The Catalyst's Tale

by nerdgirlwalking

Summary

It was in the eleventh year of the reign of King Harold the Wise when the trouble began. Tensions between the neighboring Kingdoms of Thornhill and Decima had reached a boiling point even as winter began to push in on the northern nations in earnest. As legend tells it, King Greer took a drastic step in an attempt to push the struggle his way. And though the old man eventually died for his trouble, he set the stage for one of the more colorful tales in Thornhill’s history…

Notes

In which I have lost my damn mind...
Saw something on tumblr about folks wanting more AUs with these ladies. I've always enjoyed fairy tales, knights and dragons and all that, so I figured why not try and mix ’em up with my favorite compact Persian sociopath and reformed killer for hire? Updates will be Tuesday/Thursday unless I get ahead of myself (up through chapter eight is done so if I finish early I may speed up the schedule).
It was a cold morning, though Shaw stood before her forge in a sleeveless tunic. The strong fires required by her craft ensured she never felt the bone deep chill of winter’s onset while at work. With one last tap of her hammer she used the tongs in her other hand to dip the blade she was crafting into a trough of water to cool it. Her lips quirked up in satisfaction at the hiss of the hot steel meeting the water. There was something to be said about creating things with one’s own hands.

She looked up as the back entrance to her work space was opened. A tall woman stepped in and pulled back the hood of her heavy cloak revealing a mass of fine reddish blonde hair. Shaw’s grip on her hammer tightened. There was no good reason for the woman to be here.

“I have a job offer for you,” The woman called out forgoing any introduction.

“See Cole up front,” Shaw grunted in an attempt to treat this like any other transaction.

The noblewoman shook her head, “I don’t need to see him.”

“Then I guess you don’t need me for any job.” She knew who the woman was of course. She also knew that she had access to far better shops than this one. It had been a long shot to think that she was here to ask Shaw for a new blade or to shoe her horse.

“Let me rephrase,” She said as she stepped closer. The bottom of her fur lined cloak trailed through some stray ashes from the forge and streaked the edge of the expensive fabric with black. The woman would begin to sweat soon wearing that thing so close to the fire. “I need a woman of your particular skills with a blade, not making one.”

Shaw attempted to brush her off one last time, “You have me confused with someone else.”

“No, I don’t think I do, Catalyst Indigo.”

There was no sense in trying to deny the name. Zoe Morgan was the King’s Spymaster; she
wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t completely certain of Shaw’s former life. Shaw set down her hammer, “I don’t do that anymore.”

Lady Morgan crossed her arms over her chest. “The job is not for an assassination, if that’s why you’re being coy.”

Shaw snorted, “Coy is really not my thing.” She picked up a rag and wiped the sweat from her neck. “I left that life and that name behind for a reason.” She may have kept the armor when she had paid off her debt and left the guild but that was merely common sense. You don’t throw quality gear away. Didn’t mean she ever wanted to go back to that life.

“I’m sure you did. All I am here to do is present an invitation. What you choose to do after that is your business.” Lady Morgan fingered the filigreed handle on a dagger resting on the workbench beside where she stood. “You’ve kept your nose clean while you’ve been in the capitol. The tradesmen around here applaud your work. You’ve made a good life. I’m not here to tip your apple cart.”

“Aren’t you?” That felt exactly like what the noblewoman was doing with her mysterious invitation.

Lady Morgan set a scroll on an empty place on the workbench. “No. We believe in second chances in this kingdom. It’s just that many people will lose theirs if we don’t find the right person for this job. A woman of your skills cannot be overlooked.”

“Playing to my better nature?” Shaw snorted, “If you know anything about me, you know that that sort of talk won’t exactly work.”

“Read the scroll. I think you’ll find plenty of incentive to hear us out.” She turned towards the door. After a handful of steps, she glanced over her shoulder with a smirk, “You should tell your friend to oil the latches on that door if he honestly expects to sneak up on anyone.” With that she strode from the room.

Shaw turned her head to see Cole standing in the doorway between the shop and her forge, crossbow in hand. She rolled her eyes at him, “She’s not wrong.”

He lowered the weapon and moved to stand at Shaw’s side. “What did she want?” He tilted his chin towards the place where Lady Morgan had stood.
“To offer us a job apparently.” Shaw stepped over to the workbench and picked up the scroll. She had managed to lay low in the capitol of Thornhill for three years before she was discovered. Taking over the little, abandoned smithy near the harbor with Cole had appeared to be a good cover for her knowledge of weapons, her scars, and her strong physique. She had thought that she and Cole had managed to blend in here. Apparently she had been very, very wrong.

Cole swallowed nervously having recognized Shaw’s visitor as well, “I’m guessing her ladyship is not in the market for a new boning knife.”

“Oh she needs a knife alright.” She broke the wax seal on the scroll. Shaw simply wondered whose back it would end up in by the end of this.
Chapter Summary

Something stirs in Old Thornhill.

Shaw made her way across the rooftops towards the quarry on the north west side of the capitol. The foothills of the Brookline mountains not only sheltered the capitol but they also provided an excellent source of limestone for building it’s many sturdy homes and shops. The old quarry would be deserted at this time of night making it an excellent location for Lady Morgan’s clandestine meeting.

She was wearing her old armor. The blue and black garments were comforting in their familiarity and from a practical standpoint the hood and half face mask would conceal her identity from the meeting’s other attendees. Shaw also knew anyone who saw her on the journey across the city wouldn’t interfere or ask any questions for fear of angering the guild. There had been perks to being a Catalyst.

As she drew nearer to her destination Shaw could see lights from the opposite end of the quarry. She circled around from above. There were eight men standing in a rough semicircle near a crude wooden platform. Shaw could see Lady Morgan standing just behind it out of view of the assembled men. “Probably waiting to make a grand entrance,” Shaw thought aloud. She found a scaffolding near the men and proceeded to climb down about three fourths of the way before she stopped to observe again.

The men seemed to be getting restless. They were eyeing each other as if expecting an attack at any moment. Shaw couldn’t fault that assumption. This would be an excellent way for the crown to rid itself of some rather unsavory elements in one fell swoop. But then again she had seen nothing on her way around the quarry to suggest that anyone else was here. Lady Morgan couldn’t take them all on alone so it was probably safe to take things at face value for the moment.

Shaw dropped down from the scaffolding. Two of the men startled at her sudden appearance. A third, the man closest to her, moved to draw his sword in fright. She smiled behind her mask. She did sort of miss causing that reaction.

“Ah very good you’re all here,” Lady Morgan called from her makeshift stage.
“Why is a Catalyst here?” A man Shaw recognized as Lord Elias’ Steward demanded. He was a common sight around the harbor, picking up Lord Elias’ more interesting cargo from various merchants. He’d pressed a few of the businesses for small tributes in exchange for Lord Elias’ protection, but had never tried it with Shaw, as if he sensed the presence of another predator.

“For the same reason your master was invited Anthony,” Lady Morgan replied. “She’s good with a blade.”

“Does the King no longer employ his own assassins?” Another man asked, his accent marking him as a native of one of the southern kingdoms.

Lady Morgan shook her head, “As I told the Catalyst when I extended her invitation, this job is not an assassination.”

“What other reason could there be for inviting one of them?” Anthony sneered.

“Samaritan has awakened,” A new voice called out. The men fell silent. That was an old name not spoken lightly in Thornhill. Shaw turned her gaze from the stage to see a beautiful, dark skinned woman move through the crowd, and climb onto the stage to stand beside Lady Morgan.

“You’re late, Carter.” This was Lady Carter then. The High Steward of Thornhill’s presence meant that things were serious indeed.

“There was an incident in the library.”

Lady Morgan groaned, “Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not. Not to worry though, John has men on it,” Lady Carter smirked. Her features hardened when she turned her attention to the crowd. “Word has come from the west that something stirs in Old Thornhill.”

“But how?” One of the men practically whimpered.
“King Greer. He apparently thought raising the dragon would turn the war in his favor. Several of his men got devoured for their trouble.”

“But surely had the dragon been freed it would have attacked the capitol by now,” Another man, Shaw knew to be a mercenary named Grice, called out.

“The old fool sent a man named Lambert, a young fool, to remove the wards. He failed and died horribly alongside his men. But the idiot did manage to do enough damage that Samaritan could potentially free itself given enough time.”

“A dragon is a job for an army not a handful of men,” The Southerner remarked. An excellent point, if not slightly cowardly.

“We don’t know if Samaritan can be killed. But we do know it can be contained. We need a team to go reset the wards and this time assure that they cannot be so easily broken by Greer’s lackeys. Once Decima is dealt with, the King and the army can focus on ridding us of the dragon once and for all.”

“And you want us to do this?”

Lady Carter nodded, “One of you yes.”

Anthony shook his head, “This is insane.” Shaw had to agree.

“The man who resets the wards shall be paid fifty thousand sovereigns, and in addition will be granted any boon they ask of the King. Furthermore, he or a member of his household will be joined to the crown in holy matrimony.”

“Already you make promises you cannot keep,” Another man shouted.

“Do you take issue with the King’s generous offer Ser Simmons?” Lady Carter glared at the man. It was well known in the city that there was no love lost between Simmons and Carter. He was a holdover from the old king’s regime, still wedded to old ways of thinking. Carter, not noble by birth but a woman who had earned her lofty station, was everything the new kingdom stood for. Beyond the differences in philosophy, last year Simmons had killed the man rumored to be Lady Carter’s lover at tourney. An accident with a faulty lance was the official story but everyone knew Simmons was dirty. Frankly, Shaw had been a bit surprised to see him here. But then again perhaps Carter was
hoping he’d be eaten by the dragon.

“There is no one to marry in that family other than the king.” Simmons sneered, “Forgive me if cock is not to my liking.”

“King Harold’s hand is not on offer.” She held up a hand to silence the grumbling crowd, “But this is not a hollow promise. The former king had a wandering eye.”

“To say the least,” Lady Morgan snorted.

“He left heirs. They are the wards of King Harold. The marriage would be to one of them.”

“The shocking thing is there are only two of them,” Lady Morgan added.

“An heir to the throne?” Grice called out almost in disbelief. “The marriage would be to a legitimate heir to the throne?”

Lady Carter nodded, “Do you understand how seriously the crown takes this threat now gentlemen?”

Shaw pursed her lips. The man to pull this off would essentially become royalty, in addition to gaining a hefty purse. She wasn’t about to marry any stuffy royal but if she got the job done she figured she could use her favor from the King to get out of the marriage bit.

No becoming royalty didn’t interest her. But the gold was another matter. With fifty thousand she could buy a ship. Sail away from these stupid, cold, northern climes. Find a tropical island to settle on and have coin to spare.

“Lady Morgan has a scroll for each of you outlining what must be done to strengthen the wards. In addition, each of you will also receive a five hundred sovereign advance for your trouble.”

“What’s to stop us from taking the money and ignoring your mission?”
“Nothing,” Lady Carter replied. “If you wish to take the money and run then I hope you shall at the least join me in praying for the success of one of your betters.”

“Or that the dragon eats your greedy ass first once it breaks free,” Lady Morgan added.

Lady Carter repressed her smile at Lady Morgan’s antics. “If there are no other questions gentlemen, you may collect your instructions from Lady Morgan and be on your way. Good hunting to you all.” Lady Carter turned and left the stage as rapidly as she had appeared.

“You heard the High Steward, come and get it boys,” Lady Morgan called out. The men rushed forward to receive their gold. Shaw hung back letting the rest squabble over the right to be first to receive their instructions to navigating Old Thornhill’s secrets. Shaw wasn’t in a rush; she knew who ended up there at the end of all of this was what mattered.

Lady Morgan smirked at her when she finally approached the stage. “Didn’t I tell you this would be worth your time?” Shaw dipped her head, acknowledging the fact that the noblewoman had indeed been correct. Lady Morgan handed over a sealed scroll. “The details on the wards and what we know of the layout of Old Thornhill Castle.” She also handed Shaw a large leather pouch. Shaw smiled feeling the weight of it in her hand. “The first portion of your advance. The rest of the coin will be delivered to you by mid-morning.”

Lady Morgan glanced around at the few men still lingering in the quarry. She leaned forward a bit. “I hope you pull this off. I could stand to work with you again. The rest of this lot have sticks permanently wedged up their asses.”

Shaw didn’t reply but nodded to the lady before taking her leave. For a noblewoman Morgan didn’t seem half bad. She took her time leaving the quarry, choosing to scale a shadowy section of the wall rather than traveling up the trail and out of the quarry the same way as the rest of the men in attendance. When she reached the outskirts of the city she swiftly scrambled up the side of a small shop and began to run along the rooftops towards the harbor and home.

Shaw was about half way when she felt like she was being watched. She slowed to a stop. Shaw glanced around the rooftops, catching sight of the tail of a red cloak disappearing behind the corner of the building opposite her position. Shaw scowled beneath her mask. This wasn’t the best section of the city. Someone else lurking along the rooftops very well could have nothing to do with her being there.

“Still,” She thought aloud. Shaw turned and began running to the east side of the city rather than south towards the docks. She’s take a more circuitous route home.
It was nearly dawn when Shaw climbed down the side of the neighboring shop and slipped into the back entrance to the forge. The latch of the door behind her startled a sleeping Cole awake. He swung his crossbow up and pointed it at her. “Put that thing down,” Shaw growled.

Cole did as he was told with a smile, “You’re back.”

“Obviously,” Shaw replied as she lowered her hood. She pulled the mask down so it hung around her neck.

“Well?”

“King wants us to kill a dragon. Or trap a dragon.” She reached into a pocket on the inside of her cloak and pulled out the scroll she had been given at the end of the meeting, which she tossed at him. “Details are supposed to be spelled out on that.”

Cole fumbled to catch it. “They want you to kill a dragon and you didn’t pay attention to the details?”

“With what this job pays I didn’t really need to hear much more,” She replied with a shrug.

“Why the sudden interest in trying to be a hero? That’s not like you, Shaw.”

“We’re being paid, handsomely, so technically it’s mercenary work not heroism.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He could feel a headache coming on. “I don’t think they’re mutually exclusive.”

“Fifty thousand sovereigns, Cole. Fifty thousand.” This was the closest to excited Shaw got without a sword in her hand. She held up a large pouch, “And they’re giving us five hundred more in advance. The rest of it will be delivered this morning.”

“That’s a lot of coin,” He gaped at her. “But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. What do you even
know about killing dragons?”

She took off her cloak and hung it on a peg just inside of the door. “Specifically? Nothing. I do know, however, a great deal about killing things in general.”

“Shaw,” He sighed. He couldn’t help but feel like they were getting out of their depth despite Shaw’s uncharacteristic enthusiasm for the task.

She turned to face him. “How hard can it be?”

“A dragon, Shaw. With the claws and the teeth and the fire.” He groaned, “Pretty damn hard I’d say.”

“You don’t have to come along, Cole.”

“No, I owe you my life, if that means I risk getting eaten by a dragon because you’re insane, then so be it.” He cracked the wax seal on the scroll. “But just so you know if it looks hungry I’m pushing you in front of it and running away.”

Shaw nodded, “Smart.”
The Good End and The Weird Sister

Chapter Summary

The first night on the road leads to some surprises.

Chapter Notes

Okay, I know I said updates are Tuesday/Thursday but it's Valentines Day so I figured you all needed a gift. Also it's time a certain person showed up in this story don't you think? And what better day for that, I ask you?

The Good End was the only tavern in the village of Turing. The village itself stood at the crossroads between the King’s Highway which ran from the capitol to the north across the mountains and into Decima, and the Pilgrims’ Pathway which curled west around the Blackwood and past the ruins of Old Thornhill before winding south. As such it was a bustling little place on a normal day. Given that several groups of would be dragon hunters were all trying to reach Old Thornhill by the most expedient path, the little tavern on what felt like the edge of civilization, was packed.

Shaw elbowed her way to the bar. “Got any rooms?”

“You’re in luck. Down to one. Old cook’s quarters round the back. Kind of small so I’ll only charge ya six sovereigns for it and to board your horses for the night,” The barman replied.

“Three,” Shaw argued. On a normal day one of the good rooms in this place wouldn’t go for more than four. She wasn’t about to let this man make that much coin off of her trying to sell it as a bargain.

“Five,” He replied.

“Three.”
“Four and that’s as low as I’ll go.”

Shaw scowled. She’d talked him down to the regular rate but would rather not be so isolated while in the midst of her competitors. She and Cole could always have dinner here and then make camp outside of the village. The door snapped open with a bang as another group of men stumbled in from the courtyard. A puddle of water began to rapidly spread out beneath their feet. It seemed it had begun to rain.

A muscle in Shaw’s jaw twitched at the thought of bedding down in the mud. The room really wasn’t worth four. But then again, cold mud. Shaw slapped four sovereigns down on the counter, “I’ll take it.”

He palmed the coins in his beefy hand and slipped the gold pieces into the front pocket of his wine stained apron. “Drink?”

Shaw nodded, “A pint of ale and a small beer.” She pointed over her shoulder to the table at the back of the room Cole had managed to commandeer. “Should I wait? Or?”

He gestured to a blonde passing them holding a tray of drinks. “My girl Lyla can bring it to your table if you’d like to rest your bones from the road.”

Shaw nodded. That would do nicely. “You got any food?”

“Lamb stew.”

“Have her bring three bowls of that as well then.” Shaw set another coin on the bar.

The Barman shook his head. “Don’t know how your man stays so thin eatin’ that much.”

Shaw pursed her lips, “Better make that four. Cole will probably be hungry too.”

He stared at her with wide eyes but swiftly nodded. “Lyla will be along with those drinks in a shake.”
“Thanks,” She muttered, and their business concluded, turned away.

Shaw felt as if she were being watched. She glanced around the room. No one seemed to be paying any particular attention to her but she couldn’t shake the feeling. It was oddly reminiscent of what she felt when leaving the quarry, the other night. She squared her shoulders and headed towards Cole. If someone here wanted to cause trouble for her they’d reveal themselves in due time.

Shaw nodded to a sour-faced man in a guard uniform a few tables from her destination as she passed. By the insignia on his shoulder he was the watch commander for the village. The man nodded back at her and returned his attention to his dinner. At least the locals ate here as well. That bode well for her meal.

“Did he have a room?” Cole asked when she was in earshot of the table.

“Got the last one.” She took the seat to Cole’s left so that her back was to the wall and she could see the front door as well as the entrance to the kitchen. “We’re not in the main part of the building.”

“Don’t tell me we’re in the barn,” Cole groaned. He was allergic to hay. The last time they had to bed down in a loft he itched for a week afterward.

“Old cook’s quarters round back,” Shaw replied. She nodded to Lyla the barmaid as she set down their drinks.

Cole scowled at his, “Small beer?”

“I’m not putting up with your grumbling about a headache from too much drink tomorrow.”

“I can hold my drinks, Shaw.”

She rolled her eyes, “Elder’s Bluff.”

He grimaced at the memory, “Not the best example of my stamina, I’ll grant you.” It hadn’t exactly
been a matter of stamina. He’d circled the village three times in his smallclothes before passing out in a fountain, actually. Cole was simply far too active of a drunk for Shaw’s patience.

“This is day one.” She held up a finger to emphasize her point. “I am not dealing with an Elder’s Bluff situation on day one.”

“Fine,” He relented. “When I’m fabulously wealthy I’ll just buy my own drinks.”

Shaw set her tankard on the table top after draining half its contents. “You could do that now; you know?”

Cole grinned over the rim of his cup. “Why would I do that when you’ll bring me a drink without my having to ask?”

He had her there. Shaw tipped her head to acknowledge the point. “Then don’t moan about the free drink.”

Soon their dinner arrived. Cole was indeed grateful that Shaw had seen fit to order him a bowl instead of making him sit idle as she downed her three. As they ate, more people filtered in to the tavern. Shaw noticed Simmons holding court with his men in one corner of the room, and two more of the meeting’s attendees were standing by the bar. She remembered that horses with the Elias’ family crest on their tack were in the stables when they arrived. It seemed the group had each followed the same general travel plan.

“You were right about everyone setting out around the same time,” She noted aloud to Cole. “One day to supply and then on the road seems to be the rule.”

“Everyone wants to reach Old Thornhill first. I wish we could have left yesterday.”

“Couldn’t be helped. Needed to be properly outfitted, can’t cut corners with what is at stake.” She drained her tankard. She tried to catch Lyla’s eye to order another drink, but the girl turned toward the kitchen without acknowledging her. “Don’t know if it’s a good thing we’re all bedding down in the same place though. I don’t trust these gentlemen to play nice. We’ll have to watch ourselves coming and going from the room as isolated as it is.”

“That might not be a bad thing,” Cole said leaning closer to her across the table. “If a fight breaks out
tonight we’ll have some distance on it.”

“Any of these guys could be dumb enough to try something to sabotage the rest of us before leaving civilization.” Frankly any move here would be bad form and you’d run the risk of the village guard getting in the mix as well. No if Shaw wanted to take out some of the competition she’d do it out on the road. But she didn’t know how these men thought. So she’d keep both eyes open tonight.

“From what I’ve heard Simmons could be ruthless enough to try. But for this amount of coin who knows what any of them might risk.” Cole waved his hand around the room, “Everyone’s playing nice so far but there’s a lot of hands on hilts under the tables.”

“Well, that sounds positively pornographic,” A lilting voice remarked. Shaw glanced up to see a willowy brunette standing beside them. “Do you mind?” She gestured towards the empty seat at their table, the other being occupied by their gear. “It’s a bit crowded tonight.”

The last thing Shaw wanted to do is deal with a random stranger on their last night in what resembled civilization. She glared up at the woman, “That’s not our prob…”

“Of course,” Cole interrupted Shaw’s refusal. “We’ve plenty of room.” Shaw glanced over at him. The fool was making cow eyes at the woman already.

“Thank you,” The woman replied. She whipped her grey, threadbare traveling cloak from her shoulders and draped it across the chair holding their saddle bags and Cole’s crossbow to dry. “I’ll grab a drink and be right back.”

“We’ll be here,” Cole smiled at her.

“Cole,” Shaw hissed, once the interloper was out of earshot. “What are you doing?”

He kept his eyes on the woman as she walked across the room, “Being hospitable.”

Shaw slapped him on the back of the head. When he turned to glare at her she glared right back. “Okay, right now I need you to think with your head, and I mean the one on your shoulders.”
“But I am.” Shaw scoffed at that. “No really.” He lowered his voice to a whisper, “You were masked and in in your old armor at the meeting so no one here knows what Catalyst Indigo actually looks like. But they have to know that she, you’re a woman.”

She got where he was going. But there were gaping holes in his slapped together logic, “Your new lady friend is a head taller than me. Even without seeing my face no one is going to confuse one of us for the other.”

“No, but what better way to blend in with the scenery than to dine with a local?”

Shaw clicked her tongue. It wasn’t that bad of an idea. It also wasn’t the reason Cole had offered the woman a seat at their table, but Shaw might as well use it. “Fine, but you’re sleeping on the floor tonight.” Normally they’d flip for it, but if he was going to make her interact socially, then she was owed the bed.

Cole grinned, “Who knows you might get the room to yourself.”

Shaw glanced across the room to where the woman was leaning across the bar to speak to the barman. She unconsciously licked her lips at way the woman’s pants pulled across her ass. At least they’d have something nice to look at while letting their meal digest. She turned back to Cole, “I think your gaze is exceeding your reach here.”

“You don’t think I can talk my way into her bed?”

The woman turned and started making her way back across the room, three tankards in hand. She winked when she caught Shaw watching her. Shaw looked Cole in the eye, “No way in hell.”

“Refills.” The woman set a pint in front of Shaw and a smaller tankard in front of Cole. “For your hospitality.” She sat down. The seat put her directly across from Shaw and to the right of Cole. Her back was to the rest of the tavern.

Cole leaned forward so that his hair flopped across his brow in a way he had told Shaw more than once he thought made him look dashing. She just thought it made him look like an idiot who needed a haircut. “What brings you here? Miss…well I didn’t get your name.”

“Veronica,” The brunette smiled. “And I’m just passing through. I come into the village once a
month for supplies.”

Cole leaned in further, “Oh do you live on one of the farmsteads?”

Veronica subtly shuffled her chair to the right to create more distance between her seat and his. “In the wood actually.”

Shaw quirked an eyebrow, “I wasn’t aware anyone was crazy enough to live out there besides bandits.” And even those men tended to only go so far into the Blackwood. The place was cursed. It was said that the souls of those that died in the fires when the old kingdom fell rained down as ash and merged with the trees. The spirits were restless and hungry. Once inside, the wood did not let go of travelers easily.

“Well, I’m certainly not a bandit.” Veronica chuckled, “There are more of us living out there than you’d think. Some families have been there for generations, since before Old Thornhill fell.”

“And the wood’s other inhabitants don’t mind?” It was also said that all sorts of twisted creatures made the Blackwood their home.

“If you’re born in the wood you learn fairly quickly how to avoid trouble,” Veronica shrugged and took a sip from her pint, “You don’t last long if you don’t.”

“And you can come and go as you please?”

She quirked a brow, “Don’t tell me you believe in those old tales about the wood holding travelers captive?”

Cole shrugged his shoulders, “Well, it’s what they say in the capitol.”

“And how many of them have actually been in the wood? Or know anyone who has?” Cole opened his mouth to reply but quickly snapped it closed when he realized he didn’t have an answer for that. “Exactly,” Veronica smirked. She leaned forward, as if she were to impart a great secret. “People go missing in the wood because they allow superstition to make them careless and stupid in a dangerous place. If you know your way around, navigating the wood is as simple as walking through town.”
“And you know your way around?” Shaw asked, unimpressed. The woman talked a good game but she looked like a stiff breeze could blow her over.

Veronica licked her lips, “A great many things.”

“So if someone needed to get to Old Thornhill quickly…”

“And needed to avoid the main road and anyone else who may be traveling along it?” Veronica finished for her. “There are ways.”

“Ways you know about?” Shaw sounded skeptical to say the least.

“Maybe,” She smiled and took a long pull from her tankard. Veronica shifted her gaze to Cole. “So what brings the two of you to the edge of the world?”

“Courier work,” He supplied. It was the most plausible cover story they had come up with. Reasonable, and most likely to not bring in undue attention. “We’re taking a shipment of goods west for a friend.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“Not if you know your way around,” Cole replied.

“Well played,” Veronica laughed.

Shaw rolled her eyes and stood up. “I’m going for another refill.” She stood and left the table before the others could reply.

As she neared the bar Shaw noticed the Guard Captain was pulling his cloak down from a peg near the door. Perhaps he could be useful. She veered away from the bar and towards him. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah,” He grunted.
“You’re the watch commander for the village?”

“Name’s Fusco,” He replied. “What’s it to you?”

If he had been trying to put her off with his gruff demeanor, he was in for a big disappointment. “How long have you been stationed here?”

“This will be my fifth winter. You want to tell me why you’re asking all these questions?”

Shaw stepped closer to him. “What’s her story?” She nodded towards her table where Cole was still trying to impress Veronica, who thankfully, had turned in her seat to fully face him revealing her profile.

“So she wasn’t the only one to find Veronica to be a little off. “She says she knows a way past Old Thornhill without taking the main road. Heard there was some trouble up that way lately.” Shaw leaned in and lowered her voice as if trying desperately not to be overheard, “We’re running some sensitive cargo.”

“And you’re looking for an alternate route.” Fusco shrugged, “The sister probably does. She’s the only one I know crazy enough to live out there in the wood full time.” He settled his cloak over his shoulders. “I’d be careful if I were you though. I’ve seen her put down three farmhands who got too close without breaking a sweat. One still walks with a limp.” He pulled on a wide brimmed hat. “That’s one scary wench.”

Shaw wanted to scoff at him. Veronica was odd, but she’d hardly call her scary. Those farmhands must have been drunk out of their minds for the slight woman to have gotten the better of them. “Thanks for the tip.”

“Serve and protect and all that,” He huffed. “Safe travels to you.”
“Same to you,” Shaw replied out of habit. She glanced over to the table. Veronica was looking her way but swiftly turned her head back to Cole once she realized Shaw had noticed her observation. Probably didn’t want Shaw to pick up on the fact that Cole was boring her. By the look of things Shaw was definitely still sharing the room tonight. She turned to the bar. She’d give Cole a bit more time to embarrass himself before she put him out of his misery.

“Another pint?” Shaw called to the Barman. He nodded and began filling a fresh cup. It wasn’t long until he set it in front of her. She paid him and took a hearty sip.

A man came to stand to her right. “I’m stunned to see a rare beauty such as yourself in such a backwater establishment.”

Shaw cocked an eyebrow, “Has that line ever actually worked?”

He laughed, placing a hand on her shoulder. He was handsome enough to catch her interest for a moment, so she decided not to break his fingers just yet for touching her without an explicit invitation “I don’t know. You tell me.”

When Shaw took a good look at his face she realized that he had been at the quarry the other night as well. Now she really was interested. “You’d get further buying me another one of these,” She replied holding up her tankard. He smiled and waved for another round.

“And your husband won’t mind your staying up here with me to drink it?”

“Husband?” Shaw sputtered, choking on the mouthful of ale she had just consumed.

He nodded, “The man you were dining with earlier?”

“Cole and me? No way.” She wiped her chin with the back of her hand. There was maintaining a cover and then there was encouraging insanity. “He’s my brother.”

He tilted his head in confusion, “Funny, you look nothing alike.”

“Papa got around.” He seemed to take that explanation at face value. Still, she felt the need to move
the conversation away from Cole. “So what brings you here? Obviously, from your opening line, it isn’t the local women.”

“Oh I don’t know; I find one woman in particular worth the trip already.” He extended his hand, “Tomas.”

“Sam,” She smiled up at him. This was going to be all too easy.

When Shaw glanced back at the table about half an hour later Cole was alone. He caught her eye and nodded towards the door. Apparently he had failed to charm fair Veronica as predicted. She signaled for him to go on to the room without her and then she focused back on Tomas.

“So the King contacted you personally,” She practically purred. A few flickers of her eyelashes and a hand on his knee and Tomas was spilling all sorts of details about his crew in hopes that he’d impress her enough to go to bed with him. Honestly, she was considering it. Tomas was nice enough to look at, polite, if a little handsy, and he didn’t speak to her as if she was a half-wit just because she had breasts. There were worse sorts of men to share a tumble with.

They continued to talk and drink deep into the evening. By the time Shaw realized Tomas was well into his cups it was too late to do anything about it. The man was far too drunk to meet any of her needs other than information tonight. At least he had given that in spades. Shaw now knew how his entire crew was outfitted and their capabilities. She didn’t believe they’d be much competition.

When Tomas almost fell from his seat for the fourth time she stood. “Where are you off to my lady?”

“To bed.” Tomas smiled widely. “Alone.”

He frowned. “But.”

“Good luck out there, Tomas.” She smirked.

He attempted to stand but his legs failed him. He flopped back in his seat. “Safe travels to you as well,” He replied admitting defeat.
She nodded and moved to the front door. While they had been talking the rain had stopped at least. She took in a deep breath of night air. Feeling a bit more awake, she turned and made her way around the side of the building towards her room for the next few hours. The area around the tavern was empty, most of the village’s residents having already returned to their homes for the night.

Shaw was almost to the stairs leading up to the old cook’s quarters when she heard the rustle of a cloak. She froze mid-step. She glanced around but didn’t see anyone. She was about to write it off as the result of that last cup of ale when she heard it again.

“Who’s there?” Shaw growled. She placed a hand on the hilt of the knife strapped to her thigh.

“Jumpy little thing aren’t you,” Veronica teased, stepping from the shadows beneath the stairs.

Shaw rolled her eyes. Her last night in a bed for the foreseeable future and Cole just had to try and pick up a girl. “If you’re here for Cole, I’m going to have to send you on your way. I need to sleep not listen to you get up to whatever a woman like you gets up to at this time of night.”

“Oh I get up to all sorts of things,” Veronica chuckled. “But I don’t want to do any of them with your errand boy.” She pointedly looked Shaw up and down. “You on the other hand…”

“So why are you lurking out here?”

“I wouldn’t call it lurking,” Veronica avoided the question.

“Am I to believe you were simply taking in the night air then?”

“Believe whatever you like,” Veronica shrugged her shoulders. “But I’d leave before dawn if I were you.”

“Oh really? Why is that?” Shaw tightened her grip on her knife.

“Simmons is planning a little surprise for his competition in the morning. I don’t think he knows who you are but you’d do well to take the opportunity to get a head start on him in the very least.” She turned to leave.
She had made it about five steps before Shaw recovered her wits, “And just how do you know this?”

Veronica smirked over her shoulder at Shaw, “I listen. You'd do well to do the same, Sameen.”

“How do you know that name?” Shaw growled. No one knew that name. Not even Cole. She herself hadn’t spoken it aloud since she was a mere initiate in the guild years ago.

“You can’t expect a girl to reveal all her secrets after one drink.” She rounded the corner of the building and slipped from sight. Shaw considered going after her for a moment, but quickly put those thoughts aside. She didn’t know how that woman knew her name but the fact that she did made Shaw extremely wary. Running after her in the dark wouldn’t be prudent.

“I’m liable to put a knife in her when our paths cross again though,” Shaw muttered. She had the distinct impression that she’d be seeing the Weird Sister before her mission was complete, probably sooner than she’d like.
Chapter Summary

The road holds its own dangers.

In the end they had left the tavern before dawn. Not so much because of Veronica’s warning about Simmons, but due to Shaw’s unease at hearing another’s voice speak her name after so many years. Her father had been the last, shouting it before the sea took him from her. She shifted in her saddle. They had been riding for a few hours now but she couldn’t seem to get her mind to settle. How had Veronica known it? There was something very strange going on.

It was still early so the air was crisp. Shaw took a deep breath. The cold air felt almost sharp in her lungs. She glanced over at Cole, “You’re awfully quiet.” Typically, she couldn’t get him to shut up in the mornings. He tended to have an unnatural amount of energy at that time of day, especially for someone who used to work primarily under the cover of darkness.

“Just tired,” He mumbled. “Someone did decide to set out before dawn, and breakfast.”

“I had a bad feeling.”

“So you said. Which is odd because you don’t typically get feelings, bad or otherwise.”

“First time for everything,” Shaw grunted. She trailed her eyes from the road ahead of them over to the dark forest that ran along the right hand side of the lane. The black-trunked oaks that gave the wood its name still held some of their leaves despite the cold. Interspersed among them were large evergreens, and smaller clumps of brambles and low shrubs, ensuring that visibility beyond a few paces into the trees was nil.

