

Megan Starks
Fiction
Approx. 1500 words

Shush

“So? How did the meeting fare?”

Bleden Mark, Archon of Shadows and infamous assassin, leaned back against the wide, stone colonnade. He liked the hard press of the stone between his shoulder blades. It jabbed at the back of his mind, distracting. It affixed him as his amber eyes roved the captivating form of his Overlord.

Kyros’ answer was a refrain, an enchanting, clipped little beat in time with his pulse in his ears. “Well. Much too well.”

He felt his pupils dilating, the blackness bleeding steadily to swallow the light from his eyes. Already, his anticipation was piqued.

His Overlord explained, “Icarix offered the perfect counter to my every concern. He anticipated, expertly, each and every question I asked—before even *I* had thought of them. I could not catch him off guard, though I most certainly tried.”

To hold one’s own in a political discourse with Kyros, the empire’s most feared and beloved ruler? It was an impressive feat, if not entirely unsurprising in this case.

“He favors that little mind-trick of his often at banquets,” said Bleden Mark. “Of course, we both know he’s merely foretelling a future he’s already experienced. But I’ve seen the way ladies and servants alike titter in response to his... attentions.”

“And yet, I am neither a lady nor a servant. I am *Kyros*.”

The dangerous undercurrent to his Overlord’s reply cautioned him to choose his words with greater care. He smirked. Then he struggled for a moment to ground his thoughts. His heart lashed at his chest. He thrummed, overcharged with adrenaline and a dark need.

He pressed harder against the grit of the stone colonnade before he said, “So he couldn’t resist the attempt to benefit himself in your presence. I’ll bet he’s been resetting events, here and there, changing outcomes, to have even garnered your interest in the first place.”

“Yes. I believe he has a limited capacity for prudence. He altered the meeting several times in order to influence me.”

Bleden Mark curled his fingers against his palm, resisting the urge to flit them across the handle of a dagger. "Then I take it you have need for me?"

From the look on his Overlord's face, there could be no other reason for his summoning. Of course, he knew this. But it was in his nature to tease, to poke and to prod and to dig deeply with his dagger's blade, especially at that which could kill him. Unfortunately, his humor tended to run blacker than even his darkest, most deadly of shadows.

"See that the Archon of Time does not survive another evening," the Overlord agreed.

With a sidestep and a soft shushing sound, a sibilation of billowing magic and darkness, he began to dissipate into the cast shadow of the stone colonnade. Until Kyros' words stopped him cold.

"Mark."

He lingered, disembodied but listening.

"You'll have but one stab at this. Miss and Icarix will reshape the events, with the knowledge of when and where to kill you. You cannot merely shadow-leap to victory this time. First, you must ensure that he cannot escape into the past."

"Have something in mind?" he asked, pitch-black eyes wider than ever.

* * * *

Icarix

Archon of Time, poisoned by a shadowy figure, TR 06

hollow steps shush across the marble hall, cloth-covered and softly strike-strike-striking closer, like the muffled gong of a distant mourning bell as time abruptly drifts and shudders a sigh, my hand sliding night to day to night again in a single pendulous breath backwards, a gasp more than any true inhale, my heart fluttering and wounded in my chest as the seconds flit passed and then stop short, aborted shockingly—in a veered, jolting pitch to the moment before, only scant minutes passed, when the silvered draught first touched my lips, cold as my late wife's last sickly kiss, and more bitter, a twisted thing, not like my darling Dalia, not sweet and warm, this woman who is finally mine, who took months of sifting the past to entrap, who is gazing at me with her half-shadowed face and sultry green eyes, gleaming and enthralled and expectant as she ushers me into bed with a gentle shushing sound from between her coy, simpering, red rouged lips;

my mouth waters at the thought at what is to come, brims unbidden with a fiery bile, choking, burning as the goblet topples from my hand, dully strike-strike-striking the whorled marble at my feet—and time ripples backwards, again;

