

Can't Spell
TREASON
Without
**TEA**

REBECCA THORNE





1

Reyna

Reyna stalked the edges of the gilded crowd, watching the assassin creep ever closer to Queen Tilaine.

The party was lively, the royal orchestra working hard to fill the cavernous ballroom with their sovereign's favorite scores. Even with the open windows, the brisk evening air smelled of sweat and perfume. Court folk clad in colorful silk attire danced with nobility from every corner of the Queendom. Servers with golden trays and matching smiles flitted between them, offering shrimp, chocolates, champagne—all imported from Shepara for the Arcandor, their absent guest of honor.

It was a bold place to attempt an assassination.

Reyna hadn't faced one this foolish in . . . oh, seven months? The Mid-Winter Celebration. An assassin tried to behead Queen Tilaine while she made her yearly address. Reyna would never forget his gurgling gasps, or the queen's impassive stare as his spattered blood stained her silk shoes. Reyna *certainly* wouldn't forget how Her Excellency nudged the body off the high balcony, then continued her address as if a corpse hadn't crunched to the ground ten meters below.

Kianthe called Queen Tilaine a sociopath.

Reyna was finding that easier and easier to believe.

“I specifically ordered faster dancing.” Queen Tilaine’s voice was melodious—but with a venomous bite. Everyone knew why she was irate: Kianthe, the Arcandor, the Mage of Ages, their foreign guest of honor—who also happened to be Reyna’s very secret girlfriend—hadn’t shown. Although the queen’s cheery expression never faltered, it was obvious that the Arcandor’s absence was picking at the queen’s mind like a child with a scab.

“Entertain me, my loves,” Queen Tilaine chimed. “Pick up your feet!”

At their sovereign’s command, the music shifted into something more frenzied, and the court folk led their partners in a faster twirl. Their faces gleamed with sweat, but no one dared to slow their footwork.

Honestly, it was probably a good thing Kianthe had avoided this party. She may have done it out of spite, but whenever the Arcandor was near Queen Tilaine, it was an immense struggle for Kianthe to hold her tongue. All she’d need was to see Her Excellency’s reaction to this assassin, and she’d have *choice* words.

Reyna, contrarily, had no words about this. Just a consistent, pulsing weariness for her profession, growing more profound each day.

The would-be assassin wove through the ballroom, expertly managing to avoid being trampled by the dancers. Although the man’s outfit was a poor mimic of their professional servers, he moved with dangerous grace. There was no doubt he was a threat; even pretending to serve the public, his eyes never left the queen.

It drew the palace guards like moths to a flame.

Already, Reyna’s partner, Venne, was matching her steps on the opposite side of the ballroom. Crimson cloaks and gold armor accents—indicators of the queen’s private guards—meant they drew attention from the more discerning citizens, but no one dared approach. Behind Venne, two other soldiers were al-

ready securing the exits. Four senior guards, the ones proven worthy enough to stand near the queen, subtly tightened their circle around her.

Yet another carefully orchestrated dance.

Reyna's short sword slid from its scabbard with a whisper.

Turn around. Walk away, she thought. *You don't have to die tonight.*

But of course, it was far too late for that. He'd been identified as a threat—and threats were dealt with swiftly and mercilessly.

Not for the first time, Kianthe's offer rose from the back of Reyna's mind. "*Run away with me,*" the mage had said, her eyes alight. "*You like tea. I like books. Let's open a shop somewhere remote and forget the world exists.*"

Reyna had rolled her eyes back then, her lips tilting in a forbidden smile. It used to sound crazy. She came from a long line of palace guards, even if most were dead now. Her duty had been inscribed with blood the moment she was born.

And yet, a part of her fantasized about lounging in a quiet, no-name town, sipping a cup of tea by the fire while Kianthe flipped aimlessly through a heavy tome. It was a distant dream, but one that left a warm glow deep in her soul.

The song ended, and almost immediately the music shifted into a brighter melody, if that were possible. But the pause allowed a breath of silence, one where the guards' coordinated commands reached the assassin's ears.

He knew they'd seen him.

His eyes grew desperate, the set of his mouth firmed, and he began shoving his way to the queen. People yelped as the man knocked them to the ground, cried out as he yanked two wicked-looking knives from sheaths hidden beneath his loose shirt.

Queen Tilaine watched the entire display with marked disinterest, chewing a delicate bite of shrimp. Her eyes flicked to Reyna, the closest of her guards, and she made a *Well? Get on with it* motion.

Gods be damned. Reyna hated this part.

Drawing a short breath and steeling her resolve, Reyna lunged. As easily as a knife through butter, her sword slid into the man's back. The blade nicked a couple ribs, meeting resistance, but she shoved it deeper, her face a distant mask as the bloody tip protruded from his chest, just below his heart.

