

A CROWNS OF NYAXIA NOVEL

THE ASHES
& THE STAR-CURSED
KING

THE NIGHTBORN DUET BOOK TWO
CARISSA BROADBENT

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Author's note:

This book contains subject matter that might be difficult for some readers, including graphic violence, violence against children, discussion of sexual assault and rape, and slavery. This book also contains explicit sexual content.



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PROLOGUE

The king knew, in this moment, that his greatest love would also be his ruination, and that both would come in the unlikely form of a young human woman.

He'd been putting off this realization for a long time. Longer, maybe, than he wanted to admit to himself. Clarity, strangely enough, came in a moment of utter chaos—in the raging screams of the audience, in the blood-soaked colosseum sands, in the flurry of bodies and sweat and gore as the young woman barely managed to stave off the brutal onslaught from her aggressor.

The king wasn't doing much thinking then. He was only reacting. Trying to get the Bloodborn's attention away from the human. Trying to get between them. Failing every time.

The Bloodborn contestant had one goal and one goal alone: to go after the human.

One strike, and another, and another, and the young woman was on the ground, the Bloodborn towering over her, and the king couldn't feel anything but his heart in his throat as the sword rose.

And then the king looked up into the stands, and his eyes so easily fell to the Bloodborn prince, standing there with his arms crossed and a cigarillo at his lips, smirking.

He understood exactly what that smirk said: *I know what you want. You know what I want.*

It was here, in this moment, that the realization hit him.

You have fucking destroyed me, he had told the young woman the night before.

She would destroy him.

And it would be worth it.

Because the king didn't even think, didn't even hesitate, as he met the prince's eyes—and he nodded.

One little movement, and he sold away his kingdom.

One little movement, and he knew exactly what he had to do.

The next seconds blurred together. The prince's smirk becoming a satisfied smile. His signal to his Bloodborn contestant. The contestant's hesitation, so perfectly calculated, and the human woman's sword through her chest.

And then it was just him and her, and a prize that only one could live to claim.

Only one choice was left then, of course. He didn't question it. He had just made a deal to save her life—a deal that would destroy his kingdom, and that he had only one way out of.

Three hundred years was a long time to live. More time, he'd often thought, than any creature deserved.

The two of them stared at each other for several long, silent breaths, unmoving. He could read her face so easily. It was endearing that someone so prickly was also so transparent. Right

now, her conflict—her pain—shone through the cracks in her walls.

She wouldn't move first, he knew.

So he did.

He knew her so well by now. He knew exactly how to push her to unleash all that ruthless, deadly, devastatingly-fucking-beautiful power. He was a good actor. He played his role well—even if beneath it, he flinched with every wound his blade opened on her flesh.

Many years later, the historians would whisper, *Why? Why did he do this?*

If they could have asked him that night, he might have said, *Is it really so hard to understand?*

Her eyes were the last thing he saw when he died.

They were beautiful eyes. Unusual. Bright silver, like the moon, though usually darkened by clouds. He found many things about the human woman beautiful, but he thought her eyes were the most stunning of all. He'd never told her so. The moment her blade came to his chest, Nightfire surrounding them both, he wondered if he should have.

Those eyes always revealed more than she ever thought they did. He saw the exact moment she caught him in his act—realized he had tricked her.

He almost laughed. Because of course she noticed. She, and those eyes, had always seen right through him.

It was too late, though. His hand gripped her wrist as he felt her balk.

His last words were not, *You have beautiful eyes.*

His last words were, "End it."

She was shaking her head, the cold fire in her face fading to dismay.

But he knew he was doing the right thing, and those eyes reassured him. Because they were strong and determined and unique, neither human nor vampire, fierce and thoughtful.

Better than his. More deserving of what would come next.

"*End it,*" he said, and pulled her wrist.

And he did not look away from those eyes as he died, by the hand of the only person who deserved to kill him.

Maybe the king always knew that his greatest love would be his ruination. Maybe he knew it the moment he met her.

He'd know it the second time he died, too.



PART ONE

NIGHT

ORAYA

My father lived in the hazy moments before I opened my eyes every day, caught between waking and dreaming.

I treasured those moments, when my nightmares had faded but they'd yet to be replaced with the grim shadow of reality. I would roll over in silk sheets and draw in a deep inhale of that familiar scent—rose and incense and stone and dust. I was in the bed I had slept in every day for fifteen years, in the room that had always been mine, in the castle I had been raised in, and my father, Vincent, the King of the Nightborn, was alive.

