

BECKLAN'S DOLL
CAMERYNE KAYNE
CHAPTER 1

Only two truths kept her company: she was officially lost in the mountains of Crobania (despite her map of Pennsylvania), and someone was watching her. Audrina Henry scanned the wooded path behind her once more before letting her bruised body sag against a tree. Aside from wild animals, there was no sign of life in the abandoned area. But the sense of being watched was damn near suffocating. The email on her computer from yesterday was vague, but it was key to the next big story to ever hit the Pennsylvania Nepa News. And if there was anything Audrina needed, it was a headline promising enough to make her head anchor at PNN. She was a great journalist and well known for getting the next-to-impossible exclusives.

But nothing impressed her supervisor unless you slept with him. And nothing made him angrier than being shot down every time. No, she was going to find her story and earn her spot, fair and square. Her next big break rested deep in these mountains, and she wasn't leaving without it. Audrina wasn't sure what she'd find in the forgotten city, so she'd brought a fully charged camera with a battery backup, just in case. Her muscles burned and her stomach cramped, but she refused to leave empty handed. There were a few good shots of the large elevation behind the path leading into the overgrown grove. Depending on what she found, she could easily use them in the segment. She would've asked her best friend and co-anchor, Myles Day, to join her, but he was too prissy for this type of excursion. Myles couldn't handle the outdoors or keep a secret. She didn't want anyone knowing her story, if there was one, until she was promised coverage. So, she'd gone on her own. However, she'd underestimated her trip.

The snacks she'd brought didn't last any longer than the few bottles of water. The sun had set three hours ago, and she'd been walking for miles beneath a dark blanket with nothing to show for it, her shorts and flannel hardly keeping her warm after daylight faded into a brisk September chill. And as the wind danced through the hollow trees, Audrina would've much rather dealt with Myles's insufferable complaining than be out here alone in the endless depth of the night. Instead, Myles rested comfortably in his lavish condo with his fling of the week almost five hours away. Meanwhile, she was stranded as determination served for a compass. Audrina's story was buried inside this highland and she wasn't leaving until she found it. Using the last of her phone battery, she inspected her map once more with the flashlight. Audrina's heart skipped a beat while she repeatedly checked her coordinates. Her exact location was missing from the map entirely! The flashlight powered off just as a heavy thud rang in her head like a Southern church bell. Audrina's world went as black as her phone.

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Becklan Crestemere sighed with annoyance at the room full of manipulating conspirators plotting to be his future bride. He'd rather have been in the shadowed pits of his quarters in the east wing than be inside a ballroom. Every female had set their eyes on him in hopes of becoming the next Queen. But to actually see them all stew inside their scheming minds in the same room was nauseating. Once he'd stepped off the grand staircase and onto the marble floor, he looked past the doe-eyed debutantes and calculating parents, where every stiff suit and gown turned with false delight.

Rumors spread fast in their kingdom, Becklan mused. His uncle's guests could plot all they wanted—any marriage of his would be in name only. They were all aware of his presence and his newfound standing status as the bachelor of Crobania, a rather unfortunate position his aunt Sophia, the former Queen of Crobania, had put him in after taking her own life. She'd married for duty to the throne, even though the king was not her mate. Centuries of unhappiness while looking for a mate to

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fill the endless void inside her had finally taken its toll, sadly. Now, it seemed he was fated the same duty before his uncle retired the throne. Crobania needed a Queen. But as he was next in succession and the Prince of Crobania, it was bad form not to attend his uncle's 721st birthday celebration.

"Oh, there you are!" his mother called out. Even in her graceful air as the Duchess of Crobania, Chantasia Crestemere never disappointed when it came to aged fashions. "Mother, I see you've stolen the light of the room, once again," he greeted. "Nonsense, I couldn't possibly be mistaken for a peering paramour with all in attendance tonight. But I'm glad your charms haven't spoiled yet. Because you, my son, need to prepare for marriage. You're not a boy anymore, Becklan. The foolishness of bachelorhood must come to an end. Don't forget blood roulette tonight," she carefully reminded.

