

A BLOOD AND ASH NOVEL

THE
WAR
OF
TWO
QUEENS

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER L.
ARMENTROUT

THE
WAR
OF
TWO
QUEENS

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



The War of Two Queens
A Blood and Ash Novel
By Jennifer L. Armentrout

Copyright 2022 Jennifer L. Armentrout
ISBN: 978-1-952457-72-2

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

Cover design by Hang Le

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

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

Book Description

THE WAR OF TWO QUEENS

A Blood and Ash Novel

By Jennifer L. Armentrout

War is only the beginning...

From #1 New York Times bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout comes book four in her Blood and Ash series.

From the desperation of golden crowns...

Casteel Da'Neer knows all too well that very few are as cunning or vicious as the Blood Queen, but no one, not even him, could've prepared for the staggering revelations. The magnitude of what the Blood Queen has done is almost unthinkable.

And born of mortal flesh...

Nothing will stop Poppy from freeing her King and destroying everything the Blood Crown stands for. With the strength of the Primal of Life's guards behind her, and the support of the wolverines, Poppy must convince the Atlantian generals to make war her way—because there can be no retreat this time. Not if she has any hope of building a future where both kingdoms can reside in peace.

A great primal power rises...

Together, Poppy and Casteel must embrace traditions old and new to safeguard those they hold dear—to protect those who cannot defend themselves. But war is only the beginning. Ancient primal powers have already stirred, revealing the horror of what began eons ago. To end what

the Blood Queen has begun, Poppy might have to become what she has been prophesied to be—what she fears the most.

As the Harbinger of Death and Destruction.

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

Click to purchase.

By J. Lynn

[Wait for You](#)

[Be With Me](#)

[Stay With Me](#)

Writing as Jennifer L. Armentrout

[Fall With Me](#)

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

[Forever With You](#)

[Fire In You](#)

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](#)

The Flesh and Fire Series

[A Shadow in the Ember](#)

The Covenant Series

[Half-Blood](#)

[Pure](#)

[Deity](#)

[Elixer](#)

[Apollyon](#)

[Sentinel](#)

The Lux Series

[Shadows](#)

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

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

Acknowledgments from the Author

Thank you to the amazing team at Blue Box—Liz Berry, Jillian Stein, MJ Rose, Chelle Olson, Kim Guidroz, and more, who have helped bring the world of Blood and Ash to life. Thank you to my agent Kevan Lyon, Taryn Fagerness, Jenn Watson, and my assistant, Malissa Coy, for your hard work and support. And to Stephanie Brown and Jen Fisher for creating amazing merch. Mega thanks to Hang Le for creating such stunning, beautiful covers. A big thank you to Sarah Maas, Stacey Morgan, Lesa, JR Ward, Laura Kaye, Andrea Joan, Brigid Kemmerer, KA Tucker, Tijan, Vonetta Young, Mona Awad, and many more who have helped keep me sane, laughing, and creative. Thank you to the ARC team for your support and honest reviews, and a big thank you to JLANDers for being the best reader group an author can have, and the Blood and Ash Spoiler Group for making the drafting stage so fun and for being utterly amazing. But none of this would be possible without you, the reader. I can never thank you all enough.

Table of Contents

<u>Book Description</u>
<u>About Jennifer L. Armentrout</u>
<u>Also from Jennifer L. Armentrout</u>
<u>Acknowledgments from the Author</u>
<u>Dedication</u>
<u>Chapter One</u>
<u>Chapter Two</u>
<u>Chapter Three</u>
<u>Chapter Four</u>
<u>Chapter Five</u>
<u>Chapter Six</u>
<u>Chapter Seven</u>
<u>Chapter Eight</u>
<u>Chapter Nine</u>
<u>Chapter Ten</u>
<u>Chapter Eleven</u>
<u>Chapter Twelve</u>
<u>Chapter Thirteen</u>
<u>Chapter Fourteen</u>
<u>Chapter Fifteen</u>
<u>Chapter Sixteen</u>
<u>Chapter Seventeen</u>
<u>Chapter Eighteen</u>
<u>Chapter Nineteen</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty-One</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty-Two</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty-Three</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty-Four</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty-Five</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty-Six</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty-Seven</u>
<u>Chapter Twenty-Eight</u>

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty](#)

[Discover A Shadow in the Ember](#)

[Discover more from 1001 Dark Nights and Blue Box Press](#)

[Special Thanks](#)

Dedication

Dedicated to you, the reader.

