

WOMEN FOOD AND GOD



An Unexpected Path to Almost Everything

"A hugely important work, a life-changer, one that will free untold women
from the tyranny of fear and hopelessness around their bodies."

—ANNE LAMOTT, author of *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*

GENEEN ROTH

THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

UNVEILED

Unveiled
Trisha Wolfe

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ISBN: 9780983868156

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No story, even a short story, comes to be without the help of many people. For all their cheerleading and encouragement through this project, I want to thank my critique partners. Tori, Rachel, Lori Ann, and Hope, you guys are the freakin' wind beneath my wings.

To all my Twitter friends for inspiring and being awesome. You kept me going. Have to shout out the amazing book bloggers. You guys rock. Valerie for reading before edits and still loving it, and Alex for doing the cover reveal.

To my agent, Lauren Hammond, for her praise and belief in my writing, and for those too fun phone calls where one of us eventually ran out of battery power. I heart you big time.

To my father for believing and being proud of me, and listening to my rambles during editing. I'm forever a daddy's girl.

To my mother for reading, many, many times, and giving me valuable input. You're the coolest mom in the world. To my son for being my sounding board. And thank you to my husband for your support so that I could write.

To my mother,
for everything . . . I love you.

Chapter 1

The torches cast eerie, affecting shadows against the stone walls as the celebration heightens and the dancing begins. Candlelight flickers from each table in the ceremonial hall of Karm Castle, and I watch as the little flame before me bows, then sways to the music.

I think how easy it would be to snuff out that tiny flame and a shiver crawls along my spine, knowing that's exactly why I'm here.

The kingdom of Karm surrounds us. The air we breathe, the grass, the water, the sky above—with its faint shimmer of voltage. Karm protects us from Outside. The wasteland.

It's home.

And it's death.

The cream satin dress irritates my skin. Its lacy bodice scathes, and I wish I was hidden in the shadows, watching and lurking, rather than openly attending Prince Sebastian's betrothal ceremony. At least then I could wear my usual all-black gear.

King Hart's son, Sebastian, and his newly acquired bride-to-be, Zara, sit at a table at the head of the ceremonial hall. Zara's expression looks like she'd rather be anywhere but here. *I'm with you, honey.*

I scan the dancing citizens, then focus my attention across the room. As entertaining as it is to swoon over the celebrity couple, I have to keep my eyes on the dark haired guy in the navy blue uniform. Xander.

My mark.

I've trained my whole life for this day. While other girls were attending etiquette class, learning how to curtsy and talk like someone from the Dark Ages, I was learning how to fight and track prey. Using the woods as my training ground. Away from the ever watchful eye of the Force.

The Force are the keepers of order and era in Karm. Only I'm not sure even they know what the true year is. King Hart says it's 2130. My mentor believes it's closer to the twenty-third century.

"Excuse me," a voice says from behind, interrupting my concentration.

Backing away from the table, I turn toward the voice. A guy dressed in era wardrobe, a blue vest with black tunic and pants, stands beside me, smiling. I smile back. "Yes?"

He bows, offering me his hand. "Would you care for a dance, Miss . . .?"

Refraining from rolling my eyes, I accept his hand and offer of a dance. "Thank you. And Miss Fallon," I say, but skip over the pleasantries. I'm not a fan of the ridiculous way King Hart has us speak. I've read enough books and seen clips from salvaged movies in the rebel camp to know it wasn't common before the Final War. Although, it's a difficult habit to break, having only ever known this life myself.

He guides me toward the center of the hall, and for a moment I'm angry that he's disturbed my surveillance. But then I realize this will get me closer to my mark. And spying on Xander while dancing looks less conspicuous than gawking at him from across the room.

Lifting the hem of my dress, I curtsy before him, then allow him to take my hand and lead me in the Ronde. I grab the hand of the person next to me and skip, following the ring of people circling the room. We break to clap, then join hands and skip again. The enchanted music from mandolins and flutes echoes through the hall combined with laughter from celebrating citizens. I'm having a hard time keeping Xander in my sight as we round the room.

Finally the dance ends, and I take a deep breath. I move out of the circle, but my dance partner clasps my hand, halting my retreat. “Another dance, Miss Fallon?” His blue eyes shimmer in the dim candlelight.

The music slows, and the staccato beat moves the bodies in tight embraces around us. I give a half-nod. “Certainly.” I have to keep a low profile, but I also need to rid myself of this guy. At some point, I must make my move on the knight.

The guy wraps his arms around my waist, his warm hand pressed to my lower back. I relax into his arms, molding myself against his embrace. As he leads, I’m stuck staring at the front of the hall. I need to turn us around so I can watch Xander over his shoulder. My chest tightens as anxiety wracks my nerves. The blade of my dagger rubs against the back of my thigh, reminding me why I’m here.

My long dark hair is twirled into a bun, and in its center is a tiny vial of Hemlock—a deadly poison. The dagger is back-up if I fail to slip the concoction into his wine. Or worse, if I’m caught doing so.

Seeing King Hart on the giant wall monitor during the betrothal ceremony was unsettling enough, never mind that I’m one Rebel in a room filled with knights of the Force. But I’m thankful his face isn’t looming over the hall now. That would make this mission more nerve-wracking than it already is. And knowing what awaits me back at the camp if I fail . . .

No. I won’t fail.

As I watch the couples dressed in absurd costumes rock back and forth, I resist rolling my eyes again. Camelot was ages—centuries ago. King Hart believes forcing us to live in his ideal realm will prevent us from repeating mistakes our ancestors made that destroyed the earth.

And the technology he uses—that only *he* has access to—binds us. Imprisons us. The barrier surrounding Karm makes sure of that. And the technology woven throughout our city keeps us perfectly monitored. King

Hart fills citizens with fear of Outside. Growing up, I was taught that the wasteland was a dead world where monsters roamed. Where people, mutated from nuclear fallout, feast on each other's flesh. Where the animals have grown larger, hungrier, and evil—the stuff nightmares are made of.

And the king himself? He's the only one so far to survive the virus that lurks in our blood—the virus spread during the Final War. It lies dormant in our blood, choosing at random who it takes. But no one makes it to a ripe old age.

King Hart's the only one who's lived long enough to know what Outside was like before, and what it's become. Somehow, he's defied the laws of man and fate. *Our* fate. No one I know has ever seen him in person. Rumors circle that he's hidden away in some secret lab, either hooked up to a machine that will keep him alive forever, or that he's part machine himself.

I don't know if any of it's true. I only know what my mentor has taught me. And that's that our world would thrive without Hart. That we could reshape it into a place where people didn't fear Outside, only giving into this sham utopian lifestyle because they're scared of being tossed into the unknown. We could send out scouts—discover places where there might be other life, people prospering. And above everything, we could find and study past medicines to discover a cure for the virus that takes us.

