



Under the Mistletoe

ELLIE OWEN

UNDER THE MISTLETOE

2025 Christmas Bonus Scene - Curse of Death

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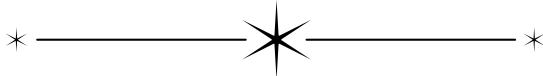
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BOOKS BY ELLIE OWEN



Ellipsis: A Love Story

Thea Scriven, a romance author struggling to have her breakthrough might have a change of luck in love and business when she meets Adrian Friedman, a Fantasy Editor and Heir to major publishing house.

Three Weeks To Fall in Love

In the novella companion to “Ellipsis: A Love Story,” Adrian juggles work, friendship, and the blooming romance with Thea as he forges connections to help the romance writer achieve her dreams.

Curse of Death

400 years after the death of her sister, Reghen Nehtvallan seeks vengeance against the man responsible for her sister’s murder.



Under the Mistletoe

NIGHT HAD ALWAYS BEEN HIS FAVORITE TIME.

Even as a boy, he preferred the moon over the golden sun, wishing to trade night for day to bask in its beauty. For years, he didn't understand the pull he felt toward darkness, believing some innate part of him longed for the background that allowed the silver webbing to surge into the world.

It had taken his bones to grow, his voice to deepen, and a Princess to come into his life like the sweetest of hurricanes to understand it was her he had always been drawn to.

It was the darkness in his veins that lured mercurial eyes toward the night sky, that commanded his attention as her presence commanded his heart. Not once had night been his to love, yet he loved it in secret.

Welcoming the whispers of her that only grew louder when he stood on a land that seemed embedded with her essence.

Azrael knew it was a King, the first of his kind, who sat on the Nehtvallan throne, but it was his daughter that the land he ruled chose as its ruler—the same Princess he chose as his Queen.

The whispering of her left him unquiet, splitting his attention between keeping the silver-black thread connecting him to her taut, as it had been when Azrael was still in Fyr a fortnight ago, and the hammering that followed him from the village's blacksmith.

Four days ago, Suri sent a report about one of Skoto's generals quietly amassing an arsenal of weapons, procuring the legal limit of swords any individual could have ordered by their local smiths, bending that limit by traveling to neighboring villages, though being careful to avoid Ianvaea.

In a matter of months, a thousand blades had found their way to the General's arsenal. Far exceeding how many weapons individuals, even Generals, were allowed to keep under their possession.

Reghen alone possessed a seal that granted her, under the Crown's permission, the freedom to collect weapons as one collects dresses. Adding to her collection without ever needing to remove a piece from it, even as every soul in Skoto knew she only fought with two swords at her side.

A rebellion, the Spybreaker mulled over the word, daring not to feel hopeful simply because, in the report he read, little suggested the General was readying a private army to usurp the throne.

There had been centuries of discontent brewing in regards to Reghen.

When she ran from Skoto—from Yorok—people believed she would return a month after with a heart forged anew.

A week became a month, then a month became a year, for no one seemed to know the depth in which Reghen loved her sister was matched by the depth she blamed herself for Lilith's death.

For the first century of her vacancy, disappointment had been buried under their understanding, slowly realizing that Lilith's death had robbed something fundamental from their Promised Queen.

Volkryon hadn't allowed anyone beside Azrael to search for her in the mortal land, breaking Yorokian law to ensure the Princess still lived—though for Azrael, his concern hadn't ended with there being beat to her heart; he longed for her to feel joy.

For the keeper of his heart to know she was allowed what Lilith had been robbed off. Yet, he never uttered those words for her, not in the first or the second century when she left, or when she'd screamed at him when he forced his presence in those short visits.

Countless nights did she lie awake in bed without knowing he was close enough to hear the shattered sound of her heart. Countless nights did he lie awake in bed without knowing if she would fight against assassins the different courts could send after her.

In the second century of Reghen being gone from Skoto, the people began to believe she would return soon. The Princess with darkness in her veins would not lose the battle to grief, not when she had been born from a womb of death.

By the third century, the few and sparse whispers slowly grew in quantity and frequency. The people did not want the throne without an heir, nor did they want a man to sit in it when their Promised Queen still drew breath in her lungs.

Not once had Azrael uttered those words for Reghen.

He did not care for Skoto, nor the rest of the world. The lives of others were inconsequential, paling into nothing when he had not heard her laugh without bitterness and scorn dripping from it.

There was no life without her in it, nor was there Reghen without joy.

In the beginning of the fourth century, sorrow hardened into hatred. Azrael would still not hear her laugh joyfully, and she'd still fight him to leave her alone until exhaustion made her collapse against his arms, weeping as no other had ever wept before.

Winter was waning from her soul.

Crystallized tears melting as they rolled down her cheeks, her voice a whisper that was no longer raw as she spoke to him gently, with calloused and trembling hands cupping his cheeks, holding his hands against her chest as she pleaded with him.

Begging Azrael, but he never understood what she was begging for.

The Spybreaker still remembered the relief he felt when she'd given herself a mission—one Azrael wished to accompany her on—to avenge Lilith, and with it, returning home.

Yet, Skotians' discontent did not dissipate upon her return.

They felt betrayed that she loved her sister more than she loved them; angered that grief weighted more than duty; sad that the Princess who left for war had never returned—only a hollow, hardened version of her did.

It would be easy for a General, who'd taken the same oath his sister and Tyreal had taken—the one Azrael took a second time, alone in the throne room with Volkryon and Reghen as witnesses before he left to begin his training in the Irmandade—to break such promise in the face of an opportunity.

Never before had the Nehtvallan bloodline been so weakened; never before had Skotians been this discontent with their ruler, for being a man, and heir, for being devastated.

Like her, Azrael alone held a seal granting him permission to act on his investigations before the need to report to the King, a seal that allowed him an army of his own.

One that no one—not even Volkryon—knew the extent of. An army that had reaped many lives, all by Azrael's, hand as no one would ever be tortured by another for the threat they posed to Reghen.

He did not allow himself hope—would not give himself permission to wait until an enemy loomed, raising its weapons against Reghen.

It did not matter who, did not matter if they were a General of Skoto or the King himself—Azrael and his weapons were Reghen's to wield, even if she did not know it yet.

“Be quiet,” he grunted under a breath that clouded in front of his lips. “We’re not going home.”

Lightning darted between his fingers, betraying his control only because they knew the streets of Vetruz, the largest village between Ianvaes and Maetrae, were quiet this time of the year when the greenhouses required less work than they did during reaping season.

It left the village without the flurry of workers and young erudite who'd leave Caligem for the taste of adventure when they did not have the coin to

visit other courts. Enjoying instead the quaintness of a village built around canals that stretched out from Habae, connecting the villages of Skoto like the veins spreading from a heart.

Azrael knew there'd been a time when Reghen had been among the erudite, as she'd often joined Lucille in the traveling her education led her to when his sister was still an student under the Department of Architecture.

He still kept the letters from that time.

Cherishing them for the joy his sister had imparted in her words, painting a vivid image of all she learned from her lecturers, of the brilliant minds she found herself surrounded by, of the long nights she spent awake to finish a maquette.

Dreams dripped from those letters, and with them, glimpses of her.

A terrible brother he had been, Azrael would read and reread the glimpses of Reghen, learning the passages Lucille offered him about them studying in the library together, of sharing lunch on the lawn of Caligem University during Febrae, or hiding away in the cheap restaurants that spotted the area.

