

# Shatterheart

Lia Habel

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*For Iason, Desmond, Kandy the Keymaker, Proffy,  
Lightfoot, and Madame.  
And dear S.*



*“To shatter upon death, that is the fate of the human soul—and what a fate! How fine! To know that when we pass from existence, the mold has been well and truly broken [...]. That the Gods have deigned to offer this balm to our greedy human hearts is evidence of Their goodness and wisdom. That each of us, amongst all our kind and all of time itself, is utterly unique—this idea confers far more comfort than the notion that we might one day return to Aevum, or find life eternal in some Aetheric paradise. We can take neither possessions, nor ranks, nor titles with us; but with our final breaths, we can meet the Void content in the knowledge that we have removed ourselves from this life.*

*The Gods know us well. We are selfish creatures.”*

—Sr. Amon Weith, High Priest of Kelandonia

# 1 Maker's Mark

Wild and unwound, her hair snarled with rhinestones and her satin ball gown tangled about her legs, the deactivated shatterbrain transcended her designation as a mere object.

Alisabeth was a vision. As always.

And for that reason, Etruscan Maldron couldn't bring himself to look at her. He didn't dare. After nine years, the realization that their reunion was now inevitable was enough to make his gut lurch and his eyes burn. The sight of her filled him with too many conflicting emotions. For the first time in his life, he *felt* like the madman his contemporaries thought him to be.

He wanted to pull Alisabeth's frozen, faultless form into his arms and never let her go. He wanted to dash his own brains out against the wall. He wanted to sing. He wanted to weep.

More than anything, he wanted to wake her up.

“Are ye sure ye can ‘andle the rest of the work yerself, Lord ‘Argrave?”

The question slashed through Etruscan’s frenzied thoughts like an ice hook, dragging him back to reality. The aitch-averse accent belonged to Jeth, the muscular young man he’d hired to bear his prize home.

Jeth wasn’t entitled to an answer. But he *was* entitled to his fee.

Etruscan took a few moments to compose himself. He knew his plans depended on keeping his wits about him. The time would come—soon, and finally—when societal scorn would cease to have meaning for him. When loneliness would be rendered a toothless threat.

But until then, he must remain in perfect control of his heart. Etruscan had survived nine years without her. He could carry on, stony-faced and inscrutable, for five more minutes.

“I’ll be fine. You’ve still got the motorcarriage to unload.” The cool reserve he heard in his own voice gave him courage. Hoping to compound its effect, Etruscan appraised the edges of the room. He frowned at the fire when it popped, as if the hungry flames deserved more attention than the flawless man-made woman lying unconscious and prone on his velvet chaise.

He behaved as if his heart was not screaming.

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that. Ye sure there’s nothin’ else I can do?”

Shaking his head, “Lord Hargrave” turned aside. Jeth was watching him with an expression that hinted at fear. For this, Etruscan was grateful. His contacts had informed him that Jeth was

gutter-born, but clever—that he knew both the value of work and the value of silence.

Still, the gutter had once taught Etruscan that fear was the best motivator. And although he aspired to the magnanimity of his mentor, Count Serrotti, he was also far more practical.

“You’ve done well,” he told the sandy-haired lad, as he reached into the interior pocket of his woolen greatcoat and withdrew a stack of ten-*met* notes. “Keep quiet, and there may be work in the future. You understand?”

Jeth’s eyes widened. By the light of the fire, Etruscan could just make out the vertical pupils bisecting them. Between his feline eyes, his pointed ears, and the sheer amount of muscle rippling underneath his tawny skin, it was clear that Jeth’s heritage wasn’t entirely human. “Yes, m’lord.”

“Good. When you’re done, drive the motorcarriage back to Colshente. Leave it by the side of the King’s Road east of town. Someone will be along to collect it.”

As he folded the money between his fingers, Jeth cleared his throat. “Before I go... do ye ‘ave a story ye’d like told, if I’m pressed? I know keepin’ mum’s the first line of defense, but sometimes it’s best to ‘ave yer own story ready. Especially where thievin’ is concerned.”

His contacts had spoken true. Jeth was a shade better than the trash Etruscan typically hired for throwaway tasks—and he’d hired plenty of trash over the last nine years. Each time with hatred roiling in his heart. Etruscan hated the sour stench most thugs carried with them, and the way it reminded him of how his mother had always smelled after a night of wenching at the Hart and

Arrow. He hated their stupidity and rapaciousness, fueled by hunger and conveyed in the very mealy, staggering street dialect he'd worked so hard to shed.

Aside from his accent, Jeth possessed none of these faults. Which meant he had potential.

"You've stolen nothing." Etruscan tightened his right hand around the handle of his ironwood cane. Annoyance wasn't the only emotion that crept into his voice—his ruined right leg was worse than usual tonight. He fought against gravity, seeking to relieve the pressure. "I hired you to carry something heavy. Now go."

Jeth glanced toward the heavy oak doors of Greyhaven Hall. For an infuriatingly long second, he hesitated. "So the lady whose 'ouse ye sent me to... she won't come after any of us, ye reckon?"

"No." Was the young man burdened with anxiety? Etruscan's newfound confidence flagged. "She was also in my employ. Tonight has been... a long time coming."

These words coaxed a whooshing breath and a thin smile from the unlikely young goon. With a nod, Jeth tucked the money into his dirty cloak and headed across the flagstone floor. The doors stood perhaps twenty feet away, and Etruscan watched as Jeth shoved one of them open with his shoulder, fighting against the bitter wind that raged outside. Snowflakes hurtled through the opening, abandoning the frigid twilight for the stones of the old manor house. Jeth's cloak rippled out of sight, and the door closed with a thud.

The instant he was alone, Etruscan's cane clattered from his hand. He fell to his knees, uttering a strangled laugh even as pain

lanced through his right hip. The candles ringing the great hall shivered.

“Nine *years*,” he ground out. In the cavernous room, his voice sounded thin and flinty. Aside from the red velvet chaise, the only furniture consisted of a matching sofa, a thick rug, and a low mahogany table. The few windows were tall, grimy, and overrun on the outside with veins of shriveled ivy. From the floor to the ceiling, the room itself was crafted of dark, unadorned stone; the effect was subterranean. “Nine years...”

Two words. More meaning than Etruscan cared to contemplate. All of it leading up to this.

This reunion. This reckoning.

Running a hand over his face, Etruscan made a concentrated effort to still his tongue and calm his racing heart. In an attempt to claim some mastery over his situation, he at last focused his attention on Alisabeth’s senseless body.

Though she weighed almost four hundred pounds, Jeth had been gentle with her. Perhaps that’s why he was inclined to think kindly of the lad. Alisabeth had been positioned on her stomach, with her bound wrists nestled beneath the soft curve of her cheek. Her hair—each strand the color of honey wine—had been loosened by her struggles, and now formed a gauzy curtain about her seamless, heart-shaped face. Her eyes were closed, her painted lips parted. She looked as though she were asleep.

In a way, she was sleeping. A sleep like death.

