

Chapter 5. A Nytherys Healer

"Is he alright?" Cerese heard herself asking. The Serasker shot her a withering glance.

"Why? Do you not want him to be?" He drawled, a challenge in his voice. There was no longer any trace of his playful self that she had seen yesterday. There were no illusions that if she had done anything he would presume to be wrong; he would kill her right then and there.

"On the contrary," Cerese clenched her fists, trying to keep her composure. "I spared no effort saving him, and I hope that he is fully recovered. That might be complicated, of course. After all, I heard Tissa saying that she used wolfsbane."

"Is that why you killed her?" The Serasker asked, studying her every feature.

"I— I didn't—" The woman stuttered. "I am a Healer of Nytherys. We don't kill, we save."

"Yeah," Jahn chuckled darkly. "Sure."

"The High King—" she muttered, then stopped and swallowed hard. "The Shahanshah killed her. He used his last surge of strength to eliminate his assassin."

"Quiet now!" Jahn ordered all of a sudden.

"You'll speak only when I ask you again."

He guided her through a maze of twisting passages, and she was convinced they had crossed one spot at least twice. It felt deliberate — a way to stop her from memorising the route to wherever he was leading her. Cerese ought to have told him he didn't need to go to such lengths. Her sense of direction was abysmal, but something warned her he wasn't in the mood for jokes. She could easily be walking straight into her own execution.

At last, they stepped into a corridor flanked by two warriors; beyond them, another pair stood before weighty gilded doors carved with intricate patterns that opened at Jahn's

single nod.

The recognisable tang of healing draughts hit Cerese's nostrils at once.

A man in expensive green and golden attire stood next to the bed, where Orhan was half sitting, leaning on the headboard, propped up by silk cushions.

That and naked to his silk pants.

The Shahanshah looked tired, crystals of sweat covering his forehead. His bronze complexion had a pale, greyish hue, indicating that, although the palace healers tried to detoxify him, they did not succeed.

"You—" He tried to sit up higher, pointing his finger at the girl, but his hand fell back into the silk cushions. "You— were there—"

Cerese opened her mouth to speak, but a kick to the back of her legs made her fall to her knees on the soft carpet before the King's bed. A sharp throb pulsed through her swollen ankle again.

She turned to glare at the Beta, but he simply loomed over without sparing her a glance, not a muscle flinching. This is why she hated dealing with warriors. They were a whole different breed entirely.

Cerese decided it was time to fight for herself, so she cleared her throat and concentrated on the King.

"I got you out of the water, my Shahanshah." She lowered her head, crossing her hands on her knees in a sign of complete submission.

"Why?" He asked, voice strained. "Why—were you there?"

"By mere accident, my King." Cerese wasn't sure which of his many titles he preferred, so she decided to use each one in turn. "It just so happened that I was assaulted in the bath, so I tried to run away from my attacker. I ended up in that room by chance, entering via the back door and hiding behind one of the wooden screens. When I

realised I was interrupting someone, I was too afraid to let my presence be known, but I was also equally scared of the murderer back in the palace corridors. I apologise for my intrusion, but at the same time, I thank the gods for it because I was able to see what Tissa did and save your life."

"Which moment did you enter?" Jahn asked.

"Right before she began explaining her plan. I saw the King slicing her throat, and at first thought he wasn't in danger, but when he disappeared under water, I went to assist him at once."

She dared to glance at the High King and met his discerning gaze. The different colours of his eyes seemed to perform various functions: Cerese felt he saw right through her and threatened her existence, yet at the same time, he was generally intrigued.

"And what is so special about you that

someone wanted to kill you on day one?"

The Serasker mocked.

"I wouldn't know." Cerese lowered her head again. "Maybe I was mistaken for someone else, or someone misunderstood why I am here—"

She could tell by the Serasker's demeanour that he wouldn't let her get away so easily, but while she was thinking of what excuse to mutter next, Orhan leaned back into his pillows, panting. She could even hear, from her place, how laboured his breathing was.

"Did— did a proper healer see the Shahanshah?" She asked, finally daring to glance at Jahn, who had his brows knitted together.

"Only the trusted healer was allowed here, and he is searching for a solution as we speak."