"Mother, please. Don't start this now. Where's Uncle Fred?"

"Talking to Calvin, no doubt," Chantasia assumed, searching the crowd while fanning her face with lilac-tinted ostrich feathers.

Becklan's stomach leaped at the said men deep in conversation across the room. Duke of Trent or not, Calvin Pembroke couldn't be trusted with much else other than to take up space on a dance floor. But, even that was pushing it. The man was always involved in some scheme or unfortunate situation. Becklan especially didn't like the man talking with his uncle, the king. He could only imagine what sly proposal Calvin had mustered up this time. He was probably working on some delirious match between his daughter and Becklan.

The very name gave Becklan a severe case of heartburn. Charlese Pembroke was a tall, blond embodiment of manipulation. She was as beautiful as she was conceited. Not to mention loud and completely over-the-top when it came to her wardrobe, or anything else crossing her path.

"Entertainment fit for a king, and he's over there gambling with my future," Becklan growled under his breath. "Becklan, your responsibility doesn't go unnoticed. You're the oldest of your siblings and must choose a wife. Besides, Breslin and Elizabeth are in Sweden for a few weeks. But I will say I'm not in favor of the Pembroke family," his mother admitted as she eyed them across the room.

"Sweden, again? How did they get permission to miss the king's birthday?" Becklan asked. His sisters may as well have just moved there.

"Forgive me, Your High Born," his butler, Evans, interrupted with urgency. "But there is a matter at the gate."

"At a time like this?" His mother inched her brows together.

"Fear not, I'll handle it. Go and enjoy yourself," he insisted with a peck to her cheek. By the time he passed the main corridor, he found his estranged cousin, Isaac Draven, outside the hidden gate. The man never had good intentions. Isaac was a weasel, always out for himself despite hurting others in the process. It was why he'd been banned from the castle. He couldn't be trusted.

"I see you haven't lost your ability to surprise me. You have only a moment to state your business before my patience wears thin," Becklan warned, giving him the benefit of the doubt.

"Now is that anyway to talk to your cousin who's brought you a gift?" Isaac drawled, tossing a human girl at his feet with a thud. "A blood-doll. My donation to a great cause, Your High Born," he added formally in a sarcastic bow of respect.

The scrapes on her body were fresh. Had his wayward cousin kidnapped her? By the looks of

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her, Becklan couldn't be sure. The broken twigs in her tattered hair spoke of the girl's time spent in the woods. But the odds of her roaming the mountains by chance were unlikely. The closest town was Carbondale, 325 miles away, which begged a bigger question. Where had she come from?

"And your reward?" Becklan asked, careful not to explore the girl further. Should his cousin notice, Isaac would kill the girl just to get a rise out of him. He was deciding whether or not to take the offering on behalf of the welfare of the girl. Otherwise, she was as good as dead.

"A night's welcome. It's a time for celebration, is it not, Cousin?" Isaac grinned. The weasel was the closest thing to a son the king would ever have, even though he was the result of an unfortunate love affair. After some consideration, Becklan let him stay.

"Granted. But don't overstay your welcome, or you'll be reminded of your place outside these walls," he stated swiftly, turning away.

"Your High Born! What about the girl?" a guardsman inquired.

"Bring her to Evans. See to it she gets food and a bath," Becklan ordered in his wake.

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The massage against her scalp was beyond incredible. Audrina smiled as soft, gentle hands worked through her hair with care while the scent of roses filled her nose. She was afraid to open her eyes, fearing her dream would come to an end. She wasn't used to such pleasantries. Once the water hit her face, she woke with a start. Audrina shuddered, taking a full scan of her surroundings and finding herself inside an oversized, marbled bowl. Her swift movement almost hit the young girl holding a bucket with splashes of soap water.

"Be still, you're getting the floor wet!" the young girl reprimanded. Audrina nearly jumped out of the tub.

"Who are you? Where am I?" she croaked, her eyes adjusting to the room.

