

# DAUGHTER OF THE DROWNED EMPIRE

CHAPTER ONE

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THE FIRST SCROLL:  
VORAKH



# CHAPTER ONE

THE TIMEKEEPERS SHOUTED the hour as indigo bloomed across the darkening sky. Behind me, the sun sank into the crashing waves of the ocean. The bells clanged louder, and my feet pounded against the waterway. I was late. I turned a corner as sweat beaded the nape of my neck. The fortress was so Godsdamned big.

My arms pumped at my sides as I ran faster; the water rushed beneath my feet. I had to reach Cresthaven's entrance before the bells stopped, but I was still nowhere near it. There was at least another quarter mile of fortress and waterway. Above me, the ashvan horses began their descent, already wrapping up their hourly patrol. Luminescent blue light glimmered from their hooves against the night, illuminating their jewel-toned bodies. Their lights vanished into the night sky, and only starlight remained.

Shit. The bells would stop at any second.

My sandals, laced up to my knees, were definitely not meant for running. Then again, neither was I, a lady of Ka Batavia.

The glass floor curved around a stone corner, and the bells stopped just as someone shouted my name.

Shit, shit! I was definitely in trouble.

"Lady Lyriana." One of my father's sentries. "Your grace? Are you there?"

I rounded another corner, sliding on the glass of the waterway. Stupid slippery glass waterways and over-sized fortresses.

Running into the torchlight, I found my father, the High Lord of Bamaria, standing impatiently before the front doors. His black robes blew in the summer breeze, and the golden Laurel of the Arkasva sat atop his head. He gave me one look. *The look. The I was definitely in trouble look.* Luckily, not the kind of trouble he would take the time to yell at me for. Not yet anyway. We had a public appearance to make.

I reached the promenade, completely out of breath. Several sentries watched me from the corners of their eyes, curiosity and judgment in their expressions. My cheeks heated as I rushed to the end of the line and tried to calm down. Servants and guards always talked, sharing gossip about their charges. But *it* had just happened. Had word spread already? Did they know the reason I was late? Or why I had lingered so long at the pools?

My eldest sister, Meera, rolled her eyes at me but didn't look upset—which was good. Even though today was *my* birthday, tonight was to be the most important night of *her* life, so attention on me had been somewhat minimized—to say the least.

Meera's light brown hair was styled in perfect waves down her back. A golden diadem swept across her forehead, positioned partially like a crown, the ends threaded into her locks. Fitting, since tonight she'd come into her title, Heir Apparent, next in line to rule as Arkasva. She would be practically a queen—except for the fact that Bamaria was part of the Lumerian Empire and bowed before the Emperor. Still, it was never a good idea to piss off an almost-queen, especially when she was your eldest sister.

Morgana, our middle sister—eternally angry at the world—scowled beneath sleek black eyebrows pointed down in disapproval. I stuck out my tongue and took my place at the back of the line beside our cousin, Jules. She shook her head at me, eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Your hair, Lyr," she chided, slender arms reaching to rearrange my long waves. A flick of her hand readjusted and centered my diadem. Jules was the only member of our party not wearing one. She was our cousin and of noble blood, but unlike me and my sisters, she was not in direct line to the Seat of the Arkasva. "Shall I assume your disarray came from your rush to get here or...other activities?" A sly smile lit up her face.

"Running," I said pointedly.

"Of course." She nodded sagely, her expression making it clear she did not believe me. One more sweep of her fingers through my hair, pushing the loose waves over my shoulder, and she nodded. "Now, you look perfect."

"As do you," I said with a grin. It was a big night for Jules as well.

We began our procession down the main waterway.

She took my arm in hers. "Well?" she asked. "I need details. What happened?"

Morgana twisted her neck to peer over her shoulder. "Please. We already know you kissed him."

"Morgs!" I snapped. "Shut up."

"Did you?" Jules asked. "Kiss him?" she whispered.

Soturi, camouflaged to blend into the landscape, began to emerge—our ever-present escorts and guards—replacing the sentries at the fortress's



entrance. Three fell in step with my father. Meera as Heir Apparent had two guards, while Morgana, Jules, and I each had one following in our shadows. Mine was a surly soturion named Markan who'd watched over me since I could stand. His muscles flexed as he walked beside me, his golden armor clinking in tune to the slaps of his sandals against the waterway's glass.

I caught Jules's eye and nodded.

She squealed. "You and Tristan! I'm so happy for you."

