

# ALPHA'S TOUCH

SHANNON WEST

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## **Author's Content Warning:**

The following work of fiction is an omegaverse and includes strong, dominant Alphas, forced relationships, knotting, possessive Alphas, omega heat but no dubcon and no multiple partners. Some short scenes of domestic type violence, not involving the main characters, are present.

# The Story of Bluebeard

For those not familiar with the character, Bluebeard, he appears to loosely derive from legends related to historical individuals in France. One source is believed to have been the 15th-century convicted serial killer Sir Giles de Rais, a nobleman who was hanged and burned as a murderous witch. Another story dates from as far back as the sixth century about a woman who is warned by the ghosts of her husband's previous wives that he will murder her if she becomes pregnant. Bluebeard later became the title character of a dark fairy tale story included in a Grimm's anthology in 1812 ("Blaubart" in German). It was most famously featured in a short story called "La Barbe bleue," written by Charles Perrault and published in Paris in 1697.

Although best known as a folktale, the story has been translated into many languages and was even an Italian libretto, or the text of an opera called "Bluebeard's Castle." The themes in the tales of Bluebeard are thus centuries old and are still debated today. Bluebeard's strange beard seems to be a symbol of his "otherness," as blue is not a color that occurs often in Nature. The beard is also used in the old stories as a symbol of virility, power and status—for so-called "Alpha" males, or for those who style themselves that way. It's a theme that has received wide criticism over the years and which resonates in any story of Alphas and omegas.

# Map of Narmada



# Part I

## Chapter One

*Darcy*

Late for my training session, I tore across the field where it was taking place, careening around other new Imperial Army recruits, who were streaming off the thick grass after their own sessions and making way for the Alphas' next victims. I searched the huge open field, looking for my Alpha, who had set up this time specifically to help those of us in his unit who were either falling behind or not very athletically inclined. Since I fit in both those categories and was in real danger of washing out, my Alpha wasn't going to listen to any of what he called my increasingly lame excuses. This time he might make good on his threats to actually kill me and put me out of my misery.

And he had every right—he'd warned me what he would do to me the next time I was late, and I had listened to him—truly I had—shaking in my shoes and swearing to him on my life that I'd do better. But apparently, I was such a complete disaster that even his terrifyingly stern, take-no-prisoners warning hadn't quite done the trick.

I had joined King Harrison's army two months earlier, full of glorious, patriotic dreams about defeating the king's enemies and marching along with my compatriots as we sang the Imperial Anthem, the banner of our noble king waving overhead. Sometimes, I was even the one holding the banner aloft, a bandage across my brave and noble forehead. In my fantasies, I'd be beating the drum as the banner waved majestically in the breeze. I hadn't quite figured out how I would beat the drum and hold the banner aloft at the same time, but those were mere petty, insignificant details I had yet to work out. I knew that if I imagined it, I could make it happen.

I had soon learned, however, that the reality of actually *being* in the King's army was not at all as I'd imagined.

What really happened was that I had to get up every morning at dawn, drill all day in the blistering hot sun, with breaks only for the endless, mind-numbing "classes" we seemed to have each and every day on the most boring topics in the world. Like sword and pistol training, which were called "Weapons Proficiency," rather unnecessarily, I thought, when there were no real weapons involved yet. It was all theory so far, and I had yet to put a hand or even lay eyes on either a sword or a pistol.



Instead, there was nothing but talk and talk and more talk. Endless lectures on military discipline and command structure took up most of the time, and then we were dismissed to do the worst part of all of it—the physical training, also known as, to me at least, “the bane of my existence.” It was just another name given to wrestling and rolling around on the grass, and getting my ass kicked, as far as I was concerned, and it went on for better part of every day.

Now I was late for said ass-kicking, and there would no doubt be hell to pay.

My morning had been total chaos—I’d stayed up far too late, straining my eyes by candlelight to study for the exam my entire unit was supposed to be having after our morning training sessions ended later today. I couldn’t afford to fail another examination, and if I did, my Alpha would have every right to drag me, kicking and screaming to the gates of the fort, no matter how much I promised to do better or prostrated myself at his feet, begging for another chance. When I heard the bugle outside calling Assembly just past dawn that morning, it had jolted me awake but I’d simply turned over and put my good ear to the pillow, fully intending to rest my eyes for only a few more precious minutes.

To my horror, I awoke some thirty-seven minutes later to someone next door slamming a door in the hallway so loudly that it finally jarred me out of bed. When I looked at my watch next to my bed, I literally couldn’t believe my eyes. I was already more than a half-hour late for the start of my private session—the one Alpha Wyatt had set up especially for me because I’d been so bad at the ones that everybody attended. He’d told me during the last one that he was going to work with me personally, because he’d “make a man out of me yet, by god, and he wouldn’t rest until he did.”

Alpha Wyatt had been so scary that day, getting right down in my face and shouting at me in front of everyone, so that I had to lean back as far as I could to get away from the overpoweringly sweet scent of him. He was all sweaty and fierce, his handsome face red with rage as he chewed me up and spit me out. But the scent of sweet honeysuckle surrounding him wafted off him and invaded my senses with every move he made and every breath I managed to choke in whenever I was close to him. My pheromones had a little party whenever he was near.

I should have been used to dealing with the delicious Alpha scents by now. All the trainers were Alpha, and most were handsome and physically perfect. But there definitely was something special about Wyatt.

I glanced at the time again—and knew I was a dead man. Because as I’d sat there on the side of the bed, paralyzed by fear and dread, I had allowed another few minutes to slip by—each one another nail in my coffin. Alpha Wyatt would tear me limb from limb and gleefully dance in my blood.

In a complete panic now, I leaped from the bed and jammed my feet in my trousers, bouncing on one leg, tripping and falling no less than three times as I struggled to pull them up past my knees and then find my boots. I remembered pulling them off the night before and slinging them under the bed in

anger and frustration over the things Wyatt had said to me that day. And at myself for being so completely hopeless that he'd had to.

I finally located the boots way at the back near the wall and pulled them out, cramming my feet into them without socks—no time—and yanked on a shirt that I'd found while I was under there rummaging around too. It didn't smell too bad, and I had no choice, as I'd suddenly remembered I'd meant to do my laundry the night before, shortly before I passed out over my book from sheer exhaustion. But it was yet another thing I didn't get done.

Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods, I chanted to myself as I raced across the field to get to my training session. Was it a prayer, a supplication or last words? All of the above? I wasn't sure.

I saw him talking to one of the other trainers near the edge of the field—a much nicer trainer, or at least relatively speaking—named Alpha Brandon. Rumor had it the two of them were cousins and pack brothers. There was a definite resemblance, both in their muscles, which were huge and swoon worthy, and also in the way they were both far more handsome than anybody had a right to be. There was also something about the icy splendor of their eyes—not the color but the obvious disdain they showed for us lesser mortals—as they glared at trainees from under their long, thick, dark eyelashes and beautifully sculpted eyebrows. People said these men were related to the King, and I could well believe it. They practically exuded nobility, class and wealth.

I rushed over to the two gorgeous Alphas, throwing myself on my knees in front of mine, because it felt right to me. Gods, I hope he didn't think that was weird, and get suspicious. Not that he didn't already think I was exceedingly odd. He did—I knew, because he'd told me so about a million times. As I knelt there, my chest heaving for breath and noticing the abrupt cessation of their discussion as they stared down at me in complete amazement, I just kept staring at the ground. After all, you never knew when it might be obliging enough to open up and swallow you whole.

Since I was staring down at his booted feet, I saw the very moment when Alpha Wyatt took a quick step toward me.

“Well?” he said after a long moment in which I'd died a thousand deaths. His voice was arctic cold and implacable. “Let's hear it. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Oh gods, Alpha Wyatt, sir. I'm so, so sorry I'm late.” I heard the rude noise he made, but I ignored it and just kept babbling.

“Sir, you have to believe me. I really, really am! You see, I-I stayed up too late studying for the test today, and...”

“I'm not interested in your excuses, Vandercliff.”

“Of course. And I'm sorry, Alpha Wyatt. So very sorry. But I know I can make this up to you. What can I do? I'll do anything. Just please, please give me another chance.”

Instinctively, I leaned forward and laid my forehead lightly against his boot, but he jerked his foot away. “Are you kidding me? Get on your feet and stop groveling. Do you actually think this is the way an Imperial soldier acts? Get on your feet, damn you!”

I scrambled up and made myself raise my eyes to his. As chill as a marble statue, he glared back at me, his face way too close as he bent over me. Suddenly, he sniffed, and jerked his head back, glaring at me suspiciously.

“What the fuck is that smell? Is that coming from *you*, Vandercliff?”

I cringed, hoping he didn’t smell anything he shouldn’t. How could I have been so careless? So thoughtless? Why hadn’t I washed before I ran out the door? I had to bathe with soap every day without fail—I knew this. I had been warned. *Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods.*

In my mind’s eye, I could still see the witch who had given me that warning—Barbarosa Lagoon, the one who had given me a potion to take away my omega characteristics and turn me into a beta.

She’d been the oldest woman I’d ever seen, and supposedly the strongest dark witch in the whole kingdom of Sudfarma—or maybe even in the world. She was rumored to be incredibly ancient—no one even knew how old she was, but her hair was patchy, showing large swaths of pink scalp, and what was left of her hair was white as leprosy, sticking up wildly around her head in a wicked halo. Her skin was like a roadmap of wrinkles heading off in all directions, and none of them good.

She had levelled her long, crooked finger at me, and her voice crackled over me like little static shocks across my skin. “You must be vigilant! Bathe yourself every morning and every night to take away any traces of your omega slick. The potion is strong, but it can only do so much. You’ll stay safe only as long as you keep your wits about you and do as I’ve told you to do. Take the potion every day, and never, ever forget. Only a few drops, mind you! Any more might kill you outright...or it could change the course of your entire life forever. Beware!” She turned to leave, but suddenly, she turned back to look at me, her filmy eyes disappearing back in her head and an eerie whiteness showing underneath both eyeballs.

Once when I was a boy, my aunt and I had been caught outside in a terrible thunderstorm. We had taken refuge under a tree, which I later learned was a terrible place to be in a storm. But we didn’t know that then and lightning struck a tree right next to the one we were standing under. Immediately, the air was filled with a sweet, clover-like smell, and my aunt cried out in a terrified voice, “It’s ozone.” Later she explained that you could sometimes smell the gas in the air after a lightning strike, and that the lightning “carried it along from the atmosphere as it shot down and struck the earth.”

It was whispered that powerful, dark witches carried that same, strange smell on their breath.

Of course, that was only my aunt’s explanation, and as I’ve said, she didn’t always get the details right. But whatever it was or wherever it came from, it had a distinctive and to me, unpleasant smell.

Just now, I could smell that same odor heavy on Barbarosa's breath as she leaned closer to me. I had no idea why or what it meant, but it was a smell I associated closely with dark magic.

"Look out for the one they call the beast. Stay far away from him, for he will kill you if he can. Only the noble warrior has the power to save you, but he will also bring about your fate. And he alone has the power to break my spell."

I had stumbled away from her then, and left in fear, her words still ringing in my ears.

Shaking off the memory, I took a quick step back and dared a glance up at Alpha Wyatt. He was looming over me, wrinkling his nose in distaste, but he didn't seem to suspect the truth. I thought I still could salvage this if I were really lucky. But I needed to distract him. I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind.

"I-I challenge you to a match, sir."

He blinked a few times and raised his eyebrows. "You do what?"

"I-I challenge you. So I can show you how much my skills have improved. I've been practicing."

He narrowed his eyes as he slanted a look down at me.

"I really have—I'm trying so hard. Please let me show you, Sir."

He made a little "humph" sound. "It would serve you right, if I did."

Behind him, Alpha Brandon laid a warning hand on his shoulder. "No, Wyatt. Our mission is to train these soldiers, not injure them."

"Please, Sir, don't listen to him," I interrupted, beseeching him with my best doe-eyed look, and earning myself a quelling glance from Alpha Brandon. "Please give me a chance. I think you'll see I've improved. I've been working so hard."

"All right. I'll do a training session with you. Not an actual match, because murder is still against the law in this kingdom. But this doesn't mean you're forgiven for being so late. I'm giving you extra duty for the next three days, is that understood?"

"Yes, Alpha." I gulped, because it seemed like I spent most of my time already doing duty in the kitchen, peeling mountains of potatoes and washing towering stacks of dishes. But at least that meant he wasn't going to wash me out of training. Not right away, at least.

He turned away, taking off his shirt and calling back over his shoulder. "Get ready, then. What are you waiting for?"

I tried to hurry by taking my trousers off over my boots which backfired badly, when my boot got caught, and I bounced around for far too long on one leg trying to extricate my foot. I looked up to see Alpha Wyatt, with his eyes turned up to heaven, no doubt seeking patience or maybe asking for divine guidance. I finally managed to kick the trouser leg off, and I quickly stripped down to just the strap that we trainees wore for protection of our private parts. Vowing solemnly to myself not to let my

gaze stray to my Alpha's "parts," no matter how tempting it was to look at the large bulge behind that strained and overtaxed piece of cloth he wore over his groin, I turned to face him, burning with embarrassment and breathing hard.

He rolled his eyes at Alpha Brandon and sighed. "Betas."

He was speaking softly to his cousin, but I was so attuned to every word he said, I could read his lips by now, even from the side. "They have no business being here, as most of them will wind up as cannon fodder. I told Harrison, but he wouldn't listen."

"It's still our job to train them the best we can, Wyatt," Alpha Brandon replied. "There simply aren't enough Alphas to go around, and war with the Crillians is probably coming soon. They have betas in their ranks as well. Harrison asked Lex if he could borrow us to help train his betas, and it's not ideal, but we may need them to act as more than just clerks and cooks. I read the dispatches from the border this morning. There was another raid on a homestead in the east. Three people are dead—a man and his two sons. You know what Harrison is going to do when he hears that news."

I'd been shamelessly eavesdropping, but I knew they were talking about King Harrison of Morovia, their home country, who was married to Queen Rozamond, from our kingdom of Sudfarma. He had been named as head of our army, as our own Sudfarman king was too elderly. It was odd to hear the king called by his first name or spoken of in such a casual way. The Sudfarman king would have had a subject's head for much less. Our king was old and ill, though, and he hadn't been seen in public in weeks. His daughter's husband, King Harrison, had taken over most of the effort of ridding our country of the Crillians.

"I know what my job is," Alpha Wyatt was saying. "All right, let me deal with Vandercliff here, and I'll join you afterward for lunch. This shouldn't take too long. By the way, you might need to check on your own man over there. I think he's going to need a little attention."

Alpha Brandon glanced over his shoulder at one of his beta trainees who was limping and being helped off the field by his friends. He blew out a heavy sigh. "Damn it. Now I'll probably have to fill out paperwork." He threw his gloves down on the grass and strode aggressively over to his trainee, shouting as he went.

"Anders, I swear to god, if you've pulled your fucking hamstring, I'm going to pull off your head and shove it up your ass."

My sphincter clenched in sympathy. And Alpha Brandon was the "nice" one.

Alpha Wyatt turned back to me then and looked me up and down. "Well? Make your move, Vandercliff, or go home."

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The fucking little beta started spluttering right away.

“I’m so, so sorry, Sir. I mean, Alpha, Sir. No, I mean...” Vandercliff careened to a stop, straightened his back, sprang to attention and saluted me. Saluted, though neither of us was in uniform. I could barely contain my sigh. “Sir! I didn’t hear the bugler. Well, I did, but I-I rolled over on my side for what I intended to be only a couple more minutes, but by the time I woke up, I...”

“Shut up, Vandercliff. I don’t want to hear your stupid excuses. And stop saluting me—you’re embarrassing yourself.”

“Yes, sir. I-I mean, Alpha. It won’t happen again.”

I’d watched as he’d stripped off his clothes, his pretty little face scarlet with embarrassment. He was awfully small for a beta, coming up only as far as my chest, and in my opinion, he had no damn business being here in camp. He was far too small and young. I’d been having deep misgivings about him for a while now, but I seemed to be the only one. He looked and acted like an omega to me, and from time to time, I’d get a whiff of an omega scent when he was suspiciously close by. It seemed impossible, but I couldn’t get that crazy thought out of my mind.

He hurriedly removed his shirt, then started on his boots, hopping around on one foot as his cock bounced up and down behind the flimsy cloth that covered it. Not that I was looking. Not much, anyway.

He’d finally wrenched the boot off to reveal no socks on either foot. Clearly somebody hadn’t done their laundry this week. Typical. He stood there, panting for breath as I ruthlessly pushed down the stirring in my gut, taking in the slim, washboard abs and the leanly muscular chest and arms. He tossed his curly, honey-gold hair out of his eyes and shot me another glance out of leaf green eyes that were as innocent as a cherub’s.

He was delicately beautiful, like a piece of exquisite crystal stemware, and what he was doing in the army, I couldn’t even imagine. Fighting him like this was like deciding to wrestle with a porcelain doll—where should I strike it first? I’d noticed that about him the first day of training, and it seemed like I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off him since. I couldn’t deny my attraction to him, but I knew I had to ignore it and focus on the job of training him to fight, or he’d die in the first battle he fought, and that idea was simply insupportable for reasons I didn’t want to think about.

I sternly reminded myself to keep my attention off the gorgeous, creamy white ass that had just turned toward me as Vandercliff pivoted and strode out in the field about ten feet away. Relying myself by bouncing up and down on the balls of my feet to warm up, I looked across at my opponent

and tried to tell myself not to notice how little he was—and how perfectly formed. Across from me, Vandercliff was stretching and shaking himself, like I'd taught him to do. He looked good, getting a little stronger every day, and he was marginally more flexible than when he'd first arrived in camp. Maybe this would be an interesting training exercise today after all.

I was determined to toughen him up. Not because I wanted to be cruel or mean to him, but to give him half a chance to survive the brutal fighting that I knew he might encounter soon. The Crillians were a vicious bunch, and the sooner we kicked them back across their border, the better it would be for Sudfarman citizens. A great deal of it could be hand to hand combat, so Vandercliff's life literally depended on him knowing how to defend himself.

I followed the line of his shapely legs down to his little bare feet with their pearly, well-trimmed toenails. Leave it to Vandercliff to have adorable fucking feet. And his other endowments I could easily see behind the thin cloth covering his groin. Like all betas, he didn't have a knot, but I'd bet he wouldn't be small for all that. When he was erect, he'd be a nice handful. I had to turn away and adjust myself at the thought.

I'd noticed the other trainees looking at him, and I didn't like it much. Those sudden flares of jealousy surprised me. I had no business getting overly involved with a trainee. I didn't even like betas. I wanted children at some point in my life, so when the time came to settle down, I'd need to find myself a woman or a nice little omega. Someone like Lex's beautiful omega, Rory, perhaps. In the meantime, betas were fine to play around with, but never to get serious about. No way. No matter how cute their feet were, or how shapely their little asses were or how creamy their damn skin happened to be. And I'd keep telling myself that until I could make myself believe it.

What the fuck was Vandercliff doing with creamy skin anyway, damn it? I'd never seen any other beta like him, and if he didn't improve his skills and soon, he'd be the first one dead before the initial week was out on the battlefield. I couldn't let that happen.

We began to circle each other, with me occasionally calling out advice or taunts like, "Hold your hands up to protect your face, damn it, or you'll lose some of those teeth." Or, "Come on, Vandercliff. Show me what you got."

I danced away as he lunged at me and swiped out with one foot, sweeping his feet out from under him and crashing him to the ground. Vandercliff huffed out a harsh breath but recovered quickly, jumping up and leaping at me again, this time taking me by surprise and knocking me on my back. He grinned as he fell down to straddle me, and I raised my eyes to heaven and prayed strenuously to the gods to not give me an immediate erection.

Apparently, they weren't listening.

He leaned forward to try and hold both of my hands down at my sides, and his scent hit me right

in the face. I jerked away, easily bucking him off and rolling back up to my feet. I turned away to hide my bulge and pretended to get interested in a group of trainees who were marching by a few yards away. What the hell kind of scent was that coming off Vandercliff? If I didn't know better, I'd have said it was an omega scent, but that was impossible, wasn't it?

"Oh, you came ready to play today, huh?" I said in a strangled tone. "Good boy." I danced around a little on the balls of my feet and gave him a little wave. "Come at me again."

A sudden cool breeze wafted over the field, reminding me that colder weather would soon be here, even in this far southern kingdom. I saw him shiver as it hit him. Then as I circled around past him, that breeze hit me again and stopped me in my tracks. Omega! The scent was fresh and ripe and lust inducing. It was so strong, I literally staggered back a few steps and stared incredulously at him.

It was strong, and I could feel my entire body language changing, as if someone had flipped a switch inside me. I felt edgy, and my dick got even harder, like it always did when an omega was nearby. Was it coming from Darcy Vandercliff? I was very afraid that it was.

I'd noticed that scent earlier when I was standing close to him. Could it possibly be that he had been messing around with some omega outside camp? One that had rubbed themselves all over him? I didn't see how that was possible since none of the trainees were allowed to leave camp, but the smell was unmistakably omega. If it was coming from Vandercliff, then he must have been with one recently and let the omega get way too close, because anything else was impossible. Was that what was really behind his lateness today? I got a sudden jolt of jealousy—and amazingly, it wasn't for the unknown omega, but for Vandercliff. Damn it, I needed to get a handle on my feelings for this damn boy.

I slowly began circling him, almost unconsciously, as if he were prey. My Alpha instincts were still surging, and I realized with a start that I wanted to take him to the ground and fuck him into it and perhaps not stop for an hour or two. Maybe not then. I wanted to make him take my knot. Make him lift his legs up and plead and moan and beg me for more, harder. And I'd give it to him, all right, over and over again.

I never felt that way before except around an omega coming into heat, and I instinctively looked around for one again, intending to take them the hell off my training field before they had every Alpha in the fort over here in a huge fight over them. But there was no one around except for Vandercliff, and no other Alphas seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary.

Omegas were needy and clingy and had no business being outside their nest in an Alpha's home. Most omegas didn't really have a mind of their own, but just did whatever they thought an Alpha wanted them to do. It wasn't their fault really. It was what they were taught. Most of them were sent off to omega training once they came into heat, anywhere from the age of fourteen or fifteen all the way up to twenty. The training consisted of learning how to decorate a house, operate a sewing



machine and manage a household—which come to think of it, might account for their complete lack of knowledge about pretty much any subject.

Rory, my cousin Lex's omega, had been a notable exception. But then he was a prince, and he'd led a strange life up until the time we came across him. He'd never been to omega training either.

Still, the idea of an omega here in camp—or of Darcy Vandercliff actually being an omega—was so outrageous and such a crazy thought that I took a big step back, intending to cool off and figure this thing out. Without warning, though, Vandercliff bent his head and charged me, clearly intending to head butt me, so I instinctively tucked my body over to meet him, wrapped an arm around his neck and got him in a hold that would quickly render him unconscious if I applied the right amount of pressure. I applied just enough to turn his whole body a bright pink and then let him go and stepped back. He fell down to his knees, panting for breath. Appalled that my first instinct had been to catch him, I resolutely turned my back.

“Dumb move, Vandercliff. I know I've taught you better than that.”

He looked a little stunned, but managed to get back to his feet before I came at him a second time. I came in low, like I was going to tackle him to the ground. I actually intended to pick him up and hold him against my body to soothe my Alpha instincts a little and then set him down safely a few feet away. I was sure I could let him go. Pretty sure.

But he wrecked my plans by turning his body to the side and managed to deflect a little, catching some of my charge on his hip, but missing the brunt of it. I turned back for him, and he jabbed his elbow into my midsection. Both of us grunted in pain, as I wrapped my arms around him and took him down to his back. I turned my body at the last second to take most of the weight so he wouldn't be hurt. And since when had I started trying to protect my recruits? What the fuck was I doing?

I straddled him as he lay on his back, reached down and grabbed his arm and pulled it around the front of his neck. From here, I could spin him on his side, and the idea of that smooth white ass turned up for me was so tempting, I had to let him go. I jumped up to my feet and backed away. “If I'd wanted to, I could have had you right there,” I told him softly. “If I got you flat on your stomach, it would have been over. You should have resisted me by extending your leg and trying to raise your shoulders.”

Vandercliff nodded and sprang back to his feet. “Do that again,” he said, a little out of breath. “Let me try it.”

Reluctantly, I took him down again and got on top of him, pulling his arm forward, but he took way too long to follow my instructions. After far too many seconds passed, he tried to defend himself by doing as I'd told him. He stuck out his leg, but just lay there not doing anything else, so I spun him around and pushed his face to the ground. This was so typical of Vandercliff. It was his fatal flaw—he

thought about things way too long and too hard before he acted, instead of just following his instincts. In seconds, he wasn't moving anymore.

I leaned in and spoke in his ear. "You have to be quicker than that, Vandercliff. What have I told you over and over again? Don't think so much. Just react." I released him, surprised at how difficult it was to let him go, and how tempting it was to bury my face in his curls and just take in his sweet scent. Alarmed by the idea, I rolled away and sprang up to my feet. He struggled back up and made another slow, abortive move toward me, but I held up a hand to stop him.

"No. Enough. You were late, and I have too many things to do today to waste any more time here." One of those things would be to clear my damn head. I felt like I was falling into a heat lust, yet there were no omegas anywhere around as far as I could tell. I resisted the urge to pull Vandercliff over to me to see if the omega scent might be coming from him or from his clothes. Come to think of it, Vandercliff would make a fine substitute if no omega was available. I actually reached for him before I caught myself and turned away.

"You've improved some," I told him, forcing myself to speak as calmly as I could. "But remember what I told you and try to get in some extra practice. And for the gods' sake, wash your clothes and go take a shower, or I'll-I'll have to put you on report."

I turned on my heel and got out of there and away from that omega scent that was turning my brain into complete mush.

## Chapter Two

*Darcy*

It was later that evening as I sat in the tavern outside the front gates, that I closed my eyes and let the sounds of people talking and laughing wash over me and around me, carrying me away to someplace peaceful and calm. A place that had no studying, and no training sessions, and absolutely no Alphas. I was so damn tired and aching all over from my pummeling that morning that I could hardly breathe without pain. Never, not even in my worst nightmares or my wildest imaginings, had I expected training for the army to be so hard.

It had seemed like the answer to my prayers when I'd allowed myself to be talked into all this by my aunt and uncle, Sir Roscoe and Lady Rudmilla.

Lady Rudmilla was my mother's twin sister, or she had been, before my mother died three days after having me, some nineteen years earlier. My aunt was still quite a beautiful woman at forty years old, with silver blonde hair and warm brown eyes, and she had Sir Roscoe wrapped firmly around her little finger. She and her husband had no children of their own and had taken me in after my mother's passing, my own father having displayed very little interest in me. He was an Alpha and not known for having an even temper, but he'd never so much as blinked an eye when Lady Rudmilla pulled up in her luxurious landau carriage outside his manor home to retrieve me.

I didn't remember a bit of it, having been only a couple of weeks old at the time, but Aunt Rudmilla had often told me the story. She had come in response to a letter my mother had written on her death bed, imploring her to please come for me as quickly as she could arrange it. She had dropped everything and come, of course, and marched into the huge manor house of my father and told him she was taking her sister's child home with her.

As he had already installed his mistress in my mother's old bedroom, barely waiting for her corpse to be removed first and stored in the barn until her burial the next day, he wasn't bothered at all by my aunt's announcement, and waved a dismissive hand in Rudmilla's face.

"Do as you will," he told her. "I need a real heir, and not some brainless omega like your sister. I should have realized that anyone who looked like her couldn't possibly have much intelligence. She couldn't even manage to give me an heir. All she produced was another worthless omega like herself."

Somehow, my hot-tempered aunt managed not to kill him, and instead, she bundled both me and

my wet nurse up and took us home with her the next morning, after my mother's funeral. My uncle plus the three of us had been the only mourners present, she had told me later.

My life after that was never boring, and it was mostly due to my aunt. She was what was called in those days "a free spirit," and whiled away her days drawing or practicing archery or taking long rides in the countryside with her five dogs, all wolfhounds and huge, sweet-tempered, patient beasts. At night, she would take me outside to look up at the stars, and she pointed out what she thought were the planets and the constellations. I learned later that she was quite wrong in her identifications, but the stories she made up about them were so entrancing that the minor, and sometimes not so minor, aberrations from the facts didn't really matter.

I'd sit with the dogs piled around me for warmth and listen to her spin her old stories about them—about Hyades, and the daughters of the Titan, and about Orion, the Hunter, and the five sisters of the Pleiades who nursed the infant wine god, Dionysus. So many stories I couldn't remember them all. It didn't matter really, because her voice became the music of my nights, lulling us both to sleep under the stars. I woke up many a frosty morning, buried beside her underneath a pile of dogs, who led us home for breakfast, shivering, but happy.

My education was unique, I think, and never followed any particular pattern. She would sit me in the library some mornings and instruct me to read from one of the books from what she called the Philosopher's Section, and then the next day or so, she'd set me on Shakespeare or perhaps one of the Romantic poets. Other days, it would be scientific books or astronomy or sometimes biology. Most of them were well over my head, but I read them because she asked me to, and I adored her.

Other times we would go on long walks through the fields together, and she'd tell me about the marigolds and their use on skin ailments, and a plant called lady's mantle to treat a range of conditions from "women's ailments" to muscle spasms. She told me about stinging nettle for allergies, and primroses for pain. Rudmilla fancied herself a hedge witch and spent some of her free time as a healer, gathering herbs and remedies from plants we encountered on our walks in the woods and in the fields and—you guessed it—in the hedges. I believe she may have had a bit of magic after all, because I could gather the same plants, mix them exactly according to her instructions and use them on the dogs and horses and pretty much on anyone else I could convince to stand still long enough to be my guinea pigs, and nothing ever got healed or helped very much as far as I could tell.

As I neared the age of eight or so, my uncle, Sir Roscoe, who had always been exceedingly kind to me, took Rudmilla aside and told her she really needed to cut my hair and make me start wearing pants.

At that point, my hair reached down all the way to my waist in a tangle of curls, so he had a point. As for the clothing, I got up each morning and happily just threw on one of the footmen's old

shirts with the sleeves cut off, because it was so much “easier,” as Rudmilla always said, for rambling through the forests. I think the habit also stemmed from her hatred of the nappies my nurse put on me as a baby. My aunt said they were smelly and unsanitary, so when I got a little older and started trailing around after her, she didn’t like the idea of either changing me or leaving me as I was, so she hit on the idea of the footmen’s old shirts. I didn’t get the hang of using the chamber pot until I was almost four, so my aunt got the idea of letting me just squat down wherever I happened to be on our walks outside. It was ever so much easier for both of us, and anyway, I was pretty feral in those days.

Since she always listened carefully to what my uncle had to say, however, my halcyon days of frolicking about half naked, with my hair full of brambles and cobwebs and twigs or whatever else might have caught on it were alas, at an end. My hair was properly cut by my uncle’s valet to just above my shoulders, and I was taught how to brush it and tie it back with a leather cord. I was given breeches and a shirt that I actually had to button up and tuck inside a waistband. And—worst of all—I was made to wear shoes.

Then when I was seventeen years old, I awoke one morning to find the bed wet underneath my hips. A thin, clear slickness covered my entire backside, and ran down between my thighs when I stood up. And I felt—well, there were hardly any words to explain how I felt. My stomach ached and I desperately wanted someone to cuddle me. I wanted to hide away in a dark corner somewhere, and I felt a yearning for...something I didn’t have the words to describe. But it was so strong that it damn near stopped my heart. I wanted...no I needed things I couldn’t even begin to describe. The feelings were merciless in their power and tried to tear me apart with the strength of an earthquake. I was in agony, and incredibly, I burst into tears and hid in my closet, pulling my blanket around me for warmth. I remained there, until hours later, when my aunt came looking for me and found me in my little nest. I told her I was probably dying and asked her how long she thought it might take.

That’s the day she crawled in beside me and explained to me that I was an omega, like my mother had been. I wasn’t dying, and the feelings I was having—though excruciating—would eventually pass. They would return though, again and again, until I had my very own Alpha to relieve me and take care of me.

I had no idea what she was talking about at the time. I was aware of Alphas, as one was vaguely aware of volcanic eruptions and hurricanes and earthquakes and other forces of nature. I had seen them occasionally when they had business with my uncle and they’d come to visit him, but I always hid until they left again. I knew only that they were powerful beings who ran our whole world, but I didn’t see how they had anything to do with me.

Once when I’d been playing outside around the age of twelve or so, I’d heard loud shouting and

laughter coming from the woods nearby. I climbed up into a tree and sat on a big limb, watching from my perch as four or five big boys rode into the clearing below me. They were all about sixteen or seventeen, so a little older than I was, but still young. I knew right away they were Alphas. I wasn't even sure how I knew. Maybe it was their wild nature or that dangerous look in their eyes.