Pulling myself from my heated thoughts, I focus on my partner. He's leading me farther away from my mark. My breath hitches. I need to move this mission forward.

I take a chance and spin my dance partner around. He doesn't seem to mind, and I rest my chin on his shoulder. Then my blood freezes in my veins. Xander's gone. *Damn!*

As discretely and *politely* as I can, I separate from him. "I'm afraid today's events have left me very winded. I must rest," I say. Then I curtsy low. "Thank you for the dance, Sir."

His eyes trail over me as his eyebrows knit together. “Larkin. Please, call me by my given name.” Then he runs a hand through his dark hair. “I’m sorry to see you go, but the pleasure of the dance was all mine.” He takes my hand, placing a soft kiss on the top of it. His eyes peek up at me, and he winks.

I force my lips into a smile, taking my hand out of his grasp. “Then thank you, Sir Larkin.”

He returns to his post near the table, probably scouting for another girl to charm, and I turn and head out of the hall.

If I’d been given enough time to study my mark and learn his habits, I might guess where he went. But this mission was assigned to me just today, my mentor only telling me that Xander’s a high-ranking knight, and that he’d be here tonight. I asked why the sudden urgency to dispose of a knight, but was told nothing. Only that it was our top priority. And that I could not fail.

My mentor stressed that this was my own personal test to prove my allegiance to the Rebels. *Trust without question*. Something, I didn’t realize until now, I might have a difficult time with.

I could understand putting a hit on someone of importance like Devlan, Sebastian’s *first* knight, but why just another knight of the Force? And why so abruptly? But it wasn’t my place to question my mentor’s instructions. After I lost my mother to the virus at age ten, I was taken in and raised by Micha. My eyes were opened to the lies of King Hart long ago.

The corridor is cold. The chilly air prickles my skin as I slink along its stone walls. Blue and silver tapestries hang from the arched ceiling, and I want to rip them, tear them to shreds. If we weren't forced to live in ignorance, someone could have developed a cure and my mother would still be here. I shake my head, clearing it. I don’t have time to brood. I have to find my mark.

The corridor sectors off into two paths ahead of me. This is my first visit to the castle and I don't know which way to go. Then I hear a noise coming from the left. I lift the hem of my dress and quickly head toward it. At the end of the hallway is an atrium, and leaning against the giant glass window is Xander.

I freeze.

He hasn't heard me. I slip behind a tall palm and watch him sip his wine. He sets his glass down on the stone bench beside him, then rests his hand on the hilt of his sword. His dark hair feathers his navy collar. I study his strong stance, his tight, defined muscles through his uniform—gauging if I could take him if he catches me sneaking the Hemlock into his drink. He's alone. This might be my only chance. If I can distract him long enough, using my oh-so stellar womanly charms—*right*—it should be simple. Then I can go back to the ceremonial hall, stay just a while longer—making sure I'm seen *there*—then return to the camp.

A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead. Murder is unheard of in Karm. Well, as far as its citizens know. This is a perfect utopia. King Hart and his Force see to that. And the punishment for murder? I shiver, not wanting to think of the possibilities. Of course it would never go to trial. The king wouldn't allow it to be known his rule is in question. No, I'd simply disappear. Whispered to have been taken by the virus. I don't know what they'd do to me, but I'm positive it's something horrifying.

I work up my courage as I awkwardly tug on my bodice, popping as much cleavage over the top as my small frame will allow. I curse myself for not bringing my own wine. I could've simply swapped our goblets. *Some assassin I'm turning out to be.* I run my hands over the soft satin of my dress taking in a gulp of air, then emerge from my hiding spot and enter the room.

Xander's form stiffens, then he spins, pulling his sword from its scabbard.

I stop, holding up my hands. "Oh!"

His dark eyes meet mine and his face reddens. “So sorry, Miss.” He sheathes his sword. “I thought I was alone. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

I place my hand over my heart, playing the role of a simple girl. “No. I shouldn’t have snuck up on you,” I say, then take a cautious step toward him. “I was winded from the dance and needed to escape the stuffy room.”

His eyes drink me in, and I work my swagger a little harder as I approach him. “You looked like you’d found something interesting out here. I was curious to why a knight was all alone, staring out into the dark instead of celebrating his prince’s betrothal.”

As I move closer, I see faint stubble along his jawline and chin, the only shadow on his otherwise smooth face. His eyes are dark pools of brown, a color so rich it looks tempting. His lips quirk into a side-grin and it pinches the corners of his eyes. I thought he was handsome before, but this close, he’s beautiful. A sharp pang of regret hits me, and it’s so intense I immediately take a step back.

Forcing the alarming feeling away, I give my head a clearing shake. He’s part of the Force. And Micha has a good reason, I remind myself.

He sweeps his hand through the air, offering me the spot next to him. “I was star gazing,” he says. “I don’t do it much, but sometimes, if the sky’s clear, I try to spot the constellations.”

I sidle up beside him, feeling the heat from his body through the sleeve of my dress. I’m shocked he’s opened up to me, and about a subject that’s considered off-limits. Anything outside of Karm’s barrier, even the stars or sky itself, could be thought a dangerous subject. It’s hard to know what should or shouldn’t be said, so most avoid unsure topics, altogether.

Xander’s slightly pained expression conveys he’s realized what he’s done. I nudge his arm reassuringly with my shoulder. “I often wonder if the stars look different from Outside,” I say, staring up at the night sky through the thick glass. “Maybe the barrier changes the way we see the sky.”

His expression relaxes. “I’ve wondered the same,” he says, then leans against the windowpane, his eyes darting between me and the sky. “But only the king would know, and I believe he’s done his best to simulate what the world looked like before.”

I smile up at him, but inwardly scoff. What the world looked like before? People haven’t lived in castles and cottages in over . . . Well, I don’t know for how long. But long enough. “He’s a brilliant man, truly.” I want to rip my tongue from my mouth, but I force my lips to hold the smile. He’s trying to move the conversation into safe territory. I must have really taken him off-guard.

He leans in closer to me. “Xander.” He taps his chest. “May I have your name?”

I wonder if I should give him my real name for a moment—if something should go wrong, he’d be able to report me—but I’m trained well. Nothing will go wrong, and in a minute, he won’t be able to repeat his own.

“Fallon,” I say, mimicking his gesture, but making sure I tap low enough to bring his attention to the right spot. And it works. His face flushes as he stares down, then he quickly looks up and away. I duck my head, hiding my knowing smile.

Sliding closer to him, I block his view of the goblet on the bench behind me. Then with my left hand, I stroke his arm. “Who taught you about the constellations?” I say, attempting to distract him. “Astronomy . . . Well, it’s definitely not required learning, and I can’t imagine that knights have use for tracking star patterns.”

