

KRESLEY COLE

DEAD OF
WINTER

THE ARCANA CHRONICLES



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Summary: In order to protect Jack from two of the most horrific Arcana, The Lovers, and the vast
army they command, Evie leaves the comfort offered by Death and joins her allies in a frozen and
perilous post-apocalyptic wasteland, but for her battle plan to succeed, she must persuade Death and
Jack to work together.

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ALSO IN THE ARCANA CHRONICLES

Poison Princess

Endless Knight

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To Marie L., for your invaluable assistance with Cajun French, and for patiently answering all my questions. (“We’d use *sauve* for a guy?” “Why is there an English word in the translation?” “*Lier* versus *amar-rer*. Thoughts?”)

To Beth Kendrick and Barbara Ankrum, for all your support and eagle-eyed beta reads!

I couldn’t have done this without you all!

— *The Major Arcana* —

0. *The Fool, Gamekeeper of Old (Matthew)*
I. *The Magician, Master of Illusions (Finneas)*
II. *The High Priestess, Ruler of the Deep*
III. *The Empress, Our Lady of Thorns (Evie)*
IV. *The Emperor, Stone Overlord*
~~V. *The Hierophant, He of the Dark Rites (Guthrie)*~~
VI. *The Lovers, Duke & Duchess Most Perverse (Vincent & Violet)*
VII. *The Chariot, Wicked Champion*
VIII. *Strength, Mistress of Fauna (Lark)*
~~IX. *The Hermit, Master of Alchemy (Arthur)*~~
X. *Wheel of Fortune, Lady of Fate*
~~XI. *Justice, She Who Harrows (Spite)*~~
XII. *The Hanged Man, Our Lord Uncanny*
XIII. *Death, The Endless Knight (Aric)*
~~XIV. *Temperance, Collectress of Sins (Calanthe)*~~
~~XV. *The Devil, Foul Desecrator (Ogen)*~~
XVI. *The Tower, Lord of Lightning (Joules)*
~~XVII. *The Star, Arcane Navigator*~~
XVIII. *The Moon, Bringer of Doubt (Selena)*
XIX. *The Sun, Hail the Glorious Illuminator*
XX. *Judgment, The Archangel (Gabriel)*
XXI. *The World, This Unearthly One (Tess)*

THE FIELD OF BATTLE

During the Flash, a global cataclysmic flare, the surface of the earth was scorched to ash, and bodies of water evaporated. All plant life was killed, most animals as well. The vast majority of humans perished, with women hardest hit. After months of total drought, rain falls constantly. The sun has ceased to rise, leaving the world in endless night. Plague spreads.

OBSTACLES

Militias unify, consolidating power. Slavers and cannibals hunt for new victims. All are bent on capturing females. The Bagmen, contagious zombies created by the Flash, roam the dark, thirsting for moisture, especially blood.

FOES

The Arcana. Into every dark age, twenty-two kids are born with supernatural powers and destined to fight in a life-or-death game. Our stories are depicted on the Major Arcana cards of a Tarot deck. I'm the Empress; we play again *now*. In my sights: the Lovers, who hold Jack captive.

ARSENAL

To defeat the Lovers and the others, I'll have to draw on my Empress powers: enhanced healing, the ability to control anything that roots or blooms, thorn tornadoes—and poison. Because I'm the princess of it. . . .



DAY 372 A.F.? (MAYBE 373?)
SOMEWHERE IN SLAVER TERRITORY

Inhale exhale inhale exhale

As I raced over the countryside on horseback, I kept hearing deep, ragged breaths.

Rain fell from the black sky, drops pelting my face. Winds whipped my horse's mane and made my poncho hood flap.

But I still heard breaths.

The tiny hairs on my nape rose. My mare snorted, her ears pricked forward. I didn't have Lark's animal keenness or the senses of a huntress like Selena, but I could feel someone—or *something*—watching me.

Stalking me?

Inhale exhale

I rode harder, pushing myself, pushing my staggering horse, forcing her to navigate the rocky terrain faster than was safe.

I hadn't slept since fleeing Death's lair days ago—if you could call them “days” in this never-ending darkness. Sheer will kept me in the saddle. Delirium was taking hold.

Maybe nothing stalked me, and my own breaths sounded foreign to my ears. If I could just rest for a few minutes . . .

Focus, Evie! So much was on the line. Jack's *life* was.

I was determined to save him from the Lovers, Vincent and Violet Milovníci.

Sadistic Vincent had captured him; Violet journeyed to meet up with her brother. Once they reunited, those twin serial killers would torture Jack with their *contraptions*.

I raced to beat Violet, taking untold risks. Even now, I couldn't believe what I'd done to escape Aric.

Every other minute, a raindrop would hit one of my eyes directly, the sting blurring my vision. I would blink to clear my eyes, and details of my last encounter with Death would blossom in my mind. . . .

The feel of his sword-roughened palms as he'd seized my waist and laid me in his bed. His rasped words: "If you surrender to me, you will be mine alone. My wife in truth. I will do anything to have that." Even coercing me, promising to save Jack—for a price.

Blink.

His scent—sandalwood, pine, masculine—had weakened my will like a drug, quelling the heat of battle inside me. Still I'd managed to say: "This won't work out as you plan."

Blink.

His head had inched closer, his amber eyes intent, just before his lips had covered mine. His kiss had a way of muddling my thoughts, making me forget all the things I needed to remember.

Blink.