She'd been raised for murder, for "protection," but Reyna could never get used to this. Pressed against the back of a dying man, his blood seeping through her uniform and slicking her sword's hilt, the coppery scent hanging thick in the air . . . it made her insides twist.

The assassin had made his choice when he arrived at this ball, but as Kianthe was so blunt to remind her, there were *other* methods of apprehension. And yet, this particular one had Queen Tilaine tilting her head, smiling amidst the screams.

"Well. Now it's a party," Her Excellency said over the faltering orchestra.

Blood dribbled from the man's mouth, and his body spasmed as Reyna withdrew the sword. He staggered, finally facing her, and gasped, "She d-deserves to die."

Reyna, who shouldn't have an opinion on that, didn't falter.

"Finish him," Queen Tilaine ordered.

Reyna raised her sword again, and inside her chest, that weariness quadrupled. She was so, so tired of this: of their sovereign, of palace protocol. All she wanted was a nice, hot cup of tea.

It was treason to think that.

She thought it anyway.

And then Venne shouted in alarm, and a dagger pressed against Reyna's neck. It sliced the skin, a drop of blood slipping along her throat before diving between her collarbones. Reyna stiffened, freezing instantly, her breaths shallow. Although her heart pounded, her mind slipped into survival mode, analyzing the person who'd grabbed her.

Most likely a man, based off the size of his hand on Reyna's

arm, his tall stature for the knife's positioning . . . and his ripe scent. He moved too close, leaning against Reyna's back, fully expecting her to comply.

"Let us go," he called, fear lingering in his voice. "Or I'll kill her!"

His partner was dead anyway—palace blades were coated in poison, just in case the physical act didn't finish the job. Already, the first assassin was teetering, clutching at the blood gushing through his chest.

But all eyes fell to Queen Tilaine.

Her Excellency regarded the situation. Warm ocean-blue eyes slid over Reyna as easily as if she were a street dog. Her white, powdered cheeks crinkled in amusement. "Dear, if you think one guard will ensure your survival tonight, you are sorely mistaken. I won't show mercy for someone intruding on my party like this."

"Mercy" was Tilaine's favorite word, considering she'd been blessed by the God of Mercy on her coronation day. The tilt of the sovereign's painted lips proved she thought this was very clever to mention.

The knife at Reyna's neck pressed more firmly. Pain, acute and shocking, lanced through her. A thicker stream of blood dripped from the blade. How lovely for Tilaine, to feel clever at the expense of Reyna's safety.

Kianthe was going to be furious.

Hells, *Reyna* was furious. It prickled along her spine. She knew she was expendable, had known since she was five years old and her mother first handed her a blade and a mission. But Queen Eren, Gods rest her soul, had at least feigned sympathy at her mother's funeral.

"*A good life lost,*" she'd said. "*We mourn her sacrifice.*"

Reyna, barely a teenager, had watched impassively. Her emotions were cold and dark that day, and they shifted to something cold and dark now.

In direct response to her pain, the inscribed moonstone Kianthe had gifted her pulsed twice over her heart. It was intended to alert

the mage to injury, but they used it to communicate too—the moonstone would warm or pulse against her skin, and they'd formed a code through it. Reyna had no idea where Kianthe was currently, but two taps meant the Arcandor would be on her way shortly.

She'd probably be in a nervous fit, too. Because even if Queen Tilaine didn't value Reyna's life, *Kianthe* did. She hated Reyna's job, reiterated over and over that she'd be devastated if something happened to Reyna.

Well, something had happened tonight—and Reyna was not going to let this be the final chapter in her life.

Barely a breath had passed since Queen Tilaine's proclamation, but Reyna didn't wait for more. Fast as lightning, she buried her elbow into the man's gut. Her heel followed, the stiff sole grinding down his shin.

He grunted, and the knife at her neck vanished as the man staggered back. It was a brief reprieve; seconds later, the assassin lunged, aiming for Reyna's chest. Reyna twisted to avoid the knife, swallowing a gasp as it sliced deep into her upper arm instead.

Enough of this. Reyna moved like a woman possessed, sliced the man's throat, then buried the blade into his heart.

He died instantly, his hazel eyes shifting into a dull sheen.

Blood poured from the wound in Reyna's arm, dripped sickly down her neck. Logic told her neither wound was life-threatening. It didn't matter; her body was numb, and true pain would follow shortly.

Somehow, the queen's betrayal hurt more.

Reyna shoved the corpse off her sword and faced the first assassin, only to see the man's head had been graciously separated from his body. It rolled to the base of the dais, eyes and mouth open in never-ending horror. Venne casually wiped his sword off on the intruder's black clothes.

"Are you all right?" His dark eyes flicked to her arm.

