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RISE

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*For Charlie, Richard, and Lyndsey:
Those Musketeers have nothing on you guys*

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

—Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

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Nightshade



ONE



ALISTAIR COULD REMEMBER screaming only once before, at least since he'd become a man. The shrill cry had forced its way from his throat when he'd been pinned to the floor of the wine cellar. Three hobgoblins held him down, cackling, while a fourth stretched its long, clawed fingers toward his eyeball. That scream had been a brittle, strangling yowl of horror.

The sound escaping his lips now was brighter than shattering glass, jagged shards of pain and loss. Ember was gone.

Less than an hour earlier, restless after the events of the day—and of the night—Alistair had gazed at the stone ceiling in his cell. His pallet was unsympathetic to his pains, offering no ease or comfort to lull him into slumber. With eyes open, Alistair didn't see the rough-cut gray blocks above him. Neither did he see darkness when he closed his eyes.

An image had burned itself upon his vision. Skin revealed as linen slipped from Ember's slender but strong shoulders. Weeks with Conatus had chiseled her arms, making them hard as a man's, but Alistair remembered the softness he'd glimpsed. Her hair was fire, flames licking the snow of her naked body, its sudden curves appearing as her garment fell.

It was a scene stolen from his very dreams. Ember baring herself to him. Wanting him. Alistair would have given his soul to relive the moment. And change the way it had ended.

No matter how often he turned in bed or summoned other thoughts—for there was much to think on: Lady Eira's plans had been set in motion and everything was about to change in Tearmunn—he failed. Ember's bare skin, captured in the glow of candlelight, held him hostage.

Unable to bear the torment another minute, Alistair rose from bed. He hadn't bothered to change from his uniform into a sleep shirt. With Conatus reeling from Sorcha's death and Eira taking control of both the Circle and the Guard, the night portended chaos. Alistair had even kept his sword belted to his waist. Should a fight arise, he would be ready to assure Lady Eira's successful ascension to sole rule of their order.

As he left his cell, Alistair briefly considered seeking out Eira. Perhaps she had need of his help maintaining order. But he readily dismissed that thought. Should she desire, Lady Eira would have no qualms about summoning him. Having given this brief attention to duty, Alistair succumbed to the siren song that called him through the dim corridor.

Passing the few doors that separated his cell from Ember's, Alistair paused in front of her door.

What took place within this chamber once he entered would determine the nature of his relationship with Ember. Alistair knew this truth. He leaned against the door, letting the image of her half-clothed figure slide into his mind's eye, coaxing him to action.

Ember must have known he was the one at the door earlier that night. Only a trusted friend would intrude upon her at such a late hour. She hadn't dropped her gown in surprise. The chemise had been falling, released with purpose by Ember's own hand. She'd been waiting.

Alistair refused to believe Ember had anticipated the arrival of another. How could she?

Despite the sick twist of his gut the thought provoked, Alistair couldn't stop the needling doubt following his question. Barrow had come upon them. The knight had disrupted what Ember's skin promised Alistair.

Could Ember have been waiting for Barrow?

Alistair's roiling stomach tangled itself into a hard knot. No. It wasn't possible. Barrow had abandoned Ember. He'd cast her off, forsaking his role as her mentor. And hadn't Alistair restored his own friendship with her in the wake of Barrow's rejection? Hadn't he and Ember grown ever closer, slowly returning to the intimacy and trust they'd shared as children?

That history, the knowledge that he knew Ember better than anyone else, assured Alistair of what he'd always believed. Ember was bound to him, and despite her characteristic stubbornness, she loved him. They would marry, and she would be his. Alistair could imagine no other role for Ember in his life, and his loyalty to Lady Eira had secured his future with Ember. Eira had promised to bring changes to Conatus, which Alistair would soon take advantage of. No longer heralding ties to those monk warriors, the Knights Templar, the Conatus Guards' vows would be of fealty to Lady Eira and Lord Bosque Mar and nothing more. The new order offered Alistair all he desired.

Fortified by this thought, he rapped lightly on the door. And waited. He knocked again, daring to use a bit more force. With Sorcha's sudden death, most of the Guard would be away from their cells, holding a vigil in the hall below. Waking someone was of small risk, and since Ember had kept away from the gathering of knights when he'd sought her out earlier that evening, Alistair wagered that she'd remained secluded in her bedchamber.

Even after more insistent knocks, Alistair couldn't hear Ember stirring within. Perhaps her sorrow over Sorcha had driven her into deep sleep. Or still grieving, Ember might be weeping in her cell, too ashamed to share raw emotion with another. Alistair thought Ember all too concerned about showing a brave face to the world. She was strong enough. Maybe a bit too strong. Ember could be a knight of Conatus if it suited her. But she was still a woman.