They were all tall and loud and the smallest among them outweighed me by forty pounds or so of pure muscle. They had guns slung over the saddles of their horses, so I knew they were hunting for game in the woods.

One of them, the biggest and most handsome of all, I thought, suddenly drew back on his reins, lifted his head and made a sniffing sound. "Do you smell that?" he asked the others.

All of them stopped and looked back and forth at each other. "No," one of them replied. "What is it?"

"I could have sworn...it smells like ripe, delicious strawberries. Surely you smell it?"

That's when one of the others—and I saw to my horror that he was wearing a thin silver circlet around his forehead, which meant he must be royalty—laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "There will be plenty of omegas at my party tonight, Wyatt. No need to start imagining them now."

They all teased him as I shrank back against the trunk and tried not to make a sound. I hid in my tree until they rode away, but I never forgot the strange mixture of longing and fear they all made me feel—especially the one who said he smelled strawberries.

On the day Rudmilla found me in my closet, she made me a tincture of Chamomile and Valerian, with a hint of Passionflower, which seemed appropriate as she took her time to explain to me the complicated relationships between Alphas and omegas. She told me to drink the tincture down to calm myself and tucked me back in bed with a hot water bottle for the painful cramps I was feeling.

That was probably the first time I actually realized I was an omega and that I was made for an Alpha. My aunt, who was a beta, warned me that once my "heats" began in earnest, I couldn't leave the house for the entire length of it, for fear some Alpha might come across me, or that I might go after some poor, unsuspecting Alpha and chase after him.

I was horrified.

Not only by the idea that I might break out of my aunt and uncle's house and roam the countryside like a rabid wolf, searching for and assaulting every unknown and unsuspecting Alpha I came across, though it did sound a bit absurd. But I hated the idea that I myself had to stay inside to avoid their attentions too. She told me that if they came across me, they might decide they wanted me as their own and take me away to live with them, forcing one pregnancy after another on me, until I was a dried-up husk, or until I wound up like my poor mother. She said there was little choice for me in life but to find a lusty Alpha or perhaps a pack of them to accommodate me. Unless...

I seized on that one word like a life preserver thrown to a drowning sailor and told her I'd do anything to avoid this fate that was surely worse than death. She only needed to tell me what to do.

"I know of a witch," she said. "A fearsome creature, who practices the...dark arts." She whispered those last two words, breaking off and looking around herself to see if she were being overheard. It sent a chill down my spine.

"Our good Queen Rozamond, who distrusts all magic, but most especially the dark variety, has searched for her for many years, but the witch Barbarosa Lagoon hides from her in the Black Peat Swamp, an area that covers twenty hectares, and where people hardly dare to go. It's said she can cast a spell on an omega that can stop their heats and provide them with a potion to make them appear to be only betas, thus escaping the attention of all Alphas, so they can live a normal life. She could give you that potion to stop yours, and then no one would know what you truly are."

"Oh Aunt, do you think she would?"

"All we can do is try to convince her to help. You must ask her yourself, but I'll go with you to the edges of the Peat Swamp, and Sir Roscoe will give you the gold she'll require as payment if she decides to help you. But you must do everything she says, or else you could make your plight a hundred times worse."

We traveled there about ten days later, when the worst of my heat was over. It was a long, two-day drive from my aunt's home to the deep, dark, mysterious forest, far from any towns.

"In there," Rudmilla told me, late in the afternoon of the second day, when the driver pulled on the reins to stop the carriage. She was pointing at a path that led into the Black Peat Swamp.

All around us were tall Cypress trees that seemed to lean over and listen to us as we sat there in her carriage, as if curious about what we were doing there at all. They were draped in gray, hanging moss that drooped off the tree limbs like an old woman's lacy shawl. The leaves on the trees sighed and whispered to each other like old women, too, in the cool, evening breeze.

"Stay on the trail, my dear," my aunt cautioned me, "and don't step off it or you might sink into a bog and never be seen again. Walk for at least an hour before you stop. She'll know you're there from the moment you set foot on the path, and if she decides to help you, she'll come to you then. But if she hasn't come by morning, then turn around and come back. On no account must you stay any longer."

I nodded. Trembling a little at the idea of spending the night alone in such a mysterious forest, I got out of it and took a few steps down the path. I was almost immediately confronted by a sign stuck in the ground that proclaimed,

Keep Out—Nothing Here is Worth Your Life

Well, the sign convinced me, for sure. I turned right back around the moment I saw it, but my aunt saw me and leaned out the window of the carriage. She shook her head and waved her hanky at me.

“No, no, go back in, dear. It’s nothing. Barbarosa Lagoon just doesn’t like company and tries to discourage it. But I really think she’ll see you. Just go down that trail. I’ll be here waiting for you.”

I sighed and turned around.

I walked for at least an hour in that gloom, with strange sounds coming from all around me. Even though I was frightened, I kept going a little more after that, just to make sure I’d come far enough.

Then I sat down on an old log by the path to wait.

The swamp was probably the scariest, most haunted place I’d ever seen. The old trees by the path were tall and spindly, rising up out of the swamp with bark that oozed and dripped, making them look as if they were weeping—or bleeding. The sky was dark overhead, and the air tasted of blood.

I tried my best to peer through the mists, but they were ghostly and dense, revealing nothing. It was almost dark when I saw the witch’s stooped figure hobbling out of the fog and down the path toward me. She was dressed all in rusty black, and she smelled strongly of mildew and pine. There was a slight underlying odor that was hot and peppery and burned my nose a little. Trembling, I got to my feet and swept her a bow.

“Good evening, Mistress,” I said. “If your name is Barbarosa Lagoon, I’ve come to see if I could get your help. I’ve brought this sack of gold as payment.”

“Well, don’t you have pretty manners, boy?” she replied in a scratchy old voice. “Show me your gold.”

I opened the small sack to show her, and she peered over into it at the bright, yellow coins inside.

She grunted and drew out a small bottle about the size of my aunt’s cough remedies, tucked inside her voluminous sleeve. “I know what you desire,” she said, “and this is the potion. But you should be careful what you wish for. The things we think we might desire are not always what we really need.” I nodded, wide-eyed but happy as I turned to go. She stopped me.

“Take just one drop or two of the potion every day. So long as you do, you’ll appear to be a beta and be safe from the heat cycle and from all Alphas. You still have to be careful and wash the scent away, because the secretions will never stop, but just slow down. Don’t miss a day or it could come back tenfold. Only a drop or two, mind you! Any more might kill you outright or ...it might just change the course of your entire life forever!”

It was as she turned to walk away that she stopped and pronounced the chilling prophesy that made her eyes roll back in her head. The scary one about the beast and the noble warrior that made no more sense to me today than it had back then.



I'd put the bottle inside my coat and bid her a hasty good evening. I turned again to leave but heard a slight noise behind me. When I turned around to look, she had disappeared, leaving only a big, black raven on the path, pecking at the ground. I was amazed and went quickly back to the road and my aunt's carriage, practically bent over to the ground, feeling my way along in the dark.

Someone slid onto the bar stool next to me, and I was startled from my memories. I turned to see another rookie, and fellow refugee, a young beta whose last name was Anders. And I was using the term "refugee" advisedly—it meant someone who has been forced to leave a place in order to escape persecution, or natural disaster. And that was exactly why we were both here tonight and not at our barracks. Our persecutors had chased us from it.

Only a half hour before, Anders had come running into my room in a panic to tell me that he'd heard strong rumors of a room inspection in less than an hour. Unable to bear the disaster that would occur when his trainer, Alpha Brandon, got a good look at his locker, Anders had pleaded with me to go out somewhere with him. We hadn't left the fort much at all before this except to buy food or an occasional book we never had time to read from the stalls that had sprung up outside the fort. Since there wasn't enough time to try cleaning my locker anyway, I had agreed to meet him at the tavern, and then I'd quickly fled.

It was only a temporary reprieve, but we both thought it might give the Alphas a chance to calm down before we saw them again. Anders had told me, eyes wide with horror, that he truly thought Alpha Brandon would snap earlier that morning and do away with him. He said he'd probably be found years from now, his mutilated body stuffed inside a drainpipe near the fort. Of course, I thought he was being a bit of a drama queen and exaggerating things—but not by much.

I hadn't met him before training started, but I had long stopped thinking of him as anything but a comrade in arms in this ordeal we were both going through. Anders' trainer was the gorgeous Brandon, and he treated Anders almost as shamefully as Alpha Wyatt did me.

On this rare bit of time off on a Saturday night, we had decided to meet here to drown our sorrows and commiserate with each other. Anders shoved an ale over to me and gave me a brave smile. "We who are about to die, et cetera, et cetera..." he said holding up his mug for a toast.

I smiled at him and bumped his mug with mine.

"Maybe it was only a nasty rumor. Maybe they didn't even do an inspection or open our lockers." It was flimsy, I knew, but all I had to offer him.

"No such luck. Busting me is what Alpha Brandon lives for. He told me just today that he didn't think I had a snowball's chance in hell of making it. I think he really wants to fail me." His eyes filled with tears. "I have to prove him wrong. I just have to. I can't go back home to cleaning the scullery and mopping floors."

Anders had worked in service jobs before joining the army, in a huge manor home, doing the jobs too hard for the maids to tackle. Jobs like cleaning, hauling water, carrying coal for fires, and a myriad of other duties were all in his purview. He rose before dawn from his room in a top floor garret with tiny windows, black with soot and worked long after his employers had gone to bed. Being sent back there was the worst fate he could imagine.

“Look,” I said with a confidence I truly didn’t feel, “Alpha Brandon is just giving you a hard time. He’s trying to toughen you up. Alpha Wyatt does the same thing to me all the time. Did you hear about what he did to me in training today?”

He nodded. “I heard. That was brutal. But at least he doesn’t call you an imbecile, like Brandon calls me.”

“Right. Because being called stupid is so much better.”

I pushed my floppy curls off my face and sighed. Wyatt had threatened to shave my head the week before if I didn’t stop.

“Personally, I admire the guts it takes for you to get onto the mats with a big brute like Alpha Wyatt.” His brown eyes twinkled a little as he grinned at me.

He sighed in one of his lightning-fast changes of mood and said wistfully, “Do you think they really hate us as much as they seem to?”

“Absolutely, they do. Why would you even think otherwise?”

“Well, it’s just that sometimes—well, occasionally—my Alpha has been almost...decent to me. Like today, just after he got a letter from his cousin, the Lord Regent Lexington of Morovia.”

“Totally temporary.”

He laughed and nodded, taking another long swig of his ale. Just then the bartender leaned over the bar and tipped his head toward two attractive and buxom women at the end of the bar. “The ladies down there would like to buy you two another round.”

Anders blushed again. “What do you think? It would be rude to turn them down, wouldn’t it?”

I tipped my mug to them. “It would. Come on, let’s go down and talk to them. Just for a bit—we have to get back to the barracks soon, but it’ll be nice to be normal for a change.”

We picked up our glasses, moved down to the other end of the bar and began chatting with the women, who were both attractive, in my opinion. They certainly seemed to find both of us that way. After suffering degradation and despair at the hands of our trainers for the past few weeks, it felt wonderful to be admired, even if it was just for a little while.

A man with a fiddle and another one with some wooden spoons sat down by the fire to play a lively tune, and one of the girls, whose name was either Martha or Matilda—I hadn’t quite caught it—got up and wanted to dance, so I let her pull me out onto the tiny dance floor. I was aware of Anders

and the other woman coming with us. The two ales I'd had, after such a long abstinence, had gotten to me a little, and I closed my eyes and swayed along to the sound of the fiddle.

Then I heard Anders make a sound that was halfway between a horrified gasp and a surprised yelp. He was staring at the door and had gone deathly pale. Before I could turn my head to see what was coming up behind me, I felt a heavy hand clamp down on my shoulder. A harsh, familiar voice growled in his ear. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, Vandercliff? I've been looking all over for you."

I dropped my arms, pushing the girl away from me in a panic and whirling to face my Alpha. "Alpha Wyatt. What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here?"

"Hey!" the girl I'd been dancing with yelled and tried to push her way aggressively back between us. I flinched, afraid my Alpha might actually kill her. Betas, male or female, didn't push Alphas around as a general rule—not if they wanted to live to tell the tale. But Wyatt simply shook his head and said something in her ear. He pulled a small coin from his pocket and pressed it into her palm, and she turned away with a swirl of her long skirts and a little wave.

My mouth fell open, but before I could react, Wyatt took my arm without another word and escorted me to the exit. I cast one wild glance over my shoulder for my friend and saw him with his feet dangling at least a foot off the floor. Alpha Brandon had a fistful of his shirt in his hands and had pulled him up to dangle inches from the floor. Brandon was talking to him in gruff, mean tones, and Anders was nodding his head up and down like a puppet.

I couldn't help him, though, because I had troubles of my own. My Alpha now had my elbow in a bruising grip and was dragging me from the bar and out onto the sidewalk. We made it as far as the alley when I found myself shoved up against the wall.

"What do you think you're doing, Vandercliff? Do you want to get washed out? Is that what this is about?"

"Huh? What do you mean? We were just having a little fun..."

Wyatt's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Having a little fun? You two broke about ten rules apiece tonight, do you realize that?"

"What? No, we didn't mean to do that. What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you even read your handbook? Until training is over, there's a strict curfew, which you're violating. Not to mention the fact that you can't leave the facility after dark. Not for anything. It also says absolutely no drinking, in case you missed that one too. Oh yes, and then there's shirking your duty—are those enough for you? Don't even get me started on the state of your locker, by the way."

“But I didn’t know! You have to believe me, sir. And I didn’t sneak out. There wasn’t anyone at the gates when I left, and I just walked out. I didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

“Ignorance of the rules is no excuse. I’ve put too much work into you to let you wash out now.”

I felt the blood drain from my face, and I shook my head frantically. “Oh no. No, please sir. It won’t happen again. I promise, sir. I need another chance.”

Even though I’d secretly been having second and even third thoughts about making it in the army, the idea of being washed out like an abject failure was frightening. What would I do if I didn’t have the army? I couldn’t go on being a burden to my relatives, and I didn’t have the training for any other employment.

Alpha Wyatt narrowed his eyes and gazed at me, like he was trying to make up his mind about something. Finally, he nodded. “All right. One more chance, and this is the last one. And you need to forget about those damn prostitutes before they give you something you can’t give back.”

My eyebrows rose almost to his hairline. “What? What do you mean?”

“I mean you and your friend Anders were letting those prostitutes rub themselves all over you. Who knows what kind of diseases they might have?”

“P-prostitutes, sir?”

“Don’t tell me you thought they just liked your pretty faces?” He snorted with laughter. “From now until graduation, you’re confined to the barracks. You can go to your training sessions and to the mess hall. That’s it.” He pointed a finger in my face. “And be in bed by nine o’clock.”

My mouth dropped open in horror. “What? No, you can’t do that.”

“I just did. And I’ll be checking to make sure you do as you’re told. Now get your ass back to the fort. Like I said, it’s way past curfew.”

I stumbled out of the alley, feeling dazed. There was no sign of Anders, and I wondered if Alpha Brandon had finally killed him like he always threatened to. I took off toward the gates and was happy to see that there still weren’t any guards, so no one would challenge me. Stumbling to the barracks and my room, I closed the door behind me in relief, only to see the entire contents of my locker thrown out onto the floor. In a panic, I searched frantically for the potion bottle I’d been given by the witch. Without it, I was done for! I found it, where it had rolled under the bed and clutched it to my heart. Thank the gods—I only hoped my Alpha hadn’t seen it.

I’d have to put everything back neatly before morning and that was only a few hours away. I sank down on the narrow bed and put my head in my hands. Confined to barracks. I’d really thought this day couldn’t get any worse. I’d been so wrong.

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That night I dreamed of Barbarosa Lagoon.

In my dream, I thought I heard a scratching at my window, and when I went to look out, I saw the thin branch of a tall pine tree scraping at the glass. I opened the latch to push it away, and a claw-like hand seized my wrist. I screamed and jerked back my arm, dragging in a thin, fragile figure, with wild white hair. Barbarosa fell on the floor by the window, and I feared she might be dead, so I bent over her to check her breathing. When I did, she opened her eyes, showing only the whites. “Look out for the ones I warned you about,” she said in her thin, croaking voice. “They’re coming for you soon. Beware.”

She pointed that long, bony finger at me again, and I woke up shouting. I told myself it was only a nightmare—but there was a faint smell of mildew and clover in the air, and my window was standing wide open, with the wind whipping the cold rain against the windowsill. I got up on shaky legs to close it, but I didn’t sleep again for a long time.

The next days passed quickly, and I had to grudgingly admit that Alpha Wyatt had been right. Forced to stay inside the barracks, I had more time to study and to do my laundry and keep my locker neat. Training was even harder, though, because now we had to go out “in the field,” as they called it. We marched out every morning, walking aimlessly, or so it seemed to me, in long columns and carrying our bedrolls and our rifles on our shoulders and backs. At the end of the day, we’d make camp and erect tents that four of us would sleep in if there was time. If not, we’d erect smaller, two-men tents, made out of our own blankets. The larger tents were carried by one of the wagons that followed the regiment, and these wagons also held our food and ammunition. It was cold outside now, and the ground was hard. We all suspected they were trying to toughen us up and make soldiers of us. Then we got our orders to go on an even longer training exercise that would take us all the way to the Crillian border.

I wondered how I’d ever allowed my uncle to convince me the army was my glorious purpose in life. Though I had once been so sure of it.

I remember coming back home from the Black Peat Swamp, and afterward, my uncle taking me aside, asking me if I’d thought about what I might want to do with my life, now that I was no longer under the shadow of living as an omega. Sir Roscoe, though only a beta, was an old army man himself. As the younger son of his noble father, he had never expected to inherit, until a sudden illness carried away both his father and his elder brother in the span of a week. Up until then, he had served in the army and enjoyed his time. He retained fond memories of days spent with good comrades around a blazing campfire during his time in what he called “the corps.”

Considering the fact that he’d been a supply clerk, I had to question just how many blazing

campfires he'd actually sat around, but I suppose in his memories, it had seemed like more.

He read to me from the Roman poet, Horace, whose poem, entitled "Odes," was particularly stirring as the speaker exhorts the Roman citizens to develop war-like prowess to such a degree that the enemies of Rome will be too terrified to attack them. He tells them never to be afraid, because, as the speaker says, "*Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori*," or roughly translated, "it is sweet and fitting to die for your country."

As officers and betas, who had worked only in the supply tents with other betas, neither my uncle nor his friends had ever been called on to make that ultimate sacrifice, but they all thought it sounded quite grand and glorious, and they had vowed to be ready should they ever receive the call.

When King Harrison put out a request for betas to join his special army and be trained to fight against the Crillian raiders, Sir Roscoe and his friends commiserated with each other at their weekly game of whist for being too old to once again answer the king's request. And then they began to quietly convince their younger beta relatives to join up.

My uncle went to work on me. He told me my options in life were somewhat limited. The man known as my father had made his fortune in trade and though he was Alpha, he was not of the nobility. Even if he had been inclined to help me—which he almost certainly was not—he couldn't have furnished me with land or titles. My uncle was minor nobility and had only a small income every year. With no children of their own, their land was entailed upon my uncle's demise to a distant cousin.

I had always known it wouldn't be possible to stay with them forever. I'd had an excellent education in some ways, yet I'd been trained in nothing much in particular. I had a great interest in a good many things, including classical poetry, but no real skills in any of them. Still, now that I'd been rescued from a life endured as a lowly omega, driven by his pheromones and at the mercy of every Alpha, I needed to find a way to make a life for myself. I needed a job to pay my way.

When King Harrison put out the call for soldiers, I talked it over with Sir Roscoe. He couldn't afford to buy me a commission as an officer, but in those first heady days of freedom from being a slave to my pheromones, I was filled with hubris. I was overly confident that it wouldn't be long until I rose in the ranks to officer status. When a recruiter for the royal army came to the closest village near our home a fortnight after I'd found Barbarosa Lagoon in the swamps, I'd decided to join the Sudfarman army. It would provide me with an income and a chance to travel. And as long as I took the potion the witch Barbarosa had given me, what could possibly go wrong?

I soon discovered the answer. Training had turned out to be so much harder than I ever dreamed it would. And after a hedonistic life of doing as I pleased, discipline and taking orders was hard to get used to. I wanted to succeed, but success and happiness, those faithless whores, seemed always to

be just out of my reach.

Now we were at last nearing the end of our training and instead of gaining confidence, I had lost what I had. I had discovered that I wasn't nearly the soldier I'd always thought I would be. I wondered what I'd do if I ever had to face a real army with real cannons—soldiers with guns pointed right at me. I began to fear I'd made a terrible mistake.

The very next morning, we received an order to go on a “patrol,” marching close to the Sudfarman border with Crillia, near where the Crillians had been raiding local farmers. Rumors ran rampant, as the soldiers around me discussed whether the raiders were in training for war. If intimidation had been their aim, they'd done a damn good job, because I was terrified. I was afraid I wouldn't be covering myself in any kind of glory after all in this patrol we were going on. In fact, I was very afraid my not so illustrious career as a soldier would end in a hail of bullets.

## Chapter Three

*Wyatt*

Brandon and I got our orders to go on patrol the same day as the trainees.

It would be the first one I'd gone along on, having been too busy with new recruits up to this point. But this final class of new soldiers had been my last. The time that Brandon and I had promised to commit to training recruits for Harrison's army was up, and we'd be leaving soon to go home—right after this last training exercise.

First, though, we planned on visiting Lexington, my cousin and the new Lord Regent of Igella, a neighboring kingdom to Morovia. Lex had recently mated Rory, the heir to the throne of Igella, who wasn't allowed by law to rule on his own, because he was an omega. It had been too long since I'd seen Lex and Rory and my new baby cousin, Princess Vesper.

Lex was still at odds with another of our cousins, the king of Morovia, Harrison, who also just so happened to also be Lex's older brother. Since Harrison's queen, Rozamond, tried to execute Rory and would have succeeded, if not for Rory's own protective magic, I couldn't blame Lex for his hard feelings. We all knew Harrison was unhappy with Rozamond, having married her only for political reasons. She had been part of an arrangement to keep peace with her father, the king of neighboring Sudfarma, a sea-faring nation on Morovia's southern borders. It also helped to keep our trade routes open.

However, Harrison had never found any happiness with Rozamond that I could see. So far, he was still standing by her, because he was such a loyal person. I knew the estrangement with his brother made him unhappy though. He didn't want to upset Lex, but he also couldn't give Rozamond the type of punishment Lex had in mind for her, so he was stuck in a bad place. I had to admit that all of our pack—which included me and my cousins Brandon and Asher, as well as Lex—had a hard time understanding why he didn't just put her aside. She was a cold, cruel woman, and I doubted her love for my cousin. I think she wanted the title of queen much more than she did Harrison. As for Harrison, he said he didn't like the idea of divorce, because as king he was also the head of the Church, and he'd made sacred vows. So, even though he was unhappy, I was afraid he'd never put her aside.

Like many Sudfarmans, Rozamond had some magic, though her talents lay in prophecy and



clairvoyance. She was sometimes able to see things that might happen in the near and distant future. I often wondered if she'd seen something about Rory and Lex or maybe even our entire pack. Something that scared her so much she'd decided to try to start eliminating members. Rozamond had been afraid to touch her husband's beloved younger brother, Lex—at least so far. Instead, she'd gone after his mate, Rory, and she'd used her religious fanaticism and her antipathy for what she called “dark magic” to seize him when Lex was out of the country and try to have him put to death. I'd never seen Lex so furious and so utterly lost when he thought she'd murdered his beautiful omega. He had never forgiven the queen, and he was determined to see her pay for her crime.

Lex had told us that he wouldn't declare war against Harrison for the queen's actions—not right away. Lex loved his brother and still felt loyalty to his home country of Morovia, but unless Harrison made Rozamond pay for her crimes, including going behind Harrison's back the way she had to try and murder Rory, he couldn't forgive her, and he refused to move on until she was made to pay for her crime. Until Harrison agreed to throw her in prison, or at the very least, divorce her and send her back home, Lex said he'd have to consider the kingdom of Morovia to be a hostile nation to Igella.

They were at an impasse.

Harrison's union had produced no children, and it wasn't hard to see why. Rozamond was an unlovely person in every way. Her hair was a colorless, ice blonde, and her face was cold and haughty. She had eyes like daggers, dark, darting and bold. Her chin jutted out pugnaciously, and she was not a woman I'd ever like to turn my back on, in bed or otherwise.

She was cunning, though and shrewd. I think she knew she'd gone too far in what she tried to do to Rory, and she'd been keeping a low profile ever since, like a sleeping serpent. She had brought her own personal guard with her when she'd come to Morovia—all of them Sudfarmans, and as sullen and unfriendly as their queen. Maybe it was a national trait in their Alphas, a bit like ineptitude seemed to be so common with the Sudfarman betas I'd been training.

For now, our pack was separated, with Asher, Brandon and I still living in Morovia, at Lex's old lodge. It was actually the property of the crown, but most of the family acknowledged Lex's claim to it. He'd vowed never to come back to Morovia until the queen was gone for good. Our pack bond with Lex was strong, however, and we had been talking for a while now about relocating to Igella permanently. Our loyalty to Harrison was the only thing still holding us in Morovia.

Meanwhile, as we tried to make our decision, we'd been talked into helping Harrison one last time, to train these betas to police the border because of Crillian raids. A war was probably coming before long and if it did, it would have been instigated in a roundabout way by none other than Queen Rozamond. The queen's cousin, a young woman named Viscountess Camilla of Sudfarma, had gone to Crillia to marry some wealthy Crillian baron or other over six months ago, and had not been heard

from since.

As a result of the Viscountess Camilla's disappearance, relations between the Sudfarmans and the Crillians were dicey at best. This baron claimed to have no information on the missing Viscountess. He merely claimed she'd never arrived. The Crillian king refused to involve himself. He had ignored all of the Sudfarman king's requests for assistance in searching for the girl.

The king's daughter, Queen Rozamond, pulled out all the stops to harangue her husband, Harrison, about committing Morovian troops to help find the Viscountess. Knowing how Rozamond was, I could imagine she'd been relentless in her nagging. A few months later, here we were, near the Crillian border with Harrison's newest troops, on a training mission to help provide a stronger presence in the area against the raiding, and doing what we could to search for any sign of the missing Viscountess Camilla, who would have come this same way as she traveled to Crillia. Not that we were actively looking for her—not officially, at least. And on top of all that, we were also trying to make sure the new beta soldiers knew enough to not get themselves killed on this simple march to patrol the border of their kingdom.

Someone had decided it might be a good idea to send their Alphas with them on this last patrol before the end of their training to give them confidence, and even to fight alongside them, should the occasion happen to arise. As we knew these new soldiers and their capabilities better than anyone else and had been working with them all these weeks, perhaps it was a good idea. Personally, however, I wasn't sure if it would give them more confidence to work closely with us or strip their confidence away entirely. We'd had to be hard on these men, all of whom were betas with no prior knowledge of fighting either with weapons or in hand-to-hand combat. Many of them still strongly resented us. Hell, to be honest, most of them hated us. We had tried our best to make soldiers of these men, and that meant using harsh tactics at times. And I still wasn't sure it had been nearly enough.

There was a reason that betas were used mainly as clerks, and I was afraid this experiment of Harrison's in using them as soldiers was doomed to ultimate failure.

Their task of this patrol was to go all the way to the foothills of a small mountain range known as the Daluri, which lay right on the border of Crillia, near the village of Lameda, where the baron supposedly lived. We wouldn't be going as far as the village. It wasn't so much a village anyway as it was a mere scattering of cottages outside an ancient, gated old castle, located high in the mountains and reached only by traveling through a forest the locals called the Wild Woods.

This ancient forest was supposed to be large, dark and fairly impenetrable. According to local legend, the Wild Woods had strange creatures lurking in its shadowy confines—almost certainly just a myth, but the stories had even reached as far as Morovia and as a boy, I'd been terrified by them. Vicious werewolves were reported to live inside that forest, along with hideous, man-eating animals,

including flying monkeys. The only road up to Lameda passed perilously close to the Woods. It was narrow and unpaved, lined with signs that warned travelers to stay strictly on the roads and to never, ever venture off into the forest.

When it rained, it was said that the road turned to mud that reached to the axles of any coach foolish enough to venture up it. The thick mud increased the likelihood of horses slipping and falling to their deaths, too, along with their riders. As for the baron himself, there were all kinds of rumors about him and none of them were good.

Like I said, probably not much of it was true. The stories I'd heard were fairly outlandish. It was said that the baron had a long, bushy blue-black beard, and he was supposed to be a huge, hulking figure, almost seven feet tall. Again, probably not much of that was true either, or else it had been greatly exaggerated. And we had more important things to worry about. It was my job and that of the other officers to make sure the men were vigilant and aware of the terrain around them, because we didn't know exactly where these raiders or bandits might be coming from, and this was a bit of a fishing expedition. We only knew that they were close—for days now we'd been hearing occasional gunfire coming from the Daluri hills.

It was interesting to note that some of the raids had been happening nearby Lameda too, where the baron lived. The raids the Crillians were suspected of carrying out against the local farmers in the area had stirred up a great deal of fear and unrest. Yet the Crillian king still denied they had anything to do with him and his army and claimed the trouble was coming from "bandits" in the vicinity. In another couple of days, we would turn around and go back the way we'd come, only skirting the border. So far, there had been no sign of any bandits, Crillian or otherwise, except for that occasional, faraway shooting in the hills.

My cousin Brandon and I had been riding ahead of the soldiers for most of the day on our horses, falling back to check on them frequently and stopping often to give them rest breaks. This was the longest march any of them had experienced yet, at a distance of nearly fifty kilometers from our fort, and it was a true test of their endurance.

Armies traveled on their feet, and as with any march, this was a slow one. Wagons containing stores and supplies trailed along behind, and many of the officers rode back frequently, trying to either encourage or bully the foot soldiers into compliance. I'd noticed some of my trainees near the back of the line and rode over often to check on them. Though I might as well face the truth that I'd really been looking out for only one of them in particular.

Darcy Vandercliff was in the back of the march, looking hotter, more tired and messier than usual, trudging along like his pretty little feet hurt. I wondered if he was wearing socks—leave it to him to not have any clean ones left in his pack and be racking up blisters on top of blisters—and then I

wondered why I was even wondering, damn it. He was a grown man, despite his looks, and he should have sense enough to take care of himself.

I told myself he was just another beta, an indifferent soldier at best and terrible at obeying orders. I'd done the best I could to prepare him and that had to be an end to it.

I couldn't understand why it wasn't.

As I watched him, feeling resentful about how damned beautiful he was, he tossed a wayward, golden curl from his forehead and wiped sweat from his brow, leaving a muddy streak. He looked hot and bad-tempered, and of course, he was marching out of step with everyone else, being slightly behind the cadence being called out by one of the sergeants. Even Anders, the other fuck-up on our training roster and the bane of Brandon's existence, was managing to march properly. But it was that, along with the way Darcy looked, that made him stand out from the other soldiers like a sore thumb—like a single red rose in a vase full of daisies. Or was it the other way around? How had I not noticed before how badly he fit in with everyone else?

Or had I noticed on many occasions and simply chalked it up to an overactive imagination? Just like all the times I'd noticed the pungent omega scent that surrounded him—the one that made me want to pick him up and run off in a dark corner somewhere to hide him from all other Alphas and growl over him. The one that made me want to leap off my horse, take him to the ground and have my way with him right there in front of everybody.

If it were possible for someone to smell like a color, he did. He was the succulent red of ripe strawberries, freshly picked off the vine in summer. And like a fresh berry, he carried that smell around with him, sun-bright and honey sweet.

Damn it, as impossible as it was, I had the deep suspicion that he could possibly be an omega, and if that were true, I didn't know how he could possibly have fooled all of us until now. I also didn't know how I was the only one who seemed to notice and how the hell any of the other Alphas could possibly have missed the way he smelled. I had to assume it was because it was fucking impossible, that was how.

It simply couldn't be. So if it were such an impossibility, why couldn't I get the idea out of my head?

He would have had to pass numerous physical examinations to become a soldier in the Imperial Army, and I had to assume he'd passed each one with flying colors. I'd checked his file and found nothing out of the ordinary. Each and every test had confirmed him to be a beta, and I had checked. None of the doctors noticed anything out of the ordinary about him. Everything, in fact, was perfectly normal for a young beta male. Yet somehow, here he was—and a big part of me was convinced he wasn't a beta at all.