"There. That's better," he'd murmured as he'd removed my clothes. "Just let me see you . . . touch you." With his supernatural strength, he must have taken pains not to rip the lace of my panties.

When I lay naked before him, his amber eyes had glittered like stars. Pinpoints of light had mesmerized me. "So lovely, *sievā*. My gods, you humble me." He'd given me one of his rare unguarded smiles. "This is joy I feel, is it not?" I'd wanted to sob.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

I shook my head hard. I needed to pay attention. I couldn't afford to get lost in memories. To get *lost* at all.

When I'd readied a bug-out bag and my gear in a panic, Matthew had telepathically directed me: —*Follow the rushing water upstream*

into slaver territory. Find the soot valley, then travel its length. If you reach the mass gravesite, you've gone too far. Ascend the next mountain to the stone forest.—

Yet since then, he hadn't answered any of my calls.

I reached the end of a soot-filled valley and started the climb. Rain began to pour.

Minutes? hours? days? passed. Despite the threat I'd sensed, I could barely stay awake. My head kept dipping. Maybe I could close my eyes—just for a second. I dropped forward, resting my cheek against the horse's mane, an arm on either side of her neck.

My lids slid shut.

When I opened them, I was at Haven.

The mare was gone. No rain, no winds. The sky was star-strewn black. All around me, that eerie A.F. silence.

Matthew, am I in one of your visions? Every detail felt so real. Bitter ash tinged my tongue. The scent of scorched oaks and sugarcane stung my nose. In the distance, Haven House was a blackened ruin. My mother's funeral pyre.

I'd burned her body and our home.

Jack had secretly helped her die. I understood *why*. I didn't accept *how*. I couldn't reconcile *after*.

How many lies he'd told.

Grief ripped through me, for my mother, for our life before the Flash. My new existence was so brutal and visceral, I wondered if my pre-apocalypse memories were actually a soft and hazy dream.

What was real? *Unreal?*

Though Matthew had looked away when my mom had died, he could still access scenes from the past. Was he giving me the memory of her death?

A breeze feathered over the ash on the ground, the sound beautiful—like sighing. I heard my mother's faint voice telling Jack, "Use the pillow. . . ."

No, Matthew! I'm not ready to see this! Not ready—
A wolf's howl pierced the night.

I jolted awake in the saddle. The rain had dwindled to a foggy drizzle. How long had I been out?

I rubbed my gritty eyes. Almost screamed. I was surrounded by shadowy figures.

Wait, not *figures*. All around me were towering stacks of rocks, placed like logs for a bonfire. There were so many stacks the area resembled a forest. The stone forest.

Who would waste calories to assemble these? And why did I find them so chilling?

Matthew, are you there?

At last, I felt his presence in my mind! —*Empress!*—

Has Violet joined her brother yet?

—*The Violet is not there.*—

Oh, thank God.

—*Soon.*—

Shit! *You told me Vincent camped within days of Death's castle. I've ridden for DAYS.*

—*Arcana all around.*—

I heard their calls, as if from a sound-out. . . .

—*Eyes to the skies, lads!*— Joules.

—*Trapped in the palm of my hand.*— Tess.

—*I watch you like a hawk.*— Gabriel.

—*Behold the Bringer of Doubt!*— Selena.

—*Don't look at this hand, look at that one.*— Finn.

—*Crazy like a fox.*— Matthew.

—*We will love you. In our own way.*— The Lovers.

So many Arcana were close. Which meant *I* was close.

—*Terror from the abyss!*— Huh?

Before I could ask about the new call, my sense of being watched returned. I jerked my head around.

—*Empress, you're one stone forest and one clearing away. Some . . . obstacles between us.*—

Movement. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man skulking from one stack of rocks to the next.

Another man loped to join the first. The armed pair wore fatigues and creepy night-vision goggles. Soldiers of the Lovers' army?

The stones were for cover, staged as if for a paint-ball course! How long had those men been lying here in wait?

Matthew, I'm in trouble! I slapped the reins against the mare. She whinnied a protest, but increased her speed. Chest heaving, she wound around the stacks.

I craned my head back. Two soldiers had become ten, all with rifles at the ready. Now they walked in plain view. Because I was already surrounded?

As the ground began to flatten, those stacks grew fewer. I raised my hand above my eyes, straining to see. Ahead—the clearing Matthew had spoken of!

My face fell. With no vegetation, it was a quagmire, water and muck pooling in huge craters.

Past that, a wall towered, must be thirty feet high. What lay behind it?

A shot rang out; a bullet whizzed by my head. My mount fled from the sound. “Go, *GO!*”

In my panic, my nails morphed into thorn claws. The razor-sharp edges sliced through the fingers of my gloves. My glyphs stirred, moving over my skin.

A second gunshot. The near-miss bullet pitted the mud beside the horse's hooves. She shrieked, trotting faster.

The shooters missed on purpose. They would want me—and the horse—alive.

Women and horses were two valuable A.F. commodities.

Desperate for safety, I squinted at the wall. Men guarded a brightly lit gate.

—*Head there, Empress.*—

My mare would have to slog through the clearing. It was like a moat fronting that wall. The soldiers would catch me long before then.

A bright color drew my attention. Attached to a post was a handcrafted sign emblazoned with a red skull and crossbones—along with the warning: DANGER! MINES!

And that explained the craters.

