

THE CRIMSON COURT

CHAPTER ONE

Caelia was sitting on a warehouse window-sill, shutters flapping in the wind as she watched the rain lash the grimy street below. She bundled her cloak around her, trying to ward off the autumn chill. The cold was only intermittently relieved by the gusts of steam spurting out of the factory opposite. Unfortunately, with the warmth came the acrid smell of hot sulphur pluming into the sky. The stench burnt Caelia's nostrils, but she didn't let it distract her from her watch.

'Wonderful day for an execution, wouldn't you say?' said Aldo, sidling up to the window.

'Spare me the poetry, brother. We've gotta keep an eye out for Goethe.' Caelia replied, her gaze fixed on the road.

'Oh, come on!' He took a deep breath, taking in the view beside her. 'Can't you feel the atmosphere? The *ambiance*? It's just inspiring.'

'Inspiring? It's cold, it's wet, and it stinks. And I'm supposed to be watching the fucking road.'

Aldo ignored that last bit. 'Exactly! Makes me want to pen a tragedy, sure to sit among the greats, like Acciaio's 'Death on the River Sén' or Sartini's 'Baleful Winter'!

Caelia gave into his insistence on conversing and looked over to her brother. He was immersed in the dreary window scene.

'*The Greats*?' Caelia spat, 'What's so great about a bunch of stuffy old men? *Dead* stuffy old men, at that.'

Aldo was shaken from his gaze, and shot a look at his sister.

'You wouldn't understand,' he said with a scowl, 'You were too young when we left the homeland. None of the culture rubbed off on you.'

‘Not this again,’ she shot back, ‘I didn’t exactly choose to be born at such an inconvenient time—’

‘Silence. Both of you.’ Another voice growled from behind them. It was old and low, turned to gravel from years of barking orders – Taivan.

They swung around in unison to face the grizzled Capo.

‘We’re not children anymore, Taivan, you shouldn’t talk to us like that.’ Caelia said coldly. He didn’t look impressed.

‘Stop bickering like children then. We have a job to do. I won’t have you two giving our position away with your mewling.’

‘Mewling?’ Aldo blustered. ‘We are your superiors. You forget your manners—’ Taivan silenced him with a look.

‘Is that right?’ he said, tone transformed, now steeped in condescending aristo irony. ‘If you are indeed my superior in this situation, could you repeat the plan back to me, seen as you should know it so well?’

Aldo cleared his throat, followed by a strange warbling sound. ‘Well, we’re here to kill Moritz Goethe, the bastard who wants to, umm, cut down our operation. We suspect will try and escape his own execution by using a stand in... And then...’

‘Well, that’s the beginning, Caelia chortled, ‘at least now we know where you stopped paying attention.’ Her voice took on a sharp edge. ‘Anyways, ‘cut down our operation’ doesn’t quite do it justice. He fucking tried to get Magda thrown in prison. For life. Surely that means something to you?’

‘Come on Aldo,’ Taivan sounded like a condescending father, ‘you of all people should’ve remembered it.’

Without another word, Aldo stormed back down the stairs. Taivan watched him, shaking his head. He cracked a small smile. He and Caelia both broke into laughter. A good, hearty laugh. And this point she didn't care if Aldo could hear or not.

'I better go check on your brother, make sure he isn't too upset,' he said. Caelia knew he was only half joking. 'And catch him up on the fucking plan.'

They shared a smile and a nod, and he turned to the staircase.

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Caelia had been sat there for a good half an hour since Taivan left to deal with Aldo. The rain had stopped. She looked up to the Sun. Goethe should be here any moment, if they'd calculated his most likely escape route correctly. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and listened. A carpenter, sawing a log in half in a nearby workshop. Carnal pleasures being enjoyed in a less than savoury location. Footsteps! Footsteps, squelching in the churned up mud. Five sets, all slightly different gaits. One set was lighter than the others. They were close, around the block. She exhaled and opened her eyes, before throwing off her cloak and hopping down from the window sill. She adjusted her well fitted, darkened leather armour which was covered in pouches, tightened the bandolier of knives slung over her shoulder, and checked that the short sword at her waist was firmly in its scabbard. She stamped five times on the floor, as she'd been told. Her stomach twisted into a knot. She looked at her scarred hand, flexed it a few times. It was finally happening. It didn't matter how many times she fought, the feeling of anticipation never wore off. She wondered whether even old Taivan felt the same. She'd ask him, once this was over.

She couldn't put it off any longer. Caelia pulled a knife from the bandolier. She put it to her hand, and dragged it across her palm, blade biting into her skin. The searing pain made her fingers spasm. The blood pooled, and she let it run down her fingers, dripping onto the floor. She uttered a phrase - something soft and elegant, but alien, unnatural. The blood began

to bubble. Then it became more viscous, like a clot, and began to harden. Before long, there were five crystalline talons protruding from her finger tips, glistening crimson in the light of the low sun. She flexed them, admiring her handiwork. They were heavy on the tips of her fingers, but with some work they could be as deft as normal.