If I was right, then he was somehow suppressing his heat cycle, and not just with pills. I was familiar with that method, but even between heats, an omega who was taking pills as heat suppressants still had active pheromones. Not enough to make Alphas go after them constantly. Or at least not necessarily, but we could still smell them and were always aware of their presence. In Darcy's case, I seemed to be the *only* Alpha who noticed, and the only Alpha of all the other officers who seemed to find him the least bit out of the ordinary. Oh, the others noticed his looks and admitted that he was extremely handsome and therefore tempting, but nothing else. I'd spoken to Brandon about it at length, and he told me I had to be imagining things. It just wasn't possible.

But I was very familiar with omegas, having lived with one of them for several months in close quarters—yet so had Brandon, for that matter. Rory had lived with us at Lex's lodge for a long while before he was arrested by the queen, so we knew about omegas.

Brandon said, however, that Darcy was simply a small and really good-looking beta—not all that unusual. He was nothing more or less, he said, and he'd noticed no strange odors around him. Why couldn't I believe him?

Rory, the omega who was the mate of my best friend and closest cousin, was a beautiful young man, an omega who was also unpredictable and magical. His magic had shown itself mostly in healing or in protecting himself or his loved ones. And he'd proven he was very powerful, indeed. Was it possible that Darcy had some magic of his own and was protecting himself with some kind of spell? If so, then why wasn't *I* under that spell? Why did I seem to be the only exception?

It didn't make sense. Rory was nothing at all like Darcy, and yet, there was something about Darcy that reminded me strongly of my cousin's omega. To an Alpha, omega slick was like catnip. It made us chase after the omega and compelled us to make him ours. To betas or other omegas, the odor was strong and musky and not altogether agreeable. And when an omega was in heat, the entire time their slick was pouring from their little asses, they had to pad their clothing to keep it from running down their legs. They craved being filled by the nearest Alpha's knot almost twenty-four hours a day. We had to make a nest for our omegas, somewhere soft and warm and dark where they felt safe. Then we had to spend all our time with them in that nest when their heats hit. Not that it was any kind of hardship to have sex and give them our knots, so we'd often be tied up with our omegas all day long. It was what most of us dreamed of.

But if a responsible Alpha didn't take charge of their omegas and give them his knot, they might literally allow themselves to be fucked to death by any and every Alpha they could find. They'd literally be in pain and had been known to roam the roads, begging for help.

It goes without saying that I would have noticed extreme symptoms like those if they'd been present. Besides, omegas weren't exactly the brightest stars in the sky. They needed someone to care

for them and the idea of an omega fending for himself all this time, joining the army and going to war? It was simply unthinkable. I had to be mistaken. I had to be. And yet... I couldn't convince myself that I was, and my feelings of lust for Darcy were growing worse every time I was near him.

Touching my horse's flanks with my spurs, I urged him back to the front of the column. He was my own horse, and I had brought him with me from home, as Brandon had brought his. Midnight was a beautiful animal, smart and spirited. I gave him the name because he was solid black, with the only patch of white on him a long, wide blaze that went down his nose.

We'd been marching alongside a stream for most of the day, as it wound its serpentine way through the countryside, but the main trail had veered slightly away from it, and it was now perhaps a half kilometer away. Midnight scented the water and I saw his ears perk up. It would soon be time to make camp for the night, so we needed to move off the main trail and back closer to the stream. It would provide the water the men and the horses needed. Besides, it would be safer to get off the busiest part of the road that led through the territory we were in now, so close to the border. The fast-running, deep stream at our backs would help prevent any raiders from sneaking up on us. I spoke to the captain, and he agreed, asking me to help him start the men toward it so we could make camp.

I made up my mind to find Darcy that evening and corner him. The march would be over soon, so I needed him to answer my questions. I intended to ask him some hard ones when I did. And I would get the answers, no matter what it took. Things simply couldn't keep on the way they were, and I'd make sure he knew that.

## Chapter Four

*Darcy*

It was late afternoon before the sergeants started us moving west, toward the setting sun and the stream we had followed for the better part of the day. The larger tents had all been taken by the time we reached the wagons, so Anders and I pitched what some called a “dog tent,” which was a practical, quick way to get at least some shelter from the heavy dew overnight. Each of us had been issued two blankets apiece, so we made the tents by using one of our blankets, which was about a meter and a half square and modified with a row of buttons and buttonholes on three sides. Two men, in this case Anders and I, pitched together by buttoning our blankets together and getting two sticks with a crotch at one end and one to go across at the top and then placing our “tent” cloth over it and pinning it down tight. To protect us from the damp ground, we put down another blanket for our “floor,” and we used the last one to cover us—a stout wool blanket kept the chill off. By that time, we had gotten to the point where we could put it up in under ten minutes and then fall down in it to sleep. It helped that we were pretty exhausted.

We’d stopped early, so when we finished putting together the tent, we went in search of food. We had been marching near the back of the regiment, so we’d been close to the food wagon. Yet men were already lined up waiting outside while the cooks got their fires going and hauled out the black pots where they sometimes made stews or big pots of beans, flavored with chunks of salt pork. Beans were in store for us that night, it seemed, along with hard bread we could dip in our bowls to soften up and plenty of hot coffee. It was plain fare, but welcome after the long day of marching. I ate a big bowl of beans and managed to get a little of the salt pork in my bowl.

When we’d first started out, I’d simply fallen in bed right after we ate, but as the days passed, I knew I couldn’t put off washing any longer. I had to visit the stream after I ate. The slick that seeped out of me was much reduced because of the witch’s spell, but it was still there, enough to dampen my underpants if I didn’t wear a rolled-up cloth pad. I’d brought what I thought would be plenty of those along with me, but I’d been too tired on those first days to wash them out and had thrown the last of them away because of the strong smell. I had no choice tonight but to bathe and try to wash out the ones I had left. I could at least rinse them in the stream and hope they’d be mostly dry by morning. I dug out my little towel, which was thin, but better than nothing, and my small bar of soap and headed

down to the stream.

When I reached it, I saw that the water was fast moving and looked deep in places, which I didn't like, because I'd never really learned to swim. I could dog paddle a bit, but I'd never been around much fast-running rivers or creeks—only the small ponds around my aunt and uncle's estate.

I found at least a dozen or more men had made it there before me, some collecting water in buckets. Others were splashing around in the stream or washing clothes like I needed to do, and a few were just soaking their tired feet after the long day's march. I didn't really want to undress in front of them. Even after the months I'd spent with the other men, with communal showering being the only option, I still had a lingering omega-like shyness around other men when I was naked. I sat down on the bank, pulled off my boots and dangled my feet in the icy water, like I saw some of the others doing, and it felt amazingly good. After a while, as the sun began to go down in the western sky, and the cool, nighttime breeze began to pick up, most of the soldiers began to drift back toward the tents and warm campfires. But I knew I had to brave the cold water soon despite the cooling temperatures and get back to my own fire before nightfall, or at least I wanted to, anyway. I'd been hearing the distant barks and howls of coyotes for a while now, as they prowled around the outskirts of camp, probably attracted by the smell of the cooked food.

When I knew I couldn't put it off any longer, I got to my feet, took off my shirt and began to ease off my trousers. It was then I heard a familiar voice call out to me. "Finally decide to get in the water, Vandercliff? I thought maybe you'd nodded off sitting there so long."

I whirled around, startled and clutching my pants to my chest. I was shocked to see Alpha Wyatt leaning against a nearby tree overlooking the stream. He looked worn out and dusty from the trail he'd been riding on all day. He needed a shave, and his dark hair was tousled as if he'd been running his hand through it. But he looked so bold and handsome there in the twilight, so much like a knight of old that he appeared like something out of a dream or a poem I read once about a lady who lived under a witch's curse. She looked out of her window one day and saw a man riding down from a nearby shining castle. As he rode toward her, through the "purple night, below the starry clusters bright," she fell in love with him because of the way he looked, citing his "broad clear brow" and his "coal-black curls."

That poem reminded me of Wyatt, although I seem to remember it didn't end well for the lady. I had a bad feeling that this encounter wouldn't end well for me tonight either.

I had no idea how long Wyatt had been standing there in the shadows of the big cypress. I hadn't noticed him before this, but he startled me so badly I took a quick step backward toward the stream, stumbling and almost falling in.

"Alpha Wyatt," I managed to say, my breath coming quick and fast. "You scared me. I didn't



know anyone was there.”

He just stared back at me, shrugged, and then he made a little go-ahead motion with his hand.

“Don’t let me stop you from your bath. It’s going to be dark soon. Harder to see the snakes then.”

“Snakes?” I glanced down at the dark water moving rapidly past me. “There are s-snakes in this water?”

“Probably.”

“What kind?”

He shrugged. “Queen snakes, water snakes, cotton mouths...take your pick.”

“Poisonous ones?”

“Some of them, yes.”

I took a quick couple of steps back from the water. “Maybe I’ll find a bucket and just dip some water up.”

“What’s the matter, Vandercliff? Scared?”

“Of snakes? Hell yes, I am.”

He chuckled and straightened up sauntering over toward me. “Want me to stand guard for you?”

I shook my head frantically, moving backward as he sauntered toward me, one thought running rampant through my head—*Who’s going to guard me from you?*

He smiled at me, coming right up on me then and looming over me. “Oh? You think you need protection from me?”

Oh, my gods, had I said those words out loud? “Huh? N-no! I’m sorry, sir. I don’t know why I said that. You just startled me, that’s all.”

“Yes, so you said. Why is that? I’ve simply come down to enjoy the evening air. Did you think I was here for you?”

“No. Of course not. No, I didn’t think that. I just misspoke before, that’s all.” I bent down to grab my boots, still holding my trousers in front of me like an outraged virgin. Which, come to think of it, was exactly what I was.

“I should probably just go.”

He stepped over in front of me, blocking my way. “I think you should stay a while, Vandercliff. I think we have things to discuss.”

“We do? W-what kind of things?”

“Like why you’ve been lying to me and the others for so long.” He sniffed at me. “Like how exactly you’re doing this. You’re going to explain it all to me, nice and slow.”

“D-doing what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I felt like I was about to faint. Did he lean closer to sniff me? Could he smell the slick, and did he

know what it meant? But how? He couldn't be implying that he knew I was an omega—could he? I panicked and turned to run like an idiot instead of facing him and trying to talk my way out of it. But he simply moved directly into my path again, blocking me.

“What's your hurry, boy? Didn't you hear me? I said I needed to talk to you.”

“But...I have to go. Please, sir. Please let me.”

“Go where?” he asked, stepping even closer to me, his voice sounding rougher and not quite angry, yet full of some emotion I couldn't quite identify.

“To my tent. I need to get some sleep. Let me go. *Please*.”

“Go on then, if it's so important to you. I'm not stopping you.”

I tried to look up at him then, but it was so dark underneath the canopy of trees I could barely see my hand in front of me, let alone the expression on his face. I took a step around him, and he suddenly grabbed my arm.

“Shh...” he said, tilting his head as if he heard something nearby. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what? No, what did you hear? Coyotes?” I stepped closer to him, right up against his side. If anything came out of those woods at us, especially coyotes, I wanted my big Alpha between me and whatever it was. Hopefully, it would get him first, giving me time to get away. It sounded mean, but I wasn't worried about Wyatt getting hurt—I'd be more worried about whatever was foolish enough to tangle with him. I was confident that Wyatt could handle anything the world threw at him.

The Alpha shook his head. “It was probably nothing.”

“Probably?” I glanced around nervously, peering into the thick underbrush. Night was falling fast, and it was by now almost completely dark. I shuddered as a cool night breeze swept across my bare chest and legs. “What did you hear?”

“Nothing. More than likely. Are you sure you won't stay and talk to me?”

I dropped my head. “Well, I-I really need to go and get some rest. I'm really tired. M-maybe you could walk back with me though? Just in case.”

“Why? Because you're scared?”

“Well, I...” A coyote with apparently perfect timing suddenly gave a long, undulating howl from not too far away. I yelped and looked around frantically. I couldn't see a thing, but I could hear the stream still gurgling and murmuring on the rocks.

We stood there quietly for the longest time—long enough for the fright I'd felt to fade away. I realized then that I was standing right up against the Alpha, with nothing but his clothing separating our chests, and his sweet, sugary scent surrounding me, had soothed and calmed me. I could still hear the stream chattering nervously against the rocks and could see how the water sparkled from the stars overhead.

With no towns or big cities anywhere close, and the moon hidden behind a cloud, the stars were putting on quite a show. I remember hearing once that ancient people used to think the starlight was actually the campfires of the gods. I glanced up and saw what my aunt had called the Milky Way, a hazy streak of distant stars in the night sky. It was so beautiful that I made a little sound of pleasure, as always slightly distracted and dazzled by sudden beauty when it happened right in front of me. I almost forgot our imminent danger from wild coyotes and poisonous reptiles for a moment—almost, but not quite. I leaned in closer to the Alpha, needing protection and seduced by the way he looked and smelled, as sweet as spun sugar. I raised my head to look at him, and he brushed his knuckles across my jaw. It made me shiver. Could touch be an emotion? Because I think I felt his touch in my soul.

“Watch out for that snake,” Wyatt said softly, pointing down at the ground, and I yelped and began climbing him like a tree.

“Snake?” I squealed—and it was impressive in a way, because I actually didn’t know my voice would go that high.

Alpha Wyatt, the ass, laughed and peeled me off him. “Calm down. I was only joking.”

I gave that betrayal the disbelieving look it truly deserved and reeled away from him. “How could you?”

“Calm down. I was only teasing. Why is it you can never take a joke?”

“I could, if I ever heard one. That wasn’t funny!”

“It was to me.”

“Ooh,” I cried out in frustration, glaring at him and stamping my foot. “Why are you always so mean?”

We were nose to nose by this time, or we would have been if Wyatt hadn’t been so much taller. He leaned down to get in my face and his breath was hot against my lips.

“I’m not mean.”

“Yes, you are,” I said, stamping my foot again. “You’re the meanest man I ever met.”

I think I must have been out of my mind, talking to him like that. I would never normally have had the nerve, but my pheromones were raging out of control suddenly, and I was filled with some kind of emotion I’d never felt before. All I could smell was the sugary sweetness that was Wyatt, and it made me aggressive. I bumped my chest against his as hard as I could, trying to provoke a response. Honestly, I was trying to arouse him, if I were being honest. I did it again—and then again.

“Go ahead. Fight me. I dare you,” I cried, totally out of my mind at that point, his pheromones making me crazy. “I can beat you with one hand tied behind my back. Go on. Hit me! Hit me!”

He didn’t respond to any of these ridiculous statements, thank the gods. He just stared down at

me, his eyes flashing a warning. My tongue darted out to wet my lips, because they were tingling. I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could, he grabbed me with a growl and bent me back over his arm to silence me by way of his tongue delving deep inside my mouth. A dizzying rush of pleasure shot through me. I clung to him, whimpering and moaning. I wanted him so badly, I could feel the excitement buzzing through my body, as I tried to get my leg up around his hips. I felt the lust haze settling over me like a veil—or like a shroud, because this would surely be the death of me.

Wyatt knocked the clothing I was holding out of my arms to the ground, took my ass in both of his hands and pulled my hips closer so I could cling to him and straddle his waist. It still wasn't close enough. I wanted him so badly. Only his trousers and the thin strip of my underwear separated me from the prize I sought. After rendering me breathless and so weak I had to cling to him after he finally raised his head, he leaned back and stared down at me, breathing hard. I saw that his eyes had changed. He didn't look like himself anymore. I realized with a jolt that I was practically naked from the waist down and pressed tightly up against his hard groin.

Oh yes, and I was humping him too and couldn't seem to stop.

"Damn you," he yelled down in my face. "I'm tired of this shit. I'm going to fuck you so hard and so slow right in this little ass that you'll beg me for mercy. I'm going to fuck you half to death and fill you with my knot."

"Go ahead and try! Do it! I dare you!" I shouted back at him, making no sense at all really, because of course he could do it if he wanted to. And I so wanted him to. I thrust my hips against him again and again and then once more for good measure. "Go ahead. I dare you! Do it!"

I was panting for breath and watching the big Alpha like the predator he was. His pheromones must have been firing off like crazy, because the air around us was full of his scent and his eyes were wild. I knew mine must be too.

My slick was flowing out of me and sliding down my legs by this time, defying the potion I'd taken that morning. He slipped a broad finger inside me and groaned. "I knew it—I knew you were an omega!" He began lavishing kisses on my face and my neck. "Damn you. Damn you," he said, over and over again.

His hand was busy at his waist, and I knew he was undoing his trousers and freeing his big cock. He had hiked me up against his groin, making me straddle him, and holding me there effortlessly with one hand. His huge dick was nudging and bumping my ass as he bent to kiss me again like he was ravenous for my mouth, like he couldn't get enough of me. Pulling away, he glared down at my face, and something had changed behind those glowing eyes of his. I thought it probably didn't bode well for me, but I clutched Wyatt's broad shoulders anyway, and wild horses couldn't have pulled me away. I rested my forehead against his after he kissed me, and he spoke to me in a low, rough, urgent

voice.

“I have to have you now. Do you understand that?”

“Yes,” was all I could manage, because despite the spell Barbarosa Lagoon had put on me, my pheromones were raging wildly inside me, and I was suddenly in full heat. I wanted him so much it was shocking, because it wasn’t supposed to happen like this. How was this even possible? The witch had said I’d be safe from having a heat cycle as long as I took my potion daily, without fail and I’d done that. So how could this be happening to me, because I was fully in heat? I was still grinding against him and clawing at him, like some mindless creature. I wanted him so much. I never wanted anything this much before in my life.

Then, as if Barbarosa were standing right beside me, her warning rang in my ears. *Only the one called the noble warrior has the power to save you, but he will also bring about your fate. He alone has the power to break my spell.*

The “noble warrior?” Could that be Wyatt? Was he the one who had broken Barbarosa’s spell? But how? Why?

I couldn’t think. I was too weak from wanting him inside me, my hole was still clenching and unclenching with need. I wanted him to fill me up, to make love to me until this dizzying lust inside me was satisfied. I could feel my slick flowing, and my come was leaking from me too, thick and heavy between us, and it all seemed to be making him crazy. It had already long since driven me out of my mind. His breathing was coming faster and faster, and he was looking around wildly, as if for a place to take me so he could have his way with me. I was in a full-blown lust haze, and oh my god, it was the worst possible time for this to happen. If the other Alphas here at camp found out—if they scented me somehow—then they’d line up to fuck me, taking turns until they killed me, and all with my full and enthusiastic approval.

I was totally on board with all the fucking, but mostly dizzy with lust for this one, beautiful Alpha. I wanted him so much I thought I’d die from it, and I humped him over and over, saying, “Please, please, please...” until I was more out of control than I had ever been before.

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*Wyatt*

Some small shred of sanity in my mind kept me from taking him right there and then, no matter what I’d said. Because I knew that once I started with him, I’d tie up with him and we wouldn’t be able to be parted from each other for hours. Then there was the danger of the other Alphas who were

in camp—once they scented him, they'd come pouring out of camp looking for him, and we were both incredibly lucky that this had happened outside by the river, with a stiff breeze blowing away from the tents. I had an inner imperative to keep him safe, but I wasn't sure how to go about doing that.

The sweet smell of luscious strawberries filled the air around him, and I couldn't even breathe properly. I wanted him like nothing and no one I'd ever wanted before, so much so that I actually felt dizzy for a moment.

The strongest, most primal urge I'd ever experienced came over me, exhorting me to throw him to the ground, fuck him, and knot him until we were both too exhausted to keep on, and then carry him off somewhere to lick him all over for a while until he woke up and I could start the cycle all over again. I was still rational enough to know that was unusual. I'd been attracted to plenty of omegas before, and even to Rory, who was beautiful and sweet. But the way I was feeling just wasn't normal for any Alphas I knew, including me. I'd only seen that kind of behavior once before, with Lex and Rory, who were true mates.

And I was suddenly rocked by the thought.

I heard the words in my head again...that kind of behavior usually happened only with true mates. I pushed the thought away from me almost as soon as I was aware of it. I couldn't even think about such craziness right now, because there was no time for this. Any minute now, someone would come looking for one or the other of us, and then I didn't know what we'd do.

I put him down on his feet and pushed him forcibly away from me—the hardest thing I'd ever had to do—holding onto his shoulders to keep him at arm's length. He whimpered and cried and tried to get back closer to me, and I had to hold him off, which almost killed me. I peered down into his face and made him look me in the eye while I spoke urgently to him.

“Darcy, listen to me. Tell me what you've been doing to hide the fact that you're an omega. It was magic of some kind, wasn't it? Tell me the spell you're using. Do it now.”

I had to repeat myself a few times to get his attention, and it finally took dragging him over to the stream and threatening to throw him in it to get him to pay attention to my words and stop trying to climb all over me. He stumbled during our struggle and fell to the ground, so I knelt down beside him on the bank where he'd fallen, helped him sit up and shook him a little to calm him down. I wished I had someone to shake me too, because I was having trouble thinking straight with my hands on him like that.

“Darcy! Baby, listen to me. What kind of spell were you using to stop your heat?”

He shook his head, wrinkling up his forehead. “No spell. A potion.” He looked up directly at me, his eyes wide. He was so happy to be able to give me an answer. “The witch—she gave me a potion. Just a drop or two every day, she told me.”

“Where’s this potion now?”

He tried to twine his arms around my neck and pull me in for a kiss instead of answering, but I managed to hold him off without being too rough with him and just kept saying the words over and over again.

“The potion, Darcy. Where is it? Is it in your tent?”

“My tent, yes. Yes. In my pack.”

He tried to kiss me again, and this time I couldn’t resist. I gave him a brief, hard kiss and held it longer than I’d intended to, but he felt so good in my arms that I couldn’t let him go.

This was definitely the mate-scent I was smelling in his pheromones, and it was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. I ached for this sweet boy; I craved him. I wouldn’t be able to rest until I claimed him. I felt humbled that the gods had brought this rare creature to me. This was my mate, and I would give my life to keep him safe and beside me.

There were rumors about true mates. It was said that it was a rare and special mark of the gods’ favor if and when you met yours, but it also could be a curse. A man who found his true mate would never be truly happy with anyone else, and if the mate left or died, the Alpha couldn’t go on without him. On the other hand, an Alpha was more likely to get his true mate pregnant than anyone else too.

I heard someone walking toward us from the trail, and I jumped to my feet, putting him behind me and holding him there with one hand. I heard Brandon calling my name.

“Wyatt? Wyatt, is that you by the stream? I need to tell you something.”

As much as I loved my cousin, and despite our tight bond, I crouched down, ready to attack him if need be to protect my omega. A loud growl escaped my throat, and I saw Brandon falter to a stop, peering into the gloom by the stream.

“Wyatt?” he asked, sounding wary. “Is that you? What’s the matter?”

The wind must have shifted then, because I heard him gasp and he took a couple of quick steps toward us. “What is that? Who do you have there with you?”

“Stay back!” I snarled, sounding almost bestial. “This omega is mine.”

Our bond was so close, I could feel him hesitating, but he was becoming overwhelmed by Darcy’s strong scent, because he took another step toward us.

“Stay back,” I growled again, even louder, and finally, I saw him cover his mouth and nose with his hand and turn away. After a long moment, with both of us panting for breath, the wind shifted again, and he was finally able to talk to me again.

I hated feeling this way toward Brandon—he was my pack mate and up to this point in my life he and the others in my pack—Lex and Asher—were my closest friends. They were more like brothers to me, and I hated feeling any kind of resentment and jealousy. I knew I had to calm down.

“Wyatt, what is this? Who do you have there?”

“It’s Vandercliff. Go to his tent and get his pack. Quickly, Brandon. Bring it here to me.”

He nodded and choking a little, he left. I heard him stumble away down the trail. While he was gone, I splashed down in the water, pulled Darcy over to the edge of the bank and laid him on his back. He fought me, trying to get up and climb over me again, but I held him down and scooped up some cold water from the stream. His omega secretions were seeping from him, and they were so potent they made me dizzy with lust. I closed my eyes, fighting the urge to ravish him. The smell was powerful, and he was all slicked up and ready for me. His hole was like a succulent, round, ripe strawberry, and all for me. Determined and trying desperately to ignore it, I held him down and washed him with water from the stream, splashing it over him again and again.

He squealed as the cold water cascaded over him and tried to get away, but I had to clean him up before Brandon returned. He cried out though and begged me to help him—like I wasn’t the one doing it to him. Anyway, I had to bend over and soothe him with kisses. That’s when I stopped thinking and just reacted to his luscious lips, as well as the delicious scent that was pouring off him. The omega lust struck me like a hammer blow, driving me to my knees in the water. His little hole was almost unbearably hot and wet against my hand. I bent to lick it and suck it, and he began opening up for me in the way of all omegas to accommodate my knot. But I was able to claw back a few shreds of my sanity, and I was grateful for the cold, rushing water, which saved us both. I still had to wash him all over again. When I was through, I allowed him to sit up and got up on the bank beside him to pull him into my lap so he wouldn’t catch cold.

I tried to talk to him and soothe him, but he had already reached that mindless stage omegas fall into during a heat lust, when nothing much helps. I heard Brandon running back along the path and stood up to greet him, a bit less feral now than I’d been before my dunking in the icy water.

“Did you find his pack?” I asked as he skidded to a stop beside me.

“Yes. I think so. Anders said this was it. He was full of questions though.”

“I know—and I’m sorry. Just look through it and see if you see anything that looks like a potion. Maybe a medicine bottle of some kind.”

He dug around a few moments and then held up a small bottle. “Like this?”

“Maybe. Toss it to me.”

He tossed it over and I looked for instructions on the bottle but couldn’t find any. I gave Darcy a quick, hard kiss and shook him a little to clear his head. “How much do you take?”

I had to ask him several times before he finally replied. He rubbed a hand over his face and whimpered a little because it was hard to think, but he managed. “Just a drop or two, the witch said.”

I didn’t have any droppers and couldn’t find one in his pack, so I put a little on the tip of my



finger and rubbed it across his mouth. He opened up for it and I saw his pretty, pink tongue sweep across his bottom lip. It was all I could do not to take that tongue in my mouth, but I managed to control myself.

“Will this work?” I asked him after a few moments. “Will this get you out of heat?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head and looking scared. “I usually take it in the mornings, and it prevents anything from happening in the first place. This has never happened before.” He put his hand over his mouth; and I heard a little sob escape. “Don’t be mad at me,” he said.

I just pulled him in my arms, shaking my head. “No, I’m not angry.”

That was a lie, because I was, to be honest—angry at the fact he put himself at such risk and the fact he was taking this vile potion that he didn’t seem to know much about at all. Who knew what it could be doing to him? But I wouldn’t upset him now, when he was already feeling so low.

“Just sit here quietly and let me step away and calm down for a minute. I need to talk to Brandon, and I need to think. Is that all right?”

He nodded and buried his face in his hands while I got to my feet on shaky legs.

“Hey,” I said, touching his shoulder. “Stop worrying. I’ll take care of this.”

He looked up at me with those big, beautiful eyes and slowly nodded.

“Brandon, give me your shirt. He’ll freeze as cold as it is and mine is soaked.”

My cousin took off his shirt and I draped it over Darcy to keep him warm. Then I had to force myself to turn away.

I turned to Brandon. “Thanks for the shirt and for getting his pack for me.”

“Wyatt, what the hell is this all about? Vandercliff is an omega? How is that even possible?”

He was talking softly, but sound can carry long distances at night, so I held a finger up to my lips and nodded. “Lower your voice. Listen...it’s a long story,” I said. “I’ll tell you everything I know, and that’s not much. But first, I have to try to fix this. Get him back to the way he was. I’m just not sure how to do that. If this doesn’t work, then I’m out of ideas. I’ll just have to take him and run.”

“He’d be hard to smuggle out of here, and then what would you do with him?” He shook his head. “No, you should tell the captain. Let him handle things. Take yourself out of the equation.”

“No,” I snarled. Then at the look on my cousin’s face, I relented. “I’m sorry,” I ran a hand through my hair, feeling a little desperate. “He’s mine to take care of, Brandon. Nobody else’s. You know I’ve had my suspicions for a while now. I told you.”

He nodded. “And I didn’t believe you. I should have.”

“I talked myself out of believing it, too, because I never knew any kind of magic potion could change an omega so completely like that. But I’ve been more and more suspicious as time went on and tonight, finally, I decided to just confront him. I found him washing himself by the stream. And

then one thing led to another.”

“I see. Did you...?”

“No, but I came damn close. I didn’t expect this, but I think—I think he must be my mate. Why else did I feel like this about him, even before I knew what he was for sure? It took us both by surprise when he went into full heat when I kissed him. Until now, I was the only one who could tell what he really was. I could scent him a little even when he was taking the potion every day.”

“And that’s why you wanted his pack? To try using this potion on him again to stop his heat?”

“Yes, but I don’t know if it will work. I don’t know much of anything for sure. But it’s worth a try. I’m sorry to drag you into this, but I didn’t expect any of this either.”

“Well, what did you expect, Wyatt?”

“I expected him to admit what he was and then I could take him to the captain and get him out of camp. But the second I kissed him, I knew he was my mate.”

“What in the hell are you going to do with him now? Especially if you can’t stop the heat. There isn’t anywhere nearby that you can take him. Not even any inns along the way.”

“I guess I’ll cross that bridge if I come to it. I have to take him back to Morovia, I guess.”

“No. If this potion does work, then you have to send him back to his tent. Make sure he keeps taking the potion and then in a few days, when this is over and we all get back to the fort, you can make some excuse to get him out of there. But you have to stay away from him until we get back off this patrol. Surely you realize that. Once you start with him, you’ll be out of control for a while.”

“I know. All right, I’ll try. That doesn’t mean I can do it. If the potion works—well, you’ll be able to tell more about that than I can. He always smells like an omega to me. He has from the beginning, but I kept telling myself I had to be imagining things.”

Brandon turned toward where Darcy was still sitting by the stream and sniffed the air. When it appeared that nothing happened, he called softly to him. “Vandercliff, can you come over here, please?”

I growled and made a move to get between them, but Brandon grabbed my arm. “Let me try this. I think the potion may have worked.”

I jerked my arm away, unhappy about it, but I nodded. “All right. But if you get carried away, I’ll stop you, Brandon, cousin or no cousin.”

He grinned at me. “Duly noted.”

I turned back to my omega. “Darcy. It’s okay. You can come over here now.”

He got up to run toward us, and I held up a hand to stop him as all my instincts came roaring back. I wanted to scoop him up and take him somewhere to ravish him.

“Slowly, Darcy. Please.”

He stopped and nodded, looking at me so fearfully, with such wide eyes that I had to take a deep breath and then go over to him and take his hand in mine. “It’s okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell. Just-just walk over to Alpha Brandon nice and slow, okay?”

He nodded and began moving toward Brandon again, but I guess the potion really must have been magic, because this time, it seemed to be working. On Brandon, anyway. He didn’t react in any particular way as Darcy came over to us, only stepping closer to him and sniffing all around him. Then he looked at me and smiled. “Smells like just another beta to me. I guess it worked.”

Relieved, I clapped him on the back. I turned to Darcy again and held him by both shoulders so I could look into his eyes, “It seems to work on other Alphas, but just not on me.”

“I don’t know what to say. The witch who gave it to me said I had to beware of the noble warrior, because he would bring about my fate. I guess she was talking about you.”

“Maybe she was, but I’d never hurt you, Darcy. For now, I’ll protect your secret until we can figure out what to do. Get some clothes out of your pack and get dressed. We’re going to walk you to your tent, and you crawl in and go to sleep. You must be tired. Anders will have questions for you, but just make some excuse. Say that I was giving you a hard time, and that I sent Alpha Brandon to get your pack just to scare you into thinking I was sending you home. Say anything. But do everything else as you normally would, and I’ll figure something out and come talk to you later. Understand?”

“Yes.”

I took his arm once he was dressed, and he’d given Brandon back his shirt. The three of us walked back into camp. We had a few interested looks, but most of the men in this part of the group knew we were trainers, and we had a reputation for being hard on the soldiers. They must have thought we caught Darcy doing something he shouldn’t have been doing. I took him over to his tent and leaned down to speak softly in his ear. I was already having a hard time letting him go.

“Act normal. Don’t talk about this with anyone, and I’ll find you tomorrow.”

He nodded and I let him duck inside the tent and lay down on his blanket, but I couldn’t seem to make my feet start moving away until Brandon touched my arm. “Come on, we should go. I came to find you to tell you something important.”

“Tell me what?”

“Asher’s here, with a message from Harrison. He arrived about thirty minutes ago and wants to talk to both of us.”