Map



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

Pronunciation Guide

Characters

Aios – (a-uh-us)
Alastir – (al-as-tir)
Bele – (bell)
Casteel Da'Neer – (ca-steel) (da-near)
Delano – (dee-lay-no)
Eloana Da'Neer – (eee-lah-nah) (da-near)
Ione – (eye-on)
Isbeth – (is-bith)
Jasper Contou – (jas-per) (con-too)
Kieran Contou – (kee-ren) (con-too)
King Jalara – (ja-la-ra)
Kirha Contou – (k-ah-ruh) (con-too)
Kolís – (co-lis)
Malec O'Meer – (ma-leek) (o-mere)
Malik Da'Neer – (ma-lick) (da-near)
Naill – (nuh-ile)
Nektas – (nic-tas)
Nyktos – (nik-toes)
Penellaphe Balfour – (pen-nell-uh-fee) (bal-floor)
Queen Ileana (uh-lee-aaa-nuh)
Rhahar – (ruh-har)
Rhain – (rain)
Saion – (si-on)
Seraphena – (see-ra-fee-na)
Sera – (see-ra)
Valyn Da'Neer – (va-lynn) (da-near)
Vonetta Contou – (vo-net-ta) (con-too)

Places

Atlantia – (at-lan-tee-ah)
Carsodonia – (car-so-don-uh)

Dalos – (day-los)
Iliseeum – (ah-lee-see-um)
Lasania – (la-sa-nee-uh)
Masadonia – (ma-sa-don-uh)
Massene – (ma-see-nuh)
Niel Valley – (nile valley)
Padonia – (pa-doh-nee-ah)
Pensdurth – (pens-durth)
Solis – (sou-lis)

Terms

eather – (ee-thor)
notam – (no-tom)
Arae – (air-ree)
dakkai – (di-ah-kee)
graeca – (gray-cee)
kiyou- (ki-you)
meeyah Liessa – (mee-yah lee-sa)

Chapter 1



Casteel

The click and drag of claws drew closer as the weak flame above the lone candle sputtered and then went out, pitching the cell into darkness.

A thicker mass of shadows appeared in the open archway—a misshapen form on its hands and knees. It halted, sniffing as loudly as a godsdamn barrat, scenting blood.

My blood.

The smooth bands of shadowstone tightened around my throat and ankles as I shifted, bracing myself. The damn stone was unbreakable, but it did come in handy.

A low-pitched wail came from the creature.

“Mother—” The thing exploded out of the archway, scurrying forward, its keening moan becoming an ear-piercing screech. “—*fucker.*”

I waited until its stench of decay reached me and then pressed my back against the wall, lifting my legs. The length of the chain between my ankles was only about half a foot, and the shackles wouldn’t give an inch, but it was enough. Planting my bare feet into the creature’s shoulders, I got a good, most unfortunate look at the thing as its foul breath blasted me in the face.

Man, the Craven was not a fresh one.

Patches of gray flesh clung to its hairless skull, and half of its nose was gone. One entire cheekbone was exposed, eyes burning like hot coals. Lips torn and mangled—

The Craven twisted its head down, sinking its fangs into my calf. Its teeth tore through the breeches and into flesh and muscle. Air hissed between my gritted teeth as fiery pain burned its way up my leg.

Worth it.

The pain was more than worth it.

I would spend an eternity taking these bites if that meant *she* was safe. That it wasn't *her* in this cell. That *she* wasn't the one in pain.

Shaking the Craven free, I dragged the short chain over the thing's neck as I crossed my feet. I twisted at the waist, pulling the dull bone chain tight across its throat, ending the Craven's screams. The shackle clamped down on my throat as I kept turning, cutting off my air as the chain dug into the Craven's neck. Its arms flailed on the floor as I jerked my legs in the opposite direction, snapping the creature's spine. The spasming became more of a twitching as I hauled it within reach of my bound hands. The chain between my wrists, connected to the shackle at my throat, was much shorter—but long enough.

