



The Watcher Series Extras: 2.3

The Price: Bowen's Point of View

*SPOILER ALERT: Best not read unless you have read *The Nexus*.*

*from Chapters 25 & 26 *The Nexus**

There was a gentle knock at the door. I hadn't slept for almost thirty-six hours, my wits were dull, yet, I knew what this was about. I had been waiting.

I had stolen Aleria from the dungeons, and I was surprised it had taken eight hours for them to come for her. Debating, I stood, pressing my thumb and index finger to my forehead. If I waited too long to open the door, they may burst in, putting me on the defensive. My mother would arrive with enough of the guard to overpower me if I wasn't careful. Or more likely, with people I would not be willing to cause any permanent damage.

"Belenus," I heard in not much over a whisper. It wasn't who I had suspected.

I cracked the door open. Morpheus was leaning against the wall just outside the door. He was expressionless. When he didn't explain his reason for being outside my room, I questioned, "What is it you want?"

"I came to warn you, Cousin. Your mother heard about your heroic gesture and has ordered Gareth to gather some of his men." He pointed to the windows in my corner room. "They will enter through the windows on both sides and through the door. I would get ahead of this. Your little pet may be put back on a leash."

I grabbed his shirt front and dragged him inside. Once the door was shut, Morpheus

shoved at me and tugged at the bottom of his shirt, straightening it. He looked around the room with a question on his face.

I pointed to the bed with the drawn curtains. “She is sleeping.”

His shoulders relaxed. He may have been worried I had smuggled her out somehow. I turned away from him and rubbed my temples, thinking. “I promised her that she would be safe in here.”

“*Safe*—you do know your mother’s plans, do you not?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

I turned back and pinned him with my stare.

“You really like this little human,” Morpheus commented as he strolled towards the bed.

“Morpheus,” I warned.

He raised his hands. “I promise not to touch, Belenus. Tsk, tsk.” He drew the bed curtain back and stared at her sleeping form. “She doesn’t look like much now, does she?”

“Meaning what?”

“Humans are fragile. I wouldn’t get attached. She faintly resembles what was brought in here weeks ago.”

“So you *have* seen her.”

“Briefly, when she and Taranis arrived. Icelos and Phantasos thought her brave little front when she saw us quite humorous. She was much prettier then.”

“You should have told me that they brought her in.”

Morpheus sighed, his trademark scowl darkening his features. “I am warning you *now*. You know I don’t like to get in between your squabbles. But, I find the girl...” He focused on her again.

“Find her?”

He tilted his head in my direction. “Familiar.”

His response surprised me. “How?”

“I am not sure. I have to admit, she is a fighter. Even in the state to which Taranis has reduced her, she fights us in her dreams. I have never seen the like.”

If I wasn't mistaken, his expression was one of respect. *But Morpheus doesn't respect humans.*

“I am concerned, Cousin. This isn't like your other disagreements with you brother, is it?”

“I'm afraid not.”

“Please tell me you do not love her!” he hissed.

“No. No...I am fond of her, but as I told...someone else, I feel *compelled* to protect her. There is no other word.”

“Who might you have said that to?” He narrowed his eyes.

“It doesn't matter,” I replied dismissively. *If my mother knew that I had warned a Slayer, I would already have been dead.*

“Put her back, Belenus. Make peace with your brother. Appease your mother. She has missed you. She needs to see some show of compliance before she will trust you again.”

“She doesn't trust me?”

“You ran off for three-hundred years. You are in some feud with your brother. You disappear for days without a word, so your mother is in fear that you are going to disappear again. She blames the girl for your recent behavior.”

“And how have you come upon all of this recent information?”

Morpheus backed away from the bed and descended the steps, shrugging. “Do you *want* to know?”

“If it has anything to do with the reason you were taken out of the succession for the throne, then no.”

The edge of his lip turned up.

“I really don’t want to know.” I looked towards the bed. Aleria looked so small, huddled in my sheets. “How do I get ahead of this?”

“Go to your mother, now, before your brother returns.”

“So her men can steal Aleria away while I have an audience with her? *No.*” Anger stirred inside me. “Are you manipulating me to get me to leave?”

