

The Witch and the Assassin

1341 IC

Yelena, the Witch of Sebitti, strode down the halls of her mountain castle, the heels of her sandals clicking on the marble floors. She looked every inch a queen: tall and curvy, pale and golden-haired, wearing an ornate, shimmering white robe that clung to her curves, with a high collar and low cleavage. She passed a servant who was cleaning one of her statues, and who gave her a nervous curtsy before hurrying away. The witch could feel the tension in the air; all of her followers knew that she was in a bad mood thanks to an attempted assassination. None of them knew just how close the assassin had come.

Reaching a section of the wall framed as though it were a doorway, Yelena gestured with her hand, letting the stone melt away to reveal a stairway down to her specimen lab. She closed the wall behind her, navigating the lab to find the site of her latest experiment: a towering, broad stone statue with a barrel chest and spiked hands. It was the first of her new stonewardens, ready for deployment once she finished testing the power source.

With a second gesture, the statue's chest began to peel away in slow layers, revealing what was within. The first thing that Yelena saw were the subject's nipples, pinched tightly and pulled upwards by stone clamps that remained in the harness as the rock around them parted. As the stonewarden's chest released its tight hold on the occupant's chest and stomach, which had been crushed flat until she could only manage the most fluttering of breasts, Yelena saw her begin to twitch, a pointless struggle for freedom.

The stone continued to unfold, revealing a small, slender woman in the heart of the statue, with skin ruddy from years of sun, wiry muscles marked by tiny scars and freckles, breasts slim and modest even with the immense pressure being applied to them. Her head was still encased in a stone sphere just below the statue's throat; Yelena knew that within, the would-be assassin's mouth was stretched around a rocky pipe that forced its way down her throat, filling her stomach with her own sweat and fluids that the statue's magic collected and marginally purified - just enough to prevent disease, but not enough to taste anything but foul. Her arms had been twisted and pinned tightly against her back, on the verge of dislocation, and her legs were bent at the knees and forced up into the small of her back.

Perhaps worst of all was the source of the power that fed the stonewarden. The assassin was resting on twin stone pillars, which rose into her most tender regions and pinned her in place. The twin protusions were slowly and steadily pumping into her, their massive outlines just visible against her slender stomach, shifting and pounding into the assassin and forcing pleasure on her battered frame. As Yelena watched, the statue shifted, and the assassin's whole body tensed as a climax began to form. She was

obviously struggling to resist it, knowing what would come next if she gave in, and Yelena watched with dark satisfaction as she failed.

As the assassin's body tensed, electricity arced through her. The magic of the stonewarden drew out all of her pleasure, all of the climax that she *should* have had, and used it to drain her energy and feed it to her captor. There was a muffled, almost silent scream of pain as the extraction ravaged her lower body, searing pain focused on the place where she should have received pleasure, and to the same degree.

Yelena waited until the processing was complete, and then made another gesture. The pounding shafts stopped, and the rocky barrier covering her captive's face folded down, revealing the tear-streaked eyes of her assassin, large and green. Black hair was matted to the side of her face by sweat, and she stared at Yelena with a hopeless anger that spoke to her strength.

"Good morning," Yelena said with a smile. The assassin gurgled and shuddered as the pipe within her slowly, painfully, withdrew from her throat, finally leaving her with the ability to turn her head to face the witch. "Are you willing to tell me your name now?"

"Death... to... tyrants..." the assassin gasped.

Yelena chuckled humorlessly. "Three days," she said, "and you're still so fierce. It's a shame you chose the wrong side. I could have used a servant like you."

Four days ago, Yelena had held a small celebration in honor of her twentieth year as a witch. She'd graciously invited her subjects to a grand feast in the capitol of her realm, a city at the foot of her castle, and hundreds had arrived to eat and drink at the expense of her bottomless purse. There had been music, dancing, contests and gifts, everything that Yelena remembered being amazed by when she was a young and foolish girl. She'd basked in the cheers of her people, their joy and excitement. And then she'd been *fucking murdered*.