"In the bathhouse, Miss! Now be still! Put your head back and let me get the rest of the soap out," the young girl with brunette hair and bright green eyes ordered.

Audrina gave the room another onceover despite her urge to get up and run. She was sitting inside a gigantic tub surrounded by four marble pillars in the center of the room. Large stone walls framed the space high above her head. The bathhouse was accented by a dozen huge limestone statues with a few private quarters off to the side. She couldn't believe the details inside the rich tiles lined in gold trim. If she hadn't known better, she'd swear she woke up inside a palace. The only thing that kept her from running was her fear of breaking something on her way out. That, and she had no clothes.

"Where are my clothes?" she said, attempting to climb out of the tub. She didn't know who this girl was, or what this place was about, but they clearly thought her to be someone else. Why else would they be bathing her like a baby? Never mind she was completely naked in front of a stranger—a disturbing fact she had to set aside as the girl put her back in the tub with an inhuman strength, despite her small frame. Soaking wet, the girl couldn't have weighed more than 120 pounds.

"Sit down and relax! We don't have much time, the master will be expecting you," the girl reprimanded.

"What do you want with me? Please, I need to get back," she protested with wild eyes. Audrina didn't like the idea of being told what to do by someone she didn't know, or the sound of meeting anyone before researching them thoroughly first—especially if they owned a bathhouse bigger than the Denver airport and went by the name Master. "I'm sorry, who are you? How did I get here? Where's my phone? I need to call the police and—"

"I'd be surprised if you lasted more than a day with that mouth. You're inside the Crestemere manor in Crobania. And I was referring to His High Born, the Prince of Crobania, Master Becklan Crestemere. Now, if you stop yapping, the headache will go away," the girl informed abruptly.

"I don't have a headache," she said suspiciously.

"I wasn't talking about yours."

She was still in Crobania? How? If there was a mansion in the woods, she sure as hell would've found it. The last thing she remembered was trying to find anything close to civilization. She also remembered being struck in the head. Was it possible she was still dreaming? She gave herself a good pinch and felt the sting clear as day. Nope, not dreaming. What kind of place was this? And how the hell was it hidden in broad daylight? So, this girl was a servant. What kind of place kept servants in this day and age? The young girl couldn't have been more than eighteen. And what did she mean by "You won't last"? There was nothing wrong with her mouth, or her eyes, for that matter. Then the words sank in a little deeper. "I'm sorry, did you say Prince? There's an actual Prince in Pennsylvania?" she asked in disbelief. This would make one hell of a story. She could see the headline now: *Delusional Maid vs Phantom Prince*.

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"Come, it's time for you to dress," the girl ordered once more, holding open a towel.

"Actually, I can handle it from here, thank you! What was your name again? I'd like very much to meet your master, but I really need to get my things and be on my way, thanks," Audrina said, grabbing for the towel. But the girl just stood there, waiting, oblivious to her questions, and anything else she had to say for that matter. Either the girl didn't have answers, or she had no intention of holding a conversation. Audrina swallowed, remembering the girl's unnatural strength, and took the hint. She wouldn't be escaping anytime soon.

She obediently stepped out of the tub like a child, then was escorted down the hall into a large room with gold-trimmed walls of almond and rich wood. If she didn't find her escape soon, she had a good feeling she and the girl wouldn't be getting along. Audrina wandered after the girl through aged halls that spoke of old wealth. They came to a set of double mahogany doors that opened to a breathtaking chamber. She almost dropped her towel as she looked up at the artwork of various sword fights on the ceiling. Who are these people? Audrina couldn't keep her eyes off the portraits sprinkled along the high, trimmed walls. Some were stunning portraits of men while others were of erotic nudes in a garden in questionable positions. Her cheeks warmed with wonder at some of the positions, but all of them were mesmerizing.

"We haven't got time to waste. Off with the towel," the girl insisted, holding out sheer black harem pants with a matching top draped in beautiful, small gold chains.

