

A BLOOD AND ASH NOVEL

THE
CROWN
OF
GILDED
BONES

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER L.
ARMENTROUT

THE
CROWN
OF
GILDED
BONES

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JENNIFER L.
ARMENTROUT



The Crown of Gilded Bones

A Blood and Ash Novel

By Jennifer L. Armentrout

Copyright 2021 Jennifer L. Armentrout

ISBN: 978-1-952457-24-1

Published by Blue Box Press, an imprint of Evil Eye Concepts,

Incorporated

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or establishments is solely coincidental.

[Book Description](#)

The Crown of Gilded Bones

A Blood and Ash Novel

Jennifer L. Armentrout

Bow Before Your Queen Or Bleed Before Her...

From #1 New York Times bestselling author Jennifer L.

Armentrout comes book three in her Blood and Ash series.

She's been the victim and the survivor...

Poppy never dreamed she would find the love she's found with Prince Casteel. She wants to revel in her happiness but first they must free his brother and find hers. It's a dangerous mission and one with far-reaching consequences neither dreamed of. Because Poppy is the Chosen, the Blessed. The true ruler of Atlantia. She carries the blood of the King of Gods within her. By right the crown and the kingdom are hers.

The enemy and the warrior...

Poppy has only ever wanted to control her own life, not the lives of others, but now she must choose to either forsake her birthright or seize the gilded crown and become the Queen of Flesh and Fire. But as the kingdoms' dark sins and blood-drenched secrets finally unravel, a long-forgotten power rises to pose a genuine threat. And they will stop at nothing to ensure that the crown never sits upon Poppy's head.

A lover and heartmate...

But the greatest threat to them and to Atlantia is what awaits in the far west, where the Queen of Blood and Ash has her own plans, ones she has waited hundreds of years to carry out. Poppy and Casteel must consider the impossible—travel to the Lands of the Gods and wake the King himself. And as shocking secrets and the harshest betrayals come to light, and enemies emerge to threaten everything Poppy and Casteel have fought for, they will discover just how far they are willing to go for their people—and each other.

And now she will become Queen...

[About Jennifer L. Armentrout](#)

1 New York Times and International Bestselling author Jennifer lives in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. All the rumors you've heard about her state aren't true. When she's not hard at work writing, she spends her time reading, watching really bad zombie movies, pretending to write, and hanging out with her husband, their retired K-9 police dog Diesel, a crazy Border Jack puppy named Apollo, six judgmental alpacas, four fluffy sheep, and two goats.

Her dreams of becoming an author started in algebra class, where she spent most of her time writing short stories...which explains her dismal grades in math. Jennifer writes young adult paranormal, science fiction,

fantasy, and contemporary romance. She is published with Tor Teen, Entangled Teen and Brazen, Disney/Hyperion and Harlequin Teen. Her book *Wicked* has been optioned by Passionflix and slated to begin filming in late 2018. Her young adult romantic suspense novel *DON'T LOOK BACK* was a 2014 nominated Best in Young Adult Fiction by YALSA and her novel *THE PROBLEM WITH FOREVER* is a 2017 RITA Award winning novel.

She also writes Adult and New Adult contemporary and paranormal romance under the name J. Lynn. She is published by Entangled Brazen and HarperCollins.

[Also From Jennifer L. Armentrout](#)

Click to purchase

[Fall With Me](#)

[Dream of You \(a 1001 Dark Nights Novella\)](#)

[Forever With You](#)

[Fire In You](#)

By J. Lynn

[Wait for You](#)

[Be With Me](#)

[Stay With Me](#)

A Blood and Ash Novel

[From Blood and Ash](#)

[A Kingdom of Flesh and Fire](#)

[The Crown of Gilded Bones](#)

The Covenant Series

[Half-Blood](#)

[Pure](#)

[Deity](#)

[Elixer](#)

[Apollyon](#)

[Sentinel](#)

The Lux Series

[Shadows](#)

[Obsidian](#)

[Onyx](#)

[Opal](#)

[Origin](#)

[Opposition](#)

[Oblivion](#)

The Origin Series

[The Darkest Star](#)

[The Burning Shadow](#)

The Dark Elements

[Bitter Sweet Love](#)

[White Hot Kiss](#)

[Stone Cold Touch](#)

[Every Last Breath](#)

The Harbinger Series

[Storm and Fury](#)

[Rage and Ruin](#)

A Titan Novel

[The Return](#)

[The Power](#)

[The Struggle](#)

[The Prophecy](#)

A Wicked Novel

[Wicked](#)

[Torn](#)

[Brave](#)

[The Prince \(a 1001 Dark Nights Novella\)](#)

[The King \(a 1001 Dark Nights Novella\)](#)

[The Queen \(a 1001 Dark Nights Novella\)](#)

Gamble Brothers Series

[Tempting The Best Man](#)

[Tempting The Player](#)

[Tempting The Bodyguard](#)

A de Vincent Novel Series

[Moonlight Sins](#)

[Moonlight Seduction](#)

[Moonlight Scandals](#)

Standalone Novels

[Obsession](#)

[Frigid](#)

[Scorched](#)

[Cursed](#)

[Don't Look Back](#)

[The Dead List](#)

[Till Death](#)

[The Problem With Forever](#)

[If There's No Tomorrow](#)

Anthologies

[Meet Cute](#)

[Life Inside My Mind](#)

[Fifty First Times](#)

[Acknowledgments from the Author](#)

Thank you to Liz Berry, Jillian Stein, and MJ Rose, who fell in love with these characters and world as much as me. Thank you to my agent Kevan Lyon, and to Chelle Olson, Kim Guidroz, the team at Blue Box Press, Jenn Watson, and my assistant Stephanie Brown for your hard work and support. Mega thanks to Hang Le for creating such beautiful covers. A big thank you to Jen Fisher, Malissa Coy, Stacey Morgan, Lesa, JR Ward, Laura Kaye, Andrea Joan. Sarah Maas, Brigid Kemmerer, KA Tucker, Tijan, Vonetta Young, Mona Awad, and many more who have helped keep me sane and laughing. Thank you to the ARC team for your support and honest reviews, and a big thank you to JLAnders for being the best reader group an author can have, and the Blood and Ash Spoiler Group for making the drafting stage so fun and being utterly amazing.

