



The Traitor's Curse (Twilight Mages #3)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Betrayed, beset on all sides, and possibly bewitched...

Since the sudden, suspicious, and unlamented death of his father, only one man stands between Lucian and the grudging acceptance of his subjects: Benedict, a powerful dusk mage, a military hero, the favorite of the ducal council...and Lucian's stepbrother.

Not that Benedict wants a shackle disguised as a crown. He'd rather start a new, anonymous life a thousand miles away and leave that beautiful, icy, sneering little cretin Lucian to whatever grim fate awaits him.

But when Lucian comes to him in the middle of the night, terrified and desperate but still as infuriatingly arrogant as ever, Benedict agrees to keep Lucian alive and on the throne. On one condition: Lucian must give in to Benedict's long-hidden desires and allow Benedict to use him, in every possible way, to sate his cursed magic's demands.

Lucian detests Benedict. He despises what he becomes when Benedict touches him. And it might be the death of him, if his father's murderer doesn't kill him first...

The Traitor's Curse is the third book in the Twilight Mages series, but it can be read as a standalone. Contains family secrets, unbecoming behavior in a throne room, and a duke who protests far, far too much. HEA guaranteed!

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Across the courtyard, Benedict had been in unnecessarily close conference with Lord Clothurn for much longer than I felt warranted, both of them huddled away from the pelting rain in the narrow cover of an overgrown arbor. Their choice to stand three inches from one another with vines dripping on them, rather than under either of two spacious verandas that ran the length of the courtyard, confirmed that they'd rather be uncomfortable than overheard.

Talking about me, I had little doubt.

Very little. And that sliver of uncertainty included the probability that handsome, smirking Clothurn might be Benedict's latest plaything, and that they'd ducked under the arbor to leer at each other while talking about me. The two weren't mutually exclusive whatsoever.

Clothurn had recently taken over as the interim Councilor for the Treasury after his father's apoplexy, and Benedict had long been the most beloved—although not by me, obviously—of Calatria's military commanders, despite his two years' absence after my father's death. Upon his return he'd taken up his previous position as if he'd never left it, his charm and the force of his personality and the unwavering loyalty of the Calatryan army too overwhelming for the court to resist. He'd spent the summer and fall fighting our ongoing, simmering war with the nomadic raiders who infested our northern foothills, but in the two months since the year's campaign ended he'd taken his seat on my council. Perhaps simply to annoy me, he'd faithfully attended every meeting.

In short, Benedict and Clothurn were two of my closest advisors, whether I wanted them or not, and they lived and breathed politics and power. They could plot against

me either in or out of bed with equal facility.

And Benedict...well, most cursed twilight mages suffered from their afflictions. But he wielded his supposed weakness as adroitly as he handled a sword and shield, fucking his way through the court and somehow managing to leave his discarded lovers as well disposed to him as ever.

Benedict's personality was more accursed than his bloody magic, and if I could undo only one of my late father's mistakes, aside from the many unjust executions he'd ordered, it would be his lust-addled marriage to Benedict's harpy of a mother.

As if he'd heard me mentally abusing her, Benedict's head came up, gray eyes sharp like a wolf scenting prey. He couldn't possibly see me here behind a second-story balcony column, could he? Vines hung all around the gap between columns, climbing from pots on the ground floor veranda up to the roof. In the gloomy light of this miserable, rainy morning, I'd be screened from prying eyes.

But I still ducked out of any possible sight, flattening my back against the column. I couldn't hear anything anyway, and I'd seen enough: Benedict's big, broad-shouldered body sheltering Clothurn's elegant silk-clad frame, his wool soldier's cloak and his mane of black hair gleaming with spattered raindrops.

So fucking picturesque, it made me want to gag.

I closed my eyes. The image behind them remained. That, and the others that appeared regularly in a nauseating rotation: my father's white silk nightshirt stained crimson and black around the collar, the matching trickle from his slack mouth, the blue eyes so like mine bulging and glazed with surprise and shock and pain.

Or the thought that always followed: that I was living on borrowed time, and at any moment I could be next. I didn't wear a nightshirt, so I'd stain my crisp linen

bedsheets instead when I choked on poison or took a knife to the chest, but otherwise it would probably be much the same. My choice of clothing (or lack of it) to wear to bed didn't have much to do with my subjects hating me, I didn't think.

Not that I'd wear a stupid nightshirt to appease them even if it did. Being murdered would be preferable to giving in, not least because if I did give in, they'd jeer at me and then most likely murder me anyway.

They being nearly anyone, starting with Benedict and the rest of my council, and my temples throbbed with it, gods, my mind going around and around wondering who it had been who prepared that goblet of wine my father had drunk before bed, and whether that would be the same someone who came for me...the two and a half years that had passed since his death had blunted the sharp edges of suspense, but had done little to reassure me. I'd installed my own hand-picked guards in the palace kitchens and at the entrance to the private ducal quarters, paying them a wage nearly triple that of their fellows, allowing them perquisites no one else could boast, and praying to all the gods that it might be enough to make them impervious to bribery.

But every time I lifted my fork to my mouth or swallowed a mouthful of wine, I wondered if it would be my last. And I never slept easily. A high wage didn't protect against blackmail—and no matter how I tried to inspire their personal loyalty, there were others whose orders they might allow to overrule mine.

Most notably Benedict. If he wanted me dead, no one would protect me.

“Duke Lucian!”

When my eyes popped open, my father's former and my current valet Fabian stood before me, his black livery as neat as ever—and his black scowl, too. The court had taken off our mourning clothes a year and a half ago, but you wouldn't have known it. Our family's colors had always been black and silver—possibly, now that I

thought about it, to save on the costs of putting everyone in somber colors when yet another one of us met a sudden end.

The doctors who'd hemmed and hawed over my father's body had proclaimed it a spontaneous seizure, the consequence of his excessive bile, and the blood the result of his bitten tongue. Some at court pretended to believe it. For his part, Fabian had made little secret of suspecting I'd been the one to kill my own father—a bit rich coming from someone whose entire job had been to remain within earshot of the late duke, and who had been mysteriously absent from his post when the duke's lateness took place. Since then, he'd served me with even less zeal.

Still, I trusted him, more or less, and had kept him on rather than replace him with someone more pleasant. Fabian despised me, but he hated the thought of Calatria's throne occupied by someone not of my father's blood even more. Even a patricide of my dynasty was better. I didn't understand Fabian at all.

"Speak to me before you approach too closely," I snapped. "I didn't hear you over the rain."

The sour twist to Fabian's mouth deepened, and he bowed. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace," he said, and his gaze flicked to the side...to the arched gap between my balcony column and the next, through which he must have had a perfect view of Benedict and Clothurn.

And they, in turn, of him—speaking to someone to whom he'd been bowing.

Perhaps Benedict would've turned back to Clothurn, too absorbed in pressing him against the wall and seducing him to notice that his earlier instinct, that someone had been watching from the balcony, had been correct.

A quick hand through my wavy blond hair to smooth down any damp-induced curls,

and a regal lift of my chin, and I stepped out from behind my column, as outwardly unconcerned about observers as any duke ought to be.

No, of course I hadn't been lurking there like a pageboy getting his thrills from seeing his betters feel each other up under an arbor. Nor had I been paranoically following my courtiers about to try to catch them plotting to kill me and replace me with Benedict.

But when I shot a glance down into the courtyard, intending to allow my eyes to flicker over Benedict and Clothurn with total indifference—Benedict was the only one there.

My breath caught as his bright gray gaze snagged mine and held me as if I'd been pinned.

Leaning against the wall, hands in his trouser pockets and booted ankles casually crossed, glossy black hair like raven's wings hanging loose down to his shoulders, crooked grin on his unshaven face, he almost could've passed as one of the lower town's ruffians.

Almost.

The long sword at his hip, the fine wool of his clothing, and the thumbnail-sized ruby hanging from his left ear marked him as the officer and aristocrat he was, even if nature had fitted him for cutting purses and breaking heads in a stinking gutter.

That earring might've been more suitable for a ruffian, too, truth be told. A successful one, anyway.

Benedict's grin widened like a shark's as I stared down at him, his teeth flashing white.

He knew I'd been watching. And he'd find some way to use it against me, to insinuate that I cared which of my courtiers he dallied with rather than simply needing to keep ahead of who might betray and murder me first. Humiliation burned acidly in the pit of my stomach.

He pulled one hand from his pocket and made a subtle, small gesture, fingers flicking. His lips moved.

And I nearly jumped out of my own skin as his hot breath brushed over my ear, projected by his magic.

"I'll be visiting his chambers tonight, if you want to try to find an open window to leer through," came Benedict's laughing whisper, as if he'd spoken from an inch away.

And then as I gaped at him, my face heating and fists clenching in rage, he winked at me, pushed off the wall, and sauntered under the veranda and out of sight.

"If Your Grace pleases," Fabian said from behind me, "the council meeting is beginning momentarily. I am here to fetch you. My apologies for...interrupting."

Gods-damned fucking Lord Zettine, the head of my council, and his childish tricks. The meeting had been set for two hours from now, but clearly he'd changed it and waited until the last possible moment to inform me.

Childish, but effective. Because now I'd be late to my own council meeting, looking like a careless fool, and if I were so stupid as to argue that no one had told me, I might as well admit to having no authority over my own government. I ought to be the one setting these meetings at my ducal convenience.

Forcing any expression out of my face had been a skill I developed in early

childhood, learning to conceal my feelings at an age when most children, so I'd been told, were encouraged to laugh and play.

So when I turned to Fabian, my cheeks had cooled and I was fairly sure my eyes showed nothing.

“The council will wait on my pleasure, as is their duty,” I said. “And it astonishes me that you think I require your reminders to carry out mine.”

Fabian's own mask showed only the faintest crack—the malicious glitter of his eyes—as he bowed, murmured his insincere apologies, and slipped away, leaving me alone on the balcony with the patter of the rain.

After counting to twenty to make it seem as if I'd been taking my time, I turned and followed, forcing myself to walk at a steady, regal pace. They hated me anyway. I might as well arrive at the meeting with my dignity intact, for all the good it'd do me.

Two years and nine months before, almost to the day, I'd woken up to Fabian bursting into my bedroom at dawn to tell me that the duke had been murdered.

And despite how much I'd come to hate my father over decades of watching him bankrupt, imprison, occasionally torture, and frequently kill anyone he suspected of treason, his death shocked me to the core. Seeing my own parent lying unnaturally still, claylike and bloated, eyes staring in horror at nothing at all, had left me in a foggy fugue through which I could hardly think, let alone hear or speak.

The first council meeting I'd attended as the Crown Duke of Calatria had been held within an hour following the discovery of his body. Lord Zettine had called it without consulting me, speaking over my attempt at a protest and assuming total authority, mouthing a few condescending and infantilizing platitudes about helping me through my time of grief: he'd served my father for decades and seen me grow up, and so on.

On another day I'd have been able to think of a rebuttal, a way to outmaneuver him. But the words hadn't come, and in the end, I'd attended and taken my father's seat without comment.

By evening, a new rumor had joined all the others burning up the tongues of the court: that I'd laughed as I settled into the duke's chair at the council table.

Benedict had been the one to bring me that particular gossip. I'd been breakfasting alone in the family parlor, a room only my father and I, plus the now-Dowager Duchess and her son, were allowed to use.

With my father dead and his wife in seclusion to "grieve," that left me. And Benedict, who preferred interrupting my solitude to buggering off to dunk his head in a cesspit, an option I'd have suggested had he asked.

"I heard someone saying last night that you'd have left his council seat empty for a meeting or two if you had any decency," Benedict said as he heaped a plate with bacon. I suspected his mother had kept to her rooms in order to carry on as usual, bacon and all, without anyone commenting on her hard-heartedness. Benedict had no such scruples. "I also heard you laughed when you sat down. I know that isn't true, of course, since I was there."

He dropped the tongs with a clatter, and I tensed up so as not to wince.

"I doubt you bothered to correct them. And you could set me a good example and leave that seat empty," I said as he dropped into the chair across from me. "But then, everyone knows you have no decency."

I set down my fork, resigned to getting through the day on the two bites of egg I'd managed to chew and swallow. The queasy slosh of my belly didn't invite further experimentation.

“At least no one’s accusing me of murdering my own father.” Benedict stuffed a slice of bacon in his mouth, gray eyes gleaming, as if the topic of patricide dulled neither his appetite nor his sense of humor.

“That shows their lack of decency, not mine,” I snapped, clenching my fists on my thighs under the table so maybe he wouldn’t see how he’d gotten to me.

Gods, Benedict had always been able to bring out the worst in me. He made it nearly impossible to keep my temper. Five years we’d been unfortunately related through our horrid parents, and he’d been a constant irritation.

Of course, his mother’s entirely unsubtle efforts to convince my father to disinherit me in favor of her own precious son probably hadn’t helped matters. Six years older than me, an accomplished soldier and clever strategist, a strong mage, charismatic and popular. All well and good, except for the small problem of his having no legal or legitimate claim to the throne whatsoever—although that could be solved with a few signatures in council, and a ratification with a larger quorum of lords.

My father had grown colder to me in the months before his death, snapping at anything I said, interrogating me about my movements and my friends, and excluding me from council meetings. It wasn’t hard to imagine what the topic of discussion had been at those.

Benedict chewed, swallowed, and leaned back with a shrug of his absurdly broad shoulders. “I suppose you’ve been impatient for the title for a long time, so if you did get him out of the—”

“I’m not the one who’s been impatient for the title. That would be your bitch of a mother!”

Silence fell, my words ringing and ringing in it. Benedict stared at me, eyes steady,

but with something gathering in their depths, a darkening storm. He didn't move, but the air around him swirled heavily, his magic palpable even to someone without a shred of magic of his own.

Fuck. Fuck me. My father had been dead one day, my grip on the crown was tentative at best, and I'd just told my rival claimant that I thought his mother had murdered her husband on his behalf.

He'd kill me right here and no one would care. They'd have him legally on the throne before some unfortunate servant had finished scrubbing my blood out of the parquet flooring. I braced myself for the blow, magical or mundane, it didn't matter—he could take his pick. Gods, no one at all would miss me except my cousin Tavius, and he might not have cared either except for the fact that we'd grown up together.

One of Benedict's eyebrows rose slowly, and some of the tension dissipated, the pressure in the air dropping enough that I could let out the breath I'd been holding. Perhaps he wouldn't kill me today after all.

"There hasn't been a duchess reigning in her own right for at least a hundred years, I believe," he said at last, "and never anyone who became so by marriage."

I blinked at him in confusion and growing disquiet, almost wishing he'd simply slit my throat. His choice to willfully misunderstand me, or appear to do so, didn't have any possible beneficent motives I could see.

Which meant he'd be toying with me in order to slit my throat later. And in the meantime, he wanted me alive either to serve as a source of amusement or to be used for some purpose I couldn't yet see.

Wonderful.

“I didn’t realize you’d added historical scholarship to your many other accomplishments,” I said, making my voice as snide as possible to hide any betraying tremors. “What’s next? You could take up fine needlework. Then perhaps you’d be able to attract a husband at last. Although you may need to go easy on the bacon. The palace seamstresses are going to run out of fabric for your tunics.”

True as far as it went, actually, but Benedict didn’t have a spare ounce of flesh on him, as far as I could tell. Pure muscle strained his woolen sleeves.

The air thickened again, though, his magic pressing on me from all sides.

Benedict’s scowl twisted his handsome face into something almost ugly. Terrifying, anyway.

At least I had the satisfaction of knowing I’d angered him as much as he had me.

The screech of chair legs on the polished wood floor as he shoved roughly to his feet echoed through the parlor like a crack of thunder, and his magic crackled around him and raised the hair on the back of my neck.

“I should marry you , you’d put me off my feed for the rest of my life,” he snarled, his composure gone at last, something raw and frightening gleaming in the depths of his eyes. Benedict loomed over me, massively strong and wreathed in the aura of his menacing power. I couldn’t have so much as twitched if my life depended on it, frozen like a rabbit. “Not to mention, that’d give me a claim to the throne, hmm? A legitimate one. Unassailable. I could keep you locked up in your bedchamber day and night, waiting to service my curse. Do you think anyone would fucking stop me? You and your army, perhaps?”

Ice trickled along my veins. I stared up at him, aghast, breath starting to rasp, with eyes that had to be as round as my coffee cup.

Marry me. Use me. Take my crown.

Gods, could he do it? Probably so. The law forbade a union between us, despite our familial relationship being through marriage only, but convincing the council to make an exception for the man my predecessor had preferred in the first place would be easy enough for someone who controlled...

“Your army would follow me, not you,” he went on, with complete, humiliating accuracy. “Your father was a right fucking bastard, but they stayed loyal because he used to be a hell of a soldier himself. He led from the front, whatever his other faults. Most of the men he executed were lords, courtiers, who’d never picked up more than a dueling rapier, and they didn’t care that much. You’re one of them, from any common soldier’s perspective. A courtier. Useless. Dressed in silk, not a scar on you. I could bend you over your throne and mount you like a bitch in front of the whole army and they wouldn’t intervene.”

They wouldn’t. They’d cheer him on, I had no doubt. Not to mention leer and jeer, and now apparently my mind had decided to gibber rather than take any more useful action.

My stomach churned, my meager breakfast threatening to reappear.

With an effort, I forced my dry lips to form the words, “I ought to clap you in chains for that. Let you rot for a few months before I put your head on a spike over the palace gates.”

Benedict went still for a long moment, face unusually pale under a tan baked in by years of campaigning, the corners of his mouth creasing.

He couldn’t possibly be afraid of my threat, could he? I couldn’t believe it. Not when he had to know that I probably, almost certainly, very likely wouldn’t carry it out

even if the council and the army would let me get away with it. (The head on a spike part, in any case. Locking him up and letting him molder in a cell for a month or two, yes. I would do that. Gladly. Asshole. And his mother with him.)

And yet the bleakness in those wintry gray eyes, the clench of his fist where it rested on the breakfast table...some strong emotion had him in its grip, and it wasn't only anger.

Finally he shook his head, pushed off the table, and said, in a tone I couldn't interpret at all, "Looks like you bid fair to follow in your father's footsteps, Lucian. Maybe he was right about you after all. That's irony for you."

And before I could muster a response to that, he'd strode out of the room and shut the door behind him with enough force to rattle the painting of my grandfather that hung on the wall beside it. The old man glared at me out of his gilt frame, as if the door slamming had been my fault.

Benedict's footsteps faded away down the hall.

Later that afternoon, my equerry braved the grim, stuffy silence of my father's—my—study to usher in a nervous servant in Zettine's livery. The man stammered through the information that Lord Zettine wished me to know that Lord General Rathenas had departed Calatria.

"What do you mean, departed?" I demanded, startled into being unable to hide the sudden, heavy sense of dismay that started to creep up from my gut to my tingling scalp. Benedict had left? He commanded my army. He wouldn't simply leave. Where the hell would he go? "How do you know he's left Calatria, and not just the palace?"

"Lord Zettine wished me to tell you that he had a note from the Lord General, Your

Grace. Lord General Rathenas has resigned his post as the commander of the Calatryan army, and has departed. He did not leave any word of his intended movements, Your Grace.” The man swallowed hard, and sweat trickled down his temple. He bowed jerkily. “Forgive me, Your Grace, I don’t have any more knowledge than that. Please excuse me, Your Grace.”

Oh, he ought to sweat. Coming to me with a message like that—Zettine had gone too far, overstepping his authority, sending me some lackey as if I were his subordinate rather than his master. I’d dispatch a party of armed guards after Benedict, haul him back by his toes, have them all—

Looks like you bid fair to follow in your father’s footsteps, Lucian .

A wave of dizziness had me gripping tightly to the arms of my chair, the world tilting around me and making me feel as if I might topple onto the floor.

“Get out,” I rasped, and the servant bowed again and fled without another word, probably with a few more gray hairs than he’d had when he came into the room.

I dropped my arms onto the desk and rested my clammy forehead on them, sucking in air.

No, if Benedict wanted to leave, he could leave. He couldn’t usurp my throne if he wasn’t here, could he? So why did it feel like the most profound betrayal, as if I’d been unconsciously leaning on a support that’d been kicked out from under me?

Maybe he was right about you after all .

Benedict hadn’t bothered to explain his meaning, of course, and now I wouldn’t have the chance to ask. Right about me? It didn’t make any sense. My father had seemed to think me unfit for the throne, too weak to hold it. But what Benedict had said first,

that I was like my father, suggested my father had also seen a resemblance between us. And if he had thought me like him, he'd have considered me fit. Wouldn't he?

My head throbbed.

Maybe Benedict would be back tomorrow, or in a week, and things would be...awful.

But he wasn't. And two years passed without my hearing so much as a single word of him.

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Benedict had left Calatria for parts unknown on a gloomy March day, riding into the cold and damp and hopefully catching a devil of a gripe in the process, damn him.

He returned with just as little warning two years, one month, and a week or so later, on a bright, crisp morning in April. Even the weather cooperated to make his grand entrance to the palace as joyful and as striking as possible, with a light breeze stirring his black hair in a romantic manner and the sun glinting off of his sword hilt and the ruby in his ear and the polished tack of his horse.

I had a perfect view of the entire revolting spectacle from my study window. The dukes of Calatria had many flaws, as a dynasty and as individuals, including paranoia, bloodlust, and plain old lust for people who weren't their spouses.

But we'd always had a well-deserved reputation as rulers who kept our fingers on the pulse of the duchy—leading from the front, as Benedict put it, and damn him for the way I couldn't seem to forget him no matter how long it'd been since his dereliction of duty.

And so my study, previously my father's study, and his father's study, and so on into a long and checkered past, overlooked the main courtyard of the palace. State visitors didn't go through it, there being a much more formal entrance on the other side of the east wing. But all of the palace's actual business went through there, and the guard barracks occupied one corner of it.

And, of course, Benedict chose that courtyard as the venue for his triumphant return.

My first warning that something had gone amiss came in the form of cheers and

shouts from the main gate, a roar of laughter, another round of whooping.

I lifted my head from the trade agreement I'd been squinting at, an overly complicated arrangement with Surbino, our neighbor to the south. Why were the tariffs structured like that? It didn't make much sense to me. It should have. I'd been raised for this, and lacking any great military talent, I'd turned to diplomacy and the law to prove my worth as a future, and current, duke of Calatria.

Someone had some explaining to do, whether our ambassador or my increasingly insolent council or both, but in the meantime I couldn't possibly concentrate with all that racket.

When I walked over to the open window, I expected to see a particularly attractive woman, possibly several. Or an unusually ugly horse.

Instead, there he was, somehow seeming to saunter even on horseback. Had he trained his stallion to saunter? Absurd. Of course he hadn't.

And yet as he nodded and smiled, threw his head back and laughed with that ridiculous ruby bobbing and glinting and his hair flowing glossy around his shoulders, it certainly seemed like that stupid horse was preening too. Like beastly master, like nasty beast.

Benedict. Home.

No, not home, because this wasn't his palace and he wasn't welcome. But back, anyway. Popping up again like a boil you thought you'd lanced and gotten rid of.

For more than two years, he'd abandoned me to the circling, snapping wolves: the council, the court, the army. Within a few days of his defection, there had been a wave of officers resigning their commissions, giving excuse after excuse for no

longer wishing to serve me. Their elderly parents needed their help, the family farm had fallen into disrepair, an old injury troubled them in the winter. Anything but the truth: that they'd respected my father's leadership, no matter what a vicious bastard he'd been, and they'd loved and trusted Benedict, and without either of them at the head of the army they'd as soon not risk their lives, thanks.

I'd let them go. What choice did I have? They'd either desert or mutiny. Or transfer their loyalty to whichever one of my council had the wit to spread gold and brandy and dissension among them. Benedict's departure had removed the most likely usurper of my throne. But that didn't mean some other lord wouldn't eventually grow more ambitious, more ruthless, and more daring.

Someone, after all, had murdered my father. And I didn't think that person had done it out of any great love for me.

Another lusty, roaring cheer broke out down below as more soldiers streamed out of the barracks, surrounding Benedict and filling the courtyard.

My stomach twisted into a sick, hard knot.

I'd spent my reign so far trying to straighten out our trade agreements and diplomacy, set aside a grain surplus, actually administer the duchy in a way that benefited us all, and not only the council. My father had been decent enough to the common folk of Calatria. But he'd spent more and more of his energy rooting out "traitors" amongst his courtiers, and that had left precious little time for more than paranoia and executions. I'd been the one to pick up the slack then, too. Years I'd spent putting every spare moment into doing my duty.

And yet when I reviewed my troops or rode out among the people, I got sullen mutterings and polite, perfunctory bows. Their rightful duke!

But Benedict, who'd abandoned all of these people for more than two years without a word of explanation, received a hero's welcome on his return.

I strode away from the window before I vomited out of it, mind buzzing with something akin to panic.

I'd have to welcome him. Without joy, obviously, because even if I could bring myself to fake it everyone would see right through it. But with regal and possibly even familial graciousness, at the very least. Because yet again—and this had formed the depressing, overarching theme of my life thus far—what choice did I have? Given my army's enthusiastic welcome, if Benedict wanted to step right back into his role as my Lord General, I'd be suicidal not to grit my teeth and pretend it had been my idea all along.

Besides, the rest of the court would be doing the same thing. Many of them, usually the ones he'd fucked into some bizarre state of starry-eyed compliance, genuinely liked him. (Sometimes I wondered if he used magic in addition to his cock when he took someone to bed. No one's cock alone could be quite so persuasively mesmerizing.) And the ones who didn't, who saw everyone as a path to power or wealth or one-upmanship, would either plot to use him or pretend to support him so as not to piss off his partisans.

They'd be pissing me off, of course. But no one seemed to care much about that.

Leaning my fists on my desk, I closed my eyes and forced myself to breathe evenly, to allow my cheeks to cool and lose their flush, to show nothing.

When I stepped out of the study on my way to receive Benedict on the steps of the palace, as everyone would expect me to do, no one would've known that my teeth ached from the force of their grinding, or that the bland neutrality pasted on my face covered a mental image of my hands around Benedict's muscular neck.

After his triumphant entry to the palace courtyard that morning, it had taken all of five minutes for Benedict to step back into his former role as Lord General of Calatria, two days for him to have the council eating out of his hand, and apparently no time at all to have every pretty young lord at court in his bed.

Twilight mages, born at dawn or dusk and bearing the sun god Ennolu's curse along with the magic gifted by his brother Dromos, god of the night, dealt with their tainted powers in different ways. Some drank a potion that protected them from the effects of the curse but also prevented them from accessing their magic.

Not Benedict. He embraced his curse—so to speak. Dawn mages had to yield to another man the way night yielded to day, the gods being given to obnoxious metaphors that tended to ruin their followers' lives. Dusk mages, on the other hand, took the other role in the magical coupling Ennolu demanded, fucking another man and spending inside him to relieve the pressure of their power at regular intervals. Twilight mages all had varying cycles, more or less time between when their curse would rear its head and cause them pain, fever, mania, and eventual death, sometimes only a day and sometimes a week or more.

I'd tried to work out the timing of Benedict's magical cycle, but even after years of observing him I had no idea. He never ran out of available men, either at court or in one of the several highly selective brothels around the city.

Or the less selective ones. For all I knew, he fucked a poxy dockside whore every night, whether separately from fops like Lord Clothurn or all in one filthy heap.

Making my way from that blasted balcony to the council meeting on that rainy winter morning, a long and exhausting eight months since Benedict's return, I should've been strategizing for the council meeting.

Instead, I contemplated Clothurn's likely reaction if Benedict showed up at his rooms

with a whore in tow. Clothurn seemed the type to expect to be gallantly complimented, enjoy a fine wine, and be taken in the dark in a gentlemanly manner. Not groped by some grinning bit of rough from down the hill.

Of course, Benedict himself wasn't actually a grinning bit of rough from down the hill, but he could convincingly play one on the stage. Clothurn might have a rude awakening.

Not that I'd be following Benedict's repulsive, mocking suggestion that I watch through Clothurn's window to find out.

A shudder passed through me as that image, unbidden, flashed through my mind. Benedict bearing Clothurn down onto his bed, his broad shoulders gleaming with sweat, his offensive grin, the grasp of his big, callused hands on Clothurn's pale flesh. Clothurn's head thrown back in mingled moaning ecstasy and shame as Benedict spread his legs and knelt between, huge cock rampantly flushed and erect...

My fists clenched, and I strode faster down the hallway that led to the council chamber, more rampantly flushed myself than I wanted to admit.

It'd been too long since I had anyone in my bed. Who could I trust, for one? Any courtier's motives would be suspect at best, a servant was out of the question, and unlike Benedict I had no taste for paid company. And any of the above might try to murder me.

Besides, my physical desires had been sublimated to my duty and the stresses of my position for so long I hardly remembered how it felt to want.

If imagining Benedict and Clothurn in the throes of passion had me flustered, clearly I'd spent so long without a bedmate that I'd become not only celibate but a prude. Or desperate.

Or worse, a desperate prude. Gods help me. I'd shrivel into a vinegary prune before I reached thirty in a couple of years.

Turning the corner into the narrow hallway outside the council chamber, I forced all those thoughts aside. Surviving to thirty would be enough of a challenge, prudish prune or no. And surviving meant keeping my council on this side of banding together to assassinate me, which would require at least my partial attention.

The guards on the polished double doors to the council chamber—at least the maids in the palace continued to do their jobs loyally—pulled the handles in unison and bowed perfunctorily as I strode through, my chin lifted, projecting as much ducal confidence as I could manage. The almost-trusted bodyguard who trailed me everywhere peeled off and took up a similar position by the door, nodding to his fellows, leaving me to enter the room alone.

My council comprised nine lords and ladies, including Benedict, Clothurn, and Chancellor Zettine. All of them were seated already, of course, due to Zettine's childish games.

Only one of them rose when I entered.

Benedict.

Of course he'd take this opportunity to both mock me and shame the other councilors, wrong-footing us all simultaneously. Unfolding himself from his chair to his full, commanding height, shaking out his glossy black hair and making that hideous earring swing, and bowing a fraction more deeply than the bloody door guards had, enough to make a point to them, too, if they'd still had the doors open.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the flush that came and went around the edges of Zettine's steel-gray beard.

Belatedly, he shoved to his feet too, the other councilors pushing up out of their chairs for a moment a beat behind him.

“Your Grace,” he said, his tone almost halfway to polite. The old hypocrite. “How charming of you to honor us with your presence. We have awaited you with the greatest respect, despite all being busy day and night attending to the welfare of your duchy.”

And there went Zettine’s attempt at courtesy. Benedict smirked and took his seat again, his expression conveying a satisfied dusting of hands. What an asshole.

Well, he wasn’t the only one who could piss off more than one other person at the same time. In fact, that could be considered one of my greatest skills, right next to staying awake while reading about tariffs.

“That must account for your oversight in appearing here before the time the meeting had been set,” I said gently. He didn’t have a sole claim to condescension, thank you. “But I’m sure these busy lords and ladies will forgive you for inadvertently wasting all of our valuable time.”

Everyone at the table stirred and muttered, and Zettine’s mouth opened. No, I still had the floor. I might pay for it later, but I couldn’t resist.

“A man of your age, with your heavy responsibilities, deserves our gratitude and support. In future, I will be the one to set the council meetings.” I glanced around the table, taking in everyone’s expressions. My eyes went to Benedict first, damn it all, and found him lounging back in his chair, gleaming eyes fixed on me. Mine caught and snagged as if he’d used more of his miserable magic to hold me.

When I tore them away, I found several of the older councilmembers, and also Clothurn, looking like they’d sucked on lemons, although Lady Bethenna had the

faintest hint of a smirk. I made a note of that; she might be an unexpected ally in this infighting of mine, even though she'd known Zettine for a hundred years.

Maybe because she'd known Zettine for a hundred years, the old bastard.

Zettine, though, had gone a shade of purple that would've made an eggplant proud. Good.

I smiled at him with regal graciousness. "I hope relieving you of this small burden demonstrates some of my appreciation for your diligence, Lord Zettine."

With everyone in the room watching him like vultures, he had no choice but to bow and mutter something that almost sounded appropriate. But his eyes flashed hatred.

Taking my seat at the head of the table, opposite where he sat at the other end, I favored everyone with a smile and nod.

"No need to stand on formality," I said dryly. Perhaps next time they'd remember to stand unprompted, period. Although I wouldn't be holding my breath. "Let's get right to business. Lord Clothurn, what is the state of our treasury?"

Clothurn answered me with a minimum of sneering, which I accounted a win, and the meeting went on—smoothly, to all appearances.

But Zettine remained silent throughout unless someone dared to address him with a direct question, and the cold, calculating fury in his deep-set dark eyes never faded.

Oh, I'd pay for this.

But asserting my authority gave me a gleeful, giddy fizzing in my veins that made me feel ready for anything.

Hopefully I'd survive long enough to enjoy it to the fullest.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

The rest of the day passed in a flurry of meetings with foreign ambassadors, a review of weary troops rotating home from garrison duty at our northern forts—and I had the pleasure of standing next to Benedict for that, pretending the soldiers weren't directing their tired cheers and salutes at him instead of me—and the signing of countless decrees adjusting the taxation rates for various types of fishing.

It had to have been my imagination, but I could have sworn the papers carried a fishy odor with them. Fish had its place, preferably in someone else's stomach, and I wanted nothing to do with it. The moment I reached my private rooms at the end of the evening, I instructed Fabian to draw me a deep bath and to use the fragrant oils with a heavy hand.

If he muttered, "Deep enough to drown in, Your Grace," under his breath, I chose not to notice.

Anyway, the rain had given way to a wild, gusty gale that rattled all the windows and whistled through cracks in their frames to flutter the wall hangings and the curtains around my bed. It gave me the perfect excuse to be conveniently deaf. As long as he didn't use some kind of fish oil in my bath I could ignore him.

Fabian oozed back out of the bath chamber and muttered something else about fetching me mulled wine, and I waved him off, shutting myself into my steamy, citrus-scented cocoon. My intense dislike of Fabian softened slightly as I lowered myself into the bath. The hot water came up to my chin, and he seemed to have used a pleasant mix of grapefruit, lemon, and orange blossom oils that completely eradicated any (probably imaginary) stench of fish.

Heat soaked into my tired bones. I leaned my head back on the edge of the tub.

Ah, bliss. I closed my eyes, letting the roar of the wind wash through my senses, a calming erasure of everything else in the world. Even the tickle of a cold draft on my face made a lovely counterpoint to the steam billowing around me.

The wind howled, a thud and muffled crash echoed from my bedchamber, and someone cried out, trailing into a low groan.

My eyes popped open. The variegated blues of the tiled wall across from me wavered in the steam.

Silence.

The wind wailed again, then subsided.

More silence.

My limbs had gone as stiff as boards, all the tension the bath had begun to melt away returning in redoubled force.

“Fabian?” I called out. Not loudly enough, though. He couldn’t possibly have heard me.

The hair had risen on the back of my neck, the air pressing in on me. If I called out to him again, another non-response might stretch my nerves to the breaking point.

I heaved myself out of my bath, wrapped myself in a soft dressing gown hanging on a hook without bothering with a towel first, braced myself, and opened the door to the bedchamber.

Somewhat to my surprise, no one shoved a knife into my chest.

In fact, nothing happened at all. There was no one.

I slumped against the doorframe, all the air whooshing out of my lungs at once. Gods, I'd heard Fabian...stubbing his toe on the door and breaking a glass in the corridor. And my paranoia had...

My gaze snagged on something sticking out from behind my bed.

Fabian's practical black shoes, and a hint of stockinged ankle.

Rounding the bed brought the rest of Fabian into sight. I leaned a suddenly clammy hand on the bedpost and fought the urge to retch. He lay sprawled out, a tray by his outstretched hand and a spilled cup of mulled wine staining the cream and blue carpet beneath him a muddy pink. The scents of cloves and orange peel and spirits mingled horribly with the coppery reek of the bloody froth seeping from his mouth and trickling down along his cheek.

Fixed, glazed eyes. Not the faintest sign of life.

That groan I'd heard had been the last sound Fabian would ever make.

No matter how much I'd always disliked him, if I'd thought there could be the slightest chance of resuscitating him I'd have dropped to my knees and given it my best effort, shouted for my guards stationed day and night at the end of the corridor that housed the ducal family's apartments.

But Fabian was dead. Unmistakably, completely dead, and his symptoms looked so much like my father's...

I did retch then, hooking my elbow around the bedpost and aiming away from Fabian's body as best I could. The meager supper I'd gotten down while my secretary organized the fish decrees rose up burning in my esophagus and spattered to the floor.

After I'd choked, coughed, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, I blinked the moisture from my eyes and forced myself to look at him again. He deserved that much from me, anyway, since I had no doubt whatsoever he'd died in my place. At least I hadn't thrown up on his corpse.

In my place. I could've been right there on the floor...gods.

Several thoughts surfaced as I stared down at his body, coming in no logical succession, whirling through the frozen rictus scream that rang inside my mind.

One: Fabian had twisted into a strange shape, as if his last moments had been agonizingly painful. My spine shuddered with horror, both for him and for myself. In my place. Fuck.

Two: Fabian hadn't been the one to poison the wine, because obviously he wouldn't have drunk it—he'd handed off the job of preparing it to someone he trusted, wrongly, as it turned out, rather than following my strict instructions to do it himself. I'd overstaffed the kitchens so that there would always be several pairs of eyes on anything I consumed, with my hope being that at least one of them would be loyal. Which meant that I'd be looking for a conspiracy, with at least one of the perpetrators being someone Fabian knew well. Wonderful.

Three: The little bastard had probably been taking a sip of my very fine wine on the sly, and possibly—or even more probably—as a prelude to spitting in it. If all the wine I'd drunk on all the other evenings Fabian had served me hadn't been long pissed away, I'd have thrown it up again. My regret over his death receded measurably. It occurred to me that he wouldn't have drunk it at all if he hadn't

believed I'd been the one to murder my father, and that therefore my wine would probably be safe enough from the same poison. My regret faded completely.

Four: Whoever had set events in motion must be waiting, lurking, ready for Fabian to raise the hue and cry that the duke was dead—again. At some point, the palace staff might start simply rolling their eyes and keeping on with the mopping when someone started shouting about dead dukes. Honestly, I would.

And five: I had a dead body by my bed. The wind raged with renewed force around the palace and there was nothing but my own harsh breaths here within, and my spine had started trying to escape out through the base of my skull and run away shrieking.

A tapestry against the far wall flapped loudly, its motion...out of proportion to the draft?

There were a few hidden passages in these walls. I knew about some of them. My father had likely known them all, but he'd kept many of his secrets to himself—or had he? He could have told Benedict. Or the dowager duchess. Or someone like Zettine...

Benedict.

Benedict's rooms opened out of a side corridor only a few yards away from my own door. His magic and his sword would be enough to handle an assassin if my guards didn't trouble themselves. Or to handle my hand-picked guards, for that matter, if they'd fully turned against me too.

The visceral force of my urge to run to him left me flushed, fists clenched, desperately trying to root my feet to the floor. Or better, to seize the knife I kept beneath my pillow, cross the room boldly, and whip the tapestry aside to deal with whatever I might find. (I'd read enough classic literature to know one didn't simply

stab through the tapestry without looking, no matter how afraid one might be.) Surely I could hold my own in a fight, even against a trained killer, long enough for the guards to hopefully come.

Another glance down at Fabian's contorted body and the black stains on his lips had the bile creeping back up my esophagus.

My viscera almost won. I nearly turned tail and bolted for the corridor.

But I had to think first. No rash actions.

My dressing gown flapping around my calves and my damp feet sticking to the tiled floor—gods, still wet from the bath, even though it felt like hours had passed rather than a few short minutes—I went around the other side of the bed and fished for my knife. I wouldn't need it, because no one would be behind that hanging. If someone had been watching Fabian die instead of me, he'd have either come to finish me off in the bath where I'd be at a disadvantage and could be drowned to create the appearance of an accident, or he'd have disappeared into the walls again like a giant rat after seeing the miscarriage of the plan.

Pulling the tapestry aside still took all the courage I had in me.

The sight of bare stone nearly had my heart leaping out of my chest with shock.

I hadn't really believed no one would be there.

A quick check of the room's other corners and wall hangings revealed nothing but the normal furnishings. These rooms had been my father's, long ago when he'd been the heir himself, and surely he wouldn't have told anyone their secrets, would he? Anyone but me, his rightful successor. He'd shown me the hidden door in the dressing room that led to a tunnel under the palace, and he'd implied that was all. His

rooms, the duke's usual quarters, would surely have more. But he'd never told me anything about those.

The lack of clarity about who might be able to come and go from the ducal chambers had been my real reason for declining to move to them—that and nausea at the memory of his death. The reason I'd given had been respect for the dowager duchess. No one believed me, because everyone knew I didn't respect her one whit. I didn't particularly care.

Fuck. Fabian's body still lay there, catching my eye every time I turned my head, weighing on my consciousness. Not my conscience; I hadn't been the one to poison the wine or tell him to drink it. But heavy all the same.

And inconvenient as all fucking hell.

My feet had started to freeze to the floor, so I moved to the fireplace and stood on the hearth rug, letting the warmth of the blaze heat the backs of my legs as I surveyed the shambles before me.

Thank the gods Fabian had his face turned away from me. I couldn't stand looking at his fixed eyes, but I equally didn't think I had the fortitude to close them.

All right. Someone had tried to kill me. My wager would be on either whoever had murdered my father, since the method appeared to be the same—or on Lord Zettine, given the way I'd stood up to him today. And of course Zettine might be the original murderer. Nothing ruled him out.

Could Zettine have some kind of alliance with Benedict? Zettine would be too canny to destabilize Calatria without a plan to bring it under his organized thumb and profit off of it. He wouldn't murder me without someone to install in my place. And so many of my relatives had come to sticky ends, almost entirely deserved, that I really

couldn't think of anyone else with a claim. My remaining cousins were on my mother's side. They didn't count.

Or the murder attempt could be far less calculated than that. It could be anyone. And I had no practical way of finding out—at least not immediately.

And no matter who had coerced or bribed the kitchen staff to poison that wine, I had to hide that the attempt had even occurred. With three visiting ambassadors in the palace, all of whom I'd been trying to convince of the stability of my reign, I couldn't afford to show weakness.

Fabian's death needed to appear to be an accident to the world at large. If he'd fallen, hit his head, dropped the wine before anyone could drink it...

He'd need to be moved. Arranged. I shivered, either from the thought of touching his corpse or from the chilly draft that swept about my ankles. When I turned my head, I almost thought I could see him breathing. The smell of death had begun to permeate the room.

At least one other full-grown man would be needed to stage the body.

If he had powerful magic, so much the better.

Gods, I couldn't really imagine that Benedict would use poisoned wine to try to kill me. If he wanted me dead, he could use his magic to do it in a hundred subtle or unsubtle ways, and he wouldn't need to depend on an accomplice.

Besides, he might not want me dead at all. Even though they'd been spoken years ago, his words to me the day he'd left Calatria had never left me, as if he used his magic to whisper them in my ear whenever I let down my defenses.

I could keep you locked up in your bedchamber day and night, waiting to service my curse. Do you think anyone would fucking stop me? You and your army, perhaps?

My shiver that time had nothing at all to do with the draft. No, if Benedict meant to take the throne eventually, he had more plans for me than a quick, if painful, death.

He might hate me enough to make me wait and wonder what his move would be. But he was also the only person I could be fairly certain hadn't made this attempt on my life—and also the only person with enough power, influence, and strength to prop up my wobbling throne. The next assassin would succeed, unless someone more diligent than my overpaid guards and servants—or guards and servants made diligent by orders from a man they actually respected and feared—protected me.

Once again, I had no choice.

With one last glance at Fabian and one last shudder, I drew my dressing gown more tightly around me and arranged its folds of heavy black cotton-lined silk. I could at least look composed when I knocked on Benedict's door, and no one would see me dressed so informally on the way there. Both suites were in the private ducal quarters.

Oh, gods, he might not be there. Clothurn. He'd meant to have a rendezvous with Clothurn. If he'd already gone...

Feeling as if all the assassins in the world nipped at my heels, I prayed to the gods as I'd rarely prayed before, slipping out of my rooms, shutting the door behind me, and making my way down the dim, paneled corridor and around the corner as silently as any ghost. Only a few small alchemical lights occupied tiny wrought-iron sconces along the top of the wall. Silence reigned. The dowager duchess had left a month before to make an extended visit to her sister's estate in the south of Calatria, where the winter weather would be milder, and all of her servants and ladies had gone with her.

At the end of the passage lay Benedict's door, looming at me like the gate to hell.

I raised my hand, meaning to tap softly and then try the door if he didn't open for me.

I jumped a foot in the air as the door wrenched open before I could touch it, Benedict standing framed in the doorway, bare-chested and bare-footed, wearing only half-buttoned trousers and a ferocious scowl and with all of his muscles and scars on full, intimidating display.

Hell might have been the safer choice after all.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

Benedict raked me up and down with a scathing gaze, the power of his magic seeming to flicker in the depths of his silvery gray eyes.

“What the fuck do you want?” he said, the curl of his lip suggesting he hadn’t found much to enjoy in his full-body survey. I resisted the urge to tug the lapels of my dressing gown together like a maiden aunt.

Not a vinegary, prudish prune quite yet, thank you.

“Let me in,” I said, and my voice came out raspier and breathier than I’d hoped.

Damn it. I should’ve tested a few words out loud before I left my rooms, except that speaking to no one but Fabian’s body would have had me screaming and running away after all.

Benedict stared at me for a long moment, massive shoulders tensed up like boulders, jaw clenched tight. He’d started out his life as pale as I was—or so I assumed, given his mother’s complexion and a portrait I’d once seen of his father. But that soldier’s tan he’d had as long as I’d known him had only deepened during his unexplained absence and his long summer of fighting in the northern hills. The livid slashes and blotches of the scars he’d accumulated over the decades stood out as starkly as fresh wounds would have.

Like badges of honor. Mute declarations, to anyone who valued brute force over sleepless dedication and endless thought and study, of his greater fitness for the throne.

Benedict huffed, sneered, and stood back to let me in.

For the first time in my life, I stepped into his suite. The door from the hallway opened into a sitting room, which looked precisely as I'd have expected if I'd ever deigned to consider the matter: bare walls, several large and shabby leather armchairs, and racks of weapons, plus a bookcase that I'd have been willing to bet contained little beyond treatises on magic and dry, tactical accounts of historical battles.

Fewer lounging, scantily-clad whores than I'd have thought, though. In fact, none. Although that doorway to my left presumably led to a bedchamber, and someone could be...

"Are you alone? Don't lie to me, Benedict. I need discretion more than you do right now."

Benedict raised an eyebrow to echo the scornful curve of his mouth. "As if I'd let you in if I had any excuse to bar the door and tell you to go jump off the battlements. We're alone. My appointment's in half an hour. Make it quick, I still need to dress."

Gods, he did, because Clothurn would probably swallow his tongue if Benedict showed up like this, all ruby earring and brawny arms and honed, rippling stomach, looking like someone's fevered conjuration of a lusty pirate.

Certainly Benedict's dishabille had me in a state of distraction and discomfort. How did one go about telling one's half-naked and much-despised stepbrother that a murder scene needed staging, and he was the lucky accomplice?

Benedict had taken up a position in the middle of the room, staring at me down that big nose with his arms crossed. Oh, he knew how he looked when he did that, the theatrical son of a bitch.

Fine. I could make him uncomfortable too.

“Fabian collapsed stone-dead a few minutes ago after drinking some of my evening wine,” I said. Benedict went utterly still, frozen mid-scoff—he’d started before I really began speaking in order to get a head start, I supposed. Oh, that was satisfying, even though saying it out loud had my heart pounding and my knees a bit shaky. “There’s blood coming out of his mouth,” I went on, wanting to horrify Benedict as thoroughly as I could. He deserved nightmares like mine. “All frothy and mixed with—”

Bile, I’d meant to say. Except that I choked on the word and on my own refluxing acids, and my scalp tingled, and that shakiness had become more of an inability to support my weight.

My father’s bloated face and Fabian’s slack lips mingled in my mind, superimposed and then one after the other, and the room blurred around me sickeningly, and gods, if I threw up all over Benedict or his belongings that would be fine, but from terror and weakness? No, I couldn’t.

I managed to side-stagger to one of the armchairs, dropping into it with a thud. Leaning back might’ve been more manly, but my spasming esophagus left me no choice but slumping over my knees with my head on my crossed arms. That meant I couldn’t see Benedict’s expression, damn it all. I’d at least wanted the pleasure of seeing him off balance. Fabian’s miserable death could give me that much, couldn’t it?

