

# REALM OF SECRETS

A NOVEL OF THE RIANDORI REALMS



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Realm of Secrets, A Novel of the Riandori Realms

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# PROLOGUE

**D**aalok hugged the crying newborn to his chest as he dodged the lord marshal's sword. The blade sliced through the side of his jerkin, barely missing flesh.

His eyes darted around the storeroom for an escape. The lord marshal had him pinned at the back of the room, while the king blocked the only door with his sword drawn. The baby's mother, Cristar, was off to the side, wobbling back to her feet, and Eselle . . .

Daalok's breath caught when Eselle sprinted across the storeroom to their rescue, a dagger in hand.

She charged the lord marshal from behind. He ducked and spun around, then kicked Eselle in the stomach. The blow hurled her sideways, sending her crashing into Cristar. Both women toppled to the hard stone floor. The dagger flew from Eselle's hand and skittered away.

"Give me the baby!" King Vorgal demanded as he watched his lord marshal harrying Daalok and the two women.

"No!" Cristar wailed. She and Eselle scrambled free of each other. "Get my son out of here!"

Daalok gripped the boy securely and glanced at his friends. Cristar, exhausted after just giving birth and defending her newborn, gasped as she leaned against the wall. Beside her, Eselle swayed while struggling to her feet. Daalok had no combat skills, save for a minimal understanding of magic he couldn't reliably use. He edged along the wall, seeking a way around Lord Marshal Silst.

"What now, little mage?" the lord marshal taunted. He made a display of swinging the sword before Daalok, then thrust forward. Daalok leaped sideways and slid farther along the wall. "You can't even save yourself, let alone that little screamer."

Daalok tightened his hold on the wailing baby and rushed to the side. Before he cleared the lord marshal, the sword swept upward inches from his face. He jerked backward, penned in once again.

"You have *nowhere* to run," Silst snarled. "Give me the baby!" His jaw muscles quivered, and the veins in his neck protruded.

"Stop playing around, Silst," King Vorgal ordered. "Kill him and bring me the whelp."

The mage locked gazes with the lord marshal. Daalok shivered at those fierce brown eyes, and a bead of sweat ran down his back. He finally understood what he needed to do, but he was horrible at it. Had accidentally killed Millie's cat and a poor stag while trying to figure it out. But he was out of options.

If he tried, they could die. If he didn't, they *would* die.

Daalok harnessed his fear and focused his energy. With soft whispers, he started his incantation.

"What are you doing?" Silst's eyes grew wider, brighter for a moment before his jaw clenched, and he raised his sword high. "*You can't escape the past, little mage!*"

Daalok cringed and faltered, but he blocked out the lord marshal. From the edge of his awareness, he saw Eselle once

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again rush Silst. The mage pushed her from his mind, blocked out everything around him—focused only on the pressure building within his chest, the tingling along his skin.

The lord marshal took a mighty swing at both Daalok and the boy.

Daalok released his energy.

*Protector, guide me.*

The fledgling mage expelled his breath. The open space beside him wavered, transformed into a silvery, rippling pool of soft light as tall as he was.

Holding the newborn tight, Daalok sprinted through what he hoped was a viable portal . . . but not before the lord marshal's blade came down.

\*\*\*

### *One Hour Old*

Pain shot through his knees and up his thighs when he hit the ground. He thrust a hand against the cool brown grass to keep from crushing the infant. Dew coated his fingers, and he took heavy breaths of crisp, earth-scented air.

"Thank you, Protector, for keeping us safe."

The baby's shrill cries jarred his nerves, but he couldn't fault the boy. He wanted to cry too. Instead, he pushed himself upright and surveyed their surroundings. Tall trees spread across the horizon. They had lost most of their leaves for the season and would soon be bare. Nestled before them sat his home, the small town of Nist. The sight calmed his racing heart and warmed his strained muscles against the cold.

They were safe, but his friends remained in the clutches of murderous men. Once he found a secure place to leave the newborn, he would return for Cristar and Eselle.

He absently put a consoling hand on the baby's chest. The fussing eased, though didn't stop.

Sunlight streamed low over the forest, illuminating the cottages at the outskirts of Nist. A few people moved about in the early hour, but he was too far away to recognize anyone. It was strange what time did to one's memories. He hadn't been home for nearly half a year. The town seemed brighter and smaller than he remembered. Fresh thatch covered Holstin's house, and Lorstal's had a new fence around it.

He rocked the child as he soaked in the sight. "Don't worry, little one. My father won't be happy to see me, but he won't turn us away either."

Only crying answered him. He looked down.

Something red lay smeared across his hands and sleeve, and across the boy. His breath faltered. He snatched the cloth away from the tiny body, trying to figure out whose blood it was, where it came from.



# CHAPTER ONE

**E**selle gave the man her coin, smiled, and walked away. "Come again, miss," the proprietor called out from behind his worn counter.

Instead of answering, she waved goodbye and left the store, certain she would never see him again. She'd only come into town to purchase new fishing line and get a good night's rest. Though accustomed to sleeping outside, she preferred a bed when one was available.

