

CHAPTER 1

A cacophony of screams coats the night air as thick as the smoke hovering over my wooded village. The extent of the damage is hidden from my secluded shanty cabin behind my father's larger cottage, but a faint orange glow illuminates the trees in the direction of the more densely populated area of the village.

The shrieks and yells from the village make me weak in the knees. I try to slow my breathing in an attempt to quell the anxiety building in my chest, but

Emma Lee Joy

the smell of smoke sets my nerves on end. Though deadened through a distance, it is as though I am in the midst of hell with them.

It has been a very dry end to summer. Long, hot days, and the cool, brisk nights are devoid of moisture. Even the humidity has been scarce, a rarity for the piney-woods of what used to be north-east Texas that I have called home for twenty-four years.

The void left by the moisture is now filled with all consuming flames.

Through the east window over the sink, the village garden is still shrouded in darkness, and I can only hope that the fire does not reach it. We are near the final harvest, and cannot afford to lose our crops. The deer have become sparse over the last few years, and we can no longer depend on their meat to feed us, cutting down our food supply significantly.

The destruction of the garden would mean famine.

My husband is conspicuously absent, and my village is under attack, so I have resigned myself to pacing the narrow patch of earth between the empty fire pit in the center of the cabin and the water pump sink against the wall, chewing on my thumb anxiously. My leather-clad feet make no sound against the rabbit skin rug covering the sandy floor as I wear a path in the soft fur.

Unsure of what to do, my anxiety threatens to overtake me, and I can do nothing except gnaw all the more violently on the calloused skin of my thumb and continue my pacing with intentionally deep breaths to try and calm myself.

My thoughts run rampant despite my efforts.

Blood 4 Honor

Tonight's attack is completely unprovoked. We have had a tense ceasefire with Charon for some time, since the new Chief took power anyway. We have had no intentions of breaking it, or so I thought. After decades of constant fighting, I thought we were finally making headway towards peace.

I can fight no doubt about it. I could swing a sword before I could read, but the thought of missing my husband somewhere in the fray keeps me within the four walls of our home. Danny will come here to look for me first, unless he needs my help.

Or he is dead.

We parted on a sour note this morning, and I cannot help but fear that negative words may be the last thing I ever said to him.

I should go look for him.

The thought evokes a strong sense of determination forcing itself through the fog of anxiety clouding my mind. It makes it easier to process my thoughts, and I finally make my decision.

A raucous banging against the doorpost of the cabin sends my heart beating erratically in my chest as adrenaline courses through my veins.

Danny would not knock.

"Iylara! You in there?" Damian's voice bellows through the barrier in his deep, southern cadence, impatience lurking at the edges of his tone.

My older brother's familiar voice from the other side of the door calms my racing heart—to an extent.

The Damian Vance from my childhood would be much more welcome to hear. That Damian was much more accepting of me back then. Now he harbors resentment against me because of whom the man I

married is. Or rather is not, which is Blackthorn, and my brother is not the only one who disagrees with my decision.

I sling the thick woven door open to reveal the six foot tall man standing outside under the thatched awning.

There is a worried look on Damian's face that enhances the creases on his forehead uncovered by the long, black hair he has pulled back with a strip of dark leather.

"Danny here?" he asks, dark brown eyes searching for my husband over my shoulder. Crow's feet are evident at the corners of his eyes in the light of the torch he carries as he narrows them at Danny's absence.

I shake my head, trying to keep the frantic feeling fluttering in my chest at bay. I glance around over my brother's shoulder, but there is no movement in the courtyard.

Where is he?

"I haven't seen him since he left to help the blacksmith this morning. What is going on?" I ask, my anxiety slowly clawing its way out of my chest.

"Charon," Damian says shortly. "We need to go."

My heart thuds with vigor against my ribs. "Not without Danny," I say, shaking my head. "Of course it is Charon, who else would it be? You know I mean 'Why are they *here*?'"

Damian ignores my question. "Grab your stuff, Iylara. Move," he orders, trying to coax me into action with the venom in his voice. He uses fear and malice to get what he wants, but it does not work on me. I do what I want—for the most part.

Blood 4 Honor

I wish to hear my brother call me by my affectionately given nickname, Ray, just one more time. It feels like a stab in the heart every time he calls me by my birth name.

He was the first to call me Ray, after all.

There is always an undercurrent of disgust in his voice now when he speaks my name.

I give Damian a shaky huff, and turn on my heel, strutting for the antique armoire in the far corner of my home with more than a little attitude.

I pull out a knee length coat from the wardrobe. It covers my olive green overdress with gentle ochre waves, hiding the two short-swords hanging from my weapons' belt on either hip.

I procrastinate in joining my brother by adjusting my belt's position languidly, and it only takes moments before an impatient Damian finally yells at me from the door.

“Hurry up, woman! We don't have all night! The fires are getting closer to the courtyard!”

Damian's patience with me is running thin, but I am stalling on purpose. I hope the extra time will give Danny a chance to make his way home. Damian is only moments away from dragging me off to the safe house, per our doomsday plans in case something like this night ever came to pass, and Danny does not know how to get there by himself.

My father never entrusted the location to him, to my chagrin.

After a deadly virus swept through three years ago, killing a third of our population that included my mother and older sister, the ruling bloodline of Blackthorn has had to take some precautions to

ensure the clan always has a leader—which entails running away from a fight like cowards, if you ask me.

That opinion is frowned upon though, so I keep my mouth shut, if I can help it.

“I’m coming!” I say over my shoulder.

I pull the hood of my jacket over the dark auburn red braid hanging halfway down my back, casting my sun-kissed face in shadow.

My leather rucksack and quarter-staff wait for me beside the door, and I meet Damian outside after grabbing both.

“Are we holding Charon off?” I sling the strap of my bag over my shoulder as I speak.

Worry gnaws away in my chest for our people like a starved beast, and I cannot help but feel less of myself as I prepare to run away from the inferno and fighting to save my own life.

“So far, but Charon is more organized this time. If you can’t tell, they got through the South Gate,” Damian says, lowering his voice as we head towards the smaller North Gate, near the Orchard.

Of course they did. We wouldn’t be evacuating if they didn’t.

“Dad ordered me to fetch you and Danny—bring you to the safe house,” he adds, as if I did not already know.

I glance back at the pine wood, scavenged metal, and animal skins pieced together in a haphazard yet functional design that is my home.

“But Danny isn’t here. I should be looking for him, not coming with you. I can fight, you know,” I say bitterly, wishing I had gotten myself together and

Blood 4 Honor

gone looking for my husband before Damian showed up.

“You know Dad won’t allow that,” Damian says.

I easily sense his annoyance, but a threat lay right beneath the surface of his words.

Damian grabs me roughly by the arm to stop me before I can take one step in the opposite direction and does not let go. He knows I am seconds from bolting off into the darkness after a man he hates, if not to help defend our people.

I let him pull me along against my better judgment for the moment. It is quiet on this side of the village, and we make it to the North Gate without interference. The sounds of battle shrink away with the ever increasing distance our feet carry us.

We slip through the North Gate, mainly used for exporting food from the gardens to the trading post. It is only wide enough for a small supply wagon to fit through. I am sure if Charon knew about it, they would have utilized it tonight, but it is nestled under cover of dense forest and overgrown trails, hidden from anyone ignorant to its existence.

“He doesn’t allow much,” I mumble, trudging along behind Damian with a bitter attitude. “I should be fighting, not running,” I add, righteous anger rising inside of me.

I do not know how much longer I can continue to do nothing in this situation.

I helped train many of the people we are leaving behind to fight for their lives. I should be by their side, but being an heir to leadership, I am begrudgingly withheld from participating in the name of preserving the ruling bloodline of Blackthorn.

“You should be thinking about the bigger picture,” Damian spits at me, poking at my anger.

I should not poke back, I know this, but I don’t listen to rationalizations on the best of days when it comes to my brother.

“You mean saving *ourselves*,” I throw back at him, unable to hold my tongue. “Our people are dying, and all we can think of are our own lives.”

Damian turns, towering over me. “You need to watch your tone, Iylara.” I do not cower from him like I know he wants.

Damian likes to throw his weight around from time to time. Since our older sister died, making him the next in line to be Chief, he has let the thought of power go to his head.

If Damian had it his way, he would have talked our father into stepping down a long time ago, but extreme stubbornness runs in the family.

I came by mine honestly, that is for sure.

“Don’t even. You know good and well that I am right.” My words only make Damian angrier, as I knew they would, but I enjoy poking the bear from time to time.

Damian brings the back of his free hand up, striking me on the cheek. I hiss, my hand automatically going to my cheek. I glower at him as he points his finger in my face.

“You forget who you are talking to,” he growls, shoving me forward roughly. “Walk.”

I grit my teeth against the stinging his hand left behind and concede. I let him guide me forward, deciding that picking a fight with him right now is the last thing we need.

Blood 4 Honor

Damian does not act like this in front of our father. Surely Leeland Vance would find his son's behavior distasteful, but he would never believe me if I told him about it.

Being the only son, Damian has always been our father's favorite.

"You aren't as superior as you think," I mutter, shrugging off his hand to walk ahead of him, determined to have the last word, as childish as it is.

Damian does not answer as his long legged-strides surpass my own shorter ones, and a small sense of victory swells in my chest. He leads me closer to our destination through the wooded forest, keeping his hand on my arm to make sure I do not run off.

Damian's anger pulsates outwards from him, like hot tendrils waiting to burn me, much like the heat of the flame smoldering at the end of his torch, and I recoil internally.

To avoid his wrath, I bite my tongue, following him in silence. Damian may very well beat me if I run off to look for Danny with the mood he is in now. He has only ever slapped me once before, on my wedding day.

I finally submit, falling into step beside him with a defeated sigh.

The Vance family safe house is not much, but it has withstood the test of time for over a century. It is one of the best kept secrets of our age, or so it seems when my father talks about it.

Inset underground in the rock of an old abandoned quarry, the hazardous pathway down into

the pit deters most passerby, but our trained feet glide over the loose ground with ease.

I vault a new addition to the crumbling stone near the bottom with the help of my quarter staff, and land on the hard stone floor of the quarry pit with a flourish and arrogant bow, trying to lighten the tension between my brother and me.

“Show-off,” Damian mumbles grumpily, but I can hear the faintest sound of amusement in his voice—a shadow of times past. It is the best I can hope for.

I grin meekly with satisfaction, but say nothing, opting for turning my attention to the stone wall in front of me.

I place a hand on the stone, inside of a chest-high indentation, and hold it there. The stone remains cold even in the heat of summer, but at my touch it burns hot for the briefest of moments.

I wince as the stone pricks each of my fingertips all at once, soaking up the singular droplets of crimson instantly.

The stone sighs, and slowly slides away to reveal a tunnel entrance that opens way to a low hallway. Sucking on my fingertips, I step through the hole in the stone, and follow it.

The winding hallway opens up to a large cavern. The open expanse in front of me is complete with a wellspring surrounded by dark-dwelling plants that glow dimly in the low light of the cavern. The foliage thrives on the minimal amount of light at noon that comes through the skylight every day positioned directly above the pool.

I glance around the cavern, my eyes stalling on the light of the fireflies flickering amongst the flora

Blood 4 Honor

around the pool, but only for a second. Taking in the rest of the room, I frown at the absence of my husband. A part of me had hoped that a member of my family already brought him to safety for one reason or another. It would have saved me from the worry rising in my throat that threatens to choke me.

That notion is laughable, though. I am pretty sure every person in this room would leave him for dead if given the chance, except for Ysabel, I would hope.

Keena, Damian's wife, and their eleven year old daughter, Ysabel, sit by the fire pit in the center of the cavern, nestled under blankets on the overstuffed couch. They ignore our entrance for the most part. The duos' matching raven hair shines in the firelight.

I catch Ysabel's glance, but she diverts her eyes before her mother notices. A look I cannot place envelopes her sharp features, but my father interrupts before I can ask what is wrong.

"Where is Danny?" my father asks, standing up from his spot by the water.

I make my way over to the small fire pit, trying to ignore Keena's derisive glare that has taken me captive with my father's acknowledgement of me.

The cavern is chilly, much colder than the mild outside air, and goose-flesh appears on my arms where my skin is not covered in fabric.

I push the hood of my coat back to reveal my strained face. "I don't know," I answer with a slight shiver.

There is a familiar energy in the air that puts me on edge, and I cannot ignore it. I begin to gnaw on my thumbnail nervously again, waiting for whatever is to come.

Keena watches me as I approach the flames. “Then he did do it!” she says with an accusing tone, her malice directed at me.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, looking between her and my father in confusion.

“It isn’t Aunt Ray’s fault, mom,” Ysabel tells her mother in her song-bird voice. It chimes around the room like music, but it does not do much to tame the chaos swirling in the atmosphere around her mother.

Keena and I both look at Ysabel with questioning eyes. Keena looks down at her daughter and waivers, but she seems dead set on blaming me for something, as always.

“Of course it is,” Keena hisses at me.

I know she sees her daughter defending me as a form of betrayal by the sharp look in her eye, but she cannot bring herself to take her frustration out on the girl.

I am a different story.

“Someone opened the gate and let Charon in. How else could they have gotten past the guards?” Keena whispers with a chirpy growl. “And now your *Charon born* husband is missing.”

Her accusation is as clear as day. Loyalty lies with your clan, and turncoats are one in a million. Meaning no one ever completely leaves their clan—unless you are Danny Rekkon.

I trust my husband implicitly.

“Don’t even go there. You know he would never betray us,” I counter. How could she have the gall the pin this on Danny? Keena was a forest rat, a clan-less outsider in her own right, before Damian found her half dead in the middle of nowhere. She was not born

Blood 4 Honor

Blackthorn either, but we took her in as our own all the same.

“I don’t, actually,” Keena says, standing up straighter as she challenges me.

Standing as tall as she can, Keena is still several inches shorter than me. To make up for her stature, her chocolate eyes, made lighter by the mocha tone of her skin in contrast, shine bright with determined anger.

“Enough,” my father’s low voice rumbles through the cavern with authority. “We have enough problems without you two at each other’s throat.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, bowing my head and submitting to my father’s authority, but not without gritted teeth. I still feel the need to fight radiating from Keena, but she manages to restrain herself after a moment.

“Let’s go get ready for bed,” Keena tells Ysabel stiffly, trying to divert her anger before she does something to enrage my father.

Leeland Vance is not one to be trifled with.

“I can’t go to bed. I need to talk to Aunt Ray,” Ysabel tells her mom, sounding more like a small adult than an eleven year old.

“No you don’t. Come on,” Keena chastises, tugging gently on her daughter’s arm.

Ysabel looks at me, and rather than giving her mother more reason to hate me, I side with Keena for once. “We can talk in the morning, alright?” I say as Keena steps between us.

Ysabel ignores her mother’s scathing glare as she takes her arm back. “It could be too late by then,” she says, but gives in to her mother’s threatening glare.

I want to stop Ysabel and find out what she means, but Keena does not offer the chance. She grabs her daughter roughly by the arm, pulling her along with her as they head off toward the tunnel by the water where the bedrooms are.

Ysabel gives me one more glance over her shoulder before her mother turns her back, and they disappear through the hole in the wall.

I cannot quite make out the look my niece gives me. Something in her translucent brown eyes hovers between fear and anger that is not directed at me, but somehow *for me*—like she knows something I do not.

With the pair out of ear shot, my father walks over as Damian towers over me, pulling my attention away from his wife and daughter. “Do you always have to antagonize her?” he asks in his favorite domineering tone. “Especially with Ysabel around!”

“Antagonize her? Keena started it,” I say in disbelief. “How come you always blame me when she starts something?”

Encounters between Keena and I are usually tense, and she is eleven times out of ten the one who starts it. Somehow I still get blamed for disturbing the peace—every time.

Damian huffs as our father places a hand on his shoulder. “Lay off your sister,” he says, looking at me in concern.

“What are we supposed to do about Danny?” I ask. I need to go look for my husband, but I know my father will never let me.

A dark look crosses my father’s lined face, but it is Damian who speaks. “Danny can take care of himself,”

Blood 4 Honor

he snaps, seemingly coming to some conclusion since we arrived that I am still in the dark about.

“I have to go look for him,” I say, looking between the two men with pleading eyes. My mother would understand, if only she were here. Meredith Vance was the only person who ever understood me.

My father takes a deep breath, hesitating to answer my question. “Iylara, there is a very good chance Danny is the one who let Charon in.”

I stare open-mouthed at my father’s words.

“No, there isn’t,” I argue. I will not stand by and let them pin this on him. They have wanted to get rid of him since day one, and they would have succeeded had my mother not of been the one with the final say in my marriage.

“He has been on the run from Charon for a long time. You think he couldn’t have finally given in, and made a deal to save his own skin?” Damian asks.

Are they all in on this?

My own family is attacking me.

“No!” I almost yell. “He would never do that. You know Charon would never take him back! You have to believe me. I know it is hard for you to put aside his past and trust him, but I will not stand around and listen to this!”

I make for the door, but Damian steps in front of me, stopping me in my tracks.

“Get out of my way, Damian.”

My brother shakes his head, but it is my father who speaks. “No.”

I turn back to my father. “I am going to look for him,” I say with finality.

“I cannot allow that,” my father tells me with disdain.

I clench my jaw in anger, withholding the retort that will get me reprimanded. I look up into my brother’s eyes. I see a challenge in them, but I am wise enough to not take the bait. My initial reaction would normally be to fight, but I have never managed to beat him sparring—ever.

I storm off through the hole towards the bedrooms, slipping by the small cavern where Keena brushes Ysabel’s hair in silence. A small fire burns in a metal barrel near the doorway. The heat seeps out to meet me as I pass, beckoning me to bask in its embrace.

I restrain the urge and continue on towards my room.

Ignoring my room altogether, I make my way further down the tunnel. There is no way I can go out the front, so I head for the back exit, knowing what I have to do. My father may think he is right all the time, but I cannot see how he could be anything but wrong now.

Crouching to pass through a low crevice, I inch my way out into the darkness. I shrug off my pack as it catches on the stones above me, and drop it behind me. I will come back for it later.

I step out of the outcropping into the dense bushes concealing the exit from view. Looking both ways through the bushes, I find my path clear, and make a beeline for the village.

Smoke permeates the air even this far out, and I can imagine that if it were daylight, I would be able to see the smoke billowing from the southwest side of

Blood 4 Honor

the village like a chimney. The stars are nowhere to be seen and the light of the moon is blotted out by the invisible haze above me. I should have brought a torch.

I spin around, sensing a shift in the atmosphere behind me, and bring my staff in front of me in self-defense. I cannot see anything until Damian steps out of the densest shadow.

I do not lower my staff as I face him, and he frowns.

“Go back,” I tell him, committed to fight him on this if he does not concede. I have to try. I cannot go back to the safe house. Not without Danny. I have to prove my husband is not to blame for this mess we are in.

“I can’t do that little sister. I’m sorry.”

As Damian speaks, a sharp sensation in my neck sends me staggering. I reach up, fingertips brushing against a small, fuzz tipped cylinder.

The effects of the feather dart protruding from my neck are instant. Even with the support of my staff, I cannot stay upright as the world fades, and I sink to my knees as my legs give out.

Three dark figures appear out of the trees and diverge on Damian from all sides, swords raised, but he has not seen them.

My cry of warning is lost to the darkness as I fall into oblivion.

CHAPTER 2

The tinkling of chains echoes off of metal walls, and I jerk awake with a helpless yelp, unsure of where I am. Slumped against a metallic wall, my wrists support me, encased in thick metal cuffs.

I grip the chains connected to the cuffs, flailing against them while praying for the chain links to give way and free me.

My effort proves futile, and the noise made by the chains against the metal wall is almost unbearable in

Blood 4 Honor

the silence surrounding me. I give up the struggle, saving my wrists from the abuse while I try to get my feet under me. The smooth leather soles of my boots slip on the slick floor, and I fall back against the wall with a grunt of pain.

Darkness envelopes the room, but the sound of rustling next to me tells me I am not alone. The individual in question either cannot talk, or chooses to remain quiet. The last thing I remember are figures surrounding Damian, and I fear it is my brother next to me, wherever we are.

Dread pools like a heavy weight in the pit of my stomach at the sound of heavy boots on concrete. My heart thuds painfully in my chest, because I know instinctively the sound is coming straight for us.

It will not pass.

The jingle of a lock echoes around me, and the door is thrust upwards, filling the room with mid-morning sunlight. The light bounces off of the silvery walls of my prison cell, and the room glows orange. Squinting, I turn my head away from the glaring light to find Danny chained up next to me in a hail of sunlight, staring at me with those amber eyes of his. His mouth is gagged, and his luminescent eyes are void of emotion.

At the sight of my husband, I forget how to breathe. With a pitiful whimper, dread constricts my heart in my chest, choking me. My eyes do not leave Danny's as Charon Chief Carnegie Lysander, in all of his ebony leathered glory, waltzes in with an air of overzealous joy about him.

I only look away when Danny does to take in the smugness of our captor.

Emma Lee Joy

Carnegie's X-shaped Charon mark is on prominent display on the side of his neck above the stiff collar of his leather vest. It triggers the memory of Danny publicly burning off his own Charon tattoo. It was my mother's request as a show of loyalty before Danny could have my hand in marriage. Much to the rest of my family's disdain, he went through with it.

Danny deserted his own family and clan to be with me, deeming himself a traitor to his kin, all in the name of love. Yet he was never worthy enough to be marked as a Blackthorn. Anger still rises at the thought.

I am starting to regret dragging Danny into my life if it is what gets him killed, because I know Carnegie is not going to let Danny Rekkon, "Blood Traitor," leave this room alive.

Not after hunting him for over four years.

Defaulting from your clan, on either side, is punishable by death. You are blood bound to your clan. Breaking that bond should not be taken lightly. For the most part, people do not break it, but Danny didn't even think twice about it.

A dagger hangs at Carnegie's side in an ornate sheath, and I glance at Danny in fear. His curly light brown hair falls in his face as he glares at Carnegie, and the sunlight sets his amber eyes ablaze behind the curtain of hair.

"Well, well, well," Carnegie says with a chuckle; there is an all too excited gleam in his ice blue eyes for my liking. "This is my lucky day," he says to no one in particular.

Blood 4 Honor

The arrogance in his tone makes me want to slap him, but Danny and I stay silent behind the gags over our mouths.

Carnegie undresses me with his cold eyes as they roam over my body. I feel like a piece of meat on display for sale. His eyes pierce my very soul as he drags them upwards to meet my own and the hair on the back of my neck stands up.

The elegant swirling black marks around Carnegie's eyes are endearing, and his clear blue eyes almost glow in contrast. His white blonde hair is shaved on the sides, the long middle section braided down his back, revealing a dragon tattoo on the side of his head.

Carnegie Lysander would be a handsome man if he were not so terrifying, and I cannot even explain why he affects me the way that he does.