There was a flash in Morpheus’ eyes. My question struck bone. “Have I ever misled you?”

“I am sorry, friend. I should not have asked.”

“No, you should not have. I know that I went to ground not long after you left for the New World, but my loyalties have not changed. You are a brother to me.”

“Again, I apologize.” I sighed. “You have the ear of my mother. How should I approach her?”

“You won’t like it.”

I blinked at him.

“Your human is worth this? She will be dead by Spring.”

My throat constricted. “I won’t leave her to my brother’s devices in that dungeon for months. I won’t. She deserves better than all of this.” I walked back to the bed to check on her once more before making my decision. I couldn’t hear her breathing or her heart beating. Panicked, I checked the pulse on her neck. Her heart rate was slow, but it was beating.

At that moment, Morpheus was on the other side of the bed, examining me. “Are you sure you are not in love with her?”

“Twelve evenings. That is how many times I was able to see her in thirteen days before my brother injected himself. Our kind does not come to love a human that quickly.”

“And what did you *do* for those twelve evenings?”

“We talked.”

“I thought I was the only one you talked to.” His scowl turned swoony. It didn’t look right on his face. He was making light, but there was truth to his statement.

I talked to few people, Morpheus probably more than anyone else. Yet, Aleria had somehow...maybe it *was* her Lux blood. I summoned images of her, sitting in that café, surrounded by piles of books with a determined expression on her face. Then of the hours I sat quizzing her for her tests until the coffee shop would force us out at closing. I had dreaded those moments. I would walk her to her car so slowly that she would chastise me for it. I couldn’t help myself.

Morpheus drew me out of my reverie. “Bowen,” Morpheus murmured. It was the first time he had used my new name.

“We talked, but that is all. She is funny and passionate and surprising and so, so very...good. I need her forgiveness. By allowing Taranis into her life, I have stolen everything from her.”

“You did not touch her after you took her from the dungeon?”

“Is that why you are here? To find out if she is *pure* for the sacrifice?” It was my time to feel wounded. “She hates me. Of course nothing happened last night. And how is it that everything is resting on me?”

Morpheus casually put some space between us. “She was checked nine days before your brother brought her in. She was a virgin.”

“You *checked?*” I was incredulous and felt violated for her.

He held up his hands in surrender. “It was part of your mother’s plan. After your human was poisoned, they implanted a tracking device, harvested what was needed for me and mine, as well as, for her pet project, and made sure her chastity was still intact.”

Aleria stirred, and we both turned to watch her, but it was obvious that she wouldn’t wake anytime soon.

Morpheus continued, "In order for your father to harness the powers from a pure sacrifice, there are extra preparations to make."

"What pet project?" I asked.

When Morpheus told me what else they had done to her, I had to sit. There was no limit to my mother's scheming.

I looked up at Morpheus, my anger simmering. "What is your idea? How can I convince my mother to keep her with me?"

"Succedaneum."

I froze.

"I doubt your mother will take anything less."

"You are right, of course." Before Morpheus had a chance to draw a breath to speak again, I had his shirt in my fist and had slammed him against the wall. "I will go, but you will stay outside and keep watch. No one. Not my brother. Not my mother. Not ANYONE will enter. And you will damn well stay out of her head. If you or your brothers tamper with one more dream, you will grieve the day."

"What if she wakes and asks your whereabouts?"

"She won't. And she will never know about this. As far as she is concerned, I never left the room."

"You will *lie* to your human?"

"Yes. She will not bare this burden, as well." I let go of his shirt, but he didn't straighten it this time. I glanced back at Aleria one last time before leaving the room. There was an awful, hollow feeling in my chest.

Once outside, I shut the door, and Morpheus leaned against the wall looking at his nails. I started down the hallway, but Morpheus called after me.

"Belenus, you will fall in love with her, if you have not already. It will only make it

more unbearable when your mother sacrifices her. You do not move on well, Cousin.”

My pace quickened, trying not to let his words settle in my mind. When I reached the throne room, the doors were open, Gareth, the Captain of the Royal Guard, was nowhere to be seen, and Mother’s beady-eyed assistant was missing. Cadeyn, Gareth’s younger brother and second in command, was in the doorway, but he didn’t look surprised to see me.