"Shh!" I clamped my hand over her mouth. Markan was too close, and he didn't need to know any details about what we'd done—or that it had been the reason I'd been late. Nor was he entitled to know that I'd sat by the edge of the pool long after Tristan had gone, replaying the whole interaction in my head again and again.

Tristan's scent, mint and the salted air of the ocean, still tickled my nose. My skin tingled with excitement, remembering the feel of his touch. His warmth. The way he'd tightened his grip on me, his fingers pressing into my back as we'd kissed and kissed, our bodies pressing closer, and hands exploring until I was dizzy from it. I'd kissed a number of boys before, but this...this was far more than a kiss. And Tristan wasn't just some boy. He was the future lord of his Ka and already a master mage. The most eligible, and attractive, bachelor amongst the Bamarian nobility.

Our party reached the outer wall of the fortress and our personal seraphim port. A dozen of the giant birds, covered in cloudy white feathers with wings of pure gold, lay in waiting, their topaz blue carriages strapped to their backs. We split into three of the jewel-encrusted carriages. Jules, Morgana, and I piled into the last one with our three escorts.

Soturion Markan sealed the doors and retreated behind the partition with the other escorts. The floor shifted beneath us as our seraphim stood. She flapped her wings, rattling the windows as we took flight.

Once we were soaring, Jules sighed happily. "I'm so glad this happened on your birthday, Lyr."

"Yes, it's wonderful she formed an alliance between Ka Batavia and Ka Grey to be sealed in marriage," Morgana said dryly.

"I'm seventeen," I said, startled. "No one is getting married." Not yet. There weren't even talks of Meera finding a match, and she'd be the country's High Lady within years.

Morgana narrowed her eyebrows. "Lyr, get your head out of your scrolls. Tristan's twenty. Which is young." She held up her hands. "But not for Ka Grey. They're so Godsdamned old fashioned, Lyr. If he kissed you, then the proposal we've all suspected for years is coming."

"No, it's not. That's ridiculous," I said.

Morgana scoffed. "Lady Romula doesn't let *Lord Tristan Grey* piss unless it makes her more money or furthers her position in Bamaria."

“Ew, Morgs.” Jules tapped a finger against her chin. “Though fair point.”

I frowned. “But Lady Romula is already Master of Finance. What higher position could she possibly want?”

“Grandmother of the groom to Lady Lyriana Batavia, Heir to the Arkasva, High Lord of Bamaria, third in line from the Seat,” Jules said slyly. “As soon as your father passes the Laurel to Meera, you’ll be second from the Seat, Lyr. It’ll be tempting for her.”

I shrugged, glancing out the window. The beaches and countryside had already given way to the city of Urtavia and the Temple of Dawn, an ancient building designed in the shape of the Valalumir—the seven-pointed star. But the effect was only visible from above. Our ancestors desired everything to be aesthetically pleasing from the sky, spending so much of their day flying on the backs of seraphim.

We landed at the entrance to the red ray of the temple, the private door used only by my Ka. My father and his guard, along with Meera and Jules, both wearing the ceremonial white robes, were to enter the temple first—since all three had important roles to play.

Jules turned to yell back at me and Morgana. “See you after! And Lyr, I hope you’re not planning to spend all night with Tristan, because my magic and I have big plans for us! You too, Morgs!”

Morgana rolled her eyes as I grinned stupidly. Jules and I had been concocting all sorts of mischief for the night. Months of planning had gone into it. Elaborate spells, and jokes to play on all the guards at Cresthaven. And sneaking out to the city.

“No sleep!” I yelled back.

“None!” Jules threw her hand over her mouth and blew a kiss. “Love you!”

I threw one back and waved her inside. A sharp gust of wind blew my hair over my eyes and tangled it in my diadem. The wind was caused by the flapping wings of another seraphim bird landing. The descending topaz carriage was adorned with a giant flag boasting the sigil of Ka Grey: silver seraphim wings beneath a full silver moon. The carriage doors opened, and four mages exited followed by Tristan, looking breathtakingly handsome in a new blue tunic and bright silver belt. His stave was tucked into a silver scabbard hanging elegantly from his hip. My stomach tightened at the sight of him. His hand rested on his belt, the hand which had run down my back, over my hips, and across my breasts just an hour ago.

“Four escorts?” Morgana sneered. “I’m second to the Seat, and I only came with one.”

“Stop,” I said. “Lady Romula has always been...a bit extra. Tristan’s different.”