While Lucille dreamed, the Crown Princess furthered her education on Skotian history and her ancestors who ruled over Skoto, understanding the fickle nature of commoners and the different forms of governance for her to know what leader she ought to become.

Azrael knew, from letters sent by his parents, that she continued on being tutored by many generals, learning to maintain a strong military power and how to strategize for war—not so the burden of each battle fell solely on her, but to know if a general was keen on betraying her.

Nothing she studied had been what Reghen dreamed of. None of her letters carried the sweetness of dreams, until they carried the news she would be a sister.

Little did she care that her place as the future Queen was threatened by the birth of Lilith. All that mattered to her was to make sure her sister had room to dream in ways she had not.

For her, there were no cities to visit and cities to explore, for she would only learn about them in books. Discovering their story and importance to Skoto from the trusted word of her professors.

If not for Lucille, he would not have memories of seeking permission to leave Daerwodu to marvel in their joy, talking excitedly with Tyreal between them when the warrior had time away from Ianvaea to join them.

Only he had never been part of their memories.

Until his training was concluded, Azrael had only been allowed to see her from afar, to converse through letters that were read by the Irmandade before being delivered to him and sent on the foot of a pigeon to her.

The leaders in the Irmandade warned him that it was torture to see the people he loved without being able to touch them, yet without those visits

from afar, Azrael would not have been able to see the ghost of Reghen meandering through streets dusted in a thick layer of snow.

He could almost hear the faint song of her laugh, feeling it pull on his heart as he passed by the one bakery in Vetrug that Reghen began her mornings in, fetching herself something different to accompany her tea.

While Lucille went to join her coursemates in visits of landmarks and the medley of buildings from bygone times that formed the Vetrug village, Reghen would sit by a canal, watching the water pass her by as blue eyes specked by red flickered through the world as if searching for something. There'd been times when she'd sigh while penning him letters, or writing in the leather-bound journal she had not touched since Lilith's death.

When she grew tired of sitting, Reghen would wander through Vetrug, stealing glances over her shoulder as if someone followed her. A boyish part of him always hoped some part of her was aware of his presence, but in those days, the thread connecting them now did not exist.

Lightning tingled his limbs, recognizing the little stall where she'd buy produce for dinner, and the black market bookstore where its owner paid the scribes in Maetrae good coin for facsimile books Caligem Library kept from the reach of commoners.

Blades and books, he mused, lids fluttering close at the joy both weapons brought her.

Azrael knew which he preferred to rest against the palms of her hands, and which he'd never cede—never trusting her safety to another.

Liohtian lamps cast their silvery glow over frosty water, painting stars on the canal. Rushing water drowned out the sound of gloved hands unsheathing a dagger as he moved deeper into shadows, no longer letting moonlight reach its hands to him.

Veering left, Azrael slithered away from the center of the village. Abandoning memories of Reghen like a trail of breadcrumbs for him to follow back into himself, for the Spybreaker did not like to think of the man and torturer as sharing the same soul.

It does not matter, lightning whispered to him as they often did when he mulled over the sides of himself, niggling Azrael with the reminder that torturer or not, every part of his being loved her.

"It matters," he argued, never wishing to become someone who enjoyed the torture.

A mere few weeks ago, Vetrug would've shared a stronger resemblance to the bygone days Reghen spent there, as the village would overflow with travelers, people from smaller villages, and passersby from Maetrae, who ventured into stores for the trinkets, pottery, and blankets the region was known for; filling their luggage with gifts for the family they'd visit during the Winter Solstice recess.

It was a tradition Azrael no longer participated in.

Not since he left for his training, when he began to feel as if his place in Skoto belonged to the shadows; when he could no longer stand to be in her proximity and pretend to be untouched by her spell, pretend to not respond when she walked into a room and his heart leapt in his chest, or that his eyes did not seek her first when he walked into a room in hopes of finding her there.

He could not buy her gifts that a friend would give her when none of those were the ones he'd buy her as a lover. Could not pretend to not see the mistletoe and wish to drift her there for a kiss.

“No,” he grunted before lightning nudged his mind toward the gifts he bought for how they reminded him of Reghen, keeping them in his room—or his luggage—as a shrine where he worshiped her in secret.

Walking along the edge of of Vetruz, Azrael followed the light emanating through the windows and closed curtains on the general's manor, where the silvery glow from Liohtian lamps washed away the golden hues of the clay filling the space between the visible timber the second floor rose from.

Reddish-brown stones clad the first floor, though a different stone was used at the base of the protruding bay window, where candles burned brightly, guiding the warmer days of Febrae into reaching Vetruz.

Several carriages were parked out on the cobblestone driveway. Some had an elegant black lacquer with the Nehtvallan crest painted in their family colors as a symbol of loyalty to the Crown. Others weren't as new, left unlacquered, though the wood was varnished to hide the scratches from age.

Closer to the manor, Azrael could hear the voices tangled into one as they dipped in laughter. For some, it was the sound of joy and home; for him, it was the sound of distraction, making it easy for him to approach the General's home unnoticed.

On the edges of the property, the Spybreaker followed shadows to the backdoor, where muddy boots littered the tiled floor and a wooden bench held the coats that had not fit on the hanger.

Inside, the voices grew louder, and his breath tasted of liquor.

Solstice was still five nights away, but Azrael knew from his own family they had long been gathered together. It did not surprise him to find the General's house filled with guests.

With the grace of a predator, he passed by the kitchen, where the adults cooked supper and prepared drinks in chatter, laughing about nothing in the way drunk people did.

Silver eyes did not linger on ruddy faces, nor on the children stealing nibbles of cake and cookies, slipping chocolate into their pockets before running to join their cousins in the great room.

The smell of the evergreen tree was stronger there, with needles falling as they adorned the tree with apples, nuts, and paper roses. Small Liohtian

lamps wrapped in silk altered the light into appearing red for the blood Moira spilled, green for the coming of Febrae and the life the Goddess had given them, silver for the light her darkness birthed.

The noise slowly faded as the Spybreaker moved deeper into the General's home, letting shadows guide him into the unlocked office that remained untouched by Solstice decorations.

A mural depicting the horizon of Ianvaes was painted on the four walls, framed by dado wainscoting and crown molding painted in the sage green of Ianvaes trees. It matched with the mammoth desk in the center of the room, carving space for the walnut piano pushed to the left wall.

Moonlight drizzled on the few books stacked on the credenza, their titles hidden by the leather chair pushed behind the desk. Azrael knew there were certain books every General, if not every soldier, kept on their bookshelves, learning from the words of the Aenain General of the Lóng Dynasty about the art of war, studying the history of bygone battles and the Skotian Queens who wrote their history through blood and victory.

Azrael knew books on statecraft and power dynamics were greatly restricted by the Crown, imparting such knowledge to few of its Generals, gifting leather-bound copies with ornate pages inked in gold along with the sheathed weapons of their station.

Yet, no weapons were hung on the wall. Not even the golden hand-and-a-half broadsword General-Commanders were bestowed with along the rank that perched them just beneath the Commander of the Skotian army.

His own father held a collection that began with a bodice dagger and ended with a golden claymore, displaying them proudly in their home, for the opposite was akin to renouncing the honor the King gave him.

Traitor, the word lingered on the tip of his tongue, wishing to be spoken, but Azrael knew that once he gave voice to it, he would have to kill General-Commander Grether.

Phantom steps carried him forward, fingers brushing on the window sill, framing the moonlight and the forest between the General's home and the centre of Vetrus, where smoke drifting from chimney flues spotted the sky.

