

1

UNCLE WILLIAM HAD returned over an hour ago, yet he hadn't summoned her.

Sage sat at her desk in the schoolroom, trying not to fidget. Jonathan always fidgeted through her lessons, whether from boredom or resentment that she—a girl only a few years older—was his teacher. She didn't care, but she wouldn't give him a reason to sneer at her. Right now his head was bent over a map of Demora he was labeling. He only put in effort when his siblings had similar work that could be compared to his. Sage had discovered that early on and leveraged it against his contempt.

She clenched her fist to keep from tapping her fingers, while her eyes darted to the window. Servants and laborers hustled about the courtyard, beating dust from rugs and building up the hay stores for the coming winter. Their movements coupled with the steady creak of wagons loaded with grain echoing from the road, creating a rhythm that normally soothed her, but not today. Lord Broadmoor had set out that morning for Garland Hill on errands unknown. When his horse trotted through the manor house gate in the early afternoon, her uncle tossed the reins to the hostler while casting a smug look at the schoolroom window.

That was when she knew the trip had been about her.

He'd been gone long enough to have spent only an hour in town, which was somewhat flattering. Someone had agreed to take her as an apprentice—the herb shop or the candle maker or weaver maybe. She'd sweep floors for the blacksmith if she had to. And she could keep her

earnings. Most girls who worked had to support a convent orphanage or family, but the Broadmoors didn't need the money, and Sage more than earned her keep as a tutor.

She glanced to the wide oak table where Aster focused on her own map, eyes narrowed in concentration as her plump fingers awkwardly gripped the coloring stick. Yellow for Crescera, the breadbasket of Demora, where Sage had lived her whole life within a fifty-mile radius. As the five-year-old exchanged her yellow stick for a green one, Sage tried to calculate how much she would need to save before she could consider leaving, but where would she go?

She smiled as her gaze drifted to the map hanging on the opposite wall. Mountains that touched the clouds. Oceans that never ended. Cities that buzzed like beehives.

Anywhere.

Uncle William wanted her off his hands as much as Sage wanted to leave.

So why hadn't he called her yet?

She was done waiting. Sage sat forward in her chair and sifted through the papers stacked before her. So much paper, it was a waste, but it was a status symbol with which Uncle William could afford to supply his children. Sage could rarely bring herself to throw any away, even after four years of living here. From a stack of books, she pulled out a dry volume of history she hadn't looked at in over a week. She stood, tucking the book under her arm. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

The three older children glanced up and went back to their work without comment, but Aster's dark-blue eyes followed her every movement. Sage tried to ignore the knot of guilt forming in her stomach. Taking an apprenticeship meant leaving her favorite cousin behind, but Aster didn't need Sage's mothering anymore. Aunt Braelaura loved the girl as if she were her own now.

Sage hurried out of the room, closing the door behind her. At the library she paused to wipe her hands over the hairs that had escaped her coiled braid and willed them to stay flat for the next fifteen minutes. Then she squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. In her eagerness

she knocked harder than she intended, and the sharp noise made her cringe.

“Enter.”

She pushed the heavy door open and took two steps inside before sinking into a curtsy. “Pardon the disturbance, Uncle, but I needed to return this”—she held up the book, and suddenly her reason seemed inadequate—“and fetch another for, um, lessons.”

Uncle William looked up from behind a half-dozen parchments scattered on his desk. A gleaming sword hung from the leather belt looped on the back of his chair. Ridiculous, that. He wore it like he was some protector of the realm; all it really meant was he’d made the two-month round trip to the capital city of Tennenol and sworn fealty before the king’s court. She doubted he’d ever encountered anything more threatening than an aggressive beggar, though his expanding girth certainly threatened the belt. Sage ground her teeth and stayed locked in her low position until he acknowledged her. He liked to take his time, as if she needed to be reminded who ruled her life.

“Yes, come in,” he said, sounding pleased. His hair was still wind-blown from his ride, and he’d not changed from his dusty riding jacket, meaning whatever was happening was happening fast. She straightened and tried not to look at him expectantly.

He set the quill down and gestured to her. “Come here, please, Sage.”

This was it. She nearly ran across the room. Sage halted at his desk as he folded one of the papers. A glance told her they were personal letters, which struck her as odd. Was he that glad to see her leave that he was telling his friends? And why would he tell everyone else before her? “Yes, Uncle?”

“You were sixteen last spring. It’s time we settled your future.”

Sage clutched her book and contained her response to an enthusiastic nod.

He stroked his blackened mustache and cleared his throat. “Therefore, I have arranged your evaluation with Darnessa Rodelle—”

“What?” Matchmaking was the only profession she hadn’t considered, the only one she absolutely hated. “I don’t want to be—”

She broke off, abruptly realizing what he meant. The book tumbled from her hands and landed open on the floor.

“I’m to be *matched*?”

Uncle William nodded, obviously pleased. “Yes, Mistress Rodelle is focusing on the Concordium next summer, but I explained we fully expect it to take years to find someone willing to marry you.”

Even in the fog of denial, the insult hit her like a physical blow, stealing her breath.

He waved an ink-stained hand at the letters before him. “I’m already writing to young men of my acquaintance, inviting them for visits. With any luck, some will admire you enough to inquire with Mistress Rodelle. It’s her decision, but there’s no harm in helping her along.”

She fumbled for words. The region’s high matchmaker took only noble candidates, or rich ones, or extraordinary ones. Sage was none of those. “But why would she accept *me*?”

“Because you are under *my* care.” Uncle William folded his hands on the desk with a smile. “So we’re able to make something good come of your situation after all.”

Spirit above, he expected her to be *grateful*. Grateful to be married off to a man she would barely know. Grateful her self-matched parents were not alive to object.

