



The King's Man #4

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He was a healer with precious magic. Now, he has nothing.

Cael has lost his power, his home, and the one person who made him feel whole.

In the city of Hinsard, where enemies lurk behind every mask, he desperately hunts for a cure for his severed meridians, for the rising sickness, and for the aching void inside him. But magic isn't the only thing slipping through his fingers.

A conspiracy is brewing in Hinsard, one that frames his ally for treason and threatens to unravel the delicate balance of power. To uncover the truth, Cael must navigate deadly politics, stolen corpses, and an elusive poison that ties it all together. And always, Quin is there, watching, doubting, challenging him in ways no one else dares. Their past simmers between them, tangled with unspoken words and the weight of something undeniable.

But when a deadly scheme threatens hundreds, including Quin himself, Cael must make a choice. Does he cling to the healer he once was? Or embrace the survivor he has become?

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The entrance to Nicostratus's Hinsard home swings wide, onto a courtyard blanketed in autumn colours. Armed guards with keen eyes patrol the shadows as attendants quickly clear leaves from the path. I drop my wrapped belongings, catching my breath at the impressive inner-city estate.

"Clearly it's been a while since their master visited." Nicostratus laughs, waving over an incredibly tall, thin man in an aklo's uniform. "This is my head aklo, Petros."

Petros. Nicostratus even respects that his aklos have actual names. I grip a handful of my cloak, comforted by the thought. A good, kind man.

Petros bows his head to me with a welcoming smile.

"Anything you need," Nicostratus says, "he's your man. Oh, and this." He touches a button pinned to Petros's—and all of his staff's—uniform. Two circling wyverns around a sun—an emblem of unity—two brothers working together to cast brightness on the kingdom. "Anyone wearing this symbol is loyal to me and my brother. They've vowed to protect us, and at my word, they'll protect you, too."

Nicostratus, although tall, has to look up at his head aklo. "Are his rooms ready?"

I pick up my belongings as Petros leads us deeper into the house. At the closed oak doors, Nicostratus asks him to bring food and looks at me softly. "You haven't eaten since yesterday evening..."

My hands close tightly around my things, mostly my grandfather's books.

He swallows audibly.

I lift my hands, the gloves now useless, mocking . I rip them off, juggling my belongings, and stuff them into the bundle with the books.

“Take all the time you need,” Nicostratus murmurs. He pushes the doors open, revealing a spacious room hung all around with tapestries. They stop me cold as I follow him inside: vitalians casting, their hands aglow, as sick masses rise to their feet. In the centre, a haloed man stands among rejoicing children, his image mirrored in another panel as he kneels to accept the apex-vitalian stamp. Kyrillos. The name carries both reverence and a sharp pang, a reminder of everything I’ve lost.

“I have some last-century medicinal goblets somewhere.” Nicostratus flings open a cupboard, clattering around. He shuts it with a frown, waving it off. “Must’ve moved them.”

An akla enters and sets food on a table, tutting at us for studying the tapestries in such dim light. She lights a few candles, leaving us bathed in a warm glow. Nicostratus clears his throat and gestures to the table.

“Eat, please?”

His plea is soft, earnest. I drop into a chair beside him and force a grape into my mouth.

“I’m sorry,” he says after a while, lifting his determined gaze to mine. “I’ll provide for all your wants. I’ll see your family gets what they need.” His hand covers my cold, bare one. “Stay with me. I’ll always take care of you. Anything you need. Everything.”

I swallow thickly. “Do you think it’s impossible for my meridians to be healed?”

Nicostratus pats my hand. “I’ve never liked the word impossible. Perhaps there’s a healer out there who could help.”

My breath catches. “You really think so?”

“Hinsard is well known for having the most travelled healers in the kingdoms. Maybe one of them has seen something on their journeys.”

I pluck a few more grapes, chewing quickly.

Nicostratus chuckles. “Only . . .”

“Only?”

“Follow the healer’s orders and rest another week first.”

“I’m fully healed. The spell was... miraculous.” Yet even that healer couldn’t repair my meridians.

I shake off the disheartening thought. Hope. Stay hopeful. If I look hard enough, if I never give up, maybe the heavens will reward me. Fix me.

“Regardless,” Nicostratus says, scowling into the middle distance, “I’d feel better if we waited.” He snaps back to a smile. “That gives me time for my scouts to discern what the situation is in the city.”

Patience. I must be worthy enough.

I nod.

I wait.

I spend my days helping all over the estate—from sweeping to cooking to cleaning out privy pots. I help the aklas change the bedding, and Petros take stock of inventory. “You’re much too helpful,” he says, laughing. “Take a rest. Nicostratus should be at the training grounds, now that he’s waited out the doctor’s orders.”

I smirk and leave Petros to it, making my way to Nicostratus.

I stand at the periphery, silently observing his combat practice from the shadows. He moves with grace and fluidity, a blur of magic and motion. Then he picks up a crude sword and spars with his personal guards. Steel clashes and vibrates through the air, shivering over my skin. He is all precision, perfection. He’s lost nothing.

I swallow. If I’m a good enough person, maybe I won’t lose everything, either.

I spend the afternoon near the kitchens, grinding grains with a quern stone, hoping soon I’ll be doing this with herbs. My eyes are covered by warm fingers, and I call out Nicostratus’s name. He pulls his hands away, and the first thing I see is his grin. “I’ve something you’ll be interested in.”

I look at his sparkling eyes.

“An invitation—for afternoon tea.”

“Afternoon tea?”

“Hosted by the esteemed Eparch Valerius, high-ranking official and philanthropist. After we’ve made an appearance, we can explore the city centre.”

I stand so fast I almost knock over all my hard work. Nicostratus laughs. “Come.”

Afternoon tea is held in a lavish hall with a grand colonnaded foyer. Exotic perfumes

lace the air, and musicians play for silk-robed dancers. Nobles and rich merchants enjoy the performances, drinking and eating, and smiling stiffly.

Nicostratus murmurs in my ear, “That’s the game. Revel in the extravagance while forging connections to increase profit.”

A woman in white at the periphery catches my eye. She’s a beautiful figure, in an intricate robe of white lace, but her hood is up, and she’s slinking toward the exit. She glances across the room, and as she does, I catch sight of her face and the delicate pearled mask around her eyes. “Who is that?”

“She must be Eparchess Juliana,” Nicostratus murmurs, curious. “She’s become well known here, my staff mentioned. Yet no one has seen her face.”

A middle-aged man moves to the stage and commands everyone’s attention with a few hard plucks on a nearby harp.

“Valerius,” Nicostratus tells me.

Unlike the rich fabrics and regal colours his guests are dressed in, Eparch Valerius’s tunic and fitted trousers, neat and orderly, emphasise his role as a respected official with subtlety and restraint. “I’ve invited you here today to ask for your aid in establishing an infirmary in the city. Hinsard has some of the best healers in all five kingdoms; we should use our resources to give back to the people. Support them with heavily subsidised medicinal spells and vitalian consultations.”

I stand straighter and tug at Nicostratus’s sleeve, then replace the circling wyvern button that my tugging popped off.

He chuckles and raises his voice over my head. “I’ll donate.”

Eparch Valerius graciously inclines his head, and it begins a series of hollers, businessmen and nobles trying to claw for the most generous donation.

We're about to slip away from the hall when Eparch Valerius intercepts us with a grateful, toothy smile that emphasises a scar along his jawline. He engages Nicostratus in polite small talk, and Nicostratus introduces me as his guest, and "exceptionally talented at healing."

"Is that so?" Eparch Valerius says. "I dabble myself. We're lucky to have so many herb fields around the city. I see you carry a soldad—if you're interested, there are daily workshops and weekly discussions run by the city's most respected vitalians. And at the end of the month, I'm hosting the healing tournament."

I grip my soldad, wishing desperately to feel any spark of magic. The Medicus Contest?

"This year we'll have teams from every city in the kingdom," he says. "See if you can't join one."

Nicostratus must feel my sudden tension. He clears his throat. "We're actually on a quest to visit all the vitalians in the region. I imagine you'd know them all?"

Eparch Valerius calls for an aklo to make a list, and once we have it in our hands, he wishes us success and watches us go.

The Medicus Contest. What an opportunity for growth. If I can find someone who can heal me.

I whisk Nicostratus around the city with newfound eagerness. The streets pulse with life: bustling merchants bartering loudly while couriers dart between stalls with messages in hand. My gaze flits over the crowd—and snags on a constabulary

uniform. My breath hitches at the distinct rhythm of a cane tapping against cobblestones, but before I can be sure, the figure vanishes into the flow of bodies, leaving me with a suddenly racing heart.

Nicostratus gestures to the third vitaliary on our list and I hurriedly sweep up the stairs.

“You’re like a pup,” he murmurs fondly.

“This opportunity... to work with vitalians, to inspire teams to grow through competition... this is where miracles happen. To be part of that, to witness that...”

“I wish you had this much sparkle in your eye when you look at me.”

My step falters over the threshold. “I . . .”

“I’m teasing,” Nicostratus says, his chuckle slightly more forced than before. “Go on in. I’ll wait.”

Inside, an older vitalian peers over his magnifying glass and greets me.

I’m a rush of words as I ask him if he knows any way to mend severed meridians.

“I’ll try anything, even if it affects my lifespan. So long as I can get my magic back.”

He lifts his magnifying glass and peers at me, humming. “What you need won’t come from herbs, potions, or spells.”

“What do I need?”

He sets his magnifying glass down. “Time.”

“They’ll mend on their own?”

He shakes his head empathetically, and a shiver spikes through me, forcing me back a few steps. “Time to accept—”

I spin on my heel.

Nicostratus catches me in my flight down the stone steps. “What happened?”

My hands shake, but not as violently as I’m shaking my head. “No, I don’t believe—” I grab his forearms tightly. “It’s not impossible. I believe you.”

I drag him from apothecary to apothecary, healer to healer. Each visit adds a stone to my sinking gut. None are able to treat my severed meridians. Still, I forge on. Of course, a cure will be rare, or all the vitalians would know how to treat it. I must keep searching.

I try again. An overweight, middle-aged man greets my entry into his apothecary with a sneer. “Can’t you see I’m packing up?”

Indeed, there are none of the usual herbs found in a healer’s apothecary. Instead, baskets and boxes and jars are stacked against one wall. Some of them moving, probably with snakes or spiders, for the venom.

“Are you Vitalian Dimos?” I call out.

“Not any longer. Soldad confiscated.”

“Confiscated?”

“Taken away. Destroyed.” He scowls into the distance, then snaps his tight gaze to

me. “What did you want?”

“I—”

He grabs my hand roughly and reads my pulse. “Severed meridians. Even if I could help you, what’s the point? You were only par-linea.” He drops my hand and returns to his violent sweeping; I’m chased out of his store by a broom.

Nicostratus, who has waited patiently outside at every apothecary, raises a brow.

“Don’t ask.”

He doesn’t. He gestures to the road ahead, and we continue on.

My steps grow heavier as the list gets shorter.

Only one left.

“On the outskirts of the city,” Nicostratus murmurs. “It’ll be dark soon. Better to try tomorrow.”

Paper crunches under my grip.

He tries to lighten my spirits at an inn. I thank him, but I don’t touch my drink; he downs both to stave off ill luck. He wishes me good health and a happy future, and it’s clear the drinks are unusually strong because he wobbles as he stands.

I catch him around the waist and sniff at the emptied glass. I stiffen. Sedative. Strong, but only a healer would be sensitive to this subtle smell.

I should have noticed earlier.

I call to the innkeeper, demanding an explanation, but the keeper looks confused. The server has disappeared, too. It's not safe here; I have to get him somewhere safe.

The sun has dipped behind the rooftops, casting us and the vibrant market stalls in shadows as I support Nicostratus through narrow streets. We step onto the weedy bank, and the hum of the city fades. The air is crisper here, cold with the scent of the canal, but something else tinges the air—something sharp, metallic. I glance over my shoulder, my pulse quickening at the empty path behind us. Even Nicostratus's stagger seems loud in the stillness—

Men in dark cloaks leap from the trees, blocking our way. I suck in a breath. We've been followed. He was drugged to make him weak so he could be easily dealt with under these trees.

Their eyes glint along with the metal they unsheathe.

“Run,” Nicostratus urges me, staggering sideways.

He tries to call up his magic, but it fizzles.

His sword shakes as he holds it up. I can't make a shield. Can't clear the effects of the drugs and return his magic. I can only...

I hit three acupoints on his neck and back, then the fourth Olyn taught me. That'll sharpen his mind for a few minutes. Give him back some strength.

The attackers lunge forward. Prince Nicostratus charges into their assault with deft swings of his blade and neat footwork. One against three. The clash of steel rings out, the vibrations jarring through my bones to linger in my jaw. He twists, the blade thrust from his opponent's guard, and strikes another assailant. Blood spatters on tree trunks and fallen leaves.

The attackers grow more frantic.

A shadow moves at the edge of my vision. Too late, I see the fourth man, his blade glinting as he slinks through the shadows. I scoop up a fallen branch and hold it tight. Nicostratus twists and turns, sword scraping against sword. Again, he yells at me to run, but the fourth attacker is moving, aiming for Nicostratus's blind spot.

My heart jumps, and then so do I. I strike with my branch before the lethal blow descends.

The attacker stumbles sideways, taken by surprise.

Nicostratus whirls, his blade singing through the air as he delivers a strike that sends the man reeling into a tree trunk. The attacker whistles, and within seconds he and the others are gone, leaving us panting beneath the trees.

“You could've been hurt.”

“I couldn't leave you.”

A heavy breath, a hand on my shoulder. “Thank you.”

I keep hold of my branch, scanning the shadows. “They gave up?”

“For now.”

“You didn't use lethal force.”

“They're my uncle's men,” Nicostratus says. “I was worried it was a trap.”

“Wouldn't it have been self defence?”

“It wouldn’t be spun that way.”

My throat stings. “I thought you were safe, now he’s regent.”

Nicostratus grimaces, then collapses against me, the sedative overcoming him once more.

It’s an effort to get him back to his residence. Petros takes the load off me the moment we enter the gates, hoisting Nicostratus onto his back with practiced ease.

“Not my first time.”

“He gets like this often?”

“Not him.” Petros hesitates, his voice quieter. “My brother’s legs gave out years ago. Back’s used to the weight.”

We get him into bed, and I thank Petros, telling him I’ll keep watch overnight. When he’s gone, Nicostratus grabs my hand and tugs me to his side, his eyes glazed, or maybe weepy.

I wake to Nicostratus watching me sleep against the side of his bed. I hurry to my feet and wipe my mouth. “Are you alright?”

“My uncle must know I helped Quin. He’s sending a message. If I support the true king, I’m his enemy and will be treated as such.”

“What will you do?”

His jaw tightens, but only for a moment. “Get you to that last healer. But first, breakfast.”

I barely choke down some bread. Nicostratus gives up halfway through his own meal and rises, chuckling. “Come, then. Let’s go.”

I race outside into thick mist that immediately clings to my face. If this healer can fix me, I’ll give up five years of my life. Ten.

The gates open, and no sooner have Nicostratus and I stepped out than we’re met with a tight-jawed constable. He addresses Nicostratus carefully, but his voice nevertheless holds a note of authority. “Your highness, I’m Constable Michealios. I have a written order requiring you to accompany me to the constabulary.”

Nicostratus’s expression flickers, as perplexed as I feel. “What’s going on?” I ask.

The constable turns rigidly to address me. “The affair will be discussed at the constabulary.”

Is this Quin’s doing? A way to meet his brother? Not the most subtle approach.

My nape prickles; I position myself in front of Nicostratus. “What magistrate has the power to take him into the constabulary?”

Constable Michealios holds out a letter.

Something’s wrong. I don’t like it. “I’m coming with you.”

“Suit yourself,” the constable says.

We follow him through dewy streets to a sturdy stone structure with iron-clad gates. Chills scuttle over me as we step into the courtyard.

To the left, a half-dozen yards away, uniformed men are positioning three narrow

carts, each holding a sheet-covered body.

A stray breeze peels off one of the sheets, and a knot tightens in my gut. I recognise that face, I saw it last night. But he's no longer dressed in black. He's wearing military uniform.

Killing on-duty redcloaks is treason. A crime of rebellion against the kingdom. A capital crime.

Even royalty can be convicted of this.

Horror has my step faltering. I'm about to come to a standstill when I catch sight of Quin, in constabulary uniform, seated on a nearby bench doling out firm instructions to aklos. He glances my way with an almost imperceptible shake of the head. I know instinctively he's telling me to swallow my shock. No matter what happens in the next minutes, I must be calm.

I keep my face impassive, and only stop walking when the constable does.

Constable Michealios faces us and watches our reactions closely as he gestures towards the bodies. "These redcloaks were found at dawn, near the perimeter of their outpost. On them was evidence suggesting an alarming connection to your highness."

Nicostratus keeps his voice steady. "What kind of connection?"

The constable orders an underling to bring him the letter, which is then handed to Nicostratus.

Nicostratus's brow crunches a fraction. He folds the paper and returns it. "This hardly qualifies as a connection."

“It instructs them to watch you for crimes against the regent and country. The very next morning, they’re found dead. It all feels rather convenient.”

“Doesn’t it. But convenience is not evidence.”

Constable Michealios has us follow him to the bodies as someone else is escorted into the yard—the innkeeper from last night, swinging a finger to Nicostratus and me. “They were in my inn last night. That man was drugged.” When the sheets are pulled back, his eyes grow big, afraid. “D-did he kill these men?”

“Redcloak witnesses said one of these men visited your inn. Can you identify which one?”

The keeper jerks his finger. “That one. That man was there. He disappeared—”

“Thank you, that will be all for now.”

My stomach has dropped into my feet.

I glance once more towards Quin, struggling to keep my composure. This accusation could kill Nicostratus. From all I’ve seen of this world, justice—true justice—is hard to come by. Instead, suspicion, intrigue, or someone more powerful determines guilt. Nicostratus was afraid of falling into his uncle’s trap last night. Has he fallen into it anyway?

Quin meets my gaze, unwaveringly confident, and that... comforts me. I give the smallest nod back.

“First inspection indicates the soldiers were poisoned.” The constable is grim faced. “Possibly echowisp, which is only found in West Wind fields outside Hinsard. We’ll investigate whether you’d have had access to it.”

“No need,” Nicostratus says. “I’m sure the inn I stayed at is on those fields. But I didn’t kill these men.”

Quin snaps his cane towards us and bows shallowly to the head constable, not once looking our way. “If you’ll give me permission, I’ll look over this again. See if we missed anything.”

Investigating something like this must be time consuming and tedious; Michealios looks relieved he has someone willing to do the job for him. He orders his men to escort the prince back to his manor. “You understand that for the duration of our investigation, you’ll be under house arrest.”

Two armed men flank Nicostratus. He accepts their escort docilely, but his gaze flickers when he turns to me with a calming smile. He wants me to find Quin.

I swallow and curl my hand.

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The outpost is perched on a rocky hill that stands between the city of Hinsard and any threat coming from the open plains and canals to the south. I pay the driver who carted me to the base of the hill and climb the last stretch, passing the odd clump of hardy shrubbery as I head towards sturdy stone walls, an impressive watchtower, and hopefully, Constable Quin.

I glimpse him leaning on his cane at a gate, stoic-faced redcloaks lining either side, and hurry my step. If I don't catch him before he goes in, I'll be stuck out here until he's done. My stomach can't handle the unease.

"Constable!" I yell, once, twice, three times before Quin turns his head.

The last dozen yards, I'm hyper aware of the soldiers and their hands at the ready. I slow my step, eyes darting between them and dark-eyed Quin, who is turning towards an approaching decorated redcloak.

"You've permission to enter," the redcloak says to him, flicking a frown my way.

"Ah," Quin says, not missing a beat, "this is my assistant." He glances at me. "Took your time getting here."

I bow my head. "Forgive me."

"Come on then, before these clouds open and we lose any missed evidence."

I remain at Quin's heels as he snaps his way inside.

We pass simple barracks and a mess hall that swells with the rowdy laughter of off-duty comrades. In a small picket-fenced herb garden beside the hall, my gaze hitches on a patch of recently upturned soil...

“Keep up,” Quin says, and I hurry after him.

A commanding figure emerges from the largest hut; the redcloak leading us stops with a bow and addresses him. Commander Thalassios.

My head whips to Quin, eyes widening. This is the man he came south to find.

Quin keeps his gaze ahead, his face impassive.

“Your superior was here this morning,” the commander says, eyeing Quin shrewdly.

Quin inclines his head respectfully, playing up his comparatively insignificant status. “We want to be sure we haven’t overlooked anything.”

Over the commander’s shoulder, in the gap of his open door, I glimpse a swish of white lace and blink. The gap is dark once more.

Commander Thalassios’s fist curls. “Be thorough this time.”

He waves us off, grim faced.

To me, Quin murmurs, “He wants control over this, but his unit moved here less than a month ago. By law that gives the city jurisdiction.”

A redcloak conducts us to the place where the bodies were found, and keeps watch as we look around.

Quin's eyes are observant, keen beneath his constable hat. He wades through the grass and stops where it's flattened. His hand runs through the blades, jaw flexing with determination to bring his brother justice. I pull my gaze off him to study the area too. A subtle, out-of-place scent catches my attention; I pluck some of the disturbed grass and sniff.

"They said echowisp . . ."

"What do you think?"

"There's another scent that doesn't belong here. I can't quite make it out."

Quin passes me paper, and I fold the grass into it.

I pause as we pass the herb garden. I don't believe I'll find anything with the same scent—in fact, I'm sure it's a concoction of some sort—but I want to double check... It'd leave a bluish trace to the soil...

"What are you up to?" booms a stout man who's barging into the garden, wiping his hands on his cook's apron and responding to the redcloak's efforts to calm him with a disgruntled hmpf . If anyone was to know if echowisp's grown here, it would be the cook.

"Not worth the risk, even if the seeds increase strength and stamina. Some of these 'cloaks haven't a clue about plants, what parts are edible and what not. Anything like that in the garden and the helpers could poison the entire unit."

Risky, indeed. "What was here?" I gesture at the upturned dirt.

"False buttonweed. The stuff's obnoxious, keeps growing back no matter how many times I pull it up." He finds another clump of it and rips it out. He shakes the nest of

intricate, shallow roots at me. “If you’re after echowisp, try the gardens outside the city.”

Not what I want to hear. “It’s not found anywhere in town?”

He shrugs. “Go check any other garden so long’s you scam outta mine.”

There’s something about the snap of the outpost gates closing behind us that jerks awareness into me as we walk down the hill. Quin and I are alone, no redcloak watching over us, no cook to buffer us from other thoughts.

I swallow as I recall the last time we were alone. Quin’s firm stare, that shattering truth, the swell of hurt, anger.

My step hitches.

He notices, and looks over at me with narrowed eyes. “Afraid?”

I glower.

“I see.”

What does he see? I don’t like the way he thinks he can read right through me. In three steps the distance between us disappears. I lift my chin and meet his eye. His cane is so close, I feel the ghost of its length down my hip, my leg. Something inside me is yelling at me to retreat, but I steel myself. Grit my teeth.

He sizes me up. “Still angry. Thought you’d be bargaining with the heavens.”

If this healer can fix me, I’ll give up five years of my life. Ten.

Blood drains from my face. “Nothing is impossible.”

Quin’s cane shifts, a brief stamp against my outer thigh. “False!”

Sickening fear lances up my throat. I shake my head. “Why are you so harsh? Why can’t you believe I’ll recover?”

He crouches, picks up a rock and smashes it. He lifts the pieces and throws some away. “It’s broken. Can’t be put back together.” He twists a remaining shard in his hand and scratches a petal reminiscent of my clasp into his wooden cane. “Doesn’t mean it can’t have a purpose.”

He leans in. “Do you understand?”

He’s breathing hard. So am I. I rip myself away, shaking my head. “There’s still one healer I haven’t seen.”

My nape prickles as he watches me race off down the hill. When I round out of sight, I sag and choke on a hiccuppy feeling rising from my belly.

Somehow, I force my feet forward and claw my way to the last apothecary on my list.

Maybe, just maybe . . .

The visit is short.

The snick of the door closing behind me is deafening.

I throw up in nearby shrubbery, roll onto the grass and stare vacantly at the greying skies. Rain splashes on my face, then the sky opens and it pours. I feel like I’m sinking into the soggy ground, fists at my sides, chest hollow. I close my eyes. I want

to stay here, let rain wear me away...

I roll onto my side, splay my fingers in the mud and struggle to push myself up. I stumble back to Nicostratus's, drenched and dirty. I ask an aklo to take me to my rooms by a route where I won't be seen, and two aklas help prepare me a bath. When I undress, I hesitate at the clasp of my cloak. I rip it off and stuff it in with my gloves and Grandfather's books.

Later, I drag myself to dinner; manage to keep my voice even. "Your brother will ensure your innocence is proven."

A gentle hand lands on my shoulder; I drag my eyes off my plate and scrimmage up a smile. "I'm just tired."

He smiles. "Go. Get some rest."

I sleep early, wake late, try sleeping again. I dream of Nicostratus's attack by the canal, my useless hands that could only hit acupoints... Those attackers had wanted to kill the prince, they'd—

I snap upright and throw my heavy legs out of bed. I skip breakfast, knot my cloak at my shoulder, and force myself to the constabulary.

I try to approach Constable Michealios, but he's busy and orders me away.

Someone grabs my wrist and I'm whirled around to Quin in his well-fitted uniform, eyes piercingly observant under his hat. His jaw twitches and he tows me to where, yesterday, the bodies had rested. He faces me, gaze dropping to my naked hand before rising to the knot at my throat. His expression pinches. "Be as angry with me as you like, but in regards to this case, talk to me first."

It's true—seeing him has me feeling a sharp strike of gravity. Part of me wants to scream and lash out. Another part wishes I'd worn the gloves and the clasp, because the touch of his disappointed gaze at those points somehow lingers on my skin.

I swallow with a tight nod. He's right. My personal feelings shouldn't interfere with this. "I don't know how relevant it is, but something feels off."

"Explain."

"When your brother was attacked at the canal, there were four assailants. Yet there were only three bodies... if we could find the fourth..."

We head to the outpost again. The commander is too busy to see us; there was an outbreak of food poisoning amongst the redcloaks last night. A deputy listens to our request. "Can you perhaps lead us to the friends of the deceased for questioning?"

"They didn't have so many friends, those four. They transferred only a few months ago. Kept to themselves. Never got the best feeling about them."

"Four?" I ask. "Only three died."

The deputy grimaces. "The other one... Paxos, I think his name is, he abandoned his post."

"When?"

"Don't know. Only that he wasn't there when we discovered his friends' bodies."

Vital information. Why was it not passed on? "Are your men looking for him?"

"Commander doesn't want anyone taken from their duties."

Quin and I spare a look at one another.

“Did this Paxos leave anything behind?” I ask.

“Everything. I guess that’s how he thought he could get away without it being noticed.”

He leads us to the barracks the four slept in, and Quin and I gather all their belongings to take back to the constabulary. We thank the deputy for his help and he sends us off through the gate, but before it shuts, a redcloak slips out and chases us a few steps.

He’s flushed, and he’s keeping his voice low. “I was in the watchtower when those soldiers died.”

“You saw what happened?”

He shakes his head. “But there was someone in the shadows outside.”

“Why didn’t you tell this to the constable yesterday?”

He reddens. “I was on watch. It’s my job to apprehend anyone who’s not meant to be here but I... fell in the chase. I... Um, could you not... tell my superiors?”

“Can you give us a description of this man?”

“I can do better.” He pulls folded paper from inside his uniform and hands it to us. “I hoped one of you might come again. I drew his face best I could remember it.”

A short distance from the constabulary, Quin tells our driver to halt. I blink and lift my head from its resting place against the window. Quin orders me out, and when

I'm too slow, helps me with an arm around mine. With me in tow, he snaps his way to the nearest stall and orders lunch.

"The moment we left the outpost, you lost all energy," he says. "Eat."

I pick at the plate. "I'm not hungry."

My belly rumbles.

He watches me closely for a moment, and then asks me to pull out the soldier's drawing.

I unfold the sketch and we study it. There's something vaguely familiar about the small eyes and large forehead... "Wait. I've seen this man."

I tuck the picture away for safekeeping and lead Quin through the streets towards the apothecary where I'd met Vitalian Dimos. I explain all I know—that he'd recently had his soldad revoked and had been packing up his shop. That it had sounded like he held a grudge.

Inside, the air is thick with the residual perfume of potent herbs and dried flowers, but the vials, jars, and boxes have all gone. All that's left is a bench, pushed up against the back wall, and a counter littered with stray papers. Quin takes the chance to ease his pain and sits while I leaf through the papers. Maybe I'll find another address, or names of people Dimos worked with. Maybe they'll know where to find him.

Quin murmurs, "You came here hoping for a cure."

I pause my fingers on a page and stare unseeingly at the words scrawled over it.

"How many vitalians have told you the same thing?"

The page blurs. You cannot be cured. I hurriedly scoop the pages up. “Let’s take these for closer inspection.”

“Cael . . .”

“We’re here for Nicostratus.” I lift my head to meet his eye firmly, but my gaze shoots to a green-striped snake slinking down a corner of the wall, frighteningly close to Quin.

I yelp and throw my hands to cast a shield between its venomous fangs and Quin’s exposed skin, but nothing comes out of me . My knee-jerk reaction has Quin jumping, and at his sudden movement the snake strikes.

Quin hisses, blasts the snake away across the room, and slaps his wounded neck.

I’m frozen only for a second before I’m bounding across the room, dropping to my knees before him. My fingers shake as I lift them to Quin’s neck, pulling his away. The puncture marks are clean but deep. I trail my fingertips over the wound, but... no magic. There’ll never be magic again.

I stiffen. Quin touches my arm. My breath becomes rapid, panicked. “I can’t extract the poison! The venom is quick working, when it reaches your organs, it’ll paralyse you and then...” I grit my teeth. If there’s never magic again, how can I protect you!

Quin cups my cheek, voice weakening. “Southern kingdom healing.”

Southern . . . Rural farmers must survive bites while working the fields. They would . . . I swallow.

Quin’s head drops back against the wall, eyes fluttering shut. A surge of fear washes through me and I scramble off my knees to straddle his lap, knees digging into the

bench either side. One hand cradles his head, the other cups his shoulder; his wounded neck is exposed to me, a reddish two-pronged puncture marks the flawless, sensitive skin.

I glance at his slackened face and hurriedly drop my trembling lips to his neck. I suck deeply. Poisoned blood rushes into my mouth, and I spit out the bitter taste; lower my head to his neck again.

Sweat pearls at my temples, and my hands are clammy where they're supporting him. My thumb moves under his jaw, a calming stroke for both of us. He stirs, and I spit and check his face for any sign of improvement. His eyelids are opening. His lips are parting.

I dip my head, clasp my lips to his neck, and take one last pull to be sure. He twitches under my mouth, and my hands lock against him. He's conscious. He'll be safe.

My breath shudders and my nose taps the skin under his ear. I rip myself away from his neck and off his lap.

“You can save without magic.”

I spit out the last of the venom and determinedly don't look back. I hastily find a sack and capture the snake inside.

But his words echo in my mind as I carry the snake to the woods on trembling legs.

You can save without magic.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am

When I return, reluctantly, in the late afternoon, Quin is still there, speaking with the manager of the neighbouring perfumery. She's a beautifully dressed woman in her late twenties, and she's happily seated close to Quin on the steps outside.

"...end of Cherrywood Lane. I can show you the way if you like?"

"That won't be necessary," I say.

Quin looks up sharply at my approach. He thanks the woman for her help, and pushes up on his cane. "Wasn't sure you'd return."

I wasn't sure I would, either. But the thought of Nicostratus, imprisoned in his own home, at risk of being dragged to the prison at any moment... "We've more to do."

We head towards Vitalian Dimos's home, and my temple burns from Quin's glances. "I walked past here with Nicostratus," I say. "I remembered the way. It's better not to involve too many people in our affairs." I halt halfway down the lane. "Which house is it?"

Quin gestures to an aklo in a nearby yard. "We'll have to involve others in our affairs."

