

The Alpha's Harem

Chapter 10. Crimson Rain

14-17 minutes

Nihan beamed, "Emir's served in the palace for years! He knows every road between here and the Ancient Palace like his own reflection, and he is very fun to spend time with on long, boring rides. Just trust me, you are in good hands." They could agree to disagree on that. She was in the very hands that tried to drown and strangle her just a few days ago. Not the best start for a trip. Cerese had to give it to him; not a muscle on Emir's handsome face twitched as he observed her keenly, keeping a respectful position. An eunuch assassin. She couldn't imagine that in her wildest dreams. Cerese's fingers found the jade beads in her pocket, clutching them hard enough that the edges bit into her skin. Perhaps luck was indeed what she needed the most. Hopefully, these beads weren't cursed... She could refuse. Could call out this man who'd tried to kill her, demand answers, demand justice, but... did she have proof? She didn't even see his face back then. All she had was a stubborn gut feeling. She trusted that, but would others do the same? They were literally sending her out of the palace for a trust test. No, this wasn't an option. "Nice to meet you, Emir," she smiled through the sheer veil. Shahanshah's women had to cover their faces and hair when outside the palace. "I expect only the best from Nihan's brother." "Time to go, Luna Consort." He bowed even lower, still holding the carriage door and offering her a hand. She used it and was already on the first step when she heard another eunuch cry out at the palace exit. "Attention! Shahanshah Orhan Velkhanor, the High King of the Thirteen Realms!" Everyone froze, bowing respectfully, and Cerese turned on her heel, about to do the same when her leg slipped from the step, and she plummeted down. She would have absolutely hurt herself, but two strong hands caught her before she reached the ground. Cerese's breath caught as Orhan steadied her, his grip firm around her waist. The smoky cedar scent wrapped around her, grounding her more than his hands did. "Careful, my Moon Rose." His blue and amber eyes fixed on her through the sheer veil. "I cannot have you breaking. Especially not on your way to the Mirror Chamber." Moon Rose. The endearment rolled off his tongue too easily, too familiar for a man who hadn't even touched her. Still, she played along because what choice did she have? "Forgive me, my Shah." She let her fingers rest lightly against his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath silk and muscle. "I was distracted by your presence.

You know the effect you have on me—" A few maids giggled in the background, barely daring to peer at the couple. Jahn respectfully averted his gaze. Orhan's hand rose toward her veil. For a heartbeat, she thought he might lift it to see her face, but his fingers brushed over her cheek, leaving the fabric intact. "The Mirror Chamber will find you worthy." Without question. "I know that much." "Then I shall return victorious." She stepped back climbing into the carriage, where she turned offering him one last look, the veil trembling in the wind. "I'm counting the minutes until I see you again, my Shah." His scarred lips twitched as he offered a nod of approval. "Bring her back safe, Emir," the High King ordered before leaving, and Cerese sighed at the irony, ducking inside the carriage. A young maid waited for her on one of the seats, straightening her back the moment their gazes met. "Ayshe, is it?" Cerese got comfortable in her seat, the girl's lips stretching into a wide smile. "Luna Consort, it is an honour you remember my name," she blurted out. "Of course I remember!" Cerese giggled. "You did my hair this very morning, and I love it." "Your hair is so beautiful," Ayshe fidgeted with the hem of her veil. "I've never seen a colour like this." Cerese was about to respond when the carriage doors opened again, and Emir got inside. There was no getting rid of him. "If you would like, I have a few card games with me to pass the time, Luna Consort," he smiled, tilting his head. He was an undeniably handsome man, slightly too well-built for an eunuch, but knowing his nighttime activities, Cerese wasn't the least bit surprised. "It's alright." Cerese produced a book she took with her from Nytherys. "I am actually planning to read the whole time, but you two go ahead." She glanced outside the window, noticing Haoran just next to her on his horse. There was no way Emir would try anything when her guard was here, but she had to be ready either way. Luckily, there was a dagger strapped to her thigh that no one knew about. Still, she hoped she wouldn't have to use it. *** Hours blurred together as the carriage rocked steadily along the rutted road. Cerese had given up on her book after the first chapter, her nerves making it impossible to focus on the words. Instead, she stared out the window at the changing landscape— lush forests giving way to rocky hillsides, then back to dense woodland again. This time slightly darker. Ayshe dozed in her corner whilst Emir shuffled his cards, occasionally glancing up at Cerese with an unreadable expression. The carriage lurched to a sudden halt. Cerese's heart slammed against her ribs. Through the window, she glimpsed Haoran's hand raised in a signal, his body tense in the saddle. "What's happened?" Ayshe jerked awake, blinking rapidly. "Emir, can you check, please?" Cerese's voice cut sharply across the confined space. "Now." His turquoise eyes met hers— something flickered there. Maybe he was surprised, or maybe he was going over in his mind how he would dispose of her body when all this was over. Either way, she needed to get rid of him first to be safe. "Of course, Luna Consort," Emir left without any objections and silence pressed against the carriage walls. Cerese's fingers found the dagger strapped to her thigh. An arrow plunged into the cushion of her seat right next to her head, and Ayshe let out a piercing scream. "Get down!" Cerese yanked the maid to the floor as sounds of a battle

