



A Kingdom of Flesh and Fire

A Blood and Ash Novel

By Jennifer L. Armentrout

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[Book Description](#)

A Kingdom of Flesh and Fire

A Blood and Ash Novel

Jennifer L. Armentrout

From #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout comes a new novel in her Blood and Ash series...

Is Love Stronger Than Vengeance?

A Betrayal...

Everything Poppy has ever believed in is a lie, including the man she was falling in love with. Thrust among those who see her as a symbol of a monstrous

kingdom, she barely knows who she is without the veil of the Maiden. But what

she *does* know is that nothing is as dangerous to her as *him*. The Dark One.
The

Prince of Atlantia. He wants her to fight him, and that's one order she's
more than

happy to obey. *He may have taken her, but he will never have her.*

A Choice....

Casteel Da'Neer is known by many names and many faces. His lies are as
seductive as his touch. His truths as sensual as his bite. Poppy knows better
than

to trust him. He needs her alive, healthy, and whole to achieve his goals.
But he's

the only way for her to get what she wants—to find her brother Ian and see
for

herself if he has become a soulless Ascended. Working with Casteel instead
of

against him presents its own risks. He still tempts her with every breath,
offering

up all she's ever wanted. Casteel has plans for her. Ones that could expose
her to

unimaginable pleasure and unfathomable pain. Plans that will force her to
look

beyond everything she thought she knew about herself—about him. Plans
that

could bind their lives together in unexpected ways that neither kingdom is
prepared for. And she's far too reckless, too hungry, to resist the temptation.

A Secret...

But unrest has grown in Atlantia as they await the return of their Prince.

Whispers of war have become stronger, and Poppy is at the very heart of it all.

The King wants to use her to send a message. The Descenters want her dead. The

wolven are growing more unpredictable. And as her abilities to feel pain and

emotion begin to grow and strengthen, the Atlantians start to fear her. Dark

secrets are at play, ones steeped in the blood-drenched sins of two kingdoms that

would do anything to keep the truth hidden. But when the earth begins to shake,

and the skies start to bleed, it may already be too late.

[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.

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To you, the reader

my parents had for one another.

Never once did those little-girl dreams include a proposal that wasn't remotely an actual proposal. Nor did they incorporate it being announced at a

table full of strangers, half of which wanted me dead. And those dreams surely

hadn't involved what had to be the kingdom's worst—and possibly most insane—

non-proposal of marriage to a man currently holding me captive.

Perhaps I had some sort of ailment of the brain. Maybe I was experiencing hallucinations brought on by stress. After all, there had been so much painful

death to process. His betrayal to deal with. And I'd just learned I was descended

from Atlantia, a kingdom I'd been raised to believe was the source of all the evil

and tragedy in the land. Stress-induced hallucinations seemed a far more believable reason than what was actually happening.

All I could do was stare at the larger hand holding my much smaller one. His

skin was slightly darker than mine as if kissed by the sun. Years of wielding a

sword with deadly, graceful precision had left his palms callused.

He lifted my hand to an indecently well-formed and full mouth. To lips that

were somehow soft yet unrelentingly firm. Lips that had spun beautiful words

into the air and whispered heated, wicked promises against my bare skin.
Lips

that had paid homage to the many scars that riddled my body and face.

Lips that had also spoken blood-soaked lies.

Now, that mouth was pressed against the top of my hand in a gesture that I would've cherished for an eternity and thought exquisitely tender just days or

weeks ago. Simple things like hand-holding or chaste kisses had been forbidden

to me. As were being wanted or feeling desire. I had long since accepted that I

would never experience those things.

Until *him*.

I lifted my gaze from our joined hands, from that mouth that was already curving up on one side, hinting at a dimple in the right cheek, and from the slowly

parting lips that revealed just a hint of fatally sharp fangs.

His hair brushed the nape of his neck and toppled over his forehead, and the thick strands were such a deep shade of black, it often shone blue in the sunlight.

With high and angular cheekbones, a straight nose, and a proud, carved jaw, he

often reminded me of the large, graceful cave cat I had seen once in Queen Ileana's palace as a child. Beautiful, but in the way all wild, dangerous predators

were. My heart stammered as my eyes locked onto his, orbs a shade of stunning,

cool amber.

I knew I was staring at Hawke—

Coldness poured into my chest as I stopped myself. That wasn't his name. I didn't even know if *Hawke Flynn* was merely a fictitious persona, or if the name

belonged to someone who had most likely been slaughtered for their identity. I

feared it was the latter. Because *Hawke* had supposedly come from Carsodonia,

the capital of the Kingdom of Solis, with glowing recommendations. But then

again, the Commander of the guards in Masadonia had turned out to be a supporter of the Atlantians, a Descenter, so that too could've been a lie.