I slink after him to the aklo and ask if he knows Vitalian Dimos. Dark eyes look at us from under a caterpillar brow. "Haven't been here long—what's he look like?"

I fish in my pouch for the folded portrait and hand it to him. He opens it, frowns again, and scratches his brow. "Isn't that—" he points a finger at Quin, and turns the

picture around. At the flash of Wanted Quin's face, I snatch the paper and stuff it back into the pouch, taking out the correct portrait this time.

My face is hot, and Quin is far too quiet beside me.

I clear my throat. "That's the man we're looking for."

"I think... he's the healer? Ah, his house is the one with the broken gable. But I haven't seen him in a couple of days. There's a rumour redcloaks claimed his spell was poison."

"When did this happen?"

He turns to ask an akla carrying well water and she puts her bucket down. "Last week. A group came to his store, some with bee stings. He gave the injured men a spell but it worsened their condition. They almost died. They said he used harmful spells and reported him."

We thank them for their help, and ask they report to the constabulary if Vitalian Dimos returns. Then we snoop—check out the herb garden he's cultivated, poke around the property—and return to the city square as lanterns are being lit against a quickly darkening sky.

"That's all we can do for today," Quin says. "Tomorrow, I'll look into the whereabouts of Paxos."

"Do you think the commander knows something? Seems strange that he wouldn't mention a runaway soldier. Especially one who left on the day of these deaths."

"He's definitely hiding things. What those things are, and the reasons for them..." Quin inclines his head, and flags for a buggy. "I'll drop you off on the way."

I eye the tight space inside and shake my head. “I’ll leave it to you.”

He narrows his eyes, but ultimately climbs in.

I watch until his buggy disappears around a bend, and turn away. Though the lanterns are many, and bright, none seem to help me see clearly. My chest feels tight and my head throbs. I should head back to Nicostratus’s house. Eat with him, reassure him things are progressing.

I continue trudging the city streets. Another hour, and I can skip to bed sooner.

I rub my temples and wander cobbled alleys and lanes. Sick beggars plead for help from dingy nooks, and I can’t even... not even simplex spells. My stomach sinks to my knees as I slouch past them.

I bump into Petros in the streets not far from the residence. He looks surprised, and straightens the uniform that he’s presumably had enough of and wants to take off. He smiles widely, and I try and fail to do the same. “Nicostratus sent others out to find you.”

He sees I’m not quite as lively as usual and turns on his heel to escort me back. Nicostratus, who is pacing the courtyard, rushes over the moment I step inside the gates. “I was worried.” He holds my arms and inspects me. “All in one piece. Good.”

Petros bids us good night, and Nicostratus urges him to enjoy his night off, thanking him for getting me here safely. Dinner is waiting inside for us. I force meat into my mouth while Nicostratus keeps the conversation going, and try not to think about rejecting those pleas for help. I swallow hard. Smile.

“You’re kind,” I murmur. “Consistent.”

He blinks, and a smile unfurls. Yes. I like that smile.

It leans towards me, close, closer. “Would you like—”

I push to my feet with a wince. “Sorry, I need to call it a night. Headache.”

“Do you need a vitalian? I can call one.”

My chest aches. I shake my head, and go to my room.

The next three days, I claim I’m sick and stay in bed, staring enviously at scenes of healing on the walls around me. I refuse anything but a few spoons of soup, but on the fourth day, afraid Nicostratus truly will call for a healer, I drag on clothes and walk aimlessly around the cloud-covered city.

At the canal, a dozen boats are drifting towards Thinking Hall. Eparch Valerius strides swiftly from the road to the dock, straightening his clothes, tucking away soiled cuffs, readying himself to greet some of the kingdom’s future great vitalians.

Those soldad-carrying scholars pile out at the dock and follow the eparch towards the hall, a smaller version of the one in the capital—the same ornate structure; the same promise of knowledge.

The edges of my own soldad are cutting into my palm where I’m squeezing it. A sob threatens to escape and I swallow it down painfully. Long grass snatches at my ankles as I near the edge of the canal. I hold my arm out, soldad hanging over the surface of the water.

I shut my eyes and will myself to release it. I can’t use it anymore. Why carry the weight of my lost dream? Drop it.

Drop it.

I squeeze tighter.

Drop it!

My pulse is hard and fast, echoing through the soldad like it's a beating heart.

A heart that's broken. Drop.

I grit my teeth. My fingers refuse to obey; I use my other hand to pry them open, one by one, until the badge shifts, and then falls—

I don't hear the splash. Frown.

I snap my eyes open, and my breath stutters. In a small rowboat sits Quin, his stern eyes fixed on me, my soldad caught in his outstretched hand.

“Getting rid of everything I gave you?”

“What are you doing here?” I choke out.

His eyes narrow.

I shrug, laugh hollowly. “My light's gone out.”

A sudden wind lashes around me—my hair flies, my cloak flaps, and I stand through it, head downcast, uncaring.

“Enough,” he says.

I slowly raise my head and look at him, and away again.

The winds twist and spin, propelling me off my feet and plunging me onto the seat across from him. The boat rocks and water splashes us, and then gusts are thrusting us along the canal.

He doesn't stop until we're at the outskirts of the city, where groups of refugees from the south are huddled, drinking handfuls of water, nursing and tending to their exhausted loved ones. My chest grows heavy; there are surface injuries and sprained ankles everywhere.

"More and more of my people are being displaced by the volatile situation at the border. They come inland, hoping for a life with more security." He looks at me. "These are people that have truly lost everything and must start over."

My throat is thick.

"Out of the boat."

I climb out and follow him through throngs of quietly suffering families, young to old. In a makeshift pavilion, aklos and aklas and a group of nobles are cooking porridge, doling out blankets.

"Who are they?" I ask.

"My supporters," he says quietly. In his constable guise, Quin heads into the pavilion; they greet him as a constable, albeit with a knowing twinkle in their eyes. "I have things to discuss with them. I'll need a couple of hours," he says, and leaves me with the aklos and aklas.

Hungry people crowd the pavilion, eager for food. Two flustered aklos are trying to

maintain order and serve—I take a ladle in each hand and tell them to organise people into a peaceful line.

“He took two bowls!”

“One is for my nannan. She twisted her foot, can’t get up.”

“You’re just scamming for more!”

The man with two bowls flattens his lips. There’s a scar cutting his brow, and his hair is hacked short—as if he might have sold it for money or food along the way.

“There’s enough for everyone,” I say, keeping my voice firm and calm. “Sir, pass one bowl along to maintain peace. I will bring another for your nannan.”

This is reluctantly agreed to, and once everyone who can move has been doled out a bowl, I take a tray and find those who are immobile. Finally, I find the grandson who’d first taken two bowls of porridge. He’s seated at the base of a tree, an arm around his nannan, spoon feeding her from his own bowl. I crouch before them and pass him the last bowl of porridge. “Make sure to keep your strength.”

“Who are you?”

“No one. I support the true king.”

“True king? The runaway king?”

“This,” I say, gesturing to the volunteers, the food, the blankets, “is his doing.”

Nannan whines against her grandson, and instinctively I reach to take her pulse, and drop my hand again.

Hope flashes in his eyes. “Do you have medical knowledge? She hurts after every meal, for days now. Can you help?”

I stiffen and scramble back. I shake my head.

“Hurts,” she croaks.

I’m on my feet, hands trembling. “I don’t. I can’t.”

“Please.”

“No.”

A hand latches onto my upper arm forcefully, and I whirl to Quin watching me with shadowed eyes. His jaw twitches, and he tells another to help the grandmother.

I feel each thump of his cane in the ground under us until he tosses me into the boat. I can’t look at him.

“I thought Nicostratus was supposed to make you feel better. I see I have to take this into my own hands.”

Quin uses his inner force all the way to the dock closest to Nicostratus’s residence, then he uses it again to tow me along to the gates. Petros lets us in, but Quin doesn’t let him lead the way. Nicostratus is shooting arrows at distant targets in the military courtyard; a line of aklos, all buttoned with circling wyverns, are arrayed behind him and running to collect his spent arrows.

Here, Quin lets go of the scruff of my neck.

Nicostratus lowers his bow, frowning. “Constable Soterios, are you here with news

on my case?”

“Another matter, today. Regarding your guest.”

Nicostratus’s gaze flickers worriedly to me, and back to his brother.

Quin continues, “I caught him destroying property carrying the royal seal.”

I straighten abruptly. That’s... a hefty accusation, if technically... accurate. “I didn’t mean it like that—”

“Silence,” Quin orders, and I shut up.

“I’m within the law to punish him with imprisonment.”

I make an objecting sound, and am silenced by Quin’s furious glare. He’s not messing about; he’s truly upset.

Nicostratus’s jaw twitches disapprovingly at his brother. He raises a hand to dismiss his staff and the brothers face off silently until they’ve all left. Then Nicostratus steps forward, lowering his voice. “This isn’t about destruction of the royal seal. What’s going on?”

“You didn’t tell him the truth. Then you gave him false hope.”

“I only want him happy—”

“How will he get that with lies? How will he overcome his grief when you feed into it, raising his hopes, only to have him crash harder?”

“That was never my intention.” Nicostratus looks from his brother to me, gaze

softening. "I will take care of you, protect you. You never have to work again."

Quin's jaw flexes. "Nonsense. Cael, pack your things."

Nicostratus laughs, shaking his head. "You can't make him leave."

"He attempted to destroy the royal seal."

My gaze shoots between the brothers, my heart beating hard in my achy chest.

"You're being unreasonable, Quin."

He ignores me.

Nicostratus lifts his bow. "How about this? We'll compete. If you win, you can have your way and I won't stop you. If I win, you forget the royal seal business and leave Amuletos with me."

"You've won every time we've competed in archery."

"Of course I'd choose a sport where I have an advantage."

"If he's that important, you'd have helped him more."

"You can have an extra arrow," Nicostratus says sharply, pulling another bow off a stand. "Sit anywhere you like."

Quin takes the bow; he moves to a waist-height wall and perches himself on the ledge. "I don't need the extra arrow."

"Stubborn. As you wish. Same rules as always. Three arrows, three targets. No magic."

“After you.”

Nicostratus stands tall under a cloud-darkening sky, his cloak fluttering in the wind. I’ve seen him practice with a bow many times, and never seen him miss the mark. His military skills, both magical and crude, are well known and envied. Quin, too, is highly skilled, but his leg is a constant weakness, and when it comes to wielding weapons, he has stood in his brother’s shadow.

Nicostratus nocks an arrow and pulls back the string with confidence. His arrow slices through the air and smacks the target in the reddened centre.

Quin’s turn. I’m reminded of the first time we met, when I’d thought I could tell so much about him. How arrogant I was. I knew nothing. I could go a lifetime and still not know him.

His arrow flies and lands beside his brother’s. An equally accurate shot.

Nicostratus seems unperturbed, possibly expecting as much; he sets his next arrow free. It thunks into the centre of the second target, a half-dozen yards farther away.

Quin’s expression is unreadable. He takes a long time holding his form, staring at the target before he releases—

The arrow also hits the centre. He lowers the bow and quietly flexes his hand. He’s feeling the strain.

Scattered raindrops fall from the sky.

Nicostratus’s bow creaks under his grip, the string taut and ready to sing. He takes aim at the target another dozen yards back; his third arrow slices through the rain, its path unerring.

Quin adjusts his posture, his injured leg braced at the wall. Rain drips from his hat as he draws his bowstring.

My stomach is a series of knots with more forming.

Thunder rumbles through the earth, and the sky cracks open with blinding light. Water cascades down, heavy and strong.

Nicostratus murmurs, “Even the heavens are against you—”

In a blink of an eye, a series of swift, strong movements, Quin has aimed and fired his last shot. The arrow sings through the rain and slides along Nicostratus’s, sinking deep into the centre of the target.

My breath catches. Even Nicostratus has frozen.

Nicostratus’s arrow creaks under Quin’s and falls.

“You . . .”

“I will save you, brother,” Quin says quietly. “But I must save him, too.”

“I can help him—”

“I’ll send someone for his things.” A small twister lifts me a few feet off the ground and gravity shoots through me as I’m deposited over his shoulder. My pulse quickens.

“Let me go.” I yell, but it comes out weak—broken, breathless.

Quin forges ahead with me dangling down his back. I struggle tiredly against him and

the winds surrounding us, but my limbs are useless.

Nicostratus watches our retreat across the courtyard with a tight jaw; before I lose sight of him, I call, “Next full moon. The tree, from when we were boys...”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am

I shut my eyes and give up my feeble resistance. The winds are strong, but at least they're whipping out the worst of the rainwater from my clothes. Once we're in the boat, Quin releases his magical hold on me and steers us along the water in silence.

He takes us to a small inn, close to the constabulary. It's a robust, cozy place filled with soft chatter. The moment Quin appears in his uniform, snapping his cane, the innkeeper welcomes him back, asking if he had a busy day. Quin barks out a bitter laugh and requests extra blankets and clothing to be brought to his rooms. He leads me through a humming dining area, where the warmth from a fire briefly warms my damp clothes.

"Come along." We head outside and cross a yard to a small communal bathing area, the pool overwhelmingly scented with rose and lavender.

The relaxing herb has no effect on Quin. He spares a tight look at aklos pouring buckets of heated water into the bath; they and a nearby guest scurry away, leaving us alone in the dimly lit room.

A few fine strings knot low in my stomach and I cast my head down.

Quin steps close with an exclamatory snap of his cane. He reaches out and yanks open the knot holding my cloak. It puddles to the floor, and he pushes me to the single bench in the room. I fall back onto it, and my boots are being pulled off. When I'm plucked to my undergarments, he grabs me by the scruff and steers me to the bath. I land inside with a splash and a sputter, scented water stinging my eyes.

When I've finally cleared them, Quin is at the other end of the bath. He rests his head

back against the edge and closes his eyes.

“What are you doing?” I cough out.

“You were shivering. Warm up.”

“Why are you in here?”

He keeps his eyes closed. “Making sure you don’t drown in self pity.”

I scowl. So much for his promise only to share his bath with the person he gave his lovelight to. “You’re angry with me. Let it out.”

“I watched you refusing to help the sick.”

I stare at lavender heads and rose petals floating in the water.

“This is not the Cael I know.”

I swallow. “You’ve seen me hesitate before.”

Quin wades along the side of the bath and stops beside me. His thin undershirt clings translucently to his chest. Seeing the outline of the flutette has my stomach knotting tighter. “Before, you hesitated for your family’s safety.” He lifts my chin to meet his eye. “Why didn’t you help today?”

“I can’t .”

“ Nonsense .”

My breath catches in my throat. I jerk my chin from his grasp and stare across the

bath.

“You can diagnose by observation and pulse reading. You know which foods can aid health. You’ve helped those allergic to magic. You understand the healing properties of a thousand plants. The application might differ, but you have enough knowledge to give more than basic aid.”

My stomach churns, and I step back from the intensity of Quin’s observation.

“I don’t want to see you go against your principles.”

The lump in my throat is impossible to swallow.

“Y-you’re disappointed in me.”

Quin’s lips flatten, and a sudden surge of heat rushes to my eyes. I grit my teeth against it, but it’s too powerful. I twist my back to him, in time for the tear to land on the water’s surface.

I croak, “I... don’t know myself right now, either.” My stomach feels like it’s suffering a series of punches. “I don’t know .”

Quin’s arms come around my shaking body and he pulls me against his chest, holding tight. My tears fall thick and heavy, splashing onto his arms.

His cheek presses against the side of my head. “No matter if you are a vitalian or a healer by crude methods, as long as it’s your dream to heal, I’ll support you.”

“By being blunt?” I choke out.

“When you need it.” His arms shift slightly around me.

I clutch his forearms tightly and the punches in my stomach rise to my chest. I shove his arms open and step away, turning in his direction, my gaze cast low. He waits, unmoving.

My voice is lost somewhere in my throat, and all I can do is nod while I find it again. “You didn’t need to take me away.”

He’s quiet a moment, then he wades back to his end of the bath and resumes lounging with his head cast towards the ceiling. “Tomorrow we’ll help refugees move into huts near Thinking Hall.”

“That’s what you were organising when I tried to ‘destroy the royal seal’?”

Quin’s lips curve slightly. He knows he twisted the truth out of proportion.

I flick the surface of the water, spraying his grin.

He raises an eyebrow and sends a wave of water across the surface until it breaks over me.

I splutter, gulp in air, wipe at the drenched hair over my face, and climb out of the bath glaring daggers at his shut-eyed amusement.

Quin seats himself in the small dawn-soaked boat, and I clamber in across from him. He moves an oar out of my way, and winces. When he sets it down, he rolls his shoulder.

I recall his three bullseye shots yesterday. “You overdid it.”

“I did what I needed to.” He says it as a matter of fact, and my next breath slides along knotted threads in my stomach.

I focus on the winding canal, and then the approaching makeshift sanctuary. Bordered by the water, the back of Thinking Hall, cobbled streets, and a weathered luminarium is a large grassy area filled with patchwork tents and quickly constructed shelters. Bright fabrics are layered over the tents along with banners from refugee villages.

We rope the boat and step into the sanctuary. I was expecting to see a similar scene to yesterday—groups of people huddled together, sharing their stories over eager mouthfuls of porridge. Instead, moans grow louder as we near the centre, each one twisting tighter in my chest. The air is heavy with the scent of unwashed bodies and bile. A child cries nearby, clutching at his mother's sleeve as she slumps against a tent post.

Quin's cane hits the ground with a sharp tap, but his usual air of command is muted. He rests on his cane and observes the scene, frowning.

Something's not right.

Ahead, in the shadows of Thinking Hall, Quin's allies are sharing worried looks as they speak in hushed tones. They're interrupted by a deep cry from a nearby tent. They race towards it, asking if anyone needs help, and a young man emerges carrying an elderly woman.

He drops to his knees and cries over her body.

I'm frozen a few tents away, a knot lodged in my throat.

If I'd done more yesterday... would Nannan still be alive?

I force myself to look away, but his grief is seared into my mind. Is this... my fault?

I glance at Quin, horrified, and he quietly wraps an arm around me, pulling me

behind one of the tents.

Best he not see you and lay unfair blame.

Unfair? Would it be?

With a tight lump in my throat, I observe the man crying for his nannan while Quin's allies bow their heads in silence.

"This is your fault," he yells at them. "Your porridge took her life!"

Porridge? Quin and I share a sharp frown.

One of Quin's supporters tries to calm him, but he is lost in his grief; other refugees are crawling out of their tents and hobbling over, moaning and clutching their stomachs.

"Look," he says, jerking his finger around. "I thought you represented King Constantinos, thought he cared."

Quin grinds his teeth and white-knuckles his cane. I stiffen. I'd told them the porridge was the king's caring deed. "Quin—"

"This is not your fault."

Before us, Quin's nobles defend the king. "He'd be devastated to learn of this."

The young man shakes his head. Others shout for answers. Healers. They're sick, weakening by the hour.

"We've sent for constables and vitalians," a noble says. "They'll be here soon; they'll

investigate the source of this.”

I glance at Quin. “Are they expecting you?”

“Perhaps they think they’ve sent for me. But I won’t receive that message. Others will come—” He gestures towards two constables marching from the street towards the commotion, Eparch Valerius in his official uniform close behind.

At the sight of the eparch, Quin pulls his hat further down, casting more of his face in shadow.

Fair. Not only would his cover be blown, there’d be more commotion and unrest among the sick. We remain veiled by tents and banners, peeking through gaps.

“What’s all this?” Eparch Valerius says, face pinched in concern as he takes in the moaning refugees around him.

Fingers point at the nobles, along with more murmurs of accusation.

The eparch grimaces and raises his hands, calling for quiet. He commiserates with the refugees and promises to send the vitalians due at Thinking Hall to them. “In the meantime, until we’ve determined the cause, I’ll have food brought here from my manor and cooked under redcloak supervision.”

The crowd is a collective sigh of relief and gratitude, and the young man, cradling his dead nannan, pleads for investigation, retribution.

Eparch Valerius casts the nobles a sympathetic look. “I’m sure these men will cooperate with the constables?”

Quin sets his lips in a grim line as his allies allow themselves to be led away for

questioning. The remaining constable calls for someone to gather yesterday's leftover food for inspection, and for a stretcher. He insists the nannan's body be handed over for an autopsy, and the young man begrudgingly accepts.

"You volunteered yesterday," Quin whispers. "Best you avoid the constabulary."

I think it through, and nod. Soon they'll look for those who handled the porridge—my connection with Nicostratus, already under suspicion for murder... I'd be thrown into prison. Interrogated.

It'd definitely worsen things for the prince.

"Let's figure out what's going on," I say. Clear Quin's supporters—and myself—of any doubt.

"Careful. I must speak to my men."

We slink off in different directions.

Healers swarm into the sanctuary, and I follow the scent of steaming herbal teas towards the cooking area.

A swish of white hits the corner of my eye. I glance towards it, but only a pale yellow banner flaps in the breeze. Seeing things.

An akla from yesterday, scrubbing large pots, spots me. I raise a finger to my lips so she doesn't call out, and shuffle to her. "Do you have any leftover oats from yesterday?"

She frowns, shakes her head, and gestures to three large sacks behind her. "All those were donated this morning."

“By who?”

“Most come from the nobles you met yesterday.”

“What about the rest?”

“The entire kitchen—dishtowels, pots, food, fuel—comes from people’s goodwill.”

“Whose goodwill? Who else donated yesterday?”

Akla scrubs hard at a pot. “Oh, a really tall aklo dropped a sack of oats off on behalf of the prince. Another was from that redcloak. What’s his name... Commander Thalassios.”

The prince donating oats made sense. He and his brother worked together for the good of the people. The commander, though... “He came personally?”

She nods and throws her wet cloth over the rim of the pot. “Need more water.” When she’s gone, I pry open the sacks and sift handfuls of oats through my fingers. They look untampered with; smell right, too. I taste a few flakes from each sack. All decent quality.

There are four empty sacks rolled up beside them, and I inspect them too, then I run a finger around the inner surface of the pots. Sand is being used to scrub them, the texture gritty under my fingertips. I stare at my fingers and back at the pots. The sand from one of the pots is slightly filmy, like it’s covered in a stubborn grease. I sniff, and frown. I can’t quite place it. It’s a subtle scent...

Maybe I’m imagining it.

I take a cleaning cloth, wipe some sand into it and tuck it into my cloak. Approaching

footsteps have me slipping out of sight; I peek back to see a constable similarly inspecting the cooking area for anything abnormal.

With the cloth damp against my chest, I sneak back through the city to the constabulary. I head in with my hood pulled low, hide in corners and slink through shadows until I spy Quin coming out of the cells. I catch his attention, and his posture tightens. He moves to the back of the building, and I meet him there.

“I told you not to come here,” he says in hushed tones.

“Could you get me inside to check her body?”

“Vitalian checked already; looks like liver failure, acerbated by severe food poisoning.”

“What kind?”

“That remains uncertain.”

I take out the cleaning cloth and hand it to him. “There’s something here... I want to see if it’s on her too.”

He sniffs, and his lips flatten gravely. He doesn’t recognise the scent, but like me finds something off about it. He ushers me secretly through the precinct to a basement room, where the nannan rests on a white-clothed table. “Quick, you only have a few minutes before lunch is over. They’ve sent constables to find all those who handled food yesterday.”

“I never properly introduced myself to the aklos and aklas, or any of the refugees.”

“That gives you time but it also makes you more suspicious. By tomorrow, they’ll

have your likeness plastered throughout the city.” Wanted for questioning.

“What about Commander Thalassios?” I ask. “He donated some of yesterday’s oats.”

Quin squares his jaw. “I’ll see to it I get the chance to question him.” At the sound of a distant door squealing, we share a sharp look and scan the room for a space to hide.

Only one option. I gesture Quin towards the examination table and he holds up a corner of the long cloth for me to sneak through. When I’m crouched in the whiteish glow, he drops the cloth—but not before I notice my soldad swaying from his belt. What—

I force the query away for another time. Through the gap at the floor, I see Quin’s boots and the end of his cane.

A second pair of boots, more rugged, comes into the room. “Gah. You gave me a fright.”

“Apologies.”

“No harm, no harm. Constables usually avoid coming down here, is all. Think they’ll be affected by restless spirits.” A pause. “But you transfers are less superstitious. Better heads on shoulders, I say. Why are you here?”

“I need help identifying this scent.”

Rugged boots stop close to Quin.

“Have you discovered this anywhere on or in the victim’s body?” Quin asks.

A hum. “Peculiar. Can’t quite make it out. Let’s take a look at her.”

Rugged boots move around the table across from Quin's. Magic glows, illuminating the white cloth, and stops after a few minutes. "Don't detect anything."

"Thank you for your time," Quin says, and his boot stretches under the table to nudge me. "Could I bother you to take a look at my leg?"

"Of course, of course."

"May I sit somewhere?"

"Come with me through here..." Their boots move into an adjacent room, and I silently scurry out from under the table. I should dash out the door, but... one cursory look.

Gently, I angle her head and check her mouth with a silk handkerchief around my finger. The spell the vitalian used didn't detect anything, and yet... I check the silk. It's ever-so-slightly filmy.

I sniff. Faint, but I'm sure it's the same scent I collected from the pot at the sanctuary. I check her neck. More traces, as if she's sweated out some of this mystery concoction.

At Quin clearing his throat in the next room, I hurriedly tuck the handkerchief away and slip out.

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Once I've made my escape from the constabulary, I head to the nearest apothecary and ask if they can identify the scent. Magic slips over the oil, unrecognised.

“Resistant to spells,” I murmur. Could it be purposefully crafted this way?

The vitalian, a wizened older man with a curved nose, lifts the handkerchief and inhales. “Very faint. Tricky. Tree oil? Mushroom?” He hands it back to me. “You want someone specialised in poisons and antidotes.”

“You believe it's a poison, too?”

“Isn't that why you're so worried?”

I nod. It's not the first time I've scented this. This same scent had seeped into the grass where the redcloak bodies were discovered. Also... I recall the snake that bit Quin in the abandoned apothecary, the bitter taste of it on my tongue. I sniff again, concentrating on the bitterness. I recognise it. There must be traces of snake venom in this concoction.

Could it be Vitalian Dimos made the poison himself? But what would his motivation be for poisoning refugees? Unless he has history we are unaware of yet, or his concoction got into the wrong hands.

My frown deepens. “Do you know any vitalians who might identify all elements of this poison?”

“Dimos, of course.”

I visit all the vitalians in the city, carrying the handkerchief alongside mounting frustration. None can firmly identify the scent. Swiftleaf, earthbloom, thundergrass—these are all familiar, but the other components elude them all. By nightfall, my search ends on a final shrug and closed door.

I meander as I think through an encyclopaedia of possible herbs and their possible combinations with the known elements... I'll look through my books—

“Oof. Sorry.” I lift my head to the man I've ploughed into. “Eparch Valerius!”

The eparch straightens himself and takes me in. He's not wearing his uniform; his fine but dark attire had made him difficult to see.

“Ah, Prince Nicostratus's friend. No harm, no harm.”

Behind him, a few dozen yards away, is a spectacularly decorated house brimming with laughter. Men in various states of drunkenness mill outside, ornately dressed ladies fawning over them and encouraging them in. Hinsard's infamous dance house.

Eparch Valerius notices my glance, lifts a pouch from his waist, and laughs. “They're more generous when they're drunk. Anything for donations.” He laughs and clamps a hand on my shoulder. “Have you received your invitation to the drakopagon match? Soldiers against the nobles. I've shamelessly asked Prince Nicostratus to play alongside me.”

“You're playing yourself? Against soldiers? Would that be much of a game to watch?”

He smiles. “Don't underestimate us on a pitch. We're born playing the sport.”

Fair. The nobles I saw play in the royal city had been rather ruthless... “When is it?”

“Two days, midday, in the outpost training fields.” He starts to move on and only then my brain catches up with me.

“Just a moment.”

He turns with a pleasant smile and an expectant expression.

“Thinking Hall has a library, may I have permission to visit it?”

“Your soldad will give you access to any library.”

My soldad. Currently in Quin’s hands—swinging from his belt as if to taunt me. I grimace and thank him. He turns away, throwing over his shoulder a reminder that I can use my soldad to join the Medicus Contest if I find a team to join.

While contemplating how best to ask Quin for the soldad back, I catch sight of a white lace robe. My senses prickle, and I pivot towards the lights and heavily perfumed women. Is it her white robe that I always see? If so, why was she at the outpost? Why again was she at the sanctuary?

A silk scarf flutters around my neck and I’m swept deep into the house on a wave of perfume and giggles. It’s a fight to scan the rooms as I pass. No white.

I’m led into a curtained nook and steered to a table. A jar of wine lands in front of me, and whispers fill my ears. Haven’t met such beauty in years. Your bright blue eyes! That blonde hair! Flawless skin, so soft!

I resist a pair of lips heading towards my cheek and gently push the dancer back, tucking a coin into her hand, and then the others’. “I’m not here for company.”

Three women giggle behind fans, and one of them calls for ‘Sparkles’.

“Sparkles?” I ask.

“Ariadne Aureliana. You’ll understand when you see—there she is.”

An elegant woman in a sparkling dress and sparkling earrings and a sparkling headpiece sweeps into our nook and takes me in with a sparkly smile. “Another one after information? What do you want to know?”

I shake my head. “I—” The curtain stirs and I glimpse two figures walking past the nook. Commander Thalassios, and the other— my figure in white lace. Her face turns in my direction; half is covered by a delicate mask. My figure in white lace is the mysterious Eparchess Juliana.

“You’re curious about something,” Sparkles says.

I down three shots of startlingly strong wine. Should I follow further? Or find Quin and share my suspicions?

I slide past Sparkles and the others and down the hall; it takes only a few moments before I spy the commander and Juliana entering a room upstairs. Finding Quin will take too much time. They might’ve left by then.

My hoard of dolled-up entertainers tug my sleeves, halting me at the bottom of the stairs. “Only important guests and performers can enter that room.”

“Is there any other way in?”

“Pay an exorbitant fee to the lady of the house. Or…”

I eye the dazzling group, and Sparkles the leader. “Or?”

Sparkles gestures to the women. They laugh and pull me into their dressing room where I'm stuffed into skirts, my hair pinned up with sparkling ornaments, my skin powdered and perfumed. Delicate silk cloth veils my face from the nose down. "Adds an air of mystique."

Also veils the less feminine angles of my jaw.

The women sigh and gush, and shake their heads. "Unfair. That he's a man. "

I give Sparkles the rest of my money. "That's all I have. Don't know how else to repay you."

Sparkles smiles and lends me a performer's token.

"Oh, don't worry about that ," another says. "Sparkles is more about giving back than she is taking. Why else do you help the eparch with all his donations?"

Sparkles flushes and there's a special sparkle in her eye. The sparkle of someone infatuated. "You're paying me in entertainment," she says. "I don't often get to play dress-up with men. Let's get you a prop."

My prop is a tray of wine. Balancing it, I quietly sneak upstairs. Hushed tones drift from an adjacent room. I set the wine on the table, and their words fall heavily on my ears.

". . . send him south to the others soon," the commander says.

Their conversation unfolds, revealing the precarious state at two of the kingdom's borders, west and south. West is stable for now, but perhaps the greater threat, while the south has been thrown into disarray since the regent withdrew troops. "Territories are vulnerable to our foes. My additional ten thousand have helped keep up the

appearance of strength, but it's a facade. Lives hang in the balance."

"How long can the units hold out?" Eparchess Juliana asks, her concern palpable.

The door snips behind me as the woman, Sparkles, enters the room carrying food. She passes me with a glint in her eye.

"Who's there?" the commander demands, entering the main room with Eparchess Juliana on his heels.

I straighten the wine and set down the cups, and Sparkles announces their food. "Leave it and go," the commander says.

"Should we not perform for you?" Sparkles asks with a lift of her eyebrow my way.

Is this her way of exacting payment? To witness me making a fool of myself? Or...

Thalassios looks like he's about to bark for us to leave again, but a redcloak enters with a message for his commander. "Sir, there's someone downstairs wishing to speak to you." He steps up and speaks quietly at his ear.

The commander grimaces, and glances at Eparchess Juliana. She nods. "I'll leave you to him."