Halfway to the town's inn, a low, rhythmic thumping came from across the square. A few townsfolk scuttled out of a nearby lane. A bad feeling settled into Eselle's gut. Perhaps leaving town would be better, after all.

Two mounted soldiers burst from the lane behind the locals. They turned toward the townsfolk. Another pair of soldiers rode into the square from a block farther down.

Eselle gave a silent gasp and rushed around the nearest corner. She nearly collided with a wall of sleek black warhorse.

Long legs rose above her as it reared, nostrils flaring angrily. Her blood pounded in her ears as she stared up at the courser's

hooves about to crush her skull. She staggered backward. The stallion's forelegs slammed to the ground before her. It stomped and snorted while its rider twisted around to grab for her. Eselle ducked low and darted between the building and horse. Once clear, she sprinted down the street, not daring to take the time to see if the soldier followed her.

Someone behind her barked orders. "Those over there, round them up!"

Eselle rushed through the streets, keeping alert for more soldiers. She needed to get out of Grimswold before it was too late.

After running through an empty alley, Eselle slowed when she approached the edge of a candlemaker's shop. A glance around the corner revealed a pair of soldiers walking toward her. Swords drawn, they scanned both sides of the street. She pulled back, ducking behind a dozen or so crates stacked beside a nearby wagon.

At the sounds of scuffling, she flattened herself against the crates.

"Stop, all of you!" a man yelled.

Eselle held her breath. More commotion sounded farther off. She risked a peek.

A trio of townsfolk had been unfortunate enough to enter the lane with the two armsmen. One of the soldiers grabbed a man by the back of his jerkin, pulling him up short. The man struggled to escape, but the soldier hauled him around and pressed a dagger against his stomach. Eselle gritted her teeth, her hand on her own dagger. With the soldier standing with his back to her, it would be easy to slip in behind him and help the man.

*But how many more would be saved if I can make it out of town?*

Pursing her lips, she yanked her hand away from her blade to keep from pulling it. The captive lifted his hands, his features

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drooping, and followed the soldier's directions. While they walked toward the center of town, the remaining armsman chased more townsfolk around a far corner.

The odds of helping anyone were slim, and the risk of capture too great. More importantly, she needed to get information to her brother. If she didn't relay the news in the next week or so, Tavith could find himself in a precarious position, waiting for support which was no longer coming.

Once the street was clear, Eselle sprinted to the next building, a bakery if the smell was any indication. She stayed close to the wall while watching for more soldiers.

Their presence was commonplace among towns closer to the capital. This far out though, they only appeared every few months when the regional commander made his regular rounds. Eselle and her brother's allies had tracked the troops' routines in an effort to avoid them. Since this was the farthest east she'd ever traveled, she hadn't tracked this region herself. Their ally who had, hadn't expected the troops in Grimswold for nearly two months.

What had changed? This particular region was known to strictly adhere to its schedule, but this was the second time they'd caught her by surprise.

*Do they know I'm traveling through this area? Or at least someone working for Tavith is?*

When she reached the edge of town, neither soldiers nor townsfolk were in sight. The surrounding woods stood twenty paces away, across a grassy field. Eselle grabbed the straps of her pack and ran for the treeline.

Halfway through the field, a gruff voice thundered behind her. "Stop right there!"

Eselle skidded to a halt in the tall grass, grumbling under her breath. "Of all the . . ."

She took a deep breath. Panic would only complicate matters, so she pushed it down deep. With one last look at the thick forest, Eselle donned an innocent expression, raised her hands, and turned.

A young armsman with a crossbow stood before her. He didn't look much beyond a recruit, late teens at most, but he held the weapon with confidence. Though his uniform of red and silver was well kept, it appeared somewhat baggy for his slender frame.

"Where are you going?" He eyed the length of her.

"I was heading home."

His gaze lingered on some areas of her body more than others, the curves of her hips in her tapered trousers, the slope of her breasts, though her straight-lined tunic didn't allow for much shape. Eselle wished she had drawn her dagger before running. It wouldn't be much use against his crossbow, but it would have been something.

"You were running away from town," the soldier said. "Everyone was ordered to the town center."

"I don't actually live in Grimswold. I was only here picking up supplies. Since the request probably doesn't apply to me, I should get out of everyone's way." She pointed over her shoulder as she stepped backward toward the trees.

"It wasn't a request." He lifted the crossbow higher, his gaze steady. Eselle froze. "The commander ordered everyone to the town center." He nodded toward the dagger on her hip. "Toss that over here."

Eselle let out a faint huff, then pulled the dagger out and tossed it at his feet.

The soldier tucked it haphazardly into his belt, opposite his own, then motioned with the crossbow. "Back this way."

She peered toward the town. Raised voices came from somewhere within it, along with an occasional metallic clang and

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neigh of a horse. Burying her fears, she pointed behind her again. "But my home is that way." It was difficult to keep her hand from shaking.

"And I said this way," he countered with a stern voice. "No one leaves town until the commander says so."

The odds of escaping the armsman were slim, at least not without an arrow lodged in her back. Until another option presented itself, she could at least gather information. "I didn't think you were supposed to be here for a couple months. Why are you early?"

