

A BLOOD AND ASH NOVEL

A
SOUL
OF
ASH
AND
BLOOD

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER L.
ARMENTROUT

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A Soul of Ash and Blood
A Blood and Ash Novel
By Jennifer L. Armentrout

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

A Soul of Ash and Blood

A Blood and Ash Novel

By Jennifer L. Armentrout

Only his memories can save her...

A great primal power has risen. The Queen of Flesh and Fire has become the Primal of Blood and Bone—the true Primal of Life and Death. And the battle Casteel, Poppy, and their allies have been fighting has only just begun. Gods are awakening across Iliseeum and the mortal realm, readying for the war to come.

But when Poppy falls into stasis, Cas faces the very real possibility that the dire, unexpected consequences of what she is becoming could take her away from him. Cas *is* given some advice, though—something he plans to cling to as he waits to see her beautiful eyes open once more: Talk to her.

And so, he does. He reminds Poppy how their journey began, revealing things about himself that only Kieran knows in the process. But it's anybody's guess what she'll wake to or exactly how much of the realm and Cas will have changed when she does.

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout revisits Poppy and Casteel's epic love story in the next installment of the Blood and Ash series. But this time, Hawke gets to tell the tale.

ABOUT JENNIFER L. ARMENTROUT

#1 *New York Times* and #1 International Bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout 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, hanging out with her husband, her Border Jack—Apollo, Border Collie—Artemis, six judgmental alpacas, two rude goats, and five fluffy sheep. In early 2015, Jennifer was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a group of rare genetic disorders that involve a breakdown and death of cells in the retina, eventually resulting in vision loss, among other complications. Due to this diagnosis, educating people on the varying degrees of blindness has become another passion for her, right alongside writing, which she plans to do for as long as she can.

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, HarperCollins Avon and William Morrow, Entangled Teen and Brazen, Disney/Hyperion, Harlequin Teen, and Blue Box Press; and PassionFlix recently made her *Wicked* series into a feature film. Jennifer has won numerous awards, including the 2020 Goodreads Choice Award in Romance for her adult fantasy, *From Blood and Ash*. She has also written Adult and New Adult contemporary and paranormal romance under the name J. Lynn.

ALSO FROM JENNIFER L. ARMENTROUT

Fall With Me
Dream of You (a 1001 Dark Nights Novel)
Forever With You
Fire in You

By J. Lynn
Wait for You
Be with Me
Stay with Me

The Blood and Ash Series
From Blood and Ash
A Kingdom of Flesh and Fire
The Crown of Gilded Bones
The War of Two Queens
A Soul of Ash and Blood
Visions of Flesh and Blood: A Blood and Ash/Flesh and Fire Compendium

The Flesh and Fire Series
A Shadow in the Ember
A Light in the Flame
A Fire in the Flesh

Fall of Ruin and Wrath Series
Fall of Ruin and Wrath

The Covenant Series
Half-Blood
Pure
Deity
Apollyon
Sentinel

The Lux Series
Shadows

[Obsidian](#)
[Onyx](#)
[Opal](#)
[Origin](#)
[Opposition](#)
[Oblivion](#)

The Origin Series
[The Darkest Star](#)
[The Burning Shadow](#)
[The Brightest Night](#)

The Dark Elements
[Bitter Sweet Love](#)
[White Hot Kiss](#)
[Stone Cold Touch](#)
[Every Last Breath](#)

The Harbinger Series
[Storm and Fury](#)
[Rage and Ruin](#)
[Grace and Glory](#)

The Titan Series
[The Return](#)
[The Power](#)
[The Struggle](#)
[The Prophecy](#)

The Wicked Series
[Wicked](#)
[Torn](#)
[Brave](#)

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

Gamble Brothers Series
[Tempting the Best Man](#)
[Tempting the Player](#)
[Tempting the Bodyguard](#)

A de Vincent Novel Series
[Moonlight Sins](#)
[Moonlight Seduction](#)
[Moonlight Scandals](#)

Standalone Novels
[Obsession](#)
[Frigid](#)
[Scorched](#)
[Cursed](#)
[Don't Look Back](#)
[The Dead List](#)
[Till Death](#)
[The Problem with Forever](#)
[If There's No Tomorrow](#)

Anthologies
[Meet Cute](#)
[Life Inside My Mind](#)
[Fifty First Times](#)

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A big thank you to JLAnders for always creating a fun and often hilarious place to chill. And to the ARC team for your honest reviews and support.

