

THE  
BELOW KING'S  
HUNTER

A PREQUEL SHORT STORY  
TO *THE MIDNIGHT ARROW*

Copyright © 2024 by Zoey Draven

All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and events are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events, places, or persons are purely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Audiobook Production by Marcio Catalano of Atlantis Audio  
Editing by Mandi Andrejka at Inky Pen Editorial Services  
Cover Art by Naomi Lane

For more information visit [www.ZoeyDraven.com](http://www.ZoeyDraven.com)

# THE BELOW KING'S HUNTER

---

A PREQUEL SHORT STORY TO THE MIDNIGHT  
ARROW

ZOEY DRAVEN



# THE BELOW KING'S HUNTER FULLY IMMERSIVE AUDIOBOOK

*My friend and narrator, Marcio Catalano, gave me an incredibly kind and special gift.*

*He produced a fully immersive audiobook of the short story you're about to read,  
The Below King's Hunter.*

*With a multicast of talented narrators, original music, and sound effects, it's a unique and fun experience...and we encourage you to listen as you read along.*

# AUDIOBOOK CAST

**Marcio Catalano** as Lorik

**Angelina Rocca** as Marion

**Aaron Shedlock** as the Below King

**Stephanie Nemeth Parker** as Rysana

**Victoria Connolly** as Thela

**Sean Orlikowski** as Silas



PRODUCED BY ATLANTIS AUDIO



## THE BELOW KING'S HUNTER

**A**n east wind pushed the drizzle in such a way that it flurried like snow. A strong gust would make the droplets sliver and dance. Then the wind would calm and the village of Rolara would appear picturesque, a frozen landscape against the darkness of the Black Veil forest, standing tall like a sentinel at its side.

It was market day. The moon cycle had begun anew, its silvery light like a timekeeper for the villagers below it, a dial turning. Tables lined the pathway into the center of the village. Wrinkled, colorful cloths were pressed to their surfaces to hide the cracking, warped wood beneath them. That day, there were twenty-three vendors but only twenty-two tables. One vendor didn't bother, selling his skewers of Massadian bird right off the firepit he'd built in front of himself. Crouched down in the muddy earth, he wiped the drizzle from his eyes with the edge of the tattered sheet he was using to protect his glowing embers and flickering flames.

I found Rolara to be a sleepy little place. Old. Dull. It wasn't beautiful. Traveling along the main road, one might pass the village by, wrinkling their nose. Olimara, the larger village on the other side of the Black Veil, boasted intricate building facades and watch towers chiseled and carved by only the best Allavari stone masons. Their archives rivaled the capital's,

drawing scholars and masters from all over Allavar. Its wealth was apparent from the pristine condition of its cobble-lined streets and the nature and dress of its inhabitants, for only the wealthy could afford to live there. Situated along the coast, Olimara could access trading ports—imports and exports—that Rolara could not.

*Stuck.* Sometimes Rolara felt abandoned. Gridlocked next to the Black Veil. Olimara thought this village was cursed. Most in Allavar believed the same.

But to me, Rolara was charming. There was a peace and a quietness here that I craved, that eased a frenetic pulse in my chest. It was a simple life here. It intrigued me.

There was a figure emerging from the Black Veil, making me straighten against the stone wall of the apothecary behind me, my arms uncrossing as my black wings twitched. My abdomen tightened at the sight of her...and then a sharp lash of annoyance followed.

I would never admit—not even to myself—that I'd been looking for her at the market, that a curl of disappointment had spiraled tight in my chest when I'd found her missing from her usual place.

The auburn-haired human woman looked perturbed as she pulled her cart behind her. There was a streak of brown mud across her cheek, and I saw that the wheel of her cart was sticking. She muscled it over a fallen tree limb that cut across the road into the village, nearly stumbling, and I knew why she was late. The Black Veil would not be kind in this weather, the earth sodden and spongy, as if it wanted to pull the living beneath it.

Her hair was damp, like she'd just bathed, and the stray fantasy filtered through my mind before I could stop it. I wondered what she'd look like drying her hair by a roaring fire in the hearth, flames warming her skin, a few stray droplets from her bath trailing down her back. I imagined tracing them with my tongue, making her shiver.

