

Chapter 3. Breathless

Cerese thrashed in the water, her limbs flailing, her vision blurring in the dim light. Her lungs screamed for air as her fingers clawed at the vice grip tangled in her hair. Her feet slipped against the wet stone floor, finding no support.

Beneath the water, her chest burned. Panic flared as she twisted, her energy draining with each second she was forced to stay underwater. She fought to keep her mind from drifting, to focus amid the roaring silence, someone's fingers digging into her flesh the whole time.

There was no other way out, and regret bubbled inside her. Her secret was about to reveal itself any moment now.

She didn't even last in the harem one full night.

Accepting her destiny and letting go, she let her eyelids flutter shut, calming down. The

attacker probably believed that she was giving up...

A spark burned within her as if kindled by her final desperate breath when water finally filled her throat.

Heat ignited, travelling from her core to her fingertips. She felt the light surge, controlled but powerful, roaring into life. Cerese embraced the sensation, fanning it outward.

A sharp, startled cry followed, and the fingers around her neck unclenched, a whoosh of air replacing them as the assassin was thrown away. She finally managed to get her head out of the tub, greedily sucking in air, her own gasps echoing in her ears as she staggered back, coughing water and rasping harshly. Her skin was still prickling with the aftershocks of her magic.

The floor trembled under her soles as she regained her footing, knowing that this was

far from over. Her attacker was slowly getting up too, the servant's uniform smouldering, a burn marring the skin exposed where the fabric was destroyed.

He recovered faster than she had anticipated. A dark cloth bound about his head concealed his features, leaving only his gaze, promising nothing but harm for her. One of his hands slid in and out of the pockets of his pants, producing a slender cord.

Cerese swallowed, regretting never taking self-defence lessons her father offered her, Elyssa and Elowen so many times before.

The assassin lunged, jerking the cord tight around her throat and wrenching it cruelly in an instant.

"Stop struggling, and I'll make it fast!" he hissed into her ear.

Cerese choked, the world around her threatening to go black. Her hands fought to pry the string away, knuckles whitening

with effort. Magic surged again, fighting the dark edges closing in.

She tried to scream for help, but there was no air or strength to do so.

The woman focused, guiding the light once more, tempering the energy to protect her. The light flared around her, and heat seized the assassin's hands, forcing his grip to falter.

"Damn bitch!" He growled, getting two knives out.

This was never going to end...

Cerese tested her voice, but only a dry croaked sound was coming out of her damaged throat. Not nearly enough to get attention. She wasn't even sure if someone would come even if she did manage to make some noise.

Not thinking twice, Cerese bolted forward. She tried one door, then another, then one more... finding each one of them locked.

They brought her here to die. There was no denying it.

Her heart thundered as her feet skidded on the slippery floor, causing her to drop her wet slippers and leave them behind. Mere steps ahead of the man who wanted to finish what he started.

She began to throw the brass buckets she found standing in a row at him, hoping to win precious seconds.

Why was he even after her? She had been here for mere moments... It was too early for an attack, let alone such a brutal one.

Cerese knew the killer wouldn't relent. He made that much clear. She was hardly his first victim, and all that was forcing her to make a choice whether to use her magic to kill him or not.

A quick glance revealed a glint of metal—a knife raised in his hand, aimed at her as he ran after her, removing each obstacle she threw at him.

Cerese dashed onwards, seeking a way out from this slaughterhouse.

She knew people died in the harem all the time, she hoped to prepare to fight for her life, but everything happened too soon. She wasn't ready at all.

She paused for a single heartbeat, flinging both her arms up as a fierce surge of light shot towards the man, blasting him off his feet and sending him tumbling back several paces.

It would have been best to kill him, burn him alive, and pretend she was never even here, but she was sworn not once, but twice, never to use her magic to harm a living being. Not after what happened...

Besides, killing him would create a mess she wouldn't be able to explain, and the result would be the same – death. This time, by the hand of the king.

Shaking the thoughts away, Cerese used her magic to break the lock on the next

door, hectically trying to come up with plausible explanations for everything.

"Stop it!" she muttered to herself. Right now, she only needed to survive and escape.

The lock was still smouldering, thin tendrils of smoke curling up to sting her eyes.

Cerese lifted her foot and drove it hard into the weakened wood. The door shuddered, gave a protesting groan, then lurched inward on its hinges, scraping against the stone as it swung open for her.

A stale breath of air rolled out to meet her. Beyond yawned a cramped, lightless passage, no wider than two people across, hemmed in by bare stone walls. It reeked faintly of damp linen and old oil, the quiet, forgotten smell of places only servants saw. For a beat, she hesitated on the threshold, heart hammering in her throat, then she slipped inside, fingers skimming along the rough wall to guide her.

Her steps were quick, almost tripping over

themselves, her bare feet already freezing on the cold stone floor. The first door she reached on the other side gave way at once beneath her push. She stumbled through, barely slowing, only to find that the next door yielded just as easily. And the next. And the one after that. Each obedient swing of wood stirred a prickling unease along her spine.

She did not know where this path led, only that she dared not pause. Ominous footfalls were already reverberating somewhere behind her.

After going through yet another door, she finally saw some light at the end of it, and even faint sounds of music.

Witnesses! She needed witnesses.

That was her only chance.

Cerese pushed the door from which the sounds were coming and was disappointed to see an enchanted quartz crystal emitting them into the air. No musicians in sight.

