



Henry Holt and Company
NEW YORK

Henry Holt and Company, LLC
Publishers since 1866
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010
fiercereads.com

Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of Henry Holt and Company, LLC.
Copyright © 2016 by Mary E. Pearson
Map copyright © 2016 by Keith Thompson
All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 978-0-8050-9925-6

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate
and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442
or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition—2016 / Designed by Anna Booth

Printed in the United States of America by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company,
Harrisonburg, Virginia

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For Rosemary Stimola,
who makes dreams come true*

Journey's end. The promise. The hope.

A place of staying.

But it is still not in sight and the night is cold.

Come out of the darkness, girl.

Come out where I can see you.

I have something for you.

I hold her back, shaking my head.

Her heart flutters beneath my hand.

He promises rest. He promises food.

And she is both tired and hungry.

Come out.

But she knows his tricks and stays at my side.

The darkness is all we have to keep us safe.

—*The Last Testaments of Gaudrel*

CHAPTER ONE

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with curved ends, a central diamond shape, and a smaller diamond shape below it.

DARKNESS WAS A BEAUTIFUL THING. THE KISS OF A SHADOW. A caress as soft as moonlight. It had always been my refuge, my place of escape, whether I was sneaking onto a rooftop lit only by the stars or down a midnight alley to be with my brothers. Darkness was my ally. It made me forget the world I was in and invited me to dream of another.

I sank deeper, searching for its comfort. Sweet murmurs stirred me. Only a sliver of golden moon shone in the liquid dark, floating, rocking, always moving, always out of my reach. Its shifting light illuminated a meadow. My spirits lifted. I saw Walther dancing with Greta. Just beyond them, Aster twirled to music I couldn't quite hear, and her long hair flowed past her shoulders. Was it the Festival of Deliverance already? Aster called out to me, *Don't tarry now, Miz*. Deep colors swirled; a

sprinkling of stars turned purple; the edges of the moon dissolved like wet sugar into black sky; the darkness deepened. Warm. Welcoming. Soft.

Except for the jostle.

The rhythmic shake came again and again. Demanding.

Stay.

The voice that wouldn't let go. Cold and bright and sharp.

Hold on.

A broad hard chest, frosty breaths when my eyes rolled open, a voice that kept pulling the blanket away, pain bearing down, so numbing I couldn't breathe. The terrible brightness flashing, stabbing, and finally ebbing when I could take no more.

Darkness again. Inviting me to stay. No breaths. No anything.

When I was halfway between one world and another, a moment of clarity broke through.

This is what it was to die.



LIA!

The comfort of darkness was stripped away again. The gentle warmth turned unbearably hot. More voices came. Harsh. Shouts. Deep. Too many voices.

The Sanctum. I was back in the Sanctum. Soldiers, governors . . . the Komizar.

My skin was on fire, burning, stinging, wet with heat.

Lia, open your eyes. Now.

Commands.

They had found me.

“Lia!”

My eyes flew open. The room spun with fire and shadows, flesh and faces. Surrounded. I tried to pull back, but searing pain wrenched my breath away. My vision fluttered.

“Lia, don’t move.”

And then a flurry of voices. *She’s come to. Hold her down. Don’t let her get up.*

I forced a shallow breath into my lungs, and my eyes focused. I surveyed the faces staring down at me. Governor Obraun and his guard. It wasn’t a dream. They had captured me. And then a hand gently turned my head.

Rafe.

He knelt by my side.

I looked back at the others, remembering. Governor Obraun and his guard had fought on our side. They helped us escape. Why? Beside them were Jeb and Tavish.

“Governor,” I whispered, too weak to say more.

“Sven, Your Highness,” he said, dropping to one knee. *“Please call me Sven.”*

The name was familiar. I’d heard it in frantic blurred moments. Rafe had called him Sven. I looked around, trying to get my bearings. I lay on the ground on a bedroll. Piles of heavy blankets that smelled of horses were on top of me. Saddle blankets.

I tried to rise up on one arm, and pain tore through me again. I fell back, the room spinning.

We have to get the barbs out.

She's too weak.

She's burning with fever. She's only going to get weaker.

The wounds have to be cleaned and stitched.

I've never stitched a girl before.

Flesh is flesh.

I listened to them argue, and then I remembered. Malich had shot me. An arrow in my thigh, and one in my back. The last I remembered I was on a riverbank and Rafe was scooping me into his arms, his lips cool against mine. How long ago was that? Where were we now?

She's strong enough. Do it, Tavish.

Rafe cupped my face and leaned close. "Lia, the barbs are deep. We'll have to cut the wounds to get them out."