Called into relief by her unnatural stillness, the windup key located at the small of her back jutted upward like a strange monument. The way Alisabeth was arranged, combined with the

artistry of her design, rendered her key the only visible sign of her inhumanity. Her face didn't give her away. Nothing there had changed—nothing *could* change. Alisabeth still appeared to be a young woman in her twenties, with iron cheekbones and a porcelain complexion. The nobility of her nose and brow belied the girlish flush painted upon her cheeks; the powdery softness of her artificial skin suggested both welcoming warmth and cold perfection.

For a moment, Etruscan forgot to hate Alisabeth's creator. He could say many things about his former friend, but he could never deny that Mikhail Canwick had possessed an astonishing gift. Like many of the greatest Engineers—Sorcerers, some still called them—he'd had a talent for summoning soul fragments from the Aetheric Void. A shattered human soul could never be reassembled, and its pieces retained no consciousness or memories. But soul fragments often *did* contain echoes of their former owners' personalities. A hint of creativity, a bit of ambition....

Over the last twenty years it had become common practice for Engineers to combine human soul fragments with modern technology, to simple ends. When installed inside a calculating unit, or a mechanical servant, a shard of patience or efficiency or mathematical prowess often did much to improve the final product. In lieu of quartz or ruby, the jewel bearings of modern automatons were studded with the glittering refuse of lives long past. Activated by the fire of electricity, these shards interfaced with cold, hard programming in a way that defied explanation.

The use of soul fragments was more art than science. Yet, while some citizens still objected to the practice on moral grounds, it had become the done thing. Hardly groundbreaking.

And in the Kingdom of Sidera—Void, anywhere on planet Aevum—there had never been an Engineer like Mikhail Canwick, Duke of Claremont. Other Engineers were content to create shatterbrains that could teach simple lessons to children, or fulfill orders inside shops, or calculate the weather. Their ambitions seldom outpaced their abilities.

Mikhail had knit the soul fragments he'd summoned into something like a *person*. A crank-generator creation with a patchwork personality and enough sophisticated, albeit artificial reasoning to allow it to hold detailed conversations and appreciate complicated jests. A woman-shaped machine that, although it had no soul, could still play at having preferences and approximate an array of human emotions. Joy. Sorrow.

Love.

Alisabeth was *close enough* to a person, in the view of her creator's equally soulless friend.

Close enough to place on a pedestal.

Their first meeting was still etched into Etruscan's heart, the one memory that time and circumstance and sheer, unbridled rage had been unable to corrode. Alisabeth, sheltered by the garden bower. A flower amongst flowers. The gentleness in her eyes; the immediacy of her trust. The way her voice had pitched up and down as she spoke, a song and then a whisper and then a shy music box stutter hidden behind soft, surprisingly active lips. How she had seemed at once warm *and* cool, both to the eyes and to the

touch, and how Etruscan had been convinced of that fact despite never once laying a hand on her. He had been too frightened to touch her.

Even now, he was frightened to touch her.

Etruscan had long wondered what he would feel when he saw Alisabeth again. He hadn't expected to feel fear. And yet, he reasoned that such a reaction was probably wise. Mikhail had had the better part of a decade to fill his creation's heart with lies. To turn Alisabeth against him.

Against the very man she was built to betroth.

It was that thought that drove Etruscan up from the hard, cold floor. Compelled him to abandon his cane against the table and limp behind the sofa, where a wooden crate awaited his searching hands. To remove from it the heavy iron key he'd had specially designed for Alisabeth's "homecoming."

With his heart in his throat, Etruscan returned to Alisabeth's side and sat on the edge of the chaise. For a few moments, he simply looked at her. She was so pale. So slender and striking. In the darkness, her face seemed to glow; the place where her neck met her jawline, accented by a ruffle of sheer black voile, promised tenderness and warmth enough to make his fingers itch.

For the first time, he touched her.

He did not touch her skin. He could not bring himself to do so. Etruscan knew that it was supposed to be pliable, soft, despite its smooth appearance—Mikhail had called the material "a proprietary ceramic polymer." It was this quality that resulted in her superb facial design, free from mars and joints. In the unbroken appearance of her hands.

But even Etruscan's curiosity could not override his sense of propriety. Alisabeth was unconscious. He would not take advantage.

Instead, he ran his palm along the edge of the golden key she wore. It was about ten inches long, its bow shaped like a pair of roses in full bloom. The petals sparkled with inlaid gemstones, watery pink sapphires and wine-colored garnets. Ribbons cast in silver, polished to a liquid sheen, coiled around and between the flowers. Their ends were tipped with diamonds. Etruscan knew the gems were probably real.

Such a beautiful key.

Such a shame to have to destroy it.

Etruscan told himself that there would be new keys. More extravagant keys. Mikhail had liked to spoil Alisabeth, and Etruscan had every intention of continuing the tradition. His beloved wife would wear emeralds and opals, ermines and sables, and society be damned. He would tear her clothing from her body before burying her in gowns; ravish her lips just so he could tuck jewels into her pockets; shower her with frivolous, fancy things, whatever it took to make her smile at him.

Make her smile....

Suddenly conscious of the great power contained within her key, Etruscan withdrew his hand and turned his attention to her gown. He knew little of ladies' fashions, but it seemed to him like the bodice was composed of two parts. The bottom was crafted of the same dusky rose satin that made up her full skirt, and designed to scoop low in the back. Above it, black voile studded with

clusters of jet crystals and silver seed beads ensured her modesty, forming a high neck and long sleeves.

Rather than perplex Etruscan, the sight coaxed a rare smile out of him. Neck to foot—such was Alisabeth's custom. She had always been so fastidious about her clothing. *Prudish*.

He would do his best to put an end to that.

Her dress fastened up the back with a row of tiny jet buttons. In addition to the ordinary opening built into the bodice, there was a round area cut out, about the size of a silver *piece*, for the shank of Alisabeth's key. It was this that Etruscan needed to access.

Or rather, the area directly underneath it.

He'd known he would dislike this part. The idea of disrobing Alisabeth while she slept, unable to escape or protest, filled Etruscan with shame. He reminded himself that he only needed to bare her lower back.

As he began to fumble with her buttons, he pretended that idea didn't excite him.

And yet, the Gods saw fit to humble Their wayward, perverted son. When the last button fell open Etruscan stared downward, stymied.

Underneath her gown, Alisabeth wore a corset. A simple one, unboned and made of white coutil. There was no fake flesh for him to ogle—instead, only a smooth expanse of cotton.

Embarrassed as he was, Etruscan had to laugh. Alisabeth's body was crafted of ceramic and steel. It couldn't possibly be reshaped. What need did she have of such clothing?

Perhaps one day, he could ask her.

After a moment's inspection, Etruscan realized that there would be no need to unlace her corset. Like her gown, it featured a hole cut through the center of the ribbon lacing. This hole was slightly larger than the one constructed into her bodice, as it had been designed to accommodate the silvery keyhole plate that erupted through the "flesh" of her back.

Etruscan's heart nearly stopped. Because he knew what he would find there.

He knew, and yet he had not prepared himself to see it.

Forgetting everything else, Etruscan traced the whorl of words engraved upon Alisabeth's keyhole plate. As he did, he read them aloud—though he didn't have to. He'd repeated the words so often that he knew them better than his own name. They were his mantra, his prayer.

