

The kiss is outrageous. I grip the precious novel in my lap, heart-pounding as the hero pressed the maiden against the soft-white bark of the tree while thrilling music played for the dancers at the nearby royal ball. Her tongue tangled with his. The dark winds of twilight twine between his hair and the midnight tresses of the rose-lipped girl.

*In full view of the court!*

One day, I will find someone who would kiss me like this chivalrous character consumed this woman, kissing her with his whole body somehow and setting everything glowing. Like this book, such a passionate moment might have to be stolen.

My destiny pointed toward some political match, not loveless, but definitely lacking the passion and sheer physical artistry as detailed within these pages.

This novel is perhaps my greatest secret. To obtain it, I'd had to concoct a series of appointments, extra duties, and an emergency situation that lured the maids out of their quarters, while leaving me free to slip through the shadowy palace halls, down the servant's stair to snatch this priceless valuable from a nightstand. I, who had everything, had stolen a book. If I'd requested its purchase, rumors would have spread. People would know how lonely I was, how I thirsted for some kind of romantic interlude. All any rising courtier needed was to put some kind of master seducer in my path and I'd be done for. Even the thought of such a thing happening made me flush. I wanted it to happen. But I had a responsibility to fulfill.

So, to protect myself and my people, I stole the book. And once I read it, I'll burn the evidence.

I cross my legs, silken skirts hissing as I turn the page, hanging on the character's every indrawn breath, nearly bursting the seams of the woman's bodice with the strength of her desire. He'd professed his love and she'd practically leapt at him to seal their bond, making them

**Commented [CS1]:** I like the contrast here. This is ridiculous! This is precious (the good kind)!

**Commented [CS2]:** This is such a nitpicky thing! But heart-pounding would link heart and pounding together to make it modify another word, like a heart-pounding story, or a heart-pounding hammer (there's a weapon for you!)? Something that pounds hearts, right. I think? Here, I think what you're trying to say is that the MC's heart is pounding. The only reason I'm investing however many sentences I've written thus far in such a tiny bit of feedback that normally I'd gloss over because grammar...word choice...something something whatever box this fits into isn't normally something we pay attention to. I'm only doing this because it's in the very first line of this book! Within the first two sentences! So it's a bad moment for the reader to stop and squint at this sentence trying to decide if it's written correctly.

As I have just done, haha.

**Commented [CS3]:** Ooh a stolen book

**Commented [CS4]:** Tense?

**Commented [CS5]:** I'm not sure I know what "sheer physical artistry" means?

**Commented [CS6]:** I'm a little confused by this. A rising courtier could put some kind of master seducer in her path...like not himself, but hire someone? So she would...give up her place so they could take it? So they'd have a hold over her because they're paying the guy she likes?

"But I had a responsibility to fill" makes me think she's thinking of falling in love with a master seducer who \*is\* a courtier because who would want someone to pay someone to go after her? But that doesn't seem to agree with the previous sentences.

**Commented [CS7]:** Makes it all better, huh? Haha

anamcara, soulmates. It's a rare bond. Anamcara are the mirrors of each other's power and together they are stronger than any other wielder of magic. The magic flowing between them heals all hurts, makes them impervious to harm. But separated, they are weaker than before. It's a dangerous, heady romance and my body feels aflame with want for what these fictional people possess.

The lovers **escaped** into the gardens, the glow of the childlike tree spirits lighting their way as they kissed, and breathlessly giggled into secluded parts of the palace grounds. Finally, they collapsed together and he kissed down her neck to her collar bone, parting the expensive brocade of her gown down to her—

**Commented [CS8]:** I'm not sure how to handle tense in a book she's reading, but she's actively reading it...so I'm not sure why it's in past tense. Might just be me 😊

My sitting room door opens, not even a knock to warn me. I snap the book closed, cheeks heating, and stand, hiding the novel in my pocket.

I needn't have worried.

"Princess." Trinity **was** a touch out of breath as she rushes through the door, hand grasping the smooth knob. "Princess."

**Commented [CS9]:** Tense?

Behind Trinity enters one of the Wittan lords. He's dressed in his usual uniform, a black doublet laced with the chain of his office. He bows deeply, expression grave.

