

ASHWOOD  
AND  
BRIARSTONE

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# CARYNTHIA



# PROLOGUE

I kept my hood up as I entered the town. The white buildings of Lonthia would all look the same were it not for the differentiating wood timber work on the exteriors, some had panels of crossed wood and others framed rectangles. The richer houses had more detail, small square designs and protruding windows that cut into the street, flower boxes full of wilting blooms.

For a moment no one noticed me, I was just another rider on the road. Then came the gasps, the whispers, the too-familiar sound of slamming doors and shutters. Parents calling for their children, and the children, being the pure curious creatures that they are, ignoring them and stopping to watch the stranger ride through town, probably wondering what the adults were fussing about.

Then one of them straightened in alarm as they caught sight of my face beneath the hood. Fear smothered their expression and the others quickly followed suit and dispersed upon noticing their friends' distress. The frightening tales of my people that their parents no doubt filled them with rising to the surfaces of their minds.

I continued on, unperturbed. Though my fingers tightened their grip on the reins.

The reaction was the same the further I rode through town, the only businesses not closing their doors, the questionable ones. The ones that cared more about money than their own personal prosperity—or imminent death.

The buildings of this sort were not white like the others, they were discolored and stained, the wood detailing splintered and lifting, never to be nailed back down.

I got down from my horse, tied her off and entered the ramshackle tavern. I placed my flask on the bartop. "Fill this."

The keeper rushed to fill it, their hands shaking as they snatched it from the counter and stepped away as quickly as they could. Perhaps I could have been more polite, but the filling of my flask was more important. I would need its contents today more than ever.

I peeked out one of the grease-coated windows up to the palace. It wasn't what I'd been expecting at all. The stones were dull, the garden unkempt, it didn't at all resemble the splendor I'd been told of. It was the first confirmation of the Isidian Queen's struggle.

"D-did you need a room, sir?" The barkeeper asked, sliding my flask across a scratched wood bartop.

The thought of staying in another cheap, dirty tavern did not appeal at all, especially not when the palace was up the hill and already expecting me. "No. How much for the drink?" I pulled my coin purse out and waited. The barkeep was staring past my shoulder when they spoke next, an outdated Isidian custom of not looking someone of higher status in the eye. I pulled my cloak closer around myself to hide my family emblem.

"One Silver."

I left it on the bar and turned to leave. Now that they knew who I was they would spread it like wildfire. I had been planning on milling about the town more before heading up to the castle but now, now I had to hurry up the hill—and face what I'd been dreading.

"H-hey," a slurred voice called from behind me. "I didn't hear you say thank you."

I ignored it and continued to the exit, I didn't want trouble.

"Hey, I'm talking to you Deathbringer!"

A hand slapped down onto my shoulder. I paused.

"Dorrick, just leave it." the barkeep said. "A-apologies s-sir, he's had too much to drink."



“No, if he’s going to swagger in here like he owns the joint, disrupting our lives and disgracing your business, the least he could do is thank you for your service.” Dorrick ended the speech with a belch.

I turned to face him, my hood slipping down and truly revealing my identity.

“Now, now sir, there’s- there’s no need for trouble, your payment is thanks enough.” The barkeep pushed, rushing over to pull his patron away from me, minding the distance between us.

As I continued out I left a handful more silvers on a table by the entryway.

# CHAPTER ONE

## ALIVE BUT DEAD

Carrot. Chew. Wine. Swallow. Sprout. Chew. Watching my mother eat was like watching the hands of a clock go round its face. Predictable. Monotonous.

“How did the meetings go today, Evalina?” She asked.

“Everything is as it should be.” I scanned her thin face. “There’s nothing for you to worry about.” If she felt anything from my words she didn’t show it.

I sat back in my chair and sipped my wine, staring at the wall just past my mother’s shoulder. It was littered with portraits large and small of past rulers of our Queendom. Family I’d never met.

We sat in silence as my mother slowly ate the remainder of her dinner. Parsnip. Chew. Wine. Swallow.

This was how our lives had been for the last sixty years, since my father was killed; though I’d only been attending council meetings in her stead for the last twenty. Every day was the same, as if my mother couldn’t bear to stray from her routine. Sometimes I wondered if it was the only thin thread holding her mind together.

“Lorkin is taking to his new position well.”

“I suppose so,” I replied, trying my best to sound indifferent.

Since accepting his position as Captain of the royal guard Lorkin hadn’t said a word to me, outside of duty, and my mother and I hadn’t spoken of it since she’d offered him the position.