When I try to follow after her, he tells me to stay. One of us is to play the harp, the other to dance. "Make sure he's entertained. Fully entertained."

I stifle a frustrated sigh when the door shuts behind Juliana. I've discovered little about her, have no clue why she keeps showing up.

Sparkles quickly jumps behind the harp, leaving me to dance. I swallow tightly. At

least I'm not behind the instrument. I eye the lazily watching commander. Perhaps I'll learn something useful yet.

Music tinkers around the room, and I thank Akilah for her insistence on making me learn traditional dances. She, of course, got me to do it for laughs—but those laughs are saving me.

I'm mid-spin when 'Constable Soterios' enters. I hurriedly regain my footing and fling my arms elegantly in time to the music, battling a galloping heart. He's here? Now ?

The commander urges Quin to sit, take some wine, and it's during their first toast that Quin scans the room. His eyes flow over me and snap back. His hand jerks, spilling wine across his knuckles. For a heartbeat, his gaze locks on mine, unreadable. Then he rips his eyes away, masking his thoughts with a laugh. "Excuse my clumsiness," he says, lifting his glass. "I wasn't expecting such... unique performers tonight."

Outwardly, I'm a series of delicate steps to quickening music, hips sashaying, hands twirling in the air. Inwardly, I'm groaning at Quin's untimely appearance.

"What brings you here?" the commander asks.

"I understand you donated oats to the incoming refugees yesterday."

"You're here about the food poisoning."

"Someone died."

"You suspect foul play."

"We must rule out all the possibilities."

“The oats I delivered were purchased from a grocer in town. The seal was intact when I delivered them.”

“You delivered them personally.”

“I should think that makes it less likely I’d tamper with them.”

Quin eyes him. Waits.

“Ah, you’re after my motivation for donating. I wanted to help. I plan to help more.”

“You’re from the border.”

A slow, acknowledging smile. “How do you know?”

“You drag your vowels slightly. I made a guess.”

“The accent leaks through from time to time. You’re right. I grew up in Lyrica.”

“Are your family amongst those—”

“I’m the only one left in my family. The townspeople took care of me growing up; it’s only right I repay them.”

Quin hums and, while I dance, continues conversing. His mouth addresses the commander, but his eyes are solidly on my performance. Something which the commander notices. He toasts Quin again, and orders another dance. “You, come closer. Let my guest admire you fully.”

I wince behind my silk scarf and flutter towards Quin, whose lips twitch knowingly. I dance again, this time close enough that I touch his chest—with warning force—and

knock his constable hat over his grinning face.

Quin neither budes nor flinches. Instead, his smile widens, he straightens his hat, and after another twirl, he yanks me into his lap with firm steering hands, eliciting a laugh from the commander. “Excellent, excellent. Pretty eyes, that one.”

“Full of hidden talents,” Quin agrees.

I purse my lips.

The commander rises. “Excuse me one moment, I’ll be right back. Keep playing,” he orders the harpist.

Quin’s hands tighten on me, stopping me from pulling away. His breath combs my ear. “Laugh,” he says. “There are eyes in the room.”

I feign a giggle, though my chest lurches with... frustration. Quin’s grip softens, but his fingers linger around my hips. I pinch the sensitive area of his chest as hard as I can, and he jerks slightly under me—but that only results in him laughing and drawing me in tighter. He whispers, “Being interested in the entertainment keeps the commander at ease.”

Makes him no threat. Maybe opens the commander up. Quin’s after this chance to understand him ...

“Hmm?” Quin says, nuzzling into my neck.

I tip his chin back and stare hard into his eyes, then lower my face slowly to his. The silk scarf shifts between our lips. “Understood.”

His fingers flex; I pull back with another giggle, pluck a grape off a plate and feed it

to him, sliding my thumb into his mouth. His teeth graze my skin. At the sound of footsteps returning, Quin grabs another grape and ducks his face under the curtain of my silk scarf to feed it to me from his lips. Our mouths don't touch, but I can still feel it, like a shiver. I almost drop the grape, trembling. His splayed hands brace me.

"The harpist is watching a bit too closely," he whispers.

I swallow. Nod. This is to further the act. To convince all eyes that he's a lady's man.

I'm swallowing the heartbeat in my throat when the commander returns with more dancers and more wine. On his way to his seat, he gives Quin a jolly slap on the back that jostles me further up his lap.

Wine is poured, drunk deeply, and getting the chance, I secretly knock some back too. Quin turns from the commander to an empty cup, and pauses. He gives me a small rub to my back, and tips more wine into the cup.

"Take your pick," the commander says. "Any woman you like. On me."

Quin laughs. "This one here's tired. Let's dismiss her. I like the harpist."

He ushers me off his lap and my stomach gives a strange, uncomfortable lurch as Sparkles rises from her perch and sashays towards him.

"Go on, off you go," he says when I don't move.

I stop my staring, hurriedly curtesy, and escape. The doors shut behind me with a resounding click. I sag against the wall. Muffled giggles vibrate at my back, and I flee downstairs.

I make a feeble attempt to keep my mind on track and search for Eparchess Juliana,

but my gaze keeps travelling back towards the staircase...

My women helpers from earlier find me in a flurry of skirts and once more I'm led into the changing room. They pluck me free of skirts and wipe off my makeup, and soon I'm staring at a more recognisable reflection of myself. Albeit one with an unfamiliar set to the mouth.

“What's the matter, deary? You look disheartened.”

I bolt to my feet, then before a row of widened eyes, ease back into my seat with a tinny laugh. “Disheartened. Ha. Where's my cloak?”

A woman at the neighbouring seat puffs a spray of perfume and my senses sharpen. I waft the air towards my nose, breathing in. “Amorous spores?”

Painted lips curl brightly and she nods. “Just a hint.”

I leap off the chair and peck her cheek to the delight of all in the room. “Brilliant.” Someone tosses my cloak over my back on my way out.

When I'm striding along the main square, I take out the handkerchief and check. Amorous spores. Definitely an ingredient.

I stall at the sight of freshly glued posters in the town square—one has a drawing of my face. Wanted for questioning. Inform the constabulary. I lower my hood over my eyes and hurry to the inn.

Sequestered in Quin's room, I take out my grandfather's books—which Quin insisted were brought here—and leaf through them for the page on amorous spores...

Should not be combined with nebularia, aquamantis, thundergrass, verdantia, or

lunabloom. The result will be toxic.

I frown. Thundergrass is an element of the poison. But if it's so toxic, why did only the redcloaks and the nannan die, while the rest of the refugees were only sick? Could the dosages have been different? Nannan was already frail, her liver was weak. Perhaps she wasn't able to filter even a small amount, and that's why it killed her?

I read over all the known ingredients of the poison and take notes. The interactions of the various plants change their properties dramatically. Lethally. According to my notes, even the smallest amount should be enough to down a horse.

I shiver. Could it be that amorous spores and venom have been combined with a type of bramble or root? Something that would act like a bubble around the poison, making it seep out slowly. But if that's the case...

The chamber's door creaks open and Quin steps inside with the snick of his cane. He stops halfway across the room, his eyes having already read me. "What is it?"

I rise from my books, trembling.

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Quin grinds the end of his cane into the floor; my soldad, tied to his belt, swings like a ticking clock.

It spurs me into harried speech. “They didn’t get lucky. The poison is releasing slowly. They’ll all die.”

“Is there a way to prove this?”

“Gelidroot feeds off a dead body. After four days, the veins in a body become visible. If the person has consumed any, the veins will be green.”

“The grandmother is still in the constabulary.”

I shake my head. “We don’t have time to wait until she gets to the right stage of putrefaction. We must find out how long the refugees have, and start working on the antidote.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I’m convinced these cases are connected. The redcloaks sweated the same poison onto the grass. So...”

Quin stares at me with a grim set to his mouth. “Without more evidence behind your suspicions, you’ll never get authority from the head constable.”

“What is the law in the face of life and death?” I say, grabbing a dark cloak.

A bark of laughter. “Do you remember everything?”

I dig around the table for useful cutlery, making a good ruckus of it. When my cheeks cool, I turn to him observing me and fast decide an extra fork might be useful. “You don’t have to come with me—”

A chastising whack meets the back of my head, and Quin passes me for the door. “I know where to go.”

The redcloak memorial ground.

Rows of trees overhanging rows of epitaphs. There are sentries walking the enclosing walls, making sure no one disturbs the dead soldiers’ peace. And from the shadows of tall pines, where I hover with Quin, I feel the mystic energy that comes from protective wards.

“Why so many measures? A single mourning ribbon has folk shaking in their boots.”

“Our people might have massive respect for the dead, but our enemies do not.” Quin grimaces. “Soldiers from the southern kingdom slipped in as merchants, gathered in Hinsard, and quietly raided the memorial grounds for redcloak uniforms. They killed many of our men unawares with their disguise. After that these wards were placed along with sentries to keep watch.”

“I suppose that means sneaking in is a wee bit dangerous.”

“A wee bit.”

Putting aside ‘kill on sight’, even if the sentries only captured us, we’d be in trouble. Quin would surely lose his position as a constable and be thrown in prison, and I’d end up with him after harsh interrogation about poisoning the refugees—possibly as

Nicostratus's accomplice, which would throw him into the cells as well. It won't matter how much I deny it, they'd have caught me exhuming bodies. That's enough. It would close this headache of a case.

My stomach tightens and Quin eyes me questioningly. I let go of his sleeve that I unconsciously gripped and whisper, "Lives are at stake."

He nods and shifts his robe, pulling the fabric higher up the side of his throat. Was that a flash of bruised skin?

I stare at the concealing fabric, urging it to move, but before it can, the two on-duty guards disappear around a wall and Quin hauls me with him over dew-kissed grass, to wrought iron gates adorned with circling wyverns that shimmer in the silvery moonlight. I tell myself to focus on them, not Quin's neck—

He pushes his cane into my grip, and a soft glowing ball of magic steers my attention down his throat to his hands. He quietly curls his fingers around iron bars, and the mystic ward shivers. A wave of light briefly shines over us, illuminating his determined face—and the edge of the mark on his neck—and the ward peels open.

I startle at the squealing of hinges.

"Hurry," Quin says.

I edge through the narrow gap, and he hobbles in silently after me, the gates closing with a muted clink. Before us is a sea of moon-speckled epitaphs, sitting under breeze-ruffled oaks. We slink through their shadows deep into the grounds. Quin leads the way, pausing occasionally behind trees, one hand gripping my arm as if readying himself to fly off with me at any moment. Though I imagine the rest of the wards would not make the escape go unnoticed...

We sneak around a small crypt, and the air suddenly stills in a way that has me shivering. Quin looks over to ask if I'm alright, and before I can nod stiffly, voices shatter the silence. "Must've misheard. Or it was a rat."

Quin instinctively pulls me back behind the trunk of a large oak, hand balling with magic. My heart pounds in time with the thump of nearby footsteps.

"If that rat shows 'imself, I'll stab it right through the heart."

"If I don't get there first." They laugh, and clomp past us. "Let's head back to the others."

I hold my breath until Quin nods us forward. I follow on with an erratic pulse to an exposed area of stone epitaphs that eventually turn into wooden ones. There are no trees to hide behind back here, and that knowledge weakens my knees. "I'm hiding behind you if they come back," I say.

Quin smiles in the dark, and I suddenly lose all sense of gravity.

I bite down on a sharp cry as Quin catches me with gusts, stopping me from stepping straight into a gaping hole in the earth. He sets me beside the dug-up loam and snaps his cane quizzically around the pit. I shiver as I peer over the edge. It's a cold, rectangular void that not even the almost-full moon dares to reach into.

"Ah ha," Quin says.

I wait for more, but he only gives it to me after a beseeching lift of my eyebrow. He gestures to the wooden epitaph that lies upturned in the grass. "This grave belongs to one of our murdered redcloaks."

I look from the epitaph to the pit to Quin.

Gusts lift and drop Quin carefully into the pit and he pushes the coffin lid aside with his cane.

I peer down to where he casts light for me to see.

The coffin is empty.

I slither into the pit beside him and check again, as if this time, a body will miraculously appear. “Someone beat us to it?”

Quin feels the upturned soil in his hand. “Recently.” He magics us out of the pit and one glance around me reveals there are other disturbed graves. My prickling senses tell me who those must belong to.

Quin observes the area with a tightened jaw and a glimmer of caution in his eye.

“Do you think that whoever did it is close?” I ask.

“Possibly.”

“How do they expect to escape, trundling bodies through the wards?”

A grimace. “Let’s check the other coffins.”

It’s only a few steps to the next yawning pit of earth and Quin swiftly settles us into it. The space is narrow for two; moist soil clings to our clothes as we position ourselves and push off the lid. It rumbles, and reveals a body dressed neatly in uniform. The clothes are bright and clean against the pallid skin of his hands and face. “They didn’t take all the bodies?”

Quin funnels fresh air into the pit to blow away the stench of decay. “The guards

from before might have hurried them off before they could finish the job.”

“To our luck. Could you produce more light? Hold it above his chest.”

Quin does as instructed, and I fold up the redcloak’s sleeve to inspect the veins at his wrist. I grab Quin’s hand and steer the light closer. “As I thought,” I say grimly. “Green.”

I swing off my knapsack, peel open the fabric and pull out a knife and a fork. I clutch them in either hand, eying one and then the other.

“Did I not feed you enough today?”

I jerk my head up to Quin’s horrified-yet-bemused expression. “I don’t have magic anymore, remember?”

His gaze drops to the utensils. “What exactly is the fork”—I stab the soldier’s wrist, puncturing the vein; Quin finishes thinly, “Never mind.”

I lift the fork and use the knife to smear the thickened blood over all the sides. I start counting the seconds. It takes four minutes before I see the result I’m after.

Quin watches patiently, curiously, and I lift the fork for him to see clearly. “The metal had corroded, that’s why I brought the fork. The properties of gelidroot in blood change after death, and—well, look. The coagulated blood turned the brown corrosion green.”

“What were you counting?”

“How long it took to change colour. It helps me calculate when the root was ingested.”

“Which was when?”

“The soldiers have been dead for four days, but the poison was in their blood for at least four days before that. The refugees ate the porridge two days ago, which means they’ll start to die in another two days—if we don’t find a cure.” I snap my head up. “We should—”

Brilliant light flashes overhead. We look up and the wards around the memorial grounds flash again, temporarily revealing their dome shape. The sound of distant shouts has us stiffening. “Someone’s tried to cross the wards. They used the wrong spell.”

Quin grabs hold of me and in seconds we’re gusted onto the grass above, where he pulls me into a crouch behind an epitaph. “Can’t ride the wind—too exposed.”

We can’t run for the same reason. “The guards won’t miss these exhumed graves a second time.” There’ll be no hiding in the shadows of their pits.

“Looks like I’ll have to expose my identity,” Quin says gruffly.

I chuckle and slap a hand over my mouth. Quin stares at me like I’ve gone mad. “I was afraid of getting caught,” I say. “I imagined us both imprisoned, set for the gallows at dawn. Sort of forgot you’re actually important.”

Quin stares at me, shaking his head, and flicks my temple.

I grab his sleeve at a sudden, sickening thought. “What if they’re your uncle’s men? What if there are too many?”

He pins me with a raised brow. “Hide behind me.”

From the shadows of the large oaks comes the cracking of twigs underfoot, coming fast. My gaze sweeps urgently back to Quin, and snaps to the darkened pit. The one with the empty coffin... I grimace, toss Quin's cane into the pit, and tug at him. "Forgive me, your majesty."

We roll into the pit, Quin's quick thinking cushioning our fall. The gust protecting us dissipates and I scramble off him to push open the lid. "Get in."

He sighs, and rushes rose-scented air through the coffin. Then he whips off his cloak and lines the box. "After you."

I don't need telling twice. I cram myself to one side; Quin slides in, half on top of me, and pulls the lid over us. "They may check inside," he warns.

"Act dead."

He shifts and we're barely a puff of air from being plastered together from legs to heavily breathing chests. Already our noses graze. I press against his with a whispered growl. "That's not acting dead."

I tense at the muffled sounds overhead, and Quin bumps the back of his knuckles against mine. We'll be fine.

A barked "Check the coffin."

I hold my breath and sink the back of my fingers between Quin's, desperate for continued reassurance. He squeezes.

I wait for the inevitable sounds of feet landing in the pit beside us, the sudden movement of the coffin lid...

“Uniform’s still there, sir.”

I release my breath in a whoosh before capturing it again. They’ve checked the neighbouring coffin first.

“Good, good. These damn graverobbers are the bane of my existence but they would’ve left emptyhanded this time. I recall this lot getting buried. Not a precious thing went with them.”

“Are we sure they’re robbers? Why these graves?”

“Of course it’s robbers. These graves are the freshest, much easier to dig up recently turned earth.” There’s a pause, and then, “Cover them up. Let’s help track the bastards down.”

“How did they get in?”

“New ward spells. My idea—easy to get in, hard to get out.”

I expel my breath again, and whisper, “Graverobbers?” I thought people were too concerned about stirring up spirits. But I suppose there are always exceptions. Or they do it anyway, out of necessity.

“More likely from the north,” Quin says. “They don’t have the same fear.”

Rose lingers in the wood around us, and I’m glad for it—it takes me a few deeper inhales to normalise my breathing. “How’d you scent the air?”

“Thank all those petal-filled baths I have.”

“Best use of roses ever.”

“Never to be repeated.”

We’re quiet again. It was dark before, but as more soil surrounds us, the darkness seems to deepen. Quin’s slight shifts sound louder and my skin prickles. The ticklish point where our noses tap seems to radiate across my cheeks, my brow, my lips.

Quin’s breath curls over my jaw, too softly. I tense in the darkness. The thickening air makes it almost impossible to breathe. It’s the coffin making my chest tight.

When I no longer hear the sounds of dirt raining over us, I whisper, “How long do we wait?”

“They won’t give up looking for a while. An hour. Two.”

“In here? Like this?”

He speaks softly against my lips, “Does this closeness bother you?”

A long shiver runs down my middle. I clench my stomach and untangle my fingers from his. “No.”

“Your heart is racing.”

“You . . . hear that?”

“Feel it.”

I can too. It’s pounding against my ribs, and when I concentrate on my chest, I feel another rhythmic thumping close to it. Not my own. My whisper cracks, “Are you bothered by it?”

“No.” His ‘no’ is said simply and feels vastly different from my own.

My heart betrays me by racing more. “It’s nothing to do with how close we are. I’m... panicking. This is not the first time I’ve been trapped in a coffin. It’s... bringing that back.”

Quin is quiet for a long beat. “Cael...”

His voice is too soft; unbearable.

I clear my throat. “To reinvent myself through crude healing, I’ll need better tools. A set of acupuncture needles, stitching needles, small sharp knives, portable brewing pots.”

It’s a lifetime before he responds, but he does, and relief sweeps through me. “Anything you need.”

His leg jerks, bumping mine, and he hisses. I can’t feel auras of pain the way I used to through magic, but I know it’s there. He shifts and so do I. On instinct, our hands briefly meet against his cramping thigh and I hesitate a moment before massaging his muscle alongside him. It takes a few minutes and some tightly-gritted grunts, but the worst of the pain subsides.

“I was too rough rolling you in here,” I say.

“You’re fine. It’s been doing this at random and inopportune times since the beginning.”

The beginning. “When was that? What was it like? How did you cope?”

A teasing lilt warms his voice and thickens the air around us. “Want the intimate

details of my childhood, Cael?”

“P-purely from a healing perspective.”

“I used to love exploring. Nicostratus and I were masters of sneaking out, and we’d walk and run everywhere. Our guards had a hard time catching us, and we were often punished, but to be free... it was always worth it.”

There’s a wistful quality to his memory that has my stomach tensing at what’s to come.

“As we got older, ten or eleven, we began to understand more of the complexities of the royal city. My father and mother had been shielding me from many dangers I was unaware of.”

“There were people who wanted you dead.”

“Mm. I started to see those around me in different lights; I became more wary. When I went outside the boundaries, I pretended I was someone else. Sometimes I’d wear my aklo’s clothes, or pretend I was a nobleman’s son, or a merchant’s. A performer.”

“Was it always the high duke after you?”

“He was there, starting his quiet schemes, but back then, it was my father’s second wife that posed the greatest danger.”

“Nicostratus’s mother?”

“A heartbreaking realisation.”

“What did you do?”

“Refused to let anyone tear me and my brother apart.”

“She poisoned you right after you saved him from drowning.”

“He’s told you.”

“It pains him, how much his mother hurt you.”

Wood creaks softly under our weight, and the darkness amplifies his uneasy exhale.

“It’s never easy to be torn between two people you love.”

I stir, and my knuckles bump against his. My voice roughens. “You went from gallivanting in disguise at ease to...”

“To lying in bed for months as vitalian after vitalian worked to rid me of poison. There was some success. I could have died. Apex-vitalian Chiron saved me, but my leg...”

“I had immortal bone. I could have—”

“It went where it needed to.”

“Why aren’t you frustrated? Angry? When I lost my magic...”

My stomach churns.

Quin’s sigh curls over my jaw. “Seeing you struggle... was like seeing myself, back then. I didn’t want to believe it. I cried and pleaded. I bargained nightly with the heavens that if I fully recovered, I’d become the most benevolent crown prince there ever was. And when I didn’t recover, I withdrew. I didn’t go out of my room, didn’t let anyone see me. Nicostratus spent days outside my door pleading to come in, but

during that time...”

“You couldn’t. It hurt too much. You wanted to give up.”

“I couldn’t bear seeing you go through that.”

“That’s why—”

“I was so insistent. Yes.”

My throat aches; swallowing has my nose briefly tapping against Quin’s. It’s too dark to see him, for him to see me, and yet I have the strong urge to close my eyes. Some kind of veil, to stop the rawness I feel inside leaking out completely. “Somehow, losing my magic hurt more when I looked at you.”

“Why?” the question is soft, too knowing.

I open my eyes and laugh hollowly.

His slow, whispered “Cael” sends a bolt of panic through me and I push my back harder against the side of the coffin.

“You don’t need me anymore.”

Silence.

I hear the words again, in my head. You don’t need me. It echoes painfully and I want to take them back. But they’re hanging there between us.

His breath hitches.

The darkness is too much, the confined space far too intimate.

“Cast some light,” I gasp, clawing for air.

He coaxes soft magic to his hands, and at once I wish it gone again. He looks at me carefully, gaze too serious. The coffin seems to shrink around us. He feels larger, warmer, closer. It’s overwhelming.

“Finding an antidote,” I say, squeezing my fist. “It’ll be a tough task. We’ll need all the help we can get. My grandfather wrote a lot about the dangers of amorous fungi. To think it’s used as perfume and incense! No wonder you paled when I gave you some.”

A brief flash of amusement quirks his cheek and he rearranges himself, shifting his glowing hands between our chests. The change in light draws my eye to the edge of the bruise at this throat, and an image of Sparkles perched atop him, like I had been, fills my mind. Had she kissed her way down his throat, or had he steered her there in the throes of the moment... Had he truly been drawn to her, or had she worn amorous perfume?

“What are you thinking?”

I jerk my gaze to his. “I’m glad you banned it from your dance house.”

“Did so immediately after it was used against me.”

I stare at him and swallow. I’m curious, but I don’t want to ask.

He answers anyway. “It was used to make me impregnate my wife.”

Veronica. Their son.

“I loathed being forced to marry, and I was stubborn enough to insist I’d never lie with her. We were locked into a room with those spores. Far more than a dance house might use. So much, in fact, we both began seeing things. Things we desired. It was like living a fantasy. He was beautiful and I craved him, and he craved me.”

“Veronica.”

“When the spores wore off, when we realised what had happened... We despised what had been done to us. The shared anger brought us closer. We talked more, opened up about our needs, confessed to wanting, one day, to find our true loves. Discussed how we might make that work. And by the time Veronica discovered she was with child, we’d become more than two people who respected one another. We’d become friends. We were happy that we understood one another and that we could be a special kind of family. With love for one another, just not... that kind of love.”

“She told me. When I was upset at you flirting with that aklo.” My brow pinches, and my gaze trails back to the darker spot at his throat.

Just how much of Quin’s skin had Sparkles ravished?

Quin shifts, nose sliding over mine. “Would you like to see?”

I snap my eyes to his flashing ones.

“You keep staring at it,” he says.

I huff a laugh and grit my teeth.

“I didn’t trust her,” he whispers against my jaw. “I didn’t like the way she looked at you.”

“You didn’t like her and you let her—” I poke in the direction of his throat, and he captures my finger in the glow of his. “At least get a vitalian to heal it!”

“I don’t want to.”

I try to pull free but he doubles his grip and pulls my hand to his throat, hooks the fabric and pulls it down, and I see the mark in its entirety. The bruising mark from lips and suction... and the twin puncture wounds at the centre.

I stare at the wound, my mind catching up with my body’s realisation. My lips. My suction. My mark.

The world tilts, and a strangled sound escapes my lips.

Quin watches me with calm calculation that feels... too intense.

I duck my flushing face and bang my forehead against his chin. He lets go and curls his arm around my back. His breath sifts silkily through my hair.

I groan. “Please. Get us out of here.”

He summons his magic and hauls me tight around the waist. Before he forces our way out of the grave, he nips my ear. “We’re not close to finished.”

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With Quin's power and royal blood, the wards of the graveyard pose no issue. Neither does gaining access to an apothecary: it belongs to a supporter of his, who happens to be leaving today with a redcloak unit. We can use whatever we need, and there's even a sleeping nook in the back room.

With a few candles flickering around stone walls, I meticulously sort through the vials and pots, and start a fire in the stove. I burn myself on the metal plate and wish I'd been wearing my gloves... My scalded fingers flutter to the knot at my cloak and I shake my head sharply. Focus.

Across the room, not helping, Quin paces. "You must be exhausted. You should have slept before coming here."

I wave him out of my line of sight. "The poison is unique. I have a fair idea of its makeup now, but designing an effective antidote... it'll take time. Time we don't have."

"I'll get people onto it first thing," he says behind me.

I startle and shoo him to a corner chair. "We'll need all the help we can get. If I can design the base, it'll make the remaining trial-and-erroring easier."

I use the largest pots to make enough, and carefully measure all the necessary ingredients. I pour a crimson liquid from one vial into the pot and mix it with clearwater, stormward, sunburst—dew and herbs that counter the earthbloom, thundergrass, silverbell known in the poison. Though I know bush-snake venom is included, its counter venom might affect the properties of the other unknown herbs,

so for the base, I exclude it.

“What is this for?” Quin asks, caning towards the glass vial at the far end of the table.

“Don’t touch that. It’s the poison I pulled from my handkerchief.” I walk him back to his seat and point a finger at him warningly. He swats it away, but remains in the chair.

I stare at the various stages of concoction and glance wistfully at my hands. This would have been easier with magic. I’d have internalised all the different elements that I could call to my palms; could play around with variations without worrying about spillage, and liquids coagulating.

I squeeze my hands. The refugees don’t have time for my inner crisis.

Quin shifts in my peripheral vision.

Crises.

I haul in a steadying breath, and without looking at him, jerk my finger toward the back nook. “Take the bed.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

Tension falls off me the moment he leaves. I take a minute to palm the table and rest my weight against it as a shiver races down my middle.

I divvy up a portion of the base liquid into various vials, and spend the next hours sweating and yawning as I mix and remix possible additions that might act as the last missing element. The room swells with the bitter scents of herbs and fungi, and every book in the apothecary has come out of its shelf. Damn venom. I slump onto my stool

and glare at the vials.

Other vitalians may have ideas.

Two candles burn out, leaving only one flickering near the window. I contemplate finding more, but the sky outside has a blueish tinge. Dawn is approaching. I spend a few more hours tinkering, and then another grinding herbs and soaking potential fungi, and packing them in boxes for Quin to deliver along with the base. Save as much time as possible.

I find paper and ink and scrawl out some hypotheses and other notes for the vitalians. I yawn again and the words before me blur.

Just for a minute, I'll rest my head. I curl an arm on the table in a wedge of free space and lay my head down. Quin has people who can help. It'll all be alright...

I wake, bolting upright... in a bed. My boots have been removed and on a small table beside me is a fresh, folded change of clothes, and glittering in... evening light? my silver clasp sits atop the pearlweed gloves.

I stare at them for a long while, then with a sharp rise and fall in my chest, I swivel out of the bed and dress. I clasp my cloak and pull the soft gloves over my scalded hands. "My soldad would've been handy."

I check the apothecary, but the shop is shut for business and—to my relief—Quin is not inside. On the table is a message—he's delivered my notes and the base antidote to the vitalians he trusts most in Hinsard; I should rest and recover; he'll see me later and we can 'talk then'.

With a nauseous twist in my stomach, I head out for food—

And duck right back around a building, groaning as I strip a poster with my face on it off a wall.

Only once the dead nannan's green veins appear will the magistrate's office take the poison seriously, and with the grass evidence from the first murders holding traces of that poison, they can make the connection. When that happens, Nicostratus, who wasn't in the city when the poison was ingested, will be proven innocent. And it will become clear I couldn't have been his accomplice. My whereabouts during the days since doling out porridge will have to be explained, but no matter—by then the focus will be finding the true culprit and saving the refugees.

Until then... I raise my hood and grab a bun from a vendor packing away for the day, tossing payment as I pass. I bite into the tough dough and, at a stray thought, chew quickly.

Grandfather had notes on snakes and their medicinal properties, and many books remain in his Hinsard cabin, left unscathed by my father. It couldn't hurt to venture out and grab them. Most likely the libraries and vitalians here will manage without, but just in case... And, bonus, the woods make it easy to avoid seeing people... er, being seen.

I hurry, head bowed, through a web of city streets to the wooded outskirts. As I cross the tree line, the last stretches of sunlight surrender to a blueish night alive with the shiver of breezes. The glow of the full moon keeps my path along the river lit.

Each step churns up dirt and the fallen reds and golds of autumn, and the damp, earthy scent carries memories with it.

Veronica's manor. The royal woods. Running from redcloaks.

Nicostratus .

Each step is a thunk of my heart and a twist of guilt in my chest.

The swing bridge has been repaired since then and I pause in the middle of it, watch the rush of water beneath. We'd ridden the wind to the tops of the trees, and I'd fallen, stopping and starting with interrupted gusts pillowing me.

I close my eyes and recall the fear, the fall, the flashes of rainbow. Prince Nicostratus had been fighting for control over a wyvern, barely trained himself and trying to keep the boy who'd latched onto his side alive.

Nicostratus. How many times I told Akilah our story. How many times I've whispered his name.

"Nicostratus." It tastes different now.

I bow my head and, at a snapping of twigs in the near distance, snap it up again. I search for signs of movement amongst the trees, but all is quiet.

I shake my head and cross the bridge into thicker woods. I keep to the river, where the moon paves my way, and at a fork, I pause. If I cross the weaker stream and continue down the broader arm, I'll pass blue-snake nests and arrive at the violet oak.

Next full moon. The tree from when we were boys . The moon is full now.

I sigh.

But I'd known, shortly after I'd called that to him as Quin stole me away, that he wouldn't be able to come here. He'd lost all his memories of the tree. Forgotten the moment we leaned on one another. Would never recall the first moment I looked at him and liked .

I can hear what Quin would say. How straightforwardly he'd say it. That might be the first moment; doesn't mean it'll be your last.

I shake off the ghost of his voice, and the sudden tickle at my ear where he'd last nipped it. With a tight swallow, I drag myself away from the past, and towards my grandfather's cabin.

The stream narrows and takes the moon's illumination with it. What's left of the light casts eerie shadows into a web before me; stepping into it sends a crisp chill over my skin. My breath becomes foggy wisps, and branches take on strange shapes in my imagination: all the sick I couldn't help, clawing angrily towards me. Their skeletal figures multiply and the fear of the dark I had as a child creeps back to me.

A sudden urge to turn back has me halting, but then I see the faces of refugees in the trees, an ominous foretelling of what might come if I don't push on. I curl my damp palms and try not to worry at the sudden ceasing of the wind.

Each step is a crunch through silence; I hold my breath, shiver, and wish for someone to hide behind...

