



Source

Author: *Penn Cassidy*

Category: Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: To the world, I'm a grieving widow, a woman who married the wrong man and paid the highest price for it. As the wife of the king's former poison master, it's my job to assume his role and train the man who will take his place, and who will become my next husband.

I do what I'm told the way women are supposed to, but the king doesn't know everything about me, not by far. As the head of The Ravens, a guild of spymasters that trades information for coin and favors, it's my job to remove threats to my king and country, even from the shadows no matter the cost.

To do that, and to prove myself worthy of being the first unmarried master, I need two things. The first is to take down the rebel group that's been leaving my Ravens for dead as a message to the king, and the second, is to find out which of the four mysterious, alluring men in my life have an agenda of their own.

I need to know who I can trust; the shifter who wants to be my new husband? The captain of the guard who once loved me? The streetrat with a haunting smile and dangerous secrets? Or the brother of the enemy king who asks too many questions for his own good.

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King Animus

I stared out over Avedin while the crowds below cheered almost violently for the arrival of the new ruler of our neighbors to the South. Nexus's new king was still a younger male in his prime and in search of a wife.

I only agreed to host our neighboring kingdom's ruler so that he could see and understand that I would always be better than him. I had a beautiful wife, wealth beyond comprehension, and I had power.

Basillius was only king because the priestesses had chosen him, not because of his bloodline. The Source is what they called the strange and unnatural power that they worshiped in their temples. That power chose the young king to lead his people out of mutiny and destruction. I refused to let myself succumb to the temptation of magic.

"Animus!" my wife's playful voice called out as she strode towards me.

I turned to her with the biggest smile I could muster.

"Amaeria, you shouldn't be walking. The healer tells me you could burst any moment now." I took her into my arms and kissed her rosy cheeks, feeling the excitement as it leaked from her aura.

"Do not be so gloomy, Animus. We have guests to welcome and no one wants to be greeted by a sour faced king."

She shoved my shoulder playfully, but I was no longer paying attention to her.

Instead, I was entirely entranced by the woman on King Basillius's arm as he strode into my throne room.

She was like some sort of dream made flesh. More than just a woman, more than a mortal of breath, blood and bone. The light seemed to bend around her beauty, as if it bowed to her the way my knees threatened to.

“Be welcome, Basillius,” I crooned as the Nexus king bowed his head, keeping his back and shoulders level. It was the bow of one king to another, both equals. The woman on his arm curtsied, her eyes sparkling in the light of my flickering torches and chandeliers.

“I'd like to introduce you to Tetia, High Priestess of the Eastern temples of Nexus.” Basillius gestured to the magnificent woman. "I'm afraid I refuse to go anywhere without her by my side."

I tried desperately to understand the markings that covered her body. Symbols I couldn't read, dipping below the fabric of her silk robes. They held my interest for longer than a king's eye should've wandered.

“Yes, of course.” I cleared my throat as I pried my eyes off Tetia. "Do excuse my queen's absence at tonight's feast. The child in her belly tires her." Amaeria was less than impressed as I watched her nose crinkle but said nothing.

She smiled pleasantly and took Tetia by the arm, leading her out of the throne room to freshen up.

“Let there be no talk of business until the morning, my friend," Basillius said, clapping me on the shoulder. "Since I was a boy I've wished for nothing more than to explore your beautiful country. I hear you have hardly any access to the Source, and only one temple outside the royal city. It is very different, to live without the aid of

magic?"

My face heated as I pushed my anger down far enough that the baby king couldn't sense it. I smiled blandly instead. "Yes, well, fortunately Avedin has no shortage of farmers, scholars and tradesmen to make up for our...lack of Source magic. It's how its been done since my ancestors first took the throne centuries ago. Blood, sweat and tears are the backbone of my country, not mystics and magic.

I could sense that he disagreed with me, but that was to be expected. I wasn't the only king who shied away from the Source and their fanatical temple worshippers, but I was the most powerful and influential.

"Perhaps we might resume this delightful conversation at dinner," I said with a bright smile, snapping my fingers at the captain of the royal guard. "Please see His Highness and his entourage to their rooms."

I waited until the child king was out of my throne room and then stormed out myself. My mind was clouded with a heady mixture of lust and irritation, and I needed an outlet.

That damn woman...

I spent the afternoon speaking with my advisors regarding how to handle this new regime. Nexus was a powerful kingdom, and could easily become a powerful enemy. I was advised to tread carefully. Basillius was a joyful, easygoing male, but something about his sharp stare and golden tongue spoke of cunning and striking will.

I only half-listened, my mind constantly returning to the beautiful female. He called her Tetia. Tetia with the strange markings covering her lush body. Her dark hair that fanned over her creamy pale skin. Her slender body was magnificent compared to my now very plump wife. There was an itch just beneath my skin that begged to be

scratched.

“Your majesty?” A deep, gritty voice cut through my thoughts of the high priestess. I looked up, meeting the eyes of my Master of Poisons as he watched me warily.

“Yes, Bane?” I didn’t bother using his first name; frankly, I didn’t know it.

His father was my own father’s poison master for as long as he lived, and when I took the throne, he was asked to step down, offering his son as a replacement. I accepted, but the boy was young and would need to marry in the coming years. He was a baby, just like the Nexus king.

“Might I suggest we continue this conversation when you’re feeling better? Forgive me, but you seem distracted tonight.”

I hummed in agreement as I swiftly shoved back my chair. Every man seated at the table stood with me. I dismissed them all with the wave of my hand as I left the war rooms.

A light sweat covered my forehead, and I ground my teeth as I switched directions without thought. It was like I was being pulled somewhere else with no ability to stop myself. I walked aimlessly for much too long.

I found myself outside a chamber door. I cleared my throat as I searched the area and found nothing suspicious, not even a servant scuttling down a hallway. The door in front of me opened before I could knock. It opened, and Tetia herself stood before me.

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Something inside me snapped. I pushed into her room and gripped her face between palms, smashing my lips to hers with bruising force.

I felt her struggle against me, but I couldn't stop. Nothing in this world had the power to pull me away from this goddess of a woman. I wanted to devour her whole, to own her, to...

I faintly heard her scream and still, I didn't stop. My pants were already down before I could stop myself and Tetia's dress was a piece of scrap on the floor. Turning her around forcefully, I had her breasts pushed against the wall.

I pushed into her slick wetness, and everything felt right again. I heard her moans as I took my pleasure vigorously. Over and over again I slammed to the hilt, feeling her walls squeeze my cock the way I needed her to. I didn't last long after that.

I pulled out as I gaped at the priestess in horror. Tetia turned towards me, and I watched as my seed poured down her legs, puddling on the stone floor. I was shaking with shock and terror at what I'd just done.

Tetia stood tall and graceful, her eyes spearing me into place. "You're going to pay for crimes, your majesty. You'll pay for them dearly." Her every word cut me straight to the bone.

I tried to find the words to explain that I didn't mean to harm her. Something had come over me, a force that was out of my control. My confusion turned to rage. "What magic is this?" I hissed, drawing my blade. "What have you done to me, witch?!"

"I don't know what you're accusing me of, your highness, but it's absurd." Her eyes were wide yet suspicious.

"I couldn't control myself! What have you done to me?!"

"That's not possible," she whispered, her eyes flitting from side to side. "There's only one sort of magic that makes a man act against his will and that's mating magic, which is preposterous. A true mate bond between a human and a priestess is not only impossible, but goes against the nature of the Source."

"You're a liar and a heretic!" I spat, my hand shaking as I clutched my dagger, contemplating how easily I could plunge it into her heart.

Her eyes became cold and unfeeling. "If a bond truly exists between us, any of your seed inside another will wither and die."

"Liar!" I shouted at the witch.

Her lips spread into a wicked sort of smile that turned my stomach. "The child inside of her shall die, and you'll only have yourself to blame. You, King Animus, will never have a natural born heir."

My feet were already moving as I cursed under my breath and headed for the Queen's rooms, slamming doors in my wake, leaving that foul priestess behind

It was unbecoming of a king to run, but I felt in my gut that something awful was about to happen. I was out of breath when I made it to Amaeria's room, and I could hear the shouting of already healers inside.

"BRING ME THE CHILD KING!" I roared as I made my way to Amaeria's side. She was crying hysterically, as blood poured out of her, soaking her white sheets with

crimson.

"I am here," King Basillius said as he entered the room. "Tetia alerted me," he tried to say, but my screams cut him off.

"Save them, you fool!" He had the Source on his side, he should have the power to stop this vile curse threatening to take everything from me.

"I cannot," the child king confirmed my worst fear. "The Source will not allow the bastard child to survive. Your wife might yet live, but Tetia is your natural mate. By right, she is your true queen, the future mother of your rightful heirs."

"That witch is not my anything!" I shouted, pointing my blade at Basillius's. "She'll hang for this! Your priestess will swing from my fucking gallows!"

The room was silent save for my wife's endless screaming. Screams that would haunt me for years to come.

"So be it," King Basillius muttered before he finally left without looking back.

I cursed him as I held my wife's hand tight. Hours passed and dawn came as I sat and stewed in my hatred. I held my dead son in my arms as Amaeria sobbed and still, my fury grew.

My wife would never bear another child, and she knew what that meant. She could never be a true queen. My betrayal hovered between us. An unspoken final blow to her fragile heart.

The Source was to blame for this. No longer would it have a place in Avedin. Never again would I make that mistake. I would have a son without my false mate, and after that, Basillius's and his heretic kingdom would feel my wrath.

Xmara Bane

Twenty-five years later

We had minutes, maybe seconds, before someone would come looking for me. Caldor's lips traveled up the side of my neck, kissing me just below my ear until my eyes rolled back in my head.

His every touch had my skin on fire, and every part of me wanted to peel off these layers between us. Tears pricked my eyes as I held his strong body against mine, knowing that these moments with him would be my last. This was the last time I'd ever hold him, the last time I'd feel his breath on my skin or his fingers in my hair. Soon my betrothed would send the guard out looking for me.

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My betrothed... The mere thought of that man sent shivers down my spine. He was older than me by a decade at least, and yet I was expected to become his happy little wife within a fortnight. I dreaded the coming moments when I'd have no choice but to look into Caldor's eyes and tell him that I was no longer his to love.

Caldor was training to be a king's guard, just like his father before him and his father's father, and just like every king's guard, they could not take a wife until they completed their training. My time was running out, and waiting another six years wasn't an option. Caldor would find some young wife to take my place when the time came, and I'd be stuck with Waylan Bane.

His face flashed before my eyes and I flinched. Caldor pulled back, noting the change in me, and looked into my eyes with furrowed brows. Waylan Bane wasn't an ugly man, nor was he cruel, but he had nothing on Caldor. Not the smooth tan skin, the dark golden hair or the depthless blue eyes that made me blush from head to toe.

"Mara, what's wrong?" Caldor asked. His eyes roved my face, narrowing on the single tear that dripped down my cheek.

"Nothing, just kiss me," I whispered, leaning in to kiss him again. I grabbed the sides of his face, anchoring him to me as our lips clashed.

My legs were wrapped around his waist as he held me against the wall of the old, broken temple. We shouldn't have been in here, but it was the only place no one would come looking for us. My hips swiveled, seeking out the hardness of him. Caldor groaned into my mouth, his hips pressing me harder into the wall.

We were ravenous now, despite the tears that free fell from my eyes that he couldn't see. Our kisses were salty with them, desperation clawing at my chest. I moaned as he thrust against me, wishing I could feel the warmth of his skin everywhere at once.

He kissed down my neck as he held me there, using his immense strength to hoist me up until my legs were now wrapping around his shoulders. I laughed as I gripped onto the altar overhead, keeping myself steady as Caldor fumbled with my dress. There were so many layers to it that it was almost comical watching him sift through them.

This was a mistake. I knew it was, but I couldn't stop. If this was the last time I'd have him, then so be it. I'd make sure it was a moment I would remember down to my bones forever.

I groaned as his mouth found my core. The sound echoed off the crumbling stone walls as his tongue swirled around my wetness, flicking back and forth over a single spot that had stars bursting behind my closed lids. I ground my hips against his face as he devoured me. We'd only done this once before, but it'd been a quick, fumbling mess in a barn on the outskirts of Avedin, where we'd gotten ourselves covered in mud and hay.

This was different. Caldor seemed to know exactly how to lick me and suck and kiss. The scratch of his newly grown facial hair felt exquisite against my inner thighs. A heat was building in my belly, making my thighs shake. It felt like something was growing deep inside me, under my skin, and clawing to get out.

His hot tongue moved swiftly and sure as if he, too, knew that the guard could burst into this temple at any moment, and my reputation would be ruined forever. Waylan Bane would refuse to marry me, and I'd be sent to live in the slum of the Gallows instead of given rooms and a place in the castle. For a moment, the thought had me pausing, wondering if that fate might not be preferable.

I shook the thought away immediately. It wouldn't get me Caldor. If I was banished to the slums, I would be forced into a brothel to survive, or even thievery, which would likely result in me swinging from the gallows. Caldor would be a king's guard, and he would marry a lady worthy of him someday.

It hurt my chest to think about him with another woman. Down to my very core, I ached with need. All I wanted in this world was to run away with him and live our lives outside of King Animus's grasp, where we could be happy and free.

But who was I to ask for that luxury? What had I done in my short eighteen years that made me so worthy of happiness while others suffered? I had a part to play, just like all the rest, and I had a job to do. Waylan Bane wasn't just any man. He was an important figure in the King's court. I was just the orphan ward who happened to have wealth enough to grant me a position of note in Avedin, but I was still nothing more than a coin purse to the King.

My breathing was labored as Caldor's full lips closed around that special spot that had my vision going dark and my thighs shaking. With one hand braced on the altar, I gripped his hair with the other, pulling his face into my core as I thrust into him. He groaned deeply as if he couldn't get enough of my taste. The sound of his deep voice had me coming undone.

Pleasure rolled through me in waves. It was as if fire flowed through my veins, filling my belly and chest with lightning bugs. I had to slap a palm over my mouth to keep from screaming and alerting any guards who happened to be patrolling the area.

In a few short heartbeats, the euphoria began to dissipate. Caldor pulled back, lowering me from his shoulders as I held onto his thick arms for support until my feet were planted firmly back on the solid stone. In the moonlight that filtered through the crumbling hole overhead, I could see my own wetness coating his face.

His blue eyes were glossy with need, and I knew it was taking every ounce of his willpower not to give in and fuck me in this temple. At this moment, I might not have stopped him. I wanted this man with a fierceness that scared me.

His eyes roved my face again as our breathing slowly evened out, and that furrow between his brows appeared again when he noticed the fresh tears on my cheeks. I couldn't hold them in. This was the moment it ended. I couldn't drag this out any longer; it wasn't fair to either of us and even dragging it out this long was cruel and selfish of me.

"You're scaring me," he whispered, stepping forward and cradling my cheek in his palm. "Tell me what to do, Mara..." His thumb brushed a tear away as I nuzzled my face into his hand.

This was it. I couldn't lie to him or hold it in any longer. By tomorrow night, the engagement would be announced, and he would know. It was better for him to hear it from my own lips. Removing my cheek from his palm, I stared into Caldor's eyes. Eyes that I could gaze into forever without blinking and be content for eons. Eyes that held so much love for me that I didn't deserve.

A change came over me then. Something cold crept under my skin like a crawling fog, swirling around my heart until it froze in my chest. I felt my tears dry up as I straightened my shoulders and clenched my jaw tight. Caldor instantly noted the difference in me and dropped my hands, his eyes flitting between mine in confusion.

I reached into the pocket of my dress and produced a small leather wrapping, holding it in my palm as he stared down at it. I noted the moment his shoulders stiffened, and when he took one step backward, a cold rush of air filled the empty space between us. He was shaking his head already as I slowly unwrapped the leather, revealing a small golden ring embedded with a single ruby.

I met his eyes one last time as the moonlight was shrouded with rain clouds. Thunder crashed in the distance, and rain began to pour lightly over the temple as if the gods themselves could feel our mutual despair and decided to make it worse.

“Who?” he gritted between his tightly clenched teeth. His eyes were filled with white-hot rage that had sickness swirling in my belly. But the ice around my heart was solidifying. When I didn’t answer, he stepped forward and asked again. “Who, Mara? Tell me and I’ll cut his eyes from his fucking skull tonight!”

I placed a hand on Caldor’s chest as his shoulders rose and fell rapidly, his nostrils flaring with rage. Keeping my expression cool, all the while I raged inside with him, I said, “It’s done, Caldor. There’s no point in making this harder than it needs to be. I met you here tonight because you needed to hear it from my lips, not the King’s.”

“You’re not marrying...” I pressed on his chest harder, keeping his at arm’s length.

“Yes. I am,” I snapped, cutting off whatever threats or promises he was going to make. “I’m marrying Waylan Bane before the solstice, and this,” I gestured between the two of us, watching in agony as the light in his eyes began to dim. Agony ripped at me as I allowed my heart to harden even more. I nearly choked as I spelled it out for him in a way that would make him hate me forever. “This was nothing more than a reckless mistake.”

Xmara

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Ten years later

The bastard staggered for the sixth time in so many hours, catching himself on the stone countertop just barely, knocking glass bottles over, ignoring the way their contents sizzled and burned into the rock. The quick breath I sucked in was fake. A ruse to make him think I was concerned.

When my husband's knees finally hit the ground with a bone cracking thud, I rushed to him, my eyes darting around the apothecary as if someone might descend the three spiraling levels downward at this very moment. But we were alone. Just him and I, and the choking breaths between us.

I dropped down beside him, scooping him in my arms. He wasn't heavy in the slightest, so when he fell limp, I easily hoisted him up onto the wooden table in the center of the room. His body began to seize, so I stepped away, staring down at the man I'd tried to love with nothing but pity and impatience.

An entire year was how long it took for the poison to start ravaging his body. It began with a slight wheezing cough, a rash on the skin and dizzy spells. Eventually, he slept every other day while I took care of the tasks King Animus had given us. So it was business as usual, seeing as I normally did all the work while he took all the credit.

I should have cared that the light was fading from his eyes. I should have clutched his hands in mine and begged him not to leave me here alone. I'd attempted to love him since the day I was given to him to be his wife. How could I ever hope to go on without him?

But those were the worries of the girl I no longer was. Those were the concerns of a wife for a faithful husband, not one that went behind her back and fucked a woman betrothed to another man. Not a man who lied, cheated and manipulated the woman whose happiness he stole away. No, I wasn't that same girl anymore, and I had the skills to make sure no man would ever cross me again and live to tell the tale.

It took until nightfall for him to breathe his last wretched breath. I heard it, the rise and fall of his rattling chest. It wasn't widely discussed, but there was a terrible, stark difference in the way a person drew breath after their soul was carried away. The empty shell they left behind was filled with hot, dead air that had no choice but to escape. As morbid as that seemed to most, it was music to my ears.

My heart raced with excitement. The hovering, heavy presence of my cheating, lying husband was finally gone, and I was free. However long that lasted, time would tell, but right now, I needed to make this look legitimate. I had minutes at the most to play the part of a grieving wife before people would start asking questions. Waylan wasn't particularly beloved around here, but still, he was a man. His life was worth infinitely more than mine would ever be.

A wailing cry slipped from my lips as I forced tears to the surface. I pinched the skin of my thigh as hard as I could to keep them flowing because it took everything in me not to laugh. I made sure my cries were obnoxiously loud, and soon, I heard the wooden door at the top of the stairs fly open with an echoing thud. A swarm of footsteps descended, so I promptly threw myself over Waylan's cooling corpse and sobbed into his still chest.

"Madam Bane!" a low voice called out as several men swept into the room. I looked up, meeting the eyes of the captain of the guard. Caldor...strong, stoic and empty Caldor. He didn't like me much. Well, not anymore I supposed. There was a time when the captain did more than just like me. "What is this?" he hissed as he approached the table, dark brown brows drawn and his hand reaching for his blade.

I forced more tears out of my eyes as I met his stare, messily swiping my black hair out of my face. “The sickness took him.” I sniffed, even adding in a slight tremble to my bottom lip. “There was nothing I could do.”

Caldor circled the table, staring down at my dead husband. He waved his free hand, and as one unit, the rest of the guards fanned out around the room. “Waylan Bane was the master of poisons, and you’re to have me believe sickness got the better of him so easily?”

Damn this man and his logic. Why couldn't he be a muscle-bound warrior with a thick skull like the rest of them?

“We tried everything, Captain. Everything. Every potion, every root, plant and petal. But nothing lessened his pain in the slightest. Sometimes it only made it worse.” I fought the urge to raise my voice at the man I once gazed at with adoration and awe. He was a cold, cynical man for his young age of thirty-one, but I made him that way. “We began to suspect...” I trailed off, averting my eyes and feigning nervousness.

Caldor stepped closer, his familiar scent wrapping around me. “Suspect what? Speak up, woman.”

Irritation bubbled in my belly. Men were all the same in Avedin. Our betters. Our masters. Women were objects to be owned and talked down to. Before this moment, Caldor never acted like any of those men. He treated me with reverence and respect, but that man was long gone now.

I leveled him with a hard, teary stare that I refused to let waver. I might be a widow now, but I was not so easily broken. “Waylan suspected the Source was at play.”

Several of the guards shifted noisily on their feet. A few of them began to mumble and whisper amongst themselves, but Caldor hissed at them to quiet down before

addressing me again. “That’s a serious accusation, Madam.” I fought a flinch every time he called me that. I longed for the days when my name rolled off of his tongue with ease. When his lips would caress the shell of my ear as he held me close to him.

He was right, though. The Source—the source of all magic in every kingdom, a magic King Animus had never been able to tap into, wasn’t something to casually joke about. Some said that the Source is what was responsible for taking the life of his unborn son and leaving his wife barren, but all we knew for sure was that it was outlawed.

Not many were blessed with direct access to the Source, and if it was true that Waylan Bane, the king’s trusted poison master, was assassinated in such a way, it could mean that there was a spy among us. It could mean a threat to the king.

Little did they know that they were standing in the same room as Waylan’s true killer. But I’d let them believe my little lie regardless. My head would roll if I was ever found out, and I wasn’t ready to forfeit my life for Waylan’s pitiful sake.

These people were terrified of the Source. The very idea of someone becoming so powerful that they could go up against a king made them weak. I shook my head at the guards in the room, muttering to themselves, already speculating about who could be responsible for the crime. I tried not to show my disgust for their weakness on my face, because Caldor’s eyes were keen, and he was clever.

“In any case, this requires an autopsy,” said Caldor. I bit my tongue as I tried not to react. He watched me carefully with those shrewd eyes as he snapped his fingers for his guardsmen. “Take him to the priests for cleansing, we’ll get to the bottom of this.” His gaze never left mine. “If the Source is responsible for this, then we will find the wielder, and they will hang.”

Xmara

King Animus was standing tall as I approached the decadent palace sitting room. Looking around, he nodded to the guards, which had them moving out of the room as I wandered deeper into it.

My heart raced as I managed to hold my composure, trying to play the heartbroken widow, the role expected of me. The king knew I wouldn't speak first. It was almost unheard of for me to speak more than a few curt words in public, especially in the presence of a male. Over the years, I'd learned the delicate art of holding my tongue, even if sometimes all I wanted to do was scream at the top of my lungs.

"Waylan's death is a heinous tragedy that will not be taken lightly, Xmara Bane. He was a beloved subject and servant of Avedin, and as repayment for that loyalty, his wife will be taken care of, far away from a life of poisons." King Animus almost stood taller, like he was proud of his little speech, but I was not so impressed with him.

He was a man who tried his best to command fear and respect. He valued wealth and status above all, but his greed practically seeped from his skin and hovered around him like a cloud. Men like him were easy to manipulate, though, because most of the time they couldn't see past their own noses, much less to the underworld of their own kingdoms. Little did this royal ass know that I was already several steps ahead of his grand little plan.

"If it would please you, Your Highness, I'm quite content with the life I live and have lived for years. Waylan thought it important to pass his knowledge onto me as his assistant. I've become skilled in the art and would be honored to train the next master of poisons the way Waylan intended."

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My words were muttered, but still sharp in their deliverance. I wanted to convince the man who believed women to be useless, to keep me right where I was meant to be. Of course, little did the king know that a woman, not a man, had been controlling his information underground for years without any help from her useless drunk of a husband.

“A woman needs a male, Xmara, you better than anyone should know that.” The King’s eyes dragged over me from my toes to my head, and I could see the appreciation in them. I wasn’t exactly hard to look at, and I could see the wheels turning in his head.

“Then assign me a man of your choosing, and let me make the grandest of spectacles. I’ll belong to this male in private, but helping my King in truth. You cannot afford to lose another tester because the next one is so badly trained.” I kept my voice as steady as I could, knowing that I was walking a fine line here. Nobody contradicted his highness.