The wind seemed quieter in here, or perhaps it’d died down at last. My panting breaths echoed in the stillness.

“That can’t—no,” Benedict said at last, his voice heavy and harsh. “I don’t believe it. You’re certain he’s dead? Not drugged? Or that he didn’t faint?”

That deserved a withering glare, and I reached deep inside myself and found the strength to lift my head and deliver it. Benedict stood rooted to the same spot, apparently frozen in shock—far more of a reaction than I'd expected. He'd been fighting and killing his entire adult life, and he hadn't had any particular attachment to Fabian, who'd been one of the few people at court to have no use for Benedict. That was perhaps all we'd ever had in common.

“Perhaps you'd like to go and stab him once or twice to make sure. Or speak to him for a few minutes. If he doesn't respond, then he's either dead or he's been sent into a coma by your stupidity.” Benedict's cheeks flushed, and...had he grown even taller? “Of course he's fucking dead, Benedict! I ought to know what dead looks like by now, don't you think?”

Benedict's chest rose, held, and finally fell as he blew out a very long breath.

“I think that in your state of mind you could very well mistake unconsciousness for death, and it matters,” he gritted out. “If whoever meant you to drink that wine wanted you alive, to kidnap you or for some other villainy, that's very different from wanting you dead.”

Ah. Well, he had a point there, one I hadn't considered. Of course, why would I, when Fabian was clearly dead as a doornail?

“I heard him fall and groan, and I got out of the bath and found him stone dead thirty seconds later,” I said. “He's dead. Expired. On the other side of the veil. In Dromos's cold embrace. Do I need to sketch it for you?”

My irritation, and irritating Benedict in turn, had started to return a bit of warmth to my chilled body. I could almost feel my knees again. Sitting up enough to brace myself on them with my elbows made me feel slightly less like a pitiful object—not that Benedict had spared me any pity, or gods forbid, sympathy. He stood precisely as

he had, eyes blazing. I could've collapsed to the floor instead of making my way to the chair, and he probably wouldn't have moved any one of those huge muscles to catch me, even though he might only have needed a couple of fingers.

Benedict took a step forward, scowl deepening. Oh, there went my knees again. But I was sitting down, so it didn't matter. I met his gaze with a lift of my chin and a continuing glare of my own.

"All right, he's dead. I'm still not convinced it was the wine. Who would—and why are you here?" His jaw tightened. "Do you think I had something to do with it, is that it? Do you think—why are you here, instead of calling for the guards?"

That forced a laugh out of me, and it hurt my chest. "I already thought about that. You wouldn't kill me that way if you were going to do it. And the guards? Really? You mean the ones who'd be more likely to draw their swords on me rather than a potential assassin, despite how much I pay them?"

Benedict froze again, this time with his brick-red flush going all the way down his neck.

"You already thought about that. I can't fucking believe you. And you're talking about the guards I command," he said flatly. "The guards who answer to me as well as to you. You think they're plotting to kill you? Or that they'd stand by while someone else had that pleasure?"

Oh, he had a lot of nerve, acting like my suspicion of him somehow offended or wronged him. And the implication that answering to him would keep them in line more effectively than answering to me, their duke and generous employer, stung like nettles.

Not that he was wrong. I'd thought about that already, too.

“Someone tried to kill me a few minutes ago. Right down that corridor. You and your guards seem remarkably unconcerned, not to mention completely oblivious!”

Benedict’s lips pressed together in a thin line, and he uncrossed his arms at last, fists flexing by his sides. “They have strict orders from both of us to be vigilant, but they have no reason to stop and challenge your own valet carrying a tray of wine, Lucian!”

Benedict only rarely used my name, probably because we were almost never alone, and it hung in the air between us, almost shimmering with the force of his anger.

Now that I thought about it, he usually didn’t call me anything at all in front of other people. No names, no honorifics, no titles. He simply spoke to me without them. As a member of my “family,” he got away with it—no one seemed to notice.

I hadn’t even noticed until now. That fucker. He hated me being his liege lord so much that he wouldn’t even address me as such.

“Your Grace,” I said. “If you think we have an intimate relationship that entitles you to use my name, think again.”

Benedict shrugged, a jerky, awkward motion that belied his attempt to look at his ease. “Trust you to give a fuck about what I call you in private when you have a dead man in your bedroom, Lucian . You still haven’t answered my question. Why are you here, if you don’t trust me at all?”

My swallow did nothing to clear the lump in my throat. How could I explain my reasoning to him, my need for his help and protection, without sacrificing the veneer of pride that was all I had left to cling to? Best case, he’d burst out laughing.

How had my accursed life brought me here? Wearing only my dressing gown with my bare feet turning into blocks of ice on Benedict’s floor, alone in the night with

him? With my mostly naked stepbrother, wild waving hair and stupid earring and big fists included, my only hope for staying alive?

“I need to make it look as if the attempt failed and Fabian died accidentally,” I said, unable to bring myself to spit out the rest of it quite yet. “Your magic would be of assistance. And I can’t move him alone without creating even more of a mess.”

“Move him—why would you—the attempt did fail. You’re alive. Sitting here and talking to me about moving the body as if — damn it,” he said, with sudden, shocking vehemence, and spun away from me, striding the length of the room to brace himself on the fireplace mantel.

He hung his head down, and the light of the candle set on his desk off to the side gilded the muscles of his back and shoulders as if he’d planned it that way. Most of the art in the palace consisted of stiff, cloth-of-gold-clad ancestors of mine, varied with the occasional fluffy landscape. But there were young artists living in the city’s dockside quarter who had begun to make a name for themselves by painting the human body: lingering on its gods-given glories and using light and shadow to pick out details most people wouldn’t consciously think to appreciate.

Maybe one of them could have done Benedict justice. Probably not. But any one of them would’ve given a less-used body part of their own to have the opportunity.

Or maybe they already had. He might have already fucked each and every one of them and posed for their paintings in between bouts.

At last he turned around, face set in hard, neutral lines.

“You’re hoping your would-be assassin will show his hand if you make it look as if you don’t suspect anything, and the wine simply spilled?” he asked, as if he hadn’t had his little outburst and then gone silent. “That’s your brilliant plan? At the very

least, whoever wants you dead and a culprit in the kitchen knows about this, and likely a middleman or messenger between them, too. You can't even investigate what happened without acknowledging that it did. You're going to cover this up, and then blithely carry on being bait for the next attempt?"

I chose to ignore his insults to my intelligence—and his perfectly logical conclusion that everyone in the kitchen needed to be turned out of the palace gates if I wanted to live. Later. Dammit. My head ached.

"I'm thinking about our foreign guests. They already suspect—" I swallowed hard. That I'm weak. That I'm unfit to rule, and that they'll be able to extort any concessions they want from Calatria by threatening our borders or hinting that they'll ally with whoever kills me first. No, impossible to voice any of that aloud. Besides, Benedict would fill in the blanks perfectly well on his own. "Any sign of chaos here in Calatria could be disastrous for our diplomatic and military interests."

There. That sounded far less whiny. The calculations of a duke, not the panic of a man with no supporters and too many enemies.

"I thought if we made it look as if he'd tripped and dropped the tray, perhaps hit his head on the way down, it might be plausible," I went on. "He needs to be moved to the other side of the room. The mess cleaned up. Some blood smeared on the corner of a table, or the mantel."

"And his head caved in to match," Benedict said, grimacing. Right. I'd conveniently forgotten that. Ugh. "I suppose you intended for me to take on that enviable task."

Sarcasm had to be one of Benedict's least appealing traits, and it had stiff competition.

"You serve at the pleasure of your duke, and you've broken a hundred heads in your

time. Surely it's easier when the head in question isn't trying to get away."

Benedict's eyes narrowed, and I held my ground without shrinking back into the chair through keeping a death grip on my knees, my knuckles aching.

"You seem to have forgotten something, Your Grace," he said, very low. Oh, no. "I also serve at my own pleasure. I pretend otherwise in the presence of the court or the council, but I left Calatria without your by-your-leave. I returned when it suited me. And I know damn well you didn't want me to take up my position again, but you didn't have any choice, so you put the best face on it you could. If you knew—"

He broke off, breathing hard, and I held my own breath, desperate for him to finish that sentence. If I knew? If I knew what? But he shook his head, and his face set into implacable lines.

"It's obvious how little you want to be here asking for my help, partly because you haven't fucking asked. You wouldn't be here at all if you weren't desperate. If someone tried to kill you tonight, they'll try again, or someone else will. And you obviously can't trust any of the palace staff. You need more help than one broken skull and the careful placement of a body, and you're damn well going to get it." Benedict bared his teeth and pinned me with his gaze, and this time I knew I could see the power of his magic flickering in the depths of his eyes. "And pay for it."

Pay for it? And damn well going to get it, as if Benedict was the one who meant to insist on helping me whether I liked it or not? I'd come here to command him, not be commanded! My immediate thought was that I'd rather die, even though this had been my idea in the first place.

Of course, I still could, simply by walking back to my rooms and waiting for someone to bring me more wine.

Time to go on the offensive, although Benedict had “offensive” cornered, in my admittedly biased opinion.

“You already receive a generous salary and perquisites for your service as Lord General,” I pointed out. “I do pay you for your help. You are paid precisely to protect me from assassins and uphold Calatria’s honor. All of this falls into—”

“And I do protect you, although clearly not well enough so far,” Benedict growled, and the rest of my words withered on my tongue. Forget poisoning me or stabbing me, he looked like he might eat me. Had he just admitted fault? Why the hell did he care? My whole body went hot and tight and odd, belly simmering with nerves. I couldn’t’ve moved a muscle if my life depended on it. “I risk my life for y—Calatria all the time without complaining about it, and I kill for Calatria, too. But if I’m going to drop everything else, watch you like a hawk, cancel my assignation—and shut up, Lucian, I need it to live, in case you’d forgotten—”

I snapped my mouth shut again as if he had it on a string. Damn it. I hadn’t forgotten, but it wasn’t as if he’d drop dead from one missed fuck!

“—or crack the skulls of dead valets and carry bodies around in the middle of the night like a fucking undertaker, I’m not doing it for a fucking salary! Absolutely not. That’s going to require...a lot more perquisites, as you put it. Provided by you personally.”

Perquisites. What? Me, personally?

Benedict wavered in my vision as I blinked, wobbled, and blinked again.

“You mean, hire whores for you,” I stammered. “Or—procure bedmates for you from among the courtiers or the servants? Are you out of your mind?”

“No,” he said grimly. “I’m completely sane. And if someone’s trying to kill you, you need constant protection. Better than what you already have. Your bodyguards can’t detect the presence of poison in a cup, for one thing. So I won’t leave your side except for my other essential duties, and only when I have you under guard by someone I trust. Which means no whores, no bedmates . You’re the perquisite, Lucian. You’re going to bend over, spread your legs, and so on, in any way and at any time of my choosing. You’ll take my cock and my spend and my magic’s curse as often as I tell you to.” He flashed me a feral grin, eyes wild, completely contradicting his assertion of sanity. “You’ll enjoy it, too. How long has it been since anyone turned you inside out the way you probably don’t deserve?”

“You,” I gasped. His cock. Spread my legs. That squirming in my gut had turned to full-on clenching, and my heart stumbled, stuttered, and picked up again at a pace that had my throat vibrating. His cock, between my spread legs, turning me inside out... “I won’t. I won’t do it. You’ll do your duty without this sordid blackmail, or by all the gods, I’ll—”

Benedict lunged so abruptly that I broke off in something horribly adjacent to a squeak, huddling back in my chair after all as he leaned down, bracing his hands on the arms of it. His face hovered mere inches from mine, close enough that I couldn’t see anything but those silvery eyes or feel anything but the warm brush of his breath.

He’d been drinking sweet red wine too, only without the spices or the poison.

No escape. Nowhere to go.

“Don’t finish that sentence,” he said softly, his words wrapping around me like drugged temple incense, his tone the same as it had been earlier when he’d spoken directly into my ear with magic from across the courtyard. He hemmed me in, his strong arms to either side of me as unbreakable as iron bars. “You’ll only need to break your oath later. You will do it. Or you can go back to your rooms, arrange

Fabian's body on your own, and take your bloody chances by yourself the next time someone comes to cut your throat. And I'll go bend Clothurn over his bed and make him squeal, and forget all about you."

A flash of something went through Benedict's eyes. Not his magic this time...and I sucked in a breath, everything below my waist tightening up. And worse. My cock twitched. Gods. Fear or anger could rouse a man. I knew that. I knew it. But I'd never experienced it before.

"You're bluffing," I whispered.

He leaned even closer, and the hair rose on the back of my neck. His mouth was only a whisper from my tingling lips, he'd take my mouth, I'd have to fight him, and he'd win... "You don't want to find out. I'm tempted. He has a much nicer ass than yours. Rounder. Yours is too flat."

My eyes popped open. When had they half closed? And there was Benedict, eyes gleaming with mockery, lips curled in a matching smile.

"Fuck you, Benedict," I hissed, past the point of forming intelligent rejoinders.

He shoved off the chair and up, putting his hands on his hips and perfectly displaying the breadth of his shoulders and chest and the endless length of his tree-trunk legs, the only part of him actually covered by fabric.

Well, not quite the only part. The bulge between his absurd legs had black cloth stretched across it, too, but that didn't do much to hide either the size of it or the way it'd grown a bit in response to bullying and coercing me.

At least, I hoped it'd grown. I already knew he had the personality of a sea slug and the character of a rabid goat, so I wouldn't be shocked if his sexual preferences were

horrid. But if that was what it looked like completely soft...no wonder he expected to make Clothurn squeal.

“Yes,” Benedict said. “I will fuck you. Tonight, in fact. Once I send Clothurn a message to let him know our assignation is permanently canceled, and after we’ve taken care of the skull and the blood and the wine stains. Up and moving, Lucian. I’ll do most of the work, but I’m not leaving you here to have the vapors while I take care of all of it. I meant it when I said I’m keeping you in my pocket from now on.”

The vapors? Fuck him twice. When I pushed to my feet, my knees held me without shaking at all. Vapors, ha.

Benedict snatched a shirt off of another chair—and why the hell couldn’t he have put that on before now, the exhibitionist asshole?—and flung the door open.

“After you,” he said, and stuck his arms through the shirt.

Tonight. Fucking me. Surely he’d change his mind. It didn’t seem real, a nightmare that had begun with the sound of Fabian’s groan and from which I couldn’t seem to break free.

I turned and strode out, hoping he wouldn’t be able to see me trembling.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

It took more time than I'd expected to move Fabian and adjust the placement of the blood and wine. I'd assumed, foolishly, that Benedict would simply follow my instructions and assist.

But I should've known better. He examined the room first, much as I had done, while I stood shifting from chilled foot to chilled foot, finally giving up and going into my dressing room—which Benedict then rushed over and insisted on inspecting before I could go in, despite my protests that I'd already done that—to shed my damp dressing gown and pull on a pair of trousers and a wool tunic.

By the time I found my slippers, he'd knelt down by Fabian's body, sniffing the wine goblet and frowning, leaning far closer to Fabian's face than I'd have wanted to. He put a finger in the wine and went still, magic crackling around him.

"It is poisoned," he said after a long moment.

"Yes, of course it is," I snapped. "And Fabian looks just like—he did."

Benedict glanced up sharply. "Like your father," he said, in a tone I couldn't begin to parse. "Is that what you mean? No. It's not the same. I mean, I don't think it is. Stop distracting me."

Of course it was most likely to be the same—which confirmed, to my grim satisfaction, that Fabian had died due to his belief that I'd murdered my own father—and I'd argue with him about it later, but he'd gone back to his magic, laying a hand on Fabian's chest and concentrating.

Finally, finally he finished, and we got on with it, Benedict making himself scarce while I called out for the guards, saying that he wouldn't go far.

As if that would reassure me, given his threats about his perquisites.

The court physician arrived to do his own examination, and the undertakers came to carry the body away. It dragged on and on, the wind whisking away the clouds and then the moon setting through their ragged remnants, leaving the dregs of the night as black as pitch.

I stood staring out at the darkness through the window beside my bed, affecting a ducal unconcern as the doctor followed the sheet-draped remains of my valet out of the room. Yawning would go far past stoicism and into callousness, though. My jaw ached with the effort, but I managed to refrain.

Despite my exhaustion, my body thrummed with tension, with sickening dread. Benedict would be back at any moment. Presumably he'd sent Clothurn a message, hopefully not mentioning that he meant to use me as his erstwhile lover's replacement.

You'll take my cock and my spend and my magic's curse as often as I tell you to. A shiver ran down my spine, and that finally triggered the yawn I couldn't suppress anymore, my teeth chattering. A chill had settled into my bones that had nothing to do with the thickness of my clothing. I wrapped my arms around my torso, giving in to weakness for a moment while I had no one to witness it.

"Doctor Serrano may have had his suspicions, but I think he'll keep them to himself," Benedict said from behind me, and I startled badly and banged into the window frame, spinning around with a curse on my lips.

"You could have knocked," I snarled.

“The door was open,” Benedict said with a shrug, and prowled into the room, moving the way he did in the palace training yard when he circled his opponent, sword in hand, confident and focused.

I resisted the urge to edge away from him, even though my heart thudded against my ribs. All my nerves lit up, right down to my tingling fingertips. He’d catch me before I made it to the door. Besides, where would I go if I bolted?

The doctor had wanted light to examine the body, and three-branched candelabra blazed on the mantel and on the table by my bed. The fire Fabian had lit before he went for my wine added a flickering red to the mix, and Benedict’s eyes glinted unsettlingly as he moved closer.

Too close. Almost near enough to touch, as I stood there rooted to the floor, mute and with my head growing dangerously light.

Benedict had always looked at me like this: as if he could see something no one else could, the real man beneath the high rank and the fine silks and the arrogant dignity I clad myself in like armor every morning before I faced the world.

And he’d made it clear he thought that man amusing at best and contemptible the rest of the time. Not to mention in possession of a too-flat ass.

The very first time we’d met had been when he returned from a northern campaign, where he’d at the time been serving as a middle-rank officer, on the occasion of my father’s betrothal to Benedict’s mother. He’d stared at me for a long moment, smirked, and bowed not quite deeply enough, his pale eyes glittering like polished quartz in his bronzed face and his gaze never wavering from mine.

I know your secrets , his eyes had seemed to say. And I’m not impressed .

At twenty, I'd found battle-hardened twenty-six-year-old Benedict intimidating in every possible way, and I'd resented that feeling, and him, with every fiber of my being. Eight long years of his mother trying to maneuver him onto my throne later, neither the resentment nor the fear that underlaid it had lessened in the slightest.

Benedict took a final step, bringing himself close enough to me that I could feel the heat of him and my eyes were level with his stubbled chin. My height had always been comfortably average, and I lived in the hopeful conviction that my willowy build made me look taller—but Benedict had always been able to make me feel small and vulnerable. That alone might have been enough to earn my wariness and dislike even if he hadn't worked hard to ensure it.

When I forced myself to raise my eyes, I found his fixed on my face intently enough to make my breath catch.

If he hadn't been close enough to prevent me from leaning forward, I might have doubled over from the sudden stabbing tightness in my abdomen.

I couldn't do this. I simply couldn't, no matter what I'd tacitly agreed to earlier in the evening. Benedict frightened me as a general and a councilor and a stepbrother, but as a man...he terrified me.

"It's not too late to keep your assignation." My voice quavered betrayingly, and I shoved my hands behind my back and balled them into fists to square my shoulders. "You don't want me. You said so. There's no pleasure here for either of us. Surely you're honorable enough to do your duty without—this."

Benedict shifted his weight, and an instant later his huge hands had slipped behind me and caught my wrists in their iron grip, pinning them at the small of my back. His expression didn't change at all as he pulled down, tugging my shoulders far past square, forcing me to arch into him. Shifting my feet only put me off balance enough

to stumble back and hit the wall.

I let out a gasp, and Benedict crowded into me, with the even harder wall of his body pressing against me in the front.

And getting harder still. He rolled his hips, and the impossibly thick bulge of his cock dug into my stomach.

“No. We’ve been over that,” he said, and squeezed my wrists, thumbs digging in, eyes flashing as I bit my lip and squirmed in his hold. The motion rubbed me against his erection and sent a new flash of heat through me.

Damn it.

“I didn’t mean to—I’m not trying to—”

“Climb on my cock like a needy little bitch?” Benedict put in smoothly, voice so low it vibrated in my chest. “Not to worry. I’ll let you.”

“Let me? You—let me go!”

To my utter shock, he did. The painful tug on my shoulders released as he stepped back and away, leaving my wrists stinging and me swaying against the wall.

Benedict crossed his arms, fingers flexing as if my skin had left the same burning mark on him that he had on me.

“I’m not going to force myself on you,” he gritted out, jaw tight. “But you know damn well I’m the only man in Calatria who can protect you. That’s why you came to my door. And I get something in return. That’s how this works.”

“Because you say so?” I demanded, fists clenched. “Because you’re going to chain me to my bed and rule through me the way you threatened you would before you went away?”

The words hung in the air between us, far more than I’d intended to say. Because if I’d remembered every word he’d spoken to me that morning, that might give him the impression that he mattered to me.

And he didn’t. Not as a man. Not as anything but a potential rival for my throne.

Slowly, ever so slowly, some of the tension that had been rolling off of Benedict in nearly visible waves started to dissipate.

“Lucian,” he said, with a shake of his head and something that almost could’ve been a laugh, “if I’d meant my threat, I could’ve done it then. I would have. Believe it or don’t, but the last thing I want is to rule Calatria. As its duke, or as the duke’s puppet-master husband. Why the fuck do you think I left? It sure as hell wasn’t because I was afraid you’d carry out your own threat to put my head on a spike. Which you seem to have conveniently forgotten, since you’re so determined to be high and morally mighty.”

High and morally mighty? I had the right to put his head on a spike if I wanted!

Not that I did, really, although it stung that he hadn’t been the slightest bit intimidated.

But the last thing he wanted... Why the fuck do you think I left? Gods, he had to be lying. He had to be. Everything he’d said to me, all of the power he’d gathered into his own hands, the taunts and the arrogant way he flaunted his control over my own army. All of it. It pointed in one direction only.

And yet, if it were true. If it were, and I didn't understand Benedict at all...

Another bitter little smile flashed across his lips. "I didn't think you would believe me," he said. Because my silence had spoken for me, whether I meant it that way or not. "That's why I've never bothered saying it. But I'm not your puppet, either. I'll help you. I'll keep you alive to the very best of my ability. But we do it my way. Or I'm walking away."

Moment of truth—for me, anyway. He'd dared me to call his bluff earlier.

And I couldn't. It was far too likely that he would walk away, and then I'd have no one at all, not even a stepbrother who might be playing his own long game against me.

Leaning on his strength might destroy me, but at least I'd be alive. For now.

"Yes," I said, and the word tasted like ashes. But he still stood there waiting, because he expected more than that. "I'll cooperate."

Surely that was my imagination, that flash of relief that passed over his face and then vanished again, leaving him hard and set.

He nodded. "Good. But you're wrong, you know," he added, voice dropping back to that low, dangerous register. "There will be pleasure here for both of us. I'm going to make very damn certain of that."

My vision blurred, hopefully only from exhaustion and anger and not anything more embarrassing.

"Don't lie to me," I said, my voice betrayingly thick. Benedict wavered in front of me as if I looked at him through a window running with rain. "You dislike me as much as

I dislike you. You want to humiliate me. That's the only pleasure either of us will get."

He didn't quite flinch, and then he shrugged. Maybe that was all. I blinked to clear my eyes, and he came back into focus as implacable as ever.

"Think whatever you want. But take your clothes off while you think about how much you hate me." He grinned, with no humor at all in it. "Maybe that'll make it more fun."

"Your sense of fun is sadistic and bizarre," I muttered, but I turned away from him and went toward my bed on shaky legs—and then stopped, cold all over, Fabian's corpse flashing before me on the carpet that Benedict had made pristine again with his magic.

I closed my eyes. Opened them. Fabian was gone.

But it didn't matter. His ghost would be back the next time I looked, I knew it.

"I don't think I can do this here," I choked out, with panic rushing up to scratch at my throat and send a fresh shiver down all my limbs, so far past the ability to keep up a stoic front that I might as well have broken down sobbing after all. "I'm not even sure I can sleep here."

Actually, I knew damn well I couldn't. And the thought of getting fucked two feet from where my valet had gurgled his last painful breath had me ready to leap out the window.

"No, I really can't," I gasped, as Benedict's hands landed on my shoulders. I tried to wrench away, but he pulled me against his chest, and he'd said he wouldn't force me, but—

“Stop fighting me,” he said harshly, and wrapped an arm around me to trap both of mine. “I’m not. We’re going to my room. We’re going, Lucian. Come on.”

I staggered with him as he led me away, not letting me go, supporting me when I stumbled. A nightmare. This whole night, gods, and if they had any mercy at all I’d wake up panting and drenched in sweat any second now, with the murky half-overcast sun shining through my curtains and Fabian opening the door to bring me coffee and pastry and his usual side dish of passive-aggressive commentary.

The hallway was a blur, Benedict’s sitting room a slightly more cluttered blur, and then we were through another doorway. Benedict’s bedroom, a place I’d never imagined going except in the occasional fantasy where he’d been mortally wounded and I had to visit his deathbed to mouth insincere platitudes.

Benedict bundled me into his bed, pausing only to tug off my slippers. His blankets landed on top of me, warm and heavy, as my head sank into a pillow that carried the scent of him, the bright metallic spark of his powerful magic and the rich spice of his body.

“I can wait until morning, but not much longer than that,” he said. “Try to sleep off the shock, Lucian. You have a few hours before I’ll need to wake you.”

Wake me? He didn’t mean to...he hadn’t joined me in the bed. He leaned down over me, face grim, and laid his hand on the side of my neck, right over my uneven pulse.

“Sleep,” he repeated, and where he touched me, tendrils of warm darkness seeped in, as if he’d somehow pushed his fingers into my flesh, reached inside me... “Go to sleep.”

The darkness rushed up into my mind and my eyes and took me.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

My eyes opened. A whitewashed ceiling. Not my ceiling, I had a blue velvet canopy over my bed. I shoved up to sitting, groggy and disoriented, what the fuck had—right.

Fabian. Dead.

Benedict.

Benedict's bedroom, and Benedict's bed.

He hadn't closed the curtains the night before, and the same subdued winter sunlight I'd expected flowed in through the room's two large windows, but it illuminated a painfully austere room, all dark wood and bare surfaces rather than my own richly carved and upholstered furniture and plush rugs.

A soldier's room, despite the fact that Lord Benedict Rathenas had never been a common soldier in his life.

Footsteps from beyond the open doorway had me tensing up, quickly shoving my hair out of my eyes—dark blond waves looked like a tangled, dirty mophead if slept on improperly, and I'd slept about as improperly as possible—and trying to blink the blariness of sleep away.

Benedict strolled in a moment later, unfairly alert for someone who'd spent most of the night cleaning up a murder and the rest somewhere other than his own bed. He bore with him the faint scent of coffee, which might account for his sharp eyes and upright posture. Damn him anyway.

Damn him twice for not thinking to bring me any.

But if he'd been up long enough to have had his breakfast, and the sun had risen all the way...

"What time is it?" I asked, suddenly alert too despite his rude oversight. I had meetings this morning. An appointment with the Guildmaster for the Calatryan weavers and woolen cloth merchants. Possibly more fish-related documents.

And Benedict to bend over for. A tremor went through me.

"A few minutes past eight." Oh, gods, I had my first meeting at half past. I flung the blankets back, and Benedict stepped forward, shaking his head. "And no, before you get frantic, I already informed your secretary that you'll be keeping to your private quarters until noon. Or mine, as the case may be, but I didn't bother informing him about that."

I gaped up at him. "You had no right to take such a liberty! Why would I do that? Damn it, I spend every waking moment proving—" Fuck, I couldn't say that I'm fit to rule. "—demonstrating my dedication to Calatria, and lounging about my bedchamber half the day simply isn't, isn't what I do," I finished lamely. Going to impress anyone. I couldn't say that either.

Benedict arched one thick brow at me. "I don't know, Lucian. Your valet, who'd served your family since long before you were born, tragically dropped dead in front of you, and then you were up the rest of the night. Maybe you need a few hours to sleep. Or mourn. Or simply be alone with your thoughts. Besides, you're the duke, you don't need an excuse."

"I don't need—I need more of an excuse, not less, in fact. And of all the absurdities. Spend an entire morning grieving my valet?" I could only imagine Zettine's pungent

commentary on that kind of sentimental foolishness. And Benedict... “Didn’t you accuse me of having the vapors last night? Are you trying to make me look the fool to the entire court?”

Oh, gods. He was. I rolled the rest of the way out of bed, ready to fight my way out of the room if I needed to.

“You bastard,” I hissed. “All of that bullshit about not wanting the throne. You’re going to use ‘allying’ with me as your opportunity to—”

“Lucian, for the love of the gods, shut up!” Benedict’s voice cracked like a whip, and I stumbled back a step against the bed, nearly falling onto it again. He stared at me for a moment in silence, and then said, almost gently, “Do you really have no idea at all what people think of you? What they—don’t you remember what everyone said about you when you took your father’s seat in the council the day he died?”

I remembered very clearly what Benedict had said to my face, at least. His anger, and his contempt. And then he’d left.

“I had no choice. You damn well know I had no choice. If I’d waited even a few days, the vultures would’ve gathered. You probably would’ve ended up the duke after all, as you claim not to want.”

Benedict’s jaw worked, and he let out a hollow little laugh. “Believe me, I wouldn’t have allowed it. And I do know you had no choice. But you didn’t even bother to act like you gave a damn about Treviso’s death, and no one more than a step removed from the throne understood why you had to take control immediately without taking time to be a son, rather than a ruler. Everyone in Calatria thinks you’re arrogant, self-centered, and as cold as a fish. And possibly that you killed him yourself.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I snapped, the offensively accurate sting of his words heating my

cheeks and sending an odd, twinging pain down under my ribs. Fabian had certainly thought I'd killed my father myself. And...a fish? A fucking fish ? He had to use that word of all the ones he could have chosen? "Of course I didn't kill him and of course I gave a damn about his death. You were there. And—he was my father, of course I cared, but I had to maintain decorum!"

As I had last night when I'd stood and stared out the window as Fabian's pathetic corpse was carried away by strangers, or when I'd forced down my nausea while my father ordered executions, standing by pale but otherwise unmoved.

All the moments I'd hidden myself away, desperate to appear as strong and capable and brave as...Benedict, for example.

"It's required of me in my position to remain rational in a crisis," I told him, lifting my chin and giving him my best disdainful down-the-nose stare. "I don't expect you to be capable of comprehending it."

"Yes," he said. "That's why they see you that way. Exactly that."

"What? What's what? Benedict, I need to—"

"What you need to do is relieve my curse as you agreed to do. Do I need to gag you?" he demanded. I choked out a denial, and he took a step closer, making all the skin on the front of me prickle with awareness. Gag me? He wouldn't dare! But I found that I couldn't keep talking and run the risk, either. "No? Good. You may not care what anyone thinks of you, but it won't do your reputation any harm to be seen to care a tiny bit that a man you've known all your life is dead."

I'd disliked Fabian intensely, but walking into my rooms and finding him absent would be a shock for a long time. Every night and every morning I'd be waiting for him, and I'd have that jolt of surprise and horror.

The thought of baring those feelings to anyone, let alone to Benedict, made me even sicker than his apparent confidence that everyone in Calatria hated me and thought I'd committed patricide—not only the ones who'd told me so to my face or tried to kill me.

Better to tackle the far less dangerous matter of Benedict's curse. Standing here in the light of day, with the nightmarish quality of the previous evening beginning to fade, I could face this bargain of his head-on without flinching.

Relieve his curse. That was all. His talk of pleasure was just that, so much arrogant bragging talk. If he hoped I'd degrade myself by enjoying his use of me, he'd have to live with disappointment. And if I needed something to distract myself from my inevitable discomfort and disgust during the act, I could savor his thwarted annoyance.

How long had it been since anyone...Benedict's voice rang through my mind: turned you inside out the way you probably don't deserve?

Years. It had been three years, in fact, since a visit I'd made to my cousin Tavius's estate in the north of Calatria, only a few months before my father's death. We'd spent the days hunting with his friends, and the nights carousing, and Tavius had thrown me together with one friend in particular, a tall, handsome gentleman with wicked eyes and black hair. Actually, he bore a passing resemblance to Benedict. We'd spent a night together, and he'd fucked me drunkenly but thoroughly enough, leaving me sore but not quite sated.

Tavius had seemed disappointed that I didn't want a more lasting arrangement with his friend, whom he'd tried to persuade me was just the man to make me happy, but causing a court scandal by coming home with a not-high-born-enough lover would hardly have been worth it for a man who hadn't even finished me with his hand after he spent inside me.

Three years.

And now I stood cornered between Benedict and his bed.

He might be much more of an asshole than Tavius's friend, but at least this time I'd be trying not to enjoy it, which might make succeeding a whole lot easier.

I lifted my chin. "Fine," I said. "I'll take the morning off. Or at least a small part of it. I can't imagine you'd need more than a few minutes to do what you need to do."

Benedict shook his head at me, eyes glittering. "Lucian, you really never learn, do you?"

And with that, he whipped his shirt over his head, tossing it carelessly aside onto the floor. His hands were busy with his trouser buttons before I could do more than blink. After all of his talk, I'd expected him to have a more practiced seduction routine. But he simply shoved the trousers down, kicking them off of his bare feet, and tugged the string of his drawers.

Those fell to the floor too.

My mouth dropped open, and I snapped it shut again.

No, he would definitely have made Clothurn squeal. I didn't like my own odds, actually. Benedict's broad torso tapered to narrow hips and a curly black thatch of hair surrounding a cock that explained his notoriety in the city's brothels and perhaps made an additional seduction routine redundant. It had already begun to harden, and the thick head had taken on a purplish-rosy flush. Heavy balls hung beneath it. As he took a step toward me, they swayed and swung, almost hypnotizing. What would he do if I reached out and cupped them in my palm, tested their weight, tugged gently the way I liked when someone handled me?

Another step brought him close enough that I could have, if I'd had the courage. Or the desire to, gods damn it, I didn't really want to touch him.

His cock grew under my scrutiny, filling out its length, growing thicker, the head darkening and lifting toward me as if seeking a target.

"My face is up here," Benedict said, his voice low and amused—but with an underlying current of heat that lit me up on the inside, kindling a warmth in my belly that I didn't want and didn't know what to do with. "Or you can touch me. Do anything you want, Lucian."

That startled me enough that I was able to tear my eyes away from the scourge of the dockside whores and look up to meet his.

Anything I wanted? "I don't want to do anything," I said, although my voice lacked a certain degree of conviction. I cleared my throat and tried again with, "You don't seem like the kind of man to lie back and let someone else take charge in bed."

Too late, I realized my mistake. Benedict grinned and took one last step, his cock almost brushing against my tunic. I fought the urge to shrink back. Our several inches of height difference didn't matter nearly as much as his several inches of additional breadth, the way he loomed not only over me but to both sides.

"How much have you thought about what I'd be like in bed, hmm? And you cast me in the role of the aggressor, apparently. I can oblige. Tell me what you've thought ab—"

"I haven't thought about anything!" I said, sounding only about half as harassed as I felt.

My whole body had flushed with heat, and I had nowhere to go, and my hands

twitched restlessly because I couldn't possibly touch him. And it didn't matter how I tried to turn my head. If I looked down, there was that massive cock. If I looked up, Benedict's mocking smile and gleaming gray eyes and chiseled jaw. Side to side, there were huge bare shoulders, biceps, a body that would effortlessly dominate mine when Benedict chose to use it.

"You're probably always the aggressor because you're more brawn than brain," I added, hoping it would annoy him enough to make him stop fucking toying with me. "That's nothing to do with me."

A glance up through my lashes showed me raised eyebrows and lips pressed into a line.

Perfect.

When he caught me by the hips and spun me around to face the bed, I nearly fainted with relief. He'd pull my trousers down and fuck me hard and fast, and he'd stop...accusing me of things and trying to ferret out my secrets.

Benedict pressed up behind me, his cock digging into the small of my back. I let out a soft, betraying sound, my lungs hitching with each of my ragged breaths.

At least I hadn't gotten hard. Maybe my lower abdomen had gone all melty and my knees rested against the side of Benedict's mattress, not quite able to keep me stable without support.

But I hadn't gotten hard, my nerves too tightly strung to allow it.

Benedict smoothed one big, warm hand up from my hip to spread it across my chest, tugging me back into his embrace as he wrapped the other arm around my waist, my arms pinned at my sides.

I squirmed, and his arm tightened: his cock a thick, heavy pressure against my back, his muscular thighs against my ass, Benedict surrounding me.

He slid his hand over and circled my right nipple with his fingertip. Lightly, almost too lightly for me to feel it through the wool of my tunic. But my nipple tightened and firmed all the same, goosebumps prickling all over my chest. My breath came faster and faster.

Benedict circled my nipple one more time and then brushed his finger across, an agonizing, barely-there tease. His hot breath tickled my ear as he bent his head down and nuzzled into my hair.

The muscles in my ass and my belly clenched, and my cock—damn it to hell—got very fucking hard, straining against the placket of my trousers.

I would not move my hips. I would not . No matter how much my thighs trembled with the effort of holding still, of not pushing back into the cradle of his body, of not thrusting against nothing to try to relieve the gathering ache between my legs.

Benedict pinched, and I writhed despite myself, the tiny sting arrowing straight down to my balls and making my cock twitch. My head fell back against his shoulder. Benedict leaned down further and pressed his parted lips to the side of my neck.

His tongue flicked out against my straining tendon. He pinched my nipple again, harder this time, enough to hurt.

My moan echoed off the rafters and the bare, unadorned walls of Benedict's bedroom.

His arm tightened again almost painfully, and he ground his hips against me with a low sound of his own that vibrated my chest and made me clench all over again—and

this time, I couldn't help imagining what that big cock would feel like pushing inside me, and I thrust after all, the head of my cock rubbing over one of my trouser buttons and drawing out a gasp. Sweat heated my forehead and stuck my hair to my temples in tendrils, beaded along my spine, gathered at the backs of my knees. At least at this angle Benedict couldn't see me all slack-mouthed and red-faced and damp, my eyes sliding shut despite how much I tried to keep my focus on the shaft of sunlight slanting along the opposite wall. It glinted off of the steel basket hilt of yet another of Benedict's swords leaned up in the corner.

If I traced every curve with my gaze...no, it wasn't enough. My eyes closed.

And that left me with nothing but sensation. Benedict pushing my trousers down at last, exposing the fact that I hadn't bothered with drawers last night in my hurry to change out of the dressing gown.

Oh, gods, I hadn't, and when he pulled up my tunic and pushed me forward, his thick cock slid between my thighs as if it belonged there.

Nudging up, toward the crease of my ass, like he meant to fuck me without any further ado.

My head spun. I wanted that, didn't I? To get it over with.

His cock burned my skin like a brand and I wasn't the only one shaking, the only one whose breath came ragged and uneven.

His curse. He'd been telling the truth when he said he could barely wait until morning. And his cock strained eagerly against me, the tip brushing my sensitive hole.

"Benedict, don't," I gasped, and as one big hand splayed across my back and pinned

me down, I started to struggle in earnest. “You’ll tear me apart if you take me like this.”

But I couldn’t break his hold, and—

“Stop,” he said, and the echoing resonance in his tone vibrated through all of my limbs, humming in my chest.

I stopped as if he’d used...magic, damn him, hanging limp and frozen in his grasp, waiting for him to thrust inside and rip me in half.

But he didn’t, even though the hand gripping my hip had gone clawlike and rigid—with the effort of controlling the tainted magic raging through him, I had no doubt. Was he in pain? He’d never trust me enough to admit it.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said, voice too raspy to be reassuring. “I won’t—don’t be afraid of me.”

“You’re not impressive enough to be frightening.”

Benedict huffed a laugh, probably because my voice had come out thin and strained, hardly convincing.

“Spread your legs,” was his only answer.

I kicked my feet out of the constriction of my trousers and shuffled them apart, hating my own obedience but unable to muster the breath for further argument, my blood pounding in my ears.

Benedict’s hand slid down my spine, pushed my tunic up and away, and slipped between my cheeks. The hair on my legs and arms prickled as if I’d strayed too close

to gathering lightning...but it was him causing that frisson in the air, whispering something I couldn't quite hear that swirled his magic around us like crackling mist.

A cool, startling tingle rushed up into my body from where he touched me, starting at my hole and going...gods, so deep, deeper than any man had ever been inside me, and I jerked and cried out, my arms wobbling and nearly dropping me face-first into the bed.

“What the hell was—” I cut off in a moan as one of his fingers pressed inside, stretching me open. Slick. It was slick, oil dripping down my thighs and coating my rim. “Where did you get—oh gods,” because he twisted his finger and pushed deeper, all the way to the last knuckle.

“Summoned it from my dressing table,” he said, and pulled his finger out, drawing another moan out of me with it, and forced two back inside. “If I let you go and went to get it, you'd run. And then I'd have to—” He thrust hard with his fingers, twisting them and rubbing unerringly over the little nub behind my balls that Tavius's friend had been completely incapable of finding. My deep, helpless groan drowned out half of what he said next, but I heard him finish with, “—pin you down on the floor when I catch you.”

Three fingers inside me now, and I couldn't breathe, couldn't even moan, splayed out with my elbows and forehead on the bedding and my ass up in the air like a whore.

Benedict's whore. The same to him as one of the painted strumpets who took his gold and his cock on nights when he didn't trouble to seduce one of my courtiers.

My hole clenched convulsively around his fingers, their uneven pressure in my soft insides nearly too much. I stifled a whimper in the blankets.

A moment later I was empty, clenching around nothing, Benedict spreading my

cheeks with his hand and muttering something I couldn't quite catch but that sounded like it contained a lot of profanities.

The head of his cock pushed against my hole—stretched, but not quite enough to prepare me for his girth, and the wet sound as he forced his way inside echoed obscenely in the quiet bedroom.

I could only push back on him, trying desperately to relieve the ache of it, as he thrust inexorably forward and impaled me. Benedict leaned down, letting his weight bury his cock even deeper inside me.

“That’s it,” he said, either to me or to himself, I wasn’t sure. “Gods. That’s right.”

No, it was wrong, wrong in every possible way: wrong that Benedict, my horrid stepbrother who might or might not be lying about wanting me dead, had his monstrous cock buried in me, that he’d started to thrust, tugging on my hole and then opening me again, tunneling into me. Wrong that I had to bite my lip and clutch the bedding in my fists to keep in the cries that bubbled up in my throat, that my hair stuck to my forehead and temples with sweat, that my own cock and balls throbbed, on the point of spilling everything I had, including my self-respect.

Benedict fucked me harder, driving me face-first into the mattress, the bed starting to creak. I spat out a mouthful of damp fabric, focusing on the scratch of a wool blanket against the front of my thighs to try to distract me from the heat and muscle of his legs flexing between them.

It didn’t work.

Nothing could distract me from the oncoming rush of spending my brains out on Benedict’s cock.

He'd lost control now, pounding me without mercy, every thrust hollowing me out and stuffing me impossibly full all at once, every inch of him hammering into that perfect spot inside me and ratcheting my tension higher, higher...

I couldn't hold it in anymore, the muscles of my stomach clenched so tight they hurt. Gripping Benedict's cock like a vise, balls tugging up, I spilled into the bedding, a few drops spattering onto my chest where my shirt had ridden up.

It turned me inside out exactly the way Benedict had threatened, everything going sideways and twisted around me.

I collapsed into a damp, whimpering, twitching heap, head spinning.

Benedict growled, caught my hips in his iron grip, and slammed me back onto his cock, like a rag doll with a wet hole he could use as he pleased.

"Lucian," he said, voice rough with triumph—and thrust once more, transfixing me, making me cry out as he spent.

Wet heat suffused me. Benedict's mark, his claim...his magic, gods, a sparking tickle deep within me that set off one more spasm in my balls and my exhausted cock.

My whole body quivered with aftershocks, sweat cooling on my skin, the bed feeling like it vibrated under me. Everything between my ribs and my thighs had been bruised and battered and pounded into jelly, and the sweet ache of it made me shudder with something horribly close to arousal, the echo of desire.

Desire. I'd never desired Benedict. I still didn't, and the throbbing, trembling, melting warmth inside me had nothing to do with him.

His withdrawal made me shudder, every inch of him stretching me again on his way

out and leaving me horribly empty.

When he let me go, my numbed toes hit the floor and almost couldn't stop my undignified slide off the side of the bed. I hadn't even noticed that he'd lifted me off the ground. I scrabbled at the blankets and shoved myself up onto my hands again, shakily making my way to standing. A hot trickle of Benedict's come seeped out, slicking my thighs. My trousers lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, still caught around one foot. Bending over to get them would expose my glistening, well-fucked ass to Benedict as he stood there savoring the sight of me all disheveled and used.

Shame tightened my chest and left me breathless as reality began to filter back in again.

And not only the shame of my own disgust and regret.

Any whisper that I'd become Benedict's latest toy would destroy any credibility I'd managed to gain among my courtiers and my subjects at large. It seemed so bloody unfair that Benedict could be the one to bear a curse that typically made twilight mages objects of fear and ridicule, and that he could be the one to know every whore in Calatria by name, but that I'd be the one mocked and despised for taking his cock. For submitting to this.

My eyes stung. My heavy head throbbed. Benedict moved around in the room behind me, dressing or washing. Watching me. Laughing at me, or gloating.

I needed to be alone or I'd lose my mind.

Fuck him anyway. I bent as quickly as I could and forced my other foot into the trousers, tugging them up and haphazardly getting a button through a buttonhole, any buttonhole. Enough to keep them on my hips.

When I turned, defiantly lifting my chin and ready to meet his sneer, I found him not paying any attention to me at all, his back to me as he splashed some water on his face from a basin on the washstand.

My fists clenched. What a fucking son of a bitch.

A completely unselfconscious and unashamed son of a bitch, powerful legs spread so that he could lean over the basin at his ease, heavy balls swinging, the muscles in his back and broad shoulders shifting as he rubbed at his face and ran his hands through that absurd hair of his.

Hatred boiled up from my churning belly, hot and vicious, choking and stifling me.

If I'd had magic, his back would've burst into flames. Maybe he'd given me some, when he spilled in me...but no, he didn't even smolder, no matter how I glared. Damn it all.

Another hot ribbon of come wound its way down my leg, dampening my trousers. My abdomen shuddered oddly, half disgust and half...I swallowed hard.

"I presume that your curse is relieved for the time being," I said, proud of how cold I sounded, how unmoved. The same skills I'd practiced for public appearances applied here, too. "I mean to bathe extremely thoroughly and then go about my duties, if you have no further objections."

"None at all," Benedict said, with a toss of his head and a final scrub of his face.

He turned and set his hands on his hips, looking me up and down with an expression I couldn't parse. I'd resented his indifference. Now I wished he'd kept his back to me, because that piercing gray gaze and a fresh sight of his enormous cock had me flushing again.

“I’ve doubled the guard on the ducal apartments,” he went on. “I’ve left the men you chose and added some I trust most. One of each will stay at their posts, and when you leave, the other two will accompany you. And I won’t be far behind, but I have some business of my own first.” He bared his teeth at me in a flashing grin. “Bathing extremely thoroughly, to start with.”

Oh, that—I gritted my teeth together and drew a deep breath. How dare he insult me the same way I’d insulted him!

“At least you’re aware of your own stench,” I said, and moved for the door. Maybe I’d thought of a good retort, but I’d get the worst of this exchange if I stayed too long. “You’ve imparted it to me, and now we’re both vile. See that you’re less so by the time you wait upon me in my study.”

His low laughter followed me out of his bedroom, through his sitting room, and into the corridor. I slammed his door behind me, but it rang in my ears all the way to my own bedroom.

It was very hard to convince myself I’d had the last word.

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Running my own bath, laying out my own clothing, and dressing without assistance didn't present any particular challenge. In fact, I preferred it, and I'd been suffering Fabian with very poor grace since my father's death.

But his absence hit me even harder than I'd expected in the unforgiving light of day.

This wasn't any nightmare.

Someone had tried to kill me. They'd succeeded in murdering Fabian. And no matter how many precautions I'd taken or how many times I'd braced myself to expect it...I hadn't. Not really. Not viscerally. My father had made so many enemies through his own actions that I could imagine dozens of people who would've killed him for revenge, or to prevent him from continuing on his deadly course of paranoia and violence.

But I'd executed no one but the usual handful of murderers, rapists, and violent robbers that any ruler had to condemn. I'd done nothing but work for Calatria's best interests.