From a slit between craggy trees, I spy Grandfather's cabin. I jog over uneven ground towards it, and halt abruptly before stepping onto the veranda. Was that a faint creaking? Footsteps? Why did it—I breathe in and my stomach turns—smell putrid?

A shadow passes the window, a flicker of light.

I grip the rail and haul all my courage. Something sticky meets my palm and I lift it up to the silvery light.

Blood.

My pulse hammers. There's the instinct to run. This might mean danger.

There's a stronger instinct.

Someone is hurt. Someone needs aid.

Heart pounding in my throat, I climb the steps and fumble for the cabin door.

Rusty hinges squeal as I push it open.

A gust of wind howls through the cracks in the walls, lifting the smell of rot and damp earth into the room. The wooden floor groans under my steps, and—movement.

I shoot my head up.

A single candle flickers in the corner of the room, casting shadows over a hunched figure... and a dead body.

I scream.

My scream is short and sharp, and then I'm storming across the room brandishing the only weapon I could find: an ostrich duster. It might be a shock of feathers at one end, but I wield it adamantly.

At my ruckus, the hunched male figure tenses, but does not turn until I'm a feather's width away. When he does, when he unravels himself with the help of a cane, I'm the one who freezes, arm extended, weapon pointed at his face.

“Quin?”

Quin prods a finger into my feather duster and steers it down. “Arcane Sovereign.

You're a lost cause. Next time, run."

My gaze drops and zips along his limbs. "There was blood . I had to come in."

"Ah, like any sensible person."

I lift the duster and give him a good... dusting. He shakes his head in dismay.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

He grinds his cane against the floorboards. "Why are you?"

"I'm not hiding. I mean, I am hiding. I don't want my face seen. And... Grandfather had a lot of books on snake venoms." I gesticulate wildly to the cabin and everything in it, halting at the dead body behind Quin. "All this belonged to him."

I frown as something about the body prickles my senses. I put down my duster, pick up the candle, and kneel at the side of the decaying redcloak. I look up at Quin, expectantly.

"There's another behind that shelf."

I startle.

"Don't worry. That one's alive, though slightly damaged."

The blood . . .

I rise and round the shelf to another prone body and an unconscious but familiar face.

"Vitalian Dimos."

“Quite the day for the lost being found,” Quin murmurs, gaze straying from my hands to the clasp on my cloak.

I swallow. “Get me some cloth.”

I tie up the deep cut on Dimos’s arm and eye Quin, who is leaning nonchalantly on the wall beside us. “Why didn’t you heal him?” This much Quin could do alone.

“At this point, he’s lucky to have his head.”

I give him a chastising headshake.

“He was dragging a dead redcloak through the woods.”

“You followed him?”

“In case he led me to more bodies.”

“Just the one, then?”

“Mm.”

“What has he told you?”

“He threw a spell, I shielded, he got knocked off his feet and landed on something that did that to his arm. He tried another spell and I knocked him out.”

“In other words, you haven’t asked.”

“Shall we now?” He thrusts his hand outward and hits our suspect’s acupoints.

The vitalian groans as he sits against the bookshelves. “Who are you? What do you want?” He squints at us and lingers on me. “You. You’re the par-linea with ruined meridians.”

I wince. He’d been very rude the first time I’d talked to him, but that didn’t necessarily make him a bloodthirsty killer. Although finding him with a dead body in a decrepit cabin in the woods...

Quin grabs hold of the man’s shirt and hauls him forward. “The soldiers. What did you do to them?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Here’s a reminder.” Quin drags the vitalian to the dead body and drops him beside it.

I tug Quin’s sleeve and pull him quietly aside while the vitalian gulps and stares at the body.

“Certain you can get a confession out of him this way?” I ask.

“I’m the—” he stops and clears his throat. “I’m a constable. Do I not exude a general feeling of authority?” He whips his cloak dramatically as he takes a confident step forward with a snap of his cane. I bite back a smirk, which he catches.

“Cael...” His eyes flash with warning as he leans closer to me.

I swallow, and a sharp shiver dashes through my middle.

His lips curl and an eyebrow arches. As our suspect tries to sneak past and make a run for it, he grabs the back of his cloak, his eyes never leaving mine.

“As you were,” I say.

Quin drags the vitalian back and once again sits him with the body. He barks for an explanation, but our middle-aged suspect looks like he’s about to soil himself.

I crouch between them. “The dead redcloaks, they tried to kill the prince the night before they died. They were not a good bunch. I know that. Were they the ones who got your soldad confiscated?”

Quin, crouched very close behind me, whispers at the back of my ear, “Being nice won’t—”

“How’d you know?” Dimos blubbers. “They claimed I gave them bad spells. I didn’t. I really didn’t.”

“Is that why you killed them?” Quin growls.

I glance to my hands. “You must have felt empty and hurt, losing everything you’ve worked your whole life for.”

Quin shifts; Vitalian Dimos shuts his eyes briefly and shudders on an exhale. “I wanted them to feel my pain.”

I should never have saved you. “I understand.” I feel Quin stir beside me, and suddenly he’s closer. His hand brushes mine as he grabs hold of the man’s shirt and hauls him forward.

“What did you do to them?” Quin growls, his focus never wavering.

“I didn’t kill them, I wouldn’t. Ever.”

The quiver in his voice sounds genuine, but I can't ignore the bloody trail that led us here.

Quin grunts, letting him go. "If you didn't poison them and try to frame Prince Nicostratus, why were you at the outpost?"

"I put some harmless activator in the well water."

"Activator?" At Quin's suspicion-filled tone, I quickly clarify in hushed tones.

"He wanted the redcloaks to lose their shit. Literally."

"That was the only reason I was there. It was supposed to vent my anger. I never thought I'd trip over their bodies."

"You knew they were dead, then. Why did you run away?"

"It didn't look good for me, did it? I'd been stripped of my soldad. I was angry and people knew it. I didn't like my chances."

"Trust the truth will speak for itself," Quin says.

Dimos laughs. "Since when is the justice system known for relying on truth?"

I nod sympathetically. "Someone really should do something about it."

"If I ever see the day."

We both sigh, and Quin flicks the back of my head.

I rub the spot and clear my throat. "I believe you didn't kill the redcloaks, but... why

exhume the bodies?”

“The poison.”

“You know about the poison?” I shift closer to him, with an eagerness that has Vitalian Dimos rearing back.

“I noticed something was off,” he says. “One of the four held a handkerchief to his mouth and the healer in me grabbed it as I passed them.”

I halt, and Quin and I exclaim simultaneously: “ Four ?”

Dimos looks between us, frowning. “The same four who came to me a few days earlier. Two of them had been stung by bees; I gave them a spell to help with the swelling. I didn’t expect it to worsen their symptoms—it shouldn’t have, it was a spell I’ve done a hundred times before without fail.”

My mind races as I analyse the properties of the spell, and how it might have—“It clashed with the earthbloom in the poison.”

Vitalian Dimos looks at me with newfound respect. “You’ve studied this.”

Quin frowns. “Where’s the fourth body? Our absent-without-leave soldier?”

A fourth body and a cover-up by the commander...

“Why would someone take his body and not the others?”

“Maybe the same reason I took one?” Dimos says. “To prove something? In my case, my innocence.”

“Innocence...” I murmur with a pointed look. “How did you escape the memorial grounds?”

He flushes.

“How?”

“Took all my magic to break out through a dog hole in the wall. From back when it was part of a manor, before it got made into a memorial. I lay low with the body until I’d restored my supplies, then waited for dark and dragged him here. As you can see”—he glares in Quin’s direction, and then shrinks back when he receives an intense look—“I didn’t get away with it. He flies in from nowhere and the next thing I know I’m being interrogated by you.”

“What do you know about the refugees?” I ask.

Vitalian Dimos frowns. “The ones coming in from the border? They’ve been coming in waves for months.”

He doesn’t know.

“Have they finally brought the plague with them?”

“What are you talking about?”

He rubs his brow. “There’s been whispers of plague in border towns in the southern kingdom. I’ve been trying to warn the higher-ups that we need to be prepared, but... out of sight, out of mind.”

A plague would sow chaos and fear, masking any foul play in its wake. If the poison was part of a larger plan, then whoever orchestrated it has calculated

everything—even the panic that would follow.

I turn to Quin and he reads my worried expression.

“I’ll have people look into it,” he says.

I nod, and meet Vitalian Dimos’s furrowed gaze. “What is it?”

“I can’t be sure, but the morning I stumbled over those bodies... I think I saw...”

“What?”

“White lace.”

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“White?” Quin’s gaze shifts from the dead body to Vitalian Dimos’s grimace, then to me. “What does that mean?”

“Eparchess Juliana. She always wears white lace and a mask. I’ve seen her at the outpost, the refugee camp, and speaking with Commander Thalassios at the dance house.”

Which, come to think of it, I haven’t divulged to Quin yet. The encounter got lost in the rush of what happened after, from exhuming a body, to working on an antidote, to interrogating our missing vitalian over a putrefying redcloak...

I steer Quin to the corner of the cabin and share what I overheard about the instability of the borders, and wrap up musing, “She’s awfully mysterious. How haven’t you seen her?”

Quin frowns. “I wonder... Or perhaps she’s avoiding constables.”

“She’s definitely hiding more than her face.” I tug his sleeve, but he doesn’t immediately react, watching me instead. “We need to talk to her. We also need to find our fourth redcloak. We need to return to the outpost.”

“Officially, we’ll have Commander Thalassios breathing down our necks,” Quin says. “But perhaps I won’t mind if you drag me along by the sleeve.”

My hand is already pulling again—too far to stop, and too hard. The fabric pulls and the collar gapes, revealing the flutette at his neck.

I fumble to push his shirt back in place, muttering, “Why is it so flimsy?”

“Feel free to take it off and cast it away.”

With flaming cheeks, I glare at him. “Keep your mind on what matters.”

“Then—”

At a flicker of arrogant mischief in his eyes, I cover his mouth quickly. “There’s a drakopagon game the day after tomorrow, at the outpost training field. Eparch Valerius asked Nicostratus to play.” I pause, dropping my hand from his smile with a tangential thought. “Why would he invite Nicostratus when he’s under house arrest?”

Quin scoffs. “He’s royalty, after all. No one would dare refuse to invite royalty to such an event.”

The world of the important. I suppose that does make sense. “Anyway, tomorrow the nannan should have started showing green veins. Let’s free your brother and get him to the game. While he’s playing, distracting the crowds and the commander, we’ll look around. Dress as if you’re there to watch the game.”

“You seem very keen on dressing me, would you like to do it yourself?”

I go to shove his chest—

And grab his belt instead.

Quin sucks in a breath, his smirk fading while I feel around the strap. “Where’s my soldad?” I ask, half expecting it to swing obnoxiously into view. “You’ve been dangling it in front of me since...” My voice falters. “It’s gone.”

Quin's hand moves to his belt with uncharacteristic haste and a deepening frown.

"You had it in the coffin," I say. "I felt the hard wood between us."

Quin stills, gaze rooted on his belt.

I try to cast the worry out of my voice. I have no right to be upset. "Maybe it fell off? I knew I should have asked for it sooner."

He meets my stare with amused calm. "I suppose you'd like me to dig it out for you?"

"Could you?"

His smile is slow and... frustrating. "If you come along again."

That 'again' throws me right back into the coffin with Quin, that tight, tight space, his knowing look...

Over a lurch in my belly, I step back to Vitalian Dimos.

"Let's rather focus on what has to be done." I jerk a finger at Quin and try not to let my gaze fall miserably to his belt. "Get us back to town. And get your brother on board."

Vitalian Dimos asks, "What about the body?"

While Dimos conducts a few tests on the body, I raid my grandfather's bookshelves; then we bury the redcloak in the woods.

As I drop the last stone onto the churned soil, I glance at Quin. "How did you end up following him?"

Quin looks away, frowning at his cane. “The vitalians working on the antidote were struggling. They shooed me off. The moon was bright, so I took a walk and that’s when I saw him dragging the redcloak through the woods.”

Something niggles at me about this story, but for now my mind homes in on one particular part: “They’re struggling?” I swallow.

Vitalian Dimos is watching us, and I hook his gaze. “You’ll help me with the antidote.” His face pinches on the cusp of refusal, and I add, “Once we’ve got it, once everyone who’s been poisoned regains their health, you’ll naturally be acquitted—and admired.”

He grunts. “You’ll let me take the lead. Non-linea like you...”

The words cut deep. Non-linea. Not even par-linea anymore.

I swallow down a rising lump and nod, and once we’ve returned to the apothecary, I work under Vitalian Dimos’s orders.

Quin leaves to see his brother while I’m flipping through Grandfather’s books, searching for anything on venoms. I scroll every page carefully, not to overlook anything in the densely written pages. There’s plenty of information on all the variations of bees there are, where they’re found, and how venomous each is. But snakes... where were such indexes for them?

Maybe one of the other books?

Quin returns before I’ve finished the second tome, with no invitation to show. One look at his troubled frown has my stomach instantly knotting.

“We have to let that decoct,” Vitalian Dimos says, following up with a yawn. “Best

use the time to sleep.” He stumbles into the adjacent room, finds the bed, and falls onto it.

Quin slouches in a corner armchair, his gaze lingering on the simmering potions and the book in my hands.

“He won’t see you?” I snap the book shut.

“He said constables should visit during working hours.”

My stomach twists guiltily, and I grab the cloak I’d flung over the armchair and whirl it on.

“Cael, leave it.”

“It was enough you stole me away from his manor. Stop making decisions for me. Nicostratus is important.”

He opens his mouth to speak and shuts it firmly. I’m already leaving as he nods.

Petros is awash with relief at his first sight of me. There’s something different about him tonight; it takes me a few moments to figure it out. “You’re not wearing your wyvern button.”

He looks down at his shoulder, where it should be pinned. “Ah... it must’ve fallen off. I’ll fix it later. More pressing is the prince.”

He leads me swiftly through the myriad torch-flickering hallways towards the prince’s chambers. Each door that creaks open gives way to more and more disorder. Knocked over chairs, strewn fabrics, abandoned goblets, emptied jugs of wine.

In the distance comes a hollow, drunken laugh against the sound of someone playing the flute. It doesn't take a constable to know what's been happening here.

I look pointedly at Petros, and he grimaces. "He's been like this since you left."

"Like this."

"We do things we regret when we're desperate."

Heart jammed with heaviness, I dismiss Petros outside Nicostratus's chambers, and wait for him to leave before I knock.

"Who is it?" comes a snarl.

I take a steadying breath and open the heavy door. The room is lit with pockets of candles on shelves and on a corner desk, and a musician stands in the middle of the room playing sad melodies on the flute. Across from her, the prince is sprawled on a velveted chair, pouring crimson liquid from a jug into a silver goblet. His dark dishevelled hair momentarily curtains me from his view, but when he sets the jug down and casts his gaze my way, his body freezes.

Wine sloshes onto his white shirt as he pushes out of the chair. He dismisses the musician, who bows and rushes past me.

"You've come back ."

My chest plummets.

Nicostratus stares at me and falls back into the chair with a wretched expression. He laughs again, no humour in his eyes, and tips the rest of the wine down his throat in three gulps. He casts the goblet across the room and it rolls to my feet.

I pick it up and set it on the table beside him.

He's shut his eyes. "You're not back."

My stomach lurches. "Let me read your pulse."

He throws his wrist at me; with a swallow, I hold his arm gently. There are still fading bruises from all that he's had to put up with. My voice rasps. "You've been like this for days? You need water. You need sleep. You need to stop drinking."

His dark gaze hits mine and I let go of his arm to fill his goblet with water, from a pitcher that has barely been touched.

Nicostratus continues, words slurring, "I love him. But this... Has he told you what he did yet?" He shakes his head. "He hasn't. He shouldn't. He won't."

I hand him the water. I want to ask what Quin hasn't told me, but I think if I do, I'll break Nicostratus. "Drink this."

He takes it and frowns at the clear surface. "Why did you come tonight?"

"Drink and sleep first. I'll ask for your help later."

"Help?" He straightens, struggling to keep his gaze sharp, focused... His brow pinches with worry. "What's the matter? What do you need?"

He is good. He is kind.

"Tell me," he insists with a small hiccup.

I perch on the arm of his chair and, rubbing my temples, murmur, "We need your

guest invitations to the drakopagon. Need you to play and distract the commander while Quin and I search the outpost.”

“Constantinos again.”

“He’ll have proved your innocence by tomorrow.”

“That’s not what I want most from him.” His words, though laden with alcohol, are weighted and his gaze bores into my profile.

“Let me get you into bed.”

“If only you meant that.” He turns my chin and makes me look at him. “You’re wavering. You were already wavering on that island. Isn’t that why you put distance between us?”

I swallow. Then, I’d been trying to protect them both.

No words pass my lips.

He lets me go and twists his violet oak armband, his eyes fixed on it. “You called him a lemon. Sour. He irritates you, makes you mad, makes you laugh, makes you afraid. And he makes you cry.” His gaze drops to my clasp. “I’m kind. Steady. But he makes you feel .”

His words drop through me, quick and sharp, and I’m left trembling in their wake. I lurch off the chair, move to his bed, and fight shaky hands as I peel open the blankets.

Nicostratus glares into the middle distance. “He makes me feel lots of things too.”

“Let’s talk when you’re not drunk.”

“I’d rather”—he stands and sways, and I lunge to catch him around the waist and steady him—“be drunk for this conversation.” He drops his head against mine. “Will you ever come back for me?”

His breathing shifts. I stir him and his head rolls forward. “Nicostratus? Nicostratus?”

He snores lightly. I steer him to the bed and buckle as I bend him into it. His shoes, I remove, but the rest... It’s too much. Too intimate.

I pull the covers to his chin and his arm dangles out the side. I take it and set it on the mattress. My fingers linger over his knuckles and I stare down at his beautiful face. My whisper comes out choked. “I’m sorry.”

I’m turning to leave when his fingers hook around one of mine. I stare across the room.

“Please don’t . . .”

I won’t go. I’ll stay and make sure he’s alright. Remind him, when he wakes, how he can help...

He lets go of my finger. “Please don’t come between me and my brother.”

I slump onto the armchair and watch him sleep. He was drunk; maybe most of this conversation will be forgotten when he wakes. I drop my head back and stare at the flickering candlelight against the ceiling.

I’m asleep when the candles burn out, and when I stir, it’s to a blueish dawn stretching through gridded windows. I rub my eyes, and the night before rushes back to me. I lurch to my feet. Nicostratus is sitting on the edge of his bed, hands clasped between his knees.

He looks over at me, and I look back.

“Nicostratus—”

“I remember everything,” he murmurs. “I meant everything.”

Please don't come between me and my brother.

“I can't go yet. There are so many poisoned, I—”

“I'll help tomorrow at the drakopagon. I beg you, say your goodbyes. Go.”

His expression is heartbroken, pleading.

“This... envy. It'll be the ruin of us. Please. I'll take care of him. I'll see he finds happiness.” His throat juts on a swallow. “It doesn't have to be you.”

My stomach sinks, and my eyes sting. It takes all my effort to hold my head up. “Will you also find happiness?”

“If I promise to, will you go?”

I briefly shut my eyes. “I have to help the refugees.”

“It's not as if you have magic anymore—”

I cry out, “I can help!”

He moves forward, reaching out a consoling hand, and drops it again. “When the poisoned are healthy, then...”

My throat is swollen. It hurts.

I take the golden feather from my belt and place it on the table beside us. Nicostratus stares at it, and I startle him by wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my forehead against his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Nicostratus."

He stiffens.

I sigh into his garments. "Let me take away our good memories?"

A watery drop lands on the top of my head. When I step back, he hurriedly turns his face to the wall.

I make my way to the door slowly, wishing he'd stop me, tell me with time, it'll all be alright.

He says nothing.

I traipse back through the city, hood shadowing my face, stomach roiling. Procrastinating, I take a detour through narrow, near-empty lanes, only to bang into Petros tucking a package of herbs under his arm.

He acknowledges me politely.

"Hangover remedy?" I murmur.

He shifts the package higher up and nods. "Better hurry back."

He and his long legs stride off to help the prince, and I stare glumly after him.

I'm so busy staring after him, I almost don't see her. Only a false step over

cobblestone has me jerkily looking up in the other direction.

Eparchess Juliana and her mysterious silver mask glide across a dingy alley into one of the smaller apothecaries. I'd been there before, in my search for a cure. It doesn't sell the usual herbs but rarer ones, ones that have traversed borders.

I follow and feign interest in some siren's tear while the eparchess picks up a small box of seeds and takes it to the counter.

The vitalian recognises her at once and strikes up friendly conversation. "Here again so soon. You're quickly becoming my favourite customer."

Eparchess Juliana laughs, but the grind of her foot suggests she's in a hurry.

The vitalian pours something into a pocket-sized pouch, and I try to get a better look. Difficult from this position...

"I heard you'll be playing against the redcloaks tomorrow. I'll put my money on you, of course."

Eparchess Juliana takes the pouch with a polite, "See you there," and strides out.

I drop the very pricey roots I've been 'inspecting', and start to follow—

"Anything I can help you with, there?" His smile is kind. I lift one of the roots and take it to the counter, bypassing the emptied box on my way... "What kinds of rare items do you stock?"

"Oh, some beauties." The vitalian points to a dozen boxes, running off their impressive names and uses.

“The woman before me. She took a whole box of something. Was it particularly rare? Have I missed out?”

He laughs. “Semi-precious. Echowisp.”

My stomach twists.

Echowisp.

I hurriedly pay an outrageous sum for a root I don't need and race out of the store, hopeful I might catch her to follow.

Nowhere in sight.

I sigh and slouch my way back to Vitalian Dimos and—I swallow—Quin. Each step has me feeling queasy and queasier, and I have to jostle myself on the stairs outside. Keep it together. Focus on the antidote.

Don't let Quin know what his brother has asked.

I practice smiling a few times while bouncing on the balls of my feet, and when I think my act will pass, let myself inside.

I find them conversing over simmering potions. Dimos has consumed some of the elixir and is stacking a spell in his palm, a bright, swirling, misty magic. My heart aches to feel it.

“At first the victims will experience tummy aches,” Vitalian Dimos says. “That resolves itself after a day, leaving most to assume they've eaten bad food. But the poison is still there. It's just biding its time until the gelidroot bubble thins. That's when the poison leaks out, surges through the blood, and kills.”

“Caelus calculated four days for the soldiers.”

“Correct. How long it takes to work depends on the dosage of gelidroot in the poison.”

“Are you suggesting—” Quin begins.

I clear my throat, coming into the room. “The victims’ deaths can be timed.”

“Why give the redcloaks four days?”

“Presumably the killer needed them to finish a task first? Or have them die at a time that gives an airtight alibi?”

Or have them die after Prince Nicostratus arrived in town.

Quin’s lips are set in a grim line. “How long do the refugees have?”

I’m not sure what the reason is for timing the refugee’s poison, but I have a bad feeling about it. “The nannan should have started showing green veins. Get the coroner to investigate, announce the poison officially, then take all combined knowledge on it and the antidote to Thinking Hall.”

“Thinking Hall?” Vitalian Dimos muses.

“We’ve a ticking clock. We need all minds collaborating on this.” I gesture to the spell in his hands. “You’ve stacked most of the spell, but there’s still a key layer missing.”

“I have some theories . . .”

“Discuss it with others. Decide on the best choice. Do it now.”

“I can’t enter the hall. I’m wanted.”

So am I. But that seems unimportant in the scheme of things. Even if I get locked away, I have a moral responsibility to help the poisoned. In whatever way I can. Collective knowledge will be the fastest way.

I glance at Quin, unable to stop my lips from twitching.

His brow arches.

“Masks.” I tap his chest, right above where his heart should be. “Yours is practically welded on.”

His gaze locks onto mine in a way that has me shivering. “And what about yours?”

His words linger, cutting deeper than I want to admit. But there’s no time to dwell on that, not with lives on the line.

“Then let’s see how well we wear them,” I choke out, forcing my focus back to the task at hand. “We need to move.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am

The rain hammers against the apothecary's windows, blurring the view of Hinsard's main square.

Inside, Quin's fingers glow faintly as he works his magic, threads of light spinning into crude disguises.

"These should hold," he murmurs, his voice steady though his hands tremble slightly. "Nicostratus can help us gain entry to Thinking Hall. He's sending Petros to bring badges that grant foreign dignitaries passage."

My stomach tightens at the thought of Nicostratus, and the masks Quin spoke of earlier feel heavier now.

True to his word, Petros arrives within the hour, his sharp gaze cutting through the apothecary's dim interior. His eyes flick between Quin and me before settling, suspiciously, on the badges he carries.

"The prince has asked me to report back to him directly," Petros warns, handing us the crested badges.

My stomach tightens. Report what back? The progress on finding an antidote? Or whether I'm foolishly standing too close to Quin again? I glance at Quin, whose unreadable expression—calm and commanding—betrays nothing.

I make a clean step away from him, and he nonchalantly closes the distance again. This time, I make an excuse to cross the room, and Quin sends Petros and Vitalian Dimos ahead.

When we're alone, he leans against the leaded windows, cane propped into the corner beside him, and curls his finger for me to come.

The air is thick with dried herbs, the floral scent of our potions, and the dust from wooden shelves on the walls.

The air in my lungs is tight.

Milky sunlight filters through the glass around Quin, outlining him in a soft halo. Struggling to keep an innocent bounce in my step, I cross to him.

I halt a few feet away and drop my gaze. Quin's fingers wrap around my wrist, his grip firm yet deliberate as he draws me closer. The air between us sharpens, and the space I thought was safe narrows until my foot touches his.

The touch of his hand lingers as he releases me, sending a shiver down my arm that I pray he doesn't notice. He picks up the mask he carved—meticulously, I realise, the edges smooth against my skin as he tilts my chin upward. The wood fits perfectly along the bridge of my nose, and his hands linger as he ties the ribbons into place.

My breaths falter as his gaze remains steady on me, his voice dropping to something softer, closer. "We won't wear these forever."

Something swells in my chest, too overwhelming to name, and I pull back quickly, forcing a smile. "Do your part at the constabulary. I'll head to Thinking Hall."

It'll be Vitalian Dimos who goes on stage. It'll be him using magic to show our progress on the antidote, him leading the discussion on how to complete it.

I know this. Quin knows this.

Others might say I don't need to be there. Why must I take the risk? He knows I must. He understands it calls inside me, to see the sick healed. That I am deeply emotionally invested. For the sake of the refugees.

For the sake of my dream.

I ball my hands still.

Quin notices. Of course, he notices. "What is it?"

I throw out a laugh that hurts and quickly turn away from him. "I'm frustrated I can't have what I want."

"What's that?" he asks quietly after me.

I pause and, at the familiar—almost comforting—sound of his cane, hurry out, away. "Magic."

Like the Thinking Hall in the capital, the one in Hinsard heaves with the weight of stone and knowledge. The air tastes like parchment and ink, and the vaulted ceiling way, way above feels like a pinnacle of learning that is both unreachable, and aspired to by all who enter.

I feel small in here, of pitiable wisdom, yet eager to drink in more. Voices of debating scholars vibrate through my mask, a heady feeling. I slip to a lone wooden bench at the perimeter.

A figure crosses my path and seats himself next me by the adjacent wall. He's wearing a sweet and musky perfume that has my senses sharpening.

I look at him—the man who's also tucked himself in the corner. There are a few signs

that, despite wearing local fabrics, he's not from here. There's his supernaturally beautiful face, and his brilliantly blonde hair—a shade lighter than my own—and while he's not wearing adornments, his right ear is pierced in three places where he might.

His gaze slices to me and his lip curls, unimpressed at my brazen staring. I jerk my eyes away slightly and shuffle over the bench in his direction, whispering under my tongue, “You must be from the south... Iskaldir?”

“For someone wearing a mask, I'd have thought you'd understand a man's desire not to be recognised.”

“Forgive me,” I say with an apologetic grin that doesn't quite reach my eyes. “When I saw you, I thought you might be a healer. Someone who could teach me...” Someone who could teach me to heal without magic. Someone who could show me a path... where Quin isn't.

“I'm no healer.” The southerner turns his attention to the stage, and it's obvious the conversation is over.

I sink back on my seat, slightly disappointed but unfazed. I'm not here today to make such contacts anyway.

Applause meets the end of a scholar's monologue, and he leaves the raised platform to be replaced by masked Vitalian Dimos. I grip the edges of the bench as he invites those seated in this hall to help him with a medicinal puzzle.

Whispers start. From my corner, I have a good view of their profiles and eager expressions, and I scan the sea of scholars with a silent prayer. My gaze freezes on the familiar face of Commander Thalassios, out of his uniform and perched in the opposing shadowy corner. His eyes are narrowed on Dimos, and he shakes his head

grimly when the elements of the poison are revealed.

I expected to see people I recognise here—like Eparch Valerius on a middle bench close to the stage, surrounded by wealthy vitalians he invited and will get donations from later; even the vitalian from yesterday in the speciality apothecary I'm not surprised to see.

But a redcloak commander? What is his purpose?

Is he here alone, or... I search for Eparchess Juliana's robes, and my stomach tightens.

There, in the front facing away from me. A female figure with white hood drawn low.

Vitalian Dimos quickly has the crowds rapt, and at the plea to help identify the missing catalyst for the antidote, Eparch Valerius rises. "Fellow vitalians, believe this not to be mere curiosity. This puzzle is of utmost importance. Before we began today's session, I was made aware that the refugees seeking help here may have ingested this poison. Please, I beseech you all to solve this. Save our guests."

Valerius climbs onto the stage to support Vitalian Dimos, offering a monetary prize for the key ingredient. He suggests ranunculaceae to get the ball rolling, and it isn't a terrible idea. He's clearly dabbled in medicines and understands compound reactions. Could buttercup or hellebore extract work?

Scholars chime in with various uncertainties. Clematis, in the same family, has been known to backfire when paired with snake venoms, causing stiffness and sudden death. The risk even of trial is much too high.

Everyone is riveted, except for Petros who keeps nodding off, and after an hour of heated discussion, Eparch Valerius raises his hands to quiet the concerned ruckus. "This topic needs further dissection. Let's part briefly for lunch, and those with

relevant experience return to my private residence in two hours.” He gestures to Eparchess Juliana. “Would you be so kind as to prepare ahead for us?”

Juliana rises and—

Not Eparchess Juliana.

Sparkles, in a similar cloak.

Invited to Thinking Hall by Eparch Valerius to entertain his vitalians? Keep them happy in the hopes of larger donations? Or another reason entirely?

She curtsies and leaves first, the commander close behind her. A quarter of the scholars follow, along with Eparch Valerius and lastly Vitalian Dimos, who catches my eye and nods that he has this under control.

A flash of envy sluices down my middle. I wish I could tag along, be in those chambers as the vitalians piece together the last of the antidote. It takes effort to return the nod.

I catch the southerner eyeing me, and wave a hand for him to return to frowning at the remaining crowd.

Those not specialised or interested in poisons and antidotes remain, and a pale, gaunt-looking vitalian takes the stage. “Recently we’ve been plagued with commoners asking if they too can learn healing skills, and outsiders asking if they can enter into our Medicus Contest. All because that par-linea was granted permission to sit the exams and enter the palace.”

That par-linea.

He's talking about me.

“How do we position ourselves against the barrage of requests?”

I clamp my hands down on the seat and tense as scholar after scholar stands to spout their thoughts.

“Par and non-linea should not be meddling in the art of healing! They're born inferior, judged perhaps on their past lives—they have not been given the right. They should accept their place in society, live a good life. Perhaps in their next one they'll be rewarded.”

“Past lives? While I don't agree with your reasoning, I do with the premise. Par and non-linea should not dabble in these arts. It's too risky, too easy to make mistakes. Those mistakes will cost lives. Our kingdom is built on a reputation for having the highest quality healing in the world. We should not risk what we are respected for.”

Two more scholars stand, agreeing with this, babbling on about the need to preserve our cultural heritage.

“Let them join in the contest, and they'll be after more.”

“As they should be,” I mutter under my tongue, eliciting the southerner's narrowed glance.

“It's a slippery slope,” someone cries. “We'll soon be overrun with healers that barely heal patients and extort them for unreasonable sums. Crime would rise significantly.”