The moonlight tugged on him, peeling his attention toward the wind outside, whispering of Reghen and the false smile she offered the ministers during the Crown's Solstice celebration.

A puppet controlled by his puppeteer, the Spybreaker used the tip of his dagger to push aside the brass seal carved with the eclipse of the Nehtvallan crest alongside the coat of arms of Vetrus General-Commander.

Mercurial eyes glossed over the drawn-out salutation that began with one's name, proceeded by the title held within a hierarchical and bureaucratic morphon before wishing a merry winter solstice.

Letter after letter, Azrael read the General-Commander Grether's well wishes for other generals of the same rank and a few of those beneath.

There were no mention of the weapons, no word that hinted at the General's discontentment with Reghen—or the King who should've never been.

No word that may hint at two or more generals being co-conspirators in overthrowing the Nehtvallan family from its throne. Yet, he continued perusing through letters and loose documents neatly organized in different piles, reading them carefully as if searching for cryptic messages.

Azrael had expected as much.

One did not architect regicide through letters, and the spies the Spybreaker had stationed across Skoto were the ones documenting the General's comings and goings, their visiting of Ianvaes without reason, the travels to see each other in the other villages they governed.

He did not expect to find evidence beyond documents ensuring that if one betrayed the plans for regicide—if one was found—they would be sent to the gallows together.

“You can’t be here.” A pitched child’s voice rose through the silence. “Mommy says no one can be here without her.”

Hand moving to under the desk, Azrael hid his dagger from view as he turned toward the auric-haired little girl with a question on his lips. “Does she? Even good friends?”

Tight coils bounced when she nodded, fingers digging around a large strawberry shortbread cookie, looking guilty as if she had followed her cousins’ example in stealing from the kitchen.

“What’s your name?”

“Siofra.”

“That’s a beautiful name, Siofra.” Azrael added a softness to his voice, letting the edge of his lips curl when she ran a hand down the front of her red-and-white checkered dress, with a ruffled square collar adorned by a tiny bow at the center of it.

Tiptoeing on velvet slippers, the little girl approached him with her arm stretched, as if to shake hands with him. “What is your name?” she demanded, pale blue eyes blinking with a hint of recognition.

“Can you keep a secret?”

Pink lips puckered along with her brows that knit close together. “Mommy say I can’t keep secrets with grownups.”

“Clever girl. How about you call your mom for me?”

“Does Mommy know you?”

Kneeling, Azrael moved a hand toward his back as he tilted his head, smiling in a way that earned trust from strangers who never saw danger behind a beautiful face.

Siofra took a small, sheepish step toward him. Pale blue eyes studying him carefully as the wall built on suspicion crumbled under the patience in his eyes, under the hand he offered her.

“Would I be here if she didn’t?” The Spybreaker knew lies were hidden in the words one says and how they say it, rather than on gestures, smiles, and an avoidant gaze.

He’d been trained to know people looked at his body and face to seek the truth from him, trained to become still when he wanted to earn someone’s trust, as if the fact he didn’t scratch his nose meant something.

Azrael could see the way Siofra studied him, focusing on cues of sincerity and missing the non-answer he gave her, nudging her mind away from seeking truth in his words to finding an answer to his question.

To lie, he needed to know what the person he was lying to knew; needed to know what would fit into his story, what he said and didn’t. With questions, the onus laid on another.

“You don’t believe me?” Mirth coated his voice, fingers closing around Siofra’s little hand, but he didn’t move further, letting her come to him until she was close enough for Azrael to lift her off the floor. “Call for your mom. You’ll see I’m not lying.”

Her little shriek echoed down the hall, propelled by how Siofra leaned away from Azrael, trusting him to catch her, much how Lilith did in her age.

“Think she heard you?”

“Mommy always hears me.”

“Does she? That reminds me of someone.”

“Who?” Siofra broke her cookie in half, giving Azrael the smallest of the two halves.

“A girl that is like the sun on a stormy day. She’s so radiant, Siofra, that there was a fool who wanted that golden light to warm only his skin.”

“*Wike* cloud in a storm?”

“Like the greatest storm she could face.”

“The sun always shines. Mommy says morning comes after night, but only if I sleep tight.”

The smile on his lips was only half genuine; part of him felt the night would be longer than their lives, yet Azrael was desperate for it to be true, for Reghen to shine bright as she once did—for her to shine brighter than she ever had.

Siofra? A voice echoed, marking the beginning of footsteps growing nearer with a hint of uncertainty.

“Darling, did you—” A woman wearing a long voluptuous gown the very color of her daughter’s eyes with a corset that hid the muscles and strength of her body. “Azrael Idis, to what do I owe the pleasure for this unexpected visit?”

Her pale skin was ruddy as if she’d been outside, a detail corroborated by the snow melting on her soft golden curls. Greenish eyes traveled down his body, jaw tightening as she forced herself to smile when the moonlight caught on the silver of his blade.

“General-Commander Vanora Grether, merry winter solstice. I did not know your daughter was so clever.”

“Moira blessed us.” Her tone was carefully curated, daring not to make her child aware of the danger. “Siofra, darling, why don’t you go downstairs? Your father was asking for you.”

Kneeling once more, Azrael set Siofra down gently, running a hand down soft curls, but his gaze lingered on Vanora, wanting her on the threshold, far from the dagger he sank into her desk when the little girl skipped away, humming a lullaby about the Goddess bringing gifts to naughty and good children.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Don’t you know?”

Vanora’s brows twitched, hands curling into fists. “I did not expect the son of the Grand General to be so treacherous.”

“I would refrain from such words if I were you, General-Commander.”

“You ought to refrain from admonishing me when the crime you committed today could cost your father his son. Do not think of me as a gentle fool, Azrael Idis. My history with your father will not keep me from communicating to the King about your trespass—”

“What history with my father?” Azrael probed before noticing the words left his lips.

The General-Commander paused, as if she too had spoken out of turn, the slip of her tongue deepening the rosy color of her cheeks. She swayed a little, a foot catching her when she moved backward.

“What history?” he demanded, commandeering the room.

“Your father and I advanced in our career at a similar progre—”

“That is not the history you had in mind, is it? The rivalry between the two of you is well known, Vanora. As is your dislike for how my father was given his rank by the King in hopes of strengthening his position.”

“No man had been King and Commander of the Skotian army. It is unbecoming of them to lead when your kin has never been known to be great leaders. Too prone to rage, too egoistical to think of the people and soldiers. Look at other courts, Azrael Idis. Look at what great leaders the Kings of Ore and Oceane are to their people.”

The Spybreaker couldn’t deny that his loyalty had always laid on Reghen, and that much of her suffering wouldn’t have come to be if the King wasn’t a gentle man, if he didn’t care to appease enemies with the cost of his risking those who shared blood with him.

Lilith would’ve never been allowed to leave the safety of Skoto if Volkryon hadn’t ceded, hadn’t agreed with the terms presented by Victon —terms Reghen had opposed, preferring to wage war alone over risking her sister’s safety.

Yet, he would not allow more suffering to be inflicted on the keeper of his heart. As much as Volkryon had failed Lilith, Reghen loved her father, and the storm had not yet passed for her.

“Do not think your father is a better leader and strategist than I am. Everything he knows, he learned from my mother, Grand General Osyn Grether, and she wouldn’t have taught him if your father hadn’t—” Vanora paused, taking in the confusion dancing in silver eyes, the tight line of his lips. “Do you not know you were supposed to be my child?”

