



The King's Man #5

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Category: Romance

Description: A healer who masks his identity. A king held captive. A game of power, deception, and undeniable longing.

Cael has always walked the thin line between healer and outlaw, but when he learns Quin, the true king of Lumin, has been captured, he risks everything to reach him. Disguised as “Haldr,” Cael infiltrates Iskeldir’s court, tending to Quin’s wounds while keeping his own identity buried. Each stolen moment between them is a battle of sharp words, lingering touches, and the ever-present danger of discovery.

But Quin’s freedom comes at a cost. To secure his release, Cael must do the impossible: win the Medicus Contest, a ruthless competition designed to prove Lumin’s superiority in healing magic. With only alchemy and wit, Cael must outmatch spell-wielding rivals, outmanoeuvre those who would see him fail, and outlast the unseen forces working against him. When the final trial demands he enter the callous regent’s memoryscape, Cael faces an impossible choice: risk his soul to save those trapped inside or lose everything. Including Quin.

In a world where healing is power and love is a battlefield, how far will Cael go to protect the man he can never have?

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I uncork a small vial, tip the contents down my throat, and stagger into the courtyard of our borrowed refuge.

Three steps, and the timber walls, beams, and upper balcony tilt drunkenly.

The cobbled courtyard shifts, rising in waves beneath my feet.

Lykos, the crusader who destroyed my magic, is a shadow at the well, hauling water as though the world owes him tribute.

Megaera, my former intended and near murderess, sweeps past in a flash of crimson, her movements doubled in my blurred vision.

“And you worry I’ll poison you,” she murmurs, catching my arm and guiding me to a bench. “You do a fine job of that yourself.”

“Is he mad?” A younger voice cuts through my haze, and Zenon, youthful and wide eyed, emerges carrying a steaming bowl. “This is the third time this month.”

Megaera takes the bowl, her tone breezy as she spoons the bitter concoction into my mouth. “He calls it trial and error. I call it a slow march to an early grave. ”

But only through trial and error can I heal; only through a lot of it can I forget .

The thought settles heavily in my gut, but I push it aside.

My newest desire since arriving in Ragn has been to learn every alchemic healing

method possible, practice each to perfection alongside my aunt and stranded companions, and, above all, avoid any thought of Lumin royalty.

... Specifically, where they might be three months after we parted.

Or how they might be faring. Or whether one in particular has had any stray thoughts about me.

“It’s all he does,” Zenon grumbles. “He barely even sleeps.”

I swallow, my throat clenching around the foul taste, and my limbs begin to seize.

Megaera assures Zenon I’ll be fine shortly and nudges him back to his reading lessons at the courtyard table.

I silently count two minutes in my head—the time it takes for the antidote to neutralise the poison crawling through my veins.

My vision sharpens first. The courtyard snaps into focus, the distorted waves settling into stone. Lykos abandons the well, his broad shoulders tensing as he grabs his spear and prowls toward Megaera. His lips curl as he presses the tip between her shoulder blades.

Megaera, ever unruffled, tosses a cloud of pale dust over her shoulder. Lykos staggers back, coughing violently, spear falling to his side.

She spins with a mocking laugh, crimson cloak flaring. “I’ve won every round, crusader. When will you learn? ”

His dark eyes flash with frustration—and something else. Fascination. “What was that?”

“One of Cael’s poisons.” Her voice lilts. “Be a good boy, and I’ll give you the antidote.”

“You—” Lykos topples, unconscious, before he can finish.

Zenon peers over the edge of the table, shaking his head. “I can’t believe women used to swoon over him.”

Megaera smiles faintly as she kneels, tipping the antidote into Lykos’s mouth. “He has a certain brutish charm. Pity about what’s in his head.”

“Should we drag him inside?”

“Leave him. The spring air will do him good.”

They mean well, all of them. Stuck here in Iskaldir with me, longing for somewhere else—someone else. Especially Lykos and Zenon. It’s like they have a place they’re supposed to be, a person waiting for them.

As soon as I can, I’ll find a way to get us back to Lumin.

I shake my stiff arm and leg, willing sensation to return.

The town bell tolls—Arcane Sovereign! It’s quarter to five already.

I’m due at the temple in fifteen minutes.

Last time I was late, Prins Lief made me write lines by candlelight under the watchful eyes of the temple statues. I’m now certain I believe in ghosts.

My arm tingles as feeling returns, and I leap to my feet. Megaera calls lazily after me,

“Your curacowl’s by the stove. You nearly cooked it.”

I snatch the white healer’s hat from its perch, inhaling a faint whiff of smoke as I cram it onto my head. Delightful. Pulling the veil down over my face, I grab my bag of remedies and bolt.

The courtyard door bangs shut behind me, and I step into the heart of Ragn, a coastal town cleaved in two by a glacier winding down from the pine-covered mountains.

I hurry along cobbled streets lined with timber houses and glance up at the peaks. Perched on one is a stone castle, its battlements silhouetted against the fading light; on the other, catching the golds of the sinking sun, stands the temple of the gods—the place I need to be.

Swinging right, I enter the town square, where a wall of celebratory music and masked dancers hits me like a wave. They whirl around enormous stone runes set into the ground—a wedding celebration.

I zigzag through the throngs of revellers. “Excuse me—sorry.”

From a balcony overhead, someone shouts, “Release the runes!”

Four massive gulls are set loose from the rooftops, their wings beating as they scatter pebbles into the crowd below. A roar of delight erupts as hands shoot skyward, scrambling for the falling stones.

Someone nudges me. “You won’t catch one standing like that.”

I suppress a laugh. The last thing I need is a love rune.

Dodging flailing arms and fervent whispers, I finally break free of the crowd. The

temple's pink-hued reflection deepens as twilight settles, urging me onward. I pick up my pace, darting through wider streets and narrow lanes until I reach the bridge—and come to an abrupt halt.

A crowd has gathered; the sharp clang of metal fills the air as two men swing and dodge, muscles straining under the lantern light.

“It's been fifteen minutes already,” someone mutters. The crowd collectively inhales as a blade misses by a hair.

By Iskaldir etiquette, they've another fifteen to tie—or until one of them dies.

The town bell chimes. No time.

I spot the light guardian at the edge of the bridge, deftly swinging a lantern to light the others. Before he pulls the flame into place above the duel, I scuttle over.

“One moment!”

The guardian startles as I grab his arm.

“You want this bridge clear for the other lanterns?” I ask.

“That'd help, but how d'you plan to stop 'em?”

I rummage in my bag, pull out a dark waxy pill, and drop it into the lantern's flame. “Lift it above their heads—quickly.”

He obeys, and plumes of smoke billow from the lantern, drifting down toward the grunting, cursing combatants.

“What is this?” the guardian shrieks.

“Harmless,” I assure him. “Just a nap. Watch.”

The fighters’ movements slow, their swings growing sluggish before they collapse into snores.

Laughter ripples through the crowd, and I don’t wait. Leaping over the outstretched feet of the unconscious men, I sprint toward the temple doors.

The ceremonial grounds before the temple are lined with stormblades, their gleaming hilts catching the dimming light. I make the sign Prins Lief taught me, and the guards open the heavy doors into the main hall.

The vast space is dominated by towering statues along the walls and small shrines scattered at their bases. At its centre is a stone pit holding an eternal fire, and Prins Lief, his hands outstretched to the warmth as he speaks to a woman wearing a curacowl identical to mine.

She turns as I approach, her veil lifted to the brim of her hat. Her face, so like my mother’s, strikes a painful chord of longing in my chest.

I move closer, passing the stormblades flanking the fire. Prins Lief’s voice is cool. “You’re late.”

I bow my head. “Apologies, your highness.”

He gestures sharply. “What is that on your curacowl?”

I touch the brim and pluck off a small runestone, realising where it must have come from. “A wedding celebration. It must have fallen on me in the square.”

He curls a finger.

I hesitate before handing the stone over. At least he seems to have forgotten my tardiness.

Prins Lief inspects the rune, then barks a laugh. “There’ll be a disappointed wedding crowd tonight.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. On the contrary, this blessing is unique—one per ceremony. It’s highly sought after.” His eyes flicker toward my aunt, a wistful look crossing his face. She doesn’t notice; her gaze is fixed warmly on me.

When she finally turns back, he tosses the rune to her as though it’s an afterthought.

She examines it briefly before smiling at me. “I see.”

I gesture to the rune. “Should I return it?”

“Runes are glimpses of the gods’ will,” Prins Lief replies, his tone cryptic. “You can’t cast those away.”

“How convenient,” I mutter.

“Asta will explain later,” he says, his voice softening as he speaks her name. Clearing his throat, he straightens. “More pressing, I’ve been inundated with requests to reveal the healer with Lindrhalda’s touch. News of your work has spread, and my father has asked to meet you.”

I stiffen. “I don’t have Lindr—”

“Your aunt has been catching me up on your progress. She calls you gifted.”

“Gifted cannot be compared to the powers of a goddess .”

“I’ve put things off by declaring your whereabouts unknown, but that only buys us the time my father gives me to find you.” Prins Lief looks to my aunt. “I cannot give you longer. Will he be close enough to live up to the title?”

“His understanding of herbal properties and how they interact with one another is the most extensive I’ve seen in Iskaldir. Far broader than my own.”

Wait, wait. This is all putting the cart before the horse. Better if there was no cart at all. “What happens if you never find the one with Lindrhalda’s touch? ”

“The king must find some answer to satisfy the public. If we don’t find an actual saint, we’ll have to find any old healer, claim him a fraud, and have him disembowelled.”

So the cart has to stay. “Can I pin my hopes on you finding an actual saint?”

Prins Lief grimaces. “How skilled is he?”

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My aunt deliberates. “He came here with vast knowledge, but no practical skills to harness it. That was the only limiting factor of his potential. I’ve since shown him the secrets of distillation, fermentation, infusion and decoction, and elixirs and tinctures.

We’ve yet to look at seasonal harvests for potency, or practice with spirit flame. ”

“Arcane Sovereign,” I whimper. “I’m going to be disembowelled.”

My aunt tsks. Then looks over at Prins Lief. “Your highness—”

He looks sharply at her.

My aunt presses her lips together and when she speaks again, it’s a murmur, “Lief. How much time can you buy?”

Prins Lief briefly shuts his eyes and pivots to me. “Father spends part of spring in Ragn. He’ll arrive in less than three weeks.”

A commotion behind me has me glancing over my shoulder. Stormblades swivel at the door and one announces the arrival of Captain Kjartan.

Prins Lief waves his hand to allow him in and the captain marches up to the fire pit, glancing over my veiled face. He takes the prince aside; they speak in low voices, nothing I can discern over the crackle of fire, until Prins Lief raises his voice and urgently dismisses us.

The storyteller’s voice greets me before the scent of grilled fish does, and I sink into

my seat with little grace. My head feels heavier than my bag of remedies.

“I’d rather a thousand lines by candlelight. And ghosts,” I say, frowning.

We’re in a private dining room, the balcony overlooking the main parade that winds from the wharfs to the castle. The storyteller’s recounting—of two men who, having inexplicably fallen asleep mid-fight, wake up laughing and leave arm in arm—drifts through the open doors.

At least one thing has gone right tonight.

My aunt raises a brow, watching me with an expression that straddles indulgence and curiosity. Our curacowls rest on the bench beside her, forgotten for the moment.

“This ‘touch’,” I say, raising my glass of wine, “might be the worst act I’ve pulled yet. And I’ve done a few.”

The thought brings an ache. It felt different when Quin was with me—his smirk, his encouragement. Really, it’s his fault for inspiring this in the first place. If he were here... If he were truly here, I’d...

I’d have to ignore him .

I shut my eyes briefly and rip into my skewered fish.

My aunt, so like my mother in looks and so unlike her in temperament, chuckles. “Don’t worry. I won’t let anything happen to my sister’s boy.” She points her fork at me. “Tell me, what concoctions did you bring today?”

I push the fish aside and pull my bag onto the table. “As you suggested, I’ve started transposing vitalian spells into their... alchemic counterparts.”

She gives me a pointed look, and I correct myself with a sheepish grin before pulling out small bottles.

“This one manipulates vocal cords—changes your voice. This one changes it back. This one’s for rapid hair growth, and I have to say, I’m proud of it.

I struggled with hair-growth spells, but alchemy unlocked something.

One pill, one inch. No more than two a day, though, or the liver suffers. ”

She takes the hair-growth bottle, her lips curving as she examines it. “I was right. Will you try others?”

“Some are too complex to begin with safely. I need to get these right first.”

“You’re nervous.”

“I have to be precise or risk harming my patients.”

She studies me, then tosses something across the table—a small runestone.

I catch it, frowning. “What’s this?”

She shrugs, still admiring the bottle. “Another reason I’m confident you won’t be disembowelled anytime soon.”

“Very reassuring.”

I turn the runestone over, its carved lines catching the light. “Good luck? ”

She shakes her head.

“Success in my career?”

“Better,” she teases, taking another bite of fish. “You’re fated to meet your other half.”

I immediately toss the stone over the balcony, glaring at her.

“I’ve never known anyone to catch one of these and not meet their soulmate.”

I shake my head. “Pass the potatoes.”

I’m halfway through my plate when a name freezes me. Below, the storyteller introduces himself.

My stomach churns. Rurik.

I grab my curacowl and shove it over my head, slinging my bag across my shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” my aunt asks.

“Precaution,” I mutter, heart pounding. Would others from the ship be here? Anyone who might recognise me as the one with Lindrhalda’s touch?

Rurik’s voice grows louder as he begins his tale. “A month ago, our Prins received a mysterious letter about a peacemaking gift. All we had to do was bring a squadron of stormblades dressed in Lumin cloth to the base of Mount Lysippos.”

Mount Lysippos.

My head swims.

“We arrived cautiously, expecting a trap. And it was” —the audience gasps— “but not for us.”

Quin. Nicostratus.

Blood rushes to my head, ears ringing as I stumble toward the door, pressing myself against the frame.

“Their magic lit up the skies, shook the earth, and summoned a storm of lightning.”

Rurik’s words pound in my chest as he reenacts the scene for his audience. I can see it—their backs pressed together, fighting for survival, for freedom.

“They might’ve won, too, if not for betrayal. A man they fought to protect stabbed them in the back, their meridians blocked, and an abyss opened beneath them. The prince fell unconscious into it—”

I grip the balustrade, a soundless cry tearing from my throat.

“Without hesitation, the runaway king dove after him, roaring with a voice that could’ve deafened Iskaldir.”

My knees buckle.

“He caught his brother by one hand. Even as strike after strike rained down on him, he never let go. He pulled the prince out, threw him onto a horse, and sent him galloping to safety. Then he turned, picked up a fallen comrade’s sword, and fought his way through half the redcloaks before he could be subdued. ”

Quin.

I retch.

“That king was handed over to us in exchange for one hundred days of peace at the border.”

From below, a voice roars: “Cut off his head!”

“Parade it through every city!”

“Too quick. Make him a slave!”

Rurik raises his glass. “The prins will decide. ”

Outside.

I stagger to my feet, my aunt calling after me, but I’m already moving—down the stairs, ignoring the crash of a toppled tray and the startled gasps.

The cold air bites at my lungs as I race past lantern-lit carriages, dodging strollers and slipping on patches of ice. Ahead, the stormblades march, their armour gleaming in the lamplight.

My feet pound against the cobblestones. The wedding party still roars in the square, masks and music blurring as I push through, emerging into quieter streets beyond.

The stormblades press on to the bridge, stopping midway. Prins Lief’s guards approach on horseback, and I duck behind a massive runestone at the bridge’s edge.

Through the iron bars of a cage, I glimpse a figure. Even in shadow, the shape is unmistakable.

I press my veiled forehead to the cold stone, my hollow laugh catching in my throat.

It's him.

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The bark of a stormblade has me hurriedly setting on my curacowl and facing the suspicious soldier. I keep my voice quiet, between us, signing my hands in a symbol that means I'm one of Prins Lief's guests.

Out the corner of my eye, the cage holding the captive king moves forward, following Prins Lief's mounted guards.

If the cage is headed towards the temple, Prins Lief is still there, waiting. And if he's still there, I must see him again.

"Prins Lief is expecting me," I say.

The stormblade squints, "Why were you hiding behind the runestone?"

"I . . . didn't want to disturb . . . this. Wanted to wait until you'd passed."

"Finally someone with common sense. A tiring job, shooing away onlookers. Took us twice the time it should to get this far. "

I feign a sympathetic nod.

"Come with me," the stormblade says, and I accompany him at the back of the procession. We're too far behind to glimpse the captive; I can only watch as the cage bypasses the ceremonial grounds and disappears behind the temple.

I wish I could follow, but am instead ushered to the main temple. I wait in the shadows as guards and stormblades take their turn with Prins Lief, until at last my

presence is announced.

He's exactly where I left him hours ago, warming his hands over spiritual fire, but his shoulders have sagged and his face is pensive.

"You really are bold."

Desperate.

I come forward. "You know why I'm here."

"Could it be more painfully obvious?"

I quietly continue until I feel the flickering warmth of the fire.

Prins Lief narrows his eyes, like he's trying to find the answers he needs within the flames. "This gift... the people crave his humiliation."

"You've been known as one who mediates; who convinces his father not to rush into war. What will you do with King Constantinos?"

"Let me be clear: I don't care for the person; I care about what he represents.

More precisely what the consequences of harming him might be.

" Prins Lief turns his hands as if weighing something.

"There is a growing undercurrent of support for this runaway king. Somehow, he's won the respect of the vespertines. Their network is extensive."

I'm thrown back to Kastoria. Quin's declaration.

“ As your king, I can promise to be with you until the end. I will eat only after all of you have eaten. I will listen to your cries and will answer them. I will wait until you have all received treatment before receiving my own. Trust in me, and I will help return your freedom.”

He followed through with his promises.

That’s what won him vespertine support.

Prins Lief casts his concerned stare to the impressive ceiling far above. “If there’s any shift in Lumin politics and we’ve humiliated or killed your king, I fear we cannot afford the repercussions.”

“Then let him go.”

He levels me a sharp look. “How did you find out about our captive?”

“I overheard—”

“Word has spread faster than the plague. Storytellers will be sharing the news of this delightful gift in inns, in public squares, sharing with their neighbours. Our people know of King Constantinos’s capture.

They crave to see him pay for denying our people access to our spiritual land; for killing us without mercy when we try. ”

“Surely there could be another way to appease them?”

A disbelieving laugh. “And what of my father? He’s never forgiven the cruelty of King Anastasius. To have his son in his grasp... ”

“You could have sent him to the castle, but you’ve had him escorted here. You’re going to imprison him on temple grounds. One of the meditation cottages, I’d guess. Simple, but humane. You won’t stop there. You’ll have his wounds tended to.”

“What are you implying?”

“You’re hedging your bets.” I drop to my knees and fist my chest over my heart. “Let me be his healer.”

“The one with Lindrhalda’s touch, healing our enemy?”

“If power does change in Lumin, you not only had King Constantinos healed, you did so using the best healer of your kingdom. This could be considered a great act of respect—”

“And if power doesn’t change?”

“Then emphasise suspecting the healer of the goddess was a fake. To treat the king with a fake is also humiliating. Say you wanted the captive healthy enough that he better feels how powerless he is. Say you wanted to flaunt everything he’s lost before him. Make him suffer in spirit first.”

Prins Lief draws a dagger and points the tip into my belt. “Are you saying you’d even let yourself be disembowelled, as long as it saves your king from physical harm?”

I lift my veil and look him directly in the eye.

He laughs and sheathes his dagger. “I’m not the benevolent prince you seem to mistake me for.

I care about overall outcomes. I keep your secret not because you intrigue me on a

personal level but because I see a future for Iskaldir's medicinal advancement.

Lumin spells translated into alchemy. I keep you so you'll betray your kingdom's vitalian secrets. ”

“How to heal should never be secret. I'll give you everything willingly.”

“What will your king think of that?”

“He'll wish he'd thought of it first. Especially if it can broker peace.”

This time his laughter echoes around the stone gods. “Rise.”

When I'm on my feet, he presses a signet chain into my hands. “Use this to enter and exit at your will.” He slowly loosens his grip on the signet with a low, rumbled warning. “You won't get far if you're dreaming of his escape.”

Escape is on my mind, but it's not my priority.

After I rob my aunt's herbarium of a myriad of supplies—most of which I made alongside her—I hoof back to the temple.

I flash the prince's signet, pass dense rows of stormblades and enter the meditation grove.

Night blooms scent the air, along with pine and the last remnants of melting ice; it should be peaceful under the dappled moonlight filtering through the canopy of trees, but each of my pounding steps is weighed down by the scrutinising stares of the guards, and the fear of what I'll find when I reach him.

Oil lamps lead the way. I run past a half-dozen meditation cottages, none his. I know

from the lack of guards on their porches, and the fact the line of stormblades continues deeper into the grove.

The final porch has two guards, illuminated by hanging lanterns either side of the doorway. Dim light seeps from the shuttered windows.

Again I flash the signet and they uncross their spears, allowing me to pass.

I come to an abrupt stop outside the door.

If fate should ever have us meet again... should I avoid you? Pretend I don't know you?

I recall the pain of his silence.

I shouldn't be here.

My fist tightens around my bag. This is different. This isn't casually encountering him somewhere where he's safe and living well. This doesn't count.

He doesn't have to know.

I rummage through my bag, pulling out white fingerless gloves, and, fate—my voice altering tonic. I down the liquid and make sure my curacowl is secured. Hauling in a steadying breath, I let myself inside.

It's a simple room, split into three main parts.

A cooking area with a small stove and wooden worktop, table and chairs.

A meditation space with one large cushion on the floor that would overlook the

garden if the door was left open.

And a sleeping area—a simple bed alongside a window, with a small chest at its foot.

An oil lamp hangs on a nearby hook, layering the room in a soft glow and making the gold-chased carvings in the wooden beams shine. I blink. Where is—

Movement from behind the privy partition has my focus sharpening. There's a hiss, followed by a ripped and bloodied cloak and shirt being tossed atop the screen. Boots topple into view and skid as Quin stumbles towards the bed.

Fright has me gasping, and Quin, who's caught himself against the side of the bed, stiffens. His bare back is a canvas of deep, painful lashes, bloody and swollen. One still has grit carpeted into it. My teeth clench. He's hurt this badly on the outside... what's the state inside of him?

The room is a blur and a series of creaks as I storm across it.

Quin turns his head with a tight glare, spearing me to the spot a few feet from him.

It's the first time in months I've seen his face.

That sharp nose, that brow, that defined jawline.

Those penetrating eyes. I'm caught between the urge to curse those who dared touch him and the painful swoop of my stomach descending to the floor.

His braids. They've all been hacked off.

“Who sent you?” Quin's voice sharpens, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. “If you're here to finish what they started, you'll regret it.”

My voice sounds foreign to my ears. “I’m your designated healer.”

“Leave.”

He turns his head away as if, with that, I’ll just go. My silly, arrogant king.

I huff, and when Quin looks back, his gaze is fiery.

“Enough,” I say. “Is your chest wounded?” I carefully touch his shoulder and peer down his bruised but less severely damaged torso. My gaze hitches on the flutette around his neck and I struggle to breathe. “Sit. Give me your wrist.”

“I don’t want your aid.”

He’s angry. Suspicious. He has every reason to be.

Placating words won’t win him over. There’s only one way to deal with him...

I laugh.

Dark, royal eyes flash.

“Excuse me. Sorry.” I laugh again. “I expected more. Someone who’d cling to life determined to make those who hurt them pay. Someone determined to rise from the ashes. I didn’t expect you to give up easily.”

He growls. “You insolent—”

“I don’t care how stubborn you are. Don’t care if you’re some reincarnation of a god. If your wounds aren’t treated you’ll have, at most, two days to live.”

His jaw twitches and he rips his gaze away from my veiled face. His back rises and falls with his frustrated breaths, and he steers himself into a sitting position on the bed.

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I let out a quiet sigh of relief and perch beside him.

My new voice is steady, but my hand trembles as I take his wrist and press to read his pulse.

Without magic, it takes longer. There's no light to guide me, no spell to magnify sensation.

Just pressure, timing, instinct. I've studied hard to feel what I used to conjure. And I use it all now.

His pulse flutters, irregular. Too soft. A whisper beneath bruised skin.

I take out a vial from my supplies and tell him to drink it all. He sniffs it, side-eyes me, and knocks it back with a wince.

"And this one." I hand over the other.

His brow furrows warily, and I help him uncork it. "Trust me."

He grunts, but his shoulders drop slightly, and he pulls out a pill. A vein at his temple flickers as he swallows. "What do I call you?"

I pack the vial, cursing myself for not anticipating this.

Quin's stare begins to narrow, and I blurt the first name that comes to my mind. "Haldr." I wince. "I'm healer Haldr."

He frowns at this, and I can't help but hope that flash in his gaze is disappointment. I clear my throat and stand. "Lie on your stomach."

I help him swivel and lower himself, feeling the twitches of pain under my fingers at each shift. I use cool water with solispine to carefully wipe away the dried blood around these angry crisscrossed welts. Grit loosens and peels away, but under it the skin is raw and inflamed.

With Quin's back to me, I lift my veil so I can see better. He doesn't turn. But a muscle in his neck tenses, as if he feels the shift in the air between us. I unravel my toolkit, take out one of the thin knives my aunt gifted me, and swallow hard.

"I have to cut away bad flesh. Bite down on—"

"I'll be fine."

I keep my breathing steady and my hands steadier. The sharp blade cuts into his skin and his muscles stiffen as he swallows a gasp of pain.

He starts counting the carved lines of runes in the timber frame of the bed and I'm hurtled back to saving 'Nicostratus' at the riverbank. I'd told him to count to stay conscious. He had.

It was Quin then. Quin who'd saved me from a wyvern, been poisoned, let me tend him; Quin who I'd curled against inside the violet oak.

Quin, who is under my fingers now.

I make precise incisions and stitch the wounds, and I tell him everything I'm doing so he knows what to expect, so that I can focus on facts and not... I let out a shuddering breath. "Stay a moment; needs to dry before I bandage you to support your rib."

With an achy chest, I lean in and blow over his salved wounds. He shifts under the sensation, just noticeable enough to make my breath catch. A quiet inhale and a trembling exhale.

His fist curls into the bedmat.

I wish I had magic to heal this instantly. Wish he didn't have to suffer.

"You're careful. "

I hurriedly pull down my veil and help him sit up. "Healers don't see enemies. We see people who need help."

His lips press into a tight curve and his eyes grow dark, heavy, glassy.

We're quiet as I take out long strips of cloth and crouch before him.

"I need to..." I press the end of the fabric to his waist and my fingers brushing his skin trigger a line of goosebumps up his side.

He shuts his eyes as I press the bandage around his ribs.

My hand curves under his arm and I carefully pass it around his back, veil fluttering forward against his chest. Quickly, I thread the bandage around him once more and step away.

Quin reopens his eyes, tries to stand and gives up with a grimace. "Shirt."

I find him a clean meditation robe. "That's all there is for now. More will be brought to you."

He nods, and struggles into the robe. I've given him something for the pain, but there's simply so much of it; with his organs so bruised, I can't give him more or his liver might fail.

My gaze snags on the flutette. Magic would soothe him without adverse effects. "Music can aid in healing," I say factually and reach for the small instrument. "You should play something."

Quin snatches my hand away.

I try to plunge through his hold but his grip tightens around my wrist.

"Don't. "

"An instrument is meant to be played, so much more if the music can—"

Quin's eyes darken, and I jump a little with fright. But it's not enough to stop me.

I let out a mocking laugh and draw my hand away. "I see."

A twitching eyebrow.

I swallow a snort and say ponderingly, "Why buy a flutette if you can't play? Unless... Ah. It was a gift?" I let out a commiserating sigh. "A useless gift, whoever gave it to you."

He trembles in his outrage, and it has my heart skipping.

"Prove it, then." I wave a nonchalant hand.

He raises his chin and everything. Oh Quin. At least when it comes to shamelessness,

we're a fitting match.

I can't help it. I really can't. I step forward and pinch his chin. "What meaning does your title have here? I'm Prins Lief's pet healer. Of the two of us,"—my veil brushes past his cheek as I lean in to his ear—"I have more power."

Quin laughs and hurriedly cuts it off, as if it got away from him. Something smooth and cunning shifts in his expression. He stares at me packing my instruments. "If you have more power, you'll have no trouble getting Prins Lief to meet with me."

I pause for a moment, with an admiring smile. How easily he turned this to his own advantage. Truly the Quin I know.

I slip my things into my bag and sling it over my shoulder. "Play every day for three days." His jaw tightens; so does my hand around the strap of my bag. "Even now you're hesitating? It's just music."

"It's magic," he snarls, the words laced with something raw, something broken. "It's his last."

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Magic. My last.

It takes a long time for the floor to stop plummeting under me, and then I'm seeing red. Pins and needles stab at my throat as I barely refrain from balling my fists. I'm unaware of how I end up right before him, but here I am, yanking that flutette from his chest before he can stop me.

His dark eyes fix on mine; something surfaces in his expression and is hurriedly buried again.

"You're brave, Haldr."

"You're stupid." I press the flutette against his unbudging lips.

My words start to pinch and wobble at the ends.

"You've been captured by your enemy. Your wounds are so deep they'll scar even with vitalian magic, magic that you have no access to here.

Someone who gave you their magic would want you to use it. "

His lips slacken and the end of the flutette slips between them. His gaze is tight on me before he rips it away. After a few moments, his shoulders jiggle, and then I hear his laughter and puffed squeals.

The flutette falls back to his chest.

He's still laughing and the tightness in my chest loosens. I rock back, relieved the veil hides my flush.

"You... you remind me of..." He shakes his head. "He'd approve." He waves a dismissing hand. "I know what to do."

I leave the meditation grove to rough notes being blown through the flutette. It resembles a Lumin folk song, sort of—can Quin really not play? Had I really forged ahead carving that for him on the assumption, because he had a magic root in air, he must have talent with wind instruments?

A high note screeches through the trees, and even stone-faced stormblades flinch.

No matter how painful the music, the magic in the violet oak would be sifting through him, taking away his pain.

As I leave the temple grounds, Quin's song follows me, a jarring note against my racing thoughts. Blindly, my steps lead me back home, where another part of me waits for reckoning.

My aunt is on the bench outside, tapping her foot. Her curacowl sits beside her and her long golden hair shimmers under the hanging lanterns. Her eyes follow me expectantly, and I take my time fiddling about taking off my curacowl .

It looks like the lights inside the house are out; the others must be sleeping. No chance for a timely interruption, then.

"I'll pay you back for dinner."

She cocks her head.

“How do you feel about examining me on distillation and fermentation? I’ll grab some—”

She grabs a handful of my cloak and steers me around. “You’ve altered your voice.”

“Isn’t this potion a grand success?”

“What spooked you?”

I shake my head and she lets go, sighing. “I have other news.”

I look at her curiously, and she continues, “I got home to this letter. From my sister.”

“Mother—what does she say?”

“She usually writes every other month. But this one...” She passes me folded paper. My mother’s writing is barely legible, full of errors and different strengths of ink. She must have written this in stages, some of it with urgency, possibly while crying.

I take a lantern and sit at the outside table to slowly decipher what she’s written. There’s been a great upheaval in the royal city. Many redcloaks and officials have been dismissed from service, left near penniless without work. Akilah has returned home...

I read the messy, incoherent paragraphs again .

Akilah was escorted by a young man—Florentius.

She was—is still—in great distress. The regent took out his anger on a third of some island where she was imprisoned, nailing them through their hearts.

One of the prisoners threw himself before her and took the hit.

The duke admired the devotion so much he sent Akilah home.

The paper trembles in my hands as my fingers grip its edges. My throat tightens, and I press the lantern closer, reading and rereading her words until the ink blurs. Akilah's cries echo in my mind, making it hard to breathe.

How much you've gone through. I should have been by your side.

And Casimiria? What happened to her?

Almost a month has passed since I wrote the above.

Akilah spends her days lying in Caelus's bed, calling out for him like she's lost her brother.

Thankfully, Florentius comes every day with spells to help her.

He even carried her into the bath himself and insisted he wouldn't shy away from anything that helped her look after herself.

It worried me that they are this close yet are unmarried.

I confronted him on the appropriateness of his behaviour and he declared, if it was the only way I'd let him help, he would marry her.

I let it go, of course. I believe he truly only wishes to help her.

He says my dear Caelus would have done everything to help her, and as his friend, he would do so in his stead.

Frostir's breath, systra! I keep putting this letter away, intending to finish soon, and life takes over.

It's been another week. We're all beside ourselves.

I caught Florentius in the herb garden, weaving spring dewdrops into Akilah's hair, murmuring to her that Caelus is smart; that he'll find a way to survive.

I begged him to tell me what he meant.

My darling Caelus is alive—he escaped under the king's orders and can't return while the duke is in power.

My husband believes Caelus will travel south to Iskaldir and seek aid from our family. Please, dear systra, take him under your wing. Protect him as if he were your own.

I look over to my aunt, watching me sort through my emotions. From the start, she opened her arms, not once needing my mother's pleas. She'd simply met me and understood. You're family. You're my responsibility now.

I return to the letter.

In the case he comes to you, pass this on. Let him know we are all well here. Little Lucetta misses him, we all do. Let him know Akilah is strong, and she's being cared for.

Let him know we'll pray for his safe return.

I fold the letter but can't bear to part with it.

My aunt moves to my side and feathers my hair. “Keep it. Do you wish to let them know you are here?”

“It’ll lead to trouble for them.”

She hums. “You escaped under the king’s orders.” Her voice grows quieter, a knowing whisper. “His capture is what spooked you.”

I say nothing. I’m unable.

She seats herself beside me and presses her arm against mine. “You may take after your mother in looks, but you have your father’s spirit of adventure.”

I splutter a laugh. “Father is all rules and responsibilities. I’m questioning now if you’ve ever met him.”

“When your grandfather was still alive, your father was a man of great vision and determination. He travelled all of Lumin and Iskaldir in pursuit of knowledge and experience. Honestly, I admired him greatly when he first came to Ragn.” My aunt flushes and laughs it off.

“Of course, I was barely ten. He only ever had eyes for my older sister.”

It’s the distraction I need from the worry curdling my gut.

“My sister was such a soft, loving girl. Her kindness was too easily taken advantage of, especially by greedy, wolfish men. Your father protected her from the shadows. It was all by chance and coincidence at first, until he realised she needed someone guarding her around the clock and made it his mission to make sure she always arrived home in one piece. He kept this up for months, the casual visitor by day, and the secret protector after dark. One day, she saw him duelling one of the wolfish men.

The crowd whispered he did this often, always for the honour of a beautiful woman. My systra, silly thing, had no idea they meant her. She helped him bandage his wounds—which, par-linea as he was, he did not need at all—and told him he was a good man. And that was that. I believe he kissed her right then and there.”