Are you kidding, Matthew? Soldiers trailing me; mines ahead. *How do I get past a minefield?*

An agonized yell sounded behind me.

I dared a glance back. Only nine soldiers followed. They ran toward me at a faster clip. The ones at the edges aimed their guns—off to their sides.

Another horrified yell.

And another.

Open gunfire erupted. Muzzle flashes warred with fog; I couldn't make out anything.

I turned forward. Screamed.

Three soldiers stood before me, rifles trained on my face. The mare reared, punching hooves at them.

The other gunmen had been pushing me toward these!

Yet behind them, a black beast melded with shadow. One brilliant golden eye gleamed like a lantern.

Cyclops! Had Lark sent her one-eyed wolf to protect me?

Baring dagger-size fangs, the massive beast gave a spine-chilling snarl. The men twisted around—

Cyclops launched himself at the panic-stricken soldiers, knocking them to the ground. His mighty jaws clamped down on limbs and rifles, snapping through bone and metal.

Body parts sailed into the air. Blood spurted like a mall fountain. I winced, though I should be used to seeing stuff like this.

The wolf lifted his head from the carnage and growled at the stupe-

fied soldiers positioned behind me. Those bastards had driven me into a trap; Cyclops *ate* the trap.

Faced with the beast's dripping maw, they fled headlong.

For me, Cyclops wagged his scarred tail. "Good damn wolf. Good boy."

Matthew said: —*Ride for the fort! You have to make it to the wall.*—

What's behind the wall? For all I knew, Matthew was sending me into the Milovnicis' camp.

—*RIDE!*—

Into mines? We're going to get blown away! Forget my self-healing powers; I couldn't regenerate from decapitation.

—*Go left.*—

Directing me around the danger?

I turned to Cyclops. "I don't know if you can understand me, or if Lark is steering her familiar. But follow my mount carefully unless you want to regrow limbs." He was still limping from our battle with the Devil Card.

He chuffed, and bubbles of blood formed over his snout. With a swish of his tail, he defiantly snapped up a dismembered arm, carrying it like a chew toy. But he did move behind me.

I'm trusting you, Matthew. I swallowed and guided my horse left.

—*MY left!*—

Quick correction. Cyclops followed.

—*Faster, Empress. Or the Azey will figure out our mine moat maze.*—

Your what? Who are the Azey?

—*A.S.E. Army of the Southeast. Go right for three seconds. Then left.*—

Holding my breath, I slapped the reins yet again. One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three. I tugged the reins to my right.

—*Faster!*—

Soon I was galloping through a minefield, a telepathic Arcana in my mind and a giant wolf at my heels.

I could hear those same wet breaths. The wolf had been following me! If I lived through this night, I was *so* going to owe Lark.

The gate creaked open ahead. I spurred the mare, racing to reach the fort.

With no idea what awaited me . . .

2

The gates slammed closed behind Cyclops's tail.

Matthew was there to greet us, wearing a vacant smile. When he crossed to me and held up his arms, I fell out of the saddle, legs gone boneless. He caught me against himself, helping me stand.

"What is this place?" I wheezed, taking in details. The wall was made of scrap metal: car hoods, road signs, rebar. Large military-style housing tents were spread out over a sizable area. Covered torches hung on lines above, casting light.

"The hunter was busy while you were away."

"This is Jack's?" Horses dozed in a stable, chickens clucked in a coop, and dozens of people milled about.

All guys, naturally. They stared not only at me—a female—but at my colossal one-eyed bodyguard, currently scarfing down the last of his human chew toy. *Wolves gotta eat.*

Matthew peeled me off him, shoving one of his sleeves up. "Take off your gloves, Empress."

I did, too exhausted to protest. My head spun like I'd just stepped off a playground round-a-bout.

He brandished a knife and sliced his pale arm before I could stop him. Then he used his blood to draw a line over the back of my icon hand. "This is Gamekeeper's blood. There's protection here." Crimson

crossed over the two markings of my Arcana kills, as if to cancel them out. “Lots of other Arcana here, but we have trues. No one strikes on hallowed ground.”

“Truce?”

“*Trues*. The true-hearted cards,” he said, adding darkly, “for a time.” Matthew had created a war-free area with a power I hadn’t known about.

I gazed up at him. In the last three months, he’d grown even taller. Had his birthday passed? Was he seventeen yet? He wore a water-proof parka, a wool button-down, jeans, and a pair of hiking boots, all newish looking. Had Jack sourced clothes for him?

As Aric had done for me?

Inner shake. “Thank you, Matthew. You got me here safely.”

With his brown eyes as adoring as a puppy’s, he asked, “The Empress is my friend?” He used to declare this. Now he had to ask.

Was I still pissed that he’d covered up Jack’s lies? I’d been furious when he’d taught Aric how to neutralize my powers, but Matthew had probably saved my life by doing that.

Maybe I needed to accept that he did everything for a reason. I’d trusted him to steer me through a minefield (talk about a team-building exercise). I’d relied on his mysterious guidance to escape Death.

But trusting Matthew completely would be like falling backward. A free fall. Was I ready?

Life had been too short for grudges before the Flash. Now . . . “Evie is your friend.” I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tight. When I pulled back, I said, “Matthew, where is Jack?”

“The hunter is nigh.”

“How do I get to him?”

“Horse.”

A nondescript middle-aged man approached. With a wary glance at the wolf, he took the mare’s reins, promising to care for her. Oh. Horse.

