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The Falconer
The Vanishing Throne
The Fallen Kingdom

THE
WOLF
AND THE
CROWN
OF
BLOOD



ELIZABETH
MAY



An Aria Book

ETERNALS OF SCILLARI

Alexios—God of Storms

Also known as: Storm; Eternal of Asteria
(the Court of Storms)

Primary powers: weather manipulation, control over
lightning, some psychic abilities

Severin—God of Death

Also known as: the Dark King; Wraith; Eternal of Nyholm
(the Dark Court)

Primary powers: necromancy, death touch

Evander—God of Light

Also known as: the Wolf

Primary powers: light shaping and manipulation,
control over fire, healing

Bastien—God of Shadows

Also known as: the Blade

Primary powers: shadow manipulation, psychic influence,
control over metal

Prologue

THE PRINCESS AND the god met in the ashes of a broken city and made a pact in blood and sacrifice.

War creates strange alliances—no one emerges unscathed when death leaves its mark. Humans turn savage. Gods become monsters. And there's a moment when the dead outnumber the living and everything you've ever loved lies in ruins at your feet that you're left with only two choices.

You either bury your pride or you die choking on it.

So Amalthea Devaliant, the last daughter of her family's dynasty, sought the enemy king. "I want to make a deal."

Alexios, Eternal of Asteria, God of Storms, had been alive long before humans dreamed of empires. He'd fought battles that had aged him more than seven thousand years ever could, and of all the wars he'd survived, this one had scarred him deepest. If the princess wanted peace, she'd have to prove it and pay the price.

And Alexios only traded in blood.

He drew a dagger from between his crimson and black wings, pressing the hilt to Amalthea's palm. "There are worse things than being tired of war," he said.

"Like what?"

"Being hungry for it."

She couldn't argue with that. They had a hundred reasons to hate each other, but hatred takes something from you, and neither had anything left to give. Just two broken realms and pyres stacked high with enough bodies to block out the sun for days. A conflict with no end in sight.

Unless *she* ended it.

The princess shut her eyes and raised the knife. It felt wrong somehow—too delicate for sacrifice, too cruel for salvation. But

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a bargain is a bargain, and the God of Storms wasn't known for changing his mind. So she pressed the weapon to her chest.

Breathe in. Hold. Let go.

This is how you save a world.

She plunged the blade in.

It hit her all at once—metal scraping bone, blood spilling over her fingers, her legs giving out. Then falling, hitting the ground hard. Amalthea stared up at a sky she couldn't quite focus on as numbness crept through her limbs.

It's worth it. It'll all be worth it.

Alexios kneeled beside her and cut open his palms, mingling his blood with hers. He spoke the ancient rites that would bind them. When the last syllable fell from his lips, a ripple went through the world. Starlight and iridescent color spread over the mountains—a veil separating the god and human realms. A Shroud held in place by a promise. A lineage. An Accord carved into every temple altar in Vartena, written in stone, in blood, in memory.

And with its birth, the war gasped its final breath.

The humans rebuilt and recovered. Their recollections of those dark days were worn smooth by time, and eventually, all who fought and survived that horrific era were gone. Their descendants remained in blissful ignorance.

But the gods? They lived with the terrible clarity of immortal memory. They couldn't erase the taste of ashes, the sight of the pyres, the trauma of losing children and lovers and family.

This story is about what comes after, when promises are stretched thin and treaties wear down until they break. This is about what happens when humans forget that peace is paid for in blood.

This is what happens when everything goes to shit.

PART ONE

BLOOD AND BEAUTIFUL THINGS

1

BRYONY

Three hundred years later

DEATH WEARS A beautiful face, and he's come to collect a soul.

I take my morning walk through the palace woods, counting my steps like always, when a strange pressure builds in the air. Like before a storm rolls in and the world seems to hold its breath. A sparrow's trill cuts off mid-note. The breeze dies. It all just...

Stops.

"Help me."

