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RR PUBLISHING

Captive Hope (Chronicles of the Twelve Realms: Book 2)

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Published by RR Publishing
www.rachaelritcheys.com

ISBN-13: 97809972033-0-1 (paperback)

ISBN-13: 978-1-955193-01-6 (jacketless hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-997203-31-8 (jacketed hardback)

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Cover Design and Interior Formatting by Rachael Ritchey

Chronicles of the Twelve Realms

The Beauty Thief

Captive Hope

The Treasonous

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MAPS



CHAPTER ONE

A TEMPORARY ESCAPE



ALL MORNING IT HAD RAINED, softening the earth now pressed beneath her feet. The threat of more hung in the air, but Idra would rather be drenched in the transparency of its tumult than suffer a cascade of gossipers' insinuations. It was they who had chased her from the comfort of the castle and they who caused her no end of grief for her unwillingness to indulge in their fancies.

Countless times she'd come close to revealing all the horrible details of the kidnapping, the trauma she and Princess Caityn had endured over a year ago, but Idra's own words to her cousin kept ringing in her ears. *"... if there are some who think poorly of you, it's only because they don't know the real you. Given time, you'll prove them wrong."*

Besides, it was the vocal few who made their dissatisfaction known over her refusal to divulge anything else and always in the most underhanded ways. As lady-in-waiting to her cousin, it was her duty to protect Caityn in any way she could, and if the curiosity of the idle elite of High Castle couldn't be satisfied with firsthand witness of their future High Queen's virtue, there was nothing Idra could say about the past that would change their opinions.

She had escaped the ladies' gathering to gallop through the rain-saturated fields outside the castle walls, banishing her frustration on the winds. And now Idra stood next to her horse in the middle of the tall, wet grass. She leaned into him, and the gentle beast answered her melancholy by nuzzling her hair. There was more peace out here with her horse and the silent groom who accompanied her than with almost anyone inside the castle other than her cousin.

Princess Caityn, though, was happily married to her prince and had a baby on the way. Idra now found herself to be something of an outsider even with her best friend whose life moved forward while she, the lady-in-waiting, seemed to always be just that—waiting. She held no grudges. Idra was born and raised for this life, to always serve the princess.

"Stop, Idra," she said to herself and swiped at un-welcome tears pooling in her eyes.

It did no good to lament the life of privilege and honor she'd been given. She had more to be thankful for than to ever complain about, but loneliness was a horrible feeling. To always feel separate, unnoticed. To wonder if you were worth anything to anyone.

"M'lady, a rider advances," the groom said from his position seated on his mount.

Idra stepped away from the comforting warmth of her horse to espy the approaching rider. At first she was unsure who it could be, but in the span of a few seconds she recognized the man on horseback.

"Tis Sir Ahmad."

The respectful and quiet groom was all but forgotten as she focused on Ahmad's approach. Thoughts of him settled like something warm and familiar, and some of the overwhelming loneliness melted away. She waved, admiring his confidence in the saddle and his strength. On occasion she'd had to stop herself from daydreaming about this handsome knight of the Realms, but Ahmad's particular attention tempted her to such unusual foolishness.

He pulled the reins and stopped several feet from her, but mud churned up from the horse's abrupt halt splattered about, some landing on Idra's skirts. Sir Ahmad jumped down from his steed and knelt in the spongy soil at her feet.

"Apologies, my lady."

Idra bit her lower lip as her heart skipped a beat while taking in the wavy, damp hair of his bowed head.

"Do not be troubled, Sir Ahmad, but please stand. You'll cover yourself in muck."

Ahmad looked up at her before a disarming grin spread across his face. He rose from the ground, his gaze locked on hers, and then he bowed.

"Thank you, Lady Idra. I'm glad I've found you, but I must apologize for interrupting your solitude."

"Think nothing of it. Your presence is always a welcome diversion from too much solitude. Oh! But, please, do not repeat that to anyone. Caityn would be upset if she thought me lonely. I'd never want to give the impression I'm discontented."

"Even if you are?"

Her heart beat out of rhythm at the gentle tone of his question. Without saying it, he told her he recognized the truth behind her words, once again proving how astute he could be in reading her...like no one else at High Castle. And once again he made her feel seen and made her wish they were in such a position she could speak freely with him always.