As the guy led her to the stable, I made a mental note to grow her a treat. “Who are all these people?” Some cleaned weapons beneath a

bright tarp—the kind you used to see at raucous tailgate parties. Others were heating water and doing laundry.

“Humans. Jack collects them. I like their soup.”

“Do they know what we are?”

“Jack lets them think we’re gods. They call this Fort Arcana, established Year 1 A.F.”

“What about keeping ourselves secret? You told me Arcana and non-Arcana mix poorly. You told me humans burn what they fear.”

A glimmer of something unsettling crossed Matthew’s features. “There aren’t enough humans left to consider.”

I’d have to think about that later. “Matthew, I need to get to—”

“The watchtower!” He stepped onto a narrow board path that ran through the muddy camp like a freeway. A plankway. Off he went.

“The what?” My legs were so tired, I could barely balance as I tried to keep up.

Cyclops padded along beside me, his frizzy black fur shimmying. His scarred snout was just to the right of my head, his filthy whiskers almost brushing my cheek. His enormous paws sloshed mud up my pants.

Was that a finger stuck in the knotted scruff under his chin?

I trailed Matthew to the far side of the fort. “Did you send me a vision of my mother? Or did I dream?”

Over his shoulder, he said, “Our enemies laugh. Smite and mad. Fall and struck.”

That was his answer? Sometimes I wanted to grab him and shake him.

“We’re here.” Along the back wall stood a three-story structure, clad in metal sheeting. Matthew climbed a ladder to the top.

I followed, leaving the wolf to prowl below. At every rung, I wheezed and winced. “Can we . . . please talk about . . . a rescue for Jack?”

At the top level, Matthew tilted up a license plate, revealing a small slot. “Empress.” He motioned for me to peer out.

“Okay, what am I looking at? Oh, wow.” We were high up on a

blustery vantage with a sheer drop-off. A river that looked as broad as the Mississippi coursed below. An amazing sight. Before the rains, there'd been no bodies of water like this.

"The placement of this fort is genius." That minefield moat bordered three sides of the wall, while this steep bluff and river protected the fourth.

"Jack," he said simply. "Fort Arcana grew from you. The mission . . ."

When he couldn't find me at Death's, Jack had targeted the Lovers for me—and for him. He'd had his own vendetta against the Milovnicis.

I gazed across the water at an opposing bluff. Fires dotted the area. Tents stretched for what seemed like miles. A few rock ridges jutted upward, offering protection from attack.

"Is that the Army of the Southeast?" It was huge. I tried to imagine where Jack was being kept. To be this close to him . . .

"Half of the Azey. Azey South. Azey North's not too far away."

Which meant Violet wasn't too far away either. How to get to Jack before she did? "I don't suppose this wind ever dies down?" I could launch spores from here, putting all the soldiers to sleep. Then I'd take a boat across, stroll into their camp, and drag Jack out.

"The winds go all night. Which is all day."

There went that idea—

Shots erupted from across the river, lots of them at one time. My stomach dropped as the sounds echoed over the water. I whirled around to Matthew. "Not him?"

"No. Daily execution." How the Milovnicis kept the rank and file in line.

I sagged with such relief, I almost felt guilty. Then I wondered how those shots had affected Jack.

"He believes no help is coming," Matthew whispered. "Knows he can't escape. Thinks his friends are dead."

The idea of Jack alone, with no hope, gutted me. "Is he . . . is he scared?"

"Certain he'll die. Surprised by how *unfrightened* he is."

"You can tell? You always had trouble reading him."

Nod. “Three months’ practice.”

“But you can’t read his future?”

Matthew’s brows drew together. “Never wanted this to happen.”

“Can you tell him we’re coming for him?”

Without a word, Matthew crossed to the ladder and climbed down. I clumsily followed. Back on the ground, he said, “Your alliance is injured.”

Did he mean that my allies were benched, or that my alliance was shaky? “Are you taking me to Finn and Selena?” I hadn’t seen them in months.

“Across the courtyard to the barracks.” Matthew started away again, heading in a different direction, balancing on the boards.

With Cyclops at my side, I tromped along the mud-caked planks through a central area, like a quad (*courtyard* might be a stretch).

When Matthew stopped in front of a tent, I bade the wolf stay outside. He snuffled indignantly, plunking down in the mud.

Taking a deep breath, I tugged down my poncho hood and entered, Matthew behind me.

Selena and Finn lay on cots. The Archer’s arm was in a sling—her bow arm. An arrow stretched over her lap, and she petted the feather fletchings, the sound like riffled cards. She stared, seemingly at nothing.

One of Finn’s legs was splinted, elevated on a bug-out bag. A metal crutch leaned beside his cot.

A fire burned in the center of the tent, vented out of the roof. More Arcana sat on benches around it: the Tower, Judgment, and the World Card, an alliance of three.

Joules sized me up. Gabriel tilted one of his black wings in greeting. Tess Quinn waved shyly, her fingernails bitten to the quick. Matthew dropped down to sit beside her.

“Well, if it isn’t our fair Empress,” Joules said in his thick Irish accent.

Selena shot upright, her silver-blond hair tumbling over her shoulders.

“Evie!” Finn called. “How did you get free of Death?”

This could get tricky. “Uh, I had an opportunity to . . . steal away.” Steal Death’s horse and saddle, steal a new bug-out bag, steal my hi-tech all-weather gear. “It’s not important. I’m here now.”