A man staggers from behind a tree. One look, and I know he's not supposed to be here. He's not a guard, not a servant, and definitely not a noble. Just an intruder caked in days' worth of dirt who somehow slipped past walls and sentries meant to keep him out.

"Hide me," he says, lunging forward to seize my arm. "*Please.*"

That's when I see it: seared into the skin of his inner wrist is a closed eye slashed through.

Oathbreaker.

The power saturating the forest, the unnatural charge—it's a god. And this man is what it wants.

"I'm sorry, but I *can't.*"

I pull against him, but the stranger is desperate, and desperate men are strong. Dangerous. He's panting in uneven little gasps, his hold tightening. The palace is right beyond those trees. Guards patrol these paths. If I run—

"Let her go. Now."

The words drop like stones into a still pond.

The stranger and I freeze. My heart gives a painful lurch as that stormy pressure from before suddenly shoves hard against me.

Shit.

Slowly, I turn.

The god is beautiful in that alluring way of predators. Tall, dark-haired, wearing gleaming golden armor that leaves his muscular arms bare. He has a face more suited to a work of art than a death dealer. Like all gods, his skin shimmers in the light, but his wings are unique. *Singular.* Pure gold feathers from ridge to tip, as if they've been dipped in molten metal.

He flexes them slightly, an unmistakable warning in the small movement. *Don't touch.*

Don't even think about it.

I'd know him anywhere. No one grows up in Vartena without hearing stories about the golden assassin who serves as Alexios' right hand. I've seen the murals on the temple walls painted with images of this god and the carnage he leaves behind.

The Wolf.

And I'm standing between him and his prey.

My eyes meet his, and I go cold. Not because of the bright, unnatural color—gilt and amber—but the way they pin me in place with the flat, dead glare of a hunter deciding which category of problem I fall into: nuisance or inconvenience.

"Please."

The whimper yanks me back to the oathbreaker. He collapses to his knees, pressing his forehead to the ground. Poor bastard. Begging won't soften a creature who has murdered thousands without remorse. The Wolf's probably played out this exact scene every time—watched these desperate, weeping victims try to appeal to a sense of compassion that doesn't exist.

To feel compassion, he'd have to have a heart. And the Wolf of Asteria is a soulless monster. Everyone knows it.

"Mercy." The oathbreaker's voice cracks. *"Please."*

But the Wolf is still staring at me. I shiver as he takes in my

walking dress, the waist-length braid of silver-white hair resting over my shoulder. Lingering on my features, my violet-colored eyes, and the gleaming skin that's not quite as ethereal as his but suggests a demigod in my ancestry. My skin is as unusual as his wings—it tells him exactly who I am before the gold cuff on my wrist confirms it.

Bryony Devaliant. Princess of the Blood. The youngest Anchor of the Shroud.

In other words, I'm not a human he can fuck with.

The Wolf's mouth curves into a mocking smile as if he plucked the thought from my head. His hand drifts up almost lazily and curls around the sword sheathed between his wings.

"Five seconds, Devaliant." His voice is smooth and deep. Resonant.

I blink. "What?"

"You get five seconds. I want you to close your eyes and count for me, nice and slow. Then keep them closed."

It takes me a moment to grasp what he's offering. Is he... seriously giving me an out? Some twisted courtesy so I don't have to witness him butcher an oathbreaker?

I hesitate. What might he do the second I look away? But his expression darkens in a warning that reminds me I'm in no position to refuse. So I let my eyes fall shut.

"One."

My nails dig into my palms.

"Two."

My pulse roars in my ears, nearly drowning out the man's whimper.

"Three."

Every muscle tenses as I brace myself.

"Four—"

A whisper of steel cuts the air, and something wet and warm splashes across my face—*blood*. My stomach lurches, but I force the bile back down my throat.

Thump. The sound of a corpse hitting the dirt is its own particular horror.

"F-five," I gasp.

