



The Healer (The Twisted Kingdoms #7)

Author: *Frost Kay*

Category: YA&Teen

Description: Nyx has been in love with the same man for as long as she could remember. She's tried to tame his demons, heal the hurts of the past, but he keeps her at arm's length no matter what. When her last attempt to sway him to her side fails epically, Nyx decides to walk away from her mate and move on.

Dark memories from the past have always haunted Briggs. He's never been able to trust himself with anything precious—especially his mate. Too much blood stained his hands to take Nyx as his wife, so he must settle as her friend and protector. But it's not enough for either of them. When she leaves him behind for good, he knows that he's made a mistake and can't let her slip through his fingers. It's time to put the past where it belongs and fight for the only woman he's ever loved.

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter One

NYX

Seven Years Ago

Briggs was the most stunning male Nyx had ever seen. With skin like midnight, a voice like velvet, and eyes of an old soul, he made something inside her cry out in longing.

At age sixteen, she was tall for a girl and the village women said she'd just continue to grow. Nyx towered over everyone, but next to Briggs... he made her feel downright petite. And she liked it.

Her brother had brought Briggs to them a short month ago but from that very moment, Nyx knew she wanted him to be hers. True she was too young for such things, at least that's what Pyre said, yet Nyx knew in her heart that Briggs was the male for her. His quiet manner, shy nature, and kind soul made him perfect. It was three years until she'd be considered an adult in the Talagan culture, but that didn't stop her body from reacting to his scent—his mating call.

Sweet poison, it just about dropped Nyx to her knees.

There was no doubt about it. He was a strong potential mate. Now all she had to do was make him notice her. Her shy bear kept to the edges of their society but tonight she'd draw him from his shell and make him see her.

Dressed in her best skirt and top, and a flagon of filched honeyed wine in her left hand, Nyx ghosted through the halls of the Dark Keep toward the library. Briggs was notorious for hiding himself away with the old dusty tomes and reading for hours.

Nyx padded to the library doors and took a deep breath, steadying her nerves. This was it. She'd been alone since her mother died, with Pyre coming and going, but never there. True, she loved him and didn't begrudge him; it left her life a bit empty at times. But no more. Excitement skittered up her spine. Soon she'd have a mate of her very own.

Slipping inside, she smiled as the familiar scent of paper and warm candle wax curled around her. There was something so comforting about being surrounded by thousands of books. It was like being greeted by hundreds of potential new friends.

With her deep purple skirt swishing around her feet, Nyx navigated through the labyrinth of towering bookshelves with silent steps. She moved deeper into the library toward the small, windowed alcove near the back that Briggs favored. Nyx paused and peeked around the edge of the last bookshelf nearest to the niche. Her heart picked up pace and her palms began to sweat as she spotted her bear.

Some of her nerves melted away. Briggs sat on the floor with his back to the wall, strong legs stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles, chin on chest as he snored. Nyx slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles as the book in his hands teetered dangerously. Faint winter light slipped through a crack in the black velvet curtains and caught in his long sooty lashes. It was almost too picturesque.

Here goes nothing.

On bare feet, she tiptoed toward his alcove, halted just out of reach, and then knelt by his side to rescue his book. Carefully, she leaned over and pulled the tome from his hands and gently flipped it closed with her right hand.

“No!”

Nyx flinched, almost dropping the heavy book as her gaze flew to his face. Briggs’ brows slashed together, and a low growl rumbled in his chest, causing the hair along Nyx’s arms to rise. She examined his painful expression and how his eyes flickered beneath his lids.

A nightmare?

Time to wake him up.

“Briggs,” she whispered softly. Nyx didn’t want to startle him awake.

No reaction.

She sat back on her heels, set down the wine and his book. The man was a hard sleeper.

Briggs growled again and shuddered, pressing back against the wall, brows lowered. “Don’t touch me.” His voice was guttural and terrified.

Nyx scooted closer and placed her left hand on his shoulder. “Briggs, wake up.” His face screwed up but he didn’t wake. She leaned closer, placing her right hand onto his chest and shook him harder. “Wake up! You’re having a nightmare.”

His eyes snapped open the same time his hand curled around her throat. Shock ran up her spine when he lunged forward, tumbling Nyx onto her back. She wheezed as he threw himself on top of her and squeezed.

“You’re hurting me.” She clawed at his hand; eyes wide as she stared up at her mate. “Briggs, it’s me, Nyx.”

His eyes were blank. No recognition.

Panic started to rise her throat and she kicked her legs against the stone floor to get traction.

“No lies, Mistress. I know what you are,” he hissed. She cried out when his grip tightened and he shook, clacking her teeth together. “I won’t let you hurt anyone else.”

You’re going to pass out. Fight.

Nyx struggled to breathe past the panic but managed to wrap her legs around his tapered waist. She heaved her hips and twisted to the right, unbalancing him enough that she was able to reverse their positions. She slammed her elbow down in the crook of his arm, managing to break his chokehold.

Coughing, Nyx scrambled back immediately, tripping on her skirt, eyes watering. Just what sort of nightmare was he living?

“Snap out of it! You’re dreaming. It’s me, Nyx,” she rasped, holding her burning throat as he rolled to his knees.

Briggs snarled and came at her again. Terror shot up her spine and she scrambled for any weapon. Her fingers curled around the flagon of wine, and she jumped to her feet, swinging as he came into range. Her stomach dropped at the sickening sound of the pottery breaking against his skull.

“I’m sorry,” she cried and backed away, holding what remained of the flagon handle as Briggs shook the wine from his black curly hair and glared at her, still lost in his mind.

He bared his fangs at her and growled low, seeming to swell in size. Dotae be good, if he shifted right now, Nyx wouldn't have a chance against a bear his size.

She held her hands up while trying to edge out of the alcove. If she could get to the bookshelves, she could lose him and reach the entrance to the library. She was smaller and nimbler. He'd never be able to catch up.

"You don't have to do this. Just wake up," she pleaded one last time. "I'm your friend, Nyx. Not the enemy."

Another step toward the library. She stiffened as the hair along his arms rose and his nails lengthened into claws.

Time to go.

Nyx bolted out of the niche and into the maze of bookshelves. Briggs snarled and followed; his heavy footsteps closer than she would have liked. Pumping her arms, she sped up, bare feet slapping against the cold stone floor.

The next turn came into view and her eyes narrowed. If she used the bookshelf to swing around the corner, she be able to keep up her momentum and?—

Briggs grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked. She screamed, clawing at his hand as they crashed into the stone wall, dropping the flagon handle. Stars burst across her vision as pain spread across her left cheek and her ribs.

"You thought you could run from you sins?" Briggs hissed in her ear. He spun her around and pinned her in place.

Nyx blinked past the agony in her face and tried to focus on him as he seized her hands in one of his huge palms and held them above her head, practically grinding

her wrist bones together. More tears dripped down her cheeks.

“You don’t want to hurt me. I’m your friend,” she choked out.

Still no recognition. All she could see was hate and fear in his gaze.

Her bottom lip trembled, and she bit it. What could she do to get him to wake up? What would comfort him?

Unbidden, she began to roughly hum her mother’s favorite lullaby. Her throat burned but she didn’t stop. Briggs frowned and his grip slackened enough that she could pull one of her hands from his grip.

He hissed but otherwise didn’t react as she carefully placed her left hand on his right forearm. Her fingers trembled as he continued to growl. Nyx began drawing patterns on his skin like her mother used to do for her when she was frightened or needed comfort. Nyx continued to hum and soothe the bear, watching as his muscles began to lose some of their tension.

Taking a risk, she skated her fingertips over his pulse at the base of his neck and up to his strong jawline. It would be so easy for him to turn his face and rip into her flesh, but he didn’t. Her bear’s eyes closed as she traced his face.

A sob escaped her when the fingers in her hair released and then cradled her skull.

Thank the stars, he was coming back.

“You’re okay,” she croaked. “It’s just me, Nyx. You’re safe. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Briggs’ eyes snapped open, clarity returning in a slow wave. Her fingertips paused on

his lips and traced down to his collarbone. Her chest rose up and down in huge breaths as she waited. He blinked slowly and scanned her face before stiffening as he noticed their position.

Briggs released her and scrambled back like she was on fire.

Nyx slumped against the wall and sucked in a deep painful breath as he eyed her with increasing alarm.

“How bad are you hurt?” he asked, deep voice holding a hint of panic.

“I’m fine.” Her voice cracked, making a liar out of her. “It’s just a little bruising.”

He blinked hard; eyes trained on her neck. “I tried to kill you,” he replied woodenly. He held out his hands like they’d betrayed him. “My fingers are imprinted on your skin.”