I feel him flex beneath my hand. “Uh, you’re correct. It’s a useless hobby, one that the first knight himself has called me out on.” His brows furrow. “But my mother,” he says. “She was a free thinker and loved the lore around the constellations.” A beat. “She taught me.”

“I see,” I say.

“I apologize.” He shakes his head. “This is inappropriate. I’m afraid you’ve caught me in a strange frame of mind tonight.”

His mother must have been taken by the virus. Astronomy is an unsafe topic, but no one speaks of people—even family—once they’re gone. It’s forbidden. We simply go on like they never existed. Xander’s odd behavior confuses me, and I’m again questioning why he’s been marked by the Rebels. I shouldn’t waste another second, but my curiosity is piqued.

I clear my throat. “You’ve said nothing to offend me.” I smile up at him. “My mother *was* a very spirited person, also. She taught me a few things about the stars,” I say, stressing the fact she’s no longer here, wanting to gauge his reaction.

At first he’s cautious, his eyes wide, studying my face. Then they pinch at the corners as he eases back into the conversation. “I’m curious, Miss Fallon. I’ve never met another to know much about them.” He points toward the sky. “Please, do your best to impress me with your knowledge.”

My stomach flutters, and I can’t stop the smile from overtaking my face. “Is this a challenge or are you mocking me?”

His smile reaches his smoldering eyes and he laughs. “I would *never* mock a lady. I’m offended you believe me so crude.”

“You do it again,” I say, batting his arm. “I shall show you up then.” I look at the sky, seeking a constellation I know. “There.” I point. “That’s the Little Dipper.”

He waves his hand, pushing air through his lips. “That’s too easy.”

“Oh?” I say. “Then please, Sir Xander, dazzle me with your infinite wisdom.”

“All right.” He nods his head once, determined. “To think, a knight having to impress a maiden with his mind instead of masculine skill.”

A laugh escapes my lips. “Well, I could always ask you to show off your skill by attacking that tree.” I nod toward the Weeping Willow near the lake.

“Why? Has it offended you?” He makes like he’s going to draw his sword.

“Xander,” I say his name through a laugh. Our eyes meet and hold. He releases his grip on the hilt. I’ve said his name without addressing him properly, and I’m afraid I’ve given myself away.

“It’s very affecting,” he says, “hearing my name from your lips.” His eyes flick down my face, landing on my mouth. I’m forced to look away.

“Now,” he says, turning his attention back to the sky. “I was about to school you on the constellations.”

I release a relieved breath, but mentally curse myself, anyway. *What am I doing?* I’m wasting time. He’s distracted now, and I need to use this moment to my advantage. My training kicks in.

“You were,” I say, pretending to smooth my hair. I pull the vial of Hemlock from my bun. “How long have you been a knight?” I add to keep his thoughts off my actions. I palm the vial, then rest my hand against my back.

He sighs. “Not long.” He keeps his eyes trained on the sky, and I uncork the poison. “I’m younger than most, nineteen”—he eyes me quickly—“only officially a knight this past week. But I’m as experienced as the rest.”

“How so?” Feeling for the rim of his goblet, I dump the liquid. “What I mean is, what experience is needed? What training? There’s no threat.”

He snaps his face toward me. “Exactly.” His eyes are fierce, like I’ve stumbled onto a topic he feels passionately about. “They’re so rigorous. I spent weeks learning to fence, and hand to hand combat, and how to—” He laughs, shaking his head. “I apologize for getting carried away. A lady is not interested in such matters. It’s just . . . why are we taught these things if we’re never to use them? Though, I am grateful for the knowledge.”

I feel my eyebrows furrow. How can he be one of the king's top knights and know nothing about the Rebels—the *threat*? Though the Force is used as intimidation to keep citizens in line, making sure they're following era guidelines, their main duty is seeking us out and annihilating any chance of a rebellion.

If he's only been in the Force a week, how did he achieve a high rank? What *threat* is he to us?

"You're not boring me," I say, batting my lashes. "I'm very interested in learning these things." I cringe. If he has any sense at all, he'll soon pick up on my probing. I press closer to him and lace my arm through his for good measure.

He gives his head a small shake. "A maiden interested in knighting? Now *this* impresses me." He pushes off the glass and begins to lead me away. "I believe I can better point out the constellation I'm looking for from outside the atrium." His eyes search mine, dark and inviting.

"Walk with me?"

"I—" I glance back at the goblet. Damn. "I would like that," I finish. "But you're leaving your wine." *Smooth, Fallon.*

"It will be here when we return."

Unless an innocent person drinks it by mistake, I think. "Let me fetch it. It's ingrained in me not to leave things lying about. You know us women." I turn my back to him, rolling my eyes. If he doesn't figure this out now, after a lame line like that, maybe I have the wrong guy.

I quickly head toward the bench, but in my haste, I trip over a potted plant as I'm reaching for the goblet. A loud clink echoes, then the goblet shatters. The wine and poison flow out, the stone floor soaking it up. *Shit.*

"One of the maids will tend to it," he says, coming up beside me. "A maiden as refined as yourself shouldn't bother with such tasks."

I nod. “Yes, I forget we’re at a celebration.” I give a forced laugh. “I’m sure the castle will be filled with all kinds of tasks tomorrow.” *Like discovering the body of a knight in the forest.* I shiver. Now I’m left with no alternative.

I link my arm through his. “Let’s go.” I gaze into his deep eyes, darker than the night sky. “I’d love to hear more about the stars *and* you.”

As we approach the atrium door, he pauses, reaching into his uniform. Then he pulls out a key ring and inserts a large, rusted key into the lock on the side of the large glass door. With a click, the door slides open, and we walk into the darkening night.

Chapter 2

The full moon shines down on the tall pines, illuminating the court woods in a blue-green hue. The pathway is narrow, and snapping twigs under our feet the only sound other than the haunting melody the crickets sing around us.

Most of my life has been in these woods. I spent hours hunting in the outskirts of Karm, but was never afraid. One of the only girls who'd go out alone, I developed a reputation for being fearless. Hunting wild animals in Karm is outlawed, just as fighting, weapons, and anything considered of violent nature. But I welcomed the rush of adrenalin. The feel of freedom the forest brings. It's as far away from Karm as I can go without actually leaving.

Now . . . fear wraps its wary arms around me. I've never hunted a human. And though I was chosen for this mission because my mentor deemed me ready, a knot of resignation slams into my gut.

I'm an assassin.

I remind myself this is my calling—what I chose when I swore allegiance to the Rebels instead of King Hart. What I do tonight is for the good of Karm. Xander needs to be eliminated because Micha wouldn't order it if there wasn't a good reason. He's my enemy. He may seem innocent, but I'm sure behind those kind eyes lie dark secrets.

Xander holds aside a low branch as I walk past. "Thank you, Sir Xander," I say.

“Please, just Xander.” He releases the branch. “I’m addressed as such by my friends.”