*Enough,* I thought, gritting my jaw.

From what I'd gathered during brief conversations with the villagers, her name was Marion. Marion Liss, though most children who'd grown up orphans on Allavar almost never kept *Liss* in their names when they became of age.



My lips twitched when I caught her muttered curse, even as far away as I was. When she cleared the fallen branch, she whacked the bolt on the wheel with the edge of her boot. It squealed as she continued to trudge down the road, drawing others' gazes. I watched as she ducked her head, keeping her eyes firmly on the ground in front of her.

My gaze tracked her as I leaned back against the apothecary, relaxing into the stone. I liked the rain—we didn't have it in the Below. The first time I'd felt it on my skin, I'd marveled at how light it felt. And the smell in the Black Veil when it rained? It was a unique earthiness that reminded me of Aeylara's Caves of the Fallen, a place my father had frequented when I'd been younger. It was nothing more than a beautiful tomb...and yet I'd found peace there.

Marion stopped at her usual place, her neighboring vendors having anticipated her arrival and leaving her enough space.

*Twenty-three tables now*, I thought, watching as she unfolded the rickety, hinged thing, setting its thin legs down into the mud. She frowned down at her boots as they squelched and then smoothed her cloth—inky blue like a midnight cosmia bloom—over the table.

I watched as she pulled dark-colored vials and rounded bottles—green and brown in color—and black jars with stoppered metal lids. Silver wax, shining and smooth, sealed every last one, having dripped down the sides before it'd dried into place.

At the first hint of Marion's wares, villagers began to approach, their pace quickening when they saw others do the same. By the time she unpacked the last bottle, there was a line stretching like a serpent down the road. I watched as she flashed that soft smile, exchanging money with a graceful hand. Her actions were unhurried, but she didn't encourage small talk like some of her nearby vendors. She kept the line moving until she served the last one...and I watched, transfixed.

It should've alarmed me that I was unable to look away from her. Even from this distance I could smell her. Her scent made venom flood over my tongue, beguiling and sweet.

My skin began to itch.

"Trouble sleeping, Lorik Ravael?" came a voice to my left. Slowly, I

turned my head. Rysana. Her mouth appeared too wide when she smiled, her gray eyes glittering like the drizzle of the day. “Or perhaps you need salve to heal all your scars? I hear she’s a gifted witch, with many little potions to help soothe one’s demons.”

I chuffed out a short breath. “What are you doing here? I thought you slunk off to Olimara long ago.”

“I found work here,” Rysana told me, lifting one shoulder. “Can’t be too choosy in the Above. You like the witch? I’ve seen you watching her.”

I pushed away from the wall of the apothecary, finding it concerning that I hadn’t noticed Rysana in the village before now. Alarming, even. Was I too absorbed with the human woman that I was losing my sense?

Leaning closer to Rysana, I watched as her eyes widened. *Good*. Even here, she knew to be afraid.

“Your glamour is slipping, Rysana,” I said, gently like I would to a lover, brushing the backs of my claws over the edge of her lips. She scowled, but I saw her mouth shrink slightly, appearing more suited to her smaller features. I smiled, flashing my fangs. “Diligence. Our king would have no choice but to summon you back home. I’ll be watching.”

“He has no power here,” she said, turning on her heel. I didn’t watch her go, but her lingering words made me feel restless. I made a mental note to report that Rysana was living in Rolara.

Marion’s line had dwindled down to nothing, only a few bottles remaining on her table. Like I was tethered, she drew me to her. My booted feet squelched in the mud. There was a buzzing ache building under my skin.

*I shouldn’t do this*, I thought, my fists balling at my sides.

But then her brown eyes lifted. Our gazes collided. I knew that there was no going back now. The choice had been taken from me with the briefest of glimpses.

There was a red flush on the edges of her cheeks when I stopped at her table. But if it was from the cold or my sudden presence, I couldn’t be certain. The front of my thighs pressed into the flimsy wood, but it was a barrier between us that I was grateful for.

