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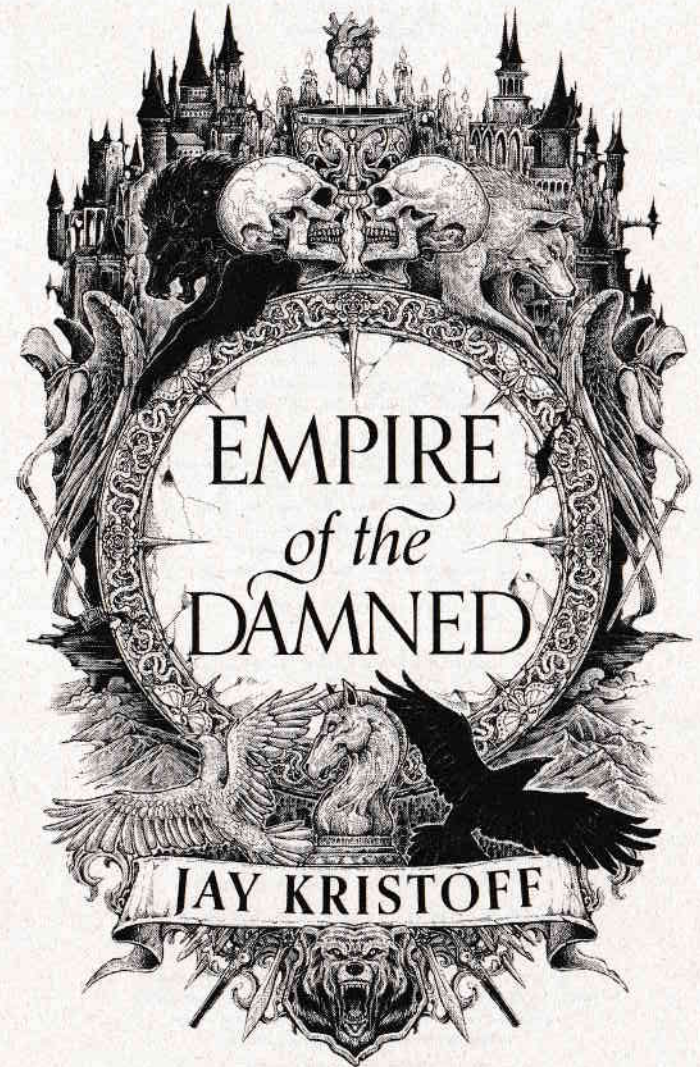
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HARPER  
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## SUNSET

✦ I ✦

THE DEAD BOY opened his eyes.

All was still and silent, he among it, and most of all. A statue he was, his only movement in the yawning of his pupils, the soft parting of his bloodless lips. There was no quickening of breath as waking claimed him, no deeping drumbeat beneath his porcelain skin. He lay there in darkness, angelic and bare, staring at the timeworn velvet canopy above and wondering what had woke him.

It was not nightfall, to be sure. The daystar was yet kissing the horizon, the dark not yet quite sunk to its knees. The mortals who shared his grand four-poster bed were peaceful as corpses; motionless save for the featherlight shift of the beau's arm across his belly, the smooth rhythm of the maid's breath against his chest. There was no hunger in a bed so laden, nor chill amid beauties so ripe. So what then, had dragged him from slumber?

He'd not dreamed during the day – those of the Blood never did. But still, he realized sleep had brought him no comfort, frail daylight no rest, and emerging now fully from the death-deep murk of sleep, all at once he understood.

What had woken Jean-François was the pain.

He remembered now; hand drifting up towards his neck as the images danced like corpseflies in his head. Iron-hard fingers, sinking into the ashes of his throat. Wine-stained fangs, bared in a snarl. Storm-grey eyes, brimming with hatred as Jean-François was slammed into the wall, red smoke boiling from his skin.

*'I told you I'd make you fucking scream, leech.'*

He'd been only a few moments from his ending, he knew it. Had Meline not intervened with her silversteel dagger . . .

