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Leith Torren had left Brandi's sister behind to die. No matter how much Brandi had kicked and screamed, Leith hadn't let her go. He'd picked her up and carried her away. And that *wasn't* all right, no matter how much Leith whispered it in her ear.

This wasn't how a rescue was supposed to work. Leith was supposed to charge into Nalgar Castle, fight off the guards, and ride away with both Brandi and Renna. That's how things always worked in stories. God always provided a way for the good guys to escape. God had told Noah to build an ark. He'd sent His angels to protect Daniel.

But Renna had been left behind. Uncle Abel and Aunt Mara had been executed. Brandi curled against Leith's chest. His arms kept her steady as Blizzard loped through the darkness, the dawn breaking in front of them.

Why had Leith left Renna behind? Brandi had tried to understand. Really, she had. But surely Leith could've tried harder. He could've done *something*.

But he hadn't. And Renna had been left behind. What would Respen do to her? Would he kill her? Why wouldn't he kill her? After all, it's what he'd planned to do. What if Renna was already dead?

No. She couldn't be dead.

How long had they been riding? They didn't stop. They didn't sleep. Whenever Leith slowed their pace to let the horses walk, he, Shad, Jamie, and the four rescued trainees swung down from their horses and also walked. But Brandi didn't move.

Brandi closed her eyes and rested her head on Leith's shoulder. Maybe Leith would think she'd fallen asleep.

She couldn't sleep. Her chest ached. Her head filled with the sights and sounds of death. She couldn't even cry.

Apparently, she didn't fool Leith. He hugged her tighter. "Just a little farther, then we'll stop."

She forced herself to nod. The horses needed a rest. She could feel Blizzard's exhaustion in the jagged way his hooves pounded the ground. He'd carried two riders for most of the way. She'd ridden with Shad Alistair, heir to Walden, for a few miles and with Jamie Cavendish, Leith's former trainee, but not enough to make up for the long miles Blizzard had run with both her and Leith on his back.

Not that she was happy with any of them at the moment.

Blizzard surged up yet another slope, legs straining, nostrils flaring. Saliva flew from his open mouth, joining the sweat running down his sides and legs. They entered a mass of boulders, like the ruins of some long ago giant's castle.

Leith halted Blizzard and swung down. "We'll rest here."

The trainees slid off their horses but remained in a group, as if they didn't dare so much as twitch an eyebrow without permission.

Leith glanced at Jamie and tipped his head at Brandi. Brandi suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. As if she couldn't tell that Leith had just ordered Jamie to keep an eye on her in case she tried something crazy.

Not that she wasn't thinking about it.

Leith and Shad headed toward a large boulder. Probably to take a look around.

Brandi twined her fingers in Blizzard's mane. Between her legs, his sides heaved. If she knew the way, she'd take up the reins, wheel Blizzard around, and charge back to Nalgar Castle.

But she couldn't do that to Blizzard. He'd given them his all to get them away. She couldn't ask anything more from him. Besides, she didn't have a plan to rescue Renna. Not yet, anyway.

Not that Leith had done any better, and he'd had a plan. Instead, he'd mucked it all up and left Renna behind where Respen could kill her.

As Jamie swung down from his horse, Buster, Brandi sighed. She probably should get down too. Blizzard deserved to get a good rub down. She eased her leg over Blizzard's back and slid to the ground. Her gaze snagged on a rock at the base of one of the boulders.

She stiffened. That rock. This place. She'd been here before. This was the same den of boulders they'd stopped at briefly after Leith and Jamie had faked her and Renna's deaths, and their bloody nightdresses were buried under that rock.

A lot of good that plan had done. Here she was, right back where she'd started, but without Renna.

What were Shad and Leith so busy looking at? She scrambled up the boulder and spotted them at the crest, lying on their stomachs and peering over the edge. From here, she could see that the boulder balanced on a tall promontory. The Sheered Rock Hills loomed all around them but fell into the rolling prairie down below.

She used the boulder to boost herself into the lower branches of a scraggly pine. It swayed a little with her weight. Far below, the dark shape of a building jutted from the prairie in the pre-dawn haze. It took her a moment to recognize the tan stone of Walden Manor. The black maze of wooden barricades, dirt mound, and dry moat surrounded the manor.