*No. Not now.*

My hand in my pocket grips the book. My heart crawls into my throat. Desperate, I want them to leave. **I want the shouting coming from somewhere deep in the palace to vanish.**

**Commented [CS10]:** ? Is there shouting?

When my mother walked into the darkling forest and never returned, everyone had the same pitying expression in their eyes. Poor **Polarys**, inheritor of her mother's power a mother who didn't love her enough to stay. I'd borne their pity and worry, as though it mattered more to soothe their sorrows instead of my own.

**Commented [CS11]:** Cool name

It's happening again.

"Master Lewellyn," I say, raising him from his bow.

"You're highness, the king—" his voice cracks and tears well in his eyes.

"My father is dead," I say it matter-of-fact. I brace for the stabbing, twisting pain that has no visible wound. That shattered glass, slivering into my heart when they finally found my mother's torn and ragged body, broken when the monster she tried to summon with her power turned on her. The pain doesn't come. Not in a crush of denial and fear. Not the wracking sobs of loss and angry repudiation. This is different, a hollow, uncertain void where once my father's presence existed.

The soft sounds of the tree spirits scattering come from far off.

Master Lewellyn gathers himself. "My princess—my queen."

It's the wrong thing. The next ruler will be announced by the Wittan and will not be named until the eolderman tallies the votes.

My maid bows as well, low and deep.

Lewellyn can hardly speak for his own tears. He has not had months of preparation, daily doses of watching a once-powerful sorcerer fade. "P-princess. I-it wasn't natural. It was an assassin."

"What?" The trees that make up the walls of the palace shiver around us. The small spirits gasp, holding tiny hands to open mouths. Then they flee, climbing the branches that make up my walls and into the thick canopy of leaves overhead.

It is unseemly to run, but I do it anyway, rushing from my tower to my father's rooms.

**Commented [CS12]:** Oh...I guess I thought she didn't want this guy to come in because she was too busy reading the spicy bits of her book. Not because of something else?

It feels like a very abrupt change paired with a lot of information.

**Commented [CS13]:** Um...wow. She was expecting this? I wasn't expecting this. I'm feeling a little unmoored.

**Commented [CS14]:** Intriguing!

**Commented [CS15]:** To say?

**Commented [CS16]:** Is she outside? I would LOVE to know more about this scene's setting, because this sounds awesome.

Attendants are weeping outside the door, a woman wails in the hall, her husband supporting her. Guards at stiff attention pull back the screening veil of black flowers on thick vines hung over the entrance to block trespassers, allowing me to step inside.

"Polarys." Voltis's voice is, reverential, cracked with grief. There's a falseness to it that irritates me. My bastard half-brother, broad of shoulder and clever of mind, is already dressed in the mourning blacks we've had waiting in our closets for months now. I am in my brocade selected for dinner with the water bringer's guild, bright blue with a wild green pattern woven across the skirt, like the fish darting through glowing streams in the palace gardens. Should I have taken the time to dress in my own silken black robes?

What is the appropriate protocol for an assassination? Let alone a royal assassination?

I don't want to see, but I force myself to approach the bedside.

The pale green coverlet is turned down. Father's bedclothes are startlingly clean and undisturbed, except for the knife in the left side of his chest, a delicate bloom of blood around it. His eyes are half-lidded, dry, and milky colored underneath. There is no flicker of life.

My father has been gone for months now, leaving all his responsibilities to his two children, neither of us wholly equipped for the job. His gentle tremors worsened like someone twisted his nerves around his spine and his head perpetually strained to the far left. We couldn't get him to eat regular meals because he'd choke on most foods. Even his skin suffered, thinning rapidly until it was as fragile as the eolderman's spider silk. In a few short years, he'd gone from a sorcerer who could call the even the dark sea to his bidding, to a bed-ridden, shriveled version of himself.

"He's finally at peace." A hot tear slides over my cheek. His suffering is over.

**Commented [CS17]:** This paired with the explanation of why she couldn't buy the book herself seems to be nice character pointers/what's important to her.

**Commented [CS18]:** Huh. The things she notices here say something about her—she isn't horrified or grief-struck. The blood is delicate, not gross, or loathsome or sticky or...any other number of descriptors.

I'm intrigued by her lack of feeling for her father and the detachment she seems to be feeling here (even admiration? Like her father's death is a work of art.)