“Mistress Rodelle has a far enough reach she can find someone with no objections to your . . . previous upbringing.”

Sage’s head snapped up. What, exactly, was wrong with her life before? It was certainly happier.

“It’s quite an honor,” he continued, “especially considering how busy she is now, but I convinced her your scholarly qualities elevate you above your birth.”

Her birth. He said it like it was shameful to be born a commoner. Like he hadn’t married a commoner himself. Like it was wrong to have parents who chose each other.

Like he hadn’t made a public mockery of his own marriage vows.

She sneered down at him. “Yes, it will be an honor to have a husband as faithful as you.”

His posture went rigid. The patronizing expression twisted away, leaving behind something much uglier. She was glad—it gave her the strength to fight back. His voice shook with barely contained fury. “You dare . . .”

“Or is faithfulness only expected of a nobleman’s wife?” she said. Oh, his rage was good. It fed hers like wind on a wildfire.

“I will not be lectured by a child—”

“No, you prefer to lecture others with your example.” She jabbed a finger at the folded letters between them. “I’m sure your friends know where to come for lessons.”

That brought him to his feet, bellowing, “You will remember your place, Sage Fowler!”

“I know my place!” she shouted back. “It is impossible to forget in this house!” Months of holding back drove her forward. He’d dangled the possibility of letting her leave, allowing her a life outside his guardianship, only to drop her straight into an arranged marriage. She balled her fists and leaned toward him over the desk. He’d never struck her, not once in the years she’d challenged him, but she’d also never pushed him so far, so fast.

When Uncle William finally spoke, it was through clenched teeth. “You dishonor me, Niece. You dishonor the duty you owe me. Your parents would be ashamed.”

She doubted that. Not when they had endured so much to make their own choice. Sage dug her fingernails into her palms. “I. Will. Not. Go.”

His voice was cold to counter her heat. “You will. And you will make a good impression.” He eased back down with that regal, condescending air she hated and picked up the quill. Only his white knuckles belied his calm exterior. He flicked his other hand in casual dismissal. “You may go. Your aunt will see to the preparations.”

He always did that. Always brushed her aside. Sage wanted to make him pay attention, wanted to leap across the desk, swinging at him with closed fists like he was a sandbag out in the barn. But that behavior Father *would* have been ashamed of.

Without curtsying, Sage turned away and stomped out the door. As soon as she reached the passage, she began running, shoving through a throng of people carrying trunks and baskets, not caring who they were or why they'd suddenly appeared in the manor house.

The only question in her mind was how far away she could get by sunset.

2

SAGE SLAMMED THE bedroom door with a satisfying *bang* and walked across to the tall wardrobe in the corner. She flung the cabinet open and dug around for the satchel in the back. Her fingers found the rough canvas in the dark, recognizing it instantly despite not having used it in years, and she pulled it out and inspected it. The straps were still strong; no mice had chewed any holes she could find.

It still smelled like him. Like the tallow and pine pitch salve Father made for cuts and scrapes. He used it both on her and the birds he trained. She squeezed her eyes shut. Father would've stopped this. No, he never would have let it start. But Father was dead.

Father was dead, trapping her in her fate he'd always promised to shield her from.

The door opened, startling her, but it was only Aunt Braelaura, come to smooth things over as she always did. Well, it wouldn't work this time. Sage stuffed clothes into the bag, starting with the breeches she wore on rambles in the woods. "I'm leaving," she snapped over her shoulder.

"So I gathered," her aunt replied. "I told William you wouldn't take it well."

Sage turned on her. "You *knew*? Why didn't you say anything?"

Braelaura's eyes crinkled a little in amusement. "Honestly, I didn't think he'd succeed. I saw no reason to upset you over something so unlikely."

Even her aunt didn't think she was marriage material. Sage didn't

want to be matched, but it was still insulting. She went back to her packing.

“Where will you go?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Do you expect it to go better than last time?”

Of course she’d bring that up. Sage furiously jammed extra socks into the bag. The nights were getting cold; she’d need them. “That was years ago. I can take care of myself now.”

“I’m sure you can.” So calm. So reasonable. “What do you intend to do for food?”

In response, Sage picked up the sling draped over a stack of books, wrapped it up dramatically, and stuffed it in the pocket of her skirt. Ugh. She’d have to change before she left.

Braelaura raised her eyebrows. “Squirrels. Delicious.” She paused. “Available all winter.”

“I’ll find work.”

“And if you don’t?”

“Then I’ll travel until I do.”

She must have sounded serious enough, because her aunt’s tone shifted. “It’s dangerous out there for a girl on her own.”

Sage snorted to hide her growing unease. She’d wandered the countryside for years with her father, and she knew very well what dangers—human and animal—she could face. “At least I won’t be forced to marry someone I don’t even know.”

“You say that as if matchmakers don’t know what they’re doing.”

“Mistress Rodelle certainly made the best match for you,” Sage said sarcastically.

“Yes, she did,” Braelaura said, unruffled.

Sage gaped at her. “You can’t be serious.” Everyone knew what Aster was. Her name—that of a plant—declared illegitimacy to the world. It wasn’t the girl’s fault where she came from, but Sage couldn’t fathom why Braelaura forgave her husband.

“Marriage is not simple or easy,” Braelaura said. “Even your parents knew that in the short time they had.”

Perhaps not, but their love had been simple; getting married should've been easy. It shouldn't have meant being disowned by her mother's parents and shunned by half the village. But to them it had been worth it to be together.

"What exactly are you afraid of?" Braelaura asked.

"I'm not *afraid* of anything," Sage snapped.

"Do you really think William will give you to someone who will treat you poorly?"