None of this would be possible without you, the reader. Thank you.

Table of Contents

[Book Description](#)

[About Jennifer L. Armentrout](#)

[Also from Jennifer L. Armentrout](#)

[Acknowledgments from the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty](#)

[Discover The Summer King Trilogy](#)

[Discover 1001 Dark Nights Collection Seven](#)

[Discover the World of Blue Box Press & 1001 Dark Nights](#)

[Special Thanks](#)

[Dedication](#)

Dedicated to the heroes—the healthcare workers, first responders, essential workers and researchers who have worked tirelessly and endlessly to save lives and to keep stores open all around the globe, at great risk to their own lives and the lives of their loved ones, thank you.



[Map](#)

[To see a full color version of the world map, click here!](#)



[Chapter 1](#)

“Lower your swords,” Queen Eloana commanded, her hair shining a

glossy onyx in the sun as she sank onto one knee. The raw emotion pouring out of her seeped into the Temple floors of the Chambers of Nyktos, bitter and hot, tasting of anguish and a helpless sort of anger. It stretched out toward me, needling my skin and brushing against this... *primal* thing inside

me. “And bow before the...before the *last* descendant of the most ancient ones. She who carries the blood of the King of Gods within her. Bow before your new Queen.”

The blood of the King of Gods? Your new Queen? None of that made sense. Not her words or when she had removed her crown.

A too-thin breath scorched my throat as I looked at the man standing beside the Queen of Atlantia. The crown was still upon the King’s golden-haired head, but the bones had remained a bleached white. Nothing like the gleaming, gilded one the Queen had placed at the feet of the statue of Nyktos. My gaze skipped over the terrible, broken things scattered about the once pristine, white floors. I’d done that to them, adding their blood to what had fallen from the sky, filling the thin fissures in the marble. I didn’t look at that or anyone else—every part of my being focused on *him*.

He remained on one knee, staring up at me from between the vee of the swords he’d crossed over his chest. His damp hair, blue-black in the Atlantian sunlight, curled against the sandy-hued skin of his forehead. Red

streaked those high, angular cheekbones, the proud curve of his jaw, and ran down lips that had once shattered my heart. Lips that had pieced those broken shards back together with the truth. Bright, golden eyes locked with mine, and even bowed before me, so motionless I wasn't sure he breathed, he still reminded me of one of the wild and strikingly beautiful cave cats I'd once seen caged in Queen Ileana's palace as a child.

He had been many things to me. A stranger in a dimly lit room who'd been my first kiss. A guard who had sworn to lay down his life for mine. A friend who had looked beyond the veil of the Maiden to truly see me underneath, who'd handed me a sword to protect myself instead of forcing me into a gilded cage. A legend cloaked in darkness and nightmares that had plotted to betray me. A Prince of a kingdom believed to have been lost to time and war, who had suffered unimaginable horrors and yet managed to find the pieces of who he used to be. A brother who would do anything, commit any deed to save his family. His people. A man who bared his soul and stripped open his heart to me—and only me.

My first.

My guard.

My friend.

My betrayer.

My partner.

My husband.

My heartmate.

My *everything*.

Casteel Da'Neer bowed before me and stared up at me as if I were the only person in the entire kingdom. I didn't need to concentrate like before to know what he was feeling. Everything he felt was wide-open to me. His emotions were a kaleidoscope of ever-shifting tastes—cool and tart, heavy and spicy, and sweet like chocolate-dipped berries. Those unyieldingly firm and unrelentingly tender lips parted, revealing just the hint of sharp fangs.

“My Queen,” he breathed, and those two smoky words soothed my skin. The lilt of his voice quelled the ancient thing inside me that wanted to take the anger and the fear radiating from all the others and twist it, turn it back, truly give them something to fear, and add to the shattered things thrown about the floor. One side of his lips curled up, and a deep dimple appeared in his right cheek.

Dizzy with relief at the sight of that infuriatingly stupid—and adorable—dimple, my entire body shuddered. I feared that when he saw what I'd done, he'd be afraid. And I couldn't blame him for that. What I'd done should terrify anyone, but not Casteel. The heat that turned his eyes the

color of warmed honey told me that fear was very much the furthest thing from his mind. Which was also a little disturbing. But he was the Dark One, whether he liked being called that or not.

Some of the shock faded, and the pounding adrenaline eased. And when it left, I realized I *hurt*. My shoulder and the side of my head throbbed. The left side of my face felt puffy, and that had nothing to do with the old scars there. A dull ache pulsed in my legs and arms, and my body felt funny, as if my knees were weakening. I swayed in the warm, salty breeze—

Casteel rose quickly, and I shouldn't have been surprised by how fast he moved, but I still was. In a heartbeat, he'd gone from kneeling to standing, a foot closer to me, and several things happened at once.

The men and women behind Casteel's parents, the ones wearing the same white tunics and loose pants of those lying on the floor, also moved. Light reflected off the golden armbands adorning their biceps as they lifted their swords, shifting closer to Casteel's parents, protecting them. Some reached for crossbows strapped to their backs. They had to be guards of some sort.

A sudden growl of warning came from the largest wolveren I'd ever seen. Kieran and Vonetta's father stood to my right. Jasper had officiated

the marriage between Casteel and me in Spessa's End. He'd been there when Nyktos showed his approval by briefly turning day to night. But now, the steel-hued wolver's lips peeled back, baring teeth that could tear through flesh and break bone. He was loyal to Casteel, and yet instinct told me that it wasn't just the guards he warned.