## Chapter Five

*Wyatt*

Though I felt torn about leaving Darcy unguarded in his tent, I consoled myself with the idea that no one would bother him until morning, and I'd be back by then. As curious as I was about why our cousin and pack brother Asher was here, I still felt uneasy leaving my omega. I was still irritated and angry at Darcy for putting himself in this ridiculous situation in the first place. I was aware of the irony, in that if he hadn't come to join the king's army, I would never have met him, but rational thought often took a big step back when it came to an Alpha's interactions with his omega. My fate was now irrevocably tied to his. His happiness and well-being depended on me. I didn't have to like it to know it was true.

I was surprised by Asher's presence here. He had refused to allow himself to be talked into training the betas, and he had stayed behind at the lodge. Why was he here now? I followed Brandon to a tent that had just been put up near the edge of the encampment. It was small, but still much nicer than just the dog tent setup we'd just left Darcy in. Asher was sitting outside by a small campfire, drinking coffee as we arrived. He rose to greet us.

"Good to see you," I told him, giving him a brief shoulder bump. He wrinkled his nose a little as he pulled away, so I knew I must still reek of my omega. So much for not mentioning anything to him about Darcy yet.

"What is that?" he asked, his eyes glowing a little too much for my liking. "Why do you smell like an omega?"

"It's a long story, but everything's under control for now, so he's not anything for you to worry about."

He grinned at me. "In other words, back the hell off, huh? All right, I won't get in your way, though I want a full report later. Sit down and I'll tell you my news, and then you're going to tell me how you managed to find an omega out here in the middle of nowhere."

"We'll see about that," I muttered, and he laughed again good-naturedly.

"Tell us why you're here, Asher," Brandon said, squatting down beside the fire. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, or at least there might be. I got a message from Harrison that the Vicountess

has been spotted at the baron's castle. Baron Dargan, the one from Lameda."

"You mean the Viscountess Rozamond is up in arms about. Her relative that went missing on the way to a mysterious bridegroom."

"Yes," Asher said, his face grim. "Harrison asked to see me urgently and when I arrived at his court, he told me all about it."

"Tell it to us, then. I only know the gist of it."

"Over six months ago this young Viscountess Camilla was set to marry a baron named Dargan. He has a wealthy estate in Crillia, and he was shopping for a foreign wife, because he said all the Crillian females were all disobedient and cared only for parties and fashion. He wanted a noblewoman, but one who would be biddable and do just as she was told."

"Why not get himself an omega?"

"He's not an Alpha, though he often tries to act like one, and most omegas will only mate with an Alpha. Anyway, he courted this viscountess and sent a huge bride price for her to marry him. But she suddenly went missing before she ever arrived—or so he said. He claimed she never got near his estate, yet no trace of her could be found along the way. Her father sent some of his footmen with orders to find out what had happened to her and to either bring her home or bring back answers from this baron. But a sudden storm came up as they journeyed up the mountain road. In a terrible accident, the men and horses were swept away and fell to their deaths from the cliffsides."

"Good Lord."

Asher nodded. "I know. There was only one survivor, who told a story of a torrent of mud sweeping down the road toward them, washing the ground out from under their feet. The survivor was found clinging to outcroppings on the cliffside, and he was rescued by the villagers below. They all said the storm came out of nowhere—black clouds suddenly roiling up out of a clear, blue sky. One minute, they said, the sun was shining and the next, they were in the middle of a terrible storm of wind and rain lashing against them. The lone survivor swore he saw a big, dark figure on a black horse that appeared on the cliffside and looked down at them, as the mud flowed over the side of the cliff, parting when it reached the horse and its rider. Some discounted the story and attributed it to the man's head injuries, but others weren't as sure.

"As for this Baron Dargan, he maintained in his letters that the viscountess had never arrived, and he'd seen nothing of the footmen her father had sent to search for her. The storm, he said, was an act of nature that he had no control over."

Asher looked at both of us in turn. "I think we can agree this is way beyond coincidence. This Dargan decides he wants a wife and then the young woman sent to marry him goes mysteriously missing, and those sent after her are killed. What the hell do you think could be going on?"

“Nothing good, that’s for sure,” I said. “What does Harrison want you to do?”

“He suspects something really terrible has happened to her. He asked if we would investigate this Viscountess Camilla’s disappearance. He’s offered a large reward to pay for our time and effort.”

“All right, I’m in,” I said. “This training exercise will be over soon, and then my omega can go back to our lodge while we investigate this.”

“Wait. You’re that serious about this omega?” Asher asked.

“Yes, I’m serious. I don’t seem to have any choice. Now can we please change the subject?”

“Not a chance,” Asher said, laughing softly. “I want to hear all about him. What the hell is an omega doing out here anyway?”

“He was using magic to disguise himself as a beta,” Brandon said. “Tell him, Wyatt.”

I shot Brandon a dirty look, but we spent the rest of the evening talking, and I told Asher how I’d met Darcy and about my suspicions, though no other Alphas noticed anything. Brandon and I stayed late, switching over to wine with Asher after a while as I explained my story of confronting Darcy. He listened carefully and then, like Brandon, Asher urged me to be cautious and not jump into anything. I respected his opinion, and I listened to what he had to say, but I knew it was already too late for any second thoughts. I was feeling too connected to Darcy to leave him and never see him again. It was too soon to say love, but I definitely felt strongly possessive of him. I felt an urgent need to take care of him. In the end, they both agreed that we could take him back to our lodge before we went looking for the viscountess.

The sentries stopped us on the way back to our tent later, but they had been slow to challenge us, and I could tell they’d been half asleep. We sternly lectured them for a few minutes before going on to our tent. I hoped the lecture we’d given them would do some good, but I didn’t have much confidence it would. As I’d told Asher earlier that evening, betas made good clerks, but not good soldiers.

The camp was dark and quiet, with only a few campfires still blazing, though most of them were only glowing coals in the darkness by this time of night. I couldn’t resist going by to check on Darcy before I turned in. I could smell him from where I stood outside the little “tent” he and his friend Anders had erected. I still couldn’t understand how I was the only one affected by his scent, because it was so patently obvious to me. I stood for a moment listening to Anders’ soft snores before peeking in, and I saw Darcy’s slim form under the blanket on the right, his golden curls the only brightness there in the gloom inside the tent.

Feeling vaguely unsatisfied and irritable, I turned away and went back to my own side of camp and the larger tent we had put up earlier that afternoon. I didn’t like the idea of being parted from him, and when exactly had that happened?

I went inside our tent and got ready to crawl in my own bed. Brandon was already wrapped in

his bedroll and asleep, which made me wonder just how long I'd stood outside that dog tent, considering whether or not I should just snatch Darcy up and take him with me. It was better for him if no one suspected what he was as yet, however, so I knew the right thing to do was to let him finish this training mission and then I'd take him to my lodge. It was for the best, and I knew that, though every step away from him and back to my own tent without him was literally painful.

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*Darcy*

Morning, as I couldn't fail to notice, always came exceedingly early in camp, and this one was no exception. Anders and I woke up with the reveille bugle call around seven. I rolled out of my blanket, feeling stiff and with a sore back from sleeping on the ground. I had a headache too and felt almost like I'd had too much to drink. It was getting colder, and that didn't help any either. In fact, I sat up in the little dog tent that managed to be both stifling and cold at the same time for a while, just cataloging all my complaints. Anders sat up yawning and knocked an elbow into my face, which didn't help a bit.

"Morning," he mumbled, scratching his chest. "Was that bugle call?"

I replied with a grunt and crawled out of the blankets with my clothes, shivering in the chill air outside as I pulled them on.

I needed to go down to the stream to wash while Anders was having his breakfast. I couldn't afford to skip that again, no matter what, and I'd promised Wyatt. As I crawled out of my tent, I almost expected to see the big Alpha somewhere around, but there was no sign of him. Memories of the night before came crowding back, but only in bits and pieces and still, my face got heated with remembering the things he'd done to me—and how I'd reacted to them. I was mortified by the way I'd acted. I didn't understand why Wyatt seemed to be the only one who noticed me or who was affected by me. Again, Barbarosa's words about "the noble warrior" being the one to bring about my fate came back to dance around me as I made my way to the stream. Was Wyatt the one she'd prophesied about? The one with the power to break her spell and bring on my cycle? He'd certainly found me out and put me in heat without even breaking a sweat.

What would happen to me if he did it again? And again, and again every time I saw him? There was no way I could stay here at camp now. But where would I go and what would I do? It was a scary idea and not one I wanted to think about, so I concentrated instead on bathing myself. One calamity at a time, thank you very much.

I dipped my damp towel in the icy water and wrung it out some, and then I slipped behind some trees to take off my shirt and pants and clean up. It wasn't as good as a real bath, but there wasn't enough time for that and too many people were around. So, after scrubbing myself as well as I could, I found the food wagon and got myself a mug of black coffee, some bread and some delicious, sliced bacon that had been fried up in a pan over the fire. Maybe it wasn't so much good tasting as the fact that I was starving, but anyway, it tasted good enough to me and filled me up.

After breakfast, I took some of my potion and then put it back in my pack. I hadn't brought much with me, having left the bigger bottle inside my locker at the fort. I wouldn't need it before we got back.

Anders was stuffing some padding into his boots when I returned, and he glanced up at me. "Word is that another Alpha arrived last night to see Alpha Brandon and Alpha Wyatt. Maybe he's come with a message for them from the king. Maybe we're about to start fighting the Crillians soon."

I hoped not. I had, of course, dreamed of battles for a long time now—of loud, uncertain and bloody fights with the enemy—but that was when I'd first come to be in the Imperial Army and had still been fired up with excitement. Back then, I'd imagined vast scenes of battle over some glorious cause, with flags flying in the air and rifle fire being exchanged on both sides. I had imagined many times how I'd act and feel and what I'd do.

In dreams, I'd seen myself in violent struggles, protecting the men around me and encouraging those who were afraid with my own fierce example of bravery. But then I'd learned that the "glorious causes" usually fought weren't really glorious at all, but just some squabble or other between kings. Not that they weren't necessarily important, but were they really enough for men to die for? The royals certainly thought so, but I wasn't so sure anymore.

I'd been secretly afraid for a while now that the time of bloody battles, glorious causes and brave deeds were all in the past, reduced to mere lines of bloody history written on the pages of old books gathering dust in the library. Maybe the old stories had never even been true at all.

The grim reality seemed to be crushing boredom and sore muscles from constant training exercises and getting up way too early and doing all kinds of boring work, like cleaning latrines and mopping floors. All of that had trampled on my old dreams over time and insidiously managed to discourage me. I began to long for home. I wanted to talk to my aunt and go on long rambling walks in the twilight and sit on the grass to look up at the constellations.

If I were home, though, I wouldn't see Wyatt, and that wouldn't do at all.

How had he come to mean so much to me so quickly? I'd always thought he was gorgeous, but this overwhelming attraction was new. Well, maybe not new—I'd just never before entertained the possibility. He was a nobleman, cousin to kings and a Duke in his own right, through his family. And



he was an Alpha, one of the strongest I'd ever seen. What on earth could he possibly see in me?

The answer was nothing—nothing outside of lust. And once that had been assuaged, what then? As my aunt had always warned me, Alphas couldn't be trusted. They'd use up any omega they came across and then throw them away when they were finished with them.

Disconsolate, I made my way back to my campfire and saw that there was movement all around the camp as we got ready to march out for the day. Officers rode past at a gallop, always seeming to be in a hurry. Soon the sergeants would be yelling at us to get in line and begin our day's march.

Only—I hadn't seen Wyatt yet, and I needed to talk to him about what had happened at the stream the night before and about what he'd said and done. What was he going to do now that he knew about me? Was he planning on telling everyone what I really was, making it necessary for me to leave? I had tried to think about the things he'd said to me, but it was only now that my full memories of what happened were coming back. Wyatt knew now what I was—an omega. And I couldn't see him turning a blind eye to that. Not in a million years. He was far too stern and serious, not to mention being an officer. Even though as an Alpha, he'd been affected by the pheromones in my scent, as I had been, he had maintained enough composure not to throw me to the ground and give me his knot. He had made me take the potion so that no other Alphas would scent me, and he'd said...he'd said—damn it, I couldn't remember exactly what he'd said. All I remembered was his hands on me and him kissing me.

I actually got a little weak in the knees as those memories came back. I thought he told me I belonged to him, but that must have only been the heat lust talking. The idea of belonging to Alpha Wyatt was too good to be true, and I must have misunderstood him. He was so far above me in rank and station. I was nobody compared to him. Plus, it was hard for me to fathom such a thing, because up until now, I thought he hated me. I knew I got on his nerves. So why would he want me, of all people? It had to be the lust he'd experienced when I'd suddenly gone into heat, and that was purely a biological thing.

I remembered my aunt's warnings about what would happen if an Alpha decided he wanted me. "If you come across some Alpha, he might decide he wants to keep you. That's what happened to your poor mother. That man she married—your so-called father—saw her at the market and followed her home to ask our father for her hand in marriage. Then he forced babies on her that quickly died. One after another until she was used up. Until it killed her as surely as if he put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger. Yours was far from her first pregnancy, you know. There were six before you, and she lost every one of them. The doctor said pregnancy and giving birth was too dangerous for her, and indeed, you were the only child who lived. But your father ignored what the doctor said."

I remember looking up at her in horror. "And you think the same thing will happen to me?"

“It could. I don’t know, but do you really want to take that chance?”

Hell no, I didn’t.

Anders came up behind me then, clapping me on the back and startling me from my memories.

“We’re getting ready to march. What are you daydreaming about?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking.”

“Well, come on and get in line. We’re getting ready to go.”

I fell in beside my friend, my eyes searching around for any sign of Wyatt, but I didn’t see him anywhere. Officers and other Alphas were around, of course, riding along the line, shouting orders and exhorting the soldiers to “straighten up those lines,” and “stop dragging your feet!” But there was no sign of Wyatt or Brandon.

As we marched, the chill of the morning passed reluctantly away as the sun rose higher. I saw Wyatt, sitting astride his big horse off to the side of the columns and talking to two other large men, one of whom was Brandon, though I didn’t recognize the other one. He was an Alpha from his size and very handsome like Brandon and Wyatt. Brandon pointed at me, our line of soldiers advancing toward them, and they all turned to look. I saw Wyatt pull on his horse’s reins to turn him and then head quickly toward me.

After a few moments he reached me and beckoned to me to break out of line and go over to him. I did so, and when I got closer, he nodded at me. “We need to talk. I’ve told your sergeant and he’s fine with it. Come and get on my horse, and we’ll go ahead a little and wait for the others to catch up. That’ll give us time to talk.”

Talk, huh? Why did I think there’d be more to it than that? As soon as I came closer, Wyatt leaned down and held out a hand and when I took it, he pulled me up in front of him, right on top of the huge horse as if I weighed nothing at all. The big, black horse glanced back at me and showed me the whites of its eyes. It snorted and pawed the ground, but Wyatt paid it no mind. He pulled me back in his lap, so my back was to his chest and turned his horse to ride away.

“Settle down, Midnight,” he said to the horse. “And you sit still and don’t fidget,” he instructed me. “You’re making him nervous.”

“Oh, I’m making *him* nervous,” I muttered and heard him chuckle behind me.

I knew that every man in the line’s eyes were on me. I tried to sit up straighter, so I wasn’t leaning on him so, but he pulled me back against him and held me there. I couldn’t look at any of them, but kept my eyes on the horizon, and I could only imagine the look on Anders’ face. I would have liked to be able to tell him what was going on, but it would have to wait.

We rode to the front of the long column and then just kept going, heading up the road toward the Daluri hills, the border between our land and the Crillians. We’d gone a couple of miles at least,

when we came to a small bunch of trees sitting off the road a good way. Wyatt turned his horse and rode over into the shade.

We had curved around toward the stream again, and I could hear it crashing over the rocks from not too far away.

He swung a leg over his saddle and jumped down, still holding onto me, and swinging me up in his arms as we landed. It was a casual display of strength that was common with Alphas. He set me back on my feet and looked down at me.

“Did you miss me?”

I think the blush that followed that remark came all the way from my toes. The unmitigated arrogance of it made me raise my eyebrows and stare at him. He responded with a quick grin, and he put a hand around the back of my neck and pulled me in for a kiss. It wasn't quick, like I thought it might be. In fact, he took his time with it and put his hands on my ass to pick me up and carry me effortlessly around to the backside of a huge, wide oak tree, where we'd be more or less hidden from anyone passing by. He held me up against it and pressed his body against mine.

“Gods,” he moaned into my ear. “I've been wanting to kiss you like this since last night. You took your potion this morning, didn't you?”

“Yes,” I replied, a bit sullenly, I admit.

“Good boy, but I could still smell you across the whole camp. Didn't you wash?”

“Yes, I most certainly did,” I snapped, and this time my tone was definitely not nice. Who did he think he was to ask me such personal questions?

I gasped as he suddenly yanked my pack off my back to put it down beside me, and then he pulled down my pants and pushed them to my ankles. “Let me see,” he said, trying to turn me around.

I tried to hit him, but he caught my hand and twisted it behind me. Laughing at me, he went for my mouth again, mangling his lips against mine and sweeping his tongue possessively inside my mouth. He didn't pull back until I was almost out of air and getting weak. As before, his kisses were rapidly tearing up my pheromones and bringing on my heat, so that I clung helplessly to his shoulders and moaned as I felt the slick begin seeping from me again. He turned me around to face the tree and began whispering in my ear, his hot breath sending shivers down my spine.

“Now this is how we're going to do this. You're going to bend over and spread those legs wide for me. You're going to hold your little ass open, and I'm going to put my fingers in there and you're going to ride them for a while. Then when you're nice and ready for me, I'm fucking you right here,” he paused to illustrate by tapping with a well-placed finger. “Until you scream. I've waited long enough.” He bent me over, rubbing his fingers against my hole, and he was wrong about the screaming. It had already started.

He laughed softly and put one big hand over my mouth to stifle my shouts and moans of pleasure, and then he patted my ass and pushed lightly down on my back again so that I would do exactly what he'd told me to do and hold myself apart for him. I was pretty far gone already, so I did whatever he asked.

Wyatt gently pushed two fingers into my thoroughly slicked hole. He plundered around, stretching and playing with me while my eyes rolled back in my head, and I pushed back against him shamelessly. The big fingers swept over my prostate and my knees sagged in total surrender as I could feel my eyes roll back in my head. I began begging him at this point, just wordless sounds, but it got the point across. I wanted him inside me—as fast as possible.

“Yeah, you like that, don't you?” he whispered to me, and I loved the dirty talk too. It was all making my pheromones go wild. “Fuck yourself on my fingers, baby. That's right. Come on. A little harder now.”

Wyatt seemed a bit out of control, but I was so far gone, I wasn't exactly a good judge. I did exactly as he told me to do, and I moaned and whimpered and strained so much I should have been embarrassed by it, but I was too far gone for that. I couldn't get enough. He had three fingers inside me now and I wanted more. I wanted his knot, and I would have done anything to get it. Wyatt drove me wild for another few minutes and then pulled his fingers out and kissed my hole with the wet tip of his big cock. He nudged it a little harder. “Feel that, baby? Tell me if you want it?”

“Oh, gods, Wyatt. Yes. Please.”

“Please what? Tell me what you want.”

“You. Now,” I told him, panting and reduced to words of one syllable.

Wyatt rammed his cock home, again and again, fucking my ass with everything he had and holding nothing back. Nothing except his knot, which he wouldn't give me, no matter how hard I begged for it.

“Oh, more please, harder,” I cried out against his hand that he still held over my mouth,

“Shhh...you'll have the whole regiment hearing you.”

“Wyatt! Wyatt, please!” I heard my muffled screams, but Wyatt paid me no heed. He bent over me and bit my neck and sucked up a mark. I swooned for a moment, and when I came to Wyatt was still pumping me, insatiable, wild.

“Please what, baby?”

“More—please, Wyatt! I need your knot.”

“I can't give it to you, sweetheart. We'll be tied up if I do, and I can't do that now. This will have to do you until I can get you back to my home.”

He sucked hard at my neck while he slowly, rhythmically fucked me into oblivion and just when I thought I might die from it, Wyatt came, his cock spurting one jet of come after another inside me.

After what seemed like a long time, he pulled away, turned me around and knelt by my feet. He took me in his hand and at the first touch of his hot, hard tongue, I had a full body shudder, came like a geyser, and I spurted all over both of us.

“That’s it, baby, you come for me. You take what I give you and then you ask me for more.”

“Oh, Wyatt,” I sighed, turning in his arms and wilting against him, hanging onto his shoulders like a lifeline. I felt wrecked and still my hips were thrusting at him. I was already ready for more. My cock probably needed recovery time, but it was still asking for another round. I pushed my groin against him and wanted him to take me in his mouth again.

“No, baby,” he said, getting back up to his feet and straightening his clothes. “It’s enough for now. Pull yourself together,” he said, handing me his handkerchief. I used it to clean up some, but I gave him a hurt, resentful look. He’d brought my slick back and didn’t even give me all I needed and craved. He reached into my pack by the tree, rummaged around and pulled out the little potion bottle, gathering some on his finger again. “Open your mouth,” he said and then fed it to me like I was some dumb baby.

“You are a dumb baby when you’ve just been fucked,” he said, laughing, and I realized I’d said what I was thinking out loud again. “Luckily, I’m here to take care of you.” He sniffed the air. “You still smell strong to me. I hope the potion worked.”

“The witch said only one or two drops each day.”

“About this witch of yours—you know that dark magic is strictly forbidden in Sudfarma and Morovia, don’t you? Who was this witch exactly?”

I turned my head and refused to look at him. Barbarosa Lagoon had done me a favor, and I wasn’t going to tell anyone her name.

He must have read some of what I was thinking on my face, because he put a hand on my chin and turned it to make me face him.

“Darcy, what’s her name? You’re my responsibility now, and I need to make inquiries.”

“No. I won’t betray her like that.”

I tried for patience, which had never been easy for me. “Her name, Darcy. I promise I won’t turn her in. You’ll need to keep taking your potion for now. We don’t have much choice.”

He gave me a resentful look. “Her name is Barbarosa Lagoon. I went to her for help, so leave her alone.”

Omegas didn’t give orders to Alphas like this. He was so entirely out of my experience I wasn’t entirely sure how to deal with him. “I’ll do nothing for now. We can discuss it when we get to my home.”

“And where’s that?”

“Morovia. That’s where I’m from.”

“Morovia? But what about my job here in the army? I signed a contract, you know.”

“That’s over.”

“What do you mean it’s over?”

“Darcy, surely you know I can’t allow you to stay in the army. You signed that contract to join under false pretenses. You lied about being an omega.”

“Yes, but...I have that under control with the potion. You saw that for yourself. No one noticed—not anyone except you.”

“You control it with a dark magic potion. We don’t even know what’s in that thing or what it might be doing to you. You know the laws of Sudfarma and Morovia, for that matter. Your king is strictly against dark magic and all of its practitioners. It’s illegal to buy a charm or potion, and punishable with prison or even death.”

I gave him a sullen look. What else could I do? I knew what he was saying was right, but I was the one who had to live as a lowly omega because of those laws. And I didn’t even know why I was arguing so much. I’d known he’d be this way, and I’d decided already that I didn’t even like the army all that much—that joining it had more than likely been a bad mistake. I probably wasn’t cut out for this kind of life. I suppose it was the idea that this Alpha had “decided” I was only an omega and had no say in things. Things like my own future. I resented him taking away my choice. It was such typical and infuriating Alpha behavior, and what I’d tried so hard to avoid by finding a witch to help me. What would my aunt say if she knew?

“And now that I know about you,” he continued, “I’ll have to report it. It would be better for you, frankly, if you’d turned yourself in and maybe you can avoid a court martial.”

“I’d be court martialed?”

“That’s a possibility, but it’s unlikely. I’d speak to Harrison on your behalf and get him to release you to my custody while you’re awaiting trial. I have things I need to do back home.”

“Oh, so you do have scruples about my lies to the army, but only when they’re inconvenient for you?”

He frowned at me. “I’ll use my influence to make sure the charges are reduced.”

“Charges?”

“It will mean a dishonorable discharge, I imagine, but I’ll make sure there’s no jail time.”

“What?”

“Well, what did you think would happen, Darcy? You broke the law—and used dark magic to do it. And all of this in Sudfarma, which isn’t exactly known for leniency for its criminals. The only saving grace is that this army is under Harrison’s control, and he’s more reasonable about things.”

“I’m not a criminal!” I shouted, stomping my foot.

He shook his head at me. “The army will disagree. They invested a lot of time and money in your training.”

“And I’m still ready to be a soldier.”

“But you can’t be. Surely you realize that. You’re an omega.”

“All I realize is that I’m not going anywhere with you. Not ever! And I don’t need your ‘influence’ either. I don’t need anything from you!”

“Oh, you think you can handle all this on your own? I ought to let you try.”

“Yes, you should. It’s what I want, because this is my business and not yours.”

“Then what’s your plan, genius?”

“Don’t worry about it. Like I said, it’s not your business.”

“What do you mean it’s not my business? You’re my omega.”

“Omegas aren’t slaves. And I’m not your omega unless I say so. And I don’t say so.”

He glared down at me, his face fierce with fury, and maybe a touch of hurt? But I didn’t flinch. I was so angry that I stared right back up at him, and held my ground, though I don’t know where I found the courage. I bent to pick up my pack and jam my hat back on my head, then I whirled around to face him.

“I’m ready. Go ahead and take me back to the regiment. Turn me in.”

“I ought to just call your bluff.”

“Do it. I want you to.”

“If I turn you in, you’ll be arrested.”

“Whatever happens, it’s still my business and *not* yours.”

Again, his face got so red I was almost worried about him, and then he mounted his horse and held out his hand to me again. “All right then, let’s get this over with.”

I stormed over to him, and he yanked me up to sit in front of him again. I thought I could literally feel the fury coming off him in waves. He jerked the reins of his big horse, and we took off at a gallop, kicking up dust behind us. All of my bravado drained away as rapidly as it had come to my rescue, but I was determined not to let him see. I sat stiffly in front of him, trying not to lean back against him and clutching the pommel of his saddle so I wouldn’t fall off. I imagined that if I did, he might just keep on going and leave me sprawled out in the dust behind him. I’d never seen him so angry.

Had I really just told him I didn’t want to be his omega? That I didn’t want him to use his influence to help me? He was riding fast, so we came back up on the regiment in only minutes. He wheeled his horse around to come up next to the officers, who were riding at the head of the columns.

The colonel, a hard-faced old Alpha with a bushy gray moustache, looked surprised as we came alongside him. He glanced from Wyatt down to me sitting in front of him on his saddle with a disbelieving glare. My head sank down to my chest, and I couldn't even look at the man. Behind me, I could feel Wyatt vibrating with anger.

“Colonel Martaan,” he said, his voice grim, “We need to talk.”



## Chapter Six

*Wyatt*

I was beyond furious, beyond upset, and for the longest time, I found it hard to calm down. Midnight ran for as long and as far as I asked him to, but I could tell I'd winded him a little when I finally slowed down. I got off and led him over to the shade of a big tree by the side of the road and then fell down beside him to try and calm myself and let him rest.

It had been a ridiculous argument I'd had with Darcy and my threats had been completely hollow. I could no more leave him to face the wrath of the colonel and a court martial on his own than I could try to fly. It was hard to leave him—full stop. But I had ridden out a few minutes ago and left him with Brandon and Asher to think whatever he wanted, because I was too angry with him to stay and be reasonable.

Colonel Martaan had been disbelieving about what I had to tell him at first, and then when Darcy confirmed it was all true, he'd been practically apoplectic with shock and rage. We had urged our horses over to the side of the road and dismounted to talk. He was so angry, I had to stand between him and Darcy or he might have tried to strike him. If he had, then I'd have had to kill him, and even my long-standing relationship with Harrison might not have survived that.

The soldiers still marching by were casting wildly curious looks at us, and even the other officers, seeing their colonel so enraged, had drawn closer to overhear what was going on. I saw Brandon and Asher among them, both of them staring at me with wide eyes. I motioned for them to come closer as Martaan continued to berate Darcy, who stood silently, his face beet red and sullenly stubborn, not looking at the colonel or bothering to reply as he demanded to know what Darcy had been thinking and how this had happened and on and on and on. Not that the colonel gave him time to answer—he didn't, and I think he just wanted to rant. To be fair, the look on Darcy's face was infuriating. Stubborn, obstinate, and completely unrepentant—his expression made it obvious he saw nothing wrong in what he'd done.

I took one, long look at Darcy's drooping shoulders and saw the hunted look in his eyes though and had to put a stop to the colonel's harangue after a few minutes by "pulling rank" on him. He hadn't been happy about that at all. But while my cousins and I didn't have any actual standing in Harrison's army, the officers all knew our relationship to the king. We were high-ranking nobility in

our own country, which they might have discounted, seeing as how Sudfarmans were haughty and insular. But what they couldn't discount was our closeness to their king. We were his cousins and his confidants, and we were pack mates to his younger brother. They knew exactly what that bond meant and how close it was.

I took Darcy's arm and pulled him away from the colonel, glancing over at Brandon and Asher who immediately came over to stand by us. Brandon grabbed his arm and held onto him. Darcy was still defiant and angry—even more angry at me than he'd been before, if such a thing were possible. I ignored him, turned my back on the colonel and spoke directly to my cousins.

"It looks like the colonel is about to have a stroke," I said, not really bothering to lower my voice. They both smiled and glanced over at him.

"What happens to your boy now?" Asher asked softly. "If you leave him here, he'll wind up in the brig." He glanced ruefully over at Martaan. "Or in front of a firing squad, from the way the colonel's acting."

Darcy gave a whole-body shudder, and I had to put an arm around him and draw him closer to me, whether it bothered either of us or not. He resisted for a moment before sagging reluctantly against me.

"Don't joke like that, Asher," I said, glancing back at the colonel, who had turned his back on us and was ranting at his officers. "Although I actually wouldn't put it past him at this point either."

Brandon shook his head. "What's his problem, anyway? He's acting like Darcy committed treason or something."

"He's in the same religious cult as the queen. Darcy has been taking a witch's potion, and any hint of dark magic makes that entire religious sect go into a frenzy. Then too, he's angry at me for not telling him about Darcy sooner. And since there's nothing he can say to me, he's taking it out on my omega."

"Still not your omega," Darcy muttered beside me.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I said, growling at him. The little shit actually growled back at me. He even showed his teeth, making Brandon and Asher smile. "My ex-omega, then, if that makes you happy."

He made a little humph sound, but I noticed Darcy didn't move any farther away from me. He burrowed into my side a little closer, if anything. Gods, everything about him was such a contradiction.

"At least it's done."

"What can we do to help, Wyatt?" Asher asked.

"Darcy has his backpack with him, so other than what's in his locker at the fort, he's ready to

leave. I think it's best if we go and take him out of here today, before the colonel gets any ideas. We'll take him straight back to Morovia to our lodge and leave him there while we go on this mission or whatever for Harrison. When we come back, I'll deal with him then."

"Nobody has to take me anywhere or 'deal' with me. I can take care of myself," Darcy mouthed off, completely unasked. "And I'm not going anywhere with you. Maybe you didn't hear what I just said. *I can take care of myself.*"

I glared down at him, and he pulled away, jumped back and put up those ridiculous little fists of his to square off at me. Brandon stepped between us, like I had any intention of fighting my own omega. I stared at him incredulously. "What are you doing?"

My cousin shrugged. "You looked like you were about to fight him."

"I wish he'd try!" Darcy piped up from safely behind Brandon's shoulder.

I rolled my eyes. "I would never touch him in anger—as much as he tempts me." I glared at Darcy. "Anyway, back to what I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted—I need to get this omega back to Morovia, and I'd like to leave right away."

Asher nodded. "They won't dare try to stop us. We're ready whenever you are."

"Let Darcy ride with you, Brandon. He can take more of his potion if he needs to. Maybe it would be less oppressively burdensome for the poor baby," I sneered.

I turned my back on him to speak to the colonel again and felt a small fist come crashing up between my shoulder blades. Taking a couple of deep breaths without turning around, I got on my horse instead and told Asher I'd catch up with them later. I rode off at a gallop, ignoring the calls from behind me.

That had been over an hour ago, and it had taken me that long to calm down. Midnight seemed to be rested, so I took another deep breath, swung up on my horse's back and headed back. I knew the trail Asher and Brandon would take for home and turned Midnight in that direction. With any luck, I'd catch up to them before they camped for the night.

I rode hard but it was still a few hours later that I saw their camp a little way off the road, just a few miles over the border into Morovia. Knowing Asher as well as I did, I imagined he hadn't felt safe until he was back in our own country. He rose on one elbow as I came into camp and looked at me before jerking his head over toward a figure on the far side of the fire.