Unbidden thoughts of him invaded her mind, and her riding gloves pinched her hands. Working to banish any intimate longings from her mind, she absently pulled the gloves off.

"Yes, well . . ." She swallowed. "You . . . you've obviously come for some reason other than to hear me complain."

"You never complain."

The soupy air choked her as she stared into his unguarded, sincere gaze. She wanted to blame it on the humidity but knew better. Her dry lips parted. Instead of having coherent thoughts to speak, she bit her bottom lip and longed for a glass of water.

Ahmad's smile remained fixed, but by the grace of Almighty, he turned to speak to the groom and gave her a moment to compose herself.

"You may return to the castle," he said. "I'll see that the lady makes it back safely."

"Yes, sir." The groom spurred his horse into a canter and left them standing in the open field...alone.

Idra's pulse quickened as she watched him go. Ahmad's next words startled her from her preoccupation. He frowned. "I've upset you. I must apologize again."

"Forgive me. No. I was lost in thought. Nothing more. Please, I feel whatever has brought you in search of me must be urgent."

Ahmad cleared his throat. "Possibly. Prince Theiandar has requested your presence. He asked me to find you immediately, and after checking the library and conservatory, I went to the stable master who said you'd ridden out."

"I'm sorry to send you on a wild goose chase. I needed to get away . . . escape for a while. But strange is this summons! Prince Theiandar has never asked for me before. Did he mention for what purpose he calls?" She gripped her gloves and ran them through her hand.

"Not exactly." Ahmad took the gloves from her hands, his fingers brushing hers, causing warmth to swirl in her middle. "I believe it's regarding your cousin."

At the mention of Caityn, Idra straightened, forgetting the brief pleasure of his touch, as disastrous thoughts swirled in her mind.

“What could he have to discuss with me about the princess? Is it the baby? Has something happened?”

“I think not, my lady. Raz . . . excuse me . . . Prince Theiandar and King Dante had a hurried meeting with an emissary from Emlyn. I’d been waiting outside the room when they emerged, and Prince Theiandar mentioned Princess Caityn. The first task he ordered was finding you.”

“Of course. We should go right away. I just can’t imagine what he could possibly want with me.”

Idra swung around to mount her horse but came up short at Sir Ahmad’s next words.

“Please, allow me to assist you.” He held out his hand for hers.

She looked at her gloves in his hand and then at his congenial face before realization dawned. Heat swept up her chest toward her face, but unable to resist the innocent temptation, she gave her hand into his. Her insides melted as he ran his rough thumb over the back of her hand before gently working the first glove back over her chilled fingers. Her breath caught as he reached for her other hand and did the same, this time bending to kiss her gloved hand when he finished.

When he looked back up, his eyes held a stormy, darkness that matched the rain-soaked soil of the field, but he didn’t speak. Idra wanted to stay in that moment, but the ethereal pleasure of time standing still could not last.

He stepped beside her horse and formed his hands as a stirrup. A strange sense of resignation that, like so many times, moments with this chivalrous knight were only a dream, and she must wake. Obedient to the silent gesture, she lifted her dirty foot and gently he elevated her into her saddle.

Once mounted on his own steed, they trotted back toward the castle.

Entering the castle gates, they slowed their pace. Ahmad, gazing up, said, “You picked the perfect time to ride out. It looks as though it may rain again soon.”

“Yes. The rain has been rather more than I am used to. Taisce’s autumn rains tend to hug the mountains.”

“Do you miss Taisce?”

“Every day. But you mustn’t ask me such things.” Unable to resist letting out a small truth to him, she said, “I find I cannot keep a secret from you. Let us talk of something else. You mentioned the emissary from Emlyn. I’d heard a messenger arrived, but I admit I’ve contemplated several possibilities for his presence. Tell me, do you see us going to war with the Crescents?”

“You’ve been listening to the gossips.”

She cocked her head and gave him a mock look of chastisement. He smiled, not seeming to be put off by it.

“I find I must ignore most chatter here, especially the abounding gossip. Still, you must allow there have been several messages sent back and forth with Emlyn of late. It only makes sense, seeing as how it is our realm closest to the Crescent Cave Nation.”

“You are as observant as you are lovely, my lady.”

