

Could Thou and I With Fate Conspire

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Could Thou and I With Fate Conspire

by [angelplates \(orphan_account\)](#)

Summary

"You seem agitated." That unplaceable amusement was back in his voice.

"Good bloody eye," I snapped, not only restless, but *outraged* that he'd make fun of me while I was in such a shit temper. "I have enough to be agitated about. I don't understand how it could have gone on for so—many—hours without anyone saying a fucking thing!"

He took me by the shoulders to hold me somewhat still. I felt like a moth in a net. "May I make a suggestion, Safiya?"

[the goods are on days 308 and 341! consider reading the first work in this series before this one; i can't guarantee this will make much sense on its own]

Year 3, Day 229

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~~Ulara~~

~~This is stupid.~~

~~Ulara is dead. Who is this for?~~ fuck it

Ula

I don't see any more point in writing to a dead woman, ~~but I remember how much the writing cleared my head~~

This isn't right. Who else

~~Mum,~~

~~Rahi~~ absolutely fucking not

Hi, Ula. I love you. This isn't for you, it's for me, but I love you regardless. Somehow—and I know you're dead—you're still the only person in the world I can talk to. And the writing used to clear my head and I could use a clear head tonight.

You've missed a lot.

It's been a bit more than two years since I came back to Arx and the Cathedral declared me the new Divine. What a bloody mess. To this day I get pilgrims *demanding* I perform a miracle to prove that I'm the real thing.

I bought our old place back, but Arx itself very quickly became unliveable; every time I left the house, it was an event. I couldn't so much as go out for a loaf of bread without being stopped fifty times and asked for a blessing or a piece of holy advice, or. . . a surprising

number of people want me to proofread their religious poetry.

But the upside of all this is that people listen when I have something to say. When I announced that I was looking for human volunteers to aid with elven recovery efforts in the eastern forests, hundreds of them had flooded east before the week was out.

(I got a very angry missive from Seville about the influx of clueless, devoted humans, who clearly couldn't give a shit about the elves outside of wanting to please their Divine. After that I learned to be more careful with the things I asked, and *much* more subtle about asking them.)

Actually, there are a lot of decisions I've made that I'm not certain about. I killed Sanguinia Tell during my first winter as Divine. I kept it under wraps, because I didn't think the city would benefit from knowing that a demon had been operating out of Arx for half a century or more. But there was no real system in place to help the people who had needed Tell's loans.

So, to raise money, I confiscated part of Linder Kemm's old estate, and sold off his collection, with the blessing of his wife, who had been disgusted to learn that her husband was a servant of the Void. But *that* made every noble in the city collectively shit themselves, claiming that I was preying on the wealthy and would stop at nothing to steal their hard-earned gold.

And, obviously, there are those that think the Divine has no business involving herself in politics at all: she should sit pretty, accept the endless worship, and maybe commit the occasional mass murder in order to help the right side win a war. You know, like Lucian loved to do.

Have I mentioned I've started having these terrible stress headaches?

Anyway. I haven't forgotten you. No one has. Nearly the first thing I did when I came back to Arx, that first summer, was to hold a memorial for you in the city theatre. Ula, the place was packed. We fixed a plaque with your name outside the entrance, so it's the first thing anyone sees when they come in to catch a show.

And I had Ram paint your portrait. I tried to do it myself, but thinking of your face for hours on end—sort of paralysed me, and I'd thrown out twenty or thirty sketches before Arhu suggested I hand it off to someone else. And Ram is a very fine painter, even if he is a sprout, even if he does have a stick up his arse.

We had nearly no pictures of you. The Divine Order emptied out our place, so my sketchbook full of charcoal Ularas was gone, too. Ram had to work off an old etching they did of you—

the very dramatic one, on the poster for Blood Red Roses. I gave him such a hard time; the nose was always wrong, or he'd made you too pink, or he hadn't captured that little sarcastic twinge in your mouth, or your eyes were too close together, or your hair wasn't shiny enough, or your hair was *too* shiny—it took more than a year before I was satisfied and poor Ram could move on with his career.

The portrait is on the wall of my quarters in the Cathedral. I'm barely ever in Arx to admire it, though. Most of the past two years I've spent travelling—east, through the elven forests, helping to replant and rebuild (and making certain the human volunteers keep their heads on straight. I learned my lesson). And your memorial—once it came out that you'd been made into a Silent Monk by the Divine Order, I got a wave of petitions to hold trials for the head Magisters who had supervised your Purging and all the other atrocities like it. So I travel between little local courts all along Reaper's Coast. Usually I don't speak, I only 'oversee'. Sometimes they ask me about you, but not often; it must be unsettling to watch their Divine weep like a child.

It's a beautiful portrait, though. I see it tonight.

I'm in Arx for my birthday, the summer solstice. Also called "Safiya's Day", now. This was the third-ever Safiya's Day, and it hasn't stopped being weird so far.

I don't remember Lucian's Day ever being such a massive event in town. Maybe it's just the novelty of a new Divine. I hope it wears off soon, though. I could do without the constant praying and chanting in the hall of the Cathedral (—I had the Path of Blood dismantled, so it's more welcoming now).

The pastries are cute, at least. They do my hair out of dark chocolate.

But I'm not really writing about today. I'm writing about tomorrow. It seems that, because I've done so much work with the humans and the elves lately, Queen Justinia feels that her kingdom and its constituents are in danger of being neglected. She says "her advisors have not ruled out the possibility of a combined attack on the dwarven kingdom in the near future". She won't say what I could possibly have to gain from an attack like that, or what evidence her advisors are basing their suspicion on.

The woman is fucking paranoid. I'd hoped it was just that Black Ring bird working magic on her, but she really is that easily led.

At any rate, she won't agree to speak with me here in Arx (because I might ambush her), and she won't invite me and my delegation to her own palace (because we might attack her), so

the Ancient Empire has generously agreed to host the proceedings.

I wonder if Justinia knows that if I wanted her dead, I could do it with a thought.

It was Hesthas' idea—sorry—that of the Red Emperor. (I can't get used to that.) Justinia didn't concern him, but he saw a chance for representatives of all four races to lay out their hopes and grievances.

I've asked Ifan and Seville to come with me. Both of them have been working 'with' me, in theory—Ifan as the head of the new Vanguard of Rivellon (what we're calling the reformed Divine Order), and Seville as my elven liaison—but neither of them have wanted to see me since I told them the truth: that Sadha and the dragons were alive and well, and Hesthas and I had been working together (more or less) to make sure that I'd be the one to ascend.

I can't blame them, but I hope they come around someday. With you gone, there's no one I trust more.

That aside, I thought it would be fitting, in the spirit of things, to have a member of each race on my council, so I also invited Yizakha, the ambassador of the lizard Consulate in town, and a dwarf named Konstalion. (When I had just returned to Arx, and I asked for a weapons trainer, he was the one they commissioned. He's a good man—and he knows me as a person who misses blows and trips over her own feet, not so much as a god. Good to have around.) And Arhu, for all the good that'll do.

I wanted an Orcish contact, too, and maybe an Undead, but every single person I said that to told me not to be daft, and that no one would ever take me seriously again if I tried it. So there went that idea.

We sail out first thing tomorrow—and I can't sleep. The day this meeting starts is going to be the day everyone finds out how horribly unqualified I am for this, and how much better off we would have been if Seville, or anyone else, had taken the seat of Divine.

And I'm going to see Hesthas again—and the Empress. I don't know how to feel.

There's one thing I didn't mention. I told you about your plaque, and the memorial, and the portrait, but there's one more thing. I painted a little cameo of you, a tiny Ulara the size of a cough drop. I wear it on a chain around my neck. (*So you're always next to my heart.* Yes, I know. I can already hear you gagging.)

I love you.
Safiya

Chapter End Notes

here we are again! can you believe i busted out 17k words in a matter of weeks?? this fic was a chance for me not only to finally write that pegging chapter but also to come back and touch on a few things from MTDP that i wanted to develop a little more (safiya's growing...not obsession but the fact that she clings so anxiously to the static memory of ulara; the dynamic between her, trp and sadha; how safiya herself is dealing with divinity...which spoiler the answer is "barely, with the aid of several terrible coping mechanisms")

i hope you enjoy the ride!!

Year 3, Day 300

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ula the Ancient Empire is *bloody* hot. I haven't been in Mezd since I was little, but I don't remember it ever being this bad. You can't even breathe, the air is so thick and soupy here.

We moored a bit earlier than anticipated, in the small hours of the morning, so our ship sat in the harbour until sunrise.

Arhu knocked at my door around half seven and promptly let himself in. I'd been making a few notes about what I was going to say when I disembarked. I hate speeches.

He cast a glance at the notebook I was hurriedly stashing away. "I hoped I'd broken you of that habit," he said. "It's not healthy."

"I wasn't—" I stammered. "I wasn't writing to her, I was just—making notes, for. . ."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," sighed Arhu, moving his long white dreadlocks over one shoulder. "If you want to dwell and drive yourself mad, who am I to stop you?"

I rubbed at my eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I came to wake you, but I see you were sleepless once again."

"Fine. Thank you. I'm awake."

"We will meet you on deck in half an hour." He cast a pointed look at the locket that dangled from my neck, then bowed his head and left.

Arhu doesn't like me very much. He's found out I'm a terrible Divine, and he considers it his mission to keep the world from finding it out, too. (He also thinks I should learn the art of letting go. Fat chance of that.)

I had no idea what to wear—someone must have chosen a few formal robes for me, but I had left the trunk in my cabin unopened. I opened it now, and nearly burst into tears. Everything white, in satin or velvet, flowing, studded with opals and crystals and diamonds. One with a crest of white feathers. *Look at me, I'm the Divine. Can you tell by my great fucking feathered crest?*

I needed something humbler. I put on the same blue travelling gown I'd been wearing for the past few months. (It's not as bad as it sounds, promise. I know a fair few cleaning charms.) I looked around the room for a finishing touch—there, a golden pin with a fat, gleaming pearl on the end. Carefully, trying and failing not to stab myself with the pointy end, I put my hair up.

Arhu has a vein on his temple that bulges when he's angry. I saw it pop out the moment he laid eyes on me. Everyone was gathered on the top deck; Yizakha in her Empire regalia, Ifan in his commander's plate, Seville in rich brown sea-silk, Konstalion at least in a clean shirt. And a flock of guards and movers, all in white.

"Oh," said Yizakha delicately, although her neck-frills fluttered with concern. "Were. . .were the gowns I chose not to your taste, your worship?"