*Imagine it.*

*After all you've seen and done.*

*Imagine dying right there in that filthy cell.*

Lying there in the darkness, Jean-François caressed the place Gabriel de León had hurt him. Picturing those grey pitiless eyes veiled in red smoke, the

dead boy felt his jaw clench. And for a moment – just the space of a single, mortal breath – the Marquis experienced a sensation he'd imagined consigned to the dust of decades.

*'There is no one more afraid of dying than things who live forever.'*

His movement had disturbed the girl beside him, and she sighed before sinking back towards sleep. A pretty flower she was, Sūdhaemi born, with soft dark curls and deep olive skin. She was on the scrawny side – but weren't they all these nights – a handful of years older than Jean-François when he'd received the Gift. But her skin was warm, and her touch oh-so-clever, and whenever she looked at him, her deep green eyes swelled with a hunger at wondrous odds with her ingénue's façade.

She'd served in his stable almost four months now. Wanton and willing. For a moment, Jean-François wished he could remember her name.

His eyes roamed the promise of her bare body; the lush line of the artery running the inside of her thigh, the delicious tracery of veins at her wrists and up, up to the sharp blade of her jaw. He watched her pulse thrum gently below it, hypnotic, soft with sleep. The thirst stirred inside him – his hated lover, his beloved enemy – and Jean-François pictured Gabriel de León again, the silversaint's face hovering just inches from his.

Fingers sinking deeper.

Lips close enough to kiss.

*'Scream for me, leech.'*

The historian levered himself onto his elbow, golden curls tumbling about his cheeks. Behind him, the young beau sighed objection, hand questing over cold sheets. He was a Nordish beauty, that one, raven of hair and creamy of skin, near twenty years old, Jean-François supposed. The Viscontessa Nicolette had presented him a few weeks past – a bribe from his blood-niece in exchange for a kind word in the Empress's ear, and though he hated Nicolette like poison, Jean-François had accepted. The beau was lean as a thoroughbred, the flesh at his wrist and throat and nethers faintly scored by needle-sharp teeth.

*His name definitely starts with a D . . .*

Jean-François traced marble fingertips over the maid's skin, gentle as the first breath of spring. Chocolat eyes narrowed in fascination as her flesh reacted – that telltale trail of prickling hair as one razored fingernail grazed the bite marks at her throat. The monster leaned in, tongue flickering swift, over, around the tightening swell of her nipple, and the maid's breath quickened, shivering, waking fully now. The warmth of the blood he'd drunk before they'd all tumbled into sleep had faded – his lips must have been cool as melting ice. Yet she moaned as he suckled deeper, biting hard but not *quite* hard enough. And parting her thighs, she dared to run a hand through his golden hair.

'Master . . .' she breathed.

The beau was awake now; roused by the maid's sighs. He scattered kisses across the Marquis's bare shoulders, and slow as melting candle-wax, his hand quested over the coldblood's hips, across the pale muscle of his belly, down towards Jean-François's nethers. The vampire allowed the Nordling to touch him, stroke him, willing his blood southwards and hearing the beau groan as he grew iron-hard and heavy in his hand.

'Master,' he sighed.

The maid was pressing gentle kisses along his throat, ever closer to the wounds de León had left. Jean-François seized a fistful of her curls, and she gasped as he dragged her back. Her pulse was a war drum now, and he kissed her, hard, allowing his fangs to slice her lip and spill a few drops of ruby-bright fire across their dancing tongues.

The thirst *surged* then, and for a moment, it was all he could do to bring it to heel. But the Marquis was a creature who enjoyed the hunt as much as the kill, and so he broke their bloody kiss and guided the maid towards the rock-hard beau behind him.