Had it not been for Lorkin, I would have lived a very solitary life confined to the castle since my fathers' death. Thankfully, our parents had been close friends. So, when his parents had died in an accident, Mother and Father had taken him in, allowing us to grow up together.

So I'd had one friend, until we were more ... and then we were nothing.

"You knew he wanted it, you can't be angry at me for giving him what he wanted," my mother added. She'd given him what he'd wanted but driven a wedge further between the captain and I, and she knew it.

"Can we change the subject please?" I asked, running my hands over my face.

"Fine, Evalina, now that you're heir, how about we discuss the subject of your marriage?"

"All right," I said, pushing away from the table. "I'm going for a walk."

"Evalina, you can't keep avoiding this," mother called after me. I waved her off and stormed from the room and out into the woods.

Slumping down onto a fallen tree I held my face in my hands, massaging my tired eyes. My head was pounding, I'd had to get away from my mother, the council, my life, but the woods were as far as I could go. Once I was Queen it would all be easier—I hoped. There'd be no need to hide my mothers' affliction anymore, and I wouldn't have to trick her into competently ruling her Queendom, signing trade treaties and laws that she seemed to read differently, that took her back to a time of war and loss. Trying to keep the council from noticing as best I could. Soon, it would be over soon. I had been named Heir now.

My head snapped up as I heard a rustle in the forest before me. At this time of night I would surely be alone. The servants would be preparing for bed and none needed to come this far into the woods. I prayed it wasn't an issue with the wards; our mages had made enough mistakes of late that soon I wouldn't be able to talk my mother down from executing them.

I hopped off the fallen tree and stepped toward the creek, the half moon reflected in its surface, looking for anything hiding in the bushes.

Our guards were trained not to make a noise while patrolling, if it was one of them I would have to report them to the Captain and punish them tomorrow in front of the rest. If it were one of our wall patrols, they'd be

wearing plated armor and the moon would be shining off it; up ahead, I saw no such thing.

Without much thought, I leapt over the creek and crept forward, like a predator stalking prey. I heard another rustle to my right and quickly ducked behind a tree; as I peered around the trunk, I was hit with a Mother awful smell—like meat that had been in the cold room for too long.

Then I saw it, stumbling through the brush, half-rotted and covered in a mix of dirt, blood, and waste. A human, but it couldn't possibly be alive, not with the gaping wounds I saw.

I swung myself back behind the tree and looked for something, anything, to use as a weapon. About five paces to my right there was a large branch, but if I went for it the thing would see me. I'd have to be quick.

I peeked around the tree again, it was about six paces away from where I stood, stumbling blindly as if it should have found whatever it was that it was looking for by now. I took a deep breath and prepared to run. Bending my left leg in front of me, stretching my right leg behind, bracing it on the tree so I could push off it for an extra boost forward, I counted myself down from five.

Four ... three ... two ... one!

I pushed off the tree and bolted for the branch.

The second I leapt out from behind the tree I heard a wet snarl. Definitely not human.

I reached for the branch as the thing leapt for me. I twisted and swung the branch at the creature's head, causing it to fall back, giving me enough time to straighten. I gripped my branch like a sword and prepared to swing again. The creature straightened and I got a good look at its mangled, rotting face; its eyes were whited over and its skin was peeling away from its jaw. The little clothes it was wearing were tattered and barely covering its wound ridden body, and its feet were bloody and torn from walking barefoot from wherever the pit it came from.

The creature darted for me and I swung at its head, again and again, blood splattering all over me and the forest floor. I dipped and swung my leg out into the thing's legs, knocking it to the ground. I forced my foot

onto the creature's neck, pinning it to the ground. It writhed under me and I dug my branch into its stomach making it squeal.

"Do you speak, creature?" It struggled against me so I dug my branch further into its stomach, making it scream again, black gunk oozing from the delicate, dead flesh pierced by the end of my makeshift weapon. "Do you speak?" I demanded, disgusted at the creature's appearance and gall to wander into my home.

"Yes! Yes, I speak!"

I cringed at its voice. "What are you?" I asked, unable to hide the disgust in my tone.

It coughed blood onto my boot and I dug my foot further into its throat, making it gasp for breath. "I am a servant of The Life Bringer," it spat with its gravelly voice. "Here to do his bidding, to start his great mission." It turned its head to the side and spat more blood on the ground.