"How about we have a chat?" Carnegie asks as he continues to look at me. He pulls the cloth from over my mouth much slower than needed, and strokes my hair where it has come loose, falling into my face.

I shrug away from him, and he lets his hand fall with a glance at Danny, who growls through his gag in protest. Carnegie shifts to stand in front of him, looking Danny hard in the eye for a fleeting moment. He rears back, punching Danny in the gut.

Danny gasps for the breath forced from his lungs as I cry out. "Leave him alone!" I yell, straining against my chains again, despite the futility of my actions.

Carnegie smiles, turning his attention back to me. His gloved hand reaches out, stroking the side of my

face gently. The kiss of the cold black leather makes me shiver, and I jerk away from him.

Carnegie roughly grabs my chin, forcing me to look at him. “There is only one thing each of you is here for.” He points to each of us in turn with an accusing finger. “*Danny Boy* here is going to die for his treachery, and you are going to watch. It is only right, since you are the reason he broke the Blood Covenant.”

I watch on in abject horror as Carnegie turns his attention to Danny, at a loss for words.

“Long time no see. I’ve been waiting a long time for this day.” Carnegie happily rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet as he speaks. “Our *dishonorable defector*. All for a good lay, right? I can see why.” Carnegie turns to look at me again, taking in my form with a hungry look in his eyes.

He continues on, ignoring the scathing look on Danny’s face. “Did you know that your face has been plastered on every Wanted board for four years? ‘Wanted: Dead or Alive,’ by the very Chief Himself,” he tells Danny, speaking of himself in third person with a flourish of his hand. “Now that is quite some time to manage to stay off of my radar, and completely undetected,” Carnegie says, pausing to smile wolfishly at me. “My patience has finally been rewarded, and I managed to kill two birds with one stone. I didn’t even plan it.”

Danny tenses next to me, gripping his chains in anger.

Carnegie turns to me, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. “You ever ask yourself if your husband is as loyal as you think?” he asks.

Blood 4 Honor

“No,” I say bitterly as butterflies flit around my stomach at his question.

“Maybe you should have.” My eyes widen at his unspoken accusation, and he grins all the more, if it is even possible.

“What do you mean?” I ask, voice shaking as dread bubbles in the pit of my stomach.

I turn my gaze, searching Danny’s eyes for answers when Carnegie remains silent. He shakes his head at Carnegie, refusing to look at me. His garbled speech is unintelligible behind his gag, and I cannot tell if he is trying to deny Carnegie’s claim or not.

“Let him speak for himself!” I almost yell, my emotions getting the better of me. Tears threaten me as the belief that my husband might have actually betrayed Blackthorn starts to grab hold.

“He will only try to deny it. He didn’t want you to know he thought he made a mistake in defecting. He thought I would let him come home if he got me inside Blackthorn’s gates. I may have failed to mention that I do not make deals with *traitors*,” Carnegie says with venom on his tongue, directing the last bit at Danny, who stares quietly at our captor while avoiding my gaze.

My world starts to crumble before my eyes. “Please tell me there is something we can do. It doesn’t have to be this way,” I plead, afraid for Danny’s life.

Even as the bitterness of my husband’s now very possible betrayal encases my heart, my love for him never falters. I do not want him to die. I want to know if Carnegie is telling the truth, and if he is, I want a chance to work through this.

Emma Lee Joy

“No, there isn’t. He broke The Blood Covenant. You know that,” Carnegie tells me darkly. “I want to watch him bleed for his treachery. You should too.”

I stare at Danny, opened mouthed but silent as I watch on in horror. I am unable to properly process what I am witnessing.

Carnegie pulls his dagger from its sheath with a metallic ring, and the shimmer of metal sends me into a panic.

“No, please!” I cry out in fear for the man I love, unable to stop myself.

Danny finally catches my eyes with his, silencing me as Carnegie stands stoically in front of him. There is defeat, and something like guilt, in the amber orbs looking longingly at me.

“Mmm rawry,” he mumbles through the cloth gag, and my breath hitches.

“You *did* do it?” I ask barely above a whisper, disbelief evident in my voice.

Never would I have truly believed it, and I won’t, without his actual admission. Surely I am misunderstanding him.

Before Danny can answer, Carnegie sends the blade of his dagger upwards under Danny’s rib cage, piercing his heart as he hangs helplessly next to me. A single huff of surprise escapes his lips through the gag.

Carnegie pulls the blade out, and Danny begins to choke on his own blood.

Time stops and I cannot breathe.

Blood stains the cloth gag, dripping down Danny’s chin as he gasps for air. His eyes never leave mine as I stare back in horror, mouth agape in a silent scream

Blood 4 Honor

of anguish. A red stain of blood grows over the front of Danny's white tunic, getting larger by the second.

A wretched sob breaks from my throat as Danny's head drops to his chest, and the life leaves him. His body slumps and a single tear rolls down his face.

"No!" I scream, finding my voice as I kick out, unable to make contact with Carnegie's face like I want to.

Carnegie laughs at me as he dances away from my kicking feet. It makes me angry as well as distraught. "You son-of-a—" I yell, my voice breaking off in a sob.

"Now, now, don't insult my mother. She was no saint, but that's just rude," Carnegie says with a wicked smile.

I cry out as I look back at Danny's lifeless body. A yearning so painful I can barely stand it burns through my chest, and my vision starts to go red.

I will never get to set things right. Treason will be his legacy.

My ears start to ring, louder and louder until it consumes me, and tears cloud my vision. I want to rip Carnegie apart for taking that from me.

Carnegie has to pay. He cannot get away with this.

I don't have time to figure out how I am going to exact my revenge. Carnegie pulls a syringe from a pocket inside his vest, and pops the cap off. I am not sure if he means to knock me out, or kill me with it.

I try to twist away from him, but he strikes at me like a cobra, impaling my thigh with the needle and pushing down on the plunger. The contents are cold in my veins, chilling me to the bone, and my vision starts to fade.

"See you soon, my love," Carnegie whispers.

Emma Lee Joy

“No—” My voice trails off as the stupor sets over me.

The serum is strong and unconsciousness creeps in. I cannot fight it, and I succumb again to the darkness surrounding me as my world completely shatters around me.

I know only one thing as everything fades away.
Nothing will ever be the same.

Reality sets in, and I surface from a dark dream world to find my mouth gagged again, but I am no longer chained against a wall. Instead, I am strapped to something cold and hard that rests on an incline. I try to lift my pounding head to see through the darkness, but I quickly give up.

There is nothing to see in the pitch black encompassing me, and my head is much too heavy to lift in my lethargy.

Or maybe it is strapped down too—I cannot tell.

Tears burn my eyes as my memories come rushing back through the drug induced fog, crashing down on me like a tsunami. The breathlessness of grief has me gasping for air in seconds, and the sound of rustling leather escapes me as I try to claw my way out of the recesses of my mind.

The door of my prison is forced up and late afternoon sunlight filters in as the door rolls open with a clatter. I jerk at the sound, and my head flops to the other side.

So it's not strapped down.

My gag absorbs the majority of the tears streaming from my eyes, but I try to wipe away the

Blood 4 Honor

remnant on my shoulder as someone appears beside me.

A gloved hand grabs my chin, preventing me from ridding myself of the evidence of my weakness. My vision starts to clear in the light, and Carnegie's face comes into focus faster than I would like him to.

His infuriating smirk appears when our eyes meet.

“Rise and shine my love.”

Carnegie roughly pushes the gag down around my neck, freeing my mouth. “I was starting to think I put you through too much.”

I am not sure what he is talking about, but with my mouth free, a surge of energy goes through me, and I use it to curse him.

“You're a son-of—” He stops me midway, bringing the back of his hand to connect with my jaw. My head snaps to the side, and blood fills my mouth with the taste of iron, but the pain clears my head.

Before I can spit the mouthful of blood at him, he grabs me by the throat, pushing me against the hard surface, a table I realize, that I lay on.

“Is that the only insult you have? Watch yourself,” he threatens, his fingers tensing around my throat in warning.

I find my voice in the pressure of his fingers. “You killed him!” I rasp out, tears cutting fresh rivers down my face.

I relive the red stain spreading across Danny's chest, entranced by the ruby red drops of blood that run down his chin as the viscous liquid soaks his gag and drips from the corners of his lips.

Emma Lee Joy

Lips I will never feel pressed against my own in passion again.

“Yeah, well I don’t take lightly to my men disgracing Charon, and running off with some Blackthorn whore. He deserted his clan, becoming enemies with his fellow brothers-in-arms—his *family*.” Carnegie spits the last part at me with vehemence.

I close my eyes, wishing I were anywhere else.
Anyone else.

The heavy weight of grief on my chest will surely kill me if I have to stay in this reality any longer. I would give anything to turn back time but this is my life now.

Carnegie loosens his grip on my throat, stroking my bottom lip with his gloved thumb in thought. I open my eyes out of distrust of his motives.

Curiosity softens the anger in his eyes as he mulls a thought over.

“You must be something special to make a man do that,” he says, voice soft as he smells my hair.

My skin crawls, but I only give him the truth, my voice becoming stronger with each word.

“Danny didn’t leave Charon because of me. He hated you before he met me. I gave him a reason to leave,” I hiss back.

Anger flashes back across Carnegie’s face. My jaw clenches, readying myself for another hit.

It does not come, so I continue goading him.

“You disgusted him with your barbarism, and blatant disregard for your men’s life. He got out before you sent him on some fool’s suicide run,” I say in a stronger voice than I thought I could muster past the lump in my throat.

Blood 4 Honor

The blood I have yet to spit out pools in my mouth, coating my bottom lip, and my confidence builds with each second. I clench my fists as adrenaline begins coursing through me, and lean forward as much as the table straps will let me.

Carnegie does not pull back, glaring at me studiously. Malice is clear in his eyes, but I can tell he wants to hear what I have to say.

“You can’t take us down,” I growl out between clenched teeth. I spit the blood on his boots in disrespect. “The blood you’ve lost to us has been in vain. You can’t overcome us. No matter how hard you try. It was for *naught*,” I say with a snarl, regardless of the fact that I do not know *who* came out on top in the attack on my village, but even if Blackthorn lost, you can bet we took most of Charon down with us.

I only want to see him lose his composure, but he must know this.

Instead, Carnegie responds with that infuriating smirk and a chuckle. With his foot, he nudges something at the base of the table I lay on. A clicking sound coaxes his smirk into a wide grin.

My stomach drops as his hand tips the table backwards, throwing me into a barrel of cold water behind me.

I scream out involuntarily, losing my oxygen supply in one fell swoop. Unable to fight against my restraints, I stare up through the water into Carnegie’s icy eyes, distorted by the water quickly drowning me. I use what air I have left to keep it out of my nose, and my lungs start to burn.

Terror holds my gaze steadily on his through the water.

Emma Lee Joy

Carnegie tilts the table upright, saving me from a watery grave just as my vision starts to darken. Spitting and sputtering, I gasp for air. Despite my tenacity, I am unable to manage a glare at the man in front of me now.

I can only barely manage to hold back the threat of tears.

Standing over me with his arms crossed, he watches me gluttonously suck in air, before speaking in a calculated voice.

“So *you* think,” Carnegie says, making my spine tingle. “You don’t know who else I have,” he adds with a sneer.

Damian’s face flashes in my mind, and a bitter sickness rises in my stomach.

How could I have forgotten?

My breathing becomes shallow as I try to control my panic. Carnegie’s toothy grin widens with my increasing distress, and he lets out a solitary whistle. Two guards drag a limp body through the door at the sound.

“Damian?” I ask in a small voice, rivulets of water blurring my vision as they drip into my eyes.

A groan comes from the man, and Carnegie grabs a fist full of Damian’s hair, lifting his head. Blood runs from his hairline and his eyes are unfocused, but it is definitely my brother—the direct heir to the Blackthorn throne in the hands of our enemy.

Oh God, no.

“Your brother is off to hang next to your dear *husband*,” Carnegie says happily, his words sending my heart into the pit of my stomach.

Blood 4 Honor

Carnegie drops Damian's head painfully, and saunters back over to me, lowering his voice to a seductive whisper to speak into my ear.

"By the way, lover boy makes a nice scarecrow."

The color drains from my face as he chuckles in my ear, but no tears threaten this time. The only thing I can feel is pure, unadulterated hatred for the man standing next to me.

I look past Carnegie to lay eyes once more on my brother. "Fight, Damian!"

Carnegie shakes his head. "He can't do that. He got whacked upside the head pretty hard," he says, smiling happily at my brother over his shoulder.

"Take him away," he orders, ignoring my protests.

My anger turns to panic as they pull my brother's limp body from the room. "Wait, please! What do you want?" I cry out, still holding onto the hope that I can say or do something to save my brother's life despite failing to save Danny's.

Carnegie ignores me.

The two men drag my brother off without a fight, and Carnegie's voice drops an octave when he speaks next.

"I want you to continue on, and sooner or later, you will do exactly as I want you to do, whether you want to or not."

The monotone way in which he speaks unsettles something deep inside of me. I want to lash out, but I am paralyzed.

He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear as he continues to speak in the same wearisome tone. "Your people won't accept your leadership when your father is gone. Not after Danny. If they find out your husband

Emma Lee Joy

is a traitor they won't trust you like they should, and they will go looking for someone else to lead them. You will do what you feel you must do to protect your people. Your clan is forged by blood, my dear. Blood rules and you will be the only one left who can fill that order when they need it most. No one other than you will do with Damian gone, but unfortunately, you won't do either."

Soft music fills the atmosphere, and my heart begins to pound against my rib-cage, an anxiety attack surfacing from the pit of my stomach. My entire body shakes uncontrollably, and I glance over at Carnegie, confounded and fearful, to find a small wooden box playing a song I have never heard before in the palm of his hand.

I know the tremors rolling through my body are not from a normal anxiety attack. My eyes roll back inside my head, turning my vision dark, but I am powerless against it. This is different from anything I have ever experienced, and it is terrifying—uncontrollable.

My vision shimmers like sunlight on ice. "What did you do to me?" I ask breathlessly through chattering teeth, barely holding onto the last vestiges of consciousness.

"It won't do me any good to try and explain it to you right now. You are only going to remember what I want you to, and that wouldn't be one of those things. You won't even remember most of this for awhile," Carnegie says. His voice is soft and reassuring. "Don't worry," he continues, "Everything will be as it should be, which is how I want it."

Blood 4 Honor

The music pierces my eardrums, and the straps over my arms and legs strain against my limbs as convulsions rip through my body. My eyes roll into the back of my head, blinding me once more. My back arches up off of the table, and I yell out once as a shock like jolt runs from my head to my toes.

It only lasts a moment, but I fall back against the table, drained and weak, as if it has lasted a life-time.

“It is not too painful, I hope?” Carnegie asks, almost as if he cares.

“W-what was that?” I ask, voice shaking, as the music fades. Tears slowly leak from my eyes, cascading over my cheeks one after another.

He disregards my question, a faint smile gracing his thin lips. A voice speaks in my mind as a thought, but it is not my own, or in a language I understand.

Despierta, mi amor.

Like a switch being flipped, everything goes black, and I see and hear no more.

CHAPTER 3

A familiar, hard cot a foot and a half off of the cold hard-packed earth floor is not where I wanted to wake up. I will take it, though, because it means I am back behind the tall oak wood fence surrounding the Blackthorn compound.

I would rather be buried under the layer of furs on my own dense bedroll, insulated well against the cold earth by a thick layer of pine needles.

Blood 4 Honor

The pine needles do the job of holding warmth much better than the cloth cot under me does. Not to mention that the dingy white blanket covering me now only keeps out the worst of the chill in the air.

I do not know how I got here, and the feeling of having lost time, along with the pounding headache, has me disoriented.

No one else seems to know how I got here either. All anyone has been able to tell me is that I walked right up to what is left of the South gate and collapsed at the feet of Warren Payne, the Captain of the Guard who was on duty at the time.

I try to focus on the yellowing, hand woven curtains hanging around my bed from a wooden pole frame and hammered iron rings. They shade my quaint space, shielding my eyes from most of the light from the hallway. It does not block out the voices though, which float lazily over the barrier from the space to my right, nor my thoughts, which have wandered back to Danny with the sight of the iron rings.

Danny made them himself, along with many other seemingly insignificant things like them. My husband was not the best blacksmith, but he was good enough for the Master Smith to entrust him with village necessities.

Danny became engrained in this place, more so than I think most people realize. It is one reason I still cannot believe he would betray everything that he has put his heart and soul into the last four years.

The lowly flicker of a small pine pitch candle on my bedside table casts the room in a soft yellow glow. I watch the shadows cast by the light delicately dance

Emma Lee Joy

across my lap until a familiar voice rouses me from my stupor.

My Father's Right Hand, Jai Norris, has a distinct assertiveness that breaks through the atmosphere with authority, despite his age. He is no more than a year or two older than me, and he has more clout than some of the senior officers around here.

"Is Chief Vance here?" Jai asks.

"No sir, Mr. Vance said he had a family issue to attend to. I'm not sure what he meant, but he didn't think he would be back until later," Carika, the head nurse, says in her upbeat tone. I would recognize her chipper voice anywhere. It grates on my nerves even on the best of days.

"Oh, well is Ms. Iylara awake yet?" he asks her hastily, as if it is what he wanted to ask to begin with. I picture Jai looking over the short brunette woman's head to see if he can get a glimpse into my room.

"She was a few minutes ago," Carika says.

I grimace, not caring to see anybody at the moment, especially someone who is so good at making me talk. Not that I mind most of the time. Jai is one of my closest friends, basically my brother after growing up together, but I am not sure I am ready to talk.

Or if I even can.

There is a shuffling sound and footsteps, and I look up to see Jai's cropped blond hair peak through the curtain a few moments later, followed by his over-observant lapis-blue eyes.

I watch him dazedly. Upon seeing me awake, he slips quietly between the curtains. "Ray," Jai says with a sigh, relief written clearly on his sharp features.

Blood 4 Honor

The candlelight casts dense shadows against his angular jaw and in the hollow of his eyes as he walks over and sits on the edge of the wooden chair next to my bed.

“How are you?”

I stay silent for a moment, trying to find a truthful answer to his question. He will know if I am lying. Reading people is his specialty.

“I don’t k-know, I—” I stop, not sure how to explain it with my brain working in a fog. Too many thoughts bounce around the forefront of my mind, and I cannot focus on any particular one without my head pounding.

Tears start to well up in my eyes as I search for the words to say, but I am unable to keep the waterworks at bay. I sniffle, looking down at my hands lying limply on top of the quilted blanket.

I try to process the flood of emotions, but my sniffles turn to sobs as they hit me like a ton of bricks. I utterly fail at gathering my thoughts to speak and the weight of my husband’s death lands in an unseen heap on my chest, suffocating me.

Jai watches patiently while I gather myself. I take a shuddering breath, forcing myself to speak. “There is this weight on my chest, a-and I don’t know how to deal with it,” I say, tears streaming down my face.

I have to tell him about Danny, but I do not know if I can speak the truth of what has happened. Someone else needs to know though. I cannot pretend that Carnegie did not finally get what he wanted.

“Argh!” I groan. I throw my hands up to my face, pressing on my eyes to try and make the pounding in my head stop.

Emma Lee Joy

It only intensifies as a tiny display of fireworks erupts behind my eyelids under the pressure of my hands.

“My head hurts,” I whimper, overcome by everything. “This is all real, isn’t it?” I ask in barely more than a whisper, motioning around me wildly.

I look up at Jai, my face crinkled in distress. “This isn’t all some bad nightmare, right? This is reality?”

I look away from him, not wanting his answer, but needing to hear it regardless. And I know he will not lie to me. It is not in his nature. Jai will tell me the truth, no matter how much it hurts.

“Yes.”

I cannot fully comprehend the simple little word, but from the corner of my eye I watch him nod as he says it and I break down again, crying into my hands.

“Dan—” I cannot even say his name without reliving his death over again in my mind. My heart twists in my chest as I grit my teeth and clench my fists in frustration.

“I can’t *un-see* it,” I say, a lump lodging in my throat.

“What can’t you *un-see*?” Jai asks.

I swallow, pausing a moment. “Carnegie killing Danny.” The very thing plays over in my head yet again, despite my desperate attempts to ignore it, but it is the only thing I can remember.

I would give the world for this to all be a bad dream, and to wake up now, wrapped up in Danny’s warm embrace, nothing having ever happened.

“Do you know where you were?” Jai asks.

Blood 4 Honor

“N-no. Looked like an old s-storage facility if I had t-to guess. I don’t remember a-anything else though,” I stammer out through tears.

Jai’s eyes glisten darkly in the light from the low burning candle flame; tears lurk beneath the surface at my words. Even with his expert mask he employs on a daily basis, Jai cannot hide his grief, not from me.

I know him too well.

Jai was one of the few who treated Danny like he was any other Blackthorn, not a defector. Not best friends, but somewhere close. With a gut wrenching pull, I realize that I am not the only one who lost someone close to me today.

Or was it yesterday?

The day before?

I do not even know what day it is anymore.

I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the cot. I cannot continue to lay here any longer drowning in my thoughts.

“Whoa, wait,” Jai says, realizing what I am doing. He grabs my arm, trying to push me back down on the pillow, being as gentle as he can be. “You need to rest. Doc said you have a concussion.”

My memory may be fuzzy and missing time, but if I know nothing else, it is that I do *not* have a concussion. At least that is the story I am sticking to. With the missing time in my memory, I have no idea what could have happened. My mind is already ravaged from everything else that has happened that I cannot even begin to ponder on it right now.

I will not be given a reason to stay stuck in this bed any longer though. “I don’t have a concussion. I need to go for a walk. It’s suffocating me in here.”

Emma Lee Joy

I pull away from Jai's hovering hand, as if he wants to push me back down on the cot again. My body protests with aches and pains that refuse to go away, my head being the worst, but I push past it.

I will admit that the fear of explaining exactly what happened also has me on the verge of a full blown panic attack, so I must escape—or at least put some space between Jai's questioning gaze and myself.

I can already feel his next question, 'What happened?' floating around in the air around us like something tangible.

The anxiety building in the pit of my stomach cannot be ignored.

Jai awkwardly clears his throat as I throw my legs over the edge of the cot. "If you aren't going to stay, I will wait outside."

Jai slides out between the curtains without a second glance.

His quick action confuses me at first, until I look down to find myself in one of those ridiculous gowns—the ones without a back. I manage a snort of humor as I put two and two together, but it is half-hearted at best.

A rickety two-drawer dresser sits in the corner. A clean set of clothes waits for me on top with my weapons belt. My swords are gone though, surely taken from me when I was captured. My pair of light boots sits on the ground beside the dresser.

I shiver in the cool air as I slip out of the gown, and gooseflesh creeps up my arms. It must be cold outside. I look around and find my long, dark green coat hanging on a hook behind the chair Jai vacated; I am relieved to know I will not have to be cold for long.

Blood 4 Honor

Rabbit fur lines the inside, beckoning me to sink into its warmth.