I nodded.

His eyes glistened. "You can't move. I'll have to hold you down."

"It's all right," I whispered. "I'm strong. Like you said." I heard the weakness of my voice contradicting my words.

Sven winced. "I wish I had some red-eye for you, girl." He handed Rafe something. "Put this in her mouth to bite down on." I knew what it was for—so I wouldn't scream. Was the enemy near?

Rafe put a leather sheath in my mouth. Cool air streamed onto my bare leg as Tavish folded back the blanket to expose my thigh, and I realized that I had little on beneath the blankets. A chemise, if that. They must have removed my sodden dress.

Tavish mumbled an apology to me but wasted no time. Rafe pinned down my arms, and someone else pressed down on my

legs. The knife cut into my thigh. My chest shuddered. Moans escaped through my clenched teeth. My body recoiled against my will, and Rafe pressed harder. “Look at me, Lia. Keep your eyes on me. It’ll be over soon.”

I locked onto his eyes, the blue blazing. His gaze held me like fire. Sweat dripped down his brow. The knife probed, and I lost focus. Gurgled noises jumped from my throat.

Look at me, Lia.

Digging. Cutting.

“Got it!” Tavish finally shouted.

My breath came in gulps. Jeb wiped my face with a cool cloth.

Good job, Princess, from whom I didn’t know.

The stitching was easy compared to the cutting and probing. I counted each time the needle went in. Fourteen times.

“Now for the back,” Tavish said. “That one will be a little harder.”



I WOKE TO RAFE SLEEPING BESIDE ME. HIS ARM RESTED heavily across my stomach. I couldn’t remember much about Tavish working on my back except him telling me the arrow was embedded in my rib and that probably saved my life. I had felt the cut, the probe, and then pain so bright I couldn’t see anymore. Finally, as if from a hundred miles away, Rafe had whispered in my ear, *It’s out.*

A small fire burned in a ring of rocks not far from me. It illuminated one nearby wall, but the rest of our shelter remained in shadows. It was a large cave of some sort. I heard the whicker

of horses. They were in here with us. On the other side of the fire ring I saw Jeb, Tavish, and Orrin asleep on their bedrolls, and just to my left, sitting back against the cave wall, Governor Obraun—*Sven*.

It hit me fully for the first time. These were Rafe’s four men, the four I’d had no confidence in—governor, guard, patty clapper, and raft builder. I didn’t know where we were, but against all odds they had somehow gotten us across the river. All of us alive. Except for—

My head ached, trying to sort it all out. Our freedom came at a high cost to others. Who had died and who had survived the bloodbath?

I tried to ease Rafe’s arm from my stomach so I could sit up, but even that small movement sent blinding jolts through my back. Sven sat upright, alerted by my movement and whispered, “Don’t try to get up, Your Highness. It’s too soon.”

I nodded, measuring my breaths until the pain receded.

“Your rib is most likely cracked by the impact of the arrow. You may have cracked more bones in the river. Rest.”

“Where are we?” I asked.

“A little hideaway I tucked into many years ago. I was thankful I could still find it.”

“How long have I been out?”

“Two days. It’s a miracle you’re alive.”

I remembered sinking in the river. Thrashing, then being spit up, a quick gust of air filling my lungs and then being pulled under again. And again. My hands clutched at boulders, logs, everything slipping from my grasp, and then there was the fuzzy

recollection of Rafe leaning over me. I turned my head toward Sven. “Rafe found me on the bank.”

“He carried you for twelve miles before we found him. This is the first sleep he’s had.”

I looked at Rafe, his face gaunt and bruised. He had a gash over his left brow. The river had taken its toll on him too. Sven explained how he, Jeb, Orrin, and Tavish had maneuvered the raft to the planned destination. They’d left their own horses and a half dozen Vendan ones they had taken in battle in a makeshift paddock, but many had escaped. They rounded up what they could, gathered the supplies and saddles they had stashed in nearby ruins, and began backtracking, searching the banks and forest for us. They finally spotted some tracks and followed them. Once they found us, they rode through the night to this shelter.

“If you were able to find our tracks, then—”

“Not to worry, Your Highness. Listen.” He cocked his head to the side.

A heavy whine vibrated through the cavern.

“A blizzard,” he said. “There will be no tracks to follow.”

Whether the storm was a blessing or hindrance, I wasn’t sure—it would prevent us from traveling too. I remembered my aunt Bernette telling me and my brothers about the great white storms of her homeland that blocked out sky and earth and left snow piled so high that she and her sisters could venture outside only from the second floor of their fortress. Dogs with webbed feet had pulled their sleds across the snow.