*"Artificial*

*"Life-Form Equipped with*

*"Intelligence,*

*"Self-Awareness and*

*"Affection—*

*"Bridal*

*"Edition,*

*"To*

*"Hargrave.*

"Lord Mikhail Canwick. 1862."

Ten years ago. Nine years of questions. A year of unresolved anger and meticulous planning.

A lifetime together.

Setting his mouth into a hard line, Etruscan shrugged off his cranberry red greatcoat. The roaring fire had done little to combat the winter air bleeding through the stones of Greyhaven, but he paid the cold no mind. Before tossing his coat aside, he removed two more objects from its interior pockets.

A hammer and a wrench.

He *would* dislike this part. But he would go through with it. For the simple reason that the magnificent creation before him, with her promising lips and her hair full of rhinestone stars—she was rightfully his.

And now, she was finally within his control.

## 2 A Sacred Pain

It was impossible for Alisabeth Canwick to articulate the horror of waking up.

Oh, she could *describe* it. She never lacked for words. Her brain was designed to apply words to everything—objects, abstract concepts, hypothetical emotional states. To name a thing was to possess it. To study it, reduce it to its most basic elements, and put it back together. Slot it into the equation that was her life.

She could describe waking up just fine.

She simply refused to say the words aloud.

Alisabeth had told the Duke, once, what it was like to be wound down. To wind down was to shrink. To fade. To scabble against the walls of her own unyielding shell for another second of consciousness, greedy for one last taste of her own fear. To wind down was to understand the concept of mercy by the turning over

of each gear tooth, only to collapse without ever realizing that mercy had been torn away.

It was inevitability. It was helplessness.

Her creator could relate to this hellish experience. Unlike her, the Duke was mortal. He would know death. He could imagine what it might be like.

But so far as Alisabeth understood, no human remembered the terror of his or her own birth.

To awaken was to explode in stages. To claw her way toward reason and sensation without understanding either, only to plummet back into the abyss of her own nothingness and begin the climb again. With each turn of Alisabeth's key, electricity would crackle through her belly and cloud her mind with dread; with each pause of the winder, her fear would crest and die. But fear was better than death, and so she rode the surges, desperate to spur them onward. Desperate to escape the Void.

To awaken was to fight as an animal fights, for life beyond the concept of life. Without a voice. Without power.

With no way to scream.

When her burgeoning existence reached the point of conscious thought, the thoughts did not bring relief. Understanding only compounded Alisabeth's fear, and within the cage of her own mind she would thrash like a drowning dolphin. Her body was a prison, a shell she could neither escape nor animate. The more she thought, the more she felt, the more there was Too Much to think and feel.

And nowhere for it to go.

But worst of all was the sensation of her soul sparking into being, constructing itself from the matrix of jewels embedded in her narrow chest. With the activation of her soul came a burning that had no name. It was nothing like the pain she felt when she dared to touch her fingertips to a flame—the one acute physical sensation of which her body was capable.

It was a burning that seemed like it would end her. End the *world*.

If she ever spoke of it, it would.

In those moments, Alisabeth felt too small. She could not expand her torso by breathing, as humans did; she could not tear at her own flesh, as a bear caught in a trap might. She had no option save to wait, and the waiting was a horrible, lurching thing that wanted to rip her apart.

And still humankind expected her to submit to shutdowns with a smile.

Her creator had learned not to. Duke Claremont had quickly come to understand that something harrowing happened to Alisabeth each time he let her wind down for repairs. And so, he had asked her about it.

Her first instinct had been to tell him everything. To unburden herself. But after explaining to him what it was like to wind down, Alisabeth had realized that she didn't *want* him to know how much his gift hurt her.

She didn't want him to think she was ungrateful for her life.

So many times, the Duke had told her things she must keep secret. That day, she'd realized she could keep secrets of her own. Just by smiling. Just by looking away.

*Look.*

Alisabeth opened her eyes.

The sight that greeted her was not her creator's face. Instead, Alisabeth found herself surrounded by stones. Thousands of stones, each one the color of an undertaker's suit. As she catalogued their placement, her sensory aggregator began to construct her new reality. A floor. Walls. A ceiling, far too high. Dark, arched windows, with snow dancing outside.

Understanding came, swift and cold. She was in a room, one entirely unlike the room in which she'd collapsed. No longer was she in Lady Patmoss's well-appointed townhouse in Olympia. She was in some sort of castle, perhaps. Or a keep.

With this thought, she attempted to rise from her forward-lounging position—only to find that she could not.

Dismayed, Alisabeth sat upright and dipped her chin to either side. Elaborate iron bands still encompassed her wrists—no longer joining them together, but holding them apart. She was shackled to a backless red velvet *chaise longue*. Each hinged iron band was connected to the chaise via a silvery carabiner clip. The clips were nestled between the cushions, nearly hidden. The way her arms were arranged, she could not undo them herself.

Still existentially woozy, still reeling, Alisabeth nevertheless tested her bonds. The chaise rocked, but her shackles did not give. Elf-forged iron. It could be nothing else. She might be small, but her enviable waist and fairy wrists concealed a dense configuration of unyielding metal parts. She could snap human-forged iron like dry wood. The chaise must be crafted of elf-iron, as well.

She was not in a castle. She was in a *dungeon*.

Alisabeth made a sound like a gasping breath. It was an automatic affectation, one intended to convey distress and secure human assistance. The moment the noise died, regret played havoc with Alisabeth's innards, causing them to whirl and pinch. If she was in a prison, then someone had *imprisoned* her. Someone whose assistance she did not want.

Could it be the same person who crafted the piano?

The piano. Such a beautiful piece of furniture. Such a devious contraption. Never had she played an instrument so wonderful, or one that produced a sound so rich. In playing it she had found a meaning that went beyond pleasing her hosts, or impressing yet another handful of human onlookers with her musical ability and her uncanny appearance. Beyond justifying her existence, and thereby securing a few more weeks of safety.

While playing it, Alisabeth had felt that she was doing well by her creator. That if his soul still existed somewhere, it might look upon her and smile.

*See?* She might've told him. *I'm still here. I'm making beautiful things.*

*Just like you did.*

But then the fallboard had clattered open, pinning her hands atop the keys midway through Igor Kaverina's *Rosedew Sonata*. Two connected bands of elf-iron had erupted from within the bowels of the piano, and closed around her wrists with a noise like a gunshot. The small audience had fled the drawing room, and the doors had been sealed. Hours later Alisabeth had dropped into her skirts with a sob, unable to reach her own key, unable to prolong her own life...

The memory caused anger to flare within her, hot and bright. Within half a second her Otherbrain—the thing her creator had often called her “base programming”—carried on without her. Alisabeth was only vaguely aware of the background processes that booted up. The Duke had not designed her to be fully conscious of the millions of tiny commands and calculations and movements that propelled her magic-and-metal shell. A few times, he had joked that it wasn’t proper for a lady to understand how she worked.

The lenses housed inside Alisabeth’s eyeballs clicked in and out of alignment, arranging themselves in endless configurations until her vision was crystal sharp. Her audio receptors hummed to life, permitting her to hear the pop of a nearby fire. Her sensory receptors began to vibrate with energy, though she felt nothing but pressure—the heavy pressure of her legs against the chaise, and the subtle pressure exerted on her wrists by the elf-iron bands. She did not control these processes, but she was grateful for them. She felt more alert, more alive.

