



THE ESSENCE

A PLEDGE NOVEL

KIMBERLY DERTING

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THE
ESSENCE



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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[PART I](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Niko](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[PART II](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Chapter XI](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Chapter XII](#)

[The AssassIn](#)

[Chapter XIII](#)

[Max](#)

[Chapter XIV](#)

[PART III](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Chapter XV](#)

[Chapter XVI](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Aron](#)

[Chapter XVII](#)

[Chapter XVIII](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Chapter XIX](#)

[Brooklyn](#)

[Chapter XX](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

To my Granny, who taught me that no woman needs to be what's
expected of her. I miss you.

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PART I

prologue

He approached respectfully, cautiously. Warily.

She'd always been capricious, his queen. But of late, she was nothing less than unpredictable.

He knew why, of course: the new queen of Ludania.

He waited twenty paces from the throne, as was customary. She would speak first. Until then, his lips remained tightly sealed.

When at last he heard her voice—like the chords of a song, lovely and melodious—he knew her mood. Tolerant. Magnanimous.

Yet he couldn't suppress the trepidation that always quivered in his belly during these brief encounters.

"Come closer," she coaxed, and he found himself drawn toward her in the same way that some animals were drawn toward their brightly colored predators. "I can barely see you all the way back there. And I want so badly to see your face."

He stepped closer, counting his paces in his head so as not to overstep that invisible barrier between respect and indiscretion, all the while allowing himself to fall prey to her seductive tone. "Yes, Your Majesty." When he reached her, he had to quell the urge to bow, a habit he'd only recently developed. One that had been browbeaten into him in his new post.

Here, though, it wasn't an action that would be tolerated.

Forcing himself to remain upright, he waited for her to explain why she'd summoned him.

"I hear she's managed to take the throne fairly effortlessly."

It wasn't a question, and his mind grappled for the appropriate response, knowing full well he had best not answer incorrectly. "Not so effortlessly, Your Majesty. She still struggles with decorum and with balancing the new freedoms of her subjects. Not all are pleased by the changes she's making."

She considered his words and he could practically feel her mood easing. A knot unraveled within his own chest.

"I hear she has many who stand by her side, including Sabara's own grandsons."

His lips ticked up. He answered without hesitation, "They are male, Your Majesty. What does it matter if they support her reign?"

She smiled back at him, and he felt a surge of promise at having known the right response so quickly. He wasn't stupid; he had only to trust his instincts.

"I hear," the queen continued in her lilting voice, "that she is beautiful."

At that he faltered. He knew what she wanted to be told, but to lie was unforgivable. He conjured an image of Queen Charlaina in his mind—her pale blond hair and shimmering blue eyes and skin that glowed even when she didn't realize it was so. He tried to find some fault he could relay to his queen—something that wouldn't reveal his forgery. Instead he lowered his voice to a whisper, hoping she wouldn't notice the apprehension hidden there. "Not half as beautiful as you, Your Majesty."

That, at least, was not untrue. His queen was nothing if not striking.

And heartless, he realized, as she spoke her next words.

"I want her dead." There was no change in her inflection; it was that same conversational banter. As if she were simply searching for information, prying for news, as she would with any good spy.

Yet even he knew this was no ordinary request.

He cocked his head, unsure what the proper reaction was now. "Dead," he stated flatly, careful not to question the command.

Her lips bowed, ever so perfectly, making her look more like she was ordering dessert than an assassination. "Dead," she said again. "You can handle that, can't you?"

He took another step forward, no longer concerned with decorum. "And how do you propose I do that, Your Majesty? How do I get her away from her guards and her family and the contingent of soldiers who follow her every move? Are you expecting a suicide mission from me?"

"I thought you might ask that." She raised her hand, a quick signal, and the door was opened. A young woman with tangled braids and dirt-covered clothing shoved her way inside. She was younger than the queen and himself, yet she carried herself with more confidence than both of them combined. She didn't count her steps or wait for the queen to speak first.

She grinned when she saw him standing there. "Didn't expect to find you here." He couldn't help noting that she sounded even less like their queen than the last time he'd seen her.

He bit his lip against the urge to tangle his hands around her braids and drag her up against him, yet he said nothing.