For a moment, I could only look at her. There was a heaviness in my

skull, and it throbbed, perfectly synced, with my heartbeat. My pupils dilated, making the dreary day appear brighter, luminous, and I could see the streaks of bronze in her irises.

For a moment, I felt like I couldn't speak. A tongue-tied boy with her scent filtering through my nostrils, words lodged in my throat like I'd swallowed stones.

Then...the edges of my lips curled and it felt I could breathe again.

"I've seen a lot of vendors at different market days throughout Allavar," I said, placing one palm flat on the table to lean forward. I heard her breath hitch, heard the sound when she swallowed hard. "You are by far the most popular. Not even the female in Olimara who sold ice puffs during the heat wave had a line as long as yours."

"Ice...puffs?" she repeated slowly, her gaze rapt on me. I sensed wariness inlaid with curiosity, puzzlement warring with reservation.

"Ever had them, little witch?" I asked, watching her full lips part. The sweep of her dark lashes fluttered low. The color of her cheeks darkened, and the smile tugged harder at my mouth. "They melt on your tongue like a snowflake, but their sweetness lingers for hours."

Her lashes swept up in a quick motion, and the sear of her eyes made it difficult to breathe. The muscles in my thighs tightened, my left wing twitching at the joint at my back—pulsing with the heartbeat I spied on the column of her neck.

"No," she murmured. "I can't say I ever have. I don't make it a habit to travel to Olimara, especially during heat waves."

My spine straightened. Her saucy remark was surprisingly flippant. I *liked* it. I had to bite back the grin that would've had my fangs flashing in the drizzle.

"And I imagine that something with a name like ice puffs wouldn't last a step beyond that village," she added, her shoulders shrugging, a small smile skirting over her face before her eyes lowered again. I watched them take account of her remaining vials and bottles. "Did you need something in particular?"

My mind flashed back to the fantasy of her in front of the hearth, her auburn wavy hair beginning to curl at the ends as it dried.

*Enough.*

I blinked hard, refocusing.

“I’m afraid I only have sleeping potions left,” she continued, pinching the neck of a slim green bottle to show me, its silver wax seal flashing. “A swig before bed and you’ll wonder how you ever slept before it.”

“Dangerous, don’t you think?” I asked, eyeing the thickened contents sloshing inside. “Maybe that’s why you have such a long line every market day. They forget how to sleep without you and your pretty potions. They—you—become an addiction.”

Marion frowned, a small down turning of her lips. She placed the bottle back on the table with a small thud.

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t have any left, don’t you think?” she told me, the brief flash of her wry smile stunning. The last three words mocked the ones I’d used moments before.

*Fuck.* I even liked it when she sassed me.

I swallowed. “I’ll take it.”

Her smile never dropped. “Excellent. That’ll be thirty *ryn*.”

“Aren’t they usually twenty-five?” I asked, patting down my vest pocket, feeling the hard square chips of stone there. Allavari black oryx, a precious gemstone mined from the northern stretch of the Massadian Mountains.

“For you, thirty,” came her reply, softened with the delicate edge of her smile. “It’s late, and I’m nearly out of potions. Wouldn’t want the villagers to feel slighted, especially in their terrible state of addiction. It might upset them.”

My laugh was low and husky as I handed over three squares of *ryn*. “The extra five *ryn* is your hazard fee? In case of an uprising? An angry mob?”

“Exactly.”

She plucked the money from between my fingertips. Our hands brushed. My thumb stroked along hers, just once, and I heard her sharp intake of air.

There was a strange look in her eyes. Wild and uncertain and excited. Like there was a part of her that couldn’t believe she was speaking with me this way. Like a part of her didn’t recognize herself.

*Or maybe she doesn’t know who she truly is,* came the stray thought. This

little witch in the woods, the only Rolarian who dared to live in the Black Veil. All alone. Hiding away? From what?

I wanted to know everything. Everything about her. I was greedy for any new scrap she fed me. It was a discomfoting place to be for someone like me...in the thrall of this new obsession. I couldn't understand it because it didn't make sense.