My eyes fly open. The Wolf is close—*too* close—and still holding his dripping sword. Near enough that I can see the flecks of amber and bronze in his irises. Neither of us moves. Neither of us speaks.

Then he reaches his free hand out and skims the pad of his thumb along my cheek. Smearing my skin with the dead man's blood. "What did I say about keeping those pretty eyes closed?" There's wry humor in his voice that's all wrong for this moment. Like this is a game we're playing. "It was a simple instruction."

I let out a slow exhale, resisting the urge to turn out of his touch. "You said I got *five* seconds. That wasn't even four. But I suppose Death finishes his work fast."

"Death is still here, Devaliant. I haven't gone anywhere."

"Hard to miss that fact when you're finger-painting your handiwork on my face." I can't hold back the slight tremor that goes through me.

He drops his hand, and some of the pressure eases from my chest. "Most humans can barely string two words together around me unless one of them is *please*. Yet here you are, running that smart mouth."

Every instinct is screaming at me to run. But what's the point? There's nothing he can do to me that hasn't already been done hundreds of times over.

"You know what I am," I say, forcing calm into my tone. "I spend half my life on an altar. You're just another kind of knife."

His gaze falls to my wrist. Hidden beneath the cuff is a brand seared magically into my skin that marks me as the protected human property of his monstrous king. I'm one of Alexios' Claimed. The Wolf could murder me in seconds, but there would be consequences for him if he damaged the goods.

His eyes snap back to mine. "Never give me a reason to come for you. I'd be so fucking eager to put another Devaliant in the Void for good."

My eyebrows pull together. Not a *human*—my family specifically. Did he hunt them before the Accords? Did he kill my ancestors?

The question burns on my tongue, but different words come out instead. "Then I want to make a deal."

He blinks at that. "Excuse me?"

Too late now. *In for a broken drachma, in for an aurelii*, as they say. Death is the one thing this monster and I have in common; we're two sides of the same bloody coin.

"If Alexios ever decides I've outlived my usefulness and sends you to take me out"—I gesture to the body cooling in the dirt—"I want a better end than that."

"That sounds a lot like a demand." There's a strange glint in his eye—something feral and almost hungry peeking out from behind the killer's mask. "I didn't realize we were on demand-making terms."

With a jolt, I realize what that look is: *interest*. Eternal save me, I've caught the attention of the god-king's Wolf.

I swallow hard. "You only come to this realm when you need to murder someone. I'm using this as a chance to negotiate. Just in case."

"Just in case," he mutters with a short laugh. "Unbelievable. And what makes you think you've earned the right to negotiate shit with me?"

"House Devaliant bleeds out every fourteen days to keep your king's precious Shroud intact. Be as eager as you want to kill me, but I want to choose how I go. Let me have that much."

No flicker of empathy at the reminder of what I endure for his king, not even a twitch of emotion. The Wolf just studies me in that unnerving way of his, then leans forward and taps my cuff. "You get this conversation because of what's under here. Never forget that. It's the only thing standing between your neck and my blade."

My thoughts are shouting. *Shut up and go. Just nod and walk away.*

But an image flashes of the temple altar slick with my blood,

After all that, I've damn well earned some basic courtesy.

"I haven't forgotten. Will you bargain or not?"

He shrugs. "Tell me what you want."

I nearly gag when he leans down and casually wipes his blade on the dead man's clothes before sheathing it between his wings.

"Let me guess," he says when I don't answer, his sharp stare settling on me again. "A string quartet playing your favorite song while I butcher you? Some pretty flowers to brighten up the proceedings? Want me to tell you how *special* you are?"

What an asshole. I should've known the monster from the murals would be an unbearable prick.

I glare at him. "Leave my guts where they belong and my head attached to my body. Don't steal any trophies for whatever murder collection I'm sure you keep. Sound fair?"

"It *sounds* like you've given this an alarming amount of thought."

"When you die as often as I do, you think about the permanent version."