She shivered at his words and gave him a weak smile. “I’ve had worse, and you weren’t yourself.” Nyx pushed away from the wall, feeling achy all over, and thanked the stars she’d survived. Tonight, had not gone as she’d planned. It definitely wasn’t the ideal rendezvous she’d imagined with her mate. “You good?”

He snorted, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and pointer finger. “I attacked you, and yet you’re asking me if I’m alright?”

“Yeah, I am.” Because you’re besotted.

He shook his head. “No, I’m not.”

That broke her heart. “That’s okay. All of us are a little broken. It’s made a bit more bearable with friends though.” Nyx smiled at him. “No need to worry yourself. I

forgive you.”

“You shouldn’t.” He dropped his hands, fingers curling into fists at his sides.

“What are friends for?” She held her right palm out. “Shall we shake hands and put this behind us?”

Briggs started and then took a step backward. “I don’t need any friends.”

Nyx jerked as if he’d slapped her. She dropped her hand and wrapped her arms around herself. Was he rejecting her?

His expression cleared and he strode toward the door, making sure to give her a wide berth. “I’ll send a healer to you. I’m so sorry.”

Nyx blinked as he practically sprinted from the library.

She’d come with plans to seduce him, and he’d almost killed her.

They were off to a great start.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter Two

NYX

Present Day

Callmai was one of her new favorite places. There was something about the blue-green water, the soft white sand, and salt air that called to her. While Nyx had loved being one of the healers at Lady Lochlee's children's home, it had been time for her to move on. At least for a little while.

Her heart panged and she rubbed at her chest. The ache had lessened over the last three months, but Briggs' rejection still had cut deep. She'd waited all these years for him, had spent years looking for a cure for his malady, only to discover something that could help, and he turned it down. Not only that, but he'd grown angry at her for it, for looking after him.

The bastard.

She plucked a shell off the beach and tossed it into the waves with a growl. So much time wasted on a man who'd didn't want her. The thought alone was enough to bring Nyx to her knees. No one found their mate at sixteen. Why did she think she was any different? Her life had never been a fairytale.

Sinking her fingers into the sand, she blinked hard against the tears that blurred her vision.

The worst part though was the thought that she'd lost her best friend. They'd grown so close over the years, training as healers and then spearheading the rebellion. She'd always harbored hope for the time when they'd be able to be together safely. Maybe she'd read too much into his one lapse of self-control.

Stop dwelling on him. He won't change his mind.

“Bah!” she yelled, startling some of the seagulls into flight from the nearby rocks. She didn't need Briggs to be happy. She'd conquered so much hardship and heartache in her lifetime, what was one more cut?

Nyx closed her eyes and inhaled, savoring the sea breeze on her cheeks.

All she needed was to move forward instead of looking into the past.

“Nyx!”

She opened her eyes and glanced over her shoulder. Marche—Chesh's first mate—loped toward her through the sand. She smiled at him. Nyx swore the handsome man never did anything slow. He was always bursting with energy, like his body just couldn't contain it.

He slowed at her side, blowing his downy white hair from his blue eyes. Long gold earrings twinkled from his ears. “What are you doing out here by yourself, beautiful?”

“Thinking.” She stood and brushed the sand from her hands.

“About what?”

“Life.”

“So serious.” He tilted his head to the side, appraising her. “Please tell me it’s not about that male who clearly broke your heart.”

She rolled her eyes and nudged him with her shoulder, before wrapping her arms around herself. “Yes and no.”

Marche curled his arm around her slim shoulders and pulled her against his wiry side. She leaned her head on his shoulder, taking the comfort he offered. “I could make you forget him if you let me,” he whispered in her ear.

She laughed. “You and I both know you’d get bored of me quickly. And I think you’ve been spending too much time with Chesh.”

“Not true. My flirtations are all my own, princess,” he exclaimed. “Aaaand... I think you’d ground me.”

“And then resent me for it. I’ve seen it a million times.” And she had. So many girls had fallen for the bad boy and ended up at home nursing sick babies while their mate ran around with other women.

“So cynical.”

“No, I’m just tired, I suppose.” Nyx sighed. “I lack direction.”

“Then pick one.” He shrugged, as if it was as simple as all that.

She smiled and glanced up at him. “How simple you make it sound. Maybe I’ll just do that once Scarlet’s wee one is born.”

“On that note...” Marche gave her a sheepish smile, the small gold ring on his lip winking in the light. “You should know that the wolf sent me for you. Scarlet’s

having contractions.”

Nyx gasped and jerked out of his arms, already running up the beach. “Why didn’t you lead with that?”

“Because Brine is being a big baby. My mother had fifteen children. I can almost always guess how long labor will be,” he said, catching up to her. “Scarlet has at least twenty-four hours before the babe is born, if it isn’t false labor. There is no rush.”

“Fifteen children?” Nyx gasped, her thighs burning from trying to run in the sand. She really needed to exercise more.

Marche grinned impishly. “My father is a hare Talagan.”

She snorted. That made a world of sense.

“Is this really as fast as you can run?” he questioned, jogging at her side like it was nothing. Like the sand wasn’t trying to suck his soul from his feet.

“Yes,” Nyx huffed, “not all of us have your heritage.”

She squealed as Marche swept Nyx off her feet and swung her into his arms bridal style. She clutched him close, giggling as he ran toward town.

“No worries. I’ll get us there faster.”

Nyx stared up Marche’s angular jawline. It was a bizarre feeling, being wrapped up in a man’s arms that weren’t Pyre’s or even Briggs’. Her fingers played with the ends of his hair. It wasn’t bad, to be held by him, just odd and... pleasant, if she were honest with herself.

“You’re staring, princess.”

“You have a very nice face,” she found herself saying.

He peered down at her through his wild fringe of white hair, blue eyes twinkling. “Are you flirting with me?”

Nyx rolled her eyes. “Just stating a fact.”

“Pity.”

Heat filled her cheeks as he continued to stare down at her, and she was the first one to look away. The breath trapped in her lungs hissed out between her teeth. What the devil was she doing? This wasn’t like her. She didn’t flirt, didn’t let men carry her around like a princess, didn’t play with their hair.

She pulled her fingers from Marche’s hair, and he squeezed her.

“Don’t stop. I liked it.”

Her blush deepened. “I shouldn’t have…”

“We’re shifters, touch is natural.”

Nyx looked anywhere but his face. They’d reached the edge of the town proper. “You can put me down now.”

“If that’s what you want, princess.” Marche gently set Nyx on her feet. She went to step away when he took her hand and lifted it to his cheek. Her fingers twitched as his stubble tickled her palm. He smiled, his lip ring winking at her. “Don’t isolate yourself.”

“I’m not.” Her tone held more defensiveness than she would have liked.

Marche smiled gently, leaning his cheek into her palm. “I know your heart is hurting right now, but it’s not broken. You’re surrounded by people who love and care for you. Don’t pull away.”

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. They’d been doing that more often. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all we can ask.” He pulled her hand from his cheek and laced their fingers together. “Now, let’s go see how manic Brine is.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter Three

brIGGS

Five Years Ago

It had taken twelve weeks for the wounds on his back to heal. Six months for Briggs to stop flinching anytime someone touched him. A year to find his new calling. And two years for Pyre to hunt down and kill the monster that had haunted Briggs' nightmares for years.

He picked up the bandages and organized them on the shelf.

Even thinking of his old mistress made his skin crawl. With her death, he'd thought there'd be a measure of peace, but the damage had already been done. She'd destroyed more than just his skin. Lorina had stolen his future.

Briggs' claws lengthened and he exhaled heavily, eyes closing, as he tried to regulate his emotions. She didn't deserve any space in his thoughts. She'd been wiped out from the world and had no control over him any longer.

"Briggs?" a sweet voice called, one that haunted his dreams.

He opened his eyes and smiled weakly at Nyx, who hovered in the doorway. She was a ray of sunshine to those around her. He still didn't know why she or her brother had forgiven him after he'd almost killed her two years prior. Even now he could remember the bruises he'd left on her body. It sickened him.

Her smile faded, eyes scanning his face. “You okay?”

He nodded. “Just finishing up with some organizing.”

“Good, that can wait. I need your help with Mr. Coalre. His bandages need to be changed and I can’t move him by myself. Help me?” she asked with a hopeful smile.

As if he could say no or would say no. There was just something so compelling about Nyx. She made you want to be her friend and to smile.

“Come on then.” She turned on her heel and flounced out the door.

Briggs removed his apron and tossed it over the worktable, following her out the door. He paused just outside the infirmary, his brows furrowing as the scent of something delectable hit him. He sniffed, savoring the mouthwatering burnt vanilla scent lingering in the breeze. Who was baking? He’d have to investigate once their house call was finished up.

He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets, already having lost sight of Nyx. The girl could run. He smiled, remembering the last spring festival. She’d beaten everyone with ease. The way she moved was captivating, and Briggs wasn’t the only one who noticed. Every unmated male under the age of twenty-five watched her with covetousness. And it bothered him.