I step into the pair of worn leather leggings someone raided from my house, and it irks me. I am thankful to wear my own clean clothes, but someone has been digging around in my dresser—digging around in our home.

My home, I correct myself.

Only one soul lives in the quaint little cabin behind my father's house now.

And just like that, it no longer feels like home.

I know I am overreacting to the former, because it would not have been anyone other than my father in there. The latter issue still remains on my heart though.

Home is where the heart is, but my heart is not there. It is dead.

I have no home.

There is the part of me that wants to feel angry at Danny's betrayal, whether I actually believe it or not, but the other part of me is too weary with grief to feel or deal with anything at all. I mentally shake away the depressing thoughts as my countenance falters under the threat of new tears in my fragile state of mind before pulling the shirt over my head.

I tighten my belt around my waist to hold down the flowing ends of the over-sized linen shirt. I doubt my father meant to grab one of Danny's shirts, only wishing to help, but the woody smell embedded in the cotton cuts another pain of longing straight through my heart. It takes my breath away.

Emma Lee Joy

I reach out, steadying myself against the dresser as the world tilts. I finally inhale a steadying breath, and continue getting dressed in a daze.

I yank open the top drawer of the dresser packed full of socks a little harder than necessary, and fumble trying to stop the drawer from falling out onto my toes.

I wince as the dresser bangs against the wall, immediately followed by Jai's voice. "You okay?"

"Y-yeah," I stutter out unconvincingly.

"You sure?" I can hear the concern in his voice plain as day, but he withholds himself from entering in case I am still underdressed. "Yeah," I say steadier this time around. "The dresser drawer was stuck," I add, less than truthfully, but if he catches the fib, he leaves it alone.

Jai doesn't say anything else, and I grab a pair of socks out of the drawer along with my leather boots from the floor before sitting down on the edge of the cot again.

The socks are thick wool, and feel like heaven on my feet. I sigh with pleasure and shrug on the mid-calf boots, followed by my coat. The fur envelopes me with warmth, and I step out of the secluded room somewhere close to contentment despite everything.

The candle chandeliers strung up along the ceiling are not bright in their own right, but they are much brighter than the single candle in my room. I close my eyes, blocking the offensive light out with a hiss through my teeth.

"You sure you don't want to go lay back down?" Jai asks from his place by my room entrance, waiting for me.

Blood 4 Honor

I squint through my eyelashes, trying to adjust my eyes to the light while still managing to cast him a dirty look.

“I’m sure,” I say shortly, heading off for the exit before he can push the matter.

I only get about ten feet down the hallway before Dr. Matthews comes out of the maze of adjoining halls to intervene.

“Where do you think you are going?” she asks with a motherly yet scathing tone to her voice.

Dr. Lorelie Matthews is a stubby, middle aged woman, and her shoulder length black curls, graying severely on the right side of her head, bounce with each antagonizing step towards me.

My eyes narrow, prepared to be brash to escape this damned infirmary. “I’m going to see my father. Are you going to try and stop me?” I ask her defiantly.

Dr. Matthews knows that she cannot stop me from leaving, or make me do much of anything for that matter; however, it does not stop her from trying to block the small hallway with her wide hips.

“You know I can’t do that, but I do have to strongly suggest that you go back to your room and wait for him, ma’am.” Dr. Matthews puts her hands on her hips for emphasis as she narrows her flat brown eyes to match my own.

I sigh with impatience as she continues to speak. “You have a severe concussion. If I had it my way, you would be bed ridden for at least 48 hours, and quarantined in a dark room,” she chides.

I am beginning to feel like a caged animal as the halls start closing in on me, and anger rises in my chest.

Emma Lee Joy

“I do *not* have a concussion!” I say for what I hope is the last time. “I’m not staying locked up for days. Not happening. *Goodbye*,” I say a little more harshly than I mean to. It makes her move out of my way, though, allowing me to push past her.

Jai follows me with an apologetic nod to Dr. Matthews.

“Come see me later, please,” she calls after me, a timid tone to her voice now.

I give her a thumb up over my shoulder, and make a beeline for the exit, shoving a chair roughly aside in my haste to get out of the building. The anxiety attack building within becomes more prominent the longer I stay in here. Everything is closing in on me, trapping me.

Out of ear shot of Dr. Matthews, Jai asks, “Did you have to be like that?” He strides ahead, opening the wooden door leading outside for me.

“Thank you,” I say as I sigh in relief once we are outside.

Bright sunlight blasts through the wispy clouds in the sky, and I hold my hand up to shield my eyes from it before answering his question.

“And no, I didn’t.” I frown a little at the thought before taking a deep breath of cold, fresh air.

Being rude is not in my nature. That is more of my brother’s forte. “I didn’t mean for it to sound like that. It just did,” I admit sheepishly.

Jai gives me a look, and I huff at him, guilty at my tone. “I will apologize later. I need to be there for that issue I heard Carika speak of, if I’m being honest.”

Jai’s eyes widen. “You could hear that?” he asks, surprised.

Blood 4 Honor

“Yeah, noise carries in that place. I can never get any rest there,” I say, looking around at the modest shacks surrounding the infirmary on the southeast side of the village.

Charred forest litter lay mere feet from some—a reminder that things could have turned out worse than they did. White stone pathways usually connect every structure to the main path winding its way around the village. The more trafficked areas having wider paths, like the infirmary, but ash stains them all an ugly blackish-gray.

There are only two ways to the Chief’s Courtyard. Unfortunately, the least populated way is also the longest.

Jai leads me towards the South Gate, and the burned remnants of buildings and trees in the entrance square come into view before I can prepare myself.

My heart drops at the sight of the charred rubble where the Apothecary my mother’s mother built. Keena runs it now, or did, just because I am usually too busy to hang around all day.

I cannot emotionally deal with the wreckage at the moment. There is enough destruction inside of me, and I do not need to add to it. I walk faster, trying to get past the worst part quickly.

Jai seems unfazed by the destruction. I am sure he witnessed it burning though, so this would of course be nothing compared to a raging inferno.

“You’ve only had to spend the night there like twice,” Jai says incredulously, oblivious to my internal struggle. “And I was up front. How could you hear that?”

Emma Lee Joy

I head off down the modest sized path to the Chief's Courtyard, brow creasing at his words, but I do not respond.

I shouldn't have been able to hear him from all the way up front.

Jai's hand reaches out to steady me as I trip over my own foot, distracted as I am. He is about to protest my walking about before I shrug him away.

"I'm fine," I assure him weakly.

The world begins to slowly spin around me when I look too far ahead, so I resign myself to looking at my feet as we walk.

I may be lying to both of us.

"You have a very distinct, and might I add *loud*, voice," I say lightly, trying to continue on like his words have not struck something as *off* to me.

"Not *that* loud," he mumbles more to himself than me.

I shake off the uneasy feeling threatening to prod the lingering shadow of an anxiety attack back to the forefront of my mind, and push on.

"I figure everyone will be at the cabin. Let's go."

The garden in front of my father's cabin has fallen far from its glory days under my mother's loving care, but it still holds a natural beauty in its self-sown and overgrown state. Give it a few more weeks, once the frost comes, and nature will prune itself. Everything but the hardiest plants will die out, leaving a skeleton of its former self until spring, when the cycle will start again.

Blood 4 Honor

The ground my mother cared for carries her memory in the self-sustaining habitat she created for it, like the metal curtain rings Danny made. It fascinates me how the little things a person does in their life can have such impact on others once they are gone.

Why do we not give those things any kind of thought while their makers are still around?

My eyes wander past the garden, and I freeze in my tracks. Beyond the garden to my right, the cabin I shared with Danny stands in all of its glory—the home we made together with our own hands, as tradition dictates.

My heart lurches into my throat and the anxiety attack from earlier starts to make its comeback with force. Jai does not notice, and keeps walking. I take in a wavering breath. I force myself follow him with a heavy sigh. Having to answer questions would surely be worse than just shoving the nauseating feeling aside.

I tear my eyes away from the cabin, focusing on my father's home. It may reside behind a secondary gate, unlike much of the rest of the village here, but the cabin is modest in size. My great-Grandfather built it and put up the fence around it right after the Desolation, or Great War as some would call it, as a means to start over. The rest of the village sprung up around the fence over the years as Blackthorn got stronger, and the border fence was built about fifty years ago.

After all this time, even my great-grandfather's memory still remains, if only within the sawn logs of a cabin in the middle of the woods. Before today, I have

Emma Lee Joy

never given any of this a thought, but I will not be able to forget it now.

Raised voices cut through the peaceful garden atmosphere before we even get to the cabin door. It sounds like my father's deep voice trying to cut through Keena's incessant high-pitch tweeting.

Jai moves to knock, but I shove past him. I throw the door open roughly with shaking hands.

Keena stands in the middle of the living room on my father's patchwork rug, tears raging as my father towers over her small form.

Ysabel sits on the couch near the fire, silent tears rolling down her face as she listens to the two of them bickering.

The noise of my entrance draws all three pairs of eyes. My father stares at me for a moment before turning his gaze back on his daughter-in-law.

"Enough," he says tersely, looking back over at me as Keena shrinks to the couch, shut down.

If Jai did not know about Danny, then my father does not either. I am loathing to repeat it again.

Ysabel melts into Keena's side as her mother wraps her arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

"Iylara," he says with relief in his gruff voice.

At the sound of my name, I run into my father's arms, tears streaming down my face once again.

He holds me as I cry, the furs around his shoulders engulfing my face, and absorbing my tears as he comforts me, or tries to.

My father is not a compassionate man, but he does his best, rubbing soft circles on my back with his

Blood 4 Honor

thumbs as he holds me close. It is enough, to just be held, if only for a moment.

Keena releases a dramatized sigh behind me. I let my father go, turning to her. I am not in the mood for her attitude.

“Do you have something else to say?” I ask scathingly, wiping tears from my face with the back of my hand.

Keena raises a dark eyebrow, her chocolate brown eyes filled with frustration. She has no desire to know why I am so upset, clearly. “Only that we are wasting time. We need to find Damian!” she croons.

“He is missing?” I ask, fear feeding the anxiety still swirling in my belly. There is something, a memory maybe? It scratches at the edge of my mind, but I cannot grab hold of it.

“You didn’t know? He disappeared when you did!” Keena says scathingly.

I look back at my father, searching his face for answers, but he has none. The last time I remember seeing Damian was when—

“The people who took me were surrounding him when I blacked out,” I say, trying hard to remember *anything*. It feels as though I am on the verge of remembering something, but the harder I try to recall it, the more my head hurts, so I stop.

I glance over at Jai, who looks to be on the verge of saying something, but he remains quiet.

“We need to send out a search party,” Keena demands, looking at my father as he sits down in his chair, a forlorn look darkening his lined face. “We have to find him.”

Emma Lee Joy

My father nods solemnly. “We will broaden the search. Get more feet on the ground.”

“What about Danny?” I ask.

I want to put my husband’s memory to rest with a proper funeral, and try to forget that he might have caused all of this. I still do not know where we were at though, making the entire search for either man like a needle in a hay stack.

Keena bristles at the mention of my husband, cutting my father’s next words off. “The traitor, you mean? He is missing too.”

I turn on her, but Jai grabs my arm, pulling me back.

“Don’t you say a *word* against him,” I snarl, but I let Jai pull me towards the door.

“I will say what I please. You know how many people are dead because of him?” Keena demands.

She already believes wholeheartedly that he is guilty and she has no proof that I know of

What will that mean for everyone else?

“He’s dead!” I yell at her, unable to find anything else to say, afraid that I will betray my husband if I tell Keena that she might be right.

I wrench my arm out of Jai’s grasp, leaving the cabin in a swirling of cloth as the anxiety begins to mount once more, nearing full blown panic. It is suffocating.

Keena follows us out of the cottage, unwilling to let it go. My proclamation has not fazed her. I am sure she will silently celebrate later.

“Our people’s blood is on your hands. If you hadn’t of gone off and seduced Danny away from his

Blood 4 Honor

clan, we wouldn't be in this mess." Poison drips from her voice, and my anger rises to face it.

"Excuse me?" I turn on her, failing to keep my emotions in check.

Ysabel appears on the porch to see what is happening, but my father pulls her back inside the cabin. I am grateful. She should not have to see us fight—again.

"You heard me," Keena says, trying to spur me on.

"Walk away," I warn through clenched teeth, trying to control myself. Everything in me wants to lash out.

I stare into her eyes, watching the rage and grief swimming in her misty eyes that mirrors my own. I know she wants to hurt me, if only to lessen the intensity of emotions raging inside of her.

I let her have the first hit, merely to have a reason to put my hands on her. Keena does not have very much strength, but her fury filled fist still stings.

I shake off the hit and shove Keena roughly with both hands, sending her stumbling back a few steps.

"You get one more chance to walk away Keena, I'm warning you."

The shove seems to tame her for a moment as she stands there seething, unable to speak or act. She looks appalled that I would even think to touch her.

Keena finally finds her voice, not hesitating to blame me for everything. "This is entirely your fault! Admit it. My husband is missing because you couldn't keep your legs closed!" she screams at me, tears running down her face.

"Keena!" my father's voice warns from the cabin door. He knows I will only take so much from her, but

Emma Lee Joy

he is not apt to stop us from going at it this time for whatever reason. Maybe some things just need to play out.

“I want to hear what she has to say,” I say more to Keena than my father.

My eyes never leave hers as she starts spewing at the mouth. “You couldn’t just do what you were supposed to do, and marry a strong Blackthorn soldier. You had to cross enemy lines, and bring a world of hell on us. Your selfishness has brought destruction to our home and death to our people!” she yells.

I react in ill-contained anger. “Are you *kidding* me?” I shout at her, taking a step forward. I want to react rashly, maybe grab her by the throat and choke the life out of her, but I force myself to stop.

Keena is right, if I am honest, but I do not want to admit that my past choices *are* what have brought this on.

Keena strikes as the guilt settles on me. I am distracted, and she strikes my face with a clawed hand before I can block. I hiss as her nails draw blood. I grab her hand before she can rear back again. I clench my fist, landing one hit to her jaw that sends her sprawling on her back.

I stand over her, waiting for her to make her next move. Keena lay there huffing and holding her jaw, but she does not move to get off of the ground. Wanting to believe that she is done, I turn to leave her, wishing to escape the guilt beginning to weigh me down.

Blood 4 Honor

“*Iylara!*” My father’s yell alerts me to danger. I spin around as Keena launches herself off of the ground at me, a small dagger in her hand.

It is a pretty little thing Damian gave her as a wedding gift. Keena normally keeps it in an intricately tooled leather sheath on her belt, never removing it, until now.

Keena lunges at me, blade extended towards my abdomen. I catch her wrist as the tip pierces the fabric of my coat. A sharp sting emanates from my side as she manages to force the blade into skin before I restrain her completely, but the wound is shallow.

I twist her arm out and away from me at the same time I grab her by the throat, pulling her back into my chest.

Holding Keena against me in a chokehold, I lean back, lifting the petite woman off of her feet. She struggles against me, feet kicking wildly. I cannot feel the impact of her heels against my legs over the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I twist her arm holding the knife back until it pops, forcing her to let go of it. The dagger lands tip down in the dirt at our feet, and Keena screeches in pain as her shoulder dislocates.

Jai grabs me by the arms. He tries to get me to loosen my hold on Keena as my father hobbles across the yard for us, but I am not done with her. She has crossed the line attacking me like that.

“Come at me one more time, especially with my own mother’s blade, and I swear, I will kill you with it,” I growl into her ear, grip tightening on her throat to get my point across.

Emma Lee Joy

Without another word, I let her go, throwing her to the ground. She collapses in a heap, gasping in pain while she holds her shoulder, arm hanging limply at her side. She looks up at me with dazed shock.

My father kneels beside her, assessing the damage I did. Jaw clenched, I say nothing and stalk past Jai. Heading out of the courtyard gate, I am unable to look at my niece staring wide-eyed at me in fear from the cottage door.

The girl has enough issues as it is, and I keep adding to them.

CHAPTER 4

Before I know it, I find myself standing under the Willow tree outside the village in a small meadow. My thoughtful place. It has been quite a while since I have been here, and the state of the place only adds to the sadness I feel.

The once lusciously green grass crunches underfoot as I approach the tree. Its leaves hang yellow and fading—dying after weeks upon weeks of no rain, and the creek that runs by it is bone dry.

Emma Lee Joy

Yellow and browns have taken over my once vibrant green forest meadow. Even the familiar blue sky has turned dark, as if changing with my mood.

A drizzle of water begins to fall to the earth around me, but the miracle of rain is lost on me.

Keena's screams of pain still echo in my ears, but all I can see is the fear in Ysabel's eyes. Keena and I have fought before, but this time was different. Keena was the one to pull a blade on me, but the fear I saw in my niece's eyes was fear *of* me, not *for* me.

I stifle a sob as crisp grass crunches behind me. Wiping me eyes, I grimace as the rough fabric of my coat scrapes the claw marks on my cheek from Keena's fingernails.

I look up as Jai steps through the trees. "I shouldn't have done that," I say solemnly before he can speak.

All my anger has ebbed away, leaving me distraught and exhausted. I cannot even fathom the unknown eternity I currently stand at the edge of. I drop my hand from the Willow leaves, and grip my upper arms, trying to hold myself together before I fall apart.

"Why is this happening?" I ask pitifully, unsure if I want an answer or not.

Jai watches me for a moment, mulling over my question. "Life doesn't generally go how we want it to," he says. "Shit happens," he adds, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Seriously?" I ask, unsure why his words affect me the way they do. I should have known he would try some poetic answer. He is my father's advisor after all. My anger rears its head again regardless of that

Blood 4 Honor

though, and I pull away from his hand. “And I guess everything happens for a reason?”

Pain flashes in Jai’s eyes but he shoves it aside, being ever patient with me. “I am actually, and yes. I would like to believe that everything does happen for a reason.”

I let out a mocking laugh, and Jai’s nostrils flair. “You expect me to believe that? You sound like my *father*.”

“Believe what you want,” he says, “but when you come to realize why something has happened a certain way, you will know that I am right.”

“Whatever,” I say, shoving past him for the village. I can no longer find solace in my thoughtful place with him here.

Jai grabs my arm, forcing me to turn and look at him. “Don’t do that. Don’t shut down,” he says.

I shrug away from him again. “Too late.”

Lightning strikes with a bang on the other side of the creek, and we both jump in surprise. Without a word, I take off back home as rain starts pouring down around us. Jai follows closely behind me as I sprint for cover, but our efforts are futile. We are soaked before we even reach the South Gate.

The rain has cleared the streets, except for the handful of children dancing around in the rain with mouths open wide towards the heavens.

“You want a drink?” Jai asks, shielding his eyes with his hand from the downpour.

“Sure, why not?” I grumble, none too happy to be drenched in rain. My anger has been doused by the efforts of running home, but I am holding onto my foul mood. I see no reason not to.

Emma Lee Joy

“Well don’t get so excited about it,” Jai says lightly, trying to break the tension radiating off of me. “Come on. Eddie opened shop in the cafeteria.”

I ignore Jai, stomping off down the path for the cafeteria. The bar may have burnt to ground, but the wine cellar was untouched. Good thing too, because tensions are already high enough around here at the moment. Or maybe that is just me. Without liquor to ease it I am not sure what would happen.

The door to the cafeteria stands open, letting in the cool air brought on by the deluge. The rain has softened to a dense mist now, sticking to our wet skin and hair like dew.

The cafeteria is a large dome building made from felled pine trees and scavenged metal with a large skylight in the center. The cloudy sky gives no amount of decent light and torches have already been lit, lighting the room with a soft orange glow.

On the opposite wall from us, Eddie stands behind a makeshift bar drying a glass. I make for him, ignoring the people who stop eating or talking to watch me walk across the cavernous room.

I keep my focus on Eddie, trying not to let my ears settle on the whispers that start up. I do not want to know what they have to say.

I plop down on a bar-stool at the very end of the bar, away from the rest of the patrons. Eddie migrates over as Jai sits down next to me.

“What can I get you dear,” Eddie asks, slinging his dingy dishtowel over his shoulder.

“Whisky,” I say brusquely.

Blood 4 Honor

Eddie glances at Jai, eyebrow raised. Jai shakes his head once and Eddie sighs, turning to grab the whisky bottle behind him.

“Same for you?” he asks Jai over his shoulder.

“Sure,” Jai says, watching me carefully from the corner of his eye. I ignore him, staring down the whisky bottle in Eddie’s hand.

Eddie slides two shots of whiskey our way, and I in hale both of them before Jai can even reach for his. With a pinched face, Eddie refills both glasses without asking. I slide one towards Jai, and toss the other back and he does the same.

I give Eddie a dark, narrow look and he refills the glasses once more without a word.

“Thank you Eddie,” I say half-heartedly before dismissing him with a wave of my hand.

I may be being a little more brash than usual, but I can’t help it. After everything, I can feel the depression settling over me, blocking out anything good from my mind. I do not see how it can get any better than this.

Not now.

We have had almost a decade of relative peace. Sure, things get tense occasionally, but it usually comes down to small squabbles that are easily taken care of—one-on-one fight-to-deaths and so on.

Never anything major.

After a deliberate attack on Blackthorn’s center of power, I cannot see anything but war in our future. I have always liked to fight, but I never wanted to see war again.

As a little girl, I witnessed enough of the horrors of war to last a lifetime.

Emma Lee Joy

“Life went to hell pretty quick, huh?” I ask Jai flatly, downing my fourth shot.

He sighs deeply. “Yeah it did.” Jai gulps down his shot, wincing at the amber fire going down his throat.

“You know what makes it so hard?” I ask him, voice already tinged with whiskey fuel anger.

“What?”

“My father will try to stop me from fighting when the time comes. After everything I know he will not allow me the chance to get my revenge,” I say, a sour downturn to my thin lips.

“If something happens to you, there isn’t an heir if Damian is dead,” Jai says.

I frown in confusion and regret shadows Jai’s face. “Do you know something about Damian?” I ask, suddenly worried.

Jai hesitates for a moment, but he is not one to lie or withhold information when asked directly. “Zeke Rekkon sent me a message. He said there were rumors swirling around that Carnegie had Damian killed, but he couldn’t be sure.”

“Danny’s brother?” I ask, shaking my head in denial. “No. My brother is alive,” I say defiantly. I will not believe anything else.

“I hope he is wrong,” Jai says, avoiding the possibility that I would be a fool to ignore. Maybe I am a fool, but I do not think I could handle accepting such a thing right now.

“Ysabel will lead when we are gone,” I say, trying to lessen the blow Jai’s words struck.

“Ysabel is *eleven*,” Jai says, making me frown. “She has quite a few years until she is anywhere near ready to lead. A lot can happen between now and

Blood 4 Honor

then. You would really allow Keena to lead your people if your brother, you, or your father were not here?”

I huff. He is right, but I do not want to accept it.