Cole, unable to remain silent now that Shaw had actually engaged in conversation, released a long exhale, sending a puff of steam into the air. “I guess it was just as well I didn’t have any company last night.”
“You’re not going to pine after Veronica like that girl in Stadd are you?” He moped around like a kicked puppy for weeks after that job. It was utterly annoying.

“I wasn’t pining. I don’t pine.” Shaw pursed her lips. “Even you have to admit Elsa was gorgeous, in an ice queen sort of way. And Veronica,” Cole actually sighed. “Maybe I’ll look her up when we swing back by the village.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Point of fact it was a terrible one.

“Don’t tell me…” Cole groaned.

She looked over at him, “What?”

“Seriously, Shaw?”

She supposed he had finally put two and two together. “We may have had an encounter.”

Cole scowled. “What happened to the guy you were working at the bar?”

Shaw really didn’t understand what Tomas had to do with anything but she opted to explain anyway, knowing from Cole’s tone that he wouldn’t leave it alone. “We had a few drinks and then a few more drinks after you left. The staff wanted to go to sleep so I told Tomas goodnight and then when I was walking back to the room she was suddenly there.”

“I cannot believe you stole another woman right out from under me.”

“What?” She thought he was mad because he had thought she picked a fight with the woman, not because he thought they had had an encounter, encounter.

He angrily shook his head. “You always do this.”

She rolled her eyes. Cole was a bloody idiot. “First, the woman was never under you. Second, I didn’t bed her,” Shaw growled. “She popped out of the shadows like a phantom and proceeded to
tell me that Simmons was planning on taking out his competition.”

“Oh,” He slumped in his saddle as the fight left his body.

“Yeah. And I don’t always do anything. You know that only happened one time. I didn’t even know you had met Sue, let alone liked the woman.”

“Wait,” He cut her off before she could rehash anymore of that embarrassing interlude. “How did Veronica know about Simmons? How did she know about us?”

Those were good questions. “I don’t know. And she didn’t say.”

“This smells weird, Shaw.” Ironic turn of phrase given Captain Fusco’s name for Veronica.

“We’re going after a dragon, Cole, you just now realized that this job is weird?”

“Weren’t you the one who had us leave before dawn because of a bad feeling?” He countered. “Hate to point this out, but since we’ve been riding without incident for hours it seems like you got me out of bed early for nothing.”

Before Shaw could reply a tree fell across the road ahead of them with a deafening crash. “You just had to say it,” Shaw grumbled.

Thankfully, there had been enough distance between the tree and them that they were able to slow their horses to a safe halt. Unfortunately, they had little time to turn them before the second tree fell blocking the way behind them. Shaw heard a whistling sound and then felt a line of fire across her right cheek. “Archers,” She shouted.

Cole pulled his crossbow from his back and made ready to fire. Shaw glanced around wildly at the tree line; she saw the barest hint of yellow against the black, brown and green of the trees and pointed, “There.”

Cole followed her direction and fired. A man in a tattered yellow tunic fell from the branches and to the ground. Then the yelling began. It wasn’t the most fearsome war cry Shaw had ever heard but it
did make her straighten in her saddle. She drew her sword as five men in mismatched armor broke out of the trees and rushed towards them. More arrows fired from the forest leading the way for them. She batted one down with her sword before it could hit her horse.

One arrow, however, struck the rope tethering the packhorse to Cole’s saddle. Another man on horseback came at them from the side at a full gallop, swooping his arm out to grab the rope and lead the horse and their supplies away. Cole turned and fired at him but only managed to wing him. As the man crested the hill five more men came running towards them from that side of the road. They were quickly becoming surrounded.

“Shaw,” He called out in worry.

“Take my reins, Cole.”

“Shaw,” He attempted to protest but shot his hand out to catch the leather straps as she flung them at him.

“Just don’t lose my damn horse,” She growled and leapt from the saddle. She rolled as she landed and popped back up, swinging her sword. She hit the first man at a run sending him sprawling back and into the dirt, clutching a bloody gash in his stomach.

A second man came at her from the side. Shaw deflected the swing of his blade with her own and swiftly punched him in the throat, crushing his windpipe and cutting off his air supply. He fell to his hands and knees choking. She kicked him in the ribs, a warning to stay down. Two more men rushed to take the downed man’s place.

Cole was so busy watching Shaw that he didn’t notice the man advancing on him until there was a hand on his leg. He brought the stock of his crossbow around to smash against the crude helmet the man wore. The man’s head snapped back from the force of the strike but he didn’t let go. If anything he began to tug on Cole’s leg in earnest after the hit.

Before he could pull Cole from the saddle his body went limp and he crumpled to the ground. Cole looked down to see a knife sticking from the back of his neck. He looked up to see another figure clad in a black cloak approaching them from the trees.

“Bear, guard,” A vaguely familiar voice called. A large brown form ran past the cloaked figure, who he now knew to be a woman, and leapt on to the back of one of the men who were starting to circle
Cole. He was frozen in disbelief. It was a wolf. And it appeared to be on their side of this fight. This day was becoming stranger by the minute.

Cole’s inactivity was broken when another knife passed just a hair’s breadth from his face. He heard a groan and turned to see another of their attackers on the ground clutching at a knife stuck just between his neck and shoulder. Blood was already streaming from the gaps in between his fingers. Cole quickly slid from the saddle and finished reloading his bow. “You’re welcome,” The cloaked woman called as she sprinted past him to advance on another bandit attempting to sneak up on Shaw.

Shaw didn’t flinch when the cloaked figure jabbed a pair of daggers into the back of one of the men surrounding her. She knew all about gift horses. She simply turned and backhanded the man she was currently squaring off with and ducked under the swing of his partner. If the black clad figure wasn’t really here to help, then she’d put them down as quickly as the rest of these idiots.

But as it turned out their savior’s intentions appeared to be genuine. In a matter of minutes several corpses littered the road as Shaw, Cole, and the woman in black were the last ones standing. Shaw flicked her sword to get some of the blood off as she surveyed the area. It seemed like the threat was extinguished for now. She turned her attention to Cole, “You okay?”

“I may have peed a little,” He joked.

Shaw rolled her eyes, “That hasn’t been funny the last hundred times you tried that joke. One of these days maybe someone will punch you in your lame sense of humor.”

“You wound me Shaw,” He clutched his chest.

“Not yet, but keep talking,” She snapped back at him. They both turned their heads at the musical laughter that remark caused from the third member of their little party.

Their savior stood about a head taller than Shaw. The cloak she wore was of good quality, the rich black fabric, Shaw knew for a fact, was costly to reproduce. Her boots were also of a superior make. This was no starving bandit or poor traveler who simply stumbled upon them. The woman pulled her hood back to reveal Veronica’s smiling face. “Hi.”

“You,” Shaw sneered. “What are you doing here?”
“Typically, in these situations the person who was saved,” Veronica pointed at Shaw, “That’s you. Tells the person who saved them,” She tapped her chest, “That’s me, thank you.”

“Uh thanks,” Cole coughed while Shaw continued to silently glower. Veronica raised the dagger in her left hand flipping her grip so that she was now holding her dagger by its tip rather than its hilt. Cole began to panic, “Tell the nice lady thank you, Shaw.”

But Veronica made no move to attack Shaw. She instead tossed the dagger over her shoulder. There was a loud shout that swiftly transformed into a gurgle and then a thud. Cole leaned his head to the side to see that just behind Veronica there was now another corpse. “How did you?” He muttered dumbly. He looked at Shaw, “How did she?”

Veronica’s smile simply grew wider. She turned and walked over to the body. She knelt and pulled the dagger from the unfortunate man’s neck.

“Nice trick.” Shaw glared over at Veronica, “I’ll ask again, what are you doing here?”

The brunette looked up from where she was wiping the bloody dagger on the tunic of the last of the men to fall. “God sent me.”

Shaw pointed her sword at her. “See Cole, this is why we don’t chat up strange women in taverns.”

“I simply adore your humor, Sameen.”

Shaw could see Cole mouthing the name from the corner of her eye. “You never told me how you know that name.”

Veronica stood up while idly twirling the now cleaned dagger in her left hand. “She told me.”

“Who?” Shaw took a threatening step forward. “No one alive knows that name besides me.”

Veronica was unconcerned by her proximity. “As I said, God sent me.”
“You’re trying to tell us that some god told you my name and sent you here to annoy me with it?”

She smiled indulgently at Shaw, “No silly, she sent me to help you kill Samaritan.”

“How do you know about that?” Cole finally added to the conversation. Veronica cocked an eyebrow in reply. He held up his hands, “Right god told you. Sorry I asked.”

Veronica let out a high pitched whistle and the wolf bounded over to stand between her and Shaw. It looked up at Veronica before butting his head against Shaw’s hip. Sensing a way to break the tension she gestured for Shaw to give the wolf a pat on the head. Surprisingly, she did. “I think he likes you, Shaw.”

Shaw’s lip quirked up in a semblance of a smile as she knelt down to give the wolf a scratch between the ears. “Hey, Handsome.”

“His name is Bear,” Veronica supplied. She turned to examine one of the fallen men’s bodies. She knelt down and pulled one of her throwing knives from his neck. Blood quickly began to pour from the wound and puddle onto the dirt below him.

“Why would a wolf be named Bear?” Cole wondered aloud, more to distract himself from the bloody scene than anything else. He could be a bit squeamish about the aftermath of battle, incredibly so compared to others in his former profession. It was part of the reason why he had become a Shadow rather than a Catalyst like Shaw.

“Because he likes it,” Veronica answered, like it was just that simple. She stood and moved on to another body in search of her knives.

Cole looked at Shaw who merely shrugged as if that wasn’t the most absurd thing she had ever heard, “He likes it,” She echoed as she continued to pat the wolf on the head.

Cole pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m surrounded by madwomen.”

“What was that?”
He coughed. “What, ah, do we do now?”

Shaw stood and wiped her hands on her thighs. The wolf, sensing that massage time was over for now, trotted over to Veronica’s side. “Loot the bodies for starters.” Shaw glanced around. “Should pick up some coin at least. Then go after the one that got away with the packhorse I guess.”

“Or,” Veronica chimed in. “You two could follow me.” She swept an arm towards the dark forest behind her.

“Lady, I don’t even know you. Why would I follow you anywhere, let alone into the Blackwood?”

“Because you want to reach Old Thornhill before the others. I know the way through the forest.”

“And you’ll show us out of the goodness of your heart because the voices in your head told you so?” Shaw scoffed.

“That and for a share of the gold the King promised you.” She walked over to stand within arm’s reach of Shaw. “A girl’s got to eat after all.”

“No way.” This woman was not horning in on their deal. Not happening.

Cole on the other hand, was ready to just hand the woman whatever she wanted. “Shaw, even split three ways, it’s still a lot of gold.”

She scowled at him. Thrown over by her only friend for a pretty face. “We don’t need her, Cole.”

“I know you think that you don’t but you really do, Sweetie.” Shaw growled at the nickname. Her fingers wrapped around the hilt of her sword in a white knuckled grip.

“How about I split my share with her?” Cole suggested to ease the tension. “You won’t be out anything and just maybe we pull this thing off before anyone else.”

“Or she drags us into the forest to be eaten by angry trees or something.”
Veronica chuckled, “Didn’t take you for the superstitious sort, Shaw.”

“I’m on a mission to trap a dragon. My horizons have expanded lately,” She deadpanned.

“Like I told you last night there’s nothing to those old legends about the scary trees. We’ll be the most dangerous thing in this part of the wood.” She leaned in close to Shaw to whisper, “And I’d only eat you in the good way,” Veronica smirked. “And never without your permission, Sameen.” Shaw could only sputter indignantly in reply.

“Honestly, Shaw she didn’t have to help us out here and back at the tavern by warning us about Simmons.” Cole interjected. He hadn’t heard that last bit but Shaw looked like she was ready to snap. It was best for everyone if they could avoid that outcome at all costs.

She stopped glaring at Veronica a for a moment to roll her eyes at him. “We don’t even know if he tried anything after we left.”

“He set the tavern on fire actually,” Veronica said with as much care as one would have saying the sky is blue.

Cole shot her a superior look. “See?”

Shaw was unconvinced. She sheathed her sword and then crossed her arms over her chest as if trying to create a physical barrier against the bad decision forming in Cole’s mind. “What? Just because she says it doesn’t make it true.”

“Shaw,” Veronica sighed. “Given your line of work with the guild...”

“Former line of work,” She cut in, “And how do you even know these things?” She held up her hand, “If you say God told you I will stab you.”

“Trust issues are understandable,” Veronica continued unperturbed by Shaw’s threat. “But I can get you to Old Thornhill before anyone else.” She poked one of the corpses with the toe of her boot. “I can also guarantee this won’t be the only ambush you’ll face along the road. The guard is stretched thin holding the border with Decima. Enterprising men are taking advantage of the lack of patrols.
Between them and Simmons at your back, the Pilgrims’ Pathway is far more dangerous than the Blackwood.”

“Come on Shaw. She’s making a lot of sense here.”

She rounded on Cole. “Weren’t you calling her a madwoman a moment ago?”

“Doesn’t mean she’s wrong about this. There’s more reward than risk here.” He gestured towards the road. “How much time could we waste going after those guys? Simmons will catch up to us and what then? Can’t sell the traveling merchants line without the packhorse.”

Shaw rolled her eyes, “Fine, but the trees better eat you first or I’ll haunt your ass through eternity.” She couldn’t believe she was agreeing to any of this. Fighting a dragon for gold was one thing. Following a madwoman in to a cursed forest was an entirely different kettle of fish.

“We should get moving,” Veronica turned and practically skipped into the trees. “We’re going to have so much fun together.” She didn’t look back to see if they followed. Bear gave a yip and trotted along behind her.

“We’ll be counting those coins in no time,” Cole said in an attempt to be encouraging.

“Seriously, haunting your ass,” Shaw hip checked him as she passed. Cole took a deep breath and moved to grab the horses’ reins so he could lead them in.
Chapter Summary

There's a reason they call her the weird sister.

Chapter Notes

A couple bunnies bite it, they have to eat, just an FYI.

The undergrowth was so thick that they had to remain on foot and lead the horses for the first hour or so. Veronica had left her own horse, a magnificent black courser, tied to a tree about a ten-minute walk from the ambush site. By midday, Veronica had led them to a wide, clear path. “Here we are,” She smiled at them.

“What is this?” Shaw asked.

“Old smuggling route,” Veronica replied. “We have several leagues of clear trail leading west.”

“What about the smugglers?” Cole asked as he pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. The wood was dark and cool; the early onset of winter could be felt more keenly under the shade of so many heavy branches.

“Missed the old part?” Veronica chuckled. “The trail hasn’t been used for smuggling goods in years.”

“Awfully well maintained for an unused path,” Shaw noted. There was barely any overgrowth, no ruts, just a wide expanse of level earth between the trees.

She smiled, “I just said it wasn’t used by smugglers, not that it was unused.” She mounted her horse.
“Right,” Shaw pursed her lips and mounted her own horse. She gave Cole another “what have you gotten us into” glare. “Anything we should worry about?”

“We may encounter a traveler or two, but I don’t expect any trouble. People tend to keep to their own counsel out here.” Veronica eased her horse forward, “Of course you always have to look out for the spiders.”

“Spiders?” Cole squeaked.

“Jumping ones. Some as big as your head,” Veronica called over her shoulder.

“Still confident in our new travel plans?” Shaw glared at him for a moment before urging her own horse forward.

The ride was easy for the rest of the day. They didn’t run into anyone else along the trail nor, much to Cole’s relief, did they encounter any spiders. There were times when Shaw could have sworn she saw red eyes watching them from the shadows between the trees but there was never anything there upon a second glance. About an hour before dusk, they veered from the path and found a small clearing to make camp. “You two set up. I’ll go find dinner,” Shaw instructed them before disappearing between the trees.

“I do so love a woman who takes initiative,” Veronica smiled over at Cole as she began to unpack her belongings.

“I’m not going to have to eat a spider am I?”

“Of course not. Plenty of game around here,” Veronica soothed. “But if you’re really that afraid of them I’d make sure the fire is nice and high tonight.” Cole nodded and set to gathering wood first thing.

When Shaw emerged from the trees an hour later she had a nice roaring blaze going in the center of the clearing. She triumphantly held up the results of her hunt, “And I even cleaned them for you.”

He whistled, she always had a knack for finding food and finding it quickly. “Three rabbits Shaw?”
“One for me, one for you two.” Shaw smirked, “And one for the dog.” She handed two of them to Cole. The third she tossed to the watching wolf. Bear caught it in his mouth and trotted off to the other side of the clearing to enjoy his dinner in peace. Shaw watched him eat for a moment before turning back to Cole. “I catch them you cook them. Don’t burn mine.”

She looked around. The horses were out of their tack and grazing. Two logs had been dragged into the clearing to bracket the fire for seating. Her bedroll was already laid out near one of them. She noticed Cole had set his between it and the fire itself. A third was set on the opposite side, Veronica’s she assumed. “Where’s our guide wandered off to?”

“Water,” Cole grunted as he jammed a sharpened stick through the first rabbit so he could roast it over the fire. He cocked his head to the side, “There’s a stream that way apparently.”

“How long has she been gone?”

“Not suspiciously long, if that’s where you’re going with this.”

“You’re too trusting, just because she’s a pretty face.”

“She’s a gorgeous face, Shaw. And she hasn’t given me any reason not to trust her.”

“Uh saying she talks to god?”

“That makes her crazy, but not necessarily untrustworthy.”

Shaw scoffed at him. “Don’t come crying to me when she stabs you in your sleep.”

“I won’t have to remember? You’ll be haunting me for all eternity.”

“Damn right.”
They both turned to look to the far side of the clearing when they heard footsteps. Shaw slid her
hand to the hilt of her sword, but relaxed when Veronica ambled into view. The woman held up a
water skin. “Thirsty?” She had a large burlap sack thrown over her other shoulder.

Shaw rolled her eyes and stood up. “Please tell me you were that loud on purpose.” Cole was clumsy
enough. If she had to look after two bumbling idiots on this job.

“Of course, I’d hate for your lackey to put a bolt in me because he thought I was an itsy bitsy
spider.”

“The size of my head is not itsy bitsy,” Cole grumbled in defense.

“I’ve seen bigger,” Veronica quipped.

“She’s talking about heads right? Bigger heads,” He practically whimpered.

Shaw pinched the bridge of her nose, “I swear to god Cole, sometimes…” She trailed off. She took a
deep breath and walked over to Veronica. “What’s in the bag?”

She held the top of the burlap sack open so that Shaw could see inside. “River toadstools.”

“Those are poisonous.” Shaw never opted to use many poisons in her work, preferring to be more
hands on. If you were going to kill someone she figured you should be up front about it. But through
her training she was well versed in many types of poison. The sack was practically bursting. One
river toadstool, if ingested, would be enough to put a man down. Why would Veronica need that
many?

“I know.” She closed and tied off the bag.

Shaw stepped closer to her, her posture challenging. “So why do you have them?”

Veronica also stepped in closer to smile down at her. “We’ll need them tomorrow.”
“Oh we will, will we?”

“Trust me,” Veronica sing sowned as she went to store the bag with the rest of her gear.

“Trust is overrated.” Shaw rolled her eyes and stomped back over to Cole. “She doesn’t touch any of the food.”

“Agreed.”

Veronica soon ambled back over with a large book. She paid Shaw and Cole no further mind as she sat and read in the firelight. Cole went between checking on dinner and inventoring their now limited supplies. Shaw sharpened her sword and lavished attention on Bear.

Soon enough Cole announced that dinner was served. They each settled against the fallen logs with their meals. Bear hovered just beside the fire ready to scoop up any stray morsels.

Once Shaw had devoured half of her meal, she glanced over at Veronica. “So has the little voice in your head told you anything useful about this job?”

“A few things.”

“Like?” She prompted.

“I’d hate to ruin the air of mystery, Shaw.”

“Do you know anything about Shaw’s future husband? Or wife?” Cole turned to glance at Shaw. She rolled her eyes and took an overly large bite from the rabbit haunch in her hand. “Did they say if the heirs were male or female?”

“Simmons was having a panic over handling a cock other than his own and Lady Carter seemed to imply the heirs were female to calm him down,” She mumbled around her mouthful of food.

Veronica tossed a leftover bit of meat to Bear. She delicately wiped her fingers on a handkerchief
she pulled from the top of her boot. “I can tell you there are two heirs, both female.”

Cole chuckled, “Awe, Shaw you’re gonna defile a princess.” Shaw tossed the now clean bone in her hand at his head. “Why do you think no one has seen them?”

“I’m sure the King values their privacy,” Veronica supplied. “And it’s simply smart from a tactical standpoint. After all there’s a war going on, if they’re not known they are not easily found and attacked.”

Cole wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “They’re probably fat.”

Veronica frowned, “They’re not fat.”

“How would you know?”

Shaw spoke up before she could reply. “Nothing to do but hang out in a tower and knit all day with servants to bring you all the food you could eat? I’d probably be fat,” She chuckled.

Veronica raised an eyebrow at that, “You knit?”

Shaw smirked, “I eat.”

“I bet you do,” Veronica licked her lips lasciviously. Shaw stared at her, not able to believe the woman’s cheek. Veronica, for her part, stared right back.

“I still say at least one of them is fat,” Cole chimed in breaking their stare-off.

Veronica looked away from Shaw to glower at him. “They’re not fat.”

“Well, when I’m stinking rich maybe I’ll give being fat a try,” Shaw leaned back and rubbed her stomach.
“Can’t see it,” Veronica shook her head.

“You barely know me.”

“True, but from what I have seen you’d be bored in a week, plus…” She let the thought hang.

“Plus?” Shaw, despite knowing better, urged.

“Well, once a princess got one good look at you I’m sure she’d want to be quite active.”

Shaw held up her hands in surrender. She walked right into that one. “Yeah, again not looking to marry any princesses.”

Veronica tilted her head in confusion. “What's wrong with marrying a princess?” Her tone implied that it was understood that anyone should want to do so.

Shaw didn’t agree. “Why would a princess want to marry me? Or any stranger for that matter?”

Veronica shrugged, “It's the way these things are done.”

“Well, that's stupid. You could get stuck with a real asshole running the kingdom that way.”

Cole nodded, “Especially if Simmons gets to Samaritan before we do.”

“Yeah not going to happen.”

“Agreed,” Veronica nodded. She stood up and added another log to the fire. Cole and Shaw watched as she coaxed the flames a bit higher so that the fire wouldn’t die out in the night.

“People should be able to choose whoever they want to marry,” Shaw added after a few moments of silence. She remembered the way her father spoke of her mother. He always sounded happy when
she was the topic of conversation. That wasn’t some forced political nonsense.

Besides, Shaw was pretty sure no one would want to marry someone like her, and she was perfectly fine with that. People were annoying. Princesses were probably doubly so.

“True, but do you not like women or something?” Veronica asked.

Cole snorted. “Shaw hates everyone equally and fucks accordingly.”

Shaw threw another bone at his head. “I like people who are hot and good with a sword. You honestly think a princess is going to be good with a sword?”

“Why not?” Veronica waved her hand between them. “We’re women who are good with a sword.”

Shaw leaned forward. “Don’t know about you, but I had to be. If the royal guards are halfway decent then a princess shouldn’t have to be.”

"Maybe they aren’t. Seeing as they're contracting out to trap the dragon," Cole added. “If you have to go looking for outside help for a job like this then there must not be much talent in your ranks.”

“I still highly doubt it,” Shaw snorted.

Veronica settled down on her own bedroll. Bear trotted over and lay down beside her. She ran her fingers through the fur at the scruff of his neck. “Maybe the princesses would surprise you.”

“Is that why you're doing this? To marry a princess?”

“Oh god no. I just want the gold. Which I'm grateful you’re willing to share of course.”

“Of course,” Shaw snorted. She still couldn’t believe this woman suckered Cole out of half his share. He was making cow eyes at her over the fire. Dimwit. If he wasn’t careful Veronica would talk him out of his entire share before she was through.
“Well, I don’t know about you ladies but I’m going to dream of counting all my gold tonight,” Cole chuckled.

“I’ll wake you in a few hours for second watch,” Shaw told him. They had agreed that the night watch would be split between the two of them. Veronica had offered but there was no way Shaw was going to trust her to watch her back while she slept.

“Goodnight, Shaw,” Cole said before rolling over. “Night, Veronica,” He added as an afterthought. The other woman didn’t reply, either already asleep or not having heard him.

First watch had been quiet. Shaw woke Cole up after his five-hour nap and settled down on her own bedroll. Cole stumbled off to water a tree. She hoped he didn’t encounter anything in the dark as she really wanted to sleep now.

Just before she closed her eyes, Shaw happened to glance across the fire to catch Veronica watching her. The planes of her face were painted in lines of orange and shadow from the crackling flames but her eyes were bright. She was beautiful. Shaw scowled at the thought.

“You get that you’re sort of creepy, right?” Shaw mumbled and rolled over. She could no longer see the other woman but she could feel her eyes on her back.

“Good night, Sameen,” Veronica whispered.

It felt like Shaw had just closed her eyes when a wet nose poked her in the jaw. “Mmmprf,” She groaned and attempted to roll away. A tongue traced her ear and her eyes shot open. Bear was attempting to nuzzle into her side. “Hey, Handsome,” She sleepily mumbled as she wound a hand into his fur.

“I told you she’d react best to him,” Cole’s voice filtered in from somewhere above and to the side of her position. She sat up with a groan. Cole was saddling the horses. Shaw looked across the smoldering embers of their fire to see Veronica seated on a log chewing on a shiny, red apple.

“We decided to let you sleep in,” Veronica smiled and took another bite. “Cole said you had a bad night at the tavern.”
Shaw snorted, “Someone knowing things they have no business of knowing tends to keep me awake.”

“Well, in that case I promise the next time I wreck your sleeping habits it will be for much more pleasurable reasons.”

Shaw rolled her eyes. It was much too early for this crap. She nodded to the apple in the other woman’s hand. “You got another one of those?”

“Check with your errand boy.”

“Cole, you been holding out on me?” She shouted.

“Never, I know better than to come between you and food,” He shouted back.

Shaw stood and stretched. She didn’t miss the way the other woman’s eyes focused in on the strip of skin revealed between her pants and tunic. She smirked. “I’ll eat while we ride then. Sun’s getting high.”

“It’s early yet.” Veronica licked a bit of juice from her lip. She tossed the apple core over her shoulder and stood up. “But we should get going, we’ve got a stop to make.”

“Oh we do?”

Veronica just smiled and walked over to her horse. Shaw attempted to stare a hole in the back of her skull. She was still glowering when Cole ambled over to douse what was left of their fire. He knelt as he dumped water over the remaining embers, and as a puff of steam rose he looked up at her, “I think the crazy lady has a crush on you, Shaw.”

She rolled her eyes. “Lucky me,” She grumbled. “She tries anything and she’ll lose a hand.”

“Oh huh,” Cole didn’t sound convinced. Pretty much anyone could piss Shaw off, but he could count on one hand, with fingers left over, the amount of people who could continuously prod at her and get away with it. “I give it three days before you either stab her or kiss her.”
“Keep talking and I'm going to stab you,” Shaw growled and stomped off towards the trees to take care of her morning routine.

“Does that mean I can kiss her?” He called after her.

“Knock yourself out. Though she may do it for you,” Shaw shouted back.

Once under way, Veronica led them away from the path they had used the day before to one that trailed south and eventually along a river. They rode for about three hours before the trail began to open up into a wide expanse. It was like the Blackwood surrounded an ocean of grass. After another hour the trail crested a small hill. Veronica pulled her horse to a stop at the top of it. “Here we are.”

“Where’s here?” Asked Shaw as she and Cole came up behind her.

“Our stop for the day,” Veronica pointed into the small valley below them. In the distance Shaw could see a massive stone wall and the tops of what appeared to be multicolored tents within it. “Welcome to the Goblin Market.”
The Goblin Market

Chapter Summary

The market reveals many secrets.

Chapter Notes

In which I crib a bit from Christina Rossetti.

Cole leaned forward in his saddle, a look of pure bewilderment on his face. “What is that?”

Veronica grinned, “Exactly what it sounds like, The Goblin Market. Since your packhorse was
stolen and I went light on gear so that I’d be able to move quickly to track you down, we need to
make a stop for supplies.”

He turned to her with wide eyes, “Actual goblins?”

“As opposed to fake ones?” Veronica glanced at Shaw as if to ask where she had found someone so
naïve. “Yes, actual goblins.”

Shaw was unfazed by their impending meeting with heretofore legendary creatures. Of course
maybe goblins were simply small potatoes compared to finding out dragons were real. “They’ll trade
with us?”

“Of course. Though just for weapons. Don’t take and especially don’t eat anything else they try to
sell you.”

“Is that a life or death thing because maybe Shaw should stay here.”
“Piss off, Cole,” She growled. She didn’t eat all the time. Though, honestly, he couldn’t expect her to stab people on an empty stomach.

“It’s a become a wraith starving for their goods which they will refuse to sell you as they watch you slowly go insane and die, because actual goblins are evil, little bastards, thing.” Veronica tapped her chin in thought, “Pretty sure they grind up the bodies to use in meat pies after.”

Cole turned decidedly green. He swallowed several times before speaking. “Oh, that’s something…” What that something was exactly he couldn’t find the words to say.

“Treat this like enemy territory. One false move here and you’re dead.” Veronica smiled, “So have fun.”

“Right,” Cole gulped. He looked over at Shaw with not a small amount of worry.

“So we’ll get food after,” She remarked without concern, there was a gleam in her eyes as she surveyed the gates to the market looming in the distance. It wasn’t often that she came across something new in her experience. Where Cole cowered, she was almost eager to explore this uncharted territory.

“I know just the place.” Veronica urged her horse on the path down the hill and towards the market. Shaw and Cole shared a silent look and then followed.

They came to a stop near a large paddock where customers boarded their horses while they perused the market. Veronica dithered over the cost of watering their horses with a creature about half her size with rat-like features. Cole simply sat in his saddle and stared wide-eyed at the colorful array of people and things around them. Shaw glared down at anyone or anything that stepped within three paces of them.

Her conversation concluded, Veronica flipped a coin to the goblin and led her horse into the paddock. Shaw and Cole rode their horses in behind her. They quickly dismounted. “You can leave your things. No one will touch them. Anyone attempting to steal from paying customers will lose limbs. They take security here very seriously.” Shaw and Cole nodded, though Shaw kept her sword and took an extra knife from her saddle bag and tucked it into her left boot. Cole slung his crossbow over his shoulder.

Curiously, Veronica took a smaller satchel from her saddle bag and secured it around Bear. “Guard,”
She directed the wolf. Bear trotted off to a shady corner of the paddock with the satchel and laid down.

“I thought you said no one would steal from us?” Shaw nodded back towards Bear. “What’s he guarding?”

“Knowledge,” Veronica replied enigmatically. She then tossed the bag full of the toadstools she had collected the day before over her shoulder and began to march towards the large black gates marking the entrance to the market proper.

“Where did all these people come from?” Cole asked her as they made their way through the crowds of people coming and going between the gates and the corral.

“I told you more than just bandits live in the Blackwood. The market is also known in certain circles as the place to acquire various hard to obtain items.”

“The Black Market,” Shaw supplied. “I thought this place was a myth.”

“In this case all the rumors are true.” Veronica shrugged, “Except for the name. The goblins don’t refer to it by that name.”

“What do they call it?” Cole asked.

“It has far too many syllables for me to even to begin to try and tell you.”

“Awe does it leave you tongue tied?”

“I’m glad you’re so concerned about my tongue, Sameen.”

“That’s not what I…” She sputtered.

Veronica simply laughed, “Come along children. We’ve much to do.”
“Come buy! Come buy!” The voices seemed to shout from every direction. A mass of bodies, human, goblin and otherwise crushed between the stalls around them. The air was thick with the smells of sweat, spices, and cooking meat. Shaw’s stomach growled and Cole, having heard, snickered beside her.

They were both glad Veronica had warned them about the food the further they moved into the market. Table after table was piled high with the most delectable looking fruits and vegetables they had ever seen. Bright red cherries. Plums as big as a fist. Apples, melons, berries of every color and variety imaginable were held out before them by shouting goblin men who were as varied in their appearances as the wears they offered.

Cat-like, and rat-like faces pleaded with them to “Come buy.” But heeding Veronica’s word, they pressed on past the food vendors and into a different area of the market. This section had many more human looking faces both in the stalls and walking between them.

They stopped for a moment next to a stand offering various blades. Shaw smiled over the wares. She liked this place already. “I think this one might be to your liking,” Veronica said holding up a wicked looking knife that looked to be made from some kind of volcanic glass. Its glossy black surface looked sharp enough to pierce the sky. Shaw was about to take it from her when something bumped into Veronica, causing her to stumble. Shaw reached out without thinking and put her hands on her hips to steady her.

“Thanks,” She smiled at Shaw warmly. The corner of Shaw’s mouth ticked up in a little grin. The moment was shattered when the little green creature who had bumped into her, having heard her voice, looked up at Veronica with wide eyes. He let out a squeak of what sounded to Shaw like high pitched gibberish and then beat a hasty retreat through the gap between two stalls.

“What’s with him?” Cole asked watching as the little guy nearly toppled over a pile of pumpkins in his haste to get away.

“Who Larry?” Veronica set down the knife she had been examining. “Oh he’s still sore I stuffed him in a trunk once. Guy can sure hold a grudge over something so silly.”

“Silly?” Cole parroted.

“Yes,” She turned to Shaw. “Does he have a hearing problem or something?”
“He was hit on the head a lot as a child.” Shaw quirked her lips, “Mostly by me.” Veronica laughed and Shaw’s mouth morphed into what could almost be called a smile.

“Come on, it’s this way.”

“What is?” Shaw asked.

“Our next stop.” Veronica led them to a y-shaped junction in the market path. She pointed to the right branch of the path. “Shaw you’ll need a bow. The fletcher’s is just over there.”

Shaw nodded, she initially had one with her but it had been on the pack horse when it was taken. She hoped Samaritan wasn’t overly mobile but not knowing what damage had been done to the wards, it made sense to be prepared for any eventuality. Being able to strike from a distance could come in handy. “I assume he takes sovereigns?”

“Anything golden will do the trick,” Veronica smiled. “I once heard he sold a bow for a chunk of one misguided woman’s hair.”

