

# THE RISING

*By Kristen Ashley*

## Part Two

*The Plan Commences*

### Chapter Thirty-Six

*The Grieving*

#### ***Prince True***

*Guest Suite, Second Floor, East Corridor, Catrame Palace, Fire City*

*FIRENZE*

“We should give her another sleeping draught,” Queen Elpis said fretfully. “The last is clearly not working.”

True did not even attempt to hide the censure in his gaze when he looked from the weeping beauty that was in his arms to the Queen of Firenze standing at the side of the foot of Farah’s bed.

Elpis was as far from them as she could get at the same time staying close.

Her wont these past days when it came to Farah and her now-dead mother, Sofia.

Elpis’s eyes were swollen and bloodshot from her own tears.

Too little.

Too bloody late.

Elpis flinched when she caught his gaze.

“You may leave,” True rumbled.

“But, I—” Elpis started.

“You. May. *Leave*,” True said lower and slower.

Her head jerked before she lifted her chin and stated, “This is my palace. She is my subject. I am queen and I—”

“For thirteen more hours,” he interrupted her to note. “Then my cousin will be the Queen of Firenze and you will be naught but Relict Queen.”

She gasped in affront.

True did not give a gods-damn.

“You leave, or my men will remove you,” True warned.

“You cannot—”

“Leave, Your Grace, or my men will remove you,” True repeated, and Florian made a move toward the queen.

“They have no authority here,” she snapped.

“I am their prince, which means I will be their king and Farah will be their queen. Ask your son what authority that gives me,” True retorted.

He immediately noted she took his meaning.

Then again, after the attack on the palace that occurred not two hours before had been quashed, Mars—her son, her king—had not allowed Silence, his intended, to climb down from his back where he held her as he battled their assailants.

It was safe, and still Mars kept Silence as close to him as he could without absorbing her, something he could not do, or he would have done that instead.

Yes.

Elpis took his meaning.

Her face softened, and her gaze moved to Farah, who was in his arms, silently crying, her head turned toward True’s body, even if she was not holding him in return. Something that alarmed him and something he wished to address with his betrothed.

It was just that he’d do that when the bloody queen left.

“I am glad she has you,” Elpis whispered.

“It would have been good if she’d had *you*,” True retorted. “If they’d *both* had you.”

Pain sharpened her features.

Pain and regret.

But Farah tightened in his arms.

This was upsetting his intended.

Therefore, this had to end.

“Go,” he ordered the queen.

Elpis seemed to crumble before his eyes and True wished he didn’t care about that either.

But he understood regret.

The woman could not know her friend would take hundreds of bites from poisonous emerald oil asps and die in her bed under a pile of them before they could find their way back to a friendship that had been torn apart by treason and murder.

However, now he didn't have time for Queen Elpis.

He needed to see to his future queen.

Fortunately, Elpis knew the only one who could look after Farah was in her bed holding her.

Thus, she gave up the fight and moved slowly from the chamber.

The door latched shut behind her.

"Leave us," True ordered Florian, Bram and Alfie, the members of his guard who were in the room. The others, Luther and Wallace, were guarding it elsewhere. One, Luther, in the hall. The other, Wallace, outside, under the window.

"True—" Alfie began.

"Leave," True said.

Alfie looked to Farah then to True.

"Magic," he replied quietly.

Indeed.

The asps that had killed Sofia had been very real.

They had also been transported to her bedchamber through magic.

A bedchamber that had been Farah's before her mother and she had switched in order to place Sofia farther away from Elpis's room.

True knew all this.

As did Alfie and his other lieutenants.

But he could have fifty swords in that room.

They wouldn't be able to fight magic.

"I'll want you in here, guarding her after I leave. But now, we need privacy," True told his friend.

"I think—"

"Go, Alfie," True demanded.

Alfie hesitated before he nodded then he jerked his head to Florian and Bram and they walked out of the room.

The instant the latch clicked, True turned his attention to Farah, pulling her deeper into his arms.

Hers remained resting limp at her sides, her body lax, her tears silent, but still tracking down her face.

“Sweets,” he murmured. “Do you wish another sleeping draught?”

He offered it, for her sake, but he didn’t like the idea. They’d already given her a strong one.

“I need to rise, dress,” she told him, her voice dull and remote.

True grew more alarmed at her tone.

And her words.

Pain, he could understand.

Withdrawal was an additional concern.

“That’s the last thing you need, Farah. You need to rest. Sleep,” he refuted.

“I need to be in attendance at the procession.”

“The wedding won’t be for hours, love,” True murmured. “Regardless, it would be understood if you didn’t attend. And Mars might postpone it altogether after—”

Her head tipped back and True saw her eyes were just as remote as her voice.

This was not Farah.

Not his beautiful Farah with her shining topaz eyes that were always keen and alert and emotive.

“The torture procession,” she explained.

True blinked down at her.

“The what?”

“Did they take any assailants alive?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Then Mars will torture them, and all affected will go to the necropolis by the pit in order to watch them walk to their deaths. They will go by procession so the people will know those who attacked our palace, our king, will have no mercy.”

True grew even *more* alarmed.

“All?” he queried.

“All,” she asserted.

“Even Silence?”

“Especially Silence.”

Gods-damn it.

“She cannot—” True started.

“She must.” Farah made to move. “And I must.”

True tightened his arms. “You’re going nowhere.”

She stilled in his hold. “I must, True.”

“You must if you’re Firenz,” he declared. “But you are no longer Firenz. You are Dellig. And the Princess of Wodell does not attend a procession to watch torture after she lost her mother...or ever. You’ll take another sleeping draught and you’ll rest. And when you wake, I’ll be here, and I’ll help you mourn.”

She turned her head away.

True jostled her. “Farah.”

She looked at him again. “I am Firenz.”

“You are Dellig,” he asserted.

“I am not.”

“You are mine and I am Wodell.”

“I am not yours,” she whispered. “I am not anybody’s. Not any longer. I’m now actually of no one and nowhere. I am not Firenz. I am not Dellig. I am nobody.”

True’s alarm increased exponentially.

“You belong to me, sweets,” he said softly. “And I belong to you.”

“For either of those to be true, you have to wish it to be true, and you do not, Your Grace.”

Your Grace?

She hadn’t called him that since the first day they met, and he asked her not to.

“Farah—”

She turned away from him, pulling out of his arms.

“Bring me the draught. As you wish, I shall sleep.”

She slid down into the bed, settled on the pillow, her back to him, her knees pulled up to her chest.

True placed his hand on her hip and leaned toward her.

He tried again, “Farah—”

“Shall I call a servant for the draught?” she asked her pillow.

True didn't move or speak. He stayed right where he was, gazing at her profile in the lamplight.

And doing this, he decided she needed time.

She also, as he had noted, needed sleep.

After that, she would need him.

Even if she did not think she did.

And she would have him.

All of him.

He took his hand from her hip, pulled her hair away from her neck and then he tugged the silks up to her shoulder.

Through this, she didn't even twitch.

He then leaned ever closer and spoke in her ear.

“You grieve and speak through that grief. And I am at your side. You will sleep and you will wake, still in grief, and I'll be at your side. I'll see you through your grief, Farah, and I'll do it at your side. I will see you past your grief, also at your side. I will remember your mother as kind and loving, and I will do it at your side. And then we will carry on with our lives, our marriage, building a family, and through it all, I'll be at your side. You do belong to me, Farah. My future princess. My future wife. And in return, darling, I belong to you.”

He got ever closer, dipped his voice lower and finished.

“And as yours, I will avenge your mother, my sweetling. The one that caused your hurt will know his own pain. That is my vow to you as my friend, my betrothed, my future princess, my future queen and just *mine*.”

Through his speech, her body got tighter and tighter.

