

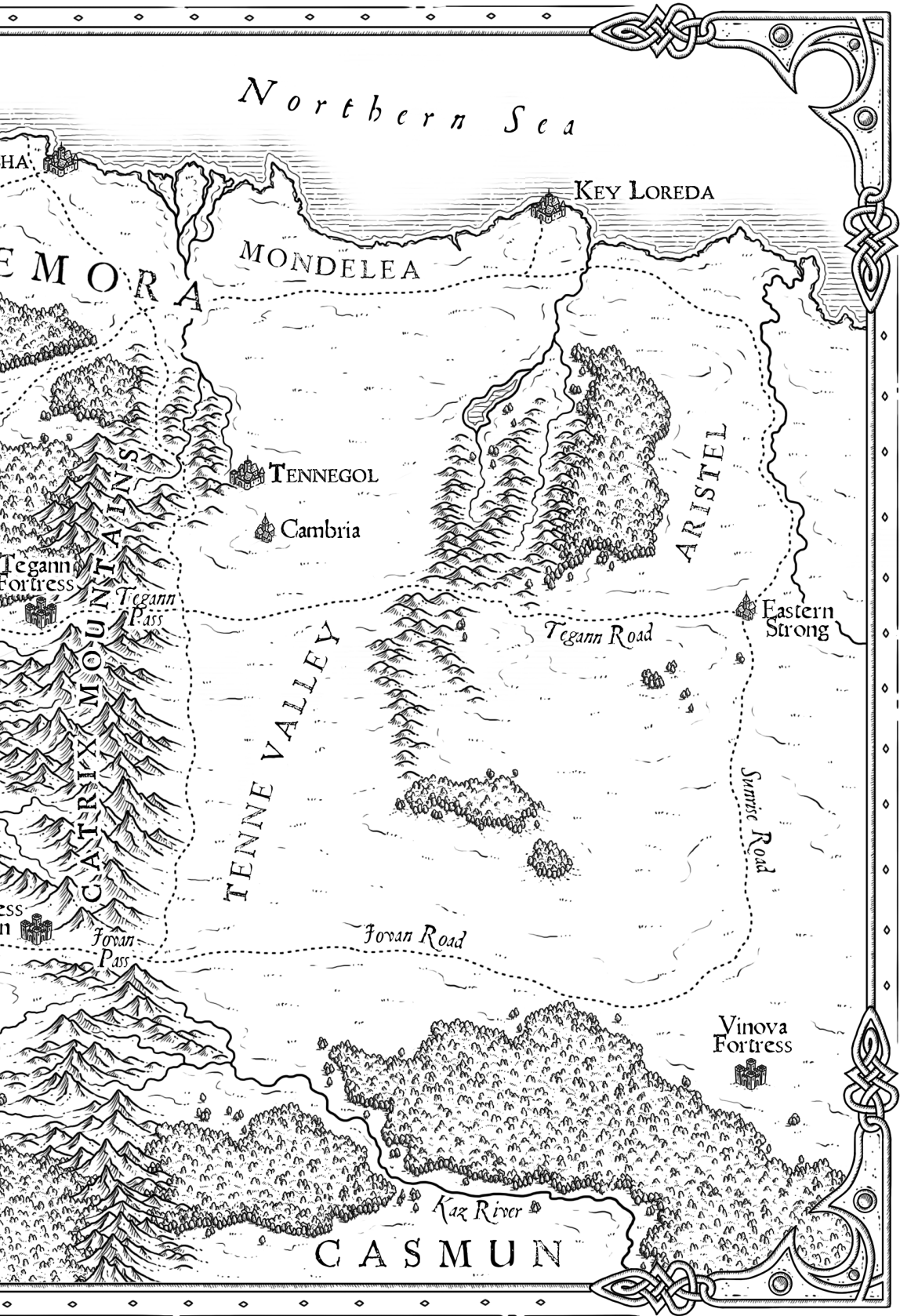
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CASMUN



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I HOPE ENJOY AND IT BRINGS YOU TO THOSE YOU LOVE,
 YOU THIS BOOK, CLOSE
BUT IF DESPISE MAY IT SHARPLY ON YOUR FINGERS.

To Mom, who showed my sister and me that being intelligent should be a source of pride. And Dad, who showed us that real men want to be around women who can think.

1

FOR SOMEONE WHO hated fighting, Clare was getting pretty good at it. Sage now had to break a sweat to defeat her friend, which was impressive today, given how cold it was. The massive stone walls of Vinova, Demora's outpost fortress, offered shelter from the winter winds that swept across the eastern plain but did little to hold in warmth. Repelling invasion and resisting siege had been first in the builders' minds. Now that the southern nation of Casmun was opening diplomatic talks, it was the location that mattered for Sage's position as ambassador. Self-defense was important for life in general, however, and so Sage insisted her best friend and companion train in combat.

Clare's face contorted into a scowl of concentration as she gripped a lightweight sword in one gloved hand. Her eyes narrowed over the shield on her left arm, but that wasn't what Sage was watching.

Beneath her knee-length skirt, Clare's boots shifted in the dirt, and Sage unconsciously leaned to the right, bracing her own feet on the frozen ground, still waiting for the movement that would give her friend away. Rare was even the most seasoned warrior who could attack without some warning in body language. At not quite seventeen, Clare was nearly two years younger than Sage, and she'd begun her training only a few months ago.

It was a sharp, slight movement a split second before Clare lunged that gave her away, but it was enough. Sage met her on the left and blocked the swing with her shield before catching Clare's sword with her own,

lifting the blade up, around, and back down. The motion drew them up against each other as their hilts locked. This time Sage left herself open to a countermove.

“What are you forgetting?” she asked, bearing down until the tip of Clare’s sword touched the ground.

In response, Clare pivoted and rammed her shield into Sage’s exposed side.

Your shield is also a weapon.

Sage grinned as she fell back, but her friend didn’t smile as she jerked her head to toss her thick braid over her shoulder. Her brown eyes flashed in silent challenge, and her slight frame trembled with something other than cold. “You don’t have to keep telling me,” Clare spat.

She was angry now. Which meant things were about to get interesting.

Rage was useful in a fight—Sage knew that firsthand. It heightened the senses and brought strength and endurance, but she’d also experienced the recklessness that easily took over. Clare’s lack of control could force Sage to react in a way that might hurt one or both of them.

“Anytime now,” taunted Clare, her words muffled behind the shield.

Sage moved several careful steps to the right, forcing Clare to adjust her stance and give herself more time to think. *What would Alex do?*

The thought of him brought an involuntary smile to her lips. Last year Sage had lashed out in anger while sparring with Alex, and he’d disarmed her and smacked her rear end with the flat of his blade in a single move. Alex wouldn’t escalate this. He would stay methodical, meeting her at her level, never forcing her back too much but never conceding ground, either.

Clare was waiting for her to make a move. Sage shifted to walk to the left side, twisting her curved sword in a lazy arc, briefly reflecting a ray of sunlight that had escaped the blanket of clouds above.

Her friend didn’t take the bait. She was in control right now, but it wouldn’t take much to tip that balance.

Sage began running through a series of basic arcs, slices, and parries, stripping her movements of the personal style she’d developed over the last year and a half. She imagined herself as the clock in the chapel tower—gears

and pendulums and arms rotating but anchored firmly from the center and therefore restricted and predictable. The only sound was their heavy breathing and the steady clash of metal on metal.

With only the slightest twitch in warning, Clare broke from the rhythm, countering a parry with a slash across Sage's leg close enough to catch the fabric of her breeches. Clare's eyes widened in shock, but Sage didn't acknowledge it, refusing to leave enough time for fear to get ahold of either of them. Their sparring dropped all feel of formality and rote practice. Even if neither truly wanted to hurt the other, it suddenly felt *real*, and they danced around each other with intense concentration and vague smiles.

Sage pressed Clare hard, slowly draining the reservoir of rage. Her friend managed to hold her temper in check, and there were no damaging hits to either side other than a few earsplitting shrieks as swords grazed across shields.

After nearly twenty minutes, the fire was spent. Sage rested on a bale of hay outside the horse paddock, fiddling with the hole in her breeches. The cold had begun to make itself known again, starting with her nose. Next to her, Clare's breath frosted in the air between them as she slowly came back down from the exertion. Every few seconds she cast a guilty look at Sage's leg, but Sage studiously ignored her concern. She didn't think the skin was cut, though it was hard to tell with gloves on. Either way, her friend shouldn't feel bad about it.

"I think your clothes give you an advantage," Sage said casually. "It's harder to see what your upper legs are doing. Makes you less predictable."

"Finally, something I have over you," Clare said, pulling her skirt down as far as it would go. The hose she wore underneath was thick enough to hide the shape of her legs, but she was still self-conscious. There was no bitterness in her voice, though, only weariness, which was good.

Sage shivered and ran a hand over her head, pressing down the hair that had escaped the short horsetail in the back. She could tell by her shadow that she looked like a half-drowned cat. Clare's mahogany braid was flawless, as usual. "We still have time for a bit of *tashaivar*," Sage said, glancing at the angle of the sun.

Just then the chapel bell tolled, its pulses echoing off the bare stone of the fortress and its surrounding walls, declaring three hours past noon. Clare hopped up, energy restored. “No, we don’t.”

