

Chapter 22



The Wicked Tower

FICTION

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The Wicked Tower 22

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The stairs circled down and down. Lady Norbana ran as fast as her overripe body would permit. It had been a long time since she'd been pregnant. She tried to remember how best to move. Her hand traced the stone wall to her right, catching herself as she stumbled more than once.

Even after the sounds of fighting and death were long behind her, she moved as quickly as she could, huffing and puffing from the effort. Sweat soaked through her undergarments. Eventually, she stopped and pulled off her armor. She dropped it to the stairs, and then continued down at a slightly faster pace.

The height of the tower was frightening. She'd been fleeing for what felt like an eternity, but when she stopped to catch her breath and look out a window, she was still just above the clouds. As she panted, cursing the magic that had brought her there, she heard a knock on the door behind her. She turned and carefully crept up to it. The thumping grew louder. Norbana put her ear to the door and heard a woman's voice calling for help.

"Shit." She looked around the deserted entryway to the floor. Was it a trap? But why have a trap there? If the person was in need of help, would it matter if she simply moved on? It wasn't like she was even supposed to be there in the first place. She took a deep breath and stepped away from the door. No one would ever know that she hadn't helped this person. It would be like it had never happened. A faint azure glow surprised Norbana, and she looked down at her shimmering hands and belly. "Shit, okay." She knew she needed to help the woman.

The glow faded as Norbana put her hands on the heavy iron bar that sealed the door from the outside. She was worried for her baby as she strained with both hands at it, but the bar gave way and her body did not. She turned the handle and opened the door. Inside, was a woman even more pregnant than she.

"Oh, thank, thank you, milady. I am Merope." Merope curtsied as best she could, given her immensely swollen belly. "Have you come to rescue me?"

"Um ... no." Norbana was happy that this woman recognized a lady when she saw one. But she wasn't thrilled at having rescued a commoner. She had hoped, truth be told, that it would have been Princess Minicia. "Is there anyone else here with you?"

"No, just me." Merope stepped around Norbana and onto the stairway. "And we shouldn't linger, Cesphea could be back any moment."

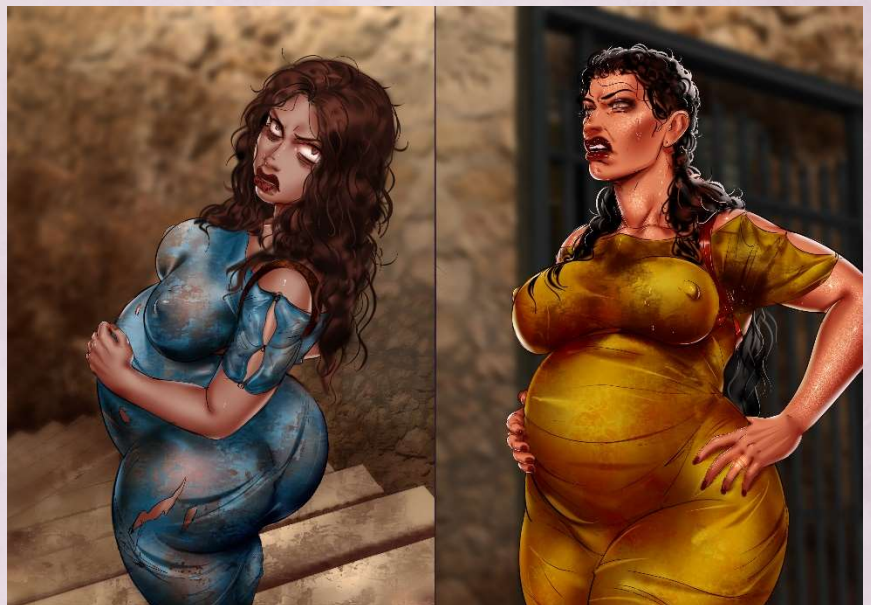
"You should use the queen regent's title, Merope," Norbana said stiffly.