“Are we friends, now?” I look over my shoulder and smile coyly.

He nods once. “I’d like us to be.”

“I think I’d like that, also,” I say.

We’re far enough away that if there’s a struggle, no one will hear. I stop next to a wide pine and press my back to its rough bark. Xander moves toward me, then hesitates. I’m sure he’s never met a girl this forward. And that’s my plan. Unnerve him so he doesn’t see the blade coming for his throat.

I clamp my eyes shut, trying to imagine him as a deer. There will be no going back to the camp if I don’t pull this off. For our own protection, Micha is ruthless. Complete your mission. No exceptions. If I don’t, I’ll be dead by morning. Either by Xander’s hand or the Rebels’ as Micha will order my death. Though, I can’t help but feel I might be spared. Even though Micha’s the rebel leader, I’ve had special treatment—like a child. But I don’t want to chance it.

I look up at the sky through the thick branches. “I don’t think you brought me here to star gaze,” I say.

He glances at the sky, then back to me. “I admit, I forgot my intentions.” He rocks on the heels of his feet. “I’m enjoying your company so much the stars are of little interest.”

“Then why won’t you come closer?” I ask him. “Are you shy, Xander?”

A brilliant smile breaks across his face. “I’m not shy,” he says matter-of-factly. “But you’re not something I’m not accustomed to.” He cocks his head, studying me. “I find myself bewitched by you.”

I open my mouth to respond, then close it. Heat creeps up the back of my neck. I shouldn't be blushing, but in the camp, I'm just another Rebel. I hide my eyes, glancing down at my dress. Of course. It's not me he's bewitched by, but the idea of a refined, flirtatious girl, wearing a beautiful dress. I shake my head, then look at him.

"I'm sure a man of your station has the girls falling all over themselves." I wedge my hands between me and the tree, gripping the bark. Then I arch my back, accentuating my curves.

He takes a step toward me. "There have been a couple," he says, taking another step closer. "But none like you."

He's playing a game. The same way I am. But he's in pursuit of something very different than me tonight. These lines may work on the simple girls of Karm, but not me. Satisfaction washes over me. I'll look him right in the eyes at the last moment, showing him he didn't fool me.

Then I wonder if I can use this to gain some information. I want to know why my mentor's marked him—what he's done so vile against the Rebels. Has he killed someone I know? Banished one of us to the Outside? But he seems so clueless. Although, so do I right now, and I know plenty.

"You say that to us all, I'm sure," I say. Then before he can try to defend himself, I continue, "But I'm flattered. It's not every day one of the king's top knights gives me such a compliment."

His eyebrows press together. "Why do you assume I rank so high?" Dammit. I'm floundering trying to get information from him. I should end this now. "Why wouldn't you?" I smile shyly, forcing a blush. "You obviously think for yourself. I can't imagine too many others do the same."

He chuckles. "No. They don't." He closes the gap between us, stopping just inches away from me. "But I'm just another knight, no high rank. Although, I'll gladly take your praise over their acknowledgment any time."

No high rank? I open my mouth, then snap it shut. I don't know how to press for more information. Why does Micha want him dead?

His hand brushes a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Do you . . ." He trails off, releasing an audible breath.

His hand lingers near my face, a current pulsing between our skin. He smells like earth and fire, and some masculine soap. I breathe him in, then push the breath out, gaining control of my senses.

"What?" I ask. "Do I what?"

"Do you ever think about going out there?" He jerks his head, indicating behind him. "Past the barrier." He shakes his head, his dark hair falling into his eyes. "That's a stupid question. I don't know where my mind is."

"No," I say, dipping my face and finding his eyes. "It's not. I wonder all the time . . . what's out there." I lower my voice at the end.

His lips tug into a grin. "Really?"

I nod. "I do. And what if things have changed—"

"Like if the earth has healed itself?" he interrupts.

"Exactly." I can't help but smile. "And we'll never know because we'll be stuffed away behind the barrier forever. Or, what if there're others out there, and they have a cu . . ." I let my words fade.

"A cure," he finishes. His eyes bore into mine, and I'm lost. He doesn't talk like a knight. He talks like a Rebel.

"Yes," I finally say.

"I think we might be the only two brave enough to admit these things." A fleeting glimmer of panic flashes in his eyes. He's part of the Force. He's not supposed to think like this, and he's especially not supposed to voice it.

But what if it's a trick? What if he knows I was sent to kill him and he's only playing with me? This is my first hit. And it's possible he's more cunning than I've given him credit for. Maybe I'm not prepared to go up against him. I bow my head, confused.

"I've said something wrong," he says, dropping his hand from my face.

I look up into his eyes. There's sadness behind them, and his expression is worried. I squeeze my eyes shut. This has to end now. He has to end. For whatever reason I was sent, I don't care anymore. I know my place, and I know his.

I open my eyes. "You've said nothing wrong," I tell him. Then I watch his soft lips spread into an easy smile. With the hand still pressed against the tree, I slowly lift the back of my dress. His face inches toward mine as I grasp my dagger.

His lips just brush against mine before my dagger's at his throat.

His eyes widen, and I press the blade into his skin, forcing him to back away. "I'm sorry," I say.

"But this is my job."

As I move away from the tree, my legs are kicked out from underneath me and I hit the ground. *Bastard!*

I roll to the side, barely escaping his hold as he lunges for me. I claw the earth, then pitch dirt into his face as I scramble backward. While he's wiping his face I get to my feet.

"I knew you were playing me," I say.

Xander rights himself and bounds to his feet. "What are you talking about? *You* tried to slit *my* throat!"

I nod, adrenalin pulsing in my veins. “And you were ready for it. You knew the whole time!”

“Knew what?” He eyes the dagger in my hand, then moves his gaze to my face. “That you’re *mad*? Who are you?”

“I’m not mad! And don’t try to backpedal. Who are *you*? What have you done? Has to be something recent, I was sent only today.” I move slowly, crossing one foot in front of the other, circling him.

He moves in the opposite direction, matching my steps as he watches me closely. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I lunge, jabbing my dagger, but he hurdles to the side and grabs my outstretched arm, spinning me. I grunt and elbow his side. That doesn’t faze him, and he wraps his other arm around my waist, hauling me to him—my back against his chest.

“Stop for a min—oomph.” I land a blow to his groin with the heel of my foot and he releases me.

“I’m tired of your games, lover boy,” I say, then I lunge again.

This time I clip his arm and blood darkens his uniform. He cups the bleeding sleeve, leaving himself open, vulnerable. *Why doesn’t he go for his sword?* I shake the thought from my head, ready to finish him. I go in for the kill, but he grabs my arm, dragging me over his shoulder and I land on my back hard, losing the grip on my weapon.

He bears down on top of me, anchoring my wrists to the ground. “Would you stop!”

I writhe beneath him. “Get off!”

