



The King's Man #6

Author: *Anyta Sunday*

Category: Fantasy

Description: The mask is finally coming off. But some truths are more dangerous than lies.

Cael never expected to fall into Quin's memories. Never expected to uncover the moments Quin kept hidden: his quiet observations, his reluctant admiration, the silent war he waged against his own heart. And at the centre of it all? A truth that shatters everything Cael thought he knew.

But the past is a trap. And while Cael is lost in Quin's memories, the war still looms.

Reality drags him back. To Ragnarson. To a battlefield where Quin stands before him, not as a ghost of the past, but flesh and blood. Real and untouchable. Their reunion burns brief and bright before duty rips them apart once more.

As the kingdom teeters on collapse, rebellion ignites. The war isn't just for a throne anymore—it's for survival. And when Cael is captured, Quin will stop at nothing to bring him back.

Because kings do not beg.

This healer does not bow.

And masks cannot hide the truth forever.

Total Pages (Source): 40

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

I fall. Fall into a thousand violet leaves; into memories.

I take my time breathing in the carefully recalled details—the roughness of the bark; the woodsy scent of it; the freshness coming from the nearby river. We saved one another here, many years ago. It's where I found my lost soldad; where I unravelled the truth.

This is a place where masks have been stripped.

Once again, I'm dressed like Quin has clothed me himself. The layers drape around me like a warm buffer against the crisp moonlit night.

I jump the last feet to the damp earth and turn from the violet oak. Rune-carved arches, dozens of them, spiral around it. I catch my breath and push against the first door.

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The gateway shimmers as I step through into one of Quin's truths.

On a pent breath, I enter the familiar, sunny woods of the royal belt.

It's warm, birds are tweeting and summer blooms pink around tree trunks.

I come to the edge of a small clearing cresting a hill: the woods spread below, and beyond, the grand luminarium glows, straddling the walled royal city and casting its light over the capital.

Some of the most heart-pounding encounters of my life have happened in these spaces.

Movement catches my eye across the clearing. A horse and its rider canter along the craggy edges of the viewpoint. My breath snags on the sight of Quin, carefully dismounting, landing on his good leg. He's reaching for the cane strapped onto his horse when a loud crash startles the animal.

Quin tries to catch the reins, but the panicked horse shies off into the woods.

Quin hobbles to the cliff edge and leans against a tree with a heavy breath that I can almost feel from here.

Another crash. My chest hiccups, half on a laugh, half on a cry as I see my seventeen-year-old self scrambling down a bushy embankment into the clearing.

I rush up the hill to Quin, who has stilled upon recognising the agent of the chaos.

I remember this.

But I never saw Quin here. This was the day I met—

I get right in front of him but he stares through me, towards Chaos Me who plucks twigs from his cloak, grinning wildly as he veers toward this beautiful young man. But Chaos Me didn't see Quin's face then like I do here. Chaos Me saw a face veiled with magic.

I sag to my knees, overwhelmed. It was you. It is always you.

My heart throbs wildly as I watch the rest of the memory. Quin and Chaos Me. Quin and Chaos.

Chaos doesn't even slow down as he nears Quin—in fact, he speeds up, waving a hand: come; come quick . When Quin doesn't move, Chaos starts jogging. “Redcloaks. Hide, quick.”

Quin, still shocked at seeing Chaos, merely blinks.

Chaos, the fool, only sees a man—frowning slightly, like he's unaware of the danger of being caught here. Chaos, the fool, grabs Quin's arm and tugs.

Quin's stare drops to Chaos's fingers wrapped around him, and Chaos suddenly squeezes. Redcloaks have entered the clearing. Redcloaks have spotted them.

Chaos swears under his breath and tosses a wink at Quin. “Don't panic. Just play along. ”

I shake my head. I know what he's thinking. He's thinking they just have to act a little loopy. So the soldiers won't see them as a threat; so they'll shoo them along

with a mere warning not to come this way again.

I cover my eyes as Chaos drops to all fours and starts crawling around. I wish I'd thought to cover my ears as he starts to whinny.

I peek between my fingers. The redcloaks stop abruptly in the middle of the clearing, watching on in bafflement. And Quin stares.

Chaos pats his hip. "Your faithful steed is here. Climb aboard!" He tosses his hair with a wild neigh, rearing up dramatically. "We'll ride into the sunset!"

"You're unbelievable," Quin mutters, and slings himself onto Chaos's back. As elegantly as one can on a pretend horse, he keeps his chin high and gives Chaos's rump a dignified slap.

I shut my fingers over my eyes on a groan before peeking once more.

Chaos is crawling along the grass with Quin positioned awkwardly on his back, pretending it's most natural indeed.

I slink after them, flushing. The redcloaks glance at one another, open their mouths and shut them again with deepening frowns.

One of them points and whispers in his neighbour's ear, "That signet on his belt, isn't that—"

The redcloaks bow as one, and Quin quickly shoos them off; Chaos keeps crawling along, totally unaware.

Chaos hisses quietly, for Quin's ears only, "Ride me proper. My mane, steer with it."

Quin shuts his eyes, shaking his head. His expression is somewhere between horrified and even more horrified, but at Chaos's buck, he grabs a handful of hair and whips it like reins.

Like this, Quin is held hostage until Chaos has crawled into the shadows of the woods, to a nook by the river where Akilah waits.

She startles upon seeing them and rubs her eyes before nodding to herself. This is Chaos; it probably does make sense to her.

"We're safe," Chaos says with a relieved sigh. "Dismount."

Quin rises slowly, placing his weight on his good leg and massaging the other.

I wince in advance and then wince again as Chaos sits back, knocking poor Quin off balance.

He stumbles and I see the flash of agonising pain he tries to hold back behind gritted teeth.

He snags hold of the nearest tree trunk but still falls.

Chaos turns around to this, immediately apologising and holding out a hand to help him up.

"Hurt anywhere? Let me read your pulse—"

"No," Quin says firmly, pulling himself up with the aid of the tree. He turns away from Chaos and his face contorts with pain. I swallow and glare over his shoulder at Chaos frowning and folding his arms.

“Why not?” Chaos asks, lifting a stubborn chin.

Quin schools his pain and faces him. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not. I can sense it.”

“Just . . . leave it.”

“I can— ”

“I said leave it!” Quin snaps, and I understand him now. He’s in desperate pain and trying to hide it, and Chaos doesn’t know when to stop.

“I helped you out back there,” Chaos says, while I groan and thump a palm on my head. “At least let me prove I can do it again.”

“Just leave him,” I whimper. He clearly doesn’t want you to know; doesn’t want you to see him weak and in pain; doesn’t want your reaction to him to be pity.

Chaos, the idiot, tries to grab Quin’s arm and Quin roars, “I’ll heal myself!”

“How ungrateful,” Chaos mutters.

Quin presses his lips tightly and glares. Chaos, without the slightest sense of self-preservation, steps right up to Quin braced against the tree and breathes him in deeply. “This isn’t your true face, is it?” He sniffs again, nose barely missing Quin’s hair.

“What are you doing?” Quin utters, and clears his throat with a growl.

“I recognise these herbs.”

Quin's nose flares.

I notice his fingers trembling on the tree.

Chaos gasps. "Were those redcloaks chasing you? Are you a wanted criminal?"

Quin lashes out sharply, "What if I am?"

Chaos jerks back at this before steeling himself again. "Then I guess I've become an accomplice—"

But Quin is already being swallowed up by the forest, having turned away in disbelief .

As Chaos huffs off to fume over this rude young man and vow never to help him out of a tight spot again, I shake my head and follow after Quin.

He limps from trunk to trunk until he's out of sight, then uses magic to hoist himself into the air.

He doesn't ride the wind long—around a few trees he finds his horse drinking at the river and gratefully settles upon its back.

He picks up the reins, stares at them, and suddenly laughs; laughs so hard birds flap into the air and squirrels scamper.

He presses the leather against his forehead and massages with a groan.

"Will I ever look at a horse the same way again?"

With a heart-warming chuckle, he starts to make his way through the woods.

He's too fast. The scene is blurring around him and I struggle to keep up.

When he pauses a moment, navigating a fork in the forest path, I grab hold of his arm and hoist myself into the saddle behind him.

He carries on unaffected—he is a memory, after all—but I slip my arms around his waist and breathe against his soft cloak all the way into the capital.

He dismounts, slides out his cane, and snaps his way quickly into Pavilion Library, leaving his mount in the care of an aklo.

I shadow him through the library and outside again to the garden of pavilions.

A slightly younger Skriniaris Evander occupies one, piles of books open before him but no cat in sight.

“Your highness.” Evander bows and eyes Quin shrewdly. “You’ve come to tell me something.”

“That Caelus Amuletos. I bumped into him again. No—rather, he bumped into me. ”

“Will you settle on a laugh or a scowl, your highness?”

Quin’s scowl turns into another laugh before he forces himself to school it again.

“It was surprising?” Skriniaris Evander asks. “Perhaps enjoyable?”

“It was... interesting. Infuriating.” Quin plunks himself onto a chair and tips his head towards the pavilion roof. “I should try harder to avoid him.”

Evander pauses, shuts the book in front of him, and looks intently at Quin. “Why?”

You've followed him for years. You're fascinated by him."

Quin closes his eyes. "I can't be."

"Can't you?"

"Name a single king who has had a genuine lasting friendship."

Skriniaris Evander taps a pondering finger over his mouth and then leans in to share a secret. "You're not king yet."

I gape at him and sidle around the table until I'm close enough to bop his nose. "Seriously, that's your answer?"

I turn to Quin and wish he could somehow see me. I want to say he can have genuine relationships, that he will. That we will. But... in the end, don't we only have stolen moments? In the end, isn't this just one of them?

The memory begins to fade, and I gaze sadly at Quin before heading back through his beautifully recreated memory to the woods where the next door waits.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

I watch quietly from afar as Quin canes his way out of his dance academy one late evening and spies Chaos slipping down an alleyway, gaze darting like he's up to no good.

Quin hesitates, hands his cane to his aklo, and tells him to meet back there later.

Bolstering his pained leg with magical winds under his long winter cloak, he masks himself and follows Chaos through a narrow, icicled street and down icy stairs to the pathway beside the canal.

There in the distance, huddled by fires under a bridge and around little fissures of warm air opened by an earth shake, are the homeless and the sick.

Their coats are threadbare, and their hands blue from cold.

Chaos, a mere few steps ahead of Quin and unaware of his presence, sighs—and slips on ice toward deathly cold canal water.

Quin turns his hand. Wind pockets Chaos and helps steady him, giving Quin time to grab him by the arms. Chaos turns his hooded head over his shoulder to see his saviour. He blinks and then laughs. “Maskios! ”

“That’s not my name.”

“Who are you then?”

“What are you doing down here?”

Chaos finally shifts out of Quin's hold and faces him. "Did you follow me?"

"You looked like you're up to something you shouldn't be."

"That's not an answer. Are you here to stop me? Or help?"

Quin looks from Chaos to the people huddled beyond. "Why not. I'm a criminal, after all." Laughing, Chaos lifts up on his tiptoes, grabs Quin's hood, and pulls it up for him.

"Follow my instructions."

He takes Quin's hand and drags him along under the bridge. There, he puts Quin in charge of his apothecary pouch and moves down the long line waiting along the wall.

"Why not use a medius spell rather than all these simplex ones?"

"Have you not heard how sharp the blade of a guillotine is?"

"I've seen... I mean, you've never used medius spells before?"

"Only when I'm sure I'll get away with it. The local luminist loves to—"

As if summoned, glowing white robes appear at the other end of the underbridge, a spiritual bell ringing accompaniment .

"Live virtuous, modest lives. Follow the rules of the linea, and be reborn as linea. Pay homage at the luminarium."

Chaos grabs Quin with a yelp and crouches out of sight, huddling in the dark behind a brazier.

“Why are we—”

A palm stops Quin’s mouth. Quiet .

Finally, when the luminist is gone and the sound of his bell has become faint, Chaos lets out a long breath of relief and drops his hand. He pauses upon catching Quin’s gaze. “He and I don’t see eye to eye,” Chaos says. “If he sees me, he’ll tell Father.”

When they return to their work, the next in line is a child—a young girl, thin and weary, with a rash of red rings over her pale skin. Her mother holds her close. “Is it plague? Is she going to—”

“It does look fearsome, but I’ve seen this before. Do you play in the woods?” Chaos asks the girl. “Did you touch a plant that looks very similar to strawberry vine?”

She nods, and Chaos smiles.

“She’s touched thistleweed. Harmless—it’ll fade on its own eventually. But...”

Soon after she absorbs his spell, the rash is gone and her skin is restored.

By the time Chaos reaches the end of the line, it’s past midnight. As they move back up to the street, Chaos sags suddenly, exhausted. He shivers in Quin’s arms when they catch him. “Windy. ”

“Let’s sit a moment.” They rest, and Quin subtly ceases the wind supporting his leg.

Across the canal, the luminarium glows brightly with magic under a sky full of stars.

Quin’s gaze fixes on the sight for a long moment, until Chaos’s bow towards the glow draws his attention. “The way you were with the luminist, I thought you didn’t

care about the Arcane Sovereign.”

“I distrust the idea that if we follow linea rules we’re reborn as linea, and I have definitely—repeatedly and shamelessly—broken linea rules. Bowing seems redundant. And yet...” A shrug. “Just in case .”

Quin takes this in. “I’ve told myself over and over that I shouldn’t do certain things. And yet, I keep doing them anyway. Telling myself not to seems pointless, but still. I keep trying and failing.”

Chaos nods. “Are you trying and failing to reform your criminal ways?”

“As successfully as you are.”

This, Chaos finds amusing, but he soon sobers. “I wish I could practice as a vitalian. There’s so much I don’t know, so many spells I’ve only heard about. Even more I haven’t.” Then, abruptly, Chaos springs off his perch and races off.

Quin watches him slip and slide down the curve of the icy bridge and into the shadowy streets. He shakes his head, smiling, as the luminist from earlier appears again, approaching at his measured pace.

The next door opens to the clearing in the woods and Quin on horseback—dressed for drakopagon, his drakopala strapped where his cane had been before. A scarred aklo shifts nervously on a horse next to him.

“Must I practice with you, your highness?”

“I’ve no one else.”

“Your brother—”

“It’s his mother’s birthday. I can’t bother him.”

“What about the redcloaks?”

“Half would use the opportunity to break my neck.”

The aklo reluctantly steers his horse alongside Quin’s and stalls.

He points to a rustling overhead, and Quin sneaks his horse closer, looking up through the branches of a honey-tree.

There are two figures in the tree, mostly hidden by leaves.

Small flashes of magic light up the foliage. “Take this one, Akilah.”

“Must we really collect syrup here? There are trees in the city.”

“Not this kind. This tree is rare. It makes the best taffy.”

“Great. We’re not just pilfering royal syrup; we’re pilfering precious royal syrup. Have you not heard the phrase ‘off with his head’?”

“Look at all those stains, that’s years of syrup gone to waste. Years of delicious taffy that never came into existence.”

“You and your taffy!”

“Let the whole world know: I love taffy!”

“The difference between syrups is barely noticeable. Are you sure you didn’t come back here for other reasons?”

“Ha!”

At this, Quin folds his arms and clears his throat. “You love taffy more than life?”

Akilah yelps and Chaos finally makes his appearance, tumbling down a few branches only to catch himself by planting a foot on Quin’s shoulder and propelling himself back to relative safety. “Arcane Sovereign!” he gasps as he rearranges himself more securely on his branch.

Quin watches him, with pressed lips and a muddy boot-print on his cloak, as Chaos peers down from his perch and his grip on the branch falters. He steers his horse a step forward, closing the distance to barely a foot, and flicks his finger lightly against Chaos’s nose.

A laugh. “Maskios! We meet again.”

“Not my name.”

Chaos leans precariously downwards. “Who are you then? Are you really a criminal?”

He twists out of reach when Quin tries to flick him again.

“You can call me . . . Calix Solin.”

“Sure, Maskios. I’ll do that.”

“I travel here a few times a year to study,” Quin says, glaring. “From Hinsard. ”

A hand reaches down to lift one of Quin’s braids. “A scholar from Hinsard.” Chaos breathes in the scent of magic. “Why hide your true appearance then?”

Quin holds Chaos's gaze, unabashed. "I have trouble with unwanted attention. My magnetic beauty becomes problematic. Like Skeldars."

Chaos drops Quin's braid and bursts into a laugh. "I'm part Skeldar, does that mean I have this magnetic beauty?"

Quin regrips his reins and looks away. His horse backs up a step.

"What do you think?" Chaos says, looking up through the branches to Akilah. "Am I handsome?"

"No. You're extremely pretty."

"Why don't I have trouble with unwanted attention?" he asks her.

"You scare all the girls off by 'testing' spells on me in front of them. They're afraid of their own faces coming to ruin."

"Huh." Chaos's brow furrows. "I haven't even noticed any girls." Quin shifts noticeably on his horse.

Chaos looks back at him and his aklo. "You play drakopagon? Are you any good?"

Quin scoffs. "Of course I am."

"Veronica is forever urging me to practice," Chaos says. "Come forward a few steps?"

"Why?"

"Three steps should do it. I can drop in front of you, or behind. Take your pick."

Quin grabs his drakopala, moves his horse out of dropping range, and smartly taps Chaos's rump. He looks like he's about to stop all this in its tracks, but he pauses, glances at his aklo, and relents. "Give him your horse," he says. "Go back."

Chaos looks smug as he drops into the empty saddle; Quin, clearly a little bewildered by his own choices, looks apprehensive but resigned.

Chaos grips and regrips his reins. "Syrup's a bit sticky."

Quin flicks a lazy finger and Chaos sighs at his now-clean hands. He lifts a knuckle to his mouth. "What a waste. Should've been licked clean."

Quin turns away, eyes closed, and moves his horse forward.

The hollering and laughing can be heard long before they reach the drakopagon pitch. Over the rowdiness of a half-dozen young men on horseback, tossing a tied-up bundle from player to player towards a large hoop goal at one end, comes the distinct sound of panicked meowling.

Quin's eyes narrow. Chaos hisses and urges his horse over the low fence; Quin catches his breath, curses, and hurries after him.

"Give me that cat."

The players turn towards Chaos, scowling. "Get off the pitch. It's ours."

"You're torturing it."

"No one wants to drop it. It adds stakes to the game. Better for practice."

"How'd you like to be tied up and thrown around for fun? "

When Quin pulls his horse to a stop at my side and demands the cat's release, they snicker. "Who do you think you are, the king?"

Chaos bites back. "Who do you think you are, rich bullies with nothing better to do?" He ducks the swipe of a drakopala from one of them as another puffs out their chest.

"We're all first-born sons of high-ranking officials! We'll be running court someday!"

But in short order the youth carrying the bundle collapses onto his horse under a sleeping spell, and the cat is safe in Chaos's hands.

He turns his horse, but he's met with a barrage of nasty spells from the rest and Quin is kept busy blocking each one. "Get to the woods."

While Chaos makes his escape, Quin faces the fight.

Six against one, all well-trained in sentinian magic, spell after spell.

One slices through his sleeve—his shield blasts at them, but they keep coming.

He becomes a challenge; someone who must be taught a lesson.

He sweats as he holds them off until, finally, redcloaks interfere.

Only when the young linea are gone, escorted to their homes, does Quin sag into his saddle.

He gnashes his teeth as he spells the cut on his arm.

By the time he emerges into the clearing, Quin is calm and collected. At least, on the

outside. He moves his horse forward and faces Chaos tightly, the flash in his eyes hinting at what's roiling inside.

Chaos shifts his horse until he can nudge Quin's foot from its stirrup. He slides his own foot in and puts weight on it as he leans over, carefully tucking the sling he's fashioned for the cat to lie in around Quin's neck. "There-there. Maskios has money. He'll take care of you."

When he's resumed his seat and his own stirrups, he cocks his head at Quin and pats the bundle at his chest. "Why are you still glaring at me like that?"

"That was dangerous. You risked your life. For a cat ."

"They might've killed it!"

"You can't save everyone!"

Chaos turns his horse so they're facing the same direction, side by side. "I can try."

"Sometimes you shouldn't. Sometimes, you just have to make hard choices. Not everything can be saved."

"How defeatist."

"They'd have spelled you from your horse. You'd have been trampled. Killed. And in the end, it wouldn't matter. You're just par-linea."

Chaos's horse shifts with him as he recoils. "Just par-linea."

"That is the truth."

Chaos slides off his horse and hands Quin the reins without looking at him. Leaves rustle, and the cat against Quin's chest gives a faint meow.

The expression that Chaos doesn't see is one of yearning—yearning to explain, to make him understand. But Quin has no words. He grits his teeth and watches as Chaos leaves.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

Next door. A chamber in Pavilion Library, the very chamber I once used when I pretended to be Calix Solin myself.

I groan quietly, banging my head against the side of the mirror that memory-Quin is looking into as he magics on his Calix Solin mask.

Skriniaris Evander is bent over a table behind him, gushing over a small white cat in a basket. “Since your father won’t let you keep her, how about she stays here with me?”

Quin joins him at the table, cooing over the fluffy creature.

“What shall we call her?”

“Taffy,” Quin says quickly. Too quickly. Skrinariis Evander looks at him with a questioning brow.

Quin clears his throat, his jaw too stubbornly set. “Taffy is sweet. The cat is sweet.”

I sneak around his side and inspect his cheeks for the faintest hint of pink.

Perhaps he reimagined himself with this subtle flush to make his thoughts back then visible—clear to me.

I touch his arm as if he can feel me, and whisper as if he can hear me: “Did you choose Taffy because I said I love it?”

Skriniaris Evander hums. “You got this cat while you were with Caelus, didn’t you?”

Quin looks over sharply.

Evander murmurs, “Does he know who you are?”

“I don’t want him to feel obligated. Wouldn’t want him to feign his feelings.”

“You want to keep this secret until you’re sure he genuinely likes you.”

“Take good care of Taffy,” Quin says, rubbing the cat’s white head as she butts against him for more.

Evander smiles. “Of course, your highness.” He pauses. “Please be safe during the archery games.”

Quin laughs. “Every year, the same warning.”

“Your magic will be sealed for a full day! What if—”

“Only those who love me can see through my mask. I’m safe.”

Skriniaris Evander grimaces. “Just be careful.”

I follow Quin into the stables, where he mounts a lightly armoured horse. I squeeze in behind him and lean snug against his back, my head at his shoulder for the duration of the ride.

When we reach the base of the cliffs on the outskirts of the capital—with that treacherous path curving and winding up into ever-present clouds—Quin is ushered into the fenced-off area where the games will be held .

I've been surrounded by all this fencing and these colourful flags before. I snuck in to watch these games often in my youth. I'd snuck in to watch this game as well...

Quin tightens his vambraces and checks his bow and arrows, then steers his horse past the stands into the arena. A dozen mounted contestants are grouped at the other end, and upon spotting Calix Solin, two peel off towards him—one female, one male; both disguised.

"Son," the woman says, and the memory of her disguise fades to reveal Casimiria's real face.

Quin stops his horse. "Mother. Brother."

Nicostratus's mask dissolves around his smile. "Who's this then?"

"Calix Solin, scholar from Hinsard."

"Well, Calix. Let's see how much you've improved."

Quin boinks his brother over the head with the end of his bow, and Nicostratus tosses his head back with a laugh. He goads Quin into a race towards the other end of the arena but Casimiria beats the both of them and they bow graciously to her greatness.

She then proceeds to boink Quin on his head in return. "I taught you both the archer's skill, and only one of you has beaten me."

I can feel his laughter bubbling from him and into my chest. "Brother, do you hear that? My mother praises you."

Casimiria grins at Nicostratus. "But you." She hones her gaze on Quin. "Shoot 'em straight."

Quin exaggerates a sigh. “I might. If you ever play fair. ”

After each contestant has swallowed the spell to block their magic, the games begin.

It’s a feast for the eyes, now as much as it had been then.

The targets are moving, the archers mounted.

Each round gets progressively more challenging.

Quin smacks the bullseyes with mesmerising ease, and by the eighth round, the spectators are cheering frantically—only the three disguised royals are left fighting for the Golden Bow.

Nicostratus grins at Quin. “Want to bet you go out next?”

“I’m a smart man. So I’ll say no.”

Nicostratus laughs and, at the wave of a red flag, he’s off, shooting ever smaller targets with swift precision. Casimiria sidles her horse close to Quin’s, admiring the show. “I’ll get the Bow this time. Bet on me .”

“Honestly, Mother.”

She smirks and lifts her chin towards the stands. “Who’s the young man who hasn’t taken his eyes off you?”

Quin startles and searches the stands. My hands grow damp and I clutch at the folds of Quin’s cloak. I feel the precise moment he spots my younger self. His entire body tenses and stills, and I bury my face in his shoulder with a groan before bravely peeking over towards Chaos.

He's dressed in his older brother's wedding clothes, 'borrowed' so he can pass as linea and enter to watch the games.

They were deep violet, lined on the inside with bright floral silk, golds and reds and greens, and they're billowing in the wind as he stands beside Akilah, hugging a fence post at the front of the stands.

It's not the robe, though, that makes me bang my head against Quin's shoulder in mortification.

It's the gaping mouth and unabashed stare.

It's the now-clear glimpse of vulnerability in a young man who's on the brink of realising something.

Quin's horse shifts under him, like it too feels how unsettling that stare is.

I recall this moment vividly—how surprised I'd been to see Calix Solin participating in the games; how impressive I'd found him, shooting those targets with barely a glance as he rode and jumped obstacles. I recall how wildly my stomach swooped; how impossible it was to let go of that post.

I also recall how itchy I'd felt, how restless; how frustrated I was with all of it. How suddenly annoyed I got...

Chaos scowls at Quin, lifts his chin, and looks pointedly towards Nicostratus finishing a perfect course. He cheers, loudly, for him.

When the flag waves for Quin to take his turn, his whole body is strung taut—I can feel it, the rapid pounding of his heart, the uneven bounce in his saddle. He glances towards Chaos, who is turned away from the pitch as if he doesn't care at all.

I swallow and shake my head. “It wasn’t like that,” I murmur into a memory that can’t change. “He’s gripping that post hard. His heart is hammering. He’s aware of you.”

Quin hits the first targets, sheering through the middle of Nicostratus’s arrows. The crowd roars with excitement, but Chaos does not turn his head.

He nocks two more arrows and pulls the bowstring. Both smack neatly into the target. Bullseye. But still, Chaos doesn’t look.

Another arrow nocks, the bowstring pulled tight. But this one doesn’t fly towards the target. At the last second, with an audible grind of his teeth, Quin swings his bow and releases. The arrow arcs and thunks into Chaos’s post, pinning his sleeve to it.

At the shriek from Akilah and the crowd, Chaos whips his head around and meets Quin’s glare with one of his own.

Only when Quin turns his horse at the other end of the arena do their frustrated, hate-filled gazes break.

Quin doesn’t even bother finishing his round.

He rides off the pitch without a word to his mother or his brother, steers towards the winding path and climbs it halfway up the cliff.

When the first clouds shield him from view, he stops his horse and looks out over the rocky edge into the mist.

“What are you doing?” he mutters to himself. “He didn’t watch. So what?” He grips his reins until his knuckles are white. “You’re the crown prince! Act like it.”

A distant voice calls from below the clouds.

Quin shifts abruptly and watches as a violet-cloaked figure emerges through the cloud, on horseback.

I hold his trembling body tighter around the waist.

Chaos lifts his sleeve with the hole in it, then pulls the incriminating arrow from his boot. “Why?”

Quin strangles his reins but doesn’t speak.

“Because it doesn’t matter if you hit me, a par-linea ?”

“If I’d wanted to hit you, I would have. ”

“So you just wanted to ruin my sleeve?”

“You were unchivalrous.”

Chaos waves the arrow. “And what was this?”

“ That ,” Quin says, starting tightly but pausing to look away with a sigh, “was an overreaction.”

Chaos seems to freeze when he registers what Quin has admitted. He sinks the arrow back into his boot and dangles his ruined sleeve. “I’ll get in trouble for this.”

“I’ll replace it.”

“It’ll never be the one my brother got married in.”

I feel his shock. “Why did you wear that?”

“Getting into these games isn’t exactly easy. I don’t own any fancy clothes. I suppose I could get married, get a wedding robe of my own...”

“I’ll give you some of my clothes.”

“And boots. So I can run far away while you stand there barefoot.”

“Why would you run from me?”

Chaos and his horse shift and this time Chaos looks away, his cheeks flushed. He scowls towards the glistening mist. “You’re... unnerving.”

“Unnerving!”

“Exactly that!” Chaos retorts.

Growing tension coils in Quin’s muscles, but he clears his throat and speaks more softly. “Around me, I’d say, you’re rather shameless.”

Out comes the arrow again. Chaos steps his horse right beside Quin’s, until he has the sharp end pointed at Quin’s chest. “When have I ever done anything shameless? ”

Quin laughs—a repressed laugh that Chaos doesn’t hear or see, but I feel it, rumbling through him. And into Quin’s hair, I laugh too. I laugh so hard I have to use his braids to dab away my tears.

“No, you’re right,” he finally drawls, lightly plucking the arrow from Chaos. “Not shameless at all.”

Chaos stares at his hand where it's still tingling from the arrow sliding over his palm, then he quickly grabs his reins and clears his throat as he turns his horse to face the same direction as Quin's. He's jumpy and restless, though not too visibly. I held it in better than I thought.

He flashes a sideways glance at Quin and points upwards. "First to the third sharp bend."

"I play drakopagon. You have no chance—"

Quin stares after Chaos as he launches forward, and blows a laugh out skyward before spurring his horse into the chase.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

“Y ou turn your corners too hard and it startles your horse.”

Chaos pats said horse under the mane and Quin slows his, watching Chaos move ahead. His borrowed violet robe flaps in the wind. He’s quite the sight, on his horse on this narrow misty path, a huge shelf of rocky cliff rising on one side while a deep drop disappears into the clouds on the other.

“She’s used to pulling carts, not racing. You had the advantage—”

The earth moves. A sudden sharp jolt, and tremors growing stronger. I tense around Quin. I know roughly what happens next, but I’ve no memories of my own, not of this part.

“Cael, move!” Quin is throwing out his hand like he expects a shield to appear—his body freezes; I can feel the thunderous beat of his heart. He’s still blocked. No shield will come.

Sound echoes around us as rocks tumble onto the mist-shrouded path, striking like a volley of arrows. Quin’s horse staggers under another jolt; my grip on him tightens as he struggles to stay steady while Chaos’s mare throws its head and rolls its eyes in panic.

A sharp crack slices the air and a rock strikes Chaos directly on the temple. His eyes flutter closed, and his body slumps forward.

“Cael!” Quin kicks his horse into action, but another rock hits the flank of the mare and she bolts up the treacherous path with her unconscious rider as rocks continue to

fall.

When the shaking stops, the mare doesn't.

Quin urgently closes the distance between their steeds, his feet coming out of the stirrups. He anticipates what'll happen next: the mare hurtling around a tight corner—

Quin and I watch in horror as Chaos's violet robe flares and he slides from the saddle, inch by inch.

The moment stretches, his fall slowly moving violet. We're too far away.

Quin's agonised roar and his sudden leap has me tumbling off the horse too. I hit the ground hard, but I don't care. I scramble onto scratched knees to watch as Quin thrusts himself towards the cliff edge, towards a lethal drop through sparkling clouds, towards that violet robe.

He snags it, barely, his arm stretched over the edge and his fingers just curled around the hem. The material protests, tears, and Chaos's limp body drops a foot further over the cliff. "No!" Quin cries angrily. "I don't allow it."

His face strains as he reaches with his other hand and snags Chaos's arm.

The weight and his own precarious position drag Quin forward and the ground shudders again, a smaller quake, but enough to have them both falling another foot.

Quin's whole chest is over the edge now, only his hips and legs—one always in pain—to keep them tethered to the earth.

His good leg has hooked around a solid protruding rock; he uses that as leverage as he heaves.

I shout at him to drop me and save himself, grab him and try to pull him to safety, but the memory carries on and I sob as Quin struggles.

As he is pelted by falling stones.

As he cries out in pain.

As his exhausted body weakens.

As he refuses to let go.

He digs his fingers into Chaos's arm, the muscles in his own bulging against his shirt. His jaw is clenched tight and pearls of sweat dribble down his temple, the fragile rock threatening to crumble under him at each small shift.

He doesn't give up. First in small arcs that grow into bigger ones—rocking them ever closer to the edge, loosening the rock under him more and more—he swings Chaos until he has enough height and then he unhooks his leg from the one rock holding him...

Quin flings Chaos onto the path, thrusting himself around with the force until he's sitting with his back to the deathly drop—his back almost over the deathly drop. My breath is stuck in my throat and doesn't release until he's moving forward, away from the crumbling edge.

He cries out as his leg gives him grief, but he grits his teeth and drags himself to Chaos's side. A trembling palm pushes blonde locks aside and cups Chaos's cheek—and lightly claps against him. "Caelus!"

He presses his ear urgently to Chaos's chest. A shuddering breath leaves him and he grinds their foreheads together. "Wake. You must wake."

Quin sits up and whistles for his horse. Using the rocky wall, he staggers to his feet, dragging Chaos with him. Using all his strength, balancing on his good leg, he slings Chaos over the horse's shoulders and swings up behind him.

The path down is broken and perilous, covered in loose rock; they don't get far before a massive slip bars the way entirely. Quin's sigh is long and heavy. "We'll have to go over the mountain."

He turns and carefully steers his horse up the winding path, one hour, two, more... until the clear sky is turning peach, making the clouds below glitter with deep pinks. "We'll have to camp soon," Quin murmurs. "It should be around here somewhere."

'It' turns out to be an abandoned luminarium, one of the small ones often found in remote places like this, so travellers can stop along their journey to pay respect to the Arcane Sovereign.

Quin carries me inside and lies me next to the curving muraled wall, away from the hole in the domed roof that looks up to deepening purple skies—and the cold that comes with them.

I move about the space, trailing my hand over every intricately recalled detail.

It's not much bigger than my childhood bedchamber, perhaps six travellers could squeeze in here at one time.

Fewer, if there ever had been a violet oak here.

Now under the open centre of the dome there's a pit where someone before us made a fire.

I glance at Quin, who has found an old luminist robe and rolled it to make a pillow

under my head. He looks over, and for a second his eyes spark; I think he can see me, but then I see he's looking at the firepit.

Twenty minutes later, he's scabbled together enough wood to make a crackling fire and unearthed some jars of liquor buried outside.

He's sniffing the contents of one of these jars when Chaos stirs. Immediately, Quin freezes and I catch the suspended rise and fall of his chest. He's holding his breath. He doesn't turn around but I can feel how aware he is of every subtle move Chaos makes, each stirring sound.

At Chaos's croaky voice, Quin slams his eyes shut and releases his breath .

"Where..." Chaos is blinking, taking in the murals, turning his head to the fire and the figure crouched before it. "Maskios? What happened?"

"You were knocked out. The path was blocked; we had to ride into the mountains."

"We're in the mountains?"

"I thought we could take the trail down the other side. But now that we have to camp, we may as well leave the way we came. Once my meridians reopen tomorrow, I'll clear the road."

As Chaos takes all this in and slowly pushes himself up into a sitting position, I lift the liquor jar and take a deep drink before setting it down with a thunk that of course neither of them will notice.

I bring my face right up to Quin's profile as he stares at the flickering fire.

"Why don't you tell him what really happened? How he almost fell; how you saved

him?”

“We’re stuck here for the night?”

“Will that be a problem? Will Akilah be searching for you?”

“I told her to go home. She may only start panicking in the morning.”

“Then she won’t be panicking too long.”

“What about me? Should I be panicking?”

Quin glances over his shoulder. “Would you? So I might see what that looks like?”

Chaos grins and winces, rubbing his head.

“Your meridians are still intact,” Quin murmurs. “Heal yourself.”

Chaos quietly does as he’s told, and Quin grabs the jar I drank from and gulps at the liquor.

Before he sets it down, Chaos is there, scooping it into his hands as he sits himself at Quin’s other side. He shakes the jar, listening to it slosh, and sniffs at the liquid. His eyes brighten with mischief as he glances at Quin. “I’ve never tried alcohol before.”

Quin immediately reaches out to take it from him, but Chaos holds it out of reach and turns to chug a whole lot down. “Quite sweet.”

Quin steals it back. “You’ll knock yourself out again.”

“You’re not secretly thrilled? You won’t have to deal with me for the rest of the

night.”

I see Quin balling the fabric of his cloak, the veins popping in the back of his hand. I cover his with mine and am surprised to feel even the ticking of his pulse.

Chaos starts rambling, progressively inching closer to Quin as the cool air becomes cooler. When they bump together, Quin hisses and instinctively clutches his thigh.

Chaos turns to him sharply and stares at his lap. “You’re wounded. Let me—”

Quin bats Chaos’s approaching hands away and shuffles in my direction, until I feel his warmth pressed against my leg.

Chaos glowers.

“It’s nothing. Just a few rocks. I’m fine.”

Chaos doesn’t stop. “This again? Why won’t you let me heal you? Because I’m par-linea. That’s ridiculous.” He pushes up his sleeves and starts summoning a spell. “If I’d known you were suffering, I would’ve healed you first—”

His spell blows up in his face, sending his hair upright. He blinks, puzzled, and frowns. Shakes out his hands. He tries again to call his magic but it merely fizzes... He looks at Quin. “I... I can’t. It must be the liquor!”

Quin can’t hold it back—he laughs and reaches out, flattening Chaos’s hair.

Chaos stiffens under the touch and their gazes meet.

Suddenly Quin is dropping his hands and Chaos becomes absorbed by the dancing flames.

“So,” Chaos says, swallowing, “have you practiced archery for a long time?”

“From the moment I could lift and aim a bow.”

“Even though you can use magic?”

“Sometimes magic isn’t an option. We need other ways to survive. To fight.”

Chaos looks at his hands and sighs, frowning irritably. “Even to heal?”

“What if this happens again? When your magic fails?”

“I’d rather never drink again!”

I sigh and stare sadly at Chaos. He’s just eighteen—too young, too prejudiced.

If only he’d truly listened, if only he’d spent more time learning other methods alongside vitalian ones.

He’d have saved more lives along the way.

Maybe if he’d learned, those who died waiting on magic in Kastoria wouldn’t have.

“I desperately want to be a vitalian,” Chaos whispers towards the fire. “It’s my dream. ”

Quin’s voice is very soft. “Your only dream?”

“If I ever stray from it, I hope someone will plunk me back onto my right path.” He tilts his head back towards the dome and the smoke rising into a starry sky. “I think that might be true love.”

“Helping one stay on the right path?”

“No. Helping one another stay on the path.”

The rest of their conversation is muted, as if Quin remembered talking but no longer the content.

As if, perhaps, Quin had been caught up in that particular one.

They talk until they yawn, until they curl next to the fire on their sides, the tops of their heads barely a few inches apart.

I watch as they fall asleep; as they toss and turn, warming their fronts then their backs; as their heads shift closer and closer until, sleeping, they’re facing each other, their soft breaths tickling, their noses skimming.

The fire dies and the night deepens, and finally they’ve found peace.

I drink the remaining liquor while I sit against the muraled wall and wait. Quin’s imagined how this night together looked; he’s gifted this for me to see how he dreamed it happened. All these moments that have meant something to him, the big ones and the little ones...

Quin wakes at the first shimmer of dawn and opens his eyes to Chaos, sleeping serenely before him.

I crawl over and kneel for a better view.

His hand hovers near the back of Chaos’s head, like he wants to bury it in the silky locks of his golden hair, and a smile is ghosting over his face .

He pulls away sharply and sits, jaw twitching as he slams his eyes shut.

He swallows hard, and I follow a subtle shake of his shoulders to his trembling limbs.

Chaos stirs behind him and Quin stiffens; when it's quiet again, he pulls himself to his feet and hobbles outside to a blast of fresh air in his face.

He breathes it in deeply, but as if it's not enough, he gets on his horse.

I hurry to jump on behind him as he steers his mount and rides down the narrow path.

His cloak whips in the wind, his hair is tossed back, his grip on the reins is white.

I have to hold on tight not to be thrown off—and Quin claimed these memories are safe! One sharp bend and I might fly off the cliffs for real.

