

T H E
T R A I T O R ' S
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E R I N B E A T Y

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REYAN

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Western Strong

Garland Hill

Broadmoor

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Sunset Road

Span Road

Na River

TASMET

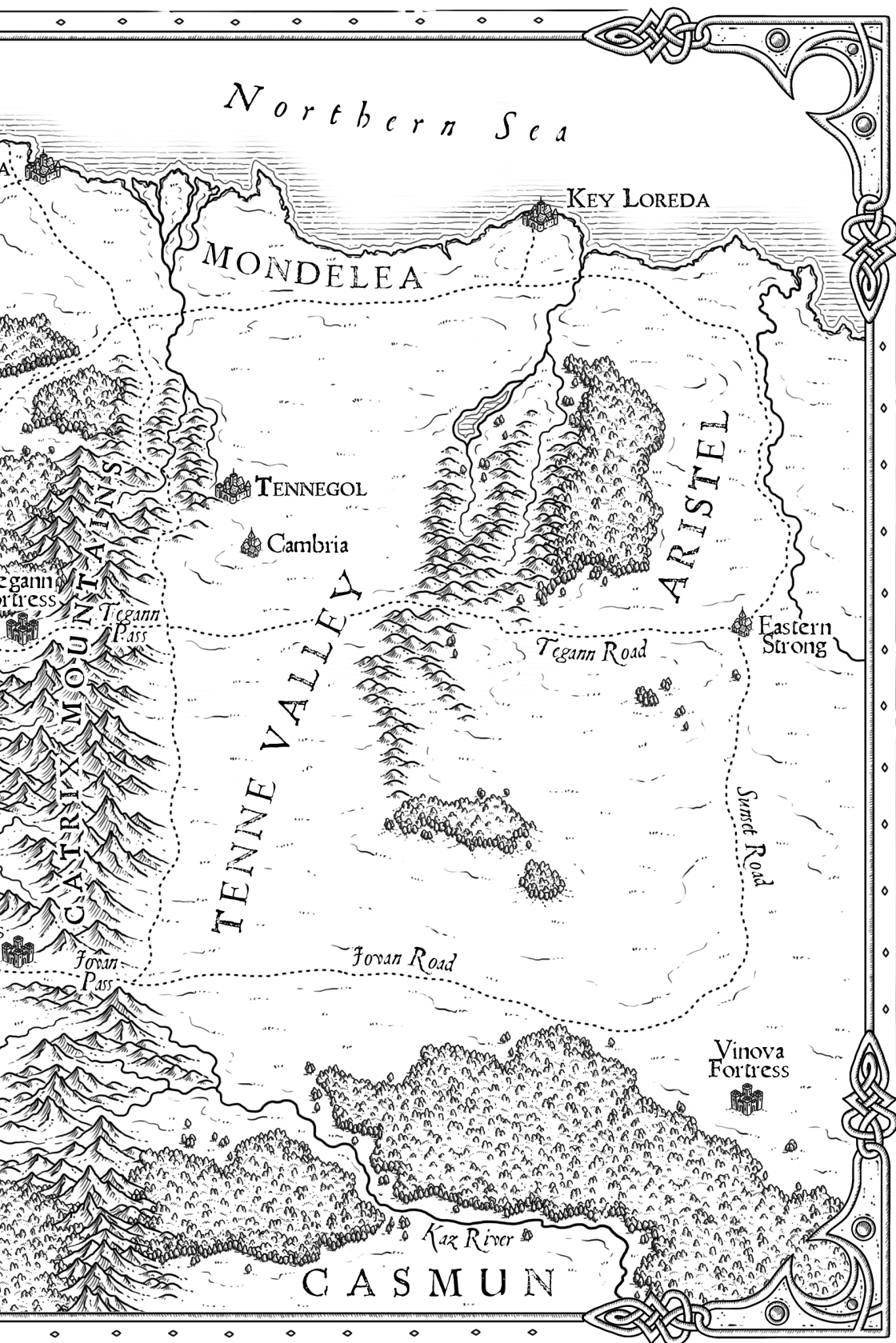
Fortress Jovan

Arrowhead Crossroad

BEY LISSANDRA

Western Sea

KIMISARA



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CHERISH	MY FRIEND	RAISE A	TO YOUR HEALTH
THIS BOOK	AND KNOW I	TOAST	
MISTREAT	MY FIEND	HOPE YOUR	ALWAYS BURNS

*To Kim, who didn't tell me how terrible that first draft was,
making all this possible.*

1

KNITTING NEEDLES WEREN'T very effective weapons, but they were better than fencing with feather quills.