I grasped the Craven's cold, clammy jowls and brought its head down hard, slamming it against the stone floor by my knees. Flesh gave way, spraying rotting blood over my stomach and chest. Bone split open with a wet-sounding crack. The Craven went limp. I knew it wouldn't stay down, but it bought me some time.

Lungs burning, I unwound the chain and kicked the creature away from me. It landed by the archway in a tangled mess of limbs as I relaxed my muscles. The band around my neck was slow to loosen, eventually allowing air into my burning lungs.

I stared at the Craven's body. At any other time, I would've kicked the bastard into the hall like usual, but I was weakening.

I was losing too much blood.

Already.

Not a good sign.

Breathing heavily, I looked down. Just below the shadowstone bands, shallow slices ran up the insides of my arms, past both elbows and over the veins. I counted them. Again. Just to be sure.

Thirteen.

Thirteen days had passed since the first time the Handmaidens swarmed this cell, dressed in black and as quiet as a tomb. They came once a day to cut into my flesh, siphoning my blood as if I were a damn barrel of fine wine.

A tight, savage smile twisted my mouth. I'd managed to take out three of them in the beginning. Ripped their throats out when they got too close, which was why they'd shortened the chain between my wrists. Only one of

them actually *stayed* dead, though. The damn throats of the other two had stitched themselves closed within minutes—impressive and also infuriating to witness.

Learned something valuable, though.

Not all of the Blood Queen's Handmaidens were Revenants.

I wasn't sure how I could use that information yet, but I guessed they were using my blood to make brand-spanking-new Revs. Or using it as a dessert for the lucky.

Tipping back my head against the wall, I tried not to breathe too deeply. If the stench of the downed Craven didn't choke me, the damn shadowstone around my throat would.

I closed my eyes. There had been more days before the Handmaidens showed the first time. How many? I wasn't exactly sure. Two days? A week? Or—?

I stopped myself there. *Shut it the fuck down.*

I couldn't go down that road. I wouldn't. I'd done that the last time, trying to clock the days and weeks until there came a point when time simply ceased to move. Hours became days. Weeks became years. And my mind became as rotten as the blood seeping from the Craven's ruined head.

But things were different in the here and now.

The cell was larger, with no barred entrance. Not that there needed to be one with the shadowstone and the chains. They were a mix of iron and deity bone, connected to a hook in the wall and then to a pulley system to lengthen or shorten them. I could sit up and move a little, but that was about it. However, the cell was windowless like before, and the dank, musty smell told me they once again held me underground. The freely roaming Craven were also a new addition.

My eyes opened to thin slits. The fuck by the archway had to be the sixth or seventh one that had found its way into the cell, drawn by the scent of blood. Their appearance made me think there was one hell of a Craven problem aboveground.

I'd heard of Craven attacks inside the Rise surrounding Carsodonia before. Something the Blood Crown blamed on Atlantia and angry gods. I'd always assumed it was due to an Ascended getting greedy and leaving mortals they'd fed on to turn. Now, I was beginning to think the Craven were possibly being kept down here. Wherever *here* was. And if that were the case, and they could get out and get aboveground, so could I.

If only I could get these damn chains to loosen. I'd spent an ungodly amount of time pulling on the hook. In all those attempts, it may have slipped a half-inch from the wall—if that.

But that wasn't the only thing different about this time. Other than the Craven, I'd only seen the Handmaidens. I didn't know what to think about that. I'd figured it'd be like the last time. Too-frequent visits from the Blood Crown and their cronies, where they spent their time taunting and inflicting pain, feeding, and doing whatever they wanted.

Of course, my last go-around with this captivity bullshit hadn't started that way. The Blood Queen had tried to *open my eyes* first, coax me to her side. Turn me against my family and my kingdom. When that hadn't worked, the real fun had begun.

Was that what had happened to Malik? Did he refuse to play along, so they broke him like they had been so very close to doing with me? I swallowed dryly. I didn't know. I hadn't seen my brother, either, but they must have done something to him. They'd had him for far longer, and I knew what they were capable of. I knew what the desperation and hopelessness was like. What it felt like to breathe and taste the knowledge that you had no control. No sense of self. Even if they never laid a hand on him, being kept like this, as a captive and mostly in isolation, preyed on the mind after a while. And *a while* was a shorter span of time than one might believe. Made you think things. *Believe* things.