"Get moving." He gave a scowl and another jerk of the crossbow.

With a sigh, Eselle adjusted her pack on her shoulders, walked around him, and headed back to town.

"What are you doing here?" she tried again as they walked. She glanced backward several times, hoping he would move alongside her. If she could gain control of the crossbow, she might stand a chance.

"We always come through here."

Eselle wanted to roll her eyes or huff, but she restrained herself. "Yes, but not usually so soon. You're not due for a couple of months."

The armsman's slender face scrunched up in thought, she presumed calculating the date. "We always come through here," he repeated, then took a few quick steps closer to her.

She shook her head. Even if she couldn't get anything useful from him, he was now within reach.

Another soldier walked around the first building, only steps ahead of them. Eselle's hope of escape evaporated. Or, at least, became complicated.

"What do you have here?" The newcomer was stockier than his fellow armsman, maybe a couple years older.

"I found her running from town."

"Need help bringing her in?" He eyed her as the lanky soldier had, but his perusal seemed more analytical than lecherous.

"Not if that means I have to share her."

Eselle's stomach lurched. Though things like this were commonplace in these outlying regions, she had no intention of being part of it.

The newcomer chuckled. "You don't really think the commander will let you have her, do you?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"You've been with us long enough. You know how he can be sometimes."

The lanky soldier only shrugged as they escorted her into town.

Grimswold's town square consisted of several simple, one- and two-story wooden structures built around a large open space, with communal cooking stations and a well off to one side. Currently, the most notable thing about it was the nearly two dozen soldiers—a relatively standard size for a regional commander's personal contingent. More soldiers were leading their own captives when Eselle and the two armsmen reached the center of town. A small group of young men, including the man she'd seen captured earlier, stood in front of a dilapidated church. Half a dozen armsmen surrounded them with drawn swords. Dust, kicked up from the road, lingered in the air.

The lanky soldier gripped Eselle's tunic by the shoulder and pushed her ahead of him.

"What's this?" a rough voice called out above the din.

Eselle turned to find another soldier striding toward them. In addition to the standard red arming doublet with silver trim, he wore the chainmail hauberk and leather armor—spaulders, vambraces, and greaves—of the higher ranks.

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His dark eyes locked onto her, and she worried he recognized her. While her known description was not always accurate after all these years, or widespread for that matter, the intensity of his gaze made her fidget. When his expression eased, she still felt the urge to back away. Though he might not recognize her now, that didn't mean he wouldn't eventually discover her identity.

Though not the tallest man in his contingent, he still rose above most of them. His distinct lines and strong jaw drew her in, as did his clear brown eyes. Even the wrinkle between his brows, the one she suspected was more from frequent scowling than anything else, only added character to his features.

As he approached, she considered the best way to handle him. Would the innocent act work with him? Or would he respond better to something different?

Then she noticed the insignia on his collar as he drew closer. The circle with two diagonal slashes inside identified him as a commander in King Vorgal's army. Speaking on the king's behalf, he ruled this region. He was the law, for this town and dozens more.

Eselle recalled what she knew of Vorgal's staff, trying to discern which of the six regional commanders he might be. Unfortunately, she hadn't studied the military nearly as well as she had the nobility. Since he only appeared to be in his late twenties, yet had advanced so high, she suspected he was one of the three lower commanders rather than one of the three ranked ones.

He said nothing when he reached them, only glared at the two soldiers who had captured her. She was grateful that glare wasn't aimed at her but worried it might soon be.

The lanky armsman stood at attention. "Sir, I caught her running from town."

The commander remained silent, his eyes moving steadily between the pair.

Straightening, the other soldier chimed in. "So, we brought her back, sir."

"And she looks like a strong male of conscription age to both of you?"

The armsmen glanced at each other. The lanky one who had apprehended Eselle spoke. "No, sir, but—"

"And does she look pregnant to you?"

The soldier took a sideways peek at her. The side of his mouth turned up in a poorly concealed smile. "Not yet."

The commander struck fast. He grabbed the soldier by the front of his doublet and yanked him close. The crossbow hit the ground. Eselle flinched at the suddenness of everything.

Muscles clenched in the commander's jaw as he spoke through gritted teeth. "Does she look like the woman we heard about who is eight months pregnant?"

"I wouldn't know, sir." The armsman's voice quavered. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands as they twitched at his sides. "I don't know much about pregnant women."

The commander thrust him away, making the young soldier stumble backward several steps. The armsman snatched up his weapon, then resumed his position, keeping his eyes somewhere around his superior's boots.

The commander stepped over to the other soldier. "Do you have anything to add?" The soldier shook his head and wouldn't lift his eyes above the commander's mailed chest. "Then why is she standing here interrupting my day?"

"I figured she had to be running away for a reason," the lanky soldier said. He sounded steadier but kept his eyes downcast. "I thought you might want to question her and find out why."

"If I had to question everyone who ran from my troops, I'd never do anything else." The dark-eyed commander looked at Eselle, scrutinizing her features again. "What's your name?"



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"Tarania."