Idra ducked her head to the side, hoping he did not see how his compliment affected her. She rarely received admiration of her attributes, physical or otherwise, and Ahmad had proven to be reserved with his praise of anyone at all. But he tended to be forthright when he did. She hesitated to believe his words now were anything other than a gallant nicety, but it didn’t stop her from wishing they meant more.

“You, sir, are attempting to avoid my question.”

“You see, observant,” he said in a teasing tone. “I’ll answer your question, even if it is complicated. I wish to say we shall never go to war with the Crescents, but as things stand, war is very much a prospect. In fact, ’tis one the king takes seriously. Much depends on a course of action which he is not ready or willing to enforce.”

"I see. Or should I say, I think I see. Is there anything I should do to prepare?"

They neared the castle keep, and Idra lamented the hasty passage of their trek. This time alone with Sir Ahmad was like a stolen gift and most pleasant occurrence, but not all things in life were meant for her pleasure.

"Prepare, my lady? No, there is nothing for you to be concerned over, but I suppose the one thing which is always acceptable is prayer."

Once inside the bailey, all she could feel were eyes upon her, staring from dark corners. A chill ran down her spine.

When they stopped at the base of the keep's stairs, Ahmad helped Idra to dismount and handed the reins of both horses to the waiting stable boy. Thick, dark clouds picked that moment to break open and release a flood of heavenly tears. Idra looked up and laughed.

Sir Ahmad grimaced at the deluge and escorted her up the steps in haste. She didn't know why, but the rain waiting to fall until they'd arrived seemed comical and diverted her from the strange uneasiness which had overtaken her a minute before.

Once inside, Idra's laughter cut short. The grim face of a chambermaid formed out of the darkness near the entrance. It was Noreeta, a girl with whom she was familiar and who'd been showing up in the strangest places over the last few days. She seemed skittish, but before Idra could inquire after her, the young woman flitted toward the kitchen.

Idra, well aware the prince could not be left waiting, let the girl go, and they continued to the king's private assembly room where, upon arrival, the knight outside opened the door for her to pass through.

"I'll alert the prince of your presence."

"Thank you, Sir Ahmad."

"Tis a privilege to serve you." He hesitated. "My lady, you would consider us friends?"

Idra stopped short of fully removing her gloves, arrested by the surprise his question afforded.

"Yes. Of course. And I value your friendship a great deal."

"Then may I beg you call me Ahmad?"

The very idea was both welcome and a little scandalous, but she couldn't resist. "I will if that is what you wish. But if I'm to call you Ahmad, you must call me Idra."

She warmed as his expression shifted from tense to pleased.

"I can think of nothing better . . . Idra."

She melted at the sound of her name said so simply in his deep tenor.

Ahmad took her ungloved hand and bowed low over it without pressing his lips to her skin. She could imagine how it might feel, and her heart tumbled in her chest. But she dared not allow herself to entertain the distant hope of something more from this man.

No, in her position, without permission from the high king, it would be impossible. Caityn would, of course, give her leave and work to convince the king, if ever she and he were . . . but no. Best not to imagine that unpromised future. Lady-in-waiting was her calling, and there was no purpose in dreaming about something else.

And so a formal distance settled between them. But it was innocent moments like this which stirred up that hope she refused to admit, often even to herself.

Ahmad gave her one more heartfelt smile and left to retrieve the prince while she stood alone in the room, her hands resting on the back of a chair at the expansive, round table. In a momentary lapse of self-restraint, Idra daydreamed of a future still shrouded in shadow and mist, and neither the approaching autumn chill nor lack of fire in the hearth could erase the heat from her cheeks or dampen the warmth in her heart at a dream. Only a simple dream.

Idra's mind drifted back to the present, and she removed her other glove, stewing over the mysterious summons. She could think of no reason for it, and the thought of speaking about Caityn without the princess's knowledge troubled her with a sense of disloyalty, as if hiding something from her friend and mistress. Idra only hoped she'd not be asked to keep any secrets from her cousin.

The door creaked open on well-used hinges, startling Idra. She curtsied with practiced grace as Prince Theiandar rushed into the room with Sir Ahmad in tow.

"Your Highness, how may I serve you?"

"Lady Idra, I'm sorry to omit formalities, but our time is short, and I believe you must be curious why I asked for you. Ahmad, you might as well stay. Soon enough this news will be common knowledge. Please. Sit."