I’m done, finished. I allowed him to mess with my head and it made me hesitate. Now that pause will cost me my life. I’m so angry with myself I can feel tears prickle in the corners of my eyes. I clamp them shut, waiting for him to kill me.

But the blow never comes. Slowly, I crack one eye open. His face is inches from mine, his dark eyes watching me.

“What are you waiting for?” I ask. “Do it. It’s embarrassing enough that I botched my first assignment, you have to make me suffer longer?”

He releases a heavy, frustrated breath. “I’m trying to decide how to tie you to a tree.”

“What?”

“Well,” he says, shaking his head. “I have to do something to keep you from attacking me.”

I squint my eyes, confused. “You’re not going to kill me?”

“What—why?” He scoffs and releases my hands, sitting back on the balls of his feet. He plants his hands on top of his thighs. “What have I done to you?”

I see my dagger just behind him on the forest floor. Before he can get another word in, I spring forward and tackle him, grabbing my dagger in the process. Then I hold it to his throat, my breath panting as I stare at him. There’s no fear or anger in his expression.

“If I’ve done something that this is my fate, then do it,” he says. “But at least tell me my sins first.”

I curse. What has this fool done? I have no answer for him.

His eyes trace my face, and I’m sick with regret that I’m about to permanently shut them. I pull the dagger away from his neck and raise it, my hand trembling. He licks his lips, readying himself for my attack, and I can’t stop staring at their perfect curve against his chin. I sink my blade into the earth just above his head, bringing my face down at the same time and pressing my lips to his.

For one shocked moment, he's frozen—his lips firm against mine. Then they soften, matching my rhythm. He buries his hand in my hair, forcing our lips together hard.

He cups the back of my head and rolls on top of me, his kiss deepening as the weight of him presses me into the ground. I wrap my arms around him, feeling his strained muscles through the fabric of his uniform. Then he pulls his face away, his eyes locked on mine.

As I stare back at him, I know I never would've completed my mission. *Damn.* I hope that kiss was worth it.

"I think we need to talk," he says.

I nod, my bun coming loose against the twigs. "Agreed."

Chapter 3

We roam farther into the forest, away from the castle and in the opposite direction of the Rebel camp. The trees are thicker, and the moonlight splinters across the ground. As I walk—my arms hugging my waist—fear envelops my core. Uncertainty of my situation plagues me.

Xander slows his pace as he glances over at me. “I’ve shut down my communicator,” he says, showing me the small silver device, then he slides it into the vest of his uniform. “So we won’t be tracked.”

I nod. “You honestly don’t know anything about the Rebels?” I study his features, waiting to see his eyes shift—a muscle twitch. But he keeps his eyes trained on me, stoic.

“No.” He looks down at the ground then back at me. “How is it I’ve never been informed?” He kicks a rock with his boot. “Because I’ve just been knighted?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. Maybe. All members of the Force are aware of us, though. Destroying us is their . . . *your* priority.”

He slants his eyes at me. “As you can plainly see, it’s not mine. Though, you almost left me little choice.”

“Ha!” I halt walking and spin toward him. “You were as good as dead back there.”

He stops, too, facing me. “Yes, the ever-effective kiss your enemy to death tactic,” he says, a smile playing at his lips. “I have to admit, it’s my

preferable way to die.”

My face heats. “You didn’t seem to mind the approach. You probably would’ve let me end you back there if I’d allowed you to continue.”

He laughs, then begins walking again, saying over his shoulder, “If I remember correctly, it was me who ended the kiss.”

I open my mouth to retort, but he continues. “But if my demise comes at your lips, you’re correct. I’d probably welcome it.”

My lips twitch as I try to keep from smiling. “And you call me mad.”

Finally we come to a clearing and I stop, convinced we’re far enough away in either direction. Xander’s life is in danger, and now I have to take precautions, too. When Xander’s not reported dead—if my disobedience hasn’t *already* been reported—Micha will search. I have to come up with a plan, but my mind won’t allow me to think of anything other than why they wanted him eliminated in the first place.

Xander leans against a tree, resting his hands on his hilt. “How many of you are there?”

I take a deep breath. “Some—not many.” I shake my head. “I’m not sure, but there used to be more of us before I was born. My mentor says the Force and the Rebels battled, and the Rebels lost.” I look down. “After that, they went into hiding, and the truth of that battle was buried. A perfect Karm wouldn’t be perfect if its people knew we existed. Ever.”

“So you stay hidden, waiting for . . . what?”

I look up into his face. He looks lost, like I’ve just revealed his life is a lie. Which, I guess I did. “For opportunities to strike. Finding weaknesses in the system.” I shrug.

“Why me?” he asks. “What could possibly come of . . .” He shakes his head.

“I don’t know.” I come up beside him. “My mentor wouldn’t tell me. But . . . but there has to be something. They have to have a reason.”

“But you’re different than them.” It’s a statement not a question.

I tilt my head. “I guess I am.”

“Because like me, you question. You want to understand and know the truth. You don’t just act on orders.”

My eyes widen. “Did you dismiss an order? Or did you disobey—” I break off before my thought’s complete.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I say, frustrated. “That wouldn’t make sense. Dammit.”

Xander repositions himself, shifting to lean on his other leg. “No, my breaking Force orders would be a plus for them, it would seem.”

“Yes. Not a reason to have you killed.” I cringe when the word passes my lips. From the moment my eyes met his in the atrium, I knew the hit was wrong. I could feel it in my bones. And I now know something’s off, something isn’t right.

“Whatever the reason, I can’t go back.” He sighs. “They kept me in the dark for a reason.”

I nod once, my neck heavy with tension. “And now I’m in that same dark. And”—I close the gap between us—“I’m an outcast. They would as soon end me for not completing the mission.” I laugh hollowly. “Never mind that I’ve spilled all our secrets.”

He wraps his arms around me. “Thank you for not killing me.”

I smile. “You’re welcome.”

“Still not admitting that I could’ve taken you?” He laughs, his deep voice vibrating in his chest.

“Well, *you’re* welcome that I spared yours, as well.”

“I would have—” My words are cut short by a snap in the forest. Xander’s arms tighten around me, pulling me to his side.

A shadow moves slowly toward us, the figure cloaked by night and branches. When he emerges, my breath catches. A lump forms in my throat and I swallow it down painfully.

“This couldn’t have worked out better,” says Larkin, a sword pointed at us. “I was supposed to do this earlier, but you were moving away from the castle. I decided to let you do the work for me.” He grins. “Hauling dead bodies is so much work.”

“You?” I say. “Who are you?”

Xander moves in front of me and unsheathes his sword. “Larkin.”

I look between them. “You know him?” I ask Xander.

He nods, never taking his eyes off his foe. “He’s a knight of the Force. And he trained me.” He steps toward Larkin. “He’s my *friend*.”