My father always claimed she was the love of his life in a brutish, don’t-ask-me-again sort of way, but I’d never imagined him quite so dashing. Also... “Duelling?”

“He’s not so bad with a sword, you know. I was young at the time, but he protected me once or twice too.”

How little I know of my own father. I drop my head into the crook of my arm and laugh .

My family . . . my dearest Akilah . . .

I close my eyes, my aunt’s stories fading into the quiet hum of the night. My family is waiting for me, trusting me to survive, to return. But Quin’s face, battered and defiant, rises unbidden in my mind. My king. My responsibility. If I fail him, I fail them all.

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Megaera frowns at our pinched faces. “It’s not my fault. It’s whoever wrote the recipe’s fault.”

I gulp back some water to lessen the spoiled tang. Zenon splutters and claws at his throat, asking for the antidote. Lykos turns purple as he chows it all down and tosses his spoon in the emptied bowl with relief.

“I always follow instructions precisely. Why else have them?”

Zenon finishes a second cup of water. “You even made me buy more hogwart when you were three grammes short.”

She smiles with scary calm. “Would you like to take over the kitchen responsibilities?”

Zenon scoots his chair closer to Lykos’s.

Lykos shoos him back. “You’re on your own, I ate mine.” He stands and collects the dishes. “I’ll clean up.” He’s halfway towards the kitchen when we hear him retching.

Megaera daintily dips a spoon into the dish and tries it. Her face remains perfectly unbothered. She smiles and looks at me. “Let’s eat out tonight?”

I return to my aunt’s for the second half of the day’s mentoring, but my mind is in knots and though I can convince myself to calm down about Akilah—she has Florentius for emotional and physical support—I can’t calm down about Quin.

His wounds will be burning him with every slight movement, and he's probably being annoyingly stubborn about using the flute.

My aunt whacks my backside with a wooden spoon and sends me off, telling me to come with a clearer head tomorrow.

I rush through town, dashing into a few stores along the way, and hurry to the temple grounds.

The guards uncross their spears and I secure my veil, rap on the door, and enter.

Quin doesn't jerk his head at my rushed entrance.

He sits cross-legged on the mat, his bandages stark against bruised skin.

Afternoon light filters through the shutters, striping his muscled frame in gold and shadow.

My gaze catches on his shortened hair and the scars marking his body—traces of pain that make my breath hitch.

"Has no one brought you clothes?" I say, sounding rather puffed, and then spy a pile of clean fabrics upon the table. "Why are you not in them! "

"I stripped," he murmurs, "for you."

I stare, my breathing so uneven I suck in a mouthful of veil.

I quickly cough it out and remind myself I'm only here to get him healthy and to free him.

I square my shoulders and give strict directions for him to perch on the bed. I tend to his welted back, redo the bandages—quick, professional—and toss him a shirt.

While he winces his way into it I turn, shaking, to the table and pull out the things I bought in town. At his limping footsteps towards me, I hold a book up over my shoulder. “This is for you. Study it. Practice .”

Quin reads the title. “How to play the flutette for beginners.” He laughs and bats the book out of my hand.

I pick it up again and this time settle it into his hands. “You can’t excel at everything, even if you are a king.”

My veil gets caught between the book and his fingers; I hurriedly pry it free and take a good step back.

Quin notices my flinch, the way my hand pulls back too quickly, the way my breath snags. He pauses, his gaze lingering, searching. “All the other healers I’ve encountered here lift the veil upon seeing their patient,” he murmurs.

I stammer, “I was poisoned as a child. It... left scars.” My voice wavers, and I grip the edge of the table, hoping he won’t press further. The silence stretches before he nods, his expression unreadable, as if he understands more than most the suffering from poison .

He lowers himself into a chair, spotting the other thing I brought him. “Chess?”

I nudge it towards him. “At the very least, it’ll stave off some boredom.”

“Did you spend money on this for me?”

“Of course not. I... had it lying around.”

He opens the flawless chequered box and pulls out one of the vitalian figures nestled in a velvet pocket. Not a scratch or dent mars the carved wood. His gaze flickers over it to me. “You take exceptional care of your things.”

I grimace. “Someone gave it to me. I barely know how to play, so I never used it.”

He pulls out a few more pieces. “Sit.”

“I’m not sure—”

He throws me a dirty look. “Consider this how to play chess for beginners .”

I plant myself across from him. Better to placate him than incur his wrath. “There’s time for a short game.”

I fool him by asking what each piece is allowed to do, and deliberately make mistakes.

“You really are playing like you’ve never touched a board,” he mutters, adjusting his pieces with precise fingers. “This is painful to watch.”

“Patience,” I retort. “I’ll have you know I’m a quick learner.”

He arches a brow.

He gestures, and I make my move, watching him in turn. Without any reflective surface in here, has he noticed his hair is an inch longer than yesterday ?

Before I take my next turn, I pull out the vial holding the hair-growth pills and pinch

him out another one.

He raises a brow but swallows it, then tells me the strengths of the move I just made, but also how it might have been better to shift my queen. I'm hit again with my mother's letter. The carnage at the island.

Does he know? Was news of this the reason he forged down the mountain despite knowing there'd be traps? Had he been trying to get to his mother?

"You can sacrifice your vitalian here, but not your prince."

Prince. That was family, and family always comes first.

Sullenly, I trade a few more moves with him.

After a while, he murmurs, "What's your relationship with Prins Lief? You're close. How close?"

I shove a sentinian across a square. "I got myself into some trouble and he's helping me out."

"Not for nothing."

"He wants me to be his."

He continues to play—too smoothly, too patiently. "You shouldn't have admitted that. What if I use you to threaten him?"

"I'm very much disposable." I pause. "Besides, you wouldn't do that."

"How can you be sure?"

Because along these years, you've been quietly setting roots inside of me. I know. "I suppose it depends on the type of king you are. Whether you want peace with your neighbours. "

"What if I don't care?"

"You do, or the sharp end of that sentinian would already be at my throat."

Quin moves his pawn, lips tipped into a grimacing smile. He checkmates me on his next turn. "Do you know many healers?"

My gaze lifts sharply to his face. He's concentrating too hard on resetting the board.

He continues with nonchalance that feels stiff. "Have you come across any hailing from Lumin?"

My heart thumps wildly.

Don't come between me and my brother.

I should stop this conversation. I promised I wouldn't involve myself with him again. I'm only breaking my word to save him. I can't indulge in anything more.

I won't .

My limbs tremble as I rise from my chair.

Step away. Leave.

His chair creaks. I feel the heat of his gaze through my veil.

“Someone called Caelus passed through here.” I slam my eyes shut.

My stomach clenches, waiting . . .

I slowly open my eyes. Quin’s expression is smooth and unreadable. He remains quiet for a few long breaths, then rises and stands to look out the shuttered gaps to the garden. Pensive. Once more bathed in sunlight and shade. What are you thinking ?

“Then I... I shall be going,” I say. Tell me what you’re thinking.

“Wait.”

My breath snags and I halt.

“Don’t let me ask about him,” Quin murmurs, his gaze fixed on the garden beyond the shutters.

My breath catches against the fragile fabric between us. I want to scream that I’m right here, but I bite my tongue until it hurts. “Why? Who is he to you?”

“My past.”

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O f course. That's what we agreed. I chose this too.

My past.

I try to voice the two little words on my way out; in the middle of the bridge overlooking massive shelves of ice; while pushing my way through a drunken crowd in the square; at the table as Megaera, Zenon, and Lykos order dinner.

If I can just voice it, if I can grab the echo and spit it out of my mind, it'll keep me grounded, fortify me, like a bubbling shield.

I'll come and go before Quin and anything he says or does will bounce off me.

I'll be unaffected. I'll be able to do what I promised. Heal him, save him, let him go.

I just . . . need to get it out.

The words stay locked in my painfully tight throat.

"Cael? What do you want?"

I wave a hand for whatever and Zenon suggests extra fish for the table. Half a dozen plates get shuttled to our private room and it should be delightful, a treat—on the prince's tab—but... I can barely squeeze a few forkfuls into my mouth.

It takes a long time to swallow and when I manage, I choke at the sounds of a drunken patron. "I, Gudmund Thriceborn, hacked off the captive king's braids!"

Once again, I'm moving outside the private room to the balustrade, shoving my curacowl on.

Downstairs, this blonde brute Gudmund staggers onto the stage.

He has the build of a stormblade—off duty by his simple attire—but his face doesn't carry the Skeldar allure.

His skin is bumpy and broken on one cheek and ear and it stretches down his neck under his shirt.

He burps and brandishes a small pouch.

I squeeze the railing. Gudmund pries open the pouch and pulls out a braided string of dark hair... pinched with a jewel at the end.

I'd recognise those fastenings anywhere.

“Gold pieces, I want gold!”

Someone downstairs snickers.

Gudmund swings Quin's braid. “Spit on it, throw it in spirit flame, and the gods will bless you.”

Patrons turn back to their meals, none interested in parting with their money. I return to my table, to three sets of questioning eyes. “How much do we have between us?”

“You're not thinking of buying those?” Megaera says in disbelief.

“How much?”

She shrugs. “You could ask Prins Lief to double his monthly stipend for you.”

I need those braids now. I look at Lykos, who has his arms folded over his puffed chest. “You’re out of your mind. He’s pure linea.”

Zenon scowls along with him.

I’m alone.

I take what I have and descend from the upper level to the packed floor below. Gudmund is leaning against a pillar, the pouch swinging from his crooked finger while he hiccups.

“I’m interested,” I say, and he turns wonkily and holds out his hand for the gold.

I take his wrist instead, lead him around the storyteller’s table and make him sit. “You’re a strong young man. Do you have family?”

“Look at my face. You think I have family? Where’s the gold?”

“I’ll cure your skin disease if you give me the braids in return.”

He pokes my veil and laughs. “No Iskaldir healer can. The only way is to go to Lumin. Pay a vitalian.”

With my knowledge of plants, vitalian spells, and now alchemy, I can cure this in a mere few heartbeats. In fact—I do a quick inventory of what I have in my bag—I can clear his face without leaving the restaurant.

“I can heal you.”

He laughs. Patrons are starting to show interest; at the balustrade above, Megaera, Lykos, and Zenon have come to watch.

Gudmund points to his peeling skin. “Prove it. ”

I lower the curtains around the storyteller’s stage for privacy, take out the necessary potions and creams and spend the next forty minutes meticulously treating him. When I’m done, I raise the curtains and let the curious onlookers decide for themselves if I’ve fulfilled my promise.

Megaera, Lykos, and Zenon push up sharply from where they were leaning against the railing. “Sure he has no magic?” Zenon asks, tugging Lykos’s sleeve.

Patrons below gasp and admire; murmurs of speculation...

My stomach tightens and I wave a hurried hand. “Just a little healing trick. Nothing special.” I twist to Gudmund and hold out my hand.

Gudmund huffs. “I asked for proof. I didn’t agree to giving you these braids.”

My companions are a collective hiss from the balustrade, and I can hear Megaera say, “How dare he?”

Her red cloak becomes hurried, swishing movement in the side of my eye.

Lykos stops her. “What are you going to do?”

I glance over as she smiles, bats her lashes, and flicks her hair.

She’s ambivalent about our king, and yet she’s gliding down the staircase to possibly have this man put his paws on her. For... me?

Swallowing, I glance at Lykos. Stop her, please.

I don't have to tell him, but he's almost at the storyteller's stage when he finally catches her by the arm. He pulls her around and she twirls with it, possibly about to say a sharp word or two, when she sees it's Lykos.

She pauses, and he uses the pause, declaring before curious onlookers. "Wife. Our table is upstairs."

Megaera stares at him, her cheeks slowly reddening.

Lykos smirks, his eye glinting. He leans in and murmurs, "I'll lead the way."

He hooks her arm in his; Megaera finally sucks in a sharp breath and mutters low into Lykos's ear. "Wife?"

"You poison me every other day, you may as well be."

They move away, and I look over at Gudmund who's admiring himself in a brass plate. I hold out my hand again. "The braids."

Gudmund tightens the strings of his pouch and puts a few coins on the table instead. "You said it wasn't difficult. This is a fair." He burps and calls for the waiter to bring him a bottle of wine for the road.

I grit my teeth and head outside for fresh air. Somehow, I need to get those braids. I'll make a poison. He'll think his skin disease has returned. He'll come to me to cure him again. And this time I'll only give him the antidote when—

"There you are," Zenon says, spilling out of the restaurant.

Megaera and Lykos, lagging behind, frown back towards the restaurant.

Megaera, still slightly flushed, grabs Zenon's sleeve and starts hauling him in the direction of our abode.

"Coming?" I ask Lykos, but he waves me off .

He probably needs a moment of air after his little show with Megaera. Or he's giving her space.

Indeed, she quickly retreats to her room.

Zenon yawns and says he thought what I did was amazing. "I'd like to learn to do that."

"Finish your reading and writing lessons with Megaera, and I'll teach you," I say. Anyone who wants to learn, I'll always be willing to teach.

He goes off to bed with purpose, and so do I. I lie staring up at the shadowy ceiling. Those braids are an intimate part of him. They are not to be spat on, cast away, burned... undone .

I clench my blankets in my fist.

I wake, bolting upright in my bed to the distant clang of bells echoing through the city. Make the poison, find Gudmund, reclaim the king's braids.

My blanket becomes a shrivelled puddle on the floor in my haste.

I suck in a hiss at the cold tiles and yank on my shirt, leggings, socks, boots, robe.

My fingers fumble at the metal clasp and I fleetingly wish it was a different one.

The one that I keep in a box beside my bed; that I can't wear or I might be recognised by the Skeldars I sailed with.

The one I absolutely can't wear in front of Quin .

I glance over towards the dark box and spy a pouch plonked atop it.

I snag it and yank open the ties and...

I press the open bag to my nose and breathe in deeply. They're here.

Scurrying out into the kitchen, I find Lykos stoking the hearth. He looks over his shoulder, at the pouch I'm gripping, and returns to prodding the flames.

"You got this?" I ask quietly.

A nonchalant shrug. "Sometimes a good ol' snatch-and-grab comes in handy. I followed him home. I was careful."

"You did this for—"

"He cheated you." He stuffs another piece of wood into the fire. "I don't like cheaters."

Silence descends between us and in it, I hear things he doesn't admit. I murmur, "Thank you for"—he tenses—"not liking cheaters."

His shoulders drop with relief.

It takes me an hour to inspect each of Quin's braids.

The scent of them is faint but unmistakably Quin—earthy with a hint of pine, like the winds he magics around him.

My fingers brush the bejewelled fastenings, each one a marker of a year survived.

And against his uncle, each one must have been a battle.

I redo all loosened braids carefully and open the fastenings to lock in both ends.

I don't like them being in the pouch, or anywhere I can't protect them, so I loop them and slide them onto my wrists, up to the middle of my forearm.

They're beautiful; like strange vambraces.

My sleeves hide them, and like this, I spend the day with my aunt carefully learning and experimenting.

"You still haven't changed your voice back," she says over our alchemy table. "What do your companions think?"

"I told them it was an experiment. Lykos and Zenon believe it. Megaera's too smart, but she doesn't say anything."

"Are you sure you don't want him to know it's you?"

"He can't know."

She nods, and finally shoos me off for the day.

At the temple, stormblades part for me on sight. Flutette sounds drift from the cottage—softer than before—and I stall in the blotchy light of evening-baked trees.

I stare down at my arms. The braids are light and ticklish around my wrists.

I only took these to protect a king's dignity...

I square my shoulders and march, totally unaffected, into the cottage. He's waiting for me, stripped to his leggings again. Stiffly, I check his pulse, pull out salves and potions and apply them. His hair is another inch longer. He flicks it from his eyes.

I hand him another pill. "Soon it'll be long enough to braid."

He snaps his gaze my way, tension stiffening his shoulders.

I fumble corking the glass .

He squints, his hand rising towards my veil, as if he wants to peel away this mask. My chest jumps and I step out of his reach. "Y-your body is healing quickly. Ten days, and you should be like new. Faster if I can find any pearl heart."

"Pearl heart?"

I talk steadily through a racing heart. "A plant that increases strength and stamina."

"I know very well what it is." He laughs heavily.

I whirl away from the memory of us then, and from him now. "I... lost track of time. Have to meet the prince." I rush out, immediately wishing I'd held it together.

I chastise myself all the way to the main gates, where at least my lie is made true.

Prins Lief is climbing into his carriage, and he curls a finger for me to join him.

I slip inside and jerkily remove my curacowl.

His carriage is rich, dark woods carved with runes of protection and good health, soft velvety cushions, and warmly glowing light from a bronze lantern. Comfortable. And yet I'm still on edge.

Prins Lief tips his head back against the wall and lets out a tired breath. "How's his health?"

"Improving. He'd like you to meet with him."

"I can't be seen to give him that privilege."

Too many pressures. As I'd feared. "If you do meet him, my name is Haldr."

Prins Lief lifts his head and blinks at me. "Haldr? As in Halda from Lindrhalda?"

I wince .

He laughs. "At least you've accepted your fate." He cocks his head at me. "You seem to make a game of disguising yourself."

"Only out of necessity."

He accepts this with a nod. "We understand this need too, of course." He smiles and continues, "You've seen our wedding celebrations. The guests come masked."

"How is this a need?"

“The allure. Our faces attract others easily, too easily. We need to make sure when we fall for someone, we fall for what’s behind their appearance. The beauty inside. We know we’ve met our soulmate once we recognise them despite their masks.”

I stare at him, his words tumbling into my chest. The masks we wear—whether made of silk or silence—are meant to protect us, yet they so often became a part of us. When Quin looks at me, will he ever see the person behind the veil? Do I even want him to?

Prins Lief looks out the window at the dazzling glacier. “How’s Asta?”

He always says my aunt’s name so softly.

“Never afraid to whack me with a wooden spoon.”

His lips twitch.

“How long have you known her?”

He takes a long time to answer. “I was seventeen when we met. I wanted to deepen my understanding of health and healing, and she was my tutor. That makes six years.”

I lean in. “Did she ever hit you with a—”

He glares at me and I shrink back .

He sighs. “I couldn’t believe it the first time. I almost had her head for it. I was too arrogant back then. She made me see myself for what I was becoming and asked who I truly wanted to be.”

“How long was she your tutor?”

“Three years. I spent three years learning from her, and three years chasing her to come back.”

“To be your personal physician.”

A huffed laugh. “Yes. To be mine.”

“She’s too independent to be caged in a castle.”

The lines of Prins Lief’s lips freeze; his whole body has stiffened, and when he unclenches, he speaks tightly. “Father’s coming early. I hope you’re prepared. I need you to stay alive—” a pause “—at least long enough to transpose all your medical knowledge into alchemy scriptions.”

“If we tell your father the truth? Maybe he’ll—”

“He hates Lumin. He’d despise the idea we value their knowledge, that we’re integrating it with our own.

One whiff of it, and he’ll not only disembowel you, he’ll ban and burn all your scriptions.

” He returns to tipping his head back against the wall and closing his eyes.

“We’ll carry on pretending you’re the one with Lindrhalda’s touch, and when we introduce the scriptions, we’ll claim they were whispered into your ear by the goddess herself. ”

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I don't intend to return, but not more than an hour later, under a glaring silver moon, I do.

Stormblades raise their brows at my second coming, but the signet I almost throw at them has them letting me through.

I slam the cottage door behind me and lean against it, catching my breath.

Quin looks over from his chessboard this time, and I'm glad to see not only a flicker of surprise, but the swift rise to his feet. My satisfaction at this is short lived. He buckles, catching himself on the table. Chess pieces scatter; I feel each one hit the floor like a pulse of pain.

The pain Quin is trying to suppress.

He grunts.

I fly across the room on a clenched stomach. He's overdone it—his leg has borne the brunt of too much. They'd blocked his magic at Mount Lysippos, who knows what the stormblades forced him to do since then. What he forces himself to do .

Like rising at my sudden entry.

"Hold on." I've grabbed him by the upper arms and am steering him to the bed. He falls onto it, palming his forehead and gritting his teeth.

I yank at his leggings, pulling them off swiftly. Smooth corded muscles rise from his

calves to his knees to his hips. Though it's not visible, I know exactly where the poison is attacking his nerves. I've had my magic inside him before.

His thighs flex at my fingers running down the inside of his leg. His only sound is a stifled gasp.

I massage into the pain, pressing on the points around it. I've climbed between his legs and my veil has swept forward, a curtain around me and Quin's pained leg. The tension in his body starts to loosen as I continue to massage. Goosebumps form where my veil tickles him.

I'm not done yet.

I shuffle, dragging my fingers down over his tight muscles to his ankle, and grab his foot.

I reach for the bag I flung at the end of the bed and pull out my needles. "This'll help. Keep still."

I push the thin needles into the acupoints that'll give him the most relief.

Finally, when it's done and I've pulled out the needles and returned them to my case, I let go of the knot in my stomach, and a small sigh slips out of me.

His voice pulls me out of my relief and into the reality of the moment. Me on my knees, his foot on my lap pinched between my fingers, his naked legs rising to his undergarments and the hem of his shirt .

I yank my gaze up past this. Quin's head is angled from the pillow, giving him a perfect view of the scene.

I let go of his foot.

His dark eyes are fixed on me through a loose lock of his hair. His chest rises on a deep breath and the quiet way he releases it has me jumping off the bed.

“Halt.”

At his whispered command, I do.

I hear him shift behind me. “How did you know where to massage? Where did you learn to use acupoints in the feet to alleviate pain?”

I ball a handful of my cloak. “A-any good healer would know to do that.”

Barely audible, he murmurs, “Turn around.”

With dark, saddened eyes, he looks at me for a long time, and despite the veil, I tuck my chin.

Say something. Every moment you don’t, it’s harder to breathe.

“You’re right,” Quin finally says. “A good healer would know.”

I want to rush away, but I came here for a reason and, frustratingly, can’t leave yet despite the pounding in my heart. “I wish I had wine.”

Quin’s eyebrow quirks.

“Additional help against your pain,” I lie, with a self-chastising grimace.

Quin eyes me again, too softly, and then abruptly he shifts his legs off the side of the

bed .

I lurch to stop him standing, but he hadn't intended to, and I step back.

He waits a beat before he gestures.

I follow his outstretched hand to the meditation cushion. Curiously kneel beside and look under—

I shoot a look at Quin, now smiling smugly, and lift the latch in the floorboard... A treasure trove of wax-sealed wine bottles. I take out two. "Guess meditation gets boring."

Quin's lips curve slightly, but his eyes remain serious. "Thank the gods," he murmurs.

I snicker, close the floorboard with my knee, and hand Quin one of the bottles. "No more than a quarter for you," I say as I push the meditation cushion to the wall and lean against it. "Make it a sixth."

"And you?"

I break the seal and gulp the cherry-flavoured wine beneath the veil. Quin leans against the bedpost and sips alongside me. When I glance over, he must somehow feel my eyes on him because his seem to deepen.

Just get through a couple of hours without being found out.

"Why did you come in here like you were being chased?"

"I was being chased."

His eyes narrow. “Who? What did they want?”

The protective flex of his jaw has me gulping more wine.

“Tell me.”

“He must know it was me who took it. ”

“What did you take?”

“Something that doesn’t belong to him.”

“Does it belong to you?”

I pause and take another long sip.

His lips flatten. “Nothing’s worth you getting harmed. Return the thing.”

“ Never. ”

“Do you intend to live here with me?”

I hold my breath and it drizzles out with the taste of cherry. “They’ll get bored of waiting in an hour or two.”

Quin watches me for a while.

“You know what’s better than bruise salves? Not getting hit in the first place.”

“Why did you run here? ”

“There’s a child at home. I don’t want to implicate others.”

“Why did you run—”

“There are three dozen stormblades between you and the temple gates.”

He looks at me for a long time, and lets it go with a murmur. “You’re safe here.”

I tip more wine into a strangled laugh.

“Will they come after you again tomorrow?”

“He couldn’t afford to send all those men again for no gain. I told them I burned...”

Quin’s brow lifts. “Burned?”

“I didn’t. But they think that.”

“Are you being obtuse on purpose?”

“Do you have to wring me of everything? ”

Quin takes a deep drink, and watches me.

“What?”

“You’ve come here many times now, yet I know little about you.”

Alcohol buzzes through my veins and I sink my head back against the wall, curacowl tipping downwards. “There’s not much to know.”

He smiles. "I'll be the judge of that."

There's something in the fragile lines of his smile and the flicker in his eyes. For a heartbeat, I want to tell him everything. But then I glimpse a flash of someone deeply conflicted, and I crush the fabric of my cloak at my side.

I laugh. "If you weren't a king, what would your life look like?"

"I'm supposed to ask the questions."

"What would it look like?"

"Before my brother met him, I would have..."

I juice my cloak of dye.

He continues with savage frustration, "That night would have been real."

Night? What night?

Quin takes a swig of his wine and rips his gaze across the room. His throat juts heavily. He says, with more control, "But I have responsibilities. To family, and above all, to my people."

My throat is sore as I drink again. "Everyone's wishes before your own."

"The people work hard for our kingdom, they allowed me to grow up without ever going hungry. In return I owe them safety."

"The crown is heavy."

“I will bear it.”

His most difficult act.

I sigh and my veil flutters forward. “You must be so lonely.”

Quin shuts his eyes briefly and looks at me. “What about you?”

“I... have healing. I bury myself in that.”

“Are you lonely?”

“I never used to be.”

There’s a sharpening to his breath and my chest swells.

My lips loosen. “Do you ever have that feeling where you don’t know if you should rush forward or hurry back?” I look at him and nod. “Of course you do. Your kingdom is a chessboard, how can you not hesitate over each move?”

“To advance or to retreat. Sometimes you must even retreat to advance.”

“Life is a very messy middle game.”

He smiles softly. “Describe yours.”

I take another drink of cherry wine. I should stop talking, but the buzz is too thick, my attempt to rein myself back too feeble.

“I say and do things without thinking, like something deep inside is urging me to... and even when I’ve said and done them, I can never let myself acknowledge...”

Stop talking! I stuff my fist into my mouth.

“Acknowledge what?”

“. . . ah, how frustrating life can be.” I abandon the wine bottle and scramble for my bag.

“What are you doing?”

I rummage in it for the right vial, this one. I can’t trust myself anymore. The only thing for it is to knock myself out.

His eyes are on me and narrowing.

My hand shakes as I pull out the cork, and I have just enough presence of mind to lean against the side of the bed before I swallow—

The heavy drumming of rain on the roof stirs me.

My head is a gentle throb as I open my eyes to the vague outline of ceiling beams. I feel around me. I’m on the bed, a blanket covering me up to my chin. How did I end up here? Quin is in no state to lift me... I must have staggered up here somehow myself.

If I climbed up on my own... did I do other things I can’t recall?

My hands fly to my face. Phew. Still covered. I’d rested my hat on the pillow so the veil draped over my face.

I knock my palm against it and my forehead. This is the second time I’ve lost a chunk of memory with Quin in very similar scenarios. I have to quit drinking around him!

I lift myself slowly to my elbows. Quin is at the side of the bed, head rolled back against the mattress at my knee.

His lashes kiss his cheeks, his lips are slightly parted, and his hair—another inch longer—frames his face.

When he sleeps, not a line of concern tweaks his marble face.

It almost makes me wish he slept all the time.

In his dreams, at least, he can be free.

Time to get out of here.

I peel back the blanket and carefully pick myself off the bed.

Sleeping like that will be hard on Quin with his wounds, and rising will be difficult.

At least... I scan the room, and cross to a broom standing in the corner of the kitchen area.

I remove the brush end and quietly set the long handle next to Quin.

My foot touches something and I glance down at a glass vial.

I recall pulling it out of my bag and pinching one of its contents into my mouth. I grip the glass with a swallow. Not the one to induce sleep. An anti-anxiety potion.

I bite my lip, slip it into my bag, and tiptoe for the door.

Rain is coming down so hard it's even seeping inside. There's a big puddle at the

door, and it seems to be swelling? Was that a leaf that washed in, or... I bend toward it, squinting—

“You’re leaving.”

His voice is rusty, but even so, I’m certain his words weren’t a question. My breathing hiccups and my shiver is lost in a lurch of fright as the puddle before me takes form.

I gasp. A wyvern? Here?

It leaps upwards and over my head, knocking off my curacowl, and I freeze as the veil flies off my face and the fabric plunks to the ground somewhere too far behind me.

Quin murmurs to the wyvern and stirs. A snap of wood against the floor has my heart pounding. I should run before I’m seen. A wyvern is in here. If stormblades catch a glimpse...

I slam my eyes shut.

But if Quin sees me, won’t I have to leave for good?

Air wakes over the nape of my neck.

I duck my head and tense, my hair only enough to curtain me from a few angles... I’m waiting for him to come into view, waiting...

He doesn’t. He stands at my back and my veil gently slides over my face as he settles the curacowl on my head. Does he suspect? Or am I imagining his gaze on my nape and the soft way his fingers brush over my hair?

I wait two hectic heartbeats and turn. He's standing with the aid of the broomstick, a warm expression on his face even though he's not smiling.

A flicker of wings behind him has me whispering urgently. "A wyvern?"

He leans in with a raised eyebrow and a spark in his eye. "Will you tell on me... Haldr?"

The way he . . .

He stares at me for a long beat, until I'm swallowing nerves. "Why is there one here?" I manage to choke out.

Quin seats himself at the table and the wyvern perches on the chessboard. I spy a familiar scar running down its side and lurch over. Quin casts me a curious look and halts me a foot before it. His arm is a warm band across my stomach and I quickly step back.

Quin murmurs, "I was surprised to find one over this side of the channel. Usually they stay in our kingdom, where there's traces of magic in the waters.

But this one crossed the sea, alone. As I was being hauled off the ship I fell—some of my wounds met the ocean and it must have sensed my blood.

It appeared in the shallows. Stormblades were up ahead and on the ship behind, they were distracted with opening the cage.

I had a moment; I commanded it to find my brother and bring me news. "

"It can scent royal blood? It would find the prince and you again?"

He nods and stares with amazement at the creature. “This wyvern, in Iskaldir, when it shouldn’t be. What luck; what hope.”

I stare from the wyvern nuzzling at something around its leg to Quin reaching out to help.

He and I. We are fated.

Ill fated, perhaps, but fated.

“You don’t seem afraid,” Quin says to me.

“This wyvern won’t hurt me.”

“What do you mean?”

I pinch myself. “I mean, I... heard you can control wyverns. I’m safe with you.”

Quin pulls off the leaf I’d seen in the puddle, but it’s not a leaf; it unfolds, thin and leathery. “Light me a candle? ”

I grab one, and Quin holds the material over the flame. As it dries, words appear. A message.

Quin reads it twice, lips moving silently, forming the words. His brow furrows in concern, but his tight lips show his determination. He lowers himself into his chair. “He’s alright.”

He means . . . Nicostratus. He only wanted word.

There’s a taut silence in the air between us. I clear my throat and quickly break it.

“What will you do now?” I ask. “Will this help you escape?”

He shakes his head. “This provides communication. Leaving here though, I’ll need another way. I won’t let my men be cut down. I need them for more important missions.”

“Recover,” I say. “I’ll help you.”

I move towards the door but he grabs my wrist. “Don’t do anything rash.” His grip is firm enough I can feel each one of his braids and the pound of my pulse.

“I have to go. My companions will be worried.”

He slowly loosens his fingers and drags them off me. I’m afraid I’ll feel the tickle of this last touch all day.

Quin says something and the wyvern jumps from the table to become a puddle at his feet.

Just as I reach the door, he murmurs, and the soft sound of it, the intensity of that softness...

“Come back tonight, Haldr.”

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When I enter the courtyard, Megaera throws me an arched brow and pauses in her step. She's carrying a steaming bowl of...

"Is that my scription for inflamed sinuses?" I recognise the sharp scent.

She nods in the direction of the west bedchamber. "See how the mighty have fallen."

There's some background groaning at this, and Megaera's lips twitch.

"Both?"

"Felled by a sore throat." She gestures to the bowl. "I hope you don't mind."

I come closer and take a whiff. "Excellent."

"Praise yourself. I follow instructions to the letter." She eyes me.

I stiffen, but she strides off, calling over her shoulder. "Don't end up hurt."

Megaera is spoon feeding uncle and nephew when I've changed into fresh clothes and repacked my bag, and she does it with such tenderness I shiver guiltily. That I ever once hesitated.

I take her spot at the bedsides and read their pulses. "Mild. With rest, they'll recover in a few days."

"Mild!" Lykos says indignantly, and Megaera holds out her wrist for me to read.

“You’ve the same thing.”

Megaera’s sly blow-kiss has Lykos spluttering as he tries to sit up. He palms his forehead against a headache, but behind his forearms he’s smiling.

Zenon, on the next bed, groans loudly and declares it feels so bad he can’t do any lessons today. The naughty side-eye to his uncle has me shaking my head.

“Quite the handful you have here.”

Megaera lifts a bowl of herring porridge—Zenon’s least favourite food—and comes over, smiling. “Of course you can’t study today. Don’t worry, I’ll look after you. Eat up. There’s more for lunch, and I’ll make a fresh batch for dinner, too.”

Zenon springs into a sitting position. “Actually, I could do some studying from the bed.”

She pats his head, to Lykos’s burst of laughter. “And if you suddenly feel better, we can check out the parade.”

I leave them to their familial banter and head to my aunt, who embraces me with a herb-scented hug and another letter from home. “It just arrived, I haven’t opened it yet. She doesn’t usually send them so close together.”

I sit on the bench behind our herb grinding table and stare at the paper. “You read it. ”

My aunt pushes it back to me. “Call it a sixth sense. This news is for you.”

I open it nervously. The letter is short, and it does seem like my mother’s hoping I’m here. Like she wants me to know .

Since I last wrote, something has happened.

Florentius and some other vitalian scholars have been sent to participate in the Medicus Contest. Apparently, this contest was delayed due to some leadership instability in Hinsard, and it's been big talk in the capital because this year, anyone under the age of twenty-five may enter—no matter if they are non- or par-linea.

Hearing this, Akilah finally rediscovered her spirit. She begged Florentius to stay, or if he must go that she go with him, but he told her it was safer here.

This morning we woke to find Akilah gone. She packed her most precious things and left. I just know she's following him, and I pray if he's unable to send her back that he is able to keep her safe.

I will write again when I have news.

All my love .

I hand the letter over for my aunt to read.

"I'm right," she murmurs. "It was for you." She tucks the letter into my belt. "The regent must have an agenda."

I grimace. "I'm sure he believes it a chance to put us in our place again. Prove we should stop chasing after chances we're not qualified for."

Had losing Eparch Valerius in Hinsard been the reason he'd lashed out on the island? Is it part of the reason he's changed the rules for the contest? Why he insists on sending his best vitalians to represent the linea?

And now Akilah—spirited, stubborn Akilah—is heading straight into the heart of

this. I picture her clinging to Florentius, begging him not to go, and my stomach knots.