"Your boy's over there. But are you absolutely sure about him? If he's an omega, I'm not picking up any of that scent on him."

"Yeah, I'm sure. He takes a potion given to him by a witch to suppress it, but for whatever reason it doesn't work the way it's supposed to on me. He says the witch's name is Barbarosa Lagoon. Have you ever heard of her?"

Asher looked surprised. “Yes, I have. But I thought she died about fifty years ago.”

“Not according to what Darcy says.”

“If it’s the same one, she was a powerful witch, or so people said. Very dark magic, indeed, though I never heard anything bad she did to people who weren’t trying to hurt her. Do you believe the boy?”

“I have no reason not to. And believe me, he’s definitely an omega. I don’t know why I seem to be the only one who can tell, and then only at times, but even so, I didn’t figure it out for a couple of months. Or maybe I couldn’t believe it.”

We were speaking in low voices, but I saw Darcy stirring restlessly. Asher noticed him too and nodded at me. “You must be tired. Go stretch out and I’ll wake you when it’s time to go. I’d like to make it to the lodge by tonight.”

“All right,” I said, getting up and heading back to my horse to get my pack and get him unsaddled and settled with the other horses for the night. I was back in a few minutes and stretched out in the only place left by the fire, which was directly across from Darcy. I’d have liked to lie beside him, except for two things—he wouldn’t have liked it, and I was still way too angry and hurt to try.

I knew it was foolish to feel that way. We’d made no promises to each other, and I’d only recently discovered what he was and how attracted to him I truly was. In reality, though, I was kidding myself. I’d always been really attracted since the first moment I’d seen him, but I’d tried to ignore my feelings or make excuses for them. Until that evening at the stream, when I couldn’t make excuses any longer, and I finally acknowledged to myself that something powerful was going on between us.

This situation had turned into a huge mess. I’d be lucky if taking Darcy out of the country didn’t set off some international incident. As it was, I’d have a lot of explaining to do to Harrison when I saw him again. Darcy must be my mate, which might account for why I had such a different reaction to him. I thought Darcy had mentioned something about “noble warriors” and that it would bring on his fate, whatever that meant.

The truth was that I didn’t have any desire to have a mate—at least not now. And even if I did, a stubborn, defiant little troublemaker like Darcy Vandercliff would never have been my first choice, omega or not. My choice would have been for someone easier to get along with, someone who had no crazy ambitions, who dreamed of making a home for his Alpha and raising a family, instead of glorious feats of bravery in battle. What kind of craziness was that for an omega?

Too damn bad then that I didn’t seem to have much of a choice in this thing at all. I pulled my thick blanket over my head to keep off the heavy dew and turned determinedly on my side and away from him. Maybe all this would look better to me in the morning.

But I doubted it.

# Part II

## Chapter Seven

*Darcy*

“Wake up, Vandercliff and eat some breakfast,” someone said from over my head. “We have a long ride ahead of us today.”

I turned over and looked up at Alpha Brandon, who had touched my hip with the tip of his boot to wake me up. I glanced behind him at the campfire and saw two more big Alphas sitting there staring at me, which woke me up in a hurry, because one of them was Wyatt.

Just the sight of him started me leaking a little, which was appalling enough, and even more so when both Asher and Brandon suddenly tensed and started sniffing the air.

“What is that?” Asher asked, and Wyatt laughed. It was a sharp and bitter sound that pierced right through me.

“That would be the omega, it seems. Who needs to go take care of that and then eat some breakfast so we can get on our way.”

I glared at him so hard that if looks could kill, he’d have fallen over dead where he sat.

“Just how do you propose I do that? Alpha Brandon has my pack and won’t give it back to me.”

Wyatt glanced over at Brandon, who shrugged. “I didn’t know if he had any weapons in there or maybe some other ‘magic’ potion he’d use against us. We left in a hurry, you know.”

“Good thinking. Toss it over here to me, will you?” he asked, and Brandon bent over to pick it up from beside his bedroll to give it to Wyatt. Wyatt rifled through it thoroughly before looking back up. “It seems fine.”

I was beyond angry. Beyond resentful. How dare they feel so free to go through my personal things? It was typical of the kind of indignities omegas had to endure on a daily basis.

Wyatt threw my bag on the ground in front of him and reached into his own pack for a canteen and put it beside mine. “Take these and go do something about that leaking.”

“Just what do you propose I do? I’m fine until you come around.”

“Just wash it off. And then take your potion.”

Scrambling to my feet, I snatched my pack and the water off the ground and stomped over toward the bushes to “do something,” unable to resist one parting shot.

“Why did you have to show up anyway? I told you to leave me alone.”

It felt good to see his face flush at my words, but the feeling of pleasure was short-lived.

“I saved your leaky little ass back there, so show some fucking gratitude.”

“It wouldn’t have been necessary if you’d have left me the hell alone in the first place!”

“I’m not the one who told lies about who I was, signed a contract illegally and flaunted himself around an entire regiment of soldiers. All against the laws of Sudfarma and that’s all on you, buddy.”

Furious, I turned and flounced off, calling him every bad word I’d ever heard inside my head. I took my time washing myself and ripping up my last clean shirt to make a pad to stick in my underwear, though the potion should take care of most of my slick. With Wyatt around though, I wasn’t sure it would. I took the potion and put it carefully back inside the pack. I’d been taking so much of it lately, the level inside the bottle was dropping alarmingly. Barbarosa had told me to take only a few drops. At this rate, I’d need more before too long. I just hoped it wasn’t doing anything to me. That was the trouble with magic potions—they had a way of playing nasty tricks on you.

By the time I stepped out into the clearing again, the Alphas had put out the fire and were getting ready to leave. Wyatt and Asher were talking softly to each other, and Asher gave me an interested look. Wyatt glanced over at me then, too, but I couldn’t hold his gaze and looked away. Brandon held out a plate to me impatiently.

“Hurry and eat. You can ride with me again. I saved you a piece of bread and a mug of coffee. But eat it quickly while I saddle my horse, and that will have to do until we stop later on.”

“It’s fine,” I said, taking it from him, and it really was. Their food was delicious. I was hungry, so I started gulping it down as he turned away. Since these Alphas were noble and therefore rich, the bread was crusty, but fine grained and the inside was soft and white, a far cry from the hardtack I was used to eating on the trail, and even the brown bread at my aunt and uncle’s home. He’d given me an apple and a hunk of rich, creamy cheese to go with my bread too, and they were both tasty. Even the coffee was strong and good and flavored with sugar. It went a long way toward waking me up. Compared to what I was used to eating, this fare was almost like fine dining.

By the time Brandon held his hand out impatiently for me again, I had finished and handed him the cup and plate, which he tucked away in his big pack. He boosted me up on his horse, a huge red roan who was not a whit more friendly than Wyatt’s beast. He snorted at me and rolled his eyes as I mounted. Brandon swung up behind me and we headed out, with Wyatt in the lead and Asher bringing up the rear.

I was very conscious of the sway of Wyatt’s hips on that horse in the lead, and I had to look away

and remind myself of how angry I was at him and his high-handed attitude. He had single-handedly ruined my life by forcing me out of the army, and I had no idea what I was going to do now. A hateful, weak, little part of me spoke up and said, *you shouldn't have told him you didn't want him. He said he would have taken care of you.*

Most of me replied, *I don't want him to, and I don't need anyone to take care of me. I can do it for myself.* I sure hoped that “most of me” was right, especially about the not wanting Wyatt anymore. I wasn't at all sure that I wasn't just kidding myself.

We traveled for most of the day, stopping around noon at an inn along the way. The three Alphas had a brief conference before we went inside, with Brandon and Asher both coming closer by me to make sure I was “safe” to go inside. Apparently, I passed their test, and we all went in. I followed them over to a big table near the entrance, and a buxom young woman came to take our order. Wyatt asked for ale for all of us and a plate of whatever they were cooking today.

She came back soon with big tankards of ale and plates that held slabs of beef and boiled potatoes and carrots, covered with gravy. Personally, I was sure they had cheaper fare, but they'd seen the Alphas' rich clothing and wanted their money. I was happy to eat the beef, though, and commended myself on the company I was keeping these days.

The Alphas didn't talk much while they were eating, but I did hear them say they expected to be back at their home before dark. That was good news in a way, because I was tired of sleeping on the hard ground, but that brought up the question of where exactly I would sleep. My traitorous heart hoped it would be with Wyatt.

As the hours rolled by that day, I was having trouble remembering exactly why I'd been so mad at him—so upset. It wasn't as if I'd loved the army, after all. I'd already decided it might not be for me, and I'd even had thoughts about leaving and going back home. I'd signed that contract though, and I wasn't sure how I'd get out of that. Then there was the fact that my aunt and uncle had told me they couldn't afford to keep me up indefinitely, and my uncle would be so disappointed that I'd failed to make it in his beloved “army corps.”

It was not quite dark when we finally made it to the so-called lodge the Alphas lived in. It was more like a huge country manor, though built in a fairly rustic, hunting lodge style. There was a big front porch with a large, inviting swing, painted dark green, like the wide, front door. The house was three stories tall, with a large front yard and circular area for coaches in the front. As we rode up to the door, it opened and several male servants came out to take the Alphas' packs inside, as other men streamed from the many outbuildings to take charge of their horses. They all glanced at me curiously.

For the first time in that long day, Wyatt came over to help me down from Brandon's horse. He didn't touch me any longer than he had to as he helped me down, but he did take my elbow to escort



me inside. Inside the main entrance hall, the ceiling rose up to the top floor, with a huge, stag-horn chandelier hanging down in the middle of the room. A wide staircase in the entry led up to the other floors.

Wyatt turned to one of the many servants bustling around. “Bring hot bath water to my room, please. And could you tell the cook to fix a tray for me and my guest? We’ll dine in my room tonight.”

She bobbed a curtsy and took off, giving me a curious, sidelong look. Wyatt, never dropping his hand from my elbow, began leading me to the stairs. Asher and Brandon called out good night to him, and though he answered, he seemed distracted. He took me to a room on the second floor. It was spacious, with a huge bed in the center of the room. He had a row of bookshelves along one wall, along with a few wardrobes and chests for his clothing.

“Make yourself at home,” he said. “And before you start complaining, I’ll sleep in the valet’s room. It’s adjoining, so you can have this bedroom.”

“You don’t have to stay there,” I mumbled, mostly under my breath.

“What?” he said, turning around to look at me in surprise. “What did you say?”

I looked directly into his eyes. “I said, you don’t have to. Sleep in the other room, that is, unless you want to, of course. I don’t mind if you sleep in the bed...with me.”

“Oh, is that right?” He folded his arms across his chest and glared at me. “*This* is a change of heart.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But if you’re going to make a big deal of it, just forget it. Stay or go. I really don’t care.”

He took an aggressive step toward me, but I didn’t flinch or back up. I wasn’t afraid of him—not much anyway—so I stood my ground. He was so much taller I had to tilt my head up to look at him. He stopped when he was only inches away.

“Why? You told me earlier that you don’t need anything from me and that you weren’t my omega unless you said so. And you didn’t say so.”

“Well, maybe I’ve changed my mind. I can do that, you know.”

“Assuming you have a mind to change. You’re so incredibly...”

“Stupid? Is that what you want to say?”

“I didn’t use that word, but if the shoe fits...”

“Oh yeah? Well, look who’s talking.”

He made a fist and came another step closer, which meant he was bumping my chest and crowding me. Defiantly, I sneered up at him. “Go ahead and hit me. Take your best shot. I dare you, asshole.”

“What did you call me?”

“You heard me.”

“Say it again, damn you.”

“Asshole, asshole, asshole! There—is that enough?”

He jerked me up off my feet so fast I thought my head would hit the ceiling, I thought I’d sail out of his hands and crash into the ceiling, even as high as it was. He threw me down on my back on the bed and then flung himself over on top of me. I expected to be crushed, but he’d landed on his hands and knees, kneeling over me. He thrust his face down into mine. His nose brushed against mine, and he moaned, like he couldn’t help himself.

“Why do you have to smell like this, damn it? And look like this?”

I was doing some moaning of my own, so I decided they were rhetorical questions and didn’t bother to answer. Instead, I boldly shoved my hand down inside his trousers and found that huge cock of his to give it a hard squeeze.

“I want this—and I want you. Inside me. Now.” My tone was demanding and urgent and I wasn’t asking. I was ordering him to do it. I didn’t think I could wait another moment.

He growled and began tearing at my clothes, until he had me completely naked underneath him. Then he started on his own clothing, and for the first time I got to see his magnificent body, completely naked. He was so gorgeous I could hardly breathe. But what the hell? Breathing, in some situations, at least, was highly overrated.

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*Wyatt*

When we first got to my bedroom, I’d been surprised at what seemed like a change of heart in Darcy when he actually seemed to want me to stay with him. I soon realized, however, that he was still spoiling for a fight, so I decided to give him one. It was partially because I was still feeling hurt at his rejection, and partially because I thought it would be a good idea to let Darcy get this whatever-it-was attitude out of his system. I thought maybe one good, knock-down, drag-out fight—a verbal one, anyway—and then maybe we could shake hands and at least be friends. Of course, that hadn’t worked. I wasn’t even sure why I’d thought it would.

Damn it, I was desperate to fuck him and give him my knot. If anyone ever needed a good knotting, it was Darcy, and I was the man for the job. I glanced down at those shining green eyes, the soft blonde curls falling across his forehead, and wondered who the hell I had been kidding. The two

of us as friends? What lay between us was too passionate, too raw, too hot and with too damn much intensity for anything as pale and insipid as friendship. This was my mate, damn it. His name had etched itself deep in my bones and my body and maybe even my soul.

Even on a girl, Darcy's eyes would have been something, but on a man, those long, thick eyelashes framing those watercolor eyes of his were almost sinful. His touch set me on fire. And his beautiful cock was ruddy and delicious, as it stood out from his body. I palmed him reverently as he handled my cock too. I ran my hand gently over the length of his shaft, enjoying the sweet heft of him in my hands. As I reached down to weigh his balls, gently kneading and massaging them, Darcy put his head back and moaned fiercely, thrusting his hips up at me.

"No, you don't," I growled at him. "You lie there and take it. You've got this coming."

He grinned up at me. "Then by all means, give it to me." He moaned as I bent my head and licked the tip of his cock. But moaning wasn't enough tonight—I wanted to hear him scream.

I began stroking him, slowly at first, while my other hand continued to knead his balls. The powerful scent of his slick rose up over me like a cloud, almost choking me with that luscious smell. I fell into a rhythm, enjoying watching his back slowly arching up, powerless to resist me, as his head thrashed, and his breathing became labored. His eyes were so tightly closed that his long lashes made dark smudges against his rose-stained cheeks.

I wanted to kiss him and make love to him until he was past speaking, past moving or feeling anything except my touch. I wanted to own him. I wanted to caress him and pet him and hold him forever and make him admit he was mine. It was frightening how much I needed him, but he didn't need to know that. It would give him too much power over me, and he had enough of that already.

I increased the pressure and the speed of my hand and now on each upward sweep, I ran my thumb over the sensitive head of his cock, dipping gently into his slit before continuing. Darcy continued to gasp for breath, so loud I barely heard the door open and then quickly shut again as the servants tried to enter and then realized what was going on. They knew better than to disturb us for the rest of the night.

Darcy tried again to thrust upward, but I put my hand on his hip and held him down with easy strength. I clamped my fingers over the base of his cock and waited for him to realize what was happening. He opened his eyes in surprise and looked directly at me, and I smiled at him.

"Please..." he said. "Let me come... move your hand because I need to... oh, I need to come," he groaned, a little note of panic in his voice. I continued to smile at him, holding his gaze.

"Hush, baby. You won't come unless I allow you to."

He began to thrash his head his crystal eyes growing wider and more desperate. "No, please!"

I smiled wider. He made an abortive move to get up, which I fended off easily. "Tell me you

understand first, Darcy. An omega always obeys and does what his Alpha tells him to do. Especially in bed. But out of it too. Are you going to be a good omega and do as I say?"

Darcy made a loud sound between a growl and a painful moan. I smiled and jerked his ass in the air, slipping a finger up inside him, wet with his copious slick. I crooked it, looking for the little bundle of nerves I knew would make him come. But I only brushed close to it, and I still clamped down on that cock.

"Tell me. Say you understand."

"I-I understand," he moaned, thrashing his head.

"What do you understand?"

"Uh...what?"

"Say you'll do as I tell you."

He looked up at me and blinked, so I repeated the phrase for him.

His eyes dazed with lust, as he said it after me. "I'll do what you say, because an omega always does...um, what?"

"What his Alpha tells him to. Especially in bed."

"Oh," he said, panting hard. "He does what his Alpha tells him to. *In bed.*"

I had to smile. I guess he didn't think I noticed the emphasis he put on the "in bed part," but I let him get away with it. I swiped a long finger over him again though, by way of punishment—and then I did it again. "Say, please."

*"Oh gods...Please!"*

I removed my fingers from around his dick and smiled down at him. "Go ahead, then. I give you permission, baby. Go ahead and come for me. I want to watch."

Defiant as always, the little shit shook his head. "No!" he shouted. It was impressive, really. I wouldn't have thought he had enough brain cells left to argue about it.

I smiled and crooked my finger again, giving those nerve endings another good massage. His screamed as his eyes rolled back in his head, and I knew I had him. "I said, come for me."

Darcy gasped and shuddered as he jerked his hips upward and then gave another long, loud squeal. He came uncontrollably, spurting out onto my chest again and again before sagging back on the bed, looking like he was all fucked out. He wasn't though. I was just getting started with him. He'd pushed me too far in the last couple of days, and I knew my control was gone. I didn't have the time to knot him—but I was going to do it anyway.

It was something I had to do. I was going to make him mine and end this defiance of his. I didn't think either of us could take it much longer.

I gave him a few seconds to recover his breath after his orgasm, before pushing his legs up and

pulling his ass toward me so I could push myself into that wet, slick hole, thrusting in so deep that my knot brushed against the soft skin of Darcy's ass. All the time I was whispering to him and wooing him with words that aroused us both.

“Does that feel good, baby? Do you like it when I'm so far inside you? Do you still want more?”

He nodded, beyond words by this point and tilted up his sweet ass for more, harder. Rich, fragrant pheromones, and his sweet whimpers filled the air around us. Overcome by my lust and unable to make it last much longer, I thrust harder, my hips rocking up against him in a hard, fast rhythm, every stroke sending waves of sensation coursing up through my cock and radiating all through me. The pleasure was so fierce and so sweet that it took very little time for me to feel an orgasm teasing around my balls.

“Wyatt!” Darcy screamed and shuddered, clutching me tighter and I came hard, spilling inside his velvet heat. I held him tighter to my body, clutching him like I was afraid someone would snatch him away.

Then as we lay panting and rocking gently against each other, enjoying the little aftershocks. I leaned down and gently parted his lips, letting my tongue slide inside his lush mouth. A prickling need was building up inside my body, and I couldn't hold back much longer. Hell, I was amazed I'd held out as long as I had. Loving the little, fucked-out sounds he was making, I pulled out and tasted the tip of Darcy's dripping cock. Then I flipped him over on his stomach and dragged him up under me again.

Darcy was sagging, already seeming to be drunk on our lovemaking, but I was far from being done with him. I still hadn't knotted him. I stroked his back and tongue bathed and teased his sweet pucker. His hole began to quiver and pulse, and I trembled with anticipation. My dick was already hard again, straining between my legs. We were both deeply affected by the heat lust. With a fierce growl I dipped my fingers in his thick copious slick, enhanced by my come and pushed it back inside him. Omegas were made to take an Alpha's knot, but mine was large, and I didn't want to hurt him, so he had to be well-lubricated. Darcy writhed under my hand and looked up at me, watching me with dazed, half-closed eyes. This lust he was feeling would help him with the pain. I pulled his ass in the air, then thrust thick fingers inside him, making him moan loudly and push back for more.

After a few more seconds of stretching him, I couldn't wait any longer and pushed inside him again, watching him drop his head to the mattress. This was all new to him, and he was already tired, but we'd started now and had to go on.

“Relax, baby. Just get used to feeling filled up with me inside you. We'll take this as slow as I can.” I reached under him and pumped his sweet cock.

With another fierce growl, I began to move slowly, easing deeper and deeper inside him.

My cock was already buried, and part of my knot and finally I was feeling some relief. I began to

work it slowly in farther, stretching him over the hard ridge of flesh that was my knot. Darcy moaned and tried to pull away, but I held him tightly to me and pulled him back on it.

Then, with a sudden wet plop, the entire knot slid in. Darcy moaned aloud and tried to get away, but I hauled him back and kissed the side of his throat and trailed more kisses over his ear. He moaned in ecstasy and pushed up onto my cock, his ass now seated deliciously on my knot.

My knot would create a steady pressure against his prostate and bring him extremely intense multiple orgasms, causing hormones to flood his body. Most omegas didn't stay conscious for all of the orgasms the knot caused, and once Darcy's started in earnest, his were so extreme that I thought he might not either.

I could feel Darcy clenching around my cock with every delicious, decadent moan and shudder. My balls slammed against his ass, trying to drive home again and again, though I was already as far in as I could go. Darcy screamed and clawed at the bed, trying to get away from me, then reached back to me for comfort. I held on as tightly as I could, crooning to him and kissing him, unable to pull out until I was finished. Once inside him, my gland had swelled even more and wouldn't release for a long time yet. All I could do to help Darcy was try to comfort him. After about the fourth or fifth intense orgasm, Darcy slumped in my arms. I kissed him tenderly, but there was nothing else I could manage. I was stuck inside him and couldn't pull out without injuring us both. I checked Darcy's cock, and it was still rigid and straining, though no more semen remained in his balls for him to pump out. Even in his semi-conscious state, his hips still jerked and thrust.

I lay beside him in the warm, messy bed and pulled him close. I think I dozed a little, and he was dreaming, judging by the little sounds he made. His ass was snug against me and stuffed with my cock. I wanted to keep it that way forever. Finally, after almost two hours his thrusting slowed, and I could feel a softening in my gland. After another thirty minutes, I was able to slip free.

I turned Darcy over on his side, pushing down his still reaching arms, and spooning him. Once he stopped moaning and trying to turn back over to get to me, he finally let the exhaustion overtake him. I'd thought I was almost too tired to sleep, the ordeal of the past few days still keying me up with adrenalin, but eventually, the soft snores of my omega and the comfort of his warm body in my arms relaxed me, and I drifted down into dreams. I don't know how long I slept, but I came instantly awake as Darcy groaned and turned toward me.

"Is it over yet?" he asked softly. "Are we done? How can I still be so hard and aroused? I'm so tired." His eyes looked alarmed, so I kissed his lips and took his sweet cock in my hand, pumping it a few times to give him release, while I kissed his neck soothingly. Darcy came in seconds, with only a trickle of semen coming from him. Once he spent, he turned in my arms and buried his face in my throat. He held on as tightly as he could, while I held him close and rubbed his back.

Over the next few hours, I fucked him again and again, whenever he wanted. When he woke up, the first thing he did was reach for me. Darcy was curled up on his side next to me, one of his legs slung over mine. I rolled him onto his back on the bed and eased out from under him. I got up to stretch and close the curtains over the windows. I pulled more of the bed curtains around the four-poster canopy bed to make a nice, safe nest for Darcy. Our beds were designed specifically for this purpose.

For the next several days, Darcy would be in full heat, and I had to make a safe nest for him so he could be comfortable, even when I wasn't with him. I'd tell the servants to change the sheets and bring in more furs and blankets for the bed after he passed through the worst of this. He would sleep, but he'd only eat and drink by my hand, in the way of all omegas during their cycle. I'd have to bathe him and care for him too until it finally eased off, in a week's time. It all sounded wonderful to me and soothed my Alpha soul, but I'd have to make new plans about this mission I was supposed to be doing for Harrison. I was afraid Asher and Brandon would have to leave and search for the viscountess without me, and I'd try to catch up with them later. The most important thing now was Darcy, and his care and comfort until his heat cycle was over.

It was a few days later that I rang for the servants and asked for clean sheets and bath water again, along with some food for both of us and fresh bed coverings. They brought it much more quickly than I thought they would, and Darcy slept in my arms in the small adjoining valet's chamber while they remade the bed. Afterward, I took a long, hot bath with Darcy, and then helped him back to the freshened bed while I ate a huge steak and probably half a dozen eggs. It was all delicious.

Once I'd finished, though, I was exhausted and had to rest a short while before I called for more food. I managed to make him eat some scrambled eggs, a few bites of porridge and most of a full glass of milk. Then I soothed him and put him back in bed to rest. He was insatiable though and pulled me down on top of him. A few rounds of sex later, I managed to make it out of bed, got cleaned up and dressed again and went to find my cousins.

I found them downstairs, eating in the dining room and they started in on me right away.

"Good afternoon, Wyatt," Asher said, holding up his glass in a toast. "Or is it evening yet? And congratulations are in order, I think, if all the noise coming out of your room is any measure of your success with that stubborn little omega of yours."

I fell down in a chair and grinned at him. "It is, thank you. And now I'm exhausted."

Brandon laughed. "How is Private Vandercliff?"

"He's fine. And he's neither a private nor a Vandercliff anymore."

In our society, we took our father's last name at birth. Alphas kept that name for the rest of their lives. Betas were free to keep their father's surname or take their spouse's name. But omegas always

took the name of their Alpha. He would use my surname from this point on.

“I’ll go talk to Harrison about the situation as soon as I can. But first, he has to come out of this heat, and that’ll take about a week. I’m afraid I’m going to miss the start of your investigation for Harrison. I can’t leave Darcy, but I can catch up with you, when this is over. I hate to let our cousin down.”

“Harrison will understand,” Asher said. “And so do we. If we need to, we can send for you. In the meantime, enjoy your omega. And get back upstairs and get some rest. You look worn out.”

“I think I will. Thanks for understanding—I tried to wait until we got back from our mission, but... I couldn’t.”

“Understood. We’ve already sent a message to Harrison, and we told him about the delay and that Brandon and I will be leaving in the morning at first light. We’ll be heading directly to this baron’s castle to see what he has to say for himself. We’re only taking a small guard with us, so we can move faster, though at this point, there may not be that much urgency. Viscountess Camilla has been missing for a long time now.”

“I know. You need to be careful and not let your guard down. That incident on the road, where the survivors of the mudslide said the mud parted and flowed around the dark figure looking over the cliff edge at them—that sounds like dark magic.”

“I’m not without some skill in magic myself,” Asher said. It was true. He and our pack brother Lex both had strong powers, though not of the dark variety. I felt some uneasiness thinking about what could happen if they offended this baron they were going to see, and I wondered if he was indeed a powerful witch.

“Just be careful. And let me hear from you, so I’ll know if you’re all right. This man could be responsible for many deaths if what Harrison suspects about him is true.”

Brandon smiled and toasted me with his wine. “Don’t worry about us, Wyatt. We can take care of ourselves.”

I knew that was true, but even as I returned his smile, I wondered why the phrase, “famous last words” kept repeating in my head. I didn’t say it, of course, but I didn’t have to. The words seemed to ring in the air around me, as a cold chill swept over my body.



## Chapter Eight

*Darcy*

The next few days after my knotting passed by in a daze of lust and heat. He was with me often, taking care of me, and making sure I was all right. I'd heard about knotting and my aunt had talked about it a little, though as a beta, married to another beta, she only knew what she'd heard, and what my mother had told her.

It hadn't been anything like I'd expected. Because Wyatt stayed with me often and made love to me over and over, whenever I asked, the agonizing cravings and longing to be filled never materialized, and I found great pleasure in everything we did together. I was sore, but he soothed that with frequent hot baths. Even the incessant need for my Alpha was manageable, because before it could get too bad, Wyatt seemed to know, and he was right there to take care of me. The only "down" side to it all was that I felt so dependent on him.

That and the fact that he called me "baby" a lot of the time, which I hated. Now that several days had passed, and I was clearer in my thinking, I was going to bring that up and tell him how I felt about it. The trouble wasn't that he didn't listen to me. He'd lean against the bedpost and watch me with those smoldering dark eyes, the scruff on his cheeks and chin because he hadn't had time to shave properly making him devastatingly handsome and sexy in those moments. Sometimes, he'd fold his muscular arms over his broad chest and stare at me, nodding occasionally to make me think he was listening. I thought it was mostly done to pacify me and make me think he'd heard me and was considering my concerns. Then he'd go right ahead and do whatever he wanted to do in the first place.

Of course, I didn't think about any of that during those first delirious days—those thoughts only came later, when I was getting tired of Wyatt's room and this haze of lust and lovemaking. As my mind cleared of it, I began to grow restless and bored. Then, on about the tenth day after arriving at the lodge, I woke up one morning feeling wonderful. I stretched, sat up in bed and pulled the dark curtains apart to let a little sunlight spill in my little nest of blankets.

Immediately, Wyatt got up from a desk he was using in the corner of the room and took a quick step toward me. When I smiled up at him with my eyes clear, he slowed down and walked over to sit down beside me on the bed. I leaned against him. For some reason, I needed to be touching him all the

time, it seemed. Maybe he felt the same way, because he put his arm around me and pulled me close, dropping a kiss on top of my head.

“You look like you feel better today,” he said.

“I do. So well, in fact, I’d like to get out of this room. Maybe go outside?”

He gave me an uncertain look. “I don’t know about all that.”

“I do,” I said, pulling away from him. “I’ve been cooped up in here for days now. Surely, a little walk outside wouldn’t hurt anything.”

“It’s just that I don’t want to have to fight any of my men off you. You smell too good, and you look...” he shook his head, like he was at a loss for words.

Nervously, I smoothed down my hair. “Do I look that bad?”

“Bad? No, baby, you look amazing. Your skin is creamy, and your eyes are bright, and your hair is growing out a little, so it’s all curly and gorgeous. I know I can’t keep you all to myself, but I guess I want to try.”

“Well, I think the heat cycle is over now. I feel different—not so dazed as I was before. Please? We can just stay on the property. You can tell your men to stay away.”

He tipped my chin up to kiss me on the lips. I think it was supposed to be a quick peck, but it turned into something white hot right away. We were still kissing, in fact and about to move things to the bed again, when we heard a commotion outside in the front courtyard.

Wyatt muttered something about annoying interruptions and went over to the window to look outside. I saw his face grow pale and a look of surprise come over it.

“What is it? What’s the matter?”

“It’s Asher’s horse, Whiskey,” he said, turning to me in stunned surprise. “What the hell?”

He turned away from the window and bolted down the stairs and outside, and I was right behind him.

The horse, a huge bay, was being tended to by the stablemen as we arrived. The horse was agitated and looked exhausted. The men were checking him for injuries and smoothing their hands over his flanks as one of the stable hands got a bridle on him. The poor horse seemed uneasy and scared. Wyatt immediately went to him and spoke soothingly in his ear, and he began to calm down a little, or at least enough for Wyatt to be able to lead him to the stables.

Once there, he allowed Wyatt to lead him to his own stall right away, and he even seemed relieved to be there. He whinnied to the other horses as Wyatt went into the stall with him and another stableman to care for him. Later, after he was given water and food and he had been rubbed down with a warm blanket over him, Wyatt came back out and leaned over the half door to speak quietly with the other man who’d was still inside the stall with Whiskey. After a few more minutes, he came

over to talk to me.

“Do you think he traveled a long way?”

“I’m afraid so. I wouldn’t have dreamed he’d be able to make it so far.”

“So you think he came all the way from Crillia?”

“Yes, I do. Helped by Asher’s magic, perhaps. He thinks a great deal of that horse.” He looked down at me. “Are you all right? I’m sure this wasn’t what you had in mind when you wanted to get outside for a while.”

“It’s fine. That poor horse. Is he going to be all right?”

“He’ll be fine. I’m worried though. This is a well-trained horse, and he’d never stray from his rider. Something must have happened to Asher and Brandon.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I need to get a message to Harrison. And then I’ll go after them, of course.”

“Oh, that seems really smart.”

He shot me a look. “Was that supposed to be sarcasm?”

“Yes. I think it’s pretty dumb to keep sending people after this baron, who keeps making them disappear. Now you want to be next in line.”

“You don’t understand what’s going on here, Darcy.”

“I think I do. What’s so hard to understand? Even if you don’t count the ladies and the maids sent along with the viscountess, and the group of footmen the Sudfarman king sent after her—which I totally do, by the way—that’s a lot of people to go missing. Now Asher and Brandon. It seems to me that your side isn’t exactly winning right now.”

Wyatt gave me an incredulous stare, and then brushed my concerns away. “You simply don’t understand what’s going on.”