“Right. And I’m the Empress of Lumeria.” Morgana shook her head disdainfully and with her single sotorion escort retreated into the Temple of Dawn.

Tristan ran his hand through his floppy brown hair—hair that I now knew was as soft as it looked. He strode toward me with the unapologetic confidence of a lord who would one day rule his Ka. A lord who would one day take a highly coveted seat on the Bamarian Council.

I took his hand and led him forward. Before any of our escorts could catch up, I settled us into a dark corner of the temple’s outer alcove, my back pressed against the cool stone. I licked my lips, slid my hands around his waist and pulled him close. One more kiss—one more moment just for me and my birthday before we had to put on our masks and present ourselves as pure, chaste nobility. His tongue slid against mine and for a moment, it was pure bliss. Until the shuffled footsteps of our escorts made themselves known and we sprung apart laughing.

Everyone who was anyone was inside. Nobles from ancient Kavim gathered in the aisles, admiring each other’s dresses and jewelry while gossiping. Beyond the inane chatter, anticipation hung in the air. Today there was an Heir Apparent in the Revelation Ceremony.

We gathered in my family’s pew in the red ray, closest to the raised circular dais of Auriel’s Chamber. On the lower stage, the soon-to-be mages and soturi sat cross-legged. Ropes glowed blue, sizzling with magic, creating a barrier between ceremony participants and those who’d come to watch. Just past the rope was the Seat of the Arkasva, my father’s golden throne.

With all the initiates in place, Arkmage Kolaya rose onto the dais, standing beneath the eternal flame. She was ancient, with dark brown skin and white hair that fell in twisted braids to the floor. As she began the opening prayers, chanting in High Lumerian, Tristan took my hand, his finger rubbing small circles into my palm. I angled toward him, and our knees bumped together. Grinning, Tristan leaned over, pulling my hair back to plant a kiss on my neck.

I shivered.

“For Gods’ sakes, Lyr. Everyone is looking at you,” Morgana hissed.

Peering over my shoulder, I found Aunt Arianna offering an understanding but stern look of disapproval. We were in public, at a state affair. A holy one at that. Every other teen in the back rows of the pews were doing Gods knew what with each other, but I couldn’t. I had a role to play. Lady Lyriana Batavia, Heir to the Arkasva, High Lord of Bamararia. A paragon of virtue; pure, proper, and polite at all times. My relationship with Tristan would be endlessly scrutinized. As noble heirs to the heads of our Kavim, it was a matter of state, a political alliance. I could sense it now, the penetrating gazes of the nobility, their speculations.

*Was Ka Batavia going to ally with Ka Grey?*

The question was almost enough to slow down my desire for him. Almost. I rested my hand on the wooden bench beside Tristan, my fingers inching towards his so we could touch unseen. I moved my knees from his—only an inch.

I glanced back at Aunt Arianna, and she nodded in approval as she wrapped an arm around her daughter, my other cousin, Naria. In two years, we'd both be wearing white and participating in the Revelation Ceremony together.

Naria had never gotten along with me or my sisters. She wasn't like us in personality, temperament, or looks. All Batavia women had brown or red hair. Naria was blonde. Blonde like her father, my uncle Tarek, had been. He'd died a traitor.

"When in the heavenly realms the Gods and Goddesses dwelled," chanted Kolaya, "Canturiel created a light so beautiful and valiant it shone day and night. The Valalimir, he named it. Every color of the rainbow could be seen inside, brighter than anything Heaven could hide. It never burned those who touched, nor blinded those who stared. Such was its beauty the sun felt less fair, for this light was brighter, kinder. The stars and moon felt their beauty wane." The eternal flame over her head burned through every color of the rainbow, casting new tones onto the white-clad initiates all patiently waiting beneath.

Tristan took my hand, his fingers running slowly up and down the length of my palm, and instantly I was lost in the endless brown of his eyes.

The Scrolls of the Valya floated out of their honeycomb homes in the walls to be read by every Lumerian. Well, every Lumerian who was actually paying attention. Several rows away in the green ray, Lady Romula watched her grandson and me with disapproval. Sighing, I released Tristan's hand, unrolled the scroll in my lap, and sat straighter. Just a few more hours, and we'd be without an audience.

At last, the chanting ended. The soft scraping sounds of the Valya being rerolled whistled throughout all seven rays of the temple, and soon the scrolls were flying in every direction, returning to their homes in the walls.