Convinced that Ember was most likely hiding her feelings, as she was wont to do, Alistair slowly opened the door. As her dearest friend, it was his place to comfort her. He thought of pulling her into his arms, of stroking her auburn tresses to soothe her. His body tightened when his mind pushed its musings further, making him imagine his hands pushing the loose neckline of Ember's chemise over her shoulders. Watching it fall as it had a few hours before. This time Alistair would catch her hands in his own if she feigned modesty. He would clasp her fingers tightly and look upon her body as he longed to.

In the darkness of Ember's cell, Alistair clenched his jaw so he wouldn't groan. The idea of offering solace to Ember as she mourned had been muscled out by desire that felt as old as his bones. He moved forward, slowly through the black.

"Ember," Alistair whispered.

She gave no answer.

He started toward her pallet, hands outstretched. As he reached to rouse her from sleep, clouds peeled back, uncovering the moon. Translucent beams stretched through the narrow window, giving light to the cell.

Alistair stared at the pallet. The wool blanket lay in a crumpled heap at its center. The bed was empty. He was reaching toward nothing.

The shock of embarrassment was trampled by sudden rage. Where could Ember be?

At the vigil? Her presence there would make sense. After all, Sorcha had taken up the role of Ember's mentor after Barrow had forsaken it. But if Ember intended to spend the night hours honoring her dead friend, why had she been readying for sleep when Alistair last saw her?

Ember wasn't one for complacency. If she hadn't been able to sleep, she might have left her cell. But Alistair doubted she'd joined the knights' vigil. Ember would be more inclined to contend with her sorrow directly. She could be out walking the grounds. Or riding that horse she loved.

Twin spikes of fear and agitation lodged in Alistair's chest. Foolish girl. Lady Eira hadn't yet been able to bring Ember into her fold. That made the young warrior vulnerable. It would take time for Eira to quell the panic in the village, to reassure them that Conatus had been cleansed of its wicked elements and a new reign of justice was about to begin.

A sudden, unwelcome vision crowded out Alistair's fantasies. An unwanted sound filled his ears. Ember's screams. Her pale skin blistering and blackening, splitting open like old, dry leather. Her hair engulfed in real flames. Villagers dancing as they reveled in bloodlust, having captured and punished another witch. For what woman but a witch would ride out alone in the blackest of night?

Alistair was running before he reached the courtyard. Once outside, he sprinted to the stable, praying he wouldn't find what he suspected. Rushing along the stalls, Alistair pulled up at Caber's holding pen. Seeing that the stall was empty, Alistair bent over, spewing curses and trying to determine his next move. How could she be so reckless?

But Alistair knew Ember's wild nature would compel her to gallop off without thoughts of safety. He craved nothing more than to tether and tame her.

Frustrated, Alistair resigned himself to saddle his own horse and go out in pursuit. He couldn't risk Ember falling afoul of witchhunters.

Before he'd reached the tack room, Alistair abruptly halted, going silent and perfectly still. A flicker of movement had slipped into his peripheral vision. Alistair drew his sword, turning to face the shape that cowered in shadows.

"Show yourself," Alistair said.

"Begging your mercy, my lord," a quaking voice answered.

"Fitch?" Alistair peered at the hunched figure. "Is that you?"

"It is, Lord Hart!" Fitch gave a cry of relief.

Alistair kept his sword at the ready. "Why are you skulking in the stables?"

Fitch crept forward, grunting with the effort. In the dark, his body appeared wide and misshapen. When he walked, his feet scraped across the dirt—or so Alistair thought. A moment later, Fitch was close enough for Alistair to see why Fitch had been hiding.

He was dragging a body.

With a hiss of breath, Alistair jumped back. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Please, Lord Hart." Fitch let the body go and dropped to his knees.

Alistair grunted in disgust to see a knight of Conatus groveling. He jerked away when Fitch reached as though to grasp Alistair's tabard.

"What I've done was to serve Conatus. I swear!" Fitch shook his bloodied fists at Alistair. "They've gone mad. They'll destroy us!"

Making sure his blade was between the cowering knight and himself, Alistair took a closer look at the unmoving man beside Fitch.

"Mercer." Alistair breathed the knight's name. Mercer's face was bloodied, his flesh swelling as it took on violet and gray hues. It was well known that Mercer and Fitch had long been friends. What

could have provoked Fitch to attack a fellow knight?

As if sensing Alistair's scrutiny, Mercer groaned. Fitch lifted a hand to strike.

"No!" Alistair's command stopped Fitch's blow. They both watched Mercer, but the knight remained unconscious.

"You did this?" Alistair forced the tremor out of his voice.

"I had to." Beads of sweat stood out on Fitch's brow. "He's a traitor, Alistair. They're all traitors."

Alistair didn't know whether to take Fitch's use of his familiar name as a good sign or not. But the word *traitor* made his knuckles whiten as he gripped his sword hilt tighter.