And yet some person, or likely more than one, had chosen to put deadly poison in a cup I had been meant to drink. That person had probably spent this morning frustrated, confused, or afraid of the consequences—my only real, if cold, comfort.

That and Benedict, who'd promised to keep me alive, and for whose help I'd already paid such a high price.

Every time I bent or stretched, the warm ache between my legs reminded me of it. No

bath could completely remove the traces of him.

Could he keep me alive? And would he? Did his mysterious “business” include causing a hubbub in the kitchens and setting off exactly the sort of rumors and gossip I needed to avoid? I’d been too angry to ask him. Not that he would’ve given me a straight answer—or obeyed any contradictory commands of mine—in any case. Besides, he’d almost certainly been vague solely in order to annoy me. Overseeing training, inspecting weapons stored in the armory, adjudicating disputes between hot-tempered officers, and all the other minutiae of leading an army occupied most of his time, and today would be no different.

Trailed by my two guards, including an intimidatingly silent tall fellow I’d never seen before, I left my rooms and made my way downstairs. The whole palace felt quiet. Too quiet? Surely all of the servants hadn’t conspired against me and then fled. But the paranoia persisted, and I had to exercise every bit of my self-control not to jump at every noise and shadow.

My meetings were jarringly but reassuringly normal. The wool merchants’ guildmaster scolded me—with, he insisted, all the respect due to me—for allowing foreign tradesmen to import cotton, and no matter how I tried to convince him that woolen undergarments were unpopular for a reason, he remained unmoved. And there were indeed more fish-related documents to sign.

As the door closed behind the clerk carrying away the ream of paper my morning had generated, I took a moment to lean on my desk, sigh, and rub my temples, for once not caring about my secretary seeing me in a moment of weakness. The events of the night had left me lightheaded with exhaustion, and Benedict had left me in a state I didn’t even have words for. Sitting straight in my chair without shifting my weight to try to relieve the aching emptiness between my cheeks had been torturously endless. My stomach gurgled, speaking of emptiness. But a glance at the clock on my desk told me I had less than half an hour before I needed to appear in court, crowned and

robed and dignified, to dispense the duke's justice.

"What will you have for lunch, Your Grace?" Mattia asked me, his tone on the border of sympathetic, something that might have annoyed me from someone else. He'd been my secretary since long before my father's death, and he was one of the few people in Calatria I thought might actually respect me.

"Coffee and sandwiches will need to do," I told him, and sent him off to the kitchens, hoping that his personal oversight might be enough to ensure I'd survive my hasty meal.

A moment later, Benedict's assigned guard stepped into the room, stopped before my desk, and bowed smartly before assuming a parade rest.

"Your Grace," he said, the first words he'd spoken to me. "I'm afraid you won't be able to eat until General Rathenas is able to attend you. Strict orders from the General, Your Grace."

I stared at him, so tired and hungry that my anger stirred slowly, creeping up on me. General Rathenas. No one called Benedict that but his veteran soldiers, everyone at court using the proper Lord General Rathenas or, more familiarly, Lord Benedict.

This man was no palace guard; I knew all of them, at least by sight if not by name and a few words of conversation here and there. And I thought I'd have met all of the army's officers, particularly those in the city, but I'd heard his men calling him Captain Venet. Wherever he'd come from, I doubted any palace guard or city guard or common soldier under his command would be likely to dare to disobey him, given his tall, heavy build and hard expression.

If he thought he could command me too, he'd be disappointed.

That said...I couldn't countermand Benedict's orders. Not when he'd supposedly given them with my blessing and in my name. Besides which, no matter how much it stung to wait on Benedict's pleasure to have my meager luncheon, this was precisely what I'd "paid" him to do when I bent over the side of his bed and allowed him to use me: check my food, appoint guards who could actually be trusted to be vigilant, and see to it that I didn't die an ignominious death at the figurative hands of tainted ham and watercress. Gods, how would that look in the history books? Duke Lucian, reigned less than three years, killed by a sandwich. He is barely remembered for lowering taxes on shellfish . What an epitaph.

I leaned back in my chair and raised my eyebrows at Benedict's insolent officer.

"Do you really think I need Lord Benedict's orders quoted back to me? Your job is to inform him that his attendance is required within the next ten minutes, not to attempt to enforce orders that I commanded your commander to give. You're dismissed."

He leveled me with a disturbingly shrewd gaze out of sharp dark eyes. "I've already sent a page to fetch General Rathenas, Your Grace. In the meantime, I'll ensure that your orders are obeyed, and keep the coffee tray safely outside your door until the General arrives."

He bowed smartly and backed up to the door in the most approved courtly style, slipping neatly out of the room with far more grace than some big, ungainly soldier ought to be able to do and leaving me seething with suppressed annoyance—also in the most approved courtly style.

No, definitely not a common soldier. It shouldn't surprise me that Benedict had surrounded himself with men as irritating and contradictory as he was himself.

A few minutes later, a small hubbub in the corridor announced the arrival of my coffee, Mattia's voice rising indignantly above the guards' admonishments.

My stomach growled ferociously, nearly drowning out the argument—the increasing argument, as Mattia clearly didn't think the guards' orders outweighed his. Fascinating, if I'd been in the mood to ponder it, how court power struggles played out at every level: between me and my council, between my guards and my secretary, and probably between the kitchen maids, too, if they had time in between ignoring poisoners skulking through the pantry. Something about the proximity to or possibility of power. It made people lose their bloody minds.

“You're not fit to touch His Grace's sandwiches!” Mattia shouted.

Well, case in point. Great gods. At this point, I didn't care if everyone, including the palace poisoners, had touched my fucking sandwiches. I simply needed them in my rumbling stomach! And my thrice-damned coffee!

But Benedict had buggered off to only Ennolu knew where, I couldn't intervene in the squabble outside the study without losing any dignity I had left, and besides, I might yield to temptation and have them all executed if I did.

The study had a second entrance, a discreet little door opening into a passage that would take me to a private suite near my throne room. My equerry, Gernard, would be waiting there with my state robes, the smaller crown I wore on less formal court occasions, and a list of everyone who'd be harassing me with their problems.

The clock ticked its way around, marking off another minute.

Fuck it. Only ten minutes remained before Chancellor Zettine would smugly take over for me in court, putting another nail in the coffin of public opinion. It was very unlikely that anyone would murder me on the short walk if I went alone, and honestly, I was too tired to care either way.

Of course, that wasn't the only thing I had to fear. But if I allowed myself to be ruled

by what might or might not anger Benedict...

That settled it.

Leaving Mattia, the guards, and my rapidly cooling coffee to all irritate one another, I slipped quietly out through the side door, my heart pounding unevenly as I shut it behind me with a quiet click.

What the hell had delayed Benedict, anyway, after all his fine talk of not letting me out of his sight? Business to attend to . Business more important than my life? Bugger the armory's inventory and his buggering soldiers.

My soldiers, I supposed.

But bugger them all, anyway, whomever they might belong to.

Righteous anger carried me along the passage, quickening my steps and surely accounting for the rapidity of my heartbeat and breaths as well.

Benedict had no authority over me, no matter how imposingly he might loom over me as he tried to insist otherwise.

And no matter how effortlessly authoritative he'd been as he held me up off the ground by my hips, my legs spread, forcing me to come on his cock like a slut.

He didn't frighten me. What could he do to me, anyway? Scold me? Bah.

That confidence lasted me all the way through dressing in my robes, skimming the list of petitioners, and striding into the throne room, nodding regally at Lord Zettine where he hovered to the side of the throne's dais attempting to appear deferential rather than impatient for me to make some stupid mistake he could exploit.

Had he tried to kill me last night? His perfect courtier's mask told me nothing either way, and of course he'd have known, when no one summoned him in a panic, that I hadn't died. He'd have had more than twelve hours to make sure his disappointment didn't show. Did he have darker shadows beneath his eyes than usual? Perhaps. But that didn't mean much.

Anyway, my presence would surely annoy him whether he'd been the would-be murderer or not, and I'd be happy to give him as many reasons as possible to regret his failure. Old bastard.

It'd help that I'd arrived on time and looked the part of a duke, in my black velvet robes all embroidered with silver and pearls. Past practice allowed me to swirl them impressively as I took my seat. The silver inlay and ornately carved ebony and mahogany of the throne framed me well, if slightly overwhelmingly. It'd been made for a somewhat larger man.

Benedict would fit it.

A little tremor there, but Benedict wasn't the one with the crown on his head, so fuck him.

I shoved that thought away and settled in, allowing my gaze to drift over the assembly with regal nonchalance. My courtiers had arrayed themselves, as usual, down the length of the throne room to my left. That side faced out on the palace's great courtyard and steps, and a score of windows provided light and ventilation for Calatria's noble and ambitious. Their jewels competed for the most ostentatious sparkle in the muted sunlight, and the open windows hopefully would provide an exit for their abundance of hot air.

Before me stretched an expanse of intricate black and white tile leading to the double doors to the throne room and the ceremonial guards in their polished armor and

peaked helmets, as still as statues, who flanked it.

And then to my right, marshalled into perfect silence and order by far less ceremonial guards, were my petitioners of the lower orders: merchants and tradesmen, country gentry, and the occasional laborers or peasants who'd mustered the nerve to place their grievances directly before their duke. Anyone could insist that I hear them; the unstated but understood risk was that I'd probably give them short shrift if I felt that my time had been wasted, and that a lower authority could've dealt fairly with the problem.

A rustle and low murmur ran through the crowd as everyone in the room took their own seats again now that I'd assumed mine. The leg of a bench scraped and squeaked, one of the ladies to my left tittered, and Lord Zettine cleared his throat and stepped forward.

"His Grace Duke Lucian will now graciously hear his subjects' petitions," he intoned, with only the slightest sarcastic twist to the word graciously .

He had state robes of his own, also black but with only a tasteful touch of silver around the collar and in the cord of his button loops. The robes billowed magnificently as he stepped forward and took his own richly upholstered seat at the foot of my dais. I had to consciously relax my hands to keep them from clenching into fists on the armrests of the throne.

No. I would not be jealous of my elderly chancellor's dashing appearance, because that would be a new low. And besides, I was the one who'd spent the morning with the court's most notorious lover between my—

And again, no, and now I had to clench my fists to take the edge off of the heat that tried to flood into my cheeks. The ones on my face, specifically, although the others...more between them, really. Where I'd been stretched, pulled open, and then

forced open with Benedict's...

Another pointed throat-clearing tumbled me back into reality with a shocking jolt, as if I'd fallen several feet into my throne.

Lord Zettine had turned to face me, eyebrows raised, and below him knelt the first of the petitioners. By the strained silence in the throne room, he'd been waiting there for me to bid him rise and present his case for rather longer than protocol dictated.

Oh, bloody hell.

I had to clear my own throat and cross my legs, subtly adjusting my robes to make sure nothing was visible in my lap, before I could speak.

"Rise and approach," I said, in my best approximation of my usual judicial calm. "We will hear your grievance."

The brass badge of the vintners' guild he wore on his shoulder gleamed as he hefted himself to his feet, and he launched into an improbable tale of woe involving soured vats of wine that he swore on all the gods and his own life had been delicious—"Fit for your own table, Your Grace!"—before his rival had hired a mage to spoil them. Reading between the lines, the rival had simply made a better batch of wine despite my petitioner's best attempts to badmouth his products.

The local magistrate had declined his case and sent my court clerk his reasons why, and his pungent commentary on idiots who'd clearly consumed too much of their own vinegar made me smile. He deserved greater scope for his legal talents and sense of humor. I lifted a finger to summon the clerk, meaning to have him make a note for me to promote the magistrate into a higher position within Calatria's judiciary.

But as the clerk mounted the steps, pencil and tablet at the ready, a prickling tingle

swept up my spine, raising all the hair on the back of my neck and settling in my scalp, the silver circlet I wore suddenly too heavy and too tight.

My fingers went rigid around the armrests of my throne an instant before Benedict's voice rang out from behind me. "Perhaps I can offer my humble assistance, Your Grace."

Humble? Every syllable dripped with arrogance, and as he took up a position beside my throne, cloak swirling in a way that even Lord Zettine would have to envy, a low murmur went through the assembly, lords and commoners alike.

No, I would not give him the satisfaction of looking directly at him, even though his presence exercised a nearly irresistible magnetic power. Instead, I tilted my head barely enough for a sidelong view and nodded at him as he bowed, one hand resting dashingly on his sword hilt, glossy hair and ruby earring swinging. My neck had gone so stiff the nod felt jerky and awkward, hopefully not visibly so.

How had he snuck up on me? He must have followed me through my private antechamber behind the throne. Hopefully he'd refrained from skewering Gerfred, either with his cock or his sword. But I doubted he'd made much of a fuss about allowing Benedict through. No one ever did, damn them.

I allowed myself a smirk in Benedict's general direction, raising one eyebrow. We might have a private arrangement, but if he wanted to interrupt my public audience with condescending offers of help, distracting everyone present with his eye-catching appearance, then I could publicly jab at him, too.

"I welcome your opinion, Lord Benedict," I said. "You of all men are qualified to offer one on large quantities of cheap wine."

A nervous-sounding wave of laughter swept through the left side of the room. On the

right, someone chortled, coughed, and went abruptly silent.

Benedict stared down at me, his expression completely bland—except for something heated and dangerous kindling in the depths of his eyes, something no one else in the room would be near enough to see.

Everything faded away but Benedict, and the uneven hum of my blood pumping too fast, too hard. His eyes bored into me, penetrating right through the velvet robes and the mask of indifference and unerringly finding that soft, inner part of me that had no defenses at all.

“My wine is not cheap, Your Grace!”

I sucked in a sudden breath, startled out of my daze, and turned back to the indignant winemaker. He’d gone as burgundy as one of his spoiled vintages, and his pursed mouth had the same level of acidity.

Damn it, I’d have to rebuke him for his interruption even though I couldn’t possibly be more grateful for it.

But Benedict spoke first, as if he’d read my mind. “His Grace shouldn’t need to chastise you for your insolence in interrupting him, and so I will. Mind your manners.” All the color drained out of the vintner’s cheeks, leaving him more the chalky color of the soil his grapes grew in. “That said, the cost of your wine doesn’t matter much. I have an opinion on large quantities of any wine.”

I glanced over at the assembled courtiers, who were—smiling up at Benedict like fools, and laughing.

With him. Not at him, as I’d intended. And certainly more genuinely than they’d managed for my joke at his expense.

Benedict stepped forward, moving down a step so that he'd be showing me the respect I deserved—while also still looming over me and dominating the room, of course.

“With your permission, Duke Lucian,” he threw over his shoulder, and hardly waited for my nod to address the vintner. “I can detect the traces left by magic. I’m willing to inspect your vats. And surely I’ll find evidence of perfidy. Won’t I?”

The vintner’s mouth dropped open and then snapped shut again, and his eyes darted from side to side, as if he hoped someone else—someone less intimidating than Benedict—would pop out of nowhere the way Benedict had and intervene.

“Ah, my lord,” he stammered. “Your time is so valuable. Surely the duke can pronounce a judgment without—”

“You sound as if you’re suggesting that His Grace’s attention and time are less valuable than mine,” Benedict cut in, and my back stiffened involuntarily at the low, furious timbre of his voice. “Are you? Surely no one could be so foolish. After all, Duke Lucian dedicates every moment of the day to Calatria’s welfare. I merely serve him and support his efforts to the best of my ability. Do you want my expert inspection or not? I can’t speak for His Grace, but if I don’t find any evidence of magical tampering, I will advise him to hang you for your lies and your impudence both.”

A strange, unfamiliar warmth bloomed in my chest, flooding up into my heating cheeks. I stared at Benedict’s hard profile, the set of his jaw, the tension in his shoulder and arm.

Surely he had some agenda of his own that would be served by supporting my efforts, didn’t he? Because why else would he praise me like that? Step in to handle a common rascal to whom I really shouldn’t take the time to address myself, thus

preserving the dignity of my rank and showing me a genuine respect I hadn't received from anyone at my court in the gods only knew how long?

Something unpleasant tickled at the back of my mind, something I really didn't want to admit might be shame.

Benedict might have been genuinely offering his help when he arrived, not condescending to me at all. And I'd replied with mockery. Perhaps, if I changed my tune now, that joke about the wine could pass as more or less good-natured.

"As my nearest advisor, Lord Benedict does speak for me," I said, the words flowing surprisingly easily off my tongue, as if they'd been awaiting the opportunity to take flight. "And I trust his expertise implicitly. I'll render my judgment now. If you decline Lord Benedict's generous offer to examine the evidence, then I'll assume you're lying, and the clerk will assess your fines on your way out. If you accept, then Lord Benedict will pronounce his own judgment, and it will be final."

I glanced up at Benedict, and I found that he'd turned to gaze down at me, lips parted in what could have been shock. Our eyes met—and held, precisely as they had a few minutes ago.

Only this time, I had no doubt at all of the meaning of the heat in his, of that dangerous gleam. The moment he had me alone...I shivered, my cock stirring and a heavy, needy ache building behind my balls.

Benedict turned away, and I was able to draw a full breath.

"Well? What's your answer?" he demanded.

The vintner hunched in on himself, expression gone as sour as his wine. "The fines may bankrupt me," he grumbled.

“Be grateful His Grace isn’t sending you back to the magistrate to stand trial for making a false accusation.”

Benedict waved a hand, and one of the guards stepped forward to escort the man away.

A loudly cleared throat drew my attention: Lord Zettine, about whom I’d completely forgotten, and whose tight-lipped, subtly murderous expression was focused on...not on me at all. On Benedict. Benedict, who’d blithely usurped Zettine’s role as my Lord Chancellor, putting himself quite literally between Zettine and the throne. And in the process, drawing Zettine’s ire away from me and focusing it, at least temporarily, on himself.

Intentionally? Or simply because Benedict didn’t give a single damn about what anyone thought of him?

Either way, it seemed less and less likely that Benedict and Zettine had some kind of secret understanding.

And as little as I wanted to come to depend on Benedict’s protection, when he could revoke it at any time, I found it hard to be afraid of someone when I had Benedict standing between us with his hand on his sword.

In lieu of sticking my tongue out at Lord Zettine, I smirked with one corner of my mouth, the courtier’s equivalent. “Allow the next petitioner to approach,” I said, in Zettine and the clerk’s direction.

“Momentarily,” Zettine said. “First, perhaps Lord General Rathenas would like to take my chair for this session? I would be honored, my lord.”

I had to give the old hypocrite credit. He sounded almost convincingly as if he’d

think it an honor to vacate his almost-throne in favor of a much younger, much more popular man.

Would Benedict take his seat? That would be a terrible misstep, making him look power-hungry and insecure about his place as my advisor and general. But of course Benedict had better instincts than that, and as I watched him in bemused, aroused confusion, he put a hand on his sword hilt and used the scabbard to push his cloak out of the way, settling himself on the step below me and lounging back onto an elbow, entirely at his ease. Far too much at his ease for the setting and the occasion, and disturbingly close to me, his hip pressed against the side of my ankle.

That one point of contact burned through me like he'd burrowed a hot coal under the leather of my boot and under my very skin.

"No need," Benedict said airily. "This is more than comfortable enough for a soldier. I believe His Grace said he was ready for the next case, Lord Chancellor."

"Step forward," Zettine said, voice tight.

And court proceeded: I heard their petitions, and I rendered judgment, and the clerk took notes, and the guards escorted those deemed guilty away.

But it might as well have been happening to someone else for all the notice I took of any of it. As a boy I'd had a book filled with tales of far, exotic places and adventures, and one beautiful illustration had shown an emperor with a great, deadly tiger in a jeweled collar lying down beside his throne. Benedict sprawled at my feet in the same way, all coiled, dangerous power and lazy willingness to pretend to be tame. Like the tiger, he could shake the collar off and rip everyone in the room to shreds anytime he wanted.

His choice to remain there, guarding and supporting me and pretending I had him on

a leash, left me flustered and too hot and with my heart pounding so hard it rattled my ribs. I knew damn well he'd stop pretending once no one else was watching us, but what form that lack of pretense would take...

At last the final petitioner filed out, the assembled courtiers rose and bowed, and Lord Zettine declared the session at an end. Benedict moved at last, sitting up straight and stretching his legs.

When he turned his head, I turned mine too, as if that leash were attached to my neck. Benedict's mouth quirked up at the corner, showing me a hint of tooth. Apparently the barely restrained tiger wanted me to be on my guard.

He didn't stand up with everyone else, and when I shifted my weight he slipped a hand under my robes where no one could see and wrapped it firmly around my calf, giving me an almost painful squeeze. His eyes gleamed silvery.

Well. Message received. And the defiant courage that had carried me out of my study and into the throne room without waiting for Benedict to arrive and escort me had finally withered away under the force of his presence.

"I would be alone with my thoughts for a time, Lord Zettine," I said. "Thank you for your diligence, as always."

A few whispers from the departing court, magnified by the echoes of the high ceiling, suggested that at least some of them thought it odd that being "alone with my thoughts" included Benedict. But they were outside the bubble of space that included me, rooted to my throne, and Benedict, poised to pounce the moment they were gone.

The tall double doors shut behind the last pair of guards with a muted thud.

And Benedict and I were alone.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

Silence fell. Benedict didn't move. I braced myself, gripping the armrests of the throne, sitting up painfully straight with all my muscles rigid.

He still didn't move.

When he spoke it made me jump, and all the breath I'd been holding whooshed out and dizzied me.

"I'm not sure what to do with you," he said in a meditative tone that absolutely terrified me. He slid his hand under my robes again, tickling the tips of his fingers up the back of my leg to my knee, sending flickering sparks of sensation along all my overstrained nerves and making me twitch. My breath quickened. The muscles in my lower abdomen clenched almost painfully.

Benedict's lips curved in a knowing smile. "It's obvious enough what you want me to do with you, at any rate. And there's the rub, Lucian. I can't reward you by giving you what you want. After you slipped away without me, without the guards I'd assigned or even the guards you'd chosen for yourself? Do you understand how stupid that was?"

"I went from my private study, which your men were guarding, through a private passage and into private rooms only accessible through there or through the heavily guarded throne room!" I'd rehearsed my argument as I took that walk, knowing I'd need to defend myself later. "No one could possibly have—ow!"

Benedict's hand had tightened around my knee, fingers digging in with startling force.

He lunged forward, eyes blazing, and even though he still sat at my feet I shrank back. “The same way no one could possibly have put poison in your wine? Damn it, Lucian, you have to take this seriously! If you won’t cooperate, I told you I can’t and won’t—”

“I can still feel you inside me, how much more fucking cooperation do you want?”

“—be bothered to—you can feel me—fucking gods, Lucian!”

Benedict rolled to his feet too quickly for me to react, leaning down and pinning my wrists to the armrests under his big hands. He blotted out the rest of the world and filled my vision. All of my senses, because his heat surrounded me and I breathed him in with every rough inhale.

“Don’t try to distract me,” he ground out. “That’s how you’re paying me for my efforts. That’s not the kind of cooperation I mean, and you know it. Every time you’re alone, you’re in danger. Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“Because you apparently couldn’t be bothered after all. I only had a few minutes to try to eat. I’d been working all morning, after you, after we—I barely had the time to look over the day’s petitions before I went into court. Because of your orders to your men, I had to spend hours here without even a fucking cup of coffee, Benedict. And you know damn well if I’d been late Zettine would’ve made me look a fool, as he always does.” I hated admitting that aloud, but it wasn’t as if Benedict hadn’t noticed for himself. “You can’t expect me to neglect my duties while I wait for your convenience.”

Benedict tilted his head, examining me as if I’d been displayed solely for his perusal. “I was furious with you,” he said at last, and his grip on my wrists loosened. I blew out a long breath, wincing as my hands tingled. He sighed, his gaze softening into something like ruefulness. “But it took some of the wind out of my sails when you

told that idiot that I spoke for you, right there in front of everyone.”

Maybe I’d discovered the secret, other than that cock of his, to Benedict’s odd power over all of the men he rotated in and out of his bed, because if he looked at all of them like this—with his entire attention, with that focused warmth—then of course they’d be eager for more of it.

Swallowing hard barely cleared the lump in my throat, and my voice came out almost a whisper. “You told them all that I dedicate every moment to Calatria’s welfare. Of course, you lied. I delayed my meetings this morning to satisfy your lust.”

He leaned in, close enough that I could see the faintest tracery of amber in his gray eyes. No wonder they shone like metal, with that hint of gold within silver.

His smile held more than a hint of mischief.

“No, it’s nothing but the truth. Satiating me does serve Calatria’s best interests, because my command of the army ensures Calatria’s welfare. And my magic deters dishonest winemakers, which is even more important for drunkards like me, as you—no, I know you were trying to irritate me, but it almost made me laugh out loud. I’m not angry about it, don’t get all agitated—”

“I’m not agitated! And you’re incredibly arrogant if you really believe—”

Benedict’s mouth cut off any further words and any possibility of rational thought. Firm, and demanding, and both softer and rougher than I would’ve imagined. My lips parted for him as if he’d used his magic, and when he teased into me with his tongue I let out a helpless, humiliating moan at how perfect it felt, that intimate entry, the way he took me as if he had every right to anything I had to give.

He let go of one wrist to wrap his hand in my hair, cradling my head and tipping it the

way he wanted me, plundering my mouth, licking into me, biting at my lips and then thrusting his tongue inside to claim me. I'd been telling the truth when I said I could still feel him inside me—or rather, the echo of him, the hollowness he'd left when he withdrew. I clenched around nothing, aching for him to fill me everywhere he could, in my mouth and between my legs, deeper, more than anyone ever had.

Benedict hadn't kissed me this morning. I'd thought he wouldn't want to.

I'd thought I wouldn't want to, would have vehemently asserted that there was nothing I'd want less, but when at last he drew back, sucking on my swollen lower lip, he left me cold and wanting. He tugged on my hair to hold me in place as I whimpered and tried to chase his mouth with mine.

“Fucking gods,” he said, voice hoarse and rough. I forced my eyelids open a crack and found him staring at me, eyes burning, his jaw tight with—anger? Why would he be angry, when I hadn't fought him at all? “You have the sweetest mouth when you're not using it to talk,” he bit out, and let me go so abruptly I had to catch myself before I hit my head.

Benedict stood up and immediately reached for the placket of his trousers, cursing again as the massive ridge of his erection interfered with undoing the buttons.

A bolt of heat shot down into the pit of my stomach, my balls drawing up, and I had to squeeze my eyes shut again and bite my tingling lips to keep in a moan. Just the thought of Benedict fucking me on my own throne shouldn't nearly make me spend in my trousers like a slut, but the image flashed through my mind, unstoppable, and...

“You can't, and your curse can't possibly need it this soon after this morning,” I gasped, clutching desperately at any shred of rationality I could find in my spinning head. I opened my eyes again. He'd made progress with his buttons, and the flushed, thick head of his cock had emerged through the gap, the tip gleaming.

Kissing me. He'd gotten into that state from kissing me , pinning me to my throne and taking my mouth.

Taking my mouth...taking my mouth. Because he hadn't made any move to undress me, or move me from where I sat, or tell me to do it myself, and that suggested...oh, no. No no no.

"Using me that way won't do a damn thing for your curse," I protested, as he tugged his trousers open to reveal more of his hard, straining cock. Did he really think I'd simply submit to him like that, with no practical reason for it at all? "That's not a part of our agreement."

Benedict kept working on his trousers, still held together at the top of the gap by his heavy sword belt. Fully clothed, booted and cloaked, his sword and knife to either side of the opening he'd made for only his cock, he looked like a soldier on duty who'd taken an illicit moment to be serviced by...by a stable boy, perhaps, or a kitchen maid.

Or his liege lord, the duke in his crown and robes.

A fresh wave of dizziness nearly carried me sideways as that image flashed through my mind: how we'd appear right now if anyone came into the room, Benedict standing over me with his cock out, starting to lean down and put it to my waiting lips.

No, not waiting. I wouldn't do it.

"I won't service you like this," I insisted, trying and failing to sound decisive and commanding. "Let me up. This is absurd."

He glanced up at last, raising his eyebrows. "What's absurd is that you're arguing

with me. Our agreement is that I'll have you whenever and however I want. And right now, I want to fuck your pretty mouth."

"You said between my legs, servicing your curse! Take me...there's no part of this that..." I stopped, thinking back, forcing myself to remember exactly what he'd said to me. Recalling precise wording was a skill I'd worked hard to develop over the years. "No," I said, as it came back to me. "Fucking my—there's no way you meant to include this in 'and so on,' Benedict!"

"You'll never know whether I meant to or not, because it's included if I say it is," he said, and finally tugged the last button free, exposing his cock all the way down to the base.

Gods, it was thick. Not that it mattered. He'd choke me to death with his length before he got the whole thing into my mouth, anyway. Much better if he stuffed it into my hole, where he could force me open at his leisure without cutting off my breathing.

No, not better, not...oh, if I'd had time for lunch I wouldn't be so lightheaded and strange. This was all Benedict's fault. All of it. Maybe he had been the one to poison Fabian, just to maneuver me into this—but that thought fled as he braced one knee on the seat of my throne and one hand on the back of it, leaning in until his cock pointed directly at my mouth.

"It isn't, and I won't—let go of me!" He'd put his other hand around the nape of my neck, and I yanked away, flailing at his arm until he cursed, caught my wrists with both hands, and then pinned them over my head with only one, putting the other right back into my hair. This time he wrapped the strands around his fingers, holding me tightly enough that any attempted movement stung my scalp.

He pushed his hips forward, the tip of his cock brushing my lower lip, satiny and

heavy. The scent of him hit me all at once: salt and bitterness, a faint note of soap, a hint of male sweat, heady and overwhelming.

“If you really want me to let go of you, I will,” he said, fingers clenching in my hair. “But your robes look like you’re smuggling a tentpole in them. You’re as pink as a peony, and I can see your heart beating in your throat. Come on and give it a lick, Lucian. Nothing but your tongue. Show me how much you want it.”

Closing my eyes made it worse. Now I only had pure sensation without the distraction of my vision. All of my concentration had narrowed down to my tongue, and on keeping it absolutely still.

I would absolutely not lick the head of his cock.

My mouth had started to water, and I’d need to swallow, and when I opened my eyes again and looked up—there was Benedict. For a long, long moment, he watched me watching him. I blinked first.

And then I couldn’t take it anymore, my heart beating in my throat precisely as Benedict had said, my wrists aching in his grip and the urge to writhe where I sat to try to relieve the need between my legs growing nearly overwhelming.

It was that or...I darted my tongue out and tasted him.

Salty, and faintly, sweetly bitter, and it always took me by surprise how something that felt so hard inside me could be so silky-smooth in my mouth.

Benedict’s eyes widened, his fingers dug into my scalp, and he thrust in, rubbing his cockhead over my tongue. “Lick, Lucian,” he growled, and I wriggled my tongue, my mouth already too stuffed for more.

But I tried, because the heat in his eyes had me pinned more surely than his weight leaning against my wrists, and I'd almost started writhing after all. If he would only let one of my arms go so I could reach down and take myself in hand, then I might have some relief from the pressure mounting in me, but my restlessness had no other outlet than my mouth: licking him, sucking him—gods help me, doing precisely what he'd told me to and showing him how much I wanted it.

I moaned around him, my eyes already starting to water from the pressure against the back of my throat. Saliva pooled in the corners of my mouth as he thrust deeper still, and then it dripped down to trickle over my neck and dampen my velvet robes.

He'd already wrecked me, and at any moment someone could enter the throne room. Yes, I'd ordered everyone out, but that wouldn't stop Gerfred if I were urgently needed elsewhere.

Moaning a protest around Benedict's thick cock only seemed to encourage him, and he grunted and thrust deeper, bruising the back of my throat, bruising my wrists with his iron grip, my scalp stinging as he pulled my hair.

Now I'd started writhing no matter how hard I tried to stay still, squirming in my seat with everything below the waist throbbing, arms aching with tension. Benedict fucked my mouth, gods, my pretty mouth, not so pretty now all stretched and wet and shiny, nothing but another hole for his cock to fill.

From this angle I couldn't see much but the wool of his tunic, and rolling my eyes back in my head gave me his stubbled chin, the tanned column of his neck. Everything jolted and bounced as he used me to chase his pleasure, and I gave up, letting my eyes slide shut, letting the thrust and drag of his heavy cock on my tongue light up every nerve in my body, choking slightly on his cockhead, which only made me shudder and draw as taut as a bowstring, both his cock and mine straining—

Benedict groaned and pulled back, cock stiffening and twitching as he flooded my mouth with his come instead of pumping it down my throat. It overflowed no matter how I tried to swallow, coating my chin and neck, salty and rich and somehow effervescent on my tongue, like champagne—or magic. Tingling.

I stayed suspended there, trembling, his cockhead still filling my mouth all thick and hot and his come soaking the front of my robes. It'd been a close-run thing, but thank the gods I hadn't degraded myself by spending in my trousers and soaking the rest of me.

“Your mouth is even prettier when it's dripping,” Benedict said.

That was it. My spine bowed, my eyes rolled back in my head, and I thrashed in Benedict's grip as my balls pulled tight and I spent helplessly in my trousers, hot and wet.

Fuck. I'd need the whole no-doubt sleepless night to determine whom I hated more, Benedict or myself.

When he let go of my neck and my wrists at last, his cock slipping out of my slack mouth as he unwedged his knee from next to my leg, I slumped down into my throne, a damp, ruined mess. I swiped at my sloppy mouth and chin with one throbbing wrist, managing to smear Benedict's come all over the rich embroidery on my sleeve in the process.

Damn it all.

“I wish I had some way to create an instant painting of you like this, but my magic doesn't stretch that way,” Benedict said, and I glanced up to find him nearly put back together again, as infuriatingly quick to look not at all like he'd been fucking me a moment before as he had been earlier in the day. “I'd like to look at you longer, but I

suppose I'll need to clean you up a bit. We can't have your robes of state all wet like that, and anyway, I don't think there's a laundress in the world who could get that much semen out of silk velvet. But my magic can."

He leaned in and laid his hand on my knee, rubbing his fingers over the fabric there, and my robes—twitched slightly, as if they'd been given temporary life in the most disturbing way. I shuddered and shook him off, but his work was done: when I ran my hands over my robes, they'd been made pristine again.

Under them, however...

Benedict grinned down at me as I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "I didn't clean anything under your robes," he said, and tugged his sword belt into place in a sure, practiced motion that sent a tiny, horrible shiver into the pit of my stomach. Why did he need to be so effortlessly competent? In everything, even the smallest of actions? "You can take care of that the mundane way. And make sure you think about me while you do."

"I'll be thinking about how much I detest you," I muttered, because I didn't need the whole night to consider the matter after all, it turned out. I hated Benedict the most.

He shrugged, somehow elegantly settling his cloak around himself at the same time. "Up to you. The guards I selected are now waiting for you in your anteroom, by the way. I'll escort you to them. If you please, Your Grace?"

"And if I prefer to remain here alone for a time?"

I really didn't. I wanted a bath and the largest coffee tray in Calatria. But simply doing what he told me without any argument at all rankled unbearably.

"You'll be alone with me if you do, because I'm not leaving you here where you

could sneak off again or be murdered by someone sneaking in. And you never know, I might get hard again if I grow bored waiting for you.”

His light tone suggested a joke, but I knew better.

Resigning myself to my drawers chafing all the way back to my rooms, I rose with as much dignity as I could manage and descended the dais toward the antechamber.

Gerfred popped out of a chair and bowed as I opened the door, Benedict’s surly guards standing behind him as promised. Surely he wouldn’t notice anything amiss, not with Benedict’s magic and my ducal poise.

“Let me take your crown for you, Your Grace,” he said. “Somehow it’s gotten all crooked!”

Behind me, Benedict chuckled.

Damn it to hell. I gritted my teeth, silently vowing revenge.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

While I soaked in my bath, closing my eyes and trying to push any thoughts of Fabian's death out of my mind, the tower bells of the temple on the other side of the palace wall chimed the sixth hour past noon. Less than a full day since Fabian had been murdered and I'd climbed out of this same tub to find his body.

Only ten hours since Benedict had bent me over his bed and taken what he wanted.

And barely more than an hour since he'd spent in my mouth while I occupied my ducal throne.

That particular act did nothing to relieve a twilight mage's curse. It had been entirely for his own enjoyment. Or perhaps to prove a point. Hadn't he threatened to have me on my throne all those years ago?

The rough grip of his hands around my wrists, around the back of my neck. Come on and give it a lick, Lucian . The pressure in my throat, the tight, desperate need between my legs, the overwhelming pleasure as I'd spilled with his cock in my mouth, his laugh as Gerfred commented on my disarray...

My face burned hotter than the steam rising from my bath, and I squirmed, desperate to escape my own thoughts, wishing I could sink down into the water and disappear.

At least the bath hid my half-hard cock. And I'd have the chance to restore myself to calm before I had to face him.

Gerfred had been dispatched to send supper, both mine and Benedict's, to the private family parlor. Surely I could ignore him while I ate, and the feral growls of my

stomach would drown out whatever irritating remarks he might inflict on me. I could endure anything for a joint of beef and a goblet of non-lethal wine.

At last the bath water cooled enough that I couldn't stall any longer, and I climbed out, shrugged on my dressing gown, and stepped out into my bedchamber, resolved to keep my equanimity. My cock had almost gone soft again. It'd stay that way, dammit. I'd grow inured to his coarse, vulgar appeal soon enough, and then I'd be able to stoically take his cock without giving him the satisfaction of my body's response.

And anyway, this wouldn't last forever. Once I'd ferreted out the assassin I could end the arrangement with Benedict, and possibly also send him on a long, dangerous mission a thousand miles away. Something that would cover him (posthumously, if the gods smiled on me) in glory.

Lost in a fantasy where I forced out one, or possibly two, tears while delivering Benedict's eulogy, I wandered to the fireplace and turned around to warm my backside.

And nearly leapt out of my skin as my eyes focused on my bed.

Stripped of his sword belt, cloak, boots, and tunic, his linen shirt hanging unlaced and open, lounging on a heap of my pillows, Benedict had clearly made himself entirely at home.

On my bed .

"Gods," I gasped, heart settling slightly from the frantic race it'd begun when he startled me. He wouldn't be able to see the outline of my cock through my dressing gown, luckily, but that had jumped too. "What the hell do you think you're doing? I have a sitting room right through that door!"

“Making myself comfortable while we wait for supper,” he said, and I gaped at him in speechless indignation. “The sofa in there doesn’t have enough pillows.”

“You claim to be a soldier,” I snapped. “Don’t you sleep on the ground when you’re campaigning? Or do you make your men carry a hundred pillows for you as they march through the mountains?”

“Sleeping on the ground when I’m campaigning is all the more reason to sleep on a heap of feather pillows when I’m not.” He slid down, his white grin and ruby earring and wicked gray eyes glinting at me in the candlelight, his long hair getting ruffled as he rubbed all six-feet-muscled-plus of himself all over... my pillows. Mine . They’d smell like him now. “Or doing other things on a heap of feather pillows. You should join me. You’re already mostly naked. And this bed is—”

“Mine!” I cried, goaded past any pretense at patience. So much for my equanimity. I took a moment to watch as it skittered off into the distance, giggling at me maliciously. “The bed’s mine , which means I know exactly what it is. And I know exactly what this isn’t, Benedict, which is more than you seem to! I’m not your whore. I’m not your—lover,” and I choked, coughed, and cleared my throat, that word sticking strangely as I spat it out. “Using me to satisfy your curse while you act as my bodyguard for now does not include—”

I waved my hand vaguely at his disgustingly handsome face with its mock-innocent expression that wouldn’t have fooled a brain-damaged drunkard, the loose sprawl of his long legs all over my previously pristine bed, and the way he’d mussed and befouled my lovely pillows.

“Doesn’t include what?” he asked, and folded his arms behind his head.

How did anyone have arms like that? Even in those loose linen sleeves his muscles showed, all firm and thick.

Firm. Thick. Like other parts of him.

What the hell had he done to me? I needed to eat. That would cure this lightheaded inability to act like a rational man.

“This,” I finished, too tired and annoyed to sum up my outrage in any more eloquent way. I drew a deep breath. “Get out of my bed!”

“All right,” he said, to my complete shock, and rolled off the bed in one smooth motion. “But only because those footsteps in the hall must be the servants laying the table.” Ah. He’d been obeying the dictates of his stomach, not his liege lord. That made much more sense. He looked me up and down. “Are you dressing for supper? Or do you plan to tease me with all that lovely skin while we eat?”

“Tease you?” I couldn’t help glancing down too, taking in my pale bare feet and ankles, the black fabric swathing the rest of me. A bit of my throat and chest showed at the top, and maybe my legs would be visible under the table when I sat (if Benedict decided to lean down under and leer at me), but “all that lovely skin”? Had he lost his mind? “This is hardly seductive. And you ought to know better than to think I’d want to be. Not for you, anyway. Besides, you’ve already debased me twice today. That’s enough even for someone with your animal appetites.”

“Well, then,” he said, a corner of his mouth twitching as if he’d barely managed to suppress a laugh, “I suppose we’ll go in to supper en dishabille.”

What? He’d found that funny ? When had I lost the ability to insult him into sparking anger? Earlier today he’d told me that he’d nearly laughed at my insult about the cheap wine, and now this? What the hell had changed, and how did I change it back?

But amused or not, he prowled like he always had, taking one slow step forward and then another, his eyes never leaving mine. The room went hushed around us, the

crackle of the fire and the voices of the servants down the hall receding into the pound of my heart and the rush of my breath.

Benedict held out a hand, his forearm at the precise, perfect angle of a gentleman offering to escort a dining or dance partner.

And he bowed. Gods help me, he bowed, eyes still fixed on my face, and I went momentarily dizzy as our first meeting flashed through my mind. This gesture didn't show any more genuine respect than before, but it did hold the same challenge.

When we'd met I'd had the option of dodging that challenge, avoiding him as much as possible and ignoring the way he smirked and stared until I blushed when I couldn't help being in his presence. Come to think of it, much of my skill at keeping my blushes in check stemmed from the practice he'd given me.

But this time Benedict wasn't constrained by a public setting, or by my father's authority as the duke, or by anything at all.

I could set my hand on his arm, rough hair and hard muscle and the heat of him under my fingers where he'd rolled up his sleeve, and walk with him to supper—both of us barefoot, half dressed and disheveled, looking for all the world like the duke and his lover taking an intimate meal together after spending an hour in the duke's bed.

Or I could refuse. And then he could carry me there if he wished. Or throw me on the bed and have his way with me again. Or tug the cord of my dressing gown and bare me to his gaze, and I knew I'd be unable to control the color and heat that'd flood across my chest and up into my neck and cheeks if he did that.

When the servants saw us like this, there'd be no way to hide it. They'd know Benedict and I had...

Unless I played it off another way? Family intimacy could be very similar to the intimacy of love from the outside looking in. If Benedict were truly my brother, of course we'd dine together casually dressed. There would be no reason not to. I could address him that way in front of the servants. Treat him like a member of my family.

My gut clenched with sudden nausea. A brother? Benedict had never been my brother, and he never would be. The very idea revolted me.

No, that would never work.

But...gods, why hadn't it occurred to me before? Clearly my shock over Fabian's murder and Benedict's demands had crippled my brain.

I'd been afraid that I'd be mocked for being Benedict's newest plaything, the object for his curse and his lust.

But as the Crown Duke of Calatria, wasn't it my prerogative to take a plaything of my own? Someone to pleasure me. Serve my whims.

...Even join me in court and announce that he served and supported me, sitting at my feet and showing that he knew I was the rightful duke.

My spine straightened as new strength flowed through me.

Benedict didn't seem to care if anyone found out he'd started using me to relieve his curse. His recklessness earlier in the throne room had proven that. But he couldn't flaunt his power over me if I seized the high ground of public opinion first, making myself appear to be the one in control of our arrangement.

So I reached out and set my hand on his forearm, accepting his escort. Benedict's arm tensed almost imperceptibly under my touch.

I ducked my head to hide my smile. Benedict would suspect something if he saw it; he knew better than to think I'd smile at him simply for offering me his arm to go to supper. Or for any reason.

"Lead the way," I said, and we proceeded to the dining room.

He walked close to me, hardly keeping a courteous distance. Could he feel the vibration of my hammering heart? If he did, he'd probably ascribe it to my being flustered by his nearness, the arrogant ass.

But for the first time since I'd heard Fabian fall to the floor—perhaps even for the first time since Fabian himself, pale and terrified and furious, had come to tell me that he'd found my father dead—I had that swooping, soaring sensation that came from taking control of events rather than having them happen to me in inevitable, unstoppable succession.

Benedict led me through the door to the dining room with all the courtly grace of a lord at a royal ball, and the two footmen who'd laid the table bowed low, one of them moving to pull out my chair and the other to pour the wine.

As Benedict handed me into the chair, I glanced up at him from under my lashes exactly the way I'd seen that idiot Clothurn do when Benedict had been seducing him in the courtyard, and I allowed my hand to slide off of his arm, my fingers tracing along and between his, feeling the length of them, their strength. All the hair rose on my own arm, a frisson that traveled up and then down again, lodging in the base of my spine.

It took no effort at all to lower my voice to a sultry purr as I said, "So gallant, Lord Benedict. I can't believe I overlooked you for so long."

Benedict stared down at me for a startled instant, and I knew the footmen were

pricking up their ears and holding their breath, eager to catch every word. While we'd both done a fair job of pretending to cordiality and respect in public, everyone at court knew there was no love lost. And whispers would already be spreading after Benedict's uncharacteristic appearance by my throne today.

These two footmen would be able to trade their story for drinks from the palace kitchens to the servants' quarters of every lord's and lady's residence in the city. By morning, they'd be drunker than even Benedict usually managed.

Benedict pulled his arm away and dropped into his own chair across from me, brows drawn together, eyes fixed on me intently.

"You can go," he said to the footmen, and I had to smother a laugh at a quickly suppressed sound of disappointment from one of them. But I couldn't look at them; I couldn't tear my eyes away from Benedict's smoldering gaze. "I'll pour and carve."

"Yes, my lord," and "Very good, my lord," and they were leaving, the doorknob rattling—which gave me only a moment to really drive it home.

"If you would be so kind, Lord Benedict," I said, "serve me generously." I leaned back in my chair, settling myself luxuriously, imagining that I was one of those sybarites Benedict consorted with in Calatria's most expensive dens of sin. Perhaps they all regularly wore silk dressing gowns to supper. They'd probably know how to make the stupid garment look alluring rather than simply wrinkled. "I spend too much of my time attending to matters of state. I think tonight I'd like to...indulge my more pleasurable appetites."

The furrow between Benedict's brows deepened, and his eyes held a dangerous gleam. "As you wish, Your Grace," he said, and the low timbre of his voice promised more danger still. I shivered, clenching my hand in a fold of my dressing gown to hide it. "You know I serve at your pleasure at all times."

The door swung shut behind the departing footmen with a light thud and a click. They were gone. No more audience. I blew out a long, shaky breath, slumping down further into my chair.

Benedict cocked his head, his brow smoothing out at last. But when he spoke, his voice had a cold, hard tone to it that seemed to cut right through me. “Ah. So that little farce wasn’t for my benefit. For a moment I thought you’d really—you’d lost your mind.”

“Then why did you play along?” I demanded.

Benedict reached for the carving knife and fork, his knuckles white where he gripped them. “What else was I supposed to do? Explain to the servants that you’re selling yourself to me for protection from your enemies? Tell them what I did to you this afternoon, and this morning?” He stabbed the fork into the joint, juices spurting, and I couldn’t help flinching. Benedict smiled sourly, with no humor at all, and began to cut with jerky motions. “Very clever, Lucian. I applaud you.” He didn’t sound the slightest bit appreciative. “When the court gossips realize we’re sharing a bed, as they’re bound to do sooner or later, they won’t guess the truth. They’ll probably think you’re manipulating me, keeping me sex-addled so that I won’t plot against you.”

He dropped a slice of beef onto my plate and began cutting another for himself. He’d said he’d pour the wine, but gods, I needed to be drunk—and quickly. Without anyone here to observe, I didn’t need to stand on my rank and wait to be served. I sloshed a large measure into my goblet, took a petty pleasure in setting the decanter down with a thump without pouring any for him, and picked up the glass.

Only for Benedict to drop the knife with a clatter and lean over and snatch the glass out of my hand before I could get it to my mouth.

“Have you forgotten why I’m here?” His voice snapped like a whip. “What you really

want me for? You don't eat or drink before I make sure it's safe."