And then I would open my eyes, and the inevitable cruel clarity of consciousness would roll over me, and my father would die all over again.

Those seconds between sleep and waking were the best of the day.

The moment when the memory returned to me was the worst.

Still, it was worth it. I slept whenever I could, just to claw those precious seconds back. But you can't stop time. Can't stop death.

I tried not to notice that those seconds grew fewer each time I woke.

This morning, I opened my eyes, and my father was still dead.

BANG BANG BANG.

Whoever was knocking on the door did so with the impatience of someone who had been at it for longer than they'd like.

Whoever was knocking.

I knew who was fucking knocking.

I didn't move.

I *couldn't* move, actually, because the grief had seized every one of my muscles. I clenched my jaw, tighter, *tighter*, until it hurt, until I hoped my teeth cracked. My fists were white-knuckled around the sheets. I could smell the smoke—Nightfire, my magic, eating away at them.

I had been robbed of something precious. Those hazy moments where everything was as it had been.

I slipped from sleep with the image of Vincent's decimated body still seared into my mind, just as dead and just as mutilated in my sleeping moments as it was in my waking ones.

"Wake up, princess!" The voice was so loud that even with the door closed, it boomed through the room. "I know those catlike senses of yours. You think I don't know you're awake? I'd rather you let me in, but I'll barge in if I have to."

I hated that voice.

I hated that voice.

I needed ten more seconds before I could look at him. Five more—

BANG.

BA—

I threw back the covers, leapt from my bed, crossed the room in a few long strides, and threw open the door.

“Knock on that door,” I breathed, “*one more fucking time.*”

My husband smiled at me, lowering his raised fist, which had indeed been ready to knock one more fucking time. “There she is.”

I hated that face.

I hated those words.

And I hated most of all that when he said them now, I could hear the hidden undercurrent of concern—could see the way his smirk stilled as he took me in, feet to eyes, in quick but thorough evaluation. His gaze paused at my hands, drawn into fists at my sides, and I realized I was clutching a scalded scrap of silk in one.

I wanted to use it to threaten him, remind him that the silk could be him if he wasn’t careful. But something about the flicker of concern over his face, and all the things it made me feel, killed that fire in my stomach.

I liked anger. It was tangible, and strong, and it made me feel powerful.

But I felt anything but powerful when I was forced to recognize that Raihn—the man who had lied to me, imprisoned me, overthrown my kingdom, and murdered my father—genuinely cared for me.

I couldn’t even look at Raihn’s face without seeing it spattered with my father’s blood.

Without seeing how he’d once looked at me, like I was the most precious thing in the world, the night we had spent in bed together.

Too many emotions. I stomped them down viciously, even though it physically hurt, as if swallowing razor blades. Easier to feel nothing.

“What?” I asked. It was a deflated question, not the verbal strike I wanted it to be.

I wished I didn’t notice the slight disappointment on Raihn’s face. Worry, even.

“I’ve come to tell you to get ready,” he said. “We have guests.”

Guests?

My stomach churned at the thought—the thought of standing in front of strangers, feeling them stare at me like a caged animal, while struggling to keep myself together.

You know how to control your emotions, little serpent, Vincent whispered in my ear. *I taught you that.*

I flinched.

Raihn’s head cocked, a wrinkle deepening between his brow.

“What?”

Fuck, I hated that. Every time, he saw it.

“Nothing.”

I knew Raihn didn’t believe me. He knew I knew it. I hated that he knew I knew it.

I stomped that down, too, until that emotion was just another numb buzz in the background, coated over with another layer of ice. It took constant effort, keeping them that way, and I was grateful I could focus on that.

Raihn stared expectantly at me, but I said nothing.

“What?” he said. “No questions?”

I shook my head.

“No insults? No refusal? No argument?”

Do you want me to argue? I almost asked. But then I'd have to see that little concerned twitch on his face, and I'd have to recognize that he *did* want me to argue, and then I'd have to feel that complicated emotion, too.

So I just shook my head again.

He cleared his throat. "Alright. Well. Here. This is for you." He'd been carrying a silk bag, which he now handed to me.

I didn't ask.

"It's a dress," he said.

"Alright."

"For the meeting."

Meeting. That sounded important.

You don't care, I reminded myself.

He waited for me to ask, but I didn't.

"It's the only one I've got, so don't bother arguing with me about it if you don't like it."

So pathetically transparent. He was practically poking me with a stick to see when I'd react.

I opened the bag and glanced down to see a pile of black silk.