It stayed that way when he bent low and brushed her temple with his lips.

He pulled an inch away and murmured, “I'll have a draught brought up.”

Then he exited the bed, moved to the door, opened it and walked through it.

“Get her another sleeping draught,” he ordered Florian after he closed the door. “Go in and sit with her,” he ordered Bram after Florian moved down the hall to the stairs. “But be silent and keep distant. She needs time with her thoughts.”

Bram nodded and entered Farah's room.

True gave Luther a look and Luther remained where he stood outside Farah's door as True started toward the stairs with Alfie at his side.

They did this dodging servants who were sweeping up plaster from the quake.

And mopping up blood from the bodies that had been removed.

"Do you know of this procession?" True asked the captain of his guard.

"I didn't, until Basil came up but moments before you came out and summoned you to Mars's study."

"Aramus will not allow Ha-Lah to take part in it," True guessed. "I wish to ask her to sit with Farah until I can return to her."

"Ha-Lah is not leaving Aramus," Alfie replied.

True looked to his man. "He can't possibly—"

"They had a guard under their window. Catedrais was killed in the attack."

This stood to reason. The assailants had breached the palace through the windows. And there had been a great number of them.

He thought it had been a miracle that all on their side had survived.

But True had learned a long time ago that miracles didn't happen.

Especially in battle.

"Bloody hell," True muttered, turning to walk down the stairs.

"The Mar-el are as us," Alfie continued. "As brothers. Aramus is not in a good state, losing his man. His wife is remaining close."

"And Mars?" True asked, now jogging down the stairs, Alfie doing the same.

"I do not know."

"Silence?" True went on.

"I do not know that either, though Luther shared, as far as he's heard, she's not left Mars's side," Alfie told him as they made the first-floor landing.

"Has not left his side or he has not let her away from his side?" True inquired.

"The latter," Alfie answered.

"Bloody hell," True repeated.

They spoke no more as they made their way to Mars's study.

Basil and Kyril stood outside it.

But the hall, both the east and west corridors, was laden with Firenz warriors as well as those from Airen, Wodell and the Nadirii.

Basil opened the door for them and True walked through while Alfie remained behind.

Only for True to stop dead.

Silence sat in Mars's chair behind his desk. She was curled into herself, thighs to her chest, arms around her calves.

And she was still wearing her nightgown, which was stained thoroughly with dried blood. So much so, only streaks of white could be seen through the rust. There was dried blood on her arms. In fact, the only bit of her that had been cleaned was her face.

And her neck, which was mottled an angry purple with bruising.

At the sight, True felt his heart begin to race, his blood heating in his veins.

Mars was behind her, pacing, his angry energy almost a physical thing in the room.

All the others were there. King Aramus and Queen Ha-Lah. Prince Cassius and Princess Elena. Queen Ophelia and Princess Serena. Queen Elpis. King Gallienus. Select members of each guard. And a variety of barons of Firenz clans and chieftains of Firenz tribes.

True's parents, King Wilmer and Queen Mercy, were also there.

But True was pleased to see his father's counsellor, Carrington, was not.

Lorenz, the captain of Mars's Trusted, was standing in front of his king's desk, reporting.

"Those who were not found dead were found asleep or unconscious, draughts for the former, blows for the latter. The sergeant for this eve realized swiftly half the unit had not reported for duty at the changing of the guard. He sent warriors to discover why, and as you know, died on the palace steps, most likely on his way to Chu to raise the alarm."

Mars kept pacing as he rapped out, "It's my understanding the hour for the changing of the guard is modified daily so this exact occurrence would not happen."

"It is," Lorenz answered.

"So tonight's hour was known to the assailants."

"It was."

Mars stopped moving abruptly and pinned his captain with dark eyes. "We have a traitor."

Lorenz's jaw was tight as he forced out, "We do."

"Have they been worked?" Mars asked.

"They have."

“Has the traitor been identified?”

“He has.”

“And?” Mars prompted

Lorenz hesitated but a moment to give his king a meaningful look.

But he did not speak.

Mars clearly read this meaningful look for his face turned to granite.

“He and the rest are being marched to the pits?” Mars queried through clenched teeth.

“They are,” Lorenz assured.

Mars seemed to realize then that True was with them and his gaze sliced his way.

“My sister?” he demanded of True.

“Your sister?” True asked in return.

“Farah,” Mars snarled, and True noticed Silence curling deeper into herself.

His attention returned to the king.

“My princess,” he corrected.

“Semantics,” Mars spat impatiently.

But True suspected he was less patient.

Farah in her state, Sofia gone, the attackers coming in through his cousin’s window, and his earlier thought proven untrue for it was a certain miracle Silence had survived.

Thus, he shared his impatience immediately.

“Absolutely fucking *not* semantics,” he bit out.

He sensed Silence’s, and everyone’s, attention sharpening on him, but he didn’t break eye contact with the Firenz king.

“I take it this means you’re finally claiming her in a way that matters,” Mars bit back.

“Do not try me, Your Grace,” True warned. “Not with my cousin sitting in a bloodstained nightgown in your chair with her neck black-and-blue and my future wife in her bed so deep in her mourning, she’s disavowed her country...*both* of them.”

A vein in Mars’s temple pulsed.

It took a moment before Mars declared quietly, “She will heal.”

“She will. Because *I* will see to it,” True returned. “In other words, Mars, she’s a bloody mess. She’s also not taking part in this procession.”

“As you’ve claimed her, that’s yours to decide,” Mars allowed.

“My cousin isn’t either,” True declared.

The atmosphere of the room became heavy.

He was surprised to hear his mother’s voice come first through the tense silence.

And he heard it when she simply said a warning, “True.”

True ignored her and kept his gaze to the Firenz king.

“As I keep telling you, she is not of your realm.”

“If she wasn’t, she will be within the hour,” Mars returned.

“I do not know what you intend to do. I just know you should not force Silence to witness it,”

True retorted.

“That is mine to decide,” Mars rejoined.

“Actually, it should be Silence’s to decide,” Ophelia declared.

True looked to the Nadirii queen.

She had her gaze on Silence.

Therefore, True turned his attention to his cousin.

“Silence?” he called when she seemed to be lost in her study of the top of Mars’s desk.

“*Mia piccolina*,” Mars murmured, crouching beside her chair.

Silence turned her head to Mars.

“I go with you, my king,” she whispered.

Mars’s face lit with pride and triumph.

“Gods-damn it,” True muttered.

“Can she at least bathe and clothe herself appropriately?” True’s mother asked in a way it sounded more of a demand.

Mars straightened but he did it plucking Silence out of his chair and holding her to his chest but for a moment before he sat where his bride had been, now with her in his lap, still held close to his chest.

Once seated, he looked to Queen Mercy and answered, “No. My people see her covered in the blood of the vanquished, alive and noble in victory.”

“That’s frankly barbaric,” True’s father snapped.

“It’s frankly Firenz,” Mars retorted. “Which Silence will be, officially, this eve. But it is what my people, *her* people will see, the now. And something I wish to happen, soon, so we can see this matter concluded and I can wed my bride without delay tonight.”

“You can hardly see an attempted coup concluded within hours,” King Wilmer returned.

Mars slid his gaze to Lorenz.

True watched Lorenz tip his head to the side.

Mars returned his attention to True’s father.

“It seems I can.”

“Prisoners have rights,” Wilmer stated.

“Not if those prisoners are traitors,” Mars replied. “Not in Firenze.”

“You surely must hold tribunals,” Wilmer retorted.

“They wear the black, they storm the palace, they march to the pits under the eyes of their people, endure the necropolis, and sink in the tar,” Mars declared. “Do not worry, Wilmer. Their time in the necropolis will be short. They planned fortuitously. I don’t wish to dally in the necropolis. I wish to be wed.”