She understood at once, lips parting as the Nordling knelt up to meet her. He groaned as she took him into her mouth, pulse thumping harder beneath smooth, warm skin. The Marquis watched the pair sway for a time, the play of shadow and light on their flesh. The scent on the air told Jean-François that the maid was wet and warm as summer rain, and the merest brush of his fingers along her quim made her shiver all the way to her curling toes, pushing back against his hand, needing, pleading.

'Not yet, love,' he whispered, eliciting a moan of protest. 'Not yet.'

Jean-François rose, languid, kneeling on the bed behind the breathless beau. Brushing long black locks from the Nordling's neck, the Marquis felt the mortal tremble; a predator at his back now, sharp claws skimming over his skin. The Marquis's hands roamed down delicious swells and valleys of muscle, finally encircling the heat of that throbbing cock. And gazing down over the plane of his prey's heaving belly to the maid, he growled a low, hard command.

'Finish him.'

The maid moaned, eyes locked on his; a priestess, lost in worship. The beau was shaking, taking hold of the maid's tresses as the monster's fangs grazed his skin. Jean-François could still feel the silversaint's fingers around his throat.

'Scream for me,' he whispered.

The beau did just that, one hand tangled in the Marquis's hair. The maid plunged him into her throat, deep and deepest, and as Jean-François felt it – that pulsing, rushing heat flooding up through the beau's nethers and into

her waiting mouth, he bit down, past that brief, intoxicating resistance of skin, unleashing the rush of bliss-thick life within.

There was nothing then. No trembling body in his arms. No cry of ardour echoing on the walls. There was only the blood, aflame with every mote of the beau's passion; an elixir of life and lust entwined and lifting him ever upwards into boundless skies.

*Alive.*

Jean-François drank just as greedily as the maid, wanting only more, only this, only *everything*. In nights before the daystar failed, he'd have taken just that. Yet sheep were too rare now, their lives too dear to waste, and so, he sliced his thumb with one sharp fingernail, pressed it to the beau's lips. The mortal gasped, latching on, suckling, one hand still entwined in the maid's curls, drinking deep as he pumped his hips, a perfect communion, consuming and consumed, all the world around them bathed in—

'Master?'

The call sounded at the bedchamber door, followed by brisk knocking. Jean-François recognized the perfume under the heavenly scent of blood.

'Meline,' he sighed, mouth dripping red. 'Enter.'

The door to his boudoir opened, admitting echoes of steel and stone, faint whispers of servants in halls above. The château was waking now; a dozen faint notes of bloodscent hanging in the air as his majordomo swept into the room.

Meline was clad in a whalebone corset, a stunning gown of black velvet damask, only slightly worn with age. A lace choker was cinched about her throat, long red hair bound into thin braids, a half-dozen strung artfully across her eyes in the seeming of thin chains. She looked a madame of middle thirty, though in truth she was closer to fifty; the relentless charge of time slowed by the blood she supped weekly from his veins. She stood framed in the doorway, tall and stately, casting an ice-cold glance over his half-savouried feast.

The beau was on his back, drained pale but still hard as steel. At the sight of Meline, the maid's mood fell, and she drew the sheets up over her nakedness, gaze downturned.

'What is it, Meline?'

His majordomo curtsyed. 'The Empress wishes to see you, Master.'

The historian slipped a robe over his shoulders. Its fabric was pale and fine, but beginning to fray at the hems — no new silk in a land where nothing grew. He brushed fingertips across a chymical globe, bringing light to the palatial bedchamber around him. The walls were lined with oaken shelves, brimming with the histories that so fascinated him. His desk was scattered with charcoal sticks, artful studies of animals, architecture, naked bodies. Jean-François sprinkled

some ground potato loaf into a glass terrarium, smiling as five black mice emerged from the little wooden château. His familiars fell to their meal, Claudia snapping at Davide as she always did, Marcel squeaking for peace.

He glanced to his majordomo.

'We have a sitting scheduled on priédi, do we not?'

'Apologies, Master. But Her Grace commands your presence now.'