Either way, the guard who'd pledged to protect me with his sword and with his life wasn't real. Nor was the man who had seen me for who I was and not just

what I was. The Maiden. The Chosen. Hawke Flynn was nothing more than a

figment of fantasy, just like those little-girl dreams had been.

Who held my hand now was the reality: Prince Casteel Da'Neer. His Highness. The Dark One.

Above our joined hands, the curve of his lips grew. The dimple in his right cheek was apparent. It was rare that the left dimple made an appearance. Only

genuine smiles brought that out.

“Poppy,” he said, and every muscle in my body knotted. I wasn’t sure if it was the use of my nickname or the deep, musical lilt of his voice that made me

tense. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so speechless.”

The teasing glimmer in *his* eyes was what snapped me out of my dumbfounded silence. I pulled my hand free, hating the knowledge that if he had

wanted to stop me from pulling away, he could’ve easily done so.

“Marriage?” I found my voice, if only to say the one word.

A glint of challenge filled his gaze. “Yes. Marriage. You do know what that means?”

My hand curled into a fist against the wooden table as I held his stare. “Why

would you think I wouldn’t know what marriage is?”

“Well,” he replied idly, picking up a chalice. “You repeated the word as if it confused you. And as the Maiden, I know you’ve been...sheltered.”

Under my braid, the nape of my neck started to burn, likely turning as red as

my hair in the sunlight. “Being the Maiden or sheltered does not equal stupidity,”

I snapped, aware of the hush that had settled over the table and the entire banquet

hall—a room currently full of Descenters and Atlantians. All who would kill and

die for the man I openly glared at.

“No.” Casteel’s gaze flickered over me as he took a sip. “It does not.”

“But I am confused.” Against my fist, I felt something sharp. With a quick glance down, I saw what I had been too shocked and disturbed to notice earlier. A

knife. One with a wooden handle and a thick, serrated blade, designed to cut

through meat. It wasn’t my wolven bone dagger. I hadn’t seen that since the stables, and it cut me deep to think I may never see it again. That dagger was

more than a weapon. Vikter had gifted it to me on my sixteenth birthday, and it

was my only connection to the man who was more than a guard. He had assumed

the role my father should’ve occupied if he’d lived. Now, the dagger was missing,

and Vikter was gone.

Killed by those who supported Casteel.

And based on the fact that I'd shoved the last dagger I'd gotten my hands on

deep into Casteel's heart, I doubted the wolven-bone blade would be returned

anytime soon. The meat knife was a weapon, though. It would have to do.

"What is there to be confused about?" He placed the chalice down, and I thought his eyes warmed like they did when he was amused or...or feeling a

certain way I refused to acknowledge.

My gift swelled against my skin, demanding I use it to sense his emotions as

I flattened my hand over the meat knife. I managed to shut off my abilities before

they formed a connection to him. I didn't want to know if he was amused or...or

whatever at the moment. I didn't care *what* he was feeling.

"As I said," the Prince continued, dragging one long finger over the rim of his cup. "A marriage can only occur between two Atlantians if both halves are

standing on the soil of their home, Princess."

Princess.

That annoying and yet somewhat slightly endearing pet name of his had just

taken on a whole different meaning. One that begged the question: How much

had he known from the beginning? He'd admitted to recognizing who I was the

night at the Red Pearl, but he claimed he didn't know that I was part Atlantian

until he bit me. Tasted my blood. The mark on my neck tingled, and I resisted the

urge to touch it.

How much of that nickname was a coincidence? I wasn't sure why, but if that was yet another lie, it mattered.

"Which part confuses you?" he asked, amber eyes unblinking.

"It's the part where you think I would actually marry you."

Across from me, I heard the choked sound of someone trying to conceal laughter. I flicked a look at the handsome face of a tawny-brown-skinned, pale-

blue-eyed wolveren—a creature able to take the form of a wolf as easily as they

could assume the form of a mortal. Until a few days ago, I'd believed that the

wolveren were extinct, killed off during the War of Two Kings some four hundred

years ago. But that was yet another lie. Kieran was just one of many, very alive

wolven—several of which sat at this table.

“I don’t *think* that you will,” Casteel replied, thick lashes lowering halfway.

“I know.”

Disbelief thundered through me. “Maybe I wasn’t clear, so I will try to be more explicit now. I don’t know why you’d think, in a million years, that I’d

marry you.” I tipped toward him. “Is that clear enough?”

“Crystal,” he responded, eyes heating to a warm honey hue, but there didn’t seem to be any anger in his stare or tone. There was something else entirely. A

look that made me think of warm skin and how those rough, callused palms had

felt against my cheek, gliding over my belly and thighs, grazing much more intimate places. The dimple in his cheek deepened. “But we shall see, won’t we?”