The weight of my helplessness churns all day, until it crashes into my other pressing worry: Quin. He may heal faster than most, but he's still fragile, trapped in this precarious situation. What if his condition worsens? What if...

By the time the moon rises, my worries are all tangled together. I'm so caught up in them that I don't realise I've dragged myself back to the temple and into Quin's space.

I plunk myself on the end of the bed, sigh, and flop backwards until I'm frowning at the same ceiling I woke up to this morning.

"By all means, make yourself at home."

His voice cleaves through my worries and I spring up, clasping my curacowl.

Quin is at the table, eating the meal sent to him with a bottle of wine to wash it down. I immediately move to him and check he hasn't overdone the drinking. I feel his pulse, and he murmurs, "More concerned about me taking a few sips than yourself downing a whole bottle."

"I'm not injured." I let him go. "But I won't drink again."

He inclines his head thoughtfully, as if he's mostly happy with this, but also... disappointed? "Whatever you want."

"What I want..." I laugh and try a morsel off his plate. It's a hard ask to swallow. "Is this the quality of food you're getting every day?"

“I am a prisoner.”

I growl and clear the food away while Quin studies me.

“Sit,” he says. “Talk to me.”

“I’d rather you strip,” I whip back, with the intention of salving his wounds, but the exaggerated way he freezes has me wishing I’d phrased that differently, and with far less intensity. I try again, softly this time, “I mean, ready yourself and lie on the bed.”

I whimper and hope he hasn’t heard it.

Quin uses his broomstick and positions himself beside the bed. He quietly peels off his top layers, and before he lies down and makes my veiled—thank all the Skeldar gods—flushing worse, I tell him to stay there and scramble behind him with the creams.

His skin ripples in shivers as I gently apply them, but it’s the sound of his breath that gets me. In the silence of the room, it’s so loud. And so is my own. Loud and uneven. My fingers tremble as I finish tending his back.

I quickly—too quickly—pull his shirt back into place and feel him jerk at my roughness. At his collar, my hand stills and his shoulder-length hair skitters over my glove. “Sorry,” I whisper. I start to drag my hand away but he snags it—and quickly releases.

He clears his throat. “My hair. It keeps falling into my face. Can you...”

His hair is still short, but I’ll do my best.

I remove my gloves and he stirs at the flash of their material dropping onto the bed. I

start shifting onto my knees, but Quin rises with the aid of his broomstick cane and settles himself on the floor.

He becomes a wall of heat between my legs as I slide them either side of him. My nail drags along his scalp, eliciting a tremble that I feel echo up my arms.

“How shall I thank you,” he says, “if I’m freed? If we meet again?”

“We won’t meet again.”

He’s quiet.

I mess up and have to start over.

“If I insist on a reward?”

“Chicken. Roasted. It’s all fish here.” Blast, I lost the thread again.

I shove up my veil so I can see better. “You know, the chuckling is not helping me.”

He calms under me, and finally I manage the first braid. But —

I tug a pouch off my belt and toss it into his lap. “Pass me a fastening?”

Quin opens the string and pulls out a plain fastening, holding it up over his shoulder. I take it and clasp the end of the braid.

“Why do you have a pouch full of fastenings?”

“Hardly full. There are only twenty-four.” Aaand, I got the perfect amount of hair this time.

“Precise number,” he says on a murmur, and I almost drop the braid.

“They were... sold by the dozen. I grabbed two sets.”

“Sold by the dozen in a country whose fashion does not include braiding.”

“The store owner was part Lumin.”

“Ah, I see.” A pause. “And of course you happened to go in to buy some.”

“I thought you’d need them soon, with your hair growing so fast, so...”

“You think about me during other parts of your day.”

“It’s hard not to.”

Quin tries to turn his head but I steer his face back with a warning tsk.

He laughs.

I click my fingers for another fastening, and he presses one into my hand.

One by one, I plait a thin braid for each year of his life and clasp them. When I’m on the last one, Quin hums. “When you said Prins Lief wants you to be his...”

I pause .

He shifts his head slightly and stops himself from looking back. “He wants you to be his what?”

I fasten the last braid. “His healer.”

“Are you sure?”

“What else?”

Quin coughs, and I quickly pull down my veil. My hand bumps his shoulder and he clasps the back of it. His skin against mine has lightning bolting through my middle.

He spreads his fingers, finding the grooves between mine.

“What are you...” It comes out half-formed and barely audible.

Quin squeezes our fingers like a fan.

I’m squeezing back too. Involuntarily. Like a momentary spasm.

“My hand feels cold, don’t you think?” He closes his fingers down, slotted between mine. “Particularly between my fingers?”

I yank his hand under my veil and nip him angrily. What are you doing to me?

“You bit me.”

My mouth is still lingering on his knuckles!

I hurriedly shake free of his hold. “S-skeldar technique. To promote bloodflow to the area. Help warm them.”

His laugh has me hurtling off the bed, yanking on my gloves.

I clamp my teeth down against the shaking in my body. “ You’re feeling cold because you don’t move. Let’s take a walk. Fresh air will help.”

He laces his shirt over his flutette and looks at the broomstick for a long moment. His lips turn up slightly at the edges, then flatten again as he curls a finger at me to come closer.

I do, hesitantly, and help him up when he clasps me.

“I don’t want stormblades to see me using the cane,” he says.

“Then—”

“I’ll lean on you.” He hooks his arm through mine.

“For a prisoner, you’re quite demanding.”

“I’m not asking as a prisoner.”

My heart pounds and I swallow thickly.

He keeps watching me. I quickly unfurl my clenching hands.

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He smirks and gestures towards the door. “Come on, Haldr.”

We walk in silence up and down the meditation grove, stormblades on alert, watching our every limping move. I keep looking at Quin, who basks under vibrant splotches of moonlight, chin and nose upturned, eyes closing briefly.

He knows.

Yet, he’d called me Haldr . . .

“You’re thinking very loudly,” he says, and looks at me.

I blink. “I have a story.”

“I can work with stories.”

“Good. I want to know how it might end. This has been on my mind all day. ”

His lips jump at the edges.

“Nothing like that.” I stop where the moonlight shimmers over all his angles.

“Imagine there’s... a really cruel family member ruling over the land.”

His rumbling sigh borders on frustration and amusement. “You really aren’t good at disguising your stories.”

“Just listen. This man, he suddenly sends some of his palace people away for a...

cooking competition, insisting they take part.”

“Cooking...” He shakes his head in despair. “At least there is no wolf and his beady-eyed wyvern this time.”

A flash of something slips in and out of my mind before I can grasp it. “What?”

“Nothing.”

I wave it away. “Why would this man do that? What’s his agenda?”

“I can’t say precisely, but it won’t be anything good.”

I grimace. “Your wyvern. Did you send it for more information? What do you know about the welfare of the rest of your family?”

Does he know about the island?

“I’m aware. It’s why I was rash, leaving the mountain.”

“Is she . . .?”

“Alive. For now.”

I steer him with purpose back to the meditation cottage, passing grim-faced and muttering stormblades. “Rest.”

He’s stabilised the worst of his injuries. He needs freeing from this place. I need a plan .

I grab my things and stop before the door at an exaggerated cry. My head snaps

around to Quin clutching his leg, not an ounce of real pain shading his expression.

I swallow a laugh. “For someone who acts as much as you...”

“Come. Take another look?”

“I can see from here. You’re fine.”

“If you don’t massage me, it’ll be worse and I’ll wake up rigid.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“I’ll check on you in the morning.”

He stops all pretences of pain. “Will you?”

“Unbelievable.”

“Bring breakfast.”

I do. And I bring ingredients for dinner the next evening too. For the next three days I spend as much time in the tiny cottage, playing chess and listening to marginally improved flutette melodies, as I do perfecting my alchemy with my aunt.

“You’re daydreaming again,” she says.

“Thinking,” I correct. “Hypothetically, if you were held in a cottage surrounded by a centuria of soldiers and were incapacitated, how would you break free?”

She whacks me over the back of my curacowl.

“What’s that for?”

“Both your impossible question, and the fact you’re even thinking about it.” She hits me again. “Do you want your head on a spike at Ragn’s grand bridge? ”

“It was a hypothetical—”

“It was a plan for treason.”

“I’m only half Skeldar.”

“Fine. Half your head will be impaled.”

I wince, and silently return to my newest tincture. “What if I could somehow convince Prins Lief to let him go?”

She laughs, and the crisp sound of it has me looking at her and cocking my head. “He has respect for you,” I murmur. “Could it be he appreciates you on a deeper level?”

Her laughter fades. She busies herself stirring her simmering pot.

“Stop it,” she tries to jest but her voice is strained. “I’m fifteen years his senior.”

“That’s nothing. With the allure you’ll always look the same age. And with his responsibilities, he’s lived a mature life longer than most.”

“Enough.”

This time, I obey. But it’s a point of conversation with Quin the next morning.

“I’m not imagining it, am I? There’s something between them.”

“If you’re seeing it, it must be very obvious.”

He can’t see my growling expression but he must sense it because he laughs. He takes his cane and rises from our breakfast. “Am I healed enough to bathe?”

I shoot to my feet.

He raises a brow .

“... I’ll ask stormblades to attend to you in the communal bath.”

“I don’t want stormblades.”

“I . . .”

“I can take care of myself.”

“But . . .”

“Unless you want to be there? Haldr.”

At first my breath gets caught in my chest, then I narrow my eyes at his lips. Haldr. A reminder these moments are fleeting. They’ll pass. We can pretend, but eventually we must go back to being strangers.

I step away from him. Back up to the door. He watches but doesn’t chase, doesn’t call me back. He only drops his head when he thinks I can’t see him anymore.

I kick up clumps of grass on my way back through the grove and stop at the sound of

his wistful flute melody carried on a breeze.

The melody becomes my phantom companion across a waking town and only disappears, abruptly, when I arrive back to a pensively waiting Megaera.

“Finally.”

“What’s wrong?” I glance towards the bedrooms.

She shakes her head. “The boys are fine. It’s your aunt. She looked afraid.”

My nape prickles and I hurry across the courtyard. “What did she say?”

“Under no circumstances are you to go to the castle. Even if the prins asks. She left just before the parade.”

Castle. Parade. The words knot in my throat and a painful bolt of understanding slices through me. The king has returned. He wants to meet the one with Lindrhalda’s touch.

My aunt—

I run.

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Megaera catches me at the gate and hauls me back by my cloak.

I try to rip out of her hold, but even without magic, she's deft, and fights like she's in a dance.

"Let me go, Megaera. Why are you stopping me?"

Her eyes flash, pain flickering behind them. "Because I didn't stop myself before," she murmurs, almost too softly to hear.

The words halt me for a moment.

"You're putting on a risky act, Cael." Her tone shifts, tightens. "I won't let you get hurt. I owe you that."

And if it isn't enough she's got hold of me, Lykos flies to her aid and bars the gate, spear in hand. I glare at him.

"What?" I snap, throwing my words like daggers. "Going to destroy more than my meridians this time?"

He flinches, but doesn't move.

I whirl to Megaera, her grip on my cloak like iron. "Should it be her death then? Should my aunt pay for my mistake?"

Her eyes darken, her jaw tightens. "I am not a good person," she whispers, her voice

breaking before it sharpens again. “But I will not let you die.” She glances at Lykos.

Locked in the woodshed, the hours drag like weights on my chest. I can’t stop picturing my aunt in that hall, ringing the bell to meet the king in my place. Prins Lief will be there, fighting for her, but how far can he go against his own father?

I whimper, “My mistake—my lie—will cost more than just my life.”

Megaera opens the door as if she’s been listening on the other side the whole time. Her face is pale but set. “Your lie also saved us.”

“Then help me,” I plead, my voice barely above a whisper. “Help me.”

The courtyard doors burst open and men march in, their voices cutting through the quiet like blades. “You are summoned to the castle.”

Megaera steps aside, her gaze lingering on me as I walk away, each step heavier than the last.

The castle looms ahead, its stone walls veined with runes that seem to pulse under the flickering torchlight.

Each step inside feels like stepping into the stories carved on the walls—stories of gods, kings, and battles fought in shadows.

My breath catches as I enter the grand hall, the fragrant snowendar curling in the air, lulling me with its false warmth.

At the far end, King Yngvarr sits draped in furs and gold, his fingers drumming a sharp rhythm on the arm of his throne. Prins Lief kneels at his feet, his posture rigid, while my aunt bows deeply beside him.

“Rise.”

Prins Lief casts me a commanding look as we stand, while my aunt grimaces and shakes her head. She doesn’t want me to admit I’m the one...

Which means, which has to mean, she hasn’t had the opportunity to lie yet.

The king stares at his son. “The one you requested came. Now explain why you stopped this woman ringing the bell?”

He narrows his eyes on my aunt. “Any bell-ringer without a reasonable cause will be imprisoned for one hundred days.”

My aunt shifts and I can feel her about to speak—

“Forgive me,” I say dropping to my knees at the same time Prins Lief steps closer to my aunt and holds her sleeve tight. “I asked her to ring on my behalf.”

My aunt snaps her gaze my way, while the king pins his glare on me. “On your behalf?”

“Please do not misunderstand, I had more important things to do than wait for your arrival.”

Air whistles sharply as nearby guards suck in their breaths.

King Yngvarr speaks softly, but each word feels dangerous. “My presence is beckoned, yet not deemed a priority?”

I bow again. “I, Haldr, was instructed by the goddess to make healing my priority, always. ”

I wait a tense moment while he digests this.

He laughs abruptly, and with great cheer tells me to get up. To his son, he beams. “I understand. You stopped her from ringing because there was no need to seek my audience. I have been awaiting this meeting.”

Prins Lief inclines his head. His knuckles on my aunt’s sleeve are white and strained.

King Yngvarr’s gaze on me is quiet, long, assessing. “You stopped the spread of poxies. You are deserving of reward. I’ll have statues built. You’ll live in fame and luxury.”

“I wish for neither.”

“Neither? You must want something. If not riches...”

“You see through me.” I bow again. “I do have one wish.”

“By all means; you’ve earned it.”

Prins Lief looks my way, face pinched in warning.

I feel his plea, but I’m desperate. “I wish to free a prisoner.”

Prins Lief slams his eyes shut, while the king leans back on his throne. “Saving someone? Nothing else?”

“I’d give up any reward for this.”

Curiosity has the king leaning forward again. “Name.”

“Constantinos Quintus Aetherion.”

The following silence is deathly, but I lift my head and meet the king’s rapidly darkening eyes. There’s a storm brewing in their depths and I brace for the first lash. I can feel Prins Lief’s gaze boring through me too, telling me I’m insane, why ever would I ask for this ?

But I can’t miss a chance—any chance, no matter how slim—to free him.

“Who is he to you?” It falls like scentless poison.

“I’ve been in charge of healing him.”

“ He was more important than ringing my bell personally?”

My aunt stiffens, and Prins Lief steps forward. “Father, he did so on my command—”

“Silence. I want to hear what Haldr has to say.”

“He is weak. He has no power, is hunted in his own land—”

“Sounds like he takes after his father. Manipulating others to do his will.”

“He’s truly pathetic. Releasing him wouldn’t harm your people—”

“I’d prefer the humiliation of his head paraded through the kingdom!”

I’m squeezing my cloak. “His throne has been usurped. Is that not embarrassing enough?”

“I want all of Lumin mortified!”

“I will provide a better way!” It’s an instinctive, volatile retort with no plan behind it except to promise something, anything .

It startles him, and he bangs a fist on his throne. “This is how you speak to a king?”

I’m still running on a temper, and fear. “I’m more scathing with him!”

He doesn’t expect this. He laughs, not sure if he’s offended or impressed .

“He’s stupid.” I pause. “Quite possibly the stupidest king to have lived.”

Booms of laughter echo around the hall and eternal flame torches flicker.

A ruckus at the door as the King’s attention turning sharply to it.

Two Skeldar soldiers make their presence known and come up the hall dragging a third person, dressed in serving robes. The soldiers deposit him on his knees. “Your majesty. A Lumin spy.”

The man spits on the ground and raises his head defiantly. “Took you six months,” he says on an obnoxious laugh.

King Yngvarr stiffens and stretches a hand towards Prins Lief, who steps forward and helps him rise. With a hardened face, the king strides with anger and purpose towards the spy.

“My regent learned enough!”

The king grabs the hilt at the hip of the nearest soldier, drags out the sword, and in one swing slices the spy’s throat.

My stomach feels like a boulder crashing to the floor and I barely hold myself from shaking.

King Yngvarr whirls towards us, blood dripping from the sword. “You,” he bellows to me, “you’ll return tomorrow morning. I haven’t finished with you yet.” He gestures for his soldiers to drag the body away. “I want to see his head on a pike!”

I keep up my frustrated pace until we reach the middle of the grand ice-and-stone bridge.

My aunt is a few paces behind me, and her gaze is tight on my nape.

A glittering frozen waterfall clings to the icy cliffs beside us.

It feels like it could tumble down and crush us, but I wonder if there’d be anything but bones left to crush.

I whirl around to my aunt. “That ’s why you claimed I’d be alright? You were planning to sacrifice yourself? Have your head cut off too?”

She looks straight at me without the slightest hesitation. “You’re my responsibility.”

“It’s my mistake. It’s mine .” My words echo off the deep blues in the ice, coming back crystal sharp. If the king discovers my deception, I will pay.

I tuck my shaking hands behind my back and clasp them, nails digging into my skin.

“What about your life? Your happiness?”

My aunt speaks softly. “You’re family. You give up everything for family.”

Our heated breaths are cloudy and the chill from the ice creeps up my legs. My aunt holds her chin high, adamant she's right, and I shiver, because I don't want her to be. She can't be .

“We shouldn't sacrifice our happiness for family,” I choke out.

But we do.

He does too.

Over her shoulder, Prins Lief is striding towards us in a cloud of anger as strong as my own.

I turn sharply and stride off on wobbly knees; I'm in the town square when I'm hauled around by the shoulder to Prins Lief's glower.

“You're impetuous. You lack patience. You're lucky it wasn't your head just now. ”

I swallow hard.

He continues, “How will you survive if you can't keep your feelings in check?”

“Why are you warning me?”

He stiffens.

“You're doing it for her. You dropped everything and rushed to her side.”

For a moment, his gaze softens, and the weight he carries becomes visible. “I made her a promise. I'll see it through.” He plucks a pouch from his belt and stuffs it into my hands, holding it tight there. “These are my some of my father's memories.”

I suck in a breath. This dromveske doesn't feel as bulky as the one from the Skeldar ship. This is smaller, more elegant—deep green with the finest stitching. A small handful of pebbles shift inside. “I thought these were gifts between lovers? For pleasant dreams?”

“For most, they're to share your partner's intimate moments. To relive the evolution of their feelings. ”

I lift King Yngvarr's dromveske. “Is this—”

“Dromveskes also trap memories. Inside this are those my father cannot forget. Those he enters far too often.”

My voice becomes hoarse. “Why are you giving them to me?”

“So you understand what you've become involved in by mentioning your captive king. To figure out a way to survive tomorrow's meeting with mine.”

“Won't he realise this is missing?”

“I'm hosting a welcome feast for him tonight. I'll be sure he's too drunk to notice.”

“What do I do?”

“Chalk the runes. Sleep next to them. Return the dromveske to the ice bridge, first light of dawn.”

He removes his hand from the pouch and I clutch it tightly.

“Some of his feelings are volatile,” Prins Lief says. “Force your way out of them.”

I step away, not sure I understand what this means, but he'd do anything to keep my aunt alive; he'd help me to keep her happy. These memories must be important.

“Go to him . He'll help you.”

I double my grip on the dromveske.

He pauses and adds, “Find a way to stay alive.”

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I've entered Quin's cottage as Haldr many times now. It should have become second nature, easy. Yet not once have I pushed this door open without coiled tension in my stomach.

It's still there as I step inside, and it coils tighter when I see him. No candlelight; only his solid form and the scent of soap, and my raw nerves made more shivery in the dark.

I should've come earlier. Shouldn't have tinkered with scriptions all day while reliving King Yngvarr's wrath over and over in my head. Of course it's dangerous. But Quin is more important than any stake.

Get inside the memories, get out again with a plan.

My veil flutters around my face as I bend over Quin. I'm about to shake his shoulders when, without opening his eyes, he murmurs, "You're late."

"Your wounds are healed. I don't need to be here."

"Yet you've come." He opens his eyes and rises on his elbows, until his face is covered by the other side of my veil. I catch my breath. His nose and his lips, I can see their grooves... I can feel his filtered breath tickling my jaw... "I'm glad of it."

I pull back swiftly and plunk myself beside his knees. "I came for your help."

Calmly, with the barest notes of curiosity, "Oh?"

Quin stares silently at the dromveske while I talk and, when I'm done, takes it with a grimace.

“These memories might be dangerous.”

“What does that mean?”

“Will it stop you entering?”

I shake my head. Prins Lief pushed me to look, to understand. He promised my aunt... he must have faith the King of Lumin can help me. He's not the only one. “I have until dawn.”

Quin opens the dromveske and tips six runestones onto the mattress. He looks up to where I'm frozen and pats the space beside him. “Lie down.”

Stiffly, I lay myself down, facing him, palm hooked on my chin, sweaty as it clamps my veil.

Between us Quin picks up a piece of chalk and rubs it into the runes.

Sweet, fragrant scents hit my nose and bring back the memory of the dromveske on the ship.

Same sort of concoction—dried flowers—but these have been reduced to their essences and infused.

I pluck the chalk from him and inspect it. A time-consuming and costly task, though it would lengthen the effectiveness of the plants. Only the wealthy could afford this—

Quin is watching me. I quickly return the chalk .

“Finish rubbing it over the grooves of the runes.”

I take the remaining runes one by one and chalk them. “Now what?”

“We sleep.”

“I’ll take the floor.”

He catches my arm before I can roll away. “We need to be close.” When I resist, he skates his hand off me and gestures. “To the runes.”

I drop my head to the pillow. Quin moves beside me.

“This is an Iskaldir tradition,” I murmur. “How come you know what to do?”

“It’s infamous throughout all the kingdoms.”

“Really?”

“There was a time people in other kingdoms tried to mimic the tradition. Too many got trapped in turbulent, inescapable emotions, and could never find their way out.”

“What does that mean?”

“If the spirit that goes wandering gets lost, the person falls into a coma. Vitalians can’t cure this. My grandfather organised the luminists to strongly discourage the practice.”

“Here dromveskes are used trivially.”

“Skeldars are very careful about falling in love.”

“It’s falling in love. It’s uncontrolled, exhilarating, frightening. Either there’s someone to catch you, or you’re smashed to pieces.” I slam my eyes shut. “Sleep. We’ve work to do.”

Quin is one heavy breath and silence.

Sleep eventually follows, and with it the rush of falling through darkness—as if my last words are about to come true—and then:

Arms around my waist.

A controlled descent.

Darkness takes form around me. A sea of leaves. Green and shadow.

We’re dropping gently into a forest. Around us, ancient gnarled trees and... a hidden glade.

Our feet touch damp earth. Quin remains behind me, arms still locked around my waist, a dazzled breath skimming the top of my head.

Soft, murky light shrouds the glade and brighter sunshine falls on six massive stone arches in the centre. Each arch frames a door carved with runes. And like a path around them are vines of blooming soulflower.

I breathe in the rich scent of them and the earth and spin out of Quin’s hold, towards the babbling of a nearby brook, and beside it, a logwood cabin. “It feels so real.”

“The dromveske doesn’t just show memories—it makes you feel them. If King Yngvarr’s emotions are as volatile as his actions, you’d better be ready.”

I take in the mossy trees and the sharp tang of tannin. “This place feels familiar to me.” I swing my head to Quin.

Quin inclines his head. “Close to my aunt’s estate.”

“This is in Lumin?”

“Before he was king, he was a hostage prince. Like my aunt Frederica was in Iskaldir. When she returned, she was granted her estate for her service to Lumin.”

“And King Yngvarr? How long was he in the royal city? ”

“They exchanged at ten, for eight years.”

“Eight of his formative years... he must have been close to your father.”

“Close but not fond.”

I gesture to the rune doors. “Will we see your family in here too?”

“Undoubtably, and not all in good light.”

“They’re King Yngvarr’s memories after all.

” I blink at Quin, really taking him in.

He’s in everyday clothing—a dark blue robe—simply but smartly attired, but his hair is twice the length we’d gone to sleep with and silvery-white.

He looks rather like he’s come straight from our undercover money-making mission in Kastoria.

I suck in a sharp breath and slap my face. My bare face.

I pivot on my heel. Quin turns me around again. “It’s your soul that enters the memories, not your body or the clothes you wore sleeping.”

He’s not even pretending to be surprised. I frown towards the grass.

“The first mention of braids, pearl heart, the way you ran off,” he murmurs, reading my mind.

I shut my eyes. He’s known for a while. Yet he hasn’t turned me away. A comfort, except... we’ll have to separate soon enough. Sooner, now.

I force myself to remain steady as I look at him. That silver-white hair... the absence of a cane... “Why’d your soul come dressed like that?”

“Without a cane? Why would my soul need one? I’m dressed how I most wish to be.”

“I’d have wished my face was hidden!”

“I got the impression you were loathing Haldr.”

“But at least then you could pretend it wasn’t me, and I could pretend you didn’t know it!”

I stare down at myself, frustrated, and take in my attire.

Immediately, I flush. Everything I’m wearing, Quin has given me.

The pants and shirt are those he lent me after the ice-bath in his dance house; the

cloak is his own, that he'd thrown around me after I lost my clasp at drakopagon; the gloves, he gifted to me at the lovelight festival.

My fingers fly to the clasp. The grooves, its slight weight, the way touching it has me shivering, all feel familiar. Even the silver ribbon he once tied into my hair flutters around my shoulders.

My hand clamps over my shirt sleeve and I turn away to peek under the cuffs. My wrists. I'm still wearing his braids.

Everything on me exposes feelings. Holds stories of him... Something in me remembers how he wrapped this cloak around me. The gloves he slid onto my hands. The clasp—the whisper of his thumbs at my jaw.

I laugh through the pain and—“You really never gave me any boots.” It's the only thing on me that's my own.

Quin blinks.

“I mean . . .”

Thick silver hair and braids tumble around Quin's shoulders as he leans in, and I notice the fastenings are not his but the plain ones I bought in Ragn. “Perhaps in this respect,” he murmurs, his foot settling to touch the tip of mine, “I'm most superstitious.”

I step shakily back.

He raises a gentle brow.

How will you ever survive if you can't keep your feelings in check?

I steel myself and force my gaze to stay on his. “We need to stop. It’ll be too hard if we continue like this.”

His lips press together as he scans my face and locks onto my gaze more deeply. “Continue like what?”

I flush and grit my teeth. “You know very well.”

“I’ve yet to hear you say it.”

I’m hot and flustered and I shove his chest, pushing him away. At least, I’m supposed to be pushing him away, except I’m following; pushing with my hands balled around his shirt while stepping in closer.

His back hits a tree trunk, and he’s a long line of warmth down my flank. I feel his chest swell on a breath. It gives me butterflies, and I hate it.

“There’s nothing to say,” I mutter, squeezing my fists tight. “We’ll be strangers soon.”

He tips his face to the dappled light and closes his eyes.

When he reopens them, his expression is raw and unreadable, but too quickly he slides his kingly mask into place.

I’m almost knocked off balance when he pushes past me and strides towards the glade.

He calls out, keeping his tone polite yet firm. “Follow.”

I do, at a distance, dancing around bursts of perfume from where Quin has disturbed

the soulbloom. There's friction between us now, a forced distance. It's hard to breathe in, but I do. "Why this place?"

"Each dromveske holds a collection of memories in a space significant to the person. King Yngvarr must consider this place important—he retreats here between each memory."

"What about time?"

"Runs slower inside the dromveske. There might be days of memories inside, played out seemingly in real time, but waking up, not more than a night should have passed. So long as we don't get lost."

Quin steps next to the first door and looks over at me. "When you're ready."

I press my open palm to the cold door and its worn runes. If I get lost in here, there'll be no Haldr, no Caelus, no healer left to return. I'll vanish inside the memories of this king who wants my head on a pike.

I swallow, glance once more at Quin, and at his reassuring nod, I push.

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It's as if I've returned to Frederica's estate—as if it could be a year ago; as if I'd never left.

The manor is teeming with aklos and aklas, there's murmuring and laughter, even a familiar tremor underfoot—short and sharp, just enough for leaves to rustle and blossom petals to rain over the courtyard where Quin and I stand, unnoticed.

Dozens of eyes pass by with not a single blink in our direction. I feel solid though, as if I must have a presence.

“Colours are sharp,” Quin murmurs, staring at the space where I'd once hauled him away from his aunt and pressed flowering soulbloom to his lips.

He snaps his head up and stares ahead, towards the archway leading to grassy fields and the black forest beyond.

“He's recalled this day in vivid detail. ”

I turn, taking it all in, and pause at the rune door we came through. “Our way back out?”

“When the scene starts to fade, if the weather changes suddenly, get out as quickly as you can. ”

I nod, and take in the surroundings again. Somewhere in these memories there must be a clue. Knowledge to help me get through to King Yngvarr.

Quin strides ahead, silver hair gleaming, his cloak flapping gently behind him.

We pass through the arch and immediately I spy a flicker of movement behind the tree at the top of the grassy hill—the same hill where I would, many years from this memory, erect a plaque for River. The tree is just as beautiful. I can scent the woodsy bark on the breeze.

I sniff again as we near it, and Quin speaks. “Everything is from King Yngvarr’s memory. We’ll smell the scents he remembers, hear the things he did, see events as he’s reconstructed them.”

“Reconstructed?”

“This scene is so vivid. He’s been here a lot. I imagine he’s added more detail with every visit.”

“Does that mean what we see may not be the complete truth?”

“Truth is always subjective. This is the truth he’s created for himself. The way he recalls—or wants to recall—what happened.”

“He’s able to meddle with his own memories?”

“You and I, too. Anyone who visits has the potential to change things. Be careful not to leave behind signs—”

I slip on a muddy patch of ground, leaving behind a long and deep groove through the grass.

“—of our being here,” Quin finishes drily. With a wan smile, I hurriedly patch it up as best I can, ignoring Quin’s shaking head.

“Onwards,” I say, and Quin points ahead.

“There he is.”

I stall. “He sees himself in his memory?”

“As he imagines himself, then.”

King Yngvarr—here, the kronprins—is a picture of ethereal beauty.

He sits at the base of the tree, chiselling at a wooden mask in his hand.

One moment, his head is gently bowed over the wood, and the next he’s glancing up and looking down the hill, a soft smile playing at the corners of his lips.

I turn, following his gaze to a graceful, energetic young woman practicing archery.

Exuding fierce determination, she nocks an arrow and aims for the target at the other end of the field.

The arrow lands among others, littered around but not touching the bullseye.

She pivots slightly and on a sharp intake of air I move to grab Quin’s forearm, then quickly jerk my hand back again. Quin notices, staring at the space between us, the almost touch. “Your mother,” I whisper and clear my throat.

He slowly turns his gaze, and is quiet a few minutes as he observes her releasing another arrow.

It’s strange to see Casimiria, possibly only weeks before she’ll become pregnant with Quin, so full of life. She’s so full of youth; a free bird about to become caged. My

stomach sinks at Quin's reflective sigh and the twitch of his jaw.

Casimiria plucks the last arrow from her quiver and her body becomes taut with concentration as she aims and fires.

The arrow whistles through the air and smacks the target dead centre.

She jumps with an elated laugh and uses magical winds to yank the arrows free from the target and return them to her quiver.

Prins Yngvarr tucks an admiring smile back towards his mask.

A smile too short-lived as two young men saunter up the hill towards him with an air of wealth and arrogance.

It's obvious the two are related, and it doesn't take much to guess who they may be.

The gangly, slightly taller brother wears long boots and has a dark glint in his eye—a youthful echo of the tyrannical regent Valerian Aetherion.

And the one behind him—handsome, gaze keen as he takes in the prins under the tree and Casimiria below—Anastasius Aetherion. Here, the crown prince of Lumin.

Soon to be Quin's father.

Prince Valerian snickers as he throws a bolt of magic into the tree, making it shake violently. Yngvarr barely has time to set aside his mask and knife before he's buried in a mound of green, the tree left stark naked and shivering beside him.

Prince Anastasius swats his brother over the back of the head, and at his voice, Quin stiffens. "Too obvious. Father will punish you."

“You told me to have fun with him.”

“I meant include him in your games,” Anastasius says smoothly, but there’s a satisfied glint in his eye that has me narrowing my gaze .

Valerian frowns, confused. He doesn’t understand yet that he’s the borrowed knife.

I take a step forward and halt as I stub my toe on a tree root. The zip of pain is a reminder I can—and shouldn’t—interfere with this memory.

I stick to glaring at the brothers. It’s Anastasius’s cunning that will get under Valerian’s skin. Get him into trouble with the king. Make him feel inferior. Lead to his warped need to prove he can be cunning too; he can be worthy of respect, love.

I feel Quin’s shadow land over me. “How on earth did you turn out so decent?”

“I wish your compliments wouldn’t always come out through gritted teeth.” He steps beside me and glances from his young father to his young mother, who is charging up the hill, arrow nocked to her bow and aimed at the brothers. “She’s the reason.”

Casimiria is a fiery figure of justice as she fires an arrow over the princes’ heads. She readies another as Yngvarr emerges from the mound of leaves, coughing, and he catches the moment she fires again, making Anastasius jerk himself sharply out of the arrow’s path.

“Leave him,” she commands.

Anastasius lazily tosses magic her way, a spiralling blast of wind that knocks Casimiria back a few steps. She recovers her composure, fighting back with her own magic—strong wind of her own. Surprise flickers over the crown prince’s face. “You must be the general’s daughter.”

“You must be the son of”—Prins Yngvarr tries to catch her gaze, a look of warning in his eye, but she doesn’t see it—“an arrogant prick.”

Anastasius throws out a furious wind and his laughter sails on it to smack into her face. When it dies down and she’s caught her footing again, he says, “Why aren’t you with the other ladies, wishing to be selected as my wife?”

Understanding hits her and she pales briefly, then roots herself to the ground and shoots a pummelling wind back at him. “I’m less willing to join them now.”

Anastasius’s eyes flash and he returns her gust. Their angry back-and-forth whips at their clothing and forces Valerian to hide behind the tree, while Prins Yngvarr attempts to yank Anastasius off balance. Leaves and twigs fly in the air like sharp missiles and—

Yngvarr sees it first. His mask, whipping around them in circles, and his carving knife hidden amongst the leaves, headed straight for Casimiria.

He lurches into the battling tempests and reaches the handle in time to jerk it away from her heart.

Instead, the sharp blade slices her arm and she yelps.

Magic ceases, and for a few breathless seconds, Yngvarr is frozen with the knife. He drops it, rips his cloak, and hurriedly ties a strip around the wound.