The King’s face twitched as if he was fighting an inner battle with himself. The way his body tensed and his hands gripped each other tight behind him gave away more than words ever could. Being nearly mute outside of this castle, I’d learned the subtle art of deciphering gestures, expressions, and all kinds of physical tells.

King Animus took me in, almost as if he was seeing me for the first time. He was considering this. Truly, and it was because he knew the Source wouldn’t give him a second chance. He believed that Waylan had trained me, not the other way around, but that worked in my favor for now.

“You’re more than Waylan made you out to be, Xmara Bane, and that’s dangerous. I will grant you this boon but do not cross me. I will check in on your progress weekly, and I expect you to fall into place, as a woman should.”

I’d won, and a sense of pride swelled in my chest. Oh, how men were so easily manipulated.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” I said in a delicate, thankful sounding whisper, bowing low. Then I turned swiftly back towards the door. No one had heard our conversation, which left no witnesses in case they decided to burn me for being a heretic. I was on my own for now, but soon I would have to accept that my position of power was being threatened.

* * *

Waylan had been dead for two entire days, and I was still breathing, which meant my secret was intact. I was safe but wouldn’t trust it until after his farewell ceremony. I was playing the sad but dutiful wife tonight.

I mourned him while others were around, but secretly I was preparing to train the newest male poison master, something that no female in Avedin’s history had ever accomplished. It would be tricky, playing this game for the long run, but I was already very good at lying.

The male would be delivered later, most likely after the ceremony, which didn’t leave me much time.

I loathed what came next. Every female in Avedin had to have a male, but a poisons master had to be someone expendable. The king knew enough, but he was still blindly playing a game he didn’t yet ask the right questions about, which led me to believe he would pick someone who could be easily understood as unimportant. A

puppet that would believe he got lucky with a widowed wife he could claim for his own. In private, it would be another matter entirely. I didn't have a single desire to be someone's little wife, and I never would be again.

It was a devious way to live, but I could be happy this way. I had tried the love thing, trying to love and serve my husband regardless of our forced union. Over time, I grew to care deeply for him, however reluctantly. I gave into those raw, vulnerable emotions as I attempted to be the best wife he could ever dream of. Obviously, that had failed. Miserably. Waylan never loved me, and I understood that too late.

My naivety was strong in the beginning until I found out about the woman he had on the side. He led me on for years with lies and fake admiration or declarations of his undying love. He claimed to believe in me as a person and not just a woman under his protection as he taught me his skillset, the very trade that made him worth something in the eyes of the King.

It all came crashing down when I proved myself better than him. He grew jealous and bitter, turning to drinking to keep him warm at night. Drink...and the whore he'd given his body to instead of me.

When I took over, I gave him the benefit of thinking he was still the one in charge. That bluff grew harder to manage the more he pushed his deceit, screwing a woman who was promised to another male. That was why he had to die. He couldn't be trusted to continue this charade in silence.

His exploits were becoming too public in those final months. People talked about his infidelity behind my back. I was a joke, and now I was a mourning widow oblivious to her husband's shameful crimes. No one would be foolish enough to bring it up now though. They were too scared when he was alive, but to shame him now would be in poor taste. His sins were no longer my problem regardless.

“It’s her,” a little girl whispered to her little friends as I walked through the courtyard. High towers rose around us, covered in green vines laden with blooming flowers and leaves. It was lush and beautiful, but outside the castle walls, I would be met with a barren wasteland, dead trees, dusty fields, and abandoned crops. The ceremony would begin soon, so I forced out a single tear to boost my ruse.

“Watch yourself, dear. Do not disrespect...” the mother whispered, grabbing her child by the arms and dragging her away, muttering something about danger and the King. I didn’t catch what else was said as I continued on my way.

The moment I descended deeper into the courtyard, I knew it was show time. A hush fell over the crowd that had gathered, and I alone walked down the elegant stone pathway that would lead me directly to my dead husband’s soon to be charred body.

I rolled my shoulders and found my tears coming without command. I was both impressed and slightly worried about my body's reaction. The closer I got to the end of the stone path, the sooner this would be over, and I could finally close this part of my life. My sins would die with Waylan.

King Animus approached the pyre that my husband’s body was laid out on. The pine was carefully woven, and the fires would burn beautifully underneath him. A golden coin was placed on the lid of each eye as payment to the gods. That is...if they decided he was worthy of entering their realm, which was doubtful.

“This is a sad day for us all. My priests have informed me that the Source may be responsible for Waylan Bane’s passing. Rest assured, we will get to the bottom of this senseless tragedy and stop this heretic from harming anyone else in my kingdom. I will not stop until every last trace of this godless magic is wiped clean from my streets. Now, join me as I give Waylan Bane back into the hands of the gods.”

I stared in wonder at Animus. It was almost unheard of for the King to make such a

grand gesture for a man who was not a member of the royal family. I almost felt like it was wasted on Waylan. Of course, no one would assume that was what I believed as I released more fake tears, dabbing at my cheeks with my black glove. It was tedious.

The arrows were notched, and I watched in fascination as the King stood tall while the archers released their flaming arrows to my husband's body. One moment my Waylan Bane was right in front of me, but then it was only flames. They licked against my face as I stepped back. It was time to put that pig of a man behind me and move on. I had a new pupil to meet.

I could feel eyes on my every movement as I walked tall and proud, skirting mourners and royalty as I headed towards the castle, back to my little domain. Their stares were almost as hot on my flesh as the flames that had caressed my face, but I wouldn't give into the heat. I wouldn't meet their probing eyes.

Once beneath the castle, I let out a long breath now that I couldn't feel hundreds of eyes crawling over my skin. On the right would be my rooms and on the left my workshop once I moved some things around. Now that Waylan was no longer here to maneuver around. One floor down was a set of rooms reserved for...a more sensitive use. Something my new master in training might need to prepare himself for.

My dark hair curled around my face as I released it from the ribbon. By accident, I glanced at the mirror, noting the way my eyes, which were usually the color of bright embers, now had dark circles beneath them. I was paler than usual, the color leached from my skin as if too many hours spent in this place had stolen it permanently. I looked away immediately. Vanity meant nothing to me. I'd been told plenty of times by plenty of males that I was beautiful, in a severe sort of way, but beautiful nonetheless. Not that Waylan ever noticed.

“Let go of me—” A raised male voice called out, echoing down the stone halls. My

entire body felt the air of confidence in his demand, the utter lack of self-doubt.

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Footsteps descended the staircase, a door slamming in the distance. Caldor appeared with a male in tow. The male had dark brown hair—still lighter than mine by at least three shades and an interesting coloration of green in his eyes that slanted slightly. His features were sharp and chiseled, making him...attractive in a jarring sort of way. He wasn't at all what I had in mind for this position.

“Your new toy seems uninterested in his second chance at life, Bane,” Caldor grunted as he threw the male to the ground and wiped his hands on his clothes as if he had just dipped them in a puddle of sewage.

I peered down at him, noting that he appeared much too dominant to become my puppet. I narrowed my eyes, and he narrowed his right back at me. Killing a second husband would just be obvious, and my goal was to survive, not to be hung or burned as a heretic.

“I'm not anyone's fucking toy,” he gritted out, spitting blood onto the stone floor. As he pulled himself to his feet with more grace than I would have believed possible, he cut his eyes at Caldor. “I'd ask if you were deaf or dumb, but perhaps it's a bit of both. Maybe the big, bad captain of the guard is the real toy here, one for the King to wind up and do his dirty work.” Then he looked at me. “The name's Remus, as he well knows.” Caldor just grunted noncommittally. Not even bothering to meet my eyes. Remus must have noticed because as his eyes bounced between Caldor and me, he grinned. “Oh, yes, I can see that my time with you lot will be entertaining at the very least.”

I brushed his shoulder as I headed for my work table. Poisons, antidotes, and elixirs. Clean deaths, messy ones, and the ability to stop them in their tracks. I allowed

myself a small smile at my glass-vialed beauties before I turned again, the table now in front of me as Caldor stood in the back of the room, and the smug apprentice stood in front of the table looking at me.

For the first time, I met his eyes straight on. “I prefer not to speak when it is unnecessary, so when I do, you will listen. I will not repeat myself, and if that means you end up accidentally poisoning yourself or getting yourself into trouble, that’s not my problem. There are plenty more apprentices in this kingdom willing to take your place. Is that clear?”

He blinked at me several times, as did Caldor, who glowered by the wall, as per usual. I wasn’t going to mince words. I never did. Remus would learn one way or another that this was my domain, and he was but a piece of the puzzle. Remus nodded curtly, but his lips betrayed him as he smirked. Oh lovely, I got to break him today after all.

“On this table is a mixture of substances. One of them, you will take every day until I feel like I can trust you. A few of them will kill you instantly, while two others are antidotes. Nothing is labeled, and you will be tested daily. Since you enjoy playing so much, just think of it as a game.”

He gave me an incredulous look, but I stood firm in my belief that if he couldn’t listen, he wasn’t worth the trouble of training. “I don’t think so,” Remus muttered, unbothered, inspecting his nail beds.

I shifted my gaze to Caldor. “Where did the King find this one?”

“He’s a thief and, in my opinion, deserves to swing by the neck, but the king insisted it be him.” Caldor ran his eyes over Remus, utterly unimpressed. “He’s also a...shifter.” He said the word like it was poison itself coming out.

A shifter, huh? It was illegal to shift in Avedin. Although it wasn't definitively proven that the Source was responsible for the ability of some bloodlines to shift into animals, it was largely frowned upon, and the King despised it.

"Drink." I handed Remus a small vial with a ruby red substance inside of it. He held it up to his face, inspecting it from every angle.

"No," Remus clipped out.

I grunted, then motioned for Caldor to help speed this up. Remus needed to drink the elixir so we could move on, and frankly, I was getting bored already. I needed to make sure I was safe, which meant the drink was not optional.

Caldor strode between us and snatched the vial before gripping Remus by his hair at the back of his head. The shifter squirmed and cursed as his head was forced back, and the captain of the guard forced him to swallow the liquid in one smooth gulp.

"What in the gods...!" Remus shouted and choked when he was roughly released. He stumbled, knocking into the work table, but luckily didn't knock any of my precious vials to the ground.

Our eyes met as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, rage burning inside his green eyes that no longer flashed brightly with humor. Now that the potion was working, nullifying his ability, I said, "Now, we may begin."

Xmara

We'd been here for hours, deep into training as Remus failed time and time again to counter any of my beautiful poisons. It was a shame, yet sickeningly pleasurable somehow, watching him bring himself to the brink of death, only to hear him beg me to save him at the last moment.

I was beginning to lose confidence in his intelligence as the hours dragged on and on with no end in sight. He picked up one of the last concoctions on the table and, almost without fear, downed the entire thing. My eyebrows lifted in interest. Could he really be so numb to the possibilities already? Intriguing.

My boredom subsided momentarily, knowing soon he would fall to his knees, unable to breathe, his throat closing up until his face turned bluish purple. Oh, what a sight that would be.

I picked up a strawberry-covered chocolate dessert. Would I have to ask the King for another taster soon? This time I decided not to help the shifter.

Just as I had anticipated, Remus dropped to his knees. The beautiful sound of coughing hit my ears as I swallowed my food and sat up in my chair to take it all in, to see what this male would do with the seconds ticking down rapidly.

He calmly searched for the vial that held the antidote to his suffering. It wasn't as frantic as it was earlier in the night. That was a good sign.

My feet touched the floor as I sat fully. One of Remus's hands was on his neck, his skin changing color slightly as the poison ran its course.

The shifter picked up the antidote unassumingly, and my blood began to hum at the anticipation of it all.

Would he or wouldn't he? Choices, decisions, a nice juicy show as I withheld any expressions that might possibly sway his decision.

He'd stopped looking to me in hope of answers hours ago. Yet, I still never allowed my face to show even an inkling of sway. Remus would either sink or swim because I would not always be there to hold his hand. He needed to know what these poisons

tasted like. He needed to know them so intimately that he could tell exactly what sort of havoc they could bring from their scent and color alone.

I took in the shifter smelling the vial, or...doing the best he could as he continued to choke. It never ceased to amaze me how long someone could choke to death before they finally just... stopped.

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He closed his eyes tightly, gritting his teeth hard for a moment of agonizing pain before gulping down half, then also rubbing some of the liquid on his skin.

I smirked, and stood to my full height. Had he actually learned something throughout this very disappointing night?

Some antidotes were meant to be ingested, but others must be absorbed into the skin. It took longer for the effects to kick in, but if you were unable to swallow, it would help.

“Fuck!” Remus cried out as he sucked in long, painfully deep breaths.

A small coughing fit followed, then he glared at me from across the room. My hip popped out, my hand moving to rest comfortably on it as I took in the male before me with shrewd eyes. He scowled at me as if I alone was responsible for every inconvenience he’d ever encountered. As if I personally forced him into thievery.

“Are you insane? Did you enjoy your delicious strawberry dessert while I was busy dying?” He coughed again. “Is this a game for you?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly. Remus’s face turned murderous as he stalked toward me, just as someone else entered the room.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” a servant muttered with a bowed head.

I hummed, waving the small female forward with the message visible in her hands. She slowly stepped toward me, and her eyes shifting between Remus and me, her

skin turning scarlet, just looking at the handsome male. I cleared my throat, which made the girl's attention shift back to me.

“Sorry, Madam Bane.” She placed the note in my palm and rushed back out the door.

Remus was obviously still mad, but as he opened his mouth to most likely argue some more, I held my palm up to shush him.

I recognized the familiar silvery seal keeping the parchment closed. My expression turned sour as I mentally cursed and walked swiftly towards my bed chambers. Remus followed just as I figured he would.

“Don’t you hush me, Xmara! I’m not a fucking dog,” Remus growled out.

Turning, I cocked my head at him, my eyebrow raised. “Is that not what you shift into then?” Perhaps he was some kind of feline then.

“There are some things you shouldn’t fucking ask.” His entire posture was coiled and violent. Perhaps he was a snake shifter. A venomous one. Perhaps that venom might make a useful poison someday...

“I’m not concerned about propriety, and you don't frighten me." I waved a hand at him. "There’s always someone somewhere who wants me dead at any given time, even if they don’t realize it. You are the least of my current worries." I looked him up and down. "Shifters are beyond rare in Avedin so excuse my curiosity. If you and I are to work together, I feel I’m entitled to know who and what I am dealing with.”

“You should be worried, Mara. My bite is worse than my bark, im afraid.” Remus grinned wickedly, and I noticed his canine teeth were exceptionally sharp.

I rolled my eyes as I opened the letter in my hands, once more ignoring him. My

body went cold as I read it several times over. I crumpled the letter in my hand, my rage nearly all consuming as I stalked to my bedside table, allowing the flames from the candles to engulf the parchment as I held it aloft.

I watched the contents burn a beautiful orange, then brown, then black. The ashes dropped to the wooden surface, but as the rage slowly subsided, Remus's voice rang again in my ears as he asked question after fucking question.

"Leave me," I snapped at him, cutting off whatever drivel he was attempting to fill the room with. His grin was wicked, as if he knew exactly how irritating he already was. Well, I wouldn't buckle so easily.

"Prepare yourself for an outing. Dark clothing. Make yourself able to blend in with the night." Remus grunted and took one step toward my door. I narrowed my eyes at him in warning. "Don't try to run, Remus. There's nowhere in Avedin I can't find you."

He clenched his jaw and blinked at me for a few heartbeats before finally leaving.

One of my Ravens was dead, which left the panic and uncertainty for me to deal with as soon as possible. There was no time to waste. My ravens were already gathering.

I knew Remus would run, of that I could guarantee. Still though, I wasn't lying when I offered him the warning. Nowhere in Avedin would be safe for him. If Caldor couldn't find him, I would.

* * *

A warm bath was exactly what I needed to release the tension that wracked my body. It was a luxury I shouldn't have wasted time on, but it had me feeling more relaxed and focused.

I threw my still damp hair into a long braid, only some baby hairs left unaccounted for as I dropped the towel from my body and moved deeper into my closet.

The cool air wrapped around me, until I could feel the hairs on my body stick up as I quickly found the clothes I would need—a black jerkin and baldric that fit snugly beneath my cloak, slim pants that a proper lady wouldn't dare wear in public, and my riding boots that hadn't failed me yet.

I mulled over which belt I would take but ultimately decided on my belt of silence, which I only used when I wanted the task to be quick and painless, leaving no traces behind. It meant stealth was my friend for the night, and I would have to hurry as daylight would approach soon.

Now I only had to check and see if Remus had run for it or if he would continue to surprise me. Part of me hoped he ran. It would make things easier for me if I no longer had to deal with a smarmy, cocky man who didn't know a poison from a bottle of rum. Another part of me—the one that wanted to hurry up and finish this nasty business tonight, hoped he stayed put and found somewhere to wait for me, because finding a replacement after killing the coward would be tedious. I moved like lightning through the corridors until I came upon a lone guard at the entrance to the barracks rooms.

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“Captain?” I called out, my voice echoing off of the stone walls.

The guard snapped to attention and then pointed towards the barracks—a small, isolated wing of the castle for the guards to rest while they were off duty. It was tucked away from anywhere the King would find himself, never one to stoop as low as the ones who served him. I think they liked it that way, but we never heard any noise in my part of the castle.

I nodded, thanking the male as I strode forward and ducked under the wall to move down the stairs. The guard barely glanced at me, as usual. I overheard voices as I went further down. Caldor’s was easily recognizable, and it twisted something in my chest. Some of them were gracious with me, treating me like some kind of respectable lady, even though I was just the poison master’s wife. Still, many of them avoided me outright, as if I was nothing but a shadowy wraith stalking their halls. And maybe I was.

At the bottom of the stairs in the first room of the barracks, was a table of shirtless guards, playing a game of cards with none other than the shifter himself.

How unpredictable ...I mused in my head, pasting a bland look on my face. Apparently, I’d been wrong about the shifter, and I would need to keep a close eye on him to make sure that didn’t happen again.

The men stopped speaking as each of them turned to me. My hood covered the majority of my face, but all of them knew who and what I was.

Remus’s large smile was on full display as his sparkling eyes drank me in, and he

nodded in understanding, smug at the fact that he'd caught me off guard. He was also shirtless, which meant he didn't take my orders seriously enough to make himself suitable.

"Alright, men! I must be off, but do have your money ready for me tomorrow because I won't forget to collect it!" Remus leaped from his chair and strode towards me. One of the guards watched us with narrowed eyes, but he quickly schooled his features when I met his stare.

I could hear Remus's footsteps behind me as I spun on my heel and headed back up the staircase, so I quickened my pace. We had a mission, and I had no time to wait around while he gambled, which was probably what got him into thieving in the first place, if I were to guess.

I ducked back under the low wall, then made my way out, nodding to the guard once more as Remus came up behind me. I threw a pack at him without stopping and smiled when he grunted under its weight.

"Change," I told him. Remus gave me a flirty smile, but I shook my head in exasperation. "Quickly!" The shifter got the hint and dropped his smile. I turned to give him some sort of privacy.

"There," Remus barked out when he had finished. "What's this big mission, oh lovely soon-to-be wife? Who do we have to maim in the name of our great king?"

I glared at him. "You will receive information as I see fit. For now, at least attempt to act like you know what you're supposed to be doing. We're getting along perfectly, and you're so smitten with me you could weep."

I offered him my arm. Usually, it would be the male who took the lead while his little wife scuttled alongside him. But the circumstances were different this time, and this

supposed romance was a joke. Remus glared at me but intertwined our arms together, and we walked calmly out through the gardens.

The darkness was thick and silent as we exited the palace gates. I could feel Remus's unease over being completely left out of the plan, but I needed him on his toes for this to work. Even in the dark, eyes roamed and ears listened. Knowledge was power in Avedin, and I prided myself on not letting anyone have any control of me. The King's little spies could scurry back to him with empty pockets tonight.

"While I appreciate the doom and gloom, this particular side of the city isn't exactly fit for a lady," Remus whispered, his head on a swivel as if the shadows themselves were about to snatch me from his arms.

I hummed in response, unsure what exactly to tell him that didn't give away more than I wanted to. He was right, though. The Gallows, as we called it, was a rough part of Avedin. It was where the radicals, heathens, heretics, and vagrants lived. The shifter haters, the Source worshipers and anyone who was not wholly human, claimed these streets. Anyone else was considered an outsider—trouble.

"Whatever scheme you've concocted is looking like a very bad idea, Xmara."

"You worry too much," I said as we neared a tavern. Over the entryway was a tall spike with the head of a lion piked on the tip. I couldn't be sure if it was a shifter or actual game, but a shiver ran down my spine anyway.

All eyes turned to us, not in a nice, considerate way. I just offered the seedy patrons a small smile before bringing Remus along with me to the bar, as if we were any normal couple out for a night on the town. The bartender looked less than impressed with my nonchalance, but that was to be expected in a world ruled by males.

"Can't help ya', miss."

“That’s not my problem,” My grip on Remus loosened, and I laid my cloak down. Several hissed breaths filled the room. The sound of scraping chairs and shuffling followed as every man in the room left in a hurry, leaving half finished mugs on their tables.

My lips flattened, unimpressed at the lack of backbone in this establishment. But, I supposed my reputation had really made the rounds.

“I’ve asked you not to come here,” the bartender grumbled, likely irritated that he’d lost his customers for the night.

“I need information,” I said coolly, my words clipped and low. I gave him a single name, and the man winced.

Remus was watching the interaction in both fascination and confusion. I wondered if he was starting to think that the rope the King had planned for him might have been a better choice.

“He’ll be in bed at this hour, and the maids will be in their rooms on the bottom level. He was in here earlier, so he’ll not be stirring easily if ya catch my drift.” The bartender still avoided looking directly into my eyes, focusing just over my right shoulder instead. Coward.

I downed the drink he'd placed in front of me out of habit and nodded my thanks before dragging Remus back out of the tavern.

“What was the point of all that?” he asked, tugging me to a stop once we were shrouded in the darkness of the city street.

I placed my hood back over my head. “An informant. He knows who I am and what I’m capable of, to some degree. He feeds me information, and I... attend to his

debts.”

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He rubbed a palm over his face. “And by attend, I assume you mean—”

“Don’t assume,” I said, cutting him off. “It never ends well for either party.”

“What the fuck have I gotten myself mixed up in? Are you some sort of assassin? Poisons I understand, but this...”

“I’m worse. But maybe you should have considered that before letting your sticky fingers do the thinking for you.”

He blinked at me, the shadows of the night playing across his face, the moonlight shining in his bright eyes. “What are you, exactly? You cleared out a tavern full of ruffians, murderers, and heretics without saying a damn word. No more minced words or secrets, Mara.”

I seriously contemplated ignoring the question and leaving him to wonder, but he had yet to try to escape. I could always tell him the truth. It would be the ultimate test, and if he were to fail that test, then he was a dead man walking.

"You've heard of my Ravens," I said, taking a chance on my new apprentice, watching as my words settled over him, his eyes widening as he took a slight step backward. I smiled wickedly as I followed.

MyRavens.Mine.

I waited for him to run. I’d have to chase after him, and I really wasn’t in the mood. We’d make this kill tonight if he chose to have any kind of backbone, and then he’d

see firsthand what exactly it was that I did for the King—for Avedin. It was never Waylan Bane pulling the strings. It was always me.

As far as Animus knew, the Ravens were a thorn in his side with the power to undermine him at any moment, when really, we were all one and the same. If he were to ever find out about my alter ego, I'd hang without a trial.

“That’s not possible, they’ve been dead and gone for years,” Remus snapped, eyes flitting left and right, eyeing every shadow suspiciously. He was referring to the previous leader or the spy ring. The reckless man who'd been caught and hanged for a crime the king would have had Waylan carry out instead. But that was years ago, before I inserted myself at the head of the Ravens, where I planned to remain.

“Is that so? Interesting,” I said, my lips twisting into a small smile. Half of my face was shrouded beneath my cloak. Remus’s face was a mask of unease and disbelief. “Well if you're so sure then you have nothing to worry about, shifter.”

Xmara

I released my belt from my hip, checking over the vials making a mental note of which ones were now empty and would need to be replaced.

It was a quick kill—in and out, after knocking out the guards watching over the mark, given his higher ranking unfortunately. It wasn’t hard, given that I brought one of my favorite concoctions—a volatile mixture of Ithica weed pollens that, when exposed to air, created a fog that would render even the largest of males unconscious for hours.

The mark lived on a large estate just on the outer edge of Avedin, with a full-time staff, a wife in a separate room, and luckily for me, only two guards posted out front. It was easy to make an incision between his thumb and forefinger, placing a single drop of scentless, colorless poison on the beading blood, where it would carry death

directly to his heart.

