

## *Sanctuary*

The pounding on the door rather than the harsh cry woke Linna. She lay in bed wishing she didn't have to throw off her warm covers again.

This was beyond absurd. Ever since the slaves of the city had whispered the news that a foreign Tactician had taken up residence at the edge of the forest, they came trotting to her the moment they broke free. Men and women -- most still bearing their manacles, some with intact chains -- slipped to her house at night.

Her days were devoted to the masters, of course.

The pounding started again. No point putting off telling this latest arrival the bad news. Linna slipped from her bed, already dressed in the impressive black robes of her trade. She twisted her long brown hair into a rough knot, allowed herself a loud long yawn, then pulled open the sturdy oak door. A bear of a man loomed in the doorway. The faint light from Linna's fire glowed on the broken links dangling from his wrist cuffs.

She launched into the speech she'd already given twice that night. "I do apologize, but I cannot help you. The local authorities have told me to stop and I don't want to lose my license. Might I suggest you head for the forest? And quickly? I believe the local guard are keeping watch on this house. Good luck."

She started to shut the door. But the man pushed his considerable bulk against it, shoved it open and charged into the room. Oh hell.

She slipped to the side cupboard, intending to reach for her stunning stick, but just as her fingers touched it, a huge hand clutched her throat. He forced her head up and she stared into a ripped and bleeding face.

"Sanctuary," he growled. "You will give us sanctuary or --"

From the door, a cultured voice interrupted. "Please forgive us, my Tactician friend, but it really is urgent that we get away from Bechton."

The tall, thin man ambled into her house as if entering a tavern for an evening's pleasure. He had the air of a gentleman, except he wore filthy rags and clinked and rattled like a dray ox hooked for plowing.

He stopped dead. "No, Stot! I thought we agreed to do this without physical. . ." His voice died as he stared at her.

She remembered those eyes, as lively, shiny and as maddening as quicksilver. Now they looked blank with astonishment. Despite the uncomfortable stranglehold the giant had on her throat, Linna felt a wave of smug satisfaction. For the first time in her life, she knew she had surprised Rafen.

He shook his head as if to clear it. The black curls were gone, she was sorry to see, replaced by a dark stubble on his face and head. Around Bechton they kept the slaves shaved to keep the vermin under control.

Rafen grimaced. "Damme, Stot, what have you done?"

"She gives us sanctuary or dies," the giant growled.

"The lady in question is a Sorcery Tactician." The amused drawl was back. Naturally the blasted man would never show amazement longer than a few seconds.

"As are you, sir."

"Ah but she is a mistress of the craft. I don't think I will be able to force her to do what we require." He bowed to Linna and the chains encircling his wrists and waist rattled. Whoever held him prisoner had tried very hard to keep him from moving, much less escaping.

They should have known better.

He gave her a smile that years earlier would have set her off on a well-hidden flutter of lust. "Good evening, Mistress Linna. You're well, I hope?"

"I am fine, Rafen." She shoved the bear man's hand from her throat. "And I see you are still getting into trouble."

One eye swollen, the edge of his mouth bleeding and the handsome devil still had a smile that reminded her of long, deep kisses and other pleasures she'd dreamed of through dull afternoons – but had never been fortunate enough to enjoy. When they'd known each other in her old life, she was only five years his senior but a thousand years older, as dull and dusty as the books she'd studied.

Rafen must have seen her gaze at his mouth. He lifted his hands, bound tightly together, to swipe at the dribble of blood with the side of his thumb. "Yes, I am still getting into trouble, but you will admit I have a good excuse for not showing up at our last tutorial."

So, he recalled that he'd missed the last lesson with her. Linna was annoyed by the small frisson of pleasure evoked by his revelation. She raised her eyebrows. "I left my teaching post eight years ago. Our tutorials were ten years back at least."

Clanking, he strolled across the room to the wooden chair. "The last was supposed to be ten years and four months ago. But I couldn't forget why I was unable to say goodbye. That was the morning I was abducted from my chambers and sold into slavery." He lowered himself carefully onto the chair. "A thoroughly dull existence, slavery. So tell me. What brings you to this godforsaken backwater?"