Anastasius shoves him aside and funnels a vitalian stitching spell into Casimiria’s arm.

Casimiria pulls away, turning her back to him, and helps Yngvarr to his feet. “Are you alright?”

Her kind words are drowned out by the urgent holler of an aklo rushing towards the brothers. “The king requests your immediate presence.”

Anastasius and Valerian swiftly follow, and Yngvarr glares after them.

Quin and I watch as the prins and Casimiria finally meet one another’s gaze and I can feel the tautness in the air. For long beats, they stare. Then the prins is bowing.

Quin is motionless beside me, his face cast in shadow. “Do you think she already knew?” I ask softly.

His lips press into a thin line, and for a long moment, I think he won’t answer. “She was never one to act without knowing the consequences.”

Yngvarr murmurs, “Thank you—”

Casimiria reaches out and urges him quickly upright, the loosened bandage around her arm slipping down to her wrist, to his arm where she holds him. They both look at the frayed fabric and Casimiria rips her hand back. “You’re the Skeldar prins. You should bow to no one.”

“Your injury came from my knife.” He pauses. “How do you know who I am, when you didn’t recognise your own Crown Prince?”

She laughs, flushing, and glances at the bandage that’s fallen to the grass between them.

Yngvarr frowns and pivots sharply away from her. He finds his mask and knife amongst the leaves, and picks them up.

“Wait,” Casimiria says, following him. “I didn’t recognise him because I only arrived

last night. I recognised you because... because... ”

He pauses, his back to her, and stares at the mask in his hand.

He waits and, when she doesn't continue, nods and starts to walk away.

Casimiria rushes around to his front, gripping the bow over her shoulder so hard her fingers are white. “They say the hostage prins is the most beautiful person they've ever seen. The ladies here for the marriage selection. So...”

Prins Yngvarr grimaces. “Ah.”

“You don't seem surprised. Not a hint of bashfulness, at being so admired?” She leans in, eyes dancing.

“They like the allure. But would they like me as this?” He puts the ferocious-looking mask against his face.

Her laughter rings loudly, and she tips her head back with it. “Gosh, what a fright it would stir. You must wear it!”

Behind the mask, Yngvarr catches his breath as he stares at her.

“Your highness?” she says.

“Yes?”

“Forgive me.” Casimiria doesn't wait—she grabs his arm and pulls him at a run down the hill, over the field, and into the black forest. He yields to her, knife in his belt, mask dangling between fingertips, eyes trained on the back of her head in wonder.

We race to follow and find ourselves quickly in shadows, the scent of moss churned up under our footsteps.

We walk, deeper and deeper into the forest, following Casimiria's laughter as she pulls the prins along, and come suddenly to a clearing.

A glade filled with soulbloom, and across it, a familiar dilapidated cabin.

"This is . . ."

"Yes," Quin murmurs. "Exactly the same, minus the rune doors."

Casimiria lead Prins Yngvarr up the steps and swings open the cabin door. She waves a hand at the sudden cloud of dust, coughs and laughs, and steps inside.

The prins stands on the top step, hesitating. "What is this place?"

Casimiria comes back to rock her feet on the threshold, her bow and quiver set aside. "My father and I have been stationed on this estate many times. This is where I go to have some peace."

"Why are you showing me?"

She plants her hands on her hips. "It isn't obvious?"

He stares at her.

She continues, "You steal all the female attention. Those princes will only bully you more, out of jealousy."

"It's been many years. I'm used to it."

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. No, just come here, and carve in peace.”

She turns her back to him and disappears inside again. After a pause, Prins Yngvarr follows her.

Quin and I slink to the open door and take a side of the frame each, awkwardly careful not to touch.

I glance fleetingly at him, but his eyes are trained on the scene with purpose, and I jerk my gaze to the room.

A dusty four-poster bed fills most of it, but Casimiria and the prins are tucked into a small corner behind an uneven table.

She pushes her quiver to the side and takes his mask, inspecting it. “Can I try?”

“Don’t you have challenges to fulfil at the selection?”

“Like I want to be there.” Her smile fades. “Besides, it’s only practice today.”

“You won’t get in trouble?”

She leans in. “My father is known as a god of war. They won’t mess with me too much.” She holds the mask up beseechingly. “Show me?”

Prins Yngvarr pulls out his knife. “Under one condition.” He leans in, meeting her in the middle of the table. “Tell me your name.”

Almost the instant after she says it, the room darkens.

Quin turns and I follow his gaze as he takes in the surrounding forest. The glade seems to shiver, its bright hues dimming. The leaves blur, edges smudging like water dropped on ink. The deep scents of soil and soulbloom, the sound of the creek babbling nearby—all wanes.

Quin's voice is calm but urgent. "Cael, this is the sign to head back."

The nearer we get to the estate courtyard, the less form our surroundings have.

When Quin reaches the rune door, he pulls it open and ushers me through first. We emerge once again to a glade of soulbloom with six large doors, surrounded by trees with the rundown cabin nestled in the fringes.

"That was tranquil enough," Quin says and eyes the other rune doors warily. "The others, though... "

I swallow and march toward the second door. "We don't have time to worry."

"What exactly are you looking for?"

"A way."

"A way to what?"

To get on King Yngvarr's side. To convince him.

To save you.

I push open the second door to Quin's warning at my nape. "Be cautious. King Yngvarr's danger lurks in this world, too."

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We find him in his mask, hidden among gathered spectators. It's evening; warm light bathes an arena where a young woman dances, showing off her talents to the crown prince of Lumin and his family.

The young woman finishes her silk-tossing dance with a flourish; people gossip and cheer around the masked prins as he waits another three dances for Casimiria's turn.

She enters the ring in riding clothes, with a fierce stride.

To the side, the other young ladies are hiding snickers behind their fans, and two matronly aklas are frowning.

The royals shift in their seats, on the cusp of being affronted, but they accept her deep bow.

And the crown prince, recognising her, smirks and folds his arms.

She angles herself to the king and queen. "Your majesty, your highness. Forgive me. I must admit my failure."

The king glances to his queen and they share a look of surprise and curiosity .

Casimiria bows lower. "I've little skill in dance. I'm unworthy of standing before you. Please allow me to relinquish the stage to these more accomplished women, who are far more deserving of attention from your son."

Quin stares at his young mother, amusement playing over his face; beside him, under

his monstrous mask, Prins Yngvarr's lips are also ticking.

"She's putting on quite the act," I murmur. "I see where you got it from."

Rich laughter has me jerking my gaze to the crown prince, who rises from his chair with an intense look of wanting that promises whatever her plan, he intends to foil it. "There are many types of dance," he says. "I've heard you're quite impressive with a sword."

He throws one to her and her instincts have her catching it as it hurtles past. She twirls elegantly as she pulls it from its sheath.

When she realises his trickery, she glares in Anastasius's direction, but the glare barely has time to land before the crown prince is in the arena with a sword of his own, coming straight for her.

She deflects his strike, and lively music suddenly erupts from the confused musicians as the crown prince and the general's daughter compete in a dazzling clash of blades.

Prins Yngvarr forces his way to the edge of the arena and watches the martial dance with balled fists.

Quin sighs. "It looks impressive. The prins sees them fighting in harmony, as a well-matched pair. It was not so straightforward. "

"Your mother told you?"

"She said at first it was instinct, from years of training with her father, the give and take of steps, the sliding and clashing of metal... and when she got hold of herself, she tried to get wounded by him—just enough to appear ultimately unskilled in this dance, too. But he thwarted all her attempts, checked himself, used magic to quietly

spin her out of the way, making their dance look all the more beautiful. She finally decided to inflict self harm and—there, that moment. She swings too hard, her blade...”

It looks for a moment like Casimiria must have cut her arm.

Yngvarr straightens sharply, along with the king and queen, but Anastasius throws his blade, making hers shoot out of her grip, and clamps his hand down on her arm, whisking her into a dance of close combat.

She twists and turns and he is in control of it all, until finally he lets go, and there’s no evidence of blood on her sleeve.

“He used a vitalian spell to heal her, to keep her performance exceptional.”

To keep her from being eliminated as she wished.

Music comes to an abrupt stop and Casimiria finishes with one final spin, prompted by the crown prince. She stares angrily into his eyes and his eyebrow quirks, daring her to be so bold as to try such a thing again.

She turns stiffly and finishes with a respectful bow to the king and queen. Prins Yngvarr sidles through spectators and follows her stomping footsteps over the estate and once more into the black forest.

“Did she mention this, too?” I ask, unable to stop myself as we trail after him. Quin’s expression tightens. He glances briefly my way before returning his focus to the prins. “No,” he says after a pause, voice low. “But perhaps some memories, maybe even the best ones, are harder to share.”

They make you feel more. Wish more. Hurt more.

Casimiria keeps glancing over her shoulder at Prins Yngvarr as she ploughs her way to the cabin. There, in the glade, she finally stops.

He pads over damp grass until he's right behind her, eyes trained on her sleeve, where he spies the slice. He reaches towards it and drops his hand again. "Did it hurt? The cut?"

She sighs irritably. "It hurt more that he used a spell to fix it."

"He wants you to stay in the selection."

She twists around with a laugh of disgust. "He only did it to spite me. For yesterday."

"You really don't want to be chosen?"

She scoffs. "I'd rather choose who I . . ."

"Why participate in the first place?"

"My father was compelled to send me here, as were all ministers their eligible daughters. This marriage is business after all. You're a hostage, you should understand it well."

He grimaces behind his mask.

After a shared frustrated pause, Casimiria takes Prins Yngvarr by the arm and uses magical winds to lift them onto the cabin roof. "The stars will be coming out soon."

Quin flies me up too and I perch myself on one of the corners. He pauses, staring at the space where I'd hurriedly ripped myself out of his arms, and quietly glides across to the opposite corner. The distance between us may be mere yards, but it feels vast. I

hate it and need it.

I swivel inwards towards the pair. They're speaking but I don't hear the words.

As if in King Yngvarr's memory, he recalls shared conversation but no longer its content—it doesn't matter, what matters is they're here together, talking with ease, taking in the darkened sky and the stars beginning to glint through it.

“Wait for it.” Casimiria's words reach my ears, and Quin and I—and Prins Yngvarr—follow her pointed finger to the east. “The luminarium runs a night service.”

Suddenly the sky blooms with swirls of light rising into the sky, twirling and twisting in a beautiful display of magic.

There's a sharp flutter in my stomach and my mind fills with a memory.

Quin and I perched on a rooftop, sharing his cloak to keep warm, the lights of lovers dancing around the city while I slap the violet oak flutette against his chest, my nervous breath stuck in my throat.

My breath sticks similarly now, and I glance over at Quin whose silver hair is fluttering with a breeze, his expression pensive as he stares towards the sky.

As if he senses me, he starts to look my way. I dart my eyes back to the prins and Casimiria, and untangle the silver ribbon I've absently wound around my finger.

Quin's gaze is a hot shiver over my profile; I drop my freed fingers to my side, the side hidden from his view, and squeeze my cloak.

Prins Yngvarr's voice drops in the space between him and Casimiria. “You said

you'd rather choose... What type of person would they be?"

She turns towards him with a laugh, the roof groaning under her. She plucks the mask from his face and sets it against her own. "Someone who'll love me even if I look like this. Someone who recognises my soul—"

Quin shifts on his corner of the roof, the creak of wood beneath his weight making me glance at him. His silver hair catches the luminarium's faint glow.

There's something in his look... like wistfulness or regret. Both stir an ache in my chest, and I force my gaze back to the pair. Then it happens. One moment they're staring at one another, the next there's a deafening snap, and the roof caves in, and they drop sharply out of sight.

Quin and I scurry to peer down into the cabin, where Casimiria and the prins have been caught by the bed, him sprawled atop her.

There's a moment of silence and then Casimiria laughs and laughs beneath the mask.

The prins scurries away, yanking back the palm that has landed on her breast. He apologises profusely, putting quick distance between them.

"I'll... I'll do right by you. I'll take responsibility. "

Casimiria pulls herself off the bed and shakes her clothes free of dust and debris. "Shush. It was an accident. No one saw us. No one has to know."

Prins Yngvarr bows deeply and flees the cabin in a rush, and Casimiria calls once more after him before the memory, and the surroundings, once more begin to fade. "You forgot your mask."

Yngvarr's third rune door takes us inside the house, to the room that would later be the dining area but is here a lavishly decorated hall. The king sits playing chess with one of his ministers.

Quin tells me quietly this is his maternal grandfather. Casimiria's father, the then god of war.

His two grandfathers, side by side. I can pick out features in each of them that resemble Quin. But of the two, it's the handsome and hardened War God that Quin most obviously takes after.

We follow Prins Yngvarr, who is being escorted in by a redcloak. The prins immediately bows and the king rises from his game and straightens him with a gentle smile. "Enough with the formalities."

Yngvarr inclines his head. "Your majesty."

The God of War rises and bows. "I'll take my leave."

The king offers Yngvarr his seat at the game. They trade a few quiet moves, sharing conversation that is once more muted, forgotten, until the king is one step from having his black vitalian take out the white prince.

"Our kingdoms have always been on edge. Only with the exchange of my daughter and yourself has there been some stability at the border. But according to our agreement, you'll both return at the end of the summer."

Prins Yngvarr is listening intently, his gaze on the vitalian that is poised to take his prince.

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The king continues, “Your father has suggested a marriage alliance between our kingdoms, and has proposed Frederica marry your younger brother. She has written to me pleading to be spared this duty, and I wish to indulge my only daughter.” Finger pinched atop his black vitalian, the king rocks it back and forth on its square.

“I can do so with a counterproposal.” His gaze meets Prins Yngvarr’s directly.

“You will marry into one of Lumin’s most influential families. ”

Yngvarr snaps his head up.

“That’s correct,” the king says. “One of those participating in the selection.”

“What of the Crown Prince?”

“There are ten noble daughters remaining. Enough for both of you to choose from.”

Prins Yngvarr looks right back at the king. “Then I shall accept on one condition. I want the daughter of your God of War.”

A shadow flickers at the other end of the room and the prins stares tightly in its direction. I shiver; the way the memory lingers here, how sharp the shadow is against the wall behind the partially open door. I look over at Quin, who has noticed it too. His lips curl into a grimace .

When this memory finally fades, Quin and I silently make our way out.

I drag my heavy limbs over soulblooms and over the next threshold. It's night in this memory; there's a chill to the wind, but it's not the reason I'm shivering.

Under strings of warmly lit lanterns, finely dressed nobles are seated around an outdoor feast. The two Lumin princes have their own tables, closest to the king and queen, with Prins Yngvarr's just behind theirs.

Surrounding the royal brothers in an arc of tables are the ten still left in the selection.

And in the space between them, one of those young ladies is making a toast.

Quin speaks quietly beside me. "Nicostratus's mother."

She's pretty, with a smooth tongue that quickly earns a laugh from the queen. She lifts her cup and drinks. The royal family indulge her and gesture for all the girls in the selection to drink along.

Prins Yngvarr glances at Casimiria as she reluctantly lifts her wine.

Immediately upon setting the cup down, she winces and rubs her temple, then shakes her head like she's struggling to keep her focus.

The prins stiffens, and when the next lady insists on a toast, he speaks up.

"So many toasts. Even a man would soon struggle to stand upright. Are we perhaps asking too much of our guests?"

Prince Anastasius smiles widely. "Father, perhaps you can allow the royal vitalians to treat their headaches before bed?"

The king agrees heartily, and the toasts keep coming.

An aklo slides up to Yngvarr's side and whispers in his ear. The prins politely excuses himself, and Quin and I share a look. We follow him inside to his rooms. Chairs are tipped over, books have been ripped apart and strewn over the floor, clothes flung across the room. His carved masks, smashed.

He picks up a shard of the mask that he and Casimiria had bonded over and closes his eyes. Blood drips from his hand where he squeezes the sharp edge. He finds all parts of this mask and sets about gluing it together. When it's done, he calls in his aklos and returns to the banquet.

Only, Casimiria is no longer there.

Neither are the princes.

Yngvarr asks the aklas where she went, and sniffs her abandoned cup as they tell him she needed to rest. "The prince sent his personal aklas to help her."

He stiffens and drops the cup. We rush to keep up with him as he charges through connecting courtyards to a side building shrouded with flowering vines.

A warm glow spreads over the pink flowers from indoor lanterns.

Two silver-robed vitalians emerge. One is a young Chiron, Florentius's father, and he's frowning, clearly displeased.

Prins Yngvarr stops them. "Why are you... Is she here? Have you given her the antidote?"

The other vitalian sneers at the hostage prins and drags Chiron away.

A wild gust of wind sweeps magenta petals around us; Quin steps sharply forward

and stares hard in all directions. “We should go. Cael! ”

But I’m right behind the prins as he swings open the door.

Casimiria is half undressed upon the bed, held in Anastasius’s arms. Her head lolls back, exposing her throat and the top of her bodice, and her dress is riding up one of her long legs to her naked thigh.

But that is by far not the worst of it. Light is swirling around the crown prince as he absorbs her lovelight, his eyes slammed shut.

He crushes Casimiria against his chest, murmuring something in her ear.

Quin calls my name again but I’m rooted in the doorway, watching as Prins Yngvarr staggers into the room and grabs a decorative sword from the wall.

At the slide of metal being released from its sheath, the crown prince snaps his eyes open and calls for his guards.

I lurch to the side as uniformed men sweep into the room and restrain the charging prins.

“You’re despicable,” Prins Yngvarr spits out. “You drugged her. You stole her light.”

“She was always going to be mine.”

A roaring wind tunnels viciously inside, rattling the bones of the memory.

The air is thick with swirling pink petals and razor-sharp leaves, their vibrant colours fading as this reality fractures around us.

Crumbling walls groan and splinter, and the once recognisable manor morphs into a chaotic whirlwind.

Debris hurtles around us and Quin grabs my hand, pulling me out of the way of falling beams. I gasp against his chest. This is what Prins Lief meant when he said the dromveske could be dangerous.

Quin urges me ahead, left and right, zigzagging past hurtling objects. If we're not fast enough, these winds will swallow the path to the rune door whole and we'll be flung into the recesses of this memory, a place it may be impossible to come back from.

Quin protects my back tightly, the only steady thing around me, his pulsing heart between my shoulders warm, real, unchanging. It, and the sudden glow of the rune gate in the distance, has my heart hiccupping.

Suddenly, I feel something tug my leg, coiling tighter with each frantic try to escape. Panic bubbles in my belly. Quin is already curling around me, yanking and pulling with urgency. "Hold on, I've got you."

His voice is a song amidst howling winds. He snatches a stone brick wallowing past him and smashes it against the vine, slicing through its hold on me.

I fall forward with the sudden freedom and Quin steadies me; with a fierce look across the splintering courtyard, he hauls me toward the shaking door.

Winds wail and I glance at a banquet table cartwheeling towards us.

I shout and try to shove Quin out of its path, but he refuses to let go; he rolls with me, further from the rune door.

Debris smashes down around us and dust sprays into a gust, and Quin takes the

second to curl his lip. “I won’t let you go.”

He pushes his frame against the force of the storm, to where the door glows like a throb, a heartbeat .

Hopefully one not about to go out—

With a roar against the wind, Quin surges forward. He slams against the door, forcing it open, and we narrowly slip through to the glade on the other side.

For a heartbeat, silence surrounds us. We sag against the stone arch as we steady our breaths and our racing hearts.

Tendrils of fear still twine around my chest.

My gaze drops to our hands, gripped tightly together. I swallow and try to loosen mine, but Quin narrows his eyes and doubles his grip. His eyes train in on my cheekbone and he lifts his other hand; drops it again, along with my other. “Your cheek,” he says gruffly. “It’s cut.”

I can feel a ticklish line across my cheekbone, and dab at it.

Quin turns away from me. “Avoid a headache in the real world. Heal it here.”

He waits for me to find calming herbs in the glade and once I’ve pasted my cut with their balm, he reluctantly leads me to the fifth rune door. “Does it hurt?”

I shake my head and push against the door, but it barely budes. I frown at it, and try again.

Quin presses his palm to the runes and it opens a fraction. “Ah,” he says, as if this is

something he understands. “We’ll need to push together for this one.”

“What is it? Why is it so stiff?”

“Some doors are like this, hard to open. Some secrets need to be locked away.”

Together we push and slip inside—into a lookalike glade, sparkling in the dewy morning light. Prins Yngvarr is sneaking quietly up to the cabin, where he can hear Casimiria’s sobbing. A twig snaps under his foot and a warning arrow flies from the open door over the glade. “Who’s there?”

“Forgive me,” Yngvarr says, and retreats.

Casimiria rushes to the door. With a graceful leap and supporting breezes, she glides to the prins standing in the soulblooms. Her eyes are puffy from tears but she still looks beautiful as she stands before him.

He stares down at her, saying nothing.

“Why did you come?” she finally asks. “Aren’t you supposed to be disgusted by me like everyone else? I tricked the prince into selecting me, after all.”

“They did this to you.” Prins Yngvarr’s hands are shaking at his sides, like he’s holding himself from reaching out to her. “Don’t ever blame yourself.”

She stares at him for a long time. “You’re the only one that believes in me.”

“I saw vitalians leave that room. I know very well.” He curses. “I’m to blame for this. He overheard my conversation with the king. I asked for you. I wanted to marry you. He hated that I might hold more power than him.”

Casimiria is blinking hard.

He looks at her. “Can you ever forgive me?”

She laughs like this is unexpected—touching and tragic. “And now I’m being forced to become his.”

Prins Yngvarr steps closer, shaking his head. “We don’t have to submit to this fate. ”

“My lovelight has been taken. I’m ruined.”

“I don’t care for your Lumin traditions. I don’t need your lovelight. I know the truth.”

She catches her breath and her hand trembles as she reaches up and strokes his cheek. She smiles sadly.

He clasps the back of her hand, holding her fingers to him.

She shakes her head softly. “You’re Iskaldir’s eldest prince. You cannot run away.”

He finally slides his fingers off hers and she drops her hand. He knows she’s right. He knows he has responsibilities. He knows the two of them cannot be.

He steps back with a gentle bow and Casimiria snags him boldly by the arm. “We can’t have a future,” she says, and he folds to her pull, “but we can have this moment.”

I stare at them sharing delicate smiles as they disappear into the cabin, and Quin clasps his hands behind his back and slowly follows after them.

“What’s the point?” I mutter aloud, and he pivots to face me. I look at him, frowning,

my voice pinching and eventually breaking. “If they can never be, why make it harder to say goodbye?”

Quin holds my gaze with such tender intensity and frustration, I’m afraid he can see me trembling.

I jerk a finger to the cabin, to them , but he doesn’t follow my hasty attempt at deflection.

He crosses the glade and I can feel the vibrations of a deep roar that he only just holds in check.

Yet despite the thrumming tension, his fingers are gentle as he peels back the silver ribbon that’s fluttered over my face, and his voice even gentler.

“Perhaps they’re just as torn. Perhaps they know they shouldn’t.

Perhaps in their life they want a single stolen moment of joy. ”

I stare up at him, my palms clammy, my stomach diving.

Our gazes lock, and I’m rising on my toes with a hammering heart and an uneven breath—

I’m startled back by a blast of tracking magic darting between our faces; it’s followed by a rush of redcloaks, aklas, and vitalians marching into the glade. The magic hovers over the cabin and the soldiers call out for Casimiria to receive the king’s decree.

With a bowed head, she slinks out of the cabin and drops to her knees on the dewy grass.

The decree declares that the crown prince has chosen her to be his consort, and their wedding ceremony shall be held at the end of the month.

Casimiria bows her head and murmurs her acceptance, but there's a tremor in her voice as the akas flank her, gripping her arms like she's a criminal. Her gaze darts briefly to Yngvarr, and something unspoken flickers between them before the redcloaks drag her away.

Yngvarr's hand twitches at his side, his fingers curling into a fist, but he doesn't move—not until the silver-sashed vitalian smirks and barks, “Bring him out.”

His protest is raw with fury, but the slap of a gauntleted hand silences him. Blood trickles down his chin as the redcloaks shove him to the ground.

I lurch forward on instinct, as if I can stop this, but Quin hauls me back by my middle. My muscles quiver and strain to be released and he whispers urgently in my ear. “It wouldn't change what happened. He'll only know someone's been in here.”

I glance at him, his clenched jaw, his hand gripping mine like he's holding himself together. For the first time, it strikes me that watching this might be harder for him than it is for me.

I sag and stare with gritted teeth as the redcloaks pause in beating the prins bloody and the vitalians heal him only for the redcloaks to start over again.

They're torturing him, not leaving a single bruise of proof.

I feel ill with anger.

No wonder he loathes Lumin. No wonder he despises magic. No wonder he wants revenge.

I slam my eyes shut and turn away, ducking my head against Quin's shoulder.

"Get me out of this dromveske." But even as I say it, the image of Yngvarr's bloody face won't leave me.

The silent way he endured it—the same way Quin does when the world presses too hard against him. .. How do they hold on?

Or perhaps the point is, eventually, they don't anymore.

I shiver.

"Don't end up like him," I murmur. "Be stronger. Promise me."

Quin's hand presses briefly against my back, steadying, reassuring. But I'm still shivering.

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The last rune door in the glade sends us spiralling through darkness.

I wake in Ragn temple's meditation grove. It takes a moment to makes sense of it all. The carved beams, the blueish light of dawn seeping through the shuttered windows, my veiled hat sliding off my head and Quin slowly shifting beside me on his narrow bed.

Anastasius's son, imprisoned by a king who'd like nothing more than to get revenge.

It's put in sharp focus just how dangerous it is for Quin to be here.

Prins Lief may have hedged his bets and kept his captive cared for, but King Yngvarr has arrived.

He must have grand plans for making Quin suffer.

I skate my hands over the mattress and under Quin's legs as I gather the dromveske and the runestones, then scurry off the bed and towards the door.

"You're missing one," Quin says. I lunge for it and he closes his fist. "I must return these," I say.

Suspicion and concern flicker in Quin's gaze and I land my hand over his closed one. His warm fingers loosen around the rune and I wriggle mine into his hold to pluck it free. When it's back in the dromveske alongside the others, Quin catches my sleeve. "Why am I afraid?"

“I’m doing what’s right.”

I turn to leave but he’s still holding on tight. “You are doing this for me...”

My throat is thick. “For Lumin.”

“You’re in King Yngvarr’s palm, while at your back is a regent who’ll even sooner kill you.”

“What are you telling me? To run away? Slink to the area on your chessboard that has me flanked only by pawns of the same side?”

“There, you have a chance!”

“But not where I’m surrounded by powerful pieces?”

He spins me around, but I’m prepared. Holding my breath, I toss a cloud of sleeping powder over him and he gasps my name as he crumples to the bed.

I whisper an apology as I position him more comfortably, my lips combing the shell of his ear.

“You’re my... you’re my king. It’s my duty as your subject.

” I shift back, staring at his resting face perfectly framed by his long hair and those delicate thin braids.

As long as they should be now. As long as the ones I can’t take off my wrists.

I squeeze my hands tight and step hastily back towards the door.

I return the dromveske and head to the castle, where I'm brought to a terraced garden.

It's overflowing with frostweiss, the beautiful white flower covering the earth like snow. The king walks through the flowers and immediately I'm imagining his bloody sword dripping and staining them. This man who kills Lumins unflinchingly is the same man as the prins in those memories.

Lumin's cruelty changed him. We're the reason he has this hate.

I shake off my shivers and tell myself I'm safe for now; the king is simply taking in the view of the town and sea.

In the distance beyond, the craggy peak of Mount Lysippos rises.

He stares to the east of that mountain, as if he might see Hinsard, or the royal city many days beyond. He clasps his hands behind his back.

"How would you humiliate Lumin?"

"They only value magic."

"They are too proud, too cunning, too cruel."

"Release him and I'll enter the Medicus Contest."

The king's hardened stare hits me.

"Huge numbers will be entering this year. All will be avidly watching, or waiting for the storytellers. I'll show them how powerful alchemic healing is."

"How do you know about this?"

“I’m a healer. It would be concerning if I didn’t.”

The king rocks back on his heels.

“Vitalians are considered the superior healers in all kingdoms. How shocked—how mortified—Lumin would be if a non-linea team made it to the final round.”

A spark of interest hits the king’s eye.

I clasp my hands together prayerfully.

“You must like this failed king,” he says in disgust.

“He’s insignificant, powerless. A laughingstock. He’ll spend the rest of his years ducking his head in shame; he has truly lost everything. I ask for his release out of pity.” I bow, swallow down a nervous flare of bile. “In return, I’ll prove the value of Iskaldir healing to all.”

He raises his brows, laying a hand on the bejewelled handle of a sheathed dagger. “You have Lindrhalda’s touch.”

“H-her touch is powerful, of course. But magic —”

He steps close and leans in. The furs around his neck swing forward against my shoulders, my nervous heart. “Surpass it, and you have my word. Your reward for healing poxies will be the failed king’s release.”

“Surpass it.” The words taste hollow on my tongue, even as I try to believe them.

I can surprise many with combined vitalian and alchemic knowledge, but surpass magic?

After all, I have none. Surpass the vast power of skilled vitalians.

Florentius will be there too. I'll be up against my former comrades, who are the best of the best. Insurmountable .

King Yngvarr follows the bulging swallow in my throat and narrows his eyes.

My skin prickles, and I can feel the weight of his judgment pressing against my ribs, squeezing the air from my lungs.

There's a deadly flash in his gaze as he rips off my curacowl to inspect me more carefully.

I've never been so relieved I have blonde hair and take after my mother's Skeldar side.

I hurriedly show Lindrhalda's 'mark' on my arm. "She'll help me. She will."

But as I say it, doubt creeps in like a shadow. What if I fail? What if my words—my promise—become the nail in Quin's coffin?

"Of course." He smiles and I shiver. "Or I'll make you watch as I put his head on a stake."

I want to throw up, but I can't. I want to leave, but the sudden appearance of stormblades stops me.

"Your majesty. We found this wyvern in our waters."

"Wyverns?" King Yngvarr smartens. "So far from Lumin?"

They present a stretcher carrying a lifeless creature, and I immediately recognise the sewn wound on its belly.

It takes all my effort to keep my expression unaffected, as if I've never seen this wyvern in my life.

Beneath my still facade though, I'm battling a thickening throat.

The king can no longer get word in or out. He's cut off. He truly only has me.

I bow when I'm dismissed and concentrate on keeping my limbs from shaking as I leave.

I'm escorted to my abode and ordered to pack. A royal envoy will see me to Hinsard .

I rush through the courtyard, calling for Megaera, Lykos and Zenon to collect their things. "I've a way for you to return home," I whisper to them. "Take only what you need."

They don't need telling twice. Lykos and Zenon exchange a look of deep relief and are ready in under a minute. I need a few more to gather a chest of equipment and another of herbs, potions, and poisons, some extra robes, and... yes, I must take my clasp.

Prins Lief is awaiting our arrival at the ship, along with Captain Kjartan. I make sure my veil covers my face and stiffen as Megaera and the others flank me.

Prins Lief comes down the gangway and meets me with quiet words. "He's my man. He's no threat. The rest of the crew are unaware of your identity." He eyes my companions and I step forward.

“You promised they could leave, given the opportunity.”

He stares hard at them and waves them aboard first. He’s about to speak again when a call has his gaze snapping over my shoulder.

I turn. Beyond the dozen armed soldiers, running along the dock in a dazzling dress without so much as a shawl, as if she’d left in haste, is my aunt.

The sight of her graceful sprint and glittering skirts and beautiful face has Prins Lief audibly hauling in a breath.

He gestures for the soldiers to part, and my aunt rushes through the gap to haul me into a hug. “Impetuous boy.”

I can barely gurgle her name she’s holding me so tight. And I’m holding her even tighter, the child in me terrified to let go. What if I don’t have the ability? What if I can’t even get past the first trial? What if I’m the reason Lumin loses its true king?

What if I’m forced to watch as . . .

I slam my eyes shut and she holds me through the shaking, before whirling around to grab Prins Lief by his robe.

Fervently, she pulls him towards her, making the soldiers all rush forward until he flings a hand up for them to cease.

“Please,” she says. “Protect him.”

He slides his hand over hers, and she shakes her head like this isn’t enough. “Vow he’ll survive, and I’ll make a vow in return.”

Prins Lief stiffens in her hold and looks hard into her eyes. His voice is a whisper, “What did you say?”

“If he survives all this, I’ll be yours.”

He stares and stares, as if he can’t trust what he’s heard. My aunt pushes herself onto her toes and whispers it again, in his ear, before turning away with a prayer to the gods to watch over us.

“You’ll obey all of my commands,” Prins Lief says sharply when she’s gone and he finds his voice. “Your fate is my future.”

His future, and my king’s freedom.

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Lykos and Zenon spare a few moments to say goodbye.

We're still on the docks, waiting for the envoy to transfer into carriages and onto horseback.

Lykos clasps my shoulder and presses a chain into my hand.

Not a regular chain—one with unique symbols, through which braided thread is knotted.

“If you ever need help, show this, and...” he murmurs in my ear.

I raise a brow and run the chain between my fingers. “What if it requires saving someone with active meridians?”

Lykos grumbles, and Zenon steps before him, bowing. “I'll make sure your favour is returned.”

He's so earnest, I can't help but fondly scrub his hair. We might have been forced together by circumstance, might have started out on the wrong foot, but I've come to like my companions. “You can promise that?”

He blows at the hair that's flicked into his eyes, and Lykos speaks over his shoulder. “He can. Zenon is the son of the chief. ”

Megaera doesn't jerk in surprise at this as I do, and I wonder if she's suspected. Or known. I shut my mouth and stare at the chief crusader's heir—and his hair I mucked

up.

Lykos speaks, “Not knowing who we were, you risked your life to save us. And now you’ve set us free again. We trust you.”

“What if my favour is your promise never to harm the king?”

Lykos meets my eyes. “I’ve observed you. Should our king reclaim the throne... I believe you may have a profound influence on him and his rule. I believe with you at his side, he will seek to improve the lives of those without magic.”

I step forward and hold his gaze with urgency. “Spread that word. Get your chief to back the true king. Make real progress for the people.”

Lykos clasps his hands solemnly and bows, and when he rises, Megaera swishes her red skirts between us and produces a bundle of books for Zenon. “Become wise. Keep practicing.”

For once Zenon doesn’t groan at the mention of study. He takes the bundle and gratefully holds it to his chest.

Lykos looks wistfully at her. “Are you sure you’ll not come with us?”

She hesitates and shakes her head. “Cael needs to form a team to compete. I owe him this.”

I look at her sharply and she returns it with a sharp brow. But she’s right. Of course I can’t enter a team competition on my own.

“You’re not a healer,” I say.

“I can cook. I’ll follow any recipe precisely. All you have to do is give me good ones.”

Indeed, she is exceptionally meticulous when it comes to measuring ingredients and following methods.

To the point that, even if a ridiculous amount of hogwart is requested, she’ll not question it and forge on.

