

"I don't think you should invite them back."

The queen didn't turn from the cradle.

"Shay," Sam said. He neared and grabbed her arm. Turning the queen to look at him, he searched her face. "What is it?"

"I'm worried. About the predictions. About the *Tash*. About everything. But why should I be worried about Bellovians? We've never turned away travelers before."

Sam sighed and stepped away. His tension tingled at the back of the queen's skull, but she pushed the feeling away. "You won't tell me the predictions, so I can't know, but what if they refer to the Bellovians?"

"They're starving, Sam."

"They're at war with our allies."

"The Florians know we only strive to keep peace."

"They've been wanting to trade with us for decades. They won't understand why you're willing to share resources with the Bellovians and not them."

"Technically we won't be trading with the Bellovians. We'll be gifting. We've given the Florians plenty of gifts over the years."

"I suppose." Sam frowned down at the cradle. The queen couldn't stop her smile.

"Quit glaring at my baby. You'll give her nightmares."

Sam snorted and his features relaxed. "She knows it's not directed at her, my queen."

"I believe you, my *resa*."

The princess cooed, confirming their words and making Sam smile.

"You truly don't trust them," the queen said.

"I don't."

"Then promise me you'll stay here with Natasha when they come."

Sam started. "You can't be serious! Of course I'll stay with you, Shay! I've never left your side in the throne room. I won't start now with the most questionable of our visitors."

"You will if I order it. I don't want to order it, Sam. I'm asking you. Please, stay here and protect my daughter."

His jaw clenched. The queen listened as he blew out a breath through his nose. It was a frustrated sound she hadn't heard him make in years and it made her smile now.

"Please, Sam. I'll be with my mother, with Tenso, and the rest of the *magsai*. I need someone I trust to be here with Natasha. My father agreed to stay, but he doesn't know the first thing about using a sword. You're the best of them. She deserves the best."

Sam's shoulders were stiff as he looked back down at the cradle. His lips quirked but he didn't smile when the baby raised an eyebrow at him. "You deserve the best protection too."

"I've always had it."

"Will Elise be in the throne room?"

"No, she's still banned from the castle."

Sam raised an eyebrow and the queen rolled her eyes. "Not that it stops her. But I don't think she'll be interested in the negotiations with the Bellovians either way."

"No. Her interests lay further out at sea."

The queen frowned a bit at Sam's accusing tone. "You may be my oldest friend, but have care. I don't want to start thinking you're questioning me."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Sam settled himself down on the floor in front of the cradle, withdrawing his blade and laying it across his knees with a huff. The queen nodded, not having realized how nervous she was until the sight flooded her with comfort. She turned at a knock on the door.

"They're ready for you," her father said. He offered an encouraging smile as he entered the room and sat himself in her chair, reaching for her daughter's small hand.

The queen bent to kiss her baby's head, her eyes lingering on the sight before her just a beat longer before she straightened to leave.

"Until I see you next," Sam said. He did nothing to hide the doubt in his eyes. The hand on his sword hilt was clenched.

"Unless I see you first," the queen said. On a whim, she bent and kissed his forehead as well. It had been years since she'd done such a thing and Sam's gaze finally softened. She was doing the right thing, asking him to stay here.

The queen met the rest of her *magsai* in the hall and descended the spiral staircase to the throne room, forcing her thoughts from the nursery on the top floor. Her mother waited at the bottom of the steps, her *resa* giving the queen a tight smile before taking her place in front of them. Sam would usually be at Shay's side and it was strange to lead the procession alone. They entered the room.

For a second the queen had a strange sensation that color had been leached from the place. With no Florians present, the world was painted in silver and black hair. In fact, black was the primary color from the Bellovian side of the room, occasional red patches on shoulders providing the only color. She made herself look toward the clothing of her people, bright colors folded and laced bringing her comfort.

The queen marched down the aisle and to her throne, waiting until her *magsai* had taken their positions before sitting. The room sat down when she gestured. It was an oddly satisfying sight when this happened. Silas would have accused her

of enjoying her power if he knew how much she loved watching her people move in unison at her beckoning.

The queen turned to the Bellovians, struggling for a second to remember the correct title. "Commander," she said by way of greeting. The word was hard on her tongue, but she had learned their language after regular contact with the Florians.

A woman stepped forward, her long black braid and black uniform jarring to look at. The woman's face twisted in a smile as she bent at the waist. Somehow, the bow felt like a mockery.

"Queen Shay. Thank you for agreeing to see us. We've come bearing gifts."

The commander beckoned at the two Bellovians behind her. They brought forth a package wrapped crudely in brown paper. The queen allowed them to hand it to her, wrinkling her nose at the sharp metallic sent she picked up. As was her habit, she shook the package next to her ear, hoping for a hint of what was inside.

There was a flash of white.