful, with many flowers blossoming anew and spreading their sweet fragrance, signaling the end of winter and beginning of spring.

Lady Ayana had bent down to examine a cracked fountain when her water had broken. She had insisted she felt fine, but Iezabel and Zelrine had wasted no time in taking her to the infirmary.

Iezabel raised her head when a soft knock echoed through the chamber.

Zelroth stood awkwardly on the threshold, his countenance uncertain and nervous. “Is she alright? Is there anything I can do?”

Zelrine shot a murderous glare at her brother. “Yes, there is,” she said through her teeth. “Close the damned door and get lost!”

Zelroth flinched. “Sorry.” He carefully closed the door, his face burning red.

Iezabel started as another scream rang through the chamber, making the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. She picked up the fan and started swinging it over Ayana’s panting face.

How much longer?

Zelrine held a leather bottle near her mouth. “Drink some. It eases the pain.”

Ayana took a small sip before collapsing back onto the pillow. It was not water, nor was it liquor. It was like a brew of honey, with flavors of apple, grape, wild berry and many other unfamiliar fruits. It was unlike anything she had tasted before, but the strange liquid helped. It slowly coursed through her body, numbing the excruciating throb.

“Thank you.”

Zelrine placed the bottle beside her leather armor on the bedside table—the armor which she had pulled off in a hurry as soon as they brought in Ayana. Her sword lay near the foot of an adjacent bed, tossed aside in haste.

She felt Iezabel’s gaze on her. “You’ve done this before?”

“Only once.” Zelrine grimaced. “When Zelroth became a father. I was mostly a bystander... kind of like you.”

Iezabel nodded, thanking the heavens for the captain’s presence. She had never done anything like this, or even watched someone give birth for that matter. She barely remembered her life before Argent.

Ayana’s lips parted in a heart wrenching shriek as another contraction shot through her abdomen. It spasmed along her spine, pulling her to the brink of darkness. She gasped. “I can feel it.”

Zelrine eyed her timepiece on the table. The contractions were closer. “Lady Ayana, you can start pushing now.”

Ayana grabbed the knotted sheet, which Zelrine had lashed to the metal foot-board and pushed. Her face strained and her teeth clenched. Her body twitched and convulsed as another contraction racked through her core. She had to endure. She had to fight the pain.

Her efforts drained her of energy, and exhaustion threatened to encompass her. Drowsiness crept into her mind and body—a tempter trying to seduce her with a promise of release from the ordeal.

Ayana growled, steeling her nerves. She had to do it for her child. She had to do it for Lucien.

Iezabel glanced at her pallid face, surprised to see a glow of hope. A fiery flame burned in her eyes, as if she saw the light of joy beyond the darkness of her torment. Iezabel helped her drink some water and dabbed at her forehead.

“Thank you,” Ayana whispered, leaning back on the pillow.

Her face tensed as another contraction twisted through her. She panted, sweat streaming down her brow.

How much longer?

There it was again, the nudge, so small, but filling her with a world of warmth and love—a touch of the one she had sworn to love and protect. She took a deep breath and exhaled. She was going to see her little one.

Her fierce passion rebelled against the thoughts of giving up, against the pain itself, washing it away with her tender affection for the nudger inside her; her whole universe, her brightest sun.

“Try to control your breathing,” Zelrine instructed.



“Slow and steady.”

“Another push, my lady,” Iezabel whispered, caressing the back of her hand. “It’ll be over soon.”

Zelrine urged. “Keep going. Won’t be long now.” She ran a towel across her forehead. The infirmary chamber felt like a oven, her sweat drenched clothes becoming wetter and stickier by the second.

Ayana moaned again, her face grimacing in pain as she clutched the knotted sheet. A contraction, then a push, followed by another push. She had to keep going. A few more spans to go. She closed her eyes and tried to slow her ragged breathing.

“Any time now.” Zelrine gave her a nod of encouragement.

