

A Corruption Most Divine

Chapter 1

Alora woke to the sound of soft bell chimes. A gentle tune to lull her out of sleep's loving embrace.

Sunshine and a cool breeze welcomed her to wakefulness.

Late morning sunlight, paired with a trio of servants fanning her bed. Alora imagined it was the perfect way to wake up. Not that she had nothing else to compare it to. If this was how she was woken up every day, it *must* be the best way.

As she sat up in bed, stretched her arms out, she basked in the manufactured breeze.

The servants wouldn't meet her eyes as she looked around at them. Standing strategically around the bed, waving their huge leaf-fans, the four women kept their eyes on the floor as they performed their 'sacred duty'.

Not the same three that'd fanned her to sleep last night, of course. There'd probably been a dozen different girls in here over the course of the night.

An odd thing to think about.

How many nameless servants had come and gone during the night?

How many eyes had watched her as she slept?

A familiar tingling warmth tickled her insides.

The servants, wearing their matching white-and-black uniforms, shifted their positions as Alora climbed out of her bed. Fanning her from all sides, far enough away from her to not make Alora feel claustrophobic.

Three pretty faces. None of which would meet Alora's gaze.

Three pairs of eyes staring at the floor. A bold lesser servant might glance at Alora's feet. But never any higher.

That privilege was reserved for those servants of higher station.

She strode over a carpet of fresh pink petals, placed all over the floor as she'd slept. The soles of her bare feet were more than used to the tickling sensation of the soft petals.

As she approached the double-doors that divided her sleeping chamber from the antechamber beyond, the doors separated for her, swinging open on soundless hinges.

As a child, she'd thought it was magic. That the palace doors could somehow sense her approach, would open themselves for her so she wouldn't need to touch them herself. As she'd gotten older, she'd realised it was her servants.

One assigned to every individual door, looking through hidden peepholes for Alora's approach. Opening their doors whenever she neared them.

She walked through the open doors into the antechamber, resisting the urge to look around at the two servants either side of the wide doorway – one for each of the two doors. It was, as her instructors and tutors had hammered into her continuously, 'beneath' her to acknowledge the existence of her lesser servants.

Furniture. That's all the lesser servants were meant to be.

Fanners. Door openers. And, of course, the petal carriers.

The moment she'd entered the antechamber, a pair of young women carrying baskets rushed over to her. They walked ahead of her, reaching into their baskets and pulling out handfuls of pink petals, scattering them over the floor in front of Alora. Creating a little pathway to her next destination.

The dress chamber.

There'd be more servants in there. Waiting to remove her night clothes, dress her up in some highly fashionable clothing from some place Alora would never visit.

All Alora would have to do was stand there with her arms out. The servants would take care of everything else.

Just like they always had.

Alora walked slowly through the palace grounds.

Rushing was not 'proper'. Those of the Divine Blood didn't run around like hyperactive children. There was never a reason that could justify a lack of dignity or decorum for Alora. So long as she breathed, she was to be the perfect princess.

Words that'd been branded into her mind from the constant repetition of her tutors over the years.

Thinking about them made her want to run around, jump and dance and roll on the grass. Ruin her dress with green stains and dirt. What she wouldn't give to see the disappointment on her tutors' faces.

But she held back. If for no other reason than for the group of lesser servants ahead of her. The basket carriers, scattering their pink petals for Alora to walk over.

If she started running, they'd have to run ahead of her. If she darted off in a random direction, they'd have to push themselves even harder to make sure every one of Alora's footfalls landed on a petal. An impossible task that'd result in the servants being punished.

Walking slow, in a planned direction, made the servants' jobs easier.

She'd learned a long time ago that, while she'd never get punished for anything she did – by definition, she could do nothing wrong – the servants were not so fortunate.

"Hmm," Alora hummed, coming to a stop.

The basket-carrying servants all froze along with her, glanced at the ground around Alora's feet hesitantly.

