

The Crusher of Kings

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For You

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It was always thought that she was a myth. A legend warning the monarchs of Ivoren that even the most noble of men can be corrupted. That to trust with the heart was to doom the mind. And when a King dared to push his boundaries, she was always there to press him back into place.

Rumor had it that she was a great seductress who would leave the men in her wake crushed beyond repair. That her powers as an enchantress were incomparable, and that any to pique her vengeful interest were certain to learn their true place in the world. No man was beyond her skills to warn or destroy.

Nor any woman.

I learned it the hard way, and now I warn the women that come after me. The woman whose skin is painted ivory, with hair a flaming auburn color, and whose eyes are the cold jewels of emerald ... she is not a myth. Not a legend. Not a spirit meant to destroy for vengeful retribution.

Instead, she is a teacher. A harbinger. A soothsayer. She is Jolene, the Crusher of Kings.

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At the age of fifteen, I came to the port city of Oirl'an, near the southern border that Ivoren shared with Jeden. My purpose was to be married to the Crown Prince of Ivoren, Voren III. The night before my wedding was the first I had heard of the Crusher of Kings. How naive I was to think it a mere story meant to scare an untouched bride.

"Do you think she will come to him tonight? Before he has a chance

to bed his wife?" giggled one of my new Ladies to another.

"Of course not," replied her companion in a haughty voice. "She comes only for those she judges to have done wrong. And only when they are King. Until the Crown Prince is sitting upon his father's throne, she will leave him to become whatever man he chooses to be."

"I have heard that she comes no matter the kind of man a King is. It is her way, to tempt, tease, and then destroy the men that share her bed. A true succubus of the most wicked sort."

Just as I was about to reprimand the maids for their wayward tongues, the woman acting as my escort added her wise voice to the speculations of the other girls. Like them, I was enthralled by the tale her gravelly voice began to weave for us.

"She is not as you would believe her. It is all well to decry her as an ancient succubus who feeds on the souls of wicked kings, but the truth is far more simple, and far less noble.

"The Crusher of Kings, many call her, but the name of your fair enchantress is Jolene. She is a woman born in the far north, leaving her with skin of the palest alabaster. Her hair is set ablaze by auburn curls that reach to her waist, and magick fills her emerald gaze with the utmost mischief.

"It is known that, in her youth, she was sought after by many suitors. Kings and princes were amidst those vying for her beauty. With so much power over the hearts of so many, one would have thought she would be more careful with the hearts she broke. Alas, Jolene made enemies of men she should not have.

"Of what I know, it is that the cruelty of powerful men knows no bounds. Jolene was made to suffer for her scorn and her beauty. And when the last of these suitors had gotten their fill of her, she was left wretched and destitute, far from her home and in lands that were foreign to her. Yet, she was as powerful as she was beautiful, and the men soon came to regret it.

"They call her the Crusher of Kings because each man who dared to lay a finger on her fell under powerful spells when she came to call. And by the time she vanished again, there was nothing left of them or their kingdoms. Save one.

"Jolene haunts the royal house of our nation because it was a long ago King of Ivoren who first took from her the innocence a woman possesses. It was a King of Ivoren who taught her what it is to suffer beneath a man's cruelty and pride. And so, Jolene allowed Ivoren to prosper, even as she bided her time.

“Then it happened one day. Having only grown more beautiful with age, this specter of a woman drifted through the palace and found her way into the King’s bedchamber. There, she taught the King the meaning of humility. Taught him what evil truly was. And made him the promise that she would return to Ivoren, whenever she deemed necessary, and his line should never know the end of her commands. To this day, she holds true to her vow.

“Yet, it is not an act of retribution that calls her to return to our Kings. Instead, it is a whim of her own, for she is beyond all feeling of petty vengeance. As her will dictates, she will sully or ruin our leaders, or she will teach and guide them. Always, however, will she seduce them. To give unto them freely what their forebear had desecrated by force. That is the only vengeance she has need of now.”

“It is nonsense,” I spoke up, if only to force the story from my own mind. At my word, no more was spoken of the Crusher of Kings.

The following morning, I was wed in a grand ceremony to Voren III in Oirl’an. It was considered neutral ground, as my marriage forged a peace treaty between our nations. Celebrations lasted long into the night before my new husband and I were able to retire. It was a grand spectacle, us being barred into our room with jeers from his fellows not to let us out until I had conceived. With such crude examples of drunkenness before me, I at first feared for my experience.

Within the moment, I was grateful for the tenderness my husband gifted unto me. It wasn’t until the actions of consummation had passed that I began to wonder if he’d received instruction from a far fairer beauty. A thought that crossed my mind every night since, following our duties as husband and wife.

In spite of my reservations and my trepidations over the rumored Jolene, I grew fond of my husband. We were both young and full of ideals that would serve Ivoren well. Though I was not of a political inclination, he never made me feel degraded for that status. Indeed, what he needed most from me was my support and my simplicity that he said stood for his people. In the days before he ascended to the throne, our relationship grew into a bond that I dared to call love. And a fool it did make me.

When his father became erratic and moody, things took a turn for the worse. He was more hostile and warmongering than he had ever been before. He built up his army at the expense of the coffers, and raised taxes to offset the cost. Each year, the tensions grew on the Jeden border, and I could feel myself quivering at the thought of my

marriage treaty being for naught. At last, when his behavior came to be too much, I got my first inclination of the infamous Jolene.