Jai continues, ignoring me as I have done him very recently. I grit my teeth. “Without you, Blackthorn will fall.”

I freeze, something clicking into place inside of my brain. I know Jai mean *us*, but his use of *you* leaves me rattled.

Again, that nagging sense of having forgotten something important comes back. Jai keeps talking though, and I have to focus on his lips as he talks to keep from losing myself in my mind.

“Keena will run this place into the ground. You can have your revenge in other ways, surely.”

I tap my shot glass on the bar, alerting Eddie as my frown deepens. “And how would I do that if I can’t kill the bastard behind all of this?”

“You’re smart. I am sure you can find a way. Death is not always the worst thing in the world,” he says.

“No?” I ask in a scoffing tone.

“No, it isn’t. It is the easy way out, if you ask me.” Jai pauses, letting me take the shot Eddie pours. “Do you want to talk about something?” he asks gently.

I slam the glass on the bar, making both men jump. Eddie scurries off to serve a couple at the other end of the bar.

“Talk about *what*?” I hiss. “About the fact that I saw my husband murdered in front of me, and is now probably hanging to rot somewhere for other’s amusement, or about the fact that my brother’s fate

may be the same?” I turn to him, my voice dropping to a desperate whisper. “Or do I want to talk about the fact that my husband most likely did exactly what Keena has accused him of?”

I sit back, regretful and wide eyed. I should not have said anything, but the whiskey has loosened my tongue. Jai looks shocked, as he should.

“He did do it?” he asks just as quietly, knowing full well that no one else needs to know about this. The people more than likely already have their theories, because if Keena is anything, she is a gossip.

I grit my teeth, looking Jai hard in the eye. “You cannot tell anyone.” My voice is pleading, but I do not hide the unspoken warning in my tone. There will be consequences and repercussions if he speaks a word of this to anyone. “Please,” I add, because he is like a brother to me. I should not be threatening him into silence.

“I won’t tell anyone. I know what they would do,” he says, holding my gaze.

“Thank you,” I say, looking down at my hands in shame. “Keena was right,” I admit. “This is entirely my fault—even more so than Danny, if he did betray us. I still refuse to believe it, but damn it, it sure looks like he is guilty. I cannot deny that. If he did open the gate, or whatever else I am sure people believe, I know one thing. He was betrayed too. If he did it, Carnegie lied to him to get him to do it.”

I am grasping at straws, and Jai does not answer. He will not lie, but he also does not want to speak the truth either. Not on this. But silence would be worse. Jai finally speaks, and his words are not comforting. I did not expect them to be, but they still sting.

Blood 4 Honor

“Nothing can make his actions okay if he did do it. You know that, right?” Jai always speaks the truth, even when I do not want him to. It is one reason my father values his opinion so much.

“I know, but I love him. I still believe he loved me. He just made a bad choice. And he died for it. Isn’t that penance enough?”

Jai holds his tongue, but I know he wants to say something, anything, to change my mind. I believe what I said though, and there is not a single thing that he can say or do to change my mind.

“I would like to be alone now,” I say quietly, looking down at the counter in disdain.

“Okay,” he says, getting up to leave. “Don’t drink too much,” he adds. I do not miss the sideways glance he gives Eddie, who nods in understanding.

“Sure,” I say before swallowing the shot in one rebellious gulp.

We both know Eddie cannot tell me ‘No’, however, and Jai heads off with one last glance back at me, worry written all over his face.

I will not be moved by his concern. “Another round, Eddie,” I say with a pointed look, offering him both of the shot glasses to refill.

“Yes ma’am.”

CHAPTER 5

I feel out of control, like my life is spiraling into chaos as it falls apart around me. I have never felt turmoil swirling in the pit of my stomach as I have of late, and I am beginning to think I am not wholly in control of myself.

That could be the whisky though.

This jarring feeling inside of me is far beyond that of the normal anxiety that I am so attuned to, very nearly overwhelming me.

Blood 4 Honor

I tap out after two more shots, and leave without a word to Eddie. I will pay him later. The old man's gaze weighs heavy on my back as I unsteadily make my way out of the cafeteria, but I am ever in control myself—in front of the masses anyway.

As a part of the ruling family of Blackthorn, I have always been conditioned to hold it together under the scrutinizing gaze of our people. Never show your weakness to the public.

We are the manifestation of their strength. If we fall apart, so do they.

It is a heavy burden to bear, but it is one I have been trained to carry on my shoulders. Even now though, I can already feel my feet digging into the ground beneath me, dragging me into a suffocating pit under its weight. I do not think I can muster the strength to climb out alone, but I cannot bear the company of anyone right now.

I slog my way back home, numb from the alcohol in my system. I do not falter at the sight of the cabin I shared with Danny. Not this time. My bleary vision acts as a filter against the reality of the world, and I am unaffected.

The numbness I feel spreads outwards from my chest making its way down to my fingertips and toes.

As though on autopilot, I shamle inside and roll up a few furs. I tie the bundle to Danny's leather rucksack, identical to the one I left at the safe-house.

I should get that one day.

I hastily shove a change of clothes inside the sack with a package of dried fruit and jerky.

I cannot feel the cold water from the well pump sink as it splashes over the sides of my canteen. I

Emma Lee Joy

should acknowledge that this is not normal, but I don't. I can't.

My mind is blank as my hands move of their own volition. I watch, but I can't feel. I can't stop.

My fingers lithely wrap around the two bottles of corn liquor under the kitchen sink. I uncork them with my teeth. Turning the bottles upside down, the noxious liquid splashes around me.

And I begin to twirl.

Liquor splashes around me, grasping at everything it touches. It rolls in rivulets down the walls, soaks into the blankets and rugs.

The pungent smell of alcohol permeates the air, taking my breath away, but I don't stop.

The bottles hit the opposite wall with a shatter, and a dark part of me rejoices as the broken pieces rain down to the ground, just as shattered as I am.

From inside the bedside table I grab a pack of hand-rolled cigarettes I keep for a rainy day. Heading for the door, I pull one out, and place it between my lips.

Despite my lack of touch sensory, I can taste the delicate mint leaves as I inhale through my mouth. I can feel the heady high before I even light the tobacco.

I inhale deeply as the end ignites in the small flame of a match, and take one last look around the room. The earthen tones are homey, and the sand floor is only made bearable by the fur rugs, but it is home.

Was home.

Now it is a dark cell of painful memories.

Standing outside the door, I drop the flaming match at my feet. It lands in a puddle of liquor and

Blood 4 Honor

ignites with a whoosh, quickly spreading across every surface unlucky enough to have come into contact with the alcohol.

I languidly step away, never taking my eyes off of the flames engulfing my home. Flames pop, sending burning debris into the air as the thatched roof catches fire. Within seconds the entire structure is consumed in a raging inferno.

I take a deep drag off of the cigarette, and flick it into the flames as the first of the shouting starts. I dart off into the dark—away from the chorus of voices converging on the blaze without a moment's thought.

“Iylara!” a voice cries.

I am afraid my father has spotted me, but no. There is too much fear in his voice to have seen me. He must assume I am inside.

It does not matter though. I still cannot feel anything, not the cool night air on my skin or the light mist swirling through the air. My body still acts and reacts as though in control of itself, with no input from me. Before I know it, my feet take off in a sprint carrying me away into the forest.

I don't know how long I run for, but weariness finally overcomes my body. Every ache and pain that has so far been numb to me as my feet have carried me further and further away from the village force me to stop.

I brace myself against a large pine tree, gasping for breath. It only takes a moment and my knees give out. I crumple to the ground, gasping sobs ripping at my parched throat.

Emma Lee Joy

How did I get here?

Blinking, I glance around at the trees and my vision clears brilliantly. The noise of the woods around me grows louder, like I am coming out of a tunnel. All of my senses are heightened and a fog clears in my mind. The forest animals around me scurry about, sounding very much like men tramping through the woods. The rustle of leaves in the wind is like a heavy breath in my ears. I can almost taste the dirt of the earth around me, and the wind washes over me like crashing waves.

“What in the world?” I wince, my voice sounding as if I am screaming in my own ears.

My hands start shaking as I realize I *did not* make the choice to come out here. It was like my body was taken over, and I went with it in a daze.

I didn't even think twice about it.

At the time it felt right, but now I am filled with horror at what I have done.

Why would I burn it down? I stare down at my hands, sticky with corn liquor I could not feel spilling onto my hands.

You snapped. It happens.

“What?” I ask, frightened at the proximity of a man’s voice. The familiarity screams at me, but I cannot put my finger on how I know the voice.

Spinning around, I find no one there.

I am in your head, my love.

“Danny?” I ask in a hopeful whisper, even though Danny never called me “my love.”

No.

I am rooted to the spot, a million thoughts running through my mind, and I cannot settle on one.

Blood 4 Honor

It is shocking, I know. You don't need to be scared though.

"I'm not scared," I say, "only crazy, apparently. I can't do this."

I turn and try to walk away, but I cannot escape my mind.

You can try to run, but you cannot hide.

Anger rises in my chest, but before I can retort back another voice stops me dead in my tracks.

"Can't do what sweetheart?" The voice is rough and unfamiliar, but very much real and nothing like the voice in my head.

I spin to face the owner of the voice as he steps out from behind some brush behind me. I unsheathe the dagger and short sword I don't remember grabbing that hang from my belt. I hold them out in front of me defensively, eyes narrowed in distrust.

A second, larger man follows the first, and adrenaline rushes through my veins.

Both men are filthy and bare the signs of a hard nomadic life.

The voice speaks again, catching me off guard, but I do not let it show. *Forest rats*, it says, as if I need to be told.

"Anything we can help you with sweetheart?" the first, smaller man asks.

"No, I'm fine," I say stiffly.

The man ignores my blades, speaking cordially. "Well that's not what it sounded like, did it Bill?" he asks the bulkier yet younger man next to him.

Bill shakes his head. "Sure don't Frank. What do you say we help each other out? How does that sound,

doll?” The man named Bill speaks in a greasy voice that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

They both smile at me with blackened, rotting teeth, and I cannot contain the disgusted grimace that spreads across my face.

“What’s wrong?” Frank asks. “Cat got your tongue?”

Bill takes a step forward as Frank speaks, and I take a step back, my grip on my blades tightening.

“Oh, don’t be like that. You’re such a pretty thing, ain’t she, Frank?” he asks, beady black eyes never leaving mine.

“Mmmhmm,” Frank purrs, licking his cracked lips. He takes a step to stand next to Bill, but I hold my ground this time.

“Stay away from me. I’m only going to warn you once,” I say, fight quickly taking over flight in my brain. An unfamiliar bloodlust bubbles up inside of me, emboldening me.

Bill raises his hands in surrender, but Frank draws a short, rusting sword from a sheath on his belt. “If she ain’t gonna to put out willingly, maybe we should just take what we want,” Frank says darkly, caressing the ill-kept blade lovingly.

“I don’t think so,” I say with finality.

“You should make it easier on yourself. I don’t take too kindly to ‘No’,” Frank says, holding his blade out to touch my own.

Bill draws two rusting daggers out from under his jacket, uncertainty in the downturn of his paper-thin lips. Fear of being outnumbered rises in my throat, but it is quickly doused by anger under Frank’s hungry gaze.

Blood 4 Honor

I run my sword down the length of Frank's, testing the waters as resolve settles in my belly.

"You sure you want to do that, doll?" Bill asks. "I don't think you know who you are up against."

I narrow my eyes. "I don't think you know who you're messing with, and I'm positive," I spit out at him.

I strike before either man has time to react.

Twisting my sword around Frank's, I push up and out. Frank's wrist twists with it until he lets go. He stumbles back with a yelp, blocking my dagger coming at his face with his bare hand.

Frank cries out in pain as my dagger slices through his palm like butter. Bill interjects before I can run Frank through with my sword.

With a growl, Bill brings his daggers down towards my chest. I thrust my blades out in front of me to block, and stagger back as he bears down on me. I dig my heels into the dirt to keep him at bay, but he is much too large to hold back for long.

Our faces inches apart, I gag at the smell of his putrid breath. Holding back bile, I push him away with everything in me. The force sends me stumbling backwards rather than him, and I struggle to maintain my footing.

I turn at the sharp sound of Frank stepping on a twig behind me. I sidestep his fist as it rushes through the night air towards my face.

I slash out at him across the abdomen, and he withdraws with a hiss of pain as I duck and spin back to face Bill, deflecting his dagger with my sword before I slash him across the ribs.

Emma Lee Joy

“Bitch!” Bill doubles over with a growl of pain, protecting his midsection from my blade.

“And you thought this was going to be easy,” I taunt. “You should have thought twice before messing around with a Vance,” I say.

There is recognition in the men’s eyes because of course they know the name—clan-less or not.

Frank retreats to pick up his sword before turning back to me. “I don’t care who you are. You are just some bitch we are gonna gut,” he says before lunging at me.

I knock his blade away with my sword, but my foot catches on a tree root as I shuffle backwards. Frank’s fist lands a right hook to my jaw in my desperate attempt to stay on my feet.

The impact spins me around a full one hundred eighty degrees, and I fall to my hands and knees.

Frank kicks my sword away from me, leaving me with only my dagger to contend with. He towers over me, and I kick out, knocking his feet out from under him. Frank hits the ground with a grunt.

Bills rushes at me, and I roll to avoid being pounced on by the hulking man. I cannot move out of the way fast enough.

A meaty fist grabs hold of my rucksack and yanks me back, throwing me to the ground. The buckles of the pack cut into my shoulder. I try to scurry backwards, but Bill grabs my boot, pulling me towards him like I weigh nothing. I swing my dagger at his head, but he deflects it with a metal arm guard, knocking the dagger from my hand.

Blood 4 Honor

Bill pins me to the ground with his legs and wraps his fingers around my throat. I yank and claw at his hands, but I cannot break his vice-like grip.

Even in an injured and weakened state, the man is much stronger than I could ever hope to fight off from this position.

“I love watching the light fade from their eyes,” he says sadistically as Frank stands to his feet.

My vision starts to blur as my body struggles for oxygen.

This is not your end.

The voice would be comforting if I believed it, but I can no longer fight against the brute of a man sitting on top of me, hell-bent on choking the life out of me. The little bit of hope that I do have left begins to fade.

Frank’s voice is muffled by the ringing in my ears. “Don’t kill her, Bill. I can’t get my jollies off if you kill her. Dead bodies make me soft.”

Bill lets go with a sigh, a breath before I lose consciousness. He gets up, leaving me gasping for air on the ground. I roll over and push myself up onto my knees.

“Hold her still,” Frank croons in anticipation.

Bill grabs me from behind, pinning my arms back against his body. I throw my head back weakly, trying to make purchase with his face, but the back of my head hits his collarbone. I let out a painful, desperate cry as Frank starts tugging at my belt.

“Now, now sweet thing, don’t make this so hard. You might like it.”

My ears begin ringing again, and my vision turns red as the old man starts kissing sloppily down my neck. My belt hits the ground with a thump, and time

Emma Lee Joy

slows down as he lifts his head to look at me with lust in his spirit-less eyes, his fingers working at the clasp of my pants.

I smile sweetly despite it all. How I am able to manage such a thing is beyond me, but it has nothing to do with submitting to this man's will—I know that for damn sure.

Frank smiles devilishly—surely thinking that the smile on my face is a good thing, but he is wrong.

Oh so wrong.

Frank leans forward and I strike, my teeth sinking into the side of his throat. He screams out and tries to pull away, but a predatory growl rumbles in my chest. I bite down harder and yank my head back, taking a chunk of Frank's neck with me.

Blood gushes from the wound. Frank screams in agony, grabbing at his neck to try and stop the torrent of blood cascading down his chest.

Stunned, Bill lets me go out of pure shock. I turn, head-butting him before he can retreat. Through the adrenaline driving me, I don't feel the pain as my forehead connects with his face. Bill cries out, holding his broken and bleeding nose. He looks at me with terror in his eyes, and I smirk with satisfaction at the sight of his fear.

I yank the small dagger from his belt, unhindered by the man in his hesitation. I ram it into the side of his head, straight through his temple.

I pull the blade out, staring blankly into the black pits that are Bill's eyes, the light of life gone from them. He crumples to the ground dead as Frank collapses behind me with a gurgling sound.

Frank twitches once, and moves no more.

Blood 4 Honor

I drop the dagger and stagger away from the two dead men, spitting out the chunk of flesh still held tightly between my teeth as reality sets in.

Violent shaking starts in my hands, making its way up my arms and before even a moment has passed, my entire body is shaking in shock.

I violently vomit, bracing myself with hands on knees until there is nothing left in my stomach. It is mostly whisky and leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but I welcome it over the caustic bite of iron.

I collapse to the ground once more, still shaking. I desperately try to wipe the blood from the lower half of my face, but I only succeed in smearing it around.

“What have I done?” I ask no one, my voice coming out in a low rasp. Bill’s hands have damaged my throat, and even the simple task of swallowing is nearly unbearable.

The pain is overshadowed by something else though.

Taking drastic measures to preserve my life and dignity is not that astonishing. What *is* astonishing is the feeling of ecstasy swirling around in my belly like a gusty wind. It would make me sick again if I had anything left to throw up.

I look up to the heavens as if the sky itself will answer me, but my vision begins to blur and spin. I drop my eyes back to the earth in a vain effort to stop it.

I rub at my eyes further trying to clear the haze clouding my vision, but the trees turn to mush around me as I try to focus. I blink and everything goes black, snuffing out the sound of my thrumming heart hammering away in my ears along with my vision.

Emma Lee Joy

It would be completely silent if not for the faint chuckle that sends a shiver down my spine. I cannot place the familiar voice through the crackle of what sounds like an antique record player, or understand the language, but the words are plain as day.

“Tu seras mia, mi amor.”

CHAPTER 6

How long have I been gone?

When will this hell end?

Is anyone even looking for me?

These are all questions I have asked myself for only God knows how long—if there is a God.

I have not gotten an answer yet.

I cannot even get an answer from that strange voice in my head. It is there, telling me to keep going

and to not give up whenever I think I have nothing left, but it never answers my questions.

Ice water rushes down my throat, suffocating me as I inhale out of pure shock, caught off guard by the strong hands of the man behind me.

Coughing and gagging, I try to calm myself, despite the fire in my lungs overcoming the icy water, making me wish for it to return. I will take ice over fire any day, but my wants are laughable.

I am fire.

My handler, the owner of the strong hand gripped tight in my matted hair, pulls me out of the water before I can embrace the peace of darkness.

Instinctually, I gasp covetously at the damp, stagnant air around me, but I violently spit up the water that continues to choke me, and my ears ring from the lack of oxygen.

Water runs down my face and into my eyes, but I look for the light I know all too well. It hangs in the center of my personal hell; my literal and figurative light in the dark.

I completely ignore the well-kept man watching on quietly with his hands clasped in front of him, his face hidden in the shadows.

The edges of my vision darken, and sparkles shimmer in the harsh white light, but it starts to slowly fade as I finally manage to take a decent breath of air.

The hand in my hair forces my head down again, back into the barrel of ice water. I suppress the gasp that threatens to inhale another lungful of water, and go still.

Blood 4 Honor

But I know he knows what I am doing, so he doesn't let me up. My lungs ignite from lack of oxygen, even without the deluge of water. Against my self-control, I begin to struggle, desperate to make the pain stop, and so very desperate to breathe.

My movements weaken, and only then am I lifted from the water, and thrown unceremoniously to the floor in a limp heap. My head hits the concrete, and I cry out in agony, tears mixing with the water dripping off of me onto the floor.

I roll onto my back, searching for my light again, savoring each wretched breath that slowly puts out the fire in my lungs.

Part of me believes that this is all some sort of horrible nightmare that I can't wake up from, but it is far too real for me to believe that wholeheartedly.

The light is the only thing that allows me to hold onto reality. Without it, I sink into myself, and someone inside of me takes over as a now all too familiar song plays in the background. I don't know who she is, but she isn't nice. Not that I ever was considered nice myself, no, but she is something else—a whirlwind of fury and anger finely tuned into an obedient and bloodthirsty wolf.

And when the man in the shadows says jump, she asks how high.

She asks with *my* mouth, *my* voice. She controls *my* eyes that travel around the bare room to find her master's eyes when he finally steps out of the shadows, his gray-blue eyes staring at her, at *me*, in adoration.

Emma Lee Joy

The man only ever shows himself to her, and I forget his face as soon as she sinks back inside of me again.

She is me, and I am she. We are one.

But I have no say in the controls of what she proudly calls her meat suit.

My body.

And the worst part of it all?

I can't look away when she does terrible things, with *my* hands, and I don't even know her name.

I can do nothing as *my* hands wrapped around the stranger lady's throat. I can't pull away as *my* fingers choked the life out of her. And I can't look away as the light leaves her eyes—the light that keeps me in control of my own mind.

I cannot stop the satisfied smirk that spreads across my lips as I sit back and study the lifeless woman from my spot on top of her from where I pounced on her like a starving lion. The feeling of pride that swells when the man says, "Good job, my dear," sickens me, but *she* is delighted.

When the light is gone, I have no control. I might as well not even exist anymore—until she sleeps. As she slumbers her control fades, and I am brought back in control of myself. I am brought back to stare at my hands that have become a terrible weapon to kill without question.

I am brought back to fear *myself*.

I no longer sleep. Not when every time I close my eyes the only thing I see is the light being extinguished from the eyes of now half a dozen people.

Over and over again.

Blood 4 Honor

No one can overtake her. No one can overtake *me*.
Not even the largest man.

He falls the hardest.

I don't know any of them, but I have no doubt that it wouldn't matter. If the man in the shadows says kill, I kill.

We kill.

I can't escape it. I can't escape *her*, because she is me, and I am she.

My masked handler offers his tattooed hand, an intricate star prominently inked on the back, and unfamiliar runes on his fingers. Every single one is different, and if I were anywhere else, I would wonder what they mean.

But I can't care.

The images will be forever ingrained in my memory as I take his hand time and time again. His skin is soft and warm to the touch. Soothing despite what that hand has done to me. He pulls me to my feet, only for me to kneel before my Master, to let his praises sink into my very being.

When his hand cups my face, I smile brilliantly up at him in adoration. My life purpose is to serve him—to do his bidding. I know this within my spirit as the terrible feelings of guilt that haunts me subsides, and a peace comes over me.

It frees me of my tormented mind so that I can embrace this 'other.'

I forget all of the pain and shove it inside the dark, overflowing corners of my mind to be recalled later—to torment me when I least expect it.

CHAPTER 7

I bolt upright in a cold sweat. Disoriented, I look around. I do not recognize the forest surrounding me, and I do not know how I got here.

These are not my woods.

The moon shines down on me, illuminating the expansive and unknown pine forest. It was cleared recently by fire, but sparse new growth has already sprung up with the absence of the pine straw floor of the forest.

Blood 4 Honor

Old ash coats my backside from lying on the ground, staining the tattered leather of my pants black as I attempt to brush it off. My hands go still, and I stare down at my torn shirt and pants, trying fitfully to remember something.

