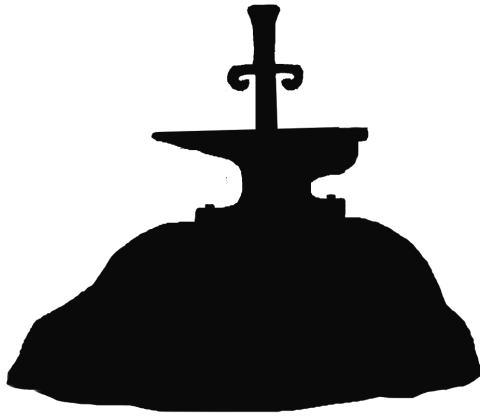


MARCO

*This book is dedicated to the Survivors.  
You know who you are.*

*Book 3 of the Books of Insanity*

# MARCO



*KT PINTO*



*By Light Unseen Media  
Pepperell, Massachusetts*

## **Marco**

Book 3 of the Books of Insanity

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## *Foreword*

This book is not historically accurate. If it were, the reader might start to believe that our kind exists, and that would make things quite difficult for us.

Rumors, shadows, whispers in the night...all are variables used to invoke a predator with supernatural powers. That is all the proof your kind has of our existence and that is all that this book validates.

You will not find names like Celeste, Vanity, Marco and Talia in your textbooks, especially in the context that they are used in these pages. They are fictional. Nothing else needs to be said.

*The Ancient Order of the Crescent Moon*

## PROLOGUE

### *From the Archives of the Ancient Order*

Tell us a tale...or die.”

I don't know what made me step into that circle of mushrooms. After over two thousand years of existence, you'd think I would know better! Or at least that I would have had the common sense to make sure that the mushrooms were devoid of those little black spots...the spots that would tell any occultist worth his salt that this fungi should be given a wide berth. Considering where I wound up after entering the circle, I know there had to have been spots on those mushrooms: big, obnoxious, black spots that I could have seen with my eyes closed.

Where did I wind up, you ask? I wound up in the last place any being, human, animal or supernatural, would want to be: the Great Hall of the Unseelie Court. For those of you that don't remember your Fae Lore, the Unseelie are the nasty ones. Forget little dancing sprites and happy-go-lucky halflings. Disregard the drooling goblins and angry trolls. The Unseelie even go beyond the shadow beasts and fire demons. They are the essence of darkness. They are the intangible fears that haunt your dreams and pick at your soul. To call them evil would simplify the malevolence of their existence. And I was standing in their Great Hall, facing their Queen. Lucky me.

The irony is that I am considered by many to be evil, although I still maintain that all I have done, I did with good reason. I am, after all, insane...but enough about me.

All I could see of the Unseelie Queen were her eyes—two green specks that glowed from deep within a pit of shadows—and even that was too much for me to deal with. I tried to turn away, but I couldn't move. All I could do was stare into the Queen's deadly

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emerald eyes and listen to her pronounce judgment.

“Tell us a tale...or die.”

Her voice sent chills down my spine and caused my breath, such as it is, to stick in my throat. What story could I possibly tell that would entertain this audience? I finally decided I would tell them the story of my life. It was the only thing I could remember accurately—especially since, at that moment, I was seeing it flash before my eyes.

So, in a slightly wavering voice, I began to tell them the tale of Celeste, a part of which you are now holding in your hands. This is not verbatim; I can honestly say that I did not have the presence of mind to be as witty or articulate when standing in the Court of the Dark Fae as when I sat down to write this in the safety of my own home. But the spirit of it remains the same.

Do what you will with this story. Regale your family with bits of it while sitting at the dining room table, scare children with it while on a camping trip, or set it on fire and roast marshmallows over it; it really doesn't matter. In some dark place, on a dark night, the Unseelie Queen listened to my tale and set me free... and that's what truly matters...to me, anyway.

*Celeste Crescentmoon*  
*August 2004*

## *When I Cast Told My Tale...*

*As you may recall, my life wasn't always as glamorous as it is now. I am presumed to be the daughter of a war camp whore and Julius Caesar. Since no one ever challenged my parental claims out loud, for fear of bringing the wrath of Caesar upon them, I was brought up as any bastard child of the Empire should be. I grew up in the war camps, every day becoming more willful, aggressive and strong...in every way turning into a young Italian male except for biologically. Of course, this pretty much made me unmarketable as a potential wife. So I was sent by Mark Antony to Cumpania to learn how to be a lady. A few battles, a rape, some bartering and a kidnapping later I became a priestess of Athena in Greece. It was at this point in my life that I was found by my Sire, Bacchus; he is the one who made me a member of the Bacchant family of vampyres.*

*In my first years as vampyre I met many interesting beings, both human and non. Some I killed, some I Changed, some I let live, and some I couldn't get rid of no matter how hard I tried. Creatures like Marco the Arean, Triad the Artemystic, the Werecat Vanity, the human known as Chryse, and my own sweet Ovos, Talia, Lysander and Dymas all came into my life and changed me for better or worse.*

*At some point in time I decided being just a vampyre wasn't enough for me. I convinced the humans that I was a goddess and started my own cult, complete with priestesses, orgies, and sacrifices. Sadly for me, this new status in life caught the attention of the Gathering, the leaders of vampyric society, who insisted that I join them in Greece. It was there I learned that Members of the Gathering had their fingers in more political scenarios—human and non—than I had ever imagined. Things like Rome burning to the ground and the Christians being persecuted were done at their command. It was during one of these Gatherings that I had a vision I couldn't hide from them about Pompeii being destroyed, and when the event actually happened they tried with their twisted logic to make me the cause of Vesuvius' eruption.*

*That was when I decided to cause some damage of my own. I didn't kill them, of course, but I made them scared. Admittedly,*

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*it probably wasn't the most intelligent thing I could have done. Because of my actions I, with Marco and Talia, had to find refuge in Carthage, where we made arrangements to flee to the north, beyond the borders of the Roman Empire.*

*It was there that I reunited with Vanity, much to the displeasure of Marco. The Aerean had never trusted him, and the Werecat's sudden appearance after we had seen him drowned did not do anything to instill trust anew. In fact, Marco went out of his way to needle Vanity, in the hopes that the latter would attack, giving the vampyre cause to kill him. We also met a vampyre of the Lokai Family who claimed to be Satan (and there has never been anything to cause me to doubt him). Since I don't place value on any religion beyond mythological—except ones that called me goddess, of course—I wouldn't have cared if he called himself Ezekiel, Job, or even John the Baptist. But Marco was devout to the verge of zealotry, so I was surprised that he took the devil more in stride than the return of the Were.*

*It was also beyond the Roman borders that I learned of the burden that had been placed on the Werecat—namely me—by his family as retribution for him being a half-breed: his mother had been a Fairy, his father a Were. When I stopped his family from whipping him senseless as punishment for “letting” me leave Rome, Vanity was taken forcibly by the Werecats into the lands of the Fae. With my confidence heightened from once again being worshipped as goddess, and with my companions begrudgingly at my side, we went into Fairyland after him with minimal hesitation.*