He died in minutes while Remus watched. I half expected him to run screaming from the house, perhaps straight to the King, or even Caldor, turning me over as a plea deal—a murderer in exchange for a second chance at freedom. But he didn't run screaming. He remained by my side while we climbed out the window and scaled the rooftop, dropping down an orange tree's trunk before disappearing back into the night.

The dead Raven would have taken this mark had someone not snuffed them out first, and now that I'd completed the task, I would find out who and how.

In less than a fortnight, Remus would create a poison for the first time without any guidance from me, and I would drink it. One of two things would happen; he'd either kill me in most likely an incredibly painful manner, or he'd pass my test and save me with the antidote, which he would also have to create himself.

If I were to die, the King would have questions, and Remus wasn't in any position to explain why he murdered his most trusted poisons master. Not to mention, now that Remus knew I was the leader of the Ravens, I imagined he would think twice before harming me in any way. The Ravens wouldn't exactly let my death slide.

Luckily for my protege, death was not among the list of things I feared. Death came for us all eventually, and the when and where were not something I had control over, so why dread it? In my line of work, death and I had grown to be old friends, and when my time came, I'd greet them with a grin.

When we returned to the castle, I found a servant and asked them to find a suitable sleeping arrangement for Remus until the 'wedding' ceremony, after which we'd be expected to share rooms. I shuddered at the thought of it. There was no official date set, and I was going to make sure the King forgot about his plan altogether. Maybe

he'd realize what an asset I was on my own and decide I didn't need a male... I could wish, I supposed.

Caldor's lips flattened into the ghost of a grimace as I walked past, but he eyed Remus with open disdain. He was always nearby. Always watching and waiting to make my life miserable. Perhaps I deserved it. We left the scowling Captain in the shadows as we parted ways, Remus casting me a long, heavy look before the servant ushered him off.

Sleep came easily but didn't last as long as I'd hoped. Three hours of dreamlessness and my eyes shot open, wide awake, my body fidgety and my mind whirring. I rang the servant's bell, and my belly rumbled with the need for food. Oftentimes, I would forget to eat, but I needed my wits about me to continue with Remus today. Pretty soon, the King would want to see for himself how his new poisons master was faring.

It didn't take long before a maid was at my door. I let her in, and she moved swiftly to drop the food off on my small tea table. On her heels were two younger maids with extra towels and warm blankets.

Then I saw her...the one woman who I risked my life and my freedom to spite. The one who ruined my life without regard for the havoc she and Waylan would cause. What that cheating bastard saw in her I would never understand.

She came strolling into my room like she was welcome, her head held high, shoulders straight and her nose so high in the air, if it rained, she'd drown. I cleared my throat, my eyes narrowing pointedly at each and every servant until they stopped dead in their tracks, pivoting to face the woman.

"You're not welcome here," I said, my voice cold and clipped. "Your engagement may have given you the opportunity to leave this all behind and claw your way up, but you should still know your place until that day comes."

As a servant in the king's household, her engagement to a Highmore male was nothing but luck and seduction. But until then she was nothing more than staff.

“You’re no better than the rest of us,” Lavinna snapped back at me, dropping a set of towels down at her feet. The other servants gasped in shock. “You think because the King allows you to use his servants, it makes you special? He’ll marry you off before Waylan is cold in his grave. ” She laughed bitterly. “You’re just his little whore he keeps locked up for when he tires of his mistress. Everyone knows it.”

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I stepped closer to her, unbothered by her lack of tact or the fact that she accused me of fucking the King. The thought of it made me want to retch. She was a spider under my shoe. One which I would gladly squish into the mud at the opportune moment.

When I was close enough to see the whites of her eyes and the silvery line of angry tears she tried to keep at bay, I grinned and whispered, “You will never amount half of what I’ve become, Lavinna. Why do you think he never left me for you?” I tilted my head, stepping closer as she flexed her jaw, clenching it hard enough to crack her own teeth. “Waylan simply occupied your open bed when I allowed it, nothing more, nothing less. We had an agreement, you see, and trust me, you weren’t his only distraction, not by far.”

My words might not be true, but she didn’t need to know that. I never claimed to be a saint, but this woman made my blood boil. I knew I should have been through with the rage of his infidelity by now. The sting of it was long gone, but looking into her narrow eyes, with her too short nose and stringy hair, all I felt was offended.

“Now get the fuck out of my sight!” I shouted in her face causing her to flinch and stumble several steps back, knocking into one of the other maids. This was my domain, my room, and she would never have any power over me.

Nothing she did, not even her engagement to one of the King’s advisors could make her my equal. To my satisfaction, she fled the room with the other maids on her heels.

* * *

Weeks passed and Remus was getting better at identifying poisons. He still made

mistakes I, unfortunately, had to clean up before he accidentally killed himself, but they were becoming less frequent.

I came to realize over the time we spent in close quarters, that the shifter had an incessant need to fill every single moment with speech. It seemed like he couldn't help himself but voice every errant thought that passed through his brain. At first, I was so annoyed that I was ready to beg the King to reconsider his choice. But as the days went by, I found myself listening to his stories with open ears and a hidden smile playing on my lips.

Remus's life was even wilder than I ever imagined. He'd been a thief and a gambler before he was captured by the city guard and sentenced to hang for his crimes. Apparently he used to frequent the taverns in the wealthier areas of Avedin, betting on card games, which he strategically fixed. As a shifter, he had the ability to smell the changes in people's emotions, scent the sweat beading on their brows, and hear the thumping of their hearts. It made him an excellent card player.

He'd been caught up once or twice, getting himself into brawls or having to lie low for a few weeks before he could show his face to the public again. When I asked him why he couldn't just find himself a trade and make his money honestly, I should have known he'd throw it back in my face. Apparently, revealing the fact that I was the leader of one of the most notorious spy rings across the realm was coming back to bite me. How could I expect him to make an honest living while I killed people and sold secrets to make mine? I supposed he had a point.

Still, after weeks of working side by side, I had yet to confide in Remus about the murdered Raven. She'd been killed during the mission Remus and I were forced to finish for her, but that still meant that there was somebody out there who'd been expecting her to show up at that house that night. She hadn't been sent to kill him. Not that night. No, the young Raven was there for information, but somebody had been waiting.

It wasn't that I didn't trust Remus, because, if I was being honest with myself, I didn't think he was the type to sell my secrets. I wanted to be sure there was actually something amiss before I had no choice but to take my investigation further. I'd questioned just about everyone I could think of over the last couple of weeks—shopkeepers, drunkards, beggars, whores, and even a few street rat children.

The Raven's death was still whispered about on the streets, and I'd noticed how empty they'd been during the nights lately, but nobody seemed to have any information on who killed her. All we knew was that her body had been dumped in the market square deep in the Gallows for anyone to find in the light of the early morning. She had a note pinned to her chest that had been delivered straight to me.

I hadn't known the girl well. She'd been sixteen years old—an orphan from Nexus, the kingdom beyond the river, taken by slave traders and passed through household after household until my Ravens took her in and made her one of our spies.

That's who we all were—orphans, criminals, outcasts, and Source users. We ran the underground of Avedin, trading in secrets and information, and taking care of the dirty work the King didn't like to muddy his own palms with. Of course, the King didn't know that I was their current leader, having been under the impression that Waylan had seen to the death of the last one, but I wasn't going to correct him. If I could operate from the shadows without anything falling back on me, that was preferable to the King watching my every move.

Tonight was Remus's final test. If he could pass it and keep me alive with his antidote, then the real work could finally begin, and perhaps I'd let him in on more information. I knew he was itching for me to spill my secrets, but to my surprise, he never pushed me.

I had a few spare hours to kill, so I decided it was time to pay a visit to my oldest friend, Saeya. Friend was a loose term, I supposed but it was the best I had to offer.

She was Caldor's twin sister, and we'd been close for years. It was one of the reasons the handsome yet stone-faced guard had such a stick up his arse. Aside from our sordid history that is.

He claimed I wasn't good company for an unmarried woman to keep, always involving myself in foul, uncouth behavior according to him. I knew the real reason he disapproved, but he'd never admit that, least of all to me.

At the time, I thought his assumptions were hilarious, back when my trust in Waylan still blinded me, but now I realized how... right, Caldor was about me. I'd never tell him that.

Despite her brother's dislike of me, Saeya had been good to me over the years, treating me like I was a normal woman for once in my life. She was a breath of fresh air amidst the haze of my darkness and secrets.

I envied her in a way sometimes. Her opinions were strong, and she'd managed to convince her father and Caldor to allow her to marry for love rather than convenience. Their father was on the war council, and I hated him almost as much as I hated my late husband. Just another cheating male as Saeya's mother was still alive and well, though I'd seen him around the city late at night with all manner of females.

I dressed in a simple black day gown of mourning, still keeping up the pretense of grieving for Waylan. My hair was loose, my dark curls spilling down my back freely as the cool air blew them around. I walked the outer edge of the castle's upper levels, already knowing where I'd find my friend.

"Hello, stranger," Saeya announced as she wrapped her arms around me. I hugged her back but released her just as quickly. "Tell me all about your new soon-to-be husband! Is he handsome? Dangerous? Charming?"

She grinned at me with stars in her eyes. I shook my head at her naivety. But she knew how much I hated Waylan, so I supposed I couldn't blame her for wanting me to move on.

Saeya stood on the landing just above the training ground courtyard, watching from above as the guard ran through their daily drills. I could see the longing in her eyes despite the smiles and inane questions she had for me.

For as long as I could remember, she'd made no secret of her wish to join the guard alongside her twin, but her father wouldn't hear of it, and neither would the King, for that matter. A female with a sword in her hand? It was laughable. And laugh, they had. To her face, over and over again, so eventually, she stopped asking.

"Has Caldor been running his mouth then?" I asked, folding my forearms over the railing, watching as her brother called out orders to his soldiers.

At that moment, the guard captain looked up, his eyes clashing with mine. They narrowed at the fact that I was up here with Saeya, so I just grinned back at him.

When he turned away, I found my gaze lingering on him. Caldor was almost too handsome for his own good, but I sincerely didn't think he was aware of it. His eyes were a dark, misty blue, shrouded by thick expressive brows that were always furrowed in brooding thought. His skin was tanned, and his short hair a golden brown that caught the sunlight just right.

It was hard to see the hatred in his eyes, especially now that Waylan was dead. I supposed it was foolish of me to think he'd run back to my arms the moment my husband's ashes flew off into the breeze. I'd hurt Caldor irreparably, and I deserved every ounce of his loathing.

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It didn't stop me from remembering how his lips had felt between my thighs or how his rough voice whispered into my ear, detailing the ways he planned to make me scream. Sometimes in the night, I could still feel his body on top of mine, pressing me into the pillows. We would never go too far, knowing a woman had to be pure to claim a husband—especially one of rank. We were so young and naive to believe it would last forever—to believe I wouldn't eventually be forced to marry a man of higher political standing.

“You're not fooling anyone, you know,” Saeya said. Tearing my eyes away from Caldor, I blinked at my friend. She smiled at me with knowing eyes. “I wish the two of you would settle this mess for good. It's incredibly tiring watching my brother mope around the castle.”

I sighed. “It's my fault, and I'll bear it. I thought by now he'd at least be able to look at me. Maybe we could even be friends one day like we used to be.”

Saeya snorted. “You and Caldor were never friends, Mara. The day you arrived at court, my brother burst into our father's study and announced he'd just met the love of his life. Friends was never an option.”

My heart sank as I watched him down there, calling out orders to the men he was training. He wielded his sword as if it was an extension of his own arms. Like the gods themselves had placed it in his hand. I was the reason he threw his life into his work. My betrayal. My choices were the reason he was hurting.

“And what about you? Did you speak to your father like you promised?” My change of subject was transparent, but I wasn't talking about things I no longer had power

over.

Saeya gave me a guilty smile that didn't reach her eyes. When I opened my mouth to let her have a piece of my mind, she groaned, cutting me off before I could say a word. "I know, I know! It's just never been the right moment. The King has him busy every day with something Father refuses to talk about, even with Caldor. He's barely ever home, and I—"

"Am running out of time," I finished for her. "Don't wait until the King tells him who to marry you off to. You're almost thirty, Sae. Silas is a good man from a good family."

"But he's not titled," Saeya countered.

"Since when have you ever cared about titles?" Saeya was one of the least judgemental women I'd met in my life. Most women clamored to marry into titled families of wealth and privilege, but my best friend had fallen for the King's personal blacksmith, a man named Silas, who was kind, generous, wealthy, and handsome. "They're the ones who agreed you could marry for love. Do you really think they'd go back on their word now that you've found it?"

"You don't know my father very well then," she said dryly. "If the King tells him to jump off the tallest tower of this castle, he wouldn't waste a second. Maybe if I could convince my brother to finally settle down, I could..." She trailed off, glancing at me apologetically. "I didn't mean... I'm sorry..."

My heart clenched and my mouth dried up at the thought of Caldor taking a wife. The notion had tormented me for years after I married Waylan, even though I had no right to ask him not to marry. I'd fallen for my husband after some time had passed, and I couldn't expect Caldor not to do the same.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said with a fake smile, gently patting my friend on the arm. “If that’s what it takes, then so be it. It’s not like my opinion matters to him anymore anyway. I’m just surprised it’s taken as long as it has.”

“Not me,” she said, glancing down at Caldor with sad eyes. “He never really got over you. Not completely.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong, Sae. And once Remus and I are married—”

“Are you gossiping about me, Mara?” Remus asked from over my shoulder. My shoulders stiffened as his footsteps neared. Saeya’s eyes widened as she caught sight of the shifter. I would’ve closed her mouth for her if it wasn’t slightly entertaining.

He was dressed in all black, much like the guard down below, with his long dark hair swept off his shoulders. His feline-like eyes were sharp and bright today, but with my potion swimming through his body, they weren’t as bright as they could be. Still, he was almost alarmingly charming when he smiled, and his smile was wide for Saeya as he took her hand, bowing as he placed a kiss on her fingers.

“Remus Felix Ambrose. I know it’s a mouthful, but beautiful ladies may call me Remus, and you are?” I rolled my eyes at the way she was falling for every word. She knew better.

“Saeya,” she purred. Saeya was a hopeless flirt, but I knew her heart belonged to Silas and always would. Besides, despite his flirtation, Remus was spoken for, even if he would never be mine in any real sense.

“Saeya ...” he mused, drawing out every syllable. “Beautiful, just like the goddess for which your name is derived.” This time I couldn’t contain my snort of amusement, and Remus simply cast me a wink as he dropped her hand.

Saeya shoved me in the arm playfully. “You didn’t tell me your betrothed was so charming.”

“That’s because he isn’t,” I said, sneering at the snifter who beamed at her. “Trust me, once you get to know him, you’ll be eating those words. He’ll never let me live them down.”

“I hear we have an eventful evening ahead of us, don’t we Mara?” Remus said, diverting his attention to me. Saeya giggled, and I smiled dangerously at the thought of what he would be doing tonight. Saeya probably had other ideas.

Caldor called out to his sister from below, so she kissed both of my cheeks before blushing at Remus and heading off. Meanwhile Caldor glared up at me, as per usual.

Remus followed close behind as I turned and headed back to my rooms. The walk didn’t take long, but the silence held me captive. He wasn’t speaking or even asking questions; he was actually just along for the ride and I realized I didn’t hate it. I was used to the quiet, but I hadn’t had much of it lately. I knew it would end soon as we were in private, without prying eyes and ears.

“So, what’s your crazy plan now?” Remus asked as we made our way toward my table of vials. He scanned the vials warily.

I grinned at him, and his eyes flashed with something unidentifiable. Excitement maybe? “Tonight, you’ll either kill me and prove to the King that you are, indeed, utterly useless, or you’ll save my life, and we can really start your training.”

“I’m not killing you, Mara,” Remus snapped, his green eyes hardening and his strong jaw going rigid.

I suddenly found myself a lot more intrigued by this shifter. Why did he care so

much? If he killed me, it would be the perfect opportunity for him to make his escape.

I began preparing the vials, ignoring his burning stare on the side of my face. He should have known better than to argue with me. Besides, it wasn't like I hadn't warned him about this eventuality.

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Eventually, he sighed. “Fine. If you’re so keen on a death sentence, tell me what I’m supposed to do.” He folded his strong arms over his chest and glared at me, and when I glanced up through my lashes, for a moment, I felt a flutter in my belly. I shook it away immediately.

“I want you to make me a poison. Make it deadly, but not instant death. It must be agonizing and slow to be useful. Keep in mind that whatever you choose to make, you must also be able to reverse the effects by creating a matching antidote. ” My pulse sped up as he stepped closer to the table.

"This is going to be bad," he whispered as he picked up the first vial.

* * *

Hours passed and my boredom exceeded expectations. Remus was getting nowhere. My lips pursed as I paced the room, and I even offered him a break to collect his thoughts. Yet, more hours passed but he was not making any progress.

Eventually, I was done with waiting and it was time to see what he could do under the knife. I walked up to where he stood, bent over the wooden table, and snatched the vial in his hands.

It was a quick reacting poison that would kill me in a matter of minutes if he didn’t reverse it. Remus tried to grab the elixir from me, but I was too quick. I threw the liquid back, the substance rough against my throat, burning as it made its way all the way down. I swallowed and watched as Remus stared at me in horror.

“Mara, no! Why would you do that? It wasn’t ready!” He panicked, frantically clutching my arms, his face drained of color.

I shrugged as I began the countdown in my head. Remus was frozen in place as I fell to my knees, unable to move. I hit the floor, unable to soften the fall. He was there in seconds, his hand protecting my head from the hard blow and I fell the rest of the way. He whispered in my ear, telling me he would fix this, muttering about how stupid and reckless I was, but his voice became muddled and incoherent.

He searched every vial as he thought through everything he added to the elixir. I gave him the basic rundown of every vial on the table the night before, so I sure hoped the information had been retained. It would be up to his instincts, most of all. Already I was beginning to suffocate as my throat began to close up, and my face swelled until my eyes began to shut.

As time ticked by, I wondered if this was really it. Was this how it would all end for me? I felt like laughing as I stared at the ceiling, the world growing darker by the second.

Remus was suddenly back in my face holding a vial, his long dark hair wild around his face and sweat beading on his furrowed brow. I couldn’t get a good look at it as he leaned my head back and poured the liquid into my mouth. It tasted bland like water, but as I swallowed, I began to sense something vaguely floral with a hint of something metallic. My throat wasn’t working at the moment, so Remus was forced to massage it, making sure every drop of it made it inside of me.

Another few seconds passed, and I felt a tingling where my limbs should have been. I felt my eyelids flutter, and breath suck back into my lungs as I heaved inward. The tightness in my chest was already lifting, and feeling was returning to my limbs.

The shifter had done it. Somehow he’d managed to pass his first real task and keep

me alive, much to my immense relief. For a moment, I thought maybe I'd made a critical error.

Sometime later, I was able to move slightly and talk just enough to give the shifter praise when he figured out he did well. "I suppose you can be useful. When you feel like it, apparently."

Remus still glared at me as he sat next to me on the floor with his arms draped over his bent knees, breathing hard. But then he cracked a reluctant smile, his green eyes filling with mischief as he said, "I'm useful in many ways, Xmara, but you don't have to kill yourself to find out."

Xmara

My head still swam, and my eyes burned every time I opened them too wide as Remus and I strode through the dark streets of Avedin. It was nearly sunrise, so we had to move quickly. Our cloaks were black, our hoods pulled down over our eyes, allowing us to once again blend in with the shadows.

On the outskirts of the city, past the Gallows, through an old dried-up orchard, was a decrepit temple that hadn't been occupied in years. The priestesses were long gone, worship of the goddess Thessia a forgotten practice and outlawed by the King, along with every other deity derived from the Source.

We ascended the stone steps, looking over our shoulders to ensure we weren't being followed, guided only by the light of the now-waning moon. Just over the trees in the far distance, the sky was beginning to glow with oranges and pinks.

"I haven't been in a temple since I was a child," Remus whispered as we passed through a stone archway leading towards a narrow corridor with massive chunks taken out of the walls that let the outside light shine through. Parts of the ceiling were

missing too, the temple more ruins than anything these days.

“Were you a worshiper of Thessia?” We stopped at what remained of an altar placed at the head of the main chapel, its walls crumbling and holes in the floor. The only remaining relics left were a simple iron cauldron, a candlestick, and a jar of herbs.

“No, but my mother was training to be a priestess when the Source was outlawed. I’ve read most of her journals, but I never realized how thorough the King was when he wiped the temples off the map.” He stood in the center of the room, gazing around the darkened space with eyes full of regret and sadness. There was a heaviness to the air in this place. “Besides, shifters have their own gods.”

“What happened to her?” I asked as I emptied a pinch of dried herbs into the center of my hand before closing the jar again. “Your mother, I mean.” It wasn’t my place to pry into his personal life, but I was curious. It wasn’t often I met someone who willingly spoke about the Source openly.

He approached the altar, watching my every movement, not with suspicion but curiosity as I dropped the herbs into the cauldron. “I don’t know, actually. My father never spoke about her unless it was an accident. I think he was just scared. As far as I know, most of the priestesses either fled Avedin or were taken by the King’s guard as prisoners during the cleansing.”

The Cleansing. That’s what our people called that horrible year. I was five summers when it happened, but nothing about it stuck in my child brain. It was the year the King announced that every magic user, anyone who spoke of, wielded, or worshiped the Source would be put on trial for treason.

The Source wasn’t as common in Avedin back then as it had been in Nexus, but it still had its place.

I pulled a small steel rod from the pouch around my thigh, striking it against a hunk of flint, watching fire flare up, sparks shooting off into the cauldron and lighting the herbs until a gentle smoke wafted upwards. I whispered a few words I knew of the god language, not because I was a worshiper, but out of respect for the space my Ravens were now occupying.

I turned to Remus, standing close enough that my whisper reached only his ear. “Just so you’re aware, I might serve King Animus, but it doesn’t mean I support the things he’s done.” His jaw clenched, his eyes narrowing as if trying to figure out if I was telling him the truth. “I don’t care that you’re a shifter. I have no hatred for heretics or mystics. I do what needs to be done for reasons that are my own, but I...”

He stepped closer. Too close. Close enough that if it had been anyone else, I would have pulled a blade already. “But you what, Mara?” There was anger clear in his voice. An old anger that had obviously built up over decades. Decades of oppression, secrecy, and lies. He reached out, moving aside a wayward curl with his finger. “Why are you telling me this?”

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Looking into his green eyes, it was suddenly hard for me to form the right words. I was mad at myself for allowing myself to care about what he thought of me. But I did care. At least, I wanted him to know I didn't hate what he was. I needed him to know that I wasn't one of them.

"Let's go. The sun will be up soon." I turned away from him, heading the way we came without looking back, letting the herbs smolder to ash behind me.

We left the altar room, heading down another corridor, this one mostly intact. In a small alcove that housed only an old wooden desk and an empty bookshelf, I shoved aside a dusty old rug, revealing a trap door. Remus tugged it open, revealing a set of wooden stairs descending into darkness.

I took the lead, taking the stairs one at a time, feeling them out for creaks and cracks. Remus pulled the trap door closed after him, shrouding us in blackness. The smell of smoke filtered through the air, and when I reached the very bottom, I spied a flickering light up ahead and headed for it.

We came to a cavernous room lit with candlelight, about fifty or so cloaked figures occupying various seats salvaged from the temple ruins. Black netting shrouded each of my Raven's faces, making sure that they were not only discreet in public but also anonymous to each other. Not a single person used their real name in this place; to do so would be a death sentence. Save for me. Keeping a low profile in my position as the King's poisons master was hard, so I didn't bother covering myself.

The low murmuring of voices quieted down as I stopped at the head of the room. Remus remained by the doorway, eyes scanning the hooded figures. I knew I would

have a lot of explaining to do once we got back to the castle. I was placing an awful lot of trust in him, letting him witness a meeting with my infamous Ravens. But I had news, and he needed to hear it too.

“I have orders from the King, and I’ll be away for some time. For how long, I don’t know, and where is not yours to know.”

Some of my Ravens shifted on their feet, their heads moving as if glancing at one another. Remus looked at me too, with confusion in his narrowed eyes.

“It might be days or months, but I’ll send word. In the meantime, I need eyes on the King at all times. Who is he speaking with? Who comes and goes from the castle? Nothing will be overlooked. A Raven has been killed, and I want to know who is responsible.”

Now there was murmuring amongst them, a nervous hum through the room. I watched them all carefully. Every Raven in the room was vetted by me carefully. They might not know one another, but I knew them. None of them would betray me, and I was confident I could rely on their information.