Another snarl came from my left. In the shadows of the blood tree that had sprouted from where my blood had fallen and then grew to a massive height within seconds, a fawn-colored wolver crept into my line of sight, head dipped low, and wintry blue eyes iridescent. *Kieran*. He stared down Casteel. I didn't understand why either of them would behave this way toward the Prince, but especially Kieran. He had been bonded to Casteel from birth, meant to obey and protect him at all costs. But he was more than a bonded wolver to Casteel. They were brothers, if not by blood then by friendship, and I knew they loved each other.

Right now, nothing about the way Kieran's ears were pinned back was *loving*.

Unease skipped its way through me as Kieran sank down, the sleek muscles of his legs tensing as he prepared to attack...Casteel.

My stomach plummeted. This wasn't right. None of this was right.

"No," I rasped, my voice hoarse and barely recognizable, even to my ears.

Kieran didn't appear to hear me or care. If he had been acting normally, I would've just assumed he was attempting to ignore me, but this was different. *He* was different. His eyes were brighter than I ever remembered seeing, and they weren't right because they...they weren't just blue now. His pupils glowed silvery-white, an aura that seeped out in wispy tendrils across the blue. My head jerked to Jasper. His eyes had changed, too. I'd seen that strange light before. It had been what my skin had done when I healed Beckett's broken legs—the same silvery glow that had radiated from me minutes earlier.

Icy bursts of surprise raced through Casteel as he eyed the wolveren, and then I felt... *relief* radiate from him.

“You all knew.” Casteel's voice filled with awe, something no one standing behind him felt. Even the easy grin was absent from the auburn-haired Atlantian. Emil looked at us with wide eyes, broadcasting a healthy dose of fear, as did Naill, who had always appeared utterly unfazed by everything—even when he'd been outnumbered in battle.

Casteel slowly sheathed his swords at his sides. Hands empty, he kept them down. “You all knew something was happening to her. That's why...” He trailed off, his jaw hardening.

Several of the guards moved to the front of the King and Queen,

surrounding them fully—

A shock of white fur shot forward. Delano tucked his tail back as he pawed at the marble. He lifted his head and howled. The eerie yet beautiful sound raised the tiny hairs all over my body.

Off in the distance, the faint sounds of yips and barks answered, growing louder with each second. The leaves on the tall, cone-shaped trees separating the Temple from Saion's Cove trembled as a rolling rumble echoed from the ground below. Blue-and-yellow-winged birds took flight from the trees, scattering to the sky.

“Godsdamn.” Emil turned to the Temple steps. He reached for the swords at his sides. “They’re summoning the whole damn city.”

“It’s her.” The deep scar slicing across the older wolveren’s forehead stood out starkly. Potent disbelief rolled off Alastir as he stood just outside the circle of guards who’d formed around Casteel’s parents.

“It is not her,” Casteel shot back.

“But it is,” King Valyn confirmed as he stared at me from a face that Casteel’s would one day become. “They’re responding to her. That’s why the ones on the road with us shifted without warning. She called them to her.”

“I...I didn’t call anyone,” I told Casteel, voice cracking.

“I know.” Casteel’s tone softened as his eyes locked with mine.

“But she did,” his mother insisted. “You might not realize it, but you did summon them.”

My eyes darted to her, and I felt my chest wrench. She was everything I’d imagined Casteel’s mother to be. Stunning. Regal. Powerful. Calm now, even as she remained on one knee, even when she had first seen me and demanded of her son— *What have you done? What have you brought back?*

I flinched, fearing those words would stay with me long after today.

Casteel’s features sharpened as golden eyes swept over my face. “If the idiots behind me actually laid down their swords instead of lifting them against my *wife*, we wouldn’t have an entire colony of wolverines about to descend on us,” he bit out. “They are only reacting to the threat.”

“You’re right,” his father agreed as he gently guided his wife to her feet. Blood soaked the knee and the hem of her lilac gown. “But ask yourself why your bonded wolverine is guarding someone other than *you*.”

“I really couldn’t care less at the moment,” Casteel responded as the sound of hundreds—if not more—of paws pounding the earth grew even closer. He couldn’t be serious. He had to care, because that was a damn good question.

“You need to care,” his mother cautioned, a thin quiver in her

otherwise steady voice. “The bonds have broken.”

The bonds? Hands trembling, my wide eyes shot to the Temple steps, to where Emil slowly backed away. Naill had his swords in his hands now. “She’s right,” Alastir uttered, the skin around his mouth appearing even whiter. “I can... I can feel it—the Primal *notam*. Her mark. Good gods.” His voice trembled as he stumbled back, nearly stepping on the crown. “They’ve all broken.”

I had no idea what a *notam* was, but through the confusion and the blossoming panic, there was something odd about what Alastir had stated. If it was true, then why wasn’t he in his wolveren form? Was it because he’d already broken his wolveren bond with the former King of Atlantia all those years ago?

“Look at their eyes,” the Queen ordered softly, pointing out what I’d seen. “I know you don’t understand. There are things you never needed to learn, Hawke.” Her voice cracked then, thickened at the use of his nickname—a name I’d once believed to be nothing more than a lie. “But what you need to know now is that they no longer serve the elemental bloodline. You are not safe. Please,” she begged. “Please. Listen to me, Hawke.”

“How?” I croaked. “How could the bond break?”

“That doesn’t matter right now.” The amber of Casteel’s eyes was nearly luminous. “You’re bleeding,” he said as if that were the most important issue at hand.

But it wasn’t. “How?” I repeated.

“It’s what you are.” Eloana’s left hand balled into the skirt of her gown. “You have the blood of a god in you—”

“I’m mortal,” I told her.

A thick lock of dark hair tumbled from her knot as she shook her head.