He slows as he reaches the slip blocking the path but the tension he carries thrums ceaselessly under my fingers. “You can’t, Constantinos Quintus. You mustn’t !”

I sigh. This is why he left me alone up there.

I lightly nip his shoulder.

Chaos will wake to a cold luminarium, Maskios nowhere to be seen.

He'll wait for an hour, thinking perhaps he was out to forage for food, or find Chaos's mare.

When he doesn't return, Chaos will pick himself up and start walking down the path on his own, becoming more and more irritated with each step.

He'd talk to himself. Hadn't we started to get on?

Why then did I wake to no one, no word left, and no idea if we'll ever meet again?

I have no horse! The beating my father will give me.

.. And my brother! His ruined robe...

Chaos would make vows on his long trek down the mountain. He'd pound his fist towards the sky and declare Calix 'Maskios' Solin could not be relied upon; could not be trusted. Just wait, if he ever saw the man again! A mask is, after all, a lie.

I grind my head against Quin's braids while Quin mutters to himself to get under control.

“ Brother .”

I look up sharply, as Quin does too. Nicostratus slows his mount to a walk and stops on the opposite side of the slip. “Been searching all night,” he shouts. “You've scared me.”

Quin manages a chuckle as Nicostratus throws out a spell that blasts the fallen rock into fine dust.

When the path is cleared, Nicostratus grins. “Coming? Or are you suddenly fond of the mountain path?”

Quin hesitates. He looks over his shoulder, back up the path to where Chaos is, somewhere hours off, stumbling and cursing him. He shifts in his saddle. A long misty breeze sails over him and Quin turns in it towards his brother, his mind set. “Let's go.”

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The taste of canal water in the dark air pulls me forward, and I tumble down a bank under a moonless sky.

One splash is followed by another. I catch my breath as I make out Quin's silhouette, tight with frustration, rowing violently.

As he passes, a lantern hanging at the stern casts dim light over the staunch line of his jaw, and I'm desperate to understand.

I run alongside the canal and make a leaping jump into his boat.

I'm almost knocked out again when Nicostratus appears on the winds and drops onto my bench. I lurch to my feet and perch awkwardly on the side, between the brothers. Nicostratus is lightly armoured and wears his red military cloak, a contrast against Quin's dark clothes and darker expression.

Quin pauses mid-row.

"You're upset," Nicostratus murmurs. "But running off into the capital on this night..."

"Better than being trapped in here. "

"I'm sorry, brother. Father is thinking about your protection. Should he die... he's thinking about the overall good."

"Right now, Nico, I don't want to understand him."

Nicostratus nods sombrely, and slowly they enter a misty section of the canal.

I peer through the fog on a shiver and spy a craggy island with a castle intact.

Neither brother knows yet that this island will soon be ruined, will soon become that island, a place of death. Including the order for Quin's own.

We pass in silence, and Quin meets his brother's eyes, speaking gruffly. "Will you join me?"

"Military training. You know how volatile Uncle gets on this night."

"Then you mustn't be late."

Nicostratus kicks off out of the boat and treads on the wind, bowing to Quin with a grin.

"I'll come with you tomorrow night, no matter the punishment."

"Drinks at the academy?"

"You know it, brother."

Nicostratus soars off, and Quin stops rowing to pinch the bridge of his nose. "The overall good?" He shakes his head and picks up the oars again; with mighty pulls, he escapes the royal city and enters the capital.

At the first blooms of lovelights dancing around couples on the canal banks, I startle. The lovelight festival. This is that night. I suck in a breath—

There. A figure careens around the bend on the path that runs six feet above the canal

edge.

He's looking over his shoulder at the group of linea—those haughty firstborns of high officials from the cat incident—chasing him, flinging spells that Chaos has ducked and jumped and run from since they spotted him in town.

Quin stops rowing, frowning at the sight; Chaos turns his head, hurrying faster along the path, his thin cloak whipping behind him.

Quin almost drops his oar, and then swiftly steers his boat under the next bridge.

When Chaos streaks past, Quin flicks his hand and a gust topples Chaos off the path into the deep shadows below. And into his arms.

Chaos's eyes widen and Quin's finger presses over his lips.

“Where'd he go?”

“Must have reached the other side. Come, we'll get him yet.”

The rowboat drifts back out from under the bridge and farther away from them as the clank and clatter of their boots fades away.

Chaos is still frozen on Quin's lap. Quin's finger is still at Chaos's lips.

And then all around, lovelights twirl against the night sky, their reflections dazzling in the inky water.

The lights turn the trees into a rustle of moving shadow and glitter, dancing over faces as Quin and Chaos stare at one another.

I press a hand lightly to each of their chests.

Chaos's, I know, is a ruckus—he'd been so surprised at this sudden and timely appearance that he couldn't quite process anything. Quin's... is also banging hard.

He moves his finger gently off Chaos's mouth, and Chaos blinks.

He saw this moment almost the way I'm seeing it now: he's noticed something about the softness in that gaze; he's felt something in the shiver that rolls through him.

He's almost aware, and yet he doesn't trust those feelings.

He doesn't know what to do with them. His breath becomes trapped in the extended silence, and he tells himself hurriedly that all this is just.

.. relief. Relief at having evaded those nasty linea.

For the rest of the night, everything will be filtered through that, and the memory of waking up alone in an abandoned mountaintop luminarium.

His eyes glitter with a little loathing and a lot of life.

My palm, still pressed against Quin's chest, feels Quin's pent breath.

Chaos leans forward brazenly, like he might nip and pull at the mask on Quin's face.

Quin abruptly throws him off his lap, and Chaos lands in a sprawl on the bank.

"I'm not your enemy."

"You're not my friend either."

I feel the weight of those words on Quin; I hear his anguish as he reminds himself over and over that he can't have friends.

I grit my teeth. I want to shove this ignorant Chaos into the icy water so he'd wake up, so he'd see, so he'd admit the truth that is itching low in his stomach.

I fold my arms instead and sigh as I pin Quin with a disapproving glance. "Of all the men, this one?"

"What were you up to tonight, before you ran into those men? Should I drop you off to someone?"

My head whips back to Quin. "What a question," I say drily.

Chaos pats his belt, but the pouch he's hunting for came loose in the chase. He looks at Quin, his eyes suddenly glittering. "Are you hungry? How about some pecan puffs?"

"Pecan puffs?"

"Ground pecans in a creamy custard set into the lightest, flakiest pastries, and pretty taffy art to top it." The rumble of his stomach punctuates this reverent description. "Shall we share a plate?"

Head shaking, Quin picks up his oars. "You've lost your money, haven't you?"

"Please? They're a hassle to make so they only sell them at the lovelight festival. I'll have to wait an entire year..."

"I don't know. Buying someone dessert sounds like something a... friend would do." Quin suddenly deflates and quickly pulls his oars.

“What . . . Are you upset ?”

Quin pinches his lips.

“Well, I’m upset too,” Chaos says, walking quickly alongside. “You took off without a word!”

Chaos frowns when Quin looks at him, expecting this to be it, another sudden departure, but instead Quin is soon on the bank, tapping Chaos’s rumbling belly with the end of his cane. “Pecan puffs.”

As they move through the streets, he sneaks glances at Chaos while Chaos isn’t aware.

In fact, Chaos isn’t aware of anything—not the cold cobbles, not the pretty lanterns strung along the streets, not the flashes of lovelights blooming in the skies.

He’s thoroughly perplexed, trying to work Maskios out, to reconcile all the contradictions—he halts abruptly on a thought outside the inn, and then when they’ve barely taken their seats at a small table, demands, “Why are you still hurt?”

Quin stiffens, like he’s realised he’s almost given himself away. I take a seat and watch him for clues—there, a slight flush, quickly schooled. The beginning of his lie. “Father was furious at my absence that night. I was punished. I’m to heal without magic.”

“He’s tough on you.”

“He’s tough on everyone.”

He clears his throat when Chaos’s brow arches. “My brother disobeyed him too.

We're both hobbling on canes today."

"Then let's order sikelion lamb and emberfruit pheasant, too. And some borage tea."
Chaos grins. "With that, I can take away your pain."

"You just want more free food."

"We both win."

It's while they make their way through the dishes that soon fill the table that I notice new things, things that aren't in my own memories of this evening; things that Chaos is completely unaware of as he points out all the healing properties of their shared feast.

I smirk as groups of pretty women whisper from the edges of the room, pointing at Chaos, sighing. That blonde hair, that perfect face! He's here without a girl, it's during the lovelight festival, he must be unattached.

What would it take to attach him?

How about you faint beside his table and see if he comes to your rescue?

When she tries, Quin slyly flicks spells from under the table, causing her to topple into another man's arms.

Later, dancers are leaping and twirling around tables, the leader with her eyes fixed with fascination on my profile.

Again, Quin flicks a spell and she and her dancers fall into a great silky heap behind me.

While Chaos moans into a delightful bite of pecan puff, he flicks a spell at a woman merely gazing at me, and she spills her wine all down her skirts.

I lean in on my elbow, cupping my chin and laughing. “You’re like a king guarding his borders. Am I your kingdom, Quintus?”

Chaos suddenly puts down his pastry and looks directly over the table at Quin. “Enough.”

Quin shifts, chest puffed on a held breath, as if he thinks he’s been caught.

“Why do you keep frowning? Why are you sharing this meal with me? Why were you so upset before? ”

“I was upset before I met you tonight.” Quin looks away, his jaw quivering. “My marriage has been arranged.”

There’s one last crumb of pastry left on the plate. Suddenly Chaos’s gaze is fixed on that morsel as he squirms restlessly. “Arranged?”

“But I can’t. I really can’t.”

“Is she not nice enough? Pretty enough?”

“She’s plenty nice and plenty pretty. That’s not it, Caelus. Being with someone should be intimate, passionate. Should be felt deep inside. I can’t be that with her.” He looks at Chaos, something desperate in his gaze; in the shake of his head. “Do you understand? I can’t. ”

Chaos pales and I cringe at where his mind leads him next. His eyes wander down Quin’s body to where he disappears under the table, and lingers. He gulps.

I slink deep in my seat on a hammering heart. Chaos picks up the last morsel of pastry puff and pops it into his mouth, nodding. "I understand." He doesn't. The meal they've just shared... he suddenly sees it as part of a transaction. Payment for... medical help.

Quin's eyes close on a shaky exhale, only to open to Chaos leaning over the table with a pointed downward glance and a whisper. "I can get that happy for you."

I freeze along with Quin, and when Quin grabs his cane and hurtles to his feet, so do I.

I've never been so glad to flee. Quin drops money on the table and I latch onto his back, arms slung around his neck as he rides the wind back to his boat.

There, he alternates between hitting his cane on the bench and laughing and groaning .

I take his cane and have a whacking-groaning session myself. All these moments we've had, and I didn't know it. I should have savoured each one. Instead, like this night too, Chaos will storm off irritated at being suddenly abandoned.

Why are you irritated, Chaos? Really ask yourself why.

I slump onto the bench and swallow thickly as Quin takes up his oars and heaves them through water, faster and harder, until we're once more inside the royal city.

"I shouldn't see him again," Quin says finally. "I won't."

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The air shifts, heavy with the storm of emotions not yet.

.. fully realised. My feet hesitate at the threshold, my breath catching as I step through the door.

The royal chambers unfold around me, draped in suffocating quiet save for the hushed voices of the vitalians huddled in a corner.

Their grave expressions cut through the stillness, but my gaze snaps to the bed at the heart of the room.

Quin is kneeling beside a very pale, prone Nicostratus.

Gold-sashed Chiron steps forward and bows low. “If we can get white chryslaced fungi, he’ll have a chance. But...”

Quin stares at his brother, whose hand he’s clutching tightly. A bold, angry tear trails down Quin’s cheek. “I’ll find it. How long do I have?”

“Six hours, your highness, but—”

“Those pastries were meant for me! He only came in to...” Quin grits his teeth. “Send out the vitalians, shoot a flare if you find it. I’m hunting for it too.”

Quin pats Nicostratus’s hand and murmurs, “I’ll save you, brother. I’d give my life to save you.”

He rides through the capital to the Amuletos manor, where he spies Chaos leaving through the side gate with a woven basket slung over his shoulder. He snags Chaos off the path and deposits him on the saddle before him, flicks his reins, spurring his horse on.

From behind Quin, I see Chaos's breathless expression. "Maskios! This is a crime."

Quin grimaces and mutters but Chaos's objections aren't that strenuous. He makes himself comfortable, back pressed to Quin's chest, their thighs tight together, and they don't speak until Quin is steering his horse towards the cliff path. "White chryslaced fungi. Help me find it."

"White chryslaced—who's been poisoned?"

Quin grits his teeth. "I have until sundown to save him."

"Tell me," Chaos demands, "What did he consume? What are his symptoms?"

Chaos's voice comes out husky and his head bows forward when the situation has been made clear. "It's the wrong time of year."

"What?" Quin hisses, bringing the horse to an abrupt stop.

"You won't find chryslaced fungi here."

"I must ."

"You won't."

Quin's voice rises to a desperate yell. "Don't tell me I won't! I must and I will. My brother is everything to me. Everything. I'd jump off a cliff for him; I'd give him my

heart. I'd do anything. We will hunt every crevice of these mountains until we find our miracle!"

Chaos takes the reins from Quin and steers the horse back down the path. "We will find your miracle," he murmurs, ignoring Quin's fury. "But it won't be chryslaced fungi."

He rides swiftly from the mountains and into the swamplands. "You'd really do anything for this cure?"

Quin leans toward him when he slides off the horse. "You're not planning to hold me hostage, I hope."

Chaos lifts his hands to Quin's cheeks, smiling. "Aquamare can be used in place of the fungi. I'll find it, and you'll unmask yourself."

Quin rips out of his hold, and Chaos diligently buries himself in swamp as he fishes for the cure.

Quin stirs on his horse as he watches Chaos search the waist-deep water.

"How are you sure aquamare can be used?"

"Grandfather was once poisoned like your brother. Also the wrong time of year for the fungi. He'd studied water roots in depth—though they look different, the way they break down is the same, and it's this burst of poison they both release that's the antidote."

"Why don't the vitalians know of this?"

"Back then they wouldn't listen to him. He was par-linea. This cure survives only

through his notebooks and... well, me.”

I can feel Quin wants to leap off the horse, to hunt for the cure too, but he doesn’t know what to look for, and his leg...

After an hour of wading around, yanking and pulling at weed, even going under completely to search the depths, Chaos finds what he’s after—an insignificant-looking hunk of yellowed root.

He’s waterlogged, muddy and tangled in reeds, but he’s laughing as he wades back with his prize held high.

“Your brother is saved. Take off your mask!”

Quin fixes his gaze on the sun sinking behind distant hills. “There’s no point. I won’t be seeing you again.”

The mud at Chaos’s feet suctions around his boots and he’s rooted there, frozen, his grip still tight on the aquamare.

Finally, he’s able to speak. “Since I won’t be seeing you again, there’s no threat in me knowing the you behind your mask.”

“You won’t like him. Or perhaps you will, but for the wrong reasons.”

“I don’t care about your face! I want to know who’s beyond the magic. I want to know who I’ve spent this time with—”

“We’ve only shared a few moments.” Chaos doesn’t notice the rasp in Quin’s voice.

“Moments can be real too, if you want them to be.”

Quin's fingers squeeze a deathgrip on the reins. Very deliberately, he relaxes his hands.

"But they can only be truly real if you let yourself be vulnerable. If you can expose your true self. Without that, what we've had will never be deeper than banter and rivalry."

The tension in Quin's body tightens. "What?"

The aquamare scrapes across Chaos's cheek as he throws up his hands. "I thought you wanted to be friends."

Quin moves in close and snatches the aquamare. "I can never have friends."

I stare back as Maskios leaves Chaos behind. He won't have a word for it, but he will barely eat or drink anything for days. And even three years later, he'll still be going to the clearing in the royal belt, to the cliffs, to the canal under the bridge, and to this solitary swamp.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

Quin's cloak is drenched and the silver ribbon he wears spins and swirls in front of him on an icy breeze.

He stays kneeling there in a courtyard on King's Island in a downpour, all night. All day.

"Please, don't force this marriage."

The king marches up to him, crouches, hands gripping his son's arms. "Who's stolen your heart?"

Quin clutches his father back. "Just, please . . ."

"You need to produce an heir."

"I don't want to marry her."

"It's not about wants. It's about musts. Needs."

"I'll never sleep with her!"

"We'll see!"

The memory blurs, and I stumble to the violet oak. It's been almost three months now, and I can't stop myself. Every night I retreat into Quin's memories. Every night I torture myself, wishing...

I lean against the trunk, my breath hopping between a laugh and a cry as I look over all the doors I've passed through this night. Maybe just... one more .

This is that fateful day on Frederica's estate. Three years after Maskios left Chaos at the swamp.

Every time I visit this memory, my stomach twists.

It hurts, yet I can't help but come back.

I stagger across Frederica's courtyard to Quin.

He's shouting, but I know now he's not really shouting at her.

"He's the one behind Father's death, he's not stopped trying to kill off my brother—I just got word of yet another ambush!

He's only keeping me around until my son's named heir.

He's using Mother against me. He's blackmailed and bribed most of the ministers in my court!

Why? Why is he like this? How can I be rid of him? "

"Be calm. This won't help any—"

Quin swings his cane against a flowerpot and it smashes. He slams his eyes shut. "Sooner or later, it'll be my son underground," he chokes on a whisper.

I move around this version of Quin, taking him in.

He's almost the same Quin that posed as Calix Solin, my Maskios, but.

.. there's an anger in his gaze that wasn't as pronounced before.

He moves like he's swathed in shadows, and to protect himself he's formed a hardened shell.

When he's angry, this Quin will roar and snarl.

When he's touched, he will school his face and feelings as if he isn't.

This is King Quin.

"I won't let them suffer—"

I swallow down an ache and this time, instead of just watching, I reach out and touch Quin's gritted jaw. "I'm sorry for all the pain you've gone through. I had no idea you were carrying the weight of an entire kingdom on your shoulders." And here Chaos is, running up behind him, about to add more.

In a giant bound of blonde, Chaos leaps onto Quin's back. Quin freezes and spins around. "Who dares—"

The second Quin sees who it is, a bolt of light penetrates all his hardened layers; briefly, just briefly, I see Maskios. I see a jump of brightness in his eyes. I see a slight tremble.

This is why I keep coming back here.

Quickly, too quickly, it's gone.

“This won’t do your face any favours.”

Quin doesn’t shake him off. He lets Chaos cling to his shell like maybe, for these few moments, he wants that shell to be cracked open. “What about my face?”

“Good looks don’t last. No woman fawns over mean lines.” A flower appears before his nose. “Soulbloom?”

Later—after the small earthquake, after Chaos heals the rabid dog—Quin stares at his face in the mirror that hangs in his chamber.

I wish he could see my reflection close behind him.

“Don’t get involved. You cannot. Leave.” He closes his eyes and his throat bulges.

“He’ll hate you if he knows who you really are. ”

I shake my head. “When he knows who you really are, how could he?”

Quin steels himself and stamps downstairs with his cane. Perhaps all along he was preparing to leave, and then that akla comes desperately seeking help for her master, and Chaos is there, determined to help no matter the consequences.

Quin strangles the head of his cane and his eyes flicker before he surrenders. Perhaps he too is telling himself, just one more moment .

Then he’s escorting Chaos down the river to the cottage in a sea of lavender; he’s admiring Chaos as he heals the hurt Skeldar farmer. And later, he’s gripping his seat inside his carriage, commanding his aklo with eyes closed in defeat: “Send him a soldad.”

I leave the memory and fall to my knees at the violet oak, where I'd later pick up that soldad—the soldad that sealed our fate together, that made it impossible to separate.

The soldad that forged a path for me into the royal city; the soldad I tried to destroy, forcing Quin to abduct me from his brother; the soldad that stripped off one of Quin's masks.

The soldad that he still stamps.

I feel the ground shake. Violet leaves tremble above me. From somewhere a great distance away, I hear a muffled, "Cael, wake up. Cael. "

It's not time yet.

I need... just a little longer. One more door. Two. Maybe a few. Time runs differently here, I just need a few more minutes...

Ignoring the shakes, I dash through a series of rune doors.

Thinker's Hall and Quin's gold-threaded underwear; Pavilion Library as he holds his breath and lets Chaos read his pulse for the first time; the dance academy where Chaos unashamedly pretends to be Calix Solin—oh, how Quin laughs!

"Cael? You have to eat breakfast."

I'll skip it for more time here.

I dive behind the rune door where Quin drapes his cloak over Chaos when they're trapped underwater.

I see him at an antique jewellery stall at the market after the amorous spore incident,

requesting the owner track down a rare clasp.

I see the moment on the rooftop during the lovelight festival, when Quin realises Chaos likes his brother.

I see his crushing pain as he gallops to save Nicostratus from assassins.

I see his resolve to never see Chaos again.

I see him break it, entering the final exam as Chaos's patient with a desperate plea for him not to enter the royal city.

“Cael?” the voice outside the dromveske calls. “I’m off to get a bucket of cold water...”

Fine. Until then . . .

I relive the disaster of the royal city—all of it, from the wyverns to sneaking out into the capital to poisoning the king to ‘dying’ and awaking in his arms.

I see all of it through the eyes of a man trying and failing to keep his distance.

I see—no, I feel— the tender moment Quin gives in; the moment he knows he’ll be forever imprisoned in these feelings, the moment his shell is pierced and that younger Quin can be glimpsed again: it’s the moment in Kastoria, when he wakes from his coma to Chaos sleeping at his bedside, holding his hand with ferocious desperation.

I feel it all. I’m a shivery, wretched mess by the time I stumble back to the violet oak.

I’m a shivery, wretched mess every morning.

I scan the glade. No shaking yet. No sign of the impending downpour.

I've time to try one more. The one I've still yet to open.

It's brighter than all the others, with a mesmerising river-pearl sheen to the door.

Like there's something magical that can barely be contained beyond it.

I reach out and shiver at the ticklish thrum coming through the ancient wood. Please budge this time.

I push. And push. Every time, the same result.

Some doors are like this—hard to open. Some secrets need to be locked away.

I swallow, fingers trailing over the thrum.

“What do you need to lock away?” I glance at the last rune door and back at the pearly one.

This memory is surely the day we save Nicostratus from the crusaders, the day my meridians are destroyed, the day I believe my dream dies and I stare all my hurt into Quin's soul and say I should never have saved him.

I stumble back on a sigh. Maybe this is why the memory is here, yet impossible to open. Those feelings are part of our journey, but too raw. Volatile. That thrumming that I can still feel vibrating through the ground could be the storm from the hurt I caused.

I yank my hand away from the door, my stomach sinking.

Perhaps it's best I don't relive this. And yet...

I walk away, but like always I glance back at the glowing wood, frowning.

Eventually. Eventually, I'll—

The sky swooshes open with the deafening sound of water lurching out of a pail and dropping all at once.

The air is suddenly cold and thick with the wave rushing towards me from above.

At first the violet oak sags under the weight of the water; I gulp in the scent of wet earth and timber before the wave smashes over me.

I swim to the exit—

And lurch into a sitting position on my mattress, hauling in air.

Casimiria is holding the offending pail with a grin.

I squeeze water from my hair. “How many times have I said it's enough to douse the dromveske. You don't need to drench my body too.”

“Yes,” she says, a twinkle to her eye. “But it's more fun this way.”

“Mother and son. Both merciless. ”

Casimiria barks out a laugh. “Merciless, but with meaning.”

She sets down the pail, her expression sobering. I have a feeling I know what she'll say. I hurriedly rise off the bed and lift the wet blankets. “I'll hang these out.”

She bars my way.

I try to duck.

She catches me by the scruff. “You can’t only live in memories, Cael.”

I grip the blankets, suppressing the urge to retort, why not?

“They’re the past,” she continues gently. “Not what’s real now. Not what will be real in the future.”

The punch of those words knocks the air from my lungs. The dromveske is only a gift of stolen moments. Stolen moments are not forever.

How can I tell her I can’t help myself? How can I tell her I’ve been inside the memories so often now that I’m seeing Quin everywhere, in everything.

Like a ghost, he appears around me. In the water of the pond; in a passing aklo; in anyone with a cane.

My mind conjures his face so clearly, I’ve even reached for him, only for the illusion to shatter.

Even looking at Casimiria now, I see him.

I squeeze my arms around my wet blanket and force a grin. “You’re right. And it’s all your son’s fault.”

She laughs but I can see she does it to spare me from the full weight of her words. “Looks like he’ll be in some trouble when he returns.”

“So much you’ll have to hold me back. ”

“I’ve grown quite attached to you these last months,” she says, moving for me to finally pass. “So if it’s a small beating, I’ll even help you.”

My laugh borders on a hiccup. “Not for this one. This confrontation I’ll have to do myself.”

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I hurry into the part of the day I hate the most. It starts with a walk through dawn-blooming albsperras that leads me to the castle, along rune-etched walls of gold, to his majesty King Yngvarr's chambers.

He greets me from the desk he huddles behind, drowning in fur. In summer.

Braziers flicker either side of his desk. The heat is stifling, but I bear it as I deliver his morning tonics. After half an hour, the layers come off, and the windows open to a refreshing breeze.

King Yngvarr closes his eyes against the stream of sunshine and I squirm.

It's hard for me to settle on how I feel about this king.

His ever-youthful appearance lends him a mask of innocence that is far from the truth.

He's commanded his stormblades to burn whole ships with all crew on board.

He's silenced a Lumin in his court with a single swing of his sword.

He's threatened to put Quin's head on a pike.

He's promised to disembowel me if I'm ever caught lying .

But he's also kind to his servers; generous to his stormblades; loving towards his son.

“Come, Haldr,” King Yngvarr says. “Eat this cake.”

“Too much sweet—”

“Is bad for me. I know. So eat it and answer my questions.”

King Yngvarr is also sick.

Dying.

I haven’t told him.

I bite into the cake, struggling to swallow over the bitter truth trapped in my throat.

I hate this part of the day the most. As a healer, I want my patient to know his condition; want him to know he has less than a year left; want him to live his life accordingly.

But he thinks I have Lindrhalda’s touch. If he learns the truth...

Perhaps with this lie, I even deserve to die.

But.

I promised to hold out. I promised to look after Casimiria.

King Yngvarr might behold Casimiria with his heart in his eyes, might promise her everything in his world other than her freedom, might promise her that now , but as he gets sicker...

“This cake looks better,” he judges. “Does it taste it?”

I shake my head. “Yesterday’s was sweeter.”

“Then that shall be for the wedding celebration.”

So very loving to his son. Even when Prins Lief asked the king’s blessing to take my aunt as his wife, King Yngvarr only asked one question: do you love her ?

“Prepared your mask for tomorrow?” King Yngvarr asks.

“Casimiria made one for me, the day after she invited me,” I say.

King Yngvarr smiles. A secret smile. Perhaps he’s thinking about his own stolen moments, when he taught her how to carve— He coughs suddenly, and I take his pulse. “I’ll prepare some more tonics for you.”

“Once you’re done, take this badge and collect the wedding runes. I want them all blessed with Lindrhalda’s touch. Health and good fortune for all our guests.”

I smile over a wince. “Of course, your majesty.”

Each step through the castle grounds lessens the weight of my lies. Wind teases through my sweat-dampened hair and I tip a relieved sigh towards the sky. It’s been over a month since I’ve had permission to leave the castle confines, and I intend to savour it.

Stormblades line the streets, more than usual, but I’m unbothered; I have royal permission to be out in the town, and I swing the king’s badge as I pass.

At the dueller’s bridge, two grown men are fighting over a sack of potatoes.

A ludicrous display, yet no crowds have gathered .

And no crowds can stop me from ending it.

I knock them out with a spray of sleeping powder and divide the potatoes while they're unconscious.

I tie a sack to each of their arms, and drag one out of sight. "It's not worth your life."

As soon as he rouses, the man rushes away into the blinding sunlight with his potatoes.

I shield my eyes, glimpsing Quin's face as I blink out the blots. On a sigh, I head further into town.

But my imaginary Quin isn't done with me yet. When his face appears behind a cloak stall, I drag a sturdy grey cloak over the rack to curtain him.

Across the street, I enter the store selling wedding runes. A little bell rings and the older man behind the counter looks relieved. "You're here for the royal runes!"

I nod and he lifts a large black bag onto the countertop. "All made from the finest green stone, carefully carved and wrapped in silks. Nothing else like these in the entire kingdom."

I carefully tighten the drawstring and slide the bag onto my shoulder. The storekeeper ushers me out and closes up shop after me.

I'm in no hurry. I breathe in a summery breeze and detect a sweet scent.

I eagerly follow my nose to a stall in the middle of the street and purchase two sticks of taffy.

The first, I devour on the spot with a delighted smile; the second I take with me, savouring it as I stroll aimlessly among the busy crowds.

Warm wind blows around me and I turn my face into it not to get taffy stuck in my hair. I take another bite. The sticky sweetness exploding in my mouth brings me memories of collecting syrup from the royal woods, of stepping on Quin's shoulder, of trying to slide into his saddle.

I glance up from my last bite and spot Quin and his cane in the crowd close by. I stare longingly for a few moments, losing myself in those dark eyes, those beautiful braids, that jaw—I laugh, shake my head, and move on.

But today my visions of Quin are more insistent. He steps out of the crowd and snaps his cane alongside me, watching me quietly. I look at him again, admiring his conjured face, the way the sunlight bathes his striking features.

“Enough now,” I murmur and speed up. I should loop around this block and visit Auntie.

Quin's ghost follows along with an easy stride, and this time I slap my face. “She's right. Too much dromvesking.” I peel my fingers from my face. “Sticky.”

When Quin still doesn't disappear, when he starts to smile, I lurch to a stop and fling my taffy-covered hand before his face. “If you must haunt me, lick!”

I expect him to disappear—to see some other poor soul startled at my sudden declaration. Expect to feel a rush of embarrassment as I apologise.

What I don't expect is for Quin's apparition to grab my hand and lock his lips around my knuckle. Soft, warm. Too real. Heat rushes up my hand, my arm, and I stumble with a gasp. Quin secures his grip on me, pulling me forward, and I catch myself

against his chest, staring up into dark eyes .

Crowds rush around us, the sun beams overhead, a light breeze blows through his hair and mine.

I stare and I stare.

He pulls my hand towards his mouth, his whisper tickling my skin. “Your fingers are still sticky, shall I...”

I yelp and snatch myself away, heartbeat in my throat. “Are you really here?”

He shifts, nose grazing my ear as he pulls my hand once more to his chest, under his shirt and flutette. “Would you like to make sure?”

“Quin!”

He laughs and I rock unsteadily on the balls of my feet before grabbing his sleeve. “Was it you earlier as well? Why didn’t you say something?”

“I was curious how long you’d keep ignoring me.”

“I thought you were in my head.”

“Is that where I’ve been these months?”

I lift a finger and wag it before his nose. “Before you start smirking like that, I’d like to inform you that you’re actually in a lot of trouble.”

“Oh?” Quin’s eyes twinkle , and it’s very hard to breathe. This is not the hardened King Quin from the later rune doors, nor the more reserved Maskios. This Quin

before me is... someone who has temporarily put his stresses aside. Someone who has come for a last stolen moment .

A sudden shove to my shoulder has me stumbling sideways, and I feel the yank of the bag on my shoulder as it's ripped off me. Quin catches me before I hit the street, but it's not bruises I'm worried about. "The runes! "

I yank my head in the direction of a man running off with my sack of irreplaceable green wedding stones. "Stop him," I cry to the crowds, but all are lost in their own thoughts, their own frowns. Even the stormblades don't try.

Quin sets me properly on my feet and I race after the culprit, only to stop abruptly, come back, and tow Quin along with me.

I squeeze his hand hard, afraid if I let go he'll disappear and that will be the end of our last stolen moment.

He navigates the chase as best he can with his cane, but our culprit gets farther and farther away.

"Can you stop him with magic?"

"Best not to give myself away."

"I've seen how skilled you are at furtive spellcasting. Pretend he's chasing me."

Quin laughs. "Free my hand first?"

I look down at our joined hands and up at him, shaking my head. "Use the other one."

He shifts the hand in mine and, after my stomach drops in disappointment, he laces

our fingers together. My chest hitches at the soft slide of our skin and the pressure of his tightening hold, and I watch as Quin drums the fingers around his cane handle and sends out a sneaky spell.

An overhanging branch snaps, knocks our culprit to the ground, and pins him there. My legs no longer know how to move; Quin is the one who steers us over to the trapped man.

When I shift the leaves and see his face, I startle. It's the man whose face I healed before a restaurant of patrons. The man who conned me, who'd hacked off the captive king's... "You!"

He doesn't recognise me. Of course he wouldn't. I'd been wearing a curacowl. He frowns at me as he struggles to wriggle out from under the branch.

Quin rests a foot on the wood and our culprit swears at him. "Who are you?"

I glance at Quin and to the heaving mass half buried under green leaves. He doesn't recall the king, either?

"Never mind that," I say, rummaging under the scratchy bark to yank the sack of wedding runes free. "That's all we're after. Later, when you're free, you should go home and think about your life choices."

"Later?" he snarls.

Quin follows my gesture and suspends our culprit by the wrists from a nearby streetlamp.

"The spell will hold for twenty minutes."

I nod and reach up, and pull his leggings to his knees, exposing the long shirt tucked about his privates. “And that,” I say, slinging the stones onto my shoulder and turning away, “is for his braids.”

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I take Quin's hand and slink through backstreets, bypassing the square to the dueller's bridge. We stop in the middle and stare at the glistening glacier as a unit of stormblades marches at our backs.

"You're shuddering," Quin murmurs.

"You might be recognised."

"I'm in disguise."

I glance at Quin and pay more attention to his outfit.

He's wearing coarse fabrics of earthy colours, and plain vambraces, and a thick leather belt around a hide vest. His boots aren't his usual, polished ones.

These have faint rune scratches on them.

He's dressed as if he comes from the Skeldar countryside.

But what good are clothes when he flaunts his chiselled face like that?

"I've seen better disguises on you. I see right through this one."

Quin faces me, a pivot that feels like a wall of heat pressing towards me.

Ice is all around us, yet in this moment, I feel it will all melt into a gushing river and snatch us along with it.

His gaze fuses with mine and he leans forward without so much as a smile, as if he wants me to be certain how serious he is.

As if he wants me to feel it to my soul. “As I saw right through yours.”

My sack slips down my arm and swings to my front. I cradle the runes between us, holding his gaze, noting its slight flicker. I can see the memory that swims to the surface. I see it and experience it again, like I did inside the dromveske the first time.

It’s a cold night and Quin is a captive, sitting in a Skeldar cage, his hair already hacked off. His escort moves him relentlessly along the lantern-lit main street.

When I go through this door, the moment I see the moving cage I’m racing after it. With an angry shout that the stormblades don’t hear, I yank open the door and crawl into the small space.

I slide before Quin, swallowing hard. I know the state of his back, his chest. Know he must’ve been in pain everywhere.

So even though he can’t feel it, even though it’s only a memory, I carefully touch his legs, shaking to comfort him while he pretends to be stoic, while he holds his chin up and stares towards the lights of the temple in the distance.

The cage shudders over cobbled stone and stops suddenly.

Stormblades double-check it’s securely locked and scoff as they head into the inn for a gloating drink.

I spy the one who’ll soon splutter out his story about the Lumin king’s capture.

I remember Chaos on this night. He’s sitting with his aunt on the second storey. Just

above us.

If Chaos only knew.

My breath fogs in the cold night, wisping around Quin's jaw. I clutch his knees.
"Quintus..."

He tilts his head up suddenly, as if something's caught his eye, and I follow to the flash of something small falling.

It clatters against an overhead bar and drops onto Quin's outstretched hand.

His fingers curl around the object too quickly and I shuffle closer, peering along with Quin as he opens his hand.

A rush gravity has me grabbing a bar for support.

There's a pebble in Quin's hand. A golden one with a carved rune.

It's the one I tossed over the balcony.

The rune of finding one's . . .

I stare as Quin inspects the small stone. I close my eyes as he slips it into the folds of his ruined cloak.

I tremble as he hums.

I tremble again as I come out of the memory and continue to hold Quin's gaze.

We're alone on the bridge, the shelves of ice around us like sparkling curtains

dropped from the heavens.

It's only him and me and all the shared memories of his dromveske.

I can see his breath and my own as we relive them all as if they're playing out between us.

I'm his horse; we're helping patients under the bridge; we're saving a cat; he's pinned my sleeve with an arrow; he's over the cliff, not letting go; he's almost touching my sleeping face in the luminarium; he's catching me in his rowboat; he's fending off lovelight suitors; he's trusting me to provide a cure.

He's leaving for a long, long time . . .

I drop the bag of runes. Slowly, I lift the pads of my fingers to his cheek and skate them along his smooth skin, into his loosening hair. I found him again. Maskios.

He shuts his eyes and swallows thickly.

"You finally let me see the real you."

His cane clatters to the ground and he hauls me against his chest, soft winds curling around us; he has no control over them.

I wrap my arms around his neck, bury my face against his throat and those braids amongst his hair. How full I feel. A last stolen moment. The ache can come tomorrow, but it's not tomorrow now. Now, I'm on top of those frozen waterfalls, about to fall over them. A giddy rush; an emboldening one.

I laugh and grab a fistful of Quin's shirt, pulling his face down.

Right from the start, he's been helping me.

Not just the cliffs. Not just physically.

On a deeper level. I look up at him. "Whenever I veered off my path, you steered me back. Right from the start, right through, you've been helping the real me."

Quin cups my face and holds my gaze steady. Without warning, his nose becomes a whisper along mine as he sharply and playfully nips at my lips. "We've been helping one another."

I'm frozen. My heart is pounding where his lips pinched mine.

Every sense has shifted to that one throbbing point.

My gaze sharpens along with my breath. Quin is raising an eyebrow, daring me to be surprised.

And I feel the coiling of his quiet goading.

It's pulling so tight. I move my fingers from my lips and curl them around his nape.

I press him closer. I whisper, "I missed you—"

We collide in a warm gust that whips around us, our hair twirling dramatically as his lips land on mine. His hands are everywhere, on my shoulders, my arms, sweeping down to my hips.

I hit the side of the bridge. He urges me onto the ledge. His lips are soft and careful, eager and hard; they're refusing to release mine. No, mine are refusing to be released. My arms are curled tight around his neck. I'm holding onto him like I once held his

hand, with that ferocious desperation.

I feel the terrible pain of those days when he wouldn't wake up.

I grip tighter.

Something warm and bright begins to bubble inside my chest. It feels like the moment he woke; it feels like the moment of mutual knowing we shared in the coffin; like the moment I saw my soldad under the violet oak.

It feels like I'm falling from the tops of these waterfalls over and over.

Sharp thrills swoop through my body and pool low in my stomach.

The bubbling brightness is warm, almost too warm.

Each scrape and press of his lips makes the brightness expand.

It wants to burst out of me; it's aching to be released .

I want to laugh it out into a covetous kiss, and I want to yell.

But . . .

My hands clench around Quin and I shut my mouth firmly. This... this can't come out. This moment is meant to be intimate and fond and fleeting . Not something that would make him feel guilty. Not something he'd regret .

“What's the matter?” Quin asks, pebbling kisses up my throat.

I turn my head to face him.

“Magic,” I murmur on a swallow. “It’ll give us away.”

He doesn’t stop kissing me, but the winds cease and his balance wavers until he’s leaning against me. I steady him and grab a handful of loose locks and braids as I steer him into a softer kiss. “Do you hurt?”

“Didn’t you warn me I was in a lot of trouble?”

I laugh, and he laughs, and between our laughs the heavy weight of reaching the end lingers.

We stare at each other. Each shift apart adds to the sting behind my eyes. He scoops up his cane, leans on it, looks towards the castle in the distance.

His mother . . .

“He won’t let her go willingly,” I croak.

“I have a plan.” He meets my eyes. “Tomorrow at the wedding, be sure to act like you don’t know us. Tell Mother, too.”

“Us?”

“Me, and Nicostratus.”

I swallow thickly. “He’s here? ”

“Yes,” he says and glares into the hills. “To save you.”

“You won’t save me?” it slips out, and at the flicker in his jaw and his briefly shutting eyes, I wish I could claw the question back.

Quin looks at me, and the change is swift and painful. The warmth of his eyes cools and his jaw stiffens, and the hardened facade of the outcast king returns. “There are other things I must do.”