erupted outside. Steel rang against steel. Men screamed at either side of them. "It's an ambush!" Ayshe began whispering a prayer while Cerese carefully moved the curtain to peek outside. Men in black with dark fabric covering their faces were everywhere, fighting the palace guards. Haoran wrenched the door on the opposite side open, scaring the life out of the women, his chest rising and falling sharply, his face spattered with blood, hopefully not his own. He gestured frantically— out, now, move! Cerese scrambled from the carriage, her slippers hitting the muddy ground outside. Bodies littered the road, palace guards and the attackers lying in pools of blood. She knew this trip was a bad idea. Haoran grabbed her arm, his sword in his free hand, dragging her deep into the forest, Ayshe stumbling behind them. His blade flashed, cutting down an attacker who'd gotten too close. Cerese searched for Emir, but she couldn't find him. They continued deeper into the shadows, not stopping until the sounds of the battle faded and they reached a tall ancient oak. Haoran shoved both women against the trunk, his hands moving rapidly. He pointed at Cerese's red veil and expensive kaftan with golden beading, then at Ayshe's ivory one with simple bronze embroidery. "Wh-what does it mean?" the maid stuttered. Cerese understood him at once, but didn't like it one little bit. "He wants us to trade clothes," she explained, realising that even Haoran did not think these were mere outlaws. She was the attackers' target. "We won't be doing this," she shook her head. "This wouldn't be fair to Ayshe." The maid glanced between them both while Haoran furrowed his brows, still breathing heavily. The realisation finally sank in. "No, that's fine." Her fingers fumbled with the pins securing her veil. "It is my job to protect you, Luna Consort." "No!" Cerese protested, grasping her hand. "You are not risking your life in my stead!" "With all due respect—" Ayshe already unpinned her veil and shoved it into Cerese's hands. "If I die defending the Shahanshah's favourite, my family will be set for life; the same will happen if I do it and survive. Trust me, my lady, I am a survivor!" Haoran let out a low growling sound, urging them to follow the plan. "They're looking for me." Cerese fastened the last button of the bronze kaftan. "Not you. If they catch up with you, show them your hair, turn your head in a different direction and scream: Run, my lady!" She hated this, but Ayshe looked so resolute that she did not dare to argue. Cerese lifted her skirt briefly, collected her dagger and pressed it into the girl's hands. "Here, take this." Haoran's blade sang again, stopping a blade inches away from the two women. "Let's do this!" Ayshe ran first, faster than Cerese expected, which probably meant she was a shifter. The assassin dropped to the ground, fresh blood dripping from Haoran's elegant sword. He waved at her, and she realised he was not going with her either. Their eyes met, and she whispered, "Please, survive too." The corners of her guard's lips turned upwards, just for a second, as he nodded and gestured for her to leave. More men were running towards them from the road. Haoran stood in their path, ready to destroy. Cerese ran in the opposite direction to Ayshe, hoping this would give them all a fighting chance. Branches whipped her face as she plunged deeper still into the forest. Behind her, steel clashed, and men shouted. Her lungs burned. Roots caught at her feet. A piercing