I could only nod, throat tight, as he inspected everything in turn: the meat, the wine, the bread, the butter, the vegetables. He took his gods-damned time, cocking his head and gently touching every dish and every implement. My father hadn't had a court mage for years before he died, too paranoid to trust anyone whose power he couldn't control. Of course, if he'd had one, maybe he wouldn't have died at all—but I'd come to realize people like my father usually ended up hoist with their own petard.

His blind spot regarding Benedict had extended to tolerating the potential threat of his less mundane abilities, but Benedict had still, probably out of self-protective tact, refrained from using them very much at court. And so I hadn't witnessed a lot of magic in my life, much less than usual for a man of my rank.

Perhaps that was why this small display of power held me spellbound. Even my impatience and my twisting, growling stomach didn't overwhelm my wonder. Magic, a godly attribute bestowed on the humans Dromos found worthy of it at their birth—and even tainted by Ennolu's anger, as in Benedict's case, such an extraordinary gift.

Beautiful, even at second hand. A lightening of the air, a glimmer in the edges of my soul. How did it look and feel to him? As he touched the slightest tip of his finger to the wine's surface, his eyes half-closed, glossy black hair falling around his face as he tipped his chin down in thought?

Benedict was beautiful like this: poised for action, a thrumming tension singing through every muscle of his powerful body, as if using his magic was the same to him as taking up his sword and facing the enemy. It struck me all at once, as if everything in the world had shifted very slightly to another angle and left me reeling from the new perspective.

Beautiful, and irresistible, and how the ever-loving fuck had I overlooked him for so long? I'd been so intent on despising him, on fearing him, on being jealous of the effortless way he inspired admiration and loyalty in soldiers and lovers and the common people of Calatria alike, that I hadn't even truly sat down and thought about why they felt that way.

At last he sat back in his chair, shook his hair out of his face, and blinked twice slowly, as if he had to transition back to the world around us from whatever he'd been experiencing.

"No poison," he said, and frowned.

I cleared my throat, shook my head to try to rid myself of the haze that had fallen over me. But it didn't work. Benedict was still beautiful. Even if he sounded disappointed that no one had tried to kill me tonight.

Oh, this was very very bad. A cold, hard lump had formed in my chest, sitting so heavily I didn't know if I'd be able to force down my longed-for supper after all.

"So give me back my wine," I managed, voice husky and betraying.

He handed it back, our fingers brushing, the sparking heat of his touch nearly making me drop the goblet. Wine splashed onto my plate and down over my fingers.

Fuck it. I didn't even bother trying to dry my hand, simply taking a long, long drink, knowing I'd be intoxicated absurdly quickly given my empty stomach.

When I set the half-empty glass down with a clumsy thump, my head already spinning, I found Benedict regarding me with one eyebrow raised.

"I see it's going to be that kind of night," he said. "All right. I don't need to tell you

that I'm as happy to drink too much as the next man." He filled his own glass, raised it in a mock salute, and drained it in one draught.

Yes. Apparently it would be that kind of night. I finished my own wine before I picked up my fork and knife, and nodded at Benedict as he refilled my glass to the brim.

It had been that kind of year, that kind of reign, that kind of life. Perhaps I'd pass out in my plate and find blessed, temporary oblivion before I could think any more about what it meant that Benedict had fucked me, that he'd forced his cock down my throat while I sat on my throne, that I'd spent like his whore while he used me, that I found him—

No. Wine. And both my half-formed revelations and the court knowing he and I were lovers would be a problem for future, hung over Lucian.

Wine. Much, much more wine. And if I did pass out, Benedict could fucking well carry me to bed and pour me into it.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

“Stop wriggling,” Benedict said, and then grunted as I shifted sideways, my elbow knocking hard into his ribs. He tightened his grip and managed to dig his fingers into mine, and I yelped and flailed, knocking us both sideways.

The hallway spun dizzily around me, my feet slipping, and we stumbled through the door of my bedchamber together, Benedict steering us as I laughed and did my best to tumble onto the floor.

Instead I landed on my back with a soft thump, my head bouncing.

Oh, gods, too much wine. I squeezed my eyes closed until everything settled, from the universe around me to my stomach.

My bed. I’d made it to my bed.

Benedict had carried me here and poured me into it after all, despite my best efforts to send us both sprawling. Of course, he’d only gotten me as far as lying sideways with my legs hanging off, but I had to give him credit where it was due.

I blinked and found him staring down at me, gray eyes wide.

Not angry, the way I’d expected. But—open, wanting something—he shook his head and drew back, expression shuttering, but I reached up and caught him by the front of his shirt, clinging on for dear life.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I demanded, not even slurring my words. Well, maybe a tiny bit. “Who’s going to fight off all the assassins if you leave me here

alone?”

He stilled, leaning down over me with one hand braced on the bed and the other trapped under my waist. The candles in the branch by the bed had burned down to stubs while we ate, shedding only a faint flickering glow on the side of his face.

Candlelight flattered everyone, but it made Benedict look like the gorgeous subject of yet another modern artist’s experimental portraiture. The sharp line of his nose and the angle of his jaw, his firm lips fading into shadow, the golden gleam in his eye, all of it held me spellbound. His heart pounded away under my hand. Wine could do that, but probably not to a mage who could drink every soldier in Calatria under the table.

A warm, lazy, melting need unfurled inside me, between my legs, spreading through me like a drug. Perhaps I did need to indulge my appetites more often: for food, for wine, for being fucked within an inch of my life by my detestable stepbrother.

He didn’t seem so very detestable right at this moment, honestly, and I could quite happily blame the wine for that as well as for my loose-limbed sprawl.

I let go of his shirt with one hand and tried to smooth out the wrinkles I’d left in it, patting clumsily at his chest. Mmm, he had such a hard chest. Patting turned into...petting. And tracing the outlines of his pectoral muscles with my fingers.

Benedict let out a strange, choked sound, and he yanked his hand out from under me and reached up to catch my wrist, tugging my hand away from his chest.

“I’m not leaving you alone,” he said, voice rough with—probably annoyance at my drunken antics. Wine brought such slow, unpleasant clarity. I’d forgotten about that side-effect. My skin burned where he touched me. “I’m going to stir up the fire. Give you a chance to get under the covers and sleep it off.”

My detestable stepbrother. Not so detestable when he held my hand like that, one thumb stroking the back of it, sending little ripples of heat down my arm, into my chest. Lower.

And not so much a stepbrother, maybe?

“Are we still stepbrothers when my father’s dead?” The words came out without any volition of mine, another blasted effect of the blasted wine. “He’s not married to your mother anymore. Of course, he actually loved her, unlike mine, and they didn’t divorce, so I suppose in the eyes of the gods—”

“Stop!” I blinked at him, arrested by the unexpected harshness of his tone. His chest rose and fell visibly as he sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. If he hadn’t moved my hand, I’d have been able to feel it, the way I could feel his thighs pressing against my dangling legs where he leaned against me. “Yes, we’re still stepbrothers in the eyes of the gods and the law and everyone we know.”

He looked down and up to my face again, his eyes lingering for a moment. I followed his glance. My robe had come partially undone, and only one loosened tie holding a fold of it in place preserved my tenuous grip on modesty. Candlelight flattered me, too, gilding my pale skin in a way that those stupid painters might have enjoyed, turning my sparse body hair into sparks of spun gold.

“Lucian,” he said more gently. “I’m sure he loved your mother as much as mine. We didn’t even meet until we were both grown men. If it bothers you—look, if it makes you feel better, your parents didn’t get a divorce in the temple, did they? I thought the marriage was just considered dissolved when she went into the convent. So maybe in some way, we were never stepbrothers at all. I don’t know, I’m not a bloody priest!”

That sudden stinging in my eyes...that had to be an effect of the wine too. But it came back to me as if it had happened only yesterday, the twist to my father’s mouth

and the look in his eyes as he told me—in his cups himself, not that it excused anything—how it had been the best thing that ever happened to him when his first wife took herself off to a convent on a western island, leaving him, and me, and Calatria, behind. Joining a religious order meant she had to be celibate. The act had legally dissolved their marriage, although I supposed the theology of it might be a bit shaky. I'd been fifteen when she left and seventeen when he told me how glad he was that she'd gone.

“He didn't,” I whispered. “He told me so. He never loved m—her. He never loved her. He had to marry her, because he'd gotten her with child and he needed an heir, and she was high-born enough that it made sense.” The stinging had become full-on burning, and my breath hiccuped in my chest. “Maybe we should ask her if she knows, since she's a bloody priestess now. Except that I can't, because she doesn't answer my lett—”

The next syllable wouldn't come, stuck in my throat like a barb. I turned my head and tried not to sob, but holding it in hurt, and I shook, and the world had gone spinny again, the bed undulating beneath me like an ill-trained horse.

And then Benedict was there, lying down beside me and pulling me into his arms, pressing my face to his chest and holding me tight. The scent of him enveloped me, his hands cradled me, and I sucked in long, shuddering breaths, tears leaking out on the exhales and sticking his dampened shirt to my cheek.

I couldn't stop, even though I hated myself for my own weakness. The tightness in my chest simply wouldn't ease, and I'd shake into pieces...

Benedict sighed, took an arm from around me, and slipped his hand into the front of my dressing gown, spreading his fingers over my breastbone. For a moment I thought he meant to start seducing me. My fresh grief was all the more horrible for being so unexpected. One moment of simple comfort, even if it was only his pity. Was that

really so much to ask? But to have him want to use me at a moment like this...

And then I gasped, startled out of my misery as a cool, tingling sensation spread out from his hand and into my chest, crawling over my skin like friendly ants, the overheated discomfort of being past the point of enjoyable drunkenness evaporating in their wake.

The magic reached my head and trickled through my mind like fresh water in the summer, an instant, stunning relief. The confusion and fuzziness rinsed away, leaving me clear, calm, centered.

Sober.

And not hung over, either. Simply refreshed.

Benedict took his hand away, but he didn't wrap his arm around me again, instead rolling onto his back. My head lay in the crook of his shoulder. He didn't shake me off, but I could feel the rigidity in the arm still underneath me.

All right. I'd embarrassed him with my display. I'd embarrassed myself, for that matter. Clearly he'd seen no option but to sober me up, and quickly, so that I stopped whining about how neither of my parents gave a bloody fuck about me.

I ought to move. Say something to change the subject, or better yet, say nothing at all. Go into my bathroom and ready myself for bed. But his alcohol-draining magic trick—and that explained quite a bit about his endless ability to handle his liquor, if he could perform the same magic on himself as easily as he had on me—hadn't rid me of the lassitude that came after an unpleasant surge of emotion.

Instead of rising, I tipped my head enough to get a look at Benedict's profile. He stared up at the ceiling, lips compressed, not giving much away.

Maybe I didn't want to move, but I could change the subject, at least.

"How much will you pay me not to tell everyone who thinks you have godlike powers of drinking that you can clear your head whenever you want, and cheat?"

Some of the tension drained out of him, his arm relaxing under me. Apparently he wanted to discuss my weeping into his shirt as little as I did.

"Pay you? You have the ducal treasury at your command. You don't need it."

"You spend enough time with Clothurn to know the treasury's not precisely overflowing," I said, and immediately regretted it. I'd meant to sound scathing, or possibly just conversational. Instead, I'd sounded...jealous. Dammit.

Benedict turned his head, meeting my eyes steadily. "Not anymore. And it's not as if we spent much time talking about council business." His lips quirked. "Although I'm getting the impression you'd prefer it if we had, hmm?"

Oh, how dare he! "Hardly," I snapped, and sat up abruptly enough that my vision went sparkly for a second.

"Oh, very hardly," he said, a thread of malicious amusement in his tone. Bastard. "Extremely hard. Over and over again."

"If you think I'm interested in hearing about—" I had to cut myself off, my previous fevered imaginings of Benedict and Clothurn in bed popping into my mind. If I finished that sentence, I'd choke on it. "I'm not," I finished lamely.

He gave another thoughtful hum. "All right. Maybe you'd be more interested in hearing about what I'm going to do to you."

My cock instantly stiffened, pressing against the small bit of dressing gown that still covered it. And wouldn't cover it for long, if this kept up.

No, absolutely not. With the wine sent on its merry way, I had no excuse at all for further...indulgence.

"It's getting late, and I'd prefer to sleep without nightmares, thank you, so no thank you." I grasped the edges of the dressing gown and pushed to my feet—almost, because Benedict struck as fast as a snake, tossing me flat on my back again firmly enough to make the bed bounce, looming over me and caging me in with his hands on either side of my shoulders, with my legs hanging off the side of the bed again.

My dressing gown finally gave up the fight and fell open, exposing my heaving chest and my flushed skin—and my fully-hard cock.

Benedict smiled slowly, surveying me up and down, finally pinning me with his gaze. I'd never seen his eyes so bright; they almost seemed to glow with his magic—or with something else that I couldn't name but that made my breath catch.

"I believe I owe you," he said at last. "I like to pay my debts in a timely manner."

"Owe me?" Gods, what could he possibly think he owed me? This had to be the lead-in to some scheme or trick, something that would put me in another terrible position—like on my throne with his cock in my mouth, or bent over whimpering as he turned me inside out. "You don't owe me anything. Nothing. I absolve you of any debt, Benedict."

He threw back his head and laughed, a full-body guffaw that would've been considered egregiously vulgar by anyone at court, including me...except that it made me want to crawl inside his chest and feel the vibrations of it.

“I get the feeling you don’t trust me,” he said, still grinning down at me with his eyes bright and his wavy hair all tumbled about his shoulders, appearing about as trustworthy as a big, predatory cat crouched over a sparrow. “I’m wounded, Lucian. Really. To the heart.”

“As if you have one. All of those languishing former lovers can attest to its absence, I expect.”

Benedict’s grin faded away for a split second, returning in its crooked, cocky glory so quickly I might have imagined it. “I certainly never had one to give to any of them, that’s true, but I didn’t hear any complaints all the same.”

“Probably because you left too quickly to listen to them,” I said, and Benedict rolled his eyes and pushed up and off of me. Didn’t he realize he was proving my point? “Or because—Benedict, what the hell are you doing?”

I tried to get onto my elbows, but he’d already dropped to his knees in front of me, caught my wrists, and tugged me right back down again, my cock bobbing in the air.

My view of my own nakedness, my erection, and his wicked smile had me biting my lip to keep in a moan. His fingers flexed around my forearms. I didn’t even bother struggling. The slight tenderness, not quite bruising, that lingered on my wrists from earlier in the day was more than enough to remind me that it’d be entirely futile. Oh, that shouldn’t make me even harder, with the needy ache spreading down into my balls and my hole.

“I’m paying my debt,” he said. “And I’ll pay interest, too. First your cock, Lucian. I’ll suck that until you come in my mouth.” His matter-of-fact tone made it all so much worse, my fight to keep from making a sound, from squirming in his grip, from spreading my legs as wide as they could go and starting to beg. “That’s just repayment. You’ll have to find out what comes next. So to speak.”

My head spun, and it had nothing to do with wine or the hour. It was simply Benedict. I had to close my eyes and tip my head back into the blankets. His breath and then his lips brushed over the inside of my right thigh just above the knee. My startled yelp made him laugh, tickling me with it, and then I was squirming after all, opening my knees and scrabbling to lift my feet and brace them on the bedframe, pushing down toward his mouth, desperate and frantic.

When his lips closed suddenly over the head of my cock I cried out loudly enough that the guards down the hall might have heard me. If they came running and saw this, I'd have to abdicate, grow a large mustache, and move to a convent myself to escape the gossip and laughter.

"Benedict," I gasped. "Oh, gods. Bene—please, a moment—" His tongue wrapped around my cockhead in a twisty, impossible way that put my earlier efforts to shame, and fuck, if he did that again I'd spend in three seconds. "They'll hear me, I can't keep quiet, you didn't lock the—mmmph!"

He let go of one wrist to clap his hand down over my mouth. It tried to open to let out a moan, but instead I only moved my lips a fraction of an inch against his skin, his hand so hot and heavy and strong, keeping me from sucking in a full breath through my nose.

Benedict swallowed my cock to the root, teeth grazing me, and I couldn't breathe, and it didn't matter how I bucked or how many muffled cries I let out, he had me helpless and flailing and—

Coming down his throat, pulse after pulse turning me upside down and inside out, choking for breath until darkness swirled in my vision, tingling pleasure suffusing me all the way to my fingertips.

Benedict peeled his hand off of my mouth and let my cock slip from his, and I lay

half conscious, panting, the cool of the room shocking on my sweat-slicked skin.

When he cupped my balls and my spent cock and lifted them, I thought he meant to clean me up or dry me off at first—but he'd swallowed my spend, hadn't he, not let it get me all wet? So what did he mean to—he set his finger behind my balls, so gently it made me shiver, and cool, silvery magic ribboned into me, leaving me...clean, it felt like. Very clean, as if I'd just stepped out of the bath and dried myself with the softest possible towel.

He massaged my balls softly. I shuddered and murmured a protest. Too much, he'd already reduced me to a quivering mess, I couldn't possibly bear whatever "interest" he'd sadistically decided he owed me...and then he bent his head down and flicked the tip of his tongue over my hole.

Benedict had left me oversensitive and a little sore from the morning. It'd been so long since I'd been fucked—and probably never like he'd fucked me.

Nerves I'd barely known I had lit up like the lanterns along the harbor during a festival, my back arching and my head thrown back.

My tender flesh throbbed under that careful touch of his tongue, every sensation magnified almost past bearing. A swipe around my puffy rim, then pressing into the center, barely penetrating me, and I clenched down around the tease of him and moaned.

"You want more than that?" Benedict murmured into my skin, so closely that he was almost kissing me as he spoke, lips caressing my most sensitive places. I clenched my hands into the bedding and let out a sound that would've shamed the erotic performers on a brothel stage. "My fingers or my cock? I could fuck you for a while, get you loose, pull out and use my hand. See how you feel on the inside. And then fuck you again." He punctuated his words with lashes of his tongue, going a little

deeper into me each time. “Definitely fuck you again.”

He still had my cock and balls in one big hand, and he slipped the other between my legs and pushed a finger inside me, startlingly rigid after the slick malleability of his tongue. I couldn’t get hard again, not so quickly and not after how many times I’d already spent that day, but as he hooked me open with his finger and thrust his tongue into me, lashing my inner flesh, my cock twitched and spurted everything I had left. A few drops, but enough to leave me shaking with the aftershocks as Benedict growled against me and fucked me with his tongue, merciless.

On and on, plunging into me, working me over with his mouth and that long finger, narrowing everything in the world down to needing him inside me, needing more of him, thrashing on the bed and alternately demanding that he fuck me and begging him to stop.

It wasn’t until my pleas and curses had dissolved into shaky little half-sobbing moans that he slowed his assault and finally stopped, pressing one kiss to my swollen rim as he withdrew.

Benedict released his grip on me at last and kissed his way up my stomach and chest, finally lying on top of me with his weight barely held off by his elbows, nuzzling against the side of my neck. My head had fallen to the side and my eyes had slid shut, and I could hardly muster the energy to twitch as he pressed gentle kisses under my ear.

That mouth...the one he’d used to ravish me so thoroughly my whole body buzzed with it. I couldn’t hold my feet up on the edge of the bed frame anymore, and they slipped off, my heels knocking into the floor with twin thumps. Surely he didn’t do this for everyone, did he? Kneeling and sucking my cock—sucking my hole, for the gods’ sakes—crouched down and pleasuring me as if he himself had been one of the highly paid companions he consorted with.

Another kiss, this time along the angle of my jaw, and I couldn't help my smile or the flush of something uncomfortably like delight that had started to follow in the wake of my fading ecstasy.

"I thought you were going to use me for your own pleasure," I said. "Treat me like a whore."

Benedict stilled, lips almost touching my cheek. His sharp inhale tickled my jaw, and his long exhale heated my neck.

"Who says I'm not?" he said at last, voice tight. He kissed me, flicking his tongue against my heated skin. It chilled me far out of proportion to the cause, goosebumps rising on my legs. "The expenditure of a few coins, or the use of a bit of magic to check for poison, doesn't give a man the right to be a thoughtless lover. Besides," and he pressed his body closer, the wool of his trousers and the cold metal of his buttons rubbing over my inner thighs and brushing against my soft cock, "I'm going to be careful, because you must be a bit sore by now, but I'm not going to be a gentleman and finish myself off with my hand. I'm going to spend inside you. Get my money's worth, as it were."

He shifted his weight again and I felt the prod of his erection, thick and hard.

His money's worth. Oh, I did still hate him, no matter what insanity his seduction and his touch had induced in my body and mind to make me feel, briefly and humiliatingly, otherwise.

"Let me know when you're done so that I can rouse enough to bathe again before bed," I said, as nonchalantly as I could manage, without opening my eyes or turning my head. It might or might not convince him, but I had no choice but to try. "I may fall asleep."

“Feel free,” he said.

And if he sounded angry, good. That’s what I’d wanted. Not his lying tenderness that he apparently spread all over the city every time he paid a whore. Did he expect praise for his noblesse oblige? What an ass.

I breathed as deeply and slowly as I could, keeping perfectly still as Benedict stood up and then leaned back down again, this time with his cock bare and pushing between my thighs.

He lined himself up, pressing the head against my hole until it forced me open, popping inside.

Even after being fucked that morning and thoroughly prepared with his fingers and mouth a few minutes before, the stretch took my breath away. I bit my lip and braced myself as best I could, not resisting, moving with him as he started to thrust. Benedict’s breath echoed harshly, the rhythmic underpinning to the symphony of the slap of his balls against my ass, the creak of the bed frame, the wet sound of his cock driving into my body.

As he’d promised, he seemed to be trying to go easy on me, but at last he lost control and pounded into me, the arm braced near my head rigid with strain and the other hand gripping my hip possessively and holding me in place for him to take. I felt every inch of him, lighting me up on the inside, ripples of sensation radiating out from where he filled me.

He groaned, stiffened, and stilled. This time, perhaps because it hadn’t been long enough since the last for his magic’s curse to build up its strength, I only felt the faintest frisson of something otherworldly along with the hot spurts of Benedict himself.

But it was more than enough to make me gasp and clench around him, a final spasm of pleasure that wrung me out and left me utterly limp.

Every cell in my body hummed with the aftermath of what he'd done to me, my mind floating away on the tide.

Benedict pulled out, leaving me hollow and soaked and shaking.

"Come on, Lucian," he said, and started to tug at my dressing gown where it still clung to my shoulders. "Get under the covers."

"Bath," I mumbled. "So sticky."

But I couldn't quite get my eyes open, catching snippets of the dim room from under my eyelashes: the bedposts, a flicker of dying candlelight reflecting from the mirror on the wall, the shadowy ceiling. And I certainly couldn't do much with my limbs, which flopped every which way.

Benedict wrestled my other arm out of its sleeve and tossed the ruined garment on the floor, rolling me into the bed and folding a blanket over me. It settled like a cloud, wrapping me in warmth, and the mattress and pillows rose up to embrace me.

"I'm still sticky," I said into one of them.

A moment later Benedict slipped into bed behind me. He'd stripped the rest of his clothes, and he curled his body around mine, hard chest bracing my back, muscular thighs lined up with mine, and his cock slipping between my cheeks as if awaiting another opportunity. Gods, but he was big, and warm, and solid, and when his arm wrapped around me I went boneless, melting into the bed.

And into his embrace, gods help me.

He spread his hand over my stomach and went still.

This time I knew to expect his magic, the unfurling of delicate ribbons of tiny cold pinpricks, dancing through me and taking away the sweat and spend and the wine I'd spilled on myself halfway through supper.

"Better?" he asked me, and kissed my hair.

No. So much worse, because as much as I'd wanted to I hadn't hated the way he'd taken his pleasure with my body so quickly and carelessly. I'd loved every moment of it. And when he inevitably took me again when we woke in the morning, I'd want that, too.

Unless I could persuade him to go away. I could take my chances with assassins. Surely they wouldn't try again so soon after the last attempt.

"You could sleep on the floor," I said. "Or the sitting room sofa."

Benedict's low laugh rumbled through my back as he pulled me closer, snuggling me against his body so tightly I could feel every hard inch of him.

If I could stay awake a moment or two longer, I could compose the most scathing response to that offensive laugh...but I slid into sleep between one mental insult and the next.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

Coming to consciousness the next morning made me feel as if I'd entered some alternate reality. To begin with, Benedict woke me long before the winter sun even thought about crawling over the horizon.

Fabian had used to rouse me by clearing his throat and rattling the curtain rings along the rods in a purposefully jarring way.

Benedict's methods were equally startling, at least to a man like me who'd always been alone in his bed—but they were far more rousing. His hand sliding down to stroke my cock, and the other, that he'd slipped under my pillow in the night so that my head rested on his arm, curling around to rest across my throat, keeping my upper body arched back into his. A whisper of magic, and more summoned oil slicked my hole, Benedict's cock already rampantly erect and pushing into me. Trying to move only bucked me into his hand and then back to impale myself on his length, and both of his hands tightened, the pressure around my windpipe cutting off the whimper I might have let out as he squeezed the base of my cock just this side of too firmly.

Neither of us said a word. I reached up and caught my hands around his forearms, anchoring myself, and he drove inside me, using me as if he owned me, as if I were his bedslave and not just his blackmailed whore.

I finished first, my come spilling down over his knuckles, and the way I clenched down and shoved myself onto his cock brought him off after, deep inside me.

He rolled out of bed and left me to recover my breath, bathe, and dress—and somehow, I found him already fully put together and waiting for me when I emerged to start my day as Calatria's ruler.

Which brought me to my second shock: that a hint of scandal, the rumor that the duke had seduced his own stepbrother in order to carry on a vulgar affair, seemed not to have damaged my reputation.

On the contrary. It seemed everyone had become more friendly overnight.

Since the windstorm the night of Fabian's death had scattered all the rain clouds to the four corners, the sun poured down out of a pure blue sky—"The very color of your eyes, Your Grace," a young lady simpered as she curtsied, giggling with her friends as Benedict and I passed her on the garden path I'd chosen as my route to my study.

"Only true beauties are flattered by sun this bright, ladies," I said. "I'll walk on lest I be too dazzled."

"Quite the charmer," Benedict murmured under his breath. He had to lean down to speak to me discreetly, and it probably looked far too intimate, not to mention the way his breath ruffled my hair and warmed my chilled ear in a way that felt far too intimate. Despite the sun, the breeze had a real nip to it, a hint of the snow on the distant mountains. It made me want to lean into him, let him put his arm around my shoulders. And if I'd tipped my head up to meet him, we'd have been kissing. That also had some appeal, damn it all. "If you want a duchess, you'll have your pick."

The last bloody thing I wanted was a duchess, something he ought to know better than anyone—although given how pronounced my lack of interest in women had always been, even the more inheritance-minded members of my council had given up on hinting in that direction. If I produced an heir, it'd be via adopting a distant relative, because I didn't think I'd even be able to stay roused with a lady long enough to get inside her, let alone the multiple times it'd probably take to have her increasing.

“They’re much prettier than you are,” I said, “but they’re also much more pleasant, and I don’t dislike them at all. I can’t think of a fourth reason why I’d prefer any one of them to you, though. So don’t be jealous.”

Benedict didn’t reply, although the strained quality of his silence was an entirely satisfying reply on its own. If he wanted to call my ass flat and compare me to my courtiers, then sauce for the goose, thank you very much.

We turned a corner, another chorus of happy giggles following us. My guards’ footsteps crunching on the gravel path behind us nearly drowned out one of the girls saying, “I don’t think our style of beauty is much to his taste, though,” followed by another replying, “Look at them together! Can you imagine? I’ll faint!”

Well. They’d certainly heard about my liaison with Benedict.

That had to be a compliment, didn’t it?

Captain Venet’s cough sounded like it’d been meant to cover a laugh of his own. I lifted my chin and strode on, pretending to ignore it but really pondering whether he’d laughed at their prurient interest or laughed because they were all mocking me.

A few damp-looking bees clustered busily around bedraggled but still cheerful clumps of chrysanthemums, and their faint buzzing underlaid the clacking of my gardeners’ pruning shears on the other side of the hedge, where a small apple orchard occupied a quarter acre of sloped ground.

My home really could be so very lovely, when the scents of damp earth and fresh grass and a hint of salt off the sea all mingled together in the crisp air, and the morning sun sparkled off of glossy leaves and mosaic-tiled fountains and bits of mica in the gravel. Being the Crown Duke of Calatria had its moments, didn’t it? When everything in the world smiled on me? Even including the footman waiting to open

the door as we approached the administrative wing of the palace.

Everything but Benedict, anyway. I glanced sidelong and found him frowning down at the ground as he walked. Well, good. He shouldn't get it all his own way, even if he'd had me at his mercy earlier in the morning. I took in a deep, cleansing breath and stepped under the veranda. The footman's smile widened, and he bowed me through the door with a flourish and something perilously close to a wink. It could've been considered impertinent, I supposed, but how often did the palace servants smile at me? Not nearly often enough.

Even Mattia, usually the soul of discretion, had a bit of a cheeky grin on his face as he greeted me at the door of my study. "Good morning, Your Grace! And Lord General Rathenas, good morning to you, too. A very good morning, isn't it?"

"No better than usual," I said airily, hoping it'd annoy Benedict.

He merely grunted and turned his attention to the coffee tray Mattia had waiting for me, discreetly checking everything as Mattia began to show me the morning's heap of paperwork.

A few moments later he turned and interrupted us to say, "I'll be about my duties. Lucian, I'll see you for lunch."

And without waiting for a reply, he strode out the door with a swirl of his cloak that felt a bit melodramatic given the mundanity of the circumstances. A page shut the door behind him. Mattia and I looked at each other. That grin had returned, and Mattia's dark eyes had a bit of a mischievous glint to them.

Damn it. Of course Benedict had chosen this moment to call me Lucian in front of other people for the first time.

“I’m glad to see you and Lord General Rathenas on better terms, Your Grace,” he said, “if I may say so? You, ah. Make a very handsome—”

The tips of my ears burned. “I strongly advise you not to finish that sentence, if you enjoy your position as my secretary,” I said briskly, and took my seat at my desk.

Those young ladies must have meant what they said as a compliment after all, since Mattia seemed to agree with the sentiment! Thank goodness they weren’t all laughing. But how odd that they weren’t. Or worse, disturbed by my nominal family relationship with the man I’d now publicly acknowledged as my lover, via the court’s lightning-fast network of whispered gossip.

As Mattia bowed and turned away to the sideboard, hopefully to pour me some coffee, I couldn’t help the impulse that overcame me. I had to know, damn it all.

“You, ah, obviously have heard something,” I said. “And Lord Benedict is always so indiscreet. So I apologize for biting your head off. But do you think others will agree with you? That we make a handsome...something?”

Mattia poured my cup and added cream, bringing it and setting it by my elbow.

“No need to apologize, Your Grace. I know you were partly joking with me. Weren’t you?” I nodded, because I had been—or at least bluffing. I’d never send Mattia away. I liked him, and I was fairly certain he genuinely liked me. “Thank you, Your Grace. But to answer your question. Perhaps not everyone at court will be pleased. The great lords and ladies. But the servants, and the rest of us? Having our duke at odds with the commander of the army has always made everyone feel...uncertain. Ill at ease.”

Right. Because under those circumstances, the risk of a violent coup in which half the palace staff could be murdered in their beds always remained very real.

“I think that’s not all, though,” I prodded him. Mattia bit his lip, eyes fixed on some point over my shoulder and off to the left. No, definitely not all, and I was fairly sure I knew what he’d say, if I could persuade him to be honest with me. “Out with it. Your duke commands you.”

Persuade, command, what difference did it make, really?

Mattia cleared his throat, fidgeted, and finally clasped his hands demurely in front of him. To his credit, he did finally meet my eyes as he told me exactly what I’d expected to hear.

“Everyone loves the Lord General, Your Grace. Not that everyone doesn’t respect you deeply! But he’s so very popular. So when the two of you, that is to say. Everyone will love you all the more for being close to him.”

Mattia’s neck had flushed bright red. Over his years as my secretary, he’d developed a courtier’s adeptness at hiding his physical reactions—which meant he had to be practically fainting from embarrassment.

Time to put him out of his misery.

And to put me out of mine. I’d already guessed, although I couldn’t have rested without confirmation. But the certain knowledge that my own people preferred Benedict, and liked me better for taking him to bed, cut rather deeper than I would have liked to admit, even to myself.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m glad our new understanding will put the people’s minds at ease, and I appreciate your candor. Now hand me that new draft of the maritime treaty with the Elaquin Archipelago, if you would? That’s more than enough time wasted on trivialities.”

“Here you are, Your Grace.” I took the document and picked up my pen, forcing myself to focus not on thoughts of Benedict—and it surprised me how much effort it took to push him out of my mind—but on my work. But before I could begin to really read, Mattia added, “Your Grace?” I glanced up. “At the risk of my position, I must say one more word, and I hope you’ll forgive me for how long I’ve served you, and how faithfully. I don’t think your happiness or lack of it is trivial, Your Grace. Perhaps you shouldn’t either.”

Lord Benedict has nothing to do with my happiness. I bit the words back before they could fall off my tongue. True, of course, but I’d just apologized for snapping at Mattia, and I didn’t want to have to do it again.

Besides, he meant well. Even though my happiness was entirely trivial compared to the welfare of Calatria. And absolutely didn’t have anything whatsoever to do with Benedict—unless one counted the thought of him going far away, which would give me the greatest possible joy.

It hadn’t made me happy at all when he’d been gone for two years, though, had it?

Ugh. I much preferred maritime treaties to these silly ideas.

“I appreciate your care for me, Mattia,” I said at last. “And I do know how faithfully you’ve served me. Put some of that service into writing down a list of amendments, if you please.”

“As you like, Your Grace,” Mattia said, and he settled into his own chair with his own cup of coffee, pen poised.

The open window let in a breath of sea air and a shaft of sunlight, and those girls really had thought Benedict and I were rather—well, best not to dwell on it.

But the world had been smiling on me rather more than usual today. And I'd enjoy it while I could.

My enjoyment lasted eleven days—honestly, about ten and a half days longer than I'd expected given recent events.

Out of sheer cowardice, and I couldn't even deny it, I'd declined to call a council meeting that first week, rescheduling it for a full two weeks after the one we'd had on the day of Fabian's death. I'd also avoided any larger court gatherings. Mattia had spoken nothing but the truth when he'd pointed out that while the servants, the guards, and a few romantic young girls might find it charming that I'd unbent (bent?) sufficiently to take Benedict as a lover, my more ambitious, critical, and politically minded aristocrats wouldn't be quite so tolerant of this shift in Calatria's landscape of power.

Unsettlingly, Lord Zettine accepted my calendar amendments without argument. Although it wasn't all that unusual to skip a week, I'd expected him to fight me on it on principle. He'd simply sent a note acknowledging the change, and other than that day in court I'd only seen him in passing. He had to be planning something.

But whatever Zettine's plans, a fortnight of dodging most of my council sounded like bliss, even if I had Benedict to contend with every morning, every mealtime, and every night.

All night, sometimes, though he used his sleep magic on me in between, giving me deeper slumber than I'd otherwise have achieved on my own. If he hadn't, I'd have been too tired to function during the days.

As it was, I'd had to give in and send Mattia to find me a better cushion for my desk chair.

He hadn't commented. He hadn't needed to.

But small humiliations—and also large, thrusting humiliations that had me gasping and moaning in the middle of the night—aside, life had gotten noticeably smoother and more pleasant since Benedict had started...humiliating me. I'd been forced to face the fact that Benedict had been right when he'd described how my subjects felt about me. They really had thought me a joyless, sour stick-in-the-mud before I took up with Benedict and proved I had human desires after all.

Even Benedict hadn't been too obnoxious. At least, no more than usual. He hadn't been talking much during the time we'd needed to spend together out of bed, mostly taking our meals. But the one evening we'd been at loose ends after supper and before bed, and he'd already fucked me, he'd actually produced a book from somewhere and flung himself down on my sitting room sofa. And when I'd sunk low enough, goaded by the oppressive nature of the silence, to snidely remark on my surprise that he'd learned to read, I'd only gotten a sharp glance over the top of the book and a grunt.

Who could blame him, I supposed, given the way I'd embarrassed myself by drunkenly weeping about my mother? Gods. He probably hoped I'd never speak to him on any topic of substance again.

Anyway, his mute companionship might have left me too fidgety to enjoy my meals very much, but at least I'd lost the jumpiness that came with wondering if someone would murder me. Benedict had (many, many) faults, but he could protect me. His years of surviving wars and politics proved that. My continued life and health proved it too. I actually felt physically much better than I had for a while.

And so those eleven days slipped by almost without my noticing their passage, as I hid myself away in meetings with justiciary and diplomatic functionaries during the day and yielded to a silent, brooding Benedict at night.

But on the afternoon of that eleventh day, Mattia cleared his throat meaningfully as I stood to leave my study for the day.

“Will Lord General Rathenas be escorting you to the reception this evening, Your Grace?” he asked. “You haven’t danced in so long. You used to enjoy it, I thought?”

The world came to a swift and grinding halt. I had to blink to bring it back into focus. The reception. Oh, fucking fuck. The Surbini ambassador, he of the overly complex tariff negotiations, had only recently joined us at court after replacing a much older lady who’d reached the end of her career and gone home. His wife hadn’t been well enough to join him in Calatria immediately, and so we’d put off holding a reception for them at the palace until she could travel and join him.

Put it off until tonight, in fact.

“Why didn’t you remind me earlier? I’d forgotten all about it.” I didn’t mean to sound so peevish, but I’d thought my evening would be free of obligations.

Benedict hadn’t fucked me that morning, saying something about a pre-dawn cavalry training exercise as he slipped away with a kiss to my shoulder, which meant he’d need me—or at least insist on having me—as soon as we both finished our work for the day. I’d be able to spend as long as I liked in a hot bath after he’d spread me out and filled me, made me sore and sweaty and aching in my tired limbs, kissed me until my lips tingled and possibly, if he happened to be in the mood, kissed and sucked and licked me in other places, too. Or stood over me as he instructed me on how to kiss and suck and lick him the way he liked it, instead. My breath came a little faster at the thought of it, my cock stirring and that now-familiar heaviness beginning between my legs.

Of course, Benedict himself was an obligation. But the bath afterward would be delicious, feeling the heat soaking into my well-used body and knowing Benedict

would be just outside, keeping the world at bay. And my supper and wine would be all the more satisfying after working up an appetite.

“I did remind you, Your Grace, beg pardon,” Mattia said. “Two days ago, I’m quite certain we discussed it.”

Damn it, we had. He’d spoken to me about it while I drank my coffee, but I’d been distracted from the topic at hand by the effort of settling into my chair in a way that didn’t remind me too vividly of what my ass had been doing an hour before.

“You did, but you could’ve reminded me again earlier today.” Damn it, I knew perfectly well my disappointment and annoyance had made me unfair.

But dread curdled in my gut at the thought of facing down all the lords and ladies of my court at last, particularly since I could be quite certain of one thing: Benedict would not be escorting me to the reception, because he’d never think of doing it on his own and I’d rather leap off the palace’s highest tower than ask him. I wasn’t some pathetic, needy little plaything who craved his public attention and acknowledgment.

“My apologies, Your Grace,” Mattias said, sounding far more subdued, and bowed lower than was his wont. “I’m sorry. I hope you enjoy yourself at least a little?”

“I doubt it, but that’s not your fault.” I had to go right now if I were going to dress for the occasion, and I also doubted Benedict would have finished with his day’s work yet. I wouldn’t even see him until after this bloody party. “Don’t spend too long here after I leave. Find a party of your own to attend, a better one, if you’ll take my advice.”

Mattia murmured his good nights as I swept out of the room and collected my guards, but I didn’t reply. Anything I said would only have sounded angry, which wouldn’t be fair at all. It wasn’t Mattia’s fault that his innocent question about Benedict

escorting me had struck directly on a nerve I hadn't quite realized I'd had exposed—or even possessed at all.

And now I'd have it exposed in front of the whole court, and I'd need to smile and bear it.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

Smiling and bearing it proved to be much more difficult than I'd feared. Difficult enough that my cheeks ached with the effort of holding my expression steady, and I had to keep consciously unclenching my hand so that I didn't snap my wine glass in half.

I'd arrived breathless, in a hurry, and with my hair all wild around my face instead of neatly arranged, since I'd run out of time after doing up all the million little buttons on my silk waistcoat. I really needed to replace Fabian.

The herald had announced the ambassador and his lady a mere moment later, right as I took up my position at the far end of the ballroom, where a marble step led to a not-quite-a-throne set beneath a huge silver-embroidered tapestry showing my house's arms. I gave a gracious half-bow and said all the right things, the ambassador and his wife bowed and curtsied and complimented the palace, Calatryan scenery, and the musicians currently playing softly in the gallery, and I led the lady out onto the floor to open the ball.

After one dance, a sedate pavane that didn't require me to do more than step and smile and nod, a young lord in my diplomatic service appeared and whisked the lady and her husband away to be introduced to the other guests while I returned to my ducal dais.

And then I'd had all of five seconds to snatch a glass of sparkling wine from a footman and slug half of it before the first of an endless parade of courtiers approached me. Benedict would be furious if he saw me drinking without his by-your-leave, but first of all, he hadn't troubled to show his stupid face, and second, the same wine was being passed around the room to everyone. No one had dropped dead

yet. I liked my odds.

In any case, each of the lords and ladies descending upon me was more ravenously eager than the last for any scrap of gossip they could glean, and dying instantly had its appeal when contrasted with facing them sober.

“You are now eight-and-twenty, are you not, Your Grace? Duke Treviso married at twenty-nine, as I recall,” said the sharp-eyed dowager currently before me. Her two terrifying cronies nodded and tutted along, the tall feathers in their elaborately jeweled headdresses bobbing, not quite close enough to tickle my nose. All three of them had been friends of my grandparents. Given what I knew of my father’s parents, they’d all bloody well deserved each other. “A suitable marriage. Which produced you, Your Grace.” Her tone suggested that they had all, upon that occasion, been obliged to make the best of it. “And your lady mother, whatever her other eccentricities, was not known to frequent houses of ill repute in the lower town.”

A low, frantic buzzing had begun between my temples.

Marriage.

Houses of ill repute.

Marrying Benedict. She thought I meant to marry Benedict .

At least she appeared to be the only person in Calatria besides me who didn’t blindly adore him.

The buzzing grew to more of a hum, my skull seeming to expand too large to fit inside my head.

I forced my already forced smile to ratchet up another painful notch. Would my face

actually crack and fall off? Probably not. Even at the advanced, unmarried age of twenty- eight, I hadn't yet started resorting to cosmetics.

My voice hitched, but I managed, "And if I were contemplating matrimony, Lady Violetta, I would certainly take the reputation of the ducal family into account, but—"

"Hah!" She snorted another kind of scoffing sound on top of that, rearing back as if I'd tried to bite her. "Do you perhaps feel you're doing so by confining your...activities to within the ducal family? Because I wouldn't have thought that would assist in any efforts to bolster its reputation. Hah!"

Oh, bugging unmerciful gods. A group of young lords standing nearby all stared, eyes wide, and then tittered behind their hands, leaning in to whisper to one another. Could I fake falling down in some kind of fainting fit, and then let my guards carry me out to safety?

Would it be fake?

"Come, Violetta," said one of her friends, taking her by the arm and glaring daggers at me. "Let us rest and compose ourselves a moment. You!" This to a passing footman. "A chair and a glass of wine, if you please..."

He led them away, bowing and scraping and being berated by all three of them.

Wine. Yes. My staff had brought out a good vintage for this occasion, a lovely dry sparkling rose that effervesced on my tongue and went down far faster than was probably wise. I raised a hand, and another glass appeared in it instantly, the page hovering at my elbow having anticipated me.

I knocked it back. It tasted even better seasoned with the knowledge of how annoyed

Benedict would be if he could see me. My brain took on a bit of a sparkle too. Oh, thank Ennolu.

The group of lordlings approached and made their legs, rising with matching smirks on their faces. “Lord Griset, Your Grace, and I am honored to pay my respects,” said the handsomest one, who’d put himself in the front of the quartet. “My mother presented me to you last year.”

“I remember you,” I lied, and nodded.

“Oh, how flattering. But Your Grace, I’m surprised to be able to approach you! Lord Benedict is so very intimidating, and I’d thought to find him fending off those of us who’d be so bold as to admire you.” His smirk grew into more of a leer. “Is it possible you might wish to honor some other gentleman with a dance tonight, Duke Lucian?”

In other words, was it possible that Benedict had already tired of me, thrown me over, and abandoned me to the court wolves?

Gods preserve me, I’d set myself up for this when I begged Benedict for his help and protection, and even more so when I’d put on that performance for the footmen eleven days ago, and triply so when I’d allowed myself to live in a fool’s paradise in which the opinions of sappy girls and clerks who thought Benedict’s earring made him dashing were the ones that mattered. I had no one to blame but myself for an embarrassment so hot and violent my flushed cheeks actually ached.

But before I could try to answer, and as if Benedict had somehow heard my internal screaming, a pause, a gasp, and then a wave of murmurs swept the assembly.

My skin prickled with heat, with awareness.

And I knew before I even looked up whom I'd see standing at the top of the stairs across the room.

"Lord General Benedict Rathenas," said the herald, his voice carrying to every corner of the suddenly much quieter ballroom.

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of staring at him along with the rest of the gaping throng. But I turned to him and stared all the same, as if he'd had me on a string. He hadn't dressed appropriately for the occasion, of course— because I couldn't imagine a world in which society's dictates would matter more to Benedict than his sturdy boots and his sword hanging from its worn belt. But he had made the effort to change into a black taffeta and velvet doublet, the sleeves all embroidered in silver and gold. It was more than enough to catch the glow of the chandeliers, with their cascades of soft alchemical lights reflected by dangling crystals.

But even as he smiled at everyone and sauntered down the stairs, fondling the hilt of his sword and playing to his admirers, his eyes found mine—and held.

For a long moment everything else fell away, the music and chatter of the ballroom fading to a faint drone. Benedict's eyes seemed to shine more brightly than the lights, and a shudder went through me, from the top of my head all the way down.

"Oh, there he is, isn't he!" said Lord Griset, too loudly, too shrilly, and I jumped as everything in the room came rushing back in again. "Strong, powerful men have their disagreements, of course," he continued, fluttering his eyelashes at me. Ugh. He had the wrong object for that sort of display. Perhaps he ought to try it on Benedict. Perhaps I might revive my father's practice of sending insolent courtiers to the dungeon under the palace when I had a whim. "But I, oh, I did understand your reconciliation had been...complete. What a—a delight to see him attending on Your Grace after all!"

The ballroom had almost filled, and the current fashion for headdresses made from an aviary's worth of feathers and for wide, ornate skirts stuffed with petticoats made it seem even fuller, especially as their wearers stepped and turned through the figures of the dance. Benedict had made it down the stairs, but his progress across the crowded room was slow. The lights shimmered off of gold earrings and jeweled necklaces, enameled fans and rich silk brocades—and a hundred pairs of avid eyes, as they all turned to follow Benedict's approach.

In a sudden panic, I shoved my empty wine glass at the page beside me, hoping Benedict wouldn't see it, and then awaited him with what I had left of my dignity.

"Surely nothing could give Lord Benedict more gratification than attending His Grace," one of Griset's friends said in a tone of unflattering insincerity—right as Benedict came close enough to hear him.

I bit my lips as Benedict's twitched, the gleam of his eyes the visible overflow of his suppressed laughter.

Damn it. He'd say something mocking, and I'd be a laughingstock forever. I'd stolen a week and a half of not feeling like a fool from the jaws of society's defeat, but now I could feel them closing around me after all.

Griset and the other three chattering twits, clearly delighted to have a front-row view, withdrew just enough to allow Benedict to stand directly before me. He stopped and bowed precisely low enough to show he knew he had to, the bastard, rising to his full, commanding height again within an instant, tossing his hair back and making his earring bounce and glitter.

He opened his mouth.

Oh, here it came.

Benedict spoke directly to me, but he pitched his voice to carry as only a trained actor or courtier could—though thankfully he didn't use the full bellow of a battlefield general.

"I can only hope my efforts in that direction have been satisfactory for Duke Lucian." I blinked at him, lips parting, hardly able to believe my ears. "For my part, nothing in this world could give me more gratification than attending him. As closely as he'll allow."

The blood beat in my ears, a steady throb that couldn't quite drown out the gasps and mutterings that rose up from the assembly like steam off a simmering pot.

"I can't believe you left me here alone for so long and then made an entrance like that. I'm going to kill you," I hissed, too quietly for anyone else to hear.

"Only if your guests can't find a way to murder us both first, such as with that wine you seem to think I didn't notice you were drinking," Benedict shot back, and stepped close to me. Damn it. "Get in line."