My chest tightened. Silk, not leather. After everything, the idea of walking through this castle in anything other than armor...

But I said, "It's fine."

I just wanted him to go.

But Raihn now never left a conversation without a long, lingering stare, as if he had a lot to say and it all threatened to bubble up before he left my room. Every single fucking time.

"What?" I asked, impatient.

Mother, I felt like my stitches were popping open, one by one.

"Get dressed," he said at last, to my relief. "I'll be back in an hour."

When he was gone, I closed the door and sagged against it, releasing a ragged exhale. Keeping myself together for those last few minutes was agonizing. I didn't know how I was going to do it in front of a bunch of Raihn's cronies. For longer. For fucking *hours*.

I couldn't do it.

You will, Vincent whispered in my ear. *Show them how strong you are.*

I squeezed my eyes shut. I wanted to lean into that voice.

But it faded, as it always did, and my father was dead once more.

I put on the stupid dress.



RAIHN WAS NERVOUS.

I wished I didn't recognize this so easily. No one else seemed to. Why would they? His act was meticulous. He embodied the role of conqueror king just as easily as he had embodied the role of human in the pub, and the role of bloodthirsty contestant, and the role of my lover, and the role of my kidnapper.

But I saw it, anyway. The single muscle tightening at the angle of his jaw. The slightly glazed-over, too-hard focus to his stare. The way he kept touching the cuff of his sleeve, like he

was uncomfortable in the costume he wore.

When he returned to my room, I'd stared at him, caught off guard despite myself.

He wore a stiff, fine black jacket with blue trim and a matching sash over his shoulder, striking against the silver buttons and subtle metallic brocade. It was achingly similar to another outfit I'd seen him wear once: the outfit he had worn at the Halfmoon ball, the one that the Moon Palace had provided for him. Even then, though, he'd left his hair unkempt, his chin stubbled, as if the entire thing had been reluctant. Now, he was clean-shaven. His hair was neat and tied up to reveal the top of his Heir Mark over the back of his neck, peeking over the neck of his jacket. His wings were out, revealing the streaks of bright red at their edges and tips. And...

And...

At this, my throat grew so thick I couldn't swallow—couldn't breathe.

The sight of the crown on Raihn's head drove a spike between my ribs. The silver spires sat nestled in Raihn's red-black waves, the contrast of the two jarring when I had only ever seen that metal against my father's sleek fair hair.

The last time I had seen that crown, it had been soaked in blood, ground into the sands of the colosseum as my father died in my arms.

Had someone had to pick through what remained of Vincent's body to get that crown? Had some poor servant had to clean his blood and skin and hair from all those intricate little whorls of silver?

Raihn looked me up and down.

"You look nice," he said.

The last time he had said that word to me, at that ball, it had sent a shiver up my spine—four letters full of hidden promise.

Now, it sounded like a lie.

My dress was fine. Just fine. Plain. Flattering. It was light, finely-made silk that clung to my body—it must have been made for me, to fit that well, though I had no idea how they had known my measurements. It left my arms bare, though it had a high collar with asymmetrical buttons that wrapped around my side.

I was secretly grateful that it covered my Heir Mark.

I avoided looking in the mirror when I changed, these days. Partly because I looked like shit. But also because I hated—*hated*—to see that Mark. Vincent's Mark. Every lie, seared into my skin in red ink. Every question I could never answer.

Covering the Mark was, of course, intentional. If I was going to be paraded in front of some kind of important Rishan people, I'd be expected to seem as nonthreatening as possible.

Fine.

A strange look flickered over Raihn's face.

"It's not closed."

He gestured to his throat, and I realized that he meant the dress—in addition to the clasps in the front, there were buttons in the back, too, and I'd only managed to make it halfway up.

"Do you want me to—"

"No."

I blurted it out fast, but in the seconds of silence that followed, I realized that I had no choice.

"Fine," I said, after a moment.

I turned around, showing my greatest enemy my bare back. I thought to myself, wryly, that Vincent would be ashamed that I was doing such a thing.

But Mother, I would take a dagger over Raihn's hands—would rather feel a blade than his

fingertips brushing my skin, far too gently.

And what kind of a daughter did it make me, that despite everything, some part of me craved an affectionate touch?

I drew in a breath and didn't let it out until he fastened the last button. I waited for his hands to move away, but they didn't. Like he was thinking about saying something more.

"We're late."

I jumped at the sound of Cairis's voice. Raihn pulled away. Cairis leaned against the doorframe, eyes slightly narrowed, smiling. Cairis was always smiling, but he was also always watching me very, very closely. He wanted me dead. That was fine. Sometimes I wanted me dead, too.