This has dozens of scholars on their feet chiming for the ‘good of the people’. “No magic, no healing.”

The gaunt man on stage calms the crowds, gesturing them to sit. “We have a consensus. The common class has its place in society, and that place is not within Thinking Halls. To educate the masses is to dilute the sanctity of magic, weakening it and thus us as a kingdom. We must, therefore, protect it at all costs and strictly deny commoner access to education, and refuse healers from other countries trying to take part in our Medicus Contest.”

The words ring through the hall with stomach-dropping finality. The applause is deafening and each clap feels like a punch. My stomach aches, along with my throat. I feel smaller in the vast hall than when I first entered. Even the air has grown colder around me.

A part of me wants to slink out and take this ball of unworthiness with me, but another part is screaming.

It's not only me they're talking about.

They're judging the vast majority of the population. They are accusing people of heinous crimes that have no base in fact, only fear. They're attacking those who have no voice to stand up for themselves.

My jaw clenches and I stand, each breath tight, fighting against the invisible chains they've been forging around me with their preconceived notions of par and non-linear capabilities.

“Education is air that is meant for all to breathe, not only those deemed worthy by your biased judgments.”

There's a collective swish as scholars turn and stare.

The gaunt man on stage smiles sickly. “And who are you?”

I ball my hands at my sides, and the southerner beside me rises too. “We are those with dissenting opinions.”

“Do you have magic? Do you have a right to be here?”

I step forward. “I have every right to be here. Even if I don’t have magic.”

The crowd gasps, and a few shout that we’ve insinuated ourselves into this sacred hall and should be cast out immediately before we taint it.

The Skeldar snarls and declares our kingdom its own worst enemy. “...kill more of yourselves than any unrest at your borders.”

He strides past me to leave, and when I take another step to fight against the crowd, comes back and drags me along with him. “Don’t waste your breath.”

But I do. I yell back, “You’re all afraid. You’re afraid you aren’t good enough. Afraid there will be others that surpass you with less.”

The words feel like Quin’s, sharp edged and unyielding. But they feel good in my mouth. Because it’s the truth.

The hall erupts into outraged shouts.

The Skeldar continues to haul me alongside him.

We leave the hall with warning shouts at our backs: not to think we can be healers; that we’ll only cause death if we try. “Sooner or later you’ll see.”

My stomach roils, and I glance at the Skeldar’s hold. The sun is strong outside, shining on red and golden trees along the canal and glinting brightly off the shock of

blonde before me. “They’ll be the ones who should wait and see,” the Skeldar says. And, without another word let alone explanation, he lets go and leaves.

I leave too, an ickiness to my step. Born inferior? Should accept our place?

I rub my temples and make my way down stone steps to the canal. Nestled between bobbing boats sits Quin’s borrowed dinghy. The bright sun from before is blocked by the stone wall casting a cool shadow over half of the water, and it takes my eyes a moment to adjust to both the shadows and the glare.

I step into the boat and it bobs sharply, pushing water around the other boats. A flash of fluttering fabric catches my eye a few vessels down. I look over to wood and spilled blood, and a crumpled figure lying face down in the boat.

I leap from dinghy to dinghy to get to him, pulse racing. The man is moaning and blood seeps from his skull. I throw my hands on impulse—nothing but air wakes over my hands, and the drop in my stomach feels like losing my magic all over again.

I choke back a curse, ripping at my cloak and pressing the fabric against the man’s wound to staunch the bleeding. “Hold on, hold on,” I say, mind racing how to treat him.

Quin’s words from days before echo faintly in the back of my mind: “ You can save without magic. ” But he’s wrong. I can’t. I’m not enough anymore.

Get him to Thinking Hall. To the vitalians.

But moving him, even lifting my hand off his head, will kill him.

I yell out for help, my voice deep and urgent, but no one responds. A gash this deep, bleeding out this fast— “Hold on, hold on,” I demand.

But I'm trembling now. I'm stuck here. Useless. No equipment, no one to help.

The victim's hand twitches, sparks briefly and fizzles. He has magic; maybe I can get him to heal himself. "Listen," I murmur. "Channel it to your head to stop the blood—"

I lose my voice.

Under me, the man has gone limp.

With my free hand I grab for his wrist, feel for his pulse. Then feel harder for it. It must be there. Has to be.

It's not.

I sink away from the body, hands shaking, covered in blood that seeped through the fabric of my cloak and my gloves. Sooner or later you'll see.

No magic, no healing.

If a vitalian had been here, this man would have lived.

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I shut my eyes, soaking in the cruel reality, and almost lose the contents of my stomach when I open them and spot a wooden mask in the bottom of the boat.

No-no-no-no.

I gently turn his face and fight the urge to scramble back in panic.

Vitalian Dimos. Someone bashed the back of the man's head and left him to die. I frantically search the boats and the shadows around me. Could the culprit be close? Watching?

Eyes stinging and fear in my stomach, I take off my cloak and rest it over Vitalian Dimos's body. I wash the blood off my gloved hands in the canal and return to Quin's dinghy. Hurriedly, wet fingers slippery on the oars, I row towards the constabulary. With clumsy feet I make my way to the road and hover in the shadows across from the gates. On a public noticeboard beside them is my picture, with a group of constables in thick conversation.

I swallow and spy to the left a familiar crest on the doors of a passing carriage. Prince Nicostratus. He's been called in formally, for an apology and to remove his house arrest.

I race alongside the carriage as it pulls to a stop close to the gates. I open the doors and Nicostratus ducks out. "Thank—" He sees me lifting my mask and stops abruptly. First his face is awash with joy, but his eyes narrow onto the shoulder of my shirt and his expression quickly greys. He looks away.

“You’ve approached for a reason,” he says, dismissing the aklo who came to aid him.

My stomach sinks. “Please, I need you to get Quin.”

He hisses, and starts striding past me.

“There’s been another murder,” I say.

He hesitates but keeps walking.

“The sooner we solve this, the sooner this all ends.”

He pauses. “Tell me where. I’ll send him there myself.”

I give him all the details, where the body is and when I found him, and then I leave Nicostratus to sort it out with his brother. Better this way. What can I possibly do to help?

I stare at my hands and scrub them once more in the water. They still feel heavy with blood. I pick up pebbles and use them to scratch it all off but it only rips holes in my gloves.

Hot tears leak down my face. I can’t even use my hands to wipe them away.

I trudge back to the apothecary and try again to wash and mend my gloves.

Ruined.

I slip them back on anyway and let my chest sink every time I look down at them.

Cherry liquor is my only consolation. I find some in a dusty corner and imbibe on the

floor of the sleeping nook. As the day wears into evening, I begin singing and laugh hollowly between songs. An emptied bottle spins in the dimming light of the room, and I stare at its dance while sipping from a larger bottle.

“Make me forget.”

The door creaks open further and a breeze rushes in. The curtain beside me flickers in front of my eyes and when it settles, there’s another presence in the room. The weight of him, leaning on his cane, is like a pressure on my chest.

I laugh through it and continue singing.

He witnesses this silently, and sinks into a sitting position against the opposite wall.

I choke on the final lyrics and end with, “I failed to save him.”

“You can’t save everyone.”

“Did you find who did it?”

“Not yet. They struck again.”

I frown.

“They bashed Eparch Valerius on the temple and left him for dead.”

“He died?”

“Nearly. Luckily, he’d invited so many vitalians to his home. And he was quickly found.”

I curl my useless fingers tightly.

“It’s not your fault, Cael.”

“I tried. I failed.”

“Not trying would be the bitterest failure.”

The clarity of his words, the sincerity . . .

I shut my eyes not to look at him. It’s not my fault. There’s simply no magic. And no reason for me to wait here until the mystery is solved. I should be putting distance between us. I should have packed my things and moved into an inn on the opposite side of the city. So why, then, have I stayed in the apothecary, drinking? Why, then, have I hoped he’d find me?

Say goodbye and go now. Get this... this tightness off me.

I open my eyes, my mouth. Quin has tipped his head back against the wall, his lashes softly kissing his skin. Tired, exhausted, he’s also grieving—the loss of his power, the distance from his son, the sufferings of his people. I press my lips shut again.

Goodbyes come in all forms. It doesn’t have to be rushed. I owe him too much for that. Spending a few last hours together is something I ought to do. In fact, bringing up goodbyes at all seems inconsiderate. Better I pretend this is like any other time. Like it might happen again. Tomorrow.

If he’s upset when he realises... well, at least our last moments will have been good ones, spent comforting one another. There’ll be others who waltz into his life. He’ll triumph over his uncle and he’ll find happiness.

I pick up my bottle and swig another sharp bite of cherry liquor. After I put it down, I catch my breath, and I crawl across the space to Quin and tuck myself into his side.

He stirs and stiffens, and I rest my head under the curve of his chin, shameless despite a distant voice warning me I shouldn't. He's warm beneath my cheek, and I feel the steady rise and fall of his breath as his arm curls around my back. His other hand brushes my hair behind my ear, the tender touch sparking something painful in my chest.

"You've gone soft," I murmur into his shirt, my voice muffled.

His fingers pause mid-stroke, then resume, slower, deliberate. "Soft for you, only."

His tone wraps itself around my thoughts, too heavy to untangle.

"Don't say things like that," I whisper.

"Why not?"

Because.

I don't answer, and his hand continues its lazy path through my hair.

I murmur, "You're not in uniform."

"I went to the inn and bathed before coming here."

I breathe in the scent on him. "You bathed in smoky water?"

"It's from the crime scene. Lingers."

“Smoke?” What’d happened?

I don’t ask the question, but my slight pause is enough for Quin to understand. He murmurs, “Valerius’s garden was also set alight. We saved most of it.”

“The killer went after both Vitalian Dimos and Eparch Valerius,” I murmur. “ They must have seen how close we are to finding an antidote. Too close for their plans.” This is meant to frighten the vitalians. It’s meant to distract them, to make them hesitant.

Which means . . . the murderer visited Thinking Hall.

Why didn’t they use poison?

I sigh into Quin’s shirt. Perhaps the poison wasn’t on them? Or if it was, couldn’t be easily adjusted to bring about an instant death? And they needed Dimos and Valerius to die quickly, before they solved the puzzle. “Did Eparch Valerius say anything that might help find the killer?”

“The knock to his head was heavy and blunt. His memory is affected. He vaguely recalls seeing a very long shadow stretching over his flowers.”

I shiver and shake it off. No use thinking about this. Nothing I can do. The fate of the refugees can only be in the hands—the magical hands—of others.

My nose pushes at the flutette under Quin’s shirt; I try to blow a sharp note through the thin material and it comes out like a sigh. “The last of my magic is in there.”

“Do you want it back?”

His voice is soft, and I curl my fingers around his to stop him taking it off.

“Your gloves,” he murmurs.

I hide my hand by sliding it around his waist.

“I’ll get you new ones.” His voice turns throaty. “When I saw your cloak over Dimos’s body...” His fingers draw down my hair to where I’d hastily pinned the clasp to my shirt. “I’m glad.”

I don’t remember doing it. I was too lost in all that was happening; I’d moved on instinct.

Like I’m doing now, sinking into the nooks of his body. I can hear his heart. It thumps as hard as mine.

We stay like this, holding one another, until the dimness of the room becomes darkness. My breath catches. There’s something about Quin’s protective embrace, the soft weight of his gaze, that leaves me feeling... understood.

“What do you think we’re doing?” he asks quietly.

My breathing becomes jerky and I fight through it and squeeze Quin tighter. “You promised as long as it’s my dream, you’ll support me. I had a hard day. Keep holding me.”

His fingers still against my hair for a second, then continue their lazy stroking.

“How full was that bottle?”

I shrug. “Both full.”

He sighs, his chest rising and falling, taking me along with it.

I'm rising again when Quin's breath stops on a sudden groan. He drops the hand at my ear to his thigh. I draw my weight off him, and he hisses, his face contorting as he tries to withstand the pain.

"Cramp?"

"is fine," he gasps. "Will pass soon."

I press a palm above his knee and at his hip and help stretch the muscle. "Stand." I support him up with an arm around his waist. "Put a little pressure on the leg, I've got you."

He does and grunts again. I clutch him tighter as he bears through it and soon his face stops scrunching. "Better."

Barely. I help him to the bed and he collapses onto it. "I'll bring you something for the pain."

Quin gestures to the bottle of liquor. "That'll do."

I grimace but comply. A few swigs has a numbing effect—too much has a tendency to impair memory, which for unbearable pain might be a good thing.

He takes a deep drink and I set the bottle on the floor. "How often has this been happening?"

"It's always painful."

"I mean like this, these cramps? The poison makes them excruciating. I know it does."

Quin drops his head back against the pillow.

“You’ve been overdoing it,” I continue, “rushing around the city, solving mysteries. You need to sit more. You—”

“—have things to do. Places to be.”

“You’re not resting your leg enough.”

“I must keep using it, no matter how painful.”

His words slam into my chest and I stare at my hands, the frayed thread of my gloves. I understand. I’d also use any fraction of magic no matter how much pain I’d suffer.

I nod, and busy myself pulling off his boots. “When you’re done for the day, have a hot bath, stretch and massage.”

“Massage?”

I kneel on the bed beside him, peeling off the cloak that covers his thigh. The muscle is tight, taut beneath my touch, and he twitches involuntarily. His gaze snaps to me, and I can feel the weight of it, burning into my cheek.

I keep my head down, focused, methodical. I tell myself this is just another wound to treat, but the steady heat of his skin under my fingertips...

My hands slide shakily up his leg, working the muscle from the knee upward—

I freeze as my fingers brush the sensitive inner thigh. My pulse trips. Quin shifts, and when I look up, there’s something darkening in his eyes.

I swallow and quickly lift my fingers.

He's still watching me.

I slap his good leg. "Stop it. I'm trying to help you."

Quin's laugh rumbles through his chest as he grabs my wrist and tugs, sending me tumbling beside him. I scowl, but my face is inches from his, and the smirk tugging at his lips roots me there.

He tilts his head. "I had a hard day." His voice drops, low and coaxing. "Hold me?"

My breath hitches. For a moment, I consider snapping something witty, pushing him away—but I can't. His words are soft, his expression rarely open. Vulnerable. I settle against him, my head resting on his shoulder.

"Don't get used to this," I warn.

He hums, the sound vibrating through me. "Too late."

I slam my eyes shut.

He strokes a hand over the side of my head, cupping the chin I've dropped and lifting it again, urging me to look at him.

"What's wrong?"

The softness of your touch. The look in your eye.

The butterflies in my chest.

I lurch over him and grab the bottle next to the bed. Half sprawled on his body, I take deep swigs. Quin laughs under me and I throw him a sharp look. “This is your fault.”

His hands slide up to my waist, pulling me squarely onto his chest. My balance falters, and I catch myself with a hand against his shoulder, but the way his eyes glint up at me steals my breath. He whispers, his voice low and daring. “What’s my fault?”

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A soft groan escapes me as I open my eyes to a sharp pounding in my head. I wince at a ray of dawn streaming into my eyes, curl my face to the side, and freeze. I'm not alone. Quin must have drunk a lot too, or for certain he'd have cast me to the floor.

My gaze drops to his open shirt, the flutette that's fallen beside his exposed shoulder. His cloak has become my blanket.

My pulse quirks as I try to piece together the night . . . but this throbbing . . .

What's my fault?

I flush and quietly smack my forehead. How did I respond?

I close my eyes briefly. It doesn't matter. It can't. I've had my goodbye.

I quietly ease myself out of Quin's embrace. I want him to notice I'm gone and wake. I want to hear his voice one last time. I want to see the dark eyes that have a way of fishing inside me, hooking those weirdly volatile feelings and demanding I squirm.

I want those things.

I need him to stay sleeping.

Accompanied by the throb in my head, I slide out of bed, find my things and tiptoe away. I wince at the creak of floorboards, and only release my held breath when I reach the workshop. I waffle as I pack my grandfather's books into a sack and, three times, I sneak towards the sleeping nook only to turn around again.

How exactly did our goodbye go last night?

Heat stings my cheeks and I shove the question deep. With a shrivelling soul, I leave the apothecary.

Every bone in my body is heavy. I trudge through a sleeping city, shrouded by the shadows of my own frown. It feels like I'm doing something wrong. But what else should I do? My memories with Nicostratus, and my memories with Quin... even put together they're a fraction of those the brothers share.

How can I come between them?

My feet clack against cobblestone and, amidst the first stirrings of the marketplace, I throw my head up and glare towards the heavens. Why is this so hard? Why does it feel like losing my magic all over again?

“That's him!”

I snap my head down. A townsman is jerking a finger in my direction, and two on-duty constables head towards me. Too late. There's nowhere to hide and no time to run. I shrink back several steps, cursing under my breath, and am forced to give in when I'm apprehended.

“This is him,” the first constable confirms.

“Could be he killed Vitalian Dimos too.”

My stomach sinks.

“And tried to murder Eparch Valerius.” One of them shoves me. “How'd you get in? Dress up, did you? Delivery man? Aklo? Pretend to be a vitalian?”

They shake their heads in disgust. “Saw the wreckage of the garden.”

“Always more sympathy for flowers than people.”

“Can’t trust people. Flowers at least you know what you’re getting.” Roughly, they drag me to the constabulary, where the head constable eyes me for a grimacing moment. He vaguely recalls seeing me before, when Prince Nicostratus had been framed. “Put him behind bars,” he tells his men. “We’ll interrogate him after the drakopagon.”

I’m shoved into a cell in the inner courtyard with a handful of other men—two passed out drunk, and three more with their heads resting on bent knees. I land on straw and the iron gate clangs. The snick of the lock sends a cold shiver through me.

Given the chance, I can prove I’m not involved in these hideous crimes. It’s also explainable why I’ve been difficult to track. But having to wait is frustrating. Not the time itself, but that it’ll give Quin the chance to discover my whereabouts. He’ll hear it from his colleagues, and he’ll come, right after investigating at the drakopagon. He’ll do everything to make sure I’m swiftly released, and I...

Will have to face him.

I scramble around on my knees and stare wistfully at the keys dangling from the belts of the constables crossing the courtyard. Come back. I shake the bars, testing their might, hopeful one might bend and let me escape.

Someone snickers. I glance to the three men sitting against the back wall, heads raised to watch me, and gasp.

I recognise them, from the morning doling out porridge to refugees. “You’re—”

“You’re wasting your time.”

I look at the bars I’m gripping and let them go, sagging against the adjacent wall with a deep sigh. “You’ll be acquitted soon,” I tell them. At least someone should get good news. “You won’t be here much longer.”

None seems particularly surprised by this. “You don’t seem surprised by this.”

The man who snickered strokes his goatee with a warm smile. “We believe in our king. He’s asked for our patience; promised our freedom.”

I stare at each of them—the goatee, the crooked nose, the frowner. “Why do you believe in him?”

Crooked Nose in the middle, polishing his circling wyvern button, answers, “We schooled with him. Knew him before he was poisoned, and after. We’ve seen him stand up for classmates bullied by the high duke’s allies, we’ve seen him pretend to be a merchant and donate his personal monies to orphanages and aid. We’ve seen him pick himself up after countless falls. If he makes a promise, he fulfils it. He’ll get us out of here. He’ll get his kingdom back.”

Frowner cocks his head and eyes me sharply, “Do you believe in him?”

I laugh painfully against a reel of flashing memories. I don’t know exactly the moment it happened, but somewhere along the way I not only began believing in him, but became someone who would die for him.

I swallow hard and turn my face away from them. My focus quickly locks onto an unaccompanied figure traipsing through the courtyard. His short, hacked hair gives him away immediately.

As if by recognising him I've summoned him, he looks up and his gaze clasps onto me. His step falters, and then he's storming towards the cells, fists balled at his sides. "You." He grabs hold of the iron bars and glares down at me. His anger seeps around him like charcoal smoke. He's par-linea like I am—like I was .

"You poisoned my nannan."

I shake my head. "I'm sorry for your loss. I promise you, I didn't harm her."

His anger swells along with his uncontrolled magic, like plumes now. "She shouldn't have gone like this. Shouldn't have suffered. Shouldn't have had to stay so many days here."

I sink my head. He's here to retrieve her body for burial. Of course his reasoning will be affected today; forcing him to believe in my innocence would be fruitless. Selfish. "May she rest in peace," I murmur.

He shakes the bars and the lock rattles. "Why did you do it? Were you in on it with them?" He jerks his finger towards the goatee, the crooked nose, the frowner. "Were you all under orders from—"

He stops speaking abruptly.

"From whom?" I ask, frowning.

His jaw twitches. "She should be having a grand funeral. All her friends and neighbours, sending her off into the heavens. Instead, she'll only get me." He sneers. "Did he invite all the refugees to a stupid drakopagon to spite us?"

Tiny hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I throw out my suspicion. "The commander?"

His anger is swirling now, his hands keep shaking the bars. He shouts, “My nannan didn’t deserve to die. His father did.”

His father did.

The commander grew up at the border. The townspeople took care of me growing up, it’s only right I repay them.

How exactly did they take care of him? What did repaying them mean?

A shiver races down my spine. Is this the motivation for poisoning the refugees?
“Your nannan killed his father?”

He doesn’t seem to be hearing me. “Why her?” He sags against the bars, sobbing.
“The whole town was in on it.”

“The whole town... did you tell this to the constables?”

“I shouldn’t have said, shouldn’t have said. Promised Nannan...” He rips himself away from the bars with a snarl and leaves with a promise we’ll all pay.

The hairs at the back of my neck are still standing. A shivery sense of foreboding tightens my gut.

If the commander did poison their town, why invite the refugees to the drakopagon?

Unless... I suck in a sharp breath. Could they be part of a big show of revenge? A town witnessed his father die, now others should witness the town dying?

The more I think about it, the more nauseous I become. We’ve been wondering how long they have. A big event like this... “They’ll die today.”

Goatee, Crooked Nose, and Frowner jerk their heads to me, and I shove to my feet. “I have to warn them.” Vitalians need to get to the drakopagon with the best hope of an antidote they have.

I yell for a constable, and one marches over with a growl. “Quiet. Should be at the game, not babysitting you lot.”

I tell him he needs to send vitalians to the drakopagon; needs to tell the constables the refugees are in trouble.

The constable hears my fervent pleas as a threat and turns his back, muttering. Goatee, Crooked Nose, and Frowner stare grim faced into the courtyard as he leaves. “If we could break you out, we would.”

I turn slowly, Goatee’s words forming an idea. “When do they open the cell?”

“When they put someone in, or take someone out.”

“Take someone out?”

“To be executed or—”

“Or?” I ask hopefully.

“If they’re already dead.”

I grimace and plant hands on my hips. No time to waste. The game must be starting soon. “Looks like I have to die again.”

Frowner’s eyebrows shoot upwards, and I explain. Ten minutes later, Crooked Nose hits my acupoints, immobilising me prone on the floor. My whole body is stiff and, to

anyone not knowledgeable in healing and the body, I look the part.

Goatee and Frowner shout for help and make a great scene to the constable that I suddenly keeled over, clutching my chest.

“He died just like that?”

“See for yourself.”

The constable kicks my legs and curses. “You two, carry him out to the courtyard. No funny business.” I’m lifted and trundled to the courtyard where, subtly, Frowner hits my acupoints again as a sheet is laid over me. “Back into the cell.”

Footsteps retreat and I hear the jangle and snick as Quin’s men are locked back inside.

“What will you do with him?” Crooked Nose asks.

“You can watch as I burn him.”

I stiffen.

Goatee speaks, keeping his voice steady. “Constable Michealios won’t like that—if you burn him without officially recording the cause of death. If I were you, I’d get the coroner.”

“What would you know?”

“Up to you.”

The constable grunts, but he stomps off, footsteps clacking angrily against stone.

Goatee calls out quietly when the clacking has receded. “Be quick.”

I throw the sheet off, bow my thanks, and run.

I’m bolting across the road towards the cover of trees when I plunge into the person I’ve most dreaded plunging into, and known it’s inevitable I would. Quin’s standing at the roadside with a squeezing grip on his cane and a displeased frown. His lips are flattened and his eyes are narrowed on me.

My heart jumps in fright and I stumble to a halt. He stares at me, his jaw flexing in the manner of a man gritting his teeth. I don’t quite understand. I’m the one who should feel the weight of emotions seeing him, knowing I’ll have to force myself to leave again. For all he knows, I left for only a moment.

“I watched you sneak out,” he says bluntly. “What were you running from? Or should I ask who?” His eyes search mine, daring me to answer. Even if I want to answer, the lump in my throat won’t let me.

I whip my head from side to side. We can’t do this right now. “We need to gather the vitalians. Get to the game.”

“I’ve already sent for them.”

I blink, startled and impressed.

“I bumped into Nicostratus’s head aklo on his way there. He said there’d be a thousand spectators, including the refugees.”

“That was enough for you to know they were in trouble?”

“Call it instinct. Suspicion.”

I tell him about the commander's father, dying at the hands of the town, and Quin steers me roughly into the nearest buggy. He tells the driver to bring us to the redcloak outpost, and then an awkward silence swells between us as we rattle over cobbled roads.

Quin glowers. I fidget.

I look out the window, and back at his brooding expression. When he meets my gaze, I rip mine away, and when I sneak it back, I find his still rooted on me. I jump, and whisper-blurt, "What?"

If there'd been shadows over his face before, they were nothing to now. Quin leans forward, scrutinising me. "You don't recall last night?"

My chest pounds wildly, and a shiver zips deep down my middle. To be looking at me this intensely... something significant happened. I shift on the bench, crossing an ankle, jiggling my foot, uncrossing it. Do I inquire? Can I handle it?

I'm supposed to be gone. After today, I will leave again.

"What do you remember?" he asks softly, but the kind of softly that feels like a mask.

I jerk a finger at his attire. "You're not wearing your uniform. Why were you headed for the constabulary?"

He growls. "I told you, I saw you this morning. I followed you. Saw your arrest. I was making a plan to bring you out."

Is he upset I left after... whatever significant happened last night? I swallow. "I thought the drakopagon would've been"—his eyes flash, and I mumble the last part—"your priority."

We stare at one another, and then he says, “I shouldn’t be so surprised you weaselled your way out of confinement.”

“Surprised?” I choke. “That isn’t... what you looked like.”

He raises one tight brow. “What did I look like?”

Like you’d whisk me away and lock me up all over again. “A smidgeon upset—”

The buggy jolts over a rock, causing me to fly off my seat and into Quin. I scramble to find balance, to push myself back, but he curls an arm around me and hauls me closer. My breath puffs against his chin and I lift my gaze to deep, dark eyes.

“A smidgeon?” He presses his face so close our noses graze, and his steely focus drops briefly to my lips before rising again. “Want me to remind you what happened last night?”

Shivers bolt hard and fast through me and when he opens his mouth to speak, I clamp my palm against his lips. I shake my head wildly.

Don’t. I don’t think I should know.

Don’t make it harder for me to leave.

My hand is trembling over his face and he hums hotly against my skin.

I talk before he tries. “It’s not the time for... this.”

His hand comes up to mine and drags across my fingers. He’s feeling my shaking from all sides, and it... softens the look in his eye. He inclines his head and I slowly, slowly drop my hand.

His arm tightens around me, crushing me to his chest, and he murmurs against my ear. “Don’t you dare leave my side until we’ve talked.”

He releases his hold on me and I slink to the opposite seat.

I bite my lip and I’m first to flee the tight confines of the buggy when it stops at the bottom of the hill. I start towards the outpost and he immediately grabs my hood, reining me back to his side. “I meant what I said.”

By his side. Right.

There’s a crowd being checked at the outpost gates and entry is a slow process. Quin presents our letter of admission, and at my lingering look at it, informs me Nicostratus gave it to him yesterday.

At the mention of the prince, I steer my gaze elsewhere. Once inside, we take to lurking in the shadows as we scope out the arena and search for the commander.

A cordoned-off area of a flat expanse of grass defines the drakopagon pitch and around it mill a thousand spectators. There’s a betting station set up on one grassy flank, and by a large margin, the favour is for a redcloak triumph. On the opposing flank is a welcoming station, where nobles are perhaps trying to sway guests in their favour. Soldiers knock back the drinks, laughing, but the smirks on their faces tell me they’re still not placing their money on the opposing team. There’s more hesitation when they’re confronted by an exquisitely dressed Sparkles, fluttering her eyelashes and swishing her skirts.

Eparch Valerius nods at her and hands out more free drinks to the drooling crowd. “Cheer on the underdogs!” Behind him, Nicostratus’s head aklo has been roped into helping, refilling quickly emptying jugs and sweating profusely as he tries to keep up.

I shield my eyes from a series of blinding flashes of reflected sunlight. “More people than I imagined.”

Quin’s hum is equally surprised. “I thought the redcloak team would be made up from the commander’s unit. My father-in-law’s soldiers are... unexpected.”

I look over at a large portion of the crowd. Even though they’re out of uniform, laughing and sipping their welcoming drinks, they all sport circling wyvern buttons.

Sunlight hits them, and once more I cover my eyes from the glare. When I look again, my sight is captured by Prince Nicostratus riding onto the pitch, waving the noble team’s flag. He rallies a cheer for his team and trots around the pitch, scanning the crowd as he rides. On the third turn he spots me—and Quin.

His jaw shifts and he churrs his horse into a vigorous canter, whipping winds around him. The crowd becomes a murmur of appreciation at his blinding grace and power. Guilt ripples down my spine. I take a large step away from Quin and force myself to make useful observations. There’s something about this scene...

Most of the spectators are men, redcloaks both in and out of uniform, wearing circling wyverns in support of the true king. But there’s also a fiery female crowd amongst the refugees, and they’re singing folk songs of infamous drakopagon matches.

I watch their joy with a sickening ache. They’ve no idea. They think the food poisoning they had a few days before was horrible, a malicious act by the runaway king, but that they’d miraculously survived it.

My jaw clenches as I search the crowds for the sadistic culprit, who is wholly aware of the atrocity soon to happen.

“Where are the vitalians?” I ask Quin.

“I told them to come as spectators. They’ve consumed and stacked all layers of the antidote barring the last key catalyst. I ordered a trusted vitalian to smuggle in rare herbs hidden under roasted nuts.”

As he says it, I taste the strong aroma of sugared almonds. The cart is parked at the far edges of the field, partially obscured by barracks, not far from the infantry kitchens and herb garden.

I glance again at the refugees singing at the narrow end of the pitch. “Will there be enough vitalians?”

“It’ll be a challenge, but they should manage.”

Dread claws sharply up my stomach. “If we don’t discover the missing part...”

“They’ll use gut feeling and hope for the best.”

Gut feeling. How many refugees would make it?

“We need to search the commander’s room. Corner him. Force him to give us the missing ingredient.”

“He’s a dangerous man,” Quin says, gusts spinning around him. “I’ll find him.”

My hair whips in the sudden rough winds. I meet his gaze squarely and ignore the lurch in my stomach at his determinedly protective expression. “Either I stay by your side, or I don’t.”

His lips pinch at my threat but he hauls me along with him, past the nut cart, into the

heart of the outpost. Sunshine burns over corridors and doors creak where redcloaks have hurried out of their barracks for the game; the distant cheering and hollering is a constant buzz that covers our steps.

“Should we confront him,” Quin whispers, grip flexing on his cane. “Stay behind me.”

I nod, and we slip through the commander’s cracked door, the floor immediately groaning in protest—or perhaps warning. The chamber is lit by streams of dusty sunlight coming through the windows. We move swiftly around the room, searching for any clue to the antidote. There’s not a single plant in sight.

“Is there anything here?” Quin murmurs, gesturing to cluttered parchment on the commander’s desk.

I join him to search through it, but these are mostly lists of army equipment, requests for funding, marked maps—

“This is...” I study the parchment. “A record of donations the refugees received.”

I frown over it. Why does the commander have this?

Quin looks at it and the other handwritten documents on the desk. “It’s his writing.”

“He copied it?” For what purpose?

Frowning over this, Quin crouches to the bookshelf and shakes each book like he might find a secret note with answers. I lean against the wall behind the desk. All I have is a list that includes his name on it as delivering sacks of oats. Where’s he hiding his spells? The equipment he’d need to concoct poison? Any of the essential herbs? I don’t scent traces of anything.

