



A BLOOD AND ASH NOVEL

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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER L.
ARMENTROUT

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By Jennifer L. Armentrout

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coincidental.

Book Description

Captivating and action-packed, From Blood and Ash is a sexy,

addictive, and unexpected fantasy perfect for fans of Sarah J. Maas and Laura Thalassa.

A Maiden...

Chosen from birth to usher in a new era, Poppy's life has never been her own. The life of the Maiden is solitary. Never to be touched. Never to be looked upon. Never to be spoken to. Never to experience pleasure.

Waiting for the day of her Ascension, she would rather be with the guards, fighting back the evil that took her family, than preparing to be found worthy by the gods. But the choice has never been hers.

A Duty...

The entire kingdom's future rests on Poppy's shoulders, something she's not even quite sure she wants for herself. Because a Maiden has a heart. And a soul. And longing. And when Hawke, a golden-eyed guard honor bound to ensure her Ascension, enters her life, destiny and duty become tangled with desire and need. He incites her anger, makes her question everything she believes in, and tempts her with the forbidden.

A Kingdom...

Forsaken by the gods and feared by mortals, a fallen kingdom is rising once more, determined to take back what they believe is theirs through violence and vengeance. And as the shadow of those cursed draws closer,

the line between what is forbidden and what is right becomes blurred.

Poppy is not only on the verge of losing her heart and being found unworthy by the gods, but also her life when every blood-soaked thread that holds her world together begins to unravel.

[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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[**Acknowledgments from the Author**](#)

Laura Kaye and I were standing in the Cincinnati airport in 2016 when I told her about *From Blood and Ash*. She was the first person who said, I need you to write this right now. I didn't. It was a high fantasy, something I'd never written before, and I kept telling myself that I needed time to see if I could take this crazy idea and pull it together into something that made

sense. I didn't find that time, not in 2016, 2017, or 2018. It wasn't until I was talking with JR Ward about writing books of the heart—books that weren't exactly what was expected from us, but needed to be written nonetheless. It was that conversation in September of 2019 that gave me the courage to finally say now is the time to write this book. So Laura Kaye and JR Ward, I owe you two a world of thanks. Without both of you, *From Blood and Ash* would've never made it from an idea to a fully fleshed novel.

There were others involved in making sure I finished this book. It was Brigid Kemmerer, whose excitement when I told her about the book, gave me the courage to continue writing something that was unfamiliar to me. It was Hawke's Harem of Two—Wendy Higgins, who sent the most lovely and inspiring words to me after reading the book. It was Jen Fisher, who fell in love with Hawke by chapter three and provided unmeasurable feedback. It was Andrea Joan who sent me paragraph length texts about the book as she read. It was all the JLanders who immediately hopped aboard the mystery teaser ship, willing to take this journey with me.

I'd originally planned on self-publishing this book. There were a lot of reasons, but there were two reasons that were most important to me. One was my goal to get this book out to you as soon as possible. The other was

the need to write and publish this book without expectations and pressure, but then I heard about Blue Box Press, and knowing all the amazing work they do on their 1001 Dark Nights novellas, I reached out to Liz Berry. I had no idea what she would think when I told her what I was writing and how I wanted to publish it. I really thought she'd "nope" right out the discussion, but she didn't. In one phone call, she not only wanted the book but, I swear, had a marketing plan that lined up with what I wanted before even reading the book. I knew FB&A was in amazing hands. To MJ, Liz, and Jillian (and Steve, because STEVE BERRY STORY TIME), thank you for taking this unexpected leap with me. Your excitement, love, support and feedback has been invaluable in finishing this story and in getting it into the hands of readers. To the whole team behind this book: Chelle Olson, Jenn Watson, Kim Guidroz, thank you!

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You are the bomb diggity. Thank you to Stephanie Brown for taking care of

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To You, the Reader.



[Chapter 1](#)

“They found Finley this eve, just outside the Blood Forest, dead.”

I looked up from my cards and across the crimson-painted surface to the three men sitting at the table. I’d chosen this spot for a reason. I’d...felt nothing from them as I drifted between the crowded tables earlier.

No pain, physical or emotional.

Normally, I didn't prod to see if someone was in pain. Doing so without reason felt incredibly invasive, but in crowds, it was difficult to control just how much I allowed myself to feel. There was always someone whose pain cut so deeply, was so raw, that their anguish became a palpable entity I didn't even have to open my senses to feel—that I couldn't ignore and walk away from. They projected their agony onto the world around them.

I was forbidden to do anything but ignore. To never speak of the gift bestowed upon me by the gods and to never, ever go beyond sensing to actually doing something about it.

Not that I always did what I was supposed to do.

Obviously.

But these men were fine when I reached out with my senses to avoid those in great pain, which was surprising, given what they did for a living. They were guards from the Rise—the mountainous wall constructed from the limestone and iron mined from the Elysium Peaks. Ever since the War of Two Kings ended four centuries ago, the Rise had enclosed all of Masadonia, and every city in the Kingdom of Solis was protected by a Rise. Smaller versions surrounded villages and training posts, the farming communities, and other sparsely populated towns.