She cleaned her sword on her already-bloodied cloak and

sheathed it, then gripped the wound to slow the bleeding. Crimson oozed through her fingers. She felt faint with anger. But everyone was watching, so she casually replied, "It's nothing I haven't experienced before."

The spell pulsed again: Kianthe was smacking her from a country away. Reyna fought a wince. In an attempt to ignore her girlfriend, she bowed to the sovereign. "Your Excellency, what are your orders?"

The whole ballroom held its breath.

Queen Tilaine surveyed them, the frozen musicians, the panting dancers, the court folk who'd stepped away from the first assassin's severed head. After a long moment, she smiled. "Well, this is a party—regardless of whether the Arcandor deigns to attend. String up the bodies, then double entertainment efforts. Everybody enjoy themselves!"

It sounded like a threat.

Already, a tall man with a thin mustache was nodding to several partygoers who'd lurked on the edges of the crowd. The queen's spymaster, commanding his spies. They scattered like leaves on the wind, undoubtedly prepared to spread rumors of the royal ball's opulence to every neighboring town and country.

It was all above Reyna's paygrade. She planted her feet to keep from swaying.

Venne was beside her then, ripping the fabric of his cloak to tie around her wound. She didn't want to let him that close, but her circumstances didn't offer much choice. His smile grated on her, even as he murmured, "You are as fierce as an ice leopard, and just as beautiful."

"Flattery won't change my preferences," she replied pointedly. He shrugged. "Can't fault a man for trying."

Were that true.

"Luckily, I can find fault in a multitude of other qualities. For example, your bandaging skills need work." She hissed as he tied the cloth too tightly, but the initial stab of pain faded into an

uncomfortable thrum. Dimly, she dabbed at her neck with her crimson cloak. The blood blended right in.

Before them, another pair of palace guards were gathering the corpses. One held open a heavy bag, and the second dropped the severed head inside. He tied the bag to his belt, then hauled the body over his shoulder. The unburdened guard scooped up the other assassin's bleeding corpse, following suit.

Waiters stood nearby, armed with buckets and mops. Soon, there would be no tangible record of this assassination attempt.

Except, of course, in the shackles by the bank of windows, where their corpses would be strung for the partygoers to appreciate as the evening wore on. Already, the court folk were offering a slight berth as a guard pried open the manacles.

Reyna could be lounging on a velvet couch beside a roaring fire, running her hands through Kianthe's dark hair as they chatted about mundane things. No bodies. No prison-like palace routine. Just them, existing together.

And this time, something solidified in Reyna's soul.

"The queen gave permission to escort you to the medical ward," Venne said. She hadn't even noticed him addressing their monarch, but apparently she'd been distracted making drastic life decisions.

Treasonous life decisions.

Queen Tilaine's cheerful response ran through her head like a suffocating song: "*You are sorely mistaken.*"

Leaving didn't feel like such a stretch anymore.

"I can escort myself." Reyna was dizzy, her body starting to go cold, but she could still walk. The bandage against her arm was beginning to soak through, and there was no doubt she'd need stitches and rest soon, but she wasn't on death's door.

And yet, her mind whirled. Kianthe shouldn't take long to arrive, distance depending. The moonstone was a quiet comfort over her heart, firm and warm as a kiss from the mage's own lips.

Gods, she was really going to do this, wasn't she?

Venne set a guiding arm over her shoulders and whispered, "You're my excuse, Rey. Save me from the pomp and circumstance."

Her entire life had been pomp and circumstance. Just once, Reyna was ready for something real.

"Reyna, I expect you back in service first thing tomorrow," Queen Tilaine called.

Reyna bowed deeply, automatically, and turned her back on Her Excellency, the ballroom, the palace . . . and the Queendom.

And it happened so quietly, no one else noticed.

She visited the doctor, sat stoically while he stitched the gash on her bicep closed, while he applied pressure to her neck wound until it stopped bleeding. Venne escorted her to her quarters in the palace's east wing, and she closed the door in his face. She slept until the ballroom cleared out, until the early-morning hours when the moon hung low and the palace guards had reduced to a skeleton staff.

Then she packed her meager belongings in two saddlebags, heaving them over her good shoulder. With her sword's sheath tied to her leather belt, she glanced one final time at her old home: at the bed where Kianthe had first whispered promises in her ear, at the desk where she'd penned dozens of secret letters to the Arcandor, at the stone window where the mage would sometimes appear with a bouquet of exotic flowers.

Reyna drew a deep breath and walked out the door.

She'd memorized the palace guard rotations years ago, so her cohorts were easy to evade. When the stablemaster's apprentice raised an eyebrow at her unusual arrival, she merely intoned: "The queen ordered me to run an errand. Saddle my horse, please."

He did so.

And Reyna did something brave, just for herself. Without resistance, she thundered out the north gates of the Queendom's capital city.

And this time, she wasn't coming back.