



# 1

TRESSIDA SAT IN an empty stall reading a book stolen—borrowed—from the palace stables library. The barn had always been empty. Yet, even without horses, the queen maintained a small Horseguard. All twenty members of that secret cohort had vanished two sennights before. Ever since, she often put her nose up to the saddles and bridles and inhaled deeply. But the only scent was the oil used to condition the equipment.

To what end remained a mystery. Rumor had it the horses were dead, or had abandoned all hope of being called, although a few people believed they would return and save everyone. Gran among them.

Tressida, too. She wanted to join the Horseguard and someday become captain. It meant little without horses, but it was better than lying in bed awaiting the slumbering sickness.

Also better than enduring the never-ending speculation about whom she would choose—whose broodmare she would become. As one of only two women in the city with any chance of birthing a child, she had grown used to the covetous gazes of nearly every man she met. Her friend Galiann was a girl of only twelve, but even her breeding potential was openly discussed. People referred to her as Cirq's Hope.

No one attached hope to Tressida. She would not join with a man before she was ready. Men. At best, they were self-absorbed nitwits; at worst, heartless brutes. Hence, the bitter comments about her being *selfish*. People called her Cirq's Doom. As if she alone were responsible for the country's condition. As if Galiann alone could save everyone by pushing out a couple of babies. Gran said to ignore the chin waggers and twaddlers, but it was hard.

As captain, she would command respect. Eventually, she would take a mate—when she met a man she could stand to be around. Thankfully, the law was still on her side. Who and when to join was the woman's choice.

She closed the book, clapping dust into her face and sneezed and laughed at the same time. The day grew dark, or darker, to be precise. The ever-present clouds meant it never truly became bright. She should get home. Tonight, they would celebrate the anniversary of her birth seventeen years before, and Gran had promised something special.

A few more pages would not hurt. Gran rarely returned from the palace before full night. Tressida enjoyed the solitude of the palace stables. Here, she was free of the twaddlers as well as the possessive gaze of their neighbor, councilman Alard, who daily harangued the queen to change the rules governing joining. If he could, he would force Tressida to become his mate the moment his current one, Reda, died of the slumbering sickness.

Reda had been abed for days. Tressida suspected she simply wanted to escape her mate's bad breath, bulbous nose, and pebble-like eyes. Alard, a man of the heartless brute variety, belittled his mate at every turn because she never had children. But Reda had kept a kind eye on Tressida when she was a little girl. She learned a great deal about forbearance by watching the woman put up with Alard.

He disgusted her. She let the book fall open. The chapter she read delineated how to groom a horse. With the Horseguard away, she found the equipment and practiced on one of the many statues around the park. As beautiful as they were, they were cold and lifeless. She longed to feel the warmth and softness of a real horse.

Other chapters covered feeding and hoof care, and her favorite illustrated methods of braiding a horse's mane. She wove her own hair in tight rows along her crown. People looked at her askance for the strange style and suggested she get her nose out of books and do something productive. She fingered one of her tight plaits. Would a horse's hair feel the same as hers?

Gran called her fairy-headed for such thoughts. But fairies were no more thick on the ground than horses. She stretched and stood. If there were horses here, the stalls would be bedded deeply with straw to protect their legs.

What she would not give to snuggle against a horse's neck and match the rhythm of her breath to his—

"Tressida!"

Gran never yelled.

Nor did she leave the palace kitchens when working. How did the old woman know Tressida had been spending her days in the Horse Park?

Gran knew things. Things she never explained.

Tressida tucked the book under her arm and trotted to the sprawling barn's entrance. A breathless Gran nearly knocked her over.

Gran never moved faster than a sedate walk.

She encouraged Tressida to emulate her air of serenity and ponder the ways of the goddess, but Tressida preferred running to walking, and occasionally she laughed too loudly for a country veiled in grief over all it had lost.

Gran kept her hair scraped tightly into a bun at the base of her skull, but several strands had escaped, and two bright spots colored her cheeks.

She grabbed Tressida's arms. "You must leave the city." She paused to catch her breath. "Now."

"Leave? What—"

"Do not question me. We have spoken of this. You remember?"