"Better like this," grinned Konstalion. "She's the Divine, not a doll to pin skirts on."

Yizakha folded her hands. "Respectfully, Mr. Konstalion, the Ancient Empire will think differently. A Divine who knows her worth, and displays it proudly, will earn our esteem, not our judgement."

Arhu sighed the way he always sighs when I cock something up—deeply, with slumping shoulders. "Is it too late to wrangle her into one of those white contraptions?"

"Sir, the Emperor's horses are here!" one of the movers cried, looking out over the side rail.

"Gracious Void," hissed Arhu to himself. "After you, then, my Divine."

"Some earrings, at least!" fretted Yizakha. "Or a broach, or—"

"Take mine," said Seville, smiling reassuringly not at me, but at Yizakha, who seemed on the verge of tears. She took out her own earrings—heavy silver ornaments, shaped to look like tree-roots snaking down from her earlobes. Very Elven.

Yizakha took them gratefully, and fixed them to my ears with practiced hands. "There," she said, stepping back. "It. . .is something."

"Now go," Arhu told me. He closed his eyes and said a prayer for us.

There's a main street that runs from the harbour, through the capital and up to the guarded gates of the Forbidden City. Six horses—five with sleek black coats, and one pure white—were waiting there for us, each with a handler holding their reins. The moment I stepped off the ramp, the woman leading the white horse knelt in front of me, pressing the back of my hand to her mouth. "My Divine," she said, quietly. "You bless us with your presence. My honour and privilege is to guide you to the gates of the Forbidden City."

"It's a pleasure," I said numbly, holding out my hand as she rose to her feet. "Safiya."

"Thukza, of War," she replied, shaking my hand gingerly, as if I were made of glass. Her golden scales glittered in the light of dawn. "You are in good hands, your Holiness."

As horses went, this one was. . .very tall. I looked behind me at the others. Konstalion threw his long hair out of his face and winked at me, *you can do this*.

With Thukza's help, I got on the horse without too much trouble. (If I'd fallen off, I'm not above wiping a few memories. I know that's an abuse of power, but hell.)

The walk to the City was slow and meandering, exactly the sort of thing I'd hoped to avoid. People clustered on either side of our procession, wanting me to wave or just to catch their eye. And I began to see what Yizakha had been thinking when she got me those fussy jewelled robes; me in my white garb, on a white horse, riding through the city, greeting the masses. I still didn't like the idea, but I felt guilty for having thrown out her hard work. She's the ambassador, for fuck's sake, she knows better than I do.

I was losing my focus, and beads of sweat were gathering in my hairline from the dry, punishing heat, when we finally reached the gates. There was no crowd there; everyone inside these walls was part of the Emperor's court, and busy preparing the palace for us. We dismounted—I thanked Thukza for her help—and followed the winding, perfectly maintained path to the palace on foot.

We were the last party to arrive; everyone else was waiting for us in the courtyard, with the Emperor and Empress front and centre, Sadha in lavish, trailing crimson robes, and Hesthas in black. I greeted Sadha first, the way Yizakha had told me. "My Empress," I said and

bowed my head to her.

"My Divine," said Sadha, showing me the same brilliant smile I remembered. "It is our tremendous honour to receive you."

"I can't thank you enough for your hospitality," I said, finding myself smiling back. She still smelled of jasmine.

"Of course," she said. "I have no doubt the coming days will be full of new insights for us all." And she looked away, subtly dismissing me.

Hesthas had been very politely waiting his turn. I caught his eye—we were both smiling like idiots sharing a joke. "My Emperor," I said, finally.

"My Divine." He nodded. "You grace us. Every last lowly tile in my humble palace will rejoice to feel your exalted steps upon his back."

I snorted, and then, irritated with myself, clicked my tongue. "Stop it," I said under my breath. "My ambassador will murder me if I start laughing."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," he said innocently. "Curious," he added, looking me up and down. "I was so certain you would be wearing something white and garish."

I winced. "It's a long story. Please don't bring it up to Yizakha. Or Arhu. He'll pitch a fit."

"You have nothing to fear from me. I prefer this—you look like yourself."

At least half of the morning's stress went out of me when I heard him say that. "I'm glad you think so," I said, softly.

He smiled. "It's time I released you, at least for the moment. You have many more acquaintances to make, your Holiness."

So I did.

Saheila and her mother Tovah were leading the Elven delegation; the humans, who were scattered without Lucian and lacking a central power, had sent a large gaggle of diplomats, all of whom I had to greet; and Queen Justinia had brought her two advisors, as well as a dozen guards in bulky black armour.

"Holiest one," she said, primly, when I came to her. "We meet in person."

"An honour, your Majesty," I said, holding out my hand.

She cleared her throat and moved her hands behind her back. "You will forgive me. Can't be too careful, you understand."

"—ah. Of course." I nodded to her instead. "I hope to, er, address your concerns in the coming days, my Queen, so we can stand together against the Void."

"We shall see," she answered, and that was all.

I looked over the courtyard, making certain I'd seen everyone. It was the end of the morning, and I was sweatier and more exhausted than ever. Luckily I didn't have to sit through a banquet. Not then, at least. A palace attendant showed me to my room, and came back half an hour later with breakfast on a large, earthen tray.

"Your worship," blurted the attendant, "I-I'm to inform you that the banquet begins at dusk. Someone will be by to escort you. In the meantime, your delegation has the run of the palace grounds."

"Thank you," I smiled, and he bowed out of the room.

I tried the food. A murderously spicy chickpea soup, and a small loaf of fresh bread. When I'd had enough, I paced the room. It was enormous; twice the size even of my quarters in Arx, with a wide, soft bed, a marble bathroom, a wardrobe our movers had already stocked with my clothes. . . a window that looked out over the entire city. I must have stood there for an hour, just taking it in.

Finally I stepped away. I had half a mind to take a nap until the evening, but I've been asked to keep normal hours while we're here: that is, to sleep at night and to wake in the morning. (I've developed a habit of skipping the sleeping part.)

I decided I was going to return Seville's earrings instead. The floors of the hallways were some sort of light yellow stone, so immaculate that I saw myself reflected in them, a foggy golden Safiya following at my heels. I knew within minutes that I was never going to find my way back to my room on my own, but that didn't matter for the moment.

Every hallway I turned to seemed abandoned. I supposed everyone had somewhere to be—no one was going to be wandering out here. So I strolled through the labyrinth of a palace, admiring the paintings on the walls, the long, narrow carpets that decked some of the corridors. The torches, flickering with harmless red magefire.

I came to a set of doors, so huge and ornate they must have lead to an entire different wing. I knocked. Nothing. I pushed tentatively against one of the doors; it gave way. Beyond them was a long, high-ceilinged hall. There was nearly no furniture; only large square cushions on the carpeted floor, and small, low tables. A shallow moat of clear blue water divided the entire floor.

Sitting on a bright-purple cushion in the centre of the room was Seville. She was dangling her long legs in the water, the hem of her dress gathered above her knees.

"Hi," I said. She must have noticed me long before I had caught sight of her. "Did you get bored, too?"

Seville shrugged one shoulder. "If I'm given free rein, dearest, I'm going to reign freely."

I hopped across the shallow moat and walked the length of the hall to sit down beside her. "I have your earrings," I said, taking them out of my ears.

She was quiet.

"They're gorgeous," I said. "Thanks for letting me wear them in."

I put them in her hand, and she closed her fingers around them.

"What do you think of the Empire?" I asked. "Having. . .having seen it for yourself."

Seville scoffed. "So far, sweetling, we've seen a very pretty front. I'm dying for a glimpse of the back." She leaned back on her arms and looked at the ceiling. I looked, too. The carvings were breathtaking. Jasmine trees—cherry blossoms, dahlias, and lithe women dancing

through them. "They certainly keep a stylish palace," she remarked. "I imagine this is where the Emperor. . .entertains."

"Oh." That was a thought that had *absolutely* no right to upset me. "Do you—do you think so?"

"I'm positive." She splashed the water with her feet. A few drops landed on my cheek—I smelled roses. "Pillows, carpets, beds. Rosewater, for the lucky woman to anoint herself with. Or women, more likely."

"Oh," I bit my lip. "I suppose that makes sense."

Sebille turned to me with an expression of contempt. It was the closest I'd been to her in ages. I thought of how well her short hair suited her sharp, lovely face, and how powerful she looked, here, in the heart of the Empire, with a gnarled, burned, ruined slave-scar. "There's a lot at stake," she said. "Don't let your dear little burning heart pull us into a diplomatic incident."

I flared. "D'you honestly think I need to be *reminded* not to sh—"

"Calm yourself, darling Divine." She chuckled icily. "I'm on your side."

"I wish you'd act like it," I sulked. "You're here to support me. . .and to keep me in line, and how can you do that if you won't talk to me?"

"Very handily," she said, pulled her feet out of the water, and stood.

"Sebille!" I called after her. She paused. "What can I do?" I demanded.

"Travel back two years and make me the Divine. If you can't, don't waste my time." She smiled. "You made your decision, darling—you need my counsel, but you'll survive without my friendship."

And she left. Her sea-silken dress shimmered in the coppery glow of the hall.

I shuffled back to my quarters. (I only had to ask for directions once.)

The remains of the soup and bread were still on my table, and I picked at them halfheartedly until someone knocked on my door. "It's open," I called, standing up anyway.

Yizakha stepped inside. "Good afternoon, my lady."

". . . Ambassador," I greeted her. Had I forgotten about another meeting?

She tented her fingers, her ocean-blue neck-ruffles quivering again. "I've been asked to ensure that you adhere to the dress code this evening."

My face flushed. "I'm sorry about this morning, but if Arhu—"

"Not by Lord Arhu, your worship, but by several ranking members of the Emperor's court." She looked past me. "There were those who felt. . .disrespected by your. . .nonchalant presentation."

Shit. Day one, and I'd already made a mess of it. "Sorry. I should have listened to you from the beginning."

"Thank you for saying so, my lady."

"I'm making your job harder, aren't I?"

"Not to worry," said Yizakha, sounding worried. "We can put this down to a—a—a miscommunication. So long as we choose something more fit for tonight, everything. . .will be fine."

She closed the door behind her and walked to the great wardrobe. I watched her sort through her options until she came up with something: a long-sleeved gown with a sheer cloak, sewn with tiny crystals. It was painfully blue, like looking directly into a deposit of Source. She found a pair of suitably blue earrings to go with it, and a chain of small, unrefined pearls that only barely fit around my neck.