The historian blinked, his attentions sharpened. Meline was still curtsying; perfectly motionless, perfectly trained. But he caught the discord in her tone, the tension in her shoulders. Padding towards her, silk whispering, he touched her cheek.

'Speak, my dove.'

'A herald has arrived from Dame Kestrel, Master.'

'... The Iron Maiden has accepted Her Grace's invitation,' the Marquis realized.

Meline nodded. 'As has Lord Kariim, Master. Envoy arrived late this morning, bearing news of the Spider's intent to attend our Empress's Convocation.'

'The Priori of the Blood Voss *and* Ilon?' he breathed, bewildered. 'Coming here?'

Jean-François turned towards the bed, his voice iron-hard.

'Out.'

The maid sat up quick, taut with fear. Pulling on a nightdress, she urged the beau to his feet, draping his arm about her shoulder. She avoided Meline's cold stare — always a clever little thing, this one — helping her stablemate towards the door. But as they passed, the Nordling met Jean-François's eyes, gaze still burning with the madness of the Kiss.

'I love you,' he whispered.

Jean-François pressed one claw to the beau's sticky lips, and aimed a pointed stare at the maid. No further warning was needed, and the pair vanished swift out the door.

Meline watched their exit, bristling.

'You do not like them,' Jean-François murmured.

The woman lowered her gaze. 'Forgive me, Master. They are . . . unworthy of you.'

'Oh, my darling,' Jean-François caressed the thrall's cheek, lifting her chin so she might look at him again. 'My dear Meline, envy does not become you. They are but wine before the feast. You know it is only you that I trust? You that I adore?'

The woman dared to cup his hand to her cheek, scattering his knuckles with kisses.

'Oui,' she whispered.

'You are the blood in my veins, Meline. And if I have one fear, my dove, my darling, it is the thought of an eternity without you by my side. You know this, do you not?'

'Oui,' she breathed, near weeping.

Jean-François smiled, trailing his finger down her cheek. He watched her pulse run quicker, her bosom heaving as his hand reached the choker at her throat. Then he hooked one sharp claw beneath her chin, almost hard enough to break the skin.

'Now dress me,' he commanded.

Meline shivered, whispering.

'As it please you.'

♦ II ♦

IT WAS ONCE said by the soothsinger Dannael á Riagán, if a man sought proof that beauty could be born of atrocity, he need look no farther than Sul Adair.

Built in the frozen heart of the Muath Mountains in east Súdhaem, the cityfort was a testament to both the ingenuity and cruelty of mortal men. It was said that Eskander IV, the last Shan of Súdhaem, spent the lives of ten thousand chattels to build it. The dark ironstone that gave the château its name – *Black Tower* in the local tongue – was quarried almost a thousand miles distant, and the route by which it was transported has forevermore been known as Ne'seit Dha Saath – *the Road of Nameless Graves*.

Sul Adair sat nestled in the Hawkspire Pass, safeguarding the goldglass mines at Lashaame and Raa, the grand cityport of Asheve. Those treasures were faded now, but Sul Adair remained, uncorrupted by the hand of fate or the teeth of time. And it was atop these frozen peaks, that the Empress Margot Chastain had raised her throne.

Jean-François strode the halls, footfalls echoing on high-flung ceilings. Meline had dressed him in his finest – a frockcoat of white velvet, a mantle of pale hawk's feathers. The twin moons and wolves of the Blood Chastain were stitched at his breast, and the long hair his Empress so adored flowed about his shoulders like molten gold. Meline walked three steps behind as was proper for a thrall, the dark damask of her gown whispering.

Servants glided the shadowed halls, falling to their knees at the sight of him. Animal familiars – cats and rats and ravens – watched his approach, slinking away as he drew near. He saw other kith; mediae and fledglings of Margot's Court of the Blood, bowing or curtsying as he passed. But the Marquis breezed by most with barely a glance, gaze fixed on the walls around him, the gables soaring overhead like the boughs of heaven.