*After barely surviving the Unseelie Court, and finding out that we had lost two hundred years of human time while we were only a short time in Faeland, we—sans Marco—decided to return to Rome to see if I was still being hunted by the Gathering. Lysander and Talia, always in disagreement as if in the middle of some vampyric sibling rivalry, were forced at my insistence to join assets and host a masquerade ball in my honor, smoothing my way back into society again. I was welcomed back into the Gathering, but an attack orchestrated by one of the Members nearly killed Vanity and I found myself once more in the lands of the Fae, this time in the Court of the Seelie.*

*Determined to see me dead and Vanity tortured, the Fae offer me to him to do with as he wished with no repercussions. Vanity did not treat me as they expected, and we found ourselves naked in a room surrounded by armed soldiers, their swords drawn and pointed at us.*

*Here is where I had paused in my tale.*

## PART I

### *The Castle*

**D**o you believe in a higher power? Someone up above that watches your every move and judges your thoughts and actions?

I believe that they exist, and they're laughing their asses off.

I mean, how can one entity—vampyre though I am—get into so much trouble, unless someone up there is pulling the strings for their own amusement?

Why else would I go from having amazing sex in the middle of the Fae world, being watched by a host of fairies, to standing in a dark castle surrounded by bare blades and angry men? Pure coincidence? Freak accident? I say the gods had gotten tired of watching the Roman Empire fall in on itself and decided to make my life miserable simply as a distraction from the tedium.

In fact, this was actually one of those rare moments in my long life where I can honestly say it was no fault of mine that I was in this particular mess. I will admit that it was my idea to visit the Fae world because I was bored with life in the Eastern Empire, and I'm also the one who convinced the fairycat Vanity to come with me. But just because I wanted more excitement in my life didn't mean the Fae Queen had to transport us to only the gods knew where.

Being that only the gods knew where I was, I'm saying that this was their fault. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

To make matters worse, both Vanity and I were naked; that sometimes happens when you're in the middle of lovemaking. Not that I usually have any qualms about being naked in front of strangers, it's just very difficult to hide any weapons on you comfortably.

Luckily, I had a trick or two up my sleeve, so to speak. If I wanted, I could call forth weaponry—or anything else, for that

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matter—from a different plane of existence. I wiggled my fingers slightly, trying to think of what would possibly help us...

*Don't do it.* Vanity's voice resonated in my head. It's in situations like this that telepathy really comes in handy.

*Why not?*

*What exactly do you think will help in this situation that won't cause us to be cut into a million pieces?*

"Marco!"

I felt the fairy Werecat jump slightly at the sound of my voice. "I don't think you can conjure him..."

He fell silent as the soldiers started parting like the Red Sea—not that I'm speaking from first hand experience—and Marco walked towards us.

Marco was a scary sight under normal circumstances. Six-foot-tall in a world of five-eighths, the former Roman general's broad shoulders and massive arms made it look like the only reason he existed was to kill. Add to that my knowledge that he was a vampyre with all the strength, speed, and endurance inherent to our kind, as well as the extra powers the members of the Arean Family had, and the minor detail that I didn't know if he was friend or foe at this point...needless to say, I wasn't exactly thrilled to see him.

I leaned back against the six-foot-two Werecat, who put a protective hand on my shoulder.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

"None whatsoever."

Marco stopped about five feet away, giving Vanity a harsh look before speaking. "Will none of you lads give my sister a cloak with which to cover herself?" he asked, his tone rejecting all negative responses.

"Your sister?" one of the men repeated as a dozen cloaks were handed to me, "But Cai, she appeared out of thin air!"

"Are you sure, Balin?" Marco replied, "Or did she suddenly appear once you took your nose out of your mug of mead?"

There was a low murmur through the crowd. "But Cai," another man objected, "surely you don't think all of us could have missed such an amazing specimen walking into our hall!"

"I think you've all gone so long without female company, you wouldn't know a beautiful woman if she came up and..." he shot me a quick look, "...bit you."

A ripple of laughter went through the men and they relaxed, but only lowered their weapons slightly. A man with natty brown hair and amazing green eyes tapped Vanity's shoulder with the

flat of his sword. “What of this one, Cai?”

I saw a sparkle dance across Marco’s eyes; that was not a good sign. “He is a stranger to me.”

Vanity’s hand tightened on my shoulder, causing me to wince. “What?” he growled.

Marco ignored the Werecat. “We must secure him until we know if he’s friend or foe.”

“But, Brother,” I said, still trying to figure out what was going on, “isn’t my word that he is friend enough for you?”

“With all the trouble you’ve been getting yourself into?” Marco replied, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, my dear Morgan, but I can’t depend on your judgement.”

I raised an eyebrow. The last time I had been called anything close to “Morgan” was when I was “Morrigan” in the savage lands of Britannia. Was Marco trying to tell me that that’s where I was again?

The Aerean held out his hand. “Now, step away from him, Sister, and let the men do as I tell them.”

I glanced back at Vanity; his eyes had turned a dark red. I gave him a sympathetic look. *You may want to try looking a little more human*, I silently cautioned.

I touched his temple lightly and he closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were a deep brown...still not human by a long shot, but it was better than the flames that were there a moment before.

I felt Marco’s hand on the back of my neck. Although the men around him saw it as a brotherly gesture, I knew it was a message to both me and Vanity: *Do as I say, or I will break her neck.*

“Come, Sister.”

I hesitated for a moment, and felt his long fingers tighten against my skin. “At least bear in mind that he is a friend of mine and he should be treated accordingly.”

Marco chuckled. “As you wish, Morgan.” He stepped back, pulling me with him. “Lads, please put my sister’s friend in one of the better rooms in our dungeon.”

The laughter was real and hearty this time, and they began leading Vanity away. The fairycat glanced back at us, but stayed passive.

“Marco,” I hissed, “his clothing.”

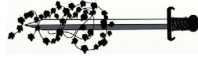
His fingers flexed slightly. “I’m not the one who lost the pussy’s clothes.”

My eyes narrowed, but I didn’t respond.

Marco sighed. “Men, please get our guest some clothing.” He

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saw I was still glaring and sighed again. “And treat him like a...a royal prisoner.” He then turned me around so I was facing him completely. “Now come, Sister. You and I have a lot of catching up to do.”



“Would you like to explain this?” Marco asked, indicating my half-nakedness. We were sitting in his private study, about five floors above the Great Hall.

I waved my arm, encompassing the room. “Would you like to explain all this...Cai?”