When I was dressed, Yizakha looked me over and finally pulled out my golden hairpin, so that my hair came loose and fell down over my shoulders. "That should suffice, I think." She glanced out the window and nearly jumped out of her skin. "Sweet Lady of the eternal pyre. We're going to be late, and then none of this will have done any good."

Just then, an attendant knocked to let me know it was time. Yizakha left me in his care and hurried off to join the rest of my council. I saw them on my way, filing into the hall through a side door. The attendant walked me around to the main entrance, and asked me to wait until everyone else was in place.

When I entered the room, a quiet fell over the hall, and every single person sitting hurried to stand up; the guests were divided between two long tables on either side of the room, and in the middle, the Emperor and Empress, with a raised seat between them for me.

I knew how to do this. I'd attended a banquet or two in my day. Heart pounding, I walked into the centre of the hall, looking benevolently around me at the other guests. (I cast a minor blessing over myself, to give me a hint of that pure-white, godlike glow. It's a trick I've picked up.) I waited for an usher, or someone, to come out and meet me. As I'd been expecting, it was Yizakha who left her place, kissed my hand and led me behind the raised table, helping me up the steps, before she returned to her seat.

I stood in front of my chair, looking over the room. "Please, be seated," I said. They sat. "Thank you all for being here," I went on, "for making this trip in the name of cooperation and transparency between all the peoples of Rivellon. I want to extend my gratitude to my ambassador, Yizakha, for her aid in planning this gathering; to Queen Justinia for her grace and patience in the years since my ascension; to Saheila daughter of Tovah for lending us her seer's wisdom; to the members of the human envoy, for coming together from all corners when the need arose; and most especially to the esteemed members of the Imperial court, to the Emperor and Empress, for their exceptional hospitality. May we all honour their good example in the coming days." I bowed my head, and sat.

"Nicely done," murmured Hesthas in my ear, over the thunderous applause.

"I try," I said. (What I wanted to say was *kill me*, but people are always listening in at these fucking things.)

Sadha touched my arm while we waited for the second entree (of four. After that, eight main courses and five dessert. Ridiculous). "You'll forgive me, your worship, but when I discovered you were going to visit us, I had to do a bit of investigation after you."

"Oh?" I asked.

"I hope you don't mind. I procured some of the works you painted under the guidance of the late Hubert Oak, and. . ." Her eyes sparkled. "I think it's marvellous. What an eye for form and colour, at such an age."

"I—I'm flattered," I said honestly.

"I must ask," she went on, dropping her voice as if we were discussing a grand secret. "I was so spellbound by a . . . a watercolour, if my memory does not deceive me, of a woman. Do you know who I mean? The woman with long, black hair, and these remarkable soft shadows around her eyes."

"Hm." I tapped my fork against the end of my plate, thinking. "Oh—she was sort of half-turned away—"

"Yes!"

"And with a serious look."

"Exactly," said Sadha. "Who is she? If I may be so imprudent as to ask. It always seemed to me that, could I strike up a conversation with her, she would regale me endlessly."

I grinned. "It was my mother, Zayna—"

"Ah! I hated to presume—"

"—and she *was* a very interesting woman." I thought back. "I painted it on a Sunday night, I think—Oak had told me I was to do six more portrait studies before the end of the week, and I couldn't think who else I wanted to paint. And I *hated* watercolour, and I was out of time, so I came to my Mum, all in a panic, and asked her what I should do."

"And what did she say?"

"'Paint your father'." I smiled at her. "But my father was never in a mood to be painted, so she sat for me. It was already dark, so we had to light loads of candles. Do you know what Oak had to say about the portrait?"

"What was that?" asked Sadha. (I've never had a more captive audience. I'm sure she was just being diplomatic, but I enjoyed the attention anyway.)

"He thought it was genius. Putting a figure in harsh light and then trying to capture that harsh light with watercolours, when—you know—"

"When they are so subtle and faint by their nature," Sadha put in. "Oh—excuse me, I'm sure I don't mean to interrupt so often."

"No, no, no, not at all," I gabbled. "Oak still swears—or swore—he always swore up and down that it was my best work. It didn't matter what I did afterward."

"I cannot make that judgement without having seen your full body of work, naturally, but it is a *very* beautiful piece. It speaks of love," she added, half to herself.

"Is there any chance I could have it back?" I asked, uncertainly. "Or a copy of it. I don't have many images of my mother."

"But of course!" said Sadha. "I will have it done." She touched my arm again, giving me a long look of understanding. "Do you still paint? My lady?"

The only time I'd picked up a brush in the last eight years was to paint that cameo of you. "I don't."

I must have glanced down at my hands. Sadha followed my gaze and I saw the dawning horror in her eyes when she noticed my missing finger. "Forgive me," she breathed.

"Oh—" I shook my head, wondering if Hesthas had told her the story about Ryker. About your funeral. "No, it isn't—I don't paint with my left hand. I just haven't, er. . . I just haven't done it in a few years. That's all."

"I understand," she said, evenly, although I saw her breathe a silent sigh of relief.

I considered. ". . . I do miss it. Maybe I'd ought to start again some time."

"You are most welcome to practice on me, your worship. If it pleases you, of course." She laughed shyly and turned away.

Usually I get stopped after these things—people catch me on my way out to bring up something they didn't get the chance to say. But thankfully, after slogging through seventeen pointless courses, no one felt very talkative, and I got to go back to my quarters without any

further fanfare.

I poured myself a glass of water and didn't touch it, just set it on the table and watched it vibrate with the constant, quiet padding of footsteps throughout the palace.

Konstalion came in. I knew it was him without looking, because he has this heavy, clumping walk, and I don't think he's ever knocked on a door in his life; he just strolls inside like an honoured guest.

"Evening, godlet," he grinned. Yizakha must have insisted he braid up his hair in the dwarven fashion for the evening, but he'd already ploughed up her hard work and loosed his long, straw-coloured hair over his shoulders.

"It wouldn't hurt you to knock," I said mildly.

"Sure," he shrugged. "Next time. The ambassador wants me to say you did good tonight."

"Well. That's good." I sipped my water. It tasted of chalk. "Why didn't she come herself?"

"Thought you'd be sick of her face."

My heart dropped. "I couldn't! What makes her think that—?"

"Don't take it personal," suggested Konstalion briskly. "I also have to tell you that Justinia's right hand didn't like your speech."

"All right. . ." I pinched the bridge of my nose until it was sore, then looked up. "Which one is that? Etann?"

"Kaulra. She said since you ended by thanking the Empire, the guests assumed you were going in order; least to highest. Meaning you put the Queen at the bottom, below the elves and the humans."

"For fuck's sake," I said. "For fuck's *sake*. Do *you* understand a fucking whit of this?"

"Don't need to," said Konstalion breezily. "I just stand where they tell me to. Yizakha says it's a fast fix: put the dwarves a little higher tomorrow. But not right next to the Emperor, Kaulra'll think you're being—"

"Fine," I snapped. "Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow."

Konstalion blinked. It occurred to me that Yizakha might have sent him because she was expecting me to react this way. "Tomorrow," he confirmed, winked at me and left.

I got to my feet slowly. The dress felt like lead, like a full set of plate—I couldn't move under it. I shuffled to the wardrobe, grabbed a nightshirt and laid it out over the bed. And I touched the first tiny button on my back, the first in a cascade of forty or fifty tiny buttons like it, and I couldn't.

I collapsed onto the bed and sat forward, with my head in my hands, hearing the blood rush in my ears. Time passed.

Someone knocked. I didn't move a muscle, and prayed whoever it was would go away.

No such luck.

I heard the door open, and then Hesthas' voice, tinged with concern. "Aren't you the very picture of liveliness and joy."

"Ugh," I said into my hands. I looked up, squinting against the bright light of the lamps I hadn't put out yet. He was standing in my doorway, completely unadorned except for a simple sleeveless night-garment. "I think Lucian had the right idea about faking his death."

"Oh, come." He sat down beside me. "Is it all so dire?"

"Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see you. I know how dreadfully taxing these things are."

I opened my mouth to ask whether Sadha knew he was here—but I decided that whatever the answer was, I was better off not knowing it.

"You look beautiful," he went on. "But surely you don't intend to sleep in an evening gown."

I bit my lip and kept a flat expression, hoping I could wait this out. But he touched my cheek, so softly I nearly burst into tears then and there.

"There's so many *bloody* buttons," I relented, my mouth trembling.

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Let me."

I sniffed and turned my back to him. "Thank you."

"Save your thanks." I felt him fiddling unproductively with the first button. "I've not had to contend with this sort of nonsense in a very long while."

"I don't know why they put in so fucking many of them."

"The expectation is, Safiya— *there*, by the flame!" Finally the first button fell open. "—that you have an army of dedicated servants helping you in and out of your various vestments."

"I don't like that," I said. "I barely get any time to myself as it is."

"An occupational hazard, I'm afraid."

"I know that, but I don't have to like it," I said stubbornly.

"That is your right." The third or fourth button came undone. He was moving faster. "Did I intrude upon a moment of crisis just now?"

"No," I said. "I would have been fine."

"But?"

I smiled, half fondly and half out of frustration. "I don't even mind all the rules. Schedules, and speeches, and whatever else. The thing I hate is that. . .becoming Divine—it destroyed every relationship I had, and it makes it impossible to make any new ones."

"And why should that be?" He trailed a slow finger down the exposed part of my back before returning to the latest button. I shivered.

"Everyone's afraid of me, or they kiss up because they want something from me. Sebille can't stick me. Ifan's avoiding me. The closest thing I have to a friend is Ram."

"The Oak boy?"

"Mm-hm," I said, fighting back more tears. "You met him. That should tell you something."

"I understand," he mused. "As a Prince, I thought power had made an island of me. But that was as nothing to the plight of the Emperor."

I bristled. "Er, I don't know how to fucking put this politely, but you have a family. You had me ascend so you could have a family—and that's. . . I've made a bit of peace with that, but don't you bloody well sit there and compare us."

He paused. "And you say this charm and courtesy haven't won you a thriving inner circle? I can't fathom why."

"All I'm saying is there's no comparison, not when you have a wife and children. All right? Don't be a prick."

"Do you hear yourself?" He undid another button, rather more forcefully than necessary. He was in the small of my back now. "In all seriousness. Say what you said once more, and tell me you don't hear yourself *drowning* in self-pity."

"I think I have the right," I said, stubbornly. "I don't have a fucking soul to depend on. If I could have freed my mother, or pieced—" or pieced my Utara's spirit back together, I wanted to say, "—this would have all been worth it, but—"

"There," he interrupted me, and the last button fell open. I faced him again. "Frankly," he said, "If this is what you've been like, then I sympathise with those who turned away." He got to his feet and made to leave.