Shaw’s face screwed up at that, “I’ll stick with actual gold.” Not that her hair was blonde any way, but exchanging body parts for anything was a good way to get hexed. She pointed at a stall with an especially flamboyant orange and green roof. “Meet you back there in an hour?”

“That will do,” Veronica smiled. “Try not to get lost, and remember no snacking.”

Shaw rolled her eyes and stomped off. Veronica turned to look at Cole and nodded after her. “You’re going to lose her.”

“She’s a big girl. And besides,” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder to point at his crossbow, “I’ve got a bow already.”

“Fine,” Veronica sighed. “I’ll probably need a helper monkey to carry everything.” She turned and went in the opposite direction from Shaw. “Do keep up.”
They navigated the path side by side in silence. Cole periodically would stop to stare in wonder at the goods the market had to offer, forcing Veronica to pull him away and forward once again. They had been walking for about ten minutes when Cole found his path blocked.

An extremely large goblin was standing in front of him. The creature looked Cole up and down and then grunted something at Veronica. This one was easily the tallest of all the goblins Cole had seen. Almost as tall as he was. Its features were more reptilian and its body appeared to be built of solid muscle. The goblin grunted in a deep voice to Veronica again and pointed a hooked finger at Cole.

“What did he say?”

Veronica replied to the goblin with what sounded to Cole like a series of clicks and then bit her lip. “I was just offered fifty sovereigns for you.”

That explained the full body perusal. “Flattering, but I’m not into guys.”

“Oh dear boy not to fuck,” She chuckled. “Though he’s a she.”

Okay, so goblin women were impressive. Duly noted. “Why else would she?”

“That’s the local butcher.”

Cole moved until he was practically smashed against Veronica’s back. “Tell her no,” He hissed.

“I don’t know, fifty is a fair price.” She glanced over her shoulder at him, “She could get a lot of sausages out of a tall fella like you.”

“And you’re getting twelve thousand sovereigns because of me,” Cole reminded her.

“But if I leave you with the nice goblin I’ll get your entire share which is a quite a bit more than what she’s offering. Sameen all to myself.” She smiled wickedly, “And fifty sovereigns’ worth of pocket money right now.”
“But I don’t want to be sausage,” He whimpered.

“Oh don’t soil yourself,” Veronica laughed. “I’m only teasing.”

Cole stepped back with an indignant huff. “She didn’t offer to turn me into sausages at all, did she?”

“Oh she did. I just don’t want to piss off Shaw that badly no matter how good of a deal she was willing to cut for you.”

“That’s Shaw, saving my ass once again,” He grinned.

Veronica started walking again. They carried on for a bit not speaking to each other, surrounded by the sights and sounds of the market. Eventually she glanced over at him through the corner of her eye. “You’ve known her for a long time.”

“Yeah.” Most of his life really.

“Is she truly as unaffected as she likes to have people believe?”

Cole turned to avoid being run down by a man pushing a cart full of teapots. He shook his head; this place was so odd. When he looked back up, Veronica had stopped walking as well, apparently waiting for his answer. “Oh Shaw’s just a little ball of rage.”

Veronica’s eyes narrowed. “But not with you, not all the time.”

“She’s used to me. I can read her better than most people. And I know what sets her off.” He scratched the back of his neck. “If this is about that crack I made this morning about her wanting to stab you, I wouldn’t let it bother you. Shaw wants to stab everyone at one point or another. It’s not personal.”

“But I want it to be,” Veronica mumbled under her breath.

“What was that?”
“Lucky me,” Veronica replied louder this time. They started walking again.

After a minute, Cole shrugged. “I actually think Shaw is starting to like you”

Veronica perked up at that. “Why do you say that?”

“She hasn’t stabbed you.”

Veronica’s face fell, “Funny.”

“And she willingly touched you earlier. She’s only known you a couple of days and she touched you, that doesn’t happen. You may have noticed she doesn’t really touch people unless it’s a punching situation.”

“She touched that Tomas fellow at the tavern the other night,” Veronica grumbled before she could stop herself.

Cole stopped in his tracks. “Are you getting jealous over Shaw?” He sputtered. Veronica didn’t say anything but she did noticeably increase the speed of her steps. Cole groaned, “Every damn time.” He hurried to catch up.

They finally stopped in front of one of the few stone structures in the market. From the looks of the sign it was an alchemist’s shop. “Okay,” Veronica clapped her hands together. “This place is owned by a friend of mine. Be polite. Don’t touch anything, and don’t stare.”

Cole held up his hands. “On my best behavior I swear.” He was very interested in seeing what sort of person Veronica would call friend.

The interior of the shop was dark. The air smelt musty like dirt and old leather. Cole could see specks of dust floating about in the bit of sunlight that streamed in from the open door but not much else. Veronica grabbed his arm and pulled him fully into the room causing the door to slam closed behind them.
“One moment,” A voice shouted out in the common tongue.

“Take your time Dai,” Veronica called. There was a sound of scrambling feet and then a torch flared to life in the back of the room. As the sound of footsteps came closer more and more torches lit up along the walls illuminating racks of different colorful vials, stacks of books, and bundles of dried herbs.

Soon a, well, the best way Cole could describe him to Shaw later was, about half a man appeared before them. He only came to about Veronica’s hip in height. His hair and eyes were black but his features were almost cherubic. “Root!” The little man heartily cheered when he stood before Veronica.

She stiffened and then smiled, “Daizo! Brought you a present.” She held up the bag of toadstools. “Do you have my things ready?”

“Of course.” He took the bag from her and then scampered over to a work table just to the right of them. Cole had been so distracted by the man’s appearance that he had missed it. Daizo reached for something under the table. Cole watched as he handed over a bundle of cloth. Veronica untied it to reveal a heavy woodsman’s axe. She ran her thumb along the cutting edge smearing a hint of blood on the polished surface as it sliced into her flesh. The metal seemed to glow when the blood hit it. Cole blinked and the effect was gone.

“Romeo already loaded the crates into the wagon for you. We were just waiting for you to come pick it up.”

Veronica brought her thumb to her mouth to lick at the small wound. She nodded to the little man, seemingly satisfied with his work. “And the flasks?”

“Over here,” He nodded towards the back of the room. “Who’s the slag, Root?”

She cut her eyes over to Cole, “New business partner.”

“Not like you to play with outsiders,” Daizo remarked as he began moving a few boxes out of her path.

“Misery needs company, my friend.”
“As long as you’re the one inflicting the misery.”

“But of course,” She smiled. Her eyes strayed again to Cole, “Still awake over there?”

“Yeah,” He nodded, distracted by what he had just seen and heard. His stomach was practically in his feet. He and Shaw were in real trouble.

Across the market Shaw was finishing up at the fletcher’s. She had found a recurve to her liking after much trial and error. She eventually paid for it, a full quiver of arrows and a few extra bolts for Cole’s crossbow. She was making her way back to the rendezvous point when a man standing near one of the stands caught her notice. “Son of a,” She swore aloud.

Shaw ducked off the main path and slipped into a stall which appeared to sell nothing but wooden shoes. The stooped proprietor barely gave her a glance as she continued to carve a large block. Shaw was grateful the old woman didn’t bring any attention to her. She glanced over again at her reason for ducking into the stall. “Crap.” Standing not ten paces from her, examining an assortment of poisons, was a man named Hersh, the lead enforcer of her former guild.

She and Cole had bought out their contracts three years ago, leaving the guild cleanly. Yet around mid-winter last year she began to hear rumors about other former guild members being killed. It seemed that whoever now held Hersh’s leash wanted there to be only one way out of being a Catalyst or their Shadow.

Shaw had thought the guild stayed out of Thornhill. It was part of the reason she and Cole had chosen to settle here. Thus Hersh’s presence here made her the closest she came to uneasy. She watched as he turned away from the poisons vendor and began to move down the path she had just come from. Shaw decided to follow.

He wound his way between the shops as if he visited the market frequently. Every few stalls he would stop and pick up a package. He had six before he veered off down a less crowded branch of the winding corridors.

Hersh’s path ended at the crude docks built on the east end of the market where it butted against the river. A long boat manned by two Catalysts in full armor was moored on the furthest end. Hersh stepped on to the boat and once seated the men cast off the lines and began to row down river. Shaw released the breath she had been holding when it disappeared from sight.
She made her way back through the stalls to where she had agreed to meet the others. When she got to the orange and green tent only Cole was standing there. She glanced around the surrounding area. “Where’s Veronica?”

“Went to get a wagon.”

“She bought that much crap?”

“Shopping with her was an experience,” Cole grimaced. He shifted from foot to foot. She knew it meant that he was nervous about telling her something. If the Weird Sister sold her horse to cover her debts, there would be hell to pay. Before she could ask he opened his mouth, “Look, Shaw we’ve got a problem.”

“You saw Hersh too?”

Cole’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head. “Hersh is here?”

“Yeah, well he was. That’s the problem isn’t it?”

“That’s a problem sure, but not what I was talking about.”

Shaw’s eyes narrowed. “What’s a bigger problem than the guild sniffing around?”

He gulped, “It’s about Veronica…”
The name Root was known throughout the five kingdoms. If you wanted someone dead, but would not or could not rely on the guild, you sought out Root. It was widely known that the former King, Harold’s brother, met his end at the point of Root’s blade. Some say King Harold, desperate to take the throne, ordered the assassination. Others say Decima arranged things to destabilize the kingdom ahead of a full on invasion that never materialized. But everyone agreed Root was the one responsible.

The guild had a standing order for her head, not appreciating the competition. Until now however, no one knew what the famed assassin looked like. It was whispered in certain circles that Root was a sorceress capable of changing her appearance at will. Others claimed that she was not one woman but a thousand, an entire legion of assassins who shared the name. Either way Root was dangerous, a killer among killers. And she was now driving a wagon not twelve paces in front of Shaw.

Shaw had silently stewed with anger as she and Cole made their way to the front gate of the market to wait for their guide. She hadn’t wanted to confront the woman right away. It seemed Root knew the people of the market very well. Shaw couldn’t fight all of them if they chose to come to the assassin’s aid. So when she pulled up in the wagon not long after Cole had delivered the news of her true identity, Shaw followed along as if nothing were amiss.

Root for her part seemed not to realize the mistake she had made. She was all smiles when she saw Cole and Shaw at the front gate. “Got you a present.” She had tossed Shaw a sheath with the knife they had been admiring when they first entered the market. Shaw fingered the handle of that knife now.
Root pulled the wagon to a stop. Bear, who had been dozing in the back popped up and leapt from the wagon and on to the ground. He must have caught sent of something because soon he was darting off into the trees.

“Why are we stopping?” Shaw asked keeping her tone neutral.

“I need to visit a tree.” Root climbed down and wandered off into the wood.

Shaw dismounted and stretched. After a minute Cole ambled up beside her. His eyes scanned the trees around them as if they were going to come to life at any moment and attack them. “Do you think she’s plotting something? Maybe she’s got something stashed back there? Or someone? What if it’s the spiders?”

“She’s been bouncing in her seat for nearly an hour, fairly sure she just needs to relieve herself.”

“What are we going to do, Shaw?” He sounded almost panicked. “She’s led us out here. We have no idea for what purpose. Even if we could overpower her…”

“If?” Shaw glared at him.

“Look I know you could probably take her, but we don’t know how to get back to civilization.”

Shaw decided not to punch him over the probably. “It’s simple, we backtrack to the market and then follow the river.”

“The same river Hersh took a boat ride down?”

Shaw poked him in the chest. “I don’t hear you giving any better suggestions.”

“Now, now kids. I leave you alone for five minutes and you get into a scrap?” Root teased as she stepped out from the trees. She licked her lips, “What has you so tense, Sameen? And is there anything I can do to make it worse?” It was the wrong thing to say.
Shaw surged forward and slammed her into the trunk of the closest tree. She puffed out a pained breath. Shaw pressed her body wholly against Root’s, forcing an arm across her chest to pin her to the tree while she brandished her new knife in her other hand. At first she seemed calm despite Shaw’s threatening posture. “While I had hoped we would reach this stage in our relationship eventually, I am not interested in putting on a show for your lackey,” She grinned.

“Cut the crap,” Shaw hissed. “We know who you are.”

“Yes, we covered the introductions days ago.”

“Did we, Root?” Shaw cocked her head to the side in challenge.

The teasing grin slid from her face. Her eyes tracked over to Cole. “I had hoped you had missed that tiny detail.”

“I bet you did,” Cole replied.

“So which one of them paid you to lead us out here?” Shaw asked pressing her harder against the trunk of the tree. Elias could certainly afford an assassin of her standing.

Wide, brown eyes snapped back to Shaw. “No, one. I brought you here to help you.”

“An assassin is going to help us?”

“Why not? You two were assassins once,” She countered.

“Don’t try and turn this around on us. You’ve been lying this entire time.” Shaw edged the knife closer to her jugular.

Root didn’t flinch. “Because you would have clearly accepted my help had I been upfront to begin with. So I may have withheld my name. I have been nothing but genuine in my intentions to help you since the day we met.”
“See I’m not so sure about that.”

“Come now I took the first steps towards trust. I did warn you about Simmons after all. Intervened with the bandits. Made sure none of the proprietors in the market threw your lackey into a pot.” The look she shot Cole suggested she regretted that decision. Root focused back on Shaw. She jutted her chin forward bringing her neck closer to the blade. “I put that knife in your hand.”

If she was trying to throw Shaw off with that little move it wasn’t going to work. Even if the things she was saying held a ring of truth. One very important fact remained, “And all that time you neglected to mention who you really were.”

Suddenly, Bear burst from the tree line at a run. His teeth were bared, snarling a warning at Shaw. “Bear, down!” Root snapped, causing the wolf to go still. She tilted her head a fraction to look at Cole who had his crossbow pointed at the wolf. “You fire that thing and I will shove it somewhere indelicate once I get free.”

“He won’t hurt the wolf,” Shaw said, making certain Cole realized it was an order. He reluctantly lowered the bow. “Now where were we? That’s right I was about to gut you for lying to us.”

“Do you go around announcing your former profession to everyone you meet, Sameen?”

“No, see this is the part where you give me one good reason why I shouldn’t put my knife through the underside of your jaw and shut you up for good.”

Root’s eyes focused on the sky just over Shaw’s head for a moment, “Your father was a sea captain. You stowed away on his ship when you were ten. There was a storm. He tied you to the mast, but stayed at the wheel.”

“Don’t talk about my father.” Shaw growled and pressed the knife against her skin. A single drop of crimson began to bead around the tip of the blade. Root didn’t flinch. “Your god tell you that?”

“I know things, Shaw.” Her eyes slid over to Cole hovering behind Shaw’s left shoulder. She lowered her voice, “Things you haven’t even told your little friend. Where you were born. Where you came from. She tells me things. Things I’d have no way of knowing about to even begin to lie to you about my abilities. She told me you’re the one who will destroy Samaritan once and for all. He has to be stopped or a great many people will die. Let me use my talents to help you.”
Shaw stared at her for a long moment, her eyes searched for any hint of further deception. Root met her gaze, eyes clear, her breathing steady. Then with a nod she pulled her arm away from Root’s chest and stepped back. “She tell you where we could find something to eat?”

Root rubbed her chest, “We’re not far from the spot I had in mind earlier.”

“We’ll call a truce for now,” Shaw told her. “But you so much as breathe the wrong way and I’ll gut you.”

Root smiled, “You know how to give a girl something to look forward to.” Shaw rolled her eyes and stomped off. “You’re walking the wrong way,” Root shouted after her. Shaw simply gave a rude gesture as her reply.

Root whistled and Bear leaped up from his crouch, and trotted over to her. “Wagon,” She directed. Bear sauntered past Cole and jumped in the back of the wagon. The wolf’s eyes never strayed from him. He did his best not to gulp and shuffled his feet to put more distance between himself and Root.

“Are you done having your tantrum, Sweetie?” Root smiled at Cole when Shaw’s curses grew in volume. “She’s so adorable.” Root reached up and wiped the small trickle of blood from her neck. She examined her fingers for a moment before licking the blood off of them.

Cole stared at her with wide eyed disbelief. “You are the most insane person I have ever met.”

“Awe flattery’s cute and all, but since we’re being honest, I’m really not interested.” She playfully elbowed Cole in the side, “I’ve sort of got my eye on someone else.”

“That wasn’t…”

“Shhh, you’ll find a nice girl someday and have lots of fat little babies. We simply weren’t meant to be.” She climbed back on to the wagon and started the horse moving again. “Shaw. It's this way, Sweetie.”

They rode for another hour before coming to an overgrown dirt lane. Root eased the wagon forward, maneuvering around a few ruts as if she traveled this path a great many times before. A break in the trees revealed a large manor, which seemed to be crumbling from disuse.
“What is this place?”

“It’s called The Groves,” Root replied. “It was once a hunting cottage for the noble houses of Old Thornhill.”

“A cottage?” Cole sputtered. His concept of a cottage was vastly different. Starting with about fifty times fewer rooms.

“Also our refuge for the night,” Root replied pulling the wagon to a stop next to a barn with an attached set of stables. “The horses can rest here. The roof is sturdy.” She moved to open up the doors. Shaw quickly dismounted and went to assist her. Root waved for Cole to ride his horse inside. Shaw, noting that the doors would stay open on their own, turned and went for her own horse.

Once they were inside Root lead the wagon inside as well. Bear jumped out and scampered back out to the courtyard. Root walked around to the rear of the wagon and lowered the gate.

“What’s in the crates?” Shaw asked suddenly at her elbow. There were two large wooden cases in the back of the wagon along with Root’s saddlebags.

“It’s a surprise.”

Shaw’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve had enough of those from you.”

“Fine,” Root huffed. She climbed into the back of the wagon and began undoing the straps on one of the cases. She opened the lid and motioned for Shaw to peer inside. “You need to dress to impress, Shaw.”

“Armor,” She looked at the other woman in confusion. “You got me armor?” She climbed up to get a better look.

Root nodded. “I had the design drawn up based on what you wore as a Catalyst. Finest leather sovereigns can buy. Reinforced at kill points with a bit of plate, but not too much, wouldn’t want to effect maneuverability. Then my friend Daizo and I treated it alchemically to offer a little extra fire-
proofing, in light of the task at hand.”

“How long have you been planning all this?”

“As soon as word came about Samaritan. I told you. She told me you were the only one who could do this.”

Shaw picked up a gauntlet and held it in her hand. The leather was supple but the piece was a good weight. The stitching looked immaculate. She turned it around in her hand, taking in the craftsmanship from every angle; it was a beautiful piece. Much care was taken in constructing it. Root smiled softly as she watched her. Shaw scowled at the reminder of where the armor came from. “You think I’m going to trust anything you give me?” She tossed the glove back into the box.

“Sameen,” Root started. She sounded far less sure of herself than she normally did.

Shaw got right in her face. “You’re on thin ice with me already. Do you really want to keep throwing that name around to get a rise out of me?”

“So is the extremely close talking going to remain a thing with you two?” Cole shook his head as he appeared at the side of the wagon. They ignored him. “I’ve got our horses out of their tack and into the stalls. Did you want me to help take care of yours, Root, or are you two planning on keeping it company all night?”

Root sighed and looked away from Shaw and over at him. “No you two go ahead and go on to the house. I’ll take care of this.”

Shaw scrambled from the back of the wagon with a grunt. Cole handed her saddlebags to her and the pair left the stables. The sun was just setting, leaving the sky awash in purples and pinks. “At least we’ll have a roof over our heads,” Cole sighed. They crossed the courtyard quickly. “Think it’s unlocked?”

Shaw shook her head, “Probably. Who’d wander all the way out here to rob someone?” She lightly pushed the door, and it swung open.

Shaw and Cole stepped into the foyer. Despite the exterior, the inside of the home looked well cared for. To their left there was a set of stairs leading to the second level. To the right was a sitting room.
The interior was remarkably free of dust. They moved towards the sitting room and set down their bags.

“Not bad,” Cole remarked as he shuffled over to the fireplace. There were already a few logs resting in it waiting to be set alight.

“I guess,” Shaw said as she looked around. There were piles of books everywhere. “Whose house is this?”

“Mine,” Root answered as she eased her way past them and further into the home. “This was the house I was raised in.” She set her saddle bags down across a dark green settee.

“You really did grow up out here? I thought that was just something you made up back at the tavern to show off.”

“A little seed of truth makes for the best lies. I was born in this house. I lived here with my mother until the day she died.” Root turned to face them. “I’m going to go and check the larder. A friend of mine was supposed to drop off some provisions. Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll only be a moment.”

Cole glanced up at Shaw once they were alone again. “Are you really going to give her a chance?”

“She’s still breathing isn’t she?”

“Shaw.”

“What?” She huffed. “I don’t exactly trust her but I cannot argue away the fact that she knows things that there is no way she could possibly know.”

“You think she really does talk to some god?”

“I think she’s tapped into something I don’t understand but if it can be useful to the mission then I will take advantage of it.” She looked him in the eye, “And if it’s not, I’ll kill her. Wasn’t that what we were trained to do?”
“You always bought in to the mission more than I did. Whether it was in the guild or with this fool’s errand.”

“And still you always followed me like an idiot,” She smirked.

“That’s me,” He smiled softly. “Someone has to watch your back with all the trouble you get into.”

Shaw raised an eyebrow at that. “You’re the one that let the crazy woman sit at our table and started this mess.”

“Got me there.”

“And convinced me to follow her into the woods.”

“No one forced you to go along.”

“Please,” Shaw scoffed, “She would have murdered you in your sleep by now without me around.”

“He’s not worth bloodying my blade. Might have left him for the spiders though,” Root teased as she walked back into the room carrying a tray of food. She shuffled past them and set the tray down on a low table. Shaw looked it over: loaf of bread, large wheel of some type of cheese, some strips of dried meat, and a bottle of wine. “I’ll eat first of course,” Root said as she sliced off a hunk of the cheese. “Just to reassure you both.”

“Thanks,” Shaw grumbled.

“Any time,” She smiled and took a large bite.

Despite her reservations, Shaw had to admit the food was good. Root indeed had a small portion of everything before eventually excusing herself, and by the sound of her footsteps walking upstairs. Shaw and Cole polished off the wine as they discussed the watch schedule for the night. Though they had a roof over their heads, they were not going to take any chances, especially given whose
roof it was. Eventually, they agreed that Cole would take the first shift.

Everything settled Shaw made her way upstairs to discuss the sleeping arrangements with Root. The smart thing would be to just bed down on the floor of the sitting room, but the lure of an actual bed was hard to resist. She found her in what appeared to be the library; given that the books in this room were actually on massive shelves lining the walls and not just piled along the floor.

Root was standing near the middle of the large room staring up at a portrait of a woman which hung above the fireplace. She didn’t look away from it when she spoke. “Something you need?”

Shaw glanced up at the portrait. “You look like her.” The woman’s hair was a darker brown, and her eyes didn’t hold the same hint of mischief, but there was no doubt she and Root were related.

“So I’ve been told,” Root smiled ruefully. Something in her expression told Shaw that whoever had made that comparison before hadn’t met a good end. “I never knew if Mama found that to be a good thing or not.”

“You two not get along or something?” Shaw took a seat on a low sofa. She was close but not crowding the other woman. Maybe if she got her talking she could find a way to get into Root’s head, ruffle her feathers, for a change.

“I loved my mother but she was a hard woman to love. Life hadn’t treated her very well and then I came along.”

“What about your father?”

“He was part of the ill treatment.” Root sighed and sat down on one of two high-backed chairs nearer the hearth. She stared into the flames pointedly not looking at Shaw. “He was a soldier. He got what he wanted from my mother on the eve of battle, and left her with a bunch of promises he never intended to keep. It broke something in her, I think. Then I came along and made things worse.”

“They weren’t married,” Shaw supplied. “You were a bastard.” Root nodded.

Shaw did the math in her head and then scowled. “There were soldiers leaving bastards left and right during the Vigilance War from what I hear. What made your mother so different?”
“Highborn ladies don’t have children out of wedlock, especially not girl children. If I had been a boy…” She trailed off.

“Well, that's horseshit.” Shaw could fight as well as any man. Craft a blade as well as any man. She was a damn sight smarter than many men she had come across in her travels. For that matter, Root was wily and could hold her own in a fight too.

“It's the way things were done then.” Root finally looked at her, “Things have gotten better in the eleven years since Harold took over the throne. There are places to go, funds to take care of widows, a boarding school which receives money from the crown to educate and care for orphaned and abandoned children. Two of his top advisors are women, and one of them not noble born.”

“And the old king had to go for all that to happen.”

Tight lines formed around Root’s eyes, “I believe in what Harold is trying to do with the kingdom. He’s helping to remake the world. But yes that world never would have been born without a few sacrifices.”

"That how you justify what you’ve done?” Shaw asked not unkindly. “The old king was an asshole?”

Root’s face morphed to one of blank disinterest. She was holding something back. "I barely lifted a finger. I'd think you would be more understanding of my former profession given your time in the guild."

Shaw went with the change of subject, sensing that she had pushed the other woman nearly to her limit. "Just how did you fall into this line of work?" A life in the woods was a long way from court intrigues.

"Despite everything, my mother always encouraged me to follow my talents, and I'm quite good at what I do."

“That's not an answer.”
“It's not a tale for an early acquaintance like ours. You tell me your story and I'll tell you mine, once we get through this little adventure.”

Shaw raised an eyebrow. “I thought you knew everything there was to know about me already.”

“I’d like to hear you tell it,” Root shrugged.

“You really think I'll feel extra chatty after we’re through?”

“I’m hoping you’ll do all sorts of things once we’ve finished this job, Shaw.” She stood up. “I need to bring more wood in. Feel free to read anything you like.” She turned and left the room.

Shaw did end up picking up a book. It had been sometime since she had settled down to read anything. With everything she had to weigh on her mind it was nice to indulge in a bit of diversion for a little while. About four chapters in Root returned to the room and added another log to the fire. Then without a word she settled into the chair she had sat in earlier and began to read something herself.

Shaw woke in the middle of the night to find Root was gone. “Damnit,” She cursed, quickly pulling herself together. She searched the house but found no sign of the woman. Cole, who was supposed to be on watch, was snoring away in a chair by the fire in the sitting room. She contemplated waking him up with a thorough ass kicking but decided she needed to find their wayward host first.

Shaw was about to check the stables when Bear came bounding up to her. “She wouldn’t run off without you, would she Big Man?”

Bear yipped at her and then took off towards the side of the house. Shaw followed. The moon was high and full, glowing brightly enough that she could see clearly so as not to trip over her own feet. Bear led her into the trees and up a small hill. She was about halfway up when she noticed Root standing in front of what looked like three tombstones. She paused for a moment, wondering if she should intrude on what appeared to be a private moment or not. Bear, having no such reservations, trotted up to Root’s side.

Knowing they were made Shaw pressed forward. Root didn’t turn around but she did acknowledge her presence. “What brings you out here, Shaw?”
“I think that’s my line,” She replied walking until she stood beside Root. “Whose graves are these?”

“My mother and her old nurse are buried here.” Root pointed at the third marker, “That’s in remembrance of the nurse’s daughter Hanna.”

Shaw noticed the change in phrasing. Hanna was dead but not buried here alongside her mother for some reason. She’d wager it wasn’t a good one.

“It was a woodcutter.” Root’s voice had the slightest tremble. “He came by from time to time. Always made Mama uneasy. She had a sense about people. Nothing like me, but enough not to trust him alone with young girls. One day when he came by I was sick with fever. Mama and Nurse were busy tending me. We didn’t realize Hanna was gone until it was too late.” Root took a shuddering breath, “He was the first man I killed.”

“Sounds like he deserved it.” Shaw hoped it had been painful. She had done a lot of what most people would call bad in her time but even she had limits. You didn’t mess with kids.

Root nodded. They stood there in silence for a few moments before Shaw realized that it had started to snow. Root shivered beside her. She was only wearing a thin tunic. Shaw frowned, “Come on. It’s freezing out here.”

“Worried about me, Sameen?” Her tone was much lighter.

“You’ve led us out to the middle of nowhere. Kinda need you to lead us out of here.”

Root smiled again. “Did you just admit that you need me?”

Shaw pursed her lips in annoyance, “For the mission.”
The Groves

Chapter Summary

Is trust overrated?

Chapter Notes

I’m a little sad as I post today you guys. In light of yesterday’s casting news, on one hand I’m super happy Sarah will continue to be on my TV, but on the other I’m sad as to what her new show means for Shaw and PoI. If the show lives on is Shaw done? Is this just a sign that the show is done? AM I in a panicky overreaction spiral? Arg...I want to keep hope alive, I really do. But Harold was right, hope is painful.

Root was the one who woke up alone in the morning. Granted, she had gone to bed the same way after Shaw found her at the gravesite, but a girl could dream. And she had, quite graphically in fact. She licked her lips, “Maybe someday.”

Rising from bed, she quickly set about her normal morning routine when not on the road. Within ten minutes she was dressed, armed, and on the move. On her way downstairs she noticed the bedroom Shaw had claimed was empty. “Now where has that one wandered off to?”

Cole was still in the chair near the hearth snoring away. He didn’t even twitch as she crossed the room. “I have no idea how he’s managed to survive this long,” She noted aloud.

Shaw, the voice that had been a constant comfort to her since she was a child whispered. She was growing weaker. But Root knew that Shaw could set things right and that She and Thornhill would grow strong again. Shaw will keep everyone safe.

“True,” She hummed in agreement. “She is magnificent.” She had no idea the former Catalyst would be so stimulating, when She had first brought her to Root’s attention. But Sameen Shaw was so much more than she possibly could have imagined. But unfortunately missing at the moment. Root continued on in her search.

Careful.
Root knew the command wasn’t in reference to her intent to check the kitchen. “Aren’t I always?”

No.

Shaw was not in the kitchen as Root had expected. Though the bread on the table had been sliced, along with more of the cheese, and the apple barrel was open. “At least she didn’t skip breakfast,” Root smiled. She found Shaw delightful all the time but even Root had to admit the compact, former-assassin was much easier to deal with once fed. She heard a bark from outside and left the room.

A glance out the sitting room window revealed her prey. Shaw was in the courtyard practicing her sword forms as Bear romped through the light dusting of snow that had fallen overnight. She could see enough of Shaw’s face to appreciate the woman’s focus as she advanced on her invisible opponents. Root found herself captivated by the show.

Shaw was like the river. Not simply moving through tired forms; she flowed, curling and whirling, smoothly turning on the balls of her feet. Then suddenly she would rush forward and lash out with pounding force. The sword in her hands was a blur, rapidly switching from left to right. Its destination apparently depended on Shaw’s fancy. Each hand seemed equally talented. Root swallowed with a suddenly dry mouth.

“Are you only planning on watching?” Shaw shouted out even though her back was to the house.

Root opened the window to reply, “I like to watch.”

“Funny. From all your talk, I thought you’d be much more hands on.”

“Is that a challenge, Sameen?” Root asked as she moved away from the window. She quickly made her way to the front door.

Shaw was stretching when she came outside. She straightened up when Root was within a few feet of her, “I need to know what you can do. No holding back.”

“We might need one of the bedrooms for that.”
Shaw rolled her eyes. She drew her sword and moved into a ready position. “Start with a sword.”

“Gladly,” Root licked her lips, “I know how you feel about women who are good with them.”

She cocked her head to the side, “And you believe you are?”

Root chuckled, “You’ve seen me work, Shaw.”

“Those bandits were idiots.” She scoffed. “You barely broke a sweat.”

“Is that something like respect I hear?”

“No. Just the truth.”

“Admit it, you were impressed.” Root grinned and unsheathed her daggers. She began to twirl the one in her left hand. Shaw noted that it seemed to be a habit of hers.

“I’ll be impressed,” Shaw shot forward and swung at Root with her sword. The other woman blocked the swing easily though the attack did force her to take several steps backwards. “If you manage to hit me.”

By the time Cole wandered into the courtyard an hour later both women had managed to work up a sweat. “Uh…” He muttered dumbly.

Shaw was on top of Root. Her body pinning the other woman to the dirt. Her sword was on the ground several paces away. Root had the tip of one of her daggers pressed to the side of Shaw’s neck while Shaw’s left hand was around her throat. They were both breathing heavily. Their bodies so close they were practically panting into each other’s mouths. They both looked over at Cole with wide eyes.

After a beat, Root sighed in Shaw’s ear, “And just when we were starting to really connect.” She pulled her arm away to lay her dagger on the ground, conceding the match.
Shaw scrambled to climb off of the other woman. Almost as an afterthought, she extended a hand to help her stand. Root smiled widely at the move. “Uh good work,” Shaw muttered.

“I aim to please,” Root drawled.

“Were you two just…” Cole trailed off.

“Doing something more productive than sleeping the daylight away?” Shaw turned to glare at him. “At least, now that you’re up we can get ready to move.”

“Not today,” Root interjected.

Shaw spun on her heels to face her. “What do you mean not today? We’re on a clock here.”

“We can’t leave yet.”

“Why not?”

“Not part of the plan.”

“Well maybe you should share the fucking plan,” Shaw growled. Just when she gives Root a little leeway she starts right back up with her woman of mystery routine.

“In due time,” Root smiled.

“Time’s wasting.”

“I think I’ll go upstairs and freshen up,” Root said turning towards the house. In the doorway she stopped and glanced over her shoulder, “Thanks for the workout, Sameen. I’m sure I’ll be feeling it in my muscles for the rest of the day. We should do it again soon, perhaps somewhere a little more private.” Then she disappeared inside.
Cole looked dumbly between the doorway and Shaw. There was definitely something going on there. Shaw, for her part, stood glaring at the house as if she could see Root moving through the walls. He was a little afraid she might permanently damage her jaw from how hard she appeared to be clenching it.

Finally, she shook her head. “Since we’re apparently staying another night, I’m going to go track down something for dinner. I need protein,” Shaw huffed, “And to kill something.” She picked up her cloak from where she had left her gear in a pile on the ground and once she had it on, she grabbed her new bow and slung the quiver over her shoulder.

Cole stood up as well, “I’ll come along.”

“Stay here,” Shaw barked. He stumbled from the unexpected force of the command. Having noticed his surprised reaction, Shaw sighed, “Look I need a little space. Just stay here and keep an eye on things all right?”

“Sure, Shaw,” He nodded. “Do me a favor though?”

“What?”

“Take some time and figure out just why Root seems to piss you off so much?”

“She lied? She never gives us a straight answer about anything?” She gripped her bow harder with each point she listed, “She’s insufferable? Her incessant need to turn everything into an innuendo? Take your fucking pick.”