Sage groaned inwardly, but a deal was a deal—Clare submitted to Sage’s combat training and Sage took lessons from her friend in diplomacy. Besides, a hot bath was what she needed now. Cold had seeped into her toes, and the dampness under the Casmuni-styled clothing she wore for sparring chilled her skin. The loose breeches and jacket were meant for desert wear and dispersed body heat quickly. Though her teeth had begun to chatter, Sage volunteered to put Clare’s weapons away so her friend could clean up first.

Clare was done by the time Sage entered the dressing room connecting their suites. When they’d taken up residence at Vinova several months ago, Sage had worried at the cruelty of putting her friend in rooms meant for the wife of the ambassador stationed at the border stronghold. After all, Clare was supposed to marry the son of the previous ambassador, Lord Gramwell, who was expected to be an emissary in his own right someday. She’d spent nine months living with her betrothed’s family, preparing for the role.

It would never happen now.

A Kimisar arrow may have killed Lieutenant Lucas Gramwell, but Sage could never forget that he’d taken it in protection of her. Clare didn’t blame her, except perhaps in her worst moments, which—thankfully—were becoming more rare. And it wasn’t as though Sage had come through the battle unscathed. She and Clare spent many nights sleeping in the same bed, comforting each other through nightmares. Now they occurred maybe once a week, and more often it was Sage who woke screaming and thrashing.

In waking hours, Clare’s episodes of anger usually sparked over something trivial and then simmered below the surface until they burst forth in the middle of training, over dinner, or during a diplomacy lesson. It was a reaction Sage herself had experienced after her own father’s death six years ago, so she didn’t judge her friend harshly. Time was the only thing that could truly heal either of their wounds.

Sage loosened the laces of her jacket with her right hand as she dipped her left into the bathwater. Just right. She shed the rest of her sweaty clothes and hopped in. Clare rolled her eyes as water splashed onto the polished wood floor, but Sage barely noticed as she ducked under the surface and pulled her short, sand-colored hair free of its leather tie. The left side of her body tingled with a sensation stronger than an itch, but she ignored it and lifted her head out of the water, reaching for the bottle of hair tonic.

“We’re almost out of this,” said Sage, pulling at the cork with her teeth to avoid taking her left arm out of the water. The scents of orange and jasmine wafted from the open bottle.

“Let me get that.” Clare finished tying the bodice of her simple gray dress and moved to help Sage get the last of the hair tonic out. Rather than just dab it on Sage’s wet hair, she began to lather it, too. She often did such things, finding quiet ways to make up for losing her temper. Sage didn’t think the silent apologies were necessary, but they made her friend feel better.

“When did you last hear from Major Quinn?” Clare asked casually, as if she didn’t know. Bringing up Sage’s betrothed was another way of smoothing roughness between them.

At the mention of Alex’s name, heat crept into Sage’s cheeks, and she tried to reply just as casually, “Two days ago.”

“How is the training coming along?”

Alex commanded the Norsari, Demora’s elite fighters. Last spring the army unit was reestablished twenty years after having been disbanded. As it turned out, the initial company had been ready just in time to face a Kimisar force coming through the southern nation of Casmun. Now the Norsari were being expanded to a full battalion. The increase had been planned from the beginning, but now it was a necessity. Kimisara’s king, Ragat, had been killed at the Battle of Black Glass, and no one in Demora knew what the combination of warm spring weather and a new ruler would bring. Whatever it was, the Norsari would be at the front lines. As would Alex. Sage tried not to think of the added distance and danger as she gently rubbed a washcloth over the pink-and-white scars on her leg. “They’ll be finishing up their seventh week now.”

Clare used a small pitcher to rinse Sage's hair. "Will he be able to visit?"

Sage shook her head and wiped suds from her eyes. "He can't afford to be away that long." The training camp was over a hundred and fifty miles to the west. At best, it was four days of hard travel to Vinova and another four back, and the winter weather didn't help. "Maybe when they've finished in another six weeks."

Yet she knew he wouldn't. Alex couldn't justify such a trip in the face of his responsibilities, especially considering they weren't married—and he was restricted from marrying until age twenty-four. Sage frowned thoughtfully and counted the days from midwinter in her head. Then she smiled.

His birthday was tomorrow. They had only a year left to wait.

2

AN HOUR LATER it was Sage's turn to scowl. How could eating be so complicated?

"Today you have an earl from Reyan on your left, a lower Casmuni prince on your right, and I am a Demoran countess," said Clare from her seat across the table, which was spread with more dishes, utensils, plates, and goblets than Sage could keep track of. "The earl only speaks his own language. I speak Reyan and Demoran, and the prince speaks Kimisar and Casmuni. Whom do you address first and in what language?"

Diplomacy gave Sage headaches and even a few nightmares. At least Kimisar weren't in the mix. The best Demora could ever hope for with them was an uneasy truce and constant denials that any of the raids in Tasmets were from their country. Reyan was a longtime ally, but the relationship with Casmun was still new. The nations' royal families wanted it to succeed, but the common people on both sides were slower to change after generations of hostility. The process was delicate, especially after last summer's events.

"Have I shared water with the prince before?" Sage asked. Casmuni didn't think it polite to fully address or use names with a person they hadn't been formally introduced to.

"Yes, but it was years ago, and you aren't sure if he remembers."

Dammit, her friend was crafty. But ambassadorship could be that complicated, and not being prepared could cause disaster on a national scale. Sage never felt more in over her head than she did during these

lessons. She suddenly grinned. "I'll leave you to chat with him while I address the messenger who just walked in."

Clare turned around to see Master Finch approaching with a scroll bound by a violet ribbon. "That looks unusual," she said.

Sage untied the ribbon and unrolled the parchment, then spent several minutes silently studying the words. Clare kicked her under the table. "It can't take that long to read," she scolded.

A slow smile had spread across Sage's cheeks. "I think we should change the prince on my right to a princess." She flipped the page around to show Clare it was written in Casmuni. "Lani is coming to visit."

"When?" Her friend seized the official-looking parchment, drawing her brows down as she scanned it, reading slower than Sage had. "Sooner than this summer?"

"Tomorrow."

The lesson forgotten, Clare jumped to her feet. "Spirit above, we've got to get ready!"

"Can't we at least finish eating?" Sage gazed longingly at the covered dishes and their still-empty plates. Time in the tilting yards always made her hungry. Sometimes the promise of food was the only thing that made etiquette lessons bearable.

"Are you kidding?" Clare was halfway to the door, casting a look over her shoulder that indicated that if Sage didn't come along, she would drag her. "We won't have time to sleep tonight."

With a sigh, Sage pushed her chair away from the table and followed her friend, but not before grabbing a bread roll. Or three.



Sage had once seen a Norsari company march into battle on a moment's notice. That was the only thing she could compare the activity around the Vinova Fortress to over the next hours. Clare took charge of the kitchens and household matters, having food and rooms prepared.

Alaniah Limistraleddai would be the first Casmuni to set foot in Demora in over two hundred years, and she wasn't an ordinary emissary;

she was the king's sister and the highest-ranking *chessa*—princess—in the nation. “How many in her retinue?” Clare asked again.

“Twelve,” Sage answered without looking at the note. “Plus sixty soldiers.” That wasn't very many, considering Lani's status.

“She could've given us more warning,” Clare grumbled, counting chickens plucked and laid out.

“*An ambassador is always ready to receive,*” Sage recited with a grin.

Clare grimaced. “Thank the Spirit that Papa began cleaning things up when he and I were here last summer. We'd be much worse off now if he hadn't.” She referred to her fiancé's father, a retired diplomat who had been recalled to act as ambassador at the Vinova Fortress near the southern border, when Demora had been preparing to reopen relations with Casmun. That was interrupted by the Kimisar staging an attack, and Sage had fled into Casmun with the king's youngest son, accidentally becoming the first Demoran they'd spoken to in generations. Lord Gramwell led the effort to retrieve the prince, escalating to the Battle of Black Glass, in which the Demorans and Casmuni fought the Kimisar and won. His only son didn't return from the fight, and once the dust had settled and the prince was returned home, the grief-stricken ambassador asked for permanent retirement.

Sage was appointed to replace Lord Gramwell and kept Clare with her, both for companionship and to keep her friend from having to return to her father now that her betrothed was dead. On paper, Sage was the most qualified person in the realm for the position. She'd learned the Casmuni language and established a good relationship with their royal family, but she was still an eighteen-year-old commoner with no formal training, and she wondered if she would be replaced at some point. Not that King Raymond had ever indicated she might be.

In the meantime, she subjected herself to Clare's lessons. Between her friend's knowledge and what she'd learned about Casmun's people and customs, Sage hoped to be worthy of the job.

Their first test arrived in a matter of hours.

3

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Sage and Clare stood atop the highest watchtower, wrapped in furs, watching the Casmuni party approach. Most of Sage's traveling experience was with military units, and the size of Princess Lani's caravan unsettled her. "Why would she need all those horses and wagons?" she murmured.

"Gifts," said Clare tersely. "This is more than a friendly visit, Sage, and diplomacy dictates we reciprocate with something of equal value."