Lightning crackled in his veins, betrayed by the idea that Azrael could’ve been born with the cold fire of the Grether family. That his hair could’ve been golden like Gavel’s, his eyes as soulless as the Crown Prince’s.

“Has your father never told you that his family and mine were close? His mother had nearly died for mine, a debt created in blood during the two Crown Princesses’ Wars. Kieron and I grew up training together, every old scar of mine was placed by your father, and kissed by him too.”

Azrael had known that the Grether and Sarmoier family—his father’s bachelor surname—had been close until his grandparents retired from their military service, moving further from Ianvaes and into the southern peaks of Nubluas.

Yet, he had never known he shared a strange proximity to his father’s relationship, never known his hesitation to speak to his mother had a woman behind it.

For the briefest of moments, the Spybreaker allowed himself to think of how life could’ve been if it had been Kieron who left courts to join the one his heart belonged to, of how Reghen would’ve never been the princess who’d invade his life without permission, altering his destiny.

Without her, Azrael would’ve been adrift in life, and he wouldn’t have known he was lost.

“Vanora.” He forced the thoughts away, for life without Reghen was no life he wished to live. “I’m not someone you or my father can touch.”

“Being a reservist does not exempt you from the law.”

“It does not, but I live in the darkness of the Nehtvallan family. I am their weapon to wield, and like Salmauweth, I do not lose my edge. Do not think you can threaten me into surrender, for I would not have come to you without reason.”

“It’s you, isn’t it?” Vanora left the safety of the threshold, letting the door close behind herself as she cloaked herself in the invisible armor of a general. “Does your father know you’re the spy under Volkryon’s thumb?”

“My father knows I’ll kill any who threaten Reghen Nehtvallan and her claim to the throne.”

“Then my life is safe with you.”

“Do not lie. Do not try to fool me, Vanora. I have never tortured a person for the truth ... I torture them and leave their brokenness to be found as a warning to renegades like you.”

There had been no fear in her eyes, no look of apprehension at one’s secret being uncovered. Azrael could only see loss in the soft panes of her face—in how her brows furrowed and her hands fluttered without any tension in them.

“What truth have you found here? I’ve heard the stories of you Azrael Idis. I know what the Master of Whispers can do. You’ve proven them true by coming into my home without anyone noticing—by holding my daughter with a dagger in your hand. Whatever crime you believe I have committed, kill me, but do not touch my children.”

“The weapons, Vanora. Why do you need them?”

Azrael did not expect such a dissimulated act from the General-Commander, did not think she’d play such an act in a flawless performance, even when he knew better than to expect evidence written in her letters.

Perhaps the oath taken had not been kept in sheets of paper, Azrael wondered at the same time enlightenment reached her eyes.

Smoothing the tension from her shoulders as if danger had gone out of the room. “Is it not the Winter Solstice?” she asked, closing the distance between the two, hand reaching for the dagger buried in her desk. “What gifts do you plan to give your father or Tyreal Atiati? I remember Kieron held a deep appreciation for the weapons forged in Vetruz.”

“*Rorwà*,” he whispered. “Do you have proof?”



AZRAEL IDIS DID NOT LIKE BEING TAKEN FOR A FOOL.

Even less when it exposed his real position in Skoto and led him to being forced to join Vanora’s family for supper. Receiving strange glances from her husband, a General-Attendant that shared Siofra’s pale blue eyes, and who knew for certain he had not been invited to join their festivity.

The Spybreaker had not been allowed to keep his dagger—punishment for marring Vanora’s beloved desk—after the General-Commander had shown him the correspondence between herself and Grand General Kieron where Vanora asked for permission to acquire new blades for the Generals and Commandants under her command.

Vanora had asked for secrecy, not wanting the Crown to know of her gifts, as weapons fell onto the treasury’s responsibility to pay for.

Lingering on the edge of their world, Azrael sunk into shadows, ignoring the buzzing of lightning that kept snickering at him, until they too fell silent at the familiar pull of a fire message destined for him.

If he hadn't felt the touch of darkness, he would've ignored the nudge, letting the message drift in its magic until Azrael found himself back in the Skotian lair in Vetruz.

It was an almost imperceptible imprint.

Something the letter of no other carried, or perhaps, an imprint Azrael had never cared to decipher when only her letters wouldn't be ignored by him, regardless of situation.

Without his dagger in hand, the Spybreaker was careful to not let wax rip the translucent envelope Reghen used for her letters. Even his breath was careful as he breathed in the scent of her.

Dear Azrael Zadok Idis, Youngest Child of Kieron Idis, the Commander of the Army, and Skai Idis, a Princess of the Liohtian throne, Reservist General-Abettor of the Skotian Army, Master of Whispers, and my dearest friend...

I, Reghen Dorethea Nehtvallan of Skoto, Crown Princess of the Court of Darkness, the First of Her Name, Bearer of Decay, Protector of Death's Reaper, Princess of Eternal Night, and the Queen of Death, hereby invite—and summon—you to bestow me with your presence at the Winter Solstice I am to host in my personal residence.

Others in attendance include the King of Skoto, Volkryon Nehtvallan, along with his beloved wife and my dear mother, Thana, the Goddess of Death. Your father, Kieron Idis, the Commander of the Army, and your mother, Skai Idis, a Princess of the Liohtian throne, shall also be in attendance with their first-born child, Lucille Idis, in tow. Our dear friend, Tyreal Atiati, has also confirmed his presence, allowing us to bask in the warm glow of his laughter and beauty.

Lastly, my beloved Sellie and her daughters, Adeline, Inessa, and Clerisse, are also in attendance, for they are the sole reason I did not join your parents at their residence in Ianvaes. This year, I could not bear to be apart from those I love most, and this, Azrael Zadok Idis, Youngest Child of Kieron Idis, the Commander of the Army, and Skai Idis, a Princess of the Liohtian throne, Reservist General-Abettor of the Skotian Army, Master of Whispers, and my dearest friend, includes you.

If you fail to be present at my Solstice Celebration, the repercussions shall be deadly. Do not fail me, for I need all the pieces of my heart to be there.

Yours, Reghen Dorethea Nehtvallan of Skoto, Crown Princess of the Court of Darkness, the First of Her Name, Bearer of Decay, Protector of Death's Reaper, Princess of Eternal Night, and the Queen of Death.

P.S. Do come, Azrael. There is no family without you here.

If not for me, than come for your mother. She misses you; as do I.

Utterly powerless against her, Azrael did not notice the width of his smile growing as he reread the letter. Each time, savoring the mirth he could see in the careful sweeps of her calligraphy, could imagine Reghen bent over this letter with her brows knit and the tip of her tongue caught between her teeth in utter attention as she amused herself with the serious tone of a simple invitation.

It seemed she'd forgotten that a mere tug on the thread connecting them together would have Azrael shadowing to her. Forgetting that if she called his name, he would run to her.

"The Princess sent you a letter?" Vanora spoke, standing in front of him with a flute of sparkling Aenain liquor. "Do not make that face."

"What face?"

"You're good at hiding your heart. Your father was too, but it did not matter what happened around him; whenever Kieron mentions your mother—whenever he sees something that belongs to her or reminds him of her—the coldness in his eyes melts in a way they never did for me."

Azrael knew well the softness his mother evoked even when she was at home in Ianvaes and he was strategizing in a war tent, voice losing its harshness when offering credit for an idea his mother shared over letters.