The assassin had been exceptionally careful. She'd poisoned the wine provided at the festivities, using an incredibly rare, expensive, and untraceable toxin that sat within the drinker until they fell asleep, then used their own arcana to hold them unconscious and dreaming for hours. She had acquired an enchanted cloak that allowed her to slip past Yelena's alarms, and into her bedchamber. Then she had plunged a dagger into the witch's heart, cut off her head, set the rest of the body on fire and burned it to ash, and escaped in the commotion. No one could have survived that particular combination.

Unfortunately for the assassin, Yelena didn't *need* to survive.

Her soul had fled to the depths of her mountain, crafting a new body around itself in a hidden chamber. Yelena had woken a few days later to learn that her servants had

caught the little bitch trying to steal a griffon from her mountaintop aviary, restraining her before she could kill herself and returning her for punishment.

Now, Yelena stared at her would-be killer, her expression stony. “You know,” she said conversationally, “I pride myself on being a fair ruler. I don’t ask for much, I protect your borders from raiders and bandits. So what could make you hate me so much... Tamara?” She reached out, one short fingernail tweaking the assassin’s extended nipple. Tamara bit down on a gasp as the sensitive flesh was toyed with, eyes going wide in a mixture of pain and concern.

“Oh yes,” Yelena said, scraping a second nail down the length of Tamara’s nipple. “I know your name.”

Tamara met her eyes, the bravado crumbling slightly, but she managed to focus enough to say. “You think you’re fair? The only threats you protect us from are your fellow witches, who wouldn’t bother us if we weren’t supplying you with materials for your foul experiments. You take humans to torture and toy with.”

“I take criminals, chosen by your own lords.”

“You decide the laws.”

Yelena gestured, and the rock grew back over the girl’s face, pouring into her mouth and up her nostrils. The assassin’s eyes grew wide, and she began to buck in her restraints, straining against the unyielding stone of her captor. “Walk with me.”

The witch began to walk through the dungeon, and the stonewarden holding the assassin fell into step behind her. With each powerful step, the assassin bounced up and down on the shafts almost impaling her, bringing new waves of pleasure and pain. At the same time, the stone mask forced over her face cut off her air, adding suffocation and lightheadedness to her punishment. Yelena could hear the muffled sounds of struggle behind her as her captive’s face slowly reddened, squirming against the twin assaults. “You talk a good game,” she said, “but you don’t care about tyranny. You were *paid* for your services. Quite handsomely, in fact.”

“Mmng!” Yelena glanced over her shoulder to see Tamara’s eyes beginning to flutter as she fought to remain conscious, face slowly changing from red to purple. The witch sighed, and made a quick move with one of her fingers, allowing stone to flow out of the woman’s nostrils and let her breathe. She couldn’t interrogate her if she passed out. “Well,” the witch said brightly, “you’ll be happy to know that your earnings will be donated to the local townsfolk. It’s not as though I need money, after all. My *loyal* subjects are happy to provide me with whatever I need.”

Tamara's breasts heaved with effort, nostrils flaring as she recovered her breath, the stone over her mouth preventing her from responding to Yelena's taunts. "I've been able to trace your efforts that far, but I haven't found your patron yet," Yelena continued, resuming her walk down the darkened corridors. "I know that they contacted you anonymously, but I expect that a smart little creature like you made sure to find out who they were before you came after me - just to make sure that you weren't deemed expendable afterwards."

Tamara was starting to squirm again, eye twitching as she subtly tried to keep from letting the witch see her discomfort. Yelena smirked. As they walked, the stonewarden was expending magical energy gathered over the past few days. This let off heat, which pooled in the creature's back right against Tamara's sensitive soles, roasting them to an unpleasant degree. Yelena could see sweat forming on the woman's skin as the heat radiated through her, tears beginning to form as the scalding pain reddened her toes and ass. Yelena's experiments had suggested that this wasn't likely to lead to permanent damage, but she would have to test further to be sure. It certainly seemed to be distracting Tamara from the forced pleasure she was otherwise being subjected to, holding her back from climax.

