

Excerpt

~Franka~

I remembered that look.

I *relished* that look.

Not only on my Antoine but any lover I'd had (but, obviously, getting it from Antoine was far more rewarding).

It was a look I worked toward, putting great energy and imagination into it, losing myself in these endeavors, feeling free of my name, my history, my secrets, my responsibilities, and reveling in my success as if I'd scaled mountains.

It was my greatest talent outside, of course (as any good Drakkar would excel), honing in on any vulnerability and manipulating it for the greatest possible gain—coin, jewels, furs, favors, silence, information, or simply for amusement.

Seeing the look on Noctorno at that moment, I knew Circe too had performed well (admirably well, I might add, considering her dismal past).

I also recognized—focusing on it keenly—what Circe might have missed, or perhaps what Noctorno hid from her understanding, or simply just sensing, how she came to him.

He was not done.

Oh no.

If she had not given indication she wished him out of her bedchamber, he'd still be in it.

Indeed, he might be in it all night, and not to sleep.

He might have been in it, perhaps, for days.

As these thoughts flitted in my mind, I became aware he'd fully entered the room, was stopped not far from my chair, and was standing, chin tipped down, eyes regarding me with a scrutiny that I found so uncomfortable I actually shifted in my seat.

I ceased this reaction the instant I became aware of it, appalled at myself.

Giving something away so easily? Especially something like discomfiture?

You've ruined me, I snapped silently at Antoine.

My dead lover had no rejoinder.

"You okay?" Noctorno asked.

"Am I what?" I asked in return.

His head gave a slight twitch before he went on, "You okay? All right?" His voice lowered. "It's been a tough day, babe, for all of us. Including you."

I looked beyond him to the fire, lifting my wine to my lips but not sipping it until after I murmured, "I'm perfectly fine."

"Yeah, right," he stated, and the disbelief veritably dripping from his tone made my gaze flick immediately back to him.

This meant I watched as he sauntered right in front of me to the chair accompanying mine, threw his lengthy frame in it and reached for the wine at the table that separated our seats.

He also reached for the extra glass.

These were seats, I shall add, that were turned at corners to each other with a small, round table in between, so my knee was nearly touching his.

He poured.

It was on the tip of my tongue to share that I had not invited him to attend me.

Alas, I became distracted by his long fingers, and the words died in my mouth.