I stood, too, the dress sloughing off my shoulders. "Hesthas," I called, and, terrified that he would walk out, I took a step, nearly tripping over the pool of skirts under my feet.

"Hesthas."

"I'm listening," he said, dully.

"Do you remember that ship they put us on—on the way to Fort Joy? You tried to appoint me as your slave. You half throttled me."

"I remember."

"I've been so bloody patient with you." My voice broke. I couldn't help it. "Please have a little patience with me."

He stood there, stock-still, halfway to the door. I watched him, my heart nearly beating out of my chest.

When he turned back to me, I sobbed with relief. He closed me in his arms and held onto me. "I'm glad you're here," I mumbled against his neck, pulling him as close as I could. He stroked my hair.

It occurred to me as I stood there that no one had really touched me in more than two years. At least, nothing more than a handshake—or a blow, if I wasn't paying attention during a sparring match.

"I should let you go." I took a steadying breath and stepped back. "We'd both ought to sleep. Tomorrow is a long day."

"Mm," he said. Then, apparently changing his mind: "Have one drink with me."

I glanced at my nightstand. On it sat a small, bulbous bottle of rice wine, along with two glasses. I wondered if that had been his doing. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"We'll consider it a nightcap."

"All right," I shrugged. I didn't want him to leave. "Let me change, though." I turned away, peeled off my slippers and stepped out of the dress. Standing in my underthings, I felt that thrill along my back that told me his eyes were on me. That was fine. I took out the earrings

and unclasped the necklace and set them on the table, then checked around for my nightshirt.

"Here," said Hesthas. I turned. He made a point of letting his gaze travel over my body. My skin heated wherever he fixed his attention. Finally he looked me in the eye and nodded at the foot of the bed, where I'd tossed the shirt.

I picked it up and pulled it over my head. He passed me one of the glasses he'd poured. "To the Divine," he said solemnly.

"Fuck off." I laughed. "To the Emperor."

We clinked our glasses together—the crystal made a delicate, musical sound.

"No. . . entanglements, then, in two years' time." He peered into his glass. "No suitors?"

"You say that like you're surprised." I crossed my legs. "Can you imagine—propositioning the Divine?"

He threw me a smug look. "Yes."

I rolled my eyes. "OK. Let me try again: can you imagine being propositioned *by* the Divine?"

"I imagine that depends entirely upon the Divine." Hesthas threw back his wine and set the glass on the nightstand; an invitation. I did the same. He took my glass from me and leaned forward, pressing me into the bed with the weight of his body.

I ran the tips of my fingers along the soft side of his throat. "Even if I had the chance," I said, hazily, as he pushed the nightshirt up past my thighs, "I didn't really. . . want anyone else."

"I do tend to set a high bar. It's no less a curse than a blessing."

I froze in my tracks like a prey animal. "Y—er—yeah." But he's so sharp. I didn't have a hope of fooling him, and I didn't really want to.

"Ah," he said, coolly. "You'll pardon my presumption."

The locket had fallen out of my shirt when he pushed me to the bed, and, slowly enough that I could stop him if I wanted to, he picked it up, pressed the release, and looked long into the face of the tiny cameo Ulara.

"Hesthas," I said, trying to keep the despair out of my voice. "I love you."

He shut the locket with a sound little *click* and moved away, giving me room to sit up. "I've kept you long enough for one night."

"I wasn't—"

"Don't trouble yourself, b—Safiya. We'll pick this up another time."

"Stay," I pleaded.

"Until tomorrow, my Divine," he said, and touched my cheek again before rising to his feet. "I know you'll do wonderfully."

And I had to watch him leave.

He was the very last person I hadn't turned against me yet—and the only reason it didn't happen sooner is because we hadn't seen each other since I ascended.

Maybe I don't cling to you because I love you so much (although I do)—I do it because you can't hate me. You're not here to tell me what you think. If you *were* here you'd have probably left, too.

It doesn't matter. I need rest if I want to stop any wars from breaking out tomorrow, so: bed.
Saf

Chapter End Notes

something i really liked doing in this fic is that like...a lot of MTDP is trp being very edgy...very wake me up inside...and safiya being like "PLEASE get your head out of your ass"—and here that dynamic is kinda reversed. this chapter ends on a bit of a bumner but there's more of it happening in the next one

Year 3, Day 308

So I lost my temper.

"Lost my temper." I didn't level the palace. I didn't massacre the guests. I didn't so much as harm a hair on Queen Justinia's royal head, I didn't so much as raise my voice, but I'm still the world's biggest villain—all because I couldn't put up with their hopeless godforsaken lumpheaded fucking nattering for one more impossible minute.

It's not fair, if you ask me, but then there are no gods left to preside over fairness.

Let me go back a bit: the last few days have actually been quite productive. I should remember that. The agreement was to draw up a sort of constitution—a set of rules for me to follow, as long as the mortal races did the same. Of course, it's an honour system: no one can really lift a finger against me if I step out of line. But it feels safer to have a Divine bound by rules than one who will just do whatever her heart desires. And I feel safer being bound. It makes me more of a politician than a god, which suits me. (I'm also hoping to prove that I won't become a second Lucian, that I'll act for the good of Rivellon and its people, just as well as I can.)

There were a few things we could all agree on without much debate: I don't have the authority to declare a war, not without a mortal ruler at my back. I can't depose or appoint a ruler without consulting first. I can't involve myself in any legal proceedings outside of Arx, unless I'm specifically asked to do so. (I can always choose to attend, though.) The power I receive from worship and prayer, I can't put toward anything other than fighting the Void.

I'm sure there's more I'm forgetting. But it's a nice list, isn't it?

But this morning, someone—I don't even remember who—brought up the question of trade between nations. That turned into a long-winded discussion about exchange rates. Long-winded, Ulara. I hoped to the stars everyone would forget it during our midday recess, but no. Before long our meeting hall was a marketplace.

I sat by for most of it, a little stupefied, *sure* that any moment now, we would all realise how silly this was, how none of it had anything to do with our stated goal, and we'd move back to discussing additions to the constitution. But the night dragged on, and slowly, very slowly, I understood that it wasn't going to end unless I ended it.

It was midnight, and my councilors were nodding off in their seats during a discussion about how many bales of Southern amaranth would equal a wheelbarrow's worth of raw iron. Yizakha shot me a pleading look and whispered something in my ear about a 'trade summit'.

With a headache screaming in my temples, I stood up. The frenzy in the room didn't die down in the slightest. So I cast a hex of silence. And I closed my eyes for a moment, enjoying the sweet absence of noise, before I spoke. I could have cried, I was so frustrated, but I kept my voice even. "While I understand the necessity of a universally agreed-upon rate of exchange for the many goods that are in circulation between our peoples," I said, tersely, "this is the wrong place and the wrong time. I'll be more than happy to broker, and to attend, a—er—a trade summit, in the near future. Until then, respectfully, I'm closing the matter. Enjoy what's left of your night." Shaking, with every last person in that room staring after me, I left.

My ears were ringing when I got back to my quarters. I wasn't *angry*, not actively, but I was overflowing with fiery energy that refused to ebb. I couldn't sit still. I hoped hoped hoped that no one would come by to talk to me, especially not Yizakha, because I would have blown up at the slightest touch—and no one deserved that, but least of all her. I couldn't *sit still*. I wanted to spar with someone, but that never ends well when I'm wound this tightly. I *couldn't sit still*.

I changed into my nightshirt, but there was no way I could sleep. Instead I paced the room, watching the door, trying to slow my heart rate. And despite having peered at it for so long, I jumped, cursing through my teeth, when the door handle creaked.

"Good evening," said Hesthas. "Or morning, as the unfortunate case may be."

"You should leave," I said curtly.

"Why?" He folded his arms, looking faintly amused as he took me in. "In order to protect myself from your unstoppable Divine wrath?"

I set my jaw. "I don't want to hurt anyone. But it seems to be all I'm good at anymore."

He snorted. "How can you take yourself seriously? Divinity has cast such a pall over your sense of humour, Safiya."

"You're afraid of me, aren't you?" I pushed. "Somewhere?"

And he laughed in my face. "I have placed a knife in your hand and slept soundly. I was beside you when your power was nascent and unpredictable. Leaving aside a wayward bit of Source, you have all the threat and malice of a harvest mouse."

"So you came here to laugh at me."

"My most treasured mouse, I came here to tell you that you did the right thing, because I knew you would tear out your hair for the rest of the night." He sighed. "Would only that you had cut off their prattling *sooner*."

I bit my tongue. "I'm meant to be facilitating a discussion, not throwing about silencing hexes whenever I want."

He shrugged. "Consider that not only was our day intended to end three hours ago, but petty trade matters have no place here, not when our mission is to draft a piece of legislation the contents of which will affect all Rivellon."

"OK. Let's say you're right. D'you think there will be consequences for me?"

"Always. These sorts will take every opportunity to feel offended, maligned or otherwise wronged. Leave them for what they are."

I blew out a breath and dropped onto the bed, and stood up again as if I'd sat on coals. My body wouldn't tolerate the calmness. "Thanks," I said uneasily. "I hope my ambassador feels the same way. I suppose I'll see her tomorrow. So that'll take care of itself. I mean. Even if it doesn't—"

"You seem agitated." That unplaceable amusement was back in his voice.

"Good bloody eye," I snapped, not only restless, but *outraged* that he'd make fun of me while I was in such a shit temper. "I have enough to be agitated about. I don't understand how it could have gone on for so—many—hours without anyone saying a fucking thing!"

He took me by the shoulders to hold me somewhat still. I felt like a moth in a net. "May I make a suggestion, Safiya?"

I chewed my lip. "Do as you like."

"What will your night look like when I leave? You will pace this room endlessly until the morning, and go into tomorrow's talks drowsy and witless."

"That's not a suggestion," I said.

"I'm offering you another option." His hands slid down from my arms to my sides, coming to rest in the curve of my waist. "Hopefully more productive and doubtless more pleasant."

"Oh." My heart soared—and promptly sank again. "I want to. But I can't. Konstalion won't even spar with me when I get like this. It's too dangerous, I don't want to risk hurting you."

Hesthas smirked. "Give me a reason to fear, harvest mouse."

"Don't *call* me that," I growled, backing him into the nearby wall. Of course, that was exactly what he wanted, so he let me do it. I nipped at the side of his throat, as high as I could reach, and he moaned lowly in my ear. There was a little theatre in it, in the sound and in the look he gave me. For the first time that day, I laughed, and I felt the anxious knot of my insides begin to untangle itself.