She should have no problem applying that same philosophy to my scriptions.

However, anyone who joins my team... “You have to know, King Yngvarr will have our heads if we fail.”

She keeps her chin high. “We’d better not fail then.”

Lykos’s large frame tenses, as if he’s holding himself back from whisking her away to safety. Megaera catches this, laughs lightly, and steps close to him. With a wicked smile, she leans in and brushes a kiss over his lips.

Kjartan’s voice cuts through the chill, a sharp command to move along. The carriages rattle closer, their wheels groaning on the uneven road as we leave Lykos and Zenon behind.

“For the duration of our stay,” Kjartan says, stepping ahead, “the king orders us to wear these masks.”

I’d been hoping to continue wearing my veil.

I touch the soft feathered mask and am grateful to see Megaera holding hers against her face.

It doesn't cover the mouth but the feathers fan down one side of her jaw and the rest of the mask around her eyes does enough to conceal her nose. She's difficult to recognise.

Captain Kjartan ties a feathered mask to his own face. "The king doesn't want the allure to draw unwanted attention. And these are feathers from—"

I recognise them and understand. "From a Celestial Seraph," I murmur. "The divine bird of the healing goddess."

I'm only just used to the ticklish feel of the mask by the time our carriages clatter into Hinsard. Around us, soaked in the midday sun, the lavish city sprawls—the constabulary teeming with uniformed men; Prince Nicostratus's glorious manor; the river that winds to Thinking Hall...

The familiar sights of Hinsard rush past, each landmark pulling at threads—the loss of magic, unravelling a murder mystery, the sting of Nicostratus's heartbreak, the wild rhythm of my own heart.

Finding my soldad inside the giant violet oak.

The realisation it had been Quin all along...

The carriage halts.

We disembark and with stiff cordiality a dozen decorated redcloaks pass on a welcome message: the regent has agreed to King Yngvarr's request, allowing us to take part in the Medicus Contest. Rooms are being readied for us close to the event, but first we are to formally sign in to the competition .

Throngs of people are gathered in the square on three sides, facing the city's grand

luminarium, cheering for teams of four and five as they ink their names into a book set atop a mosaic-covered stand.

A flash of a peacock robe ahead stops me short. My heart stumbles. I push forward, trying to coax the envoy to a quicker pace, but the stormblades close ranks with a sharp glare. The figures vanish into the crowd, leaving only murmurs rising like smoke around us.

Megaera's lips set in a tight line; I urge her to ignore it and steer her through our parting stormblades as they flank a path to the book of registration.

Behind the podium, unseen from my earlier limited angles, is a man in deep violet robes. I almost trip over my feet. Skriniaris Evander! He's here. He's in Hinsard. He's involved somehow in this. Perhaps, like in my first examinations, he's one of the judges.

He looks over at us with a warm, welcoming smile.

And I'm so grateful for it. When everything else feels daunting and everyone else is against me, his unjudgmental approval lifts my spirits.

He takes Megaera and me in with a small bow, and hands us the crude ink set aside for non-linea.

He smiles again, but I can see he hasn't recognised me. Doesn't even suspect.

That's good. I need that to be the case.

But . . .

I wish I could talk to him again. Ask him for advice; have an ally on my side.

As I scrawl our names into the book, I hear the sneers and whispered insults coming from the crowd pressing around us.

I straighten my back against it. It's not my pride on the line—it's Quin's life. "Thank you," I say, handing back the quill. "Would you be kind enough to tell me if we're able to access the libraries?"

"I'll look into that for you." Skriniaris Evander glances between us. "Are you sure you don't have another member to join your team? Most teams have four. I'm afraid you'll be at a disadvantage with only two."

"We're the only ones under the age limit. Unless we're allowed to recruit a Lumin?"

"That wouldn't violate the new decree," he says. "'Teams of two to five under twenty-five, regardless of background or blood'." He pauses, his gaze steady. "But finding someone willing to join a Skeldar team... that's another matter."

He's straightforward about this, and I approve.

Most in Lumin are against our participation, wary of our being in their land and even involved in their contest. And of those that do not harbour fears or resentment, most will at least believe us sadly disadvantaged.

Who would be willing to join a team that will surely suffer humiliating defeat in the first trial?

Even if there was someone willing, would they be willing to be pegged as a possible traitor to Lumin? Would they be willing to be sneered at by Skeldars?

"We are here to prove exceptional healing without magic. "

Skriniaris Evander accepts this, and Megaera and I are once more swept up by stormblades and brought to our temporary accommodations: Prince Nicostratus's manor.

The grand facade and vibrant murals remain unchanged, but the life within has dimmed. Pinched-faced redcloaks haunt the halls, and the prince is conspicuously absent.

When Petros shows me to my room, he's limping, and when I offer help, he looks around skittishly and declines as if he's being watched.

As I set myself up in my allocated chambers—under the same murals of Lumin's greatest vitalian, in the same chambers the prince had given me—I pick up worrying whispers from aklos and aklas.

They don't know where the prince is, or how he's faring.

After the showdown with Eparch Valerius at the drakopagon game, after the royal brothers left for the south, the regent's men swept into the manor, dragged out anyone wearing the prince's symbol and beat them into submission. Since then, this place has been theirs.

I'll need a space free of eyes in which to study in the days before the contest begins.

Prins Lief agrees to this and Megaera and I move to my grandfather's cabin in the forest to practice.

Megaera proves herself a quick study, cooking my scriptions over and over until her hands are stained green, and when she asks for space without my constant critiques, I take my grandfather's books and slink through the woods, to that tree .

The violet oak's branches sway gently, waving like an old friend welcoming me home.

I press my palm to its bark, cool and rough beneath my skin, and breathe deeply—crisp, earthy, familiar.

The scent carries both comfort and the weight of everything that's passed.

Here—under its canopy, in the hollowed base of the trunk—is where my fate with him began.

It's also where we once parted. Now, I'm here again, carrying the deepest wish to free him.

The tree hums faintly under my fingertips—as if it understands. As if to offer me luck.

But I'll need more than luck.

I'll need skill, and the confidence not to falter.

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“ I know you’re hesitant,” Megaera says as we walk back through the forest and into Hinsard’s cobbled streets, “but if there is any way to find a third...”

I grimace, but I know she’s right. We have so much stacked against us already. But the risk...

I stop and face her. “Why are you helping me? You must know I’m doing all this for our king.”

She looks back at me, and I catch a flicker of regret in her gaze that says everything. “I know why I’m here.”

I don’t make her explain. I nod quietly. “Go ahead. I need some things from the apothecary.”

She continues on, and I pinch my nose under my feathered mask and traipse over the main square.

When I exit the apothecary, I glimpse Florentius’s figure again, and again I chase after it only to lose him once more to the crowds heading into the afternoon service at the luminarium.

Even if I did catch up to him, what then?

I can’t risk revealing myself. Can’t ask how Akilah is doing or where she is.

Can’t thank him for being by her side when I wasn’t.

An outraged shout has me snapping my attention to a skirmish in the square.

A young man is shouting savagely at someone on the ground and between them is the vapour of smashed capsulised spells.

Remaining intact ones roll in all directions.

One spell bumpily skids my way and I pluck it up as I take in the sneering seller.

“This man—no, not even a man—this deceitful woman — Look. ” He implores those who’ve stopped to watch to see the fumes of his lost revenue.

“I came a long way with these, hoping to reach people in need of unparalleled magic. These rare spells can bring one back from the brink of death! They can be compared to the lovelight in their potency and potential! How do I know? They once revived me!”

The crowd gasps and murmurs.

“I apologise for the accident,” says the figure, rising from where they’ve been picking up the unbroken spells.

I catch my breath as I see their profile.

Her profile. Olyn, the non-linea apothecary from Kastoria, who hides her gender so she can help those in need.

Of course. She’d have come to watch and take notes, perhaps to meet some of her vitalian idols.

“How much for your lost wares?”

I move towards her. She laughs suddenly, incredulous. “Twenty bricks of gold?”

My step stutters at this sum too.

“They are the last known spells from Sacran Kyrillos himself!” He finds an intact spell and holds it up. “It holds his signature, see for yourself.”

I inspect the capsule in my hand. Indeed, there is a mark on it, however... I roll the gel-like material in my hand, and sniff my fingers. Frowning, I burst the capsule. Magic fumes out; I inhale deeply, easily recognising the scents of a dozen plants.

Olyn is frowning, but when she tries to speak, he cuts her off and incites the crowd to hold her while he finds a constable. The injustice of it burns under my skin, and before I’ve realised it, I’ve stepped between Sneerer and Olyn. I address the crowd. “Don’t be fooled by this seller’s nonsense.”

“Get away, this is none of your business.”

I take one of the capsules from Olyn’s palm. “These capsules are nothing but simple rejuvenating spells.”

“You’re in one of their masks. A crude healer. What would you know about vitalian spells?”

This is met with a rush of angry whispers. I take in their pinched faces and pointing fingers and step closer, holding up another of the capsules. “You, take this to the apothecary there and have him write down all the ingredients that make up this spell.”

Sneerer pales. “You have no right—”

“Afraid of the result? If so, apologise for your deception now.”

“Take it! Let’s see if you recognise even one ingredient.”

An age-weathered grocer takes the capsule and rushes into the apothecary I was in moments ago. He returns with a folded piece of paper.

I gesture to it. “I can name everything on that list.”

The crowd scoffs and laughs as they egg me on. Let him make a fool of himself now. Maybe he’ll go home.

“Arcanaberry, vitamindra, luminaria, aetherpetal, auroraroot, silverbell, aquilafolia.”

The grocer holding the list darts his eyes over it, wide eyed. He nods, over and over.

“There’s something else,” I say as he parts his lips to tell me there’s one I haven’t said.

“Small traces of bloodmoon vine.”

The grocer gives the curious crowd an astonished nod.

There’s quiet as they exchange looks with their neighbours. Disbelief. Uncertainty. Reluctant acceptance. Murmurings.

I continue, “These spells may awaken the drunk but they certainly won’t bring you back from the brink of death.”

Sneerer, pale faced at the truth, sneers harder. “Even if they do only rejuvenate, they’re still made by the infamous Sacran Kyrillos!”

“This cannot be so.”

“You—”

“Leaving a signature on a spell requires much skill indeed—quite fiddly to do during the capsulisation process... So I hear,” I add.

“Indeed! Even a Skeldar admits this!”

“But this is not that skill. This is the skill of a forger. Touch the capsules for yourself, rub over the signature—look how the gold bleeds onto your fingers. These marks have been added after the capsulisation process.”

“So? Perhaps Sacran Kyrillos chose to do it this way.”

“This gold oil contains geldiroot sap. That sap has only been added to coloured oils in the last five years.” I toss more capsules into the crowd for their judgement. “Unless Sacran Kyrillos has indeed come back from the dead, these are not his spells.”

Sneerer flusters and gets louder. “They still cost me money. She broke them. She should pay.”

I pull out the pouch I have from Prins Lief and throw it to him. “Maybe you’ve been tricked as well. Take this and let’s all move on.”

Sneerer glowers and peeks into the pouch.

There’s a flicker of surprise in his eye—he’s getting rather a good deal indeed.

He puts on a showy huff and marches away.

The crowd release Olyn’s shoulders and disperse, and she dusts herself off.

“How much do I owe you? For the money pouch and the favour?”

Over her shoulder I spy Kjartan and flanking stormblades making their way sternly across the square and I get the immediate feeling I’m in trouble. I bid Olyn a hurried farewell. “That tavern over there. Tomorrow. Lunch.”

I leave her with a confounded expression and rush away to be grabbed by the stormblades and dragged to Prins Lief in his chambers. He sends the stormblades to surround the room to make sure there are no eavesdroppers .

“Our first day and you’re picking fights with petty profiteers?”

“Word finds you quickly.”

“Haldr!” he says with emphasis, to remind me of my role.

“If I can’t even stand up against a wrong, how will I have the courage to stand up against the vitalians?”

“All eyes are on us. Every move we make is being judged. Now they are out there in restaurants with their comrades criticising us for getting into a public argument!” Prins Lief turns angrily towards the wall. “My father wants Lumin embarrassed. He doesn’t want to hear stories that embarrass him .”

“The people are laughing at our team, criticising us already. Demonstrating the truth—without magic—is confronting their assumptions. It’s making them wonder about our potential. It’s making them curious about our skills. How is this something your king would be against?”

Prins Lief keeps his mouth shut, then mutters about sharp tongues running in the family. He shoos me away. “Don’t cause any more trouble.”

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I don't mean to cause more trouble.

But I do.

I knew Megaera was uneasy about it just being the two of us, but I'm unprepared for the relief she can't quite suppress when I tell her I may have found us a third team member.

I know I don't really understand her motivations—whatever they are, they've been enough to counter the risk of what we're doing—but the fear.

.. it's still there. Another set of capable hands could help tip the balance, but I can do nothing more about that until lunchtime tomorrow, and in the meantime. ..

The following morning, I rise early, slip on my feathered mask and roam the streets asking the whereabouts of the royal vitalian team.

Most people ignore me, but a kindly scholar points towards an inn beside the main canal and when I get there, I'm in luck.

Florentius is emerging from its main doors and—

Akilah. My Akilah.

From the shadows of trees, I follow her as she chases after Florentius, down the riverbank and into a canopied alcove where redcloaks are surrounding large longboat.

“Please, let me talk to him!” Florentius says, louder and louder when the redcloaks ignore him and block his passing.

Akilah pulls on his sleeve, pleading him to step back, not to get in a fight.

“I’ll heal myself!”

“It’ll still hurt. Please.”

I eye the boat cautiously. Who is on board? Why is it so heavily guarded?

Florentius’s shoulders are tense with emotion, but he lets Akilah pull him back to the trees.

I slip further behind the trunk, out of view, and peer around at them. Akilah is stroking his arm and murmuring as Florentius rubs the heels of his palms over his knotted brow. “I just...”

“I know,” Akilah says when he chokes up.

She slips her arms around him and holds on tight. He shuts his eyes and breathes deeply, shifting the hair Akilah hasn’t tied back—like she raced out on impulse. Her hands rub circles over his back and after a few quiet moments he drops his lips to the top of her head.

So much has happened. My Akilah has gone through hard times, and Florentius too. They’ve forged an alliance, taken care of one another, fallen in love.

“He’s cruel to do this,” Akilah says.

Florentius holds her tighter and stares towards the longboat. “We must win. I must

free them. ”

I’m distracted by the uncomfortable weight of Florentius’s vow as I slip through narrow streets towards the square. I don’t notice the shadows following me until too late.

I spin on my heel, and two dark-hooded men fly towards me. I grab at my belt for poison, for something to toss at them to give me time to get away, but I know I’ll be too slow. Their swords gleam, and I squeeze my eyes shut—

This is it. All my plans, already ended.

But then air funnels over me—the cracking of a whip and clatter of metal, and the fact I’m still breathing has me opening my eyes.

A familiar vespertine wields his whip, pulling the last sword from its handler.

The hooded men flip forward, but they’ll be no match for him.

I step out of Bastion’s way, keeping one eye on his graceful display of agility, strength and swagger.

Eventually, one of the men runs off; the other is caught, his hood thrown back with a whip that coils around his throat.

“Who are you?” Bastion hisses.

The Hood grabs a dagger from his cloak and before the vespertine can stop him, he plunges it into his own chest. I cry out and rush forward, driving a hand into my medicinal pouch, but—

Blood gurgles up his throat and his body slumps.

I suck in a sharp breath and let it out again, feeling a strange mix of frustration that I couldn't stop his death, and... relief that I'm safe. That the dagger hadn't been meant for Bastion.

The body slumps to the side and I notice a mark at his nape—the mark of the regent. I pick up one of the abandoned swords, frowning. The hilt carries symbols of the gods. Iskaldir weapons.

Hinsard, this Medicus Contest... it's a dangerous game from all sides.

“They were trying to make it look like I was killed by one of my own party.”

Bastion coils his whip, hooks it onto his belt, and flashes his dimples. “Aren't you lucky I was passing by, beautiful?”

Despite the situation and the lingering shock, I can't help but laugh.

Incorrigible! He truly flirts with every half-decent-looking man he stumbles across.

He doesn't even care I might come from Iskaldir.

In fact, judging by the way he's... appreciating my form and feathered mask, he may find that all the more exotic.

“Pretty laugh too,” he says and raises an eyebrow. “How about you thank me for saving your life?”

I palm my hips and he grins cheekily.

“With lunch, I meant.”

“Of course you did,” I say drily, then gesture to the body. “What do we do with him?”

Bastion whistles and two men appear to deal with the issue. He turns back to me. “Shall we?”

Bastion is here, and Olyn is too. I can easily guess the travel arrangements. “I’m due to meet a young woman at a tavern.”

“Young woman?” He smiles. “Three is company, is it not?”

Bastion is a sharp shriek when he sees the ‘young woman’ at the private table. “You said you had plans,” he says, wagging his finger at her.

Olyn swats him away. “You said you weren’t out to find beauties.”

“He was in trouble. I couldn’t help it.” He delivers her a winsome smile and winks at me. “I’m a swashbuckler.”

“You need to be swashed in cold water! Out, out you go.”

Olyn shuts the door behind him and returns to the table. “Sorry. He’s always like this.”

“I know,” I say.

She picks up a cup of water and glances over it at me with a wobbling, how-could-you-know frown. I close the shutters overlooking the square and pull down my mask.

She yelps and water splashes coolly over my face.

I wipe it off, blinking, and she scurries around the table apologising and dabbing at my cheek with a napkin. “You—you—you—” she keeps shaking her head and prodding me with the napkin as if to make sure I’m real .

I chuckle and steer her forceful fingers away. “Sit, I’ll tell you everything. Then I have a favour to ask....”

When I’ve asked, she simply stares at me. She drums her fingers on the table, opening her mouth to say something and snapping it shut.

I try again. “Will you join our team? As a woman. As yourself.”

She leans over the table and thumps it with a flat hand. When she resumes her seat, she holds up her water as if it’s wine and she’s making a toast. “I never thought I’d get such a chance, but this... without hiding? It’s a life-long dream. I’d risk my life for this opportunity.”

“You may be doing so.”

She slams her water back and stands.

She keeps her gaze steady on mine. “Let’s go.”

Mask back in place, I follow her across the square to the luminarium and the podium holding the registration book, where Megaera has been waiting. She takes Olyn in with crossed arms and approves. “I saw what she did in Kastoria. She has guts too.” Megaera looks at me. “And comes with...”

I follow her darting look to the stalls across the square and glimpse Bastion

pretending to inspect the quality of a potato. “Added security.” I shiver, recalling the assassins. “We may need it.”

Olyn captures his attention and signals for him to be off, and Bastion immediately follows her orders. “Under it all, he’s fiercely loyal,” she murmurs. “Now, shall we?”

Skriniaris Evander isn’t here today, but someone else reluctantly hands us ink to add Olyn’s name to our team. We leave on a high and—

A snicker hits my nape. I turn to five faces—square jaws and long braids clasped at the ends with jade. The men, all our age, wear cloaks of the same burned-orange fabric, and have leather healing bags strapped to their waists.

“Why waste your time?” the middle one says, clearly the leader.

“Why waste your breath?” I retort. “Unless you fear we won’t fail?”

A hiss. “Put him in his place!” another urges.

The leader squares his shoulders. “This is a competition for worthy linea scholars. A team with no magic and two women? You’re making this contest into a joke.”

Megaera and Olyn step up on either side of me, folding their arms.

“Ah,” I say. “You’re afraid of being shown up by alchemy and female intellect?”

Team Orange turn red. “Back out while there’s still time, and you won’t leave the biggest laughingstock in the kingdoms. The regent might even give you face and send you home with the promise of a few months more peace at the border.”

“You think highly of your regent. But we think highly of another king, and for him,

we stay to prove our worth.”

A scratchy laugh. “Aren’t you afraid of the shame? Your king might die of mortification.”

I smile calmly. “I will not let my king die.”

Team Orange takes a menacing step forward and Megaera steps out. “Show your competence in the contest.”

Her breezy confidence infuriates the leader and he gestures to his teammates. A blast of magic immediately hauls Megaera, Olyn and me off our feet and flips us upside down.

“Not so confident now, are you?” He pushes me by the shoulder so I swing hard, knocking into Olyn and Megaera, who stifle their yelps. I stare through my slipping mask and laugh.

Magic flashes, but whatever spell it is, it doesn’t land. It’s knocked away by a shot of sparkling silver.

Florentius carefully positions himself in front of us as Mikros and Makarios make a welcome reappearance in my life by setting us free and on our feet.

When we’re upright and steady, the two silver-sashed royal vitalians step up to Florentius’s side as he eloquently puts Team Orange in their place.

“The regent himself has declared anyone may enter this contest. Let them prove themselves in the trials.”

They sneer. “Your skills we respect, but sticking up for Skeldars and women... It

makes you complicit in muddying our traditions.”

I sidle between Makarios and Florentius and catch stubborn eyes. Attitudes like this are what is affecting Lumin relations with Iskaldir. I need to do well in this contest—for my king, but also to open their minds.

“If my team surpasses yours, I want you to publicly apologise.” Florentius jerks in surprise at my incision but steps back a half pace and lets me continue. “And take back your contempt of non-magicked—and women’s—skills. Spread the word that Skeldars are equal to Lumins in medical proficiency.”

A disbelieving laugh. Team Orange ball their fists in unison. “Then, should you lose to us...” He smiles. “You must tattoo on your face a wyvern triumphing over the Skeldar gods, and” —he steps forward mockingly— “your team, including your Prins, must kiss our boots.”

At the mention of such humiliation, people around us hold their breaths. But mine comes easily. I plunge my hand forward and shake his. “Deal.”

“Tell me,” Prins Lief says with a quiet intensity that has me hastily kneeling before him, “is there a day you don’t get yourself—and royalty—into trouble? Why didn’t you hold your tongue, walk away?” He prowls closer and tips my chin. “Why can’t you see the delicate position we’re in?”

His words are reminiscent of Quin’s warning, about being a pawn surrounded by powerful pieces.

I don’t so much as blink as I hold his stare. “Yes, there is a tremendous amount to lose. There’s also a tremendous amount to gain. ”

He drops his fingers from my chin and narrows his eyes.

I continue. “Spreading the word of Skeldar skill will have people pausing before they judge you. It’ll help tackle misconceptions. Perhaps lead to better relations, understanding. I’m thinking about the bigger picture.”

“What about the picture you’re in right now?”

” he tosses back. “You think winning will solve everything. Let me ask you this: have you thought about the case you do ? Have you wondered why Captain Kjartan and Iskaldir’s elite stormblades are accompanying us?”

Have you understood why your aunt promised her life to me if you return unharmed?
”

My stomach sinks and I finally drop my gaze. I’ve been caught up in the challenge, in the dream of freeing Quin, even our kingdom’s future relations with Iskaldir. But I haven’t thought about this. “You don’t think they’ll let us leave easily.”

“You’re idealistic. You desire change, and you desire it to happen all at once. Let me tell you this: you’ll change nothing if you’re dead.”

I bow my head. A stiff silence follows, and I slowly rise to my feet.

“You’re right. They’ve already started trying to be rid of us.

” I tell him about the assassins and the Skeldar weapons used to get away with it.

“They’ll make it look like an accident. An attack by a third party.

Something that doesn’t implicate the regent. ”

“I’ll have men escort you, for safety.”

I shake my head. “I have a candidate for that job. A Lumin. Someone less conspicuous. He has men in the shadows too; the regent will be keeping a close eye on your men.”

He purses his lips and heaves in another breath. “Should we bring up the other issue?” The other—oh, he means Olyn. A Lumin, on our team. “How do I explain her to my father?”

“By the time he hears of it, there’ll be nothing to be done.”

“That’ll be trouble.”

“It’s more trouble to fail. And to succeed, I need her help.” I need all the help I can get.

“Then I’m the one who insisted she join the team. Me.”

This... My voice comes out gravelly. “Thank you.”

“Enough of all that. I received this today.” Prins Lief settles a badge into my hand.

“Skriniaris Evander,” I murmur.

“He says you should use it after hours.”

That’ll help avoid unnecessary confrontations.

I back up towards the door, clutching the badge.

“Focus.” The prins looks at me in pinch-eyed warning. “Don’t do anything frivolous.”

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Megaera needs a kitchen—I left some tricky scriptions for her to practice—so it’s only Olyn and myself heading to the library that night.

The shadows feel menacing and Olyn follows my darting looks. “As you asked, Bastion is following.”

“You’re close with him.”

She laughs lightly. “As close as friends can be.”

“Not more?”

“With that philandering swashbuckler?” Somewhere in the distance there’s a distinct sound of protest. She laughs. “He’s well figured out that I’m not inclined that way.”

Ah.

I flash the badge to a robed man stationed at the library door, and he glances around to make sure no one’s watching before he sneaks us inside.

He leads us to Skriniaris Evander, working at one of several tables surrounded by walls of books, and leaves again.

Taffy arches her back and yawns, and pads her way over onto the book the skriniaris is reading.

He chuckles and looks over her to us—Olyn in simple women’s dress and myself, in

my mask.

“Found yourself a third.”

“It was wise advice.”

“I’ll admit, I’m surprised you found someone.” He acknowledges Olyn kindly. “It’s not my intention to be dismissive. But your team has more to overcome than the others.”

“You’re right. We have no magic, or” —as in the case of Megaera, who could have her meridians unblocked if we paid someone or found someone willing— “choose not to use it. We are limited to other techniques—alchemy, needling, muscle and bone manipulation, surgery. We do not have the ability to reach into the body with the same precision. We have to touch the disease to cure it. And atop all of this, we’re looked down on for being Skeldar or female. ”

Skriniaris Evander lowers his head solemnly.

“You may believe us to be the weakest team,” I say, and reach over to pat his cat. “But you need us to win the most.”

He blinks and looks quizzically at us, but before he can inquire further, the robed man from earlier reappears. “They’re here.”

Skriniaris Evander’s expression tightens; he immediately rises.

His cat follows him as he goes, and after whispering to Olyn that I’ll be right back, I do too.

I caught anxiety in the lines of his eyes and I want to understand— who can cause

Skriniaris Evander to so swiftly stride from a room, and why he's in Hinsard too.

Taffy leaves traces of white fur over the hallways and down a set of narrow stairs, all the way deep into an underground hall. A few lanterns light the way, here and there. Little light, but enough to know this meeting has been anticipated.

I linger a moment, brushing the edge of my mask. I shouldn't be here. If they found me...

The sound of hushed voices hits my ear and curiosity takes over. I follow it to the end of the hall. Massive tapestries decorate the walls, and behind one of these is a partially opened door and a... tunnel?

"Is he in danger?"

"We're still trying to find that out."

"What we do know is, he didn't manage to save her."

The voices are coming from right behind the wall, and I recognise all of them. Something touches my leg and my boots make a scuffing sound as I jerk back from... Taffy's tail.

"Who's there?" barks the heavier voice, and before I can so much take a step back, Commander Thalassios has emerged from the tunnel, his magic choking my throat and pinning my arms to my sides.

Skriniaris Evander follows, and finally the regent's prodigal daughter, still in a mask of her own.

I cough, trying to squeeze out words.

Skriniaris Evander waves a hand, cutting through the commander's hold on me. I fall to the ground, struggling to catch my breath. Wrinkled hands kindly help me to my feet and wary eyes watch me.

I pull at the knot at the back of my head. My feathered mask slips off and dangles from my pinched fingers.

All three suck in a sharp breath.

Evander clasps me by the arms and inspects me. He frowns. "Your meridians..."

I shake my head, and he swallows.

I look at each in turn and focus on Evander. "You need our team to win." My voice strains. "Our king's life depends on it."

I tell them everything and they listen grim faced, then tell me what has happened since the attack at Mount Lysippos.

Skriniaris Evander strokes his cat with a sombre expression.

"After Mount Lysippos, he purged the king's supporters from the military—blocked their meridians, forced them onto the streets.

Half of— that island was slaughtered, the rest scattered across the Fotimos canal camps.

" He pauses, his voice heavy. "They're labourers now. Hidden in plain sight."

"And the prince? Where is he?"

“The king begged Prince Nicostratus to save his mother, to focus on this first.”

Skriniaris Evander adds, “The regent brought her here.”

“Does that mean the prince is coming to Hinsard? His manor is under regent control. It’s all traps. He cannot...”

The three faces before me darken with frowns and worried shadows. My stomach knots. “What happened?”

Princessa Liana speaks quietly, “He was seen being dragged onto a longboat this afternoon.”

I shake my head—I can’t stop.

“The regent has an elite guard around the boat and another five hundred close by. We need to plan extremely carefully.”

The grim set to their lips suggests it won’t be an easy operation.

Skriniaris Evander picks up his cat and strokes her, staring hard into a thought hovering in the middle distance. “The regent... he has a dramatic personality. He likes having an audience.”

Like with his poisoned wyverns during the spring gala.

Or having me serve Quin life-shortening tea during the crowning ceremony.

Or making me choose between a stamp on my soldad and Akilah’s lovelight during an examination—and having it taken from her anyway.

He wants to be feared and revered. He craves to be seen .

“We believe the king’s mother is also being held on that boat.”

“Not just her.” Bastion’s voice travels from half a hall behind me, and I blink hard in surprise. Did he follow me in the shadows, or—

His boots snick as he approaches.

The others acknowledge him like he’s an expected part of the company. He laughs darkly. “There’s a pretty boy I’ve been tailing, and he’s attracting a lot of unwanted attention. Had another stand-off with an assassin outside. ”

I turn.

Bastion’s step hitches and his smile widens. “Husband!”

“Good grief.” I roll my eyes and he snaps me around the waist and whirls me around. I have to bat him off with my mask as he tries to peck kisses on me.

He gives up with a wink and shifts seamlessly from flirt, to vespertine with serious news.

“It’s not just the king’s mother and the prince.

” I recall Florentius staring wistfully towards that longboat and shiver.

“It’s the survivors from the island too.

He’ll free them all... if the royal vitalian team wins the contest.”

I slam my eyes shut. I can picture the faces on board that boat, ones I lived and worked with when I was trapped on the island. Fellow prisoners; comrades. And Florentius's older brother...

He's always yearned to free Lucius. He perfected his vitalian skills and entered the bloodthirsty royal city to save him.

My stomach dives hard through my feet. The regent is playing a game.

I shiver. "We have to save everyone on that boat."

Bastion grimaces. "My men won't be enough."

The commander's jaw twitches. "I have none, not anymore. I have some loyal friends, but... they may think it too risky."

"The prins..." I explain how he's on our side, that he has been protecting the captive king as much as he can, how he is as invested in winning his freedom as I am.

I explain that if... if we do win, we'll have a tough time leaving.

Perhaps the prins' men can help free the longboat and in return they can support our escape.

"Even with his help we might only have a slim chance of saving those on board."

Prince Nicostratus. Casimiria. Lucius . . .

I slam my eyes shut.

I dream vividly that night.

I'm on a cobbled street lined with blossoming trees. Beside one, I spot a carriage and a scarred aklo perched on the driver's seat. In a giddy rush, I stop Quin's aklo from announcing me and dive through the hangings into the plush carriage.

Quin keeps his eyes calmly on the book before him, and I slide along the bench until our knees bump. "Shouldn't you be working, your majesty?"

Without looking up he drawls, "I snuck out to see you."

I laugh and press a finger down on the cover until he looks at me. "If that's the case, what's with this book that you're reading upside down?"

Quin pauses, quietly shuts the book, and sets it aside. Then in a flurry he hauls me onto the bench beside him. He calls for his aklo to head to his dance house. "How are the minions today?" he asks, eyes dancing over me .

"Running a school is exhausting. I love it."

"You're my son's favourite teacher."

"Well, I'm not supposed to admit this, but he's my favourite too." I wag a finger with a caveat. "But if he smuggles Generalus into my lesson again..."

Quin tips his head back with a laugh. "Just be happy he's only smuggling his cat. He wants a pet wyvern."

I shake my head, smirking, and then pause. "He'll have to practice controlling them first. Perhaps a trip to Hinsard?"

Quin taps my growing smile. "You love it there."

“It has our oak. And we can go past Kastoria—”

Quin growls, and mutters, “Vexing vespertine.”

I laugh so hard my stomach hurts. “It’s nice travelling, though. Seeing how happy people are now.”

“Are you happy?” Quin asks softly.

“Let me mull it over.” I fling myself around so my knees are bent and the back of my head is nestled in his lap.

“Only you would use me as a pillow.”

I smile up at him. “Only I’m allowed to use you as a pillow.”

His lips curl as he strokes my hair, and the braid I wore today comes apart ticklishly between his fingers. “Only I’m allowed to do this.”

The whisper has me catching my breath, “Quin...”

His eyes twinkle.

The carriage comes to a violent halt and I slide off Quin’s lap onto the floor. Arrows spear through the carriage, narrowly missing us, and Quin charges out to his aklo, dead by a dozen arrows. Everything moves too fast, while I’m still clawing my way out of the carriage.

We’re surrounded.

Quin tries to use magic—but nothing comes.

His leg buckles.

One of the assassins throws back his hood, and it's King Yngvarr. He swivels my fallen Quin around by his hair, his face trained on me while Quin's beautiful one is begging me to run, to free myself.

"Let him go," I scream but it comes out a gurgle. I can't move. Fear lances up my middle. I need to save him.

I can't.

King Yngvarr unsheathes a sword and it glints in the sun. "I told you. You have to win ." And he moves his blade towards Quin's throat—

"No!"

I wake, bolt upright, sweating.

Blankets pool around my waist. The murals on the walls are dark and strange in the cold silvery dawn seeping into the room.

It's a dream. It's only a dream. Just a dream. Nothing about it was real...

Yet no amount of telling myself this lessens my shivers. I swing out of bed into the chill of the room, and I rummage hurriedly through my things. There.

I pick up my clasp with trembling fingers, crush it into my palm and squeeze it hard. I squeeze until I feel blood. I squeeze until I feel the pounding beat of my fearful heart.

The first trial is today.

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The morning is overcast, the air tense with anticipation. Crowds of spectators line the cobbled streets, cheering the teams as they head to the main square, stopping only when it's our turn to pass. "No pressure or anything," Olyn murmurs, "but I put my entire month's wages on us."

Megaera murmurs, "I did the same on the prins' behalf."

The prins taps a fist to his mouth and clears his throat, glancing pointedly at Megaera.

"How... frivolous," I murmur, with a small, thankful quirk of my lips.

When we round a corner, we come to a sharp halt, narrowly avoid colliding with Team Orange Cloaks. We shift into single file and stiffly share the road, their leader directly across from me.

"Still time," he mutters. "Back out."

"Of our bet? I'd rather not."

"Of the contest! "

He huffs and quickens his team's stride, overtaking us to enter the square.

Crowds cheer upon their arrival, and heckle at ours, and then become a deafening roar as the favourites make their way.

The royal team—all solemn faces and exquisite silver glowing with infused magic.