"Speak quickly, Fitch," Alistair said. "Or I shall deal with you only as a cur who dishonors his companions with unprovoked violence."

"Take me to Lady Eira," Fitch pleaded. "She favors you. She'll grant me an audience if you ask. When Mercer wakes, he can be questioned and my words will prove true."

Alistair grimaced. "I'll take your confession and pass it on to Lady Eira. I'd sooner see you wait in the barracks for her judgment."

"No." Fitch fell over in the dirt when Alistair took a menacing step toward him. Fitch lolled on the ground like a beaten dog showing its belly. "Begging your pardon, Lord Hart, but I fear that I might be implicated in this treachery. I only wish to tell Lady Eira myself so she can see my contrition and restore me to my station. I risked my life to overpower Mercer so I would have proof of this conspiracy against Conatus. Please consider that."

Alistair found it difficult to feel anything but contempt for this man. Yet his bloodied hands and Mercer's limp form promised an intriguing tale. And if this treachery he spoke of was true...

"Very well," Alistair told him. "Lady Eira will hear your words. Now get up and stop shaming yourself with this pitiful display. I need your help to carry Mercer."

Fitch scrambled to his feet, casting a fearful glance at Mercer as though the unconscious man might revive and grab him.

Alistair seized Fitch and gave him a rough shake. "Act like the Guard you're supposed to be, Fitch. Take his feet and lead the way. I'll carry him at the shoulders."

Fitch turned away from Alistair and kicked Mercer's legs apart. Tucking a calf on either side of his waist, Fitch lifted the unconscious man's lower half while Alistair took care of his torso.

"That's good," Alistair told Fitch. "Head into the courtyard. And be quick about it."

A man twitching and quavering the way Fitch did wasn't someone Alistair wanted at his back. The two knights, one tall and wary, the other bent over as if on the verge of being sick, made their way across the courtyard.

"She's likely in the great hall," Alistair said, directing Fitch to the manor. "And if the Circle is with her, all the better. If traitors are in our midst, it's a matter to be addressed without delay."

Fitch muttered something unintelligible in response, but Alistair didn't bother asking him to repeat himself. He was already questioning his decision to bring Fitch to Eira. What if the man had taken ill and the madness of fever had turned him on his friends?

Still proving his worth to Eira, Alistair detested the thought of raising alarm without reason. It was the cool touch of fear, light on his skin, that kept Alistair moving at a swift pace toward the great hall. No matter how unstable Fitch might appear, something real lay beneath his words. Something real and very wrong.

The corridors of the manor were still. The Guard would be occupied with their vigil, and the staff must have sought their beds for the night. All for the best, Alistair thought. Too many questions were bound to chase after a pair of knights carrying the broken body of one of their fellows. With Sorcha's death raising alarm only a few hours earlier, further bad news could incite panic throughout the keep.

When they reached the thick double doors, Alistair pivoted to the side, bracing Mercer against him.

while he freed his other arm and pulled the door open. He took care to leave space only wide enough to carry the body inside.

“This is a private session!” Claudio’s shout stopped Alistair in the doorway, leaving Fitch and the other half of Mercer still in the hall.

Despite his many years as one of two Circle members hailing from craft, Claudio still bore the strength of years working with his hands. He strode toward Alistair.

“Peace, Claudio,” Lady Eira called to him. “Lord Hart is welcome here.”

Claudio hesitated, but didn’t counter Eira’s words, and Alistair quickly pulled the rest of Mercer, and Fitch along with him, into the room.

“What’s this?” Claudio gaped at Mercer.

Alistair glanced back at Fitch. “Let’s put him down. And then shut that door.”

They laid Mercer on the floor while the other occupants of the hall gathered around. Fionn, per his office as a cleric, carried a scroll in his hand. He gazed calmly at Mercer as though the unconscious man were a puzzle to be solved.

Lady Eira spoke first. “What happened to Mercer?”

Before Alistair could answer, Fitch blurted out, “Have mercy, my lady. I swear I’ll confess all.”

“What do you have to confess, Fitch?” Eira asked, her voice cool.

“I’ve done wrong. I thought to betray the cause. But I know I was misled now. I seek to make amends.” Fitch gulped, but when he opened his mouth to speak again, he suddenly yelped.

A hand had wrapped around Fitch’s ankle. Mercer’s eyes were open. With a jerk of his arm, Mercer pulled Fitch off balance. Fitch tumbled to the ground, and Mercer was on him, snarling like a wildcat.

Claudio shouted in surprise and backed away from the struggling pair. Fionn ran across the hall to take cover behind the sacred tree. Eira didn’t move, but neither did she try to interfere.

“Traitor,” Mercer spat as he struck Fitch. “I’ll see you in hell for this.”