She groaned, trying to hold back her scream as another wave of intense pressure passed through her belly. She felt a surge of energy and pushed with all her might.

“You are almost there, Lady Ayana. I can see the head,” Zelrine said. “Another push,” she instructed.

Ayana gripped the knot and clenched her muscles, a scream escaping her lips as she pushed with all her remaining strength.

“I almost got you, little one,” Zelrine whispered. She placed her palm below the baby’s neck and carefully pulled out the rest of the tiny body—all slick with fluid and blood—into a warm towel. She cleared its nose and examined it for vitals.

Ayana waited, her anticipation mirrored by Iezabel.

“It’s a girl!” Zelrine announced with a wide grin.

A glowing smile enveloped Ayana's face as she beheld her wondrous daughter. Iezabel squeezed her hand, a laugh of mirth escaping her lips.

At last, it was over.

"Iezabel, a little help here."

Ayana whimpered as they snipped the cord, her eyes following the struggling, blood covered infant in Zelrine's hands.

"Let me... Let me see her."

Zelrine brought the wailing child over to Ayana, letting the mother hold it in her arms. A satisfied smile spread across her face, for she had never witnessed a more beautiful moment. Not the whole world matched the immense love and adoration in Ayana's eyes as she crooned over the babe at her breast.

"So pretty," Ayana whispered, her eyes bright as the shining stars. She gently pressed her lips to the child's brow. Bright and bloody curls covered her tiny head, cheeks pale and flushed, cherry lips curled as she bawled the melody of new life.

"I love you so much," Ayana murmured, tears streaming down her cheeks. A glowing warmth flooded her chest, for she saw what she had waited for; her world, her soul, and her life. "Her name is Scarlett Lisa Ironfang."



## (XVII)

It was the fourth night of Buel, third and last month of spring. Iezabel sat in a corner, reading a book she had borrowed from Zelrine. *Anheira*, it was called, a collection of myths about the nameless one, based on a religion widely followed by most humans in Isouvien, Equilon, and Neisa.

A candle flickered on the table beside her, throwing a dim glow across the bedchamber. With dawn fast approaching, it was an hour past midnight. Lady Ayana breathed peacefully in her sleep, her hand unconsciously reaching for the crib beside her bed.

A low thud reached Iezabel's ears, followed by a slight creak from the wooden cradle.

Iezabel sighed and placed the book on the table before rising to her feet. Scarlett lay on her stomach, her tiny hands patting the soft padding under her blankets. Iezabel lifted the child from her little prison just as her lips parted in a wail.

"Shush, my little princess," Iezabel crooned, rocking the child in her arms. "You are going to wake your mother. You are." She pouted reproachfully at the frowning face. "Adorable little thing, aren't you?"

She nuzzled the soft blushed cheeks—the tiny fingers trying to pull her locks even as the tears kept flowing. Iezabel could lose herself in those big sapphire-blue orbs. The wailing ceased as Iezabel started humming the lullaby Lady Ayana usually sang to her daughter.

*Hush little baby, go to sleep,  
Mama loves thee, don't cry or weep,  
Sweet little pea, don't puff thy cheeks,  
Sparkle thine eyes, like stars that peep.*

Scarlett stared at Iezabel as she recognized the tune and watched in puzzlement, her wide eyes following the movement of her lips.

*Close your eyes as blue as skies,  
Hush little baby, don't you cry,  
Dream of lilies and butterflies,  
Rest your head, the night is nigh.*

Iezabel sat in her chair and lowered the child onto her lap, handing her a woolen doll.

*Lovely as a rose, and sugar sweet,  
Laugh like chimes and bells that ring,  
Diamond tears and pink little feet,  
Thou art my precious bloom of spring.*

Those tiny hands grabbed the doll and started

swinging it by its ears. Ayana twitched once, but continued her slumber.

Iezabel turned her attention back to the wriggling babe in her arms.