Remus was frowning at me, probably wondering when I’d planned on telling him about my summons from the King. I’d received the letter this morning, signed and sealed by his highness, ordering me to travel to Nexus, his enemy’s kingdom beyond the river and forests to the south. Normally I gritted my teeth at such orders when I had plenty of work to do here in Avedin, but this time, I welcomed them.

I met with each of my Ravens. Debriefing was tedious, but necessary. There had been sightings of strangers in Avedin over the last few weeks, turning up in taverns and inns. I had to know it all. Every sordid detail.

We stayed until the sun was high in the sky. I questioned their whereabouts the night

of my Raven's failed mission, not because I suspected any of them of wrongdoing but because I needed to know who they saw, where they were, and what was said. They had their eyes and ears open at all times. There wasn't a single event or gossip in Avedin that I was not privy to. It would be up to them to run this city while I was away.

Rijjat

There were whispers of outsiders in the city. It was easy to spot them in the crowds of colorful silks, jewels, and finery. Nexus, otherwise known as the 'kingdom of plenty,' was lush and wealthy beyond comprehension, and it was my home. I knew every face, every name, and every story. So who were these strangers skulking about my streets in the night?

I followed from above, traveling by rooftop as the unfamiliar man hurried through the night market. His face was lit by the torches lining the cobbled streets, bouncing off jewels hanging from the vendor's carts and wagons. The air smelled like roasting meats and spices, laughter and music filling the night even at this late hour. Nexus rarely slept. There was always something to taste, do, or see.

The stranger paused, staring straight ahead, eyes locked on a pair of fire dancers performing for a crowd of children. Flames flickered from their fingertips, the air around them buzzing with the Source. The man was entranced. I didn't blame him; the fire dancers were certainly enchanting in their long, colorful dresses made of gossamer and silk, their shiny hair braided through with glass beads and ribbons. Fire danced in their eyes and crackled over their skin. Magic was alive in Nexus.

He remained in one spot, further confirming my suspicions that he didn't belong here. Nexus was one of the very last kingdoms in the realm where the Source was not outlawed. King Animus had managed to conquer everything from the seas to the East, to the mountains in the North, forcing kings to bow at his feet and fight for him

if he ever called upon them. Only a few outliers remained, and Nexus was the strongest of them all.

The man managed to pull his eyes away from the fire dancers, hurrying through the crowded street towards the edge of the city. His dark cloak was pulled up to cover most of his face, but I could see his shifting eyes bouncing off every strange shadow and alleyway. I followed him, my feet carrying me over the edge of rooftops, landing lightly as I rolled, bracing myself on a clothesline before landing in the middle of an empty alcove. The direction the stranger was heading in would lead him to dead end after dead end, eventually bringing him to this very spot.

I waited, leaning casually against the dirty wall, crossing my feet at the ankles. Sure enough, he rounded the corner, and now that I was on his level, I could see that he was clutching something beneath his cloak. He didn't see me right away. Not until it was far too late. I stepped out of the shadows, making him stop in his tracks and freeze.

I grinned at the stranger, sauntering towards him slowly. "Well, well, aren't we a sneaky lad." Clicking my tongue as I neared, I took my time sizing him up. Now that I was closer, I could tell whoever this man was, he was less of a man and more of a...boy. A young boy, possibly no older than seventeen.

If he ran, I would catch him, and he knew that. I followed as he backed up. Step after step, I kept pace with him. He looked left and then right, panic flashing through his dark brown eyes.

"Sir, let me pass," he said in a choked plea. He even sounded young. I almost felt bad for scaring him, but I needed to know what mischief he was up to in my city before I let him go on his way.

"Who isme?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. "Doesmehave a name?"

“I do not.” The boy straightened his shoulders, trying to make himself appear larger than he was, but even as he rose up as far as he could, he still only came up to my shoulders.

I tapped my chin as I neared him, watching as he shoved the item further into his cloak. “Now that is strange. A boy without a name. However do you manage it?” I stuck out my hand, and he flinched as if I were about to strike him. I made a come hither motion with my fingers. “Give it here, boy.” His eyes darted over my shoulder as if contemplating making a run for it. I sighed, feeling a warm tingle travel down the length of my arm, letting the Source flow through me, leaking out of my fingertips in the form of dark purple hued smoke. “Don’t make me ask you again.”

His eyes were wide, staring at my magic like it was a coiled snake about to sink its fangs into his soft skin. “She’ll kill me...” he whispered, dread lacing every word.

I stepped closer. “Who will kill you?”

“I cannot say—”

“Can’t or won’t?” I snapped, already beginning to lose my patience. “Give it here, and I promise to give it right back.” My word was my bond, and I meant what I said. I would let him live tonight, as long as he promised to leave Nexus before the sun rose, but not without leaving me with information. “You’re testing my patience, lad.”

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He pulled the object from his cloak, looking defeated, before passing it to me. It was a rolled up piece of parchment tied with a black ribbon, a wax seal with the stamp of a raven embedded into it. Cold dread washed over me, and I immediately cast a look towards the rooftops. Nothing but empty shadows.

“You’re a Raven,” I said—a fact, not a question. He was awfully young for his line of work, but the spymaster was known to take in orphans and beggars off the streets, employing them in her network of spies and assassins.

The boy didn’t speak, so I unrolled the parchment, reading the scribbled words as fast as I could, sucking in a hissed breath at what I found. At the bottom, signed in deep red ink, was an X. I rolled it back up, pushing it into the boy’s hands before grabbing him by the collar and pulling him towards me roughly.

“You say nothing of this to anyone, do you hear me?” He nodded frantically, his face turning red as my grip continued to tighten. “Leave this city before the sun rises. Tell your master she can expect a warm welcome upon her arrival.” I shoved him away, and he stumbled, barely catching himself before he fell. “Go!” He broke into a run, heading past me, down the narrow alleyway until the shadows swallowed him up.

Wasting no time, I made my way out of the darkness, blending in with the crowded night market, hurtling through Nexus with one goal in mind. I needed to warn my contacts that X was on her way to our city.

I’d never seen the spymaster in the flesh, but it was said she was beautiful in a haunting sort of way. Rumor had it she was a cold, cynical woman. Only the Ravens knew her face, but getting information out of the likes of them was next to

impossible.

It was pure luck alone that I happened upon the boy tonight and luck that he hadn't used a silencer—a poison powder turned into a small tablet that, if swallowed, would kill you in seconds, your secrets dying with you.

That was the lad's first mistake. He must have been new to the job because if he'd been more experienced, he would have memorized the contents of the letter, making his life infinitely more valuable. He should have burned the parchment, making sure it never had the chance to fall into the wrong hands, especially in an enemy kingdom.

Now, all I had to do was wait and watch. X would be here any day now.

Xmara

It took a week of traveling to reach the border of Nexus. Remus and I were camped atop a hill that overlooked the walled city, the lights in the distance flickering like jewels against the backdrop of the night sky.

We would leave the horses behind tonight and make the rest of the journey on foot, cloaked in simple black, crafted of silks from Nexus. We wouldn't blend in, but perhaps we could stall for as long as possible before whispers turned into gossip that eventually reached King Basillius's ears.

Nexus's king was rumored to be a kind man, strong in the Source, who valued the hard work of the common people, unlike King Animus. Basillius had a large family, including six younger brothers, two sisters, and plenty of allies. I'd done my research on our neighboring kingdoms years ago. It was always smart to know your enemy inwards and out. Enemy might have been a strong word for it. Maybe they were the King's enemies, but outside of my official position, I had no such allegiances.

“It’s time to go,” Remus said, joining me as I stood at the highest point of the hill, letting the wind blow through my loose hair, carrying with it the smell of lush crops that thrived under the Source’s influence. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked when I remained in place.

“There’s beauty in the darkness too,” I said, taking my time as I pulled my gloves on one by one. “You just have to learn how and where to look for it. But you’re right, it is beautiful. Let’s hope we can manage to keep it that way.”

Worry festered in the back of my mind. I was sent here to collect information for the King. We hadn’t known war since the cleansing, and even then, it was over before it even began.

Kingdoms closed their borders for years while Avedin withered under the absence of the Source. But Animus was a paranoid man. Always watching and waiting for the moment when his precious empire would fall under attack.

So here we were, on the verge of entering foreign territory, tasked with luring King Basillius’s war council advisors into a trap, where I was to feed my chosen man a potion that would have him babbling in no time, feeding us his secrets.

I didn’t personally believe that Nexus was gearing up for a war, but the King wouldn’t listen to me. I had a job to do, and the sooner I saw it through, the sooner I could return to Avedin and find out what happened to my Raven.

“What will you do if the King's suspicions are confirmed?” Remus asked, standing beside me with his arms crossed over his broad chest, narrowing his eyes out over the view of Nexus. When I didn’t answer, he glanced at me, raising a single dark brow. “You don’t know, do you? What would happen if tomorrow Animus ordered his army to attack Nexus? There are millions of innocent people behind those walls. Would you see them dead because of a madman’s paranoia?”

His green eyes were more serious than usual, lacking any sort of wry humor behind them. I clenched my jaw tight as he turned to face me, taking a step that brought our chests nearly flush together.

“What are you doing?” My words were whispered as he neared. I hadn't been this close to a man since Waylan.

Remus took my hand in his and squeezed gently. I could feel his warmth even through the leather gloves I wore. “I don't believe for a second that you'd stand behind a king like Animus. A king who's committed endless atrocities against people like me...people like your Ravens.”

I tore my hands from his grip. “You don't know a thing about my Ravens.”

His lips pulled into a wry smirk, but I didn't move when his fingers skimmed the side of my face, his eyes flitting between mine rapidly. “I think I do. Even with your potion running through me, I'm still a shifter. I can sense when a Source user is near, and there were plenty of them in that temple. Do you expect me to believe that you, X, the spymaster herself, didn't already know that? You collect strays and give them a purpose, even the ones you know Animus wouldn't think twice about putting to death. I know you're better than that.”

“You don't know me either...” I was getting lost in the sincerity of his gaze. The conviction of his trust in me, which made no sense. He knew who I was and what I did for the King. He saw my work with his own eyes, yet I was somehow better than Animus?

I opened my mouth to tell Remus he was wrong about me when the sound of hoofbeats broke us apart. Turning towards the intruder, we drew our daggers, hiding the blades beneath the cover of our cloaks.

“Get behind me,” Remus hissed, moving to stand in front of me. A shadow in the distance approached fast, the hoofbeats getting louder.

I laughed, shoving him aside as I stepped towards the oncomer. “You forget your place, shifter. I’m not some damsel that needs a protector.”

He made a noise under his breath that sounded like an animalistic growl, once again confirming what he truly was. If my potion hadn’t dulled his power, I imagined his eyes might be glowing bright with irritation. The moment was broken when the shadowy rider rode into the light of our campfire. I took one look at his face and lowered my dagger, however, Remus kept a firm grip on his.

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“Caldor, what are you doing here?” I moved towards him slowly as he stopped, dismounting his horse. “Did you follow me?” I knew he no longer trusted me, but spying was crossing a line.

He lowered the hood of his riding cloak, his dark blue eyes flashing in the firelight. I kept my face neutral, even as something twisted in my chest. His face, so familiar, one I saw every single day of my life, was still enough to bring me to my knees. I had to harden myself against him on the outside. It’s what had to be done regardless of what I truly wanted. Sometimes I didn’t even know what that was anymore.

“I came to make sure you were getting the job done,” he said, his voice hard and cold like always. He approached the fire, removing his gloves before rubbing his palms together for warmth. The ground was beginning to ice over in the early dawn mists, and he had to be freezing.

I gave him a sour look. “So the King doesn’t trust me.”

He glared right back, looking up from his hands and into my eyes. “Idon’t trust you, and the King trusts my opinion.”

“That’s nothing new,” I grumbled as I secured my dagger under my cloak again.

Remus had relaxed but had planted his feet apart, anchoring him to the spot as he stared at the captain with his arms folded over his chest. “Do you plan to help us, or are you here to stand guard and report back to your master?”

Caldor took a step towards him. “You mean the same master who spared your neck

and gave you a second chance at life?” Only the fire between the two males kept them from exchanging more than words. “Perhaps you should show a little more respect.”

Remus huffed, waving Caldor off as he returned to the horses, removing something from one of the saddle bags and shoving it into his riding cloak.

“Don’t provoke him,” I said to the captain, earning a wry glare. “I mean it. He’s done well so far, and I trust him to do his job. Perhaps you could extend some of that reverence you hold for Animus to someone else for a change.”

“KingAnimus, you mean. Were you always so impertinent?”

I blinked at him, my lips threatening to twist into a smirk, but I held it back. “Maybe you never really knew me, Caldor. Have you ever considered that?”

“You made sure to put on a good show, so who can really say?” he growled out, his eyes flashing in the light.

“Or maybe you were just too stupid to realize you were always going to lose.”

Silence hung between us as my words drifted off into the night. Remus had stilled, likely listening to and digesting every word we exchanged.

I didn’t want him to know about my murky history with the captain, but I supposed now was as good a time as any for it to come out. It wasn’t some dirty secret. Caldor and I were in love once, but my fate never really belonged to me, and he’d known that just as well as I had.

“We’re done speaking of this nonsense,” he spat, pulling his riding gloves back on. “It’s getting us nowhere to rehash a past neither of us can or would change.” I

managed to hold in a wince at his words. “It’s almost sunrise. We need to get to the city with the others.”

“Others?” Remus asked as he joined us by the fire, passing me a small bag. I took it, securing it with a string to the belt around my waist. Glass clinked as I jostled the vials nestled in various pockets.

“Every morning at sunset, travelers from the lower villages set up shop in the market square. They're mostly farmers, jewelers, and blacksmiths. If we can manage to catch up, we should be able to get past the city walls without raising too much suspicion.”

“How do you know all of this?” I asked. Even I hadn’t known that, and I prided myself on knowing most things others didn’t.

“I’m the captain of the royal guard. I’ve been to Nexus plenty enough to understand how the city functions. I wouldn’t be very good at my job otherwise.”

He was right, of course. He usually was, and that irked me. Being captain didn’t just mean he got to boss around a handful of city guardsmen. It meant he was also on the King’s war council. He was a strategist. A warrior.

“Will you be recognized?” I ran my eyes over his face. His features were the antithesis of bland and forgettable. Caldor was a beautiful man, strong and imposing, tall and dignified with a face like stone and eyes like the deepest sea. Or maybe I was still lost when it came to him.

“That brings me to you,” he said, striding around the fire towards me. “I need to alter a few of my features. King Basillius has his guard all over the city, and though I haven't been here in years, there might be someone who knows me. Do you have anything in your...” He paused, his eyes darting down towards my belt. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

This time my lips did turn up in a dark grin. His eyes dimmed with hesitation, but I was already reaching beneath my cloak. “You’re lucky I thought ahead.”

* * *

Getting into Nexus was easier than I thought. Caldor’s once dark blond hair was now pure black, and his eyes were dark brown to match. The potion I gave him would only last about one day before it gradually wore off.

We entered with a crowd of merchants, just as the captain said we would, and the guards hadn’t batted a single eye in our direction. We headed towards the center of Nexus, the castle looming ahead of us, casting its shadow over the city with the rising sun behind it.

The castle was built on a hill with the city surrounding it, secure behind its high walls. I had to admit it was the most beautiful place I’d ever seen, especially compared to Avedin’s dreary black and grays against the backdrop of dying fields and poverty.

Nexus was the very opposite. The city was lush with colors and greenery. The streets were lined with shops, bakeries, art, jewelers, and more riches than I’d seen in my entire life outside of Avedin’s castle. Unlike him, King Basillius didn’t hoard his wealth while everyone around him suffered.

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We traveled as a group of three, blending in with the other merchants, even though we did garner some strange looks from the merchants who had obviously never seen us before. Nobody asked any questions. I kept my eyes on a swivel, taking stock of my surroundings and trying my best to memorize every building and alleyway. There was a fair chance that we might need to make a quick escape, so it was always better to be prepared for the worst.

This task still didn't sit well with me. The King was too paranoid for his own good, always worried that the world was out to get him. He had it in his head that King Basilius was lying in wait, preparing his magic users for an attack on Avedin, when in reality, that was probably some kind of paranoid delusion.

Perhaps this truth potion would clear up this mess, but I doubted it. Animus was a stubborn man, and if his pride was wounded, I wouldn't put it past him to launch a preemptive attack just to save face.

The market was already crowded as we pushed our way through throngs of brightly dressed, happy looking people. You'd never see this in Avedin. Our streets were dreary and silent, and the markets were dirty with wilting crops and beggars lining the streets. Nexus appeared to be thriving.

"We're being watched," Remus murmured, looking straight ahead.

"I know," I replied, barely moving my mouth. I'd felt the presence of eyes watching us from afar as we continued through the markets, slipping further into Nexus towards the castle. "The rooftops. One man."

I felt Caldor stiffen on my other side and knew he was probably aching to reach for his weapon. Smartly, he kept his gait casual, pretending to look around, enjoying the sights.

“We need to split up,” he suggested, and I glanced at him with a frown. Splitting up was a stupid idea. We needed to get in and out of this city and leave before the city guard spotted us. Caldor met my eyes. “If we’re being followed, he’d have to make a choice. We can meet at the gates of the castle.”

I couldn’t fault him for his logic, but I still thought it was a bad idea to split up. Before I had the chance to agree with his plan, a low, lilting voice from the shadows of a nearby alleyway stopped us dead in our tracks.

“Well, if it isn’t the infamous X, gracing our city streets with her presence at last.”

Caldor reached for his dagger immediately, but I stopped him, laying a hand on his forearm. Our eyes met again as he stiffened. I shook my head. If he pulled a weapon in the streets, it would garner too much attention, and we still couldn’t afford that.

I peered into the shadows as a tall, handsome man stepped forth. His skin was the color of sand after the rains, and his brown hair reached his shoulders, pulled back halfway, leaving loose strands around his face. Shrewd dark eyes narrowed at the three of us, and his lips that were shrouded by a coating of facial hair smirked at having caught us off guard.

Looking around to make sure we weren’t being watched elsewhere, I took several slow steps toward the man, keeping my face neutral and bland.

“Have we met, sir?” I asked conversationally. He’d called me X, which meant he already knew much more than I was comfortable with.

His grin grew wider. “Oh, I’m no sir, and you’re no lady, so why don’t we avoid these tiresome pleasantries and agree to have a chat somewhere with less prying eyes and ears.” He extended his arm as if he wanted me to take it and allow him to lead me into the darkness.

Caldor and Remus immediately moved as if to block my way, Caldor with his hand on his dagger and Remus relying on brute strength. “What do you take us for?” Caldor asked the man. “Why would we follow you when you haven’t told us who you are and what you want from us?”

The man kept his arm extended and bent for me to take, waiting patiently. “My name is Rijjat, if that eases your mind some, but I’m afraid the business I have with X isn’t a conversation for the market square. There are eyes and ears all over these streets, don’t let the pretty trinkets and music fool you.”

I considered my options. I could follow this man and find out for myself what business he claimed to have with me, or I could ignore his request, and he would just continue to stalk us through the streets. I knew if that were to happen, we’d no longer have anonymity, and this man could easily alert the guard to our presence. If we were found out, the mission would be over.

“We’ll come with you on one condition,” I said, and both of my companions turned to face me, frowns marring their handsome faces. Ignored them, focusing on the Rijjat. He nodded curtly. “Answer me truthfully because I’ll know if you’re lying. Do you mean to lure us away and kill us?” My question was as blunt as I could put it, but I had a knack for seeing the truth behind someone’s eyes, and if he lied to me, I would sense it.

He was silent for a moment, and my question hung between us. His dark eyes were full of mysteries that I suddenly had the yearning to uncover. Who was the stranger? How had he known we were in his city so quickly? Unless he’d been expecting us. A

pit opened in my stomach, and suspicion bloomed. My mind went back to my Ravens, one dead and one missing, reported just before we left the city. Perhaps this man had something to do with that. If so, he wouldn't be alive to see the next sunset.

Rijjat approached me, and the men on either side of me stiffened, but to my surprise they didn't attempt to step between us. I would have taken it as the utmost disrespect. As he came closer, I began to notice that his face was marred with slashes of slivery scars, but it didn't detract from how handsome he was.

We were only a few paces apart now. Close enough that I could see the flecks of amber in his dark eyes. "I swear on the old gods that I mean you no harm while you reside in my city."

Our eyes were fixed, unblinking as the words fell from his sharp tongue. He spoke them with clarity and truth. I could feel it emanating from him, a certain sense of sincerity you didn't often find in many people. As much as I didn't want to follow this man and be deterred from completing my mission, now that he had my attention, I was going to see it through until I had some answers.

"Lead the way then," I said, raising a single brow.

His lips quirked again, and his eyes sparkled with what I could only describe as excited mischief. "I knew you'd see it my way," he said almost smugly, looping his arm with mine as if he were some kind of gentleman and not a street rat, probably a thief or a hired sword.

Caldor and Remus grumbled at my back as Rijjat led us towards the alleyway, but I knew they would be on my heels with their weapons ready for whatever this man had in store for us.

We were deep into the shadows between buildings when he spoke again. "You know,

you're a lot more beautiful than your sneaky little Raven made you out to be."

I froze, my blood icing over as I stopped dead, grinding Rijjat to a halt. His words and not so hidden meaning bounced around in my head. My Raven... The Raven that never returned back to me. I moved swiftly and had Rijjat pinned up against the wall with a dagger blade to his throat. Caldor had pulled his blade too, and Remus was now on my other side, ready to attack if I only said the word.

Remus pulled a vial from his own pouch and smashed it on the ground. A black fog began to surround us, smelling sweet but blinding any passersby to our presence in the alleyway. We were shrouded in darkness as I pressed in closer to Rijjat.

"What have you done with my Raven?" My words were clipped and low, filled with simmering rage that I refused to let loose until I knew where my Raven was.

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Rijjat's smirk was still in place as if this was exactly the outcome he'd intended upon sauntering out of the darkness. "I've done nothing," he said with conviction that I didn't trust. "Yet..." he added, and I pressed the blade in further, drawing a trickle of blood from his throat, threatening to slice all the way through if he didn't start speaking.

Remus growled next to me, a bit of his animal slipping through. I mentally tallied how many hours it'd been since I made him drink his potion, but I had bigger things to deal with at the moment.

"You have moments to tell me what you want with me, Rijjat, before I carve you up and leave your carcass for the rats. If you know my name, then you know exactly what I do to traitors and spies." My reputation wasn't a secret, making me wonder why this man was so unfazed.

"Spies?" he asked with a laugh. "The only spy I see is the one with a blade to my throat in my own city. The way I see it, I should be the one questioning you and your purpose in Nexus. Your Raven thought they would slip by unnoticed, but all it took was a single white lie to make the little birdie give up his secrets. So I have a deal for you, lovely X."

"I don't do deals," I spat. "Tell me where my Raven is." I was getting tired of having to repeat myself.

"Oh, but you will if there's enough incentive, won't you? Why else would such a strong, cunning woman lower herself into King's Animus's service when she could be oh so useful elsewhere."

I narrowed my eyes at him, bristling at the truth underneath those words. “Useful, unlike someone else.” I tilted his head up using the edge of my dagger. “If I slit your throat right now, who would miss you, Rijjat? Who is it that finds you so useful?”

He blinked at me, that smile still wide and his eyes still twinkling with excitement and anticipation. I realized he wasn’t afraid of me in the slightest, and it irked me. In my satchel and belt, I held so many potions that could kill a man with a single drop. My blade could end his life before he even thought about screaming for help. And yet his heartbeat was steady.

“I’ll take you to your Raven if you agree to meet with a friend of mine,” he said.

I paused. That wasn’t what I’d expected him to say at all. I thought he’d ask me for a trade, or money perhaps, knowing I was directly employed by the King and had access to more coin than the average peasant.

“Who?” I asked, somewhat curious now. Who was important enough that he would want me to meet with them in exchange for such an expensive trade? Capturing a Raven was difficult, and if one managed it, they could have access to limitless secrets. Which was why I always sent them out with a backup plan, which apparently my Raven failed to utilize if he was still breathing.

He clicked his tongue and shook his head, causing my knife to slice the surface of his skin, drawing more blood. “Now, why would I tell you that when it’s the only thing preventing this knife from ending my life? If you want to know where your Raven is, you’ll meet with my friend. No more, no less. Just a meeting.”

“How do we know this isn’t some kind of trap?” Caldor asked from beside us, and Rijjat flitted his eyes to the captain.

Rijjat scoffed. “I may be eccentric, but I’m not daft enough to pull one over on the

infamous X. I do value my life, you know. I'm far too pretty to die just yet. ” He narrowed his eyes at Caldor, looking at him oddly. A pit formed in my stomach, so I spoke before he could remember Caldor’s face, even if it had been years.