“Yes, you are mortal, but you are descended from a deity—the children of the gods. All it takes is a drop of god’s blood—” She swallowed thickly.

“You may have more than just a drop, but what is in your blood, what is in *you*, supersedes any oath the wolvern have taken.”

I remembered then what Kieran had told me in New Haven about the wolvern. The gods had given the once-wild kiyou wolves mortal form to serve as guides and protectors to the children of the gods—the deities.

Something else Kieran had shared then explained the Queen’s reaction.

My gaze shot to the crown lying near Nyktos’s feet. A drop of deity blood usurped any claim to the Atlantian throne.

Oh, gods, there was a good chance I really might pass out. And how embarrassing would that be?

Eloana's gaze shifted to her son's rigid back. "You go near her? Right now? They will see you as a threat to her. They will rip you apart."

My heart stuttered to a panicked stop. Casteel looked as if he might do just that. Behind me, one of the smaller wolveren lurched forward, barking and snapping at the air.

Every muscle in my body tensed. "Casteel—"

"It's okay." Casteel's eyes never left mine. "No one is going to harm Poppy. I will not allow that." His chest rose with a deep, heavy breath.

"And you know that, right?"

I nodded as each breath came too fast, too shallowly. It was the only thing I understood at the moment.

"Everything's all right. They're just protecting you." Casteel smiled for me then, but it was tense and tight. He looked to my left, at Kieran. "I don't know everything that is going on right now, but you—all of you—want to keep her safe. And I'm all about that. You know I would never hurt her. I would tear out my own heart before I did that. She's injured. I need to make sure she's okay, and nothing is going to stop me from doing that." He didn't blink as he held Kieran's stare, as the rolling thunder of the other wolveren reached the Temple steps. "Not even you. Any of you. I will destroy every single one of you who stands between her and me."

Kieran's growl deepened, and an emotion I'd never felt from him before poured into me. It was like anger, but older. And it felt like that buzz in my blood had. Ancient. Primal.

And in an instant, I could see it all playing out in my mind as if it were happening before me. Kieran would attack. Or maybe it would be Jasper. I'd seen what kind of damage a wolveren could inflict, but Casteel wouldn't go down easily. He would do just as he'd promised. He'd tear through all that stood between him and me. Wolveren would die, and if he harmed Kieran—if he did worse than that, the wolveren's blood wouldn't just be on Casteel's hands. It would mark his soul till the day he died.

A wave of wolveren crested the Temple's stairs, both small and large, in so many different colors. Their arrival brought terrifying knowledge. Casteel was incredibly strong and unbelievably fast. He would take down many. But he would fall with them.

He would die.

Casteel would die because of me—because I called to these wolveren and didn't know how to make it stop. My heart thumped erratically. A wolveren near the steps stalked Emil as he continued backing up. Another tracked Naill as he spoke softly to the wolveren, attempting to reason with the creature. The others had zeroed in on the guards surrounding the King and

Queen, and a few... Oh, gods, several of them crept up behind Casteel. This had slipped into chaos, the wolveren beyond control of any of them...

I sucked in a sharp breath as my mind raced, breaking free of the pain and turbulence. Something had happened within me to make that drop of god's blood break the bonds. I superseded their previous oaths, and that had...it had to mean that they now obeyed *me*.

"Stop," I ordered as Kieran snapped at Casteel, whose own lips were now peeled back. "Kieran! Stop! You will not hurt Casteel." My voice rose as a soft hum returned to my blood. "All of you will stop. Now! None of you will attack."

It was like a switch had been thrown in the wolveren's minds. One second they were all poised to attack, and then they were sinking onto their bellies, lowering their heads between their front paws. I could still feel their anger, the old power, but it had lessened already, was fading in steady waves.

Emil lowered his sword. "That...that was timely. Thank you for that."

A ragged breath left me as a tremor traveled up and down my arms. I almost couldn't believe it'd worked as I scanned the Temple, seeing all the wolveren lying down. My entire being wanted to rebel against further confirmation of what the Queen had claimed, but gods, there was only so

much I could deny. Throat dry, I looked at Casteel.

He stared at me, his eyes wide once more. I couldn't breathe. My heart wouldn't slow enough for me to make sense of what he was feeling.

“He will not hurt me. You all know that,” I said, my voice shaking as I looked at Jasper and then Kieran. “You told me that he was the only person in both kingdoms that I was safe with. That hasn't changed.”

Kieran's ears twitched, and then he rose, backing up. He turned, nudging my hand with his nose.

“Thank you,” I whispered, briefly closing my eyes.

“Just so you know,” Casteel murmured, thick lashes lowered halfway, “what you just did? Said? It has me feeling all kinds of wildly inappropriate things at the moment.”

A weak, shaky laugh left me. “There's something so wrong with you.”

“I know.” The left side of his lips curved, and his dimple appeared.

“But you love that about me.”

I did. Gods, I really did.

Jasper shook out his fur as his large head swung from me to Casteel.

He turned sideways, making a rough, huffing sound as he did. The other wolveren moved then, coming out from behind the blood tree. I watched them trot past me—past Casteel and the others—ears perked and tails wagging as

they joined those descending the steps and left the Temple. Of the wolvern, only Jasper, his son, and Delano remained, and the feeling of chaotic tension lifted.

A thick lock of dark hair fell over Casteel's forehead. "You were glowing silver again. When you ordered the wolvern to stop," he told me. "Not a lot, not like before, but you looked like spun moonlight."

Had I been? I glanced down at my hands. They looked normal. "I...I don't know what's happening," I whispered, my legs shaking. "I don't know what's going on." I lifted my eyes to his and watched him take a step forward, and then another. There were no snarls of warning. Nothing. My throat started to burn. I could feel it—tears creeping into my eyes. I couldn't cry. I *wouldn't*. Everything had already turned into enough of a mess without me sobbing hysterically. But I was so tired. I *hurt*, and it went beyond the physical.