“I’m going to make you a new one,” she murmured softly, brushing back the bright red curls she had inherited from her mother. “But only if you are a good-”

Iezabel started as a slight vibration shook the chamber, raining motes of dust from the ceiling.

Scarlett began to cry again, alarmed by the disturbance.

She rose to her feet and rocked the child against her chest, ears strained for the slightest sound.

What was that?

Just then, another, more intense vibration resonated across the stone walls, sending a jolt through Iezabel.

Faint shouts and running feet echoed outside.

The doors opened just as Lady Ayana jerked awake, her eyes skirting the chamber.

“The base is under attack,” a rebel informed them. “Do not step outside.”

Before Iezabel could inquire further, he closed the door behind him.

“They have come for me,” Ayana whispered, dread in her eyes.

Iezabel handed over the child to Ayana and snatched her sword from atop the wardrobe. “Stay with her, my lady,” she said. “I’ll be back.”

“Come back soon.”

“I will.” Iezabel rushed after the rebel down the hallway toward the entrance hall.

The commander stood near the huge stone door, three captains and a score of warriors behind him.

More explosions shook the stone temple.

“I thought they couldn’t find us!” Iezabel was furious. “You said Lady Ayana would be safe here.”

Cornelius turned his gaze to her. “Someone betrayed us,” he said, his eyes blazing with anger. “Our gates have been breached. They are here.”

“Who?”

A thunderous boom echoed through the hall. The gigantic stone door before her cracked and collapsed, shattering into a pile of smoking debris. The monotonous crunch of rubble reached Iezabel’s ears before she beheld her worst nightmare.

The image she had buried deep within flashed before her eyes; a huge shadow looming behind a contingent of vlarik as they marched through the remains of her village, her entire family bound to stakes and burned before her eyes, the searing pain as the billowing tongues of flame enveloped her in their fiery embrace...

“Stand your ground and steady your swords,” Cornelius shouted. “Our enemy is one of the Imperial Guard.”

Iezabel’s feet froze as a gigantic figure stepped over the heap of disintegrated marble; the remains of what once used to be a three foot thick door of solid stone. And his blade! It was a weapon of death forged in the darkest abyss

of damnation.

Half hidden in shadows, Stonearm towered before them. A thick steel armor enclosed his knotted muscles, cold eyes glaring through the slits of his horned helm. He raised his scimitar, a blade almost as big as himself, and pointed it at the commander.

Clash of metal and horrified screams drifted in through the wrecked archway. It seemed the fallen city had been overrun by enemy forces. The base was doomed. They had walked into a death trap after all.

A deep voice echoed through the hall, harsh and ruthless like a rising storm. “Bring me Ayana of Iliria, and you shall die a painless death. Resist, and you will end up on Ryk, surrounded by terrible beasts of hell.”

Cornelius shouted at his men. “If you want to run, do it now. If you get in my way, I’ll gut you myself.” He drew his longsword, purple cape flapping in the draft.

The commander squared his shoulders as he faced the giant. “You cannot pass further.”

With surprising speed, the huge scimitar flashed, swatting aside the commander like an insignificant fly. He hit the wall with a sickening thud and dropped to the floor, unconscious.

“Where is she?” Stonearm stepped forward, even as the rebel fighters retreated with terror in their eyes. “Bring me the woman,” he said, slicing the air before him. “She is the one who brought this upon you. She deserves death, don’t you think so?”

At this, Iezabel’s jaw clenched and her fear vaporized

like mist in the wind. She gripped her blade and lunged at the giant, her fangs bared in an enraged scream. “You will never find her.”

A gleam crossed his eyes as he raised the scimitar, his movement as quick as a striking viper. Iezabel realized she was done for when she sensed the blade cleaving toward her, too fast and too powerful for her to counter with her pathetically small weapon.

Iezabel felt the bone crushing tug a moment before it happened. A wave of darkness shoved her aside, followed by an ear splitting clang that bounced across the walls and shook the ground beneath her feet.