"Right." Raihn cleared his throat. Touched the cuff of his sleeve.

Nervous. So nervous.

A previous version of myself, the one buried beneath the dozens of layers of ice I put between my emotions and the surface of my skin, would have been curious.

Raihn glanced over his shoulder at me, mouth twisting into a smirk, shoving his emotions down the same way I did.

"Let's go, princess. We'll give them a show."



THE THRONE ROOM had been cleaned up since the last time I was here—artwork and decor replaced, floors cleared of the broken pieces of Hiaj artifacts. The curtains were open, revealing the silver-shrouded silhouette of Sivrinaj. It was calmer than it had been a few weeks ago, but little sparks of light occasionally burst through the night in the distance. Raihn's men had gotten most of the inner city under control, but I could see clashes throughout the outskirts of Sivrinaj from my bedroom window. The Hiaj were not going down without a fight—not even against the House of Blood.

A twinge of something far beneath that ice—pride, maybe. Worry. I wasn't sure. It was so hard to tell.

My father's throne—Raihn's throne—sat upon the center of the dais. Cairis and Ketura took up their places behind it, against the wall, dressed in their best fineries. Ever the dutiful guards. I assumed I would be there, too, in the single chair perched there. But Raihn took one look at it, cocked his head, and then dragged it up to place it beside the throne.

Cairis looked at him like he'd just lost his mind.

"You sure about that?" he said, quietly enough that I knew I wasn't intended to hear.

"Sure am," Raihn replied, turned to me, then motioned to the chair while taking his own, not giving Cairis the chance to disagree. Still, the advisor's pursed lips said more than enough. As did Ketura's ever-present dagger glare.

If I was supposed to be moved by this show of... of generosity, or kindness, or whatever the fuck this was supposed to be, I wasn't. I sat and didn't look at Raihn.

A servant poked her head in through the double doors, bowing as she addressed Raihn. "They're here, Highness."

Raihn glanced at Cairis. "Where the fuck is he?"

As if on cue, the scent of cigarillo smoke drifted through the air. Septimus strode in through the hall, ascending the dais in two long, graceful strides. He was followed by his two favorite Bloodborn guards, Desdemona and Ilia, two tall, willowy women who looked so similar I was certain they must be sisters. I'd never heard either of them speak.

"Apologies," he said breezily.

"Put that out," Raihn grumbled.

Septimus chuckled. "I hope you intend to be more polite to your own nobles than that."

But he obeyed—putting out the cigarillo on his own palm. The smell of smoke was replaced by that of burning flesh. Cairis wrinkled his nose.

"That's nice," he said drily.

"The Nightborn King asked me to put it out. It would be rude not to."

Cairis rolled his eyes and looked like he was trying very hard not to say anything else.

Raihn, on the other hand, just stared across the room at those closed double doors, as if burning straight through them to what lay beyond. His face was neutral. Cocky, even.

I knew better.

"Vale?" he asked Cairis, voice low.

"He should've been here. Boat must be late."

"Mm."

That sound might as well have been a curse.

Yes, Raihn was very, very nervous.

But his voice was calm and breezy as he said, "Then I guess we're ready, aren't we? Open the doors. Let them in."

RAIHN

The last time I had stood in this room with these people, I'd been a slave.

Sometimes, I wondered if they remembered me. I was nothing to them back then, of course. Another faceless body, something more akin to a tool or a pet than a sentient being.

These people, of course, knew who I was now. Knew what my past held. But I couldn't help but wonder, as they filed into the vast, beautiful throne room, whether they actually remembered *me*. They certainly didn't remember all those little mundane cruelties, to them just another part of another night. I remembered, though. Every humiliation, every violation, every strike, every casual agony.

I remembered it all.

And now here I was, standing before the Rishan nobility, with a Goddess-damned crown on my head.

My, how things had changed.

Not as much as I wished, though. Because secretly, even after all this time, I was still terrified of them.

I hid the truth with a performance that was so carefully curated—a fucking impeccable mimicry of my former master. I stood on the dais, my hands behind my back, my wings out, my crown perfect, my eyes cold and cruel. That last part wasn't difficult. The hatred, after all, was real.

The nobles had been called from every corner of Rishan territory. They were old power. Most of them had been in power when Neculai was king. They were as finely dressed as I remembered, swaddled in silk garments so intricate that it was obvious some poor slave had spent weeks toiling over every stitch of embroidery. Their faces held the same haughtiness, the same elegant ruthlessness that, I knew by now, was shared by all vampire nobility.