When I first stepped into this Temple and looked out over the clear waters of the Seas of Saion, I'd felt like I was *home*. And I knew things would be hard. Proving that our union was real wouldn't be nearly as difficult as gaining the acceptance of Casteel's parents and that of his kingdom. We still needed to find his brother, Prince Malik. And mine. We had to deal with the Ascended Queen and King. Nothing about our future

would be easy, but I had hope.

Now, I felt foolish. So naïve. The older wovlen in Spessa's End, the one I'd helped heal after the battle, had warned me about the people of Atlantia. *They did not choose you.* And I now doubted they ever would. I drew in a stuttering breath and whispered, "I didn't want any of this." Tension bracketed Casteel's mouth. "I know." His voice was rough, but his touch was gentle as he placed his palm over the cheek that didn't feel swollen. He lowered his forehead to mine, and the shock of awareness his flesh against mine brought was there, rippling through me as he slid his hand into the tangled mess of my hair. "I know, Princess," he whispered, and I squeezed my eyes shut against a stronger rush of tears. "It's okay. It will all be okay. I promise you that."

I nodded, even though I knew it wasn't something he could guarantee. Not anymore. I forced myself to swallow the knot of emotion that rose. Casteel kissed my blood-streaked brow and then lifted his head.

"Emil? Can you retrieve clothing from Delano's and Kieran's horses so they can shift and not scar anyone?"

"I'll be more than happy to do that," the Atlantian answered.

I almost laughed. "I think their nakedness will be the least scarring thing to happen today."

Casteel said nothing as he touched my cheek again, gently tilting my head to the side. His gaze then dropped to several of the rocks still littering the ground at my feet. A muscle popped along his jaw. His eyes lifted to mine, and I saw his pupils were dilated, only a thin strip of amber visible. “They tried to *stone* you?”

I heard a soft gasp I thought had come from his mother, but I didn’t look. I didn’t want to see their faces. I didn’t want to know what they felt right now. “They accused me of working with the Ascended, and they called me a Soul Eater. I told them I wasn’t. I tried to talk to them.” Words spilled out in a rush as I lifted my hands to touch him, but I stopped. I didn’t know what my touch would do. Hell, I didn’t even know what I would do *without* touching someone. “I tried to reason with them, but they started throwing stones. I told them to stop. I said it was enough, and...I don’t know what I did—” I started to look over his shoulder, but Casteel seemed to know what it was I searched for. He stopped me. “I didn’t mean to kill them.”

“You were defending yourself.” His pupils constricted as he caught my stare. “You did what you had to do. You were defending yourself—”

“But I didn’t touch them, Casteel,” I whispered. “It was like in Spessa’s End, during the battle. Remember the soldiers who surrounded us?”

When they fell, I felt something in me. I felt that again here. It was like something inside me knew what to do. I took their anger and I—I did exactly what a Soul Eater *would* do. I took it from them and then gave it back.”

“You are not a Soul Eater,” Queen Eloana said from somewhere not too far away. “The moment the eather in your blood became visible, those who attacked you should’ve known exactly what you were. What you are.”

“Eather?”

“It’s what some would call magic,” Casteel answered, shifting his stance as if he were blocking his mother from me. “You’ve seen it before.”

“The mist?”

He nodded. “It’s the essence of the gods, what’s in their blood, what gives them their abilities and the power to create all that they have. No one really calls it that anymore, not since the gods went to sleep, and the deities died off.” His eyes searched mine. “I should have known. Gods, I should’ve seen it...”

“You can say that now,” his mother spoke. “But why would you have even thought that this would be a possibility? No one would’ve expected this.”

“Except for you,” Casteel said. And he was right. She’d known,

without a doubt. And, granted, I had been glowing upon her arrival, but she'd known with unquestioned certainty.

"I can explain," she said as Emil appeared, carrying two saddlebags. He gave all of us a wide berth as he dropped them near Jasper and then backed away.

"Apparently, a lot needs to be explained," Casteel remarked coolly.

"But it will have to wait." His gaze touched on my left cheek, and that muscle throbbed along his jaw again. "I need to get you somewhere safe where I can... Where I can take care of you."

"You can take her to your old rooms at my place," Jasper announced, startling me. I hadn't even heard him shift. I started to look over at him but saw skin as he reached for the saddlebag.

"That will do." Casteel took what appeared to be a pair of breeches from Jasper. "Thank you."

"Will it be safe for you there?" I asked, and a wry grin tugged at Casteel's lips.

"He'll be safe there," Kieran answered.

So shocked by the sound of Kieran's voice, I turned. And didn't stop. There was a whole lot of tawny skin on display, but he stood there like he wasn't naked in front of all who remained. For once, I really had no

problem ignoring the fact that he was nude. I looked at his eyes. They were normal—a vivid, striking blue without the silvery-white aura. “You were going to attack Casteel.”

Kieran nodded as he took the pants from Casteel.

“He most definitely was,” Casteel confirmed.

I looked back at my husband. “And you threatened to destroy him.”

The dimple in his left cheek appeared again. “I did.”

“Why are you smiling? That isn’t something that should make you smile.” I stared at him, stupid tears burning my eyes. I didn’t care that we had an audience. “That can never happen again. Do you hear me?” I twisted to Kieran, who arched a brow as he pulled his breeches up over his lean hips. “Do you both hear me? I won’t allow it. I won’t—”

“Shh.” Casteel’s light touch to my cheek drew my gaze back to his as he stepped into me. He was close enough that his chest brushed mine with each breath. “It won’t happen again, Poppy.” His thumb quickly swiped under my left eye. “Right?”

“Right.” Kieran cleared his throat. “I don’t...” He fell quiet.

His father didn’t. “As long as the Prince doesn’t give any of us a reason to behave differently, we will protect him as fiercely as we will protect you.”