Her trepidation bled away, leaving only the lust to shed others blood, the lust that had put her in danger so many times. Caelia leapt onto to the windowsill, surveying the area with a newfound alertness. Her eyes were keener and her hearing sharper. Woodworms, squirming in the carpenter's log, hatching, eating. A hot, heated, animalistic rutting, the climax a few buildings away, nails scraping on wooden planks. Gulls high in the sky, their wings swishing and cutting the air. Her head spun, it threatened to overwhelm her, the ecstasy and sheer volume of peripheral noise. She breathed deeply, honing in. The five sets of footsteps were even closer. She felt dizzy from the excitement, her stomach writhing at the thought of the coming combat –

She heard Taivan's words in her head. She tried to listen, to grasp them.

Control yourself. The blood serves us, do not falter, or you shall serve the blood.

But they were lost in a sea of instinct and craving, primal desire.

Then they appeared. They rounded the corner onto the street - four guards, dressed in black and holding pikes, and between them - his pointed black beard the only sign that it was him. Moritz Goethe, the fucker who'd see their little sister, barely an adult, languish in a cell. The slippery coward trying to dodge his rightful death, cloaked and hooded. Caelia watched as they marched closer. *Wait for the signal.* She heard Taivan again, but couldn't hold herself back. She launched herself from the window.

Onto the closest guard. There was a sickening crunch as he collapsed under her sudden attack. She grappled him onto the floor, pinning his forearms down. There were

shrieks of surprise around her. The terrified guard looked up at her wide eyed. He was young, maybe Caelia's age, the first of his facial hair barely emerging from his chin.

She raised her bloody talons and raked his face with them. Skin and muscle tore as they gouged deep, scraping bone. He screamed, blood foaming from his mouth.

She leapt backwards, narrowly avoiding the hooked end of a pike. Goethe was cowering behind the three remaining guards, who had formed up to face Caelia.

'What the fuck did I say?!' barked Taivan. Caelia swung her head around – he was rushing towards her, flamberge held high. In the split second she was facing away, a sharp pain shot through her arm. She buckled, and tried to pull herself away, only just swatting another pike away with her claws. Taivan crashed into another guard, launching him stumbling onto Goethe, who squealed in terror. Caelia took advantage and lurched forward, grabbing the nearest leg and pulling one to the ground. She plunged her talons into his chest. The last guard dropped dead beside her, a crossbow bolt planted between his eyes.

She ripped her hand free and stood up. Taivan was finishing the last guardsman, wrenching his sword free from the man's abdomen. He shot a venomous look at Caelia, his beard bristling.

'How many times! We are going to have a long talk about this at home!' He turned to spit bloody phlegm on the ground, a fresh gash on his face.

Goethe was trying to crawl away, whimpering.

'Oh no you don't,' said Taivan, yanking Goethe over by the shoulder.

Caelia watched on as Taivan straddled the squirming man, forcing his forearms down into the mud next to his head, pinning him. Goethe threw his legs up, flailing, trying to kick Taivan in the back.

'Be still you fucking rat!' Taivan tightened his grip around Goethe's arms. It was pathetic, like a child lashing out at a scolding father. Except this wasn't a child, it was a

senior member of the Neustadt Prosperity Council, throwing a tantrum because he'd been caught out.

The blood rage was waning in Caelia's mind, and her thoughts were becoming her own again. The bloody talons steamed, clots dripping onto the ground around her. She flexed her fingers, now free from their gruesome bindings, and shook her hands, speckling the mud crimson. She looked around at the bodies, a twinge of guilt bubbling up to her throat. She and her family had killed countless times before, but something about the single hair on that boy's chin made her wince. The thoughts usually wore off after using her blood like that, but the immediate aftermath was always painful. She wrenched her mind back into the present, and tried to focus on the Councillor, still writhing under Taivan's weight, who, if no one else, really did deserve this.

Just then, Aldo jogged up behind her, puffing lightly.

'Damned good shot, did you see it? He yapped.

'I'll be honest, it was impressive.' She said, trying to match his bravado with a cool façade, not letting the cracks show. 'Still, only got one, though.'

Crossbow slung over his back, he swaggered over to the corpse he'd made and dislodged the bolt with a tug. It made a strange sucking sound as it left the man's head.

'That's fine by me. I'd rather one finely –

'Would you two get over here!?' Tavian boomed. Goethe had worn himself out at this point, laying slack under Taivan's hold, sobbing gently. 'I won't risk him making a run for it. Caelia, help me bind him.'

Caelia ambled over to them. Goethe's hood was draped over his face, concealing most of his features. The cloth over his mouth quivered as he drew sharp, ragged breaths. Aldo appeared at her side and flung the hood from his face. Goethe squinted, the setting sun

beaming into his face. Aldo examined his face as if inspecting a tenderloin steak at the butcher's shop.

'Hold on,' Aldo mumbled, 'where's his mole?' He ran a finger along the man's jaw, which flinched as if it'd been struck.

Caelia scrunched up her face. 'Sorry? What mole?'

'There should be one, on his jaw, next to his beard.' Aldo spoke thoughtfully. Then Caelia realised. One of the gifts the God's Blood gave Aldo was a near perfect memory. He squandered this talent memorising pages long monologues from classical plays, so he could recite them to guests at dinner parties. However, in times like these it had genuine uses.

'The forehead wrinkles aren't right either. Far too shallow.'