She was a treasure to be protected. None of those boys could take care of her.

And you can?

Briggs brushed away his errant thought. Nyx was younger by several years and she had the whole world ahead of her. True, her life hadn’t been easy, but she rose above it. She kept choosing to bring light into the life of others. His friend was remarkable.

He truly thought himself lucky to have gained her as a friend. He didn't deserve her, that's for sure.

"Hey, so I'll—" Nyx crashed into his chest as he rounded the corner of the nearest building, and he caught her as she stumbled back. "Sorry!" she squeaked. "I didn't mean to..."

Her words faded into the background and all he could do was try not to drown in her incredible scent. Blackcurrent, burnt sugar, and vanilla.

A growl rumbled in his chest, and he found himself tightening his grip on her biceps and took a step closer. Sweat broke out on the back of his neck and he took another step closer, backing Nyx up against the rough stone wall of the building. He stooped down, hunting for the source of the scent. His nose brushed the shell of her ear.

Sweet poison, she was sweeter here.

Briggs groaned, running the tip of his nose up and down her neck. His claws lengthened and he pressed his body along hers, sinking into her curves. Dear god, it was heaven and hell. All he could focus on was her. She shivered beneath him and tipped her head to the side. His growl deepened at how she yielded to him. He pressed a kiss at the base of her throat, his tongue sneaking out to taste her skin. Nyx was delicious.

"Finally," she whispered breathlessly beneath him as his thigh slid between her own. "I've been waiting for this."

Briggs froze, her scent still muddling his mind. What did she mean finally?

"Nyx?" he questioned, pulling back far enough so he could see her eyes, but he couldn't find it within himself to let her go.

She smiled up at him, eyes hazy with desire and... love? Panic wrapped around his chest. This couldn't be happening. Her hands cupped his face, and she lifted up onto her tiptoes, lips almost brushing his own.

"I've known for two years that you're my mate, Briggs. It's okay. My mating call has finally kicked in. Don't fight it."

Mate.

The word echoed around in his mind. He couldn't have a mate. Hell, he didn't deserve one. Let alone his best friend's younger sister. She was perfect and he was... broken.

Despite how her scent called to him, he managed to release her and stumbled back a few steps. It pained him. Everything inside him screamed to wrap Nyx up in his arms, carry her off, and make her his mate. But it was wrong. He could never have a mate—a wife—it just wasn't in the cards for him.

And Nyx deserved so much more than himself.

She stepped away from the wall and he held up a hand, his claws fully extended. "Don't come closer."

Her smile dropped. "Why?"

Briggs shook his head. "This can't happen."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "We can choose each other. I know it's overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be now. We can wait. I'm just glad you know."

He swallowed hard, her scent still swirling around him. "I won't ever take a mate."

The words seemed to echo between them. Her expression was shocked and then hurt.

“You’re rejecting me?” she whispered.

“No,” he rasped. “You’re my friend, but I can’t take a mate. You know what happened when I attacked you? I have those dreams every night. How could I ever risk someone I care about? I could never sleep in the same bed as my wife or take a nap near the fire if there were children. I am always a danger to those I love.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks. “So you’ve decided for us both?”

He shook his head, his heart breaking. “Matches come and go, Nyx, but I’ll always be your friend.” She nodded and walked away from him. He shot forward, unable to help himself, and caught her by the wrist. Just touching her soothed part of him. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” She yanked her wrist from his hand, a sob breaking from her throat. “So am I.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter Four

brIGGS

Present Day

He tapped out a nervous rhythm on his thigh as Brine paced the room. First time fathers were always a wreck. They were more dramatic than the mothers most of the time.

“Where in the blazes is Nyx?” Brine growled, stalking back to the large fireplace. He grabbed hold of the mantel and braced himself, blowing out a hard breath. “They should be here.”

“Don’t worry,” Briggs soothed from his plush chair. “I’m sure she’ll be here soon.”

Brine glared over his shoulder at him. “Not fast enough. Scarlet won’t let me back in until Nyx arrives.”

Briggs stifled his smile. Brine’s mate had banished him from their room no more than twenty minutes prior and the wolf was about to lose his ever-loving mind. “Scarlet is fine, Brine.”

His friend growled and spun around, crossing his arms. “She is not fine. I can smell her stress from here.”

“Because you’re stressing her out. Your pup will come when it’s ready. Some time

with Ari and a nap will do her good. This is just the beginning. It will be some time before the hard labor begins.”

“And this is why I asked you to come,” Brine muttered. “Because Nyx never tells me anything. She just tells me to stop worrying and to get out of her way.”

That sounded like Nyx. She was a force to be reckoned with.

And you hurt her.

He grimaced and ran a hand over his face. Nyx was his best friend. There wasn’t anything they couldn’t weather together. At least he hoped. The door creaked as it swung open, and Briggs found himself on his feet waiting to catch sight of the woman he’d secretly loved for years but could never have.

Until now.

A smile bloomed on his face as Marche held open the door and Nyx stepped inside. The sight and scent of her nearly dropped Briggs to his knees. He took one step in her direction. Blackcurrant, burnt sugar, vanilla, and... sage mixed with Marche’s male musk. He froze, eyes snagging on how the hare held Nyx’s hand, their fingers laced together like they belonged that way.

A growl rumbled in his chest that he couldn’t contain.

Nyx stumbled to a stop, her smile dropping as she spotted him. There was a flash of emotion in her eyes before she buried it beneath a placid expression he knew well. The one she used when she didn’t want anyone to see the pain that bubbled just beneath the surface.

She squeezed Marche’s fingers and released his hand.

Another growl escaped him as Briggs got another whiff of Marche's and Nyx's blended scent. They reeked of each other. His stomach curled in on itself as his mate dismissed him and focused instead on Brine.

"How's Scarlet?" she asked briskly.

"Stressed. Where have you been?"

Her eyes narrowed at Brine's sharp tone. "I'll let you off the hook this time because you're worried about your mate, but don't think to snipe at me again." She chuckled her chin toward Briggs but didn't meet his eye. "It seems you already have a healer here to help." The last part was an accusation.

"I sent for him two weeks ago," Brine grumbled. "These last few months of Scarlet's pregnancy haven't been easy on her. I thought you could use the help."

Briggs grimaced. That was the wrong bloody thing to say.

Nyx gritted her teeth. "If I needed the help, I would have sent for another healer."

Not Briggs. Another healer. Her message was obvious. She didn't want him here.

Well too bad. They were going to talk.

She peered over her shoulder at Marche. "Did you know?"

The hare shook his head. "I didn't not, princess."

Briggs bristled at the nickname and the way Marche shared a knowing look with Nyx. Had she moved on so fast? Briggs swallowed hard as blackcurrant and burnt sugar mingled on his palate.

Nyx spun around and pressed a kiss to Marche's cheek. "Thanks for today."

Briggs grounded his molars together and tried not to lunge for the other male.

The hare smiled at Briggs' mate and pushed a strand of her dark brown behind one ear. "My pleasure. Same time tomorrow?"

"Sure."

It was one light word, but it felt like the rug had been pulled from beneath Briggs. Just what had she agreed to? He needed the truth of the matter now before he lost his mind and tore about the whole bloody room in a mating rage. He inhaled deeply.

"Stop that," she barked, locking eyes with Briggs.

"I can't help it," he replied softly, dragging in another deep breath. He arched a brow but otherwise said nothing as he sorted through their scents. Briggs nearly sagged when he didn't decipher any scents that spoke of sex.

"Find what you're looking for?" she practically snarled as she stormed by him toward the bedroom.

"No." He twisted, unwilling to let her from his sight quite yet.

Nyx opened the bedroom door and stepped inside, Brine hot on her heels. She held up a hand and the wolf trembled.

"Get out of my way," he hissed, his claws lengthening.

Briggs took a step toward his friend, feeling his own claws extend. No one threatened her like that.

“I’m not scared of you,” Nyx spat back, one hand on a hip, the other on the door.
“Scarlet, you want your bastard of a mate in here yet?”

“No,” Scarlet moaned. “I just need a nap and he won’t leave me alone.”

Nyx arched a brow. “You heard it from the lady. Kindly piss off until she wants you.”
With that, she slammed the door in Brine’s face.

Pride and humor bubbled in Briggs’ chest. That was his girl. No one cowed Nyx. It was part of the reason he loved her.

Brine slowly turned around; his expression black. He scowled at Briggs. “What the devil are you smiling about? My wife just banned me from the birth of my child,” he practically yelled.

“Not true,” Scarlet bellowed, her voice muffled from the bedroom. “I want to bloody nap. Have a drink with your friends or brawl for all I care. Love you!”

The wolf huffed. “Bloody woman.”

“She’s in good hands, my friend. Why don’t we get something to eat at Ari’s pub and then come back?”