She ignored the question. “Good God. How on earth did you allow yourself to be captured by traders?”

“A bad bet.”

“I can only imagine.” She wrapped her black professional’s robe tight around her to block the draft seeping under the door. “Well. No point in pushing you two out, is there. Tomorrow you’ll leave.”

“Food,” Stot rumbled.

“I have none,” she said. “The authorities give me rations enough for one each day. They suspect I’ve been feeding the escapees.” She went to the cupboard and pulled out the wispy bit of twig, which she used in her least complex work of illusions. “But I can eliminate the hunger pangs. Shall I?”

Rafen sat up straighter and his eyes glittered with something she’d seen in other slaves’ eyes. Longing. That the rogue would be reduced to this state was bad enough. To see that he could almost be on the verge of begging . . . She quickly touched him with the twig, perturbed by the look of an ordinary mortal in that trickster’s face.

His eyes fluttered shut with relief. As she turned to Stot, Rafen murmured, “I have changed, Mistress Linna.”

She’d forgotten his ability to sense emotion.

His eyes still shut, he grinned. “I know you did not think much of me –“

Did he feel her impatience at that moment? She didn’t bother to hide it in her voice. “Nonsense. You wasted your talent.”

“I have changed.”

She placed the twig on a shelf and went to build up the fire. “I can get you hot drinks. There is no rationing of them.”

She mixed a bit of alcohol and a draught into the brew and handed them each a glass.

“Drink and sleep,” she ordered. “I cannot help you escape, but I can make you comfortable while you are with me.”

“If we can’t escape then we must stay with you.” Rafen yawned. “But together we will find a way, Mistress.”

“I turn away all slaves now. Why should I help you?”

Rafen shrugged, but Stot gave the surprising answer. "He is the prince. He must be away from here. We must raise an army and take back his throne."

"Prince?" Linna snorted. "He's a student. A poor one."

Rafen muttered. "A second rate scholar."

Linna waved her hand in a wide gesture of disdain. "Indeed, that's true enough. A second rater who could have been the best."

The silver eyes opened again and she thought she saw longing in them again. "You said so then, I recall. But . . . Do you really think so?"

"Oh, I do."

"Better than even you?"

She recalled the afternoons, years before, when she'd seen the flashes of brilliance in his careless work, in the very bend of his arms as he composed the words for his tactical work. She nodded. "Yes."

He spread his long fingers on the shabby ripped trousers, as if warming up for one of their tutorials. "Then we shall stay, Stot. Perhaps I won't need an army to take back my crown."

Linna rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. The breeze outside had died down and she knew dawn was not far away. She was too tired to argue. Instead she made conversation while waiting for the drugs to take effect. "You're prince of what? Of rags?"

"Of benighted Bechton," Rafen murmured. His rangy body stretched a bit in the confines of the wooden chair. One long leg stretched out and he rested his cheek against his fisted hand. Already his black lashes were drooping over the magic silver eyes. "I was a refugee in your land and was captured when the corporation discovered my whereabouts."

The large Stot was the first to succumb to the drink. He slowly sank to the floor next to Rafen.

A prince. She should have known. The air of untouchable elegance, of mysteries that she didn't dare explore because it might have revealed her interest in her pupil.

She went to the cupboard and pulled out the books on heirarchy. Skimming the history section, she read about the last prince of Bechton, who was a child when the corporation took over the land and enslaved the unlucky ones who couldn't buy their freedom from the mines.

The Prince called Raffalien.

The slumped figure in the chair was more scarecrow than prince now. No the hints of Rafen, the heedless, glowing man for whom she'd secretly pined. She'd always thought he was carefree. Linna studied him now and understood he'd run from the devils of his cares when she knew him.

So much for her professional study of a man's character. She'd always been better at the abstract Tactician work than other humans.

She mixed a healing powder for their wounds, a cutting glaze for their shackles. At the very least, she could ease pain and restore some of their dignity. More she could not do.

"You will help," Rafen muttered, his eyes shut. "I know you, Mistress."