“Take me to your friend then, but no tricks. If you betray me, I will peel the flesh from your bones, Rijjat.” He tore his gaze from Caldor and grinned at me as I let him go and backed up a step. I held out a hand. “Give me your weapons.”

* * *

We followed Rijjat towards the outskirts of the royal city, keeping to the shadows and alleyways, though I wasn’t sure exactly who he was attempting to avoid. We’d disarmed him with little effort, which made me even more suspicious of him. Perhaps he was a Source user if he felt so comfortable without a weapon.

He walked in front of me while Caldor and Remus watched my back. The sun was high in the sky, and we were hours away from losing daylight, which meant an entire day was wasted, and we were no closer to completing our task. I hadn’t wanted to spend any more time here than was absolutely necessary, but it seemed Rijjat had other ideas.

It took an hour of navigating the dense, colorful city to come to a copse of trees that formed a small orchard, next to which was a pond with a well house. We stopped and stared at the looming structure on the other end of the pond. I’d recognize the architecture anywhere.

It was a temple. The same as the one my Ravens used to meet under to floors in secret, only this temple was still completely intact, the bright white marble shining in the midday sun, the steps bleeding towards the arched entryway unscathed. I blinked at it, trying to take it all in while my heart beat faster, my stomach filling with equal excitement and trepidation.

“What are we doing here, Rijjat?” I asked, still staring at the beauty that was Thessia’s temple.

There was a statue beside the entrance of a tall woman with flowing hair and a braided gold band around her head. She held her hands out in a cupped position, waiting for offerings from those who wished to grace her halls.

I never thought I’d have the chance to see an intact, functioning temple. In Avedin, they were outlawed, and most had been demolished years before I was born. Sometimes I still sat alone in the temple, staring at Thessia’s altar and imagining that she could hear me as I asked for guidance. Perhaps she could. Even without the finery and offerings, perhaps Thessia still watched over the shadows of Avedin.

“I told you, there’s someone who really wants to meet with you,” Rijjat said, gesturing to the temple. “Don’t tell me you were expecting a seedy underground meeting where we’d rob you and leave you for dead?” His eyes sparkled with humor that I didn’t appreciate.

Just as the words left his mouth, the sound of hoofbeats erupted behind us, growing closer by the second. My weapon was out instantly, as were Caldor and Remus’s. Our backs were pressed together with Rijjat left on the outside as men on horseback came into view. I glared at Rijjat, noting that he also had a weapon drawn, his dark brows knitted together tightly.

“What are you playing at?” I spat at the street rat. The men on horseback were sheathed in all black, with masks that covered their faces. “You fucking liar!” I couldn’t believe we’d fallen for his tricks.

Rijjat looked at me, his brows still furrowed and his eyes...confused? Surely he was faking the panic there. “I swear to you, X, this was not my doing. I do not know these men.”

“Why should we believe you?” Caldor gritted through his teeth. “The timing is too convenient for your lies to work a second time.”

Caldor was right. What were the chances that these men would appear the moment we arrived at Thessia’s temple? Very slim. They came closer, the men forming a circle around us, their horses whining and stomping, creating a cloud of dust that flew into my eyes and mouth.

I noticed belatedly that each of the men wore a belt much like the one I wore, and dangling from the belt were dozens of glass vials. They clinked together as they continued to surround us, purposefully attempting to disorient us.

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“What do you want with us?!” Rijjat shouted to the riders. “You are in the presence of a holy temple, and you are trespassing. Thessia will not look kindly on this vulgar offense!”

I glanced at Remus in confusion, and he simply shrugged back, his eyes flitting back to the riders. It was at this moment that I wished I hadn’t forced him to drink his potion. Had his shifted form been readily available, perhaps he could have given us the upper hand.

The riders didn’t speak. They only gestured at one another strangely, leaving me confused. Instead of appearing savage and wild, they seemed to be coordinated somehow.

One of the riders pulled something from his belt. A glass vial that he promptly threw on the ground with force. Immediately, the air filled with a blue hued smoke that filled my lungs and had me sputtering. My eyes stung, and my throat felt like it was closing up. It seemed we’d discovered the reason for the masks they wore.

Remus fell to his knees first, dropping his weapon as he choked on the smoke. Whatever concoction they’d created affected the shifter harder because of his sensitive nose, but we would be next. I tried to hold my breath, blinking through the tears that streamed down my face. My eyes felt like somebody had poured sand into them.

Caldor was the next to fall, only he didn’t even have time to choke on the smoke before he went limp, losing consciousness completely. My heart dropped at the sight of his motionless body, and I lunged for him.

That was a mistake. Before I could make it to him, an arm wrapped around my torso, creating a vice grip around me. I was being hauled upward by one of the riders and dragged up onto his horse. I tried to scream, but all that came out were choking, wheezing breaths that nobody would ever hear.

I even tried to slash at the rider with my dagger, but it was no use as the strength began to drain out of my body. I grew impossibly tired and impossibly angry. I was better than this, and it was shameful. Perhaps the Ravens deserved better than a leader who fell so easily for a handsome face that spat nothing but lies.

Before I fell unconscious, the last thing I felt was a strong, warm hand gripping mine, pulling on my arm until I felt like it would pop right off. I blinked through the haze to see Rijjat holding on for dear life, running alongside the rider's horse as it began to back away from the smoke. The strangest sensation traveled up my arm, flowing through my body as if lightning had filled my veins. Rijjat stared at our joined hands, his once black eyes shining an unnatural blueish purple.

"Let go..." I choked out as I tried to pull away from him, but it was as if our hands were fused together.

My body was on fire as strange magic raced through. I looked down at my skin as strange markings appeared, first as lines of bright blue before fading to black, as if I'd been branded. The marks faded into my skin a moment later.

"It wasn't me..." Rijjat said as he too choked around the smoke. His grip was beginning to loosen as the horse backed away. "Please, believe me, I had no part in this, and I will find you."

My eyes were falling shut now, heavy with sleep. I still managed to shake my head. "I hope Thessia curses you until your very last breath..."

He sucked in a pained breath as his hand let go of mine, and he tumbled to the ground. The last thing I saw before the smoke consumed Rijjat were his bright blue, glowing eyes closing as he fell unconscious. It didn't take long for me to do the same as the riders carried me away.

Caldor

I should've followed her. How could I have allowed myself to be ambushed by street rats and criminals? Shame welled up inside of me, accompanying the rage that set my blood on fire.

I groaned in pain, trying to get my mind in order, imagining what just happened from every angle. What could I have done differently? There was no question about it that the Source was at play here. There was no logical way that a ragtag bunch of untrained civilians could get the jump on the captain of the royal guard, a shifter and a clearly trained fighter.

I was beaten down like a dog, and Remus didn't fare much better, but Rijjat, the little rat, did manage to bloody one of them pretty badly. Nevertheless, the end result was the same. I was stuck here with a shifter who couldn't shift and a stranger who lied about having an injured Raven to lure Xmara into a trap.

Xmara handled herself beautifully, despite having been taken in the end. I never understood the extent of her training and never bothered to investigate the rumors. They said she was powerful and deadly but it rivaled the memories I had of the woman I used to know so well. Now she was a woman who could fight almost as well as any man and had the tools to kill.

Finding out that Xmara was the infamous X, the leader of the most infamous spy ring in the kingdom, was a shock to my system, and I still had trouble processing it.

I suppose in my head I always assumed X would be a cruel sorceress who wielded absolute power, sending her Ravens out to do her dirty work. I pictured her cunning and without conscience, but never could I have imagined that X was living under the same roof as the King himself.

I did wonder about her training. Who trained her? How had she come so far and held such secrecy? Was it Waylan Bane himself? I doubted that. He could barely keep his cock in his pants long enough to realize he had a wife, much less take the time to train her. She could wield a knife or a dagger almost effortlessly, but could those skills match mine if I handed her a crossbow or a spear? I'd have to test that if and when I ever got her back.

Rijjat, Remus, and I were tied together with rope on the front steps of the temple and left there. Rijjat woke up first, then me, then Remus, probably slowed down by the concoction Xmara made him drink to keep his shift at bay.

I was concerned when I found out he was a shifter, but not Xmara. The Xmara I once loved had a kind, deep heart, and she always tried to see the best in everyone. I just wondered if remnants of that woman still existed now after all she'd been through.

"Do you plan on speaking to anyone, or are you going to wallow in your head while I figure out how to get Xmara back?" Remus growled out, breaking my concentration. I suddenly pictured running him through with my blade just to see if it would get him to finally shut up.

"I would advise you watch your tongue, kitty cat" I muttered as I scanned the forest in front of the temple.

It was silent and still, which meant bad weather would be coming. It was always calm before a storm, which would mean trouble for us if we remained tied together like a bunch of idiots for much longer.

The hairs on my neck stood on end as I felt a fourth presence somewhere behind me. It crept closer and closer until it became stifling. My skin buzzed uncomfortably, and there seemed to be a low humming in my ears that I couldn't shake.

“Why do you stand on my temple steps without an offering?” The woman's voice was low and melodic. I turned slowly and took the woman in.

White hair and markings down her face and body that I couldn't read or interpret, she had to be a priestess. I could feel the change in the air around the priestess. The buzzing only grew, and I knew it stemmed from the Source. Magic emanated from her skin and hovered around her like a cloud, setting my teeth on edge. Nothing good ever came from wielding magic, and this kingdom was lawless with their use of it, making them a dangerous enemy.

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“We were ambushed, Priestess. One of our travel companions has been taken,” I answered as honestly as I could. The Source sometimes allowed the wielder to tell the truth from lies. I couldn't take the chance of offending the priestess when she might be the only one around with the ability to help us out of this embarrassing predicament.

“You must be in need of warm food and a place to sleep. The temple always provides.” She waved a hand, and my body tingled as a wave of Source magic rolled over us. I gritted my teeth as the ropes that bound us fell away, freeing us. I scrambled to my feet, rubbing the soreness from my wrists where the rope left deep, bloody marks behind. She stood to the side and waved us in. “Be welcome,” she said, her tone soft yet still stern and obviously suspicious.

She gave Rijjat a strange look as he passed through the entrance first. Remus cocked his head towards me as if to ask me if I'd witnessed the exchange. I nodded, following the priestess inside.

We moved through a shield of thick Source magic as we entered. It was a protection barrier, but I didn't quite understand the mechanics of it, which was becoming more frequent in this country. I didn't enjoy facing the unknown, yet I constantly found myself up against it. It made me wonder if I should start preparing my men back home to detect magic if it was to be used so easily against us.

I'd been taught from a young age that the Source was inherently evil, giving power to those who would abuse it. I didn't know if I agreed with that or not, but I knew enough to be wary of it. Was it the Source itself that was evil? Or was it the wielder and the dark soul inside them that controlled the magic? I supposed the same thing

could be said for any man who wielded a blade.

“It isn’t much, but this will be where you can stay for now,” the priestess said, looking me over as I waited for the others to enter the room. She looked perplexed like she wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words. Or maybe it was because the potion was starting to wear off, and I was returning to my natural state. Either option wasn’t favorable.

“Thank you for this gift, Priestess,” Remus said reverently as he bowed his head in thanks. The shifter knew more about these customs than I did, so I decided to follow his lead and bow my head for once.

The room was larger than I’d expected, with long gossamer fabric hanging from the ceiling and swaying in the breeze from the open windows high above our heads. Sconces crackling with fire lit and warmed the room, and cots were situated in groups of threes and fours in every corner. In the very center of the room was a slightly smoldering fire in a pit, the smoke traveling upwards towards seemingly nowhere. Magic, I supposed.

The temple was beautiful, with murals splashed across the marble walls and the sound of free-flowing fountains somewhere in the distance. Here and there were other priestesses wandering the halls, their faces shrouded behind thin veils, but none of them paid any attention to us.

“Rijjat, these friends of yours—keep them out of the tithing chambers. The altars are not meant for the eyes of the undevout. And keep them out of trouble. They don’t know our customs, which means they are your guests and your responsibility.”

My head swiveled between Rijjat and the priestess, my eyes narrowed. So they knew each other well then...

“Yes, Priestess,” Rijjat said with a respectful nod. Satisfied with that, the priestess cast me another odd frown before turning and striding out of the room on graceful feet.

“If this potion wears off, I can find her,” Remus said the moment she was gone. He was due for another one before the sun set, but Xmara had the potion. “I can scent her when it wears off, and we can hunt them down like dogs.” His nostrils flared, and something in his eyes was feral.

I wondered what their relationship actually entailed behind closed doors. Technically they were betrothed now. Why did the thought of them together turn my stomach? The time for Xmara and I was long over, and I thought I’d come to terms with it. And yet the thought of what might be happening to her at this very moment made me want to call upon my King’s army to storm this city, overturning every rock and stone to find her.

“And what if I don’t feel comfortable with that plan?” I found myself asking. Rijjat paused, eyes bouncing between Remus and me. Remus glared at me. “You were forbidden by your King from returning to your shifted state. Do you really expect me to stand by and watch as you commit treason?”

“Then you’re out of luck,” Remus growled, stepping closer to me. “Xmara is going to be my wife someday, making her my responsibility. My cat wants to find her just as much as I do, and that means I am going to do whatever I have to do to bring her back, with or without the Captain’s permission. You can return to your King and beg for forgiveness for losing his poisons master if that’s what your conscience tells you, or you can just trust me.”

“I don’t trust you,” I snapped in his face. In his eyes, I could see a barely there ember of light burning inside of him, the animal within growing excited to be set free. “How could I ever trust a thief?”

Remus scoffed, shaking his head as he backed away from me. “Well, Xmara trusted me more than she did you, so that has to mean something, right? You didn’t even know she was X. She was right under your nose for ten years. What kind of Capitan does that make you, Caldor?” He laughed, his eyes flickering over me in what looked like pity. “Or is there something the two of you aren't sharing with me? Perhaps it’s clouding your judge—”

“Mine and Xmara’s past does not concern you!” I bellowed out.

Rijjat was standing to the side, his eyes shifting between the two of us even faster now as if in rapt attention. Remus’s lips twisted into a smirk at my outburst, and I realized I’d just made a mistake and revealed information he had no right to know. Information that made me seem weak.

“Well, this is just lovely,” Rijjat drawled, rolling his dark eyes as he leaned against the wall picking at his nails. We both turned to look at him. “Xmara might be rotting away in a dungeon somewhere getting fondled by grubby thieving men, and you’d rather sit here and bicker instead of finding her?” He shook his head and sighed. “Perhaps I’ll have to do this myself after all.”

What could I say to that? He was right. Remus and I were bickering about things that shouldn’t have mattered while Xmara’s life was at stake. I could only imagine the things she’d say if she were here right now. Remus shook his head and walked to the other side of the room, fiddling with the vials and trinkets in his belt, hopefully contemplating their use for when we went after Xmara.

I turned and headed for the fire pit to warm my hands while I contemplated our next move, and I supposed, while we waited for Remus’s shifter senses to come back. At this point, his ability to scent her might be our saving grace.

Xmara

I came to with bleary, stinging eyes, struggling to sit up as I took in the decadent room I found myself in. The walls were high, with the ceiling towering above me, painted murals across every surface.

The open window beside me was covered, barely holding back the sunlight that added only a small amount of warmth to the room. There was nothing else near me aside from a chair and the bed I was currently tied to. I searched for anything sharp or serrated, but found nothing, realizing that my belt of tricks and trinkets was gone, along with every weapon stashed on my person.

I shuddered, grinding my teeth in irritation at the realization that someone somewhere had to have become intimately familiar with my body while I was out if they managed to locate every single weapon I had. The only thing I had left at my disposal was my thallium—one of the world's deadliest poisons—tasteless, odorless and untraceable. It was the same potion I gave to Waylan in small doses over the course of a year.

I could feel the highly concentrated capsule in the back of my mouth. If I had no other choice, I could bite down on it hard enough to break my teeth. The thallium would travel through my body, killing me so quickly that nobody could intervene.

I laid silently as I plotted either death or escape. One way or another, I was getting out of here. I needed more information than I currently had though, not to mention I had to relieve myself badly, and I refused to die and soil myself at the same time.

Still, I had nothing left to process about the room. I could tell you the colors of the walls, how many chips were in the paint, every smell, both good and bad, and that the person who had been here before, sitting in that chair, had a habit of picking the paint off of it.

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None of this was going according to plan, which meant they might have been aware of exactly who they'd captured. If that's true, my odds of getting away with my life were looking better. I stopped struggling, not bothering with trying to free myself. I needed to save up my strength for when I was eventually cut loose and could make a run for it. At the moment, all I could do was wait.

I thought about my companions, wondering if their deaths had been swift and painless. I assumed they'd been killed after watching each of them succumbing to magic and losing consciousness. My heart gave a painful tug in my chest at the thought of it. Well, I still wasn't so sure about Rijjat, after all, he was the one who got me into this mess in the first place, but Caldor and Remus...

That reminded me... If they'd somehow managed to escape, that meant Remus had to have been gaining his shifter senses back, as I was the one with the vials of his potions. In theory, if he hadn't decided to run off and be free, taking his one and only chance to escape to some far-off land across the sea where the King couldn't find him, he might be able to track me down.

Perhaps I was giving Remus too much credit. Who in their right mind wouldn't jump at the chance to live a free life outside of Animus's reach? There were times when I myself had contemplated fleeing the kingdom to start over somewhere where nothing was expected of me, and where I no longer had to live under a mad king's thumb.

But those were thoughts for another time and another place. All I could do was hope that Remus made it out alive and that he and Caldor were still out there trying to find me.

The thought of Caldor made my stomach flip. Why did he come after me? This wasn't exactly the first task I'd ever been asked to complete for the King, but it was the first I'd ever had to do without Waylan to help...or so Animus thought. I wasn't sure how to feel about this. Did Caldor truly not think I was capable enough on my own? It was an insult, and yet... Did that mean he still cared somewhere deep down inside of him ?

It was dangerous to think that way, I knew that, but as I laid there with nothing better to do than stare at the ceiling, my imagination ran wild. I shouldn't have been thinking about Caldor at all. Technically, Remus was my betrothed now, and even the thought alone made me break out in a sweat. But I couldn't say for certain that I necessarily dreaded the thought of it.

At first, perhaps I'd been using the eventuality as a way to stave off the King's worries about a woman being at the helm of his poisons, but after the time I'd spent with Remus, I'd come to realize that I enjoyed being around him. It was a breath of fresh air to share space with a man who enjoyed my particular brand of humor and who I didn't have to lie about what I really did in the shadows.

That was another thing I had to consider where Caldor was concerned. The captain of the guard now knew my darkest secret. He knew who I was and all of the things I'd done in the name of the Ravens. If and when we returned to Avedin, he would have a choice to make, and I honestly didn't know if he hated me enough to expose me.

The door to the room burst open, and a man swept in. His voice was low and lilting like Rijjat's. "I'm so glad to see you awake and alert." He had short black hair and darkly tanned skin. His nose was a bit prominent, but it somehow suited his face, drawing the eyes to the dimples that accentuated his mouth.

His ice blue eyes, which would give a lesser woman chills, took me in, sparkling in the low light. I knew this man, only I couldn't figure out how. It was on the very tip

of my tongue when suddenly his hair shifted from stark black to a golden yellow, then to silvery blue. A Source user. Of course he was.

He noted the widening of my eyes and chuckled. “Ah, yes, it does that. The price I must pay for my magic, I suppose. It just never seems to settle on just one color before it’s changing again.” His glittering eyes were full of humor that I didn’t reciprocate. “Onto other matters. Tell me, how did the infamous Xmara Bane—widowed wife of King Animus’s poisons master, come to be in Nexus without a royal summons? And what is she doing in possession of enough poisons on her person to kill an entire naval fleet? What mischief have you concocted for me?”

His steps were slow and methodical as he came closer. His voice lowered as he spoke, and his words slowed until a very real threat rang through them. Despite this male’s beautiful face and seductively charming voice, I knew he was dangerous.

“You know who I am then, so that gives you an unfair advantage,” I said evenly.

Instead of approaching the bed, his face smoothed out, the dangerous edge dimming from his eyes as he took a seat in the only available chair, rubbing a hand thoughtfully over his strong jaw. His eyes shifted from blue to gold.

“I know a lot more than you’d think, Madam Bane. I also know how to get information, both willingly and unwillingly, so I suggest you cooperate.” Again, the threat in his voice was real, and it was menacing.

“Let’s put us on more solid ground then, hm? Who are you? And no lies. I’ll know if you’re lying.” There was a very real chance that this Source user had the ability to mask his true intentions, and as a human with no magical abilities myself, I had no way past his defenses other than my own cunning.

His hair shifted again, this time to a deep, rich brown. I found myself staring at it long

enough that he sighed, rolling his now bright green eyes. “So uncivilized. Manners must not be common in Avedin. I suppose I’ll play along.” He sat forward, his eyes refusing to release mine as if he held me in some sort of chokehold. I couldn’t look away. “My name is Nero, brother to King Basillius, Crowned Prince of Nexus.”

Silence fell between us as I struggled to process his words. Crowned Prince of Nexus. My blood ran cold. I was in so much more danger than I thought I was. I had no doubt that come sunrise, I’d be swinging by a rope from their gallows.

“I have committed no crimes in your country,” I said evenly, attempting to appeal to his political side. “You have no right to capture and hold a free citizen.”

Nero just smirked as if that’s exactly what he was hoping I’d say. “Poisons are illegal for foreigners.”

“How can that be when your people are free to wield the Source at will? Am I not permitted to utilize my own skill set when I need protection from those who might use their magic against me? Are you telling me that my elixirs are more dangerous than your precious Source?” I wanted to smile, but I refrained as I attempted to use the laws of his country as my salvation.

King Basillius had never done anything to stand in the way of Source magic, allowing his people to practice openly and freely however they wished. Perhaps this little flaw in their rule book might gain me my freedom back. Poisons were a weapon, but they were also a gift.

Nero’s eyes narrowed on me as his wide lips stretched into a smile. He leaned back in his chair, clicking his tongue. “You are definitely trouble. How did you learn so much about your enemy kingdom’s laws and customs?”

“Reading,” I said flatly as if it was such an outlandish concept that a woman might

have the desire to learn something about the world she lived in.

He chuckled as he ran his fingers through his hair. Once again, it changed color, now to a darker, paler blond that bordered on silver. Then he stood and sauntered towards me, his gait slow and leisurely as if he had all the time in the world. He bent down and traced his fingers down my jaw, carefully studying my every feature. I wasn't prepared for the light tap on my nose. "You're more exquisite than the rumors claim."

I blinked at him, my mouth falling open in shock. "You cannot keep me trapped here, Prince." The title was spat at him. "This is an act of war against my King!"

I didn't actually know whether or not Animus would view this as an act of war. Or maybe he would simply replace me with a man and move on. Perhaps this is why he sent me here in the first place, to get caught, therefore ridding himself of a defiant female.

"You being here is a problem, Xmara Bane. King Animus has made no secret of his hatred for the Source and my king. He's gone too far in this silly war against our natural-born abilities. He claims that we are the danger to him when in fact, it is the other way around. We're still thriving, while your Kingdom is slowly dying. Your people kill our people mercilessly, and you would have me believe you've come here with pure intentions? I'm not a fool."

"I am a woman," I gritted out through clenched teeth as I glared at the prince. "I am not granted the luxury of having an opinion."

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He wrinkled his nose in disgust at my words, looking down at me. “Yes, I know all about how they treat their women in Avedin. But still, they fare far better than anyone with the smallest connection to the Source. Shifters, magic wielders, healers, artists, minstrels and travelers... any person with questionable ancestry and they are disposed of like vermin. You’re fighting for the losing side, Xmara. I do not feel a shred of pity for your plight as a woman in that unholy place because I know all too well who you really are.”

The hairs on my arm rose as he peered deep into my eyes as if he could see all the way through to the soul beneath. There was no way Nero could possibly know who I was.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.” I tried to hold his eyes, but the longer I stared at him, the colder I became, the chill in my bones deepening painfully.

Breaking our stare, the prince snapped his fingers, and several of his guardsmen entered the room. “Make sure she’s fed and watered. Madam Bane will be staying with us until she feels like talking.” He stood and loomed over me, tilting his head to the side. “It’s a pity. You might know our customs, but you do not know me, X. If you did, you’d know there’s no possible way to hide the truth from me. I have one of the strongest connections to the Source in ages. Even my brother is no match for it. You and I will speak again soon, and maybe by then, you’ll be in the mood to hold an adult conversation with manners.”

He swept out of the room, and two of the guards followed after him, leaving two others in the room with me. I glared at his retreating back and still at the door well after it shut and locked.

