

Mariel and Frederic had history. He'd humiliated her the first time they met in a fight, left her sprawling in the mud and even *apologized* to her for it, like she was a little girl he took no pleasure in defeating. It had mostly been luck, but her father had seen, and Mariel knew that he was thinking of it every time he looked at her for months afterward.

She'd managed to deal Frederic an arrow to the knee during that recent fetching mission though, so it had almost been worth it. She often thought fondly of the expression on his smug blond face as he'd toppled over, bleeding profusely, white with shock. The memory was very cheering.

Her father didn't see it that way.

"You're letting your personal feelings get in the way of being a leader," he'd said, during the dressing-down that had taken place after the Frederic incident. He didn't understand how much Mariel hated that boy; that he perfectly encapsulated all the worst things about Nottinghamshire, a rich kid with a corrupt father and the world at his feet. "A good captain doesn't let petty vendettas—or friendships, for that matter—get in the way of following orders. I can't believe I even have to say this to you."

"You don't," Mariel had said quickly. It came out a little slurred, thanks to her enormous fat lip, a parting gift from one of Frederic's men. "It won't happen again."

He'd looked at her with something that was half disappointment and half pity, an absolute shit sandwich of a look that always made Mariel feel lower than a grub.

"See that it doesn't," he'd said, giving her a dismissive, businesslike pat on the shoulder, the closest he ever came to fatherly affection. Mariel had treasured those little pats, until she saw him doing exactly the same to another young captain and realized that they weren't reserved for her at all. "I'm counting on you, Mariel."

A lot of people were counting on her. Mariel wished she could trust her own judgment absolutely, but as she approached her father in that clearing with the wrong healer tied up on her cart, she felt a sickening lurch of worry that she'd made a bad call. It was always like this—she'd feel confident in the moment, right up to the part where she had to face her father and explain the logic behind her decisions, and then suddenly she'd be sure she'd ruined everything instead.

Jack was talking to his deputies; Deputy Commander Neill, more commonly known as *Big John*, a gruff man of nearly sixty who had probably never even heard of the concept of retirement, and Deputy Commander Payne, her father's best friend and second cousin, who could have been his twin in certain lights and certainly seemed to agree with Jack on every matter brought before him. Mariel was fond of the first and wary of the latter. It probably should have been the other way around.

There were sixteen captains underneath them, distinguished by the pins at their throats, each responsible for their own company of Men. Most of them—even the ones almost as young as Mariel—commanded upward of fifteen fighters, the most experienced thirty or forty. Mariel had been allowed four, and her father had chosen them for her. The humiliation still smarted, although she was well-practiced in pretending she hadn't even noticed that her father did not yet trust her with any real power.

Big John clapped Deputy Commander Payne on the back—he wasn't a particularly tall man, but he packed a lot of power into the little stature he did have, and Captain Payne almost stumbled—and then the two of them separated to deal with other business.

"All well?" Jack said, finally turning to his lower-ranked captains.

"Fine," said Captain Morris, who'd been leading one of the other wagons. She had leathery brown skin and graying hair, in perfect twin braids, and she never laughed at anybody's jokes. "Copped a bit of noise down nearer town, but nothing to write home about."

"Good," said Mariel's father. He turned to the other captain, a steady and comfortingly boring man, Captain James Hughes. "And you?"

"All well."

Last and very much least, he looked to Mariel. "Anything to report?"

"No," said Mariel. She glanced behind her at the wagon, caught herself, refocused. "Well. Yes. The healer you sent us for—she had an apprentice. A ward. We took her instead. It seemed the better option, and I thought it might provide . . ."

She trailed off, because her father had raised a hand, frowning. He seemed tired but, as always, he didn't have a hair out of place or a stray smear of mud on his Commander's cloak. Sometimes she looked at him and couldn't believe he was her father. Not because they didn't look alike—they did; fair skin, lean build, dark hair, although her father's was graying at the temples and his eyebrows were even more impressive than her own. He just felt like a stranger to her some days. A man who existed entirely apart from her, half his life a mystery, with so much going on below the surface that she couldn't even begin to guess at.

"You took . . . her ward?"

"Yes," Mariel said. She realized that she was fidgeting with the knife at her hip, and abruptly stopped. "She seemed more suited. And . . . she offered."

Jack didn't quite *sigh*, but he exhaled quietly through his nose, and Mariel clenched her fists hard enough that she could feel the dull pressure of her blunt fingernails against the creases of her palm.

"Captain Hartley-Hood, you were given a very simple order."

Mariel was the first person to tell the members of her company to call her *Captain*, but it was fucking weird when her own father did it. She supposed that was proper procedure in front of the other captains, both of whom were looking fixedly at the ground.

"I know," said Mariel. "But I believe I carried out that order effectively, with some changes to a few small . . . details."

"Details like retrieving the correct person," said Jack.

There wasn't really anything Mariel could say in response to that, so she looked back over her shoulder at Clem, instead, and discovered that she had somehow wriggled free of her blindfold and was blinking right back in a brainless, watchful way, akin to a large pigeon.

“All right,” said her father, already on the move. “Let’s do this now.”

Mariel had to rush to catch up with him.

She hated it when he left her behind.