"Not after the things she's done to me." Merope looked Norbana up and down and decided that the lady would be no more help. "Is the only way out to descend?" Merope held her belly through her tattered and stained stola, frowning at the curving stair.

"I think so." Norbana hadn't considered another way out. They were in a tower, after all.

"And do you know where they're holding the other prisoners?"

"You mean the Princess?" Norbana shrugged. "I'm not sure."



“No, I mean my husband.” Merope took one last look at the lady. “Thank you for your help. I’ve got it from here.” She turned and descended as fast as she could.

“Hey, wait for me.” Norbana followed close on her heels.

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The wind whipped at Circe’s copper hair as she plummeted beside the tower. She squinted her eyes. Her dragon scale armor clattered. The world was a new, wonderous place to her. But that did not mean she was naïve. Of course, she understood that if she hit the ground below, she would meet Pluto much sooner than expected. “Almost ... there.” Her whole body pointed down, like a stiff arrow. One of her hands went to her belt where the coiled rope and grappling hook tugged.

Fortunately, her grandmother fell horizontal to the Earth with her arms and legs splayed. That would slow her down enough. Cassia’s form disappeared into a cloud and Circe lost her. She plunged after her grandmother, pierced the clouds, and came out damp on the other side. The ground, now visible, approached at an alarming rate. Circe closed the gap to Cassia until only a few feet separated them. She made sure not to draft behind her but drop to her side. She would have warned her grandmother to ready herself, but the wind was too loud.

With one fluid motion, Circe released the end of the grappling hook and let the rope unwind toward the tower. With her other arm, she grasped Cassia around the waist. Circe glanced at the windows, judging the distance between each. She engaged the belay device and the two women arced quickly toward the tower. Satisfied with their approach, Circe turned her back to the window to protect Cassia.



Circe’s neck surged with pain. Glass broke around them, and they hurled into the tower. She folded herself as best as she could around Cassia, and rolled up against an oak table. Satisfied that they had no more momentum, Circe released Cassia and rolled to her side, groaning.

“Am I dead?” Cassia blinked wind-induced tears from her eyes. She looked around the strange room. A fortune in books lined the walls. It was some sort of library. Did they have libraries in the underworld?

“We ... are ... both alive.” Circe sat up. She reached to the base of her neck, lifted her hair, and carefully pulled a small shard of glass from her bluish flesh. It was only a half inch, but it was the first thing to pierce her. Circe contemplated her mortality for only a moment and tossed the shard away. She pressed her hand down on the wound and stood on shaky legs. “And somewhere far below the others.”

"We're ... inside the tower?" Cassia tried to join her granddaughter on her feet, but a flash of pain in her shoulder stopped her. She looked over to see the bolt sticking out of her. "Oh, Gods." She reached for the wooden shaft.

"No, leave it be." Circe took her hand off her own wound and felt blood trickle under her armor, slithering down her back. She reached for Cassia's shoulder. A faint blue iridescence moved about her fingers. She touched Cassia and her grandmother shuddered with relief. "That should help with the pain, but I cannot heal you here. Would you like to leave now? You have the power."

Cassia took an offered hand and rose to her feet. The pain had subsided to a dull thudding. She thought of her son and daughter, somewhere above her. "No, I'll stay." She looked up into Circe's deep eyes. "How did you save me? Can you fly?"

"I cannot fly, no." Circe put her hand back to the wound on her neck. "My mother had the foresight to provision me with a rope."

"A rope?"

"If you are to stay, we should find the stairs and climb. We have a long way to go." Circe tried to get her bearings, decided on a direction, and strode across the floor.

"It would be easier if you could fly." Cassia, with her much shorter legs, hurried to catch up.

"This is true." Circe nodded. "You should bring it up with my mother."

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The room shook around Valeria. She stumbled and put her weight on her scepter. The earthquake lasted no more than a few moments, jarring dust from the rafters above. "Something evil has happened." She reached to her breast, her royal consort holding her arm to steady her. "Did you feel that? It is as if something has been torn away."