Then, after a long moment, I smiled. A slow smile as I realized what he'd given away. More information than he should have because now I knew that Nero, the prince of Nexus, just claimed to have more magic than the King.

The guards weren't gentle as they removed the chains from my wrists and lifted me from the bed. I snarled and cursed at them, but my energy was fading fast, and I didn't understand why. I should've been strong enough to withstand days without food or water, yet I felt like I'd been drained of every last drop of energy I thought I had.

"It hits you quickly, but it will pass. Prince Nero's magic is very potent," the guard on my right said with a wicked chuckle as they moved me to another room.

The long corridor was beautifully adorned in golds and purples, the floors made of rich stone with tapestries hanging on the walls spun with gold, silver and bronze threads. Before I had the chance to get my bearings and figure out where I was, I was thrown unceremoniously into another room, this time with my hands unbound.

This room was much larger and much more colorfully decorated, with a fluffy bed in the center draped with soft sheets and pillows. There was a washroom on the far wall, and I hurried towards it, locking myself inside until I felt safer with four walls closing in around me.

With any luck, the guards would leave me unattended long enough to escape this room.

Xmara

I'd been pacing for what seemed like hours. There was no window in this room despite the finery and amenities, so my hope for escape was crushed. But it did tell me that I was most likely in a large building with several layers to it, meaning I was

on the inner layer, away from the outside. Away from freedom.

The warm bath left for me had long turned cold, and I grew irritated and restless waiting for Prince Nero. Either him or my would be rescuers...if they were still alive, which was very much doubtful at this point.

I wondered if my Ravens had dispatched scouts to Nexus yet. Before I left Avedin, I'd told only a select few where I was going and when I was expected to return. With no word from me, they would be sending a scout to find me. There was still the matter of finding my missing Raven since apparently, Rijjat didn't have him after all. After he lured me to that temple under false pretenses, I was left with more questions than answers.

There was also the matter of completing the King's task. How was I supposed to get close to Basillius's war council if I was being so closely watched by the Prince himself? Even if he decided to set me free, which was doubtful at this point in time, there was no feasible way to get around his watchful eyes and enter that palace. I couldn't return to Avedin without completing my task, so that meant I was stuck here.

"Open the doors!" The Prince's familiar voice shouted from the other side.

I stopped pacing and waited, my hands behind my back almost like it was second nature to make myself appear smaller in the presence of a powerful male. Every part of me was tense, but I wouldn't give him the sick satisfaction of knowing that. I rolled my shoulders as the doors opened and Nero's tall frame came into view. He smirked when he took me in, and I could feel my jaw grind in irritation. The truth was, Nero was an annoying hitch in my perfectly concocted plan.

"Clean suits you," he purred as he came to stand before me, his eyes washing over all of me. I narrowed my eyes at him and didn't offer any words of thanks. It was a mind game, but not one I would give into. "Ah, it seems your manners haven't improved

much. Pity, as I have gifts for you.”

I raised a brow at that because there was nothing this man could gift me, other than my freedom, that I was interested in. I knew he had wealth and power, but what was any of that to a woman like me? I thrived in the shadows, away from prying eyes of royalty.

“I don’t want anything from you,” I said curtly. He glanced at me with a raised brow, and I added, “Your Highness.” The words held enough venom in them that he cracked a smile, knowing it was killing me to treat my kidnapper with respect.

“Bring them in!” Nero shouted to his guards that waited at the door.

My eyes widened in horror as a handful of his guards dragged in three unconscious male bodies and laid them in the middle of the room.

They were slightly bloody, but not beaten, and had only a handful of bruises on them that I decided must have been from the struggle. Caldor, Remus, and Rijatt were laid at my feet. I glared but didn't make a move toward them. I simply shrugged with indifference at The Nexus Prince.

He chuckled, once again expecting this from me, apparently. “Don’t try to play games with me, Mara. I can feel your emotions, you know. It’s one of my many, many special talents. I have to admit though, your emotions have a certain sweetness to them. There’s an edge there that I might just swallow whole if you slip up again.”

The way his color changing eyes drank me in, he was like a predator stalking his prey. In his eyes, I could see a mix of emotions, from suspicion, to anger, to irritation... but there was also want, lust and longing.

What was this Prince playing at? I hadn’t done anything wrong, so what was his

reason for holding me here? Surely there was no way for him to know who I was after. Unless... I thought back to what Rijjat had said about my Raven, wondering if perhaps someone else had somehow found him and gotten the truth from him.

A cold shiver went down my spine at the thought of Nero knowing my secrets. A pit formed in my stomach as I contemplated the fate of my Raven, wondering what had become of him. A King rarely decided to spare the messenger for such treacherous news.

“I know plenty of the urges of men like you, Nero.” His brow raised at my use of his improper name, but if he was going to call me Mara, I could play his game too. “Kingdoms fall under the urges of men, preying on the emotions of their lessers. But it’s all you’ll get from me unless you’re willing to take it by force.”

“Then you’re in luck,” he said, coming closer. “I’m not the sort of Prince who enjoys burning down kingdoms, but I can not easily walk away from someone who feels so much but shows so little. It’s a game of cat and mouse, but trust me, it’s not one you want to play with me. Your resolve truly is astounding, yet you’re feeding me without meaning to.” He breathed in deeply, letting his eyes fall closed as he sighed. “Release all that built-up rage towards me, and you’d leave me powerless. I know you care for these men. I know which one holds your heart and which one you wish did not. Stop playing games, and let us speak with candor, and maybe you can finally be free of this so-called cage.”

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I stared down in confusion. Rijatt was here with Caldor and Remus. Why did they come here? Together?

I glanced back up at Nero. “What are you hoping to get out of me, Nero? If you want to speak plainly, then let's.”

Something like triumph shone in his eyes as he made his way closer, stepping around the males sprawled out on the floor. “I do not want to fight with you. However, I cannot in good conscience allow you to bring harm to my king and country, now can I? Therefore, I need answers.”

“I have nothing of value to offer you,” I ground out, unwilling to let a few pretty words force my secrets out so easily. I was stronger than he gave me credit for.

Nero nodded as if that's what he'd been expecting me to say before he turned to the door, just as the guards let in a beautiful woman who came to stand beside the prince. She had long white hair and markings that covered her body that I vaguely recognized as one of the runish languages of the old gods. This woman was a priestess.

“Must we stay in this suffocating room, Nero? You were raised better than that. You won't get the answers you need if you keep a frightened woman caged. ”

To my shock and horror, Nero had the decency to look properly sorry before he nodded, and the guards grabbed the men from the floor and carried them out of the room.

“I’m not a frightened damsel,” I gritted out at the priestess. I was seconds away from gouging the bitch’s eyes out with my fingernails. But perhaps I was being a bit too dramatic. This was a priestess, after all, so she was bound to have an air of self-importance.

She gave me a bland smile. “Of course not, dear, and that’s very admirable of you.” Her tone was just shy of condescending. I returned her smile, a mutual understanding hovering between us.

“Have it your way, Tetia. We’ll take her through the gardens as long as she makes no attempts to escape.” This was aimed at me, but I remained staring at the priestess, already knowing I didn’t trust her. Maybe even less so than the prince.

As we left the room, trailing behind Nero, Tetia interlocked our arms as if we were old friends going for a stroll. I gritted my teeth, my arm stiff and unwelcoming. She ignored my rudeness.

“I don’t understand what I’ve done to offend his highness,” I seethed, badly attempting to keep the venom out of my voice but failing.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand. Not just yet, anyway. Your allegiance to King Animus, coupled with your... profession,” she said, clearing her throat to cover a dark chuckle. “Is definitely a cause for concern. What business does Xmara Bane have in her enemy’s kingdom without invitation?”

“Are your walls so closed off to foreign travelers?” I asked. As far as I knew, Nexus had relatively open borders, unlike Avedin, whose borders were heavily guarded.

The priestess laughed. “I think we can drop the pretenses, don’t you?” She stared straight ahead, her eyes on Nero’s muscular back, but I watched her profile, every dip and curve of her delicate face inked with those strange runes. “It’s clear that you have

no hatred for Source users, yet you serve a king who would stop at nothing to wipe us from existence. How long does it take before turning the other cheek to tyranny becomes tyranny itself?"

This was a question I'd asked myself time and time again, and yet I never had an answer. I had no great love for Animus or even for Avedin. I was a victim of circumstance. But was Tetia right? How long must this go on before I, too, was just as guilty as my King?

"Loyalty does not equal blind faith," I said as we walked through corridor after corridor, the ceilings draped with flowing fabrics and vines with sweet-smelling flowers.

"Spoken with true honor," Nero grumbled without turning back, leading us through a series of rooms decorated in colorful murals, pottery, statues and fountains. We exited into a large garden as the sun shone high in the sky.

The sprawling garden was like something out of a dream. My mouth watered as I smelled ripened fruits, blooming flowers and fluffy moss that coated the trees. Butterflies fluttered around us, and birds chirped from the branches. The garden had no strict pattern to it but rather was a series of woven pathways of soft moss that felt amazing under my bare feet.

"What is the point of this walk, exactly?" My patience was beginning to run thin. The pleasantries were getting boring, and it was time for me to plan my inevitable escape. But how was I supposed to accomplish that when my companions got themselves captured. I shook my head. Men really were useless sometimes.

Nero tsked, clicking his tongue. "Those manners just won't do, not in this court. How have you survived this long in Avedin as a woman with such a nasty temper? The gods know how they treat the fairer sex. Curious..." His eyes flickered over me

slowly, with a slight twitch to his full lips.

His hair continued to change colors, as did his eyes, setting my nerves on edge. A strange sensation swirled through me. My skin felt tingly while my head was as light as a feather. An honest answer was just on the tip of my tongue, and the way the prince watched me was as if he knew it. What was he doing to me? Was this some kind of Source magic? Something wasn't right because, at this moment, it was all I could do not to spill all of my secrets at his feet.

"Don't confuse the girl," Tetia said with a chuckle. She watched me with a smile that made me uneasy. No, I didn't trust this priestess one bit.

Nero shook his head, his stare releasing me. "How could I forget? I must be a gentleman even when I feel less than ecstatic about it." He gestured towards me with the wave of his hand as if in exasperation. "Forgive me, Xmara, your emotions will fluctuate in my presence, but it can't be helped. When I leave, you will return to your normal, happy self." He winked, and despite the sudden flip in my stomach, I glared in return.

"You're making me act this way and then complaining that I'm acting this way?" I pursed my lips in disgust. Nero laughed but covered it up with a cough as Tetia shot him a glare.

"No. I am not controlling how you feel or what you say. Let's just say I can weaken your resistance. You don't want to lie to me, Xmara. Everything in your nature might try, but my power is stronger. I can't change your emotions. I simply make you unable to hide them. That's why lying doesn't work here because it's almost impossible to lie to me."

"And what are you doing to me?" I questioned Tetia. Her white eyes flashed with power that sent a chill down my spine and raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

The runes on her skin appeared to be glowing slightly.

“I serve many deities. I was handpicked at birth to be sent into the Source as an offering. When I emerged, I was stronger than any other child going back generations. My connection is soul deep. It’s a part of me as much as my own limbs. I do not simply ‘do’ anything. It’s just who I am. The Source feeds off of me and protects me from almost anything that would do me harm.” She came closer with measured steps. Her hair blew off her shoulders as if from some invisible force, though there was no wind. “The Source has become a lifeforce of its own. It’s the very magic in the air, the intuition that makes you clever.”

“I have no connection to the Source,” I said, my voice quieter than I intended under her penetrating stare.

She raised a single brow. “Don't you? Something that king of yours doesn't want his people to know is that nearly everyone can use the Source. You just have to learn how to make it work for you. It's all around you, Xmara. In the air you breathe and the soil beneath your feet. The Source is everything. Your country is dying because your king is a fool to continue to ignore the signs. Without access to the Source, how is life to thrive?”

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“Nothing but lies,” I spat, taking a step away from the priestess. I glanced between her and Nero, who was watching me intently. “The Source has never served me and neither have its gods. They abandoned Avedin a long time ago. Magic is gone from that place and it’s not coming back.”

“Tell me then, how does magic happen? How do shifter children become animals in your kingdom? Surely they are born amongst you, even if your king pretends otherwise. Is it not magic that fuels them?”

“It’s dormant blood,” I countered. “Something passed down through generations that only appears in certain shifters. I’ve studied it, priestess. I know what I’m talking about.”

I’d spent years researching shifters and Source users, attempting to mimic their powers in potion form, attempting to harness those qualities for practical use. Shifting was in one’s blood, in their very core, passed from ancestor to ancestor but rarely manifesting. Magic had nothing to do with it. Right?

Tetia rolled her eyes. “It’s not dormant. It’s very much alive. It’s why it scares your king so much.” Her lips twisted into a mockery of a grin, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. It was clear she had no love for my king... not that anyone really did.

“The tale of Basillius’s visit to Avedin is infamous,” I said, recalling the story I’d grown up with. “The Source was responsible for the death of his only heir.” Now the king was childless. A cold, empty man with nothing to live for save for his own vanity.

“Animus chose his own fate!” Tetia shouted, her eyes flashing so brightly that I had to blink against it, as if power writhed just beneath them, exposing itself for the first time. Her hair rose off her shoulders as if lightning were running through the strands. “He could have had an heir, a mate, and a thriving kingdom had he not simply taken what he wanted. He could’ve saved thousands of lives. Instead, he chose a human woman with a child that was never meant to be his! You speak of things you have no knowledge of, girl!” Her words were hissed and shouted at the same time. “The Shadowbane is coming, and its reckoning will be...”

“Stop!” Nero barked, stepping between us. His back was towards me, and I watched as his right hand crept towards the blade at his hip. His voice became softer, and a shift in the air told me he was using his abilities. “Tetia, stop this. You know she’s only stating what the world already knows. You’ve moved on from this.”

It sounded like this was an argument that had happened before, and Nero was exhausted with the priestess. But one word stood out from all the rest. It bounced around in my head with an odd sense of familiarity.

The Shadowbane...Why did that sound so damn familiar?

Tetia closed her eyes and backed away from me as she sniffed, brushing a wild strand of hair off her forehead. Instead of responding to the prince, she looked away, off into the distance of the garden, her mind far, far away even though her sudden rage had faded.

Nero, who looked less than impressed, guided me by my arm back the way we came. He tried apologizing on her behalf as we walked, but my mind was elsewhere too.

I stared at a row of rose bushes, inhaling deeply, my eyes watering. While the petals smelled light and herbal, there was another scent just beneath them. As I inhaled deeper, I moved closer to the bushes while Nero attempted to hold me in place.

The roses were poisoned. The smell was pungent now and unmistakable. Acacia powder was tasteless, but to the trained nose, smelled like fresh dirt after a rain with a tinge of cinnamon. Nothing like roses. Who had planted these, and for what?

I didn't mention the poisoned roses to Nero; instead, I just let him guide me back the way we'd come. I wondered what was happening to Caldor, Remus and Rijjat. Were they being tied up, chained up and locked in a dungeon? Was Nero preparing them to face the gallows?

We reached the archway that would lead us back into the beautiful rooms we'd walked through before, and several guards stood posted on either side of the tall, intricately carved pillars. They stood up straighter as their prince approached.

"Let her go with her men but make sure they do not leave this city. No one touches her unless I say so. She'll need to be presentable for tomorrow." The guards nodded in unison, and I peered up at the prince in confusion.

"You're letting me go?" I asked, arching my brows in disbelief. "What's tomorrow?" Surely this was some kind of trap. Still, his words burrowed deep into my bones. Her men... My men?

Nero grinned down at me as he raised a hand to my face, lightly brushing a strand of my wayward hair behind my ear. He let his fingertips drag down my cheek in a featherlight touch. "Tomorrow is my brother's name day, and the entire city is invited to a ball in his honor. You'll be joining us, along with your... companions," he said with a cheeky smile that made my blood boil. "I'm letting you leave out of trust, Mara. Trust that you're far too curious to run back to your little king just yet." He stepped closer, his voice lowering as he brought our bodies flush together. "But if you defy me and attempt to flee my city, this is your warning that you will be caught. I won't be so forgiving a second time."

Xmara

We'd already ordered three rounds at a run-down tavern on the edge of Nexus. Rijjat insisted he knew the owners and would run us a tab, so I took advantage.

It wasn't really a tavern though, it was more like a brothel masquerading as one. But it had good soup and tasty ale, so I was content. Even Caldor had lost his perpetual scowl, chatting away with the man behind the counter. The potion I'd given him would start to fade soon, and he would need more of it to attend the king's name day ball without being spotted, but I had to admit it was easier to look into his eyes while they were dark brown.

He'd come for me. Remus and Caldor had put aside their differences and come for me despite the danger they faced, even if they had managed to get themselves not only tied up but also captured in the process. I hadn't had enough time to process that yet, but I suddenly felt warm inside, and I didn't think it had anything to do with the ale.

We had until tomorrow night to prepare for this ridiculous ball. I'd been to plenty of them on Waylan's arm over the years, but aside from the food and gossip, I didn't enjoy them much. This wasn't in the plan and derailed everything tremendously. I didn't trust that devious prince; I just knew he had some kind of plan up his sleeve.

The longer I sat, the more I drank, and the more I drank, the harder I pondered. I kept replaying the priestesses' words in my head...The Shadowbane's reckoning...What had she meant by that, and why had Nero leaped between us to keep her from explaining? Something wasn't right between those two, and suddenly, I realized that Nero was right. I was far too curious to flee the city.

Rijjat managed to secure rooms upstairs for the night, which was lucky since my vision had begun to double and triple with each mug, and I didn't think I could make it back to the temple with dignity. It wasn't often I allowed myself to indulge in drink.

Avedin had strict rules about women consuming ale or spirits unsupervised, so I never bothered.

I was reluctantly starting to enjoy myself in this strange country despite having been captured by the prince himself, and that was what scared me most of all. I'd come here to do a job for my king, and we were a week into the journey, and I was no closer to the castle than I was when we crossed the border. Attending a ball, though yes, it was inside the castle, still wasn't good enough. It was too public. Too many eyes would be on the strange, nameless woman who'd shown up without invitation.

By now, Nero would have reported back to his brother Basillius and warned him that the infamous X was in his city and would be attending his name day ball. I wouldn't be surprised to wake up and find a host of city guardsmen at the door to the tavern, ready to drag me before Basillius himself.

"I've had enough for one night," declared Remus after emptying his mug and slamming it on the wooden bartop. He rocked back on his stool and hiccupped.

His eyes were bright green tonight, the feline under his skin awake and prowling. He'd missed his dose of potion, and I hadn't bothered to force it down his throat yet. The thought of it made my stomach queasy.

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For so long, I'd lived under the thumb of powerful men telling me what to do and how to think. I had but a taste of the oppression that Source users lived through every day of their lives. Was it right to defy my king and let Remus keep his cat on the surface? Or was it wrong for me to force the other half of his soul into painful submission?

I met Remus's eyes, realizing he was standing next to the bar top as if waiting for me to join him. Something in my stomach twisted, and my heart fluttered. As my betrothed, it was only fair that I share a room with him, but I couldn't bring myself to make that step yet. We hadn't even talked about what exactly transpired between myself and the prince, nor had I questioned any of them on their subsequent capture. That was a discussion for a safer place with less prying ears.

I felt eyes on me but refused to acknowledge them, knowing the captain of the guard was watching us openly. I ordered one more drink, nodding for Remus to go up without me. I trusted him not to leave in the dead of night and escape now that he knew I was safe. The thought of waking up and finding him gone had my chest feeling unusually heavy.

It was just Caldor and I left after Remus stumbled out the door. Rijjat had gone to the back of the tavern to speak with the man that owned the place—apparently, the two had important business to discuss, and I wasn't privy to it. But no matter, I was too drunk to care about Rijjat's secrets right now.

I gulped down the warm ale in seconds, feeling my head spin, and knew it was time to call it a night and get some sleep. I would be regretting this tomorrow, but luckily I had a potion I could take that would take the edge off of the sickness.

I left the tavern and headed outside, making my way around the building in the dark. A staircase went up three levels to the rooms reserved for paying customers. I could hear moaning from the outside of the building, slapping skin and even screaming as the whores fucked their customers.

In another life, I might have been one of them had I followed through with running away once I found out about Waylan's infidelity. I'd sincerely thought about it and would have been glad to make an honest living without the aid of a man to keep me alive. I held no ill will to the ladies of the night, and I applauded their ability to overlook the sweaty, grubby males that pawed at them day in and day out. It took a strong stomach to live that way.

I stumbled into the room I'd been given for the night. The hearth was blessedly lit, as was a bedside candle. A loaf of bread sat on a plate next to the candle, and a small piece of parchment was by it. I picked it up, my eyes running blurrily over the elegant scrawl.

It was a note from Rijjat, telling me to eat some bread, drink some water, and help myself to the nightgown on the hook. I looked over my shoulder, scanning the room and found a nearly sheer white nightgown dangling from a hook on the wall.

I grumbled as I discarded the note, burning it up in the candle until it crumbled to ash. Who did he think he was ordering me around like this?

Still, once the parchment was well and truly ash, I noticed a mug next to the candle as well, and upon sniffing its contents, I found it was water. I gulped the entire thing down in one go, groaning as the refreshing liquid coated my parched mouth. Then I tore a chunk out of the bread and angrily chewed it as I ripped the nightgown off the hook.

I was still grumbling as I removed my dirty clothes, kicking them into the corner of

the room. The nightgown felt soft and luxurious against my skin, and I couldn't help but run my fingers over it, twisting this way and that as the gauzy fabric swung around my ankles.

It wasn't often that I allowed myself to feel beautiful or delicate. My dresses back in Avedin were practical and simple, made of rough fabrics that could be easily scrubbed clean of whatever kind of potion or concoction I might spill on it that day. But this gown was obviously something borrowed from one of the house ladies, something designed specifically to capture the male gaze.

My head spun, and I stumbled a bit. Feeling woozy, I moved to grab for my potions satchel but paused, my body going utterly rigid. Where was my satchel? Eyes wide, I scanned the room. I could have sworn I'd brought it up with me. Had I left it back in the tavern? This was bad. Very, very bad. If someone were to get ahold of the contents of that satchel, I could wake up to find the guard knocking down my door and dragging me to the gallows.

In a panic, I threw open the door to the room, forgetting for a moment that I was wearing nothing but a sheer gown, but before I could take a single step into the dimly lit corridor, I found myself face to face with a disheveled Caldor, clutching my leather satchel in his hand.

The potion had worn off, and I was now gazing into a pair of familiar dark blue eyes. Eyes that made my heart race and my throat close up. Eyes that were busy scanning me from head to toe in my dress and darkening by the second. "Caldor, what are you—"

His lips cut off whatever I was about to say as he backed me into the room, tossing my satchel on the floor. He kicked the door shut behind him, his mouth devouring mine in a frenzy. I barely had time to think as I thrust my fingers into his hair, gripping tightly as I pressed into his kiss.

He had me against the wall, kissing his way down the side of my neck as he undid the ties of the nightgown, letting it fall to the sides, exposing my bare breasts. My skin was on fire with every kiss and every touch, and I wanted more.

We were frantic as we peeled clothing from our bodies, me working his trousers and letting them fall to the floor while he kicked them away, him peeling off his shirt and throwing it somewhere behind him. I scratched at his back and gripped his shoulders as he lifted me by my thighs and hoisted me up against the wall.

Breathing heavily, Caldor laid his forehead against mine, his pupils wide and black with need as we breathed in each other's breath. "Only this time," he whispered against my lips.

"Only this time," I repeated right back. I wasn't sure exactly what I was promising, but in the darkness of the room, with his hands on my heated skin, it seemed like the only logical answer.

How many times had I lied awake at night with my fingers inside myself, imagining it was his tongue? How many times did Waylan rut inside me while I squeezed my eyes shut and wished I was staring into a pair of dark blue eyes instead? This was wrong for so many reasons, I knew that. I should thrust him away and tell him to leave before we took this too far, but I was beyond that point now.

When he thrust into me, both of us groaned in unison as he buried his face in the crook of my neck and shoulder. He stilled for a moment as if savoring the warm feeling of being connected so intimately. Though our love was pure and fierce for all those years, we'd never been allowed to act on it in order to keep me pure for my future husband. All of those stolen kisses or touches couldn't sate the lingering fire in my veins that yearned for him.

His hips began to move. Slowly at first until the pleasure was nearly agonizing. I

needed to feel him deeper, harder and faster. I needed to feel Caldor everywhere—under my skin and in my soul. I didn't care what the morning brought, all I cared about was how his body felt against mine.