The château's interiors were decorated with the most breathtaking frescoes in all creation. The grandmaster Javion Sa-Judhail had toiled thirty years in the painting of them. It was said when the grandmaster received word of the birth of his first son, he did not even look up from his toil. When the Súdhaemi

warlord Khusru the Fox launched his ill-fated campaign to wrest the city back from Augustin control, Javion continued to paint even as the armies of the Emperor and would-be Shan clashed upon the battlements. And when his beloved wife, Dalia, hurled herself from Sul Adair's highest tower in protest at his neglect, the grandmaster did not even take the time to attend her funeral rites.

Jean-François admired the mortal's passion. But more, what he'd created with it.

A beauty that would endure, long after its creator had fed the worms.

The château was built in five magnificent tiers, and Javion had painted the walls of each level as a step on the ascension to heaven. The first level was dedicated to the natural realm, and God's favoured children, humanity. The second was adorned with parables of the saints, the third, a tribute to the Seven Holy Martyrs. Above them flew the angels of the heavenly host – Eloise, Mahné, Raphael, even dear old Gabriel – spreading dove-white wings along the towering walls of Sul Adair's fourth tier.

Jean-François climbed ever higher, Meline breathing soft behind him as finally, they ascended the château's highest level. Here, a grand hallway stretched before them, blood-red carpet swathing dark flagstones. Beautiful chandeliers adorned the rafters, like great spiderwebs of glittering goldglass, hung thick with the shadow of roosting bats. And upon the walls, where Javion Sa-Judhail had painted his decades-long homage to God Almighty, the sovereign of heaven himself, there was now only featureless black stone.

The grandmaster's lifework had been sanded completely bare, and replaced with dozens of paintings in golden frames. Different portraits of the same subject, over and over again. Striding past steel-clad thrallswords, Jean-François reached the tall doors to his dame's inner sanctum. And there he stopped, studying the portrait above the entrance.

She who had obliterated heaven, and supplanted its rule on earth.

'Enter,' came the command.

Thrallswords pushed open the mighty doors, unveiling the grand chamber beyond. Meline stepped forward, speaking in a loud, clear voice.

'The Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain, Historian of Her Grace, Margot Chastain, First and Last of Her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men.'

A road of deep red carpet stretched into the dark, flanked by tree-tall pillars. The Marquis felt a chill in the room, banishing the bloodwarm passions of his bed. Entering alone, he followed the carpet, hands clasped like a penitent, accompanied by the bright song of a lone castrato somewhere in the shadows. With every step, that chill pressed harder on his skin, along with the swell of a dark, impossible power.

A low, warning growl rang out ahead. The Marquis stopped immediately and dropped into a bow, deep enough that his beautiful golden curls brushed the floor.

'My Empress. You commanded my presence.'

'I did,' came the reply, rich and earth-deep.

'Your word is my gospel, Your Grace.'

'Look upon me, then, Marquis. And pray.'

Jean-François lifted his gaze. The carpet was a river of blood, flowing down from a magnificent throne. Four wolves, black and fierce, lounged on a dais about it. To one side, a page in Chastain livery knelt with palms upturned, holding a leather-bound tome almost as big as he. And behind the throne, twenty feet high, loomed another portrait of the Priori of the Blood Chastain, the eldest of the line of the Shepherd, dread sovereign of all her kin.

The Empress Margot.

It was not the best he'd painted – Jean-François had painted *all* the portraits in this keep – but it *was* Her Grace's favourite. Margot was depicted sitting upon a golden crescent, clad in a beautiful onyx gown. Twin wolves flanked her feet, twin moons kissed her sky. She was a maid in form, but a goddess in stature, pale as the sun-bleached bones of her foes. The portrait had been replicated countless times, sent to duchies of the Blood across Sūdhaem; a reminder of she to whom they had sworn fealty eternal. The Empress was an infamous recluse – this was the only version that most of her subjects would ever know.