“I think it’s more than that.” He rubbed his jaw, “I think you do too.”

Shaw wanted to argue but realized she couldn’t. Root was able to get a rise out of her far more easily than anyone had before. She was angry but the anger was getting mixed up with something else. If Shaw couldn’t get herself sorted, her volatility would make the dangerous path they were walking even worse. With a nod to Cole she stomped off towards the tree line.

Cole shook his head and collected the rest of Shaw’s things and carried them back into the house.
Root was sitting on the stairs watching. “If you hurt her, I’ll find a way to kill you myself.”

“Chances are she’ll kill me first.”

“All the same,” Cole said as he turned towards the sitting room. “In her own way, she’s trying to give you a chance here. Don’t take that for granted.” He walked away before Root could reply.

Shaw seemed much calmer when she returned a few hours later, carrying a deer across her shoulders. Cole was in the courtyard playing fetch with Bear who had seemed to have forgiven him for his indiscretion the day before. He gave her a tentative smile as he stood up. “I still don’t know how you always manage to find game no matter what the conditions are.”

“I don’t like being hungry,” She grunted in reply as he helped her set down the carcass.

“Here,” Cole handed her a handkerchief to wipe some blood from her face. “Why don’t you go get cleaned up and I’ll work on getting this guy sorted and starting dinner.”

“Thanks,” She nodded. She walked a few steps before turning to him. “Where’s Root?”

“She hasn’t come back down from upstairs since you left. I think she locked herself in the library.”

Shaw nodded, “Can you take care of the prep on your own?”

“You kill ‘em, I cook ‘em,” He replied.

Root and Cole were both in the kitchen when Shaw came back downstairs. What looked like a loin was roasting over the fire on a spit. Cole was stirring a pot of what looked to be the beginnings of venison stew while she crunched on another apple. “Feeling better?” Root asked as Shaw stepped into the room.

“It’s time you let us know what you know,” Shaw’s tone brokered no argument. She had thought about things while out hunting. They needed Root if they were going to pull this mission off. She was a good fighter and more importantly she knew the terrain. Shaw would figure out how to reign in her temper, but the other woman had to meet her halfway. “If I’m going to trust you to watch our
backs then I need you to tell me everything. You’re still holding back.”

“Beautiful and smart,” Root smiled, much to Shaw’s rising ire.

She took a moment to breathe so that she wouldn’t bite the other woman’s head off again. “Cut the crap.” She sounded stern, not angry. Progress.

“Very well,” Root sighed. “Let’s go into the library.” She turned and left the kitchen not waiting for them to follow.

Root was clearing space on the grand oak table in the center of the room when they walked in. “As you know cutting through the Blackwood has provided us with a far more direct route to Old Thornhill.” She rolled a large map out across the table. The map was clearly old, the parchment yellowed and crumbling a bit along its edges.

She pointed at a spot marked ‘The Groves.’ “We’re here.” She walked her fingers across a curving line past a rendering of Mount Lethe and then tapped on the spot labeled ‘Thornhill.’ “Old Thornhill is there.”

“Looks like less than a week’s ride,” Shaw nodded. Cutting through the wood had reduced their travel time dramatically.

“About that.”

“What now?” Shaw rolled her eyes.

“This time of year, it will be difficult to get the horses over the mountain. We’ll have to go on foot once we reach Bellenger Pass here.” She tapped another spot on the map.

“You’re kidding.”

“I suppose I could be making it up,” Root chirped.
Shaw stepped into her personal space, “And I suppose I could be kicking your ass.”

She cocked her head to the side, “Tempting. But I’m still just so pleasantly sore from how expertly you handled me this morning.”

“How are we supposed to beat everyone else to the keep if we don’t take the horses?” Cole cut in, to ease the rapidly rising tension in the room.

“Maybe Root here has a magic carpet stashed somewhere?” Shaw deadpanned.

“Nothing so radical. We’ll ride from here to the pass. Then go over the mountain on foot and down into the ruins of Claypool Village. We won’t need the horses for speed at that point because the distance is so minor.”

“And if something happens and we need to get out of Old Thornhill quickly?”

“Honestly, if we need a quick exit that badly then we’re already dead.”

“That’s a cheery thought,” Cole groaned.

Root let out a breath, “Look last night we got a dusting of snow. On the mountain you can believe it was far more than that. The path is shallow and treacherous in good weather. It’s not worth it to risk the horses. We can carry everything we need.”

“And what about the way back?”

“Is that a bit of positive thought slipping in, Sameen?”

“I didn’t go in to this thing expecting to die. I’m not starting now. Far as I’m concerned we’re going to get the job done no matter how we get there, but there will be the tiny matter of getting home again. I’m not looking to die of exposure before I can collect my gold.”

“Very sensible,” Root nodded. “We’ll go back the way we came.”
Cole shook his head. “It’ll take double the amount of time without the horses. The heavy snows won’t hold off forever. That’s a long, cold walk.”

“I didn’t say we’d be without the horses the entire time.”

“You just…”

Root tilted her head to the side as if listening to someone whispering into her ear. She smiled brightly, “Perfect timing.”

Cole frowned in confusion, “For what?”

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Then who…”

He was cut off by Shaw slapping him on the arm, “Shut up a minute.” Cole snapped his mouth closed, knowing better than to argue when Shaw spoke in that tone. “Hear that?”

Shaw ran outside with her sword drawn. Cole quickly followed. Two figures on horseback, the shorter of which was hooded, were coming up the lane. “You have about a minute to tell me who you are before my friend here puts a bolt through your eye,” She shouted. The men halted their horses but didn’t say anything.

“Now, Shaw there’s no need to be rude,” Root drawled as she stepped into the courtyard behind them.

“Root!” One of the men called out. “You pick up a new watch dog or something?”

“Friends of yours?” Shaw sneered. Root just grinned at her. The men rode into the courtyard and swiftly dismounted. Shaw raised an eyebrow when she realized the hooded man was a goblin. Each greeted Root warmly.
Root turned to Shaw and pointed to the goblin and the man. “This is Greenfield and Daniel. Both excellent scouts, and two of the best smugglers in the Blackwood. They’ll ride with us until the pass and then take the horses back with them.”

Shaw grunted at them. “Well met,” Cole added. “Don’t mind Shaw, it’s been a few hours since her last feeding.”

Daniel smiled, not bothered in the least, “Speaking of, Root do you have anything to eat?”

“Do I ever disappoint you boys?” She smiled. She pointed back towards the manor. “The larder is full. And Shaw was kind enough to bring down a deer earlier. If you ask nicely, maybe, she’ll let you have a hoof to gnaw on.” Shaw rolled her eyes and stomped back inside.


“Oh Greenfield just asked Root if the tiny human lady glared the deer to death.”

Cole turned to the goblin, “I wouldn’t put it past her.” He waved towards the stables, “Here let me help you with your horses.”

Root found Shaw back inside the library. She didn’t turn around when she entered the room. “You just can’t help yourself with all the secrets can you?”

“To be fair, I was literally about to tell you about the boys when they rode up.”

“If I’m going to pull this off, I can’t have people I don’t trust at my back.”

“I’ve never really played well with others, only child and all. Maybe I went about things the wrong way at first in how I approached you.” Shaw snorted at that. “But you can trust me.” She sounded sincere, but good liars always did.
Shaw spun around to glare at her, “Can I? You and honesty have a shaky accord in my experience.”

“Has anything I’ve done since we met harmed either you or Cole?” Root shook her head. “Everything I’ve done, everything I am doing, is to save you.”

“I don’t need saving,” Shaw sneered. Did this woman think she was weak?

Root paled. “Samaritan isn’t an opponent to take lightly, Sameen.”

“I’m not stupid,” Shaw snapped. She knew the dragon was serious business. “And I’m not afraid of a hard fight.”

“Maybe a little fear would do you some good. The dragon isn’t the only danger lurking out there. You focus too much of your energy on him and another wolf will be at your throat. Not enough focus and Samaritan will break free and we’ll all be dead. You’re walking on a thin line here. I don’t want to see you fall.”

“No faith in your prophesy?” Shaw scowled. “I thought the voice in your head told you I’d kill the damn thing?”

“She did.” Root looked away. “She just never told me whether you’d survive it or not. I find that detail matters to me more than I ever imagined it would.”

“Root,” Shaw began, but she didn’t know what to say. She already told the woman that she wasn’t planning on dying. But it wasn’t like she could guarantee that nothing would go wrong. Hell, she was already in such a vastly different situation than what she had originally planned when she set out on this crazy mission. But then again why was she considering trying to reassure the woman to begin with? That was more Cole’s thing. She shook her head not knowing what to say or why she even wanted to say anything in the first place.

“It’s alright, Shaw,” Root sighed. “There’s nothing you can say that will change the fact that there’s a job to be done. You’ve taken on this fight. All I ask is that you let me stand beside you, fight with you.”

Shaw stared at her for a moment. “You have to stop lying to me. And you need to lay out this plan of yours, no more surprises.”
“Whatever you need.”

“Just try and remember it’s for the good of the mission and your continued fine health that you tell me the truth.”

“Sure, Shaw.” They both turned to look at the map again. She traced a fingertip over the spot marking their current location. “Are you going to argue some more about the horses or can we move on?”

“Let’s see what your friends have to say first,” Shaw nodded towards the door. They could both hear the men’s voices echoing in to the room from the hall.

Root looked up from the map as they entered, “What news do you have for us, boys?”

Daniel took a seat by the fireplace. He took a bite from a large hunk of cheese and then mumbled around the crumbs, “Word is the guard swarmed Turing and the Pilgrims’ Path. They’re looking for something or someone.”

“Simmons?” Cole asked. “He torched the tavern after all.”

The goblin growled something at Daniel. “I was getting to that,” He grumbled. “It seems Simmons also killed a man named Donnelly on the road.” Greenfield walked over to the table and tapped a claw on the map outlining a spot along the highway. Shaw assumed that was where the body had been found.

“Donnelly was at the meeting in the quarry but not the tavern.” Root clicked her tongue, “Sounds like Simmons is very determined to whittle down his competition.”

Shaw nodded, “Looks like his attempts to attack the others are slowing him down though. He should be much further along.” He was still less than half way. That was good news at least. Shaw leaned over the map, which brought her closer to Root.

“He didn’t bring them all into Turing, but he’s traveling with around thirty men. He’s going for brute force rather than speed.”
Shaw turned her head to look at her, bringing their faces within a hair’s breadth of each other. “Do I even want to know how you know that?”

Root smiled and inched that much closer, “Are you going to threaten to stab me again if I tell you?”

Cole turned to look at the library’s other two occupants. “You’ll get used to the whole close talking, violent flirtation thing. Owe!” He yelped as a book Shaw threw smacked him on the back of the head.

“All the more reason for us to get a move on first thing in the morning.”

“The flirtation?” Daniel asked with a bewildered look on his face. The women shook their heads practically in unison and walked away to prep their gear before dinner.

“Thank god I’m not the only one confused by them.” Cole slapped him on the shoulder.

“I’ve been nothing but confused by Root since the day we met.” Greenfield chirped something at him. “Okay, confused and scared.” Greenfield chirped again, “And a bit aroused.”
Shaw stepped out of the manor the next morning adjusting the buckle securing the pauldron over her left shoulder. She had to admit, at least to herself, that Root knew her armor. After much consideration, she had snuck out to the barn while on watch last night and collected the equipment from the wagon.

Every piece had fit her perfectly. Shaw had run through a few of her sword forms in the bedroom she had claimed the night before, and the leather and iron armor moved with her beautifully. Unlike her Catalyst gear, everything was pitch black. Shaw did appreciate that Root had kept the hood in the design, especially given the cold winds this morning. She had it down for the moment, however, so Root was able to see her expression as she walked towards her.

“I really like the new look, Sameen,” Root grinned.

“Please, I make anything look good,” She huffed. Shaw knew the woman would be her usual insufferable self over this. But she was going after a dragon and was far too pragmatic to let pride get in the way of the mission’s success.

“True,” Root tilted her head to examine the way the black leathers fit Shaw’s frame. “Does this mean that I’ve made some strides in getting you to trust me?” She asked with an ever widening smile.

“No,” Shaw replied causing Root’s face to fall. “It means that I’m not stubborn enough to forego using quality gear when there’s a dragon in my future.”
Root’s smile returned, “I knew you’d appreciate the work of a skilled hand.” Shaw wasn’t the only one to swap out her gear for the occasion. Root had exchanged her cloak for a fur-lined leather coat that just brushed the back of her heels. A drum-shaped fur hat was cocked jauntily on her head. Shaw noted the hilts of four stilettos bracketing each side of her ribcage, secured by a thick leather harness. A dagger better suited for defense or slashing attacks was strapped to her hip. The handle of what Shaw thought was a woodsman’s axe stuck out behind her left shoulder.

She quirked a brow, “How many blades do you have on you?”

Root shrugged, “Just enough to have a little fun.” Meaning there were probably more Shaw could not see.

“What’s fun?” Cole asked as he came to stand beside them. His eyes widened when he took in Shaw’s new armor.

“Don’t say a word,” Shaw grumbled as she turned her back to him and stomped towards her horse.

“Who me?” Cole laughed. He turned to Root, “Though why don’t I get presents like that? I mean she gets a new knife, new armor, a guy feels left out.”

“You’re not as pretty as Sameen.”

“Sad but true.”

“Are you two going to mount up sometime today?”

“You offering to give me a ride, Sweetie?” She leered. Though she did pick up the large pack at her feet and began walking to her horse’s side.

“Mount your damn horse, Root.”

“Someone’s grumpy this morning.”
“And someone’s looking to get stabbed this morning.”

“Promises, promises.”

The pass was a good three-day ride from The Groves. As agreed, when they reached it they left the horses with Greenfield and Daniel. The smugglers told Root that they’d return with the horses in a week’s time and then wait for them to return for another two weeks after.

With one last wave, the trio and Bear set off up the pass. The route was fairly wide to begin with. Though the road was littered with bits of fallen rock, boulders and patches of tall grass they had to navigate around. The first day’s hike overall was easy.

The further they climbed the more the walls closed in however. By early evening on their second day in the pass, solid sheets of dark grey stone rose above them to either side leaving only a small strip of sky visible. This place felt oppressive, treacherous, even when they were the only ones there.

“Spooky,” Cole puffed out at one point when a raven swooped down from one of the walls and buzzed past their heads in search of some meager game they could not see.

“You need me to come back there and hold your hand?” Shaw quipped from up ahead. She had taken point for this leg of the trip.

“You sure your lady won’t mind?” He fired back.

“Of course she won’t,” Root chuckled. “At least not for long, because I’m going to have to kill her, whoever she is.”

“And now you’ve circled back to creepy,” Cole pouted.

“You’re both idiots,” Shaw rolled her eyes. Behind her back, Cole and Root shared a smile at her expense.
“We should camp soon for the evening,” Root suggested not long after. “We don’t want to try and navigate the mountain in the dark.”

“Makes sense,” Shaw nodded. “How far is the bridge?” An old rope bridge connected the high end of the pass with the western slopes of Mount Lethe.

“Not far. Maybe ten minutes more?”

“May as well stop here then.” She pointed to an outcropping bit of the rock wall just ahead. “That overhang would give us some extra protection if it starts to snow again. And we’re at the top of the slope so we don’t have to worry about anything falling down on us.”

“Except maybe from the walls,” Cole gestured to the rocky sides of the pass.

“The only things up there all day have been ravens,” Shaw replied. “Just try to side step any bird shit.”

Setting up camp was an easy routine between the three of them now. Soon a small fire was lit, the bedrolls laid out, and Shaw was chomping away on a strip of dried meat. “How do you want to split watch?” She asked Cole.

Root perked up, “I can take a shift.”

“No.”

“Surely, I have proven by now that I can be trusted to guard the camp while the two of you sleep for a few hours.

“What’s with your poor listening skills? No!” Shaw turned her back, effectively blocking out any attempt for Root’s further argument and looked to Cole. “You want first watch?”

“I got first watch last night,” He complained.
Shaw rolled her eyes, “Fine, I’ll take the first watch. Go to sleep you overgrown infant.”

Root sat up with her for another couple hours. They didn’t talk much, both comfortable with the other’s silence. It was kind of nice, not that Shaw would tell Root that. The strange woman had grown on her over the past few days, like a particularly clingy, innuendo laden fungus. She was amusing and slightly less annoying than most people when she laid off the flirting. But Shaw had no interest in listening to her gloat over that fact. So she quietly sharpened her sword while Root gazed up at the stars.

Eventually, with a softly whispered, “Goodnight, Sameen,” Root laid down to rest as well.

Shaw glanced down at Bear who had settled beside her, “Just you and me now buddy.” Bear licked her wrist in agreement.

She had been sitting staring into the fire and listening to Cole snore for about two hours when she heard it. A slight crunching sound, like a boot on gravel. Like someone was traveling up the pass towards their position. She slowly stood up. Bear hopped up as well, her movement having woken him from his place sleeping at her feet.

Shaw tilted her head to the side to listen, eyes straining to see into the darkness beyond the flickering light of their fire. She held her breath. Maybe it was nothing. The wind shifted and Bear began to growl. Then a moment later she heard it again, the distinct crunch of gravel under a boot. She drew her sword. “Cole, Root,” She hissed.

Root sat up almost immediately. “What’s wrong?”

“I heard…” Shaw gasped as an arrow hit her in the chest.

“Sameen!” Another arrow struck her in her right shoulder. “Bear go, hunt!” Root yelled causing the snarling wolf to charge off into the darkness. Cole rolled to a crouch and crawled to the small boulder Shaw had been using as a seat. He loaded his crossbow and fired in the direction the arrows had come from. Taking advantage of the covering fire, Root scrambled to her knees and crawled to Shaw’s side.

“Sameen.” She touched her hip trying to turn her so that she could see the wounds.
“The armor held,” Shaw grunted as she pulled the first arrow from her leathers. “Just knocked the wind out of me.” There was a small trickle of blood coming from the wound on her shoulder. She reached up and snapped the shaft of that arrow, leaving the arrowhead in place for the moment to staunch the blood flow. “Shoulder wound feels shallow.” It was a lucky shot; the arrow caught her just under her pauldron.

“Good, because we have incoming,” Cole shouted. The women turned to see four black clad figures running up the pass at them. Catalysts.

“Family reunion?” Root quipped as she threw a knife hitting one of the men in the side. He fell to a knee and Cole put a bolt in his chest.

“Not a joyous one. We were disowned a long time ago,” Shaw growled as she got to her feet. She grabbed a long sick from the fire and threw it out in front of their position to illuminate more of the pass. Root quickly did the same.

The three remaining men rushed them. One man went for Root while the other two challenged Shaw. They stayed close making it difficult for Cole to take a shot to even the odds. He kept his eyes on them waiting for an opening.

Shaw engaged the first man while keeping a wary eye on the second. They circled each other, thrust, parry, strike and block, the pattern repeating, neither gaining much ground. The man was well trained as a Catalyst should be. But Shaw was better. Finally, she forced an opening in his guard and plunged her sword into his chest.

The only problem was her sword caught in his armor. She tugged but couldn’t free it with her weakened arm. Seeing an opportunity, the second man swung his blade at her head. Shaw released her sword to catch his wrist, preventing his strike from connecting with her side. She drove her free hand as hard as she could into the joint of his elbow, sending a loud snap echoing across the pass as the bones in his arm splintered. His eyes widened under his hood. She pulled her knife and ended it with a quick slice across his throat. “You obviously didn’t know who you were sent here for.” She sneered as she shoved his body away.

Shaw looked around. Root was standing victorious over the body of her opponent. Damn woman didn’t even look winded. She shook her head and turned to retrieve her sword. Shaw put her foot on the dead man’s chest and with a tug was finally able to wrench her sword free of his armor.

Cole stepped out of cover to meet them. “So do we go after the archers?”
“Bear’s on it,” Root replied. She had absolute faith the wolf would find any men still lurking in the shadows beyond their fire’s light.

“We should pack up,” Shaw noted, “Get to the other side of the mountain in case they send more men.”

“We basically took out half a squad. The Shadows won’t attack us directly even if they get away from Bear. They’ll go back and regroup.” He shrugged his shoulders, “The worst is over.”

More men chose that moment to drop down from the walls. Shaw pointed at Cole, “You are no longer allowed an opinion.” Then she backhanded the nearest Catalyst.

“Did they send an entire company?” Cole shouted in disbelief as he backed away to give Shaw and Root room to maneuver. Six more men. He quickly shot one in the throat. Make that five. Still, the guild never sent this many for a job. “This is insane.”

“Flattering,” Root quipped as she ducked under a swinging sword. “They obviously see the two of you as a major threat.” She managed to kick her opponent in his nethers, which sent him toppling over. She stabbed him in the back once he was down.

“Shaw’s head is swollen enough already,” Cole replied. He glanced around. “We need to even the odds.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” Shaw replied as she stumbled past them after taking a punch to the face. Root stabbed the man that did it in the side as soon as he was within arm’s reach.

Cole’s eyes settled on a boulder a little further up the slope. If he could get that thing to move. “I may have something.”

“Whatever it is, do it quickly,” Shaw growled as she rushed forward to meet another opponent. Root swiftly followed. Cole sprinted for the boulder.

Root was quickly intercepted by two men. Before Shaw could turn to give assistance, three men stepped up to challenge her. “Shaw!” The one in the middle called out and lowered his hood. He
gestured for the other two to attack.

“Wilson,” She growled. He had worked as a go between for various squads while she was in the guild. She always thought he was a pushy little, self-important asshole. Apparently, the new leadership council had decided to give the idiot his own command. She spun out of the way of one man as she kicked the second in the chest. He stumbled into the rock wall, hitting his head, and ultimately falling to the dirt knocked out cold. It took mere seconds but it was just in time for Shaw to raise her sword over her head to block the swing of the first man’s sword from behind her.

“Lost a step in your retirement?” The man laughed.

“Do I know you?” She hissed. Before he could answer she pulled her spare knife from her boot and stabbed him in the gut. She twisted the knife. “Didn’t think so.” She shoved his body away.

Wilson began to clap. “Impressive.”

“Or your lackeys just suck,” Shaw quipped. “What’s a matter, Hersh not have a real squad to put you in charge of Wilson? Or was it that no real warriors would follow an asshole like you?”

“Brave words from a deserter,” He growled and drew his sword.

“I settled my debt and left the guild with honor. But I guess you wouldn’t be able to grasp the concept.” She swung out at him. He dodged and countered, but she was able to parry his blow. He swung again and she blocked but Wilson began to force her back.

“I’m glad Hersh gave me this assignment,” He snarled in her face. “We received word from Ser Simmons that someone was parading about the capitol wearing our armor. Imagine how surprised Hersh was a few days later to see you in the Black Market.”

“He’ll be even more surprised after I track him down and slit his throat,” She grunted. She was starting to feel dizzy. Which was odd as the wound in her shoulder wasn’t that deep. If it’s not blood loss…

“Feeling a little woozy?” Wilson taunted her. “Imagine the purse I’ll receive for bringing the council not only your head but the infamous Root’s as well?”
“Not going to happen,” She growled. She swung at his head but he was able to deflect the blow easily. It was like she was trying to move through thick mud.

“That’s your problem, Shaw. You were always much too overconfident.”

Something was wrong, the bastard was far too smug. She needed to end this quickly. She feigned a stumble to the left. When Wilson took the bait, she moved into his body, receiving a deep cut on her upper arm. However, the move brought her under his guard. Shaw swung her sword up in a wide arch. He couldn’t brace for the blow and could do nothing to stop her blade from severing his sword hand clean off of his wrist. “Feeling woozy, Wilson?” She sneered as he fell to the ground clutching what was left of his arm. She kicked him in the face.

Shaw turned to survey the fight going on around her. Root was facing off with three men. Her face was bloody but Shaw couldn’t tell from this distance if she was hurt or if it was splatter from her kills. Cole had put down his crossbow and was attempting to push a boulder down the incline. She could hear more men coming up the pass. Shaw turned and started towards Root. Halfway there she stumbled and fell to her knees. Her vision wavered. Something was very wrong.

“Shaw!” Root shouted. She kicked one of her opponents in the gut and when he doubled over she followed up with a knee to his face. She then slashed out with a sword she had acquired from somewhere at the other two men creating some space between them. Shaw managed to focus for a moment to throw her trail knife into the back of one of them. Root, using the distraction of the suddenly fallen man, quickly dispatched her other opponent.

Meanwhile, Cole managed to work the boulder free. It rolled down the incline of the pass, picking up speed and hitting a Catalyst or two along the way. It also happened to trigger a few smaller rockslides. “I think that will buy us a minute or two,” He whooped.

Root ran to Shaw’s side. She quickly wrapped an arm around her waist and hauled her to her feet. They stumbled over to where Cole was setting up his crossbow behind another boulder, this one much closer to their campsite. “Don’t blackout on me, Sameen.”

“You just want to cop a feel,” Shaw replied, her voice noticeably wavered. Root reached up with her free hand and ran her fingers along the wound in her shoulder. “Wasn’t meant as an invitation,” Shaw grunted but made no move to push her away.

Root brought her bloody fingertips to her face and sniffed. “Poison. We need to get her out of here
so I can treat that wound and get a countermeasure down her throat.”

“She’s still right here,” Shaw growled weakly.

“And we want to keep you here, Sweetie,” Root replied, brushing a few tendrils of damp hair from her face.

“M-fine,” Shaw mumbled, but it was apparent she was swiftly losing consciousness.

Cole popped up from behind their cover and fired a bolt. They heard a pained grunt. He knelt back down beside them to reload. “They’re still coming.” He looked around. “There’s too much open space between here and the bridge. We’ll never make it there without being hit.”

Root whistled. “Bear!” A few moments later the wolf came bounding towards them. His muzzle was decidedly bloody but he looked no worse for wear, clearly the victor of his battles. “Good boy,” Root smiled. She pointed at Shaw, “Guard.” The wolf took her place at Shaw’s side as she transferred her to Cole.

“What are you doing?” He asked as he wrapped one arm around Shaw’s waist. She grunted as the arrowhead in her shoulder shifted.

Root began to stand up. “Take her and be ready to move. I’ll handle our cover.” With that she darted out into the open.

Somehow she seemed to know the trajectory of each arrow fired her way, bobbing and weaving out of the path of each projectile. She seemed to be made of smoke rather than flesh and bone. When she was standing in the open she pulled a crystal flask from a pocket on her belt. She tossed it into the air. The flask shattered when it hit the ground a few paces away from Root and with a roar a wall of flames twice the height of any man shot out from it remnants.

She turned to a gaping Cole with a manic grin. “Daizo thinks we should call it a firewall. Neat, huh?”

“How many of those do you have?”
“That was the only one. Test case. We knew the theory was sound but just look at that,” Root grinned manically as a man tumbled down the hillside engulfed in blue flames. This was most encouraging for the prospect of her lightning in a bottle project. “He’ll be so excited when I tell him about this.”

“You mean you didn’t know if it would even work?” Root shrugged her shoulders. “Insane, insane,” Cole muttered.

“We should move. I’m not entirely certain how long it will hold up.” She quickly grabbed her pack and threw it over her shoulder. Then she picked up Shaw’s. Cole secured his crossbow over his shoulder and then picked up Shaw to carry her towards the bridge.

As they ran Shaw slipped in and out of consciousness. “I don’t think she’s doing too good, Root.” Cole worriedly called when they were about halfway across the bridge. Two thick ropes held a series of roughhewn planks suspended by a netting of smaller lines across the wide expanse of the canyon between the pass and Mount Lethe. The Aletheia River raged just below.

“I’ll take a look as soon as we’re across,” Root called from behind him. She could see Shaw’s legs twitching over the side of Cole’s arm. She began to catalogue the symptoms in her mind. Weakness. Muscle spasms. Fairly powerful, debilitating even with a minimal amount introduced to the bloodstream. Whatever Shaw had been hit with, it was nasty. “We should probably hurry.” He began to run faster. Root matched his pace. Worry for Shaw, giving them both an extra burst of energy.

Once on the other side Cole gently laid Shaw down beside the path that lead away from the bridge. Root quickly knelt at her side. She slipped her left hand under Shaw’s neck and tilted her head up. Then she pulled a vial from a slot on her belt.

Cole grabbed her hand, “What’s that?”

“Hopefully enough to keep her alive,” Root replied grimly as she yanked her arm from his grasp. “You need to trust me, Cole.”

He clenched his jaw but nodded. Root tipped the contents of the vial into Shaw’s mouth. She clamped her hand over Shaw’s lips and nose to get her to swallow.

Shaw sputtered and hacked. Root removed her hand. She slipped her arm behind her shoulders to
allow Shaw to sit up a bit so that she could breathe through it. “That tastes like crap,” She moaned conscious again for a moment.

“If they made medicine taste good no one would believe it was medicine,” Root replied, her eyes suspiciously watery. She eased Shaw back down. Then she took one of her daggers and placed it’s tip next to the imbedded arrowhead. “This may sting a bit.”

Shaw let out a shaky breath and nodded, “Do it.” Root jabbed the blade into the wound and with a wet squelch, pried the arrowhead free. She quickly cast her dagger aside and poured the contents of another vial on to the wound. Shaw hissed but remained still.

Root dug into her pack for a bit of clean cloth to bind the wound. “That should do until I can get you properly stitched up.”

“I’ll do it later,” Shaw groaned. She closed her eyes again. Root wasn’t sure if it was so that she could concentrate on something other than the pain or if she had passed out again.

They heard shouts. Cole turned his head towards the bridge, “I think the fire went out.”

“We can cause a bottleneck at the bridge. Thin out their numbers,” Root suggested.

“They still have archers. They’d pick us off from that distance.”

“Then we run.”

“Carrying Shaw the entire way down the mountain?” Cole shook his head. He set his crossbow on the ground and picked up the sword Root had taken from one of her kills.

“Cole, you’re thinking of doing something stupid aren’t you?” Shaw groaned, her eyes still closed.

“You know me, Shaw.” He smiled at her. “Try not to get eaten by anything. Let Root help you.”

She was becoming more and more disoriented, but she knew something was very wrong. “Cole,
“what are you? Why are you?” She blinked at him in confusion.

“I’m sorry.”

“What happened to not trying to be heroes?”

“Maybe I just want to be yours for once.” He looked over at Root. “Take care of her?”

“Absolutely,” She swore. He nodded and stood. With one last glance at Shaw he sprinted for the bridge.

Cole ran half way across before the first of Wilsons’ men appeared. They shouted with manic glee, thinking they had their prey cornered. Root watched silently as Cole waited for a few of them to scramble on to the bridge.

He hooked his free arm around the rope on his right side. Then he turned and swung the sword into the one on the left. The rope frayed but did not sever on the first swing. He lifted the sword again. Wilson’s men shouted and tried to fall back as his plan became clear. Some managed to grab the right side of the bridge just before Cole cut the left line cleanly, sending the planks into a free fall until they were perpendicular to the river below.

Hanging by his elbow, Cole swung the sword down again, putting everything he had into the blow. This time when it connected with the line holding the bridge, the sword severed the rope cleanly on the first strike. Root met his gaze for an instant and then he was gone, fallen with the bridge and Wilson’s men into the water below.

“No!” Shaw shouted from beside her. She used the anger coursing through her body to struggle to her knees. “We have to get down there.”

Root shook her head sadly, “We can’t.”

“The water. We have to look for Cole.”

“He’s gone, Sameen.”
“Fine,” Shaw finally stood up on shaky legs. “I’ll go myself.”

Root rushed to steady her but she shrugged her off. “The poison is still in your system. You can barely stand.”

“Watch me.” She’d will herself all the way down the mountain with a hundred Catalysts nipping at her heels if she had to.

Root grabbed Shaw’s shoulder, “I can’t let you do that.” Cole’s final act would not, could not, be in vain. Even if Shaw hated her for it later, she would stop her from putting her life at further risk tonight. She slipped her free hand down to her belt.

“Let me go, Root.”

“No.” Suddenly she was waving a vial under Shaw’s nose. Shaw recognized the scent of camphor and nightrose oil. A sleeping solution. She attempted to hold her breath but her eyes already felt heavy.

She spun around with the last of her strength and grabbed Root by the throat. “I will end you,” She hissed through clenched teeth.

Root let out a gasp as Shaw’s grip tightened and then began to slacken as the vapor from the vial began to take effect. “You can end me all you want,” She soothed as she eased Shaw to the ground. “After your nap.”
Chapter Summary

After her nap.

Chapter Notes

So some shit went down Thursday night. I don't know how many of you may cross fandoms but I am assuming people know what I'm referencing in general. Just want to say that my personal manifesto is that while there may be angst, obstacles, slow burns, grumpy assassins who don't do feelings until they kind of do, etc., there will always be hope (genuine not the bull shit shenanigan PR kind) in my stuff. Maybe that's sort of boring, it may be naïve, maybe I watched too many princess movies as a kid, who knows, but I will always do my best to give you what's printed on the box. In this case a fantasy adventure with our favorite emotionally stunted assassin and former killer for hire. Just putting that out there.

Also, for real, Maybe Someday was our thing...not cool!

Memory was a funny thing. Shaw could barely remember the first few weeks after the shipwreck. She knows she drifted to shore on a piece of the decking but not how she ended up in the market. She remembers stealing food, but not how she got caught by the nightwatch. She remembered Hersh towering over the cage the watchmen had thrown her in. But not the moment when she was actually released.

She remembered being escorted into the barracks the night she was brought to the guild hall very clearly. The younger initiates shared quarters until they came of age and were separated by task. There was only one other child in the room. He was thin, as if he hadn’t been fed regularly, with sad blue eyes. Cole was three years younger than she was, overly tall for his age, but Shaw later learned his size made him clumsy.

For the next three years they trained side by side. Then Shaw was set on the path of a close combat specialist, while Cole was trained for information gathering and support. They were paired together years later simply because of happenstance. Cole’s Catalyst had been cut down on a run. Shaw’s Shadow caught the sleeping sickness and passed in his bed. So Cole became Shaw’s new Shadow. Always at her back, always by her side.
And now Cole was gone.

She sat up with a gasp. Warm hands settled on her bare shoulders easing her back. Root’s concerned face swam into view. “You’ve been asleep for two days.” Shaw struggled harder to sit up. “Relax, you’ll pop a stitch.”

“The dragon. I can’t waste time laying around.” The sooner that thing was taken care of, the sooner she could go after Hersh and Simmons for Cole.