What the guards saw on a regular basis, what they had to do, often left them in anguish, rather it be from injuries or from what went deeper than torn skin and bruised bones.

Tonight, they weren't just absent of anguish, but also their armor and uniforms. Instead, they donned loose shirts and buckskin breeches. Still, I knew, even off duty, they were watchful for signs of the dreaded mist and the horror that came with it, and for those who worked against the future of the kingdom. They were still armed to the teeth.

As was I.

Hidden beneath the folds of the cloak and the thin gown I wore underneath, the cool hilt of a dagger that never quite warmed to my skin was sheathed against my thigh. Gifted to me on my sixteenth birthday, it wasn't the only weapon I'd acquired or the deadliest, but it was my favorite. The handle was fashioned from the bones of a long-extinct wolverine—a creature that had been neither man nor beast but both—and the blade made of bloodstone honed to fatal sharpness.

I may yet again be in the process of doing something incredibly reckless, inappropriate, and wholly forbidden, but I wasn't foolish enough to enter a place like the Red Pearl without protection, the skill to employ it, and the wherewithal to take that weapon and skill and use them without

hesitation.

“Dead?” the other guard said, a younger one with brown hair and a soft face. I thought his name might be Airrick, and he couldn’t be much older than my eighteen years. “He wasn’t just dead. Finley was drained of blood, his flesh chewed up like wild dogs had a go at him, and then torn to pieces.”

My cards blurred as tiny balls of ice formed in the pit of my stomach.

Wild dogs didn’t do that. Not to mention, there weren’t any wild dogs near the Blood Forest, the only place in the world where the trees bled, staining the bark and the leaves a deep crimson. There were rumors of other animals, overly large rodents and scavengers that preyed upon the corpses of those who lingered too long in the forest.

“And you know what that means,” Airrick went on. “They must be near. An attack will—”

“Not sure this is the right conversation to be having,” an older guard cut in. I knew of him. Phillips Rathi. He’d been on the Rise for years, which was nearly unheard of. Guards didn’t have long lifespans. He nodded in my direction. “You’re in the presence of a lady.”

A lady?

Only the Ascended were called Ladies, but I also wasn’t someone

anyone, especially those in this building, would expect to be inside the Red Pearl. If I was discovered, I would be in...well, more trouble than I'd ever been in before and would face severe reprimand.

The kind of punishment that Dorian Teerman, the Duke of Masadonia, would just love to deliver. And which, of course, his close confidante, Lord Brandole Mazeen, would love to be in attendance for.

Anxiety surfaced as I looked at the dark-skinned guard. There was no way Phillips could know who I was. The top half of my face was covered by the white domino mask I'd found discarded in the Queen's Gardens ages ago, and I wore a plain robin's egg blue cloak I'd, uh, *borrowed* from Britta, one of the many castle servants who I'd overheard speaking about the Red Pearl. Hopefully, Britta wouldn't discover her missing overcoat before I returned it in the morn.

Even without the mask, though, I could count on one hand how many people in Masadonia had seen my face, and none of them would be here tonight.

As the Maiden, the Chosen, a veil usually covered my face and hair at all times, all except for my lips and jaw.

I doubted Phillips could recognize me solely on those features, and if he had, none of them would still be sitting here. I would be in the process of

being dragged back, albeit gently, to my guardians, the Duke and Duchess of Masadonia.

There was no reason to panic.

Forcing the muscles along my shoulders and neck to ease, I smiled.

“I’m no Lady. You’re more than welcome to talk about whatever you wish.”

“Be that as it may, a little less morbid topic would be welcomed,”

Phillips replied, sending a pointed look in the direction of the other two guards.

Airrick lifted his gaze to mine. “My apologies.”

“Apologies not needed but accepted.”

The third guard ducked his chin, studiously staring at his cards as he repeated the same. His cheeks had pinkened, something I found rather adorable. The guards who worked the Rise went through vicious training, becoming skilled in all manner of weaponry and hand-to-hand combat.

None who survived their first venture outside the Rise came back without shedding blood and seeing death.

And yet, this man blushed.

I cleared my throat, wanting to ask more about who Finley was, whether he was a guard from the Rise or a Huntsman, a division of the army that ferried communication between the cities and escorted travelers

and goods. They spent half the year outside the protection of the Rise. It was by far one of the most dangerous of all occupations, so they never traveled alone. Some never returned.

Unfortunately, a few who did, didn't come back the same. They returned with rampantly spreading death snapping at their heels.

Cursed.

Sensing that Phillips would silence any further conversation, I didn't voice any of the questions dancing on the tip of my tongue. If others had been with him and had been wounded by what most likely had killed Finley, I would find out one way or another.

I just hoped it wasn't through screams of terror.

The people of Masadonia had no real idea exactly how many returned from outside the Rise cursed. They only saw a handful here and there, and not the reality. If they did, panic and fear were sure to ignite a populace who truly had no concept of the horror outside the Rise.