Thus fortified, Alisabeth searched the room anew. Mentally cataloged the wide, roaring fireplace and the rest of the furniture. The floor candelabras, full of candles with knife-like flames.

And the man.

He sat on an ornate rosewood sofa with crimson cushions, just outside her peripheral vision. Alisabeth had to turn her head to look at him, which was likely what he wanted. When her eyes met his, he shifted forward. His knees were spread apart, and a dark ironwood cane capped with an eagle’s head sat within reach of his right hand.

For the second time in her life, Alisabeth knew what it was to be speechless. Two seconds dragged by. Three. A name fizzled to the tip of her tongue; she imprisoned it behind her shining ceramic teeth.

She knew that if she tried to speak, she would only scream.

If he sensed this, the man did not show it. He continued to watch her, his expression one of anxious curiosity. His eyes were a deep bluish gray, so dark that to call them “blue” seemed a ridiculous formality—even if it was technically correct. Like a blue heeler, or a statue made of blue granite.

How many times had those dark, piercing eyes looked at her the way they were looking at her now? With such avarice?

With such awe?

Alisabeth’s terror gave way to disgust. If her skin could crawl, it would’ve been off her body and halfway to the door by the time the man took his next breath.

“Miss Canwick,” he said. “I trust you are no worse for wear?”

The words echoed through the room like a funerary bell. His voice. It was deep and reverberant, as always, and yet there was something new in it. Something harsh.

Something that deepened her fear.

Alisabeth chose not to respond. Instead, she allowed her eyes to rake over her captor’s face. The enormous room seemed to swallow light, even the glow of the candles set amongst the cut crystal decanters on the low table between them. The man’s face was a marl of firelight and shadow, a mask that revealed as much as it hid. But that didn’t matter.

From what she could see, she knew that it was fundamentally changed.

Etruscan Maldron had been a handsome young man the last time she'd seen him. Not as handsome as her creator, but still not bad to look at. His features had been smooth, but masculine; his skin fair, but flushed with life. His burnished brown hair had stood in contrast to her own. The cleft in his chin, the dark hairs on the backs of his hands, the way one little lock of hair always liked to fall right in front of his forehead, no matter how hard he tried to slick it back—all of these details had appealed to her. Once.

Now, the only physical traits she recognized were his eyes and his hair. Time had been cruel to him. In the shadows that flickered around his eyes and mouth she could make out a smattering of creases. His strong jaw was obscured by a beard and mustache; together they did more to age him than the traces of wind and weather, anger and age she saw elsewhere on his face. His skin was haggard. He looked unwell.

Alisabeth felt the shock more deeply than a human woman might. Every time she looked into a mirror, she saw the same face. She never aged, she never altered.

How old was he now? Only thirty-three?

Alisabeth pressed her lips together, overtaken by the idea that, were he alive, her creator would now be thirty-two years old.

The man noticed this. His eyes softened. He opened his mouth, as if to repeat his question—but then he thought better of it. He reached toward the table, and picked up a glass. He'd already poured himself a tippie of whisky.

The silence began to weigh on Alisabeth. A few moments later, despite the danger thrumming through her wires, she broke it. “Mr. Maldron.”

Etruscan’s shoulders lowered. With relief, she supposed. “You used to call me Lord Hargrave.”

“That was before I knew about your lies.”

Etruscan nodded, as if he’d expected to hear that. “I’m sure you could number them.”

“Would it please you if I did so?” Alisabeth’s tone sharpened. “Is that your first command?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Etruscan tapped one of his fingers against his glass. “We’ve already had melodrama aplenty tonight. I’d rather save our first fight for another day.”

Shutting her mouth, Alisabeth dropped her chin against her chest. After a second’s meditation, she murmured, “Melodrama. That’s what you call this.”

“What would you call it?”

“Evil.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but that’s Mikhail talking.”

Alisabeth lifted her head and narrowed her eyes. “You’re not fit to speak his name.”

“I can do anything I like.” Etruscan downed a sip of whisky. “After all, I’m an earl. Or at least rich enough to look like one.”

Alisabeth uttered a soft, humorless laugh. Nothing about her current situation was funny. “I suppose I can’t blame you. If I could get away with telling people I was human, I would.”

Etruscan didn’t take the bait. After a moment of reflection, he said, “Gods, what did he do to your voice? It’s...” He took another

swig of whisky. Considered his words. “Melodious. Ten times more beautiful than I remember.”

“His Grace did nothing.” Alisabeth found herself distracted by a lock of her own blonde hair, hanging just close enough to her eye to catch on her eyelashes each time she blinked. The fact that she couldn’t brush it away reminded her of her continued bondage. “I have more practice speaking, now. I’ve learned to master the music.”

“Well, master it you have.” Etruscan sat back, wincing through the pain. Alisabeth knew that he was always in pain. “*Melodious*. Gods. I apologize if that seems overweening. I’ve never been able to give you a compliment without sounding like a lovesick puppy.”

Alisabeth did not agree with him. She did not smile. “How did you find me?”

“I didn’t. You came to me.”

“Some sort of ruse, clearly.”

“Clearly.”

“Was Lady Patmoss in on it?”

“Lady Patmoss doesn’t exist.”

Suspicious confirmed, Alisabeth allowed her voice to rise a touch. “Just like the Earl of Hargrave?”

Etruscan snorted. “And the clockwork Duchess of Claremont? She exists?”

Alisabeth’s gears twanged with indignation. “That title is rightfully mine. Mikhail Canwick considered me his daughter. I inherited everything.”

“Everything except the title. His sister won out there. Objects can’t be entitled. I watched the case in the papers.”

Seething, Alisabeth fell silent.

This time, the quiet got to Etruscan first. After a few more half-hearted sips, he placed his glass on the table and stretched his arms across the back of the sofa. “Do you really want to know how I nabbed you?”

“Earls don’t say ‘nabbed.’ Careful, or your street urchin heritage will out.”

That blow landed. Etruscan’s nostrils flared, and his fingers tightened on the back of the sofa. Rather than retort, he tipped his head back and cast his eyes upon the fireplace in an effort to disguise his ire. The sight filled Alisabeth with satisfaction.

After a minute or so, though, she gave in. “Tell me.”

“I started to think like you do, is all.” Etruscan tore his attention away from the flames, and lowered his arms so he could busy himself with his rolled-up sleeves. He wore dark trousers, a white wing-tip shirt, and a green waistcoat. If he had a jacket or a cravat, they were nowhere to be seen. “I started to look for patterns.”

“After you got tired of chasing us all over the globe?”

“I never *chased* you.” Etruscan’s eyes darkened. “Don’t make me sound like a villain from a children’s puppet show.”

“You showed up where we had been plenty of times. A day late and a met short.”

“And each time I did, I learned something.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the fact that you never turn down a social invitation from a rich old lady.”

It was true—but Alisabeth was disturbed to realize that her actions had been so transparent. She looked at Etruscan in shock.