He knew there was no other soul that could blunt his father's brashness than the General's own family. Only they could peel from him the armor he wore at all times.

"The males of the Sarmoier family have always been like this. They have always been devout to those their hearts have chosen, and have always been loved with equal force. The blood of the Sarmoier family is strong in your veins, is it not?"

His mother had spoken of his father as a near impenetrable wall that only one person would be given the gift of warding its key.

The woman who'd given him his silvery eyes would gain the harshness Kieron lost when she spoke of how she would've found a way through the cracks, forcing her way in, for she knew that to be loved by such a man was not a love that ought to be feeble.

"General Vanora, I confess it is strange to hear you speak of my father so...intimately."

"Intimately?" she asked, thrusting the flute into his hands before perching herself on the empty seat beside Azrael. "I do not hate your father, Azrael. The day he penned his parents a letter to inform them Skai was with child, he wrote for me too."

Vanora bit on her lips, eyes flickering toward the letter Azrael had involuntarily pressed to his heart. Yet, she did not lean closer to steal a glimpse at the words meant for him.

"He remains a close friend of mine—close enough to be the first, after my husband and I, to hold Siofra when she was born. Why did you think she thought of you as being familiar?"

Just as quickly as the little girl glanced at them, as if she heard her name, a cousin of hers pulled her back into their little dance that violated all the rules Reghen had taught him about dancing.

"My dislike for your father as Grand General has little to do with my personal feelings for Kieron and much with tradition—with recognizing they are not protectors but territorial beings. There are many good men, but your kin is one of ego and violence. The will of a man is a long as the word itself."

"He's a good general, is he not?"

"Kieron had to prove himself, as will the Princess's friend, Tyreal Atiati, need to prove himself worthy, to prove that his loyalty is to the Promised Queen and not to his own interests."

"He too will be good."

"Yet, I did not come here to speak of him."

His fingers pressed the letter protectively into his chest, wrinkling the paper as the Spybreaker let the words come in a growling sound, "I cannot show you the content of this let—"

"Nor have I asked you to." Vanora raised a hand when Azrael opened his mouth. "I only came to ask you to care for the woman you love."

"General Vanora, I will not lie and say I do not love Reghen, but it is not the love you think. I love her as every Skotian loves the Princess."

"It's in the way you speak her name, Soldier."

Betrayed by the blood in his veins, Azrael felt his face grow warm as he blushed at the veracity of her accusation.

"You speak it with the worship of a man in love. You speak it as if her name was a blessing and a secret. Still, I did not come here to tease you about our beloved Promised Queen."

"Why did you come here?"

"To offer you what you came to see. After the Solstice, I'd like you to come back to Vetrus, perhaps if you could persuade the Princess to come with you. I'd like you to see the love the soldiers under my command have for her...They would not be alive if they didn't."

She will never betray her; Azrael realized in the ferocity of her words rather than in the smile she kept plastered on her delicate face, fooling any of her guests that paid attention to them.

"Your love for her is a different kind than mine, but it is not greater than mine. I was born into a family blessed by the Nehtvallan clan, my ancestors would've not lived without their grace. To betray them is to betray my blood, Azrael Idis. Protect her heart, and the soldiers under my command will protect her safety."

“By Moira’s blessing, you will not see this as a slight against you, General-Commander, but I will never trust her safety to another. The blessings my ancestors had in being loved as they loved has skipped me, but it does not mean I shan’t be a fortress for Reghen.”

“It has never skipped a generation. Perhaps the letter in your hand is proof of it.”



THE HOME WELCOMED HIM WITHOUT ANY RESISTANCE, unlocking its doors as the Spybreaker left footprints on fresh snow. Even outside, he could hear the rambunctious symphony of different songs being played by Aenain crystal, etched with tiny valleys that produced music.

Waiting outside the backdoor that led into the kitchen, Azrael listened to Sellie’s daughters talking about supper and how strange it had been to have the King and Grand General responsible for breakfast and lunch.

A strangeness so profound that they had refused to let them tend to supper, though they worried their refusal had come across as if they hated their cooking. Something Azrael knew to be unlikely when both men were fine cooks, learning from a young age as all Skotians did.

Noble or not. Male or not.

Voices drifting toward the pantry, Azrael slipped inside, thankful for the open window that aired out the home as an excuse for the sudden gush of wind that billowed the curtains.

His steps evoked no sound as he lingered on the edge of rooms, waiting on thresholds for the full house to shift and settle as reapers decorated the living room for the Solstice night—a small touch he’d known Reghen prepared, wanting each night to feel special and having little care about the propriety in having reapers do her work.

From the kitchen, to the great room, where he left another gift for her, to the staircase, Azrael moved quickly, pausing only when needed as he basked in the distant sound of his sister’s voice and his parents dancing in their room between getting ready for the night.

Azrael faltered only when he reached the wing that belonged to Reghen, finding her alone in her dressing room. Through the reflection in the mirror, he could see her gaze was low and unseeing as her hand held a section of hair, while the other ran a wooden comb through.

Beautiful, he thought for a moment. Beautiful and lonely as the moon.

Shadows stirred around Reghen, some nudging the back of her shoulder to lift her gaze toward him, others slithering on the oak flooring to meet him halfway as he drifted close.

The air belonged to her, tasting of peaches and rain. It made his head swoon with each breath that inebriated him more than liquor did, bringing heat to his face down to the tip of his toes.

Azrael had long wondered if the tingling he felt spreading across his body when his sight was locked on her was akin to being hit by lightning. It ought to be when silver webbing darted between his fingers, tangling itself in darkness when his fingers wrapped around hers.

“Did Sellie forget about you, Your Highness?” His voice was broken—breathless in how Azrael was all too aware of every inch of skin that touched her hand.

The tips of his fingers touching the side of her thumb. Calloused palms warming the back of her milky hand. Thumb resting on the second joint of her index finger as his little finger dared to caress the back of her hand, as if it had slipped and climbed away from her wrist.

Somewhere along their existence, their magic must’ve been mixed, for Azrael could swear lightning danced in her eyes when she tilted her head to look at him.

Naively unaware of how his heart nearly came undone with the smile raveling in the planes of her face. “You came!” Reghen spoke in a broken whisper, afraid this was no more than a dream.

“You summoned me, did you not?”

“Five nights ago, and you did not come.”

“Your Highness invited me for your Solstice Celebration, not for the Solstice recess. I would not dare to impose my presence.”

“I want you here for all of it.”

Taking the comb from her hand, Azrael set it down on her vanity, cluttered with products she would never need to be beautiful. “I brought you a gift.”

Reghen smiled once more, pivoting in her chair to face him with expecting hands, though she did not let him pull his hand away from hers. Forcing Azrael to pull the small cherry wooden box from the breast pocket of his coat with a single hand.

Blue eyes twinkled like stars at the velvet ribbon wrapped around it without any way of knowing the time he spent perfecting the bow at the top, and every store he visited—or forced open in Vetrug—to find a soft buttery yellow velvet that matched the silver comb he’d gotten her, along with a mirror and a boar-bristle paddle hairbrush.

“It’s lovely,” she spoke softly and adoringly. “Is it from Vetrug?”

Nodding, Azrael didn’t speak of how the box and ribbon were new items for a gift he procured long ago. Visiting many of Skoto and Yorok’s best artisans for the kind of gift he knew Reghen would love without being able to foretell that he loved her.

“Seemed like the thing you’d like.”

A small lie when Azrael knew from watching her from afar that she held a strange love for these things. Adoring little combs that promised to add shine to her hair, and hair pins to hold back the braids she’d spend hours weaving into her hair.