Taivan groaned. 'You're not telling this isn't him?'

'I'm saying it's a possibility.'

'Fuck.' Caelia massaged her temples.

'Bollocks.' Taivan hissed. 'We need to get him inside, find out what the fuck is going on.'

'And get rid of these bodies.' Aldo piped up.

With Caelia's help Taivan bound, then slung, the quivering man over his shoulder and they set to work hauling the still warm bodies into the abandoned factory. Aldo stamped the bloody trails into the wet mud. The metallic, loamy smell of blood mixing with earth caked Caelia's nostrils. They unceremoniously piled the bodies up in a large crate lined with stones, stuffing them in so all three corpses would fit - ready to be dumped by the docks.

Taivan slammed the remaining living man down onto the floorboards, which creaked under the sudden pressure. A thought prickled at the back of Caelia's head.

'If this was Goethe,' she started, 'he'd be grovelling and begging like the toad he is. This man hasn't said a fucking word.'

‘Unfortunately she’s right, Taivan.’ Aldo kicked at the floor. ‘We might have a doppel on our hands.’

‘Fuck sake!’ Taivan slammed his fist into a nearby table. Whoever it was, lying hogtied on the floor, was still whimpering, eyes bright red and trousers soiled. ‘Who the fuck is this then!’ He kneeled down beside him and hooked a thumb into his mouth, forcing it open. ‘Got no fucking tongue. A mute!’

‘Check his arm,’ Aldo mused, ‘might be a slave.’

Taivan ripped away the cloak and tore the sleeve of his undershirt off at the shoulder. Underneath was a circular slave brand in Munpaur script, still scabbed over. He was doubtless here in the Republic of Saxana through a legal loophole, living as a ‘servant’. Caelia bristled at the thought.

‘Shit.’ She said, ‘Goethe has money, but to pay for a dop...’ She looked at the man with fresh eyes. To anyone but Aldo, this *is* Moritz Goethe. To weave a doppel spell this accurate requires serious skill. God’s Blood skill. ‘Poor sod.’ She finally said. ‘Must’ve taken days to cast. Fucking agony.’

‘Don’t get soft on me know.’ Grunted Taivan. ‘We’ve got to get rid of him. He’s mute, but I doubt he’s deaf.’

‘Don’t forget what this means.’ Aldo sounded serious for once. ‘Goethe is still out there. Probably on a boat up the coast to the Free Cities.’

Caelia wanted to argue but they were both right. The thought that Goethe had outsmarted them made her fists clench. *Slimy rat*. They anticipated him weaselling his way out of execution, but the idea that he had planned around that fact was enraging. Either he was suddenly a master of manipulation, or he had information. Caelia’s stomach squirmed at the thought. *A traitor in the family? Surely not.*

‘I’ll do it.’ Aldo said flatly, breaking the brooding silence.

‘Is there nothing else we can do?’ Caelia blurted, almost unintentionally.

Taivan looked at her, his grizzled façade melting slightly. ‘I know it’s hard,’ he spoke softly, ‘but we can’t risk him giving any information away. Even if he’s mute, if Goethe has a witch in his pocket, they have their ways.’

‘He doesn’t deserve it.’

‘Does anyone? That’s how these things go.’ Aldo said, his voice deliberate and toneless.

Caelia sighed. Aldo hefted his crossbow, reached into his bag and loaded a bolt. The doppel’s eyes went wide, and he thrashed on the floor, desperately trying to escape his bonds. Taivan placed a boot on his back to steady him. Caelia turned, closed her eyes.

Thud.

The flailing and sobbing stopped.

CHAPTER TWO

Caelia, Aldo, and Taivan had managed to jam the last body into the crate, nail it shut, haul it onto their carriage and set off for the docks before sundown. It was hard work but they’d carried out the task with well-practised efficiency.

Caelia was perched on the front seat next to Taivan, who held the reins, peering into the murk of the dusk-lit street. Aldo was splayed out behind her, next to the wooden crate in the wagon bed, snoring gently. Caelia coveted his ability to snooze seemingly anywhere at any time.

The lamplighters were just coming out to do the rounds when the horses plodded around a corner into the cobbled Old Quarter. The upper stories of the townhouses before them loomed overhead like sagging bags of flour.

Caelia had a soft spot for the Old Quarter - despite it now mainly being a home to debt-saddled merchants, paupers and squatters – it brought back her scant memories of home

- the great and ancient city of Avennio, of their quaint mansion in Saint's Square, of incredible clockwork toys that moved on their own, and the delicate scent of orange blossoms in full bloom. Though, those memories were fading now, like the semi-legible inscription of a weathered tombstone, which will be smooth rock in a few years' time. Aldo's stories of the homeland didn't help, his embellished tales only served to obscure the truth of their childhood.

Splash.

'Fucking watch it you old trout!' grated Taivan.

A bucketful of shit and piss landed next to their carriage. The horses snorted and reared their heads at the sudden noise. Caelia's attention snapped up to a window above them. A crooked old woman, features warped by deep wrinkles and pockmarks, stood shaking the last contents of her chamber-pot onto the street. She seemed completely oblivious to the fact their carriage was passing underneath. Her gnarled face disappeared behind the curtains without a word. 'Honestly,' Taivan grumbled, mainly to himself, 'you'd have thought all the grace and decorum in the world died with the fucking gods.'