Not like my brother Ian and I did.

Which was why when the topic at the table switched to more mundane things, I struggled to will the ice coating my insides to thaw. Countless lives were given and taken by the endeavor to keep those inside the Rise safe, but it was failing—had been failing—not just here, but throughout the Kingdom

of Solis.

Death....

Death *always* found a way in.

Stop, I ordered myself as the general sense of unease threatened to swell. Tonight wasn't about all the things I was aware of that I probably shouldn't be. Tonight was about living, about...not being up all night, unable to sleep, alone and feeling like...like I had no control, no...no idea of who I was other than *what* I was.

Another poor hand was dealt, and I'd played enough cards with Ian to know there was no recovering from the ones I held. When I announced that I was out, the guards nodded as I rose, each bidding me a good evening. Moving between the tables, I took the flute of champagne offered by a server with a gloved hand and tried to recapture the feelings of excitement that had buzzed through my veins as I'd hurried through the streets earlier that evening.

I minded my business as I scanned the room, keeping my senses to myself. Even outside of those who managed to project their anguish into the air around them, I didn't need to touch someone to know if they were hurting. I just needed to see someone and focus. What they looked like didn't change if they were experiencing some sort of pain, and their

appearance didn't change when I concentrated on them. I simply *felt* their anguish.

Physical pain was almost always hot, but the kind that couldn't be seen?

It was almost always cold.

Bawdy shouts and whistles snapped me out of my own mind. A woman in red sat on the edge of the table next to the one I'd left. She wore a gown made of scraps of red satin and gauze that barely covered her thighs. One of the men grabbed a fistful of the diaphanous little skirt.

Smacking his hand away with a saucy grin, she lay back, her body forming a sensual curve. Her thick, blonde curls spilled across forgotten coins and chips. "Who wants to win me tonight?" Her voice was deep and smoky as she slid her hands along the waist of the frilly corset. "I can assure you boys, I will last longer than any pot of gold will."

"And what if it's a tie?" one of the men asked, the fine cut of his coat suggesting that he was a well-to-do merchant or businessman of some sort.

"Then it will be a far more entertaining night for me," she said, drawing one hand down her stomach, slipping even lower to between her—
Cheeks heating, I quickly looked away as I took a sip of the bubbly champagne. My gaze found its way to the dazzling glow of a rose-gold

chandelier. The Red Pearl must be doing well, and the owners well connected. Electricity was expensive and heavily controlled by the Royal Court. It made me wonder who some of their clientele was for the luxury to be available.

Under the chandelier, another card game was in progress. There were women there too, their hair twisted in elaborate updos adorned with crystals, and their clothing far less daring than the women who worked here. Their gowns were vibrant shades of purple and yellow and pastel hues of blue and lilac.

I was only allowed to wear white, whether I was in my room or in public, which wasn't often. So, I was fascinated with how the different colors complemented the wearer's skin or hair. I imagined I looked like a ghost most days, roaming the halls of Castle Teerman in white.

These women also wore domino masks that covered half their faces, protecting their identities. I wondered who some of them were. Daring wives left alone one too many times? Young women who hadn't married or were perhaps widowed? Servants or women who worked in the city, out for the evening? Were Ladies and Lords in Wait among the masked females at the table and among the crowd? Did they come here for the same reasons I did?

Boredom? Curiosity?

Loneliness?

If so, then we were more alike than I realized, even though they were second daughters and sons, given to the Royal Court upon their thirteenth birthday during the annual Rite. And I...I was Penellaphe of Castle Teerman, Kin of the Balfours, and the Queen's favorite.

I was *the* Maiden.

Chosen.

And in a little under a year, upon my nineteenth birthday, I would Ascend, as would all Ladies and Lords in Wait. Our Ascensions would be different, but it would be the largest one since the first gods' Blessing that occurred after the end of the War of Two Kings.

Very little would happen to them if they were caught, but I...I would face the Duke's displeasure. My lips thinned as a kernel of anger took root, mingling with a sticky residue of disgust and shame.

The Duke was a pestilence of overly familiar hands and had an unnatural thirst for punishment.

But I wouldn't think about him either. Or worry about being disciplined. I might as well go back to my chambers if I was going to do that.

Dragging my gaze from the table, I noted that there were smiling and laughing women in the Pearl who wore no masks, hid no identities. They sat at tables with guards and businessmen, stood in shadowy alcoves and spoke with masked women, men, and also those who worked for the Red Pearl. They weren't ashamed or afraid to be seen.

Whoever they were, they had freedom I deeply coveted.

An independence I chased tonight, because masked and unknown, no one but the gods would know I was here. And as far as the gods were concerned, I had long ago decided that they had far better things to do than spend their time watching me. After all, if they had been paying attention, they would've already taken me to task over numerous things I'd already done that were forbidden to me.

So, I could be *anyone* tonight.