The King let his eyes fall shut, a furrow etching itself between his brows as he fought to keep himself composed.

"Tissa had to use a paralyzing agent," Cereese muttered. "I guess it was in the paint she used to decorate her body. The King was paralysed almost instantly when she got into the water—"

Jahn rubbed his chin, looking at his Shah struggling on the bed.

"Impossible," he said, "we checked the paint on her. It's harmless to us."

Now it was Cereese's turn to be taken aback. However, a Nytherys healer knew better than to give up easily.

"May I ask a question?" She peered at the Serasker from the floor, acutely aware that she was still dirty and dishevelled after all the unfortunate events of the previous night.

"Shoot." He seemed annoyed with her.

"What Kingdom was Tissa from?" Cereese bit her lip. "What is her... kind?"

"Tregovern." She finally managed to pique

the Serasker's interest. "Shahmaran serpents—"

"Oh!" The revelation was almost instant. "Oh, that makes sense now. Shahmaran serpents of royal blood can release nerissai venom, right? And the paint on her was probably created by Shakri ink mixed with Zareth oil. The oil takes time to activate, so she easily passed any checks and could even afford a whole dance before it started working. All three mixed would indeed create a paralyzing agent potent enough to harm the Shahanshah's wolf."

The Serasker's lips parted as her explanation sank in.

"What's more important, together they are pretty lethal." Cerese momentarily lost track of her surroundings as she bit her bent index finger, a silly little habit that helped her concentrate that she had carried since childhood. "We have already lost a day, which means—"

"Tell me what course of action you would take to heal him?" The Serasker arched his brow.

If she simply revealed it, their trusted healer would handle the task, and they would toss her back into the dungeon. Or worse still—see her disposed of altogether.

"Nytherys' magic is necessary, together with a few specific ingredients." She flicked a glance up at the man looming over her. It was not entirely untrue; Nytherians were better at cleansing toxins than anyone. "If you have a trained Nytherys healer in the palace, they will know what to do. And if you have not—"

"You will have to instruct our healer on what to do," Jahn insisted. "And we can invite a mage—"

"My apologies, Serasker," Cerese fidgeted with the edge of her dirty robe. "I am afraid this will not work. At least, the best method I know to cleanse him of the toxins and

venom in his body will not. Our practices are somewhat unconventional. No mage or common healer can truly replace us."

Jahn's eyes were on his King, who let out a low growl from the pain.

"Besides, there is no time to teach anyone," Cerese went on. "If you only trust me once, I can help. I've been learning the craft my whole life. Healing magic is my speciality, and if you provide me with the correct ingredients, I will do my best to save the High King. Besides, as you already know, I am sworn not to harm. This may not mean much to you, but it means the world to me."

Jahn's lips pressed tightly together, his fists clenched so hard his knuckles went white.

"Do it—" Orhan's voice interrupted them both. "Let her—"

Cerese was about to breathe out in relief when the Serasker grasped her throat so tight that if he applied just a little more strength, her neck would snap. "If he dies,

you die," he warned. "And then I will go to Nytherys and kill everyone who even said hi to you at least once. That includes your little sister, whom you care so much about. Got it?"

Cerese nodded through tears. "I would not dare. It's against my nature and my vows," she assured the man. "And I will do everything in my power to—"

"He dies, you die." The Serasker motioned for her to stop talking and yanked her to her feet. "Now, write me the list of the things you need."

The woman inclined her head and trailed after him to the writing table that unmistakably belonged to the Shahanshah. She did not dare to touch anything on the desk, but Jahn brusquely slid open the top compartment, drawing out a pen and a new paper scroll, which he tossed towards her. She did not require a second command and immediately started compiling the list,

adding far more plants, tonics and draughts than she needed so that, should the court healer inspect it, he would not understand what she truly intended to do.

After the list was complete, Cerese handed it to the Serasker, who watched her every movement.

"Please make certain the bowls and pots I listed are made from the exact metals mentioned. It's important."

His eyes went through the list fast, and he nodded. "Anything else?"

"I will need the cuffs removed to use my magic," she said. "And I also need to clean myself of this dirt since it can cause an infection. Where will I be working?"