“Yet you didn’t accept my offer.” Joules’s reddish brown hair was disheveled, his gaze cagey.

Selena—who’d called out no greeting—said, “If you got a jump on Death to escape, then you could have brought Joules’s payment.”

Aric hadn’t been the only one to offer a deal to save Jack. Joules had demanded Death’s severed head in exchange for a rescue. “It’s not that simple,” I told them. “Things aren’t how we thought them.”

“Did you have a chance to kill the Reaper or not?” Whatever Joules read in my expression made him say, “You feckin’ did! A shot at the Endless Knight! The one who always bloody wins!”

Selena’s lips parted. “Death dies; J.D. lives. What part of that equation are you having problems with?”

“We can hash everything out later.” I was nearly choking with worry and exhausted to the point of kicking toes-up. “For now, let’s focus on—”

“We were in an alliance to defeat Death,” Selena bit out. “One you started. When Matthew told us you’d recovered your powers, we believed you’d do whatever it took to free J.D.—especially from the psychotic Lovers.” Selena swiped a hand over her livid face. “Instead, you betrayed all of us. J.D. more than anyone! Do you know what they’ll do to him?”

My grandmother had told me they warped and perverted their victims, making them confuse torture and pain for pleasure. “I have an idea.” My glyphs moved over my skin, a sign of high emotion—or aggression. But I grappled for patience. “Which is why we need to stop arguing over things that can’t be changed and start planning a rescue!”

Maybe Gabriel had done a flyover for recon on the army; he’d know the lay of the land across the river. We could plot a mission.

“Start planning?” Selena sneered. “You don’t have a plan? You’ve got some nerve to show up here with no answers and no payment,

sauntering in with your fancy new clothes, looking like you haven't missed a meal."

Exactly the way she'd looked when I'd first met *her*.

"Because of you, J.D. is suffering right now." Voice rising with each word, she said, "You should have paid the Tower!" With her supernatural speed, she leapt from the cot, lunging to attack.

3

Selena's good hand was in the air, poised to backhand me; instinctively my thorn claws shot out—

“Gamekeeper's blood!” Matthew cried.

Selena and I both screamed in pain, matching red lines glowing across our hands.

Cyclops sprang inside the tent, baring his monstrous fangs at her. I used Selena's moment of shock to scramble back.

Tess whimpered and shrank away from the beast; Gabriel flared his wings.

“Th-that wolf was dead!” Finn sputtered from his cot. “The cannibals killed all of Lark's war wolves.”

Joules opened his palm upright; a silver baton materialized out of thin air—one of his lightning javelins. In a blur, it extended to its full length. “My bolt once fried that very beast!”

Which was why Cyclops's fur was frizzy. “Lark's familiars are . . . hardy.” I withheld the full truth: her three wolves were undying—as long as Lark lived.

“It's protecting you?” Selena looked aghast.

“He won't hurt anyone unless I'm in danger.”

“You're allied with Lark now?” Finn's gaze darted from me to

Matthew, as if the Fool should've told them this. "Even after she sold us out?"

Matthew rocked back and forth on the bench.

"Lark didn't know us when she made the pact to hand us over to Death," I explained. "For all she knew, we could've been cannibals like the Hierophant's followers."

Finn peered at Cyclops. "But then she did get to know us," he said to the wolf.

Hoping Lark was listening through her familiar?

"And she still betrayed us. *Me*. For days, we were down there in the pitch dark because of her, and the water kept rising, about to drown us." He visibly shook from the memory, and a soft whine came from the wolf's chest. "When I realized she'd played me, it—laid—me—out."

"If the Empress is allied with Lark, then she's allied with Death," Joules said. "She might be here to open the gates for them while we sleep."

I rubbed my still burning hand. "We don't have time for this!"

"You have no idea what we went through over these months." Selena sank down on her cot, adjusting her arm sling. "And it was all to save you from Death!"

Finn tucked his dirty-blond hair behind his ears. "While you were getting chummy with our enemies, we took a cruise through hell."

They made it sound like I'd waltzed over to the other side without a care. "Enough! You all went through hardships, but so have I."

Selena cast me a *bitch, please* look, goading me to say more.

"A cruise through hell is when a cloven-footed monster tells you he's about to feast on your bones—and you believe him." I let that sink in. "Lark stayed by my side to fight Ogen—even as he grew three stories tall! Because of her loyalty to me, she lies in a bed with broken bones."

Finn winced at that. He wasn't over the girl by a long shot.

"I'd be dead if not for her and those wolves." When I gestured at Cyclops, he lay down, sphinxlike and regal. The effect was offset by the finger he still wore in his scruff.

“We heard when Ogen got capped.” Joules used the tail of his coat to polish that lethal spear. Cryptic symbols adorned the already gleaming metal. “Didn’t quite believe who did the deed.”

“It was Death. To save me and Lark.”

Excitement shone in Joules’s gaze. “He eliminated one from his own alliance. He’ll be weaker now. Unless you really are Ogen’s replacement?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, accepting I’d never get through to these people about Aric. And could I truly vouch for him anyway? “Joules, will you help me rescue Jack?”

“For all we know, you’ll go get cozy with Vincent and Violet, just like you did with Death and Lark. My alliance won’t touch this. We came here to do a job. Job got canceled. We leave tomorrow.”

Though Gabriel and Tess hadn’t said a word, I sensed they wanted to help. But Joules was like their all-powerful labor leader.

