

Court of Crimson Vows

by Aria Sinclair

She bargained with the god of the dead. He kept her.

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The Lord of the Below did not kidnap her. That was the first thing Seren wanted made clear, to anyone who asked, which was everyone.

She had gone willingly. This was a fact that her mother, the Spring Court's most powerful voice, had decided to reframe as coercion, because the alternative — that her daughter had looked at the dark god of the underworld and said *yes, I'll come with you* — was less useful politically.

The truth was this: Caedric, Lord of the Below, had come to the surface for the first time in a century to negotiate a treaty. He had attended the Spring Court's grand convocation, sat in the seat reserved for the dead, and said four words throughout the entire six-hour proceeding. His presence had changed the temperature of the room. The other court members had watched him the way you watched weather.

Seren had watched him with different attention. She had noticed: the way he moved with the ease of someone who owned more than anything in this room could imagine. The way he spoke precisely when he spoke. The way he had looked at her once, across the full width of the court, and not looked away when she met his gaze.

After the convocation she had gone up to him in the corridor.

"Lord Caedric," she said.

"Lady Seren," he said. He had a voice like deep water.

"You didn't say much."

"I said what was required."

"The treaty will fail," she said. "My mother intends to renegotiate clause seven once you're below again."

He looked at her. "I know."

"Then why agree to it?"

"To see who was paying attention," he said. And his eyes — dark, deep, not quite like other eyes — had done something that she had no word for.

"Take me with you," she said. "When you go back."

A silence.

"You know what you're asking," he said.

"I know exactly what I'm asking," she said. "I've known for two years. I've been waiting for you to have a reason to come up."

The Below was not what the stories said. Not bones and darkness and suffering — or not only that; it was the largest place she had ever been in her life, wider than sky, with its own light that came from the rock itself, amber and deep as old honey. Caedric's court was built into the walls of it: halls of black stone and flame-coloured stone, archives that went back to the first age, a river that was cold and clear and not the one the stories named.

She moved through it with the particular orientation of someone making a place their own. She asked questions — good ones, he said, which was how she knew they were good — about the governance of the dead, the mechanics of the Below, the ecology of a place where things did not grow in the ordinary sense but did not stop, either.

He answered. He had been waiting for questions like hers for a very long time; that was visible in the way he answered, the slight forward lean, the sentences that went longer than they usually did because she asked the follow-up.

"My mother," she said, on the fourth day, "will be negotiating treaty clause seven."

"Yes."

"Will you let her."

"For now," he said. "Until you tell me not to."

She looked at him. "I'm not a political instrument."

"No," he agreed, immediately. "You're here because you chose to be. What your mother does with the politics of it is her concern, not mine."

"Then why 'until I tell you not to'?"

"Because it may annoy you at some point," he said. "And your annoyance is a useful signal."

She considered this. It was the most honest thing anyone in a position of power had said to her.

"You've been ruling alone," she said.

"For a very long time."

"Why?"

He was quiet for a moment. The amber light of the Below moved slowly around them, as it always did — not static, not dynamic, something between.

"There was no one," he said, "who was interested in what this place actually was. Only in what it was feared to be."

She looked at the amber walls. The archive doors. The clear river.

"I'm interested," she said.

"I know," he said. "I could tell from across the convocation hall."

The formal bond came later — three months later, by which time it was not ceremony but acknowledgement. The Below had already shifted around her in the way of a place accepting an occupant: the amber light seemed to find her, the archive ordered itself more usefully when she spent time there, the river, she was fairly sure, was warmer.

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Caedric watched this happen with an expression she had learned to read. It looked like nothing from the outside. It was everything.

"The bond," she said, one evening, in the room that had become her favourite — high windows of black stone, amber light, his desk and her reading chair, both of which were there now without anyone having planned it. "What does it require."

"Nothing you haven't already given," he said.

"And what is that?"

"Your presence," he said. "Your attention. Your questions." He looked at her. "The rest is — there is a ritual. If you want it. It's not required."

"What does the ritual do?"

"It formalises," he said. "To the Below. To the dead. To the Spring Court, above, which will have to respond to it."

"Tell me what it involves."

He told her. Clearly, sequentially, holding nothing back. It was, she thought, a description of him — direct and specific and prepared for her to say no.

She did not say no.

The ritual was old enough that the words were in the first language, which she had been learning from the archives. He spoke them and she answered in the same tongue and the amber light moved differently when she did, brighter, warmer, and she felt it as a change in the quality of the air rather than any grand performance.

"That's it?" she said.

"That's it," he said.

She looked at him. The Below was around them, enormous and amber. He was looking at her with his particular quality of attention, which she had

been given freely for three months and was now, by ancient compact, permanent.

"I want to do something the stories also don't describe correctly," she said.

"What do the stories say?" he said, and the deep-water voice was doing something to the word *stories*.

"That you're terrifying," she said. "Cruel. Cold."

"And the reality?"

"Patient," she said. "Deliberate. Careful." She stepped forward.

"Remarkably good at answering questions."

He looked at her without the composure that was usually there — something underneath it, older and warmer than the amber light.

"Seren," he said.

"Yes," she said.

What followed was not in any of the stories, because the stories had been told by people who had never been here, who had never seen the Lord of the Below look at someone the way he was looking at her — like she was the thing the Below had been waiting for, and like he was not entirely sure he deserved it, and like he was going to try anyway.

She held him and said his name into the amber dark, and he made a sound that was not a lord of anything, just a person, finally, with someone to be a person with.

Afterwards, the Below was very quiet. The river ran clear and cold. Somewhere in the archive, the first-language texts were accessible to her now in ways they hadn't been before.

"The Spring Court," she said, to the ceiling.

"Will adjust," he said.

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"My mother—"

"Will also adjust," he said. "Eventually."

"You said until I told you not to."

"I did."

"Don't let her have clause seven," she said.

He made the sound she had started collecting — low, specific, hers.

"Noted," he said.

Outside, above: the living world, doing its seasonal business without her.
Below: the amber dark and the clear river and the archive and the desk and
the chair and three hundred thousand years of a place that had finally, after
considerable waiting, found its queen.

She had gone willingly. She had chosen correctly.