“So you’re saying you intend to wed my niece just hours after she suffered what she suffered in her chambers *and* you forcing her to watch you torture some of your citizens, then put them to death?” Wilmer asked in shock.

“I’m not forcing my Silence to do anything,” Mars drawled. “*Mia bellezza* made her choice and wielded her own dagger rather than running from the fight. She makes her choice now, seeing this matter through to the end, instead of hiding in her chamber. If I did not know differently due to the color of her skin and the stature of her frame, I would think she *was* Firenz.”

True studied his cousin as she sat silent in the lap of her betrothed.

She did not worry her lip, wring her hands or appear anxious, agitated or disturbed in any way.

She also did not seem relaxed and at her ease.

She simply seemed... dignified.

Or as dignified as a being could be, sitting in an enormous man’s lap.

This sent True’s gaze to the Firenz barons and chieftains.

At what he saw, he almost smiled.

Silence, enduring what she’d endured that night, sitting in a bloodstained nightgown in a barbarous king’s hold, crafty enough to use this moment to advance her station.

That was his cousin.

Nobody's fool.

Fit to be queen.

Yes, he almost smiled.

True's thoughts were turned from this when Aramus spoke.

"I will know vengeance, Mars."

"What is your wish?" Mars asked, his tone no longer swaggering, but conciliatory.

"How many were caught?" Aramus asked.

"Seven," Lorenz answered.

"My men and I will have three," Aramus decreed, and Ha-Lah, who was already close to her husband's side, got closer and took his hand.

Aramus's fingers wrapped tight around his wife's. Too tight. True saw it. She winced at the pain.

But she said nothing.

"You shall have your pick," Mars murmured.

True turned again to Mars. "The snakes were another matter."

True saw the lick of flame in Mars's eyes before it extinguished, and he inclined his head.

"Is their aught known about that?" True asked.

"Nandra tried to trace the magic," Lorenz answered. "She failed. It's cloaked."

"Leave us," Mars ordered abruptly.

His attention was on his barons and chieftains.

True stepped out of the way as the men started to file out, and Mars commanded, "You ride in procession to the pits behind me and your future queen."

He received nods and chin lifts before the men disappeared behind the door.

"You leave us too," Mars demanded.

That, True noted, was directed to his mother and father.

"Just us?" Mercy asked.

"You and Gallienus. Yes," Mars answered.

"Whyever would we alone be left out?" True's father queried peevishly.

"You are neither soldier nor witch nor directly involved in the vanquishing the Beast," Mars answered.

"We represent Wodell," Wilmer returned.

“So does your son, far better than you. Now, I explained why you are to leave my study, when I did not need to. Don’t test my patience further. There are things to do and one of them is not answering to you,” Mars replied.

“I—” Wilmer began.

“My king, let us go,” his mother urged, taking Wilmer’s hand and shifting toward the door.

“I’m happy to leave,” Gallienus declared. “All this talk of the injustice of Airen? Hypocrisy.” He stopped at the door and leveled his eyes on Mars. “Even a traitor I’d give a tribunal.”

“Sadly, I cannot ask any descendants of the women your ancestor put to death after the Night of the Fallen Masters as they were put to death without tribunal, therefore they have no descendants,” Mars noted drolly.

Gallienus sniffed before he stormed out.

Wilmer and Mercy followed him.

When the door closed behind them, True turned again to Mars.

“When the sorcery behind the asps is uncovered, they are given to me,” he decreed.

“They killed my second mother,” Mars said quietly.

“They killed my mother-in-law, the grandmother my children will never know, but their intent was to kill my princess,” True retorted. “Thus, whoever killed Sofia will be given to me.”

“For tribunal?” Mars asked.

“Yes,” True answered. “And then he’ll be given a torch and the length of time it takes for it to burn out before he’ll find himself covered in snakes in a different kind of pit in Wodell. It’ll be Farah’s decision if she wishes to watch. But I shall do so. Until the end.”

Mars’s lips twitched before he stated, “I find this acceptable.”

“I don’t very much care,” True muttered.

“I find that acceptable too,” Mars shared.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, can we move this along?” Cassius entered the conversation.

“It’s clear, with the attack of the asps, Farah was the target,” Ophelia noted.

No one spoke to that.

“They try to break the prophecy,” the Nadirii queen continued.

“Perhaps, regardless of our grave losses this evening, we can take heart in understanding they fear the prophecy enough to try to do something about it,” Ha-Lah noted.

“Your sisters, along with Nandra, must cast over this palace,” Mars said to Ophelia.

“Protection spells will be done while you’re at the pits,” Ophelia agreed.

“And cast over the women,” Cassius added.

“Ah yes, seeing as, due to you having a magical appendage, you need no protection spell cast on you,” Elena clipped to her betrothed.

True studied her, feeling something strange, but his mind was consumed with so many other things, the most important being getting to Farah and checking on her before he had to attend this bloody procession, he couldn’t put his finger on what that feeling was.

“We’ll cast over the men too,” Ophelia put in quickly, before Cassius could reply, as he’d opened his mouth to do.

Cassius wisely shut his mouth and a muscle danced in his cheek.

Elena turned away from her intended and crossed her arms angrily on her chest.

“I need a moment with my bride,” Mars decreed.

Excellent.

Mars would see to Silence.

True could go up to look in on Farah.

He turned to do so but stopped when he caught sight of Aramus.

The king felt his regard and shifted his attention to True.

“My deepest sympathies, my brother,” he said quietly.

Ha-Lah got even closer to her husband.

Aramus simply glowered at him before jerkily lifting his chin.

True left the room, made his way to the stairs, up them, and to Farah’s room.

Thank the gods, she was asleep when he arrived.

Even so, he sat on the bed and stroked her soft hair.

He then tried to find his way to where she was in her mind.

He had no brothers or sisters, and she had no brothers or sisters.

But he had something she did not.

He had cousins, the closest of which was Silence. He could not say she was close as a sister, but he cared deeply for her, and she for him. And if something happened to him, she would be there for him, as he would for her.

He had a weak father and she had the weakest of fathers there could be.

But his father was alive.

Her father's bones were preserved in the tarpits of Fire City after he'd committed regicide and left her and her mother to bear the consequences of his actions while still breathing.

Her mother had been loyal and loving.

His mother was the same, the latter in a somewhat cold way that was often calculating, but that was for the betterment of husband and son.

She was also alive.

Thus, True could not put himself in Farah's place. He could not understand how alone she felt.

All he could do was whatever he needed to do to make her feel not alone as well as loved.

Mars would assist with this, obviously.

As would Silence, as was her way.

And if Farah could forgive her, True would as well, so she would have Elpis.

But his mother would be there for his bride too.

He knew Queen Mercy had no respect for his betrothed.

She also had no reason for her intolerance.

She would need to find her way past that.

Immediately.

Or she'd find herself without a son.

For True would soon have a wife, the mother to his children, the future queen of his country.

He'd realized that night that she was the most important thing in his life.

And she always would be.

His mother would know that, and she'd know it soon.

As would his Farah.

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### ***King Mars Laches***

*King's Study, First Floor, East Corridor, Catrame Palace, Fire City*

*FIRENZE*

When the door closed behind Lorenz, the last one out, Mars turned to his Silence, still curled in his lap.

“*Amore*,” he called.

She tipped her head back to look up at him.

He ignored her garments. The skin of her arms crusted with blood. The visions in his head of her being dragged to the open window by her glorious hair.

And he especially ignored the bruising at her neck.

He had to ignore these things, or the rage would return, and the fullness of his vengeance would not be meted out for he’d set her aside and find the men still left and dispatch them far more quickly than they deserved.

