

Poison Study

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Extract

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L O C K E D I N D A R K N E S S that surrounded me like a coffin, I had nothing to distract me from my memories. Vivid recollections waited to ambush me whenever my mind wandered.

Encompassed by the blackness, I remembered white-hot flames stabbing at my face. Though my hands had been tied to a post that dug sharply into my back, I had recoiled from the onslaught. The fire had pulled away just before blistering my skin, but my eyebrows and eyelashes had long since been singed off.

“Put the flames out!” a man’s rough voice had ordered. I blew at the blaze through cracked lips. Dried by fire and fear, the moisture in my mouth had gone and my teeth radiated heat as if they had been baked in an oven.

“Idiot,” he cursed. “Not with your mouth. Use your mind. Put the flames out with your mind.”

Closing my eyes, I attempted to focus my thoughts on making the inferno disappear. I was willing to do anything, no matter how irrational, to persuade the man to stop.

“Try harder.” Once again the heat swung near my face, the bright light blinding me in spite of my closed eyelids.

“Set her hair on fire,” a different voice instructed. He sounded younger and more eager than the other man. “That should encourage her. Here, Father, let me.”

My body jerked with intense fear as I recognized the voice. I twisted to loosen the bonds that held me as my thoughts scattered into a mindless buzzing. A droning noise had echoed from my throat and grew louder until it had pervaded the room and quenched the flames.

The loud metallic clank of the lock startled me from my nightmarish memory. A wedge of pale yellow light sliced the darkness, then traveled along the stone wall as the heavy cell door opened. Caught in the lantern’s glow, my eyes were seared by the brightness. I squeezed them shut as I cowered in the corner.

“Move it, rat, or we’ll get the whip!” Two dungeon guards attached a chain to the metal collar on my neck and hauled me to my feet. I stumbled forward, pain blazing around my throat. As I stood on trembling legs, the guards efficiently chained my hands behind me and manacled my feet.

I averted my eyes from the flickering light as they led me down the main corridor of the dungeon. Thick rancid air puffed in my face. My bare feet shuffled through puddles of unidentifiable muck.

Ignoring the calls and moans of the other prisoners, the guards never missed a step, but my heart lurched with every word.

“Ho, ho, ho...someone’s gonna swing.”

“Snap! Crack! Then your last meal slides down your legs!”

“One less rat to feed.”

“Take me! Take me! I wanna die too!”

We stopped. Through squinted eyes I saw a staircase. In an effort to get my foot onto the first step, I tripped over the chains and fell. The guards dragged me up. The rough edges of the stone steps dug into my skin, peeling away exposed flesh on my arms and legs. After being pulled through two sets of thick metal doors, I was dumped onto the floor. Sunlight stabbed between my eyes. I shut them tight as tears spilled down my cheeks. It was the first time that I had seen daylight in seasons.

This is it, I thought, starting to panic. But the knowledge that my execution would end my miserable existence in the dungeon calmed me.

Yanked to my feet again, I followed the guards blindly. My body itched from insect bites and from sleeping on dirty straw. I stunk of rat. Given only a small ration of water, I didn’t waste it on baths.

Once my eyes adjusted to the light, I looked around. The walls were bare, without the fabled gold sconces and elaborate tapestries I had been told once decorated the castle’s main hallways. The cold stone floor was worn smooth in the middle. We were probably traveling along the hidden corridors used solely by the servants and guards. As we passed two open windows, I glanced out with a hunger that no food could satisfy.

The bright emerald of the grass made my eyes ache. Trees wore cloaks of leaves. Flowers laced the footpaths and overflowed from barrels. The fresh breeze smelled like an expensive perfume, and I breathed deeply. After the acidic smells of excrement and body odor, the taste of the air was like drinking a fine wine. Warmth caressed my skin. A soothing touch compared to the constantly damp and chilly dungeon.

I guessed it was the beginning of the hot season, which meant that I had been locked in the cell for five seasons, one season shy of a full year. It seemed an excessively long time for someone scheduled for execution.

Winded from the effort of marching with my feet chained, I was led into a spacious office. Maps of the Territory of Ixia and the lands beyond covered the walls. Piles of books on the floor made walking a straight line difficult. Candles in various stages of use littered the room, single marks evident on several papers that had gotten too close to the candle's flame. A large wooden table, strewn with documents and ringed by half a dozen chairs, occupied the center of the room. At the back of the office a man sat at a desk. Behind him a square window gaped open, permitting a breeze to blow through his shoulder-length hair.