I kissed along his neck and searched the front of his robe with my hands—a flimsy thing, glossy black fabric. I found a fastening tucked just inside the lapel, near his waist. One little fastening. I undid it, and the robe fell open. Holding my breath, I spread my hands on his chest and left them there for a moment. His skin was as burning-hot as I remembered. I wove a little Hydrosophy and brought a chill to my palms, and I felt each muscle as it stiffened under my touch. He shuddered when I trailed my fingers down the hard expanse of his stomach—I moved closer still, so that the only thing between our bodies was my icy hand.

Leaning forward, I nestled my head in the crook of his shoulder and pressed long, careful kisses into his collarbone—with my hand, meanwhile, I teased at his slit. I was perfectly positioned to hear his sounds. He was putting them on: long low moans the kind I loved, and whimpers, *ah, ah*, that surprised me so starkly I laughed against his neck. My slow kiss became a bite—not a hard one, mind, not the sort that would have left a mark. But I pressed my teeth into his shoulder and thumbed open his soaking slit, and he put a hand in the small of my back to steady himself.

"Ah—Saf—Safiya," he stammered, as if speaking was difficult.

"Mm?" I looked up at him.

He breathed deeply, took me by the shoulders again and, reluctantly, moved me away. Then he pushed off from the wall. "I h—I haven't much time tonight."

"Oh," I said. "That's fine. You didn't want to take another minute to let me—?"

"You misunderstand. My end in coming here was—well. Not *my* end, but yours."

I pressed my lips together. "I was happy watching you." *Put on a good bloody show, too*, I thought.

"And I am joyed to be the subject of your attention," he said, placatingly, "but there is a better use in the time we have."

"What's that?"

He leaned in and took my earlobe in his teeth—just for a moment—but long enough to make my heart race. Sharp; good gods, sharp as needles. It would have taken barely any pressure for him to pierce my skin in twenty places. "Lay me on my back," he murmured, "and bury my head between your thighs."

I laughed again—or—a small, feverish giggle. "Look who planned ahead."

"I always do."

"Er—wait, can you do that? On your back?"

He smiled and let the end of his tail travel along my ankle. "On a soft bed, for a brief while."

"Don't sprain anything for my sake," I said firmly.

"Perish the thought."

"All right." I pulled my shirt over my head. (I hadn't worn your locket since the last time he was here.) "And you'll stop me if I smother you," I added, tossing it aside.

"I don't know," he said, mockingly. Pretending to consider it. "I might find it agreeable."

"Hesthas."

"Fine," he amended. "If I find myself on the verge of an ignoble death by asphyxiation, you will be the very first to know."

I glared at him as I unlaced my bra. "I'm being serious."

"As am I." He slipped off the black robe and laid it over the foot of the bed. After a moment's thought, he picked my shirt up from the floor and draped it beside his. "Murdering the Emperor will hardly improve your diplomatic standing."

"It's not murder if you suggested it," I argued, holding back a laugh.

"Save your appeal for the trial."

"Right." I stepped out of my unders. "Go on, then."

He lay down smoothly, put his hands behind his head and looked up at me with that insufferable air of victory about him. I climbed up onto the bed and touched my ear. I swore I could still feel his bite—obviously that was ridiculous, he'd hardly grazed me, but the memory was vividly sharp on my skin.

"Second thoughts?" he asked, giving me a lazy smile. There was something so carefree about him tonight. One morning on the Lady Vengeance, years ago, he told me that he felt compelled to calm whenever I was upset. Maybe that was it.

"No. I just—" My face heated; I felt my whole body flush. "—teeth," I finished, lamely.

"You won't feel them."

"No?"

"On my life and my honour."

He held out his hand to me. I took it. When I had settled myself on top of him, he put his hands on the backs of my thighs—not to pull me nearer, just holding on to me. I took a

breath, went up on my knees and leaned forward.

"So I—oh!" He licked a hot stripe up the length of my sex, surprising me. "Fucking hell." I felt the rumble of his laughter between my legs. "Go on and laugh," I grumbled. "You—uh—" His tongue had wandered higher up, teasing at the nub there, and I closed my eyes—and he pulled away again. "—fucking—*please*," I gasped, thrusting into his mouth on a raw instinct.

His fingers dug harder into my thighs, and I realised he was provoking me again. I'd give him what he was after, in that case. I ground into his long tongue, over and over, trying to get the friction I wanted, exactly where I wanted it—he found the spot again and pressed his mouth against it—and when I was just on the brink, when each muscle in my legs and my middle was tight with anticipation, he stopped short.

"Please," I groaned, well past the point of self-consciousness. "*Hesthas*. Don't play games, *please*, I can't—" The moment I felt the slightest touch of him against me, I thrust my hips again—taking myself, more or less, with his mouth. He didn't stop me this time; we moved together and I felt the rising relief until I remembered about those teeth, and I wondered that I might gore myself on them if I moved wrong. And I froze—and peaked at the same time, so that I was warm and fluid and cold with terror all at once, and I cried out, a sort of strange hoarse sound.

I drew back, cautiously, and moved off him, trying to get to grips with myself. My heart was pounding, I had goosebumps and I felt phantom teeth on my ear.

Hesthas sat up and observed me for a moment before I burst out laughing. Something in the way he cocked his head—I don't know. Suddenly everything else had a place.

"Your voice did something memorable," he said. "I should commission an aria in the same key."

"I love you," I said, which was as good an explanation as any. I might have also said: I trust you. "Can we try that again?"

He grinned, consciously baring all those sharp teeth at me, and watching for my reaction. "Fortune favours the bold, as they say."

So we tried it again. It's a mental exercise as much as anything else, entertaining the edge of fear without letting it paralyse you.

"I can't get out of my fucking head," I said, flopping onto the bed, more frustrated than ever. "I know you know what you're doing, but I'm in my head."

"It's a skill," said Hesthas softly. "Like any skill, it demands practice."

"You would say that." I looked him up and down, the tail sweeping idly back and forth, the gleaming claws—and those teeth. "You're a walking weapon."

"Oh?" His bearing changed; he propped himself up with his elbow and looked intently at me. "From my point of view, dearest: you are the Divine. Anything you wish to do to me is made manifest with a thought. I am at your mercy," he said, with relish, "before you are at mine."

That was a long fucking way from 'harvest mouse,' but it had the intended effect; I was giddy, my skin prickled. "Give it one more go, then?" I suggested, in a trembling voice.

"As you like."

This time, with his fingers digging into my thighs, I tried to imagine myself invincible; I moved more easily—taking myself, as before, and trying to ignore the threat of sharp teeth altogether.

I managed it that time—it was deceptively easy. At the final moment, one of those teeth really did glance me. Not the point, only the smooth edge brushed the inside of my thigh. There it was, a brief cold rush down the back of my spine, the rest of me pulsing. My blood rang in my ears.

"That was promising," said Hesthas, once I'd given him some room to speak.

I had no words. What I felt was a fantastic contradictory burst of joy and fear, that seemed to have burned all the remnant anxiety out of me. "You did that on purpose," I said, beaming. "You bit me."

"Hardly a bite," he scoffed, although he neglected to answer the question.

"That was perfect." I didn't mean it to be flowery: strategically speaking, this was what we'd set out to do. The nervous energy that had strung me so tightly was gone in the space of a moment.

He gave me a lingering look, then glanced aside. "We might take advantage of our victory and try to sleep a few hours."

"Mm," I said, and pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "Thank you."

"My sincere pleasure." He stood and slipped into his robe again.

"Come by another night," I suggested. "We'll even the score."

"Tempting," said Hesthas. "Until the morning, Safiya."

It was already morning. The darkness outside was beginning to lift. I wrapped myself in the many soft blankets, tired to my bones and fabulously comfortable.

Tomorrow might be better.

Saf

Year 3, Day 317

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ula—

We're halfway! The idea is that our final written constitution will contain twenty-four clauses to start, and yesterday we set down the twelfth, so we've taken today to—not to celebrate, obviously, there's more work to be done—but to rest.

It's been very pleasant. The halls are bustling with people, finally taking a moment to explore this massive palace, seeing what fun they can make. I played a game of Four Heads with the human envoy, the way it's meant to be played—hours long, bitter, full of lies and backstabbery, so that your cards are trembling in your hands by the final round. Fucking amazing.

I mentioned that the human envoy is bloody enormous, didn't I? We sat in a massive circle to begin our game—with a short, dark-skinned young woman in the centre loudly explaining the rules and assigning teams of four. I was half listening, but mostly daydreaming, caught up in the simple bliss of playing a game with other people.

"Any pledgers?" asked the woman at last. "This'll be a rubbish game or we need a pot worth winning."

"Here," said a man—I looked up sharply, recognising his voice. Ifan was across the circle from me, unhooking one of his earrings; a small horn, maybe, or a tusk, delicately carved and with a gold setting. He slid it into the centre of the circle. While the woman inspected it, Ifan caught sight of me, and his eyes flashed—same as ever, startlingly green. He shot me a small smile.

"This'll do," confirmed the woman in the middle. "Anyone else?"

"Here," I said, and took the chain of freshwater pearls from around my neck. (Yizakha is going to murder me.) There was a lot of murmuring and elbow-nudging when I put the necklace down.

"Everyone see this?" called the woman, inspecting the necklace bead by bead. "You've got a chance at the Divine's own pearls!"

"You're not going to cheat and win them back, your Holiness?" cried someone from the crowd.

I blinked, and the entire circle went quiet. Finally I let out a stunned laugh. "I'd be a bit of a shit Divine if I cheated at Heads," I said, before I could think about it.

And the awful silence broke into guffaws and chattering. Someone bellowed 'hear, hear!'. "OK!" I added, over the din. "If I *do* happen to win, second place gets the pearls."

"Can't say fairer than that," grinned Ifan, looking straight at me.

The woman in the centre of the circle collected a few more pledges, mostly more small bits of jewelry. One man offered up a fantastic velvet cloak. Whoever won the game was going to be suddenly very well-dressed.

I actually don't know who won in the end. I lost my last head just before the groups broke up and it was every one for herself. In the meantime, I'd had to stop three fistfights, four people had fainted from the pressure (and probably the muggy, crowded heat of the room), and one had burst into tears—not disappointed because he'd lost, but relieved that he wouldn't have to spend the next three hours tearing out his hair and could just enjoy the spectacle.

Ifan had lost the round before mine, and I'd watched him walk out of the room and turn right. So when I was out of the running, I walked out of the room, and I turned right. I found myself in a long hallway tiled in pink and gold. Several small, high windows cast squares of sunlight onto the shadowy floor. Something smelled *terrible*.