“Nyx will take good care of Scarlet,” Marche piped in, making Briggs want to punch him in the face.

Brine ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I suppose there’s nothing for it. I want my mate to get rest.” He trudged through the open door and Briggs followed his friend, Marche not far behind. He barely restrained himself from baring his fangs at the hare as Marche skipped on by. Briggs closed the door and flexed his hands, willing his claws to retract. He was acting like a territorial fool. Nyx would never

Speak to him if he couldn't get himself under control.

Sucking in a deep breath, he stole a glance at the front door of Brine and Scarlet's home. Soon he'd be able to make things right. Until then, he'd help Brine and pray that he didn't accidentally eat the hare in jealousy.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter Five

NYX

Three Years Ago

“Why are you stubborn?” Nyx asked, trying not to yell.

“I don’t want the serum. Why is that so hard for you to understand?” Briggs replied, studying his cards and avoiding eye contact.

Nyx turned her attention to her brother and glared at him before tilting her head toward their friend.

Pyre sighed and placed a ten of spades down. “You might as well give in to my dear sister. You know how relentless she can be.”

Briggs took a sip from his ale, his dark eyes flickering between the two siblings before he set his cup down. “I don’t like the idea of it.”

That was the final straw.

Nyx slammed her cards facedown on the table and threw her arms up in the air. “You’re a healer , Briggs. You know as well as I that draughts and medicine are good things. In fact, you even got Mrs. Woreland to take something for her mood swings last week. Don’t be a hypocrite.”

That got underneath his skin. She could see it from the way his jaw set. Briggs never yelled, or spoke venomously to a single soul, but he felt frustration and anger like the rest of them.

“If you would just give this a try...”

His dark eyes snapped to her face. “I said no .”

“Give me a good reason why,” she pressed.

“Because I don’t want my mind to be tampered with,” he replied softly. “I’ve lived that hell once before and I shan’t do it again.”

She bit her bottom lip as his quiet admission settled over the three of them.

Pyre leaned back in his chair and tipped his ridiculous top hat back, amber eyes characteristically somber as he watched their friend. “I take it you’ve had dealings with such drugs before?”

Nyx felt her heart clench at the look of utter destruction that encompassed Briggs’ features. He’d shared much of his past with them, but always left out the gory details. She knew it was much worse than he ever let on. Each time they had an assignment which meant sleeping over, he had her tie him up so he couldn’t sleepwalk and hurt anyone during one of his episodes. Every time he had one of his waking nightmares, she always sat with him just out of reach, humming to give him the only comfort she could.

“In the pits,” Briggs murmured, his gaze drifting to something far off. “I fought for their entertainment as you well know. But after I was taken as a child, I never stopped fighting back, so they began to drug me.” She sucked in a sharp breath. “When I realized what the Mistress was doing, I stopped eating and drinking so they couldn’t

control me. But as I wasted away, the Mistress began sending younger children into the pits—the ones I'd been trying to protect for years. If I died, who would help them?" He shook his head, a sheen of tears filling his dark eyes. "So I began eating, and I would lose time, only to wake up covered in blood and the scent of death."

Briggs set his cards down and ran a hand over his face. "Then at some point I began to crave it. I wanted the drugs she gave me so I could forget the horrors. But the Mistress was all too clever. She loved to torture those under her control. Once she saw my longing for the drugs, she changed it to something else. It altered my perception so that I felt like I was trapped inside my mind. I could see everything that was happening, but I couldn't control my own body."

A shudder wracked his large frame as Nyx reached out and took his hand in her own. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

Her bear gave her a weak smile. "I know. That's why I'm sharing this with you. I won't ever be controlled by a drug again."

Nyx nodded, feeling her heart sink to her stomach. "You know I would never do that to you, right?"

He held her gaze, warmth finally filling his lovely dark brown eyes. "I know you would never hurt me, but my mind also fears much because of my past."

She squeezed his hand. "I won't press you anymore, but I want you to know that what I've created is for liberation, not slavery. Everything comes from the forest and is natural. Pyre and I both care for you," her cheeks burned as his gaze warmed further, "we just wanted you to find some peace."

"Thank you."

Nyx released his hand, her fingers tingling at the contact and picked up her cards. The backs of her eyes burned but she refused to cry. How could anyone do something so horrific to someone so gentle and kind? It made her want to raise the Mistress from the dead so Nyx could kill her all over again.

Briggs sniffed, and she caught him watching her from the corner of her eye. “You mourn for me?”

“I do,” she said, her voice wobbling the tiniest bit. “I’m so sorry.”

Briggs studied his empty mug as Nyx pulled herself back together. Pyre tossed his cards onto the table and leaned back in his chair.

She narrowed her eyes playfully at her brother. “You never quit.”

“Seemed like the game was over.”

“You were going to lose,” she accused.

He grinned, tipping his hat forward so it covered his eyes. “I would never.”

“You would always?—”

“If I were to agree to taking your serum,” Briggs cut in. “I would need Pyre to be there.”

Nyx blinked at him. “I didn’t mean to push you so hard for this. Just forget I ever mentioned it.”

“I trust you.”

Butterflies took flight in her stomach as she held his gaze. She'd always hoped he'd say three little words to her that meant everything, but somehow 'I trust you' seemed to mean more.

"Thank you," she whispered. "But don't make a snap decision. You've had some ale. Sleep on it and we can talk tomorrow."

He shook his head. "No. I won't sleep on it, and I don't want to wonder about it, or talk myself out of it. It's time to stop living in the past."

She jerked awake.

Nyx blinked hard, her eyes adjusting to the darkness. The coals burned low in the hearth and Pyre stood by the fireplace; his gaze focused on Briggs. Her friend had them tie him to the large upright leather.

Her bear whimpered. Whimpered in his sleep.

She stood from her own chair and moved to her brother's side. "How is he doing?"

"Quiet until about five minutes ago."

"What time is it?"

"The middle of the night."

Briggs whimpered again but didn't move a muscle. "I can take the shift now. You lie down and get some rest."

Pyre pulled her into a hug and kissed her forehead. "Stay out of his space. This is a trial."

“I know?—”

Briggs screamed, the sound so terrified that she clung to Pyre, eyes wide as their friend continued to bellow, still not moving from the sleep. Nyx released her brother and rushed toward their friend. Pyre grabbed her by the forearm and reeled her back.

“What part of stay out of his space did you miss?”

“He’s trapped,” she said brokenly. “Look how he’s not moving with the night terror. I told him he’d be safe.”

Nyx shook off Pyre and approached her bear cautiously, heart breaking with each cry of pain. Tears rushed down his onyx cheeks and his mouth gaped open in horror.

“Briggs?” she murmured, reaching out to cup his cheek. “Wake up.”

He didn’t.

Oh god, what if she’d given him too much?

He screamed again, body twitching in his sleep and she couldn’t handle it for one more second. Without another thought, she climbed into his lap, his ropes pressing against her stomach and breasts, and she leaned close to cup his face.

“Nyx! Get back.”

“Briggs can’t hurt me. He’s in too deep and is tied up.” She choked on her own cry. “I have to help him.”

She began humming her mother’s lullaby and caressed his face, wiping each tear away as it fell. He continued to scream so Nyx wrapped her arms around his neck and

pressed his face into her hair. She started singing in his ear and combing her fingers through long dark braids.

His terror, panic, and screams seemed to go on for hours.

Each pained sound he made was like a dagger to the chest.

The sun slowly rose, casting soft light into Pyre's room in the Dark Keep. Nyx closed her eyes for a moment, still humming the lullaby. Her throat felt raw from singing for so many hours. Her chest vibrated, rousing her, as did the brush of a nose along the column of her throat.

She blinked hard. She wasn't vibrating. Briggs was growling softly.

Her whole body clenched and released, warmth flowing through her limbs. Drowsily, she leaned back, meeting liquid dark brown eyes.

"Briggs?" she rasped.

"Mate," he murmured.

Her heart clenched. "What?"

He smiled at her and leaned forward. Her eyes fluttered shut as he kissed her collarbone. His teeth scraped her skin and her eyes snapped open. "What?—"

Pain.

He'd bit her.

She jerked back, her hand flying to her shoulder. "What have you done?"

Briggs grinned, his teeth bloody and then his eyes rolled up.

“Did he just mark you?” Pyre asked, his voice soft and deadly.

“I think so.”

But it wasn't the glorious moment she'd imagined. Nyx had made a drug that mind-raped him and he'd marked her while out of his mind.

Tears streamed down her face, and she scrambled off Briggs' lap. “We can't tell him.”

“The hell you say?”

Nyx shook her head. “He'd never forgive himself, and well... it's all my fault. He doesn't want me.” It killed her to say it out loud. She'd done everything in her power to seduce him in the last two years and he'd never once budged on having a mate. “He doesn't want a mate. I won't take another choice from him.”