Sage lunged at her pupil, and the princess blocked her smoothly but stopped short of where she ought to have finished the move.

"No, no," said Sage. "Carry that around and force my blade away so you can move in." She took a step back. "Let's try that again."

"Do you mind?" snapped eleven-year-old Carinthia from across the schoolroom. "I can't concentrate with combat knitting in the background."

Princess Rose lowered her "blade" and rolled her eyes, but Sage gestured for her to stay quiet. "Sorry, Cara. How many problems do you have left?"

"Five."

"That's good enough for today. You can go." The princess was out the door almost before Sage had finished speaking.

"Would you like me to look over her paper for you, Sage?" Arithmetic was easy for Rose, but she'd also do anything to delay needlework.

"No, thank you." Sage picked up the page and scanned it. Twelve of the fifteen finished were correct. Carinthia had made a lot of progress in the nine months since Sage had become her tutor.

"Are you going to the training yards this afternoon?" Rose asked, idly twirling her knitting needle.

Sage tried to act like it hadn't been on her mind for hours as she

nodded. "They're having a double ring fencing match today. Master Reed says I'm ready." A glance around the room told her it was tidy enough. She offered Rose the knitting needle she still held. "Don't forget this."

The princess made a face before accepting it. Together they walked into the adjacent room, where Rose's mother and sister sat working on an elaborate tapestry near the hearth fire. The queen was a fair-skinned northerner, with bright, wheat-colored curls that Rose had inherited. Sitting by her side, Princess Cara was in her element at last, stitching scarlet designs into the heavy fabric. Rose groaned. Knitting she disliked, but embroidery she hated.

Sage curtsied. "We're done for the day, Majesty," she said. "Is there anything else you need of me?" The queen was slightly farsighted, and Sage had taken on the additional duties as her private secretary a few months ago. "Any new correspondence?"

"I suspect you are really asking if there is anything for you," the queen said. "But no, there is nothing."

Sage frowned. This was the second week in a row there was nothing from Alex. As he was the king's nephew and she was employed in the royal household, their private letters were often included in official dispatches going to and from the capital—more reliable delivery, but still sporadic.

Orianna looked up from her sewing with a gentle smile. "The Tegann Pass is already opened for the year, so communication will increase in the next few weeks. If anything does arrive, rest assured I will forward it to you immediately."

Sage wasn't sure when she'd stopped feeling awkward when members of the royal family showed such consideration for her feelings. "If there's nothing, then Your Majesty will excuse me."

"May I go with her, Mother?" asked Rose.

The queen's tone became more formal as she addressed her elder daughter. "Twice already this week you have skipped embroidery to watch Sage. Both times you promised to make up your work, and both times you have failed to do so."

"But, Mother—"

“The answer is no.” Orianna squinted in the magnifying glass over the cloth. Close work and reading strained her eyes and gave her headaches, but sewing was something Her Majesty would not give up. “You need not ask again.”

Sage shrugged apologetically at the thirteen-year-old, but privately she was glad not to have an audience today. Rose stomped to her sewing basket and plopped down, slouching against the back of her chair. Orianna glared at her, and Rose immediately straightened. With a sigh, the queen sat back and rubbed her eyes before looking up to Sage with a weary smile. “You’ve gone down to the training yards every day this week, if I’m not mistaken. If it weren’t for Captain Quinn, I’d think you had your eye on someone.”

Sage flushed. “It helps me feel closer to him in a way.” The conflict in Tasmet had started last summer and was now entering its ninth month. No amount of writing could make up for all the time they’d lost. “I also enjoy it. And with all the new soldiers arriving lately, there’s so much more I can learn.”

Orianna’s expression clouded over. “Yes, well, I’m sure you don’t want to be late today.” She turned back to her sewing and jabbed her needle into the fabric.

The mood shift was puzzling, but Sage didn’t have time to unravel it right now. She curtsied and departed the queen’s sitting room, her mind already mentally wielding a sword. She’d have to hurry if she wanted to claim one of the padded armor suits small enough to fit her slight frame. In her excitement, she’d taken twenty steps before she remembered she was still wearing a dress. Sage whirled around and trotted back in the direction of her room, loosening the laces of her bodice as she went. Five minutes later she was taking shortcuts through the servants’ passages, dressed in breeches and a linen shirt.