“Lay back down.” Root shoved her shoulder. Shaw fell back, weak as a kitten. She was laying under her cloak and the spare blanket she knew Root had shoved in her pack. Bear huffed slightly beside her. She glanced around, they were in a cave of some form. She could hear the howl of the wind from outside.

Root clicked her tongue against her teeth in a scolding manner. “Just lie still. We’re not going anywhere right now. It’s essentially a blizzard out there.”

“Simmons and the others are still on their way,” Shaw attempted to argue.

“And they’re still on the Pilgrims’ Path, having to deal with the snow as well. We gained days on them by taking the road through the Blackwood.”

“And we’re losing any gains we’ve made by sitting here.”

Root blew out a frustrated breath ruffling her hair. Shaw was struck with the insane impulse to reach out and tuck it behind her ear so she could see all of Root’s face. She clutched her hand into a fist instead. “We need to move.” She practically growled.

“One more day, Shaw. Give it one more day and then I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

Shaw shuffled until she was partially sitting up against what felt like her pack. Her limbs felt like they were encased in iron. “Fine, one day,” She grumbled. “But tomorrow we move, I don’t care how much snow there is.”
“Whatever you say.” Root smiled softly at the compromise. There was a long cut on her cheek, a line of crimson bracketed by neat black stitches. The sight of it made Shaw want to gnash her teeth. She shouldn’t have been brought into the middle of their mess with the guild. Anger burned hot, molten, through Shaw’s veins.

But the rightful owners of that anger were all either dead or several leagues away. “I still haven’t decided if I’m going to kill you or not for knocking me out.” In the absence of the appropriate outlet, she settled for picking at Root’s defenses instead.

“You didn’t leave me any choice,” She sighed. “I saved your life. Surely, you can’t hold that against me.”

“Watch me,” Shaw huffed. Root handed her a cup of water. She sipped at it while staring into the fire. She could see Cole’s crossbow propped up against the wall just across from where she lay. “Did you know?”

Root looked over at her from where she had knelt to dig into her pack for something. “What?”

“About Cole. Did your god,” She practically spit the word, “Tell you this would happen?”

“Sameen, look at me.” Root waited until dark eyes turned to meet hers. “No. If I had known, I would have found another way. Some way to stop the Catalysts and to keep Cole with us. Or even make him remain down at the mouth of the pass with Daniel and Greenfield.” She had spent not a little bit of time over the past two days wondering why a warning about the Catalysts’ attack had never come. She had been silent on the matter and Root didn’t like the implications of that silence.

Some of her worry must have shown in her eyes, as Shaw’s gaze softened. She nodded accepting Root’s words as fact. She broke eye contact first. “Why didn’t he just cut the stupid bridge down from our side?”

“The archers would have hit him before he could make the first cut once they figured it out. Needed the other Catalysts near him to ensure they held their fire until it was too late. It was a brilliant move actually.”

Shaw smiled, “That’s Cole, never as dumb as he looked.” She clenched and unclenched her fist, the wound in her shoulder pulled a bit but she’d be able to hold a sword. She glanced down, and thanks to Root’s fine hand with stitching, it probably wouldn’t scar. Not that she had left the pass unscathed,
however, “He didn’t deserve to die like that.”

“No.”

“Hersh, the guild, Simmons, I will make them all pay for it.” She’d bleed them all dry. Burn them and everything they loved down until not even a single cinder remained.

Suddenly, Root’s hand was covering hers. “I will help you, Sameen. I promise they won’t get away with it.” She gave Shaw’s hand one last squeeze and then pulled away.

Shaw’s chest felt tight. She was heavy but at the same time hollow. Her vision wavered again. She spent several moments focused on her breathing. In, out, she counted each exhale until the edge of her vision was no longer tinted red. Root remained silent at her side the entire time. When she felt semi-normal again she examined the stone walls around her. “So where’s here. Well, I assume it’s a cave on the mountain but…”

“We’re still on the western slope of Mount Lethe. About half an hour’s walk from the bridge.”

“You carried me and the gear that far?” It was impressive. As was the fact that the other woman had apparently sat vigil over her for two days. Not that Shaw was going to say that out loud.

“Bear helped.” Root sheepishly bowed her head, “And I made two trips.”

Shaw reached out and stroked Bear’s flank, “Thanks, Handsome.” Root cleared her throat. “You too I guess.”

“You’re very welcome, Sameen.”

The look in Root’s eyes, not pity but a mix of sadness and something soft, made her uncomfortable again, so Shaw opted to steer things to much safer ground, “Did you manage to save any of the food?”

Root nodded, apparently glad at the prospect of being able to physically do something. “What would you like? Cheese, dried venison, or an apple?”
Shaw almost laughed. Of course she saved the apples. “What’s with you and apples?”

“Nothing. Lots of people like apples.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t turned into one by now with how many you eat.”

Root bit her lip, “If you’d like to offer me something else to…”

“Don’t start,” Shaw cut her off. “I’m injured…and hungry. I will kill you if you finish that sentence before I get some protein.”

Undeterred by the not so subtle threat, Root grinned, “So I can make advances once you’re properly fed and watered?”

“Nothing’s stopped you so far,” Shaw grumbled mostly out of habit. She much preferred having the somewhat normal interaction with Root as opposed to thinking about other, darker matters.

“Can’t help it,” She shrugged her shoulders, “You’re just so wildly attractive.” She handed Shaw a few strips of the dried meat.

“Cole was right,” Shaw shook her head, “You are insane.” She shoved an entire strip of venison into her mouth. Root refilled her cup of water. Then she sat back against the wall and picked up the book she had been reading their first night at camp. Shaw was sure it was in an attempt to give her a little space. But oddly enough, she found that she didn’t want it.

“I’ve been wondering,” Shaw mumbled around her mouthful of jerky, “What’s in the book?”

Root didn’t look up from the pages. “Do you know the legend of Old Thornhill and Samaritan?”

“Big-ass dragon torched the countryside, torched the peasants. Then somehow they managed to trap it in the half burnt out ruins until that idiot Greer decided it was time to party.”
“It’s a bit more complex than that, Sweetie,” Root snorted, amused by her summary of events all the same.

“Tell me the story then.”

Root turned her head to gape at Shaw. Her eyes widened comically with surprise, “Really?”

Shaw rolled hers. “Yes, before I change my mind.”

“Allright,” She began, not wasting anytime. “So in the beginning the old gods walked the earth. Yet the world was still empty, cold. The land was vast so the gods created new beings to fill it. Some of the gods believed that these beings should fight and die in their honor. Others believed that it was their responsibility to watch over them, guide them, as their children. A great many battles were fought amongst the gods over this until many were no more.”

“After this time of chaos their creations were left to wander alone without a plan. Then long ago when men first settled in the north, the King of Old Thornhill made a pact with the elder dragon who made these lands her home. He and his descendants would trust in her and she would use her ancient wisdom to guide them, and in turn their people, to prosperity.”

“Yeah that worked out well,” Shaw snorted.

“It worked for generations actually. The crops flourished, the people were well fed, safe and happy. But then it’s said that the King of Decima, a prideful man who had renounced the dragon’s guidance, whose own fields laid bare after too many years of famine, summoned Samaritan in his jealousy.”

“Sounds familiar.” Decima assholes not being able to leave well enough the fuck alone, seemed to be a family tradition.

“Samaritan, the Terror of the North, burned his way across the mountains and down into Thornhill. The elder dragon, knowing that her people were dying, faced Samaritan above Old Thornhill Keep, sacrificing herself, using her very blood to bind the beast in place until the day came that he could be destroyed once and for all.”

“So that’s it, your book there tells the story?” Seemed awfully thick for such a simple tale.
“Among other things,” Root held the book out so that Shaw could see its pages. “Written in the dragon’s own blood, by one of the castle’s few survivors.”

Shaw’s eyes narrowed in confusion. The rust-colored marks on the page weren’t any language she was familiar with. It looked like a bunch of tally marks and circles. “That’s gibberish.” She shook her head, “No, gibberish at least contains letters.”

Root traced over the marks with her fingertips. “Dragon language, and it’s quite clear if you know how to read it.”

“And you do?” Root simply raised an eyebrow. “Of course you do. Listens to god. Speaks dragon.”

“Are you impressed?”

Shaw rolled her eyes. “Impress me by telling me something useful.”

“Anything my lady asks,” Root replied. She flipped several pages to a diagram of some sort. “This is a layout of the wards’ placement in the castle.” She tapped a finger on two spots in turn. “She told me that these two are the nodes Lambert managed to damage. Samaritan will be awake and angry when we arrive, thanks to his work.”

“But the dragon is still trapped in the castle?”

“As far as we know,” Root nodded.

Well that was less than reassuring. “It really could get out on its own?”

Root laced her fingers together. “The wards create a lattice of energy. It held Samaritan in place like a net. The damage to those wards caused that net to fray.” She pulled her first two fingers up. “If you pull on a lose thread long enough the whole thing unravels.” She slowly pulled her hands apart to illustrate her point.
“Given enough time and energy, Samaritan wriggles free and the world is fucked.”

“To put it delicately, yes.” She flipped to another page. This one was clearly a layout of the old castle. She pointed to what looked like the beginning of the rocky foundation. “There’s an old system of culverts that were used for drainage. We’ll enter there and work our way up to the keep.”

“Making sure the dragon doesn’t see our approach.”

“Exactly.”

“Why didn’t Lambert take that path?”

“Because he was an idiot,” Root shrugged. She gently closed the book and set it on the ground beside her hip. “And because I don’t believe anyone in Decima had access to the full layout.” She nodded to the pack with Shaw’s gear. “I’d wager the scroll you were given by Lady Morgan doesn’t contain information on the lower foundations either. It was most likely assumed that they had collapsed in on themselves.”

“And your special friend tells you they haven’t?”

“Not all of them.”

Shaw leaned back. “So we get in, we fix the damage that Greer’s lackey did to the wards, tell the dragon to fuck off, and then limp back to the capitol for our reward.”

“I doubt it will be quite that easy, but you’ve grasped the general idea, Sweetie,” Root chuckled. The bunching of her cheek drew Shaw’s eyes to the wound there again.

“Were you hurt?”

“Pardon?”

Shaw tapped her own cheek. “I see you did a decent job patching up your face. Were you hurt
anywhere else?"

“No, not really. A minor slice on my arm. Bumps and bruises,” Root shook her head. She trailed two fingers along the row of stitches, “This was the worst of it. It will most likely scar, I’m afraid. Seems I shall be an old maid forever,” She mock pouted.

“Oh yeah, no one will ever want that now slightly less than perfect face hanging around,” Shaw scoffed. She could admit to herself that Root was hot. Scars on Root? Even hotter. Anyone who thought any different was clearly blind or dead.

“You thought my face was perfect?” Root was practically bouncing.

Of course she’d glom on to that one word. Shaw shouldn’t have said a damn thing. “That’s not what I said.”

“Pretty much,” She laughed in delight. It soon turned into a jaw-cracking yawn.

“How long since you last slept more than an hour or two?” Now that she was really paying attention, Shaw could see the lines of exhaustion on Root’s face, the dark purple smudges under each eye.

“The night before the pass.”

“Lay down.”

“I’m fine.”

“Look I’ve been sleeping for days apparently, and Bear is here. Between the two of us we can keep a lookout long enough for you to grab a nap.” She scowled, “You’re no good to me if you topple over a cliff tomorrow from exhaustion.”

“I am more than capable,” Root stopped talking when she noticed Shaw’s glare. “Fine, I suppose I could use a quick nap.”
“Uh huh.”

Root yawned again. “Don’t be smug.”

“You, sleep, now.”

“I can’t tell you how much I positively throb when you take that tone with me, Sameen,” Root purred but she did slide down so that she was laying on her back. Then for long moments there was only the crackle of the fire and the howl of the wind. “Why did you leave the guild?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Shaw grumbled to cover her surprise. She had thought the other woman was already asleep.

“She was a bit, circumspect when it came to the details.”

A god that respected people’s privacy. That was different. “We already had story time, go to sleep.”

“I can’t get my thoughts to settle. Your voice, I think it would help.” Root took a deep breath; it had been so quiet since the bridge. “Please. Just talk to me for a little while, Shaw.”

For a moment Root thought Shaw wasn’t going to say anything but then she let out a loud huff. “There was a swap in leadership. There’s a ruling council that picks the targets, sets up the teams. Control was an old man, he died as old men do. A new Control was appointed from among the council.” Shaw still did not know their identity, but when things were settled here she would find out.

“Nothing major changed about how we did business at first. I never really cared either way when I killed a man. What his life may have been like before he met my blade didn’t matter. A job was a job. I did what I had to do to survive. But my father had honor, and even though I was a kid when he died and the guild took me in, some of that stuck I guess. So I tried to kill cleanly. Didn’t use poisons, kept collateral damage to a minimum. I never failed to bring down a target, so no one cared how I chose to operate.”

“But I eventually noticed a trend with our targets. Groups we didn’t go after before became open game, the poor, the elderly, children. I’m a killer but even I know there should be limits to what jobs people like us choose to take on. I had gold put away so I bought out my contract. Cole, like an idiot,
followed."

“He loved you,” Root noted.

“We weren’t.” She trailed off. There was a point where she was sure that was something Cole had wanted but Shaw was only interested in the mission. So she ignored it. Eventually, it seemed to pass and they settled into the brotherly/sisterly pattern they had begun with.

Root turned her head to look at Shaw, “But you were family.”

“Yeah,” Shaw breathed. “We were.”

“I am sorry, Sameen.”

“I bet you are,” She huffed, uncomfortable with all this sentiment. “You’re stuck alone with me now. No Cole to keep me from stabbing you.”

“Whenever you want to get your hands on me,” She rolled onto her side, “All you have to do is ask.”

“You never quit do you?”

“Not when I want something,” She replied. Shaw rolled her eyes. The woman was beyond insufferable.

“Can’t imagine why you would put in this much effort.” Shaw knew she was attractive enough but still.

“You’re different,” She replied simply.

“That’s never been a point in my favor.” Too brusque. Too hard. Too angry. Too violent. Too cold. All ways of saying not normal. That’s all Shaw ever heard when she bothered to listen to the gossip that swirled around her in the guildhall and later in the streets of the capitol. She didn’t need people,
and she sure as hell didn’t need their opinions of her. But she didn’t want to hear Root say what everyone else inevitably said for some reason. The very thought of it made her gut twist in fact. Which was stupid though, she absolutely did not care what Root thought of her. No, she did not.

“You may be different, but it’s not a bad thing, Sameen,” Root whispered. “In fact I think you’re the most fascinating person I’ve ever met.”

“Are you flirting or sleeping?” Shaw huffed in a halfhearted attempt at deflection.

“Good night, Sameen.”

After a beat Shaw replied, “Good night, Root.”
Chapter Summary

There are more dangers than the dragon in Claypool Village.

“Fuck, son of a bitch.”

“What?” Root stopped walking to turn and check on Shaw.

“I rammed my knee into something.”

Root pulled the scarf she was using to shield her face from the wind down so that Shaw could see her indulgent smile, “You’re the one who wanted to go play in the waist high snow.”

Shaw had woken her up at dawn and told her to bundle up. The storm had passed and it was time to move. Root had tried to convince her to rest one more day but Shaw wouldn’t be stopped. She was more determined than ever to finish the mission. Root didn’t believe she had considered how much the large amount of snow on the ground would affect their progress, however. They would have already been in the village by now under normal conditions. Yet, Shaw had gamely pressed on until something literally stopped her in her tracks.

Root watched as Shaw busied herself brushing the snow away from the object she had run into. “Who the hell puts a stone in the middle of the path?”

“Technically, we’re nowhere near the path.” They had been using the position of the sun relative to the mountain to navigate as most other markers were buried in the snow.

“Not helping,” Shaw grumbled, as the top of a large black stone was revealed. Bear circled around them, sniffing out the area, most likely trying to determine why they had stopped.

Root drew nearer, “We’re close.”
Shaw glanced up at her. “How do you get that from a random rock?”

“Brush more of the snow away.”

“Why?” Shaw frowned. Its placement was suspect, but it was just a rock.

Root had that, ‘I know something you don’t,’ look in her eyes again. The fact that she was usually correct in that belief was extremely annoying. “Indulge me.”

Shaw rolled her eyes but knocked away more of the snow from the stone. Her efforts revealed a name. “What the hell?”

“I think we’ve wandered into the monuments. A little off course but not too bad.”

She ran her fingers over the name and then looked up at Root. “This is a tombstone?”

“Sort of. There are four hundred and four of these.” Root knelt so that she was shoulder to shoulder with Shaw beside the smooth, black pillar. “One for every man, woman, and child Samaritan killed. Some mark graves but most simply carry names of bodies that were never found. The fires burned that hot.”

“They lost that many?” The next time Shaw uprooted her life to move to a new kingdom she was going to thoroughly research its history. If only to be prepared for the offer of any clandestine monster slaying missions.

Root nodded. “And that was with another dragon willing to sacrifice herself to stop Samaritan.” She laid her palm against the stone. “Never again.”

“We will get this done,” Shaw agreed as she stood up. She held out her hand to help Root stand.

“Indeed we will,” Root nodded and took her hand. Once she was upright she let go quickly not wanting to take advantage of Shaw’s somewhat uncharacteristic action. “If we’ve reached the
monument valley, then Claypool should be over that rise.”

She was right of course. As they crested the hill the ruins of Claypool village stretched out across the valley before them. Due west of their position, Old Thornhill Keep rose out from the cliff side to tower over the village. Jagged piles of stone, the ruins clawed angrily up at the sky. And in the middle of them, Shaw could catch glimpses of red and white scales. She adjusted the focus on her spyglass to take more of Samaritan in. She couldn’t see much at this angle, yet what she did see still left an impression, “That’s bigger than I thought.” Much bigger.

Root was undaunted however, “Chin up, Sweetie. Even a pawn can topple a king.”

“I’m no one’s pawn,” Shaw groused as she lowered the spyglass.

“I was implying scale, not worth.” Root poked her cheek. Shaw violently batted her hand away.

“I’m not that small. Everything is small compared to that thing. Morgan didn’t tell me I’d be fighting a damn mountain.”

“She did tell you it was a dragon, Sameen.”

Shaw shook her head causing her hood to fall on to her shoulders. She raised the spyglass to examine the creature in question again, “I still think she undersold it.” The dragon’s body nearly filled the great hall from what she could observe from here. They had to get the wards back in order. There was no way anyone would survive if that thing managed to break loose. Shaw lowered the spyglass and began to toss it between her hands as she thought about their options.

Root held her palm out for the device, “May I?” She wiggled her fingers for emphasis.

“Fine,” Shaw slapped the cylinder into her hand. “Don’t break it.”

“I’ll be gentle as a lamb.” Shaw snorted at that. “What?” Root asked in mock offense. “I can be quite delicate should the situation require it.”

“If the dragon needs tea and biscuits I’m sure you’ll be the first the King summons for the job.”
“Oh I would kill for a cup of tea right now,” Root shivered. “Do you like tea? I know green is all the rage in court, but there’s this little shop in the older part of the capitol that has a black blend that’s simply to die for.”

Shaw smirked, “I know a tavern out that way with a steak that’s better than sex.”

“Doesn’t that sound yummy,” Root chuckled. She tapped a finger against her chin, “Though perhaps you’re not doing it right if…”

“I do it just fine,” Shaw cut her off.

Root quirked an eyebrow at that. “If just fine is your average experience then I’m not surprised about the steak comparisons.”

“Fine. When we get back to the city I’ll buy you a steak and you can see for yourself,” Shaw grumbled.

“You want to have dinner after this is finished?” Root blinked at her in astonishment, “Together?”

“We eat together all the time now, Root,” Shaw replied, playing dumb. She knew exactly what Root meant but wasn’t about to pass up a chance to mess with her for once. The look on the other woman’s face right now was priceless.

Root swallowed. She raised the spyglass up to her eye. “Let’s get this job done then.”

“By all means,” Shaw chuckled. She could sort of see why Root liked the flirting thing, putting someone this off their guard was hilarious.

“The good thing is despite its size…”

“Tiny mountain,” Shaw interjected.
Root snorted in amusement, “Yes, well, Samaritan seems to still be contained within the ruins of the great hall.” Meaning it likely hadn’t managed to further damage the wards.

“So your special friend was right.”

“She always is,” Root smiled.

“You know it’s kind of annoying.”

“Don’t be jealous, Sweetie,” Root replied. She tilted her head and then adjusted the focus on the spyglass. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

“The smoke.” Root pointed to the ruins of the old village.

Shaw followed the line of Root’s arm. She could see it clearly with her naked eye. Tendrils of white smoke were indeed wafting up from the valley. “What about it?”

“Where its originating from.” Judging by the wind, the source of the smoke was well below the castle ruins, in the village itself. “Why would there be a fire in an abandoned village?”

“I take it our boy can’t spit that far?”

Root shook her head, “We’re not alone.” She handed the spyglass back to Shaw. She pointed to a stone outcropping a bit further down the slope. “Let’s see if we can get a better angle on them from over there.”

A few minutes later they were laying side by side in the snow about a hundred paces farther along the rise. Root scowled as she adjusted the focus of the spyglass to watch several men milling about between two half crumbled homes. “A Decima patrol.”

“How did they make it across the border?”
Root handed the glass to Shaw and rose to her knees. “There are leagues of mountain range between Thornhill and Decima lands, the guard can’t watch it all.”

“Why didn’t your little friend tell you this was happening?” Shaw counted five men. A scouting party maybe?

“It’s getting too hard to hear Her voice this close to Samaritan.” She dug into her pack and pulled out the book. Then she took out a smaller leather satchel. “Bear,” She called the wolf over. Root put the book into the bag and then secured it to Bear’s back just as she had at the Goblin Market.

Shaw whipped her head around to stare at them, “What are you doing?”

“Decima can’t get its hands on the book.” She looked Bear in the eyes. “Home.” Bear barked and then took off in a run.

“You can’t just send him away. What if someone catches him?”

Root shook her head, “They won’t.” She pointed back towards the village. “They’re here to prevent anyone from getting in. My guess is that this is the lot of them. No one is waiting on the road.”

“Pretty big gamble.” Shaw decided to let it go though. Bear was smart and Root hadn’t been wrong about much yet. Besides, they had bigger issues to worry about. “How are we supposed to get the job done with them here?”

Root shrugged, “I suppose we’ll have to kill any of them that get in our way.”

“Finally, you’re starting to make sense again.” Shaw flipped her hood so that it was covering her head. “Watch and learn, Sister.”

They waited until dark. Sheltering in a mostly intact cottage on the outskirts of the village they went over the layout of the keep one last time. Shaw used her, heretofore unknown to Root, artistic ability to sketch a near perfect copy of the rendering of the wards from the book out into the ashes of the cottage floor. They left their gear there for safe keeping. Just after sunset Root circled around the village to scout ahead while Shaw made her way towards where smoke was still rising up near its
Five men were sitting around the fire. The first two were felled by Shaw’s arrows before any of the men could react. The third man softened her landing as she leapt from the roof of the hovel they were sheltering next to. She drove him face first into the ground, knocking him out cold. She was still kneeling over his body when number four took a throwing knife she had borrowed from Root to his right eye. Lucky five actually managed to draw his sword before Shaw cut him down.

She smiled surveying her work. That had been fun. “Hey,” Shaw whipped around to see a sixth man pointing a sword at her. Oops. Missed one.

The man fell over clutching the knife that suddenly appeared in his neck. Shaw turned her head to see Root emerge from between two of the crumbling buildings. “Missed one.”

“I had that.”

“Right.” Root cocked her head to the side, “But what were you going to do about the rest of them?”

“Excuse me what?”

“There’s at least thirty men scattered throughout the ruins. Maybe more inside the keep.”

“Crap.” Shaw pursed her lips. They needed to take out at least some of the men but do it without drawing attention to themselves. It was a fair walk from here to the cliffs as well. Lots of opportunities to be discovered and captured or worse. She looked down at the bodies she’d amassed. They’d need to hide those. It wouldn’t do for a patrol to stumble upon them and raise the alarm before they could even reach the keep. As she stared at one of the fallen men inspiration struck.

“Grab his cloak. Ditch the stupid hat.” Shaw was already bending over to pull the cloak off of the shortest of the men she had killed.

Root grinned as she cottoned on to Shaw’s plan, “As I said before beautiful and smart.”

Once properly disguised, they made their way towards the cliffs. When and where opportune they
killed any Decima men they encountered and hid the bodies among the ruins. Neither wanted to have to face a full company after dealing with Samaritan.

It seemed that they had avoided discovery as they reached the cliff side however. Root held up a torch they had liberated from a pair of soldiers who had been patrolling the outskirts of the village. “It should be right around here,” She hummed.

“What?”

“Our way inside.” She stepped in close to the vine covered rock wall. She ran the fingers of her free hand between and underneath the thorny plants. After a few moments she pulled her hand back with a smile and drew the knife from her boot.

“Progress I take it? Or are you planning to dig your own tunnel?”

“Here,” Root cut away a few of the vines to reveal a stone door. She began to push at it with her free arm while holding the torch aloft but it didn’t budge. Shaw stepped in closely beside her and shoved her shoulder against the stone. Root laid her hand on her bicep, “Wait, your wound.”

“Is fine,” Shaw grumbled. “Worry about your face.”

Root shook her head and stepped back, “Why? It’s still nearly perfect.” She waved for a grumbling Shaw to continue. She had to trust that the other woman wouldn’t push herself too far and endanger the mission.

After about a minute the panel began to give. Root smiled as Shaw gave one last hearty push to work it all the way open. “I memorized the layout days ago. This tunnel should take us where we need to go.”

“Should?” Shaw raised an eyebrow at that. “You really can’t hear your god here?”

“I’m sure She’d find a way to make herself heard should we fall into dire straits,” Root frowned, “I’d rather not have to test it though, would you?”
“Let’s hope the layout down here still matches up to your memory,” Shaw grumbled and stepped through the dark opening.

They roamed the warren of tunnels for what seemed like hours. Shaw felt dizzy from all the twists and turns but Root strode confidently on as they moved higher and deeper into the mountain. A part of her did have to admire the work that had been put into this place however. The smooth stone pathways looked strong even after centuries of existence. The iron doors and gates scattered throughout were still in workable order for the most part. And there were no rats, though that may have had more to do with the dragon lurking just above them.

“We’re almost there,” Root remarked as they entered what looked to be a hub where several of the underground pathways intersected. The area was almost like a long gallery with several paths branching off to either side.

Shaw cocked an eyebrow at that, “We can’t possibly be to the top yet.”

“No, but we’ve almost reached…” Root’s sentence was cut off before she could finish however.

“You there,” A rough voice called out. Shaw and Root turned to see what appeared to be a full squad of Decima men on the other side of an iron partition. A man with a lieutenant’s insignia on his shoulder stepped closer to the grate, “Which squad are you two with?”

“Uh second company,” Shaw mumbled in reply. She hoped she had read the insignia on the men she had killed’s uniforms correctly earlier. She slid her hand down to the hilt of her sword. She wasn’t going to take any chances even with the iron grate between them.

“You’re supposed to be on exterior watch.”

“The lieutenant sent us to check on a noise, but we got turned around in these tunnels,” Root piped up. She subtly shifted back a step. “Nothing to see here though.”

“Funny,” The man grumbled as he moved closer. He peered through the bars at them, “Ain’t no women I know of in the ranks that marched out here.”

Root looked between the man and Shaw, “Umm. Run.” She shoved Shaw towards one of the tunnels.
“They’re from Thornhill,” He shouted after them, “Go around. Quickly!”

“No women,” Shaw huffed as they darted down the dark pathway. “So not only is Decima full of assholes but they’re women hating assholes?”

“It’s cute that, that is what you’re focusing on right now, Shaw.”

“Just pointing out the obvious.” She slowed down as she noticed they were coming to a junction. “Which way?”

“Go left, then right, left, then right again and then through the third archway.”

Shaw nodded and increased her pace. She wasn’t certain they could lose the soldiers perusing them but they could at least buy a little time. Root’s long legs easily matched her stride. They stopped for a moment to catch their breath once they were through the archway. “It should take them a fair bit of time to get all the way back here,” Root noted as she tucked the torch into an iron ring embedded in the stone to the left of the archway.

“Having this many Decima soldiers wandering around while we’re trying to work is going to be a problem.” Shaw shrugged out of the borrowed cloak. “And this plan is obviously not going to work.”

There were too many men running around these tunnels for them to fight them all one on one. Shaw glanced about looking for any way to even the odds. Yet every plan she could conceive of ended badly. A bit of brick tumbled down from the ceiling as Samaritan thrashed about the ground above them again. They had to get those wards taken care of no matter what.

“It got us this far, Shaw. We’re close.”

“Getting close doesn’t matter if Samaritan breaks loose and kills us all.” She could hear shouts echoing down the tunnel. They’d be found sooner rather than later.

“We won’t let that happen.” Root began to look around as well. “We just need a little more time.”
Shaw pointed to what looked like a giant fissure in the far wall, “Where does that lead?”

“Back into the mountain.” Root shook her head. “Who knows where we’d end up. Could be a dead end. Could lead out the other side of the valley.”

Shaw nodded to the only other way out of the area, a small alcove with an iron ladder. “And that?”

“Up through the foundations. If I remember correctly it should take us the rest of the way up and out into the barracks.”

“Good. Now just have to get rid of your suitors.” They had to keep them from following somehow. She examined the ladder. Looked like it was sturdy, probably wouldn’t be able to knock it off its moorings after they climbed up.

“Have you looked in a mirror, Sameen?” Root chuckled. “Clearly they’re here for you.”

Shaw was about to grumble out a reply when a length of rope next to the archway leading to the alcove with the ladder caught her eye. Her gaze trailed to the upper portion of that doorway. Several metal spikes ran its length like serpents’ teeth. A gate. Maybe there was a way to distract the soldiers and still get the job done. But how could she get the other woman to go along with it?

“Hey Root.”

She turned her eyes from the mouth of the tunnel to look at Shaw, “What? Mmmmf,” Root moaned as Shaw grabbed her and kissed her.

When in need of bait, give the mark exactly what they think they want. The old tenant also worked wonderfully as a diversionary tactic in this instance. For a moment, her plan backfired as Shaw felt Root’s tongue trail across her bottom lip. She groaned as she opened her mouth to Root. Okay, perhaps Shaw wanted it too. Shame really she didn’t realize how much until this instant.

Savoring the moment for what it was, Shaw gave as good as she got for a few happy seconds before refocusing and slipping her left hand along Root’s side to the top of her boot. And if she copped a slight ass grab on the way down, well she was about to do something really stupid, so she allowed
herself a treat. Root certainly didn’t seem to mind based on the moan she released at the move.

Knowing the other woman was fully off her guard, Shaw slid her free hand up to Root’s shoulder. She drew the knife concealed in Root’s boot and simultaneously pushed her through the arch. Then with a flick of her wrist, Shaw threw her borrowed knife severing the line that held the gate aloft. It crashed down to the floor with a deafening clang. Root slammed her palms against the grate. “What are you doing?”

“Leading them off. Go set the wards.”

“Sameen!”

“Go,” Shaw shouted. The sound of running feet coming closer filled the silence after the command. The Decima soldiers were drawn to their position by the noise.

“No,” Root shouted pushing against the grate again. “Don’t do this.”

“It’s done. Now do your damn job, Root.” Shaw snarled. She walked over and pulled the knife from the wall. She threw it at the first soldier to round the corner. She looked to her right. There was only one way out now. When three more men entered the tunnel she shouted, “Kill me if you can.” She darted through the opening in the wall.

Root stepped back from the grate with an angry howl. She watched as seven men ducked down the pathway behind Shaw. She was now alone with ten foes clamoring at her heels. The eleventh, the lieutenant, stopped and smiled at Root from the other side of her cage. “We’ll be back for you,” And then he disappeared after Shaw as well.

“Not bloody likely.” She shouted after him. She moved towards the ladder. She was going to make every last soldier she came across suffer for this.
Root gets to work.

Root’s shoulders were burning by the time she pushed the trapdoor into the barracks open. The ladder had seemed to go on endlessly through the dark. Or perhaps that had just been Root’s thoughts. How could Sameen have done this? Kiss her like that and then run off to die.

Root violently shook her head. No! She wouldn’t think that way. Shaw was still alive. Those Decima morons couldn’t touch her. She would be back for her or Root would go and find her herself once this task was complete. Root refused to believe anything else.

She pulled herself through the door and glanced around her surroundings in a crouch. Once she was sure she was alone, she eased the trapdoor closed again. She was now on the north west corner of the keep, the furthest point from Samaritan’s lair practically. Which made sense as to why Lambert would have begun his task with the wards in this area.

This part of the keep hadn’t been as damaged as the rest. Though the air around Root smelled dirty. Every time she moved a trail of dust rose into the air that smelt like smoke and ash and burnt meat. She did her best not to breathe in too deeply. Thankfully, the cracks in the barracks’ ceiling let in some fresh air and enough moonlight for her to move about without smacking into anything.

If she remembered correctly, the first of the wards she needed to reach was in the old armory. Which should be in the next building over. She shuffled to the door and eased it open. A cursory glance around revealed a clear path to her goal. Root sprinted between the stone structures.

Fortunately, there was a door on this side of the armory. She slowly pushed it open and peered inside. The floor was covered in dirt and ash. She could see the tracks that Lambert and his men had left when they entered. It was almost a pity that they had died for nothing. Because their actions would all be for naught. She was here to make that fact very certain. Root quickly closed the door behind her. Like in the barracks the damaged roof allowed enough moonlight to filter in to paint everything in a blue-white glow, including the pillar that stood on the opposite end of the room from the door.
“Well, hello there.” The smooth black stone was as tall as she was, and inscribed with various runes. She crossed the room quickly to stand before it. Root brushed her fingers reverently against the symbol for Her name. She lifted her eyes skyward. “I hope you’re watching. I hope you are proud.”

Root removed the glove from her left hand. She pulled the dagger from her hip and swiftly ran the blade across her palm. She waited as the blood welled up in her cupped hand.

When she found the amount shed sufficient, Root placed her bloody palm against the stone. “I give my blood, my life for my people. I will be their swift sword, their sturdy shield against the dark. That which would bring the land to ruin be bound here until our blood is no more.” With her final word, the runes glowed a bright green. She pulled her hand away with a smile.

Samaritan roared. Apparently, the dragon was displeased with the notion that his cage was closing once again. Root’s smile widened.