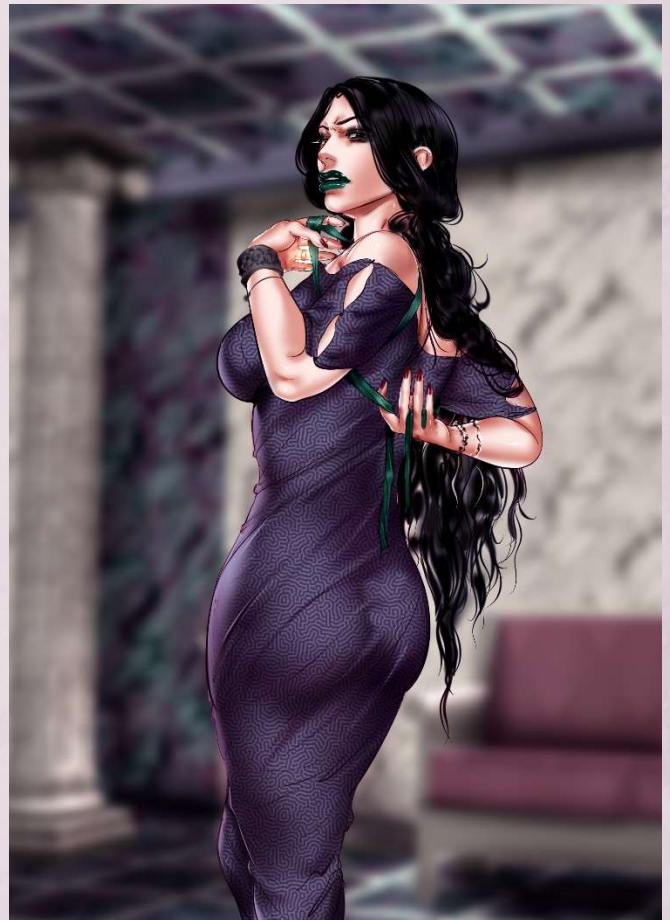
"I felt the trembling." Tiberius glanced at the massive, undead brute out of the corner of his eye. His skin crawled whenever the queens brought out their pet.

"Cesphea was right. They have come to the tower." Valeria straightened and steadied her nerves. She felt naked despite her resplendent gown. She turned toward her consort. "Bring me my armor."

"Of course, my dear." Tiberius's face was grim as he hurried off.

"I believe your wife shares this tower with us now." Valeria straightened her crown and gave Lord Spurrius an imperious look. "Stop her. And all that accompany her."

"May I take him?" Spurrius nodded up at the silent soldier. "I am but one man."



"No." Valeria shook her head and untied the straps to her gown. "I will use him to reenforce the guards on Minicia. Use treachery against them. You have no shortage of skill in that regard."

"Where are they?" Spurrius checked his sword. His heart was in his throat. Would Dellia cut him down? He didn't think so.

"They are above us, I think."

"But, Her Majesty is up there. Surely, they are already stopped." Spurrius cringed at the withering look Valeria offered.

"Go, now." Valeria stepped out of her gown and readied herself for her armor.

"I have an alternative. We might lay a trap instead." Spurrius bowed low.

"I'm listening," Valeria said.

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"Shh." Merope put up her hand to quiet the jabbering Norbana behind her. "There's someone up there, milady."

"Who?" Norbana held her belly and tried to catch her breath.

"Someone just went through that door. That's where they keep Minicia." Merope crouched in the shadows on the stairway and waited.

"Minicia?" Norbana thought she was supposed to know when they found Minicia's level. The others would need to know this, if they weren't already dead at the hands of those red capes. She looked back up the stairs behind her. "I couldn't possibly."

"What?" Merope hissed.

"I think you were sent to us to show us where she is. It's stupid, but I think you telling us is how we would know how to find her. That's how gods talk. In dumb riddles."