I held my foot steady on the creature's neck, though dread filled me. "What mission? Who is he?" I asked. The creature struggled against me again, I removed the branch from its stomach and thumped it over the head. "What mission!?" I repeated, desperation creeping into my voice.

"You Elves," the monster drawled, "think you own everything, you couldn't be more wrong. The Life Bringer is going to sort you out, starting with you pale, uppity bastards."

"He's human then?" I snorted. "He will be easy enough to dispose of." One lone human could do nothing against an army of Elves.

The creature chuckled. "You can try, she-elf, but The Life Bringer has survived much."

"He has not had to deal with me yet," I said before removing the branch from its stomach and hitting the creature over the head again, this time hard enough to render it unconscious. My false confidence faltered as the creature's eyelids fluttered shut. What could I really do?

I removed my foot from its throat and took a better look; it was human, or had been. I didn't know if it still counted as human if it had already quite possibly been dead. Its body was covered in wounds that were still leaking blood as if it had just walked through every obstacle it had encountered. The smell this close was torturously bad, the little food that was left in my



stomach threatened to resurface, I swallowed it down and bent to pick the thing up and flung it over my shoulder, I wanted it to be interrogated and I wanted the mages to study it so they could fix our damn wards.



I carried the body of the thing back through the forest, its blood covering me. As I walked through the tree line a few guards began to rush for me. I dropped the creature on the ground. “Get the Captain, now!”

One of the guards darted away toward the servants’ quarters, the other guard stopped just in front of me and looked me up and down—checking for any injuries.

“I’m fine, it didn’t touch me. Just bind it.”

He got to work tying the arms and ankles as I saw Captain Lorkin and the other guard rushing over.

Lorkin bolted straight for me, grabbing my shoulders violently and looking me over. “Are you hurt?” He said looking me in the eyes frantically.

“Lorkin—”

“ARE YOU HURT?!”

I’d never seen Lorkin so wild.

I struggled out of his grip. “I’m fine, Lorkin!”

His shoulders relaxed. “What happened? Why were you alone?” He was still looking me in the eyes.

“I went for a walk,” I avoided mentioning my need for a break, “and found him stumbling around the forest. I want him interrogated and studied by the mages right away.”

Lorkin snapped back to normal and focused on a random point just past my shoulder, our ridiculous customs forbidding him to look me in the eye. “Of course, Your Highness, I’ll get on it right away.”

I placed my hand on his arm. “I’m fine Lorkin, you’ve trained me well.”

He quickly glanced at my eyes and away again, running a hand through his hair.

“What do you think it is? And how did it get through the wards?” I asked, watching the guards bind the bloated corpse, gagging at the putrid smell as they did.

Captain Lorkin sighed, "I don't know what it is, but it was already dead when it crossed the wards. That's why it didn't set them off."

My back straightened. "What?"

"The human was alive but ... dead when he crossed the wards."

"What do you mean? Alive and dead? And how do you know?"

"This isn't the first one," he continued confidently, despite my obvious frustration. "There was another one, earlier this week. I didn't kill it, so when the watch told me what they'd caught I didn't believe them. I thought it was some stupid joke ... until now."

I straightened and turned to the guards behind me. "Leave us, and take that ... thing to the mages." The guards turned at once, lifted the body and trekked back toward the castle. I faced Lorkin. "Why am I only hearing of this now?"

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, staying silent for a moment before he continued, "Like I said, I didn't believe them. I didn't want to add more stress if it was nothing."

"Well, clearly it wasn't nothing." I chided. "Any reports, even ones you think may be pranks should be reported to me, Captain."

"Of course, Your Highness. I apologize for my misjudgement," he said, his eyes downcast, shoulders slumped.

"Work with the mages to discover what it is, and inform my mother of it, with care." I added, not that Lorkin needed the reminder. "I want to know what it is, where it's come from and what it wants."

"I can handle that, Your Highness," Lorkin said.

"Can you? You couldn't even pass on important information."

"I didn't pass it on because I didn't think it had any merit," he argued, something he shouldn't be doing.

I pinched the bridge of my nose in frustration, attempting to reign in my temper. He should be punished for speaking to me like that, but I couldn't do it. I turned away from him and stormed toward my chambers. "I'm going to bed."

"Princess Evalina," he called, rushing to catch up with me. "I don't want you wandering around the woods alone again, or the grounds. Clearly it's not safe."

“Yes, thank you for that observation, Captain,” I snapped.

“Evalina.”

I paused, noticing the dropping of my title. I faced him, his expression was bleak.

