



VENOM

ANAGHA BAHETI

I ran down the hallway and marched up to Father's council chamber. Miranda caught up to me just outside the door, grabbed my hand, and tried to pull me away as she whispered soothing words in my ear. I jerked my hand free and marched into the room making myself as noticeable as possible.

Father was hunched over a table, nodding along as the important people from all over our kingdom counselled him. At the flick of the curtains, they had stopped talking and were now looking at me, unsure of my presence amidst the war council.

"I need an audience. Now."

Without moving his eyes from the table, Father waved a hand, and the room emptied itself. Miranda was the last to leave, and only at my insistence.

"What is this nonsense?" I threw the royal decree on the table, and the red and blue markers denoting the two armies were thrown in every direction. Father calmly called for a squire and ordered him to pour us wine.

"I wish it were nonsense, my child, but this seems to be the only way to stop more bloodshed."

"You gave me your blessings to marry Edward." I accepted the goblet from the squire and took a deep swig. The arbour red left a spicy taste in my mouth.

"And now I must take them back for the sake of my people. For the prosperity of our kingdom, I must bear the pain of your heartache."

"My heart is not mine to give away any longer." I slammed the goblet against the table, spilling the wine and staining the ends of my sleeve red.

"I know, my little dove. I know." Father closed the distance between us and pulled me in for an embrace despite my resistance. He stroked my hair, like Mother did all those years ago to soothe me. His gentleness coaxed the anger out of me. With the anger gone, fear was free to reign my mind. "I wish things didn't have to be this way, little dove. I truly do. Alas, the

situation grows dire with every beat of my heart. I want to keep my people safe, but I also wish to give you every happiness your heart desires. The situation has progressed against us, and I cannot give you to Edward, but I can give him to you. It won't be what you want, but know in your heart, my little dove, this is the best I can do. I am adding Edward to your dowry."

I pulled myself out of Father's arms and took a few steps back.

"I would do my love a great disservice if I made him my paramour. When I walk into the sept to take the holy vows, I want him beside me, not a foreigner barbarian old enough to be your father."

"What would you have me do?" He grabbed my shoulders. His nails dug into my skin, but I didn't let that show on my face. "Pull the scarecrows from the fields and pile them against the seasoned soldiers knocking down our gates? We need more men, but we can't contact our allies. What little force we can muster starves under the siege. My generals can't face our enemies in the field, so my daughter must face them in the chapel. Save the unnecessary bloodshed, my little dove. Become the leader this kingdom needs."

The helplessness in his voice added to my guilt in heaps. He was only asking me to do my duty. I looked up at him, and he thrust a parchment into my hands. The broken seal held two halves of a lion's paw.

"These are the terms the barbarian offers us. Read carefully and talk to Edward before you make your decision. I will honour your decision, as I always have, but please, little dove, think long and hard about what is at stake."



The baby's cries echoed through the tower, adding to the pounding in my head. Edward helped me pull my aching body to a sitting position and stroked my sweat-soaked hair as I nursed the baby. When the baby finished

feeding, a maid took him away and another helped me squeeze into a dress I could have comfortably carried only a year ago.

A few minutes later, the usher announced the king's entry. Richard entered my chambers and stood by the foot of my bed. Around his neck, on his silken yellow tunic, sat the necklace that had once belonged to my grandfather – a precious piece of our lineage that even Father hadn't deemed himself worthy of wearing.

"Ah, my precious queen, I trust you are recovering quickly?"

"I am, just not enough to stand up to greet you, having given birth to *your* son five days ago."

"You know, my precious, in these parts of our vast kingdom, the saying goes something like 'little doves should not go around bothering lions.' You should meditate on the meaning." Richard smirked. That smirk made me want to jump out of my bed and punch him in the face, but I bit my tongue.

"I need your permission to speak plainly."

"Granted."

"I have given you two sons now. An heir and a spare. I have fulfilled my obligations. I need to know if you would honour your part of the promise we made on our wedding night."