"What are you talking about?" Merope stood. She was breathing more evenly now. "Never mind, the way is clear. Let's pass quickly."

"No." Norbana stared at the upward stair with hatred. "I have to turn around. Good luck." She ordered her trembling legs to climb. She wouldn't have to go far. There was one way down. She would find a hiding spot and wait for Vel. He would come to her. If he was still able to walk. And if he didn't show, she would continue down again.

"Good luck, milady." Merope spared barely a backward glance as she stole by the massive ironwood door. Soon, she was past and racing toward her husband again.

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"I am no use, Circe. I cannot climb any further." Cassia collapsed on a stair. The penumbra of her shadow stretched above her. She looked out the gray window and could see the palace far below. They were almost in the clouds again.

"I could carry you." Circe scrunched her nose as she thought things over. They were lucky to have met no one on their way up, but that wouldn't continue forever. And she could not fight while carrying a woman, even one as short as her grandmother.

"What happens when we run into some red capes?" Cassia's eyes moved from the window to the bolt sticking out of her shoulder. Her impulse was to try and pull it out of her, but she resisted.



"That was my thought, too. We may find out now, someone is coming." Circe turned and freed her shield and sword. She waited in a crouch. As the sound of the person's approach drew nearer, Circe thought it unlikely a soldier. The footfalls were clearly those of someone with bare feet. A pregnant woman with a pretty face and dark hair emerged from around the bend in the stairway and stopped. She stood still as a statue when she saw Circe.

"Don't take ... me ... back." Merope's brows knitted. She looked behind the tall redhead and lying on the stairs seemed to be the duchess. She blinked in surprise. "Wait ... you don't work for the queens?"

"We do not. And you?" But Circe was already sheathing her sword and slinging her shield on her back. This woman was no threat.

"I am a servant of Ostia Nova. Is that you, Your Grace?" Merope tentatively approached them.

"It is." Cassia looked up and her eyes got very round when she saw the state of her former servant. She looked like she could give birth any moment. She shuddered to think about the story behind that pregnancy. "And you are Merope. Are you hurt?" Cassia, with Circe's help, got to her feet.

"Better than Your Grace, it seems." Merope eyed the bolt sticking out the duchess with some disquiet. "I am headed to find my husband. They have him locked away somewhere."

Cassia exchanged a knowing glance with Circe. "I cannot climb, but I can descend. I will help this woman. She and her husband are my responsibility."

Merope, grateful and seeing this woman's need, moved over to her and put Cassia's arm over her shoulder.

"I will help my father. Do not worry about Vel and Naevia. No harm will come to them." Circe nodded at Merope, curtsied at Cassia, and ran up the stairs, taking two at a time.

“Nicias is your husband, yes? He disappeared with half the servants of my castle.” Cassia was much relieved to have gravity working with her as they set off together.

“It was terrible, Your Grace.” Tears welled in Merope’s eyes. She told the duchess everything that had happened.

Cassia listened in horrified silence.

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"She said Minicia is in there."
Norbana pointed at the ironwood door from around the curving wall.

"Well, that is well and good. We rescue her and then all we need to do is find the heart of the tower." Vel sighed. Exhaustion gripped him.
"What do you think, Dellia? Smash and grab?"

"That sounds about right." Dellia nodded.

"Yes, strength over stealth." Circe said just over Vel's shoulder.

Everyone jumped.

"Good gods, Circe. Where did you come from?" Naevia looked around to see if there were any more surprises in their hiding spot but saw none.

"I climbed the tower." Circe smiled at the shock on their faces.

"We thought you were dead," Vel said. And then he and Naevia both said, "Mother?"

"She is safe for the moment, helping a wayward servant find her husband." Circe smiled brightly, and then turned her attention back to the ironwood door, as if the matter was closed.

"Thank the gods." Vel leaned forward and kissed his daughter on the cheek. "My heart broke when I thought I'd lost you two."