A claw of resentment hooked into Caelia's chest. No more orange blossoms. Just shit, piss and blood. She pushed her boots into the wagon's toe-board, sending the bench creaking back and forth on its spring. In moments like this she understood Aldo's whinging about the 'good old days', the high culture of the Confession and all its traditions, and she wished for it as well. If just half of what he said was true then it was leagues better than Neustadt, which was supposed to be the capital, the shining jewel of the Republic. She shuddered to think what some of the more rural areas were like.

The claw dug deeper as she remembered her weakness in dealing with the dop. In front of Aldo. *In front of Taivan.* She winced, but tried not to move the bench any more, to stop Taivan raising an eyebrow. She was humiliated by the fragility the blood rage brought

on. The suddenly delicate stomach, the sudden hot flush of guilt, the sudden itching thought that they were evil, wretched people. Caelia could only compare it to those few seconds of post-orgasm clarity. The few delirious moments after climax in which she emerged from the animalistic stupor of sex and was launched into complete sobriety, and the lust for the barely-known bedfellow on the other side of the sheets slipping away with a plunging feeling regret and shame. It was like that, but lasted at least an hour. Torturous.

The brooding thoughts continued to plague her as they rode through the Old Quarter – thankfully with no more interruptions – into the old dockyards. They used these docks as they were largely abandoned by decent folk now, mainly used by smugglers bringing in slaves and bushels of dazeroot from Munpaur and The Isles of Exchange. The sea beyond was black as tar. A few people still lived in the yard - crusty old fishermen and their wives who couldn't afford to leave. The candles and lanterns dotted around their salt-scoured homes ebbed weakly into the murky depths around the carriage. The reek of fish and seaweed blew towards the carriage with every wave that crashed against the gangways.

‘Eh? That’s new.’ Taivan raised a fist, gesturing at the squat old guard post at the centre of the dockyard. Through the grubby window, Caelia could see two bearded men playing cards around lantern.

‘Who the... There hasn’t been a guard rotation here for years,’ she mused. Taivan grunted in agreement.

‘Keep your wits about you, I’ll do the talking.’ He said, not taking his eyes of the guard post. The men inside seemed to notice them. Caelia sent an elbow back against Aldo’s boot.

‘Up. Get up, Aldo. We’ve got company.’

He snorted drowsily. ‘Hello? Did I miss something?’

‘You were about to.’ Caelia snapped back. ‘Be ready.’

Taivan brought the wagon to a halt with the reins. Rain started spitting down, splashing onto the gravel. The door to the guard post swung open, and the two men stepped out into the downpour. Their lumbering gaits implied a few too many ales had been shared between them.

They stomped across to the wagon, lantern held out before them. A prickle shot down Caelia's neck, and her hand came to rest on the scabbard at her waist. The left one was shorter and more wiry than the one on the right, who was broad and brutish. Whoever they were, they *were not* watchmen. No uniforms, no pikes, no helmets.

'Help you?' Taivan said coldly. The broader man held the lantern to Caelia's face. She squinted through the bright light towards their greasy faces.

'Fraid you're gonna 'ave to pay the toll.' The smaller man said, bearing his yellowed teeth. His voice was ratty and nasal. The ripe stench of cheap booze and body odour emanated off of the pair.

Taivan chortled. 'And what toll would that be? You should be paying us to put up with your stink.'

Caelia stifled a laugh. Aldo didn't even try. The smaller man's face twisted into a frown, rain dripping out of his matted hair onto his leather jerkin. The other growled, spat onto the wet ground.

'Very funny,' the little one said, 'This 'ere dockyard is now the property of Wedekind Brunost. Any and all what come through have to pay, for the privilege of using it.'

Taivan let out a hearty chuckle this time. 'Who the *fuck* is Wedekind Brunost?' he jabbed, 'Do you know who we are, you *fucking small fry*?'

They were both bristling now. The big one twitched – Caelia wasn't taking any chances. She pulled her short sword free of its scabbard and swung the blade into his throat. He choked, hands scrambling uselessly at his neck before falling limply by his sides. Before

the other man could react, Taivan lunged forward and grabbed him by his greasy hair, awkwardly pulling him around and mashing his face into the toe board. His legs fell out from underneath him and Taivan tugged again, slamming his face into the splinter bar of the wagon with a sickening crunch. He collapsed to the ground. Caelia tugged her blade away and the big man crumpled into a pile, like a marionette doll whose strings had been cut.

Aldo cleared his throat. 'So much for talking.'

'That was only going one way.' Caelia sighed.

Taivan surveyed the mess they'd made. 'Fucking idiots. Let's dump the crate, get this over with.'

'Shouldn't we get rid of these ones too?' Caelia said plainly.

Taivan thought about it for a second. 'Nah.,' he decided, 'serve a warning to this Wedekind twat.' He urged the horses into motion with a crack of the reins. 'Have to wash the fucking wagon now...' The crunch of bones snapping under iron-shod wheels rattled in Caelia's ears.

'I wonder who he is.' Caelia asked, cleaning her blade with her cloak.