Very close. Close enough to fling the last bit of oil on the wildfire of the gossip running around the ballroom—and to convince anyone who'd been skeptical that their duke really had taken up with his notorious stepbrother, defying etiquette, the prevailing morality, and everyone who'd ever wanted Benedict for themselves.

The line to kill me might be a long one by the end of the night.

At least we made a picturesque pair for everyone to stare at, Benedict's piratical black a striking contrast to my pearl-embroidered sky-blue silk.

He always had to be the center of attention. Arriving late. Dressing to draw everyone's eyes to his broad shoulders and long legs.

Slipping an arm around me and resting his hand on the small of my back, a heavy warmth that burned through my layers of clothing and made me sway toward him involuntarily, everything below my waist going tense.

“You shouldn’t do that,” I whispered, frozen in place, even as I fought the urge to wrap my arms around his neck and press myself to him, wrap my legs around his hips and climb him. “It’s too much. You’re causing a scene. Show some decorum. If they try to kill us, I’m standing behind you and letting them murder you first.”

Instead of listening to me, he slid his hand down an inch, teasing over the crease of my ass in an arrogant, proprietary way that had me trembling under his touch, the ache between my legs building to a desperate clench.

Gods, they’d all see—they’d all know where he’d put his hand when he reached behind me.

They’d see, and they’d realize Benedict was the one taking what he desired while he reduced me to a weak and wanting thing, that I’d never have been able to lure him, or anyone, into a lascivious trap of my making. They’d know that later tonight Benedict would strip me and spread me and use me, their duke, as nothing but a hole for his cock and his magic. Why had I thought any of these clever, malicious, observant people would really believe I’d been the one to seduce him, to use him for my own pleasure? When they’d been watching us both for years, and they knew Benedict was the one who always got his own way?

He leaned in and down, gazing into my eyes as if no one else in the room existed.

“If they really try to kill us I hope you will,” he said, the corner of his mouth quirking into a smile even though his eyes stayed steady and serious. “I’m fairly certain that’s my job, because you’ll be paying me for it later.”

Paying him for it.

Right.

Benedict's eyes on me, dark and intent, and the solidity of his arm at my back, and the magnetic warmth and strength of his body...they were all temporary, conditional, and ultimately false.

No matter why he'd chosen to play into my charade, to act as if the rumor I'd started had been true, it wasn't real.

We couldn't simply stand here with everyone gawking at us. My false smile had melted away, I could feel it, and they'd all know something was terribly wrong. I had to speak. Make some witty remark. Pull away from him. Think about anything other than the strange, hollow ache that had formed under my ribs, or about the way Benedict hadn't taken his eyes off of me, still meeting mine as if he'd forgotten about everything else on Earth.

Another lie, of course. But he'd had so much practice in making men believe he meant it that I couldn't be blamed for falling victim too, could I?

In desperation, I said, "Dance with me, Lord Benedict," pitching my voice to carry to the nearest eavesdroppers and raising a hand to signal the musicians.

"I'd be honored, Your Grace," Benedict replied—as if he meant it. As if he wanted nothing more than to dance with me, and despite myself, despite damn well knowing better, the warmth and pleasure of it fizzed in my veins more intoxicatingly than the sparkling wine.

The tambour player set a brisk rhythm, the tambourine and recorder adding a counterpoint and a sweet, lilting melody—they were playing one of my favorites.

Gods, I hadn't danced in so long. Not really danced, something more invigorating than that dull walk across the floor I'd carried out with the Surbini lady. My whole body began to move with it as Benedict led me out, his arm still around my waist even though the dance called for us to be linked only by our outstretched hands for the first figures.

He slid his arm away and took me by the hand at last as we reached the center of the ballroom, and I wished I'd defied propriety and gone without gloves the way he had, so that I could've savored his skin against mine.

But even through my glove, I had the heat of him and the sureness of his hold on me, the gentle way he led me through the opening of the dance and then his sudden strength as he swung me close.

He grinned at me as I took the lead, drawing him through the dance in reverse, turning and kicking, feet tapping to the jingle of the tambourine and the low thrum of the viol, spinning as the higher notes rang out.

Everything whirled around me, almost too fast and too exhilarating, but Benedict remained the steady point in the center of it all, anchoring me, and I was smiling for real, now, rather than faking it—until he spun me once more and reeled me in, fetching me up against him suddenly as the music stopped with one final clash of the tambourine.

He held me so close that I hardly had room for my heaving breaths. Our faces were inches apart, my head tipped up and his bent down, his lips so close, one hand on my shoulder, the other wrapped around my waist, the thick length of his cock digging into my abdomen, one thigh pressed between mine, and my breath came faster and faster—

Someone applauded, someone else laughed, and I startled and tried to jerk away. My

face burned.

Benedict didn't let me move a single inch.

"Let them," he breathed, and tightened his arm until my ribs creaked. "Fucking let them. We're not staying here to listen to them in any case."

"We're not?"

"No." His silvery eyes had gone molten, burning with intent, his tone deep and rough. "And if you give me the slightest bit of trouble, I'm putting you over my shoulder and carrying you. I don't give a damn what anyone thinks."

Putting me over his...

He didn't give me a chance to argue, simply letting go of me enough to turn us both in the direction of the stairs and half-dragging me away, his hand clamped on my hip.

Open-mouthed faces and wide eyes went by in a blur as he pulled me to the stairs, up, and then out of the ballroom, the startled herald and guards bowing as we went by.

The voices of the assembly rose to a crescendo and then cut off suddenly as a pair of footmen swung the doors shut behind us.

"Benedict," I gasped, recovering enough at last to try to resist him. "What the hell do you think you're—"

"What you wanted me to do," he said, not slowing his stride at all, keeping me moving no matter how I squirmed and stumbled. "What you goaded me into doing by asking me to dance."

“What I—you’re out of your mind! I didn’t want this! Goaded you—you—”

“Shut up and walk unless you want me to fuck you right here on the floor,” he ground out, and tugged me along at a breakneck pace.

Right there, on the marble floor of the palace’s public corridor, surrounded by oil paintings in gilt frames and elegant vases, reflected in the enormous mirror on the wall, crying out to the ceiling frescoes while Benedict...

Oh, gods.

I shut up and walked.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

Benedict hustled me past the guards at the entrance to the ducal apartments, throwing a quick, “If anyone tries to get past you, stab them,” over his shoulder as he did.

“He doesn’t mean that!” I called back, not reassured at all by one of the guards laughing as soon as we were out of sight, and then we were down the hall and through my bedroom door. Benedict kicked it shut behind us with a crash that made me wince, and then let me go so abruptly I went stumbling into my bed, catching hold of the post and pulling myself upright again.

I turned to find him advancing on me with focused intent, eyes glittering.

“That was entirely unacceptable,” I said. “And I absolutely did not —”

“Oh, you absolutely did. Get on your knees.”

“—want you to cause the scandal of the century— what? ”

He took another step. My spine pressed against the bedpost as I tried, uselessly, to back up. “You wanted to play games with me, Lucian. Fine. I played. I came to the reception, and the moment I saw you—do you know how transparent your eyes are, sometimes?” He reached up and stroked his fingers down my cheek and around my jaw, tipping my chin up. My own fingers ached with the force of my grip on the post behind me. “You wanted me to show everyone I’d come when you called. And I did. You should be grateful I brought you back here before I collected on my part of the bargain.”

“Grateful,” I choked. “Grateful? Come when I—you and I both know that’s not what

they saw. What any of them will think.” I couldn’t keep the bitterness out of my tone. It’d really started to sink in, what had happened in that ballroom. How deeply I’d humiliated myself with my delusions of being something I wasn’t—and that no one who mattered would really believe I could be. “I played and lost, Benedict. Don’t mock me by pretending otherwise.”

“Lost?” His voice had an odd note to it, something off. His jaw tightened. “Fine. You didn’t want them to see? All right, I fucking did. Get on your knees or I’ll put you there.”

“Bloody well put me there, then, because I’m not going to kneel for—oh!”

With one hand on my shoulder pressing me down, and the other tugging on my waist, he had me on my knees in two seconds, and then instead of my shoulder he had my hair in his grasp. Benedict pulled my head back. Not violently, but irresistibly, enough that the skin of my neck felt stretched and I had trouble getting a full breath.

“Imagine they’re all watching,” he said. “If I’d done this after the dance. Because they might as well be watching, if you’re right about what they thought.” He tugged at his trousers with his other hand, cursed, and then spread his hand over the bulge of his erection. The buttons whispered out of the buttonholes, the placket falling open.

If I’d had his powerful magic, I’d have liked to think I’d have used it for only the most important, meaningful tasks, not for opening up my pants to get my cock sucked.

But I was a man—of course I’d have used it to open my pants to get my cock sucked.

And also because I was a man, without any more moral fiber than any other despite my title and my pride, my own cock throbbed and tented the front of my silk breeches. I knew if I could look down I’d see a damp patch on the pale silk.

“I think you know what to do, don’t you?” Benedict asked. But it wasn’t really a question, of course. He’d taken his cock in hand, and the thick, purplish head pointed right at my mouth. The scent of him rose up, salty and sweet. “Everyone in the ballroom knows what you’re doing right now, Lucian. Every single one of them’s picturing you on your knees for me. And every single one of them is jealous.”

All of them. Every aristocrat and footman, the ambassador, Lord Griset and his smirking friends, dancing and drinking and talking about me—and I couldn’t even try to deny it. They would be agog at the way Benedict had dragged me off, reveling in any lewd speculation they could invent. Benedict putting me on my knees would be the very least of it.

It should’ve withered my erection like a delicate vine in the first frost of winter, but instead my cockhead twitched, more moisture seeping out. I quivered like a hound on a leash, and for a moment I wished they truly were there watching. They would be jealous, all of them, because who could honestly claim to have never thought about what it might be like to have Benedict’s attention, his desire? Of course, he had some nerve, saying it out loud.

The instant my mouth opened he leaned in, his cockhead nudging insistently at my lower lip.

“You’re incredibly arro—mmm—gant,” I slurred, as his cock pushed in. “Thinking they’re jealous over your, oh, your coc—mmm.” If I didn’t swallow, I’d have my own saliva dripping down my chin, but I couldn’t swallow except around his cockhead, wrapping my lips tightly, and then he went deeper, and I started to stroke with my tongue, teasing the ridge of the glans with the tip of it.

Benedict thrust lightly, bumping the roof of my mouth. I blinked away the droplets gathering on my eyelashes. His face went wavery for a moment, reforming with his mouth open and his eyebrows raised.

He shook his head. And laughed. The fucker laughed , as if he found the way I'd started to slurp and whimper around his thick cock amusing .

“Jealous of me, not you. Lucian.” He thrust again, this time filling my mouth completely, stretching my lips obscenely wide. “How could you think I meant—fuck—jealous of anything but your mouth? Your perfect fucking mouth, Dromos fucking save me,” and he broke off in a moan as my throat convulsed, milking him hard enough that it probably hurt.

My perfect mouth. He'd called it pretty when he fucked it the first time, and sweet once or twice since when he had me rouse him with it before he took me, but...perfect.

My perfect mouth, with everyone jealous of it, envying Benedict , not me.

He couldn't possibly believe that.

But his fist clenched in my hair, his eyes widened, and as I forced myself onto his cock, bruising my own throat to take as many inches as I could, he groaned, shuddered, and spent down my throat in thick, hot pulses, too deep for me to taste.

He'd brought me so close to spending myself, so incredibly fucking close, and before he'd even pulled out of my mouth I was tearing at the front of my breeches, desperate to bring myself off, moaning around his softening cock as it rested on my tongue.

“Yes, fuck,” Benedict said, almost drowned out by the rending tear of my silk breeches. I'd given up on the buttons and didn't have magic to fall back on. My hand wrapped around my straining cock at last, the relief enough to take me out at the knees if I hadn't already been on the floor at Benedict's feet. “Just think if they could see you now, Lucian.”

He released his grip on my hair in time for me to curl in on myself, spending all over the floor, shudders running up and down my body. I tipped forward and leaned my forehead against his hip, moaning into the soft velvet of his doublet, my hand still wrapped around my slippery cock.

“If they could see me, they’d despise me,” I murmured.

Every cell in my body seemed to have grown immensely heavy, sinking down into the earth, even though my mind spun in circles. Had I lost the game I’d played? Or had Benedict even been my opponent in it, the way I’d thought?

“No, they wouldn’t despise you,” Benedict said, and he pulled back, the motion toppling me over. He caught me under the arms and hauled me up, wrapping me in his arms as I found my footing and swayed into his chest. He bent and kissed my ear. “They’d only be twice as jealous of me. Come on. Into bed.”

Bed. No, we hadn’t... “I thought you were going to fuck me and then I’d take a bath,” I complained. Oh, fuck, I was complaining—about not getting fucked. Maybe he wouldn’t notice. And then he chuckled and held me tighter, and yes, he’d noticed. Damn it. “Not that—I want a bath. I hate those receptions. The Surbini ambassador’s trying to screw us on trade negotiations, and Lord Zettine’s clerks passed it through without comment. Which means they must have some reason for—mmph!”

Benedict cut me off with a kiss that crushed my lips and drove every thought of Lord Zettine’s clerks out of my mind. A fresh current of energy trickled through me, reviving parts of my body I’d thought had been exhausted.

No, I couldn’t really believe I’d lost anything at all, not when Benedict bore me back onto my bed, sucking gently on my lower lip, working his way down my throat with flicks of his tongue and soft caresses, with no immediate urgency.

Only desire, and the desire to please—because I couldn't believe this could all be for him, not really. He might enjoy unlacing my shirt and pressing his lips to my breastbone, undoing each tiny waistcoat button and breathing hotly on my chest through the thin linen that covered it, mouthing over a nipple and glancing up at me with a smile when I squirmed and gripped his shoulders.

Clearly he did enjoy it, because his cock had hardened again, brushing against my inner thigh as he slid down my body.

But he couldn't enjoy it that much only for its own sake. He had to be taking some pleasure from mine.

He'd been the first to make this a game, taunting and challenging me, telling me how he'd make me enjoy his touch despite my protests. And I'd set out to win, trying to ensure that the tide of public opinion turned in my favor as much as it could, at least, since I hadn't been able to keep my body from responding to him.

It hadn't occurred to me until tonight that Benedict might really want us both to win—at least here, when we were alone without the politics and jealousies and ambitions of the court.

Except that we couldn't ever be entirely without those things, or escape them, could we? Benedict had left for two years, but he'd still returned. And while he hadn't explained that decision, some of it had to have been the inability to outrun responsibilities we'd both been born and bred to.

“Someone asked me, oh, that feels—” Benedict had eased my breeches down enough to nibble at my hipbone, something he'd already discovered drove me rather mad. Something about the proximity to my cock, and the sensitive skin there, and a nerve ending that transmitted eager need to all the ones lower down and farther in, where I wanted his touch the most. “I can't think when you're doing that,” I gasped.

“That’s the idea.” He’d laid me out on the bed at an odd angle, with one of my feet hanging off the end and the other off the side, and he sat up to start tugging at my shoes and maneuvering my legs. “Someone asked you what?”

Gods, I shouldn’t say anything. This topic would surely lead to trouble.

But we were playing a game. Whether we played it on the same side or meant to strive for winner take all, we truly couldn’t avoid the reality of our lives, even here. And I had to have some idea of how he meant this to end. Would he simply finish things between us once he thought I didn’t need his constant protection anymore? Did he have ambitions for the throne, despite his protestations? Or to be the power behind it, which seemed far more likely?

Benedict dropped my shoes to the floor and lifted his head, eyebrows raised, waiting.

My heart juddered so hard I couldn’t get a full breath, and I had to force down the thick lump under my vocal cords.

“Not in so many words.” My voice shook too, and I clenched my hands in the bedding to try to steady myself. “If I meant to marry you. She didn’t approve. Ow! Careful.”

“Sorry. I think I tore your stocking.”

He had, and possibly the skin beneath it. He smoothed his hand up my calf, pushing the stocking back up, and began to loosen the cuff of my breeches. With his head bent down to look more closely at what he’d been doing, he’d hidden his expression from me.

Benedict didn’t speak, moving on to the cuff on the other side with efficient motions that were very careful indeed. Exaggeratedly careful, even.

“It doesn’t matter. So it’s rather absurd, isn’t it? It’s not even legal. Unless you have some arrangement with Lord Zettine to make it legal so you can take the throne that way.”

Benedict looked up at last, face as blank as I’d ever seen it, gray eyes shuttered to an opaque slate. “I’d have thought your objection would be your disgust at the idea, not its illegality.”

I couldn’t read his tone any more than his eyes. And clearly my attempt at turning it into a joke hadn’t been successful.

“Well, yes, of course,” I stammered out. “It’s a horrid thought, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter, because it’s impossible,” he snapped, lips curling back in something close to a snarl. “Now do shut up, Lucian. We need to fuck and take care of my curse so you can take your bath, I think.”

I blinked at him in shock at his sudden anger, a cold, stunned numbness spreading down through me, leaving me shivering in its wake.

Well, that answered one of my questions, anyway. How many times had he told me how little he wanted to take or even share the power of my throne? I’d never believed him. But now I did, down to my bones. He didn’t want to be the Crown Duke of Calatria or anything adjacent, not even as a consort.

Perhaps particularly as a consort.

It should have made me deliriously happy, overflowing with relief: my most obvious rival, removing himself from the running. That furious threat he’d made years ago before he left Calatria, to keep me chained to my bed while he ruled in my name, spending his nights using me and his days doing whatever he pleased? That would

never come to pass.

But that numbness only spread, leaving my limbs clumsy and awkward as Benedict finished getting my breeches off and arranged me to his liking. My waistcoat hung undone, my shirt loosened and pushed up over my stomach, and he'd left my stockings on, leaving me bare only from the hips to the knees, with him kneeling between my legs fully dressed except for his open trousers. He'd taken a moment to shed his boots and sword belt when he got me on the bed, but he still could've been visiting one of those houses of ill repute Lady Violetta objected to so strenuously, ready to go back downstairs and drink for another hour before he chose another companion.

I felt infinitely more exposed than if I'd been completely naked, with only the part of me he wanted to use put on display. Wanton. Debauched. And still sticky from spending on the floor.

Benedict leaned down, bracing himself by my shoulder and stroking his cock to full hardness, looking down between my legs.

Ennoluhelp me, but my breath came faster and my cock filled under his attention. I couldn't keep still, restlessly opening myself for him, bracing my feet on the bed and spreading my thighs.

Benedict whispered under his breath. I'd never grow used to it, I didn't think, no matter how many times I experienced his magic: the frisson all along my limbs, my hair prickling, as a tingling slipperiness spread inside me and slicked my hole.

He bent down and kissed me as he lined up his cock, circling his hips, using his hand to work the thick head into me without hurting me. That had to feel spine-meltingly good for him, the way my tight hole stretched barely enough to let him wedge his cockhead inside my rim.

It did for me, anyway, and I moaned into his kiss, my arms wrapping around him, my clawing fingers gouging furrows in the velvet of his doublet.

Benedict lifted his head enough to look into my eyes. Nothing existed but him, filling my vision, filling my mind, about to fill my body.

“Shhh, Lucian. You can take me.” He kissed me again, lingering, and pressed forward, his cockhead embedded in me now. “You take me better than anyone ever has.”

He slid in slowly, so slowly, still working his way in with swivels of his hips, the thickest part of his shaft eased with another dollop of magically summoned oil. He thrust, and the last couple of inches of him sank in all at once, his balls between my cheeks and mine flattened by the weight of his body pressing down. The thick brush of his hair tickled my cock.

I panted into his mouth, stuffed and transfixed, and brought my knees up to try to ease the pressure, only for him to rock forward, working his cock inside me. Up and down and deeper and deeper, until the buzzing under my skin became almost unbearable and I writhed beneath him, throwing my head back and moaning.

It seemed to go on forever, that thorough, deliberate claiming of my body. Sweat stuck my shirt to my skin, dampened the silk stockings he'd left on my legs, beaded on my temples and upper lip. Benedict licked it off, bit at my jaw, and thrust harder at last, his cock driving into me mercilessly.

The luxurious velvet of his doublet caressed the head of my cock, so soft, and the edge of a band of silver-thread embroidery caught on the ridge of my glans, not enough to hurt, but enough. More than enough.

I spent first, ruining his doublet and my own silk waistcoat.

He spent a moment later, ruining me, filling me so deeply I didn't think I'd ever be free of him.

Benedict dropped his head onto the bed beside mine, shuddering with an aftershock of his pleasure. His cock twitched inside me. My little sigh sounded more like a sob.

"I'll go start your bath running in a moment," he said, muffled by the bedding. "One moment."

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Horrid. Marrying him, spending the rest of our lives like this, would be horrid and impossible and awful, although we didn't need to be married to spend every night—but no.

No.

Impossible. He'd said so.

And I wouldn't start desperately rationalizing, arguing my way to a different conclusion to this, even inside my own mind, because if I did that I'd have to think about why I would even try in the first place.

"Lucian? Are you all right?"

Impossible.

"Yes," I said.

No.

But I'd lost the game, and that was that.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

The clatter of hooves, the shout of a groom, and then a booming laugh in the courtyard below shook me out of my concentration on my paperwork, and I lifted my head and blinked at the clock on my desk. Half past eleven. Government officials had been in and out, singly and in groups, the Surbini ambassador had dropped by to ambush me with more issues with the trade agreement—in the guise of thanking me for the party the night before, of course.

Other than that, Mattia had brought piles of paper and taken them away again, and nearly four hours had passed without my pausing to do more than refresh my cup of coffee.

Benedict had examined the pot, the cup, and the cream and sugar when he left me in my study shortly after eight, and had promised to be back before noon to see to my lunch. We hadn't spoken except for brief, practical exchanges.

We'd been mostly quiet the night before, too, after we'd finished in bed. He'd run my bath for me, laid out the bathmat, and then made himself scarce in my sitting room, all without saying a word.

The silence had given me more time than I'd wanted to think. I'd always either done those things for myself or had a servant take care of them, and it had never even occurred to me how intimate they were.

As soon as it had occurred to me, I'd done my best to drive the thought out of my mind, which left a lovely vacancy into which vivid recollections of dancing with Benedict, being all but carried out of the ballroom by Benedict, and being fucked within an inch of my life by Benedict could rush. Any remaining space in my mind

was filled by the laughter of my courtiers. The result had been a mostly sleepless night, made all the more unbearable by the need to remain still and not draw Benedict's attention to my restlessness.

Work had been something of an escape this morning, but now whoever had decided to cause this disruption had ruined that for me too, damn it.

That laugh broke out again as I approached the window, and this time I recognized it, though I could hardly believe my ears. I knew who I'd see before I looked out: my cousin Tavius dismounting from his horse, his servants and guards doing the same all around him, the courtyard swarming with palace staff coming out to get them settled.

Oh, gods. Tavius? Why in the world would he have come here? Now, of all times?

Fuck. Of course. It'd been twelve days since my liaison with Benedict had become public gossip, and in that time someone had written to Tavius. And of course he'd come at once, probably determined to protect me from Benedict, whom he'd always detested. He'd almost certainly made the same assumptions that I had at first: that Benedict meant to kill me, usurp the throne, fuck me into compliance, or use magic on me, in whatever sequence seemed most convenient to him.

Tavius would be furious with me for what he'd see as self-destructive weakness and folly.

My stomach sank with disappointment and dread, and then curdled with guilt an instant later.

I ought to have wanted to see him. I ought to have been thrilled! The sons of two close sisters, Tavius and I had grown up practically like brothers, as my mother had taken me on long, frequent visits to Tavius's parents' estate throughout my childhood. Only a few months older than me, Tavius had always been bigger and

stronger—but he'd never used it against me. Quite the contrary. We'd learned to swim together in a pond a quarter mile from the manor, and when I'd been out of my depth, Tavius had let me ride on his back until I gained the confidence to strike out on my own. I'd always trusted him to look out for me.

But his mother and mine had some kind of falling out when Tavius and I were adolescents. We'd seen little of each other for several years and then picked up a relationship again throughout our teens and early twenties after my mother had gone to the convent, with me visiting him fairly often at his hunting lodge—including three years ago, when I'd spent that disappointing night with his friend.

But he'd never visited court much, and I hadn't seen him since he'd come for my father's state funeral shortly after that hunting trip, first too overwhelmed with shock and grief and then too busy with the business of ruling to take any holidays.

I'd missed him, of course. But even our correspondence had fallen off and become sporadic. Tavius had never been much of a letter-writer.

A light rain had started misting down, and Tavius tossed his reins to a groom and strode quickly for the shelter of the palace, disappearing out of sight.

He'd be at my study door within a few moments, quite possibly without even pausing to let a manservant clean his muddy boots. Tavius had always been loud, brash, and unconcerned with mess and disturbance—usually the cause of it, in fact. Gods, even if I managed to calm him down, it'd be impossible to get any work done with him rattling around the palace and trying to drag me out of my study and into the nearest keg of brandy—and away from Benedict.

Not that I'd manage to calm him down. As soon as he heard about what had happened at the ball last night...

Fuck. I dropped into my desk chair too heavily, yelping as it sent a shock through all the soft parts of my rear, and put my head in my hands. Mattia hadn't said much, but he'd confirmed, when I asked him, that the palace and the city were abuzz with the story.

Damn it, damn it, damn it to hell. Tavius couldn't have chosen a worse moment to descend upon me if he'd tried.

"Lucian! Where are you hiding?" Tavius's voice carried clearly through the study door from somewhere out in the corridor. Double damn it.

I jumped up and practically dived for the door. Mattia had gone off on an errand to Lord Zettine's office, which meant Tavius—aggressive by nature and a little too attached to his status as the duke's favorite cousin—would be facing down Benedict's humorless officers within seconds.

Both of my door guards had their hands on their sword hilts as I burst into the corridor, with Tavius coming to a stop a few feet away, his brows already drawing into a frown and face red with brewing anger.

For a strange moment, he reminded me so powerfully of my father in one of his tempers that my heart gave a skip and I froze in place.

But then Tavius saw me and his face split into a smile, and he looked almost like himself again. Older, of course, with a few harsh lines in his face he'd never had before, but still my cousin Tavius. I shook my head to clear the vision away and stepped forward between my guards, smiling too despite how mixed my feelings were. Tavius and I both had blond hair, and we resembled each other rather strikingly—and he'd inherited his build from his father, obviously, whose height and bulk were similar to my own father's. So it wasn't so odd, really, that Tavius could momentarily remind me of him.

But gods, that had given me a turn that it'd take a glass of wine to recover from.

"Lucian, call off your dogs," Tavius said. "I'm your bloody cousin, not a threat to your throne!"

"Let him pass," I said, and the guards hesitated and then drew aside, allowing Tavius to stride forward and pull me into a bear hug that made me oof as all the air was knocked out of my lungs.

For a moment I let myself relax into his embrace, wrapping my arms around his back and giving him a friendly thump, which he returned enthusiastically enough to have me laughing and wincing. Some of my worry melted away in the familiar warmth of his touch and the faint scent of home and family that somehow clung to him, no matter how much time had passed since we'd seen one another.

When I pulled back and looked up into his tanned, ruddy face and the eyes that were so much like mine, I almost felt happy he'd come.

And then that feeling evaporated instantly as he said, "Glad to see me?"

I bit my lip to keep in the automatic litany of apologies that tried to spill out in response to the challenging edge to his tone. He'd invited me to his lodge several times over the last three years, and I'd had to turn him down each time, much to his annoyance—even though he hadn't made the effort to travel, either. And now he knew perfectly well I wouldn't be glad he'd come to chastise me over Benedict, but if I said so, he'd turn it around on me.

Damn it, he'd put me on the defensive with four little words. Family could be so fucking overrated.

"Of course I am," I said, and his eyes narrowed. Ugh. I hadn't sounded convincing

even to myself.

“Are you?” He’d started to redden, puffing up his chest. “What the fucking hell, Lucian? That fucking ass Rathenas? Have you lost your mind? I had to come and talk some sense into you!”

Fuck, I’d forgotten quite how loud Tavius could be, and how overbearing. They’d be able to hear him halfway across the palace, and there were two pages and two guards standing a few feet away! “Come into my study and talk there, Tavius, this isn’t the place for—”

“I see you’re not denying it!” I winced and couldn’t help shooting a glance at our small audience, who were all leaning forward, unashamedly agog. “We need to get you out of this palace. Away from that bastard. Somewhere you can clear your head and have a bit of fun. If you’ve picked up with him, you’re clearly desperate. Or he’s muddled your mind somehow, because you’ve always hated him as much as I—”

Oh, gods preserve me, the guards would report this to Benedict, I knew they would, and even though I’d always been openly hostile to Benedict in private, and he had no illusions, somehow the thought of him knowing how I’d spent years abusing him to Tavius made my lungs seize up.

“Lunch!” I practically shouted, needing to do anything to head him off until I could get him somewhere more private. And Tavius could always be influenced through his stomach. “We’ll—find some hot punch to drive out the chill. My cooks can send up all your favorites. Roast beef and anything else you fancy. Whatever you’ve heard, I’m sure I can explain it.”

No chance of that, actually, but at least he could rant and carry on where not as many people would hear him. I took him by the arm, trying to tug him away, down the hall and away from the administrative offices. We could go around by a back corridor that

would get us to the semi-formal area of the palace where we entertained extended family or visiting dignitaries in smaller groups.

“Fine,” Tavius said, “but I swear to all the gods, you’d better not be trying to put me off!”

He slung his arm around my shoulders, giving me a bruising squeeze, and began to list all the delicacies he expected the cooks to prepare for us on the double, damn it, and without messing about. Out of the corner of my eye I caught Captain Venet practically twitching with the urge to intervene.

“Run to the kitchens, post haste, and order it all,” I muttered to the closest page, almost drowned out by Tavius’s booming voice, and the lad nodded and scurried off, leaving the other to close my study door and remain at his post.

Tavius kept his grip on me, striding quickly enough I had to trot to keep up, and the guards fell in behind us.

“...fine to eat our lunch here, but tonight we’ll be going down to the city, damme, somewhere with music and dancing and no bloody mages...”

Tavius’s voice washed over me as my mind raced in frantic circles. Benedict would arrive at my study soon expecting to find me and be furious that I’d gone off somewhere without him, Mattia would return from the chancellery and be confused, none of my work would be done, and worst of all, Tavius would pour me a glass of something strong from the sideboard decanters the moment we reached the parlor, and I’d have to refuse to drink it (because if I disobeyed Benedict and drank something he hadn’t approved twice in the same twenty-four hours, I probably ought to hope it killed me before he caught up with me), and then Tavius would explode with even more questions, and then...

“—somewhere we can have a proper revel,” Tavius was bellowing as we approached the intersection of this corridor with the one that would lead to the dining parlor.

He paused for breath, and I interjected, “I can’t drink the whole night away, Tavius! I need some sleep, and besides—”

“We’ll sleep when we’re dead! Besides, you don’t need sleep, you can spend the night on a cock that isn’t that fucking son of a bitch’s—oh, buggering fuck, where’d you come from, eh?”

My heart skipped a beat, a shock jolting me all the way down to my toes as Benedict strode around the corner and came to a sudden halt. Tavius skidded to a stop and me with him, my feet sliding out from under me for a moment. I had to cling to his side to stay upright.

Benedict’s gaze flicked from Tavius, to me—lingering, with a hard intensity that had me trembling with the desire to run away—and then to the guards, finally settling back on Tavius. Benedict’s eyes narrowed and his jaw went tight.

He’d heard every word. Did he think that was what I wanted? To spend the night on a cock that wasn’t his?

“I came from the barracks,” he said slowly, each word deliberate, as if he were biting them off one by one, “where I command. In this palace, where I live. With Duke Lucian, whom I protect. What about you, Lord Tavius? I didn’t know you’d been invited.”

Behind me, a slight jingle and rustle suggested the guards were bracing themselves for a fight. So was I. Tavius had stiffened against my side, his arm heavier around my shoulders, and I could hear his teeth gritting—and practically hear the fizzing of his blood as it bubbled in his veins. Benedict’s hand had moved to rest on the hilt of a

long, curved knife at his belt, his fingers flexing.

All at once, I lost my patience with their posturing. What did they even have to fight over, really? At twenty-eight, I had the right to choose my own bedmates, even if I chose poorly. (Very poorly.) Tavius might feel that the proprietary authority over me he'd taken on as my slightly older cousin when we were children still applied, but—it didn't.

And Benedict didn't need to protect me from my own cousin. He didn't have the right to dictate which of my relatives I invited, or welcomed without an invitation.

He certainly didn't have the right to be offended that I might want to take someone else to bed. Especially since I didn't even intend to bed anyone else, tonight, anyway. And would I even be able to find a cock in the lower town that Benedict hadn't already seen? For fuck's sake.

No, they were simply using me as an excuse to establish which of them was the biggest man in the room, like a pair of cockerels who'd strayed into the same barnyard.

My body ached from Benedict's use of me, my eyes ached from weeping in the middle of the night like a fool, my ears ached from Tavius's tactless shouting, and I'd spent the morning buried in heaps of paper. No, I had no more patience left.

And unfortunately for them, while they might be taller, broader men with bigger swords and hasty tempers, I was their ruling duke. Perhaps all I had to do to reassert control was...reassert it. They could come and have a civilized lunch with me, or they could go fuck themselves, or each other, or stab one another, or whatever else they wanted to do, somewhere else very fucking far away from me.

I straightened my spine, both literally and figuratively, and shrugged off Tavius's

arm.

“Lord Benedict, if you’re here to join us for luncheon, you’re very welcome,” I said crisply, and completely insincerely, in the same tone I typically used when instructing the clerks and secretaries and solicitors who really kept the duchy running smoothly while men like Tavius and Benedict swaggered about glaring at one another.

To be fair, the duchy would have ceased to exist during the past decade without Benedict’s military talents, but that didn’t make his current behavior less childish. Perhaps he’d decline and save me the misery of dealing with the two of them in tandem.

“Neither the Dowager Duchess’s son nor my cousin need an invitation,” I went on. “But both of you will be eating elsewhere if you delay me on my way to my own luncheon, because I’ve been working all morning with only a single pot of coffee that went cold hours ago, and I’m famished. And Tavius, I’m not going to listen to a lot of shouting over my meal. Save your arguments for later or don’t come at all.”

Without waiting for either of them to agree or not, I set off around the corner toward the dining room, lengthening my stride and smiling sourly to myself as Benedict’s guards fell in smartly behind me and left both their commander and Tavius to follow if they chose.

Or perhaps they’d do me a favor and fall into a pit instead, damn them. Family, lovers, and lovers who were also some definition of family were all so very, very bloody overrated.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

The parlor lay at the end of a short branching corridor, overlooking the gardens, with a broad set of doors leading out onto a terrace. My page had clearly run quickly and executed his orders with aplomb. When I entered, the drapes had already been drawn back to let in the gloomy gray daylight, a cheerful blaze had been lit in the fireplace, and several servants paused, bowed, and went back to their hasty work of laying the table for a full meal when they'd expected to be bringing a more casual lunch for two into my study.

"Beg pardon for the delay, Your Grace," said the butler. "There's hot punch ready by the fire, if you please to have it while you wait."

One of the cooks was a witch, and while her powers weren't extensive she could get things hot much more quickly than the stove could manage. Hot punch in five minutes was one of her specialties, one reason why I'd been reluctant to replace the kitchen staff. If she'd been responsible for the poisoning, I might cry. And then shrug and accept my doom, because I'd never sack her.

I took the goblet the butler handed me, warming my hands on it while both Benedict and Tavius followed me in at last, greatly to my disappointment. Their stiff postures suggested they'd probably been snarling at one another in the corridor.

Benedict made a beeline for me, frowning gaze fixed on my wine.

"I haven't had any yet, it's a bit too hot," I said, understanding what he hadn't said. "Careful with yours, gentlemen."

Benedict nodded jerkily, eyes softening in relief despite the tension in every line of

his big body. He approached, standing so close to me that I had to tip my head up to meet his gaze. Despite my irritation, his nearness warmed me more than the fire.

“Don’t trust him, there’s something off about him,” he said softly, leaning down a little, almost as if he meant to kiss me. Don’t trust him? How dare he! The air between us thickened and stretched, every part of me close to Benedict quivering with the need for his touch, like a flower straining to the sun—and gods, how could I react like this to him, even when he angered me the most? “I know you didn’t want me here, but I’m not leaving you alone with him. I don’t care if it annoys you.”

He reached up and quickly wrapped his hand around the goblet, out of sight of the rest of the room, flicking the surface of the liquid with the tip of his finger. And then he nodded and stepped away to the sideboard, ladling out a cup and saying something to one of the servants about the proper proportion of brandy in a wine punch, his tone easy and smooth, as unconcerned and casual as if he wasn’t considering cutting my cousin’s throat at the lunch table.

“...as long as the beef’s really hot,” Tavius was saying, and I could hear the rattle of a serving cart in the hallway, probably carrying our first course. Thank Ennolu, and the kitchen staff—even the ones who’d colluded to try to poison me. If they were efficient enough today that I could get this over with quickly, I might forgive them anything, even treason.

Benedict turned from the sideboard and held out the goblet he’d filled. “Have some punch, Lord Tavius,” he said, in much the same tone he’d have used to say, “Go bugger yourself and die.”

“Have it yourself,” Tavius snapped. “I don’t need you to play host, you fucking usurping parasite. I’ll pour my own.”

A fraught silence fell, Tavius glaring at Benedict, teeth bared, as if daring him to

respond in kind, Benedict frozen in place with the goblet held out.

And then Benedict half-smiled, shrugged, and stepped aside with the air of a man washing his hands of a situation in which he'd done his best. He took a drink. Tavius edged around him, bristling like an angry cat, and filled his own goblet. Benedict smiled slightly and sat in the nearest chair to me, stretching his feet out toward the fire.

Oh, for...I reviewed the last few moments in my mind. Benedict had poured a glass, checked it for poison, and tried to give it to Tavius, but had not, as far as I had noticed, checked the punch bowl itself.

I opened my mouth, trying to think of what I could say, but Tavius had already knocked back half of his goblet and begun to refill it.

Too late.

My raised-eyebrow stare bounced right off the side of Benedict's stupid smug face.

Not that I could really blame him for not trying particularly hard, after Tavius's blatant insult...but would he simply sit there getting drunk and shrugging while Tavius dropped dead, if it came to that?

Almost certainly he would, damn him.

Tavius took up a position beside me with his back to the fire, sipping at his second glass of hopefully non-lethal punch. In the momentary lull of hostilities, I dared to take a drink of my own wine at last, letting the heat of it soothe my chest and the bite of the brandy begin to sand down some of the jagged edges of my mood. Would I survive Tavius's visit, dealing with both of them?

Would they survive? Even if they didn't fight a duel or allow the other to be murdered by a third party, I might lose my own temper and stab them both in the neck.

"Where's Fabian?" Tavius said, and I glanced up at him sharply, startled out of my sour contemplation of the hearth rug. "Shouldn't he be here somewhere serving you? Don't tell me Rathenas ran him off. Are you driving away anyone who might talk some sense into him, eh? Anyone close to him? You'll regret it if you try it on me."

Oh, by all that was holy, he simply wouldn't let up, would he?

But his dogged insistence on being as unpleasant as possible didn't disturb me nearly as much as the horrible shiver that the sound of my dead valet's name sent through me, his pain-twisted, rapidly cooling corpse flashing before my eyes.

Hang on a moment. The sound of his name...why in the world would Tavius even know his name, or remember it if he'd ever heard it in the first place? He didn't give a damn about the names or doings of any of his servants or anyone he considered beneath him, as evidenced by his carrying on about Benedict in front of the guards and pages in the hallway a few minutes ago.

"He would be attending on me," I replied, keeping my voice even with an effort. "But he's dead, I'm sorry to say."

Tavius jolted and then went as still as death himself, staring at me with his blue eyes bugging out. The pink washed out of his cheeks as if someone had taken a sponge to him. "Dead? He's— dead ? How the fuck did he die, then? Why the fuck didn't he tell—who killed—was he killed?"

All the hair rose on the back of my neck, and Benedict leaned forward slightly, eyes fixed on Tavius, his entire demeanor that of a hunting hound on the scent.

Who killed him . No one knew he'd been murdered but me and Benedict—and presumably whoever had planned the murder in the first place. Tavius couldn't have, he couldn't. The room seemed to spin around me, my head going too light, I couldn't answer him, I couldn't—

“He fell and hit his head,” Benedict put in, and thank the gods for that. I didn't think I could have spoken without screaming. “It was a terrible thing. Why'd you think someone killed him?”

Tavius's open-mouthed hesitation lasted a moment too long.

Don't trust him, there's something off about him .

“Why do I—I don't!” Tavius closed his mouth, opened it again, and then raised his goblet in a motion so jerky the punch sloshed and dripped onto the floor, tipping his head back and draining it. He lowered the cup, his hand so tight around it his knuckles had gone white. His face matched, still chalky under his tan, with deep grooves around his mouth. “It's a shock, that's all. Someone's dead. I need to—Lucian, you'll have to excuse me,” he went on, and he was clearly trying to sound like himself. But failing, badly. He spoke so rapidly his words almost slurred together. “I'm not as hungry as I thought. Tired, that's what I am. Have one of these fellows take me to my room to wash up a bit, eh?”

As a cousin and a friend, I wanted nothing more than to put my hand on Tavius's arm. Ask him what the hell was wrong, shake an explanation out of him if I had to, and offer my help—because surely he'd accept it. He cared for me. Whatever this mystery, he'd never hurt me.

As a duke and a born-and-bred courtier and a man who'd found his valet's murdered body on his bedroom rug, I damn well knew better. What had happened to his determination to separate me from Benedict? None of his behavior made the slightest

bit of sense.

I found my voice at last, although it rasped as if I'd been screaming after all.

"Of course, Tavius. It was a long journey. Tiring. Of course." I waved at one of the footmen, and he approached and bowed. "Show Lord Tavius to his room. And—and see to anything else he or his party requires."

"Brandy's what I'll want." Tavius shot me a smile that approximated his usual brash arrogance, but on the haggard pallor of his face it just looked ghastly. "The best in the cellars."

"The very best," I said. My own smile probably looked even worse than his. "The duke's own, if you please."

Tavius barked out a harsh, ugly laugh. "That's the stuff. Now are we going, or not?" he snarled at the footman.

He stomped off, almost knocking into Benedict's chair as he did and not troubling to acknowledge him at all otherwise, not even with an insult. The footman all but danced out the door in Tavius's wake, murmuring apologies.

A nervously cleared throat drew my attention to the butler. "The table's ready, if it please you, Your Grace," he said—tentatively, and I couldn't blame him.

"Thank you," I managed. The table. I might never have an appetite again. But I couldn't think of a plausible excuse for Tavius's behavior or for dismissing the butler and footmen before they'd served the remaining two of us lunch. Fuck it. Let them talk. After Benedict's and my behavior at the ball last night, it hardly mattered. I simply said, "You can all go."

The door shut behind them, and Benedict and I regarded each other in silence for a long moment. Dread sat so heavily on my chest that I could hardly draw a breath.

“By your reaction,” Benedict said at last, “you also don’t know of any good reason why your cousin ought to have been particularly attached to Fabian. Or why he might know or guess that his death wasn’t an accident.”

A gust of wind pattered a few drops of rain against the glass of the terrace door, a chill draft sweeping past my feet from under it. I hardly felt it. I’d gone cold all over. Apparently the past week’s fine weather had come to an end, both outdoors and for me.

“I can’t even think of a reason why Tavius would have known Fabian’s name. Or that he existed, except in the sense that he’d assume I’d have a valet.” I closed my eyes for a moment, knowing I couldn’t deny it to either myself or to Benedict, letting the pain of it course through me. “He knew. That wasn’t a wild guess. I know him. And he didn’t have any doubt about it.”

Benedict pushed to his feet and put his empty cup on the sideboard, coming to stand by the fire with me.

“I may be inferring too much from that,” he said slowly. “Tell me if you agree with my reasoning. But Lucian—if he immediately jumped to the idea that Fabian was murdered. If he wasn’t guessing, then that means he knows why someone would want Fabian dead. Are you with me so far?”

That made sense. I nodded, throat too tight for speech.

“All right. But don’t you see? That suggests the poison wasn’t meant for you at all. We’ve been assuming the murderer meant to kill you, because it was your wine and you’re the obvious target. But what if Fabian was the intended victim all along? What

if he always drank a portion of your wine before he gave it to you, and someone had seen him do it often enough to know? It'd be a damn clever way to kill him," he added, sounding more admiring than condemnatory.

I might not be applauding the cleverness of the killer—after all, unlike Benedict, I had some slight grasp on morality. But I couldn't argue with his logic. I'd had the same thought when I realized how Fabian had died, hadn't I? Wondering how many times Fabian had drunk from my cup and then possibly spit in it afterward. Every night, probably. Anyone in the kitchen could've seen him and made a note of his habit.

If that poison had really been for Fabian, if he'd been murdered on purpose...gods, no good and decent man would feel such a rush of relief, nearly enough to take me out at the knees. But knowing someone hated me enough to viscerally want me to suffer and die had been a constant, nagging, terrifying weight to bear. And more than that...hope struck me with sudden, breathtaking force.

"If it was Fabian the poisoner meant to kill, then whatever mystery this is about Tavius, it may have nothing at all to do with me. It might mean that—"

"Lucian, don't waste your breath. Lord Tavius doesn't seem like the sort to even notice the death of a servant. Tell me I'm wrong." I wished I could, but I had to shake my head. "All right, so he certainly wouldn't care why he'd died, unless he'd had some personal connection to him. Which he wouldn't have had without your knowledge, particularly without wanting to admit to it now, unless he meant to—"

"No, I won't believe it!" I couldn't let him say it aloud. Not about the one person in the world I'd genuinely trusted until today. "He would never—"

"—betray you," Benedict finished, his face and his tone equally grim. He took a step toward me, close enough that I could see the fine lines of tension at the corners of his

eyes. “Lucian,” he said, gently but with no compromise at all, “the best thing I can say is that he didn’t kill Fabian himself. His surprise proves that. But he almost certainly knows who did. And that implies a plot that he’s part of, something that must have to do with you.”

A plot. Why the fuck didn’t he tell... Tavius hadn’t finished his sentence, and it’d almost passed me by in the moment, but it reoccurred to me now. Whoever had sent him word of my new understanding with Benedict? And who’d neglected to mention Fabian’s death, perhaps because he didn’t understand that it’d be important information for Tavius to know.

My hands shook so much that the cup of leftover wine I’d forgotten I held sloshed everywhere. Benedict took it from me and put it on the mantel, eyes never leaving my face.

I had to be as pale and wretched as Tavius had been a few minutes ago.

There must be some explanation, there must be, but if there was Tavius would already have given it, as Benedict had pointed out. And I couldn’t even imagine a convincing hypothetical. You might have secret dealings with a valet in order to blackmail him, buy information from him, or use him to manipulate his master. If Fabian had been younger, perhaps...but Tavius only took women to bed, anyway. And even if there could be some other explanation, no innocent reason for sneaking about with a duke’s servant resulted in death.

If Tavius had a co-conspirator, someone unconnected to Fabian, then that didn’t simply implicate Tavius in a plot. It made him the likely center of it.

“He’s my cousin,” I said, and my voice came out as broken as I felt. “I’ve always loved him like a brother. And I’d, gods. I’d have sworn on my own life he was the only person in the world who really loved me.”

I turned my head away and stared down at the fire, focusing on the jump and dance of the flames, hoping that I could pretend the stinging in my eyes came from keeping them open in the heat rather than something else.

Benedict didn't make a sound. The hand hanging down by his side in the corner of my vision had balled into a fist.

"I'm sorry," I managed at last, as the horrid silence stretched. "You must think I'm pathetic. I think I'm pathetic. I know I ought to be thinking about what to do next. And I will, I promise. I'll get over it in a mom—"

"It's not just that fucking cretin who loves you, Lucian. Not when you're—damn it, look at me!"

He caught me by the chin and turned my head up to face him. Resisting wouldn't have done any good, not that I wanted to—not when I found him bending down, peering at me as intently as if he wanted to see into my soul. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

"I have no doubt you're more beloved than you know," he said, very low. His other hand had come to my waist, somehow, his arm sliding around me. His attempt at a smile didn't convince me at all, and it came nowhere near his troubled eyes. "Probably you have a dozen courtiers pining over you at this moment. Writing terrible poetry about your rose petal lips. That idiot who was flirting with you when I arrived last night seems like the type."

"Even good poetry isn't much use to me, although thank you for your suggestion that only idiots would address it to me in the first place."