"It'll take more than a small tumble off a tower to extinguish my flame." Circe smiled with pride at her father.

"We're going to need more than that." Naevia nearly laughed with relief.

Circe filled them in on all that had happened to her. And they returned the favor. When they were all caught up, they stood and moved toward the door.

"Should we maybe try the handle? It could be unlocked." Vel eyed the solid planks reinforced with iron bands.

"I can help." Spurrius appeared from out of the shadows. They all stood on a landing just inside the spiraling stairs. He on one side, Vel's party on the other.

"Stop right there." Dellia, whose sword was already drawn, raised it before her.

Spurrius did not stop, but he raised his empty hands palms out. His hips had a confident swagger as he closed the distance between them slowly. "I am sorry how we left things, my sweet. You want to save the Princess, consider her my reunification gift to you. Our marriage can surely withstand some bumps and bruises. Let this rectify things." His smile flickered when he noticed his wife's belly under her armor. He knew not what had happened to her, but he hoped her capture would answer some questions.



"If you come within striking distance, my sword flies, husband." Dellia's words frosted with chill.

"Come now. The princess is unguarded. I can open the door, and you will have her in an instant." Spurrius's pace slowed considerably at his wife's threat, but still he walked on. "The queens have had their time. I want only to be with you."

"Gods, you are still more handsome than Apollo." Dellia's sword wavered in the air. Her husband was now only a few feet away.

"You will accept my help?" Spurrius filled his whole being with sincerity.

"You are also less trustworthy than a Kart Hadasht merchant. Not another step, Spurrius. So help me ..."
Dellia bit her lip, and watched his sandaled feet slap on the wood floor.

"It's me, Dellia. Put down the sword." Spurrius was close enough to reach out. He extended his finger, and lightly pressed the flat of the blade so that the sword pointed away from him. "This is our chance to –" All the air escaped his lungs. It happened so quickly he could barely track her movement. His heart filled with ice. He looked down, gasping. Not ice, iron. She had run him through. "You ... you ... bitch ..." He staggered back when she withdrew the sword. "You ... killed me." His hands went to his chest as if he could somehow hold his life in.



"I would not betray my cousins or my progeny for you, Spurrius. You should have known that." A tear rolled down Dellia's cheek. "He would have led us into a trap." She looked away from her husband as he fell to his back and sputtered. In a moment, he was silent. "To answer your question, Your Grace. I do not think we should try the handle. They are waiting for us. We should blow the door out with all the force we can muster."

And that is what they did. Leaving Spurrius's prone body on the landing, Naevia, Dellia, and Circe summoned what destructive magic they could. Vel stood behind them, wondering what horrors awaited them on the other side. Was Minicia so important that they should risk so much?

A ball of blue energy crackled and hissed at the iron reinforcements. The explosion that followed sent the door twisting and hurtling through the air across an open chamber on the other side. The rent iron and ironwood swept over several crimson capes on its way to the far wall, and the lot punched a hole through the stone and exited the tower. Quickly, Vel's party stormed in after the door.

Circe was the first one through, followed by Dellia.

There were a dozen people waiting for them, all knocked over, or turned away from the blast. The queen's consort got to his feet, next to Valeria, who leaned on her scepter. They were both clad in glittering gold and crimson armor. Several guards quickly stood upright, swords drawn. After the trick Spurrius had tried to play on them, Vel had expected a greeting such as what he found. What he did not expect was the towering abomination standing unaffected by the explosion near the queen.

"Vel, is that ...?" Naevia knelt next to her brother and loosed an arrow. Horror was written all over her face.

"It is." Vel stood still, his mind fighting panic. Even in life, his brother Fortinbras was a nightmare of sorts to Vel. But this monster before him was in no way alive. Vel could see that clearly. His skin was gray and mottled, and his eyes clouded over. His once handsome face was twisted and gruesome. The thing that had been his brother, lumbered toward Vel, brandishing a sword nearly the size of Naevia.