“Ball, dinner, recital... doesn’t seem to matter. Though you especially love recitals. If someone with white hair asks you to come and play for her friends, charming and incredibly complex little music box that you are—you’ll do it.” Etruscan shook out his right sleeve, and concentrated on reconnecting the plain silver cufflink located at its wrist. He didn’t sound proud of his cunning—if anything, he sounded annoyed to have to explain it. “So, I invented a rich old lady. Rented a house in Olympia. Hired an Engineer to make the piano and reinforce the drawing room doors.”

Well. At least his plan made a terrifying kind of sense. “And the elf-forged iron?”

“I told you.” Etruscan began to unroll his left sleeve. “I’m disgustingly wealthy.”

Closing her eyes, Alisabeth did her best to marshal her wits.

“But you should know that.” She opened her eyes and found Etruscan staring at her, sleeve forgotten. “Not a screw went into you that I didn’t pay for.”

And so they came to the crux of the matter. “That doesn’t make me yours.”

“In the eyes of the law, it does. Mikhail knew that. That’s why he absconded with you.”

In the space of five seconds, Alisabeth concocted a plan. Modeled a few scenarios in her head, adjusted course, and went in for the kill. “He refused to give me to you because he learned what kind of man you really are.”

When she heard the contempt in her own voice, Alisabeth was almost impressed. Though the game was only just revving up, she couldn't help but congratulate herself. Surely this would work. Because the way Etruscan had stared at the fire earlier, with an intensity that bordered on plain fury—it'd been a show of self-control that only served to remind her just how little of it he had.

How many times had Alisabeth seen him lash out? Shatter *objets d'art* with his cane, or scream at her creator? Alisabeth knew that something dark and passionate governed Etruscan's heart, something that his stiff manners and practiced accent could never eliminate. Something so powerful that it couldn't help but override his personality from time to time.

Etruscan had a temper. And she was prepared to use it against him.

In the wake of her words Etruscan tensed, his fingers clenching around the fabric of his left sleeve. The firelight seemed to linger upon his cheeks, and Alisabeth realized that he was turning red. Her hopes soared. Let his anger build. Let this come to blows. All she needed was for him to tip the chaise over and break something, something that she might coax into her grasp. A weapon, or a tool. She'd take whatever she could get.

At the moment, she could think of no other way out.

But to her infinite surprise, Etruscan soon cleared his throat and resumed adjusting his cuff. His motions were stiff and overly calculated, his voice husky with swallowed rage. "Gods. I'd forgotten just how magnificent you are when you're in full flush."

Disturbed, Alisabeth retreated into her own mind. Her Otherbrain raced on ahead of her, trying to make sense out of

nonsense. It wasn't like Etruscan to control his temper. For so long, he had been her own personal boogeyman. A specter of anger and ash. The way he'd acted after her creator had spurned him haunted her to this day.

Alisabeth knew who the man was. It shocked her that she had so misjudged *what* he was. Perhaps time had changed more than his face.

Etruscan flicked his cufflink closed. "Now. Let's discuss how this is going to work."

When Alisabeth's behavioral predictions proved incorrect, her deep programming instructed her to seek out additional data. So, biting her tongue, she decided to listen. Observe.

Scrounge enough information together to form a new plan.

Grabbing his cane, Etruscan pushed himself to his feet. He was a hair shorter than the Duke, but more broadly built. When he stood at his full, albeit stooped height, Alisabeth felt the pressure of her bonds anew. "First of all—your chains."

She curled her fingertips back against them and waited.

"I don't want you in chains." Leaning on his cane for support, Etruscan hobbled closer to the table. "I'll remove them the second you promise not to attack me."

Alisabeth told the truth. "Remove them, and the second it becomes feasible I'm going to beat you senseless."

"Then let's discuss the reason you better not." And with that, he kicked something out from behind the table. It clattered into the light, just close enough for Alisabeth to make out what it was.

Her key.

When she recognized the mangled, broken pile of metal and gems in front of her as her key, Alisabeth screamed. The sound was far from melodious. It was a cry of betrayal, of total and abject fear.

Without her key, she was doomed to run out of power. To wind down again. And with winding down came the shrinking, and the fear that she would never again know the horror of waking up.

This understanding pushed Alisabeth dangerously close to system overload. Fear mingled with hopelessness and rage; her imagination overruled her sensory input. In her mind, she railed against the understanding that she could do nothing to work out her own salvation. That when it came to matters of life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, she possessed immortality—but no control over it.

“I need my key!” she cried. Even in her terror, she hated how small and weak she sounded.

“You have a *new* key.”

Whatever Etruscan said, she didn’t hear. Hurling her body forward, Alisabeth bucked against her bonds. “Hargrave, please! It’s the same as food or water to you!”

“Miss Canwick...” A note of panic entered Etruscan’s voice. “Calm yourself. Listen to me.”

She twisted her torso to the side. Sobbed when it did no good. “It’s the same as someone wrenching out your still-beating *heart!*”

“*Alisabeth*. Listen to me!” Etruscan was suddenly at her side, so close—and so changed. His voice was gentle, almost repentant. “Look at me. I’ve already installed your new key. That’s the *point.*”

“What...” His words finally registered. Wrenching her body around, she sought to glance over her shoulder. In the darkness, she couldn’t see anything. “What do you mean, new key?”

Noticing her struggle, Etruscan picked up one of the candles burning on the table and limped around the chaise with it. There he lowered it to her waist, expression grim.

There *was* a key jutting from the small of her back. It was not gilded, or bejeweled—it was crafted of plain, cold steel. Its bow consisted of two hollow wings, their shape reminiscent of the wings of a dragon. Along the top of each, wrought in blackened iron, was a word. One wing said *DISOBEDIENCE*.

The other read *DEVOTION*.

Within the wing dedicated to *DISOBEDIENCE*, a set of cogs sat tangled in the grip of a greedy octopus. The tentacles were realistically rendered, all fat and slime. The sight of them was enough to make Alisabeth shudder.

Within the wing dedicated to *DEVOTION*, another set of cogs turned idly away, powered by the rotation of the key itself.

The symbolism was obvious.

“Notice the key shaft,” Etruscan said.

Alisabeth looked. It was thicker than she was used to. There was something mounted on the side, like a bolt or a dial; she couldn’t make out what it was. It was too close to her waist.

“What is that?” she asked. She hated the way her voice trembled.

“A combination lock,” he explained. “And do you think I’m so stupid as to have written down the code?”

She knew he wasn't. Etruscan Maldron was many things—many vile, wretched things—but stupid was not among them.

“If you want to go on ticking, you'll have to rely on me.” To his credit, Etruscan didn't sound like he was gloating. His dull tone betrayed his discomfort. “Unless it's unlocked, no one can wind this key. Not you, not me. And before you think about braining me after I enter the code—the shaft relocks after sixty seconds.”

Before Alisabeth could stop him, Etruscan reached forward to demonstrate. With a few spins of the dial, he entered a three-digit code. Between the lock's position and his covering hand, she had no hope of spying the numbers. The thick part of the key shaft then slid backward, revealing a series of metal sockets along its interior edge. Alisabeth realized that it must secure itself around the bolts studding her key plate.

“You were designed to take interchangeable keys.” Etruscan grabbed hold of her key and turned it to the left. Alisabeth's body bent at the waist. The key didn't budge. “But this one won't come out. Not unless I want it to.”