The three of them took seats at the round table, and Idra watched Prince Theiandar run his fingers through his wavy, dark-brown hair.

"The reason I asked to see you—before word spreads—is because I must tell Cait I've been called to the northwestern borders of Emlyn. I need your support in convincing Cait she must not accompany me on the journey. Otherwise, I know she would risk her health and, by so doing, that of our baby. Will you help me?"

After watching the prince's obvious agitation, Idra had become tense, but relief washed over her as she listened; this was something she could do.

"Of course, Your Highness. Caityn and the baby are my highest priorities, not only as her lady-in-waiting but as her cousin and friend. I'll do my best to help however I'm able."

"Thank you. I know she'll protest, but I must have my way in this. I'm sure you can understand. Will you go to her now? I would prefer for you to be there when I tell her. If there is any disagreement, you can help to persuade her. I'll be along after I brief my men."

"Yes. I'll go this minute. Excuse me." Idra was about to slip out the door, but she stopped as a thought occurred to her. "Would you rather I break it to her, Sire?"

"I thought about that, but no. I should be the one to tell her."

"I'll see you shortly, Highness." She gave one last, quick curtsy and hastened from the room.

CHAPTER TWO

THROUGH NEW EYES



AHMAD WATCHED IDRA GO AND couldn't focus on anything else but her lingering presence. He was far more captivated by her than he'd been willing to admit to anyone and couldn't stop thinking about her. It wasn't just the smoothness of her skin or her expressive brown eyes. He was drawn to her dignified grace and loyalty and all manner of things. For Ahmad it was a hard day to endure if he could find no way to cross paths with the lovely lady-in-waiting.

"Ahmad, my friend," Theiandar said, disrupting his thoughts, "this trip we're taking is sure to be unpleasant. We'll be leaving within the hour and not returning for at least two weeks. It all depends on how our mission goes. Father and I are hopeful it'll be less complicated than King Ekreton has implied. His dispatch was altogether negative. I'm concerned nothing short of an arranged marriage to my sister is going to appease King Donegold of the Crescents, which is absolutely unthinkable. Eliya will not be used as a pawn in a king's twisted chess game."

Prince Theiandar, Raz to his unit of guardsmen, slammed the tabletop with the side of his fist, his deep-rooted anger toward their neighboring nation apparent in the vehemence of his words.

"Listen, Raz, let me inform the men. You go. Speak with your wife, and we'll be ready to leave when you are."

"Are you certain?"

Ahmad nodded, and the prince stood. He squeezed Ahmad's shoulder.

"I'll see you shortly."

Raz left and Ahmad was quick to do the same, heading in the opposite direction, toward the barracks.

Now that his task was set, Ahmad let his mind wander back to more pleasant possibilities. He'd been pining after Idra for a year. Raz had advised him to make his feelings known, but he'd refused under foolish pretenses of social caste barriers, having been born a lowly gatekeeper's son. But all the while he'd let hope linger as she'd danced her smiling eyes before him in complete oblivion, none the wiser about his growing esteem.

He lived to see her soul through those eyes.

As the all-but-true possibility of war loomed over them, his desire to tell her increased. The thought of never knowing whether she could care for him in return grew more frightening than the prospect of being rejected.

* * *

The storm had passed, and now the sun shone through broken clouds. Idra and Caityn stood on the keep's stairs overseeing the soldiers' final travel preparations in the courtyard.

Caityn broke the stilted silence between them. "I'm still upset you sided with him, Idra."

A thin smile graced Idra's countenance at the disappointed tone in Caityn's voice. "Be that as it may, Caity, you know as well as I that it would be foolish to travel so far north when you have only a few months left before the baby arrives. And you heard him. Theiandar doesn't want to be parted from you any more than you from him, but you are more important to him than his comfort or his life. You'd be putting him at risk by traveling into hostile territory."

"I hate admitting when you're right, Idra. I just can't help loathing the idea of not seeing or being near to him for weeks on end. What if something horrible happens, and I'm not there for him?"

"You'll have to let go of those fears and trust the Almighty."

Caityn nodded in reply, but the look on her face was that of a dejected child.

Idra let it go. She couldn't see a way around the unpleasant notion of separation, and talking about it did no good.