No, she didn't, but Sage turned back to her packing to avoid answering. Uncle William had ridden day and night to fetch her as soon as he heard about Father's death. Then, when she ran away a few months later, he tracked her for days until he found her at the bottom of a ravine, too broken and frozen to climb out. He'd never said a word in rebuke, just lifted her up and carried her home.

A voice inside whispered that this matching was an honor, a gift. It declared she was part of the family, not just a poor relative he was forced to support. It was the best he had to offer.

It would be so much easier if she could hate him.

Sage felt her aunt's hand on her shoulder, and she stiffened. "He must have put down quite a sum to get her to take me."

"I'll not deny it." Braelaura's smile leaked into her tone. "But Mistress Rodelle wouldn't have agreed if she didn't see some potential." She brushed a dozen stray hairs away from Sage's face. "Do you think you're not ready? It's not as difficult as you think."

"The interview or being someone's wife?" Sage refused to relax.

"Both," Braelaura said. "The interview is a matter of presenting yourself. As for being a wife—"

"Father told me how babies are made." Sage flushed.

Braelaura continued as though Sage hadn't interrupted. "I've been teaching you how to run a household for years, if you haven't noticed. You did just fine last spring when I was ill. William was very pleased." Her hand lowered to rub Sage's back. "You could have a comfortable home and some little ones. Would that be so bad?"

Sage felt herself leaning into the soothing pressure. A home of her

own. Away from this place. Though to be honest, it wasn't this place she hated so much as the memories.

"Mistress Rodelle will find a husband who needs someone like you," Braelaura said. "She's the best at what she does."

"Uncle William said it could take years."

"So it may," her aunt agreed. "All the more reason not to let emotions drive your actions now."

Sage set the bag down in the wardrobe, feeling defeated.

Braelaura stood on her tiptoes to kiss Sage's cheek. "I'll be there for you, every step, in place of your mother."

Since her aunt rarely mentioned Sage's mother, Sage wanted to ask questions before the subject changed, but twelve-year-old Hannah burst into the room, blond curls bouncing. Sage scowled. "Don't you ever knock?"

Hannah ignored her. "Is it true, Mother? Is Sage going to the matchmaker? The *high* matchmaker?"

Aunt Braelaura hooked an arm around Sage's waist as though to keep her from running away. "Yes, she is."

Sage continued glaring at her cousin. "Do you actually have anything important to say?"

Hannah gestured behind her. "The dressmaker's here."

A cold sweat broke out over Sage. Already?

Hannah turned wide blue eyes to Sage. "Will she pick you for the Concordium, do you think?"

"Ha!" came thirteen-year-old Jonathan's barking laugh from the passageway behind Hannah. He was carrying a trunk. "I'd like to see *that*."

Sage felt sick. When was the interview? She'd interrupted Uncle William before he'd said. Braelaura began guiding her to the door, where Hannah bounced on the balls of her feet. "She's setting up in the schoolroom."

"When am I going?" Sage managed to ask.

"Tomorrow, love," said Braelaura. "In the afternoon."

"*Tomorrow*? But how can I possibly have a new dress made by then?"

"Mistress Tailor will adjust something she has on hand. She'll go over with us in the morning."

Sage let herself be led across the hall and stood numbly as Braelaura pulled the laces of her bodice loose enough for Sage to slip out. The room darkened suddenly, and Sage thought for a second she was fainting, but it was only Hannah and Aster pulling the curtains across the window. When they were done, Aster perched on a chair in the corner, obviously hoping, if no one noticed her, she could stay. Hannah danced around, chattering about how she couldn't wait for her own interview, and did Mother think Father would let her be evaluated at fifteen even though she couldn't be matched until the year after?

Her cousin also still imagined Sage had a chance at getting into the Concordium. Sage had no such delusions. The high matchmaker's primary job was to select the best from her region for the conference held every five years, but Sage wouldn't have wanted to go even if she was pretty or rich enough to be considered. She had no desire to be herded across the country to Tennegol and practically auctioned off like a prize head of cattle. Hannah, however, fantasized about it, as did girls all across Demora.

Braelaura pulled the dress off Sage's shoulders. The outfit was one of several she had and hated. How bizarrely unfair to have so many things she didn't want. Most girls would kill just to be evaluated by a high matchmaker.

Mistress Tailor was sorting through a basket on the table, but she paused long enough to point to the stool she'd set out. "Up," she commanded. "We've no time to waste."

Braelaura helped Sage step up and steadied her when the stool wobbled under her feet. She fought a wave of dizziness that had nothing to do with keeping her balance.

"Shift off," said the dressmaker over her shoulder. Sage cringed and lifted her under-dress over her head and handed it to her aunt. Normally a fitting didn't require full stripping—just a knotted cord measuring over her shift. She crossed her arms over her breastband and shivered, glad the window was covered against breezes as well as eyes.

Mistress Tailor turned around and frowned at Sage's undergarments. The boyish linen shorts were the only thing Braelaura had let Sage

continue wearing when they forced her into dresses. The shorts were far more comfortable than what women wore, and nobody could see them anyway.

The dressmaker pursed her lips and squinted at Sage from several angles. "Thinness is her main weakness," she muttered. "We'll have to fill her out, especially on top."

Sage rolled her eyes as she imagined all the padding and ruffles it would take to disguise her flat chest. Braelaura had given up putting lace and bows on her dresses long ago. They always had catastrophic encounters with scissors when no one was looking.

Cold fingers pinched her waist. "Good curve here, and solid birthing hips. We can emphasize that."

Sage felt like the horse her uncle had bought last month. *Solid hamstrings make a good breeder*, the horse trader had said, smacking the mare's flank. *This one can be mounted for ten more years.*

The dressmaker lifted Sage's arm to scrutinize it in better light. "Naturally fair skin, but too many freckles."