scream made the blood in her veins freeze, and she stopped, realising it was a female voice. High and terrified and cut brutally short. Cerese's legs nearly gave out. She pressed her fist to her mouth, swallowing the sob that tried to claw free. It was Ayshe. They had caught her. Wearing Cerese's clothes. Thinking she was the Luna Consort. She ran harder, the forest swallowing her whole. The maid's sacrifice could not go to waste. Tears streamed down her face, slowly soaking the veil. The forest around her had fallen silent. No clash of steel, no shouts, no thunder of hooves. Only Cerese's ragged breathing and the snap of twigs beneath her feet remained. She stumbled to a halt, pressing her palm against rough bark. Blood roaring in her ears. Her chest heaving. Had she gotten far enough away to be safe? Was Haoran alive? What happened to Ayshe? The light shifted. Cerese looked up, and her stomach plummeted, a dark chuckle escaping her. Well, this was a brilliant plan. Whoever came up with it knew how to kill off a concubine. Crimson clouds roiled overhead, spreading like spilt blood across the sky, swallowing what little daylight remained, casting the landscape in an ominous red glow. Cerese's breath caught. She had seen clouds like these before, back home in Nytherys, when the witches warned everyone to seek shelter. The first droplet struck her veil, hissing on contact. Acid rain. The continent's curse returned every couple of decades. Another drop landed on the skin of her exposed hand, pain searing through her sharp and immediate. She jerked back, cradling her wrist as a red welt bloomed across her knuckles. There was no time to waste. She'd escaped assassins, watched people die for her, lost her guard somewhere in this cursed forest, and now the sky itself wanted her dead. The rain began in earnest — fat drops that smoked where they collided with leaves, turning green to brown in seconds. The acrid stench of burning vegetation filling the air. Cerese yanked her veil tighter, tucking her hands beneath the kaftan's sleeves. Her eyes darted frantically through the trees, searching for anything— a cave, an overhang, a bloody rock large enough to huddle beneath. Nothing. Just trees, endlessly stretching in every direction, their bark already beginning to blister. At best, the acid would eat through her clothes and skin, leaving her disfigured beyond recognition. At worst— She didn't let herself finish that thought. Her hands shook as she dropped to her knees at the base of another ancient oak. She curled as tightly against the trunk as she could, hoping that the leaves above would offer some coverage. Raising her arms to shield her head, fingers lacing together at the nape of her neck. She had to at least save her face and hair. Maybe she could heal the scars on her arms later. The first drops hit her exposed hands like liquid fire. Cerese bit down on her lip hard enough to taste copper, as the acid seared her skin, her shoulders, her back. The brocade kaftan offered no protection at all— it may as well have been paper for all the good it did. She squeezed her eyes shut, tears streaming down her face. Elowen. Ayshe. Haoran... Shahanshah... Hopes to see them all again were dying slowly and in agony. Something heavy and dark fell over her trembling frame, scaring her. Cerese's breath caught. Her muscles locked, frozen. Another assassin had come to finish off what the others had started?

She was too afraid to look, too afraid to move. "Don't worry, you are safe." The voice was male, unfamiliar, but steady. Not threatening. Not cold. She dared to crack one eye open. A thick waxed cloak covered her completely, the acid rain beading and sliding from its surface instead of burning through. Above her stood a man she didn't recognise— ruggedly tall, broad-shouldered, with a scarf wrapped around the lower half of his face. His clothes were of good quality, but they were not luxurious. A brown leather sleeveless jacket, a blue shirt underneath and dark form-hugging pants with tall boots. Perhaps he had been hunting prior to the menacing rainfall... "The rain's about to get heavier," he extended a gloved hand. "There's shelter not far from here, but we need to run. Can you manage?" Usually, going deep into the woods with a complete stranger would be a solid no. Today, however, this was by far her best option. The acid rain hissed against the trees as smoke continued to rise where it reached exposed bark. Her hands throbbed beneath what remained of her kaftan. She placed her palm into his, and his fingers closed around hers. "Wise choice." He hauled her to her feet, keeping the cloak secure around her head and shoulders. "Stay close. Don't let go. Trust me." Cerese nodded, and then, they ran...