And beneath his portrait, sat the Empress herself.

At least, the version *Jean-François* knew.

She was not the towering figure he had painted on the canvas. In reality, Margot was slight in stature – even short, a fool might remark. She was not a buxom youth, nor a perfect blonde beauty. No maid had Margot been when she Became, but a woman of middle age. And now, carved of white marble and black majesty though she was, still she bore the marks of a mortal life hard lived, years unkind, preserved in the forever tale of her flesh.

But that was the beauty of it for an artiste like the Marquis. And his path to Margot's favour. Because there was no mirror, nor glass, nor pool of moonlit water that would cast a vampire's reflection back to them. And the years since the Empress had seen her own face in anything save the portraits Jean-François flattered her with were nigh uncountable.

Margot was so old, she couldn't even remember what she looked like.

The Empress of Wolves and Men fixed Jean-François with eyes as black as heaven. Her shadow stretched out before her, caressing his own, and though not a breath of wind moved in the chamber, the Marquis felt his curls stir in

a chill breeze. Her clawed hand stroked the closest wolf – a vicious old dame named Malice – and the Empress spoke with a voice that seemed to come from the air all around him.

‘Thou art well, Marquis?’

‘Perfectly, Your Grace. Merci.’

The Empress’s lips curled gently. Another wolf – a sleek beauty named Valour – growled as she spoke again.

‘Come ye closer, child.’

Jean-François ascended the dais and knelt at his Empress’s feet. Even sitting above him, Margot was almost smaller than he, and yet, her presence dwarfed his completely. The shadows lengthened, and she raised her hand so swift it seemed not to move, but *blink* from her lap to his cheek.

Jean-François’s belly thrilled as Margot lifted his chin so he might look upon her. It had been fifty years, and he still remembered her murderous passion the night she’d killed him. The dark joy in her eyes as he’d risen from the bloody floor of his studio, aghast with horror and wonder that she’d not destroyed him, but *gifted* him a life undreamed of.

‘Thou art injured still.’

*Scream for me . . .*

‘A trifle, Your Grace.’

‘Six nights and this trifle lingers?’

‘Yet slowly heals. I assure you, Mother, it is unworthy of your attentions.’

The Empress smiled. ‘Who am I, my son?’

‘You are rightful sovereign of this empire,’ he replied, voice rich with pride. ‘Conqueror and sage and soothseer. Ancien of the kith, and Priori of the Blood Chastain.’

‘Think thee, then, I am unable to judge what is and is not worthy of my attentions?’

The Empress’s tone was gentle, fingertips brushing his wounded throat. Vampires could not choose which of their victims were granted the Gift, and most ended up rotting for days before they turned, arising as that vile breed known as *foulbloods*. Jean-François was the last highblooded vampire Margot had ever created, and he knew many in the Empress’s court whispered that she indulged her youngest. But as Margot pressed harder, as he felt just a *hint* of the monstrous strength inside her, a chill trickled down his spine.

‘I apologize, Your Grace. It is not for me to say what should not concern you.’

‘Say’st thou, this *should* concern me?’

‘I . . . say nothing, Your Grace.’

A thumb strong enough to crush marble ran gently over his larynx. The chill deepened, shadows bending, *screaming*.



'Of what use be a historian who doth not speak?'

'... Mother, I—'

A soft chuckle rang in the chamber, sharp fangs glittering as the dark fell still.

'I sport with thee, love.' Margot cupped his cheek, black eyes gleaming. 'Thou art so boyish, ofttimes. So *young*. I would warn thee to 'ware such weakness, if it did not make me adore thee all the more. And adore thee I do, my beauty, with all a mother's heart.'

Her smile fell from her lips like dead leaves.

'But thou dost reek of the sheep ye rut with, Jean-François. Back now.'

The third wolf, an elderly dame named Prudence, watched as the Marquis retreated, head low. Jean-François kept his face a mask to hide the storm within – ardour, shame, fear, devotion. His mother always set him off-balance, always left him feeling such a . . .