“The summit is approaching,” the queen responded, ignoring the brazen girl who stood insouciantly before her. “It’s been many decades since an invitation’s been extended to a queen of Ludania.” Her lips pursed, as if she were holding back a secret. “This year’s going to be different, however. This year the Vendor queen is to be summoned. And this year, she’ll have to leave the safety of her palace fortress to travel north.” She looked at each of them in turn. “I expect the two of you to find a way to stop her from reaching her destination. Understood?”

He didn’t dare hesitate, and he didn’t have any qualms about what he was being asked to do. It was an order, after all. “Of course, Your Majesty. Anything else?”

The queen’s gaze narrowed when she answered. “Keep her safe,” she explained, casting a quick glance at the girl with smudges on her face. “She might not want the part, but she’s still my sister, and a princess of this realm.”

The girl drew a razor-edged knife from her boot and flashed her teeth at the queen. “Don’t worry about me. I’m not the one who’ll need protecting.”

In the privacy of my dreams, I'm a warrior.

I'm still me, of course, just a tougher version of me. More valiant and fearless.

I've always loved those dreams, the ones in which I can wield a weapon without breaking a sweat, or cut a man's throat without blinking an eyelash. In them, my body is honed and fine-tuned. My mind is as focused as any Canshai master of lore's, and I, too, can move objects simply through my powers of concentration. My spirit is dogged.

No one can stop me. I am invincible.

I tried to summon those feelings now, as I lay facedown in the mud, blinking furiously against the grit blinding me, and spitting out mouthfuls of pond scum. Unsteadily, I wobbled as I rose to my feet, moving entirely too slowly, my legs trembling beneath me.

I am fierce, I tried again to convince myself, but that unblinking resolve I so desperately craved had been seriously shaken.

My weapon had disappeared somewhere in the slimy pit I had just pulled myself from, so it was only me . . . and my opponent. I needed to think quickly. I knew he wouldn't wait long before striking again.

Staggering to my full height, which unfortunately was not nearly as impressive as his, I struggled to find any weakness in his defenses. He was both massive and armed, and, as if reading my mind, he lifted his steel blade to his forehead in a mock salute, his lips twisting into a sneer.

"Your Majesty." His voice rumbled—a sound like thunder coming from deep inside his chest. "It seems you find yourself in a most precarious position." His eyes narrowed as he closed the gap between us, and my heart stuttered. "Whatever shall you do?"

He lunged then, thrusting his sword toward me, the sharpened edge glinting as it sliced through the air. Fortunately, I recognized its trajectory and was able to react in time, dodging left at the very moment the blade arced right.

I felt the air ripple at my earlobe. Too near a miss.

But even as relief uncoiled in my chest, I felt my foot slide in the slick mud. I lost my balance and careened backward, falling hard once more. My

breath rushed out in a painful *whoosh* as my spine connected with a sharp stone beneath me. My mind was still scrambled, trying to beckon my inner soldier, trying to conjure that fierceness within . . . to overlook the pain.

Warriors do not cry, I admonished myself silently. And then I dared a quick glance at his feet, which were still coming for me. *He is a true soldier*.

I swung my leg. It caught him right behind the ankles, hooking them, and I dragged as hard as I could, trying to sweep his feet from beneath him. My fingers clawed at the soil beneath me as I struggled against his massive weight, but I refused to surrender.

And then I felt him give. I felt him buckling above me, and he, too, was falling.

The moment he was on the ground, at the same level I was, I raised both my booted feet, my knees cocked and my thick heels aimed directly at his head. The blow could be deadly if delivered correctly. In the temple, just as I'd been taught.

I hesitated, staring into my attacker's hard brown eyes. He'd had no qualms about hitting, kicking, pushing, and nearly stabbing me. I knew because I bore the bruises to prove it.

"What are you waiting for?" he jeered, his white teeth flashing, reminding me that *he* didn't have mud in *his* mouth. "Finish it."

I wanted to. I wanted to be the girl from my dreams. Tough like Brooklyn, or determined like Xander. Willing to kill if necessary.

But I wasn't. And I couldn't.

Sighing, I dropped my feet as I turned to roll onto my stomach so I could push myself up from the ground.

