

*"I won't tell you a fucking thing," the male before me spat. His features were sunken in, a sheen of sweat glistening on his bare skin. He hung from the ceiling in the middle of the cool, humid cave. His skeleton-like hands were bound by metal cuffs and chains so heavy that he was barely able to balance on his toes. Ribs and sternum were sticking out from his pale chest, the moonlight peeking in revealing how starved of nourishment he was.*

*I looked through amber and green eyes, the markers of my lineage. Pure, smooth stone surrounded me in the room. I could hear the sound of the Aeriös Ocean crashing maliciously against the edge of the cliff, and felt the mist of those raging waves blowing into the cells. The bars on the window were the only thing that divided me from the deadly force of the waves. Only one wooden door in the dank room led to the outside world. However, there was no handle on the inside. This was not a room, it was a prison cell.*

*He appeared sickly, with a putrid mixture of sweat, dirt, and blood coating every inch of his skin. He had not been fed in weeks—that was clear by the bones protruding from his face. His blonde hair was greased to his forehead, and his brown eyes were completely dull. The prisoner could have been handsome once, but only a living corpse remained.*

*I wanted to help him. With my Gift, I could help him.*

*Looking down, I saw my hands stained with blood. Not my blood, as I sensed no injuries on my own body. It had to have been someone else's, and by the state of the prisoner before me, I had to guess it was his. I spotted the sleeves of my white cloak, the one I always wore when my face needed to remain hidden from those who wanted to cause me harm. When I did terrible, terrible things that now seemed like a long, awful dream.*

*Instead of helping, I strode toward him on legs that disobeyed my mind's command. The prisoner required more coaxing if I were to get any information from him. I spoke with my voice, but it was sweetened into something deadlier.*

*"I do not think you know what that means for you."*

*My fingers clutched both sides of the soft fur on the inside of my cloak, the only thing shielding me from the icy wind that snuck through the bars of the cell. I pulled my hood down, revealing my auburn hair. It was tied back in a functional braid, but small frenzied curls still found their way out.*

*"Or maybe you do. In any case, I will get what I need from you." I pulled down the soft fabric that covered the lower half of my face and gave him a full-lipped smile. The cold air bit at my cheeks and shivered down my spine.*

*What was I doing? With my face completely exposed, I had no choice but to—*

*I knew how this ended.*

*“Tsk. Julius. Why would you say such things about my father? My father is a great ruler, the king of these lands.” I spoke effortlessly, my voice foreign yet concise.*

*I had said similar words before, and each time I did, they led to the same ending. My Gift tingled at my fingertips and up the nape of my neck: the subtle reminder that I could easily control the prisoner, mind and body. But I was not ready to use those yet.*

*His tethers were so easy to see. His will was broken, despite his brave words. I could ask him to do anything I wanted, and he would obey.*

*“Julius. Tell me the information you know about the other Third Kingdom rebels,” I instructed, a command that floated musically into his head, sailing along with the slow-moving ribbons of his mind.*

*He grunted and spat on the ground in front of me. I took a long second to look at the mark it made by my leather boot. My anger was rising, a heat grew on my face. An extreme buzzing started at the back of my skull that almost caused me to tremble. I stepped back from the spit, taking him in.*

*I felt sick, choking on the knowledge of what I used to be. I knew what I wanted to do: to stop all of this and heal the prisoner. That was not possible then, when I was my father’s deadly executioner. His heir.*

*I could feel the anger radiating into power, and I knew that it was time to use it. My father watched from behind me, as this was our favorite bonding activity. I felt obligated to torture him, to get the information we needed. More than an obligation, I felt a sense of duty to do so. I was driven by the need to act upon the blatant display of disrespect, as Father would have wanted.*

*“Do as I command, ganera,” I demanded threateningly. My head vibrated so hard I could hear it in my ears.*

*He did nothing, his life dangling by a thread, defying me with what little energy he had left. At least I could respect him for trying.*

*Stepping forward, taking in the dying man before me, I chuckled.*

*Chuckled at death.*

*“Stupid ganera. So prideful, but at what cost? Obviously, you do not value the life the Smiths blessed you with.” I took one step closer, and his exhausted—yet unbending—gaze met mine. “Luckily, I appreciate what they gave me.” Both eyes lit up. “I can just take it from your mind. Your thoughts. Your dreams. Your nightmares. Every little thing in your fragile mind. I can pluck them out and keep them for myself. That’s the Gift that I was blessed with, and I honor it by using it. But I will warn you, it can be painful.” Now, the tingling of my fingertips worked in tandem with the buzzing in my mind.*