Braelaura nodded. "Cook's already brewing lemon lotion for that."

"Use it liberally. Are these scars all over your arms, child?"

Sage sighed. Most were so old and minor they could only be seen if looked for.

"Her father was a woodsman," Braelaura reminded the dressmaker. "She spent a lot of time outdoors before she came to us."

Mistress Tailor drew a bony finger down a long red scratch. "Some of these are recent. What have you been doing, climbing trees?" Sage shrugged, and the woman dropped her arm. "I shouldn't complain," she said dryly. "All your wardrobe repairs over the years have kept me afloat."

"Glad to be of service," Sage retorted, spirit rising a bit. Anger was more comfortable than fear.

The dressmaker ignored her and rubbed the stray end of Sage's braid between her fingers. "Neither brown nor blond," she grumbled. "I don't know what color to put with this." She glanced at Sage's aunt. "What do you plan to do with it for the evaluation?"

“Haven’t decided,” said Braelaura. “When we pull it back, it always escapes. It takes curling well, despite the fine texture.”

“Hmmm.” The dressmaker jerked Sage’s chin around to look in her eyes, and Sage resisted the urge to bite the woman’s fingers. “Gray . . . Maybe blue will bring some color to her eyes.” She released her hold. “Gah! Those freckles.”

Aster tilted her head in bewilderment. She’d always been envious of those freckles. When she was three, Sage caught her trying to make her own with ink.

“Blue, then,” Mistress Tailor said, calling Sage’s attention back to her, though once again, she addressed Aunt Braelaura. She turned to dig through the enormous trunk set off to the side. “I’ve got something that will suit, but I’ll be up all night taking it in to fit her.”

The seamstress lifted a mass of fabric and shook the folds out, revealing a blue-violet monstrosity Sage couldn’t even imagine walking in. Gold-threaded designs—undoubtedly itchy—wound around the long sleeves and in similar patterns over the bodice. The low neckline had a draped collar, which would probably be embellished further to create fullness.

“It’s off the shoulders,” Mistress Tailor said as Braelaura and Hannah oohed and aahed. “Hers are rather nice; we should show them. But that means no breastband.”

Sage snorted. It wasn’t like she really needed one anyway.

3

THE TWO-STORY, WHITEWASHED building loomed out of the October mist. Sage hopped down from the wagon as soon as it stopped, so focused on the matchmaker's house, she didn't notice the mud puddle until she found herself sitting in it. Her aunt sighed as she heaved Sage up by her elbow and hustled her into the bathing room around the back. "Don't worry," Braelaura soothed. "This is why everyone prepares here."

Mistress Tailor was already waiting inside to help with last-minute adjustments. Sage wasted no time shedding her muddy clothes and climbing into the warm bath. "Rinse your hands, then keep them out of the water," Braelaura instructed. "Or your nail paint will peel off."

"How am I supposed to get clean?" In response, her aunt picked up a washcloth and began scrubbing Sage's back. Sage cringed but endured it. She just wanted this day to be over.

Once Braelaura was satisfied, Sage clambered out and toweled herself dry, then stood shivering as smoothing creams were spread over her shoulders, neck, and arms. Her body was dabbed with powder. "It itches," she complained.

Braelaura swatted her. "Don't scratch; you'll ruin your nails. The powder will keep you dry from sweat."

"It smells like chamomile. I hate chamomile."

"Don't be ridiculous. Nobody hates chamomile; it's soothing."

I guess I'm nobody. Sage held her arms up as her aunt wrapped the corset around her waist. Spirit above, it was the most uncomfortable thing

she'd ever worn. The boning dug into her hips as Braelaura tightened the laces, trying to get it snug enough to hold in place. When Sage stepped into the first of three petticoats, the corset shifted and jabbed her in new places.

Mistress Tailor and Aunt Braelaura lifted the dress over Sage's head, and she shoved her freezing arms into the long sleeves. The pair then fussed around her, pulling the dress straight and adjusting it for the most cleavage before lacing the bodice in front. Sage swept her fingers over the velvet and lace flowing off her shoulders. After the interview, the dress would hang in her wardrobe until the day—months or years from now—she was presented to the man Mistress Rodelle had chosen for her.

While a man could approach a matchmaker about a girl he admired, it was ultimately the matchmaker's decision as to whether they should be paired. Often couples knew very little of each other before they wed. A fresh start was considered advantageous. Sage shared her father's disgust at that idea, but supposedly, matches were based on temperament—even the highly political ones, like those at the Concordium.

Marriages made outside the system were rarely stable or happy, though Sage suspected that had a great deal to do with how self-matched couples were ostracized. Perhaps Sage could convince her uncle to at least let her get to know this potential husband first. After all, he'd known Aunt Braelaura for years before they were matched. The thought gave her a glimmer of hope she'd not had before.

Aunt Braelaura moved her to a stool and draped a linen sheet over the outfit so they could paint her face. The twisting rags from last night were removed and Sage's hair cascaded in ringlets down her back. The two women pulled the curls away from Sage's face with pearl-studded pins, exposing her shoulders. Mistress Tailor made a noise of approval and handed Aunt Braelaura the first of many cosmetic jars.

"Do you think Uncle William will let me meet my match before he gives his consent?" Sage asked as her aunt spread cream across her cheeks.

Braelaura looked surprised. "Of course he will."

"And what if I don't like him?"

Her aunt avoided her eyes as she dipped her fingers in the jar again. "We don't always like what's good for us," she said. "Especially at first."

Sage couldn't help wondering if Braelaura was referring to her own match, but she was more concerned with hers at the moment. "So if Uncle William thinks this man is good for me, it won't matter what I say?"