I’m more confused than ever. If the Rebels put a hit on Xander, why would another knight, especially one who trained Xander, want him—*us*—dead?

Larkin steps to the side, beginning to circle. “To be fair, none of this was planned until today.” He shrugs. “You really are my friend. But I have orders.”

“Why wasn’t I informed about the Rebels, Larkin?” Xander asks, inching closer to him. “Don’t you think that’s information I might have needed?”

“And why aren’t you in a uniform?” I add. I danced with him and had no idea who he was. For some reason, this angers me more than him threatening me now.

Larkin cocks his head, grinning. “I was given special privileges for the night,” he says to me with a wink. Then to Xander, “And I was ordered not to inform you.” He raises his sword higher.

“Devlan arranged for you to be unknighthed after Prince Sebastian’s betrothal.”

“For what reason?” Xander demands.

“You were found to have questionable beliefs.” Larkin sighs. “Honestly, Xander. You can’t go around spouting off at the mouth. Now,” he says, taking a step forward. “I’ve wasted enough time tracking you and answering questions. I need to kill you both and get back before I’m missed.”

“Fallon,” Xander says my name softly. “Run. Go somewhere safe.” Then he takes off toward Larkin.

“The hell I will,” I say, reaching for my dagger, then remember it’s on Xander. Damn. I gave it to him when he kept eyeing at it as we walked through the forest. I’m really the worst assassin ever.

Their swords clang, and I watch the moonlight glinting off their blades as they slash, metal meeting metal. My chest tightens. I don’t have time to think, only act. I look around the forest floor and find a rock. Their shadowed figures move too quickly for me to get Larkin in my sights. Xander grunts as he strains against Larkin’s sword. I have to help.

Xander bears up, pushing Larkin backward, but then Larkin punches Xander and he stumbles. Larkin slices his sword through the air. A scream catches in my throat as Xander dodges, falling to the ground, but he blocks the blade coming at him with his own. Then he kicks Larkin in the chest, doubling him over, giving Xander time to get to his feet.

While Larkin is still bent at the side, I throw the rock, knocking his head sideways. Xander nails him in the back of his head with the hilt of his sword and Larkin drops to the ground. Xander lowers the point of his sword to his neck.

“Whose orders?” Xander says, gasping.

I race to his side, then grab my dagger from his belt. “I could’ve used this.” I eye him.

He shrugs. “I’m capable.”

“I see that,” I say. “I suppose my aim was of little use to you.” I smirk, then turn my attention toward Larkin, pointing my dagger at him. “He asked you a question. Whose orders are you following?”

Larkin grabs the back of his head. “You know whose.” He looks between us, then stares at me. “You’ve been following them your whole life, Fallon.”

My brows pinch together. “You’re a plant?”

He nods. “And I was told to watch you tonight—make sure you succeeded.” A small smile forms on his face. “Fearless,” he scoffs. “You’re full of fear. Micha should’ve never taken you in.”

Anger burns in the pit of my stomach. My mentor, the person I trusted more than anyone, sent someone to spy on me—not trusting that I’d complete my mission. And what’s worse? I *have* failed. I hang my head. But in my heart, I know I made the right choice. How could Micha do this? How could . . . No. Micha’s wrong. The Rebels have the wrong guy. Xander doesn’t know anything, and he’s not a threat to us.

Xander glances at me. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I say, pushing my anger down. Then I glare at Larkin. “Why does Micha want Xander dead?”

Larkin doesn't answer. I huff. "Tell us," I snap.

He releases a heavy breath. "I wasn't privilege to that information."

I shake my head, disgusted. "You trained him. Spent time with him and were his friend," I say. "How could you accept an order to kill him without being made to understand why?"

"My oath," he says flatly. Then his eyes cut through me. "The same reason you apparently did."

I want to correct him, say that I hadn't known Xander when I'd accepted the mission. But as much as I want to defend myself, he's right. I took Micha's orders without question—what I was trained to do. My stomach lurches.

Xander inches his blade closer to his throat. "What should we do with him?"

I'm stunned for a moment that he's asked me. I'm used to taking orders. I shake my head, clearing it further of the resentment I feel toward my mentor. "We can't kill him," I say, looking around. "But he can't be left to track us. Take his belt."

After we bind his hands and feet together, Xander cuts a couple strips of fabric from Larkin's tunic, using one to tie him to a root system he dug near a large pine. The other I tie around his head, gagging his mouth.

"This won't hold him forever," Xander says. "We need a plan."

"I have one," I say, looking down at the bound and gagged Rebel. "I'm going to Micha."

Xander cranes an eyebrow. "Your mentor. The person who wants us both dead."

“Micha has to know the truth, that you’ve done nothing to warrant a hit. I’ll make it clear—”

“And they’ll let me walk away.” He shakes his head. “Despite the truth, I know who you are. I know who he is.” He points to the wiggling spy. “I know too much now. There’s no way I’ll walk away alive.”

“We have to try,” I say. “There’s no alternative.”

I turn to go, then pause. I’m about to take Xander—a member of the Force—into the Rebel camp. If he does this, there’s no going back for him. I turn around and take his hand in mine. “Xander, you have to make a choice.”

“I know.” His thumb caresses the top of my hand. “And I’ve made it. I didn’t belong.” He cocks his head in the direction of the castle. “They knew it. I was being unknighthed.” He forces out a breath. “As I watched the stars earlier tonight, I knew change was coming. I could feel it. And there you were.” His eyes bore into mine. “I’m staying with you.”

I lace my fingers through his. “I wasn’t letting you out of my sight, anyway.”

Chapter 4

The Rebel camp is still. Tents scatter the deeply wooded grounds and campfires burn low, their embers barely lighting our path. At this moment, I'm a traitor. I've abandoned my mission, apprehended a fellow Rebel, and betrayed my mentor. Now, I'm giving away our hidden base to the enemy.

Xander walks silently beside me. I need to discover what his place is in all this, and I need to convince Micha that I did the right thing. That they marked the wrong guy.

As we near the center of camp, I see two guards posted at the entrance of Micha's tent. We'll never get by them without disturbing the whole camp. I tug Xander's hand, nodding toward the woods. We have to sneak around.

Stealthily, we circle the camp, making our way toward the back of the tent. Suddenly the crickets and sounds of the forest are too low, my breath is too loud, and I feel my every step is echoed throughout the camp. I have to be smart about this. If I walk into the tent, Xander in tow, I'll bring on a fight before I can speak my mind.

I turn toward Xander. "I need to go in by myself."

He cups my shoulders, shaking his head. "No. We're in this together. I'm not letting you do this without me."

I smile at him, realizing how similar we are. “Yes, you have to. Or else this will end bad. Trust me.”

He sighs. “Give me a signal—something to let me know if you need me.”

I nod. “Okay, I’ll whistle.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Whistle?” Then he nods. “It’ll have to do.”