And then I froze as my numbed mind recalled the first rule of battle: Never turn your back on your opponent.

Before I could reconcile my mistake, he was on top of me. I never even heard him. He was stealthy, like a tiger. And I was at the receiving end of his claws.

The knife at my neck seemed to have materialized from nowhere, and there was a moment when my blood turned to ice as he dragged its blade along the base of my throat until its point converged with my hammering pulse.

"That's what happens if you break rule number one," he growled against my ear, his breath like fire. Then he withdrew his blade, shoving me back to

the ground. And again, I found myself eating dirt.

“Dammit, Zafir,” I complained, getting to my already battered and bruised knees. “You knew I’d given up, there was no need to attack again.”

Zafir held out his hand, both as a gesture of submission and as a genuine attempt to help me up. I took it, but only because my back was still throbbing where the rock had jabbed me. “There’s always need for attack. Remember that.”

“I’ll never be a skilled combatant, will I?”

“No,” he stated flatly, gripping my hand and yanking me to my feet as if I weighed less than nothing.

I swayed slightly and glared at him, but kept my mouth shut. He was right, of course. I was inadequate.

I waited while he waded up to his ankles in the shallow pond to retrieve my sword—*his sword*, actually—and wipe it clean. Bending over, I stifled a groan as I hefted the one he’d been using from the ground where it had fallen. It weighed at least five times what mine did and had intricate carvings, not just around the hilt but continuing along the length of its curved blade. To anyone else, the carvings would appear to be gibberish.

To me, the girl who could understand all languages, they were poetic: *Danii, a weapon forged of steel and blood.*

I grinned over the fact that Zafir’s sword bore its own name. And that whoever had crafted his steel had lovingly engraved a message declaring not only its name but also its origin. I’d asked him about it once—about the origin of the weapon and the language engraved into its blade. He’d told me only that he wasn’t born in Ludania, and that the weapon had been an ancestral gift.

“We’d best get back before Sebastian tells your father what you’ve been up to.”

“We,” I corrected, trading him weapons so that I didn’t have to drag his through the silt, and wishing, once more, that I were stronger. “What *we*’ve been up to, you mean.”

Zafir glared down at me. “I wanted no part of this. I’m a reluctant participant.”

“But a participant nonetheless,” I maintained, lifting a brow. “And maybe if you were a better instructor . . .” I trailed off, trying not to let my disappointment come through in my voice.

“It’s not my instruction that’s lacking.” His pointed gaze found me. “Your Majesty.” He added my title as if it were an afterthought, even though we both knew it wasn’t.

“Whatever. I might as well be spending all my time in riding lessons considering how little my fighting’s improved. At least then the horse might do what I want her to.”

“I believe those were my exact words. You need riding lessons, not fighting lessons. You’re a queen, not a soldier.” And then he added it again, this time his lip twitching ever so slightly. “Your Majesty.”

We reached the stand of spark willows, beneath the largest of which we’d tethered our horses. During the day, the drooping branches’ tips, which nearly brushed the ground, were extinguished and the trees served as the perfect shelter for the enormous animals we’d ridden, shielding them from view. At night, however, the nibbed ends of each branch would burn bright in shades of blues or reds or white, depending on the blossoms. A million tiny buds of light would flicker and flash, casting this entire sector of the forest in an ethereal glow in which nothing—and no one—could hide.

Something I understood all too well, I thought as I glanced down at my hands, where light flickered just beneath my skin.

Zafir slipped through the curtain of wilting boughs and, after a moment, returned holding the reins of two magnificent mares. Magnificent, that was, to those who appreciated horses.

Unlike me.

It was unnatural for humans to be riding animals. Or at least that was what my aching body insisted, even before I readied to take the saddle once more.

I wasn’t like Brooklynn. I seemed incapable of learning that natural rhythm required to master horseback riding, that same rhythm she possessed when sitting astride her stallion. The easy way her body moved and rocked, not just in sync with the horse, but almost as if she’d become an extension of it. Like part of a single fluid wave in which they seemed to become one.

I, however, remained separate from my animal, remaining stiff, and bouncing and lurching uncomfortably. My body fought the motions of the beast beneath me, resistant to its gait.

