

Chapter I: A Midnight Sky & A Glowing Moon

There was only one thing on my mind. It was not the pounding rain from the raging storm. Nor the sound of claws of my four legged companion, sloshing and ripping through the gathering mud. My only thought, an all consuming thought, was getting to her before the end.

My days were becoming shorter and the nights much longer. Winter was fast approaching and with it the *Dark Veil*. A beautiful time for my country, to be sure. But also a time of danger and at worst times, death and destruction. The curtain separating the world of the living from *Yomei*, the underworld, would be thin. One would simply just need to tear it with their fingers. The seals put in place centuries ago would weaken. Leaving the opportunity for the stuff of nightmares to enter our realm at their leisure.

That reality was only a month away, a few short weeks. And while we were always prepared, we do so even more now. And that preparation meant sitting on a black throne and listening to the needs and wants of the people I swore to protect, for starters.

I was their king.

“Your grace?” A voice called to me. “Are you alright?”

My attention had faltered, wandering off to the view of the orange, green and yellow tree line just outside of the window. Umbran City was gorgeous this time of year and I could not help but wish that I could step out for a few moments to enjoy it. But this voice broke my trance.

“Hm? Yes, Evyn, I’m alright. Just got a bit distracted.” I smiled. “And drop the formalities, please? We have been friends since grade school.”

Evyn Bae, one of my oldest friends. With her observing and calculating auburn eyes she saw through any illusion, lie and trick. Today she wore her ruby red hair in a careful tail on her head. And the gown that fell over her looked as though it were freshly crafted. The purple and black paired well with her olive skin. In fact I had never seen her look quite this put together in some time.

Her voice morphed into the know it all genius that I knew, loved and hated at the same time.

“Kindly keep your head out of the clouds for a few hours, *Jasper*.”

“On second thought...” I started, hearing the sarcasm and humor in her tone. “Maybe it might be better to keep the formalities going, I can’t say that I like the way you just said my name then.” I laughed.

She rolled her eyes. My playful humor deflecting off of her. There was a thin roll of paper that she twirled around her nimble fingers.

“The list of people and their reasons for an audience. Here.” She shoved it in my face. The edges nearly cutting my cheek.

A groan fell out of my throat. The list of names was never ending. This was going to take it forever it seemed. “We had best get started then I suppose. Where’s Inara?” I asked looking around the vast foyer of the throne room.

“Hmm oh I’m sure that she’s around here somewhere.” Evyn sang in an amused tune.

Inara, my wife and now Queen, was just as close to Evyn as I was. In fact I believed that the two of them were sisters in another life. Always getting into trouble when we were younger and leaving a trail of mayhem in their wake.

“The two of you, I swear... if I have to do this then so does she.” My statement sounded more like a child’s protest when being told to go to bed.

I refused to do any of this without Inara by my side. Playful and childlike she may be, when it came to helping and taking care of others, to ruling a county with kindness and compassion, she was much more suited to it than me. And I needed her with me.

“The queen witch will be along shortly.” Evyn nudged the side of my head, forcing me to sit up straight on my throne. “Look presentable and kingly. Now get to work, King Jasper Luné.”

She gestured for the guards to open the doors of the throne room and within seconds there was a line of more than eighty people in front of me. All with bright smiles and expecting eyes. I much preferred the castle when it was full of people like this. The black banners with their gold lace and shining stars represented the people, while the silver moon stitched above the royal family.

It all came together when everyone was gathered like this. Opening the royal grounds completely was something that mother always wanted. No barriers between us. I can't help but smile seeing her wish fulfilled.

“What can the crown do for you today, sir?” I asked the elderly man stepping in front of me.

But before he could speak the window that held my focus so intently before burst open. The brisk fall air blew through the room. Soft and gentle while the smell of vanilla and a meadow of blooming flowers tickled our noses. And riding that breeze was a surprisingly large creature. It's black fur could have been mistaken for the midnight sky itself. Its whiskers were thin and long, its ears pointed and alert. Sea blue eyes scanned the room it pounced around. I would have terrified, had I not recognized the overgrown feline. As well as the passenger she carried.