We. As in the entirety of the wolveren race. That's what Alastir had meant when he'd said that all the bonds had broken. I had a lot of questions, but I plopped my head on Casteel's chest. It didn't feel that great, sending a flare of pain across my head. I didn't care because when I inhaled, all I smelled was lush spice and pine. Casteel carefully folded an arm around my upper back, and I thought... I thought I felt him shudder against me. "Wait," Kieran said. "Where is Beckett? He was with you when you walked off."

Casteel drew back slightly. "That's right. He offered to show you the Temple." His eyes narrowed as he stared down at me. "He led you here." A wave of goosebumps pimples my skin. *Beckett*. Pressure clamped down on my chest, squeezing tightly as I thought of the young wolveren who'd spent the vast majority of the trip here chasing butterflies. I still couldn't believe that he had led me here, knowing what awaited. But I remembered the bitter taste of his fear that day in Spessa's End. He'd been terrified of me.

Or had he been terrified of something else?

His emotions had been all over the place. He'd gone from being normal around me, happy and grinning, to suddenly afraid and anxious, as he had been when he brought me up here.

“He disappeared before the others showed up,” I told Casteel. “I don’t know where he went.”

“Find Beckett,” he ordered, and Delano, still in his wolveren form, tilted his head. “Naill? Emil? Go with him. Make sure Beckett is brought to me alive.”

Both Atlantians nodded and bowed. Nothing about Casteel’s tone suggested that the *alive* part was a good thing. “He’s just a kid.” I watched Delano rush off, quickly disappearing with Naill and Emil. “He was scared. And now that I think about it—”

“Poppy.” Casteel placed the tips of his fingers against my cheek, just below a spot that ached. He dipped his head, brushing his lips over the cut. “I have two things to say. If Beckett had anything to do with this, I don’t care what or who he is, and I sure as fuck don’t care about what he was feeling.” His voice rose until all who remained at the Temple could hear him, including his parents.

“A move against my wife is a proclamation of war against *me*. Their fate is already sealed. And, secondly?” He lowered his head even farther. This time, his lips brushed over mine in a featherlight kiss. I could barely feel it, but it somehow still managed to twist my insides into knots. He then lifted his head, and I saw it in his features—the stark stillness of a predator

locking onto its prey. I'd seen it before, right before he'd torn out Landell's heart back in New Haven.

Casteel turned his head to the side, looking at the only wolveren who remained, now standing on two legs. "*You.*"



Chapter 2

Alastir Davenwell was Casteel's parents' advisor. And when King Malec had Ascended his mistress, Isbeth, it was Alastir who had alerted Queen Eloana, breaking the bond between him and the now exiled—most likely dead—King. Only the gods knew how many Atlantians Alastir had saved throughout the years by helping them escape Solis and the Ascended, who used their blood to make more vamprys.

Who knew how different things would've turned out for my family if they had found Alastir? They could still be alive, living a happy and whole life in Atlantia. And my brother Ian would be there, too. Instead, he was in Carsodonia and was likely now one of them—an Ascended.

I swallowed hard, shoving those thoughts aside. Now was not the time for that. I liked Alastir. He had been kind to me from the beginning. But more importantly, I knew that Casteel respected and cared for the wolveren. If

Alastir had played a role in this, it would cut Casteel deeply.

Honestly, I hoped that neither Alastir nor Beckett had had anything to do with this, but I had long stopped believing in coincidences. And the night the Ascended had arrived at Spessa's End? I had realized something about Alastir that hadn't sat well with me. It had fallen to the wayside when the Ascended arrived and with everything that had happened afterward, but it took center stage once more.

Casteel had once planned to marry Shea—Alastir's daughter—but then Casteel had been captured by the Ascended, and Shea had betrayed him and his brother in an attempt to save her life. Everyone, including Alastir, believed that Shea had died heroically, but I knew the true tragedy of how she'd perished. However, Alastir also had a great-niece, a wolveren that both he and King Valyn hoped Casteel would marry upon his return to the kingdom. It was something he'd announced at dinner, claiming he believed that Casteel had already told me. I wasn't so sure he truly believed that, but that was neither here nor there.

I couldn't be the only person who found the whole thing...weird.

Alastir's daughter? And now his great-niece? I doubted there weren't plenty of other wolveren or Atlantians that would've also been well suited to marry Casteel, especially since Casteel had given no indication that he'd be

interested in such a union.

None of that made Alastir guilty, but it *was* strange.

Now the wolveren looked absolutely thunderstruck as he stared back at Casteel. “I don’t know what you think Beckett did or how it has anything to do with me, but my nephew would never be involved in something like this. He’s a pup. And I would—”

“Shut the hell up,” Casteel growled as I peeked around his shoulder.

The wolveren blanched. “Casteel—”

“Do not make me repeat myself,” he interrupted, turning to the guards.

“Seize Alastir.”

“What?” Alastir exploded as half the guards turned to him, while the others nervously glanced between Casteel and the only King and Queen they knew.

The King’s eyes narrowed on his son. “Alastir has committed no crime that we know of.”

“Maybe he hasn’t. Maybe he is completely innocent, as is his great-nephew. But until we know for sure, I want him held,” Casteel stated.

“Seize him, or I will.”

Jasper prowled forward, growling low in his throat as his muscles strained under his mortal skin. The guards shifted nervously.

“Wait!” Alastir shouted, his cheeks mottling as anger pulsed around him. “He does not have the kind of authority required to make demands of the Guards of the Crown.”

I imagined the Crown Guard was a lot like the Royal Guard that served the Ascended. They only took orders from Queen Ileana and King Jalara, and whatever Royal Ascended were seated to lord over a city or town.

“Correct me if I’m wrong. I don’t think I am, but stranger things have happened,” Casteel said, and my brows puckered. “My mother removed the crown and told everyone here to bow before the new Queen—who happens to be my wife. Therefore, according to Atlantian tradition, that makes me the King, no matter what head the crown rests upon.”