"Where are my clothes? It also freaks me out when people are watching me dress, so . . ."

Audrina looked at the two servants entering the room, waiting to brush someone's hair. "I need something to change into, like my clothes," she added hastily now that she had everyone's attention.

"Your clothes were ripped when you got here. You'll wear the cloth of a blooddoll," the girl insisted, displaying the sheer garb. "You are forbidden to speak to the master unless spoken to. Just do what you're told until dismissed."

"And where is this great master you speak of? He sounds like a real charmer," Audrina sarcastically predicted. He was probably some old man, soiled with the idea of authority. "It's the King's birthday. His High Born is in the great hall for the celebration. You'll see him soon enough."

"I'm Audrina, by the way. Audrina Henry. What's your name?" She was going to have a conversation with this girl if it was the last thing she did. The more people talked, the more answers they revealed. Now, whether they were straightforward or not was an entirely different animal. She just needed to find some clothes and an escape plan.

"Tia," the girl finally answered with a slight smile, working her sheer garb into place. "Come, you'll meet the others now," she added.

"Others?"

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Becklan reluctantly joined the meeting in the library when he returned. A King's request was never denied. He found his mother sitting in a chair sipping a glass of pig blood as his uncle and Isaac stood beside the fireplace. They turned at his entrance. The stagnant atmosphere and his mother's expression all but screamed what this was about: his future. The very idea of his cousin's involvement made his throat burn worse than wanting a mouthful of warm blood. But as royal immortals, he had to set an example and keep his cool.

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"Ah, Becklan. Do have a seat," his uncle greeted. "Uncle," Becklan said in greeting, taking a seat and a glass of squirrel blood from Evans.

"Not a fan of meetings? You should be used to them by now," Isaac taunted, not wasting time for a jab in his favor.

"I'm not a fan of parasites, either," Becklan remarked in return.

"Enough!" his uncle snapped. "Becklan, we must talk about the future of Crobania. I won't be in the throne much longer, and I need you to at least consider what changes have to be made. I was talking with Calvin Pembroke, and—"

"Oh, for the love of the damned!" Becklan yelled, throwing his glass into the fireplace. "I'm willing to bet you had something to do with this!" he accused, jumping up from his chair and piercing his cousin with a cold, hard stare.

"Becklan, calm yourself! Just hear your uncle out, please," his mother quietly reprimanded.

"Forgive me, was there a Queen in that room? If so, we have bigger problems than we realize. And should one of those little harpies in there find herself in such a position, may the devil help us all, because a kingdom doesn't run on silks and lipstick!" he said, taking another seat by the fireplace.

"Becklan, I think we should consider what Calvin proposed—a match between you and his daughter, Charlese Pembroke. She brings much to the table, unlike many others. Don't forget, she was bred for this. And decisions have to be made, unfortunately. Isaac offered his assistance should there be any issues, and I'm confident with this plan moving forward. Think of Crobania, please," his uncle pleaded.

Becklan looked to his mother for answers she couldn't voice. Her worried expression was enough. She clearly wasn't a fan of the idea. Of course, her hands were tied on the matter. Charlese Pembroke as a daughter-in-law would be misery to them both unless he found her unfit for the position. It wouldn't take long for her to be scheming before the month was through. But this time, their immortal kingdom would be watching her.

It was an easy task if all went according to plan, and one he'd see to for the sake of Crobania. At least, it was a way out of the trap his uncle and cousin were so hell-bent on putting him in. "On one condition. The union will be in name only. If I should find her unfit by any means, consider it terminated in haste, during which time a replacement will take her place. Isaac leaves tonight as planned. I doubt the lady needs a chaperone. Do we have a deal, Uncle?"

"That's not part of the plan, Cousin. I have ways to tame her behavior," Isaac said with a tight smile.

"I hate to brag, but I don't need help when it comes to women," Becklan returned. There was no way in hell he was letting his cousin step foot inside this kingdom after tonight.

"Done," the king answered swiftly, eager to put the task at rest. "Father! That's not what we discussed," Isaac said as his father's betrayal lingered in the room like a bad smell.