“But they will try to follow,” I said. “Eventually.”

He nodded.

I had killed the Komizar. Griz had lifted my hand to the clans who were the backbone of Venda. He had declared me queen and Komizar in a single breath. The clans had cheered. Only producing my dead body would prove a successor's claim to rule. I imagined that successor to be Malich. I tried not to think about what had happened to Kaden. I couldn't allow my mind to drift there, but still, his face loomed before me, and his last expression of hurt and betrayal. Had Malich struck him down? Or one of his other countrymen? He had fought against them for me. Ultimately, he chose me over the Komizar. Was it the sight of a child's body in the snow that had finally pushed him over the edge? It was what had pushed me.

I had killed the Komizar. It had been easy. I'd had no hesitation, no remorse. Would my mother think of me as little more than an animal? I'd felt nothing as I plunged the knife into him. Nothing when I plunged it in again, except for the slight tug of flesh and gut. Nothing when I killed three more Vendans after that. Or was it five? Their shocked faces blended together in a distant rush.

But none of it had come soon enough to save Aster.

Now it was her face that loomed, an image I couldn't bear.

Sven held a cup of broth to my lips, claiming I needed nutrition, but I already felt darkness closing in again, and I gratefully let it overtake me.

CHAPTER TWO



I WOKE TO THE SOUND OF SILENCE. THE HOWL OF THE STORM was gone.

My brow was sticky, and strands of hair were plastered across my forehead. I hoped dampness was a sign the fever was breaking. And then I heard strained whispers. I carefully slivered my eyes open, peering from beneath my lashes. There was soft light filtering through the cave, and I saw them huddled close together. What secrets were they keeping now?

Tavish was shaking his head. “The storm’s over, and they’ll be on the move. We need to go.”

“She’s too weak to ride,” Rafe said in a low voice. “Besides, the bridge is damaged. They can’t get across. We have time.”

“True,” Sven said, “but there’s the lower river. They’ll cross there.”

“That was a good week’s ride for us from the Sanctum,” Jeb countered.

Rafe took a sip from a steaming mug. “And now with the snow, it will be twice that.”

“Which will also slow us down,” Tavish reminded him.

Orrin rocked on his heels. “Hang me, they probably think we’re all dead. I would. No one could ever make it across that demon river.”

Rafe rubbed the back of his neck, then shook his head. “Except that we did. And if they don’t find a single body floating anywhere downriver, they’ll know.”

“But even once they cross, they’ll have no idea where we are,” Jeb said. “We could have exited anywhere. That’s hundreds of miles to search with no tracks to follow.”

“No tracks *yet*,” Tavish warned.

Sven turned and walked over to the fire. I closed my eyes and heard him pouring something from the kettle into his tin cup, then sensed him standing over me. Did he know I was awake? I kept my eyes closed until I heard him walk back to the others.

Their discussions continued as they weighed their options, Rafe arguing in favor of waiting until I was stronger. Was he risking himself and the others because of me?

I mumbled as if I was just waking “Good morning. Rafe, can you help me up?” They all turned and watched me expectantly.

Rafe came over and knelt by my side. He pressed his hand to my forehead. “You’re still hot. It’s too soon—”

“I’m feeling better. I just—” He continued to resist, holding my shoulders down.

“I have to pee, Rafe,” I said firmly. That stopped him. He looked sheepishly over his shoulder at the others. Sven shrugged as if he didn’t know how to advise him.

“I’m afraid to even think of the indignities I may have suffered these past days,” I said. “But I’m awake now, and I will relieve myself in private.”

Rafe nodded and carefully helped me up. I did my best not to grimace. It was a long, awkward, painful process to get to my feet, and putting the slightest amount of weight on my now-stitched thigh sent fiery shocks through my leg and up my groin. I leaned heavily on Rafe for support. My head spun with dizziness, and I felt beads of moisture spring to my upper lip, but I knew they were all watching, gauging my strength. I forced a smile. “There now, that’s better.” I clutched the blanket around me for modesty’s sake, because all I had on were my underclothes.

“Your dress is dry now,” Rafe said. “I can help you put it back on.”

I stared at the wedding dress spread out on a rock, the crimson dyes of many fabrics bleeding into the others. Its weight had pulled me under in the river and nearly killed me. All I could see when I looked at it was the Komizar. I felt his hands running down my arms, once again claiming me as his own.

I knew they sensed my reluctance to put it back on, but there was nothing else to wear. We had all narrowly escaped with just the clothes on our backs.

“I have an extra pair of trousers in my saddlebag,” Jeb said.