My heart tumbled. King. Queen. That couldn’t be us.

“You never wanted the throne or the trappings that come with that crown,” Alastir spat. “You spent decades seeking to free your brother so he could take the throne. And yet now you seek to claim it? You’ve truly given up on your brother then?”

I sucked in a sharp breath as anger flooded me. Alastir, of all people, knew how much finding and freeing Malik meant to Casteel. And his words had cut deep. I felt from Casteel then what I’d sensed the very first time I ever laid eyes on him—a rawness that felt like shards of ice against my

skin. Casteel was always in pain, and even though it had lessened a little with each passing day, the agony he felt over his brother was never far from the surface. He'd just recently allowed himself to feel something other than the guilt, the shame, and the anguish.

I didn't even realize I had moved forward until I saw that I was no longer under the shade of the blood tree. "Casteel hasn't given up on Malik," I snapped before I could find my damn dagger and throw it across the Temple. "We will find him and free him. Malik has nothing to do with any of this."

"Oh, gods." Eloana pressed her hand to her mouth as she turned to her son. Pain tightened her features, and in an instant, soul-deep sorrow rolled off her in potent waves. I couldn't see it, but her grief was a constant shadow that followed her, just as it did for Casteel. It hammered at my senses, scraping my skin like frozen, broken glass. "*Hawke*, what have you done?"

My focus darted to Valyn as I shut down the connection with Casteel's mother before it overwhelmed me. A jagged pulse of grief surrounded him, pierced by a surge of peppery, desperate anger. But he locked it down with a strength that I couldn't help but admire and envy. He bent and whispered in his wife's ears. Closing her eyes, she nodded at whatever he said.

Oh, gods, I shouldn't have said that. "I'm sorry." I clasped my hands together tightly. "I didn't—"

"You have nothing to apologize for," Casteel said, looking over his shoulder at me and finding my gaze with his. What radiated from him was warm and sweet, overshadowing the icy ache a bit.

"It is I who should apologize," Alastir stated gruffly, surprising me. "I shouldn't have brought Malik into this. You were right."

Casteel eyed him, and I knew he didn't know what to do with Alastir's apology. Neither did I. Instead, he focused on his parents. "I know what you're likely thinking. It's the same thing Alastir believed. You think my marriage to Penellaphe is yet another fruitless ploy to free Malik."

"It's not?" his mother whispered, tears filling her eyes. "We know you took her to use her."

"I did," Casteel confirmed. "But that's not why we married. That's not why we're together."

Hearing all of this used to bother me. The truth of how Casteel and I had gotten to this place was an uncomfortable one, but it no longer made me feel as if my skin no longer fit. I looked down at the band around my pointer finger and the vibrant golden swirl across my left palm. The corners of my lips turned up. Casteel had come for me with plans to use me, but

that had changed long before either of us realized it. The *how* no longer mattered.

“I want to believe that,” his mother whispered. Her concern was oppressive, like a coarse, too-thick blanket. Maybe she *wanted* to believe it, but it was clear that she didn’t.

“That is something else we need to discuss.” Valyn cleared his throat, and it was clear that he too doubted his son’s motivations. “As of right now, you are not the King, nor is she the Queen. Eloana had a very impassioned moment when she took off her crown,” he said, squeezing his wife’s shoulders. The way her entire face pinched in response to her husband’s comment was something I felt deep in my soul. “A coronation would have to take place, and the crowning would have to go uncontested.”

“Contest *her* claim?” Jasper laughed as he folded his arms over his chest. “Even if she wasn’t married to an heir, her claim cannot be contested. You know that. We all know that.”

My stomach felt as if I were back on the edge of the cliff in the Skotos Mountains. I didn’t want the throne. Neither did Casteel.

“Be that as it may,” Valyn drawled, eyes narrowing, “until we discover who was involved in this and have had time to speak, Alastir should be kept somewhere safe.”

Alastir turned to him. “That’s—”

“Something you will accept, graciously.” Valyn silenced the wolveren with one look, and it was quite clear exactly where Casteel had gotten that ability from. “This is as much for your benefit as it is for everyone else. Fight this, and I’m sure Jasper, Kieran, or my son will be at your throat in a heartbeat. And at this moment, I cannot promise that I would move to stay any of them.”

Casteel’s chin lowered, and his smile was as cold as the first breath of winter. The tips of his fangs appeared. “It’ll be me.”

Alastir glanced between Jasper and his Prince. Lowering his hands to his sides, his chest rose with a heavy breath. His wintry blue eyes fixed on Casteel. “You are like a son to me. You would’ve been my son if fate hadn’t had something else in store for all of us,” he said, and I knew he was thinking of his daughter. The sincerity in his words, the rawness of the pain he felt sliced into him, cutting deeply, and fell like icy rain, only increasing when Casteel said nothing. How he’d kept that level of pain hidden from me was stunning. “The truth of what is happening here will be revealed. Everyone will know I am not the threat.”

I felt it then as I stared at Alastir. A surge of...determination and steely resolve pumping hotly through his veins. It was quick, but instinct flared

inside me, screaming out a warning I didn't fully understand. I stepped forward. "Casteel—"

I wasn't quick enough.

"Protect your King and Queen," Alastir commanded.

Several of the guards moved, surrounding Casteel's parents. One of them reached behind his back. Valyn spun around. "Don't!"

Jasper shot forward, shifting in mid-leap as Eloana screamed out a hoarse cry. "No!"

An arrow struck the wolveren in the shoulder, stopping him in midair.

He went down, slipping back into his mortal form before he slammed into the cracked marble. I stumbled back, shocked as Jasper went still, a pale, gray color sweeping across his skin. Was he—?