When I was a few meters away, I asked, “Where is your brother, Gareth?”

Cadeyn narrowed his yellow eyes. “Off serving our Queen.”

“I need an audience with my mother.”

“She was hoping you would stop in.” Cadeyn held a pleasant look on his face, but I knew him well enough to know that he wasn’t comfortable.

I entered, and the door was quickly shut behind me. My mother sat at her desk at the base of the steps to the throne. She was dressed all in black, as if in mourning. Nothing flashy. No jewelry. *This was not right.* I glanced around the room. There were no advisors or familiars. For the first time since I had returned, we were truly alone.

She didn’t look up from her papers. I walked to the middle of the vast room and knelt on one knee. “My Queen.” When she started to look up, I quickly bowed my head.

Mother didn’t say anything, but I heard the slow click of her high-heels drawing closer. She could approach silently if she chose, yet she didn’t. I wasn’t some sycophant that could be intimidated, though.

I was, however, surprised when she crouched in front of me and grabbed my face. “Someone has informed me that you have been a bad boy,” she patronized as if I was a child.

“I did not mean to offend, my Queen.”

“You really must want something, my love.” Her grin was so sharp, it could cut glass. I never called her “Queen” unless in the presence of visiting dignitaries. I swallowed as her fingernails cut into the skin of my cheeks.

“I ask for permission to keep the Seer in my custody until the time of the sacrifice.”

“Don’t you mean, *in your bed?*” She let go of my face and stood.

“On a literal level, she is, but I give you my word that I will not join her.”

“Why should I believe you when you have defied my orders?” she scoffed, baiting me.

I grit my teeth. “I did not give you my word before. I am sorry if I have offended.”

She started walking in a slow circle behind me. “On both of your knees, please.”

I eased onto my other knee. My back tingled with her behind me. I listened, but could not locate her—she had stopped breathing, and her heels were no longer clicking against the marble.

“Why would I allow it?” She spoke from directly behind me.

“*Succedaneum.*”

She went silent again. I counted the seconds, waiting for her answer...one...two...three...four...five...six...seven...eight...nine...te— The whir of splitting air stopped me short. I held my breath, just as the whip lashed at the flesh on my back.

It was so much more painful than I had remembered. I spotted a droplet of blue, iridescent liquid that had been knocked from the whip. She had dipped it in Pyralis to prevent me from healing too quickly. She was angrier than I had realized.

I heard the whir again and braced myself. She struck me three more times, the metal tip biting harder with each successive strike. It was four in total before she bothered speaking to me.

“One for defying me, one for taking what is rightfully your brother’s, one for breaking my dungeon, and one to pay for her first night’s rent. You asked for *Succedaneum*. You can be her substitute for as long as you pay. I will see you tomorrow. This will increase by one for each day. If you cry out, I will assume it is for mercy, and she will be sent back. Am I *clear?*”

“Yes, Mother,” I finally gasped. I was trembling and found it hard not to fall forward...or hold my tongue.

“What is it, Son?”

“I just wished you had warned me. I liked this shirt.” When the whip struck me this time, I did fall forward, but I didn’t cry out. I wasn’t sure why I had let my words slip.

“Get out of my sight,” she spat.

“Yes, Mother. Thank you for your mercy,” I choked out. The words felt like acid, but I had gotten what I had wanted. Aleria was mine. For now.

I labored to my feet and walked to the door. It took all of my strength to walk as if I wasn’t in pain. The second I was outside, Cadeyn shut the door, blocking my mother’s view. I grabbed his arm to steady myself.

“Let me see,” Cadeyn ordered, his face stoic.

“Call off Gareth. She’s mine.”

Cadeyn allowed me to hang onto him for support as he placed his phone to his ear. “Belenus is with me. It has been called off...No, *Succedaneum*.” He hung up and promptly leaned around me. I felt his fingers on the shreds of my shirt. In a hushed tone, he asked, “She used Pyralis on you?”

“I was always curious as to why they chose a name meaning ‘of fire’” I quipped, but my pained voice kept it far from being humorous.

“Let me call someone to help you back to your room; I can’t leave my post.” Cadeyn face was no longer stoic.