“Silverheart.” The giant sneered. “It’s been a long time.”

A hooded figure stood over her, his dark great-sword pushing back the giant’s blade. An ivory skull adorned the pommel, holding a black stone in its jaws; a stone wrought from darkness, which seemed to devour the very shadows around it.

Iezabel knelt shell shocked, her sword still clutched in her hand. The cloaked stranger had appeared out of nowhere. Iezabel couldn’t sense his presence or his scent. He was no human, nor any other creature she had encountered before.

Who was he? What was he doing here?

Someone grabbed her shoulder. She raised her eyes to see Zelrine. “Please, take Lady Ayana and run. Take the escape tunnels,” she said. “Now!”

“Lady Ayana!” Iezabel gasped, realization hitting her hard.



She jumped to her feet and dashed toward the bedchamber, her mind still in turmoil. The bone shaking clangs echoed through the passages as the stranger clashed with the giant.

There was no place in that battle for the likes of her. She had to get Lady Ayana out of here. Fast.

“What is it, Iezabel? What happened?”

“They are here,” she said. “The Imperial Guard.” Iezabel ignored her shocked expression and continued. “You are in danger, my lady. We need to leave. Right away.”

Lady Ayana just stood there, rooted to the spot, wailing child in her arms.

As Iezabel watched, her expression changed from panic to that of calm and then to sorrow. “Do they know about my daughter?”

Iezabel shook her head. “But they know who you are. We mustn’t tarry.”

“I cannot,” she said, her eyes brimming with tears. “I cannot come with you.”

Iezabel snarled. “What do you mean you can’t? The Guard is here for your head!”

“They are after me, Iezabel, not Scarelett,” she said. “They will keep coming after me no matter where I run.”

“What are you saying?” Iezabel asked, already dreading the answer.

Her voice broke. “I want you to take her far from here... far from me. Take her to Atlantis. She will be safe there. Please.”

Iezabel grabbed her shoulder. “Don’t do this.”

“Look at her, Iezabel,” she said. “I do not want her to share my fate. She does not deserve it.”

Iezabel growled. “Neither do you.”

Ayana ignored her. She touched her forehead to the child’s brow, tears streaming down her cheeks. She kissed her face and squeezed the child to her breast. “I love you, my beautiful Scarlett... so much. I will always love you.” Ayana sobbed. Her eyes closed as she hugged the wailing child. “Farewell, my love. I will see you again one day, if the gods will it.”

Looking at the resolve on her face, Iezabel knew there was no changing her mind. No matter how much she loathed to abandon Ayana in her time of need, Iezabel knew she had to do her bidding. Ayana would never forgive her if harm came to her child.

The door flew open as Zelrine rushed into the chamber. “Hurry,” she urged. “One of my men sighted Iowen near the gates.”

Iezabel rushed to the wardrobe and grabbed a packed backpack and the harness they had made for the child. She strapped it on, ignoring the pain in her chest. She cleared her mind and replaced her expression with a blank mask of indifference. She wasn’t going to make it harder for Lady Ayana than it already was.

“She can never come back to Aria,” Ayana said. She handed over the child to Iezabel, her face torn in pain. “Thank you for everything, my friend.”

“I’ll keep her safe, I promise.” Iezabel buckled the squirming child to her front. The pain in her chest was

getting more and more unbearable. She kissed Ayana on her cheek. Iezabel had never imagined it would come to this, not in her wildest dreams.

She grabbed the Captain's arm. "Please protect her."

"I'll get her out of here," Zelrine promised with a reassuring nod. "Let the gods be with you, friend. Good luck."

"Take this," Ayana said, handing Zivnâr to Iezabel. Her voice trembled with grief. "It is for Scarlett."

Iezabel strapped the sword to her belt, a reminder of her promise to Lady Ayana. "Farewell, my lady."

"Farewell, Iezabel."