The Red Watcher of the Light and the Violet Watcher of the Light, veiled head to toe in their colors, joined Arkmage Kolaya on the upper dais for the ceremony.

Kolaya began calling the names of the nineteen-year-old mages and soturi-to-be. Tristan's large silver signet ring pressed against my skin. Despite my earlier words, I suddenly couldn't stop imagining our official engagement...being bound to Tristan for life...sharing his bed. When that happened, he'd offer me jewelry with the sigil of his Ka, and I'd give him something with mine. My stomach twisted.

“Jules is next.” Aunt Arianna tapped my shoulder. I turned to smile at her but found Naria watching Tristan with an open, hungry expression in her eyes. She’d tried to kiss him at the summer solstice the previous year. He’d rejected her, but she clearly still wanted him. I glared until she realized she’d been caught and suddenly became busy with a sapphire jewel on her gown.

“Lady Julianna Batavia,” Kolaya’s deep voice vibrated.

Hushing sounds drifted through the temple. Feet scraped against the floor in their search for stillness. Several people coughed, their wooden seats creaking as they leaned forward.

“Your Aunt Gianna, *Ha Ka Moka*, would be so proud,” Arianna said quietly.

Automatically, Morgana and I repeated the words for the deceased, “Her soul freed.”

Jules stood, looking like a goddess in her white robe, and stepped onto the stage. The eternal flame flared and crackled, glowing pure white before it hissed. As Jules approached, the flame paused on red. Batavia red. Our color. A sign of good luck. It lit her wavy brown hair in a fiery red glow. My heart raced with excitement for her.

“Lady Julianna,” Arkmage Kolaya said, “what path do you choose?”

“Mage.” A glowing smile spread across Jules’s face, and my heart burst with pride. Her eyes found mine. She winked, and removed her white robes, revealing a violet, floor-sweeping gown. We’d spent weeks shopping in Urtavia for it, driving the dressmakers farther than Lethea with our demands until we’d found the perfect one.

The Watcher bowed her head, putting the white robes aside, and Jules held out her right hand. Kolaya’s ceremonial dagger reflected light as she slashed the skin above Jules’s wrist. Right slashes were for mages, left for soturi. Blood beaded on her skin. Jules pursed her lips together, but ever the perfect noble, she didn’t flinch. She glided to the Violet Watcher’s table, extending her arm. Her blood dripped into the ceremonial bowl of water. The small splash echoed through the temple.

“My oath begins here,” she said.

The Violet Watcher opened her trunk and produced a stave for Jules, a beautiful twisting of gold and silver wood from the sacred sun and moon trees. Arkmage Kolaya cupped her hands above Jules. Sparks pulsed until a golden sphere of light crowned. With a thrust of the arkmage’s hands, the golden light illuminated Jules’s body, descending to the floor where it vanished, along with the Birth Bind that had contained her power—until now.

I could barely breathe as I waited for her to raise her stave, her name magically burned into it. Now she would show off her first essence of magic. Her mother, Aunt Gianna, had been a highly respected, powerful

mage, like all women of Ka Batavia, so anticipation was high throughout the temple.

But Jules dropped her stave. It hit the dais with an awkward clang.

My throat tightened, my face heating. Embarrassment came first. Red hot humiliation for Jules. I was mortified and ashamed. That wasn't supposed to happen. No one dropped their stave, not when they were experiencing the most powerful moment of their life. This was an utter disgrace on Jules and our Ka.

It wasn't until her stave rolled off the floor of the Chamber through the initiates sitting on the lower level and landed on the temple floor that the shame disintegrated and fear took hold of me.

Something was wrong.

Morgana grabbed my hand. "No," she said, her voice a strangled whisper.

Jules's eyes widened into an expression full of terror. Her lips parted.

"Why isn't she picking it up?" I demanded. It wasn't proper to leave a stave on the floor.

"No, no, no!" Morgana's whisper had gone silent, but I could still sense her forming the words as her grip tightened. Her nails pierced my skin until I cried out. She'd drawn blood.

"Morgs!" I tried to wrench my hand away, but she only shushed me and held tighter as Jules screamed from the stage, a blood curdling, animalistic sound.

Tristan whispered something harsh and unintelligible in my ear. But I couldn't think, I couldn't hear—because his highness the Emperor had stood up.