More soldiers than ever filled the yards, shouting greetings to old friends and making new ones. Sage wove through the crowds, focused on getting to the main arena. She’d long ago cured herself of automatically searching every group of soldiers for Alex’s face, hoping against hope he’d returned to Tennegol before he could tell her he was coming.

She had been only partly honest with the queen. Coming here *did* help her feel closer to Alex, but her reasons went deeper. Ever since Father died five years ago, Sage's life had been ruled by others. Her aunt and uncle may have had good intentions, but her guardians had set her on a path of relying on a husband for her safety and well-being. When she worked for the matchmaker, Darnessa was better at letting her have independence, and Sage might have found herself after a few years, but last summer changed everything. She'd never felt more helpless, more of a liability than she did at Tegann.

Alex's soldiers had needed to get packets of red blaze—powders that created massive columns of red smoke when burned—to the scouts outside the fortress so they could signal for help. Sage was the only one who could squeeze out of the sewer grate to escape, but she was caught by a sentry. She'd been barely competent enough to defend herself, and it had almost cost her her life.

She would never be helpless again.

Sage managed to snag the last suit small enough to fit her, beating out a palace squire who had wasted time picking out a sword first. She tried not to look too triumphant as she shoved her arms into the sleeves and buckled the top half to the bottom. Even luckier, this particular outfit was designed to also wear on horseback, meaning the rear and back of the thighs were looser and not padded. Frankly, her backside needed the extra room.

Once the practice armor was secure, Sage selected a training sword, opting for one heavier than squires normally worked with. She would tire quicker, but she'd learned the extra weight behind her swings somewhat compensated for her weaker arm strength. It also made her stronger. She pinned the sword between her knees as she tucked her sandy braid inside her helmet and lashed it down. Then she stood straight and hefted the weapon in her hand, trembling with sudden nervousness.

Today she would find out just how good she was.

2

SAGE TOOK A place in the inner circle of fighters, facing outward. A ring formed around them, matching up one-to-one. She saluted her first partner and took a guard stance, idly wondering if she knew the man. With the bulky and often misshapen padding, there were only three or four men she could positively identify once helmets were on—and one of them because he was missing an arm. It worked both ways, however. Due to her size, most assumed she was a squire, which suited Sage just fine. The regular guards had gotten used to her presence over the last few months, but with all the new soldiers lately, things tended to get awkward if they realized she was a woman.

When the bell rang out, Sage and her opponent quickly fell into a rhythm of attacking and defending. As it was the first round, they both were more interested in warming up than scoring points. They lunged and blocked with increasing intensity until the bell signaled the end of the round after seven minutes. Both lowered their swords and saluted each other again. Her partner took several steps to his right so another fighter could move in front of her. She saluted the new man and set her feet for the next round.

After four rotations, Sage was sweating heavily under her armor but feeling confident in her performance. A few fencers slid in or out of the formation, one pair inserting themselves two positions to her right. She didn't recognize either of them, but it felt like the one in the outer ring

was watching her. Had he seen signs she was a girl? Hopefully not. As the man rotated closer, she watched him, too.

The scruff of a black beard showed under the padded helmet, so he was likely in his twenties at least. He was taller than her, but most men were, well-built without being bulky—though the padding made him look slightly hunchbacked—and his sword . . . It was a standard practice weapon, not a personal one, yet he handled it like an extension of his arm, with swift and smooth efficiency. Not a movement was wasted. A clip across her shoulder reminded her to pay more attention to her current opponent. Sage shook sweat from her eyes and refocused on her own match.

At the next bell, the man stepped before her. His helm exaggerated the movement of his head as he looked her up and down. Assessing her, no doubt. Though she couldn't see anything—not even his bearded neck from this angle—when he saluted she got the feeling he was smiling. He plainly did not see her as a challenge. Well, she would show him she was no novice.

But in less than a minute, his superiority was obvious. Master Reed described her as advanced for her time and with promising grace of form, but her new opponent anticipated her every move and countered effortlessly. When he went on the offense, she could tell he moved slowly for her benefit. Part of her felt angry at being patronized; another part was grateful he hadn't merely disarmed her in the first three seconds. After a time, she realized he was testing her, letting her show what she could do, and she began to appreciate him—until she leaned too far to the right in a parry. His sword whipped around and smacked her rear end.