What happened? These clothes were in relatively good condition when I put them on.

Confused, I run my hand over my loose hair. It is dreadfully knotted and greasy, hanging loose from my usual braid.

What the hell happened?

The forest sounds grow louder around me, as if the volume of the world is slowly being turned up. With it comes the sound of purposeful footsteps striding towards me, growing ever closer.

I reach for my blades, but my belt is missing along with my sword and dagger. No rucksack in sight either.

The bare forest floor offers me no concealment other than the large pine trees. I scamper behind a particularly large tree, trying to determine from which direction the sound comes from.

The noise bounces off of and around the trees, melding together with seemingly no particular point of origin.

What am I doing here?

I do not actually expect an answer, and jump involuntarily as that same voice from before speaks again.

For your piece of the puzzle—the key.

Well that is not comforting, only confusing. Not to mention crazy.

Emma Lee Joy

Puzzle? Key? I cannot help but question this seemingly free thinking voice in my head.

The key to your progression.

What progression? I get no answer in response.

The footsteps approach and I have no place to run. I lean up against the tree I try to hide behind, fear bubbling in the pit of my stomach. I try to hold onto the hope that maybe it is dark enough for me to be overlooked, but it is a feeble hope—the moon is bright tonight, filtering easily through the sparse pine canopy above my head.

I pause as realization hits me. That moon was beginning to wane the last time I looked up at the sky. Now it looks to be a day or two away from being completely full again. It takes around three weeks for that.

Three weeks.

What the hell?

Carnegie steps through the trees, dragging me nearly screaming from my mind. His eyes bore into my own as he pockets a familiar wooden box. I cannot recall where I have seen it before, but at the sight of it, my heart-rate spikes.

For once I want to flee rather than fight.

I feint right, making a break for it, but Carnegie is fast—impossibly fast. His leather clad fingers close around my arm before I can even get ten steps away. He yanks me backward, slinging me to the ground.

I grunt more out of frustration than pain. The soft ground pads my fall and I quickly push myself off the ground. My fingers grope for any kind of weapon on the charred forest floor. They close around a blackened but pointed pine branch. I hold it out in

Blood 4 Honor

front of my defensively, like it could actually do that much damage.

Desperation makes fools.

Drop it, the voice in my head says.

No. I can kill him now and be done with all of this, I dare to respond back with. I am talking to a voice in my head. This is crazy.

I am crazy.

“You won’t need that,” Carnegie says, motioning at the stick with a black gloved hand, oblivious to the conversation going on in my head.

I turn my attention on Carnegie, ready to shove the stick in his eye.

“Why are you here?” I demand, matching his smug demeanor with malice.

Carnegie feigns hurt at my words. “What, I can’t check in on you? See how you are doing after everything?” He speaks as though we are old friends.

“No,” I growl, actively searching for the opportune time to strike with the meager stick in my hand. The charred thing will surely snap after the first strike. I have to make it count.

Carnegie ignores my hostility. “It’s time to go home.”

“Really?” I ask with a sneer, trying to keep my emotions under control. “Why?”

If looks could kill, my revenge would be made so much easier.

Carnegie speaks three simple words, freezing me in place, and rendering me unable to even process the thought of trying to kill him.

“Damian is dead.” He holds out a large silver ring in the palm of his hand.

Emma Lee Joy

My eyes lock onto Damian's ring in Carnegie's palm, engraved with the Blackthorn crest. The metal shines dully in the moonlight against the backdrop of Carnegie's black glove, entrancing me.

I have never seen my brother without it, not once, since he passed the initiation into manhood and received it as his prize at the age of twelve. The coyote is engraved with such precision as to not miss a detail, including the snarling teeth.

Unshed tears pool in my eyes.

Carnegie reaches over to grab my hand, completely ignoring the stick still in the other. I do not strike out, but I weakly attempt to jerk away from his touch unconsciously, captivated by the ring as I am.

Carnegie holds fast until I stop resisting, and places the ring in my palm. He closes my fingers over the cold metal, and I look up at him, wide-eyed. His ice blue eyes keep me frozen in place, like a mouse mesmerized by the cat cornering it.

"This is just a piece of the puzzle—the key to your progression. It's all a part of the bigger plan," Carnegie says innocently.

My heart skips a beat. "What?" I ask, astounded at his word choice. I must have heard him wrong.

Carnegie's grin widens, but he ignores my question. "*Drop the stick, Iylara,*" he tells me, a strange quirk to his voice, like a change in resonance.

My hand moves of its own volition, and I drop the stick without hesitation at Carnegie's command.

"Good girl," he says with a genuine smile, revealing nearly perfect, well kept teeth.

Blood 4 Honor

I jerk as if prodded with red-hot metal, coming back to myself. The same sensation that led me out here in the first place fades, and tears pool in my eyes.

“Why did I—” I start to ask, looking at the stick lying at my feet, then back at Carnegie with wonder in my eyes.

Wonder and complete terror.

“Because in the end, you will always do what I want,” he says, leaning towards me as if it is our little secret.

Something clicks in my brain almost audibly and words once forgotten come rushing back to me.

You will continue on, and sooner or later, you will do exactly as I want you to do, whether you want to or not.

I choke back a frantic sob. The visage of Damian beaten bloody and dragged off to his death flashes before my eyes. I sink to my knees.

Carnegie stands back, watching me patiently as forgotten memories play in my mind, paralyzing me. Agonizing seconds pass before there is a sense of finality with the sensation of cold water covering my face. I jerk with a gasp, the familiar sensation of suffocation taking my breath away.

Somehow I know that I have remembered all that happened after Danny died that fateful day. I should be glad to have my memories back, despite how horrible they are, but knowing the truth is worse than living in blissful ignorance, because it solidifies Carnegie’s claim.

My brother is dead.

My grief clouds my mind once again, but the burden of having forgotten something eases. It does

not disappear completely though, and I now have more questions than answers—like what the purpose of that little music box is.

“It will all make sense soon, but until then, know that if you ever need me, just holler,” Carnegie says with a devilish grin. The quirk in his voice comes back as he adds, “*Go home.*”

I nod my head, unable to control myself. I will do exactly as he says, and I have no idea why. I am still incapable of speaking, like I have lost the ability to form words completely.

What is happening?

That single question is the only one I am able to form in my tormented mind.

Carnegie turns to walk away, but stops mid-step to look at me over his shoulder, as if stopping to answer my unspoken question. The dragon tattoo on his head shines in the moonlight.

“Tu seras mia, mi amor,” he says in a velvety voice with a knowing smirk. He turns on his heel, disappearing into the woods with a swirling of black coat-tails, leaving me in shock.

“Oh my God.” My voice comes out in a whisper as that now familiar voice floods my mind. The voice that called out to me from the dark in a language I did not understand.

The same voice I have been listening to since I ran off without question. Uneasily, yes, but that is beside point.

Now, in an uncanny way, I know what the words mean before he speaks them in my mind, the voice now all too familiar. How I never recognized it before is beyond me.

Blood 4 Honor

You will be mine, my love.

It takes the rest of the night and half the morning, but at around ten o'clock I step foot through the newly repaired South Gate. There is barely any recollection of the journey home, and I have no idea how long it has been since I ran off into the woods.

Three weeks. No, that can't be right.

I stop mid-step, looking back at the progression of the repairs in the South Gate Courtyard. Nearly complete buildings have been erected in the place of what was lost in the fire.

That isn't something that can be done in a few days. But, if possible, more pressing matters distract me from that very troubling thought.

For one, Damian's ring bounces against my leg in one of the pockets of my coat, never letting me forget Carnegie's words. "*Damian is dead.*"

With those words, my grief has resurfaced to become a constant companion trailing along after me, but it cannot hold a candle to the torment raging inside over the voice in my mind. Not to mention my complete incapability to do anything other than drop the stick or walk home after Carnegie told me to do so.

I never stopped walking—just continued traipsing along like it was the very thing I wanted, but I did not want to come back. I also did not personally know the way home, but my feet sure did.

Damian's ring triggered something inside of me. I can remember all too clearly what happened when I was taken, but the pain of Danny's death is somehow

muted inside of me now. The loss of Damian is fresh. I do not want to face my father and tell him his son is dead, but I must, because I know it is true.

Remembering what happened is so much more than seeing Damian to solidify Carnegie's claim. It is also the realization that he *did something to me*.

And I have no idea what.

All I know is that the one person I want to kill is also the same person invading my mind, with the ability to *control* me, somehow. None of it makes sense.

Whispers and pointed looks follow me as I walk the path towards my father's home, and I am suddenly all too aware of how I must look. I pick up the pace, nearly running for my father's cabin.

"Ma'am?" the Courtyard gate guard asks, surprised to see me as I skid to a halt outside the closed gate. "Where have you been?"

"Around," I say with a wave of my hand. He raises an eyebrow, but does not question me further. "I must speak with my father," I say, pushing through the gate without waiting for him to open it.

"Chief Vance will be in the War Room, ma'am."

I slowly turn at his words. "Why?" I ask, dread flitting around like butterflies in my stomach.

"Some men showed up just before dinner last night asking for a meeting with him. He has been entertaining them all night," he says.

My brow furrows. "Charon?" I ask.

I am afraid of meeting Carnegie again, but rationally I know it will not be him. This is something else.

"No ma'am. They go by Vesper," he says.

Blood 4 Honor

“Thank you.” Turning around, I head for the War Room on the northwest side of the village, near the creek, trying my hardest to ignore every confounded look that comes my way.

I hurry down the carved dirt steps overlaid with wooden planks, but stop at the bunker door, my hand outstretched to touch it, but only just.

With a deep breath to prepare myself for the inevitable, I place my hand upon the stone door, so very much like the one leading into the safe house. The stone pricks my fingertips, and the heavy stone door opens on silent hinges.

The narrow stone hallway opens up into a domed room. Roots hang from the ceiling, and the walls are lined with hardwood bookshelves. The smell of damp earth permeates the air in a thick haze, and a slight water leak trickles down the back wall. The water collects in the sunken dirt floor that restrains the mud puddle on the floor underneath.

Large leather bound volumes fill the shelves, and even more are stacked on top. Most books were destroyed during the Great War, making my father’s collection one of the largest in the region, or world for all we know. But nobody is keeping tabs over that sort of thing these days.

Charts and maps cover a large oak table in the middle of the room, and the space glows in the yellow light of wall sconces made from goat horns. My father stands huddled around the table with three men, deep in conversation.

Emma Lee Joy

My father looks up at the sound of footsteps. His eyes widen as they land on my silhouette in the mouth of the hallway. “Iylara, where the hell have you been?” he asks, disregarding the other men.

“That doesn’t matter right now,” I say, causing him to raise an eyebrow questioningly. “Can we speak in private?” I glance between the men, and the oldest stands straight with pursed lips, as if aggravated that I interrupted.

My father grits his teeth, failing to restrain evident frustration in his voice as he speaks.

“Gentlemen, will you please wait outside for a moment?”

“Sure,” the oldest says. “Don’t be too long,” he adds in a cool tone.

I openly glare at the men as they walk by. The disrespect in the older man’s voice sparks a disdain for him immediately. His is peculiar in more ways than one, including his choice of dress.

The man’s attire matches what I imagine a suit to look like from before the Great War. I have only ever seen such a thing in picture books my mother once read to me as a child. Seeing one in person only solidifies my impression that they are stiff and uncomfortable.

The dark gray of his suit brings out the silver in his gray-blue eyes and perfectly styled chocolate hair. Nothing out of the ordinary, but as he walks by, my glare fades into a frown as his eyes land on me. Something is familiar about them, and that nagging pull to remember something I have forgotten scratches at the edges of my mind.

Blood 4 Honor

Once the door shuts, my father looks hard at me. In the midst of the disappointment and frustration, I see relief. “Then what does?” he asks, voice softer than before, but still rough and hardened with exhaustion.

I cannot find the words to speak, and reach silently into my pocket instead. I pull out Damian’s ring, and lay it on the table.

The meaning of it is not lost on my father. “Oh God, no!” His voice is barely audible, but I can clearly hear the pain he cannot contain at the sight of his son’s ring. He knows the chunk of silver well, having been the one to put it on Damian’s finger.

Tears spring up in my eyes at the torment in his voice. My father carefully takes the ring, holding it in his palm as he looks mournfully at it. “I knew it in my heart,” he says, shaking his head, “but I didn’t want to believe it.”

“I’m sorry, father.” It is hard to speak through the lump in my throat.

I never even once believed Damian was dead, until I did, but somehow my father already knew. I merely brought the evidence. I feel wretched inside. If I would have stayed in the safe house like he told me to, none of this would have ever happened.

My father looks at the ring a few silent moments before speaking. “We will grieve properly in due time.” He swallows hard and takes a shaky breath, forcefully replacing the sorrow on his face with determination.

I do not understand how he does it. Maybe he has already cried all the tears he will cry for his only son in private. It is the only reasonable answer.

“We have to look at what lay in front of us, and those men are from a group called Vesper. They are not part of any war clan like we are. They prefer diplomacy over fighting, and they want to speak with us, Blackthorn and Charon alike, on neutral ground.”

Through the sadness threatening to overwhelm me, fury rises at the thought of *diplomacy* with Charon. The world would be much better off without the lot of them. “*Excuse me?* You mean to say you are going to just sit down and talk peace with those bastards? Like nothing has happened? Like no one has died? Like—” I close my mouth before I say something I cannot explain. Something I cannot tell my father.

Carnegie needs to die, and now for more reasons than mere revenge. If he is dead, he cannot invade my mind. There is no place in hell that we could possibly live peaceably together now. But my father can never know about this. I don’t know what he would do if he found out I have been compromised in some way.

If I were not the only surviving child of my father with a duty to uphold, I would probably disappear into the woods again and off myself to save everyone the trouble that may come upon us because of me. Since I cannot do that, I must not let Carnegie get the chance to use me against my own people—while keeping the truth of our strange connection to myself.

“If Charon agrees, we need to go and hear what they have to say.” Under normal circumstances, my father would be angered by my tone. But now his voice is softer, almost pleading. The lack of backlash stuns me. He steps around the large table to pull me into a hug before I can protest. “We will need to talk

Blood 4 Honor

about where you have been later. I thought you were in the cabin when it caught on fire at first.”

I stiffen under his touch, but relent to wrapping my arms around his broad back. I will do my best to avoid that conversation, but I know it won't be easy.

“How long was I gone?” I ask into his shoulder, barely audible.

He pushes me away to look at me—to study me. “Twenty-four days,” he says after a moment. There is a questioning look in his eyes, but I watch it fade as he replaces concern with business. “I need to talk to these men some more. Vesper wants to end the fighting before it begins, bring us all together.” My father heads for the chair next to the table, sitting down with a grunt.

“What did they offer you?” I ask, knowing there must be something in it for him. He has never been eager to drop arms against anyone before, especially Charon.

My father looks at me thoughtfully for a moment, mulling over his words. He averts his gaze, taking a deep breath. “Peace of mind,” he says after a moment.

Something about the way he refuses to look at me now sends a nervous tremor down my spine. It is a pretty evasive answer, and I cannot help questioning him.

“Don't you think the people should have a say in whether we fight or not?” I ask. “You can't make a decision like this without presenting it to them first.”

My father nods, still avoiding my gaze. “Yes, but first I need to talk to Luther and his advisers some more. What the people want may not be what is best

for them.” The tone in his voice all but screams ‘No more questions.’

There is no point in arguing with him over this at the moment, but he is crazy if he thinks I am going to drop the subject entirely.

“I will see you later then,” I say, saving my argument for later.

“Alright sweetheart,” he says gruffly. My father’s eyes once more meet mine, but it is like he is looking through me, rather than at me. “Send the men back in, please.” He smirks at me wrinkling his nose, but his grin doesn’t meet his eyes. “And go take a bath. You stink.”

I huff. “Sure thing,” I say, sniffing my armpit. He is not lying.

I hesitate, realizing something. I turn back to face my father. “Where is Jai?” He should be here for peace talks—or any kind of talks really.

My father falters, and my heart starts to beat faster. “Luther didn’t want him here.”

My eyebrows nearly disappear into my disheveled hair line. Jai has never been absent for something as important as this.

“It’s okay,” my father assures me—or tries to. I am not assured in the slightest. This all feels very wrong. Jai is a voice of reason—*the* voice of reason—against my father’s own very unreasonable voice eleven times out of ten.

I withhold my question under the heavy dismissal in my father’s hard eyes. I know he will not give me a straight answer. Not yet. And then he will be mad on top of his silence. That is never a good combination.

Blood 4 Honor

Stepping outside, I turn to the formal looking man waiting on the left side of the door, assuming he is Luther.

“You can go back in now,” I say snidely.

“Finally,” he says, disappearing inside once again. The other two men remain silent as they follow him.

Jerk.

The door shuts behind the men, and I trudge off with a swirling storm of anxiety forming in my belly.

I hope my father knows what he is doing.

CHAPTER 8

The current of the icy river gently glides around my bare feet as I walk back to the bank. I almost feel like a new woman, free of the dirt and grime that was caked up in all the wrong places. It took longer than I would have liked to scrub and detangle my hair in the swirling river current, but I could not bring myself to chop it all off.

I flex my toes, squishing sand between them while watching the pine trees lining the opposite riverbank

Blood 4 Honor

sway in the gentle evening breeze. The trees block out the harshest of the mid-afternoon sunlight, but the abundance of goldenrod lining the bank brightens the shade dappled river.

Shivering in the cool breeze, I slip my coat over my damp shoulders, and crawl onto a large stone jutting out of the sandbank. Turning my eyes back to the swathes of goldenrod, I watch it sway hypnotically as I run my fingers through my hair, not nearly as absentmindedly as I would like.

If I cannot keep my mind from replaying my new found memories I will surely lose my mind, but I know if it goes silent, another voice will be there to fill the void. I am not sure what I would prefer: Bloody images of my brother and the sensation of ice water flooding my lungs, or his killer's voice in my head.

You are stronger than you think you are.

Carnegie's voice is soft, something I do not associate with the vile man. He has been awfully quiet since our last meeting, until now as I successfully shove aside the mental images tormenting me.

I scoff but do not reply. That is a lie. I am more fragile than I have ever been. I do not miss the compliment, but I cannot bear to agree with Carnegie of all people, on anything.

He does not let my silence deter him. *I know you think I am lying. You have already bought the lie that you cannot continue on. It will destroy you if you let it.*

I bang my forehead against my knees with a groan. *Just shut up*, I plead. My fingers find my hair and begin to roughly pulling my hair into a braid down my back.

Emma Lee Joy

If you could remember everything you have forgotten you wouldn't push me away like this.

My fingers freeze in their braiding and my eyes widen as fear courses through my body like electricity. I look up from my hair, staring blankly out over the water. "What else have I forgotten?" My voice is faint and my heart starts racing. There is an instinctual knowing deep inside of me that I cannot explain. All my anger towards Carnegie twists into an ugly knot of fear, constricting my throat.

My father said I was gone twenty-four days. Twenty-four! Carnegie is *not* lying. I *know* I have lost time and forgotten who knows what, despite what I have remembered. But to be told it is actually real?

Everything he doesn't want you to remember—not yet, Carnegie answers, his voice barely audible over the ruckus in my mind.

His words sink into my being as though he has screamed them, silencing the chorus of thoughts in my mind. "Who's he?" I sit upright, completely ignoring how crazy I must look talking to myself—not that anyone is around to see me. Thank God for that.

There is no answer.

"Why even bring it up if you aren't going to say anything?" I ask, my anger returning to uncoil the knot constricting my voice.

You will understand soon enough, he says after a moment.

I growl out in frustration, abandoning my hair. I stand up hurriedly on the stone, like it will prove my point to a person who cannot see me. "I am done with cryptic answers!" My distraught voice echoes across

Blood 4 Honor

the water, but Carnegie does not answer, leaving me with a silence that only makes me angrier.

“So much for being helpful,” I spit out, staring up at the sky with narrowed eyes.

It is almost too easy to forget who I am talking to when it is only a voice in my head. It should affect me more than it does, but some part of me has already accepted that this is how it is going to be—just for a little while.

I hope.

I have completely lost my mind.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I hop off of the rock, landing with a grunt as my feet sink into the sand. My body is sore, but I cannot recall why. One of the many mysteries suddenly ruling over my now very complicated life.

I shove my soiled clothes in my bag before slinging it over my shoulder. I do not even bother putting my boots on before heading back home, opting for swinging them childishly at my side if only to distract myself with the rhythmic beat they pound out against my thigh with each footstep.

When that does not work, I try to revel in the softness of the pine needles covering the worn path under my bare feet, desperately trying to ignore the words playing over and over again in my head.

If you could remember everything you have forgotten...

But what have I forgotten?

“This running off thing is becoming a habit I do not like, Iylara,” my father says as soon as I step through

the door of his cabin. I feel like a teenager again being chastised for staying out past curfew.

I bow my head, knowing I was gone longer than I probably should have been. “I was bathing in the river. I’m sorry. I should have told someone where I was going—” My eyes fall on the half-empty whiskey bottle sitting on top of my father’s chair-side table, and my voice trails off. “When did you start drinking?” I ask, trying to change the subject as I grab a glass from the cupboard.

“Not too long ago,” he says, pouring me some as I hold the cup out to him.

I sink into the soft leather couch cushions with a sigh, and tuck my feet under me, warming my chilled toes under my bottom. I cradle the glass of whiskey like a steaming mug of tea. The amber liquid glows in the light of the roaring fireplace warming the room.

My father sits quietly in his recliner, staring at his glass. “How did the meeting go?” I ask, taking a sip of whiskey.

He clears his throat, looking up at me. “We got word that Chief Carnegie has agreed to meet with Vesper and ourselves before Luther and his advisors left.

“We leave for the Market at noon tomorrow. Luther is supplying food and music. A way to show the people he means well. We have a supply wagon with some things we can trade to make a good impression with him. I suggest you take notes,” my father says seriously. He takes a long drink of whiskey, downing the rest of the glass. “I’m not arguing about it either.” There is a decisiveness in his voice that I cannot ignore.

Blood 4 Honor

I clench my teeth, biting back the argument I know is futile in this moment. “What has you drinking?” I ask, trying to ignore the reminder that I am now next in line to be Chief with my father’s ‘take notes’ statement.

Most would miss the slight slur in my father’s words, or the way his eyes droop, but I can see it. He has been hitting the bottle hard. The last time he drank this heavy was when my mother and sister died of the pestilence.

My father looks up at me with sorrowful eyes.

Damian. That is why. Of course. It is still as if I am dreaming, and none of this is real. My mind will not process it all, and my nightmares have become my reality. It is all I can do to not buckle under the weight of it. To truly acknowledge that my brother is dead will surely break me past the point of ever being mended again. Not just because it is my *brother*, but because of the repercussions that reality brings.