Orrin gawked at him in disbelief. “Extra trousers?”

Sven rolled his eyes. “Of course you do.”

“We can cut away the bottom of the dress so the rest can serve as a shirt,” Tavish said.

They seemed eager to busy themselves with something that would distract them from my more personal task at hand, and began to move away.

“Wait,” I said, and they paused mid-stride. “Thank you. Rafe told me you were the best of Dalbreck’s soldiers. Now I know that he didn’t overestimate your abilities.” I turned to Sven. “And I’m sorry I threatened to feed your face to the hogs.”

Sven smiled. “All in a day’s work, Your Highness,” he said, and then he bowed.



I SAT BETWEEN RAFE’S LEGS AND LEANED BACK AGAINST HIS chest. His arms circled around me, and a blanket covered us both. We huddled near the mouth of the cave looking out at a mountain range, watching the sun dip between its peaks. It wasn’t a beautiful sunset. The sky was hazy and gray, and a dismal shroud of clouds hung over the mountains, but it was the direction of home.

I was weaker than I thought, and my few solitary steps down another arm of the cave to my requested private moment had me collapsing against a wall for support. I took care of my business, but then had to call Rafe to help me walk back. He had scooped me into his arms as if I weighed nothing and carried me here when I asked to see where we were. All I saw for miles was a white canvas, a landscape transformed by a single night of snow.

My throat swelled when the last glimpse of sun disappeared. Now I had nothing else to focus on, and other images crept in behind my eyes. I saw my own face. How could I possibly see my own terrified expression? But I did, as though I watched from some high vantage point, maybe from the vantage point of a god who could have intervened. Every footstep replayed in my head, trying to see what I could have done—or should have done differently.

“It’s not your fault, Lia,” Rafe said, as if he were able to see Aster’s image in my thoughts. “Sven was standing on an upper walk and saw what happened. There’s nothing you could have done.”

My chest jumped, and I stifled a sob in my throat. I hadn’t had a chance to mourn her death. There’d been only a few cries of disbelief before I had stabbed the Komizar and everything tumbled out of control.

Rafe’s hand laced with mine beneath the blanket. “Do you want to talk about it?” he whispered against my cheek.

I didn’t know how. Too many feelings crowded my mind. Guilt, rage, and even relief; complete, utter relief to be alive; for Rafe and his men to be alive; thankful to be here in Rafe’s arms. A second chance. The better ending that Rafe had promised. But in just the next breath, a drowning wave of guilt overwhelmed me for those very same feelings. How could I feel relief when Aster was dead?

Then rage at the Komizar would bubble up again. *He’s dead. I killed him.* And I wished with every beat of my heart that I could kill him all over again.

“My mind flies in circles, Rafe,” I said. “Like a bird trapped in the rafters. There seems to be no way to turn, no window to fly through. No way to make this right in my head. What if I had—”

“What were you to do? Stay in Venda? Marry the Komizar? Be his mouthpiece? Tell Aster his lies until she was as corrupted as the rest of them? *If* you lived that long. Aster worked in the Sanctum. She was always a step from danger long before you ever got there.”

I remembered Aster telling me *nothing’s safe around here*. That was why she knew all the secret tunnels so well. There was always a quick exit at hand. Except this time, because she was watching out for me instead of herself.

Dammit, I should have known!

I should have known she wouldn’t listen. I told her to go home, but telling her wasn’t enough. Aster yearned to be a part of everything. She wanted to please so very badly. Whether it was proudly presenting me with my polished boots, ducking low to retrieve a discarded book in the caverns, guiding me through tunnels, or hiding my knife in a chamber pot, she always wanted to help. *I can whistle loud*. It was her plea to stay. Aster was eager for any kind of—

Chance. *She had only wanted a chance*. A way out, a greater story than the one that had been written for her, just like I had wanted. *Tell my bapa I tried, Miz*. A chance to control her own destiny. But for her, escape was impossible.

“She brought me the key, Rafe. She went into the Komizar’s room and took it. If I hadn’t asked her—”

“Lia, you’re not the only one questioning your decisions. For miles I walked with you half dead in my arms. And with every step, I wondered what I could have done differently. I asked myself a hundred times why I ignored your note. Everything might have been different if I’d just taken two minutes to answer you. I finally had to push it out of my head. If we spend too much time reliving the past, it gets us nowhere.”

I laid my head back against his chest. “That’s where I am, Rafe. Nowhere.”

He reached up, his knuckle gently tracing the line of my jaw. “Lia, when we lose a battle, we have to regroup and move forward again. Choose an alternate path if necessary. But if we dwell on every action we’ve taken, it will cripple us, and soon we’ll take no action at all.”