"I am offended that you would think I would break my word. One given in the presence of Gods on our wedding night, no less. Put your mind to rest, my precious. Peace in this kingdom rests on our marriage, so we shall remain married in the eyes of our subjects. However, within these chambers, you are free to lead your life as you see fit. I shall not enter your chambers unless invited. Now, is there anything else?"

I shook my head. Richard turned around and walked away. My eyes met Edward's, and we shared a tiny smile. Richard stopped at the door and turned around, a wicked smile on his face.

“Little Eddy, why are you always in my wife’s room?”

Anger flared within me, but Edward raised two fingers without looking at me, telling me not to engage.

“I read to the queen, my king.”

“As she feeds my boy?” I felt the colour drain from my face. His face cycled through various expressions, and with each shift, my blood fell colder and colder. Richard made a show of thinking. The barbarian wasn’t truly capable of it. Then, with a cruel smile, he uttered the words that froze the blood in my veins. “Guards, escort Eddy to the dungeons till I decide how to kill him.”

“No!” My scream was primal. Animalistic.

“Come, my love, this behaviour is unbecoming of a queen.” He rubbed his thumb against his temple and let out an exaggerated sigh. “He is your great love, I get that. But you must see things from my perspective. I am the king. I have to punish the commoner that dares look upon my queen while she is indecent. It is my job to keep you safe. No, no. Do not speak. Rest and recover.”

I did not speak. Not because of fear. But because there weren’t enough words in my vocabulary to inform him of the pain and anger choking me from within. Not that he would ever care.



The dungeon smelled worse than I could have imagined. The lack of light made it difficult to make out what soiled the hems of my dress, and I was grateful for it. I felt my way through the serpentine maze until I heard someone call my name.

“Is it you?” The voice pulled me closer. The lantern by the wall cast a dim light on me, and a sharp gasp followed. “It is you! What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see your face.”

Footsteps echoed in the silence, and his bruised face came into view. He had lost a lot of weight and his hair was a knotted mess. I looked away. Seeing his plight only reminded me of my inadequacy, and that filled me with pain and anger.

“My apologies for my appearance, my queen. I wasn’t expecting a visitor.” His laugh did little to hide the pain his body felt, but hearing his voice soothed my aching heart. Tears flowed freely down my cheeks. Edward reached out and wiped them away. “Why do you cry, my sunshine?”

“I tried... I begged and bartered... All my lands, my gold, my titles... All this wealth and yet I couldn’t save my heart.”

“Hush now, my sunshine. I resigned to my fate the day you took your vows. It was only a matter of time. His jealousy rises because he can’t possess your heart like I can.” He rubbed his knuckles against my cheek. A sad smile spread upon his lips. “I am a dead man walking, my love, but your life must go on.”

“I am sor-”

“Do not sully our love with that apology. My sentence is not to punish me, but to break you. Only by breaking you can he keep the kingdom whole and under his thumb.” Tears welled up once more, and he wiped them away. “Hush now, my love. Listen to me. I am not the only one who cares about you and our people. You still have friends at the court. Seek them out. Bring the barbarian to his knees. Free our people. Become the leader your father couldn’t be. Spend the rest of your life in the service of your people. I will wait for you on the other side of the veil. We couldn’t take the vows of life together, but I won’t take the vows of death without you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, my sunshine, in this life and in all of the others. But our time has come to an end. You must leave now. Return to your chambers before someone notices.”

He kissed my hand and gave me one final smile as he shooed me away. I dragged my feet away from his cell shoving down the urge to turn around. Looking back would have broken my resolve.

His footsteps announced his arrival before the usher did.

The curtains on my door went flying as Richard stormed in, anger reeking through his body. He grabbed my hair hard and pulled my face so close to his, I could smell the whiskey on his breath. Six months ago, this would have terrified me, but all my emotions ended with Edward’s last breath, leaving behind nothing but a void filled with anger.