But surrounding that...Brandi's pulse beat in her throat. A sea of dark shapes with lines of white tents sprawled around Walden Manor. Respen's army. Hearing Respen taunt her and

Renna about it was one thing. Actually seeing it surrounding Walden, a place she'd called home for several months since having to flee her home town of Stetterly, was another.

Leith's voice carried to her. "They haven't fallen yet. Maybe they'll be able to hold out. It looks like the army's settled in for a siege."

Shad remained silent and still, staring at his besieged home. Lord Alistair, Shad's father, was down in that manor. Brandi swallowed. Lord Alistair had been so nice to her and Renna when they'd stayed at Walden these last few months. Why did she have to lose him too?

He was going to die. That much was certain despite Leith's attempt at reassurance. Sure, Lord Alistair and his men had held out against Respen's army for three days but that didn't mean they could hold out forever. Who knew when help would arrive? If it ever did.

Brandi dropped to the ground and trudged back to Blizzard. The horse had waited long enough for a rub down. She set to work untying Leith's bedroll and saddlebags. As she reached for the saddle's girth, Leith appeared at her side and beat her to it.

She scowled and stepped back. She didn't need his help. She could handle this on her own.

Leith set the saddle on the ground and rested his hands on her shoulders. His grip was firm enough that she couldn't pull away. She huffed, crossed her arms, and met his gaze.

The journey had tousled his black hair. His forehead creased as he stared at her with eyes as green and bright as cornstalks. "Renna's safe for the moment. Respen won't hurt her."

"How do you know that? He was going to kill us." Brandi's throat squeezed. What if Respen had already killed Renna? Or worse, tortured her. Renna wasn't strong enough for that. How would she ever manage being alone at Nalgar Castle?

Leith held her gaze. “No Blade has ever escaped, much less betrayed Respen and lived. He can’t let me get away or he’ll lose his hold on the rest of the Blades. And right now, as long as we escape the Blades, Renna is his only means to lure me back.”

Brandi cocked her head. It’d cause a ton of problems for Respen if the Blades stopped fearing him. After all, look at Leith and Jamie. The moment they stopped being afraid, they turned on him.

Leith squeezed her shoulders, his eyes begging her to understand. “I never would’ve left Renna behind if I thought I was leaving her to die. You know that, right?”

After a moment, Brandi managed a nod. If she hadn’t been so mad, she probably would’ve seen it sooner. She shouldn’t have doubted him. He’d done a lot—lied to King Respen, joined the Resistance, taken a knife in his shoulder, broken his friendship with Third Blade Martyn Hamish—to keep Renna safe. Of course he wouldn’t stop now.

If running away was keeping Renna safe, then that’s what Brandi would do. For now.

She glanced at Jamie. He rubbed a handful of dry grass across Buster’s drenched back. The sweat turned the buckskin’s fur into the same color as wet sand. “Will the Blades be hunting Jamie? He’s an escaped Blade now too. And the trainees?”

“Yes, though I’m the one Respen will want the most.” Leith straightened but kept one hand on her shoulder. “Go rest. I can finish with Blizzard.”

Brandi pulled away from him and shook her head. “I’m all right. I can take care of Blizzard.” She jabbed a finger at the trainees huddled in a group. The oldest boy couldn’t be much more than ten and the youngest maybe eight. “I think they need someone to reassure them that they’re safe. They’re still looking at you like you’re the First Blade.”

Leith grimaced but he headed toward the trainees. They shrank away from him. He knelt and spoke in a low voice.

Hopefully they'd listen. Leith might still look like a Blade with his black clothes and knives strapped all over his body, but he wasn't a bad sort. When he wasn't dragging her away from her sister, that is.

Martyn, on the other hand...Brandi ripped two handfuls of grass and scrubbed them along Blizzard's back. She wouldn't mind biting his shoulder. Or giving him a good kick in the shins or somewhere else more painful. He was the cause of all their problems. If he hadn't captured her and Renna, dragged them to Nalgar Castle, and stopped Leith's rescue, she and Renna would already be at Eagle Heights, safe with the Resistance and away from Respen.

The stalks of grass turned into mush in her hands. She grabbed another few handfuls and kept scrubbing. When Blizzard was as dry as she could make him, she hobbled him.

She plopped crosslegged on the ground and nibbled on the bit of dried meat Leith handed her. Of course it'd be dried meat. It seemed to be the only thing Blades ate.