Drawing my throbbing leg up as far as I could, I looked down at my hands resting in my lap. In the darkness, I almost couldn't see the shimmer of the golden swirl across my left palm.

Poppy.

I closed my fingers over the imprint, squeezing my hand tight as if I could somehow conjure up anything but the sound of her screams. Erase the image of her beautiful face contorted in pain. I didn't want to see that. I wanted to see her as she'd been on the ship, face flushed, and those stunning green eyes with their faint silver glow behind the pupils eager and wanting. I wanted memories of cheeks pink with either lust or annoyance, the latter usually occurring when she was silently—or very loudly—debating whether stabbing me would be considered inappropriate. I wanted to see her lush lips parted, and her skin shining as she touched my flesh and healed me in ways she would never know or understand. My eyes closed

once more. And damn it, all I saw was blood seeping from her ears, her nose, as her body writhed in my arms.

Gods, I was going to rip that bitch Queen into pieces when I got free.

And I would.

One way or another, I would get free and make sure she felt everything she had *ever* inflicted upon Poppy. Tenfold.

My eyes snapped open at the faint sound of footsteps. Muscles tensed in my neck as I slowly eased my leg straight. This wasn't normal. Only a few hours could've passed since the last time the Handmaidens had done the whole bloodletting thing. Unless I was already beginning to lose track of time.

An unsteadiness rose in my chest as I concentrated on the sound of the footfalls. There were many, but one was heavier. Boots. My jaw locked as I lifted my gaze to the entryway.

A Handmaiden entered first, nearly blending in with the darkness. She said nothing as her skirts glided past the fallen Craven. With a strike of steel against flint, a flame caught the wick on the candle on the wall, where the other had burned out. Four more Handmaidens entered as the first lit several more candles, the females' features obscured behind winged, black paint.

I wondered the same thing I did every time I saw them. What the fuck was up with the facial paint?

I'd asked a dozen times. Never got an answer.

They stood on either side of the archway, joined by the first, and I knew in my gut who was coming. My stare fixed on the opening between them. The scent of rose and vanilla reached me. Rage, hot and unending, poured into my chest.

Then she walked in, appearing as the utter opposite of her Handmaidens.

White. The monster wore a skintight gown that was a pristine, nearly transparent white and left very little to the imagination. Disgust curled my lip. Other than the reddish-brown hair reaching a cinched, narrow waist, she looked nothing like Poppy.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

That there was no hint of familiarity in the set of her features—the shape of her eyes, the straight line of her ruby-pierced nose, or the full, expressive mouth.

It didn't fucking matter.

Poppy was *nothing* like her.

The Blood Queen. Ileana. *Isbeth*. Better known as one soon-to-be-dead bitch.

She drew closer, and I still had no idea how I hadn't realized that she wasn't Ascended. Those eyes were dark and bottomless but not as opaque as a vampy's. Her touch...hell, it had blended with the others over the years. But while it had been cold, it hadn't been icy and bloodless. Then again, why would I or anyone else ever consider the possibility that she was something other than what she claimed?

Anyone but my parents.

They must have known the truth about the Blood Queen—about who she really was. And they hadn't told us. Hadn't warned us.

Biting, stinging anger gnawed. The knowledge might not have changed this outcome, but it would've affected every aspect of how we approached dealing with her. Gods, we would've been better prepared, knowing that centuries-old revenge drove the Blood Queen's special brand of madness. It would've given us pause. We would've realized that she was truly capable of *anything*.

But nothing could be done about any of that right now, not when they had me chained to a damn wall, and Poppy was out there, dealing with the fact that this woman was her mother.

She has Kieran, I reminded myself. *She's not alone*.

The false Queen wasn't alone either. A tall male entered behind her, looking like a walking lit candle. He was one golden motherfucker, from the hair to the winged facial paint across his face. His eyes were a blue so pale they appeared nearly leached of all color. Eyes like some of the Handmaidens. Another Rev, I bet. But one of the Handmaidens whose throat hadn't stayed torn open had had brown eyes. Not all Revs had the light irises.

He lingered by the entryway, his weapons not as hidden as the Handmaidens'. I saw a black dagger strapped across his chest and two swords secured to his back, the curved handles visible above his hips. *Fuck him*. My attention shifted to the Blood Queen.

Candlelight glittered off the diamond spires in the ruby crown as Isbeth glanced down at the Craven.