He didn't even pretend to laugh at that. Anger built in me like a banked fire flaring up in response to fresh fuel, and I welcomed it in the place of some of my betrayal and

grief. Damn it, he didn't need to find my halfhearted jests amusing, but he also shouldn't treat me like an idiot! He didn't want me for more than quenching his curse or putting me on my knees—and he expected me to believe he thought someone else would?

“Don't patronize me, Benedict. No one's pining. And even if they were, it's not the same. Tavius—” and my voice broke again, damn it all, “—is my cousin, and the only real family I have left. Unless I count you. And we can't even agree on whether we are family, or on whether it'd be worse if we are or aren't! Are you going to claim to love me, or—ow!”

“I'm sorry, fuck,” he muttered, and let go of my jaw where his fingers had dug in painfully.

But he didn't release me altogether, the arm around my waist only pulling me closer. Close enough that I could've stretched a few inches and pressed my lips to the side of his neck. Caught that ridiculous ruby earring between my teeth and tugged on it, made him gasp. My heart beat faster and my cock thickened, pressing against the front of my trousers.

“Lucian,” he whispered, his breath ruffling my hair and tickling the top of my ear. “Do you want me to tell you I love you? Hmm?”

What I wanted was for him to throw me down on the rug before the fire, strip me bare, force my legs open and take me. That was better than anything anyone could say to me, because at least his lust was honest. And for a few minutes I might forget about everything else.

Oddly, I didn't think he was mocking me. But his pity might be even worse.

“For the gods' sakes, no,” I said, and put my hands on his hips—and pushed him

away, even though I thought I might break in half as I stepped back, my fingers not wanting to release him. His arm felt like steel around me, unbreakable, but at last he let it drop. “I’ve had enough of being lied to for one day.”

Benedict turned away from me and back to the sideboard. He didn’t bother with the punch, going straight for the brandy decanter. Like a fool, I wished I hadn’t made him let me go. Gods. At least he wouldn’t see me rubbing my eyes.

When I blinked them open again, the dining parlor was exactly the same: the table laid, the silver covers gleaming, a few drops of rain spattering the windows.

And yet everything was different, just as it had been in the moments after I’d heard my father had died, and after I’d seen his body, and after I’d found Fabian’s. Less genuine, as if I couldn’t quite feel real in a world where everything I’d thought I could depend on had turned out to be false. A flimsy stage set with props. Would I ever have a crucial juncture in my life after which everything would be different and also better ? Probably not.

Benedict put down the empty brandy glass with a click.

“All right,” he said roughly. “Only the truth for you, then, if you insist. You have two choices. You can arrest Tavius now on suspicion of treason, lock him up and interrogate him. Or you can give him enough rope to hang himself with and watch him while he plays it out.”

My stomach churned. I had to swallow down bile before I could say, “No. No, I won’t be—I won’t turn into my father. Imprisoning my relatives. Assuming the worst of everyone. If I’d wanted to reign like that I’d have clapped you in magic-suppressing irons long ago, wouldn’t I?”

Benedict’s laugh didn’t have any humor in it. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten you

threatened to. And I agree that he should be left at liberty, but not because I think he deserves any benefit of the doubt. Your father assumed the worst of people who'd never hurt anyone," he said, his face twisting with fury, his tone laced with venom.

Had my father executed or exiled one of Benedict's friends? Or...someone he loved? The constriction in my ribs ratcheted up a notch. Was that why Benedict had never spent more than a couple of nights with anyone? If he'd never stopped grieving for a lost love, pining for what could never be, then anyone who basked in his smiles or melted under his touch or surrendered to his kisses was a fool, doomed to disappointment and heartbreak.

"You're not your father," he went on. "You're nothing like him. Nothing at all. He'd have had Lord Tavius strung up with his feet in the fire here in the dining parlor, and I'll be honest with you, I'm tempted myself, bloody bastard. But Tavius wasn't glad Fabian was dead. Quite the contrary. He'll be out to pick a quarrel with whoever killed him, and all we need to do is let him lead us to his co-conspirators. And then I'll be happy to do all the stringing up you could want. More than happy."

Happy to do all the stringing up I could want? Gods. With Tavius's feet in the fire. Surely Benedict would have the decorum to go downstairs to the dungeons for that and spare the dining parlor rugs.

I'd been trying to maintain some appearance of strength, but I'd had it. Two steps took me to the chair Benedict had been sitting in, and I dropped into it, elbows on my knees and head hanging down, and sucked in as much air as my lungs could manage.

My father had spent years suspecting his various relatives and vassals of betraying him, and his methods of dealing with possible treason had been harsh, dreadful, and often final.

Ironic, really, that I might truly have a treasonous cousin, and I didn't think I'd be

able to do what needed to be done and still look myself in the mirror afterward.

“He should’ve chosen you as his heir after all,” I muttered. “I am nothing like him, and I’m not sure I have the stomach to be. Why did you say I’d do him proud, then? The morning you left Calatria. I’ve always wondered.”

“I should never have said that.” I glanced up sharply, shocked out of my misery by Benedict’s anger. His eyes blazed as he looked down at me, lips pressed flat.

I shrugged. “We both said a few things that perhaps we ought not to have. But you did say it. And that he was right about me.” Without stopping to consider, I added, “You have no idea how much it bothered me, thinking about what the hell that meant.”

Benedict shook his head. “I’d have bet every silver crown in my pocket that you didn’t spare a single thought for me after I left.”

Oh, fucking hell.

“I was thinking about what my father might have thought of me in the last days of his life. Not about you, Benedict.”

“Of course not.” His faint smile didn’t reach his eyes at all—so bleak I’d have thought he was the one who’d been grieved by someone he loved. “I’ll try to explain what I meant—later. Or some other time. It’s not important right now. You ought to go back to your study and carry on as usual, let Tavius and anyone else involved with him think you don’t suspect him of anything. And I’ll see what he’s up to.”

Back to my study, where the trade agreement and a hundred other tasks awaited me. All the other business of ruling a duchy, none of which I could neglect no matter how many valets had been murdered or cousins had betrayed me. I pushed to my feet

again, accepting the inevitable.

“He said he was going to his room to wash up,” I said. “I’m not sure what you think you’ll learn from lurking about while he bathes.”

“I doubt he’ll stay where he’s supposed to be. I’ll set someone I trust whom he won’t recognize to follow him. And if I don’t come to find you before you finish working for the day, I’ll meet you in your rooms.”

I nodded, and Benedict turned away, moving toward the door. He had his hand on the knob when the words burst out of me. “Don’t hurt him! We could be wrong about him. We could.”

Benedict hung his head down for a moment, and when he turned he had an expression I couldn’t read at all in his stormy gray eyes.

Three quick strides brought him back across the room, and then he had a hand on my hip and the other on my shoulder, and he’d bent down. My eyes closed. His mouth covered mine, warm and firm and sure, grounding me down to the soles of my boots. Gods, it wasn’t fair how quickly my body and my mind responded to him—how much I’d come to need him. In his arms, in his kiss, I was steady in my place in the universe, and all the edges of my nerves smoothed away.

Benedict lifted his head, leaving me dazed and half-hard and wishing I could simply drop my head on his shoulder and forget everything in the world but this.

“You’re too good for him,” he said, and then added, so low I almost couldn’t hear him, “and for me.”

He bent and kissed me again, fast and hard, and let me go abruptly enough that I stumbled back a step.

He'd already gone out and shut the door behind him before I could do more than open my mouth and stare.

Too good for him? I couldn't have heard him clearly.

My little laugh sounded strange in the quiet, empty room. What next, would I be expecting him to write that poem to my lips?

I shook my head to clear away the nonsense, composed my face into the calm, authoritative mask of a duke, and followed Benedict out the door.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

The afternoon dragged endlessly as I signed documents and dictated letters, keeping up the appearance of focusing on my work while thinking of nothing but Tavius. Who had written to him? And why? Had Tavius been spying on me all this time, or only recently?

His pale, haggard face and Fabian's grotesque corpse reoccurred to me again and again, along with increasingly bizarre imagined scenarios: Tavius storming into my study and attacking me, Benedict and Tavius dueling and killing each other, Lord Zettine tossing their bodies into the harbor and rallying the army behind him in preparation for a violent coup. Mattia, Gerfred, and even Captain Venet all assured me that the palace was quiet, but it didn't help—and if stoic, unconcerned Venet had made the effort to try to soothe my nerves, I probably hadn't been doing such a good job of keeping up appearances.

Tavius. What could he possibly have to gain from any dealings with Fabian, and why would he hide what he knew about his death?

And more than that, more than any practical considerations of politics or money or aristocratic maneuvering, it gave me a sharp, breathless pain somewhere under my ribs to think about Tavius wanting to hurt me—or not caring if he did.

I'd never have hurt him. I loved him.

And he didn't love me.

Perhaps I ought to have been used to it after my mother's abandonment and my father's lack of affection. But it only hurt all the more, one wound on top of another.

At last the clock ticked over to six. I stood and stretched my back and blinked my burning eyes. Benedict ought to have been here by now with a report, but he'd said he'd join me in my rooms, and if I waited for him there, at least I could take off my boots and warm my feet by the fire after hours of sitting still in a chilly room. Miserable, grief-stricken betrayal and seething anger might be slightly more bearable once I could feel my toes.

My guards fell in behind me as I left my study with Gerfred and a page as my vanguard. The palace had broad corridors, gracious architecture, hundreds of years' worth of paintings in carved and gilt-painted frames, mosaiced arches, ceilings frescoed in rich blues and burgundies and ochres, polished tile floors. Even with night pressing in against the windows it should've been bright and beautiful.

But it seemed to close in on me as I made my way to my rooms, every shadow and whisper enough to make me clench my teeth and try not to jump.

Even the usual array of minor courtiers who haunted the halls to bow and scrape and attempt to attract my favorable notice were absent, and only a few servants scurried by. Logically I knew they were probably dressing for their dinners, but it felt ominous, as if the hush meant that the palace itself held its breath in anticipation of trouble.

Even the rain had stopped, at least for now.

My rooms lay in the same oppressive silence, with only the faint crackle of the fire to relieve it. Servants had come in as usual and lit candles and tidied, but there was no other sign of life. At least Fabian had been another person in the space with me in the evenings, his sullenly hostile commentary something to distract me from my other cares, and since his death I'd grown used to having Benedict to contend with. When this was over, I wouldn't have him around, either.

That thought left me bereft and cold in ways I didn't want to acknowledge and that no armchair, fire, and glass of brandy could possibly alleviate.

Just in case, I went down the corridor and opened the door to Benedict's rooms, but they were utterly dark and chilly and abandoned.

That didn't mean more than the obvious, that he hadn't returned. He didn't have servants come in his rooms much; a mage could light his own candles without any fuss.

But he hadn't returned.

I shuddered, shut the door quickly like a child afraid of monsters, and breathed a sigh of relief as I shut my own door behind me a moment later.

At least I could blame my unmanly shivers on the draft. The candle flames dipped and stretched as another breezy gust swept through the room, odd since I'd already closed the door. Someone must have left a window open while cleaning up earlier.

Except...I went still like a rabbit scenting a predator, all the hair rising on the back of my neck as a tingle swept over my scalp. What had set off my instincts? There. The dressing room door stood open, nothing unusual there. But the edge of my bed canopy closest to the dressing room fluttered again as I stood with my eyes wide open, alert for any oddity.

The dressing room had a window, but it stuck and was rarely opened even in good weather. Had one of the footmen forced it open and then been unable to close it?

The only other explanation was impossible, because if my father's ghost haunted the palace, surely he'd find something better to do than muck about with secret passages in dressing rooms, and no one but my father and I had known about that door.

Impossible.

But all too probable.

I spun, wrenched at the door, opened my mouth to shout for the guards—and quick, heavy footsteps gave me one second's warning before a burly arm wrapped around my middle and a hand slapped down over the lower half of my face.

“It’s only me, Lucian, leave off!” Tavius, and I redoubled my struggles, kicking out at the door and thrashing my head back in an attempt to break his nose. But he was too tall, and he cursed as I smacked my skull against his clavicle, but he didn’t let go. “I’m not going to hurt you! That bastard Rathenas is the one who’s betrayed you, and those are his men out there, so you can’t summon them. You know I’d never hurt you, so leave off!”

I could hardly see, blinded by rage and fear and the sudden overwhelming shock that had gone through all my nerves, and I shouted behind his hand but it came out a muffled grunt.

My foot connected at last, with a crack and a rattle of the door in its frame, and Tavius dragged me back, stumbling sideways into the wall with a thump.

“If I’m not back soon to instruct my men on what to do, your precious fucking Benedict’s a dead man,” Tavius snarled, raw and furious, in a tone I’d never heard from him. “And if you don’t stop fighting, or you call out for your guards, I’ll fucking hurt you after all.”

Benedict. He had Benedict.

And I went still except for my heaving chest.

“Quiet, or else,” Tavius warned me again, and then he took his hand away from my mouth and pushed me out of his hold.

I turned and found him glowering at me, nothing but malice in those blue eyes I’d always known as open and friendly and full of humor.

He could have been my father’s furious, paranoid, hostile ghost after all.

I staggered back a step.

Tavius. Not my father.

But the bizarre resemblance that had struck me earlier was back so forcefully that I couldn’t clear the vision.

“Don’t look at me like you’ve seen a ghost,” Tavius said, and I let out a crack of laughter that probably made me sound like a madman. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”

That only made me laugh all the more, but I sucked in air and forced myself to stop, fists clenched. I couldn’t fight Tavius. He might not be Benedict’s match—few men were—but he had several inches and forty pounds on me, much of it muscle, though his life of drinking and carousing had begun to show in his belly and chest.

Anyway, he could snap me like a twig before the guards came even if I shouted my head off.

And he claimed to have Benedict. I didn’t believe him. How in the world could he have taken Benedict captive, for the gods’ sakes? With his skill with a sword, his strength, his powerful magic?

But Benedict wasn't here, where he'd promised me he'd be.

No message, via magic or a page sent with a note, no word at all.

Tavius could be telling the truth. Benedict could be unconscious, bleeding, beaten, broken.

Or Tavius could be lying to me, only not the way I'd thought at first. My stomach coiled into a sick, horrid knot.

Benedict could be dead already.

"What the hell do you think is wrong with me, Tavius? You broke into my room and assaulted me, you claim to have Benedict hostage, and you're threatening more violence if I resist you! How did you get in? And I want proof that you have him and that he's alive. Or I swear to you, I'll—"

"You'll what?" Tavius demanded, practically bristling. "Have me arrested? Sent to the torturer and the headsman, eh?"

Flying spittle flecked my face, and his had gone red and mottled, his eyes wild.

A frigid, paralyzing shiver trickled down my spine, leaving me stiff and wary, shaken out of my anxiety and fear by sudden, undeniable certainty: Tavius might have loved me, and somewhere in him he might still love me.

But he hated me at least as much.

And he wouldn't hesitate to kill me.

"I'm not going to do anything," I said, lowering my voice, hoping a calm, even

demeanor would calm him too, like a feral animal. “You’re my cousin, Tavius. I’d never arrest you. But you have to explain this to me. What are you doing? Why—if something’s wrong, if you have some quarrel with Benedict, you only needed to—”

Tavius burst out laughing, rubbing his hands over his face, turning away and then back again as if he could hardly contain himself.

“A quarrel with Rathenas? You could say that. The same as I have with you. Except that I hate him for his own sake, and I like you fine except for who you are.” He gestured wildly up and down. “Treviso’s legitimate fucking heir,” he spat, and his face twisted with rage. “And now you’re fucking that—son of a bitch, that’s what he is. He had him wrapped around his finger. Would’ve taken the throne if Treviso had lived long enough to give it to him. And now he’s got you fooled, too. How could you, Lucian?”

For a moment, confusion almost edged out the terror blooming in me as Tavius grew wilder and wilder.

How could he possibly be angry with me for being my own father’s legitimate heir?

The same as I have with you .

Both of us possible heirs to my father’s title, at least in some people’s view.

Could Tavius possibly think he had some claim that Benedict and I were both in the way of? He couldn’t, that’d be absurd. He was my maternal cousin, with no relation at all to my father’s side.

Except that he resembled my father far more than he resembled me, really. I’d seen it before. But I’d always dismissed it as a fluke of nature and of his late father’s passing similarity to mine.

“I don’t understand. You can’t—you couldn’t,” I stammered. But the idea had taken hold, gaining shape and weight, corroborating details slotting into place in my mind in inexorable sequence.

My mother’s quarrel with my aunt, the one that left them completely estranged and after which she ended her marriage to my father. Tavius’s horror at Fabian’s death—Fabian, who’d been my father’s confidential servant long before I was born, certainly during the time I’d been conceived.

And when Tavius had been conceived. Only three months before me, and both my mother and Tavius’s had been residing at court at the time. My parents had wed during my gestation, and I’d heard my aunt had missed it, going home to the country estate for some urgent matter or other.

That urgent matter could have been the need to fuck her husband in order to cover up the fact that she’d already become pregnant with the duke’s bastard.

Tavius took a step closer to me, baring his teeth in something horribly unlike a smile, eyes glittering. “I think you do understand. I think you’re beginning to, eh? Always said you loved me like a brother, Lucian. Now’s your chance to prove it.”

“Prove it,” I repeated, mouth so dry I could hardly force the words out.

“I can see by the look on your face that you know it’s true. Our father knocked up two sisters, the randy fucker. My mother and yours, and in that order, you see? Only my mother was married. Couldn’t claim me then, could he? But he regretted it. I know he did. Fabian told me so!”

Tavius took another step, too close to me, and the faint scent of him, wine and horses and some pomade he used on his hair, wafted across. My stomach churned. Home, safety—not anymore.

“Fucking Rathenas found out Fabian knew the truth,” he snarled. “He must have. And that’s why he killed him. To hide it. To clear the way for him to bend you over and violate you and cloud your mind, take the throne with you still on it. And for all I know, Rathenas killed our father, too, for the same reason. Suspected he was going to push him out and legitimize me instead.”

“No,” I whispered, and I fell back a step, praying he wouldn’t follow.

No, I didn’t and couldn’t believe it. Benedict wouldn’t have looked me in the eyes when I ran to him, shocked and terrified, and lied to me about Fabian’s death. And then discussed it with me since, puzzling over it. Or today, when we’d tried to work out what Tavius’s involvement might have been. He simply wouldn’t have. As for killing my father... murdering him, and then watching as the council and the court accused me of patricide in not-so-quiet whispers. Bringing me the rumors the morning after, sneering at me and threatening me and knowing, all along, that he’d cold-bloodedly poisoned his own stepfather.

No.

“Yes,” Tavius almost shouted, and then looked around quickly and lowered his voice to a hiss. “Of course fucking yes! Damn you, Lucian, you bloody well know what he is. What he’s capable of. You have to break this hold he has on you. It’s his sorcery, that’s what it is. It is poison, but it’s the kind that works on the mind, not the body. And I have the answer to that, the answer to all of it. You’ll have him under your thumb, doing exactly what you want. What we want. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Tavius smiled, the kind of smile you’d give a recalcitrant child who wasn’t sure he wanted the treat you were offering him, but his eyes were as hard and cold as granite. Nothing like mine at all, now, but they could’ve been my father’s— our father’s, gods—any one of the times he’d gazed down on some terrified wretch from his throne and sentenced him to death.

“We’ll settle this between brothers, eh? You’ll have charge of Rathenas, and he’ll give us the army. And I’ll guide you in what to do with him. I’m the elder. It’s a simple enough matter. You have to see that, Lucian.”

See it. Yes, I saw it—some of it, anyway, and too clearly. My illegitimate brother thought he’d been unjustly deprived of his throne, and he expected me to meekly hand it to him. Do his bidding. Control Benedict and force him to Tavius’s will, because the council and the army and probably the rest of Calatria would never accept Tavius as their ruler unless he had our full endorsement and support.

I’d have laughed, except it’d have come out a sob.

“I don’t see that it’s simple,” I managed. “Control Benedict? You don’t know him at all if you think I could do that. Or that anyone could do that. He doesn’t care what you do to me. And he won’t respond well to threats to either of us on principle.”

Tavius laughed, a nervous, unpleasant sound. “Threats? I’m not threatening you, Lucian. I’m sorry I frightened you earlier, eh?” He smiled again, but still with that opacity to his eyes that I knew so well from seeing my father’s in moments of cruelty. “But I had to get your attention. Make sure you’d listen to me and not call out for those men Rathenas set on you. I have another way of controlling him and his foul magic. A potion they use in Ixyon to keep their blasted twilight mages in line, tying them to a bondmate they can’t sate their curses without. I was getting another one—but I’m surrounded by fucking incompetent fools. Anyway, I’ve already given the potion to Rathenas, and this’ll work as well. He’s helpless. And he’ll stay that way. You just need to do your part. Because if you refuse, I have someone else who will.”

A bondmate. Can’t sate their curses without ...gods, that couldn’t be possible, a potion that would force a twilight mage to have only one lover or die. Could it? The large, powerful island kingdom of Ixyon had a sinister enough reputation for such a

thing, but it lay far to the southeast, distant enough that Calatria didn't even have a diplomatic relationship with them.

There was some trade, though. They had a formidable navy and extensive merchant fleet, and the latter's ships called at our port from time to time. If such a horrid, poisonous potion existed, Tavius could have heard of it and gotten hold of some, certainly. It sounded like he'd tried to use it on some other victim already. If he'd dosed Benedict with it, and wanted me to "do my part," then—gods, he must mean me to be the bondmate.

Or he had someone else who would. The mysterious correspondent? It looked like I'd be unlucky enough to find out.

Fuck, it was too much to take in, and I needed at least a moment. To draw breath, to be weak, to be knocked over by the betrayals and the fear and the bewilderment and the grief. Most of all, to wrap my mind around all of this and make a plan of my own to counter Tavius's.

Even without the opportunity to think, though, I did know I wouldn't be helping Tavius force Benedict into some kind of magical slavery, and I wouldn't be abdicating in Tavius's favor. It was possible that I'd have considered giving him the title, or sharing its responsibilities, if he'd come to me with proof of his paternity, with a measured, affectionate appeal for justice and for me to support him and bolster his reign and use my own talents to help him do what was best for Calatria.

But he'd lied to me. Threatened my life and assaulted me. Kidnapped Benedict and forced some hideous concoction on him.

And no matter how much I wanted to believe that he wanted me by his side in the future, a loved and trusted brother, I simply wasn't that stupid. He'd use me and Benedict until he didn't need us anymore, and then he'd get rid of us. He might even

feel some regret over killing me—or convince himself he did, because no one wanted to be the villain in the privacy of their own minds. But it would need to be done if he were ever to have any security in his title and position. And he wouldn't hesitate.

I'd let him take me to Benedict, and I'd pretend I did believe him. And I'd pray to any gods who might be listening to help me seize my moment when it came.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

It'd been more than a decade since I used the passage from my dressing room, and on that occasion I'd been escaping my rhetoric tutor in order to ride to the lake and go for a swim. At the time I'd been so angry, chafing at the restrictions placed on the life of a duke's heir.

If I'd only known the life of a duke would be infinitely worse—or that an alternate heir had been waiting in the wings to kidnap me—I might have passed the lake and kept on riding.

Tavius chivvied me along the narrow, claustrophobic tunnel under the palace, the webs and corpses of ancient spiders feathering over my face and getting caught in my eyebrows. He'd brought a pocket alchemical lantern with him, an expensive little contraption that cast just enough illumination to send my shadow wavering out in front of me, watery and eerie, but not really enough to see what might lie ahead.

Of course, it didn't matter much. I had the worst thing in this tunnel at my back.

"Where are we going?" I asked, unable to bear my own panting and Tavius's huffing and puffing echoing around the tunnel. "And how did you learn about this entrance to my rooms?"

Another step, two, three, my elbow knocking into the wall, and finally Tavius said, "They ought to have been my rooms."

I flinched at his tone, glad he couldn't see my face. If he had, he'd have realized that I knew: his mask had slipped too far for recovery. There was no going back for us. That degree of venomous bitterness would have only one possible outlet.

But I had my own mask, the face and voice of the Crown Duke of Calatria. A duke didn't show worry, and he didn't show weakness, and he certainly didn't allow himself to be intimidated by the brutal by-blow of a ruthless father who'd never loved me any more than Tavius did.

"If we had known the truth sooner, things might have been different," I said, because it was, for one thing, patently obvious, and for another it might mollify him to think that only my ignorance of his claim had stood in the way of my ratifying it.

He grunted something that could've been agreement, and I slowly, silently blew out a long breath of relief. Another few steps took us to a turn in the passage, a tight corner that probably followed the juncture of two rooms in the wine cellar, if my sense of direction could be depended on in the slightest.

I squeezed around it carefully, before venturing, "Instead, I was saddled with Benedict. Our father did favor him more than I could ever understand."

What I really wanted was to spin around and seize him by the collar, shake him, shout in his face, demand to know what the fuck he thought he was doing, how he could do it to me . But I couldn't. Not if I wanted any chance of surviving—or getting to Benedict in time for him to survive.

This tunnel let out in the stables, and there would be people there, grooms and cavalrymen, stableboys going about their business. How did Tavius think he'd get us through there without attracting attention? If he'd only tell me where we were going, I'd be able to call for help once we were out in the public eye, overpower him, and hopefully reach Benedict before the potion killed him.

"Perhaps it was because father was a soldier too," I went on, as if simply musing aloud, but my heart pattered against my ribs and my palms had gone slick with sweat. We were getting near the stable exit. I didn't have much time left. "Benedict

impressed him with his swordsmanship, I suppose. He's formidable." I put as much admiration and wonder into my tone as I could and asked, "How did you manage to capture him? And where have you put him?"

Tavius chuckled. Oh, thank the gods, I'd gotten to him. He'd always been most susceptible via his vanity, and he'd never been able to resist the opportunity to brag. I'd used to find it endearing, the way he'd puff up and tell me about the stag he'd brought down that no one else could hit with an arrow at that distance, or the beautiful women who'd been unable to resist his charms.

"Formidable, hah," Tavius scoffed. "Didn't seem that formidable after he'd gotten that potion into his veins. And all it took was a pretty face to get him off his guard and down at the end of the grounds where there wasn't anyone around to—here we are. Stop here."

I stopped, my blood turning icy. The end of the grounds, he'd given me enough to go on, if we could only get out of this tunnel and into the stables! Was he going to kill me and leave me here in the passage after all?

"We're not at the end of the tunnel yet," I said. "Only a little further to go, though, I think."

"We're not going out that way." Tavius elbowed me aside and lifted his lantern, shining it on a patch of unremarkable mortared stone wall.

Apparently unremarkable, anyway, because he wrapped his fingers around a slightly protruding corner of one block and tugged—and with a grinding grumble, a section rotated inward to reveal another branch of the passage retreating into darkness.

No. Fuck, no, I didn't know about this route, and Tavius had said "the end of the grounds where there wasn't anyone around." No one would be there to help me. And

my plan, such as it was, had crumbled.

I stared open-mouthed, too astonished and terrified to hide my reaction. “How the hell did you know about this?” I demanded.

“Fabian told me,” Tavius said brusquely. “He told me a lot of things after he told me the truth. Now move. Clock’s ticking.”

Fabian. Fucking Fabian. My better nature, such as it was, had been shocked by his murder and horrified by the painfulness and grotesquerie of his end.

But my better nature couldn’t overcome the burst of rage that swept over me. I’d guessed Fabian must have been the one to tell Tavius about his parentage, sometime after my father died, but this confirmation infuriated me far more than I’d expected.

Of course. Of course it had been Fabian. He’d hated me, but he’d never supported Benedict either because he wasn’t my father’s blood. But Tavius would have been a viable alternative, in Fabian’s mind...

Which meant this was Fabian’s fault. All of it. If he’d still been alive I’d have murdered him myself—after torturing the truth out of him. The whole truth, including who else he’d told, because Tavius had to be right: Fabian must have told someone else, and that confession had gotten him killed.

Tavius shut the section of wall behind us with a terribly final-sounding clunk. My heart fluttered and sank. Gods, somewhere up there someone would notice I’d gone, wouldn’t they? First they’d look for Benedict. When they discovered he’d also gone missing, they’d either waste precious time searching all the city’s brothels for him, or they’d report to the next available authority, Lord Zettine or one of the other councilors. Would they find us in time?

Fuck. If I'd reached the point of pinning my hopes on my ducal council caring enough to rescue me from Tavius, I might as well give up and slit my own throat.

My mind spun in helpless circles as we walked along the new tunnel, this one simply bored through the earth and shored up with timbers rather than built from stone. The damp seemed to seep into my bones, and I wished I'd thought to take a cloak. A pretty face? What fucking pretty face? If Benedict had gotten us into this situation by chasing a whore right into Tavius's trap, I'd slit his throat too.

But I had no trouble at all believing that he had.

He hadn't murdered Fabian. I clung to that conviction with every fiber of my being, partly out of the same horror at the idea that I'd felt earlier and partly because if he'd had any idea that Tavius was my older, illegitimate brother, he'd have killed him, too. Benedict had always been the pragmatic sort.

And as for Tavius's other accusations—well, Benedict certainly hadn't killed my father, that was simply absurd.

No, he probably wasn't a murderer. But a philanderer? Yes. It seemed all too likely that he'd risked both of our lives by looking for a quick fuck while he was supposed to be investigating Tavius's possible treachery—now thoroughly confirmed, with no thanks whatsoever to Benedict and his wandering cock.

A few hours ago, he'd held me in his arms and kissed me. He'd known that my life depended on his help. How could he? A pretty face. The searing pain of it nearly knocked me breathless.

But I forced one foot in front of the other, and at last the tunnel came to an end, this time at a rough-hewn wooden door with a simple iron latch.

“Go on, then,” Tavius said, and I opened it and slipped through.

As the tunnel had slanted slightly upward, I’d expected the outdoors, but instead there was a rickety set of stairs leading further up to a wooden trap door.

“I’ll go first,” he said, and shoved past me to climb the stairs, knocking on the trap door in a pattern before he pushed it up. “Is the fucker alive?” he called out.

“Yes, my lord,” said a male voice. “Not happy, though.”

Tavius responded to him, and someone else was speaking too, but it faded into a meaningless hum as I closed my eyes against a wave of lightheadedness. My knees nearly gave out, and I sagged against the wall, catching myself with a hand.

Benedict was alive.

It shouldn’t matter so much to me, should it? We weren’t really family. I’d never liked him. In fact, I’d hated and resented him. Circumstances had forced me to yield to him, to accept his kisses and his manhandling and his humiliating, degrading use of me. If Tavius had killed him, it would’ve been no more than one traitorous rival for my throne eliminating another.

And yet I knew, leaning there in the dark and shuddering with relief, that I wouldn’t have felt that way at all.

“Lucian, get up here!” I pushed off the wall at Tavius’s peremptory command, starting up the stairs. “There you are. Bloody well move it. Lord Benedict doesn’t have a lot of time for you to fuck about.”

His sardonic, mocking tone set my teeth on edge, and my heart pounded with sick suspense.

I climbed the stairs and emerged into—I knew this place. Of course. An old gatehouse at the edge of the palace grounds, disused since I was a child. My father had thought this section of wall had too many entrances—or at least so he'd said, although now I wondered if he'd actually thought my dressing room had too many entrances—and he'd blocked off this gate and the small building attached to it. I'd explored it as a boy, and I recognized it now by its odd interior angles where it'd been built to accommodate a turn in the wall.

The four men-at-arms standing in a semicircle in the middle of the rough plank floor were a new feature, though. They had their swords out, and their harsh faces wore nervous, wary expressions.

As I came out of the trap door and stood next to Tavius, I saw what they were guarding.

Benedict—but not only Benedict.

He lay face down beside a wooden pillar, one hand stretched out with his fingers clawing into the floor, legs sprawled and hair all fanned out and tangled, his torso heaving with rough, panting breaths that echoed through the room. He was in the act of pushing up onto his hands, lifting his head to look for—me. Gray eyes glazed with anguish and blazing with fury met mine. His lips moved, I thought in the shape of my name. As I watched in horror, he writhed, groaning, rolling onto his back with his head thumping to the floor.

And Lord Clothurn, kneeling near Benedict's head, reached out and patted his shoulder as if to comfort him. I wanted to rip it off his wrist and stuff it up his ass.

Clothurn. Here. With Benedict. All it took was a pretty face to get him off his guard .

Tavius had used Clothurn to lure Benedict here, then. And even though I hadn't

expected any better from Benedict, it still cut like a knife that it had worked.

Even worse, I didn't think Tavius had used Clothurn at all—it appeared to have been more of a collaboration. Clothurn's richly embroidered mauve silk suit, probably donned for a party before Tavius had come along to upset Clothurn's plans, bore a few streaks of dirt, and the trousers would be utterly ruined by the splintery floor. But he didn't have any bruises on him, and he seemed perfectly calm.

No. He hadn't been taken prisoner. He'd come here willingly, as Tavius's ally.

Gods, I'd been so incredibly stupid. I'd disliked Clothurn for his insolence, and his foppishness, and...oh, I couldn't lie to myself. For being Benedict's lover. But I'd never taken him seriously. How the fuck had he known to write to Tavius, specifically, to vent his spleen about my replacing him in Benedict's bed? That nagged at me, but the answer couldn't help me now, no matter how curious I might be. However he knew, it must have been him, and now he was obviously ready, more than ready, to force Benedict to belong to him.

Nausea welled up in me, my fist clenching as I fought the urge to throw myself on him, rip him away from Benedict, and beat him to a pulp. It was vile, unimaginably vile, and if I survived this he'd be the first I strung up by his toes. I'd build a new, special dungeon, with extra rats and slime, just for him.

Benedict tried again to sit up, and this time he managed to get himself propped on one elbow, his back to the pillar. The grooves around his mouth and between his brows gave me a preview of what he might look like in forty years, and the damp pallor of his skin could've belonged to a corpse.

"Lucian," he said, his harsh rasp barely audible this time. He hadn't looked away from me. Every line of his body showed his terrible, desperate tension, as if he strained toward me with all his strength.

That broke my determination to remain still, and I surged toward him, seeing nothing but him, my skin prickling with the need to touch him and feel his arms around me and his lips on mine...

Tavius caught me by the arm and yanked me back, and I stumbled into him, wincing as his fingers dug in with punishing strength. I forced myself to stop struggling before he injured me, but not going to Benedict hurt more than Tavius's grip, a deep, burning ache under my ribs, a frantic buzzing in my blood and nerves.

"Let me go to him, damn it," I cried. "Let me go. You want me to—so let me go to him!"

Tavius examined me, pale eyes flashing with malice. "You're too attached to him," he said, almost as if thinking out loud, and a nasty shiver went down the back of my neck at his tone of regret. There was only one reason he'd sound like that—only one action he could take, as committed to his course as he was, that would cause him any sorrow. "You don't see him for what he is. It'll have to be Lord Clothurn. You're willing enough to do it, eh?"

"Of course, my lord," Clothurn said, sounding more than willing. Eager, as if the thought of enslaving Benedict to his will had him panting to spread his legs. "I only want to serve my rightful duke. And—and help Lord Benedict."

The way his sharp, avid gaze rested on Benedict made my flesh crawl. I'd already assessed Clothurn as someone who'd betray his own grandmother if it meant more wealth, prestige, or the envy of his peers, and controlling Benedict, and his magic, would give him all of those.

But he wasn't simply eager for power. This aroused him, excited him.

No. I couldn't allow this to happen. The thought of "playing my part" in Tavius's

plan revolted me down to my bones, but I'd rather die than leave Benedict at Clothurn and Tavius's mercy.

"I'll do it, Tavius. You don't need him." My voice came out hoarse and thin, my heart beating so fast I could hardly force words out at all. "Tell me what you need me to do, and I will."

"You're not going to do anything," Tavius snapped, and he wrenched at my arm, making me flinch and cry out. That hadn't been an accident. He wanted to hurt me. And when he leaned down and looked into my eyes, I saw my death there. "Soon he'll be begging for relief, and Lord Clothurn will be the one to give it to him, because I trust him to do it right. Keep him under control. Formidable!" He shook me, his voice rising to a shout. "Hardly! Groveling on the floor, worthless without his army or his magic. That's the man our father thought to put on my throne. The man you were willing to submit to! Look at him!"

Tavius grabbed me by the nape and wrenched my head around, nearly snapping my neck. Benedict had gotten halfway up again, braced against the pillar, his body visibly shaking and sweat dripping from his forehead. He half fell against the pillar, curling in on himself, his low, guttural groan fading to a wheeze.

But he didn't fall.

Benedict was fighting to the last, even as the potion Tavius had poisoned him with stole away his magic and his self-control and racked him with pain and fever.

Because I understood at last the full scope of what Tavius had done. The potion hadn't just altered Benedict's magic to be tied to another man, it'd accelerated his dusk mage's curse, bringing on the crisis of his symptoms immediately. If he didn't sate himself in another man's body soon, very soon, he'd die: an apoplexy, or the vessels in his heart bursting from the pressure, or convulsions.

But the human body's instinct to survive would override Benedict's rational mind. Before he reached that point, he wouldn't be able to resist the urge anymore, and he'd take the nearest man who offered himself. He'd bind himself to Clothurn. They wouldn't have to do anything but wait.

"He is formidable," I said, and I wasn't speaking to Tavius, but to Benedict. He deserved to know that I did see him for who he was. Too late, but at least I'd seen him. "More now than ever."

"He's a filthy bastard," Tavius spat, and shook me again, hard enough that my teeth rattled and my vision blurred. "And you're his willing slut, his thing. You make me sick. You thought you could trick me, eh? But you couldn't hide the way you feel about him. You've chosen him over your own brother. And now you'll have to face the consequences. I'm disappointed in you, Lucian."

Face the consequences.

That could only mean one thing. And I wasn't surprised, I'd been expecting this, but my sudden terror and desperation shocked me, the visceral difference between knowing he meant to kill me and knowing .

I started to fight in earnest, struggling in Tavius's hold, reaching back to claw at his face, kicking, until his arm locked around my throat—and then he was dragging me away, away from Benedict. I'd never see Benedict again, and everything had gone all hot and spinny as panic overtook me at last. The gatehouse whirled around me. Bile rose up, burning my esophagus, and my legs were numb.

"You don't need to do more than get his trousers off," Tavius called out, and I realized with sick horror he was talking to Clothurn. "He'll beg for it when he's desperate enough, or he'll run out of strength to stop you, and that'll be that. Two men'll stay right inside the door to make sure you're safe enough. And get a bit of a

show.”

A show. Clothurn forcing himself on Benedict and binding him into slavery in the process, a show for the guards, and meanwhile my cousin Tavius, my brother, would be murdering me and discarding my body in the mud.

We were almost out the door, and I did my best to drag my feet, to throw my arms to the sides and catch at the walls, because I knew I’d be dead as soon as he had me outside. My forearm knocked painfully into the doorframe with a sickening crack, and I felt the chill of the night on my face, a glimpse of moonlight through a crack in the clouds, but I’d never see the sun again—

Someone screamed. Clothurn? And then a shout and a thud and a ringing of metal on metal, and Tavius cursing as he flung me away from him, back into the gatehouse. I flailed through the air, limbs windmilling, and crashed to the floor in a dizzy heap, gasping for air through my bruised throat.

I pushed up on my hands. I had rough wood under my palms, a splinter digging into my thumb. The sting of it grounded me. I rolled up to my knees.

The shouts and thuds and scuffling came from a struggling mass of men, at least two of Tavius’s men-at-arms and—Benedict, who roared in fury, grasping them by their hair and slamming their heads together, tossing them aside like matchsticks.

One of the others was already on the ground, blood pooling around his head. Benedict had broken his skull. Clothurn was scrabbling backward on the floor away from the body, mouth hanging open in shock, face streaked with crimson.

Benedict stepped over the dead one and picked something up: his sword, the one they must have taken from him when they ambushed him. He tossed the scabbard aside and straightened up, gasping, face as white as milk but eyes sharp and focused, dark

and burning with fury and purpose. The blade glowed reddish in the torchlight, eerie and grim.

Tavius had drawn his own sword, and he stood waiting. His last man-at-arms took up a position beside him. Two to one. They ought to have been confident, but the corpse and the two groaning, half-unconscious casualties of Benedict's rage that lay on the floor seemed to be giving them pause. They didn't charge him, and the tip of Tavius's sword shook slightly.

"I don't have—my army," Benedict said, chest hitching, his voice ragged and raw. "Or my magic at the moment. But I have my, fuck, my sword. And that's more than enough to deal with the likes of you."

"Fuck you," Tavius snarled, and attacked at last.

I shoved up to my feet and stumbled toward the other fallen men. There. A sword, and I snatched it up, spinning around and lunging at the man-at-arms, distracting him and drawing him away from Benedict. He struck at me, and I parried with a horrible scrape of metal on metal and fell back.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Clothurn dash out the door, heels flying, the cowardly little fucking son of a bitch. It distracted me enough that my assailant almost had me, and I leapt back, the point of his sword whistling past my nose. The hilt of my sword slipped in my sweaty hand, and I batted his next attack away, barely—and his foot caught on an uneven board, sending him cursing and staggering to the side, off balance for a crucial second.

My military training had only consisted of the usual fencing practice of any young nobleman, but it was more than enough for me to know how to press an advantage. I jumped forward and ran him through his right arm, wrenching my sword back out with a horrible scrape of bone and pull of tendon, and he screamed and dropped his

weapon, stumbling back and clutching at the ruined mess of his arm with his face gone horribly pale.

For a moment I stared down at the blood-slicked blade in my hand. I'd never actually hurt someone with a sword before, and it gave me a strange shuddery feeling in my stomach.

Another metallic clash pulled me out of my shock and I turned in time to see Benedict parrying Tavius's thrust, and then Tavius lunging at him again, mouth open in a snarl. For a moment I stopped breathing: Benedict listed to the side as if he might fall—and then he brought his sword up in a motion so quick and smooth and almost casual that I thought it was an accident. The sword disappeared.

And Tavius froze, his sword slipping to thunk point-first into the ground. He lifted his head, staring at Benedict, eyes wide. And then he choked, gurgled, and slumped forward, blood dripping from the corner of his open mouth as Benedict lowered him down, the sword still buried in him.

Benedict collapsed too, landing on his knees with a grunt. Their bowed heads almost touched, and I swallowed hard against a violent convulsion of my stomach.

I dropped my sword with a clatter that rang loudly in the sudden silence. The fight was over. Tavius was dead, and Benedict had saved my life and my throne.

And I realized, with horrible, belated certainty, that I didn't care about my throne or even about whether I lived or died if I couldn't save him too.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

Benedict slowly toppled over, and I scrambled to him and caught him barely in time to be knocked sideways under his unmanageably heavy weight. He landed against my chest, waves of shudders going through his big frame, and then pushed himself off and up again with what appeared to be pure force of will.

With a horrid squelch and scrape, he tugged the sword out of Tavius's body, gripping the hilt of it with knuckles gone white and resting the blade on the floor.

Of course Benedict would keep hold of his weapon even while so weakened from poisoning and pain that he couldn't stand up anymore. I'd have laughed, but I didn't know if I could ever laugh again. Tavius's body slumped to the floor. Thank the gods he'd fallen with his face turned away from me.

I wrapped my hand around Benedict's arm, half to make sure he didn't fall over again and half to make sure I didn't. "You need a doctor," I said. "A mage. Can you walk if you lean on me?"

He blinked at me, eyes taking a moment to focus. "No doctor can help me," he said, voice worryingly slurred. The mottled brick-red across his cheekbones and the clammy pallor of his forehead worried me more. "I know what he put in my blood. There's no way out but through. Or death. As long as you're not hurt, that's all that matters. Tell me you're not hurt, Lucian."

His voice hitched on my name, and his eyes were so dark, fixed on me as if he couldn't see anything else.

"No. Thanks to you, no. But I don't believe you that no one can help you, and I'm not

letting you die. Some of Tavius's men are still alive, and we can't stay here. Can you stand up?"

"I'll kill them if they touch you. And—possibly." I ran my hand up his body, feeling the ragged rise and fall of his chest, and resting my fingers on the side of his neck. His pulse hammered far too fast, thready and uneven.

The pathetic flutter of my own heart at Benedict's eagerness to protect me aside, he wouldn't be killing anyone else tonight. And while the man I'd wounded lay whimpering against the wall, probably too weakened from blood loss to do much, the ones whose heads Benedict had knocked together were stirring and groaning. If they realized their liege lord was dead, they might choose to throw themselves on my mercy...or they might kill us both to eliminate the witnesses to their treason, climb over the gate, and disappear into the night.

I could lay Benedict on the floor, take his sword, and kill all three of them before they recovered enough to fight back.

My stomach flipped and churned. I'd never be able to murder three men in cold blood.

"You have to," I said. "Direct command from your duke. Get up, Benedict. And leave that sword. It's extra weight I can't help you carry."

Benedict huffed a laugh that turned into a soft groan. "Direct command, hah," he muttered, and I'd have been much angrier with him for that if I hadn't been desperately, unbearably terrified that he'd fall over dead at any moment.

But he dropped the sword and started trying to shove to his feet. I got him under the arm and heaved, and we staggered up to standing and started to lurch toward the door.

The fresh, chilly damp of the night air came as an overwhelming relief after the salty iron reek of blood and the stench of viscera inside the gatehouse. Moonlight filtered through the trees, clean and cool, Dromos's uncaring gaze sweeping over us.

Asshole. Viewed from a certain perspective, this was all his fault. If it weren't for his meddling with humanity, I wouldn't be collapsing under Benedict's weight, legs aching, lungs laboring, with icy fear seeping through all my veins.

"I'm sorry," Benedict said at last, after we'd been staggering along for a couple of minutes in complete silence except for the hoot of an owl off in the distance. His arm around my shoulders tightened. "About Lord Tavius."

I had to swallow down the lump in my throat. "He would've killed me."

"I know. But he was still—fuck—your brother." A tremor went through him, and he bent over for a moment as if struck with a sudden pain. "I'm all right, keep walking," he gasped. "But you could leave me here. Go ahead for that doctor, hmm?"

"The doctor you claim won't help you," I snapped. "You just want me to leave you here so you can die alone, and I wish you'd tell me why! You seem better. You are better. Perhaps you're resistant to whatever it is, or it's not what he thought it—"

"Don't," he said heavily. "I'm not better. It hit me all at once, and then ebbed a bit, but I'm—it'll be worse again. Soon. I've been to Ixyon, actually. While I was—away."

Away. A nice, neat word to describe those two years where he'd left me here to take my chances with assassins and my hostile council and my sullen, barely loyal populace and an army that blamed me for the loss of their adored commander.

How much more would they blame me if he died tonight because of a plot against

me?

How much would I blame myself?

New resolve straightened my spine, even under the burden of Benedict's weight, slowly increasing as he lost his iron grip on his strength.

"Tell me what you bloody well know, then! And if a doctor can't help you, we'll get a mage. A dozen mages. Everyone in the city."

"They don't even have an antidote in Ixyon, Lucian! It opens up—it's hard to explain to someone without magic, but it opens up a channel, a, fuck, a sort of conduit. Everything that bastard Tavius told you was true. The curse is moving more quickly. I need to sate it, or I'll die, and if I do I'll be handing control of my magic to whoever it is. And I won't," he snarled, "I fucking won't."

That cut deeper than a sword, a sudden, shocking pain.

"You didn't want Clothurn to control you," I said. "And I understand that, even though you were there to fuck him in the first place, which I—I suppose doesn't matter now, but—"

"I was there because he sent a message to meet him, that he'd discovered something important. He'd never been—a threat, I didn't think." Well, I couldn't really criticize Benedict on that front. I'd stupidly thought the same. "I was overconfident and arrogant, didn't think I needed anyone with me as long as I had my magic and my sword. Tavius stuck me with some kind of needle with the poison on it right when I walked in, Clothurn distracted me, but I wasn't there to fuck him, Lucian, believe me! I wasn't there to—"

"It doesn't matter!" It did matter, although it shouldn't. Benedict hadn't made me any

promises. He'd told me he wouldn't fuck anyone else while our arrangement lasted—but that had been more of a threat than a promise. And the fact that Benedict had clearly seen my jealousy stung, a horrid humiliation that I truly didn't have the strength to bear at present. "What matters is that I'm here." I swallowed, closing my eyes for a moment, bracing myself. "I won't let you die, Benedict. Bond with me. If you have to do it to live, then use me."

A long pause followed, in which I heard a shout up ahead, toward the palace. My heart thudded against my ribs in a sick, uneven rhythm.

"No," he said, with absolute finality. "Not a chance, Lucian."