“Those sound like a soldier’s words,” I said.

“They are. That’s what I am, Lia. A soldier.”

And a prince. One who was surely wanted by the Council now as much as the princess who stabbed the Komizar.

I could only hope the bloodbath had eliminated the worst of the lot. It had certainly taken the best.

CHAPTER THREE

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with ornate scrollwork at both ends and a central diamond-shaped element.

R A F E

I KISSED HER AND LAID HER DOWN CAREFULLY ON THE BED of blankets. She'd fallen asleep in my arms, mid-sentence, still insisting she could walk back in on her own. I covered her and went outside to where Orrin was roasting tonight's dinner.

Nurse the rage, Lia, I had told her. *Use it*. Because I knew the guilt would destroy her, and I couldn't bear for her to suffer any more than she already had.

Orrin had built the fire under a rocky overhang to diffuse the smoke. Just in case. But the skies were thick with gray and mist. Even if there was someone searching the horizon, smoke would be impossible to see. The others warmed themselves by the coals while Orrin turned the spit.

"How is she?" Sven asked.

"Weak. Hurting."

“But she put on a good show of it,” Tavish said.

None of them had been fooled by her smile, me least of all. Every part of my own body was beaten and bruised by the river, knuckles cracked, muscles strained—and I hadn’t been pierced by two arrows on top of it all. She’d lost a lot of blood. Little wonder her head swam when she stood.

Orrin nodded approvingly at the roasted badger that was turning a dark golden brown. “This’ll fix her up. A good meal and—”

“It’s not just her body that’s hurting,” I said. “Aster’s death weighs on her. She’s second-guessing every step she made.”

Sven rubbed his hands over the fire. “That’s what a good soldier does. Analyzes past moves and then—”

“I know, Sven. I know!” I snapped. “Regroups and moves forward. You’ve told me a thousand times. But she’s not a soldier.”

Sven returned his hands to his pockets. The others eyed me cautiously.

“Not a soldier like us, maybe,” Jeb said, “but a soldier just the same.”

I shot him an icy stare. I didn’t want to hear about her being a soldier. I was tired of her being in danger and didn’t want to invite more. “I’m going to go check on the horses,” I said and left.

“Good idea,” Sven called after me.

They knew the horses didn’t need checking. We’d found a stand of bitter pea for them to graze on and they were securely tethered.

A soldier just the same.

There was far more that I looked back on during my twelve-mile walk than just my failure to answer her note. I also saw Griz, over and over again, lifting her hand and declaring her queen and Komizar. I saw the alarm in her face and remembered my own rage surging. The barbarians of Venda were trying to sink their claws in deeper, and they'd already done enough damage.

She was not their queen or Komizar, and she was not a soldier.

The sooner I could get her safely to Dalbreck, the better.

CHAPTER FOUR



ONE BY ONE, THEY DROPPED TO A KNEE, OFFERING FORMAL introductions. Though they had all already seen me half naked and held me down in the most familiar ways while I was stitched, perhaps this was the first time they thought I might actually live long enough to remember any of it.

Colonel Sven Haverstrom of the Dalbreck Royal Guard, Assigned Steward of Crown Prince Jaxon. The others laughed at that title. They were free with their jest and jabs, even with an officer who outranked them, but Sven gave it back as good as he got it.

Officer Jeb McCance, Falworth Special Forces.

Officer Tavish Baird, Tactician, Fourth Battalion.

Officer Orrin del Aransas, Falworth First Archer Assault Unit.

I bit the corner of my lip hesitantly and raised my brows. “And I can trust those are your real names and occupations this time?”

They eyed me uncertainly for a moment, then laughed, realizing I was jesting along with them.

“Yes,” Sven said, “but I wouldn’t trust that fellow you’re leaning on. Claims he’s a prince, even though he’s nothing but a—”

“That’s enough,” Rafe said. “Let’s not wear the princess out with your mindless yammering.”

I smiled, appreciating their levity, but I sensed a certain unease behind it, an effort to mask the grimness of our situation.

“Food’s ready,” Orrin announced. Rafe helped me sit down against a makeshift backrest made of saddles and blankets. In the process of sitting, I bent my leg and a fiery jolt shot through it as if I was being pierced with an arrow all over again. I bit back a groan.

“How are the back and the leg?” Tavish asked.

“Better,” I answered once I caught my breath. “I guess you need to add skilled Field Surgeon to your list of titles.”