"I think I'd like to visit the baths," Alora said, turning on the spot but not taking a step in that direction.

The servants rushed as one, began scattering pink petals ahead of Alora. A new trail for her to follow to the palace baths. She waited until there were enough petals on the ground, the servants all in their correct places, before resuming her walk.

The baths were a separate building from the main palace. Fashioned out of marble, with carved and painted statues of men and women long-dead set at intervals around the huge building. Only two of the marble statues were of people still living.

One depicted Alora; her skin so pale that the marble needed no colouring, the statue's hair painted with gold leaf. The statue wore the same dress Alora had been adorned with a few days ago; a bright blue, silk dress with a high neckline and a cloth collar around the neck. Long leaves and lace gloves covered the statue's arms, while its feet were hidden behind a long skirt that fluttered in a gentle breeze.

The statue's clothes were swapped out every few days, or any time weather ruined the dress. Chances were, the bright yellow dress Alora was currently wearing would adorn the Statue tomorrow.

She paused before the statue, stared at it for a long few moments.

It was amazingly detailed. Capturing the contours of her face perfectly. Its body shape a mirror to Alora's. Slight and slender, elegant. Lacking the massive busts of some of the other statues, but by no means flat or small-chested. It was a body that perfectly fit the fashion of the time.

Modest, skin-concealing dresses that hugged the wearer's body tightly. A middle ground between overly prude and overtly enticing.

Some of the other statues – Alora's female ancestors – were far more modest in their attire. Full-body coverings with veils and cowls, not a hint of marble in sight. On the other hand, some of the statues came from a time of more *revealing* fashions. Marble cleavage displayed openly, in gowns and dresses that seemed downright scandalous next to Alora's clothing.

Whoever made the lewder clothes for the statues obviously took great pride in their work, from how detailed and rich those scant fabrics looked.

Alora bit her lip, looking at one particularly revealing statue.

What would it have been like, being able to wear something like *that*? A loose, low-cut dress that fluttered open in the breeze, giving hints and flashes of the statue's marble nipples?

And, if *that* statue had nipples, did Alora's statue have them too?

Images flashed through her mind in quick bursts.

A man gazing at her nakedness from the shadows, learning the shape of her body and private parts to create a perfect marble replica. Painstakingly carving nipples into place, thinking about her bare breasts.

Hot tingles flushed through her.

And what about the servants who changed the statue's clothes so often? Did they take the opportunity to gaze at her nipples or the slit between her legs? When no-one was looking, did they run their hands over marble Alora's pert curves?

She flushed, forced herself to look away from the statue.

Her petal-laying servants led the way inside the building, guided her all the way to a changing area where other servants waited.

It took minutes for them to undress her.

Minutes Alora spent cooling the heat inside herself. Calming the wave of lust and wickedness, controlling herself as a good princess should.

As soon as she was naked, the servants left.

The changers, the petal-carriers, everyone.

Only two pretty servants remained. Beautiful girls that looked no older than Alora's two decades, who were just as naked as Alora herself.

Her bathers.

If she went to the small bath, they'd scrub her clean with soft sponges and sweet-scented soaps. If she went to the steam room, they'd be the ones tending the coals, adding oils and incense. If she went to the bathing bed, they'd massage her body as they cleaned it, washing and brushing her long hair.

Alora headed to the larger bath. A huge pool filled with water, wide and deep enough to swim laps around.

The bathers didn't join her in the water. They stood on opposite sides of the pool, each holding a large towel. Ready to scrub Alora dry the instant she was done swimming.

She let out a satisfied sigh as she descended into the pool.

Floating on her back, she stared up at a marble ceiling.

A perfect existence.

If she wanted a drink or food, all she'd need was to say so. One of the servants would rush off to get it.

She could spend the rest of her day here, floating on the water, relaxing to her heart's content. Ignoring the fact that she was meant to be with a tutor right now. Forgetting all about her lessons.