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I barely notice the streets passing. My chest is tight, full of silent sighs and unspoken questions.

What became of Skriniaris Evander? The old man was an echo of my grandfather and he had risked everything—distracted the regent so I could escape Hinsard.

And I'd left him. I swallow hard and send a quiet wish skyward, hoping he and his cat are safe.

I round the final corner, my feet moving on their own, only to be bowled over by a blur of motion at the gate.

“Goddess above!” A firm grip steadies me before I can stumble back. “I just finished with my last healing, and now I’m late for my fitting.” My aunt plants a kiss on my cheek, her touch brisk but warm. “Let’s steal a dance tomorrow, alright?”

And just like that, she’s gone, rushing down the street in a flurry of fabric and purpose. I stare after her, exhaling a short, wry laugh of admiration.

“Her work will always come first,” I say, mostly to myself. A warning. A reminder. I smirk slightly, shaking my head. “I hope Prins Lief is aware of that.”

A sharp whack lands on the back of my head.

I whirl around, half ready to curse the culprit, only to find Prins Lief himself standing there with arms crossed and brow lifted.

“Of course I am,” he says coolly. “Her dedication to helping others is one of the reasons I love her.” His gaze narrows slightly, assessing me with suspicion. “What are you doing here?”

The sudden shift in mood prickles my skin. For a moment I expect a scolding, as if I’d been caught climbing over the castle walls.

I yank the king’s badge from my pocket and lift the bag of runes for good measure, waving them between us like a shield. “I didn’t sneak out.”

“I didn’t suggest you had.”

“You were thinking it.”

He leans in, “And don’t I have good reason to?”

I flash him a smirk. “You forgive me all transgressions, uncle .”

“That’s Prins Uncle to you.”

“Yes, your uncleness—”

I run as my soon-to-be-uncle-in-law chases after me with exaggerated swats of his sheathed sword.

Patrolling stormblades offer their help and he waves them off.

Only when he catches sight of Captain Kjartan does Prins Lief stop playing.

He moves swiftly towards the captain, and I stick in his shadow .

“What news?” Prins Lief asks.

“As we feared.”

“They’ve taken Crosshaven?”

“Harmoria, too.”

Harmoria, the independent trader town where Akilah and Florentius had gone?

“They’re getting closer.”

“A week at most and they’ll reach Ragn.”

“We depart after the wedding.”

“Give it to the morning after,” Kjartan says quietly.

“Even tomorrow is—” Lief hesitates, grimacing.

“This is a moment for you to remember,” Kjartan insists. “Let your men see what it is we fight for.”

Lief closes his eyes and nods. “I’ll try to find a miracle.”

“Many more men will do.”

I’m left standing in the harsh heat of the summer sun, shivering. I suddenly see the day differently—the larger numbers of patrolling stormblades, the rune store owner hurrying to close shop, the desperate thieving of my bag, the duelling over potatoes.

Ragn is a town preparing for war.

I turn sharply towards the castle, my heart hammering.

What other things is Quin here to do?

There's no one to ask, and no one to tell me. Casimiria is at the king's side this evening, as she is most evenings; I'm alone as I pace the small courtyard between her chambers and my shed. I will the heavens to give me some clue so I might understand. So I might know how to support him.

I stall, mid-step . . .

I ball my hands.

It's no longer my place to support him. Nicostratus will save Casimiria and me, and I will disappear. I have the dromveske; I have my last moment. Whatever he is here to do, it's not for me to involve myself. He's no longer a captive. He has a plan. His brother is by his side.

I rub the back of my neck as I nod and nod.

Behind the piles of wood in my shed are jars of goddess tears—peach wine—gifts from King Yngvarr when he's been in a good mood. When he's falsely believed his health is improving. I've not been able to stomach tasting it, but now guilt is overpowered by an anxious tightness in my chest and...

I drink.

The liquid burns down my throat and waters my eyes as I stare up at the half moon. The half moon that shimmers over all of Ragn, that witnesses all the frightened

families packing their things and leaving while they still can...

I slosh back more wine.

Akilah and Florentius. If they ended up in Harmoria, are they safe? What does it mean, exactly, that the town had been ‘taken’ ?

I drop my jar onto the table. Another question for Quin. Surely I can ask this before I leave. Then, once Nicostratus sets me free, I’ll know where to head.

Quin will know where I’ve headed too.

“Ahhh.” I bang my forehead against the lip of the table. “Stop it. Stop.”

But I don’t. Instead, I’m dragging myself to my freshly dried bed. I’m rubbing chalk over his runes. I’m falling into the dromveske.

On a hiccup, I stumble around oak roots and turn my face up to the sky of violet leaves. Once more I’m dressed in everything Quin gave me, and once more I breathe in the faint echo of his scent from the cloak.

On a hollow laugh, I fall onto a rune door.

It swings in and I tumble into the meditation grove behind Ragn’s temple.

The first part of this memory is still shiveringly fresh.

The second part, I’ve only seen through Quin’s experience.

It’s the night thugs came after Chaos and he ran back to Quin—his reason: to hide behind the hundred stormblades there.

Quin had been suspicious of that excuse, and he'd been right to be.

Chaos told himself he only wore the king's braids so no one else would get them. For his dignity. But Chaos had been living on ticklish shivers all day. He was drawn back to Quin. He couldn't help it. He knew he shouldn't expose the truth. But he wanted to.

Chaos tries to inhibit the feeling with alcohol, but he only gets drunk.

I watch the moment, shaking my head. The seams of your mask are unravelling, Chaos. Like they still are. Look at you, just as drunk, finding it just as impossible to stay away.

I sag against the door with a hectic laugh as Chaos pours a potion against insomnia down his throat. Only, it's not a potion to help knock him out; he's taken something to ease his worries.

Suddenly, like me, he's laughing. Quin, perched at the bedpost, raises a soft brow that freezes when Chaos's veil sweeps over his cheek and he dives onto the bed.

Quin sets down his cherry wine and turns slowly towards Chaos with twitching lips. He leans over that veiled face and murmurs, "I haven't finished my interrogation."

Chaos laughs, puffing the veil up to Quin's lips.

Quin snatches the edge and pinches like he's ready to rip it off, but after a pause, he settles it carefully over Chaos's jaw. He lowers his voice. "Are you laughing or crying?"

Chaos flings a crooked arm over his curacowl, tipping the hat to his nose as he groans. "Can it be both?"

“Tell me your story. Are you a young man lost and lonely in deep dark woods? Are you a young man flushing after falling over your feet at a dance? Or are you—”

“I’m a young man who once encountered a wounded wolf.”

Quin leans back against his post, turned towards Chaos with a pensive expression.

Chaos spills out his story. “I helped the wolf recover and he ran off again, but whenever I returned to the woods, he visited me. He was a beautiful red wolf but had lost his pack and was very lonely. I fancied myself... a keeper for him—someone who would always be there for him; companionship at last. The wolf, not one to trust easily, gave me that privilege, and I was deeply touched. But between visits from that dazzling wolf, I encountered a... beady-eyed wyvern. This wyvern was goal-driven and determined. He swooped me up and wouldn’t let go.

He lifted me high into the air and flew me over great distances and demanded I help all the hurt creatures in the forest. I was afraid I would fall from such great heights, that the fall would surely kill me, but the grip of the wyvern never wavered. A promise he would never drop me.

“The wolf kept visiting and I loved that, but... its glossy red coat didn’t dazzle me the same way anymore.

I started to anticipate the beady-eyed wyvern’s return.

I wanted to keep flying with him; feeling that wild gravity-defying thrill: the wyvern saw me as someone worthy to help the little creatures, and each time I did, I loved myself more.

And each time I strayed, he would clasp me around the arms and fly me back to the right path. ”

Chaos laughs, while Quin shuts his eyes on a hard swallow, while my heart trips over itself.

Here, Chaos is baring everything. Here, Quin is quietly taking in his confession.

“Somewhere along the way I started to feel protected, and then, suddenly, I was eagerly awaiting each glorious sight of him soaring and diving towards me. I realised I never wanted him to fly away without me. ”

“But the wolf... the only other he had in this world was that very wyvern. Before that beady-eyed wyvern had ever known me, they had shared a cave, had protected one another, had vowed to always have one another’s backs.

“To want to be with the wyvern was a betrayal. I lost the wolf’s trust and seeing his heartache crushed me. Just one thing , he begged. Don’t take my wyvern away from me .”

Quin reaches out to rest his hand atop Chaos’s head, and pulls back.

Here, Quin is drawing his line.

Chaos’s voice cracks. “So I left. Not just for the wolf’s sake but the wyvern’s. He is fiercely protective of his wolf and has loved him through the mountainous ups and downs of their lives. I shouldn’t come between them.”

I watch the end of the scene with a hard lump in my throat. Of all the rune doors, I’d stumbled into this one.

“It was right to leave,” Chaos whispers, and I nod and nod. “But.” Chaos says it.

So do I.

Quin's voice is a soft, hesitant whisper, "But?"

"But what if the wyvern returns? What if I'm not strong enough to stay away?"

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Around the runes on the walls and ceiling of the grand hall, a thousand candles flicker.

Under them, the wedding guests sit at long, opulent tables laden with delicacies, or dance to the melody of bone flutes and harps.

All wear finely crafted masks: golden suns, carved antlers, feathers of rare birds.

It's a colourful sight, but there's a heaviness in the air, an unease.

Their masks all say they are here, they are happy for the couple, but behind the masks they are there, outside the castle, concerned what the next days will bring.

I too crave understanding. What has been done to Harmoria? Will Florentius and Akilah be safe?

What other things is Quin here to do?

He said he'd be here—he and his brother. But where?

My gaze searches the sea of masks and swirling silks, catching clips of laughter and the clinking of goblets. And then, it snags on a flicker of light over bare skin. Bare skin at this elaborate wedding feast?

In the middle of the thrumming hall, I freeze.

My stomach dives. There, on the raised podium where the king presides, flanked by

eternal flame, Quin kneels—head bowed, shoulders naked, clad in traditional tribal garb.

Braided leather criss-crosses his torso, showing diamonds of smooth skin.

His arms are wrapped in leather with fur, from his belt hangs a dagger, and.

.. resting against his chest, my flutette.

Why is he so close to the king? With so little on? Surely King Yngvarr will recognise him!

Behind his table, King Yngvarr rises. His intricate beaded mask catches the light as he pulls it away, revealing his cold, calculating face.

My heart pounds against my ribs.

And then King Yngvarr gestures.

No.

You can't obey this command! You can't remove your mask!

A chill steals up my spine. If the king sees him, if he recognises him, it'll all be over. Before I can shout, the king will have his sharp blade at Quin's throat.

Panic punches me and I shove through the guests, trying to close this giant chasm between us. My shoulders slam into a perfumed heiress and wine spills from her goblet onto my white robe.

I hear her shriek but I don't listen. Someone yanks me into a traditional lovers' dance,

but I yank free, burning to shout. Don't. Get away, now. He almost killed you once, he won't hesitate again.

On the podium, Quin reaches a hand to his mask .

My heart stutters, pounding so hard I can't hear the flute or the harp.

Don't do it. Quin, please. Don't.

His fingers brush the edge of the leather at his face. I cry but my voice is stuck.

And then—

The mask slips off.

The hall tilts into a mass of swirling colour as I retch, waiting for the king's expression to shift, waiting for his blade to scream out of its sheath, waiting for...

It doesn't happen.

King Yngvarr's expression doesn't alter. He steps forward and gestures Quin to his feet.

I buckle as the king points to a seat at the lower end of the table and catch myself on a nearby guest.

Before Quin seats himself, he turns to a burly leather-clad man waiting behind him and nods; the burly man pivots and ploughs into the crowd.

I overhear a lady nearby exclaiming with a shudder, "Who is that with the king?"

Another answers, "I heard the jarls are offering their assistance against the Wyrds."

"I hope a face as frightening as that will scare them back west."

I spin to the young ladies and with a funny lurch in my chest ask them what is so frightening.

"It's not just the paint on his face and his arms. These jarls are fierce. They never back down. One look at them has me glad they're on our side. "

They move on and I'm left staring towards the high table. Paint? There isn't any paint in sight, not his arms, nor his face.

All I see is soulful eyes, and my favourite jaw.

The burly leathered man Quin spoke to halts before me. He has runes and symbols of the god of war painted on his cheeks and down his arms. "There you are," he says, his voice meaty and unfamiliar.

When I stare, he grimaces and leans close. "Don't you recognise me, Amuletos."

I snap my eyes to the ink on that unrecognisable face. Nicostratus? I don't detect any scent, let alone...

He speaks, but I'm stepping around him, gazing at the podium.

"I've seen better disguises on you. I see right through this."

"As I saw right through yours."

My chest swells and I ball my robe.

Casimira swishes to my side and murmurs to Nicostratus before whispering in my ear, “You’re giving yourself away.”

I whirl around to look at her and the frowning, brutish Nicostratus . I swallow. “It’s my aunt’s wedding. What King Yngvarr doing with... that jarl?”

Nicostratus’s frown vanishes.

I forge on, stomach plummeting, “Is he here to aid in this war? Is the situation very dangerous?”

Nicostratus plants a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll get you and Casimiria back to Lumin.”

That was not my question !

Casimiria lays a hand on my rigid arm and pats. “King Yngvarr will reward those who help him against the Wyrds.”

I suck in a breath. Quin is going into battle—his men alongside the Skeldars, under the guise of rural jarls.

“Why jarls?”

“It’s the only way,” Casimiria says. “Yngvarr won’t accept Lumin aid.”

I know the answer, but I dare to speak the question anyway. I must . I look at Nicostratus. “What about your brother? Is he safe?”

Nicostratus narrows his eyes. “Once you’re safe, I’ll lead our men to meet him.” He steps closer with a pointed glance to Quin, as if to tell me that tribesman is him. As if

he believes I don't know—or hopes as much. “I'll live or die by his side.”

Aware he's being watched, Quin looks over the hall in our direction. His gaze strolls impassively over me like I'm nothing more than background noise, and hesitates on Nicostratus. To whom he nods quietly before blankly looking past me again and returning his gaze to the king.

I know he told me to act like I don't know him; I know he's refusing to look at me for my safety and his own; I know he needs to be indifferent.

I also know... I do not like it.

My attention is jerked to Nicostratus, who is hauling me close and whispering against my ear. “We escape during the dropping of the runes. During the frenzy.”

I quickly step back. His eyes sharpen on the sudden space between us, and he casts his frown towards the podium.

“What about our things?” My books? My soldad? My clasp?

My dromveske.

“Things can always be replaced,” he grinds out.

I shake my head and bypass the quietly observing Casimira. “I can be quick.”

Nicostratus snags my arm, halting me. “You can't.”

My head pounds and I snap, “Why do you always get to decide? What about what I want? What about what I need?”

Nicostratus shuts his eyes briefly. “We can’t risk it. If I don’t mobilise our men in time...” He grimaces in Quin’s direction, and at this I deflate and sink back on my heels.

Neither of us looks at the other.

“Haldr!”

I turn to my aunt, a stunning sight, her smile radiant as she glides towards me in cascading white silks.

Her mask is simple, delicate pearl and while it shimmers, it’s nothing to the shimmering in her eyes.

She holds her hand out, delicate fingers just like my mother’s, and it feels like for a moment, she’s here too, she sees my pain and is offering me a way out. “You promised me a dance?”

I glance at Casimiria, who nods, her expression unreadable. I force myself to smile, pushing aside the weight of this evening’s spoken and unspoken truths.

My feet move awkwardly; I can’t find the rhythm of the first dance, nor the second. How can I when I can’t hear past the panic in my head?

During the third dance, my aunt pinches my arm gently. “At least try to look happy for me,” she teases. But there’s an edge to her voice. She knows this is not just her night, but everyone’s eve before war.

It’s a weight she doesn’t deserve.

I haul her into an embrace, the soft scent of her perfume comforting, like home.

“Forgive me,” I murmur. “You’re beautiful, Auntie.

Truly. You and Prins Lief...” My throat tightens.

“You have something tender, something special. Something that’s grown deep over so many years.

You’ve found a way to get past your hurdles and now.

.. now you can finally be together. You have a chance at a beautiful future. ”

She strokes my hair softly, and I close my eyes before I glance his way again.

“In the end, it was a simple.” She starts to whisper in my ear, but a horn blows, and Prins Lief is carted around the hall on a bejewelled chair, his presence commanding all attention.

The sound of green stone runes clattering as they’re tossed into the air has me pulling away from my aunt.

Has me turning, not to the prins, but to the frenzy.

To Casimiria, and to Nicostratus gliding through the banquet hall doors like he’d briefly left. Perhaps to clear a path for our escape?

They catch my eye. It’s time.

After a hasty pecked kiss to my aunt’s cheek, I slip away into the rush for the blessed runes and out the other side towards the door.

Nicostratus meets me there with Casimiria close beside him, and a bag slung over his

shoulder.

He doesn't speak, simply takes hold of my wrist and pulls me swiftly along.

We're passing through the first set of doors, Nicostratus commanding us to act drunk, when eager shrieks for blessed runes turn into horrified shrieks and Prins Lief's wretched cry.

Casimiria looks over her shoulder and halts, and I follow her gaze over a hundred masks towards the podium where the king is bent over, hacking out a cough.

I hear the frightened whispers and grow cold. "Blood. He's coughing up blood."

Casimiria sucks in a sharp breath.

Between violent coughs, King Yngvarr desperately demands his healer.

Me.

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I hear the fright and anger in his voice. Blood isn't expected. This has not happened before. Shouldn't he be healing? Recovering? Why has his illness progressed to this?

Why, if he has Lindrhalda's touch healing him?

"Haldr!" the king commands his stormblades as Nicostratus pulls Casimiria and me away from the banquet. "Bring him to me."

Casimiria pulls free on a strained, "I can't," and plunges back into the hall, pushing through the crowd to get to the king.

Nicostratus curses under his breath, his body wavering in some decision, to chase after her or to hurry on.

He chooses to hurry on, yanking me with him, but I resist, pulling against him as my stomach tightens in knots.

The king is realising the truth: I'm not who I claim to be. He'll never be healed.

I should run, I should run very far. What I've done is unforgiveable. What I've done will cost me my life.

But I can't run.

My stomach is too heavy. I don't deserve to run.

And if I do run, stormblades will chase me. I'll implicate Nicostratus. If he's caught

aiding me, he'll never get to his soldiers on time. If they're not there to help Quin...

Nicostratus needs to leave now, and the only way he can go unhindered is without me. With a plummeting stomach, I push him away. "Get his men there on time. Go."

Nicostratus tries to snag my sleeve again and grips air in a closed fist. Frustration flashes across his face, but he too can foresee the future. He too realises I'm a liability. He too chooses to leave without me.

I watch him dash into the shadows and turn to the approaching stormblades, who stop their questioning stares at the flicker of movement behind me and focus.

They escort me to the king.

Each step is dizzying. This is it. I'm found out. My aunt cries as I'm dragged forward, and Prins Lief hauls her back from lurching towards me; from giving herself up too. He drags his wife from the room, and for this at least I'm grateful. He'll look after her .

I'm shoved to my knees before the podium. Except for a fleeting moment where his eyes close, Quin remains impassive as the king thumps his blood-splattered table.

The crowd holds its breath close behind me, and Casimira shakingly tries to dab the blood dribbling down King Yngvarr's chin.

He pushes her hand away. "You deceived me. You promised I was blessed by Lindrhalda's touch."

The crowd gasps and their thickening sense of disappointment and despair is choking. It's hard to breathe. The guests had only rushed after those runes believing them blessed by the goddess. Believing they'd give them hope during a time they need

hope the most.

Green runes flash in the corner of my eye as they're dropped, clattering to the floor.

I'm supposed to mend hearts, not shatter them.

King Yngvarr coughs blood and staggers to his feet. He rounds his table and comes down the steps. A brilliant gleam hits his sword as he slides it from its sheath and levels it on me.

Casimiria chases after him, grabbing his shoulder, pleading with him to hear me out.

She's worried for him and worried for me, and though I tell myself not to, I glance towards Quin.

He's stiff in his chair, unmoving. Though I can see through the disguise, though I know his heart is pounding, I hate the mask he has on. Hate how even now, as I stare down a sword, he still wears it .

I hate that in my last moments, I won't see his truest face.

My gaze snaps back to the man behind the outstretched sword. "I hate it," I say tightly. "I hate hiding the truth. I hate having to."

The sword jerks shakily.

"Lindrhalda's touch was my mask. My way of surviving.

I did it to save myself, my friends, and your own people from being burned alive.

I did it to help your son forge better healing scriptions that will aid all Skeldars, now

and in the future.

I did it to stay by your side where I could protect my king's mother. ”

“Your king—” He steps closer, his blade coming with him. I can feel the cold breath of the steel. “That’s why you fought so hard for that captive’s life? You’re a Lumin?”

“Not only a Lumin.” I force my chin up, baring my throat to him. “I am the king’s man.”

King Yngvarr regrips his sword in the following deathly silence, and I close my eyes.

“Please,” Casimiria whispers. “He won the Medicus Contest on your behalf. He saved me.”

There’s a cold wake of air at my throat where his blade shakes, and then, his voice.

“If he must die for his deception,” Quin says in an off-hand tone, “let it be a death that serves the kingdom. Send him to the fight. A healer as skilled as he’s claimed to be... could at least save some lives.”

“The fight?” King Yngvarr’s voice is pinched, but there’s an inflection that says he’s listening. Or at least, that he’s aware of his audience.

“There are few healers there as it is,” Quin says. “Perhaps he saves a husband, a brother, a son.”

The crowd murmurs.

There’s another shift of icy air against my throat, the blade still not drawing away.

I ping my eyes open. Quin is drumming a lazy hand over the arm of his chair, his gaze resolutely off me and respectfully on King Yngvarr.

“Take him!” King Yngvarr orders. He motions for his personal guards. “If he survives—”

Casimiria captures his arm and helps steady a wobble. “A thing like him?”

Quin laughs heavily. “If he should last, the gods must want him to.”

King Yngvarr coughs and lands his frightened, angry gaze on mine. “Then we’ll leave it to the gods.”

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We're to leave within the hour. I rush to gather my things only to find them gone.

My books, my soldad, my dromveske where I've also hidden my clasp.

.. I double-check under my bedcovers, behind the woodpile, but there aren't so many places they could be.

My stomach is falling out through my legs.

I almost died in the banquet hall, but somehow being robbed of my treasures feels more emptying.

I suck in a sharp breath. Nicostratus. I recall the bag slung over his shoulder. My things, were they right under my nose?

Nicostratus has them.

They'll be looked after. They'll be safe.

But my stomach doesn't stop feeling like it's falling.

I leave the shed to find my teary-eyed aunt and Prins Lief consoling her. When she sees me, she peels away from him, glowing pearly white under the moonlight, and the hold she grabs me in is terrifyingly tight. "I'd go with you. I'd go with you, but..."

She drops her arms from around me to touch her belly tenderly.

I laugh and hug her warmly. “I’ll use all the skills you’ve taught me to protect the soldiers, who in turn will protect you.”

Prins Lief clears his throat; his wife may worry about me, but he has other quarrels.

I reluctantly move over to him and he hustles me angrily behind the shed, out of Auntie’s view. He pushes me against it, demanding to know how sick his father is; how long he has left.

“A year,” I say. “He’s been told by many healers before me.”

“You made him think there was a chance.”

I bow my head.

He bangs his fist against the shed and curses.

“I tried to extend his life, but this is beyond my ability.”

He bangs his fist again.

“Even a vitalian couldn’t save him.”

“Even? You still think their magic makes them better than you.”

“I thought you were upset about my lying to your father.”

“ Upset? ”

“Angry, then.”

“You’re going to take everything I throw at you?”

“I deserve it.”

He roars. “It was I who forced this mask on you!” His roar breaks into something defeated. “For the sake of scriptures. It is I who harmed him.”

He drops his head, and I steady him before he crumples against the shed. “You sought a better overall outcome,” I murmur, wrapping an arm around his waist and moving him back to my pacing aunt.

She curls an arm around him and kisses his forehead.

Prins Lief murmurs. “There is no winning.”

I swallow hard. Once I believed there was such a thing as clearly defined right and wrong.

Good and bad. Once I threw myself towards the ultimate justice, determined to help forge a better world.

But Prince Lief summarises all my experiences into a punch of reality.

As a healer I know there is no one cure for all.

I know not everyone can be saved. Why do I expect more of my world? More of myself?

There is no way to make everyone happy. Not everyone will be.

Quin’s men, in the mismatched leather of country skjoldmenn, escort me on

horseback to Portael.

The town is desolate. I can see the rush of fleeing people in the upturned buckets littering the street, the abandoned fruit and rotting fish left for wildlife, the doors banging in the wind.

I shiver under the moonlight all the way to the edge of town, where tents are pitched and stormblades patrol .

Quin's horse stops before the guards, and Captain Kjartan strides over. The two men converse and the gates open onto the camp. I'm taken straight to the healer's tent, where two other alchemists are busy healing, and another is sleeping, preparing to relieve his fellows in a few hours.

I'm to sleep too and help tomorrow.

Except, I can't sleep. Every time I shut my eyes, I'm back in the banquet hall—on my knees, a blade held to my neck—and he is seated watching, expressionless. I can't distract myself by diving into my dromveske, because that's gone. All I'm left with is raw nerves.

I throw back my thin blanket, sneak outside, and find Quin's tent. The men standing either side of the entrance must recognise me, and they must have been given instructions, because they let me pass.

A single lantern glows on a table, its weak light casting flickers in the darkened tent.

Shadows stretch over leather walls, curling their fingers for me to come deeper inside.

I shiver and shuffle over wet earth towards Quin, slouched on the edge of his cot.

His shoulders are hunched and his forehead rests in the palm of his hand.

He doesn't move when he hears the sound of my shuffled steps. He knows I'm here.

I drop to my knees before him. Instinctively, I reach for his knee and shakily scroll up into the tight, painful knot in his thigh. I begin to ease out the tension, a familiar rhythm that's helped him before, but with every press into him, my chest tightens.

His leg stiffens under my fingers, muscle recognising the hiccuppy mess inside me, the heavier dig of my massage. I push deeper, my throat aching, my teeth clenching. I'm pressing too hard. It's not hard enough. I lift my hands and strike his leg over and over, my vision blurry.

He captures me firmly in his arms, making it impossible for me to continue.

My breathing thickens, making sounds where it hits the flutette, and my eyes sting against his throat.

I try to hit him again but it only thrusts him back against his bed and he takes me with him.

His words shiver through my hair. "Shh. I would never have let him hurt you. I promise. I will keep you safe."

I clutch his arms and hiccup. "We have to win a war."

"Then we'll win it."

I sink into his hold for a few irregular breaths then pull up, looking at him. "You would have come here without me."

“Are you upset about being sent here, or upset about almost not being sent here?”

“It’s dangerous. You should always take . . .”

He brushes a damp spot from under my eye and gently raises his brow. “The king’s man?”

We lie there, nose to nose, staring at one another.

At Quin’s slight shift , I swallow and start to scramble off him but he laughs and pulls me back, curling us onto our sides. “Stay. Sleep next to me. I need the strength.”

“You’ll go into battle tomorrow?”

He hums.

“Will you keep up the jarl act? ”

“I can’t have stormblades turning on me and my men.”

“So you won’t use magic?”

“I’ll infuse some into my bow and my sword.”

“How long can your magic last like that?”

“Long enough. It’ll have to be.”

“Why is it so important to be here?”

“When it’s revealed my Lumin soldiers fought alongside the stormblades, protecting

them with their lives, King Yngvarr will owe me a public debt. He must seek an alliance with Lumin, and for that, he must back me as the true king.”

“With Skeldar backing, you’ll have enough power to face your uncle?”

“And reclaim my throne.”

“But first you must fight.”

“My brother will be here tomorrow, with our men.”

I close my eyes. “He’ll bring you the strength you need.” Not me.

He bundles me closer, strokes my hair. “Can I have both?”

My lungs deflate and I burrow into his nooks until I can hear the rapid pound of his heart. I can’t leave him here to face the eve of battle on his own. All is fair in war. I find his hand, thread our fingers, and tuck his arm to my chest. Just for tonight.

We’re supposed to sleep, rest before the unknowns morning will bring, but I keep stirring at every worried twist of my stomach, and Quin keeps stroking my hair or rubbing my back or holding me tighter against him.

Each squeeze feels like magic, like a connecting force ties us together.

Its calming and addictive, and soon I’m stirring for more of that strength flowing from him into me.

It must be magic, and yet, he’s using none.

I shift my leg and his breath shudders into my hair, his arms tightening around me

more than all the times before, and my own breath hitches at the feel of him, a rigidity that I don't know what to do with—even though my own responds, flooding me with syrupy heat that feels achy and shivery and ticklish.

Like a different kind of magic that's linking something emotional with something physical.

I swallow thickly and my hand shakes as I slowly press against his chest and try to move away.

Quin doesn't let me; he holds me hostage in this thickening feeling and his lips brush my ear. I can feel them curving. "You did once promise you could make that happy, remember?"

The lovelight festival, the restaurant, my naïve thought he struggled to be physically intimate... I'd thought he'd meant he needed healing...

I flush and something between outrage and mortification slips out of my mouth.

Quin laughs against the sound, stopping it with a press of his warm lips that freezes me mid-shiver. "You were so unbelievable," he murmurs, "and I was utterly charmed."

"Quin..." I barely manage to get that out.

He understands what I'm unable to articulate. What I don't want to do, and must, and he replies. "We go into battle tomorrow. There is no better time."

No better time.

I open my mouth and shut it on a mounting pressure to... to confess things, my heart

hammering too hard for me to sort through them all. I cast my gaze away and admit something small, something he can take with him, without making promises I won't be able to keep later.

We go to battle tomorrow . . . what if he . . .

I swallow and slide my fingers under his shirt to curl around his flutette.

He watches me, eyes dark in the silvery shadows of the tent; dark and patient.

I finger each hole of the flutette, my voice unsteady. "In Kastoria, when you wouldn't wake up, I took this and played music into your mouth."

His catches his breath and his chest stills. He holds my gaze steady.

I swallow. "I couldn't bear you not waking up. It was the closest I could let myself come to... kissing you."

He sighs and strokes the back of my head. "I wish you weren't just telling me your confessions because you think I'll die."

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“You can’t die.” I say it bluntly, over an enormous flare of panic in my chest.

“Caelus...” His whisper goes right through me, instantly carving through the panic to reach into the thickening heat and those low-slung shivers.

My fingers pinch at his flute and my breathing is so hard I’m surprised music isn’t giving me away.

I shake my head .

“Caelus . . .”

His voice. It has that creamy softness to it, almost a plea. It’s exactly like the memory inside the dromes of that night. The night he wanted to be real.

That bittersweet night I’ve visited too many times.

“I need to work on my self-restraint.” I shove myself away and land with a cold thump on the ground. Quin peers over the side of the cot with an amused smirk and a raised eyebrow. I jump to my feet and wag a finger. “You too, your majesty.”

I climb a hill inside the camp and try to cool myself on the night grass while staring at the sky. Only, I can’t escape it. That memory is too strong, too pulling.

I clutch blades of grass and slam my eyes shut, and sink into every detail again...

Quin has been knocked out. When he awakes, it is to find himself locked in his

bedchamber, his magic sealed.

Incense burns in all corners of the room, smoke swirling lazily in the air.

He coughs on the thickness of it and snaps his cane in a hurry to put them out.

He bangs on his door, shouts, but the men outside are under king's orders—still he calls out, begging futilely until his voice is hoarse.

Soon he's slumped at the door, shallow breaths turning into pants.

His face is flushed and his neck blooming red.

He tears off each layer of clothing and staggers to a basin to splash his face.

He murmurs to himself he must watch out for trickery, he cannot succumb to this, but his voice is slurred and he keeps squeezing his eyes shut, slapping his head .

He's slumped against a wall, half-naked and dripping when the door opens and a figure is shoved inside.

Quin squints and the room grows blurry. When his vision finally sharpens, Chaos's face appears, also flushed; Quin surges to his feet and whisks him close, demanding to know what he's doing here. Who brought him. Why.

Chaos tilts his head back, baring his throat as he moans and pulls at his clothes.

He doesn't know how he got here. He was sent in by redcloaks.

He doesn't know what to do, but he's hot.

He's feeling hot and shivery and shaky, and he reaches for Quin, pushing himself against his body with a groan, as if just being against him provides relief.

"Something's not right," Quin says, the room coming in and out of focus, but each time, it is Chaos standing before him, half undone, his shirt torn, his leggings very tight indeed.

Quin's hands clamp around Chaos's hips and his lips urgently seek Chaos's ear.

"What are you doing to me? Is this how you feel too?"

Chaos shudders in his arms. "I can't help this," he says. "I don't know what they did, but I'm burning inside. You feel cool, so cool. Will you cool me?"

Quin's body is wracked with something hot and primal and he crushes Chaos against him.

"You're the one who feels cool. Arcane Sovereign, I must have you cool me also.

" Quin's hands tighten around Chaos and their shivers are linked as they stumble to the bed, Quin dropping first, embracing Chaos protectively on the way down.

Quin's gaze seeks Chaos's and holds. "Some... scheme... but... "

Chaos shudders against him, cocking his hips and arching to get closer. "Don't care," Chaos says. "I need..."

"But we haven't before . . ."

"Please. Please."

Vicious heat slams through Quin, making him growl and flip Chaos onto the bed. He struggles to keep the barest slither of reason. “I’ll take... you carefully.”

The memory Quin shared with me of that night didn’t stop there, but it faded—as if he couldn’t let me see everything.

Only enough to know he thought of me. He thought that night was with me.

And when the memory sharpened again it was morning, and the doors to his chamber were open, blowing in a mind-clearing breeze, and Quin turned in his sheets to find not Chaos sprawled beside him, but his crown princessa. Veronica.

She awakens too. They stare at one another in shock and misery.

They utter apologies at the same time and grit their teeth as they stare at the redcloaks lined up outside.

The princessa rushes away, and Quin canes himself angrily to the bathhouse where he curses and slams water and scrubs himself over and over until he sags into the depths with a single tear rolling down his tight jaw.

I wake on a hollow sigh to discover Quin and his small unit of men gone. Along with the grey rays of dawn, a heavy quiet has descended over the camp. Only the flapping of tent doors and hooves stamping the ground break the silence.

The air is heavy with the scent of blood and pain, carried on the wind from a not-too-distant battle. I stare into the foreboding breeze as stormblades ride solemnly through camp, axes and arrowheads glinting at their backs.

Quin has already headed there.

I wish he'd told me, and I'm glad he didn't. It's hard enough watching men I don't know brace themselves and bravely go into a violent unknown. How could I have possibly watched Quin?

I know how strong he is, how determined, how utterly courageous. But I also know he too feels the furious pound of fear. He too can bleed into the earth. He too can cry.

"Get through this," I pray, squeezing my fists. "Nicostratus will be coming soon."

Cutting through the silence comes a hectic bustle of soldier feet and cries to make way. Bloodied stormblades are running through camp, with injured men on their backs.

I bolt towards the healing tent.

There's no time for introductions—I meet my fellow healers with a mere nod before helping settle an unconscious soldier onto a straw mat as other wounded are laid likewise in orderly rows.

I check my soldier's pulse and scan the tent for supplies.

There's a fair amount, but how long is it supposed to last? How many does it have to save ?

I choose only to heat a brew for his critical internal bleeding and the older healer beside me nods once.

All morning, we work relentlessly through the copper tang of blood.

When we've removed arrows, sewn slashes, patched and bandaged one group of soldiers, another group is carried in, and another.

There's no time to eat, no time to use the privy.

When we're not cleaning wounds, we're cleaning cloth for future wounds.

Even when two more healers arrive to help, we are too few.

After midday, more come racing into the tent carrying their injured.

This time, Quin is behind them, hobbling.

I've never been so happy to see that hobble.

It feels so relieving that I, too, am unable to balance.

I stagger to him. His face is tired, worn, but he's still attempting a smile for me.

I steal him to a stool outside where he can look up at the cloudless sky and not upon the fallen.

I grab his wrist and take his pulse, but he shakes his head. Not wounded. This is his leg.

He glances at passing stormblades and back to me, and my gaze meets his with shared understanding. He's been on horseback so far, but there will be times he'll be forced to his feet. He needs a plausible reason he can't move easily or he might raise suspicions. Might give his true identity away.

Quickly, I bandage his lower leg under the knee, with some wood for the appearance of added support.

Anyone will understand a hobble now. As I tie the last knot, Quin organises his band

of fighters, giving orders, receiving the condition of his injured men.

And no sooner is his horse brought to him than he hops right back on it.

I clasp his reins and whisper up at him. “You’re tired. Your magic is near drained. You need to meditate.”

He grimaces, taking his reins. “Their numbers are greater than ours.” He glances towards the healing tent. “I need my men fit enough to fight a few more hours.”

Until his brother arrives with more.

“I saw some pearl heart.”

“Commander Kjartan will escort any capable of battle in an hour.”

I rush inside and brew a soup using the last of the pearl heart; my fellow healers help me feed it to those with minor injuries. The colour soon returns to their cheeks and their pulses thicken with strength.

Commander Kjartan. The ship’s captain I’ve shared weal and woe with is again at the heart of a fight. A commander of fighting men. He enters the tent and asks if there are any willing to help their comrades at the centre of battle.

Without a moment’s hesitation, all those with minor injuries rise and file out of the tent—even the more severely injured try, but we steer them back to their mats with a shake of the head.

“You’ll drag them down like this,” I murmur. “Recover first.”

Commander Kjartan calls again into the tent. “We need a healer to join us out there.

Who's brave enough to volunteer? ”

Out there is the thick of battle, the clash of metal and the spilling of blood.

Out there is blood that might become our own.

I feel their fear along with my own. I want to shrink behind my patient, but what of those that can't be moved here? Those who so courageously march towards death on the hope they can save those behind them? And—

Out there is Quin .

I rise from my crouch. Commander Kjartan spots me and his eyes flash in recognition. “You will come,” he says with certainty.

“I will come.”

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We approach the rocky pass bridging Harmoria and Portael on foot.

We're to climb with bow and arrow into the cliffs that rise sharply on either side of the narrow pass where the battle rages.

Their armour is light; it allows them swift and quiet movement into rocky crevices, but this lightness also amplifies the din ahead—the clash of metal, the roar of commands, the warcries of the Wyrds, the thuds of the fallen. ..

Kjartan steers me into a nook in a wall of rock, large enough for a healer to patch a few men up, but little else, and when I peer around the edge I get an eyeful of fierce movement only a dozen yards away—

There. Quin on horseback, the last barrier of defence on the pass, slashing with his mighty sword. My heart pounds and my sweaty hands clutch the rock concealing me.

Two Wyrds uniformed in blue and seated upon black horses charge at Quin at once, and Quin masterfully steps his horse to avoid the brunt of it, turning their force to his advantage and throwing them off their steeds.

Kjartan has his bow out and fires an arrow at the Wyrd who rises and tries to stab Quin's horse.

The killing thunk of the arrow has my stomach rioting. He's a soldier violently forcing his way into Skeldar land, but he's also a young man. A boy under orders.

Commander Kjartan grunts. "Beyond this pass there are tens of thousands of them.

Their numbers are heavily stacked against us. I pray to all the gods that jarl's backup arrives soon."

Nicostratus.

A fresh wave of Wyrds charge into the pass, and I feel the weight of the men's exhaustion as they quickly drag the wounded behind them and regroup at Quin's orders. This must be the Wyrds' tactic. Tire us out with wave after wave of fresh attack.

Commander Kjartan orders our men to bring the wounded to me, and while the battle continues, behind the shield of Quin's fighters, I staunch wounds, stitch skin with swift precision, bind broken limbs, and use potions to ease their pain.

Some are sent back to camp, while others grab their axes and roar their way back into battle.

In the next lull, I search for him. He's close. Closer than before. Only a half dozen yards from me.

We've lost ground.

Regardless, Quin remains on his steed, swinging his sword, throwing back a handful of Wyrds in one blow—

I gasp as a Wyrd rises from the supposedly vanquished and throws a short spear. Quin sees, but too late to dodge it completely. The spear slices along his upper arm and in his moment of pain, another Wyrd swings his sword.

