

The Alpha's Harem

Chapter 4. Condemned

Cerese's eyes widened as the High King struggled against his assassin, but the woman on top of him was slowly drowning him in merciless water. "Not as strong as when you killed my brothers, are you?" Tissa sneered, digging her nails so hard into the Shahanshah's shoulders that she drew blood from him. "To ensure you die tonight, we've been preparing this whole time. Even my jewels contain wolfsbane. Wolfsbane and a little secret ingredient." Tissa crushed one of the rubies on her chest, and a faint purple liquid dripped down her wet skin and breasts straight into the water. Cerese covered her mouth too afraid to even breathe. "Yes, your best guards checked me, but found nothing." The woman let out a cold laugh, obviously enjoying herself. "You have won a war against your own father, you destroyed your brothers. Every family in the Thirteen Kingdoms has lost someone thanks to your bloodthirsty dynasty, but a mere woman destroyed you, oh mighty Orhan Velkhanor! Everything you did was for nothing! Soon we'll all be free from you and your kin." A strangled sound escaped the High King, pulling another laugh from the woman straddling him. "And the best part?" She went on. "You will be remembered as the shortest reigning Shahanshah in history. How does that feel?" Orhan's hand flashed in the air before falling back into the water, the last bit of his strength used as his claws glistened for mere seconds. Tissa wrapped her hands around her neck, blood slipping through her slim fingers, dripping down her naked body in golden chains. Cerese hesitated, uncertain what to do next. Tissa's lips curled once more as she let go, filling the bath with her crimson blood. She was dying, but knowing she had still won was enough for her. "Thank you for granting me this quick death, my Shahanshah," she hissed, grasping Orhan's face and submerging him into the water for their inevitable death. Time stood still as Cerese watched crimson bubbles die down on the surface of the bathwater. Her mind raced with all the possibilities. What would happen next? Was the Shahanshah dead? And what would happen to her now? In case of the High King's death, his wives were sent to the Palace of Tears to mourn their husband for the rest of their lives. Unless they had an heir, of course, but it was unclear if any of Orhan's women were already pregnant. At least, it wasn't announced to the public. Nonetheless, things would change once a concubine killed him. Then everyone would be under suspicion, and the next High King, whoever it would be, might demand them all to be put to death just to be safe. Luckily, Cerese wasn't technically one of

them. Not yet anyway. Tissa's body was floating on the water, the woman clearly dead. Sooner or later, someone would come to check on them, and by then she needed to have her own story straight. Cerese carefully walked out of her hiding spot, her entire body shaking. How would she explain that she was even here? Could she run back into the bathing hall? Was the assassin still waiting for her? It now seemed that killers infested this place. The music from the crystal stopped playing, scaring the hell out of her. Was it connected to Orhan somehow? Or maybe Tissa? And now that they were dead, it stopped working? Cerese realised she was already ascending the stairs that led back to the bath. This was probably a mistake. Her shaking fingertips grazed the bath's rim, and she gazed over the crimson-tinted water. She flinched when she saw Orhan's eyes still open, the amber one emitting a dull glow, slowly dying down. Her heart painfully clenched in her chest. She was a sworn Healer of Nytherys, bound by oath to save lives and not take them. Although, logically, she was not at fault, would she be able to prove that? Would she not be blamed as Tissa's accomplice? Could she run and catch up with Elowen? After all, the King gave her sister money and gifts for her short and uneventful time in the palace. They could escape together and... and nothing. Being hunted their whole lives by the wolves was the same as having a death warrant signed. She couldn't put Elowen through that, and she would prefer not to die herself. She could, however, honour her Nytherys vows. Cerese bent down and laced her hands under Orhan's arms, pulling him out of the water. It was easier said than done, considering how heavy the High King was, but she did not give up, panting as they both fell down the bath stairs. A cracking sound followed, and excruciating pain shot through her ankle, but she knew that no time could be wasted. Cerese knelt beside Orhan, water pooling around his limp form. Her hands, shaking, found their way to his chest. She pressed down hard, feeling the resistance give beneath her palms. "Please, breathe," she muttered, rhythmically pushing down again, remembering her healer training from the convent. With each compression, her hopes were dying. Weren't gokurt wolves supposed to be strong? "Please, my Shah—" she muttered. "Please, keep fighting!" She leaned down, her ear close to his mouth, checking for breath that hadn't returned. Nothing. Desperation gripped her. She covered his mouth with hers, forcing air into his lungs, willing life back into him. Then she resumed her compressions, her earlier fear of being discovered gone completely as her healer instincts kicked in. Orhan's body spasmed violently; a strangled cough erupted from his chest. Bloody water spewed from his mouth, splattering across Cerese's thin robe. In an instant, his hand shot up, wrapping around her neck with an iron grip. His mismatched eyes peered into her soul, burning with confusion and primal fury. "No—," Cerese's voice was barely making it out of her constricted throat. She gently tapped his hand pleading to release her. The door burst open, Jahn darting inside, his braids bouncing. It took him just a moment to process the scene: Tissa dead in the water, the King, a breath away from death, and Cerese, caught in his grasp. "Guards!" He called out, rushing forward. He dislodged her, throwing Cerese aside with force. She crashed