A hot, prickly feeling spread over my skin. “We shall see absolutely nothing.”

“I can be very convincing.”

“Not *that* convincing,” I retorted, and he gave a noncommittal murmur that sent a bolt of pure rage streaking through me. “Have you lost your mind?”

A deep belly laugh came from farther down the table. I knew it wasn’t the

fair-haired Delano. That wolven appeared as if he'd just witnessed a massacre,

and his neck was next on the line. Maybe I should be afraid, because wolven

weren't easily scared, especially not Delano. He'd defended me when Jericho and

the others came for me, although he and the Atlantian, Naill—who currently sat

on one side of him—had been sorely outnumbered.

The Dark One wasn't someone most would dare to anger. He was an

Atlantian, deadly, fast, and impossibly strong. Hard to wound, let alone kill. And

as I learned just recently, capable of using compulsion to enforce his will upon

others. He'd killed one of the most powerful Dukes in all of Solis, thrusting the

very cane Teerman often used on me through the Ascended's heart.

But I felt no fear.

I was too furious to be scared.

Sitting on Delano's left was the source of the laugh I'd just heard. It had

come from the mountain of a man, the one called Elijah. I didn't think he was a

wolven. It was the eyes. All the wolven had the same wintry blue eyes. Elijah's

were hazel, a color more gold than brown. I wasn't the only one staring at him

now. Several gazes had landed on him. I took the opportunity to slide the meat

knife off the table, hiding it under the slit in my tunic.

“What?” Elijah stroked his dark beard as he met the many stares. “She’s asking what most of us are thinking.”

Delano blinked and then slowly looked at Elijah. Casteel said nothing. His tight-lipped smile spoke volumes as the piercing weight of his gaze moved from

me to farther down the table.

Fingers stilling on his beard, Elijah cleared his throat. “I thought the plan —”

“What you think is irrelevant.” The Prince silenced the older man.

“You mean the one where you thought to use me as bait to free your brother?” I demanded. “Or has that magically changed in the last couple of hours?”

A muscle popped along Casteel’s jaw as the full focus of his attention returned to me. “You should eat.”

I almost lost it right then and threw my scavenged knife at him. “I’m not hungry.”

His gaze dipped to my plate. “You’ve barely eaten.”

“Well, you see, I don’t have much of an appetite, *Your Highness*.”

His jaw tightened as his eyes met mine and held. The golden hue of his irises

had chilled. Goosebumps prickled my skin as the air around us seemed to thicken

and become charged, filling the room. There hadn’t been an ounce of respect in

my tone. Had I pushed Casteel too far? If so, I didn’t care.

My fingers tightened around the handle of the blade. I was no longer the

Maiden, bound to rules that prevented me from having a say in matters of my life.

I would no longer be controlled. I could and would push harder than this.

“She asks a very valid question,” someone said from the end of the table. It

was a man with short, dark hair. He looked no older than Kieran, who, like

Casteel, appeared to be in his early twenties. But Casteel was over two hundred

years old. The man could be even older, for all I knew. “Has the plan to use her to

free Prince Malik changed?” he asked.

Casteel said nothing as he continued watching me, but the utter stillness that

crept into his features was a far better warning than any words could be.

“I am not trying to question your decisions,” the man stated. “I’m attempting

to understand them.”

“What do you need help understanding, Landell?” Casteel leaned back in the

chair, his hands resting lightly on the arms. The way he sat as if completely at

ease, raised the tiny hairs all over my body.

A tense moment of silence descended, and then Landell said, “We have all followed you here from Atlantia. We stayed in this archaic, cesspool of a kingdom, pretending loyalty to a counterfeit King and Queen. Because, like you,

we want nothing more than to free your brother. He is the rightful heir.”

Casteel nodded for Landell to continue.

“We have lost people—good people trying to infiltrate the Temples in Carsodonia,” he said. I tensed as images of the sprawling, midnight-hued structures formed in my mind.

If all that Casteel had alleged was true, the purpose the Temples served was another lie. Third sons and daughters weren’t given over during the Rite to serve

the gods. Instead, they were given to the Ascended—the vamprys—becoming

nothing more than cattle. Much of the pile of lies I’d been fed my entire life was

terrible, but that was possibly the worst of them all. And as revolting as what

Casteel claimed was, I feared it was the truth. How could I deny it? The

Ascended had told us that the Atlantians' kiss was poisonous, cursing innocent

mortals and turning them into these decaying shells of their former selves—

vicious, blood-hungry monsters known as the Craven. But I knew that to be

untrue. The Atlantians' kiss wasn't toxic. Neither was their bite. I was proof of

both of those things. Casteel and I had shared many kisses. He'd given me his

blood when I was mortally wounded. And, he'd bitten me.