Jamie laid out her bedroll near her. His brown hair stuck out in several directions above blue eyes that studied her.

She opened her mouth to argue. She wasn't some simpering, helpless ninny who needed someone else to set up her bedroll for her.

Jamie shook his head. "Just rest. If you can."

She snapped her mouth shut. Arguing sounded like too much work. Exhaustion pressed against her skull. Perhaps she could close her eyes for a few minutes. Surely she was too tired to dream.

2

Leith leaned against a boulder, but he couldn't rest. He should. He hadn't slept the entire ride from Nalgar Castle and very little the night before that. But his stomach knotted too tightly. He'd assured Brandi that Renna was all right, but did he believe it? Even if Respen didn't kill her, what would he do to her the meantime?

If only he could turn Blizzard around now and return for her. But what good would it do? He'd simply be captured and take away Respen's one reason to keep her alive.

And Martyn. What had Respen done to him? What punishment had he suffered because Leith had succeeded in rescuing Brandi? How much did he hate Leith now?

Shad slid down the boulder and dropped to the ground next to him. "I can take your watch if you'd like. You look done in."

Leith shook his head. "I can't sleep. Might as well do something useful while I'm at it."

"She'll be all right." Shad patted Leith's shoulder, but his mouth remained in a tight line. He looked about as sure of those words as Leith. "Don't worry. Once we arrive at Eagle Heights, the Resistance will help. We'll rescue Renna."

Leith leaned forward, resisting the urge to jump up and pace. The Resistance couldn't let Renna remain at Nalgar Castle. She and Brandi were the last of the Eirdon line. They were daughters, and not sons, but they were all Acktar had.

Leith might not be able to do much for Renna right now, but the Resistance would aid her. The mysterious Leader, whoever he or she was, would rally the Resistance to rescue Renna. All he and Shad had to do was get to Eagle Heights safely.

Easier said than done. Respen would send the other Blades after them. How much of a lead had Leith gained on the Blades by pushing everyone so hard? Half a day, if that.

If the Blades caught up...if they captured or killed him, Renna would die. Respen no longer would have any reason to keep her alive.

He had to focus on that goal, not on the ache in his chest. He'd failed to rescue her, but he wouldn't fail her again. He'd get to the Resistance at Eagle Heights. They'd mount a rescue, and Renna would be saved.

"How far is Eagle Heights?" Leith waved at the mountains stretching north above them. How long would Renna have to stay at Nalgar Castle? What would Respen do to her in the meantime?

"A week's hard riding, though we're going to take longer." Shad nodded at the trainees. "They won't be able to keep up a hard pace for long. And my mother, Jolene, Lady Lorraine, and everyone else who left Walden before the attack are waiting for us in the meadow, and they'll be traveling with us to Eagle Heights. I'm the last one left in Acktar, besides my father, who knows the way."

Leith raised his eyebrows. "What would they have done if we'd run into more trouble than we could handle?"

"A Resistance scout was bound to pass through eventually to check on the situation in Acktar, so they wouldn't have waited forever." Shad shrugged. "What do you want to do when we get there? Do you have another change of clothes?"

Leith ran his hand over the knives strapped across his chest over his black shirt and trousers. He did have his set of prairie tan clothes in his saddlebags. He could slip back into his role as Daniel, a peasant farmer.

But he was done with lies, even that one.

Perhaps he could change out of his black clothes and take off his knives and tell them that he was a Blade once he was in their camp. But somehow, even doing that much felt like a lie. Like he was tricking them into taking him in, only to reveal the truth later.

“I don’t want to continue lying.” Leith leaned his head against the stone behind him.

“Besides, they already know you have a Blade on your side. Some have even seen me from a distance. It’s not like they’ll attack me once you explain.”

“They’ll be wary. You won’t be accepted as one of them.” Shad’s hand closed around his sword’s hilt. “And whatever you choose now, that’s how you’ll enter Eagle Heights.”

He could enter Eagle Heights as any other Christian peasant fleeing Respen. He’d be welcomed, befriended. Or, he could remain a Blade. It wouldn’t matter if he’d turned to their side. The thirty-seven marks on his right arm gave them plenty of reasons to hate him.