Sweat slicked between us as he thrust in and out of me. My back hit the wall repeatedly, our moans mingling in the silence of the room with only the crackling of the hearth to accompany us. I moved my hips, swiveling them fluidly, making Caldor growl into my mouth as he kissed me harder and more fiercely than before.

I was no stranger to fucking. Waylan had me in every which way possible over the years, as was a husband's right, but this was something else entirely. I never knew that pleasure could be so utterly exquisite, to the point that I felt like clawing out of my skin just to feel more and more and more.

His hands were everywhere at once as if he couldn't get enough of the feel of my skin. The room was impossibly hot, and it was becoming harder to breathe. But I didn't care. Who needed air when they could have the breath of the one they craved?

He moved as if he knew exactly what he was doing, and an errant thought hit me. Was I his first? Surely not. His movements were too fluid, too practiced. Names and faces flitted through my head, wondering who it was. Was it a lady? A whore? A friend?

Suddenly it was all I could think about as I gripped him tighter to my body. My nails dug into his skin, anchoring him there as he moaned in response to the pain.

"If you only knew how many times I dreamt of your taste..." he whispered into my ear, his hot breath tickling my skin and lifting the hairs at my nape. I moaned at his slurred words as he picked up speed, slamming me into the wall. "Tell me, Mara, did you ever feel me when you were with him?" My eyes flew open as I craned my head back, meeting his suddenly rage-filled eyes. "Answer me," he grunted, straining with

the effort to hold himself back.

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“Yes...” I found myself whispering.

“Yes, what?” he snapped, threading his fingers into my hair and gripping the back of my head, tilting my head backward until his mouth skimmed along my jaw. “Tell me!”

I closed my eyes tightly, trying to catch my breath as he kept a steady pace, a tingling heat building between my legs. “Yes! I thought of you, Caldor,” I panted breathlessly. “When he was inside of me, it was always you... Your tongue, your hands, and your cock.”

The truths were spilling from my lips, and I couldn’t stop them, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. Maybe he needed to know this truth of mine. That after all these years, I never once forgot him. I never forgot the way his mere touch would steal my breath and make me wish that I had been born a peasant girl. My fate had never been my own, and we’d known that, but this... this just hurt.

“Fuck...” he said with a long groan. He shuddered, his eyes closing tight as his whole body locked up. He spilled himself into me as pleasure rolled through my body. I clenched around him, gripping on tight as his seed spilled from me, dripping down my thighs and onto the floor between us.

As the tremors began to subside and his hips stilled, locking us in place against the wall, Caldor craned his head back and gripped my chin between his fingers—not tight enough to hurt, but enough so that I couldn’t look away from the drunken haze of his eyes. “Finally, the truth for once in your wretched life...”

Xmara

I woke with bleary eyes to sunlight streaming through the frosted over window. My mouth was parched, and my head throbbed. With a groan, I reached for the side table where my satchel lay discarded, fumbling for the vials inside until I found the right one.

I uncorked the little black bottle and took a swig of the bitter contents, making myself gag in the process. It tasted like swill, but it would do the trick. The moment it reached my stomach, I began to feel better, my head clearing up and the light sheen of sweat on my forehead already drying up.

It took a moment for it all to rush back. I sat up with my heart in my throat, scanning the room for any signs of Caldor, but he was gone. I might have thought I imagined the whole thing if it weren't for the pleasurable way my body ached from his touch. I could feel the bruising on my back from when he'd thrust me up against the wall and the soreness of my thighs from wrapping them around his strong body.

Everything was coming back to me now—the moans, the sweat, the raw need. What had come over us? Ten years apart, and we'd hardly spoken to one another aside from snide remarks, insults and accusations. Perhaps the king was right to restrict a woman's access to drink if this was the unintended result. But that didn't explain Caldor's actions. The way his eyes had scanned my body as we stood in the doorway had said more than words ever could.

There was a quiet knock on my door, so I gathered up a sheet from the bed and wrapped it around my naked body, opening the door narrowly to find a pile of freshly folded clothing waiting for me on the floor. Poking my head out, I looked left and right but found nobody around.

Snatching them up and shutting the door again, I realized the clothing was mine, only

freshly laundered and smelling of lavender. I frowned at the bundle in my hands, wondering how someone managed to get my clothes when they had been strewn around the floor haphazardly. Unless... Unless Caldor had requested someone wash them for me. The thought had my head spinning. Surely Caldor wouldn't have bothered to do something so thoughtful on my behalf.

I washed in the cold water left in the washroom basin, chills racing up my spine the moment my feet hit the water. After braiding back my dark hair, I dressed, feeling strangely refreshed, though my thighs were still aching. Slipping on my riding boots, I was strapping on my potions satchel and belt when there was another knock at the door.

Before I could call out for them to enter, the door opened, and Remus stepped in. His mouth was open, ready to say something charming or snarky, but he paused. His eyes brightened to a feline green as his nostrils flared. I stood there utterly still as he went rigid, scanning the room with a clenched jaw. I noticed belatedly that his fingers looked off, and upon closer inspection, I realized why. Claws were protruding from the tips of his fingers. They were long and black and needle thin at the tips, sharp enough to shred flesh and bone.

I sighed, trying to pretend as if I had no idea why he was acting this way as I said, "Well, let's get a move on then." I headed towards him as he refused to move an inch, his shoulders heaving with every breath.

As I went to pass him, his hand shot out and blocked my way, anchoring his claws to the door's wooden frame, digging in deep enough to leave gashes. His eyes flitted to mine, and I could have sworn there was a flutter of movement beneath the skin of his arm where his shirt sleeves were casually rolled up to the elbows. I realized why he was so utterly still. He was trying to keep his shift at bay.

"I smell the captain all over this room," he growled out, his teeth clenching hard. He

inhaled again, filling his lungs with my scent. “You let him touch you...”

Irritation washed over me as I squared my shoulders. I refused to be intimidated by any man. Forcing a bland, careless expression, I said, “Actually, I let him fuck me.” I gestured to my right with a shrug. “Right there against that wall.”

He hissed, stepping towards me, the sound so feline and feral that my heart leaped into my throat. Remus looked ready to pounce, his dark hair unbound around his broad shoulders, his slanted eyes bright, flashing green and slitted down the center, and his long claws extended. I could only begin to imagine what he looked like in his shifted form, but a part of me longed to see it in the flesh.

He moved into the room as I backed up, shutting the door with his foot. My back hit the wall where Caldor had me pressed against it as Remus closed in on me. He was so much taller than I was that I had to crane my neck back to meet his furious eyes. His hand came up to the side of my cheek as he lightly trailed his claws along my skin. “You’re betrothed to me, Xmara. How dare he touch what’s mine...”

“I belong to no one,” I spat, my whole body going rigid. “Do you think because the king spared your life, it gives you ownership over my body?” I leaned in until our lips were almost touching. “I would die before I ever let another male own me.”

He hissed again, exposing his fangs that gleamed white in the sunlight streaming through the window. “Do you honestly expect me to believe you feel nothing for me?”

His words made me pause, my eyes flitting rapidly between his. I wanted to scream at him that no, I didn't feel a thing for him... but was that true? I prided myself on my ability to read other people well enough to know when they were lying, but shifters could smell it, and I knew if I said the wrong thing, he would know the truth.

Did I care for Remus? In my own messed up way, I supposed I did. When I looked at him or touched him, there was a feeling in my stomach akin to the fluttering of hundreds of tiny little wings. My skin burned where his hands gripped me, but it wasn't painful. I'd only felt this sensation with one other person in my life, and he'd left my room in the night without so much as a word to me.

"That's what I thought," Remus said when I hesitated for too long. His thumb moved over my bottom lip, his claw leaving a scratch behind.

His eyes zeroed in on the scratch, and before I could stop him, he was leaning forward, sucking my bottom lip between his and licking away the sting. My heart was beating so loud that I knew without a doubt he could hear it.

But then he backed away, taking each step slowly as his lips stretched into a wicked grin. "Let the games begin then."

Xmara

Tonight we would meet King Basillius.

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In exchange for my temporary freedom, we were all required to attend this name day celebration, but I didn't want to go. I had a task to complete, and parading around in front of the court, pretending to be a wealthy lord's daughter, sounded torturous.

I wondered how much Nero had decided to tell his brother about me. Would I look like a fool introducing myself as some simpering female looking for a husband all the while he knew my secret?

The sun was nearly setting as I made it back to my room at the tavern. After a tense breakfast across the table from both Remus and Caldor in which neither man spoke a single word, I'd spent the day carefully avoiding the men that Nero had tasked with following me, making sure I had no ideas of fleeing the city. I wouldn't lie and say I hadn't considered it. I was ready to hide away while I could and not be bothered. Besides, I had a letter to write.

Caldor hadn't bothered to meet my eyes this morning, and Remus had been busy glaring at Caldor, while Rijjat glanced between the three of us with a devious smirk that made me grind my teeth in irritation. So, I avoided each of them, instructing them to meet in my room before tonight's... festivities. Whether or not they would follow my instructions remained a mystery.

I stared at the door to my room, blinking at it in the dark light of the corridor, lit with only one small wall sconce. Sitting in front of it was a wrapped parcel. I snatched it up and hurried inside, locking the door behind me.

I tore at the wrapping, letting it fall to the floor as a long, glittering dress unfurled. It hung from my fingers as I twisted it this way and that, letting the light of the blazing

hearth wash over it. I'd never seen a fabric like it. Not quite black, not quite red, but somewhere in between. When the light hit it just right, I even spotted a bit of gold. It was by far the most decadent item I'd ever held in my blood soaked hands.

There was no note to go along with it, but I already knew it was Nero who'd sent it. My lips thinned as I realized his intent, giving me a dress that changed colors the same as that magical hair of his. He clearly thought he was clever... and maybe he was.

What I should have done was toss the dress out the nearest window and donned one of my black cloaks and a full belt of potions. But I doubted I'd make it very far into the castle gates like that. The mental image, though, was enough to make me grin. But barely.

I spent the next hour drafting a letter, which I rolled and tied off with a belt of leather. Opening the window, I tipped my head out, eyeing the rooftops. I whistled a familiar tune, and soon the fluttering of wings hit my ears as a black shape swirled overhead before landing on the windowsill. The raven's beady black eyes stared at me, its mouth slightly open and ready.

This raven was trained to wait and listen for that specific tune and would bring my letter directly to Avedin, letting my Ravens know where I was and that I was indeed still alive. We had messenger ravens in every kingdom, every continent, ready and waiting to serve us when needed, and it was a lucky thing too; otherwise, someone would come to investigate, and I couldn't risk that with Nero watching us so closely.

I placed the letter into its waiting mouth, and it wasted no time shooting off of the windowsill and into the fading light of the day. I watched it go with a pit of longing in my stomach. Sometimes I wished I could be like a real raven and just fly away and disappear.

It took another hour for me to wash up and slip into the dress. I stood before an old worn and cracked mirror, turning and twisting, letting the firelight bounce off the fabric. It was lighter than silk and soft against my skin, cooling to the touch. I didn't have any shoes that were suitable to match it, so I dug out a pair of my nicer boots from my riding bag. They were black but daintier than the ones I usually wore, and the dress was more than long enough to cover them.

There was a knock at the door, and I froze, my head snapping to the knob that didn't turn and the footsteps in the distance that faded away quickly. Cracking open the door, I stuck my head into the corridor, looking this way and that, but nobody was there; instead, there was yet another parcel at my feet.

Locking the door behind me, I tore into the parcel, revealing a pair of crystalline silver slippers. They were just as delicate and unique as the dress, but staring at them in the palms of my hand had my blood running ice cold. I tossed them on the bed and rushed to the window, throwing it open and scanning the rooftops and shadows for prying eyes.

Was he here? Was the prince watching me somehow? My skin prickled with unease as I slammed the window shut, stripping the bedding off of the bed and tossing it over the shutters. It hung off at an angle, but it blocked the nearby rooftops enough that nobody would be able to spy on me from the outside.

A thought occurred to me that had nausea rolling in my stomach. My eyes flitted to the spot where Caldor had me pinned on the wall. Had someone been watching us? Was there someone out there who knew? I thought of Prince Nero having that sort of emotional leverage over us, and rage flooded me. I wasn't being careful enough in this enemy kingdom.

I stared at the slippers with a frown. They appeared to be my exact size. Had Nero simply forgotten them and sent a courier to fetch them for me? Had it been a

coincidence that I was thinking too deeply about? I wasn't so sure that anything was a coincidence anymore.

* * *

"I'm not going to help you with whatever scheme you've concocted tonight," Rijjat said. He stood against the far wall of my room with his arms crossed, dressed in finer clothing than some kings. His thick brows were drawn tight as he shook his head. "Prince Nero knows you're here now, so it's pointless, whatever it is."

I glanced at Remus, who was peering out the window. He let the bedding drop from his two fingers as he met my eyes. They were greener than I'd ever seen them and filled with mischief as usual.

I tugged my riding cloak tighter around me as the room chilled, the fire in the hearth still flickering but slowly dying out. "And just how do you know we're up to anything?" I asked innocently. "I was invited to a ball. Who am I to turn down a direct summons from a prince?"

Rijjat snorted, looking me up and down with suspicion. "You're the leader of the largest underground spy ring this side of the realm. Your very presence in this city falls under scrutiny, and rightfully so." He stepped away from the wall, taking several slow steps my way. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Remus stiffening as if prepared to leap between us. Rijjat tilted his head, his long dark curls falling over his shoulder. "You're here to spy on my king. That much is obvious, but what I want to know is why. Why now, after all these years of peace between our countries, does King Animus feel so threatened?"

I blinked at the cunning man, still innocent as can be. I was under no obligation to confess anything to a man I'd only just met and under curious circumstances as well. My lips stretched into a bland smile. "Why indeed, Rijjat."

His dark eyes sparkled in the firelight as he held my stare. The closer he got to me, the more my skin heated and my breath stalled in my chest. There was something about this man that stumped me. Something that set my teeth on edge and my heart racing. My mind flashed back to the moment he'd reached for my hand as the prince's men hauled me away. That spark between us, the crackle of something fierce that flowed from him into me. The invisible runes I could feel under my skin. What was it? Who was this man?

"Why did you come after me?" I asked as I stood from my place on the bed, meeting him nearly eye to eye. "You could have run, but you didn't, and you nearly died because of it. Why?" It was a question that had been plaguing me since the moment he'd run after that horse to get to me. The fear in his eyes had been real.

Remus huffed from beside us. "I'd say it was less of a choice than the fact that we'd been dragged straight to your captor's doorstep."

I cast him a wry look, taking my eyes off Rijjat for a split second. "I don't believe I asked you. Why don't you make yourself useful and prepare my..." Remus coughed, cutting me off, his eyes bouncing to Rijjat. "My satchel..."

Rijjat shook his head, clicking his tongue. "You think I don't know what you hide away in your satchel, X? You're not fooling anyone, least of all me." He stepped closer. "You asked why I came after you? I'll tell you why, but you won't believe me."

We were so close I could feel his breath on my face and see each fleck of amber in his dark eyes. He smelled like spices and something sweet, with a hint of morning dew, and it was an effort not to breathe in deeply.

I angled my head with a subdued smile. "I'm very versatile in my beliefs."

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“Noted,” he said, excitement lighting his eyes in a challenge. He licked his lips, and my eyes flickered to them.

“So tell me then. Why did you risk your life to come after me?” I narrowed my eyes carefully at him, waiting to see if he would lie to me. Not that I thought he would. What did he have to gain from making an enemy of me?

His eyes flickered to Remus, who watched us with a frown, clearly ignoring my instructions to prepare my things. We’d be having a talk about his disobedience later, but for now, I was thankful to have someone at my back.

“Because, I can see plainly what you have yet to even consider.” Rijjat’s eyes roved over my face slowly. “You feel it, but you won’t admit it to yourself, but I’m a patient man. I can and will wait.” It was getting harder to hold his stare. I felt like he could see right down inside me. Like he was reaching for something that wasn’t there. “I have no doubt you’ll figure it out soon enough, and when you do, I’ll be right there waiting.”

I couldn't take it anymore. The room was becoming stifling, and sweat beaded on the back of my neck. I took a step back, trying not to make it obvious that I was struggling to breathe. Rijjat just watched me with a slight tilt to his lips.

Everywhere I turned in this damn country, it felt as if someone wanted—noneeded something from me. It was exhausting in a way I never knew. My king usually left me to my own vices. He hadn’t bothered Waylan often either, trusting that he would fulfill his duties with loyalty, ready and willing to do whatever the king asked of him. I’d been in Nexus only four days, and already I’d been pulled

in more directions than I had feet to follow.

I couldn't afford to have any attachments here. It would only distract me from the task I'd set out to do. Even if that task was at the beck and call of a king I didn't trust or respect. But I would complete the task, given that it was only a search for information, relatively harmless. Besides, I, too, was interested in that same information. Was Animus becoming paranoid? Was there a legitimate threat of war on the horizon?

It was hard to say with my king. He was a paranoid man, but were his delusions so far gone that he'd start a war when there was nothing brewing already? I had a feeling I already knew the answer to that. Yes. I believed Animus's hatred for the Source and the ones who openly encouraged it ran far deeper than anyone really knew.

Rijjat must have noticed how tense I'd become because he took a slow step toward me, a cautious smile in place as I held my breath. Again, Remus shifted in my peripheral, once again ready to leap between us. "You're far too serious, X. Even spies need to rest sometimes. There are so many pleasures around you, ripe for the taking," Lifting a finger to my face, he lightly tapped the tip of my nose. I blinked in disbelief as he chuckled.

Before I knew what I was doing, my teeth were sinking into the tip of his finger biting down hard. Rijjat's laugh turned into a sharp hiss of pain as he yanked his hand back and glared at me, though I couldn't help but notice a different kind of fire burning in his eyes.

Ignoring that heat, I laughed, Remus joining me as Rijjat sucked on the tip of his finger to soothe the sting. I tried to pretend the movement didn't have something in my belly tingling and my thighs rubbing together.

"Children..." came a dry admonishment from the doorway. We all turned collectively

as Caldor stood there against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl on his face.

I was still wiping the tears of laughter from my eyes as I turned to Rijjat. “You think I’m too serious? I’d like you to spend more than a week with the Captain. You’ll be crawling back to me for my wit and charm in no time.” Caldor’s scowl deepened, but Remus howled in laughter while Rijjat’s eyes sparked with new life at the jab.

“You didn’t seem to mind my charm last night.” His tone was dry and bored as if he were recounting the weather or something trivial. The room fell silent. Caldor was looking right at me, a clear challenge in his deep blue gaze. “In fact, I seem to remember you begging for...what was it again?More, more, more?”

“Watch yourself, Captain,” Remus growled. The animal under his skin slipped through, reminding me that he had yet to take any more of the suppression potion. I wasn’t going to remind him just yet, not while we were surrounded by potential enemies.

Caldor smiled bitterly. “Does the lady deny it?”

Remus rumbled again, taking a step towards Caldor. Rijjat again watched our back and forth with nothing short of excitement and curiosity.

I let my eyes drag up and down the length of the captain slowly. He was dressed just as fine as the other two, in head-to-toe black, with golden buttons, and a black leather and gold embellished baldric to match that I assumed Nero was also responsible for. “Perhaps I begged for more because I found ourrather shortencounter lacking.”

His eyes narrowed, and his smirk dropped as Rijjat laughed behind his palm. Meanwhile, Remus couldn’t contain it anymore. Both men were nearly howling, while Caldor only looked like he was ready to lunge for me. To run me through with

his blade or to finish what we'd started? That was the mystery.

"So what's the plan then, oh wise master of poisons?" Caldor asked, stepping into the room after inspecting the corridor and locking the door behind him. As it clicked shut, our eyes met yet again, and a buzzing feeling filled my chest.

We might have been drunk last night, but I could remember every second of his hands on my skin and his cock filling me as deep as he could. My thighs ached with the memory, and somehow, I could tell he knew that.

"Do you have it?" I asked Remus, holding my hand out to him. He was handing me a rolled parchment he'd taken from his saddlebag in a blink.

After unbinding the leather wrapping, I turned, spreading the parchment out on the bare mattress while the men in the room crowded around me.

"Where did you get this map?" Rijjat asked skeptically.

I peered up at him with a raised brow. "What do you take me for?"

He huffed through his nose. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised when it comes to you."

"I'm glad you're catching on," I quipped with a sly grin. Caldor shuffled on his feet, nudging against Rijjat as he peered over my shoulder. I rolled my eyes but looked back to the map, pointing to a centralized courtyard. "We enter separately. Remus comes with me as my guardian—"

"No," Caldor snapped, cutting me off. He stood up straight, his hand going to his blade. "I'm not entrusting your life to a shifter, not this time."

A growl built in Remus's chest as he faced the captain. "Say that again?"

I straightened up, placing a palm on the shifter's chest, stopping him as he moved closer to Caldor. Then I turned my glare on the former. "You have no say in the matter. Besides, I need Remus's gifts and training when we get close to the king and his advisors. If something happens to me, Remus is equipped to finish the task himself and report back to my Ravens and to the king." I added that last part half-heartedly. Sure, I would report my findings to Animus, but not before I figured out what it all meant for Avedin.

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“You’re not killing anyone at my king’s name day celebration, Mara,” Rijjat warned. There was no room for argument in his stern tone.

“I never said I was.” I met his eyes head-on, having nothing to hide from him. “We’re only here for information.”

“What kind of information?” he pressed.

With a sigh, I peered back down at the map, studying the castle courtyards where the ball would be held. It was an outdoor event, something I’d never seen the likes of in Avedin.

“My king suspects a plot to launch a war on Avedin and our territories. I’m here to coax the truth out of the men on his war council. I need dates, times, locations and the names of Nexus’s potential allied nations.”

Rijjat just blinked at me in silence as if it were taking everything inside of him to absorb what I’d just told him. He scrubbed a palm over his beard. “And how do you plan to get close enough to his war council to ask them?”

This time my lips twisted into a wry smirk. “Again, you underestimate me, Rijjat.” I patted his cheek with my palm, and his dark eyes brightened. “I have something in my arsenal created specifically to loosen lips. The rest, I’m afraid, will be left to my boundless charm and fluttering lashes.” I fluttered them comically as Caldor groaned and Remus chuckled. “See this dot right here?” I asked them, pointing to what looked like a smudge on the map.” The men crowded around me again, their warmth hitting my back as they followed my finger. “There will be a Raven waiting behind this door

tonight. If anything happens to me..."

"Nothing's going to happen to you," Remus growled out, placing a hand on my shoulder. I looked up, meeting his green eyes, filled with the power of his cat just under his skin. "I'll make sure of it," he added.

I blinked at him for too many heartbeats, with silence stretching between us. He meant it. Whatever that entailed, I knew Remus had my back tonight. Still, I shook my head and went back to the map, repeating my instructions. "If I don't make it out, I need you to get to the Raven and send them back to Avedin. They'll know what to do from there."

"Mara, this is suicide," Rijjat said. Surprisingly, he didn't sound angry with me but rather nervous and wary of this plan. "The king's guard knows you're here now, and all eyes will be on you and most likely us. You won't get within five feet of the war council, or the king for that matter." He scrubbed his fingers through his tousled hair. "Gods, I don't know why I'm even indulging this."

I straightened up, rolling the map back up and shoving it towards Remus before I turned to face Rijjat. He was scanning my face, and a thousand unanswered questions were in his eyes. "And yet here you are. Here you are, aiding a foreign spy and her band of infiltrators. Why is that, Rijjat? Why are you here with me right now instead of reporting this to your beloved king?"

I swaggered a step into his space until our chests were too close together, and he didn't back away, dragging the tips of my fingers down the sleeve of his right arm ever so slowly.

I could feel Caldor's stare burning through my skin as he watched us, but he had no claim on me anymore. Even after what happened between us, it was clear to me that it was a mistake, at least on his part.

Rijjat's eyes darkened as he too stepped in closer, raising a hand to cup my cheek. A crackle of something hot flowed from his palm to my face, but this time I didn't wince or pull away. A faint buzzing sound rang in my ears, and somehow I knew he heard it too because he tilted his head as if pondering something and coming up empty-handed.

Yes, there was something here between us, but finding out what it was, was a task for another night.

Rijjat lowered his face to mine until his lips were just barely grazing my own, and I didn't bother pulling away. Perhaps a part of me enjoyed how I could feel Caldor tensing up or Remus's rumbling growl rolling through the room and over my skin. But maybe what I really enjoyed was the power I felt, knowing with absolute certainty that should I only ask, each of these three men would do unspeakable things.

The thought alone made me lean in, pressing my lips to Rijjat's as he whispered hoarsely, "Goddess help us all."

Nero

Oh, how the poison master tried her best to annoy me with her sharp tongue. She managed to wedge herself under my skin, which was admittedly entertaining, but it was also very annoying.