Orrin watched me eat as if every bite I took measured his cooking skills. Besides the roasted meat, he had also made a soup from the carcass and some turnips. Apparently Jeb wasn’t the only one who had stowed some luxuries in his saddlebag. The conversation centered around the food and other game that they had spotted for future meals—deer, possum, and beaver. Gentle topics. Not at all like their plotting this morning that they had tried to keep from my ears.

I finished my meal and turned the conversation to a more pressing topic. “So, it sounds like we have a week’s lead,” I said.

They paused from their eating and glanced at one another, quickly assessing how much had been said this morning and what I might have overheard.

Rafe wiped the corner of his mouth with the side of his hand. “Two weeks’ lead with the heavy snowfall.”

Sven cleared his throat. “That’s right. Two weeks, Your—”
“Lia,” I said. “No more formalities. We’re well beyond that by now, aren’t we?”

They all looked at Rafe, deferring to him, and he nodded. I had almost forgotten he was their sovereign. Their prince. He outranked them all, including Sven.

Sven confirmed with a single nod. “Very well. Lia.”

“At least two weeks,” Orrin agreed. “Whatever Rafe put in the gears of the bridge did the job.”

“Lia gave it to me,” Rafe told him.

They looked at me, surprised, perhaps wondering if I had conjured some sort of Morrighese magic. I told them about the scholars in the caverns below the Sanctum who were unlocking the secrets of the Ancients and had devised the powerful clear liquid I gave to Rafe. I also described the Komizar’s hidden army city and the things I’d witnessed—including the charging brezalots that carried the packs that exploded like a firestorm. “The Komizar was planning to march on Morrighan first and then the rest of the kingdoms. He wanted them all.”

Sven shrugged and marginally confirmed my story, saying the

Komizar talked up the power of the army that the governors and their provinces were financing. “But at least half the governors were skeptical. They thought he was inflating the numbers and their capabilities to get greater tithes out of them.”

“Did you see the city?” I asked. “He wasn’t overstating his claim.”

“I didn’t, but the other governors who had still weren’t won over.”

“They probably only wanted him to sweeten their own stakes. I know what I saw. There’s no doubt that with the army and weapons he was amassing, Venda could easily quash Morrighan—and Dalbreck too.”

Orrin snorted. “No one can beat Dalbreck’s army.”

I looked at Orrin pointedly. “And yet Morrighan has done so many times in our rocky past. Or do you not study history in Dalbreck?”

Orrin glanced at me awkwardly, then back down at the tin of soup in his hands.

“That was a long time ago, Lia,” Rafe intervened. “Long before my father’s reign—and *your* father’s. A lot has changed.”

His low opinion of my father’s rule didn’t escape me, and strangely, it made a defensive spark ignite within me. But it was true. I had no idea what Dalbreck’s army was like now, but in the past several years, the Morrighese army had shrunk. Now I wondered if that was by the Chancellor’s design—to make us an easier target—except I wasn’t sure that as overseer of the treasury, he alone could make that happen, not even with the Royal

Scholar's help. Was it possible that more in the cabinet conspired with him?

Rafe reached out and rested his hand on my knee, perhaps perceiving the harshness of his comment. "It doesn't matter," he said. "If such an army does exist, without the Komizar's calculating ambition, it will fall into disarray. Malich doesn't possess the wit to lead an army, much less keep the loyalties of the Council. He may be dead already."

The thought of Malich's arrogant head rolling across the Sanctum floor warmed me—my only regret being that I wasn't the one who had sent it rolling. But who else might step into the powerful shoes of the Komizar? What about Chievdar Tyrick Governor Yanos? Or maybe Trahern of the Rahtan? They were certainly the most nasty and driven of those left on the Council, but I was sure none possessed the cunning or finesse to secure the loyalty of the entire Council, much less follow through with the Komizar's staggering ambitions. But with so much at stake, was that an assumption that any kingdom could afford to make? Morrighan needed to be warned of the possible threat and be prepared for it.

"Two weeks easily," Jeb said, trying to return to the more positive subject of our ample lead time. He tore off another piece of the badger meat. "The Sanctum was in chaos when we left, and with more grabs for power, they may not set out for the lower river at once."

"They will." Sven eyed Rafe with cool gray eyes. "The question is not how soon but how many will they send? It's not just

her they'll be after. You'll be a highly sought prize too. The crown prince of Dalbreck has not only stolen away with something they value but has no doubt greatly injured their pride with his deception."

"It was the Komizar's pride," Rafe corrected him, "and he's dead."

"Maybe."

I looked at Sven, incredulous, and my heart squeezed to a cold knot. "There's no maybe about it. I stabbed him twice and twisted the blade. His guts were in pieces."