Quin's horse rears violently at the attack and Quin is thrown to the ground, his head hitting rock. He doesn't get up.

Four Wyrds close in, swords gleaming.

I'm yelling and running, my heart in my throat.

Commander Kjartan's stormblades have been sent further up the cliffs with their bows, Kjartan himself twelve feet above me on the wall. There's no way they can reach Quin.

I run hard and slide on my knees to Quin's side as arrows whistle overhead and plunk into Wyrds. The air tastes of salt and iron, dust and bitter blood, and it's not allowed to be his. With all my strength, I haul Quin by the arms, dragging him away from the battle and into my rocky nook.

Blood streams from a cut at his hairline and I hurriedly staunch the flow, feeling the pulse of it leaking through the too thin fabric.

With gritted teeth, I dunk my needle in my shallow bowl of strong spirits, thread it and stitch him up.

Each moment of resistance as I pierce through his skin has me murmuring to him.

He'll be fine. It's a surface wound. It's just for now.

When he has meditated, I'll guide him through a vitalian spell to remove any scar. I could heal him constantly from the shadows if only...

Magic is better. It just is.

"You need to meditate! You need..." My voice breaks and I throw down my needle and check his pulse.

Steadying.

I let out a long breath and grab a tonic to rouse him. It slips over his lips and down his chin, and I force a finger into his mouth and pour more. He gags and swallows, and blinks.

“Close your eyes,” I tell him and dust a powder against infection over his head wound. I carefully blow away any that fell onto his eyelashes. “You’re drained.”

He grimaces as he sits. “You shouldn’t be here.” I tie a hard knot in the bandage on his arm, making him wince, even chuckle. “Just as well you are?”

“Better.”

“Got any pearl heart to keep me going?”

I snatch his face in my hands and kiss him fiercely. “This will have to do.”

He stills and laughs and kisses me again until I’m gasping. There’s a battle raging around us, there’s blood being spilled onto earth, and his warm lips are urgently parting mine .

“Such self-restraint,” he murmurs.

I flick his good arm.

Laughing quietly, Quin pulls back. He whistles, and at the vibration of approaching hooves, he staggers up and throws himself into the saddle. With one last lingering look my way, he charges back into battle.

Commander Kjartan slides down the cliff and back into the nook. His voice is gruff,

heavy with responsibility and regret. “If we lose this ground...”

His words hang in the air like a death sentence.

If we lose this ground, they’ll take Portael.

Once they have Portael, it’s a half day’s near-defenceless march to Ragn and its many innocent lives.

Lives like those who dropped their ‘blessed’ runes in despair.

Lives like my aunt’s, whose belly gently swells with child.

I clench my fists. Stare out towards the horizon. Evening sky is bleeding as red as my stained hands. Where are Nicostratus and his men? I turn my gaze up at the cliffs, at all that hard smooth stone. Could something have stalled him? Is he hurrying determinedly towards us, hoping we’ll hold out?

I push off the dense rock. “Blocking the pass would stall the Wyrds, wouldn’t it?”

Commander Kjartan’s sharp eyes follow my gaze to the cliffs. “If enough rock came down, they’d need at least a day to dig out.”

“Enough time to rest and re-gather.”

“We’ve no way to shift it.”

Quin has a way. After he’s meditated. When he’s full of spiritual power. Although surely Nicostratus will have brought reinforcements by that time...

A blood-red sky darkens into a black one.

Fresher stormblades arrive, muttering that there should have been more of them by now.

They charge into the fray, and Quin and his men slump out of it, bloodied and dismayed as they look over the men relieving them. Who will make it back?

Kjartan escorts me and his men back to camp. He's quiet, like we all are. I glance at the tents. Everyone's exhausted. They're at their end, and there's no pearl heart left. They crawl towards their mats to sleep. Hopefully they at least can dream away their reality.

I halt abruptly at a chilling thought. It feels like an icy fist clenching around my stomach.

Nicostratus.

What if he's looked into my things?

What if he entered the dromveske?

What if . . .

I peel off from our group and run. When I get to Quin's tent, I almost smack into him caning his way out of it in fresh clothes. "Where are you going? You need to sleep. You—"

"I need to meditate," he says quietly and continues past me. "Come."

I follow him to the back of camp, to the hill where I'd come yesterday.

It's a crisper evening and the sky stretches forever over us, twinkling with a million

stars.

Could they really be the souls of the dead?

Could the soldiers from today already be there?

How can something so painful be so beautiful?

Quin seats himself crossed-legged at the top of the hill where breezes whip at his hair.

“You’re pacing,” he murmurs. There’s a question behind it. Why? How can I help ?

My stomach lurches and I open my mouth. Say it. Tell him. But no words come out. I slam my mouth shut again. I shouldn’t say it now. Quin needs to meditate, needs to regain his spiritual energy. I can’t interfere with this. He must concentrate.

I force myself to stop pacing and settle beside him, my own hair flickering in the wind along with his. Below us stretches abandoned Portael and the large inky river running through it, and further in the distance are the larger hills of Ragn...

I dig my hand into the grass.

“You’re breathing is uneven,” Quin murmurs.

I let go of my breath and forcefully steady it. “Meditate.”

His brow pinches, but he inclines his head. “Rest. This will take a while.”

With heavy spirits, I lie down and curl onto my side, bracketing him. For two hours I come in and out of sleep, each time feeling sicker as I glance over Portael and see it quiet. No movement. No soldiers marching to join us.

After the third hour, Quin uncrosses his legs. I should sit up now, tell him... But I'm curled on my side, rigidly still.

Quin feels it. He shifts to rest a hand on the back of my head. "Caelus?"

My heart bangs, and his gentle fingers slide out of my hair.

As he moves to stroke again, I push up quickly, avoiding the touch. His expression flickers and he drops his hand. "Talk."

"I..." The words are gummed up, too sickening to speak. I gesture towards camp. "How would we win this war if these men were all we had?"

"We'll have more—"

"If."

Quin observes the camp and does his quick calculation, ending with a grimace.

I shiver.

He takes off his cloak but I stop him from giving it to me, hand balled into the soft fabric. Could there be another way? To stop them dying? My gaze rises sharply from his cloak to him. "The rocks. Break them. Block the pass."

"If they see my magic—"

"Then don't be seen!"

"You were so brave today. Why are you afraid now?"

“It’s war. Of course I’m afraid.”

“This is something more.”

“I just think, while you wait for backup, let the men and the healers rest.”

Quin searches my eyes, and I avert them.

“What if,” I hurry on, “while they’re busy digging, we could get into their camp and... and... destroy their food? So they’d have to retreat to get more? There are dead Wyrds amongst the bodies in the pits. We could take their clothing, we could—”

“We could nothing!” Quin bites out. “Today, I was afraid if a single Wyrd passed me, you’d be killed. I won’t let you be surrounded by them.”

“It’s my punishment.”

“I will not let anything happen to you. We will win,” Quin says more softly. “Nicostratus—”

The words finally fall out of me in a whisper, “Is not coming.”

Quin pauses, and carries on, “When he comes—”

I cover his mouth with my hand, shaking harder. “He has my dromveske. He’s seen it. He’s heartbroken. He’s angry.” I look at the horror entering his eyes. “He’s not coming.”

I can’t remove my hand. My voice comes out strangled.

“He asked me to stay away. He warned me about coming between you. You knew it

too; you asked me too. And I couldn't stay away.

I kept justifying why this time it didn't count.

You're captured and I'm only saving you.

It's just one last moment. It's the eve of war.

You're wounded... But I can't keep justifying it. Look at the consequences. Look ."

I drop my hand from his mouth and sweep it toward the sleeping fighters and the stormblades still fighting at the pass, then sweep it towards Ragn and the vulnerable lives depending on us there.

Quin closes his eyes and when he opens them again, he too is staring at all the souls on the line. "He will come. Maybe he'll be late. But he'll come."

I heave to my feet and turn away from him. "Until then," I say on a breaking voice. "Every death is on me."

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I 'm not three feet away when winds snatch me and haul me backwards. I thump against Quin's chest and his arms grip mine tightly, his voice at the back of my head. "Not on you. On us ."

I jerk forward, but his grip doubles. "Do you think you're the only one responsible for this?" he growls. "Do you think I haven't met you halfway at each longing look? That I haven't dreamed alongside you? That I haven't justified each moment?"

I stop trying to pull free and stare at one of his hands on me.

His fingers slide up an inch as he speaks in my ear. "Who gave you that dromveske?"

My body is thrumming at his breath skating down my neck.

I whisk around, facing him. "You're right. It's on us."

I take a large step back.

His jaw clenches.

"You know it's the right thing to do," I say .

His gaze hits mine sharply, then in a blur of movement he has me over his shoulder and is riding the wind over the camp, all the way to the pass—to the clashing of steel and the stench of fresh blood and the sheltering nook in the cliff.

He deposits me in the nook and I land in a heap. "Why'd you bring me with you—"

“ Together we made this mess. It’s our responsibility to make things right. Together.”
He offers his hand to help me up; I ignore the temptation to take it, and push to my feet.

I take a deep, frustrated breath. My stomach is sick with guilt and fear of what could happen before Nicostratus shows.

And yet. Quin dragging me here. Demanding we be responsible.

.. It reminds me of all the times he’s set me back on my path when I’ve strayed.

Despite everything, deep inside, it flutters.

I hold my chin up. “What do I do?”

“Warn the stormblades.”

I feel the gust rush over me as Quin sneaks up the cliff in the dark. When he reaches the top and hides from view, I come out of my nook, yelling at the top of my voice.
“The cliff’s breaking! Retreat!”

Stormblades and Wyrds alike throw glances to the cliffs to see fine dust like a crumbling cloud sifting towards them.

“It’s coming down,” I yell. “Retreat!”

Soldiers from both sides dig their heels into their horses and race to either side of the pass in time for a loud CRACK to pierce the air .

A stormblade scoops me up as he gallops past and I’m flung over the retreating horse. I watch the cliffs crumble into boulder-like chunks that block the pass.

The soldiers stop outside the clouds of dust and take in the significance.

They laugh and throw their heads back towards the gods.

They cheer, their spirits revived. I spy Quin returning and merging with the soldiers, coming towards me.

I slide off my stormblade's horse murmuring thanks, grateful for the care he has for his fellow men whether he knows them or not.

A significant act of kindness when a single additional moment might have cost his own life.

He'll have to return here in a day because of me. Because of my dromveske. Because Nicostratus has seen it. Stupid dromveskes. If only I'd never learned of their existence—

I stiffen.

“What is it?” Quin says, reaching my side.

I snap my gaze to his. “Take me into Portael. I know how to stop—”

Movement at the top of the cliffs has me narrowing my gaze on a distant figure. “I thought the cliff face was too smooth to climb on that side?”

“That's not a Wyrd,” Quin murmurs.

“It's not?”

Quin is quiet and there's a tightness to it that has me asking. “Who is it?”

“I saw him while I was bringing down the rock. I stopped him from venturing where he’d get hurt. ”

My pulse is pounding now, and I have a queasy feeling. “Who is it?”

“He was up there alone, collecting healing plants.”

I rock back on my heel. “Florentius?”

Quin inclines his head.

Florentius is in Harmoria. No, on the outskirts, between it and us. He’s... being used by the Wyrđ camp, like I am by the Skeldar side, healing...

“What about Akilah? Why didn’t you bring him to our side?”

“He wouldn’t come.”

“Akilah?” My voice is thin.

Quin’s eyes meet mine and look away, that look speaking the words before he does. They’re holding her hostage.

She’ll die if Florentius doesn’t return. If he doesn’t do the Wyrđ’s bidding.

I storm towards camp. “Take me to Portael.”

Hooves echo on the cobblestones, loud in the eerie silence.

“What are we looking for?”

I keep my eyes straight ahead. “The first dromveske I saw was on the Skeldar ship that brought me to Iskaldir. It was faulty, along with a batch of them bought here in Portael. It caused massive upheaval. ”

“Indeed. You claimed you were touched by the healing goddess and cured the poxies.”

I laugh. “Cure poxies? I’m a mere magic-less healer. There was no poxies.” I steer my horse to the edges of town. “Let’s check this lane. The bushes look promising.”

Quin tries and fails to catch my eyes and blocks my path with his horse until I look at him. “You want to fake the plague?”

“It drove Skeldars to kill their own. Wyrds should run for their lives.”

“They’re soldiers. They came to die.”

I shake my head. “This river flows down from here through Harmoria and into the west.”

“How do you know this?”

“In the months you were gone, they were gone too. I wanted to know what kind of life they might be living in Harmoria. I read books. I studied the geography. This river is important for trade.”

“You want to poison the river?”

“I want to end the war.”

Quin squints as he reads my mind. “You want the soldiers rushing back to their

borders to block the river and keep the plague out of their kingdom.”

“They’ll race the river. With shortcuts, they’d make it in time.”

“What if they realise it’s not the poxies?”

“That’s why we need to convince them first.”

“How? ”

“Poison some of our own. Make it look like we’ve caught it. That contact with us will spread it to them.”

“They won’t believe anything until they see deaths.”

“You’re good at acting, Jarl. Teach them.” I steer my horse to the bushes behind Quin, and he snatches my arm.

“What’s that tone for?”

I remain quiet for a long time, staring at the strawberry-like thistleweed winding around.

“Caelus?”

“I’m just tired.”

He lets me go.

We gather the thistleweed and return to camp. While Quin shares this plan with the other commanders, I tuck some of the thistleweed into my medicinal pouch and under

the cover of night, slink to the grave pits.

Among the dead—in a separate pit—are a few Wyrds.

Quin is right. The Wyrds need to see the ‘poxies’ hitting their men. I climb into the pit and strip their bodies. To do it right, we need to get into their camp.

“For someone tired, you’re sure quick to don Wyrd clothing.”

I spin on my heel to Quin, crouched at the edge of the pit with a grim glare.

“Being tired doesn’t negate necessity.”

“You understand, then.” He lowers himself into the pit, breezes pushing out the stench of death and keeping him upright. “What’s your plan?”

“The healers have a reprieve thanks to the blocked pass. I’m not needed here. ”

He lowers his head toward mine. “What’s your plan, Caelus?”

I swallow down the sudden jolt at my name and the dangerous way he says it. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“And once you’re in their camp?”

“I’ll figure it out. I’ll use poxy herbs to make some seem sick.”

“And save your Akilah and Florentius, and skip out again?”

I swallow.

He plucks at my Wyrd clothing. “Someone else will go.”

I grab his hand, holding the blue Wyrd cloak in place. “What stormblade will care for my Lumin friends?”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous it is?”

“I can’t leave them.”

His eyes flash in the dark. “I can’t let you get hurt.”

“But I need— I must . . .”

“ All death from now until he comes is on us. You know whose death will destroy me the most? Hm?”

The weight of all this darkness is pressing down on me so hard I can’t breathe. “My choices killed his brother. His death is on my shoulders and it’s paining me. I can’t carry more. Not stormblades’, or the people of Ragn, and especially not my friends’.”

He looks wretchedly towards the stars, breathes heavily. “ I’ll get them back.”

I stiffen.

“Now you’re scared?” he murmurs .

I look up at him and nod.

He laughs softly and looks towards the dead Wyrds. I pause. “On one condition: I come with you.”

He pauses. “Yes.”

“After all that. So easily?”

He throws me a dirty look. “You’ll chase after me if I leave you behind.”

We share a look, a moment teetering between the dark and the light.

“You know me well,” I say.

“I’m in charge.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“That means I get the last word.”

“Of course.”

“Caelus . . .” he says warningly.

“Understood.”

He goes to flick my forehead, but I dodge the touch, and our short reprieve ends. He sighs and swiftly changes from his leathers into the blues of Wyrds. At my motion, he reties his hair into a single braid.

Commander Kjartan’s face appears over the lip of the pit. “You read my mind.”

Quin inclines his head smartly. “We’ll infiltrate and sow the thistle.”

“Only two of you?”

“Any more will make us too obvious.”

Kjartan’s gaze lands on me and lingers. “You’re always at the centre when it comes to ruses.”

“I’m just trying to stay alive. ”

“By going into the enemy camp?”

“It’s not only the body that has to survive.”

“What was that?”

“I can get into their healing tents.” I jerk a thumb to Quin over my shoulder. “He can roar.”

Kjartan’s brows lift. “You seem to know this jarl well.”

I straighten. “I stitched him up. That’s why he chose me to go with him.”

“You saved my men, and then your own in Hinsard.” Kjartan’s eyes settle on Quin. “You’ve chosen well.”

Quin speaks bluntly. “I know. No one can persuade me to change my mind.”

I whip around on an unsteady breath, but Quin is looking resolutely ahead. Commander Kjartan calls me, and I pull myself over to him. He hands me a sheathed dagger. “Come back alive.”

When it’s just Quin and me again, when he’s about to fly me towards the blocked pass, I briefly halt him. “We have our mission. Plant poxies. Save Florentius and

Akilah. Get out again.”

“Why are you reminding me?”

“That’s a lot to concentrate on.”

Quin leans closer. “What are you saying?”

I poke his arm and narrow serious eyes on him.

He raises a challenging brow.

““No one can persuade me to change my mind’.” I poke him again. “We’re in the middle of a mess of our own making and you haven’t learned anything.”

“On the contrary.” He lightly pokes my shoulder. “It’s someone else who’s failing to understand.”

I bat his finger away. “My head is pounding. I can’t be trying to read between lines while we’re out there.”

“I’ll speak clearly then.” He leans in. “ No one can persuade me to change my mind .”

My chest seizes and I have to clench my teeth against it. “Just. No more of that until we’ve won.”

“I have a rule too,” he says.

“If you abide by mine, I’ll abide by yours.”

“Do you promise?”

“I’m not unreasonable, your majesty.”

His laughter curls softly around me. “I won’t talk about us. And you...” He tucks a finger under my chin; I try to dodge but he grasps me anyway. “You won’t avoid my touch.”

I press my lips firmly together and glare at him, but I’m frustratingly pliant when he slings an arm around my waist and hoists us into the air.

I concentrate on our mission. “How will we get in?”

Quin already has a plan. He infuses the cliffs with just enough magic to make them shake, and the Wyrds digging their way through the blocked pass make a hurried retreat.

While their backs are to us, we descend to the fallen rocks.

A gust whips us with fine dust until we’re covered and Quin slings us between boulders, carefully placing rocks over us to make it seem like we were caught in the landslide.

I dig into my pouch and pull out a tonic. “This will weaken us.”

Quin stares uncertainly, fingers slowly curling around it.

“Quick,” I murmur under the quick-shuffle of approaching footsteps.

He eyes meet mine as he snaps the tonic to his lips and pours it down. With a shaky breath, I do the same and cast the bottle away into the shadows.

Darkness creeps into my mind, and—

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I wake, as expected, to magic. Magic, and Florentius working it. His face hovers over mine and his eyes are piercing. His expression is one part barely stifled shock, and two parts unresolved pain. His jaw is tight. He makes a small motion with his head to tell me not to speak.

Out the corner of my eye is the outline of another figure. A healer perhaps. I flutter my eyes shut again, and Florentius clears his throat, speaking to the figure. “I’ve restored both to health, but I must oversee things as the spell is absorbed, in case of complications.”

The figure hums and I feel a wake of air as they move away. I ping my eyes open, and Florentius holds a “wait” finger against my chest, his gaze following the figure out of the tent. He removes his finger and whispers, “Are you insane? What are you doing? Who did you bring along?”

“That’s . . . under the jarl mask is . . .” I whisper. “Your king.”

Florentius stiffens and bows his head in respect. I’m relieved to see Quin is stirring on the mat beside me, a palm pressed to his forehead.

“The Wyrd will slaughter us all otherwise,” I rush out quietly. The tent is full of mats with injured soldiers and walled with snake baskets—poisons, one of the primary methods of Wyrd healing. “We’re here to end the war, and do it quickly.”

Florentius’s gaze sweeps towards the canvas doors and once again his finger presses on my chest. He clears his throat. “You’ll experience some tingling in your hands and feet over the next hours...” His gaze finally comes back to mine and his voice is a

hush. “What are you talking about?”

I try to sit up but Florentius shakes his head. I feel for my pouch and pull out the sachet of herbs. He understands the moment he opens the drawstring and peers inside. He tightens it shut swiftly, his gaze hitting mine.

“Use them on the dying,” I murmur.

“To make it look like . . .”

“Yes.”

“They’ll come with torches!” Florentius’s whisper is sharp and he coughs to cover his sound.

“Wyrds have a deep spiritual connection to water,” I whisper under his cough. “If they see their dying soldiers bathing in the river and then hear of others falling sick, they’ll think the poxies are spreading through the water.”

“If they don’t believe it—”

“They will,” Quin cuts in, his voice quiet yet still sharp. He sits up on the neighbouring mat and Florentius rounds to his side. “A letter with the Skeldar commanding seal is coming.”

Florentius swings his gaze between us, a dark shadow clouding his face.

“They’ll come to me to provide a cure. Real poxies is impossible to cure.

Akilah is being held in the commander’s tent, what if they take it out on her?

What if they torture her?” Florentius looks hard at me.

“What if your plan kills my loved one? Again .”

The hurt in his voice plunges into me and I fist the blanket draped over me.

“Enough,” Quin says tightly. “This is my plan. Will you obey?”

“I’m sorry,” I gasp. “Lucius was a good man—”

“Don’t say his name.”

Quin keeps his whisper steady. “Akilah is his beloved sister too. We’ll save her.”

Florentius closes his eyes and swallows hard. When he opens, he looks to our king and subtly inclines his head in acceptance as he pretends to straighten his blankets.

He keeps facing Quin. “In a moment, I’ll get you a cane and release you. Come around the back of the healing tents to the laundry.”

Soon, Quin and I are exiting the tent carrying bloodied cloth and clothing.

The sun hits our heads at an angle that suggests we were unconscious for many hours.

It must be near midday. I whip a glance to Quin also absorbing the direction of the sun and his lips flatten.

He canes swiftly along, surveying the camp.

To our left is a long wooden palisade jutting up into makeshift watchtowers at regular intervals; behind us is the familiar stomp of hooves and the whinny of horses—no

doubt the stables are nearby; ahead a cluster of guards surrounds dozens of large barrels and crates, rope and baskets of arrows.

A squad of Wyrds march past us and we duck our heads and turn down the side of the healing tents towards the laundry. There, many workers, mostly veiled women, are scrubbing clothes over a narrow stream while the occasional soldier tries to steal their attention.

Florentius hurries up to us with another bundle of cloth. After dumping half in the baskets, he walks behind blankets strung up to dry.

Quin snaps after him and I hurry alongside.

Florentius throws the rest of his bundle into my arms. “You’re lucky they brought you in lying down. You’re too short to be a Wyrd.”

I unravel the dress he brought me.

“I’ll spell over whatever this voice is you’re using.”

I sigh. “From Haldr’s voice, to a woman’s. I wonder when I’ll ever hear my own.”

I strip and slide into the fresh cotton, and Florentius does the rest while Quin leans on his cane, taking a moment to delight in the transaction. I send him a scathing look, and his smirk deepens.

“Beautiful,” he says after Florentius is gone.

“Quin . . .” I warn.

“A mere observation.”

“You don’t have to keep observing.”

I grip the glass bottle Florentius pressed into my hand until Quin’s dancing eyes finally look away.

A serving girl is sent thrice daily to serve the commander his tonic. I’m to be that serving girl.

We make our way slowly through the camp, taking our time to memorise the layout.

It smells sweatier the deeper in we go, until we pass a training area.

After this, the metallic scent of sweat is replaced by the rich aromas of cooking; long lines of Wyrds with their wooden bowls, some banging out beats and singing while they wait.

Behind the mess area are simple tents, lean-tos, and firepits set with fresh wood waiting for nightfall; finally, behind them, is the tent we’re after. It’s bigger than most of the others, and marked with blue banners and more guards.

Quin counts from behind a neighbouring tent. “A dozen outside.”

I glance at them and back at Quin. “You’d better stay out of view. I’ll take it from here.”

He catches my arm before I go; all traces of his earlier humour have vanished from his eyes. “You must be careful.”

I nod.

He holds on tighter. “That means biting your tongue. No matter how unfair you find

something.”

“When have I ever—”

He tsks.

“Fine.”

I move to the commander’s tent, keeping my head bowed in subservience.

Upon seeing the tonic in my hands, the guards let me pass.

Inside, it’s dim and the air tastes of leather and ink.

The canvas tent is worn and patched in places and the heavy folds block out most of the daylight.

Only the stretch coming in from the doors allows for some glow.

Behind a large table covered in maps and parchment, a tall Wyrd with a sharp nose is bent over his quill as he scribbles in haste.

He stiffens at my approach, but barely flashes his gaze my way.

The dress is enough to tell him who I am and what I’m here for.

He taps the table next to a half-eaten meal of cured meat, cheese, and bread. “Here.”

As I set the tonic down, I scan the space. Next to the table is a low cot and a wool blanket, on a shelf are piles of books—treatises? Records? Tactical guides? In the other corner is a stand of armour—helmet, breastplate, gauntlets—ready to be donned

for the next surge against the Skeldar defence.

Movement from behind the stand has the commander looking over. He taps the table where his leftover food sits. "Offer this to the girl."

I incline my head and pick up the tray. My step almost falters when I glimpse Akilah.

She's sitting against a post, in a blue cotton dress with her hair braided over one shoulder, and she's bound with rope at her wrists and her ankles.

Although I will her to, she doesn't look up when I set the tray beside her.

Instead, she lashes out with her bound hands and the bread, cheese and meats scatter over the ground .

"Feisty, aren't you?" the commander says with a hint of admiration. He lays down his quill and crosses the room; I pick up the strewn lunch, watching from the corner of my eye. Akilah looks tense and angry, but I don't see bruising or blood.

The commander leans against the post, crossing his ankles. "Come, you need to eat."

Akilah turns her head to the tent wall.

"You're upset at the situation. I understand that. But I've done my best in the circumstances."

She huffs.

"I didn't let my generals get their hands on you, nor the high-ranking officers. I even faked whipping you."

Akilah sags at this and her gaze falls to the ground and her bound feet.

The commander lets out a weary sigh. “You’ve got to understand. Magic is irreplaceable. He is worth ten, maybe twenty, of any other healer.”

I pinch meat and flick it down onto the tray. The movement catches Akilah’s attention, and she looks over at me. Her eyes momentarily widen and she quickly snatches her gaze away, schooling her shock.

After a moment, she clears her throat. She’s speaking to the commander, but also to me. “We don’t want to be here.”

“Once we have control of Ragn, I’ll set you free.”

“You think you’re kind.”

“You could be thrown in with the other prisoners. I’m making sure you’re looked after. ”

“By making me sleep in your tent? Making others think that we—”

“Out there, other soldiers do more than think .”

I pick up the runaway bread roll and reach out, offering it to her, keeping my head bowed.

“Eat!” the commander says.

Keep your strength , I say with the push of my hand towards her. I’ll get you out soon.

She takes the bread, her fingers finding momentary connection with mine.

I don't linger long, quickly pulling myself to my feet and heading for the door.

"Wait," the commander calls, and I freeze.

He moves behind me and my pulse ticks up. But then he settles once more at his table. "My war hound was agitated this morning. Feed him more."

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With this dismissal, I step out into daylight.

The sun is warm on my skin after the tense air of the tent, but nothing can be warm enough to ease my tension.

I need to grab Quin and get Akilah out. My eyes flick to the guards flanking me, the last barrier before I reach Quin, and just as I hope I've slipped past them unnoticed, a voice calls, "Oy. The commander told you to feed his hound. He means right away."

I freeze and suppress a wince, gaze sharpening anxiously on the commander's tent before focusing on the soldier who is jerking his thumb over his shoulder, presumably in the direction of the hound.

With twelve sets of Wyrd eyes on me, I glide demurely around the back of the commander's tent.

The shadows are short at this time of day, but along with the sudden scent of hay and dust, there's a sudden shift in feeling behind me.

The hairs on my nape prickle and I know I'm being followed.

It's not Quin and his cane, but the Wyrd.

His presence feels thick and sticky, like he's going to be hard to shake off.

"Hound's barking mad," he says, swaggering up to my side, breath wet at my temple.

"I'll help you."

He touches my elbow and I grit through it as he steers me to the war hound. The snarling dog has its own spacious tent in a fenced area with room to move and hay to sleep in. I shake off the Wyrd under the guise of getting food: preserved snake meat, sitting on a shelf beside some large sacks.

The hound claws eagerly at his fence, frantic, but as I lean down to grab the snake meat, the air shifts.

I feel his hands clamp around me, crushing me into heat and muscle.

The sudden pressure of his chest against my back has me choking out a strangled sound.

My blood grows cold as he wraps himself closer and starts shifting my skirts as he murmurs in my ear.

Vile bastard. Taking advantage of someone he thinks is a weak woman.

I shove his hands off me and he laughs, snatching me again, tighter this time. "Might die tomorrow. Let me have this."

My female voice lacks the punch I want. "Let go of me!"

"I like it when you squirm."

I grab a handful of snake meat and walk back into his arms. He's not expecting it and staggers a few steps into the fence, where he gets his balance and starts jerking up my skirt. Bastard! I wrap my arm behind me and him and dangle the snake meat.

The hound rushes for it and I slip it into the Wyrd's pants just in time for the hound to take a massive bite through the gap in the fence.

The Wyrđ howls, dropping his arms from me, and I grab my knockout powder, whirl around, and punch him with some in the nose.

He's surprised at my force for a brief moment before the powder hits and he falls to the ground. My chest heaves, my fingers locked into a fist, bracing in case he surges up again, but... nothing.

A sudden sharp, powerful gust slams into the tent and I look up from the Wyrđ to Quin, his cane digging into the dirt beneath him. The ferocious look in his eye is slicing through the Wyrđ like a blade. The intensity of it feels so protective, I'm able to breathe again.

Quin thrusts himself over the space separating us in a single moment. He hauls me close and inspects me carefully. His eyes meet every inch of me with concern and the fear I felt before is replaced by another kind of fear. One that pulls more deeply, one that I've been trying not to feel.

"I arrived late," Quin murmurs angrily. "Are you alright?"

I crouch and heave the Wyrđ over. "Fine."

"What are you doing? "

"Staunching the blood before it leaves a suspicious puddle."

Quin watches with the tightest jaw as I methodically sew up the torn wound on the Wyrđ's buttocks. "Rather leave him here to rot."

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Quin and I share a tight look. Quin uses the wind to thrust the incapacitated soldier behind the large sacks, and slides an arm around my waist. His gaze hits mine. We need to provide a reason for the soldiers not

to come over. He has a way. Will I agree?

My breath hitches.

The footsteps grow louder. Someone mentions the hound.

I stare back at Quin, feeling his idea like a dangerous weight swinging between us.

My nerve endings leap at the glimpse of the first soldier's shadow.

I throw my arms around Quin's neck, drawing him to the sacks.

He drops his cane and leans against me, his tight long length a shield.

His face bows over mine and I arch my throat wantonly as I glance over his shoulder.

The first Wyrd has stopped abruptly. The others are still coming.

I sigh breathily and curl a leg around Quin, pushing him closer. He drags a nose up my ear. "Careful."

I giggle and gasp and catch his eye.

The flash in them has me exploding in shivers.

There's not so much as a hint of a smile.

His entire body thrums, taut with energy that sparks against mine.

And then... that uneven way his chest rises and falls, and the softest hitch in his throat.

.. This moment may be acted, but it's also real.

I swallow hard.

He digs his nose into my hair and his breath shudders like he's fighting something intoxicating. My leg loosens around his hip and he clasps my thigh to keep me there.

"Let's give these two a moment, eh?" one of the Wyrds finally says, and the others laugh and sneak away, and I'm still locking Quin against me, my arms rigid, pulsing with my frantic heartbeat.

On a sharp breath, I come back to myself. My foot hits the ground and my arms shift to his chest and shove.

Quin rocks back onto his good leg and steadies his gaze on me.

"Your looks say too much, Quin."

The Wyrd behind the sacks stirs; Quin grabs his cane and whacks him unconscious again with a scowl.

"So do your actions."

We decide to move the Wyrd. Quin finds a flask at his hip, undoes the cap and splashes the sharp scent of alcohol over him.

I'm aware of the cold sweat forming at my nape.

Every footstep feels like it might betray us, the weight of the Wyrd growing greater by the second.

Quin's uneven gait beside me is a constant reminder that he isn't using enough magic to move painlessly.

We're too obvious, we'll be exposed. I glance around with a racing pulse and force my feet to keep moving forward .

Quin stops suddenly, resting heavily on his cane while his other arm remains determinedly around the Wyrd. I glance over and mouth. "Use more magic."

He grimaces and keeps moving.

We slink past the commander's tent, where officers have gathered demanding the commander come out and explain away the rumours amongst the generals.

The commander emerges like a shadow, stern and unyielding, holding a parchment. The officers are briefly quiet as he speaks, but there's a restlessness around them. Suspicion, fear.

Quin's grip on the Wyrd shifts, his gaze darting to mine, a silent nod. The Skeldar camp has made their move. We don't stop walking. We'll need to act swiftly: get Akilah and get out.

The commander's gaze scrolls over the soldiers and us.

I stall and hurry on, and the commander shifts his attention to the Wyrds before him.

"This letter seemingly warns us that the Skeldar camp is riddled with poxies. It may equally be a scare tactic. Until such time as this is confirmed, you will maintain your order and that of your men."

"If it's true?" someone calls out.

“Ten strokes for speaking out of turn. Another ten for inciting panic.”

That officer is dragged away and we hear his howls even as far away as the training area.

In the healing tent, a healer spots us and rushes over, thankfully intercepted by Florentius. He takes over from Quin and we drag the man to a secluded area near the river, deposit him in the shadow of a tree.

Within moments, Florentius has used his magic to seamlessly heal the dog bite. So fast, so precise. The wound vanishes beneath his spell as if there'd never been damage at all. My stitches, the ones I pushed in with needle and thread, burn away in an instant.

I look away but I still feel the throb of my clenched teeth. I gesture to Quin leaning against the trunk, watching. “Heal Quin’s hairline cut properly while you’re at it,” I mutter irritably.

Florentius looks up; Quin touches the stitches I gave him.

“Leave it,” Quin says.

“It’ll scar.”

“Let it.”

My gaze flickers to the deep cut, but Quin’s silence cuts deeper.

His voice is low and firm. “Some things shouldn’t be forgotten.”

A hollow laugh trips out of me, but it’s nervous, too. “How could you ever forget

this?”

His lips twist. “Call the scar a symbol, then. Of the repercussions of war. The importance of healers—”

“The consequences of us?”

His eyes darken as he throws back, “The meaning of responsibility.”

“The need to take a step back in order to move safely forward! ”

“The need to forge a path together.”

Florentius is looking between us with a crunched brow, a witness to our heated exchange. “Perhaps this lover’s quarrel can be put on hold?”

I throw up my useless hands. “We can never be lovers.”

Quin laughs darkly. “We’ve always been lovers.”

He says it like a fact, like it’s something I should know, something I should stop denying. It slams into me and I hiccup at the rawness it leaves behind. “You promised we wouldn’t talk about this.”

His gaze glitters, but there’s no humour in it. “You invited me to.”

The consequences of us .

I’d directed this conversation. I was the one burning to be clear. I was the one who wanted to hear...

I wrench my gaze guiltily away from his. At war, and I'm at war with myself.

Quin gives me space by refocusing the discussion. His voice is clear and decisive. "We need to take advantage of the soldiers' unrest. Poxies in the camp will provide the distraction we need." He looks at Florentius. "Panic will amplify the situation."

As he continues to lay out the plan, I force my mind into formation, tamping down the conflict inside.

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With my assistance, Florentius moves the dying into healing baths, where he spells them to make them more comfortable while also pushing in the poxy herbs.

Their skin quickly grows rashy and forms boils and I have to look away.

Their last moments, and I'm the one insisting on disrespecting their bodies. ..

If there is such a thing as fairness, as true justice, I will be made to pay for this. But... this plan, if it works, will save not only Skeldars, but also Wyrds. It is better overall. It's worth it.

As planned, I stir up panic. I drop a bucket of water near the lines outside the mess tents and hold up a hand forming boils.

Soldiers turn towards the commotion, to this servant woman suddenly shrieking.

When I have enough eyes on me, I cry, "Something's wrong with the river water!"

While they back up, leaving a ring of space around me, Wyrd Quin snaps his way over and prods the bucket with his cane. Then makes a show of prodding my hand, lifting it with his cane again for all to see. "Everyone stand back. Someone warn the commander. I'll get her to isolation."

I sob my way out of their view until I'm safely behind some tents, where Quin takes the pouch I gave him and pulls out the antidote. I smear the oil over my hand and slip on gloves to cover the skin. It'll take a fair few hours to fully recover, but the rest of my skin is spotless.

From the shadows, Quin and I watch as Wyrds stumble off in agitation. And perfectly on time, two healers and Florentius run towards the commander's tent.

We follow, hiding ourselves, as more Wyrds—upon seeing the frantic approach of the healers—begin spiralling into chaos. The word poxies is being thrown from tent to tent, and with it whispers that the water is the source.

The healers bring news of deaths, and fear. “It must be quickly contained. All water collected from the river must be discarded.”

“We won't last three days without water,” an officer barks.

“What about our homes? The river runs west.”

The commander is grim-faced as he tells his generals and officers to keep order, but there's sufficient panic now that he has to respond with urgency. He orders half his generals to take their men and block the river. “Spread out along the border; no one with poxies enters our kingdom.”

“If this truly is an outbreak, we'll need reinforcements.”

The commander grimaces and urges the men to action .

Quickly, the whole camp is in upheaval as the Wyrd army halves.

“Move,” I murmur, willing the commander to get far enough from his tent for Quin and me to get Akilah out. “Come on...”

Quin scans the area and speaks low. “I'll lure him away. You get Akilah and reach the horses Florentius has ready for us at the river.”

In the chaos of the camp, I can do it.

He continues, “If I’m not there, don’t wait.”

Florentius will lead us towards the pass. He’ll use his magic to get up the cliffs.

Quin moves and I grab his arm, halting him. My gaze hits and holds his. Words are trapped behind the lump in my throat. He squeezes my hand and nods, then canes off.

Within a few minutes, new shouts hit my ears.

“The hound got out! The hound is loose!”

The commander rushes out of his tent. “Which way?”

Soldiers point and the commander gestures for two of his guards to help him catch his beloved dog.

Four guards and freeing Akilah to navigate without getting caught.

I rummage in the pouch, pull out two glass bottles, spill some vinegar in one and mix in a pinch of crushed phosmiris.

Setting it under the back of a tent far enough away, I grab the bottle of the commander’s tonic.

Swiftly, I move towards my goal. One of the guards halts me.

“You were here already.”

I bow. “There’s upheaval in the healing tents. I was instructed to make sure this is

delivered to the commander before it gets lost in the disarray.”

The guard hesitates. “Come back when he’s returned.”

I speak softly. “The healers need all helping hands in the healing tents. I’ve seen the poxies up close. They’re spreading quickly.” I lift the tonic. “You can take it inside, if you like?”

The Wyrd, realising he’ll have to touch me to take it, hesitates. “Drop it on his table. Quick.”

As soon as the door flaps shut behind me, I rush to Akilah’s side. She jerks her head up, eyes wide. I press a finger to my mouth and she nods. Quickly, I unknot her binds.

She whispers, gesturing to the door, the guards.

“Wait for it,” I mouth and peek out a crack.

Within seconds there are startling popping sounds and someone yells, “Fire!”

Alchemy to the rescue!

The guards rush towards the smoke, and Akilah and I use the distraction to slip out of the tent and merge into the general chaos of the camp. I’m holding her hand tightly and I can’t bear to let her go until we reach the river, where horses and plant-collection baskets wait.

Quin isn’t here.

And Florentius—

Emerges from a nearby tent and strides toward us, his gaze locked onto Akilah, his tired creased expression melting into relief.

His gaze falls to our hands and he plunges his between us, pulling her from me.

He whisks her behind the cover of the nearest tree and engulfs her, dirtied clothes and all, into a hug.

His hands glow with a spell that sinks into her and Akilah presses her forehead against his neck and sobs.

I look away with a hard swallow, and spy two Wyrds headed our way. I grab the baskets. “Akilah, catch!”

She pulls back and grabs the basket in time, and Florentius urges her onto his horse. I leap onto a second one.