"Honestly, Sage," her aunt sighed. "I think it's more likely you won't give the man a fair chance to win you over. You're so set against him, and he doesn't even exist yet."

Sage lapsed into a sullen silence, and Braelaura tapped her cheek. "Don't pout. I can't do this properly if you make such a face."

She tried to relax her brow, but her thoughts made it impossible. Her uncle's desire to have her settled and out of his hair would weigh heavily against his wanting to do right by her. He'd likely consent to the first man he thought wouldn't mistreat her, but that wasn't a recipe for happiness. Sage brooded as her aunt continued to apply creams and color to her face for what felt like an hour. At last she held up a hand mirror so Sage could see the result.

"There," Braelaura said. "You look lovely."

Sage stared at her reflection with morbid fascination. Not a freckle showed through the smooth ivory paint. Her lips were bloodred in striking contrast to her pallor, and her high cheekbones had an unnatural hint of pink. Violet powder on her eyelids made her gray eyes appear almost blue, which was probably the intention, but they were barely visible between her curled and blackened lashes.

"Is this what ladies at court look like every day?" she asked.

Her aunt rolled her eyes. "No, this is what a nobleman's bride looks like. What do you think?"

Sage twisted her scarlet lips in distaste. "I think I know why Mother ran away."



Sage struggled to balance in the ridiculously heeled shoes as they made their way from the washroom to the front of the house. At the porch steps, Sage positioned herself behind her aunt, eyes downcast and hands folded to display her painted nails. Villagers loitered in nearby doorways and gathered at windows to catch a glimpse of the newest bridal

candidate, and Sage flushed under her makeup. Did they stare because they didn't recognize her, or because they did?

Braelaura pulled the bell by the door, and a clang echoed through the streets, drawing even more attention. The matchmaker took almost a full minute to answer the door, and a trickle of nervous sweat ran down Sage's back.

The door opened, and the matchmaker stood imperiously in the door frame. Darnessa Rodelle was a tall woman, nearly six feet, and her graying hair was bound in a tight knot on the back of her head. At fifty, she had the shape of a potato dumpling and the fleshy, flabby arms that bespoke a life of comfort and good food, but her mouth twisted like she smelled something offensive.

"Madam Rodelle, Mistress of the Human Heart," said Braelaura, in what Sage assumed was some traditional greeting. "May I present my niece, in the hope your wisdom can find a husband to match her grace, wit, and beauty?"

Sage pulled her skirt away from her trembling knees and curtsied as low as she dared in the wretched shoes.

"You may, Lady Broadmoor," the matchmaker replied with a grand sweep of her hand. "Bring the maiden forth so she may honor her family name."

Sage rose and took a few steps forward. It felt like a play, with lines, positions, costumes—even an audience. A sick feeling began building in her stomach. None of this was real.

"Is marriage your wish, Sage Broadmoor?"

Sage flinched at the name change. "It is, mistress."

"Then enter my home so I may learn your qualities." The matchmaker stood aside to let Sage pass.



Sage caught one last glimpse of Aunt Braelaura before the door closed, cutting off shadows and blending them into the gloom of the parlor. A thick, braided rug dominated the floor, with a low tea table centered on it and an upholstered sofa to one side. Though little light passed

through the heavy linen drapes, Sage was relieved they were drawn against prying eyes.

The matchmaker circled her slowly, looking up and down. Sage kept her focus on the floor. The silence became maddening. Had she forgotten something she was supposed to say? The skin under her corset itched as sweat soaked the fabric. *Stupid, useless, nasty chamomile powder.*

Finally the woman directed her to an uncomfortable wooden chair. Sage lowered herself onto its edge and spread her skirts in a fan around her. She tried rotating her bodice to provide some relief from the itchy sensations. It didn't help.

Mistress Rodelle sat across from Sage on the wide couch and fixed her with a critical eye. "The duties of a nobleman's wife are simple but all-consuming. She places herself first in his affections with her looks and pleasing manners . . ."

The phrasing annoyed Sage. As long as she was pretty and in a good mood, her husband would love her? People needed love most when they weren't at their best. Sage blinked and refocused on the matchmaker, but the thought stuck in her mind like a thorn.

On and on the woman droned: she must be submissive; she must be obedient; she must be gracious; she must always agree with her husband. More about how she had to be what *he* wanted. The matchmaker leaned forward, tilting her head to look down her nose.

Abruptly she realized Mistress Rodelle had stopped speaking. Had she ended with a question? Sage answered with what she hoped the woman expected, question or no. "I am ready to be all this and more for my future husband."

"The greatest desires of your lord . . . ?"

"Become my own." Sage's responses had been drilled late into the night. It felt absurd, though, to make such a promise when she had no idea what this husband would want. Given the exaggerated claims this dress made about her figure, he was bound to be disappointed in at least one regard. The series of questions continued, and Sage's memory easily supplied the answers. So little effort was required, in fact, that it began to feel silly. None of the answers were her own—they were just what the

matchmaker wanted to hear. The same answers every girl gave. What was the point?

“Now, moving on,” the woman said, interrupting Sage’s thoughts. Her lips curled back in a smile that did not reach her eyes. “Let us talk about your more . . . intimate duties.”

Sage drew a deep breath. “I’ve been instructed in what to expect and how to . . . to respond.” She hoped that would be enough to satisfy her.

“And should your firstborn be only a daughter, what will you say when you place the child in his arms?”

Next time I will have the strength for a son was the answer, but Sage had seen women suffer difficult pregnancies. Even the best of them were sick in the beginning and massively uncomfortable at the end, and that was before the laboring began. The idea of doing all the work of bearing a baby only to apologize stirred a smoldering furnace within. The heat of her anger felt delicious, and she embraced it.

