

“I see Lilith’s curse still finds its mark.”

The quill in my hand froze as I recognized the silky voice that made me cringe like no other. Not even Morgan unnerved me this much. Before I even looked up from the parchment, I knew its owner, but not the reason for his unexpected visit.

“Hello, Father Marius,” I greeted him through gritted teeth, setting the letter aside and rising to meet him. I cast my eyes upward, for he was several hand spans taller than I, jaw clenched.

He was standing in the doorway, wavy blonde hair catching the torchlight in a mocking halo, hands clasped in front of him at his waist, clearly an invitation to be seated.

I motioned for him to sit, regarding him warily. “I would say you are welcome, but that would make me a liar and I do not go against my word.” I signaled Octavia to fetch him something to drink. “You have a strange way of greeting your Queen.” I noted, leveling a purposeful gaze at him and taking great pains to subtly remind him who held the power in this situation. “I am afraid I do not know the meaning of your words.”

His lips flared in a smirk. “Of course you would not. You have not enough Christian education to know the true cause of mans’ fall.”

I raised an eyebrow at his unspoken challenge. “I may not share your faith, *Father*,” I emphasized the word carefully, “but I am no heathen fool. I know you think your god created the world in six days and then his greatest creation – man – betrayed him by breaking the only *geisa* set upon him. In punishment, your god banished him and his wife from paradise and he decreed all people would share his sin and for the woman’s part in tempting the man, every woman would scream in labor.” Octavia returned with a pitcher of wine and poured glass for each of us. “How am I doing so far?”

“Not bad,” Father Marius regarded me over the rim of his cup. “But you forget one important detail. Eve was not Adam’s first wife. Though Eve sinned against God, Lilith’s sin was greater.” He took a sip of the wine and set his glass upon the cluttered desk separating us. “Lilith was God’s first companion for Adam, created separately from him. She refused to accept Adam’s dominance over her and so God cast her out of the garden and decreed all her children would be born dead.” He looked me straight in the eye, triumph blossoming on his deceptively handsome face. “Do you understand the meaning of my words now?”

Indeed, deep within my heart, they pierced like a dart thrown straight and true, but I was determined not to show this manipulative charlatan how accurate his barb had been. I traced a finger around the rim of my glass. “So what are you are saying is that it is worse to disobey your husband than to disobey your god? For that is what I understand Lilith’s crime to be.” It was my turn to smirk at him.

Father Marius picked up his goblet, clenching it so tight in his fist I thought the metal might cave in. “Lilith disobeyed both God *and* her husband,” he spat. “For God gave him dominion over her, so in disobeying him, she disobeyed God. Therefore, her crime was twice that of Eve. When she was cast out, she became the mother of all demons, for only children begotten of a wicked womb are born without a chance at redemption.”

He rose and began to pace, as was his habit when trying to make a point, as though the motion would lull the listener into assenting to his opinion. “Allow me to illustrate in terms you will not fail to understand. Your mother committed the sin of Eve by allowing herself to fall prey to the serpent’s lies. She lived a godless life and trained you to do the same. And so she was punished to die in childbirth, killed by the pain meted out by God’s justice to all of your kind. But you,” he gestured toward me, nearly sloshing wine onto the floor in his disgust. “You freely

chose to vow yourself to the same evil that killed your mother, and instead of allowing Lord and Lady Dyfient to match you with a good Christian man who might have been able to save you. No, you fled into the arms of this pagan King. It was then that you defied man – your father, who had as much God-given authority over you as any husband – and so you were doubly cursed to suffer the fate of Lilith. Do you not know now that all you will ever bring into the world is more death, if in fact you are not barren?”

The laughter started in my abdomen, still sore from its travails, and bubbled up through my chest, shaking my frame and bursting out of my lips in gleeful mirth. Father Marius stopped in his tracks and stared at me as though I was the devil himself. “Is that truly what you believe, Father Marius? If I am Lilith, then what are you going to do, fashion Arthur another wife from his rib? For you certainly seem to believe you are a god. And if I am barren, what then? Should Arthur simply cast me out and take another wife? Surely that goes against your precepts as well.

“Do you realize that in your diatribe, you not only insulted me, but called the King’s authority into question – both punishable, perhaps even treasonous, crimes? For it was Arthur who chose me, not the other way around – you may wish you get your facts straight the next time you choose to defame the royal house. My father consented to my union with Arthur more than did I, so if anyone is to blame for defying your god, it is him.

I turned to Octavia. “Octavia, you have witnessed this affront to my person and my husband. Please, fetch the guards to take this man into custody.” Octavia bobbed a curtsy and started toward the door, watching me with great satisfaction, for she remembered the hell that had befallen me the first time I was the object of one of Maruis’ diatribes. His orthodox interpretation of Christianity was the Aggrivane and I were separated and I sent to live at Corbenic, setting my whole path to the throne in motion.

Father Marius stood still for a moment, shocked into silence, but put out a hand to stop Octavia. “Wait. I meant you no insult,” he said.

I clucked my tongue at him. “Father, your own religion commands you not to lie.”

He shook his head, eyes darting about like a caged animal. “I do not lie. I simply wanted you to understand why this tragedy has befallen you. You may not understand this, but I care deeply for the fate of your soul. Why else would I continue to fight for it? I could much easier leave you to your own damnation.”

I considered him, well aware he was indeed lying. He had it out for me from the moment he wormed his way into my father’s life. If he could not convert me into a docile Christian woman he could control, he would destroy me. I knew that as clearly as I knew my own name. But I had very little proof of it. No, now was not the time to bring him down; I would wait for the moment in which I had irrefutable proof on which to hang my case.

“Why are you here, Father Marius?” I asked, leaning on my arms, palms face down on the desk. “Surely you did not travel all this way simply to explain Lilith’s curse. You could have done that by letter, were you as concerned as you claim.”

Father Marius visibly relaxed and took a step toward me, his usual crimson robes swishing around him, careful to keep the desk between us. “My Lady, I accompany your father. In truth I am bound for distant shores, but I wished to see him safely in your care before my departure.” He cocked his head and listened. “Ah, here he comes now.”

This time he did not lie. I heard the footfalls, too. Two pairs of steady, solid steps followed by one set that shuffled a slower, more measured pace than the others, punctuated at regular intervals by a reverberating thud.

“I am bound for Rome upon the dawn. His Holiness the Pope has taken note of a need for greater Christian intervention on this isle and has asked me to make a full report of what I have witnessed. You can be assured I will be honest in that.”

Before I could respond there was a polite knock upon the door and a guard announced my father. As the door swung open, I took in my father’s frail, stooped frame, supported by a stout staff.

“My Lord,” Marius bowed and hastened to my father’s side, eager to help him to a chair.

“Wait. Father Marius, will you help us down the hall? My father will be more comfortable there.”

He nodded. “Of course. I am honored to be of service.”

I rolled my eyes behind his back as they followed the guard to Arthur’s lounge, a comfortably appointed room with a couch cushioned by down pillows and a blazing fire to keep out the chill.

Once my father was settled, Father Marius took his leave. “I will leave you to catch up. My Queen, have no doubt we will continue our discussion upon my return. I bid you good eve.”

“I shall pray you meet only gentle seas on your voyage.” My voice was an exact match for the coldness with which he bid my farewell upon my banishment from home three years earlier.