Fear and dread washed over me. His seat was already front row, but he walked forward, standing just outside the magically protected borders of the ceremony. The Emperor stopped behind my father. He stood casually, sweeping back his cloak, black and bordered in gold. But there was nothing casual in his face. He was a predator, as dangerous as the wolf on his sigil. The powerful magic coursing through his body swirled in a dark aura around him.

Morgana shook, inching closer to me, still clutching my bleeding hand. Tristan sat forward, cocking his head to the side. Since he'd been a boy, that had always been his tell that he was angry. He no longer touched me. His lips, which had been so soft when we'd kissed, formed a harsh frown, and he turned toward his grandmother, and then the Emperor, offering a signal I didn't understand. A black cloud settled over my heart. His aura pulsed with darkness, with vengeance, and with hatred.

Jules screamed louder, and I stood. I had to reach her, to protect her. She was my cousin, my sister...my best friend. But Morgana grabbed my waist with an unnatural violence. My back smacked against the wooden pew, shooting daggers of pain up my spine. Fresh tears formed.

Arianna's fingernails pierced my shoulder from behind, pinning me down. "Still, Lyr," she said sharply. "Be still."

Jules's cries shattered through me as my tears fell. She was thrashing at the air, clawing at some invisible opponent, making sounds that were more monstrous than human. I'd never seen her look like this. Something was so very wrong, and it was scaring her. We had to help her, go to her. But I was trapped, pinned by my aunt's nails.

Tristan stood along with the rest of the temple. The Emperor took another step toward Auriel's Chamber, his black eyes on my cousin. He strode in front of my father, breaking through the ceremonial ropes. I'd never seen them crossed before. I didn't think it could be done. But the Emperor was no ordinary Lumerian. He was the only man in Bamaria who outranked my father; he was the Emperor's own blood.

"No," the word rushed from my lips.

"Shut up, Lyr," Morgana hissed. "Shut up!" She turned to me so slowly I couldn't tell if she'd halted her movements or if my mind was slowing down the event. "Don't move," she mouthed.

My whole body trembled, my vision blurring, throat tightening.

"Why?" I croaked, knowing in my heart what was wrong, but not ready to admit it. "What's wrong with her?" My voice was desperate, weak, the voice of a terrified child.

Morgana's dark eyebrows were drawn together, her chest heaving. "Vorakh," she hissed.

My head swam as black spots obscured my vision, and confirmed what I knew.

Vorakh. Taboo magic. Forbidden.

The Senate and Emperor had forbidden the vorakh centuries ago, marking the magic as taboo. There were three powers named, all uncontrollable, dangerous, and volatile. First was traveling, the ability to vanish and reappear in a new location. The second, mind-reading. The third, visions, the ability to see into the future. Anyone found in possession of them was immediately bound and arrested. They sometimes developed in mages a few years after revealing their magic. But the most powerful mages revealed their abilities immediately. Tristan's family, Ka Grey, specialized in hunting vorakh, in bringing those that escaped the Revelation Ceremony to his Highness, the Emperor for justice.

The Emperor stepped onto the stage. Initiates scattered quickly, scurrying out of his way. Behind him was his lackey warlord, the repugnant man known as the Bastardmaker. He was said to have fathered half of the Soturi of Ka Kormac—by force. His hand was already on the hilt of his sword.

"Lady Julianna Batavia." The Emperor's voice echoed like a death march drum.

"Stop them!" I cried.

Arianna leaned forward, her voice like a knife in my ear. “You’ll damn us all, Lyr, if you don’t shut up. Control yourself now. You must control what they see. Especially him.”

My vision went in and out of focus, and my breath caught. The temple walls felt like they were closing in on me, the ceiling ready to cave in. I felt certain I was going to die and the temple was going to fall and crush me. I couldn’t actually be seeing what I saw—Jules having a vorakh, the Emperor and Bastardmaker approaching her....

“Lady Julianna Batavia, by order of the Senate and Emperor Theotis, High Lord of Lumeria Nutavia, you are hereby under arrest for the possession of vorakh, in the first order, the power of visions.”

The room roared, drowning out my screams. Every member of the nobility was calling for her arrest, for her blood, when just minutes ago the hypocrites had watched her with awe and respect. Even the Watchers stepped back, their veiled faces cast down.

The Emperor’s eyes flicked to the Bastardmaker. “Seize her!”

I searched for my father, trying to get his attention. He was Arkasva Batavia, High Lord of Bamaria. How could he allow this to happen? How could he allow his niece to be taken?