She faced Pyre, pasting on a wobbly smile. “Let me know when he wakes, and I'll be back. I'm just going to get this cleaned up.”

“You should be here when he does.”

“I can't. Would you clean him up?”

“You want me to brush his teeth?”

“I want you to clean away the evidence.”

Pyre pinched the bridge of his nose. “This lie will not help you. It will make things

worse.”

She turned her back on her brother and strode for the door. “Don’t lecture me on the truth. We both know I learned from the best.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter Six

NYX

Two Years Ago

“No!”

Nyx glanced from the window toward Briggs who slept on the floor of the cabin, in front of the low burning fire. Shudders wracked his body, and she dug her fingers into the skin of her biceps to keep from reaching out to him.

Touching Briggs during a nightmare was a near death sentence.

Her brother emerged from the single bedroom where they were keeping the girl—the one he was obsessed with but didn’t want to admit it. Pyre crept toward Nyx on silent feet and nodded at her bear.

“Another one?” he whispered. “They’ve gotten worse in the last few weeks.”

“I know,” she replied in a hushed tone. It worried her. Usually, she knew exactly what set him off but not this time.

Pyre pulled his cloak from the peg near the door and chucked it over his shoulders before giving her arm a gentle squeeze. “Try to get some sleep. I’ve got the next watch.” Her brother slipped outside and closed the door softly behind him.

For a moment, Nyx didn't move. She was weary to the very soul. So many had died recently and there hadn't been time to mourn. All she could do was survive. It was exhausting. When would it get better? Pyre was pinning his hopes on the Lady Hound but Nyx wasn't so sure she'd come around.

Briggs whimpered, snapping Nyx out of her thoughts. Enough was enough. Giving him a wide berth, she grabbed an extra pillow from the bedroom and crept closer to the fire. Nyx stayed just out of reach before she lobbed the pillow with all her might at his head.

Her bear bolted upright, snarling, tearing at the pillow with his teeth. Heart pounding, she backed away toward the little kitchenette and began humming a soothing lullaby that he liked. Briggs' attention darted to her. Tears ran down his cheeks and he blinked repeatedly.

She froze as he stared at her, slowly coming back to himself, escaping whatever hell he'd been trapped in.

"Are you alright?" As soon as the word passed her lips, Nyx felt stupid. Of course, he wasn't alright.

Briggs shook his head, more tears tracking down his face. "I'm so tired," he rasped.

She could help with that.

Nyx spun on her heel and dug through her pots of herbal remedies before uncorking the little purple bottle and generously pouring some sleeping oil into her hands. This would help him.

She bustled to his side, rubbing her hands together and reached for Briggs. He caught her left wrist in the palm of his massive hand, and she paused, staring down at

him. How'd he escape his bindings? She'd not done a good enough job.

"No drugs." His whole body was tense.

She frowned. "It's just herbs."

"What's in it?"

"Lavender, tart cherry extract and wolfgave."

"No Mimikia? Or mushrooms?"

She glared at him. "None. I know how you feel about such things. I have not put anything extra in this."

The tension in his body fled and he released her. Nyx stepped around him, so his back pressed against her legs. She reached down and began rubbing the base of his neck and skull with smooth motions. "I thought you trusted me."

"I do. It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

Silence.

Not surprising, but still disappointing. They were beyond close as friends and sometimes it felt like more, but he opened all the way up. Briggs kept some parts of himself from her and it cut deep. She wanted to share his burdens.

This is not about you.

She set aside her feelings and continued rubbing down his neck to strong wide shoulders that seemed to bear the weight of the world. At least he'd let Nyx do this much.

Carefully, she edged around him until she stood before him, and he knelt in front of her. Nyx brushed his braids back from his cheeks and massaged his temples, humming softly.

More tears squeezed out of his closed eyes, and she felt her own well. Why was life so unfair to someone so kind and gentle? It wasn't fair.

Briggs tipped forward, pressing his forehead into her soft stomach just beneath her breasts and wrapped his arms around her tightly, his whole body shuddering. Nyx hugged him back, combing her fingers through his hair, humming while he cried into her skirts, releasing all the pain from his nightmares.

She cried silently with him, hating all the cruelty he had suffered and made a promise to herself that she'd try to only bring good into his life. While she wanted a life with him, being his friend and giving him this much peace was enough. It had to be.

His shaking stopped and Briggs turned his face to the side, his arms never letting her go.

"You know," he rasped, "that's the only thing I remember from the first time I spoke to you."

"What?" she murmured, stilling her hands over his braids.

"The lullaby you hum for me." He pulled back to look up at her, his dark eyes shining in the dying firelight. "The night I almost killed you. My mind was muddled but what brought me through was your song."

Her heart clenched. “I’ll always sing it for you whenever you need reminding of where you are.”

He swallowed hard. “I don’t deserve such friendship.”

Nyx pushed his shoulders, so he released her, and she leaned down until they were nose to nose. “Don’t you dare say that. You are kind, smart, generous, thoughtful, and understanding to everyone around you. You deserve friends better than me.” And it was the truth.

She heaved in a deep breath and his eyes dropped to her lips. Her pulse skittered when a low growl rumbled in his chest and his fingers curled into the fabric of her skirts. He pulled, tumbling her into his lap. She grasped at his loose shirt, her knees falling on either side of his thighs. Nyx trembled as she gazed up at Briggs who seemed to be shaking as hard as she was.

“Briggs?” she whispered. Was he still dreaming? Was she dreaming?

His warm hand landed on her lower back and pulled her closer as he leaned forward, his breath mingling with her own.

“Just this once,” he panted.

“What—”

Briggs kissed her.

Nyx froze as Briggs devoured her, begging her with his lips to give into him.

And she did.

Her nerves sparked alive, and she grabbed handfuls of his hair, pulling him even closer. He crushed her against his body, his hand on her lower back burning through her dress, branding Nyx. She gasped as his hands slid up the back of her thighs before he lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. It was everything and not enough all at once.

The room spun and she tipped her head back, gasping for breath as he pressed urgent kisses to her jaw, neck. His fingers clenched her bare skin, his thumbs sweeping her curves. She shivered as he licked the hollow behind her ear and tugged on the lobe.

Sweet poison, that was heaven.

Nyx cupped his face and brought him back to her mouth for another deep drugging kiss. Briggs shuddered and his hands seemed to be everywhere at once. The world went hazy, and she sighed, eyes closing. This was what she'd wanted for ages. It was for him to notice her. To want Nyx as much as she wanted him.

Her dress sagged and slipped off her right shoulder. He tugged on her hair, tipping her head back so he could once again nibble on her jawline.

"No," she moaned, running her hands down his muscular chest. "Kiss me."

The kisses stopped.

She opened her blurry eyes and blinked at Briggs. He stared down at her.

Not at Nyx, but her neck.

Releasing his hair, she slapped a hand over the mark.

"What is that?" he asked gutturally.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, pulling up the sleeve to her dress. Nyx practically scrambled from his lap, and Briggs let her. She moved to the window as her bear slowly got to his feet and stared her down.

“You’re marked.” It wasn’t quite an accusation.

“Just a scar,” she mumbled, messily tightening the laces on her side.

“It’s not just a scar.” A pause. “Who marked you?”

“No one.”

He took a step in her direction, his eyes dark. “Are you mated?”

“No.”

“That mark is fresh. Maybe a few years old.” He ran a hand over his mouth. “Were you mated?” A demand.

“No.”

He inhaled deeply and her skin prickled.

“Stop attempting to scent me,” she whispered.

“I can’t smell another on you.”

“Because there is no other!” she shouted.

“Then why hide it?”

So you wouldn't hate me.

"Because it was an accident."

"That mark is too clean to be anything but deliberate." He paused, his expression sobering. "Did he leave you? Did he hurt you?"

Nyx swallowed hard.

"You can talk to me," he murmured, all kindness. "You know you're safe with me."

She laughed, the sound grating in her own ears. He wasn't safe with her. "You can't help me." Nyx yanked her cloak off the peg and tossed it over her shoulders. She had to get out of here before he wheedled what he'd done out of her.

Nyx wrenched open the door and stepped out onto the porch, intending on fleeing. Briggs caught her hand and pulled her back to him. She sniffed hard as he cupped her cheeks, his large warm hands dwarfing her face.

"We all have our secrets, but you don't have to bear yours alone. And if a male forced you, all you must do is say the word," he rumbled softly.

"It's nothing."

His gaze dropped to the clasp of her cloak, guilt creasing his forehead. "And I just took from you. I didn't ask." A heartbeat. "I shouldn't have done that."

If he'd stabbed her, it would have been less painful.

Nyx ripped out of his grasp and backed down the stairs until she reached the forest floor, sniffing back her tears. "I'm not safe with you."