"Hey," said Ifan, stepping into a yellow patch of light.

He'd surprised me, but I managed not to shriek. "Hey," I said uncertainly. "Still. . .skulking?"

"Hard habit to break," he said. "It's cool in this wing, and no one ever passes through. Good place for a smoke."

"Ah," I said, catching sight of the long cigarette poking out between his lips. "Bitter-leaf, right?"

"Want some?"

"No," I snapped.

He narrowed his eyes, trying to read me.

"No," I reiterated, more calmly. "I don't like the smell."

"Shall I put it out?"

"I'll live, don't worry. It's just not for me."

"All right." He shrugged and took another drag, letting the dark smoke billow out through his nostrils. I tried not to breathe.

"So—" I began.

"I owe you an apology," Ifan interrupted me.

"What?"

"Maybe not an apology, but a word. I, er—" He stood up straighter and ran a hand through his hair. "Look, it's a bit sour for me. To have a Divine on the throne, after everything I did to keep it from happening."

"You have—"

"Saf, just let me. I thought it might be all right, knowing you a little, or thinking so, anyway. But then we found out, Sebille and me, about Sadha and everything else, and I thought I'd just helped to crown a second Lucian. Maybe worse."

I frowned. "I—"

"*Let me*," he cut in, and stubbed the fresh cigarette forcefully on his boot before continuing. "That was a couple of years ago. You've been nothing but fair since then, as far as I can tell. Rebuilding with the elves. Cleaning up the city. Maybe I don't know you after all, but I know Lucian. I know he'd have never agreed to a meeting like this. And if you dragged him by his

ear, he'd have never let them put down a word to tie up his power."

"You'd know me better if you hadn't stayed out of my way since I came back," I said, and I couldn't keep from sounding resentful.

He twirled the dead cigarette in his fingers. "You want to dodge my point? Fine. I'm sorry I opened my mouth."

I bit hard into my cheek. "What's your point?"

"My point is I have a bit of hope. More than I had after you ascended, and—maybe more than I had in the years before."

"Oh. All the better, right?"

"Yeah," he said, and smiled tightly at me. "I, er, trust harder on the second go. I'm not there yet. But you might see more of me if you keep on like this."

"I'd like that," I said. "I'd like your input on more of my decisions. Coming from you, I mean, not from a sealed report."

"No promises. I'll see what I can do."

I worried my lip between my teeth. "D'you think Sebille—?"

"I can't say. I, er—" Ifan sighed through his nose. "I don't think your chances are good."

"Yeah," I said. "I can't really blame her."

"No, you can't," he said shortly. "I'll see you," he added, and disappeared down the corridor.

I stood for a few moments, just thinking, until I looked out the window and my heart dropped through the floor—I had agreed to meet Sadha on the palace roof at noon. (Nothing scandalous. I was going to paint her portrait!) With the card game and Ifan, it had completely slipped my mind. I sprinted to the stairwell, unbuttoning my dress as I ran to reveal the plain

white shift and stained apron I was wearing underneath.

Sadha smiled her serene smile at me when I came up, bright pink and breathing hard. "Ah," she said.

"Your Majesty, I'm so sorry," I panted. "The human envoy stuck me in this ridiculous card game that got out of hand, and I—"

"Your worship," she said, holding up a hand. "I am very pleased that you had some leisure. You deserve it more than anyone."

I paused for a moment, listening for a trace of sarcasm in her tone. I found none. "You're too generous," I said, putting my hair up to keep it out of any paint. "I shouldn't have kept you waiting for anything, let alone a card game."

"That game of the heads? I used to play it with the human servants when I was a girl. I understand its dangerous allure," she said conspiratorially. "Please, take your time. Drink something."

There was a tall glass ready for me. Some sort of dark liquor, by the taste, although it was watery and thin. I realised, with a new stab of guilt, that there had been ice at the bottom, and that it had melted while I was dawdling downstairs. I drank it all, looking about me as I did.

We'd talked about this, she and I, every night at dinner, when I was in my seat of honour and she was at my left side.

She had been the one to bring it up—again, and again, for four nights before I relented. I had told her I'd like to do a few sketches first, and I wouldn't touch a brush until I had a sketch I was happy with. I might not touch a brush at all, in one afternoon. I wanted a simple setting. I wanted natural light. I wanted her in plain clothes, not the lush robes she always wore. Every condition I set, she would bow her head, smile sweetly, and say 'of course'.

I saw the result now. I hadn't been to the palace roof before, but I expected it to be packed with great plants—banana leaves and palm fronds, maybe a snake or two, or a lion kept as a pet. But the roof was almost entirely bare, except for a carpet, a handful of cushions, a side table for the drinks, and an easel for me. Sadha herself—I hadn't properly looked at her, I had been too busy apologising, but now she took my breath away. She was dressed simply by her standards, in a linen dress, carefully dyed to the exact blue colour of her eyes. My eyes almost couldn't make sense of her, blood-red, shimmering scales against that pure, cold blue.

She had caught me staring and smiled uncertainly. "Is this anywhere in the realm of your vision, my lady?" she asked, half nervous and half teasing.

"It's perfect," I said. "Thank you for doing this. I hope I didn't put you out. I know I can be very particular."

"Of course not," she said. "It was my initiative, after all. And," she added, thoughtfully, "I believe I am quite disposed to the idea of an. . .informal piece. I would so love it if, years from now, an onlooker saw your portrait of me and thought me as fascinating as I thought your mother, my lady."

"I try to paint what I see," I said, picking out a sharp bit of charcoal. "I saw a fascinating woman then. I see one now."

"Do you?" She touched the collar of her dress, maybe expecting to find a gold chain to toy with. "I think of myself in. . .different terms."

"Guarded," I suggested, and made a few light Sadha-shaped strokes on my page.

"Guarded. As a valuable treasure is." She grinned into her lap, sharing a joke with herself. "I'm afraid I haven't much experience with this sort of thing."

"No?" I asked. "I thought someone with your status would have had one done twice a year."

"My existence was a grand secret until just recently, remember. It seemed poor practice to make images of me."

I started to see why she had been so eager about this. "Is this your first portrait, then?"

"Oh, no," she rushed, "No. My husband and I had one made together, on the occasion of our wedding. A very lovely piece, of course, beautifully done. But both of us so smothered with finery, and so impassive. I don't believe anyone could look at that picture and see Sadha of Law as she truly is. Am I impeding your work? Should I speak?"

"What? Oh—" I smiled briefly at her. "I'm only sketching. You can speak. But it would help me if you kept your eyes on me."

"Of course," she said, and fixed her gaze on me so intently I felt like I was the model, and she the painter.

"I meant to congratulate you on your wedding," I said, absentmindedly, as I worked. "I would have loved to be there, only. . ."

"The fault was ours. We knew that few guests were likely to make the trip on such short notice, and so soon after a new Ascension, but we wanted to be married at the very first opportunity." She smiled. "I must admit, I don't regret a bit of it."

"I'm glad you two are happy together," I said, honestly. "One second. I'm going to take a new page."

Charcoal wasn't the right tool, I decided. As I dug around for a pencil, footsteps sounded in the stairwell.

"Curious," said Hesthas, casting a look around the bare roof terrace.

Sadha smiled sunnily up at him. "Dearest. The Lady Divine is taking my portrait."

"Is she."

"Preparing to," I corrected. "At some point in the future. When there's time. I'm only sketching for now."

He cleared his throat. "It is not, of course, my place to question your craft, your Holiness. I have my humble doubts, however, about the necessity of remodelling our rooftop and forcing all those poor parrots into exile for the sake of a few sketches."

"Parrots?" I asked, half-laughing as Sadha threw him a withering look.

"I'm very partial to them," she said, folding her arms—and then unfolding them quickly when she remembered her pose. "What was I saying?"

"Have you dismissed your guard, as well, Sadha?" asked Hesthas. There was a warning edge to his voice—meant for me, not her.

Finally I looked up at him. I was expecting fury; I saw fear.

"I didn't—" I began.

"It was my decision," said Sadha sternly. "Now. I was telling the Divine about our wedding." She turned back to me. "It was really very lovely. Even our hatchlings attended, as well as they were able. Oh!" She seemed to remember something. "My eldest daughter, whom you've met, is named for you."

I put down my pencil and looked into Hesthas' face. ". . .What?"

"Only one name of many, as you know," he explained, refusing to meet my eye. "Naming children in the honour of the Divine is common practice, even here. The stars only know how many little Lucians have lolloped about during the past age."

"I—I'm honoured," I said, catching myself. "Sorry," I told Sadha, who had started to look dismayed. "I *am* honoured. I was just a bit shocked. No one's ever named a child for me."

"Surely there must have been dozens by now," she said brightly.

I felt vaguely ill. "I. . .suppose so."

"I'll leave you to your art," said Hesthas. "Will I see you both at dinner?"

"Yes, my love," said Sadha, and reached out with her hand. He stooped to kiss her, then nodded to me and made himself scarce.

We sat in silence after that. She folded her hands in her lap to keep from fidgeting, but every so often her gaze would wander off, and I would remind her, and her eyes would snap back to mine like the lash of a whip, catching me off guard every time. Not to be a poet about it, but I really had never seen eyes so blue.

"Am I making you nervous, your Majesty?" I asked, when I was tired of playing hide-and-seek with those eyes.

"No," she sighed. "If you are, it is no fault of yours. I just—it is. . .different, being the sole object of attention. I haven't a husband, nor an armour of jewels to shield me."

"Oh," I said. "I wouldn't know. I've never been on the other end."

"Shall we call a brief pause?" She stood, without waiting for an answer. "I'll call for drinks. One of the elven dignitaries gifted us an excellent banana rum. I wish to share it with you."

"That—sounds lovely," I said helplessly, and within minutes, attendants were bringing up wide, squat glasses of something cream-coloured and deadly sweet. Crystals of lemon sugar were clustered on the rim of the glass. Some of them crumbled onto the table when Sadha touched my glass with hers; the late gold of the afternoon sun set her scales alight.

"To her Holiness, Divine Safiya bin-Zayna," she said gravely.

I hadn't felt much from the watery liquor, but this banana concoction went straight to my head, and I burst out laughing. "To her Majesty, Empress Sadha of the House of Law. I'm sorry," I spluttered, "I don't know why I'd laugh."

She grinned, although she was confused. "That's quite all right."

"No, I—really," I said, when I had myself under control. "I'm not making fun, I just—it doesn't always feel real. All of this, for me."