Her mind strayed to thoughts of how it felt to be separated from her own family. Memories of home distracted her, and the ache of missing them left her feeling a bit despondent, but Caityn needed her full attention right now. Idra looked over at her cousin, reached out to squeeze her hand, and received a fragile smile in return.

Theiandar approached the two of them, and Idra backed away to give the young couple privacy. She did her best to ignore their hushed conversation while denying the fact that she scanned the crowd in search of Ahmad, but she did admit she hoped to say goodbye to him before they left.

It startled but pleased her when Ahmad approached from behind.

"Ahmad. Where did you come from? Not that it matters. In truth, I was hoping to see you before you left."

"You were?"

She didn't miss his pleased tone, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Of course. I'll miss . . . I always look forward to our conversations."

A flush heated Idra's cheeks and made her wish for a fan to hide behind. He smiled but didn't say a word, and she was sure the redness of her cheeks deepened a shade.

Ahmad wore a peculiar smile which worked to increase her confusion and made it worse when he held something out to her. She didn't think it possible she could turn redder, but his demeanor implied something confidential—a familiarity.

Idra shifted her gaze to the thing balled up in his fist. He opened his fingers for her to see what he possessed, but still not comprehending, she took it from his outstretched hand to better examine the offering.

Idra read her initials embroidered into the corner of the rather dirty handkerchief and was flabbergasted. She looked from cloth to man with disbelief. What to ask? What does this mean? Is it the one I lost? Where did he get it? Why does he possess it? The questions flooded her mind.

"It's yours," he said as though reading her thoughts. "When Roache abducted you and Princess Caityn last year, I was devastated . . . for many reasons. I was concerned for your safety."

"Mine and Caityn's?"

He shrugged. "Yes and no. Princess Caityn was also my responsibility at the time, but I confess I was overcome with distress over you—your well-being alone."

"I don't understand."

He looked down at the cloth she held between them.

“Princess Caityn, being who she is, wouldn’t likely have suffered any real threat, but you . . . When I found this handkerchief in the bushes and realized it was your clever way of showing us where to go, I held onto it like a lifeline.” He raised his head and implored of her with his eyes. “Idra, we’re friends, and I’m grateful. I know now is not the best time to tell you, but I’m not sure what to expect on this trip, and I need to say it now, before I lose the courage. I want more. The moment you were taken in the forest I realized I had feelings for you beyond those of a friendly acquaintance. I’ll be blunt, Idra. I’m in love with you.”

Her jaw dropped. She gasped and almost lost her grip on the handkerchief but caught it by the edge. Idra had no idea he felt so strongly. Her mouth closed and opened again, but no words would come.

Her vision spun, and Ahmad reached out to grasp her elbow.

“Are you well?”

She shook her head trying to clear her vision. “I’m . . . I’m well. I just never . . .”

Silence filled the gaping chasm of unsaid words between them.

“Please, say something, Idra.”

The pained, pleading look in his light-brown eyes spurred her to formulate her thoughts.

“Ahmad, I did not know. Of course, you know I value our friendship. Deeply. Are you sure? No, don’t answer that. I can’t think straight. I never guessed. I’m flattered. No, I’m more than that. I just . . . I never thought. I’m sorry.”

“Please, don’t apologize. I can see I’ve distressed you, and I know I should have said something long ago, but I—” The thought hung in the air. He let go of her elbow. “Idra, all I ask is that you take this time, while I’m away, to consider my suit to court you. I beg your favor. When I return, I hope to have your answer. Will you think on it?”

She’d heard every word, drank them in like a thirsty man at a desert oasis, but it was too good to be true. Even so, she surprised herself when she heard the words coming from her mouth.

“Yes, Ahmad.”

She looked down at her worn handkerchief and then held it out to him. A tentative smile spread across her face. “You keep this. I will think on your proposal with great care, and you may think of this kerchief as a token of my esteem. A reminder to come home safely.”

She watched his face register the implications and couldn’t suppress a bubble of laughter; she was surprised at how light she felt. He didn’t bother to stifle his exuberance over her words either—words Idra herself was rather pleased to have said. His contagious, wide grin accentuated his stubbled jawline, and she had a sudden desire to touch it, not for the first time.