"Vel, run." Naevia let fly another arrow. It hit Fortinbras in the thigh. He stumbled, fell, and rose again. This time walking with a limp. So, at least, he could be wounded Naevia thought. She pulled her brother across the wide room toward Dellia, who battled the guards. Then a second shock threatened to stop her feet. Chained near the center of the room, gruesome and undead in the same ways as Fortinbras, stood a woman silently howling and wreathed in a pink flame. Her face was barely recognizable, but Naevia had seen her likeness before. It was Princess Minicia. And Naevia knew the second she saw her. "That's the heart. Minicia is ... the heart of the tower." She dodged a blade and pulled her short sword.

"We'll fucking know it when we see it." Dellia screamed over at them.

Red bolts shot from Valeria, and hit an azure barrier Naevia had placed around them. Vel swiped his sword at a closing guard and turned him away. Circe engaged Fortinbras, but was sent flying into a wall. Discord and chaos had their way with the room. Another red bolt hit Naevia and she screamed, fell, and slowly got to her feet.

Vel could quite plainly see they were losing. Circe picked herself up and engaged Fortinbras again. But now the queen sent evil magic her way. They needed help. "Please, Hekate. Please." But no help came. Vel fought off Tiberius and was pushed closer to Valeria. If she turned her red fire on him, he would be finished. He wished desperately for some way to save his family. And then, he saw it.

On the wall behind the queen, a doorway opened to the dryad forest. He could even hear the song of the wood faintly under the din of battle. Vel had his sword wrenched from him by Tiberius, but he didn't care. He rolled back, rose into a full sprint and had Valeria in his arms before she saw him coming. Together, they tumbled through the door. In the blink of an eye the battle disappeared and it was only Vel, Valeria, and the wood.



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Breathing hard, Vel jumped up from the spongy earth and moved away from the queen. "Hekate! Hekate! Are you here?" The stars twinkled through the canopy above. Most of the forest hid in shadow. The dryad song was as slow and beautiful as he remembered it. Overhead, an owl hooted down at him with annoyance.

"What have you done?" Valeria picked herself up. She looked for her scepter, but it wasn't there. She lifted her hands and waited for the pink glow that would finish off the young idiot. But her magic was no more available than the scepter. She looked around and took note of the eerie sounds of the place. They were not in the Surround anymore. Quickly, she pulled her dagger from her belt.



"I've given my people a chance." Vel watched her warily. He had no more weapons, so he made sure to give her distance.

"Bring me back, and I'll spare your family. You will be exiled to the North." She stepped toward him slowly, trying to herd him into a clearing where the starlight might let her see better.

"For some reason, I don't trust you." Vel continued to back away as she slowly pursued him. He felt quite a bit like a rabbit conversing with a lion. Although, of course, he was more than a foot taller than her.

"Eeeeeiiiiiii." Valeria called out a battle cry as she charged him. A branch caught at her hand and pulled the dagger from her grasp. Undeterred, she closed in on Vel, swept at his legs with her foot, and pounced when he hit the ground. She had her hands around his neck in an instant.

“Waaaaaiittt.” Vel tried to pull her hands away, but she was incredibly strong. He couldn’t breathe. His hands loosened. He looked up into that pretty, regal face, twisted in anger. The copper crown hung askew on her head, and he idly wondered if it might fall off and end up on his head as he died. The dryad song began to fade in his ears. But then, her grip on his neck relaxed.

“What? What is this?” Valeria’s arms soaked up a delicious warmth from the nineteen-year-old erstwhile duke. “What sorcery do you possess?” Her hips rhythmically rocked of their own volition. She was rubbing herself on his chest. Without thinking she reached up with her left hand and untied the laces to her armor.



“Your magic ... doesn’t work here.” The world came back into focus for Vel. The hand on his throat was now caressing him gently. “But my gift ... does.”

“Your gift?” Valeria stopped unlacing. She looked down at the young man, suddenly understanding that she had fallen into a trap. With all her effort, she pulled her hand away from his neck and jumped off him. “What are ... you?”

