

YA NOVEL: QUEEN OF SPADES BY VALLEY SHAIJA

*Summary: Queen Malise Litonia of Auraun was abducted--and her daughter, the princess Leena, is determined to find her. She holds the only clue to the queen's whereabouts and, with help from a dark elf at The Underbelly, Leena learns of a way to follow her mother. Leaving her life of leisure behind and putting herself at risk of her half-brother's evil powers, she stows away aboard a ship. They travel across the Feanix Sea to Vagari Isle, where she discovers the vessel the elf suggested, The Maverick Maiden.*

*When mother and daughter reunite, Leena learns of Malise's past and true nature, and questions whether or not she should have come. Unable to return home, she joins in Malise's dangerous quest, hones her weapons skills, and meets the deadly yet handsome Draeden Hunt, who is charged with keeping her alive--if he can.*

The soft pads of her shoes resounded against the stones of the dungeon level. On one side lay the prison, sealed by a thick, steel door, the criminals a subdued clamor behind it. To the other was the quarters reserved for the warden. Years ago, however, the warden had been given a cottage on the palace grounds. Instead, in the isolated stone room, now lived her half-brother, Averyn.

For what better warden was there than a living column of flame?

Leena shivered. The air was cold and stale. She sensed the sins and violence and ilk of the convicts swirling behind the steel door, aching to be released. That door. It had not been erected to keep the prisoners in.

It had been forged to keep the fire out.

It was said that when Averyn was an infant, simply holding him had blistered Malise's arms. All babies' tempers turn in an instant, and when his did, she burned. How can a mother choose between comforting her child or remaining painless? Allegedly, when Prince Jarron III—now, king—discovered the marks on Malise's arms, he not only ordered the infirmary nurses to divine ways to care for the babe and the scholars to ascertain a cure, but he gifted Malise two copper cuffs for her wrists. The queen could finally, comfortably hold her son.

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Leena rapped lightly on Averyn's door, icicles of fear sinking into her stomach. A long moment passed. He didn't answer.

She rapped harder.

The door swung inward, booming as it smacked into the stone wall. Averyn, slick black hair ruffled from sleep, shirt haphazardly tucked into his breeches, glowered at her. His skin was golden-brown like their mothers, and it glowed in the torchlight.

"What?"

"Have—have you heard?" Leena blurted.

"Heard what?" he seethed.

The icicles sank deeper, tickling her rib cage. Oh, by the Gods, she was right. Of *course* no one had told him. No one ever thought of him down here, caged like a drake. She felt something different stab into her gut now, guilt...and pity.

And a twinge of fear at being the one to tell him.

"Averyn, Mother's been taken. She's gone."

For once, the fury roaring behind his eyes extinguished. "What?"

An urge to take his hand overcame her, but common sense reigned; his skin could boil hers at his whim.

"She's missing. Someone took her. Last night. Out of her study."

"*When?*"

"Las-last night."

His eyes danced menacingly, the wrath reigniting. "And no one came to tell me?"

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The queen's favorite. Her prized son, the only one of her children to reflect her Vagari heritage because of his brown-skinned father. The only other person permitted behind that study door. And he had been ignored.

He wouldn't be any longer.

Suddenly, it was happening. A sweaty sheen dewed the stone walls. Leena's brow dampened, as did her nightgown. Red clouded at the corners of her vision as she remembered a time from long ago. A time of stuffed bears and pleading screams.

"Averyn—please," she begged, air thick in her throat.

He cackled. "They shut me down here in this dank hellhole, where only my mother cares to visit, and they can't even deign to tell me she's been kidnapped?"

Waves of heat pulsated off him. His clothes smoked.

"Averyn—" Heat coated her throat, coated her throat. She could barely breathe. The red creeped in further, further. She could hardly see him.

"I should have been the first one notified! They owe me that at least!"

She might suffocate. "Brother—"

"I'm the only one she loves!" he thundered. "And they couldn't deign to tell me?!"