“I’m no traitor.” Fitch grasped Mercer’s tabard, trying to shove Mercer off. “You’re mad for believing them. They’ll be the death of us.”

“Stop!” Cian’s clear voice rang out.

Alistair, who’d been about to grasp Mercer from behind and wrestle him away from Fitch, wheeled around. He hadn’t noticed Lady Eira’s sister in the hall. Cian leapt from the far corner of the room and closed the distance between herself and the tangled knights in a few long strides.

With a movement of such grace and strength that it stunned Alistair, Cian took hold of Mercer and Fitch—one in each hand—and threw them in opposite directions. Mercer rolled over once before jumping to his feet. He had no weapon to draw, but his fists were raised. Fitch, either reeling from Cian’s sudden intervention or still shocked that Mercer had regained consciousness, fell back onto his hands and heels.

Cian’s sword hissed out of its scabbard. “What is this talk of treachery?”

Mercer stared at her, and without breaking her gaze, he pointed at Fitch. “There is your traitor.”

When Cian glanced at Fitch, his eyes bulged. He began to crawl backward like a crab. “You... you —”

“Yes, traitor.” Cian moved toward Fitch. “You should fear me.”

When Alistair realized Cian’s intention, he rushed at her. “No! Wait!”

He didn’t reach her in time. Cian brought her blade down in a clean arc, and Fitch’s head toppled from his body.

“Damn your impatience!” Alistair watched blood pour out of Fitch’s severed neck. “He was the one who came to me seeking aid. Why would you kill him?”

Unruffled by Alistair’s fury, Cian said, “Your companion claimed he had a confession to make. One must sin to require confession. Fitch’s face spoke to me plainly of his guilt. I’ve no doubt that his sin

were great.”

~~Alistair was shaking with outrage when she walked away from him.~~

Mercer stood still, face pale and fists raised. His expression was resigned, as though he expected to meet the same end by Cian’s sword.

“You’ve seen how we deal with traitors.” Cian spoke slowly to Mercer, holding his gaze. “Perhaps you would like a chance to confess, and if your contrition proves genuine, you’ll be shown mercy.”

Drawing a sharp breath, Mercer said quietly, “You cut him down like a common thief. I desire none of your mercy, and I have nothing to confess.”

“Very well.” Cian raised her sword.

“Put down your sword, Cian,” Eira commanded. “When did my sister become a barbarian?”

Cian paused, glancing at Eira. “Death is the penalty for traitors.”

“Of course it is,” Eira answered. “But we’ve yet to learn the cause of these accusations.”

“Lord Hart brought the men.” Cian turned to Alistair. “I assume he has the answers we need.”

Alistair jumped forward, speaking as quickly as he could. “I found Fitch in the stables. He’d beaten Mercer senseless and claimed there was a conspiracy against Conatus.”

“Is there any truth to his story?” Eira asked him.

Alistair looked with regret at Fitch’s headless body before he answered. “I don’t know, my lady. Fitch desired to make a full confession to you personally. That’s why I brought him here.”

“You shouldn’t have killed him,” Eira told Cian. “It was reckless.”

Cian returned Eira’s stare without flinching. “To my mind, they’re both traitors. The only difference between the two is that Fitch was clearly the coward. I took his head to make a point. A necessary one.”

“You let your temper get the best of you, and you dishonor yourself by making excuses for it.” Eira regarded her sister coolly. “Go with Alistair and take Mercer to the stockade. Secure him there until we know the truth of this.”

Cian pursed her lips and then said to Alistair, “Wait here. I’ll bring irons to bind him before we go to the stockade.”

Alistair nodded. The chaos in the room gave way to an uneasy quiet. Alistair heard Fionn retching behind the tree.

Claudio approached them cautiously. He eyed Mercer, gauging whether any threat remained.

Mercer stared blankly ahead, giving no sign of worry that Alistair stood close by with his sword drawn in case of any trouble.

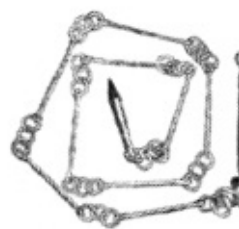
“You’re going to question him, then?” Claudio asked Eira.

“I know one more suited to the task than I,” Eira answered. “I’ll ask Lord Mar to join us shortly.”

Eira walked in a slow circle around Mercer, looking the knight up and down. Her smile made Alistair shiver.



TWO



STEAM ROSE FROM THE horses' bodies, mirroring the mists that veiled the hillsides. The sun wouldn't show her face today, Ember thought. Though it was still night, Ember could almost feel the weight of low clouds pressing down upon them.

Leaning into Caber's strides, Ember tried to gather her wits. The stallion's hooves threw clods of damp soil into the air with each strike against the earth. Though the wind brought tears to her eyes, Ember had a hard time shaking the sense that she was caught in a dream. This breakneck flight from the Conatus keep of Tearmunn was too wild and frightening to be real.