“What do you think you are doing?” Drops of spit fell on my face.

“Your presence in my chambers violates your oath, my king. One taken in the presence of Gods, no less.”

“Do you suppose yourself smart, woman? When your decision to close the pillow houses results in a mutiny by the soldiers, do you think I would lift a finger to help you?”

“Times are dangerous, my king. Who is to say the mutiny and the silence from their king will not result in revolts across the kingdom? I would assume they didn’t have the resolve, but the servant girls whisper otherwise. What if the farmers burn their crops? However shall we feed the massive army without interference from their king?”

His demeanour changed as defeat dawned on him. With a cold smile, he released my hair and rubbed his knuckles against my cheek.

“Stop poking your nose where it does not belong, or you will force me to hurt you. Have a pleasant evening, my queen.”

Richard was a sore loser. I needed to anticipate his strike and prepare my defences. The one thing in my favour - the one thing that would be his downfall - was that he underestimated me. I was only getting started.

“Apologies for the interruption, Mother. The king has summoned you.”

Henry took my hand and led me to his father’s chambers. His touch was gentle and his words were soft, but I could feel the anxiety within him. This day was the culmination of years of effort, but I hadn’t expected to be summoned so soon.

The usher announced our arrival as we entered Richard’s chamber. It was larger than a family affair. Richard had invited his trusted advisors and – according to Henry - mine. Most of my people had chosen not to respond, but my father’s chief advisor Martin stood away from the crowd, fidgeting with the goblet of wine.

“Ah, there she comes – the bane of my existence. The one who sows the seeds of malice and discord in my harmonious court.”

“Father, please. You agreed to make this peaceful.”

“Peace is the one thing your mother is incapable of, my boy. But for my part, I will honour my word. I will not agonise you.”

“Thank you, Father. Chief Arthur, please begin.”

The old man squeezed himself past Richard’s guards and spread a parchment on the table before us.

“Given the events of the last few months, after hours of careful consideration, we believe that for the stability of this kingdom, the crown should be passed from His Highness to Prince Henry. We bring this

proposal to the King and the Queen in hopes they would agree. We await your guidance.”

“Advisor Martin, would you bring me my seal?”

I accepted the seal, dipped it in the indigo dye and stamped the parchment at the bottom. Richard did the same. The advisors gathered the parchment and left the room, escorting Henry along.

With us alone in the room, Richard filled two goblets with wine and carried them to the window, motioning for me to join him. I did. He handed me a goblet and I took a deep swig. The evening market was in complete chaos below, and we spent some time observing our subjects hustle about.

“You finally did it! Our marriage no longer holds the kingdom together.” He said, still not looking at me.

“It was easier than I had anticipated. My people needed very little push to disobey your orders, and your people were all too eager to sabotage mine. A few lies whispered in the right ears, and here we are.”

“You must be proud.”

“Of our son, yes.”

He took a deep gulp before responding.

“He is the only good thing about our marriage. The boy is exceptional. He will be a better ruler than both you and I.”

“It just dawned on me. Once Henry gets the crown, our marriage will lose its importance.”

“Oh, it has never been important, my queen. The relevance of it... now that is a different matter altogether. You can’t leave me. Our divorce would take the crown off his head. And if you think you can get away with killing me, you aren’t as smart as I gave you credit for.”

“You failed to consider one thing, husband.”

“And what is it?”

“I am driven by revenge. And I have been poisoning our son for fifteen years. You will never be able to mould him into your image. In his desperate hours, he will never come to you. I will take back my kingdom, and I will erase your legacy while I steal your armies.”

“Why are you so callous and rude and... and impertinent? Why do you insist on being my downfall?”

“Does the venom in my heart burn you, dear husband?”

“Deeply.”

“Good!”

“Why?” He turned to me and whispered in my ear.

“Because you killed the antidote.”

I plunged Edward’s dagger deep into his heart. It did nothing to soothe my anger, but the tears that followed celebrated my freedom.