“Where are you off to?” a Wyrd demands.

“It’s a poxy outbreak. I need to collect the necessary plants.”

“Send the women.”

“The faster I start consuming, the more I’ll save.”

The Wyrds grunt. “Hurry.”

When they walk away, I let out the breath I’d been holding. Florentius doesn’t linger; he leaps behind Akilah and urges his horse towards the bridge in the distance.

He glances at me scanning the camp. “There’s a horse there for him.”

I follow behind, lagging as I keep looking over my shoulder.

Two skittish guards at the bridge see Florentius and our baskets and let us through. They must be familiar with him. They must want him to hurry with a cure.

Barely a half-dozen hoof-steps onto the bridge, shouts slam into us from behind. “Stop them!”

Two dozen Wyrds are running in formation towards the bridge. Another six come on horseback. Fast. “Commander’s prisoner is gone.”

The guards whirl around, drawing swords.

We’ve come so far—we’re so close. Half a bridge, then the cliffs where Florentius can use magic to help us scale the pass.

These soldiers are too fast. Florentius and Akilah are too heavy to outrace them. They’ll be caught by the end of the bridge. Unless...

I yell to Florentius, who’s hesitating between fight and flight. “Tell Commander Kjartan I sent you. Go!”

He hears something in my voice that makes him listen. With a last clash of his gaze on mine, he digs his heels in and urges his horse into a sprint. My pulse thrums as I watch them disappear over the bow of the bridge, and with a frightened gulp, I pull my horse around, facing the oncoming force.

Riders and neat walls of soldiers advance, glinting with blades, shields, and armour. Their footsteps pound in unison and shake the bridge. Will I be able to hold them back, even for a moment?

I rear my horse, slowing them slightly. No one touches my friends.

The saddled Wyrds grunt and swing their weapons. More are rushing towards the bridge behind those already swarming onto it. In their eyes, I'm merely one defenceless woman on horseback.

I yank off my gloves and slice my hand as they charge.

I throw blood out in a large arc between us .

“I have poxies!”

The riders come to a skidding halt.

I slice and throw more blood towards them.

“A single drop and you'll be infected.”

I lift my boil-covered hand high.

Hisses. Curses. Someone orders for archers to be brought.

Fear riddles through me, and I pray Florentius and Akilah have made it to the other side. That they'll make it to safety.

A Wyrd spears a short sword towards me and I dodge it, deeply grateful for all my drakopagon experience.

“Archers!” comes a booming call, and the riders part. The footsoldiers kneel, holding shields above their heads until all I see is a metallic path leading to nocked arrows.

My hands shake around my reins. Do I try to outrun them, or plunge in hoping they'll scurry back afraid of my blood?

An icy shiver slinks through my middle.

Too late.

Glinting arrows hurtle in a large arc into the sky.

For a moment, everything becomes still: the Wyrds' shouts disappear; the breezes cease; even the sunlight dulls. And then—

A savage gust slams into me, so sharp it stings in my lungs and the hairs on my nape prick. The arrows flying overhead are thrown far behind me.

On the same gust is a magnificent sight. The world fills with life again: men gasping; winds impossibly strong; sunlight beaming brightly with a dark shape leaping before it, soaring high, soaring fast. Quin, on his horse, flying over the Wyrd army.

The wind fades with the clop of hooves hitting the bridge.

I've forgotten how to breathe. An entire Wyrd army stretches threateningly before us, and my eyes are caught on Quin as he roars. "Mine!"

The bridge is made smaller. There is hope in my heart. For a few seconds, the Wyrd stare, mouths gaping in disbelief. They shuffle uneasily.

But they hold strong.

A volley of arrows flies into the air, and a blinding light flares as Quin's shield erupts. The arrows clang against the shimmering dome around us and fall, but their

force ripples through Quin's body.

My pulse jumps.

A horn blows.

The Wyrd army parts for the commander, his armour glinting under the sun. He lifts an arm and lets it fall.

Wyrds charge towards our dome and Quin buckles at each assault. His stance is unsteady, and the Wyrd are relentless. He grits his teeth.

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War cries swell. The scent of iron and sweat seeps into the shield, mixing with the damp river smell underfoot. The Wyrds thunder over our dome, their shadows shifting over us, a heavy weight as they make it to the other side of the bridge and towards the pass.

I shift my horse closer to Quin's, grabbing his reins as Quin buckles again. "It's too much. Can you get us to the clifftops?"

Quin presses his lips together and shakes his head.

"I expended too much collapsing the cliffs, and now..."

Leaping to my rescue. He's short on spiritual energy. "How long can you hold on?"

He doesn't answer. He doesn't want to frighten me.

"Florentius and Akilah will reach the camp soon," I say. "They'll tell Captain Kjartan. We just need to hold out."

His face is pale, sweat beading at his forehead.

Each series of stabs into the dome saps him further.

He doesn't speak, but I know what he's thinking.

I'm thinking it too. Even with the Wyrd army halved, the Skeldars are outmatched.

More and more are marching onto the bridge, are running over our heads. We're simply overwhelmed.

We've failed to keep the soldiers safe, Ragn safe. My king safe.

I tighten my hold on his reins and mine. Our legs are pressed together tight from the knee down and I press more. "Get out of here."

He grabs my thigh, squeezing hard as he leans in to growl. "Going to throw yourself in front of the spear again? Will your last words be a plea to save my people?"

He stops my reply. "If I don't leave with you. I don't leave at all."

My hand slackens around his reins and as it drops, he glimpses the deep cuts on my palm. He snatches my wrist and lifts it carefully, inspecting the wounds with a hiss .

"It'll be fine."

His fingers shift over the edge of a cut and I jerk.

His lips twist, displeased. He pulls out the flutette from under his shirt, presses the end to his mouth, and hauls me in close.

I'm half out of my saddle but his arm around me is strong and steady, even through the punches of pain that roll through him as soldiers mercilessly barge over the shield.

Through the slithering blue, sunlight filters into the dome, casting a shifting dappled light over us.

Dark eyes meet mine, imploring me to stay still.

Gently, he slides his hands off me, and fingers flutter over his flutette.

Soft music vibrates in the air, tickling over my face.

The magic in each note is familiar—my own from a long time ago.

The tune is soft and elegant. He's practiced in the months we've been apart.

Quin plays, closer and closer, until the end of his flute brushes my lips and I'm gulping in the sound, and the healing magic with it.

The sting in my palm lessens until I can't feel it, and the rest of my body fills with warmth and energy. When he finishes, he keeps the flute between our lips and his eyes on mine.

My hand comes up shakily and lowers the flutette to his chest. "I could have used something from my pouch."

"I didn't want you to."

"Because magic works better."

He covers my hand. "Because I wanted to kiss you."

A wall of metal shields slams against the dome. Quin retches and gasps. The shield shudders, its shimmery walls cracking in a jagged web, each line throbbing with light. Quin clenches his jaw hard and his entire body convulses as he fights to hold the dome in place.

Wyrds are pressing forward in endless waves, a sea of soldiers set to slaughter anyone in their path. The bridge groans under the weight. Two people, against this.

Quin forces himself upright. He glares at all the Wyrds, unyielding. A promise he will fight. “Keep your back to the side of the bridge.”

He draws out his Wyrd sword, shadows of intense determination layering his face.

I rummage through my pouch and grab knock-out powder. It won't hold off many, but I must try to defend myself. So he doesn't get distracted.

A bitter laugh escapes me. Absurd, at a time like this. But my bout continues as I stare at the impossible chances of survival.

Quin raises a brow as he lifts his sword towards the thinning dome and the Wyrds beyond.

I murmur, “Fate is truly left to the gods.”

The dome splinters, light glaring with each fracture until with a blinding flash and a sound like thunder, the dome explodes, blasting back the closest Wyrds in a tumbling wave that quakes across the bridge.

Quin remains steadfast on his horse, sword unwavering. His voice cuts through the chaos, heavy; full of absolute promise. “I will be your god.”

The declaration silences even the war cries for a shivery, breathless second .

He spurs his horse forward, and the steed rears with his furious cry. His blade glitters through the air and Wyrds fly back with the force, collapsing atop one another in a pile of steel.

He swings and swings, forcing a path. I fling out powder to the sneaky soldiers who pass him for me, but they're few and far between. Quin is a blur of movement as he

furiously defends me.

When I'm out of powder, I cast my gaze about for a weapon. I only have my pouch and the basket at my back, which—

My fingers fumble at the basket straps. The Wyrds are closing in, their blades catching the light in sharp glints.

There's no time. I cut the reins with a jagged slice, tying the leather to the basket handles as quickly as I can.

The weave is tight—tight enough to hold river water, just long enough for one last desperate chance.

Three Wyrds barge toward Quin's flank as he fights forward, and I swing my basket up, raining water in arcs, shouting that it's tainted with poxies.

They jerk and scramble back, and Quin and I cover more ground. Ever nearer to the cliffs and the blocked pass.

We've forced our way through so much, but still, there is so much coming. Even if we get out, the Skeldar army is ultimately outnumbered.

I wield the last of the water in my basket, thrusting it in a high arc, making Wyrds scurry out of its path. Quin snags a bow and aims at the commander .

The commander lurches sideways, thrusting Wyrds off the side of the bridge, and motions for archers—

Drums. Coming from behind the rocks. Coming from an approaching army.

Arrows sing.

With a cry, Quin dredges up the very last traces of his spiritual energy, and with it hauls us off our horses and into the air towards the fallen rock. We make it halfway before gravity yanks us onto a boulder. But it's enough.

Clambering over the crest of the pass, are Skeldars. Not just a few. There are more behind, scaling the fallen rock with bow and arrow. And more behind them. Half are covered in boils. Poxies.

Commander Kjartan leads.

And Nicostratus is by his side.

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They're a blur of deafening roars as they plummet down crushed rocks either side of us and into the fray.

The battle is brief, and brutal. Blue cloaks scatter, whipping behind Wyrds as they flee before the onslaught of boils.

Finally, a bellow from the Wyrd commander forces his men into a harried retreat.

Amidst the chaos, Commander Kjartan and Prince Nicostratus press on, chasing the last of the invaders across the bridge.

I haul Quin over the rocks, his limp heavy on my side.

Each step is another battle for him, but his eyes glitter, like perhaps there is something desirable about this pain.

Like it's a reminder he's alive. We're alive.

We made it. My pulse pounds steadily. I want to feel the same relief.

We're no longer surrounded by the enemy.

All night and all day I've begged the heavens for this.

For Nicostratus's arrival. And now that he's here, that hope has been answered, but. ..

I'm still glancing over our shoulders.

I'm still shivering .

“We're free,” Quin murmurs.

From the Wyrð . . .

“What do you think happens next?” I ask, and grimace at my voice.

“The Wyrð commander is aware of Lumin magic, Lumin-Skeldar support. He'll take that information home and it will keep them there.”

“What else do you think will happen?”

“King Yngvarr will hand his reign to his son. Prins Lief will want to establish mutually beneficial relations with Lumin. He'll get that only by supporting me as king.”

I look at him. I'm quieter this time. “What else will happen?”

“My mother will leave with him.”

“What else?”

“I'll take what is mine.”

His gaze doesn't waver. The firm certainty of his words sinks into me, heavier than the battle we've braved. I breathe in deep, cool air, and on shivers, I continue moving him into camp, to the top of the hill.

“You'll have to head back to Ragn to take off the jarl mask,” I say.

“I hope I’m right in hearing you won’t follow me.”

“I’ll only anger the king.” After a pause, I add, “If you see Prins Lief, my aunt...”

“I’ll let her know you’re safe. You’re headed home.”

Home.

“If Prins Lief tries to give you any trouble,” I say, “remind him I have more scriptions to transcribe. ”

A light laugh. “You really know how to hold royals hostage.”

I swallow and palm my nape. “Meditate. You’ll need your magic.”

He seats himself on the crest of the hill and closes his eyes. “Magic is powerful, but it’s finite. It’s fragile.”

It can’t be relied on. I’ve seen as much.

“I’ll be a week behind you,” Quin murmurs. “Leave for Lumin with the protection of my men.”

On instinct, I glance towards the pass. Towards his brother.

When I look back, it’s to Quin watching me. “You faced death .”

I throw my hands up. “Fine. I promise.”

He shakes his head, lips twisting.

I hurry back through camp, asking for news of Florentius and Akilah, finally finding them in a small tent at the edge. I fling open the door only to drop it again, flushing.

They just survived war too. Of course they might be... embracing.

I slam my eyes shut until a wake of air has me peeking out to Akilah opening the door. Her cheeks brighten and she gestures me inside. With a hesitating step, I follow her in.

The tent has two mats, blankets, and little else but shadow. Shadow I'm glad for as I kneel on the ground, Florentius on one mat, Akilah dropping to the other.

I look from one sombre face to the other and bow until my head hits the grass. I address Akilah first. "Other akilas only had to worry about visits to dance houses. You were right to worry about what trouble I'd get you into."

"Trouble? You no longer call it adventure?"

"I always thought I could do the right thing. Make the right choices." I shake my head. "It got too hard. My trouble got you hurt. I hurt you. I am sorry."

She shuts her eyes, her throat working with a swallow. When she doesn't respond, my shoulders sag and I bow again. To Florentius, I speak, my voice pinched. "Florentius—"

He holds up a hand, halting me, and then a soft glow of magic stretches over me. My voice—my real voice—returns. "I need to hear you say it," he says.

I look at him, and he looks right back into me. His pain is visceral, I feel it in the growing lump in my throat and the sting at my eye.

“I’m sorry.”

The words are simply too small. But I don’t think there will ever be words big enough to properly express...

He breathes in deeply and out again. “I’m blaming you more than I should.”

“I deserve that blame.”

“Then, equally, you deserve my most sincere gratitude.” His eyes grow shiny and he looks away from me to Akilah. “Only a man with love in his heart would face an army so his friends could escape.”

“An act I borrowed from someone better.”

Florentius nods and nods, his lips wobbling with Lucius’s name. Akilah throws her arms around him and holds tight.

He looks at me over her shoulder, and in his eyes, I see forgiveness.

I see hope for our friendship. I bow low again and give them space.

I’m a dozen feet from their tent when I’m grabbed by the arm and yanked into a hug.

Akilah’s grip on me is unfathomably strong.

Her face burrows against my shoulder and I feel the splash of a tear roll down my neck.

I wrap my arms around her and squeeze back fiercely.

Later, I return to my tent, wash up and change my clothes, then take a turn around the darkening camp.

There's the swell of celebration and relief in the air, and I feel echoes of it too.

Akilah will head back to the capital with Florentius, she said.

They want their home back. They'll stand alongside the true king to make it happen.

Soldiers wave me to join them but I decline, smiling, and continue walking.

A week behind me. I'll take what's mine.

Will he succeed?

A distant moving shadow has me narrowing my eyes through the dark. I recognise the figure, the long stride. He's moving towards the hill, and his gait is tense.

My stomach crunches .

I trip over my feet as I chase him and scramble upright, until I'm halfway up the hill and see them, short bursts of magic sparking from them as they trade fierce blows.

I freeze, pulse pounding shrilly in my ears.

My mind spirals in indecision. Leaking his magic might give them away, a reveal Quin wanted only once safely in front of King Yngvarr. Not here amongst an army of Lumin-hating stormblades. But stepping between them, speaking... this may blaze out of control.

A group of singing men halt suddenly beside me, staring at the crown of the hill.

Suddenly, they're calling for their comrades, and a hissing crowd begins to gather. Some storm up the hill and I race to cut them off.

"Are you also one of them?" they hurl.

"One of them? One of the people who fought by your side?"

They scowl and try to pass.

"Attacking a fellow soldier without permission of a superior will have you whipped fifty times!"

They halt.

Others declare they'll get permission.

When Kjartan charges onto the scene, I meet him with urgency. "Please calm your men."

Commander Kjartan spies the truth revealing itself atop the hill and his eyes narrow. "They're Lumins?" He grabs his weapon and I step closer, shaking my head vehemently.

"Do you really think your king doesn't suspect?"

He needs Lumins to keep Wyrds out of Iskaldir.

He played along with the jarl act to keep his inner peace—and perhaps the peace between our soldiers.

"I eye his hand, tight on his hilt, while clashing light bursts behind me.

Big enough now for all the camp to see. “Your prins also knows. Knows and understands the importance. Keep your men at bay.”

“You might be lying to me.”

“Let your men attack, and all those Lumin soldiers will fight back. You’ve won a war. You want a skirmish now?”

He throws his sword back into its sheath. “Stop this. I’ll take the jarl leader back to our king.”

“Thank you.”

Commander Kjartan calls for his men to back down, and reluctantly, they listen.

I do what I promised. Spells flare as they hurl them at one another, and shields pound with light absorbing each attack. As the distance between us falls away, I hear their voices.

“You should’ve come.”

“I did.”

“Sooner.”

Quin attacks this time, and Nicostratus blocks, a clash of magic that fountains like spurting blood. We’ve seen enough blood already. I don’t want to see more, and I certainly don’t want any spilled between brothers.

“Quin,” I cry, stumbling up the hill towards them. “Nicostratus. Stop.”

Nicostratus jerks at my voice and his furious, hurt gaze halts me a step from him. He tugs at his belt and casts the dromveske to my feet. “I saw it all. Before we ever met, he dangled off a cliff for you!”

“He dangled off one for you, too,” I cry back. “While being flogged by the enemy!” Listen, please listen . “Your brother loves you.”

His nose and clenched teeth dive towards mine. “Not enough.”

The words hit Quin with noticeable force. He rocks back on his feet like I do. There’s a growing rift between us, and no matter who volunteers to dangle over it, they’re still left with a choice who to save.

From the clashing of magic to dark and silence.

Nicostratus stares at me, stares at his brother. Then he turns his back, his last words left to cleave deeply into Quin’s chest.

It’s cutting more deeply than a sword, and I need to stop it or nothing will heal the wound. Even though it means leaving Quin without a goodbye, even though it means breaking my promise to leave under the protection of his army, I have to do it.

I have to bring back what’s his.

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I barely catch a glimpse of his shadow before it slips over a rolling hill, through dense forest. Whenever I get close, he spurs his horse on, anger and hurt driving him. And I follow in desperation—somehow, someway, I must bring him back to Quin, to their loving brotherhood.

Each day, each breathless glimpse of his red cloak, feels like a step deeper into the past. We pass through Hinsard, neither of us stopping.

The city is a blur of memories—of the three of us.

This is where we broke apart. No. The truth sinks its claws in, sharper than I want to admit.

We fractured much earlier. Maybe we were never whole to begin with.

My attraction to Nicostratus had been a mask, a desperate attempt to stitch myself back together after the last time Maskios left.

I'd searched for my masked friend for so long, I'd let myself believe Nicostratus might be the answer.

Or at least someone who could help me forget.

I grip my reins tightly, steering my horse— a trade for tonics after my journey back to Lumin—into a narrowing gully.

The air grows cooler, and towering trees stretch overhead, their canopies dappling me

with patches of light and shadow.

Somewhere in these woods is the crusader base.

Perhaps, if I yelled out, Lykos, Zenon, and Megaera might hear me. But this is not their fight.

In the far distance, I glimpse a flicker of red flashing through the trees. Slower, this time. My gut churns. He's letting me catch up. He must be.

The path twists, and I realise where we are. The fortress ruins are rising at the base of Mount Crysippos. Memories flood me as I enter, this time through the creaking front gates. The clatter of hooves echoes off the courtyard stone, the sound swallowed by the stillness. My heart pounds.

This is where Quin and Nicostratus snuck off to as boys, on their travels to Hinsard.

This is where Quin and I saved Nicostratus from the crusaders.

This is where my magic was taken from me forever.

I dismount, the reins slipping through my trembling fingers. There's a quietness in the courtyard that has me shivering. It's still. Too still. I see a flicker of movement, a shadow, but when I turn my head it's gone. My pulse races.

I tell myself it's nothing. It's fear. This sense of foreboding is trauma; my body recalling what happened to me here. I shake off a shudder and move across moss-slick stone to a broad back of red: Nicostratus waiting.

"You led me here," I say quietly .

“You wouldn’t stop following me.” Nicostratus doesn’t turn to face me, his voice strained and sharp.

“So this place was meant to—”

“Yes. Hurt. So we can be on even ground.”

The ache in my chest rises, spreading hollow and cold around my severed meridians. “Now that we are, can you let us talk this through? Yell it through even, so long as we get it through?”

He turns, his gaze cutting through me. “I saw everything. I know your history. I know how he feels about you. And...” His gaze falters, his throat working hard as he looks toward the ruins. “I could see in your eyes how you’ve always felt about him.”

“It was never conscious—”

“Whether you realised it or not, I simply wasn’t enough. I was never enough.”

My throat tightens. “It isn’t about being enough. You are an incredible choice. Kind, loyal, always there when I needed help. You’re beautiful. But... feelings aren’t simple.”

His laugh is bitter and hollow, bouncing off the crumbled stone walls. “Then feelings should be avoided.”

I step closer, my hands trembling at my sides, one grazing Quin’s gifted dromveske hanging from my belt. “I tried. I tried very hard to do as you asked.”

“Very hard,” he says drily, his lip curling.

“I couldn’t leave him to die, and he couldn’t see me die either. Life forced us back together. ”

“Don’t put this on fate,” he snaps, his voice trembling with fury. “You wanted to be together.”

I flinch, my mouth dry. My silence hangs heavy between us.

He steps closer, his voice low and dangerous. “Or are you here to tell me from now on, you’ll leave us alone?”

I look at him, my heart pounding. There’s a rational side that says I should agree, that says that’s what I’ve been trying to do all along and should do properly final, but I cannot say those words. My stomach roils even at the thought of them.

He looms over me. “So?”

I inhale sharply. “You love your brother. Nothing is worth destroying your relationship. Hate me, not him.”

“What if I only agree if you leave his life?” His words are a threat, slicing through the air.

A sharp pain pierces my chest. My fists clench instinctively. “He needs your support for the kingdom .”

“Leave him!” he roars.

I shake my head, desperation thick in my voice. “You want me to give him up. Why won’t you give up your jealousy?”

His eyes blaze, raw and pained, as he recoils. “My brother falls for my only spark of joy, and I’m the one who has to get over it?”

Guilt twists in my gut—almost as much as the spear that plunged through my meridians. “I hate how much I’ve hurt you. I am sorry.”

“Sorry enough to give him up? ”

“Sorry enough that I will do anything I can to make it up to you. Anything, except that.”

His laugh this time is a quiet, broken thing. It doesn’t echo—it sinks into the air, heavy and unbearable. “Make it up to me?” His voice is tight, trembling. “Why bother? You’re going to do whatever you want no matter the outcome of this conversation.”

He turns toward his horse, and panic surges in my chest. I lunge forward, snagging his sleeve. He halts but doesn’t face me.

“I am grateful to you,” I whisper. “Fond of you. I owe you my life, and I would gladly give it for you.”

He turns slowly, his voice barely audible. “Do you know how painful it is to hear that platitude? I’d rather you say the truth. You don’t care for me at all.”

“You’re his beloved brother,” I say, my voice breaking. “I will treat you as if you are mine.”

“Keep digging this knife in!” His voice cracks on the words, and he pulls away from me, his face twisted with anguish.

“I’m sorry I’ve hurt you.”

“Sorry isn’t enough!”

He steps back, and I’m about to beg him not to run away again when figures slip out from behind broken stone walls.

At first, I’m slammed with panic, I see purple crusader cloaks and spears, but as I steady my breathing, I see the figures for what they are: sickly looking villagers aiming scythes and pitchforks.

But why at us? Why do they look so serious. And so sickly ?

I take in the figures surrounding us. “What’s going on?” I call out. I step backwards, closer to Nicostratus.

No one speaks, but they keep shifting closer.

I frown over a lurch of fear. I don’t know what these villagers want, but I feel like we should get away. Or at the very least, Nicostratus should. Taking me along might be asking too much. “Fly out of here,” I murmur.

“Haven’t meditated since . . .”

I glimpse a flicker of pain in his expression. Meditating might mean confronting his fight with his brother in a way he hasn’t been ready for yet.

“Are you telling me you’ve no magic right now?” I gulp.

“I still have a sword.”

He starts to draw it and I stop him. “We don’t know the situation. They look sick.”

I call out again, this time directing my question to the silver-bearded man who seems to be leading. “You’re pale. I see a damp sheen on your faces. You’re unwell.”

“Unwell?” he spits, voice hoarse. “We’re dying.”

They rush forwards, scythes and pitchforks gleaming in the daylight. Nicostratus’s sword comes out and I raise both hands. “Stop! If you’re that sick you need a healer. Why attack?”

Silver-beard halts the men. “You’re not sick. You’re like the rest of them in Kastoria. Suspicious.”

“Slow down. We’re travellers, from the south. What’s happening?”

Silver-beard squints at us, his scythe still angled at us, but he’s not moving forward .

I narrow my gaze, scrolling him for signs. “What are your symptoms?”

Silver-beard shoves at his sleeves and raises his arms. My chest seizes as I take in the familiar sheen of scales creeping over his skin. I’ve seen this before, in Kastoria. The regent should have taken care of this. At least this.

“There are scriptions to try,” I murmur shakily.

“That’s what she said, but it’s not working!”

“She?”

Silver-beard lowers his scythe, as do the others, but they continue to step closer.

Nicostratus mutters a curse under his breath.

“That one seems to know scriptures,” Silver-beard calls out. “This one looks like a bleedin’ redcloak. Bring them to the luminari—”

It happens in a heartbeat.

His shoulders jerk with a sudden spasm. His breath hitches violently, and his head snaps forward.

He sneezes.

Time slows. I see the droplets shimmer in the sunlight as they arc toward Nicostratus.

“No!” My body moves before I think. I slam my hands into Nicostratus’s chest, shoving him aside—

The spray lands wetly across my profile.

My heart pounds as I swipe at my face with my cloak, but it’s no use. If this is what Grandfather’s journals described... it won’t matter.

“Nicostratus,” I say urgently. “Cover your mouth and nose, now. ”

He hears the directive in my voice and doesn’t question it, hurriedly tying a handkerchief to his head. I do the same as I address the circling men. “I’m a healer. I’ll let you take me with you, if you leave him behind.”

“We’ll take you both.”

I grab the hilt of Nicostratus’s sword and thrust it outward, its weight almost pulling

me down. “Leave. Him. Behind.”

The men hesitate, their grips on scythes and pitchforks tightening. Silver-beard flinches and raises a trembling hand. “Do as he says.”

Nicostratus steps forward carefully, his gaze locked on mine as he takes back his weapon. His voice is low, sharp. “What are you doing?”

My throat tightens as I murmur, “If this is what I fear it is, you need to meditate. Shield yourself.”

“What do you fear it is?”

I don’t answer. I can’t. The words catch in my chest, and I swallow hard as I’m dragged away. My pulse hammers; I force myself to breathe steadily. Nothing will come from faltering now.

As they shove me onward, Nicostratus stands motionless, his red cloak—blood red—whips against the grey ruins. A foreboding colour that might soon stain a kingdom.

His face is unreadable, but his grip on the sword tightens.

He won’t follow. Not yet.

I’m escorted through the greens of the gully to a boat, where I’m stuck in the miasma of their wheezing as they strain against the oars.

On wet coughs, we finally glide into an eerily quiet Kastoria, not stopping until we arrive at the luminarium.

Looming against the setting sun, the reflection mimics magic the dome used to have.

Lies. There is no magic here. Instead, the truth gleams over the villager's arms, along their deadly scales.

I press a clenched fist to my mouth against what's been racing through my mind and heart:

This might be the thing healers—magic or not—most fear.

This might be plague.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

The villagers prod me into the luminarium, and a familiar fear claws at my chest. It's the fear I thought I'd left behind after the first outbreak—only now, it's worse. Stronger. It slams into me like a wave, cold and suffocating.

The stench of sweat hits first, followed by the low moans of patients rolling on straw mats.

Steam from boiling herbs hangs thick in the air, failing to mask the decay.

My eyes sweep over a dozen bodies, each one a stark reminder of Kastoria's horrors.

Last time, I barely made it through—with magic. Now I'm here again, without it.

Silver-beard barks and Olyn rises from needling a patient. Her tired gaze hits mine over the sea of sick and relief bleeds out in her long sigh.

She crosses the luminarium and speaks calmly with the men who captured me, who also hand over sacks of herbs. Once the sacks are sorted, she grabs me by the wrist with a trembling hand and hauls me outside. "Cael... I begged the heavens for help, and now you're here. This has to mean hope."

Hope... I glance back at the luminarium, my chest tightening. We thought this was over, but now... "It's the same, isn't it? But worse."

Her nails dig into my sleeve as she nods. "These families—they're from remote mountain villages."

“Why not go to the capital? There are vitalians there.”

“They think we have a cure,” she says, her voice breaking. “They’re desperate. And when the scriptions don’t work—” She swallows hard. “They think we’re lying. That we’re hoarding cures—or worse, spreading it ourselves.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“They’re sick and terrified, Cael. People don’t think clearly when they’re scared. And...”

She hesitates, her voice dropping. “They’re not entirely wrong to be suspicious.”

My breath catches. “What do you mean?”

She points at herself, her expression taut with worry. “I’ve been in that luminarium for days, right beside them. Breathing the same air, touching the same patients. And I’m not getting sick.”

Her words send a chill down my spine. My grandfather’s journals flash through my mind. “Those who aren’t getting sick... are they the ones who survived the first time?”

Olyn’s brow furrows. Slowly, she nods. “Yes. Most of them. Now some are being held hostage...” She trails off, her face pale in the moonlight .

“Where are the vespertines when you need them?”

I expect her to say they’re busy, spread thin across Kastoria helping the weak—but instead, she grimaces. “Half of them are hostages. It was an ambush. Poison.”

“Bastion?”

She shakes her head. “He left the day before to get more information in the capital.”

I grimace, but she’s not finished yet.

“For every death they suffer,” she continues, “they’ve killed one of ours.”

I slam a fist against the tree trunk. Fear might be the most frightening effect of all.

I glance at the luminarium, where those dying patients are waiting and will take healthy ones with them.

There is no time to get angry. This sickness is only going to keep spreading. “How many fall sick each day?”

Olyn shudders. “A dozen today. But it’s doubling every day.”

Doubling.

I grip the trunk so hard splinters sink into my palm, but I don’t care.

I can’t look past the horror of that number.

Horror—and nauseating guilt. To win against the Wyrd army, we faked a plague.

We toyed with fear like it was a game. We tricked people into believing the poxies would spread. We used terror to win a war.

And now? This sinister sickness is real. It’s spreading faster than we ever imagined.

Is this the price of our deceit? The consequence of our deception? Our punishment ?

My impersonation of one with Lindrhalda's touch, my idea to mimic plague—had it all tempted the gods?

My stomach clenches so violently I double over, bile burning the back of my throat. I brace a hand against the luminarium wall, swallowing hard to keep from heaving.

Olyn whips out her needles and presses them into three acupoints, relieving the sickness in my stomach but not the one in my heart.

“This is bad, isn't it?” she murmurs.

“If there's sickness here,” I say on a thick swallow, “It'll be elsewhere. This will spiral exponentially out of hand.” I shove myself towards the luminarium, rolling up my sleeves. “Let's take a look; ease symptoms where we can. At dawn, we leave.”

“Leave? We can't leave.”

I meet her eye firmly. “If we don't, we may not save anyone.”

The night stretches on in fevered whispers and dying breaths. When dawn breaks, frost glazes the luminarium's dome, and in the distance three towers of smoke plume towards the heavens. A sharpened scythe halts an inch from my throat.

The farmer gripping it has skin shining like turquoise shells and yellowed eyes burning with fever. Behind him, more block the way, their cracked nails scraping against wood, against their own arms, against each other.

The metal at my throat is cold. I don't move.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the farmer demands, voice raw.

Olyn grips my sleeve. I don’t dare let my hands tremble.

“We won’t find a solution sitting here,” I say, measured but firm. “We need to see the villages where you came from.”

“One of us will escort you.”

“No.”

The tension sharpens and glints like their curved blades. I raise my hands before they think to use the rusting weapons. “You’re sick,” I say quickly. “You’ll infect the healthy. You must remain here at the luminarium.”

They don’t like that. A cough rattles in the air, followed by whispers, then arguments, then nails digging into skin.

In the end, they strip us of everything—our money, our packs, even my dromveske, everything except my healing bag—before stepping aside.

“If you don’t come back by sundown,” the man with the scythe growls, “we’ll kill two more of your lot.”

I bow stiffly, biting back a curse. My fingers twitch toward my belt, where my dromveske should be. Mine. Quin’s. The loss sinks deep, but now isn’t the time to fight for it.

I’ll get the dromveske back. It won’t be long. It can’t be.

The sick and the not-yet-sick are counting on us .

We follow the canals into the river that cleaves through the forest, then race through the woods, the dappled light blueish from a cold dawn. A very cold dawn; I've been shivering since I left the boat. I curl my cloak deeper around me.

"This isn't the most direct route," Olyn says, pointing to the distant hills and more smoke rising from them.

I don't slow. "I need something first."

The ruined fortress looms ahead, blackened stone swallowed by vines. My breath comes quick. He has to be here.

I step carefully over the rubble, my voice cutting through the ruins. "Nicostratus."

The silence tightens. A cold certainty coils in my chest.

He wouldn't have left. Not yet.

Not until he knew what had happened to me—

A flash of red. A rush of wind. He lands before me.

For the first time since leaving the luminarium, my chest loosens. Just slightly. Just enough to breathe again.

His expression is unreadable but his gaze drinks me in—whole, unhurt. The tension in his shoulders unwinds, and a slow, quiet sigh escapes him. "You're unharmed."

I shiver, not from his concern, but from how very cold it feels. "You're shielding yourself. Good."

“I spent a long night meditating,” he says, and there’s more behind the simple statement. More than simply absorbing spiritual power. He’s reflected on how he last used his. Our eyes hold, his dark and wistful and pained. He looks away first. “You fear that sickness. Is it— ”

“Yes.” I snap towards the horse showing its head around a wall. “You have my things. My books. I need them.”

He grabs my shoulder, pulling me back around, his gaze deepening with fright. “A real plague?”

I look over his shoulder at Olyn, patiently waiting for us with a grim smile.

Last night I asked her how many succumb to it.

Her answer had me shuddering. I look at Nicostratus and grimace.

“Have you seen how thick the smoke is coming off the mountains?” He steers his gaze to the distance where four streams funnel into the sky. “There are more and more each day.”

“Burning the dead?”

“The sky will soon turn black.”

“So many?”

“Half might survive.”

Nicostratus rocks back as if struck, his breath catching. His hands flex and curl at his sides, like he’s resisting the urge to grab onto something—anything—to ground

himself. “That’ll destroy the kingdom.”

I move past him and search through the saddlebags until I find Grandfather’s journals. There, I also find my other belongings. My soldad. My clasp. I tuck both into my belt with trembling fingers. They pulse in my hand like a heartbeat. Like Quin’s.

I quickly turn when Nicostratus shifts behind me.

He says, “Surely vitalians can—”

“The scriptions we have aren’t working. Vitalians won’t have an answer to this either.”

I find a broken wall and spread the books out along it, flipping through pages, shivering.

“Surely there’s a cure.” Nicostratus’s shadow lands over my grandfather’s scrawl. “Can’t you find one?”

“You could have all the vitalians in the kingdom work on it, and you may have one in half a year.”

“Half a year! But by then—”

I look up at him. “Exactly. There’s no time for a cure.”

Nicostratus goes very quiet.

I search for the relevant pages, tapping urgently against the paper when I find them.

His broken voice reads a snippet of Grandfather's words. "Halt the progression." He looks at me. "How?"

I snap the book shut. "We need to check the villages, now."

We speak to the sick. We speak to the frightened. We speak to the crying.

A woman clutches a fevered child to her chest, her fingers white from gripping too tightly. "Please, healer—there must be something. Anything."

A man clings to a doorframe, coughing, red-eyed. "My brother is dead. What do I do now?"

And at the village's edge, we pay our respects to the burning dead .

We try to get the villagers to wear cloth over the nose and mouth, and we encourage them to remove themselves from their family if they start to feel unwell.

I'm the only one to look after my children and my grandmother. I can't be sick. I can't remove myself.

With a heavy heart we ask for directions to the alpine farms and leave them to decide for themselves.

"Why farms?" Olyn asks.

"Because I need to test—" I stop.

A farmer trudges past, boots kicking up dust, eyes wary. "What'dya want?" he growls, stepping away from me. With Nicostratus shielded and Olyn immune, only I have my mouth and nose covered. I can see it makes him uneasy.

“Your animals. Have they caught it too? Which ones are dying? Which ones aren’t?”

“How d’you know some aren’t?”

My heart skips a hopeful beat. “Which is it? Goats? Sheep?”

“All get infected.” He hesitates, scratches the back of his neck, and grudgingly adds, “Cept my horses got better fast. The pigs drop like flies. I’ll lose half my yearly taking if this keeps up.”

On a pent breath I step urgently forward. “Let me try and save the healthy ones?”

“Whatcha mean?”

“I’m a healer. I’m looking for a way to help people, but I need to test a theory first. If I’m right, it’ll save your pigs.”

The farmer’s lips thin. “You say you could save the healthy ones?” He hesitates .

“I’ll do my best.”

His face hardens. “Best. So you might harm ‘em?”

My shoulders sag and I grimace. “If so, you’ll be no worse off than you fear now.”

I tell him what I want to do, drawing gasps from Olyn and Nicostratus and a decided shake of the farmer’s head. “Infect the good ‘uns? Get outta here.”

“Listen, please—”

“Off with you! Or I’ll git the constable!”

“This might be the only way. There’s so little time—”

A shadow falls over me.

“Let me try.” Nicostratus’s voice is soft, but the authority in it makes the farmer flinch.

He grips his pitchfork tighter.

“You’d rather lose all your livestock?” Nicostratus murmurs. “Because that’s what will happen.”

I press a hand to his forearm before he can push further. “Go.”

“If you’d just let me—”

“He needs to agree of his own free will. Stay back.”

Nicostratus tries again, pulling at something beneath his cloak, and I push him back this time. No need for swords here.

He grimaces, scowls, and reluctantly returns to Olyn’s side while I try once more to placate the farmer. “You’re a good man. All you want is to protect your animals. I agree with you.”

“Then why’d ya say you’d infect ‘em! Maybe this thing passes. Spares the rest. Won’t have you fir certain killin’ em.”

“What if it saves them? What if this is the only way to spare the rest?”

The farmer hesitates, but his lips are stubbornly firm, like nothing will change his

mind. But I try one last time. “Have you heard that Kastoria has very few sick?”

“They’re hoarding the cure!”

“No. Last year, they suffered a variation of this plague. All those who survived have become resistant to this one.”

“Whatcha saying?”

Before I can respond, I’m cut off.

“Pegus!” the cry comes from a middle-aged woman who stops her cart and crosses the dirt road, clutching the loosening fabric binding her hair, her pounding feet stirring up a dust cloud.

The farmer turns and rushes towards her.

The woman clutches the farmers soil-stained shirt. Tears stream down her face and she sobs. “They didn’t make it. The luminists were burned this morning.”

The farmer—Pegus—stiffens, and lets out a guttural cry.

“Them poor little ones, they aren’t sick. They haven’t got it.” She gestures to the cart where two small heads pop up from amongst the hay.

“Let me get rid of this lot, and I’ll help them inside.”

The woman finally notices me and my companions and she swipes at her leaking eyes. “W—who— ”

I step forward, bow my head, and lie. “I’m a royal vitalian. The king has ordered me

to stop this plague.”

Pegus hisses. “He wants to test his strange theories on our animals!”

The woman looks from me to her husband and back to me. “A royal vitalian?” Her gaze glimmers with hope. “Prove it.”

I open and shut my mouth. In a flutter of cool air, Nicostratus is once more by my side, showing his royal beads. They immediately gasp and drop into a deep bow for the prince.

“How easy this could have been,” Nicostratus chides softly, and I rub my throbbing head. Indeed. I should have thought. The fear has simply been all-consuming.

The woman scrambles nearer, pleading. “Take all the animals. Just please, find a way to keep us and these children safe.”

It’s from the sun passing behind a cloud. It’s her words, weighted with life and death.

I shiver again.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

I bite my tongue. The world sways, but I force myself to stay upright.