“Why is that?”

“Because it’s beautiful.”

As beautiful as you, Azrael finished the reasoning in the solitude of his mind, where it wasn’t dangerous for him to express his love for her.

“Am I vain to only love beautiful things?”

“If you did, you’d be terribly in love with me, Your Highness.”

“Perhaps it is true then.” Reghen squeezed his hand. “I do love you.”

“Liar.”

Her laugh echoed in her room, sounding so close to what it had once been that he sank into hope. Longing for the day when the wounds became scars, when she no longer poked at its seab by hunting everyone when she could use him instead.

“Are you waiting for Sellie to braid your hair?”

“She’s braiding Lucille’s hair.” Reghen sprawled the palm of her hand against his, words sounding distant when her gaze lingered on the fingers she wove through his. “It doesn’t feel right to wear braids. Not anymore.”

“You never liked them much, have you?”

Silver eyes dropped toward her long wavy hair. The ends of it pooling around her lap and spilling down the hollow back of her chair, it reached beyond the small of her back, brushing a few fingers’ width past hip bones.

The wildfire of her hair hadn’t always been this long. There’d been a time when the waves were tighter, bordering on being curls, when the ends of her hair reached her midriff.

Rarely did she let it grow past such length, preferring to wear her hair a certain way that seemed to bear no consequence now.

“How do you know so much about me, Azrael Idis? I’ve never told anyone about preferring my hair without braids in it.”

“I pay attention. It comes with the job.”

Her smile faltered.

It became saddened for the briefest of moment, saved only when Azrael spoke again, softer and closer as he bent at his waist, whispering for her alone. “My grandmother used to braid her hair for battle, just the front of it, enough to keep locks from her eyes. Soldiers snickered at her for it, claiming it wasn’t befitting for one to wear a symbol of peace during war.”

“At times, I wished you paid less attention, Azrael Idis. I would not feel so naked if you did.”

“I would be the one who’d feel naked without you in my mind, Your Highness. It is part of my nature to think of you.”

Rolling her eyes at him, the keeper of his heart studies the planes of his face. Thankful for how the overcast gray light seemed to pool around them, bathing the two in its softened light that left little hidden in utter darkness.

“Will you braid my hair? Will you keep my secret?”

“I cannot imagine a greater honor, Reghen.”

“Thank you.” Reghen pushes herself off the chair, whispering against his ear before planting a kiss there.

The Princess did not see the warmth spreading over Azrael’s cheeks as she turned back around, gaze lowered to match the grin she tried to keep hidden, even from herself.

Awakening from the sweetest dream, it took several moments for Azrael to move again. Coming to only when Reghen lifted the orange silver comb he got her.

The Spybreaker exerted all of his focus on detangling her hair, using all that he learned about torture, about how a crawling cut elicited far more pain, requiring a deliberate control to be careful around the few knots on her hair.

Preferring torture over tugging on her hair—over bringing her even the most fleeting of pain.

“Sellie could learn from you,” Reghen meowed, lids fluttering closed, heavy with sleep. “Sometimes she tugs on my hair, but she’ll pamper me with kisses when it happens.”

“Giving me ideas, Your Highness?”

“If I am?”

Azrael laughed nervously, hoping she did not hear his longing for it. Hoping no one other than Vanora could name what he felt for Reghen, that no other would care to study him closely enough to notice the honey his voice dripped when speaking her name, for he knew no sweeter sound.

“Do not tempt a moth with flame, Reghen Nehtvallan.”

The bluest of eyes met his reflection through the mirror, tempting him with flames that burned bright as she puckered her lips. Pouting in a way that vacated his mind of all thoughts, except the memory of the single kiss they shared and that had haunted Azrael every night since.

It was the memory of her that filled his mind when Azrael laid his head on a pillow, fingers digging into his duvet with the single wish that she’d be laid by his side, wishing it was in her hair that his fingers tangled—wishing he could have her cheek against his chest, or his face buried in the crook of her neck.

Every night, he fell asleep to the phantom touch of her lips, waking every morning with her name whispered along the song of birds.

He would burn if she let him.

Would drown in flames just to kiss her again.

Would never feel warm if it kept her happiness safe.

“There is no flame,” Reghen mused, low enough that Azrael wondered if she spoke at all.

Braiding her hair, the Spybreaker split his attention between the vibrant red locks and the pink lips that lingered in a disingenuous smile, watching his reflection until he took a step back.

For only a moment did she look at her reflection. Running lithe fingers down the wavy length of her hair, palm brushing on the braids that to her still symbolized a peace she did not know.

“Wonderful!” She clapped her hands together, rising from her chair to loop her arm through his. “You’ll stay, won’t you?”

“I did not bring gifts for anyone else.”

“It will be our secret then, that you brought me one.”

Two, he thought, letting Reghen take the lead as his gaze dropped to the cable knit gown she wore in stark contrast to the rich velvet dress with a billowing skirt she had chosen for the Crown’s Solstice celebration.

It had been worth it to interrupt Volkryon’s mingling and drinking to inform him of the false threat in Vetruz, luring the King away from Reghen’s line of sight while managing to imbibe in the sight of her.

He paid little attention to how noisy the home had become, with voices speaking over each other, laughter mingling in a way that still felt jarring to Reghen, tightening her muscles and her hold on Azrael’s hand.

Steps slowed, lingering a few heartbeats too long.

Azrael knew the source of her reluctance, knew it by heart when Reghen had hollered at him that joy could not exist in a world without her sister, claiming she would not betray Lilith when the Spybreaker knew the youngest Nehtvallan would’ve never wanted Reghen to extinguish joy from her life.

“Won’t you ask me why I was in Vetruz?”

“What?” Reghen blinked, glancing back at him with surprise lifting her brows. “Indeed, why were you in Vetruz?”

“The truth, or what I told your father?”

“I always want the truth from you, Azrael Zadok.”

Smiling, Azrael chose his words careful, knowing he could not speak the truth about the months’ effort he put into searching for an artisan and the months he spent visiting Vetruz to be sure the gift was turning out how he wanted it to.

Chest pressing against her back, Azrael whispered about Suri and the correspondence they had had about the General traveling to buy weapons in secrecy. He kept his tone serious, basking in how concerned Reghen became with each letter he spoke of, deepening her frown, and him etching it into memory.

He spoke until they reached the great room, and concern morphed into laughter as she spun to face him, still holding his hand. “That cannot be the truth, Azrael. Did you really suspect Vanora?”

It was his name that brought a pause on the conversation until Skai rose from the long coach claimed by his family and Tyreal. Walking between Volkryon’s limbs, as the King preferred sitting on the floor, with his hand wrapped around Thana’s ankle.

"My darling boy," Skai shrieked, stealing Azrael from Reghen, even though the Princess had let go of his hand in tandem with the silence. "Why didn't you tell us? I would've brought the gifts I got you."

"I wasn't planning on coming. I've been summoned and forbidden from leaving."

Dropping her hands from Azrael's cheeks, Skai turned toward the Princess, assaulting her face with little kisses as she mumbled, "My darling Eggie, thank you for forcing him here."

"I didn't say it was Reghen who—"

"Who else would it be?" Kieron probed, keeping his smile small. "Her Highness is the only one of us who hasn't given up on inviting you."

Stretching himself, Tyreal grunted, "It's odd when he never needs an invitation for Febrae."

"There is a reason for that."