“No more lies. If that means I enter Eagle Heights as a Blade, then so be it.” Leith stood and dusted off his trousers. “Doesn’t look like anyone else is sleeping either. Let’s push on.”

Leith held out a hand to Shad. As he pulled Shad to his feet, Shad winced and pressed a hand to his side. A bright spot of red seeped through his shirt.

“Your wound. It’s bleeding again.” Leith frowned. Shad had been wounded while pretending to be former First Blade Harrison Vane shortly before they left for Nalgar Castle. Leith had tended it, but they hadn’t taken the time to stitch it.

Shad shook his head. “It’s fine. Nothing to worry about.”

Should Leith press him to get it stitched? Leith could do it if he had to. He eyed Shad’s shirt. The red spot wasn’t growing, and the wound hadn’t been that deep.

Shad signed and unbuckled his sword belt. “Fine. You get the others moving, and I’ll wrap a fresh bandage over it.”

While Leith saddled a horse for the two youngest trainees, he glanced over his shoulder at Shad. From what he could see, the scab had broken open at one corner. Nothing serious, but the ride ahead of them might tear the scab open worse.

Leith boosted the two youngest trainees, boys of only eight, onto the horse. They gripped the reins and stared at him. So silent. Still so scared.

If only Renna was here. She would’ve been able to give them the kindness they needed. Leith had rescued them. He’d assured them they were safe now. But he was still their former First Blade. They didn’t trust kindness given by him.

He shook his head and helped another trainee onto a horse. He hadn’t trusted kindness when he was nine either. Not until Renna had given so freely when he’d hadn’t deserved it.

Leith strode to Blizzard and tossed the saddle onto his back. *Renna*. How could he possibly think about leaving her behind? It’d be two, almost three weeks at the earliest before he could return. How could he abandon her for that long?

He had no choice. He could return to Nalgar Castle now. He might even be able to sneak into the castle and find her. But she’d be well guarded. The bait in a trap. And once Leith was caught, both of them would die.

More than that, Renna was Martyn’s responsibility. Martyn had fought Leith once. He’d do it again to keep Leith from rescuing Renna. The only way for Leith to rescue Renna by himself would be to kill Martyn.

Leith couldn’t do it. Was that wrong of him? Should he be willing to kill Martyn if it meant he could rescue Renna? He’d once betrayed Martyn and risked his life. But back then, Shad and

Lord Alistair had assured Leith that they'd do everything in their power to make sure Martyn didn't get killed.

If only there was a way to rescue both Renna and Martyn. But Martyn remained too loyal to his duty. It'd take more than mere words to convince Martyn to turn on Respen.

The Resistance. It was their only chance. Even Martyn wouldn't resist an army. Perhaps, somehow, Leith could rescue Renna and Martyn with the Resistance's help.

Brandi trudged to Blizzard. When Leith knelt to give her a boost, she scowled and shoved past him. "I don't need help."

Leith stood and handed her the reins. He shouldn't let her actions hurt. He had dragged her away from Renna.

With Brandi settled on Blizzard, Leith saddled a brown horse they'd taken from Nalgar's stables. Earlier, one of the other trainees had ridden it. But Blizzard needed a rest from carrying two riders, and doubling the youngest trainees wouldn't tire their horse.

After he swung into the saddle, Leith sidled his horse closer to Brandi. He patted the brown horse's neck. "What's this horse named?"

Brandi shrugged. "I don't know."

Leith gripped the reins. Not the answer he'd been hoping for. Had he left both sisters behind in Nalgar Castle? "Well, he's a horse. He needs a name."

"Big Brown." Brandi's voice remained as flat as a river boulder.

What would it take to get the old Brandi back? He hung his head. Renna. That's what it would take. But how long would it be before he could reunite Brandi with her sister?

Shad led the way deeper into the Sheered Rock Hills. Leith eased into the rhythm of the unfamiliar horse beneath him. Last time he traveled this trail, he'd had Renna behind him. He'd been confident—too confident—in the knowledge he was sending her to safety.

He glanced at Brandi. She swayed in time with Blizzard's strides, her face blank, her eyes cold. What sort of pain was she feeling now? How much would it hurt her to reach the meadow tonight, the last place they'd all been together and happy only a few weeks ago?

Leith caught sight of Jamie also studying Brandi. Their gazes met, and the tight line of Jamie's mouth probably mirrored his own expression. Leith tipped his head toward Brandi, and Jamie nodded. Perhaps if Leith couldn't help her, Jamie could.