They glide into the square like ethereal beings. A mesmerising sight indeed.

In total, twelve teams, of mostly four or five members, line up in the square and face the luminarium, bathed in its light.

Darker clouds stretch over the sky in contrast, and the seat at the top of the entrance stairs seems to glow.

I can't stave off a shiver. Megaera and Olyn inch closer either side.

With a rumbling groan, the ornate doors open and out of the luminarium marches a guard of redcloaks followed by the regent.

All in the square bow, and he keeps us prostrated until he is seated, a lavishly dressed figure illuminated on a gilded throne. "Rise."

He waves to the contest orchestrators—including Skriniaris Evander—arrayed at the bottom of the stairs, and one comes forward to commence the first trial.

A dozen stations have been set up in the square, each with five sick people standing on pedestals. We have five minutes to diagnose, and one to gather what we need to treat our patients from a shared stall of apothecary resources.

We hit our first hurdle here: stoves, teapots, cups, but no alchemy pots. No vials. We take the teapots to brew our potions and enough cups to store them .

When we arrive back at our station with our arms full of amenities and life-saving plants, we wait for the bell to ring before we start. The first six teams to raise their flag will move on to the second trial.

"At least there were needles," Olyn murmurs, dabbing a line of sweat at her brow.

“This trial is to assess if we have mastered curing through the acupoints,” I murmur to her.

“All these patients need accurate needling to heal.” That’s why there were needles in the stalls.

Even vitalians will use them, although their needles will be wrapped in healing spells and won’t require the use of force and fingers.

“Acupoints,” Olyn murmurs with a determined gleam in her eye.

I glance between her and Megaera. “I’ll provide the scriptions. You’ll work on those. And after the needles have been dipped in them, I’ll tell Olyn the order of the acupoints, and she’ll deliver the cure.”

Megaera inclines her head and glances at our five patients. “Are you confident you understood their ailments?”

I caught the trick pulse in the last patient. This was not the difficult part; the difficult part is to get the precise scription, to simmer the potions to the perfect consistency and temperature, to needle them into the body at exactly the right points. Difficult is to do this under time pressure.

Sound vibrates around the square as the bells chime, and the teams leap into action.

I race to the first patient, check how long her skin takes to turn from white to pink after a pinch, calculate how long she can stand on one foot, check once more the glaze in her eyes.

I note down the scription to best suit her body and pass it to Megaera, who heeded my instructions to already start heating, chopping, grinding.

She brews the potion in the teapot, and I inspect the second patient more closely.

When I have the right scription for him, I pass it to Megaera and hurry to Olyn. The first needles are dipped into the teacup holding a Megaera's pink potion, and I quietly list the seven acupoints in order. Olyn nods emphatically and breezily administers the cure-tipped needles.

Back and forth, from patient to scription to acupoints.

There's no time for rest, but as I race through the trial, I catch glimpses of flashing light and the sparkles from spells.

I can hear the hollers of the crowd when a patient has dismounted their pedestal.

From this, I can roughly gauge that we're neither the fastest team, nor the slowest. We can make it into the next trial, as long as nothing goes wrong.

Three patients treated. Four.

One to go. One last, somewhat trickier, case.

Two team flags have been raised—

There's a third . . .

"Arcane Sovereign!" Megaera curses and, catching her error, adds a few Skeldar gods to her expletive as I rush to her shattered teapot—and the potion puddling into the ground. "It couldn't withstand the heat. "

With a backdrop of hand-pointing and laughter, Olyn crouches beside me and the sharp shards of teapot.

Carefully, I lift a curved shard that still carries a little fluid and set on the table. One by one, I dip three needle ends into it, and set my lips in a flat line. “It didn’t boil enough to coagulate.”

“What does that mean?”

“If it doesn’t hit the exact centre of his acupoints, it’ll poison him.”

“You mean . . .”

“The patient will be paralysed.”

Olyn sucks in her breath. Two more flags are raised around the square. Only one more team can pass. If it’s not ours, Quin...

I pinch the needles and twirl towards our last patient. The neighbouring team are a burst of vibrant light as they quickly finish stacking their last spell.

“What are you doing?” Olyn says, hurrying to my side.

“I can’t ask you to bear this responsibility.” My stomach is diving out of my feet as I stand before the last pedestal. This is a life I will ruin along with the king’s if I don’t...

“You’re an exceptional healer.” Olyn strikes my acupoints, freezing me in place, and plucks the needles carefully from my fingers. “But I’m still better with needles.”

She doesn’t hesitate. There’s no time to hesitate—the team beside us are driving their magicked needles towards their patient’s lower stomach.

Olyn flings the three needles into our patient —

Megaera gasps—as do I, internally.

Such perfect accuracy.

Even our patient is stunned a full second before he raises our team's flag and leaps off the pedestal.

Bells chime around the square announcing the end of the first trial.

Olyn jabs to free my movements and I growl at her and grab her into a fierce hug.

Even Megaera is laughing joyously. The crowds swarm past us to surround the other teams, lifting them onto their shoulders to parade them.

Even the teams who didn't make the second trial bow with respect to the other five.

Ours, they all ignore. Stormblades surround us, blocking us from a few violent attempts to put us 'in our place'. Only Captain Kjartan, the prins, and Skriniaris Evander give us nods.

"Must've cheated," most murmur, while the more generous shrug. "Luck."

Skriniaris Evander calls for order and when the square is quiet, he and the other orchestrators officially announce the six passing teams. The regent looks over each, with a stiff smile at ours, and rises.

"Prins Lief," he calls with feigned diplomacy, "you'll be happy we've considered non-magic limitations."

Captain Kjartan surges forward to retort, but is held back by the prins' warning look.

I smother the instinct to defend and fold back between Megaera and Olyn.

I don't listen to the rest of the exchange, nor do I pay much attention as the regent and his men leave, or when Team Orange laughingly point out to us how easy that round was.

"The next will be harder, and I hear the third has been designed by the regent himself!"

My hand squeezes my clasp once more, and the pulse I feel is all that matters.

One trial down . . .

When the prins and stormblades have gone, Bastion emerges from the shadows. "Had my heart in my throat back there. You scraped sixth only by a second!"

Olyn pulls out her personal set of needles—withheld along with my medicinal bag until after the trial—and turns a tiny tip in his direction. "What you're saying is I need more practice."

Bastion admits he's an insensitive fool and with a gulp begs her to point it elsewhere.

On a chuckle, we head for dinner—to an upstairs table, where vespertines make sure we're served like any other customer. Bastion hooks his leather-clad forearm on my shoulder, and I skip right past his wagging brows to the patrons seating themselves at the table across from ours.

The royal team, their silver cloaks no longer glowing. Mikros and Makarios, joined at the hip, are teasing one another while Florentius solemnly guides Akilah to a seat beside him. He catches my eye and raises his drink with a polite sip—a quiet congratulations for our team.

I find myself moving to their table.

Mikros and Makarios stop bickering and look towards me with surprise and caution.
“Where’s your fourth team member?” I ask.

Florentius answers, “Resting.”

I settle myself at their table and pour myself wine from their jug. I raise it in a toast, my gaze straying to Akilah and mentally calculating any change since we parted. There’s a small scar beside her ear—vitalian magic should erase it. Why is it there?
“Your team is the talk of the town,” I say.

Florentius raises a brow. “I beg to differ.”

“Your team is all the agreeable talk in town.”

A small frown. “Why are you engaging with us?”

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I look at him and speak quietly. “I want to exchange thoughts about today’s last patient.

It was an interesting case.” I tell him the herbal make-up of the scription we used and note the glimmer of interest in his eyes.

Mikros and Makarios are also listening carefully, but when I’m through my explanation they act unaffected.

“Sure. Your way works.”

“What was your way?” I ask.

Makarios stiffens and wags a finger at me. “You’re just trying to learn from us!”

I reach out and gently lower his finger. “Of course I am.”

“See? Mikros? He admits it!”

“Why wouldn’t I want to learn from outstanding healers?”

“You want to use it against us!”

Florentius calms him with a hand to his shoulder. “This case will not be repeated in upcoming trials.” He looks at me carefully. “Why is sharing knowledge so important to you?”

“Do you not know the story of the old man and his mansion?”

His whole body stiffens for a few beats before his gaze sharpens on mine. Akilah notices with a frown.

Florentius murmurs, “We wouldn’t want our kingdom dying of damp while we each build our own mansions.” He holds my gaze as he rises to his feet. “Follow me. I’ll write our spell out for you.”

We leave our companions gaping after us and I follow Florentius outside and into his carriage.

He stares at me again; presses his lips tightly. He leans forward. “You’re hiding your identity, yet you risk seeking me. Why?”

“I really do want your healing method.”

“The real reason.”

I grip the edges of the bench. “I trust you.”

He waits for me to continue, and I do, my voice breaking. “She’s like a sister to me. My Akilah, right before me, and I can’t...” I swallow thickly. “I have to know... what happened? How is she? Will you continue to look after her?”

“Why don’t you ask me yourself?” Her voice is muffled from outside the carriage but it’s hers, and it’s pained. She whips the fabric back and sets her teary eyes on me. “Why are you hiding from me?”

I pull her inside and into a fierce hold, my fake voice barely a whisper between hiccups.

“It’s dangerous. I wasn’t supposed to..

. I was supposed to leave you alone. I just.

..” I sniff into her shoulder as Florentius watches us silently, various emotions creasing his flawless face.

Things are weighing heavy on his shoulders—this contest, his brother held hostage, Akilah here in the midst of all the danger, my sudden appearance in the company of Skeldars.

And he’s noticed my lack of functioning meridians.

He wants to know what’s happened to me as badly as I want to know what’s happened to them.

Now’s not the time or place, though. I tell them where and when to meet later, but when later comes around the only one to meet me in the darkening woods is a pale Akilah.

“The regent’s detained him,” she tells me. “He keeps applying more pressure to ensure a win in this contest.”

“Pressure like holding lives above his head?”

“The regent has promised their freedom, if . . . And if not, he’s vowed to . . .”

“There’s more pressure to apply than this ?” I slam a hand on the trunk of the nearest tree.

Akilah’s voice cracks. “If there is, I’m afraid he’ll use it.”

Splinters dig under my skin where I crush the bark.

She speaks quietly. “He has to win, Cael. He must .”

I take my frustration, alone, to the library.

Skriniaris Evander seems to be waiting for me—he pours tea and gestures towards a seat at his chosen table.

Taffy prowls between our ankles and chair legs and in the light of the single lantern beside us, her shadow flickers, enormous.

“The regent grew up a paper tiger, yet now his shadow looms over all of us.”

“When a paper tiger gets set alight too many times, it must become a real one.”

“How can you still sympathise with him?”

“Sympathising and condoning are vastly different.”

My teeth ache from gritting all afternoon. “Have you made a plan to save those on the longboat?”

“Trust me, we’re working on it. But if we’re aiming to save all on board, we can’t attempt anything until you’ve completed your third trial.”

“That’s too late, they’ll be killed the moment the royal team loses.”

“We can’t set them free beforehand or risk upending the contest—with far greater consequences.”

I know this too. “We have to free them during the third trial, while the regent is watching.”

Skriniaris Evander emphasises the princessa and commander’s assessment of the risk. To win the contest at all will be a mighty challenge; to also save the hostages... it seems like I’d be asking a lot, even of the Arcane Sovereign.

“Then I’ll pray to all the Skeldar gods!”

“Nice to hear your enthusiasm for our gods,” Prins Lief says, stepping into the room alongside Captain Kjartan. “But it’s not the gods who will be risking their lives.”

“We need all our men to aid your retreat,” Kjartan says bluntly.

“Then, if we’re to win this contest, I’m condemning a boat full of people.” My stomach lurches into my throat and it’s sickening to swallow. “How am I supposed to perform with this on my shoulders?”

The prins grimaces, but Kjartan looks sternly ahead, unmoved.

“Please,” I say. “You must join hands and save them.”

“They’re a boat full of people I don’t know.”

“Should one not help a boat full of strangers?”

Kjartan stiffens and his chest rises as he lowers his dark gaze to mine.

His flickers as he stares at me. Perhaps he recalls his own men, his stormblade family, saved from burning at sea.

Helped by a stranger. Slowly he raises a fist to his leather breastplate.

“If our Prins agrees, you have my pledge to help.”

I swivel my gaze to the prins.

His jaw flexes and he stares at the painted ceiling. When he looks at me again, it's with a glint in his eye that says I'm trouble indeed. “This may not save everyone.”

As long it saves enough people . . .

There's guilt and wrong in all directions. This way at least... holds the brightest light at the end of the tunnel?

I clutch the clasp at my belt as the six remaining teams gather in the woods for the next trial.

We're escorted to a circular clearing, banked on one side by dark rocky cliffs with two even darker cave mouths that seem to breathe icy air over us.

On the other side of the clearing there's sunshine, and, bathing in it surrounded by redcloaks and the contest orchestrators, the regent.

Beyond him, on an overhanging branch with a good view, sits Akilah, watching us intently, her gaze seemingly swinging from me to Florentius.

My eyes pull away from her to the rising regent, who welcomes all to the second trial, promising the crowd it will be a treat, “...full of poison and peril! Only true healing masters will be able to both save and survive. Let us begin the separation of the sharp from the weak.”

Six orchestrators come into the clearing and station themselves before a team, each bringing a patient. I glance wistfully at Team Orange, who have Skriniares Evander as their judge, but recall his words. He must not rouse the regent's suspicion.

He glances briefly our way though, and inclines his head. Then he announces the rules of this trial.

We're told that our patients were wandering these caves when they suddenly fell ill. We're to determine the cause, and administer the appropriate treatment. This time, from the table, each team is allowed to pick only one item .

"The first three teams to complete the trial successfully will go forward."

Handheld bells are lifted into the air and rung to commence the race.

Unlike the others, who first head for the table, I check our patient's pulse and body and ask questions to determine their state of mind and form a history of their illness.

Our patient is delirious, hallucinating; I get Olyn to immobilise him for his safety.

"We're three," I murmur. "One must stay at all times with the patient, to monitor and to measure the time between changes. Olyn—" I glance at her, and she nods "—massage any acupoint that will help relieve his pain." I look at Megaera.

"Go to the table and find us something we can use for light in the cave."

She runs off and Olyn helps me position our patient on his side, using her cloak to pillow his head.

Megaera returns with a fire-starter wedged inside her belt.

I rise. “We need to find the plant that poisoned him.”

Megaera starts for the caves and I snatch her arm, gently pulling her back, shaking my head. “We need to prepare.”

Her gaze sweeps over the other teams; all but the royal team are racing towards the caves. I look over and Florentius catches my gaze. We both know what kinds of plants and animals may lie in wait in these caves, and we both know the importance of protecting ourselves first and foremost.

To murmurings in the crowd, our two teams don’t run to the caves but turn into the woods. “What are you doing?” Prins Lief hisses as I push past our attending stormblades.

“Trying to win this.”

I scramble to collect useful plants, and have Megaera grind them into powders and pastes that we store between waxy leaves or in our emptied pouches. Our handkerchiefs I use to tie around our mouths and noses, and after finding cane-like sticks, we race for the caves.

The royal team are about to enter the left cave mouth when we arrive; they glance at us as they enter. Megaera and I careen into the other cave. Icy air instantly curls around us like rope and drags us deeper inside. Megaera takes the fire-starter from her belt and blows on it.

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A small flame bursts to life and she looks over it at me.

Her hand snaps out and flicks something off my shoulder.

I follow the soft thud to a venomous blue-backed spider scurrying away.

Megaera moves calmly past a larger web of nesting blue-backs and I follow, reminded that she's always been adept at handling poisons, not only in the cheeky way she uses them on Lykos, but earlier.

When she was betrothed to me. When she studied them in her pursuit to save her father.

"He has symptoms of magentapuff poisoning," I murmur.

"Mmm. His nails were turning green."

"You've used magentapuff before?"

She shakes her head. "Only read about it. It's rare, and dangerous. We can't touch its petals or breathe in its puff. "

"The antidote is in its nectar."

She nods with a grimace. We'll have to get close.

"That's not the only hard part," I murmur.

“You’re expecting silversnakes.”

I’m impressed. “How do you know?”

She opens the string on the pouch carrying knockout powder and pinches some. “There are two behind you.”

She tosses a small cloud at my heels and I swivel to see two raised and ready-to-strike snake heads flop to the ground.

A shrill cry echoes around the cave walls, the source sounding close.

I pinch some knockout powder and use it through a nest of silversnakes to get round a darker, moister corner of the cave.

There, groaning against a slick mud wall, is a young man in an orange cloak; his leader crouches over him, training magic into his veins.

I spy the snake bite and the swelling and inhale the sharp tang of the spell.

I rush forward, grabbing one set of our waxy leaves.

“You need serpentiswort. It’ll keep the venom from spreading. ”

Sweating under the intensity of his spell, he grunts.

I rip at the young man’s leggings, exposing the severity of the wound. It’s already turning. I peel open a leaf and slather minced serpentiswort over his wound, tying it in place with shredded orange fabric. “Get him to safety. Where’s the rest of your team?”

“Getting the antidote,” he hisses.

He finishes his spell and buckles forward, bracing against his knees as he catches his breath .

The young man whimpers. “Whatever’s on this leaf, it’s—” he stops himself. “Help me up. I can get myself back to the patient.”

His leader growls as he carefully aids his friend. “ I’ll get you there.” Narrowed eyes land on me. “This doesn’t change anything.”

Only the way I see you. Loyal to your friends.

They hobble away, their flapping orange cloaks a beacon in the dark.

Megaera and I continue deeper into the cave.

There are lots of tunnelling passages and at each turn we take a rock, blacken it with our flame, and mark our direction.

The musical sound of dripping water has me racing around a few lefts.

Our plant thrives on the dark and water—

I stumble over a root and catch myself on crumbly rock. “Careful, Megaera, there’s—”

I gasp. It wasn’t a root. It’s someone’s arm. I hold our small flame closer. Four unconscious bodies. I take their pulses. “Megaera...”

She passes me the salve and I swipe some under each of their noses. We find

handkerchiefs to protect them from breathing in any more of the spores, then I push to my feet and we round a corner into a spacious cavern.

My step hitches. The ceiling rises far above, as high as a grand luminarium; from its centre, a shaft of sunlight streams into the middle of a dark lake, water droplets big and small falling around it.

The rest of the cavern is covered in blooming vines, the sparkling light of their pollen dancing between petals—like walls with a million floating candles.

“Mesmerising,” Megaera murmurs and I halt her before she dreamily reaches for one of the flowers.

“Puffers grow under them. That’s how people get poisoned.”

Movement across the cavern has us looking over to the royal team, their faces also covered, entering from the opposite side. A third and fourth team join us from other entrances.

All three teams immediately send spells to retrieve the lifesaving nectar, and my stomach dives to my feet. “Megaera, hold the flame up to the vine—”

Before she can lift the fire starter, a shriek echoes around the cavern.

Someone has disturbed the vine—all those hidden flowers are bursting into puff, triggering those nearby to puff too.

Clouds of dusty poison smother the two teams by the far wall, and the cloud is swiftly moving towards the royal team—and us.

Florentius instinctively throws a bubble shield around himself and his team and I see

relieved shoulders sagging against the shield as puff passes over them without effect.

We can't conjure such a shield. Our masks might be good against spores but will be useless against this.

If it touches our skin or we breathe it in, our limbs will become sluggish.

Movement will become painful, our minds will blur, and our hands will shake.

We might make it back to the clearing, but it'll damage our chances of completing the trial .

I knock the fire starter to the ground. "Hold your breath!"

I shove Megaera into the lake and jump in after her.

Cold water rushes around us, colder than the first icy breath of the cave, the type of cold that stings and numbs your mind.

It's dark under the water, too dark to see Megaera, but her cloak tangles around my arm and I'm pulling it down.

To make sure she stays under long enough. ..

How long until the puff settles? A minute?

My heartbeat is loud in my ears; it feels like it vibrates in the water around us. It's so cold, and then... then it's not. My limbs warm like I'm sinking into a cozy sleep. My eyelids are heavy.

I hear Quin's voice telling me to look at him and I frantically turn, searching through

the darkness until—there, light. Quin. He glides towards me, his face so frustratingly beautiful I start choking. He keeps closing the distance, this time with his lip curling. “Let me help you.”

He hauls me against his chest and his mouth descends upon mine with a flood of warmth and air—

“Cael! Wake up!”

A startling slap has me ping-ponging my eyes open to a twinkling cavern and Megaera’s looming face.

I scramble into a sitting position, catching my breath, steadying my damn heart. “What just happened?”

I’m not talking about nearly drowning. “Dragged you out with me,” Megaera says. “Lucky you were caught in my cloak.”

I scan the cavern. We’re alone.

I slam my eyes shut, my wet clothes heavy and cold against my skin. Even my loosened hair adds pressure to my shoulders. The silence feels poignant, even the dripping from earlier has momentarily ceased.

I’ve overestimated myself. I’ve wished too hard. Yearning to win, to free him... it’s not enough. We’re an outcast non-magic team up against the most refined magical healers. Young vitalians who have grown up studying just to pursue this contest.

There’s always been little chance. I’ve been a fool to hope otherwise.

I drop back, hitting the floor of the cave with an agonised whimper. It won’t just be

us who pay the price. Quin's life hangs in the balance, as do the lives of those on the longboat. Failure isn't an option. But right now, it feels inevitable.

I've lost this.

I've killed my . . . king.

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A nother stinging slap meets my cheek. I startle upright and blink up at Megaera, who bites out fiercely, “The surest way to lose is to give up.”

I touch my cheek with a pained wince, and when she pulls a hand back to slap me again, I spring up like the sting has given me clarity, has knotted my stomach into steely resolve.

It’s something Quin would have done, if he were here. I can see him now, a storm in his eyes as he asks me savagely if that’s all I’ve got. I feel a surge of anger, a need to show him; to prove myself to him.

He’d goad me, and I’d rise to it.

I’ll fight to the end. I’ll fight until it kills me.

I scramble to the vines, whip out my clasp and use the sharpest point to scratch our life-saving nectar into a hollowed rock. It’s an intricate task; a lot could go wrong, but my teeth are clenched with a determination that simply won’t let that happen.

We slap on our soggy feather masks and race back through the caves into the harsher light of the clearing.

Four of the teams have arrived. The royal team and the Orange Cloaks are swirling with autumn-coloured magic as they spell the antidote, while the other two teams are crawling to their patients, suffering under the effects of the puff.

For one of those teams, the poison clogging their meridians makes using their magic

impossible.

The other team at least left a person behind with their patient, someone whose meridians are still intact.

But they only absorbed the pollen in the cave, didn't bring any nectar back; they need to use an extraction spell, which would tire the one magic wielder, before they can work on the antidote—or, they have to go back into the caves. ..

I sink to my knees at our patient's side and check his pulse, asking Olyn to give me her calculations. She tells me how long between bouts of seizures and I call out measurements to Megaera, who gets to work grinding the herbs we picked up earlier and the key nectar.

Two flags are raised—onlookers cheer for the royal team and the orange one. The teams next to me are yelling out solutions. The team who've lost throw a sachet to the sole magic wielder in the team that still has a chance.

I don't look over. I don't let the glow of magic distract me. My vision tunnels to my patient and his consumption of our antidote. He chokes on the bitterness but swallows, and Megaera and Olyn hold their breath as I keep two fingers at his pulse, waiting for the change.. .

I focus on the rhythmic beat of blood under my fingers becoming slower, smoother, silky—

“Judge!” I call, and our shocked orchestrator stumbles to our patient. His face pales.

“He's cured,” I say.

“How could he be...” the judge looks at me strangely, like his own magic has to be

failing him when he checks.

The next team call for a judge, and my heart rams against my chest. “Your flag. Raise your flag.”

“But . . . but . . . you don’t have magic.”

I stare hard into his puzzled gaze. “This trial of itself is the reason why you should not be shocked. Poisons and perils. Save and survive. The sharp and the weak.... With the peril of being poisoned, vitalians may have their meridians temporarily damaged. To survive, they have to find other ways. Healing methods like ours. You are a healer. Judge from your heart.”

He stares at me and slowly his disbelief morphs into respect. Just as the neighbouring judge grabs his flag, ours shoots his arm into the air, golden fabric flapping smartly.

I sink onto my haunches, murmuring over and over my gratitude to the world for this narrow win.

My enthusiasm is not shared by many. Megaera and Olyn, the prins, Kjartan, the stormblades.

The rest—the surrounding teams and the crowds between the trees—are silent.

The kind of silent that tries to smother overwhelming mortification.

The kind of silent that precedes a storm of anger, frustration, retaliation .

I dare to glance at the regent and my nape prickles. He’s staring right at us, one hand drumming the arm of his throne.

The sixth team—the team that had been rendered unconscious by fungi spores—emerge from the caves, their mouths and noses still covered. They bow to the remaining teams, graciously accepting their loss. “Thank you to whoever aided us. Only true healers would stop in a race to help the helpless.”

Teams look at one another, and I hold Megaera tight with a quiet shake of my head.

Under the eyes of the regent, it’ll only add fuel to the fury.

Florentius, not far from me, catches my eye and I feign a clumsy fall in his direction, tossing a pouch to his feet.

He bends to pick it up as I gather myself and murmur under my breath.

“There’s more nectar in there. Make a show of it. ”

His intelligent eyes hit mine; he rises and pulls his team with him in a dramatic display of saving the last suffering patients—and curing the members of the failed teams.

The sixth team assume the royal vitalians are their heroes too, and again bow to them. Whispers of how gallant, gracious, and generous the royal team is sweep through the crowds until they’re chanting. Medicinal and moral winners. The clear favourites.

The regent is placated by this show of enthusiasm for his chosen team and announces—to the shock of the orchestrators—that he himself will design the third and final trial, and that it’ll be more difficult than any that has come before.

“An impossible challenge, if you will.” His gaze cuts to mine and he adds, with a sudden soft smile that makes me shiver, “But as a token to our guest team, I’ll give it a Skeldar twist.”

When the regent is gone, the crowds drift in, trying to get the attention of the royal team. The orange team is also well admired, and I'm relieved that their leader is at least occupied by this. I'm too tired for another round of folly.

Prins Lief and his crew march away, and I catch a walnut zooming towards my face. I follow the path it took and find a dark eyed, devilish shadow in the treetops. I throw the nut back to the smirking vespertine with a murmur that I know Bastion will hear. "Shell it for me first."

I hear his quiet chuckle on a breeze and move across the clearing to Akilah dropping off her leafy perch. "Meet me tonight," I whisper as I pass her.

There's a chill bite to the woods once the sun has sunk.

Inky black has taken over the skies. My lantern swings on its stick, illuminating a small circle of shivering trees, and there—Akilah, huddled into a thick cloak, tucked on a branch of a sprawling chestnut with her own lantern between her feet.

I climb past her and up to higher branches; she silently follows until we emerge to a vast view of the starry night. We used to do this growing up, in trees or on rooftops. Stargazing, quietly being with one another, letting the worries of the world fall away.

"I missed you," she says croakily.

My heart aches and I can only nod. It's the same for me.

She sighs heavily, breath fogging towards the sky. "You left me on that island." I tense, waiting for more. Expecting it. "I looked at you and you looked away. That's the last I saw of you."

I close my eyes on the stars.

“How could you . . .”

The words hang in the cold air and I shiver to the bone.

“Say something,” she chokes.

My sigh comes out quiet, tired, heavy.

She sniffs.

I swallow and look over at her. “I was afraid.”

“You weren’t the only one.”

I’ll have to hold this guilt forever. I left her to experience the wrath of the regent, the violent loss of her newest friend; I left her to suffer through my sudden demise.

An apology feels too paltry. I rip off a bunch of leaves and squeeze them until juice trickles down my wrist. “I’ll live the rest of my life making it up to you.”

“Promise me.” Her gaze meets mine and her words shatter my heart. “Give up in the third trial. Make sure Florentius wins.”

I slam my eyes shut and shake my head, pleading with sorrys, with the promise I’d do anything else.

But when I reopen them, she’s gone. The stars have dulled above; clouds cover the moon, and the forest beneath me is swelling like a heavy sea.

I climb down the tree, slipping and sliding and scratching myself.

My world feels like it's cracking open and I'm being dragged into an abyss.

I have to fix things with Akilah, somehow—

A gravelly male voice has me swinging around with my lantern. Florentius emerges from behind a trunk. I wonder how long he's been there, and know deep inside he's been there long enough.

Our gazes meet and I plead with him. "We have a plan to save them."

"Your plan may backfire. My plan, all prisoners walk free."

"Winning isn't only about proving a point about non-linear healing—"

"Our king is a captive, trapped in Iskaldir," Florentius says bluntly, "I know."

"Then you must understand!"

"Our king has done nothing for me. I owe him nothing. Lucius is my life."

I shake my head sadly and Florentius's eyes flash with frustration. "When will you learn? You can't do everything. You can't save everyone. You're full of lofty ideals but that is not our reality!"

He steps forward with a rush of emotion and I brace myself against it.

"Our reality is messy," he bites out. "It's grey."

We all have to make choices: who lives, who dies.

The regent, the king, you, me—we're all just fighting to be the one who decides.

” He steps in again, and this time my balance falters and I stumble back.

His eyes fill with glassy tears. “I’ll always choose Lucius. I’ll always choose my brother.”

The knot in my throat thickens. “I’m choosing the poor, the non-linea, women... I’m choosing the bigger picture.”

He storms off, laughing, and it echoes ominously around the trees, hitting me over and over. “Don’t fool yourself.”

Trees swallow his elegant form until I’m left alone with my flickering lantern.

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When it goes out, a rush of movement comes from the neighbouring tree, and I spy Bastion's silhouette as he uses his whip and swings to land with quiet thud before me. "Need a hug?"

He tosses it out with a purposefully distracting leer, and I stare at him until his opened arms start falling.

Then I'm tripping over the yard between us, throwing my arms around his neck and dropping my throbbing head on his shoulder.

His breath hitches with surprise and he slowly lifts his hands to pat my back against a silent sob.

A spring breeze ruffles over us with the scent of impending rain; I'm still holding Bastion when the first drops hit.

"Holding one another in the rain," he says, patting hands becoming roaming ones. "How romant—"

"Don't push your luck."

He laughs and we pull apart, and I'm grateful for his company as I drag myself back to town.

In the morning, we go over our 'retreat plan' in a corner of the manor where we're sure the regent's spies will overhear.

The real plan, we formulated the night before in the library: We—the Skeldar envoy and the prisoners on the longboat—must make it to the vespertine tunnel, the entrance to which is hidden down the narrow, western arm of the canal.

Not only must we all make it there, we must make it there without being followed.

Only then can we get out of Hinsard undetected, and part ways in the southern woods.

Our chances aren't good.

We must try anyway.

Out in the streets, making our way to the third and final trial, the prins catches my elbow.

His face is tight with concern. A lot is riding on my performance today. That Lindrhalda's touch will win the contest, and with the win, my chance of survival, and with my survival, his chance of a life with my aunt.

I look down at his gripping hand and past it to the ever-ticklish braids spiralling under my sleeves. I laugh out an ache. Everything rides on today. I snatch his arm back and pierce his gaze with my desperate one.

His jaw tightens in determination and we enter an alley where we meet Bastion.

Quickly and silently, his men and ours exchange clothing, and when we emerge into the next street, I'm walking beside Bastion in the prins' gear.

We're four in feathered masks, with two token 'stormblades', and when we get to the square Megaera, Olyn and I leave them in the crowd to take our place.

Like the first trial, today's is held in front of the luminarium and the enthroned regent. And like then, the day is overcast.

But this time there's only one stage positioned at the base of the steps, and it's equipped with a stretcher, furnace, pots and teapots, and an entire apothecary of plants, seeds, and collected venoms.

A glance at a grim-faced Skriniaris Evander reminds me again: the regent has replaced the trial the orchestrators originally planned with one of his own design. It will not be a fair trial.

The favourite team glides into the square in their glowing cloaks and the people roar with delight. Team Orange on their other side look as though they've begrudgingly accepted they're unlikely to come first, but their arrogant gazes are sharp: they don't intend to lose to us .

My gaze washes over the show to Florentius, and my pulse hitches. Despite his dazzling cloak, he's shrouded in shadow, his expression sickened. When he catches me looking, he stares at me hard and mouths something—

My stomach twists. "What—"

But there's no time. The regent is rising; the square is a wave, bowing down to him .

With a wicked gleam in his eye, he announces the third and final trial. "I promised you all insurmountable difficulty. Each team will come onto this stage in turn, and will have one hour to revive a comatose patient."

The regent sweeps his gaze across the crowd, landing for a few moments longer on our team. His lip curls and he removes a pouch from his belt, brandishing it for all to see. "All three patients have lost their souls in this Skeldar dromveske."

There's a collective gasp. Even Florentius pales. A patient in this kind of coma... no vitalian has ever succeeded in waking them.

When one of the orchestrators kneels to protest, the regent dances down the steps and helps him to his feet.

“Of course, I don't expect any one of you to perform a miracle!

” He throws the dromveske onto one of the worktops on stage.

This time his gaze shifts pointedly to Florentius.

“Your trial will assess the quality of your attempts. Technique and overall patient improvement—every twitch counts!” He gestures towards Skriniaris Evander, at a board to one side. “Our judge will keep a tally.”

Each team draws a straw—orange pulls first, our team last.

Team Orange is given a two-point advantage, and the royal team, one point. This is to consider the advantage of the watching teams.

“There's no advantage to us,” Olyn murmurs. “We can't use magic! ”

I purse my lips. The regent took control of this trial to assure our defeat. This play of fairness is just that: an act.

Team Orange step onto the stage, and when they're presented with their comatose patient, their leader cries out and clutches the almost-lifeless body into a hug. He jerks his head towards the regent, croaking, “What's the meaning of this?”

The regent merely smiles and motions for the hourglass to be flipped. “Motivation.”

Bile lurches up my throat as I look from the little girl prone on the stretcher to Florentius and his clenched fists. He's taken her.

I whip around, scanning the crowd, desperate to see Akilah waiting there, watching...

When I don't see her face, I snap to Florentius; he conjures a shield to stop me getting any closer and I'm thrown back into Megaera and Olyn's catching arms. "Who will you choose?" he says. "Your sister or your king?"

I can barely breathe. Megaera and Olyn hold me tightly, taking my sagging weight, as Team Orange try to revive the little girl.

Attempt after attempt, to no avail. When the bell chimes the hour, they have to be dragged off the stage and held in place by sentinian spells.

The team gathers around their leader, trying to console him, but he crumples to his knees.

The little girl is moved off the stage, and though I know it's coming, it's still a punch to my guts when Akilah's brought out .

I push out of Megaera and Olyn's arms and stagger to Florentius and his team moving swiftly to her side.