It was a dark, stormy night. King Voren II had been in a rage all through the afternoon and had locked himself up with his war council for several hours before my husband called for their dismissal. His father had been coerced into going to his rooms, taking whatever pleasure he so decided.

Years following that night, I learned the truth of what was said and done. At the time, I was not aware that the King had ordered his son to bring me into his bedchamber. He swore that his line would live on, even if he had to bequeath me with a child himself.

On the night that I learned my husband returned my love, it was the night the King fell asleep and did not wake. Had it not been for the name of Jolene slipping between my husband's sleeping lips, I might never have suspected the Crusher of Kings. By the time I became aware of her influence, it was too late.

With the uproar of my husband becoming King, it was lost on everyone but myself the changes occurring in him. The moods and sudden disinterest in the things he once loved was blamed upon his ascension. Were it not for the name he called in his sleep, I might also have made that mistake.

The worst day yet, however, was the day in which I was able to inform my husband that, at long last, I bore his child. Though he loved me still, I could see in him the moment he regretted that I was to birth his heir, instead of her. There was a sorrow in his eyes for several seconds, and I could not tell if that was because I was not her, or because he knew the pain he was causing me. All the same, a celebration was ordered and he went on as if I did not know he was longing for another.

It was the moment that broke me. When my husband could not look upon the mother of his child and love her as he once did, I could not bear the shame. Thus, I went in search of Jolene.

That very same night, I awoke to a presence appearing in my rooms. Somehow, the magickal creature had known of my plea to meet, and she had come to me in the form of a gracious queen. It was the height of surreal that I then sat in a chair opposite the woman responsible for the degradation of my husband, and my heart twisted in despair.

"You are Jolene, the Crusher of Kings."

"You are Moire, Queen of Ivoren."

As I stared at her porcelain skin, luxurious hair, and emerald eyes, I

felt tears threaten to fall. "It is you who chooses to destroy my family."

At once, she shook her head. "I have neither hand in the creation of your family nor the destruction of it."

"You have seduced my husband and his father before him. Their minds have twisted, and even now—"

Her chin raised. "Even now your husband looks upon you and wishes that he beheld me in your stead. That is not a mark of my strength at seduction so much as it is a revelation of the weakness of his love. If you are to trust a man of such fluctuating character, it is better that you learn not to love at all."

"But I do love him. Despite his faults, I will love him. Despite his actions or words, I will love him. I am his Queen and I shall stand at his side until we are both dead. All I ask of you is to let me have him as I once did. Before he was King, he was mine, and you had not touched him. Please, Jolene, give him back to me."

I was surprised by how long she seemed to ponder my plea. How thoughtful her expression became as my words traveled through her mind. Yet, when her eyes lowered to my middle, I felt a hand cover the womb where my child was yet growing.

"You say that you love him. Even now, when you know that he prefers another."

"I do," I said, feeling the first of the teardrops escape my eyes.

"Do you know, Moire, that you are the first Queen to ask my pardon? The first to acknowledge the thrall I hold over their husbands and nation. Am I what you expected?"

My throat tightened and I tried to think of what phrase would appease her most. "I expected your beauty."

"And you expected a monster to be wrapped within it, do not lie. The rumors said of me are meant to pander to my wrath, though they often forget my mercy. Therefore I will grant you a mercy, and the lesson to be borne with it. My Queen, I give you now the choice: your son or your husband."

The air rushed out of my body as my chest constricted. "What do you mean?" I stammered.

"Choose who you will love the most. The boy child growing in your womb, or the man who regrets you as his wife. Save one of them from me. Choose your son, and I will leave him to whatever life his own will should provide. Choose your husband, and I will leave him to your love. Know this, however, that the King of Ivoren never rules here."

My bottom lip trembled and I could just stop the keening sound

from escaping my throat. It was an impossible choice, of course. At least, if I did not know her intentions, it was.

“How will you rule it through my husband, Jolene?”

The smile that spread across her sweet face was nothing short of sinister. “How I have always ruled: through the whims of Kings. As I have always done, I but release the desires of rulers and allow them to be unleashed. Should those desires prove honorable, Ivoren thrives. When they are despicable, the nation collapses. Your husband, alone, knows in what way Ivoren will survive. As will your son.”

My eyes closed as I thought through her words. If I chose my son, he would not feel her cold fingers wrapped around his throat for the entirety of his rule. Should I raise him to be an honorable man, however, would her influence not help him to keep Ivoren prosperous?

If the choice was my husband, could he recover from her absence? Could Ivoren recover from the catastrophe his father put us in? And even if I did choose him, would he ever look upon me and not wish that I was her?

A man could have many wives. A son would have only one mother.

“You have made your choice, I see,” she mused, a gleam entering her green eyes.

I gave her a solemn nod. “My husband would have you in his bed, and I accept that. You will not, however, taint the mind of my son.”

“You have chosen wisely, Queen Moire of Ivoren. As a parting gift, I will take from your son the weakest of the role models he has available to him. May he never grow into the steps of his forebears, and may his heirs never crave my touch.”

It was many months later, long after my son entered the world, that my husband suffered a strange death. At once, I was Regent and my son was King. And I raised him as any mother could raise a man, and as any Queen was meant to raise a King. Even then, my eyes searched over my shoulder for her.

Jolene spared my son, as her word required. Yet, no ruler of Ivoren will ever be untouched by her. This is my last and final warning. Beware the Crusher of Kings.