“If you’re a mercenary, then what else can I pay you?” I studied his face, trying to gauge my opponent and gain an advantage—like perceptive Jack often did. “Come on, Joules. Everybody wants something.”

Death had desired me in his bed; Selena desired Jack. Lark longed to live past her teens. Ogen had hungered for sacrifices on an altar.

Joules was impossible to read, like a bubbling cauldron. Tess was an open book, but I saw nothing for me to use. Mysterious Gabriel had a poker face.

“All I want is Death’s head.” Because Aric had killed Joules’s girlfriend (in self-defense). “Seems I might get it anyway. He’ll be comin’ after you. Just like the other games.”

The unstoppable Endless Knight. I shivered.

“And we’ll be waitin’.” Joules rose to leave, twirling that javelin, skirting around Cyclops.

Chewing a fingernail, Tess followed. “Sorry, guys.”

Gabriel hesitated at the tent flap. “Farewell.” His gaze flicked to Selena and back so fast, I almost missed the yearning in his green eyes.

A few months ago, I’d suspected his attraction to the stunning Archer, but his feelings had grown. How to use this?

He exited, leaving me with Selena, Finn, and Matthew.

In a defeated tone, Selena said, “You don’t know what it did to J.D., imagining how Death was hurting you.”

“I have a good idea, since I was out of my mind worrying about him taking on the Lovers’ army and other Arcana. I can just as easily blame you three for his capture!”

“J.D. wouldn’t see reason.” She retrieved that arrow, petting the flights as if for comfort. “He was crazed for months; then you just abandoned him.”

Finn exhaled a long breath. “Look, Eves, I’m sorry about the rough welcome. If you come up with a rescue plan, I want to hear it. I’ll help in any way I can.”

“How, Magician?” Selena scoffed. “You can’t walk without a crutch. I can’t draw my bow. How do we take on an army? Joules and Gabriel were our best option.”

“I’ll infiltrate the camp,” I said. “Finn can disguise me as a soldier before I set out.” If his illusion would last that long. “He doesn’t have to leave the fort. Once I’m across the river, I’ll put the guards to sleep with my spores.”

“The camp’s enormous,” Selena said. “How will we know which tent Jack’s in?”

We? “The wolf can track his scent.” Cyclops chuffed, his exhalation stoking the fire.

Finn adjusted his splint. “In my condition, I don’t know if I can cloak an enormous wolf. People are easier.”

“Besides, we can’t cross the river by boat.” Selena tapped the arrow against her chin. “It’s controlled by the High Priestess. If we get anywhere near the water, she’ll drag us down to the deep.”

Terror from the abyss! “She’s here? Is she working with the Lovers?” We all glanced at Matthew for an answer, but he stared at his hand. Which meant the subject was closed for him.

I turned back to Selena. “You keep saying *we*. As you told me, you can’t draw a bow.”

“I guess I’ll use a pistol. Or a sword. Even injured, I still have my superhuman reflexes and strength.” Her modesty too!

I vacillated, then nodded. “Okay, we’ll have to figure out another way across. Is there a bridge?”

“A few miles away,” Selena said. “The one where J.D. got nabbed. The Azey patrols it heavily.”

With each of her words, my hopes sank. *How to get to Jack? How to get to . . .*

An idea arose. “If we can’t go across the river or around it, then we’ll go above it.”

4

“I’m getting Gabriel to take us over.”

Selena rolled her dark brown eyes. “Jesus, ditz. Pop some Adderall. They just got through saying they wouldn’t get involved for anything less than Death.”

“Did *they* say it? I have a feeling Gabriel will help me.” Because I was going to get Selena to flirt with him. Desperate times . . . “They might have this mercenary thing going, but who says he can’t moonlight?”

“He’s a decent dude,” Finn said. “Can’t hurt to ask him one on one.”

“I’ll just go talk to him.” I turned to the Archer. “I’ll let you know what happens, when I get a spare minute.”

Selena’s reaction? Her signature *the hell* expression. “Fine! I’ll show you where their tent is.” She draped a coat over her shoulders like a cape.

I turned to Cyclops. “You’re going to stay here with Finn and Matthew.” Talking to the animal always made me feel ridiculous (though he was smarter than most beasts—and I might actually be communicating with Lark).

In CLC, the loony bin I’d been clapped up in, patients had only been allowed to watch classic shows on cable, like *Lassie*. I feared any second I was going to say, “What’s that, Cyclops? Timmy fell down a Prepper well?”

Selena and I had barely exited the tent before she started criticizing me. “Talk about a long shot. Joules and Gabe are like”—she raised two twined fingers—“*this*. They’ve had a whirlwind bromance. I’m giving us a one in a billion chance. Which means you’re an idiot.”

I glared. “Do you know how climbing ivy clings to brick? It pokes and pokes until it finds a weak spot to burrow into. We can do the same. Unless you’ve got something better to occupy your time?”

She pursed her lips. But she must’ve seen I was at my limit, because she said, “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Okay, let’s talk Lovers.” When Matthew had given me my memories of previous games, he’d said they would come sporadically (in order to guard my sanity—har).

I tried to recall the Lovers from the past, but got nothing. Maybe I’d never faced them.

All I kept seeing was an elusive memory of a picnic with my grandmother. “*What have you got there, Evie?*” I dimly remembered her cutting her thumb on a pecan shell, on purpose, blood welling.

“So talk.” Selena bounded like a gazelle from one plank to another, all long limbs and grace.