Tressida nodded. Truthfully, she had only humored Gran's instructions about escaping. She expected to succumb to the slumbering sickness before any need to make a run for it arose.

She grasped Gran's shoulders, still straight and strong despite her age. "What happened?"

Gran dragged her toward the nearest gate to the lower city. There, she paused, listening. Tressida did, too, but heard nothing.

"They come." Gran pushed the heavy iron gate. It swung out silently, the horses worked into the design ready to leap free. "Stay to the east and away from the main avenue."

"Who is coming?"

Gran shook her head enough to rattle teeth.

Gran never used force. A cold knot of worry formed in Tressida's belly.

"Derrians. They come to take the city, likely the whole country."

Hope unraveled the knot. "They bring the horses?"

"Foolish girl. Do you listen to nothing I say?"

The irises of Gran's eyes, usually placid blue like the sky reflected in one of the palace ponds, took on the cast of a storm cloud, surging as if pushed by wind. That, more than the yelling and running and dragging, snapped Tressida to attention.

"What should I do?"

The creases in Gran's forehead eased but she spoke quickly. "Beneath the trunk in your closet is a trap door. It leads to a tunnel beneath the city. This will take you to the east wall. No one guards the gate. There is a pack at the bottom of the ladder. Make sure the trap is shut and pull the ladder away—"

"Wait. You are coming, too, right?"

Gran brought her hands to Tressida's cheeks. "My darling fairy-head." The tempest in her eyes quieted. "I should have told you." Again, she canted her head toward the city, but all was quiet to Tressida's ears.

"Galiann will meet you at the cottage. Go through Seawood until you reach the coast, then north. The terrace road will be fastest. Empty the larder, but do not waste time. Make for the city of Siban and go to the house of Warden Kadre. He will know what to do."

"Warden Kadre. I will remember. But..." Tressida had never been outside Lerom and knew little about Derr except that they were Cirq's neighbor to the west. "Surely the Derrians come to help?"

The squall returned to Gran's eyes along with the glint of tears. "They do not—"

"Gran, your eyes look strange. Are you all right?"

Gran blinked and the cloudiness disappeared. “These men that come are barbarians bent on destruction. Do not let them catch you.”

Tressida almost laughed. “Have I ever been caught in the stables?”

“Captain Geed caught you and banned you from returning.”

“One time—”

Gran shook her again. “This is no joke. You possess great but lethal powers, and you must not use them. Do you understand?”

“Powers?” Tressida wondered if Gran had dropped a pot on her head in the palace kitchen. “Do you mean the ground’s vibration?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Yes. Remember how you used to play in the fountain?”

Tressida thought back to when she used to play in the small pool in their yard. She could ripple the surface as if a breeze blew across it and sometimes make it sing just by looking at it. One day, Alard caught her. After that, Gran forbade it.

“When I brought you to Lerom, it was to hide you.” She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment.

“Hide me?”

“By rights, you should be dead. They always kill your kind.”

Tressida tensed. “What in Elandevan are you talking about? *Who?*”

Gran pressed her forehead to Tressida's, mumbled a few words and said, “Remember how much I love you. You are a gift to Elandevan. Never let anyone tell you otherwise. Embrace what you are. What does the goddess of all say?”

“Love not fear. But—”

“You have the knife I gave you?”

“Yes, of course. But—”

“I have been honored to care for you.” She kissed Tressida's cheeks. “Do not let them catch you. Do not look back. Do not wait for me.”

“Gran—”

“If the Derrians discover what you are, they will try to use you against us. Do *not* let them catch you, understand?”

“Gran, *please.*”

“Do *not* use your powers, understand?”

“I do not understand anything.”

“Goddess forgive me. I should have told you sooner. Your fear will trigger the smoke.” Gran glanced around as if expecting to be attacked at any moment.

Panic rose in Tressida, fluttering in her chest like a frightened bird. “You make no sense.”

Gran tugged her along and spoke in an urgent whisper. “They will find you if you spin your smoke. If you are not already dead from spinning, they will kill you.”

“You are scaring me.”

“I am sorry you had to learn like this.” She bit her lip and glanced at the nearly dark sky. “You are innocent, you hear? Do not trust other crones or sages. Except sage Marzak. You remember him?”