Most importantly, none of this would be possible without you, the reader. I hope you realize how much you mean to me.

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DEDICATION

For you, the reader.

MAP



To see a full-size version of the map, visit <https://theblueboxpress.com/books/asoabmap/>

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Characters

Aios – AYY-ohs
Alastir Davenwell – AL-as-tir DAV-en-well
Andreia – ahn-DRAY-ah
Arden – AHR-den
Attes – AT-tayz
Aurelia – au-REL-ee-ah
Baines – baynz
Beckett – BECK-et
Bele – bell
Blaz – blayz
Brandole Mazeen – bran-dohl mah-ZEEN
Braylon Holland – BRAY-lon HAA-luhnd
Britta – brit-tah
Callum – KAL-um
Clariza – klar-itza
Coralena – kore-a-LEE-nuh
Coulton – KOHL-ton
Casteel Da'Neer – ka-STEEL DA-neer
Crolee – KROH-lee
Dafina – dah-FEE-nuh
Davina – dah-VEE-nuh
Delano Amicu – dee-LAY-no AM-ik-kyoo
Dorcan – dohr-kan
Dorian Teerman – DOHR-ee-uhn TEER-man
Duchess and Duke Ravarel – duch-ess and dook RAV-ah-rell
Dyses – DEYE-seez
Ector – EHK-tohr
Effie – EH-fee
Ehthawn – EE-thawn
Elian Da'Neer – EL-ee-awn DA-near
Elijah Payne – ee-LIE-jah payn
Eloana Da'Neer – EEL-oh-nah DA-neer
Embris – EM-bris

Emil Da'Lahr – EE-mil DA-lar
Erlina – Er-LEE-nah
Ernald – ER-nald
Eythos – EE-thos
Ezmeria – ez-MARE-ee-ah
Gemma – jeh-muh
General Aylard – gen-ER-al AYY-lard
Gianna Davenwell – jee-AA-nuh DA-ven-well
Griffith Jansen – grif-ITH JAN-sen
Halayna – hah-LAY-nah
Hanan – HAY-nan
Hawke Flynn – hawk flin
Hisa Fa'Mar – hee-SAA FAH-mar
Ian Balfour – EE-uhn BAL-fohr
Ione – EYE-on
Ivan – EYE-van
Isbeth – is-BITH
Jacinda Teerman – juh-SIN-dah TEER-man
Jadis – JAY-dis
Jasper Contou – JAS-per KON-too
Jericho – JERR-i-koh
Joshalynn – josha-lynn
Kayleigh Balfour – KAY-lee BAL-fohr
Keella – KEE-lah
Kieran Contou – KEE-ren KON-too
King Jalara – king jah-LAH-ruh
King Saegar – king SAY-gar
Kirha Contou – k-AH-ruh KON-too
Kolís – KO-lis
Kyn – kin
Lady Cambria – lay-dee KAM-bree-uh
Lailah – lay-lah
Lathan – LEY-THahN
Leopold – LEE-ah-pohld
Lev Barron – lehv BAIR-uhn
Lizeth Damron – lih-ZEHTH DAM-ron
Loimus – loy-moos

Lord Ambrose – lohrd AM-brohzh
Lord Chaney – lohrd chay-NEE
Lord Gregori – lohrd GREHG-ohr-ree
Lord Haverton – lohrd HAY-ver-ton
Loren – LOH-ren
Luddie – LUHD-dee
Lyra – lee-RAH
Mac - mack
Madis – mad-is
Magda – mahg-dah
Maia – MY-ah
Malec O’Meer – ma-LEEK O-meer
Malessa Axton – MAHL-les-sah ax-TON
Malik Da’Neer – MA-lick DA-neer
Marisol Faber – MARE-i-sohl FAY-berr
Millicent – mil-uh-SUHNT
Mycella – MY-sell-AH
Naill – NYill
Nektas – NEK-tas
Nithe – NIGHth
Noah – noh-AH
Nova – NOH-vah
Nyktos – NIK-toes
Odell Cyr – OH-dell seer
Odetta – oh-DET-ah
Orphine – OR-feen
Peinea – pain-ee-yah
Penellaphe – pen-NELL-uh-fee
Penellaphe Balfour – pen-NELL-uh-fee BAL-fohr
Perry – PER-ree
Perus – paehr-UHS
Phanos – FAN-ohs
Polemus – pol-he-mus
Preela – PREE-lah
Priestess Analia – priest-ess an-NAH-lee-ah
Queen Calliphe – queen KAL-lih-fee
Queen Ileana – queen uh-lee-AH-nuh