I trudged behind her, as if my boots were weighted. “Death told me they hunger for pain, but I don’t know why.”

“Maybe because they’re hella evil, like the Hierophant and the Alchemist?”

And Ogen? Possibly the High Priestess? What if all Arcana had the capacity for true evil? What if that was what *made* us Arcana? My alter ego—the red witch—could scare even me. “Tell me what you know about the Lovers’ powers.”

Selena hesitated.

“This is not the time to hold back information.” I stopped in the middle of the courtyard. “We need to be working together. I’m going to give this rescue everything I have. Will you?”

She came back to stand in front of me. “I was trained never to reveal my chroniclers’ info. Matthew always says, ‘Converge and conserve.’ I

was taught, ‘Convergence, conservation, *concealment*.’”

I crossed my arms over my chest, as unbending as an oak.

At length, she said, “For J.D., I’ll go against all my extensive training. Because I always have his six, always will, and unfortunately I need you to help him.”

Always will?

“In my Arcana primer, there was a lot of speculation about the Lovers.”

She’d gotten a primer? I wanted a primer.

Instead I had my grandmother, a Tarasova, a wisewoman of the Tarot. She’d be a wealth of knowledge—if I could find her, *reach* her.

But so might Selena be—if I could *trust* her.

“Some say that if they whisper in your ears at the same time, they can mesmerize you to confuse pain for pleasure. If they clasp hands and swing their arms, they can tempt you to love bad things, like murder and suicide. Is any of this jibing with what you’ve heard?”

“Ditto on the mesmerizing. But I can’t remember much more.”

“Other chroniclers were totally vague about them. The Emperor? Everyone can tell you he moves mountains, creates earthquakes, and uses lava to kill. The High Priestess manipulates water, drowning her enemies. Straightforward stuff. But the Lovers are surrounded by mystery. Could be because they always die early in the game. Could be they’re good at hiding power secrets. Like most of us.”

“I’ve told you everything I can do. What are you hiding?”

She waved that away. “I didn’t know Lark has bulletproof animals or that Ogen could supersize himself that much. Speaking of which, you talked about what the Devil did to you, but not Death.”

Death? He nearly seduced me into falling for him, then broke my heart. “Let’s focus on the twins, okay? I’ll try to get more details from Matthew.”

“Good luck with that. If possible, he’s making less sense than before, and he’s having fits. Only J.D. can calm him down.”

I felt a pang that Jack had been looking out for him. “Joules and his crew don’t have any info?”

“Gabe’s line was the only one that chronicled, and his books got destroyed centuries ago.”

I’d bet Aric knew all about the Lovers. As the three-time, reigning Arcana champion, he’d lived for millennia, gathering knowledge the way he gathered priceless relics. . . .

Two armed sentries passed us. Each wore a hooded camo poncho and carried a rifle. They nodded politely.

Under my breath, I said, “Arcana don’t freak them out? Gabriel’s wings alone should throw them.”

“At first, yeah. But they look to J.D. to see how to act. They hero-worship ‘the hunter.’”

Charismatic Jack could be so compelling when he wanted to.

“He uses our help to maintain order,” Selena said. “The Azey might have the twins, but J.D.’s got three Arcana himself—a psychic, an exquisite bow-goddess, and an illusionist.”

“How did this place come to be?”

“He built a lot of the wall with his own hands, worked himself to exhaustion. It’d stand up against a tank.” She couldn’t sound prouder. “He’s been recruiting skilled Azey dissenters, leaving messages for scouts. With his leadership and Finn’s illusions, we’ve been stealing tons from the army: food, fuel, even the mines J.D. planted in the moat.”

“It sounds like you guys are gaining momentum.”

Selena nodded. “That’s why the Azey sent half their force to set up shop across the river. Their guns are out of range—for now—but we think they’re hauling heavier artillery from Azey North. If it reaches here . . .”

Another worry to put on my list. “How did Jack get captured?”

“We were going to blow the bridge I was talking about—while Vincent was on it. We’d taken up position on a cliff overlooking the strike zone, waiting for his convoy to cross. J.D. had his finger hovering over the detonator.”

“Matthew told me Vincent surprised him.”

“The bastard parked just before the bridge. While we were coming up with a new plan, one of the convoy trucks that had already crossed fired a fifty-cal at us.”

I nodded like I knew what that was. It sounded bad. “Go on.”

“Bullets chewed the mountain apart. Finn fell, but J.D. and I held on somehow. He climbed up to get a shot at Vincent, so I headed to another rise, drawing fire. Next thing I knew I was falling too.”

“How did they know where you’d be?”

She peered around. “I think we’ve got traitors here, men planted by the Milovnićis.”

I rubbed the back of my neck.

“If we can free J.D., we’ll smoke them out.” She pointed behind me. “Gabe’s tent is over there, just past the courtyard. How do we do this with him?”

“You’re going to flirt with him.”

“Are you mental?”

“He’s head over heels for you.”

Selena huffed with impatience. “Understandably. But how does this help us? You want me to act like I *like* him? He’s completely bizarre.”

Yes, he wore an old-timey suit everywhere with a strange tie (a cravat or whatever). And yes, his speech was outdated. But . . . “I was going to say eccentric.”

She snorted, then lowered her voice. “Tess told me he was raised on a secluded mountaintop, in some kind of Arcana monastery. His chroniclers were cultish wing-worshippers. They separated themselves from society for generations, waiting for him to be born.”