"I don't know if you realize this or not," I said casually, "but you have a pest problem."

A single dark brow rose as she snapped her red-painted fingers twice. Two Handmaidens moved as a unit, picking up what was left of the Craven. They carried the creature out as Isbeth's gaze flicked to me. "You look like shit."

"Yeah, but I can clean up. You?" I smiled, noting the tightening in the skin around her mouth. "You can't wash off that stench or feed that away. That *shit* is inside you."

Isbeth's laugh sounded like tinkling glass, grating on every single one of my nerves. "Oh, my dear Casteel, I forgot how charming you could be. No wonder my daughter appears to be so taken with you."

"Don't call her that," I snarled.

Both brows rose as she toyed with a ring on her pointer finger. A golden band with a pink diamond. That gold was lustrous, shining even in the dim light—gleaming in a way that only Atlantian gold could. "Please don't tell me that you doubt I'm her mother. I know I'm not a paradigm of honesty, but I spoke nothing but the truth when it came to her."

"I don't give a fuck if you carried her in your womb for nine months and delivered her with your own hands." My hands closed into fists. "You are nothing to her."

Isbeth went unnaturally still and quiet. Seconds ticked by, and then she said, "I was a mother to her. She would have no memory of it as she was just a tiny babe then, perfect and lovely in every way. I slept and woke with her beside me every day until I knew I could no longer take that risk." The edges of her gown dragged through the pool of Craven blood as she stepped forward. "And I was a mother to her when she thought I was only her Queen, tending to her wounds when she was so gravely injured. I would've given anything to have prevented that." Her voice thinned, and I could almost believe she spoke the truth. "I would've done anything to stop her from experiencing even one second of pain. Of having a reminder of that nightmare every time she looked upon herself."

"When she looks upon herself, she sees nothing but beauty and bravery," I snapped.

Her chin lifted. "You really believe that?"

"I *know* that."

"As a child, she often cried when she saw her reflection," she told me, and my chest seized. "She often begged me to fix her."

“She doesn’t need fixing,” I seethed, hating—absolutely *loathing*—that Poppy had ever felt that way, even as a child.

Isbeth was quiet for a moment. “Still, I would’ve done anything to prevent what happened to her.”

“And you think you played no role in that?” I challenged.

“It was not I who left the safety of the capital and Wayfair. It was not I who stole her away.” Her jaw clenched, jutting out in a godsdamn familiar way. “If Coralena hadn’t betrayed me—betrayed *her*—Penellaphe never would’ve known that kind of pain.”

Disbelief battled with disgust. “And yet you still betrayed her, sending her to Masadonia? To Duke Teerman, who—”

“Don’t.” She stiffened once more.

She didn’t want to hear this? Too bad. “Teerman routinely abused her. He let others do the same. Made quite a sport of it.”

Isbeth flinched.

She actually flinched.

My lips peeled back over my fangs. “That is on you. You don’t get to blame anyone else for that and relieve yourself of guilt. Each time he touched her, he hurt her. That’s on you.”

She drew in a deep breath, straightening. “I didn’t know. If I had, I would’ve cut his stomach open and fed him his own entrails until he choked on them.”

Now that, I didn’t doubt.

Because I’d seen her do it to a mortal before.

Her tightly sealed lips trembled as she stared down at me. “*You* killed him?”

A savage rush of satisfaction hit me. “Yeah, I did.”

“Did you make it hurt?”

“What do you think?”

“You did.” She turned away, drifting toward the wall as the two Handmaidens returned, silently taking up their posts by the door. “Good.”

A dry laugh left me. “And I’ll do the same to you.”

She sent me a small smile over her shoulder. “I’ve always been impressed by your resilience, Casteel. I imagine you got that from your mother.”

Acid pooled in my mouth. “You would know, wouldn’t you?”

“Just so you know...” she said with a shrug. A moment passed before she continued. “I didn’t hate your mother at first. She loved Malec, but he loved me. I didn’t envy her. I pitied her.”

“I’m sure she’ll be glad to hear that.”

“Doubtful,” she murmured, righting a candle that had tilted. Her fingers drifted through the flame, causing it to ripple wildly. “I do hate her now, though.”

I couldn’t care less.

“With every fiber of my being.” Smoke wafted from the flame she’d touched, turning a dark, thick black that brushed against the damp stone, staining it.