He shrieked like a gutted boar, wrenching away from Leena. Both hands flew up in front of him. Tongues of orange and blue flames erupted from his fingertips and splashed across the stones, scorching, blackening.

Burning.

Leena dove past the doorway into the corner, coughing, searching for a fresh pocket of air. The stench of charring cloth seared her nose. She curled into her self, shaking violently. Her vision swirled in shades of red.

And he howled. And he howled.

Slowly, the temperature cooled. The air hissed in her ears and thinned, becoming stale and safe once more. She raised her head from her arms, running fingers through her hair to check for any singed strands. Her vision spotted, cleared.

No more heat. No more cries. Only muffled sobbing.

Leena crawled to the threshold, peering in.

Averyn laid crumpled on the floor, arms wrapped around his head. His shirt was blackened to the elbows and ash fell in gentle flakes around him, kissing his skin. Soft cries bounced off the stone walls, impossible to cloak.

Wordless, Leena scooted up next to him, daring to place a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I know you love her. I understand how you’re feeling. I feel the same.”

He glared sharply at her through the crack between his elbow and knee. “Don’t compare our feelings. You don’t know Mother like I do.”

She hated his unapologetic truths and ignored this one. “They’ll find her, Averyn.”

He swiped his forearm across his eyes and sat up. “They know nothing of blood and danger, those untested palace guards. They know she is gone and nothing more.” He stood. “Anyone able to capture her must be truly skilled. I’m going after her myself.”

Leena hopped up. “You can’t! It’s dangerous. You don’t know who took her—or where.”

He glared at her and stalked to his steel armoire, throwing it open. “I think I can handle myself.”

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Leena, accustomed to his obstinance, switched tactics. “If you go, other people will find out about you—people outside of Litonia. You’ll be crucified.”

“I don’t care.”

“You’re not supposed to have Söl. People will think you’re an abomination.”

“And you don’t?”

Leena flinched, as if he had slapped her. Those plain truths, attacking her from all sides. “You can’t control your Söl, Averyn.”

She imagined his face softened a fraction.

Quietly, she continued, “Don’t be so rash. Have faith in the Royal Guard. At least for now.”

“I have faith in no one who has no faith in me.” Jaw set, he said, “Tell the king I will be seeking his council this evening.”

Leena knew their conversation—interaction, really—was over. For now, she had averted another royal crisis. Averyn would be staying and his Söl contained.

She raised her eyes to his, catching the scorched wall in the corner of her vision. His shirt continued to disintegrate around his wrists and his crystal pink eyes—eyes that all Söl Bearers shared—were swollen. She nodded. “As you wish.”

The second she stepped out of the room, the door slammed.

She turned to head back to her chambers, but something glinted seductively on the wall across from her. Had that been there before?

Up close, she recognized the object for what it was: a knife, wedged halfway into the mortar between stones. It pierced a playing card, pinning it to the wall.

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She grasped the hilt and yanked. It didn't budge, as though someone had sunk it into the mortar when it was still soft. She tried again, throwing her shoulder and back into the effort, to no avail.

Frustrated, Leena flexed her hands, easing the cramps. A lone blade in the wall, its hilt bloodied, was suspicious. Would be considered a threat to Averyn's life.

She doubted a soul would care.

*Shhhhrk!* Leena tore the card from the dagger, pulling it downward in a rough slit.

The card was black with white X's covering it. She flipped it to the face side. A queen of spades. She turned her wrist, viewing both sides again as if something would change. That's it? This was the possible threat? Just a queen of spades?

She almost flicked it to the floor, but a splatter of red on the card caught her eye. She peered closer. The queen was holding a bloodied sword and the copper crown about her brow was blood-stained as well. Curious, for a card in the diplomatic kingdom of Auraun. And there, at the bottom, in minuscule handwriting, was a message:

Come find me.

This note was obviously meant for Averyn. Stabbed into the wall across from his room. Because this was their mother's handwriting.

Maybe the queen hadn't been abducted after all.