"Clearly." Now he just looks bored, as if I've somehow disappointed him. "Anything else?"

"Treat me like an equal," I tell him, just to see what he'll do. "Or should I lower the bar even more?"

That finally gets something out of him. "Bury it in the ground if that's what you expect." His lip curls in disgust. "You're not my equal."

Right. Seeing humans as insects scraped off the bottom of his shoe is probably how he justifies his daily slaughter quota before he goes to bed at night.

Well, fuck him.

"Pretend for one occasion," I snap.

His eyes narrow. Just when I think he'll declare he'd rather eat glass, he says, "Only if you don't make me hunt your ass down. Chasing my targets is irritating."

I snort. "Like there's anywhere I could go that you wouldn't find me."

The Wolf doesn't disagree. "One more thing." His smile is sharp. "I want eye contact the whole time you're bleeding out."

I cringe. Good gods, he's vile. I'd heard the Wolf was part feral, like a toddler with a knife and the skill to use it, but I always thought those were exaggerations meant to terrify children into good behavior. Of course, I had to go and negotiate with Alexios' most unhinged Enforcer.

Too late to take it back now.

"Fine. Uninterrupted eye contact until my last breath." *You heartless bastard.* "Sound good?"

"Deal. If it comes down to it, I'll make it a good death." Those gold eyes rake over me one last time. "See you around, Devaliant."

Then he spreads those massive golden wings and leaps into the air, disappearing over the canopy in seconds.

Leaving me to deal with the corpse.

BRYONY

Two years later

THE CROWD ROARS beyond the gates as Theodora and I step out of the palace. My older sister and I wear matching gold gowns shot through with crimson, rubies glinting at our throats and earlobes. Our gaudy temple regalia as Princesses of the Blood.

Another day, another death.

The city sprawls past the royal square. Hellevig is a patchwork of ancient ruins and buildings constructed after the Godkiller Crusades, when the war between humans and gods nearly wiped this place off the map. During the rebuilding, House Devaliant's colors became the dominant palette. Red spires. Red domes. Red pillars. Red arches. Red, red, red. There's a reason the capital of Luceni is called "the city that bleeds," not just because of what my ancestress did with that blade, but because you can't escape the color of Amalthea's sacrifice.

Theodora's nails dig into my wrist, jolting me to the present. To the crowd clamoring for our attention.

"Smile," she tells me. She tucks an errant curl of copper hair behind her ear. "They're all watching."

No one could accuse me of being anything but well-trained, so I plaster on a smile and follow her toward the carriage waiting in the drive.

The portcullis groans as the servants heave it open.

"Princess Bryony!"

A girl darts under a guard's arms before he can grab her, skidding to a halt in front of me.

My bodyguard tenses, but I wave a dismissive hand. "Stand down, Silas. She's six, not an assassin. Just give her a minute."

The last thing I need is an overenthusiastic member of my security pulling a sword on a child in view of a few hundred spectators. The broadsheets would have a field day.

I crouch down, my skirts pooling around me. "Hi there. What's your name?"

"Ara." She sticks out her small hand. "May I have your blessing?"

For a moment, I'm sure I misheard her. But no, those words definitely fell out of her tiny mouth, hanging between us like an accusation. Theodora goes rigid beside me. We both know blessings are the Eternal's purview, not mine.

I bend and kiss her knuckles. "May Eternal Alexios protect you always."

A standard non-answer. But the girl isn't having it. Her grip tightens, nails biting at my Claim cuff. "Please, Princess. A blessing from *you*."

Theodora's lips press into a thin line, her expression hardening. *No. Don't you dare give that girl what she wants.*

So I kiss the girl's head and say the most neutral thing I can. "Fortune keep you, little one. Now get back to your mother before she worries."

Silas scoops her up and deposits her behind the gates with a scowl darkening his face.

I smile and wave at the rest of the spectators, blowing a few kisses. "Remember to visit the temple and offer your tithes!" I call out. "Eternal bless you!"