My temper flared right away. He was doing it to me again—implying that I was too dumb or naïve to comprehend his Alpha thinking. I resented it, to say the least.

“I understand that all these people are missing and now you want to plow right ahead with your genius plan and go missing too. Tell the truth—right now you’re already choosing which men to take with you and planning which routes to take, aren’t you?”

“Darcy, I don’t have a choice. Asher and Brandon are my family, and they must be in trouble. I’m going after them.”

“Because going after people has worked so well up to now.”

I got an angry glare for my trouble, and he turned and started back to the lodge, no doubt to write his message to Harrison and start packing. I followed right along behind him.

“If you go, then I’m going with you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I don’t think I’m the one being ridiculous here.” I caught up with his long strides and pulled on his arm. “Listen to me.”

He whirled around to face me. “What? What would you have me do, Darcy? Allow my omega to accompany me on a dangerous, maybe even deadly journey?”

“Well, what do you expect me to do, Wyatt? Sit here and wait for you to maybe come back? What if you don’t?”

“I’ll come back, and I’ll bring Asher and Brandon with me.”

“Again, what if you don’t?”

He blew out a long breath and tried to take my hand, but I jerked it away.

“Look, baby...”

“Don’t you ‘baby’ me. I just got you, and I’m not ready to lose you.”

“That won’t happen.”

“You can’t promise me that. Listen to what I’m saying and forget all those ideas you have about omegas. They’re all wrong anyway. For once, see me. See who I really am and not some messed up Alpha notion of what I am. I’m pretty strong, you know—strong enough to decide that I didn’t want to live as an omega until I found you. I still don’t, actually, but I do want to be with you, so if that’s what it takes...”

“Darcy, be reasonable. I’m not taking you into danger. It’s out of the question.”

“I’m smarter than you give me credit for, you know. I found Barbarosa Lagoon and got her to give me a potion. It would have worked too, if it hadn’t been for you.”

“Darcy...”

“No, listen to what I’m saying! I’m a victim of my nature, and I can’t change it. Or I could for a while, but eventually, even that didn’t work. It doesn’t mean I’m stupid, though, and you need to wrap your mind around that, or I don’t think we have any real future. I may not have been the greatest soldier, but I was making it work—and making my own way in the world, and with no help from any Alpha. Then I met you, and...”

I wanted to tell him that I’d fallen in love, but I couldn’t. Not because it wasn’t true. I did love him, and I had never been surer of anything. Did that mean I was simple-minded, or maybe that I was smarter and more in touch with my feelings than he was?

But I didn’t tell him, because I knew something else too. He didn’t feel the same way about me. Oh, he loved to fuck me, and he even seemed to enjoy “taking care” of me. That was *his* nature. But when it came to being in love with me—not so much.

How could he be though, really? He was rich and noble, and I was a nobody. And now I was

exhibiting what most Alphas would call “typical omega behavior.” Falling madly in love with the first Alpha who came along and showed me attention didn’t exactly strengthen my position.

Hell, maybe it was typical omega behavior. Maybe I was just doomed to repeat my mother’s mistake of loving someone who didn’t love me back. I was still willing to wait and give Wyatt time to catch up. It might be possible that he’d come to love me in time. And for now, if I had to be in love all by myself for a while, then I could manage. After all, if I could love Wyatt and keep on loving him without him returning that sentiment . . . then at least I’d know that what I felt must be real love and not an infatuation. It hurt too much to be anything else.

My omega mother had tried to navigate the same swamp I now found myself in. When she first met my father—according to what my aunt had told me—she had fallen head over heels for him at first sight. He was young and handsome, though cruel with the knowledge of his good looks, in the way of those people who love themselves much more than they could ever love anyone else. At first, my mother had been flattered, not to mention happy and excited to leave with my father when he came to her house to ask for her.

Not that she didn’t see his faults. My Aunt Rudmilla said she thought my mother saw them quite clearly—she was a bright girl, after all, despite what my father believed about her. But knowing it didn’t affect the feelings she had for him, or at least not enough. Even though he was mean and miserly with his affection outside of the copious sex he demanded, he was still the object of all her love and desire, which was as extravagant and colorful as the most beautiful wildflowers in the fields. Eventually, his despicable behavior and the way he treated her beat down even her love. He trampled on her feelings and crushed them down, but somehow, they stubbornly remained alive, struggling to stand back up again and seek the warmth of the sun again.

Was I acting like my mother? Refusing to see that Wyatt would not only never treat me as his equal, but he’d never really see me as much more than a kind of pet that he owned. Was it too much to hope that he’d fall in love with me?

“Darcy...” Wyatt said again, breaking me out of my thoughts, his voice condescending and dripping with patience as he tried to “handle” me. “Listen to what I’m telling you. This mission is far too dangerous for you to be involved in it. It’s out of the question. Now let’s go back inside. You were right about one thing—I need to send a message to Harrison and then get ready to travel. You should probably pack too.” He held up a hand at my surprised expression. “No, not to come with me, but to go home to your aunt and uncle while I’m gone. I don’t like to leave you here with only the servants for company. It’s far too remote and not what you’re used to. Get ready—I’ll take you home for a visit on my way to Crillia and the baron’s castle.”

*Two Weeks Later*

“Darcy, you know what they say about a watched pot never boiling,” Rudmilla said. “You keep staring down that road like you think you’ll see your Alpha coming any minute. Come for a walk with me instead.” She held out a hand enticingly to me. “It will be just like old times. I need to pick some marigolds to make an ointment for your uncle’s rash.”

I turned away from the window and tried to give my aunt a smile. I knew I wasn’t the best company for her. I’d been seriously out of sorts since the first day Wyatt had dumped me here at Rudmilla’s home in Sudfarma and went on his way to Crillia without me. Yet I couldn’t seem to shake it. It had been over two weeks now and there had been no word from Wyatt, even though he’d faithfully promised me he would send a message as soon as he arrived with his men in Lameda, the town high in the mountains where the baron’s castle was located.

To date I’d heard nothing from him. Not in the fourteen days, six hours and twenty-three minutes since he’d left.

I knew that part of my feelings of uneasiness and unrest came not only from worrying about him—and I had a constant feeling of dread that seemed to be lodged firmly and aching in my chest—but also because of the remaining stubborn feelings of anger I had toward him. It had been Wyatt who had decided to interfere in my life and try to force me back in the omega mold I’d managed to escape in the first place, after all. I had made a decision to leave all that behind me, and though I loved Wyatt and wanted to be with him, I wasn’t a brainless child. I hated being treated like I was. For example, I had begged him to make a real plan and not just run after this baron half-cocked and wind up as a victim himself, but he’d refused to listen to me. Alphas like Wyatt always thought they knew best. I was afraid that would never change, and I wasn’t sure I could always live with that.

My aunt came up behind me and touched my shoulder. “Darcy, darling? Would you like to go for that walk with me? It’s a lovely day outside.”

“Sure. I’ll go get some walking shoes on.”

She smiled up at me and I left to go back to my own room and change my slippers for my boots. My aunt had seemed to really like Wyatt when they’d met. He had brought me home as he’d threatened to do and was very sweet and polite to my aunt and uncle, who were surprised to see me back home, to say the least.

Wyatt had smoothed everything over and brushed over the details about my abrupt departure from the army. Once my uncle found out that Wyatt had been my trainer, and more importantly, that he was

nobility and a cousin to King Harrison, he had quickly been all smiles and welcome. Even more so once Wyatt explained I was in no trouble for leaving the army. My aunt had been a bit more reserved, but she had gradually succumbed to his charm and warmed to his good manners, too, though she still watched me and my reactions carefully.

She knew I was angry at him, and she'd been concerned, but she had also witnessed my farewell to him and saw how desperately I'd clung to him before he left. I hadn't been able to help it, because I had a really bad feeling about this whole thing.

To make matters even worse, I discovered over the next few days that my potion had stopped working altogether, and I could no longer pass as beta to anybody. My guess was that Barbarosa hadn't been kidding around when she'd said, "Only a few drops... Any more might kill you outright... or it could change the course of your entire life forever. Beware!"

Beware, indeed. Not taking the potion the way she'd told me to hadn't killed me, outright or otherwise—and for that I suppose I should have been grateful. And I was. But there was no denying that the potion had definitely changed the course of my life. I couldn't be entirely unhappy about that, because it had brought me Wyatt. But it had also brought back the inconvenience and frustrations of being an omega.

There was no way to disguise who I was anymore. Rudmilla called in a physician who gave me omega pills, but the daily tablets he prescribed me didn't conceal what I was, like my potion had. It only suppressed my full heat cycle temporarily. In about two more weeks' time, I'd be going into heat again, and I dreaded it with every fiber of my being. Without Wyatt to soothe my heat lust, I'd be in a miserable state for at least a week or so. I'd have to stay inside and hide in my old closet nest, suffering the almost constant cramps and pain and hoping for my Alpha's arrival every day.

Or I could go visit Barbarosa Lagoon again and see if she could do something to help.

As I pulled on my boots and went to rejoin my aunt for our walk through the forest, my mind kept returning to the idea again and again. Not only might the witch be willing to give me another potion—one that would work despite Wyatt's influence on me—but she might be able to give me news of my Alpha, along with Asher and Brandon and the missing viscountess. I was getting more and more desperate to get some word on what had happened to Wyatt. He had promised me faithfully that he would write and let me know, but I hadn't heard a word since he left, and I was growing more and more frantic every day.

I told Rudmilla what I was thinking as we took our stroll through the woods, stopping occasionally to pick the colorful wildflowers and fill the big basket on her arm. She looked quite pretty that afternoon with her big, floppy-brimmed hat tied in a bow under her chin as she walked along the trails by my side. Her dark eyes became huge when I told her I was thinking of seeking out

Barbarosa Lagoon again. Wyatt had left me a small bag of gold coins for my “expenses,” and I had nothing else I needed the money for. He had left another, larger bag for my uncle to pay for my upkeep.

“Oh Darcy, do you think that’s wise? She might not like it that you didn’t follow her instructions.”

“I did follow them, until I met Wyatt, and then the potion stopped working the way it was supposed to. Barbarosa knew it might happen though, and she even warned me about it.”

Her eyes got huge again. “She did?”

“In a roundabout way. She told me to ‘beware of the noble warrior, for he would bring on my fate.’” I intoned, mimicking Barbarosa’s raspy tone.

“Your fate? What did she mean by that?”

“Who knows? I assumed it meant that he was my intended Alpha. The one man in the world that I was supposed to be with.”

“You sound as if you’re in love with him.”

I sighed heavily and made a little face. “Because I am, though an Alpha wasn’t what I ever wanted. I hadn’t planned on feeling that way about him at all, even though from the first time I saw him, I was really attracted to him.”

I bent to pick a few flowers I saw growing by the base of a big oak. “He’s been gone too long. I want to ask Barbarosa if she can tell me whether or not he’s all right. And his cousins too. I’m worried about all of them.”

“Well, dear, as you know, it’s a two-day carriage ride from here to the Black Peat Swamp. Your Alpha might be back here by then.”

I shook my head. “No. I think something has happened to him or he would have sent me word by now. If I can borrow the carriage, I’ll go try to talk to her.”

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll talk to your uncle this evening and you can leave first thing in the morning.”



## Chapter Nine

*Darcy*

Like the last time I'd entered the Black Peat Swamp, I was struck immediately by the tall, dark trees that seemed to lean across the narrow road that ran along the edge of the swamp so they could peek inside the carriage and see who was coming to visit. I told the driver to pull over when we reached the sign that warned everyone to keep out, and then I took a deep breath and began walking down the narrow, weedy path.

The swamp was still one of the scariest places I'd ever been, and I was trembling a little as the dusk began to fall around me and the mists rose up out of the ground like insubstantial ghosts swirling through the murky air. I walked along the path for maybe thirty minutes before I sat down on a stump to wait and see if Barbarosa knew I'd arrived in her swamp and would come to see me, like she had the last time I was here.

I waited what seemed like a really long time—long enough for the sun to sink below the horizon and the chill night to draw around me like a shroud. The stars came out, and a sliver of yellow, crescent-shaped moon hung overhead like a tiny crack in a ceiling, exposing a little of the light coming from some spooky, celestial attic. I could barely see my hand in front of my face. I heard slight noises around me, including some that seemed to be coming steadily toward me from farther down the trail. Barbarosa? I certainly hoped so and not some other, even wilder denizen of the swamp.

I noticed the faint smell of her again, just before the witch stepped out of the fog and onto the path in front of me. I wondered if the smell was from her sorcery. She was even more hunched over than she'd been the last time I saw her a few months earlier. Her patchy white hair stood up in a wild halo around her face.

"You again," she grumbled as she came up beside me. "Why do you come to see me and pay for my services when you don't follow my advice?"

"I did try, Barbarosa." She shot me an evil sneer at the familiarity of the address, so I flinched and quickly amended it with a little bow. "I-I'm sorry—I meant to say, Madam Lagoon. Please forgive me for my rudeness."

"Humph," she grunted, only slightly mollified. "What do you want now, boy?"

“I need your help again and I have the coins to pay for it. You see, I met an Alpha, and he-he did something to me, so that whenever he was around, I started going into heat, despite the potion you gave me before. I took it like you said, but when he kissed me... Well, it just got worse and worse, and now the potion’s not working at all.”

“I did warn you about the noble warrior. Magic can’t create true love, nor can it prevent or destroy it. He must be your true love, which means he has immense power over you. The good news is that if you’re his, then you have the same power over him—unless you want me to try and take it all away...”

“No. No, I don’t want that.”

She gave me a long, considering look before she shrugged. “Ah well...it probably wouldn’t have worked anyway. If this Alpha is your mate—then there’s nothing I can do,” she said, wagging her bony finger in my face. “I told you to be careful or he would bring about your fate.”

“M-my fate? What does that even mean?”

“Your destiny, boy. The way things were meant to be. You’ve been cheating it up to now. Trying to hide your true nature instead of accepting and embracing it. Don’t you know the story of the three Fates?”

“The three what? No, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She muttered something under her breath about ignorant people with no proper education, and then her eyes rolled back in her head and her voice became eerie and otherworldly, like it had the last time I came to see her. I jumped to my feet to take a quick step back, but at the same time, I was fascinated by her. I couldn’t have moved far away from her if I’d tried.

“The Fates,” she said in her odd, creaky voice, “...are the ones who preside over the birth and death of all humans.” She held up her crooked, old hands and moved them through the air to illustrate. “They spin,” she said, moving her hands in circles around each other in the air. “They measure,” she said, pulling her hands wide. “They cut,” she said, with a slashing motion, “...all the threads of your life. They’ve already sewn this fabric of yours, so your destiny is already made. This warrior is your destiny, and you are his. No amount of sorcery can ever change that.” She peered into my face in the uncertain light. “It seems to me that you already know that.”

“I know I love him. That much is true. I can’t help it, but I think he doesn’t love me, or at least not yet. And now I’m afraid he’s disappeared before he’ll ever get the chance. Can you tell me where he is? I need to find him. I have a terrible feeling he’s in trouble.”

“He *is* in danger. But that way lies the beast. I warned you about him too, and I told you what he’d do if he could.”

“I remember. You said he’d kill me if he could.”

“Yessss...” she said, making a hissing sound as she raised her rheumy eyes to me. “I have no potions or elixirs that can remedy that. Besides, you have the means inside you already.”

“What?” I asked, confused at her words, but she only shrugged.

I took out my own small bag of coins and held it up for her to see. “I brought this for you. I can pay my way, but you have to give me a potion. *Please.*”

“Potions won’t work against your Alpha. And as for the beast, I told you...all that you need is there inside you.” She patted my chest with her twisted old hand. “In here, boy. This is what will make you attractive to him, so he’ll allow you to come near him.”

“Attractive to him? What do you mean? Are you saying he likes other men?”

She gave a cryptic shrug. “Such things don’t matter to him. He likes obedience. He likes those who follow orders. You’ve lost some of that ability since I saw you last, but you still have the same... essence...he’ll appreciate it and want it for himself. It comes from your true nature as an omega. You must turn what you think of as your weakness into your greatest strength. Let him see that you’re an omega. Only then can you save your Alpha. Only by going into the den of the beast—into his castle and into his service—only then will you learn his secrets. If you want to know who the beast truly is and what he’s done with your noble warrior...if you want to find your mate, then go there. Use your true self to get inside his lair. He is about to give the girl a test to see if she has what he wants. When she fails it, she’ll join the others, and that will pave the way for you to be his next victim. However, there’s still a chance to save yourself and perhaps the others too. If you wish to be in time to do that, then you must keep your wits about you—no matter what happens. No matter what you see.”

“That sounds ominous. What am I going to see? Can’t you be a little less vague? And what girl are you talking about? What do you mean by a test? Is this girl the viscountess that Asher and Brandon went to find? Is that where Wyatt is? Please explain what you mean, because I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Seek both high and low, and you’ll find all that you need.” She thrust out her hand and snatched the bag of coins from my hand. “Now go.”

“Wait a minute...I still don’t understand. Is there really no potion? You’re saying I need to go to the baron’s castle like Wyatt and the others did, right? Is this Baron Dargan the beast you told me about?”

Instead of answering, she turned to leave, blending into the dark night so quickly and so seamlessly that I never even saw her walk back down the path. One second, she was there and the next, she had melted into the darkness. My audience was apparently over.

I turned and made my slower, more halting way back to the carriage, afraid that if I went any faster, I’d stray from the narrow trail. I climbed in the carriage after waking the sleeping coachman,

who had locked himself inside, and we got on our way back to my aunt and uncle's home.

I left a couple of days later, heading toward the Crillian border.

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My uncle gave me the gold Wyatt left to pay for my upkeep, which enabled me to take a hired carriage to Crillia. We weren't at war with the Crillians—not yet at least, so I had no trouble booking my seat on a public coach and heading to the foothills of the Daluri Mountains, on the border of Crillia, not far from Lameda, where the baron supposedly lived. The last time I'd come this way, I'd been walking, so this journey was much faster.

I arrived early in the morning, after a long, bumpy ride in the public coach. My companions for the journey were two betas, one a tradesman and the other a young man taking up a position as a tutor in a private home. Neither of them had much to say for themselves, being as steeped in misery as I was on the uncomfortable ride. Since they were both betas, neither of them took much notice of me or anything at all unusual about me, which I took as a good sign. I was taking my omega pills, of course, that kept me out of heat for another couple of weeks, and it was good to know they would keep me mostly safe and unnoticed.

And even if Alphas still presented a slight danger, staying safely at home and meekly waiting to see if Wyatt would ever turn up again just didn't seem like an option. If any approached me, I'd use my Alpha's name and his relationship with kings and hope it would be enough. Besides, my virtue seemed a small price to pay when measured against Wyatt's life.

I was wearing a voluminous cape, one of my old uncle's cast-offs that my Aunt Rudmilla had rounded up for me, saying I'd need the warmth in the high mountains I was headed to. It was indeed noticeably colder the closer we got to Crillia, so I pulled the hood over my head, sank into its thick, woolen confines and tried to get at least a little sleep on the long, rutted road to the border.

Rudmilla had written me a letter of reference too, suitable for someone in service, saying I had been a footman in her employ for several years. She piled on the platitudes about what a good worker I'd been. I thought it was about as much as I could do to get ready. I wished I had a weapon of some kind, but if such a thing were found in my luggage, it would probably only arouse suspicion.

The coach didn't go as far as the village of Lameda, where the baron's castle was located. That tiny village was reached only by traveling up a steep mountain road that led from the little border town called Redmill, where the coach deposited its passengers. I was exhausted anyway. I decided to rest for at least a night to try figure out my next step. I found a small, modest inn and paid for a room for the night. I needed to regroup before trying to find someone to take me to the baron's castle. My

plan was to simply go up to the door of the castle and knock. Then ask whoever answered if there was any work to be had inside the house, on the grounds, or even in the stables. Times were as hard here in Crillia as they were back in Sudfarma, and it wasn't all that unusual for people to randomly show up at the door of great homes to inquire about employment. I was young and strong, not afraid of hard work and I had a glowing reference. I hoped that would be enough to convince the baron to hire me.

There were also the cryptic words of the witch about my "true nature" and how that would somehow convince the beast to let me inside his castle. Barbarosa hadn't steered me wrong so far. I hoped this time would be no different.

The next morning over a cheap, but hardy breakfast of steaming porridge and strong, black coffee, I struck up a conversation with the innkeeper. He told me that Lord Dargan's cook sometimes came to market on Saturdays, which was only two days away. Even if she didn't, there were bound to be a few Lamedan villagers at the market, and I could beg or pay them for a ride on one of their carts. He said the baron's staff was small, but they might still be interested in hiring me, especially if I had good references and was willing to work hard. It was difficult for the nobleman to keep employees in such an isolated and strange spot as Lameda. I wondered if he was a hard person to work for, as well. I suspected he was.

"I understand Lameda is isolated, but what do you mean by 'strange?'" I asked the innkeeper and his face flushed, as if he'd said more than he meant to.

He shrugged. "Oh, nothing really. It's just a long way from everything up there on the mountain. And once the weather turns bad, there won't be any coming back down before Spring. Then there's the Wild Woods. The house and grounds are a bit too close to that for my liking."

"The Wild Woods—I think I've heard of it. Is it true that forest has strange creatures inside it?"

I got another shrug, and he mumbled something about needing to get back to work. He took off toward the kitchen then, and I went back upstairs to grab my cape and have a quick look around town. It didn't take long, because it was a really small place, hardly worthy of the name town. I asked around in a few shops about the coming market day on Saturday.

I had enough money for a few more nights at the inn with still enough left over if I were careful with my coins to pay some villager from Lameda to give me a ride up the mountain to the baron's castle. When Saturday finally arrived, I was disappointed at the low turnout. A few enterprising souls had set up stands in the middle of town around the town square. This was a poor area, and most of those present were selling produce they had grown in their small gardens. One or two sold bolts of cloth or cheap jewelry. One tinker had a few pots, and a sign said he would repair any that a customer brought to him. One old woman was roasting chestnuts over some hot coals in a huge round pan that

had a perforated bottom, and another half-grown boy was roasting sausages over a small grill. Like I said, it wasn't much of a market.

I bought a sausage roll and some of the old lady's chestnuts and stood around until midday, when the few people who'd come to market were beginning to pack up to go back home. I went over to a ruddy-faced farmer, who had sold his vegetables and was packing up to leave too. I knew from talking to him earlier that day that he was from the village of Lameda, so I asked him if he'd give me a ride on his cart back up to the baron's castle when he left to go home. He looked at me with a slight sneer on his face. I could see he had a "no," ready on his lips, but I held up one of the gold coins Wyatt had left with my uncle and said, "I can pay my way."

His whole face lit up with greed when he saw the coin. It was probably worth more than he'd made all day with his vegetables. And suddenly, he was all smiles. He began to clear away some of the boxes he'd brought his produce in to make room for me in the back of his cart.

"It's a long way, but we can be there by nightfall," he told me. "There aren't any fancy inns in Lameda though. And the soldiers close the gates to the baron's castle at dark."

Soldiers...I hadn't counted on soldiers, but it must be some of the same ones we'd heard doing target practice in the mountains on the long march from camp to the Crillian border. I wondered if they were responsible for the raids at the border too.

"I'll manage," I told the farmer with a bravado I didn't really feel.

He nodded and gave me another slight sneer as he looked me up and down. "If you say so," he replied, and I bit my tongue and told him I'd be back as soon as I settled up with the innkeeper. In truth, I needed to talk the owner into selling me a couple of quilts or heavy blankets, a basket of food and a jug of water, because it sounded like I had a long, cold night ahead of me. I was in luck, and he sold me two old quilts, which I rolled up and carried with me and some sandwiches and even some fruit in a small basket. I went back to meet the farmer who said he'd take me up the mountain. It was a good thing, I guessed, that the army had prepared me for sleeping pretty much anywhere, because I knew I probably had a night of sleeping rough ahead of me.

It grew noticeably chillier as we traveled up the road to the village. The higher we went, the more it became a bitter cold that seemed to radiate from out of the woods that ran alongside us almost all the way. The slight wind was colder too, like the breath of some Frost giant. I pulled one of the quilts around my shoulders and prepared to endure it.

The air this high up had a strong, cloying smell of pine, along with a darker, gamier scent underneath. I didn't want to think about what kind of animals might be responsible for that odor, but of course, my mind conjured up the stories of dragons and werewolves and flying monkeys that were supposed to be in the Wild Woods. Once I heard a strange howl that was cut off so abruptly it scared

me worse than if it had kept on going. What had made it stop so suddenly? To make things even worse, thick clouds had gathered as we went slowly up the mountain road, making the approaching evening even darker and gloomier.

Just before the pale sunlight disappeared completely, the farmer called back over his shoulder to me. “Lameda is just ahead, around that bend, but this is where you need to get down.”

“What? But why? I paid you to take me all the way to Lameda, to the baron’s house.”

“The baron may be glad of that—but he may also be angry that I brought a stranger to his home. It’s best for me that you get down here and walk the rest of the way.”

I tried arguing and even pleading with him, but he wouldn’t back down. He wanted me off that cart, and he wasn’t taking no for an answer. Resentfully, I gathered my bag and the quilts and hopped down off the cart. Then I stood watching as he urged his mules up the road, leaving me there on the darkening road behind him. Not far away, I heard another long, undulating howl from the Wild Woods beside me, so I quickened my pace up the steep road.

I couldn’t help glancing at the gathering clouds overhead and thinking of the story Wyatt had told me about the men who had gone looking for the viscountess and the sudden torrent of rain and mud that had swept them off that same road. The memory did wonders for helping me shake off how tired I was. I made it up to the village in record time and came into the tiny square. It was really just a collection of huts, not far from the castle gate, really—all that constituted the village of Lameda.

As predicted, the gates to the castle courtyard were locked up tight, though I tried them anyway. I also tried calling out to any guards who might be able to hear me and I even rang a bell up high on one wall, but my voice just echoed around the inner yard, and no one came. I set my bag down near the gate, spread out one of the quilts and sat down on it to think of what to do next. Since nothing really came to mind, I decided I’d better gather some firewood from the forest that crept so close to the castle walls or else settle in for a long, cold night. At least I’d be the first to know when the guards arrived back at the gates the next morning.

I squared my shoulders, reminded myself again that there were no such things as dragons, werewolves and flying monkeys and went over to the edge of the Wild Woods to gather some sticks, branches and other dead wood for my fire, thinking belatedly what an unfortunate name my mind had conjured up to describe the fallen branches I was looking for to make my campfire. The trip into the woods was uneventful, as I didn’t go in far, and I never heard or saw anything at all—if I discounted the shadows that seemed to lurk everywhere and even dart back and forth among the trees. I thought I heard the faraway chittering of some unknown animal, and I thought I saw a pair of red eyes staring at me, but it was probably my imagination. As long as it stayed faraway, I was all right with that.

I came out of the woods and built my small campfire not far from the gate, hoping the baron

wouldn't object to the smoke drifting over the wall into the courtyard. I took one of my omega pills, just in case the baron might come out of his castle sometime during the night to confront me. I desperately hoped Barbarosa had been right about him being attracted to my omega nature. I wanted to leave nothing to chance, because I was out of money now, with literally nowhere left to turn. If the baron didn't give me a job inside his household, I didn't know what I was going to do.

Tired and dispirited, I drew up my hood, wrapped the other quilt around me and prepared to endure the long, lonely night ahead. My last thought before sleep found me was whether or not Wyatt might be close by, within those castle walls. The idea gave me a little comfort, though, and I drifted off to sleep.



## Chapter Ten

*Darcy*

“You there! Who are you? Wake up and state your business!”

The loud, rumbling voice startled me out of an uneasy sleep the next morning, and I threw off the quilt I had wrapped around me and tried to jump to my feet. Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I looked up into perhaps the fiercest face I’d ever seen. The man it belonged to loomed over me, with a bushy blue-black beard that covered half his face.

Not only was he at least six and a half feet tall, but he was massively built too. That was alarming, but it wasn’t what made my mouth go dry and my hands tremble. It was the magnificent horse he was sitting on.

The beautiful animal was about sixteen hands high, measured from the highest point of the withers, where the neck meets the back down to the ground. Black with a long white stripe down his nose—Wyatt had called it a blaze. I knew that horse—it was Midnight, Wyatt’s horse and I was sure of it. That could only mean something terrible must have happened to Wyatt.

It took my breath away for just a second, because my first thought was that Wyatt would never allow this man to touch his beloved horse *if he were alive* to stop it.

That idea came to jeer at me for a few moments, and I staggered slightly and put out my hand to steady myself against the wall. Waves of nausea hit me, and I feared I was going to throw up at the man’s feet.

The man on the horse sneered at me. “What’s wrong with you? If you’ve brought some sickness to my gates, I’ll make you regret it!” he shouted at me, his eyes wild and mean. His hand dropped to a dagger at his waist.

“N-no, nothing like that, Your Lordship,” I managed, before he carried out his threat. “I must have gotten up too fast, and it made me dizzy. That’s all.” It wasn’t all, of course. Not by a long shot. It was the fact that there was no way Wyatt would have given up his horse willingly—the same thing Wyatt said about Asher’s horse, Whiskey, the one whose sudden appearance in the yard at the lodge had started Wyatt on this mission to find Asher and Brandon in the first place. I was worried sick, and my soul trembled at the thought that Wyatt could already be dead, and I had come for nothing.

But the man continued to glare down at me, as if considering whether or not to kill me and be

done with it. It gave me a chance to collect my wits. I looked him over carefully as he gazed down at me. He was not an Alpha, though he was as large as one. He was beta and not yet middle aged. His skin was a swarthy color, and his eyes were black. His gloved hands, clenched around the reins were approximately the size of small hams, and his beard was the thickest and bushiest I'd ever seen. And so black it looked almost blue in the soft morning sunlight.

This must be the baron, and he was unnatural looking in almost every way, from his huge size to his crazy blue beard and his strangely piercing, sapphire-colored eyes. His mouth was soft and sensual, though, and the wild beard was trimmed neatly around it, framing his full lips, though it was maintained nowhere else. My aunt once remarked that blue was a color that rarely occurred in nature, except in translucent ponds or lakes. Because of that, some people considered it to be a color not of this world. It was almost...inhuman.

"Well?" he thundered, leaning down over the pommel of the saddle to sneer down at me. "What are you doing here? Give me a reason I shouldn't set the dogs on you or string you up by your scrawny neck for trespassing on my property!"

"I-I..." Because I was upset about the horse, I wanted to yell back at him that this wasn't actually his property, and that I was outside the gates, and *where the fuck* did he get Wyatt's horse anyway? But something told me that was the wrong way to speak to this mountainous man who could no doubt crush me with one of those massive fists without breaking a sweat. My true nature was what Barbarosa had told me he'd respond to. So instead of yelling at him, I instinctively fell to one knee and lowered my head in supplication.

"Your lordship," I said, in a tone as meek and obsequious as I could make it, "Please forgive me, but I arrived very late during the evening, so I had no choice but to wait here until morning to see you."

"See *me*? For what?" he roared.

"I'm seeking employment, Your Lordship. I can provide references, and I hoped that such a magnificent house such as this one might have a vacancy in service."

The prolonged silence made me peek up to see him still glowering down at me, but I couldn't read the expression on his fierce face. That frown might have meant "I'm thinking about eating you for breakfast," or perhaps just, "get the hell out." I had no way of knowing, and I prayed that Barbarosa had been right about his attraction to omega qualities.

He continued to stare at me until it got to be beyond uncomfortable, but I stayed silent, waiting.

"Who *are* you?" he suddenly asked.

"My name is Benjamin," I replied, using the fake name I'd decided on at my aunt's house, when she wrote me the reference. "Benjamin Tate."

It was highly unlikely he knew the name of Wyatt's omega—even improbable—but better to be safe than sorry, so I had decided to use a fake name. Now that the initial shock was receding a little, I was hoping as hard as I could that the fact he was riding Midnight simply meant that Wyatt was being held here or somewhere close by. Anything else was unthinkable, so I decided I just wouldn't think about it.

It wasn't that I was cavalier about the possibility of his death...I simply couldn't hold the idea in my mind and still keep functioning. I'd think about it later. And I would find Wyatt, if it was the last thing I ever did.

Without another word, the man pulled on his horse's reins and turned Midnight's head away. He rode slowly toward the gates, and my heart sank. I thought I'd failed to convince him, and he was just leaving me here. It was only as he reached the gates that he stopped and turned back to look at me.