Etruscan was right. If Alisabeth tried to turn the key herself, locked or unlocked, she'd only wrench her own back.

“I hope you don't mind the design.” Etruscan withdrew his hand and moved toward the table. “It's my own. Luckily, the Engineer I hired was quite... *enthusiastic* about it. Overall a rather *intense* fellow, but he did excellent work.”

“Excellent work.” Alisabeth's voice was weak.

“Yes.” Etruscan coughed. “And I think the sentiment is a useful one for you to contemplate. For now, you need me. So it's in your own best interest not to harm me.”

These words were enough to make Alisabeth long for the ability to feel nauseous. “My Gods, what have you done?”

“This is all temporary, I assure you. I don’t relish this forced intimacy.” Etruscan glanced at the key as the shaft snapped back into place. The impact caused Alisabeth to flinch. “If I wanted a slavish toy, the sort they fill low-rent brothels with nowadays, I would’ve bought one long ago.”

“My *Gods*.” The words were a sob. “Hargrave, you’re *sick*.”

“It might look that way to you now.” The man lowered his head so he could gaze into her eyes. “But you’re already back to calling me Hargrave.”

Alisabeth wanted to headbutt him. Doing so would probably kill him, and thus doom her, but she was in the mood for violence. She’d lived in fear that Etruscan would find her. That he would try, once again, to take her away from her beloved creator.

But the Duke was dead. She’d been an orphan for a year. And now, Alisabeth was in far worse trouble than she’d ever imagined.

“Just in case you’re wondering, the building we’re in is called Greyhaven Hall. It’s about a hundred miles away from Olympia.”

A hundred miles? Where on Aevum *was* she?

“It’s a relic. The family that built it is long dead.” Etruscan gestured to a nearby window. “Outside, there’s nothing but forest for twenty miles in every direction. Each full winding will keep you going for two hours. Your top speed is five miles an hour. I know—I signed off on it.”

Alisabeth turned away from the window. She couldn’t bear to think about how dire her situation was becoming. She didn’t need math to make it *worse*.

“If you don’t believe me, you’re welcome to go look for yourself.” Etruscan pointed at his own chest. “But if you do, you better pray I’m able to find you after you collapse.”

All Alisabeth wanted to *do* was collapse. Curl up into a little ball and try her best to cry.

“Now—are you going to attack me?” Etruscan reached into his pocket and withdrew a silvery key strung on a leather thong.

What could she say? What other choice did she have?

“No,” Alisabeth whispered.

“Fantastic.” The word popped off his tongue like a grocery list entry. For a man whose diabolical plans had just gone off without a hitch, Etruscan was unnervingly placid. If he felt any emotion at all, it was buried deeper than his body soon would be.

As Etruscan approached the chaise and knelt down to access the iron bands, his mouth contorting in a grimace, Alisabeth faced forward to avoid looking at him. She detested the idea that he was so close to her. His actions aroused in her a bitter loathing that threatened to overwhelm her powers of emotional comprehension. The Maldron she remembered was more passionate, more vengeful; she was unaccustomed to this new man, quiet and calculating. She couldn’t predict him. She put nothing past him.

She was even more frightened of him than before.

Still, though Alisabeth did her best to ignore him, though she couldn’t feel anything he did—she couldn’t help but notice that as he loosened her shackles, Etruscan limited his touch to the metal alone.

### 3 The First Night

Etruscan felt like he was going to suffocate.

The repression he was exercising over his emotions seemed to weigh on him like a physical thing. His chest felt hard and heavy, like the useless torso of some ancient statue. His tongue felt like lead. For once, he was grateful for the stabbing pain that radiated through his right side each time he moved. It served as a reminder that his personal reality still endured.

The words he wanted to say had not changed. His heart had not changed. His *body* had not changed.

For the moment, they were simply denied.

As Alisabeth adjusted herself on the chaise, drawing her hands into her lap in order to inspect her wrists, Etruscan found himself wishing for a body like hers—a chassis of stone and steel. So easily controlled. So unfeeling. Mentally, verbally, Etruscan knew

he was doing well. He'd not given in to either his anger or his adoration, and that alone was a triumph.

Physically—Etruscan felt like his heart was in danger of flying out of his chest.

The thought occurred to him, cold and more than a little disconcerting, that he was wholly unprepared for this. Their roles had reversed. In the garden, he had felt like a supplicant approaching a goddess. Back then, they had been new to each other—and Alisabeth to the world. Her innocence had intoxicated him, soothed and smothered his every human desire. For one glorious summer, Etruscan had submitted to her in everything.

*"Do you like flowers?"* Her first words to him. Even then a challenge, a test.

*"Yes,"* he had lied. *"I like flowers very much."*

Etruscan had lied because he feared her unhappiness the way Mikhail feared rust. Alisabeth was so pure, so untried and sweet. Unhappiness would corrupt that. And for Etruscan, child of unhappiness, there was no worse thought in the world.

But as of this night, *he* must set the tenor for their relationship. It was Alisabeth who must learn to defer to him.

It should have been that way from the beginning.

Etruscan reclaimed his cane and staggered over to the fireplace. With one hand, he wrestled open the mesh grate and heaved in a few more logs. The flames licked the throat of the chimney, and for a moment he lost himself in their glow.

*"I want a promise as well."*

Etruscan turned. Alisabeth was looking at him. When she saw his head move, she jutted her chin forward in a display of defiance. The motion filled him with ten different kinds of longing.

“A promise?” he managed to ask. “Of what?”

“I want you to refer to me by my title.” Alisabeth sat taller. The slight motion was graceful enough to put an entire *corps de ballet* to shame. “As a duchess. If I’m to pretend you’re an earl, I think it’s only fair.”

As she spoke, Alisabeth’s face performed a ballet of its own—lifted nose, lowered eyelids, tightened mouth. Etruscan was struck by the realization that her facial expressions seemed more... subtle. As yet, he had noticed no repetition. Like this season’s soprano, Alisabeth’s face did beautiful tricks, and each one flawlessly—but it lacked versatility. Somewhere in her programming lay instructions for hundreds of expressions—everything from amusement and peevishness to fear and fatigue. The servos hidden behind her flexible skin cycled through them at a prodigious rate, but never embellished them.

Yet, he couldn’t remember her ever looking so fierce. So haughty. A few moments ago Alisabeth had been fear itself, but now she looked like a chess queen carved from the glittering heart of a diamond. Even the way she sat on the chaise, erect and expectant—it was absolutely regal. No longer was she a quivering ingenue, unwilling to venture far from the garden bower.

Alisabeth’s innocence had once bewitched him. Her newfound poise made him burn for her in a way he’d long tried to suppress.

Etruscan decided that some concessions could be made. “I’m more than happy to call you Lady Canwick. That’s what I used to call you, is it not?”

“It is,” she acknowledged. He could hear a tang of disappointment in her voice.

“Well. When it comes to those who have the temerity to rise above their station, you’ve already made your opinion clear. So, Lady Canwick it is.”

With that, Etruscan surrendered to the pain throbbing through his leg. He returned to the sofa and gingerly lowered himself down, using his cane for leverage. The sensation of the eagle’s beak digging into his palm served as a grounding mechanism that kept him from grunting or swearing.