Zelrine gave her the instructions. "Go to the crypts. Zelroth is waiting with his men near the escape tunnels. They'll collapse the entrance after you. You need to hurry."

Iezabel nodded. She gave Ayana's tortured face one last look before disappearing into the dark hallway with the crying child.

*I will protect her, my lady, to my last breath.*



## ( XVIII )

Ayana followed Zelrine through a dimly lit passage, closely shadowed by two of her best fighters. The flickering torches barely flung any light on the bare walls of stone. A carpet of dirt muffled their footsteps as they rushed along the tunnel, sending motes of dust flying into the air.

“This will take us out of the valley,” Zelrine said. “But we need to be careful. This tunnel is much older, and almost everyone in the base knows about it.”

“Hmm,” Ayana mumbled, the weight in her chest too heavy, too much to bear. Innumerable blades of hurt stabbed into her heart as Scarlett’s crying face flashed before her eyes.

How was she going to live without her little girl?

She had to find Lucien. She needed him. As long as he was fine, she had no regrets. He was certainly out there, looking for her. When she reunited with him, they would leave Aria for good.

Their child was safe with Iezabel, of that she had no doubt. Scarlett did not have to share her fate. She would be away from Aria and all of its darkness. Maybe if she escaped the Empire’s clutches someday, she might get to see her little one again.

Ayana jerked back to reality when she bumped into Zelrine.

A dark mass of stone blocked the path before them, a metal wheel protruding from the wall beside it.

“At last,” Zelrine muttered. “It was farther than I thought.”

“Turn back while you can, Zelrine,” Ayana said. Enough people had gotten hurt because of her. She had already lost too much. “They will find me no matter what.”

“I’m not abandoning you. I already promised Iezabel,” Zelrine said. She gestured at the wheel. “Turn that, will you?” she asked her soldiers.

They inclined their head.

A grinding noise reverberated through the dark passage as they rotated the wheel. The wall before them slid into a hidden alcove, letting bright shafts of dawning sun pierce into the shadows.

Ayana stepped out onto the grass covered ground, her eyes sweeping the surroundings. They were nowhere near the fallen city. Before her stretched a great forest, giant birches and pines towering to the sky. Dead silence reigned the trees, not a living soul to be seen, nor a whispering breath to be heard.

“Where are we?”

“The Green Valley,” Zelrine replied. “It lies adjacent to our hideout.”

One of the rebel soldiers held up his hand in caution. “I saw someone.” He motioned to his companion.

“What do you mean?” Zelrine asked, her fingers

creeping to the hilt of her blade. “No one is supposed to know we're here.”

A shiver crawled along Ayana's skin as the rebels stalked toward the dense foliage.

The boughs parted as if blown by a silent gust. A young man, barely out of adolescence, leaned against a great pine. Dark shoulder length hair framed his sharp features, and thick brows arched over his sea green eyes. He was unarmed, except for a small hunting knife strapped to his belt.

A mischievous grin spread across his face. “Going somewhere?”

One of Zelrine's men strode toward him, but as he reached for his sword, the youth pointed at his legs.

“Aburó verni.”

A surprised grunt escaped the rebel's lips as he collapsed to the ground. “What did you do, you little mutt?”

A sorcerer! Ayana had never met a sorcerer this young. She stood frozen, heart racing and unable to move. They were no match for him. Strangely, the only emotion in her mind was relief—relief that her little Scarlett was far away, safe with Iezabel.

He ignored the fall soldier and fixed his gaze on Ayana. “If you let me escort you to my mother, I will consider letting them go.”

“Run, Lady Ayana!” Zelrine shouted.

She drew her blade and charged, just as her other soldier lunged for the kill.

“Quaró descì.” The sorcerer waved his palm, as if swatting aside mere bugs.

Ayana heard a loud intake of breath as they met the rock-face with a sickening crunch and collapsed to the ground. She half expected them to jump back on their feet, but they did not.

What was happening?