I did not turn.

Just like I hadn't turned when I was attacked by the Craven all those years ago.

And it wasn't like I hadn't begun to develop suspicions about the Ascended

before Casteel entered my life. He had only confirmed them. But was it all true? I

had no way of knowing. My fingers ached from how tightly I held the knife.

“We haven't found any leads on where our Prince is being held, and too

many will never return home to their families,” Landell continued, his voice

steadying with each word, thickening with anger I didn't need my gift to sense.

“But now we have something. Finally, something that could be used to gain knowledge of your brother's whereabouts—to possibly free him, keep him from being forced to make new vamprys, living through the kind of hell you're all too familiar with. Instead, we're going home?”

I knew of some of that hell.

I'd seen the numerous scars all over Casteel's body, the brand in the shape of

the Royal Crest on his upper thigh, just below his hip.

But Casteel said nothing in return. No one spoke. There was no movement, not from those at the table or the ones near the hearth at the back of the banquet hall.

Landell wasn't finished. “The ones hanging on the walls of the hall outside this very room deserve to be there. Not just because they disobeyed your orders,

but because if they had succeeded in killing the Maiden, we would've lost the one

thing we could use. They put the heir in jeopardy for vengeance. That is why I

believe they deserve their fate, even though some of them were friends of mine—

friends of many at this table.”

I will kill them.

That was Casteel’s promise when he saw the wounds the others had left behind. And he had. Mostly. Casteel had staked those Landell spoke of to the

wall. All were dead now, except for Jericho. The ringleader was barely alive,

suffering a slow, agonizing death to serve as a reminder that I would not be harmed.

“You can use her,” Landell fumed. “She is the Queen’s favorite—the Chosen. If they were ever to release your brother, it would be for her. Instead,

we’re going home for you to marry?” He jerked his chin toward me. “*Her?*”

The distaste in that word stung, but I’d been on the receiving end of far more

cutting remarks from Duke Teerman to show even a flicker of reaction.

Across from me, Kieran’s head snapped in Landell’s direction. “If you have any intelligence, you would stop speaking. Now.”

“Let him continue,” Casteel interjected. “He has a right to speak his mind.

Just as Elijah did. But it seems as if Landell has more to say than Elijah, and I

would like to hear it.”

Elijah’s lips pursed, and he emitted a low whistle, eyes widening as he leaned back in his chair, dropping an arm over the back of Delano’s seat. “Hey,

sometimes I speak and laugh when I shouldn’t. But whatever you plan or want,

I’m with you, Casteel.”

“Are you serious?” Landell’s head whipped toward Elijah as he shot to his feet. “You’re okay with giving up on Prince Malik? You’re fine with Casteel

bringing her back home, to our lands, and marrying her, making her the Princess?

An honor meant to bring all of our people together, not to divide them.”

Casteel moved slightly, his hands sliding off the arms of his chair.

“As I just said, I’m with Casteel.” Elijah lifted his gaze to Landell.

“Always,

and no matter what he chooses. And if he chooses her, then we all do.”

This was...that was entirely ridiculous, the whole argument. It didn’t matter.

And I didn’t care why there was a need to bring the people of Atlantia together

because Casteel and I weren’t getting married. I didn’t get a chance to point that

out, though.

“I do not choose her. I will *never* choose her,” Landell swore, the skin of his face thinning and darkening as he scanned those who sat around him. Wolven. He

was a wolven, I realized. I adjusted my grip on the knife and tensed. “All of you

know this. The wolven will not accept her. It doesn’t matter if she has Atlantian

blood or not. Neither will the people of Atlantia welcome her. She’s an outsider

raised and cared for by those who forced us back into a land that is quickly growing too small and useless.” He stared down the table, looking at Casteel.

“She didn’t even accept you, and we’re supposed to believe that she will bond

with you?”

Bond? I glanced at Kieran and then Casteel. I knew that some wolven were bonded to Atlantians of a particular class, and it took no leap of logic to assume

that Casteel being a Prince was just that. The two of them seemed the closest out

of everyone I’d seen Casteel interact with, but I knew of no other bond.

However, again, it was irrelevant since we were not marrying.

“Are we supposed to believe that she is worthy of being our Princess when

she flat-out denies you in front of your people while reeking of the Ascended?”

Landell demanded. My nose wrinkled. I didn’t smell like...like the Ascended.

Did I? “When she refuses to choose you?”