"You truly prefer death to a bond with me?" My voice shook with hurt that I couldn't even try to suppress. "I wouldn't use it against you. I'm sure you don't believe me, and maybe—maybe you don't have reason to, but I give you my word I wouldn't! I don't even know how to use it to control you. Or your magic. I don't have any magic!"

"You wouldn't need any. You'd be sharing mine. It's not about how you'd use it against me. I won't—"

"Your Grace! General Rathenas!" Pounding footsteps approached, and two men burst out of the trees: Captain Venet and another of Benedict's handpicked men.

"We've found them!" Venet's companion called out, and more voices acknowledged him a moment before a whole contingent of the palace guard spilled out all around us.

Help at last, and thank the gods, because I couldn't keep Benedict upright much longer—although they could have waited for him to finish his sentence, damn them.

"Your Grace, my Lord General," Venet said, sheathing his sword and already coming

to Benedict's other side to prop him up. "What's happened? How severe are your wounds? Sergeant! Back to the palace, find Doctor Serrano. Have him in the general's rooms waiting."

"We're not wounded, but Lord Benedict's been poisoned," I said. "The doctor can't help. There's another solution. Help us back to the palace, and—"

"There isn't another solution, I've told you—"

"Benedict, shut up!" Every single soldier stopped and stared, mouths hanging open. Well, perhaps they needed to get used to seeing Benedict treated like a man and my vassal instead of some untouchable god. "Get us back to the palace," I repeated, shooting Benedict a glare of death. He'd live. He had no choice, damn him. "There are dead and wounded men at the old gatehouse, do you know where I mean? Arrest the wounded ones. And Lord Clothurn's about somewhere. Find and arrest him, too."

Venet nodded. "Lord Clothurn's the one who directed us there, Your Grace. With a little persuasion. I kept him in custody. Glad to know you're not displeased. He seemed guilty as sin. Caught him trying to sneak out the east gate, in fact."

"He is guilty as sin, and keep him bloody well locked up, good work," I said, and earned my first smile from Captain Venet. "Have the wounded men seen to once you have them secure. And my—cousin, Lord Tavius, is among the dead. Have him taken to the temple and laid out as befits his rank."

His supposed rank, anyway. I had no idea if anyone else knew the truth, or if Clothurn would keep his mouth shut, but I wouldn't be publicly mourning Tavius as my brother.

Privately...that would be another matter.

And a problem for tomorrow. First, I had to see to it that Benedict had a tomorrow, whether he liked it or not.

The two men Captain Venet had told off to help Benedict back to the palace laid him down on his bed and stepped back, looking as worried as I felt. Benedict had passed out for a moment on the way here, and though he'd come around again quickly he seemed to be losing strength at an alarming rate.

Not all of him, though. I couldn't help my glance down Benedict's body. The potion had done its work thoroughly. Even halfway to unconsciousness, his eyes open to slits with only a gleam of silvery gray visible under his long lashes, Benedict had an erection that strained the front of his pants.

The soldiers had been doing their pointed best to ignore it, but I knew all kinds of rumors would be running wild through the barracks within the hour. They'd already known Benedict was fucking me. Now they'd have some vivid details to fill out the story.

"You can go, and thank you for your care," I said. "Tell Captain Venet I'll want to see him later tonight. But I don't want anyone to disturb us unless I call."

They bowed, gave me a chorus of, "Yes, Your Grace," and clumped out of the room. The door from Benedict's sitting room to the corridor shut with a click, and the thumps of their heavy boots retreated.

The moment they were gone, Benedict convulsed and curled onto his side, letting out a low, rasping groan. He shook, his teeth starting to chatter, clearly racked with agony, and I hovered over him in my own agony of indecision and panic, afraid to touch him, afraid not to touch him, and wondering with sick misery if he even wanted me to.

Gods, I'd never seen Benedict weak before. Possibly no one had. And I'd never realized until this moment what a cornerstone it had been of my universe that he could always be depended on—although I'd never have admitted it except in the greatest of extremities, such as the murder of my valet in my own bedroom.

And now, while he moaned and shook and twitched, I felt the way I had during those two years he'd been gone: adrift and infinitely alone.

My desperation to comfort him won out over my diffidence, and I sat on the edge of the bed, my hip pressed against his leg, and stroked his hair back from his sweaty forehead.

My eyes traced his thick, dark brows, the hectic flush painted on his cheekbones, and the strong lines of his nose and jaw before dropping to his parted lips. How many years had I watched him flirt with and smile at and seduce everyone but me? How many other men had he kissed and pleased with that wicked mouth while I lay alone in my bed night after night, set apart by my rank and too cowardly to cross the intangible barriers that divided me from anyone who might have made me happy?

I'd despised those other men. And I'd convinced myself it was because they had too little self-respect to resist Benedict's crude, practiced charms.

For all those years, he'd never once practiced on me. Never pressed me up against a wall in a shadowy corner of a ballroom, never whispered lewd compliments in my ear as he passed me in the corridor.

Never kissed me, even though I'd dreamed about it once or twice, fleeting and quickly fading visions that left me aching and bewildered and yearning.

Until I'd gone to him and begged, and he didn't have anyone else available to kiss. Before that, he'd never pursued me. He probably only desired me because he'd fuck

anything half-attractive that moved.

He certainly didn't want to be tied to me with his magic for the rest of our lives—his reaction to my mention of a marriage proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt. A marriage wouldn't be nearly as inescapably permanent as this bond. Ennolu's temple granted divorces, and spouses could be physically separated even without one. But if we bonded he'd be beholden to me, unable to leave my side for more than a day, with even that incurring a risk that something would keep us apart for too long.

"Benedict," I said, helplessly, and ran my fingers through his hair again.

"I won't," and his teeth clenched against another wave of pain, another gasp, "do it."

"I'm commanding you," I said, although it came out like a plea. "You're sworn to me as your liege lord, and I'm ordering you not to die!"

Silence, except for his hoarse panting.

"I know you've never liked me," I began, and swallowed hard.

No, he wouldn't take any commands from me. He'd proven that. But I could beg.

I found that my dignity and my pride had melted away completely, gone without a trace, with the specter of his death looming so large. Benedict's stiff corpse, gray eyes glazed, big, powerful body that had held me and touched me and fucked me and protected me gone still forever...no, I couldn't bear it, and I shuddered with horror as it flashed before me, made all too real by the power of my terrified imagination.

"And I know you don't give a damn how many commands I issue. And you don't trust me." He'd turned his head to stare at me, but I couldn't read his expression. He wasn't softening, that I could see. "But listen to me. Benedict, please," I went on,

more and more desperate. “I don’t think I can rule without your help. I’ve been—sinking, slowly. Drowning by increments. I need you. All right? Damn you, I need you, and now I’ve said it, and you can laugh at me all you like and mock me and shame me for admitting it, but don’t die, please, don’t leave me to—Benedict!”

He rose up so abruptly that I started, and when he caught me and flipped me onto my back, I could only cry out and catch at his shoulders. We landed in a twisted heap, with him braced on mine, pinning me down.

“Stop!” He shook me, the bed jouncing and creaking under us, and his eyes had gone wide, wild and glittering and half mad. “Gods damn it, Lucian, you’re begging me to do what I want more than anything in this world or the next, and I can’t, you’d hate me—I can’t !”

What he wanted more than anything in this world or the next? My heart gave a lurching leap.

I gripped onto him with all my strength, digging in my fingers. “But why not? If you—Benedict, you can’t mean that. Not the way it sounds. If you want me, gods,” and I had to stop to suck in as much air as I could, my lungs suddenly all tight and shallow, “then take me. I won’t hate you. No more than usual, anyway.”

Every line of his body had gone absolutely rigid with tension.

All of him. His cock dug into my thigh, thick and demanding. I squirmed, rubbing against him like a cat in heat, my own body flushing with eagerness. Gods, he’d made me into such a shameless slut. Tavius had been right about that, at least.

“Yes, you will. You’ll be happy to watch me die. So please don’t,” he said, and his voice had a note to it that had the hair rising on the back of my neck. Dark, and hopeless, and utterly despairing.

He pulled in a deep, shuddering breath, and squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them, I'd never seen that look in them before. It took me a moment to recognize it as fear. Benedict, whom I'd have sworn had never been afraid in his life, was terrified.

“Don't tempt me, sweetheart,” he said, as if each word were being pulled out of him by torture. “I'd give my life to—Lucian, I'm the one who killed him. Your father. It wasn't poison, it was magic. It was me.”

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I'm the one who killed him. It was me.

Benedict's pale, agonized face swam in front of me, his words sublimating into a buzzing hum.

Your father. It was magic. It was me .

Tavius had been right. Of all of his accusations and wild theories, that had been the one I instantly dismissed as utterly, impossibly absurd.

And Tavius had been right.

I'm the one who killed him. Your father.

Maybe he had murdered Fabian, after all. The methods appeared to be so similar. Tavius had known all along.

And now Benedict had killed Tavius, too—not that he hadn't deserved it.

That strange, hysterical sound...right. I'd started laughing, shaking with it, tears leaking from the corners of my eyes, and I let go of Benedict to put my hands over my face. The darkness behind my palms felt horribly claustrophobic, and I dropped them again, only to shove at his chest. I needed him off of me, off , and when he rolled away at last I scrambled off the bed, stumbling across the room and fetching up by the fireplace, gripping onto the mantel for dear life and hanging my head down. My laughter subsided into wheezes.

Below me, the fire popped and spat. The rain must have started again, then, a few drops making their way down the chimney to hiss in the flames. Falling on Tavius's face, perhaps, as Captain Venet's men carried him across the grounds and through the western palace gate and along the narrow cobblestone street that led directly to the back entrance of the temple. Perhaps it'd wash away the blood. Or simply spread it around. Would the icy water seep into the hole Benedict's sword had left in his guts?

I bent further over the fireplace, dizzy and retching, holding on to the mantel so tightly my knuckles creaked. Behind me there was a rustle and then a heavy thump.

"Lucian," Benedict said, and I'd never heard anyone sound more hopeless in my life. Broken.

I turned and found him on the floor, half slumped against the bed as if he'd tried to stand and fallen instead.

As if he'd been trying to get to me and hadn't had the strength.

"I won't ask you to forgive me," he said, "but please, Lucian. I didn't want to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you. Believe that, even if you hate me for the rest of your life."

He'd never wanted to hurt me. He'd never wanted to—my vision washed crimson, rage and grief and shock nearly suffocating me.

"You murdered my father! You didn't want to hurt me, you didn't—you're out of your fucking mind, Benedict!" I lunged at him, bending down and grabbing him by the collar and twisting, shoving him back against the side of the bed. "You killed him, and you knew everyone thought it was me. Tavius said it was you, he was right, and I thought he was insane." I shook him, slamming him against the edge of the mattress. "My father loved you, he wanted you to be his heir, I know it, whether you'll admit it

or not!”

Benedict didn't resist me. He didn't touch me. He let his head fall back against the bed, hair all tumbled around his shoulders, and gazed at me with eyes as bleak and desolate as an overcast winter sky.

He could have stopped me. Even unable to stand, he could have found the strength to overpower me, and we both knew it.

That was what brought me up short. I let go of him.

And then I couldn't hold myself up any longer, and I dropped to my knees beside him, sitting on my heels with my hands falling limp into my lap.

“I know he did,” Benedict said at last.

I remained perfectly still, too exhausted and miserable to reply or move or do anything at all. Benedict had killed my father. Someone, possibly also Benedict, had killed Fabian. Tavius had tried to kill me. Benedict had killed Tavius. Surely I'd wake up and find myself back in my own bed, with a resurrected Fabian opening the curtains and telling me how irresponsible I'd been to sleep past seven while having such strange dreams.

“He meant to push a law through the council that would have allowed him to name me as his heir.” Benedict paused, gasping, and his eyes slid half shut. Sweat dripped down his neck. The curse had him fully in its grip, and the potion had weakened him critically. “He—they were going to—no, don't interrupt me! I can't die without telling you. I should have long ago, but I didn't want to—Lucian, this is going to hurt you more than anything, but it's the truth. He'd started to believe you were plotting against him, that you wanted the throne. He was going to—arrest you. For treason.”

Benedict paused, eyes searching my face.

And then his jaw went hard and tight as he found what he'd been looking for: the moment I fully understood.

It hit me like a physical blow, and I tumbled backward, landing hard on my ass.

No one my father had arrested for treason had ever escaped the gallows. Once he convinced himself that someone he'd trusted had turned against him, he never changed his mind.

Old friends. Family. Vassals whose families had loyally served ours for centuries. It didn't matter.

His own son.

My father had intended to kill me. Not outright, not with a sword thrust through the stomach or even a slit throat in the darkness. But with an accusation, and an arrest. A long imprisonment, visits, opportunities for me to deliver impassioned pleas for mercy and protestations of innocence. He'd have drawn it out until he'd removed every trace of doubt from his mind—after all, even if I had been innocent when he arrested me in the first place, I'd have turned against him during my incarceration and interrogations, wouldn't I? He'd have had no choice.

And he'd have killed me.

Benedict had saved my life when he murdered my father, as surely as if he'd appeared on the scaffold, thrown me over his shoulder, and carried me away from the headsman.

And then he'd protected me from knowledge that would have broken me. Why the

fuck do you think I left? When he'd asked me that the night of Fabian's death, I'd laughed at the implication that he'd gone away to avoid being put on the throne in my place.

But he'd been telling the truth. He'd killed my father to avoid being put on the throne in my place, and then left Calatria and his position and his friends and his beloved army, everything he cared about, to remove himself from any possibility of being used against me and shoved onto the throne after all.

And also, perhaps, because it would've become untenable for him to stay without telling me the truth.

And if he told me the truth, he'd have broken my heart—much as he'd done now.

Incredible, really, how much it could hurt to discover that the parent I'd already known didn't love me, didn't respect me, and didn't trust me had...neither loved, respected, nor trusted me, only to an even greater degree than I'd imagined.

Benedict's lies and obfuscations, the way he'd watched me stew over it, and grieve, and worry, and wonder, had probably been unconscionable. Unforgiveable. Oddly, it angered and distressed me far more than the actual murder.

But I believed, all the way down to my bones, that he'd done it with the intent to spare me. Dying men rarely lied. And while I might shout the palace down later, and it'd be a long time before I trusted that he'd learned to tell me the truth—I would forgive him.

Eventually. If he groveled enough.

"I don't hate you," I whispered.

No, I didn't hate him. I didn't know what I felt—about anything. Every bit of knowledge and every emotion I'd ever possessed had been shaken up and swirled around, flying about like a flurry of snow, blinding and chaotic and disorienting. I did know I wished I could topple forward onto his chest and feel his arms around me, sure and warm and strong, and wait there until everything made sense again.

But that couldn't happen. Not until I'd saved his life, and perhaps not even then. But certainly not until I knew he'd be alive to apologize and hold me close.

"I'm glad," he said. "Even if you don't mean it. It's kind to let me die thinking you don't. Lucian, listen to me, there's something else I need to—"

"No." I pushed up on my knees again.

Benedict blinked at me. "No? Yes. Lucian, I need to—"

"And I said no. No more confessions." I rose up on my knees, caught at the hem of my tunic, and yanked it up, pulling it over my head and flinging it away. It left my hair a curly, tousled mess, and I shoved it out of my eyes. "Anything else can wait. Unless you also killed Fabian. Actually, that can wait, too. At this point I don't even care, and I don't think you did, because whoever murdered him almost certainly knew about Tavius."

And knew Fabian's corroboration would be necessary to get Tavius on the throne, and who therefore wouldn't have killed Fabian unless he wanted Tavius's claim to fail. That thought teased at me, something that had to be pursued, but not now. I didn't have the time. Benedict didn't have the time.

He stared up at me, mouth dropping open, as I whipped my shirt over my head and sent it sailing after the tunic. Despite everything, I couldn't help the frisson of power and pleasure it gave me that he seemed struck dumb by the sight of my body. No one

had ever looked at me like that when I took off my shirt.

“I didn’t kill Fabian,” he said as I reached for my trouser buttons. “I have no idea who did. But you don’t want to do this. You have to let me tell you—”

“Shut your mouth, or I’ll shut it for you,” I said, with a lot more bravado than I felt, and shoved my trousers down over my hips. “And lie down on your back. The floor’s not the most pleasant, but I don’t think I’m strong enough to get you on the bed again. And I think I need to do the work this time.”

Benedict shuddered, and he leaned over for a moment, breathing deeply. “Fuck. I need—you. Lucian, I need you .” He slid down, rolled, and fell onto his back on the floor. “If I didn’t think I might die before you finished, I’d tell you to come up here and shut my mouth with that pretty cock.”

He fumbled with his own trousers, made a frustrated sound, and tore them open, ripping the placket and sending the buttons flying.

It was my turn to stare. His rampant cock had flushed eggplant-purple at the head, and the veins stood out along the thick shaft.

Benedict’s ragged, bitten-off moan pulled me out of my fascination. “Please,” he said. “Fuck, Lucian, please, the curse is—I can’t, I can’t—”

“It’s all right, I will, I promise,” and I kept on talking, reassuring him the best I could, and I’d gotten my shoes and all my clothes off, but—fuck, I’d need oil. Something. “Benedict, can you slick me up? Like you did before.” I leaned down over him. “Benedict!”

He only moaned again, arching his back, one hand on his cock now, stroking and squeezing as if he meant to throttle it.

Stupid, I was so stupid, of course he couldn't use magic under the influence of the potion. If he could, he'd have done it long before now, and he'd die while I fumbled about at this rate. Sweat damped my temples and beaded on my spine as I jumped up and went to his dressing table, rummaging until I found something likely. I pulled the stopper and sniffed. A hint of rosemary. Something for his hair, probably, the vain bastard, but it'd do well enough.

I dropped down beside him, cursing as he tried to roll onto his side and curl around the pain. I shoved him back over and straddled him. Gods, this would have to be quick, and probably it'd hurt. Oil splattered everywhere as I poured it liberally all over my hand, with more dripping down my thighs as I forced two fingers inside myself, wincing at the suddenness of it. Benedict had fucked me only last night, but it felt like years in every way except for the lingering soreness I hadn't had time to recover from.

If this worked, I'd never recover from his cock again. He'd have me every day, perhaps more than once, and unless I wanted to let him die in agony like this, I'd never have a choice again.

Benedict would belong to me forever.

And I to him. Because I never would let him die. Even if I found I did hate him and couldn't forgive him after all, even if he betrayed me or hurt me or killed the rest of my relatives—though two seemed like more than enough to be getting on with—I wouldn't abandon him.

That shook me to the core, and I stopped, frozen with two fingers stretching my hole, Benedict writhing beneath me and my heart galloping frantically.

Of course, he wouldn't have a choice either. Perhaps he didn't now, except...he'd said he needed me.

So had I. I'd admitted it first, in fact, and no revelations about my father's death could change that. It might make me a terrible son and a terrible person—but no one had ever accused me of being soft or sentimental.

Except perhaps when it came to him, gods. I leaned down and pressed my lips to his in a quick, desperate kiss, carrying the warmth and taste of him with me for strength as I grasped his cock and guided it between my cheeks.

I lowered myself down, letting out small moans with every incremental push, until his cockhead popped in and wedged inside me.

Fuck, but it was big, and I had to lean my hands on his chest and let my head hang down, catching my breath.

Benedict groaned and bucked his hips, thrusting up into me, and it was too much, too much, I needed to adjust to the stretch of him—but he reached up and grasped me around the waist.

My head came up, my eyes probably wide as saucers, meeting his—which were open again, glittering, and fixed on me with a look in them that might have frightened me if I'd had the time to spare for fear.

"Benedict, wait," I gasped, but he only bared his teeth at me and slammed me down, thrusting up to meet me, impaling me so deeply I couldn't draw enough breath to cry out.

And then he lifted me, suspended me there while I squirmed on his cock, kicking my feet against the floor in a desperate bid for leverage...

"Please, Benedict, please, don't do—oh gods," and I broke off in a wail as he forced me back down again, every inch of him opening me up and stretching my insides to

fit.

And again, and again, until I toppled forward and lay across his chest, holding on as best I could while he pounded up into me.

It didn't take him long to finish, his guttural cry echoing off the rafters as he wrapped his arms around my waist and pinned me there to take everything he had to give. My face rested against his collar bone, and the prickly stubble on his chin brushed my forehead when I tried to move. My own cock had gotten hard as iron while he wrecked me, but I hadn't spent. And my state of quivering need magnified all the little sensations of being sprawled across him, spread open over him, of each of his fingers where they pressed against my back, of his cock still thick and heavy inside me.

There was something else, too, something I couldn't begin to define: a prickling awareness, as if someone had brushed a feather over my mind or my soul, a faint warmth and intoxicating texture.

It ratcheted me up to an almost unbearable level of clenching arousal, and I squeezed around him, rocking back, grinding the sweet little spot inside me against the thick base of his cock, my own cock trapped between our abdomens. The head rubbed almost too roughly against a fold of his shirt.

"Lucian?" Benedict sounded as if he'd come out of a trance, his voice stronger than before and more alert. His arms tightened. "Oh fuck, Lucian," he breathed, and thrust once with his hips, his half-hard cock pressing up into me.

I whimpered into his chest, open mouth catching on the linen of his shirt, as everything in me drew up tight: my balls and my hole and my stomach and my chest, my cock spreading wet heat between us.

And as I went limp, letting everything go and drifting, that awareness blossomed into a powerful sensation that teased the edges of my consciousness, like bright sunlight seeping in around the sides of a heavy velvet curtain, almost more blinding for being only the thinnest line of illumination.

Under me, Benedict went rigid, hands almost bruising on my back.

The light grew stronger, wrapping around me, drawn to me, and I knew without thinking that I could manipulate it—pull it, hold it, and most crucially, not allow it to flow back where it had come from.

Back to Benedict.

It was Benedict's magic, and the power and beauty of it stunned and overwhelmed me. How could his physical body contain all this? How could he not dazzle even the nonmagical eyes of everyone around him?

"Lucian," he said, and now my name wasn't an endearment, the way it had been a moment ago, but a tense, wary plea.

It took an effort of will to open my eyes and return to the real world, letting his magic fade from my sight—not because I wanted to keep it from him, but because I wanted to bask in it.

"It's beautiful," I said, and pushed up, leaning on his chest on my elbows. "But I promise, I don't want it. You'll have to help me learn how this works, it's very strange. But I have no desire to control it, or you. Please believe me."

His expression softened, and his hands gentled on my back. "I do, actually. Do you believe me when I tell you I've never wanted your throne and title?"

Did I believe him? Yes, because he'd proven it, and in the worst possible way.

All at once, I couldn't stand to be in Benedict's arms anymore, with his half-soft cock still filling my hole, an odd, constant pressure.

"Well, I suppose I must, because you're surely the only man in the history of the world to kill a reigning monarch to avoid being his heir," I said. "Let me up, if you would."

Benedict flinched as if I'd struck him across the face, lips pressed tight. Without a word, he let me go.

It was far less satisfying than I'd thought it would be. The urge to apologize, kiss away his unhappiness, and spend the rest of the night wrapped around him with the rest of the world held at bay rose up nearly irresistibly.

Climbing off of him made my chest ache.

My knees ached, too, and the indignity of climbing awkwardly to my feet with twinges in all my joints made my mixed emotions, guilt and regret and anger, so much worse.

"I need to clean up, dress, and see Captain Venet," I said, reaching for my filthy clothing. The fraught silence felt unbearably thick, pressing in on me from every direction. "Tavius's men will need to be questioned. And Clothurn."

Benedict sat up, running his hands through his hair and pushing it back with none of his usual insouciance, motions heavy and slow. My heart gave another painful squeeze.

"I'll do it," he said. "You don't need to be there for this. Venet and I will take care of

it, and I'll give you a thorough report."

The temptation to leave it to Benedict nearly overwhelmed me. I couldn't imagine anything I wanted less than to dress to ducal perfection, put on my unmoved, unemotional mask, and question hostile, wounded prisoners—and that nasty little viper Clothurn.

How many times had I sworn I'd never become my father, jailing and interrogating my lords and councilors? Of course, Clothurn had committed treason in the real world, not only in my paranoid imagination.

He'd also tried to forcibly bond with Benedict, an infinitely worse crime—morally, if not legally. Anyone might try to overthrow a ruler for a variety of rational reasons, but it took a uniquely loathsome type of scum to take pleasure in enslaving a man to your will by torturing him to death if he didn't want to fuck you.

"No," I said, and pulled my trousers up. "I doubt he'll have much to say that we don't already know, but he is one of my councilors. I have to question him myself, and do it tonight. It's my responsibility."

My shirt could go on inside out, and I'd carry my tunic and shoes. It wasn't like any guards who might look down the corridor wouldn't know what Benedict and I had been doing, but the thought of sauntering between our rooms completely in the nude made me shudder with embarrassment. A duke had to have some standards, even if he'd just climbed off of his stepbrother's cock after learning he'd murdered his father.

Benedict sighed heavily, but he didn't argue.

As I went through the doorway to the sitting room, he said, "Lucian."

I turned and looked over my shoulder to find him gazing at me with such intensity in

his silvery eyes that it had me breathless. He opened his mouth. Closed it again. Shook his head, expression shuttering.

“I’ll clean up too and meet you in your rooms in a few minutes,” he said at last. “And if you send for something to eat, I’ll intercept it and make sure it’s safe. Although I don’t know if poison is such a risk now that we’re fairly sure that wine was meant for Fabian.”

That wasn’t at all what he’d intended to say, I had no doubt.

But I simply nodded and left, too close to a complete loss of control to trust my voice.

When I shut the door of my own bedroom behind me, I leaned back against it and slid down to the floor, resting my forehead on my knees.

The quiet rang in my ears.

Five minutes. I could give myself that long to be a man rather than a duke.

I let myself weep until I knew I didn’t have time for more, and then wearily rose and made my way to the bath.

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The very thought of food made me gag, and so I simply bathed as quickly as possible, dressed in a simple black tunic and trousers, and added a heavy silver chain that bore the falcon emblem of my house. Hopefully its austere ducal authority would be a good distraction from my puffy eyelids and pale cheeks.

While I went through all the little motions of becoming presentable, every moment I'd spent with Tavius as a child crowded into my mind in unstoppable succession: his red-faced, doubled-over laughter when the string of my bow had snapped me on the nose, and his proprietary pride when it turned out that arrow had struck the very center of the target despite that. He'd been the one to explain to me, awkwardly but thoroughly, what it meant that I didn't have the same interest in girls that he did. And he'd roared with more laughter when I described my first even more awkward encounter with another lad. That had been a few months after I'd done the deed, when Tavius and I were both seventeen.

He'd laughed until I blushed and threw things at him, and then he'd patted me on the shoulder and told me he had no doubt I'd left the fellow lovesick, and that I'd have better luck next time. There had also been his ten-minute tangent telling me how well he'd fucked the woman he'd lain with first, but he'd had me laughing with him, anyway.

And then he'd decided that getting his due in the eyes of the world mattered more than any of it. Taking what he should have had from our father, who hadn't loved or trusted him enough to tell him the truth, meant everything to him. Enjoying what he already had with a brother who'd loved and trusted him all his life meant nothing.

The suffocating weight of my loss and his betrayal rested so heavily on my chest I

could hardly breathe.

And then it occurred to me with startling, terrifying force that Tavius might also have lied about the potion's ultimate effects, and that it might be killing Benedict after all. He should have been here by now. He always managed to be ready long before me through some combination of clever magic and a soldier's efficiency.

I burst out of my rooms, wild-eyed and almost frantic—and I found him in the corridor, leaning against the wall with his thumbs hooked in his sword belt, in a posture that suggested he'd been there for a while.

He looked up from his frowning contemplation of the floor as I stopped abruptly and blew out a long, shaky breath of relief.

Aside from his own slight pallor, no one would've known what he'd endured this evening. His plain black doublet and trousers and his soldier's cloak were all perfectly neat, and he'd replaced the sword I'd made him leave behind in the gatehouse earlier.

The one he'd stuck through Tavius's guts. Probably the same one he'd been wearing when he killed my father.

No wonder he didn't think he'd be welcome in my bedroom and had chosen to wait in the hall.

But his distance hurt nearly as much as everything else. The effort of remaining upright and lordly might prove too much for my fortitude, and who else did I have to support me?

He'd killed two of my closest relatives. I had to remember that, and I certainly shouldn't forgive it. That would be wrong, wouldn't it?

Even though he'd done it to save my life, at least in part. Hadn't he? To keep himself off the throne at any cost, whispered the part of my mind that had been trained for years to suspect everyone in general and Benedict in particular.

His broad chest still looked like the precise place to nestle into as I suffered another bout of tears.

Benedict's eyes met mine. The sympathy and grief and unhappiness in their gray depths didn't help in the slightest with my effort to be practical and efficient.

"We'll speak to Clothurn first and get it over with," I said, in lieu of attempting to express the impossible. "Venet can question the others for now. Hopefully we can get it over with quickly, at least for tonight. I could sleep for a week."

I began to walk down the corridor, and Benedict fell into step beside me. How did he do that, with those incredibly long legs? He must've been modifying his stride for me every single time we walked together.

He'd murdered my father and then abandoned me, and lied about it for years. Tavius had bled out on his sword.

I swallowed hard, but the lump didn't go anywhere, damn it.

"He mentioned, I mean, Tavius," and my voice cracked a little, "said something about having another plan. For that potion. Another mage. Make sure Venet asks if they know anything about that."

"Very well," Benedict said quietly. I waited. That was all.

He didn't speak another word to me as we collected the guards waiting at the end of the corridor and made our way to the cells behind the barracks, where Venet had

taken the prisoners. There were real dungeons under the palace, but I'd had them mostly in disuse since my father died. He dropped back, quietly explaining Venet's instructions to him, and then joined me again as a guard unlocked Clothurn's cell and bowed us in.

Clothurn stood from the rough wooden bench bolted to the wall, quickly brushing dirt off of his breeches and tossing his hair back, though it accomplished precisely nothing. Blood and splinters and dirt streaked him from head to toe, his hair matted and one of his gilt shoe buckles missing, the satin shoe and silk stocking all torn to reveal his bare, filthy foot.

"Benedict," he said, widening his eyes and clasping his hands in front of him. "Benedict, look what they've done to me! And, ah, thank the gods you're all right," he added, an obvious afterthought.

Oh, how fucking dare he. If Benedict responded to this blatant, manipulative act, I'd kill them both.

"No thanks to you," I said, barely restraining myself from snarling. "You have five seconds to begin explaining how and why you spied on me for Lord Tavius. If you're forthcoming I might not mount your head on a spike over the gates tomorrow morning."

"Oh!" Clothurn gasped. "Your Grace, your cruelty is—Benedict, will you not intercede for me?"

He took a step forward, raising his hands as if to plead with Benedict, and Benedict moved in front of me so quickly that my step forward ended in my nose flattened against his back.

"You conspired to murder your duke," Benedict said, with no apparent sense of irony,

and I'd never heard that flat, deadly tone in his voice before. He'd certainly never spoken to me that way. "If you come within arm's reach of him again, I'll put your head on that spike myself. Sit down, hands in sight, and fucking talk."

Another, "Oh!" followed by a soft thump and rustle, suggested Clothurn had sat down rather abruptly.

Not that I could see, because Benedict might as well have been a brick wall in front of me. "Move," I hissed, and shoved at him.

Gods, this was undignified. Finally he took one step to the side, allowing me to come around and stand next to him again in the small cell. Clothurn had retaken his seat, and he'd gone pale as milk, ashen around the mouth and eyes. When I glanced up at Benedict, I could see why. His eyes blazed pure fury.

Well, who could blame him after the way Clothurn had taken him to bed, pretended to be besotted with him, and then plotted to turn him into a magical slave?

Although...Benedict hadn't mentioned that, had he? Only Clothurn's willingness to watch Tavius drag me away and murder me so long as he got what he wanted. He didn't seem angry at all on his own account.

The world around me went still and silent, and I stared up at him, mouth open, feeling as if a bolt of lightning had struck all the way through me and down to the ground.

Had anything he'd done been on his own account? Anything at all? Or had it all been...gods, for me ?

If he'd wanted to stay off the Calatryan throne at any cost, he could simply have disappeared. Ridden away one day, concealing any trace of his route with magic, and gone wherever the hell he pleased—precisely as he had done, in fact, when he'd left

almost three years ago.

Except that he'd run the incredible risk of killing my father first. Which had, now that I really thought about it, offered him no benefit at all.

He'd had no other reason to do it than protecting me, and a lot of reasons not to—such as the fact that no magic, no skill with a sword, would've been enough to save him from the headsman if he'd been caught.

Protecting me.

Three years ago, and now, and with or without any of the “payment” he'd demanded. Certainly without any appreciation from me.

His task had been quite literally thankless.

Gods damn it, Lucian, you're begging me to do what I want more than anything in this world or the next .

It couldn't be.

A heavy scrape of metal on metal jolted me back to the world around me—just one of the guards opening the door to another cell across the way, probably for Captain Venet to go and question one of Tavius's men.

My fists had clenched, my breath coming too quickly, and Benedict was peering down at me, his brow furrowed.

“Are you even listening to me?” Clothurn demanded.

Benedict didn't even glance at him. “Lucian, are you well?”

I blinked, forced myself to take a deep breath, and said, “Perfectly fine.” My voice sounded odd even to me.

Turning back to Clothurn took an extraordinary effort of will. I didn’t give a damn about his story now. I wanted to get Benedict alone with a fervor that felt like an unreachable itch under my skin right between my shoulder blades. How could I not have seen the truth?

Possibly the truth. I might be seeing what I wanted to see, but...my heart pounded in a skittery, heavy rhythm, and I needed to know .

Benedict told Clothurn to go on, and he began his story again.

“Lord Tavius and I met when we were both staying with a mutual friend in the fall,” Clothurn said, in a tone of sulky terror. Of Benedict, no doubt, not of me, but I’d take what I could get. “He asked me to correspond with him, because he told me he liked to know how things went on at court but didn’t have the time to visit often.” Clothurn shrugged, his shoulders slumping down after in total defeat. “I didn’t see any harm in being on good terms with the duke’s cousin.”

Gods. I forced myself to focus for a moment, to make sure I wasn’t missing anything important. When had Fabian told Tavius the truth about his parentage? Before that meeting with Clothurn, I guessed, and Tavius had been on the lookout for someone to keep him informed. If Benedict hadn’t killed him, maybe I’d have been able to know for certain.

Of course, if Benedict hadn’t killed him, then I’d have had to execute him myself—which would’ve destroyed me.

Fuck, but I really needed to talk to Benedict. Alone, now, uninterrupted.

“He didn’t tell me he meant to depose the duke,” Clothurn whined, and his throat bobbed as he swallowed convulsively. “All I knew was that he’d come to court and needed my help. He told me Benedict would come back to me if I helped him! I swear to you, I thought of nothing but you, because when you left me for Duke Lucian—”

“Enough excuses,” I snapped, and Clothurn subsided into a satisfyingly watery-eyed silence. At least I could be a little bit intimidating. My harshness owed its strength to my sudden nausea. If I had to listen to Clothurn go on about his supposed romantic feelings for Benedict, I’d throw up all over the cell.

Besides, Tavius had been angry that his correspondent, Clothurn, hadn’t mentioned Fabian’s death. But that would’ve been front and center in his letter if Clothurn had known about Tavius’s plans. If Clothurn did have anything else of use trapped in that stupidly pretty traitorous head of his, Captain Venet could bloody well get it out of him.

I’d done my duty here. When the rest of the council asked why Clothurn had been arrested and if he’d been given my personal attention, as was his right given his rank and position, I’d be able to honestly tell them he had.

“You committed treason,” I told Clothurn, taking a petty pleasure in seeing tears welling up in his eyes. Maybe these ones were real. I could hope. He deserved to be miserable. “You colluded in an assault on your duke and on a fellow councilor, and you’ll probably lose your head for it. Concentrate on appealing to my mercy rather than on trying to justify yourself.”

I turned to Benedict, completely done with Clothurn and everything about him. He’d started making noise again, half complaining and half pleading, but I let him fade into the background. Benedict had turned too, and our eyes met again instantly. His magic tugged at me, a connection that snapped into place the moment our gazes

held—but...it wasn't that different from before.

Every time I'd ever looked into his eyes I'd felt it. Even the very first moment we'd met.

Benedict. It was Benedict, and not his magic.

Gods, I needed him alone.

"I've had enough," I said, voice rough with emotion I couldn't suppress. "We can go."

"As you wish," Benedict replied, and he ushered me out of the cell without favoring Clothurn with so much as another glance.

Clothurn's voice rose to more of a yell, and one of the guards cursed at him and slammed the door in his face. Good.

Captain Venet came out of the cell across from us and bowed. "Your Grace, they're talking freely." He lowered his voice and added, "I think they're hoping to be spared the gallows if they do. I must admit I let them think as much. And they've hinted at a plot Lord Tavius had to abduct someone from Surbino—I think it might be worth your while to promise them their lives, so that I can extract every bit of what they know. There's always torture, of course, but—"

My stomach churned. "No," I said, with my utmost ducal firmness.

Venet raised his eyebrows. "My apologies for mentioning it, Your Grace," he said. "It's not my favorite way of eliciting confessions, myself."

"I'm glad to hear it. Very well. Give my word that I'll spare them, and bring me a full

report in the morning, unless you learn anything so urgent that it requires our immediate attention.” I glanced up at Benedict. “Do you have any instructions to add?”

“Carry on, Captain Venet,” Benedict said. “And if anyone else asks for a report, such as any other court official, don’t tell them anything. Come directly to me.”

I ought to have thought of that. Once Zettine caught word of this he’d give me no peace. I nodded at Venet as if it’d been my idea, and he bowed and returned to his interrogation.

With two guards falling in behind us, Benedict and I retraced our steps. It had begun raining again, a steady, gentle patter on the courtyard paving stones outside the barracks. We walked around the perimeter and reentered the palace through the same door Tavius had used when he arrived...gods, earlier that day.

Well, yesterday, I supposed. Midnight had come and gone a while back. The temple bells had chimed their pattern as we went to question Clothurn.

But still—less than one full day. A wave of dizziness hit me. I blinked and walked on, carefully putting one foot in front of the other. Benedict took my arm and tucked my hand into his elbow. Had I swayed? How had he even noticed? Had he always been so observant of everything about me?

Yes. He had. And I’d either been entirely unobservant in my turn, or I’d attributed it to some kind of malice.

When had Benedict ever done anything worse to me than tease me, needle me, flaunt his handsome face and his powerful body and his many lovers? If he’d meant his behavior to bother me, then that implied he wanted my attention. And if he hadn’t...well, that simply meant he’d had it, whether he wanted it or not.

“You need to eat something, Lucian,” Benedict said, so quietly that even our guards probably couldn’t hear. “And you need to sleep. I’ll leave you alone when we’re back at your rooms, I promise. Don’t pull away from me, though. I’m afraid you’ll slip.”

A perfectly healthy man of twenty-eight could probably be counted on to walk across a marble floor in very slightly damp shoes without mishap, and a few weeks ago, or even a day ago, I might have snapped at him to that effect.

It sounded very different to me tonight. Seeing someone you cared for in danger could make even a small threat loom large until the effects of the shock wore off.

Benedict had nearly been forced to watch Tavius murder me a few hours ago. Two weeks ago, he’d thought I’d missed being poisoned by the tiniest chance. And he’d spent the time in between constantly on his guard.

The danger had passed, but not in his mind. Not yet. He’d probably try not to allow me out of my rooms for a while, and I’d need to put my foot down. But not tonight.

I couldn’t answer him. A thousand questions and demands and speculations bubbled up in my chest, nearly irrepressible, and if I opened my mouth they’d all come spilling out.

By the time we reached my rooms, I was biting my lips to keep them in. I led the way into my sitting room and let go of his arm to walk over toward the fireplace, turning to face him once I heard him shut the door.

He stood next to it, frowning, his hand still on the knob. “I give you my word I’ll go as soon as I’ve made sure you—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” I said. And he wasn’t. Not until he told me the whole truth. My conclusion, the most logical conclusion, still felt so impossible after years

of distance and what I'd assumed had been mutual dislike. I needed to hear him say it—or deny it. My heart pounded so violently I almost couldn't speak. "You killed my father because he'd turned against me and wanted to make you his heir. But you could've simply left. Why did you kill him instead? You're not leaving this room until you tell me why."

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

The doorknob rattled in Benedict's hand, and his whole body went rigid with sudden tension.

I stared at him, holding my breath, trying to read his expression. But his tight jaw and hard eyes didn't give much away.

"He would've killed you eventually," he said. "I had no choice."

My heart had been thudding before, and now it raced, making me breathless.

"There's always a choice when it comes to murdering someone in cold blood, Benedict." But I didn't sound convincing, not even to myself.

My own father. I ought to hate Benedict. But my father had been a monster—and I couldn't deny it, because I'd spent my whole life coming to terms with it. He'd had his good qualities: a sharp intellect, courage in battle, the bluff, blustering charm Tavius had inherited from him. But he'd never had the capacity for real love. And he'd cared more for his power and his throne than for anyone around him.

Another quality Tavius had inherited, as it turned out.

Did it make me a monster too if I allowed myself to care more for Benedict than I cared about justice for his crime? I didn't want to hate him. I didn't want to push him away. I wanted to take him in my arms and never let him go.

Benedict took a step toward me, and then another, slowly enough that I could've dodged away from him or told him to stop. All the while, those gray eyes never left

my face, as if he wanted to memorize me.

“There was no choice,” he said, voice husky. “Not for me. I was trying to tell you before we bonded. To give you a choice, because you shouldn’t be tied to me under false pretenses. I’ve lied to you enough.”

“Trying to tell me,” I repeated. He was right, I’d stopped him from saying anything more when we were about to bond. No more confessions. But I’d expected it to be something else I wouldn’t want to hear, and not... “Trying to tell me—Benedict, were you trying to tell me that you, you,” oh, gods, the word would sound so stupid aloud, I simply couldn’t. “Care for me?” I finished instead, like a coward.

His laugh had a sharp, bitter edge to it, and his eyes blazed. “Care for you? You can’t even say it, can you? It disgusts you too much, doesn’t it? To even think it. That I love you. That I love you enough that I—gods, Lucian! I knew I’d never be able to win you if I murdered your father, I knew I’d lost you, but I couldn’t let him kill you. And I’d never had you in the first place, anyway,” he said, the break in his voice echoed by a sympathetic resonance in my chest, a snap I could almost hear.

Benedict loved me.

He’d loved me three years ago.

And the way he gazed down at me, I found it difficult to doubt him—not with years’ worth of longing shining out of his eyes, nothing hidden from me.

He loved me.

The tightness in my chest spread down, lower, my breath catching and the pit of my stomach in a knot.

Benedict was so close. I could tilt my head up and he'd kiss me, because the way his eyes had dropped to my lips told me how much he wanted to.

But I simply couldn't let his self-pity pass without comment. Not when I'd suffered all those years at least as much as he had, lonely and jealous—not to mention always wondering if he'd decide to kill me and take my throne.

“You never tried to have me in the first place,” I said. “You act like it's some—some fault of mine that we were never—but you flirted with everyone but me! You never had anything pleasant to say to me, let alone seductive, and that morning after you, after he, you were dreadful, Benedict!”

“Because I knew I'd given up any chance of happiness, and I'd never had a chance in the first place. I was dreadful, you're right. I'm sorry. I should've gone without seeing you at all, but I hoped—I don't know what I hoped. That you'd fall into my arms and ask me to take care of you, I suppose.”

“You shouldn't have gone,” I whispered.

Buggering Ennolu help me, I was so close to simply getting on my knees. He could've had me on my knees anytime the last eight years. When he'd made his very first bow upon meeting me, he could've led me out of the throne room and straight to his bed and done anything he wanted with me for as long as he chose to keep me there.

The day he returned from his two-year absence, I'd been furious with him, bitter and resentful, terrified of what he might do.

But if he'd swept me into his arms right there on the palace steps, kissed me until I couldn't breathe, thrown me over his shoulder and claimed me in front of everyone...

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop,” Benedict gritted out. “I’ll be inside you within ten seconds if you don’t. That’s why I had to go. You’ll never know how close I came to stripping you then and there and fucking you through the breakfast table, and you couldn’t have stopped me. Not even if you fought me with all your strength.”

Oh, gods, if more blood left my brain and went to my cock, I’d faint. The air between us felt sticky, as if it were drawing me to him, and he loomed over me, leaning down, a heartbeat away—

The words came out without any volition of mine, horrifyingly honest. “I wouldn’t have wanted to.”

“Lucian,” he breathed, and then he was kissing me, sweet and demanding and desperate, arms around me, and mine clinging to him so fiercely I didn’t think I could let him go if my life depended on it. He broke the kiss long enough to say, “I wish I knew what you were thinking just now, though,” and then his mouth descended on mine again, his tongue sliding into me, laying claim to me, tasting and teasing me.

When he moved down to my throat, nipping at the side of my neck, I was able to gasp out, “I was thinking about you kissing me on the palace steps when you came home last year, and—Benedict, Benedict!”

He hoisted me into his arms, muttering something into my throat that sounded filthy and felt delicious, with the brush of his lips on my overheated skin, carrying me through the sitting room door into my bedroom while I clutched at him and tried to wrap my legs around his waist, needing him, needing more of him, needing everything .

Half my clothes were already gone by the time we landed on my bed, Benedict simply grasping the back of my trousers and ripping them in half, flinging the shreds to the floor.

Before I could protest, he'd splayed his hand over my bare ass, massaging me, pushing me up into him as he bore me down with his weight, rubbing circles that sent tremors of sensation all the way into the center of me. Two fingers dipped into my crease. I spread my legs as wide as they'd go, tearing at his clothing, everything a blur of his mouth and our hands and my panting breaths, and the mounting, molten heat inside me.

He rutted against me, the friction of his cock on mine driving me wild even through his trousers and what he'd left of mine, seams ripping as he drove into me, kissing me, tugging my head back with a hand wrapped in my hair so that he could lick his way down and bite at my nipples through my tunic.

"Fuck this," he gasped. "Too much in the way."

He stood up abruptly and laid his hands on my chest, and his magic flowed over my skin, tangible this time, the bond amplifying every sensation as every remaining stitch of my clothing simply—vanished.

I shoved up on my elbows, staring down at my naked body in mingled horror, delight, and awe at his magic.

"Where the hell did it all go? That was—silver chains with heraldry on them don't grow on trees, Benedict!"

"It didn't go far," he said, but his self-satisfied wolf's grin didn't reassure me much. He looked me up and down, eyes narrowed. Hungry. He nodded, as if he'd made a decision—and bent down, grabbing me by the hips and flipping me over. I flailed and landed on my face with a mouthful of bedding. Benedict's big hands wrapped around the backs of my thighs, he shoved me up and splayed me open, more of his magic coursing through my body in a cool, sparkling wash, leaving me clean and tingling.

The thud of his knees hitting the floor gave me one second's warning before his mouth closed over my hole, his tongue thrusting inside, hot and slick and demanding.

"Benedict," I said, and then, "Benedict, please!" My voice rose to a wordless wail as he kissed and sucked my tender flesh, softening and opening me and driving every thought out of my mind except how much I needed him in me, filling me, using me to completion.

I moaned as he pulled his mouth away and licked a stripe from my balls all the way to the top of my crease, pressing a kiss to the small of my back. The cool air on my wet hole made me shiver.

Benedict's harsh breaths and the rattle of his belt buckle seemed terribly loud as I lay there, clutching at the blankets with my knees hiked up, ass spread, completely exposed. My dangling balls and the head of my cock brushed against the embroidered silk of the coverlet as Benedict tugged me back and up onto my knees. I pressed my forehead into the bed and waited, biting my lip, forcing myself not to shove my ass higher in the air and beg.

His hands tightened around my hips and the head of his cock touched my hole. Another whisper of his magic, and slickness spread over my inner walls, around the rim of my hole, dripping down my balls, making me obscenely ready for him with no more than his will.

My rim stretched around him as he sank into me, slowly, letting me feel every inch of him. The fat cockhead, the ridge of the glans and then the slight relief from pressure as he narrowed below it, and then the increasing fullness of his thick shaft impaling me until I could hardly breathe.

Benedict bottomed out, his balls resting against mine, and stilled.

And then drew back just as slowly as he'd entered me.

And then in again, with only the way his fingers dug into me betraying his tension as he opened me, slid out, opened me, slid out again, until he had me on a knife's edge of pleasure and desperation, my cock and balls aching hard and tight. One touch would be enough to finish me, but I didn't have the leverage to get a hand under my body.