No wonder he was so outdated. “You said his books got destroyed?”

“Villagers tried to burn the cult, à la Frankenstein; the chronicles went up in smoke.”

Villagers had tried to burn me in a past life as well. *They burn what they fear.*

“Selena, I’m not asking you to nest with Gabriel. All you have to do is ask him really nice to fly us over.” I reached up to brush her

silvery-blond hair back, tucking a silken lock behind her ear. “I miss lip gloss, and clearly you do too.”

“Shut it. I can’t believe I’m going along with this. I hate it when girls use their wiles. Normally, I’d just strangle him until he agreed.”

I sighed. “That’s plan B. Sometimes climbing ivy does that too.”

5

“Yo, Gabe!” Outside their tent, Selena cast me a glare for good measure. “I need to talk to you.”

He rushed out, flattening his black wings to duck under the tent flap. His long black hair was tied back in a ponytail. Like Lark, he had claws and a set of fangs. His eyes were leaf green.

He was a striking, if unusual-looking, guy.

“Selena,” he breathed, cheeks flushed. “Uh, and the Empress too.”

Why was I even here? As Matthew would say, “Nature and course. Love and bloom.”

“Greetings to you both.” He adjusted his suit coat. Must be a bitch to line up the slits in the back with the bases of his wings. “What is the issue at hand, ladies?”

Selena rolled her eyes. “You mean: *what’s up?*”

Wow, way to flirt. She was a regular coquette.

He nodded. “For me, I believe all things are best when pointed *up*.”

She and I blinked at him. Gentlemanly Gabriel probably had no idea his words sounded kind of dirty.

“Whatever.” Wasting no time, Selena said, “We’re going in to rescue J.D., and you’re going to help.”

He glanced over his shoulder and back. “Joules has already spoken on the subject. Our alliance will not—”

“I’m not asking your alliance,” she interrupted. “I’m asking you. All we need is transpo. You don’t have to do anything but fly us across the river.”

I recalled another of his talents—animal-like senses. “And to track Jack’s scent. It’d mean a lot to me, and so much to Selena.” I cast her a look.

“Yeah. It’d really mean a lot, Gabe,” she added, laying a hand on his muscular arm.

His lips parted, and his wings seemed to flutter uncontrollably. Wait, had he grimaced from the movement? Was something wrong with our transpo?

“Everything all right?” I asked.

He didn’t answer, just stared at the hand on his arm.

To her credit, Selena gave it a squeeze. “So we can count on you?”

When he remained undecided—or mind-boggled by her touch—I said, “Help us end the Lovers tonight.” Well, at least one of them.

Collecting himself, he said, “I thought you didn’t want to play the game, Empress.”

“I don’t. But I need time to figure out a way to stop it.” I pictured the game as a machine with cogs and wheels—that I longed to blow up. “The twins are going to keep coming after all of us.”

“What is your plan?”

“Finn disguises us. You fly us over. We march right into the Lovers’ camp. I fumigate their tent. Selena and I extract Jack.”

Gabriel was quiet for long moments.

With a glare, Selena removed her hand; at once, he said, “I shall assist you with more than transportation, as a full-fledged member of the team. But I have a condition.”

Full-fledged said the boy with wings. “Let’s hear it.”

“We go there to assassinate any Milovníci. Not to ask them to be in an alliance. Not to spare them.”

I totally agreed, but hadn’t thought he’d be this hard-core.

“We’ve talked to soldiers here about the general and his spawn. They must be stopped.”

“We’ll take them out,” I assured him.

He offered his claw-tipped hand, and we shook. “Joules will be displeased. I sense an AC/DC moment in my future.”

Huh? “Like the band?”

“No, like the currents. But I’ll handle him.”

“You do that,” Selena said. “Bring a bandanna for a spore mask and meet us at the watchtower. Midnight sharp.”

I frowned. “That’s hours away.”

“Their soldiers maintain a regular schedule,” she explained. “Like they do here. Reveille in the morning, even though there’s no daybreak. At midnight, most of the camp will be asleep.” To Gabriel, she said, “Don’t let any humans know what we’re planning.”

“Understood.”

I furtively kicked Selena’s boot; she straightened and said, “Oh. Thanks, Gabe. I won’t forget this.”

“It will be my pleasure, Selena. I look forward to it.” His eyes widened. “I mean, not that I am pleased about the occasion.”

Selena let him off the hook. “I look forward to kicking serial killer ass.”

He grinned. “Precisely.”

We started back toward Selena and Finn’s tent. Halfway there, she murmured, “I can’t believe he’s going against Joules! I would’ve bet my bow he’d refuse. My God, we might free J.D. tonight. Evie, if this works . . .” Though Selena was 100 percent, grade-A badass, her eyes glinted, a hairline fracture in her prickly façade. “If we get him back, you and I’ll be solid again.”

“Were we ever solid?” I was so different from her, and we’d hated each other at first. But we’d muddled along until we’d begun to rely on one another. And now she was lowering her guard a degree.

As soon as the thought occurred to me, her expression hardened.

“In every game, the Archer has an arrow for the Empress.”

I exhaled. “Yeah, yeah, I remember.”

“In this game, I might have misplaced it.” Shoulders squared, she turned from me.

As she strode away, I realized two things:

That’s the closest she’ll ever come to telling me we’re friends.

I’ll take it.

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from DEAD OF WINTER!

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