

Hearts of Broken Beasts

Her scarlett skirts, embroidered with delicate golden thread, billowed behind her as she strode down the hall. At the sound of steady, angry footsteps on the stone, guards lining the way straightened and the usual flitting of maids stopped to bow. Raine paid them no heed. Her green eyes blazed and her callused fingers gripped her sword with white knuckles. Its polished, deadly silver hilt and scabbard gleamed in the light of the moon that came freely through the open arched windows. The usual notice was not given to the climbing vines clinging to intricately carved pillars, or the little white flowers that bloomed on them, nor to the hounds that turned their bellies to her. The queen was hunting, and nothing would distract her from the prey that awaited behind the heavy oak doors in front of her.

As those doors swung open, the voice of a queen booms through the room.

“Where is she.”

It is not a question, it is a command, and her stride does not slow as she stalks forward, toward the raised dias and her throne. Knights standing at attention do not lower the weapons they have aimed there, only shifting out of her way. Raine’s gaze narrows on the figure lounging on the throne, a look that would send most men- and women- fleeing.

“Hello darling,” the intruder muses. Her hood casts a perfect shadow over her eyes, so only her teasing smile shows. Her body is draped lengthwise across the throne, booted feet swinging idily, as if there weren’t a dozen weapons trained on her. An elbow propped her up from the armrest behind her back, and in her hand a dagger was being twirled. “So nice of you to join us.”

The queen stopped barely outside the protection of her guards, “I could say the same for you.” Then she smiled, in a way that proposed no enjoyment, only a wolf baring its teeth before a kill.

If Raine was a wolf, then the intruder was a snake. Patient and venomous.

Absinthe knew her hood covered her eyes, so she watched unabashed as the queen strode into

the throne room, tracking her graceful movements, so full of power and purpose as she made her way to the front of the room.

“So nice of you to join us,” the woman mused, twirling her knife. The familiar metal was cool as it glanced off her fingers, and the therapeutic movement helped calm Absinthe’s mind and refocus on the task at hand.

She knew she had the queen trapped. Knew that her team was carrying out the plan they had spent years studying and perfecting, altering and setting up. The details were the lullaby she fell asleep to, and the echoing ring of the morning bells she woke with. Absinthe held a confidence only achieved by the monarchy and masters of their craft, and it caused a tremor to ripple through the room. And yet... the queen remained unwavering. In fact, a wicked grin split across her face.

Raine knew exactly what she was doing with her words, her movements. She knew the effect they had on the intruder.

“You’ve been missed, Thea. Though I suppose Thea never really existed in the first place. Isn’t that right, Absinthe?” The queen relished the idea of watching something so... *unconquerable* fall apart piece by piece from the woman in front of her, and from the slight stiffening in the face under the hood, Raine knew she was on the right track. “Whatever would Zion and Traycee think of all this deception? They seem like such a nice couple, it’s hard to imagine them raising such a pretty, lying daughter. Though I suppose it’s only polite to ask about their well-being first.”

“And how have you come by such... presumptions?” Absinthe appeared calm, but Raine could hear the edge in her words. Thea had a different past than Absinthe, and Raine had made it her mission to know both after the last night they were together. So whether it was fear or anger that tightened the intruders’ words, the queen couldn’t tell. It wasn’t as if she particularly cared, either.

“You may not be Thea, but I am who I have always been, and you know better than anyone that

I am no dim-witted damsel. I know everything that goes on within these walls, and it was only a moment of weakness that you were allowed inside,” Raine didn’t know if it was the palace walls or the walls of her own heart that she referenced, but love was a fickle, weak thing, and she pushed it aside quickly. Determined to stay on course, she continued, “including four other thieves. Quite a coincidence, to have five *children* make their way into my home on the same night, all armed to the teeth.”

At this, Absinthe turns and leaps from the chair in one swift movement, too quickly for any of the armor-clad guards to reach her. The two women stand not a foot apart now, and the dagger she was twirling looks much more lethal against the soft skin of the queen’s throat. Her hood is thrown back, blue eyes raging and a thick blonde braid falling over her shoulder.

The guards don’t have a chance to take any protective steps toward their queen, and yet, Raine laughs. It’s enough movement that the fine edge catches and nicks the skin on her neck. Blood the same color as her gown beads beneath, and she wears it like the finest jewels she owns.

“You never answered my question, though. How are your lovely parents? Enjoying the money you send every sixth day on the eleventh bell from the Northern docks?” The queen steps closer, her eyes continuously locked with the woman in front of her. Absinthe unconsciously retreats the same distance, though keeping her knife level and without lethal pressure to Raine’s throat. “Or are they living prosperously off that little farm they bought with it? I hear the heifer just had a calf. Your parents must be so thankful, given the temperamental weather they’ve been having.” Absinthe’s eyes grow more fearful, and Raine can feel a slight tremor in the cold metal pressed against her neck. She can’t help but smile wider.