If she wished it, she could ask for music. Within a few minutes, servants would be singing and playing instruments for her as she 'bathed'. Or she could ask for privacy. Dismiss her to bathing assistants. Likely, there'd be servants watching her through peep holes somewhere – she could never *truly* be alone – but that could be titillating itself.

Would the spying servants avert their gazes if she started fondling herself? Would they keep watching?

Alora shuddered at the thought, let out a tiny moan.

Servants weren't meant to look at her. Ever.

Lesser servants were supposed to look only at the ground around her. Greater servants – her tutors and the like – were permitted to look at Alora's feet, her legs, but to look anywhere else was blasphemy.

To look upon Divinity was a sacred act, unworthy of mortal eyes.

Only one man could look at Alora as an equal.

Alora's heart thundered in her chest at the memory. The last time that man had come to the palace.

He'd looked her up and down. From head to toes, from toes to head. He'd met her eyes, held her gaze until – blushing – Alora had looked down like *she* was a servant.

To be looked at like that again...

Again, heat flushed through her.

She looked around the pool to the two naked servants.

Pretty servants. Both petite and small-chested, their hair tied back neatly, skin bearing the same faint tan and lean muscles that most servants had.

Both were looking at their feet. Eyes averted from Alora.

Alora reached between her legs, gave that hot area a subtle rub. Feigning like she was 'cleaning' herself.

Still the servants looked down, refused to glance at her.

Alora rubbed a little more vigorously.

Look at me.

She searched the marble walls surrounding her, seeking out any hints of peepholes. Far as she was from the walls, she couldn't spot any. Though she was certain there were some. Servants looking through them.

Watch me.

She strummed herself, bit her lip, gasped quietly.

See me.

The bathing servants would never look up at her. But maybe, *maybe*, the ones watching through the peepholes would. Maybe they *were*.

Yes!

She clamped a hand over her mouth, muffled her gasp.

Look at me!

"The All-Maker grew the world from a Cosmic Seed," the tutor said, staring at his own tented hands. "From rock grew plants, from the fruits of plants came animals, and from the All-Maker's tears of joy blossomed mankind – the keepers of Creation."

Alora knew the story. Hard heard it almost every single day of her life. She knew the story better than her own face.

"The All-Maker left the world to grow in harmony. But mankind, without a figure to guide it, fell to anarchy and destruction. Millenia later, when the All-Maker returned, the world was a place of strife and chaos. Mistreated and uncared for. Again the All-Maker wept. And this time, a single man sprouted from those tears. Morthan, the first God-Emperor of mankind."

There was no statue of Morthan standing guard around the palace baths. That tradition had started later. Much, much later. Alora couldn't help but wonder what her first ancestor had looked like.

"God-Emperor Morthan grew up in a war-torn world, fought countless battles to unite mankind under one banner. But strife and conflict were all Morthan knew. His reign was marred by constant unrest and calamity, the world itself raging and tearing itself asunder. It was only when Morthan's son ascended the Midnight Mountain to the Celestial Throne that the world calmed."

Alora did her best not to appear bored by the lecture. It was important. Perhaps the most important story she could know. Why else would her tutors repeat it so often?

"God-Emperor Hastin grew up in chaos, a frightened boy that developed into a craven man. The world calmed under Hastin's rule, but it also withered. Mankind became skittish and aloof, crops grew sparse and frail, mighty mountains trembled in fear. By the time Hastin's reign came to an end, mankind's numbers were dwindling to disease and

nature's strength was faltering under decades of famine."

One side of the divine coin. Now came the other side; the role Alora would have to fill one day.

"God-Empress Nara grew up appreciating love and companionship. A kind and charitable woman, who gave food from her table to feed to hungry masses. The day she ascended to the Celestial Throne, the world changed. Mankind grew closer and nature thrived. It was under Nara's reign that the connection between the Divine Blood and the Celestial Throne became apparent."

"Whosoever sits the Throne," Alora repeated from memory, barely managing to hold back a bored sigh, "be they of the Maker's Blood, shall rule the world in its entirety."