He sat in the Seat of power. He was still as a statue, his expression full of neutral indifference. I wanted to run and jump on him, claw at his skin until he did something, rip the golden wreath from his head and shove it down his throat until he remembered he wore the Laurel of the Arkasva. He had power. Why wasn’t he saving Jules?

The Bastardmaker moved swiftly, his meaty hands closing around Jules’s wrists as he tugged her over his shoulder. Jules screamed harder when his arm clamped over her legs as he hauled her over to a spidery looking mage from Ka Kormac.

“Bind her,” snarled the Emperor.

The mage lifted his stave. Black shadows uncoiled into long ropes around her, glowing red before settling into a glittering black. Jules slumped forward, silent, eyes rolling back before the Bastardmaker dragged her outside. The temple doors closed with an ominous slap, the sound thudding across the walls of the seven rays. They’d gone out through the red entrance—a door meant to be private and reserved for use only by my Ka, my family. Jules was gone, already out of reach, and we remained behind, trapped in the temple.

“She’ll be kept in the Shadow Stronghold and bound until transport to Lethea can be arranged,” announced the Emperor.

“Lethea?” I struggled for air that would not come. One did not come back from Lethea. Jules didn’t deserve to go there—she wasn’t a criminal. She was a nineteen-year-old girl with her whole life ahead of her. My cousin. My best friend. The kindest, sweetest, funniest person I knew. She couldn’t go there. We couldn’t allow it.



I tried to stand, thrashing against my aunt who kept me still. I tried to hit Morgana, to get her to move, to stop this, to save Jules. But Morgana slumped down in her seat, her arms wrapped around herself, her face white against her black hair.

My aunt's arms relaxed their restraint, just as Tristan took hold of me, his cheek pressed to mine.

"Lyr." Tristan's voice was firm, and his arms were everywhere, suffocating me, pulling me against his body. His touch was as intimate as before, but this time, he was imprisoning me. "Lyr, you have to stop. Calm down."

I pushed him away. Was he farther than Lethea? I would not calm down. The Bastardmaker had taken Jules! The Bastardmaker! Everyone knew it wasn't safe to be alone with him. She was in danger.

Tristan's eyes darkened. His mouth was tight. "Lyr, I'm sorry. I...I cared about Jules—a lot. But...." His fingers pressed into my arms.

"Cared?" I asked. Why was he using the past tense?

"She has a vorakh," Tristan said. There was a note of finality in his voice. "She's not who we thought she was. You must let her go. She has to die in Lethea."

I snapped my arms back, but Tristan's hold on me was too tight. Sweat dripped down the back of my neck. I was too hot and too cold. I was about to scream in his face. Jules adored Tristan, had grown up beside him, and this was how he repaid her?

"Thank the Gods for Ka Grey," Naria crooned. "Your family has kept Bamaria safe from vorakh for years. It's lucky Jules was exposed so easily."

I could feel the contents of my stomach churning and rising. Just like that, Naria had turned on our cousin, her own blood, her own Ka. Aunt Arianna remained calm as ever; only a small storm of emotion in her eyes gave her away.

My father stood, stepping forward, limping on his right leg. He'd been attacked by a mob after he became Arkasva, and the injury had only worsened over the years due to a spell one of the mages had threaded into the attack. His laurel slid forward, shadowing his eyes. He quickly readjusted it, centering the golden wreath on his head.

Shouts sounded from all over but were silenced by a look from my father, High Lord of Bamaria, along with a show of power from his warlord, hand on the hilt of his sword. No emotion appeared on my father's face as he waved to the unsettled crowd in an unspoken command for them to take their seats and remain calm. We did not grieve vorakh. We destroyed it.

"Continue." He lifted his hand in dismissal, his fingers moving carelessly in a practiced flourish. Waves of calm seemed to emanate from my father, unnatural, forceful.

Arkmage Kolaya's eyes were wide as she rushed back to the center of the Chamber. In silence, the High Lord of Bamaria limped back to the Seat, the steps of his uneven gait echoing.

I was awake in a nightmare. The Revelation Ceremony went on, like Jules's arrest had never happened, like I'd imagined it. Arianna continued holding me down, ensuring my silence.

I watched the ceremony with blurred vision, a sick feeling rising in my stomach. I couldn't stop picturing Jules standing outside the temple, blowing kisses, so happy and excited for tonight, for her chance to finally use magic.