“What matters is that I choose her,” Casteel spoke, and my stupid, *stupid* heart skipped a beat, even though I did not choose him. “And that is all that matters.”

The wolven’s lips peeled back, and my eyes widened at the sight of his canines elongating. “You do this, and it will be the downfall of our kingdom,” he

snarled. “I will not choose that scarred-face bitch.”

I flinched.

I’d actually *flinched*, cheeks burning as if I’d been slapped across the face. I lifted my fingers, touching the uneven skin of my cheek before I realized what I was doing.

Landell’s hand dropped to his hip. “I’ll see her dead before I stand by and allow this.”

Seconds, mere heartbeats passed from when those words left Landell’s mouth, and the frenzied stir of air as it lifted wisps of hair at my temples.

Casteel’s chair was empty.

A shout, and then something heavy clanged off a dish. A chair toppled, and Landell...he was no longer standing by the table. His plate was no longer empty.

A narrow dagger lay there, one designed for throwing. My wide eyes followed

the blur that was Casteel as he pinned Landell to the wall, his forearm pressed

into the wolver's throat.

Good gods, to be able to move that fast, that silently...

"I just want you to know that I'm not even particularly upset about you questioning what I intend to do. How you've spoken to me doesn't bother me.

I'm not insecure enough to care about the opinions of little men." Casteel's face

was inches from the wide-eyed wolver. "If that had been all, I would've overlooked it. If you had stopped after the first time you referenced her, I would've let you walk out of here with just your overinflated sense of self-worth.

But then you insulted her. You made her flinch, and then you threatened her. I

will not forget that."

"I—" Whatever Landell was about to say ended in a gurgle as Casteel's right

arm thrust forward.

“And I will not be able to forgive you.” Casteel jerked his arm back, throwing something to the floor. It landed with a fleshy smack.

My lips slowly parted as I realized what the lumpy, red mass was. Oh, my gods. A heart. It was an actual heart.

Letting go of the wolver, Casteel stepped back, watching Landell slide down the wall, the wolver’s head lolling to the side. He turned to face the table, his right hand stained with blood and gore. “Does anyone else have anything they’d like to share?”



[Chapter 2](#)

A chorus of denials echoed through the banquet hall, but none of the men had so much as twitched in their seats. Some of them were even chuckling, and

I...I stared at the red coursing down the length of Casteel’s fingers, dripping onto the floor.

Casteel leaned forward, plucking up Landell’s napkin. Strolling back to his chair, he idly wiped his hand clean.

I watched him sit, my heart thumping as he turned to me, his gaze sheltered

by a fringe of heavy lashes.

“You probably think that was excessive,” he said, dropping the crumpled, blood-stained napkin onto his plate. “It wasn’t. No one speaks of you or to you like that and lives.”

I stared at him.

He sat back. “At least, I gave him a quick death. There is some dignity in that.”

I had no idea what to say.

I had no clue what to feel. All I could think was, *oh my gods, he just ripped a wolverine’s heart from his chest with his bare hand.*

The men who stood by the doors were picking up Landell when one of the men at the table asked, “So, when is the wedding?”

Laughter greeted the question, and there was a hint of a smile on Casteel’s lips as he leaned toward me. “There is no side of you that is not as beautiful as the

other half. Not a single inch isn’t stunning.” His lashes lifted, and the intensity in

his stare held me captive. “That was true the first time I said it to you, and it is

still the truth today and tomorrow.”

My lips parted on a sharp inhale. I almost reached for my face again but

stopped myself. Somehow, in the process of getting used to being seen without

the veil of the Maiden, I'd forgotten about my scars—something I'd never thought possible. I wasn't ashamed of them, hadn't been for years. They were

proof of my strength, of the horrific attack I had survived. But when I was unveiled in front of Casteel for the first time, I'd feared he would agree with what

Duke Teerman had always said. What I knew most thought if they saw me unveiled or looked upon me now.

That half of my face was a masterpiece, while the other was a nightmare.

But when Hawke— *Casteel*—had seen the pale pink, jagged streak of skin that started below my hairline and sliced across the temple, ending at my nose,

and the other that was shorter and higher, cutting across my forehead through my

eyebrow, he had said that both halves were as beautiful as the whole.

I'd believed him then. And I'd felt beautiful for the first time in my life, something that had also been forbidden to me.

And gods help me, but I still believed him.

“What he said was more than an insult. It was a threat that I will not tolerate,” Casteel finished, sitting back as he picked up his chalice with the same

hand that had torn a heart free from its cage moments before.

My gaze fell to where the dagger still lay on Landell's plate. What the wolveren would've attempted to do with that dagger shouldn't have come as a shock. It wasn't like I didn't know that many of those at this table would rather

see me sliced into pieces. I knew I wasn't safe here, but all of them had seen the

hall outside this room. They had to know what would happen if they disobeyed

Casteel.