Sage raised her eyes. “I will say, ‘Isn’t she beautiful?’”

Mistress Rodelle pinched off what initially looked like a smile before settling into annoyed expectation. “And then?”

“I will wait for my husband to say she is almost as beautiful as me.”

Again the smothered smile. “Girls are useless to a lord. You must be prepared to apologize.”

Sage’s fingers curled around a fold in her dress. She’d once asked Father if he was disappointed his only child was a daughter, and he had looked her in the eye and said, *Never*. “Without girls, there would be no more boys.”

“There’s no denying that,” the matchmaker snapped. “But in giving your husband no heir, you fail.”

The last two words felt like they were meant for the present moment: *you fail*. What had possessed her to abandon the proper responses? Her mind scrambled to repair the damage, but nothing that wasn’t both honest and insulting would come to her lips.

“Should you produce no heir after a time, will you stand aside for one who can?”

What would Father say to that? Sage looked at the floor and inhaled slowly to calm the tremor in her voice. “I . . .”

The matchmaker continued, “When you have a husband, Sage Broadmoor, you must endeavor to create more honor than you bring to the marriage.”

Something inside Sage snapped when she heard that again—they were changing her name, like she should be ashamed of who she was. “Fowler,” she said. “My father’s name was Fowler, and so is mine.”

A look of disdain crossed Mistress Rodelle’s face. “You cannot expect to be accepted with such a name. ‘Sage Broadmoor’ sounds like a bastard, but ‘Sage Fowler’ sounds like a commoner’s bastard.”

“It is the name my parents gave me.” Sage quivered with resentment. “They valued it, and so shall I.”

The matchmaker’s words lashed out like a whip. “No man of breeding would value such a name above the filth of a common whore.”

Sage leapt to her feet, lightning flashing through her veins. Mistress Rodelle’s thoughts were laid bare. And Sage had submitted to this, betraying everything her parents had suffered at the hands of people like her. “I would rather be a whore than the wife of a man of such *breeding*.” Her voice pitched higher with every word. “*Your* name speaks of the same breeding, and *I want no part of it!*”

A palpable silence hung in the air.

“I think we are finished.” The matchmaker’s voice was so calm, Sage wanted to rake her painted nails across the woman’s face. Instead she tripped across the rug and flung the door open. Aunt Braelaura froze in her pacing next to the wagon. When her eyes met Sage’s, they widened in horror.

Sage hiked her skirt up to her knees and ran down the steps and across the street, stomping so hard her shoes were sucked off her feet into the mud. As she passed her aunt, collecting stones and muck on her stockings, she heard the matchmaker call out from the door in a voice everyone in the village could surely hear.

“Lady Broadmoor. You may tell your husband I will return the deposit on your niece. There is nothing I can do for her.”

As the driver scrambled to help Braelaura climb up and then turned the wagon to the road, Sage marched out of the village without looking back.

4

SAGE CREPT INTO Garland Hill in the early morning light two days later, wearing breeches and her father's faded leather jacket. Uncle William had been so stunned by her disastrous interview that he hadn't raged or yelled as she had expected, just dismissed her from his presence. Until he felt ready to deal with her, Sage had a narrow timeframe to decide her own fate by finding work. Yesterday's inquiries in Broadmoor Village had yielded nothing, and asking around Garland Hill would probably be just as fruitless, but it was the only other place within a day's walk. She'd also come to a very difficult realization.

Her tantrum could very well affect the matching prospects of her younger cousins, and Aster already started at a disadvantage. After tossing and turning all last night, Sage knew what she had to do.

She had to apologize.

So now she stared at the bell outside the matchmaker's home as the village stirred around her. There were noises coming from behind the house, and she slipped down the alley and saw movement in the kitchen window. Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the back door just loud enough to be heard.

Mistress Rodelle peered with one eye through the crack before fully unlatching the door. She wore no face paint at this hour, and her gray-streaked hair was pulled back in a loose braid that draped over the shoulder of her plain wool dress. "You've come back, eh?" she grunted. "Thought of some better insults?"

Sage had been ready to identify herself, but it now appeared unnecessary. “Y-you know it’s me?” she stammered.

“Of course it’s you.” The matchmaker scowled. “I know what you look like without your face caked and your figure padded. Do you think my evaluation begins when you ring my bell? What is it you want?”

Sage lifted her chin. “I would speak with you, please, woman to woman.”

Mistress Rodelle snorted. “Where is the other woman, then? I see only a proud, spoiled girl-child on my step.”

The insult rolled off Sage’s back. Nothing said today could make things any worse, which was an odd kind of comfort. She held herself still until the matchmaker opened the door wider to let her in.

“Very well,” Mistress Rodelle said. “Come in and say your piece.”

Sage stepped past her into the surprisingly bright kitchen. The walls were a soft yellow color, and the wooden floor and table shone with polish. A cheerful fire crackled in the iron stove in the corner, on which a pot of tea steeped, pouring its minty steam into the air. Two teacups sat nearby, making Sage think the woman was expecting company, so she ought to hurry this conversation along. The matchmaker directed her to a wooden chair against the table in the center of the room and took the seat opposite. Sage studied the grain of the smooth oak planks for several seconds before clearing her throat.

“I’ve come to apologize, mistress. My words and actions were rude and disrespectful, and I wholeheartedly regret them and any pain they have caused you.”

The matchmaker folded her fat arms over her chest. “Do you expect that heartfelt apology to change anything?”

“No.” Sage worked her jaw a few times. “I don’t expect it will.”

“Then why bother making it?”

The embers in Sage’s soul flared. “You see, the way this works is, I say I’m sorry for the horrible things I said, and then you say you’re sorry for the horrible things you said. Then we smile and pretend we believe each other.”