“One down.” She took a moment to remove a length of cloth from a pocket on the inside of her coat. She wound the clean bandage around her hand several times to cover the wound. She twisted the end around in a loop and tied it in the best knot she could with only the use of one hand and her teeth.

Medical concerns addressed for the moment, Root moved to the door and peered out into the courtyard. She’d need to cut through the open space to get to the next ward which was located to the rear of the property. She was about to move when she heard the faintest echo of a footstep.

She stood by the door with baited breath as the sound grew in volume until it wasn’t an echo at all. A patrol. One man from the sound of things. Root smiled, she was looking for a fight. She pulled the axe from her back and eased the door open, keeping her body concealed in the shadows.

A few minutes later a thin man with a slight limp came to a stop just outside of the armory. He drew his sword when he noticed the open door. He was about to step forward when Samaritan roared again. He swore and whipped around as if the dragon were about to break through the walls and take him right then and there.

Root used the momentary distraction to her advantage. She stepped forward and used the axe to hook the man by the shoulder. One good yank and he toppled backwards and into the armory. His head bounced against the stone floor stunning him. Root slammed the door behind him and Samaritan was kind enough to oblige her with another roar to cover the sound.
“Now what am I to do with you?” She smiled down at the man before raising the axe.

Fifteen minutes later, she was once again darting across the courtyard. Her new friend Carlo had informed her that there was a squad of soldiers patrolling the exterior areas of the keep. Most of the men were patrolling in pairs. Carlo’s partner had wandered off to take a piss and he had proceeded on alone telling the other man he would meet him back at the gatehouse where the squad had set up base camp of sorts when he was done with this round. Root figured she had less than half an hour before anyone would begin to worry about poor Carlo. Not that he’d be able to tell anyone much of anything once they found what was left of him.

Still the force inside of the keep in addition to the men in the village below was concerning. In light of that information she decided stealth was the order of the day. She was outnumbered and until she could reset the other ward she could not risk being found. For all she knew she might be the only one from Thornhill who would manage to make it this far into the keep. She could not falter now.

She was halfway to her target when she heard voices coming from behind her. Root had fortuitously turned down a side corridor and this could not be seen by whoever was approaching. Still she needed to get out of sight. She scanned the walls around her.

Fortune further smiled upon her however, just up ahead there was a gap in the masonry. Root rushed forward and ducked into a small alcove. The area was shadowed just enough that she wouldn’t be seen until the patrol was nearly on top of her. She took a calming breath to steady herself. There were two men this time, it wouldn’t be as easy as her encounter with Carlo.

The men were walking casually. Neither had their sword drawn. If she didn’t know any better Root would assume that the pair had simply wandered off from their peers to enjoy the brisk night air. So it seemed Carlo’s disappearance wasn’t known yet. That was a point in Root’s favor in the very least.

Root counted the men’s steps as they drew nearer. She held her breath until just when they were within arm’s reach of her position and then moved forward to strike. She hit the first man in the throat with the back of the axe. The blow crushed his windpipe; he’d likely suffocate on his own blood before she was finished killing his friend. Speaking of which Root spun around and dropped to her knees to duck under his swinging sword. She reversed her grip on the axe handle and swung for all she was worth at the man’s leg. He cried out as the blade went right through his thigh, severing his leg just above the knee. “Shhh,” Root chided him before striking against the side of his head with the flat of the blade and leaving him to unconsciously bleed out.

She cautiously stood, her eyes sweeping the area around them. It seemed no one had been alerted by
the man’s shout. “Small favors,” She hummed. She examined the axe blade for a moment. It held a slight glow as the blood on it seemed to be drawn in to the metal. She grinned, the alchemical treatment she requested Daizo apply to the blade was doing its intended job. “So far so good.”

Root encountered and dispatched two more men before she reached the second site. Given what Carlo had told her, it seemed Decima had been warned of Harold’s plan to send agents to reset the wards. What Root found odd was, given that Samaritan was still restrained, that they had seemed to do nothing to the remaining ones. What could they possibly have been waiting for?

She shook her head. There would be ample time to discover the answer once her task was finished and she found Shaw again. Root peered around the last corner separating her from her target. The area was clear. She stepped into the small courtyard where the ward should be, but there was no pillar. There was only patchy, dried grass, snow, and a pile of black rubble.

“Crap.” She looked out at the shards of rock scattered about the ground with a heavy heart. Lambert hadn’t just severed the mystical connection to this particular ward. He had somehow completely shattered the pillar. There was nothing left for Root to reset.

She kicked over a hunk of stone in pure, unbridled frustration. They had been so close to ending this farce. Damn Lambert and Greer to hell.

“Alright, now I just have to figure out how to kill a dragon by myself.” She stood and took several deep breaths to steady herself. No flashes of brilliance were forthcoming, however. She looked up at the dark sky. “Really? No input at all?”

“Well, first things first.” She had to get around to the great hall. Root was currently on the north end of the grounds near the outer wall. She’d need to make her way back into the inner walls and around to the back of what was remaining of the hall to keep Samaritan from seeing her.

Root methodically made her way through the ruined keep. Once again she was blessed as she did not encounter any soldiers on patrol. That changed when she turned a blind corner to see five Decima soldiers standing in the intersection of two corridors. Root slowed to a stop. There were too many men to pick a fight. She’d have to go a different way.

She spun around and ran back the way she came in hopes that maybe they hadn’t seen her. The sound of multiple footsteps echoing on the stones behind her soon dashed those hopes. Root pressed her legs to run harder. She began to turn down various corridors at random to try and throw her pursuers off. She thought that plan was working rather well until she took her final turn.
A heavy iron grate much like the one in the catacombs below the barracks blocked her way. She kicked it in a fit of spite. “A fine day for me to make a wrong turn,” She grumbled. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have sent my map away with the dog.”

“There she is.” Root turned to see two soldiers advancing on her. One had his sword drawn while the other was brandishing a crossbow. Two was better than five but the situation was far from ideal. She could rush the swordsman but she’d definitely be shot at this range.

“All right bitch, drop the axe,” The one with the sword ordered her. The other kept his crossbow trained on her chest. She took a half a step back and they eased closer in reflex.

Root caught a bit of movement just over the men’s shoulders. She smiled so widely she was sure she was going to split the sutures on her face. “Why are you smiling at us?”

“I’m not smiling at you,” Root beamed. The tip of a sword burst through each man’s chest and then just as quickly was withdrawn. The men crumpled to the ground to reveal a smirking Shaw.

“You don’t even want to know what I had to crawl through to get up here,” Shaw said as she stepped over the bodies to walk towards Root. Her hair was coming out of its tie leaving dark wisps to cling to the sweat on her face and neck. A garishly purple bruise spread across her jaw, and her armor was splattered with blood and mud. Root was absolutely certain that Shaw was the most beautiful thing she had ever laid her eyes on.

Root smiled adoringly as she moved closer. “I knew you’d come back for me.”

“Yeah well,” Shaw shrugged, “Clearly whenever I leave you alone, you get into trouble.”

“Absolutely.” She cocked her head to the side, “Though I much prefer getting into it with you.”

Shaw rolled her eyes, both out of habit and to cover the swift stab of something…she felt at finding Root alive. She looked pointedly at Root’s bandaged left hand. She had memorized the ritual required to reestablish the magical connections so she knew what the wound likely meant. “So have you finished the wards?”
“There’s a slight issue with that I’m afraid.”

“I knew this whole thing was going to go pear-shaped the moment we saw those Decima idiots.” She sheathed her sword and propped the other up against her leg. She pulled off her gauntlets and tucked them under her arm. Shaw then reached for Root’s hand to check the bandage. Clearly it wasn’t to her standard, because she immediately began to unwind the fabric.

“One of the wards was far more damaged than we originally thought,” Root explained as she watched Shaw work. “There was nothing left to reset. Samaritan cannot be contained at this point. We’re going to have to kill it.”

Shaw looked up from her task. “That isn’t what I’d call slight, Root.”

“We knew this was a possible outcome.”

“We as in you and your imaginary friend,” Shaw rolled her eyes, “You left me out of the loop on that one.” She tied a knot in the bandage and tucked the ends under. She unconsciously brushed her thumb against Root’s wrist but dropped her hand like it was on fire once she realized what her treacherous appendage was doing.

Root tried not to pout at the loss of contact. “I did tell you that She told me you would destroy Samaritan.”

Shaw busied herself with pulling her gloves back on. “Forgive me for thinking you were insane at the time.” She not so subtly looked Root over for any other injuries. It seemed like other than the hand all the blood on the infuriating woman belonged to someone else.

“And now?”

“I know you are.” Shaw shrugged her shoulders. “But here we are, so clearly so am I.” She raked her teeth over her bottom lip. “How exactly are we supposed to kill this thing?”

Root raised her hand holding the axe and passed it handle first to Shaw. “The more blood this absorbs the sharper it becomes.”
Shaw’s eyes lit up at the possibilities. “Please tell me you gave it a good soak in Decima idiots on your way here?”

“I may have alleviated three or four limbs from their owners.”

Shaw grinned as she took a few practice swings. “Think it’s sharp enough to hack into a dragon?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Shaw tossed Root the spare sword. “Let’s get on with it then.”

“After you, Sameen,” Root sketched out a quick little bow. She smiled wickedly when she stood up again, “Oh and don’t think you’re going to avoid talking to me about that kiss once this is over.”

“What’s there to talk about?” Shaw’s tone implied nothing was the correct answer.

“How soon we can do it again of course.” Root’s eyes narrowed, “Well, not the part where you ran away…”

“I was protecting you, you ingrate.”

“And yet here I am about to face a dragon,” Root tisked, “Not your best work, I’m afraid.”

“Right, you’re going to face it,” Shaw snorted, “Which one of us is holding the magic axe right now?”

“True, you’re very fortunate I look after you so well, Sameen.”

“I should have let you get stabbed.”
God Sends Her Regards

Chapter Summary

How to kill the dragon who has everything.

Chapter Notes

Is everyone as ecstatic about May 3rd as I am? Finally we have an air date (and cancellation news, screw you CBS)! I had an all caps-y GIF party on twitter for a good three hours yesterday. SO EXCITED! See there I go again. Can't help it the power of Shoot compels me.

Ahem, anyway story note, finally this chapter as the tags say some people get eaten by a dragon, just an FYI, it's no one you'd like anyway. I hope the action comes off okay as I've described it. I'm way better at banter than the biff, bang, pow, stuff, and I would hate to disappoint at this juncture.

“In hindsight, I should have brought a bigger axe,” Root remarked as the pair of them peered over at Samaritan from behind a section of the great hall’s crumbled wall.

“The voice in your head did tell you it was a dragon,” Shaw snapped back in a poor imitation of Root’s voice from earlier that day. She shook her head. Had it really been less than a day since they had first set eyes on this place?

“Okay, Sameen. I’ll admit it. You were right,” Root pointed with the sword in her hand. “That’s a tiny mountain.” She shivered, Shaw didn’t know if it was fear or because it had begun to snow again.

Samaritan was lying in the middle of what was left of the hall. Its white lower body and flanks were highlighted by a jagged pattern of deep red scales that flowed out from its spine. The dragon’s hulking mass rather resembled a bloody snowdrift. Even on its belly, the beast towered over Root and Shaw. The great hall ran half the length of the keep and Samaritan was easily as long as half of that. Shaw pursed her lips, and that was with its tail tucked in as it curled in the space like a cat sleeping in a window.

“What are the odds I could get over there and kill it without waking it up?”
“Slim to none I’m afraid,” Root sighed. “It’s sense of smell is better than its vision and that’s excellent. Honestly, I’m sure Samaritan knows we’re here, it just can’t do anything about us because the wards hold it within the ruins of the hall.” Root pointed to two black pillars that suffused the hall with a green glow. As long as those pillars stood, she and Shaw were out of the dragon’s reach on the opposite side of what was once the east wall.

“If Lambert wasn’t already dead I’d kill him myself.”

“There’s always Greer,” Root shrugged with a smile.

“Trust me, the old man is on my list,” Shaw scowled. Who the hell thought unleashing that thing on the world was a party? That kind of stupid did not deserve to live.

Root chuckled, “I’m sure Harry would be willing to pay you extra for your time.”

“He’d better; I hate the cold.” She sullenly brushed a bit of snow from her shoulder to further illustrate her point. “Decima is even snowier than here.” Though Shaw would probably kill the guy for free. She shook her head as she looked over at Samaritan again. Definitely would do it for free.

Root leaned into her side, “I could come along to keep you nice and toasty.”

Shaw shrugged her off. “I assume I need to take its head or its heart?” She asked as she examined the beast’s body. Its thick hide might prove problematic even with Root’s magic axe in play. The eyes should be a weak point. Yet there was the tiny matter of claws and teeth, and oh yeah the ugly bastard could spit fire. Why had she signed on for this job again?

“Either would do,” Root nodded.

“So, what do you think, high road or low road?”

“Either way, we have to figure out a way to get you in close,” Root said as she scanned the area around the dragon. Maybe they could use that pile of rubble as cover, lure Samaritan over to them somehow and attack from underneath? She felt Shaw move beside her. Or perhaps they could scale what’s left of the wall over there and leap on to Samaritan’s back? She turned her head to ask
Shaw’s opinion only to see that the woman was walking away towards the path that would take her
to the main gate, “Where are you going?” Surely, she wasn’t giving up.

Shaw glared over her shoulder at Root, “Stay there, stay down. Do not move out of cover until I get
back.” Bewildered, Root simply nodded and let her go.

It took Shaw about ten minutes to find what she was looking for. In the courtyard between the inner
walls and the gatehouse a group of soldiers were sitting around a fire. She smiled and drew a knife
she had taken off the body of one of their peers from her belt.

“Oh boys,” Shaw called. The soldiers turned to stare at her. She threw the knife hitting one of the
men in the chest, sending him toppling backwards out of his seat and into the fire. He screamed and
began to roll around to put out the flames. The rest of the men stood in unison shouting curses at her.
Shaw smirked and then spun around and ran back the way she came. Her smirk grew into a rare
smile as she heard the soldiers’ footsteps thundering down the corridors behind her.

She rounded the final corner and sprinted into the hall. Samaritan’s pitch black eyes fixed on her and
it stood in anticipation of a snack. Shaw glanced over her shoulder to see the group was still blindly
chasing her like a pack of dogs. She grinned and increased her speed. Samaritan’s tongue flicked out
like a snake scenting the air as Shaw came closer.

The soldiers cried out in terror as they realized where she had led them. But Shaw kept running; just
when it looked like she’d be Samaritan’s next meal, she dropped to the ground and slid under its
snapping jaws. The men following her were not quite so nimble, however. Stumbling to a frantic
stop just before the massive beast.

Having missed the first course of its meal, Samaritan wasted no time, darting its head forward and
pinching one of the men between its teeth. He screamed as the dragon shook its head tossing him
into the air. Even that terror was short lived as he fell into its open mouth, the beast swallowing him
in one gulp. The remaining men scrambled to move out of range. Samaritan sucked in a deep breath
and then sent a jet of fire after them, catching three it its wake.

Root swallowed, “Poor bastards.” Still better them than Shaw. Root could see her darting under the
dragon’s swinging tail. The axe glinted in the moonlight as Shaw swung out at Samaritan’s legs. It
growled and rocked its head around to snap at Shaw. Root held her breath as Shaw rolled out of the
way just in time.

Samaritan growled again but Shaw stayed under and around its legs so it couldn’t reach her with its
teeth. Whenever she got an opening, she swung out with the axe. But all she managed were a few
nicks and scrapes not being able to plant her feet well enough to put any real power behind her swings. The dragon seemed to consider her a minor pest and focused its attention instead on the burned bodies of the Decima men at the front of the hall. It crawled forward and began to eat what was left of them.

“Shaw?” Root shouted.

“Stay put.” She shouted back. The last thing she needed was to have to worry about the dragon and Root. She hoped the crazy woman actually listened to her for once, and without looking back, charged after Samaritan.

While the dragon munched on unfortunate idiot number two, Shaw slipped underneath its body. She figured she could take a whack at its breastbone from down here. Maybe splinter a rib? Anything to slow the bastard down would do really.

Shaw lifted the axe above her head and swung it up at Samaritan’s chest. The blade made a tiny split in the white scales, yet it didn’t even bleed. She growled and swung the axe again. This time the blade managed to cut completely through the scales. A few drops of iridescent blood dripped on her face. Shaw’s skin burned where they landed. She rubbed what she could away with one hand while tugging on the axe with the other.

Suddenly, the dragon rolled onto its side taking Shaw and the axe with it. It kept rolling over and on to its back, coming to an abrupt stop which sent Shaw and the axe flying. She landed hard on her side near the western wall. “Son of a,” She groaned. The dragon kept moving until it was on its feet again. Shaw stood up and ran before Samaritan could corner her.

Root scrambled to climb over the wall. She wasn’t certain what she could do to assist Shaw but she was not about to sit there and watch her get killed. Not after they had come this far.

Samaritan turned and using its tail like a whip lashed out, Shaw ducked, but the remnants of a stone support column just behind her were shattered. She had to drop completely to the ground on her stomach to keep from being hit by debris. The dragon quickly repeated the action this time causing a large hunk of falling masonry to nearly crush her. Shaw rolled out of the way, but some pieces of brick still clipped her side. She went still, the breath knocked out of her lungs. Samaritan rounded on her and began to advance.

Root ran towards them. “Hey!” She shouted, but the dragon ignored her. Shaw still wasn’t moving.
Root threw one of her stilettos at the dragon’s side. The blade bounced back at her, not able to pierce the hard scales. Samaritan snorted. Had it been human, Root was certain that the beast would be laughing at her. But it did turn its attention away from Shaw to look at her. Root threw another blade this time hitting Samaritan on the snout. The beast growled in irritation. It drew another deep breath, preparing to rain down fire once again. Root dove behind a bit of rubble just as a torrent of flames came at her.

However, even though she was at risk of being roasted at the moment, her distraction did allow Shaw enough time to right herself. With a groan Shaw rolled on to her knees, one arm wrapped around her ribs. She picked up the axe with her free hand and looked around. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Root barely concealed by a pile of rubble with Samaritan advancing on her.

“Well crap.” She frantically looked around for anything she could use to get the dragon’s focus away from Root. For a brief moment she thought of throwing the axe but that would leave her without the best weapon she had should she miss, or if the blade got stuck again. Shaw growled. It was useless there was nothing here but rocks and snow.

She canted her head to the side. There were a lot of bricks now that she thought about it. She tucked the axe back into its scabbard on her back and picked up the largest hunk of stone she could. One good thing about being a smaller than the average recruit in the guild? Hersh made damn sure she trained her body until she was deceptively, almost freakishly, strong. She’d stab him a few less times when she finally caught up to the bastard for it.

Shaw wasn’t the superstitious type but she looked up at the sky as she raised the heavy stone in preparation to throw it, “If Root is right and anyone is up there listening, help me out here.” With a grunt she let it fly. The hunk of stone hit Samaritan in the back of the head. It whirled on Shaw with a roar. Step one complete.

“Hopefully the same trick works twice,” She swallowed and then ran at the charging beast. Samaritan lunged at her and once again Shaw was able to slide out of the way of its jaws and underneath its body, the snow slick stone aiding in her momentum.

Shaw stood back up the moment she could see the dark sky once again. She ran straight for Root who was peering up over her hiding place with wide eyes. Shaw was certain that woman was going to get herself killed someday but Shaw wasn’t planning on letting it be today. She grabbed Root by the arm and hauled her to her feet. “Go,” Shaw shouted as she pushed Root towards the side of the hall.

“Have I told you how ridiculously attractive it is to see you sliding around on your knees?” Root panted. Woman had the nerve to flirt when they were running for their lives from a dragon. Shaw would laugh if it wasn’t so insane.
'Hope you enjoyed yourself because I doubt it’ll work a third time.’” She glanced back at Samaritan only to notice that it was apparently gearing up for another blast of fire.

“Pity,” Root pouted without concern for their current predicament.

“Save your pity and jump.” Shaw shoved her at the wall. Root managed to clear it without much trouble as far as she could tell. Shaw only heard a slight grunt as she herself jumped.

“This isn’t working.” Shaw panted as she landed safely in cover beside Root. A wave of fire sailed over their heads as she leaned back against the wall. “I’m sure it’s annoying as shit, but it will take way too long for that damn thing to die from the hundreds of paper cuts I’ll manage before I get stomped into a gooey paste.”

Root clicked her tongue, “We need to do something drastic.”

“You think?” Shaw grumbled.

She couldn’t help but smile. “You’re adorable.” She stood up to peer over the wall.

“Remind me to check you for head injuries if we live through this.” Shaw yanked Root down by the back of her coat as Samaritan shot another jet of flame their way. “Serious, did you land on your head? Stay down.”

“I’d love to, but now is really not the time, Sweetie.” Shaw shoved her away in a huff. “Awe don’t be that way.” Root licked her lips, “Once we pull this off, I promise I’ll go down and stay down for as long as you want.”

“Root,” Shaw ground out between clenched teeth, “No one is going anywhere if we don’t come up with a better plan.”

“I’m very open to suggestions.”
Shaw pinched the bridge of her nose. “Does your imaginary friend have any input, Lady Sex On the Brain?”

Root frowned, “Not a word.” Shaw drew her sword. “Threatening me won’t get her to talk, I’m afraid. Though we could most definitely have fun with that later.”

Shaw rolled her eyes and angled the blade so that she could use the reflection to peer over the wall. From what little she could see it appeared that Samaritan had returned to finish off the final Decima soldier’s corpse. Too bad the rest of those idiots had run away, they could have served as a further distraction. That part of the plan was the only one that had worked.

Root grabbed her bicep, “The north end of the hall, there’s ceiling left.”

She pulled her arm out of Root’s grip and sheathed the sword. “Yeah and?” Shaw really wasn’t in the mood to talk architecture. Root stood up and motioned for Shaw to follow her to a point further down the wall. They stopped just beside a wide fissure that allowed them to see up into the north end of the hall.

“The chandelier,” Root pointed to the object in question. It hung about ten paces from the break in the roof. A massive iron ring that once held a bevy of candles was bracketed to a central iron pole. That pole ended in a decorative sort of spike. It looked like it was once part of a pair, one at either end of the great hall illuminating the space. Its twin lost the night Samaritan crashed through the roof of the south end of the hall and was trapped in this place. It was a bit of a marvel everything was still up there actually. One that certainly worked in their favor. “That would make quite an anchor.”

Shaw realized where this was going and the idea wasn’t half bad. “Get him under it. Cut it down and pin the bastard like a bug.” The force of the fall would do all the work for them. Once Samaritan was nailed down Shaw could close in and lop off its head.

“Not a bad plan, if I do say so myself,” Root grinned with pride.

“Best you’ve had all day, not that, that’s saying much,” Shaw smirked. She hooked her thumb over her shoulder to point at the axe. “You think this will cleave through the chain holding that thing up?”

“I think the real issue will be getting up there.” The thick chain anchoring the chandelier was secured on a platform almost as high up as the fixture itself. “Can you make that climb?”
“Please, I was climbing rigging before most kids my age could walk.” There should be enough gaps in the masonry to provide decent handholds the entire way up. Shaw could use the axe to carve a few out if need be as well.

“So you climb and cut, and I’ll get Samaritan in to position,” Root replied darting away before Shaw could stop her.

“Root,” She hissed. Damn that woman. Shaw sprinted in the opposite direction. She had to get to that platform before Root did anything stupid. She found another break in the east wall and pulled herself up and over. She stuck to the shadows as she moved closer to her target.

Shaw came to a stop and looked up at the north wall. Seemed easy enough. She could already see her first handhold. As her eyes tracked higher she mapped out her route to the platform. She had made more difficult climbs back in her catalyst days. Though once she got about halfway up a fall would most likely kill her. No pressure.

“Nothing to it.” She took a deep breath and then with a running start jumped up and grabbed an iron ring embedded into the wall that she was sure was once used to support a tapestry. She pumped her legs back and forth a few times gathering momentum and then launched herself up. At the height of her ascent she jammed her left hand into a break in the block. With a grin she reached up with her right hand and up she went.

She had been climbing steadily for about five minutes when she heard a roar from behind her. So Root had decided to finally get in the game. Shaw glanced over her shoulder, sure enough Root was running just ahead of a charging dragon. She watched as the other woman leapt over a pile of rubble. A moment later Samaritan charged right through it kicking up a cloud of dust.

The dragon shook its head as it lost sight of its prey. Root circled around to its side needing to force it to turn. Samaritan flexed its wings to fan the dust from the air. Unfortunately, the left one sailed straight at Root. To Shaw’s astonishment she bent backwards out of its path. Root tipped her body so low, in fact, that Shaw swore her shoulders nearly brushed the ground. When Samaritan retracted its wing, she popped back up and continued running as if nothing extraordinary had just occurred. Shaw swallowed, she was so bedding that woman if they survived this. With thoughts of a very pleasurable future in mind, Shaw continued to climb.

Root, for her part, ran to the side of the hall with Samaritan still on her heels and ducked behind a half shattered column to catch her breath. She closed her eyes as flames shot out to either side of her. She could smell her hair singeing from the heat. She pressed her body as close to the stone as she was able, while she worked out her next move. She needed to draw the dragon further into their trap but still give Shaw enough time to get into position.
Shaw kept climbing despite the cracking of the fire. If she stopped Root was as good as dead. She was more than halfway up the wall now. She flung her left arm up and grabbed on to a what had looked like a secure handhold only to have the stone crumble under her hand. She swung around, a little off balance but did not fall. She swore as several blocks fell to the ground. Samaritan whipped its head in her direction at the sound. “Oh that’s just great.” She reached up and began to frantically climb higher.

Having decided Shaw would make for a less troublesome snack, Samaritan began to move towards the north end of the hall. Root poked her head around the pillar when the fire stopped. Her eyes widened in horror when she realized what had caught the dragon’s attention, “Ut oh.”

The dragon reared up on its hind legs and snapped at Shaw’s feet. She swung her legs out of the way, nearly losing her grip on the wall. Samaritan drew in a deep breath. Shaw sneered knowing what would come next. Just perfect, she was going to die a pot roast. Cole was somewhere on the other side laughing his ass off.

“Hold on, Shaw.” Root shouted up at her as she ran towards them. She flipped her grip on her sword and took aim.

With a swift prayer that She do anything she could to guide Root’s hand, Root threw the sword like a javelin. She smiled as she watched the blade hit her mark, Samaritan’s left eye. The dragon roared its displeasure. It blinked rapidly but could not dislodge the blade. Iridescent blood began to seep from the wound. It fell back on to all four of its feet, shaking its head in a frenzy.

Knowing Root had just given her a chance that absolutely could not go to waste Shaw began to climb with renewed vigor. She only needed a few more minutes. Her muscles burned as she flung her body from handhold to handhold. She was nearly there. Just a few more minutes and this would be over.

Root smiled widely as she watched Shaw scramble up the wall. She’d be at the platform soon and Samaritan was sure to be hit when the chandelier fell here. This was working out swimmingly. Honestly, Shaw should let her do all the planning from here on out.

Samaritan chose that moment to turn its head and look at her. A deep growl reverberated across the stone chamber as it took a step forward. Or perhaps not, seeing as she was still down here with a very angry dragon. Root turned and ran. “Hurry, Sameen.”
Shaw pulled herself onto the platform with a grunt. Without sparing a moment to catch her breath she got on her knees and then rose to her feet. She pulled the axe from her back. The chain looked even thicker up close. Each link was solid iron and at least as thick as her thigh. She glanced at the axe, “I hope Root knew what she was doing with you.” Then she rolled her eyes at herself for talking to an axe. She was going to need such a vacation after this ordeal. Somewhere tropical maybe…

Samaritan’s roar caused Shaw to refocus. She glanced over the edge of the platform to see Root running in a serpentine pattern across the hall. Shaw knew the fool woman was simply trying to make sure Samaritan stayed where they needed it to be for the trap to work, but she really did not want her to get hurt doing it.

“Only one thing for it.” Shaw stepped back and raised the axe. She took a breath to focus and then let it rip. The axe met the chain with a deafening clang. Shaw shook her head and then frowned. There was a definite split in the chain but it was by no means broken. She rolled her eyes, they didn’t exactly have all day to get this done. She raised the axe again.

Meanwhile Root continued to barely stay one step ahead of the dragon. She knew what the clanging sound meant. Shaw was doing her part, which meant Root needed to keep Samaritan right here no matter what. But the dragon had also heard the noise and turned its attention back to Shaw. Root groaned in frustration. She didn’t have another sword to throw and she couldn’t exactly lift and hurl heavy stones as easily as Shaw. She pulled her remaining stiletto, and prepared to throw it, that had at least managed to annoy Samaritan the last time.

“Hey, ugly,” She shouted and let the blade fly. Once again it bounced harmlessly off of the dragon’s back. But this time it didn’t even turn around.

Instead, Samaritan cracked its tail like a whip hitting Root in her chest and launching her into the air. She sailed into one of the remaining pillars. Her back and right side taking the brunt of the impact. The force of the collision shattered the stone sending dust and debris flying.

At the sound of the crash, Shaw scrambled back to the side of the platform. “Root!” Shaw screamed over the dragon’s triumphant roar. She couldn’t see her. Part of the wall had collapsed though, giving her a pretty good idea of where Root had disappeared to.

Samaritan, though still partially blinded, sensed some of its prey was down for good, and began to shuffle towards the shattered stones. “Oh hell no,” Shaw swore. She turned and swung the axe again. The iron split with a screech, there was only half a link of the massive chain remaining now.

A quick glance between the ground and the chandelier told her that Samaritan was still on target. She
pulled the axe back one more time. Then with a shout she swung at the remaining bit of chain with everything she had. Shaw knew the thought was utter nonsense the instant she had it, but for a passing moment it almost felt like someone else was there with her guiding her hands. This time the axe cut through the iron link in one strike.

The chandelier fell true. The iron pole impaled Samaritan just below its shoulders. The beast roared in pain and fury. Its massive body thrashed to and fro but it could not dislodge the heavy iron pinning it to the stone floor. In fact, the beast’s movements only served to rend its skin and muscle further. After a few minutes it slumped to the ground in exhaustion.

Shaw smiled in grim satisfaction as she tucked the axe back into its scabbard and then scrambled to climb down the wall. She spared a glance to the pile of rubble she knew Root was buried in somewhere. “Just hold on,” She whispered under her breath. Halfway down the wall, she pushed off with her legs, executing a perfect back flip, and landing on the dragon’s back. Samaritan tilted its head to watch her with its good eye, growling a warning as she pulled out the axe.

“You should be afraid,” Shaw growled back at the beast. She twirled the axe in her hand so that the blade was pressed against the stream of blood pouring down the dragon’s back. After a moment it began to emit a steady glow. Shaw smiled.

“You see my friend over there believes in a higher power.” She began to move, dragging the blade along Samaritan’s scales leaving an ever growing furrow in its back, as the blade absorbed more and more blood. “I think she’s full of crap most of the time, but I’ve got to admit she’s got a connection with something I can’t even begin to understand.”

Shaw carefully made her way around the iron mass holding the dragon in place. “But I bet you can.” Samaritan growled again, trying to be fierce even as it’s body sagged from blood loss. “And I bet it’s the one thing until now you were afraid of.”

She stopped just where its neck met its shoulders. “Root would want me to give you a message,” Shaw said as she raised the brightly glowing axe, “God sends her regards.” And then she swung the blade for all she was worth into Samaritan’s neck.
The moment Samaritan’s head dropped to the stone floor Shaw leapt down from its back and started towards where she had last seen Root. She ignored the burn of the dragon’s blood where it had splattered on the exposed skin of her face and neck. All that mattered was finding her friend. Making sure that Root was still alive.

From what Shaw could tell it seemed like Samaritan had knocked down part of the wall on top of Root somehow. Shaw cursed herself for not getting the chandelier down faster. She didn’t see any sign of Root right away so she began clearing the bricks nearest to her.

After about ten minutes of work Shaw found her first sign of encouragement. Root’s bandaged left hand was sticking out from between two stone blocks. “Root. Root can you hear me?” Shaw heard a muffled sound. “I can’t understand you.” Her fingers slowly curled. “Okay, hold on I’m going to get this stuff off of you.”

Shaw began methodically shifting stone. She pushed and shoved the blocks until Root’s arm was free. Shaw could tell it was broken. She’d have to set the bone and splint it before they moved. “Root, are you good in there?”

Root took a shuddering breath, “So nice to hear your voice, Sameen.”

“Well, give me a minute and I’ll grace you with my beautiful face.”
“Oh goodie.” She could tell she was in pain, so Shaw paused her work for a moment to do what she could to create a makeshift support for Root’s arm out of a miraculously clean portion of her tunic and the scabbard for one of her knives.

The pillar she smacked into actually saved Root’s ass in the end. When it fell on over her it created an angle with the floor that formed a pocket of sorts. That pocket shielded Root from the section of the wall that had fallen right after. Maybe there really was some god out there looking out for the woman. No one in Shaw’s experience was that lucky. Still despite her good fortune Root had definitely taken some hits. “Oh you look like crap,” Shaw noted when Root’s head and chest were finally visible.

“The poetry that springs from your lips, Shaw,” Root groaned, “I can’t tell you how much it thrills me.”

“You stupid idiot. Were you trying to get eaten?”

“Since the day we met.”

Shaw’s eyes narrowed to slits. “By the dragon.”

“No, but you know how I feel about a nice bit of tail,” Root smiled. She was smiling that crazy smile of hers even while covered in flecks of mortar and blood. Shaw didn’t know whether to strangle her and finish the dragon’s work or to kiss her again. The cut on Root’s cheek had opened up again and judging by the sound of her breathing some of her ribs could be broken. Her expression must have given something away because Root spoke again, “Didn’t know you cared so much, Shaw.”

She choked and sputtered, “You’re my partner now.”

“Oh am I?” Root chuckled and then groaned at the strain it put on her ribs. “My partner,” She stressed the word, “Needed a distraction so she could finish climbing the wall. I did what I had to do.”

“Never again. If there’s a risk, then I’ll take it.”
“I’m not one of your Shadows, Sameen. We’re the same, you and I. Neither of us can stand aside when there’s work to be done.”

Shaw hung her head. “You really, really piss me off. You know that?”

“I’ll take whatever I can get when it comes to you.” Root blinked a few times. “I’d like to take a nap now, Sweetie. If you don’t mind.” Her eyes slipped closed.

“Root,” Shaw tapped her gently on her uninjured cheek. “Root.” She didn’t respond at all. She was out cold. “Crap.”