That was the same.

But a lot was different, too. Two hundred years had passed. And maybe those two hundred years hadn't marked their bodies, but they were hard years, and those hard years had certainly marked their souls. These were the handful of powerful Rishan who had survived a violent coup and then two centuries of Hiaj rule. They'd lorded over the ruins that Vincent had allowed them to keep.

And now they were here, standing before a king they already hated, ready to fight like hell for their pile of bones.

The worst of privilege. The worst of oppression.

I lifted my chin, smirk at my lips.

“What a somber bunch,” I said. “I’d think you’d all be happier to be here, considering the circumstances of the last two centuries.”

I’d intended to make my voice sound like his. A perpetual threat. Only thing these people understood.

Still, it was a little shocking to hear it coming out of my mouth.

I loosened my grip on my magic, letting wisps of night unfurl around my wings—highlighting, I knew, the streaks of red feathers. Reminding them who I was, and why I was here.

“Nyaxia has finally seen fit to restore us to rule,” I said, pacing along the dais with slow, lazy steps. “And with the power she has granted me, I will lead the House of Night into a stronger era than ever before. I have reclaimed this kingdom from the Hiaj. From the man who murdered our king, raped our queen, decimated our people, and took our crown for two hundred years.”

I was so deeply aware of Oraya’s stare, digging into my back as I listed Vincent’s misdeeds. I was constantly conscious of Oraya, actually, through this entire act—knowing she could see right through it.

But I couldn’t show distraction. Instead, I let my lip curl in disgust.

“Now, I will make the House of Night once again something to fear. I will restore it to what it used to be.”

Every *I* was carefully chosen, reminding them with every sentence of my role.

I’d watched Neculai give some version of this speech countless times, and I’d watched these people lap it up like kittens at milk.

But no matter how good my acting was, I was not Neculai.

They just stared at me, the silence heavy not with reverence but with skepticism—and just a little bit of disgust.

Despite the Mark, the crown, the wings, they still saw a Turned slave.

Fuck them.

I paced the dais, staring them down. I stopped short when I saw a familiar face—a man with ash-brown hair speckled with gray at his temples, and sharp dark eyes. I recognized him immediately—faster than I’d like—because the memories came in an unwelcome, violent slash. That face, and hundreds of nights of suffering.

He resembled Neculai, in some ways. The same hard-angled features, and the same cruelty in them. That made sense. They were cousins, after all.

He’d been bad. Not the worst. That prize went to his brother, Simon, who, I noticed with a quick scan of the room, was not here today.

I paused before him, head cocked, smirk at my lips. I just couldn’t help myself.

“Martas,” I said pleasantly. “It’s a surprise to see you here. I could have *sworn* my invitation was addressed to your brother.”

“He couldn’t make the journey,” Martas said blandly. Downright dismissively. And there was no mistaking the way his eyes flicked up my body, the twitch of disgust at his lip.

The room was utterly silent. Harmless words on the surface. But everyone here knew what an insult they were.

Simon was one of the most powerful Rishan nobles that still remained alive—hell, *the* most powerful. But he was still just a noble. When a king summons, you fucking come.

“Really?” I said. “That’s a shame. What was so important?”

Martas—that snake—actually looked me straight in the eye, and said, “He’s a very busy man.”

A dark, bloodthirsty pleasure seeped through my careful composure.

“I suppose you’ll have to swear fealty on his behalf, then.” I lifted my chin, staring down my nose at him, smiling broadly enough to reveal my fangs. “Bow.”

I knew exactly what was about to happen.

Simon and Martas had believed that they had a clear path to the throne. They were the king’s only remaining relatives—surely, they must have thought, Simon would find an Heir Mark on his skin when Neculai died, as Neculai’s oldest next-of-kin.

But unfortunately for them—unfortunately for me—Nyaxia wasn’t so predictable.

The pricks had probably spent the last two hundred years assuming that no one had the Mark at all. Must have been an unpleasant shock a few weeks ago, when I revealed mine and then summoned them to Sivrinaj to kneel before the Turned slave they’d abused for seventy years.

They had no intention of doing so, and I knew that.

Martas did not move.

“I cannot,” he said.

One might have expected a gasp through the room, a ripple of murmurs. No. The crowd was silent. No one was surprised.