“Thank you, Idra. I . . . thank you.” He took her hand and leaned over it, his soft brown hair falling forward to block his eyes from view. This time, his lips touched her skin. The gentle pressure of them affected her from the inside out.

He looked up, his eyes bright and lingering where she thought his soul memorized hers. Idra beamed at the idea that this brave soldier of the Realms could perchance have feelings for her.

“The weeks cannot go by fast enough. I’ll miss you, Idra.”

“And I you. Be safe.”

Parting was harder than Idra imagined now that she knew how he felt, and with obvious reluctance he tore himself away to mount his horse. Watching his departure left her light-headed.

The knowledge of his feelings was powerful and elating. True, Caityn and all her family loved Idra, but apart from them no one ever showed her any great affection. She was at least partially at fault for being aloof, but she’d never sought attention.

Ahmad turned in his saddle before he disappeared around the corner and gave a hearty wave. She returned the farewell gesture and then he was gone. It almost felt like he took the last of the summer warmth with him.

Soon after the last soldier disappeared around the buildings a foreboding chill swept over Idra. There were people everywhere. She scanned the faces of all the well-wishers and townsfolk, but nothing stood out of place in her mind even though that unpleasant feeling of being watched had crept up on her again. Doing her best to ignore the prickling along her spine she backed up a step and followed Caityn into the keep.

CHAPTER THREE

MORE THAN ONE WAY



FOUR DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE Prince Theiandar, his father, and their knights left for Emlyn. Caityn seemed to have adjusted. She'd cried the first night and did not sleep, but the exhaustion which accompanies pregnancy interrupted her ability to stave off the rest her body craved. The next night she'd slept without issue. Out of concern for her well-being, Idra spent each night sleeping on the settee in Caityn's salon.

For some reason, knowing Ahmad's feelings for her only made Idra more restless instead of giving her any sense of peace. She knew she cared for him—a great deal, in fact—but she struggled with a trust over how deep his attachment ran. What if he didn't know his own feelings and only thought he loved her?

She guarded her heart so closely. It was frightening to let anyone in and she rarely had. Other than Caityn and her own younger sisters, Idra had few close friendships.

She'd spent hours each night tossing and turning on the too-short couch in Caityn's salon while she wrestled with serious thoughts of the depth of her fondness for Ahmad. He'd become a regular part of her life and was found moving within her circles at High Castle.

When she closed her eyes, she could picture his brooding brown ones and imagined his warm lips pressed to her hand again. Idra's sensibilities, her devotion to duty and family, were outside her own desires, and they warred against her heart. Her mother would know what to do, but Ketra could not give counsel at a moment's notice since she was back home at Tanfield in Taisce.

It must have been affecting Idra's mood, because on the fourth day of the men's absence, Caityn spoke up while they sat embroidering in the princess's salon.

"Idra, you seem more restless than even I. Will you tell me what bothers you?"

"What? Oh, nothing really. I mean, there is something, but I'm not sure I'm ready to discuss it. I can't quite grasp how I feel, let alone how to put it into words."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, Caity, but thank you for asking. I guess maybe I'm out of sorts because I miss my family. It's been over a year since I saw them at the wedding."

"Idra, that's it! I wish you would have said something sooner. My family came here and will be back again for the baby's birth, but you haven't seen your family at all. You need to go home to Taisce for a visit. I can't believe I've been so selfish. Let's plan a trip for you to leave tomorrow. You can spend a week with them. Or more, if you like."

"Really, Cait? Shouldn't I stay with you while Theiandar is away? He made it very clear. I wouldn't feel right leaving you."

"I insist. You have always been there for me, and I can't think of a better way to show you how much I appreciate you. Besides, I'll have Zoe and Eliya to keep me company and plenty to do, what with preparing for the baby. Tis not even worth mentioning that you can't make Theiandar come home any faster by sleeping on that tiny couch in my salon."

Caityn raised her eyebrows in mock seriousness.

"I was just concerned. You slept so horribly that first night. I didn't want you to be alone."

"Well, knowing you the way I do, I didn't bother to let on that I knew. You'd have just done it again anyway. You're far too good to me. But I insist. You must travel home to see my dear aunt and uncle. My cousins could stand to behold the elegance of their elder sister as well."