I slipped out to the river while my father relayed the news of Damian’s death to Keena. She was hysterical, of course. I could hear her wailing as I escaped out of the North Gate. Even though my father would not let me go with him and hear it for myself, I know she blames me. She practically shrieked it at the top of her lungs for the entire village to hear.

I take another sip of whiskey, bracing myself to ask the one question rattling around in my head that stands out amidst the chaos. “Are you so gung-ho about Vesper’s promise of peace for the sake of peace, or because you don’t trust me to lead our people when you are gone?”

Emma Lee Joy

My father looks up at me, too fast for comfort, and my stomach drops. Sure, Luther showed up while I was gone, but my father agreed once I was back and clearly in line for the throne after him.

My own father doesn't trust me, but if I am honest, I don't trust myself either. "You may not have been raised to lead, but you are smart. I know you picked up a thing or two over the years." He tries to deny what I already know, but I shake my head.

My father's gaze falters and he looks away. Something has him seriously unsettled, and it is more than his son's death. The man before me never falters, never averts his eyes from those he is speaking to. Yet that is all he can do when talking to me now.

"Don't lie to me," I say quietly, tears welling up in my eyes.

Leeland Vance gnaws on the inside of his cheeks, his eyes darkening as he looks up at me, eyes flickering between my own. "There are things you do not know—things I cannot tell you, Iylara. Please trust me when I say that I am doing what I am doing for the good of our people." His voice is unsteady, and he looks decades older than sixty. "And for God's sake, don't make me answer that question."

A tear rolls down my cheek as I stand. I swallow the rest of the whiskey in one gulp and nod my head. "Yes sir."

I sit the glass down on the counter and flee the cabin, unsure of where I am headed, but unwilling to sob like a child in front of my father. He already doesn't think I am capable of leading Blackthorn, regardless of what he does or does not say. I will not give him any more reason to believe that I am weak.

Blood 4 Honor

The only thing that hurts worse than my father's unbelief is my own knowing that anyone else would be better suited to the job than I am—even an eleven year old girl.

The wagon trundles up to the side door of the Market, and I cannot overcome the creeping feeling of constricting anxiety that has had my foot tapping the entire ride here. My father has not said anything, but from the sour look on his face and his tense jaw, it is driving him crazy.

I hop down from the wagon before it comes to a complete stop, but stop in my tracks at the sight of a checkpoint that has been set up in the entrance.

Today you cannot get into the Market without a pat down—a weapon free zone. I have an issue with the entire thing, which I voiced to my father when he told me about it. He then reprimanded me, telling me to trust him, which I do, but he is not the problem. My trust issues are with everyone else, clearly.

A woman in black stands guard at the checkpoint, and motions for me to stop as we approach. My heart rate speeds up as she starts to frisk me.

Don't look in my boot. Please don't look in my boot, I pray over and over again.

The small knife I have concealed in my boot weighs heavy on my conscience. It felt wrong to go without it, though, despite my father's warning. My trust only goes so far.

The thought of using it on Carnegie when I have the chance still dances around in my mind. We can have peace without him—even more so, if you ask me.

Emma Lee Joy

I sigh with relief as the woman finishes her search. She allows me through without inspecting my boots. For a moment I felt regret at undermining my father's orders, but now that I am inside the Market, the feeling fades away.

Today, the Market barely resembles the old dirty warehouse that it is. Bright lights have been strung across the ceiling, giving the place a more welcome feeling than the torches hanging on the walls have ever achieved.

Tables full of finger food and drinks are situated on one side of the room, and black curtains hang along one wall as a backdrop for the group of musicians. They play a twangy upbeat song on beautifully crafted instruments, the likes of which I have never seen before.

I look around the room to find a few X-marked Charon talking civilly to an even smaller number of tear-drop marked Blackthorn for the first time ever. Something like this has not happened in years, if not decades, and the people are somehow managing to put their differences aside and act cordially to one another.

The Market is neutral ground, but each clan usually tries to avoid the other on a day-to-day basis. To see anyone conversing civilly like this is beyond strange to me. Now, we are purposefully brought together, but the hope that it brings cannot squelch the anxiety mounting within me

That anxiety got stronger the closer we got to the Market, and now it has me biting my nails, the likes of which are becoming nubs. I will draw blood soon if I don't stop, but there is something brewing under the

Blood 4 Honor

surface of the civility around me, and I cannot explain how I know it.

Leaving my father to converse with a man at the door, I creep to the closest food table, trying to avoid human interaction. Glasses of a bubbly pink liquid catch my attention and I head for the table they sit on.

I pick up a glass, and inspect the contents of it. Brows furrowed in curiosity, I bring the glass to my nose and sniff. My nose wrinkles at the overly sweet smell of flowers and some fruit that is vaguely familiar.

“It’s champagne,” a voice says from behind me.

I turn in haste, trying my best to keep the surprise off of my face as memories flood my mind from over four years ago—back to the first day I met Danny and the man standing in front of me.

“Are we gonna gut this bitch or not?” the black-haired teen asks. His voice is almost as dark as his almond-shaped eyes.

“No,” the honey-haired man next to him says, voice low. His amber eyes glow with a light the first is missing as we stare at each other.

I am still in the grip of the rather large woman that restrains me, pinning my arms behind my back. Something about the man in front of me freezes me, preventing me from moving. My feet feel as though roots have dug into the ground underneath me, planting me in place.

The spark in the honey-haired man’s eyes captivates me, warming something inside of me like I have never felt before.

Emma Lee Joy

“What?” the dark-eyed teen asks, bewildered.

Amber-eyes shakes his head slowly. “I said no.”
His voice is languid, silky.

The dark-haired teen darts his eyes between the two of us, eyebrow raised in question. “So you want to keep her?”

The man’s amber eyes never leave mine. “I didn’t say that. You know how I feel about slavery, Max.”
Amber-eyes speaks as though they could actually get away with keeping me as a pet.

Over my dead body.

“Well then what do you want to do with her?”
Max asks.

“Let her go.”

“Let her go? Have you lost your mind Danny?”

The man, Danny, turns his eyes from mine to glare at Max. “Did I stutter?”

The woman behind me remains quiet, the two of us watching the duo arguing in silence. My captor waits for instructions, and I wait for an opportunity.

“Let her go,” Danny says again, and the woman’s grip disappears from my arms.

I stand silently, still frozen in place. “Run,” Danny says, leaning towards me slightly. “Don’t stop until you get home.”

So I run, knowing deep inside that it is not the last time I will see those amber eyes.

“You good?” Max’s voice breaks me out of my memories, and I focus on the dark-haired man, no longer a teenager, standing in front of me.

Blood 4 Honor

Max Parker, one of Danny's 'friends' before he defected, stands an arm's length away. He is not someone I care to act peacefully with. That can happen when a person wants to kill you for the fun of it.

I restrain the urge to blow everything and draw the knife in my boot meant for Carnegie, but I know it is not worth it. Killing Max where he stands would bring on a world of trouble no one needs, so I take a very different route from the scene playing in my mind's eye.

I force a smile across my face, which comes out more like a grimace, but my voice is more in line with my act. "Champagne? Never heard of it," I reply conversationally.

I take a small sip while praying it isn't poisoned. I smack my lips at the sweetness of the drink. "It tastes almost like—"

"Orange and blackberry," Max says, smoothly cutting me off. "Or so he says."

"He?" I ask, annoyed with his interruption.

"Luther Cain. He is Vesper's Chief. They call him Commander though. He supplied all the food and drinks as gifts of hospitality. Even brought solar panels for the lights—big ones," he says, eyes flashing. "And that isn't all they got," he continues, taking a step towards me.

I cannot help leaning away from Max, but I hold my ground as he speaks in a silky tone. "This meeting could be very beneficial to all of us. Wouldn't you say?" he asks, tilting his head to the side quizzically. "I can put our differences aside. Can you?"

Emma Lee Joy

Max extends a hand in peace, bridging the short distance between us. It takes everything in me to force my own hand out to shake his. Turning him down would not bode well for the image my father is trying to portray, but that does not make my skin crawl any less when our hands grasp each other.

“Well that was nice of them,” I say with a more grateful tone than I thought I could manage. I jerk my hand back, too quickly, and Max smirks.

“Very much so,” Max says, downing a glass of champagne in two gulps. He discards the glass on the table, and takes another step forward, lowering his voice as he speaks in my ear. “Meet Carnegie on the rooftop in five minutes.”

My heart drops, and nausea swells in my belly. I cannot come face-to-face with Carnegie. I am afraid of what he may make me do. I did bring the dagger to kill him with, but my plan never got further than that.

Don't even think of running. Carnegie's voice is soft, a mere whisper in my mind, but he means business. Someone will surely drag me to stand before him. He doesn't seem to be able to compel me through this connection we have though, or else he would have done that. A blossom of hope blooms in my chest.

Max steps away, and I release a breath I did not realize I was holding. It takes a few moments to gather myself before I can think of moving my feet.

I take the first step and my feet take over, leading me the dilapidated staircase on the other side of the room like they already know where to go.

Blood 4 Honor

The second floor creates the ceiling for half of the first floor, and the balcony opens way to the cathedral style roof over the main area of the warehouse floor.

Unused storage rooms line the wall across from the balcony, only interrupted by a small hallway towards the end.

My feet guide me until I stop in front of the last door on the left. “Roof Access” is neatly hand-painted on a sign nailed to the door.

I reach out, slowly turning the rusting knob as my heart thunders away in my chest. *I shouldn't be doing this.*

The door creaks open, and I step into an empty, sunlit room with a narrow set of metal stairs on the other side of the room. I mount the stairs, my footsteps echoing off the walls. The exit door takes a little more effort to get open, but it swings open on quiet hinges with a little persuasion.

Pebbles litter the roof, crunching underfoot as I step out from under the alcove surrounding the door. Carnegie stands near the edge with his back to me, looking out over the meadow surrounding the Market. His long black coat billows behind him, caught in the persistent breeze.

“It’s about time you found me. Thought you were going to stand me up,” he says without looking at me. “I should have known Max would strikes up a conversation though. He talks too much.”

“I wasn’t aware we had a date,” I say as my own olive green coat tails flap in the soft breeze wafting across the roof.

Emma Lee Joy

“It’s okay. You aren’t aware of much.” Carnegie turns to face me. I do not miss the jab, but I remain silent, frozen again in the iciness of his gaze.

My hand itches for the blade in my boot, longing to lodge it in his eye like I failed to do with the pine branch in the woods.

Or I could shove him off the roof. I only have to wait for the right moment.

“*Come here.*”

The compulsion to comply with the quirk in his tone is too strong for me to deny. I walk to stand directly in front of him, teeth clenched, but grateful for the opportunity to get closer to him so I can strike.

Carnegie studies me while I stand there rigidly, trying to coerce my body into shoving him, but I cannot even raise a hand to him. He could probably make me throw *myself* off though.

The thought is not comforting.

He looks me over once as he speaks. “What if a person could be changed completely on the inside, but remain untouched on the outside?” he asks me softly.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say not much louder. I am surprised I can even speak.

Carnegie bites his lower lip, a sideways smirk appearing on his lips. “I mean what if everything *you* are could be turned off at a moment’s notice, and turned into something else?” he asks, trailing a fingertip down my pointed nose.

“I still don’t understand,” I answer, peeved at his games. I am growing weary with his words, unable to rid my face of his hand, much less end his life.

Blood 4 Honor

“Our mind connection is only the beginning.” His words bring fear, like they so often do now. It grips me at my core, and I struggle to catch a breath.

Carnegie reaches out to cup my cheek in his gloved hand. Only his fingertips are exposed. I try to flinch away from his cold skin, but I still cannot move, no matter how hard I try.

My cheek starts to tingle where his fingertips touch me, his skin warming up considerably. “You feel it?” he asks.

“Yes,” I whisper breathlessly.

Trailing his thumb over my lips, he lowers his hand to hover just above the skin of my throat. Static pops at his fingertips. The sensation increases in strength, and I hiss in pain as he withdraws his hand.

With a pushing motion, he sends me stumbling back without even touching me. I bend over, hands on my knees, groaning at the lingering effects of the shock that ripples through my body.

“As you evolve, you should be able to do the same thing, with greater effect,” he says with a friendly smile.

“Evolve?” I stand up straight, refusing to cower before him.

He ignores me. “You are one of a kind, you know that?” he asks.

“Don’t try to flatter me,” I say, anger boiling alongside the horror at what I have just witnessed.

What was that?

“I’m not. Only speaking the truth,” he says, walking by me nonchalantly as he heads for the door. “The power you will be able to possess has the potential to surpass my own. Sound—”

Emma Lee Joy

Pulling the knife, I lunge before he finishes his sentence, my blade aiming for his face.

He turns, quick as a whip, bringing his arm down as if to strike me. He does not touch me, but the knife is knocked painfully out of my hand, sending it skidding over the edge of the roof.

“You cannot kill me, Iylara. I know you want to, but you are no match for me,” he says, disappointment in his voice. “And I thought we were actually making progress.”

I look up at him, speechlessly holding my hand in pain, eyes wide. As if the first time he used that trick was not shocking enough.

Carnegie does not give me a chance to ask questions before he carries on as if I have not tried to kill him. “*Walk with me.* We have something to attend to,” he says with a full on grin, the quirk back in his tone.

I fall into step behind him against my will, feeling like a scorned dog who tried to bite its master.

“My father is willing to work towards peace. Are you going to turn that away?” I ask. He did not tell me to be quiet.

“I am here aren’t I?” he asks evasively.

“My father is willing to forgive you for what you have done and let you live—even after you killed his son. You wouldn’t try and do anything to hurt that, would you? You know how easily we can take you out,” I passively threaten.

Carnegie chuckles, but otherwise remains silent. I follow him to the balcony overlooking the mass of bodies below us before he finally speaks. “Some things have to happen for others to come to pass,” he says,

Blood 4 Honor

stopping to look at me, his hands casually gripping the railing in front of us.

“What things?” I ask, trying to figure him out, but I am not succeeding. I do not miss the fact that he has failed to answer my question.

“*Just watch. Don’t move. Don’t speak,*” Carnegie compels me.

I grit my teeth, my eyes skimming across the mass of bodies carrying on with their daily business. They are all oblivious to the two of us standing above them in the darkness. I find my father standing by the food table I stopped at earlier, talking to Charon’s Captain of the Guard.

Brit Ryder is a very recognizable man with a bald head completely covered in tattoos. He stands at almost six and a half feet tall. Even my father has to look up at him to speak to him.

Jai appears, making his way through the crowd opposite the room of another Charon making a beeline for the food table. As the man gets closer, he pulls a pistol from under his jacket.

I try to scream out, to alert someone, but I am compulsive to follow orders of silence. Jai calls out something unintelligible, and my father looks around.

Captain Ryder grabs Jai in a headlock, keeping him from pouncing on the gunman. Jai says something else as he struggles against the Captain, but I cannot read lips.

My father turns as the man stops within four feet of him, gun raised. The man’s lips move as he speaks to my father, who stands his ground with a dignified look on his face. He stares down the barrel of the gun without flinching.

Emma Lee Joy

The people nearby look around confused, but it is too late to make a move.

A blast reverberates off the metal walls of the building, and my father's head snaps back then forward. The crack of the gun cuts off the band, and shuts down the idle chatter bouncing around the room. Jai looks on in shock, limp in his arrestor's grasp. My father's blood is splattered across his face.

Leeland Vance crumples at his killer's feet, eyes staring up at me in death where I stand next to Carnegie on the balcony. His eyes are accusing.

A scream sticks in my throat as I watch blood trickle from a hole in the middle of his forehead.

"*Go do what you must,*" Carnegie says, releasing me from his hold. The smugness is gone from his voice, almost hollow.

Shaking like a leaf, I rush for the staircase as the room erupts into chaos. At the foot of the stairs the crowd swallows me. Panicked bodies toss me to and fro, jostling me back towards the door, away from my father's body. I cannot see him, but I cannot bear the thought of leaving him, so I try to push against the crowd without any success.

Gunfire rips through the air with a seemingly endless ammo supply, and unarmed civilians scurry for the exit. Bullets miss me as people fall dead all around me, unable to escape quickly enough through the checkpoint barricade.

Guns have appeared in the hands of Charon, somehow smuggled in past the checkpoint, and they are making easy work of the helpless Blackthorn inside the warehouse.

Blood 4 Honor

Charon start to fall as Vesper joins in a firefight against our attackers, and the echoing cacophony of gunshots pierces my ears painfully. I have never heard such noise. Charon somehow managed to get a hold of bullets, lots of bullets.

And Vesper, for all of their “no fighting” nonsense, have the bullets to match them.

Jai appears out of the crowd with a snarl on his bloody face as he grabs my arm, steering me towards the door. A sharp gun blast distinguishes itself, louder than the rest, and Jai stumbles. He regains his footing with a groan, and forces me out of the warehouse, staying close behind me.

I catch sight of Carnegie on the balcony as I glance over my shoulder. He lowers a large revolver from our direction with a fiery look in his eyes. Jai drags me outside, pulling me none too gently to our wagon.

The people who manage to make it through the door scatter in all directions, running across the field unable to fight back against the barrage of bullets.

“We gotta go.” Jai’s words come out strained. He roughly pushes me onto the wagon bench with a grunt of pain.

I am in shock. “But my father!” I cry out desperately, about to hop down from my perch. “I can’t leave him!”

Stricken with grief, tears start to pour down my face as Jai shakes his head, grabbing my shoulder. “We can’t help him. I have to get you out of here. We can’t lose you too,” he pleads with me.

Unable to deny his urgency, I nod my head. Jai pulls himself roughly onto the seat next to me. He

Emma Lee Joy

grabs the reigns, awkwardly holding his left arm, and pushes the horses to follow the path towards home.

My eyes do not leave the warehouse until we take a sharp curve, and it disappears behind the trees.

CHAPTER 9

“Take the reins.”

“What?” I ask in a daze.

“Take the reins,” Jai repeats through gritted teeth.

I look at him; worry settles in the pit of my stomach. He is as white as a ghost. He shoves the reins into my hands before I can respond. My fingers grasp the worn leather as Jai clumsily climbs over the back rest of the wagon bench.

Emma Lee Joy

He collapses into the back of the wagon with a grunt of pain. “Just get home,” he says, barely loud enough for me to hear over the thudding of horse hooves, and then he is out cold.

“Jai?” I yelp, frightened at seeing him like this.

A Y-bend approaches, forcing my attention onto the horses. We only have a few miles left, but not knowing whether Jai is alive or dead makes it feel like fifty.

I stand as the village gate comes into view, waving at the guards on duty.

“Open the gates!” I hear one guard shout upon seeing me. I pull the horses through the gate, barely open enough for the wagon to fit through, and up the path to the infirmary.

Stopping the horses at the open front door, I jump in the back to check on Jai, with a “Get Dr. Matthews!” to Carika, who comes outside to see what is going on.

With two fingers on Jai’s throat, I find a faint pulse. At my touch he opens his eyes and looks up at me blearily, coming back from unconsciousness.

“Asshole was going to take you out the same way they did—” Jai inhales as a shudder runs through his body.

I strip off the fur covering his shoulders and back to find that blood has completely stained the back of his beige undershirt. A single bullet wound rests off-center between his shoulder blades.

“Dammit,” I breathe. “He wasn’t shooting at me.” Jai does not hear me. Maybe it is better that way.

Heavy footsteps running towards us makes me look up. “Alec, help me get him inside!” I yell out in

Blood 4 Honor

panic at the burly, red-haired man headed for us in a sprint.

With a nod, Alec leaps into the back of the wagon, grabbing Jai's head and shoulders while I grab his feet. We carefully lower him down, and walk awkwardly towards the door with him between us.

Dr. Matthews meets us at the door with a rolling cot for us to lay Jai down on. "What's happened?" she asks frantically.

"Bullet wound." My voice quavers.

Dr. Matthews nods, rolling Jai into an open room without another word. Alec follows behind, brows furrowed in confusion.

Bending over Jai's prone form, Dr. Matthews checks his vitals while I hover over her shoulder. "Turn him on his side, gently," she says to Alec.

Dr. Matthews turns to the shelves, pulling a few jars of herbs and liquids down. Alec carefully turns Jai onto his side, revealing his bloodstained back while Dr. Matthews mixes up some concoction in a bowl. She sits it on a rolling tray next to Jai's cot, with scissors, tongs, bandages, and a scalpel on top.

With the scissors, she cuts Jai's shirt, revealing his back. The skin is crimson with blood. Dr. Matthews dabs around the wound, cleaning the blood away to assess the damage, and I start pacing.

Too much blood.

"Stop pacing and come here," Dr. Matthews says sternly.

I raise an eyebrow at her tone, but say nothing. I know that I am not helping Jai with my pacing.

I approach with apprehension, not knowing what to do. The feeling of helplessness almost overwhelms

Emma Lee Joy

me as I stand next to Jai's head, watching blood continue to slowly ooze from the hole in his back.

She hands me a clean strip of cloth from her tray. "Clean his face."

I do not know what cleaning his face will do for him, but I withhold my question, dipping the cloth in the bowl to find the liquid lukewarm. It smells strongly of mint and basil.

Squeezing the excess out, I dab at the side of Jai's face, wiping away the blood with shaking hands.

"Whose blood is that?" Alec asks.

I look up at him wide-eyed, trying to restrain the tears that threaten to spill forth. "My father's," I manage to say loud enough for them to hear. Dr. Matthews glances at me in surprise, but neither of them asks any more questions. Alec merely nods solemnly.

Without any warning, Dr. Matthews grabs a set of forceps from the tray, and starts digging the bullet out without any word of warning. Jai yells out in pain, eyes opening in alarm. I grab his shoulders in an attempt to hold him still.

"It's okay. Stop moving," I say firmly, trying to be calm for his sake as he tries to arch away from Dr. Matthews' probing tongs. To the doctor I say, "A little warning next time would be nice." I do not try to hide my aggravation with her.

She does not respond, as if I have not even spoken, and focuses on her work. I sigh in annoyance, and turn my attention back to Jai, who has stopped fighting me. His muscles are still tight under my fingertips though, and I know he is conscious.

Blood 4 Honor

In record time, Dr. Matthews lifts up the forceps gripping a rather large, twisted bullet covered in blood. Jai goes limp, and I look at her worried. “He is out again.”

Dr. Matthews nods. “He has lost a lot of blood. We need to find a match for him.” She gets up to rummage through a drawer under the shelves on the wall. “Luckily I already have you all on file. I will be right back,” she says, darting out of the room.

“What does she mean?” I ask Alec. “I thought blood was blood.”

“You have to have the right blood type to give a person, or their body will reject it, killing them,” Alec answers. I look at him questioningly. “I’m trained as a field medic,” he says. I nod in understanding, taking note of that tid-bit of information for later.

“What will happen without it?” I ask, looking at Jai with fresh tears in my eyes, but I already know the answer.

Alec frowns. “Jai dies,” he says.