**Commented [CS19]:** So he's in a bad state of health, but she didn't feel the need to be with him, just doing her thing waiting for news that he'd finally kicked off. I'm getting thistly vibes from and for Voltis as well, which is a cool name.

**Commented [CS20]:** Oh, wow, that wasn't the vibe I was getting! Maybe just me, I'll ask the others.

"Yes, so sorry it interrupted your personal *study time*," Voltis looks at me, eyes lingering too long, too hard. I meet his stare, challenging him. The book is heavy in my pocket and I wonder if he can see it in the voluminous folds of my clothes. He knows he can't hurt me. He's tried and failed before.

"As if you spent any time with father," I say.

"More than you."

I want to scream at Voltis.

Who had to go to the council meetings and hear the measly complaints of every lord who thought it was worth the court's attention to consider if the slight change in the luminescence of the mushrooms on his farm could herald a coming famine? Not him. Voltis certainly didn't oversee the palace operations either. His days weren't piled with meetings and schedules that he didn't choose for himself. The one hour I carved out for myself before falling into an exhausted sleep has been taken by an assassin along with what remained of my hope that my father might recover and resume his duties.

*Clang. Bong. Clang.*

I flinch at the intrusive noise of the bells coming through the open window. Beyond, the dark sea glimmers with the glowing shape of one of the water bringer's beasts. The city sung from white-barked trees shines brighter as the tree spirits wake and push back the ever-twilight.

*Clang. Bong. The king is dead. Clang. Bong.*

"It's been weeks since I've seen him," Voltis says, a strangely emotional admission even from him. He stares at father's face, I assume. At the wrinkles, the sagging yellowed skin, now pale with a bluish tinge, at the spotty discolorations, the bruise from when he fell out of his chair last week and hit the window ledge.

**Commented [CS21]:** Intriguing. And feeding my theory that this is one of those murder families where the kids try to off each other in order to get their daddy's throne.

"The last time I saw him, was after he got this." Gently I brush fingers over the greenish discoloration and draw my hand back. His skin is so cold. I'd merely come into the room and asked the nurses if he was okay. I hadn't bothered to speak with him myself.

"How did this happen?" I whisper so the people in the hall listening do not hear.

Voltis lifts an irritated brow and gestures to the dagger.

I roll my eyes at him. "Who would do this? He was already dying."

"Not soon enough, it would seem." All Voltis's vinegar is thrown in my direction.

As though I would be so impatient.

"You said it last week," Voltis begins. "Something about father lingering too long."

"I didn't intend for this. It's just difficult to keep being outvoted by the Wittan, or stalled because they don't want to act hastily in case father recovered and his wishes were different." We all hoped for it, but there was no cure for this disease.

"Now we'll never know if he could have," Voltis quips. "They're searching the castle for the assassin. They've closed the city and the port."

That explains the beast swimming in the harbor. Probably to stop ships from leaving.

We share a look. My dark gaze on Voltis's gray, washed-out blue eyes. He takes after our father in looks, but his lips are too full, distinctly his mother's, the Lady Zarabeth. I look nothing like the man in the bed, taking after my mother entirely, in far too many ways.

"Did anyone try to reveal the counter-image?" I reach internally for that part of me connected to magic and it hisses to life. Glittering black dust pools in my palms and I direct it to the blade, to show me the outline of the last person who touched the hilt. It's a simple use of magic, used to deter thieves and reveal crimes, but the moment the tiny particles of my power

**Commented [CS22]:** Wow, that's a terrible accusation followed by not a denial of said accusation...but I'm not sure what she IS saying?

**Commented [CS23]:** Eeek! Murder family! But...not the kind that seizes power because they're all hanging back to see if he'll get better rather than taking everything they can the moment no one is overseeing them. Not sure how that works.

Unless we just...really, really don't care one way or another if Dad is dead or alive. But I don't see justification for that. Or any other feelings on display here. She's being mentally very cold, but physically very gentle and affectionate.

**Commented [CS24]:** ?! What beast? Sounds cool.

I went back to figure out what beast, and it's so casually mentioned along with the tree sprite things that I didn't really take note of it being a thing that was abnormal. Or needed to be taken note of.