My heart froze at the sound of high-pitched yelps and snarls coming from below the Temple. The other wolveren—

An arrow zinged through the air, striking Kieran as he leapt toward me. A scream caught in my throat as I lurched toward him. He caught himself before he fell, his back jerking straight and then bowing. The tendons in his neck stood out starkly as my eyes locked with his. The irises were a luminous blue-silver as he reached for the arrow protruding from his shoulder—a thin shaft leaking a grayish liquid. "Run," he snarled, taking a

stiff, unnatural step toward me. “*Run.*”

I ran toward him, grabbing his arm as one of his legs buckled. His skin—gods, his skin was like a chunk of ice. I tried to hold him, but his weight was too much, and he hit the ground on his back as Casteel reached my side, folding an arm around my waist. Horrified, I watched the gray pallor sweep over Kieran’s tawny skin, and I...I felt nothing. Not from him. Not from Jasper. They couldn’t be...this couldn’t be happening. “Kieran—?” Casteel suddenly spun me behind him, a roar of fury exploding from him, tasting of icy-hot rage. Something hit him, knocking him away from me. His mother screamed, and my head jerked up in time to see Queen Eloana shoving her elbow into a guard’s face. Bone cracked and gave way as she rushed forward, but another guard grabbed her from behind.

“Stop! Stop this now!” Eloana ordered. “I command you!”

Terror sank its claws into me as I saw the arrow jutting out of Casteel’s lower back—also leaking that strange, gray substance. But he still stood in front of me, sword in one hand. The sound that rumbled out of him promised death. He stepped forward—

Another arrow came from the Temple’s entrance, striking Casteel in the shoulder as I saw Valyn shove a sword deep into the stomach of a man holding a bow. The projectile pierced Casteel’s leg, throwing him back. I

caught him around the waist as his balance faltered, but like Kieran, his weight was too much. The sword clattered off the marble as he went down hard, the long length of his body straining as he kicked his head back. The tendons in his neck bulged as I dropped beside him, not even feeling the impact on my knees. Gray liquid poured from the wounds, mingling with blood as his lips peeled back from his fangs. Veins swelled and darkened under his skin.

No. No. No.

I couldn't breathe as his wild, dilated eyes met mine. *This isn't happening.* Those words repeated themselves over and over in my mind as I bent over, clutching his cheeks with shaking hands. I cried out at the feeling of his too-cold skin. Nothing alive felt this cold. Oh, gods, his skin didn't even feel like flesh anymore.

"Poppy, I..." he gasped out as he reached for me. A gray film crept across the whites of his eyes and then the irises, dulling the vivid amber. He went still, his gaze fixed on some point beyond me. His chest didn't move.

"Casteel," I whispered, trying to shake him, but his skin—his entire body—had...it had hardened like stone. He was frozen, his back arched and one leg curled, an arm lifted toward me. "*Casteel.*"

There was no answer.

I opened my senses wide to him, desperately seeking any hint of emotion, anything. But there was nothing. It was like he had entered the deepest level of sleep or was...

No. No. No. He couldn't be gone. He couldn't be dead.

Only a handful of seconds had passed from the time Alastir had issued his initial command to Casteel lying before me, his body drained of the vibrancy of life.

I quickly looked over my shoulder. Neither Jasper nor Kieran moved, and their skin had deepened to a dark gray color, the hue of iron.

Panic-fueled agony flooded me, entrenching itself in the area around my pounding heart as I slid my hands to Casteel's chest, feeling for a heartbeat. "Please. Please," I whispered, tears gathering in my eyes.

"Please. Don't do this to me. Please."

Nothing.

I felt nothing in him, Kieran, or Jasper. A hum whirred within the very core of my being as I stared down at Casteel—at my husband. My heartmate. *My everything.*

He was lost to me.

My skin began to vibrate as a dark and oily, soul-deep rage rose within

me. It had a tang like metal in the back of my throat and burned like fire in my veins. It tasted like *death*. And not the kind that occurred here—the final kind.

Fury swelled and expanded until I could no longer contain it. I didn't even try to stop it as tears tracked down my cheeks and fell on Casteel's iron-colored skin. The rage lashed out, pounding the air and seeping into the stone. Under me, I felt the Temple begin to faintly tremble once more. Someone shouted, but I was past hearing words.

Leaning over Casteel, I picked up his fallen sword as I brushed my lips over his still, stone-cold lips. That *ancient* thing inside me pulsed and throbbed as it had done before as I rose above my husband and turned. A sharp wind whipped across the Temple floor, extinguishing the fire of the torches. The leaves of the blood tree rattled like dry bones as my grip on the short sword tightened. I didn't see Casteel's parents. I didn't even see Alastir.

Dozens stood before me, all garbed in white, holding swords and daggers. Familiar metal masks, those worn by the Descenters, hid their faces. Seeing them now should've terrified me.

It only *enraged* me.

That primal power surged, invading all of my senses. It silenced every

emotion inside me until only one remained: *vengeance*. There was nothing else. No empathy. No compassion.

I was me.

And yet, I was something else entirely.

The sky above was free of clouds, remaining a stunning shade of blue.

Blood didn't rain, but my flesh *sparked*. Silvery-white embers danced over my skin and crackled as wispy cords stretched out from me, swathing the columns like glistening spiderwebs and flowing across the floor in a network of shimmering veins. My rage had become a tangible entity, a living, breathing force that could not be escaped. I stepped forward, and the top layer of stone shattered under my boot.

Tiny pieces of stone and dust broke away, drifting down. Several of the masked attackers moved back as thin fissures appeared in the statues of the gods. The cracks along the floor grew.

A masked attacker broke from the line, rushing me. Sunlight reflected off the blade of his sword as he lifted it into the air. I didn't move as the wind picked up the tangled strands of my hair. He yelled as he brought the hilt of the weapon's handle down on me—

I caught his arm, halting the blow as I shoved Casteel's blade deep into his chest. Red poured across the front of his tunic as he shuddered, falling