'Some young punk looking to make a name for himself, I should expect.' Taivan replied.

'Whoever he may be,' Aldo interjected, 'he probably won't be very happy with us.'

Taivan let out a grave laugh. 'Let him come.'

They rode the wagon to the nearest barnacle riddled gangway, protruding into the watery abyss. The unrelenting waves threatened to come crashing over the top of the wooden walkway, but never quite made it, petering out and colliding with the rocks below. The dim lights from the buildings they'd passed were futile this far away. Taivan lit a lantern of his own, hooking it next to the wagon bench.

‘Let’s make this quick,’ he bellowed, straining to be heard over the booming waves and lashing rain. Caelia and Taivan dismounted, and Aldo got into position behind the crate. He started pushing, Taivan came around the back, and eased it down. His face was red from the effort, his cable-like neck muscles straining as he stopped it from falling too hard. The crate came down with a dull thud. After checking it for damages, Caelia pushed it to the edge of the gangway, made easier by the slimy wood underneath, and kicked it hard into the depths. That was the last they saw of it.

‘Let’s get out of this shithole,’ Aldo said. ‘I can’t feel my fucking fingers.’

They hopped back onto the wagon, and Taivan brought it round to the direction they’d come from. The horses were shivering now, probably only too happy to be leaving as well. Taivan set them to a trot, and rode back through the dockyard.

At the centre, a squat figure was hovering over the two thugs they’d dispatched, lit by a lantern held close to his head.

‘Oh for fuck sake,’ Taivan sighed, ‘just let us get home!’

As they got closer, Caelia could see that it was an old man in a heavy cloak, white beard streaked with yellow. He looked up at them, eyes peeled wide, creasing his already wrinkled face.

‘You... You! Did you do this?’ he croaked. Taivan brought the wagon skidding to a halt, horses struggling on the wet ground.

‘Yes! We did. They were fucking gutter rats. What’s the problem?’ Taivan growled impatiently. The man let out a cry as though he’d just loved a lost one, or was about to.

‘He... He’ll kill us! You’ve killed us!’ He wailed. Taivan went to speak but Caelia but a firm hand on his arm.

‘Who’s going to kill you?’ she said, trying to maintain a quickly dissipating patience.

‘B-Brunost! Wedekind Brunost! He’ll demand justice! They’ll take my wife!’

The three of them let out a collective sigh. Caelia's patience ran dry.

'Look, you tell this Wedekind prick that this dockyard is now under the protection of the Jacobazzi family.' She said sharply. Taivan's scrunched his face up at the words. Aldo sucked air through his teeth. She ignored them, continued: 'You tell him that, he won't lay a fucking finger on you, or your wife.' The man tried to get some garbled words out but nothing came. 'Are we done here?' Caelia added. He nodded slowly. 'Good.'

Taivan wasted no time getting the horses moving again. The old man silently watched them leave. Aldo shifted in his seat behind Caelia. 'That was, what we call in the business, a mistake.'

Caelia clenched her fists, and craned her head around to face him. 'Would you fuck off?'

'Leave it—' Taivan started.

'You wanted to get out of this fucking dive, Aldo—'

'Leave it!' Taivan boomed. 'I'm not listening to you squabble all the way home.'

Aldo ignored him. 'All I'm saying is, you could've just started a turf war. We don't do that anymore. When mother hears about this—'

Caelia slammed him in the face with a balled fist, sending him sprawling backwards onto the bed of the wagon. She felt Taivan clip her round the ear with a gloved hand, knocking her hair into her face. A surge of anger bubbled in her stomach, she thought about swinging around and booting him off of the fucking wagon, tumbling into the filth below, but managed to hold it down.

'Just...stop,' he said quietly. 'We'll deal with this at home.'

The three of them were as silent as the night around them for the rest of the journey.

CHAPTER THREE

By the time they got home it had easily passed midnight. The downpour of rain had stopped, leaving puddles in potholes, shimmering with starlight. The moon was at its pinnacle in the sky, bathing them in a gentle glow as they hitched the horses in the stable.

Caelia snorted. Once upon a time a servant would've done it for them. The manpower couldn't be spared these days. The glory days of the family enterprise were well over. Of all enterprise that dwelt in the shadows. She looked up at their dilapidated, crumbling house. The old manor was a mess – broken windows, missing roof tiles, pigeons nesting in the exposed rafters.

It was only because their father had had the foresight to build an underground expansion that they were able to stay at all. The crackdown of '04 on 'criminal elements' had left them legally exiled, without a single coin to their name. The Lord-Protector of Saxana had claimed a moralistic high ground, issuing an end to ruthless gangs lurking inside the city walls. The fact of the matter was that there were plenty of firms operating legally who were just as cut throat as their family, except they paid their taxes. That's all it came down to. Coin, and control of it.