He smiled slightly. “What would you like to know?” He sat in a large red chair, facing the fireplace. (Of course, I didn’t know that’s what the big fire pit in the wall was called at the time. I actually continued to call it “fire-pit-in-the-wall” for quite some time until Marco told me what this interesting creation of his was called. Granted it did take up a lot less space than the traditional pile of wood in the middle of the room, and there was less of a chance of a drunken soldier tripping and falling in. But the obvious planning and labor that had to go into creating such a thing in any building meant that it was something the much-slower-thinking-humans wouldn’t invent until centuries later. In this time period of my life, fireplaces were only seen where Marco resided...and any dwelling of my own, of course.)

It took me a couple of moments to pull my attention away from the fire-pit-in-the-wall and say, “How about you start with your name change and go from there?”

Marco shrugged. “Most of these men are of Roman blood. My true name might still be known by some.”

It wasn’t a conceited statement. Even after all of these centuries, the name Marco DelaSangue still packed some power. Besides, it was well known that Marco hadn’t had any legitimate children; why give them a reason to ask more questions than were necessary?

“And you chose the name Cai because...?”

“Because that was the name of the lad who died in my arms.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “In your arms, or by your hand?”

“Both, actually. He had been mortally wounded and his younger brother, Arturus, fetched me to help.”

“Why you?”

Marco shrugged again. “Arturus had been secretly visiting my cottage since he was a young lad. He and Cai had been on

their own for almost a decade and Cai just couldn't manage their farm if Arturus went to a tutor during normal hours. So when Cai was asleep, Arturus would come to me for instruction in philosophy, history, theology, mathematics, sword fighting, battle stratagem...everything a young boy should know."

"And no one noticed when you took Cai's place?"

Marco smirked. "We didn't stay long after Cai's accident. We went to another village and started life over as siblings."

I walked around the room slowly, not really looking at anything in particular, but not looking at Marco either. I couldn't picture the Roman powerhouse playing guardian to a young orphan...especially a *human* orphan. It was a situation I couldn't fathom, so I didn't bother. "And how did that turn into a dilapidated castle filled with scruffy barbarians?"

"They aren't barbarians," Marco snapped. "They're Roman soldiers."

I raised my brows. "Just because they were born to Romans doesn't make them Roman soldiers."

"They're descendants of some of the finest soldiers in the Empire."

"Well, so am I, but that doesn't make me a warrior. But never mind that," I said before he could respond. "Why are they following you and living in dirt?"

"They are following me because that's what men do. As for the dirt," his eyes narrowed at me, as if I had done something wrong. "That's how poor they are."

"Don't give me that look," I snapped. "I didn't make them poor."

He walked over to me and grabbed my shoulders hard. "You show up here, all primed and perfumed, and have the audacity to talk about these men as if they're worms?"

I tapped his hand with my finger; he was extremely close to breaking bones. "Um...ow."

"Tell me you are going to treat these men with respect."

"Fine. I'll treat them with respect."

He applied more pressure; I knew I was going to have to drink some blood to heal from this. "Now try saying that without rolling your eyes."

My lips curled. "Look, Marco, you can rip my arm out of its socket if you choose to. That's not going to make me respect a bunch of ruffians whose only visible skills are to point weaponry at me and reek to the high heavens."

Marco became very still, then let go of me. "Interesting

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argument, Child.”

“Thank you.”

He turned and walked across the room. “Of course, you could have just taken me at my word.”

“Yeah, well, you could have just left Vanity alone instead of throwing him in the dungeon.”

He paused for a moment, then continued walking to a large trunk nestled in the corner of the room. “Would you like some refreshment?”

I moved my arms slowly. “Refreshment or healing potion?”

Marco turned to me and smiled. “Would you like a little of both?”

“Both sounds good.” I didn’t return the smile.

Marco’s face turned hard at my solemn look. “How about we start over?” He stood with a wine carafe in each hand.

“Fine.” I still didn’t get it...was this the Marco of old: my confidant, my teacher, my protector, or had he completely gone off the deep end? “So, you raised Arturus as your brother.”

Marco nodded as he filled up the chalices. “You will be impressed when you meet him, Celeste. He would make any Roman father proud.”

“So, why isn’t he in Rome, impressing people?”

He handed me a chalice; the wine had the sweet smell of fresh blood. “The lad’s destiny is not in Rome.”

“You think his destiny is here? With these...men?”

Marco nodded. “It’s going to be. And you, my darling sister, could not have come at a more perfect time.”

My eyes narrowed; I knew scheming when I saw it. “And why is that?”

The Arean leaned against his desk and ran his finger around the lip of his cup. It was an incredibly sexy pose, and I believe he knew it. Sex appeal is always a great tactic to get me to do something. “Arturus is a good man. A little too good, in fact. His pure heart and gentle soul entice nothing but good will from others.”

“And this is bad because...?”

“Because a good man makes a good King, but it doesn’t make a legend.”

I tilted my head at him. “Putting aside the reasons why you think he in particular should be a legend, which is something we can talk about later, tell me exactly what makes a man a legend.”

“It’s two things, actually. One is that he has to bring prophecies to fruition, and the other is that he has to have a formidable enemy.” He leaned forward with a wicked grin. “Guess who I

think would be perfect to play that role.”

I smiled. “My dear Cai, you now have my undivided attention.”



Before I could take down King and country, a King and his kingdom had to be created. Marco had been researching Britannia’s myths, trying to find ways to “prove” that Arturus was the chosen King. He had found quite a few, but most weren’t feasible even for creatures of our resourcefulness.

While planning Arturus’ road to greatness, I decided that I could no longer live in such a pigsty. Two nights of living in clutter, filth and male body odor was enough for me. I convinced Marco to ride with me to the nearest village to recruit maids, servants, cooks and—seeing that I was still only wearing a cloak tied at the waist with some rope—seamstresses. It was much more difficult than it sounded, especially since we had to rely solely on Marco’s funds, which were rapidly dwindling. Becoming self-sufficient was something else we had to worry about, but my pride insisted on getting a wardrobe first.

With the scant amount of money allotted to me, I was able to get material for two plain garments. Marco, meanwhile, hired a skeleton staff to handle the day to day doldrums of the castle.

“That’s really unacceptable,” he complained as we rode back to the castle, “We need more gold.”

“At least it buys us a week. Maybe a month if we make some sacrifices.”

He shot me a look. “And then what, Child?”

“And then...” I paused as an idea started to form, “...the money Talia sent will be here and we’ll have something to work with.”

“Your Ovo is sending you money?”