That wasn’t even remotely normal. “What in the hell are you?”

“I am nothing more than a myth. A cautionary tale once told to Atlantian children to make sure they didn’t steal what they didn’t deserve,” she said, looking over her shoulder at me.

“Are you a *lamaea*?”

Isbeth laughed. “Cute response, but I thought you were smarter than that.” She drifted to another candle, straightening it, as well. “I may be no god by your standards and beliefs, but I am no less powerful than one. So, how am I not just that? A god?”

Something tugged at my memories—something I was sure Kieran’s father had once said when we were younger. When the wolveren Kieran loved was dying, and he’d prayed to gods he knew were sleeping to save her. When he prayed to anything that could be listening. Jasper had warned him that...something that wasn’t a god could answer.

That a false god could reply.

“Demis,” I whispered hoarsely, my eyes widening. “You’re a demis. A false god.”

One side of Isbeth’s lips curled up, but it was the golden Rev who spoke. “Well, apparently, he *is* rather clever.”

“At times,” she said with a shrug.

Holy shit. I’d believed that the demis were as much a myth as the *lamaea*. “Is that what you’ve always been? A poor imitation of the real thing, hell-bent on destroying the lives of the desperate?”

“That’s a rather offensive assumption. But, no. A demis is not born but made when a god commits the forbidden act of Ascending a mortal who was not Chosen.”

I had no idea what she meant by a mortal that was Chosen, and I didn't get a chance to question that because she asked, "What do you know about Malec?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the golden Rev's head tilt. "Where is my brother?" I demanded instead.

"Around." Isbeth faced me, clasping her hands together. They were free of jewels except for the Atlantian ring.

"I want to see him."

A faint grin appeared. "I don't think that would be wise."

"Why?"

She inched toward me. "You haven't earned it, Casteel."

The acid spread, hitting my veins. "Hate to disappoint you, but we're not playing that game again."

Isbeth pouted. "But I loved that game. So did Malik. Admittedly, he was much better at it than you ever were."

Fury pounded through every inch of my body. I launched off the floor as the rage was given sound. I didn't make it very far. The bonds at my throat jerked my head back as the shackles on my ankles and wrists clamped down, yanking me against the wall. The Handmaidens stepped forward.

Isbeth held up a hand, waving them back. "Did that make you feel better?"

"Why don't you get close?" I growled, chest rising and falling as the band at my throat slowly loosened. "That will make me feel better."

"I'm sure it would, but you see, I have plans which require me to keep my throat intact and my head still on my shoulders," she replied, smoothing a hand over the chest of her gown.

"Plans can always change."

Isbeth smirked. "But this plan also requires you to remain alive." She watched me. "You don't believe that, do you? If I wanted you dead, you'd already be that."

My eyes narrowed on her as she tipped her chin in a curt nod. The golden Rev stepped out into the hall, returning quickly with a burlap sack. The stench of death and decay immediately hit me. Every part of my being focused on the bag the Rev carried. I didn't know what was in there, but I knew it was something that used to be alive. My heart started pounding.

"It appears that my once amicable and charming daughter has grown quite the...violent streak with a knack for showmanship," Isbeth remarked

as the Rev knelt, untying the sack. “Penellaphe sent me a message.”

My lips parted as the golden Rev carefully tipped the sack, and a... godsdamn head rolled out. I immediately recognized the blond hair and square jaw.

King Jalara.

Holy fuck.

“As you can see, it was a very interesting message,” Isbeth stated blandly.

I couldn’t believe I was staring at the Blood King’s head. A slow smile spread across my face. I laughed—deep and hard. Gods, Poppy was... damn, she was vicious in the most *magnificent* way, and I could not *wait* to show her just how much I approved of it. “That’s... gods, that’s my Queen.”

Surprise widened the golden Rev’s eyes, but I laughed until my empty stomach cramped. Until tears stung my eyes.

“I’m glad you find this entertaining,” Isbeth remarked coolly.

Shoulders shaking, I tipped my head back against the wall. “That is the best godsdamn thing I’ve seen in a long time, to be honest.”

“I would suggest you need to get out more, but...” She waved dismissively at the chains. “That was only a part of the message she sent.”

“There was more?”

Isbeth nodded. “There were quite a few threats included with it.”