In the long run it was probably for the best that Root had passed out. Once Shaw had dug her the rest of the way out of the rubble, checked her for additional injuries and had wrapped her chest to support her ribs, Shaw still had to physically carry her out of the keep. She was cradling Root in her arms trying to scoot around various piles of debris, while not slipping in was left of Samaritan, when she heard footsteps.

“Okay Root,” Shaw whispered as she gently laid the other woman down behind one of the many piles of rubble dotting the hall. “I have to take care of something. Don’t die.” Root of course didn’t say anything in reply. Shaw glanced up at the sky just in case her imaginary friend was back in play.

When Shaw stepped out into the open, several Decima soldiers were standing staring with gaping mouths at Samaritan’s corpse. One by one they turned their attention to her. She imagined she must have looked quite a sight covered in dirt, ash, and the dragon’s blood. She raised the still glowing axe in one hand and drew her sword with the other. “I just fucking killed a dragon, but if any of you are stupid enough to try me?” She lifted her chin to dare any of the men to step forward.

The Decima soldiers collectively opted to turn and flee.

Shaw smirked, “That’s what I thought.” She turned and made her way back to Root. She was still exactly where she left her, still passed out. Shaw shook her head and then pulled the other woman into her arms once again. She started walking towards the keep’s main gate.

Shaw stopped when she reached the gate house on the outer wall. The structure was mostly intact being that it was made of solid stone and a fair distance from where Samaritan had been trapped all these years. She knew that she needed to stop a minute and regroup. Shaw also knew she’d be able to defend them both from any attack in that location.
“Looks like we’re camping in style,” Shaw told her unconscious friend. She carried Root into the building.

“Hey there,” Root groaned when she next opened her eyes.

Shaw shuffled over to her side, “How do you feel?” Root had been out for almost two days. She had also been running a fever for most of that time. Shaw was afraid one of her wounds had become infected.

“Like a dragon sat on me. My memory is a little fuzzy. Samaritan didn’t actually sit on me before you killed him, did he?”

The corner of Shaw’s mouth ticked up into a wry grin, “No, but you did get some tail.”

“Did I?” She smiled, “You are more than welcome to molest me in my sleep, Sameen. But I’d like to be awake for it at least once,” Root quipped.

Shaw rolled her eyes but the look was fonder than normal, “Idiot.”

“Do you have water?”

Shaw picked up a water skin. The soldiers she had run off had left some of their gear in the gate house in their haste to run home to their mothers. She had helped herself to their hospitality. “Slowly,” She instructed as she held it to Root’s mouth.

“How long?” She asked once she had drunk her fill for the moment.

“You’ve been out for a day and a half.”

“Decima?”
“Gone, I think I scared what was left of them away.” She had kept a watchful eye on the valley. There had been no more smoke rising up from between the buildings. No men moving about either in the keep or down below. It really seemed like once they knew Samaritan was good and dead that the lot of them had turned tail and run back north.

Shaw turned and carefully moved a clay pot off the ashes from the fire where she had been keeping it warm. She tipped the contents of the pot into a tin cup she’d found among the soldiers discarded belongings. “Here,” She shoved the cup into Root’s good hand.

To her credit, Root was able to grasp it and lift it to her lips on her own. She took a sniff “Tea?” She smiled, “You made me tea?”

“It’s willow bark and a little something to put you back to sleep.” Shaw had been pleased to discover a cache of proper medical supplies with the other abandoned gear. She had been able to properly set and then splint Root’s arm and tend to both of their various wounds. She mimed taking a drink. “Go on. You need to rest.”

“I know of far better ways for you to knock me out.”

Shaw rolled her eyes. She knew for a fact that Root wasn’t up for anything remotely like that at the moment. “Shut up and drink your tea.”

“Don’t think this means you get to skip out on that dinner,” Root teased, though she did take her first sip.

“Please, I’d dine with Samaritan’s corpse for one of those steaks.”

“Good to know where a girl ranks,” Root grimaced as she swallowed more of the bitter brew.

“Drink your tea so you can go to sleep and I can have some peace and quiet to figure out how I’m going to get us out of here.” Shaw had been working that issue over in her mind and frankly she still had no clue.

“Just give me a couple of days and I’ll be good as new.”
“You’re not going to be up for such a long walk in a couple of days,” Shaw sighed. “Hell, I might not be either.” She was sore everywhere. A wall hadn’t fallen on her, but as far as her body as concerned one may as well have. Her body was basically one big bruise. She had also had to re-stitch the arrow wound in her shoulder; she still wasn’t one hundred percent certain when she had managed to pop the old ones, during the fight or the climb up the wall. Basically, they were both a mess at the moment.

Root set down the cup. Shaw nodded her approval when she saw that the tea was more than halfway gone. “We’ll think of something.” Her focus shifted to the ceiling, her expression going blank. Shaw recognized the expression. Seemed Root’s imaginary friend was back. After a moment, Root ran a hand over her face, “We need to do something about what’s left of Samaritan.”

“Way ahead of you,” Shaw replied. “I’ve moved anything flammable that I could find around the body. Figured this place could stand one last funeral pyre. We can light him up when we’re ready to go.”

“Do it now,” Root ordered. “There are…things that could be done with any pieces of him left remaining.”

Shaw raised an eyebrow, “That sounds both vague and dangerous.”

“Please, Sameen.”

Shaw stood up with a groan. “Fine, I hope you’re ready for the smell you just signed us up for.”

Root smirked and held up her cup, “Perhaps I’ll sleep through the worst of it.”

“Sure leave me to take care of all the hard work. That’s just like you.” Root just grinned at her over the lip of the cup. “Fine,” Shaw huffed. “One roasted dragon coming right up.”

“Thank you, Sameen.”

Shaw turned pointed at the cup as she reached the doorway. “Finish that. I expect to hear you snoring when I get back.”
“I do not snore,” Root sputtered indignantly.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Shaw chuckled and stepped out into the afternoon sunlight.

Hours later Shaw stepped back into the gatehouse to pull off the top half of her armor. It had taken a while but Samaritan’s corpse was pretty much ashes now. The fire was still burning in the great hall but there was so little remaining that Shaw felt comfortable returning to Root’s side while it burned itself out.

Root was snoring away, curled up under her blankets by the fire. Shaw reached out and grazed her palm against her forehead. Root had been running a bit of a fever earlier but Shaw was satisfied that it seemed the tea had done its job when cooler skin met her hand. Now that she was sure her charge was doing well for the moment, Shaw set her armor and weapons aside and stepped back out into the courtyard.

There was an old horse trough that had survived the ages not far from the gatehouse. Shaw ambled over to it to wash away some of the sweat and grime from her work. As soon as she got back to civilization she was going to have a proper bath. Or a steak. Or a drink. A steak and a drink while soaking in a warm tub. She licked her lips, maybe she’d invite Root if the other woman was feeling up for it.

Yeah, that made for a pretty picture. One that Shaw was going to make happen. She hoped Root wasn’t all talk because Shaw had big plans for the two of them now.

She knelt next to the trough and reached in to scoop out some of the icy water to clean off her face. She caught her reflection in the water. It seemed like the story of this entire ordeal could be told from it. The small circular burns on her cheek and neck from where Samaritan’s blood had made contact with her unprotected skin. Her bruised jaw from her fight underground. The thin pink line from the arrow that grazed her the day she and Cole had been ambushed on the road. Shaw shook her head, all and all she still looked hot. She brought her cupped hands to her face and began to rub away the dirt and sweat.

Something hit her back hard and then her head was shoved into the trough. The ice cold water felt like needles in her skin. Shaw thrashed against the hold. Her elbow connected with someone’s side and then the pressure on her head eased up enough so that she could lift her head from the water.

She scanned the area around her. There were men in green and gold guard uniforms all around the courtyard suddenly. Why would the king send them here? Lady Morgan had told them that this job was strictly a contract situation. They shouldn’t be here. Unless…
Her eyes wildly cut to where she had left Root. Two men were carrying her out of the gatehouse on a stretcher. She couldn’t tell if she was conscious or not. “Root” Shaw screamed.

She took a deep breath, tilted her head forward into the water and then rammed it straight back into the face of the man attempting to hold her down. When his arms loosened their hold, she followed up with an elbow to his gut. He wheezed and his grip loosened further, so much so that she could completely break out of his hold. Shaw spun around and brought her knee up into his stomach and then his face knocking him out cold. She quickly pulled the dagger from his belt and turned to face the courtyard once again.

She sidestepped another man rushing towards her. He stumbled over his friend on the ground and fell into the trough. Shaw paid him no mind. “Root!” The men were carrying her away. Shaw snarled. Three more men stepped between her and her target. But Shaw was determined. They would not stop her. She ducked under the first man’s swing, flipped her grip on the knife and slashed him deeply across his side. She kicked out at the left knee of the second man, smiling in grim satisfaction when it buckled beneath him. The third got the knife in his thigh for his trouble when he tried to grab her.

From behind her, arms the size of tree trunks circled her waist, pulling her up off of her feet and backwards. One of the idiots in the first wave recovered and took a swing at her unguarded face; her head whipped to the right with the blow. Blood oozed down her chin from her now split lip. Shaw kicked her legs forward in an attempt to throw her captor off balance but could not break his hold. Another man grabbed her legs. Another fist connected with her jaw.

She spat out a mouthful of blood, “You’ll have to do better than that.” Unfortunately, the men obliged her raining down hit after hit until she blacked out.

When Shaw woke up she was surprised to see a set of green velvet drapes directly overhead. “Fancy dungeon,” She groaned. Slowly she took a quick inventory of her wounds. Her head felt as if an entire flock of ravens were trying to peck their way through her skull. Her right side pulled a bit when she breathed but she deemed the pain manageable. She slowly sat up.

Her senses felt dulled, beyond the haze of having a simple head injury. Had she been drugged on top of getting the crap beaten out of her? “Oh I am going to kick some righteous ass for this!” She growled under her breath. As soon as she figured out where the hell she was that is.

Shaw took a look around. She was in a bedroom. A fancy one at that if the soft bead beneath her, and the heavy curtains pulled away from leaded glass windows to let in the sunlight were any indication. “What is this place? And where’s Root?”
Shaw stood up from the bed and made her way over to the window. “Thornhill,” She exclaimed after taking in the view. She could see nearly the whole of the capitol all the way down to the harbor. “I’m back in Thornhill.”

“Ser Shaw?” A voice called from the now open door behind her.

Shaw turned to see the High Steward of Thornhill. “Just Shaw.”

The woman nodded, “I don’t know if you remember, my name is Carter.”

“The High Steward,” Shaw cut her off. “I know who you are.”

She stepped into the room letting the heavy wooden door close behind her. “You had us worried.” Shaw raised an eyebrow at that. This woman didn’t even know her, and who was this us she was talking about? Lady Morgan? Shaw didn’t think she had made that much of an impression on the woman. “You were already pretty beat up from your mission and then that idiot Laskey had his men hit you over the head before Ser Reese could arrive...”

Okay, at least Shaw knew the name of the guy whose ass she was going to kick now. “To the idiot’s credit, I had just put several of his men down.”

The Lady let out a rather unladylike snort. “That’s charitable of you.”
“Yeah, I’m having a bad streak of that these days.” Shaw turned away from the window and walked closer to Lady Carter. If she could get this woman talking, then maybe she could find out where they had taken Root. “So where am I? Got to say this is the nicest prison I’ve ever had the pleasure of being held in.”

“Prison?”

“You know that place you take people after you send a squad of soldiers to arrest them?”

“That was a mistake.”

“I’m sure that Laskey guy and his friends would agree.”

Lady Carter held up her hands, “No, I meant that we didn’t send the men to arrest you.”

Shaw frowned. The beating she received certainly felt like an attempt to arrest her. “Then why the attack?”

“As I said Laskey was with the advanced guard. They were only supposed to assess the situation at the castle and hold position until receiving further orders. Kid will do anything for approval though. He approached you before Ser Reese could arrive. He saw your armor and your traveling companion, added two and two to reach the assumption that you were a threat.”

That story could sort of play. Shaw was a dangerous woman after all. “He wasn’t entirely wrong.”

Lady Carter smiled, “I suppose he wasn’t.”

“So I gather that I am not under arrest?”

“Far from it actually.” She slapped Shaw on the shoulder. “You really killed that thing. You’re going to be a legend, Ser Shaw.”
“Again with the Ser thing?”

Lady Carter shrugged. “I think you’re going to have to get used to that.” She pushed open the door and waved for Shaw to follow her. “Now we have much to do and not much time. First, I am to take you down to the baths. Then once you’re presentable we’ll briefly visit your friend…”

Shaw trailed her out into a wide stone corridor. “Root?”

“Uh no,” Lady Carter frowned, “The other one.”

“What other one?” She only had the one these days. That is if Root was even still alive. They tended to behead king-killing assassins in most kingdoms, in Shaw’s experience. If Root was dead, she was going to rip this Laskey guy’s dick off and feed it to him.

“Cole, I believe his name was.”

Shaw stopped walking. “Cole’s alive?”

“A fisherman named Leon pulled him out of the river and brought him to us.” Carter kept walking for a few feet until she realized she was no longer being followed. She stood and waited for Shaw to catch up. “He’s actually the reason Ser Reese knew to look for you specifically. Once we knew who you were riding with…”

“I can’t believe that little shit is alive,” Shaw growled interrupting her.

Lady Carter cocked her head to the side in confusion, “I thought he was your friend.”

“He is, the bastard.”

“Oh okay,” Lady Carter shook her head. This woman was rather odd. “Well, you can growl at your friend and then I am to escort you to dinner. The King shall be joining you to discuss your reward.”

Shaw convinced Carter to take her to see Cole first. She stood in the doorway to his room for a
moment staring. Honestly, he didn’t look his best. Quite bruised and broken, in fact, but he was most importantly alive. She shook her head. The lucky son of a bitch. “You can’t even die correctly, idiot.”

Cole’s head snapped up. His smile threatened to split his head in two it was so wide. “You’re alive.”

She pushed off from the doorframe to walk to his side. “I think that’s my line.”

He tracked his eyes across her face, no doubt cataloguing the damage the guard had done to it. She was certain the bruises were quite a sight given they were placed on top of what the Decima men had given her and oh yeah burns from freaking dragon’s blood. Shaw made a mental note to kick this Laskey’s ass twice. “You look like hell, Shaw.”

“Again my line,” She grumbled and took a seat at the end of the bed. He had a large bandage wrapped around his head and his left leg, also bandaged and splinted, was propped up on a mound of pillows. “What’s with the leg?”

“Broken in several places,” He grimaced. “I’m told I’m fortunate they didn’t have to amputate.”

“Cole…” She began, but honestly, what could she say about that? Thank you didn’t seem good enough and she wasn’t really sorry as his sacrifice meant that she and Root were alive to get the job done.

“I’d do it again, Shaw.”

She looked away, “Idiot.”

He nodded. “I can’t believe you pulled it off.”

“Of course I did.”

“Yeah, the mighty Sameen Shaw.” She scowled at him. “Right, I guess there’s only one person allowed to use that name,” He smirked. He glanced over towards the doorway where he could see Lady Carter pacing the hallway, and lowered his voice, “What happened to her?”
“Don’t know yet. They were taking her away when the guardsmen decided to do this to my face.”

“I hope you gave as good as you got.”

“I’m sure there are a few guards walking with limps.”

“When I told the Knight Captain to look for you, I thought they would find you and help you,” He held up his hand to point at her bruised face, “Not do that.”

“Did you tell them about Root?”

Cole frowned, “Of course not. She was helping us. I knew the guard would try and arrest her if they knew who she was.”

Shaw nodded, she hadn’t thought so but she had to be sure. She released a long breath and leaned forward so she could whisper, “I’m going to find out what they did to her and then I’m going to get her out of here.”

“How?”

She shrugged, “Got a meeting with the King.”

“Shaw,” He grabbed her arm. “I don’t think stabbing King Harold will do Root any favors.”

She jerked her arm away. “Why does your mind always go to the stabbing place?”

“Because it’s you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Yeah, well I plan on using my words this time.”
Just then a woman entered the room with a tray. She was cute. Tall, dark hair, nice hips. Shaw cut her eyes over to Cole, he sure seemed to appreciate them. Upon noticing Shaw, she quickly curtsied, “Ser Shaw.”

Cole burst out laughing. “No Ser, just Shaw.” He smiled at her. “Veronica, I’d like you to meet my best friend.”

She smiled at Shaw. “A pleasure my lady.”

“Yeah, you too,” Shaw awkwardly replied.

Veronica set the tray down on a low table next to Cole’s bedside. “I’ll be right back with a cup of ale for you, Cole.” She nodded to Shaw, “My lady.”

Shaw watched her leave with narrowed eyes. When she was out of the room she turned back to Cole who was already stuffing half a roll into his mouth. “Veronica?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, weird coincidence huh?”

“Yeah,” Shaw replied. Not long afterwards Lady Carter came to collect her. She told them both that after that evening’s festivities Shaw would be welcome to remain in the castle until Cole was well enough to be moved back to their rooms above the forge. Shaw told Cole she’d check back in on him after she settled up with the king.

“Try and be nice, Shaw.”

“When am I ever nice?” She replied with a grin.

“Can’t take you anywhere,” He smiled.

Lady Carter shook her head at the both of them and then ushered Shaw from the room. “He said you two have known each other since you were kids?”
“Yeah,” Shaw nodded.

“Anything,” Carter wiggled her hand back and forth, “Going on there?”

Shaw choked, “No, he’s like a brother.” Why did people always assume she and Cole were shacking up? “Why the interest?”

Lady Carter’s lips ticked up in a little grin, “I think Veronica has a crush.”

“Oh, well in that case it should be smooth sailing. I think Cole is pretty smitten. He was giving her cow eyes earlier.” Not that, that was a rare occurrence for Cole when he was around beautiful women, but Shaw figured the universe owed the guy one.

“Excellent,” Lady Carter smiled. “Veronica is a sweet girl. They should have plenty of time to get to know one another while he recuperates.”

That brought up something Shaw needed to know. “So Cole’s leg?”

“We have the best healers in the capitol looking after him…” She trailed off.

“But?” Shaw prompted.

“But, the damage was severe. It may never heal completely.”

“What happened to Simmons?”

“Ser Reese confronted his party on the road. Part of the reason why Laskey’s group was sent ahead for you, John knew if you needed help a delay could have been fatal. He remained with the majority of his forces to execute the capture. Most of Simmons’ men were taken alive but the man himself got away.” Carter clenched her fist as she recounted his escape. It appeared Shaw might be able to count on her as an ally when she eventually went after that asshole. “John was able to track him to an area near the border, where it appears he met up with a larger force. Strange thing is even though they had the numbers to fight our men, the group turned tail and ran back to Decima.”
That was sort of weird. But then again, “Maybe they told him what I did to Greer’s pet dragon.”

“Maybe,” Lady Carter nodded. “Either way we have our contacts over the boarder keeping an eye out.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“I can help with that.” Shaw turned her head to see Lady Morgan striding down the hallway towards them. “Look at you, dragon slayer. Best idea I ever had.”

“Zoe, really?”

“Shut it Joss, I’m the one who recruited her, I’m due a bit of boasting.”

“Didn’t you contact her on recommendation from…”

“Details on the why don’t matter, I did it,” Lady Morgan interrupted. “How are you feeling, Shaw?”

“I could use a snack,” She shrugged.

Carter answered before Lady Morgan could, “Cook’s roasted an entire boar for tonight, will that do?”

“Sure, but what is everyone else going to eat?”

“Crow because I was right!”

“Please ignore her,” Lady Carter told Shaw. “I think she got into the wine early.” She mimed tipping back a bottle.
“Merely the satisfaction of an ass well kicked,” Lady Morgan scoffed. “I just finished reassigning Laskey.”

Lady Carter pursed her lips, “Assignments within the guard are John’s responsibility.”

“And he was only going to demote him, not nearly humiliating enough.” She turned to Shaw, “That idiot is going to be cleaning out every stable, pig sty, and slop jar in the capitol until he runs crying back to his mommy or he’s ready to retire,” Lady Morgan grinned, inordinately pleased with her work.

“Probably a good idea to keep all those guys away from me for a while.”

“I don’t think that will be an issue,” Lady Carter supplied. “Pretty sure they’ll all run the other way when they see you. Well, the ones who can still run properly that is.”

Shaw shrugged her shoulders, “Hit me I hit back twice as hard.”

“And that’s why I picked you to kill Samaritan,” Lady Morgan cheered again. The trio began descending another stairwell.

“Seriously, did you break into the wine cellar again? Sample some of Harper’s magic plants?”

“Can’t a Lady be happy around here without medicinal assistance?”

“Of course one can,” Lady Carter smiled, “Doesn’t explain why you’re bumbling around shouting like a madwoman.”

“You wound me, Joss.”

“I thought you titled types were all supposed to be stuffed up assholes?”

Carter and Morgan both turned to look at her. “I think you’ll soon discover that we do things a little differently around here,” Carter smiled. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Shaw could hear
what sounded like splashing. The air felt warmer, kind of humid. Carter led her down a small
hallway and then into a large bathing room.

The floor was covered in bright blue and white tiles. There were several wooden benches
surrounding the actual water which was collected in a sunken area of the floor. “Hot spring from
under the mountain feeds into these pools,” Lady Carter gestured towards the bench closest to them
which held a few items already. “Soap and clean towels.” She elbowed Lady Morgan.

“Oh yeah,” Lady Morgan held out a bundle of black cloth to Shaw. “We were told you’d prefer
something in black.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Shaw replied accepting the bundle of clothes. She hadn’t even noticed Morgan was
carrying it before now. Whatever she had been given was still making her a bit dull in the head. Or
maybe she had just been hit with too much information to properly process everything coming at her.
Hopefully, a good soak would clear out the remaining cobwebs.

“Once you know what your next steps will be we can send a runner to the smithy for your things.”
Shaw nodded but didn’t reply otherwise, deep in thought. Lady Carter gestured to the doors, “I’ll be
back in half an hour.”

“I’ll see you at dinner Shaw,” Lady Morgan added. “You have to tell me how you killed that thing.”

Shaw nodded but didn’t say anything. She heard the doors closing behind her as she ambled over to
the bench. She catalogued her bumps and bruises as she stripped off. Nothing looked too bad. The
stitches in her shoulder were her own work. Honestly, the worst bit was when she caught a glimpse
of her own reflection in the water. Yikes, came to mind. “I suppose I’m lucky the bastards didn’t
break my jaw or my cheekbones.” Purple was not her color.

After her bath Shaw had changed into the clothes provided, black leather pants and a thigh-length,
belted tunic made out of the softest material she had ever touched. She left her hair down to dry. If
the king had an issue with it he’d just have to suck it up. When Lady Carter arrived exactly a half an
hour later as promised, she had handed Shaw a pair of knee high boots dyed to the exact shade as the
pants. The boots, like everything else fit perfectly. Shaw scowled, it was more than a little weird.
Had someone taken her measurements while she was knocked out?

Honestly, this whole thing was more than a little surreal. One minute the guard is arresting her and
then next she’s being called Ser and getting treated to a visit to the King’s private baths. Carter’s
explanation for Laskey’s apparent misunderstanding didn’t exactly fit. Sure her armor kind of looked
like her old Catalyst gear, but if Cole had told them to look for her then they would know she wasn’t
the bad guy. And it wasn’t like people knew what Root looked like. Why grab Root, and then attack her? Something about all this didn’t smell right.

Lady Carter led her up another set of stairs and through a warren of hallways. Whenever they passed any of the servants they greeted Lady Carter and bowed their heads. Weirdly, they did the same for Shaw.

“What’s that about?”

“The walls have eyes and ears in this place. Everyone knows you saved their asses with Samaritan. You’ve earned their gratitude and respect.”

“Could have used some of that before your asshole Lieutenant decided to use my face as a punching bag.”

“Laskey is going to get his,” Carter assured her.

“Yeah, I appreciate the shit shoveling gesture from Lady Morgan.”

Lady Carter stopped in front of a set of double doors. She pulled one open and waved Shaw forward. “Trust me, Zoe’s little pig sty scheme is the least of that boy’s worries. He’s going to have to sleep with both eyes open from now on.”

“I may kick his ass a little but I don’t plan on attacking him in his sleep if you’re that worried about it.”

Lady Carter snorted, “You really don’t know do you?”

“What?”

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t spoil it for the world.” She nodded to the doorway. “This is where I leave you, Shaw. King Harold will meet you shortly. I look forward to hearing your take on that conversation at dinner.”
“Thanks, I guess,” Shaw mumbled as she entered the room. Was everyone in this place crazy or was it just her? Lady Carter closed the door behind her with one last smile and then she was alone.

The room was grand. Tiled in shades of green and gold, twelve columns held six wide arches. Between the arches were several tall, mahogany bookshelves, packed to near collapse with various tomes. The doorway she had entered from was situated between two of the arches on the south end. To her left on the short side of the room a fire burned cheerily in a large hearth. Two high backed, green velvet chairs waited beside it. To her right she could see a table and further back on the north wall a large desk under a tile relief of the Thornhill crest.

Shaw’s sharp eyes took in every detail of the room, attempting to suss out any clues to where Root was being held and/or what plans the king had for them both. This seemed to be King Harold’s personal study. How odd that she would be left alone here.

She wandered towards the table. It was covered in books and scrolls. A notice board in one of the alcoves beside it, held a map of the Pilgrims’ Pathway. Several colored flags marked various locations. Shaw recognized the area where Donnelly’s body was found and there was a marker where she was certain the bandits had ambushed her and Cole.

“Obviously, the king had eyes on his merry group of dragon slayers this entire time.” Too bad none of them managed to do a damn thing about Simmons before he nearly fucked everything up.

Shaw wandered towards the desk. A large book rested in its center. The tome looked oddly familiar to her. Before she could reach it however, she heard footsteps in the hall. She quickly moved back towards the south end of the room. It probably wouldn’t make the best first impression to be caught snooping. She stopped near one of the bookshelves, back to the door, and waited.

Shaw heard the doors open behind her but she didn’t turn around just yet. Just because a man had a crown on his fat head didn’t mean she was going to fall over herself to kiss his ass. The rapid click of nails on the tile caught her attention just before something heavy bumped against her legs. She looked down to see a familiar set of brown eyes looking up at her, “Hey Buddy.” She knelt to give Bear a hearty scratch between the ears. “What are you doing here?” Had the guard found him along the road and brought him back here?

“This is his home,” A kind voice answered her. Shaw glanced up to see a slight man with spiky brown hair, and spectacles close the door behind him. “Bear was born within the castle. My brother thought to breed a pack of wolves as his personal hunting dogs. He lost most of the litter when he switched his attentions to dog fighting. But Bear’s mother survived.”
“Your brother was a real nasty piece of work,” Shaw grumbled as she stood. So this was the King. Not exactly what she was expecting.

“On that we agree,” He limped towards her. If she remembered her gossip correctly, he had received the injury on the frontlines during the Vigilance War. The man didn’t look like much but he had a core of steel. “I trust Lady Carter saw to your needs.”

“Carter was most polite,” She replied, not wanting him to think the woman had done a poor job. Shaw felt like she could like Carter if given half a chance.

King Harold settled into one of the high backed chairs near the hearth. Bear padded over to stand at his side. “I must begin by apologizing Ser Shaw.”

That again? “Not a Ser. Just Shaw is fine.”

He smiled, “Oh I don’t believe you will ever simply be just Shaw again. But we’ll get to that in a moment.” He gestured towards the other chair.

“I’d rather stand,” Shaw replied to his unspoken offer.

“My men were under the mistaken assumption that you had taken something from me.”

“Yeah, Carter said something about a kid named Laskey being a little overzealous.”

He raised an eyebrow at that, “I’d hardly call the beating you received a little. Nor do I support the choice to drug you in order to bring you here.”

Shaw shrugged, “I’ve had worse.” Hell, it wasn’t even her first drugging on this trip.

“I imagine so. But you had just done the kingdom a great service.” He bowed his head, “It was a dishonor to you and I am thoroughly sorry.”
Shaw could tell he was genuine in his remorse for something he didn’t even do. Weren’t these royal types supposed to be assholes? Even after interacting with Morgan and Carter she hadn’t expected this sort of treatment. It made her wary. “It was a mistake. But I gave as good as I got,” She deflected.

“Yes, Knight Commander Reese was very impressed, not so much in the state of his men, but he tells me you did quite a bit of damage of your own.”

Shaw smiled, “I’m good at what I do.”

“Exceedingly,” King Harold nodded. “And it was time you were put to good use.”

Shaw’s features hardened. “Killing a dragon for you wasn’t enough?”

“We are still at war. Greer will try something to tip the balance to his favor again.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Hard to get more dangerous than releasing a dragon.”

“True,” He conceded, “Be that as it may, Thornhill could use a woman like you.”

“I have my own scores to settle.”

“Ah yes, the guild, and Hersh. It’s troubling that they seem to be making inroads into Thornhill. We could work out a mutually beneficial agreement in that regard.”

“I am going to kill Hersh and whoever is holding his leash.” It didn’t matter that Cole had survived in the end. Hersh had crossed a line. Shaw would not let it stand. “Then I’m going to find Simmons if I have to burn my way across all of Decima to do it. Simple as that.”

“Are you familiar with the legend of Samaritan and Old Thornhill?”

“Not sure how it figures into my plans, but yes, a friend told it to me recently.”
“And given your experience in the keep, I am certain you realize that a great deal of that legend is true.”

Shaw fought not to roll her eyes. Kind of hard not to see the truth when a massive dragon is breathing fire down upon your back. But king or not her patience was wearing thin. “Where are you going with this?”

Thankfully, he didn’t seem offended by her curt tone. “My family has always had a connection to a guardian spirit if you will.”

“You mean the dragon that supposedly trapped Samaritan in the castle?” Although Shaw supposed she could drop the supposedly. She had seen the wards herself, just as Root’s book had described them. If they were real, and Samaritan was real, then the other dragon must have been as well.

He nodded, “Yes. Through that connection I, and members of my family, have the unique capacity to foresee certain dangers to our people.”

“Then why did the Old King let things get so bad that someone sent an assassin after him? Shouldn’t he have seen it coming?”

“One has to be willing to listen and accept the spirit’s guidance. And the events surrounding my brother’s death are not as simple as the rumors have made them seem.” Shaw was confused. Root killed the guy, what was so complex about that?

“Furthermore, the connection is stronger in some than others.” The king continued to explain. “All in all, he wasn’t very gifted. The way the messages are received varies from person to person. I myself mainly have prophetic dreams and occasional bouts of spirit writing.”

Okay Shaw had no clue what that meant. “And you’re telling me this because?”

“Because I have seen you in those dreams, what you could be for my kingdom.”

“Wait,” Shaw held up a hand. “Is all this your roundabout way of offering me a job?”
He nodded, “I’d like you to consider a more permanent arrangement with us yes.”

Okay, this day just continued to get weirder. “Let’s get things settled up for this first job before going anywhere else, all right?”

King Harold stared at her for a long moment. “Do you play chess, Shaw?”

Well, that was yet another random change in topic. She shook her head, “Never had much time for games.”

“Ah but it’s such a fascinating game. It’s entirely about strategy.” He leaned forward in his seat. “Reading an opponent’s moves and motives. Knowing where they’ll place their forces before they do. Understanding value, sacrifice. There are many lessons one can glean from it.”

“And your point?”

“Some people see the world like a game of chess, and take the lessons it teaches too far. They assign value to people as if they are simply pieces on a board, some matter some do not. My brother was such a man, as is King Greer.”

“Yeah, the guy was an idiot thinking that letting Samaritan out was going to end well for anyone other than Samaritan. Everyone was going to die whether they mattered to Greer or not eventually. The dragon wasn’t a piece he could control.”

“Indeed,” King Harold nodded, “Even then, Greer forgot that the smallest pawn may topple a king given the opportunity.”

“You’re starting to sound like a friend of mine.”

“I’d wager,” He smiled as if knowing something she didn’t. The look also reminded her of a certain someone.
She cleared her throat. Might as well get to it. “The woman I was captured with,” Shaw began.

The king leaned back in his seat once again. “Ah yes, Root.”

“She still alive?”

King Harold paled, seeming appalled at the question. “Of course she is, we are not Decima. We’re not barbarians.”

Though the bruises on Shaw’s face would suggest otherwise, she decided not to rehash her own treatment by his men. She had a request to make after all, “Let her go.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m due a reward, gold and a favor. That's what I want for my owed favor, let her go.” It was the only way she could think of to get Root out of this mess.

“From speaking with your friend Cole it was my understanding that you would ask to be released from the betrothal should you complete your mission. Why change your mind?”

Shaw clenched her fist, “Root helped me. I wouldn’t have been able to save your kingdom without her. She doesn’t deserve to be in a dungeon because of it.” And if she hadn’t nearly been killed helping Shaw those idiot guardsmen never would have been able to get their hands on her. Shaw owed her this.

King Harold steepled his fingers together and tapped his chin in thought, “But she does belong there, she lied to you. Because of her, several of my men were injured. She has an astonishing reputation as both a murderer and a thief.”

“Don’t care. You owe me so you let her go. If she’s dumb enough to get caught again then that’s on her. But she walks away this time.”

“You will have to go through with the betrothal then.”
Shaw tightened her jaw. She did realize that. She was actually banking on the fact that after one conversation with her most people ran for the hills. Surely some pampered princess would balk at being forced to marry someone like her and would make Harold kill the deal. As long as Root got away first. “Yeah, well jokes on you. I’m not really cut out to be the marrying kind.”

“I don’t know, Sameen,” A familiar voice interrupted. “I think you're uniquely suited for it in this case.”

Shaw spun around, “Root?”

“Hey Sweetie, did you miss me?”

King Harold’s smile was wide as he stood. “May I formally present my niece, Princess Samantha, Duchess of Groves…your intended.”
Come Undone

Chapter Summary

Root’s final secret is out, but what does that mean for our heroes?

Chapter Notes

Can’t sneak a princess dress past you lot. LOL. No, actually I am glad Root’s title didn’t come as a surprise to many of you, seeing as I have been dropping hints like bread crumbs along the way. Though I think I did throw a few of you a curve with Cole!

The smutty bit is a little after the half way point so if that’s not your bag you can stop when you hit it (or rather when they start to) right after a familiar bit of dialogue from 4X11, and just scroll down to the last couple paragraphs and still get the gist of everything you need going into the epilogue.

“Oh I am going to kill you,” Shaw growled at the smiling woman.