I shuddered, causing the chains to clatter. From the whispered conversations between prison cells, I had determined that condemned prisoners were taken to an official to confess their crimes before being hanged.

Wearing black pants and a black shirt with two red diamonds stitched on the collar, the man at the desk wore the uniform

of an adviser to the Commander. His pallid face held no expression. As his sapphire-blue eyes scanned me, they widened in surprise.

Suddenly conscious of my appearance, I glanced down at my tattered red prison gown and dirty bare feet roughened with yellow calluses. Dirt-streaked skin showed through the rips in the thin fabric. My long black hair hung in greasy clumps. Sweat-soaked, I swayed under the weight of the chains.

“A woman? The next prisoner to be executed is a woman?” His voice was icy. My body trembled on hearing the word *executed* aloud. The calm I’d established earlier fled me. I would have sunk sobbing to the floor if the guards weren’t with me. The guards tormented anyone who showed any weakness.

The man tugged at the black ringlets of his hair. “I should have taken the time to reread your dossier.” He shoed the guards away. “You’re dismissed.”

When they were gone, he motioned me to the chair in front of his desk. The chains clanged as I perched on the edge.

He opened a folder on his desk and scanned the pages. “Yelena, today may be your lucky day,” he said.

I swallowed a sarcastic reply. An important lesson I had mastered during my dungeon stay was never to talk back. I bowed my head instead, avoiding eye contact.

The man was quiet for a while. “Well-behaved and respectful. You’re starting to look like a good candidate.”

Despite the clutter of the room, the desk was neat. In addition to my folder and some writing implements, the only other items on the desk were two small, black statues glitter-

ing with streaks of silver—a set of panthers carved to lifelike perfection.

“You’ve been tried and found guilty of murdering General Brazell’s only son, Reyad.” He paused, stroking his temple with his fingers. “That explains why Brazell’s here this week, and why he has been unusually interested in the execution schedule.” The man spoke more to himself than to me.

Upon hearing Brazell’s name, fear coiled in my stomach. I steadied myself with a reminder that I was soon to be out of his reach forever.

The Territory of Ixia’s military had come to power only a generation ago, but the rule had produced strict laws called the Code of Behavior. During peacetime—most of the time, strangely enough for the military—proper conduct didn’t allow the taking of a human life. If someone committed murder, the punishment was execution. Self-preservation or an accidental death were not considered acceptable excuses. Once found guilty, the murderer was sent to the Commander’s dungeon to await a public hanging.

“I suppose you’re going to protest the conviction. Say you were framed or you killed out of self-defense.” He leaned back in his chair, waiting with a weary patience.

“No, sir,” I whispered, all I could manage from unused vocal cords. “I killed him.”

The man in black straightened in his chair, shooting me a hard look. Then he laughed aloud. “This may work out better than I’d planned. Yelena, I’m offering you a choice. You can either be executed, or you can be Commander Ambrose’s new food taster. His last taster died recently, and we need to fill the position.”

I gaped at him, my heart dancing. He had to be joking. He was probably amusing himself. Great way to get a laugh. Watch hope and joy shine on the prisoner's face, then smash it by sending the accused to the noose.

I played along. "A fool would refuse the job." My voice rasped louder this time.

"Well, it's a lifetime position. The training can be lethal. After all, how can you identify poisons in the Commander's food if you don't know what they taste like?" He tidied the papers in the folder.

"You'll get a room in the castle to sleep, but most of the day you'll be with the Commander. No days off. No husband or children. Some prisoners have chosen execution instead. At least then they know exactly when they're going to die, rather than guessing if it's going to come with the next bite." He clicked his teeth together, a feral grin on his face.

He was serious. My whole body shook. A chance to live! Service to the Commander was better than the dungeon and infinitely better than the noose. Questions raced through my mind: I'm a convicted killer, how can they trust me? What would prevent me from killing the Commander or escaping?

"Who tastes the Commander's food now?" I asked instead, afraid if I asked the other questions he'd realize his mistake and send me to the gallows.

"I do. So I'm anxious to find a replacement. Also the Code of Behavior states that someone whose life is forfeit must be offered the job."

No longer able to sit still, I stood and paced around the

room, dragging my chains with me. The maps on the walls showed strategic military positions. Book titles dealt with security and spying techniques. The condition and amount of candles suggested someone who worked late into the night.

I looked back at the man in the adviser's uniform. He had to be Valek, the Commander's personal security chief and leader of the vast intelligence network for the Territory of Ixia.

"What shall I tell the executioner?" Valek asked.

"I am not a fool."