Idra laughed, her fancy taking hold of the idea, not to mention it would give her the opportunity to speak with her mother about her feelings for Ahmad and his request of courtship. If she'd been younger he'd have needed to speak to her father first, but twenty-three was old enough to be asked directly.

Now that she knew how he felt, she found it less difficult to admit her overall attraction to him. She'd barely been able to stop thinking about him since the men left. With the hope of distraction in mind and scant effort to suppress a desire to see her family, she was excited to go.

"Thank you, Caity. I will go. Should we go to my room so you can help me pick out what to wear?"

"Now is a good time to start," Caityn said, rising from the chair.

They left the salon and slipped down the hall to Idra's room, both giddy for the distraction from their individual melancholies.

Idra opened the door to her room and was surprised to find a chambermaid, Noreeta, standing next to her bed.

"Noreeta, what are you doing here at this time of day?"

"M'lady Idra, I apologize," she said. Her hands flew behind her back. "I . . . I overslept this morning." There was her odd, stuttering speech. "I'm behind on all my chores. I... I decided to take care of the sitting room down the hall first. In order to make sure any rooms that may be used during the day were taken care of . . . first."

"I see." Idra was confused but took the rambling chambermaid at her word. "You're welcome to finish what you were doing. Princess Caityn and I are going to pack some of my belongings for a short trip. Would you find my extra pair of riding boots?"

"Certainly, m'lady."

Noreeta, hands still behind her back, shuffled off to the farthest closet to get the boots Idra requested. Her back was turned to the ladies while she retrieved them. Neither Idra nor Caityn noticed her odd behavior as they spoke openly about Idra's trip.

"I'll have an escort arranged for you after we're done here. Come to think of it, since the chambermaid is here, let's lay everything out, and she can pack it while you come with me to make the rest of the arrangements."

"I'm sure Noreeta wouldn't mind. Would you, Noreeta?"

Noreeta jumped, but was quick to speak. "M—mind what, m'lady?"

"Would you mind packing my things? I'm taking a trip to Taisce tomorrow so I can visit my parents. Princess Caityn and I laid out the clothes I'd like to take. Or, if you're very far behind, you may fetch my lady's maid to do it."

"Oh! Of course. I'd be happy to pack."

"Thank you, Noreeta."

Noreeta stilled her fluttering hands and curtsied low. "Good-bye, Princess, Lady Idra."

* * *

She watched the princess and Lady Idra leave the room and took a deep, calming breath. That had been close. Too close. Noreeta shoved Idra's belongings into a trunk and rushed down the hall to the servant's stairs. An idea was forming. It couldn't be ignored.

Noreeta was cautious enough to avoid running into any of the head housekeeping staff; they'd be sure to stop her and require some task. For now, the only task Noreeta wanted was to find Zaide and relay what she'd learned.

It took what seemed an eternity to dash through the muddled lanes to reach the street of shops within the castle walls where Zaide's false storefront was located. She didn't care for his business dealings, but he had a way of reassuring her of the necessity for such things.

Noreeta believed in him. She trusted him above anyone else. He told her he loved her, and his touches always implied the same. Noreeta would do anything for him, including help him kill the woman who stood in the way of their marriage.

She swung the door open, out of breath. "Where is your master?"

The man behind the counter stared at her in contempt. She'd never liked him, and he'd never liked her. It was a mutual hatred.

"This is important. Where is he?"

He motioned with his head.

She tried to rein in her hurried breath and smoothed out her rain-damp skirt before she walked with head held high toward the door leading to the back room. Noreeta stepped through without knocking.

Zaide sat at a table with two other men. They all turned to glare.

"What are you doing here, Noreeta?"

"Zaide, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have some news I need to share with you. It's about *her*."

She felt justified in interrupting his meeting as she witnessed his face brighten up when realization dawned.

"Excuse us, men."

He rose without waiting for a response and motioned for Noreeta to follow him. She did so, ever the obedient woman.

Noreeta's eyes widened upon seeing what was on the other side of the door leading into another adjoining room. Lavish decorations with plush furnishings, expensive drapes, and gold candlesticks were packed in the cramped space. In one corner sprawled a four-poster bed with the most beautiful silk coverlet Noreeta had ever seen; it took up a great deal of the room. Working in the castle, she'd seen many lovely things, but this closet of a room held treasures she'd never imagined. It made her giddy with anticipation.