"Never mind what we discussed. We've got a wedding to plan," the King laughed heartily. "Dear Lucifer, save us," his mother uttered, finishing her glass.

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Audrina was soon brought into a room with pretty white furniture and lilac walls. Four girls stood wearing the same sheer garb in front of a mirror, dolling themselves up as if their futures depended on their looks, oblivious to the fact they were half naked. In fact, they didn't seem to care at all—far different from Audrina's constant selfawareness every time she felt a draft brush against her skin. The closest girl was tall and slim with long dark hair brushing her hips in curls, just like hers.

"Don't mind them, we don't bite. But the guards are a different story. Hi, I'm Danika," she said with a face full of dark makeup. A fit of giggles filled the room behind her.

Next to her was a slender, short-haired blonde fixing her puckered cherry-red lips in the mirror.

"I still don't understand why the arrows are dipped in poison; the damn things do enough damage. Hello, I'm Mo, short for Maureen. And that's Angela, and Hannah," the blond girl introduced.

But the daggers came from girl they call Angela. A curvy redhead behind Mo putting lotion on her legs and glaring as if Audrina's presence somehow ruined her evening. The smallest of them must be Hannah, in short black hair with a face dusted in freckles. Her dark brown eyes were windows of innocence while being caught in the cookie jar.

"They're dipped in poison to be more effective to immortals. You're not in Kansas, Dorothy," Angela answered before offering a pained wave in her direction. Audrina offered a silent wave in return to the girl and glanced at Tia, who was already busy making room for her.

"You'll be staying here," Tia informed her.

"So, what's a blood-doll?" Audrina asked.

"You mean you didn't tell her? Tia, we talked about this. She has a right to know," Danika said with a pointed look.

"Tell me what?" Audrina chimed in.

"She knows enough. Let's go girls, hurry! We must not keep them waiting!" Tia returned, avoiding the subject. Despite Audrina's questions, the girls followed after Tia, one by one. She was relieved when Danika chose to be last in line—it gave her a chance to chat and find out the real story to this place.

"What you know of your world doesn't matter down here. As a blood-doll, it's our duty to sacrifice our blood and give them what they need to survive. Besides, they don't take much," Danika informed her once they started moving.

"Our what?! What do you mean, 'down here'? I thought we were still in Crobania?" Audrina asked, trailing behind her.

"You are. Our kingdom rests beneath the mountain to protect them from the mortal world. There is a great shortage of blood in our kingdom of Crobania. You only need to worry about Calvin Pembroke and his friend, Isaac Draven. They're rough when it comes to feeding. But the others appreciate what we provide, which is life," Danika continued on.

"You mean . . . they . . . you can't be serious!" she stammered, coming to know her fate. Dear God, she was going to be sacrificed like a lamb, like one of those cults she'd always heard about.

"It's not as bad as you think. When done right, the experience is actually quite pleasurable." Danika grinned wickedly. Audrina's stomach twisted at the thought of what could happen to her while stepping into the grandest library she'd ever seen. The room was wall-to-wall with full bookshelves, expensive wood, and dozens of formally dressed pale complexions with stiff backs.

Her eyes slid over the hollowed faces with hungry eyes, settling on the one in particular intently staring back at her. The man sitting in the high-backed chair by the fireplace held a strong presence over the others. As if the very floor he walked on was one above them. His large build and wide frame

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gave warning to unspeakable strength and little patience, with a promise of authority radiating from his gaze. Audrina held her breath at the span of his chest stretching the fine fabric of his white dress shirt, testing the limit of the material beneath a high-end black dress coat. His jaw was firm and dusted with a slight shadow of stubble. His piercing dark eyes, direct and unchaste, were a physical blow to her knees. They reminded her of the stolen midnight swims she took in the lake back home.