“She will as soon as I tell her to.” I reached my mind across Europe and sought out my sweet vampyric child, who resided at my manor in Greece. *Talia?*

*Milady? Where are you? I could hear the relief and worry in my Ovo’s “voice.” Are you all right?*

*I’ve been better.*

*Are you still in Greece? What happened?*

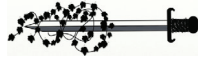
*I don’t have time to tell you the whole story right now, my love. Suffice it to say the Fae had their hands in my latest adventure.*

*Is Lord Vanity with you?*

I visibly winced; I hadn’t given the Werecat much thought since Marco and I started scheming. *He is safe...now Precious,*

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*listen to me. This is what I need you to do...*



It had taken more than a week for the money from Talia to get to me, but not as long as it normally would have in the Dark Ages. Every vampyric household has Bloodslaves: humans made stronger, faster and more resilient than normal by drinking our blood. Talia sent three of them out right after she “spoke” with me, each carrying a hefty sum of money and vials of blood to keep them better than human. They covered much more terrain in a day than normal humans could, and with little need for sustenance or sleep, they arrived only a short time after things had gotten desperate at the castle. The sacrifices I had mentioned to Marco that we would have to make to survive did of course include me killing off a few of the hired staff and having their comrades unwittingly prepare the human meat for meals. Once out of its casing, food from a human tends to look the same as from any other animal. The victims’ savings of course went back into our coffers to pay the remaining staff. Marco was unaware of this ploy of mine; for all of his vampyric ways, the Arean was sometimes hampered by morals left in him from when he was human. I, thankfully, did not have that problem.

I stared at the pile of new clothes on my bed. Talia had been regularly sending me my percentage of the profit from our Family’s shipping company, which was run by Lysander, one of my other Ovos. It was a tidy sum, but not enough to take care of all the things the castle needed. That’s why I needed the new wardrobe. There was one thing I did really well that could make me a lot of money, but wearing the rags that we had originally purchased wasn’t going to get me the cash I wanted.

All I needed was a place to run my enterprise. I could not work out of the castle; I had a reputation to uphold there—phony as it was—and Marco and the others would frown on my endeavors. But the village people didn’t know me from Eve (although, most assuredly, by this point in history she was only a pile of dust) which kept Marco and his men’s names out of my business.

I found a building for my establishment rather quickly: the village pub was in the center of the main square with good traffic flow and two stories of sturdy-looking wood. The problem was that someone already owned the building. The bartender lived in the front rooms on the second floor with his wife and five children. They all worked in the bar, and it didn’t take me long to

figure out that not all was perfect in this family dynamic. The middle child—Gillie, by name—was obviously the family outcast. While his siblings wore clothes of rich fabrics, Gillie was dressed in little more than rags. The sweet words and voice that his parents used for the other children were not used on him. He was the one who mucked the barns and cleaned the vomit, threw out the trash and dumped the privies.

He was ripe for the picking.

I made my move on the second night. Gillie had just been yelled at by his father about some miniscule transgression when I walked over to the bar.

“Excuse me,” I purred, “but is there someone here who can brush down my horse? He’s filthy.”

The father smiled. “Of course, Milady. I have someone right here.” His eyes bore into his son. “Gillie. Do it.”

With a sigh, the young boy followed me out of the bar. He stayed silent until we started walking past the stables. “Where’s your horse, Milady?”

“Horse?” I responded with a laugh, “What horse?”

“Milady, if you don’t need me, I have to be getting back...”

I smirked. “So your father can yell at you some more?”

Gillie paused, watching me with a caution that was very rare in humans. “Then what do you need me for?”

“Well, you see Gillie, I’m thinking of opening a business, and I believe you’re the one to help me do it.”

“Me?” He laughed. “How could I possibly help you?”

I turned slowly so I was facing the pub. “Well, I need someplace to run my business...”

He sneered. “And you think I have any say in what goes on in that place? Do you know how many people would have to die in order for me to own that building?”

“No, I don’t.” I leaned forward and bared my fangs. “Why don’t you tell me, and I’ll see what I can do...”



It only took a couple of months for my enterprise to start booming. Gillie’s family—having been invited to the manor of a Roman noble—left him in charge until their return which, of course, never happened. I had easily trained two of the waitresses in their new profession. The third—a rather large, older woman—I gave the honor of being the receptionist. Basically, I told her that none of our clients could get what they wanted without

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going through her first. I also told her that bribery—within reason—was an acceptable way to pad her wages.

Once the women began making me money, I started traveling to other towns, in search of new employees. By the end of the month, word of my business venture had preceded me, and people in the larger cities were waiting for my arrival, both to be hired and to be patrons.

Money started coming in by the wagonload. After business expenses, there was still more than enough to clothe, feed, and entertain Marco's soldiers, refurbish the stables and outer buildings, repair many of the rooms in the castle, and bring some of my priestesses from Greece to tend to my needs.

The men never asked where the money came from, although it was obvious that Marco had his suspicions. I caught him many times looking from the feast laid out in front of him to me a few seats down, his eyes narrowing.

Arturus couldn't stop complimenting me on my talent in keeping a castle livable and a staff well organized. Any time one of the men mentioned the well-needed bath he'd had or the power of his favorite stallion, Arturus would make them acknowledge my part in their fine living. While usually this would cause animosity, I was Marco's—and therefore Arturus'—sister. They would have thanked me on Arturus' urging even if they were eating swill and wearing rags.

Beyond these instances, there wasn't really much to say about Arturus. Marco was correct: he was a good man, and good men tend not to be very entertaining. But he did have the hearts and loyalty of his men and—Marco was right—there was a King inside that mild-mannered soldier. But a legend? I didn't see it.

His knights were not the most virtuous of men, and many an evening I found them looking for pleasure from my ladies; a few times they had to be escorted out by my bouncers. Since weaponry and armor were not allowed in my House, my village muscle was an equal, if not more powerful, match for the soldiers. It made me wonder what made Arturus' men worthy to wear the armor.

Since I didn't leave my office very often, there was little chance that the men would see me in a house of ill repute. Usually one of my women would let me know of the soldiers' arrival so I could assign women to tend to their needs, and have my bouncers at the ready...and so I knew to use my private exit instead of the one that led to the common room.

But one night, the inevitable happened: Gawaine, angry about

a fumbled tryst with a milkmaid, came into my House drunk and armed, demanding to screw the Madam.

“I want the best lay in this hellhole!” he bellowed; I heard him clearly through my office door. “And the best bitch here would be the Madam, because she’s the one who taught you how to fuck! Where is she?”

Silence met his words, then I heard a startled scream.

“Someone tell me where that bitch is, or you will be sprayed with this whore’s blood!”

I stood up angrily and grabbed my cloak on the way out the door. I stormed down the hallway, yanking the hood of my cloak up as I neared the common room. Gawaine had little Terese by the hair, his blade pressing against her throat. I swallowed my anger as I looked upon this madman. His brown hair—clean now, but still as wild as the first time I saw him—was like a mane around his head, and his dark green eyes were glazed, unfocused.

I felt a wave of desire wash over me. I was going to tame this madman, whether he wanted to be tamed or not.

“You are looking for the Madam of the House?” I asked quietly, forcing him to focus on my words.

He turned to me and squinted, trying to see my features. “I want to buy her services,” he growled.

I saw Gillie reaching for the sword he had behind the bar; Terese was his favorite. “And you believe threatening her employee is going to curry her favor?”