But I wasn't my father, who lived his life tethered to law and logic. He would never bear a crime marking. Not a single one. His honor and virtue would not allow it. It would be a small death to him.

Me? I understood that there were deep folds within the pages of this life, that sometimes those pages were torn or wrinkled or stained or ripped apart at their very seams. I understood that sometimes one needed to bend the law and that a crime didn't make you an evil being. Life was not black and white. Instead it was like a crystal with many faceted sides that were shadowed one moment and glittering the next, depending on the cast of the light.

Marion was brightly lit before me, her eyes glittering like crystals...but I feared I might cast her into shadow one day if I wasn't careful. If I was reckless.

Even still, I stayed, the front of my thighs pressed to the edge of her table. I'd paid for the sleeping potion, and yet I didn't reach for it. Our eyes were holding. Her tantalizing scent made venom drip on my tongue, sweet like ice puffs from Olimara.

I wondered what her blood would taste like, silken and hot and deliciously satisfying. I wondered what her lips would taste like.

My fangs pricked into my bottom lip, and I took a sudden step back. Behind me, my wings flared, and I feared that I'd been so consumed by her that I might've dropped my glamour for a brief moment. But she gave no indication that she'd seen my true face, so my wings tucked against my back, relaxing.

*Hypocrite*, I thought, seeing as I'd just reprimanded Rysana for the same thing.

Behind me, someone bumped into my shoulder as they skirted around me. An older human male.

“I’ll take all the sleeping potions you have left,” said the man, a note of desperation in his voice that had me smirking at the human beauty over his head. *See?* I thought, smug. Marion caught my eye. The look was disapproving, but I swore I caught the pull of a smile.

“Of course, Silas,” she replied. “I have five left. One hundred twenty *ryn*.”

Only twenty-five *ryn* each for him, then. Not thirty.

“Oh,” Silas said, reaching a trembling hand into his pocket. The square chips in his palm as he counted them carefully made Marion’s lips press. He was short. “Only four bottles, on second thought.”

Marion pushed over five, and Silas began to protest.

“Take them,” Marion insisted as she took the *ryn* from his outstretched hand. “You’re doing me a favor. Now I can leave sooner. You know the village always makes me restless.”

“I’ll pay you the rest next month,” he promised.

“Please, don’t,” she replied, embarrassed.

Silas frowned, but his eyes were already on the five bottles. He had a brown cloth bag slung over his shoulder, and he began to nestle the potions inside. Distracted, he almost took mine, but my hand flashed out, snagging it quickly.

He looked at me, startled, his mouth agape. I grinned. My fangs flashed. “That one’s mine.”

I had no use for sleeping potions. Yet there was an alarming part of me that wanted something of hers. Something that she’d made. Something that she’d poured her time and talents into.

“My apologies,” Silas murmured, nodding at Marion quickly in appreciation and then scurrying away.

I was still grinning when I looked back to Marion.

Her brow was raised. “Possessive, aren’t you?”

My smile widened. I looked down to the potion bottle, its content sloshing inside when I shook it. Something shimmered within it like starlight. *Glowfly magic*, I realized.

“You have no idea,” I rasped, catching her eyes once more.

Her table was empty now. She was free to leave, just as she’d claimed

she wanted. But her feet were rooted into place like the ancient river trees in the Black Veil, whose trunks were so wide that they seemed like small mountains, immovable and eternal.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her to Grimstone's for an Allavari ale. Wasn't that what these villagers did to court one another? I wanted to look into her glittering eyes in a dark back booth and listen to her voice. I wondered what would make her laugh or if those were as hard to come by as her smiles.

I wanted to steal her kiss and feel her whispered sigh across my tongue.

Instead I took another step away, feeling the weight of the potion in my palm.

"Take caution on your way home," I told her, nodding my head to the entrance of the Black Veil.

Her lashes lowered, and she began to ball up her table cloth. "Thank you for your concern. But I don't really believe in all the stories the villagers whisper about. The Severs in there have always steered clear of me."

My throat tightened. "You should believe them. There is always some truth in stories."