I scan the page and jerk at a familiar name further down the list. Ariadne Aureliana. “Quin, look at—” I push my foot against the wall to kick off it, and my heel clicks something—

Suddenly the wall is shifting with a low rumble and swinging inwards. I stumble back with the momentum and yelp as I’m deposited into a cold, dark space. Quin swings around wildly in the commander’s room, and his frantic “Cael!” is cut off as the stone slams back into place between us.

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“Cael. Cael!” Quin’s yell is muted behind thick stone.

He bangs against the door-wall. It doesn’t budge. I press against it, but it remains firmly closed. I shiver, jam the list of donors into my belt, and turn around in the black space. I squint; the tiniest bit of light comes from under me. Far under me. I crouch and make out the rungs of a ladder descending. If there’s light, there’s something down there.

It’s not unheard of for commanders’ chambers to have secret passages running to the outside of outposts. Many war stories tell of redcloak messengers being sent down them during battle, to gather help from neighbouring outposts. It’s not even the first secret tunnel I’ve been in.

“It may feel impossible, like there’s only floundering in the dark, but if you look you’ll see lanterns lining the way. People on your side, giving their light.”

I close my eyes on the rolling punches in my gut. I promised I’d be the light moving with him. Instead...

Stiffly, I lower myself onto the ladder, gripping the rungs hard. It’s not a betrayal. If I stay, a brighter more consistent light will go out. Nicostratus must always be there, steadfast for his brother, as he has been for decades. It’s better to give up the smaller light for the bigger one.

With a croaky voice, I call to Quin that it’ll all be alright, that he’ll be alright, and begin my descent into the cold. Each step away feels like something stretching painfully inside, about to snap at any moment. I should be worrying about refugees

and murderers, but in the dark of this tunnel, I'm swimming in memories.

My soldad. Pretending to be my master. Encouraging me to fight for a place in the examinations. Giving me gloves to protect my hands. Trying to stop me from entering the bloodthirsty royal city; looking out for me when I went anyway. Cheekily suggesting I steal his pearl heart and gleefully punishing me for it. Letting me absorb his blood to infuse wyverns. Allowing himself to be publicly spanked; entering a poisonous miasma in my place; sacrificing his own healing for that of his subjects. Stealing me away. Promising to support me. Watching with wide-eyed amusement as I danced for him. Hiding with me in a coffin.

Holding me.

My eyes are hot; my throat stings, and my hands choke each rung violently. There's a sound above, and I miss my step, lose my footing. My arm jerks with my weight and my grip fails.

The world tips—the ladder vanishes beneath my feet, and wind tears through my lungs. Panic surges, but before I can scream, I'm caught—held in a blur of motion. Warmth closes around me, solid and steady. Quin. His arms lock around me, anchoring me even as we descend. His breath is hot against my temple, his grip secure and safe. When we hit the ground, he lets go, and the chill rushes back in.

“I told you not to leave my side!”

All those memories are crammed into my throat and I'm choking on them. I shove him. “Fine. Let's talk so that I can . Why are you angry? Because of last night?”

He growls.

“I didn't take you for the clingy type.”

Quin slams a hand against the damp wall beside me and leans close. “Don’t test me. You must know why I’m feeling this way.”

“Because I left you, after.”

“After, what?”

In the tight confines of the narrow tunnel, I yank him close until my back hits the wall and I’m pressed in on all sides. “Why are you so infuriating?”

“After, what?”

The damp earth and musty stone are a cool contrast to the fiery heat of Quin’s body.

“After—”

I can’t take it anymore—his questions, his presence, the unbearable heat of his nearness.

I grit my teeth, grab him around the nape, and slam my mouth against his. Fire and ice and lightning. My skin comes alive the instant our lips touch. I’m a cascade of goosebumps and my heart feels like it’s tumbled over a waterfall and is rushing away from me. Slowly the rush gives way to calmer waters and as my senses return, I gasp, tremble, and shove at Quin. Quin, who has gone still under my launch.

Heat floods my face as I wait for him to tell me how I lost control like this last night too; how I couldn’t hold myself back; how I—

“What was that?” he murmurs.

“What happened last night.”

The lines of his body shift against mine, and his hand cradles my head from the hard wall, fingernails sliding with a tantalising shiver over my scalp. His sigh against my wet lips is uneven. He dips his face against my throat and his nose glides up to my ear. “Last night... that never happened.”

My hands suction clammily onto the uneven wall behind me. “But you were half naked. You usually toss me off the bed!”

“I couldn’t summon the strength. And tossing you out of my bed? Takes all my strength.”

A zap of more electricity. “Y-you were upset this morning. I thought—”

“Why would I be upset at you kissing me?”

I fluster. “I was drunk.” I close my eyes to the image of his open and rumpled shirt, the flute askew against his bare chest. “I acted without thought. I snuck out in the morning, afterwards. Mostly, I thought you were hurt that... I don’t remember.”

Quin is quiet. Still a warm weight against me.

I swallow, whisper, “Why are you upset?”

A soft sound scuttles down the tunnel, shattering our fragile moment. Quin’s gaze snaps towards the noise, while mine stays stuck on him—on the way his chest rises and falls as if he’s been using magic for hours. His lips are still slightly parted, and I wonder—

Reality slaps into me with a chilly breeze and I shove Quin away and straighten my cloak, growling. Trembling. “This—” my voice cracks and I force it steady “—this is the last conversation we should be having.”

“It’d better not be,” he mutters, and follows alongside me.

Our footsteps are quiet shuffles as we head deeper underground. The air begins to thicken with the scent of herbs, a rich concoction that has all my senses on alert. Caelumradix, sylvestrisa, auroraroot... someone is seriously hurt, possibly near death.

My steps quicken. Quin stops using winds to support his leg—it might give our presence away—and hobbles, using the wall for support. My nape, my entire body, is a web of shivers from his touch and I’m afraid to pluck the web again, but he’s put too much pressure on his leg lately. His pain will worsen.

I hook a supporting hand around his elbow and try to ignore his gaze on my profile as we follow the scents.

We’re led to a hidden chamber, glowing with lantern light and vitalian spells. In the corner of the room is a bed, and on it rests a figure in red. His breathing is shallow, laboured, and it’s only the spells swirling around him that keep his blood pumping, keep him tethered to this life.

“Paxos,” Quin murmurs.

Our missing redcloak.

Who, the night before his abrupt disappearance, attacked Nicostratus near the canal.

Across the room, through an arched doorway, I glimpse an apothecary-like space. Shelves line a wall with jars of fungi and herbs, and there’s the distinct sound of something bubbling. A place to craft healing spells? Or to test poisons?

Before we can move nearer, a swish of white lace precedes the figure of Eparchess Juliana emerging from the room—without a mask. Her hands are aglow with a life-

prolonging spell, and it lights up her flawless, youthful face. She halts briefly when she sees us and calmly continues towards the body. “I wondered when we’d meet,” she murmurs.

I’m a myriad of half-formed questions and I want to start asking, but pause. Eparchess Juliana is not looking at me at all, but at Quin. Quin, who she has been avoiding since we’ve been here. Because he was a constable, I’d thought, but...

I frown, and glance between the two of them. Quin’s expression flickers, and he barks out a short laugh. “It’s been a while, cousin.”

“Cousin?”

They glance at me.

Quin says, “This is Princessa Liana, the high duke’s daughter.”

Eparchess Juliana— Princessa Liana —stiffens at the mention of her father, and my mind pulls at a few threads and puts them together.

“You’re the one Lucius taught? The reason he was sent to that island?”

“The reason I was cast away myself,” she says, briefly shutting her eyes. When they reopen, she settles her gaze on me. “You’ve seen him? How is he?”

“Trapped. Helping others as best he can.”

She lets out a heavy breath.

I steer Quin to a stool, which he reluctantly lowers himself onto, and I catch the dawning understanding in his eye. His sharp wit is already piecing things together.

But I still have questions. “May I ask?”

He inclines his head and I step towards the princessa. “You knew King Constantinos was here, acting a constable. You purposely avoided him.”

“I glimpsed him the first time you visited the outpost. I was behind the commander’s door. I admit, I was shocked at the time.”

My mind races, and I nod. “You were at the refugee camp—”

“I wanted to hear their story, to help build a picture of him.”

“They were sick that day. You couldn’t be sure what kind of man your cousin is. So at the dance house, aware Quin—Constantinos had followed, you left him to the commander to feel out.”

“Blood is thick with betrayal in my experience. I’m unsure who in the royal court I can trust. Including the king.” She eyes me sharply. “You were at the dance house?”

“Feeling you out.”

She laughs dryly. “And?”

“The puzzle I first put together has come apart and is reforming rapidly.” I frown. “The commander...”

“What about me?”

I swing around and my gaze narrows on his confident gait into the secret room and to Princessa Liana’s side, where he quietly asks if she’s well. She nods, and I look between them to the redcloak prone on the bed, and back to the stacked life-

prolonging spell swirling in Princessa Liana's cupped hand. The commander hovers his hand over it and uses his magic the same way Florentius did when testing the quality of my spells. I recognise one of the layers. The essence of echowisp seeds. I recall Eparchess Juliana buying them; the same flower used to frame Nicostratus. But of course, apart from its poisonous petals, its seeds are well known to increase strength and stamina. It would aid someone suspended between life and death.

Commander Thalassios nods, lowers his hand, and gestures for the princessa to continue.

Not the behaviour of a murderer. Unless this redcloak's death had been accidental.

The commander looks over my shoulder at Quin; he inclines his head respectfully. "No doubt you have questions," he says.

Quin returns, "Caelus here is quite capable of asking them."

The commander looks at me; I square my shoulders, step forward, and speak bluntly. "Your father was killed by the town the refugees came from."

His reaction, as intended, is sharp. His gaze darkens. "He was."

Dark wisps leak from him.

"Did you poison the refugees in retribution?"

"I was extremely angry, but not at the townspeople. At my father."

I bolt. "Your father?"

"He was a cruel, vicious man. I was barely twelve, and he'd nearly killed me multiple

times. When the townspeople found out how he'd torture me, they worked together. A secret they've kept since."

That's why no one mentioned it voluntarily. They must keep their mouths shut, or be held accountable for this death. "You donated porridge out of respect for them? Thanks?"

"I'll do more."

"Like inviting them to watch this game?" Was my intuition wrong? Are the refugees here out of gratitude?

"I didn't invite them."

My relaxing shoulders stiffen again. I pull out the list of donors from my belt. "Why do you have this list?"

"I copied it. Like you, we're trying to get to the bottom of this."

I look from the commander to the princess, who's pouring the last of the spell into the redcloak. "How did he end up down here? Why are you working so hard to keep him alive?"

"We were too late to save the others," the commander said. "Juliana had come to the outpost to discuss something with me. We were walking the perimeter when we saw them on the ground. The others were dead, only Paxos was clinging to his last breath. When he coughed up her real title, we went cold. No one is supposed to know her identity here. There's a reason she wears a mask; why she's designed a mysterious background. It became imperative we save him. We suspended him like this, between life and death. We've exhausted ourselves trying to find a cure. We must find out what he knows."

He stops suddenly.

“Or?” I ask.

Princessa Liana staggers back from her spell and the commander steadies her. She lifts her head and stares at Quin.

“Or all the witnesses involved in the earthquakes that I’ve found and hidden may be compromised.”

Quin sucks in a sharp breath. “My lead to find the commander was to find you .”

“I knew that’s what you’re truly after.”

“I must force him out of the royal city.”

They stare hard at one another. Princessa Liana speaks first. “It’s not the right time.”

“He’s actively ruining our kingdom. Compromising border security. Tearing families from their homes. Confiscating food and medicine from the people.”

“Are you any better?”

“Yes.”

“Such confidence. That’s why he’ll be trying to kill you. Destroy your power.”

I step into the mounting tension between them. Their words have sent a shudder through me. “Let’s discuss saving the kingdom after we save the refugees.”

Tight nods.

“The game has already begun,” says the commander.

Princessa Liana retreats towards the apothecary. “Let me get my mask.”

Mask.

The word rattles through me. Constables, demanding how I got into Eparch Valerius’s place . Dress up, did you? Delivery man? Aklo? Vitalian?

It all comes crashing together in my head. I ball my fist.

“The culprit has indeed been masking himself.”

Quin uses magic to support himself as he leaps off the stool. “You know who it is.”

“Worse. I don’t think we’ll have enough vitalians, even with a proper antidote.”

“What are you talking about?”

I see a flash of the welcoming stall, those continuously refilled jugs...

“The entire audience has been poisoned.”

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In the dim, musky stables, Quin leans against a beam, his cane braced at his side, while I press my weight into the wood to steady my nerves. Through a gap in the stable doors, I catch fleeting glimpses of the drakopagon pitch, where hooves thump against churned earth. A distant cheer from the spectators ripples through the stillness—and tightens the knot in my stomach.

A horn blows. Half time.

I glance at Quin with a tight swallow. This is it.

Murmurs drift from redcloaks traipsing to the privy. “They’re gonna cost me a pretty penny. S’like they’re asleep out there.”

Commander Thalassios leads Nicostratus and his horse to the stables, and he gracefully dismounts and hands the reins to a stableboy. He crosses to us, face impassive, but his eyes track both me and Quin and one of his hands—the one still wearing my armband—tightens.

I shake my head. No time for that. I pull him with haste further into our private corner; he lets me, his fingers closing around mine and lingering. Quin’s gaze drops, noticing this, and he schools his expression. The air suddenly feels stiffer and I jerkily face Nicostratus. “I need your help.”

He lets out a strangled breath. “I’ve always been willing to help you. Now is no exception.”

I tell him everything, and his eyes widen and search Quin and the commander’s faces

for confirmation. He looks down at the object I've pushed into his hands.

"Can you do it?" I ask.

His voice drops with displeasure. "Of course. I'll take him down." The steely grit in his tone is reassuring, but also unsettling. He's a man who is kind until he is pushed to the edge.

"The horn will sound soon for the second half. I'll use the chance."

"Wait," I say, following him as he snaps his fingers for his horse. "Did you have a welcoming drink?"

"No matter how tempted I was today... I never drink when I play."

I let out a relieved sigh, which elicits a frustrated expression and Nicostratus turning his back on me. As he rides out onto the pitch, the commander sets off towards his ceremonial seat, and Quin snaps over strewn hay to my side. "Are you alright?"

"No, I'm not alright." I leave it at that and push my way through the crowd, who are again sipping drinks. My stomach rises and falls and it feels like I might throw up. They've no idea what's happened to them.

Nicostratus's head aklo trots into the centre of the arena, where each team is lined up at either end of the pitch, waiting.

He blows his horn energetically and tosses the ball high into the air.

The moment it's released, horses charge forwards, and Petros races out of the way. But he's not fast enough. Nicostratus gallops ahead of his team and swerves suddenly, causing two reactions: Petros's horse startles and takes off sideways, and

the horse behind him rears violently and throws off its rider.

Petros blows on his horn to pause the game, jumps off his horse and races towards the accident. But Nicostratus is already on foot, crouching beside the unconscious Eparch Valerius.

I hold my breath, heart galloping wildly as I step onto the pitch. Nicostratus glances sternly at his Petros and pulls a hidden flask from his person. He tips the contents into the Eparch's mouth, and Eparch Valerius stirs, coughs. He spies the flask, swipes his tongue over his lip at a drop left behind, and scrambles backwards. "What did you give me?"

Nicostratus gestures to the jugs at the welcoming station.

Eparch Valerius fingers his pulse and pales. He searches his body for—

"Looking for this?" Nicostratus holds up a small vial he must have noticed and snatched.

"Return it. It's a . . . calming concoction."

Nicostratus tips the contents onto the churned-up grass, and Eparch Valerius lunges for the vial. Nicostratus holds it out of reach. "It's just a calming concoction. No need to get aggressive."

Uniformed constables have approached the fence line, waiting for orders from their leader. Constable Michealios seems hesitant to involve himself until he spots me closing in on the scene.

Suddenly he's a roar of orders—they jump the fence and race towards me from four directions. Quin casts a shield around me, stopping their blasts of magic—and one

arrow. Constable Michealios whips his head to Quin and orders him to return me to the constabulary.

“I’ll do no such thing.”

“It’s your duty.”

“I know very well my duties.”

“Insolence. Who do you think you are?”

Prince Nicostratus pushes to his feet, spins around and crosses to Quin. He stops before him and bows low.

The blood drains from Eparch Valerius’s face. The constables freeze.

“W-who are you?” It comes out a fearful whisper.

Nicostratus rises as Quin channels his magic overhead. The sky rapidly shifts from clear blue to grey as winds gather clouds over us into the symbol of chasing wyverns.

The constables drop to their knees, as do all the spectators in a wave of respect for the king. Quin stares at the head constable. “I’ve deceived you. Understand I have my reasons for it.”

Constable Michealios crawls forward. “Of course, your majesty.” With a pinched glance my way, he says, “This man may mean you harm. He’s involved in these deaths.”

“Stand.” When the constable is on his feet, Quin continues, gesturing to me. “Let him prove now, to everyone, his innocence.” He projects his voice. “Let him show you

all.”

The constables take one step back as Quin removes the shield around me. He nods, and halts Nicostratus by the arm when he starts to come between me and Eparch Valerius, who is now eating the grass where his ‘calming concoction’ had been upturned.

I step closer to him, the murmur of the crowd fading into the background. My voice cuts through the tension like a blade. “City philanthropist, friend to the refugees, healer of the sick—you’ve played your part beautifully. Too beautifully.” My words hang in the air, the accusation as sharp as the glare in his eyes.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he snaps.

I smile grimly. “You attempted to kill and killed three of four redcloaks; you poisoned the refugees, and you murdered Vitalian Dimos.”

“Insanity.”

“You may choose to plead that after.”

“I have alibis for all those events. The last one I was almost killed myself!”

“We’ll get to that. Let’s start with your henchmen.”

“Henchmen? I didn’t know them.”

“You’ve never had any prior interaction with those deceased redcloaks? Are you sure about that?”

“Of course I’m sure. Constables, this interrogation is unwarranted. He does not stand

for the law. I will not answer to these accusations.” He tries to get up but a blast of magic from Quin has him pinned to the ground. The constables don’t move.

Quin looks at me. “Continue.”

“You say you’re sure you’ve had no interaction, but you confiscated Vitalian Dimos’s soldad after they came to you demanding punishment for a medicinal spell that almost killed them.”

Eparch Valerius flushes and grits his teeth. “Indeed I’ve had a little contact with them. Quite forgotten.”

“Quite forgotten?”

Eparch Valerius’s eyes flash angrily.

I crouch to his level and spell it out for him. “They were abusing their power, forcing you to get rid of Vitalian Dimos. You realised they couldn’t be trusted, so you withheld their next dose of antidote.” He jerks his eyes to mine and I see how deeply treacherous this man is. “You poison all those who work for you. If they leave your service or become problematic, they’ll simply keel over and die. Those who remain useful will repeat your poison-antidote cycle, quite likely completely unaware.”

“Those soldiers consumed echowisp, a flower found where the prince resided before coming into the city. Perhaps you should be confronting him .”

“You know very well the prince was in the West Wind fields before coming here. You’d sent your men to scout for him after hearing rumours he’d left the capital. They recognised him, sent word, and you sent word back to pluck some echowisp flowers before returning. It’s a pity in doing so they got stung by fern bees. They’d have thought the stings a nuisance at first, but by the time they got back to the city,

the stings would have become painful welts. They ducked into a nearby apothecary—Vitalian Dimos’s—and he did his job using spells he’s used a hundred times before. Only he didn’t know your men were poisoned. Didn’t know it would clash with his spell, worsening the effects of the stings.”

Eparch Valerius flattens his lips. His silence is welcome. In fact, it speaks loudly.

“Those bees are particularly drawn to echowisp pollen. They’re almost solely found in places where echowisp grows.” Something I tripped across in my grandfather’s books. I’d been so focused on snake venom I hadn’t realised its importance until today. “An investigation of the bodies can determine they were stung by these particular bees, and prove the redcloaks had been near echowisp. Your henchmen, though, they didn’t know much about flowers and poisons. They probably assumed your request was for a rare medicinal spell, and perhaps at first you too thought it useful as such. After all, you work with many of the best vitalians and dabble in herbal concoctions yourself.” I lean in. “You don’t need to deny that part. I remember clearly you telling me as much the first time we met.”

“I dabble. That proves nothing.”

“After you confiscated Vitalian Dimos’s soldad, you gave your henchmen one last mission: to kill the prince. They tried very hard, by the way. Ultimately, they returned to you in failure. But you had another idea. You gave them the flowers and told them they’d know when to use them.”

“What idiots would take flowers with such vague instructions?”

“Idiots who might’ve been told a story. Something along the lines of: Prince Nicostratus is crafty. Wouldn’t be surprising if he used underhand methods in his fight. Poison. Carry these flowers on you in case you show symptoms. Consume immediately at the first sign.”

Eparch Valerius's hand clenches around grass. Seems I'm right.

"It looked like poisonous petals had been stuffed in their mouths and they, left to die. The real poison went undetected. This worked well, and so you used it again. This time on the refugees."

"I organised donations for their welfare, helped set up temporary homes. Why would I harm them?"

"Why did you have men scouting for the prince? Why did you want him dead? The answer is simple. The king's supporters have been most active in aiding the influx of refugees, and as they move on and disperse through the kingdom, they'd take their gratitude with them, spreading the word, strengthening support for the king." I narrow my eyes on the eparch. "You wanted to destroy the true king's remaining power." A pawn of the high duke, wearing a mask of benevolence.

"They got sick from porridge you gave them. I didn't donate a single oat."

"This is true. You didn't touch any of the oats." I lean in. "But you donated the pots, and the poison on them seeped into the food."

There are hisses around me as my words are repeated and passed on until there comes a cry of outrage from the spectators—the refugees themselves.

Valerius scoffs. "If my aim was to kill the refugees, why didn't they die immediately?"

"You delayed their deaths by a few days to play the role of saviour. No one would suspect someone who came to the rescue. In fact, your popularity would soar. This is how cunning you are."

“Stories.”

From my belt, I show the record of donations.

“My name isn’t on it.”

I glance over my shoulder and see that, as planned, Eparchess Juliana has found Sparkles and is hauling her across the field. “Hers is, though. Ariadne Aureliana.”

She stumbles onto her knees beside the eparch and stares up at me, frowning, perplexed.

I soften my voice as I address her. “Your colleagues at the dance house said you help the eparch with his donations. Have you helped him deliver to the refugees?”

Sparkles swallows and looks beseechingly at the eparch, who dares not look back. “He means well,” she says. “Anything he says, I’ll do.”

“What did you deliver on his behalf?”

“He didn’t do anything to make the refugees sick! He only donated tents, blankets, pots and such.”

I return my gaze to Valerius. “Pots.”

He says nothing.

To Sparkles, I say, “The night I came to your dance house, you helped me. Why?”

Again, she tries to seek the eparch’s gaze and fails. “I saw you bang into each other outside. I chased after the eparch to see if he was alright—I was afraid you were

trying to steal his hard-earned donations. He said all was fine but to watch you for the evening. So I did.”

Quin hadn't liked the way she'd been looking at me. I thought he'd meant in a more flattering way, but he'd sensed an ulterior motive.

“It was prudent. You were skulking around alleyways in the dark. What if you were a risk to the prince?”

“Does he often get you to watch people?”

She hesitates. “He just wants to be sure his city is safe.”

“Did he ask you to keep an eye on the commander? Eparchess Juliana?”

She swallows.

“He's been using you.”

She calls for the eparch to deny it. He barely looks her way. “I almost died helping with the antidote. How can I be the mastermind?”

“He's fooled everyone from the start, why would he stop at this point?” I say. “Vitalian Dimos died because I had no magic to instantly heal his injuries. Eparch Valerius, however, invited half of Thinking Hall's vitalians to his house to resume discussions on the antidote. He bashed his own temple, knowing he would be saved. His impaired memory of the killer was believable, and ‘a very long shadow’ was enough to have everyone scrambling to find... someone else. Anyone else. Nicostratus's head aklo.” I throw Constable Michealios a look. “Me.”

The constables shift awkwardly, looking from me to the eparch to the king. Quin

keeps his eyes rooted confidently on me.

“Vitalian Dimos went to Thinking Hall to use collective knowledge to help find the antidote.” I meet the eparch’s furrow-shadowed eyes. “You jumped up on stage in an appearance of helping but you were actually taking control. Steering the discussion away from the answer. When impassioned vitalians began drowning you out, you suggested taking a break for lunch and meeting at your residence.

“I imagine when you got out of the hall, vitalians split off in different directions and you kept Vitalian Dimos close, invited him to lunch with you. You got to the canal, out of sight. And perhaps it was there Vitalian Dimos had an epiphany. Discovered the answer. You couldn’t have your plans foiled and took immediate action. You smashed his head with an oar and hurried to your residence to stage your own attack, leaving him for dead.”

Valerius laughs, but there’s a desperate quality to it.

To the constables, I say, “Prince Nicostratus has the vial the eparch so desperately wants. Investigate. You’ll find it’s the antidote. Proof he knows far more about the poison than he’s led us to believe. This—along with the donation of his pots, and his connection to the redcloaks and the flower used to frame Prince Nicostratus—is enough to have him interrogated, if not prove his guilt.”

Constables close in on Eparch Valerius and he blasts magic, bowling them, Sparkles, and me back. I’m caught by a pocket of wind and carefully set on my feet beside Quin. Nicostratus leaps towards the eparch, captures him tightly, and blocks his meridians.

He snarls wretchedly. “You think you know everything. You have no idea what’s coming.”

I square my shoulders and step up to him. “You mean all the spectators you poisoned, timed to die during the game?”

His eyes glimmer with fury. The mask of philanthropist has shed rapidly.

“Something about the audience today niggled at me,” I explain. “The poisoned refugees, the commander’s unit, five hundred invited from the king’s father-in-law’s army. And then it hit.”

Quin channels magic; his wyvern clouds rapidly disappear and sunlight streams down on us. Glints and flashes come from all directions.

I sweep my arm toward the crowd, their buttons catching the light in a dazzling array of reflections. “These aren’t just spectators,” I say, my voice rising. “These are the king’s men. And you’ve poisoned them, just like the refugees.” My words ripple through the crowd, sparking gasps and murmurs that grow louder with every passing second.

“Dying like this is better than him gaining power and warring against his uncle! More lives will ultimately be spared.”

Constable Michealios finally looks like he believes. “You thought you’d get away with it.”

A twisted laugh bursts from Valerius. “Who says I won’t?”

“Ah,” I nod. “Of course. Everyone who took welcoming drinks will die here, not to forget the refugees. Only you, the prince, and a few planted ‘witnesses’ will be left. You know Nicostratus well enough to know he doesn’t drink when he plays, so it’s easy enough to set up. Originally you intended his head aklo to be the last left standing, because he’d lead back to Nicostratus, under house arrest already under

suspicion of murdering the redcloaks. But Nicostratus was released early, and you pivoted with it. How would you explain his motive? Killing the high duke's redcloaks—that makes sense, but these are his own men." I lean in. "You can tell me. We're all about to die."

"Who says he's to be the fall person? The high duke has promised the prince's pardon. The prince killed these rebellious soldiers to stop an uprising against the young king."

Quin and Nicostratus hiss. The constables whip their gazes around the pitch, on the lookout for anyone keeling over, for the wave of deaths to begin. One of them squeals in fear.

"I'd never betray my brother," Nicostratus says, a dark mutter in the eparch's ear. "I'd sooner kill myself."

"That also works."

I grit my teeth and slap the eparch. "You failed."

"I know the antidote. Once you drop dead, I'll save myself."

I tap my foot. "Should we wait?"

"What do you mean?" Eparch Valerius stills suddenly, like something has occurred to him.

I smile.

He struggles against Nicostratus's binds. "You don't have enough vitalians! You don't know the missing component!"

Quin steps forward. “He solved those problems.”

A baffled splutter. “He? Him? His meridians have been smashed. No way an insignificant youth without magic could—”

Quin slaps him soundly.

I ask for a rock, and a gust of wind delivers my request. I catch the hefty stone two handed, lift it, and ask Quin to smash it for me.

With a soft kind of quiet, he looks at me, and sends magic hurtling the rock into the air and more to splinter it in pieces.

“It might be broken,” I say, throat and cheek prickling where Quin still watches me. “Might be impossible to put back together.” I pick up a shard and press the sharp end under the eparch’s chin. “But it still has a purpose.”

“At most you’ve delayed their demise.”

“It was the fire that didn’t make sense. Why not bash you and leave? Why go to lengths to burn your garden? Baffling. Then today I overheard constables pitying you for losing your flowers. I was preoccupied with being arrested so I didn’t think too much of this, but it came together the moment I squared away my confusions around the commander. Masks, I heard Eparchess Juliana say. I thought, what kind of mask was used to get into the eparch’s place? And then I thought, why burn the garden?” I lift his chin with the rock. “I know the properties of a thousand plants and when I cross-checked the reactions it should have with the snake venom, what do you know? Gardenia root holds the key to the antidote.”

Eparch Valerius snarls. “There’s none growing on this outpost. By the time you get it—”

“True, there’s no gardenia here, but you know what really drives the redcloak cook wild with rage? Weeds in his herb garden. Specifically, False Buttonweed.”

The eparch blanches. He understands. False Buttonweed is a part of the same madder family. It’ll work the same way.

He shakes his head. “You’ll never have enough vitalians to spell everyone in time.”

“While you were showing off winning goals in the first half, the vitalians and I worked to save the king’s men.”

“I’d have noticed a bunch of vitalians running around spelling everyone.”

“Your poison was delivered in liquid form. The antidote you carried around too.”

He jerks his head to the spectators, half of whom are still holding their half-time drinks. He shakes his head. “It was all filtered through me, weighed to perfection with my inner scales, stacked and timed precisely. You’d never have enough vitalian power to concoct enough antidote. You might save a hundred, but never a thousand.”

“I met resistance at first. The vitalians of this kingdom are raised to look down on crude healing. They believe spells to be superior. I’ve had prejudices too.” I stare at my hands that, despite having no magic, were able to save a thousand people. I recall Olyn reminding me that magic isn’t always available or enough. “A broth will stretch a cure. Will reach ten times as many patients.”

Most vitalians had brought prepared ingredients, in case their first attempts failed and they needed to consume and start over. They weren’t convinced to make a broth with it, but when I told them about the gardenias, the false buttonweed, when I asked them why they became healers, one by one they relented and tipped their bottles into the cauldron borrowed from the cook.

While the nobles scored goals on the pitch, we filled barrels with sweetened antidote, and with the commander's aid had redcloaks doling it out under the guise of a half-time top up.

Eparch Valerius snarls, at me, at all of us. "He wants you all dead. He'll get everyone here eventually."

Quin barks, "Take him away." To Constable Michealios he says, "You'll free all of my men; exonerate them, and Caelus Amuletos."

Constable Michealios bows and hauls the eparch off the pitch.

Sparkles, who started weeping when the eparch showed his true colours, gets to her feet and runs past me with mumbled apologies. Eparchess Juliana and the commander bow to the king, thank him for his part saving the people—including Paxos, who upon waking vowed to bear witness to take the high duke and all his men down.

They have more to discuss, and after a glance at me, Quin requests they find a place to sit.

The spectators drift away in all directions, and soon only Nicostratus, Petros and I linger on the grass. Fiddling with the horn, Petros looks for dismissal from Nicostratus and starts to slink away.

I capture his sleeve and pull him around. "Not so fast."

Nicostratus, whose sad eyes have been on me since I entered the pitch, raises a questioning brow.

"Explain yourself," I tell Petros.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

I crane my neck and look up at him. “It’s understandable you do so much to help him.” I recall Petros carrying the drugged prince on his back all the way to his chambers. How he’d said he’d had much practice lifting with his brother. His very sick brother. “You’ve been stealing from the prince’s residence.”

“I . . . I . . .”

I murmur gently, “You shooed me away while taking stock of inventory. I thought you really wanted me to take a break, and perhaps you meant that too, but foremost you needed space to fudge the books. Am I right?”

His head sinks.

“You took off your supporter button when you pawned items. You used the money to pay for your brother’s care.”