"Enlighten us," Reghen said, sitting beside Sellie, ignoring the wounded look in her mother's eyes.

Lifting his shoulders in a feline movement, the Spybreaker let Skai lead him to a seat so his mother was between him and Lucille—across from Reghen, by some small mercy of the Goddess.

"I don't trust Tyreal can stay sober enough to be vigilant," he said, losing interest in whatever jibe the warrior hurled at him when all of his attention belonged to deciphering which of her smiles were real.

The conversation drifted past Febrae and into a game Azrael did not play, claiming to prefer watching, using work as an excuse for being too tired. In truth, he always found it difficult to not focus solely on Reghen and on not being painfully obvious.

He did not know how his father had ever been able to keep secret the love he had for his mother, fooling Skai into believing he lacked any interest in her.

Azrael found it so difficult to keep himself from finding excuses to sit beside Reghen, to leave a room to follow her when the smiles grew distant and cold, to not be the one to fetch her whatever snack or beverage she craved in that moment.

The evening drifted by him, barely touching Azrael, except to whisper which moves his mother should take in the strategy board game they had been playing in pairs—Volkryon and Thana, Lucille and Tyreal, Azrael and Skai, Reghen and Sellie, with his father acting as game master, for he had become Grand General for a reason.

At the end of each round, the winner and first one to lose could open a present that awaited for them from the tree adorned with lit white candles, held in place by spells that kept the pine needle from burning.

It was a tradition of the Idises, something his mother started before Azrael even had consciousness to remember a life without such games on

Solstice and birthdays, wanting each moment of the day to be joyous and less about the gifts than the people who were gathered by their shared love.

Through every round—even the one Azrael won with his mother—the Crown Princess kept her smile on. At times, it reached her eyes, and Azrael knew those to be genuine, but he'd watch how her eyes raked over the great room, taking notice of the one person missing who Reghen couldn't venture into the kitchen to find.

It was then that she'd fix her smile as one might fix the sleeve of their coat, making sure they were presentable when everything else was disheveled in their world.

“Little One!” Sellie squealed, taking Reghen’s hand in hers. “We won.”

“Course we did. I was letting them win.”

A choir of laughter rose in bitter disagreement, with Lucille, Tyreal, and even the King mentioning her recklessness as reason for denying she was a brilliant strategist.

Only Kieron and Azrael added nothing, with Skai’s silvery eyes flickering between faces in search of the truth, forgetting it had been the Grand General himself who tutored Reghen on being an strategist.

The Crown Princess knew how to turn a battle in her favor, building dams and letting them wash away platoons, surrounding enemy forces with a false display of weaknesses.

Even in her reckless behavior, Azrael knew she had pondered all the risks and decided they were worth taking when it came to rescuing soldiers and her friends from enemies.

Azrael himself had been rescued by her a few times, and each time he'd chided her about letting him die before risking herself.

“Our Commander of the Skotian Army has not agreed with your accusations,” Reghen pointed out, rising to pick hers and Sellie’s gifts from the pile, walking in a way that held more authority in her little finger than Volkryon held in the entirety of his being.

Do not let her pick me, Azrael prayed to the Goddess, wishing for mercy when he would prefer his gift to be something she forgot this night, opening it tomorrow morning, before anyone else was awake.

For Sellie, Reghen picked the biggest of the gifts wrapped in silk, while she opted for the smallest of them in a long rectangular box that was too familiar to Azrael.

Sitting beside Sellie, the Crown Princess waited for the servant and her mother-figure to unravel the wrapping to discover a beautiful wooden toolbox with velvet-lined drawers deep enough for knitting needles, sections for little accessories Azrael did not know the name of and rolls of yarn with little recipes for Sellie to bring to life.

“It’s beautiful,” Sellie spoke through the lump in her throat, lifting her eyes toward Lucille. “Thank—”

His sister raised her hands to stop Sellie. “I wish I had, but that’s not my gift for you.”

“It has a card. *‘For Sellie and Lucille’s knitting adventures.’*”

Looking guilty, Reghen cleared her throat. “It’s from me. Lucille mentioned not long ago she wanted to learn knitting, and you mentioned you wished there was more in common between you and her.”

“My kind Little One.”

“I got her something similar, but that should be useful when she gives up on knitting.”

Hurling a pillow at Reghen with no force at all, Lucille bemoaned, “I never give up on new hobbies! I just discover a new one before I could master the previous one.”

Smile reaching her eyes, Reghen turned her gift from side to side, searching for a card that foretold from who the gift was. “Odd,” she murmured, pulling the lid off as Azrael held his breath.

Ginger brows furrowed at the strangeness of his gift for her. Yet, as she examined it closer, the Crown Princess bit on her lip to keep herself from expressing her excitement at the silver sheathe he’d gotten her from a smith in Kaekiel, the only artisan who’d been able to fit rubies and sapphires in the empty space of the design Azrael had asked Lucille to draw him.

One side of the scabbard depicted the night sky on the night they first met, when Azrael foolishly loathed the Princess for destroying life as he knew it, and on the other side, it carried the night sky that blanketed them the first time they kissed.

It was a detail Azrael dreamed of one day explaining to her, but only his Vanora had been right about the men of his family being loved by those he loved.

For the darkness she commanded as the night, Azrael did not want black to be a background for the silver stars that few of them had small diamonds at their center—creating a constellation believed to be Moira’s blessing—he wanted it to be a representation of the one thing he had never been able to deny being drawn to.

“It’s beautiful.” Her voice was small, choked up.

“Is that a note?” Tyreal probed, standing on his knees to steal a glimpse of it. “Tucked on the side of the box?”

Following obsidian eyes, Reghen peeled the small card with her nail, careful with it as if it were more than a mere sheet of paper. Recognizing his handwriting, blue eyes speckled with red flitted toward him as she leaned into her seat, keeping anyone else from reading it.

“Well? What does it say?”

“*‘For a day when you no longer need to draw your sword,’*” she read it out loud, and Azrael wished he had thought of something better to say. “It’s from a friend of mine. They must have sent it sometime along the day. I’ll—I’ll write them a note thanking them for it.”

Powerless to follow after her without making it known he had been the one to gift her that scabbard, Azrael lingers, watching Reghen walking down the hallway that lead toward her solarium.

If she does not come back soon, I'll find an excuse to search for her; he told himself, biting on the inside of his cheek to keep his feet from bouncing impatiently.

NIGHT HAD FALLEN OVER SKOTO, BRINGING A BLANKET of snow with it, covering the yard between her home and the forest beyond it, where he could see both Reghen and Letalis out in the snow.

If he weren't such a coward, he would go outside with the soft blue wool cloak he held in his hand. But Azrael Idis was as much of a coward as he was in love with Reghen.

He would not move beyond the solarium, watching her from afar as the Crown Princess built a snowman with ungloved hands. That had been a tradition she began when Lilith was still small, keeping it alive just between the two of them every solstice.

Azrael had no doubt Reghen preferred if no one else knew she kept this tradition alive since returning to Skoto for vengeance. So he watched, and wished he could hold her in his arms, that she would kick and scream at him one more time so that she would not carry that pain alone.

So that he could have an excuse to hold her and whisper sweet nothings until her crying stopped.

“You still love her, don’t you?”

A hand rested on his shoulder, startling the Spybreaker, who had not noticed his mother walking the hallway laden with white walls adorned by paintings Skai and Lucille had gifted Reghen.

“That obvious?”

“It has always been obvious, my darling. I believe your father and I knew you loved her before you named the feeling yourself.”