“I’m sorry. If anything had happened to you ... I-I don’t know—”

“Lorkin.” I placed a hand on his shoulder, it was the most contact I would allow myself. “I’m fine. Just don’t hide things from me. I’m going to be Queen, I need to be able to handle the pressure.”

“You don’t have to do it alone, I’m here to help.”

“I know,” I said, and left him standing on the steps of the east wing of the palace.

# CHAPTER TWO

## BAD BLOOD

I stalked through the gardens to the mage's tower, furious with myself that I would be so careless. Of course, I should have told Evalina. Of course, I should have taken the threat seriously. I felt like a damn fool. And if anything had happened to her ... I didn't want to think of it.

"Captain Lorkin!"

"What is it now?" I snapped at the guard running toward me.

"Apologies, Captain, the Osirian Prince has arrived," the guard huffed. "He's waiting at the gates."

For a moment the world around me faded to nothing, then, a lone face filled the black, a wanted poster of the man who'd killed my King. The only other Dark-Elf I'd ever seen. "He's not meant to arrive for three more days," I said, more to myself than the guard. "All right, let's get this over with, then."

I diverted my path to follow the guard to the gates, mentally preparing to meet the Prince.

"Also, Captain, we were given this directive from the Queen weeks ago, she asked us to keep it from you until the Prince arrived." The guard added sheepishly.

I glared at her as I snatched the letter, it was written in the Queen's shaky handwriting.

My gut dropped, my grip on the letter tightening until it was at risk of ripping. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” I looked toward the Queen’s quarters. What are you planning?

“I want extra guards everywhere, he goes nowhere without my knowledge.” I directed. The guard nodded and headed toward the barracks to pass on the order.

I spotted him as soon as I grew closer to the gates. His hair, unlike our black Isidian hair, shone white in the moonlight like a beacon, and his yellow eyes glowed as I’d imagine a Pit Creature’s would. He stood holding the reins of his horse, tight enough that for a moment I thought perhaps he was as nervous as I was—or he was struggling to rein in his power, to keep from killing us all as we’d been told Osirians did.

“Your Highness.” I bowed, locking my hands behind my back to hide the shaking. He towered over me and the rest of the guards stationed at the gates. “Welcome to Lonthia.”

“Thank you, Captain,” he replied, bowing back to me. I worked to hide the confusion that threatened to creep onto my face. Royalty did not bow to soldiers. “I was going to stay the last few nights in the town, but the palace looked so inviting I just couldn’t pass it up.”

“And I’m sure you’re exhausted from your travels. Grenfield will take your horse to the stables and I’ll escort you to your room.”

The Prince nodded and silently followed me through the gardens; if he had any weapons on him, I hadn’t noticed them. Though it wasn’t weapons I was worried about but the second his hands had left the reins he’d stuffed them deep into his pockets. Extra guards had already stationed themselves through the gardens and inside the palace and I was thankful that I hadn’t had to spell out what I’d meant when I ordered it.

We reached the hallway to his room quickly, I was anxious to begin interrogating the creature.

“Are there always so many guards posted?”

I gazed back quizzically at the Prince, my hand resting on my sword.

“I only ask because it seems ... excessive.” He added, a knowing tone coating his words.



“The Queen is wary of guests and we are expecting many,” I said simply. The Prince’s eyes darkened, catching the true meaning of my words. “Your room, Prince Thanatos. Dinner has already been eaten but I’m sure the kitchens can put something together for you.”

“No need,” he said. “I should like to meet with the Princess tomorrow, can that be arranged?”

My eyes narrowed. “She is indisposed until the afternoon.”

“Tea then, if you could let her know—”

“Of course, Your Highness.” I bowed and backed away from the door, waiting until it was closed before I moved down the hall.

Ten paces and I was at her door. The Queen had ordered the Prince be placed ten paces from where her daughter slept. I rested a hand on Evie’s door. I would not disturb her again tonight, it had already been difficult enough.



The tower was hidden at the back of the castle, behind the kitchens so they could store their ingredients in the cold stores if they needed it.

My legs were already burning from rushing to find Evalina and the stairs in the tower were not helping that at all. I could hear raised voices and quick movements echoing down from the rooms above and prepared myself to deal with the chaos.

“Hold it down!” Hemfain called over the struggle.

The creature was bound by its arms and ankles but it was still fighting with the guards, having woken since they’d left Evie and I. Fiona was attempting to hook its arms to the top of an examination table and failing. I darted over to help.