A bolt of rage shot down her neck as Caelia recalled her father's execution. She was only ten when it happened. As the patriarch of the family, he needed to be made an example of. The bleating, mindless crowds, the slovenly Lord Protector slithering onto the gallows, decrying his death as a victory for the Republic. Her father's silent, serene form, noose around his neck as he waited for oblivion. His last words: *Can we hurry this up? I haven't got all morning.*

Caelia smirked into the night as she remembered the revenge they unleashed on the Lord-Protector. Magically forged letters, as close a match to his handwriting as possible, down to the slight shake of the pen in his arthritic hands. An expensive service. The writing

instigated His Lordliness as a child molester. A serial one at that. Nasty stuff. Hung, drawn and quartered in front of the whole city, his family right at the front. *Fat prick.*

‘Caelia, come on!’ Taivan’s voice brought her out of the past. She must’ve been stood there for a good five minutes. ‘You’ll freeze if you don’t change those clothes.’

She was suddenly aware of just how cold she was. The rain had soaked through her cloak and into her clothes, and the night chill was seeping into her skin. Then came the exhaustion nagging at the corners of her eyes, and the dull hunger pangs in her stomach.

She caught up with Taivan and Aldo as they turned the corner of the house, into an unlit graveyard, on land shared between their house and the small chapel opposite. The Republic largely frowned on religion, an unenlightened thing that should be left in the past with the gods. However, it seemed like they still desired an afterlife, anything but the endless void, Caelia supposed, so they tolerated burial rituals and funerary practises.

They wove their way between the headstones, towards the large crypt in the centre of the graveyard. The thought of all the mouldering bodies underneath their feet, under the grass where they played in their as children, wrinkled Caelia’s nose.

They reached the central crypt, adorned with gargoyles and ghouls, the phrase ‘Enter and be cursed to eternal damnation’ over the door, just enough to keep the superstitious commoners from poking around. Taivan creaked open the door, and gestured for Caelia and Aldo to enter. Once they were in, he slipped inside and closed the door behind them, leaving them in complete darkness. The faux coffins on the wall made it a very tight fit for all three of them.

Caelia could see well enough in the dark due to the God’s Blood, though Aldo had told her that her eyes lit up like a cat’s. She still wasn’t sure if it was a joke. She could see Taivan, with a deft and practised hand – no darkvision needed – pull at the eye sockets of the skull protruding from the wall opposite the door. The forehead came out on a mechanical

arm, revealing a chain inside. He gave it a tug. The stone wall came shuddering up, stone chipping off at the edges and spitting onto the floor. It revealed the unlit staircase down to a wooden door, this one far more conventional. Must and mould wafted up from the passage. They descended down, careful not to slip on the slimy stone steps. Taivan wrapped the door with the coded knock – *knock, tap, knock, tap, tap, tap, knock, knock*. A few seconds passed, then the sound of the bolt being drawn. The door swung open.

A blast of hot, homely air, scented with water-crust pastries, sweet meats and fruit tarts, erupted into the passage from the kitchens through the door. Caelia's hunger swelled. At the door was Gondulfo, the concierge, sleepy eyes squinting into the darkness of the passage, small spectacles balancing on his crooked nose.

'Good evening Sirs and Madam,' he drawled, 'I trust your task has been completed, given the hour?'

'Sorry to wake you, Gondulfo.' Taivan said, ever so slightly sardonic in tone, 'Unfortunately, there's been some complications. Just let us in will you? We're all starving, and freezing, for that matter.'

'Especially freezing.' Aldo added.

Gondulfo stiffened slightly. 'I'm afraid Her Graciousness Missus Veridiana would like a word. With all of you.' All three of them slouched. Caelia groaned. Her stomach felt like it was about to fold in on itself.

'What does Mother want? Surely it can wait till morning.' She said.

'I'm afraid she made it seem really rather urgent. She wants a full debriefing with regard to today's events.'

'Very well,' said Taivan, 'let's get this over with.' Caelia didn't bother arguing. Since Father died, Mother had been as sour as a lemon tart on the best of days, so Caelia knew not to rile her up any more than she had to.

Gondulfo gave a curt bow and led them through the kitchens, servants busily preparing tomorrow's breakfast. It took all of Caelia's strength not to pinch a pork pie off of the counter. Aldo, less wise, tried to swipe one, but a stern look from Taivan stopped that plan in its tracks. They continued through to the dining room, adorned with a tapestry of the family crest above the fireplace, and various artefacts from the homeland, then further into the building.

The whole place had the appearance of a cellar – low ceiling, stone walls and floor, no windows – because, it essentially was, only extended into a fully liveable space. Bar the servants in kitchen, the place was eerily quiet. As much as Caelia liked the silence of the streets at night, it felt strange to see a place usually so bustling so empty. The only ambient noise was the distant clattering of pots and pans, and the gentle crackle of the fires in each room.

They walked until they got to the other end of their home, where Mother's drawing room was. Next to it where the stairs up to the trap door under the old house, though it was seldom used now. The double doors to her room were intricately decorated with scenes of mythology, of Xiros, their ancestor god, resplendent in carved mahogany, smiting the greedy and corrupt. A single candle was lit in a sconce outside, so servants knew they could knock without risking waking her up, although that meant the one tasked with lighting the candle was in a precarious situation.

Gondulfo gave the door a short, sharp knock. Nothing. He cleared his throat and knocked again.

'What?' came a thin voice beyond the door, volume barely above a conversational level.

'They have returned, Your Graciousness.' Gondulfo said back, raising his voice slightly to make sure he'd been heard.