A woman that I could find and recognize in the darkest abyss. She jumped off of the beast, gliding down as if she were as light as a feather. Her scent still reeling in her nostrils, swimming in my blood stream. Crystal sparks appeared with every silent step she took on the breeze.

Her flowing, moonlight white hair rested down her back and over her thin shoulders. The black lace dress that she wore was likely a creation of her magick. Yellow stars sparkled all across the strange fabric. Its sleeves crept up to her delicate wrists, its collar twisted around her neck snugly and covered her chest. While the remainder dropped down to her ankles, where shining anklets and bare feet rested.

The silly witch never did enjoy wearing shoes.

A ring, matching my own was wrapped around her finger, twinkling under the sunlight.

Her milky and smooth skin called out for my touch. Her gentle, pink lips were like clouds and they invited my own. And her loving lavender gaze held on tightly to mine. Refusing to let it go. She smiled and suddenly it wasn't the weight of the crown, or gravity keeping me planted on earth. It was her.

Inara Freya-Luné. The ethereal witch and Queen of Umbran. The most beautiful creature in existence. And her heart belonged to me. And mine to her.

A room filled with people, gasping in awe of their queen. Although they've all been used to exhibitions of her magickal abilities for years. It always felt like the first time. The large feline creature was the first to greet me. Pouncing over me and the throne. Showering me with kiss and a mouthful of fur. Her soft pur buzzing in my ears.

“Usagi you overgrown cat.” I chuckled. “Hello there girl.” A motor like song played while I rubbed her belly.

A pair of soft lips brushed my cheek suddenly. “Sorry I’m late, my love.” Her voice was as soft as freshly fallen snow. She sat in the throne next to mine and crossed her legs. Jewelry clinked and sang as she moved as she patted the space by our feet. “Come on fluff ball, nap time.” She laughed at the now yawning cat.

I leaned over to whisper in her ear. “Nice of you to finally join me. Thought I’d have to do this alone. What misadventures were you and my cat up to this time?”

“Tell you after.” She winked. “No sir, what can the crown do for you today hm?”

The sun was beginning to set by the time our business in the throne room had ended. Every citizen that came forward left with grievance satisfied. There was one gentleman, though, who demanded that the crown used our extensive facilities and knowledge of magick to make his family rich. He was quite disgruntled when we denied such a foolish request. Inara waved her finger and replaced his mouth with a zipper and locked it tight. While the guards escorted him out. I hoped the hex would wear off relatively soon.

There was so much to prepare for before winter arrived and now that one task was finished my mind couldn't help but wander back to that fact. Back to what would arrive with the frost. We needed to be strong and I would do everything I could to make sure that we were. I stood up quickly, stretching my limbs, washing away the sleep. Care needed to be taken or I'd risk waking the napping beast at our feet.

"And where are you off to?" Inara asked with a lifted brow.

"It's time for training."

"But it's already gotten so late and I've hardly seen you today!" Her eyebrows furrowed but a smirk playfully tugged at the corners of her lips. "And I still haven't told you what I was up to today."

"You could always come along and train with me. Tell me while you help me work on my magick?" I placed the offer, knowing she'd bite at this line. "You know that I'm hopelessly lost without your guidance."

"Mmm." She rested the tip of her chin in her palm while she pretended to ponder. "Alright alright. Since it's clear that you so desperately need your loving and knowledgeable wife to teach you everything. Come along then."

She bounced from the throne to the archway leading out of the foyer in one sweep. Waiting for me and my normal, regular strides, to catch up. I turned to Evyn, who was was giggling at her playful friend. “Send the soldiers and trainees to the proving grounds, please? They’ll benefit from this lesson.”

“Have fun.” She continued to laugh as she turned away.

Why did have the feeling that these two knew something that I didn’t? Was I always the last to know? My eyes rolled as I jogged over to the waiting witch.

I suppose a bit of fun was waiting for me tonight.