Sage felt herself blanch. "We don't have anything here yet." Demoran resources were strained due to the conflict with the Kimisar in Tasmēt. Grain and ore shipments from the west side of the Catrix Mountains had been reduced to a trickle, and the northern ports tended to shut down in the winter. "Doesn't she know she's several months early?"

"I'm sure she does." Clare shook her head. "I don't know what she expects of us."

"We might be able to do much with warm blankets and hot water." Sage pointed to a bundled figure on a white horse. Were she not out front and wearing a curved golden sword, Lani would've been unrecognizable. "She looks cold."

Fortunately, firewood was plentiful in this area. There was so much dead brush and so many fallen trees in the woods nearby that none had needed to be felled yet. Sage ordered the fires in the bedchambers to be stoked higher, and more kindling delivered to the barracks. "And double

the amount of hot water on hand,” she called to the steward as she followed Clare down to meet their guests.

They waited atop the steps to the main keep as the entire retinue filed into the main courtyard. Lani and her inner circle continued through the second gate. As the princess far outranked Sage and Clare, they came down to meet her as she dismounted. They curtsied together, but before either could get a word out, Lani strode past them and up the stairs into the stone building without invitation.

“Yes, yes,” she said in her own language. “Get me warm, and then we will talk.”

Sage and Clare scrambled to keep up with the princess, who headed straight for the hearth at the end of the receiving hall. Three attendants followed, picking up the clothing their mistress had begun to shed. A thick headscarf came first, freeing her ebony braid, followed by gloves and an outer jacket. Though finely woven, the sturdy clothes the princess wore were similar to what Sage used for sparring in the yards. Casmuni women usually wore long skirts like Demorans, but they were much more practical about changing into breeches when riding or practicing *tashai-var*, their form of close combat. Not oblivious to her servants’ discomfort, Lani gestured for them to join her in the circle of warmth. They all sighed a little.

“I am sorry to be rude,” the princess said in Casmuni, stretching her hands toward the flames. Her bronze skin had rosy splotches where it had been exposed to the wind. “But I have not stopped shaking from cold since we crossed the river. It will take months to get used to.” Lani sighed, her greenish-brown eyes resigned. “But midwinter has just passed, so it will get warmer, yes?”

“Um . . .” Sage glanced to Clare, who appeared to have caught that Lani intended to stay a long time. “The days may be lengthening, My Princess, but the coldness has only begun for Demora.” Lani’s mouth dropped open in horror, and Sage rushed to reassure her. “But we rarely have snow here.”

“What is *snow*?” asked Lani, repeating the Demoran word with interest. “Will we have it in Tennegol?”

Most of Casmun was desert or rain forest, and Sage struggled to explain it. “It is when the rain gets so cold it becomes like wool and sits on the ground.”

One of the servants dropped the clothes she held and began crying. Another tried to comfort her. Lani glanced at the girl before addressing Sage. “Feshamay comes from a city to the far south. Even Osthiza has been cold to her at times. Do not worry,” she told her attendant. “This *snow* cannot be higher than your toes.”

Sage exchanged glances with Clare. This would be an interesting visit.

“You wish to travel all the way to Tennegol?” Sage asked, pulling the conversation back to the princess’s apparent intention to visit the Demoran capital. She herself hadn’t been there in almost a year. When Sage and Alex were returning from Casmun four months ago, royal couriers had met them on the road with the request that she turn back to Vinova and take the post of ambassador. Alex had also been promoted and continued to Tennegol for fresh Norsari recruits, to bring the number up to a full battalion. Between missing Alex and being so isolated, Sage felt a little homesick, and she’d be happy to serve as Lani’s interpreter and guide. Clare looked excited, too, though she must already be tallying all the messages to send and supplies to be gathered.

“Of course I must go there,” said Lani. “You have two princesses, and I must choose the one who will best suit Casmun.”

This was going to be a very interesting visit.

4

THE REASON FOR Lani's surprise arrival was now clear: the extra thirtysome desert-bred horses and the heavily laden wagons the princess arrived with were negotiation tools. King Raymond would be more open to discussing the marriage of one of his daughters to a Casmuni prince after receiving such generous gifts.

Sage decided their conversation would be best continued in private. Outside Clare, the residents of Vinova Fortress understood only rudimentary Casmuni phrases, but it was better to be safe. After assurance from Lani that she intended to pause here for a few days, Sage left Clare to take the princess to her chambers and the hot bath that waited there and went to check on accommodations for the rest of the Casmuni.

In the main courtyard, wagons were being unloaded and horses were being led straight to the stables. Lani's escort all carried weapons, implying the extra cartloads of newly forged swords, spears, and knives were intended as gifts—a positive sign, as Casmuni made it a point to give weapons only to those they trusted most. Sage would have to make King Raymond aware of the underlying message.

She returned to the inner walls and the guest quarters. Lani was already setting up her rooms to her liking, having the maids unpack clothing and hang bright tapestries over the bare walls. Feshamay sniffled as she sorted a trunk of fabrics.

“I told her to make something warm to wear with the cloth of her choice,” Lani explained as she sipped a cup of hot tea by the fire. “It was all

supposed to be for your princess, that we could make her Casmuni dresses right away, but there is more than enough.”

“Yes, about that,” said Sage, taking a seat in the chair across from Lani, shifting to keep her left side away from the heat. She couldn’t tell what her friend was wearing under the blankets draped over her lap and shoulders, but her long black hair tumbled free around her to dry from her bath.

“I thank you for all of this,” Lani said, raising her cup. “It is just what I needed.”

“I am well thanked,” Sage replied. “What was it you were saying—”

“I have a new scabbard for you,” Lani interrupted. “Reza made it. There wasn’t time for her to finish it before you left, which is why the one Banneth gave you with your new sword was plain.”

The original *harish* gifted to Sage had been lost in combat, buried under the mound of melted stone that gave the Battle of Black Glass its name. Reza was the Casmuni king’s ten-year-old daughter. “I will gladly accept,” she replied, then took advantage of Lani pausing to sip her tea to blurt out, “Why are you here, Lani?”

The princess wrinkled her brow. “To learn about Demora, of course. To open trade and begin our friendship officially. I told you I would come.”

“Yes, but we did not expect your arrival for several months.”

“That was before we learned about King Ragat,” said Lani.

Sage had only recently received the official news of the Kimisar king’s death. It had been suspected last summer, but within Kimisara itself the truth had been obscured for a long time. Confirmation through spy networks had taken months, then it took several more weeks for the information to reach her at the outpost. She and Alex had discussed some of the implications in their last letters, but all they could do was speculate.

“After Sinda’s treason last summer,” Lani continued, flinching a little, “our people are worried for the future, especially as our relationship with Demora is not officially defined. I am here to define it.” She smiled mischievously. “And to plan your wedding. You need my help for it to be a proper affair.”

Sage shifted uncomfortably, thinking her friend must have misunder-

stood how long she and Alex still had to wait. “That’s not for another year.”

And then only if they could find a way to see each other. Her heart squeezed a little. What had seemed a short time ago yesterday once again felt like forever.

“I can stay that long.”

Sage breathed a sigh of relief. “So when you talked of choosing a princess . . .”

“She can go to Osthiza ahead of me,” said Lani carelessly. “Then the Casmuni people can see we are now allies. Kimisara will see it, too.”

Sage had tutored both of King Raymond’s daughters, the older of whom was now only fourteen. The thought of one of her former charges being forced to marry so young made her queasy. “I don’t think our king will be ready for this kind of agreement.”

“Which is why I need your help,” said Lani.

“I was only an apprentice to a marriage maker,” Sage objected. “And I was ill-suited for the job. I did it for less than a year.”

Lani gaped at her. “Banneth doesn’t want to *marry* her, Saizsch. She is only a child, yes?”

It had been the Casmuni king’s son Sage was thinking of. “But Hasseth—”

“Is twelve years.” Lani’s cup clattered back onto its saucer. “By the Spirit, Saizsch, you of all people should know my brother would never do *that!*”

Of course he wouldn’t. At fifteen, a newly crowned and frightened Banneth had been forced to marry a girl who hated him. Sage slumped against the back of her chair. “Well, what else am I to think when you talk of dressing a Demoran princess in your clothes and taking her away to Osthiza?”

“Oh, well.” Lani looked a little guilty. “We only wish her to live among us for a few years. If she were to develop affection for Hasseth over that time, we would be most pleased.”

Sage narrowed her eyes. “I imagine you will encourage that.”

“We will do everything to make her happy,” Lani countered calmly. “But we will never force her.” She arched one perfectly shaped eyebrow as

she sipped her tea again. “For all you know, we may not find her queen material. Perhaps it is your country who will reach for what it cannot have.”

“Perhaps,” said Sage, mirroring the princess’s expression, then grinning when Lani did.

One of the maids offered Sage a cup of Casmuni tea, then refilled her mistress’s. Sage warmed her fingers on the porcelain and sighed. “I missed this brew,” she said. Rose and jasmine. It felt auspicious. “I think the princess who would suit this idea best would be Rose. That is also our name for your *risha* flower.”

“And you think your *Risha* will transplant well?” asked Lani. “She likes to visit new places?”

Sage snorted into her cup. Rose had actually traveled very little in her life and once confessed to Sage how maddening it was to be so sheltered when she longed for a storybook adventure. The Demoran princess would probably pack her trunks that night. “She will be open to the idea,” was all Sage said.