Marion's hand paused, and she looked up at me again. Just then, I felt a searing heat at my inner wrist. I looked down, saw the mark appear, shimmering across my skin.

"Have a good evening, little witch," I said, the edge of my lip curling.

Then I turned away, my palm gripping the rounded bottle tight enough that I thought I might shatter it.

*No good will come from this*, I reminded myself, my jaw gritting.

The mark at my wrist tingled like a touch. Warm and distracting. I was being summoned home.



The entrance to the Below was nothing more than a hollowed-out tree trunk. Once, it had been splintered from within by black fire, an ancient spell cast by Veranis Sarin. Other portals had been created over the years, spread out across Allavar, but this was my preferred entrance. The closest to

home and nestled deep within the confines of the Black Veil, where very few dared to venture.

I pushed the little witch from my mind and stepped into the tree. The magic shot through me like a spear of lightning, and I breathed deep, feeling my shoulders relax. I pressed my fingertips into the blackened, deadened bark, answering the call with magic of my own. *Reciprocity*. The Below gave to me, and so I gave to it. I felt the energy spread from beneath my own hand, like ink over wet parchment.

The portal veil was like the gossamer wings of a glowfly. Delicate and light and pierced easily. When I felt it split, I stepped through.

The air was pure and crisp. I would never get tired of that first deep breath of home.

I let my glamour drop as the magic surged in, filling my lungs, wrapping around my bones. My strength returned in a dizzying rush, and I wanted to bellow at the relief.

Once I caught my breath, I stepped from the portal. The Sarin Woods spread around me, serene and hushed. Behind me, there wasn't a deadened trunk like in the Black Veil. Instead I stepped from Sarin's Temple, made of alabaster Aeysonian stone, the strands of silver ore weaving through it like glittering thread. In moonlight, the small temple glowed like a beacon.

The sun was nearly gone beyond the trees, and I cut through to the river path which would lead me into Aeyson, the Below King's city.

As I walked farther, the gentle trickle of the stream crescendoed into the violent rush of a river. The soft and spongy forest floor became unyielding paved road. The sky darkened. When I neared the south bridge into Aeyson, I heard the roar of the waterfall as it tumbled into the great sea below the city.

The blue lights were beginning to glow in their glass lanterns along the bridge, casting pools of light at my feet. Stray glowflies—brightbell glowflies, perhaps—flittered across the bridge. A hive must've been nearby, perhaps tucked next to the river.

The gray cobbled stone clattered beneath my boots. I saw a tall figure standing at the end of the bridge. Someone I didn't expect to see here.



“What are you doing down here?” I asked, approaching the Kelvarian male. I frowned, noticing we were alone. “Without a guard?”

The Below King rested his arms against the ledge, peering down at the lake beyond. The waterfall tumbled right below us, the river’s path ending at the bridge, and it cast spray upward, misting the air. I blinked it away from my eyes, turning my back to lean against the banister.

“Am I not allowed to walk within my city?” he asked. His lips curled, and he cast me a sideways glance, his silver eyes catching the rising moon. “May I remind you, Lorik Ravael, that I was like you once? Free to come and go as I pleased, without needing to answer to anyone.”

“You were not the king then,” I said simply, crossing my arms over my chest, the sleeping potion still hanging loosely from my grip. “And my father will not be happy you are unaccompanied, given the...”

I trailed off, and the Below King looked at me knowingly, almost daring me to continue.

“Given the disturbances of late,” I finished.

His eyes lowered, the line of his mouth thinning for a brief moment.

“What is that?” he asked, nodding at the bottle in my possession.

“A sleeping potion,” I answered, bringing it up to my eyes and giving it a shake. Blue sparks glowed brightly within before they faded.

“Having trouble sleeping, Ravael? A week or two home might help cure that.”

Hadn’t Rysana asked me the same thing?

I sighed and turned, scanning the bridge and the path from Sarin Woods I’d just come from. I’d seen no Shades and didn’t scent any on the road inward either. We were alone. This section of Aeysara was always quiet this late. He knew that. We wouldn’t be disturbed here.

“Perhaps I purchased it for you, my king,” I said.