Yelena stopped in front of a massive set of double doors, and turned to face the statue as it came to a halt. "You've had three days in the stonewarden to think about your fate. Depending on how much power a statue draws, I believe that a healthy heart could survive up to fifty years within it, seeing and hearing through the statue's eyes and ears but otherwise trapped in their own filth, forced to watch and to suffer endlessly to power the device. I want you to think about what that future could look like, and then I want you to tell me who hired you."

She closed her fist, and the stone around Tamara's mouth finally melted away, giving the assassin a chance to gasp for breath. The two women stared at each other, Yelena's eyes cold and hard, Tamara's wide and fierce. "Fuck you," Tamara finally said tiredly.

"Well, then. We'll move on to the next stage." Yelena pushed open the doors, and the stonewarden followed her into a large experiment lab. The walls were covered in old scorch marks and gashes from failed experiments, the floors were smooth and clean, and light shone down from crystal chandeliers above.

Tamara's gaze went past Yelena to the far wall, and the witch heard her breath catch in her throat. "I knew you wouldn't crack easily," the witch admitted. "If you were going to, you would have done so at the hands of my men while I was... recovering. No, the reason that I put you in the stonewarden was purely so that you would know what it will feel like... for them."

There were three shivering, naked people on the ground in front of them, each one chained to the floor by the wrists a few feet apart from the others, tight gags on their

mouths to prevent them from speaking. One was a large woman in her forties, broad and heavyset, with a long brown braid and large, dark eyes. The other couldn't have been older than twenty, with shaggy black hair and a fine layer of fat over farm-trained muscles, her breasts small and perky as she shifted nervously. The last one was a man in his late twenties, taller and thinner than the other two, his hair and skin both a shade darker than that of the women, his once-trimmed beard growing ragged. All three looked up at Tamara, eyes slowly growing wide as the totality of her punishment became clear to them. The older woman let out a muffled moan of despair.

As Tamara stared in horror, Yelena turned to her triumphantly. "I haven't told them why they're here. Would you like to?"

"No..." Tamara gasped.

"Oh, yes. Your lovely mother, your younger sister, and your paramour." Yelena snorted. "Or should I simply call them my new power sources?"

"They're innocent!" Tamara said. "They didn't know about this! My mother and sister haven't even seen me in over a year!"

"And yet you care for them." Yelena gestured, and the statues on the wall behind the three came to life, their chests opening up as they slowly reached down for the captives. Tamara's sister was the first to realize what was happening, screaming into her gag as she looked behind her at the space that would soon be filled with her body. "If you intend to kill a witch, you should make sure there is no one living who you care for, because they *will* share in your fate. Fifty years, I said. Well, I don't know that your mother will live that long. But each of you will be stationed near the others, so that you can hear one another's suffering."

"Stop! I'll tell you! I'll tell you everything!" Tamara was practically babbling. Yelena smiled triumphantly. These sorts were always the same. They could take any pain themselves, but a threat to those few things that they valued was another matter."

"Well, then. Go on." Yelena crossed her arms, and behind her the statues slowly began to lift up their prey.

"I was hired by Baron Plavos. He is in a conspiracy with Baroness Yieran and Baron Leeds." Tamara spoke as quickly as possible, eyes darting to her family. "They have raised soldiers. They planned to occupy the mountain as soon as news of your death was publicized, to 'protect' your legacy."

Yelena nodded thoughtfully. "Plavos I expected. Yieran is a coward. Leeds..." Leeds hurt. He had always supported her research, even gifted her with reagents that he thought

might prove a new avenue of study. She'd mistaken the bootlicking for affection. "You have proof, I assume?"

"Hidden away, yes. In case they came after my family. Please, don't subject them to this."

"Very well. I will verify this, but if you're telling the truth, the signs will be there, and your family will not be turned into stonewardens." Yelena gestured, and the statues still. The three captives sagged with relief, then froze as she continued. "They will be executed with the others."