There's no time for me to be sick, so I ask Nicostratus to magic me a shield like his own.

He asks why and I tell him a truth: I must get close to sick animals and a shield will be safer than mere cloth over my nose.

Nothing will get past it—neither in, nor out.

With the vibration of his magic glittering faintly around my skin, I ignore the heaviness of my limbs and get to work.

I ask to see the infected horses first, and to Olyn's gulps, I scrape the pus oozing around the hardened scales on its flank.

“The horses are stronger; their bodies fight the plague better. This pus has become weakened plague. The pigs might fight off weakened plague.”

“You hope to do this on people.” Olyn's words are not a question. She's smart enough to understand. “Even if it works, who will let you?”

I grit my teeth against that and a sudden spell of dizziness. I exhale sharply and the world rights itself—just barely .

How long do I have before the fever wins? A day? Less?

Not now. Not yet.

I have to see this through. I finish scraping pus into a vial and hand it to her. “Hold it upright. Don’t spill any.”

I find two more vials in my bag and fill them past the point the cork can hold them too.

Olyn watches me for a beat too long. “You look... flushed.”

I force a laugh, tossing off a hollow smile. “It’s the shield.”

She doesn’t look convinced, but she rushes along with me to the next paddock, where Nicostratus and the farmer have pulled in a dozen healthy pigs.

I hand over the pus. “Did your wife find any angelica root?” I say as I dig in my bag for ground mustiva, oldeaf, and costmary.

Pegus pulls a warty root out from behind his belt and I take it, quickly snatching it away before anyone notices my tremors. I smash the end of the angelica root until I can squeeze its juice into a shallow bowl and gesture for Olyn to hand over a vial of pus.

When all the parts are put together and I have three bowls with differing supportive herbs—all my grandfather’s scriptions according to his research—it’s time to infect the pigs.

“Divide the pigs into three groups. One we cut small crosses, another circles, the last an equivalent sign. When each seep blood, we’ll smear a spoon of the corresponding pus into it.”

Farmer Pegus can't bear to watch. Nor can he bear to leave his poor pigs, and holds them through it with his eyes slammed shut.

Nicostratus also finds the sight disturbing and retreats to the fence, leaving Olyn and me to infect each pig.

After three pigs, I'm sweating; after six, my breathing becomes tight and stiff.

I look away from Olyn and shut my eyes for a brief moment until a wave of dizziness passes, then I snap to the next pig and the next.

I glance up at the sun. Two hours before midday. Shivers roll through me.

"You're looking off," Olyn grumbles.

I don't have to mask my discomfort this time. There are too many things to be 'off' about. "Pegus said once the pigs get sick, they die within eight hours. We need to wait ten to see if this works. But..."

She lets out an expletive. "They'll kill two if we're not back by sundown."

My stomach twists. "Go."

"What if they only let one of them free?"

My throat closes. I don't have an answer for that.

Olyn studies me, then nods sharply.

She pivots and runs before I can stop her.

The hours drag, slow and merciless. My skin itches like fire, raw and unbearable, the effort to hide it becoming agonising.

I dig my nails into my palms to keep from scratching—because if I do, Nicostratus will notice.

And if he notices, he'll send me back. If I refuse, he'll knock me out and carry me.

He'll mean it kindly—he always does.

But kindness is not what I need.

I need someone who won't coddle me.

Someone who won't let me fold beneath this.

Someone who will demand I get through it, no matter what.

Someone who will fight beside me until we've saved them all.

I need Quin.

I smuggle myself into the shadows of the farmhouse and sag against the timber wall, letting the coarseness scratch for me—

“One pig is seriously ill,” Nicostratus says, turning the corner to me. “Others show mild symptoms but all are still alive.”

I nod weakly. “We need to keep an eye on the grave one.” I use all my strength to push off the wall and follow him at a distance. The shimmer of his shield—the second he's spelled on me today—round my body seems to be dulling. “I need

another shield.”

Nicostratus grimaces and casts his gaze away. He exhales sharply, rubbing his temple. “It’s been difficult to meditate.” His voice is quieter than usual, his jaw clenched. “The smoke—” He swallows hard. “The smell of it...”

He doesn’t finish. He doesn’t have to. The presence of death has thickened in the air as the hours have passed. I understand his difficulties, and yet... I need him to be clear-headed now. I need to stay shielded. I can’t spread this to others, and especially not to my king’s brother.

“I have enough to shield you, or to get you back to Kastoria by sundown. But not both.”

A strange laugh bursts out of me. Carrying me without a shield will infect him. But without his magic, we’ll arrive in Kastoria well past sundown. Will Olyn have convinced the people there to wait? To hold off killing an innocent?

If we leave now, I might save two lives. If we stay, we might save thousands.

But even two lives are still lives.

The decision coils tight in my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. My fingers dig into my palms, as if pain might force the right choice into me. But there is no right choice.

Every hour that passes brings us closer to proof. Proof means survival. But what if I’m wrong? What if the pigs only appear stable? What if I wait too long and return to dead bodies and no protection from the plague?

Arcane Sovereign!

My shield flickers again. I exhale sharply, my hands flying to my belt—the dromveske, the soldad, the clasp. “Shield me!”

If I fall here, Quin will have no one who will use the forbidden means that his people need. I must keep going for them. I must keep going for him .

I scramble away until there’s a good distance between us and he’s frowning at me over the pigs.

“That’s your decision?” he says. “What about the two—”

“Do it.”

He hesitates a moment, and accepts. In moments my itchy skin also tingles with his protective shield.

“If the pigs are still all alive in half an hour,” I say hoarsely, “it’s hope enough. Then, we’ll run.”

And run we do.

My limbs are heavy, aching, my lungs feel like a snake is coiled tightly around them, but the pigs were still alive .

And that glimmer of light gives me the spirit to chase myself down the mountain, drag myself through a darkening forest. Nicostratus catches me when I tumble at one point, but accepts that I didn’t see that root.

The sun is sinking fast, pinks and peaches stretching across the vast sky.

Hurry, must hurry. Nicostratus helps me into a borrowed rowboat but when he tries to

follow, I stop him.

Just in case. I can't let him get caught in the mess at Kastoria.

Nicostratus stares at me, hands flexing open and closed. "The pigs were getting better."

His voice is quiet, like he's trying to convince himself of something too terrifying to say aloud. "Why did you put them back in with the infected? What if they get sick again?"

I exhale sharply and heave the oars into place. "For the people of this kingdom, pray they don't."

Sweating, I pull water as hard as I can, and soon Nicostratus's watching figure is a slash of red at the river's bend. Shivers I've been holding back unleash and my teeth chatter as I force myself to row, to race against the now-tangerine skies.

In mere minutes, tangerine becomes burned orange.

Stroke. Breathe. Stroke. Breathe.

Faster.

The sky is rust now. There's no darker shade before night.

Please wait. Wait, wait, I plead in time with the pounding throb in my head. At first glimpse of the luminarium, I scrabble out of the boat and claw my way across the field, calling hoarsely.

I plough forward—

Ahead, Olyn screams and my body seizes with the sound. I glimpse trussed up crosses and two figures tied to them, a farmer raising his scythe over his head as he approaches one.

“No!” My voice breaks with barely any sound.

Olyn thrusts needles at the farmer about to execute a frightened, wide-eyed innocent, and the farmer staggers and turns menacingly to her. I try to run, to cross the dozen-yard divide, but my legs are heavy. I’m not going to make it.

I spy a rock, lunge for it and hurl it with all my remaining energy. It thunks the farmer’s back and he whirls round, startled .

He lowers his scythe and I drop to my knees. “Release them,” I say. “Give us our things.”

I sway on my knees until the hostages are released and another sickly farmer hurls my things to me, my money. My dromveske.

I clutch the dromveske to my chest as I’m wracked with shivers, as the world spins; the figures, the luminarium.

No. Not yet.

Olyn is running, her voice a distant cry.

Not yet. Just one more breath—

The world turns black.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

Blackness fractures. A rush of violet light engulfs me, blinding, weightless—then the world yanks me downward. Leaves whip past, large and luminous, the sacred wood twisting around me in a dizzying spiral until— crack.

Pain lances through my ribs. My breath stutters. I hang, hooked over a low branch, the sacred bark pressing into my stomach.

I groan, pressing a shaking hand to the wood. The violet oak.

The knowledge settles deep.

I'm inside Quin's dromveske.

A shudder wracks me, my spirit-form trembling at the edges, too light, too unsteady. How did I fall in here? Is this truly the dromveske or is it some dying dream?

If I am dying, at least I'll pass surrounded by his moments. At least Quin will be here. At least I won't die alone.

The thought presses against me, heavier than my own body, heavier than the sacred air around me .

I reach for the branch, but my grip slips through it as if my hands aren't entirely solid. A sharp inhale, then—I plummet.

The ground rushes up to meet me.

I brace for impact, but when my back slams against the violet roots, I feel nothing.

That's when I know.

The words. The words I need to say.

I push upright, shaking. If my spirit form is this weak, does that mean I'm dying? Is the body I left behind only hanging on by a thread?

I can't die yet.

I push to my feet, swallowing against the ache in my limbs. The dromveske glows under moonlight, a vast spiral of runed arches curling around the oak, each one a door into Quin's past.

I've stepped through all of them.

All but one: the arch that has always remained just beyond reach, the one that hums with something more than memory, something alive, something waiting. The one that shivers against my touch whenever I try—and fail—to open it.

I stumble forwards, my breath tight in my throat.

The shimmer of river-pearl catches my eye—finally, there it is.

I surge forward—only to lurch to a stop.

Something is wrong.

The glow is cracked.

A door that has been impossible for me to open .

Broken. Smashed.

A place I vowed to enter—is now laid bare before me.

I reach for the broken wood, my fingers brushing the splintered edge. The weight of understanding sinks deep into my chest. Nicostratus did this.

He is the only other person who has ever stepped into this dromveske.

Had he smashed the door to enter? Or on his way out—after seeing what lay inside?

A lump rises in my throat, thick and heavy. My pulse hammers against my ribs as I take a trembling step forward.

The glittering mist parts. The memory unfolds around me.

The courtyard at the ruined fortress.

The night is thick with battle cries. Spear-wielding crusaders swarm the stone, purple cloaks whipping, their blades and the nails around them glinting in the moonlight.

Across the courtyard, Quin is struggling, an exhausted figure barely holding on. One arm is braced around his weakened brother, the other locked around me—my past self, Chaos-me.

I know what happens next .

But knowing does not soften the horror.

I race forward, weaving through the crusaders' angry forms, hurtling toward Quin just as he tenses his body and unleashes the surge of magic that will save us.

Twister-force winds whip around us.

I leap—slamming onto Quin's back—

And the spears come flying.

I brace myself. I know which one will hit Chaos.

And I watch as Chaos sees it too and moves instinctively, twisting to shield Quin with his own body.

I hear the thunk.

The force of the spear rips through Chaos's back, cleaving through muscle and bone.

Quin's roar of fury shakes the courtyard.

Magic hurls the crusaders away in an explosion of raw power. Then, we're soaring, Quin's arms locked around me and his unconscious brother, wind screaming in our ears as he carries us over the mountain to the gardens outside Hinsard—the nearest safe place, where he can find help.

The landing is rough.

The moon hangs low. The scent of earth and herbs thickens the air.

Quin staggers under our weight, his breaths ragged, blood soaking through his fingers where he holds my wound closed.

The innkeeper answers the furious pounding on his door, bleary-eyed.

Quin doesn't ask for a healer. He demands one.

“The nearest . . .it'll take a few hours— ”

“Now!” Quin orders.

Aklos and aklas hurry, pulling Nicostratus away, but Quin doesn't let Chaos go.

His arms stay locked around him, fingers pressed tight against his wound as if sheer willpower will hold him together.

The memory shifts.

I see myself—Chaos-me, past-me—sprawled on his stomach, face turned toward Quin.

Quin's hands are slick with Chaos's blood.

His voice is low, urgent, breaking apart at the edges. “How many times do I have to say it?”

His grip on Chaos tightens. “Your life is mine.”

The words echo through me, slipping past shivers and memory, carving into my bones.

I follow beside him, shadowing the past, breathing in hitched gasps as the truth pulls tighter and tighter around me.

I clutch Quin's sleeve, desperate, trembling. Trembling from the truth of this moment and from the flickering of my spirit. Is time running out? Is this the last of Quin's masks?

I can't grip Quin anymore. My voice is still working though. "The vitalian will never make it in time. Chaos is slipping away. How did you save him? How did you save me?"

The answer lives in my heart.

I know it already.

But knowing does not prepare me for what comes next .

Quin's face hardens. His breath is shallow. His grip tightens.

His voice rumbles low, raw, shaking with fury and something else, something deeper.

"I do not accept this."

His fingertips press harder against my wound, as if sheer force can keep me from slipping away. His other hand pushes back my damp, blood-matted hair, his touch at once gentle and devastatingly possessive.

Then, he bends down, his breath ghosting against my ear, his voice a savage command.

"Survive."

His lips press against Chaos's temple.

And the world erupts.

A burst of light, brilliant and blinding, floods the room.

The force shatters the stillness, flinging open the windows, rattling the walls, sending dust and candle flames flickering wildly.

Magic. His magic.

No—his lovelight.

It is not fire, not wind, not rage or destruction, but warmth. A golden, shimmering force that swells and dances around us, tender and fierce all at once.

I feel it.

I feel Quin's lovelight against my skin, ticklish shivers running through my fading form, curling into my chest like a held breath.

For a single, aching moment, my body in the dromveske solidifies .

I gasp, dragging in air like I'm waking from drowning.

His one and only lovelight in his entire life—

And he gifted it, without hesitation, to Chaos.

To me.

I watch, my heart pounding, as his light sinks into Chaos's broken body, wrapping around muscle, bone, and torn flesh.

Quin doesn't just let his lovelight heal me.

He steers it, his hands trembling as he guides the magic toward my wound, weaving it through the damage, knitting me back together with every flickering pulse of golden warmth.

The room glows with it.

With him.

With all that he is, all that he has never given to anyone before.

And in moments, Chaos breathes again.

I breathe again.

Quin's lovelight saved me.

The then-me, and the now-me.

Something inside me shifts. A warmth spreads through my core, unfurling, anchoring me to this place. To him. My spirit is strengthening, as though his gift has not only healed my wounds but ignited something greater inside me.

I am not fading. I am not lost.

I hold on to that realisation, to Quin.

Memory-Quin turns Chaos toward him. Their hands clasp, his grip firm, unshakable .

His eyes, fierce and certain, cut through time itself—and land directly on me.

“We will save my people together.”

My breath catches.

It’s not just a command to Chaos.

It’s a command to me.

I need to hold on.

His people are sick. Dying.

He needs me.

I can’t let the fever, the plague, take me.

I can’t lose the fight now.

Quin’s voice pulses through me like an anchor. I must finish what I started.

I bow low.

Then, fists clenched, I turn and force my body through the forest.

Every step, my spirit flickers, my form distorting, breaking apart, trying to drag me under.

No.

Anything I consume in here will strengthen me.

I drag myself up the mountain, chewing bitter herbs, ignoring the burn of my weakening limbs.

I press forward, the fortress ruins looming ahead.

I stagger through the door.

The violet oak shudders before me.

The ground rumbles beneath my feet—

Something—or someone—is shaking the dromveske itself .

I throw myself at the exit rune, chest heaving, heart pounding.

The dromveske cracks apart around me, a rush of violet light collapsing inward.

I fling myself into the darkness.

Wake, Cael. You have his people to help.

You are his man.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

A sharp sting lances through my forearm, and my eyes snap open to a familiar room and bed.

For a moment, I think I've woken into a memory of my own, where Quin lay during the first Kastoria outbreak, prone, unconscious.

But now it's me on that bed. I turn my stiff neck and my vision slowly sharpens on Olyn beside me, pulling needles from my arm.

"I thought I'd lost you there," she whispers, sagging onto her haunches in relief.

I push myself into a sitting position, my limbs heavy, the skin of my inner arms shiny with thin scales. My nails dig into the blankets to stop from scratching. I murmur, "Where's his dromveske?"

"I just put it there." She gestures towards the shelf and frowns. "What's so special about it that you wouldn't even let me treat you until I chalked them last night?"

I sag back to my pillow with a rush of warm relief. It was real. That rune door, the memory behind it, happened .

Including the fragile grip on my life, making it back through the darkness. I pull myself clumsily out of bed, Olyn rushing to catch me. "Rest. You're not out of the woods yet. Second-day fevers can be worse."

I gulp over a parched throat and murmur for water.

She hands me a cup and I sip, clearing my throat. “As long as I’m breathing, I owe him. We’re going back up the mountain.”

Olyn exhales sharply. “Your stubbornness is something else.” A pause. “But... I admire it.”

She doesn’t stop me. Instead, she decocts a scription I dictate, and I drink it down. No cure, but enough to keep me on my feet. When the medicine’s hum settles in my blood, we hurry toward the luminarium. I brace myself to relinquish my belongings once again in exchange for leaving Kastoria.

But the moment we step outside, chaos meets us.

A half-dozen men stand guard, the clasps pinned on their shoulders unmistakable. Vespertine insignia. Bastion’s men.

I scan their faces. “What happened? I thought they were holding you hostage?”

The nearest meets my gaze, his expression grave. “All but one of them succumbed to the plague overnight. We escaped.”

A chill snakes down my spine.

Smoke curls into the sky in thin, dark ribbons. Beside me, Olyn murmurs, “Seven more died yesterday.”

My pulse slams against my ribs. I grab her arm and steer her toward the boat, ignoring the fire burning through my limbs. We don’t have time.

When we land at the fortress, Nicostratus doesn’t ask questions.

At my word, he shields me and summons the wind, and we soar toward the mountain farm.

The night air is a sharp whip against my skin, the ground a blur beneath us.

I barely register the ache in my joints, the exhaustion clawing up my spine.

My thoughts oscillate between two things: the pigs, and the broken rune door.

Nicostratus did that. He'd seen his brother gift me his one and only lovelight; he'd torn down that door in hurt and frustration.

He still held those feelings in his bones.

When we land, I push those thoughts aside and stumble forward, boots sinking into the damp grass. My breath catches—there, in the pen, the pigs are moving. Alive . The ones we marked, the ones that survived the horse pus, are trotting around. None have been reinfected.

Relief crashes over me so violently my knees buckle. Pegus is nodding, speaking rapidly about how he pulled twelve dead pigs away through the night—but none of the ones we treated. My hands tremble as I ask for ink and paper.

I have to write it down. The scription, the method, the proof. Pegus must convince the village to do the same. His hands tighten on the parchment. “Some won’t take the risk,” he says, voice uncertain.

I stare at the ink bleeding into the fibres of the page. Neither will my father.

The thought clenches around my ribs like a fist. I reach for another sheet and begin to write, forcing my hand steady.

Father.

I tell him everything—the pigs, the illness, the cure. The truth. My throat is dry, every scratch of the pen against parchment tightening my lungs.

This healing—such warding—is forbidden.

It is built on Grandfather's research.

It is what got him executed.

My father stood there that day. He saw the blade fall. He saw the way the luminists made an example of him. And now I'm asking him to do the same thing—to defy them, to risk his life, not just to protect our family, but to fight for others.

My pulse thunders. My fingers shake so hard the ink blots the page. I have no right to ask this of him.

But I must.

I swallow hard and press my pen to the parchment once more. I promise him the true king will not hold him accountable. I tell him he will not be alone. I tell him—

The words catch in my throat. My hand hovers over the page.

He won't do it. Not after what happened to Grandfather. Not after what he's lost.

He wouldn't even use a mere medius spell to save his grandchild from an agonising limp. How could he touch this forbidden healing?

And yet.

I have to ask. Have to plead .

The ink is still wet when I set the letter aside. My breath comes too fast. My skin prickles, my arms itching. I rub at them furiously, clawing not only at the hardening scales beneath my sleeves, but at the anxiety burning through my veins.

Olyn catches my wrist and shakes her head. I meet her gaze. Her expression is steady. A silent reminder that scratching will make this worse.

I exhale. Nod.

Then, with my heart hammering, I seal the letter and beg Nicostratus to deliver it, somehow, after he brings us back down the mountain.

Something feels wrong.

Mist smothers the fringe of the woods, thick and low, swallowing sound. We should see the river from here. We should see our boat. But the fog coils through the trees, dampening everything except the pounding in my chest.

Nicostratus moves beside me, a shadow shifting through the gloom. Olyn is a step behind. We stay close, skirting from trunk to trunk, careful. I lead, my shield casting a faint glow against the dark.

Then— crack .

Not from behind us. Not from the left or right. Ahead.

Nicostratus halts sharply, his hand locking around my arm as his other presses to his lips. Shh. Stay still. His muscles go rigid.

Something moves through the mist—many somethings. Boots scuff damp earth. A voice barks low, urgent. “Hurry up.”

A flicker of red. My gut clenches. Olyn stares at me wide-eyed, mouth forming the word we both dread.

Redcloaks.

Here, along the river leading south from the capital. The last time the royal soldiers passed through these woods, it was to barricade Kastoria—to let them rot in sickness and starvation.

A sickness that has only spread.

The mist thickens with the weight of old ghosts, and I barely get a breath before something snaps.

Too close. Above.

A black coil lashes out of the trees, snaring my waist. Before I can shout, it yanks me skyward. Olyn’s muffled shriek is swallowed by the mist as I’m lifted from the ground and plunked onto a branch.

A familiar voice greets me, smug as ever.

“We keep meeting like this.”

My breath rushes out in a laugh—stunned, startled, relieved all at once.

“Almighty Sovereign.”

“Just ‘Husband Dearest’ will do.”

His whip coils back into his grip. That playful smirk lingers, but his eyes are tight. Not a game this time.

Below, Nicostratus and Olyn materialise through the mist. Nicostratus reaches for me, but I shake my head. We’re not alone.

Bastion crosses his arms. Grim. Tense.

I swallow. “You know what the redcloaks are doing here.”

“You won’t like the answer.”

Bastion keeps his voice low. “The capital is in chaos. The last two days, the city has realised—this is everywhere. A plague.” His gaze darkens. “The people are desperate, sick, angry. They demand the vitalians provide a cure. Demand the regent take responsibility.”

“Something he should have done months ago,” I mutter, jaw tight. “What’s he doing about it?”

Bastion lets out a dry, humourless laugh. “The regent? He’s sent the silver-sash royal vitalians into the capital, but no further.” His smirk fades. “He keeps the gold ones to himself.”

Nicostratus swears under his breath. I stare into the mist, bile rising in my throat. Mikros and Makarios. He sent them to handle this alone?

Bastion’s tone sharpens. “They’re dodging rioters while scrambling for a way to help. But at least they’re grown men.”

A terrible, suffocating weight presses against my ribs. I clutch the branch harder, fingers digging into bark.

Bastion exhales. And speaks the words I fear.

“The regent should have gone himself. He should be standing in the worst-hit places, giving aid, facing his people. Instead—” A pause. A grim tilt of his head. “He sent the four-year-old king.”

A sharp inhale. Nicostratus’s face pinches in horror. “The redcloaks at the riverside. They’re guarding a royal vessel. Are you telling me—”

Bastion turns, narrows his eyes as if noticing Nicostratus for the first time. A slow, assessing tilt of his head. “Who are you?”

Nicostratus ignores him, voice tense. “Tell me who’s in that boat.”

“You already know.”

My stomach sinks. No. I close my eyes. Please, no.

“Quin’s son,” I whisper.

Bastion nods. “A mere child and his queen mother.” His jaw tightens.

“I saw them in the capital. The redcloaks shoved the her and the boy onto the public stage. The child was crying, his crown slipping over his eyes. His mother tried to reason with the people, but they didn’t want placation.

They want a cure—the one they believe is being withheld.

The queen had to shield herself and her son from hurled furniture, men with fists raised, linea wielding spells.

The redcloaks only stepped in after they had endured an hour of it.

Then marched them to the next town, where it happened again. ”

I grip the branch harder. The dread in my stomach turns to something far worse.

“The more people get sick,” Bastion murmurs, “the more violent they become. ”

Nicostratus recovers first. “You’ve been following them?”

“Not because I have respect for our true king,” Bastion says quickly—too quickly. “He’s just a boy, isn’t he? And the royals in charge—” A bitter scoff. “Even ruthless to their own.”

“Where are they taking him?” Nicostratus demands.

Bastion’s face darkens. “Hinsard.” A pause. Then, quieter, grimmer, “If the boy makes it there, he and his mother will be dead within the week.”

The bark bites into my palm. I can barely feel it.

My friend, Queen Veronica . . .

The young king . . .

Quin’s son.

I cannot let them be dragged to Hinsard. Cannot let them be hurt any more.

The thought is a fire in my chest, burning with the weight of certainty. My throat tightens, but I say the words steadily. “We need to save them.”

Nicostratus exhales sharply. “There are four of us. At least twenty-four of them.”

I turn to him, heat flashing through my veins. “What kind of uncle will you be?”

His jaw flexes. A muscle twitches. “I’ll never be like him .”

Bastion flicks his gaze to Nicostratus again, eyes assessing. “He and I can lure the bulk of them away. Start a fight, make it loud.” His smirk is all sharp edges. “But how will you get them off the boat? ”

Olyn rolls a needle between her fingers. “I can take a couple of cloaks.”

She could. But that would reveal there are more of us. Too risky. I rummage through my healing bag, fingers grazing over vials. I have something that could work—but it needs an igniter.

I pause. Then glance over at Bastion.

He raises a dark eyebrow. “What?”

I shuffle closer and pat his chest. He stiffens, a low rumble sound vibrating from him.

I hiss and slap his arm. “Not what I meant.”

His grin is wolfish. “Shame.”

Ignoring him, I pull out the bottle I was hoping for.

His amusement vanishes. “That’s my wine.”

I tuck it into my belt. “That’s my plan.”

The plan works—at first.

Nicostratus and Bastion launch a chaotic diversion, and the redcloaks don’t hesitate to take the bait. Three remain stationed near the boat, keeping watch.

I slip through the mist.

The boat is shrouded in fog, quiet except for the occasional murmur of the soldiers. Keeping low, I crouch near the hull. Quickly, I mix an alchemic paste, Bastion’s wine acting as the burning agent. I smear the compound along the waterline.

The reaction is instant. The wood sizzles. Softens. Bubbles.

Water seeps in .

I press back into the shadows just as the boat groans. A sickly, splintering noise.

A sharp cry from within.

Queen Veronica and her son are pushed out onto the deck as the soldiers rush below.

Now.

Olyn and I step from behind the trees. I catch Veronica’s sharp breath as she sees us.

Hurry. I motion for her to come.

She hesitates—just a fraction of a second—then bundles her son into her arms and slips over the railing.

She's not using magic. They must be sealing and unsealing her powers at will.

No time to talk. No time for the questions burning between us.

We run.

The ruins loom ahead. Safety. We actually did it.

We—

Steel flashes.

A sword slashes toward my throat.

The blade rebounds off my shield and my breath chokes in my lungs. I'd be dead if—

Men step out from the trees. More than I can count.

Two lunge for the Queen and the child—Olyn whips her needles into their acupoints. They collapse before they can touch them.

Their captain booms, “Kidnapping royalty?”

I snarl. “That would be you.”

The redcloak raises his sword again. The second impact rattles through my bones. How long will my shield hold?

Olyn twists her attacker off balance, but his hand rips her tunic as she moves, exposing the bandage binding her chest.

She stills.

A snarl of disgust. “Many reasons to die today.”

Queen Veronica hisses. “Caelus. Protect my son.”

I turn and shield the boy with my body. He trembles, clinging to me.

Veronica snaps a branch from a tree and parries a redcloak’s strike. The soldier hesitates, uncertain.

Until another voice calls.

“Only the boy needs to live.”

My shield flickers, still there—but only faintly.

Quin’s son screams for his mother.

We are truly caught. This time, there is no way out.

The next sword blow will kill me.

The redcloak lurches, gurgling. A spear is buried in his throat.

A roar. A rush of air.

The other redcloaks whirl around, facing a new threat.

Crusaders.

Purple cloaks. Spears flashing.

They tear through the redcloaks in seconds. Then their eyes land on us.

Queen Veronica, wielding a branch like a blade.

Olyn, exposed.

A child, sobbing in my arms .

Me—my shield flickering, magic draining.

The crusaders raise their spears again.

I dump my healing bag onto the ground, spilling it open. “Wait!”

They don’t lower their weapons.

I dig through the mess. My heart pounds.

A spell blasts into them. They stumble. Nicostratus lands before us, Bastion at his side.

Bastion immediately rips off his cloak to cover Olyn. Nicostratus prepares another spell.

I grab the chain and leap up, holding it high. “I am friend to Lykos and your leader’s son, Zenon.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

Beneath the mountain on the west side, a labyrinth of streets sprawls inside a vast, hollowed-out cave, its walls swallowing the light in jagged, uneven gulps. My companions and I are marched into a vine-choked hall.

We're ordered to kneel. I comply. Olyn, Queen Veronica, and the young king do the same.

The moment my knees hit the damp stone, heat rushes beneath my skin, pressing with a throb behind my skull.

The air is thick with damp earth and something bitter—an attempt to purify the depths, perhaps—but all it does is make my already constricted lungs work harder.

I suppress the urge to exhale too sharply, forcing my hands to stay still on my thighs.

Only Bastion and Nicostratus remain upright, their jaws tight.

The crusaders don't ask twice. The dull thunk of spear shafts forces them down onto all fours.

Nicostratus's fingers twitch out the corner of my eye, magic stirring with his temper.

Don't, I warn him with a glance, and he exhales with a grunt of displeasure.

Laughter slithers through the hall. A shadow sweeps forward, the weight of its presence alone commanding silence. "Gave them this, did he? Call him in."

The man steps into view, broadly built, carrying the kind of presence that makes others step aside without a word. The resemblance to Zenon is uncanny, though where Zenon is all keen edges, his father is carved from stone.

He swings the chain idly between his fingers before catching it in his fist. His gaze cuts straight to mine, sharp, knowing. Like he could feel me watching him.

“My son wouldn’t give this to just anyone.” He grimaces, nostrils flaring at the scent of magic still clinging to me from my shield, weak, flickering. I need it replenished soon, or I risk infecting everyone around me.

But there’s something else. A scrutinising look that has me holding my breath, as if he might sense the symptoms I’m trying to hide. Dizzying warmth sneaks up my spine and intensifies. The fever. It’s coming back.

Day two can be worse.

I will myself to stay calm. No matter what happens, I have to make sure Queen Veronica and Quin’s son will be safe.

“Father!” Zenon barrels into the room, all gangly limbs and determination. “Please.” He turns to me, nodding once. “This is the man who saved Lykos and me.”

Silence holds for a beat too long. Then, laughter. Rough, unexpected. Zenon’s father waves his crusaders off and tosses the chain back to his son.

“Then they are no prisoners, but most welcome guests.”

Zenon releases a breath so deep it almost topples him.

His father chuckles, waving us away. “Prepare rooms for them. And since you and

Lykos owe him so much, invite him to the wedding banquet.”

Zenon practically throws himself at his father, arms tight around his neck. For a moment, the man stiffens, but then his shoulders ease, the gruff exterior fracturing just a little. He clears his throat and shoos us off, already retreating into authority once more.

The crusaders are ruthless. They’ve destroyed families, shattered spiritual meridians—including my own. And yet, beneath the violence, they stand for equality. They love fiercely.

We’re shown to our rooms, but Zenon lingers at the doorway, grinning. “Stay put. I have a surprise for you in just a minute.” Then he’s gone.

The moment I’m alone, I grab a strip of fabric and tie it over my nose and mouth. My fingers fumble the knot—not from haste, but from the fine tremor in my hands. I shake them out. Ignore it. Then I push through the door and hurry to Nicostratus’s chamber.

The corridor swims for a few pounding heartbeats. My vision tightens at the edges, and my breathing shallows. I reach out towards the wall, steadying myself on the stone and vines before stepping away, forcing each step to land evenly. No one saw that. I keep moving.

“Please. Strengthen my shield.”

Nicostratus sets down his teacup with a quiet clink, his brows pulling together. “No one here seems sick. We’re far enough away from—”

“Hurry.”

His eyes narrow.

If he knows, he might lock me in a room until I recover, but if I'm to die of this—and my chances are fifty-fifty—I want to go doing everything I can to save Quin's people.

I want to turn the horse pus into protective paste; I want to get it to the people; I want to head back to the capital and help spread the scription for warding there.

I add quickly, "You didn't see anyone sick. But I think I did. I need to check."

A beat. Then, with a sigh, Nicostratus raises his hands and strengthens the shield.

The glow brightens instantly, but for all the magic around me, it doesn't dull the throb behind my eyes, the fever pulsing just beneath my skin. I force my shoulders to relax, schooling my features into something neutral, something that doesn't betray the way my body is burning from the inside out.

Then—

"Using magic, here? Have some respect!"

The deep voice crashes through the doorway I forgot to close. My pulse lurches as I spin around—

The sudden movement sends a fresh wave of dizziness through me. I barely steady myself before Lykos smirks at me, shaking his head.

He doesn't wait for a greeting. He hauls me into a hug that lifts me off my feet.

"Good to see you." His grip tightens before he sets me down, a glint of something

unreadable in his eye. “And good you made it just in time.”

I eye him warily. “In time for what?”

His grin grows, all mischief and something I’m not used to seeing on this gruff man: delight. “You’ll see.”

I see sooner than I expect. I’m barely one breath in, and Zenon joyously yells my name in the distance. I emerge from the chambers into the vined hallway only to crash into silk and gold embroidery.

My hands reflexively grip the bride’s delicate dress before I jerk shakily away.

A laugh tickles up my throat—over the heat and tightness building there—as I take her all in.

Golden silk skirts with fine jewels studding the shoulders and delicate chains dangling into sleeves.

Her hair is extravagantly braided, sparkling with pearly clasps.

Her clothes are traditional and not too dissimilar to when she was first dressed up this way, but she looks more radiant today: she’s smiling.

She’s marrying someone who wants to marry her this time.

“Megaera,” I murmur.

Her dark eyes dance, and her smiling lips open to let out a laugh. Behind her Zenon is grinning. “Good surprise, right?” he says .

I swallow. “You’re getting married today?”

“We’re aware of the plague. We decided it wasn’t worth waiting.”

Married. First my aunt during war; now Megaera during plague. Troubled times put things sharply into perspective. Love should be celebrated as much as it can be—one never knew when it could be taken away.

My hand grips the dromveske at my belt.

“We did the rites this morning,” Megaera continues, spying Lykos slipping out of the room behind me. Her eyes narrow playfully at him. “I was just hunting down my husband who left me to welcome our guests at the banquet.”

Lykos gulps audibly behind me. “I heard Cael had arrived, you see. Had to make sure he was treated right, or you’d poison me for sure.”

I pivot to see them staring with quiet smiles at one another.

Her golden chains jingle as she faces me. “Thank you for running out on our wedding. Today, I got to marry my ideal choice.”

In a blur, Lykos snatches her up over his shoulder and starts marching off. “I have business to attend,” he calls out to us, and says quieter to Megaera, “and it’s not the banquet.”

“Wait,” Megaera laughs and pulls something out of the folds of her dress. She lifts up, bracing against Lykos’s back, and throws a small vial that Zenon neatly catches. “For Caelus,” she says, laughing. “I’ve perfected this poison!”

They round the corner out of sight and Zenon hands me the vial. Poison! How

typically Megaera. Not a gift I need at all.

I roll the vial between my fingers, bemused. It's lighter than I expect, or maybe I'm just unsteady.

The fever flushes just under my skin again, pressing harder, along with an unfathomable itch up my arms. I force myself to ignore it as I move back towards the horse pus and scription, and focus on Megaera's vial.

She's not the only one who gives terrible gifts.

Quin had once looked at me the same way when I pressed a vial of amorous spores into his palm.

He'd hated the spores as much as I hate poison.

But he hadn't let me take it back. A gift was a gift after all.

I sigh softly and at the same time shiver hard.

Wait—I forgot to ask Nicostratus. I turn, but it's too sudden. My head throbs so hard my vision turns white and I lose my balance, stumbling blindly.

I'm caught by winds before I fall, and then Nicostratus is lifting me to my feet again. "What was that? Are you—" He hisses. His palm is on my forehead. He'll feel the fever. He'll know. "How long?" he demands. "How long have you known?"

Another shout. Bastion.

"I've got him," Nicostratus bites out.

A steady female voice trails down the hall. Olyn's. "It's day two. Get him to his rooms. I'll make a broth. "

As I expected, Nicostratus marches me straight to my chamber and paces beside my bed. "The letter," I ask on a cough. "Can you get it to my father—"

Nicostratus snaps. "That's all you're concerned with?"

"It's more important than one life."

Magic leaks from him and he grits out, "A redcloak we met in the forest was one of Quin's. He took the letter with him to the capital."

I let out a long, relieved sigh, but it quickly turns into a cough.

Nicostratus bows his head. His voice trembles. And this is the real reason I couldn't tell him I was sick. "The ruins, those farmers, that sneeze. You blocked it for me."

When I don't speak, he drops to his knees with a groan.

"I told you," I say. "I owe you my life, and I would gladly give it for you. I can give you anything." I meet his eyes. "Except for my heart."

Silence.

His breath shudders, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. A storm brews in his expression—something raw, unreadable. He blinks hard. His voice breaks. "Give me instructions. I'll write letters, copy scriptions, decoct them. I'll do whatever you want."

"Whatever?" I whisper.

His gaze hits mine with a shimmery, knowing depth. He closes his eyes and breathes in and out, slowly. Then he rises. A last lingering look. His mouth parts like he might say something—but he doesn't. His cloak whips as he turns and walks away.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

I chalk my dromveske with trembling, fevered fingers, and collapse into swirling depths that bloom into violet as I land with a hard thud before the hollow in the oak.

My spirit form shivers, my fingertips flickering—much like they did the last time I was in here.

I almost didn't make it then. How can I hold on tonight, with fevers wracking my bedridden body?

With my lungs so tight I had to escape into the dromveske to have the feeling of breathing?

I must hold on.

To help his people.

To see him again.

To tell him . . .

I must.

I press into the hollow of the violet oak, breathing in bark and soil.

The rune doors hum, shimmering in the earth.

Every shared moment with Quin flickers behind my eyes.

Butterflies flutter in my chest and my heart pounds harder, but no matter how I try to nourish my spirit, it continues to flicker.

My eyes flutter from open to shut to open again.

The runes swim. Shift. Blur. I crawl toward them, but the world tips sideways.

I hit the ground, rolling. The violet leaves waver above me.

Flickering. Fading. I shut my eyes. Too long?

Then, as if I'm hearing things: Quin's voice calling down from the treetops, sharp, commanding. "Don't sleep. Count the leaves."

One, two, three... twelve, thirteen... Leaves shiver and my mind plays tricks on me as Quin's face appears between the branches. "Keep counting."

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—I say the numbers on a weak, disbelieving laugh. What next? Can I make him crouch at my side? Gather me into his arms?

. . . twenty, twenty-one.

Quin looms above me, silver hair catching the moonlight. His jaw—sharp, sculpted, unyielding. His dark eyes lock onto mine. "Stay with me," he growls.

I reach out for him, but my hands flicker. I cannot feel him. I must say my words, must. This might be the last chance. "Quintus..." My voice croaks. "I am so much in—"

"Stop!" Quin barks as he tenderly collects me in his arms. "No." The word is soft. A plea. Then, harder: "Don't say it. Not like this." His arms tighten around me. "You're

only allowed when you've recovered. When you're healthy. Only then will I believe you."

Quin . . .

"So you must recover."

The urge to say the words is overwhelming, yet he dares refuse to listen? I murmur, breathing in his familiar woodsy scent, "I have to tell you, in case—"

He shakes me, his carefully guarded mask shattered—frantic, raw. His eyes shine, pleading. His voice grows hard, demanding. "Let the words burn! Let them be the fire you need to get better!"

Quin shifts me, guiding me gently to the base of the violet oak, his hands steady despite the storm in his eyes. He props me carefully against the bark, as if I might crumble.

"Are you really here?" My hand flickers, unsteady, reaching— afraid to touch only air.

Quin moves out of my reach, casting his gaze towards the runes, until I only make out his profile and the lump in his throat as it juts out with a hard swallow. "Am I really here or is this a figment of your imagination?" He looks at me tightly. "Wake up, and you'll have your answer."