He blanched and she regretted her words but didn't take them back.

She turned her back on him and strode into the woods. The time was coming for Talagans to be free from the monarchy and all she could think of was Briggs. That had to change. She had to turn off her feelings.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter Seven

NYX

Present Day

“You’re doing great, darling,” Nyx praised while Scarlet blew out a long breath. “Now lift up your hips.”

Scarlet groaned but did as she was told. Nyx nodded to Brine who quickly but gently set several pillows beneath her hips to elevate them above her heart. Scarlet dropped her hips down with a grunt and smiled up at Nyx.

“I feel like a beached whale.”

“Not for long.” She grinned back at her friend and eyed Brine who watched Scarlet like a hawk. Patting Scarlet’s leg, Nyx tucked the very pregnant woman back under the sheets. “You’re doing great.”

“How much longer will she be like this?” Brine asked softly.

“Depends on the person.”

Scarlet snorted. “My pains are only coming every half hour. It’s going to be forever.”

“Which is not a bad thing,” Nyx said. “The babe is trying to enter this world bum first. We need to get them rotated head down before the pains get any closer

together.”

Brine’s lips thinned. “Is that dangerous?”

“It’s uncomfortable.” She stared down her old friend. “Can you handle that?”

He nodded and Scarlet laughed, wiping sweat from her brow. “Stars save us from consoling men who aren’t going through the actual pain.”

Nyx snorted and set a knee on the bed, watching Scarlet. “Are you ready?”

She nodded and squeezed Brine’s hand. “Have at it.”

Nyx nodded, pulling down the sheet until Scarlet’s round belly was visible. She placed her hands on either side and peered up at her friend. “Take a deep breath and then slowly release it as I put pressure on your belly to turn the babe.” Nyx applied steady pressure and began to rotate the little one.

Scarlet groaned and panted, and Nyx’s arms began to shake when the wee one didn’t budge. She released her hold and gave Scarlet a break before trying again. Still no change. She gritted her teeth and stood from the bed.

“I’m just going to grab Briggs.”

Brine’s upper lip curled. “He’ll see Scarlet.”

Nyx arched a brow. “You’re the one who called for him. Maybe you should have let me make that call.” Her gaze moved to Scarlet. “Are you comfortable with Briggs being here?”

“I don’t mind.”

Nyx hid her smile when Brine muttered underneath his breath. She moved to the door, opened it, and stepped through. Her traitorous heart fluttered in her chest as Briggs pushed away from the window, his dark gaze intent on her. He seemed to be soaking in the sight of her.

It's just your imagination.

She straightened as he approached. "I need your help," she said in a low tone. His eyes flickered to the bedroom and then back to her face. "She's breech." Briggs cursed. "We need to turn the babe now but they're being stubborn."

"I see."

"I need you to turn the wee one. Your hands are larger, and you have more control."

"I'll wash up."

Nyx nodded and turned back to go into the bedroom. The back of her neck prickled as Briggs followed her in. She led him to the wash basin, avoiding looking directly at him. Briggs rolled up his sleeves, revealing muscled forearms. She fought a blush and helped him wash his hands without meeting his gaze.

She practically scampered back to Scarlet's side as Briggs dried his hands. He smiled, his teeth a white flash against his complexion.

"How are you, sweet?" Briggs asked.

A long time ago, hearing her mate call someone else by a pet name would have bothered Nyx. But now as an adult, she knew he was only trying to calm his patient. It was how he treated all females. She no longer coveted pet names. They didn't mean anything.

Scarlet smiled. “As well as I can be.”

He approached the bed, brushing Nyx’s side and sat on edge of the mattress. He held his hands out. “Is it alright if I touch you to help move the babe?”

“Yes, please,” Scarlet said.

Nyx took Scarlet’s hands. “Now remember what I said. I need you to take a deep breath and slowly release it as Briggs rotates your wee one.”

She nodded her head and did as instructed as Briggs put pressure on her belly. Scarlet groaned, squeezing Nyx’s hands.

“That’s it, sweet girl,” Nyx crooned. “You’re doing great.”

“Hurts,” Scarlet huffed.

“Just keep breathing.”

“That’s right, love. You listen to Nyx. We’ll have you right as rain soon enough,” Briggs said, his voice gentle and calm. “Another breath.”

Scarlet inhaled and then groaned as he rotated the baby a smidge more. By the time he was finished, Scarlet was a panting mess, Briggs was covered in sweat, and Nyx couldn’t feel her fingers.

She brushed the stray strands from her friend’s damp forehead and stood. “I’ll let you rest a little bit. When your next contraction hits, do you want me here?”

Scarlet shook her head. “From what you say, it will be a long while before this babe comes into the world.” She smiled up at Brine. “He’ll help me through the worst of it.

I'll call for you when I need you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Go get some rest yourself."

Nyx nodded and left the room. She strode through the living area and out the front door, the scent of seaweed and brine greeting her. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, cupping her elbows. She leaned back against the stone house as Briggs stepped from the home, closing the large wooden front door behind him.

How could it sicken and hearten Nyx to see his face?

"You were never one for silence," he murmured.

"I have nothing to say." A lie.

"Love—"

"Don't," she growled, glaring up at the man she'd wasted so many years on. "Don't use pet names. You've never done that with me. I'm not one of your wounded patients to soothe."

His lips thinned. "It's not a pet name. It's the truth."

She laughed caustically and stepped away from the wall. "The truth? You want to speak about truth?"

His gaze dropped to her shoulder, and she placed a hand over it, even though her dress covered the mark.

“That’s mine.”

She said nothing. He had already learned the truth three months prior when he broke her heart for the last time.

“Why did you not tell me?” He took a step toward her. “You could have told me that night at the cabin.”

“Would that have changed anything?”

He fell silent and Nyx dropped her hand. Go figure. More silence, more rejection. What more could she expect? He wasn’t willing to try. Only guilt moved him now.

She wove around him, feeling sick. Briggs was good for helping those who he thought needed rescuing, but she wasn’t some maiden he needed to save. She wouldn’t be his next project.

He stopped her, his hand curling around her bicep. Nyx stared at his hand and then peered up into his handsome face.

“Nyx...”

“You were right about what you said a few months ago. We can’t be together.” She hiccupped but cleared the lump in her throat. She’d cried enough over the bear who refused to allow himself a happy future. “You refuse to move on from the past and I refuse to be penalized for your choices.”

“That’s not what I intended,” he rasped, looking miserable.

“And that’s why I don’t hate you, but I can’t love you either. It hurts too much.” She pulled her arm out of his grip, and he let her go, like he always did.

Nyx walked away from the only man she'd ever loved, and wondered how she was going to survive losing her best friend.

Chapter Eight

brIGGS

Three Months Ago

“And that’s how you can tell if wild berries are poisonous,” Nyx said, smiling at the children sitting at her feet.

Briggs leaned his shoulder against the nearest tree in the Lochslee garden and soaked up the sunlight, praying it got rid of the chills from his latest nightmare. A shudder worked through his body and his palms began to sweat. What had started as a small nap had turned into a full-blown terror.

His nightmares had been worse since the battles between the Dark Court and Heimserya. The faces of the past that always seemed to haunt him had changed to those he loved now, but today was one of the worst. He’d watched as the Mistress had tortured Nyx repeatedly while he hung useless in chains, unable to help her as she begged for him to save her.

Briggs closed his eyes and tried to calm his breathing as his pulse hitched. When he’d awoken, he’d trashed half of his room. His bedding and mattress were destroyed. He could have hurt someone—the children or Nyx... it was unthinkable.

“Briggs?”

He forced his eyes open and stared at the aspen in front of him. Particularly how he’d

sunk his claws into the trunk of the tree. When had he moved? Panic clawed up his throat. He didn't want to start losing time again like in the past.

A soft hand rested on his forearm, and he stared down into Nyx's worried face. Her gaze scanned his expression, missing nothing.

"Let's go get some tea," she said softly.

Briggs pulled his claws from the bark, and she slipped her hand inside his. There were no questions. Nyx knew him inside and out. She understood he wasn't okay. He let her lead him from the center of the lush gardens, past a small babbling brook full of colorful fish, over the wide cobblestone walkway and into the large, airy infirmary.

Nyx led him to one of the cots and had him sit. He watched her bustle around the sunny room, the familiar scent of herbs swirling through the air, and tried not to drown in his shame. Briggs glanced toward the gardens, the melodious tinkle of children's laughter reaching his ears.

"Did the wee ones see me?" he asked, a lump in his throat.

"No, they did not." Nyx glided back to his side and handed him a warm cup of tea. He took it and she sat down next to him, taking his left hand in her own once again. "Our lesson was finished up and the cook had pastries waiting for them. They never even looked in your direction."

"How long was I... out of it?"

"About ten minutes."