Petros falls to his knees and bows low, head against the ground. “Forgive me, please. I took off the button because I didn’t want any rumours about the prince’s supporters pawning for money. I know it’s little, but your reputation is important. My brother is important too. I can’t see him die. I took things you barely used, that were otherwise gathering dust.” He bangs his head against the dirt. “I’ve done wrong.”

Nicostratus takes this all in and addresses me, “How did you find out?”

“The redcloaks playing like they’re asleep. Petros didn’t know about the poison, but he slipped relaxant into the drinks the players had. To rig the game in his favour and come out with hefty winnings. I didn’t know for certain. It was mostly a story forming from things I’ve seen, and he’s now confirmed it.”

Petros's voice cracks as tears streak down his face. "I found a vitalian who thinks he could be cured, but he was asking more than I could possibly raise." He bangs his head against the ground again. "He's my everything. Do what you will with me, but please—"

Nicostratus reaches down to help him up, and dusts his sleeve of dirt. "I knew what you were doing."

He did? He'd let his head aklo—

"Why didn't you stop me?" Petros asks. "Cast me out?"

"I understand." Nicostratus looks across at me and his words ripple through me until I stumble backwards, turn, and leave. "Brotherly love is more important than anything."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am

As I leave the outpost, air suddenly coils around me with telltale force. Before I can resist, it reels me backwards, depositing me at Quin's side. His hand presses against my back, steadying me, though the heat of it feels more like something unspoken—and reprimanding.

I wince-smile. "Ah, there you are!"

He doesn't believe for a second that I've been looking for him and he's half right. I'd been walking blindly, my stomach sunk low and my mind lost in thoughts. Those thoughts, though, were predominately Quin-related. Still are.

I follow him down the hill to a hired buggy and make the way back to his inn. He doesn't push me to talk; nor do I offer to. I don't know how. What's the best way to run away from a king I'd once told off for doing the very same thing? I can't use his 'can't be responsible for you' line; neither would I get a chance to hit his paralyzing acupoints.

His tactic of riling me up and angering me hadn't made me leave willingly, but perhaps that was a personality thing. It didn't work on me, but Quin trying it must mean he believes it to be a tactic that'd work on him .

I nod to myself as I climb the stairs and follow him to his chambers. I'll have to restrain him somehow. So he doesn't chase after me and make the whole process difficult.

A streak of dirt running down his cloak has my plan uniting. I clear my throat and speak to his nape. "Your clothes have drakopagon pitch on them." I sniff, almost

inhaling a lungful of his hair when he steps backwards. “Still smell of smoke, too.”

His cane makes a light snick when he turns. It lands very close to my leg. His dark eyes hold mine cautiously.

I fidget. “It’s been a long day. Bathing is in order.” I force a smile. “You first, your majesty.”

He starts to frown and stops upon glancing at his dirty attire. He gives me a warning look and orders me to come along.

I wait outside the bathing chamber while Quin strips and plunges into flowered depths. When he calls me in, I come, but not before I spot an aklo trundling across the yard with the king’s requested clean clothing. I halt him quietly, duck inside to a steam-filled room, and gather the sullied laundry.

Quin eyes me, and I tell him an aklo is here to collect them. That I’d rather we weren’t interrupted. He waves water droplets, allowing me to carry on, and I rush back to the aklo and dump the clothes atop the pristine ones.

“W-what—”

I pat his shoulder. “Your guest has requested no one enter for the next hour.”

“But his—”

“An hour.”

The aklo leaves and I nod, momentarily satisfied, before the achy sludgy sinking stomach returns and I slouch back into expression-veiling steam.

“That sigh. Explain,” Quin says.

I crouch at the edge of the bath, keeping my distance, but it’s no use. Quin wades towards me, his bare chest and the familiar lines of his flutette emerging through the steam. It’s quite the sight, and for a moment, I’m lost in a stare. Until he grabs one of my feet and topples me onto my arse. With deft hands, he strips my boots and socks and casts them behind me.

“Explain,” he says as my feet drop into the water.

The heat surrounding my soles adds to a shiver that’s already rolling through me. I glance nervously towards my boots and then back at Quin leaning in the corner beside me. His face is angled pensively towards the water’s surface and droplets slide down the side of his face, his nose.

I open my mouth and shut it again. What to say, to break things with finality? So he knows there’s no hope? So no lingering feelings remain?

“Last night”—my head jerks up and I clamp the sides of the bath, breathless. What had happened last night that he’d been so upset this morning? He clears his throat and starts again. “Last night you told me you were leaving.”

I’d told him?

“This morning you took all your belongings. Your grandfather’s books. You left.”

I swallow. This was the cause of that dark assessing look outside the constabulary. This was why he strapped me to his side all day. “I—”

Quin raises his head and his expression flashes with exasperation. “You promised me you’d say goodbye.”

“I—I—” I scramble to my feet. “Then, goodbye!”

I get one step away from the bath before I’m met by a sudden, ferocious wind. It buffets me relentlessly, and despite how fruitless it is, I push with all my strength and stagger against it. I whirl around, glaring at him where he leans against the side of the bath with a frown and flattened lips. “You can’t keep me here. It’s dangerous. Let me leave. I’m tired of following you around.”

“I don’t believe you.” His eyes pierce mine and I’m slammed with that underground kiss.

My cheeks burn, and I curl my fists. “That was nothing,” I say and laugh. “A momentary whim. A good story. That’s all. There was an opportunity. I took advantage. Meant nothing else. Let me go.”

The wall of wind behind me eases to stillness.

I take the most confident steps I can to collect my boots. Quin is watching me quietly. I’m afraid he’ll notice my trembling fingers, my wobbly knees. Afraid he’ll think that moment meant more... It didn’t. It really didn’t. I’m shaky because I have to leave him when I vowed to help, when I promised to always be by his side. It feels wrong, like failure, like some kind of betrayal...

I shove my boots on without looking back, and this time I make it to the door before I’m stopped. Not with wind this time, but by the splash of him coming out of the water, the snick of the cane he summoned, the tone of his voice.

He doesn’t use kingly authority with me, yet his voice is firm—unyielding, demanding. The voice of an upset friend. “Cael.”

I stiffen and stand there, breathing in and out, unable to continue forward, nervous to

turn back.

“Talk,” he says. “Don’t take me for a fool that believes you don’t care.”

His words ring in my head and my chest rises and falls. It takes me a long time to find words, and when I do they come out strange to my ears. Gravelly, weak. “I’m trying to make it easier... to leave.”

“Throwing out hurtful words will haunt you later.”

There’s already a sick guilt churning my gut. I palm my face and rub it. Slowly, I turn—and keep going full circle with a yelp. “Get back into the water!”

“I know why you got rid of my clothes. I want to make it clear: I don’t care. I’ll chase you until I get a proper goodbye.”

His promise sends a long shiver through me and I flap a hand for him to submerge himself. When I hear the telltale sounds of him slipping into water, I steady my breathing, remove my boots, and inch to the edge of the bath.

I’m flustered and hot and I can only lift my gaze as far as his flutette. Water stirs; each ripple from his chest to my feet laps against me, weighted with expectation. I dip my fingers into the water to halt it and sigh when the water sifts between them.

“You’re not objecting to my actual departure,” I murmur.

“No.”

For all I’m trying to leave, I don’t like how simple this no is.

Quin speaks again, “That’s not an easy ‘no’.”

I raise my eyes. His lips are pressed in a sad, wistful smile.

He leans back against the edge of the bath, lips pressed with exasperation and something softer—or perhaps, raw. “I never wanted to like you,” he murmurs in resignation. “But you’re like a weed, Cael. No matter how many times I try to pull you out, you keep coming back. Persistent and unstoppable.”

“A weed!” I kick a spray of water over his cheek.

His bittersweet smile momentarily sweetens. “You wore away my resolution. I knew you cared about my brother, fancied yourself in love with him, but whether you were aware of it or not, there’s always been a pull between us.”

“That’s not—it’s not—”

He slams a wet finger to my mouth. “Don’t.”

“But—” my voice is smothered by more of his fingers and I give up with a glare over them.

“One day you’ll acknowledge it.” He drops his fingers from my lips and uses them to rub between his eyebrows. “For now, I’ll begin.” He hauls in a breath and lets it out again past the angry grit of his jaw. “When you were... when you lost your magic...” His hands ball at his sides and my throat feels like it’s doing something similar. I look away.

“I couldn’t contain my feelings,” he murmurs. “It’s more painful to see the one you like hurt than to be hurt yourself. It made me volatile. For the first time, I got angry with my brother, and I could feel him starting to resent me, too. Taking you from his home...” his voice breaks. “It began fracturing us.”

I swallow hard, whisper, “I know, and I won’t let that happen.”

Water ripples around me again and each break over my ankles has a way of making my eyes sting. “This is why I must leave,” I say. “Why I tried to sneak away, lashed out with words that would hurt you. That kiss...”

Quin watches, waits. His eyebrow quirks but his lips are set in a firm line. Ready for whatever I’ll say.

I’m shaking now, the ripples are coming from me and slapping him. “It wasn’t an opportunity. Wasn’t for a good story.”

He’s still waiting, and I kick the water irritably. “It just happened. I couldn’t help it. Something overcame me.”

His lips twist as if he was studying me and coming to a briefly satisfying conclusion, and I swallow and shake my head. “It was just a kiss. Nothing more. A terrible thing to do when I promised your brother...”

Quin shuts his eyes.

I continue, “We must part ways. But I approached it wrongly. I should have acknowledged the journey we’ve shared together. I should thank you for supporting, encouraging, and protecting me at each step.” I lift my gaze and meet a quietly watchful one. “Can we leave everything between us as memories?”

It takes him a few steady breaths before he answers, “As a man, I don’t want to. As a king, I know I should. As a brother, I will.”

My eyes burn; I slap them and haul in a stinging lungful of air that still resonates with Quin’s magic. I want to leap up and take my leave so I can find somewhere quiet to...

grieve. I tighten my resolve and smile.

It wobbles. “What will you do next?”

“I’ll follow my cousin to the mountains, collect her witnesses before winter sets in, and bring them back to the royal city to attest to my uncle’s guilt.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“It must. Nicostratus will help me.”

Brothers working side by side. They have better chances this way. “If fate should ever have us meet again... should I avoid you? Pretend I don’t know you?”

Quin is quiet, and I understand.

He says, “What about you? What will you do next? The Medicus Contest—” He cuts off, recalling he’d lost my soldad.

Even if I had it... In the end it’s a wooden badge with a few carvings on it. Completing the soldad was never the true goal. Carrying it stood for something more. Healing. Helping. Saving lives. Advancing medicine. Education. Equality. Responsibility.

All things that exist beyond vitalian magics.

How prejudiced I’ve been. How privileged—even as a par-linea. My soldad isn’t something to be checked off to feel satisfied. I don’t believe Quin ever meant that when he gave it to me. There’s always been another layer to it. Peel back the facade, and see the truth shimmering. The soldad was an expectation. No, not an expectation, a belief. In me.

I meet Quin's steady gaze, purpose thickening through my bones. "I'll go to Iskaldir, learn healing through crude—learn healing through their methods."

He inclines his head, as if he expected as much, and then he tests me. "Travelling south is dangerous. You'll have no powerful backer."

"I have family there. Maybe fate has been trying to send me this way all along."

"You must be the master of your own fate."

I swallow and nod tightly. "I want something from you."

"Name it."

"I might be gone a while. Would you have someone check on my family sometimes?"

"Whether I manage to overthrow my uncle or not, I'll make sure they—and your friends—are cared for."

I touch my clasp to take it off and hesitate. Quin has stiffened. I drop my fingers. "I don't want to give this back. Even if I should."

"Why should you? It's a gift."

"It's a token ."

His gaze clashes with mine and it's hard for me to brace against the emotions flickering through him. He balls his fists underwater and presses himself more firmly into the corner of the bath.

It's time now.

With trembling hands, I pull my feet from the water, the warmth lingering even as I clutch my boots to my chest. My heart pounds with each step I take toward the door and my last words are whispered. "I wish you success as a king. And happiness as a man."

I pack what's left at the inn and head into the woods. Before I pick up my things from the constabulary, I take refuge in Grandfather's cabin.

I spend the time reading every book there that references southern healing. I commit it to memory.

Two days later, I leave it all behind.

The forest is cool and damp, and water from an earlier rain drips from leaves overhead like tears. At the fork in the swiftly flowing river, I indulge the pull I've tried to ignore for days. Something still niggles in my chest, something that has been niggling at me since my last trip into these woods; no, before. Since the coffin. I feel like... what if ...

I'm leaving, I'm not sure when or if I'll ever return, I...

I follow the river towards the memory of my childhood.

The violet oak.

Winds blow and large, hand-like violet leaves wave, capturing my attention. Beckoning me closer. The scent of the powerful wood has me imagining two young boys curled tight in the hollowed trunk, telling stories and falling asleep, heads tucked together.

I bite my lip and move slowly towards the rush of indigo and bursts of lighter purple. I touch the rough surface of the trunk, and the past comes alive. If I close my eyes, I might imagine I'm a child again, crawling in here for the night. I can almost hear our voices...

I duck into the hollow and step on something out of place. Hard, the wrong shape to be a protruding root. I shift my foot and crouch, and wipe away a layer of dirt.

My fingers tremble.

I rub my thumb over the riverpearl edging and over the four carved stamps inside the frame.

I sink onto my haunches, heart hammering. What if ...

He'd lost my soldad. Here.

He'd come here.

I shut my eyes as it all slides together.

He'd called himself Prince Nicostratus, but back then, Nicostratus's mother had wanted him dead. He'd known it. He couldn't use his real name. His safest bet, outside, was to assume another identity. What better than pretending to be her son? Hired hands would make sure not to harm 'Prince Nicostratus'.

My chest seizes with a flutter and the swoop of something inexpressible, the sudden dropping of my stomach. Hollowness. Something's been torn from me. And then... I'm laughing.

How did I not see it sooner? How stupid. How utterly mortifying.

He's always been wearing masks.

My laughter keeps coming. I can't stop. It's this or complete loss of feeling. And I have to cling on, to this at least.

I laugh so hard tears stream down my cheeks; so hard birds lift from their perches and rush crying into the sky.

I laugh so hard I won't hear the crack of twigs where he waits, where he watches from the darkened bushes.

The prickle of his gaze skitters alongside my hectic bouts and I brandish the soldad in my firm grip as I push my feet away from the violet oak, away from the stream, away from him.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am

Must. Go. On .

Rain lashes against my soaked arms as they shield my belongings.

Behind me is the capital that believes I'm dead; that will kill me if I'm not. Behind me is Hinsard and vitalian magics I can no longer wield. Behind me are two royal brothers vowing loyalty to one another.

Vowing never to let me come between them again.

Steel clashes through the trees, and the tinny scent of blood pierces the damp air. The sky shudders with flashes of lightning, thunder rolling like drums underfoot, shaking the final golden leaves from the branches. An eerie screech rises from the river.

Ahead, soldiers battle. Wyverns thrash. Still, the path before me seems easier than the one behind.

Rain drips down my nape, trickling from my hood, running off my chin onto my grandfather's books, a change of clothes, needle and thread, a few rare herbs, some food... I clutch my bundle tighter and hurry along the narrow path.

Keep west of the woods. Pass the Great Violet Oak and the soldiers guarding it. Descend to the coast. Find the merchant ship to Iskaldir.

His last instructions, scrawled on a note, left beside southern currency and official passes for safe passage.

The rain thickens, pelting my face. I swallow the knot in my throat, grip my bundle, and push through a tangle of bushes—

A cry shatters the storm, and a flash of movement draws my eye. A wyvern falls, its body thumping into the leaves at my feet. I freeze, breath held, searching the sky for more.

Wyverns could rip through my flesh, their venom killing within minutes. I have no magic now. Even if I have herbs to combat the poison, I don't know the crude methods to prepare them.

I step back. The sky is a dark bruise of clouds, evening closing in. The rain patters steadily on skeletal tree trunks. Thank the Arcane Sovereign, there's no other movement. The wyvern must have been separated from its pack.

I glance at the shimmering scales of the small creature. It's wounded, blue blood seeping from a gash in its stomach. Its chest rises and falls with shallow, laboured breaths. It's too hurt to shift into its watery form, to attack me.

I could leave. I should leave.

But its eyes are on me, filled with pain, exhaustion, fear.

It's vulnerable. Afraid.

Its claws flex as it tries to move, but its wings go limp. A small, pitiful whine escapes it.

I haven't used my voice in days, and it comes out rough. "I won't hurt you. I'll help, if you'll let me."

The wyvern can't understand my words, but maybe it senses something in my tone. Its claws retract.

I drop to my knees on the wet leaves and fumble for my herbs. I have some that will fight infection, promote healing... but the gash is large.

For a sharp, painful moment, I'm back in Hinsard, beside the canal and the vitalian who died under my hands, the gash on his head too deep... Without magic, I hadn't known how to save him.

I vowed to learn from that, spent days in my grandfather's cabin poring over crude healing methods. Now, I pull out my needles and thread.

This wyvern will not die today.

My fingers are numb, wet, and it takes three tries to thread the needle. I speak softly as I work, wrapping its claws in a torn handkerchief. "Just until I'm done. I've numbed your scales. I hope it doesn't hurt too much."

I've practiced stitching on leather, but never on living flesh. With magic, I never felt the visceral sensations of healing a wound. Now, the wyvern's laboured breaths tremble under my palms, its scales silk under my fingers, its blood warm and slick.

I steel myself against the shiver that runs through me as the needle pierces its skin. Strength and steadiness. No room for anything else.

The wyvern whines, and I tighten the thread, carefully knitting the gash together.

The clash of steel grows louder. The battle is closing in. I have to hurry or be caught in the crossfire. I have nothing to shield myself from blades, arrows, axes.

I knot the last stitch, but I'm not done. I chew on an elderleaf, spit out the bitter pulp, and dab it over the wound.

An axe whistles through the trees and buries itself in a branch too close to my head. I duck lower. "Your wings are fine. Rest. Don't fly until you've healed."

Pounding footsteps. The ground trembles.

I want to run. My stomach drops to my knees.

The wyvern will be trampled if I leave it here.

I scan the woods, eyes darting. There—a hollow at the base of a tree.

Heart pounding with the rising battle, I gently shift the dragonette onto my spare shirt and tuck it into the hollow. As I scramble to repack my things, I spot the last of my food—berries I collected yesterday.

What good is saving it if it starves?

I pile the berries beside the wyvern, knot my belongings, and sling the pack over my shoulder.

More metal whistles nearby. I don't wait to see what kind. Doubling over, I scramble through the underbrush, thorns tearing at my cloak, one slicing a line under my temple. Blood trickles down my jaw.

I scurry down a small bank.

Wrong way.

Leather-clad soldiers with axes and round shields—Iskaldir’s stormblades, on Lumin turf.

I back slowly into the shadows—

And bump into something warm, solid.

Someone.

Someone who freezes against my back.

I whirl around; the figure spins with a flutter of dark cloak. Our gazes lock—

“Megaera?” I gasp, staring at the woman before me. She arches a brow, her lips silently forming my name.

In an instant, our hands cover each other’s mouths, eyes wide with surprise and a silent warning: stay quiet, stay careful. One wrong move, and we’re dead. Or worse, captured.

A stormblade’s crow rings out, and Megaera and I press back to back. She gestures toward the sound, and I nod, pointing west where the merchant paths are guarded by sentinels—a safer route to the coast.

We carefully inch our way out of the battle, and as soon as the clash of metal fades, we tumble onto a broader path. I lurch away from her.

Her elegant, sharp features turn toward me, eyes locking onto mine with a shrewd intensity. Her voice curls through the damp air, edged with a soft, shivery laugh. “You trusted me through the woods.”

I look away, focusing on the darkening path ahead, the towering black outlines of ancient oaks. “My choices were limited. You were the safest option.”

“Where’s your sidekick?”

“He’s our king.”

“He’s alive, which is the only respect I’ll give him.” Her gaze sweeps over my drenched cloak, my pitiful belongings. She sneers. “He cast you away.”

Live. Love. Leave.

The final words of his note, his last command. Words he’s spoken before, but this time in his kingly scrawl. An edict.

My grip tightens on the fabric cutting into my shoulder. “Why are you headed south?”

Megaera’s lips press into a thin line. “Turns out I value this cheap life of mine.” She forces a smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Didn’t you enjoy me begging you to save me?”

I’d hesitated to save her. She was a venomous presence in my life, lashing out and hurting those I cared about.

But then, hadn’t I set her on that path?

My negligence, my arrogance as a healer, had killed her father—the only family she had left.

Didn’t she have a right to grieve, to be a mess of emotions, to make mistakes?

Hadn't I?

I close my eyes briefly, the shadow-laced path tightening the knot in my stomach. "Is the regent after your life for letting us escape?"

"He'd try to silence me even if I hadn't. Perhaps with more determination. A price I thought I could accept. Then."

The rain stops, but the scent lingers, sharpens as we step through puddles, until a cool breeze overwhelms it with the salt of the coast. A rustle in the distance has us padding quietly, ears pricking for signs of danger. Branches sway under a cloudy sky. An owl hoots. Something slithers.

Someone curses.

We press ourselves behind a tree and peer around it. In the darkness, it's hard to tell friend from foe. Do we sneak past, or—

A pained hiss. "Damn stormblades. Just wait."

Not one of theirs, then. Someone from our side, and injured.

Megaera realises it too, her tension ebbing with an elegant roll of her shoulder. She steps out from behind the tree, chin up, eyes sharply forward. I lead the way, scuffing through damp leaves, following the scent of blood—

I stop sharply.

A violet-robed man slumps at the base of a knotty tree, one broad shoulder resting against the trunk, the other grasped in his hand as he tries to wrench it back into place. His face is gritted with pain, but there's a steely look in his eyes—he's seen

countless battles, fierce and deadly. His long spear rests over his bent legs, the dark, deadly head surrounded by sharp nails, angled toward me like a warning. Like a reminder of the damage it can do.

The damage it has done.

Crusader.

Not just any crusader. I've seen this determined face before—in the ruins where Prince Nicostratus was held hostage. He was teaching a boy how to destroy linea meridians.

He joined the battle during our escape.

He got up after a blow from Quin, gripped his spear, and thrust it toward the king—

My stomach drops, a sick, sludgy feeling of fear, unrealised hatred, overwhelming hurt. This man robbed me of my little magic. Magic that, despite all hardships, I'd protected, nurtured, finessed. Magic that made me feel I could help in this harsh world.

“Who are you?” the crusader barks. “What's your purpose?” His eyes slice sharply to Megaera as if sensing the magic in her veins.

He raises his spear with his good arm.

Instinct and unbridled anger surge—I kick the spear out of his grip. If he weren't injured, he'd have resisted, but his arm is in agony, and a deep slash across his chest has soaked his shirt with blood, staining the leather meant to protect him. The spear lands in a nest of rotting leaves.

I should leave. Before I yell. Before I lash out. Before I make a fool of myself by crying.

The crusader tries again to reset his shoulder. He hisses, unsuccessful. “Don’t need weapons for the likes of you two.”

Megaera picks up the fallen spear and aims the point at his throat.

The crusader barks a laugh, but she slides the spear along his skin, and he shuts up, jaw flexing as fiercely as my clenched hands.

“We’ll do the talking, hmm?” she purrs.

His eyes flicker stubbornly, but there’s a small jump of... admiration in his brow. “Hurry. I’ve some Skeldars to settle scores with.”

“With your arm like that?” I say coolly.

“If I must.”

“What are crusaders doing so far south?”

“This is the most sacred land in the kingdom—all the linea pilgrimage to the Great Violet Oak. Why wouldn’t we gorge on such a banquet?”

I steal the spear from Megaera and press the sharp tip against his chest wound until he grunts and my hands shake. “Why do you kill us like this?”

“We rarely kill. We maim meridians.”

“Why!”

“Why should only those with magic hold power? Our kingdom will be better when we’re all on equal footing. Destroying meridians is about equality. About being fair.”

My hands tremble so violently Megaera has to catch the spear as I lose my grip. “Your fair is not my fair. There’s no such thing as fair.”

Megaera flicks her wrist, a bolt of magic sparking between us, and she hisses, “Cael... your meridians...”

I stare at the crusader.

“It was you who released those redcloaks,” the crusader grunts.

My eyes sting. I yank myself back, refusing to let him see a tear. “Let’s go, Megaera.”

Her sultry laughter stills me. “You’re right. He’s not worthy of healing.”

I slice my stinging eyes to hers. “That’s not what—”

“Then what are you doing?” She glides before me, whispering at my ear, making me shiver. “Why does this hesitation feel so familiar?”

“They’re not . . . mortal wounds,” I say weakly.

“Fair enough!” She hooks an arm around mine and pulls, but it feels like a test.

I don’t move. “He won’t die.”

“Come on, then.”

A suppressed grunt from behind hits me like sharp needles. He's in pain. There's danger around.

I squeeze my fists. He hurt me. This is fair.

My fair is not his fair, either.

Leaving him here, in a forest of wild animals and battling factions... Can I be responsible for what may happen?

What kind of healer does that make me? What kind of person?

I swallow thickly, peel Megaera off me, and turn to the grimacing crusader. I drop to my knees, gripping his bad arm. "This will hurt. Bear through it."

He cocks a smirk, and I angle his limb into position—

The crusader's cry shakes through the woods.

"Admit it," he gasps, "that was satisfying."

I stitch up his chest wound. "Stay away from the stormblades for now."

"Can't."

"You must, or you'll rip open your wound. If they don't hurt you worse."

"Stormblades delivered my boy to a Skeldar ship. I must get him back."

My fingers pause. "The terrified boy you forced to fight?"

The large man bows his head, a silent sigh skidding over my wrist.

I pull back. So, he knows how to regret.

My wrist tickles.

He uses the tree trunk for support, heaving himself to his feet. I rise and press crushed elderleaf over his stitches while blocking his path. “What will you do? Fight your way onto the ship?”

He flinches at the press on his wound.

“Skeldars have rituals this time of the month. This area is sacred to them.”

Megaera hums, a reminder she’s been quietly watching, judging. She twists the spear in her hand. “If they leave their ships to congregate... you may have a chance.”

A grunt of confirmation.

“But they’re not foolish enough to abandon their prisoners without guards. How will you get past them? What if he’s injured?”

My stomach clenches. A young boy, imprisoned, frightened... not sure if he’ll live another day. Maybe he’s humming to keep calm.

River’s frightened face flashes in my mind.

“An innocent child,” she says.

I glance sharply at Megaera. She’s recalling the court case too. She’s reminding me of my failure...

“You—” I croak over the thundering guilt in my heart.

She holds my gaze. “For a boy’s untimely death.” She glances away, shrugging. “I suppose I can assist.”

I stare at her. Is this another trap? Or could she be sincere? Could she feel some of the blame? Could she be trying to right it?

I square my shoulders. Either way, a boy needs saving, and everything in me compels me to go, hurry, make it right this time.

The tall crusader spares us unimpressed looks. “You can heal, but what can a beauty do?”

Megaera casts a spell at his feet, the earth rising and rolling under him, toppling him back to the foot of the tree. She tosses him his spear.

I answer him. “Don’t underestimate her.”

He looks from her to me, back to her, a brow quirking. He could easily destroy her meridians.

Megaera turns her back on him, casting a teasing look over her shoulder. “You have a choice. Me, or your son.”

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To lessen the temptation, I step between them in the shadowed forest.

“What do we call you?” I ask.

“Are we close enough for names?”

Something darts out from behind the trees, and Megaera swiftly conjures a transparent dome around us. The wolf is knocked back, snarling, as more of its pack emerge from the undergrowth.

We move cautiously, the dome shielding us from each rushed attack until the wolves, with pitiful whines, retreat into the darkness.

The crusader scowls at the dome, and a laugh escapes me—hollow, sharp.

Two pairs of eyes narrow at me. I thump the crusader’s back. “You despise magic, yet now you must rely on it.” I nudge Megaera. “You... you have to perform with a killer at your back.” I shake my head, the irony bitter on my tongue. “And I...” I trail off, the words too heavy, too raw. I have to hold hands with both of you . The one whose father I killed, and the one who killed a part of me.

My laughter doubles, but it’s empty, pained. I steer the crusader until he faces me, and point. “Cael. Megaera.” I gesture to him, my brow raised expectantly.

His mouth presses into a grim line. “Lykos. Like the river. The boy’s name is Zenon.”

“A right trio we are, Lykos.”

Megaera grabs a handful of our cloaks and yanks us down. “Stay low.”

Crouched in dense foliage, we inhale the salty air, peering through the bushes toward the rugged coastline. The view is a wash of navy and black, the silhouettes of ships barely visible under the clouded sky. Sails unfurl as vessels glide toward a row of anchored ships in the bay.

Officially, the water is neutral territory—a trader’s path between kingdoms. But not everyone stepping onto Lumin soil is here for business.

Danger lurks in every shadow.

One misstep . . .

I recall the escaped slaves I’ve treated—backs crisscrossed with scars, their movements impaired by wounds left untreated for so long that only unaffordable spells could heal them. Even for the few who received those spells, they never forgot the agonising pain of years under barbed whips. Years later, they still flinched at any sudden movement.

I swallow hard, focusing on the image of River in my mind. His head on my shoulder in the cold cell. Are we going to die?

Faint footsteps clomp over wood, followed by a flurry of shadowy movement on the decks. Torches flare to life as golden-haired Skeldars march toward the hills, axes and shields strapped to their backs.

“That’s the boat,” Lykos says, his voice taut. “This is our chance.”

I'm on my feet before he finishes.

You won't die this time .

Under the cover of the moonless night, we slip through shadows and sneak aboard after a leather-armoured patrol completes a round on the starboard side. The subtle sway of the boat mirrors the anxious churn in my stomach. I flank Lykos, who knows the ship's layout and leads the way.

A gull squawks in the distance, and we curl behind a rowboat, waiting out the patrol as it slouches by again. Megaera, to my right, curls a ball of magic in her hand, ready to strike. But if we're caught here, getting into the ship's guts to save Zenon will become exponentially harder. We don't know how many more Skeldars are on board.

I grip her arm and quietly shake my head. Her magic dims, and we hold our breath as the patrol nears... and pauses.

“Frostir's breath! What are you doing?”

For a heart-stopping moment, I think he's spotted us. But just as my stomach drops, he clicks his heels and moves on.

We exhale as one, then push against the briny deck, stepping over coiled rope as we sneak toward the main hatch. A set of steep, narrow stairs leads into the ship's belly. As we descend, my hand slips against the worn wooden wall, and a sudden lurch of the ship sends me toppling forward—

I'm caught by Lykos's broad back; he holds both our weights, preventing a noisy tumble down the stairs. Below, a faint lantern flickers. I peel myself off Lykos, and we wait for the light to fade before slipping into the narrow halls.

Lykos motions us down a skinny corridor, and when he rams himself against the wall, Megaera and I do too. “Three guards,” he whispers.

“No harming,” I say.

“One each.”

We melt into the brig, lined with nearly empty cells. The three guards are huddled around a central table. Megaera is a burst of light as she knocks one of them out. Lykos whacks another with his spear. I target the third, jabbing his acupoints to paralyse him.

“Three for one prisoner?” I murmur.

“They’re not really guarding,” Megaera says, glancing at the pile of coins on the table.

“Found him,” Lykos calls. “Grab the key.”

The paralysed guard glares at me as I remove the key from his belt and toss it to Megaera, who strides to the cell.

Lykos drops his spear and hurries inside. “He’s unconscious! Megaera, grab his feet.” He starts pulling the boy out.

“Stop. Moving him might make it worse.” I sidle into the cell and kneel. Lykos holds Zenon upright under the arms.

Megaera removes her hands from the boy’s ankles—

Zenon snaps his head up, rears back, and kicks Megaera square in the chest. She

slams into the wall, and I lunge to grab her cloak, but my fingers only graze the fabric. Her head smacks against the wood, knocking her out.

I gather her in my arms. No blood.

I whirl to Lykos, who slams the cell shut, the lock clicking. Behind him, the young man drops his head, avoiding my gaze. River's face flashes through my mind—caught up with the wrong crowd, back then...