The freedom in that was a far headier sensation than I imagined. Even more so than the unripe poppy seeds provided by those who smoked them.

Tonight, I wasn't the Maiden. I wasn't Penellaphe. I was simply

Poppy, a nickname I remembered my mother using, something only my brother Ian and very few others ever called me.

As Poppy, there were no strict rules to follow or expectations to fulfill, no future Ascension that was coming quicker than I was prepared for. There

was no fear, no past or future. Tonight, I could live a little, even for a few hours, and rack up as much experience as I could before I was returned to the capital, to the Queen.

Before I was given to the gods.

A shiver tiptoed down my spine—uncertainty, along with a bite of desolation. I tamped it down, refusing to give life to it. Dwelling on what was to come and could not be changed served no purpose.

Besides, Ian had Ascended two years ago, and based on the monthly letters I received from him, he was the same. The only difference was that instead of spinning tales with his voice, he did so with words in each letter. Just last month, he wrote about two children, a brother and sister, who swam to the bottom of the Stroud Sea, befriending the water folk.

I smiled as I lifted the champagne flute, having no idea where he came up with those things. As far as I knew, it was impossible to swim to the bottom of the Stroud Sea, and there was no such thing as water folk.

Shortly after his Ascension, on the orders of the Queen and King, he'd married Lady Claudeya.

Ian never spoke of his wife.

Was he happy at all in his marriage? The curve of my lips faded as my gaze dropped to the fizzing, pinkish drink. I wasn't sure, but they'd barely

known each other before marrying. How was that long enough when you'd presumably spend the rest of your life with a person?

And the Ascended lived for a very, very long time.

It was still odd for me to think of Ian as an Ascended. He wasn't a second son, but because I was the Maiden, the Queen had petitioned the gods for a rare exception to the natural order, and they had allowed him to Ascend. I wouldn't face what Ian had, marriage to a stranger, to another Ascended, one who was sure to covet beauty above all else, because attractiveness was seen as godlike.

And even though I was the Maiden, the Chosen, I would never be viewed as godlike. According to the Duke, I wasn't beautiful.

I was a *tragedy*.

Without realizing it, my fingers brushed the scratchy lace of the left side of the mask. I jerked my hand away.

A man I recognized as a guard rose from a table, turning to a woman wearing a white mask like I was. He extended a hand to her, speaking words too low for me to hear, but she answered with a nod and a smile before placing her hand in his. She rose, the skirt of her lilac-hued gown falling like liquid around her legs as he led her from the room toward the only two doors accessible by guests, one at either end of interconnecting

chambers. The right went outside. The left door led upstairs, to more private rooms where Britta had said all manner of things occurred.

The guard took the masked woman to the left.

He'd asked. She'd said yes. Whatever it was they did upstairs, it would be welcomed and chosen by both, regardless of whether it lasted a few hours or a lifetime.

My attention lingered on the door long after it had closed. Was that another reason I had come here tonight? To...to experience pleasure with someone of my choosing?

I could if I wanted to. I'd overheard conversations between the Ladies in Wait, who weren't expected to remain untouched. According to them, there were...many things a woman could do that brought pleasure while retaining their purity.

Purity?

I hated that word, the meaning behind it. As if my virginity determined my goodness, my innocence, and its presence or lack thereof was somehow more important than the hundred choices I made every day.

There was even a part of me that wondered what the gods would do if I went to them no longer an actual maiden. Would they overlook everything else I did or didn't do simply because I was no longer a virgin?

I wasn't sure, but I hoped that wasn't the case. Not because I planned to have sex now or next week or...ever, but because I wanted to be able to make that choice.

Though, I wasn't quite sure how I'd find myself in a situation where that option would even arise. But I imagine there'd be willing participants who'd want to do the things I'd heard the Ladies in Wait speaking about here at the Red Pearl.

A nervous flutter beat in my chest as I forced myself to take another sip of the champagne. The sweet bubbles tickled the back of my throat, easing some of the sudden dryness in my mouth.

Truth be told, tonight had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. Most nights, I couldn't fall asleep until it was nearly dawn. When I did, I almost wished I hadn't. Three times this week alone, I woke from a nightmare, with my screams ringing in my ears. And when they came like this, in clusters, they felt like a harbinger. An instinct much like the ability to sense pain, screaming out a warning.

Drawing in a shallow breath, I glanced back to where I'd been looking before. The woman in red was no longer on the table. Instead, she was in the lap of the merchant who'd asked what would happen if two men won. He was inspecting his cards, but his hand was where hers had been heading

earlier, delved deep between her thighs.

Oh, my.

Biting down on my lip, I pulled away from where I stood before my entire face caught on fire. I drifted into the next space that was separated by a partial wall, where another round of games was being played.

There were more guards here, some I even recognized as belonging to the Royal Guard, soldiers just like those who worked the Rise but who protected the Ascended instead. This was why the Ascended also had personal guards. People had tried to kidnap members of the Court before for ransom. No one was usually hurt too seriously in those situations, but there had been other attempts that stemmed from far different, more violent reasons.