Zaide pressed the door closed behind them, and Noreeta jumped when she heard the lock click into place. She spun around in time to see him slink toward her as if he were a beast and she his prey. She was content to be devoured by him and stood her ground forgetting for a brief moment why she'd come. His promises, his masculinity, and his charm had all worked their way into her heart.

"Well, my dear, what news do you have to share with me about Idra? Did you make all the preparations and unlock the necessary doors?"

"Not exactly." She squeezed the key in her pocket, her thoughts turning morose.

Noreeta couldn't ignore the storm brewing behind Zaide's glassy stare. She knew it wouldn't be held off for long. She wiggled under his scrutiny.

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'?" It shouldn't have been difficult to accomplish. We are prepared to move tonight to finish the job. With Dante and his men well away, it is the best time to act."

"I mean a better option has come along." Noreeta held up her hands in entreaty. "Please don't be angry, Zaide. If you don't like the idea, there is still a chance I can clear the path."

"A chance, woman? I'm listening, but it had better be good."

She swallowed hard. It wasn't exactly that she was worried he would hurt her, but there was this lingering feeling of unease every time he looked at her like that. She didn't know why it frightened her so much.

Noreeta touched her damp hair, fluttering her hands around, unsure where to place them before clutching them in her skirts.

"Well, Zaide my love, Lady Idra hasn't been sleeping in her own room since the king and prince left. She sleeps in Princess Caityn's salon. It would be a terrible risk to break in there. But I have good news." She took a deep breath and plowed ahead. "Idra is to travel with an escort to Taisce. Tomorrow morning. They'll take the main road to her family's estate."

"I heard their whole plan. What I was thinking was that it would be easier to do away with her, not in High Castle."

Noreeta's hands flapped while she spoke, her nerves getting the better of her. If only he'd smile at her; it would be reassuring. She cleared her throat.

"It would mean you'd have to . . . do something with her escort. But, my dearest, you'd be better protected and have less chance of discovery not being within the walls."

Noreeta held her breath and waited while he considered her rushed chatter. She wanted to pass out with relief when he nodded.

"I am both surprised and pleased by your forethought, Noreeta. I didn't know you had it in you. Yes, this will be better. Now, you must go back to the keep. They cannot know you were here. My men and I will leave tonight."

"Can't I come with you?"

"No, Noreeta. It will be too dangerous."

"When will you come back for me?"

"When I'm ready."

"You must come for me the day after tomorrow. I'm afraid to stay here without you."

"Noreeta, don't be irrational. You're perfectly safe."

"Promise me you'll come back for me."

"I will. Now go."

The impulse strong, she leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. It was quick, and even she was surprised by the outburst. Noreeta knew he was not a demonstrative man, but she tried not to let it bother her when he didn't return her affectionate gesture.

Zaide's mien was stoic as he stared at her before he moved to undo the lock and motioned for her to leave. Not another word was spoken.

Noreeta didn't want to admit it, but she felt like a chastised schoolgirl as she scurried from the room. Her only comfort was in the knowledge that he loved her and would come back for her.

* * *

Idra, a High Castle kitchen maid, and two guards assigned to escort her left the castle early the next morning.

From her mare, Idra looked back at Caityn who stood on the steps. They waved farewell to each other much as they'd done with the men five days before. It was comforting to know Caityn wasn't upset by Idra's desire to see her family and would relay an invitation for Ahmad to visit her family's estate.

The weather had cleared and the day was perfect for travel. Idra enjoyed the start to the trip, watching the early morning fog burn off. The fields along the road were blanketed in the white fluff. As the golden orb

rose higher behind them, its rays cast a magical tint to the fog. The white mist slowly dissipated in the presence of the sun, leaving behind the honeyed glow of autumn wheat fields.

The day passed in affable fashion for Idra and her escort. She didn't know the maid very well but found out the young girl hailed from Taisce. She grew up in a village not far from Tanfield, Idra's home. Idra hoped the girl would be able to see her parents on this journey.

Before long, they would be leaving the open fields for the dense cover of forest. Her enthusiasm grew with each passing mile. The sight of trees dotting the horizon, the sun casting long shadows over the ground, made her wish it wouldn't take days and days to get home. With Tanfield close to the river, it would take only three or four days to arrive, but it was still too far to appease her excitement.