**Commented [CS25]:** Nice! (I wish I knew what it meant, though! A promise of things to come, for sure, and that's awesome, but I'm really having a hard time getting a read on our girl here)

**Commented [CS26]:** ???WHAAAAAT HOW HAS THIS NOT BEEN BROUGHT UP??

Hissing to life and the way she's connected is a pretty cool description though.

come within an inch of the blade, the magic bleaches white and fizzles out, disappearing entirely.

**Commented [CS27]:** Oooh intriguing.

"Barristan had the same result." Barristan is one of Voltis's friends and a member of the Wittan.

"He was here?" I ask sharpish. I dislike Barristan. He's excellent at challenging everything I suggest.

**Commented [CS28]:** Nice character hint.

"He was with me when I was informed."

It makes sense, Voltis's rooms are closer than mine. Voltis has very little in the way of a magical gift. I've taken residence in one of the towers, keeping myself and my sometimes erratic power away from the gossip of the court as much as I can.

**Commented [CS29]:** Sooo.... Most people have power? And it's shameful hers is erratic?

"Surely someone saw something."

"The staff are being questioned," he says. The palace's many tiers of employees and sorcerers were doing all they can. There's nothing for me to do. Again.

My only duty now: bear witness to a dead king.

"The Wittan will have a choice to make," Voltis says.

I look up from the strange metal of the dagger, something about it had stopped my power, killed it as effectively as the blade had killed my father. And then I see how Voltis stands. Hands in his pockets, the king, our father between us, something grim and determined shadowing his expression.

**Commented [CS30]:** Between...her and him? Why did that other guy say it was her for sure then? When she denied it, I thought it was a nod to beaurocracy, not that he was completely departing from what was supposed to happen. It didn't surprise her, and she wasn't like "oh, you hope that because you're loyal to me" she just kind of brushed it off like it was normal?

"He had no final words," Voltis continues. "No one heard him say who will take his place."

I blink, as though slapped. I clutch the book in my pocket, using it to steady myself.

"You can't possibly think that the Wittan will choose someone else," I scoff. I am the legitimate heir, female though I may be, I carry the power of the family line. Voltis does not. However, with the right wife, his children would likely be formidable. As the bastard prince, he'll be lucky to make a good match with an eligible woman of significant power without any of his own.

**Commented [CS31]:** Oh, ok

**Commented [CS32]:** Oh. This wasn't super clear either.

If the monarch cannot name a successor, the Wittan will choose.

Though I am the legitimate heir, the lords will not have forgotten what power it was I inherited, and what it did to the last person who wielded it and the vote has to be unanimous.

Trees sung into shape droop overhead. They know the king is dead. A few leaves have fallen, one on father's cheek, caught in his beard, one on his parted lips. Another drifts, freewheeling and spiraling to the blood staining his bedclothes.

"Sister, all that matters is what is best for the kingdom. We'll find the assassin and who was behind this. Barristan has gone to the Ovates. They may have something."

Ovates are half in this world, half consumed by a divinatory madness and unlikely to be of any help.

**Commented [CS33]:** Sounds interesting

Perhaps I should wait, but the king is dead and I am not the clear successor. I slide my hands out of my pockets.

**Commented [CS34]:** ...wait...isn't she?  
Like, I mean maybe she's a little worried because of her magic, but what changed between ten minutes ago and now?

"What are you doing?" Voltis moves as though to stop me.

I grab the dagger.

Numbing almost-pain grips my right arm as though it has fallen asleep. No wonder no one else had tried this. No other magic user would have the strength after touching the blade to remove it.

**Commented [CS35]:** How does she know this?

She doesn't seem to recognize what has been done to the knife, so why does she think other people do and would know not to touch it?

I let go. Magic flows back into my body, dark and sweet like chocolate. Yet, my palms break out in a cold, unfamiliar sweat.

"What is it?" I ask. **Though I already know. Star forged. Altairean. Enemy. Only the Altair make blades from starbright metal.**

Voltis leans over, inspecting the weapon. "Barristan said it **might be Aquillan Ore.**"

"Why would **the Altair be sending daggers for father and not me, or you? We haven't been in conflict with them for decades.**"

Voltis shrugs. "They have a new princess about to marry."