Queen Orianna, on the other hand . . .

“I am glad you are now on my side, Saizsch,” said Lani smugly.

“I am on the side of Demora,” Sage retorted. “And Rose.”

Lani shrugged. “And I am here to ensure they are all the same.”

They went back to their tea, an idea forming in Sage’s head. Clare joined them a few minutes later, taking a brief respite from the preparations she’d already started for the journey. “I’ve drafted the message telling Their Majesties to expect us,” Clare told Sage, accepting a cup of tea. “After you’ve looked it over, I’ll finalize and send it. The sooner the better.”

“How long will it take to get to Tennegol?” asked Lani.

A courier changing horses frequently took two weeks to make the distance between Vinova and the Demoran capital, but a large, diplomatic caravan took at least twice as long, especially in winter weather. “About thirty days,” Sage answered. “But I was thinking . . .” She glanced sideways at Clare.

“Yes?” said Lani, raising her eyebrows when Sage didn’t finish her sentence.

“Perhaps you would enjoy stopping at the Norsari camp on the way,”

Sage said innocently. “Your soldiers might be interested to see some of their training. They could spend a few days showing each other fighting techniques. As a show of goodwill.”

“Hmmm.” The princess gazed at the hearth thoughtfully. “Is Lieutenant Casseck still serving with them?”

“Captain Casseck now,” said Sage. “Yes.”

“*Kap-tan*,” Lani repeated slowly. “This is a promotion of rank?”

“Yes.”

Lani’s already flushed cheeks darkened a little as she buried her nose in her teacup. “I think I should like to congratulate him in person.”

5

HE WAS TRYING to write her a letter.

Alex sat on the cot in his tent, a board across his knee and a quill in his ungloved hand. The weather was turning into full-on winter, though it was milder here in the south, and he wore an extra layer of brown clothing. It was a new uniform he'd designed for the Norsari, with better camouflage qualities than the black traditionally worn by cavalry, and Alex still reflexively brushed the sleeves when they caught his eye, thinking they were dusty.

He flexed his cold fingers and frowned at the parchment waiting for his words. Sweet Spirit, he missed her.

Ideally this would be something to replace the lost letter. Alex had sent it to Sage over a year ago and found it among her things after the Kimisar raid had forced her to flee into Casmun. He'd carried it with him as he followed her, but when he'd been captured and tossed into prison for a few days, they'd burned all his clothes to prevent vermin. While the pages had been full of phrases and descriptions that made Alex blush to remember now, she'd obviously treasured it.

He still felt those things about her, perhaps even more strongly than he had last year. The problem was how, at the moment, those feelings were overlaid with aggravation. Everything he thought of writing was tainted by the emotion.

His frustration wasn't over his responsibilities. Commanding the Norsari was a dream assignment—not to mention he was now the youngest

major in Demora's history. Nor was it because his uncle the king had appointed Sage ambassador to Casmun. There was no one better for the job. They were both in the best possible places considering the state of the world.

The world, then. The world was what kept them apart. That and a stupid army regulation.

In reality, lifting the age restriction on army officers being married wouldn't change their situation much. Norsari assignments were riskier and more secretive than those of the regular army, and fighting with the Kimisar in Tasmel was expected to escalate when spring arrived. Sage would still be a foreign emissary with responsibilities of her own.

But at least when they were together, they could *be* together.

They had less than a year now, though. Some days were easier to bear than others. On Chapel Days, routines were relaxed, but that only gave him more time to miss her. When he'd felt the clouds gathering in his mood that morning, he'd removed himself from the company of even his best friend and second-in-command, Captain Casseck. Nobody needed to see their commander pouting like a child.

Alex clenched his fist and pounded on the writing board hard enough that it flipped off his lap, dumping the inkpot across the page and onto the ground. He quickly scooped the glass container up and kicked loose dirt over the puddle, cursing the ruined letter. Not that he'd gotten down more than a few words. Last time he'd been pouring his heart out. Somehow trying made it more difficult.

"Permission to enter, sir?" came a familiar voice from outside the tent.

Alex didn't feel like being formal. "Yeah, come in, Cass."

Captain Casseck ducked inside with a cold breeze. Outside the sun was nearly at its peak, shining harshly from the cloudless sky. His friend stood straight, looking down on Alex for a few seconds, like he was assessing him. His blond hair brushed the ceiling of the tent. "You sick?" he finally said.

The hint of amusement Alex heard annoyed him. Cass could always read him like a book, sensing Alex's attraction to Sage back on the night

he'd first met her—and been irritated as hell by her. “Just wanted to be alone for a bit.”

“That’s why I came to talk.” Cass grabbed the collapsible chair to swing it around, then sat on it backward, facing Alex. He folded his arms, focusing serious blue eyes on him. “It’s been more than ten weeks since you’ve taken time for yourself. You need a break.”

Norsari training was intense, and Alex knew men needed time to unwind, so they additionally rotated through having a full day off. Most went to one of the two nearest villages, hiking or riding up the Kaz River or out to the Jovan Road. Due to secrecy, such amusements had been forbidden last year. Now the Norsari re-formation was to be known, and word of the summer’s battle in Casmun would soon spread to all corners of Demora.

It would also make Alex’s name even better known. As if he didn’t already have enough pressure to succeed.

Alex flipped the stained parchment over and began writing to hide the knot that suddenly tightened in his stomach. “I’ve hardly done anything today.”

“Not good enough. You need to get out of here,” said Cass. When Alex didn’t answer, his friend tried a different angle. “It would be good for the men to see you trust me to handle things while you’re gone.”

“You mean good for you.”

“That, too.”

Alex scowled. His friend was right, though—even if a commander was well liked, there was something about having him gone that changed the mood in an army camp, made it relax where no one realized it was tight. “All right. Next Chapel Day.”

“Today,” said Cass firmly.

“Are you giving orders now?”

“Since you’re leaving me in charge, yes.”

“Fine,” Alex sighed. Having resigned himself to the idea, the weight on his shoulders had already begun to lift. “I’ll go . . . somewhere.”

“Excellent.” Cass stood with a grin.

There was too much triumph in his friend’s tone. Alex’s suspicion

was suddenly aroused. A courier was due today, but he could hear more activity outside than that arrival would've produced. He narrowed his eyes at his friend. "What the hell is going on?"

Casseck only saluted and turned to duck back outside. "You have a visitor, by the way," he called over his shoulder.

Visitor?

A hand caught the tent flap before it closed, and in strode a small figure dressed in Casmuni riding clothes. Alex jumped to his feet just in time to catch Sage as she pitched herself into his arms.

Sweet Spirit, he was dreaming.

Her freckled cheeks were flushed and her nose cold as it brushed against his, and then their lips met, and he knew it was real because not even his dreams were this good. It had been so long since he'd seen her—nearly six months—that it was almost like the first time they'd kissed. Tentative at first, and then eager. Then desperate. Alex lifted Sage up and against his body, then moved to pull her legs around his hips so he could sit down with her in his lap.

He forgot they were both wearing swords. His straight, heavy Demoran blade jabbed against the cot and tipped it down, causing the other side to go up, catching on the curved Casmuni *harish* she carried on her hip. For a few seconds he struggled to keep his balance, but it was no use. Alex fell back, trying to protect her from being hurt as he did, landing awkwardly on the hilt of his sword and hearing the crack of splitting wood as the leg of the cot snapped. "Ow," he said.

They looked at each other, blushing, before laughing. Sweet Spirit, he'd missed that sound.

Sage grinned and pushed stray shoulder-length hairs away from her face as she untangled herself from his legs and the canvas of the broken cot. "I guess you missed me as much as I missed you."

"More," he said, and Sage rolled her eyes, but he pulled her close again before she could say anything. After kissing every inch of her exposed skin—she was heavily dressed and there wasn't much, so he covered everything twice—Alex finally got around to asking why she was there.

“Princess Lani,” she said a little breathlessly. “We’re on our way to Tennegol with her. Thought we’d stop here since it was on the way. Promote goodwill, all that.”

“Good thinking,” he said absently as he started his third pass. How could he have forgotten how wonderful she smelled? Even after days of riding, the scent of floral soap clung to her hair and clothes, but it wasn’t just that. Somehow he always felt like he was breathing sunshine in her presence. Tasting it, too.

Casseck’s voice interrupted them from outside the tent. “Major, I have all reports and readiness,” he said formally. “I relieve you, sir.”

Sage glanced over her shoulder at the captain’s silhouette against the canvas wall. “What does that mean?” she asked quietly.

“I stand relieved,” Alex called back, and Casseck’s shadow disappeared. He turned to Sage, feeling almost giddy. “It means he wants me to leave. I promised him I’d take the day off.”

For a second she looked overjoyed, but then guilt took over. “Oh, no.” Sage shook her head. “I don’t want to disrupt anything.”

Spirit bless her for trying, but it was too late for that. “It’s all right,” he assured her. “I need a break, and . . .” Alex cleared his throat. He had an idea, but Sage would be reluctant if she thought it was taking him away from his duties. “I could use your help with something.”

A spark of interest lit her face as he knew it would, and Alex leaned close to whisper in Sage’s ear. When he sat back, her gray eyes were wide. “Really?” she asked.