It feels like it takes me hours to drag my flickering limbs over damp ground to the exit. When I do, I fall into darkness and startle awake, clinging to Quin's command.

He is the first thing I see.

We're on my bed, my head resting on his crossed legs like he's a pillow. The rest of him leans against the wall, arms crossed. At my stir, his head bows towards mine and his hands cradle gently around my ears. His first words come with the tight curl of his lips. "Finally."

I stare up at him and smile. "On the brink of death, and still aggravating."

His hair and braids drop closer, the ends touching my face. "I'm also your king, after all."

I blow at his hair, the warmth of him under me radiating through to my bones. "If I do recover," I murmur, "beware of more spanking."

"Promises, promises."

I raise a hand. It feels easier to move this morning, with Quin here. I pinch one of his jewelled fastenings and tug it off, and Quin's eyes flash in a way that steals all my breath. My hand remains ticklish at the ends of his hair, the fastening clamped between my pinched fingers.

He lifts his hand to mine and for a moment I think he'll steer it into his loosening braid, but his grip tightens and he draws my hand away. "Recover," he murmurs.

Recover . . .

I lunge upright out of his lap, checking—still the faint glimmer of a working shield. I haven't infected Quin. Yet.

I heave my achy body off the bed, almost knocking Quin's cane to the ground, and throw on a cloak. "I need Nicostratus to shield me."

One step toward the door and wind surges, pushing me backward. Quin catches me effortlessly, his large hand splayed against my back. A heated whisper hits my ear, “You’ve got me now.”

I turn my face towards his, and his lips skate over my cheekbone. His breath pebbles down the side of my nose and catches at my lips, and for a moment I feel a shivery rush in my bones—like a pull of light. His light. The lovelight he gifted me.

“Save your magic,” I say quietly. “You’ll need to shield yourself when—”

He presses my chest and a shielding spell stretches out of him and around me. “My brother searched through the night until he found me and my men. I’m indebted to him for helping you while I wasn’t here. But, Caelus, I’m here now. And the only magic I want covering your body is mine.”

The light swells inside me. I grab the back of his neck, pressing my forehead to his. “Quin, you must know I—”

He steals my lips—fast, bruising, gone before I can breathe. “I said, not until you’re better. Not just less fevered—fully healed. Not until then, got it?”

“You’re always goading me.”

His lips curl.

A knock at the door has me trying to pull away, but Quin holds me firmly against him and hollers.

Olyn enters with a hot broth and a startled look.

Quin doesn’t bat an eyelid, but his arm curls me even closer against his chest. And

when I reach out for the broth, he bats my fingers away, takes the steaming bowl and holds it up to my lips.

My eyes cut to his, and his hook mine back with a quirk of his brow that just dares me to resist.

I sip. And sip and sip and sip until he's tipped an entire bowl of broth down my throat. He smiles with satisfaction and I shake my head, lips twitching.

Olyn clears her throat, a pointed reminder that she's still in the room. I push myself up from Quin's lap and cross to the table, where my healing bag waits. "Your son and queen will be relieved to see you."

"My son I hugged the moment I arrived."

I glance at him, at this simple statement, and it feels like my stomach and chest drop through me suddenly. I'm left feeling... even lighter than I possibly knew I could. Quin tended to his son's needs first.

This . . .

What a good father, what a clear-minded man. What a king.

I hold up the vial of horse pus. "Then let's gather the crusaders and talk."

We stand in the same hall we were first led to in the mountain stronghold. Nicostratus and Bastion, myself and Quin, Olyn and Queen Veronica holding her son, and then Lykos and Megaera, who sit close to Zenon and his father. A dozen other highly-ranked crusaders stud the hall as well.

"You're talking about infecting healthy people!" someone cries in outrage.

“It’s forbidden,” another hisses.

“If caught, your entire family will be killed.”

“If caught crusaders like us will be guillotined regardless!”

“What if it harms the healthy?”

“What if it saves them?”

“The risks . . .”

“Horse pus! Who would?”

“I will.” The words strike like a hammer, ringing through the hall, cutting through the rising noise. Silence falls.

Quin, who had observed all this quietly, steps into the middle of the room with the snap of his cane. The air around him shimmers with authority, and even Zenon’s father, leader of the crusaders, seems to hold his breath.

Megaera watches with a glimmer of respect in her eyes, and even Lykos looks on with curious admiration at the man demanding their attention.

“And who are you?” someone rasps.

In a second, Nicostratus joins Quin in the centre of the room, prepared to fight if needed.

Two brothers, side by side. Quin looks at him—steady, searching.

A thousand words unspoken. Nicostratus inclines his head.

Quin rests a hand on his brother's shoulder and squeezes, a quiet declaration of trust. "This is Prince Nicostratus Aetherion, general of King Constantinos Quintus Aetherion's army, and the king's most beloved brother. "

Gasps ripple through the hall. Nicostratus steps forward, his grip firm on Quin's shoulder. He turns to the room, voice ironclad. "Bow." He lets the command settle. "This is your king."

Shocked expressions and worried glances give way to hurried bows.

During their murmured—gritted—exhalations, Bastion sidles next to me, letting out a deep breath of appreciation. "I might have to divorce you, Husband. This prince is looking pretty."

"Don't you dare fool him with your wish-washy feelings," I warn under my breath. "Or I'll use you to practice the crude technique of prick removal."

Bastion slinks away, gaze nevertheless riveted to Nicostratus.

Olyn snickers on my other side, muttering about lost causes, and Veronica glances at her, a bright twinkle in her eye that she quickly hides behind the kiss she drops onto her son's head.

A small wave of fatigue rolls through me, but I brace through it as Quin speaks.

He declares his disdain for the crusaders' past ruthless actions; says he will not tolerate harm to any of his people.

But he also promises, if they acknowledge the fault in their unmitigated violence, he

will listen to the cries that have fuelled their desperate actions.

He will do his best to redress the inequality running rampant throughout the kingdom.

He will help those without magic to pursue an education.

Quin's gaze flickers to me, holds for a beat, then sweeps over the crusaders.

“Right now, we face a crisis. This plague does not discriminate—it does not care if you are linea, par-linea, or not.

It strikes rich and poor, strong and weak, old and young.

This illness is blind to power and status. And we must be too.

“You speak of risk, of fear. I know fear well. I have struggled under the thumb of my uncle too long. I have walked death and humiliation, and have dragged myself through it, fought through it, and I have led through it. And now, I will do so again.”

He whips off his cloak, his sleeve rolled back in a single, decisive movement.

“If there is a way to protect the healthy, we must try it. But words are not enough—we must act. Do you have the courage to follow? If you fear, then let that fear rest on me. Let me lead the way.” His voice hardens. “Caelus.”

I'm about to step forwards when Queen Veronica rises, setting her child down upon the chair with a glance at me to stay close to him.

I rock back and remain at the boy's side as she crosses the hall and yanks down the king's sleeve.

“I will do this here. You will need to demonstrate before a much bigger audience.”

She rolls up her sleeve and glances at me. “I’ve known the healer who developed this since he was young. He has dedicated his life to helping others. I, Queen Veronica of Lumin, will stake my life on it. ”

Olyn turns to me with a questioning look as she plucks the necessary vial from my healing bag.

I blink and nod, and she takes it, along with her needles, and faces the queen before all eyes in the hall.

With careful movements and permission to touch her highness, she skims Veronica’s sleeve higher up her arm and gently holds her steady as she cuts a small cross into her skin.

As a pearl of blood begins to dribble, Olyn dabs pus over it while the crusaders catch their breath.

Veronica boldly looks around the room before landing her gaze on Olyn. “If I am well by morning, you will treat my son next.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

Morning mist clings to the valleys, our horses kicking up damp earth as we ride. My breath comes easier today; the tightness in my lungs is easing, the scales on my forearms fading. I had Quin shield me, but I believe it's the last shield I'll need.

On the wind comes the distant tolling of luminist bells, muffled and eerie. The capital looms ahead, still a half-day's journey away.

We've left the queen and Quin's son under the protection of the crusaders, away from sick, frightened, angry people.

Away from being forced to take their blows.

Away from the regent and his wrath. Lykos, Zenon, and Megaera vowed to protect them, and Olyn and Bastion remained as well.

Not only to treat the queen and her son, but to take responsibility for Kastoria and all their neighbouring villages.

It's an easy goodbye. A fond one. I have absolute faith in her. And yet... I glance back. Will faith be enough?

Quin and Nicostratus flank me, silent but present. Quin's jaw is tight, his gaze set forward, unreadable. Nicostratus glances toward him once, as if weighing a question he doesn't ask.

We ride with purpose, the road stretching ahead, made longer as we pass burning pyres, wailing families seeing loved ones off, children orphaned, the elderly

abandoned at the outskirts of the capital—waiting, hoping someone will take them in.

A knot tightens in my stomach. Skriniaris Evander.

Where is he now, amidst all of this? Is he safe? Does he have people looking after him, or is he alone—just an old man and his cat, waiting forever for us to return? Does he think we abandoned him?

The thought gnaws at me long after we've shared our food, used horse pus on the healthy who are willing, and made promises Quin vows to keep. It lingers as we finally reach Frederica's estate.

She meets us in the courtyard—the very same one where, believing him to be harassing the kind woman, I leapt onto Quin's back sparking renewed fate between us.

A fate that has led us to this critical moment.

We all must work together to help his people.

Frederica leads us into fields that are peppered with tents as far as the eye can see. Quin's soldiers, his men.

This is the force he's risked so much to gather, to reclaim his throne.

“We've separated the sick soldiers and animals,” Frederica says. “We've been mostly lucky so far, but the plague has reached here too.”

Immediately, Quin summons his generals, commanders, captains, and healers to the courtyard.

There are faces I recognise among them: Commander Thalassios from Hinsard, the regent's outcast daughter Princessa Liana, Captain Kjartan—he has Skeldar soldiers too. His negotiation in Iskaldir went exactly as planned.

Quin tells me to prepare the warding I spent the morning crafting—scraping pus from every infected horse I could find, mixing it with ground mustiva and oldeaf, and blending it into large batches of paste.

Nicostratus and I empty all the bags we rode with, the high-ranking soldiers watching on quizzically under the late afternoon sun.

Like he did in the crusader hall, Quin delivers his speech, asking his men to infect themselves for the good of the people.

The resistance is quieter this time, but still present.

When Quin kneels, gripping his cane-shaft tightly against the pain, the entire courtyard holds its breath. The king, begging his people.

“I will not ask of you what I am not willing to do myself.” Quin rolls up his sleeve and calls for me. And Nicostratus joins his brother on his knees, baring his arm alongside him.

The generals stir in their light armour. Whatever hesitation they had, by the time I've cut and smeared the horse pus into their skin, it's vanished. His men are all on their knees too, shoving up their sleeves.

Princessa Liana rises to help me after she has been treated. I give the scription to the healers as well, and Quin orders one of his commanders to take charge of collecting infected horses and bringing them to Frederica's estate.

“Convince as many of your soldiers as you can to take the treatment,” Quin orders. “Tomorrow, you’ll leave for all corners of the kingdom to convince the people too.”

I whip my gaze over the small sea of still-kneeling soldiers to Quin, now standing regally before them. My stomach flutters. He’s willing to scatter his power and men and everything he has suffered for to aid his people. This is what a ruler is. Sacrifice. People over power.

Under the flutter, though, I tense too. Will this make Quin more vulnerable?

Commander Thalassios steps forward. “We’ve finally consolidated significant numbers. You need us here, marching into the royal city to take back what’s yours.”

Quin stares at his generals and commanders and says simply, “The people are mine, too. They always have been.”

Quin and Nicostratus are busy well into the night, and so am I.

Along with all the healers and the volunteers, we treat every willing soldier—and all but a few are willing.

The news of their king kneeling and pleading has spread like wildfire, causing even the broadest, gruffest men to swallow thickly.

The families they left behind—their wives, their children, their parents—will be cared for first. Before battle.

Before the throne. Before everything else.

They raise their drinks to King Constantinos and promise even their lives in this pursuit of peace for the people.

Other stories also spread, causing outrage and disgust: how dare the regent protect only himself, hiding from responsibility. How dare he shove the four-year-old king towards volatile unrest.

Even the Skeldar section of the king's army share praise for the king, singing songs of glory about their battle against the Wyrds.

When the soldiers start feeling sick, they band together, keeping up morale, and I remind them as I brew calming broths that their symptoms will be mild, and after, they will no longer need to fear the plague for themselves.

As I finish the last broth, my shield flickers, weakening.

I murmur an excuse and step away, my body finally demanding rest. I traipse over Frederica's estate, breathing in the crisp, moonlit air.

Across the fields, the luminarium—once a beacon of light—stands hollow, nothing more than a silhouette in the dark.

No linea pour magic into it now; the city's customs have crumbled beneath crisis.

No luminist bells will change the will of the people now.

I sit on the hill, beneath the tree where River's name is carved in memory, and I speak to him as if he can hear.

I tell him everything—about Quin, the soldiers, the kingdom teetering on the edge of collapse.

I remember refusing to heal after River's death.

How grief paralysed me. And how Quin—stubborn, infuriating Quin—made me get on that horse.

That happened here, such a pivotal moment in my healing life.

If it hadn't happened, nothing else that followed would have either.

How impactful a single decision can be. How impactful moments are in life.

At this very tree, the regent once fell in love—with a luminist's son, a love that ended in violence. A love that shaped his cruelty. And it was here too that Casimiria, Quin's father, and Yngvarr met. Relationships that ended up shaping the history of a kingdom.

The soft sound of footsteps padding over grass comes from the other side of the hill. I peer around the thick base of the tree and still at the sight of Quin and Nicostratus, who pause under the branches, staring out towards the sky, their backs to me.

There's a quiet tension pulling between them, and it has me curling back behind the trunk. I'm debating how to pick myself up and sneak away without being caught when Nicostratus speaks, and I'm rendered frozen to the tree roots.

"For those days, I hated him, Quin. Hated you."

The words are soft and a gentle breeze carries them away.

"No," Nicostratus says on a heavy exhale. "I hated what you took from me. What I thought you took from me."

Quin doesn't say anything for a few breaths, and then he speaks evenly. "We did take from you."

Nicostratus lets out something between a groan and a sigh. “He also gave to me. He gave me back this life.”

Quin murmurs with immediate understanding. “He is sick in your stead.”

“I didn’t know at first. Not when he shoved me at the ruins.

I was too angry, outraged. All I wanted then was to hurt him as much as he hurt me.

” Nicostratus’s voice grows quiet. “I didn’t understand it in the moment, but it’s since played relentlessly in my mind.

The sneeze meant for me. The way he shielded me.

The wipe of his face. The flicker in his eyes like he knew it was already too late. ”
Nicostratus’s voice breaks.

I feel the breezes calm, and though I cannot see, I feel in my bones Quin moving closer to his brother. “Did you think he’d let you die?”

“Wouldn’t that have solved everything for you both?

” Nicostratus lets out a frustrated sound and I imagine him dragging his hands over his face, scrubbing at his mind to accept .

“To have thought this at all... I’ve already failed him—him and you.

You both care for me. It’s just that I only now realise that there can be deep affection without romantic love.

You love me, Quin. I love you. And Cael.

.. He loves us both, but—” he exhales deeply “—he’s in love with you. ”

Quin hums, low and thoughtful, and I imagine his lips tipping up quietly at the edges. “He always has been. Even if he didn’t always know it.”

Nicostratus scoffs and I hear the start of an achy laugh. “I saw it all. Even I don’t think you have a choice.”

A long pause follows, and then Quin’s rumbled voice, “No, we do not. Our feelings cannot be undone.”

“Even if they could . . .” Nicostratus starts.

And Quin finishes, “I have memories of him. I can visit them forever. He can’t be taken from my mind. I can’t be taken from his. Even without living a future, he would still always be between us. ”

The weight of that truth settles deeply, a confession that tickles warmth—light, his light—through my veins.

Nicostratus curses gently. “I still hate it. But never as much I love you.”

Quin speaks, voice softened—just a little. “That is enough.” The trees rustle gently overhead like a soft cheer, and Quin adds, quieter. “I never want to lose you.”

It’s very quiet now.

The quiet that comes with embrace.

My chest clenches and I close my eyes, absorbing the tenderness permeating the air. Then without making a sound, I sneak away. This moment was not meant for me to

hear, and yet. Yet witnessing it is a balm to my soul—more than a balm. Nourishment
.

I take the confession to my empty tent, and despite the uncertainty the next morning
will bring, I sleep deeply.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

Quin and I leave early the next morning.

He swings himself into the saddle smoothly and adjusts the straps holding his cane across his back.

He's dressed simply, so as not to attract attention from the regent's men.

Princessa Liana catches us before we leave, speaking gravely.

"Be careful. If this warding takes root, it threatens everything he's built.

He'll strike back, hard, where it most hurts. "

"He has power yet cannot wield it for the people," I mutter. "It must be taken from him."

"Yes," she agrees, and meets Quin's sober gaze. "But you cannot go up against him alone. Father still has more power and people behind him. When this plague is under control, your men will reunite. Wait for us."

"I've been the underdog too long. I know I can't win alone." Quin exhales slowly, jaw tense. "I will wait. For now."

She watches us go, and we ride in silence, our path leading straight toward the black smoke curling thick over the capital.

My legs tense around the horse the closer we get.

The plague may no longer be a personal threat to me, since I've recovered from it—or to Quin, who is immune—but there is danger ahead.

Quin looks my way, something unreadable in his dark eyes. He exhales through his nose, shifts in his saddle. Then, his voice is quiet, certain. "I may have no army left. But I have you, Cael."

I steer my horse closer to his, so close our knees nearly knock together. I murmur, the words quiet but resolute, "I won't let you die."

The smell of burning bodies chokes the air, thick and acrid, coating my throat until I heave up coughs.

The dead have been dragged from the streets, their pyres rising into charred spectres beyond the city walls.

The sound of tears is like a new birdcall—ever-present, ceaseless.

I hear it until I don't. Until the wailing becomes just as constant as the tolling of luminist bells.

I halt my horse abruptly close to home, to the Amuletos manor. A long line of people snakes down the street, disappearing around a far corner, all quietly standing with covers over their mouth and nose—

And Akilah is here too, handing out cloth to those yet uncovered, urging them to use it while they wait. The sight has my stomach clenching hard. She's here, home, helping.

I croak, "Take me to the roof over the courtyard."

I barely finish speaking before winds coil around us.

Quin's arm hooks around my waist, steady, unyielding.

In a breath, we're soaring, the streets blurring beneath us until we land on the rooftop above the courtyard.

Below, Florentius is with my father, my mother and my brothers.

All pricking patients and smearing paste on their arms.

My father—the man who always warned me to obey the laws, to never risk the lives of our family—is standing beside my mother and brothers, pressing his hand against another patient's arm, his touch steady. He's defying the law. He's defying the luminists.

I exhale sharply, the reality hitting me with a soft shiver. He read my letter. He listened.

Quin's arm presses me in closer, quiet comfort, steadying my shaking limbs. He doesn't have to hear me speak to understand. He knows my feelings better than I do myself. He always has.

With gentle winds, he drops us to the courtyard and draws out his cane to follow as I lurch towards my family.

Mother throws her arms around me, gripping tight, as if she never wants to let go.

Florentius and Father look over. They too seem unsurprised, as if this moment is inevitable.

Florentius points towards the table where bowls of my warding sit, and I gently steer my mother away with whispered promises to talk after.

I move to take a bowl and wave a patient forward.

I glance over at Florentius, holding an achy breath.

He has magic, yet he is using my alchemic method.

Beside me, Quin murmurs he'll bring in the supplies and our horses, and once he has, he helps me administer treatment. We're wordless until the sun is high in the sky and luminist bells get closer and closer. Father stiffens, but he doesn't stop his work.

When the premade warding runs low, I make more away from the eyes of patients, in the vitaliary room where I once hid all Grandfather's books.

Florentius finds me there, measuring and stirring. I glance up and speak. "You—who are so elegant, who hates mess, who is exceptionally skilled at spells—you could have transposed this warding into magic. Instead, you're smearing it into cut flesh."

"You know why."

I think I do. I know I do. It takes too much energy. A vitalian could save forty people in a day with spells. But with fingers and paste? Each healer will save hundreds.

I exhale, long and deep, as if letting go of something I didn't know I was holding. The work of my hands, the blood and paste beneath my nails—it isn't lesser than magic. It's more. It's enough.

"Crude healing can save a kingdom." The words feel heavier in my mouth than I expect. A truth I've known—but only now, only here, do I fully understand it.

“Yes,” Florentius agrees simply, without hesitation.

I look at him then—really look at him.

Florentius, who once turned up his nose at my healing.

Florentius, who could have chosen to keep his hands clean.

Florentius, who has suffered at my hands, and still forgave me.

Florentius, my fellow healer. My friend .

His voice is steady, his eyes unwavering. “And I will not be a man who builds my own mansion.”

A long silence passes between us.

And then, a small thing—our lips curl softly at the edges.

Without ceremony, Florentius picks up my freshly made batch and disappears into the courtyard, while I follow, feeling something settle inside me—a truth stronger than my meridians ever were.

The scent of blood and paste lingers under my nails. The work of my hands.

Once, I had thought it lesser. Now, I know.

This is what will save us.

After another hour of infecting the healthy, Father clears his throat. “Make sure you eat,” he says to me, and nods his head towards Quin beside me. “Tell your aklo to

bring something from the kitchens.”

I nearly drop the paste. The true king of our people, casually ordered off to fetch food like an obedient aklo. I open my mouth—to correct, to protest—but Quin’s hand finds my arm, an unspoken plea for patience. “I’ll bring anything you need.”

Father nods. “I’m glad you’re at the service of my son.”

I try to interrupt again but this time Quin strokes my arm, placating me. He even bows his head towards my father! “I’ll always be at his service.”

My heart hitches and my throat tightens at the sudden warmth spilling through my body. I look up and his eyes soften on mine as he picks up his resting cane and snaps off towards the kitchens.

I get another five treated before the bell enters our household.

Father peels off from the patients and I follow, gesturing to my line that I’ll be right back.

The luminist strides grimly towards my father in his slightly glowing robes and rings his bell in his face, as if that’s meant to make him obey.

“Cease your unlawful practices immediately. The entire Amuletos household will face trial for this.”

My father speaks with calm confidence. “We are not using linea spells. We are simply helping the people.”

“You’re infecting the healthy!” the luminist shrills. “Such practices are against our laws.”

“This infection is weak; it helps them—”

“You sound just like your father when he stood trial for the same crime!”

I stiffen in the shadows, and my father’s shoulders tense too.

The luminist presses on. “He was lucky it was only his head. This time, your entire household will pay the price.”

“Plague is ripping through our kingdom,” my father says quietly. “Have you nothing better to do?”

“I’m stopping you from harming the people!”

“You are harming them by stopping me!”

The luminist stubbornly rings his bell, denouncing our family to an audience of only me.

My father grabs the bell to stop its tolling.

The same man who once obeyed every luminist preaching over the health of his own family now looks sternly into the luminist’s eyes.

“The law does not outweigh the lives of the people.”

I swallow hard, my knees buckling. My father—the man who punished me for simply reading books on forbidden spells, who wanted to marry me off for fear I’d cause trouble—

“Father,” I breathe, raw and hoarse. “You—”

I don't know what to say. I don't have to.

Father glances in my direction. Not directly at me—as if he knows I'm here, as if he understands.

The luminist's eyes widen and his hands shift, preparing a spell. "You'll come to the courts with me this instant!"

The spell surges toward Father and my voice cracks as I call out desperately, "No!"

I lurch forward, reaching for him—

Too slow.

A gust of wind erupts before me.

The force of it slams into the luminist like an unseen fist, hurling him backward. His spell misses by a breath, shattering the gate instead.

Before the luminist can rise, Quin lands between them in a rush of wind. His cane strikes the earth with a sharp, deliberate crack, and the air itself seems to recoil. A pulse rolls outward—an invisible pressure, an unspoken warning.

It has my breath catching.

Quin doesn't speak.

The luminist rings his bell again and his cloak glows brighter. "I've seen you before. With that man's troublesome son! I don't care you are linea. I will have you on trial for impeding justice!"

Quin leans forward with a wolfish snarl and brandishes his badge in the luminist's face.

The luminist pales, his robes dulling until the only one shining is Quin. He takes an unsteady step back, his bell hand twitching. His mouth opens as if to argue—but no words come.

He knows.

He knows exactly who stands before him.

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His breath hitches. He staggers once, knees buckling, and then—he bows, forehead nearly touching the stone. “Your majesty.”

Father stirs uneasily behind Quin, his breath uneven. His eyes dart around, finding me in the shadows, then snap back to Quin as if searching for the trick, the deception.

“Majesty?” he mouths.

I let out a long breath and nod my head slowly. Not an act.

His knees buckle. He stumbles back, catching himself against the stone wall.

“You—” His voice cracks. He swallows hard, blinking rapidly, his world shifting beneath his feet. “You are—”

Quin, ever patient, bends down and steers him upright before he can fully collapse.

“I sent you to serve food,” Father gasps, flushing deeply. “I once... I once made you do our dishes! ”

Quin tips his head up in an easy laugh. “You may treat me as family.”

Quin’s gaze sneaks away from Father to lock with mine, and I finally manage to make my legs work. I stumble towards them.

“Your majesty,” the luminist croaks behind him.

Quin turns, his voice even but edged with steel. “My identity remains secret. My whereabouts, unknown. Should a whisper of me reach the regent’s ear, I’ll know where it came from.”

The luminist’s throat bobs. He nods fervently, understanding the warning beneath the words.

I step forward, pulse hammering. “If you really want justice—” I pause, then push forward. “Summon the other luminists. Convince them this is the way to help the people.”

Quin’s gaze flickers to mine, sharp and thoughtful, before he nods once. “Gather them at the luminarium. We’ll meet you there in an hour.”

The luminist rises shakily to his feet and rushes away, leaving his bell behind.

I try to convince Quin to leave me tending patients and go alone—he knows what must be said—but Quin staunchly refuses and whisks me on winds to the luminarium .

Inside, the air hums with debate. There is a clear divide—some are desperate for a solution that will save lives, they are the ones willing to try this forbidden method; others stand resolute to the preachings of the Arcane Sovereign and the laws laid in words before them.

Quin quietly finds my local luminist and hands him a roll of parchment, then gestures for me to follow him. With a startled hop in my belly, I do. Before all the luminists, my local calls for order and reads the scroll Quin gave him, stamped with the king’s magical seal.

It calls for the luminists to consider the greatest good of the kingdom; to indeed infect

the healthy and make them immune; to offer all luminariums as places of sanctuary for the sick.

“... Caelus Amuletos, royally accredited with six stamps on his soldad, and the king’s personal healer, is in charge of plague management along with the entire Amuletos household. ”

I blink rapidly. Six stamps. I clutch the soldad hanging from my belt and turn it—

All squares have been stamped.

Quin must have done it while I wasn’t paying attention. My gaze searches for him over the heads of the luminists, and I find him watching steadily from the shadows. I curl my fingers around my soldad, drawing in a steady breath. Later. Later, I’ll let myself think about what this means.

Now, I turn my focus back to the luminists.

Half of them are still unconvinced. “A decree from a runaway king? A king who abandoned his position?”

“We must follow the regent! ”

“The regent hides in his palace. What good is he?”

“We must focus on finding cures—vitalian spells—to end this plague.”

“I survived the plague—perhaps it’s the Arcane Sovereign’s will.”

Gasps ripple through half the room, while the other half nods fervently.

“Disgrace!” a white-haired luminist snarls. “Are you saying the fellow luminists that passed this morning were unworthy?”

“I was the only one among us who properly punished those using horse pus on the people!”

That luminist lifts his bell, as if ready to toll in condemnation.

My local shakes in his boots, glancing rapidly between Quin and the crowd.

The weight of the soldad hangs from my belt. The kingdom is burning, and they argue in circles.

I set my jaw. Enough.

I step forward, my voice ringing through the dome. “Put your bells away and listen .”

I speak simple facts. Blunt ones. If they lend their hands and luminariums, if we all work together, we can save more than a hundred thousand lives. “One. Hundred. Thousand.”

The number sinks in slowly, rendering them speechless. They attempt to argue but falter—there’s nothing to say in favour of condemning so many—so many young, old, linea, commoner, luminist... All will be affected .

The stubborn faction wavers.

And then the doors swing open with a blast of magic and bright daylight.

A bulky silhouette steps inside and it seems to be shuddering.

And then I hear the wail, the curse against the luminists—the Arcane Sovereign himself.

My eyes focus and his form sharpens. Silver sash.

I step forward and halt, a stinging dread washing over me as his anger pulses through the luminarium.

He drags himself forward; a young girl clutches his cloak beside him, and in his arms.

.. he's holding someone. Their head rocks limply over Makarios's arm—

It's Mikros.

My stomach plummets toward the floor and I don't want to believe it. I want to have seen wrong. His eyes, his one green and one blue, are not open. Are not lifeless.

He is not dead.

Makarios roars again. "Just for using pus to save this innocent, orphaned girl! Just for that—" Makarios glares across the luminarium at the glowing-white-robe who survived the plague. "That luminist thrust a spell that shattered through his shield and killed him!"

"He defied my order to stop!"

"He was doing the right thing. He was saving people."

My hands grip my soldad, shaking hard. Mikros. Dead.

The thought doesn't fit inside me. It stretches painfully against my ribs, against my

lungs, against my pounding head. I have seen death. I have touched death. I have even caused death. But not his. Not for this. Died defying the luminists. Died using my warding .

“He died defending the right thing!” Makarios shouts, veins in his throat throbbing, tears in his one blue and one green eye—the eye from Mikros and now the only thing he has of him. “But he shouldn’t have died at all.”

I push through the luminists and catch Mikros’s body, holding alongside Makarios’s trembling arms. My hands curl under Mikros’s weight, my fingers pressing into the fabric of his robes. His warmth is fading fast. It’s already gone. A phantom.

Mikros’s arm falls and dangles against my cloak.

This arm, these hands that showed me how to find my inner scales; his sharp tongue that joked, keeping every heavy moment light—gone.

The boy who once let me practice transplantation spells on him, grinning nervously as he did. He was my vitalian brother.

Makarios’s teary eyes meet mine, searching for answers, for what he has to do next. He doesn’t have his Mikros anymore. He’s lost.

I have to keep strong for him. Have to lead the way. I look at the girl kindly. “Follow us.”

I speak quietly to Quin, who I feel has slid to my side. “Help carry him to the pyres.”

Quin’s cane slides over his back, and he uses the wind to sweep us out of the luminarium. I call to the luminists behind me as we leave.

“If any of you have conscience, you know what to do.”

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Quin sets us carefully down at the pyres. Makarios slumps to the ground, his breath ragged, and the young girl coils her small arms around his neck. I step forward, carefully arranging Mikros's body atop the dry stacked wood.

When I step back, Quin has returned with Florentius and Akilah. They rush to the pyre, gasping, and sink to their knees beside Makarios, swallowed by tortured, sniffling silence.

Quin strikes the flame. It catches, crackling, the light licking at the wood.

I kneel beside Akilah. Her knuckles bump against mine as she exhales a shuddery breath. "He was funny," she whispers. "And so kind to me in Hinsard."

Florentius murmurs his own quiet memories. When Makarios sobs, he shuffles over, wrapping him in a tight embrace, the young girl pressing in beside them.

Makarios stares over Florentius's shoulder at the rising flames. His voice is hoarse, barely above a whisper. "He was like a brother to me." A shudder rolls through him. "I wish you could hold me again. I didn't know the last time would be the last."

A hollow ache swells in my chest. I grab Akilah's hand and squeeze. She's like a sister to me, too. We've been through hell, but we're still standing. I have to hold on—to her, to all of them. Who knows how much time we have left?

Akilah turns her damp eyes to me. Her hand slips from mine, and then, suddenly, she throws her arms around my neck, holding on as if she, too, is afraid of what might come next.

A sob rips from Makarios. He stumbles forward, out of the embrace, crawling towards the pyre. “We had plans,” he chokes. “What now? I do them alone?”

Silence. Only fire, answering him with its relentless crackle.

His fingers twitch at his eye—the green one. “Fine,” he rasps, the word like a blade against his throat. “You will miss out.” He trembles. “I will raise this orphaned girl. I will teach her all our spells. I will experience all her love.”

No one speaks. We only watch, grief clawing at our ribs.

Only the young girl moves. She rises, steps forward, and slips her small hand into Makarios’s. She tilts her face up to him, eyes wide and hopeful. “You’ll be... big brother?”

Something inside him cracks. His body folds, like the grief has finally torn him in two, and he pulls her into his arms, holding her tight. “I will,” he swears. “I’ll be your family, if you want me.”

The girl nods. Then she looks to the fire, pointing with a small, steady hand. “He saved me. Does that mean his spirit is in here?” She presses her fingers to her chest.

Makarios shudders and nods, his breath hitching.

“I’ll take good care of you,” he promises. “You’ll become a grand healer, like him.”

The girl shakes her head. “No magic.”

Makarios blinks, then shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter.” A small, wry laugh escapes him—wet with grief, but filled with something else, too. Determination. “I met a team of healers once who rivalled the best vitalians. We’ll find them. We’ll

learn.”

A team of healers. I know who he means.

Megaera. Olyn. Me.

Makarios will find us. He will learn.

And we will teach.

I stare into the flames as they climb higher, consuming what was and scattering it into embers. Mikros will not be forgotten. We will carry him forward.

The thought grips my heart so tight it hurts, but I hold onto it, feeling each beat pound against my ribs. When we leave the pyre, it feels like each of us choosing a new fork in the road.

Akilah and Florentius walk ahead together. Makarios takes the young girl home. Quin and I, we step into the city, where luminists are ushering the displaced into the luminariums .

The domes shine against the darkened sky. A half day ago, they shone only for the linea. Now, they shine for all.

I glance at Quin, the king who promised to make this happen—and who is making it happen. He doesn’t look at me; he keeps his gaze ahead, but he knows I’m watching him. He always does.

His jaw tenses, the faintest movement. Then, as if hearing my thoughts, he exhales and shakes his head. “This is all your work,” he murmurs.

I rest a hand on his cane, halting him. The motion is small, but it stills him completely. His dark eyes lock onto mine, unreadable in the flickering luminist glow.

I step forward until the shaft of his cane presses against the length of my leg—until I can feel the slight tremor shivering through the wood. A tension coiled beneath his steady exterior.

“It’s ours,” I whisper.

The city hums around us—distant hopeful voices, the absence of luminist bells, a wail and a laugh in the night—but none of it truly sinks into me. There is only him. The warmth of his breath against the cool air. The press of his cane deepening against my leg.

His fingers shift subtly against the cane’s handle, tightening, combing my hip. The tension is more tremulous now. No longer heavy with war, or the burden of duty.

It’s more desperate. More aware.

It flickers along with the luminarium light that catches in his eyes.

And I don’t move away .

I slide closer.

I slide until I can feel the hum of him battling his self-control.

I slide until he loses it.

A visceral shiver rolls through him, blooming with magic.

The winds rise, lifting us—through the lingering smoke above the city, through the thick curtain of mist, until we break into a sky full of stars.

His magic pockets us, wind keeping steady beneath our feet, very little above—just enough to flutter the hem of his cloak.

His cane is still against my thigh, his fingers still resting at my hip. His breath still caught between us.

The vast sky glitters above us and under it is just the two of us. Down there, the weight of the world rests on his shoulders. But up here, he is free. He is light. He can take off his crown and be .

I raise a trembling hand to his cane, fingers curling over his. Slowly, I loosen his grip, freeing him of it. Up here the only support we need should be from one another. I toss the cane onto the soft, moonlit cloud that Quin reins in, and the cane sinks slightly into its glow.

I take his fist, tight and trembling, and slowly pry his fingers open. I guide his hand, press his palm against my waist. A place to anchor himself—to me.

His breath stutters. His eyes shutter. And then—his fingers curl in, clamping onto me, desperate, like I might slip through his grasp if he doesn't hold tight.

“Cael...” His voice is a rumble, low and uneven. A warning .

A warning that he's coming undone.

That if he does, he won't stop.

It all sinks low into me on a delicate shiver and I pull myself forward, a hand in his

shirt, a whisper landing on the flutette I gave him, sitting at the base of his throat.

“I don’t want you to—”

He moves.

He tilts my head up and his lips crash into mine, hard, messy.

Raw. Years of longing, years of suppressing.

.. his kiss is uncontrolled, fiery, like he’s tearing down all and any walls between us.

I clutch his jaw and pull him even harder against my lips so he knows not to stop.

I don’t want anything more between us. So long we’ve worn layers of masks around one another, for so long we’ve slowly peeled them off, and this is what’s under them all.

Relentless desire for one another, an insatiable need to feel .

His one hand is riveted on my waist; the other skims my face, thumbs my chin, pulls my lips open to catch a breath—his breath.

It slinks inside me with an intimacy that has me trembling. He feels it too and gathers me close, pressing his forehead against mine, his pulse ticking in his throat, unsteady, wild. Neither of us speaks, the words simply don’t exist. This is us. This is our truth.

A braid drags lightly along my jaw, under my ear, where it rubs. Flickers of sensation—ticklish, sharp, magical—snap down my middle in quick, pulsing waves.

I gasp, searching his darkening eyes, my fingers already moving, already slipping

into his hair.

The bejewelled fastening kisses my neck, while his others glint under the stars.

I roll it between my fingers, slow and deliberate.

I have touched his braids before. I have plaited them into his hair.

I've worn them around my wrists, felt them in every way—except one.

The one way that is most intimate. That is only meant for one other person.

I feel the fastening warming under my touch. Holding his gaze, I slowly, carefully pull it free. A piece of him. A piece of his life that he's letting me take into my hands. A piece of him that is also mine now.

I press the bead into his hand, then slip my fingers into his hair. I touch the braid, tease it loose. The strands are silky, soft. They curl around my skin like whispers, like sharing secrets they have waited too long to tell.

One by one, I remove his braids. One by one, I undo them all.

His breath hitches, his grip falters, and then—his hands curl around the beads and around me. A shudder ripples through him, low and deep, as if he's just been unlocked.

His kiss—his whole body—throbs against me, urgent, unrestrained, consumed. And at the slide of his tongue against mine, at my guttural hum—he moves. Hard. Certain. Desperate.

The stars tilt and I fall in a tantalising rush, my back sinking into a bed of cloud,

weightless, cradled by Quin's magic.

He lets go of the fastenings, discarding them alongside his cane, and then the scent of him—fresh rain, earth, wind—wraps around me as his hands tear at my clothes and find my skin.

His hair spills around my head like a curtain and I scrunch it in my hand as I lift my face to his. I smile into a teasing kiss. “You’ve taken all my layers off.” I pluck at his shirt—and tear it too. “Now the very last of your own.”

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With a spell, his clothes disappear, only his cloak whips upwards in the sky and flutters slowly back down.

Quin looms over me, knees spreading mine to settle there.

His arms brace either side of me just in time for his cloak to settle over his back like a blanket.

I swallow nervously. He's all tightly refined muscle and smooth skin, and I suddenly don't know what to do with all of that.

He shifts my knee slightly, and I grab his back to steady him. "Your leg—"

"The cloud gives way perfectly when I need it to," he murmurs.

He's not in pain; he won't be.

I swallow and nod.

What was desperate and impatient before has settled into something achingly exposing. And slow. Quin sinks his gaze over every inch of me and I have to steer it back to my flushing face.

He raises an eyebrow. "Could it be... Cael?" he lowers his lips to my ear in a wolfish whisper, "Are you finally afraid of something?"

I grit my teeth and snatch him into a kiss, and his chuckle pearls over my lips.

He always could tease me into proving otherwise .

I kiss him again, softer this time. “But who knew you possibly hid that , your majesty.”

He doesn’t expect it and his laughter rips up the air, the cloud rising and falling with each bout, sending achy jolts where it’s already aching.

He shifts knowingly and the short gap between us feels syrupy, the air heavy and hot.

His hair combs mine where it’s splayed and tangled, and it tickles.

Every slight shift, every flicker of our uneven breaths—I feel it all.

Caresses and coiling nerves. An ache that builds and builds.

My toes curl in wispy cloud and I feel silky tendrils puff around my feet.

And Quin’s lashes tremble—like he feels me through his magic too.