Standing near a leafy potted plant that sported tiny, red buds, I was unsure of what to do from there. I could join another card game or strike up a conversation with any of the numerous people who lingered around the tables, but I wasn't all that good at making small talk with strangers. There was no doubt in my mind that I'd blurt out something bizarre or ask a random question that would make little sense to the conversation. So that was off the table. Maybe I should head back to my chambers. The hour had to be growing late and—

A strange awareness swept over me, starting as a tingling sensation along the back of my neck and intensifying with every passing second. It felt like...like I was being watched.

Scanning the room, I didn't see anyone paying much attention to me, but I expected to find someone standing near. That was how potent the feeling was. Unease blossomed in the pit of my stomach. I started to turn toward the entrance when the soft, drawn-out notes of some sort of string instrument drew my attention to the left, my gaze landing on the gauzy, blood-red curtains that swayed gently from the movement of others in the establishment.

I stilled, listening to the rise and fall of the tempo that was soon joined by the heavy thump of a drum. I forgot about the feeling of being watched. I forgot about a lot of things. The music was...it was like nothing I'd heard before. It was deeper, thicker. Slowing, and then speeding up. It was...sensual. What had Britta, the servant, said about the kind of dancing that took place at the Red Pearl? She'd lowered her voice when she spoke of it, and the other maid Britta had been speaking to had looked scandalized.

Making my way along the outskirts of the room, I neared the curtains, reaching out to part them—

“I don’t think you want to go in there.”

Startled, I turned at the sound of the voice. A woman stood behind me—one of the ladies who worked for the Red Pearl. I recognized her. Not because she’d been on the arm of a merchant or businessman when I first came in, but because she was utterly beautiful.

Her hair was a deep black, thickly curled, and her skin was a deep, rich brown. The red gown she wore was sleeveless, cut low across her chest, and the fabric clung to her body like liquid.

“I’m sorry?” I said, unsure what else to say as I lowered my hand.

“Why wouldn’t I? They’re just dancing.”

“Just dancing?” Her gaze drifted over my shoulder to the curtain.

“Some say that to dance is to make love.”

“I...I hadn’t heard that.” Slowly, I looked behind me. Through the curtains, I could make out the shapes of bodies churning in time with the music, their movements full of mesmerizing and fluid grace. Some danced alone, their curves and forms clearly outlined, while others...

I sucked in a sharp breath, my eyes swinging back to the woman before me.

Her red-painted lips curved into a smile. “This is your first time here, isn’t it?”

I opened my mouth to deny that statement but could feel the heat spreading across every visible part of my face. That alone was telling. “Is it that obvious?”

She laughed, and the sound was throaty. “Not to most. But to me, yes. I’ve never seen you here before.”

“How would you know if you had?” I touched my mask just to make sure it hadn’t slipped.

“Your mask is fine.” There was a strange, knowing glint to her eyes, which were a mix of gold and brown. Not exactly hazel. The gold was far too bright and warm for that. They reminded me of another who had eyes the color of deep citrine. “I know a face, whether it’s half-hidden or not, and yours is one I haven’t seen here before. This is your first time.”

Truly, I had no idea how to respond to that.

“And it’s the Red Pearl’s first time also.” She leaned in, her voice lowering. “As we’ve never had the Maiden walk through the doors.”

A wave of shock rolled through me as my grip tightened on the slippery champagne glass. “I don’t know what you mean. I’m a second daughter—”

“You are *like* a second daughter, but not in the way you intend,” she cut in, lightly touching my cloaked arm. “It’s okay. There is nothing to fear.

Your secret is safe with me.”

I stared at her for what felt like an entire minute before I recovered the use of my tongue. “If that were true, why would that kind of secret be safe?”

“Why would it not be?” she returned. “What would I have to gain by telling anyone?”

“You’d earn the favor of the Duke and Duchess.” My heart thumped.

Her smile faded as her stare hardened. “I have no need of a favor from an Ascended.”

The way she said that, it was as if I’d suggested that she was courting favor with a pile of mud. I almost believed her, but no one who lived within the kingdom would waste the chance to earn an Ascended’s esteem unless they...

Unless they didn’t recognize Queen Ileana and King Jalara as the true, rightful rulers. Unless they supported he who called himself Prince Casteel, the true heir to the kingdom.

Except he was no prince or heir. He was nothing more than a remnant of Atlantia, the corrupt and twisted kingdom that had fallen at the end of the War of Two Kings. A monster who had wreaked havoc and caused bloodshed, the embodiment of pure evil.

He was the Dark One.

And yet there were those who supported him and his claim. Descenters who had been a part of riots and the disappearances of many Ascended. In the past, the Descenters only caused discord through small rallies and protests, and even then, that had been few and far between due to the punishment that was meted out to those who were suspected to be Descenters. The trials couldn't even be called that. No second chances. No long-term imprisonment. Death was swift and final.

But things had changed of late.