He nodded sheepishly.

She bit her lip, even as it turned up at the corners in eagerness. “I don’t know how much I can do in just a few hours.”

Alex shrugged. “Anything will be better than nothing.”

“Isn’t it a little cold for that, though?”

“I have a place in mind.”

6

SAGE RAN TO get what she needed, then changed clothes in Alex's tent while he went in search of food and other supplies. He'd said it would take at least an hour to get where they were going, so they had to hurry if they wanted to be back by dark. They headed north, Alex not even waiting until they were out of sight of the camp before taking her hand.

Cold mountain air from the west chilled them at first, but their brisk pace kept them warm after the first quarter mile. Sage asked Alex all about his training, reveling in his happiness and pride in what he was doing. The Norsari were down to the last three weeks of their time here, and he enthusiastically described his plan to divide the soldiers into elite squads and platoons with specific skills such as archery or knife fighting. Competition was already fierce for those spots. No man would be in a special unit without a high level of achievement in every other category, however.

When that topic was spent, Alex asked about her time at Vinova. Sage described Clare's lessons in diplomacy and deportment, and he laughed. "I'd forgotten how much of that was drilled into me at a young age," he said. "I hated it, too."

"I don't *hate* it," she said. "It just makes me feel inadequate."

He leaned down to kiss her ear. "Never, Sage."

"Hmmp." She nudged him away with her shoulder, then stopped as she recognized where they were. "Is this it?" she asked. "That lake we found last year?"

“Yup.” It wasn’t overly large, but Alex said the size and number of fish the Norsari had caught meant the lake was fairly deep. A light fog drifted across the surface, indicating the water was warmer than the air. Sage walked to the edge and dipped her fingers in.

“It’s warmer than I expected,” she admitted. “But still too cold. We won’t last ten minutes.”

He tugged her elbow. “This way.”

They walked around the south shore. Last year they’d paused at the lake only long enough to get a drink before returning to camp. Now, as the steam became thicker, Sage detected a whiff of sulfur in the air. “It’s fed by a hot spring?” she asked.

Alex grinned and nodded, leading her over the narrow stream whose heat she felt through the soles of her boots, and stopped on a pebbled beach upwind from the drifting steam, which now had a strong, acrid scent. Here the lake water had a yellowish tint, and the ground was noticeably warmer.

He wrinkled his nose. “Sorry about the smell.”

Sage shook her head and smiled. “I think the trade-off will be worth it.”

Alex began collecting wood for a fire to keep them warm when they got out of the water. She watched him coax the flames to life, taking in the small differences in his appearance from when they’d parted almost five months ago. His black hair had been sheared off in the Casmuni prison, but now it was nearly as shaggy as it had been when they’d first met. He’d grown out his beard again, too. Shaving every day had become impractical, he’d written, apologizing, but this closely trimmed, Sage considered it the best of both worlds—dashing and mature in appearance, yet not too rough on her face. Or maybe she’d just gotten used to it. Once he’d built the fire up to his liking, he looked at her. “Ready?”

Sage nodded and turned away to hide her flushed cheeks, wondering why it hadn’t fully occurred to her how much she’d be stripping down in front of him. Being embarrassed was silly, though. He’d taken care of her wounds last summer; it wasn’t like he didn’t already know what she looked like undressed. For that matter, she, too, knew exactly how he looked without all his clothes. Well, almost all of them.

Focus, she told herself sternly. *Alex needs your help*.

With her back resolutely to him, Sage peeled off her layers until all that remained was the boyish linen underbreeches she'd always preferred, much to her aunt's dismay, and a long, sleeveless Casmuni silk shirt. The air on her exposed legs made her feel unbalanced as one burned with cold while the other merely had gooseflesh. Leaving her clothes in a messy pile, she stepped quickly past a shirtless Alex and into the water, going deep enough to cover her shoulders before she dared to turn around. Not quite bath warm, but almost as pleasant, though the farther she went from shore, the cooler it got. Alex followed, wearing only undershorts.

Seeing him like this would *never* get old.

To cover the fact that she was staring, Sage gestured to Alex's left shoulder. "New tattoo?"

Alex paused in water up to his waist and twisted to show her the sharp, angled head of a bird and the wings, which stretched a few inches around to his chest and back. The shape arched over the ones she already knew, designating cavalry and other army units he'd been a part of. "Norsar," he explained.

The swift and deadly raptor the Norsari had been named for. There was little detail in the design on his skin, just a dark silhouette. Much like the last thing a norsar's prey ever saw—if anything—before they were snatched into oblivion.

Sage shivered, and not from cold. "All right," she said, turning away and pushing out into water deep enough to go over her head. "The most important thing to remember is to stay relaxed. If you get too tense, it's harder to stay afloat." She glanced back.

Alex was gone.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears as Sage spun around, calling his name, squinting down into the murky water, but she couldn't see past the sun's glare on the surface. He'd followed her too far, right over the ledge of stone where the bottom dropped away. Terror clawed at Sage's throat. Spirit above, was she strong enough to drag him to the surface? Would he panic and pull her down with him?

A hand on her lower leg made her scream, but it didn't yank her

under. Instead it followed her body upward, and Alex broke the surface in front of her, tipping his head back to keep his hair out of his eyes, which were bright with merriment. It took Sage several seconds to comprehend that he was treading water effortlessly.

“You ass!” she shouted, shoving him away and then splashing him for good measure. “You already know how to swim!”

“Of course I know how to swim.” Alex laughed and wiped water from his eyes. “But I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist teaching me if you thought I couldn’t.”

Sage scowled. “You’re still an ass.” But she let him pull her closer.

“As long as I’m your ass.” Alex wrapped his arms around her and kicked to take them back into shallower, warmer water. When they got to where he could stand, he lifted her legs around his waist, like he’d tried to so disastrously earlier.

She hooked her feet together behind his back and settled against him, vibrantly aware of every place they touched. “I should punish you for that,” she whispered against his mouth.

“How do you know I wouldn’t enjoy it?” he asked, the coarse hair of his beard brushing her lips. His hands traced her thighs up and to the small of her back.

Now her heart was pounding for an entirely different reason.

He moved to close the minuscule gap between them, but Sage leaned away. “I noticed you aren’t afraid that everyone knows we’re out here together.”

“And I noticed what you aren’t wearing under this shirt.” He slipped his hands beneath the silk and up her back, drawing her against him.

“Alex.”

He stopped, waiting. Sage looked down and away, tracing his right bicep with her fingers. The muscle beneath the scarred and inked brown skin was solid as iron. There was a slight difference in texture where it was tattooed in soft shades of green and violet, rather than the stark red, blue, and black on the left side. Soldiers didn’t risk their sword arms, which made the sage leaves and flowers on the right all the more meaningful. She

was his strength. She was what he risked everything for. “Have you changed your mind, then?” she whispered.

“About bedding you?” Alex brought one hand around and pushed her chin up to face him. “Or rather, *not* bedding you until we’re married?”

Sage took a trembling breath as she met his smoldering, almost coal-black eyes. “Yes.”

“No.”

“Then you can’t keep doing this,” she said, shaking her head to hide the disappointment on her face. “You can’t keep bringing us to the brink of control. One day you’ll cross the line. And you’ll hate yourself for it.” *More than you should*, she added silently.

Alex sighed and put his head on her shoulder. “You’re right,” he said, then kissed her collarbone. “I’m sorry.” He slipped his other hand out from her shirt.

“Why do you have to be so damn honorable?” Sage asked, sliding her fingers up to the back of his neck, threading them in his wet hair.

He lifted his head to meet her eyes again. “For you,” he answered seriously. “Otherwise, what’s the point?”



HONORABLE DECLARATIONS ASIDE, Sage let Alex keep her in the water longer than she should have, then spent even longer nestled against him by the fire. They shared the food he'd brought and sipped Casmuni tea and talked about the places they wanted to show each other someday. Alex promised to take her to the eastern hills where his grandparents lived, and Sage told him about the vast fields of grain in Crescera, bordered by wide stretches of woods she could navigate blindfolded. In those precious hours there was no war, no thoughts of months apart both now and later. But all too soon their time was gone.

They returned to the Norsari camp as the mountain peaks were swallowing the last streams of sunlight. Under Sage's breeches and shirt-sleeve, the tight pink skin itched and chafed as she walked. The sulfurous water had dried it out, and she'd have to rub it down with the oils that kept it supple and encouraged healing. Alex had wanted to see her scars again. She could barely stand to let him, but he insisted.

"It's so ugly," she whispered, holding back tears as he ran calloused fingers down her left leg. She hated how his touch felt different there, like it was farther away in some places but on the bone itself in others.

Alex bent down to kiss a spot above her knee. "Sage, I remember it at its worst. I thank the Spirit every day that you were strong enough to survive this. Most aren't."

Perspective. She was alive. Others weren't. Even through the haze of

agony, she'd smelled the charred flesh of hundreds of corpses. Men she'd killed by unleashing the weapon that then burned her. For a time she wished it had taken her, too, because of what she'd done. It was that memory as much as the fire itself that haunted her dreams.