Through the slit in the helm she caught the glint of his teeth as he grinned. Rage flashed through her—he knew she was a girl! Why else would he have done that except to mock her? Nearly blind with fury, she recovered her balance and attacked, which he easily blocked. Sage shoved away and stepped back, and he shook his head in warning. She struck out wildly, but he knocked her sword to the ground and laid the flat of his blade across her backside again.

Tears of humiliation blurred her vision. While she stood clenching

her fists and trying to decide what to do, he retrieved her sword and offered it back to her. There was no sign of a smile behind the mask this time, and she understood. He'd warned her not to attack in anger and taught her a lesson when she didn't heed him. Humbled, she accepted her weapon and assumed the guard position. He nodded approvingly, and they began again.

The bell clanged, ending the round, but the man gestured for the next fighter to go around. The other swordsman shrugged and moved past them. Her mysterious partner had taken an interest in her. Given his skill, it was somewhat puzzling—he gained nothing by staying. Then the bell rang again, and she dismissed her confusion to concentrate on the fight before her. After a few exchanges of blows, her partner stepped back and motioned for her to lower her blade. Cautiously, she did, and he shifted his sword to his left hand and approached to stand behind her. Without a word, he placed his hand on her wrist and corrected what she'd been doing, guiding her arm in a more efficient arc and slice. The man's directions were better for her height and arm strength than what she'd learned.

"Thank you," she said, the words echoing in her helm. The man nodded and took up his position again. When he switched his sword back to his right hand, he flexed his left several times, like it was numb. Her eyes widened.

No, it couldn't be.

But the more she watched him, the more sure she became. When the round ended, once again her partner waved for the next fighter to skip them. The man at the bell called out that this would be the last round.

Their sparring changed. Her opponent became aggressive, forcing her back almost constantly. He plainly intended to make her yield by the end, though she knew he could do it at any point.

Winning this fight would require something other than skill.

She waited until the right moment, then faltered. As she knew he would, the man took advantage of the opening, but she was ready to move into it. Making it look like he stabbed her, she collapsed with a cry. Her partner dropped his sword and dove to catch her.

He rolled her onto her back and knelt over her, pushing her helmet off and feeling along her ribs. "Where?" he gasped. "Where are you hurt?"

Sage grinned up at him. "I'm fine, Captain, but you're dead." She jabbed him in the stomach with the dull point of her practice sword, and he glanced down.

Scrambling to take off his helm, he looked back at her with a mixture of pride and vexation in his brown eyes. "You're a cheater, you know that?"

"As I recall, you taught me to use every advantage I could."

Alex laughed. "So I did. I yield to my lady." All the padding made it difficult for him to kiss her, but he managed.

3

CAPTAIN MALKIM HUZAR sat in the corner of the bustling tavern, nursing a pint of ale. It was a weak brew, but he endured it as he endured everything in this country. The rough weave of his cloak hung around him so only his forearms were exposed. From beneath the hood, his eyes tracked the movements of over two dozen other customers, three barmaids, and the establishment's owner—a fat, greasy man who acted like he owned the barmaids as well, the one exception being a pretty girl with lips and nails painted to match the fiery tints in her hair. The barman gave her a wide berth. Two silvery scars under his left ear were likely the reason.

The redhead brought him an ale to replace the one he'd finished. Before taking his empty mug, she traced a fingernail over the swirling tattoo on his bronze arm. "Don't get many Aristelans here," she said in a husky voice.

She mistook him for an eastern Demoran, but that was fine with him. Kimisar weren't welcome in Demora, even before the current conflict. Huzar allowed himself a vague smile. The door to the tavern opened, bringing a gust of frigid March air Huzar could feel even in this corner. Finally.

"Another ale," he told her. "For my friend."

She glanced over her shoulder at the man weaving through the crowd, and turned back to the bar with a sigh. Huzar exhaled in relief. Pretty as she was, the less attention he drew from anyone, the better.

The newcomer swept back his own cloak, made of a fine but sturdy cloth with the Demoran royal crest on the collar, and joined Huzar at the table, bringing with him the strong scent of horse sweat and dung. He sat at an angle so neither man's view of the room was obstructed. Unlike Huzar, he'd spent most of the winter indoors, and his southern complexion had lost some of its copper undertones. The arms he leaned on the table were also scrawny compared to the muscles Huzar displayed.