Briggs hung his head, his dark braids sliding over his shoulder to create a veil of sorts between himself and Nyx. What if she hadn't been there? What if he'd lost control?

She squeezed his hand. “Stop it. I know you’re beating yourself up. But you didn’t hurt anyone. You never have.”

“Except for you.” He looked at her and she shrugged.

“We both didn’t know any better. Now we do. I’m not upset about it. You should let it go.”

Nyx was too good to him. He didn’t deserve her forgiveness or even her comfort. His attention was drawn to the way their fingers were laced together, his dark like midnight, hers warm like honey. Briggs knew he should pull away, but he couldn’t find it within himself to break the contact. She was his anchor. And he loved her, but this was all he could ever take or give to her which made him a selfish man. She was stuck with him, never moving forward because she had hope for a future he knew would never come.

You’re pathetic. Mistress was right. You destroy everything good around you.

“Briggs?” she murmured, and he blinked at her. “Did you hear what I said?”

“No.”

She pursed her lips in that way that made him crazy with want. All he desired was to bite and kiss her bottom lip until it stopped pouting.

“I said that I have a present for you.”

He arched a thick brow. “Really?”

Nyx gave him a nervous smile and stood, releasing his hand. He flexed his fingers, already feeling the loss of her touch as she strode over to a small wooden trunk and

opened it. She pulled out something and clutched it to her chest and she swung around to face him. Nyx walked until she stood before him and rocked back on her heels, not meeting his gaze.

What was this? His little kitsune was never nervous around him. “It can’t be that bad.”

She winced and shoved her hand out, uncurling her fingers. In her palm rested a vial of glowing blue liquid.

Briggs jerked back, a memory of his Mistress holding a vial similar in color and having her guards hold him down so she could pour it down his throat. He bared his teeth and growled, swiping at her.

“It’s me. It’s just me!”

Nyx’s voice pulled him from the memory, and he glared at her. Before she could move, he jumped down from the cot and yanked her to his chest, plucking the vial from her hand.

“How could you?” he growled, holding the drugs up to her wide eyes, his hand shaking.

“I didn’t.”

He laughed, pushing her away. She stumbled but caught herself. “I’m not stupid. There’s only one kind of plant that can turn a draught this color. Mimikia.” Briggs threw the vial onto the stone floor. It shattered, the liquid spattering over his boots and the bottom of Nyx’s skirts.

He panted, his whole body shaking with rage as he tried to control his temper. She’d

betrayed him. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Nyx gazed at the floor, her cheeks flushed. Her fingers curled into fists as she lifted her head to meet his glare head on. “How could you?”

“How could I?” he hissed, hurt and anger turning his question into a roar. “You’re the one who stepped over the line. You know my feelings on Mimikia.”

She blinked slowly at him. “You really think I would brew something for you with a drug you detest? That you have forbidden me to meddle with when it comes to your tinctures? I would never do that. I can’t believe you would think that I would.”

He scoffed. The proof was splattered all over the floor. “We both know you’re good at keeping secrets if it benefits you.” His gaze dropped to the mark on her shoulder. She gasped, tears filling her eyes. Nyx still hadn’t told him who’d marked her. And every time he saw it, Briggs wanted to tear something apart.

Or leave one of your own.

“You’re unbelievable.” She took a step closer, gesturing to her neck. “And I’m done protecting you. You want to know whose mark it is? Yours.”

“Not possible.” Briggs flinched when she smiled sharply at him.

“It was the first time I brewed something to help with the night terrors. You were stuck in them. So, I drew closer to soothe you and you bit me.” One sob escaped her. “But I knew you wouldn’t remember it when you woke up and that you didn’t want this life for yourself until we got your terrors taken care of, so I hid it to protect you.”

A deranged laugh escaped him. Briggs couldn’t stop it. He knew it was the wrong thing to do when Nyx’s face crumpled. But his body wasn’t under his control. For the

last two years he'd been insanely jealous of himself.

Nyx closed the space between them and slapped him. Hard.

The sound seemed to ring in his ears. He rubbed his cheek before he met her fiery gaze. "I deserved that."

Her bottom lip wobbled but she bit it. "You have broken my heart for the last time. You want to languish in the hell you created in your mind."

His stomach bottomed out. "That's not fair."

"None of this is fair!" she shouted, brushing away her tears. "I have waited for you for years. I've spent hours upon hours researching a cure for what you suffered so that you could live a happy life— even if it wasn't with me."

"I never asked you to do that." He cleared his throat. "I didn't ask you to wait for me. I always knew my life would be lonely."

"I know." She placed a hand over her heart and took a step back from him. "But it doesn't have to be. You're choosing this." Nyx pointed to the floor. "I perfected your serum. That was your best bet for a peaceful future without fear. And you threw it away."

"I told you no drugs."

Nyx swallowed hard and kept backing away from him. Panic seized his chest as she put more space between them. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. Everything in his head was so muddled.

"The fact that you still think I would try to get you to take Mimikia breaks my heart."

She held her hands out. “Clean up before you leave. And do me a favor, make sure you scent my serum.”

She disappeared from his sight, and he started to tremble. Briggs paced the infirmary with his hands on his head as he tried to calm down. The glass crunched beneath his boots, and he winced. He needed to clean that up. Retrieving a broom and dustpan, he stooped low to clean the mess up and inhaled.

His brows furrowed.

He inhaled deeper.

Not one sweet tone.

There wasn't one drop of Mimikia.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter Nine

brIGGS

Present Day

Brine and Scarlet's pup had come into the world with a loud howl. Briggs smiled as Nyx held out the wee little girl to their friend. Scarlet cried, fat tears dripping down her cheeks as she held her daughter for the first time. Brine wrapped himself around both, his large hand hovering over their daughter's mop of dark blonde hair as if he were afraid to touch her.

"She's beautiful," Briggs murmured. "Congrats my friends."

He envied the love between his two friends as they shared a loving glance and quick kiss before turning their attention back to their precious child. Briggs gaze sought Nyx who worked efficiently at the bottom of the bed, cleaning up the afterbirth and clearing out soiled bedsheets.

He wanted children with her.

A future full of love.

Only if she'd listen to him.

Briggs approached. "I can take those for you."

She pushed the linens into his hands without so much as a glance at him. She'd been that way since she'd dismissed him the night before. Briggs left the bedroom and exited the home. He moved to the washing barrel around the rear of the house, tossed the sheets in, and dropped a soap bud in that began to bubble immediately, causing the water to turn pink.

The shuffle of tired footsteps met his ears, and he lifted his head, watching Nyx weave toward him, dirty towels in hand. Dark shadows marred the skin beneath her brows. It had been a long night and day of laboring. Briggs glanced at the horizon. The sun was setting behind the ocean. Poor Scarlet had labored for almost twenty-four hours.

Nyx dumped her towels into the barrel and reached for the washing churn. Briggs grabbed her hand, and she blinked at him slowly.

"Not a chance, Nyx. Go get some rest."

"I don't need you to take care of me," she whispered without heat.

He nodded as he began to agitate the laundry. "You're very capable, my love. But someone once told me that it was okay to have help. Now, go get some rest."

"Too tired." She plopped down onto the ground with a groan. "And no pet names."

Briggs hummed but didn't say anything. He wouldn't agree to any such thing.

They sat in companionable silence for a long while before he felt Nyx lay her head against his leg. His heart picked up pace, but he didn't say anything, just continued to wash the linens. Maybe this meant she was softening toward him. That she'd listen to him.

“A pretty view to do chores, no?” she commented.

“Brine is a lucky man.”

Nyx snorted. “If only it were the man’s lot in life to wash the laundry. Alas, it falls to women.”

“And yet I am the one agitating the sheets.” Briggs smiled as he heard her giggle. It soothed his soul. It had been way too long since he’d heard it.

She pointed toward the ships. “I’ll be leaving soon.”

Briggs flinched, halting his ministrations. “Oh?”

“Need to move on with my life. Chesh and Marche invited me to go with them. I’m going to enjoy the south for a while.”

He swallowed hard and focused on churning the towels slowly. Briggs thought he had more time to convince her to stay to give him a chance. To tell her what he’d been doing in her absence. But he couldn’t say anything now. It wouldn’t be right.

“You love new adventures.”

“I do.”

They fell into a comfortable silence as the sun sank, the dark sky nipping at the soft orange glow on the horizon. A light snore broke the quiet and Briggs let go of the churn. Nyx had fallen asleep, her cheek pressed against his leg, mouth slightly open.

As gently as he could, Briggs picked her up from the ground. Nyx grumbled but otherwise snuggled into his chest as he carried her back inside Brine and Scarlet’s

home. He paused when he caught sight of Marche standing outside the door, messing with a small wooden puzzle. The hare pocketed the toy and cocked his head, watching them. He reached out a hand and opened the front door without a word.