Mistress Rodelle's eyes sparkled with amusement, though her expression remained grim. "You presume to come into my house and lecture me on manners, girl?"

"I presume nothing. But I've made my effort, and I wait patiently for yours."

"You are on the wrong path." Again the woman's eyes didn't match her harsh tone.

Sage shrugged. "I have every right to ruin my own life." She twisted her mouth in a crooked smile. "Some might even say I have the inclination. But my actions are my own, not a reflection of the Broadmoor family. I'd like to trust my cousins will not suffer for my mistakes."

"Nicely put. It's a shame your words weren't so refined the other day."

Sage was growing weary of this exercise in humility. One could serenade a stone wall for hours, but it would never weep in response. "My father once told me there are some animals that can't be controlled," she said, picking at her painted fingernails. "It doesn't make them bad, just wild beyond taming."

To her surprise, the matchmaker smiled. "I think, girl, you're seeing yourself clearly for the first time." Sage raised her eyes to find a piercing, but much less hostile, gaze. "For a teacher, you're incredibly obstinate about learning your own lessons."

"I study every day," Sage objected.

"I'm not talking about history and geography." Mistress Rodelle waved her hand in irritation. "Look at me. I can barely read and write, yet I hold your future and the future of girls all across Demora in the palm of my hand. Not all wisdom comes from books. In fact, hardly any does."

Sage wrestled with the matchmaker's words. She wanted to reject them, but they sounded like something her father would have said.

The matchmaker stood and turned to the stove. She poured tea into the pair of cups as she spoke. "Now, I *am* sorry for what I said the other day. I aimed only to make you realize how much you didn't want to be matched." Sage's eyes widened, and Mistress Rodelle glanced over her

shoulder with a shrewd smile. “Yes, I understand you well enough, and no, I never had any intention of foisting you on anyone.”

“But—”

“And now your uncle realizes it, too, and he’ll be more open to what I *do* want.” She turned around and looked Sage straight in the eye. “I want you as an apprentice.”

Sage shoved away from the table and stood. “No. Matchmaking is backward and demeaning. I hate it.”

Mistress Rodelle set the cups and saucers on the table placidly, acting as though Sage wasn’t halfway to the door. “Would it surprise you to learn I once felt the same way?” She eased back down into her chair. “You won’t necessarily have to take my place someday. I just need an assistant.”

Sage turned back, astonished. “Why me?”

The matchmaker folded her arms and leaned back in her chair, drawing a long groan from the wood. “You are intelligent and driven, if not yet wise. Your looks are pleasing, but you’re not a beauty men will be dazzled by. I have the Concordium next year, and I could use some help picking the best candidates. Finally, you have no wish to marry, so you won’t stab me in the back.”

“How could I possibly do that?” Sage asked. “Stab you in the back, I mean.”

“One of the simplest ways to get the result you want is to create a false choice.” She flicked her fingers at Sage. “I can offer a man the choice between the girl I want him to marry and you, acting as a pleasant but less appealing option, and I don’t have to worry about you bucking the process and stealing him for yourself.” The matchmaker calmly raised her cup to her lips and blew the steam away.

“So you want me to be rejected over and over,” Sage said, sinking back into the chair. “That’s what I’m good for?”

Mistress Rodelle leaned her elbows on the table and eyed Sage over the tea. “That and other things. Matchmaking is primarily a task of reading people, collecting information, and piecing it together, which you

have talents for. It's also not really rejection if you were aiming for it. Think of it as a game where the lowest score is the winner."

Sage wrinkled her nose. "Sounds manipulative."

"So it is. While blacksmiths bend iron to their will, matchmakers bend people to theirs." She took a sip and shrugged. "We aren't alone in our vocation. Actors and storytellers manipulate their audiences as well."

Sage eyed the teacup before her. The high-quality porcelain was sturdy and functional, just what she would expect in the home of a well-off but practical person. One who valued quality over looks. The matchmaker had known exactly when and how she would come to her. Sage raised the cup and took in the sweet whisper of spearmint—her favorite—rather than the more popular peppermint or chamomile. "How long have you been watching me?" she asked.

"Most of your life, but don't be flattered—I watch everyone. I knew your parents. They may have thought they matched themselves, but some of my work is subtle."

Sage's head rocked back like she'd been shoved. The cup in her hand dropped a few inches. "That doesn't sound profitable," she retorted. "How'd you collect your fee for that one?"

Mistress Rodelle arched her eyebrows with an amused look, and Sage plunked the cup back onto the saucer, sloshing tea over the side. She knew the answer already. "Your large fee for my aunt's match came from Mother's forfeited dowry."

The matchmaker nodded. "It was quite a tidy profit, actually. I have no regrets. Your parents belonged together."

Sage's only response was an openmouthed stare.

After several seconds of silence, the matchmaker rose from her chair. "You may think about my offer for a few days, but I doubt anyone else in the village will offer you a place," she said. "I'm not taking anything from your future. We both know you cannot be matched, wild Sage."

Sage stood and let herself be guided to the door. Before the matchmaker closed it, Sage heard her name called. She looked back over her shoulder.

“Your family expects a visitor today, yes?”

Sage nodded. A young lord was to go hunting with Uncle William, though his secondary purpose of being introduced to her was now pointless.

“Consider him an exercise in observation,” said Mistress Rodelle. “When you come back to see me, be ready to tell me all about him.”

5

CAPTAIN ALEXANDER QUINN peered over the jagged edge of a rock jutting from the hillside and squinted through the trees. The bright glade spread out below him, making it impossible for him to be seen in the shadows above, but he still crouched to stay hidden. His black leather jacket creaked a little, and he flinched at the sound, though it wasn't loud enough to give him away.