Tristan took my hand and assured me that what had happened was for the best. My skin crawled from his touch, but I didn't pull away, not even when he told me Jules was dangerous and what had been done to her was to ensure my own safety as much as everyone else's. Nor did I push him away when he continued saying that mages who had the vorakh of visions went mad, and their minds deteriorated into violence that led to murderous rages. Nor when he told me he knew it hurt in the moment, but this was to protect me, it would be all right. I remained frozen, numb. I let him continue to touch me with every poisonous word.

"Lady Meera Batavia, Heir Apparent to the Arkasva, High Lord of Bamaria."

I sucked in my breath as Meera stepped onto the Chamber, removing her robes. Her blood dripped, her blessing commenced, and her stave was produced. The sun and moon wood gleamed under burnt embers, revealing her name carved into the stave. Meera's eyes dipped down. I followed her gaze to where Jules's stave had been left behind. Untouched.

Gold pulsed overhead, expanding, washing Meera's body in light. The diadem she wore over her forehead, a simple, small golden circle that marked her station, shined like a beacon. Meera's mouth opened, a perfect mirror image of Jules's face when her visions had come.

Morgana's fingers clamped around my arm, but I was already shaking.

*By the Gods, please!*

Meera's expression took on a stilted, awkward look. One eyebrow lifted oddly. Every breath she took and every lift of her arm was jerky and unnatural. She took a step forward, uneven with her weight, and lifted her stave. Wild blue sparks shot forth, a simple, basic show of magic—not impressive for an Heir. Under normal circumstances, it would have been an embarrassment. In that moment, it was a relief. Meera returned to her seat with those same jerky, odd movements.

The Emperor inched toward the stage again, one leather sandal resting on the Chamber's lower floor, the eternal flame crackling into a riot of color. Suspicion curtained in the slight lift of his lips. I could feel it, his pointer finger slowly tapping his cheek, his wolfish eyes focused and alert. But Meera had no vorakh. And though the Emperor was nephew to

the Emperor, even he dared not arrest an Heir Apparent without ample proof.

The ceremony ended, and Markan appeared at my side, dismissing Tristan by wishing him a good night. Markan never spoke. Something was happening. There was a flash of blue stone glowing beside his ear—a vadati stone. He was receiving orders. Were they to get rid of Tristan so we could rescue Jules? The Bastardmaker couldn't have gone far. My heart leapt.

Tristan looked disappointed. "I thought we could...spend more time together, and if you need any comfort...." There was an almost flirtatious tone in his voice, as if tonight had been normal, as if there was anything for me to celebrate.

"Sorry," I said. "I forgot about our private gathering for Meera tonight. To celebrate her coming into her title. You know she hates a big fuss." The lie came out of nowhere, as did the strength in my voice. "I'll send word to you tomorrow. Good night, Tristan." I held out my hand for him to kiss.

His mouth felt disgusting and wet against my skin. My fingers twitched. Were these really the same lips I'd craved at the start of the night? The ones I'd pulled against my own in a dark alcove outside?

A moment later I was hidden in the back halls of the red ray with Markan, I rubbed my hand against my dress, wiping the feel of Tristan's kiss away.

We turned a corner, ending up right where the Bastardmaker had taken Jules.

"Markan, are we going to find Jules?" The words came out rough; my throat still felt dry.

"We're flying to Cresthaven, your grace. Your father ordered you and your sisters' immediate return."

"No." My stomach twisted. "What about Jules?" I eyed his vadati stone, now white and clear.

"I protect you, your grace. Not cursed vorakh," he said, voice gruff.

"Vorakh! Jules is my cousin and your lady, you gryphon-shit bastard! You're going to help me get her back now! Or you'll answer to your Arkasva with your life."

"Forgive me, your grace. I am answering to my Arkasva."

I turned and ran, my arms pumping at my sides as fast as I could make them. Markan's sandals slapped against the ground behind me. I ripped off my diadem and flung it back at him, but Markan was on me in seconds, grabbing me from behind and scooping me over his shoulders. I yelled and punched his back, squirming to escape, but he was nothing but thick, corded muscle, his body as strong as a stone wall. He walked outside to our waiting seraphim; the carriage doors were already open.

I couldn't let him take me away from here, away from Jules. If I could escape, I could run. I could find her.

"Markan! Stop! I order you to release me! Now!"

"Your father ordered me first." Markan pulled a golden cloth from a belt pocket.

"No!" I kicked, struggling against him. "We have to get Jules. Markan!"