“How thoughtful. I might have need of it soon if these *disturbances* continue.”

“Why did you summon me?” I asked, watching him carefully. “Has something else happened?”

The Below King turned. There was a lantern between us, and it cast his face in blue light, making his gray skin appear darker. His black wings—the

scars silver and thin across them—hung heavy at his back, dragging on the cobblestones. He was wearing a long dark blue tunic, the hem cutting at his knees, a slit running up the side to his hips. Embroidered into the fabric was silver thread, the pattern intricate, hand stitched by an expert seamstress.

His black pants were neat and molded loosely to his legs. Not a single scuff mark marred his silver-toed boots. At his wrists were glittering Aeysonian metal cuffs—a gift from a Kelvarian sorceress when he'd taken the throne, forged and soaked in magic to channel his own power more easily.

Behind him, Aeyson sat, quiet and peaceful, following the path that led from the bridge. The road weaved and swirled across the flat land before heading up the mountain pass and running below along the cliffside, homes built into the rock. The road widened just after the bridge, and there were two statues on either side. Tall and wide and eternal like the river trees in the Black Veil. One was of Veranis Sarin. The other was of his Hunter, the Below King's own bloodline.

“There is a rumor of a sorceress who lives in the Outer Lands,” he told me. A chill prickled the back of my neck. “Within the Ashen woodlands. An Alashen sorceress.”

“Did Thela tell you this?” I wondered, my tone darkening.

“Yes,” he told me. “So has your father.”

I straightened, frowning.

“He told me he saw her.”

“He did?” I rasped, shock souring my belly. “When? That day?”

“He told me she saved Thela's life with magic he's never seen before. Never felt before.”

I processed the words, knowing that if my father had spoken them, they must've been true. I knew that with certainty, though it only brought more questions rising. Why hadn't he ever told me this? Had my mother known? And Thela...

“Thela told me,” I started quietly, “that she was mad. That the sorceress spoke to things not there. That she told Thela she had cut the horns away from her mother's and her grandmother's bodies and adhered them to her own head when they died. So they would always be with her.”

The Below King's lips pressed together and his chin lowered. "Yes. The Alashen people believe magic flows from their goddess through their horns first. They consider them sacred."

"Then what of the sorceress? She cut her own from her head to replace them with her mother's and grandmother's? Is this really what we've been driven to, Kyavar? To enlist the aid of a witch in the woods, driven mad with grief?"

The Below King held my gaze.

"And what if it is the Alashen doing this to us?" I questioned. "This blood magic, turning our people into Shades, condemning them to a lifeless existence...this kind of power hasn't been seen since Veranis."

"If Alashen magic is responsible, then perhaps Alashen magic is the only way to stop it."

I scoffed, the summoning mark on my wrist burning. Instead of a comfort, it felt like my skin was twisting.

"I have to consider all possibilities," Kyavar murmured. "I know you will understand that. That is why I am tasking you with finding the sorceress, Lorik. I want you to lead a scouting party out at dawn. Don't return to Aeyesara until you find her."

I closed my eyes, feeling the mist of the waterfall brush my cheeks. It reminded me of the drizzle in Rolara. It reminded me of Marion, with her damp hair and flushed skin.

"And if she's dead? They encountered her nearly twenty years ago."

"Then bring back her bones," my king ordered. "We lost ten more Aeyesarians today. Even more in the villages. They will all become Shades within the week."

When I opened my eyes, I saw he had already turned away. His footsteps echoed on the path that led back into city. Just then, I heard the night chants from the sky temple lift into the sky. Beautiful voices, so ethereal and pure, echoed through the city. So haunting, they pierced me through my chest. The backs of my eyes burned.

"I thought he'd never leave."

I started, peering down over the side of the bridge.

Thela blinked up at me, completely soaked to the bone and shivering.

She had tucked herself beneath the bridge, leaning against one of the support columns, situated on a precarious stone ledge right before the waterfall tumbled over the cliff.

“Get up here,” I growled. “What if you had gone over the falls?”