A kind, benevolent, just God-Emperor would result in peace and prosperity and bountiful harvests. A cruel, uncaring, sinful God-Emperor would infect the rest of mankind – and the natural world itself – with their corruption. War, strife, disease, famine, disaster. So on and so on.

It was the gift and burden of the Divine Blood.

"One day, you will be God-Empress," her tutor said softly. "The world will be as an extension of you. Nature will bend to your will, and the hearts of mankind will become a reflection of your soul."

"I know," Alora groaned, resolve finally snapping. "I *know*. I *get* it. Prosperity or ruin on my shoulders, can't be greedy or selfish. I've got to be a good, proper little princess or else the world will end. I *know*. Can we please move on to the *actual* lessons for today?"

Alora winced even as those last words left her lips, the sharp tone of her voice hanging in the air, creating a tense silence in its wake.

Impatience. One of the 'bad' traits.

Being snappy and dismissive. More worrying traits for a future God-Empress to have.

"I'm sorry," Alora said, face heating. "I didn't mean- I just... I've heard it so many times..."

"There are no lessons today," her tutor said, impossibly calm. Eyes still on his hands, the man slowly rose to his feet. "The God-Emperor – your father – has sent word. He believes the time has come for your first taste of Divinity."

"My... What?"

"If it pleases you," the tutor said, bowing his head. "Follow me. It's not far."

Alora blinked at the man as he walked past her.

He opened a door that Alora had never walked through before, one she'd assumed led to a hidden servant corridor – one of many in the palace. She hesitated before following him.

No pink petals marked her path as she walked after the tutor.

No other servants followed.

The narrow hallway Alora found herself in was dark and cramped, perhaps the most confining space she'd ever been in. A frightened shudder rocked her. She walked quickly to catch up with the tutor.

The hallway ended in a tight staircase that descended down into the ground. Alora followed the man down it for what felt like an eternity, but which was probably less than half a minute.

Finally, the staircase ended at a door.

The man opened it, stepped into the chamber beyond.

Alora followed, shuddering.

Was it her, or was it unnaturally cold down here?

The chamber was natural. A cave with jagged walls and stalagmites growing from the floor and stalactites dangling from a dark ceiling. Like narrow stone teeth, they surrounded Alora as she walked to the centre of the room. To where an obsidian

stalagmite rose from the centre of the cave floor.

Above the tip of the obsidian spike, it looked like there was a window hanging in the air. A diamond-shaped window into a night sky. Stars twinkled at her through that window, glowing nebula and colourful clouds an impossible distance away.

Alora gaped at the not-window.

She walked around it, squinted at it.

It was a long, sharp rock. Floating in the air. Its surface like a window into the night sky, despite Alora being certain it was still daytime.

"What..." She turned to her tutor, who was staring down at the floor in subservience. "What is it?"

"A Celestial Shard, highness," the man answered. "A lesser version of the Celestial Throne your father sits upon. It is the God-Emperor's will that you touch the Celestial Shard and 'connect' with it."

"Connect?" Alora asked, hesitant to touch the bizarre, impossible rock. "What does *that* mean?"

"I do not know, highness," the tutor answered. "All I know is that this Celestial Shard has influence over the palace and its grounds. Indeed, the palace and walls were built specifically for it. To my understanding, highness, you 'connecting' with the Celestial Shard will tap into your divinity and give you a form of lesser godhood, similar to that of the God-Emperor. You will become a 'demi-god princess', so to speak."

Hesitantly, Aurora reached her hand towards the Celestial Shard. She stopped before her fingers touched it.

"How do it 'connect' with it?"

"I do not know, highness."

Fear gripped Alora's chest. She pulled her hand back a little, then stopped herself.

Cowardice was another 'bad' trait.

Fear was natural for all living things. But a true God-Emperor never submitted to their fears. Their fears submitted to them.

She pushed the hesitation aside, reached out and touched the Celestial Shard.