Alisabeth watched his progress with practiced disinterest. She was aware of his condition. She’d never held it against him before, but she’d already let loose with a few cutting remarks—a trend that Etruscan meant to quash.

As a warning, he met her eyes. They were the pale olive green of a standardized glass medicine bottle, a luminous green that parts of Etruscan’s brain still associated with relief and warmth and the safety of oblivion. The first time he’d seen them, he’d wondered if Mikhail had chosen the color on purpose. The man did have a dark sense of humor.

“Why have you brought me here?” Alisabeth asked.

“Because you’re mine to bring wherever I wish.”

“I have no owner.”

“Because your previous owner passed away, yes.”

“The Duke was not my owner,” Alisabeth shot back. In her lap, her hands turned into fists. “He was my creator. My protector. My *father*.”

“He was your designer,” Etruscan said calmly. “I am your purchaser.”

Alisabeth screwed up her mouth and went silent. Etruscan was certain he’d never seen *that* facial motion before. And yet, although the sight of it filled him with a dull sort of shame, he said nothing.

He squeezed his cane more tightly, and reminded himself that he was in control.

“You said you don’t want a forced intimacy.” As she spoke, Alisabeth noticed a hank of hair hanging in front of her shoulder. She reached for it—and then thought better. Returning her hands to her lap, she rolled her shoulders back. She seemed determined not to fidget, to remain aloof and composed. Etruscan approved. “What *do* you want?”

“I want your love. But I want you to give it... I suppose ‘freely’ is the wrong word.” Sick fantasies aside, there were some facts about their situation that Etruscan must concede. As ornery as she currently seemed, Alisabeth did not have free will.

Had anyone other than Alisabeth ever looked at him the way she did in response to this, he would’ve seen red. Her jaw dropped, revealing a glimpse of the clacking machinery gathered in the back of her head. Disgust and disbelief played with the arrangement of her lower eyelids, her feathery blonde brows, even the hollow of her throat. When she spoke her voice was thin, steely, like a vibrating guitar string.

“My love.” It was not a question.

“Yes.” Etruscan shifted his weight to his left thigh. Sitting or standing, it didn’t matter—he could never fully relieve the pain. But he tried. “I know Mikhail told you a different story. But I want you to understand that loving me is the most logical, sensible thing you could do.”

“You... kidnap me.” Alisabeth’s nostrils twitched. “You put me in irons. You assault me, you lie to me, you call me an object and yourself my purchaser, and now you want my love?”

“Well.” When she put it like that. “I hardly—”

“Then I suppose you’re out of luck!” Her voice battered its way past his. “Because I’m a machine, am I not? You’re determined to treat me like one. So you must know that I’m *incapable* of love!”

Etruscan took a steadying breath. “Are you so certain that makes a difference?”

“Yes!” Alisabeth sagged backward, as if physically exhausted by her outburst. “I cannot need you. I cannot love you. So just let me go.”

Etruscan remained unmoved. “You’re right. Compared to a human woman, I don’t believe you’re capable of love, or need, or want. But that doesn’t matter. Not to me.”

Alisabeth looked at him in confusion.

“Because you’re a very good actress.” Remembering his whisky, Etruscan leaned forward. “I always knew what I was paying for.”

Alisabeth’s eyes radiated danger. “And what was that?”

“An odd form of companionship. A happiness others would neither embrace nor understand.” He finished the shot. The liquid blazed a trail of fire down his throat. “A pretty form of fakery.”

Alisabeth went quiet. She seemed lost for anything to say.

“Even now...” Etruscan gestured to her face with his empty glass. “Your expressions. They’ve changed. They’re even more lifelike. You’re *very* good at what you do.”

“That’s because you’ve stolen a broken object, Hargrave.” Alisabeth’s bottom lip twitched. “I hope you’re happy. The warranty’s long expired.”

The way she said this—every syllable a drumbeat of resignation wrapped around a core of fluttering fear—made an alarm sound in Etruscan’s head. He sat up taller, and raised his left brow. It was a habit of his, one that Alisabeth, to his intense relief, seemed to notice and remember. She nodded in response.

“Broken?” he asked, surprised by the roughness in his throat.

“It happened after His Grace died.” Alisabeth looked at her hands as she unfurled them. “So it couldn’t be fixed.”

“What happened?”

She didn’t answer, only said, “It’s a problem with my emotional automation system. Luckily, as you can see, I still have conscious control of the individual servos that animate my face. So I’ve learned to copy human expressions. Spent hours practicing. A twitch here, a curl there... it all builds into a repertoire.”

This news did not disappoint Etruscan, or anger him—rather, it concerned him. If someone had done this vile deed to her, he wanted that person’s head on a platter. If it brought Alisabeth distress, he wanted to fix it.

Still, Etruscan noted, “Well... I’m sorry to hear that. But all things considered, I think it’s a vast improvement.”

“Improvement?” She looked skeptical.

“Yes. As you said, you’ve built an expanded repertoire. Your expressions are more complex, now. More natural.”

Alisabeth looked at him the way a nun might an inveterate drunkard clamoring for communion. “But to have to think so carefully about everything I feel? To put on a conscious, deliberate display of emotion? A show?” She scoffed. “No. It is no improvement at all.”

*Everything I feel.* Etruscan was used to such language coming from Alisabeth. Amazed at how quickly he parroted it back, once again accepting it as the foundation of their make-believe reality. *Yes, this orange crate is our house. Of course, this bundle of rags is our baby.* “I suppose you have a point, there. I’ve spent the last nine years doing the exact opposite. It’s exhausting.”

“What do you mean?”

Etruscan chose not to elaborate. “But, on the subject of Mikhail... let’s discuss what he did to you.”

Alisabeth curled her fingers around the edge of the chaise. “He did nothing but love me. *Truly* love me.”

“If you’re incapable of love,” Etruscan countered, “then how do you know what true love is like?”

Without warning, Alisabeth rose to her feet. Etruscan stiffened. Talk was cheap, and he knew that nothing in her programming bound her to any promises she made. When it came to his own survival, he was counting on the one need he *knew* Alisabeth was capable of feeling.

The need to go on existing.

Alisabeth looked at him with scorn. It was enough to tie Etruscan's soul into knots. Still, he endured her glare in stony silence, and soon she walked away from him toward the fire. He couldn't help but lean forward to watch her, entranced by the way her body swayed as she moved. Her gait was so fluid. So smooth. Alisabeth had been designed to dance through life.

He had to thank Mikhail for that.

Inspired, Etruscan said, "When I ask you a question, you should give me an answer."

Alisabeth paused. The fire turned her blonde hair into a halo, and played over the surface of her new key. "What do you want me to say?"

"You could tell me what Mikhail did to you."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"While you were on the run. How did you spend your time?"

Etruscan got down to brass tacks. "What did he tell you about me?"

Alisabeth could ignore her hair no longer. In the dim light, the rhinestone pins clinging onto the remains of her fanciful chignon glimmered like teardrops. She began to pick them out, fastening each one to the edge of her bodice as she secured it. "He told me nothing."

"*Bullshit.*" The word was out before he could stop it.