‘No need to shout.’ It snapped back. ‘Send Aldo in, tell the others to wait.’

‘Why me?’ Aldo whispered to Gondulfo.

The voice beyond the door replied. ‘Because I bloody well told you so.’ Aldo bit his lip.

‘Wish me luck.’ He said to no one in particular. Aldo seemed genuinely nervous, a rare occasion, though normally warranted when Mother was involved. He shuffled towards the door, and Gondulfo let him in. Aldo was swallowed by a cloud of incense smoke, perfumed with flowers from the homeland, and the door closed behind him.

Gondulfo gestured to the chairs on the opposite side of the hallway. Taivan and Caelia obliged wordlessly. The concierge gave another sharp bow and glided down the hallway. Caelia rolled her eyes. It was like waiting outside the schoolmaster’s office, waiting to be scalded or caned, or both.

She realised that despite Mother speaking through the door just seconds ago, if she and Aldo were speaking now, it couldn’t be heard.

‘I doubt this will be good.’ Taivan murmured.

‘I’m not gonna bet against that.’ Caelia replied. It got a small chuckle out of him.

‘I’m going to miss you when you retire, Taivan,’ she said, not really knowing why.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that now, I’ve still got a year or two left in me.’

A moment hung between them. For all his stringency and strictness, she really was going to miss him. In those few seconds her mind was flooded with thoughts of what life would be like without him. He had always been their guardian, and even though they were all adults now, he had a soothing presence which made her feel safe. It would take a while to get used to his absence, even if it was a ways off.

Taivan broke the silence. ‘Your brother... He was due that smack in the face.’ He chuckled quietly. ‘Quite the belter it was. To this day, I still can’t believe that you’re the younger sibling,’

‘Don’t be too hard on him,’ she said, ‘I still don’t think he’s gotten used to life here.’

‘It’s been fifteen years!’ He exclaimed, lowering his tone once he remembered where they were. ‘Homesickness is one thing, but he needs to pull himself together.’ As if to respond to the question, the door to Mother’s drawing room swung open, another plume of smoke escaping, and Aldo came striding out, but he said nothing. Caelia tried to make eye contact, but he was very deliberately looking ahead, unyielding. The door was swinging closed when the thin voice spoke again:

‘Caelia.’

Her stomach dropped. Taivan put a hand on her shoulder, as if he knew. She forced her legs to stand, and she moved to the door. Caelia collected herself for a moment. Pulling it open, she realised it seemed to move by itself, once she’d touched it. Another gust of smoke, and she was inside.

The drawing room was the most lavishly decorated room in their home, each wall filigreed in the old style, copper and silver. Heavy red curtains were fixed to the far wall, despite the lack of windows. Mother was sitting at her ebony vanity desk, raking her greying hair through with a comb. The action was violent, frustrated, and probably quite painful. She didn’t turn around as Caelia entered, she looked forward into the broken mirror at the centre of her desk, which smashed many years ago. Caelia saw her mother’s reflection, dozens of them in fact, one in each fragment of the mirror, all pale and impassive, her taut features lined with age, or stress. .

‘I hear you did something rather brash today.’ Mother said coldly.

‘Is that what Aldo told you?’ Caelia replied, fighting back the nerves.

‘He also said you punched him in the eye. You know how he feels about bruises. He’ll sulk all week.’ Her tone was icy, with an assured, steely edge.

Caelia held down a wave of anger. *When Mother hears about this*, he’d said on the wagon. Happy now Aldo? She tried to match her mother’s tone. ‘He overreacted. Like he always does. This is no different.’ It didn’t work. The words came out far more childish, more naïve than she wanted. Mother shifted slightly in her chair, moved the comb to the other side of her head.

‘Is that right? Because to me it sounded like you started something of a turf war with some petty thug.’

‘That’s not... That isn’t—’

‘That’s not what happened? Then care to explain who *Wedekind Brunost* is? Who you killed at the dockyard, without a second thought?’

‘Well, I...’ Fuck. Nothing had changed. Caelia was twenty and one this coming winter, and Mother still managed to make her feel like a snot-nosed, infantile runt, flailing around at the world like a moron. Tears stung the corners of her eyes. *Keep it together*.

‘It’s, it’s nothing we can’t handle. You said it yourself. He’s some small time thug. A small fry.’

Each and every Mother in the broken mirror fragments flinched, met Caelia’s eyes with their own.

They chided her in unison. ‘I said, *Caelia Ornella Giuditta Jacobazzi*, not to complicate an already very delicate situation. Which is exactly what you did.’

‘I did what I had to, I—’ Mother slammed the comb onto her desk, sending bottles of perfume rattling onto the floor. She still didn’t turn around.

‘You *failed*, first and foremost. Moritz Goethe is still out there. Not only that, but you put some stinking old fishermen and their fishwives under our protection, a deal we must now respect, unless we want our reputation ruined—’

‘That’s not fair—’

‘Do *not* interrupt me.’ She finally turned to face her daughter. Caelia felt like she was withering under her icy gaze. ‘If all that wasn’t enough, you’ve put us to war with some idiot gangster over the arse end of the city. Then, you have the gall to come in here and tell me we can handle it, knowing full well it won’t be you fighting and dying for some shit-stain dockyard!’