But it was that fear, churning beneath her ribs, that made Ember all too aware that this midnight ride was not the stuff of dreams. Glancing over at her companion, Ember tried to muster courage. She could barely make out Barrow's features in the dark, but she could see well enough to take in his unusually rigid pose astride Toshach. He kept his eyes on the path ahead, urging Toshach to an even faster pace. As she watched Barrow, conflicting impulses wrestled within her. Barrow seemed incapable of fear. He led them into the night without hesitation. Ember trusted him. In brief moments when the terror of what she'd done released her from its grip, she reveled in the knowledge that she was riding abreast of the man whose company, whose touch, she'd come to believe was something she would never have. No matter how much she wanted it.

Joy surged in Ember's blood, like lightning strikes, but that ecstasy was chased away by the chill of doubt. They were running from friends. From sworn allies, beside whom she'd fought and bled. From a duty she'd come to believe was sacred. How could it be that they were fleeing Conatus? For years, Ember had longed for a life other than that which her father had planned for her. At Tearmunn, Ember had been granted that once-impossible dream, and she'd only begun to glimpse the wonders that serving Conatus offered. Now, only a few weeks since she'd arrived in Glen Shiel, she was running away from everything she'd ever wanted.

Everything except the knight who rode beside her. If it weren't for Barrow, Ember wondered if she would have been able to leave Tearmunn.

Despite her faith in Barrow, Ember wasn't at ease with the events of the last several hours. It had all happened so fast, and in a blur of such confusion. From the heat of Barrow's kiss in the woods to the attack on the village that had led to Sorcha's death, the night had brought Ember heaven and hell. And then there had been Alistair's unexpected appearance in Ember's cell. Her mouth went dry when she

remembered the way he'd stared at her, his face tight with desire as he took in her half-naked form.

It hardly seemed possible, but Alistair's words had been even more disconcerting than his intrusion in her chamber. Not only had he spoken of them being together, as lovers, but he was in a frenzy over Conatus itself—the plans Eira had laid, the possibilities of a new order. None of it had made sense.

Ember wanted to face the night with courage, but as the hours of hard riding took their toll, she fought a losing battle against her uncertainty over the choice to leave. Though she tried to remember the reasons she'd been compelled to join the small band of rebels in their escape, Ember wished that the bearer of ill tidings had been someone in whom she had as much faith as she did in Lukasz and Father Michael. But their informant had been a stranger, a woodcutter whose mind seemed frayed at best.

Could any of what that disturbed man had told them be true? Ember would readily admit that Eira exuded strength and ambition, but how could she survive—a rare woman among the leaders of Conatus—without such traits? What could drive her to do anything to put those things most sacred to her at risk?

As Ember pondered these questions, she felt her confidence slipping away. A shout rose in her throat. She could stop this. All she needed to do was call out to Barrow and halt their mad dash from the keep. But when Ember looked at her companion, the panic swelling in her chest lessened. How could she behave with such cowardice?

"That is all your strength and none of mine," Barrow had told her just before they'd fled Tearmun. He'd said more, as well: *"And that is why I love you."*

The memory of his words, the quiet strength behind them, kept the early morning chill at bay. Ember welcomed the fresh resolve that she could be the warrior Barrow believed she was.

A sudden shout jolted her out of her thoughts. Toshach had stumbled and squealed, either in pain or fright, knocking into Caber's shoulder. Barrow had called out as he worked to steady Toshach. Caber pinned his ears back, but Ember quickly checked the young stallion before he could bite the other horse.

Reining Toshach in, Barrow slowed their pace to a walk. The horses blew clouds of hot air, and their chests were lathered from the hard run. Barrow kept Toshach moving forward. He sat tense in the saddle, waiting. A moment later, he swore and swung down from the saddle.

Ember brought Caber to a halt, watching as Barrow knelt by Toshach's right foreleg.

"He's favoring this foot," Barrow told her without looking up. "If we keep riding, he'll pull up lame soon enough."

Barrow cursed again. "I'm sorry, Ember. I knew it was a risk to press the horses this hard at night. It's too easy for them to be injured by stones or branches on a path they can't see."

"What should we do?" Ember asked, trying to remain calm.

"I have the means to make an herb poultice that should give Toshach some relief," Barrow answered. "But we'll need to rest him for a few hours, and when we continue, we'll be traveling much more slowly."

Ember nodded, swallowing the hard lump in her throat.

"We've covered a lot of ground," Barrow said. "With luck, this delay shouldn't put us in any more danger than we already face."

He scanned the valley floor that buttressed the narrow path. "Let's head to that copse of pines. We shouldn't stay in the open."

Barrow led Toshach from the path and toward the cluster of trees. Ember stayed in the saddle but followed at a slight distance. Caber snorted and tossed his head, confused and frustrated by the sudden change of pace. Leaning forward to rest her head against the stallion's neck, Ember murmured soothing sounds until Caber's protests subsided.