“Thank you, Captain,” she breathed. “He was out cold when he first arrived, we didn’t even think to properly restrain him.” She brushed her hands down the front of her green mage robes leaving streaks of inky black blood.

“That should have been the first thing you did,” I chided.

Fiona flinched at my words and moved away to fetch parchment and a quill. Hemfain began examining the creature, as did I.

It resembled the one my guards had previously killed. Decayed and wound ridden. Its rotten smell was quickly filling the tower. The smell was not new

to me; I'd dealt with death before when disease had spread through the city and mass disposal was needed, after executions, and on expeditions through the forests beyond the palace walls. There were always dead things on the forest floor. But this was different.

"What is it, Hemfain?" I asked the Head Mage, he looked no older than our Queen but he was centuries beyond her.

"It looks to me to be a Corse."

Fiona gasped.

"Corse?" I frowned at the unfamiliar term.

"The creation of a Necromancer. Dark magic, Captain," he explained, prodding the writhing creature with a small cane, causing it to gasp in pain.

"Necromancy," Fiona whispered. "The returning of the dead through dark magic. It doesn't heal as our magic does, only returns the soul to the corpse."

"Depending on the skill of the Necromancer," Hemfain corrected.

"Wonderful," I said, pacing around the table. "Can it be questioned?"

Hemfain's eyes locked with mine as he nodded. I pushed my sleeves up and requested that Fiona leave. She may be a mage but she didn't have the constitution to witness what I was going to do.

"Right," I said after the last of the mages had also left the tower and it was only Hemfain and I, "Let's get started."

"You speak, creature?" Hemfain asked.

"I already told the wench that I do," it replied, its voice almost sending shivers down my spine.

"How do you want to do this, Lorkin?"

I took a deep breath, "I want answers no matter what it takes."

The Head Mage nodded and retreated to a back room, returning with a roll of healing tools. I rolled out the leather pouch onto a bench behind me and selected a thin metal poker, no longer than my middle finger, with a wooden handle and a pair of sharp cutters.

Turning back to the creature, I asked, "Where did you come from?"

"The Life Bringer sent me."

"From where? Last chance before I start removing toes," I said, walking to the end of the table.

“The Life Bringer summoned me back from ... brought me back.” It seemed to struggle with its words. “He—” The creature screamed in pain as I closed the cutters around its smallest toe, blood oozed from the wound I was inflicting, slowly creeping its way down to mix with the blood already drying on the torn soles. The feet were already destroyed, I was surprised it could feel pain at all.

“Answer the question and I’ll heal you,” I said, removing the cutters from the fresh wounds. “I’ll make the pain go away.”

“If I may, Captain,” Hemfain cut in. “Perhaps it’s the wording of the question that needs adjusting.” He turned to the creature and in a firm voice asked, “Where did you come from before The Life Bringer?”

The creature paused its whimpering and seemed to fall into its own mind for a moment. “I-I—” it struggled, trying to remember. It seemed to be warring with itself, fighting through a blockage.

Hemfain caught on as I did and placed his hands on either side of the creature’s head, the loose skin on its jaw flapping as it tossed. Hemfain called his power, the familiar white mist manifesting in his palms. “Where were you born? Where did you live your first life?” He asked.

The creature stilled, its eyes glowed white as Hemfain’s power flowed through its mind. “Minoma,” it said, its tone dull and hollow. “I was born in Minoma.”

“And where did your second life begin?” Hemfain asked. The creature seemed to balk at this as if he’d forgotten that he’d died and been resurrected. The white glow of his eyes flickered as Hemfain fought to keep control over his mind. “Someone, much more powerful than I, has compelled this creature beyond what I can do. I don’t know if we’ll get much more from him.”

It was Minoman. I couldn’t leave it at that, I needed to know more. “We keep trying,” I ordered. “Compel him as I cause pain and maybe it’ll snap him out of his master’s control.”

The Head Mage nodded and we continued.

We learnt that we could heal him, almost back to normal. Hemfain informed me that this meant we were dealing with a highly skilled Necromancer. To bring the corpses back is one thing but to bring them back enough that they can be healed is another.

So we healed him, and then we broke him and then we healed him again.

I lost count of how many times I removed toes and fingers, before stitching them haphazardly back on and healing them only to remove them again, the tower filling with the dead man's screams. It was possible to compel things to not feel pain but, clearly, the thought to do that did not occur to the creature's creator, or they were not strong enough. This was all evidence, evidence to support the idea that the Necromancer, though powerful, was indeed a human.