He held Terese tighter. “She’s just a little whore. I am a Roman knight.”

“I see.” I felt my anger rekindle at his words. “Follow me, please.”

He pushed little Terese away and noisily followed me down the hallway. I opened the door to my office and let him enter first, locking it behind me as he looked around the empty room.

He turned angrily to me. “Where is sh—”

His body hit the far wall after my fist connected with his chin. I jumped on top of him, my knee pinning his left leg down as his body slid to the floor. The hood of my cloak fell back as I punched again, missing his head by inches as he turned to me.

I felt, rather than saw, his elbow flying towards my chest. I rolled with the hit, landing on my side, my hips still pinning him to the ground.

“Now that wasn’t very Roman of you,” I huffed.

I watched his amazing eyes focus. “Morgan? What are you... are you the Madam?”

He glanced around the room, as if not believing what was going on, before refocusing on me.

“Yes, I am,” I said, untangling myself from both him and my cloak. “Do you still want to see if this bitch is the best lay in the House?”

He stood up slowly, unconsciously rubbing his shoulder. “You’re the Madam?” he whispered. “What will Arturus say?”

“Nothing,” I said, my eyes narrowing, “because you’re not going to tell him. Not if you’ve grown used to your comfortable lifestyle, that is.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning where exactly do you think the money comes from to pay for your horse and your food and your clothes? Do you believe it grows on trees?”

Gawaine watched me walk to my desk before responding. “So, everything we own is tainted?”

“No, everything you own is everything you own. The money I make from here I send to my more legitimate businesses elsewhere in the world. They turn that money into profit, which they then send back to me to use for the castle.” I put my hands on my desk and leaned forward. “You don’t think I’d let my brothers’ hands or souls touch anything unclean, do you?”

“But what about your hands?” Gawaine implored. “Your soul?”

I smiled softly. “Trust me when I tell you that my soul has been in disrepair for quite some time. Providing for my brothers and their men is a small step towards redemption.”

It was all bullshit. The money I made from the House went right into my pocket, then right to the marketplace. What entrepreneur would actually go through all that nonsense I had spewed? But Gawaine believed it and agreed to keep my secret. To pay him for his discretion, I asked him to be my Champion.

Then I had to explain to him what I meant by that.

“When there is a challenge—a joust, a duel, a battle—you will be fighting for my honor.”

Gawaine’s brow furrowed. “How does this help me?”

“Fighting for the honor of Arturus’ sister? The only thing loftier than that is being Arturus’ wife’s champion.” I shrugged. “And that just leads to complications.”

The poor knight was even more confused. “Wouldn’t Arturus be his wife’s champion...whoever she may be?”

I shook my head and crossed my legs. “How could Arturus choose his wife, who is not of his blood, over his sister, who is?”

“But you have me...”

I sighed. “No, you’re not getting it...let’s not use Arturus as an example. Let’s say a knight has three sisters, a mother, and a wife. Who does he champion?”

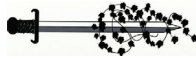
“If he picks one,” Gawaine said, understanding, “then he insults the others.”

“Exactly.” I smiled; that had taken longer than I had expected. “So, if you’d like, I will have Arturus name you my Champion at the next official gathering.”

“In front of everyone?” Gawaine beamed; if the knights had anything in common, it was their egos.

“Of course in front of everyone,” I laughed. “An honor such as this shouldn’t be kept a secret.”

Gawaine sat there in silence, his eyes growing wide as he envisioned himself being named Champion in front of his peers. I was pretty certain that his concerns over my night job had been sufficiently erased.



With money coming in at a steady pace, it was time for us to plan Arthur’s legendary future. Marco and I had been researching for months and months, trying to figure out which tales and prophecies could actually be done in real life to prove to the world that Arthur (I had sufficiently modified his old, obviously Roman name into one a little more savage-land-friendly) was the blessed King of Britannia. There were many tales that I knew could be done, but for most of them we were going to need help.

Any free time I had was spent trying to convince Marco to let Vanity go free. I hadn’t forgotten my precious Werecat and stood for hours every night speaking to him through the dungeon door. I say speaking to him because he refused to respond to my words. I verified with the guards that he was well-fed and insisted that he receive a few sunlight hours outdoors, mainly with the hope that he would take advantage of the situation and make his escape.

But he didn’t and I couldn’t understand why.

I had asked Marco numerous times to let the Werecat go, but he stubbornly held his ground. The Arian’s dislike of the fairycat made it almost impossible to sway his mind. I think part of me hoped I would catch him off-guard one night and he would agree to my demands, but it was not happening. I finally decided not to mention it again because it just set a bad tone for the rest of

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the conversation.

Besides, I had something else to ask of him.

He was sitting at his desk almost hidden by the pile of papers he was working on. When he saw me in the doorway, I would swear a smile touched his lips before his face became a stoic mask once more. "Is it that time of the night again, Sister?"

I grinned at him; he called me "sister" as a lover used a pet name. I don't think he realized his voice took on that tone when he spoke to me. It was intriguing and something I stored in the back of my mind for future use.

"Unless you are too busy for me."

He smiled; we go through this ritual every night. "I am never too busy for you, Morgan."

I stepped into the room and shut the door, then hurried over to him. "Marco, I think I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"Arthur's ascension. I have the story that will make Arthur King and legend."

Marco pushed his paperwork out of the way. "Show me."

"Show you what?"

"The story you found."

I laughed. "I didn't bring it with me! Do you know how many scrolls and writings and tablets I would have to carry up here?"

He stood and walked over to a table with a few carafes of wine on it. "So, tell me this great tale of heroism."

"It's not really a heroic tale. The next King of England must pull a sword from a magical stone."

"That's all?"

"Well, you've got to visualize it a little better. We're not talking about any old rock and knife here."

"What kind of rock and knife *are* we talking about?"

"Well, a magical sword, of course," I paused for a moment as the idea formed in my mind. "One given by the Fae."

Marco folded his arms across his chest. "And how exactly are we going to get the Fae to give Arthur a sword?"

I tapped my finger against my lips. "Well...it doesn't have to actually be the Fae...we can just...make it look like something otherworldly gave it to him."

"How?"

"How..." I paced the room slowly.

Marco watched me for a couple of moments. "Do you always go into plans half-assed..."

"The lake," I replied as if he hadn't spoken. "It can come out

of the lake!”

“Swords don’t just float to the tops of lakes, Mor—Celeste.”

I stared at him for a few moments. “I think you’re getting way too deep into this Cai persona, my friend. You’re not even thinking like a vampyre anymore!”

“Running a castle isn’t as easy as it looks.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Do you see that pile of paper on my desk? That’s just from today.”

I glanced at the pile. “Don’t you have any assistants?”

“No one can do this as well as I can.”

I laughed at him. “What happened to that logic that always guided you?” I asked, taking his mug of wine from him. “Do you think it’s going to get easier once Arthur is King? Once he’s famous? Once his knights obtain their own fame as well?”