behind me

a shadow looms and in my thoughts rises a dark desire, the swirling whispered words that really Kyros is not so very impressive once met, is merely an Archon like myself, risen to fame, but with a power laughably inferior to my own, and who must rely on the cunning of an advisory council to survive, surely, of which I will soon be a well-respected member, because I saw within the Overlord's eyes a coveting for which I myself felt toward my enchanting Dalia even as my wife still struggled to live, and so I understand cannot be controlled;

as I approach the bed, soft linen garments shushing across the marble, a virile laugh cracking from the pit of my throat,

thunder claps,

and Dalia is crouching on the cream-colored coverlet like some little Beast, her tawny skin burnished nearly black from a sharp swath of shadows, her gleaming brunette—no, milky white hair flung forward over her forehead, untamed though I alone was able to cage her, just as I shall soon bring even the Overlord to heel, and abruptly Dalia is backlit by a strike from the skies, beyond the narrow window, her wholly-shadowed face and sultry black eyes seared wildly into my mind, her smile dark and promising as she hands me my nightly concoction, and I am struck by how dusky and cold her fingers are, wispish where they brush my own, and the goblet is just as frigid against my lips, the silver liquid caustic in my throat, and I choke,

as poison spews in a deluge, a drowned curse from behind gritted, grinding teeth,

and time stutters and stumbles once again as I mentally trip backwards over my own feet even as cream-cloth-covered, they shush forwards across the churning whorls of blood red marble beneath; I am at the bedside and my throat and heart are fire, and Dalia—

she is a shadow, she is darkness,

she is grinning, inhuman, teeth flat and white in her shrouded face,

a sibilate exhale rushing past her parted, black lips, a shush-shush swishing in my ears, the sound of shadows coalescing as my temptress warps and twists and flickers into the solid, broader form of a man with red war paint masking his face, and time painfully wrenches around by my hand, as far as I can wrest it, though I am so very tired now and though I know the dangers of veering too far-flung, too beyond what can safely be re-stepped, yet I cannot seem to escape the trip—the

trap—that is this moment before, the grain of sand in the sift of time that is my consumption of a burning, liquid amalgamation;

my teeth knock the lip of the goblet as the poison brims, biting, into my mouth, and I gag mid-swallow, but it is already too late—my magic wanes,

inhibited;

“What have you done?!” my voice rings out, the harsh chime of a mourning bell in my throat as the goblet strikes and strikes and strikes against the cold marble at my feet;

“You sound surprised. Can I then assume this is the first time?” the man who had been my Dalia, this shadowed assassin muses,

words reverberating as I rip time apart with a keening scream,

the fire ravaging my throat and now raging in my chest, spreading hotly

while I am falling to my knees, and time rips backwards and stops short at the liquid clogging my throat,

and he asks, “Or have we had this conversation before? Maybe a few times, hm? Or maybe an infinity of them?”

Painfully, I am tired, shuddering and spent,

standing before him without even having moved, this time having stumbled even less distance back, and I fall to the floor, shadows shushing beneath me, metallic bile dripping from my chin, and

on the bedside table, the lone candle’s flame flickers and dims—

and then dies.

* * * *

“Were there any complications?” the Overlord asked after.

Bleden Mark shrugged, arms crossed firmly over his chest. He felt a certain sense of satisfaction coming off of his kill, was still enjoying the buzz in his veins and a zippy little burn behind his eyelids, but he knew it wouldn’t last long. Already he was beginning to feel restless. Caged.

He glanced to the Binding of Shadows clasped about his left wrist. Uncrossing his arms, he ran a thumb along the bracer's seam, considering.

He answered curtly, "Much as it often pains me to admit it, you were right. The dumb lecher drank the potion, keeled over, and died. Though I'm not sure... exactly how many times I did the bastard in."

His Overlord's head canted to one side. And Bleden Mark grinned, teeth flat and white in his shrouded face.

"So who's next?" the shadow assassin asked.

Who, he wondered excitedly, would the darkness devour next?