"Well? Are you coming or not?" he asked, and I jumped to my feet, scrambling to pick up my things and follow him inside to the courtyard. Once inside the gate, we were swarmed with his soldiers, who didn't touch me or talk to me, but gave me deeply suspicious looks. He ignored them completely and I watched him ride to the broad steps of the castle and dismount. He never even looked back as he mounted the steps and went inside. I stood inside the gates, feeling foolish and not knowing what to do until one of the men—an officer by the looks of his uniform, came over to growl at me.

"Who are you, boy?"

"M-my name is Tate. I'm here about a job as a servant. The baron told me to follow him in the gates."

That was a bit of a stretch, but he'd asked if I was coming inside. Close enough, I figured.

"Go around back to the scullery and talk to Mr. Nolan," he said. "He's in charge of the servants, and he's usually eating his breakfast there at about this time." He looked me up and down and sneered. "You don't look strong enough to do a man's job. Maybe you can work as one of the maids."

The men standing around him laughed, and I knew better than to react in any way. I simply said, "Thank you," and then hesitated. The man was unfriendly, but I still had to ask. "That was the baron, right?"

He looked me up and down before finally nodding. "Baron Dargan, yes."

"Thanks," I said and hurried around to the back side of the huge building before he could stop me, my head still reeling.

It was a long way—the house was huge, with a gray slate roof and at least four stories in height. Still, it was more of an old manor house than a traditional castle and had no towers or fortifications on top. It was long though, with many windows that looked out onto the courtyard. I had no idea how

many rooms were inside, but I suspected there were a lot of them. The castle looked ancient, and the once white stone siding was now yellowed with age.

The back of the house was almost deserted compared to the front courtyard. I found a broad door, with a couple of men dressed in similar clothing to the villagers I'd seen, engaged in bringing out rubbish from inside and stacking it near a cart to haul it away.

"Is this where I might find Mr. Nolan?" I asked, startling them a little.

One of them, a younger man with red hair, jerked his head toward the door. "He's inside. But where'd you come from?"

"I've come to ask for a job. Do you know if Mr. Nolan might be hiring? I met the Baron outside and he told me to come in and see Mr. Nolan."

The older man shook his head and looked a little surprised. "The baron did? You'd have to ask Mr. Nolan then 'bout that. You can go on in there if you want to. He's eatin' his breakfast, though, so I'd wait till he's done. Suit yerself."

"Thank you," I replied and went through the door that they'd propped open, but didn't immediately approach the people I could see sitting at a big table inside the scullery itself. I had come into a small storage area next to it so I could stand there and look my fill without them noticing me. A large man with a florid face and thinning gray hair sat at the head of the big table. He wore a dark suit of clothing and looked as if he considered himself to be pretty important. I decided that was probably Mr. Nolan, but I waited as patiently as I could for him to sit back in his chair and begin to drink another cup of coffee, before I cleared my throat and stepped boldly in.

"Excuse me," I said, coming out of the little area where I'd been standing. I think I startled a couple of the scullery maids, who jumped and let out little squeals that they quickly stifled. One of the older women at the table—probably the housekeeper from the way she was dressed—gave both the girls a long, disapproving look.

"Shush, you two. You know the baron doesn't like noise." She turned to me.

"Who are you and how did you even get in here, boy?"

"My name is Benjamin Tate. I've come about a job and actually, the baron let me in through the front gate. The men outside told me I could come in and speak to Mr. Nolan."

Her mouth literally fell open. "The baron told you to come in here?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She narrowed her eyes at me. But it was the other woman at the table who spoke up. She was perhaps the cook, because she wore a stained apron, looked hot and tired and kept pushing her gray hair off her face. She didn't look at all like my aunt's cook, Lucinda, who was about the same age, but much jollier than this lady. Lucinda had rosy cheeks, a cheerful smile and was fat from tasting her

own delicious, rich cooking. And she sometimes slipped me treats when she thought my aunt wasn't looking. Lucinda made amazing chocolate chip cookies that were my favorite, and she never skimped on the chocolate. I would be willing to bet that this woman in front of me would count the chips out precisely, and strictly rationed the chocolate chip to cookie dough ratio.

"Are you sure?" she asked suspiciously, thinning her already skinny lips further. "I could use some help down here with washing up and with the serving, but are you sure you didn't just sneak in when the guards weren't looking?"

"Why would you assume any such thing, Mrs. Lumpkin?" came a booming voice from the door on the opposite wall. The baron filled the doorway, ducking his head to peer in at the servants, who almost turned the table over when they scrambled to their feet, bowing and scraping to him. He stepped closer to the cook and leaned over her, giving her a frightening look. Or at least it frightened me—I would have hated to be on the receiving end of such a look.

Mrs. Lumpkin's skin turned white as the blood drained from her face, and she was as frozen in fear as a rabbit in front of a wolf. When he straightened up, Mrs. Lumpkin fell back against the wall, which seemed to be the only thing holding her up. I feared for a moment that she might have a stroke. What kind of man could instill such fear in a person?

He came toward me then and again, I instinctively bowed deeply in front of him and never looked up into his eyes directly. Up close, I thought I could smell the sorcery on him, like I had with Barbarosa Lagoon. His was a pungent mix of woodsmoke and that odd clover smell. Not exactly unpleasant, but it sent a chill down the middle of my back to lodge at the base of my spine.

He took in a lungful of me too, at the same time. His eyes looked puzzled and wary.

"Your Lordship," I said. "How good of you to come and help me get acquainted."

He held out a massive hand to me impatiently. "You mentioned references. Let me see them."

"Oh yes, indeed, Your Lordship." I pulled the letter out of my pack and handed it over to him. He scanned it quickly and tucked it inside his coat. "You're from Sudfarma?"

"Yes, your Lordship."

"What brings you here to Crillia?"

"The hope of a job, sir. After my previous employer retired, he and his wife, the lady who wrote my reference, moved to smaller lodgings. After no jobs were available in our district, she advised me I might try here in Crillia."

"Why?"

"Uh...what?"

"I said, why? Why come to Crillia? And to Lameda in particular, which is not exactly on the beaten path. What an interesting suggestion your former employer made to you."

“My former employer used to live near here, I believe. She remembered this house fondly. Seeing it, that is.”

“Did she now?”

All right, so it wasn't the best explanation I could have come up with, but it was all I could think of at the time. I never thought he'd ask for so many details.

After a long, considering look, he asked, “Where is your Alpha, boy?”

So, he had noticed my scent. Betas often did but were not impressed by it in the least. In fact, most betas found it unpleasant.

“My Alpha is dead, sir,” I lied, as convincingly as I could. “He was a soldier in the Army and was killed in battle.”

“I wasn't aware Crillia was at war.”

“He was killed in Sudfarma, sir. And not exactly a battle, but more like a Morovian raid.”

“And no one else wanted you? As pretty a boy as you are? With such pretty manners too.”

“Thank you, Your Lordship. My mistress, who wrote the letter, took me in. I'm a good worker.”

“We'll see about that,” he said, and then turned to Nolan. “Let him start tonight at dinner. We'll see if he knows how to serve properly. Give him a room in the servants' quarters so he can get settled and let me know when it's done.”

Nolan bowed to him, and I started to thank him again, but before I could get a word out of my mouth, he turned and strolled out of the scullery abruptly. An uncomfortable silence stretched out after he was gone. Then Mr. Nolan got to his feet and jerked his chin in my direction. “Come on, boy. Follow me.” I followed him out and up the narrow servant's stairs to the top floor.

I had at least made it inside with the help of the baron. Now I had to be smart and keep my eyes and ears open. Somewhere in this huge, old mansion, the baron was keeping Wyatt and his cousins captive. He had to be. All I had to do was keep my wits about me and I'd find them.

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Later that evening, I was in the scullery, trying to keep out of the way of the frenetic activity as the staff prepped for dinner service. The scullery maids were busy washing mounds of dishes the cook had dirtied up, and I saw one of them filling a small tray with bread and a few scraps she'd gleaned from the pots and pans before she scrubbed them. She saw me watching her and said she was going to feed the scraps to the dogs, but I hadn't seen any dogs since I'd arrived. I was trying to keep an eye on her and not be too obvious about it, when Mr. Nolan saw me standing by the wall.

“You there, what are you doing? Take that soup tray up to the dining room and be quick about it.

The baron hates to be kept waiting.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, just barely keeping myself from saluting him. He barked orders like my old first sergeant had done. As soon as I got settled, I had dressed in one of the uniforms Mr. Nolan had given me to wear. He had then taken me on a limited tour of the downstairs, so I knew at least where the dining room was. The interior of the castle was drafty and old, but it was well maintained, and the furniture in the dining room looked like solid mahogany and was very fine. The wallpaper was hideous though—a deep, purple color with garish yellow flowers. Still, it was high quality, and I knew this baron was rich—that much was apparent.

Which was probably why my livery was very fine, too, for such an out of the way castle—dark blue trousers made of good woolen material and a blue waistcoat with gold-colored buttons. On my feet were soft leather shoes I’d spent an hour polishing before dinner. Mr. Nolan was wearing a similar outfit, and we were the only ones serving. I grabbed the tray laden with bowls of soup and bread, draped a white napkin over my forearm, like I’d seen the footmen do at my aunt and uncle’s house when they were serving and went carefully up the steps to reach the main level of the house. Nolan was not far behind me, and I was concentrating so hard on not spilling anything, I barely looked up as I came in. I was still aware, of course, that two people were seated at the long, polished dining table. On one end was the baron, dressed in a beautiful dark waistcoat of black velvet with a snowy white shirt and cravat. He picked up a large goblet of blood red wine and drank deeply of it as his eyes followed me around the room. In fact, I felt his intent gaze and glowing eyes on me from the moment I entered, and it made me incredibly nervous.

At the opposite end of the table, some twelve feet away, was a beautiful young woman with blonde hair and dark, hunted eyes. She had long fingernails, and I thought she might be pretty when she wasn’t so nervous and stressed. She had on a beautiful, low-cut blue gown that left her shoulders and upper arms bare. It hung on her frame though, as if she’d lost a good deal of weight since she’d last worn it. I could see dark, finger-shaped bruises littering the creamy skin of her arms, shoulders and even her throat. She saw me notice the bruises and pulled up a dark, silken shawl to cover her shoulders.

I wondered if this was the viscountess Camilla, and if it was, why did she look as if she were about to have a nervous breakdown?

Her skin was pale, and she had ashen smudges under her eyes. Her movements were jerky, and her hands trembled as she picked up her fork. She wouldn’t make eye contact with me, though I tried. To be honest, she looked petrified, and she watched the baron like a cornered rat might watch a cat in the room.

She ate only a little of the soup I served her before quietly putting down her spoon. Dargan

glared at her along the length of the table. “Waste not, want not, *my dear*.”

She flinched at his words, as if he’d berated her, though they were mild enough. All except for the term of endearment. It almost sounded like a curse as it fell from his lips. She picked her spoon back up and tried valiantly to eat a little more, though it was obvious she was forcing down each mouthful. After a moment, he noticed it too.

He shouted at her, banging one of those big fists on the table and making the dishes rattle. “I said to eat your damn soup! Why must you always be so disobedient and willful? Are you trying to irritate me? Are you *deliberately* trying to make me angry? You are, aren’t you?”

She put her head down, still trembling, and said in a meek, tiny voice, “N-no my Lord. I’m so sorry, my Lord. I don’t mean to offend you.”

“Don’t you?” he thundered back. “I doubt that, you ridiculous fool. Bah! Just *leave*, if you’re not going to eat. Get out of my sight and go to your room! You disgust me.”

The poor lady got to her feet and stumbled from the table, practically running as she went toward the door and sobbing as she held a wadded-up handkerchief to her mouth. But as she passed his chair, a malicious smile creased his face, and he reached for her, snagged her hand and dragged her onto his lap. A wave of color rushed to her cheeks as he put his hand under her skirts and gave her a lascivious grin as she squealed not only with outrage, but seemingly with pain at whatever he was doing to her under her skirts. I shuddered to think what those ham-like hands could do to my own tender parts. Neither Nolan nor I moved so much as a muscle, and kept our eyes on the floor, but there was nothing wrong with our hearing. I felt like I should do something to stop this, but if I tried, he’d throw me out and first, I had to find out what had happened to Wyatt.

“I’ll come to you later tonight. Be ready,” he told her, his eyes hot with devout promise before he finally let her go. She managed to nod, keeping her face turned away from his as he let her go, and she sprang up and ran quickly from the room.

Neither Nolan nor I had made a sound, but Dargan still turned that violent temper of his on us like a weapon anyway.

“Well?” he shouted. “What are you waiting for? Don’t just stand there goggling at me. Clear these plates and serve me my next course!”

“Yes, Your Lordship,” I said, rushing forward and clearing away his bowl. “Right away, sir.”

I left Nolan to clear the woman’s dishes away and rushed back down the stairs to find his Lordship’s dinner. There was a huge beefsteak waiting on the warming pan, with some side dishes and another bottle of blood red wine. I quickly loaded my tray and raced as fast as I dared back upstairs to that ugly dining room, passing Mr. Nolan on the way.

“Have a care,” he whispered to me. “The baron is in a rare mood tonight.”



I went up to the dining room and served him, flinching a little as he cut into the steak and made me watch to make sure it was cooked just the way he wanted it, which was extremely rare. The bloody juices oozed out on the plate, but he swallowed the meat with apparent satisfaction, then waved me away. I stood back against the wall and watched him carefully, in case he needed anything at all.

Or in case he made any sudden moves.

Thank the gods he ate quickly and then sat back in his chair for me to clear his plate away. I knew there was one more dish left downstairs—some kind of cake for his dessert—but he scooted back his chair and abruptly stood, throwing down his napkin and getting to his feet to stride from the room without a word. I took his plate back to the scullery and it felt like a lucky escape.

Mr. Nolan told me to help clean up. “The cook may need help with the heavy pots and pans, so that will be your job too. We don’t have the luxury of only doing one task around here.”

“Of course, sir. But what about the Vicountess? Should we take a plate of something to her? She never finished her meal.”

He looked at me like I was insane. “No,” he said, already turning away. “The Vicountess is none of my concern, nor of yours.”

I didn’t say a word back to him, but I knew he was wrong. The lady, if I had to guess, was none other than the Viscountess Camilla from Sudfarma—the one that Asher and Brandon, and eventually Wyatt, had come to Crillia to find. I was almost sure of it. And if she was, then she was very much my concern, and I needed to find a way to speak to her alone to find out what she knew.

## Chapter Eleven

*Darcy*

Later that night, when the house was dark and silent, I crept downstairs.

The old castle was even more imposing and terrifying in the dark, like all places where many people have lived and died, and some of them unhappily. They leave behind impressions on the air and sometimes a sense of something moving around in the ether, as silent and inoffensive as the old portraits on the wall. Except for the ones who died violent deaths. I had always believed they weren't at rest, and something told me there were many of those lost souls in this house.

My aunt and uncle lived in an old house, and yet no ghost ever bothered me there, or came to stand jeering over my bed at night. This house was different, though—darker somehow and more breathless. It sounded foolish, even to my own ears, except I felt that this house contained terrible secrets. Was that why Barbarosa Lagoon had called the baron a “beast?” What did she know about him that I didn't?

I shook off the thought as I made my way down the stairs, holding tightly to the railing so I wouldn't break my neck. I went to the scullery first and to the door I'd seen the maid go through earlier, when she went to “give some scraps to the dogs.” I'd watched her get a key from the pantry where it hung on the wall that day, but when I opened the pantry door, no helpful key was hanging there. Who had moved it? Nolan? The housekeeper? Mrs. Lumpkin? Or the baron himself?

What were they hiding in the cellars, or should I say *who*? I made up my mind to get that key if it were the last thing I ever did. And in the meantime, I'd go see the viscountess. It hadn't been that long since both she and the baron had retired for the night, so I thought there was a good chance she might still be awake.

Unless, of course, the baron had kept his promise to come to her. At the time, I hadn't believed him, and thought he was only saying that to scare her, but what if he'd been serious? If he found me upstairs, and even worse, inside the Vicountess's room, it wouldn't go well for me, and I knew that for sure. If he didn't kill me outright—which he probably would—then he would throw me down some dark, damp stairs to the cellar and leave me there to rot.

Was that what he'd done with Wyatt and his cousins? Were they down there even now, suffering and waiting for someone to come help them? The idea made me moan softly and wring my hands, but

that kind of weak behavior would do no one any good. I made myself stop breathing so hard before I hyperventilated, because it would be all I needed to pass out in the middle of the scullery floor, hit my head and still be lying there when Mrs. Lumpkin came in and found me in the morning. I tried to slow my breathing down and calm myself.

I needed to find some food for the viscountess anyway and take it to her and hope like hell that I didn't get caught. If I could make the lady a friend, and let her know I was on her side, she might be able to give me information about what had happened to her guards and her attendants and even more important—at least to me—maybe she could tell me what had happened to Wyatt and his cousins. I needed whatever information I could pry out of her.

When I was calmer, I went back to the larder and found the makings of a small meal—nothing fancy, just cheese and bread and a big slice of the fruit cake the baron hadn't touched at supper. I bundled it all up in a napkin and gathering my courage, I made my way to the main stairs in the foyer.

The big house was as dark and quiet as a tomb, and every creak of the old stairs sounded to me like the crack of gun fire. Even so, and as frightened as I was, I kept going, creeping up to the second floor. I made it all the way to the next floor landing, with no sign of doors flying open in alarm and large, scary barons storming out, brandishing a weapon. It was only as I reached it, though, that I realized I had no idea which room might belong to the Vicountess. I cursed myself silently for my foolish lack of preparation, and then I decided I was already in the middle of this thing, so I may as well see it through. I could at least try to investigate and figure things out.

The baron had promised to go to her after supper. Was he just trying to scare her and intimidate her or was he with her right now? I pressed myself against a shadowy wall by a window and stayed still for a few minutes, waiting and listening.

As luck would have it, I didn't have too long to wait. From the end of the corridor, I heard a door open and then close again. A huge, dark figure came striding quickly toward me, his face illuminated by the candle in his hand. If it were possible, he looked even more frightening by the light of the candle. I shrank farther behind a set of curtains covering a big, mullioned window, pressed my back to the glass, trying to hold my breath until he passed by.

Suddenly, the curtain was ripped aside, and the baron peered in at me. I thought for a moment that my heart would stop.

“What are you doing up here, little omega?” he said, his voice menacing, yet not overly loud. He leaned in, sniffing at me. “Are you snooping?”

“N-no, sir. I-I can explain, sir,” I stammered. “I went downstairs to fix myself a small snack. I was too nervous to eat my dinner. And-when I finished, I got turned around and came up the wrong staircase. When I realized what I'd done, I was going back down but then I heard the door and

saw you coming.

“So you hid from me?”

“Yes, sir. I’m so sorry.”

He kept glaring at me, shaking his head. “The main staircase looks nothing like the servants’ stairs. Why are you lying to me?”

“I’m *not* lying, sir,” I said, lying through my teeth. “Please believe me.”

He leaned in close to me with his glittering eyes and his bushy beard. So close, I could feel the hair on his beard scratching my face. “Swear it,” he said, and his breath smelled like ozone. Like dark magic.

“I swear, sir,” I said, and he loosened his grip and took a step back.

“Very well then, I’ll believe you. This time. Go to bed immediately and don’t get up until time for your morning chores, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. I will.”

I tried to slide past him, and he grabbed my arm. “Are you a good, obedient boy, Benjamin? If you are, you’ll be rewarded, and I’ll be most pleased with you. But if you’re not…” He let the words trail away, but the look on his face was terrible, and I couldn’t hold his gaze.

I dropped my eyes and stammered. “I-I can be a g-good boy, sir.”

“Can you now?” he purred at me and ran one huge hand down my arm. I shuddered—I couldn’t help it, but he seemed to like the fact that he terrified me. He smiled and did it again.

“Take no more walks outside your room at night, Benjamin. It’s far too dangerous for a pretty little omega like you. As your employer, it’s my duty to look after you now.”

“Yes, sir. Whatever you say.”

He seemed to like my reply, because he leaned in even more, until his nose was grazing the side of my throat. I struggled to stay absolutely still and not cringe away.

The next moment he straightened and took a step backward. “Run along, now.”

I moved past him on shaking legs and made it down the main stairs and back to my own room, furious with myself for being so intimidated by him. Once safely inside, I walked up and down in a helpless fury, thinking of how much he’d intimidated me and how I wish I’d stood up to him. Finally, I threw myself into bed, realizing I’d have to be up in only a few hours, but I lay awake for a long time, thinking of all the things I should have said and done. It was infuriating and I wished again for the millionth time that I had Wyatt here beside me.

The next morning came too early as anticipated, but I managed to get out of bed, despite very little sleep and go down to the scullery to see what chores Mr. Nolan had for me to do.

When I got there, everyone was at breakfast, so I made myself a plate from the sideboard and sat

down to eat. It was the first good meal I'd eaten since I'd been there, and I realized I was ravenous. I half expected the baron to make an appearance just to give me some orders, since he'd seemed so keen the night before, but the morning remained quiet, and I went about my duties and never saw the baron again until that evening at dinner.

Once again, Nolan and I did the serving at dinner, and again, the Vicountess was quiet, barely looking up from her plate. I made up my mind to try to get to her room as soon as I could to speak to her, even as scared as I was of the baron.

As for Dargan, he barely looked at me, and while I was glad of it, I couldn't help but wonder at how strangely he'd acted the night before. It was as if my fear of him excited him and that frightened me more than anything.

I was too afraid to go again that night, and in fact, it wasn't until two more nights passed that I finally decided I couldn't wait any longer. Every day that went by might mean more torture for Wyatt and his cousins, and I couldn't stand to think of them somewhere, suffering. I waited until much later this time, and it was just past the witching hour of midnight when I crept out of my room and made my way to the Vicountess's room, stopping to get food on the way again, because again, she had eaten almost nothing at dinner. It was deathly quiet on the landing that led to her room, and I jumped at every creak and groan of the old floorboards. I crept down the landing to the room I'd seen the baron come out of a few night's before. I figured it must be her door, and afraid the baron might hear me, I tapped very lightly on it. About the time I thought she couldn't hear me or just wouldn't answer, the doorknob turned, and the door cracked open the tiniest bit.

I could only see a small sliver of her face peering around the door. Her eye widened as she saw me, and she pulled the door open farther. She had a look of dread on her face, rapidly cycling through confusion and then terror as she realized where she'd seen me before. "Oh gods," she whispered fiercely. "Aren't you the new footman from dinner? What are you doing here? If he finds you, he'll kill us both. Go away!"

"Let me in and he won't find me." I held up the napkin. "Look. I brought you some food. You must be hungry."

She still looked afraid, but after a long moment of hesitation, she stepped to the side so I could duck inside, and she closed the door softly behind me. The room was messy, with the bed in shambles and the covers tossed to the foot of the bed. It looked as though the Vicountess had been trying to put things back in order when I knocked. I noticed the red marks on the side of her face and more bruises on her arms.

"Was the baron here tonight?"

She gave me a wary look. "Why do you ask?"

“Vicountess, I don’t mean to offend you, but I think you’re being abused by your husband.”

She drew herself up and glared. “Who are you to ask me such questions? You must be crazy to come here and say such things. You’re going to get us both killed.” But she grabbed the bundle of food I was holding out to her, as if afraid I’d snatch it back and stared down at the contents. Then she ran over to the window seat, already gnawing at some crusty bread, like she was ravenous.

“Who are you?” she murmured around the food in her mouth. “Why have you come here?”

“I’m a friend,” I said, trying to calm her. “An Alpha named Wyatt, cousin and pack mate of King Harrison sent me. The king and queen have been searching for you.”

Her eyes widened dramatically, and she bounced a little on the window seat. “Did they send you? Harrison and Rozamond? Are they coming here?”

“You haven’t seen Alpha Wyatt then?”

“No.” She frowned and bit her plump, bottom lip. “I saw the other two Alphas, though. The cousins of Harrison, I think. They came to talk to my husband.”

“What happened to them?”

She got a hunted look on her face, “I-I don’t know. They had dinner here one evening a couple of weeks ago and told me they’d come back to talk to me the next morning, but Dargan said they suddenly decided to go back home, and I haven’t seen them since.”

“They never made it home. My Alpha, Wyatt, came to look for them.”

She shook her head. “I never saw this Wyatt, or the other two again after that evening at dinner. I’m sorry, but I have no idea what happened to them.”

“Do you want to leave this place?”

Her face crumpled for a moment, and she shook her head like she felt hopeless. “He’ll never let me go. He despises me, but he would never hear of me leaving. He’d kill me first.”

“Was it the baron who put those marks on you?”

She shrugged.

“Ma’am, please tell me if he’s been hurting you. I only want to help.”

She glanced up in surprise and then nodded as fat tears seeped out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. “He calls it ‘correcting’ me. He does it when he thinks I’m disobedient or willful. He says he has to teach me to be a good wife to him.” She dropped the half-eaten sandwich back down on her lap. “I brought a maid with me when I came here. She helped me dress for dinner and did up my hair. She told me once that the other servants told her there was a wife here before me—a young woman from Crillia. But she left suddenly one day and never returned.”

“Where is this maid? Can you arrange for me to talk to her?”

The princess shook her head. “No. I never saw her again after she told me that. She left suddenly

too.”

If the baron had somehow discovered she’d been carrying tales to his new wife, then I had no doubt she’d made a “sudden” departure.

“Is there someplace in this house that the baron might have imprisoned the Alphas who came here?”

She frowned and looked puzzled. “Imprisoned them?”

“Yes,” I answered impatiently. “They would never have simply left you here without even speaking to you again, and I think the baron might be too afraid to have murdered them, even if he could. At least not right away. There may still be a chance to save them. They’re nobility, too, and too closely related to kings for the baron to kill them outright.”

“I-I don’t know. He has a big keyring with keys to every door in this castle, but he keeps it on his belt at all times and guards it jealously. That’s all I know.”

“And you don’t know of any secret places he could be hiding them?”

“He has a secret room in the attic that he goes to from time to time.”

“What about the cellars? Do you know if he goes there too?”

“I don’t know about the cellars. Only the attic.”

“I saw the maids with a key a few nights ago. They used it to go through a door in the scullery that I think must lead to the cellars. I need to get in that door. Do you know where that key is now? Or any keys?”

She shook her head and looked annoyed. “He has a key ring he guards jealously, but it’s always at his side. He may have given a key from it to the maids for something he wanted them to do and then taken it right back again. Like I said, he hardly lets those keys out of his sight.”

Frustrated, I blew out a long breath and turned away. This poor lady knew nothing that would help me find the Alphas, so I should leave and get back to my room before the baron made an appearance. I shuddered to think what he’d do if he found me on this floor again after telling me not to leave my room at night. I turned around to head for the door, but Lady Camilla jumped to her feet and grabbed my arm.

“Wait. If you need to get in that door so badly, then why not just pick the lock?”

“What?”

“Pick the lock. All these locks are like the ones in the old home in Sudfarma. A hairpin is what I used as a girl. when my parents used to hide my Christmas gifts from me.” She reached up to her hair and pulled a long pin from it. “Here. Use this. It’s easy to do. It always worked for me.”

I looked down at it and then back up at her. Could it possibly be that easy or would it even work? I found it hard to believe. She gave me a little smile, and I wondered if this could possibly work.

“Thank you, Lady Camilla. If this helps me find them, then maybe we can all go back home.”

She clutched my arm and looked at me, the smile wiped off her face and her eyes haunted and filled with dread. “You have to hurry. We need to leave this place before that monster kills us all.”



## Chapter Twelve

*Darcy*

It was several more days before I got the chance to explore again at night. I'd been kept busy mucking out the stables. Like Mr. Nolan frequently told me, the staff was too small to do only a few jobs. He said the last stable hand had left "abruptly." There was that word again. And they hadn't yet found anyone to replace him.

I shoveled out the stables along with the other man assigned there, and tried to ignore the idle soldiers that seemed to always be lounging around the courtyard and who came to look in at me every chance they got. None of them seemed to be Alphas, though, and I thanked the gods for that. I suppose the baron didn't want any Alphas around.

At least working in the stables, I got to check on the horses and make sure they weren't being abused in any way. They were still as unfriendly as ever and rolled their eyes at me when I got close. One of them was Midnight, and I wasn't all that surprised to see the big red roan that belonged to Brandon in the stall next to him. Somehow, Whiskey, who was safely back home in Morovia, had gotten away, and with the help of Asher's magic perhaps, had made it home. Or maybe he made it on his own. I didn't know enough about horses to be sure. What I did know was that none of the Alphas would ever have been parted from their horses willingly. That could only mean they were either imprisoned somewhere close by, or they were dead.

I refused to believe that Wyatt was gone, because I felt like I would know if he was dead. Maybe it was just a form of denial, but if I really believed he was dead, I wouldn't be able to function, so I refused to even entertain the idea. He *was* alive. And I would find him. And there was nothing else I could believe.

It was about a week later that the baron caused a terrible scene with his wife at dinner.

Lady Camilla had managed to stay in the room past the first courses that evening. She was quiet and had been agreeable to everything the baron said, so I had hopes that they could avoid another scene. Not only for her sake, but for mine. It was painful to watch the baron treat her so badly and not intervene or do anything to help. I had promised myself I'd do something if it happened again, even if he struck me down.

We had made it all the way to the main course when it happened. When I uncovered her plate, she

looked down at the small squab on the dish with distaste. I wondered why, because it looked all right to me and smelled delicious, but she must have had previous experience with the way it was prepared. When she cut into the breast, red juices ran out and the piece she cut out wasn't done at all. She made a small sound of disgust and the baron exploded.

“Is nothing ever good enough for you?”

His features twisted into a wild, distorted rage all out of proportion to her offense, and suddenly the fire in the fireplace roared up with a loud angry sound as well. The baron surged to his feet and glared at her. Then he literally threw his knife and fork at her across the long table, and the fork struck her squarely in the forehead, causing her to scream in shock and pain. Blood gushed from the wound, and she grabbed the fork and literally had to pull it out. I started toward her, but he was already out of his seat and storming around the table toward her, and I was in his way. He shoved me aside with a roar, and I slammed back into the wall. Nolan grabbed my arm to pull me back to my feet and his hands were shaking violently.

Lady Camilla still cowered in her chair, probably in shock, but he pulled her from it and began dragging her from the room. She stumbled and fell, but rather than stop, he just kept dragging her away by her arm. Again, I started toward them, but Nolan wrenched me back against the wall.

“Are you crazy?” he whispered hoarsely in my ear. “He'll kill us both if you try to interfere. You must stay out of this!”

The fire roared again, and I wondered if the baron were somehow responsible for it. The next second the flames died back down, and I was left to think I must have imagined it or it had been only a log shifting.

“But we have to do something,” I cried. I could hear her body thumping on the stairs as he dragged her up them, but he shook his head violently.

“There's nothing to be done. Clean up the mess at the Vicountess's place at the table and then go downstairs. *Now.*”

I did as he asked, because by the time I got out of the dining room, they had disappeared up the stairs, and all was quiet again. I hesitated at the bottom of the stairs for a long time, but then Nolan came out and saw me.

“Go, damn you,” he hissed at me, and gave me a shove. “This is none of our concern.”

Things were almost ominously quiet after that, and neither the baron nor the Vicountess ever came down to finish dinner. Later that night in my room at the top of the stairs, I thought I heard a single cry, cut off suddenly. I listened for a long time afterward, but never heard anything like it again.

That next day, Mr. Nolan announced that the baron and his wife had both left for a short visit to some of the baron's friends in the capitol city of Crillia. He said they'd be back in a few days. When

I'd glanced at him in alarm, he'd given me a quelling look, as if daring me to say a word.

That night, I went upstairs to the Vicountess's room. Nothing was out of order and some of her clothing was still hanging neatly in her wardrobe. On a hunch, I went up to the attic room, though, and knocked softly on that door. The hairpin trick wouldn't work, because the door suddenly had a bright, new padlock on it. I tapped softly to see if anyone was inside, but only silence replied. It was only as I was leaving that I saw a long, blonde hair lying on the floor across the doorway. I knew then that Lady Camilla must be inside that room, probably too frightened to answer the door or maybe even tied up in a corner somewhere.

I tried again to knock and even called out to her, but the Vicountess didn't answer, and no one came to the door or made the slightest sound behind it.

Barbarosa Lagoon had once told me to search high and low, however, so when the baron still hadn't returned two nights later, I decided to go down to the scullery just past midnight and pick the lock on the cellar door with the hairpin given to me by Lady Camilla.

I had already explored most of the rest of the house by then, and I was even gaining a bit of confidence. Twice now since the incident in the dining room, I'd stood outside the baron's room, trying to get up the courage to go inside, but I chickened out both times.