"I believe I understand," she said. "It can be trying for me, and I have been trained for it from the day of my birth. It must be a terrible, continuing shock for you."

"Well." I trailed off. I was secretly very glad someone felt as sorry for me as I sometimes feel for myself. "I suppose it has its upsides. I could never have dreamed I'd be on the roof of the Imperial Palace, sharing a drink with the Red Empress."

"I consider your presence an upside, for my own part," she said, giving me a long look. Then she seemed to fluster and quickly finished her drink. "Come. The sun will soon set."

We settled back in, she on the carpet and I in front of her, with a pencil and a page. I don't know if it was me being so charming or the drink—probably the drink—but Sadha seemed much more comfortable under my gaze. She told me about her youth as a Princess of the House of Law. I listened as well as I could, trying to draw the version of her that was slowly unfurling itself for me.

I didn't get to paint, but I had enough to make a start with, once I was back in Arx and could find a decent canvas.

"Perhaps I'll come to Arx to sit for you," she mused. "I have yet to see the city of my Divine."

"We'd be honoured to have you, your Majesty," I said, packing up the pages I wanted to keep. "Thank you very much for your patience, and your company."

"Thank you for yours," she said.

Together we watched the sun, blood-red, dip below the horizon.

Sadha sighed and adjusted one of the sleeves of her thin dress. "I should hurry back to my quarters. If I attend dinner in a glorified chemise, I am certain to hear of it."

"I should go, too. I'm not much better off." I had charcoal stains all down my front, and a few on my sides, where the apron hadn't saved me.

"Hold," she said, looking into my face. She licked the pad of her thumb and rubbed gently at a spot on my cheek. "A. . .smudge," she explained.

"Thank you," I said, and excused myself, blushing furiously.

Yizakha wasn't waiting for me in my room tonight; I supposed she trusted me to pick something out for myself. I chose a gown the colour of a nightshade flower, and put up my hair with the golden pin. The necklace of pearls would have been a nice touch, but that was gone. Smiling, I decided to leave my neck bare. Maybe the new owner of the pearls would notice and feel tremendously proud of themselves.

I was half-expecting the knock on the door as I tried to poke a jeweled stud through my earlobe. "It's open," I called.

Hesthas came in, dressed in his usual, copious black and gold robes.

"It was her idea," I said before he could open his mouth. I was having a good day, and I wanted a good, nonsense-free end to it. "You know that. She brings it up every night."

"And you thought it wise to accept," he said finely.

"I don't see the harm. Am I supposed to avoid her?"

He clasped his hands behind his back and studied the room. I saw the troubled swish of his tail, rippling his robes. "I should like to see your work."

I put a protective hand on my pile of sketch pages. "You're winding yourself up over nothing."

"You'll forgive me my distrust," he drawled. "I have not survived this long by virtue of credulousness and sentimentality."

"I have." I grinned. "Go find your wife. I'll see you in the dining hall."

"Before I leave—" He sighed shakily. "You do know how it would shatter me?"

I finally forced the stud through my ear, and tweaked the wire on the end so it would stay in place. "I know."

"I leave it in your hands," he said, and turned away briskly—embarrassed, maybe.

"Sadha is her own person," I pointed out, before he could leave. "And she's your wife. If you're worried, take it up with her."

He turned back and watched me, silently. I marked how different his eyes were from Sadha's—the bright gold of a candle flame, igniting his gleaming scales.

The corner of my mouth twitched. "Have you told her? About—"

"Careful. Even the Divine may overstep herself," he said, in a low voice. "I will say this once. Sadha was brought up, as I was, not to inquire after—potentially displeasing matters."

"And what does that mean? She won't ask you whether or not you've stepped out, and you can't ask her not to do the same bloody thing?"

"I have been faithful to her, and I have been unfaithful. Unless she should ask, neither is a lie." He smoothed the front of his robes. "I don't expect you to understand."

"Just as well, because I don't."

"Until dinner," he said, and left.

I think I had the most awkward dinner of my life, Sadha at my left hand and Hesthas at my right, but I can't be sure, because I had the good sense to get terribly drunk. Yizakha was nowhere to be seen; I honestly think she might have slept through this entire day. I hope so. She needs the rest.

I can't believe I'm saying this, but I can't wait for the talks to start again tomorrow. Look at what happens when we have free time on our hands.
Saf

Chapter End Notes

OK LOTS of things here...i really don't go in for love triangles—i mean i do but it feels like manufactured tension most of the time. however like. we literally get a line from trp about how "if i saw you and sadha together it would break my heart" or something. so what can i do except conclude that he is a hypocritical little man who doesn't want to share?

THAT SAID this whole chapter feels like the most blatant fucking sequel bait, doesn't it? i am thinking of doing another short(ish) fic a year later where sadha does come to arx and maybe we get to hear from her all the things trp tends to leave unsaid re: how the empire is functioning, what their marriage is like, etc. but we'll see

Year 3, Day 341

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ulara—

Ulara whom I love.

It's done, we're finished, I can go *home*. We have a brand new constitution, and I can go home. I'm going to board that ship and lock myself in my quarters until we dock in Arx.

The ships set out early tomorrow morning; tonight was a celebration. For me, that didn't mean much more than that I had to give another speech, and that I had to sit through more courses than usual. Delicious, all of it, obviously, but—just—so much.

I finally wore one of those pure white gowns Yizakha had wanted me to put on, that first morning. It seemed like the right time. I looked *ridiculous*; it was the sort of monstrosity under which you need a corset, so I couldn't properly breathe, and the bodice was so heavy with diamonds I thought I would tip over.

My celebration was getting back to my room, struggling out of the dress, and lazing around on the great soft bed in my underthings, with a glass of wine in hand. It was only late into the evening that I decided I should have a bath, since I'd be missing that luxury for weeks on the return voyage.

The black marble tiles were cold under my feet. I studied my own face in the mirror. My eyelashes were sticky with mascara. Yizakha had put something white and sparkling on my eyelids, and something brownish on my cheeks that made them look gaunt. I supposed it was meant to be striking and fashionable.

I turned on the hot water and let the bath fill itself up while I rinsed the various powders and creams from my face. When I looked up again, my skin was raw from the way I'd scrubbed, and the faint outline of lipstick was still about my mouth, but I was myself.

I saw the wrinkles, shallow little things, beginning between my eyebrows and around my eyes. I wondered if I would let them continue. Safiya the Very Old and Venerable—or Safiya of Eternal Youth. I wanted a few grey hairs at least, in my temples, where my mother was starting to get them in the months before she died.

There was an array of delicately blown glass bottles on the edge of the bathtub. I'd been trying a different one each time I took a bath, and I hadn't gotten even halfway through them all. I picked out a pink one in the shape of a blossom—a few drops in the water, and a layer of bright, fuchsia-coloured foam sprang into being, thickening the air with the scent of berries. I dangled my feet in the hot water until there was enough to lie in, and then I took off my underthings and sank into the steamy, fragrant water. It was a little too hot. I lay still until my body settled.

I don't know how long I was in there, with my eyes closed, halfway floating. I do know that when I opened them again, the water was deathly cold, and I dragged myself out of the tub and towelled off the dregs of the foam. I combed a bit of coconut oil through my hair and tied it up high, so it wouldn't drip into my neck.

Every night there was a freshly laundered silk bathrobe on the rack, waiting for me. Freshly laundered even on nights when I didn't bathe—I knew, because the robes changed colours each day. Tonight's was a deep green. I quite liked it, I thought, wrapping it around me and tying the slim, braided belt about my waist.

I sprawled across the bed, pleasantly groggy and warm in all my limbs, but not yet ready to sleep and face the morning. I was reaching for the half-empty glass of wine on my nightstand when Hesthas came in, without so much as a courtesy knock. I could guess at his intentions—he was in the same glossy night-robe as last time, which would fall open if I only touched that fastening.

He was carrying a wooden box—he set it down on my table.

"d'you bring a gift?" I grinned, sitting up.

"Something of that order," he said vaguely, and sat down beside me.

"Hey," I said—still grinning. "We're done!"

"So we are." He touched my cheek the way he does, caressing with the backs of his fingers. "My congratulations. You have carried yourself beautifully."

"I'm going to go *home*," I sighed, and lay back down. "Only it's made me think—I'm not at home in Arx anymore. I'll probably be trekking through the Elven forests again. Which is fine, but I'd like my own place. Do you think I could take a false name and buy a house somewhere?"

He laughed. "You certainly might try. But Divine Safiya is a memorable figure. Nine-fingered, to begin," he touched the spot on my left hand where my pointer finger had been torn away. "Half an elf," he added, following the blunt point of my ear with his thumb. "And. . ." He moved my robe aside, baring my breast with its golden piercing. "That is certainly distinctive."

"I don't think—hmm—" I put my hand in the back of his neck as he leaned down and ran his tongue over my nipple, dragging the gold bar along. "I don't think the good people of Reaper's Coast will be doing any full-body inspections."

"Please. You can do far better than Reaper's Coast."

"It was only an example."

He took hold of my wrists and pinned them to the bed above my head, so I had nothing to do but look up at him as he looked down at me. "You've Source behind your eyes, beloved," he said at last. "There is no disguising that."

"There goes that idea, then." I smiled listlessly.

"Stay here," he urged, taking my wrists in one hand as the other slipped under the green silk and parted my thighs. "In the city. You'll be hardly *incognito*, but no one will pester you."

"I can't do that—Hesthas—" I clenched my hands into fists when he started to make those slow, infuriating circles with his thumb; I had nothing else to hold onto. "You know. . .ah. You know I need to stay in—in Arx, and even if I didn't, love, please just—"

He smiled to himself; his hand was slow and torturous. "It doesn't take very much at all to ruffle you, does it? Where *has* your stamina gone?"

I couldn't move—he still had my hands—except to lift my hips up against his touch. Taking pity on me, he moved a little faster, and I shuddered, breathing shallowly, until he took his hand away. Suddenly I was on the verge of desperate, disappointed tears. He opened his mouth to say something clever, but I cut him off. "Hesthas," I said roughly. "Look at me. I can't have games. Please."

When he saw my face, he let my hands go. "All right," he said, softly, and kissed my neck.

"You don't have to let me go," I said.

He took my wrists again and, as if he'd read my mind, held them tighter than before—and he put a little of his weight on me as he leaned forward, enough to flare up the old, instinctive comfort I used to feel when I woke up beside him. He nudged my legs apart again—my thighs, still damp with water, stuck together a little—and went to work with his hand, steadily. I was so fast I surprised myself.