He'd pinned his gold bars inside his collar; they were too shiny—flawless—which declared how recently he'd been promoted and how little action he'd seen since. Once the awe of making captain a month before turning twenty-one wore off, the glare bothered him to no end, but at the moment he was more concerned with the enemy seeing the bars flash in the darkness.

To his right, twenty yards away, sat two of his lieutenants, both hooded—his oldest friend and second-in-command, Casseck, covering his blond head, and Luke Gramwell, hiding the ruddy tints in his brown hair. Quinn's mother was from the far eastern region of Aristel, and he'd inherited her dusky complexion and black hair, so he had no need for such precautions. Nor did Robert Devlin, positioned beside him. Rob had begged Quinn to pick him last fall. A new cavalry captain was granted his choice of officers so his first successes or failures were his own, but it had taken some smooth talking to convince the general to let the crown prince join a regular company.

At the moment Rob's hazel eyes were wide and his face pale, his

gloved hands clasped to steady their trembling. Other than in height and eye color—the prince was slightly taller and Quinn’s eyes were so dark they were nearly black—they looked so much alike, people often confused them. Quinn eyed his cousin, wondering if he’d worn the same terrified look just before his first battle. Probably. There was only one way to lose it, though, just like the shine on his gold bars, and that was experience.

Heavy snow and ice storms through March had confined the army to their winter camp in Tasmet, near the border with Kimisara. Patrols had started up again only a few weeks ago, and Quinn had been eager to prove his new company’s worth. As the most junior commander, he had to wait his turn.

And wait.

His opportunity came last week, and his riders picked up the trail of ten men almost immediately. While he wasn’t positive this group had come across the border, as far as Quinn knew they were the first potential Kimisar raiders anyone had seen this year. After two days of watching, he’d reached the point of needing to know more than just tracking could provide.

When the group of men came into view, walking—almost marching—down the road, every muscle in Quinn’s body tightened. They carried themselves like fighters, and he didn’t like the look of those staves they carried. What if they smelled a rat? Beside him, Rob craned his neck to watch, going even paler, though Quinn hadn’t thought it possible.

At that moment, another figure came ambling from the opposite direction. He slowed his pace briefly, as was prudent for a solitary man suddenly faced with ten. The group of ten also looked at the stranger with caution, but they obviously didn’t feel threatened. Quinn’s mouse could take care of himself, but five crossbows were backing him up from other angles in the shadows, just in case.

Quinn’s tension increased as the men came together, and Ash Carter held up his hand in friendly greeting. The strangers offered few words from the looks of it, but seemed cautious. He turned and pointed back

where he'd come from, probably describing the distance to some point ahead, or telling part of his story. Ash always said the trick to coming across as real was to change as few details as possible. Maybe that was why he was so good at this kind of scouting. Quinn would've had to change a lot more, starting with his name.

The talk concluded and both parties continued on their ways. A few glances were thrown back at Ash, but he never looked around. He didn't need to—over a dozen pairs of eyes were already watching their every move. Quinn relaxed and sat back. He'd never get used to putting his friends in danger. With a series of hand signals, he gave the pair on his right some instructions, and the lieutenants eased back up over the ridge behind them and disappeared.

A few minutes later, Ash scrambled down the hill to join him and the prince, having looped around behind them once he was out of sight. "They gone enough?" he asked quietly.

Quinn nodded. "Cass and Gram went ahead to watch. What did you learn?"

"Definitely not from around here," said Ash. "Most didn't speak, but the two accents I heard were Kimisar. Not that uncommon in these parts, though."

The province of Tasmets had belonged to Kimisara less than fifty years ago, and Demora had annexed it after the Great War, using it as a buffer against invasion more than anything else. For many this far south, Kimisar was still the primary language. It made identifying raiders more difficult.

The prince, who'd been uncharacteristically silent for the last three hours, stared at nothing. Ash leaned over and punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Wake up, Lieutenant."

Rob jerked out of his thoughts and scowled at his half brother. "Watch it, *Sergeant*."

Ash grinned. "Yes, sir." Ash had trained as a page and squire like the rest of the officers, but refused a commission last summer, never wanting to risk outranking his brother. Most soldiers treated him like an

officer, though. He often joked that his position in the army reflected his life as the king's bastard son: all the perks of rank, but none of the responsibility.

"Any distinctive metalwork?" asked Quinn, drawing the talk back to the matter at hand. Kimisar soldiers usually carried symbols to invoke their gods' protection.

Ash shook his dark head. "Nothing visible."

"Did you find out where they're headed?"

"They asked how much farther the crossroad is. I told them they'd reach it by sunset," Ash said. "They looked happy to hear that."

"Weapons?"

"A few carried short swords—not long enough to draw attention, but bigger than knives. Couple bows, but that's to be expected if you're living off the land and traveling as light as they are." He paused. "Those staffs didn't look right, though. They looked hinged on the top."

Quinn nodded grimly. "Folded pikes. We've seen those before." It also pretty much proved the group had entered Demora with hostile intent, but in twelve years with the army, he'd never met or heard of any Kimisar who hadn't. Raids had been especially numerous in the last two years as Kimisara had suffered some sort of blight that destroyed half their harvest. There wasn't much in Tasmets to steal—the population was sparse, and the granaries were all the way north, in Crescera. "The bad news is that means they're ready to repel horses. The good news is they're not as strong as solid pikes."

Ash smiled. "Also that we're just as good on foot as on horseback."

"I guess that settles it, then," said Quinn, pushing to his feet. "It's time."

"Time for what?" said Ash.

Quinn wore a wicked grin as he brushed dirt off his black jacket. "Time to welcome your new friends to Demora."