"Why did you run?"

"I was afraid of all the soldiers in town." Eselle added a little quiver to her voice. "I was afraid what they might do to me."

He watched her a moment longer, then nodded and looked back and forth at the men flanking her. "There's your reason. You idiots scared her." He nodded to the dagger awkwardly tucked into the lanky soldier's sword belt. "Is that hers?"

The soldier pulled the dagger out and handed it over. "Yes, sir."

Taking hold of Eselle's elbow, the commander glared at his armsmen. "Get back to rounding up conscripts. And find me the right woman. She'll be the one so large you won't doubt she's pregnant. Now move! We have enough work without you two wasting time pawing at pretty women."

Both armsmen nodded and scuttled away without a word. The commander peered beyond them and gave a firm, more distinct, upward nod. Eselle followed his gaze to a blond, armored soldier across the square. He seemed to be coordinating prisoners but stopped long enough to return his superior's gesture.

Before Eselle got a better look, the commander turned and led her away from the commotion of the town center. His profile was as solid as his grip on her arm. Though she had been hopeful about escaping the lanky armsman if she could get the crossbow, she felt confident she had little chance of escaping the man beside her—even with a crossbow.

Since she hadn't been in Grimswold long, she didn't know where they were headed. A series of two-story buildings stood along one side of the lane, while several squat ones lined the other. The identifying sign above one of the doors—Jail—made her yank back on the commander's grip.

"I'm not locking you up." He didn't look at her, but his voice had softened, lost the sternness he had used with the soldiers. "I just want to talk."

"About what?" She remembered how he'd scrutinized her features. As the jail grew closer, her pulse began a slow, steady rise.

"The real reason you ran from town."

"I told you, I was afraid of—"

"Yes, I heard." He finally peered down at her. "That doesn't mean I believe you."

## CHAPTER TWO

**E**selle gripped her pack with her free hand as the jail loomed closer. Despite the commander's assurance that he didn't intend to lock her up, she bit her lip as they reached the building. He bypassed the dreaded door, his grip tight on her arm, and guided her to the business at the corner of the building. Muscles she hadn't realized she'd clenched suddenly loosened. At least she wasn't being imprisoned. Yet.

They walked through the doorway and into an office. Nothing connected it to the neighboring jail—no door, no archway, or even a pass-through window—which eased more of Eselle's tension. There was only the single door, with a pair of large, dirty windows on either side. Another set of windows hung along the outer sidewall, and a faint mustiness permeated the room. Two well-worn desks sat up front. Various bins and paperwork covered one of them. Three uniformed men sat around the other, which held a pile of money and some drinks.

One of the soldiers rolled a pair of dice. He smiled when they settled, while the other two men grumbled.

Beside her, the commander gave a single huff of amusement. "You two should know never to play against Holker. He cheats."

"I don't cheat," Holker said, then paused. "Often." He broke out in a grin as he gathered up the dice. "I don't even have to against these two. They're horrible players."

"I know, Commander," another soldier said, scratching his thick red beard. "I'm trying to figure out how he does it."

"Give it up, Lew." Holker beamed as he shook the dice. "You'll never outplay me."

Before they could start again, the commander ordered, "Out."

Holker stopped shaking his hand and glanced over his shoulder, seeing Eselle for the first time. The brief leer he gave turned petulant when he turned to her captor. "You said we were done for the day."

"And you are. But be done somewhere else. I need the room."

The winner's petulance returned to a leer. "Of course, Commander." He pocketed his dice and pile of coins.

As the soldiers left, Lew argued with Holker, demanding to know his secret, while the last soldier only muttered about his losses, seeming grateful their game was over.

Eselle peeked sidelong at the man next to her. While he appeared calm, her heartbeat hadn't quite settled yet. He escorted her to a chair at the nearest desk, pulled the pack off her shoulders with one hand, and set it on the floor.

"Now, the truth." With a firm grip on her shoulder, he pushed her down onto the seat, then took a step back and peered at her.

"I already told you the truth."

"You're not from here, are you?"

He still held her dagger. With a grip on the blade, he spun it in slow circles between his fingers, over and over. He paid it no attention. Did he even realize he was doing it? Shifting in her seat, she placed her feet securely in a position to bolt if she

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needed to. What would be the best way to alleviate his concerns or redirect his interest?

"No, I'm not from here."

"Where are you from?"

"Florial." The village was fictitious, one she had created after she'd been caught in one lie too many.

"Where's Florial?"

"West of here."

"Considering we're nearly at the eastern edge of the realm, everything is west of here." There was a small upturn to the right corner of his mouth as he spoke. He finally stopped twirling her dagger and tucked it into his sword belt, alongside his own sheathed dagger. "Be more specific."

"Um." Usually, saying the name and west made people lose interest. She stumbled over possibilities, then named the first town she thought of which was nowhere near his region. "It's near Halmbridge, but farther down the river."

"How far down?"

"Perhaps a couple of days ride. Three, if you walk."

"What's the population?"

"Around fifty or so, maybe a little more. I haven't really counted." She began to find her rhythm.