I force tears away, but it is not easy. *I can't lose anyone else.*

“But there is bound to be a match somewhere, if not us,” he adds to reassure me, seeing the distress on my face. “The match just has to be willing to donate.”

No they don't. I will force it from them if I have to.

Dr. Matthews appears with a black box in her hands, and her eyes on me. “You’re a match. Take your coat off.” I unclasp my jacket and slide out of it without question.

I sit on the chair Dr. Matthews offers me. She yanks my right arm out straight on the tray. “Don’t move,” she orders, and I oblige her.

Emma Lee Joy

I look up at Alec afraid, not knowing what is about to happen. He nods in reassurance, and I try to steady my racing heart. I turn my eyes to the older woman's fingers delicately cleaning the area of skin in the bend of my elbow.

Dr. Matthews looks up at Alec, motioning to a black box she brought in. "Open that."

Alec opens the box to reveal a glass bottle with a strange looking stopper in the top with hoses coming out of it. Dr. Matthews produces a needle from a bowl with some kind of solution in it in from the cupboard, and attaches it to the end of the hose Alec hands her.

Dr. Matthews ties an elastic band around my upper arm tightly, thumping the crease of my elbow with her finger. In one fluid motion, she grabs my arm to steady it, and pushes to pointed end of the needle into the skin. I hiss at the sharp pinching sensation, but I hold steady against the discomfort.

Blood gushes into the tube, and Dr. Matthews places a piece of tape over the needle to hold it in place. "Stay like that," she says, releasing the elastic band. My arm goes tingly for a moment as blood rushes back to the area, only to be siphoned out into the jar.

I watch in amazement as my blood fills the glass bottle before flowing through the other tube. When all the air is out, she sticks Jai with a needle connected to the other hose, and my blood disappears into Jai's arm.

I lose track of time as I become entranced by the procedure. I start getting lightheaded right about the time Dr. Matthews hobbles back over to me, and

Blood 4 Honor

removes the needle from my arm. She wraps a piece of gauze around my elbow.

“You are good to go,” she says. “Fresh air may do you some good. You look pale.”

I go to stand up, and Alec has to steady me as the room starts to spin. “Never gone without that much blood, huh?” he asks me, trying to lighten the situation.

I take a deep breath, trying to ease the spinning of the room. “Is it that obvious?” I ask in a strained voice. “I think I might puke,” I say, hands clinched around my jacket like a lifeline.

“Come on then,” Alec says, grabbing my arm. I let him lead me outside after Dr. Matthews assures me Jai will be alright for now.

The cool air of evening causes gooseflesh to rise on the exposed skin of my arms, wet with cold sweat. It helps ease the nausea though, so I cannot complain about being cold for once.

“Would you like me to walk you home?” Alec asks. “You need to rest now.”

“I can’t leave him,” I say earnestly, eyes filling with tears once again. “They killed my father. I can’t lose Jai too.”

Alec looks at me sadly. “There is nothing else you can do for him. Trust the doc’s skills. She knows what she is doing.”

I know he is right. I have seen the woman work miracles. “Fine,” I say taking a slow step. “I can do this.”

My knees start to get wobbly. Before I can protest, Alec scoops me up carefully into his arms, and carries me home as if I weigh nothing.

Emma Lee Joy

“Thanks,” I mumble, breathing deeply as my ears start to ring. After a moment, it starts to recede.

“You’re welcome, uh—” Alec’s brow furrows as he pauses. “I guess I call you Chief now, huh?”

My breath shudders, and I unconsciously grip the front of his coat, trying to steady myself. “I suppose so,” I say drearily, the cause of my sudden promotion searing my heart like a hot knife.

At the courtyard gate, the guard hurries over to open the gate to let us through. Seeing his worried face, I force myself to tell him everything is okay, but I am lying.

I focus on the buttons on Alec’s coat, ignoring the empty place where my cabin once stood. Mother nature has already begun to cover the patch of dirt with weeds despite the coming of winter.

Alec carefully walks up the stairs and stops, unsure of what to do. “I think I will be fine. Sit me down on the porch. I’m not ready to go in yet,” I say, saving him from the awkwardness.

Alec obliges, lowering me onto the edge of the porch. My feet dangle, booted toes brushing the grass underneath.

“Will you stay with him?” I hope it is not too much to ask, but I know he will do it either way.

“Of course,” Alec says with a gentle smile on his rugged face. “I will let you know when he wakes up.”

“Thank you,” I say again.

“Anytime, Chief,” he says, leaving me alone on the porch, shuddering at the title.

I really do not think that I am prepared for what lay ahead, but I have no choice but to face it. It is all up to me now, to do whatever it is that we are doing.

Blood 4 Honor

But what are we doing?

I remember Carnegie's words clearly, as if he were speaking to me now. Maybe he is. They pierce my mind, affirming my fears regardless.

Blood rules and you will be the only one left who can fill that order when they need it most, but unfortunately, you won't do either.

CHAPTER 10

Despite favoring diplomacy over fighting, even Vesper could not turn a blind eye to what Charon did. There isn't anything much lower than one who takes advantage of peace talks to slaughter the competition when they are defenseless.

All anyone has these days is their word, and if you don't have that, you have nothing. It is dishonorable.

Scout reports say that Vesper took control of the Marketplace after subduing Charon, but they didn't

Blood 4 Honor

put them down as I would have done. There are whispers that speak of cages and torture, but it sounds like wild speculation for something no one actually knows anything about.

All I know is that Vesper sent wagons loaded down with ammo, guns, medicine, and the dead—including my father's body.

We are able to give our people a proper burial, rather than letting their bodies rot away in some mass grave somewhere. Funeral pyres have lit up the riverbank for days, and nearly every Blackthorn from the outer lying villages has made the pilgrimage here. Many more than just our village lost people that day.

On either side of my father's unlit pyre, memorial flames already burn for Damian and Danny. As the next Chief, no one questioned me when I commissioned Danny's pyre next to the others, but I know many still whisper, spreading dissent.

Whether I could ever prove Danny's innocence or not, there are those who believe he is guilty. I will be hard-pressed to change their mind when I am not sure of his innocence myself.

The fact that I do not have the bodies of my brother or husband to close this chapter of my life has not fully hit me, but I am grateful to be able to put my father to rest properly. There is something to a proper funeral, and whatever happened to Danny's and Damian's corpses are too morbid to ponder. It will hit me one day, I am sure, but it will not be today. Or I may never feel anything again.

If only life were that merciful.

The pyres are built on the edge of the river bank, overlooking the white sand bar meeting the water's

edge, about a mile from the village. Rose petals litter the ground around the wooden structures where some of the children took it upon themselves to help decorate for the send off—more than likely spearheaded by my own niece.

Who could tell a little girl that she should not pick the last of the year's roses for her grandfather's funeral, much less her father's memorial? A shortage of rose petals in the newly rebuilt apothecary is nothing compared to the importance of this night.

Small ceremonies have been ongoing all week, but tonight will be different. Tonight we are sending off a Chief. Our Warlord. My father.

His coyote pelt mantel rests on my shoulders like a heavy weight, shielding me from the bitterly cold wind that whips my wool skirts around my ankles. Winter is approaching fast.

The Matron of Death, a white haired woman who tends to our dead, appears from the shadows as she ignites the torch in her hand. The riverbank goes silent. She slowly lowers the flame, resting it in the cavern underneath my father's body in the silence.

Tongues of fire crackle to life and spread out from the point of contact with the mother flame, consuming the base of the pyre before fully engulfing the shrouded figure on top.

The Matron speaks words I cannot hear as I watch the flames dance across the old woman's face, illuminating the lattice work of tattoos across her wrinkled face. Her milky eyes glow orange in the fire as she turns to meet my gaze. She motions for me to step forward, and I kneel at her feet.

Blood 4 Honor

Matron Death lays a short ceremonial dagger into the flames of my father's pyre, heating it to red-hot. She speaks with her low, ambient voice ebbing and flowing in unknown tongues. The sound sends shivers down my spine.

She slips the coyote fur from my shoulders, brushing the thin straps of my shirt away to expose the skin beneath, and withdraws the dagger from the fire. She holds it in front of my face and I peer into the ebbing yellow-orange heat pulsing through the metal. I should fear the pain that I know it will bring as it scars my skin, but I almost welcome the pain.

With one side, she presses it into the skin on my right shoulder. I grit my teeth, withholding the hiss of pain I wish to exude, but this must be done in silence. To show pain is to show weakness. The leader of Blackthorn cannot be weak.

My nostrils flair and I close my eyes as the putrid smell of cooking flesh fills my nostrils. In one smooth motion, she repeats the same with the other side of the dagger on my left shoulder.

I almost cry out, but I refuse to make a noise. I take a deep breath, embracing the pain as she withdraws the dagger from my burning flesh. I open my eyes to meet the Matron's gaze once again. She smiles a toothless smile with a short nod, and holds the dagger up above her head.

Her voice is raspy, but full of pride as she speaks. "Bear witness to the transition of power. Gather to swear fealty to your new Chief."

I stand and turn to face the mass of bodies watching the ceremony quietly. I shiver as cold looks from the crowd penetrate me like blades. I shudder

out an unsteady breath under their scrutiny. All eyes are on me, but Keena's gaze from the front row burns more than the blistering wounds on my shoulders. Ysabel's eyes are wide with fear as she looks between her mother and me.

Why is she fearful?

Keena looks down at Ysabel, a single eyebrow raised in question, but her daughter shakes her head quickly in disbelief. Keena bears her teeth in anger. She rears back and slaps Ysabel across the cheek. The smacking sound echoes down the river, and Keena turns on her heel, cutting through the crowd to leave without looking back. Ysabel watches her go with a hand over her cheek, tears glistening in her eyes.

Keena will not swear fealty to me. I can accept that. I never dreamed that she would actually kneel in front of me and kiss the Blackthorn ring on my finger. It should be on her husband's hand. What hurts is the third of the crowd that turns to follow her without a second of hesitation.

My breath hitches as I watch Blackthorn fracture before my eyes, because of me.

Your people won't accept your leadership when your father is gone. Not after Danny. If they find out your husband is a traitor they won't trust you like they should, and they will go looking for someone else to lead them.

Carnegie's words will haunt me forever.

Some people nervously look around, unsure of what they should do. Only a fraction of the group is unwavering in their loyalty, staring daggers at the backs of those who dare turn their backs on our clan.

Blood 4 Honor

Ysabel steps forward, leading the remaining group to line up in front of me as if nothing happened. Her mother's handprint is already red against her olive-toned cheek, shining brightly in the firelight.

My niece, bless her soul, kneels first and delicately kisses the large Blackthorn signet ring on my outstretched hand. Tears well up in my eyes as she stands, kissing me on the cheek before stepping away to allow the next person to kneel.

She doesn't leave though, just stands off to the side while the remaining members of our clan kneel before me. Not because she wants anything, but because she wants to be here; otherwise she would not have turned her back on her own mother.

I cannot let her sacrifice be in vain.

Everything is off-kilter. With fewer people, the jobs they would be doing falls on those already burdened with keeping our village up and running.

War looms on the horizon with Charon, and now more needs to be done on top of everyday chores. Even the children are hastened to work twice as hard. Ysabel has stepped up wondrously, leading the pack to complete the work loads handed down.

The weapons and ammo that Vesper sent takes some of the burden off of our shoulders in the weapons department, but the Blacksmith has been working overtime sharpening and making swords, daggers, and axes. Without Danny's help the work is slow going.

The handful of blacksmith apprentices have never had to work under the pressure that they are

currently experiencing. Unfortunately, not all are able to withstand the test, painstakingly slowing down the process even more.

I feel useless, not being able to put my hand to anything, but there are just too many questions, too many things happening at once. All of which require my attention. I walk through the streets, tightening the furs around my healing shoulders against the brisk breeze, while making sure everyone is breaking their backs and getting things done. It does not sit well with me, but it must be done despite my reservations.

It is way more mentally exhausting than I thought it would be.

Answering questions is quickly becoming tiresome, and I long for the monotony of following orders without thought. It may not give my weary body a break, but it would at least give my overworked brain a much needed reprieve.

I sigh heavily as my name is called once again, and turn to face yet another onslaught of problems I have to figure out how to fix.

Would it be worth it to pray for a little rain? If it rains hard enough, we will have no choice but to retreat inside.

Ask and you shall receive. My mother's voice echoes in my mind like a faint memory. I fear I will soon forget what she sounded like entirely, but that is beside the point. Meredith Vance had to have told me that saying at least once a week, if not more. My mother was a woman of faith who believed in the impossible being possible.

Blood 4 Honor

However, I know my selfishness will do no one any good, so I refrain from trying to will thunder clouds into existence with my mind.

We don't need any more set-backs, and I do not really believe in that mess anyhow.

CHAPTER 11

Whiskey slides down my throat in an amber stream of lava, settling in my belly with the only lasting warmth I can attain these days.

My father's funeral pyre flashes before my eyes more frequently than I would like, followed by the desertion of a third of our fighting force. The fact that they find my leadership so appalling that they would leave the safety of our clan hurts worse than the fact that they refused to swear fealty.

Blood 4 Honor

I had my own problems with swearing fealty to my father when I came of age, because I felt that it took away a part of *me*, but when given the only other option of fending for myself in the wilderness, I gladly knelt and kissed the ring.

I was never meant to be in this position though. Leadership was first meant for my oldest sister, Nadia—the epitome of a humble leader, before she was taken by pestilence. Then, the future role fell upon my brother’s shoulders, who embraced it with an overbearing pride, frequently trying to push his agenda before his time.

And then in one sweeping pull of a trigger the responsibility landed on my unready shoulders in a smoldering heap.

As the youngest, I learned things like tattooing clan marks and helping to train fighters, not leading the people. Sure, I have picked up a thing or two, but I am wholly unqualified for this position.

A log falls in the fire with a spray of sparks, startling me from my alcohol fueled slumber for a moment. Ysabel wakes with a gasp from her place on the couch. She lifts her head and glances around the room, finds me watching her, and settles back into the cushions of the couch. She is asleep again in seconds.

I wish I could sleep. The decisions I must make in the near future weigh heavy on my mind, and I am now forever restless. I rub my eyes and look blearily into the fire.

Flames roar in the fireplace, warming the cabin against the freezing rain that has halted all work in the village. I apparently didn’t need to pray for rain for it to show up with a vengeance, completely

Emma Lee Joy

unannounced within the following hour after thinking about it.

Now it seems like all the rain that we have needed for months decided to show up all at once.

We will be lucky if the river does not flood at this rate. The last day and a half has been nothing but a torrential downpour. The creek is already overflowing, creating a small lake at the back of the village—the likes of which we have never seen before.

Lightening cracks in the distance, followed by a violent strike of thunder that makes the cabin's foundation rattle. Ysabel cries out, bolting upright.

"It's just thunder," I say tiredly.

Her light brown eyes are wild, but after a moment, she relaxes a little. She leans her head back against the couch, and her eyes find the open letter at my elbow before she looks up at me.

"Did you read it yet?" she asks.

With heavy eyes, I look down at the letter sitting on the table next to my father's recliner I have taken up residence in. Luther Cain's handwriting runs across the page in an elegant slant, but the contents of the letter are nowhere near as lovely as the writing.

"Yeah," I reply sluggishly, acutely aware that I have probably had more whiskey than I should have.

In a bid to put the conversation off, I light a cigarette in the flame of the candle casting an orange glow over the off-white paper. I take a long drag as I glare at the letter. Ysabel waits patiently for me as I gather my thoughts.

It took me days to actually read it. Not out of fear necessarily, but more out of putting off added

Blood 4 Honor

responsibility. If only I could ignore everything and it all be okay in the end, but that is a hollow wish.

“He apologized for what happened at the Market,” I say cautiously. I am not sure how much a young girl like herself should be burdened with, but at this rate, she is next in line to lead. I do not see myself having an heir of my own, because I will never be able to replace Danny.

If only I were a worthy mentor.

Blackthorn’s only saving grace is that Ysabel is wise beyond her years and Damian undoubtedly trained her for the role in some aspects. Maybe I should just let her lead, but that would surely be frowned upon.

Join or risk annihilation is the gist of the contents of Luther’s letter, although he did not use those exact words—nor was he threatening. I cannot tell her that though. I do not want to frighten her.

Ysabel watches me expectantly with those wise eyes of hers, and part of me cannot help but feel that she already knows everything, but she wants me to speak it out.

I sigh, picking at my fingers. “He gave me the same offer he gave your grandfather. He thinks we would all be better off if we joined together.”

Luther believes our way of life is unsustainable, but he overlooks the fact that we have survived for a century the way we are. I can almost hear the pompousness in his voice through the overly stylistic script on the page. The man has superiority issues, and my first impression of him in the War Room was not flattering.

Emma Lee Joy

“And you think grandpa was wrong?” she asks conversationally.

My father may have thought it was a good idea to join, but I am convinced that it isn't in the best interest of our people like my father believed. I know how many want to fight, and majority rules. I have already pushed enough of them away. “Not necessarily, but—”

“Then why don't you just follow through with what he was going to do?” She catches me off guard with her statement and I cannot even reprimand her for interrupting me. Her eyes glitter in the firelight with curiosity. She reminds me of me.

I stare at her openmouthed for a moment before I can form coherent speech again. “Because I cannot join forces with someone I know nothing about when we can finish this mess ourselves,” I say defensively. “Luther didn't even want Jai in the meetings. I have no way of knowing what was discussed. Luther didn't exactly lay it all out on paper either.”

“You don't think grandpa wrote anything down?”

I shake my head. “No, Jai was his scribe. He never wrote anything down himself, not within the last five years. His arthritis was getting too bad.”

Ysabel shrugs and stands, stretching like a cat. “I don't think it would hurt to look through the War Room and see if he left anything that could help you,” she says matter-of-factly.

I chuckle, thankful that she did not leave with her mother. I just have to make sure I do not do something to drive her away. “Yeah I guess not,” I say quietly as I watch her flit around the kitchen, looking for food.

Blood 4 Honor

“You don’t have any food?” she asks, searching high and low for anything edible.

I look down at my glass of liquor sheepishly. I have been sustaining on whiskey and cigarettes for the most part. “I’ve been eating in the cafeteria lately.”

Ysabel opens her mouth to say something, but snaps her mouth shut with a sigh. I know she knows I have not left the house since it started raining. What she does not know is that food has been the last thing on my mind for more than a few days now. My skin-tight pants hang looser than they should, and my wrists are bonier than normal. I try not to look in the mirror at the sunken pits that have become my eyes.

Rather than chastising me, Ysabel looks out of the window with disdain as her stomach growls audibly across the living room. “Well I’m gonna go get food. You want anything?”

I shake my head. “No I’m good.”

She purses her lips, looking more like my mother than I thought possible. She bites back whatever words she wants to say and answers with a simple, “Kay,” before slipping into her boots. “I’m going home to find something to eat. I’m not making a trip across the village. My socks are still damp from the walk over here.”

I nod, feeling guilty about her having to get back out in the weather. “You don’t have to come back tonight if you don’t want to. You should get some rest in your own bed.” I know how empty her home may feel now, but Ysabel does not look to be taking the current turn of events as hard as I would have thought she would.

Emma Lee Joy

“You sure?” she asks, brow raised in question.

“I will be fine,” I say with a nonchalant wave of my hand, but I am not very convincing. She takes the hint though. I want to be alone, but I have not had the heart to push away my niece—not after everything she has done for me.

Ysabel leaves me in silence. I know I should follow her out into the rain, head for the War Room, and sift through every journal and bound book in the place. But I cannot bring myself to do so. I don’t want to know more details, because I do not want a good enough reason to join Vesper.

I do not want anything except to fight—to steal the last breath of as many Charon as I can, and ultimately put a bullet between Carnegie’s eyes. I want to watch the light of his existence fade away to nothing, knowing he will never be able to make me do anything ever again. I am convinced I can do this, if nothing else.

Blackthorn was match for the weapons Charon got their hands on, until Luther sent us the weapons and ammo in recompense. In his letter, Luther apologized for the lapse in judgment that allowed Charon to get their hands on such weapons, and yet he acts as though he had no idea that the bastards would do exactly as they did once given the chance.

The few terms for joining that Luther did manage to fit in the letter *are* alluring, but nowhere near nice enough for me to drop arms by themselves. I cannot see why my father jumped on board with the peace talks so fast. To join with Luther may come with some pretty useful perks, like food security and better medicine, but at what cost?

Blood 4 Honor

It could be to sell out everything that I believe in, destroying everything my family has built within the last century.

Carnegie is on a war path, and not afraid of using every bit of firepower that he has to make a point. Before the wagon loaded with supplies, we could not match his firepower, thereby possibly forcing us into the bosom of Vesper for protection. Now we are equipped to take his army on headfirst with a very real chance of finally putting an end to this thing before it ever truly starts—without selling out to Vesper.

So why does Luther still insist that Blackthorn may not survive unless we join forces? He could know something I do not, but he is not going to tell me anything like that through a letter. I loathe the idea of having to speak with the man face-to-face.

I growl in frustration.

Unable to sit still any longer, I stand, pacing the rug in the center of the cabin. Much more of this, and I will wear a path through the aged fabric.

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask no one. Tears burn my eyes, and in my frustration, I chuck the glass of whiskey into the fireplace with a distressed cry of outrage. The glass explodes in a hail of crystal, and the remnant of alcohol in the glass causes the fire to swell dangerously past the hearth before dying back down.

I sink to my knees, head in my hands as I finally break down after days of ignoring the raging storm inside of my mind.

Damn this rain.

Emma Lee Joy

If I were not cooped up, I might be able to continue to ignore it all with menial tasks, but no. All I have are my thoughts as company, and they are far from hospitable.

“What do I do?” I ask again with a sob.

Join me.

Carnegie’s voice is not what I want to hear, but I have no control over it.

I laugh out loud, nearing hysterics. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say into my hands. The last thing I want is a conversation with Carnegie of all people.

We can take the fight to Vesper. Who are they to show up out of nowhere? They want to take our land and make slaves out of our people. Once we take them out, we can get back to you trying to kill me if you want.

“Like I would ever join you for anything,” I hiss, staring at the wall as though he were standing in front of me. I can almost see the smarmy grin on his face.

Or we could make something new.

“Destroying everything in the process,” I say through clenched teeth.

Nothing is meant to last forever.

I shake my head violently, trying to will away his voice in my head. “I will never join the likes of you. You will die by my hand, and I will bathe in your blood.”

My threat sounds hollow, even to my own ears, but I mean what I say. I can already picture that glorious day, currently and distressingly out of my reach for the moment.

Or at least I *want* to mean them, but part of me doesn’t believe that I can actually beat Carnegie. Not

Blood 4 Honor

after what I witnessed on the roof of the Market. He wields some unnatural power that I fear nothing, not even my need for revenge, can overpower.

I am the lesser of two evils, my love. Don't forget that.

“You're a liar. Go away,” I say, barely louder than a whisper, but it is enough.

Have it your way then. But I don't say I never offered. Carnegie's weighty presence in my mind disappears, and resolve settles on me.