Instead, he looked into her silver eyes.

“We need words,” he murmured.

“I’m quite all right, Mars,” she assured.

But she was not.

Her demeanor had changed, and it was not due to shock or fear.

Or perhaps it was, as she was locked away.

He’d seen her like this only once before. When she’d walked in his thronal room the moment he first saw her.

Except then she had been guarded and locked away and it took but a few words to draw her out.

Now she simply seemed...

Extinguished.

“You have endured a lot, my monkey,” he reminded her. “And now, alone, just you and I, I will know your feelings about going to the pits.”

“I’m going.”

“You’ve said this,” he replied. “This is not what we’re discussing. As I noted, I will know your *feelings* about this and then I will decide if you will go or you will stay.”

“Will Queen Elpis go?” she asked.

“She will. But you are not my mother,” he answered.

“I will be queen,” she returned. “And thus, it will be expected.”

“Silence—”

“I’m going,” she repeated.

Mars allowed his gaze to roam her face.

She was there, in his arms, but he could not shake the sensation that she was gone.

“When things such as this happen,” he started carefully, “it’s important to talk about them.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are changed.”

“I will likely change a lot over the course of our years together, battling the Beast, you besting coup attempts, clan clashes, tribal wars. It’s the nature of being, especially in Firenze.”

“And we will talk about it,” he declared.

“Yes,” she agreed instantly.

“Honestly,” he added.

She hesitated before she repeated, “Yes.”

He did not like the hesitation.

Her light was out.

“Silence—”

She pushed against him to start to get up, asking, “Should we not go?”

“We have something else to discuss.”

She settled in and gazed at him patiently.

He fought grinding his teeth at the loss of inquisitiveness, attentiveness and what he now knew, since it was gone, was constant awareness of and interest in him that was no longer a part of her expression.

“What else must we discuss?” she prompted when Mars did not speak.

“I’ll have your vow, right now, if aught like this happens again, which it will not, but if it does, when you are made safe by a warrior, and told by that warrior to run, that you bloody do as you’re told and *run*.”

She stared up at him, a mercurial shifting of the silver of her eyes the only indication she gave she did not like his words.

“They’re still counting body parts, but at least a hundred men attacked this palace,” he went on. “If it was not for the might and skill of those who were close to your chamber, you could have easily been killed.”

“Earlier, you bragged about me taking up a dagger,” she remarked.

“Earlier, my barons and chieftains were here, and you desire to impress them, so I bragged of something that would mean something to you as it would mean something to them. However, it means something entirely different to me.”

She shook her head. “I’m not certain it was safe for me to escape.”

“Serena reported Elena told you to run, something she would not do if it was not safe for you to run. Instead, you attacked an opponent Elena easily dispatched.”

“I was right here, Mars. I heard Serena report that. And just to say, I was *there*, and it wasn’t that long ago. I remember what happened.”

“It is not wise for you to be flippant in this moment, *piccolina*,” he warned.

She fell silent.

“Do I have your vow you will not act so foolishly again?” he pressed.

“I will not act so foolishly again, Mars.”

He did not like her tone. The rote manner in which her words came.

Not as if she did not mean them.

As if it meant nothing to her saying them, even if in saying them they meant a good deal to him to know his bride would keep herself safe.

In response to this, Mars pulled her closer and whispered, “There is a great change in you, *mia bellezza*.”

“I’m bloodied, tired, Sofia is lost, she was a kind soul who touched mine too short of a time, yesterday was long, this night longer, and thus this day looms longest of all.”

“And we will be wed at the end of it.”

“Of course,” she said, as if he’d told her they would sup together at the end of it.

He decided not to address that.

“And I have lost a woman I have known the whole of my life who means a great deal to me.”

It was that which moved her.

She lifted a hand to his jaw, her face softening, and she said gently, “I’m so sorry, Mars.”

He studied her, noted the softening of her face set the silver of her eyes to a liquid and that made him turn his head and kiss the skin of her palm.

When he turned back, he shared, “It is with darkness in my heart that the first official occasion you will stand at my side as my queen that is not our wedding will be the funeral of the

woman who helped raise me. But we will give her the rite she deserved as to her place in this palace, her place in my father's heart and her place in mine."

"It will be with a sad heart, but still my honor to stand at your side for that, my king,"

And that was his Silence.

Mars dipped to touch his mouth to hers.

When he pulled back, he asked, "You are sure you wish to attend the procession?"

Silence nodded.

"If you need to leave, I will have you escorted back."

"That will not happen."

"You do not have to become my mother in one day, Silence."

"Yes, I do, Mars."

Mars studied her again.

Yes, this was his Silence.

And by the gods, she pleased him.

Every day, in new ways, this came more and more.

She was correct. Yesterday had been eventful, that night fraught, and there was much happening that day.

Perhaps she was conserving energy to endure it.

This was wise.

This was Silence.

He should not be concerned. His bride was clever. He knew that already.

She simply continued to prove it.

He stood, holding her to him as he did.

He only let one part of her go when he was on his feet.

After her legs swung toward the floor, he held her close, her toes brushing the tops of his feet.

"Then let us get this done," he muttered.

His bride nodded.

Mars then put her on her feet, took her hand, tucked it to his chest, and moved them to the door.

He would ride to the pits barefoot and bare-chested.

She would ride before him on his mount, barefoot, bloodied, but entirely intact, healthy and resplendent in their victory.

And his people would see, much more than any fetching red dress could show them, the great strength and trueness of the woman who would very soon be their queen.

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### ***G'Seph***

*Catacombs, Go'Doan Temple, Fire City*

*FIRENZE*

In a rage, G'Seph sent the clay pots flying.

They crashed against the empty sepulchers of the walls, carved out and waiting to bear the shrouded bones of dead priests, the ash of the spent incense in the pots dusting the air.

*"How could it bloody fail?"* he screeched.

"My liege," one of the men behind him murmured.

Seph turned, doing it lifting his arm and backhanding the soldier. As the man's head jerked to the side, Seph neared him, putting his hands on his shoulders and lifting his knee covered in the dark robes of The Rising and catching the soldier sharply in his groin.

The man's hands went to his crotch, he bent forth and coughed.

Seph cuffed him again with full fist on the side of his head and the man went down to a hip.

It was then, he kicked him with his sandaled foot right in his face.

Seph stepped back, staring at the cut that had opened up on the man's cheekbone that was oozing blood and he did this breathing heavily.

No other soldier dared to speak.

G'Seph looked to one of his other lieutenants. "Were any taken alive?"

His lieutenant did not answer his question.

And yet he did.

He advised, "We must flee the city, my liege."

"How did this happen?" Seph hissed. "They had few guards. Our men outnumbered them ten to one at *least*. And our squad were all bloody *Firenz*. They're beasts!"

"We...we don't...we don't know, sir," his lieutenant stammered.

“Word is spreading through the city,” Seph spat. “Those men didn’t even manage to kill the Dellish *waif*. She can’t weigh fifty kilos! How can *she* best a one hundred and fifteen kilo Firenz? How the bloody hell can she best *one hundred of them?*”

“We...I’m sorry, we don’t know, sir,” the lieutenant repeated.

Seph shook his head in disgust.

“Tonight was meant to see the end of her. The end of True. The end of Ophelia,” he ground out. “Pitting Wodell against Firenze in vengeance for their prince and their Countess of the Arbor. Weakening the Nadirii as it would pass on to the older sister, who wouldn’t know an act of diplomacy if it struck her in the face. Which in turn would mean the younger would need to dispute the new reign. And as that played out and the older weakened her warrior nation, she would turn *all* against the Nadirii. We cannot *wait* for that sick queen to meet her end! Sister needs to be pitted against sister for the Nadirii to fall.”