into a marble pillar, the air forced from her lungs, leaving her dazed. By now, she was surprised her back did not break. It would surely have bruised her later though. "Guards!" Jahn repeated his order, urgency and anger lacing his voice as he dropped beside Orhan. The King's ragged breaths reassured him, but the uncertainty lingered in Jahn's gaze as he assessed his Shah's condition. Cerese, fighting through the pain radiating from her ankle, found her voice. "It wasn't me! I saved him!" Her pleas echoed against the chamber walls. Jahn ignored her, focused solely on Orhan, but she could see the doubt in his sky-blue eyes. "The King has been poisoned!" Cerese cried, panic swelling in her voice. "There's still time — I can help!" Men clad in dark, sleek armour stormed the chamber, their footsteps heavy and resolute. Metal sabatons clanged against the marble floor as they hurriedly followed Jahn's orders. "Take her," Jahn commanded, not looking at the girl anymore. He turned back to Orhan, his dimples barely visible now. "No, please!" Cerese's voice rose as they dragged her away. "I am a Nytherys healer! We are sworn to protect lives and not take them! I can save him! I know the poisons and my magic—" "Magic blocking cuffs! Now!" Jahn growled. Chains cut into her wrists, cold, binding and uncomfortable. Rough hands propelled her forward, each step jarring her twisted ankle with a fresh wave of pain. She should have run while she had the chance. Now it was too late. They weren't gentle as they threw her down the stairs of a dark dungeon cell. There was no light in there, not even a glimpse. "Please!" she begged one last time. "Please, just listen to me!" Iron bars slammed shut, receding footsteps echoing away. Silence wrapped around her like a shroud. Alone, she hugged her knees, shivering from both cold and fear. Her robe was still wet, and even if it wasn't, it was definitely too thin for this place. She didn't even make it in the harem for one day. She heard the sounds of scurrying rats, and it gnawed at her nerves. She closed her eyes, summoning her strength, cupping her hand to create a delicate light flame, its flicker more comforting than warm. It revealed the jagged stone around her, small shadows dancing eerily on the walls. Cerese wished she could make the flame bigger, but no one could know that the magic blocking cuffs were useless on her. Let them think they work. Hours melded into one another. Deep shadows of night surrendered to the hesitant tendrils of morning light. Still, no one came to save her. What if they forget about her entirely? Would she just die here and be consumed by the rats? She had no power to break free. Or at least she didn't think she had... *** By the time night fell again, she knew that it wouldn't be her magic to get her out of this. She'll have to use her wits. Footsteps echoed down the grim corridor above, stirring her from her thoughts. She extinguished her light, listening intently until her name, softly spoken, pierced the quietude. "Moonlady Cerese? Are you there?" Cerese climbed the stone steps cautiously, finding Nihan waiting with a small linen bag clutched in her hands. The Serfina offered her a little smile. "When I heard, I saved this for you." She passed the humble meal through the bars. Cerese hesitated, memories of the assassin sent to kill her still vivid in her mind. Nihan was the one who found out about her before the other servants; she left her alone so the

other girl could set a trap for her. Since then, everything has gone wrong. The servant noted her hesitation, sighed, then opened the bag and broke off a piece of the bread, chewing deliberately. "See," she said between bites, "you can trust this. And sorry I can't bring you anything better. It would be too suspicious. No one knows what happened still, no one knows where you are. I heard Jahn giving orders about you, that's how I found out." "I appreciate it," Cerese murmured. Despite her words, she fidgeted with the little bag in her hands. Trust had to be earned, and so far she couldn't trust anyone but herself. Nihan surveyed the room, speaking quickly, "So, what exactly happened?" "The palace is crawling with assassins. That's what happened. Someone tried to kill me yesterday in the bath hall." Cerese was looking straight into Serfina's face, noticing how her eyes widened, and her brows went up. Maybe she didn't have anything to do with all that after all. Before Nihan could press for more, heavy footsteps resounded, Jahn stepping into view. He glared at Nihan, his voice sharp. "Back to your duties, Serfina. Unless you want to join her in the cell, of course." Nihan shot Cerese a brief, meaningful look before retreating into the shadows of the corridor. Once they were alone, Jahn assessed Cerese, his face too hard for her to read, a mosaic of conflicted emotions. Authority tensed his stance, but there was curiosity, perhaps suspicion in his gaze. "The High King summons you," he began to open the door, and Cerese's heart drummed in her ears again.