“*Mam*, you raised a fool, did you know that?”

“Did I?” Skai rolled onto the tips of her toes, smiling when Azrael bent his knees for her to plant a kiss against his temple. She ran a hand against his hair, looking at it with familiarity. “How I see it, I raised a man who trusts the woman he loves to fight the battles she wants to fight alone, but who wishes to be the haven she can return to. My Eggie is the sharpest sword in this world, is she not?”

“Deadlier than Death.”

“And you wonder why her mother loathes you.”

“Nothing goes unnoticed by you, does it?”

"What mother would I be if I did not know Thana hates you for loving her daughter. There might be a day you'll understand why, but her heart is still raw."

Silence fell between them, Azrael watching as Reghen continued to work on her snowman's backside, turning her toward the house, as if watching him from afar as he did with her.

"It pains me to see her false smiles, *Mam*. I would kill Gavel myself if that wouldn't devastate her further."

"Our darling does not need you to fight her battles. Have you forgotten already? She is the sharpest sword in this world. She'll kill him herself, and you just need to be there when she no longer needs to draw her swords."

Azrael chuckled humorlessly.

Wondering how good of a spy he could be when his mother knew the scabbard was a gift from him. "Even that?" he asked, not daring to look away from Reghen.

Always afraid that if he did, she'd vanish from the world as all mirages did in the desert.

"I know your heart, *nek moi bebe*."

My precious baby, she spoke in Liohtian, as she always did for the words that carried heart in them.

"Will you stay here all night?" Skai pinched his waist. "Go be with her. Do not let this tradition of hers and Lilith's become one of sorrow. Be the light Moira wishes she had."

Should I? The words hung unspoken as Skai pushed him out of the solarium, forcing Azrael into the cold evening with nothing but the coat he brought Reghen and the white fox fur hat with ear flaps she would want to be tied up to the crown, but that Azrael would fasten under her chin for protection against the cold.

He stood there in the cold, and she paused too, waiting with large eyes, blinking as if to clear her sight. Only Letalis was untouched by how time seemed to forget to pass by them, leaving them frozen with hearts beating faster while the direwolf ran toward Azrael.

A whistle cut through them a breath before she could lurch herself at him. Whimpering, Letalis ran circles around Azrael, nibbling on his hand as she pulled at him.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he muttered, hoping Reghen thought of the heat on his cheeks as belonging to the cold.

"Am I needed inside?"

"No...I—I just thought that maybe—" Azrael paused, biting on the furred hat to drape the cloak around her shoulders, tying it twice to make sure the wind couldn't pull it away. "That maybe you were cold."

Reghen held back a laugh, watching Azrael slap the hat where it'd been in his mouth before he placed it around her head. "Tie it at the—"

Reghen rolled her eyes when he let the ear flaps fall, trying it under her chin. "Crown. Have you forgotten I am the Crown Princess of Skoto?"

"It does not make you immune to the cold, Reghen."

"I believe it does."

Ignoring her protesting, Azrael reached for her hands, blowing his breath on the tips of her fingers that were red from the cold. Arrogance covered every inch of his face as he arched a brow to make a point.

"Will you stay?"

"Yes...if you want me to. I won't touch a thing if you—"

"I'd like if you stayed. Lilith would like you to be here."

"She loves you. You haven't forgotten that, have you?"

"Not for one second. Not once. Not even when I wish she never loved me, when I wish she had been the sister to someone more deserving. Can I tell you a secret?"

Pressing her hands to his chest, Azrael rubbed them as he answered her question, "Always, Reghen. Always."

"I wish she had been your sister. I would've loved her all the same, would've sworn to protect her as I've sworn to protect you, Lucille, and Tyreal. I would've seen her as my sister, even if she had been yours by blood, because then she would be alive if it wasn't my blood in her veins."

"Reghen." He pulled her closer, drawing her toward him. "I do not think he wanted only her to be gone—"

"Don't. Please, Azrael. You would've never let anyone take her from you. You would not have failed her because you have never failed me."

"You never failed her, Reghen. Not once."

Reghen peeled herself away from him, whistling for Letalis as she turned her back on Azrael, focusing solely on the snowman to put an end to a conversation that brought tears to her eyes.

Wind howling around them, Azrael refused to let her compact snow until her hands were warmed up again. A little voice that crackled like thunder whispered in his mind, trying to convince Azrael to have Reghen wait inside, loathing to see her shadows out in the cold.

He worked quickly under her demanding gaze, building more of the first layer because Reghen decided she wanted the snowman to be taller than the year before, though Azrael suspected she just liked watching him work for her, doing everything she commanded him to.

If he were a better man, Azrael wouldn't have to deny loving the little ruddiness the cold gave her face, reddening the tip of her nose into matching the red of her lips.

They worked together on building the middle section, with Azrael lifting Reghen so she could push the branches Letalis had picked from the forest into their snowman.

By the time they finished the head, moonlight had risen to its fullness, blotching out the stars to keep the darkness between them company.

Untying the hat from under her chin, Reghen wielded shadows to lift it onto the snowman with a giggle at how tiny the hat looked in contrast with their gargantuan sculpture.

“Happy?” Azrael asked Reghen, who walked backwards to take in their sculpture, falling under the shadow cast by the branches serving as arms.

“Proud.”

“You seem happy to me.”

Reghen turned around, standing close enough that she needed to tip her head back to look into his eyes. “You’re here. How could I not be happy?”

The Spybreaker let himself dream about these words, pretending they carried a meaning more profound than the one she ought to have given them. Yet, he felt lightning inching closer to her. Will tarnishing for a moment, he let it touch her shadow in ways he could not.

“Are you happy?” Warm breath tickled his throat, nearly stealing a moan from him.

Unable to answer that question without a hint of lie, Azrael averted his gaze toward the branch adorned by small red berries. *Mistletoe*, he realized, letting his hand drop toward the small of her back.

“I’m always happy with you, Reghen Nethvallan.”

“Always?”

“Always.” His tone was solemn as he bent his waist, nearly resting his forehead against hers. “Why the mistletoe?”

Blue eyes flickered toward the snowman’s arms. Missing how Azrael’s eyes focused on her lips, mesmerized by how she bit down on them. “Letalis’s choice...We’re under it, aren’t we?”

“Have you forgotten about not tempting a moth with flame?”

“I never forget anything you say to me, Azrael.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

Chuckling, Azrael planted a kiss on the border of her lips, basking in the loosened gasp that evaded her control. Then, he kissed her cheek, fingers digging in the small of her back, pressing her chest to his.

At last, the Spybreaker planted a kiss against the shell of her ear, feeling her jaw slacken when he whispered, “Merry Solstice, Amiki.”

“Merry Solstice, *Vri Priet Azrael*.”

My little Azrael, she said, making him chuckle before gasping when fingers colder than icicles cupped his cheeks in sweet revenge. Yet, his attention flickered toward the house and the predatory grace his sister had in walking against crunching snow.

“Duck,” he said, lifting a hand to stop the snowball Lucille hurled at him and Reghen, who laughed at the cold showering them. “An attack against the Crown Princess of Skoto will not go unpunished, dear sister.”

“*Rorwà*.”

Within seconds, Reghen was crouched down, compacting snow into larger balls while Tyreal did the same, and then Skai, Kieron, Sellie, and even the King and Death.

Lightning crackled in the sky as Azrael Idis etched a promise in his heart: he’d be damned if any of them managed to get a hit on Reghen or the snowman.