“We risked our lives.”

“In return for your help, I won't destroy her meridians. Today.” He grabs his spear.

“W-why not let them escape, uncle?”

Lykos pauses by the guards. “A cheated Skeldar vows vengeance. But a Skeldar who receives a double gift in exchange...” He claps the guard's shoulder. “Good luck in the south.”

Megaera stirs, consciousness returning. She takes in the situation, her eyes narrowing. “He'll be back.”

“What—”

She whispers in my ear, and I nod, understanding. Always thinking a few steps ahead. This is her strength. Perhaps—

I whisper back.

“For what?” she asks.

“Please do it,” I mouth, exposing my forearm to her.

I’m pulling down my sleeve when Lykos returns to the brig, Zenon in tow, both scratching uncontrollably at their necks. “What’ve you done to us?”

I spy the bright, patchy rash creeping up their throats and fold my arms. “She poisoned you.”

Megaera smiles slickly. “Why would I step into a cell at your request without taking precautions?”

“You—” Lykos stares at Megaera, his brow twitching. He’s suppressing his frustration, struggling not to be impressed.

The cell opens, and Megaera teases a fingernail up his throat with a sly gaze, relieving him of the itching torture. She helps the boy next, and I rummage in my bag for coins, dropping them on the table. Lykos had a point about leaving a gift. “In return for the boy’s freedom.”

We slink through narrow passages, up the steep stairs, and peer out the cracked hatch. When Lykos is certain the coast is clear, he opens it fully. We climb onto the shadowy deck, and—

The patrol rounds the ship’s stern and spots us—a thundering yell stirs movement below deck.

An axe flies.

Lykos curses, pulling Zenon into a protective hold.

I toss my belongings, deflecting the axe away from them.

Megaera's shield rises around us.

Skeldars swarm up the hatch onto the deck. Rushing footsteps approach from behind.

They glance past us, their focus shifting, and straighten. We turn slowly to gauge the new threat.

My stomach churns. A neat circle of armed Skeldars is forming around us.

Lykos spits out a curse. "Any way to poison them all?"

"Only some. I'd have to drop the shield to do it."

"Don't!"

"Now you like my magic."

He huffs. "What about you, healer?"

I grimace toward my sack, now lying behind armed men.

"Well, aren't you caught in Sylgja's tides," comes a thickly accented voice.

In front of us, the blonde, leather-clad men part, making way. The captain. He gestures to two of his crew, who scurry off at his command.

Torchlight flickers against his stoic, broad-shouldered profile and his golden mane. Like most Skeldars, his beardless cheeks give him a deceptively youthful appearance. Along with their renowned attractiveness and tall, large frames, Skeldars are difficult to calculate. They look strong, but too beautiful to be truly dangerous.

That's how they trap their enemies.

Even Megaera sighs. But not me. I grip her arm tightly. "Don't be fooled."

She stiffens.

Behind us, Lykos mutters.

The captain laughs, his brilliant blue eyes locking onto me. "Ah. You're part Skeldar."

Megaera snorts lightly beside me. "Finally explains what everyone sees in you."

I elbow her.

The captain removes his weapons, passing them to his men, and whisks off his fur-lined cloak, revealing a reinforced leather breastplate adorned with intricate patterns, imagery of Skjaldur, their God of war, and runes for bravery, victory, and protection.

"You were too eager. If you'd waited longer, we might've been too far into the hills to see you scurrying over our deck."

I grit my teeth against the urge to deflate. We can't give up now; we have to find a way...

Gravity shifts as the boat rises and falls more deeply than before. I glance sideways—

We're already drifting away from the dock. The briny tang of the stirred sea grows stronger.

My heart pounds wildly. This ship will sail over the channel to Iskaldir. I want to get

there, but as a free person. Not as a slave. Megaera notices the movement too; her shield quivers before she regains her composure.

The captain smiles, leaning toward our dome, lowering his voice. “Nice shield.”

His unspoken challenge: You’ll be drained of spiritual energy soon enough. Then what?

Megaera speaks first, her tone light, unaffected. “We acted out of familial duty. This prisoner is young, a child to us. Let us go, and in our retellings of this adventure, you’ll emerge as merciful, honourable.”

Lykos seizes his moment. “Let me and my boy go, and you can have these two. Along with valuable information about our king.”

I stiffen. What does he know? What would he dare tell these enemies? I can’t let that happen.

“Drop the shield.”

Megaera hisses at me.

“Drop the shield or let the captain in.”

“I could kill you in one sweep,” the captain says.

“You won’t.”

A curious laugh.

“The gods are watching.”

His gaze sharpens.

I roll up my sleeve. On the inside of my forearm, there's a dark mark.

The surrounding Skeldars gasp, weapons lowering as they whisper to one another.

The captain stares hard at the mark, the pulse at his neck ticking faster. Suspicion and caution glimmer in his eyes. "Lindrhalda's touch."

I bow my head slightly, the knot in my stomach tightening. It's shameless. If Quin were watching, he might laugh, but—

If it saves your life, do it. I command you to.

The mark is roughly flower-like in shape, the shape of one flower in particular. Lifebloom—the sacred plant of Lindrhalda, Iskaldir's goddess of healing.

"Drop the shield," I say softly.

Megaera hesitates, but I catch the flicker of understanding in her gaze as she sweeps over the birthmark she helped me create.

The captain steps forward, pinching my chin upward.

His lips curve into a thoughtful smirk as his gaze bores into mine. Without looking away, he calls out to one of his men, who comes forward with my belongings.

A man—Nordre—lies on a low cot, clutching his lower back and moaning in pain. Half a dozen others, including the guard I paralysed, crowd into the room, murmuring urgently. The captain passes by in the hallway, his sceptical gaze lingering on me.

I take Nordr's pulse, analysing his pained movements and noting the sporadic twitch of his right leg.

I unroll my set of fine silver needles, a parting gift from Quin, and select one.

A wave of curious murmurs.

I must keep up the act. "Lindrhalda gave me the gift of understanding how best to heal my patients. I choose this needle with her guidance."

I carefully insert four sharp needles into the acupoints around Nordr's tailbone. "Wait fifteen minutes. He'll walk to his cabin on his own."

And fifteen minutes later, to a chorus of amazed gasps, he does.

"Lindrhalda has truly blessed you," the Skeldar I paralysed says gruffly as he escorts me to a small cabin.

The door closes behind him, and I lean against it, banging my flushed forehead against the wood before turning to my companions.

Lykos is sitting on the floor, resting against a wooden chest with one leg extended and a forearm casually hooked over his bent knee. His scowl keenly follows Megaera, who is hanging her wet cloak on a wall hook. His fingers twitch, as if itching to attack. I step into his view, tutting. "We're in this together."

He glances at Zenon, asleep on a narrow bunk under a pile of furs. "Did you pass the test?"

I drop my belongings at the end of another bunk. "This one, at least."

Luckily, Nordr only had a pinched nerve. The needles quickly relieved his pain. If they test me with something more serious, though...

Megaera perches on the edge of the bunk, her face pale and greenish under the swaying lantern above. She clutches a beam. “Will the rocking ever cease?”

I rummage through my things. Where’s the ginger? It should help.

I find a minuscule crumb and offer it to her, then rise. “I’ll find more.”

“I’m fine.”

I leave the cabin—with a warning look to Lykos, who smirks back at me—and after pocketing some ginger from the galley, I head onto the deck. I’m not feeling all that great myself, but the last thing I can do, having Lindrhalda’s touch, is throw up.

I walk around the ship, breathing in the salty air. The captain is at the helm, staring grimly out over the channel. I follow his line of sight.

In the distance, a great bloom of light dances over the water’s surface. My heart lurches as I hurry to the ship’s side. Is that fire? Is something burning on Iskaldir’s coast? No, it’s not onshore.

A ship is ablaze.

Flames leap into the sky, and breezes carry the first traces of burning wood to our ship. A distant boom and crackle follow a violent explosion. A burning ship in the channel would not be empty.

I turn to the captain, who bows his head at the distant sight. “Are we the closest ship? There could be survivors in the water.”

“Such sincerity. I might almost believe you have Lindrhalda’s touch.”

I rear back a step.

He faces me, his gaze settling on my arm. “I don’t believe gods and goddesses choose our fates.”

“Then why did you let us go?”

“My men believe.”

“They must be important to you.”

“We’re family. Indulging you satisfies their superstitions.” He steps closer, his golden hair falling over his shoulders like curtains. “I’m sure they’ll be disillusioned soon enough.”

“And if they aren’t?”

“Are you bargaining with me?”

“I want a promise that we won’t be sold into slavery.”

He pulls back, his gaze returning to the distant flames. “Lindrhalda’s touch is far too precious to keep to myself. If you prove yourself, I’ll present you to Prins Lief of Ragn. You could say he... adopts healers.”

Ragn? I’m not sure what kind of prince this Lief is, but if this bluff gets me to Ragn, I’ll be that much closer to reaching my mother’s systra. I gesture across the night-heavy waters to the flames.

The captain snarls. “I’ll never risk my men for that .”

“Risk?”

His laugh is heavy, hollow.

I wait, dread tightening my chest.

“All ships to Iskaldir pass through that checkpoint. It used to be called Skogar. Now we call it Cinderbay.”

“Cinder . . .”

“It started a month ago. This is the fifth ship to be set ablaze.”

I stare across the dark, to the brilliant flames. Set ablaze? “This is deliberate?”

He grunts in affirmation.

I grip the dewy railing. “But the people—the crew, passengers...”

“It’s not the ship our stormblades are ordered to burn.”

It’s those on board.

“Are they... spies?” My stomach sinks. “Lumins? Is this warfare?”

“They’ve all been Skeldars.”

“They’re burning their own?”

“Only those ships with no signs of sickness are allowed through.”

The flames dim as the ship sinks into the water. “Signs...” I snap my head to the captain, sucking in a sharp breath.

“Poxies. A single man with rashy cheeks or sores, and all on board go down with him.”

“They don’t distinguish between the healthy and the sick?”

“They won’t risk it coming ashore.”

It spreads too easily. My stomach clenches as the boat dips suddenly. Nausea races up my throat.

“In the name of Vaesen, god of balance and harmony and the natural order. Their lives are a sacrifice for our beloved land.”

I laugh dryly, then wretch. “Not all of them would die.”

“Do you think the command of our king is cruel?” He pounds my back. “I don’t. A few burning ships are nothing compared to towns full of pus-pocked victims, piles of decaying bodies on street corners, and the neverending wails of families losing their loved ones.” He pauses. “The squawk of a crow in an empty town square. A fox curled atop a dirt mound, under it your sister, your brother.”

I push myself upright, my arms trembling.

“I won’t let it aboard this ship,” he murmurs. “No matter how many tricks you have, you won’t beat this.”

I shudder. He's right.

My grandfather died trying to create wards against it—his most important work, for the most dangerous disease. But Lumin wouldn't allow it, too afraid of what it might do. Too afraid of worsening the spread.

Iskaldir is also afraid.

The plague is the most devastating sickness to have ever ravaged the kingdoms. It terrifies me most as a healer. That it will come at all. That if it does, I won't be able to cure it.

For an ugly second, I understand why the redcloaks imprisoned Kastoria during its outbreak.

For an uglier second, I accept the flames.

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There's a tautness in the air at breakfast. Men scrutinise their comrades' faces, laughing weakly when suspicious gazes connect.

There's an almost collective sigh of relief when it's clear no one here is showing symptoms. Shoulders drop, conversation eases.

At the table behind me, a Skeldar shivers in the chilly air. "Snowing early this year."

"Shaman predicted a cold so brutal, not only Iskaldir will see an early ice-over, but half of Lumin too."

I grip my spoon hard.

Quin had hoped to make it into the mountains and back to the capital before winter. An early cold means... He'll be stuck on Mount Lysippos for months. Travelling would be too dangerous. Using magic to clear a path would drain him and Nicostratus too quickly. Even with a dozen linea clearing the way, it would be agonisingly slow. And worse: far too conspicuous.

The regent's men are set on killing him, after all.

No, the royal brothers have to arrive stealthily, with the surviving witnesses. But being stuck on a mountain would make it easier to corner him. They'd only need to set traps at the base and wait for spring...

"Has that spoon offended you in some way?" Megaera slips onto the bench beside me, elegantly kicks her foot into Lykos's shins across from us, and smiles daintily.

Lykos grunts, then smirks. “Surrounded by Skeldars, and you’re the one to fear most.”

The smirk turns into a laugh.

I adjust my grip on the spoon, trying to push thoughts of Quin aside. He doesn’t want me interfering in his life. There’s nothing I can do from here anyway.

I shove my untouched porridge away, prop my elbows on the table, and sink my pounding head into my palms.

“Cael, are you—” Megaera cuts off.

All chatter stops.

I raise my head to see the captain making a tight-lipped appearance.

Megaera and Lykos also lose interest in their food. Last night, I told them about the burning ship.

The captain holds up a tiny scroll of paper. “They’ve sent scout boats. They’ll arrive within the hour.”

He turns sharply on his heel and held breaths release around me. We’ll be fine. We’ve pretty much made it —

An urgent screech echoes through the bowels of the ship.

Dozens of spoons clatter into bowls, and Skeldars leap to their feet, shouting to grab weapons, as the man I’d paralysed stumbles in.

His limbs are trembling, and so is his voice.

My stomach tightens.

“Kjartan—captain—it’s Hakon. He’s . . . he’s sick. He’s got . . .”

I slam my eyes shut, drawing a quiet breath as panic erupts around me. Megaera slides closer, her body strung taut.

Lykos lurches to his feet and bolts from the room, calling for Zenon.

Kjartan blows on his fingers, releasing a sharp whistle that commands immediate attention. If he’s afraid, he hides it well. The elegant lines of his face tighten with responsibility, sharp control. He speaks, and no one dares challenge him.

“Sit. Down.”

They sit.

He addresses the bearer of the bad news. “Rurik. Details. Now.”

“We were on night watch. Nothing happened. Around dawn, we played a little by the brig, to stay awake.” A guilty look.

“Continue.”

“At first, I thought he was flushed with drink; we fell asleep. When I woke just now, he... he...”

The captain grabs him by the hood of his cloak. “By Hrafnar’s beak, spit it out.”

“He’s still sleeping. But his face. It’s covered in boils.”

Rurik’s frightened eyes latch onto me.

I rise slowly, hiding any signs of concern. I’m the one they’re looking to; their hope. My reactions control their panic. “I’ll see him. Rurik, you’ve been in contact with him. Quarantine yourself. No one but me goes near them.”

Megaera clutches my arm, her eyes warning me.

Stay steady. Stay strong. “Keep them calm. Get everyone to cover their nose and mouth.”

I stop by my cabin, pull out a kerchief, and tie it around my face, my shaky fingers fumbling. I gather all my rare herbs and Grandfather’s books, then head to my patient.

The captain is waiting outside the brig.

“Wear a face covering,” I tell him.

“I must show my men I’m not afraid. I’m willing to go down with them.”

“You have a responsibility to lead by example. If more crew get sick, even if I have the knowledge and ability to heal them, I may not have enough resources to.”

He processes this with a firm press of his lips, then pulls a kerchief from his cloak.

“You don’t have to come in,” I say.

“You won’t change my mind about that.”

We enter the brig. Hakon is slumped over the table, snoring. As we round the table, the dreaded sight of pus-filled boils meets us.

“Lindrhalda have mercy!”

“I thought you didn’t believe.”

“I do if it’s the only chance of a miracle.”

I take out a square of silk, laying it over Hakon’s wrist. He stirs, then continues snoring as I press my fingers to his pulse—

That doesn’t make sense.

I press deeper. Check again.

The phantom sensation of his skin beneath my fingers grips me now. My breath shortens. The memory hits like a punch to the gut: Vitalian Dimos, prone and bloodied on the canal in Hinsard. I’d checked his pulse too—weak and weakening. I’d wanted save him, but without magic, he’d died under my hands.

I shake off my fear. I must concentrate.

There’s no weakening of this man’s pulse. I frown.

“What is it?”

“His pulse is steady, strong. Fit.” I move the silk to his forehead and press my palm against him. “No sign of fever.”

“What does that mean?”

I search Hakon's face again. The boils are real, but... I spy a small pouch under his cheek, used as a pillow. A wedge of embroidery catches my eye—a beautifully stitched rune, nestled in a patch of strawberries. But there's a small hole in the fabric...

I suck in sharply and pluck the pouch free. Dried, crumbled flowers and rune-carved pebbles spill out of the knotted end.

Hakon lurches upright, dazed. His gaze sharpens on me and the pouch in my hand.

He lunges for it, but Kjartan grabs his arm and yanks it down.

At the sight of his captain, Hakon slams a fist to his heart in respect.

I take the knife from the captain's belt and drag the tip through the dried flowers.

"It's a dromveske. The runes inside catch pleasant memories," Kjartan says. "An Iskaldir tradition—a gift between lovers."

I sniff the end of the knife. As I thought. Strawberry thistle... and another weed. A reaction to this mimics sinister disease.

I laugh bitterly and slide the knife back into the captain's sheath.

"When did you get this?" I ask Hakon. "Where?"

"My girl. During the farewell a month ago."

A month ago. "Did anyone else get one?"

Kjartan speaks, "The farewell festival is at the start of the season, before we take to

the sea. For those leaving their loved ones on extended journeys. There would've been many setting out; most probably got dromveskes."

"Are they handmade by the giver, or—"

"She bought it for me, at a stall in Portael."

"How is this relevant?" Kjartan asks.

I pull off my kerchief. "This isn't the poxies." I gesture to the spilled flowers. "It's thistleweed. It looks very similar to strawberry vine. Contact with the skin causes harmless boils."

Hakon feels his face. "Boils?"

A lookalike symptom.

Like mine, Kjartan's expression pinches. "How long will it take for the boils to disappear?"

If we had bittersweet balm and magic, this could be cured immediately. With neither, I can only grind up some frostbloom in oil. "By tonight."

The captain curses and slams a hand against the wall.

"At least it's not the poxies. Send a message and—"

He hauls me away from Hakon into the hall outside the brig and throws me against the wall. "Ignorant fool," he snarls under his breath. "Why would they believe us?"

"If they gave us time, they'd see for themselves."

“They won’t give us time.”

“Why not?”

He lowers his voice further. “This may be worse than if it were the poxies.”

I start to protest, but he shuts me up with a scowl.

“If all this resulted from dromveskes, they’ve taken innocent lives for nothing.” Kjartan slams his palm against the wall beside my head. “They’ll cover this up. For the sake of peace.”

“What peace?”

Serious eyes bore into mine. “A mistake of this magnitude? Their authority will be undermined. Those grieving their loved ones are holding themselves together, believing their children’s deaths were meaningful. Sacrifices to protect the people of Iskaldir. But a bad batch of dromveskes? They’ll rise up.”

I swallow hard. I understand. They would rather burn our ship, all ships, until that batch of bad dromveskes disappears. Then they can claim the poxies have been eradicated. Praise to those who sacrificed their lives.

“They’re coming.”

“Worse,” Megaera says, stepping out of the shadows where she must have hidden to listen in. “They’re already here.”

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“Don’t tell anyone it’s not what it looks like,” Kjartan warns, sending Megaera off with a flick of his hand. When she’s gone, he leans in close, whispering his plan in my ear. It’s risky, and I know that best, but it’s our only chance.

I agree, but then I whisper another thought. His brow furrows, lips pursed, before he nods and strides away, leaving me to hurriedly prepare herbs and oil.

Hakon watches with wide, fearful eyes as I get him to slather the mixture on his face and chew on ignisfern to lessen the inflammation. The boils will take until nightfall to fade, but I look him in the eye, my voice firm. “You mustn’t leave the brig until an hour after your face has healed. No matter what happens above.”

I hand him a bronze plate to check his reflection, carefully removing the incriminating dried flowers from the dromveske before I release Rurik from quarantine with a message from his captain. Then I race through the hallways, up the stairs, and out onto the deck.

The cold bites at my skin, but not as bitterly as the sight that greets me.

A half-dozen boats in all directions, cutting off any chance of escape. Each is lined with bow-and-arrow-armed brutes, their expressions hard and unyielding. Fiery braziers flicker on their decks, flames licking at the air, ready to ignite arrowheads wrapped in fuel-soaked fabric.

The boat directly at our starboard side seems to be in command, and just behind it, a larger ship looms with an imposing figure watching from the deck, his cloak billowing in the wind.

One by one, our crew steps onto the extended plank for screening, and one by one, they're sent back. Megaera walks out too, followed by Lykos and Zenon.

"Any more?" comes a heavy shout. "All on board, including your extended families, will be sacrificed if any stowaway is discovered."

The men stiffen. One quakes, sagging against the mast. "Our families, Captain. I don't care about my life, but..." Panic seizes him. "There's a sick man on board!"

Kjartan's gaze flickers with annoyance, but his lips curl in a mix of understanding and pride. It's a good man who chooses his family over his own life.

"And not just any sickness," Captain Kjartan says calmly. "He carries the poxies."

The surrounding boats erupt into frantic movement. Stormblades set arrowheads alight; bowstrings pull taut, awaiting the order to release.

I scurry to the captain's side, and as discussed, he grabs me by my hood and drags me down the plank. The narrow wood bends and groans under our weight; my stomach lurches with each step. In my peripheral vision, I see Megaera and Lykos rush to the side of the boat, their faces drawn tight.

We all know it—the chances of winning this gambit are slim.

Snow flurries around us, but my shiver isn't from the cold. It's from the sight of those fiery arrows aimed right at us. Scorching heat and impending death. The stormblades' faces are a mix of regret and ruthless determination, flickering in the firelight.

Kjartan yanks up my arm, exposing the birthmark. "This healer has Lindrhald's touch. The goddess has shown him how to cure this disaster."

The stormblades exchange confused, disbelieving looks, their bowstrings tightening.

The one in command steps onto the side of his boat, his voice thick with scepticism. “I’ve seen many desperate acts. No one bold enough to claim they can cure the poxies.”

“I-I couldn’t walk from pain,” a voice calls from our ship. “He cured me with Lindrhalda’s guidance.”

The commander scoffs.

I hold up the herbs in a plain pouch. “Lindrhalda’s wisdom.”

Kjartan barks an order, and Rurik lets fly an arrow. It snatches the pouch from my hand, sending it in a neat arc to embed itself in the wood beside the stormblade’s feet.

“You dare aim a weapon at me?” he roars, his face twisting with fury.

He moves to kick the pouch into the sea, but a comrade halts him with a sharp jerk.

“What if it’s true? What if that is the cure?” He nods toward the grandiose ship, where the figure looms, watching.

The commander hesitates, his eyes locked on me and the captain, then picks up the pouch. He opens the tied end, casting a tight look at me.

Kjartan tenses beside me, and I’m ready to bow my head, to pray to any deity—even the Arcane Sovereign—to help us escape this. The only thing stopping me is the fear of taking my eyes off those sharp flaming arrows.

The commander dips his fingers into the pouch, pinches out a chunk of herbs, and sniffs deeply. His laughter is cold, cruel. He tosses the pouch to his comrades. “Nothing but the contents of a dromveske!”

He draws a fiery arrow, pulls the string taut, and lets it fly.

It hurtles toward the side of the boat —

Lykos barrels into Megaera, knocking her out of the arrow's path. They crash to the deck, Lykos shielding her with his body. Zenon leaps to the fallen arrow, bravely stamping out the flame.

A second arrow is aimed at the ship on our other side.

I understand what the commander is doing. He wants us to panic, to know the third arrow is meant for the captain and me—exposed and vulnerable at the end of the plank.

A shriek echoes in the distance, but no one pays it any mind.

A third arrow is nocked, this one brighter, angrier.

It's aimed at me.

We could jump into the sea, but the icy water would kill us soon enough. It feels wrong to go that way. At least we've stood firm until the end. We've tried our best to save the lives on this ship.

The arrow is released, whizzing toward me. I clutch onto the warmth of Quin's memory, a feeling I'm supposed to bury forever. And in a way, I'm about to—

A deafening screech.

Water shoots up from the sea—not sea water, but the water of a transforming wyvern, wings spreading as it rises majestically up and—

In a fierce, blooming spray, it catches the arrow mid-flight.

The flame extinguishes into a lone, insignificant plume of smoke.

Stormblades lower their bows, stunned, nervous, reluctant to incite the wrath of the poisonous beast.

The wyvern spits the arrow into the sea, screeches again, and circles grandly overhead.

All eyes follow the sight.

My heart leaps. On the wyvern's flank is a pale, freshly healed scar.

My knees buckle; Kjartan steadies me with a firm grip on my arm. "What—"

Quin once said wyverns, for all their fierceness, are even more fiercely loyal. Royal blood might ultimately control them, but when not under royal influence, wyverns have a choice who they protect.

This wyvern has chosen me?

"Do we shoot it down?"

I shake my head. "She's on our side."

Relief floods through me, and as if she senses it, the wyvern falls like water, disappearing into the sea as swiftly as she'd come.

A frightened yelp has stormblades yanking their gazes away from the wyvern.

The stormblade commander drops his bow, his hands flying to his face in horror. The

men around him flush with bumps too.

Their panic is messy, palpable, fear a living shadow on their boat. I raise my arm with 'Lindrhalda's touch'. "I've been sent to make this illness disappear. Give me six hours, and I will cure you."

Stormblades on the other boats stir uneasily. Some set down their bows, others aim with more determination at our ship, awaiting the order. A few point their flames at their neighbours.

The commanding stormblade curses, halting his men. He tells them to lower their weapons. "Six hours. We can give them six hours. If we're not healed... we'll go down alongside your ship. Fellow men," he calls out to his soldiers, "the wait will be worth it. If there is no cure, at least flames are prettier in the dark."

I'm the only one allowed to board their vessel. I treat them with the oil I prepared. While there, I find the dromveske pouch lying abandoned in a corner, surreptitiously toss it overboard, pull out another one—seemingly identical but filled with harmless dried flowers—and declare it will solve the problem.

Oiled and chewing on herbs, they hold me hostage, staring me down, taking turns enlightening me on exactly how I'll die if I fail.

As their voices drone on, I glance over at Megaera, Lykos, and Zenon, who watch, along with the captain. Their sombre faces are too much. I force a reassuring smile and turn away, focusing on the ornate ship lingering nearby.

The figure on the high deck is still there, watching, unperturbed by the falling snow.

There's something about him . . .

"What are you staring at our Prins for?" a stormblade huffs in my ear.

“Prins?”

“Prins Lief of Ragn. Second only to our king.” They all slam loyal fists over their chests.

The one Kjartan wants to gift me to if we make it through the night? “If he’s so important, why is he so close to this chaos?”

“He’s been hunting for a cure. In case it slips through our net. In case it gets to shore.”

Ah. He’s in charge of the second line of defence.

I raise a hand and wave.

He watches me for a long moment, then inclines his head.

It feels like forever before the hours pass. I’m reduced to huddling into my cloak, blowing on my hands to keep them from going numb. Blankets have been passed around the stormblades, but I’m left in what I arrived in. Luckily, their tall, larger bodies block the worst of the breeze, and the brazier radiates just enough warmth to keep me from freezing—but barely.

I almost fantasise about those dozen arrows being set alight and stationed along the side of the boat.

I shake my head, gritting my chattering teeth.

The boat rocks over gentle waves, wood creaking. One of the stormblades mutters, “Almost sundown.”

I lift my head from my cocoon. The sky is low, the fading light making the drifting

snowflakes glimmer. It's beautiful. And terrifying. Only a few minutes until darkness.

What if my oil isn't strong enough? What if it takes longer than six hours for their symptoms to fade? What if I've made a mistake? What if—

I'm yanked to my feet, my heart pounding, and—

Yelps and shouts come from our ship.

A Skeldar bounces down the plank in a hurry. "Lindrhalda's touch saved me!"

"Commander!" a stormblade gasps. "Your face. And his, look!"

Around me, men shout in awe and relief, dropping their weapons—and my sore arms.

Lykos and Zenon entangle themselves in a joyous, relieved hug.

Megaera gazes at me, her eyes shimmering with respect.

Cheers ripple from the Skeldars, echoing across the surrounding boats.

The commanding stormblade mutters and then laughs, a sound of bitter relief.

A chant begins, "Praise Lindrhalda's mercy! Praise Lindrhalda's mercy!"

And I sag to my knees, finally allowing myself to shake.

I'm pulled up, yanked triumphantly onto shoulders, and amidst blonde hair and leather vests, I'm steered onto a bridging board, up a ladder—

And over the side of the ship to a lantern-lit deck—

This is not the ship I snuck onto with my companions.

The ship's sides are studded with hand-painted Skeldar shields, bearing emblems of their gods. The sailors here are dressed in finer wool tunics. Somewhere close someone is playing the flute, and wafting up from below is the rich aroma of cooked chicken.

Stormblades hustle me to the bow of the ship and drop me to the deck, where I catch myself on all fours.

I'm pushing myself up when two boots come into view.

I stare at my foggy breath bouncing off the deck as I wait for permission to rise.

Laughter. "Do you prefer conversations staring at feet?"

I hurriedly stand and let out a most undignified splutter. "It's you!"

To be fair, he looks equally taken aback, seeing me up close—but he holds his response in better check. "Ah. The one who dared to speak up in Hinsard's famous Thinking Hall."

In Hinsard, he'd tried to fit in, wearing our fabrics and taking off his adornments. Here, he wears a cloak lined with fur, three studs of gold pierce his right ear, and an intricate golden chain extends around his head like a crown.

"You were trying to find healers to fight this supposed outbreak?" I say, rapidly putting things together.

"Vitalians are too proud, too vain. There's no working with them."

"Dangerous, to go yourself. You might've been captured; taken hostage."

“Risks must be taken.”

“Others could have gone in your stead.”

“We are unlike you. We lead our men; we don’t hide behind them.” He pauses, analyses me with a long scrolling look from face to feet and back again. “Lindrhalda’s touch? You, too, have quite some nerve.”

I’m quiet.

He folds his arms. “What do you mean, ‘supposed’ outbreak?”

I tell him the truth of the poxies, and why we pretended our way through it.

Prins Lief barely bats an eye. “Your captain is right. This must be kept quiet. But rest assured, I’ll have the weed eradicated. We shouldn’t protect anything that masks itself.”

His words sit uncomfortably. I frown. “It only mimics the look of common strawberry so that it doesn’t get destroyed.”

“That might be a good thing for the plant, but what about anyone coming in contact with it?”

“If prepared properly, the roots can save lives.”

“What are you saying?”

“The answer isn’t simply to burn them all to the ground. Those coming close to it need to sharpen their eyes and understand what’s beneath the surface.”

“Are we still talking about the plant?”

“Don’t burn them. Educate. Have the thistle prove its worth.”

He grimaces, but lets this lie. “You’ll have to bear the role of the one with Lindrhalda’s touch.”

I stiffen. The ruse had been necessary in the moment, but it’s not a role I wish to live.

Dread is a terrible clawed fist in my belly. “Expectations from you will soar. You might have saved your life for now, but every procedure hereafter will be a throw of the dice of fate. Should you fail...”

If I’m discovered a fraud, they’d make a public show of it to warn anyone off trying anything like it again.

I drop to my knees on the deck. “Please. Take me to Ragn and let me disappear.”

“I’m rather curious how far you’ll go as a healer.”

“I have much to learn. I came here to find my mother’s systra and further my healing knowledge.”

“Who is your mother’s systra?”

“Asta Nightshade.”

“Of course you’d be related to her.” A heavy, pained laugh. “Your aunt has thrice refused to become my... personal physician. She prefers to heal those outside the castle.”

I hide a small sigh of relief. ‘The ones the world looks past are the ones most in need of saving,’ she’d written to Mother. I like that she stands with this philosophy rather than bowing to a prince.

But the fact royalty lets her get away with it... “You respect her.”

He looks at me sharply, curiously. “What makes you think that?”

“She could refuse.”

“Think I’ll let you go as easily?”

I pump my fist over my heart. “Let me learn from her, and I will come to you whenever you call for aid.”

“Your name?”

“Caelus Amuletos.”

He smiles.

I mask a shiver crawling up my spine.

I’m a healer. Not a god. I will not be able to save everyone.

And certainly not without magic.