Absinthe would never admit it, but she was scared. Maybe she had always been scared.

For her family, for her friends. For herself. Even now, holding a knife to the throat of the beast in front of her, all she could think about was all the nights she had kissed it, nestled her head against it as

morning sunlight shone a spotlight on the only two souls who seemed to matter in those moments. But she had made a promise, so she blocked out the memories.

Absinthe turned instead to the information Raine had shared with her. She had been careful, so careful in keeping her parents out of the way of what she did. She had told no one of whereabouts, and always wore different disguises, using different penmanship on the letters to match. Sent them enough money to be taken care of, to also know she was okay, but not enough to draw suspicion. They would send letters back, but Absinthe never opened them. She tore them up and dumped them right back in the sea, watching as the ink bled into the water. Absinthe shook her head slightly, needed to get herself out of the rabbit hole she was falling down, though the woman in front of her wasn't making it any easier.

"Though your brother misses you dearly. Pity you never read his letters. You would know that he found himself a pretty little thing. Witty, too. Did you know she's a printed writer? Her work is magnificent, I must say."

"Enough," Absinthe spit out through gritted teeth. She forced her thoughts away from her family and to her friends. The queen knew they were in the palace. Had she caught them? Were they hurt? How many of their tasks had they completed? "Where are the others?"

"I can take them to you, if you want. But that would really, well, kill the mood." Raine stepped forward again, and Absinthe's arm bent to keep the knife from tearing the queen's skin. "See, your problem, *darling*, is that you care too much," the queen stepped again, and again Absinthe retreated. "About your family, your friends, your people. Indifference is strength." Absinthe's heel bumped into the step up to the dias, "It allows you to think quickly and clearly," Now she was above Raine, on the step. "It ensures that you make the best decision for the majority, not the few you care for the most." The back of Absinthe's knees hit the throne, and she stumbled into it, now looking up into the striking green eyes of the queen.

“Caring is no weakness-” Absinthe started, but was shut quickly by the queen leaning forward, pushing her lips close to Absinthe’s ear. The box of memories threatened to break open, so she focused on the far door, mapping a way to all the possible places her friends could be. The tactic didn’t work as Raine began speaking, her voice barely above a lover's whisper.

“I learned early as a girl that to care was to be clouded, and that it was a luxury a woman could not afford if she was to be respected in this world. I learned to stop caring and soon after I stopped hurting.

“I had it figured out, *Absinthe*. And then you walked in.” Absinthe can’t decipher the tone Raine has taken on, but her heart breaks a little at it.

“That midnight blue dress with all the silver detailing fit you so *perfectly* and I had never seen hair as golden as yours. It was easy to see that you would cause trouble, but something in me loosened nonetheless, and you made me *doubt everything* I had taught myself.

“All I could see when I closed my eyes was you. All the little details of you. The scattered freckles, the hint of gray around your eyes, the way your lashes flutter when you are angry but trying not to show it. How you love the dawn because it means a blank canvas just waiting for you to paint with life, but even then you seemed to belong to the night. That was when you always shined the brightest. You dazzled guests at dinners with your pretty gowns, your poetic words. Everyone stopped when you laughed, just so they could hear it clearer. You trapped them all in your little web, and me as well.”

Raine had pulled away slightly, so they were staring into each other's eyes. Absinthe could have sworn Raine’s had become sorrowful, but she assured herself it was only the reflection of the moon through the towering windows.

“A good villain knows to keep to the darkness, a great one simply becomes it. You loved the dawn because it helped chase away your shadows, and helped you to deny your *true* nature.”

“I am no villain, Rai-”

The queen's head shakes slightly, "you know that the one thing I hate above all else is liars, Absinthe."

"I am *no-*"

"Though I suppose you've been lying since the very beginning. And I don't mean when you came to that initial party. You were lying to yourself when you thought you could take my kingdom and emerge unscathed. And you are lying to yourself even now, as you try to figure out an escape. You are not leaving here alive, Absinthe."

With those words said, the queen seizes the forgotten knife from the woman's loosened fingers, slides it easily between the intruder's ribs, and into her heart. A flurry of emotions cross Absinthe's face; confusion, fear, pain, regret... but the expression that becomes clear is most often described as heart shattering grief.

Raine catches the body as it lurches toward her, and there is no mistaking the final whisper that escapes in the last breath,

"I love you, Raine, and that is the only truth that matters."