But as intelligent and seemingly stoic as she was, or tried to appear, she'd never best me in this little game we played. Emotions were fickle things, I'd come to realize over three decades of feeling them from everyone I encountered, but hers sang like a canary in a sea of silence. They were tumultuous and sharp with an edge of bitterness. But hidden deep within the roughness of those dark waters were slivers of light that not even she knew were there. She wore a beautiful mask of indifference that didn't correlate with her truth.

I watched her from the tower window as she arrived on the arm of the shifter male who'd come to the city with her. I hadn't delved into the specifics of their relationship to each other in the short time I had her under my thumb. But the way the male's bright, cat-like eyes shifted back and forth, inspecting every person they passed, told me enough. He would protect her with his life, as he'd tried to do before.

She was as radiant as the goddess Thessia herself in the dress I'd sent. It shimmered in the moonlight, deepening the black of her long flowing hair and the paleness of her smooth skin. Something deep in my chest expanded at the sight of her. The immediate hardening of my cock was an annoyance I'd have to deal with for the foreseeable future because, frankly, I couldn't help myself. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, with eyes like burning embers and a mischievous half smile that made me want to do bad things.

I sipped the last of my wine as I watched her navigate the courtyard on the arm of the shifter. It was clear he was somehow infatuated with her, given that he held onto her arm tightly enough that I'd have to pry her off of him if I wanted to steal her away. Perhaps he'd try to fight me for her attention. Wouldn't that be a spectacle?

I chuckled at the thought of how red those creamy pale cheeks would become at such a dispute. But my chuckle died in my throat as I watched the captain of Avedin's king's guard waltz through the gates of the courtyard. Yes, I knew it was him. I never forgot a face, even though it was cleverly disguised, no doubt the work of our lovely poison master. The captain was watching Mara with an intensity that had me shifting from foot to foot, my fingers itching to wrap around the hilt of my blade and challenge him for the right to do so.

Not far behind him was the street rat. Tetia informed me that he was called Rijjat. I'd heard of him in passing, but what had me stumped was his interest in Xmara. Rijjat was a watcher for the priestesses on the outskirts of town. Information and secrets flowed through him from all corners of Nexus. He wasn't a wealthy man, but he was

connected in all the right ways. He even had the ear of the ladies of the night, who had a knack for coaxing secrets from the lips of the drunken men who visited their beds.

He, too, watched Xmara. He watched her with the strangest sort of intensity, circling around the courtyard in the opposite direction from the captain of the guard.

What were the four of them up to? They were an unlikely little group that much was obvious, but I didn't particularly think they were an immediate threat to my brother, the king. X was a known killer. An informant, a master of her craft, and an assassin when need be, but she was too smart to waltz into Nexus with the intention of harming its ruler.

No, she was here for another reason, and tonight I would coax it out of those luscious rosebud lips, no matter how I had to do it. In fact, I looked forward to all the ways I could make those lips sing, and I hoped that she would see sense and leave her misguided loyalty to Animus behind her.

I finished the last dregs of my wine and straightened my uniform as I turned towards the door. If all went well, I'd have the pretty little poisons master writhing beneath me, spilling her secrets onto my bed sheets while I drank down every delicious emotion that flooded from her to me. If all went well, she would be loyal to me by morning. It had to go well tonight, because it would be a shame to have to kill Xmara Bane if it didn't.

Xmara

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The decadent palace loomed over me as Remus and I strolled through the arched doors. The place was overrun with beautiful people. They looked happy, thriving even.

I could feel Caldor's eyes on me as I moved forward tensely. I knew somewhere around here would be the insufferable Prince Nero. I was almost positive his eyes were stalking me through his home as well, but I couldn't let that distract me. All the handsome men in the world couldn't stop me from moving deeper into this very obvious trap.

I knew very little right now, which left me off kilter, but I didn't know some things. Firstly, I knew there were poisonous roses in the gardens which had yet to be explained, nor had I inquired about. Secondly, I knew these Source wielding people would kill me in an instant if given a reason. And finally, I knew that all three of the men with me could feel the danger in the room just from their body language. Even Rijjat's eyes were shifting uneasily as we moved through throngs of people. Remus's arm intertwined with mine, holding me in a death grip, and without my potion, his shifter nature was closer than ever.

"You look beautiful tonight," Remus purred as he shifted me closer to his warm body.

Caldor grunted in disgust before walking in another direction. I knew he wouldn't go far, but in order to keep up appearances, Remus had to be the man on my arm tonight. Caldor didn't like it, but he knew I was right.

My eyes met Remus's warm stare as he studied me from the tips of my toes to the

curling tendrils of my dark hair. There was raw appreciation in those cat-like eyes, and my stomach fluttered with excitement, remembering the dark promises he'd made to me. I just had to decide if I was willing to succumb to the temptation or keep him at arm's length.

Rijjat followed Caldor's lead, moving out of sight but close enough to help if something went wrong. We had no real plan to get out of here if things went badly, but we'd kill to save ourselves if we had to. I just had to hope that if something did happen tonight, Rijjat wouldn't turn on the three of us in favor of his prince and king.

I still wasn't sure about that man, but something deep in my gut urged me to place my trust in him. I knew it was foolish, and I might come to regret it later, but as of now, I decided to watch him carefully.

"You shouldn't push him on purpose, Rem," I warned my soon-to-be husband, even though my lips tilted into a small grin.

He chuckled wickedly. They would have to figure their differences out eventually, or else this was going to get messy. Caldor was my past, and Remus was supposed to be my future. I couldn't snuff out the flame I'd held for him, even if I was starting to kindle something new with someone else. I wouldn't admit it to him though, as their ego was already too big for their own good.

"Tell me, what can I do to make you crave me as much as I throb for you?" I sucked in a breath as Remus's whispered question caressed the shell of my ear.

He shouldn't be speaking this freely in a place full of so many potential enemies with listening ears. I narrowed my eyes as they shifted through the room, searching for the person responsible for our suddenly loose tongues and unchecked emotions. Nero had to be near, and that made the hairs on my arm stand up.

“Looking for me, sweet Mara?” Nero’s smooth voice crooned as if he’d been hovering nearby this entire time without me noticing.

I stopped, pulling Remus to a sudden halt that caught him by surprise. The shifter growled in displeasure as Nero appeared in front of us with a Cheshire grin. His hair was a deep midnight blue, like the sea during a storm, contrasting with his eyes, appearing silver like moonlight on a clear night. It took seconds for his hair to begin shifting colors, from dark blue to black, as his eyes began showing hues of oranges and yellows.

It was mesmerizing to stare at the ever-changing prince. In fact, there were many eyes on him tonight, especially women who tracked his every movement and who were beginning to turn their shrewd eyes on me, the very obvious intruder.

“You summoned us and we came. What now?” My words were curt and clipped. Remus was stiff beside me; no doubt if I met his eyes, I would find him glaring at Nero.

Nero grinned wider. He threw his arms out and chuckled darkly. “Enjoy your time in my beautiful home. Eat and drink your fill, and perhaps dance a bit. You’ll know when it’s time to make your appearance before the king, little one.” He leaned in, placing a chaste kiss on my cheek, before bowing deeply and disappearing into the crowded room.

Remus moved to follow the prince, but I caught his arm and subtly shook my head. We didn’t need to draw attention to ourselves yet. It was clear he was trying to throw us off.

I peered around the ballroom and found a door that led outside of the main hall. The ballroom was mostly reserved for politics and greeting dignitaries, while the dancing, dinner, and entertainment took place under the stars.

I moved towards the double wooden doors and lost my breath at the sight before me. It was a terrace that overlooked the beautiful gardens, spanning the entire outer edge of the castle grounds. The garden was lit with torches that flickered with warmth and accompanied by shimmering lights of purples, blues and greens that seemed to hover over the guests gathered below. Magic...

It was still so strange to be in a place where the Source was so openly flaunted, but I had to admit it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Pressing against the stone railing, I could see out for what seemed like miles of beautiful flowers, herbs, and fountains. There were winding pathways through the gardens that led to private alcoves, small ponds, and beds of soft grasses. Beyond that was the glittering city that shone like colorful starlight in a sea of blackness.

Remus's deep, rumbling purr made me turn my focus back to him, and I sucked in a quick breath at the change in his eyes, fully yellow now and narrowed directly at me. "Seems your potion burned right through me. It took two days for my cat to drink it up, but now he's free at last."

"Now might be a good time to tell me what kind of shifter you are, Rem," I said, trying to distract him from whatever made his eyes glow like a predator stalking its prey. With my potion worn off, his cat would have snapped back into Remus at full force.

Shifters were primal creatures, and after having been suppressed for so long, it was only a matter of time until Remus was no longer in control and the animal within took what it needed. It would want to shift or fight or fuck soon, and I didn't know if I was okay with any of those things.

I stood taller, squaring my shoulders and peering directly into his eyes, unable to allow the shifter to dominate me.

“Seems you should’ve put it together by now. I’m a fucking panther, Mara. The most cunning of cats.” He tipped my chin up with the tip of his suddenly clawed finger. The sharp point nicked my skin but didn’t draw blood.

“And all this time, I thought you were a pretty little meowing house cat.” I swallowed a lump in my throat as he moved in closer, his feet silent on the stone terrace.

“More like the kind that eats up pretty little things like you.” Remus groaned as he pinched a lock of my hair between his fingers as if savoring the softness of the strands. I bit my lip and moved closer to him.

This was a bad idea; I knew that already. We were in enemy territory, and any number of eyes could be on us at this moment, but the draw and pull I felt towards Remus was undeniable.

“Look at me,” I murmured as his eyes flitted over my shoulder, glossing over as he fought for dominance over his panther. “Remus, I command you to look at me,” I said again, more forcefully.

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He shook his head, clenching his jaw tight enough to be painful, but I forced his eyes down to me with a palm on his cheek to guide him. They glowed a beautiful shade of yellow with flecks of bright, glowing gold.

“You’re not making my control any easier,” he gritted out between clenched teeth, yanking me flush with his body until I could feel every hard inch of him through the thin fabric of my gifted dress. “I want to fuck you. Hard. So hard you'll feel me for weeks, and it's taking everything in me not to sink into you here and now.”

Fuck, I wanted that too... I ached for it.

There was a growl underneath his words. Something feral prowled under his skin, scratching to get out. At this moment, all I could think about was watching it happen.

Remus as a human was already a wildcard with his sly smiles, wit, and sharp tongue. But as a shifter, he was nothing short of lethal and alluring, and I’d never been the kind of woman to deny myself my own needs or wants.

“Why don’t you then?” I challenged him. My tone was low and teasing, contradicted by the slide of my fingers up the side of his thick arm. I was walking a very fine line here; one, if snapped, would be nearly impossible to mend.

“Because if I do, you’ll be mine entirely. You’ll belong to me in a way no one else ever could. I don’t know if you’re ready for that.” The hand that toyed with my hair had moved to caress my shoulder, snaking over my collarbone until he gently wrapped those claw-tipped fingers around my throat. “I would own you in every way, Mara. Your body and your soul. Cats are very possessive creatures. We play with our

toys before we snatch them away and hide them.”

I swallowed roughly at the threat and promise of those words, wondering why they were suddenly so enticing.

All my life, I'd belonged to someone, yet never to myself. I was finally free of Waylan Bane. Could I so easily hand over my soul to this man?

“And others?” I whispered against his lips, which were much closer to mine than seconds before. My breathing was ragged, and I could feel the anticipation swallowing us both whole, but it couldn't be stopped. I shook my head. “I won't be owned, Remus. Never again. I'll die before I ever allow myself to become another man's property. Caldor and I...”

I still wasn't sure what was happening between Caldor and me, but I wasn't ready to forget what happened. After a decade of dreaming about the man I'd once loved and had to walk away from, I couldn't turn a blind eye to the very obvious feelings that still existed somewhere deep inside both of us. Whatever I felt for Remus was brand new, and I could stoke that flame if I wanted to, but I wouldn't snuff out the other so hastily.

Our heartbeats were in sync, and the cold chill in the air only encouraged me further into his arms. His eyes studied mine, growing brighter by the second.

“I'm a generous male, too. I have no intention of caging you. As long as you understand that if I take you, you will become my mate. Our souls will merge, and you will become a part of me in every sense of the word. Shifters don't take husbands and wives as the humans do. We mate for a lifetime.” His fingers sifted through my hair, and I nearly purred. “That means you're going to get fucked the way shifters fuck. Fully. Completely. Wholly.”

I sucked in a breath, the answer immediately in my eyes as his lips crashed on mine. I opened without hesitation. Our tongues tangled together, and my hands shot forward to his shoulders, finding their way up to his neck and wrapping into his hair.

I shivered when I felt claws gently move down my back towards my hips.

“Remus,” I mewled, my body begging for him to come closer. Everything felt too intense.

Lifting me, he sat me on the ledge overlooking the garden, still in the comfort of the shadows, but we could easily be caught in the open if someone were to wander through the double doors, but I didn’t care about any of it. All that mattered was Remus being inside of me right this second.

A force inside me snapped as I let my legs wrap around Remus, his lips cascading down my neck as he loosened his trousers, bunched my dress to my thighs, and shoved into me fully. Our movements were hurried because at any moment we could be caught.

I gasped as he groaned; it was like the stars aligned the moment he was inside me. Things clicked into place, every emotion heightened. For a moment, I couldn't remember why we were even here. Why did it feel like there was something pressing we needed to do?

“Fuck, you feel like home,” Remus murmured before he forced himself all the way out and shoved back into me, his eyes closed tight.

Raw pleasure covered his face, and I couldn’t stop watching him. My own pleasure wracked my entire body as I gripped him tightly, unsure how he could breathe.

I felt every inch of him, and suddenly, the thought of how he must have been made

just for me filled my body and mind until all I could think about was the feel of him everywhere. Suddenly this felt so right. Suddenly I couldn't think of him with anyone else without boiling rage overtaking me. It was as if another entity had taken over my mind.

"Feel me, little assassin," Remus grunted as he slammed into me. I wondered if anyone down below was looking up. "Give me what I've been craving since the moment we met..."

"Then be a good kitty and let me cum," I murmured against his ear, my breath coming out in pants. "Make me hurt, Rem. I need it..."

Remus chuckled wickedly before he nipped my ear. "I don't meow when you call for me, little assassin. You'll cum when I say you can but not before," he purred.

I closed my eyes and let myself feel how he pumped into me faster and faster, the way his thick throbbing cock pushed so deeply I could feel him in my belly. An urge to bite down came over me. It was undeniable, pulling at me and filling my mouth with saliva.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew what this was. I wasn't a shifter, but the Source wouldn't care. If he wanted me for a mate, the bond would take me over too. The question was...did I want this? Or was this just a moment of weakness?

I tried to think fast, to answer my own nagging questions, but it was hard to see past the fog of lust and need that gripped me. The truth was, I did feel something for Remus, and I think it'd been growing since the beginning. If I gave over to this feeling, it would solidify a bond that would last a lifetime.

But hadn't I been shackled already? To a man who never truly wanted me? Was it such a bad thing to crave one who did? One who made my body come alive? I didn't

have much I could truly call my own in this world...but perhaps it was time I took it for myself.

Remus growled low in his chest, his claws flexing on my skin, breaking the hold I had on my control. I clawed at him, tilting my head before sinking my teeth into the sweat-slicked skin of his neck, right as he did the same to mine. Together we hit the crescendo of pleasure as his seed filled me, his cock throbbing as I tightened around it.

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He continued to fuck me, both of our bodies shaking with pleasure as blood dripped between us. Suddenly everything was clear. My mind, my heart, my senses. I could feel him everywhere, inside me, against me.

I pulled back, licking my lips of his blood, meeting his slitted eyes that glowed bright yellow with feral male satisfaction.

All was silent for a moment, save for the pounding of our heartbeats, which were remarkably in sync. It was as if I would feel the shifter under my skin and all around me, his magic leaking into me as if he was pouring it into my soul straight from his.

Our breaths evened out as we stared at one another, both of us realizing exactly what we'd just done. I didn't see an ounce of regret in his eyes.

Footsteps from the darkness had us both stiffening as a familiar voice called out to us. "It would seem you've found your Source Mate, shifter. How special for the both of you." Tetia appeared in the light of a single flickering torch. The runes on her skin flashed like the whites of her eyes.

A sick feeling coiled in the pit of my stomach as Remus pulled out of me, securing my dress around my thighs. He placed a warm plam on my cheek, forcing my eyes to meet his again. "I regret nothing, and neither do you," he whispered with a wink. "Let's see what this bitch needs and then finish this elsewhere."

I nodded, my lips tilting into a small smile that fell an instant later and I flicked my eyes back over his shoulder to where the priestess stood, watching us with her hands clasped in front of her and a sickening smile on her pretty lips.

Remus turned, his body pivoting so that he stood in front of me while I fixed my dress and lowered myself from the railing.

“What do you want, Priestess?” I asked, a bitter edge lacing my words. I wouldn’t hide the fact that I didn’t like her. I didn’t bother addressing her words to Remus. Whether or not I’d truly become his...Source Mate, was something we would deal with once we left this place far behind us.

“It’s time for you to meet King Basillius. I was asked to warn you to be on your best behavior.” Her eyes scanned me from head to toe, noting the disheveled state of my hair. With a wicked grin, she snapped her fingers, and a crackle of magic ran over every inch of my skin. When it was over, she clicked her tongue. “Yes, that’s much better,”

I touched my hair to find it perfectly smooth, not a hair out of place. The wetness that had been previously dripping down my legs was gone, and my dress was unwrinkled. It was as if nothing had happened between Remus and I. I wanted to carve her eyes from her skull.

* * *

Tetia led us through the grand halls of the castle, the floors made of gold and glittering jewels embedded into the stone walls, flickering like starlight against the torches.

We passed through throngs of people, each of them draped in beautiful silks, dazzling diamonds and rubies, some of them wearing ornate eye masks while others adorned their hair with feathers, flowers and fur headdresses.

We reached the throne room eventually, though it had been transformed into a party hall, with tables laden with drink and sweets, fountains of melted chocolate and wine.

The crowd parted down the center of the room as we passed through, all eyes drinking in the two strangers approaching their king.

At the very head of the room was a man, sitting high above all the rest, with an empty throne beside him and no queen to be found.

Basillius. King of Nexus, and Nero's older brother.

Rijjat and Caldor stood below the king, having been summoned before the two of us arrived. Caldor's eyes were hard on Remus, as if somehow he could tell exactly where we'd been and what we'd been doing. Rijjat's face was stoic and stern, but I noticed the way his shoulders relaxed the second our eyes met.

The court watched me approach the steps that would lead to the gilded throne, where I stopped and curtsied, bowing my head in respect to the foreign king. Several people in the crowd behind us tittered, whispering behind our backs. I ignored them, raising my head again to meet the king's sparkling eyes. Beside him, was Nero, already watching me with an excited light dancing in his color shifting eyes.

"So, you're the infamous X," Basillius said with a click of his tongue. It wasn't a question. Just as I expected, Nero had told his brother exactly who I was. I responded with a simple 'yes' and a nod of my head, and the king glanced at Nero. "Not much of a talker, is she brother?"

Once again the crowd murmured. Before now, none of them had known who exactly was in their midst. But they knew now, and my name was infamous. I wasn't going to volunteer him any information unless specifically requested. It was the best way to not only lie, but to omit the truth, by sticking as close to it as possible without saying too much.

"And what do you think this spymaster, poison master...whatever it is she calls

herself, can do for me?” His question was for Nero. Indeed. I’d asked myself that very same question. “I have no need for another political prisoner, you know this. What am I to do with a spy and her entourage, slinking around my kingdom in the dead of night and conspiring behind my back? I do trust you, brother, but I have to admit I’m stumped.”

Nero tore his eyes away from me, and it was as if the physical weight of them had lifted. He turned towards the king. “I have reason to believe this woman might be the answer to our...predicament. ” His eyes flickered toward the waiting crowd, which once again began to murmur, gossip already beginning to spread.

Predicament?What was he talking about? Was Nexus in some kind of trouble the rest of the world didn’t know about?

A new sort of scrutiny entered the king’s cunning eyes as he looked me over. I felt every inch of that cunning stare. Remus shifted on his feet beside me, a growl already beginning to build in his chest. I could tell he wanted to get out of this place as soon as possible.

I met Nero’s eyes again, glaring into them, pushing every shred of emotion towards the prince. Hatred, regret, betrayal and disgust and hurt. He was just like all the rest of these males, wanting to use me for their own games, political or otherwise.

I didn’t know why I had thought he was any different, but something inside me ached at the realization that I’d been used again.

His lips flattened into thin lines as he held my eyes. Then I felt it. A wave of tingling magic caressed my skin like the lightest of touches. I braced myself for Nero’s power to alter my emotions. For him to forcefully make me more compliant. But the compulsion never came. Instead, I nearly staggered backwards at the invasion of emotions that were clearly not my own...grief, torment, fear, anger and longing.

The king's booming voice cut through the moment of silent tension between the prince and I, and the wave of emotion dissipated. "I'm intrigued," he said, stroking his chin with his palm." He collected himself, clearing his throat. "I'm afraid this discussion is much better held in the privacy of the council chambers." Basillius sent his brother a warning look that I couldn't decipher, and Nero just nodded. "Perhaps our guests are willing to..." The king's next words were cut off as movement caught my eye and the out of place scent of roses filled my nose.

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A servant had entered from behind the throne steps, carrying a large bowl with a mound of dried red rose petals in the center of a shallow pool of steaming water. The smell of them was pungent and wrong, my mind immediately traveling back to that beautiful garden where I'd smelled them before.

Roses were the sigil of Basilius's royal line, and it was only now that I realized that the room was filled with them. They sat in every vase, were stitched on the linings of dresses, coats and cuffs. They were engraved on golden goblets and painted on plates, dishes and decanters. The scent of them suddenly became suffocating. How could I have missed it before?

The roses were poisoned.

The roses were poisoned.

The roses were poisoned.

My eyes bounced between the servant and the steaming rose water as she neared the king, and it was as if time stood still. I couldn't hear a single word out of the king's mouth as I began to move.

The look in the servant's eyes was blank, devoid of any sort of emotion, thought or feeling as she pivoted on the last step to the dais, purposely tripping over her dress to make it look accidental.

I shouted before I could help myself, lurching forward and pulling a small dagger from my leg holster through the slit of my dress. The guards rushed me from every

corner of the room. Nero reached for his sword, pulling it free, and yet didn't rush towards me. The look in his eyes was one of confusion as he tilted his head, trying to get a read on me.

I made it up the steps, only inches away from throwing myself at the blank-eyed servant who fell towards the king, ready to spill the entire bowl of poison over his royal head. I managed to throw myself sideways, shoving the servant out of the path of the king. The woman fell backwards, the bowl clattering down the steps, spilling rose petals and steaming water everywhere.

Before I had the chance to right myself, strong hands wrapped around my shoulders, pulling me from where I'd practically fallen into the king's lap. I dropped the dagger as Caldor, Rijjat, and Remus rushed up the stairs behind me, shouting my name, but the host of the king's guard got there first. Each man was knocked to the ground and held there by my spear tip, ready for the king's command.

Nero twisted me around, his sword held across my throat, though the iron didn't touch my skin. I noted the way his hand shook on my arm as he held me against him.

"Did she just try to kill the king?" someone asked from the crowd of horrified onlookers. Suddenly the room was filled with shouts and accusations. The word 'treason' was thrown around a few times, turning my saliva to acid in my mouth.

"What have you done, little assassin?" Nero murmured in my ear. Once again a wave of emotion that wasn't my own washed over me, but this time I was hot with stark, naked fear.

Tetia stood behind the king, staring at me with a glimmer of satisfaction in her bright eyes, and my stomach turned over. Was this her doing? Had she poisoned those roses in the garden?

The king stood from his throne, towering over everyone in the room as the crowd fell

silent. The way he moved commanded power and respect, as if everyone in this kingdom both feared and loved him. He faced me, running his eyes over the way his brother held me against him, tilting his head as if in contemplation. He was remarkably calm for a man who, according to everyone else in this room, was almost assassinated.

He approached me slowly, each of his steps echoing like thunder through the room, the only other sound was the thundering of my heart in my ears. My eyes flickered down the steps to the three men held at spear point.

“Brother, it seems you’ve brought a snake into our midst.” He reached me, reaching out a hand that crackled with magic, glowing blue light dancing across his fingers.

That same blue light glowed in his eyes, extending towards me, freezing the blood in my veins And rendering me motionless. He forced my chin up as I narrowed my eyes, clenching my jaw tight.

His lips thinned into a wry smile as he tilted his head again and ran a thumb over my cheek. He clicked his tongue with the shake of his head, “Or perhaps... a Raven.”