"And they're going to celebrate their nuptials with assassins sent into the dark and start a war?" The Altair are battle-hardened barbarians who like to wear revealing clothes and touch in public, but I doubt they are this bloodthirsty. Or crafty. To sneak into the palace, raising no alarms and kill the king. . .

"They make war, Polarys. They always have. We've talked several times about securing our borders."

I draw myself up, lifting my chin. "And the Wittan always chooses to respond to threats of war with peaceful action. We can't afford open war. Especially not with the Altair who can block our power. We do not fight with arms, well most of us don't." I mean it as an insult because his weak gift means he's had to learn to fight with blades.

"Things are different Polarys. **They murdered a man who was already dead. They took father's peaceful passing from him, the last joy he had.**"

I shake my head. "They have Aquillian ore. They can defend against any attack we might make."

**Commented [CS36]:** Does she? She just...chose not to share with us when she realizes it? Why ask if she knows?

**Commented [CS37]:** So...not what she thought?

**Commented [CS38]:** These two sentences don't seem to jive together?

**Commented [CS39]:** We jumped from "maybe it's this" to "I definitely think it's this and we're having an active discussion about starting a war over it" without any transitional steps.

Voltis makes an angry sound under his breath. He comes around the bed and takes my hands. "This isn't about us, or about father. This was an act of war. We need to present a united front to the Wittan, or they will make weak decisions again. Our enemies know it and the strength of Orion has never been greater. Now more than ever it is time to bring magic back to the magicless, don't you think?"

I clench my hands and take a slow breath, though nothing I do prevents the shadows in the ceiling canopy from deepening, and the gentle glow from witch lights from dimming.

"You want this war," I accuse him. "Father isn't even in his grave and we're discussing spilling blood. He wouldn't want this."

"Are you afraid, Polarys? Afraid of what might happen if you show Orion what you're capable of? You could stop the Altair once and for all. End their poisonous empire, regardless of their metals. Barristan couldn't even get close to the bed because of that blade. *You touched it.*"

"Stop it. This isn't what father would have wanted."

Voltis merely points to the fireplace. Over the mantle, are father's battle weapons. Twin blades are crossed, the strong steel stained by magical fire. I know the story well, that father's beloved brother was killed in a border skirmish and he made a decade of war against the Altair when they last attempted to cleanse Earthame of magic. "Father decimated their forces, destroyed their villages once before. He bought Orion forty years of peace and left a scar on Altair's ancestral memory. Perhaps this is why they sent a dagger for him, killing him only when he was at his weakest and most defenseless."

But why assassinate a dying king?

Voltis continues, "Even if what you say is true. Their stores of aquilla are limited and trade routes with Iridia are being plundered by brigands. We could win. Orion has the numbers."

**Commented [CS40]:** Voltis doesn't have much magic. Can he touch it?  
How is his lack of magic different from her...lack of magic? Is it a lack?

I shake my head. "Why would they bring war upon themselves? Someone wants this war, Voltis, and you are angry enough to give it to them. Think rationally!"

Voltis grins. "I am, little sister. And the Wittan will vote for war before they vote you onto the throne. Long enough for them to consider alternative choices for leadership."

He leans forward and kisses my forehead. I stiffen, his words a total shock. Then he leaves me there with father's body and cold growing dread.

**Commented [CS41]:** Ok, so...this whole chapter is building to "I'm going to be king, take THAT" but I pretty much knew that was what he's been saying all along. And...I'm wondering why she didn't know it?

#### Things we like:

- The first line is a great hook.
- A palace made of trees is a neat setting.
- Good lampshade of how odd it is to assassinate someone already dying
- There is some super cool world building in here--I can tell this is a very full, complex world, which is my favorite. The magic, the cool beasts and fairy things.
- The whole stolen book thing as a description of the MC's place in the world and what is important to her is cool
- Love the line "I dislike Barristan. He's excellent at challenging everything I suggest." Which says a lot about the MC haha. Maybe about Barristan too.
- Polarys is a cool name!