"You are late," Huzar said in Demoran. He hadn't spoken his native tongue in over nine months; only a trace of his accent remained. He could even say *Jovan* as the Demorans pronounced Shovan.

"My work has increased with all these arrivals," the stablehand said. "Fortunately also my pay. Riders tip well for extra care of their mounts." He pushed a small bag of coins across the table.

Huzar pocketed the money with a grunt. As much as he moved around, he didn't have time to find steady employment, meaning every man he checked in with had to give him a small portion of his wages. "What news, then? I have seen many soldiers arriving."

The other man nodded. "I hear rumors."

Huzar held up a finger as the barmaid returned with a full mug. The stablehand grinned up as she set it before him, but Huzar didn't dare look at her. Once she left, Huzar lowered his hand and waited for the man to elaborate.

"They say the king will reestablish the Norsari."

Having delivered this incredible statement, the man took a smug drink, letting it sluice over the sides and down his chin. Huzar blinked as he tried to process the news. Demora's elite fighting unit had been disbanded over twenty years ago, as a disarmament condition of the truce after Kimisara's last major campaign to reclaim the region of Tasmēt. A weak and foolish move on the part of the Demoran king, but he'd been young and eager to be seen as a peacemaker at the time. The events of last year undoubtedly nullified the terms of the treaty, however.

Huzar tapped the side of his mug but otherwise held himself still. "I would not consider the fuss in Tasmēt worth such action. Maybe only another year with the forces they have will be sufficient." He was also

surprised the Kimisar were still raiding Tasmet after all these months, but after three years of famine and blight, there was likely little to return home to.

“It would seem the Demoran king expects more trouble.”

Huzar had no knowledge of what his own nation planned, but given the state of Kimisara when he left last year, he doubted it had recovered enough to attempt an invasion. Only the alliance with the D’Amiran family had made last summer possible. The agreement had been distasteful from the start, but he’d followed orders. When it became obvious the Demoran duke had no intention of keeping to the terms, however, Huzar had ordered his men to abandon Tegann and return home. Unfortunately, a company of Kimisar had been stranded in Demora, on the east side of the Catrux Mountains, and Huzar had made it his mission to find them.

Once he did, he realized there were too few men to fight their way back, but too many to keep together for long. He’d ordered them to disperse into the Demoran countryside, find work, and lie low until the time was right to either escape or make a stand. To further throw the Demorans off, Huzar had taken a team to the border to make it look as though the group had crossed into Casmun. Perhaps none of it had worked as well as he’d thought.

“Trouble? From where?”

“Casmun. There have been signs of an alliance between our people and theirs.”

Huzar snorted. The Kimisar and Casmuni had common roots, but they hated each other even more than Kimisara and Demora. More likely the Demoran king was misinterpreting the trail Huzar had left going south, believing it was Casmuni testing the border as the Kimisar were known to do in the west.

He stroked the stubble on his chin, wondering if this was a positive or negative development. That the Demorans were confused could be an advantage, but once there were Norsari, it was only a matter of time before he and his men were hunted down and wiped out.

A Norsari unit would take weeks to train, though. Huzar probably had enough time to gather the 150 or so Kimisar scattered east and south of

the capital and make a plan to get home. Information would be his primary asset until then.

The captain turned his eyes back to the stablehand. "If there are to be Norsari, who will be the commander?"

"I have heard one name more than any other." The man's grin displayed two missing teeth. "And it is one you will recognize."

A few minutes later, the stablehand left to return to his job at the palace. Huzar ordered a third pint and barely noticed when it was placed in front of him. He did indeed know the name. Few in the city did not. But Huzar had special reason to know it.

Captain Alexander Quinn.

He'd long ago discovered the name of the lead soldier escorting the women to the capital city of Tennegol last summer. In scraping together information in the past months, Huzar was able to paint a clear picture of what had happened at Tegann. D'Amiran had been outfoxed, and Quinn had taken over the entire fortress with only a handful of soldiers. It appeared the Demoran captain would've succeeded even if Huzar and his men had stayed, the plan and its execution had been that solid. Quinn had also personally killed the duke.

An enemy one could respect was far preferable to an ally without honor, and Huzar bore him no ill will. He only wished to go home. It now appeared he would have to go through Captain Quinn to get there.