"You are not leaving this room unless the King is getting better," Jahn locked eyes with her. "And even after he is well, you will need his permission, not mine. The cuffs will be removed only when I am in the room with you, and you are ready to heal him."

"Understood." Her voice was barely a whisper. "But how can I clean myself?"

Just the thought alone of returning to the bath hall made her shiver.

"I'll see what I can do." The Serasker replied and left.

Cerese stayed alone with the High King; all the guards and servants were stationed outside. She used water from one of the pitchers to wash her hands as best she could and checked the Shah's forehead.

"You are burning—" she whispered, quickly looking around. She had to improvise, but luckily, the palace healer left some items behind. She made a silk cloth wet and patted his face, wiping away the sweat.

To her surprise, the Serasker returned pretty quickly, and she gasped when she saw four guards bring a bronze bathtub inside. Others followed with buckets of water, filling the bath almost to the brim.

"Clean up." Jahn's gaze was on her hand, still holding a cold cloth on Shah's forehead.

"Actually, wait." She shot back onto her feet. "Can you bring cold water instead of warm?"

Jahn pinched the bridge of his nose, his nostril flaring. "Can you just wait until this one goes cold if you prefer it?"

"It's not for me." She shook her head. "The Shahanshah's temperature is too high, and we need to bring it down. A cold bath should help while I prepare his medicine."

Jahn scowled, then turned to bark orders at the guards. "Bring ice! Now!"

Everyone here was used to obeying this man, and three ice buckets were brought into the chambers within minutes. Cerese made the water a comfortable temperature and signalled to Jahn that the bath was ready for the Shahanshah.

"Keep your distance," the Serasker warned, stepping towards the bed. With surprising gentleness, he helped Orhan to his feet.

Orhan groaned, too weak to resist the Serasker's assistance. Sweat glistened across his skin, and Cerese sensed he no longer grasped reality.

Jahn carefully lowered Orhan into the bath, ice cubes bobbing at its surface. As the chill seeped into his skin, he let out a long breath, discomfort giving way to relief.

Cerese checked his forehead a few minutes later. "He is getting colder. That's good. It'll give us more time."

Cerese sat by the Shahanshah's side under the Serasker's watchful eye.

"Moon Lady?" She heard a familiar voice and saw Nihan walking in with a big wooden chest carried by two guards. "I heard this was your request."

Cerese offered her a weak, tired smile and

opened the chest, finding all the ingredients and appliances she asked for inside.

Vials, herbs, bowls and glass tubes were just perfect for the purpose. Cerese inspected each one to ensure nothing would endanger her work.

"So, you are still alive," Nihan hummed quietly, helping her to sort the herbs on the desk. "Impressive."

"Barely—" Cerese whispered. "If the Shahanshah dies, so do I."

"If that man dies, we are all doomed anyway," Serfina shrugged. "So, best of luck to you and— you will find some pastries I sneaked out from the kitchen at the bottom of the chest."

"Thank you," Cerese couldn't help but smile a little. Maybe Nihan wasn't behind her attack after all. At least she had everything she needed now to test the food for poison, and she was actually starving. The Serasker had not bothered to feed her.

Soon she was left alone again, and she approached her work as a seasoned strategist.

"Fresh feverfew leaves, valerian root, silver oak charcoal..." she murmured, collecting all necessary items for the tonic.

She crushed some of them and brewed others over a water bath, making sure everything was done correctly.

"Time to take off my cuffs," she stretched her hands to the Serasker, when he returned to check her work. "I need to infuse all this with my magic, and after that, it needs to brew for a couple of hours."

The Serasker grunted but unlocked the cuffs on her wrists. "Just remember—"

"He dies, I die." She rolled her eyes. "Isn't the whole point of taking a consort from Nytherys due to the fact that we don't have a political agenda? My archipelago just wants to live in peace and continue healing those who come seeking our help. I have no

reason to kill the Shah."

Jahn's lips twitched ever so slightly, but a heavy feeling settled in Cerese's chest. Something in her words irked him, and she couldn't tell what it was.

"You can call the guards if you need anything else," he told her and left, leaving her alone with his Shah.

Well, that was a surprise. So, maybe he wasn't afraid she would take his master's life after all.