Some unconscious part of me still underestimated their hatred of anything that reminded them of the Ascended. And that was me, even if I hadn't done

anything to them other than defend myself.

Conversation picked back up around the table. Quiet discussions. Louder ones. Laughter. It was like nothing had happened, and that rattled me. But what

left me wholly unsettled was what I couldn't admit, even to myself.

Kieran cleared his throat. "Would you like to return to your room, Penellaphe?"

Pulled from my thoughts, it took me a moment to respond. "You mean my cell?"

“It’s far more comfortable and not nearly as drafty as the dungeon,” he replied.

“A cell is a cell, no matter how comfortable it is,” I told him.

“I’m fairly certain this is the same conversation we had earlier,” Casteel commented.

My gaze swiveled back to Casteel. “*I’m* fairly certain I don’t care.”

“I’m also sure that we came to the conclusion that you have never been free,

Princess,” Casteel tacked on. The truth of those words was still as brutal as it was

when they had first been spoken. “I don’t believe you would even recognize freedom if it were ever offered to you.”

“I know enough to recognize that’s not what you’re offering,” I shot back, fury returning in a hot, welcoming wave, warming my too-cold skin.

A faint smile appeared on Casteel’s mouth, though it wasn’t his tight, calculating one. My anger gave way to confusion. Was he purposely baiting me?

More than a little agitated, I focused on the wolver. “I would like to return to my more comfortable, not-nearly-as-drafty cell. I assume I won’t be allowed to walk there myself?”

Kieran’s lips twitched, but his expression smoothed out pretty quickly,

proving that he had the common sense not to smile or laugh. “You would assume

correctly.”

Without waiting for His Highness to give permission, I pushed back my chair. The legs screeched across the stone floor. Internally, I sighed. My motions

weren’t as dignified as I wished, but I kept my head high as I started to turn.

One of the men who’d been at the door and had retrieved Landell’s corpse stalked across the banquet hall, headed straight for the Prince. He bent low, whispering in Casteel’s ear as Kieran rose. Without waiting for Kieran, nor looking at the smear of blood across the wall, I took a step.

Suddenly, Casteel was at my side, his hand on my arm. Not having heard him rise, I swallowed a gasp of surprise and moved to pull my arm free as the

man who’d spoken to Casteel stepped away.

“Don’t,” Casteel whispered, holding onto my arm. Something about his tone

in that one word stopped me. I looked up at him. “We’re about to have company.

Fight me all you want later. I’ll probably enjoy it. But do not fight me in front of

him.”

My eyes met his as knots formed in my stomach. Again, his tone struck a

chord of unease within me as I looked at the door. Who was coming? His father?

The King?

Casteel shifted so that he stood partially in front of me as a group of men filled the doorway. The sandy-haired man who walked in the center, tall and broad of shoulder, snagged my attention. I inherently knew that this was who

Casteel had spoken of.

The man, his wealth of blond hair brushing a square, hard jaw, appeared much older than Casteel. If he was mortal, which I doubted, I would've pegged

him for someone on the verge of approaching mid-life. I didn't think this man

was Casteel's father. He looked nothing like him, but I supposed that didn't mean

much.

He strode toward us. The heavy cloak he wore, dusted with melting snow, parted, revealing a black tunic with two gold lines overlapping across his chest.

As he drew closer, I somehow managed not to gasp. It wasn't the pale blue eyes I

associated with the wolver. It was the deep groove in the center of his forehead as

if someone had attempted to slice open his head. I, of all people, knew better than

to be surprised by scars. Shame crept up my throat as I averted my gaze. It wasn't

that the injury was ugly. The man was handsome in a rugged way that reminded

me of a lion. It was just a shock to see someone, a possible wolverine, scarred.

Vaguely, I became aware of Kieran coming to stand at my back.

"What in the gods' teeth is happening here?" the man demanded.

The breath I had taken got stuck as my gaze flew back to the man. His voice...it sounded so familiar to me.

"Or do I even want to know?" he continued, his brows lifting as he saw the blood on the wall. The others who'd traveled with them moved among those at

the table, all except one. He was shorter than Casteel and more compact. His hair

was a reddish-brown mop of waves, and his eyes were a brilliant gold like

Casteel's. This one remained close to the man, and his gaze seemed to track every

breath I took.

"I've just been doing a little redecorating," Casteel replied, and the wolverine chuckled as the two males clasped hands.

I felt a catch in my chest again, a tug at my heart. His laugh...it was raspy

and rough as if his throat weren't sure what to do with the emotion. Like Vikter's.