“No. No one knows except you and Gareth. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

I didn’t respond, but it was readily apparent when he understood my meaning: This was not going to happen just once.

I started in the direction of my room, but Cadeyn stopped me. “Wait.” He trotted over and took off his guard’s coat. “Put this on so you don’t leave a blood trail.”

I glanced at the floor. Random splats of my blood littered the stone. I raised my arms, and he helped me into the coat. I managed to stumble all the way to my room without running into anyone. I prayed tomorrow and the next day I would be so lucky.

When I opened my door, Morpheus grinned, “Did she take your title and make you a guard in...” He didn’t finish.

I fell to my knees again. “I need the antidote to Pyralis to prevent scarring. Can you get it for me?”

“Damn your mother.” A few more curses slid through his lips as he stood up. “I will be back with everything you will need in a few minutes.”

I bent forward until I was on my stomach on the floor. The cool marble easing some the fire. I forced myself to stay awake, afraid that Gareth would creep inside and step over my body.

True to his word, Morpheus returned with a water basin filled with supplies. He ushered me into the bathroom, never letting go of my upper arm, and had me sit on the ledge of the tub.

My shirt was stuck to my back, so I needed help shrugging out of it. Morpheus’ voice was uncharacteristically thick: “I will have to stitch a few places before using the antidote if you don’t want scarring.”

“Do it.”

He rearranged my flesh as I sat still. When he had finished the needed repairs, he poured several liquids into the basin and dipped a sponge into it. The moment he dabbed the mixture onto my back, the fire eased. I let out a gasp of relief. *I could get through this.*

“So this is it? She stays with you?”

“Morpheus,” I paused. “I will need your help each day after Aleria goes to sleep.”

Morpheus took a few labored breaths. “She is worth this, Cousin?”

I stared at him. “She cannot know.”

“As you wish. I have a familiar that I glamoured outside. You will feed, and then you will sleep for a few hours. I will stay. If she starts to wake, I will rouse you and be out of the room before she is fully conscious.”

“No, Morpheus. I ca—”

“If you need my help, this is what you will do. She never need know that I was here.”

I showered once my wounds had closed. When I entered my room once more, Morpheus had the familiar on the waiting for me. As I fed, he cleaned the signs from the bathroom. He emerged just as I had finished feeding and sent her away. She wouldn’t remember a thing. I couldn’t have asked more of him.

“Sleep,” he ordered.

I nodded, walking to the couch and stretched out on my stomach. Sleep came quickly.

Someone shook me. “I apologize, Cousin. I must go.”

I rubbed my eyes and glanced at my watch. It had been four hours. “Thank you. Has she stirred?”

“No.”

“I will see you tomorrow then.”

Morpheus hesitated. “How many days of this can you take?”

“As many as needed,” I replied.

Morpheus stared at me with disapproval for a long moment. “I will see you tomorrow.”

When he was gone, I settled in for my vigil. I wouldn’t be able to rest much until things were settled with my brother, despite reaching an agreement with my mother. I didn’t allow myself to sleep and had to continually check to see if she was still breathing to ease my fears.

After another eleven hours, my lids became heavy. I remembered closing my eyes, but not drifting to sleep.

I woke, and my eyes drifted to the bed. Panic seized me. I stood and spun in a circle—she wasn't here. "Aleria! Aleria!"

"I'm here," a small voice called from the bathroom.

I was at the door. "Are you all right?"

She opened it. "Yes, thank you. Sorry."

I was still trying to calm my panic. "No...I just thought..."

She grinned at me. "That I had been snatched away."

"Yes, I shouldn't have slept," I replied, angry with myself.

"You can't stay awake 24/7," she scolded me. "How long did I sleep?"

"Over a day. I worried that you might not wake at all." Worry spilled into my voice.

"Then it was good you slept." She smiled again and lightly touched my arm. The smile was genuine. I looked down, trying to hide my shaky exhale.

When I had pulled her out of that cell, she had told me that she had spent five months hating me. But it was already apparent that those feelings were waning.

My last moment with her in California, I had told her that she would always be part of my heart. Morpheus was correct. I released another shaky breath. I was going to fall in love with this girl, and it was going to cost me more than I could imagine.