Alex's bearing had been slowly changing as they walked back, and as the camp perimeter came into view, Sage watched him pause and fully resume the mantle of command like an invisible cloak. She loved it in some ways—it meant there was a side of him that was only for her. Yet it also meant there were times and places she couldn't exist in his life. "What happens when you're finished here?" she asked softly.

"We go to Tennegol and present ourselves to the king. Do a few demonstrations, mostly for the council, to assure them I've done a good job training the Norsari." He squeezed her hand and glanced down with a wink. "And when I'm not busy with that, I'll be mussing up your hair in dark corners."

It was a running joke between them, as he'd made a mess of her hair the first time they'd kissed. And the second, for that matter. She burst into a giddy smile. "You'll be there at the same time? Why didn't you say so before?"

He shrugged, grinning. "Didn't occur to me until now. I think I was overwhelmed by your arrival."

It was almost too good to be true. "Now I'm gladder than ever that Lani came, otherwise I wouldn't be there." Sage paused. "Then what?"

"Tasmet and the border with Kimisara," he replied, sighing as the reality of their situation intruded. "We haven't heard anything for months, but who knows what kind of chaos King Ragat's death will bring? The Kimisar may be more desperate than ever, and new rulers often think they have to prove themselves. We have to be ready for anything."

It wasn't like Alex to shy away from a fight, yet he didn't appear eager for once. She laced her fingers with his. "You sound worried."

"Not like you think, probably," Alex said. "It's just . . ." He drifted off, the invisible cloak pulling tighter around him.

She understood. The pressure to succeed. The need to prove he had this job because he deserved it and not because his father was the commanding

general. Not to mention the stakes were higher than ever before. Sage felt sure that no one who'd actually served with Alex could doubt him, but thousands knew him only by name.

"You are your father's son," she said. She'd met General Quinn once, and it was undeniable how alike they were—not only in looks but in bearing and drive. In the way they cared for those they commanded. "But you've earned everything you have. Everyone here knows it."

He shook his head. "Outside the Norsari it's different. Many don't believe I deserve this command."

"And some never will." She tugged at his arm to make him face her. "Alex, you can't let that rob you of what you've accomplished."

"It's all for you, you realize?" he said solemnly. "Everything I do, everything I have, is yours."

Sage rolled her eyes though his words warmed her deep inside. "Then what motivated you for the first twenty years?"

Alex shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know. Prestige. Rank. Fixing things that were broken or wrong. Protecting the realm." He hesitated and glanced away. "Revenge."

She knew what he referred to. He'd almost left the army after his first skirmish, physically sickened that he'd taken a life, but then a friend had been killed. From then on, there was always one more death to avenge, one more wrong to right, until he no longer kept count of the bodies.

And then it was Alex's own brother who was slain.

"You're not a monster," she whispered.

He shook his head. "You have no idea how much I want to pay them back for what happened to you. For Charlie." Alex closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I worry it will cloud my judgment."

"You're better than that."

"I'm not sure I am."

"You must be," she said firmly, reaching up to turn his face down to hers. "This cycle of violence won't stop until people like us say, *Enough*."

"Both sides have to say it, Sage."

She stood on her toes for one last kiss. "Someone has to say it first."

The way he kissed her back told Sage she'd reassured him, and it gave her a measure of comfort to counter her own deep uneasiness. Because when it came to being a monster, that word was reserved for those who killed hundreds with a single act of rage and anguish.

People like her.

8

SAGE KNEW THEY'D been spotted by sentries because Casseck walked out to them with one of the teenaged squires, looking apologetic. "The courier from Tennegol arrived an hour ago," he said. "Everything is waiting for you in the command tent."

Alex returned the captain's salute without any sign of weariness or frustration. "Very well. I'll head straight there." His other hand released Sage's as they both unshouldered their packs for the squire to take.

"Mistress Fowler's dispatches are there, too, as he had them." Casseck dropped his hand. "I told the mess to bring your supper there. The rest of the officers will be dining in the Casmuni princess's tent. I told Her Highness it would be better to have you there, but she insisted." He shrugged helplessly. "She said she wanted to honor my elevation. At least I think that's what she said. I hope she understands I was only in charge for a few hours."

Alex's eyes darted to Sage, but she blinked innocently. "That's fine, Captain," he said. "You never had a proper recognition of your promotion. Enjoy yourself." He put his hand on the small of Sage's back and guided her in the direction of the command tent. Once out of earshot, Alex said, "I'm not sure we should encourage Princess Lani's interest in him."

Sage snorted. "You try telling her no."

The table under the main tent was almost overflowing with documents, and half of them were Sage's. She groaned. "This is going to take all night."

“Tell you what,” said Alex. “Let’s sort into two piles: things that matter to both of us, and everything else. We’ll only worry about the first tonight.”

He was right—there was no need to rush to handle everything now. Tennegol was already going to hear back from her sooner than they expected. Sage joined Alex at the table, sitting across and a bit to the side from him, and opened the message on top, which bore an official seal. The single sentence within took her breath away.

The presence of Ambassador Sage Fowler and Lady Clare Holloway is requested in Tennegol by His Majesty at the earliest possible date.

It did not say why.

Alex was watching her. “What’s wrong?”

Sage tore open the next message. “Clare and I have been called to the capital immediately. I don’t know the reason, though.”

The next letter was a personal one from Princess Rose. Sage tossed it aside for later.

Another note, this one from Aunt Braelaura. Later.

A letter from her cousin Hannah, who was now thirteen. She got straight to asking if she could be in Sage’s wedding, with a heavy hint that she’d be willing to stay at court for the next couple of years. Sage was more interested in little Aster’s note scrawled at the bottom of the parchment, but still, later. She dropped it on the table and picked up the next.

Personal letter from Crescera’s high matchmaker, Darnessa Rodelle. Sage paused only long enough to note that her former employer had a new apprentice and desired any information Sage had on the shifting political landscape, as it would affect future matches. That would require a long response, and anything Sage would write now could change when Lani threw Casmun into the royal mix.

The last correspondence was from the queen herself, saying she’d be happy to celebrate Sage’s marriage when she arrived in Tennegol. Didn’t anyone in this country think about things *other* than weddings? Sage grimaced and looked up. “What do you have?” she asked Alex.

“Standard yearly list of changes to army regulations,” Alex muttered

as he tossed several pages onto a stack of opened messages. “Only regular replies and reports so far. The official order to return to Tennegol is here, but that was expected.”

“You’re called back early?” Sage brightened at the thought of traveling to the capital together.

He shook his head as he set another parchment aside. “Just on completion of training. It does say come *immediately*, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. This looks important, though.” Alex picked up a triply sealed letter and showed it to Sage. One of the wax disks had the impression of a quill crossed with a sword. An intelligence report.

Sage watched as Alex broke the seal and read the letter, her impatience growing as he inhaled sharply but said nothing. “What’s happened?” she demanded when she could wait no longer.

“Kimisara officially has a new king,” he said. “Ragat’s son Mesden has ascended to the throne.”

Sage dug through her memory. “But Ragat’s previous wives died childless, and the last he married maybe twelve years ago. This Mesden must be only a child.”

“He’s six.” Alex frowned at the page in his hand. “Not old enough to rule.” He shook his head. “Which means a struggle over who gets to hold the reins of power.”

“Then won’t the fighting be within?” Sage took the parchment from him and scanned it. “And there’s an official regent already—Mesden’s mother, Queen Zoraya. It’s settled.”

“Sage,” said Alex quietly. “Do you know what happened to Ragat’s first two queens?”

“Only rumors,” she said. “In Crescera people said both were executed because they couldn’t provide an heir.” She frowned. “Terrible as that is, it’s not like Demoran kings didn’t do similar things in the past.” *D’Amiran family kings*, she added silently.

“And this Zoraya lasted several childless years.”

“So?”

“So she’s a survivor,” said Alex. “Not only that, but she was cunning

enough to wrest control from probably a dozen men who would kill for her position. Powerful men who probably won't take defeat well."

"And you think they aren't done fighting for what she has?" Sage offered the parchment back. "Are you afraid someone like that can't last?"

Alex shook his head as he refolded the dispatch. "I'd be more afraid of someone who actually can."

9

CAPTAIN MALKIM HUZAR stood one step behind and to the side of the smaller throne on the dais, his face carefully blank. In this situation, like most others, he was to be invisible, part of the decorative wall hangings. The young king fidgeted on his velvet cushion, but the movements of the last half hour had changed a bit.

Mesden needed to urinate.

In the larger throne next to the boy, Queen Regent Zoraya ignored her son as she listened to Brazapil Donala droning on and on, but Huzar knew she was aware of his discomfort. While most mothers were mindful of their children, Zoraya took it to a new level. As the boy was all that had stood between her and being disposed of in the last seven years, it was understandable, yet she also loved him fiercely. Perhaps because for many years she'd had no one else to love—a desolation Huzar knew only too well himself.

The glint of light off the queen's tightly pinned hair flashed in the corner of Huzar's vision. He wondered if any in the kingdom knew how long it was when unbound, that it almost reached her feet in blue-black waves.

He knew.

Mesden, unable to catch his mother's eye, stole a glance at Huzar.

That was dangerous.

Zoraya kept the young king mostly away from Huzar, afraid her

closeness to the captain might become public knowledge in an offhand childish statement, but the boy couldn't be completely ignorant of how much time they spent together. Nor could anyone else, for that matter.