"Did you see him die?" Sven asked.

See him?

I paused, taking my time to compose a reasoned answer. "He was on the ground, choking on his last breaths," I said. "If he didn't bleed to death, the poison released into his gut finished him off. It's a painful way to die. Sometimes slow, but effective."

Wary glances were cast between them.

"No, I haven't stabbed someone in the gut before," I explained. "But I have three brothers who are soldiers, and they've held nothing back from me. There's no chance the Komizar survived his injuries."

Sven took a long, slow sip from his mug. "You were shot in the back with an arrow and fell into a raging icy river. Not good odds, and yet here you are. When we left the terrace . . . the Komizar was gone."

"That means nothing," I said, hearing the panic rise in my voice. "Ulrix or a guard could have carried his body off. He's *dead*."

Rafe set down his cup, the spoon clattering against the side. “She’s right, Sven. I saw Ulixir drag the body through the portal myself. I know a corpse when I see one. There’s no question, the Komizar is dead.”

There was a strained silent moment between them, then Sven quietly acquiesced, dipping his chin in acknowledgment.

I hadn’t realized I was leaning forward, and I lay back against the mound of blankets Rafe had made for me, weak with exhaustion, my back damp.

Rafe reached out and felt my forehead. “You’re running a fever again.”

“It’s only the fire and warm soup,” I said.

“Whatever it is, you need to rest.”

I didn’t argue. I thanked Orrin for the supper, and Rafe helped me over to my bedroll. The last few steps drained me, and I was barely able to keep my eyes open as Rafe helped me get settled. It was the most conversation and activity that I’d had in days.

He leaned over me, wiping strands of damp hair from my face, and kissed my forehead. He started to stand, but I stopped him, wondering what else he had seen.

“You’re sure you saw him dead?”

He nodded. “Yes. Don’t worry. You killed him, Lia. Rest now.”

“What about the others, Rafe? Do you think they survived? Governor Faiwell, Griz, Kaden?”

His jaw denched at the mention of Kaden’s name. He was slow to answer. “No,” he finally said. “I don’t think they made

it. You saw the soldiers swarming in as we left. Kaden and the others had nowhere to flee. There was Malich too. The last time I saw Kaden, he was engaged in combat with him. If Malich made it down to the river, you can guess what happened to Kaden.”

The ache of what he didn’t say swelled in me—Kaden was no longer an obstacle for Malich.

“He got what he deserved,” Rafe said quietly.

“But he helped us fight so we could escape.”

“No. He was fighting to save your life, and for that I’m grateful, but he wasn’t trying to help you escape. He had no idea we even had a way to escape.”

I knew he was right. For their own reasons, both Kaden and Griz wanted to keep me in Venda. Helping me leave wasn’t their motive for raising swords against their brethren.

“He was one of them, Lia. He died the way he lived.”

I closed my eyes, exhaustion already making my lids too heavy to keep open. My lips burned with heat, and my mumbled words stung on them. “That’s the irony. He wasn’t one of them. He was Morrighese. Noble born. He only turned to Venda because his own kind had betrayed him. Just like I did.”

“What did you say?”

Just like I did.

I heard Rafe walk away and then there was more whispering, but this time I couldn’t discern what they were saying. Their muffled words wove with the darkness into a silky black fog.



I STARTLED AWAKE AND LOOKED AROUND, TRYING TO remember what had roused me. A dream? But I could recall nothing. Rafe slept next to me, his arm protectively around my waist as if someone might whisk me away. Jeb sat back against a large rock, his drawn sword at his side. It was his watch, but his eyes were closed. If we had a two-week lead, why did they feel the need for a watch? Of course there were wild animals to consider that might like this nice roomy cave to take refuge in. Orrin had mentioned seeing panther tracks.

Jeb must have just stoked the fire, because it blazed with heat, and yet a chill tiptoed over my shoulders. The flames flickered with a breeze, and the shadows grew darker.

Don't tarry, Miz.

My head throbbed with the sound of Aster's voice, and I wondered if it would forever haunt me. I rose up on one arm and sipped from a canteen. Rafe sensed my movement, and his arm pulled tighter, his body edging closer. I found comfort in his small tug. It felt as if he would never let anything come between us again.

Sven was snoring, and Orrin lay on his side with his mouth wide open, a thin line of drool trickling from the corner. Tavish was curled in a ball, his blanket pulled over his head, only a rope of his thick black hair peeking out from beneath it. All of them peaceful, getting the rest they very much deserved, their bodies healing from their wounds too.