When Barrow led Toshach into the copse, the pair suddenly vanished from sight. Arriving just behind them, Ember was grateful for the shelter the trees provided. Huddled together as if for comfort, the tall pines bent inward. At their upper reaches, the branches and needles tangled together. Ember might have wagered that if she jumped from the top of one tree toward the center of the ring, the branches were so tightly woven they'd break her fall, catching her in a net of fragrant greenery.

"Should I unsaddle him?" Ember asked as she swung out of Caber's saddle.

Barrow shook his head. "We're not likely to be surprised by an enemy, but it would be foolish to take anything for granted. We should be ready to leave at a moment's notice."

Ember settled for freeing Caber of his bridle and giving his ears a good scratching. Barrow gathered herbs and a strip of cloth from Toshach's saddlebags. He laid the cloth flat on the ground, measuring the herbs into a heap at the center. He hunted the soil until he found a stone that matched the size of his hand and, adding a bit of water from one of the skins, crushed the herbs into a paste.

"Ember." Barrow beckoned her to join him as he crouched beside Toshach's injured leg.

She knelt alongside him as Toshach watched them, flicking his ears in curiosity. Barrow held the poultice in one hand and gestured for Ember to crouch beside the stallion. He pressed her palm against the muscles just above Toshach's fetlock.

Toshach snorted, and Barrow spoke to him gently. "Easy, old boy. We're only trying to help."

Barrow looked at Ember. "Do you feel that heat?"

Ember nodded. Beneath Toshach's coat, his muscles radiated a strange warmth that pulsed against Ember's skin.

"That's the injury," Barrow told her. "The only way to cure it is a good rest, but the poultice will ease the swelling and some of the pain."

Ember watched as Barrow wrapped the poultice tightly around Toshach's leg. When he finished, Toshach whickered, lowering his head and blowing into Barrow's face.

"I know, friend." Barrow laughed. "It's not your fault." He patted the stallion's bowed neck.

Toshach swished his tail and wandered to the spot where Caber was foraging for spring shoots.

Though the copse of pines felt well protected, it was also very dark. Ember rubbed her arms, trying to chase away the sense of isolation that crept over her.

"We can't risk a fire," Barrow told her. "I'm sorry for the chill."

"Don't worry about me," Ember said. "Of course we must stay hidden."

Though she didn't want to, she shivered. The tremor hadn't been brought on by cold, but by a heightened awareness that many more nights of hiding awaited her.

Tentatively, Barrow reached out for Ember. She smiled, surprised that he'd worry she'd do anything other than step into his embrace.

Once Ember was close, Barrow folded her into his arms. She took a deep breath, noticing the way the astringent scent of pine mixed with the warm spice of his skin. He held on to her, his fingers running over her hair, down her neck.

Ember lifted her chin. Barrow looked down at her. She could barely see his face in the darkness. Raising her hand, she found the curve of his cheek and let her fingertips run over the rough stubble of his jaw. When she touched his mouth, his lips parted in a sigh.

"Kiss me," she breathed, taken aback at her willingness to voice her desire so boldly.

But Barrow was already bending close. She felt his breath on her lips for the barest moment before his mouth touched hers. Her hand moved from his face to wrap around his neck as he kissed her hungrily, discovering the contours of her lips and neck with his teeth and tongue.

Ember's limbs began to quake. She gripped Barrow's shoulders, no longer trusting her legs to hold her upright. As she swayed, Barrow slid his arm around her waist and lifted her off her feet. He was still kissing her when he took them to the ground. Ember looked up at the tangle of branches that

stretched over their hiding place like a canopy of ebony lace. Barrow paused, looking down at her, hesitating.

Grasping the front of his tabard, Ember pulled Barrow to her. When his weight pushed her against the earth, Ember swallowed a moan.

“Ember.” Barrow kissed her temple, her ear. His hand moved over her, tracing the shape of her body from her collarbone to her hip. His other arm slid between her back and the ground, lifting her up against him.

“Please,” she murmured, shuddering as this strange longing took hold of her body.

Barrow unbuckled the leather belt that held Silence and Sorrow. It fell away and he slipped his hands beneath her tabard and then her shirt. His fingers rested briefly on her stomach, making her draw a sharp breath. His lips touched hers softly as his hand moved up. When he found the edge of the cloth that bound her breasts to her ribs, he traced the line of fabric.

Ember swore, and he laughed.

“I didn’t know that was a word you used, Lady Morrow.”

“Only when it’s appropriate,” she answered. “I’ll have to take my tabard and shirt off. There’s unwinding to be done.”

She felt his smile when he kissed her again. “Perhaps... or...”