He did not know why he was explaining the plot to them. They all bloody knew it as well as he.

“*By Go’Bedi!*” he shrieked. “*How did we bloody fail?*”

“Sir, I must beseech you to make the order for the soldiers of The Rising to flee the city immediately,” another lieutenant begged. “Some of our recruits were captured. We may be exposed.”

“And why is that?” he demanded. “Those caught know to speak nothing of The Rising.”

“We cannot assume they will do as instructed. They will be tortured, if they haven’t been already, and marched to the pits. They could share of our sacred mission in hopes of mercy.”

“They all knew this would be an eventuality if they failed,” Seph returned.

“We did not, none of us, expect them to fail,” his lieutenant replied.

This was true.

For it shouldn’t have failed.

There was a significantly reduced guard at the palace. They’d seen to that. They should have dispatched the waif silently and gone on to the others without an alarm being raised, and then escaped unscathed, or at least with minor losses due to their vastly superior number, for Go’Vicee’s sake.

Seph drew breath into his nose.

“Thus, we also cannot assume that they will share this is naught but another Firenz coup against their sitting king,” the lieutenant went on.

“We cannot flee the city,” Seph declared.

“But, my liege—”

Seph leaned forward and bellowed, “*We will not leave the city!*”

He leaned back, took another deep breath and calmed himself.

“If we did, they would suspect. G’Dor nor any of the men he recruited spoke even a word of The Rising. Mars and his men investigated that thoroughly. Even entering the hallowed confines of this very temple...*thrice*...to search for some evidence of Go’Doan collaboration.” He shook his head. “No. A man can and will say anything under torture. It is rarely the truth. And Mars knows this.”

“I fear we are still vulnerable,” his man murmured.

“Then we will strengthen again,” Seph returned. “And we will start to do that by not showing our hand by bloody *fleeing*.”

No one replied which was all well, for Seph tired of this conversation.

And further, there was much to do.

Distractedly, he looked through them before he would dismiss them.

But he went still.

“Where is G’Drey?” he asked.

“My liege?” one of his lieutenants queried in return.

“Where’s G’Drey?” he demanded, louder and sharper.

There was a shuffling of feet that made the heated blood in Seph’s body feel like it would boil before a man in the back spoke.

“He was in an accident on his way to the school.”

Seph’s chin jerked into his neck. “I beg your pardon?”

“He was in an accident, my liege.”

“Come forward,” G’Seph ordered.

The man shifted through the bodies around him, doing it hesitantly, but he came forward.

“What of Drey?” Seph asked quietly when the soldier was standing before him.

“Apparently, my liege, on his way to school, he turned a corner as a horse was riding down the street. He gave the horse a fright, it reared and struck him in the head with a hoof. He

received a headwound and was taken to a Firenz infirmary. A Firenz city guard came and reported it yesterday afternoon.”

It was at that, Seph’s blood ran cold.

For they might be treating a headwound.

But in so doing, they would undoubtedly find his other injuries.

And questions would be asked.

Not to mention, Seph had whipped that weak-willed priest.

G’Drey was devout to The Rising. No one who knew of the plot had not been vetted and thus known to be faithful to their righteous cause.

But Drey was weak-willed.

This story could be a ruse. Drey could have gone to the Firenz and shared the plot.

For the stupid twat was getting fucked by Mars’s top general, and he didn’t even know it.

Dear *Bedi*.

“And why wasn’t this reported to me?” Seph asked.

“Why?” the man queried stupidly in return.

“Yes, why?”

“Well, my liege, you instructed us to be wary of G’Drey and not—”

Seph turned, finding the handle of whichever instrument was closest, instruments that were kept there for times such as these, and others besides.

It was a crop.

Perfection.

He then lifted it and brought it down violently on the man’s cheek. And again. And again. Again. Again. And again. Until the soldier fell to a hand and his knees, lifting his other arm to stave the blows that Seph kept raining on him.

G’Seph tired of the crop, tossed it aside and kicked him in the face, taking him to his back.

And he did this again.

Again.

And again.

When the soldier was curled into himself, his arms over his head, Seph stopped and squealed, “*Disrobe him! Bind him to the slab, fifty lashes. And someone go to that bloody infirmary, find bloody G’Drey and bloody bring him back! Immediately!*”

Men moved to the soldier on the floor or out of the room, but Seph moved his eyes to his lieutenants.

“We do *not* flee,” he declared. “The Go’Doan had naught to do with this coup no matter what one of those infidels might say.”

“Sir, we lost over one hundred foot soldiers to that—”

“We will replace them,” Seph stated offhandedly.

“This is our second failed—”

Oh yes.

He tired of this conversation.

“Silence,” Seph whispered. “Recruitment goes unabated in schools and hospitals. Firenz, Dellish, even Airenzian are brought to their bloody knees in gratitude for healing of loved ones and the promise of a bright future for their children. It’s ludicrous, but we all know how very well it works. And it will continue to do so. The Rising has had a setback, but we will recover, we will regroup, and we will rise again. Much more swiftly this time. So swiftly, they will not expect it.”

He turned to another of his soldiers.

“Send a bird to G’Fenn in Go’Doan. Report these events. Share our defeat but that we are not defeated. I will see to it that I ride with the cavalcade when they leave Firenze. We will rise again in Wodell.”

The man nodded and moved to push through those behind him.

Seph waited until the whipping started.

But he did not wait to see it end.

He wished to.

But he could not.

He had much to do.

## **Chapter Thirty-Seven**

### *The Mortal Blow*

#### ***Prince Cassius***

*Guest Suite, Second Floor, East Corridor, Catrame Palace, Fire City*

**FIRENZE**

His intended whirled on him the minute he closed the door behind them after following her into her bedchamber.

“Did I invite you into my chamber?” Elena asked.

“Where’s Theodora?” Cassius queried in return.

She crossed her arms on her chest and tilted up her chin. “The palace is no longer safe. I sent her to the Nadirii camp. With my sisters. They have might and they have magic. They won’t allow anything to harm her.”

“This is a good decision,” he murmured.

“I don’t care you think it is, or it is not,” she retorted.

His princess was in a snit.

This was not news. She’d been in that state since the attack ended.

Or, precisely, some moments before.

It was simply that Cassius was tiring of it.

“Elena—” he started on a sigh.

“You may leave. I must get kitted for the procession,” she interrupted him, dropping her arms and turning away, dismissing him.

He didn’t know what “kitted” meant. She’d already changed into her Nadirii tunic. Something he would have thought was a boon, considering she’d fought in a miniscule nightgown with thin straps and a hem that barely covered her arse. A garment that forced Cassius to the understanding that her long, shapely legs were miraculous, considering he wanted them wrapped around his back even if they were coated in blood.

Though, he knew what she wore under that tunic. And his brain had been seared with images of her stretching in the garden wearing nothing but her body stocking.

So it wasn’t the boon he’d wish it to be.

“I think it’s more important we discuss your pique,” he replied.

That saw the return of her attention.

And she did this twisting her neck to look at him with narrowed eyes.

“My...*pique*?”

“Allow me to take us back to yesterday morning, at the fountain,” he began.

Her mouth got tight.

“To yesterday afternoon, our chat after the Go’Doan spoke to you,” he continued.

Her entire frame got tight.

“And last night, in my chamber,” he finished quietly.

All of these occasions had been promising.

With last night, prior to the attack, the most promising of all.

They had spent some time together in his chamber after dinner the night before.

Most of it, they had talked, Cassius sharing the many issues that had been discussed and decided around the diplomatic table, a great number of them affecting her as Princess of the Nadirii, but mostly as his betrothed, the soon-to-be Princess to the Regent of Airen—and eventually Airen’s queen.

He had been surprised her mother had not apprised her of these decisions.