“Thank you,” Briggs whispered.

Marche nodded. “You hold treasure. Don’t be careless.”

The men shared a knowing look before Briggs entered the home and strode into the spare room Nyx had been staying in. He gently closed the door with his foot and then moved to her bed. Part of him cried out as he laid her down on the mattress, hating to be parted from her. He removed her slippers and then pulled the quilt over Nyx’s shoulder. For a moment, he just stared at her sleeping form. He should leave. But he wouldn’t.

Instead, Briggs kicked off his boots, edged around the bed, and sat on the other side. Nerves tumbled around in his stomach.

You can do this. Don’t run away.

He pulled the small blue vial from his pocket, uncorked it, tossed it back, then laid down on the bed beside the only woman he’d ever loved. Nyx rolled toward him, naturally snuggling into his side, her head resting on his bicep. Briggs stared at the ceiling, tears dripping down his cheeks and closed his eyes.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:28 am

Chapter Ten

NYX

Present Day

Stars she was warm and comfortable.

When was the last time she'd slept so well?

Nyx snuggled deeper into the bed, pressing her face into the pillow, savoring how incredible it smelled. It rumbled and she frowned. That wasn't right. She opened her eyes and sucked in a sharp breath.

It was most definitely not a pillow, but a large, muscular chest that she was sprawled across.

Nyx gasped and tried to sit up, but Briggs' hand on her hip kept her pinned to his side.

"Not yet, love, just a few moments longer." His deep voice washed over her.

She placed a hand on his chest and stared down at Briggs who peered up at her through sleepy eyes, a small smile curling his plush lips.

"What the devil?" she whispered, shaking her head. "What are you doing?"

Briggs reached up with his left hand and pushed a lock of unruly hair from her face, before cupping her cheek. “What I should have done a long time ago, mate.”

Mate. It seemed to echo in her ears.

“But I’m not...”

“Yes, you are. You always have been.”

Soul-wracking sobs burst from Nyx and she scrambled out of the bed, the sheets tangling around her feet. She stumbled and caught herself on the windowsill as Briggs rose from the bed.

Pointing a shaking finger at him, she cried, “Don’t you dare!” It was as if the whole world had tilted. She’d seen Briggs sleep rumpled before but not because he’d slept the night with her.

Her mind screeched to a halt.

He. Slept. The. Night. With. Her.

She scanned him from head to toe, then scoured the room for restraints of any kind.

None.

“How?” she choked out.

“Your serum.” The room seemed to drop out from around her. He held a hand out to her. “It worked.”

Another horrible sob escaped her, and Nyx slapped her hands over her mouth to try to contain the sound.

Briggs took another step in her direction. “Take a breath, Nyx.”

“But you said...”

“I know, and I was wrong. I was so caught up in my own fear. But it works.”

“I know it works!” she yelled. “Do you think I could have taken disappointing you one more time? I’ve spent every spare moment in the last four years searching for others like you—to discover herbs that could help create a draught that could help you all live a better life. After our last attempt a year ago, I knew I couldn’t let you down again.” She angrily brushed away her tears. “Then you tossed it away like it was trash—like I was rubbish.”

Pain creased his expression. “That’s not what I... I’m sorry. I overreacted and you bore the brunt of it.”

It was more than that. “You accused me of trying to drug you, of trying to trick you!”

Brine burst into the room, glaring at the two of them. “My wife and daughter are currently sleeping but not for long if you continue to shout the house down.” He glanced between her and Briggs and gave the blasted bear a smile. “Congrats, old friend.” He nodded and disappeared back out the door.

That bastard.

Nyx stormed from the room—as well as someone could on tiptoes—and out the front door without closing it behind her. She practically raced toward the nearest beach, Briggs’ steady steps following her. The warm morning sand greeted her bare feet and grew cooler as she reached the ocean’s edge.

“I’ve never known you to be one to run, Nyx.”

She spun on her heel, scowling. “I’m not running.”

“Yes, you are. I know what it looks like. I’ve been doing it for years since Pyre rescued me from the pits.” Briggs strode through the white sand to her and stopped just before her. Nyx tipped her head back to stare up at him, feeling like the world was off-balance. “I’ve thrown myself into helping others to atone for my mistakes and to avoid what haunts me. I never wanted to look back, but I didn’t know how to move forward either.”

“I was there, trying to help you!”

“I know.” He seized her face, his touch desperate. “You have always been a bright spot in my life, my very best friend. I’ve just never let myself hope for or imagine anything else.” Briggs smiled and leaned down until his forehead touched her own. “You’ve given me hope. You’ve given me everything.”

Nyx shook her head. “If this is all true, why wait so long to come to me? It’s been three months.”

“Because I had to be sure.”

“You didn’t believe me?” She jerked back.

“I did.” Briggs didn’t let her go far, wrapping an arm around her waist. “I’ve always trusted you.”

“That’s not what you said.” It hurt even to remember it.

“Words that I have regretted saying each day since.” He touched her chin and lifted it so she met his serious gaze. “I’m so sorry for the hurt I’ve caused. I know it’s no excuse, but I wasn’t in my right mind that day in the infirmary. All I could see was you being tortured, the Mistress standing over you, and the blue drugs.” Shame filled

his eyes. “I reacted poorly. Honestly, I was having a hard time telling what was real and what wasn’t.” He shook his head, his dark braids swaying between them. “I will forever be making up for my mistakes if you’ll let me. Know that from this day forward I intend only to bring joy into your life.”

“Not possible,” she retorted on another sob. How could she believe him?

Briggs grinned. “I’ll try my best at least, if you’ll let me.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“I’ve known you a long time, Nyx. You and I both know that’s not true. You are kind, generous, loving, strong, courageous, and forgiving.”

No, she wasn’t. “So I’m just supposed to forgive you? Like you never ripped my heart out? Like you never accused me of being like your Mistress?”

Briggs blanched. “No! I have and never will compare you to her. As I said before, I trust you.” He released her chin and dipped into his pocket, pulling another blue vial out. Briggs held it up between them. “You wanted to know why I didn’t come sooner? It wasn’t because I didn’t believe or trust you. It’s because I wanted to make sure that I could trust myself.” His throat bobbed. “I wanted to make sure that I was the kind of man you deserved.”

More tears flooded her eyes. “I never asked you to be anything other than yourself.”

“I know, love. But you were right in accusing me of being stuck in the past. I’ve buried myself in healing to atone for my sins. While I love it, and it’s given me peace, I’ve never truly dealt with what I experienced in the pits. So I sought out the help of a mental healer that Tempest suggested.”

Nyx blinked up at him. A mental healer? “And?”

He exhaled, and glanced down at the damp sand, the ocean lapping gently around their feet. “It opened wounds that have been festering for far too long. But it’s been cleansing too. I think the terrors will always lurk in the back of my mind, but they won’t control my life.” Briggs put the serum back in his pocket before taking her right hand and bringing it to his lips. He kissed her knuckles tenderly before meeting her gaze once again. “I don’t deserve your forgiveness, but I’ll wait forever if that’s what it takes.”

This man was going to ruin her.

He already has.

She wanted to forgive him. He’d never been a cruel soul. But she needed to know one more thing.

“The mark.” Nyx pushed her hair back so he could see it. “You’re not just saying these things because you feel obligated to me? Because if that’s the case, I’ll be walking away right?—”

Briggs kissed her. The type of kiss that stole your breath and set your soul aflame. She clutched his shirt between her fists as his thick arms banded around her waist.

“You are what I’ve dreamed of for five years. You’re my best friend and dearest love,” he breathed against her lips. “You will never be an obligation but the ultimate blessing of my life.” Her sweet bear began kissing away her tears as they fell. “If you’ll have me, I promise to sleep next to you every night.”

She cried harder.

“To cheat at cards to beat your brother so you can win.”

She half-laughed and half-hiccapped.

“To wash the sage and boil it while you’re out so you don’t have to smell it.”

Stars, she hated the scent of sage.

“To never raise a hand or voice to you when we argue.”

Nyx could never see him doing that.

Her tears slowed but Briggs never stopped kissing her face.

“To cherish any wee ones that might come from our mating.” A pause. “And I want many.” A slight growl to that promise made Nyx shiver. “To love you until we both are dust and we’re just memories on the wind.”

“And if I say no?” she forced herself to say.

“Then I will be your very best friend and protector for the rest of our lives. But know this, there will be no other for me.”

Nyx sank her fingers into his braids, her decision already made. Briggs had always been it for her.

She’d found her mate at the age of sixteen.

“Well then, I suppose there’s only one thing left to do.” Nyx beamed.

“What’s that?”

“For you to find someone to marry us and then take me back to bed.”

She squeaked as he swung her up into his arms and began running toward the house.

For once, everything was perfect.

Thank you so much for reading THE HEALER.

Stay tuned for The Rogue!