#### Things that might need a second look:

- Though the first page gives us some good insight into the main character's character and position, because all she is doing is sitting and reading, the beginning came across as a little slow.
  - I'm no expert, but I think a knife in the side would make more than a small pool of blood
  - I don't feel like POVs reaction to be accused of murdering her father is strong enough
  - With the king dying it feels extremely odd that the question of succession wasn't either already resolved or immediately the question on everyone's mind. Similarly, Voltis is the obvious suspect since with the succession line not resolved, he has the most to gain by removing the king before he can settle it
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- So, in essence, this chapter is about a girl who is abruptly interrupted while reading a steamy romance novel with news that her father is dead. I had a really difficult time understanding what the MC was feeling about this piece of news. It seemed like she thought it was inevitable, though she kind of perks up when she finds out it was an assassination rather than of natural causes or an accident. I'm not sure if she liked her father or if she was attached to him, if she is sad he's dead, if she's glad, if she's...ambivalent? It seems like we get tastes of all these different things directly in

conflict with one another--very cold and analytical thoughts, focusing on her brother rather than her own emotions, while being very tender with her father physically? Which...I mean human relationships are always complicated, but in a story it would be great to know in clear terms that complicated is what we're going for and how those complications manifest in the character rather than getting little impressions of all of it so it feels...a little meandery and muddy. Why does she feel the way she does? Does she get frustrated with her father and the conflict inside her? DOES she love him? I'm not even sure if "complicated" was what I was supposed to take from the scene. If it was,, I'd LOVE to get some lampshading pointing me toward that fact, because right now I'm not sure which details to cling to. I got lots of "I really don't care about this at all" lampshades mixed with "I am very sad about this" ones.

- Same with her brother, a little? I can see they aren't close, and there was a reference to trying to destroy each other, so I'm guessing we're in a Murderous Royal Family™ situation (which further adds questions to the dad relationship! Especially because they seem to be okay with killing each other, but would NEVER try to carve out whatever power they can now just in case daddy feels better tomorrow? Those two things don't seem to go together. This all seems very administrative/duty driven rather than "I'm taking what I want no matter who gets in the way!") but then it sort of seems like a "you think you're in charge but I do all the work" sort of thing instead. She's not upset about her brother being so callous about her father dying. Him saying the assassin killed him because he wasn't dying fast enough with the implication that it was \*her\* who did it draws the response "as though \*I\* would be so impatient". She was okay with waiting for him to die, biding her time?
- I feel like we get some details in the wrong order--like we find out she's the heir and that the succession of power is pretty set in stone only after she's had a weird conversation with one of the council people and then after Voltis calls it into question, so instead of the reader knowing what is expected, we only find out what is expected once something unexpected is suggested. Also, Voltis being a bastard prince and not in line for the throne is only brought up only after vague hints that their parents aren't the same, and she realizes that maybe he's behind their father's death/something isn't right long before we have the information to know that he might have--so instead of having a lightning bolt moment alongside the MC, she has the lightning bolt moment...then has to explain it to us. Which messes with pacing etc. etc. Another example: guy comes in and says "something happened!" and she's like "Oh yeah, my dad's dead, right?" with...no context--we don't know how she feels about it, how she knew, if she was worried (see my whole comment about this. It's essentially the same issue, I think)
- I think my biggest thing here is feeling ungrounded. There is some SUPER COOL world building here, political and societal, magical...super, super cool. However, I feel like a lot of it is introduced either after I already needed to know what it was or just...a lot! All at once! Without enough explanation about why I need to remember it. I think there's not really any infodumping, which is GREAT, but I'm so confused about the political situation and who the players are by the end that it's very hard to understand how the characters are feeling and get invested in what the MC is worried about/wants because it's so snarled up in stuff that...I just don't get yet. I feel like I need to be standing on something solid before getting pushed off into "all this is changing!!"

- Similarly, I feel ungrounded physically--I would have loved to have gotten just a little bit more about where we are, what's normal, what's not normal, what it feels, smells, tastes like. Even if you don't lean super far in that direction, there are a few gorilla in the phonebooth moments where we get a detail I am much more interested in than what is actually going on (there are WHAT in the trees?? WHAT IS THAT IN THE WATER??) with no further description or comment. It's a fine line to walk--the fish doesn't know how to describe living in water, right? but just a *little* more lingering would have helped me :)
- I was very surprised to find out that everyone here has magic, including the MC! There was mention of magic earlier, but not that she had access to it. And that EVERYONE seems to. Except that she and her brother are somehow...lesser. Another detail I feel like I would have loved to get at the beginning so when it mattered I already understood the situation rather than having to have it explained in the moment?