Reaver – REE-ver
Rhahar – RUH-har
Rhain – rain
Rolf – rollf
Rune – roon
Rylan Keal – RYE-lan keel
Sage - sayj
Saion – SIGH-on
Sera – SEE-ra
Seraphena Mierel – SEE-rah-fee-nah MEER-ehl
Sera – SEE-rah
Shae Davenwell – shay DAV-en-well
Sotoria – soh-TOR-ee-ah
Sven – svehn
Talia – TAH-lee-uh
Taric – tay-rik
Tavius – TAY-vee-us
Tawny Lyon – TAW-nee LYE-uhn
Thad – thad
Theon – thEE-awn
Tulis [Family] – TOO-lees
Valyn Da’Neer – VAH-lynn DA-neer
Veses – VES-eez
Vikter Wardwell – VIK-ter WARD-well
Vonetta Contou – vah-NET-tah KON-too
Wilhelmina Colyns – wil-hel-MEE-nuh KOHL-lynz

Places

Aegea – ayy-JEE-uh
Atheneum – ath-uh-NEE-uhm
Atlantia – at-LAN-tee-ah
Barren Plains – bar-uhn pleynz
Berkton – BERK-ton
Carsodonia – kar-so-DON-uh
Cauldra Manor – kall-drah [manor]
Chambers of Nyktos – cheym-berz of nik-TOES

Dalos – day-lohs
Elysium Peaks – ihl-LEES-ee-uhm peeks
Evaemon – EHV-eh-mahn
High Hills of Thronos – hie hilz of THROH-nohs
Iliseeum – AH-lee-see-um
Isles of Bele – IGHelz of BELL
Kithreia – kith-REE-ah
Lasania – lah-SAHN-ee-uh
Lotho – LOH-thoh
Masadonia – mah-sah-DOHN-uh
Massene – mah-SEE-nuh
Mountains of Nyktos – MOWNT-ehnz of nik-TOES
New Haven – noo HAY-ven
Niel Valley – nile valley
Oak Ambler – ohk AM-bler
Padonia – pa-DOH-nee-ah
Pensdurth – PENS-durth
Pillars of Asphodel – [pillars of] AS-foe-del
Pinelands – PINE-lands
Pompay – pom-PAY
Seas of Saion – SEEZ of SIGH-on
Skotos Mountains – SKOH-tohs MOWNT-ehnz
Solis – sou-LIS
Spessa's End – SPESSAHZ ehnd
Sirta – SIR-ta
Saion's Cove – SI-onz kohv
Stygian Bay – stih-JEE-uhn bey
Tadous – TAHD-oos
Temple of Perses – TEM-puhl of PUR-seez
The Three Jackals – thuh three JAK-uhlz
Three Rivers – three RIH-verz
Triton Isles – TRY-ton IGH-elz
Undying Hills – UN-dy-ing hillz
Vathi – VAY-thee
Vodina Isles – voh-DEE-nuh IGH-elz
Western Pass – WEST-tern pass
Whitebridge – WIGHT-brij

Willow Plains – WIHL-oh pleynz

Terms

Arae – air-ree

benada – ben-NAH-dah

ceeren – SEER-rehn

Cimmerian – sim-MARE-ee-in

dakkai – DAY-kigh

demis – dem-EEZ

eather – ee-thohr

graeca – gray-kah

Gyrm - germ

imprimen – IM-prim-ehn

kardia – KAR-dee-ah

kiyou wolf/wolves – kee-yoo [wolf/wolves]

lamaea – lahm-ee-ah

laruea – lah-ROO-ee-ah

meeyah Liessa – MEE-yah LEE-sah

notam – NOH-tam

sekya – sek-yah

sparanea – SPARE-ah-nay-ah

tulpa – tool-PAH

wivern – WY-vehrn

NOTE TO READER

While the lives of those written on these pages are fictional, what they experience occurs in life outside of these pages—myself included. For that reason, please be aware that there are discussions surrounding self-harm and abuse.