Barrow’s hand moved away from the tight wrapping of cloth around her chest, his fingers traveling along her skin, over her stomach and down. Ember went very still, suddenly unable to breathe.

Her hips moved, and she drank in the cool night air, its contrast sweet against the heat of her blood.

Ember reached for Barrow’s hips, drawing up his tabard. Her palms molded against the strength of his thighs. She slid her fingers up, wanting to learn what it was to touch him.

But before she could, Barrow pulled back and, instead of holding her, knelt beside her.

Startled, Ember scooted up to rest on her elbows. Not sure if she should worry or just shout at him, Ember did neither, because Barrow spewed out such an array of curses that she almost blushed.

“Barrow?” Ember rolled onto her side, watching him.

“By all that lives on earth and in heaven,” he said roughly. “There is nothing I want so much as you.”

She reached for him, and Barrow pulled her into his arms, but when Ember tried to kiss him, he turned his face from her.

“This isn’t the time for us, Ember,” he told her. “Not here.”

Ember laughed. “Do you honestly believe I’m still attached to the thought of making love only in a feather bed? I’m not a spoiled noblewoman, Barrow. You know that.”

“That’s not it,” Barrow said. “I would make love to you here, in a bed, in a river. No place would thwart my desire for you.”

“Good.” Ember moved to kiss him again. This time his lips lingered against hers, but not for long.

“The only thing that could stop me is putting you at risk.” Barrow held her slightly apart, his hands strong on her shoulders.

“What risk?” Ember frowned, her body thrumming from his touch and her frustration growing from being kept at bay.

“That you could conceive,” Barrow said quietly.

Silence filled the small space between them. For a time, Ember could hear only the rapid beating of her heart.

Finally Barrow said, “To father your child would be a great honor, Ember. But this is a dangerous time. If you were to become pregnant, you might fall ill as some women do. And you must be strong now, ready to fight.”

“I know,” Ember answered. She couldn’t imagine carrying a child in her belly. Not now. Perhaps

not ever.

When Barrow's fingers lightly touched her cheek, she covered his hand with hers.

"Does that mean... I can't be with you?" Ember asked, not sure she had the will to keep her distance from him.

"No," Barrow said quickly, with a forced laugh. "Merciful God, no."

"But—"

Barrow laughed again, pulling her against him. "You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"You asked me once if members of the Guard ever took lovers."

Heat rushed into Ember's cheeks as she recalled the conversation, the confusion she'd felt that day and how much had changed since.

Barrow continued, "I told you to seek advice from Sorcha about getting herbs that would allow you to make your choices without risk of a child."

"I never—I didn't—" Ember spluttered. Barrow was the only man she'd wanted in this way. When he'd passed her training to Sorcha and kept himself distant, Ember had assumed that he held her in disdain. A child with a misguided infatuation. Only when he'd drawn her into his arms amid a downpour, beneath the shelter of a great oak, had she learned that he returned her feelings.

"Sorcha and I never talked of these things," Ember finished awkwardly.

"Mmmmm." Barrow made a sound that blended frustration and disbelief. "When you asked me if any of the guard took lovers, I thought you might have sought a companion for your bed."

Ember nearly choked on her own breath. Fortunately Barrow continued speaking, sparing her the embarrassment of an attempt at spluttering a response.

"And it was that day"—Barrow paused, holding Ember in his gaze—"that I was forced to admit my jealousy. Though I thought I could fight my own desires, I learned quickly that my only choice was to keep myself away from you."

"I thought you despised me," Ember said.

"Despised you?" Barrow said. "How could you think—"

"You left me," she answered sharply. "You were my teacher, my friend, and then you were gone. What else was I to think?"

"I thought you would take me to be a brute no different from Alistair," Barrow continued, "who tried to force his way into your bed."

"You are nothing like Alistair. I longed for you to come to me." Ember leaned toward him, her pulse thrumming with the boldness of her words.

"I still feared you," Barrow told her. "What would happen if I..."

He rested his hand on her knee. Very slowly, Barrow's touch moved up her thigh, following the curve of her hip and finally resting on her waist. He spread his fingers wide, pressing firmly from the bottom of her rib cage to her lower back. Ember didn't break from his intent gaze, but her every breath was short and trembling.

"I could ease your fears," Ember murmured.

"Yes." Barrow kissed the crown of her hair. "But only when the risk is mitigated."

Ember turned her face up. Barrow looked down at her, taking her chin in his hand. After a moment he kissed her, letting his mouth linger on hers, tasting her. He didn't push her away when she moved closer, settling onto his lap and wrapping her legs around him.

When their lips parted, Ember was breathless. Barrow's fingers dug into her hips. She didn't want him to let go.

"When we reach Krak des Chevaliers, I'll find someone who knows of the herbs you need." He let all his breath out in a huff. "Believe me, I'll find someone."

“Good.” Ember backed away, toying with the lacings of his chausses.