I had started to ease back onto my bedroll when the chill hit me again, stronger this time. It pressed on my chest, making it harder to breathe. The shadows grew darker, and dread snaked

through me like a viper waiting to strike. I waited. Knowing. Fearing. Something was—

Don't tarry Miz, don't tarry, or they will all die.

I sat upright, gasping for breath.

“Can't sleep?” Jeb asked.

I stared at him, my eyes prickling with fear.

Jeb yawned. “Sun won't be up for another hour or so,” he said. “Try to get some more rest.”

“We need to go,” I said. “*Now.*”

Jeb motioned to quiet me. “Shhh. The others are sleeping. We don't need to—”

“Everyone up!” I yelled. “Now! We're leaving!”

CHAPTER FIVE



K A D E N

FIND HER. DON'T COME BACK WITHOUT HER. ALIVE OR dead, I don't care. Kill them all. But bring her back.

There wasn't much else to occupy my thoughts but what may have very well been the Komizar's last words. He needed her head as evidence. A way to quell the unrest once and for all. The random slaughter of cheering clans in the square hadn't been enough for him.

I looked back at the perilous footbridge we had just led our horses over. "I'll do it," I told Griz, grabbing his ax from him. He started to protest but knew it was no use. He couldn't lift his left arm without paling. What would have taken him a dozen swings when he wasn't injured took me more than twice that, but finally the stakes toppled free and the chains jangled into the water below. I stowed the ax and helped Griz back onto

his horse. The trail ahead was thick with snow, and we had no tracks to follow. All we had to go on was a hunch of Griz's and a faded memory.

I pulled my cloak tight against the cold. Conniving, all of them. I should have known Governor Obraun was part of her plotting. He gave in too easily during our Council negotiations because he knew he would never have to follow through with giving tithes at all. And the prince. *Damned liars, he was the prince.* My fingers were stiff in my gloves as they gripped the reins. It all added up now. Every detail added up, all the way back to the beginning in Terravin. He was a trained soldier just as I had suspected—probably with the very best training Dalbreck could offer. When Griz confessed to having known his identity all along, I wanted to kill him for his treachery. In turn, he reminded me of my own treasonous ways. I couldn't argue with him. I had betrayed my oath months ago when I hadn't slit her throat as she slept in her cottage.

Bring her back.

The Komizar would see her dead one way or another for what she had done. For what they had all done. But his preference was to get her back alive—and then make her suffer publicly in the worst possible way for her betrayal.

Find her.

And with my last Vendan breath, that was just what I would do.



*he winds bore down, the heavens raged,
and the wilderness tested the Remnant
until the last of the darkness spilled into the earth,
and Morrighan charged the Holy Guardians
with telling the stories, for though the devastation
was behind them, it should not be forgotten,
because their hearts still beat with the blood of their forbears.*

—Morrighan Book of Holy Text, Vol. II

CHAPTER SIX

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with curved ends and a central diamond-shaped ornament.

R A F E

WE STARTLED AWAKE, ALARMED BY HER SHOUTING, JUMPING to our feet, drawing swords, looking for imminent danger.

Jeb was saying it was a false alarm, that there was nothing wrong, but Lia had somehow gotten to her feet on her own, her eyes wild, telling us we had to leave. A relieved breath hissed between my teeth and I lowered my sword. She'd only had a nightmare. I stepped toward her. "Lia, it was just a bad dream. Let me help you lie back down."

She hobbled backward, determined, sweat glistening on her face, and her arm stretched out to keep me at a distance. "No! Get ready. We leave this morning."

"Look at you," I said. "You're tottering like a drunk. You can't ride."

"I can and I will."

“What’s your hurry, Your Highness?” Sven asked.

She looked from me to my men. Their feet were firmly planted. They weren’t going anywhere based on her wild-eyed demands. Had she spiked another fever?

Her expression sobered. “Please, Rafe, you have to trust me on this.”

That was when I knew what she was saying. She was speaking of the gift, but I still hesitated. I had little knowledge of it and less understanding. Which could I trust more: my experience and training as a soldier or a gift that even she couldn’t fully explain to me?

“What did you see?” I asked.

“It’s not what I saw but what I heard—Aster’s voice telling me not to tarry.”

“Didn’t she say that to you a dozen times?”

“At least,” she answered, but her stance remained determined.

All this rush over *don’t tarry*?

Ever since I had gathered her into my arms on that riverbank, I had been looking over my shoulder for danger. I knew it was there. But I had to weigh that uncertainty against the benefits of healing too.

I looked away, trying to think. I wasn’t sure if I was making the right decision or not, but I turned back to my men. “Pack up.”