Please know that you do not need to hurt.

There is help.
Visit crisistextline.org

PRESENT I



A sweet but stale scent drifted out from the dark corridor. My head jerked toward the sound of light, fast footsteps as I reached for my hip, drawing the bloodstone dagger.

A vampry darted between the sandstone pillars, rushing into the lamplit hall of the seemingly unending vault beneath Wayfair Castle, nothing more than a flash of streaming dark hair, alabaster skin, and crimson silk.

There was no hesitation. Neither Kieran nor I had given any of them leeway since entering the underground.

I released the dagger, sending it flying across the hall. The bloodstone blade struck true, embedding deeply in the vampry's chest, cutting off the annoying, godsawful shriek as it knocked the Ascended back. A web of fissures rapidly appeared in the Ascended's flesh, spreading across its cheeks and down its throat. Skin cracked and then peeled back, lifting from bone and turning to dust. Within a heartbeat, my dagger clanged off the stone floor beside nothing more than a pile of silk.

"Cas." It came out as a sigh, and my lips curved into a smile despite the frustration filling the breathy word.

I couldn't help it when Poppy called me that. Hearing it sometimes made my chest tight yet made me feel light as air. Other times, it made me hard as fuck. But it always brought out a smile.

"The Ascended didn't attack us," Poppy said.

"It was running at us." I went to where the dagger lay and picked it up.

"Or running *from* us," she suggested.

"That's one way to look at it." Cleaning the blade on the leg of my pants, I sheathed the dagger and faced her—and damn if I didn't feel a catch in my godsdamn breath.

Every inch of Poppy showed that she'd just fought a terrifying battle. Blood and grime smeared her cheeks, hands, and her clothing, not to

mention what covered her bare feet. The braid she'd forced her unruly hair into had mostly come undone, and the strands gleamed like bold, red wine in the dim light of the gas lamps, spilling over her shoulders and down her back.

And still, she was so damn beautiful to me.

My heartmate.

My Queen.

Not a goddess but a Primal—*the* Primal of Blood and Bone. Of Life and Death.

Shock rippled through me, nearly causing me to stumble. It had been doing that every couple of minutes since she went all Primal on the Blood Queen. I imagined it would be a long damn time before it stopped happening.

“But the last thing anyone who doesn't want to end up a pile of dust should do is run in your direction.” I bowed at the waist. “My Queen.”

Poppy blinked slowly, clearly unimpressed by my chivalry. That brightened my smile, and her full lips twitched as she fought back a grin, revealing a hint of sharp canine.

Lust punched straight through me as my chin dipped, and my eyes locked with hers. Every time I caught a glimpse of her fangs, I wanted to feel them in my flesh. *Correction*. I wanted to feel them in my flesh while I was buried deep inside her.

A throat cleared. “May we continue?” a raspy, flat voice asked. “Or would you two like a private moment?”

Poppy's cheeks warmed, flooding her face with color that had been absent since we'd arrived at Wayfair. My gaze shifted to the speaker.

The massive mountain of a male with his black-and-silver-streaked hair raised a brow.

Fucking Nektas, the eldest and inarguably most dangerous of the draken, was starting to piss me off.

Holding his stare, I checked my desire for my wife. Not because of his presence. And not even because we were down here searching for her father. But because of Poppy.

Something wasn't right.

I rejoined her and the ever-alert Delano, who had been sticking close in wolverine form. “You ready?”

Nodding, she started walking again, the stone floor likely icy against her bare feet. I'd offered to carry her.

The look she'd given me ensured I didn't ask again. That hadn't stopped Kieran from making the same offer, though. He'd received a similar look of warning—the kind that made you want to cup your balls. Lucky for us, Poppy likely preferred us with those parts undamaged.