The day stretched into long hours and still longer miles. Night had fallen by the time they reached the ridge overlooking the mountain meadow, its edges screened with thick pines. A pinprick of light flickered between the branches.

Leith drew in a deep breath, realized he gripped the hilt of one of his knives, and dropped his hand to his thigh.

As they drew closer, low voices murmured through the pines. To their right, a stream gurgled, and the small waterfall churned in a muted roar.

"Halt." A voice like that of a girl or young boy growled from somewhere in front of them. "State your names before I put an arrow in your chest."

"Jolene, it's me. Shad." Shad held out his arms away from his weapons.

"Shad?" Something rustled. A dark shape dashed from the trees. Shad barely had time to swing down from his horse before the figure slammed into him. "You're all right?"

Leith glanced away. His chest ached. Renna had greeted him like that, right before he'd left her behind.

Shad finished murmuring to Jolene and turned to the rest of them. "Let's join the others."

He led the way through the tree line. Leith hung back, letting everyone else pass him. When Shad stepped into the firelight, Lady Alistair leapt to her feet, followed by Shad's sister Lydia. They hugged Shad so tightly he winced. Lady Lorraine remained where she was, though a smile twitched the corner of her mouth.

Leith didn't belong here. The moment he stepped through the trees, the guards would panic. Lady Lorraine and Lady Alistair would eye him with suspicion.

Shad tugged Brandi into the firelight and explained how Renna had been left behind at Nalgar Castle. He introduced the Blade trainees. Lady Alistair smiled, wrapped her arms around the youngest two, and pulled them closer to the fire. At least they would be welcomed and cared for.

"And the Blade?" Lady Lorraine rested a hand on the knife in her belt. "Where is he?"

Leith stepped through the pines into the firelight. The guards jumped to their feet, hands reaching for their swords. Lady Alistair paled. Lydia gaped and pressed her hands over her mouth as if she couldn't believe that the peasant farmer she'd encouraged to pursue Renna was also a Blade.

Leith forced himself to stay still. He couldn't blame them for being wary. How could they reconcile Daniel, the person he'd pretended to be, with a former killer?

"It's all right. This is Leith. He's on our side." Shad glanced around at the circle of faces. His gaze stayed on the guards. "You trained with him. You can trust him."

The guards took their hands away from their swords, but none of them relaxed their stance.

Leith hung his head. Even now, while on the run and no longer a Blade, he couldn't outrun his past.

Jolene glanced at Shad, straightened her shoulders, and stepped forward. “I believe we have a little venison left if you’re hungry.”

Leith nodded and sank onto one of the logs circling the fire. Two of the guardsmen shifted away from him, leaving a yard gap between him and the next person.

Shad plopped onto the log. “We’re travelling, and for once, I don’t have to do the cooking.”

“Don’t be so sure about that. So far, I’ve done the hunting and helped with the cooking. Tomorrow is your turn.” Jolene handed him a plate. She turned to Leith and held out a second plate. Her smile remained in place, though it had tightened to something forced. “How was Renna? When you saw her?”

Leith took the plate and inhaled the rich smell of the chunk of roasted meat. Would Martyn make sure Renna had something to eat? Or was she being fed moldy bread and water in Nalgar’s dungeon? He cleared his throat. “Scared.” Except at the end, where she’d remained behind so Leith could escape with Brandi. “But brave.”

On a log a few feet away, Lydia leaned forward. When Leith glanced at her, she looked away and toyed with a piece of bark.

Leith might’ve been worthy of Renna as Daniel the peasant farmer, but he wasn’t as a Blade.

He forced himself to eat the venison on his plate and ignore the way the guards flinched every time he picked up a knife to cut another bite.

As he finished, Brandi dumped her plate on the pile of dirty dishes and strode away. Lady Alistair hurried after her and laid a hand on her shoulder. Brandi shrugged it off and stalked into the dark in the direction of the stream and waterfall.

Leith set his plate aside, but before he could climb to his feet, Jamie dropped his dishes and headed into the trees after Brandi. Probably just as well. Jamie might be able to help Brandi more than Leith could right now.

He rested his elbows on his knees. He had to rescue Renna, if only to bring back Brandi's smile.