"You know me? Except when you tried to cozen me into giving extra lessons, you never noticed my existence." Why did she sound so annoyed?

"You were intense, intelligent, inspiring." The small smile on his face did not look entirely mocking. "I often reminded myself that the world containing such as Mistress Linna could not be all evil."

She snorted.

"You think I lie? No. That calm face you wore." His voice grew faint. "It kept me sane. I saw your face so often. . I thought I had gone mad when I saw you . . .here. . ."

She thought about casting a counter spell to hear what he was thinking. "Go on," she whispered. "I hardly care if you lie. I want to hear it."

But the only answer she got was his breath, deep and even.

She tended the large man's injuries first, for she wasn't sure how long he'd sleep. By the time she came to Rafen, the sky had turned pink. Soon enough her appointments would begin. During the day, the elite of the country sought her out.

She traced the cuts on Rafen's face, his neck and arms. His legs, still strong, had old scars under new slashes. Someone had beaten him often, and chains had rubbed his skin raw.

She reached for his bleeding wrists. As she touched them, horrible pain shot through her. The last she knew was his hoarse, deep cry and his hand slashing out.

When she opened her eyes again, she lay in her bed, the scarred and anxious face of the two men hovered above. Her hand stung, and she knew at once what had happened.

"I told you that you had power," she muttered, disgusted with herself. "How in hell did they keep you a slave?"

The bed sank as someone sat down next to her.

“Thank god.” His voice shook. “I thought I’d killed you.”

“No, but you might have killed someone who wasn’t a Tactician. But you haven’t told me how in –“

Rafen's hand rested on her shoulder and his touch silenced her. He leaned close to her ear to whisper, “I didn’t have any such powers. Not until I came here. Do you know why?”

“Oh. No, I don’t. Perhaps you recall ancient lessons when you see me?” She closed her eyes, pretending to gather her wits while enjoying the warmth of his touch. Her body rapidly recalled ancient spells he’d cast on her that had nothing to do with a Tactician’s skills. As pathetic as ever.

“Why are you smiling, Linna?” he whispered. “Something funny?”

“Me. But I must get up.” She rolled over and ignored the dizziness as she stood. Stot reached for her when she tottered. “No, thank you. I have appointments. And you two must stay in here. Rest.”

Rafen’s eyes narrowed. “Your appointments.”

Without another word, he strode to the table where she worked and randomly picked up the leather bound books stacked there. He found her ledger and thumbed through it.

“Leave it,” she said, her heart beating fast.

“I can’t. Your appointments are the answer.”

She stared at the lean figure pawing through her book. “No. I forbid it.” Reluctant but certain, she wrapped one hand around the pulse in her other wrist, ready to gather the strength she’d need to overcome them both.

He turned, folded his arms and leaned his hip on the table. “I understand that you would break vows. That is why I will make you a prisoner. That should keep your name and honor safe.” Before she could raise a hand, he nodded. “Stot.”

In a flash, his servant pulled her into a hold that she could not escape. Rafen must have shown Stot how to grab a Tactician, for he went for her wrists at once. Unwilling to hurt the two men, she had not moved quickly enough, and now they would destroy her.

The wretched Rafen still leaned against her table and watched, his face unusually grave, his mouth set in a harsh line. He turned back to the book.

After a minute, he gave a humorless laugh. “She’s seeing General Mittard. Today.”

“Mittard, that bastard.” Stot tightened his grip on her arms.

“Ow. You needn’t snap my wrists to keep the power at bay,” she protested.

Rafen did not look up from the book. “Hurt her, Stot, and I abandon you. Understand?”

The big man gasped, then stuttered, “Sir. Yes.” Clearly Rafen didn’t often use that threat.

“Mittard will do nicely.” Rafen flipped the book closed and strolled over to them, rubbing the scarred skin of his wrists. “He was our master, Linna. The worst of my ten-year career as a slave. We’ll force two passes from him. No, three passes. Once this day is done, you won’t be safe here, Mistress.”

“No,” she agreed. “But neither of you will be safe anywhere. I can’t let this go unpunished.”