"That is, indeed, conveniently small." He clasped his hands behind his back and tilted his head as he watched her. "The problem is, I've traveled that area extensively, and I've never heard of Florial. Why?"

She could have kicked herself for picking Halmbridge. How was she to know his previous travels? It was too late to back down, so she continued to weave her tale.

"We don't have much to offer there, so we don't get many visitors. We're also pretty self-sufficient and keep to ourselves."

"But you left?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see more of the world, be part of something bigger than Florial."

"You traveled nearly the entire length of Likalsta in search of something bigger?"

She shrugged. "There's a lot to see out there."

"And have you found what you're looking for?"

"Not yet," she answered, with more honesty than he knew.

The commander stared down at her. Uncomfortable with his continued scrutiny, she rose, forcing him to step back to make room.

If he wouldn't believe her, there was another tactic she could try. While it wouldn't make him lose interest, it could at least deflect him from her identity. And if he didn't fall for it, he might become so disgruntled he would cease questioning her.

She wasn't particularly skilled at seduction, only having used it sparingly with more easily manipulated underlings. Thus far, she'd never needed to take things beyond a few kisses or touches, a few suggestive glances. She'd never dared try with anyone of real authority. Not that she usually crossed paths with the higher ranks.

A commander at her disposal could be valuable. If she played things right, he could provide the most useful information they had ever gathered, as well as more tactical favors.

"You seem determined not to believe me, so I won't waste time trying to convince you. I do, however, want to thank you."

His eyes narrowed. "For what?"

"For getting me away from those soldiers. I worried about what they would do to me."

"Really?" He sounded unconvinced.

"You heard what the one said . . ." Eselle dropped her eyes briefly and swallowed pointedly, ". . . about me not being pregnant yet."

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"But you're not worried about what I could do to you?" He stepped forward, removing any space between them. "Especially for lying to me? I could arrest you for running from town when I ordered everyone to the town center."

She fought the urge to step back. After all, this was what she'd hoped for. She studied him, tried to read his nearly black eyes and that enticing little corner of his mouth. "I didn't lie. And, yes, you could arrest me," she said. He was well within his authority to lock her in the neighboring cells. "I don't think you will, though."

"Why not?"

Slowly, she raised her hands to grasp the front of his sword belt. "You don't seem overly concerned with a single woman running off when more important things are occurring in town."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because we're in this office instead of the jail, and you're here alone with me instead of having an underling interrogate me." When he didn't reply, she added, "You said it yourself, if you had to question everyone who ran from your troops, you'd never get anything done."

His smile turned devilish. "You are clever."

The sight sent a pleasant tingle down her spine. It was impossible not to return his grin.

Eselle leaned closer. If he wasn't wearing the chainmail, she could play with his clothing. With only the sleeves accessible, her options were limited. Teasingly tugging at his sword belt could work though, so she did. "If you're not going to arrest me, am I'm free to leave?"

The commander glanced down at her hands as they fondled the leather. "That depends."

"On what?" She leaned a little closer while peering up at him.

His gaze returned to hers. "On whether you're telling me the truth." He was harder to distract than any of the soldiers she had previously tried to seduce.

"Do you really think I'm lying?" She ran her hand up his chest, along the cool rings of his chainmail, to the back of his neck, then slid her fingers through his thick, dark hair.

"Yes." His brows drew together slightly. "I'm not certain about what, though."

"Who do you think I am?" She leaned into him. There was a hint of apple mixed with the smell of leather and iron.

He scrutinized each of her features as he had the first time. What did he expect to find? Was he on to her?

"Doesn't matter," he finally said.

Before she could speak, he bent his head and kissed her. She was delightfully surprised by his sudden intensity. He clearly knew what he wanted, and as his tongue wrapped around hers, so did she. Under normal circumstances, Eselle would have pushed a target away by this point, only acted the tease to get information or favors. But it had been a long time since she had been intimate with a man. And the commander was an appealing one to consider.

A few more kisses wouldn't matter, a few more to strengthen her position.

He backed her against the desk and hauled her onto it. Without planning to, she wrapped her legs around his hips as he pressed against her. She wanted to touch him. She pawed at his chainmail, which prevented her from getting to him.

With a grumble at the barrier, she pulled her mouth away. "Why do you have to be wearing this?"

"You're creative enough to switch tactics and try seducing me. I'm sure you're creative enough to get around a little armor." Eselle froze, and he chuckled deeply. "I don't mind. And I certainly won't stop you."



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Before she processed his words, he had her tunic unlaced and open. He pulled her shirt from her trousers, slid his warm, rough hand inside and cupped her breast. His tongue licked across her upper lip, and it was all the encouragement she needed.

She tried working her way through his layers. First, the sword belt. She didn't even feel bad when it slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor with loud clanks. She tried to push the chainmail up and away from him. It proved too cumbersome. His spaulders would prevent her from removing it anyway. They had to go first.

*Damn. Why was he wearing all this?*

With a smile against her lips, the commander kneaded her breast. "There are easier things to remove if you're so inclined."