I step forward, but he yanks me back, placing a hard kiss on my lips. I pull him closer as I commit to memory his scent of earth and fire, and something indefinably him. I slowly pull away, and the absence of his lips leaves mine cold.

I walk away without another word. If I look back, I’ll ask him to run away with me. I know this. So I keep moving forward. I have to face Micha, or we’ll be running forever. And in Karm, there’s nowhere to run.

The smell of campfire and sharp pine sap hits my senses, and it feels like home. Micha is my home.

The back of the tent is pitch black as I search for a loose seam. I finally find one and lift the brown fabric, crawling under. A candle burns low, revealing Micha seated at the desk.

“Hi, Mother,” I say, announcing my presence.

She stands, startled. “Fallon.” Then she sets down the dagger she has outstretched before her. “I didn’t—”

“Expect to see me alive?” I finish for her.

She holds up a small silver device. A communicator. “Larkin hasn’t reported back,” she says. “I knew you’d be coming.”

“And if he had?” I press my lips together, knowing the truth. “You had no faith in me. You didn’t trust me to make the right choice.”

A slow smile crosses her face. “You were given an order. There was no *choice* to be made.” Her voice is cruel, and her bright blue eyes cold, taking me in—sizing me up. “This was a big mission for anyone to take on. But you were the perfect agent.”

I nod once, annoyed. “Because I trusted you so completely. I wouldn’t question your judgment.”

“Yes,” she says simply.

“I’m not a child anymore,” I say, taking a step toward her. “You could’ve told me the reason. You can *still* tell me the reason. Why Xander?” I huff. “He’s not a threat.”

She moves toward the middle post of her tent, then leans against it. “But he is. He could ruin everything we’ve set into motion. It’s taken years to place our two plants in court. And Sebastian’s getting ready to wed. There will be many distractions—prime opportunities for us. And he could undo all of it.” She sighs. “He’s a liability we can’t afford.”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand. He’s nobody. In fact, according to your own agent, the Force was about to unknight him.”

Her eyebrows rise. “And with a motive like that, he could do a lot of damage in court.”

“Stop!” I shout-whisper. “I deserve to know the truth. I almost took a life tonight. One that had no reason to die.”

“Fallon,” she says my name like she always does, like she’s my parent. It makes me cringe. “He’s King Hart’s first son.”

The air leaves the room, and I gasp, trying to catch my breath. “No.” I shake my head. “You’re mistaken. Karm would be in an uproar if it were true.”

“It would,” she says. “If they knew.” She pushes off the post, taking a step toward her desk. “And no one will.” She pulls out a document from her desk drawer. “Before the virus took Xander’s mother a couple days ago, she left a confessional for her priest—one of my spies.” She hands the letter to me. I stare down at the shaking letters on the page as my hand trembles. Xander just lost his mother. It explains so much of his strangeness tonight.

As I study the page, I realize how big Micha’s web of secrets and agents has become. She has her hands in every facet of the kingdom.

The letter is addressed to Xander, and it explains how his mother didn’t want him to become a part of Hart’s vileness. It talks about a time when Hart had a vision to create a world safe from Outside, but how it turned into madness. How, after she became pregnant, she fled, hiding herself and Xander—Hart unaware of his existence. And of Hart marrying another to bear an heir to the throne. The words merge into blobs of ink on the paper before me.

“But,” I say, trying to gather my thoughts. “This could change everything. Xander could take over ruling the kingdom and change things from the inside. He could even take down the barrier—there’s so many . . .” I let my words hang, realizing the truth. “You don’t want change.”

“No. Our goal is to tear down Karm, destroy the dictatorship. Not simply change the order . . . or the ruler.” She picks up her dagger, twirling the hilt and digging the point into the desk. “And that plan is already in motion.”

I release the letter and it floats to the ground. “I understand. You want control.” My hands ball at my sides, gripping my once beautiful gown, now dirty and torn. “And once I killed for you, I’d have committed myself to the Rebels. To you.” I shake my head. “You’re just as evil as King Hart himself.”

“Fallon, it’s not easy to make these decisions.” She twirls her knife faster. “There are casualties in every war. We have to be willing to do what it takes.”

“No.” I take a determined step toward her. “We have to be willing to be above our enemies. We’ll never win this if we sink to their level, playing by their rules.” I get right up in her face. “In the end, we’ll be no different than them. And that’s not something to construct a new civilization after.”

Her eyes flick over my features. “I’m sorry to hear that. You were my favorite,” she says, then backhands me across my face.

I flop to the side, gripping my thigh for support. She grabs my hair, attempting to force me straight, her dagger raised, but I drop to the floor and I roll, losing a handful of hair. I kick her legs out from underneath her and she hits the ground on her back. I roll farther away as she grunts, getting to her feet at the same time I do.

I draw my dagger, and we circle each other. I hear the flaps rustle behind me, but I don’t take my eyes off her. Damn. I forgot about her guards. “No,” she says to them. “I’ll handle her.” Then she lunges for me.

I block her blade with mine, and my arm strains as I force her dagger above her head. Then I spin and kick her in the stomach. She stumbles back, but then comes at me again. I duck as she swipes her dagger through the air. I bound up as she slashes again, her blade carving a deep gash across my chest.

A scream rips from my throat, and for a moment I don’t feel the wound, then it hits me like fire, searing. I fumble backward as she continues to attack, her dagger just grazing my stomach.

I back into the corner of the tent, my weapon held out in front of me, shaking. She trained me and knows all my moves. I know hers, as well, but she has years on me. And above everything, she’s like a parent to me. Even if I could best her, I don’t know if I could kill her.

“Did you ever love me?” I ask, hoping there’s another way to settle this.

She laughs. “There’s no room for love in this war, Fallon.” She slowly walks toward me, backing me father into the corner. “I thought you’d soon

take my place. I raised you hard so you could lead after the virus finishes me.”

I squint. “You’re sick?”

She nods. “And I only have a few weeks left. I can’t believe I’ve invested all these years in you.” She spits. “I should have sent you on a mission years ago. If I’d known you’d turn into the sniveling child I see before me now, I’d have left you to wither in that damned farmhouse.”

The fire burning my skin sinks deeper, scorching my soul. Anger wells inside my chest, pumping adrenaline through my veins like blistering lava. “Don’t worry, Micha,” I say, the words like acid on my tongue. “You don’t have weeks. This ends now.”

I point my dagger out and wail, running toward her. Our blades meet, and something takes over. I don’t feel the blows from our daggers, or the punches she throws. My body’s numb. My brain’s numb. I feel betrayed, abandoned. She tried to turn me into me into something evil, and all I can think is giving her what she wanted. A killer.

As I brace my blade against hers and we tangle our arms around one another, we stumble, each straining to get the upper hand. My arm gives, and I fall backward—her on top of me—through the tent flaps.