He nodded and gazed into her face. The impish gleam had vanished from his eyes, perhaps forever. “I thought as much. An honest woman like you wouldn’t stand for trickery in her name.” He sighed. “Tie her up. I’ll show you how to make the knots.”

It took a half hour of careful arrangement and tying before Rafen was satisfied.

Hands tied behind her on the chair, she watched as he sat at her work table, used her paper and her special ink to compose a note, called away for an emergency, and signed it with her name.

He opened the door to pin it to the wood, and found the daily ration of food in the clearing next to the hut.

Stot gave a harsh cry and swooped upon the day’s meals, designed for a slender woman.

Rafen stared at the wooden bowls, his hand pressed to his thin middle as if he felt pain. “We’ll split it three ways.”

From her chair, where she carefully wound her fingers through the rope’s coils, Linna lied, “I’m not hungry.”

Perhaps hunger made Rafen think less clearly, or perhaps it was that unconscious jolt of power to push her away. Whatever the reason, she would undo these knots in a matter of minutes. As she worked, she considered what she must do next.

Mittard was coming soon, much earlier than Rafen suspected. The general had sent a messenger the day before requesting an earlier appointment. She had not written the new time in the book.

Mittard.

She disliked the beefy general, but his requests for her skills were honorable – experimenting with dirt and crop spells. He would arrive any minute with his weak fool of a household Tactician who thought only spells would cure the earth. Worms, Linna’d told them often enough.

Spells and incantations were fine, but good dirt required worms and fertilizer. Tacticians who feared their masters rejected workaday solutions for showy spells.

After the men wolfed the bread and stew, Rafen rose from the table and retrieved the note he'd written from the door.

Linna had freed one hand and began on the other. But she froze in place when Rafen came close to her. He squatted down so that they were face to face. Oh, she could even remember the light woody scent of the man. Ten years later, inhaling a deep breath of him could still set her blood humming.

He stared into her eyes. "I am sorry, Linna. Desperation forces me to do this."

For long moments she studied the thin, lined features, any starved slave's face. No, with those high cheekbones and the startling eyes and thick lashes, he was far more handsome than any man had the right to be. Just as she wondered how she could see his thoughts, he made them clear. He leaned closer and the bruised but perfect mouth touched hers. Too much. She closed her eyes and their lips brushed and met again.

"Desperation forces you to kiss me or betray me?" she murmured, against his mouth.

"Yes." He inched closer for another kiss, even more earth shattering. She groaned and leaned into him, wondering why she let him, and why he did this to her. He didn't need to kiss her. As far as he knew, he had what he wanted: Passes to flee the wretched country.

"I might die today. I'll be damned if I'll go to my grave not knowing how you tasted," he whispered.

A near silent mew of agreement rose from her throat. He again bent to her.

The dull thud of many horses' hooves on earth came from the woods close by.

Rafen broke away from her. He straightened, graceful considering his injuries. Stot looked around the cottage wildly. They weren't prepared to face the general alone, let alone with his entourage.

"Mittard," she said, though the words hurt her heart for now she could never be an honest Tactician again. "It's him. Go on. Hide."

She rose to her feet, and was delighted to see that for the second time in her life, she'd managed to surprise Rafen, who stared open-mouthed at her.

"Go on," she repeated.

"The knots --"

“I am still more skilled than you, my lazy scholar. When I am not taken by surprise.”

“Linna. I beg of you. He will kill all of us if he sees you are free. Sit back down and let me tie the knots. Your Tactician’s honor--”

“My honor is worthless. It has done nothing but make me turn my back these last few months. I can’t any longer. I shall return to teaching, I suppose.”

“Linna. . .Let me fight.”

She blew an impatient breath. “Don’t be a brave fool. You know he travels with a guard and you aren’t strong enough yet. Stay alive now to take back this pit of a country.” She waved at her bedroom. “Go hide. I will get your passes with no trouble. It’ll be simple with a sleeping potion because they always take a glass of refreshment. By the time they wake, we’ll be long gone.”

“Three passes,” he whispered and pressed his mouth to hers one last time.

The pounding on the door grew impatient by the time she opened it to began her new career as an exiled Prince’s tutor, again.

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