Many believed the Descenters had been responsible for the mysterious deaths of high-ranking Royal Guards. Several in Carsodonia, the capital, had inexplicably fallen from the Rise. Two had been killed with arrows through the back of their heads in Pensdurth, a smaller city on the coast of the Stroud Sea, near the capital. Others had simply vanished while in the smaller villages, never to be seen or heard from again.

Only a few months ago, a violent uprising had ended in bloodshed in Three Rivers, a teeming trade city beyond the Blood Forest. Goldcrest Manor, the Royal Seat in Three Rivers, had been burned, razed to the ground, along with the Temples. Duke Everton had died in the fire, along with many servants and guards. It was only by some miracle that the

Duchess of Three Rivers had escaped.

The Descenters weren't just Atlantians who were hidden among the people of Solis. Some of the Dark One's followers didn't even have a drop of Atlantian blood in them.

My gaze sharpened and zeroed in on the beautiful woman. Could she be a Descenter? I couldn't fathom how anyone could support the fallen kingdom, no matter how hard their lives were or how unhappy they may be. Not when the Atlantians and the Dark One were responsible for the mist, for what festered inside of it. For what most likely had ended Finley's life—had taken countless more lives, including my mother's and father's, and had left my body riddled with the reminder of the horror that thrived inside the mist.

Pushing aside my suspicions for the moment, I opened myself up to sense if there was some great pain inside her, something that went beyond the physical and stemmed from either grief or bitterness. The kind of pain that made people do horrible things to try and alleviate the anguish.

There was no hint of that radiating from her.

But that didn't mean she wasn't a Descenter.

The woman's head tilted. "As I said, you have nothing to worry about when it comes to me. Him? That's another story."

“Him?” I repeated.

She moved to the side as the main door opened, and a sudden gust of cool air announced the arrival of more patrons. A man walked in, and behind him was an older gentleman with sandy blond hair and a weathered face, colored by the sun—

My eyes widened as disbelief thundered through me. It was Vikter Wardwell. What was he doing at the Red Pearl?

An image of the women with the short gowns and partially exposed breasts came to mind, and I thought about why I was here. My eyes widened.

Oh, gods.

I didn’t want to think about the purpose for his visit any longer. Vikter was a seasoned member of the Royal Guard, a man well into his fourth decade of life, but he was more than that to me. The dagger strapped to my thigh had been a gift from him, and it was he who broke with custom and made sure I not only knew how to use it, but also how to wield a sword, strike a target unseen with an arrow, and even when weaponless, how to take down a man twice my size.

Vikter was like a father to me.

He was also my personal guard and had been since I’d first arrived in

Masadonia. He wasn't my only guard, though. He shared duties with Rylan Keal, who'd replaced Hannes after he'd passed in his sleep a little less than a year ago. It had been an unexpected loss as Hannes had been in his early thirties and in prime health. The Healers believed it to have been some unknown ailment of the heart. Still, it was hard to imagine how one could go to sleep healthy and whole and never wake up again.

Rylan didn't know I was as well trained as I was, but he knew I could handle a dagger. He wasn't aware of where Vikter and I all too often disappeared to outside the castle. He was kind and often relaxed, but we weren't nearly as close as Vikter and I were. If it had been Rylan here, I could've easily slipped away.

"Dammit," I swore, turning sideways as I reached back and pulled the hood of my cloak up over my head. My hair was a rather noticeable shade of burnt copper, but even with it hidden now and my entire face obscured, Vikter would recognize me.

He had a sixth sense that only belonged to parents and made itself known when their child was up to no good.

Glancing back toward the entrance, my stomach dropped as I saw him sit at one of the tables facing the door—the only exit.

The gods hated me.

Truly, they did, because there was no doubt in my mind that Vikter would see me. He wouldn't report me, but I'd rather crawl into a hole full of roaches and spiders than attempt to explain to him, of all people, why I was at the Red Pearl. And there would be lectures. Not the speeches and punishments the Duke loved to deliver, but the kind that crawled under your skin and made you feel terrible for days.

Mainly because you had been caught doing something you deserved reprimand for.

And, frankly, I didn't want to see Vikter's face when he discovered that I realized he was here. I stole another peek and—

Oh, gods, a woman knelt beside him, a hand on his leg!

I needed to scrub my eyes.

“That's Sariah,” the woman explained. “As soon as he arrives, she's at his side. I do believe she carries a torch for him.”

Slowly, I looked at the woman beside me. “He comes here often?”

One side of her lips curved up. “Often enough to know what happens beyond the red curtain and—”

“That's enough,” I cut her off. I now needed to scrub my brain. “I don't need to hear any more.”

Her laugh was soft. “You have the look of one who is in need of a

hiding place. And, yes, in the Red Pearl, that is an easily recognizable look.” She deftly took my champagne glass. “Upstairs, there are currently unoccupied rooms. Try the sixth door on the left. You will find sanctuary there. I’ll come for you when it’s safe.”

Suspicion rose as I met her gaze, but I let her take my arm and lead me toward the left. “Why would you help me?”