“I have not seen him in a long time—”

“Leave Galiann with Warden Kadre and find Marzak. The others will stop at nothing and kill everyone around you.”

*Other crones? Smoke spinning? Kill?* Tressida's throat closed so tight it hurt to breathe. "Come with me."

Gran tilted her head again. "No time. I will find you if I can. Then I will explain. Go."

She shoved Tressida down the narrow stone walkway and ran in the opposite direction.

The iron gate clanged shut.

Tressida started after her, but the woman was gone. In her wake, a sweet scent.

Even though she still could hear nothing of the Derrians, even though the city appeared calm and quiet as ever, she did as Gran said, running as fast as her legs would take her, the bird's wings beating inside her chest the whole way. Down and around the streets that twisted back on themselves, always down, for Lerom had been built on a small mountain with the palace and horse park at the pinnacle.

She flew through the alley, into their tiny house, and raced to her room. Gran had never mentioned a trap door. Tressida grabbed the handle of the heavy wooden trunk and jerked it to the middle of her room. Nothing. Not even an outline to indicate where the door might be.

On her knees, she swept her hands around the inside edges of the closet and along the floorboard seams trying to find a crack or crease to dig a fingernail into.

Still nothing.

She sat back on her heels. Tressida might be a fairy-head, but she believed the dread in the old woman's eyes, had felt it as if it were her own.

She made a fist and rapped on the closet floor with her knuckles. A hollow sound returned. This was the right place. A slightly darker line appeared where the walls met the floor, forming a perfect square that when open would be just large enough to fit through.

More strange abilities Gran neglected to explain. Without questioning whatever created the secret door, Tressida pulled her belt knife and wedged it into the newly formed groove. The door popped up on hinges hidden below. The ladder rested against the doorway. At the foot, she could make out the pack.

Truth be told, Tressida had sensed a change coming. In the last couple of days she had scented something new and fresh on the north breeze. Lying in bed at night, listening to Gran humming in the next room, Tressida had felt lightened, almost as if she floated above her mattress.

When she walked barefoot on the dead grass in the horse park, her feet tingled as if something lived just beneath the surface. It filled her with longing and contentment in equal measure. She wished to lie on the ground and absorb the life from below at the same time she felt she could sprout wings and escape the gloomy city.

She had asked Gran about it, but Gran only smiled sweetly like she hid a private joke, and said they would talk soon.

Soon had come and gone. A lethal power crouched within her, a power she could only keep hidden by containing her fear.

Whatever the north breeze brought, whatever dwelled under Tressida's feet, it was not the Derrians. She could feel them in a dusky westerly wind and an erratic heaving in the ground.

She hurried to the kitchen and filled a sack with a hunk of stiff cheese, half a loaf of stale bread, a small sack of nuts—leftovers from the palace. Almost an afterthought, she filled a skin with water from the barrel in the corner. As she turned, she saw the horse book on the kitchen table. She shoved it in the bag.

Where was Galiann? Gran had said the girl would meet her here. Should she go find her?

Driven by the storm in Gran's eyes and the anxious fluttering in her chest, Tressida climbed down the ladder. At the bottom, she slung the waiting pack onto the shoulder opposite her food and water and told herself Gran would be fine.

Satisfied she had everything she needed, she climbed the ladder again. A scuffling noise came from the front of the house.

Reminding herself not to be afraid, she silently eased the packs off her shoulders, hung them on the top of the ladder, and boosted herself through the opening.

From the street came the sound of people running, and farther away shouts echoed through the city's alleys.

Her room was next to the kitchen. She liked being close to the only source of heat. The city was always cold.

Thin light trickled through the front window, enough for her to see someone squatting by the door, hiding, it seemed, from those outside.

More people ran past. What was happening?

Tressida pulled her belt knife. Her palm felt slick. Blood pumped against her ears. Slowly, she moved into the room, staying in the shadows. Her shoulder brushed a pan hanging on the wall. It clanked the one next to it.

The person spun to her, a man, his face frozen for a moment, eyes wide, teeth bared. He pulled open the door and bolted.

Tressida stared after him, then followed.

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