“Then I would’ve swum to the north bank and walked back home,” she answered, grinning, wiping the water from her eyes. Thela had been born without wings, which made her position at the edge of the waterfall all the more concerning.

I leaned over the side of the bridge, my arm outstretched, and she grabbed it. I hauled her up easily, only feeling the tight knot release in my chest when she had her two feet firmly planted. Water dripped off her clothes, making a large pool at her feet.

“What were you thinking?” I asked, my nostrils flaring.

“I was thinking that Father would be upset if Kyavar was unaccompanied.”

“Don’t call him that,” I reprimanded.

“You did,” she challenged, raising a brow.

“That’s different.”

“How? He’s your king too.”

*Stubborn female*, I thought.

“If Father finds out you were under the bridge—”

“But he won’t, will he?” she asked, her eyes shining as she wrung out her long black hair.

I bit the inside of my cheek, my fist squeezing around the potion bottle.

“You two still act like I’m a child,” Thela observed, sighing. She wandered to the banister, taking the same place that the Below King had. She inspected the stone, running her hands across it like she could still feel the heat of his palm there. She stroked the stone like it was his hand. “Do you think you’ll ever see me as anything else?”

There was a tendril of hurt in her tone, and it made the anger in my chest deflate like it had been pierced by a needle. Slow but steady.

“I’m the same age our brother was when he died. Older, actually,” she continued. My brow furrowed. Had it been that long already? She gave me a

sad smile. “Isn’t that strange? I realized it the other day, and it nearly brought me to tears.”

“Yes,” I answered softly, joining her to peer down at the great sea below as the sky temple chants filled the quiet. Our shoulders touched. “Yes, that is strange.”

Thela’s expression was calm as she regarded me. We studied one another, and I knew what she was thinking.

“I’m not taking you with me,” I informed her. “And you know better than to eavesdrop on a conversation between the Below King and his Hunter. If anyone else had discovered you...”

“I didn’t expect you to stroll up,” she argued, rolling her eyes. “He was here for a long time. And you haven’t been home in nearly five days.”

“Did you miss me, sister?” I teased.

Thela huffed.

“I *worry* for you,” she corrected.

My smile came easily, and I bumped her shoulder with my wing. “What is of danger to me in the Above?”

Her eyes drifted down to the potion bottle in my grip.

“You tell me,” she replied, reaching for the bottle.

The back of my neck tingled, and my smile slowly died. Thela always saw far more than she should. She was like our mother in that way.

I watched as she shook the potion, her face lighting up with bright blue before the glowfly magic faded. Her eyes met mine.

“She’s talented, whoever she is,” she commented, returning the potion. “Does Father know?”

“There’s nothing to know,” I rasped, frustration coiling in my chest.

“Very well,” she said. “I know where the sorceress is—I remember the way. You should take me with you.”

“I already said I wouldn’t,” I told her. “And Father knows the way. In fact, he probably remembers the path better than you. You were only eight years old.”

“A child’s memory is sometimes better. We absorb more. We *feel* more,” she said. “I remember everything. Everything about her. The color of her eyes. The two different shades of her horns, one longer and more curled

than the other. Her mother's, I think, that one. The knots in her hair. The way she smelled. She was so very...sad. So sad, Lorik."

Discomfort threaded down my spine, making my wings twitch. "My answer is no, Thela. Don't ask me again."

My sister drew in a deep breath and then released it. "Yes, Hunter."

A sound like a growl made its way up my throat.

"Do you like being in the Above more than being home? Is that why you stay away so long?"

The question was vulnerable, and my brow furrowed. "Of course not. Is that what you think?"

But I thought I tasted the bitter tinge of a lie on my tongue, making me question my answer. *Do I?* I wondered, scowling.

"The Above...it's different. An entirely new experience, an entirely new place—one we've only ever heard about in stories, Thela," I continued. "There are things I like about the Above. Things I don't. Just like home."

"But?"

My lips lifted. I leaned my arms across the banister and let my hand dangle over the edge, the potion bottle swaying.

"*But* being home does have its own responsibilities. They are beginning to weigh heavier. So heavy sometimes it's hard to breathe. I think I've been a coward," I admitted, feeling Thela's hand rest on my forearm, the warmth of her touch comforting and familiar. "Hiding away in the Above when I am needed here most."