However, in the end, he’d been gladdened, for he was able to share the fullness of them, further strengthening their burgeoning communication, establishing trust, and using both to draw her closer to him.

They had ended this interlude embracing for some time on a divan in his chambers.

Although she had heated for him quickly, like their few times before, unlike those times, the longer they shared intimacy, the more nervous she became.

Cassius understood this had to do with his declaration that he had given her a climax in the garden that morning, but that had not been reciprocated, and he wished for it to be so.

He’d thus gently ended their time together, deciding such would need to be led up to, come naturally, not announced it would occur, and then be taken.

However, for the most part, she responded to him beautifully.

One could definitely say they had chemistry. She roused him, he roused her.

But she was still virgin, and they’d known one another but days.

He had to tread cautiously, apparently in all things, and give her time to get used to him.

Hearteningly, the impossible seemed to be occurring. They were learning to come to accord and doing it swiftly.

A Nadirii and an Airenzian.

Unbelievable.

But it was true.

Until now.

“Let us go back to how we were in those times,” he suggested.

Elena turned fully to him.

“With your hand between my legs?” she asked sarcastically. “Or with your tongue in my mouth?”

“I meant us speaking to each other and listening to each other in a civilized manner,” he replied, seeking patience.

“We did this before you behaved in the manner in which you behaved during the fight,” she retorted.

“Elena—”

“I do not know who those assailants were, but they were untrained. Easily dispatched. They factored surprise, numbers and brawn higher than skill and strategy. This is always a faulty play, as it was last night. I was in no danger.”

“I disagree, my princess, for the minute I entered that room, you were moments away from receiving a mortal blow.”

“And did this happen?” she queried.

“No,” he gritted. “But only because True interceded.”

“I did know he was near, Cassius,” she spat. “Any warrior in any battle knows where her allies are.”

She wished to speak of this?

They would speak of it.

The *fullness* of it.

“And of course it was True who was near,” he returned.

“He was fighting to Silence.”

She might be right.

She was still wrong.

“He was fighting to *you*.”

She shook her head. “You cannot say that as you’d just arrived.”

“I can say that because he’s besotted with you.”

“He didn’t seem besotted with me not long ago, when he clashed with Mars over Farah.”

“And does that wound you, my future wife?” he drawled.

She blinked rapidly three times before her eyes stayed open and they did this wide.

“I am no longer True’s,” she snapped.

Oh no.

Bloody *no*.

Those words did not just leave her mouth.

He leaned forward and bit back, “You were *never* True’s.”

Her eyes again narrowed. “You cannot know what True and I had.”

“I know he never had his hand between your legs.”

She gasped, and her cheeks flushed.

He had not known that. Not with certainty.

But he knew it then.

And he was absurdly gratified knowing it.

Thus, Cassius wasn’t finished. “That is solely mine and *will be* solely mine *forever*.”

“You may leave now,” she hissed.

“Has he had his tongue in your mouth?” he demanded.

She stared at him in disbelief before declaring, “You cannot possibly be jealous.”

“You know naught of men. *Real* men. You cannot know what I am, or I am not,” he retorted.

“Now answer me, has he had your mouth?”

She turned from him, muttering, “I’m not participating in this conversation.”

“You bloody are,” he contradicted.

She whirled again to him. “Is that why you carried me bodily from the fray *not* like I am what I am, trained warrior, but like I’m some damsel in distress who needs a *man* to keep her safe? Because you were jealous True and I were battling side by side?”

“You aren’t answering my question, Elena.”

“You aren’t answering mine,” she returned.

“You can’t know of me and not know precisely why I carried you out of harm’s way,” he told her.

“You can’t know *of me* and not know I do not *need* you to carry me out of harm’s way.” She took a step toward him. “We have not met in battle, Cassius, but by the goddess, you must know that I don’t dither in my treehome making wicker baskets. I patrol. I don’t use my bow only for parade. I don’t use my staff simply to keep my arms trim. There isn’t a single patrol where I don’t clash with brigand or sorcerer attempting to breach The Enchantments. And this might not often be hand to hand, but it is certainly often sword to sword.”

Cassius felt a tightening in his chest.

And it was painful.

A pain he had to stop.

“Cease speaking,” he growled.

She did not cease speaking

“You don’t know women like me and I’ll warn you now and urge you heed this warning. You need to have a care in dealing with a woman like me. It is all well and good, and I not only applaud your efforts, I shall champion them in the progress you desire to make for the females of your realm. But I am not one of them.”

She was not.

But she would be.

“That will be your last battle, Elena,” he decreed.

At that, her eyes grew enormous.

“And I’ll repeat what I’ve informed you of before. You will significantly limit any time you spend with True. This being you spend time with him only when I’m with you,” he concluded.

“You cannot tell me who I can spend time with.”

“I just did.”

She studied him a long moment before she whispered, “Are you mad?”

“I am not. I am Prince Regent. I will be king. But for you, most importantly, I will be *husband.*”

Elena was still whispering when she said, “You *are* mad.”

Cassius didn’t deign to respond.

He was marrying a Nadirii.

He knew that.

But she was marrying an Airenzian.

She knew that too.

They would make compromises in their life together.

However, these would not be among them.

Her voice was vibrating with fury when she declared, “You need to leave now.”

“No True,” he stated. “And you will hang up your bow unless you use it for parade or to teach our daughters how to string theirs for interest and the fullness of their education. That is all. But

in the now, you will kit yourself out, however that needs to be, while I wait, and we will walk together to join the procession.”

“Get out,” she demanded.

“Get sorted,” he returned.

“Get out or I’ll force you out.”

“You couldn’t manage that,” he scoffed.

Her voice was chilling when she replied, “You do not wish to try that.”

Cassius held his arms out to the side. “Again, you cannot know that.”

She didn’t hesitate.

She attacked.

Her attack was a surprise, even if it was not.

What was truly a surprise was that, in no time, she had him down on a knee and almost had his arm up his back in a way it would be difficult, and painful, to extricate himself.

And might even break a bone.

Or at the very least dislocate his shoulder.

Therefore, he had no choice but to use her hold on him to swing her around.

This took her off her feet, but before she hit ground, he surged up and caught her in his arms.

He then tossed her to the bed.

She bounced up instantly with grace borne of knowing every inch of her body and how to use it. She thus gained her feet on the mattress and launched herself back at him, front to front.

He caught her again, and she used her arms and legs around his torso to wrench him into a painful twist.

Thus, he was forced to move with the rotation, and he did. After, he backed toward her bed, dropped to it, and rolled onto her.

“Enough,” he clipped when he’d subdued her.

She bucked under him at the same time she tried to find purchase on his hair.

And this meant he had to catch both her wrists and hold them to the bed over her head.

Gods bloody damn it, she felt good under him.

And her smell...

“*Enough*,” he barked in her face. “You cannot possibly win hand to hand which is my *bloody* point.”

“Get your broadsword and we’ll see about your *bloody* point,” she retorted, breathing heavily from exertion and fury, which did not make it any easier to lie atop her and not grow hard, something he was struggling mightily with already.

“We’ll continue to discuss this later when you’ve calmed the fuck down,” he growled.

“We won’t be discussing *anything* at *any time*. We’re done, Cassius. You are Regent. You will be king. You can do anything with your realm. Including allowing your daughter to assume your throne. You need no heir. You have an heir. I will be your wife. We will battle the Beast. And then I will live in my treehome in The Enchantments with Dora and carry on with my life as I wish, and *you* will do whatever you will, just without *me*.”

His chest did not feel tight with her declaration.

It burned.

“We’ve already made our bargain, my warrior,” he reminded her.

“No, *you* made your decree. Heed this, *my warrior*, you may be able to best me hand to hand, but you will never cow me to your whim.”