She opened the door. “Because everyone should be able to live a little, even for a few hours.”

My mouth dropped open as she parroted what I’d thought to myself minutes ago. Stunned, I stood there.

Giving me a wink, she closed the door.

Her figuring out who I was couldn’t be a coincidence. Repeating back to me what I’d been thinking earlier? There was no way. A rough laugh escaped my lips. The woman may be a Descenter, or at the very least, she wasn’t a fan of the Ascended. But she might also be a Seer.

I didn’t think there were any of them left.

And I *still* couldn’t believe that Vikter was here—that he came here often enough that one of the ladies in red liked him. I wasn’t sure why I was so surprised. It wasn’t like Royal Guards were forbidden from seeking pleasure or even marrying. Many were quite...promiscuous since their lives

were rife with danger and often far too short. It was just that Vikter had a wife who'd passed long before I even met him, dying in childbirth along with the babe. He still loved his Camilia as much as he had when she lived and breathed.

But what could be found here had nothing to do with love, did it? And everyone got lonely, no matter if their heart belonged to someone they could no longer have or not.

A little saddened by that, I turned around in the narrow stairwell lit by oil wall sconces. I exhaled heavily. "What have I gotten myself into?" Only the gods knew, and there was no turning back now.

I slipped my hand inside the cloak, keeping it close to the hilt of the dagger as I climbed the steps to the second floor. The hallway was wider and surprisingly quiet. I didn't know what I expected, but I'd thought I would hear...sounds.

Shaking my head, I counted until I reached the sixth door on the left. I tried the handle and found it unlocked. I started to open the door but stopped. What was I doing? Anyone or anything could be waiting beyond this door. That woman downstairs—

The sound of a male chuckle filled the hallway as the door beside me opened. Panicked, I quickly backed into the room in front of me, closing the

door behind me.

Heart pounding, I looked around. There were no lamps, just a tree of candles on a mantel. A settee sat in front of an empty fireplace. Without even looking behind me, I knew the only other piece of furniture had to be a bed. I drew in a deep breath, catching the scent of the candles. Cinnamon? But there was something else, something that reminded me of dark spices and pine. I started to turn—

An arm curled around my waist, pulling me back against a very hard, very male body.

“This,” a deep voice whispered, “is unexpected.”



[Chapter 2](#)

Caught off guard, I looked up. A mistake that Vikter had taught me never to make. I should've gone for my dagger, but instead, I stood there as the arm around my waist tightened, and his hand settled at my hip.

“But it’s a welcome surprise,” he continued, sliding his arm away.

Snapping out of my stupor, I whirled to face him, the hood of the cloak remaining in place as my hand went for the dagger. I looked up...and then

up some more.

Oh, my gods.

I froze, utter shock rippling through me, shorting out all common sense when I saw his face in the soft glow of the candlelight.

I knew who he was, even though I'd never spoken with him.

Hawke Flynn.

Everyone in Castle Teerman knew when the Rise Guard arrived from Carsodonia, the capital, a few months ago. I'd been no different.

I wanted to lie to myself and say that it was due to his striking height, placing him nearly a foot taller than me. Or it was because he moved with the same inherent, predatory grace and fluidity that belonged to the large, gray cave cats that normally roamed the Wastelands but that I had seen once in the Queen's palace as a child. The fearsome, wild animal had been caged, and the way it continuously prowled back and forth in the too-small enclosure had equally fascinated and horrified me. I'd seen Hawke pacing in the same manner on more than one occasion, as if he too were caged. It could've been the sense of authority that seemed to bleed from his pores even though he couldn't be much older than I was—maybe the same age as my brother or a year or two older. Or perhaps it was his skill with the sword. One morning while I stood beside the Duchess on one of the many

balconies at Castle Teerman, overlooking the training yard below, she'd told me Hawke had come from the capital with glowing recommendations and was well on his way to becoming one of the youngest Royal Guards. Her gaze had been fixed on Hawke's sweat-slick arms.

So had mine.

Since his arrival, I'd found myself hidden in the shadowy alcoves more than a few times, watching him train with the other guards. Other than the weekly City Council sessions held in the Great Hall, it was the only time I saw him.

My interest could simply be because Hawke was...well, he was beautiful.

It wasn't often that could be said about a male, but I could think of no better word to describe him. He had dark, thick hair that curled at the nape of his neck and often fell forward, brushing equally dark brows. The planes and angles of his face made me yearn for some talent with a brush or a pen. His cheekbones were high and wide, nose surprisingly straight for a guard. Many of them had suffered at least one broken nose. His square jaw was firm, and his mouth well formed. The few times I'd seen him smile, the right side of his lip curved up, and a deep dimple appeared. If he had a matching one in his left cheek, I didn't know. But his eyes were by far his

most captivating feature.

They reminded me of cool honey, a striking color I'd never seen before, and he had this way of looking at you that left you feeling stripped bare. I knew this because I felt his stare during the Councils held in the Great Hall, even though he'd never seen my face or even my eyes before. I was sure his regard was due to the fact that I was the first Maiden in centuries. People always stared when I was in public, whether they were guards, Lords and Ladies in Wait, or commoners.