So I writhed, and moaned, and the coverlet grew damp under my cheek from saliva and the tears leaking out of my eyes—and then he pulled out completely, abruptly enough that I cried out as his exit tugged on my flesh.

A thunk of something falling to the floor had me glancing over my shoulder to find him undressing at a speed that almost equaled his magic trick. A soldier's skill, perhaps—or one cultivated over decades of fucking everything that moved and then leaving in a hurry.

“Turn over,” he said, voice a little muffled as his tunic whipped over his head.

The sword belt and sword had been the sound I'd heard, and he had one of his boots off and flying across the room before his upper garments had hit the floor. The other boot went next, Benedict's trousers falling down unimpeded.

He stepped out of them and stood before me completely, gloriously nude, from his impossibly broad shoulders to the sparse black hair on his muscular chest to...my eyes caught, unable to go lower than his cock, all shiny with the oil he'd summoned from the gods knew where, framed by the vee of muscle above his hipbones.

“Do I need to do everything myself?” he said, and I startled, eyes snapping up to his face.

He stalked forward, intent on me, transformed into a looming shadow by the dim candlelight.

Benedict climbed onto the bed, rolling me to my back as he did, crouching over me. A burst of rain gusted against the window, and the candles dipped in the draft, sending warm flickers over Benedict's bold nose and firm jaw. His silvery eyes and the ruby hanging from his ear caught sparks of gold.

He reached up and stroked my hair back from my forehead, sliding his hand down to cradle my jaw, and then lower, to wrap around my throat and cup my chin, gently forcing it up. My pulse hammered against his fingers.

"What would you have done if I had kissed you when I came home?" he asked. "Kissed you until you stopped trying to argue with me. Or maybe gotten down on my knees and kissed your hands, like a lover. So no one watching would've had any doubt what it meant."

"What I," I stammered. "What I would've done?"

Spent in my trousers, possibly. Or run away screaming. Or tried to shove him down the stairs.

His slow smile had a wicked little quirk to it. "I think you would've turned red and threatened to put my head on a spike over the gate. You seem to like that as a deterrent for your nobles. Not that you ever follow through. I could've sucked on your fingers right there in front of everyone."

Sucked on my...I choked on any words that might have come out, and Benedict's smile widened as he leaned down, pressing his lips to mine, keeping me in place as he explored my mouth, as if he had all the time in the world. As if our still-hard cocks weren't kissing too, brushing against each other in a way that had me arching up and

whimpering.

Perhaps we did have all the time in the world.

It struck me with startling, eye-opening force: Benedict and I would have this for the rest of our lives. Every night, month after month, year after year, so long as we managed not to be assassinated—but we'd take precautions against that in any case.

Of course, we could both survive long enough for him to change his mind. If he found a way out of this magical bond Tavius had forced on us, I'd help him in any way within my power. Anything else would simply be wrong.

Even if it broke my heart if he decided to leave me once he had a choice.

Benedict nibbled at my lower lip, the sensation spiraling all the way down between my legs, and I squirmed in his grip, spreading for him, clutching at his upper arms and feeling his muscles flex as he held me down.

At last he let go of my throat and broke the kiss to settle between my thighs, cock nudging behind my balls and then sliding smoothly in to fill me, as if he'd created a space inside that fit him perfectly. I pulled one knee up, allowing him room to go deeper, to rock into me, to give me that sweet, singing ache deep within. He lowered himself down and let me take his weight, pressing kisses to my hair and my ear and my neck, my cock trapped between our bodies.

My fingers dug into the sweat-slicked muscles of his back, surging under my hands. Candlelight danced on the silk canopy of my bed, barely visible past his bulging shoulder when I threw my head back on a moan. He moved in me like the tide, irresistibly powerful, and I turned my face into his arm, mouth open on his skin, squeezing my eyes shut as my back bowed and I shook with one wave, and then another, and then a last convulsion as I turned inside out and spilled everything

between us.

The low, bitten-off groan that Benedict made as he filled me almost could've been pain, and it drew a fourth shivering spasm out of me.

My head dropped back onto the bed. I sucked in breath after breath, my body going limp. I mustered the energy to gently scrape my fingernails up his spine and stroke my hand through his hair, making his big body shudder, glad he'd rested his forehead next to my head and couldn't see the stupid, sappy little smile that had taken over my face.

Benedict stirred at last, pushing up onto his elbows. His hair had tangled into a wild mane, sticking up at odd angles, and it had no right to be quite so endearing. My heart gave a pathetic flutter.

"I love you," he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. As if he'd said it a thousand times before and meant to say it again a million more. His lips quirked in a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "It's a relief to say it, anyway. Even if you don't love hearing it."

We gazed at each other in silence for a long, long moment. The warmth of his body surrounded me, and there was something else, too. His magic, its touch so soft, tickling senses I hadn't even known I possessed and winding around me like a friendly cat—or perhaps that tiger from the storybook, the one that remained friendly only so long as it suited him to be kept in luxury and fed from a golden bowl.

I could take control of it if I wanted. It beckoned to me, showing me the way if I only had the will to do it. Benedict would fight me, though. The potion's bond might not even be strong enough to overcome his resistance. Cornering a tiger would only make it infinitely more dangerous.

“Do you really trust me not to take over your magic?” I asked him at last, softly, into the hush of the night.

He shifted his weight, reaching up to lay his hand against the side of my face, stroking my temple with his thumb, smoothing it over my eyebrow. Perhaps my mother had touched me that gently, twenty years ago or more. But no one had since. It’d been so long that I’d forgotten how it felt to be loved—not only in the killing-people-to-protect-me way, though I appreciated that too, but tenderly. As if I were cherished and precious.

“It doesn’t matter if I trust you,” he said. “I belong to you. And no, don’t look like that, not because of that fucking potion. It’s nothing to do with what happened tonight. I belonged to you from the minute you curled your lip at me when I bowed to you, when we met. You were so beautiful and so contemptuous, and I’d never wanted to bend anyone over and fuck him so much in my life.”

Oh. Well, then. Hopefully the flush left over from being thoroughly fucked after all would hide my fresh blush of pleasure.

“But Benedict—”

“Don’t ‘but Benedict’ me, Lucian. I also trust you. You’re too honorable by half. That’s why I came back, and I know you’ve wondered.” I had, losing sleep over it nearly every night since. “You probably thought I was plotting against you. But it was making me sick thinking about you muddling along with no one there who’d be willing to kill for you, and it wasn’t like you’d actually mount any heads on spikes, even if they bloody well deserved it.”

“You really came home to protect me?” I couldn’t quite believe it. Everything I thought I’d known about him had been turned on its head, and not always for the best, but this particular claim strained my credulity to the breaking point. “You didn’t act

like it.”

“I retook control of the army and kept an eye on your council and your enemies, and I’ve always been loyal to you, no matter what you thought. So yes, I did act like it. You simply didn’t believe it. You can’t blame me for your own misconceptions.”

“I can’t blame—you,” I sputtered, laughing in sheer disbelief at his extraordinary nerve. “You’ve always acted like you didn’t like me a whit more than I liked you. You’ve mocked and threatened me, Benedict! And for the gods’ sakes, when I did come to you for help, you fucking blackmailed me! You forced me to—to—”

“Take my cock any way I wanted to put it in you?” he suggested, blinking at me innocently, as if he meant to be helpful .

“I’ll show you taking your cock,” I hissed, and I bore down, squeezing my inner muscles in a way that would have made him slide out of me...if he hadn’t still been half hard. “Oh, gods, are you even human?”

And getting harder, as he grinned at me, rocking his hips, stirring my insides in a way that had me biting my lip and quivering under him, trying not to moan like a slut.

“Well, you can’t blame me for that, either,” he said, shrugging. “Look at you, you’re—I love you. I couldn’t resist the temptation to have you any way I could get you. Besides, I knew you were protesting too much, and if you’d really put up a convincing fight I’d have done whatever you wanted anyway.”

I stared up at him, frozen with outrage, as he started to fuck me again, nudging me up the bed, eyes fixed on my face with a look in them that—gods, he really did love me, didn’t he? And every thrust made an obscene squelching sound as he fucked his spend right back into me, and I’d gripped onto his arms and braced my feet to take him again, and—I’d been protesting far too much.

“I trust you too,” I said, because anything else would have to wait until I’d slept, and eaten, and slept again, and buried Tavius, and accepted that I loved the man who’d murdered the father who’d never loved me.

Benedict’s rhythm faltered, and for a moment he gazed down at me in shock, expression as open and vulnerable as I’d ever seen it.

“That’s all I can ask for,” he said.

I tugged him down into my arms and kissed him, wrapping my legs around his waist and pulling him closer, deeper, until I couldn’t feel where he ended and I began.

For tonight, there was nothing else I could ask for, either.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

Benedict slipped out of bed in the morning before dawn had even managed to break through the rain clouds, when my bedroom still lay shrouded in the world's most enervating gloom.

“Umph,” I managed, and curled into the warm spot he'd left behind.

He glanced over his bare shoulder from where he'd crouched by the fireplace, smiled at me, and went back to effortlessly lighting a new pile of kindling with a snap of his fingers. The flames crackled around the logs he set on top, throwing out enough light to limn all his muscles. Mmm. All right. That might be worth keeping my eyes open for a bit.

And he loved me.

Oh, that was strange, and it didn't feel particularly real, either.

He'd killed Tavius, and my father. Yes, that would also take some getting used to. The stab of pain somewhere under my solar plexus might take much longer to get used to, or to fade, depending. My love for Tavius would almost certainly be more lasting than my anger at his betrayal, and I knew I'd wake with a sudden shock of grief for a long time, mourning what could've been. After my mother left, it'd been three years before it didn't hurt every morning.

I rolled onto my back and winced as all my very, very well-used flesh tugged with the motion, and winced again as more of Benedict's spend seeped out of me.

That, at least, I'd enjoy getting used to.

Blinking at the canopy above me only made my eyes sting and my temples ache.

“Go back to sleep,” Benedict said quietly, and I blinked again to find him leaning over me. He bent and kissed me so quickly I couldn’t even kiss him back, and then was already rummaging on the floor for his clothes. “I’m going to get a report from Venet. Take a walk through the palace, down to the barracks. See if everything seems as it ought to be.” He cleared his throat. “Let you wake up in your own time.”

I should probably send word to Mattia. Or simply get out of bed, as a duke with endless responsibilities needed to do no matter how few hours of sleep he’d had the night before, or how many of his relatives he’d seen die.

Fuck it.

I nodded and closed my eyes, and a moment later Benedict shut the door softly behind him.

Wake up in my own time. Wake up alone, he meant, unconstrained by his presence.

My perception of him had shifted enough that I recognized it for tact rather than embarrassment or avoidance. He didn’t want to crowd me.

And gods, I couldn’t have been more grateful. No silence had ever been so beautiful, an emptiness into which my mind and soul and mixed feelings could expand, like bedraggled butterflies airing out their damp wings.

Tears dripped down my temples for a while, as steady and gentle as the rain pattering outside my windows. The fire crackled, the room slowly warming. Faint gray light finally filtered in. My breath hitched and then settled into an easier rhythm than it’d had for a long time.

At last I drifted back to sleep.

When I woke again I felt much more alert. And I remembered everything, thank the gods, and didn't need to go through that bloody awful process again—at least until tomorrow. The light hadn't changed, still an indeterminate gray. The rain continued unabated, interspersed with the occasional wail of the wind.

When I turned my head and peered through the dimness, the mantel clock told me it was almost eleven, and I rolled out of bed with a start.

Gods, I hadn't stayed abed that late since I'd been a raw youth.

Bathing and dressing took me twice as long as usual, my body seemingly unable to shake off the sluggishness of shock and exhaustion, and a hundred aches and pains I hadn't noticed the night before making themselves known. Tavius had been rough with me, and then Benedict had been a bit rough with me in an entirely different way.

Four guards waited at the entrance to the private corridor, and two stayed behind while the others followed me obediently...where? My study, I supposed, for lack of any better ideas. Although I wished I knew what would be waiting for me there. Someone had probably seen Clothurn being arrested, and even if not, his servants would've gone looking for him when he didn't go home. Lord Zettine had informants everywhere. I'd have bet my left testicle that he'd already received a full report on everything that had happened last night.

So where was he? It was midday. Had Benedict intercepted him? Why hadn't he been raising a riot outside my rooms, demanding that I appear? Why didn't I have urgent messages from my whole council, for that matter, or an emergency meeting already in session that no one had told me about?

Perhaps there was. I quickened my stride.

Outside my study I found only a page, who jumped up from a chair when I approached and opened the door for me. A short passage led to an antechamber where anyone seeking an audience with me would present himself and then wait, and a wary glance in that direction showed me nothing but a bored-looking clerk making conversation with an equally relaxed guard.

Mattia popped out of my study, bowed, and said, “Good morn—well, close enough, Your Grace! I have coffee waiting for you.” I followed him in, and the page shut the door behind us. “Lord Benedict was here and said you’d want some,” he continued. “And he asked me to tell you to go ahead and drink it. Which seemed a bit strange, but—”

Abruptly, I was far too weary to dance around the subject any more, at least not with Mattia. “He’s not giving me permission to have coffee, he’s telling me I don’t need to worry that it’s been poisoned,” I said. Mattia’s eyes went wide, and his mouth rounded into an O. “There was some concern. I think it’s over now. Pour me some, and you too, if you’re not too afraid to drink it. And tell me if anyone’s been here looking for me this morning. Lord Zettine, probably?”

“Poison? Ennolu preserve us, on top of everything else!”

“Coffee, Mattia,” I said, and went to sit behind my desk, hoping the familiar view might make everything seem a bit less surreal.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace,” Mattia said, and went to the sideboard. “But I—Lord Zettine wasn’t here. But there have been a few visitors, including the Surbini ambassador. They seemed to have heard—ah, rumors. About last night.” He put my coffee in front of me. “About Lord Tavius, and Lord Clothurn, and Lord Benedict. And you.”

Of course there were. I’d have been shocked otherwise.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” I said. “For now, all you need to know is that Lord Clothurn’s been arrested. And Lord Tavius is dead. Don’t answer any questions from anyone today.”

Mattia muttered and fussed, but I drank my coffee and ignored him, considering the problem of the rumors. In all likelihood, most of the palace had been on tenterhooks all morning waiting for me to emerge and provide clarity—or start putting people’s heads on spikes over the gates.

It wasn’t like Zettine to be on tenterhooks, was it? Hiding himself away and waiting for someone else to take action, rather than running roughshod over anyone he could bully.

Mattia subsided at last, refilling my cup and then sitting across from me in silence. His presence didn’t disturb me the way most people’s would; we’d spent so many years working together that I found his quiet company stimulating, rather than a barrier to contemplation.

A bracing sip of fresh coffee, and then another, and I let my mind drift, idly picking up thoughts and putting them down again, waiting for the moment when I’d...yes. That. So many little threads that had been floating in the breeze, waiting to be woven together into a coherent fabric.

I drained my cup and put it down with a click.

“Didn’t Lord Zettine’s youngest daughter marry a Surbini lady?” I asked. “Some great heiress. I remember hearing about the wedding gowns, they were encrusted with pearls, an absurd expense. Thank Ennolu they held it in Surbino so I had a good excuse not to go.”

“Last summer, yes,” Mattia said. “Why?”

“Am I right in remembering that one of their estates produces some staggering fraction of Surbino’s white wine grapes?”

Mattia chuckled, shaking his head. “Only you would remember such a thing, Your Grace. If you’d like me to verify it with the clerks, I can, but—”

“Just read me the part of the trade agreement we’ve been working on that deals with wine, if you’d be so kind.”

Mattia’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, dear,” he muttered, clearly already busily going down the same path I’d mentally trodden, and went to pull the latest draft from the files on the opposite wall. “Here it is, Your Grace. Yes. For red wines...”

The tariffs on wines, and in some cases lack thereof, had been a particular sticking point for me, but the Surbini ambassador had been incredibly stubborn, almost nonchalant in his dismissal of my concerns. And now I thought I knew why: he’d been privately assured of Lord Zettine’s support in making sure that Surbino’s white wines would command the best possible prices at the greatest possible volume, while sacrificing the interests of other vintners on both sides of the border to compensate for it.

“That’s enough,” I said, cutting Mattia off as he began to fight his way through a subparagraph about barrels. “Thank you. I think that’s what I wanted to know.”

My voice had gone grim—nearly as much as my mood.

Zettine had been Calatria’s Lord Chancellor for more than thirty years, since well before either Tavius or I had been conceived. He’d been here, in this palace, when my father carried on his affair with Tavius’s married mother, and I had no doubt he’d been as canny and ambitious and well-supplied with spies nearly three decades ago as he was now.

Fabian had known. Zettine had almost certainly known. Tavius would've come to the same conclusion, I felt sure. And if Zettine had known all this time, and never said a word...well, Tavius would never have trusted him. Zettine would've been out on his ass at best, and far more likely his head would've adorned one of those spikes Benedict knew damn well I'd never actually use. But Tavius wouldn't have had the same qualms.

Even if Zettine and his family survived Tavius's ascent to power, they'd have ended up bankrupt, either through Tavius's persecution of them or through a war. Tavius had hated Surbino, something about effete southerners who hadn't come to our aid a hundred years ago during a war we'd had with the Elaquin Archipelago. He'd had similar attitudes regarding every other kingdom I could think of. And then, of course, there was whatever he'd been plotting with a Surbini captive. He'd have had Calatria embroiled in some stupid, wasteful conflict within months of taking the throne.

No, Zettine would've been highly motivated to see to it that Tavius never made a claim on the throne, let alone succeeded.

And now, he'd be highly motivated to avoid drawing attention to himself—and to his part in what had happened. If he came charging to my study demanding answers, I might expect the same from him.

I stood, straightened my tunic, and said, "If Lord Benedict comes looking for me, tell him I have a meeting. And don't specify with whom."

"It's very difficult to lie to Lord Benedict," Mattia said dubiously. "With the best will in the world, Your Grace."

"You won't need to lie. I won't tell you where I'm going."

Mattia raised his eyebrows. "Not that I can't guess, Your Grace. But I'll do my best

to pretend I don't know. Although—speaking of poison? Not that I'm accusing anyone of anything. But don't take any refreshment, if you're going to have the confrontation I think you are."

"Good advice," I said, and set out for Lord Zettine's offices. Particularly good and also quite pertinent, if only Mattia had known it.

Zettine had an administrative suite in the same wing as mine, in a small annex overlooking a private courtyard. I knew him well enough to be fairly sure he'd be there, even though he wanted to avoid me. He spent even more time buried in paperwork than I did. Nothing short of an apocalypse would keep him from his desk.

That said, I also knew he'd have no compunction about fleeing through the side door into the courtyard and having his secretary, a humorless, ageless stick of a man who'd terrified me since I was old enough to walk, lie to me that Zettine had never been there in the first place.

And so I went around and in through the courtyard rather than along the busy corridor and through Zettine's anteroom, where he'd have notice of my arrival.

When my men pushed the protesting guard on duty out of the way and opened the door from the courtyard into Zettine's private study, the look of shock and dismay on my Lord Chancellor's face was one of the most satisfying sights of my life.

It gave me the courage to shoot my coldest ducal glare at that horrible secretary and say, without any apology, "Leave us, and don't allow anyone to interrupt us until you're summoned."

To my gratified surprise, and to Zettine's sputtering indignation, he did just that, bowing and stepping out of the room with no more than a muttered, "Yes, Your Grace."

I turned to my guards. "Wait in the courtyard." They hesitated, I frowned, and they left.

Zettine had risen and now stood behind his desk, drawing himself up to his full height, beard bristling over his high embroidered collar.

"I must protest, Your Grace," he said. I raised my eyebrows and stared him down. "Of course my duke is always entitled to my time," he went on, a bit less confidently. I kept staring, and this time I curled my lip at him. Benedict had mentioned the effectiveness of my lip curling, and why not. "But out of respect for my position, you could at least present yourself at the door, or knock!"

"I have the greatest respect for your position," I said. "And, in fact, for you, though we've had our differences, and you haven't always reciprocated." I overrode his protests with, "It's that respect that brings me here. If I didn't value your decades of service to me and my father before me, I'd simply have you arrested for murder and have done with it. Or for treason, if I really wanted to be vindictive. It was the duke's wine, after all. Only you and I know for certain that you meant it for Fabian and not for me."

Not even Zettine's practiced court mask could remain in place when struck such a blow as that. I watched in fascination as his age-reddened cheeks went ashen. He wobbled, caught himself on the edge of his desk, and remained stubbornly upright.

Well, good for him. Anyway, if he dropped dead of an apoplexy, I wouldn't have the satisfaction of watching him squirm. Not to mention, I had a few questions. There were holes in what I knew, and if I didn't get them filled in I'd never rest.

"You're going to answer my questions, Lord Zettine, and it may take some little time," I said, and dropped into one of the comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace across from his desk. "Why don't you join me."

When he came around and sat in the other chair, lips pressed in a flat line and hands clenched in his lap, I knew I'd won—and more importantly, so did he.

“Thank you for not insulting my intelligence and injuring your own dignity by pretending not to understand me.” Zettine nodded stiffly, his teeth gritting together. “Have you known about Lord Tavius's true paternity the entire time?” Another nod. “And so did Fabian.”

“Yes,” he said, after a pause. “We both knew. Neither of us ever spoke of it to anyone. Not even my wife knew the truth.”

He said it as if I ought to praise him for his discretion, but I knew damn well he'd have kept that secret out of pure self-preservation. My father clearly hadn't wanted to recognize Tavius, and anyone who went against my father in matters of state ended up in a dungeon being nibbled by rats, at best.

“Until?” I prompted him. Fabian hadn't liked me, but he'd wanted my father's son on the throne—and he'd cared about things like legitimacy of birth. Tavius wasn't any improvement over me in that regard.

“Until Lord Benedict returned from his journeys, and Fabian feared he had designs on the crown. I beg your pardon, Duke Lucian, of course I didn't share this belief. But Fabian didn't think you had the strength and resolution to hold your throne if Lord Benedict chose to take it.” Didn't share that belief, my sweet, slightly too-flat ass. I coughed to cover an ungentlemanly snort of laughter. Zettine frowned disapprovingly and added, “He also doubted that you'd produce an heir of your own, a concern that I admit I share, along with the majority of your council.”

He sounded shockingly sincere. Well, he might be an asshole, but he'd served Calatria loyally for longer than I'd been alive—mostly. Unless it conflicted with his daughter-in-law's profits from her vineyards, of course.

“Given recent events, I think that this year I’ll give my attention to the matter of an eventual heir. Not of my body, I don’t think. But other Calatryan dukes have been unable or unwilling to father a child. We’ve gotten over it. There are legal provisions for it. It’s possible you may even be a part of that discussion.”

Zettine raised his eyebrows. “You mean if I’m not imprisoned for murder, Your Grace?” he asked drily. “If you attempt to lay charges against me, I’ll admit to no such—”

“You’ll admit to it now, or I’ll set Benedict on you,” I said briskly, and had the pleasure of watching him go pale again. “The full truth, Lord Zettine.”

His lips compressed again. “Very well,” he bit off. “In brief: Fabian came to me some months ago and shared his concerns. He told me he wished to inform Lord Tavius of the circumstances of his conception. I forbade it. But he disobeyed me, and I discovered his treachery. I would eventually have needed to handle Lord Tavius more directly,” by which I presumed he meant murder him, too, but I let it pass without comment, “but in the meantime, I had to prevent him from approaching the council with his story and with a reliable witness. I was forced to remove any possibility of Fabian presenting his testimony. And I could argue, were I required to,” he said with sudden animation, “that not only did I not commit treason, I punished treason. Fabian was the traitor. He conspired to remove the rightful duke, Your Grace. I only did my duty.”

“I’d like to see you prove you didn’t intend to poison me with that wine,” I replied, my tone as dry as his. “You certainly ran the risk of doing so accidentally. And if you try to look me in the eye and tell me you cared one way or the other, I’ll clap you in irons on principle.”

“Hmmp,” Zettine sniffed. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I did indeed care. Of the current options for the Calatryan throne, you are the most acceptable.”

That broke my grip on my self-control; I burst out laughing. Zettine glared at me as I wheezed my way to recovery. “That at least is probably honest, my Lord Chancellor,” I said. “Fine. But you’re going to need to do better than that if you expect to keep your head and your title.”

Zettine sat up straighter. “My title?” he said. “Lord Chancellor, not my barony, I assume you mean.”

“You’re experienced and generally extremely competent.” And Fabian had sold me out to Tavius. Having really digested that information, the last of my concern over his death had evaporated. My anger at his murder could only be considered a formality at this point—or simply a matter of leverage. “So yes, under a series of conditions, any violation of which will be met with immediate and possibly final consequences, you will keep your position and the honors and perquisites that pertain to it. Except for any authority over tariffs,” I added, taking malicious pleasure in watching his mouth open in unhappy surprise. “We will be taxing white wine from Surbino at the usual rate. I may not be the duke you’d have chosen, if you had your way, but I’m not an idiot.”

Zettine gazed at me thoughtfully for a few moments, his jaw working. “No,” he said at last, and for once I didn’t think he had any agenda other than simply saying what he thought. “You’re not an idiot. I think I might have chosen a rather stupider duke, in fact. A stupider, more biddable duke who wanted to marry a stupid, biddable duchess. And I certainly wouldn’t have chosen a duke who could not be more precisely designed to attract the attention of the very unbiddable Lord General Rathenas.”

“Lord Benedict and I have come to an understanding, Lord Zettine,” I said, as airily as I could manage, although I could feel my cheeks heating. “In fact, one of my conditions relates to him.”

“You seem to have brought him into line, yes.” He sniffed again. “Since more accepted means of controlling him proved insufficient, Your Grace, then I suppose I must congratulate you on having found one that’s more effective, albeit a bit unorthodox given your familial relationship. And of course Lord Tavius contributed the potion.” He smiled sourly at the little start of surprise I couldn’t suppress. “Lord Benedict’s officer took all of Lord Tavius’s servants into custody, as was his duty, except for one who’d already fled. One of my men located him in the lower town. We had a very informative chat early this morning.”

Oh, for the love of all the gods. Executing Lord Zettine would be by far the best choice if I wanted any chance of having a biddable Lord Chancellor. But...a more biddable one would probably also be stupider. And a clever duke would use his resources, bend them to his will, rather than simply execute them when they became unruly.

At least bringing Lord Zettine under control wouldn’t involve spreading my legs.

“Good,” I said. “You can tell me everything you learned from him after I’ve laid out my conditions. We’ll start with the wine...”

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

It took another half hour for me to reach the end of my list of conditions, which included full transparency regarding everything Zettine knew about my father's peccadilloes and also—because he hadn't become the Lord Chancellor by being easy to out-negotiate—an agreement on my side to buy twenty cases of a light dessert wine from his daughter-in-law to be served at palace functions.

I'd opened my mouth to add one more, a demand for his word that he'd never call another council meeting again, when a hubbub broke out in the antechamber. Zettine's secretary's voice contributed a high note of violent protests, and—yes, the bass line was Benedict.

The door burst open an instant later.

Benedict hadn't quite gone so far as to draw his sword, thank the gods, but he had his hand on the hilt and his magic swirled around him, spreading through the air and raising all the hair on the back of my neck.

He stopped, looking around the room and taking in the total lack of danger.

His hand fell away from his sword.

"Excuse me," he said stiffly, and bowed to me. "I didn't—I apologize for the interruption."

I stifled a sigh. Benedict chose the oddest times to stand on court formality, as if his birth and breeding seeped through the cracks in his ruffianly facade whenever he felt truly at a loss.

“Shut the door,” I said to the secretary, and he huffed and slammed out of the room. “Come in, Benedict. I’m guessing you had enough time to think this morning that you reached the same conclusion I did, that our esteemed Lord Chancellor murdered Fabian and knew about Tavius all along. Don’t worry, he’s not going to try to kill me. He’s had time to reach a conclusion too, that it wouldn’t be in his best interests.”

Benedict stared, raised his eyebrows so sharply they nearly disappeared into his hairline, and started to laugh.

“I wouldn’t try to kill you in any case, and it ought to go without saying. Your flippancy does you no credit, Your Grace,” Zettine snapped. “And as for you, Lord Benedict, I find your hilarity most unbecoming in the soon-to-be Lord Consort of Calatria.”

Benedict’s laugh cut off in a choke and a fit of coughing that resolved in a wheeze and a raspy, “I beg your pardon?”

Oh, bloody gods. I’d kill Zettine after all. A spike had his name on it, damn it. I’d do it, no matter what Benedict thought me capable of. Right after I sank through the floor and died of confusion.

“As you ought. And please do forgive me, Your Grace,” Zettine purred, eyes glittering. “I’d assumed you’d informed Lord Benedict of your intentions before discussing it with me.”

“Of course he did,” Benedict lied, more loyally than convincingly. “I merely—damn it,” he muttered under his breath. “Lucian, do you want me to arrest Lord Zettine and put him in a cell next to Clothurn’s, or don’t you?”

I eyed Zettine, baring my teeth. “Do I?”

“No,” he said, and cleared his throat, shooting a wary glance at Benedict. “I would offer you my study to talk to one another in private, Your Grace, but unfortunately I have an appointment for which I am now rather late. Perhaps you’ll do me the honor of sending for me when you wish to speak further.”

Tempted as I was to force Zettine to leave after all, and to have Benedict fuck me over his desk simply out of spite...no. And while it rankled to be dismissed so summarily, I did need to talk to Benedict. Urgently, thanks to Zettine’s malicious meddling.

“Attend me tomorrow morning at nine,” I said, and rose. “Expect to answer a great many more questions. And we’ll have a council meeting in the afternoon at two. Summon everyone, if you please, and make it clear that the summons comes from me, through you.”

“As Your Grace wishes,” Zettine said, rising with me, all smiles now that he knew he’d wrongfooted me. Bastard. Maybe he’d only live a few more years, and I’d be rid of him via natural causes before I reached middle age. I could cling to that happy thought. “I’ll also speak to the ambassador today, with your permission. And inform him of the changes to the trade agreement.”

“Only if you make it very clear those changes are by my order and not yours,” I said.

Zettine stared me down. I held his gaze, vividly picturing his head on a spike.

Perhaps he’d been imagining the same thing, because he blinked first. “Very well. Until the morning, Your Grace. Lord Benedict.”

“My guards are out here,” I said to Benedict, and led the way out to the courtyard.

“I’m glad to hear it, for their sakes,” Benedict grumbled, low enough that only I could

hear him. “When I didn’t see them in the anteroom I thought you might have come here unattended. As well as unwisely. I think that goes without saying.”

A guard shut the door behind us. The little courtyard held a row of cypress trees against the wall, two small lemon trees in pots, and a tiled area with a fountain. I walked away from Zettine’s study door and around to the other side of the fountain, where its splashing would prevent the guards from hearing our conversation. A light drizzle misted down, but it wasn’t really raining, more trying to make up its mind.

I turned to Benedict, mustering every bit of bravado I had left after dealing with Lord Zettine. He had his hands on his hips and his lips pressed together, an ominous gleam in his eyes.

I swallowed hard. “It was perfectly wise,” I said, “because I held all the cards this time. Zettine wants to live and he wants to remain Lord Chancellor, and if I generously refrain from executing him for murder and treason, he’s going to be perfectly reasonable. Mostly. Anyway, I didn’t need your permission. Besides, why should it need to go without saying, when I know you’ll bloody well say it?”

Benedict took another step forward, crowding me into the nearest cypress. Its wet needles poked me in the back of the neck, and icy drops trickled under my collar.

“Anything more to add?” he asked. “Or are you going to keep babbling and hope I forget you apparently told Lord Zettine we’re getting married? And for the record, you ought to have waited for me. That man’s a rabid wolf in silken sheep’s clothing.”

“A wolf with no viable candidate to replace me on the throne, and so he’s stuck with me. He admitted as much. And as for getting married, no, I didn’t—you misunderstood!”

“Soon-to-be Lord Consort,” Benedict quoted. Another step brought us toe to toe, and

I had to tip my head back into the cypress. Now I had wet needles in my hair. I should've been cold, but I felt hot all over, restless, almost frantic. "I didn't misunderstand. As I recall, you accused me of making a deal with Zettine behind your back to legalize it so that I could rule through you after all. Do you remember that? Hmm?"

"But I—I don't need to rule through you," I stammered. Damn it, I should've talked to Benedict first, but Zettine wouldn't be in this conciliatory mood forever. He'd probably be permanently more loyal out of self-interest, but that wouldn't make him yielding, either. If I wanted to have the option of marrying Benedict someday, I had to strike while the iron was hot! "And anyway, you said it was impossible. I know you don't want to marry me, Benedict. You don't want to be anywhere near the throne. You convinced me of that. I just wanted to see if Zettine would, ah, cooperate, if I suggested that he might sponsor an amendment to the marriage laws."

Benedict leaned in, eyes flashing. "Yes, I said it was impossible," he growled, "right after you said it sounded like a horrid thought. I love you! And you think I'm the one who doesn't want to marry you? But finding you talking it over with him, when I'd already panicked wondering where the fuck you'd gone, until Mattia admitted it—don't fuck with me, Lucian. I know you've had a hell of a time. But so have I. There's a limit to how much I can take."

Now I'd gone cold all over, and it had nothing to do with that blasted tree, or the rain, which had started to come down again in tiny stinging drops.

"You mean you'll leave me," I said, barely able to get the words out—and only realizing once I had that he couldn't. No matter how much he eventually wanted to. And that was even worse.

Benedict's expression softened. "No. Not even if I could. But you have to be honest with me. And yes, I know that's a bit ironic, coming from me. You haven't forgiven

me, and maybe you never will, but Lucian. You said you held all the cards with Zettine? How many of them do you think you have with me? Have a little mercy.”

The staccato patter of raindrops striking tile picked up its pace, and frigid water flecked my face and scalp. Benedict leaned forward, curling around me, sheltering me with his body. For a moment I was standing on that balcony again where I’d watched him with Clothurn the day Fabian died. I’d been alone, and wanting, and bitterly jealous.

Now I had him right here, warm and solid and strong and mine , gazing down at me and asking me for mercy, of all things, when he’d probably never begged before in his life.

Mercy. From me. When I’d have been grateful for a scrap of his attention, little though I’d have admitted it, only a month ago.

Oh, buggering hell, I couldn’t lie to myself. I was grateful for it now.

And I simply didn’t have the strength to try to do the moral thing, or the correct thing, rather than what I longed for more than anything in the world. Even staying in bed until late morning I still hadn’t slept nearly enough. I’d skipped breakfast in favor of coffee, and I’d skipped lunch in favor of confronting Zettine. Come to think of it, I’d skipped supper the night before. Perhaps someone with a stiffer backbone might not love the man who’d killed his father. And perhaps someone with a stronger sense of right wouldn’t blackmail his council into legalizing his marriage to his own stepbrother.

Those very respectable and moral people could bloody well go be self-righteous, and lonely and miserable, without me.

“You really want me to be honest with you?” I asked him. He nodded, brow

furrowing, and stood up a bit straighter, as if he meant to take what I had to say like a man. “I’m not sure I have forgiven you, and perhaps you’re right that I can’t and won’t. For the way you lied to me, anyway. But I don’t care. I’m too tired. I have to be the Crown Duke with everyone else. Please just put me back in bed, and feed me a roast beef sandwich, and tell me that you love me. And then kill anyone who tries to wake me until tomorrow morning when I need to meet with Zettine again.”

Benedict slipped an arm around my waist and drew me close, using his other hand to pull me into a fold of his cloak. His low laughter warmed me even more than his embrace.

“Your rose petal lips look so beautiful all dewed with raindrops,” he said, his tone suspiciously sincere, “and even lovelier wrapped around my cock. Maybe I should write a poem about your perfect mouth wrapped around a roast bee—”

Even in the cold, the tips of my ears burned like fire. “Shut up, Benedict! I’m hungry! And I—” I had tears in my eyes, actually, accounting for at least half the water on my eyelashes. My knees shook. Gods, I’d fall down in a faint right here from sheer starvation. An hour of fencing with Zettine had taken the very last of my strength. “I love you,” I said, and my voice came out so weak the words were almost lost to the rain.

But not quite.

Benedict went utterly still, staring at me with his mouth open, rain washing his long hair down against the sides of his face in damp tendrils, eyes so wide I could see the whites all around them.

“You what?” he said blankly, and blinked. His arms around me had gone rigid. “You—I beg your pardon, you what?”

“I love you!” It seemed easier to say the second time, perhaps because I hadn’t known how true it was until I said it once.

But of course I loved him. I needed him like air, and I’d never really thought about anyone else since the first moment he looked into my eyes. Besides, no one else had ever loved me like he did, and that counted for more than I’d realized it could. Even if I hadn’t fallen in love with him spontaneously, I probably would’ve just for the way he’d protected and cared for me.

And killed my father. Dromos help me, perhaps I’d inherited something of my family’s ruthless insanity after all.

“I love you,” I repeated, and the third time, it simply flowed off my tongue like warm honey. “Once I’ve forced it down the council’s throats, will you marry me? You don’t have to,” I hastened to add, lest he think I meant it as a ducal command—not that he gave a fuck about those, anyway. “But you had to bond your magic to me. You’re tied to me through no choice of your own. I want you to choose me. Do you understand? Marry me because you want to. I’ll make sure there’s a codicil in the contract. That you can’t inherit the throne if something happens to me.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Benedict said, and he sounded a little dazed. “I learned a bit about these bonds when I visited Ixyon. If you die, I die.”

“What? You—what?” I tried to pull away from him, the shock of that giving me more energy than I’d had all day, but he was like a brick wall. “How could you not have told me this? I thought you weren’t going to lie to me anymore!”

“It just hadn’t come up yet, Lucian, I wasn’t lying—”

“It hasn’t come up yet,” I forced out through my gritted teeth, “because we haven’t died. At which point you wouldn’t have to tell me anything.”

“It’s not as if it goes both directions,” he said, sounding like a person who thought he was being eminently reasonable. “If I die, you’ll be completely unaffected.”

“Completely unaffected,” I repeated, unable to believe my ears. Had I thought I was in love with this infuriating idiot? Clearly, I’d inherited far more than my share of my family’s propensity for insanity. “Completely un—I love you. And I’m beginning to regret it. Would it affect you if I died?”

“Well, since I’d also be—”

“Benedict!”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and almost sounded like he meant it. “Yes. Even if it didn’t kill me, I’d kill myself. You’ve made your point. But even if you love me,” and the way his lips twitched up, as if even saying it made him happy, forced a smile out of me in helpless response, “you don’t love me as much as I love you.”

“You can’t possibly know that, and I can’t believe how arrogant and presumptuous you are! Don’t try to tell me how I—”

He cut me off with a hard, searing kiss, bruising my lips and bending me back over his arm, squeezing the breath out of me.

Benedict lifted his head an inch, barely enough to look into my eyes. “I do know, because no one’s ever loved anyone as much as I love you. So however much you love me, it’s less.”

I still couldn’t quite seem to fill my lungs, as if my heart had expanded too much to give them room.

“Oh,” I gasped, like a fool. “Really?”

Benedict's smile grew, creasing his cheek, bringing out the dimple that only made an appearance once in a blue moon—when he was truly happy. His eyes sparkled with his magic, and with joy, and with more love than I'd known could exist, at least for me.

“Really,” he said, with his usual unshakeable confidence. And he kissed me again.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and stopped arguing.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:00 am

Benedict and I were wed a little more than two months later, on the cool, sweet-scented evening of the first night of spring. Early flowers had started to bloom, and those apple trees the gardeners had been so busily pruning before had clad themselves in soft, delicate pale pink.

As befitted the Crown Duke and his Lord General, we married in the throne room, standing on the ducal dais. Just below, in a seat decked with flowers and silk, Benedict's mother had the place of honor reserved for parents of the marrying couple—in solitary splendor. Benedict's father had been dead for decades, my mother hadn't replied to my invitation, and the less said about my own father's reasons for missing his son and stepson's wedding, the better.

The Dowager Duchess didn't seem to mind being alone in receiving a parent's honors, and she was pleased enough by Benedict's ascension to at least the throne's dais, if not the throne itself, that she behaved herself. Mostly. She tried to insist that Benedict's family arms should be hung above the ducal crest on the many flagpoles decorated for the occasion. I left her to argue about it with Lord Zettine, and I wished them joy of each other.

For his part, my Lord Chancellor officiated side by side with the temple's high priest. In return for my allowing him this mark of favor, his daughter-in-law provided all the wine for the wedding reception.

I might have been madly in love, and happier than I'd ever been in my life, and recklessly facing down the greatest scandal Calatria had enjoyed in decades by marrying the Dowager Duchess's son, but that didn't mean I needed to waste money the treasury didn't have to spare on wine when I could get it as a gift, thank you very

much.

Benedict's hands shook as he wrapped the silk cord around my wrist, and I'd never forget the shining look of wonder in his gray eyes as I recited my vow to honor him in this world and the next.

And then he ruined it, leaning in to whisper, "Do you think they'll all leave so we can consummate it on the throne? Or we could just let them watch."

Crown Dukes did not kick their newlywed Lord Consorts in the shins, and so I gave him a pained smile—or tried to. It ended up more of a delighted grin, because I couldn't seem to make any other facial expressions that day.

He kissed it off my lips and led me away to the cheers and laughter and wild speculations of our courtiers, to the clanging of the temple bells, and likely to the bitter disappointment of half the men in Calatria.

But Benedict belonged to me now. They could all weep into their reasonably tariffed wine.

We spent our wedding night in our new suite: Benedict's former rooms, but renovated and redecorated and made fresh and beautiful.

And he showed me, again and again, that he did belong to me—and I to him.

As the spring wore on, we discovered a dismaying drawback to our marriage and our bond.

The northern raiders had made their first foray since the snow melted on the lower passes of the mountains, and we were preparing to send our usual reinforcements to the foothill forts. Benedict had always led them himself. And the realization that he couldn't go without taking me with him didn't fully sink in until he watched his

former second in command, now the leader of the expedition, giving his orders for the march.

“What good am I?” Benedict asked me, voice tight. We stood on the steps in the barracks courtyard watching the preparations, ready to review the troops as they rode out and receive their salutes. “I’m your Lord General, but if I can’t—it’s in name only. Damn it!”

“Most men in your position don’t ride out for every border skirmish, and no one will think any less of you,” I said. Of course, that wouldn’t soothe his disappointment in the slightest. He loved riding out for every border skirmish. That was the point. He’d never given a damn about appearances. “Perhaps—later in the summer, we could travel together to that little castle of my mother’s, it’s only a half day’s journey from the northernmost fort. I’ll stay there while you go and spend two days at a time overseeing things. You can ride back and forth as you need to.”

Although we never reached his curse’s limit, since he fucked me at least every night and usually every morning, we’d tested it twice and discovered that he could go four days and three nights before the curse, and the bond, asserted themselves.

His eyes lit up, and I fought the urge to roll mine—affectionately, of course. For all his commanding presence on the battlefield and in the bedroom, and his ability to talk his way out of nearly anything, he had the same exuberant, boyish enthusiasm for going and hitting other men with pointy sticks as any village lad brawling with his fellows.

“Thank you, Lucian,” he said. “I know you don’t like spending too much time away from all your clerks and the council,” and I had the distinct impression he, in turn, was affectionately rolling his eyes, “but I won’t feel quite so much as if I’ve abandoned my men if I spend a part of the summer campaign with them.”

“Good. Let’s see them off in style, then, until you can join them,” I said, and we did,

watching them ride out in twin columns, kicking up a cloud of dust and cheers from everyone in the city who'd lined up to watch them go.

We rode out after them a month later, taking a much smaller troop of fresh men and a few supply wagons with us. I liked getting out of the city from time to time; if nothing else, it allowed me to meet a broader cross-section of my subjects and to hear their thoughts.

To my chagrin, they were much friendlier than they'd ever been.

"They really do like you more than they like me," I confessed to Benedict as we lay in bed in the dark in our room in a country nobleman's house halfway to our destination.

"No," he said, and kissed me. "They like you more when you're happier. You're more approachable. I'll take the credit, of course."

"The hell you will!" I rolled on top of him and dug my fingers into his ribs, with utterly predictable results. "Benedict," I gasped a few minutes later, as he shoved his shoulders between my thighs and bit my hipbone. "You already—mmm, all right, I suppose once more won't kill me..."

We stayed in the north for nearly a month, at which point I'd started practically frothing at the mouth with the need to be back to work in my familiar surroundings.

Reluctantly, Benedict agreed to leave.

He was much quieter than usual on the journey home. It began to eat at me. We'd been married for less than five months, and already he seemed to be chafing at the restrictions placed on a Lord Consort, particularly given the limitations the bond imposed.

We reached the city after the late summer sunset, and the palace as the last dregs of twilight faded out of the horizon. I went straight for the bath, so tired of the smells of dust and horses that I wanted to crawl out of my own skin.

Benedict, as usual, managed to wash up surprisingly thoroughly with a basin and a cloth and a touch of magic, and when I emerged from the bathroom I found him all freshened up and sitting in an embrasure by an open bedroom window, leaning against the frame and spinning a brandy glass in his hands. He'd changed into clean trousers, but no shirt.

That had to be one of the most underrated perquisites of marriage: a handsome man without a shirt, anytime I wanted one. Gods, those shoulders. My cock stirred under the light silk dressing gown I'd wrapped up in. His shoulders barely fit between my legs, though I never grew tired of having him try.

I went and leaned against him, and he slipped his arm around my waist. Insects hummed and chirped in a raucous chorus, filling the velvety warmth of the summer night. A sliver of moon bathed the garden in a pale, silky glow.

"I'm sorry to have been such an ass," he said suddenly, and set the glass down to turn and take me fully in his arms, pulling me down into his lap. "It wasn't easy for me to come back. But I shouldn't have taken that out on you."

"I'm sorry." I slipped my arms around his neck, playing with his hair. "I know you'd rather be there, and that I'm keeping you—"

"No," he said fiercely. "No, never think that! You're not keeping me from anything, and I'd always rather be with you. Lucian, it's not that, it's—commanding the army is what I am to you. For you. I defend you, and Calatria. It's what I've always done. I feel like I'm failing you."

"Failing me? Benedict, don't be—" I bit my lip. Absurd, I'd almost said, but calling

your husband's deepest fears absurd, when he chose to allow you to hear them, had to be some hitherto unknown depth of tactlessness. "You could never fail me. Do you, all right. Do you feel like I'm failing you when I take an afternoon off from working? Or cancel a council meeting because I simply don't want to go?"

He raised his eyebrows at me. "You never take an afternoon off from working."

Almost entirely true, damn it. But... "I've canceled two council meetings this year!" I said triumphantly. "I have. Were you disappointed in me? Because that's what I do, isn't it? For Calatria, and for you. Keep the duchy running smoothly. Administer justice. Ensure that our laws are followed, and none of the council does anything stupid or starts a war that your men would have to go and die in."

"It's not the same," he said, and his jaw set in the way I knew meant he wouldn't listen to reason.

"Fine, it's not the same," I snapped. "Clearly what I do is far less important than what you do, Benedict!"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. Lucian, it's just that—"

"It's just that your role has changed, and you need to accept it," I said. Perhaps tact was overrated, after all. I wouldn't call him absurd, at least. That had to count for something. "You're the Lord Consort. I'm the Crown Duke, and we need to act like it. I need you here, helping me rule. You can't fail me as long as you're by my side. Promise me you don't regret marrying me?"

"Lucian," he said, and shook his head. "If that's how you feel—I love you more than life itself. I'd want to be married to you even if I had to do all that paperwork in your place. Although I'd rather just fuck you in the throne room. That's part of a Lord Consort's official duties, and if it isn't already, I'm going to issue a decree to that effect. Who's going to stop me?"

I couldn't help laughing, relief making me giddy. "I'm beginning to think Lord Zettine's right, and we're both unbecoming. Certainly you are!"

Benedict flashed me a wicked grin. "I could show him a thing or two about unbecoming. Actually, perhaps I'll just show you. That's more fun."

We were both laughing, most unbecomingly, as he slid his hands under my dressing gown and bore me down onto the floor, spreading my legs and pinning me under him, kissing my laughter off my lips.

No ducal propriety was observed that night—or any night thereafter.

And neither of us regretted it.

The End

Thank you for reading *The Traitor's Curse* !

Curious about the Surbini mage Tavius meant to use in his plot? Prince Nikola's adventures and hard-won HEA with his devoted bodyguard Andreas can be found in *The Royal Curse* , book one of *Twilight Mages*.

Book two of *Twilight Mages*, *The Captive's Curse* , features a harassed highwayman who deeply regrets the life choices that led him to hold the irrepressible Lord Cyril for ransom.