My heart squeezed. That was why his voice and laugh sounded familiar to me.

"I didn't expect you to be here so soon, Alastir," Casteel said.

"We rode hard to get ahead of the storm headed this way." Alastir's gaze slid

past the Prince to me. Curiosity marked his features, though not the flush of anger

or the coldness of distaste. "So, this is her."

"It is."

Every muscle in my body tensed as Alastir's gaze lowered. His head tilted, and it took me a moment to realize that he was staring at my neck—

The damn bite!

My braid had slipped over my shoulder, revealing my throat.

The skin around Alastir's mouth tightened as his gaze shifted back to Casteel. "I feel like things have occurred since we last spoke."

Had Alastir been with Casteel's father when he left New Haven to speak with him? If so, where was the King?

"Many things have changed," Casteel answered. "Including my relationship with Penellaphe."

"Penellaphe?" Alastir repeated in surprise, one eyebrow arching. "Named

after the Goddess of Wisdom, Loyalty, and Duty?”

Since I very well couldn't stand there and ignore him, I nodded.

A faint smile appeared. “A fitting name for the Maiden, I imagine.”

“You wouldn't think that if you knew her,” Casteel replied, and I clamped my lips shut against a retort.

“Then I cannot wait to do so.” Alastir's smile tightened.

“You will have to wait a little longer.” Casteel glanced back. His eyes briefly

met mine, but it was long enough for me to know that he wished for me not to

challenge what he said next. “Penellaphe was just about to retire.”

Kieran stepped closer, placing his hand on my lower back to urge me

forward. I squelched the urge to refuse, having enough sense to realize that

Casteel didn't want me around this man, and there was probably a good reason

for that.

I walked forward, well aware of several gazes following me. I'd made it

halfway to the door when I heard Alastir ask, “Is it wise to allow the Maiden to

roam freely?”

I stopped—

“Keep walking,” Kieran said under his breath. The handle of the knife I'd

stolen dug into my palm.

“It wouldn’t be wise to refuse her to do so,” Casteel said with a laugh, and it took everything in me not to throw the blade at him.

Kieran kept pace with me as we passed the men who’d returned to standing sentry at the large wooden doors. Striding forward, I told myself not to look up,

but my eyes lifted anyway as I passed the impaled body of Mr. Tulis.

Pressure clamped down on my chest. He and his wife had come before Duke

and Duchess Teerman, pleading to keep their third-born son, their only remaining

child, who had been *destined* to go into service to the gods during the Rite. I’d

felt their soul-deep pain and desperation, and even without my gift, I would’ve

been affected. I’d planned to plead their case to the Queen. To do something, even

if I weren’t successful.

But they’d escaped. His entire family, his wife and infant son, given a chance at a new life. And he’d taken that opportunity to deliver what would’ve

been the wound that killed me if it hadn’t been for Casteel.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell, “*why?*” as I stared at the pale face and

the dried blood that stained his chest. Why had he made that choice? He'd thrown

everything away for a short-lived sense of retribution. Against me, who had done

nothing to him or his family. None of that had mattered in the end. Now, his son

would grow up without a father.

But at least he would live. If he'd been given over in the Rite, he'd likely

face a future worse than death. I had no idea how long the third sons and

daughters survived within those Temples. Were they...fed upon immediately,

even as infants? Small children? Third sons and daughters were given over

annually, while the second sons and daughters were given to the Court between

the ages of thirteen and eighteen. They lived—well, most of them. Some died at

Court due to a sickness of the blood that took them during the night. Casteel had

said the vamprys struggled to control their bloodlust, and I now doubted that

there'd been an ailment that took them. Instead, it was like what had happened to

Malessa Axton, who'd been found with a bite on her throat and her neck broken.

It was never confirmed, but I knew Lord Mazeen, an Ascended, had killed her

and left her body there, half exposed for anyone to find.

At least Lord Mazeen will harm no one else, I told myself as a savage wave of satisfaction flowed through me. I easily recalled the look of shock etched onto

his face when I chopped off his hand. I'd never thought I would be glad to kill

anything but a Craven, but Lord Mazeen had proven that false.

The violent joy came to a swift end as thoughts of the children crept back in. How could anyone, mortal or not, hurt young ones like that? And they had

been doing it for years—hundreds of years.

Realizing I'd come to a standstill, I started walking again. Chest heavy, I didn't even bother to look at Jericho. I could tell by the pitiful whimpers coming

from him that he was still alive.

I believed everyone deserved dignity in death, even him, but I didn't feel even one iota of empathy for what he'd brought upon himself.

And Landell? Did I feel sorry for him? Not particularly. What did that say about me?

I didn't want to think of that so I asked, "Who was that man?"