4

FROM HER SEAT within the giant willow tree, Sage watched Alex pace the garden path, pausing often to look in the direction he expected her to come from. She'd arrived several minutes before him and loosely braided her bath-wet hair as she waited. Maybe it was cruel, but she wanted to watch him for a few minutes, remembering the way he moved, savoring his eagerness. It was only fair, really, since he must have been spying on her in the tilting yards for quite a while.

He flexed his left hand as he walked, probably out of habit more than necessity now. It had taken weeks to recover full movement from the wound Alex had taken in the forearm at Tegann. He'd even admitted in his letters that he feared there was some minor permanent nerve damage. Alex wouldn't want to make her worry, though, and Sage was concerned it was worse than he said. She'd have to ask his best friend, Lieutenant Casseck, for his opinion.

Sage nervously traced the silver-threaded designs on her dress. The blue brocade gown had cap sleeves and a neckline lower than she usually preferred, making her feel exposed. It was much too formal for a walk in the gardens, but everyone said it suited her coloring and played up her better features. Sage had actually come to like skirts in the past year. Well, perhaps *like* was too strong a word. She'd come to a greater appreciation of pretty clothes, even if she felt like a duck wearing swan feathers.

As the edge of the sun dipped below the high walls, Alex went to sit

on the bench, bouncing his knees impatiently. Sage decided she'd had enough and called his name.

He jumped up and turned to squint into the thick, drooping branches behind him. "Sage?"

"I'm in here."

Vaulting over the bench, he parted the curtain of leaves with his hands and leaned in. When he saw her he scowled. "How long have you been here?"

Sage hopped down from the low-hanging limb. "Long enough."

"Oh, you are going to pay for that." He swooped inside the shelter of the tree and lifted her off her feet. She shrieked and flailed as he lowered her gently to the ground, then pinned her arms down so he could kiss her neck. "Say you're sorry," he whispered, his breath in her ear hitting her like a lightning bolt she felt to her toes.

"I can't." She giggled. "That would be a lie."

"How long did I wait there like a fool? An hour?"

"Try three minutes. Five at most."

"The longest five minutes of my life."

"You deserved it after that stunt you pulled in the yards. How long were you watching me there?"

"Two times in as many hours you defeat me with treachery." Alex released her wrists to bury one hand in her hair and slip the other around her waist. "I'm marrying a criminal mastermind."

"I'm hardly—" But he cut her off with his mouth on hers. Sage wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. His hair was still wet, too, and smelled of evergreen soap, like the mountain forest in winter.

He lifted his face to whisper, "I've missed you so much," before kissing her again and again, each time seemingly different, with a separate memory of longing attached. She never wanted it to end, but at last he leaned back to look at her, tracing his thumb over her lips. "Sweet Spirit," Alex said softly. "I'd forgotten how much I'd do for that smile."

Sage pulled one hand back from his shoulder. "You look well, though this will take some getting used to." She ran her fingers over the scruff on his chin.

For a second he looked puzzled, then he laughed. “Would you believe I’d forgotten it was there? It was just easier to manage these last months. Warmer in the winter, too.” He studied her face. “Do you like it?”

She pursed her lips. “I’m not sure yet. It looks quite dashing, but I’ve only seen and imagined you clean-shaven, so it’s a little startling. And a bit rough on my face.”

“I’ll get rid of it tomorrow.”

“I can get used to it. Give me a couple days.”

Alex shook his head. “Nothing will come between me and my lady—nothing that would cause her to deny my kisses, especially. Besides, I can always grow it back later.”

“If you want.” Sage shrugged, honestly not caring. “Who else came with you?”

“Cass and Gram for officers,” Alex said, rubbing his face where she’d touched him. Lieutenants Casseck and Gramwell were two of his closest friends and had been with the escort group last year at Tegann. “Plus a hundred handpicked fighters.”

That was interesting, especially considering how many similar soldiers had been arriving in the past weeks. She took a deep breath. Now came the question she wasn’t sure she wanted to hear answered. “How long are you here?”

“Not sure yet. Several days at least.”

Not great, but not terrible. “Will you have many daily duties?”

Alex rolled lazily onto his side next to her and stroked her bare arm with one finger, raising goose bumps among the freckles and faint scars. “Cass can handle most of them for me.”

“Shame on you, Captain. That’s an abuse of power.”

“Rank has its privileges. Besides, he’ll make captain soon, so he needs the practice.”

“Where will you go from here?”