~~He caught her hand, pulling her fingers to his lips and kissing them softly. “I only have so much will, Ember. Be kind.”~~

That made her laugh, and to demonstrate her kindness, she moved to sit beside him, her arms and legs no longer holding him hostage. Barrow smiled, and she nestled her head against his chest, afraid to look at him as she next spoke.

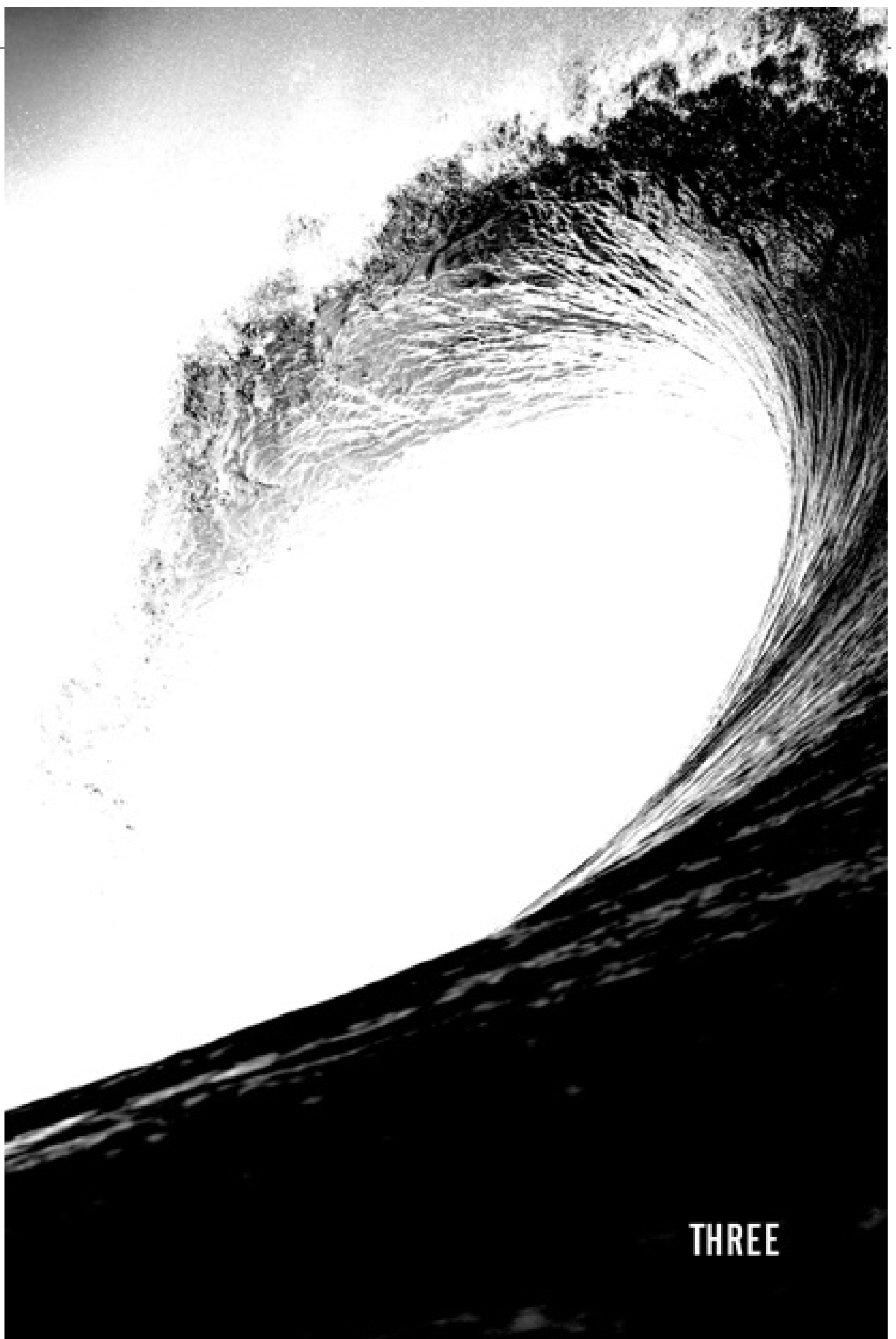
“I never knew I could want like this.”

Barrow didn’t answer, but he pulled her closer, letting his finger circle the hollow of her throat.

With a blush, Ember asked, “Is it... supposed to hurt? Wanting you? Because it does. A little.”

Barrow’s deep laugh rumbled in her ear. “Be assured that I share in your suffering. Now rest. I’ll wake you in an hour or so to take over watch.”

Ember thought to protest, but the warmth of his body drained the tension from her mind and muscles. Her eyelids fluttered only once before she nodded against Barrow’s chest and slept.



THREE

sample content of Rise (Nightshade)

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