That both startled and excited her. Eselle reached under his chainmail and doublet, pulled his shirt clear, and slid her hands across his tight stomach. He was warm and hard, smooth and enticing, and she roamed over every part of him she could reach. His hands slid around and down her back. They slipped into her trousers and grabbed hold of her bottom, pulling her against him. She quivered with the need to touch more of him.

Lost in the feel of strong, warm, masculine hands on her, Eselle sighed and leaned into him.

The door burst open.

Two red-uniformed soldiers rushed in.

"Commander, we're—" one said and then clamped his mouth shut.

Eselle jerked straight in the arms wrapped around her. The soldiers came to an abrupt halt, staring at the couple at the desk. One man stood only halfway in the doorway. After a quick smile from each, they diverted their eyes. Luckily, between her tunic and the commander's body, the soldiers had no view of what was happening.

"We're, uh, ready for you in the hall."

She tried to scramble out of the commander's embrace and off the desk. One of his arms slid around her waist before she could, holding her securely. The other slid enticingly along her side and back to her breast, rubbing a thumb back and forth across her nipple. Without thinking, she leaned into his hand. Mortified at her response with the soldiers present, her eyes darted between the soldiers, the commander, and the door. She didn't know where to look.

"I'll be there shortly." The commander kept fondling her, his steady gaze never leaving her face.

The soldiers glanced once more at the pair before exiting.

The moment she tried to move off the desk, the commander tightened his arm around her.

"Let go," she ordered, her voice soft but firm. She could no longer meet his eyes. Instead, she stared at the insignia at his collar, a visual reminder this might not have been her best idea.

"Is that truly what you want? Because my men have seen worse than this." His arm slid down to her hips, pulling her closer against him as he pressed into her.

"I'm sure they have." The feel of his hand nearly made her sigh. "They also need you." *And I need to get my head straight.*

"They can wait."

"So can this." Eselle looked up at him, then realized her hands were still under his clothes, one splayed across his chest and the other on the small of his back. Startled, she pulled her hands back around, but not out of his clothing. Instead, she ran her fingers across his sculpted stomach. "It would also let us move things to somewhere more comfortable." Though her body approved of the multitude of sensations, the interruption allowed her brain to regain control. She needed to leave before the commander decided to detain her for less personal and more treasonous reasons. The soldiers' interruption was the perfect opportunity to slip away while he was occupied.

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The commander gave a husky chuckle before he pinched her nipple. Eselle jumped with an involuntary giggle. He slid his hand from beneath her clothes. His reluctance was evident, but there was also amusement in his eyes, along with that upturned corner of his mouth. Instead of kissing that upturn as she wanted to, she slid off the desk. After tucking her linen shirt back into her trousers, she started retying her tunic.

It dawned on her that she still didn't know his name. Eselle opened her mouth to ask, but he was intently studying her features again. She wished she knew what he sought. "What . . . that is . . ." She brushed a stray strand of her light brown hair behind her ear. "We . . . I should probably be going," she said instead, giving her clothes one final adjustment.

"Not yet." The commander finished with his own attire and retrieved the blades from the floor. "I need to handle a few things. It shouldn't take long. Then we're picking this up from exactly where we left off." When she shifted her feet, he moved in to back her against the desk for another deep kiss. Before her head cleared, he ordered, "Stay here," and was gone.

As the door closed behind him, Eselle savored the lingering sensations. Why couldn't he have been an ordinary resident, one she could risk waiting for?

Gathering her wits, she rushed to the window.

The commander stood on the edge of the porch, calling over two soldiers. He secured his sword belt while they spoke. Eselle grumbled, seeing him tuck her dagger into it. After a moment, he pointed over his shoulder toward the office. Did he just put a guard on the place?

Eselle snatched up her pack, opened one of the side windows—cringed when it creaked—hopped through, and rushed for the trees. With any luck, she would be leagues away before he returned for her.

## CHAPTER THREE

Eselle ran for the first quarter league after leaving Grimswold, then dropped to a brisk walk, catching her breath. A few hours later, well after her legs wore out and her lungs burned, she broke for the day.

It seemed unlikely the commander would send anyone after her. From what she could tell, he hadn't figured out her real identity, and she hadn't actually done anything illegal—that he knew of—so sending soldiers would be a waste of resources. To be safe, she made her campsite far back into the woods, well out of sight from the road. A cluster of oaks provided a good canopy where she curled up in her cloak and blanket. Despite the cozy campsite and her fatigue, sleep eluded her. The soothing sounds the regular forest inhabitants surrounded her—squawking, croaking, and chirping—but she couldn't help but listen for anything unusual.

Though lack of sleep made traveling the next day arduous, she managed a decent pace.

A few days later, Eselle reached her destination, the small town of Eddington. The first buildings came into view after she

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rounded a bend in the road. A broad stream swept past the edge of town, then snaked through a few evergreen trees before disappearing into a thicker part of the forest. With luck, the waters would be teeming with fish so she could replenish her food stores before leaving.

Eselle found most of her food in the wild, and her gear was comfortably broken in, sturdy and well-maintained, so she rarely needed to replace anything. There were other items, however, she needed to purchase—such as a new dagger. She made her first stop the local store.