Huzar pretended not to notice Mesden, focusing on the increasing frustration he heard in the queen's tone as she argued with the man in front of her. She'd kept her temper in check all afternoon, but now her voice had a knife's edge, cutting through the space between her and Donala, the wealthiest member of her council. Rather than the layers of nobility of Demora, Kimisara had only the rank of brazapil between peasants and royalty. Anyone could claim the title as long as the parcel of land they owned was large enough to be called a brasa. The system allowed landowners almost complete autonomy, reminiscent of the country's loosely unified nomadic history, but it tended to make them outspoken. With the weight of over a dozen brasa in his pockets, Hanric Donala was the boldest of all.

He'd also been the council's choice for regent, yet Zoraya had prevailed, thanks in great part to information Huzar provided. She'd seized the moment, interrupting the ministers just before their official vote, carrying the royal declaration with her name at the top and Mesden's childish scrawl at the bottom. As the brazapilla themselves had drafted the document, they couldn't dispute its legality.

Nor did they even try, with Huzar's sword to back her up.

"Yes, I know the glorious plans my husband had for our nation," the queen snapped, her patience finally spent. "But perhaps you've forgotten his lack of achievement."

Huzar tensed and the entire room of courtiers gasped audibly at her insult to King Ragat's memory. Zoraya stood, sweeping her silver threaded gown around her. Silver was the color of mourning in Kimisara, used to remind anyone in a widow's presence not to tarnish the name of her departed husband. No one knew how to react to a woman doing that herself.

"I will not pretend my son has inherited a position of strength, nor will I refuse to acknowledge whose fault it is," she said. The room was

silent, save for the soft snores of the hound dozing at the foot of Mesden's carved chair. "Demora surely knows this as well, and we will appear weaker still if we deny the truth."

Beside Donala, a weaselish man who gobbled up every scrap the more powerful brazapil threw his way, ventured to speak. "Kimisara is not weak, My Royal Lady—"

Zoraya cut him off. "Our people are starving, Brazapil Nostin. Three years ago we were decimated by a blight that killed most of our harvests and reduced our stores to nothing. The next year, wildfires destroyed half our forests and grassland, leaving no game to hunt. Then we made an alliance with that Demoran traitor, Morrow D'Amiran, and he turned on us. Tell me, was that the best time to plan the largest invasion in a hundred years?"

Huzar had been there when Ragat tried to invade Demora through Casmun. It had been a disaster, though mostly due to a Casmuni weapon of fire, which melted the valley—and the men in it—into a solid wall of black glass.

The queen paused and looked around, her reddening cheeks seeming to draw color from every blanched face watching her. "No. It was not. Anyone who believes so is a fool, and I am no fool."

"Then, with respect," said Nostin, his tone dripping with condescension, "I must remind My Royal Lady the Demorans cannot be trusted. This plan to talk with them will not end well."

Huzar almost laughed out loud. After several battles against one of Demora's most capable soldiers—a man his own age named Quinn—and losing every encounter, Huzar would gladly face him again before turning his back on the snakes in this room.

"Maybe so." Zoraya took three steps toward Nostin and Donala, head high. "But I consider us fortunate that they've even agreed to meet with us."

Donala bowed. "Then we will make all effort on your behalf."

"And I will be there to ensure you do."

At that, Huzar's impassive face slipped, and his eyes darted to the queen. She'd not said anything to him about attending the talks herself.

Zoraya's blue eyes swept the room again, meeting Huzar's for the briefest of seconds. "I have written the Demoran king to say I will be there."

"Surely that is not necessary—"

"I believe it is," she interrupted. "My presence will show the Demorans how serious we are." She narrowed her sapphire gaze on the sputtering pair before her. "For we *are* serious. We can never regain our strength without a time of peace."

The queen pivoted back to address the young king, who was astute enough to realize how tense the situation was and had stopped wriggling for the last few minutes. "Come, my son," she said. "We have finished our work for today."

Mesden hopped down from the throne. The dog at his feet was instantly awake and alert, trotting after his young master. When the two reached her side, she took her son's hand and strode down the steps of the dais. The crowd parted silently for her, which she barely acknowledged. When she reached the double doors of the throne room, she stopped and turned back to face the sea of councilmen and courtiers. To everyone else, she appeared to be shaking with rage, but Huzar recognized it as fear, and his stomach turned over in anxiety.

"And I will say this only once, *Brazapil*," she said, emphasizing the title like it was a crude word. "I am regent, yes, but I am also queen. Ragat's death does not take that away. You will remember to address me as such. Or you will be made to remember."

With that, she exited the room. Huzar counted slowly to ten from his place on the dais, then left to follow.



"Was that wise, My Queen?" Huzar asked softly as he closed the door behind him.

She didn't answer him from where she stood gazing out of a window at the bustling courtyard. A voice from below called up a blessing to her, and she smiled a little and lifted her ringed hand in response.

Huzar approached but stayed out of sight of the window. Zoraya was

five years older than him, but the twelve years she'd been married to Ragat had aged her appearance beyond that. Not that it made her any less beautiful. "I must be strong for Mesden," she said without looking away from the activity below.

"Yes, but you are making powerful enemies," Huzar said.

Zoraya shook her head. "The real power lies with the people. They are tired of the demands of the brazapilla. If I am the first to ever make their lives better, we will see who has their loyalty."

It was difficult to tell whether that was out of genuine concern for the people or for her own welfare. She'd come from humble origins, which made the former easy to imagine. Huzar sometimes tried to picture her as the careless girl she must have been, before the king plucked her out of an obscure village and made her his wife, the third queen he'd had. The first two had not met pleasant ends. Zoraya possessed a talent for survival that her predecessors had not.

"Do you know why he chose me?" the queen said quietly, as though hearing Huzar's thoughts. "My parents had ten children, and I was the only girl." She turned to face him, her cheeks still flushed from the confrontation in the throne room. "Because of that, I was believed to be fertile, and that sons were more likely. My role was clear from the beginning." Her chin lifted. "But it also made me a queen. If I lose that, I will lose everything, starting with that which is most important."

Mesden.

"Where is the king?" Huzar asked. Though he kept his distance, he rather liked the boy.

"I told him to relieve himself and then go outside and expend some energy. The nursemaid is with him." Zoraya took a step toward Huzar and put her hands on the front of his jacket, tracing the white four-pointed star of Kimisara embroidered in the leather. "We are alone."

Those last words had become a signal between them, but Huzar wasn't ready to let his guard down. He placed his hands over hers, which were smooth and fragile in his own. "You didn't tell me you intended to go to the negotiations," he said.

The queen tilted her face to meet his gaze. As always, the brilliant blue

of her eyes was startling. “How could I do otherwise? You and I both know the brazapilla cannot be trusted to be honest with me, or to work toward my goals.”

“That’s why I was supposed to go with them.”

“Yes, but you have no authority. You would only be able to tell me what happened after the fact.”

“It’s not safe,” Huzar insisted.

Zoraya smiled coyly and tugged the lapel of his jacket. “But my most faithful bodyguard will be there.”

He frowned. She overestimated his skills.

The queen lowered her gaze to their now intertwined fingers. Her long black lashes fluttered on her cheeks. “Perhaps I also felt I would miss you,” she murmured.

Huzar had come to know two different women in Zoraya over the last six months. One of cunning manipulation and another of sweet vulnerability. The question was which of those he was seeing now.

Also which had pulled him into the bedroom the first time.

“Malkim,” she whispered, leaning into him. “I can’t do this without you.”

In the end, it didn’t matter. He loved them both.

10

HER SCREAMING WAS a sound Alex would never be able to forget; he still heard it in his dreams.

Alex jerked awake. It was muffled by distance and the walls of canvas between them, but the sound was unmistakable: Sage was screaming.

He threw his blanket aside and jumped off the broken cot. Grabbing his boots and sword belt, he tore outside and ran in the direction of the Casmuni camp, where Sage was staying. Heads peeked out of other tents as he sprinted past, but he didn't acknowledge them. The noise stopped suddenly as Alex skidded to a halt outside Princess Lani's tent, gasping for air.

Several Casmuni guards appeared out of the shadows, spears leveled at him. Two more stepped outside the tent, sheathing their curved blades. When they saw him, they issued a few orders to the men surrounding Alex, who lowered their weapons and backed away.

Everything was silent.

Had he imagined it?

A glance around told him he couldn't have. At least a dozen Norsari had also come running, weapons in hand. And there wasn't silence, either; there was quiet sobbing.

Sage.

Still carrying his boots and sword, Alex strode barefoot to the heavy tapestry that served as a door to the royal tent. The guards stepped to

block his path, and Alex made to shove them aside. “Get out of my way!” he snarled.

Whether or not they understood him, neither obeyed, putting their hands on Alex’s shoulders to stop him. Alex twisted around, forcing them to counter. He growled. “I said—”

“*Chet!*” came a woman’s voice. “*Hasta vos nel.*” *Do not restrain him.* The Casmuni princess stood at the curtain, holding it open for him.

Alex shook the men off without looking at them and strode inside. It was dark, but the glow from the iron stove was enough for him to see by. Lani stood before him, her black hair in a single braid down her back as she tugged a wool blanket around her. “You heard her?” she asked in Casmuni.