“Like any of us ...” Vel sat up and slowly stood. It was his turn to unlace his armor. He could see he wouldn’t need it in that wood. “I am what the gods made me.” He removed his lorica squamata and dropped it to the grassy forest floor. The dryad song around him grew more urgent, its beat seemingly connected to his accelerating pulse.

"Eeeeeiiiiiii." Valeria swept at his legs again, but Vel jumped over her. She swung with her fist and struck him on the arm. He was much too tall to fight standing up. She struck out at him over and over in their clearing, but either she came up empty, or her attacks were deflected away. Then, he caught hold of her wrist. That beguiling heat ran up her arm again. She practically melted, her vagina gushing. Unlike her sister, Valeria had never given much energy to sex. Certainly, her body had never responded with such a deluge to anything she'd done with Tiberius. Her body called out to surrender to Vel, but she wrenched her wrist away.



"Do you not see where this ends?" Vel reached down and adjusted his cock so that his belt supported it. He was hard now, but he didn't want it to slow him down too much.

"Yes." With that, Valeria turned and ran through the forest. There was no plan now, just a need to get far away. The horribly, sickly singing of the forest filled her ears. Branches lashed out at her, cutting her laces.

"Well, shit." Vel took off after the queen. His strides were much longer than hers, so he didn't think she'd get too far. But when he didn't quickly close the distance between them, he realized his cock was indeed slowing him down. He willed it to soften, but it didn't listen. "Slow ... down ... Your ... Majesty."

"Wither ... and die ... Vel of the North." Before she had traveled two hundred yards, twigs and brambles had torn her armor from her, and tattered her battle tunic. Valeria looked over her shoulder and could see him dodging through the trees after her. His pale skin made him easy to spot, even in the darkness. Her tunic tore from her, and then a branch somehow caught under her chest band and ripped it clean off. She ran only in sandals, copper crown, and underwear, her breasts now bouncing uncomfortably. She held them with her arm and ran on.

Vel was out of breath, sweaty, and trembling all over when he saw the queen stumble on a root and fall to the ground. He didn't let up, finally closing the gap between them. She'd fallen in a small, mossy gully. He reached down and placed his hands on her bare shoulders and did his best to hold her down. She was quite strong, and turned around, her hands punching at his chest. He took the punishment, and held onto her hair and her breast. Despite her fury, he was enamored of her beauty. He reminded himself that only minutes ago she'd tried to kill him. And that she'd killed poor, innocent Bantia. And done something horrific to Fortinbras. The list went on in his head, and his hands turned to iron. After a minute, her thrashing died down and she looked up into his eyes dumbly.