Carved wooden screens partitioned the rest of the chamber, and a wash of relief went through Cerese when she caught a woman's laugh and the light clink of coins. Feeling slightly better, she locked the door behind her with a bolt.

The woman in the room let out another laugh, and Cerese felt much safer. She wasn't alone anymore.

She slowly tiptoed to check if she was safe with these people and froze when she saw a large white onyx bath in the centre with none other than King Orhan in it.

Slowly, Cerese covered her mouth with both her hands, too afraid to breathe or make a noise.

Maybe she could still take her chances with the assassin... If Orhan found her here, it would probably be so much worse.

She heard steps behind the door and rushed to hide between a golden silk curtain draped over a white marble wall and

a carved wooden shield, which probably gave the Shahanshah privacy from the servants.

The bath dominated the centre of the chamber – an immense octagon carved entirely from white onyx, its surface veined with pale gold that shimmered softly beneath the lantern light. Two wide steps, polished to a mirror sheen, circled the bath for accessibility.

Steam curled idly over the rim, bearing a subtle fragrance of sandalwood, roses, and something indefinable, as King Orhan lounged with his back against the stone, arms extended along either side.

Cerese closed her mouth, hoping that her scent wouldn't give her away. Luckily, there were too many scents floating around, sweet, nauseating scents of oils and flowers. Even a wolf wouldn't be able to notice her here.

A beautiful woman was dancing before the

High King, wearing a luxurious, sheer, red outfit with golden chains and coins draped across her body. Her every move was elegant and precise, aimed to seduce the Shahanshah.

She moved with practised grace and elegance. The sheer silken veils of her outfit clung and floated with every breath she took, revealing just enough to tempt, concealing only what her rhythm chose to hide. Delicate golden chains wrapped around her wrists and waist, strands of them cascading down her hips where tiny coins danced and sang with each motion. Her bare feet glided over the smooth marble floor, anklets chiming with her every step.

The dancer wore a sheer veil that barely hid her stunning face, golden liner on her eyes contrasting with her dark skin.

Her arms flowed like water as she was getting closer and closer to the King. Every

turn of her body sent ripples through the air – a deliberate elegance while she slid the cloth from her shoulders.

“Have your slave pleased my Shah?” The woman asked, placing her leg on the first step and continuing to rock her hips with the music.

Were Cerese a man, that alone would be enough to make her offer that woman anything she desired.

The dancer took another step, and Cerese calmed down, realising she was the odd one here. It was best to find a way out and leave. If they found her here now, her death would probably be even worse if she gave in to the assassin.

“Tissa, you came here to be my Consort just like the others. Don’t refer to yourself as my slave,” the King corrected her lazily.

Cerese gasped, hearing this. Somehow, she always believed that the ruling dynasty enjoyed having slaves. She did not know

much about the Shahanshah in general, but to her, his gaze was lacking general interest. He must have witnessed countless such dances before, for this breathtaking woman in front of him appeared to leave the mighty Shah unmoved and completely uninterested.

Tissa was one of the twelve Lunar Consorts to be. Cerese was the twelfth of them all. Each kingdom was conquered one by one over the past few centuries. In the end, it even brought peace to these lands... until the Mad Shah, Orhan's own father, began destroying everything he touched.

Cerese's train of thought broke when coins clunked again and she saw that Tissa dropped down her main dress, standing before the King covered in golden chains and coins only.

Orhan let out a low growl of appreciation. He probably wasn't bored anymore, and no matter how much Cerese wanted to close

her eyes, she couldn't stop staring.

She only read about the sacred nights between husbands and wives in books before tonight.

Tissa slowly descended into the water, taking a handful of it and pouring it over her perky breasts with tawny n****s.

The following instant, she slipped beneath the surface and vanished for a brief moment, reappearing directly before the Shah, her skin shimmering with a shade Cerese recognised.

"But I *am* your slave." Tissa's lips curled as she placed her arms on Orhan's shoulders. "We are all your slaves. Just one word from you and any of us will be dead. So, Orhan, let's not lie to each other, alright?"

Cerese furrowed her brows, thinking this was no way to speak to the mighty High King, the Shah of all Shahs.

She peered at them again through the

wooden lattice of the screen, noticing that Tissa already straddled Orhan, but something about the whole scene was off. For a tyrant, he didn't even tell her off.

Maybe she was his favourite. Or maybe Orhan liked to be challenged, and Cerese had to learn from that, considering that in just one night she would be in Tissa's place.

But Orhan's hand awkwardly fell into the water as Tissa threw her head back. cold laugh leaving her chest.

"You are probably asking yourself what is happening." Her tone was laced with venom. "Well, I will tell you. You were doomed the moment I stepped into the water."

Cerese covered her mouth with both her hands, afraid even to take a breath. What the hell was happening in this palace?

"You see, my whole body was soaked in a paralyzing agent that works on your kind

but is harmless to mine," Tissa purred. "It works fast too."

"If you think—you are getting away with this —" Orhan sounded like every word was a struggle.

"Oh, I know I am probably not walking out of this palace alive, but who cares?" Tissa's lips curled into a cruel smirk. "The important thing is that you would be dead, and your crazy bloodline dies with you. If any of your other concubines carries your child already, we will take care of her too."

Cerese could feel her heart drumming in her ears.

"This is the end, Orhan," Tissa pressed on his shoulders. "You will die here in your own bath! From the hands of a woman you were supposed to fuck tonight! A woman who hates you with all her heart!"



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