*He cringed, shying away from my touch as I lifted a hand to him. My small finger was adorned with a silver ring. It climbed up my pinky, ending in a point at my fingernail. It was decorated with blood-colored rubies; the color to match the blood that the small weapon would draw. My small finger traced the blade against his chest, caressing the space between his pectoral muscles. Rather, lack of muscles.*

*“You are a monster,” he managed, attempting to clear his dry throat. The measly spot of spit at my feet probably took all of what was left. “The Freed will rise, and creatures like you will be recycled into the fires of the Forge.” His gaze shifted to my glowing irises. “Go ahead, kill me.”*

*No! I screamed in the catacombs of my head, but the memory would not end. It belonged to what I was before. To the Bone Princess. My hands, they were those same hands covered in blood. The man had scars all over him; I had tortured him maliciously. And I was about to finish the job.*

*“You heard him, sweetling,” a deep voice said from behind me, causing me to glance back to my father. The Bone King. He sat in a rickety, wooden chair. His crimson crown atop his shaved head matched the color of the blood on my hands. His amber eyes, which were identical to one of mine, glittered with pride. He was observing me torture the prisoner. We were beneath the Third Kingdom, in the cliff prisons. I was only sixteen, and I was his murderous pride and joy. The warm, proud smile he blessed me with gave me confidence, and his admiration meant I could do what I needed to do.*

*If I didn’t, he would no longer look so happy.*

*I turned back to the prisoner quickly, taking the sharpened finger blade to his bare stomach. He grunted as I stabbed a hole in his emaciated abdomen.*

*A drop of blood surfaced from the small wound.*

*My fingertips sprung to life, the ever-familiar tingling that meant my helbredera powers were wanting to be used.*

*Yes! Heal him! I begged, my desperation to control the outcome overwhelming me. I was stuck in this reality, unable to move even though I knew my body was no longer in the Third Kingdom.*

*But the Maeve of my past did not heal him. She did the opposite.*

*I touched the skin around the wound and opened it wider, the blood rushing out as quickly as it could. His skin and muscle fibers listened to me, falling apart like a blade through butter. The male screamed, his screams heard by no one but the other prisoners that resided in the cliff prison. The wound kept spreading, the puncture opening across his stomach. It continued to grow, his organs becoming visible to the night air. His blood drenched the stone floors, his liver falling to the ground as there was no longer anything to hold it in. The intestines came next, and the male’s scream turned into a gurgle as he died slowly. I was disemboweling him, my touch causing more pain than a single being could fathom.*

*Blood splattered, painting my white cloak with familiar crimson decorations. They would stain; they had stained, many, many times before.*

*But the cleasiera side of me wanted to play, too. My mind reached out, grasping onto the weak tethers of the male's ending life.*

*No! I pleaded with myself as I took the male's mind while ripping his body apart. I prolonged his suffering, giving him the will to live just a little longer. My Gift grabbed the last of his thoughts as if opening a book and reading the first line.*

*"Varde, I am sorry I failed you." It was nothing but a whisper in his mind.*

*I smiled, dropped the male's tethers, and let him hang in the suffocating prison cell to bleed out onto the stone floor. Someone would clean up my mess.*

*Why ... By the Smiths ... Why? I whispered to myself, sobbing silently as I recounted one of many memories that revealed who I was.*

*"Father, I think you will be pleased. In his mind, I found that he's from Varde," I said, feeling the bubbles of hope bounce in my chest at his prideful expression.*

*His deep laugh rumbled, warming me. The fine lines on his face deepened, and his charming smile was infectious. He approved.*

*"Varde. My daughter, you have done well. We must journey south, it seems our friends in Varde have been left to their own devices for far too long. Perhaps they need reminding of who rules this kingdom."*

*"Indeed, father," I said, stepping toward him. My boots squelched in the blood that had pooled beneath the dead prisoner.*

*The Bone King stood, his height barely greater than mine. "Oh, sweetling. You are the true Gift of this kingdom. Your power. Your influence. One day, you will follow in my footsteps and rule this kingdom as mercilessly as I have. Come, we must prepare." He kissed my temple as I looked at the mangled body hanging from the ceiling. My kill.*

*I may be the Bone Princess, but I do not mind dealing in blood.*