I didn't take my eyes off her as we continued.

Out in the Bone Temple, before she unleashed unholy hell on the Blood Queen, I'd watched in unfettered horror as pure light exploded her armor. And I'd been unable to do a damn thing. I'd only ever felt such fear one other time; when the bolt had struck her in the Wastelands, and I'd watched her life slipping from her. I'd felt that same terror earlier when I saw the blood running from her mouth. She'd *changed*, even if only for a few seconds, her flesh becoming a kaleidoscope of light and shadow with an outline of wings taking shape and arcing behind her. It reminded me of the winged statues guarding the City of the Gods in Iliseeum.

I'd then watched her destroy Isbeth.

No one among us would miss the woman, but the Blood Queen had been Poppy's mother.

At some point, the realization that she had taken her mother's life would hit her, bringing out a lot of messy, complicated emotions.

And I would be there for her.

So would Kieran.

He walked on her other side, doing the same as I was. Every couple of moments, he glanced down at her, a mixture of concern and awe flashing across his blood-streaked features.

He was a fucking mess.

So was I.

Our clothing and what remained of our armor was shredded from the battle. I knew blood splattered my flesh—some of it mine, some from the dakkais. The rest was dried specks from those who'd been struck down—those who had died but hadn't *stayed* dead.

I glanced to where Delano prowled silently behind us. While most of the wolveren and the others were currently moving through Carsodonia in search of the Ascended and looking for my brother, he had chosen to follow Poppy.

There was a strange, unnerving sensation I couldn't shake as Delano lifted his head and pale, luminous blue eyes met mine. I wondered if the life restored to those who'd fallen in battle had been a gift that could be stripped away at any moment. I had no real reason to feel that way. According to Nektas, the act of restoring life to so many was not only known to the Primals of Life and of Death but also aided by them.

Besides, that feeling of unease could be sourced back to a shit ton of things. We were currently moving about the enemy's nest, and while none of the mortal servants or Royal Guards who remained at Wayfair had put up a fight when we entered, and there had only been three Ascended underground so far, none of us were comfortable here. Wayfair wasn't ours. It never would be.

Another thing preying on my mind at the moment was my brother, who was somewhere out there, chasing after Millicent, who happened to be Poppy's sister. And none of us knew where Millicent stood in regard to their mother.

Then again, from my personal experience with Millie, I didn't think she knew where she stood on anything half the time.

There was also the fact that Poppy's Primal grandparents were no longer sleeping, and from what I could figure out, one of them could enter the mortal realm whenever they felt like it.

And then there was Callum, that golden fuck of a Revenant who still needed to be dealt with, which brought me to what probably should be the most disconcerting item of all. Yes, we'd defeated the Blood Crown, but the real battle awaited. We had only prevented Kolis, the original and *true* Primal of Death, from taking full corporeal form. Still, he was free, he was awake, and he wasn't the only one. All those things were hardcore pressing issues, but...

My gaze returned to Poppy's profile, and my chest tightened again. The thin, jagged scar on her cheek and the one cutting across her forehead and eyebrow stood out more starkly than they ever had. She was pale—paler than she'd been when she came to at the Temple. And shouldn't it be the opposite? Shouldn't her skin have become flushed? Other than the passing blush earlier, it hadn't, and that worried me most of all.

Poppy turned her head in my direction. Our gazes met. Her irises were the color of dewy spring grass laced with vibrant streaks of silver—eather. Was it just me, or had those luminous lines gotten brighter in the time it

took us to arrive at Wayfair? Her full lips curved up in a reassuring smile, and I knew immediately that she'd picked up on my concern, either because I was projecting it, or she was simply reading me—reading all of us around her.

I reached out and took her hand. More pressure clamped down on my chest. Her hand, so much smaller than mine, was *cold*. Not icy, but also not warm.

“Are you feeling all right?” I asked, my voice low yet echoing through the cavernous hall.

Poppy nodded. “Yes.” Her brows knitted as her eyes searched mine. “Are you?”

“Always,” I murmured, glancing at Kieran.

There was more concern than awe in his stare. Without me having to say anything, he inched closer to Poppy.

Something wasn't right.