The Empress glanced to the boy beside her. The page had remained motionless all this time, that brass-trimmed tome upon his palms. Though the boy had a thrall's strength, his arms still must have burned with the agony of holding it – that was the point, Jean-François supposed. He knew the Empress did not approve of the way he spent his nights. Gifting him this display of casual cruelty was her reminder of what he was. What *they* were.

*The wolf frets not for the ills of the worm.*

'I have perused thy chronicle,' she said.

'Does it please Her Grace?'

'Thy artistry is wond'rous as ever. Yet I found the tale somewhat . . . incomplete.'

'It is a work in progress, Your Grace.'

Jean-François felt a chill breeze, and his Empress simply disappeared – one moment, she sat upon her throne, and the next, that throne sat empty. Brushing his hair back from his face, he saw her now standing at one of the tall windows looking to the north.

'They run blind, who run quick,' Margot murmured. 'Impatience was the end of the Forever King, and no intent have I to follow pretty Fabiën into hell.' Margot turned pitch-black eyes to her child. 'But matters grow . . . pressed, my love.'

'You speak of the Iron Maiden. And the Spider.'

Margot's lips twisted into what a fool might call a smile.

'They are actually coming *here*,' Jean-François breathed, walking to her side.

'Aye. And word have we 'pon the winds that the Draigann approaches o'er the oceans, our invitation clutched in his beggar's hand. They shall arrive before the feast of Damesday.'

'The Priorem of *three* bloodlines. Voss. Ilon. Dyvok. All here within the week,' Jean-François looked out on the mountains in wonder. Small figures in black steel roamed the battlements below, firepots blazing like stars upon impregnable walls. 'And you intend to grant them Courtesy?'

'Twould hardly be polite to refuse. Given 'twas I who proposed this Convocation.'

'Such a gathering has not occurred once in *hundreds* of years. We have waged shadow war with the other Priorem since time immemorial. How can we trust them?'

The Empress actually chuckled at that. 'We cannot, sweet Marquis. But their desire for self-preservation? *This* can we trust. These wars hath bled this land dry, my child. And every petty fiefdom carved by upstart bloodlords, every mouthful gnawed by rampaging packs of mongrel fowlbloods, the closer we all stumble towards catastrophe. Kestrel knows this. Kariim knows this. E'en the Draigann knows this.'

Margot shook her head, lip curling.

'But e'en drawn here willingly, they shall ne'er bend the knee. We require advantage to achieve that end. And e'en now, it lies screaming in the hole where ye left it.'

Jean-François clenched his jaw. 'He is dangerous, Mother.'

'Of course he be. How think ye, he hath survived a world this cold otherwise?' Margot's fingers caressed the hurt beneath his cravat, gentle as whispers. 'Yet they are the key, my son. This riddle, this weapon, this Grail – they alone hath the keeping of its fate.'

'De León *loathes* our kind, Mother. He has told us *nothing* wh—'

'Why suppose ye, I set thee this task?'

He frowned, befuddled. 'I am your historian. There is no one in your c—'

'Because thou art *young*, Jean-François. Young enough to recall what it is to be a man. There be potency in that. Comfort and comradeship a clever wolf might turn to advantage.' Margot waved to the history in the thrallboy's hand. 'Pon those pages is the tale of a man whose cup overflows with rage. And grief. But above all, *pride*. Protest he may, but doubt it not – Gabriel de León hath *desire* for the world to know his story. Such is the profound depth of his vanity. And the key to his undoing.'

Margot's black gaze flickered to Jean-François's throat.

'And he feels a kinship with thee, sweet Marquis. The murder of his familie. His bond with Dior Lachance. Think ye, so intimate his confessions would have been to me?'

'Intimate?' Jean-François's jaw clenched. 'He tried to *murder* m—'

'Thou hast taken thy sport,' she snapped. 'Time hath come to swallow