His stare could also just be a product of my imagination, driven by my small, hidden desire that he was as curious about me as I was of him. Perhaps it was all those reasons why he caught my interest, but there was another one that I was a little embarrassed to even acknowledge. I'd purposely reached out with my senses when I saw him. I knew it was wrong to do when there was no good reason. Nothing to justify the invasion. And I had no excuse other than wondering what often made him pace like a caged cave cat.

Hawke was *always* in pain.

Not the physical kind. It was deeper than that, feeling like chips of sharp ice against my skin. It was raw and it felt never-ending. But the anguish that seemed to follow him like a shadow never overwhelmed him.

If I hadn't prodded, I never would have felt it. Somehow, he kept that kind of agony in check, and I knew of no one else who could do that.

Not even the Ascended.

Only because I never felt *anything* from them, although I knew they felt physical pain. The fact that I never had to worry about picking up residual pain from them should make me seek out their presence, but instead, it gave me the creeps.

"I wasn't expecting you tonight," Hawke spoke. He was giving me that half-smile of his now, the one that showed no teeth, made the dimple in his right cheek appear, but never quite reached his eyes. "It's only been a few days, sweetling."

Sweetling?

I opened my mouth and then clamped it shut as realization rose. I blinked. He thought I was someone else! Someone he'd obviously met here before. I glanced down at my cloak—the borrowed garment. It was rather distinctive, a pale blue with an edging of white fur.

Britta.

Did he think I was Britta?

She and I were about the same height, a little under average, and the cloak hid the shape of my body, which was not nearly as thin as hers. No

matter how active I was, I could not achieve the willowy frame of Duchess Teerman or some of the other Ladies.

Inexplicably, there was a little part of me, the same bit that was hidden, that was...disappointed, and maybe even a little envious of the pretty maid.

My gaze swept over Hawke. He wore the black tunic and breeches that all guards wore under their armor. Had he come straight here after his shift?

I gave the room a quick once-over. There was a small table beside the settee, where two glasses sat. Hawke hadn't been alone in here before I arrived. Could he have been with another? Behind Hawke, the bed was made and didn't appear as if anyone had...slept in it.

What should I do? Turn and run? That would be odd. He'd be sure to ask Britta about it, but as long as I returned the cloak and mask without her knowing, I would be in the clear.

Except Vikter was most likely still downstairs, and the woman was, too—

My gods, she had to be a Seer. Instinct told me she had known this room was occupied. She'd sent me here on purpose. Had she known that Hawke was here and likely to mistake me for Britta?

It seemed too unreal to believe.

“Did Pence tell you I was here?” he asked.

My breath caught as my heart started pounding like a hammer against my ribs. I thought Pence was a guard on the Rise, one around Hawke's age. A blond, if I remembered correctly, but I hadn't seen him downstairs. I shook my head.

"Have you been watching for me, then? Following me?" he asked, tsking softly under his breath. "We'll have to talk about that, won't we?"

There was an odd threat to his voice, one that gave me the impression that he was not all that pleased by the idea of Britta following him.

"But not tonight, it seems. You're strangely quiet," he observed. From what I knew of Britta, she was rarely ever demure.

But the moment I spoke, he'd know I wasn't the maid, and I...I wasn't ready for him to discover that. I wasn't sure what I was ready for. My hand was no longer on the dagger, and I didn't know what that meant. All I knew was that my heart was still racing.

"We don't have to talk." He reached for the hem of his tunic, and before I could take another breath, he pulled it over his head, tossing it aside.

My lips parted and my eyes widened. I'd seen a man's chest before, but I'd never seen his. The muscles that flexed and bunched under the thinner shirts the guards trained in were now on display. He was broad of

shoulder and chest, all lean muscles defined by years of intense training.

There was a fine dusting of hair under his navel that disappeared behind his breeches. My gaze dipped even lower, and heat returned, a different kind that didn't just flush my skin but also invaded my blood.

Even in the candlelight, I could see how tight his breeches were, how they gloved his body, leaving very little to the imagination.

And I had a vast imagination thanks to the Ladies' frequent tendency to overshare, and *my* frequent tendency to listen in on conversations.

A strange curling sensation hit my lower stomach. It wasn't unpleasant. Not at all. It was warm and tingling, reminding me of my first sip of bubbly champagne.

Hawke stepped toward me, and my muscles tensed to run, but I held myself still by sheer will. I knew I should've stepped away. I should've spoken and revealed that I wasn't Britta. I should've left immediately. The way he prowled toward me, his long legs eating up the distance between us, told me his intent, even if he hadn't removed his tunic. And while I had little—all right, absolutely *no* experience—I inherently knew that if he reached me, he would touch me. He may do even more. He might kiss me. And that was forbidden.

I was the Maiden, the Chosen. Not to mention, he thought I was