A gentle knock sounds on the cabin door, and I freeze, heart pounding. I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself as I wipe away a stray tear that manages to escape.

I stand, smoothing down my shirt. “Come in,” I say breathlessly.

I turn as the door opens, and Jai steps in. Every problem fades upon seeing him in the doorway, and I dart towards him, wrapping him in a desperate hug.

He is real. He is alive. He is okay.

I let him go as he grunts in discomfort, and step away to look at him with wide, tear-filled eyes. With everything going on, I have not had the chance to go back and check on him—or maybe I was scared to be there if something bad happened to him, I am not sure.

Alec's updates have kept me afloat amidst the ocean of responsibility thrust onto me, but to see him—*God I missed seeing his smiling face.*

Jai's meek smile fades to a frown upon seeing my frazzled face and the dark circles under my gaunt eyes. Fear darts through me that he might have overheard my side of the conversation with Carnegie.

Emma Lee Joy

“You okay?” he asks before I can speak.

I swallow the torrent of things I want to say and shake my head, silently praying he heard nothing.

“No, I’m not,” I answer honestly.

I turn for the kitchen with the intention on grabbing another glass. “You want a drink?” I ask.

Jai shakes his head, sinking down onto the couch with a sigh. “Not a good idea. Doc has me on some fancy pain pills Vesper sent. She explicitly warned against booze.” I shrug and pull out a glass for myself. I fill it to the brim and gulp it down in two swallows.

I slam the glass down on the bar and refill it before making my way back to my chair.

“How much whiskey have you had?” Jai asks with a disdainful look at the glass in my hand.

I pause, looking at the fifth of whiskey on the counter with pursed lips. “That bottle might have been full last night,” I say, wincing at the nearly empty bottle.

Trying to divert attention away from the severity of my drinking I add, “Did you hear about the desertion?” as if it justifies my behavior.

Jai nods quietly, looking at me with concern on his usually stoic face. “What are you going to do now?”

I tuck my legs under me, and peer over the rim of the glass at Jai. “We are going to fight. Blackthorn don’t back down,” I say with determination. “Vesper sent guns, and I intend to use them to solve our Charon problem, without selling out to Vesper.”

“Do you think that is wise?” Jai asks quietly, falling into the advisor role he fulfilled for my father out of habit. He is not technically an advisor anymore, unless I formally offer him the position, but he cannot

Blood 4 Honor

help himself. It is all he knows, other than acting as my personal shrink over the years.

I would be an idiot to deny him to continue on in his position, but now is not really the time to talk about such things. Not when I have had this much to drink, anyway. It seems unprofessional.

I bite my bottom lip, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. “Carnegie has to die for what he has done. You cannot deny that.” Doubt clouds my expression and waters down my resolve. I know Jai can pick up on the slight uncertainty in my voice.

“Maybe not, but throwing ourselves into all out war will probably kill more of us than not.”

I grit my teeth, suddenly wishing he had not stopped by. “It’s either that or bow down to a strange power that I have no wish to serve. There are no strings attached to what Vesper has already sent. I intend to not have to ask for more that will carry a price. We have to finish this now.”

Jai chews on the inside of his cheek. “That may be so.”

I watch him quietly for a moment, but he makes no move to continue speaking. “That’s all you have to say? You aren’t going to argue with me?” I ask, astounded by his surface level acceptance despite his brief questioning.

“Why would I argue with you when I know you have already made up your mind?” he asks innocently.

I let out a genuine chuckle. “It’s what you do,” I say, but the small grin that appears does not reach my eyes.

“Is it?” he asks with a small laugh.

“If you want.”

Emma Lee Joy

Maybe now is the time for a job offer.

“Will you fill the same position for me as you did for my father?” I ask, almost shy about it.

Jai holds my gaze for a moment, trying to read me in his offhand way. He must find something he can agree with, because he nods his head. “I would be honored to advise you.” He pauses before looking up at me through his eyelashes. “Not that I expect you to listen.”

CHAPTER 12

Propped up on my elbows, I lay prone on a moth-eaten mattress, looking down the scope of my rifle at what is left of the incoming army of Charon.

The gun in my hands was another one of the many gifts sent on that fateful Vesper supply wagon, literally with my name on it, and I am smitten with the thing. After shooting arrows and muzzled loaded single shots my entire life, the power I now wield has

Blood 4 Honor

me buzzing with excitement—it unlocks a certain bloodlust within me that I cannot quite explain.

I am hoping the supply wagon really was Luther's way of trying to atone for what happened at the Market in some way, and not some scheme to get one over on us. I did not want to mention my misgivings to Jai, and now that I am finally getting to kill Charon indiscriminately, I'm not going to ask too many questions. There may be only one I truly seek to riddle with bullet holes, but I will take any that come my way. They are all fair game.

X marks the spot, I think wryly to myself, unable to suppress a small giggle at my own joke. It makes me giddy.

There will be peace when Carnegie has nothing left to play games with—when he lay lifeless at my feet. He cannot compel me through our mind connection that I know of, so I just have to stay away from him. Kill him from a distance.

I can do that, I think, looking down at the rifle like a mother gazing upon her first child.

“Incoming explosives! Over,” a voice crackles through the hand-held radio beside me. It is a small but useful gift from Vesper. I am not sure what we will do once the batteries die, but for now they are an invaluable tool.

Glancing in the direction of the voice on the other end of the radio, I can barely see Lieutenant Connor's silhouette hidden in the shadows of a covered roof patio; seconds later a deafening explosion rocks downtown of the decrepit city that is our current battleground.

The second floor windows of the crumbling brick building I have made my sniper's nest rattle violently. I am surprised the structure is still standing, barely holding on to its dignity with time as it is.

Positioned on the outer edge of a square grouping of antique buildings, I watch the cloud of smoke billow into the sky as the old bank, already crumbling from decay, finally meets its end in a violent explosion. Red brick and concrete fly in every direction.

Fortunately, I had the foresight to keep my fighters out of the old bank. I already knew if Charon made it this far, they would surely destroy the building. In fact, I was counting on it. If they didn't take it down, we would have eventually.

As the dust clears, the absence of the large building opens my range of sight up considerably, allowing me to see another mile down the dirt road beyond it.

With the high-powered scope, I can clearly see Charon coming around the bend, marching over the pitted road straight for us. I start strategically picking the outsiders off, and they have no idea from which direction the shots come from.

The weariness appearing on Charon faces is plain as day from here as their comrades' bodies drop around them like flies.

It did not take me long to get warmed up to this new weapon—it came naturally. Almost too easy, actually, but I can't complain. We only had about a week to prepare with our new weapons before Charon bodies were at our borders. Their firepower has emboldened them, but we have the high ground now. I can only hope that actually matters.

Blood 4 Honor

Our numbers are far from what they should be to do much in an extended war, but Charon does not know that. If we can make a show out of today, I am hoping we can at least put a dent in their moral, if not completely end this by putting a bullet between Carnegie's eyes. But I have yet to see any sign of the man yet.

Charon numbers are not what they used to be either, not after whatever happened to the group taken by Vesper from the Market. Even if neither side has brought our full fighting force to the table today, if my plan succeeds, they should soon be running scared. That does not mean the fight is any easier though. One slip up and we could lose everything.

I catch a glimpse of a cannon being wheeled ever so slowly down the rough road. I line up the crosshairs of my scope over the chest of the man holding the torch, and release the man's death sentence with a delicate pull of the trigger.

A half-second later, the chunk of lead hits him in the chest, sending him stumbling back before falling to the ground, dead.

The men around him hunker down behind the cannon, but not before I take out the guy going for the torch in the same fashion. I sit back in the shadows of my nest, relishing in watching them scramble.

"Fire in the hole!" sounds out from the right side of the buildings off the square. I catch sight of the missile a second before it hits its mark in the middle of the first group of Charon to make it within a hundred yards of the bank's remains.

Charon scatter, running for their lives as gunfire erupts, dropping the rest of their front line in the

street as bullets rain down from the building still standing across from the bank.

I turn my attention back to the cannon across the way, picking off another soldier who dares to run for the torch. The last three guys manning the cannon manage to get it into position for a shot at the building across from the demolished bank, but the torch lay on the ground mere feet away, useless. I can see the fear on their faces, all hesitant to make a move for it.

Reaching for the radio, I hold the button down before speaking. “Take out the cannon—over.”

“10-4—over,” a voice responds back, and I count five seconds before I watch another missile fly from behind the buildings on my right, this time hitting the cannon head on. It instantly kills the one soldier who did not see it coming.

The other two take off running for a cove of trees, and as they line up almost too good to be true, I take my shot. One, then the other, stops mid-step with the same bullet to the head.

“Nice one, or two,” I say with a quiet chuckle to myself, caught up in the thrill of the chaos of battle. That will be worth telling about later.

“WEST SIDE BREACHED! WEST SIDE—” The screeching through the radio abruptly cuts off.

My heart drops with the terror in the voice, and I turn my scope in time to see a small black disk shaped thing I have no name for appear under the awning with Lieutenant Connor. It catches her off guard, and she just stares at it for a second before something moves on the bottom of the flying object.

“What the—”

Reality dawns on me a second too late.

Blood 4 Honor

Through my scope, I watch her head snap back as the thing shoots her in the head.

“Shit—” I go silent as the thing spins around in my direction, as if it heard me.

I aim for the red light blinking from the center of it, and my bullet shatters it into bits.

This isn't good.

My hand hastily grabs the radio, depressing the talk button. “Connor is down! Get reinforcement to West side—over!” I order frantically into the speaker. I throw it down beside me, looking back into the scope to scan the area. My heart thuds violently against my chest, making my hands shake.

A swarm of Blackthorn exit the end of an alley to my right seconds later, heading for the west side on the left, unclear of how bad the breach is as of yet. I blindly grasp for the radio again, finding the button without taking my eye away from the scope. “West side, speak to me! Over,” I call.

No response.

“Dammit,” I mutter, nearly chucking the radio across the room.

I shake myself, trying to get rid of the lurking feeling of dread at the sight of that black disk.

What was that?

“Watch out for flying black disks. I don't know what they are, but they are deadly—over.” I warn through the radio.

I have only just spoken, when almost a dozen of the little flying things burst into the middle of the square from the west. My blood runs cold, and I only have enough time to take one out in a hail of debris. One by one the things dart into the buildings around

me where my men and women are posted up, waiting to ambush the Charon who make it to the square.

“No, no, no,” I say, fumbling for the radio again. My fingers wrap around the plastic box, my finger depressing the button. “Breech in the square!” I nearly scream through my rising panic.

Gunfire erupts around me, but cuts off abruptly. I wait for a disk to enter the building I am in through the open window, but I am overlooked while every other building is infiltrated.

Moments later, all of the disks come flying back out, and a shiver runs down my spine. My voice is weak as I speak. “Anybody in the square read me? Over.” But again, I get no response.

Taken out, just like that.

I do not have the luxury of letting myself feel the pain of the loss as I manage to take out another disk. The third *dodges* my bullet.

I take another shot that is dodged again, but the disk catches the edge of the one to its left, and they both crash into a wall, disintegrating on impact. The rest disappear around the corner to wreak havoc elsewhere.

“Watch out for the flying disks!” I try to warn anyone who can hear me.

In the short time I have been preoccupied with the new threat, Charon have advanced much further than is okay. My front defenses against them are no longer firing back and I have a horrible feeling they too have felt the onslaught of the flying disks.

We are not equipped to fight *this*.

“Chief!” Alec shouts as he runs into the square, dodging behind an old mailbox for cover. Bullets ping

Blood 4 Honor

off the metal as he shouts up at me. “My radio died. We are being overrun, ma’am!”

I find the woman shooting at Alec, and take her out.

“Withdraw!” I shout into the radio. “Go! I’m coming!” I shout down to Alec.

He hesitates, about to wait for me. I will not be the reason for his death.

“That’s an order!” I shout.

I take one last glimpse down my scope as soldiers make it to the bank rubble. Alec darts down the cracking sidewalk. I take one more shot, hitting the one guy who spots Alec in the shoulder, hopefully delaying him enough for Alec to get around the side of the long row of buildings.

“Light the other cannon!” rings out from the street where the Charon soldiers are starting to advance on the square, unhindered by the dead Blackthorn in the buildings around them.

I cannot find the other cannon they speak of.

Get out now! Carnegie’s voice sounds in my head.

This time I do not question it as I grasp tightly to my rifle and scramble off the old bed where I have been laying for hours in the shadows. I can ask myself why he would be helping me later, if I am still alive.

A large cannonball rips through the window, landing in the wall directly behind where I was laying. It throws glass, brick, and mortar straight for me. A stray piece of glass from the edge of the window catches me on the side of my right thigh, sending me stumbling into the hallway with a grunt of pain.

“Throwing Molotov!” I hear from directly below the hole in the wall.

A glass bottle comes hurling inside my nest with a flaming tongue. The glass vessel shatters on the hardwood floor, unleashing a fury as the fuel inside is ignited. Dust and smoke fills the air as the flammable contents of the room catch fire easily.

Through the adrenaline, a sickening sting starts at my right thigh, making me hiss. I grab for my leg reflexively, and feel the rip in my pants. I jerk my hand away as my fingers touch the edges of what feels like a fairly deep wound. I force myself not to look at it.

I have much bigger problems.

A whirring sound sends a bolt of panic through my chest as I picture one of those flying disks coming for me. The smoke starts whipping around me as the body of a large black mechanical bird-like contraption appears in the window from above the building.

Much worse than a *little* flying disk.

A man sits behind the glass window where he controls the thing encasing him, and a large headpiece covers his ears, making him look larger than life.

I stare wide-eyed and lift my rifle. I fire one shot that ricochets off the glass, leaving no damage behind. I continue to stare at him in shock for a moment from around the door frame, unable to move. I have never seen such a thing, but I am pretty sure it is called a helicopter from what I remember of the few history books I have read in my father's library.

It takes fuel to power one of those things, something no one has had in seventy-five years or more, so how is this possible?

Blood 4 Honor

I know what guns are of course, and those are two very large guns moving to point in my direction, mounted on the bottom side of the helicopter.

With a yelp, I throw myself out of the line of sight of the two guns as they start spinning. I trip over rotting floorboards, dropping my rifle. Within seconds, rapid gunfire fills the atmosphere. I reach out to grab my rifle, and a bullet shatters the scope. I jerk back with a cry, and hurry along the long hallway, unable to retrieve my newfound love and severely hindered by my injured leg.

The man guiding the guns cannot see me, but he knows the direction I went in. He does not hesitate to follow me, and I cannot move fast enough.

Closer and closer the holes forming in the drywall behind me become. I stagger along, unsteady on my injured leg, but I cannot stop. I will not go out like this.

The stairs are within reach.

I grab the railing and throw myself down the stairs as a bullet pierces through my shoulder. I tumble gracelessly down the stairs, and slam into the wall at the bottom where the stairs turn, knocking the wind out of me in a rush. Adrenaline numbs the pain, but it only amplifies the amount of warm blood running down my arm and leg with each rapid heartbeat.

Don't think about it.

The gunfire continues along the second floor, blowing out windows and throwing debris and dust around, making it even harder to breathe as I gasp for air. I groan, knowing I need to get out of this building. Charon move around out front and smoke begins to

billow out from upstairs as the fire spreads. The metal cage covering the front door and windows slows Charon down, but I know it will not keep them out forever if they want in. There is only one way out from here.

I roll over and slide down the last few remaining steps, landing with a huff as I hit the hard-tiled ground at the bottom. I stand on shaking legs, making myself hobble to the back exit while trying to hold my injured shoulder still.

The back door is stuck, forcing me to throw myself into it, once, then twice, bruising my previously uninjured shoulder. The impact to the old building from the explosion earlier must have upset the foundation because it opened without a fuss when I first got here.

The door finally flies open, sending me stumbling and falling to my hands and knees with a shock of pain from my injuries. Blood seeps down my arm and across my chest under my jacket where it appears, coating my gloved fingers in blood.

I force myself to my feet again as Alec appears in the mouth of the alley. “We have to go, ma’am!” he yells, quickly closing the distance between us.

“Yeah,” I say with a huff and a nod.

I let Alec pull me along as I fight through the pain in my leg with each step, but I am getting light headed.

I do not get far before I have to tell Alec to stop. “Wait, please.”

Alec turns, looking at me in confusion. “Are you okay?” he asks, eyes roving over my body with concern. His eyes go wide as they find the blood.

Blood 4 Honor

I am clammy, and a cold sweat is starting on my brow. I am losing a lot of blood. I cannot lie to him. “No—” My knees buckle and I collapse into him.

“No, don’t do that. Hold on,” Alec says, turning to try and pull me along as he gets me back on my feet. “I can fix you up when we get out of here.”

A single, eerily familiar gunshot rings out, and Alec gasps in shock. He halts suddenly, and I stumble mid-step. I turn to face him, and he clutches at the front of my jacket.

Alec’s eyes are wide, lips parted, as he looks down at me. Blood coats his teeth, running out of the corner of his mouth.

“No!” I gasp.

I reach around him, feeling his back, and find a single bullet hole straight through to his heart. Alec exhales as his eyes roll back, and he falls into me. I would not have the strength to hold him up on a good day, and we both collapse to the ground.

Alec falls to the side, and I stare at him dumbfounded. He stares back lifelessly with an all too familiar death gaze, and I turn my head, unable to meet his eyes.

“Goodbye,” I say weakly, closing his eyes without looking.

I look back at his face for a moment, shielded from his gaze by pale eyelids. He could almost be sleeping—if it were not for the blood trickling from the corners of his mouth.

Footsteps alert me to a small group of Charon headed straight for me from the alley Alec appeared out of. I stagger to my feet as they surround me. I pull my short sword from my belt, daring them to come

any closer—despite the guns pointed at me and the severe blood loss.

“It’s her!” a voice calls towards the back.

“Disarm her,” a familiar voice answers from the mouth of the alley—the owner of the bullet in Alec’s back.

“You can try,” I say to the men around me in defiance of the tingle of fear that Carnegie’s voice instills in me.

The soldiers look at each other once in decision. Three of them lower their guns and withdraw swords, challenging me.

“Why don’t we have a little fun?” I tease, trying to sound stronger than I feel. Pure adrenaline is all that is keeping me upright.

I need to feed it.

The first man attacks and I dodge his swing, hopping backwards on my good leg. A second man meets me face-to-face, and I plant my sword in his neck with a deft swing, knocking his sword away with my forearm.

The reinforced leather of my jacket deflects most of the damage, but the impact jars me. The blade bites skin where it manages to cut through. I cry out as my injured shoulder protests, but the pain does not fully register. I shove the man away from me roughly, and stumble backwards.

“*Stop!*” Carnegie shouts.

I fall to my knees, unable to stand any longer and utterly helpless against the quirk in his voice. The third person, a woman about my size, stands by with her sword pointed at me.

Blood 4 Honor

Sucking in a steadying breath, I look up into the face of the man trotting towards me with purpose. His heavily buckled boots fall heavy against the packed earth. The grip on my sword tightens. I just want to end this, but I do not have the strength left to raise the steel blade.

I drop my gaze from Carnegie's blue eyes to my injured leg, breathing deeply to calm myself. An almost two inch deep gash mars my thigh. It oozes blood freely, coating my leg and turning my leather pants black with the crimson fluid. I close my eyes as ringing starts in my ears.

That doesn't look good. Carnegie's voice is light and airy—almost joyful. I bear my teeth at him, eyes still closed.

When you get close enough, I'm going to plant the sword in your skull.

You can't, he says while stalking towards me. *You won't.*

Watch me, I mentally retort, trying to gather enough will-power to strike regardless of my current shortcomings.

"It's so good to see you," Carnegie greets me cordially for everyone to hear. He carefully closes the distance between us.

"I disagree," I say, weaker than I anticipated.

"Oh, not feeling too well, huh?" he asks with what I believe is feigned concern, accompanied with that infuriating sideways smirk of his. "Let me help."

Carnegie walks right up to me, and kneels down, pulling a roll of gauze from the inside of his jacket. He unfolds it once before pressing it against the gash in my leg as I look on with blurring vision.

I am so cold.

I shudder in pain at his touch and drop my sword. I unconsciously put my bloodstained hand over his where they stay like that for a moment. An electric current flows from his hand, leaving a tingling sensation in place of the worst of the throbbing in my leg. It is reminiscent of his hand on my cheek on the roof of the Market, but I am not sure what is happening.

Carnegie gently pulls his hand away, and I am left holding the gauze in place in confusion. I look up at him in wonder. The pain recedes along with the lightheaded feeling and ringing ears.

But not the weakness—or maybe it is not weakness. It is as though I have completely lost the will to fight. I at least had thoughts of retaliation before, but now there is nothing.

“Better?” he asks soothingly. Stars sparkle around him for a moment, and I have to blink them away, unable to answer.

Music.

That’s what the soft hum in my ear is. I don’t recognize it, but the melody seeps into me, even as it plays, barely audible. The two of us are probably the only two who can even hear it.

I focus on Carnegie, and my vision clears. My eyes drift down to an obsidian stone encased in a delicately carved iron enclosure. It hangs around his neck by a band of leather, where it rests just below his tanned collarbone, glowing faintly. The music softly emanates from it.

The thing begins to pulse with energy to the beat. A strange sensation pierces my abdomen, and I double

Blood 4 Honor

over with a surprised gasp as my hand goes to my belly.

Not knowing what is happening to me, I shakily breathe in and out. The sensation sends a current through my body, and I tremble involuntarily. It is nothing like the anxiety attacks I have become accustomed to in the wee hours of the morning, but not wholly unlike them either.

“Incredible,” he mutters, looking down at the stone around his neck himself. “This is good,” he says, placing a hand over the bullet wound in my shoulder.

“Mmm,” I groan, unable to control myself. I lean into his hand as an ethereal sensation pierces my chest. The tingling starts again and then the pain fades, just like before.

Carnegie takes his hand away, and I lean forward, hands on my knees while I try to get a grip on my reality.

My wounds no longer hurt, but nothing seems real. I cannot comprehend what is going on, but I have a curious feeling that necklace has something to do with it—or at the very least the music does.

What happened to the music box?

New toy, Carnegie replies silently. I can hear the smile in his voice.

I continue to breathe in and out slowly, trying to gather myself as I watch the stars shimmering behind my eyelids. A hand appears under my chin, lifting my face. I slowly open my eyes to look at the man I hate, but in this moment I am entranced in a sea of blue as our eyes meet.

Staring intently at me, he whispers, “Despierta, mi amor,” in an elegant accent.

Emma Lee Joy

I do not understand the language he speaks, but it does not matter.

I groan as a pulse of energy radiates from my belly once again, stronger this time. It sends me forward into Carnegie's arms, where he holds me still as I start to seize up, my body racked by uncontrollable spasms. I clench my teeth, trying to hold on to myself, but inky blackness takes over my vision.

My body goes limp in my enemy's arms.