Root was dressed in a brilliant blue dress. The cheerful color exquisitely complemented her pale skin. Silk, if Shaw’s eyes didn’t deceive her, and the material probably cost more than she made in a year at the forge. She did her able best to ignore the way it clung to Root’s body.

Her left arm was in a black, canvas sling and she rolled her shoulder to adjust it before replying to Shaw’s threat with a coy smile, “Kiss, kiss to you too.”

The king blinked owlishly between them for a moment before clearing his throat. “Perhaps it would be best if I gave the two of you some time alone to discuss the matter. Try not to break anything, Samantha.”

“Sure, Harry,” Root replied though she didn’t take her eyes off of Shaw.

“Bear, come,” King Harold called the dog and then the pair of them left the room, making sure to close the massive doors behind them.
“Princess,” Shaw hissed. “You’re the fucking princess.”

“Well, not anytime soon from your tone,” Root pouted.

“Stop it,” Shaw barked. She was in no mood for her games.

Root’s shoulders slumped. “My father happened to be Harold’s brother. It’s nothing to dither so over.”

“Dither?” Shaw sputtered. “Nothing to?” She pinched the bridge of her nose, “Oh I was a right idiot to ever even remotely consider trusting you. Let alone…”

“Let alone what, Sameen?”

Shaw held up her hands and shook her head. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“I think we know each other well enough by now to…”

“So what’s the rest of the story?” Shaw sneered, cutting Root off. “You took on a contract on the old man to get back at him or something?”

“No.”

“Come on everyone knows how the infamous Root strolled in here and killed the old king.” Shaw spread her arms wide, “Did you do it here? In this room? Did you tell the old man who you were before you stuck the knife in or did he already know?”

“I just wanted to look him in the eye,” Root answered in a voice so low it would barely count as a whisper.

It was enough to stop Shaw’s tirade in its tracks. “What?”
“I wanted to look him in the eye and ask him why my mother and I weren’t good enough. She never told me who he was. After…” Root closed her eyes for a moment. “After Hanna, I started apprenticing with an alchemist and taking on minor, local contracts on the side. Low level stuff. Still, I made a name for myself. Spent six years running wild through the wood and then Mama died. I was cleaning out the library for some of my alchemy equipment when I found her diaries. That’s when I discovered my connection to the king. When I found out he had apparently known about me all along. So I came here to make him tell me why he left her alone with a baby already growing in her belly. But when he saw me…” She trailed off, wrapping her good arm around herself as if to ward off a sudden chill.

Shaw felt a crazy impulse to touch her then. She even took a half step forward before she quickly and viciously squashed it down. Why the hell would she feel the need to comfort anyone let alone the woman who had been lying to her this entire time? But she still wanted answers. “What happened when he saw you, Root?”

“He died. He called out my mother’s name. Then he keeled over and died.” She shrugged, “Best I can tell he thought I was her vengeful spirit or something.”

“And the rumors of an assassination contract?”

Root held up her hands as if the answer was obvious. “Were just that. Rumors. I hadn’t come here with the intent to kill him. Certainly no one ever paid me for the task after the fact.”

“And King Harold knows that?”

Root smiled, “She made sure that he knew what had actually happened. She speaks to him too you know. Their relationship isn’t quite as…intimate as ours. But he knows to trust what She shows him.” She shrugged as if it weren’t that important.

“So you ended up here how?”

“Harry’s really quite clever. Sent his favorite lackey to find me, once he had stabilized his hold on the capitol. I am responsible for most of the kills attributed to my name. So in some circles it serves Harry very well to have a pet assassin of my reputation on retainer.”

“I’ll bet,” Shaw grudgingly conceded.
“I don’t do the princess thing. Only a select few even know I’m related to Harold. Most of the servants think I work for him through a contract with Zoe.”

“Bet she loves that,” Shaw snorted. From what she’d seen of Lady Morgan she was sure the Spymaster relished the opportunity to make someone wet their pants simply by invoking Root’s name.

“Zoe does adore threatening people with me,” Root chuckled. “I didn’t tell you I was related to the king because honestly, it’s not like that matters.”

“Blood doesn’t matter?” Nobles, in her experience, thought blood was the only thing that mattered. Shaw had spent enough time among them while taking contracts for the guild to hear more than enough talk of various lineages to last several lifetimes.

“Blood didn’t make my father a just ruler. It didn’t force him to show me any kindness.” She took a tentative step closer to Shaw. “You and Cole are family just because you choose to be. And I am so happy for you that he survived.”

Shaw grinned despite herself, “Idiot can’t even die right.”

“He’ll be taken care of for the rest of his life. I swear, Sameen.”

“Your promises are supposed to mean something to me now?” Her tone held no malice even if her words were hard. If anything she sounded tired.

Root opened her mouth to argue but snapped it closed. She let out a breath and then tried again. “The truth is a vast thing. I shared as much of it as I could at the time. Even holding back, you know more of it, of me, than anyone I have ever met.”

Sure she did. Shaw shook her head, she refused to be taken in by this woman’s way with words again. She had, had quite enough. “So what happens now, Samantha?”

“Please, don’t call me that.”
“Why? It’s your name isn’t it?”

“Yes, but…” She shook her head in frustration. “Despite how much Harry wishes it so, that’s not who I am anymore. I don’t know if I ever was really. Certainly not with you. Never with you.”

“Yeah, you were just Veronica with me. And then Root, the crazy woman from the wood. And then whatever that bout of insanity was under the keep,” Shaw clenched her jaw, anger rising within her again. She didn’t know why her treacherous mouth decided to bring that up.

Root smirked, “You mean when you kissed me?”

“I don’t know who I kissed. But it wasn’t like it was a grand declaration of anything.”

“You do know me,” Root swore, “And yes it was.”

“What do you even want from me? The dragon is dead, you had your laugh.” The thought that Root had managed to play her greatest trick on Shaw made her angry but there was something else. A hollow feeling in her chest. Shaw didn’t know what that meant but she didn’t like it. She didn’t like any of this.

“Sameen…”

“You know what? Job’s done. Get your uncle back in here to give me my gold. I really don’t care about anything else.” Maybe it was better if she focused on why she started on this path in the first place.

“Yes, you do,” Root sneered. It seemed she had struck a nerve. “You care about me. We care about each other.”

The unmitigated gall of this woman. “You can’t force me to give a damn, Root.”

“There’s nothing to force. You do care, enough to save my life.”
“I needed you alive for the mission,” Shaw snapped even though they both knew that wasn’t the only reason.

“To call me your partner,” Root continued undeterred.

“I only said that because thought I could trust you,” Shaw countered.

“To trust me.”

“Did the past tense in that statement completely fly above your notice?”

“If you didn’t care why would you agree to marry a stranger just to get me out of trouble?”

Shaw opened her mouth to reply but came up short. She snapped her jaw shut with an audible click. After a long exhale she finally found something to say, “The person I was willing to do that for doesn’t exist.”

Root came closer then. “I am exactly who you believed me to be, Shaw. I showed you who I was every step of this journey, it didn’t matter what name you called me, I always fought for you. You saw me. If you can’t believe a word I’m saying, believe that.”

“So all this,” Shaw gestured to the room around them, “Doesn’t matter?” A part of her, a tiny, barely noticeable, hardly worth mentioning, part of her wanted to believe that. Actually, wanted to believe that the woman she had fought beside, bled for was the real Root.

“Give me a chance to prove it to you.” She drew even closer.

Still Shaw was nothing if not stubborn. “Root, how can you prove anything to me when you can’t even go three sentences without lying to me?”

Root squared her shoulders as if accepting a challenge. “You look delectable with your hair down like that.” Shaw rolled her eyes. “Even if you’re angry at me, I am so happy you’re here.” Root took
another step towards her. “I love you.”

Shaw gaped at her, “You really want to throw that in now?” They had enough crap to deal with without shoveling that on top of the pile.

“If the truth is so important to you, then let’s start with the biggest one.”

“We’re not going to do this now.”

“Why not?” She took a step closer, even as Shaw took a step back. “You had to have some inkling of how I felt. Unless you’re simply afraid to talk about it.”

“Root,” Shaw sighed. She did know. Kind of hard to miss it when a woman literally runs off to face a dragon for you. But Shaw didn’t know how to do this. Anger was easy. It was familiar, like the weight of her favorite knife in her hand. Anger she could do all day. And make no mistake she was still pissed that Root had lied to her yet again. What Root was asking for wasn’t easy. It was messy, and complicated, and stupid.

If there was one thing Shaw could not tolerate it was stupidity. It was stupid that she had felt what could possibly be called relief at seeing Root. It was stupid that there was something about the woman that both infuriated her and intrigued her in equal measure. It was stupid that even now she felt a compulsion to check the splint on her arm to make certain it was done properly. It was stupid how much she had grown to like Root’s stupid grin and her stupid flirting and her stupidly perfect face.

Root made her stupid. Her first thoughts upon waking up here had been about Root: was she safe, how to get to her, how to protect her. Even as she gathered more information about Cole, about Simmons, her mind trailed back to the other woman. That was not normal behavior for Shaw to say the least. She didn’t think it was love like Root said. Frankly, Shaw didn’t believe herself capable of anything as insane as that. But this feeling Root inspired in her, whatever it was, was probably something she’d be colossally stupid to let go of.

“Would being with me really be so bad?” Root interrupted her reverie. While Shaw had been weighing her options in her head Root had drawn within arm’s reach of her. “You cannot tell me that we don’t have fun together.”

Shaw thought about wandering the stalls in the Goblin Market, about the morning they sparred at
The Groves. She did have fun with Root. “Listen…”

“We’re good together, Sameen.” Even if she did talk way too much.

“Root, seriously, no offence…” Shaw tried again.

“Perfect even, you’re going to realize that someday.”

“Oh for god’s sake,” Shaw growled. She took a step forward bridging the final bit of distance between them and pulled Root into a hard kiss. She cupped Root’s cheek making sure their eyes met when they separated, “If I stick around and keep doing that, will you shut up?” Shaw figured she couldn’t lie to her if her lips were otherwise occupied.

Root’s smile was almost blinding. She nodded enthusiastically and pulled Shaw in for another kiss. Shaw wasn’t sure how it all went down but many long, wet, kisses later she realized that she had backed Root up against one of the columns. Not that the other woman was complaining as she nipped at the chords of Shaw’s throat.

Shaw moved her right hand from the wall and down, sliding over Root’s hip to palm her ass. “Sameen.” Yeah, Shaw could really grow to like Root calling her name in that tone of voice. She nudged Root’s head back so she could chase the growing pink flush of arousal up her throat with her tongue. When she sucked hard on a spot just under her jaw, Root grabbed a fist full of Shaw’s hair to hold her in place. She leaned in closer trying to bring their bodies together from head to foot.

Root hissed in a pained breath when Shaw accidentally pressed against her bad arm. She made to pull away but Root tightened her grip on the nape of her neck, “Don’t go all shrinking violet on me now, Shaw.”

“Your arm?”

“Is fine, worry about your face,” Root chuckled in echo of their conversation at the base of the cliff. She nipped at Shaw’s bottom lip. “I’ll admit I did not imagine being quite this limited in my mobility for our first time but you know how I feel about personal challenges.”

“And what’s the challenge this time?”
Root trailed her lips along Shaw’s jaw until she could whisper in her ear, “How many times I can make you come with one hand tied behind my back so to speak.” She tilted her head to look Shaw in the eye and grinned wolfishly, “Are you game?”

“Seeing as I’m basically on top at the moment.”

“First and last time.”

Shaw pursed her lips. “Do you have to be difficult about everything?”

“I was trying to be easy until you became so adorably concerned for my health.” Shaw growled low in her throat and then slipped her left hand down from the wall to Root’s waist, and then around to join her right hand on her ass. Before Root could comment again, she hauled her off her feet in one swift motion. Root only smiled wider, “There’s my dragon slayer.”

Shaw carried her over to the table. Keeping her hold on Root with one arm she used the other to shove a pile of books and scrolls out of her way. Once sufficient space was cleared, she set Root on to the table.

“Your uncle isn’t going to have me beheaded for fucking you on this, is he?”

“No,” Root let out a breathy laugh, “Though I will if you don’t, now that you’ve mentioned it.”

Shaw palmed her breast over the fabric of her dress. She could feel Root’s nipple pebbling under her hand through the thin fabric. “Don’t you know by now that I always deliver on my promises?”

“As long as we both get to play,” She smiled and tangled her hand in the front of Shaw’s shirt. Nimble fingers worked the ties loose. Once the fabric parted, Root ran her lips along one of Shaw’s collar bones. “Mmmm I knew you’d be scrumptious.” She punctuated the sentence with a sharp bite.

Shaw snorted, “Scrumptious, seriously that’s what you’re going with?”
“Delectable, mouthwatering, gushingly gorgeous…” She rocked her hips trying to gain some much needed friction, “There’s a great deal of gushing going on.”

“Really,” Shaw’s lips brushed against her ear. “Because I could probably make that, ah, worse for you.”

She smiled against her skin. “By all means, feel free to wreck me, Sameen.”

Shaw bunched the skirts of Root’s dress in her fist and eased the material up slowly. Root huffed in impatience but Shaw wasn’t going to allow her to dictate the pace this first time. Some things needed to be savored. Once the fabric was gathered in heavy folds on the upper portion of Root’s thighs, Shaw let it go, and placed her hand on soft, warm skin. The contrast between her hand and the creamy expanse of Root’s thigh made her swallow. She pulled Root’s right leg up and guided it to wrap around her hip, bringing their bodies closer together.

“There’s a time for teasing and there’s a time for action, Sameen,” Root groaned in frustration.

“That’s rich coming from you.” Shaw replied as she ran her hand along a meandering path from the top of Root’s thigh to the sensitive skin behind her knee and back up again. Root tapped her heel against her ass as if she were encouraging a disagreeable mount. Shaw held fast though. She liked being able to make Root unravel like this.

Root tugged on the nape of her neck until Shaw was forced to meet her gaze. There was a gleam in her eye that promised all sorts of wicked revenge for any further delays. She leaned forward and drew Shaw’s bottom lip between her teeth, only allowing her to pull away when they both tasted blood. “A lady doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Shaw rolled her eyes fondly, “You are such a brat.” But she finally dragged her fingertips up and under the folds of Root’s skirt. Her hand was met with damp curls. Root wasn’t wearing anything under the dress. She didn’t move her hand any higher. Instead Shaw leaned back to look Root in the eye. “Were you told to expect?” The thought of Root’s imaginary friend predicting how soon they’d be fucking was sort of killing the mood.

Root bit her lip, “I was hoping.” She canted her hips trying to bring Shaw’s hand where she needed it most. “I had such hopes for this, Sameen.”

“Oh?” Shaw stroked the crease of her thigh with her thumb. Each tiny circle drew nearer to where
Root wanted it, but Shaw didn’t give it to her just yet. She leaned in and nuzzled Root’s throat. She dragged her teeth along the pale skin until finally nipping at the skin behind her left ear. “What did you hope for when you thought about this, Root?”

“So much,” Root shuddered, “But now all I’m hoping is that those hands of yours are as talented with me as they are with a sword.”

“Let’s see.” Shaw finally moved her hand to where they both needed it.

Shaw wanted to commit it all to memory. The slick feeling under her fingertips. The breathy sighs and moans those same fingers managed to pull from Root’s lips. How warm and wet she was. The feel of blunt nails digging into the back of her neck when Root finally fell apart. Even if she somehow managed to capture the moment perfectly, Shaw knew for a fact that they were going to do this again and again.

Once was never going to be enough. Things were already bordering on the sublime and they were just getting started. They were still pretty much dressed and she was the wettest she’d ever been in her life just from getting Root off. Shaw would have been amazed except she was too busy trying to make Root come out of her skin. She was working her up to orgasm number two when there was a knock on the door.

“Yes,” Root gasped out. Shaw wasn’t sure if it was in response to where she had just moved her thumb, or the moron at the door. Unconcerned either way, she kept her pace.

“Samantha, if you are quite finished, erm, explaining things to Ser Shaw the pair of you are presently expected in the dining hall.”

Root grabbed Shaw’s forearm, digging her nails into the skin to get her to stop her ministrations long enough to reply, “We’re coming, Harry.”

“The hell we are,” Shaw grumbled against the hollow of her throat.

Root ran her fingers through Shaw’s hair, “We probably should eat something.” Shaw reluctantly slid her hand to more honorable territory. Root smiled softly at her, “I owe you one.”

“More than one,” Shaw grumbled and stepped back. She needed a moment to collect herself if she
was to be expected to interact with anyone in a non-violent or naked way.

“Hey,” Root grabbed Shaw’s wrist and pulled her in close again. She brought her right hand to her mouth and took her fingers between her lips cleaning away the evidence of their previous activities. After a moment, Shaw pulled her hand away and then leaned forward and planted a searing kiss on her. Root moaned and tangled her fingers back into her hair. Dinner could wait.

After the sound of a throat being impatiently cleared filtered through the door, she pulled back. Shaw for her part glared at the door as if she could kill the king with her thoughts alone. Root reached out and gently cupped her chin, turning her attention back to her. She pecked Shaw on the lips and then hopped off the table. “It’ll be worth it, Sameen.”

Shaw groaned but straightened her spine and began adjusting her clothes. She was kind of hungry. It’d be a damn shame to have to stop in the middle of round three for a snack run. Though Root probably had servants for that sort of thing. Shaw smiled. Servants, who could bring them snacks on demand. This whole princess thing was getting better and better the more she thought about it actually.

“We just need to get through this dinner and then I’m sure Harry will give us some space for a few days at least.” Once her dress was straightened, Root made for the doorway. “I plan to spend those days vigorously celebrating our engagement.”

“Wait,” Shaw stood frozen, “You’re not serious about the whole marriage thing are you?”
One Year Later

Chapter Summary

The end is the beginning is the end, at least if you ask the Smashing Pumpkins... (no pumpkins were smashed in the writing of this epilogue)

Chapter Notes

So sorry this was a bit delayed. Easter weekend happened and then I had an idea that caused me to scrap the epilogue I had written for something new. Why do I mention that? Well, because the idea I had was for a sequel. That is if anyone would be interested. Though it won't happen for a while because I have only the barest outline sketched out for it and I should probably finish some other stuff before people hunt me down.

Thanks to everyone who commented, kudo'd and read along the way. I had a ton of fun with this and I hope you all did too.

Sameen Shaw, The Dragon Slayer, Knight Champion of Thornhill, wanted to get off of this stupid horse in the worst way. She and Ser Reese had been riding practically non-stop for the past three days in order to reach the capitol. She was tired. She was hungry. She was ready for a bath and a bed before she had to be her version of friendly with people on the morrow.

“Home sweet home,” Reese sighed as he swung down from his saddle. They had reached Thornhill Castle at last. Two of the stable hands rushed forward to see to his monster of a stallion’s needs.

Shaw grunted as she alighted from her own mount. The grunt turned into a sigh as she stretched the aching muscles in her back. She was definitely visiting the baths first. The natural hot springs would do wonders for her pains, there were some perks to the whole knighthood thing.

“Hold up,” She directed the boy who had grabbed Razgovor’s reins. The kid gulped but held fast in his place as she reached into her saddle bags and pulled out two wrapped parcels. She then waved the kid off. She knew the rest of her things would be delivered upstairs by one of the squires shortly.
“Pleasant evening, Ser Shaw,” The boy replied with a bowed head. He started towards the stables. Razgovor clopped behind him, much like his master, already envisioning rest and a fine meal. Shaw smirked as she caught the stable master’s pale face peeking out at her from around the wall.

She schooled her features into a glare, “Hey, Laskey!”

The man yelped and ducked into the darkness of his barn. Shaw suppressed a chuckle. Reese came to stand beside her. “When are you going to tell him that you’re not planning his eminent demise?”

“When the faces he makes whenever he sees me stop being so fucking funny,” She replied with a grin.

Reese shrugged. He really couldn’t argue that point. Laskey’s fear of Shaw was almost as hilarious as his fear of Root. Though in that case his every fear was well warranted. He may have grown to love working in the stables, but his proximity to the King’s court put him at very real risk. Still, the kid had brought that doom upon himself. He was just lucky Shaw found his panic every time he saw her so amusing.

Reese nodded to a nearby servant’s entrance, “Shall we?” They were much less likely to be stopped on their way taking that route rather than through the formal courtyard. No doubt news of their arrival had spread throughout the capitol once they hit the outskirts of the city. Reese knew the both of them wanted to retire to their quarters as soon as possible. It wouldn’t do to encourage the opportunity for too many interruptions.

Shaw nodded and started towards the door. They were almost there when they were discovered. “Shaw,” A small voice called out just a moment before a body slammed into her side.

She stumbled a bit from the impact but quickly recovered. “Hey, Gen.”

“You made it,” The princess beamed at her as she released her and stepped back.

“I said I would,” Shaw grumbled, pointedly avoiding Reese’s laughing eyes.

“And a true knight always keeps her word.” Gen eyed the packages tucked under Shaw’s arm. “Are those for me?”
“One of them might be,” Shaw shrugged.

“The bigger one right?”

Shaw rolled her eyes but it was more playful than her typical use of the expression. It was actually the smaller of the two. A throwing knife, the perfect size and weight for Gen’s smaller hands. She was sure to hear a lecture from the king about it but it would be worth it for the look on the girl’s face when she opened her gift tomorrow. “So what’s been going on while we were gone?”

Gen bounced with excitement, sending her unruly mop of curls flying in every direction. “Uncle Harry finally agreed to let you and Samantha train me with a sword.”

“You better stick to me kid. Your sister adds so many useless flourishes to show off that you’re likely to lose a finger or two with her as a teacher.” There were days Shaw was amazed the other woman still had all ten of hers. Then she shook her head so as not to focus too long on Root’s fingers and what they could do.

“But you will?” Gen asked. “You’ll teach me?”

“You need to know how to take care of yourself. Especially now.” Shaw tapped her chest, “You may as well have the best teaching you how to do it.”

Gen hugged Shaw tightly once again, “Thank you, Shaw.”

She stiffly patted Gen’s shoulders, still not accustomed to casual physical affection from anyone. “Don’t thank me yet, Kid. I’m going to work your ass.” She caught Reese’s narrowed gaze from the corner of her eye, “Um tail off.”

“I can take it.”

Shaw gave her a rare smile, “I bet you can.” She gave the girl a push and the trio started towards the door. “So how’s the party planning going?” The big event was the reason Reese and Shaw had pushed the horses so hard to return to the capitol ahead of schedule.
“Seems fine.” Gen shrugged, “They’re making me wear a dress though.” The sour face she made revealed exactly how displeased she was with that development.

“I guess that’s in the Official Heir to the King job description.”

“Yeah,” Gen sighed.

“King Harold just wants to do this the right way,” Shaw said pulling the door open and waving for Gen to enter before her. “When you’re in charge you can wear whatever you want.”

“I want to dress like you and Samantha.” Gen had a small case of hero worship for her half-sister. Shaw thought it was cute. Not that she’d ever say it out loud without being half-dead, tied to a rack, and under threat of a branding iron. She clicked her tongue against her teeth. Perhaps not even then.

Reese took the opportunity to jump into the conversation, “You do realize she wears dresses from time to time. Actually likes them, too.” More for the reaction she got out of Shaw when she wore them, but he wasn’t going to broach that topic with the girl. It was awkward enough the day he stumbled into the library when she had decided to ask Harold where babies came from.

Gen scowled at the flaw in her logic, “She can be weird.”

“Speaking of the Weird Sister, she around?”

Gen’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, “She’s not back yet.”

Shaw too felt a pang of what she could recognize as displeasure at Root’s absence. “She’ll be here.”

Gen nodded, “Because she keeps her promises too.”

“Exactly.” Shaw knew Root wouldn’t miss tomorrow night for the world. She’d show sooner or later.
“Genrika!” A voice called out.

“Ut oh,” The girl gulped and tried to hide behind Reese’s much taller form. That plan worked for all of a minute until Bear scrambled around a rapidly approaching Lady Morgan and then Reese to poke the girl with his muzzle.

“Did you have to make me run around the entire keep looking for you kid?” Lady Morgan huffed as she joined them.

Gen slipped out from behind Reese. “I just wanted to say hi to Shaw.” Shaw for her part had knelt to give Bear a hearty hello of her own.

Lady Morgan smiled at the princess fondly, “How about you take Bear out to the stables for a second and then we’ll get you back to your tutor?”

“Do I have to?”

Lady Morgan cocked an eyebrow, “We could just go straight back now, if you’d prefer?”

Gen scowled, “Fine.” She patted her thigh, “Come on Bear, let’s make this a long walk.”

“How did you get stuck on babysitting duty?” Reese asked once the girl and Bear had bounded through the door.

“She keeps giving her tutors the slip.” Lady Morgan turned to Shaw, “Without you or Root around I’m the only one who can find her when she decides to hide.”

“You or Bear?” Shaw smirked.

“I supervised.”

“Uh huh,” Shaw shook her head.
“How was your trip?”


“Muddy,” Reese added looking down at his stained boots.

“Poor dears,” Lady Morgan clucked sarcastically.

“How’s security looking for tomorrow?” Reese asked.

“Joss is all over it,” Morgan assured him. “And I have eyes all over the capitol. Nothing is going to spoil the big day.”

“Except Root being late,” Reese grumbled.

“She’ll be here,” Shaw argued, a little disgruntled at the man’s lack of faith. They’d made it back in time, so would Root.

“In any case, most of our guests have already arrived.” Lady Morgan interrupted before the pair could really get into it. Reese wasn’t exactly Root’s biggest fan, while Shaw was understandably biased in the woman’s favor.

“I’m supposed to assist Joss this evening. Harper is using the celebration as an opportunity for opening negotiations with the representatives of the tree people for the import of more of her magic plants.” She looked Reese up and down, Shaw was reminded that they hadn’t seen each other in three months. Then she promptly tried not to gag, as there were some things you didn’t need to know about the people you worked with. “I should be able to sneak out in an hour once things are under way.”

“I still need to see the king,” Reese grumbled. Duty always came first.

Gen came bounding back in with Bear. The wolf trotted to Shaw’s side for more welcome home
“Do I really have to go back?” Gen asked as she came to stand beside Lady Morgan.

She smiled, “That was the deal, Princess. You stick to the new tutoring schedule and your uncle lets you play in the dirt with Shaw.”

Gen rolled her eyes in a scary imitation of her mentor. “Fine,” She huffed and started towards the stairs.

“No more skipped lessons unless you want me to skip training,” Shaw called after her.

“But it was boring.”

“Don’t care.”

“Fine,” Gen sighed. “See you at dinner?”

“We’ll talk to your uncle about setting up a training schedule that works with your tutoring.”

“Thanks, Shaw!” Gen beamed.

Lady Morgan smiled at Reese, “I’ll look for you in the library after I’m done.” She swiftly leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “Glad you’re back in one piece too, Shaw.”

“What no kiss for me?”

Lady Morgan shook her head, “No. You forget I was there when Tomas met with his little accident.”

Shaw pursed her lips, the guy probably still walked with a limp. “I see your point.” Lady Morgan shot one last heated glance Reese’s way and then followed Gen up the stairs.

Reese came to stand beside Shaw as they watched the pair go. “You’re good with Gen.”
“She’s less annoying than other kids.”

“Or you’re less heartless than you’d like to appear.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t you have some royal ass to go kiss?”

“Then again,” Reese chuckled. He walked towards the staircase Gen had just climbed. When he reached the first step he stopped and glanced back at Shaw. “Don’t forget to have that shoulder looked at.”

“It was a minor dislocation.” They’d gotten into a bit of a dustup with a few bandits outside of Turing. She’d popped the joint back into place against a tree, once they’d dealt with the idiots. She held up the arm in question, “Already good as new.”

“Humor me. I don’t want to wake up to a knife to my throat again.” He rubbed a small scar on his neck at the memory, “Once was quite enough.”

Shaw shook her head. “That wasn’t my fault.”

“Sure it wasn’t,” He replied as he disappeared from sight.

After a quick trip down to the baths to wash away the sweat and smell of horse clinging to her skin and hair, Shaw trudged up to her little used suite of rooms in the palace to put away her things before dinner. She ran into Veronica along the way, telling the woman to let Cole know she’d be stopping by the forge the next day.

“He’ll be glad to see you. Someone in the market told him you and Ser Reese had been captured by the Brotherhood and were to be ransomed back to King Harold for his entire private library.”

Shaw fought not to roll her eyes. Cole gossiped like an old fishwife, and was twice as stupid about it. “Please, I’m worth way more than a pile of books. Any ransom would include the crown jewels and at least half the fleet.” She shook her head, “Tell Silva to keep him away from the forge, the fumes make Cole a little dimwitted.”
Veronica chuckled, she had told her husband not to believe everything he heard in the taverns by the pier. If anything had happened to the Knight Commander and the Dragon Slayer she would have heard talk of it in the palace. But Cole worried about Shaw so, now that he was no longer able to serve as her Shadow. “I’ll be sure to pass that along, Shaw.”

Shaw pursed her lips as she watched the other woman go. How the hell did she end up with her life so entangled with all these people? Things were so much simpler, and quieter, when it was just her and Cole against the world. Now she was surrounded by noise and people’s well-meaning concerns. She’d killed a great many men, but did the universe really need to punish her so? She huffed out a pained breath and finally opened the door to her assigned chambers.

A fire was already burning merrily in the hearth of her sitting room. Her saddle bags draped across the settee. She set Gen’s present down on a small table next to the door. The other package, a book on the old gods bound in blood red leather, she set down on the window seat to be discovered by its intended recipient later.

That sorted, Shaw turned towards the bedroom. She had washed but had to put the same clothes back on as she had forgotten to bring anything to the baths in her haste. She’d need to change before dinner. She stumbled to a stop just inside the doorway.

“Hello, Sameen.”

“Root.”

The elder princess smiled as she sat up from her perch lying across the bed. “I must say I expected a slightly warmer welcome.” She stuck her bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout.

Shaw stepped further into the bedroom. “Gen didn’t think you were here yet.”

“I snuck in a couple hours ago. I wanted to be a surprise.” She crawled to the end of the bed, “Got gift wrapped for the occasion and everything.” She was wearing a corset and a scrap of material that barely counted as a pair of smalls. It did wonderful things for her ass, even if it was not overly practical in design.

Shaw crossed her arms over her chest as she came to a stop just within arm’s reach at the foot of the bed. “You think this is an appropriate gift for a thirteen-year-old’s birthday?”
“No, but I think it’s an appropriate welcome home gift for my wife, after all she’s been gone for three months chasing down rogue assassins.”

Shaw raised an eyebrow, “Was there a handfasting while I was asleep or something?”

Root grinned, “Just trying the term on for size. I’m going to get you to that alter someday, Sameen.”

“Betrothed doesn’t have enough pizzazz for you?”

“Too many syllables,” Root shook her head, “Wife, however, just rolls off the tongue.”

Shaw pursed her lips, “Uh huh.”

Root toyed with the laces on Shaw’s pants. “Don’t you want to unwrap me like a good little wifey, Sameen?”

She really did but it was far too early in the scene to cave to Root’s advances just yet. “Actually, I’m seriously considering bunking down in the stables, where it’s quiet.”

Root pulled at one of the strings, undoing the knot entirely. Now loosened, the pants slid down until they caught on Shaw’s hips, revealing a sliver of tan skin between them and the bottom of her tunic. Though Root didn’t move to touch Shaw just yet. She licked her lips and then looked up at her through her lashes, “Admit it, you missed me too.”

“I missed the orgasms.”

“You better have been missing orgasms,” Root growled. She had a bit of a possessive streak. For not being raised a princess, woman felt very strongly about what she felt belonged to her by divine right. She told anyone she could force into listening how she and Shaw had been fated, which meant no one else was allowed to touch, or look at Shaw for too long. Though really that second one depended on the day and the mercurial royal’s mood.
Shaw simply rolled her eyes, not dignifying the statement with an immediate reply. They both knew she hadn’t gone looking for anyone else to warm her bed since the day she met Root. Let alone once they started sleeping with each other. Why grab any old sausage when you had all the steak you could eat at home? Not that Shaw was ever going to say anything that lame out loud ever. Especially not to Root, woman’s head was swelled enough already. “Am I going to be having any, any time soon?”

“I already offered to let you unwrap me,” Root leered.

“This isn’t really home though,” Shaw playfully chided, just to rile her up.

Root slipped her hand under Shaw’s tunic and raked her nails over her abs. “Do you really want to wait to unwrap me until we get back to the manor?”

“Nah.” Shaw replied pushing Root back so she could slip her tunic over her head. “Any injuries I need to check before we get started?”

Root scooted back across the mattress. “Oh Sameen, you know how I positively throb when you go all field medic on me.”

“Root,” Shaw growled as she stepped out of her pants.

“No, I’ve been a good girl since last we met.” She smiled as Shaw climbed on to the bed, now naked as a babe. Shaw quickly moved so that she was hovering over her. The smile turned into an outright leer as Root hooked her calf around Shaw’s knee and flipped them so that she was the one on top. “It was absolutely trying.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Now, Sameen I hope you’re not too tired from your trip,” She leaned down and sucked one of Shaw’s nipples into her mouth before releasing it with a wet pop. Root looked up at her with bright eyes, “Because tonight I aim to misbehave.”

The next evening, a pleasantly sore Shaw watched as Gen was announced to the crowd gathered to celebrate her official coronation as King Harold’s chosen heir. The kid looked happy, even if she was wearing a dress with an overabundance of pink ruffles. Shaw pursed her lips, Gen looked a bit
like a sweet cake with too many toppings. She’d probably topple over in too strong a breeze.

“Are you upset that we’re not up there?” Root asked as she handed Shaw a cup of ale.

“Okay I’m hot, but not really pretty, pretty princess material. The knight thing is weird enough.” Shaw turned to frown at her companion, “Why are you?”

“No, not at all,” Root shook her head. “I liked my life as it was. I could come and go as I pleased, walk among the people. Put my skills to good use. But now it’s so much more. The fact that I can still serve the crown and I get to be with you while I do it is… more than I deserve.” She nodded towards the balcony where Gen was waving to the crowd, “Besides look at her. I doubt I’d ever look that happy in a corset.”

Shaw’s grin was wolfish, “Last night.” They had made excellent use of that corset too before Shaw had finally ripped it from Root’s body in a fit of pique.

“In a corset and a tiara,” Root amended. “I love our life Shaw. And Gen will make a far better queen.”

“Kid’s too soft. Someone will try to take advantage.”

“That’s what we’re here for.”

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