“His name is Alastir Davenwell. He’s the advisor to the King and Queen. A close family friend. More like an uncle to both Casteel and Malik,” Kieran said,

and I jerked a little at the mention of Casteel’s brother.

“Is that why Casteel didn’t want me around him? Because Alastir is an advisor to his parents? Or because he too will wish to chop me into pieces?”

“Alastir is not a man prone to violence, despite the scar he carries. And while he knows his place with the Prince, he is loyal to the Queen and King. There are things that Casteel would not want to get back to his father or mother.”

“Like the ridiculous marriage thing?”

“Something like that.” Kieran shifted the conversation as we rounded the corner and entered the common area where the air was free of the stench of death.

“Do you feel pity for the mortal? The one Cas helped escape the Ascended with

his family?”

Cas.

Gods, that sounded like such a harmless nickname for such a dangerous man.

I glanced at Kieran as we entered the narrow stairwell, noting that he was

without his short sword and bow as he moved in front of me. But he was far from

defenseless, considering what he was. I didn't even bother to make a run for it. I

knew I wouldn't make it more than a foot. Wolven were incredibly fast.

Kieran stopped without warning, spinning around so suddenly that I backed up, hitting the wall. He took a step toward me and dipped his head to mine. Every

muscle locked as he inhaled deeply.

Was he...?

His head lowered, the bridge of his nose brushing my temple. He inhaled again.

"What are you doing?" I jerked to the side, putting space between us. "Are you *smelling* me?"

He straightened, his eyes narrowed. "You...smell different."

My brows lifted. "Okay? I don't know what to tell you about that."

He didn't seem to hear me as his eyes brightened. "You smell like..."

"If you say I smell like Casteel again, I will punch you in the face," I promised. "Hard."

"You do smell like him, but that's not it." He shook his head. "You smell of death."

“Wow. Thanks. But if I do, that is not my fault.”

“You don’t understand.” Kieran eyed me for a moment longer and then turned, starting up the stairwell once more.

No. I didn’t understand, and I really didn’t want to.

I sniffed the sleeve of my tunic. It smelled like...roasted meat.

“Earlier, you said you didn’t feel sympathy for any of them,” he said as I followed him.

“That hasn’t changed,” I said. “They wanted me dead.” We stepped out of the stairwell and onto the covered walkway. Damp, cold air greeted us. “But I

can’t help but feel pity for Mr. Tulis.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Well, I do.” Shivering, I ducked my chin against the sharp gust of wind.

“He was given a second chance. He threw it away. I feel pity for that choice and

for his wife and son. And I guess I feel sorry for the families of any of them that

are now on that wall.”

Kieran fell into step beside me, taking the brunt of the wind. “The pity for the families is rightfully placed.”

I stopped in surprise but said nothing.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I murmured.

He issued a soft chuckle. “You think I’m not capable of compassion?”

I glanced out over the yard below. A fine layer of snow shone brightly in the

moonlight. Beyond, I saw nothing but the thick darkness of the encroaching woods. It was strange to look out and not see a Rise, the often-mountainous walls

constructed from limestone and iron mined from the Elysium Peaks. The sleepy

town of New Haven had one, but it was much smaller than what I was accustomed to in both Masadonia and Carsodonia.

“I don’t know what you’re capable of,” I admitted, touching the banister’s cool wood as the wind picked up, lifting the shorter strands of my hair that had

escaped my braid. “I hardly know anything about the wolveren.”

“My animal side doesn’t cancel out my mortal one,” he replied. “I’m not incapable of emotions.”

My gaze cut to his. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just...” I trailed off. What had I meant? “I guess I *did* mean it like that. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It’s not like you’ve met many wolveren,” he reasoned.

“Yes, but that’s no excuse.” I gripped the railing with one hand. “There are a

lot of different people from various places that I haven’t met and know nothing

about. That doesn’t mean it’s okay to make assumptions.”

“True,” he replied, and I almost cringed. How many times had I made assumptions about the Atlantian people? The Descenters? Biases were taught and

learned. Maybe that wasn’t my fault, but that didn’t make it acceptable.

But nobody at that table had even twitched in their seats as Casteel killed

Landell. What did that say about them? “Is what happened tonight common?”

“Which part? The marriage proposal or the open-heart surgery?”

I shot Kieran a dark look. “Landell.”

He studied me for a moment, and then his stare turned to the yard and the

trees. “Not particularly. Even if you don’t see this yet or don’t want to, Cas is not

a murderous tyrant. Honestly, it’s rare that any question him. Not because what he

does or doesn’t do is always reasonable, but because he has no problem getting

blood on his hands to assert his authority to get what he wants or to keep those he

cares for safe.”