Starting with Nektas, who now walked silently on Kieran's other side. Poppy had asked earlier if what she had become, a Primal that had never existed before, was a good thing or bad. I already knew the answer to that. But Nektas's response?

That is yet to be known.

Yeah, I didn't like that at all.

I also didn't like his expression when he looked at Poppy. It reminded me of how we all looked at Malik—like we weren't sure we could trust him. No one wanted a draken looking at them like that.

Poppy suddenly stopped at the entrance to a long, shadowy hall. There was a musty scent to this area, one that threatened to send my mind back to darker, colder places. I stopped that before it could happen. Now wasn't the time for that shit.

Slipping her hand from mine, Poppy faced us. “Okay. Why does everyone keep looking at me?” she demanded, propping her hands on her hips as she lifted her chin. “Has something changed about me that I'm unaware of?”

“Other than your adorable fangs?” I offered.

Her eyes narrowed on me, but I grinned as I saw the skin around her mouth move as she ran her tongue over her top teeth. Then she winced, likely nicking her tongue yet again. “Other than that.”

Kieran said nothing as Delano plopped his ass down, thumping his tail on the stone floor. I wasn't sure what that was supposed to translate to.

"I imagine they are looking at you with concern," Nektas answered in that gravelly voice of his.

"Why?" Poppy glanced between Kieran and me. "Aren't I the last thing any of you should be worried about?"

"Well..." Nektas drew out the word.

Kieran's head cut sharply in the draken's direction, his nostrils flaring, and it reminded me of what else Nektas had told us at the Temple. The heavy meaning to his words as he said we'd better make sure that what Poppy had become *was* something good.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say you're the last thing anyone should be worried about," Nektas continued. "You're likely the...second thing they should be worried about."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Kieran demanded.

Nektas gave the wolveren a passing glance. "Kolis is our primary concern." He tilted his head. Long, silver-streaked strands slid over a bare shoulder, revealing the faint ridges of scales. "And she should be your second."

Poppy frowned. "I disagree. I think my father and your daughter are tied for first place, then Kolis. I shouldn't even be on the list of things to worry about."

Nektas opened his mouth.

"I'd be careful how you answer that," I warned.

Slowly, the ancient draken turned his head to me. Our stares locked. His vertical pupils constricted until they were thin strips of black against vibrant blue. "Interesting."

I arched a brow. "What is?"

"You," he answered. Delano's ears flattened in the tense silence that followed the word. "You stepped in front of her as if you believe she needs your protection."

I was completely unaware that I had. So had Kieran and Delano. "And?"

Poppy sighed from behind us.

"That is wise of you. Even the most powerful of beings need protection at times," Nektas advised. "But this is not one of them."

“I’m not so sure about that.” My hand rested on the hilt of the dagger at my hip. It wouldn’t do shit to a draken, but I would make it hurt.

“This is all really unnecessary,” Poppy began.

“I’m not so sure of that, either.” Sensing that she was edging to my right, I sidestepped her and held Nektas’s stare. “I don’t give two shits who you are. You don’t need to be worried about her at all.”

One side of the draken’s mouth curled up, and another too-long moment of silence passed. “You are far too much like him.”

“Like who?” Poppy asked.

His pupils dilated. “The one his bloodline is descended from.”

“What the fuck?” Kieran muttered under his breath and then said louder, “Who was that?”

A shadow of a smile appeared on the draken’s face. “You mean to ask who *is* that.”

My brows shot together. “I’m going to need—”

A low rumble cut me off. Delano stood, looking around as the sound increased, becoming deeper. My gaze flew to Kieran. He turned as the very floor beneath us began to tremble. I spun toward Poppy.

Her green and silver eyes were wide. “What?”

Clouds of dust drifted like snow from the high ceiling, coating our shoulders and the floor. The rumble grew as the entire castle shook.

“It’s not me,” Poppy shouted over the noise, throwing up her hands. “I swear.”

My gaze flew to the ceiling, where thin fractures suddenly erupted in the stone. “Shit.”

I launched forward. Delano followed as I grabbed hold of Poppy, cracks forming in the pillars and quickly racing down their lengths. Afraid the entire damn castle was about to come down on our heads, my first thought was of her. I shoved Poppy between Kieran and me as Delano pressed against her legs. She squeaked as we caged her in, using our bodies to protect hers in case the ceiling ended up on top of us.