Alex gently tugged her sleeve down and kissed her exposed shoulder. “Not sure about that, either. I have a theory, but I won’t know for a couple more days. We got here a little earlier than expected. Can’t imagine what drove me to travel so fast.”

“Did you come through Tegann?”

Even in the dim light she could see his face pale. “Yes, why?”

“I was just curious how much it had been rebuilt, after all the fires and such.”

“I honestly don’t know. We didn’t stop.” The venom in his voice made her recoil a little. “If it were up to me, I’d have burned the whole place down.”

How could she have been so thoughtless? Sage turned his face up to hers to find his eyes bright with tears. “Alex, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “It’s all right. I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

She searched for something better to talk about. “So what’s your theory about your assignment?”

Alex sighed. “Sage, I’ve spent nine months waiting for this night. Can we please talk about something besides the army?”

His eyes were still closed as she brought her mouth to his. “I don’t think we need to talk at all,” she said.

5

MORROW D'AMIRAN HELD *Charlie* tight against him with one hand, a dagger in the other. Alex's brother, barely nine years old, struggled vainly as his dark brown eyes begged forgiveness for being caught.

No, Alex wanted to tell him. You did everything right. This is happening because of my mistakes.

"Choose, Captain." D'Amiran smiled as he brought the blade to Charlie's throat.

Choose?

From the back room—the bedchamber—stepped the duke's guard captain, Geddes, dragging a battered and bloody *Sage*. She was too weak to struggle as Geddes pinned her against his chest, but she stared at Alex accusingly.

"You said you'd come for me," she spat. "But you didn't."

I thought you were dead. He begged her to understand. I would've torn this tower down with my bare hands if I'd known you were here.

The hate in her gray eyes did not diminish as Geddes pulled out a knife and yanked her head back to lay the blade across her slender throat. The ratty-eared guard looked back to the duke.

D'Amiran was still smiling. "Choose," he said again.



Alex reached for his sword but found nothing at his waist, instead striking his elbow on the stone wall next to his cot. A bolt of pain shot up his arm to his shoulder, waking him fully before rendering his arm too numb

to use. He tore at the blanket with the other hand and half fell, half rolled out of bed, then stumbled through the pitch darkness to the door and out into the cooler passage of the barracks. The light of the low torch burned his vision, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he gasped for air. When he was sure he wouldn't be sick, he pushed to his feet and felt along the wall to the outer door.

The faint light from the approaching dawn was gentler on his eyes, and he wiped sweat and tears away as he sagged against a barrel of drinking water. It was a dream he'd had before, though not for several months.

Breathe, he told himself. *It wasn't real.*

But so much of it was.

When he'd kicked his way into the window of D'Amiran's private chamber that day at Tegann, it was the only place left she could've been. Alex had fully expected to be forced to choose between Sage and Charlie, and he'd had no idea how he would handle it. But only Charlie and the duke were in those rooms. And Charlie had died.

D'Amiran had made a critical mistake that morning in sending Captain Geddes to imply Sage had been caught in her attempt to escape Tegann. Alex was meant to think she was being tortured, but instead he'd assumed she'd been killed. For the first hour he was too sick to do anything. By the time he and his soldiers realized she might not be dead, Alex had regained control of himself, and he was able to make a rational, though rushed, plan. Had Alex thought from the beginning she was alive, he might have charged in without thinking.

Not might have. Would have.

Alex ran a hand through his damp hair, relieved that feeling had returned to his fingertips, and stood straight. His body pulsed with adrenaline as he strode back into the barracks. In his room, he quietly felt around for his boots and socks. Lieutenant Casseck stirred as Alex opened the door again to step out into the passage.

"Where you goin'?" his friend mumbled. "I thought we had the morning off."

Normally a day began with group exercises, but Alex had pushed the

men with him hard to get to the capital early and felt they deserved rest. “For a run,” he answered. “It’s almost dawn. Best time for it.”

“Crazy bastard.” Cass rolled into a sitting position and squinted at the torchlight slicing across the floor. “Need company?”

Alex hesitated. He didn’t want to wait the ten minutes Cass would need to be ready. “Catch me on my second lap?”

One circuit was a mile and a half. Cass rubbed his face. “Yeah. Second lap. Just make sure you actually wait for me.”

“Then don’t be late.” Alex broke into a run as soon as he was outside again. By the time Cass joined him, all traces of the nightmare and fear were gone from Alex’s face.

At least he hoped so.