Ayana stood rooted to the spot as he advanced.

“Who are you?”

The boy chuckled. “Wiser of me if I didn’t tell you that.”

He peered behind her, as if he was expecting someone else. A dramatic sigh of disappointment escaped his lips. “I was quite eager to meet your violent companion, the one who killed my *vlarik*. Well, not really mine, but who cares.” He waved his hand. “Do you know how difficult it is to bend them to my will without *her* knowing?” He shook his head.

His mouth stopped rambling long enough for him to inspect her like a prized acquisition. “She warned me to be wary of you, though I don’t see why,” he said with a mocking grin. He held out his hand. “Now, will you come with me? Please? It is bad enough I had to come here myself to collect a mere human.”

“You will never have me!”

Ayana moved like lightning, burying the retrievable blade in her sleeve into his chest.

His eyes widened in shock, and his grin of amusement turned into a grimace of pain. He gasped, blood dripping from his mouth.

“Sturió hulfoven.”

An invisible hand closed around her neck. She desperately clawed at the convulsing sorcerer, but to no avail.

*I love you, my little Scarlett.*

Her knees crumpled beneath her.

*Stay safe.*

Together, they collapsed to the ground.

*I am sorry, Lucien.*

A sad smile formed on her lips as cold darkness enveloped her in its embrace.

*The  
End*



# Appendix

## Spells

*Derived from the Immortal Tongue*

<b>Revien déseviet tuo</b>	—	<i>Reveal your secrets</i>
<b>Ingien</b>	—	<i>Burn</i>
<b>Venta</b>	—	<i>Open</i>

*Self-made spells of the young sorcerer*

<b>Aburó verni</b>	—	<i>Scythe of severing</i>
<b>Quaró descí</b>	—	<i>Bludgeon of wind</i>
<b>Sturió hulfoven</b>	—	<i>Clutch of death</i>

## Eitheonian Language

<b>Adân yadakar Ilirwyn</b>	—	<i>The blood of Ilirion remembers</i>
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## Azerian Language

<b>Algilad</b>	—	<i>Immortals</i>
<b>Ayana Réid</b>	—	<i>Fire hair</i>

## Gods

<b>Bia Ilvia</b>	—	<i>Azerian Goddess of the sea</i>
<b>Izei Ilvi</b>	—	<i>Azerian God of winter</i>
<b>Avnán</b>	—	<i>Avenian God of bad fortune</i>

## Vanthesia's Vampyre Class System

<b>Vyára</b>	—	<i>Royals</i>
<b>Vyána</b>	—	<i>Nobles</i>
<b>Vyáha</b>	—	<i>Warriors</i>
<b>Vyáka</b>	—	<i>Commoners</i>
<b>Vymák</b>	—	<i>Half-Breeds/Lowborns</i>
<b>Vyzek</b>	—	<i>Turned Humans/Blood Slaves</i>



## Lady Ayana's Azerian Lullaby

Amuin ikin, titlaman lia qahin,  
Aiyal anvanakar, sa' aquin shrigan,  
O' nuin miniha, O' nuin milihali,  
Amuin ikin, titlaman lia qahin,  
Ik' tisail thalhial thalkisakir saquari,  
Abr zayan saovad, sak' saik o sak' zitri,  
At' mi amaeen, kul si al kun' bari

loosely translated into the common tongue as

Oh little child, listen to my heart,  
The night is dark, and the moon is bright,  
A star of glory and a star of light,  
Oh little child, listen to my heart,  
Thy touch as sweet as tinkle and chime,  
Through a vale and a mount, and thorn and thyme,  
Thou art with me, and all shall be fine



*The tale will continue in*

# SCARLETT IRONFANG

SCOURGE OF THE GRIMOIRE

*Book One of the Immortal Saga*

THE IMMORTAL SAGA

# SCARLETT IRONFANG

SOURCE OF THE GRIMOIRE



A. ROYDEN D'SOUZA