Hours trickled by, and once the tonic was ready, Cerese helped Orhan to take the first dose. Then, she called for the guards to help her get him back into the bed.

They removed his wet pyjama pants, and Cerese gasped audibly when she turned to see the King of all Kings in all his glory.

Muscle stacked over muscle, perfection as if carved with precision, clean lines from collarbone to hip, a warrior built to kill.

Broad shoulders, cords of strength running down his arms, a chest that rose in a slow, stubborn rhythm. Power wrapped him like armour, even in his current state.

Pale seams cut across the bronze of his skin: old knife work under his ribs, a crescent near his left hip, a puckered scar low on his side where something once tore through flesh and almost took him with it. Whip tracks banded his back and shoulders in brutal order, some fine as threads, some thick and warped, like roots tearing through earth. On his right thigh, teeth had sunk deep once, the marks stretched and healed, ragged crescents around toughened tissue.

Closer to the ruined half of his face, the scars thickened, as if every blow had landed on that side first. A jagged line crossed the hollow of his throat, close enough to the pulse to feel reckless.

This wasn't a body; it was a map, a history lesson, a story to be read.

"Merciful skies—" slipped from her, but she instantly covered her mouth, so as to not attract attention.

Orhan's mismatched gaze cracked towards her, heavy-lidded, the ghost of a smirk touching the unscarred corner of his mouth.

And then the servant stepped away, her own eyes instantly trailing all the way to his ... very generously sized manhood.

Cerese had seen countless naked bodies, she knew what a good male organ looked like, even without experiencing the pleasure it could bring to a woman, and still she could feel how the heat reached her cheeks.

It lay against the King's thigh, heavy and veined even in its relaxed state, the pink mushroom head glistening, its foreskin missing.

Maybe sharing the bed with him wouldn't be so awful after all...

Although the girls from her healer class shared that it was the way a man wielded his sword that mattered the most... She has seen them longer, and she has seen them thicker, and yet Orhan's c**k somehow seemed just... right.

The servants put fresh Samayard silk sheets over the King, and Cerese let out a breath of relief. Finally, her sinful thoughts could go away.

Though a display like that would be difficult to erase from her mind.

NO, she scolded herself, she was a healer first and had to address this as a professional.

The servants left, and Cerese clapped herself on the cheeks a few times to come to her senses.

Then she remembered that the remaining buckets of water were still there, and the bath drained, but not removed. She had a few hours until it was time for the next dose

of the Shahanshah's medicine, and she really needed that bath.

The water was already too cold, but it was better than nothing. She had spent days in all that filth and could take it no longer.

Getting into the tub, Cerese scrubbed herself clean, using some of the oils from her list she had given to Serasker for her hair and skin. Goosebumps prickled her skin from the chilled air, yet it was still bliss to rinse the grime away.

When she finished, she rose and seized one of the buckets, tipping the cool water over her bare skin.

She doused herself with a second bucket, her eyes fluttering open, peering into the shadows. It seemed as though something glimmered in the corner of the chamber where Orhan rested on a four-poster bed with ornate carvings and a canopy.

Weariness, she decided, was causing her to see things.

Her old garments were unwearable, but she spotted a fresh black-and-gold tunic lying over a chair. The Serasker must have left it for her, so she shrugged it on, the cloth hanging loosely and oversized. Still, she was in no position to complain. The fabric was soft and clean, the golden thread on it woven in intricate patterns.

There was only one problem now: she was freezing, and it was the middle of the night.

It would be at least two hours until the detoxifying tonic was ready, so she sat by the High King's bedside waiting.

Cerese's ice-cold fingers reached for Orhan's forehead. His temperature felt like embers dancing beneath her fingertips. She couldn't afford for it to climb any higher than that.

She slid her trembling palm to his cheek, seeking warmth and hoping to cool him down, at least a little. Her plan was rudimentary, but it was better than doing

nothing.

Orhan leaned into her touch, a sigh of relief escaping his lips. She wanted to pull her hand away, but his grip closed around her wrist.

Before she knew it, with a surprising tenacity, he pulled her into the bed beside him. The scent of smoky cedar and silver sage enveloped her, mingling with the mustiness of the herbs she used to prepare his medicine.



Marissa Gilbert

“

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12

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