“Why would his knights have fame?”

“Dear gods!” I downed the wine and slammed the mug on the table. “Are you daft? How can Arthur become legendary if those around him are unknown?”

He stared at me for a few moments, then filled the mug again. “Have I really been that oblivious?”

“I don’t know about in the past but you certainly are being so now.”

He dropped into the nearest chair and sighed. “How do I go about getting assistants without killing them for their incompetence?”

“I can’t believe *I’m* telling *you* this, but that’s what patience is for.” I shrugged. “Besides, you’d only have to deal with the incompetence until Arthur becomes King. Then you’ll have hordes of lackeys eager to do your dirty work. Which won’t happen unless we can create a fairy sword...”

“How is the sword going to both come from the lake and be in a rock at the same time?”

“I’m not certain...” I watched his face to gauge his reaction to my next words. “Which is why I need to call on an old friend to help us out.”

“Which old friend?” he asked warily.

I smiled. “Why, Satan, of course.”

## PART II

### *The Victims*

Satan is a vampyre from the Lokai Family who we met the first time we were in the Savage Lands. He was lonely and we were bored, so we joined together and caused havoc across what had been left of the Roman Empire. He was my friend, advisor, and confidant, and I had somehow managed to leave him in Greece.

But that was in the past, and I knew that he would come back to Britannia if I asked him. The problem was that Marco might not have wanted the embodiment of Biblical evil helping Arthur to become legend. So, being that this was the Arean's grand production, I had to let him decide if he wanted Lucifer's help.

"Why Satan?" Marco asked. "Why not one of your Ovos?"

"Because we need someone who will have his own opinion and ideas," I said, thinking about my vampyric children, "which leaves my darling Talia out of the running. Lysander really shouldn't be taken away from the trading company, and Dymas is in a pretty good strategic position for us living by Hadrian's wall."

Marco nodded. "Very true on all points."

"Besides, you get along with Satan as well as you get along with anyone. And you value his opinion. That really can't be said about a lot of people."

The Arean rubbed his chin. "And who would we say he is?"

"A business associate from the former Empire," I said with a shrug. "That's pretty easy to remember compared to the other stories we're going to be telling."

"Do you know how to contact him?"

"He's still living in the woods between my property and my Sire's. At least, that's what he said in his last missive to me."

"You've been communicating with him?"

I stared at Marco for a moment, unblinking. "Was I not supposed to?"

“No...I mean...” He sighed. “I just don’t see you as the corresponding type.”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere with little income and big ideas. Even if I didn’t need a connection to the outside world, I would still need the money owed to me, and someone to be my eyes and ears in Greece.”

Marco poured himself another cup of wine. “If the Lokai is here, won’t you then be eyeless and earless in Greece?”

“His are not the only body parts that I have there,” I answered with a smile. “So, are you saying that you approve of Lucifer traveling here?”

“You mean you haven’t already invited him?”

I rolled my shoulders. “It’s your party, Milord. I’m just a guest here.”

A hint of a smile played on his lips. “An uninvited guest, if I remember correctly.”

I walked over and took his wine once more. “Uninvited,” I said, looking at him over the rim of the mug, “but not unwanted.”

“No,” he agreed, “not unwanted.”

“Good, then I’m off to invite Satan to help us make a legend.”

Marco watched me walk towards the door. “You forgot something, Celeste.”

I paused and looked at him, confused. “Did I?”

“You forgot to plead for the release of the pussy.”

I bit my tongue to hold back the snide comment that was about to escape. “Why would I? You’re not going to say yes.”

“You never know,” he answered coyly. “I may say yes one day.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and scrutinized him, then I sighed. “Fine. Marco, will you please let Vanity out of his prison?”

He gave me a genuine smile. “No.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth. “Very good! Glad we had a chance to talk!” I drawled, turning towards the doors again.

“Why do you want him released?”

“Why don’t you want to release him?”

“Why should I?”

“Is this whole conversation going to be in questions?”

Marco’s face became stony. “He hasn’t proven worthy of my trust yet.”

“And how is he going to do that? By not escaping? He’s done that. Even when...” I bit my lip, deciding I had said enough.

Marco finished my thought. “Even when you convinced the soldiers to let him have some fresh air during the day?”

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I thought about denying it, but to what end? “Yes, even then. But he hasn’t left the guards’ sight. Doesn’t that say something?”

“Yes. It says that there’s a reason why he won’t leave here. That sends up a warning signal to me.”

“Marco, he’s here because of me!”

“I know,” the Arean growled, “and until I know why he has such an interest in you, he will stay where he is.”

“Why he has...” My eyes widened in realization. “That’s right! You don’t know!”

Marco’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what?”

“Oh, we cleared up that whole mess a while ago.”

“Oh, we *did*, did *we*?” He folded his arms across his chest. “And what did *we* find out?”

“We found out he was having...changing problems.”

Marco scowled. “He’s a *Werecoat*. ‘Changing problems’ is a bit vague. What problem did he have, exactly?”

“Puberty,” I replied. “He’s over it now.”

“Is he?” the Arean sneered. “Then by all means, let him out.”

“Really?”

“No.”

I snarled. “Fine. I’m going hunting.”

“For deer, right, Morgan?”

I smiled as I opened the door. “Of course, dear Brother. What else?”

“Maybe you should take someone with you for...”

“A snack?”

Marco’s eyes narrowed. “Protection. I rarely understand your jokes, *Sister*.”

I noticed he emphasized the last word as a warning. “Don’t worry, Cai. One day you may obtain the sophistication to understand all that I say.”

Marco’s lip twitched. “Go find your...champion. Take him with you.”

“Yeah, when are we going to have that ceremony to make that champion thing all official?”

“First we need a King. Then we’ll honor his champions.”



I stood at the edge of the woods, watching the humans go about their mundane business. The town had had an influx of people since Marco started organizing the area. Many of the warlords of Britannia had lost power because they couldn’t provide a

steady trade business, which made food, weaponry, and money pretty scarce. So people started looking for someplace better.

That gave me a lot of new prey to hunt.

I shifted the quiver of arrows on my back and walked closer to the village. I was wearing a knee-length tunic with soft leather boots, my hair up in a high bun. It wasn't the most appropriate attire for the sister of the future King, but it was the only outfit comfortable enough for me to hunt in, no matter what type of animal the prey was.

I watched the people pushing their way through the crowded streets, wondering what kind of meal I was in the mood for. A week before I had had an old man by the water. He was a little bitter...in taste, I mean, although I'm pretty sure he was also upset that I was killing him. Anyway, I was in the mood for something sweet. The problem was that the sweeter they were, the younger they were, which made them much more difficult to hunt. The adults tended to keep a keen eye on their young.

But there was always one...

"Morgan?"

I closed my eyes and sighed, envisioning the sweet little treats running away, back to their safe little homes... "Good evening, Gawaine."