His hand grips the cloud as he steadily, slowly inches his body towards mine.

Air billows between us and his warmth rushes nearer.

The first touch comes to my stomach, a blunt, fleeting touch that lifts again with our hitched breaths and leaves a wet trace to cool on my stomach.

The fleeting touch is followed by a lingering one, heavy, warm.

Long, thick. Pressing next to mine. Pulsing.

A pulsing that vibrates through the cloud, through Quin's very being.

A pulse that trips my own into something erratic—

His body presses down on mine, hot and firm, and protective like an anchor to help me through the rush of this unknown.

I know theoretically . I know through the lens of a healer.

I know from dreams and imagination. But I didn't know the trembling, panting reality.

Didn't know the solid feel of these hard lines.

Didn't know this unbearable mounting something slinging through my body.

Didn't know staring into someone's eyes could be so vulnerable.

I grip Quin's shoulder blades, pressing tightly. I feel his expanding chest on thick breaths. I feel the harder bite of the flutette jammed between us.

I feel his question slide down my neck and pool at my collarbone. "Can we?"

My limbs shake. Not from uncertainty or fear. This is something else—a collision of all the memories of us that led to this moment. All the banter, the teasing, the spoken support and the unspoken. All the anger and surges of frustration. All the times he's looked at me and shaken my insides.

All the times I've felt.

They've led to this.

And it feels inevitable. I whisper into the waves of his hair.

A tremor rolls through him and I feel the fading of his restraint once more. I skim over his back, my touch light and then hard. A touch that commands.

His hand finds mine and grips it above my head. His fingers glow with a spell that feels oily, slippery. He deliberately runs his fingers down the length of my arm to tell me—

This is what's coming.

He wants this now.

His eyes are dark on mine, his lips parted; his desire is unchecked—

This is Quin letting me beneath all his masks .

We are both at our most vulnerable here. And we're sharing this moment together.

My throat is too jammed up to speak. I lift his glowing fingers and steer them on a gasp between us.

His eyes flash, his pulse wild beneath my fingers. His lips part like he might say something, like there's one last thing he needs to be sure of. But I shake my head before he can. I know. I want this. I want you.

Something in him breaks. A shudder runs through him, and Quin cannot control it anymore, he growls into a messy kiss, fingers shaking between my cheeks as he searches and skims .

The slick spell rubs up against me with a desperation I feel mirrored in my panting

against Quin's mouth. I'm ready to break apart for you. To break apart with you. Together.

All in a rush.

I claw at his back, pulling him closer and closer, because I too am losing control. Let us be free for these moments. Let us enjoy a moment of coming completely undone.

Through the shifting gaps in his hair, the stars glint brightly.

More brightly when Quin skims me there again and shallowly dips in.

His slick spell is warm and a million nerves wake up under his exploration.

His finger presses inside and I clench. Not from not wanting.

But from the shock of shivers that throttle through me, that have me gasping against his jaw, that have my knees falling into puffs of cloud as I open myself more.

I whine as I bite his chin .

The cloud suddenly lurches up and I love that I can feel his cracking composure, not just in the deepening of his needy fingers, of his quick removal of them, of his repositioning between my legs, but in all the spaces around me. Wisps of silky plumes slide over my arms, my waist, my ankles.

His hand tightens at my hip, against my forearm—the only warning before a sharp intrusion and Quin's guttural, shuddering gasp.

His eyes flutter closed with unbearable pleasure—pleasure he is taking from me, that I am giving him.

He moves and there's pain and fullness but also connection.

A raw, intimate connection, but also a deeper one.

It stirs inside my chest and swells—his lovelight inside me, responding to him, recognising his soul—

It unfurls, a mounting ticklish beat that drums through my veins, from deep in my middle to the tips of my toes, to my knuckles, to the sensitive spot at the base of my neck.

Even my scalp prickles with it. With each plunge, the lovelight connects with his pleasure, releasing it inside me. I feel Quin as if I'm one with him.

He is awash with desire, he cannot push himself deep enough, he wants to live in this moment. He moves in me with curiosity and need and such achingly simple joy.

This is something he has always longed for. Something he thought he'd never be able to have. He has always been a man of a million masks: the ruler, the tactician, the symbol. But here, with me, he is just a man. Just Quin.

In his hectic moves inside me, he's not bound by rules and discipline, doesn't have to be afraid of schemes and cunning, doesn't have to keep his mind sharp. He doesn't have to think. He can just feel.

And the more he just feels, the more I do too; his sweaty skin rubbing over mine, the obscene squelching between us, the broken groans, and my delirious whispers mad with wants .

Wants that make him spiral and move harder, wants that threaten to split me in half.

I clench around him, eager for it. Let him own me.

Let me own him.

I fist his hair, pulling him in to devour my lips too, because I can't get enough. I refuse.

He holds me harder and with each plunge the cloud beneath us drops, an exhilarating thrill along with Quin's feelings mirrored inside my veins—and then there are my own. The thickness, the fullness... and the pain from before has shifted.

I throw my head back into the silky cloud, baring my throat. Don't hold back. You never have to hold back with me.

And he doesn't.

The cloud drops and catches, drops and catches, drops and catches. His cloak rises off us and settles again each time. The stars blaze and then disappear as we sink into mist, and the wet touch of air over my skin, along with Quin's sudden swelling and pulsing, has me yelling his name as I combust.

Quin sags against me, uneven breaths mingling with mine. We share a tender laugh of relief, and his fingers soften around me, cradling me closer. I feel the pound of his heart, and the matching pound of my own.

I curl against him, tucking my head under his chin, where the flutette catches my long, satisfied sigh into a whistle.

Quin murmurs into my hair; a spell cleans us up and, as the cloud slowly drops back to reality, another redresses us.

I remain in his arms, and he remains in mine.

The descent is slow. A drift. A glide. A return.

But with every inch we fall, the weight returns.

The kingdom beckons. The people cry. The crown tightens its grip.

I feel it happen. I feel the shift in his body the moment we inhale the smoke, the slow reclaiming of duty. His shoulders tensing. The exhale that is not release, but resignation.

I swallow thickly. “Do you regret—”

Quin’s head snaps toward me, his eyes dark with unrelenting possessiveness and the answer he will not allow to be questioned. He snatches my lips with a snarl and curves a protective arm around me. “Never.”

He steers the cloud and us to the square, above his academy. Before he lowers us to the ground I pluck his spilled fastenings, drop them into my healing pouch, and plait his hair into one fat braid. He raises a brow and I glare. “No one else is allowed to see you undone.”

He leans forward, eyes flashing. “Close, but still not the words I’m waiting for.”

“Those words—I would have said them already.”

“Not on the brink of death! ”

I’m healthy now. I’m allowed to say them. But I’m feeling all of a sudden rather stubborn, and I fold my arms. “Not before you face your uncle!”

His eyes glower, but with a warring twinkle at the edges. “A taste of my own medicine?”

“Approved by your healer.”

Quin barks a laugh and the cloud rapidly descends, coming to a swift halt three feet off the ground. Quin reaches for his cane—

I scoop it away, shuffling off the cloud, to lean heavily against it. “You’ve still got enough magic.”

He stares at me and I snap towards him and lower my voice. “It’s this or carry me, Quintus. My legs? Utterly useless.”

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We sleep in Quin's chamber—Quin on his back, royally prone in bed, or stiff like he's practicing for burial. I lean over him, peering at his perfectly aligned lashes, and trace a finger over the form of his nose without quite touching. I smirk, and—

“Get to sleep, Cael. Or I'll send you to the floor.”

I laugh and curl against his side. I fall into a sleep so deep that I don't notice when he leaves at dawn.

I find out when I wake to cool sheets and his message that he must meditate.

He needs spiritual power to defend against any attack that might be launched against the sick—or the healthy receiving forbidden treatment.

He orders me to eat properly and continue my work. He'll meet me at the Amuletos manor.

I'm on my way, just stepping onto the cobbled street, when an aklo carrying a basket sinks to his knees before me. “Caelus Amuletos?”

The basket moves. In it is a white cat. I've seen the cat countless times, I'm familiar with every knobble of her spine and the scratchiness of her meow.

I've felt the softness of her fur keeping me company during the endless nights I studied at Pavilion Library.

I snap my head up. “Skriniaris Evander! What's happened? ”

The aklo wheezes as he rises to his feet. He's sick.

Does that mean Evander is too?

Or is he . . . could he be . . . No. "Tell me!"

The aklo regrips the basket. Other than confirming my name, he seems reluctant to speak. His gaze keeps flittering to the side as well. "He said you'd believe he needs help if you saw this cat. Follow."

I move with him in the direction of the library. Evander... I must help him in any way I can and ease his— "What are his symptoms?" I ask over a long whine from the cat.

The aklo just tells me we should hurry.

I take the basket from him, to help ease his own suffering. The cat paws at my wrist with another long meow.

"The luminariums are now open to the sick," I say, slowing. "Did you send him there?"

"He's at the library. Too weak to move."

The aklo glances away. He keeps pulling up the collar of his cloak. A drop of sweat beads at his temple.

The morning is crisp. Not warm enough for that.

Something is wrong.

I glance at the cat. The familiar weight of her settles me. She meows again, scratchy,

urgent. Evander needs me.

I glance across the square, as if I might spot Quin meditating in the fresh morning air, as if I might beckon him to join me, but he's nowhere to be seen—and there may be no time to wait.

Smoke hangs thicker in the air here. Coughing rattles from behind closed windows. And then—

A voice.

Soft. Strained.

My name?

I turn instinctively, pulse quickening, but—the aklo locks a hand around my wrist. “Hurry.”

He drags me forward as if he's afraid I might change my mind.

I prickle at his urgency and resist his pull. Maybe I should find Quin. Tell someone about this. But Evander's cat stretches up from the basket, paws on my chest, and meows so desperately.

If Evander is on the brink... I cannot ignore what might be his last plea.

I rush up the stairs to the library, calling his name. My voice sounds so loud among the walls of books. Too loud. Even in the silence of a library.

But there should be some movement. The rustle of turning pages. Even a cough.

“Where is he?” I ask the aklo, who prods me further into the main room.

I spy legs on the floor; someone is slumped behind those shelves. Evander’s cat leaps from the basket, hurrying there.

I take a few steps forward—

From behind the shelves, stepping over Evander’s legs, a redcloak emerges. I hiss, snapping to a halt. He drags Skriniaaris Evander’s body for me to see. Blood trickles down his forehead, but his eyes are awake, aware, and they bulge as he tries to yell through the magic gagging him.

More red fills my side vision. I spin; redcloaks close in behind me too. “What is this?”

Swords, at least, are not unsheathed. Perhaps they don’t think they need them against one pitiful non-magicked healer. Perhaps there’s a chance to talk a way out of this.

But in my gut, I know there isn’t. I know why the aklo kept pulling at his collar now. He was trying to make sure the regent’s mark wasn’t obvious. That I wouldn’t piece all this together.

I did suspect, but I let my emotions manipulate me. I’d once more been impulsive. At the very least, I’m consistent to the end.

“The regent must be afraid,” I say on a hollow laugh. “Even the luminists are defying laws and listening to the king. The. True. King.”

The blow comes fast and brutal—a crack across my cheekbone that sends a shock through my skull.

My vision blurs. I taste blood before I feel it, a metallic heat spilling over my tongue.

I swallow. Straighten. And smile with the hit staining my teeth.

“He’ll never change the will of the people.

And the people are all bowing to Constantinos now.”

Again, I’m hit.

Evander keeps shaking his head violently, willing me to stop. I could stop. But I won’t. I know what these redcloaks will do. They’ll use me to lure Quin in, and Quin will come, without the aid of his army.

Evander’s hands tremble. The redcloak kicks at him to keep still. I see the magic gagging him tighten.

The same magic that’ll be locked around Quin’s throat. The same magic that will steal his breath. His voice. His power.

They will bind him. Drag him before the regent like an offering.

And he will come willingly. Because of me.

I cannot let them. I will not let them.

If I goad these soldiers into killing me now, there’ll be no bait. Quin will grieve, he will be unfathomably furious, but he will wait for the king’s men. He will storm the royal city with the power he needs to win it back.

I hesitate on a lurch of fear, on a voice in my head that says if I let them take me, at

least I'll see Quin one last time. At least we'll die together.

But I grit it away, raise my chin, and force out a dark laugh. "Your regent is nothing but a coward. You've dedicated yourself to the whim of a sad, selfish man—"

"Let me go!" The yell is frightened. The yell is behind me. The yell is from Akilah.

It comes at the same time as another ringing slam to my face.

My vision spins, my head rattles, and I collapse to the floor.

But where I promised to let go of this life, I find myself clawing to it.

They have Akilah. Why? What will they do to her?

I cling on through stuttering vision and weak limbs and stagger to my feet.

Her form comes in and out of focus. She's straining against redcloaks that have her bound tight.

"Found her shouting after him. Must've followed."

"What do we do with her? Get rid of her?"

No! I stretch out an arm, clawing the air, lurching unsteadily through it toward her.

"Caelus!" she cries, and then snarls. "Let. Me. Go!"

She jerks her arm free just enough to scratch at the redcloak's face. A short, vicious strike.

They curse, tighten their grip. Then a spell flares between them, and she goes still.

Another redcloak, murmuring thoughtfully, “Seems like he wants to protect her.”

Magic binds my arms, yanking me away from her, and then a voice sails past my ear. “Take her too. She could be leverage for our regent.”

I lunge, blind with panic—

The next blast slams into my back.

The last thing I see is her limp form; the last thing I hear is an order for Skriniaris Evander to inform dead-walking Constantinos.

Then—nothing.

A surge of vitalian magic slams through me, yanking me from the void.

I splutter awake. I’m crumpled on a slick, gleaming floor.

My limbs shake as I push myself onto my knees, taking in the sight before me—the grand luminarium of the royal city.

The dome glows brightly today, too brightly, and under it, the branches of the violet oak unfold, stretching in all directions across the circular hall.

Under that, the regent sits on his throne.

Through the haze, I make out a figure in bright robes.

Magic hums in the air and sharp metal nails hover—waiting, shifting, aiming.

Akilah!

She dangles from a branch, wrists bound in twisting magic. Her head slumps forward, her feet twitching—a final protest before unconsciousness swallows her.

I lunge forward. The nails snap toward her—fast, predatory. A warning.

I freeze. So do they.

The regent coughs, a wet, rattling sound, and slowly turns toward me. My vision sharpens. His face is pale, waxy, his breath laboured. Scales coil up his throat, creeping, strangling.

But his eyes burn with something that refuses to die. “So eager to save an akla.”

I grind my teeth. “Her name is Akilah.”

The regent smiles, his cracked lips curling. “I have the akla in my hands, you’ll do best to follow my instructions.”

“Instruction! You only need me here until he arrives,” I snarl. I know his game. I know I’m a pawn in his hands, for his easy disposal.

“Don’t undersell yourself, healer. In fact,” his eyes flash with anger, “I’m to congratulate you on finding a cure for the plague.”

“I’m also here to be rewarded?” I laugh, knowing well this is not the case. “If so, let Akilah go.”

He waves a hand and the magical binds stringing her up sever. She crashes to the ground. The slam has her yelping to life and scrambling, afraid, to the tree trunk

where she curls her knees to her chest and shakes.

The regent's nails snap back to his palm. His voice gentles. "I can be merciful. Work for me, and I'll ensure your loved ones live long, peaceful lives."

A slow coil of dread knots in my stomach. I grit my teeth and say nothing.

The regent dances his nails casually around me and back to him. "I know he gathered men. I know they scattered again. He'll come today all alone. Your only real chance to save yourself and"—he glances at Akilah—"your loved ones is to pledge allegiance to me."

Never in a million years. I squeeze my fists. "I'm a healer without magic. You have the best vitalians in the kingdom."

"But you have the cure."

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“There is only protection. No cure.”

The regent narrows his eyes. “You saved all those lives in Kastoria.”

“The disease—left by the wyverns you manipulated— has altered. You should have prioritised finding all your sick dragonettes and stopping this plague before it started. You were warned!”

The regent’s eyes flash. “Are you telling me”—he gestures to his scaled throat—“this is poetic justice?”

“I don’t need to tell you. You already know.”

The nails fly—too fast to dodge.

Pain erupts, searing through my upper arms. I hit the floor hard, knees buckling, my breath ragged as I shake beneath the weight of it.

The regent yanks his nails back, spraying my blood across the gleaming floor.

He exhales a slow, rattling breath. “Let’s try this again.”

His gaze cuts to the healing pouch at my belt, sharp and knowing. My fingers fly to cover it, instinctive, protective.

“Give me the cure.”

I shake my head. There isn't one!

He lurches to his feet in fury—but the motion is too fast. His body betrays him. He stumbles, a violent cough wracking his chest. His knees hit the floor with an unrefined thud. “Chiron!” he demands, gesturing to one of the redcloaks stationed around the dome.

A healer's oath is written into their soul, their very nature—friend or foe, it does not matter. And yet... I have resisted before, struggled. After River's death. With Megaera. Each time, Quin was there, his voice sharp and steady, guiding me back to my path.

But Quin is not here .

I am alone with this choice.

And as this sick—dying man crumbles before me, the weight of my decision slithers through me like a poison.

Do I close the space between us and help my king's enemy?

Or do I deny my oath?

Even he was once just a boy.

Ridiculed. Sidelined. Made to feel unloved.

Until he met Liandros.

His only friend. The love—the light—of his life. The one who saw him, not as the forgotten son; not as a shadow, but as someone who mattered.

And then Liandros was taken from him, leaving behind only an emptiness that festered into darkness.

Skriniaris Evander once said it: the regent is a man to be pitied.

With blood streaming down my throbbing arms, I cross towards him.

I crouch beside the regent just as Chiron arrives, his presence sweeping across the room like a blade drawn in warning.

His boots hit the floor between us—a deliberate line drawn. His gaze flickers between me and the regent, unreadable. The message is clear: I am not the healer here. He is.

A show of dominance.

And yet... somewhere in the sharp edges of his stance, I feel the faintest whisper of... protection?

I step back and let Chiron use spells to aid the regent. When the regent resumes his seat on his throne, Chiron bows. “The lovelights have extended your life. But until we find a cure, you’ll need one a day.”

“How much longer will this one last?” the regent demands, tapping his chest.

Chiron bows lower, hesitating.

“How long!”

“An hour, maybe two.”

The regent pales, but before he can speak, a redcloak approaches him. “He’s entered

the royal city.”

My body sharpens with awareness. Quin is here. Now, close. Alone. In danger. Did he come with any semblance of a plan? Or only his magic blazing?

The regent waves him off with an order. “Delay him a little. Drain.”

I tense and will the Arcane Sovereign—any of Iskaldir’s gods—to help him.

The regent coughs and snaps a spell into his hand. Akilah is dragged helplessly from the oak across the floor. She gasps, her nails clawing against the polished stone, trying to stop herself—trying to resist the unseen force pulling her toward him.

“Use her light,” the regent orders Chiron.

A heartbeat of silence. Chiron hesitates.

I choke on a cry, disgust curling through me like bile. “You’ve already taken hers.”

The regent coughs violently again, then sweeps his cold gaze to me. He holds out a hand. “Then you have a choice. The cure. Or your lovelight. ”

“You can’t be cured!” I hurl back.

“Chiron!”

Chiron shifts and when he turns to me, I see his expression pinch. He’s visibly disturbed, he’s even dragging his feet towards me, but a sighing resignation ripples through him: he will obey.

I step back, terror surging through my body. Severing a lovelight is worse than death.

A ripping. A raw tearing of the soul—too deep to ever fully heal.

I remember Akilah's agony. Her wails, the pain and grief of what was being torn away.

The pain will be unbearable.

But not as unbearable as the thought seizing my chest—

Quin will never feel it.

Chiron swishes his hands and I can see him stacking his transplantation spell; I've seen this dozens of times, when I was his student. Then, his spell glowed effortlessly; now, the same spell wavers.

The regent's voice slices through the air, low and taunting. "Is losing one son not enough?"

Chiron flinches. A subtle, sharp inhale—almost imperceptible. But I see it. I feel it. The wound is fresh, still bleeds.

Dark, smoky magic seeps from his skin, thick with grief.

His jaw locks, his fingers tightening in a telltale tremor.

He forces his hands steady and turns the spell on me.

It hits fast. Splicing pain through my chest. I scream, my whole body arching against the burn.

I feel warmth and light dart through my body as it tries to escape the spell's grasp, but

the spell weaves and follows with its clawing touch.

Akilah is a shout in the distance, but her words are blurred under my agony and the clench in my stomach as I will myself to fight against the spell.

“Give in,” Chiron pleads. “It’ll hurt less.”

I grit my teeth. “Florentius will never forgive you.”

His spell wavers.

I churn out more words. “Is losing one son not enough?”

Chiron almost stops. I feel the slackening of his spell, taste the salt of tears springing into his eyes through it. But before he lets go completely, the regent spears a nail through his leg. “My way of losing hurts more.”

At this, Chiron pushes in his spell with more force.

I buckle forward. Every limb shakes and shudders and my light has nowhere to hide anymore.

The spell’s claws hook onto it and yank—

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It's shredding me apart, layer by layer.

Glittering golden plumes are ripped from me, spiralling upward. Chiron's spell pulls—harder, deeper.

I shouldn't scream for him. Shouldn't bring him here.

But . . . it hurts. It hurts so much.

The memories we made—our dromveske, our stolen moments—they're all that hold me together. They tether me, keep me from splintering into nothing.

I see him—his dangling braids as he leans close, the glitter in his eye reflecting fireflies, the weight of my name as he tugs me onto his lap, the sweep of his thumb over an escaped tear.

His barely-there kiss.

My head tips back, voice shattering.

The doors do not just break.

They explode.

Shards of splintered wood punch into the luminarium like daggers, and a storm surges in .

Winds roar, howling through the chamber; violet oak leaves rip from their branches, scattering. The air crackles—charged, boiling —

A whip of blinding energy cracks through the chamber, striking Chiron like thunder. The force of it rips him from his feet, hurling him back into the violet oak with a sickening crack.

Redcloaks stagger. One fumbles for his weapon.

Through the chaos, through the storm—

My king comes.

My head is heavy, my vision blurring, but I keep my eyes on him.

A flash of dark robes, wind roaring in his wake. Magic crackles from him, whips of pure light: he isn't summoning a tempest. He is the tempest.

And the tempest is coming for me.

My heart pounds, and with each beat my lovelight pulses brighter.

Quin.

To be so relieved, and so devastated at once.

He came for me.

But what have I brought him into?

My mouth forms his name but everything aches. My voice is lost. I fall—

Quin catches me.

His cloak billows and a domed shield slams around us. His magic is as commanding and defiant as he is. He clutches me desperately, hold almost strangling. Quin— who could always control his expression, who could fight calmly through anything—

His face is wretched.

His arms shake as he holds me closer. His hands press over my chest—as if trying to keep me here, keep me whole.

His magic surges—he tries to steer my lovelight back inside me.

But he can't.

It's only tethered to me by a thin, fragile thread.

A tremor rolls through me—the pain surges again. My muscles scream. I can't seem to move them voluntarily. They're too heavy, too exhausted, too agonised.

Quin yanks the flutette from his throat and presses it to my lips.

Relief.

It floods through me.

The magic within the flutette that he's hoarded, sparingly used—all that remains of my magic—he gives it back.

It curls deep—everywhere Chiron's spell touched, it fills. Soothes. Heals.

His trembling fingers push my hair back, touch achingly gentle. His voice breaks with it.

“I didn’t know we’d both face him,” he murmurs.

His hands tighten. A vow.

“But with you by my side... it’ll be enough.”

The regent coughs violently—and it turns into a laugh. A raw, brittle thing that echoes around the lunarium .

Spells hammer against Quin’s shield. Not a single crack forms. Not even a tremor.

But the regent isn’t looking at them.

His gaze locks onto us. And for the first time, his face contorts—not with rage, but with memory. With something far more dangerous. Perhaps our closeness reminds him of Liandros. Of what he lost...

“You think love makes you strong,” he sneers, voice curdling, bitter— hurt . “But love... love can be ripped away.”

Quin’s voice rings out like a blade drawn from its sheath.

“You think power makes you strong. But power can also be ripped away.”

The regent’s lips twitch. The air shudders. “I will not let everything be taken from me.”

Quin doesn’t hesitate. His dome explodes outward. “Neither will I!”

The force hurls the redcloaks back like puppets, slamming them against the walls. Another whip of light lances through the luminarium, striking the regent—flipping him through the air. He crashes to the ground before the glowing, leafless violet oak.

Quin's hands clench in the air, magic blazing.

Chiron, staggering upright, latches onto Akilah. Scrambles away.

Even through the haze of pain, I see it. The flicker of something in him. A choice.

At least this .

At least he's helping her.

Quin's arms tighten around me—then, carefully, he lowers me to the ground. A shielding spell weaves around me, settling over my skin like the one used when I was sick.

My lovelight still drifts in the air, shimmering—a fragile, beautiful dance in the middle of this destruction.

“Wait, Quin—”

But he's already rising.

Magic crackles in his palms, the very air thickening with the intent to kill.

Before him, the regent forces himself upright. His breath comes ragged. Uneven. But his hands—

His hands slam into the earth.

The floor jolts. A deep, unnatural rumble.

A fissure splits the marble beneath me.

Quin's voice is low, lethal. "You were behind those earthquakes."

The regent wrenches his glowing hands from the cracking floor—

And the violet oak rises.

Not just lifts—is ripped from the earth, its ancient roots tearing free.

Higher. Higher. The whole tree is suspended.

And then—

The regent slams his hands into the tree.

All the centuries of linea power it has absorbed, the very magic of kings long dead, condenses—racing toward the heart of the wood .

A pulse shudders through the luminarium.

A pulse that doesn't fade.

It forges.

It solidifies.

And then the regent draws a sword from the violet oak.

Not just a weapon. A living force.

A single, devastating arc of its blade sends Quin and me flying.

I don't even feel the impact.

Just the shock of Quin's magic shattering.

He barely manages another shield—a desperate one. Weak.

The regent laughs.

“You feel it now, don't you?” His voice curls with satisfaction. “What it feels like to be pitiful.”

Quin doesn't answer. But I see the strain in his arms, the wild flicker of magic trying to weave back together.

It's not enough.

Not against this.

I reach for him. Above me. Somewhere close, but not close enough.

“Quin—”

The regent swings the violet oak sword again.

A ripple of power yanks us forward.

I gasp—the world lurches, and we are dragged toward him, helpless.

“I lured you here for a reason, Constantinos.”

Quin digs his heels into the cracked ground, but the pull is too strong .

Behind the regent, the remains of the violet oak finally topple.

The weight of it shakes the luminarium. Branches crumble to ash.

The tree has fallen.

My chest tightens, my world lurches—

Quin will be next.

“Please,” I beg the regent. “I’ll do anything. I’ll cure you.”

I try to raise my arm to Quin. Try to reach for him. But my muscles cave. My limbs are useless. I cannot move.

Quin’s shield flickers—weakens.

Then—shatters.

Quin plummets.

The regent swings his sword.

“NO!”

The violet oak blade strikes first.

Quin gasps—a sound sharper than any blade. Blood erupts from his stomach. From his mouth.

His body suspends in air—held there by the regent’s magic. For a single, agonising moment, he’s still.

Then—

The spell releases.

He drops.

A lifeless, crumpling fall. A thud against marble. Red spilling onto white.

He doesn’t move.

Why isn’t he moving ?

I claw, scramble, heave— but the regent’s spell snaps tight around me.

“QUIN!”

My voice fractures. The floor tilts. My vision blurs. I can’t breathe. Can’t think.

The silence is unbearable. No struggle. No ragged breath. No single twitch.

I twist, fight, try to pull free, but the spell crushes me down.

“Chiron.” The regent’s voice has me seething. I’ve never truly hated before, but I do now. I’m a healer, but I wish I’d never stepped forward out of pity. I wish I’d killed.

Chiron steps forward. Bows over Quin. Presses his fingers to his pulse.

Once.

Twice.

He pauses. Then casts a spell. Once. Twice.

He doesn't speak.

Too quiet.

Far too quiet.

The regent's voice sharpens. "Well?"

Chiron rises. Bows. And speaks.

"Dead."

Dead.

The word slams into me.

My chest hollows. My breath doesn't come. My heartbeat struggles too.

"No." No, no, no, no—

Something inside me cracks .

My lovelight pulses violently. My chest burns. My limbs shake.

I lurch against the regent's constricting spell, thrashing. My knuckles slam against the marble.

Quin is—

Chiron steps toward me. His boots clomp against the floor. His face is hard, distant. "That's right," he says. His voice is flat. Unfeeling. Absolute. "He is dead."

But his eyes . . .

They stay on mine. Too long. Too steady.

And suddenly—

My body remembers.

I was dead once, too.

And Chiron had given the same proclamation about me.

My stomach clenches. The realisation hits so hard, I nearly choke on it.

Chiron lied to save me.

And now—

He is lying to save him.

A single, sharp breath stabs through my lungs.

I know what to do.

I wail. A long, raw sound. I thrash against the marble. My voice twists with agony.

“YOU KILLED HIM!”

The words tear from me. My body convulses, shakes, as if it’s rejecting the very truth of it.

“I said I’d cure you—” My arm lunges forward, muscles burning against the spell’s hold. My fingers claw for Quin— let me go, let me —

The regent laughs.

His spell dissolves.

The moment I’m free, I lunge.

I collapse over Quin, fingers scrambling for him. My hands find warm arms, still but not cold. I press down, feel for a pulse—

A faint beat, barely there.

A sob rips from my throat.

“No, no, no—” His name catches in my chest. My breath heaves. My fingers clamp on tighter, digging into his skin, as if I can pull him back from the abyss.

My arm wraps around him. A lover’s tragic, breaking embrace. My forehead presses against his. A tear falls, rolls down his cheek.

“Wake up. . . You can’t be—”

I reach blindly, shaking, fumbling. My hands dive into my healing bag, searching—something, anything.

I spill the contents onto the floor.

Powders, loose herbs—useless things. The small, bright vial Megaera gave me glints among them.

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“Nothing can bring back the dead,” the regent murmurs. Not mocking now. Thick with something else.

Understanding.

“Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Liandros.

He held his dying body once too .

I cradle Quin’s head in my lap, my breath coming in jagged, broken gasps.

My lovelight pulses.

Bright. Unfurling.

My fingers tremble as I press my lips to his temple, near his ear.

My light blooms.

The last, fragile thread lets go.

It unspools from my chest, unravels, and flows into him.

The regent clicks his tongue. Displeased.

“What’s the use of giving it to the dead?”

“Let him take it into his next life.” My voice wobbles, raw. More softly now, against his skin, “It belongs—it has always belonged—to him.”

The slightest twitch. His finger against my thigh.

He’s stirring.

I tighten my grip around him. I sob, clutch his body, bury my face in his hair.

And then—

I press my lips to his temple one more time.

A single word. A word that has saved us before.

“Act.”

It sinks into his skin, a command only he can hear.

And then, on a shuddering plea— “Please. You can’t be dead. You can’t. I haven’t said the words. I’ve been waiting for the right timing .”

Quin’s limbs remain slack in mine.

But I feel it .

A faint warmth unfurls in my chest. A pull—not strong, but there. Our lovelights are connected. He understands.

He hears me.

But he doesn't move.

He won't. Not yet.

The regent coughs, hard. The sound cracks, turns violent. His fingers scratch, claw at the scales spreading up his throat.

His time is running out.

"Chiron!" he snarls.

Silence.

No response.

He turns and finally notices.

Chiron is gone.

Chiron has taken Akilah and fled.

There is no vitalian left to help him.

Hoarse, violent coughs wring the regent's frame.

He staggers, his knees nearly buckling. But he forces himself upright and swings the violet oak sword.

Magic ripples from it, sweeping up the scattered contents of my healing bag.

Bottles clink, powders whirl, herbs scatter through the air like falling leaves. His eyes dart wildly between them, frenzied. Desperate.

“Which one is it?”

His fingers scramble, grabbing at the vials. Tossing them aside.

His hands snatch Megaera’s poison .

He grips it tight.

His breathing is ragged. His fingers shake.

“That’s not it,” I say, voice steady.

His gaze snaps to mine.

Suspicious. Untrusting.

His grip tightens. Crack. A vein bulges in his forehead.

“You’d say that,” he rasps. “You want revenge.”

I don’t look away.

“That won’t help you.”

His eyes flicker. Just a moment—hesitation.

But it’s enough.

He shifts his sword. I see it. The flicker of magic. The pulse.

He doesn't know. He doesn't realise that every time he draws from the sword, it's preserving him.

He's funnelling power from it, keeping himself alive without knowing it.

Only a healer's eyes can see it.

Slowly, deliberately, I lower myself onto my knees. Before the regent. I bow my head.

Surrendering.

I feel Quin's warmth still tethered to me, waiting. But I do not let my body betray it.

The regent watches. Wary. Weak. But still dangerous.

He must believe this.

He must let go of the sword.

"It's not that vial," I say.

I pick up two others, hands steady, and begin combining them. Carefully. Calculated .

"I need alcohol as the activator."

The regent's eyes narrow. He barks an order, and a redcloak hurls a flask across the room.

I catch it. Uncork it. Slowly tip the bottle.

The regent watches eagerly.

The sword rests on the ground, its hilt under his fingers.

If this goes wrong—

Keep breathing. Keep it steady.

I tip the flask a little further.

I lift the other vial toward it.

A heartbeat.

A second.

Then—I thrust the contents over the length of his blade.

The liquid hisses, seeping into the wood.

Silence.

The regent jerks back, confused—

And then—

A sudden burst of green-blue flame crawls up the hilt, racing toward his fingers.

The regent screams.

The sound isn't rage. Not at first.

It's disbelief.

He snatches at the blade, but it's already disintegrating in his hands. Power too can be ripped away.

Quin's words. A foreshadowing. The regent stares at dust. Power, gone. Burned to nothing.

His bloodshot roar rips through the chamber. He clutches his burned knuckles, shaking. His breath rasps. Another cough wracks his body.

He staggers back.

In his desperation, his eyes dart. He snatches Megaera's vial. "It is this one!" he snarls, voice fraying at the edges.

I shake my head.

He doesn't listen. He rips the cork free—tilts it back—and swallows.

A beat of silence.

Then—

A violent spell surges into his palm.

His eyes flash.

He's going to punish me for the sword.

For everything.

He lifts his hand—his magic spirals—

Then he convulses.

His fingers spasm, clenching air. His breath hitches, throat locks. A long gasp expels into the air. His chest heaves. Then—bile. Blood. A sickening splatter over his lips.

He stares at me.

His eyes widen—

He sees now. Understands.

“You did this to yourself,” I whisper.

He wasn’t cursed. He wasn’t betrayed. His own choices led him here.

He is the one who mutated the wyverns.

He is the one responsible for this plague.

He is the one who made himself sick .

And now—

He was the one who sealed his fate.

His lips tremble. His fingers twitch—reaching for me.

“Help me,” he gasps.

I watch him.

“I don’t have a cure,” I murmur. “If I did...”

I hesitate—just enough to give him hope. Then, softly: “Even though I hate you, I’d give it to you.”

His breath hitches.

“I’d destroy your meridians. I’d make sure Quin expels you from the kingdom, never to return. But I’d give it to you.”

I meet his gaze—firm. Unwavering.

“Do you want to know why?”

A shudder racks his body. He leans forward. Clinging.

“Because no matter how much I grieve... No matter how much I hate...” I steel my voice. “I will not become you.”

The truth hits like a killing blow. His eyes widen. His hand falters.

“I’m a healer.”

A long, rattling breath escapes him.

“I will heal.”

It is the only mercy I have left to give. I reach for my bag—relief, at least, for the pain.

But with his last energy, he surges. A burst of raw, violent anger—herbs scatter, a final spell twists through the air—

Aimed at me .

A killing curse.

Quin moves faster.

Light explodes between us—his magic collides with the regent's in a booming blast. The force sends the regent skidding across the fractured marble to the very spot where the violet oak once stood. Where, long ago, he met his only friend. His first love.

His final breaths come ragged. And then—a sob.

He stretches out his hand—as if someone stands before him.

Perhaps, in his last moments, he sees Liandros.

His fingers tremble—falling through air.

Then stillness.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

The regent is no more.

The last of his men have fled.

Quin stands before me—shield still shining, body shaking. His breaths are shallow, laboured. His legs falter.

But still, he protects me.

Gently, I slip my arm around his waist.

And this time, it's me who holds his weight.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:09 pm

We stagger out into the chaos of rebellion. A storm of redcloaks, magic flaring in desperate bursts, steel clashing against steel. I stop short, a cold weight dropping into my stomach. I hadn't thought there'd be more fight to come.

And Quin—Quin has nothing left.

I tighten my grip on him, feeling the faint tremor in his limbs.

“The gong,” Quin murmurs, his voice raw.

I move towards it, half dragging him as I scan the battlefield. Then I freeze again.

“Who are they fighting?”

Quin lets out a low, breathless laugh. “You don't see him yet. But I feel his magic.”

A surge of power ripples across the courtyard, slamming through the luminarium, the palace—through us. It's so strong that Quin and I grab onto a column, bracing against the force, while the redcloaks collapse in waves below .

And then I see him.

Soaring from the palace wall like a falcon cutting through the sky.

Quin's lips curl into something like a smile. He grips the baton, his fingers white around the wood, and slams it into the gong.

The sound explodes through the royal city, reverberating off stone and steel, swallowing battle cries. Every head turns. Redcloaks freeze, blades faltering. Even Nicostratus, mid-flight, turns his gaze toward us.

Quin's voice rings clear across the courtyard. "The regent is dead."

A ripple moves through the redcloaks—not of defiance, but something heavier. Relief. Some sag to their knees, others cover their eyes.

"Stop this fight," Quin commands, lifting a hand to the thick black smoke curling above us. "We have a bigger one to win."

Some of the regent's men break, scattering into the alleyways. Others linger, pale-faced, uncertainty flickering in their eyes. Will they face a sword? A guillotine?

Quin raises his voice again. "Anyone who testifies against the regent before the king's court will be granted clemency."

Hesitation. Then, one by one, they bow.

Nicostratus lands on the platform in a sweep of motion, barking orders to lead the surrendering men away. Then he turns to Quin, chin high.

Quin shakes his head. "You were supposed to go west. "

Nicostratus doesn't flinch. "I wouldn't risk the kingdom's people. But I couldn't risk you, either."

Quin's exhale is sharp. "How did you know?"

Nicostratus holds his gaze. "A spy. I got word last night and turned back with five men."

Only five.

How reckless. How close it had been.

Quin and I—we had no more fight left in us.

I step forward, still supporting Quin's weight, and bow my head toward Nicostratus. If he hadn't been here...

Nicostratus swallows hard, his throat bobbing as he nods.

Quin shifts in my grip, muscles tightening against quietly swallowed pain, and pulls free.

Then, without a word, he embraces his brother.

Quin and I make our way to King's Island, where the breeze carries the soft rustle of pearl heart bushes, their white-speckled leaves bowing in welcome. A cheeky greeting. A whisper of the past.

The sight tugs at something deep in my chest. Quin teased me mercilessly the first time I set foot in the royal city—pretending he wasn't the king, watching me grumble about the crown making me coax these bushes to life.

Without magic .

It feels like a lifetime ago. I was a lifetime ago. A Cael with endless cheek and little experience. A Cael who thought magic was everything. A Cael who hated the king.

So much has changed since I pressed each little cutting into the earth with careful fingers, praying they'd take root.

And now?

They have. They've grown.

And I—I am a Cael who has felt profound dilemmas. A Cael who heals without magic. A Cael who...

I sneak a look at Quin, only to find his gaze already on me. Steady. Knowing.

He raises a brow. My fingers tighten at his waist. “Bathe. I’ll decoct some pearl heart for us. Maybe some thorn tea...”

He laughs, pressing his forehead against mine. “Only if you tell me stories again. Your first childhood love in the violet oak. And your second love—meeting Maskios. And the third—”

“You’re far too smug right now, Majesty.”

“It’s always been you for me, too.”

A flicker of movement—a streak of fur. Generalus, the young prince’s cat, scampers past, chasing a drifting petal, utterly indifferent to the weight of history between a king and his healer.

I let out a slow breath. “Bathe. And I’ll tell you how I fell in love with you.”