She'd never had a man look at her like that. As if she were the only one in the room despite the crowd surrounding them. Her legs felt like rubber and her pulse sped while his dark locks swept past his high cheekbones as he peered at her. The intensity of his eyes made her feel small and exposed, as though she wore nothing at all. Her lips parted at the reflection of her soul deep in his pupils. She was damn near paralyzed to her spot, yet spinning inside her own skin. The fullness of his lips appeared soft under the slim nose supporting a thin pair of glasses.

His studious look made him a very attractive man. He was possibly the sexiest man she'd ever laid eyes on. Dear God, who was this man? And why was he looking at her like that? She couldn't stop thinking of him in the most intimate ways. She needed to focus on what was happening. If she wasn't practically nude in front of twenty-some strangers, she almost would've been charmed. Meanwhile, the smirk on the gentleman's face sent her cheeks burning with humiliation. And desire? What was wrong with her? Did she have to be thinking about sex at a time like this?

Audrina covered herself with her arms in hopes of a veil of modesty as some sort of game was being announced. She wanted to be anywhere but here in front of these people. In that moment, she prayed a sinkhole would open under her and swallow her whole. What kind of place was this? Audrina was afraid to think about what kind of monsters existed outside of the small world she knew. She liked her normal world, even if it wasn't equipped with the most attractive man ever. Audrina glanced back at the man in the shadows once more, and she was once again snagged by his eyes. She surprisingly found a sense of security and warmth lingering inside his alluring stare and his stone-faced expression.

His dark mane was tossed here and there, but relaxed and out of his face. His masculine features accosted her from across the room. He was hard to read, she determined. Yet somehow, the gentleman made her feel comfortable under the circumstances. Safe. She didn't know who he was, but she was thankful he took her mind off of the unfortunate turn of events.

"It's time for the blood roulette. Let's get started, shall we?" an older gentleman with slick black hair and sharp yellow teeth announced, rubbing his hands together. "Hannah," he chose after a pause. Audrina didn't know who Isaac or Calvin were that Danika warned her about, but she didn't like the troubled look on Hannah's face. The older gentleman smiled from ear to ear with greedy anticipation. His boasting as Hannah was escorted out of the room only spoke volumes of his distasteful perception of women. Audrina was sickened to think of the girl in his company.

"Come along, Mo. I have a surprise for you," another gentleman said with a smile. Maureen blushed happily before rushing off in his direction. Audrina was relieved as she watched them stroll off together.

"Who picked Hannah?" she whispered to Danika, unable to hush her worrying mind.

"Isaac," she responded as another man called out a name.

"Angela." The crowned man smiled, resembling a King of sorts. Angela curtsied with a knowing smirk in his direction. Audrina assumed he must be the master Tia had mentioned. His outdated suit was littered with blue and gold badges surrounding a silver metal crest while his regal air suffocated the library. The two seemed to share a scandalous secret unbeknownst to their audience. But their sick game was quickly coming to an end. She and Danika were the only ones left. She didn't

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understand what was happening— what were they being chosen for? To give their blood? How could Angela and the others smile over it? Audrina's body tensed at the next name called.

"Audrina!" a much older man called out, with yellow, razor-sharp teeth and desperation oozing from his eyes. Audrina shot a panicked look to the mysterious man in the chair for some kind of requiem to calm the heart now pounding wildly in her chest.

"That's Calvin," Danika warned her. Her words struck Audrina's gut with a blow as her body numbed with alarm. Her legs were ready to give out but she needed to be strong, like she did a few years ago when she'd lost her family in one afternoon from a drunk driver. She was a Henry—the last Henry to be exact—a family name her father prided himself in before the accident, which claimed the lives of her mother, father, and her younger brother a few days before Christmas. Ever since, she'd tried her best to keep them living on through the family name by not dishonoring it. She wouldn't start now with being a coward.

"I'd rather it be me than you," Audrina decided.

"No, I'll go. I've done it before," Danika offered.

"My decision is final," Audrina bravely returned. She was all for getting the hell out of there, but she wasn't about to put someone else in the face of danger in her place while she did it.