“Do you wish to test that?” he asked.

“I think that question is better asked of you,” she retorted.

He dipped closer and whispered, “I can smell your excitement.”

Her chin dipped into her neck and he saw the truth of his statement flash fleetingly in her eyes.

Cassius did not relent.

“You like sparring, verbally, physically. You like my weight. You want my mouth on you. You want my hands on you. You yearn for it, Elena. I can feel it. I can *smell* it.”

“That’s absurd,” she hissed, but her breath was coming even faster.

“So you wish to test that.”

“Get off me,” she snapped.

“I see,” he murmured, studying her mouth. “You don’t wish to test it for you know I’m right.”

“Get off me, Cassius.”

He looked to her eyes. “Has True had your mouth?”

“Yes,” she bit.

“Liar,” he whispered.

She turned her head to the side and he watched her swallow.

It looked painful.

He didn't like that for her.

Therefore, it was then he relented.

He kept hold on her wrists, but he did it using his thumbs to stroke the apples of her palms.

She swallowed again, for a different reason this time, and he spoke.

"Not even a stolen kiss, my lamb?" he asked gently.

"I am not your lamb."

Oh, but she was.

Playful and frisky in sparring.

Soft, innocent and dewy-eyed after climax.

Skittish and stubborn pretending she didn't want him as badly as he did her.

"Yes, you are."

She shook her head, still turned away. "Please, get off me."

"True is a gentleman."

"And you are not."

He didn't need to be.

He would be her husband.

"True was not meant to be," he told her quietly. "If he was, he would have had you. And you would have had him. We barely know one another, my princess, but we cannot keep our hands off each other. There is a reason for that. There is a reason you feel as you feel right now with my weight upon you. What I feel, with the softness of you under me, the smell of you in my nose. We were meant to be. This means you are mine, Elena. Do you not see that?"

She did not look at him when she stated, "I will not be cowed."

"I cannot believe you can even begin to think I wish to cow you, my warrior," he whispered, and her head turned, her eyes coming to his. "I cannot believe you can even begin to think I'd wish to take away any part of what makes you."

"And you reconcile this how, Cassius?" she demanded. "Catching me up and throwing me bodily from the fray. That is taking a very large part of me away, my prince."

She wished this?

She would have it as well.

"My dead wife was warrior," he returned, his voice gritty.

Elena went completely still beneath him.

“There are different kinds, my princess,” he shared. “And she battled mightily. In a manner, she won. She gave me our daughter. They both did not perish to the fight. She fought, she did it bravely, and she succeeded in her goal. She also died doing it. And she did that happily. I know this because the last thing she did on this earth was smile at me as I held Aelia in my hands but moments after she slipped from her mother’s womb. Now, ponder this, Elena. Do you think I tossed you bodily from the fray because I did not trust in your capabilities? Or do you think in a million millennia that I wish to lose another warrior to a battle beyond my control?”

“Cassius,” she breathed, her face having softened, her eyes having warmed.

And there was his lamb.

But it was too late.

He might not have won the argument, but he won his point.

However, in forcing him to win it, she’d drawn blood.

And she had to learn that was no way to win between lovers.

Thus he pushed up at her wrists, angling from her and taking his feet.

She got up to her elbows but took one look at his face as he scowled down at her, and she made no other movement and said no further words.

“I shall meet you at our horses,” he declared.

“Of course,” she whispered, knowing she’d wounded her opponent, and conceding graciously. “I’ll be down directly.”

With that, he turned and left her chambers.

He had no desire to join a procession that would lead to witnessing torture and execution, this before he had to prepare to join the masses and watch his friend take his marital chain and give his new wife hers.

He wanted whiskey, an orgasm and sleep.

In that order.

All with Elena.

Even after their episode.

Which meant perhaps she was correct.

He was mad.

But that was what he wished.

However, he did not have a choice.

Instead he had torture, death, marriage and a stubborn bride on his hands who was born warrior who he did not want to die warrior.

No one was mentioning it, but the last quake that occurred but hours before shared explicitly the Beast was not only closer to the surface, it was angry.

And Cassius feared he was not going to convince Elena to use naught but her formidable magic as her part in quelling it.

So his chest was tight again and his heart felt heavy as he took the steps that would lead him to the front of the palace in order for him to mount his steed and await his bride.

He took these steps thinking of the tarot card he'd turned the morning before.

The warrior card he'd turned had had his head bowed.

His armor was intact. His body not bloodied.

But he'd tasted defeat all the same.

Cassius knew that taste.

It was vile.

And he would not experience it again.

Unless he had no choice.

He was now bloody Regent.

Even so, it seemed he still lived a life of limited choices.

A life marked with profound loss.

Both that of the past.

And as the warrior card was swept from his memory, and the vision he saw charging into the conflict but hours before of Elena under a raised sword filled his brain...

He knew it was a real possibility loss would scrape deep through his future.

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### ***Queen Ha-Lah***

*Guest Suite, Second Floor, East Corridor, Catrame Palace, Fire City*

*FIRENZE*

“I go with you.”

“You do not.”

“My king, I would go with you,” I beseeched.

“You will not,” he denied.

“We will surely be protected.”

“It matters not.”

“I know it might be difficult to witness, but I would be at your side through this.”

“I do not need you at my side, Ha-Lah.”

“Aramus,” I whispered.

“Xi and Nis will stay behind, both in this room, where you will remain, wife.”

After he issued that order, he started to move to the door.

I followed him.

Swiftly.

“I would wish to help you in your grief,” I told my husband, reaching out, nearly touching his back.

But my hand fell when he spun around and pinned me with a glower so ferocious, I felt my breath catch in my throat.

“And how would you do that, my queen?” he asked caustically. He then tipped his head to the side, his black eyes flashing with derision. “Ah yes. I forget. You know me so well. You knew Cat so well. With all the interest you take in me. My men. These months of our marriage. These weeks when you sailed with me. With us. With them. With *him*. Traveled with me. Us. Them. *Him*. They kept you guarded and safe. You have come to know us all so very well?”

“That isn’t fair, Aramus, and you know it,” I replied softly.

Though, uncomfortably, I had to admit, he had a point.

“It isn’t?” he asked, his brows rising. “You spent a good deal of energy spouting your defense of whales and dolphins, how do you feel about the loss of the life of *men*?”

He was right.

I did spend that energy in defense of my friends.

But that was even less fair.

And he had to know that too.

I chanced a step closer, considering putting my hand on his chest in a conciliatory matter.

I decided against it and simply said, “I’m very, very sorry you lost your friend, my husband.”

“I am as well,” he replied. “He will have no wife. He will have no children. He will have no grandchild carry anything of his from home to home just to keep him close, even if they had never met him but they knew of him and they knew he was beloved. He will be but a memory for me, Tint, Bond, Oreti, Xi, Nis, Nav, and when we are gone, he will be gone, for there will be no heart that bears him any longer.”

I nodded, feeling my eyes prickle and wishing fruitlessly I had come to know this man at the same time deciding from that point on to make a concerted effort to get to know the others.

“You loved him a great deal,” I whispered, and I loved this a great deal, this capacity for emotion my husband was demonstrating.

Even if the occasion for which he was demonstrating it rent my heart.

“He was my brother,” Aramus confirmed. “And now he will be shrouded, borne through this bloody heat, rotting along the way—”

“Don’t say that,” I urged gently. “Don’t even think of that.”

He continued as if I didn’t speak.

“Taken aboard a ship and carried home, only to have the black rocks of Mar-el piled upon what’s left of him without his brothers at his side for we’re traipsing across Triton attending fucking *weddings*.”

He was in pain.

Such pain.

“Would you please let me come to you?” I asked, even if there was but a few feet of space between us, it felt like miles.