On the other hand, picking the lock in the old scullery that night proved to be amazingly easy. So easy, it made me nervous, like I was being set up in some way. After the lock clicked and opened in my hand, I stepped through quickly into the old passageway leading to some narrow stone steps, the middle stones worn down with great age. When I stood at the top of the stairs, a musty odor of damp and a gamey, unpleasant smell of rat piss rose to hit me in the face. I'd need a light if there were rodents down there, so I went back to the pantry and found a candle, lit the wick from the coals in the fireplace and made my way down the passageway and the steep, old stairs.

About halfway down, the walls began to glisten with wetness and the smell of mold and rot was stifling, but I made myself keep going. The thought that Wyatt could be close by kept me going, despite my fears. I came to a corridor with old, solid, iron doors, half rusted, but still strong looking. As I stood there hesitating, something ran over my foot, and I jumped and almost dropped the candle. That would have left me in the dark, which was terrifying. I tightened my grip, gritted my teeth and kept going.

I thought about calling out, but I was afraid to make any noise. What if Dargan had some guards down here? I went up to the first door and tried the doorknob. It was locked, of course, so I bent down and tried to pick the lock again, thinking I'd never be lucky enough for it to work a second time. I was right—it didn't work.

I began looking around for keys, thinking that perhaps the guards would have keys somewhere

close by. And since these doors were ancient, I figured the keys to them would be large and clunky and hard to carry around.

I poked my head in every little storeroom or storage I could find and got lucky. In a small, rusty storage bin on the wall, a set of old iron keys was hanging on a nail. I grabbed them and went over to the first cell door. Fitting the old key in the lock, I held my breath and twisted it, shocked when it actually made a clicking noise and opened up. I was so surprised, I flung open the door and it banged back against the wall with a loud, hollow sound.

I almost passed out at how the noise reverberated throughout the cellar, expecting a whole mob of guards to swarm into the cellar any minute. Every muscle tensed, waiting for a loud outcry when they spotted me where I definitely wasn't supposed to be, I froze for a full five minutes, feeling unable to drag enough air in to make my lungs work properly. But that level of fear can't be sustained indefinitely. As time ticked by and no one came running down the steps or from some side entrance to see what had happened, I slowly relaxed. The servants slept on the third floor and the baron and his lady's rooms were in another wing, but that noise had been so loud in the hush of the cellar that it seemed like I must have shaken the whole castle. Taking a deep breath after a few more minutes passed with no alarm being raised, I sighed with relief and moved down to the next door.

I knelt down, tried a few more keys and moved them around until I heard another click. This time, I'd open the door slowly and not just fling it recklessly open.

I stood back up and slowly eased open the door. Before I could get it even halfway, my wrist was grabbed in an iron-like grip that made me cry out in shock and pain. Then whoever had me twisted that wrist up behind my back, threw a muscular arm around my neck and pulled me back into a rock-like body so hard that for a moment I was stunned.

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*Wyatt*

It was cold and damp as usual that night in the dungeon room we were locked in, with only a small slit of a window to show whether it was day or night outside. It was still dark, which meant that yet another day had passed in this miserable cell the bastard baron was keeping us in.

Winter was coming on fast and with no heat in this place, I didn't think we'd last long. We'd have probably starved to death by now if not for the young girl who brought us scraps from the baron's table. It was never enough, but I thought she wasn't supposed to bring us even that much. There was sometimes stale, hard bread that his soldiers would bring and throw inside, so I think his plan had

been to feed us nothing but a little bread and water to weaken us, but the girl, at least, still had a soul left. She kept slipping us small scraps of meat and sometimes potatoes or other vegetable pieces to supplement that, but it was never enough, and we still went hungry. Still, the pain didn't gnaw at us quite as badly, and none of us were ill yet. It was only a matter of time before the baron wondered why we weren't dying fast enough, though, and then he'd no doubt come to finish the job.

I was worried about Brandon, who said he hadn't been quite unconscious when they came to haul him and Asher out of the dining room after they'd been drugged, and he'd tried to fight back. One of the soldiers had hit him on the head, and I think he'd sustained a concussion. He had bad headaches ever since waking up in this place and was frequently nauseated. If and when he did eat, he threw up most of it, and it had been almost a month since his attack.

As for weapons, I'd painstakingly sharpened a buckle from my belt, and Asher had found a piece of hard slate that had broken off one wall, and he'd sharpened it into a point on one corner. Asher could also use his magic, though it hadn't worked all that well so far. We thought the baron must be a sorcerer and have some strong spell already in place to block Asher's magic. The iron door didn't help either.

I turned over and scooted closer to Brandon's back. Asher and I tried to share as much body heat with him as we could at night, and it helped a little. I tried to clear my mind so I could rest, but the thoughts kept racing through my head. It had been two weeks since I'd been stuck down here, and much longer for Asher and Brandon. I had to count up the time to make sure I still could, and it got harder to do every day. I knew that was a sign of my growing weakness, both mentally and physically, so I fought it off as hard as I could, though I knew it was only a matter of time.

Eventually, Harrison or maybe Lex would come looking for us, but I feared it would be too late by the time they arrived. I was angry at myself for being caught so easily by the baron in the first place, and my cousins had been captured the same way. He had been odd, but friendly at first when I'd arrived. Even welcoming, in a way.

But when I'd asked him about the missing girls over dinner in his antique dining room, he'd ignored me and plied me with wine and rich foods, trying to change the subject. When I persisted, he'd grudgingly admitted my cousins had been there and had come and talked to him but left soon after to go into the Wild Woods to see if somehow the soldiers had strayed there on the way up the mountain.

While he was telling me this load of bullshit, I tried to appear as if I might believe him. My plan was to leave with my men and go back down to the village at the foot of the mountain and get word to Harrison that there was something very wrong with this baron. I thought he was insane, and I knew that he must be a warlock, because sorcery draped around him like a cape, even clouding his breath. I

felt as though I might choke on it when he stood too close. But I thought it was even more than that.

His eyes had something hot and hateful peeping out of them at times, and I was afraid he was demon possessed with the evil inside him waiting to devour everyone it could before consuming him from the inside out. I'd seen it happen once before with a truly wicked warlock, who had made a bargain with a demon and then was consumed by the creature. The only remedy that time had been to cut off the warlock's head and burn his body to ash. I'd be happy to dispense the same fate to Dargan.

When I stood up to take my leave from that dinner, a strange lethargy had overtaken me, and I became so weak I collapsed to the floor. My men who had been waiting outside in the courtyard for me were nowhere to be seen as I pulled myself up and stumbled to the front door, and I feared for them.

Passing out while I was trying to make it outside to my horse was the last thing I remembered until I woke up hours later, with a crushing headache. I was in a dungeon room and Asher and Brandon were beside me, trying to awaken me. From the shape they were in—particularly Brandon—I'd known they'd suffered a similar fate. Now all of us were trapped here in this dungeon room.

I tossed back over to my other side, trying to get comfortable enough to sleep if I could. As it always did, my mind traveled to a certain beautiful omega, who would be so worried because I hadn't made it back home yet.

Like everyone, I supposed, who was faced with their own mortality, I frequently went over and over the mistakes I'd made in my life, especially when it was late at night and the others were quiet. My behavior toward Darcy led the list, along with all the things I should have said to him and never did.

I'd never said I loved him, never admitted it, even to myself. Not once. And now that I couldn't tell him anymore—now that I'd missed my chance for happiness with the love of my life, all I had left were regrets. Why hadn't I spoken up and told him how much he meant to me? Told him how beautiful and how necessary he was to my happiness? I'd have done almost anything for one more chance with him, and why had it taken me so long to realize it?

I thought it might be a matter of trust. When you admitted to another person and to yourself that you loved them, and that they were of vital importance, and you probably couldn't live without them, it was a huge thing. It changed everything, and I simply hadn't been able to step up and do it. I was very afraid now that I'd never get the chance.

A loud, clanging noise from the passage outside the room we'd been locked in made me start and raise warily to one elbow. I heard a gasp and then soft footfalls in the corridor outside. It was the middle of the night—I figured nothing good could be outside that door. I thought it could mean only one thing. Dargan was finally making his move.

I put my hand over Brandon's mouth, woke him and watched as he quickly awakened Asher on his other side. Then quietly as we could, we got up and took positions around the door. I could hear faint scraping noises in the door lock, and I tensed, getting ready for action. It was dark inside the dungeon room, but my eyes had adjusted to it a bit. I was ready.

When that door opened, I planned on killing the first man through it.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Darcy*

The arm began tightening around my neck, but just as spots began dancing in front of my eyes and I started gasping for air, I was suddenly released and whoever had me took my shoulders and wrenched me around to peer down into my face.

“*Darcy?*” came the incredulous voice of my Alpha. “*Darcy, is that you?*”

I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out except a few little croaks.

The next thing I knew I was being crushed to him and practically smothered with kisses. He was begging me to speak to him, but he was holding onto me so tightly I couldn’t take in a good enough breath to respond. I was vaguely aware someone else was trying to pull me from his arms. A tug of war was going on with him and the cousins, with me as the prize. In their defense, I think they were trying to save me, but Wyatt won. He turned his back on them and hunched over me, crooning and patting my face. I guess he was trying to say he was sorry. I knew he was being driven by his pheromones, so I just let him do what he wanted and finally after a few minutes, he began to calm down. Of course, by that time, he had me stripped naked, supposedly so he could check me for injuries, or so he said.

Thankfully, one of the cousins threw my shirt over my bottom half to help cover me up a little. Wyatt never even noticed, still trying to get me to respond to his questions.

“How are you here?” he was asking, over and over. “Is Harrison outside? Or Lex? Did they bring soldiers?”

I shook my head again for what felt like the hundredth time. “No,” I said again in a scratchy voice. “I’m trying to tell you; I came alone.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s a little crazy, Darcy,” Asher said, squatting down beside us. “You must have hit your head. No way you came here all this way and found us on your own.”

Wyatt shot him a look, not liking his tone, I guess, but Asher shrugged an apology. “Sorry, Wyatt, but he’s not making sense.”

“I’m not lying,” I said, getting angry. Why were Alphas so obtuse? Did they truly think that because I was omega, I didn’t have enough intelligence to find them. “I came alone.”

“Darcy,” Wyatt said in a gentle tone, like he was talking to a child or an idiot. “We don’t think



you're lying. Only confused. We just can't understand how you knew to come here to the baron's castle—which is a long way from where I left you at your aunt's home—all the way to this village, this dungeon room, *inside this castle*, to find us. You must admit it's hard to believe."

"Must I? And yet here I am and here you are. And maybe if you hadn't tried to kill me as I came in to *rescue* the three of you, I'd have been able to tell you how I got here."

Brandon snorted a laugh, and I noticed for the first time how weak he sounded and how he had to hold onto the wall to stand up. He looked even worse—pale and thin and exhausted. He needed a physician as soon as we could find him one.

Meanwhile, as I'd been distracted by Brandon, Asher and Wyatt had been exchanging looks. "You have an unusual omega, Wyatt," Asher said, with not a little sarcasm.

"You can say that again," Wyatt replied and gave me a look that said he, too, thought I was altogether too mouthy. "You have no idea. Look, Darcy, I've apologized for attacking you, but how were we to know it was someone friendly coming in here in the middle of the night? We've been expecting the baron to try and finish what he started ever since we got here."

"Speaking of the baron," I said, "maybe we need to stop talking and just get you out of here before somebody comes down to see what all the noise is about."

Wyatt shook his head. "These stone walls are two feet thick. And we've barely seen anyone resembling a guard since they threw us in here. We have time for you to explain to me how you're here, Darcy."

"Oh, for the gods' sake, I took a public carriage to Redmill, the town at the foot of the mountain. Then I paid a local farmer to bring me up here on his cart. When I got here, I asked for a job as a servant at the front gate."

"You asked for a job?"

"Yes. From the baron himself actually. He was riding your horse, by the way."

Wyatt gave me a tight-lipped look. "Never mind that for now. Are you saying you simply waltzed up to the gate and asked the *baron* for a job?"

"Not saying I 'waltzed' anywhere, but yeah, I asked him. And he gave me one. I've been here working as a footman, and a stable hand and whatever else they needed me to do for almost two weeks now. Seems like they have a hard time getting people to work up here. Imagine that."

"And then what? You just decided to go exploring in the middle of the night?"

"Something like that, yes. I've been searching for you every chance I got. It's why I came looking in the first place, obviously. And I have a lot to tell you."

Wyatt and the other Alphas were looking at me like they were stunned, so I kept going. "The lady you were looking for is here. She did arrive, despite what the baron told her family."

“The viscountess,” Asher said. “Yes, we know. We saw her at dinner the first night we arrived, and the baron allowed us to talk to her.”

“She told me she saw you.”

“You’ve actually spoken to her too?”

“Yes. I went to her room, and she let me in.”

Wyatt clapped a hand over his forehead. “You went to her room.”

“Yes. It was the only way I could talk to her. I’m a footman, after all and not a lady’s maid. But she talked to me and admitted the baron was abusing her. She has bruises and marks on her arms and shoulders. I’ve actually seen him abuse her at dinner. This last time, he dragged her out of the room and then up the stairs. I know he hurt her, but when I tried to intervene, the butler stopped me.”

“Thank the gods for small favors,” Wyatt said, his mouth twisting sarcastically.

“Well, I haven’t seen her since, and he was open with his abuse of her, I can tell you that for free. The servants never even tried to help her, because they’re all terrified of him.”

“Darcy, don’t you see how dangerous he is? If he caught you...”

“Well, he hasn’t so far. Once he did, actually, on the upper landing, but I talked my way out of it—told him I had been exploring the castle and took a wrong turn.”

Wyatt put his hand over his forehead again and sighed. After a moment, he took my chin in his hand and made me look into his eyes. “This stops now, Darcy. Do you understand?”

“But what if he’s done something to the Vicountess? I need to find out.”

“No, you don’t. You’ll leave this up to us now. And you’ll stay in your room while we do.”

“But you don’t understand. I think the baron has put the viscountess in an attic room and locked the door so she can’t leave. Like I said, they had a terrible fight a few nights ago, and then he left afterward, and her room is empty now too, and I think she may be upstairs in that attic. It has a brand new padlock on the door. If we can rescue her, then everyone will know what a horrible person he is, and we can tell the king. If we go now to look for her, maybe we can find her and then get away down the mountain before the baron comes back home.”

“What about the soldiers in the courtyard? How will we dodge them?” Asher asked.

Wyatt gave him an exasperated glare. “Wait a minute. My omega isn’t dodging anybody. We’ll handle the soldiers, though we might need a small diversion to get the horses out of the stables.”

Brandon interrupted this time. “Are you crazy? You’re not actually contemplating this, are you?”

“Not with my omega, no. He can stay with you while we go up to search this room he’s talking about and look for the Vicountess. After all, if she’s here somewhere, we can’t just leave her.”

“Agreed,” Asher said, nodding.

“But I need to get Darcy clear of this house and keep him safe.”

As they'd continued talking, I'd been already putting on my clothes, but I stopped what I was doing and looked up at Wyatt. "If you think you're stashing me somewhere, then you're crazy. I'm in this thing too, you know."

Wyatt shook his head. "Darcy, if the baron is gone, then now is the time for us to try and find the Vicountess and get out of here. We can regroup down the mountain, contact Harrison and come back after this bastard later."

"So, you go ahead, and I'll try to make some kind of diversion to distract the soldiers in the courtyard."

Asher and Wyatt looked at each other incredulously. "Have you hit your head?" Wyatt said. "We already told you that's not happening. Now take us upstairs and you can take Brandon to your room to rest while we search. Wait for us there and we'll find the Vicountess if she's here and come for the two of you."

I didn't see any way of convincing him because he really was such a stubborn ass, so I took them up the shadowy, nasty steps to the scullery, and I even let him hold my hand all the way, but it was dark, after all, and let's not forget—*rats*.

The house was silent as we crept upward out of that cellar, and I took that as a good sign. I felt like it was now or never for searching the baron's bedroom for the attic key, and I told Wyatt as much when we made it to the scullery. The whole household was quiet and still sleeping.

"With any luck, I can be in and out of the baron's bedroom, with no one ever being the wiser in a few minutes," I told Wyatt, still thinking I could convince him. "Hopefully, I'll find the key and then I can come for you. We can all check out the attic room, just to ease our minds. Then if the Vicountess isn't there, we can leave. We can make it to the stables and get the horses and get out of here."

That's what I meant to say, anyway, but as soon as I opened my mouth, Wyatt clamped his hand over it and hissed in my ear. "Be quiet. There is no 'we.' Point me in the direction of the main staircase and then get the hell up to your room and lock the door. Take Brandon with you, and we'll be back for the two of you after we search."

He pulled his hand off my mouth, turned me around to face the servants' stairs and gave me a little push, mouthing the word, "*Go*," at me when I turned to give him a dirty look.

I still gave him the fiercest expression I could muster, which simply bounced right off him, and took Brandon's arm to help him climb up to my room at the top of the stairs. On the way up, I looked long and hard at a small door near the top. Recently in my explorations, I'd discovered this old servant's door that was a shortcut from the servant's quarters and led to a short corridor and then over to the main part of the house. It actually came out on the second floor landing. I wondered briefly what Wyatt and Asher would do if I suddenly popped out that door and then decided I probably didn't

want to know.

By the time we got to my room, Brandon looked even paler and more exhausted than before, so I led him over to my bed and got him to lie down. I covered him with my blanket and the old quilts I still had, because even though it was warm up here, he was shaking some.

“Just try to rest,” I told him, and he nodded and then closed his eyes.

As for me, I started to pace. It was still not long past one o’clock in the morning, even though it seemed much later. I opened my door and stood at the top of the stairs, listening, but I couldn’t hear a thing. Then suddenly, from the courtyard, I heard a commotion of horses and what sounded like a carriage. I flew to the window and to my horror, I saw the baron’s fancy coach pulling around to the front steps. All I could think of was warning Wyatt and Asher that the baron was back at the castle. I immediately ran out of the room and made it to the passageway between the servant’s part of the castle and the main hall. It was pitch dark on the upper landing, and I stopped for a moment, listening.

All I could hear was the sound of my heart pounding.

I hurried down the hallway to the stairs that led to the attic as fast as I could, hoping Wyatt and Asher were still up there somewhere, and I could warn them before the baron climbed the stairs. If I could find them in time, we might still have a chance to escape and at least make it to the Wild Woods.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I whispered Wyatt’s name, but there was no reply. The hallway was as silent as a tomb. I turned to go, because the padlock was still on the door, and I knew they either hadn’t been able to get it off or they hadn’t even made it up to this floor yet. Maybe they were still searching the lower floors, thinking they had time before the baron returned home.

Just as I started down, I heard heavy, plodding footsteps coming slowly up, passing the second floor and still climbing up. Was the baron coming to check on his prisoner?

As silently as I could, I backed away, sliding into the shadowy darkness of the upper floor landing. I crept quietly as I could to the end of the narrow passageway and flattened myself against the wall, partially hidden, I hoped, by a large pedestal, holding a bust of some Greek philosopher or other.

I heard the baron come to the door and heard his key slide into the lock. The door creaked ominously as it opened to him. I still heard nothing coming from that room—no conversation, no piteous cries, not even the sounds of someone moving around, nothing. And thankfully, no sudden outcry from Wyatt and Asher either. Though I knew they couldn’t have been inside that room since the padlock was intact, a small part of me was still scared to death, afraid they might have found some other way inside it, and they’d been discovered.

A cold, whispering draft came drifting toward me there in my hiding place against the wall,

touched by an odd odor, which could only be caught now and then. It soon faded after a moment or two into the stronger smell of incense and heavy spices, like someone was trying to cover up something. I was wildly curious as to what was in that room, and I grew careless, leaning forward to try and see inside and making the terrible mistake of leaning a little hard on the old pedestal holding the bust. The damn thing fell over with a loud clatter to the floor, the bust shattering into a hundred pieces.

For a moment, I was frozen in place. Then I came to my senses and tried to run, right past the open doorway and down the stairs, which was the only way out. My arm was seized in a punishing grip before I made it to the top step.

“You!” the baron cried out, hauling me around to face him. He was grimacing wildly at me, his expression feral and wild. “What are you doing sneaking around here when I told you never to prowl around my house again at night? You disobedient wretch!”

He shouted this at me, as he reared his hand back and slapped me so hard I thought he’d take my head off my shoulders. My ears rang with the blow, and it stunned me for a moment. I fell to the floor and tried to scramble to my feet, but he reached for me instead and hauled me up to face him again. “You want so badly to know what’s inside my door? Then look your fill. And when you’re done, you can join them.”

The floor was covered with black, clotted blood. In the dull shine of it something horrible was reflected. He seized my head and forced me to look at the wall facing me, and with an effort I lifted my eyes. There, on an iron hook, hung the body of poor Lady Camilla, with a gray, dead face and her feet dangling a few inches above the horrible pool on the floor. There was a terrible wound in her chest and stomach that gaped wide. He had gutted her body and was letting the blood drain into a grisly grate on the floor.

I could scarcely breathe as I gaped at the nightmarish scene, and he twisted my head around to stare down into my face. His eyes weren’t human anymore, but solid black from one corner to the other, soulless and demonic. He threw me down into the pool of blood and loomed over me with menace written in every line of his body.

“Now prepare to join her!” he shouted in a gleeful tone, and I knew he was looking forward to my screams and pleas for mercy. But this monster had no mercy, no pity in his heart, so I saved my breath. He’d pulled out a huge knife and held it over me, leaning down close and enjoying the fear he no doubt saw in my eyes.

In a final act of defiance, I swept up some of the gore and threw it directly in his face. He screamed as it struck him, and he swiped it angrily off his face. For someone who enjoyed letting blood, he certainly seemed to not want any gore on his skin.

Before he could swing the knife down into my heart, Wyatt and Asher came bursting through the door behind him. Asher wrapped his arm around the baron's neck and squeezed, his face grim and determined and terrible to see. At the same time, Wyatt chopped down on his arm to make him drop the knife he held at my throat, and then flipped it around to use the pommel to drive a hard blow into the baron's temple. His knees buckled like a pole-axed steer and Wyatt, still in the grip of an awful rage, hit him twice again as he went down, caving in the side of his head. Wyatt might have continued, but Asher seized his arm and called his name sharply, bringing him back to his senses. Only then did my Alpha stop beating him and straightened back up, looking for me.

When he saw me back on my feet, swaying unsteadily beside him, he folded me into his arms and picked me up, carrying me out of that awful room and down the stairs.

## Epilogue

Our escape from the baron's castle after that was almost anticlimactic. Asher left the poor Vicountess in that horrible room, because it was a crime scene. But he hauled the baron down the stairs and swung wide the front door. When the few soldiers still milling around in the courtyard came running toward him in the cool night air, he dragged out the baron's dead body and threw it at their feet, inviting them to go upstairs and see what the monstrous man had done to his wife and the ones who'd come with her to this place. Then he turned toward Mr. Nolan, who had come running half-dressed and gasping into the main hall and told him to go fetch the king's guard from the town down the mountain.

Wyatt joined him at the door and announced to them all that once the investigation found that not one of them had reported the missing Vicountess or indeed, the prisoners the baron was holding in the dungeon room in the cellar, they might all be hanged before morning anyway, there was a quick and general exodus of soldiers and servants out the front gates.

Wyatt began to worry that Nolan might never make it to town on his way out, so he sent me upstairs to sit with Brandon and then got on his horse to ride for a physician from town. Asher requisitioned a gun from the soldiers before they all took off and stood guard in the main hall, so that none of the servants could disturb the scene in the attic, should they be so inclined. Wyatt returned in a couple of hours with the doctor and told Asher and me both that he had sent messages to the Crillian king, to King Harrison, and to the poor Vicountess's family.

"What do we do now?" I asked him, and he turned to look down at me.

"Now we wait," he said, pulling me over into the crook of his arm. "If I know Harrison, he'll ride all night to get here if he has to. Someone will be coming from the Crillian king very shortly, I think, and if this doesn't start a war between Crillia and Sudfarma, then I'd say nothing ever will."

My Alpha wasn't wrong. King Harrison was spitting mad and horrified when he arrived and found the bodies of all the viscountess's entourage—the ladies and servants who had come with her when she came to Lameda—with their throats cut and all of them piled up in the back of that horrible attic room to rot. Harrison wanted to burn down the castle, and it was only with difficulty that Asher and Wyatt convinced him that he probably shouldn't, as it wasn't strictly his property. Or at all, really.

He had many long, angry conferences with the Crillian ambassadors though, and they vowed to pay reparations to the viscountess's family, though I doubted her family would be satisfied with money. I couldn't imagine I would ever be, and Wyatt agreed with me.

After King Harrison arrived, and Brandon was on the mend again, Wyatt took me down to the little town of Redmill and got us a room. He said I had no business in that awful castle of the late baron, and he was still appalled that I had come there in the first place. I reminded him that if I hadn't come, he'd still be languishing in that cellar starving to death with the rats, but he tried to shut me up with kisses and told me it was time I learned to be less talkative and more obedient to my Alpha.

"Oh? Like poor Lady Camilla was? It didn't seem to help her."

He shuddered and pulled me close. "I'm sorry, Darcy. I hope you know I didn't mean it that way. I was only teasing."

"Hmm. I do know you were horrified at what Dargan did. But you need to know that I'm never going to be an obedient little omega. Except maybe in bed when I feel like it. If that's not what you want..."

"I want *you*, Darcy. Only you."

"If you really want me in your life, then things will have to change between us—I'm not your trainee anymore, Wyatt. I'm not a child, either. I have a mind of my own. If you can't accept that, then as much as I love you, I'm afraid we don't have a future."

He grabbed my hand. "No, don't say that. Please. I know you're right, and I promise I'll try to change. I think you may have to help me, because since I met you, I've come to realize I don't really know anything at all about omegas. Everything I thought I knew was wrong."

I took his hand in mine and gazed up at him. "Maybe we can start by you telling me how you feel about me. You never really have, you know."

His face got red, but he met my eyes. "I love you, Darcy. And I have for the longest time. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to say the words, and I know it's long past time I remedied that situation. I *know that*. I've been too stubborn to admit the truth of who you are to me. But I promised myself when I was languishing in that cell that if I ever got the chance, I'd not only tell you, but make sure you believed it. *Do you believe me, Darcy?* I want you to marry me in an actual ceremony so our friends and family can see us. I want you to have my babies, and most of all, I want you to be happy."

With each word, he had drawn closer, so I backed away a little, laughing and holding out my hands. "Not so fast. We may need to negotiate some of this. For example, what exactly did you mean by 'babies' plural? How many are we talking about exactly? And just how do you plan on making me believe you really mean all this?"

He smiled as he pulled me into his arms. "I'll try to show you."

He began to nibble on my ear, and I had to admit, I was totally on board. I had been afraid I'd never have this again, and I couldn't get enough of him now. I didn't care if we were in an old inn near a murderous baron's castle or even if we'd been in the middle of the king's court, I needed



desperately to make love to him. *This* was the destiny Barbarosa had been talking about, and I hoped Wyatt was feeling it too, but even if he wasn't, it was strong and undeniable enough that I'd didn't doubt it.

I was stripped in no time, but I didn't mind, because so was he. He pulled me closer, gripping me by my ass to bring my body close to his. I had dreamed of this so many times. My legs went up around his waist and there I was, spread out wantonly underneath Wyatt at last, my head thrown back to give him access to my throat, my legs open wide, offering up everything else I had to him.

Wyatt touched me reverently and ran his hand gently over my ass, as if re-familiarizing himself with me. As he ran his hand over the length of my shaft and reached down to weigh my balls in his hand, kneading and massaging them, I tried to scream my pleasure, but he put his hand over my mouth to quiet me, because I was so far gone, and the walls were thin. He put me down on the bed and my slick was making me nice and slippery, so he slid his hand up inside me, still crooning to me and getting me stretched and ready. Wyatt leaned over me, kissing me and robbing me of breath. He swept his tongue inside my mouth, and he murmured to me about how sweet I tasted and how he had lived without it for so long and had thought he'd never taste it again. Then with one long thrust, he buried himself inside me—including his big, beautiful knot.

I began to orgasm uncontrollably almost at once, and he held me through it, telling me how beautiful I was and how much he loved me. That was different. He'd never said those words before, not even during sex. We were tied up now and would be for a while. I think I had another orgasm, or maybe two, but I had lost my mind by then, so I couldn't be totally sure.

Much later, when I finally came to my senses again, we were no longer tied together, and he was kneeling between my legs, gasping a little for breath. His huge cock was right in front of me, still hard and still perfect. Gods, but the man was gorgeous.

Wyatt's shaft was still bobbing eagerly in front of me, so how could I resist? I gripped the base of it and bent my head, sucking just the tip into my mouth, gently, my chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. I wanted to make up for lost time—I wanted this to be good for him.

He groaned, surprised I was even still awake, and I heard him moan my name long and low and glanced up to see him with his eyes closed in bliss. He didn't thrust against my mouth, but tightly controlled his body, holding himself still for me to pleasure him.

I dipped my tongue into the slit, and I could taste him as a few drops spilled out, the flavor of the salty beads of his come bursting on my tongue. It was suddenly almost unbearably arousing. This magnificent man was here in front of me, his head back, his legs open wide, offering up his thick, gorgeous cock to me. I ran my tongue up the blue, throbbing vein on the underside of the shaft reverently. Kneading and massaging him gently in my hands. I felt a rush of power. Who said an Alpha

has all the control?

I engulfed his cock with my mouth and sucked him to the back of my throat. Wyatt put his hands on my head. Not forcing me but gently holding on. His chest rose and fell rapidly with every breath now as I increased the pressure and speed and moved my head rapidly up and down on his cock. I ran my teeth gently over the sensitive head. He thrust upward one time as if he couldn't help himself, then opened his eyes in shock and looked directly at me, his eyes slightly dazed as he began to come.

His orgasm lasted a long time, and when it was over, he collapsed on the bed beside me. I rolled over to hold him and pull the covers over us both. After all we'd both been through, we deserved a nice rest.

Just before he fell asleep though, he raised one eye to look at me. "I'm sorry it took me so long to thank you. I'm saying thank you now, though, for everything. And I need you to know how much I love you. I'm proud of you and your courage, Darcy. You saved us. I'll love you forever. And I'm not sure even that will be long enough."

I kissed him because how could I not? Sure, he had a lot to learn, but then so did I.

I whispered softly to him. "I think it won't be long enough. But it's a start."

The End

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Shannon West** lives in the southern United States, and is a lover and avid reader of M/M romances. Shannon began writing gay romance a few years ago, and now has over ninety short stories, novellas, and novels to her credit. Her stories have been translated into French, Italian, and even one Japanese Yaoi. Her favorite genre is paranormal and most of her characters don't get really interesting to her until they grow a tail. Shannon loves men and everything about them, and writes Romance (with a capital R) unashamedly and unabashedly. She believes, in the words of Helen Steiner Rice that "love is the answer that everyone seeks, love is the language that every heart speaks." Shannon mostly spends her days at the keyboard, ably assisted by her cats, and eluding housework, which stalks her relentlessly.

# Alpha's Kiss

A kiss can be a magical thing...

Rory is an omega prince, heir to the throne of the magical kingdom of Igella. His country's laws dictate that omegas must have a Regent to rule in their stead—and that the Regent must be an Alpha. Rory's wicked stepmother, Queen Berenda, needs to find an unscrupulous Alpha, because she has nefarious plans of her own for her stepson.

But there are flies in the ointment—Rory isn't fully awakened, and the king's health is growing worse daily. When gorgeous Alpha, Lord Lexington, arrives with his pack, flashing plenty of gold, Berinda is overjoyed and quickly arranges a marriage between the young Prince and his new Alpha, and that's when the trouble truly begins. In reality, "Lord" Lexington is a prince in his own country of Morovia, Igella's most bitter enemy.

Rory and Lex get married, and head back to Morovia, so that Lex can discover the truth about Rory's infamous family, and his real mother, the "warlock" Vesper. Using his powers as a witch and a warrior, Lex has to try to keep Rory alive long enough to reach Morovia. Along the way, they develop a fierce and burning attraction to each other, but other dark and unknown forces are moving against them, and danger is all around. It will take both of them, along with a little help from magical forces to come out of this alive and find their happily ever after.

*This is an omegaverse, with strong, dominant Alphas and some MPREG. Forced marriage, knotting, possessive Alpha, omega heat but no dubcon, and no multiple partners.*

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**Painted Hearts Publishing** has an exclusive group of talented writers. We publish stories that range from historical to fantasy, sci-fi to contemporary, erotic to sweet. Our authors present high quality stories full of romance, desire, and sometimes graphic moments that are both entertaining and sensual. At the heart of all our stories is romance, and we are firm believers in a world where happily ever afters do exist.

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