I'm signaling our procession onward when a voice shouts, "*The Princess will lead us to ruin! Alexios' butchers will come for us all!*"

My head snaps up, but I can't see anything past the sea of faces. A ripple goes through the crowd as confusion gives way to anger. It looks like a fight might break out.

"Time to go, Bry." Theodora's grip on my elbow is firm as she guides me to the carriage.

The door slams shut, muffling the chaos outside. I stare out the window, watching as the guards attempt to calm down the masses and clear the road. Some people are still shouting.

"It's always a delight joining you on temple day." Theodora settles across from me and arranges her skirts. "I never know if I'm going to see a brawl or a parade in your honor."

I glare at her. "Hilarious."

The famous Devaliant skin is the only thing that marks my sister and me as related. Our father once told me that Theodora got her looks from our mother, who died giving birth to me, while I inherited features from a dead grandmother. Where my hair is nearly white, hers is a rich, glossy red, spilling over her shoulders in loose curls. Her bone structure is elegant, with a willowy physique that resembles a dancer's. Mine is more petite. The Hellevig broadsheets often remark that we're equally beautiful, but Theodora has an austere face that comes across as aloof. Remote. *Cold*.

People call her *the ice princess* when they're being kind.

Frigid bitch, when they're not.

"Should we take bets on when they build you a shrine?" Theo asks me. "Ten aurelii says it's up by next week. Twenty says someone tries to steal a lock of your hair for a holy relic."

"People are literally screaming about divine wrath, and you're making jokes?"

"What else am I supposed to do? Uncle's too busy drowning in wine and women lately to listen about the crowds outside our gates. Last week, he face-planted in his soup before I could even finish a sentence."

I slump against the seat with a sigh. When the emperor spirals like this, it never ends well. Last time, he vanished for half a year, hopping on our family's private train to screw his way across the empire while Theo kept the capital from crumbling.

Not that I could blame Idris much, to be honest. It's tempting to throw yourself into any random vice when your life revolves around scheduled ritual sacrifice. That's the price House Devaliant paid when we brokered peace with the gods three

hundred years ago. Meanwhile, every other citizen gets off easy with a fingerprick and a single drop of blood for their tithe.

I trace the notches I carved on my inner elbow—five cuts, five steps to resurrection. *Breathe. Feel. Name. Present. Real.* To remind me that I exist and that I'm more than just a vessel.

Outside, gravel crunches under the carriage wheels as the vehicle makes a turn. Silas bellows at someone in the crowd who strayed too close, "Back the fuck off before I remove your head!"

I wince. "Could Uncle not find me a bodyguard who's less... threatening? He made three children cry yesterday."

"Listen, that man might have a brain like a rusted bear trap and the personality of a hostile brick wall, but he's very large and enjoys hurting people who come near you." Theodora taps her fingers against her armrest. "Which, given current events, makes him more useful than our wine-soaked excuse for an emperor."

"At least Uncle isn't riding with us."

"Oh yes, I'll miss his lectures on our many failings." She mimics Idris' voice, slurring slightly. "Theodora, you empty-headed waste of space. Probably dropped you on your head as a baby.' Like he has any right to criticize when his idea of leadership is bellowing at people until his face turns red."

Laughing, I peer out at the streets rolling by, at the stone towers and their massive stained glass windows. Every pane depicts some Devaliant sacrifice in revolting detail. You can't walk ten feet in Hellevig without seeing our family's offerings commemorated somewhere. They've made our deaths into decoration, our suffering into architecture.

And perched on the hill in the center of the city, with spires piercing the low-hanging clouds, stands the temple where I've been summoned for my tithe. Alexios' holy building is the only structure built entirely of pale marble, probably because blood shows up better on white, and the God of Storms enjoys watching us all bleed from wherever he is in Scillari. The facade comprises multiple twisting steeples that loom over the landscape like jagged teeth.

I hate that damn place.