From what she knew of Eddington, it was the farthest town to the east before reaching the Punstol Mountains. A few small settlements had been established in the mountains, but little else. Unless someone had business there, few people ventured past Eddington. The town had the only market for several leagues, and judging by the number of people milling around, it maintained decent business from surrounding villages and farmsteads.

After leaving the store, Eselle headed for the nearest inn. The proprietor didn't recognize her contact's description, just shook his head and apologized. She thanked him and sought out the next inn, the only other in town. It proved equally unsuccessful. She wasn't surprised she had beaten Jinsle to Eddington, so she rented a room and prepared to wait out his arrival.

Eselle dropped her pack in her room, then settled at a corner table in the main hall. The inn had a handful of patrons scattered throughout the dozen or so tables. A short hallway off to the right led to boarding rooms, and a staircase ascended to more, hers included. On the opposite side of the room, a long, well-worn bar kept patrons out of the kitchen behind it. The back wall held an unlit, over-sized fireplace that gave off a lingering smoky scent.

As she finished her meal, she waved a hand to hail the proprietor.

"Excuse me. Do you know when the regional commander is due? I have some business to discuss with him."

The proprietor was a small man, older in years and with a slight hunch to his shoulders. He seemed pleasant enough, though she rarely saw him speak outside of taking orders and collecting money. That was fine with her. She disliked innkeepers getting too friendly when she wanted to be discreet.

The man took a moment to think before he answered. "I don't believe he's due for another month or more. You may have a long wait, miss."

"It appears so. Thank you." Eselle gave an inward sigh of relief. If the last schedule change had been a fluke, and the commander and his contingent kept to their previous route, she wouldn't have to worry about running into them before she left. She could take the southern road and never see them again. If they'd changed more than their timing . . . well, she'd have to manage.

Eselle studied the growing crowd of townsfolk seeking food and company. With no other business in town, she didn't know what to do with herself until Jinsle arrived. An early start in the morning might help, maybe checking the stream outside of town for fish.

Another idea struck her, and she smiled. *In what devilish ways could Grimswold's commander help me pass the time, if only he was here?*

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The next morning, Eselle took an indirect route to the stream, wanting to see more of Eddington. She didn't plan to fish until right before leaving, but it never hurt to take a look, find the best holes and see what kind of fish were present.

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Well-maintained shops and homes lined the streets, several with signs of recent repairs. Most of the residents she passed wore straight-lined, woolen garments of subdued colors, but she occasionally saw women with a splash of color. The regional maps and reports didn't do this place justice. It was quainter than she had imagined. From her limited knowledge about these outlying areas, she had expected a rough and barren land with dilapidated structures and dirt-covered inhabitants. The truth exceeded her expectation.

A huge garden sat beside the last house on the lane, surrounded by a picket fence. Kneeling in a thick section of greenery, a woman tended vegetables. She brushed her unruly brunette curls away from her face where they'd escaped her loose braid, yet she wore a contented expression as she harvested what appeared to be leeks. Once done, the woman gathered her tools and vegetables, and pressed a hand against the ground to rise. As she did, the woman's stomach came into view, having previously been obscured by the lush vegetation. The sharply curving plumpness suggested the woman was nearing the end of her pregnancy.

A smile tugged at Eselle's cheeks as she walked by.

The woman held the underside of her stomach with the hand clutching the vegetables, while her other gripped her tools. A slight waddle showed in her steps as she emerged from the garden and headed toward the house. Eselle envied the woman's life of tending her garden and caring for her family, whether this was her first child or her fifth. Though, the woman didn't appear old enough to have many children. Eselle guessed her to be around twenty, a few years younger than herself. She wondered if the woman's husband was waiting for her inside, if he would sit on the porch with her before they headed to bed. While Eselle sometimes dreamed of that life, she enjoyed her freedom; plus,

she had other responsibilities to consider to her family, her brother, their people.

Halfway to the house, the woman gasped and lurched forward. She dropped everything to grab her stomach. Eselle jolted at the sight and released her own gasp. She rushed through the gate, reaching the woman as she began to rise, and put a hand under the woman's arm to steady her.

"Are you all right?"

The woman studied her for a moment before donning a soft smile. "I'm fine. Thank you."

"Are you sure? You almost fell over."

"Yes. This happens all the time. It's nothing." The young woman shook out the skirts of her sky-blue dress, then began to bend down for her tools.

"Let me help you." Eselle gathered up the woman's gloves and trowel, as well as the dropped vegetables. She was pleased to find they were, in fact, leeks.

"Thank you," the pregnant woman answered, taking her belongings. "I'm Cristar."

"Eselle."

Why had she given her real name? It had left her lips before she realized it. Even a well-meaning stranger could reveal her to the wrong people and get her hanged.

The young woman scrutinized Eselle's features. "You're not from here, are you?"

"No. I'm passing through." It wasn't surprising the woman recognized her as a stranger. That was typical in remote towns; everyone knew everyone.

"Oh. So, you're staying at one of the inns? Are you at the Broken Spoke or the Old Goat?"