The shameful words hurtled from me.

"I have this recurring dream where you leave for the Above and you never come back," Thela admitted quietly. "I worry it will take you away one day."

"Don't *ever* think that," I scolded, my tone harsh. I felt raw from my admission, and hearing my sister's words cut even deeper.

"We would be all right if you decided that," Thela told me. My lips parted, and I swung my head to regard her. A sting of hurt pinched in my chest. Her gaze strayed to the bottle. "If you wanted something more there. If it made you happy, I would forgive you."

I didn't know what it was...this feeling that came over me. I felt like a

statue, an eternal river tree, my legs heavy on the bridge. I felt rooted into place like the ancient statues or slotted into the stone of the road beneath my feet.

*This is your home, I told myself. Don't let silly fantasies blind you from duty, from family.*

My fingers relaxed. Thela gasped as she watched the potion bottle disappear over the edge of the waterfall.

She studied me carefully, but I swung my arm around her shoulders and turned her from the bridge, leading her down the familiar road that I'd walked the entirety of my life. As a boy, I'd often sneak into Sarin Woods. Even before I knew how, I'd attempt to open the portal, sitting in Sarin's Temple for hours as the magic floated over me. So frustrating because I couldn't grasp it. Not yet. I hadn't understood the reciprocity of it then.

"Let's go home," I told her.

"You mean that?"

"Yes. I have to be up before dawn to find your sorceress, after all, and now I find myself short of a sleeping potion."

"A river will always find the sea," Thela murmured, her hand patting mine. "Though there are many twists and turns in between."

"I haven't heard that in many years," I commented quietly, my eyes casting down onto the paved road. Something our grandmother had always said.

"I think about it every day," Thela told me.

We passed between the statues of Veranis Sarin and his Hunter. There was a break in song from the sky temple, and Aeylara was blissfully quiet, the golden lights in the distance twinkling. Welcoming.

"Your potion will wash up on the bank by the morning," Thela told me, giving me a sly smile. "Things meant for you will always find their way back to you. And knowing you, Lorik...you'll find it just fine."

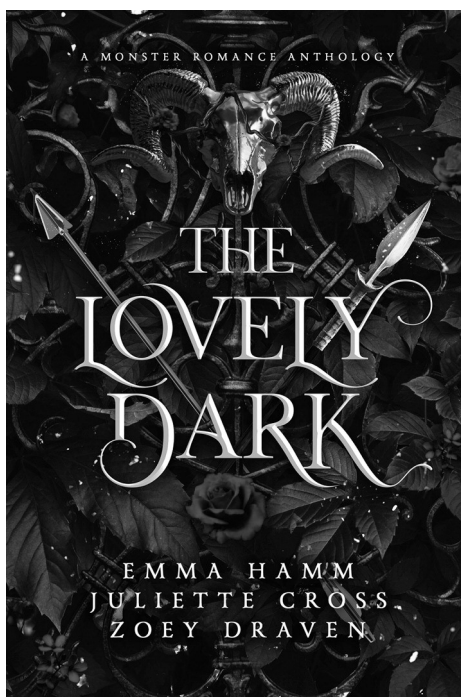
# THE LOVELY DARK: A MONSTER ROMANCE ANTHOLOGY

This short story is a prequel to...

## **THE MIDNIGHT ARROW**

by Zoey Draven

One of three standalone short novels in:



### *The Midnight Arrow*

Marion enjoys her quiet life in the shadowed woods, selling her healing



potions in the village by day and tending to her otherworldly garden by night.

But then she saves a devilishly handsome Kylorr, with his powerful wings and sharp fangs, shot through with an arrow and bleeding to death one moonlit night.

Her mysterious Kylorr awakens new desires—but she fears he might be hiding dark secrets of his own...

EBOOK AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

## CONNECT WITH ZOEY

SCAN THE QR CODE WITH YOUR PHONE TO  
ACCESS HER LINKS:



*I'm usually on Instagram...come say hi!*