"She's reserved," a smooth voice cut in, sending a panicked wave of silence into the grand room.

Audrina glanced at Danika as the crowd moved in the library, revealing the gentleman inside the high-backed chair. Who was he? And what kind of power did he have to quiet an entire room in just a few words? His position in the chair shifted to one displaying power. His shoulders were squared with a relaxed palm holding his chin while sharpening his gaze on her. She imagined that's how he looked like when choosing what cuff links to wear for the day. It was the air of a man who knew exactly what he wanted.

"He never participates. In fact, this is the first time he's taken a blood-doll. I want details later," Danika said with a smirk. "Oh my, Calvin doesn't stand a chance," she added.

The gentleman's eyes burned passively into hers as she looked at him, freezing her to the spot. She definitely wasn't reserved for anyone. Tia would've said as much. Whoever this man was, whatever this man was planning, Audrina wasn't afraid of him as much as she was afraid of Calvin.

"Are you certain, Your High Born?" one of the guards asked, taken back by the order.

"As I said, reserved," the gentleman confirmed.

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Becklan hadn't planned on tonight's sport. He hadn't planned on coming at all, but he wanted to see how the new blood-doll fared. He hadn't taken from a blood-doll in ages, and he wasn't planning on it now. Mountain lions were just as useful when it came to blood. But he didn't like the idea of the woman in Pembroke's company, either. Becklan eyed Audrina carefully as he'd done since the moment she walked into the room.

Despite her plight in the massifs, her body was remarkably striking compared to how she'd appeared on his doorstep. So much so, he had to control his reaction to her in front of his uncle's guests. The girl was beyond beautiful for a human. She was gorgeous, he admitted to himself. He felt esteemed with an enchanting enigma. Becklan couldn't take his eyes off her exotic features as his mouth dried with fascination. Even his fingers itched to run across the hidden curves beneath her garb.

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He was too wrapped inside his thoughts to realize he'd gained the attention of the entire room. Audrina was far more exquisite than he expected for a woman lost on his highland. A simple bath had changed her into a sultan's goddess with the most radiant, sun-kissed skin he'd ever seen. It was a refreshing change from the paleness he was used to inside the walls of the manor. And he was rather shocked by the defiance of his arousal. He wasn't accustomed to having this issue in front of company, much less a social event, but this human was awakening things inside him he thought were forever lost.

It had been a while since the need for a woman had found him. But his duties as Prince didn't exactly leave much room for musical bedsheets. He couldn't tap into her mind like he could with others—he couldn't read her thoughts, not even her desires. Just silence. It worried and excited him to no end, and now he wanted answers. She was a true riddle to his musings. This sexual excitement was a feeling he didn't recognize. What was so different about her? He was used to the bland blood-dolls over the centuries, but nothing came close to this.

The girl's face glowed around a sparkling set of clear blue eyes. Becklan could hardly look away while wanting to lose himself inside them. Her luscious lips were as full as her chest, and both were firm and delicately soft. Her long mahogany hair shined brilliantly just above her hips, giving him a sudden need to grasp it while delivering unthinkable pleasures to her compliant body. He easily pictured her in his bed, beneath him, panting for him. The wayward images pressed a carnal fixation into his mind he just couldn't shake.

He didn't plan on revealing himself so soon, but it was time to end the charade. Becklan was already regretting ignored tasks as of late. But now he was truly considering the idea of ending his latenight adventures. The Crestemere blooddolls were treated and nurtured like queens for their daily sacrifice, so it was unsettling to think Calvin, or anyone else inside their realm, would treat them any differently. But he could smell Audrina's fear from across the room, along with the rose water she'd bathed in. The idea of harm coming to the girls made him sick. The idea of harm coming to Audrina forced an unexpected play in the game of blood roulette.

"Reserved, you say? Suddenly taking an interest, Master Becklan?" Calvin taunted with a grin. Becklan watched as the realization struck Audrina's stunned face, her delicious lips forming an O from his spoken name. "Indeed," Becklan confirmed, shocking the room.