"The Old Goat," Eselle replied, for some reason unable to lie to the woman. Maybe it was because Cristar was vulnerable from



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her recent . . . whatever had made her nearly fall over. Or maybe it was her soft, pleasant smile. Eselle couldn't figure it out, but she needed to stop tossing out the truth.

"I've heard it's nice," Cristar said.

Eselle gave a noncommittal smile.

"Would you like to come up to the house for a drink? I have some freshly brewed tea, and I was about to make myself a cup. You can join me if you'd like."

Eselle hesitated.

"The leaves are from my garden."

Eselle glanced at the impressive assortment of vegetables and herbs. Some she suspected were for cooking, while others appeared medicinal. There was too much for the woman's family alone.

"I'd like that," Eselle said. "I could use a nice warm drink. Thank you."

"Have a seat on the porch, and I'll bring it out."

As they walked to the house, Eselle couldn't help looking at the woman's belly. "What happened back there? You said it happens all the time."

Cristar caressed her stomach with one of her loaded hands. "He kicked me."

"He what?" Eselle had never spent much time around a pregnant woman, being that she was either traveling or living on a farm with a bunch of men.

"He kicked me," Cristar repeated, then shook her head. "I don't really know if it's a boy, but he's been kicking a lot. I figure a girl would be politer and at least kick gently if she really had to. This guy's tough, though. He lets me know he's there and ready to come out and roughhouse." Some faint color rose to her cheeks. "It's silly, I know. I just think it sounds better than calling him 'it.' Anyway, this time he caught me off guard with a real wallop. He's going to be a handful, I can tell."

"How much longer until he arrives?"

"About two months. I can't believe he's almost here." Cristar smiled down at her stomach.

Eselle waited in one of the wooden chairs on Cristar's porch and examined the small, well-maintained house. The porch, over-sized for the house, appeared to be a newer addition with fresh wooden planks. She wondered if Cristar's husband built it. Facing west, it undoubtedly allowed for spectacular views of the sunset. She could easily imagine the baby playing out here while his parents watched.

Cristar stepped out of the house with a teapot and two cups balanced in her hands. "Here's the tea."

Eselle jumped up to help. After taking the items, she arranged them on the small table. Cristar strategically settled herself into a chair while Eselle poured the drinks.

"Thank you," Cristar said, taking the full cup from Eselle.

"You're welcome." Eselle raised the warm tea to her lips and enjoyed the fresh floral aroma that wafted up. "Mm, that's wonderful."

"I worried about the crop this year because of all the rain. Luckily, it turned out pretty well."

"Do you and your husband grow all this for yourselves, or do you sell some? I wouldn't mind buying some fresh supplies from you. Your crops look better than any I've seen in a long time."

Cristar sat silently and stared off into her garden. She blinked several times and swallowed before she looked back. Eselle recognized the change in the woman. While she'd never been married, she'd once had a significantly larger family.

"My husband died a few months ago," Cristar said. "It's just me here. The garden's mine, it always has been. Klaasen never had much of a green thumb. The first time he killed one of my plants,

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I banned him from my garden on pain of . . ." Cristar looked down at her drink.

Eselle remained respectfully silent, running her fingers along the perfectly smooth wooden arm of her chair.

After wiping her eyes on the back of her hand, Cristar lifted her head. "Well, I told him I'd handle the garden. He worked miracles with wood though. He built the back room of our house, added the porch, built me a garden shed and himself a workshop out back. Plus, he's helped nearly every neighbor in town at one point or another on some project. That's how he did so much to our house; he traded his labor for materials and such."

Eselle felt a twinge in the back of her throat as she listened to the woman reminisce. "He sounds wonderful."

"He was." Cristar's voice had softened. She took a sip of her drink, then sniffled once before raising her head again. "Yes. I sell some of the crops to the general store and others directly to townsfolk. If you'd like to buy anything, it's for sale."

They finished their tea while discussing the various produce Eselle wanted to examine.

Once she had rearranged her supplies to accommodate her purchases, Eselle waved goodbye and headed down the road. After three steps, she stopped and gazed at the stream ahead of her.

Jinsle might still be a couple of days since she'd arrived early, seeing as she'd nixed her stay in Grimswold and hustled away. She glanced over at the garden, at the vegetables ready for harvest. Growing up, she and Tavith had run through similar, though much larger, rows of crops. It had been so difficult for Cristar to move about in the short time they'd spent together, even to simply get out of the chair.

Eselle turned and found Cristar watching her.

"I might be here for a couple of days. Or maybe more." Eselle took a few steps back toward the house. "Would you by any

chance need help around here? I'm probably not as good as you with a garden like this, but I grew up on a farm, so I know a few things about plants."

"Oh, thank you, I couldn't afford to—"

"No." Eselle took another step forward. "I don't want you to pay me. I'm waiting for a friend, but he's late, and I'm bored. I thought this might be something to keep me busy. Plus, that's a big boy you're hauling around there, so you could probably use some assistance."

Cristar gave her a soft smile. "I'd like that. Yes, I'd appreciate the help."

"Great." Eselle examined the garden as she adjusted her pack. "Where can I start?"