"Sorry," was the first thing I said, while he lay beside me. "My stamina really has gone."

"Your circumstances are difficult, beloved. I won't add to your frustration," he assured me, in such a low, sweet tone, I could have wept.

I bit my lip. "You aren't. I just always think—it's never going to be enough. Every time you're here, I'm already thinking of how I'll miss you when you've left."

"None of that," he said firmly. "I am here, and I love you."

I closed my eyes. "Say that again?"

"I am here," he whispered, taking my hand and lacing my fingers with his, "and I love you."

"All right," I said, and tried not to think of ships, of the morning, of your portrait in Arx, of being adrift on the endless sea.

He kissed the back of my hand and sat upright. "Would you like to see what I brought?"

"I would," I said, watching him as he went to the table and picked up the wooden box. It was a little longer than it was wide. I had an idea in the back of my mind, but I waited until he sat down again and set the box on the bed between us.

"Do open it," he said, folding his arms.

I grabbed the lid and made a point of lifting it just as slowly as I could. He scoffed lightly, trying to cover his eagerness.

The box was lined with a sheet of soft velvet, to protect the contents. Nestled in that bed of velvet was a slender jade cock. The cloudy stone was polished to a sheen, and as smooth as skin, though much colder. I weighed it in my hand. It wasn't straight, as I'd thought—there

was a soft curve in it.

"There's more," he prompted.

"What?—oh." I lifted the corner of the velvet sheet; underneath, a jumble of leather straps and a small phial of clear oil. "Rhalic's eyes," I swore.

"Do you recall what we talked about, that night in the hold of the Lady Vengeance?" He rested his hand on my thigh. "I haven't forgotten for a moment."

"But—this fucking thing?" I stared down the jade piece. "This is a blunt weapon. I—I'm happy to do it," I went on, before he could speak, " *more* than happy, but you'll have to clear your bloody evening. Or—have you tried it out before?"

He shook his head no. "I meant it for you."

"And—no one else in the meantime?"

"None."

"Yeah," I said, secretly pleased. "What I said. We need to be able to take our time, or I'm not going to do this. Do we have time?"

"All the time in the world," he said. I was on the point of calling him a liar; he shot me a knowing smile. "We have time enough," he amended.

"All right. I—er—I want you on your back. Can you manage that for very long? We won't do it if it bothers you, but I want to see you."

"Easily arranged," he promised. We stripped the pillows from my bed and made a nest of them—he lay across them on his back, craning his neck to look down the length of his body at me.

"You can relax," I said, and undid that single fastening in his robe, laying him bare. "I'm here. You'll know I'm here."

For all the hell he had given me about my being sensitive, he was trembling before I ever touched him. I played my fingers along the line of his neck; I held down his arms. He chuckled and pretended to resist me, and I drew back with a giddy laugh when I felt his muscles working under my hands. I forget, sometimes. Exactly how strong he is.

I took my time about him. I kissed down the hard plates of his chest, his stomach, and paused. "You don't feel very much here, do you?" I asked.

"Not strictly. But there is something wondrous in it—that!" he said, when I kissed the plated skin again. "You might compare it to—living through the memory of a kiss."

"I'm not a memory yet," I said, and looked lower—let my lips brush against his slit, near enough that he would feel my breaths, and I could feel the heat of him, shaking with impatience.

There were so many things I was tempted to do; to put an ice charm on my hands before I touched him again; or to pull away now and watch him try to collect himself. But I'd meant what I said: no games, not tonight.

He twitched; not—bucking his hips the way I'd done, but just these little starts in the base of his stomach to bring my mouth nearer. Just then, the end of my belt touched my leg, and I thought of something—so I broke my word for a moment, and pulled away.

"Promise," I soothed, as he let out a low, tormented sigh, "love, sorry, *promise* I won't fuck about after this. But I've had an idea, and I want to hear what you think."

"Speak, then," he muttered. I smiled to hear him sound so sullen. I'd make it up to him.

"I want to bind your hands," I said, slowly, "but I can't decide whether—you won't be able to t—"

"Bind me," he said.

I crossed my fingers behind my back. "You could stand to ask nicely."

He sat upright and looked straight into my eyes. "Please, Safiya," he said, without a moment's hesitation. "*Please* bind me."

It was what I'd wanted to hear, but I had no idea how badly I had wanted to hear it. Every drop of blood in my body seemed to rush to my head. With my mind reeling, I fumbled to undo the knot about my waist. Hesthas laughed, moved my hands out of his way, and opened the knot easily. My robe came open; I felt the humid air on my skin. Flustered as I was, I refused to look at him and see his self-satisfied smile as he offered me his wrists.

At least I hadn't forgotten how to do this bit. The belt was really just a rope-length of braided silk. I knelt in front of him, gave the rope a few experimental tugs, and then passed it around his wrists and tied it fast. "Is that all right?" I asked.

He reached out with his newly-bound hands and lifted my chin with the tip of his claw, making me look up at him. For a moment, he was silent, watching my face flush all over again as I took in the sight of him. "Take me," he said, barely at a whisper, and lay back again.

I groaned, and felt—almost annoyed with myself. He had done more to me with a few words than I'd done to him all night. I decided now was a good time to put on the jade cock; I slid it into the leather harness and fastened the straps around my waist and my thighs. Grinning to feel the weight of the thing between my legs, I gave it a few familiar strokes.

There was going to be no more preamble. I leaned close and licked up the length of his slit—his breath caught with surprise, and I remembered he couldn't see what I was doing, and that made me bold. Plying his inner thighs with my hands, I ran my tongue along his centre, that same spot, mercilessly, until he was shivering and the head of his cock slowly emerging.

I reached over and found the tiny bottle of oil, and covered my finger thoroughly in it. "Ready?" I asked.

"Go on, Safiya—ah. . ." He gasped a little. I had one hand around his cock, and with the other was, carefully, easing one finger inside him.

"That's all of it," I said softly. "Tell me when I can move."

He was quiet for a while, breathing as slowly and calmly as ever. "All right," he said, finally.

I moved, very slowly, in and out, with my other hand still on his cock, making lazy strokes. He kept nearly silent for all those long minutes. Point of pride. That was all right; I'd make him sing sooner or later.

My heart was pounding when I finally straightened and emptied the last of the oil into my palm, covering the smooth, chill surface of the jade cock. Now, standing, straight-backed, I saw him beneath me the way I'd been dreaming: with his clever hands resting, powerless, above his head, his chest rising and falling feverishly, his thighs gleaming with oil and parted for me. "OK. Ready?" I asked, breathlessly.

Now that he could see me, I had no defense against the overpowering look of need in his eyes. "*Take me*," he said, for the second time. He moaned aloud when I entered him, and I saw his arms jerk—he wanted to take himself in hand, or to touch me, and he couldn't.

We waited. I walked my fingers along his thighs, feeling happier than I could remember being in months. I pressed a kiss to the head of his cock. "Hesthas."

"Safiya." He was managing to sound very calm; that little half-smile of his was undaunted.

"I love you," I said. "I've never seen you look as good as you do right now."

"I'll look better still in a moment. Whenever you're ready, that is," he smirked—as if *I* was the one we'd been waiting for; even now, he was trying to get under my skin.

So I moved inside him, rolling my hips to press the curve of my cock just there—and he cried out. He was louder than I'd ever heard him, that rich, beautiful voice rising and rising, pleading with me *faster*, pleading *harder*, *for gods' sakes*—then it was only my name—then a slew of Empire curses—his muscled arms strained against their silk bindings with how badly he wanted to take hold of me, the sheets, something.

"It's all right, love," I said, with a gentleness that was cruelty at this point. "I'm here. It's all right. You can let go."

He came with a long breath, so choked that it was approaching a sob—wracked with little spasms over his whole body; his tail flicked against the inside of my leg.

I pulled out of him gradually, by stages, then took off the harness so it wouldn't be in my way, and set it aside. I came back and licked the trails of come from his stomach. When he'd calmed a bit, he sat up, and I unbound him. The moment his hands were free, he pulled me close—we sat like that, in our tarnished robes, me with my head on his shoulder, smelling the berry soap I'd bathed in and the coppery heat of his skin.

When the sun, forcing its way through the gaps in my curtains, began to throw yellow bars of light across the floor of my room, he stirred.

"Stay," I murmured.

He smoothed away the hairs that were falling out of my bun. "As you well know, as I sorely regret—"

"—you can't," I said for him. "You can take tonight to remember me by, though," I grinned.

"That I will." His arm around my waist tightened. "My dreams will be pale spectres of the real thing, but I must content myself."

"Do you dream about me?"

"Often. It will be oftener when you are away again." He sighed. "I love you," he reminded me. "Let that be a comfort, when you are on the open sea."

I squeezed his thigh. "I'll see you in the morning. Later in the morning."

He kissed the side of my neck, the way he would do when we woke up together in the cabin of the Lady Vengeance, and stood up, looking at me as though he was committing me to memory, as rumpled and sweaty and delighted as I was. "Until the morning, then," he said, and left.

I found the locket I hadn't worn in weeks, with your tiny cameo inside (I'd stashed it in a pocket of my plain travelling dress. I was relieved to have it around my neck again.)

Probably best that Hesthas left when he did; it was only an hour, or less, before Yizakha came in to help haul me into a white dress—the one with the feathers, unfortunately. Maybe she was doing it to get back at me for that first day; she knew I wouldn't put up a fight this time. The crest of feathers stuck out half an arm's length in all directions.

But the ceremony itself was bearable. Short. The Emperor and Empress came out in person to watch us go. Sadha took my hands and promised to join me in Arx some time, and Hesthas—I was already on the point of tears when I saw him in his Emperor's finery. All black, that morning, and me in white. I suppose he meant to save me from snivelling in front of my council and all the other dignitaries; he made fun of my feathers, under his breath, so no one

else could hear, and my impending sob became a laugh. And that was all. We'd already parted in my room—this was just duty.

After a series of lengthy speeches from each leader, we all took to the harbour. The moment we were at sea, I went down into my quarters and peeled off the dress, and saw the golden chain of the locket around my neck. (You're in my head all the time since I started this again, do you know that?)

I changed into something simple, and then I brought the locket onto the top deck and gave it to Arhu. I asked him to do with it whatever he pleased. Maybe he threw it into the sea once I had turned my back.

I think I should stop writing.

Wish me a safe trip?
Saf

Chapter End Notes

how long have i had this damn scene in my head with nowhere to put it...
anyway! thanks for reading this far!! and once again please leave a comment if you have thoughts <3

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