Alisabeth frowned. "Charming. And why are you so convinced that I'm lying?"

The idea that Alisabeth could lie did not terrify Etruscan. He knew she was capable of it. During the design period Mikhail had

assured him that Alisabeth could be trusted with marital secrets. *"She won't blab your business to the whole town. If silence isn't an option, she'll come up with something pretty to say. Nothing worse than a tale-bearing woman, eh?"*

The things Etruscan had worried about, back when he'd thought Alisabeth's love as inevitable as the setting sun.

Etruscan reined in his growing temper. "Because you *can* lie. You can make a promise and not keep it. But you don't have free will. Every choice you make is a mathematical calculation. Right now, the numbers are stacked against me. I want to know why."

Alisabeth fastened the final pin to her bodice and eyed Etruscan narrowly. "I see. Do you want me to tell you that His Grace subjected me to some sort of brainwashing regime? Or perhaps you'd rather hear that he cracked open my skull and popped in some new programming. Would that put your mind at ease?"

"I just want the truth." Etruscan set down his glass and picked up the whisky decanter. He would not allow her to goad him. "You're acting like a willful wretch. Once upon a time, you were my little shadow. If you've come to view me uncharitably, it's because Mikhail did something. *Told* you something."

"His Grace told me nothing." Alisabeth actually rolled her eyes, and buried her fingers in her hair. "Aside from a few times, after we left Amaranth? We never spoke of you."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe that." Etruscan would've been insulted by the idea if he thought it had any merit. "I can't be both a cackling villain and a ghost."

"What was there to speak of? What could he tell me that I didn't witness with my own eyes?" Inch by inch, Alisabeth

detangled her locks. Etruscan focused his attention on pulling the crystal stopper from the decanter, unwilling to be distracted by such a display. “Would it help if I listed out what I know of you? Very well. You were friends with the Duke for a long time. You served together in the war. You were injured. Your injuries drove you to seek an artificial companion. But the Duke realized too late that he couldn’t fulfill the order. That it would be wrong to do so. After that, you became such a nuisance that we had to run.”

“I could drive a zeppelin through the holes in that story.” Amusement urged Etruscan to pour his second drink of the evening.

“Oh? How would you tell it?”

“The way I see it, the Duke defrauded his old friend. Took his millions and millions of met and poured them into the most advanced mechanical creation Aevum has ever seen. And then? After she was completed?” Etruscan leaned back with his glass. “He refused to hand her over. The courts call that *failure to deliver goods*. Or *breach of contract*.”

Alisabeth turned away from the fire. Her hair now hung about her face, wavy with the remnants of her carefully placed curls. The sight of it got Etruscan right in the gut. He imagined that she might spend her evenings with her hair so arrayed—or perhaps up in a braid. It was an intimate style, one that suggested a glass of wine and a teacup full of sewing machine oil after the stifling atmosphere of a ball. The cool of evening, the blueness of shadow. “This really is a business transaction to you. Isn’t it?”

“At heart.”

“I think *that’s* the wrong word.” Alisabeth glanced toward the ceiling, as if for guidance.

“Use whatever word you like. Fact remains, we’re going to be here for a while. Together. *Alone*.” Etruscan downed his drink in one gulp. “Until we work out whatever it is Mikhail did to turn you against me.”

“His Grace did *nothing*.” Alisabeth was beginning to sound exasperated.

“Then why didn’t you seek me out when he died?” Etruscan’s chest tightened as he finally asked the question that’d been haunting him for months. His arm began to tingle, and before he knew it, he was slamming his empty glass down on the table. It didn’t break, but Alisabeth flinched at the sound. “Or write to me? Why did you *run* from me, when I found you in Opalmarena? Mikhail was dead, so why did you keep running?”

Outside, the wind howled. In the fireplace, sparks went careening up the chimney. It was a few seconds before Etruscan realized what he’d done. Shame and rage nearly sucked the breath out of him, and it was all he could do not to stagger to his feet and stomp out of the great hall.

Even when delivered in his own voice, the truth cut like a knife. It wasn’t the first eight years Alisabeth had been hidden away that incensed him. That’d driven him to *this*. This secluded house, this morbid seduction.

It was the one year she’d *run*.

Alisabeth was looking at him with something akin to satisfaction. Her hands hung at her sides, white and lovely. “I told you. I’d already witnessed your behavior for myself.”

“Oh?” Etruscan tried hard to keep all traces of hostility out of his voice. He failed. “And what did I do, pray, to fall out of your good graces?”

“When His Grace tried to explain why you should leave us alone—you acted like a madman.” Alisabeth dared to step closer, and Etruscan reached for his cane. “You threw a *tantrum*. Like a child!”

“Did it ever occur to you,” Etruscan argued, “that I did that because I *loved* you, and the idea of being parted from you was enough to destroy me?”

Alisabeth drew to a halt, her skirts whispering about her legs. Shadows played over her face, rendering her expression unreadable—but Etruscan could guess what he might find there. Consternation. Disbelief. So, he let the question hang heavy between them. Gave Alisabeth plenty of time to play and re-play it in her endlessly looping, language-hungry mind.

“That doesn’t change what you said,” she decided. “The things you did.”

“Well then, Lady Canwick, here’s your first lesson in love.” Etruscan struggled to his feet. The alcohol coursing through his veins both dulled the pain in his leg and made it more challenging to use. “Love forgives much.”

“So I should forgive this?” Her voice was nearly drowned out by the fire. “The fact that you’ve made me your prisoner?”

“I prefer the term ‘honored guest.’” Testing his luck, Etruscan limped closer to Alisabeth. While she did her best to hold her ground, his cane soon threatened to land upon the hem of her

gown. She stepped back, her skirt swaying atop its supports. Etruscan reveled in the meaningless victory, even as his heart sank.

“Guests may leave whenever they like.” Though Alisabeth’s voice was quiet, her eyes were alive with anger.

“Let me show you to your room.” Etruscan was weary. He needed to prop his leg up. Break his cane over something, perhaps. He’d anticipated a long, tiring conversation—and gotten precisely that. He hadn’t expected the wayward Alisabeth to fling herself into his arms and plead for forgiveness.

Still—a rotten little part of him was growing quite surly over the fact that she hadn’t.

Beside the fireplace sat an open crate. Inside was an assortment of lanterns. Etruscan took hold of one, and glanced at Alisabeth. “A little help, if you please?”

Her eyes fell on his cane. After a moment’s hesitation, she stepped forward and took hold of the fireplace grate, moving it aside.

“We’ve provisions aplenty,” he informed her as he opened the lantern’s glass door. The box also provided a stick of wood, which he used to transfer a drop of fire to the white candle within. Once the flame was tall and fat, he moved further into the heart of the great room. As he traveled, the lantern called out additional doors and windows—and eventually, a wide hallway. “Food, medicine. And the forest will provide. In short, Lady Canwick, neither of us is going anywhere until we’ve come to some sort of agreement.”

“What if we can’t agree on anything?” she asked, trailing in his wake. She put a good bit of distance between them by taking one measured, lady-like step for every two of his. “What then?”

“Well, only one of us can starve.” Alisabeth frowned, and he realized too late the implications of his joke. With an apologetic shrug, Etruscan limped onward.