"Why are you out here without a chaperone?"

I gritted my teeth and reeled in my temper. "I...was looking for you. One of the maids told me that you were headed in this direction."

"But you shouldn't have come looking for me without someone else escorting you."

"If I had someone else escorting me, then why would I be looking for you?"

Gawaine paused, trying to figure out my logic.

I sighed again, knowing I was going to have to settle for a lesser animal that night. "So come then, Sir Gawaine! Let's go hunt!"

"Hunt?" Gawaine repeated. "You're out to hunt?"

I stared at him, then looked down at my outfit. "Was my bow not hint enough?"

He indicated his own clothing. "I'm not dressed for the hunt."

"Well then, you have a problem, don't you?" I smiled slightly. "Because I'm going hunting."

"Then let's go back to the castle so I can change into some hunting clothes..."

My eyes widened. "Are you mad? Do you know how difficult it was for me to get out of there in the first place?" I glanced

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around. “How about I sit right in that tavern over there and wait for you?”

“I’m not sure...”

“I promise, I will not move from that spot.”

Gawaine ran his tongue across his lips. “All right. I will escort you there now, and you will stay there until I come fetch you. Agreed?”

“Of course.”

I didn’t stay in the tavern, although no one saw me leave. Using my vampyric powers, I turned myself invisible. Gawaine had seated me in the darkest corner of the tavern with a mug of ale and gave strict instructions to the staff that I should not be disturbed. So it was safe for me to leave a simple illusion of me nursing my drink while I hunted for real nourishment.

Every vampyric Family has one special supernatural talent, except mine. The Bacchant Family is able to use a myriad of talents but, unlike other Families who are born with their talents, we have to learn them. Like every other creature of the night, we have supernatural speed, strength and fortitude, but that makes us only superior to humans. Could I take on Marco in a fight? Well, I could, but I’d lose...a lot. But I had learned enough at this point in my life to get by rather well.

I hated using my powers for mundane purposes like hunting, but I had no idea how long it would take for Gawaine to get back and I was hungry.

I found my prize seated in an alleyway, playing with a stick and singing a popular lullaby. She had blonde ringlets and a face smudged with dirt; she was no more than three years of age.

I glanced around, looking for any adults in the area. Seeing none, I grabbed the little girl with inhuman speed, took her into the woods, and drank her sweet, sweet blood.

I dropped her body on the ground, slightly buzzed from the high I had gotten from her blood. It took me a moment to realize that I needed to do something with her body; I hadn’t licked her wounds fast enough, and now she was too dead for the bite marks to heal. I couldn’t just leave her there with obvious puncture wounds on her neck.

Unless...

I held my hand out and called forth a dagger from another plane of existence. That was one of my favorite talents, making something appear out of thin air. With a flick of my wrist, I cut the clothes off the child, then tore them into strips. I cut a jagged tear down her chest and then, with my hand wrapped in a piece

of cloth, plunged my fist through her tiny ribcage and ripped out her still heart. There was very little blood...and that was the problem. A slaughter like the one I was staging needed a lot more blood; even the villagers in the backwater town where we were living would know this. I propped the body against a tree and ripped the throat out with my teeth. I was about to spit it out, but realized that it would be more realistic if the flesh was missing. So I wrapped my tongue around the meat and sucked it into my mouth, feeling the flesh slide down my throat.

Then, standing partially behind a tree to avoid getting splatter on my clothes, I threw the heart at the body, the impact turning it into so much chopped meat. It now looked like the remains of a vicious animal attack.

Realizing I had wasted too much time already, I dusted myself off and raced back to the tavern. I was seconds ahead of getting caught, being that I passed Gawaine as I ran up the stairs and into the pub. I stopped the illusion of me as I went out the back of the building and into a privy.

I would've killed for a mirror at that moment (not really; even I usually don't kill for such trivial reasons), but only the poshest of places had those at this point in history. So, I hoped any grime I may have accumulated could be explained by my trip to the outhouse.

When I walked back to the bar—at human speed, of course—I saw Gawaine demanding to know where I was. As expected, no one knew.

I walked up behind him and folded my arms across my chest. “Is there a problem?”

Gawaine turned to me, the anger melting off of his face. “Morgan! Where have you been?”

“Where could I have possibly gone, my handsome gallant? You told me not to leave without you.”

“I told you not to go anywhere without me,” he corrected gently.

I raised my eyebrow. “Were you going to follow me into the privy, then?”

He blushed for a moment, then cleared his throat. “That is not what I meant.”

“Right, then.” I grabbed my bow and quiver. “Let's go hunting.”



Of course, we were the ones who found the little girl's body. It

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was towards the end of the hunt and I thought I had done a good job of avoiding where I'd killed her, but Gawaine went in a different direction from me. It wasn't long until I heard him cry out.

Trying to keep my face blank, I walked over to where he stood. "What's wrong?" I asked.

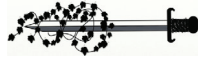
He whirled, his face white. "Milady," he gasped, grabbing my shoulders, "There is no need for you to see this."

My eyes widened innocently. "See what?"

He forcefully turned me around, his composure coming back as he remembered his knightly duties, the first of which was to get me to safety.

I had forgotten about that.

When he led me out of the woods, he spotted Balin by the mercantile. Grabbing me by the elbow, he steered me towards his fellow Roman. "Balin, please do me the honor of escorting Lady Morgan back to the castle." He lowered his voice. "Then get back here quickly with some of the men and Lord Cai."



I sat quietly in the library, watching the torches dispersing from the death site as the girl's body was carried to the church in the center of the town. I knew it would only be a matter of time...

"Got a little carried away, didn't you, Sister?"

I turned to face Marco, whose expression was stony as usual. "Carried away?"

"We're alone, Celeste."

"Oh," I shrugged, "Fine, then. No, I didn't get carried away. But I knew I had to make it look like I did. It would be tough to explain marks on her neck, but not if her body's torn apart."

"You could have always left the child alone."

I shook my head. "No, that wasn't an option."

"You do realize that I now have to suggest to Arthur that the men go out and hunt this phantom beast?"

"So?" I shrugged. "It will give them something to do with all of their free time."

"Celeste..."

"Actually," I said as a plan formed in my head, "it's the best thing for them, chasing after an animal they'll never catch..."

"What are you talking about? You're the one who..."

"Marco," I snapped, exasperated. "Stop being so damn logical, because I'm getting really tired of having to explain myself. I can't be the beautiful antagonist of your legendary King *and* keep

your soldiers busy...and they *must* be kept busy,” I added before he could respond, “because boredom leads to mischief. We both know that.”

Marco nodded slowly. “And who do you have in mind to play this beast?”

I made a face. “You know that answer as well as I do.”

“And you trust him not to go on a rampage?”

I rolled my shoulders. “Well, I’m not the one who locked him in a cage for months, but I think I may still have a bond with him...”