“I hear her now,” Alex replied, though it was difficult over the echo of his pounding heart. “What happened?”

He took a step in the direction of the sobbing, but Lani put a hand on his chest. “Please, be calm.”

“But—”

“She is well cared for, Maizshur,” Lani said firmly, lisping the same consonants in his rank as she struggled with in Sage’s name.

The sobs took on a retching quality. Another voice, soothing and feminine, came from behind a partitioned area. Alex slowly realized Sage must have had a nightmare, and Lady Clare was comforting her. “You have seen this before?” he asked.

Lani shook her head, then seemed to think better of her answer. “Once, in Osthiza, in the time she believed you were dead. She carried much guilt then.” She glanced over her shoulder as the choking noises stopped. “Clare told me this happens at times, but it is the first I have seen on this journey.”

Alex’s Casmuni vocabulary wasn’t very large, and he had to pick through the words he knew to make a coherent sentence. “In her sleep she is on fire,” he said.

“*Da.*” Lani nodded once.

“Clare helps her through this?”

Lani nodded again. “I think she likes that Saizsch has this pain.” Alex’s

mouth dropped open in horror, and she sighed. “That is not the best way to say it. Her love died, and Saizsch was wounded. In this way they share suffering from the battle. You understand?”

Despite the awkward wording, Alex did. “I’ll stay until I can see her,” he said.

“She’s asleep.” Clare was pulling the partition closed behind her as she stepped out. “I’m sorry you heard that, Major.”

“I think everyone for five miles heard her, Lady Clare.”

Clare sighed as she came closer. After thanking Lani in Casmuni, she focused back on Alex, and the princess returned to her own sleeping area. “It doesn’t happen as often as it used to.”

“But it does happen.” Alex stepped around Clare and went to the partition. With the hand still holding his boots, he pushed the curtain aside. Sage lay on the thick carpets in a tangle of blankets, curled up on her right side. Her hair and clothes were dark with sweat, her breathing shallow and regular. An empty chamber pot sat near her head.

“She’s getting better, I promise,” Clare whispered. “She didn’t actually vomit this time.”

Such a casual statement that spoke of many times the nightmares were worse. Alex stepped back, dropping his boots and sword belt to put his face in his hands. “I let her go up there,” he gasped.

The tide of the battle had suddenly turned when Kimisar came at them from two directions, and Sage had asked to help the soldiers struggling with the Casmuni waterfire. Alex had agreed, sending Lieutenant Gramwell as protection. When the hillside collapsed, pouring the weapon’s fury onto the invading ranks of Kimisar, she had fallen with it. He choked back a sob. “I thought it would be safer away from the fighting. It’s my fault.”

“No, Major,” Clare whispered. She reached up and drew him into her shoulder. “You can’t blame yourself for that, not when she saved us all.”

Alex pulled away, shaking his head. “And how can you forgive me when you know I sent Luke after her?”

Clare’s pale face almost glowed in the dim light. “He was where he needed to be for Demora.” She paused. “And I know either one of you would give anything to bring him back. That’s how I can forgive.”

All Alex could think of at that moment was revenge for Luke and Sage. Spirit damn this endless conflict. How many more friends would he lose in the coming years? How many men would Demora end up sacrificing for what was only ever a few months of peace? How many years would Sage be tormented by nightmares?

This cycle of violence won't stop until people like us say, Enough.

Sage bore scars and dreamed of fire and could forgive.

Clare had lost her future and could forgive.

During the battle, the Kimisar Captain Malkim Huzar, surrounded by his dead and dying countrymen, had given Alex the cloak off his back to carry Sage away, even knowing she was responsible for the destruction around them. He could forgive.

Alex wasn't sure he was ready.

11

ALEX HELPED SAGE mount a white Casmuni stallion. The desert breeds were smaller than Demoran warhorses, and this one was the size of his own mare. Sage didn't need assistance, he just wanted to touch her as much as possible. He kept a hand on her lower leg. "Where's Shadow?" he asked.

The horse he'd had since childhood had been having trouble bearing the weight of a fully armed soldier, so he'd given her care over to Sage. She smiled apologetically. "The cold weather's been hard on her, and I thought the journey might be a little much. She's happy, though. Enjoying retirement. The cook's daughter has been spoiling her rotten."

Alex ran his free hand over the stallion's muzzle. "I assume Lani loaned you this one."

"He's mine, a gift from Banneth." Sage blushed a little, and Alex wondered if the horse was actually meant to be a wedding present. "He sent several more for King Raymond."

Alex handed up the reins, debating whether to mention the other night. Clare was adamant that Sage didn't want him to know, and yesterday she'd acted as though nothing had happened, laughing and joking as she practiced the Casmuni fighting art, *tashaivar*, with Lani and Clare. He decided these last moments weren't the time to bring it up, either. His right hand still rested on her leg. When he finally let go, she'd be gone. "I'll be in Tennegol shortly after you," he said. "Then we'll have lots of time."

The smile she returned didn't quite reach her eyes. "We always say that, and yet it never happens."

“This time it will.”

They’d spent last night discussing the implications of Kimisara’s new king and regent with Lani, Clare, and his officers. Not even the Casmuni princess was optimistic.

Sage nodded absently. “How many days now?”

“Three hundred forty-eight,” he replied without hesitation.

“If we’re on the same side of the mountains then.” Sage smiled sadly.

“I’ll move them out of the way if I have to,” Alex promised.

She chuckled, but it only lasted a single breath. A few yards away, Lani’s mount stamped its hooves impatiently. The princess tilted her head in the direction of the path back to the road. “Time to go,” Sage said.

Alex nodded. “I’ll see you soon,” he said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she whispered before tugging the reins to one side. The horse turned around, and Alex’s hand slipped away. When she reached Lani and Clare, together they led the way up the trail to the Jovan Road. Alex watched the group until all had left the camp, then turned back to his tent with a sigh. Today the Norsari were focusing on knife fighting and throwing, competing to find the best among them for a special platoon, but the other officers would have to handle it. He had all the less important correspondence to catch up on.

That was what no one told you about command. All the administration work meant less time actually soldiering. He’d observed his father enough to expect some of it, but he also felt like it was a test: sift out the important parts and delegate the rest. He was terrible at delegating. Casseck had chastised him more than once for not passing tasks on to him or others.

He stared at the stack of parchments on his desk. They were already sorted into critical and noncritical, and sometime last night Sage had further organized them by topic—supply, army-wide general messages, current events summarized by each province’s ruling duke, annual reports on road conditions. Each perfectly fit his officers’ collateral duties: Hatfield, Casseck, Tanner, and Nadira. It was like she knew. Maybe Cass had put her up to it.

Alex turned and walked out of the tent, calling out to the first squire he saw.

The fourteen-year-old came running. “Yes, Major?” he gasped, his voice cracking out of nervousness as much as because of his age.

Alex pointed behind him with his thumb. “Inform all the officers they each have a stack of dispatches to attend to on my desk. I want a summary from each by tonight.”

The teenager saluted and ran off, and Alex headed for the training grounds, loosening the dagger at his belt as he went. He was a soldier first and foremost. Everything else could wait.



Despite missing Sage, Alex was in a good mood that evening as he leisurely read the personal correspondence he normally set aside until official dispatches were taken care of. All the officers but Cass had made their reports on the contents of their stack, and none had taken more than ten minutes. In total, they’d each spent only an hour of their time and saved four or five of his own. Next time he wouldn’t hesitate to divide the task up.

Alex finished another letter and set it aside. Mother was over the moon about his sister Serena’s new baby, but she sounded eager to visit him when he arrived in Tennegol in a few weeks. He was the only son she had left, now that Charlie was gone.

The last parchment was a brief note from Colonel Traysden, the minister of intelligence, which was slightly unusual in that it was personal. Alex would’ve expected it to pertain to the Norsari, as the spymaster had also been the commander when they were disbanded over twenty years ago, but instead it was about Sage.

Once again I congratulate you on your promotion, Major. We will let you be the one to share the news with Mistress Fowler.

It was straightforward on the surface, but Alex had been promoted five months ago, and Sage had been there when he received the notification. Colonel Traysden was getting on in years—he was older than Alex’s father, the commanding general of the western army—but his mind was

sharp as a razor. Knowing Traysden would never have made such a mistake, Alex scanned the words over and over, searching for a pattern or a code embedded within. Nothing.

He was still frowning at the letter when Casseck walked in, carrying the dispatches he'd been assigned. Alex glanced up. "Report."

Cass handed him a page. "Here's a list of the pertinent changes in army regulations from the past year."

Alex dropped Traysden's note and perused Casseck's, which was also short. Hardly anything in that package had applied to the Norsari. "Very well." He looked up at his friend again. "Thanks," he said, referring to both the summary and helping him delegate it.

The captain nodded but didn't turn away. His lips pinched with the same suppressed smile he'd worn when Sage had arrived. "There was one other change you might be interested in." Cass pulled a set of pages from under his left arm and dropped them in front of Alex. "Article Twenty-Nine."

Alex knew that particular regulation by heart. He'd tried to find a way around it, but the simple language had made it impossible. Casseck grinned as Alex snatched the parchment up to read it himself.

And suddenly Colonel Traysden's letter made perfect sense.