“I’m sure.” I chuckled, wishing I’d been there to see it. There wasn’t a single part of me that doubted it had been Poppy’s hand who’d ended Jalara’s life.

The Blood Queen’s nostrils flared. “But there was one warning in particular that interested me.” She knelt in a slow slide that reminded me of the cold-blooded serpents found in the foothills of the Mountains of Nyktos. The orange and red, two-headed snakes were just as venomous as the viper in front of me. “Unlike you and my daughter, Malec and I were never granted the privilege of the marriage imprint—proof that either of us lived or died. And you know that not even the bond shared between heartmates can alert the other of death. I have spent the last several hundred years believing that Malec was dead.”

Every ounce of humor vanished.

“But it appears I have been mistaken. Penellaphe claims that not only is Malec alive, but that she knows where he is.” The Rev’s head cocked again as he focused on her. Isbeth appeared unaware. “She said she would kill

him, and the moment Penellaphe starts believing in her power, she very easily could.” Her dark eyes fixed on mine. “Is it true? Does he live?”

Damn, Poppy really wasn’t messing around.

“It’s true,” I said softly. “He lives. For now.”

Her slender body practically hummed. “Where is he, Casteel?”

“Come on, *Isbitch*,” I whispered, leaning forward as far as I could. “You should know there is literally nothing you can do that will make me tell you that. Not even if you brought my brother in here and started cutting off pieces of his skin.”

Isbeth eyed me quietly for several long moments. “You speak the truth.”

I smiled broadly. I did speak the truth. Isbeth thought she could control Poppy through me, but my stunning, vicious wife had checkmated her ass, and there was no way in hell I would jeopardize that. Not even for Malik.

“I remember a time when you would’ve done anything for your family,” Isbeth said.

“That was a different time.”

“Now you will do anything for Penellaphe?”

“Anything,” I promised.

“Because of the opportunity of what she represents?” Isbeth suggested. “Is that what truly consumes you? After all, through my daughter, you usurped your brother and your parents. You are now a King. And because of her bloodline, she is *the* Queen. That would make you *the* King.”

I shook my head, unsurprised. Of course, she would think that what I felt had everything to do with power.

“You plotted for how long to claim her?” she continued. “Perhaps you never planned to use her to free Malik. Maybe you don’t even really love her.”

I held her stare. “Whether she ruled over all the lands and seas or was the Queen of nothing but a pile of ashes and bones, she would—*will*—always be *my* Queen. Love is too weak an emotion to describe how she consumes me and what I feel for her. She is my everything.”

Isbeth was silent for several long moments. “My daughter deserves to have someone care for her as fiercely as she cares for them.” A hint of faint silver glimmered in the center of Isbeth’s eyes, though not as vivid as what I saw in Poppy’s. Her gaze dipped to the band around my throat. “I never wanted this—this war with my daughter.”

“Really?” I laughed dryly. “What did you expect? For her to go along with your plans?”

“And marry your brother?” The light in her eyes intensified as I snarled. “Goodness, the mere idea of that gets to you, doesn’t it? If I had killed you when I had you the last time, then he would’ve aided her Ascension.”

It took everything in me not to react—not to attempt to rip her heart from her chest. “You still wouldn’t have what you wanted. Poppy would’ve figured out the truth about you—about the Ascended. She already was, even before I came into her life. She never would’ve let you take Atlantia.”

Isbeth’s smile returned, though tight-lipped. “Do you think that all I want is Atlantia? As if that is all my daughter was destined for? Her purpose is far greater. As was Malik’s. As is yours now. We are now a part of the greater plan, and all of us, together, will restore the realm to what it was always meant to be. It has already begun.”

I stilled. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

“You’ll see in time.” She rose. “If my daughter truly loves you, this will pain me in ways I doubt you’ll ever believe.” She turned her head slightly. “Callum?”

The golden Rev stepped around Jalara’s head, careful not to brush against it.

My gaze snapped to him. “I don’t know you, but I’m going to kill you, too, one way or another. Just thought I should let you know that.”

He hesitated, his head cocking to the side. “If you only knew how many times I’ve heard that,” he said, a slight smile forming as he withdrew a slender shadowstone blade from the strap across his chest. “But you’re the first I think might actually succeed.”

The Rev snapped forward then, and my world exploded in pain.