But Markan was done talking. He covered my mouth and nose with the cloth. The scent overpowered me.

"No, no, stop—" My world went black.

I came to, my vision groggy and head pounding. I was in the Seating Room, where the Council met and made state decisions. Ropes fabricated of pure light secured my wrists to my chair. Dizzily, I turned and found Meera and Morgana tied up beside me.

Morgana was staring straight ahead; her body erect with tension. Meera watched me carefully. Her usually perfect hair was unkempt, her expression wild.

My father entered, limping toward his Seat. His energy was off. His aura was dark and swirling. He pointed his stave at the small side table. A dagger appeared on the smooth surface.

"Father," I asked, gripping my chair. "What's going on? Where's Jules?"

He grabbed the dagger's hilt, pointing his stave at it until the blade shined black as onyx glittering with silver sparks. The dagger hummed low as he sheathed his stave. The ropes around my wrists vanished, reappearing around my waist. My father approached; the blade pointed right over my heart.

"Hold out your wrists. All three of you will swear to me now."

"Swear what?" I asked. "Father! Stop! You're scaring me."

"Do as he says, Lyt," Meera said. There was an underlying command behind her words, a new force in her aura I hadn't felt before, like glass shattering, rain pouring.

"I don't understand. What am I swearing?" I sobbed.

"Meera is a vorakh," my father said. "Like Jules." His voice broke on her name.

I swayed in my seat, my hands grasping hold of the edges of the chair.

"The Seat of the Arkasva is within the magic boundaries protecting the ceremony," he said, voice low. "With Jules...it was too late. I had to make a choice. I chose Meera, I took control of her body, used my own magic to hide hers. If anyone finds out she's a vorakh, finds out I interfered in the Revelation Ceremony, we're dead. Dead as Ka Azria."

"Ka Azria?" I asked, feeling sick to my stomach. "I-I don't understand."

His eyes jumped between us. “You know what happened to them. But do you know why everyone in Ka Azria was killed?”

Ka Azria. They were a scary story, a campfire tale used to terrify noble children. Ka Azria had been powerful, rich, and beloved in Elyria, a neighboring country in the Lumerian Empire. Then one day, they were all killed—by order of the Emperor. I wracked my brain, realizing I’d only ever known they’d been executed. It had been before I was born. I’d never once thought to ask why the Emperor had ordered their deaths. Having grown up with the story, I’d never questioned it. Never asked why. Never needed to. A chill ran down my spine as my stomach twisted. Just like that, I knew.

My father confirmed it. “An Heir of Ka Azria was vorakh. They thought they could keep her condition secret, keep her safe. But they made a grave error. Too many knew, too many were sworn to silence in their fortress. They were betrayed. We will not make their mistakes. No one else will know. No more of the Ka, no one in our household, not even a single escort in our service. The stakes are too high. We four keep this secret. We four die by this secret. Swear it. Your arms. Now!”

Tears streamed down my face as I turned up my left wrist, revealing pale, sensitive skin that had never seen a scratch or blemish. The skin of a noble. I held my arm steady with my hand, as it shook with fear of the coming pain, fear of everything. My father slashed my wrist, striking fast and violent, a snake claiming its prey.

“Now say it,” he commanded. “Swear it.”

“*Ani dhara me sha el lyrotz,*” I said, voice trembling. An old magic lived in those words. One that would hold me. One that would punish me if I ever proved untrue.

*I give you my oath in blood.*

I closed my eyes as the magic sank into my wrist, the cut bleeding out onto my dress. Every drop felt like a death sentence. It was a trade. By swearing to this, by moving forward, I was forsaking Jules. I would never see her again. And in exchange, I got to keep my sister.

*We four keep this secret.*

I staunched the wound and closed my eyes.

*We four die by this secret.*

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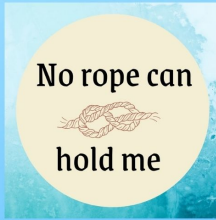
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frankie Diane Mallis lives outside of Philadelphia where she is an award-winning university professor. When not writing or teaching, she practices yoga and belly dance and can usually be found baking gluten free desserts. Daughter of the Drowned Empire is her debut novel in the highly anticipated fantasy romance Drowned Empire Series. Visit [www.frankiedianemallis.com](http://www.frankiedianemallis.com) to learn more, and join the newsletter. Follow Frankie on Instagram @frankiediane, and on TikTok @frankiedianebooks.