“My brother only swears his fealty to the rightful king of the House of Night, and I bow only to that man,” Martas went on. “You are no king.” The sneer at his lip twitched again. “I’ve seen the way you’ve defiled yourself. I can’t bow to someone who has done such things. Nor to someone who stands on a dais beside a Bloodborn prince.”

Defiled myself.

What a way to phrase it. It was almost fucking elegant, the way he made this about some non-existent moral code—as if I’d chosen anything that had happened all those years ago, and as if he hadn’t been one of the ones holding me down.

I nodded slowly, considering them. I smiled at him. It was now entirely genuine. I couldn’t have suppressed it even if I’d wanted to.

Bloodlust hammered through my body with every heartbeat, taking over.

And then Martas said, words growing faster, hand thrust to the dais, “You say you’ve freed us from the Hiaj, but I see Vincent’s whore sitting right next to your throne.”

His eyes flicked over my shoulder. Landing, I knew, on Oraya.

I knew that look. Hatred and hunger and desire and disgust, all rolled together. “Fine if you want to fuck her,” he snarled. “But look at her. So untouched. Not a scratch on her. All you need is a mouth and a cunt. Why did you bother keeping the rest?”

My smile disappeared.

I no longer found it fun to toy with him.

I had been keeping everything about this meeting calculated, deliberate. But now I moved on nothing but impulse.

“I appreciate your honesty,” I said calmly. “And I appreciate Simon’s.”

I stepped down the stairs in two long strides and placed my hands gently on either side of Martas’s face. He really did look so damned similar to how he had centuries ago.

Maybe people never changed.

I had *felt* different ever since Nyaxia restored the power of the Rishan heir line. I’d felt something change in me from the moment Neculai died, but I’d been able to stifle that power, subdue it into something easier to control and less likely to draw attention. But ever since that night, my magic had surged back with an uncontrollable force, like Nyaxia’s gift had ripped open a new vein of it.

It was actually something of a relief to use it at full force again.

I let it go.

Asteris was both exhausting and exhilarating to use. It felt like the raw power of the stars bursting through my skin, tearing through my body.

It tore through Martas's, too.

The room went white, then black, then snapped back into an unpleasant sharpness.

Warmth spattered over me. A dull *THUMP* cut through the silence, as a broken, crushed body fell to the floor in a pile of silk.

The light faded, revealing a sea of shocked, silent faces. I held Martas's head, the features twisted into satisfying confusion. Now, *that* was a new expression for him.

A few people near the front of the crowd took several quick steps back to avoid the pool of black blood spreading over the marble. There was no screaming, no hysterics. Vampires, even vampire nobles, were well accustomed to bloodshed. They weren't horrified, no, but they were surprised.

Maybe it was unwise to murder the brother of my most powerful noble.

In this moment, I didn't care. I felt nothing but satisfaction. I wasn't built for this bullshit—the preening, the parties, the politics. But this? The killing?

I was good at that. Felt good to give it to someone who deserved it.

I glanced over my shoulder. I wasn't sure why—I did it without thinking.

The look on Oraya's face struck me.

Satisfaction. Bloodthirsty satisfaction.

The first time in weeks I'd seen something that looked like fight in her eyes. Goddess, I could've fucking wept for it.

There she is, I thought.

And something about the way she stared at me, right in the eyes, speared through my costume and my performance. I could practically hear her saying it, too: *There he is*.

I turned back to the crowd, stepping backwards up the dais steps.

"I am the Nightborn King," I said, voice low and deadly. "Do you think I'm going to beg for your respect? I don't need your respect. Your fear will do. *Bow*."

And I let the head fall with a sickening wet *thump*, rolling down the stairs right into his former body. Fittingly, the position it had fallen into did indeed resemble a bow of prostration.

The nobles stared. The world held its breath.

I held my breath, and tried desperately not to show it.

I was walking a very thin line here. Vampires respected brutality, but only from the right people. I wasn't one of the right people. Maybe I never would be.

If one or two refused to bow, I could handle that. But Heir Mark or no, I needed some loyalty from my nobles, especially if I ever wanted to get out from beneath Bloodborn control. If *all* of them refused—

The door burst open, the slam against the walls splitting the silence like a sword through flesh.

Vale stood in the doorway.

I never thought I would be relieved to see that man. But Ix's tits, I had to physically stop myself from letting out a sigh of relief.

He took in the scene—me, the crowd, the advisors, Martas's bloody body—and immediately strung together what he'd just walked into.

He strode purposefully into the room, so fast his long dark waves flew out behind him. The crowd parted for him. A woman followed him, then lingered at the back of the crowd, looking