“Do you think I need your comfort?” he queried with contempt.

I blinked at his tone.

But he did not stop there.

Alas, my husband did not stop.

“You have given me nothing in this marriage. Not a thing, Ha-Lah. What little I have you made me earn. The barest scrap of your attention, your history, any part of you. I should likely praise Triton *and* Medusa both that you did not make me scrape and beg for morsels of you. But I fear I’m in no mood to praise our gods right now, my queen. There are ankles to noose and throats to slit.”

I winced.

“Absolutely,” he spat decisively when he caught my reaction. “You don’t have the stomach to be queen.” He leaned toward me. “In all this change, my wife, that I will bear on my realm after this bloody ludicrous journey is through, there will be one more. When I get my heir, *he* will not be saddled with the greatest beauty of the land. He will pick who he wishes. She can be ugly of visage as long as she’s kind of heart and lustful for his cock and desirous of his company and supportive of his thoughts. What he will *not* have is he will not be burdened with a queen the likes of *you*.”

At that, I flinched and took a step away.

It looked as if his lip would curl as he watched me do this, but he caught it before he did.

And instead, he dealt his mortal blow.

“We will battle this fucking Beast. I do not know of destiny, of the supposed power of these unions of man and wife, except it seems naught but nonsense. But when it is done, we will sever ties, you and me. And then I will find a queen that suits *me*. A queen that suits *Mar-el*. And *she* will give me an heir. Then I will change the laws of our land so my son will know nothing but happiness.”

On that, he spun again and stalked to the door.

“King Aramus,” I called.

He twisted at the waist and barked, “*What?*”

“I am truly very sorry for the loss of a man you cared for so deeply.”

“This I believe,” he bit.

“And I am further sorry for the loss of you, for I was falling in love with you, my king, and your brother died an honorable death, protecting his king and queen. I will carry him in my heart as well, for as long as I am breathing, grateful for the sacrifice he made for you and for me. But in the fury of your grief, you killed something not as precious, but it was coming to be precious to me. And I will mourn its loss, not as you clearly mourn, but I shall do it all the same.”

As I spoke, he turned fully to me, his neck inclining, the rage seeping out of his expression.

It was then I turned away from him and moved toward the bath and my dressing room.

“Ha-Lah,” he called.

I kept walking.

“Ha-Lah,” he repeated.

I did not miss a step.

“My queen, come back to me,” he issued his command, albeit gently.  
At that, I stopped, turned only my head to him and looked him in the eye.  
Mine were brimming.  
At the sight, *he* flinched.  
“Never,” I whispered.  
And with that vow, I walked away from my king.

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***The Priest***  
*Cell of a Go'En, Go'Doan Temple, Fire City*  
*FIRENZE*

Sitting cross-legged upon a pentagram surrounded by sacred symbols drawn on the floorboards in chalk, black candles lit all around him, the priest closed his eyes, felt the whoosh in his stomach, and in astral form, his spirit left his body and he soared the astral plane.

Gleeful.

Joyous.

Victorious.

The Beast was almost there.

And he was angered that a ritual had taken place without his master in attendance.

As it should be.

All of it was just as it should be.

Thus, the priest was smiling when he took astral form in the chambers of his lover, Rupert.

His smile died instantly.

For what he saw was Rupert abed.

Inside a *woman*.

He was grunting and sweating, his cock thrusting in her cunt, his tongue in her mouth.

And when they broke the connection of their lips, his Rupert, his lover, his chosen one, his favorite, smiled with lust and bliss and *love* at the female.

In his body in Firenze, the priest felt fire blaze in his stomach, as his eyes in his astral form narrowed.

And as his lover bent his head back to the woman to take her mouth, the creatures the priest brought forth through magic slithered across the floor.

At his command they waited.

He'd give his lover one last thing.

And after the priest endured the revulsion of watching her cry out her ecstasy, he endured the heartbreak of watching Rupert throw back his head and shout his climax, thrusting deeply inside her through it as he would do the same when he took his priest.

That was when the asps struck.

His thigh.

Her ankle.

There were gasps.

Then Rupert pulled free and rolled, his eyes growing large as he stared at the snake slithering over his lover.

He brushed it off as she bolted up and screamed.

Many bites of the asps brought near-instant death.

One bite, it took a bit longer.

And Rupert was far from stupid.

He did not take a blade to himself or his female to slice it across the punctures and try to draw out the poison.

It was far too late for that.

As she started to pitch in agony when the venom reached her veins, Rupert's eyes searched his chamber.

And he found his priest.

"Why?" he asked.

It was then, the priest grew perplexed.

"Why?" he queried in return.

Rupert had no answer for he was curling into himself as the pain struck his system.

She was already writhing.

"*Why?*" Rupert cried, his face beginning to contort.

"You are mine," the priest answered. "Or were."

"Yes," he pushed out feebly. "I was."

The priest blinked.

But he had seen...

The female rolled off the bed.

Dead.

Well, that didn't take long.

"We would..." The priest looked back to his lover as he spoke again, Rupert's eyes to the vision of him, no attention to the woman, "rule the world."

"I will now, without you," the priest told him.

Rupert shook his head, but seized, his much larger frame taking longer for the venom to vanquish it.

"You...you..." Rupert forced out, awkwardly indicating a snake slithering over the bedsheets, "are weak. You do not...do not...understand loyalty."

"This is not loyalty," the priest sneered.

"There was naught but you," Rupert whispered.

The priest stared.

"He will...he will consume you," Rupert wheezed, spasming into himself. "And you will...you won't...have that first ally. You will...be alone and he will...be master."

The priest's corporeal form in Firenze felt a frisson of fear trace up the back of its neck.

"Emerald oil asps?" Rupert rasped. "You fool," he whispered.

And these were his last words.

His chosen one's eyes open, the priest saw the light of life blink out.

But Rupert was correct.

Rupert's chamber was in his manor in Airen.

There were no emerald oil asps in Airen. They were only in Firenze.

And they had a particular bite, a bite that left a unique mark. One that, if observed by someone knowledgeable in the subject, was easily recognized.

If those bite marks were identified ...

And then there were those asps that had killed the Dellish prince's intended that very night...

And if these were connected...

"Blast!" the priest cried, spiriting the asps back to their realm and speeding his way through the astral plane to his body, his eyes opening with a snap.

He stared at the walls of his cell, his body unmoving.

He could jump atop a horse and ride like blazes, but it'd still take at least two weeks to get to Rupert's manor.

His body and perhaps the nature of those bites would be discovered long before.

The priest could send no bird. There had probably already been dozens of birds and messengers dispatched, sharing the news the Dellish prince's betrothed had perished to the venom.

If the connection was made, if inquiries into Rupert commenced, all before they'd brought the Beast to the surface, it could be disastrous.

Not to mention, the others would be furious at this juncture in the raising of the Beast that he'd taken one of their own. They were close, but they couldn't know how long it would take to complete the rising.

They'd need to replace Rupert.

Train the replacement.

This would take weeks.

More likely months for the priest was weeks away from even bloody *getting to them*.

And the priest did not wish to even consider what Thom would say about all this.

"What have I done?" he whispered.

*There was naught but you.*

"How could that be?" he moaned.

No.

No, he had been betrayed.

You did not betray your master.

This was naught but a setback.

And the prophecy had fallen with the death of Farah.

They had time.

All the time they needed.

He would leave that day.

They would advance a new conspirator. It did not take long to train a man to rape and kill.

At such, they were naturals.

All would be well.

A delay.

They had no one to fight them now.

When the Beast rose, all would be theirs.

Or his.

And the Beast would be his new chosen one.

He did not need Rupert.

It was as it should be.

Or it would be.

Soon.

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