Delano whimpered as something heavy toppled somewhere in the underground lair, crashing down. More dust fell in thick clouds. The rumbling grew louder until nothing else could be heard, and the very realm itself shuddered—

Then it stopped. All of it.

The rumbling. The cracking of stone and plaster. The crashing of what were probably very important things like support beams. It all just ceased as quickly as it had started.

“Um,” came Poppy’s muffled voice. “I can barely breathe.”

I could only see the top of her head beneath Kieran’s and my arms. I wasn’t quite ready to lower them.

“That wasn’t her,” Nektas stated, a bemused expression on his face. “That was them.”

“Them?” Kieran repeated, slowly lowering his arms from Poppy.

“The gods,” the draken elaborated. “One of them must’ve awakened nearby.”

One of them must have...

Poppy shot out from under me as fast as an arrow, her eyes still wide but now lit with eagerness. “Penellaphe,” she gasped, her head darting between Kieran and me. “Remember? You said the goddess Penellaphe sleeps beneath the city’s Atheneum!” She shoved Kieran in the arm, causing him to stumble back a step. “Oops. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Kieran caught himself, grinning. “And, yes, I did say that.”

She spun toward Nektas. “Can we see her? I mean after we’ve freed my father and located Jadis. You see, I was named—”

“After the goddess who spoke of you so very long before you were born,” Nektas finished. “Who was the first to call you the Harbinger and the Bringer of Death. A prophecy you have fulfilled.”

Her arms slowly lowered to her sides. “Well, when you put it like that...” She pressed her lips together. “I think I’ve changed my mind.”

I never wanted to punch someone more than I did the draken for stealing that brief excitement from Poppy.

Nektas chuckled. “I’m sure she will be interested in meeting you. All of them will be when the time is right,” he said, his face softening in a way I had yet to see from him. “We should get moving in case there are more who slumber in the capital. I do not want to be down here if that happens again.”

He was right. None of us wanted that.

“By the way,” he said, glancing at Kieran and me as we started down the hall once more. “You two are...adorable.”

Kieran’s forehead scrunched as he brushed dust from his shoulder. “I don’t think I’ve ever been referred to as adorable before, but thanks.” He paused. “I think.”

The draken chuckled once more. “All three of you raced to shield her.” He nodded at Delano, who trotted beside Poppy as she led us down another hall, this one narrower. A column had toppled here, leaning against another. “The one person who would survive the collapse of a building.”

I hadn’t even thought of that.

Poppy grinned. “It *was* kind of adorable.”

Kieran huffed, and I swore I saw a deepening in the color of his light brown cheeks.

“And unnecessary in more ways than one,” Nektas went on. “The three of you are Joined, are you not?”

Delano’s ears perked as Poppy’s head swung toward him. Some color returned to her cheeks. His tail wagged. Clearly, he’d communicated something intriguing through the Primal *notam*. I’d have to ask him about it later.

“Yeah,” she answered. “But I think it’s going to take all of us a while to remember that if I’m okay, then all three of us are.”

“Understatement of the century,” Kieran remarked, drawing a grin from me.

The expression disappeared, though. Because as soon as her blush faded, the paleness of her skin was even more noticeable.

Something isn’t right.

The feeling only intensified as we walked, traveling deeper into the underground maze of chambers and halls that Poppy had moved about as a small child. I couldn’t place why I felt the way I did. The pressure remained in my chest and the back of my throat—

Click. Click. Click.

Poppy halted once more. This time, her hands opened and closed at her sides. I dragged my gaze from her to the hall in front of us. Up ahead, a soft glow spilled out into the hall, beating back the shadows.

That sound. We all recognized it. We’d heard it before in Oak Ambler. The rapping of claws against stone.

Nektas started forward, his steps fast and sure as Poppy remained frozen. I touched her shoulder, drawing her attention to me.

“Are you okay?” I asked. This time, I wasn’t talking about how she felt physically.

Nodding, she swallowed as she looked at Nektas. He stopped at the cusp of the light, turning his head back to us.