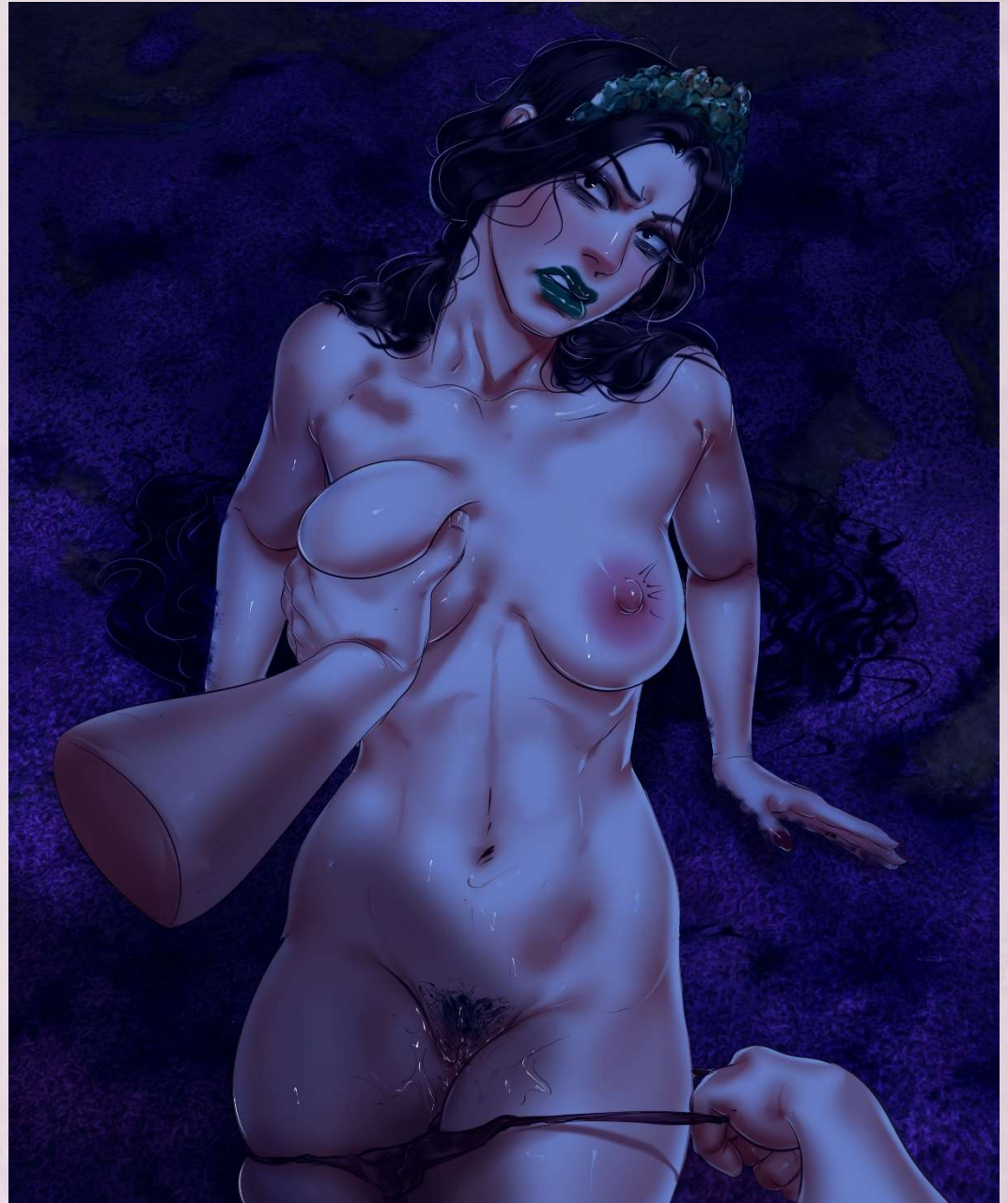
"You ... you are going to take me, aren't you?" She lifted his tunic, pulled down his underwear, and worked his monstrous cock from under his belt. The heat licked at her fingers as she fondled it like a love-struck virgin.

“Is that what you want, *Your Majesty?*” Vel released her hair and pulled his tunic over his head with one hand, careful to keep his left hand on her breast. The tunic hung from his left arm. He then unclasped his belt and threw it away.

“Even looking at your queen naked is a capital offense.” This wasn’t true, but Valeria swore it soon would be. She watched her hands as if they were someone else’s as they moved lovingly up and down the long shaft. “I do not want your filth in me.” But she gave no resistance when he pulled down her underwear. She was down to just her crown and sandals.

“Does your consort have a similar size, or should I go slowly?” Vel knew the answer, but wanted to torture her, at least a little.

“Go ... slow.” She watched him climb between her wide-open legs. She guided him in.



“Eeeeeeeeeiiiiiiiiiii.” The wood echoed with a comical parody of her battle cry. Only the head was in, and he stretched her beyond comprehension. She pushed her head back into the moss, her nostrils flaring and teeth gnashing. “Do it ...” The heat of him coiled around her heart. “Push it ... ugh ... all the way ... aaaahhhhhh ... in.”

Vel complied.