Tamara stared at her. "What?" she said, voice almost silent.

"Examples must be made," Yelena said. "There are many people like you, fools who think that if they die, the rewards will go to others. I will not torture your family, but their deaths are part of your punishment." She raised a hand, and the statues behind the three came to life again. In easy motions, they shattered the chains holding the three down, lifting them into the air. "I'm not a monster, though. You will be placed in cells next to each other tonight, so that you can say your goodbyes."

Tamara let out a scream of terror as Yelena turned to leave, watching the statues easily lift her family into the air. "You can't do this! You promised!"

"I promised nothing," Yelena said. "You should count your blessings that I'm granting them a quick death." She moved for the door, listening to the helpless struggles of the family behind her.

"Mistress Yelena, *please!*"

Yelena's cool footsteps faltered. Tamara's broken words were like an echo. *Master Marius, please!* She looked over her shoulder, taking in the desperate face of Tamara struggling against her stone bonds as she stared at her family in abject terror. Tamara's mother was straining to reach her other daughter, who was sobbing with fear. Her boyfriend was catatonic, looking out at nothing as he awaited his fate.

Casualties of another man's war.

She let her hands fall to her sides, and the statues holding the three hostages stilled. Forcing a smile on her face, she turned and walked back to Tamara, one hand lifting up to wipe tears from the assassin's cheek. "So," Yelena said, "you know how to beg after all."

"I'll do anything," Tamara begged brokenly. "Please, let them live."

The stone holding Tamara within her statue fell free, and the assassin collapsed to the ground at Yelena's feet. Before she could stand, Yelena's sandaled heel was resting on her head, pressing her face into the ground.

"I will test you," the witch said. "I will gather your co-conspirators and their families, and I will pass judgment on them publicly. *You* will denounce them, tell my people how they threatened you with the torture and deaths of your family, and how you tried to kill me and were instantly overwhelmed. You will throw yourself on my mercy, accept whatever punishment I see fit to give without complaint, and you will watch silently as the men who hired you are bound into stonewards for the rest of their miserable lives, and their own families are punished as I see fit. If you can do that, if you can beg and plead as convincingly to the crowd as you do here, I swear to you that your family will be allowed to go into exile with as many goods as they can bring with them, with no further malice or retribution from me or any who are sworn to me. I will make that pronouncement publicly."

Tamara's mother tried to say something, and Yelena followed her pleading eyes to Tamara.

"She will not receive that mercy," Yelena said. She looked back down at Tamara. "I may bind you into a stonewarden, or turn you into a court jester for my amusement, or simply crush you to death on stage in front of the crowd. I will decide in the moment, and whatever I decide, you *will thank me for my mercy*." She looked down at the sobbing assassin. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, mistress," Tamara sobbed.

"Then show me. Grovel in front of me, and tell me how thankful you are for my mercy." Tamara nodded, abasing herself in front of Yelena. "Thank you for having mercy on a miserable, treacherous worm, mistress," she choked out. "Thank you for only giving me my due punishment, and for sparing my family for my terrible deeds. I will worship the ground that you walk on. I will take whatever pain you choose to give me, and I will plead or be silent as you command. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Yelena watched the broken woman at her feet, triumph and discomfort mixing inside her. When she'd left Marius, she had sworn that she would never become him. Would never be a witch who reveled in the suffering of others. And yet here she was, using innocents as pawns to get her way. In ten short years, had she already begun to become like him?

No. No, she had made a misstep, but Marius wouldn't have wondered. He would have laughed at Tamara's despair. Yelena had given these people *everything*, been a just and kind ruler, and she had been *betrayed*. Making an example of those people wasn't just

about revenge, it was about ensuring that she was safe. She just needed to make sure that her actions were just, and she would never have to fear becoming a monster. Yelena looked down at the abject woman under her heel, doubts fading. Perhaps she would show some measure of mercy after all, keeping Tamara as a servant to demonstrate her magnanimity, punished or rewarded according to her subservience.

Yes.

That would be just. And Yelena was nothing if not a just ruler.