"Use the dromveske," I croak. "Maybe there's a way. If you enter the—"

Florentius is a mighty snap of his cloak when he spins to me. "That's why she's in a coma to begin with. Do you want us all to end up dead?" He blasts me back to my place and Skriniaris Evander reluctantly sets two redcloaks on our team to ensure I don't meddle.

The regent has his eyes narrowed on us and it takes all my strength to stand straight, not to give away my anxiety—and with that my true identity. Akilah's sworn brother; the 'executed' royal vitalian; the king's man.

I whisper into Megaera's ear. "Nod. Make it seem like I'm discussing ideas with you."

I say the same to Olyn.

They huddle around me, nodding and whispering as if we're plotting tactics, so my intense looks at the stage are misinterpreted—

I gasp. Akilah's arm just twitched.

My gaze pings around the four-person vitalian team.

One is preparing teas; Mikros and Makarios are drawing out blood, funnelling it through spells, and pouring it back in again; and Florentius is stepping back as he abruptly finishes a mind-revitalising spell.

He immediately downs tea and stacks another.

All eyes are riveted on him. Older vitalians are sucking in mesmerised breaths. There are astonished whispers. An elder scholar shakily points his finger .

Clever, very clever. To use dragonbane in that way.

He's using such a complex spell—the hardest known spell to stack! Only ever achieved once, by Sacran Kyrillos himself!

We're watching a miracle here.

He's doing it with such grace.

With grave concentration, Florentius perfects the spell as the crowds hold their breath and then burst into cheers and applause.

Just completion of this spell is enough for Florentius to be written into lore.

The judges tallying on the board don't even know how to rate such skill and genius.

It's clear in all their minds—even if Akilah never wakes, he's achieved something.

Chiron beholds his son with relief and the regent claps proudly, throwing the father a nod that suggests perhaps the royal team had an advantage.

In fact, that must be the case. The regent wishes to ride on the coattails of this historical feat; he's pressured Florentius in every possible manner.

He'll have made sure Florentius has the winning edge while ensuring, through this impossible-to-cure coma, that all other finalists have no conceivable chance.

In rush of rainbowed threads, Florentius trains his spell into Akilah's chest. The spell is strong and he shakes, fighting to keep it steady. Sweat dribbles down his temples. Regardless of any advantage he's been manipulated into taking, this is an incredible operation.

My stomach clenches. An unbeatable one?

Akilah stirs and her eyes flutter open. The crowd is silent for a moment, astonished .

Even Orange are beholding Florentius with hope. If this works, if he truly can bring his patient back to life, could he save the others?

With a final push, Florentius forces in the remaining spell and falls to his knees, holding Akilah's hand in both of his as he calls her name with a plea to please, please wake up. I'm silently chanting the same, even as I fear what comes next.

As the hourglass trickles its last traces of sand, my heart bangs hard against my ribs and I push forward out of Megaera and Olyn's supportive arms. A wall of redcloaks shoots up before me. I press against it in overwhelming, sickening relief. Akilah. She's moving. She's sitting up!

The redcloaks finally notice the happenings on stage and the absolute silence that has taken over the courtyard.

For a few moments, only the sound of a pigeon squawking can be heard, and then the skies alight in a fireworks of bursting magic, brighter than the luminarium dome.

The royal team have done it. They've brought their patient back to life.

Florentius grabs Akilah into a hug while the crowds scream the contest has been well and truly won. The regent beams and booms to the orchestrators to make it official.

My stomach roils at his words, but even more when I see Florentius pull back from his hug with a worried frown.

Amongst a celebratory crowd, he's checking her pulse again and swallowing thickly.

He slings an arm around her and she rises, lets him lead her off the stage, but as they pass by I see the glazed look in her eye.

She's moving, but she's not there. She's a mere puppet, without a soul.

While the redcloaks are distracted, I scramble past them and onto the stage, Olyn and

Megaera rushing to follow me. The regent snaps his head our way and pauses. “You can’t possibly think you can beat that.”

He waves a hand to dismiss us, but I refuse to budge.

His eyes narrow.

I quickly bow. “Please.”

After a long stretch of silence, Skriniaris Evander speaks.

“Your highness, this contest has always prided itself on being a challenging but fair competition. While admittedly there is extremely little chance of surpassing the feat we just witnessed, perhaps it does no harm to allow the third team a chance?”

The crowds look on, shaking their heads, laughing.

Why humiliate themselves?

It’s these murmurings that have the regent drumming his fingers thoughtfully on the arm of his throne. With a smug smile, he raises his hands to silence the onlookers. “Indeed, the contest is known for the impartiality of its trials. Let this last team have their turn.”

I feign a thankful smile and say, “In the case we revive our patient, how will we determine the overall winner?”

The square fills with snorting, mocking laughter.

The regent is cackling too. A non-magic team really insists on competing against this spectacular display? He clears his throat. “The only way you could win is if you

revive two patients within the hour!”

The crowds snicker and snort, and I haul in a deep breath. “Do I have your highness’ word on that?”

“Everyone here can attest to my word. Shall you revive two patients, not only will you win the Medicus Contest, I’ll bow down to you!”

“Just the win will do. May I request we heal the little girl?”

The regent flicks out a commanding hand and the orchestrators bring back the orange team’s patient and set her on the stage. Following this, they bring out ours.

Casimiria, her limp hand flopping over the edge of the stretcher.

I force myself not to make a sound, not to so much as squeeze my fists.

The regent says, “I’m sure your king would be on the edge of his throne if he were here.”

He means Yngvarr—his childhood beloved, almost lifeless on stage. But my king would be beyond distraught.

I whirl around to the counter where the dromveske sits and lift it before the regent. “I’ll go inside.” I have to bring her back. I have to bring all of their souls back.

For a beat, I feel the weight of everything at stake pressing against me—Quin’s life, Akilah’s soul, Casimiria’s survival, the longboat prisoners’ freedom.

If I fail here, it won’t just be me who pays the price.

It will be all of them. Everyone. Failure isn't an option.

And yet, staring into the regent's dark, gleaming eyes, it feels unavoidable .

The regent leans forward, his dark gaze boring into me.

His smile is savage. "No one but myself has come back from my dromveske." He rises, moves to the large hourglass, and turns it himself.

From inside his cloak, he produces a stick of chalk that he throws to me.

I catch it as the regent addresses the crowd.

"Best none of you fall asleep. My memories could suck in the souls of the entire square."

Sharp gasps. Mothers jostle their babes awake, and fathers shake their bored boys.

Olyn and Megaera grip my shoulders and murmur I must find a different way.

"They're wounded inside, or lost. I have to heal their souls. To do that, I need to reach them."

"You'll lose yourself if you go in there!"

My hand hurts where I've instinctively clutched my clasp. "I'll be just as lost if I don't."

I give Megaera a scription that nourishes the body, tell Olyn to needle all stimulus points, and inhale a quickly ground sleeping drug.

I curl up on the stage floor, chalk the dromveske, and to the sound of incredulous laughter, fall asleep.

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S hivers lurch up my middle as I fall through darkness and crash against a hard floor. I blink, and the inside of the regent's dromveske takes form. I'm on shiny marble. Beside me is a purplish reflected glow—

I jerk my head up to an illuminated violet oak, sitting magnificently under an impressive stained-glass dome. I recognise the circular hall with its mosaic pillars and frescoed walls. This is the royal city's luminarium.

I push up achily to my knees and frown at the scent hitting my nose. The luminarium should be filled with the spicy scents of incense, not—I cough and hurriedly slap a handkerchief over my nose—

“Not another one,” comes a grim voice from behind me and I spin on my knees into a ring of descending smoke. Through the clear centre I see a scruffy face puffing on a pipe. I startle into a baffled laugh and rise. “Lucius!”

Lucius rips the pipe out of his mouth. “Caelus?”

“There's not much time. What are you doing here?”

“We're all in here. ”

“All?”

He moves sharply toward the back of the luminarium and I follow, to the uneasy sight of all the islanders lying unconscious around the walls, their feet pointing towards the violet oak and their heads resting on... luminist robes?

I catch sight of Akilah and beside her the little girl. They too look lifeless, pale with the faintest green sheen at their throats... If their souls are like this, they'll never return... I grab Akilah's wrist and read her slow, sluggish pulse. "Siren poisoning?"

Lucius sighs. "We all fell inside at once. I recognised the scent of poison coming from the incense burners and covered my nose. Prince Nicostratus was the only other to stop inhaling in time. The rest collapsed within moments, even though the prince flew up there and smothered the source. Good you covered up; it still lingers."

"Where is he now?" I say, alertly scanning all the bodies. I bolt to my feet. "Where's Casimiria?"

"She was put in here days before the rest of us. One thing I can tell you, this dromveske has been made specifically for her. Her name is inscribed into each rune door. Which one she's now behind—or stuck in—I don't know. But the prince tried going after her."

I frown and glance again at Akilah and the little girl. "You've been giving them serpentweed. To keep them alive."

"Luckily the regent's mind is detailed. There are luminist teas and scented sacks in storage. "

Enough to find the herbs to keep the souls from withering to nothing, but not enough to bring them to life. "We need lullaby ash and nightshade essence." I say and he agrees in surprise. "But to find them..."

I look down at the attire my soul clad me in this time. It's the same as when I entered the dromveske with Quin. All things he's given me, but no pouch of life-saving potions—I suppose that would've been too convenient.

I grimace. “I need to find Casimiria and the prince. I’ll search for the plants.”

Lucius guides me down a set of spiralling stairs that start behind the violet oak and end in the middle of a damp underground platform.

The platform is ringed on the outside by canal water and tunnels, and on the inside by a dozen rune doors.

Lantern light strung down the spiralling staircase casts a cold glow over them, and shines on another door tucked under the last round of stairs—the rune patterns. .. this door is the way out.

“You could have left this place,” I murmur.

“I’m a healer. I will save every life in here before my own.”

I swallow and my eyes prickle. “I used to think you were negligent. I remember my abhorrence at those fake spells.” I look at him and the pipe puff that barely masks his worried frown. “You taught me so much. If it weren’t for you, countless lives would be lost.”

I bow and he hurriedly stops me, his hand on my arm trembling subtly .

“I see why you mean the world to your brother,” I say, and... “He certainly takes after you.”

Around his pipe, he sighs fondly. “Little Florentius. It’d be nice to see him again.”

I ball my fist and stride across the damp platform to a dark blue door with golden symbols carved around the stone frame. With one emphatic nod at Lucius, I push open the door and enter... the luminarium all over again.

I'm standing before the violet oak, a slightly smaller version of it, and from beyond it comes a small sob.

Through gaps between branches, I spy two youths. A gangly boy in rich clothing, sniffing into his bent knees, and another with tight reddish-brown curls, who is approaching cautiously, his head cocked. "Boy," he murmurs. "Why are you crying?"

The boy lifts his head and I see the sharp angles of Prince Valerian Aetherion—thinner and smooth faced, and not even fifteen years old. He slaps away his tears. "What are you looking at?"

The redheaded youth cups his hands, hiding something as his fingers begin to glitter with seeping magic. "Want to see something special?" Slowly, he parts his hands. A silver bud floats upwards and blossoms into a brilliant flower.

He waves his hand and the blossom sweeps to Valerian, who prods at the stem curiously only to have his finger sweep through glittery magic.

The prince tries to grab the blossom but it lifts just out of his reach .

"Who are you?" he says.

"Liandros!" someone calls out grumpily. "Stop shirking. Come here at once!" At approaching footsteps, Liandros hurriedly gets to his feet and his blossom bursts into a thousand sparkling specks that rain over the prince. "That's me," he whispers with a mischievous laugh.

The prince snaps out his hand and steals a handful of his cloak; he pauses—

"Liandros!"

Liandros jumps at the shout. “Sorry, I have to go. Come back again tomorrow!”

Prince Valerian stares after him and slowly stands, smiling softly as he dusts himself free of lingering sparkles.

The luminarium begins to fade and I quickly race once around, looking for Casimiria or the prince. I duck through the rune door just as the last of the colour leaches out and emerge onto the underground platform with its tepid scent of canal water. I bolt for the next rune door.

Again, the luminarium. Again, no sign of my missing souls. Again, a short scene between Valerian and Liandros. This time they’re sitting on the violet oak, Liandros spreading his magic into the tree to make it bloom with silver blossoms.

“Do you really want to become the grand luminist after your father?” Valerian murmurs, taking in the dazzling sight.

Liandros hums, smiling softly as he looks up at the radiating light from his magic. It streams toward the glass dome, illuminating it. “We have to make sure this pure light never wanes.” He swings from his branch to Valerian’s. “You know about the Dawn War, right?”

“We were outnumbered twenty to one; our soldiers pulled off a godly feat to save our land.”

“Luminists might not be trained in sentinian magic, or in combat, but our luminariums won us this war. We worked hard to infuse our violet oaks and then sacrificed hundreds of them to make talismans so our linea commanders had a near-unlimited source of magic.”

“There aren’t many trees left.”

“Even the tribute boxes sitting in place of those sacrificed trees hold immeasurable amounts of magic. As much as is given by our linea people. But you’re right. It’s less now than it was. I want to change that. I want to bring all the luminariums back to their former glory.”

“There are fewer linea to do that.”

Liandros bows his head with a sigh; Valerian reaches out with a trembling hand and pulls back just before stroking Liandros’s face.

The next rune door.

Liandros shows off his strengthening magic and Valerian sneaks wyverns into the luminarium crypt, showing off his control over the animals. Together, over their teenage years, they practice their magics in the underbelly of the luminarium.

I race through these memories, searching to no avail for Casimiria and Nicostratus, stealing cakes, dry teas, luminist incense.

One door shows a memory I’ve seen before, through King Yngvarr’s dromveske, but this time the memory is Valerian’s.

He’s trying to win an ounce of his brother’s respect by teasing the prins, submerging him and the mask he was whittling in leaves.

I see Casimiria through his eyes too: a feisty, vibrant woman who captures his brother’s eye and, Valerian notices, his brother’s breath.

The scene, though, ends differently for Valerian.

I follow him back to the manor with the summoned prince, only to see him

immediately dismissed by his father.

Alone, he slouches his way back to his best friend.

Liandros is a bounce of curly hair as he spots Valerian and races across a smaller luminarium to greet him. “Thank you for inviting me here! It’s wonderful—what’s wrong?”

Valerian tells him about the tree, being told he wasn’t being smart, and Liandros pulls him into a hug. “That prins deserves it. He’s always scoffing at our beliefs. Yesterday I was just trying to enlighten him, and he waved his knife at me.”

Valerian stiffens at this and his jaw clenches noticeably. “How dare he!”

Liandros pulls out of the hug with a glittery smile.

“What?”

“I love how protective you are of me.... ”

Through the next rune door, Valerian watches from a distance Liandros playfully magicking blossoms onto the tree Valerian stripped of leaves.

Prins Yngvarr passes by, bumping into a row of flowers, and they burst. Liandros calls out for him to apologise, and Prins Yngvarr stops, jumps up into the tree and shakes the branches until all the blossoms burst. Then he leaves a deflated Liandros behind.

Valerian rushes to his friend, leaping gracefully into the tree to perch beside him. Liandros leans into the prince’s opening arms and rests his head against his shoulder. “I’m always most comfortable here.”

Valerian flushes and he quietly breathes in Liandros's curly hair—

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Liandros looks up, catching him, and their gazes meet on sharp breaths.

Before Valerian can pull away, Liandros lifts a hand to his cheek.

Their eyes are whispering confessions, and Liandros leans in.

It's no ordinary kiss. It's the clash of two lovelights, bursting out of them simultaneously.

Their magics chase each other playfully, leaving blossoms on the trees once more in their wake, before barrelling into their chests with a force that has their kiss breaking.

They stare at one another, and laugh. Valerian rubs over his heart. "So warm."

Liandros tucks himself against the prince again. "Let's never forget this feeling."

I swallow at the soft scene and move out of it into the next one with apprehension.

Again, it's a memory I've seen before. The outdoor banquet.

Valerian is seated next to his brother, and across from him is Prins Yngvarr, who he keeps narrowing his eyes on.

Casimiria—her younger remembered self—sits among the marriage candidates, and it's in this scene I learn that it's Valerian who ordered his aklos to drug her wine.

It's Valerian who had Prins Yngvarr's room trashed; Valerian who left the banquet

right after the prins.

In the shadows, he meets two vitalians—one silver sashed, the other green and Florentius’s young father.

“Can you do it?” Valerian asks.

Chiron grimaces. “We shouldn’t.”

“This is for the prince. I can see the light in his eyes. He looks at her and... trust me, I know that look. If I do this, I can make sure he gets who he wants. He’ll experience this unimaginable warmth. He’ll finally see what I’m capable of.”

“The pain—” Chiron is cut off by Valerian’s glare.

“For her, it’ll be fleeting. She’ll become one of the most powerful women in our kingdom.”

The silver vitalian inclines his head and tugs Chiron’s sleeve. “His highness is commanding you. Know your place.”

“Here she is,” Valerian says, spying Casimiria stumbling away from the banquet with the aid of an akla.

I tense, sickened as I drag myself through the scene. Casimiria led to the bed, the vitalians ripping out her lovelight, Prince Anastasius bursting into the room at her cries, catching her as she falls into unconsciousness. Valerian in the shadows, shocked at the prince’s outrage.

“What have you done?” Prince Anastasius screams at them to leave, and Valerian sweeps out first. In confusion and anger, he tears the vines off the trellised wall and

storms off .

I glance at the courtyard he's left behind and know any second Prins Yngvarr will be here, will see the vitalians and assume Prince Anastasius viciously stole Casimiria's lovelight.

As the scene starts to fade, I yank off nightshade leaves and cut a portion of vine, then race back through the rune door. I drop most of my collected plants onto the platform, calling for Lucius to prepare them.

"This should be enough." The rest, I keep with me. I don't know what kind of state I'll find Quin's mother and brother... A wave of desperation hits my gut and I scramble over to a red rune door. "Only two left."

I charge through the door and into a familiar clearing in the woods. It's covered in soulbloom and sunk into the ground at one end is a dilapidated cabin with a broken roof.

Valerian is pacing angrily in the treeline, as if he followed Prins Yngvarr here and perhaps witnessed the stolen moment between him and Casimiria.

He's motioning for his redcloaks, aklos and aklas, and vitalians to hurry along and break the two up.

In his fiery mood, he casts out a flare of magic into the glade—the flare that in King Yngvarr's memory separated my shivery moment with Quin. ..

When young Casimiria is escorted away, Valerian orders two soldiers and his vitalians to teach Prins Yngvarr a lesson.

Chiron grits his teeth and refuses to move into the clearing, and Valerian gets into his

face.

“Even you don’t show me respect!” He jerks a finger towards Prins Yngvarr.

“ He hurt my man. He’s disrespecting my brother’s woman.

You’ll make sure he regrets it, or I’ll hold it against you and your future family! ”

One of the redcloaks shoves Chiron into the clearing and together they torture and heal and torture Prins Yngvarr until the Skeldar prins is screaming towards the skies a promise of revenge.

While my stomach twists at the tortured cries, I stumble through the surrounding woods searching for Casimiria, imagining her watching this, imagining her crumpling to her knees wishing for it to stop.

An arrow suddenly shoots across the glade and embeds into a tree, an arrow that wasn’t in King Yngvarr’s memory.

I tug it out, knowing instinctively this is not Valerian’s memory, but evidence of Casimiria’s grief.

She must have taken one of the bows; she must be trying to kill the men hurting her friend.

I whirl in the direction the arrow came from, but I don’t see her.

Another arrow, two , whistle towards the redcloaks, and they fall listlessly.

There are no cries, no reactions. It doesn’t even stop Prins Yngvarr’s cries of pain.

None are real after all; they're just puppets acting out Valerian's memory. And Casimiria has messed with it.

I run around the edge of the trees, snatching soulbloom and stuffing it into my belt, and skid to a stop where Casimiria should have been.

I call out for her, but there's no response.

I search the area, but she's nowhere to be found.

Perhaps she already left, I just saw the remains of her visit, her.

.. The damp trees and glistening glade begin to lose their texture, their scent, their colour, and I hurry out, catching my breath on the musty platform on the other side.

One more door left.

I shove it open, feeling something sticky against my hand, and step out into deep woods, sniffing my fingers—

I freeze at the subtle scent. Frostbloom. Casimiria and the prince must have unknowingly touched this too, slowly becoming paralysed until frozen, locked in this memory forever...

I grab the soulbloom from my belt—it's not emberleaf, but it has similar enough properties.

I chew it and quickly smear it, with some heat-inducing vine-sap, over my skin.

I put the rest in my pouch. My cloak whips behind me and snags on bark as I race through trees towards the celebratory sounds coming from the almighty violet oak at

the border of Lumin and Iskaldir.

Around the shimmering oak, rings of linea dance, pouring magic into a glittering canopy over the heads of the attending royal family.

Over music and song, Valerian—resplendent in rich, bejewelled attire—sneaks sweet words to Liandros, channelling the most beautiful blossomed garland throughout the canopy.

“Seriously,” Liandros says on a laugh. “Can’t you see I’m working?”

“I can’t help it; whenever I see you, I want to be near.”

“Three generations of my family are staring at us right now!”

“They’re staring at their illuminating handiwork.” He pauses, and says with a mischievous smile, “You know, you have a lot of competition for becoming the next grand luminist. If you’re not indulgent with me, maybe your cousin—ouch.” Valerian laughs.

“There are more thorns where those came from.”

“Fine, I’ll leave you alone. So long as you promise me a sneaky moment in the woods later...”

Liandros smiles.

I scan the crowds for Casimiria and Nicostratus. Would they be where they could see the scene play out? Or would they be lost somewhere in the recesses of this memory after the scene faded?

Valerian steals my focus again as he approaches his brother, who is gleefully throwing and catching a giggling baby.

“Constantinos will be sick all over your face if you keep that up.”

I halt abruptly and shuffle nearer to the child. Constantinos? This was baby Quin?

Quin giggles again as his father throws him up towards the glittery canopy, and my chest feels funny, light and sad at the same time.

This little baby will grow up, will experience so much hate and manipulation, will eventually be—on his uncle’s orders—held captive in Iskaldir with the threat of his head adorning a stake. . .

This little baby. He’s the reason I’m inside this memory at all. “We truly have an unusual fate,” I murmur.

The little baby giggles.

A loud scream has heads turning, and suddenly the trees surrounding the clearing shake to life.

Men drop from the trees, purple cloaks billowing like ominous clouds.

All around the ceremony sharp steel glints: spears, tipped with long nails, glistening in the light.

With unsettling speed, those sharp edges turn gasps into screams.

“Seal in the royal family!” the grand luminist cries, and all those surrounding the royals cast their magic into a protective shield.

Valerian throws himself towards Liandros, and their eyes connect as Liandros forms a thick buffer of blossoms between himself and the prince.

Valerian's eyes widen in horror, but no matter how much he pries and casts his own magic, he can't break through it.

The luminists turn, facing the onslaught.

They fight hard, but they are only a dozen luminists with linea unskilled in sentinian magics—by the clangs and bursts of colour deeper in the woods, redcloaks are fighting another front.

The crusaders are relentless. Linea fall with pierced meridians. Blood splashes against magic.

Liandros stands firm, brow furrowed, sweat dripping down his temples. Valerian is hammering his fists against the barrier, pleading to help, and Liandros shouts, deflecting an incoming spear with swift grace and crackling magic. "I'll never let them hurt you!"

I stand rooted in the middle of the chaotic, blood- drenched scene, my heart in my throat. Crusaders force forward, slicing through the weaker defensive spells until they find a breach—

Luminists cry one after the other as they fall. Liandros's uncles, cousins, father...

Tears streaming down his face, Liandros fights on with every ounce of angered energy he possesses.

The shield protecting the royal family is held up only by him.

He defends it valiantly, parrying blow after blow.

But soon three crusaders turn into five, and in the space of a single wavering spell, a spear hurtles through from the side—

He turns to face it, to throw up a hand to deflect it, but the crusader's thrust was too hard, too fast, too lethal. Seven long nails shoot forth from the spear, piercing Liandros through his chest.

He falls to his knees, blood soaking his white robes. Still, he fights, maintains the protective shield until redcloaks arrive and swiftly reclaim the clearing. Outnumbered, the surviving crusaders drop their spears and plead for their lives.

They're chained with spells, and only at the call of the commander does Liandros's shield abate.

Valerian crawls to him and collects his shuddering body, holding him tightly, futilely trying to heal him. Liandros tries to speak, but blood bubbles out of his mouth and he goes limp.

Valerian rocks him back and forth, telling him not to sleep, telling him the vitalians will be here soon. He continues rocking as Prince Anastasius charges towards the crusaders, baby in one arm, sword in the other. He steers it towards a purple-cloaked figure. "Who ordered this?"

When the crusader doesn't answer immediately, he presses the sword tip against his throat, drawing blood.

Another crusader spits blood to the ground. "The new king of Iskaldir. His revenge aligned with our purpose."

Valerian strokes Liandros's cheek, whispering for him to wake up.

My eyes are damp and it's hard to swallow. But another thought has me lurching out of the messy scene and hurrying through the woods for the door—

A brutally devastated cry pierces the woods and sky, making them rumble, making winds sweep... Valerian's grief. Gusts tear at my clothes, rip branches from trees, send lethal leaves slicing through the air... I stagger through it, fingers clawing into the fading earth for purchase.

Logs roll down a bank and I scramble out of their way—

Wait, they weren't logs. They were people. Two people covered in mud and leaves, as stiff as trunks...

I spy the rune door, thirty yards that way. Should I race there first and re-enter the scene from the beginning, hopefully finding them in the recesses of this memory? Or do I risk becoming lost too?

Do I even have time to come back?

With a pounding heart and pounding steps and a pounding gale at my back, I slip and slide and chase after their rolling bodies.

One bumps to a stop against a boulder and the other is about to hurtle off the edge of a cliff—I dive for a limp arm, slamming against the ground, catching it by the wrist as it goes over the edge.

A tornado is forming, whipping all the leaves from the trees.

Need to hurry. I pull at the broad wrist, feeling the hard wood of my carved violet oak

armband.

Prince Nicostratus. Through pinched eyes, I see his form as I heave his weight up.

We lurch back with the aid of a wind that is still carrying Valerian's cries.

With strength that comes from utter desperation, I drag two deadweight souls towards the rune door, fingers clutching their wrists like I'm binding our fates together.

Winds swirl around us, debris a curtain sweeping towards us.

I crash to the ground, covering Casimiria's and the prince's exposed faces.

A jagged branch skids across my back, tearing through fabric and skin, and I bite down on a cry.

When the curtain passes, I take their wrists and pull defiantly, blood sluicing down my back.

The sting keeps me grounded, keeps me focused on the faint glow of the door in the swirling darkness.

To falter now, to fall, is not only to lose Casimiria and the prince, not only to lose myself, it's to lose...

With a surge of determination, I double my grip.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:51 am

I collapse on the damp platform beneath the luminarium, calling hoarsely for Lucius.

He pounds down the spiral staircase and I yell out what he needs to stack. He'll have been consuming teas while I was searching. He'll be ready.

Magic is faster. Ultimately, that fact always remains.

Lucius hasn't even reached the last step before he's funnelling the spells into Casimiria and the prince.

I see colour slowly seeping into their faces, and with plummeting relief—and queasy anxiety—I leave Lucius to finish his spells while I check on the souls upstairs.

They are stirring.

I skid over to the little girl and Akilah, taking their pulses as they sit dazedly upright. They're ticking smoothly, getting stronger by the second.

The little girl starts pouting and calls out for Nestor.

"It's alright," I murmur, patting her back. "He's waiting for you. You'll see him soon."
"

She sniffs and Akilah offers her skirts for the child to wipe her tears away.

With a frown, Akilah asks quietly, "Where are we?"

“You fell into the regent’s dromveske. Your soul will leave soon and you’ll return to your body.”

“This is part of your trial?”

“Yes.”

She takes in all the familiar faces of the island prisoners stirring awake around her, and pins a frown on me. “If we leave, do you win?”

“Yes.”

“What about Florentius? What about his brother?”

“What about his brother?” Lucius says, coming up from behind with the prince and a hobbling Casimiria at his side. Their gazes hit mine and widen. Between the prince and me is a thousand questions—between the king’s mother and me, the quiet reminder we have scores yet to be settled.

I jerk my head away to Akilah climbing to her feet. “If we leave now and Cael wins the Medicus Contest, all your lives are in jeopardy!”

Lucius takes out his pipe and starts puffing. “The regent already imprisoned us on a boat and tried to poison everyone in here.”

Akilah swallows. “He said he’d let you all go if Florentius won the contest.”

“So he’d have dumped our comatose bodies on the bank? ”

“Then leave here after you’re dumped, and be free for the rest of your lives. Safe.”

There's a gasp of longing, and I stand. "If our team wins—"

"Your boat may be set alight with all your bodies in it!" Akilah says to them, glaring at me.

Her wrath stings. It hurts to argue against the ally I'd thought would always have my back.

Your sister or your king?

I made my choice.

She is making hers. Me, or Florentius.

I briefly shut my eyes on the ache and force out my voice. "Redcloaks won't expect resistance from the inside. Leave now—tip the battle in your favour and free yourselves."

"You might not all make it!"

"We need this win to save our true king."

"They don't care about a useless king!"

I reel back at her punching words and a steady hand clasps my hip. I feel the press of his armband, and know it's Prince Nicostratus.

My heart races as I address all the prisoners.

"If my team doesn't win, the regent does."

The regent who cast you away on that forsaken island; who denied you healthcare; who put you all here.

” I look at all of them earnestly. “He promised Florentius he would free you, but who’s to say he’ll keep that promise?

Prince Nicostratus’s hand stays at my side as Lucius steps before me. “I’ve never trusted the regent. But I have seen Cael toiling for weeks on arid land to produce life-saving plants to protect you all.” There’s stirring and whispering at this. “I choose to fight.”

More murmurings, and the three men who taught me to weave coffinweed on that island rise.

One by one, they all stand, vowing to fight for their escape.

Lucius faces me. “What do you need us to do?”

I ping my eyes open to Olyn and Megaera bowed over me. They startle and rear back as I lurch upright and check the hourglass. Mere minutes left.

I hope they all follow my instructions as promised.

“Needle the rejuvenation acupoints.” Olyn swiftly follows the instruction. “Sniffing salts!” Megaera grabs some and holds them under each nose.

The clouds have thickened overhead and the luminarium dome glares along with the regent, who is shifting tightly in his seat. The crowds are full of quiet whispers.

The royal team watches closely, Florentius with a twitching jaw. He sees me as a threat. He sees me standing between him and his brother—

And, I am.

I cannot forget that.

Gravely, I move to the little girl's side and whisper in her ear to wake, to see her Nestor. As instructed, Lucius has guided the little girl through the exit door first, and she sits up crying. "Nestor! Brother!"

Spectators take a collective step back, enlarging the stage in their shock, their disbelief. And in the centre of it is Florentius, dropping to his knees with an agonised cry while the leader of the orange team races forward with a shout of relief, pulling his little sister into his trembling arms.

Nestor's wet eyes meet mine over her small shoulder and in their depths, I see remorse and endless gratitude. I incline my head, and he whispers as he passes me, "I lost. I know what to do."

They leave the stage and I huddle over Casimiria's slowly stirring body with Olyn and Megaera. I whisper, "The moment he sees her, the regent will set his soldiers in motion. We split here."

Olyn swallows. "Bastion told me what to do."

"This is goodbye then," Megaera murmurs with a wry smile, "I'll be happy not to owe you any longer." She pauses and her eyes lock on mine quietly. "Take care."

They step back, and as the hourglass drips its last sand, Casimiria awakens. "Had some rough sleeps before. That was the worst."

Absolute silence. The crowd doesn't so much as whisper.

They don't know how to explain this away.

They don't know how to comprehend that an outcast, non-magic team just won the Medicus Contest; that we revived two comatose patients.

Clouds descend, thickening the shadows of their frowns—and the regent's fury.

He's risen from his throne, his face pinched. He wants to lash out, strike us down, but he's aware the people are watching, judging. He has to finish his act.

He's motioning for his men instead, silent language. I know what it means.

As planned, Bastion has capsulised spells tossed high into the air, and they burst into sound and colour. In the confusion, I take Casimiria by the hand; she slaps me away and springs to her feet, gaze meeting mine. We might have scores to settle, but right now we need to flee.

We dash through the throng, weaving between startled spectators and drink stalls. Skriniaris Evander is yelling false directions in the distance, a risky move that he could not be dissuaded from taking. I'll lay my life down, if it gives you the chance to get away; to free my friend and my king.

With a hiccup in my heart, we race on. The smell of rain hits our noses before the first drops pelt our heads, and the chaos of people dashing for cover from the sudden downpour aids our escape.

"Here!" Bastion hisses; we veer into the alley where we hand over our cloaks and my feathered mask and don plain black. In our stead, vespertines continue our race towards 'escape'.

Bastion pauses, meeting my gaze with a wink before dashing off with a dramatic flap

of Prins Lief's cloak. "Dream of me. "

Casimiria and I move swiftly in the other direction, towards the canal. Get to the tunnel. No one can follow .

In the near distance, muted clangs of metal and grunts of soldiers engaged in combat. The battle of the longboat is underway.

My stomach twists. I grab Casimiria by the wrist and pull her towards an overgrown bridge that I've been instructed to cross. I'm not to come near the fight—Prins Lief's orders. I'm to skirt the woods until we reach the west canal arm, and slink into the tunnel.

A flash of movement on the bank behind us—

Along the upper edge, Florentius is sprinting in the direction of the longboat.

Casimiria hisses sharply and I let go of her wrist as I curse. Florentius might throw up a good shield against wyverns, but what could he do against redcloaks who've trained their entire lives to breach shields and kill?

I recall Lucius taking me aside just before I left the dromveske. His grim stare. "Whatever happens, promise you'll protect my little Florentius."

Bastion's men were supposed to stop him and Akilah from running into danger. They're supposed to lead them to the tunnel to choose between fleeing with Lucius, or saying their farewell. Something has gone wrong.

I need to catch up to him, take him along with me and Casimiria to see Lucius on the other side—

I step in his direction and halt. Quin's mother. I have to protect her. I have to get her safely to the tunnel.

Another figure snags my attention and my stomach drops at the sight of Akilah chasing Florentius, begging him to stop, not to throw himself into the battle.

Casimiria eyes the situation. She takes charge, hauling me along towards the longboat.

"It's dangerous," I gasp, even as my steps quicken. "Your meridians have been sealed—"

She finds a dead redcloak slumped in the grass and swipes his bow and arrow. "I've trained for this."

She nocks an arrow and shoots it into a redcloak jumping out from behind a tree, sword ready. I gaze at her with a slack jaw. "He really takes after you."

Akilah screams as three more redcloaks appear, and Florentius whirls back and blasts them away with a shield. He scoops her close to his side and—

Pom-pom-pom. Casimiria fends off more of their attackers. The string of her bow sings.