The cold dirt kicks up around us as we roll. I see the guards chasing after us, and I hear shouts of confusion as people rush from their tents and surround us. Finally, as Micha lifts to take a swing, I get leverage and bring my leg up, kicking her in the chest. She’s tossed back, and I get to my feet.

Taking a quick look around at the Rebels I grew up with, people I thought of as family, I see it in their eyes. No one comes to break up the fight. They know what I’m only just figuring out. Micha’s leadership is over. And they’re counting on the fearless girl, the one who hunts alone, to end it. But I don’t want her blood on my hands.

Then I see Xander at the edge of the forest. He's making his way toward me, but I give my head a slight shake. If I fail, he's in danger. His eyes meet mine. The deep, haunting eyes of a prince. And in this moment, I know I can't allow Micha to continue her twisted plan.

She slowly picks herself off the ground, and I can tell she's weaker. The virus is slowing her down, but she's still a ruthless opponent.

She nods over to me. "Everyone knows the rules," she says to the crowd. "You don't finish your mission, you're out." She takes a step toward me. "Fallon has disobeyed direct orders. Take her to the holding tent. We'll take care of it there."

No one has ever been "punished" in public. It's always a private, disgraced event. Micha knows she can't kill me in front of all of them.

I wait for the guards to take me, still holding onto my dagger. I'm not going down without a fight. But when no one steps forward, I glance around at the still bodies. The guards are planted at the front of the crowd, and one nods to me.

I look at Micha. "I think it's just you and me."

She doesn't reply, just stares at me, her jaw tight as she grits her teeth. Then we both lurch into action, coming for one another.

I lunge for her and she lands a punch in my stomach. Reflexively I lift my arm and our daggers slice the air. Hers swipes awkwardly and I block her arm with mine. Micha grabs the skirt of my dress and pushes off me with her foot, turning me sideways. The fabric tears as I struggle to get free. *Damn dress.*

I slash at the fabric and free myself of her grasp, but fall to the ground as I'm let loose. I land hard, my hand impaled by a sharp stick. She towers over me, her dagger aimed at my throat. I stare into her cold blue eyes as she bears down on me. Then at the last moment, I swing the stick, knocking her hand to the side, and sink my blade into her heart.

Her lips tremble as she drops her weapon and grabs mine, holding her hands to her chest. I'm frozen as I watch her drop to her knees. Her eyes are still locked on mine, then she tumbles to the ground. I back away from her.

My body shivers as my blood runs cold, wrapping me in ice sheets of panic. *I killed Micha*. The realization sucks the air from my lungs, and I gasp to fill them.

Then I feel a hand take mine. The person removes the stick from my hand, but I don't feel the pain. I'm still staring at Micha's limp body. They lift me to my feet. "You had to, Fallon," the voice says. "She was going mad."

I look at the person speaking. Silas. Micha's guard. "She was the only—" I break off. It's done, there's no taking it back. "What do we do now?"

He steps over to her and kneels, then lifts her hand. He removes a silver band, twirling the ring between his fingers. The ring marks the leader. I assume he's ready to accept that station, but then he stands and takes my hand, slipping the band onto my ring finger.

"Now," he says. "You decide who's your first in command."

I search the trees, finding Xander. "Done."

Chapter 5

Xander, Silas, and I stand around the dark mahogany desk, a map of the court laid out before us. I placed Silas in charge of battle strategy. And he points to a spot on the map.

“That’s the weakest area,” he says. “It has the fewest rounds. Guards only stationed for a couple hours at night, then two walk-bys. One at dusk, and then another in the early morning.”

I nod. “Then that’s where we need to get one of ours stationed,” I say. “They can grant us access to the castle when we need it.”

Xander clears his throat. “I think I might know of another entrance.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Do you? The anomaly knight had access to this kind of privileged information?” I tease.

He stares down at me. “Of course not. But you discover things when you have hours to roam, and no one thinks you’re a threat.” He reaches inside his pants pockets and brings out a key ring. “And, I still have these.” He jingles the keys.

Silas laughs. “Brilliant.” He claps Xander on his back.

Xander cocks his head, leveling a look at me. “Will this mission involve seeing our fearless leader in another dress?”

Silas covers his laugh with a cough. “Excuse me.” Then he looks back and forth between Xander and me. “I can see you two want to battle this out.

Find me when you have an operative for us to send in.”

I’m lost in Xander’s eyes, wanting to kiss his soft lips as soon as Silas leaves the tent, but then a thought springs to mind. “Wait.” I glance at the map. “Don’t we have someone on the inside now?”

Silas shakes his head. “Larkin was our only plant.”

Xander speaks up. “No, Fallon said Micha mentioned two in court.”

“That’s right,” I say. “Silas.” I look at him. “Please bring our good friend Larkin here so we can question him.”

After I was made leader of the Rebels two nights ago, I had Larkin brought back to the camp and placed in the holding tent. He couldn’t go back in as a plant, his loyalties were questionable. For one, he was furious that I was made leader instead of him. And two, he was even more furious that Xander was my first in command. But I couldn’t kill Larkin. That was the first of Micha’s rules I threw out. However, I couldn’t let him loose to cause trouble for us, either.

Silas grunts. “I hate that guy.”

“Yes, but he knows who we still have in court,” I say. “And hopefully this person will be of greater use to us than Larkin.”

“Agreed,” Silas says. “I’ll be back within the hour.”

After he leaves, I take Xander’s hand in mine and stare at our laced fingers.

“What?” Xander asks, brushing my hair from my eyes. “You look like something’s troubling you.”

I keep my eyes down, away from his. “Is this truly what you want?”

I gave him his mother’s letter shortly after Micha’s demise. Xander has had to face so many things all at once—his mother’s death, discovering Hart is

his father, and the fact he's a prince. More things than any one person should have to handle. He chose to join the Rebels and help lead us to a free world. However, I can't help but wonder if he understands what he's giving up by not claiming his birthright.

I release a heavy breath and ask him again. "Are you positive this"—I tap my chest, repeating the action he used with me—"is what you want?"

He lifts my chin, and I finally look into his dark eyes. "Always," he says.

I smile as he presses his lips to mine. And in this moment, I know that we'll find a way to be free. Live a life not dictated by others. We're together. We'll face whatever comes our way.

And as he pulls me closer to him, removing all my fears and doubt, I know I'll never have to question him again.

Bio: Trisha Wolfe is the author of the YA Steampunk/Paranormal Romance *DESTINY'S FIRE* ([Omnific 2012](#)). Her published short stories have appeared in YA literary journals and Fantasy magazines. She's the creator of [YA Bound](#), a book blog for the promotion of YA authors. And she's currently working on a novel with the characters from *UNVEILED*. Check out her website www.TrishaWolfe.com for more on her books and short stories. Follow her on Twitter [@TrishWolfe](#) for updates.