It wasn't until we moved away from removing toes and up to sawing limbs that the creature divulged more information.

The saw was slick with blood, practically slipping from my hand as I pulled it through the skin and bone of the creature, my muscles screaming with the effort. Hemfain had asked for the fourth time what the Necromancer wanted and it had finally responded, "Isidia's downfall!" It gasped. "The Life Bringer wants you all dead, gone ... all of you." He trailed off, his voice rougher than it had been when we'd started. "Elves," he spat. "The lot of you should die. You only cause trouble. Especially you pale fucks and the Deathbringers in the north!"

"Are the Osirians the next target?" I asked. The light of Hemfain's magic again flickered in the dead man's eyes. I began sawing again, the screams echoing off the walls, filling my head.

"I don't know!" The creature sobbed. "I don't know." It added once I stopped sawing.

"Captain, I don't think we'll get much more from him tonight, or any night," Hamfain said, resting a hand on the saw. I nodded, my breathing too heavy for me to speak. I removed the saw unceremoniously, the creature screamed once more before returning to sobbing.

"Minoman, the Necromancer is most likely human and it's targeting Isidia—possibly all Elfkind," Hemfain concluded, running a hand through his black hair. "This could be war, Captain."

I nodded.

"You must tell the Queen as soon as possible, and Princess Evalina."

"The Princess is aware," I said. Something in my tone must have given the situation away.

“I would advise against informing the Queen of that detail.” The mage and I shared a look.

“I’ll send someone up to remove the body,” I said, reaching for a rag to clean the blood off my arms and face. “I’ll inform the Queen at once.”



I rushed back to my rooms to clean myself more, and change my blood-soaked tunic, before seeking out the Queen, the early dawn sun peeking through the trees. I hadn’t slept and, with the Prince now here, I probably wouldn’t get a chance to. My eyes stung with tiredness, my arms almost limp at my side from exhaustion.

I’d been told the Queen had eaten dinner alone and I wondered why Evalina hadn’t eaten with her mother, why she’d been in the woods alone, but I didn’t want to push my luck with her. She’d been distant, more so than I’d expected. Though it wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if she said the same for me.

It was complicated between us now, and it was both our faults. In trying to do what was best for ourselves, we’d done what was worst for us.

I knocked on Queen Islina’s door before entering. “It’s just me, your majesty,” I called.

“Lorkin?” She had her back to me. “It’s quite early for a visit.” She didn’t turn to face me, just continued writing at her desk before the window.

“I’m sorry, but something’s happened and I had to inform you urgently.” I crossed the room to stand beside her.

“Has something happened to Evalina?” She asked almost frantically.

“No, no, she’s fine, but there was an attack on the palace.” Her eyes widened for a moment and I paused, giving her time to process. Speaking to Islina required patience, it was why I did it and not Evalina.

When she’d calmed, I continued, “I’ve been informed by the Mages it was a Corse—”

“A Necromancer.” She interrupted, her eyes glazed, her mind traveling to some other time.

I waited for her to return again. “We believe so. Hemfain and I have gotten what we could from the creature and, unfortunately, it wasn’t much.”



I paused again, allowing the information to soak in. “The Corse was Minoman in life, and it seems this Necromancer is targeting Isidia, for what reason, we do not know.”

“Humans are a jealous race, it could be anything.” She waved off, uncaring. “We’ll deal with it.”

“Also, Your Majesty, the Osirian Prince has arrived.” At this, she straightened and turned to face me, but her expression was not what I’d expected. I’d thought she would react with fear, or anger, or retreat into her memories so deeply I’d need to send for the mages to calm her, but she was excited, beaming.

“Early? How wonderful.”

“Majesty, should we not send him away in light of last night’s events?”

“No, we mustn’t. And our other plans will proceed as arranged,” she urged, her eyes bright and clear for the first time in a long time. “We need these events to take place now more than ever, but take any other precautions you feel are needed.”

“I have him heavily guarded already.”

“Good. I will break the news to Evalina today. I will need you there, you know how ... explosive she can be.”

I nodded. I’d spent the last sixty years of my life prying the mother and daughter apart when things got explosive. “He’s requested tea with the Princess this afternoon,” I cautioned.

To my surprise, the Queen’s smile only broadened. “Excellent,” she purred.

We shared a look, her eyes softening as she rested a hand on my cheek. I felt my eyes grow wide for a moment before I could compose myself and excused myself from the room.