The Aerean stood for a few moments in silence, then nodded. “Go down to the dungeon and talk with him tomorrow night.”

I thought about arguing with him about waiting a night, but decided I had pushed far enough. “As you wish...Brother.”



I stopped in front of the cell and handed the bored soldier at the door a parchment written by Marco’s hand. The soldier read it over twice—at least I think he was reading it—then handed it back to me.

“Am I reading Lord Cai’s words correctly?”

Well, at least he knew how to identify Marco’s alias without a problem. “Yes, the prisoner is to be released into my care. So please unlock the door...”

“I don’t know...to leave you alone with him...”

“If it makes you feel better,” I sighed, “you can stand out here the entire time.”

He nodded, then opened the door. I stepped inside, closing the door on the soldier’s inquisitive face. The Werecat was sitting on a bench in the corner, his leg propped up and his face turned away, leaning against his knee. I stood there for a few moments, admiring the line of his body, for my darling Vanity seemed to have given up clothes altogether.

Not that I was complaining; I rather liked him that way.

“Hello Milady,” he said after a few minutes.

I noticed he hadn’t moved; something was wrong. “Hello, Milord. Would you care to give me a proper greeting?”

“I...would like nothing more, Milady.”

“Well, I’m standing here.”

“My darling Cel...”

*Morgan*, I corrected silently.

“...Morgan, you are much too...I am not...”

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My eyes narrowed as I stepped closer; that's when I smelled him. I had thought the strong smell of waste and filth was just natural in a dungeon situation. I had never dreamed that it was all coming from him.

I couldn't hide my reaction as his smell assaulted my nostrils, letting a strangled gasp escape. He slowly turned his head, his natty hair hiding all his features except one glaring eye. "Yes, I reek. There were many other ways the Areal could have made my stay unpleasant without making it so...unpleasant."

At the mention of Marco, my mind found his and I telepathically yelled his name.

It took him all of four seconds to appear in Vanity's cell. "Celeste," he said, forgetting who might be listening, "What in God's name..."

I whirled on him. "This is what you do when I ask you to treat him well? This is what you do to royalty?"

Marco's eyes narrowed. He snapped his fingers and the soldier at the door entered. "My lord! When did you..."

The look on the Areal's face was enough to silence the young man. "Get lords Balin, Balen and Gareth and tell them I said to bring down the biggest tub they can find, and get some servants to bring a lot of steaming water."

"Yes sir."

"And then," Marco continued, causing the soldier to step back into the room, "gather all the men under my command and have them on the parade grounds in two hours."

The man paled. "Yes sir."

Marco turned back to me, giving the soldier a chance to high-tail it out of there. The Areal watched me for a few moments, then growled, "Leave."

I glanced back at Vanity, who still hadn't moved, although he was watching me as intently as Marco was. "But..."

*Celeste*, came the Areal's voice, *let the Werecat retain some dignity.*

I hesitated for a second more and then left the room. I could tell that Vanity's state of being was just as big a surprise to Marco as it was to me, so I was not going to make things any more difficult than they already were for my "brother."

As I walked towards the Great Hall, I saw the summoned knights run past me carrying the tub, a look of dread on their faces. My eyes narrowed; someone was going to pay dearly on the parade grounds that night.



On my way to the front yard later that night, I spotted Arthur in a heated discussion with Dinas and Dinadan. I paused to watch them, studying the form of the future King of Britannia. He was tall—though not as tall as Marco was—with light brown hair and startling green eyes. He had the body of a soldier: broad shoulders, small waist, sturdy legs, and a visible scar, most probably from some childhood mishap, starting behind his left ear and traveling down his thick neck to his chest. His hair was long and tousled, and he was dressed in comfortable breeches and tunic.

But none of this made him King-worthy. What did was the impassive look on his face as the brothers debated Marco’s decision to release the prisoner. His expression didn’t reveal any emotion as he listened to both sides, weighing their words with respectful silence. He asked questions in a quiet and soothing voice that forced the others to respond in kind and kept tempers from flaring uncontrollably.

As I stepped closer, I heard Dinadan say that Arthur was biased because the prisoner was a friend of his sister. His voice trailed off as he saw me approach.

“Lady Morgan,” he said, obviously caught off guard, “We were just...”

“Accusing my brother of playing favorites?” I drawled.

Dinas had the decency to look embarrassed. “We just don’t believe he considered the effects of letting the prisoner free.”

Arthur rubbed his chin. “Can either of you remind me why he was incarcerated in the first place?”

Dinas and Dinadan both paused and looked at each other. It was obvious that neither of them knew the answer to Arthur’s question. The thing was, Arthur did know the answer. Without pushing his point of view on them, he made them see things his way.

*That made him worthy of being King.*

“Well,” I said with a smile, “I’m off to the parade grounds. Anyone care to join me?”

“Milady,” Dinadan chided, “don’t you know what’s going to happen there?”

“Yes, retribution for disobeying my brother’s orders. That is something I must witness.”

Arthur nodded and took my arm. “And I as well.”

## MARCO

The brothers silently fell into step behind us, once more showing Arthur's leadership prowess. Dinas and Dinadan had no stomach for what was about to happen, but followed Arthur without a word of dissension.

The moon was almost full, and brightly illuminated the grounds of Arthur's castle. Standing at attention were the males of import, about four deep, in various stages of dress. I noticed the brothers—who hadn't as yet become more than Arthur's advisors—hesitate when they saw all knights there, but Arthur didn't stop, so neither did they.

In front of the soldiers were two logs slammed diagonally into the ground, forming an X over six feet tall. I noticed Marco standing a few feet ahead of the men with his back to them as the stragglers found their places in line. He was dressed in full uniform, his armor glistening even in the soft moonlight. He was draped in deep purple with greaves on his calves and wearing a brown leather kilt.

His eyes were fixed straight ahead, although I did notice a slight flutter of his lashes as Arthur approached. They exchanged the briefest of nods as the future King took his place on Marco's left side. I should've known that the subtle exchange relayed more than just a greeting, especially since Arthur had let loose my arm. I did notice, however, when Marco put his hand up and blocked me. It was like having my shoulder slammed into a brick wall. I stopped in mid-stride and turned to him, my face expressionless.

"You have no business here, Sister," he growled.

"I allowed her, Brother," Arthur answered, then lowered his voice. "Better she be here under our watchful eyes than causing mischief elsewhere."

Marco stared at me for a few seconds before nodding and putting his hand down. I slowly walked past him to stand to the left and a step behind Arthur.

The Arean stood motionless for a couple of moments more, letting a heavy silence fall over the area. Then he took three deliberate steps forward and pivoted, facing the men.

He launched into a speech about honor and loyalty and discipline that was so powerful, I know I would be doing him a great injustice if I tried to repeat it. He then explained why his orders needed to be followed to the letter, but managed to do so without sounding condescending.

Then he announced that there was one who hadn't followed his orders, and called forth the jailer, Gawaine's brother Gareth.