Silence.

Caelia wished in that moment that she could just disappear, better than that, just stop existing altogether.

‘I’m sorry,’ was all she could manage, ‘I’m sorry.’

Mother moved stiffly back around to face the mirror. ‘We’ll talk about our next move in the morning. Get some sleep, you look terrible.’ Caelia didn’t need to be told twice. She fumbled at the door until it opened, and practically threw herself through back into the hallway. She couldn’t stop the tears from flowing down her cheeks.

Taivan was still sat there, eyes peeled back with worry. ‘Caelia? What happened? Are you okay?’

She couldn’t look at him, ran past him, down the hallway.

‘That bloody woman...’ She heard him say as she ran. Then came Mother’s voice again:

‘Taivan.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Caelia ran into her room and slammed the heavy oak door behind her, wiping the tears from her eyes with a sleeve. She threw herself onto the bed, and sat there in the dark. *Fucking pathetic.* Was she really still that much of a child? Crying into her pillow, like a heartbroken teen. She loathed that she was only proving Mother right. And she loathed Mother even more. *Fucking cold-blooded reptile bitch.*

It wasn't often that she thought of Father these days, but in times like this she couldn't help but wish he was still around. His calm, quiet presence, the great equaliser of Mother's temper. After he died though, Mother's fiery demeanour twisted, contorted from passion into something monstrous. Caelia couldn't help but feel like her mother died that day as well. Her heart ached double with the thought. *Can we hurry this up? I haven't got all morning.* Father, with his glinting pale blue eyes, his witch-hazel scented aftershave, his prickly beard. *Just fucking come back, please.*

Then a strange serenity came over Caelia. Her breathing slowed, her mind cleared and the tears dried up. *I need to fix this.* That's what Father would do. He'd take accountability and right his wrongs. Part of her wanted to believe it would work, but knowing Mother she'd only find something else to complain about. Pleasing her was like trying to sate the appetite of a ghoul.

There was a knock at the door. A gentle wrapping. *Shit.* There was no point trying to hide her doubtlessly puffy face and bloodshot eyes.

'Come in.' She said quietly. The door opened, revealing Magda, long browns curls of hair draped over her nightgown. She looked tired.

'Hi Caelia,' she said tentatively, 'Taivan told me what happened. I wanted to see if you were okay.' Tears threatened to come flowing again.

‘Oh, bless you, Magda. I’ll be okay, don’t you worry about me.’ Magda took a step inside, closed the door behind her.

‘Even Taivan seemed scared. I don’t know why Mother can’t just be happy.’

Caelia plastered on a smile. ‘You and me both.’

Then Caelia noticed the bandage on her hand. The smile disappeared. She jumped up and strode over to her sister.

‘W-what are you—?’

‘Magda, what is this?’ Caelia held up her sister’s hand. Magda tried pulling it away but Caelia gripped harder. She pulled off the bandage to reveal a fresh gash on her palm.

Caelia’s heart sunk.

‘Magda... We’ve talked about this—’ She yanked her hand away, turned to look at the wall.

‘I’m just trying to help,’ said Magda, without meeting Caelia’s eye.

‘It’s too dangerous!’ Caelia’s anger swelled, ‘There’s a reason you and and Uberto are forbidden from practising it. You’re too young!’

‘I’m just trying to help!’ She said louder, ‘I want to help you and Taivan and Aldo. It’s not fair that I have to sit at home and read boring old history books.’

‘Magda, you are only sixteen. If you do this, and no one is there to find you, you could *die*, okay? Die. And I am not letting that happen.’

Magda shuffled slightly where she stood. ‘It’s only a bit of blood.’

‘That’s not the point!’ Caelia snapped. ‘It’s not the bleeding that’s the problem. If you can’t control what happens, the rage, we could lose you forever. Like... Like what happened to uncle Endrigo.’ That seemed to do the trick. Endrigo had died a few years ago, in absolute agony, blood drunk and driven to madness. Magda was looking at the floor now. Caelia could see the tears welling in her eyes. She pulled her close for an embrace. ‘Just, whatever you do

don't show Mother, okay? Else we'll all be in real trouble. If she asks, tell her you hurt yourself making food, or something.' She wrapped the bandage back around her sister's hand.

'O-Okay.' Magda said between snuffles.

'You can help when you're old enough. Now get back to bed, yeah? It's very late.'

Magda nodded, wiped her eyes, opened the door and shuffled out.

The weight of the whole city felt like it was on Caelia's shoulders, and she sagged with the effort. The contradiction of being treated like a child and then instantly having to step up and be an adult figure for her sister had taken the last of her strength. She collapsed back into her bed, and stared blankly at the ceiling. Her stomach was still grumbling, but she could think of nothing but lying there in that moment. She hadn't even changed out of her soaked clothes yet. She inspected the scars on her own hands, as well as the fresh wound from today's events. Magda knew full well that Caelia was younger than her when she'd learned to use her blood, but Caelia would not risk her sister treading the same path. She realised that she wasn't really worried about the blood rage, the madness, but of Magda becoming *like her*.

Her eyes flickered closed, and she slipped into a dreamless slumber.