Florentius and Akilah spin, catching sight of us. His gaze hits mine—but hers doesn't. She's only focused on him. Her hand, still in his. My breath crackles. She's my sister, but now he's become her world.

We're stuck in this together now. We can't go back the way we came. Our only way is to forge forward and follow with the boat.

“Close in on the boat!” Captain Kjartan booms, his voice cutting through the chaos like a knife.

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I'm pulled along through the battle, ducking and dodging with Akilah as Florentius and Casimiria fight. At one point, I hold Akilah tightly against a tree while the battle rages. Over her shoulder I glimpse the fierce clash of magic and steel.

I spy the boat and the commotion on deck.

Lucius is locked in combat, his magic flashing and slashing under the dense dark clouds.

He parries and strikes effortlessly; two redcloaks fall overboard.

He rocks back on his heels and searches the battle, his gaze pausing on Princessa Liana battling fiercely alongside the commander.

They're a graceful pair, their movements synchronised and knowing.

He goes low and she goes high, they fight back to back, pulling, flipping, conjoining their magic like a dance.

Their attacks are strong and playful, their tacit understanding palpable.

I recall Lucius mentioning her fondly; I can only imagine how hollow he must feel, seeing this. What they once shared is now nothing but a memory; a stolen moment. Because that's what they are in the end: a heartbeat that races wildly, never to race again.

Lucius grimaces, and I wonder if stolen moments only lead to more pain. After a

deep breath, he nods to himself and busies into battle again, saving a fellow prisoner from the bite of a redcloak spell.

The fight flashes furiously, and then Captain Kjartan is yelling. “Get to the boat!”

My ears prick, and time seems to stretch as we all pause, held in that fragile moment. Does this mean we won this battle?

Florentius sprints through the sparse trees, the urgency in his movements propelling him onto the longboat that is already pushing away from the alcove.

Stormblades and Prins Lief leap aboard, greeted by the cheers of weary prisoners and Prince Nicostratus, whose face dribbles with blood, glistening against the pallor of his skin.

We race after the vessel, Prins Lief halting his archers just in time.

He rolls his head back in exhaustion, a wry smile ghosting his lips.

“I suppose it’ll be a miracle if you ever once do as I say. ”

“Just help us on board!”

He hesitates, but it’s Nicostratus who acts.

With a flick of his wrist, he rides the winds, sending a pulse of magic that unlocks Casimiria’s meridians.

She makes a graceful leap toward her fellow prisoners while in a swift motion Nicostratus wraps his arms around my waist and Akilah’s, lifting us off the ground and flying us aboard.

Florentius snags Akilah from him—and I suspect, away from me—and forges through the crowd of prisoners to Lucius.

I take a heavy step towards them, yearning to explain—

Nicostratus steps in front of me. It's the first time we've truly looked at one another since the dromveske. Our fleeting glance then had been filled with the promise of difficult questions; now, the tension crackles between us like the static before a spell.

We don't have time for this, but his gaze stubbornly holds mine. I can see the conflict etched in his features, flickering in his stormy eyes. To ask. Or not to ask.

The longboat glides silently down the canal, then halts abruptly at the west arm, jostling me against him. He catches me, his warmth flooding through my cloak. I pull away too quickly, the distance between us fraught with unspoken feelings. His brow furrows, confusion clouding his expression.

I meet his eyes with resolve. "Not right now."

Now, we need to gauge the situation. The longboat blocks access from the main canal, the looming cliffs on either side of the west arm offering a narrow route for prisoners to climb into the rowboats that Princessa Liana and the Commander are magically steering towards us.

The tunnel. We just need to reach it.

"Get moving!" I order, inhaling the metallic scent of blood mingled with the fresh, damp earth. "There are wounded."

"I'll help you first."

It's kind. Softly protective. It's the opposite of what Quin would say. He'd tell me to put others first, to hurry on with it, that he'd have my head if I got hurt.

I rip a strip off my black cloak and wrap it around the nasty cut on Nicostratus's head. Blood soaks into the fabric. He watches me, a mix of gratitude and something sad in his gaze. "That's not what hurts."

I swallow hard, forcing my voice steady. "Lucius or Florentius will spell you when we get to the tunnel. Get Casimiria there and come back for me when they're all safe."

His eyes search mine for answers I can't give.

I shoo him away with a fragile smile that I hope looks confident, and when he finally turns to help the prisoners onto the rowboats, I find an apothecary kit inside the boat.

The wounded men's eyes brighten when they see me coming, hope flickering to life amidst their pain.

"Caelus! You should have seen us. We snuck up behind and got the better of them. They had no idea it was coming!"

Three have broken legs, one a stab wound through his flank, and the last a dislocated shoulder. I prioritise the stab wound, applying pressure and shouting for Lucius and Florentius, who come rushing in from their reunion.

They become a synchronised team in the chaos and spell four of the five to health.

I focus on the dislocated shoulder, pulling it back into place with a quick, brutal motion.

Akilah appears with water, her eyes briefly softening before she stiffens again, her smile strained.

She offers Florentius and Lucius crystallised ginger, and she's about to pop one into my mouth when she jerks her hand back.

Like she'd momentarily forgotten she was upset with me.

"You don't need this anymore."

I steal it anyway, grinning despite the lump in my throat.

I focus on the wounded, the atmosphere heavy with urgency.

A long train of rowboats moves up the canal, but it's clear they're struggling.

Princessa Liana and the commander are weaving magic, but the sheer number of prisoners makes it challenging.

Prins Lief is among those at the oars, his face strained, while Nicostratus continues shuttling prisoners, his own magic waning.

Suddenly a horn blares in the near distance; birds explode from their cliffside perches, squawking into the grim grey skies.

Lucius races to the side of the boat, jerking back just in time for an arrow to fly past his face. He conjures a shield of shimmering magic, yelling as he deflects more arrows with his glowing barrier.

I spin in horror, my heart sinking as I see Nicostratus sprinting for the last prisoners, his face a mask of resolve and fear. The regent must have sent a portion of his army

down the canals, hedging his bets.

Florentius grabs me by the collar of my cloak. “I told you this wouldn’t work!”

Akilah pushes between us, concern etching her features. But when she glances my way, disappointment lingers in her eyes.

Nicostratus whisks toward me, fire flashing in his eyes, and I shove him back. “Last. I go last!”

His resolve hardens. He steps forward again, and I grab his dagger from its sheath, holding it to my throat, our breaths mingling in the tension.

He backs away, curses spilling from his lips.

“Get them onto the boats first,” I say. “Get his people to safety.”

Nicostratus flings out gusts of wind that propel the remaining prisoners into a dinghy.

“Go!” Lucius grunts as he braces against another volley of arrows hitting his shield. “Your highness—”

“I’ll take over.”

“No. This is my fate, not yours.” Lucius holds his chin up and his shield grows. “I’ll hold them off long enough for you to reach the tunnel.”

Florentius staggers toward his brother, desperation in his eyes. “No!”

“Pull out my pipe before you go, would you?”

“I won’t leave you here!”

Lucius’s teeth clench, tension thick in the air. “Caelus. You promised.”

Protect my little Florentius.

My ears ring, blurring the sounds of begging and the thunk-thunk-thunk of too many arrows. My vision doubles with each pound of my heart, with each whisper in my head telling me what I have to do...

My stomach churns, bile rising up my throat. It’s hard to breathe. I forced this. I was the one who chose this.

The brother Florentius has fought so hard to free, who was his whole reason for entering the royal city, who he dreams of living with the rest of his days...

They’re supposed to have more than one reuniting embrace. They’re supposed to find a cottage somewhere—possibly with Akilah now by his side—heal the locals and have benign adventures getting lost in the woods. Adventures that end up as fond stories.

How can I rip that future away?

My knees buckle and Nicostratus knocks the dagger from my trembling hand.

Each choking breath only has the redcloaks getting closer. We have to leave Lucius behind .

If I don’t, we’ll all die here, all . No one would be coming back.

I yank Nicostratus even closer and force out my broken plea.

He does what I ask with a swift, brutal strike. The horrified realisation is frozen on their faces as their bodies slump towards the deck.

A sickening wave crashes over me as Nicostratus catches them and whisks them into a boat.

“Good,” Lucius says. “He’ll be safe.”

“You’ll be alone—”

“I know who I’m protecting. I have all our memories to keep me company, to keep me strong.”

He smiles softly; like he’s already starting to remember; already comforted.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I claw my way to him and pull out his pipe. “I’m sorry,” I say as I set it smoking into his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” I say again as Nicostratus flies me away.

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After hours of silent rowing through caves, we leave our boats behind a waterfall and follow a rocky path into an isolated glade.

It's sunny this side of the mountains; light softly streams over sparse woods and the rosy springblooms that cover the ground with pink.

It feels like a funeral procession prepared by nature. Flowers to wish the parting well...

Princessa Liana and the commander are in front of me, her tucked against his side, his shirt soaked with her tears.

The moment she realised we'd left Lucius behind, she'd clawed desperately against the commander, but going back was suicide. It would compromise them all.

She'd slumped in sobbing defeat.

Prince Nicostratus covered one of my ears with his hand and pushed my other against his shoulder, muffling the sound.

But no matter how much he murmured to distract me, I still heard enough.

Still heard the moment Florentius and Akilah awoke.

Still heard his anguished hiccups. Still heard my betrayal in her voice .

My legs are numb like the rest of me. I stop moving in the middle of the

springblooms, their pink coming in and out of focus—

Suddenly I'm carried on the winds into the treetops.

From here I can see the long line of us—the Skeldar envoy ahead with Prins Lief and Captain Kjartan, leading the way; the islanders trailing behind, heads bowed.

Casimiria picking blooms and using magic to scatter their petals in the wind.

Akilah supporting a tired Florentius by the arm.

I jerk my gaze away from the pink below to the blue above. Nicostratus sits quietly beside me. When I'm ready to look at him, he offers me a bunch of springbloom. "You're allowed to mourn too."

I take the flowers with a sore swallow, rip off their petals, and scatter them, thanking Lucius for being a true teacher.

In the middle of the glade, everyone stops to sing a song of farewell.

Farewell to the parted, farewell to friends.

It's here they split and go their different ways.

Perfume swells as flowers are trod underfoot and crushed between hugs.

One by one, they fan out in all directions, towards a free future.

If he could see this, he'd be smiling.

I watch as Florentius and Akilah hesitate, looking at all the possible paths they could

take. Not one of them is in my direction. I ball my torn cloak but I can't blame them. Choices have consequences.

Finally, they move towards the west. Will they make a quiet life together on their own? Will they come back to the capital, if the regent is gone? Will I ever see them again?

“Why don't you follow? Why don't you fight for them?”

Force them to be 'reasonable'? Force them to forgive? I shake my head and meet the prince's eye. “It's kinder to let them hate me.”

Prins Lief calls my name, turning as he searches for me.

“You're going back with them? To Iskaldir?” Nicostratus shakes his head.

“I have to.”

His eyes land on me sharply. We haven't spoken of it, but he knows his brother is being held captive. He heard me inside the dromveske: the Skeldar team needed to win the contest to free the king.

His jaw twitches as he stares into the distance.

“Should I have walked away from you dying in the dromveske too?”

He slams his eyes shut, grimacing, then with a flicker of hope in his voice he asks, “You're only saving the life of your king?”

My stomach is so tightly knotted it's hard to breathe. As if I didn't hear, I begin scrambling down the tree to Prins Lief waving below.

Nicostratus follows.

Not only does he follow, he demands to come to Ragn. To be there when Quin is set free.

As if his coming isn't enough, Casimiria declares she'll go with us also .

No Skeldar ship is big enough to hide from them and their hard gazes.

Casimiria corners me a few times over the days—scores beginning to be settled—but the true reckoning comes the night before we're due to land in Ragn.

She drags me to the stern-rail of the Skeldar ship and sends the stationed stormblades away, and then we're all alone.

Her, me, and a full moon glowering over us as she says her piece.

"I don't like it," I say, shifting my weight to keep my balance. " He won't like it."

"You once poisoned him before my eyes," Casimiria retorts, revealing a shiny bow and quiver full of arrows. "You can do this."

I throw my hands up dramatically. "It was an act we put on! I'm sorry, truly! Could you at least point that arrow at my heart? Like your son, I'm quite fond of my face."

"I'm sure he's fond of it," she replies, a sly smirk dancing on her lips as she pulls harder on the bowstring, at least aiming lower.

"He's also rather fond of my heart," I shoot back, trying to negotiate my way out of this.

Her smirk widens and she lifts the arrow towards my face again.

I raise my hands in surrender and almost lose my balance.

A gust of wind at my back keeps me upright, but I pretend I don't notice her doing it.

"I hate being pitted with these awful decisions."

"It's about handing me over in exchange for him."

I cast a longing glance at the icy water drifting below. The moonlight sparkles over it, rather more tempting than what will come tomorrow...

A whirling wind pushes me into a heap on the deck.

Casimiria's gaze is keen.

"I'll exhaust all other ways first."

"And when he refuses to let my son go?"

"I'll do it. Even... even if he hates me for it."

She offers me a hand and pulls me up, nodding thoughtfully.

"You must call me Haldr."

She lifts her brows. "Is that all, Haldr?"

"And if you're given any moment to speak with him, you mustn't let him know..."

“That King Yngvarr will disembowel you when he discovers you’re not touched by the goddess? I don’t like it,” she admits. “ He won’t like it.”

“We understand each other so well.” I pat her arm and though we’re keeping our tone light, the heaviness of the conversation lurks just beneath the surface, glimpsed in the flash of our eyes.

We part ways, her going portside while I head starboard. From the shadows, Nicostratus appears, his lips in a tight line that suggests he overheard it all.

In the space of a heartbeat, he has us leaping upwards until we’re dropping into the crow’s nest.

Dark ocean stretches in all directions, shimmering softly under a full moon. Above, a few brighter stars twinkle in the direction of Lumin .

Nicostratus stares at me with a furrowed brow. “If he knows what lengths you’ll go to for him...”

“He’ll be angry. Isn’t that what you want?”

“He’ll come back for you!”

His outburst triggers my own and I glare back at him. “So let him!”

It’s like I’ve stabbed him. His eyes widen and sadden at the same time and his voice is strangled and desperate.

“We’re family. I need him. I need him, but I want you.

” He holds his arm up, sleeve falling to show his armband.

His other arm curls around my waist and hoists me close.

I push futilely against his chest, but his hold is too tight and his words rumble into my ear.

“Can’t you see how much I’ve always craved you?

You make me want to fight my brother for you.

” He shudders in his self control and shoves me from him again. “I hate that I’m tempted!”

I straighten my clothing and turn to the ladder, pausing to look back at Nicostratus, slumped with his face buried in his hands.

I sigh. “Isn’t there a way... could we at least all be friends?” my words are quiet, barely there, but he hears them. Hears them and laughs sadly.

I hate that I understand. Hate that I find imagining that difficult too.

This is the reason Quin spoke of stealing a single moment.

I’m a thorn between brothers.

My continued presence can only cause harm. I know it. Nicostratus knows it. Quin knows it.

I say the words he wants to hear. “I’m only saving his life.”

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Once more, I'm faced with the deeply carved, intricate knot on the doors. I glance over my shoulder, nod to Prins Lief, and—at the king's summons—push my way inside, alone.

Guards flank the long hall, light from the pits of eternal flame reflecting on their armour. At the far end, King Yngvarr sits on his throne, a beautiful bejewelled figure of grace with his ageless face. Only his dark eyes hold the truth of his age, his pain, his anger.

The fragrance in the hall hits the back of my nose; had I not taken herbs to counter it, I'd already feel the lulling effects. This meeting is too important. I need a sharp mind.

As I move towards his curling hand, another figure comes into view.

He's crouched behind a stormblade, bent over a side table before the king.

And I immediately recognise him. My heart hammers hard against my chest and my teeth snap together at the sight of the iron chains around his wrists, his ankles.

King Yngvarr follows my gaze and clicks his fingers. Quin lifts a pot, pours dark liquid into a fine cup, and holds it out to the king, who tsks. "Do it on your knees."

Quin obliges, emotionlessly.

I force myself to keep walking, but my fist is curled tight behind the folds of my cloak. King Yngvarr motions towards me. "Pour another cup."

I stop just behind Quin's stiffening back and bow to the throned king, holding out the letter Prins Lief instructed me to deliver.

The king snatches it and reads. He gulps back his tea and laughs.

"I heard rumours of your tremendous feat in Hinsard. This validates them." He gestures Quin to hurry and hand me my tea.

Slowly, Quin turns. His gaze meets mine calmly, as if to tell me he's fine.

It flickers with warning. Tread carefully.

I take the tea and another laugh bursts out of King Yngvarr. "Haldr, Haldr. I'm so pleased you're my man."

Quin's fingers freeze around the cup. For a long beat, all calm bleeds away. His eyes are a frenzied flash hitting mine, and it's my turn to cool him. I take the cup, brushing our fingers together, pausing a fleeting second—a message of my own.

Slowly his mask slips back into place and his fingers slide along mine, leaving a wake of shivers as he drops his hand and steps back.

I sip hurriedly and chains clank and clatter as Quin returns to the king's table.

King Yngvarr leans forward. His smile seems soft but his eyes are hard. "This contest certainly tested your ability. I'm satisfied. I have another patient for you to heal. A challenging one. Are you willing?"

His hand tightens on the arm of his throne, a reminder that I must agree, or...

I press my hand against my chest and incline my head. "Before I submit to this

request, may you please deliver upon your promise.”

I glance briefly in Quin’s direction. The King looks his way too.

“Your triumph in Lumin indeed impressed me. The mortification rolling through their kingdom right now! I’m truly pleased. But promises...” He sighs and it has my stomach tightening. “Promises are merely motivators. When they’ve served their purpose, they can be abandoned.”

“With a philosophy like that,” I reply, “they won’t work as motivators for long.”

“Ah, but you see I do fulfil the ones that are harmless; the ones that offer me more advantage.” He sweeps a hand in Quin’s direction.

“I’m afraid he is too smart. Letting him go will infuriate their regent, and I cannot afford his wrath at my borders right now.

Wyrd armies threaten war from the west.”

“What if... what if you give this king your support? What if he becomes your puppet? What if he can take down the regent and become your ally?”

From the corner of my eye, I glimpse Quin shifting, trying to snag my attention, probably with a clenched jaw. I don’t look. I can’t. I keep my gaze steeled on King Yngvarr, who chuckles in amusement before narrowing lethal eyes on me.

“Lumin and Iskaldir will never be allies.” He pauses, calming his voice. “Fighting on two fronts weakens us. I must keep him here.”

“So you’re afraid of the regent.” I lean in, lowering my voice. “You don’t think he’s already incensed?”

King Yngvarr tenses.

“Perhaps it’s in your interests to let him go. He may provide a distraction. As you say, fighting on two fronts weakens.”

He uncrosses his legs, laughing, but there’s a strain to it. My palms sweat with hope—

“Losing a mere contest, and losing the upper hand on Lumin’s true king... The magnitude of one significantly overshadows the other. He’s embarrassed now, but so long as I don’t unleash my captive on him, he’ll not push at our border.”

My lungs deflate, my knees buckling in desperation. I do not want to reach for my last resort. I do not want to betray Quin like that. “An enemy of my enemy is a potential ally. Release him, let him gather his forces, rally support, and fight against the Wyrds with you.”

“What gall, to suggest political manoeuvres on behalf of kings!”

I do dash a look Quin’s way at this. I expect him to be glowering at my ruthless negotiation attempts, but he’s watching me thoughtfully.

King Yngvarr, though... his head cocks as he eyes me with suspicion.

Tread carefully . Already he’ll wonder why I fight this hard for Lumin royalty when I’m supposed to be a Skeldar healer—one, even, with the goddess’ touch.

I bow again. “I am merely a healer. My desire is simple: for no one to be hurt; to heal those who become so. My suggestions are not to interfere with the games between kings but merely to save this man’s life—and perhaps more, if these strategies are employed. ”

“I’d let any other captive go. Why this man?”

I twist slightly to avoid Quin’s upcoming glare. “Quite frankly? He’s pitiful.”

“So are others.”

“Pitiful but full of potential. I truly desire him to be used to bring peace between our kingdom and his.”

After a moment’s deliberation, King Yngvarr accepts this. “I suppose someone touched by the heavens would hold bigger aspirations.”

I clutch this straw, even if it does mean Quin finds out the depth of my deception, the risk I’ve taken. “Indeed, I’m afflicted with dreams of peace and the wellbeing of our people. They never stop; nor will they, until the gods are satisfied.”

A cup drops and I glance to Quin, who’s quickly straightening the mess of tea he’s made; his grimacing gaze slaps mine and though we don’t speak, we’re conversing. Caelus!

I had to don this mask. I’d do it again.

We’ll talk about your beheading if we ever get out of this!

I shift on a shiver and refocus on King Yngvarr .

He nods. “I will fulfil one part of my promise to you. I won’t put his head on a stake.”

I sag to my knees.

I only have one thing left.

“In my dreams, releasing this man is crucial to establishing this divine peace. This is why I’ve been so bold before you.”

“Boldly living the will of the gods can be forgiven.”

“Then I boldly ask you to forgive me for intruding on your past.” I touch my head to the ground.

“What do you mean?” King Yngvarr says tightly.

“I discovered your dromveske; I entered your memories.”

An unsettling silence follows and I dare not raise my head. One step, two steps towards me—

A hand clasps my shoulder and King Yngvarr steers me upright to face him. His eyes should be angry, but instead, they’re damp. “My son gave them to you.”

He already knew.

King Yngvarr continues, “He too has always yearned for peace, always intercepted my wrath towards Lumin. He wanted you to understand me. Do you?”

“I feel for Kronprins Yngvarr.”

“Kronprins Yngvarr is me.”

“Is he?”

King Yngvarr rocks back on his heels.

“I brought you a gift from Hinsard,” I say quietly, and his eyes shoot with hope and anxiety towards the main doors. “It comes with conditions. May I have it brought in?”

The king croaks out the order, and a woman wearing my veiled curacowl enters the hall.

King Yngvarr staggers to a stand and stares at her, and with a sickening lurch in my stomach, I glance at Quin.

I expect to see his horror and hurt and what I’m doing, but once again, his face is well controlled.

He appears calm and collected, ready to face whatever twists and turns will follow.

His gaze shifts from his mother to me and I struggle to hold it.

I’m sorry. Please. I’m sorry. Don’t hate me.

Or maybe do. Maybe that is the best result.

“Remove your veil,” King Yngvarr says, almost a whisper, when Casimiria has come to a stop beside me.

“A gift is meant to be unwrapped,” I say, “but is first delivered with a few words.”

“Your conditions.”

“His freedom in return for her.”

“I’ll have them both!” King Yngvarr snags the veil and rips it off Casimiria, revealing

her elegant frame and her keenly intelligent eyes.

She smiles at him and King Yngvarr most clearly buckles. “Haldr,” she says, glancing at her son and to her first love again, “please continue.”

“I poisoned her.”

Both he and Quin suck in air.

“Only I know the antidote,” I continue. “She must receive it within three days.”

King Yngvarr roars, “How dare— ”

“Fulfil your promise! Free him. When he’s safe, I’ll save her.”

He lunges forward and grips my throat, his thumb and fingers squeezing hard.

“If I didn’t need your skills, I’d have your head!

” He throws me away and I cough and claw in breath.

Chains rattle and, in an instant, Quin is at my side, setting me upright, cuffed hands lifting to softly check my neck. I don’t meet his eyes.

He should hate me. He should want to finish the job.

But of course, not yet. The antidote.

“It wasn’t he who poisoned me,” Casimiria says and steps towards King Yngvarr. “Nor he who pushed me into this corner.”

King Yngvarr trembles. His lips are pressed into a hard thin line. He can't hold her gaze either.

“If you still hold me in your thoughts even a little, please. Free my son.”

King Yngvarr jerks his finger towards Quin. “He is half that vile man! He is half the man I hate!”

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Casimiria speaks again, quietly, and her words have the king stumbling back into his throne. “He is also half this woman. Half this woman that you once loved.”

My hand is on Quin’s wrist, squeezing it so hard I’m leaving nail marks. Still, I can’t loosen my grip. Can’t let go.

King Yngvarr finally speaks. “He has one night to leave.”

An hour later, at the king’s command, I’m escorted by Prins Lief’s men—led by an impatient Prins Lief himself—to my Ragn abode. I’m to pack my things and return immediately to the castle.

My aunt greets us at the gates, hauling me into a fierce herb-scented hug as she murmurs to Prins Lief over my shoulder. “Thank you. Thank you.”

Prins Lief tells his men not to enter, to guard from the main gate, and shuts it on them. He comes over, murmuring under his tongue, “He’s not safe yet. He’s under my father’s eye.”

I temporarily push away those anxieties and shuffle out of the hug, leaving them a moment to talk, to.

.. be. I sink onto my bed with a long sigh and hold my clasp in my hands.

The setting sun leaks stripes through the shuttered balcony doors, the light falling like the bars of a cage.

Like it knows I'm the one now imprisoned.

The clasp glitters between my fingers. But at least. .. "You're free."

I blow on the silver and polish it with fresh garments, garments I change into after a good, long soak.

I'm tying up the small bag of my belongings—my grandfather's books, my journal of scriptions, the box holding my soldad—when tumbling colour has me startling to my feet.

My balcony doors fling open and Quin breezes in on a graceful wind.

His meridians have been unlocked. He's met with his mother.

My stomach knots as he lands quietly. His gaze locks on mine with a dark, shivery intensity that promises confrontation. "Come."

"I have to go back—"

In a hair-prickling breeze, he crosses the room, hauls me to his hip with an arm belted around my back, and kicks off the ground with his good leg.

We move so fast, I drop my belongings, but Quin reacts swiftly and a surging gust lifts my bag within reach.

As we pass over the courtyard, I glimpse Prins Lief cradling my aunt close.

They break apart as they look up and Prins Lief shouts a furious, "Seriously!"

Before I can beg him to save me from the stomach-dropping fear of Quin's

impending wrath, Quin calls, “One hour. Collect him from the temple.”

We touch ground in the grove close to the meditation cottage, now eerily barren without the lines of stormblades.

From somewhere nearby comes the crackling of an outdoor fire and the delicious scent of roasted meat, but I’m not to think of such trivial things.

The way Quin has deposited me, the way he’s whipped up that old broom cane, the way he thunks it on the ground as he paces.

.. the confrontation is about to begin.

Deserved. Still, I back up slowly in shivery anticipation, as if that extra distance might lessen the blow —

The trunk of a walnut tree halts me with a push of resistance at my back, bark snagging my hair. My bag does fall this time.

Quin stops pacing and faces me. His lips are curled in thought, brow slightly pinched.

He cocks his head and ponders. Steps closer, and ponders some more.

Closer and closer. Sets his cane against the trunk and comes closer still.

My breath catches, and his gaze strokes over my face.

It’s almost too much, but I can’t look away.

Between us, the air thickens and warms, and something delicate throbs through me.

He closes a hand around my sleeve and loosely pins my wrist to the tree above my head.

His other hand slides around my hips, jostling me an inch closer as his head bows over mine, our noses grazing.

He slides his along the side of mine, ghosts it over my jawbone, his soft breath colliding with my shuddering one.

His eyes shut briefly as his nose drags to my throat.

His sigh runs down my neck, and his next inhale sucks at the very edge of my ear.

He squeezes my wrist gently, his thumb stirring ticklishly as he whispers, “How long will you keep wearing my braids?”

Nothing about this moment I expected—this, I’m most unprepared for. My knees tremble and his hand at my hip closes around me tightly, holding me up along with the softest magicked wind.

I swallow thickly, still shaking, and Quin’s nose travels over my temple and sweeps down my cheek until he’s pulling back a half inch to look at me. His gaze is so soft, so intense, so intimate it’s hard to breathe.

I briefly close my eyes, and he moves my arm between us, draws back the sleeve and reveals the braids curled around my wrists. His fingers trace over each one. “Did this cost you a lot?”

I shake my head.

“I don’t believe you,” he murmurs.

“I didn’t spend any money.”

A smile ghosts at his lips. “Who said anything about money?”

“I . . . I did it for your dignity.”

“You don’t hesitate to spank me or call me pitiful before kings, why care about a moment of lost dignity?”

“It’s different if anyone else does it!”

“Now we’re getting closer.” His finger trails over the braids and fastenings again. “Why are you wearing them?”

My stomach hops with a kind of vulnerable panic. “So no one else touches them.”

He laughs lightly and presses me closer against him, my hand and his locked between our chests as his mouth hits my ear again. “Keep going.”

“If you know why I wear them, why don’t you tell me?”

His nose bumps against mine and he presses our foreheads together, staring deeply into my eyes.

I close my eyes and the form of Nicostratus is there, the barrier between us. Some things... shouldn’t be said. And yet... Something is unfurling in my chest, a great wave of light that is bursting to be let free, that tries to force its way out with every beat of my heart.

His gaze flashes, like he feels it, and his breath skitters over the bow of my lips, the warmth of his own hovering close.

I sway on this precipice; I want to fall and I can't .

We're tangled in these shivery seconds, him waiting for me to decide, and I... screw my eyes closed and curse myself as I push him away. He takes his cane—and my bag—and leads me through the grove.

I follow him with my head bowed, my steps heavy. This could've been our one stolen moment. I kick at a pebble in the grass.

“But shouldn't you be angry at me?” I ask. “Your mother...”

“I'm not,” he says simply and we turn past trees to a firepit, where someone's spit-roasting a chicken. Quin dismisses the man, tossing him a Skeldar brooch.

“What's this?” I say when we're alone. Quin gestures for me to sit on the bench dragged beside it.

“Roast chicken. I believe it's the reward you wished, for freeing me.”

It's so absurd, it startles me into a laugh. I throw myself onto the bench. “You wouldn't believe how over fish I am.”

He sits beside me, my bag between us, unravelling to expose my belongings.

My box has tipped over and my soldad is spilling from it.

I reach for it, but Quin brushes my hand away and picks it up himself.

He stares at it and I wonder if he's recalling the last time he saw it, as I left him watching me from the shadows in the woods, brandishing it to let him know I knew the truth.

It's always been Quin.

I look away, fighting a sad lump in my throat as I grip the bench. When I glance back again, it's to Quin and his glowing fingers as he carves a fifth stamp.

“But I'm not a—”

“You won the Medicus Contest. Any winning team would have been awarded this stamp.” He sets it in my hands.

I stare at it through blurring eyes as Quin quietly rips off a chicken leg for me.

I tuck the soldad carefully into my belongings and take the chicken, biting into it ravenously.

I laugh and tell him if this king thing doesn't work out, he has options.

He threatens to clock me with his own chicken leg.

We're easy and carefree and humoured. But it's acting.

Masking. Masking the sadness lurking beneath at our imminent parting, masking the intense longing to whisper things usually said in the dark, masking the burning urge to sink into his arms and stay there.

When we've finished our meal and cleaned our hands in the nearby brook, we return to the flickering flames of the fire.

The sun has almost completely set and the light is so mesmerising it's brought out the fireflies.

Dozens and dozens twinkle around us but though I'm not looking at him, his presence feels sharper.

“Cael. Give me your wrists.”

I instinctively hold them closer to myself, and Quin gently pulls them to him. It wasn't a request. He pushes his fingers against one of the braids, grimaces, and starts to undo the fastenings.

“Stop it,” I say.

“They're biting into your skin.” He continues until both my forearms are bare. He plucks the bejewelled fastenings free and tosses his hair unceremoniously into the fire.

I start with a gasp and lunge to save them—

Quin snatches my hand and pulls it back from the flames. He massages the deep red indents running up my arms. “They were hurting you.”

“They're our memories!”

Quin pulls at something under his cloak and settles a pouch into my palm. A pebbly weight shifts over my skin and I glance sharply at him; he stares at the pouch as he presses my fingers closed around it.

“A dromveske?” I croak.

“In return.”

I roll my fingers around the runes filling it. There are a lot. I look at him again.

“I made this for you while you were gone,” he says. “They’re safe.”

“You’re giving me your memories?”

“Of us.”

My chest heaves and my throat pinches at his emphasis, his promise. A hot tear threatens to break through my mask. I quickly attach the pouch to my belt. With feigned levity, I toss out, “Well, this certainly beats the fight I thought you brought me here for.”

“I contemplated being upset.”

I drop my smile and nod. “I am sorry about your mother—”

“Not about her. About you risking your life for mine.”

I open my mouth and shut it again. Then open, and frown. “Wait, you’re not upset I gifted your mother to the Skeldar king?”

“Cael!” he says in utter exhaustion, and sighs. Gently, he places the bag buffering us behind the bench, and pats for me to slide closer.

I shakily shift half an inch; Quin slides the rest of the distance and bops my nose with his finger. His voice is rumble and as warm as the fire before us. “I’m not upset for two reasons. I know that for now she’s safe, with her first love.”

I nod quietly and stare over the flames and the fireflies. “And the other reason?” I murmur.

A braid drifts over my shoulder as he leans in. “I trust you wouldn’t have made the

decision easily.”

I turn my face to his, and slowly shake my head. He’s wrong. “It was easy. I always knew who I’d choose.”

“Then you were thinking of the bigger picture.”

I stare into his eyes. My voice breaks, but my gaze does not. “No, I wasn’t.”

His breath suspends and I keep staring at him as flames crackle and fireflies dance in the dark. My heart races, and his stare on mine... I glance away into the dark, hoping the night’s cold whispers will wash over my heated cheeks.

Fireflies dart frantically at the sound of approaching footsteps. I’m hopeful for the reprieve they’ll bring.

I’m devastated.

Our time is up.

It’s time for Quin to return to Lumin. Our stolen moment, ending so soon. I barely grasped it.

With a sinking stomach, I stand. Quin clasps me and gently tugs me onto his lap.

“Cael...” Breathless, I let him steer my face towards his.

His hair falls like a curtain either side of us as he cups my face, his thumb brushing over an escaped tear.

He leans in to whisper against my mouth, lips combing mine. “I’ll remember this.”

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My lips still tingle as Quin pulls away. “Look after my mother.”

I blink and nod, and he leaves me, soaring through the air towards the harbour where his brother waits for him.

I stare in his long-gone direction as I’m escorted back to the castle, to dilapidated quarters that Casimiria and I will share.

I retire to my bed—a mattress on the floor of what might have been a woodshed—and huddle close to my lantern, using its light. The dromveske swings in my fingers.

I swallow hard and tip the contents onto the mattress. Dozens of carved grey and white pebbles spill out, along with some chalk Quin must have pilfered from Yngvarr’s dromveske. And... a letter.

I hesitate. This is a farewell of sorts. A memento of a story that has reached its conclusion. To be looked back on fondly, to watch from time to time, to reminisce .

On a shivery breath, I open the letter and read.

The paper falls from my fingers, drifting to the runes scattered across my mattress. Runes that will unmask him. Runes that will tell me the truth, that will help me find...

I snap up the stones and chalk.