In truth, they terrified me, the horses. All of them. They were large and unpredictable and far too powerful.

Yet another reason I could never truly be warrior. What kind of soldier couldn't manage her own steed?

Stretching my back and preparing for the ride home, I reached up to the saddle's horn and balanced one foot in the stirrup as I hauled myself up, throwing my other leg over the smooth leather seat. Once I was settled, Zafir handed me the reins, and as he did, my stomach tightened. I hated this part. I hated that it was in my hands to command this beast.

A country, sure. An animal larger than my royal guard, no thank you.

When we returned, Sebastian was already waiting for us in front of the stables. He rushed out to take the reins from me, and held the mare steady while I dismounted.

I glanced around, searching for Brooklynn. "Is she here yet? She promised she'd be here when I got back." I hated the edge I heard in my own voice. "She's late, isn't she?"

Zafir took great care to stifle a yawn.

Sebastian frowned and bowed low, clutching the leather reins in his hands. I stared down at the top of his head, envious that any man could be blessed with such lustrous curls. They were the color of polished mahogany, matching his eyes to perfection. It was unfair, considering that I'd been born with hair and skin so fair they were nearly transparent, not a single curl in sight. "Your Majesty. I'm sure she's just running . . ."—he lifted his head and scowled upward at the sky, noting the sun's location, completely unable to mask his worry about the time—" . . . behind schedule." His last two words sounded less than convinced, and I fought the urge to giggle at his attempt to assuage me.

Zafir was less composed, and his laughter boomed like a thunderclap across the meadows, making the poor stable master jump. "Knowing Brooklynn, she's probably off causing trouble. Probably getting you into a war, if I had to wager."

I cast a warning glare in Zafir's direction; Sebastian didn't deserve to be laughed at. "Don't worry, Sebastian, I don't blame you for Brook's absence." I sighed heavily, not wanting to do this alone, and unwilling to admit why. "I suppose we can start without her," I muttered.

Sebastian perked up at the idea, and I was reminded that this was his true passion. This was why he'd been made stable master after barely reaching the age of legal consent. At eighteen, he was the youngest stable master the

palace had ever had. No one knew his way around a horse the way Sebastian did.

Plus, he was patient—assuring me I would grow more comfortable, that my skills would improve. That time would give me the confidence I so desperately needed.

But Sebastian was serious about his instruction, and training with him was as physically exhausting as my fighting lessons with Zafir. It wasn't simply about sitting in a saddle—anyone could do that, he'd repeated time and time again. He wanted me to learn the finer points of horsemanship: riding bareback, emergency dismounts, jumping, and groundwork. He worked both the horse and me until we were unable to work a moment longer.

“You won't be sorry, Your Majesty,” Sebastian vowed, pulling his red bandana from his back pocket and tying it around his head, something he always did before my lessons. “With a little more practice . . .” He hesitated, as if trying to convince himself and not me. “With a little more practice, you'll be riding like a champion.”

I bit the inside of my cheek at the thought of me as a champion rider. “That sounds . . .” My lip quivered ever so slightly. “. . . wonderful.”

Sebastian's face lit into a huge, triumphant grin as he dipped his head once quickly before straightening and spinning on his heel, his shoulders high.

“Oh, and Sebastian?”

He stopped and turned back around. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Will you please just call me Charlie?”

Sebastian's brows crumpled, uncertainty clear in every feature.

But it was Zafir who answered. “No.” His voice was like iron. Unyielding. And then he looked down on me from his horse, and his gaze was equally obstinate. “He will not, *Your Majesty*”

brooklynn

Brooklynn stood on the street, staring up at the scarred sign that hung above the door. She hated the pang that coursed through her, the ache of nostalgia that betrayed her as she questioned whether being here was wise or not.

Still, wise wasn't her reason for coming. And neither was nostalgia.

She had a job to do. An important one. Longing had no place in her world. . . . Not today, anyway.

She tamped down the emotions and shoved her way through the battered wooden door. Even the weathered brass of the door handle beneath her fingertips was entirely too well-known to her.

Inside, she scowled at the man behind the counter. He looked older now than she remembered, more haggard. The skin around his eyes was lined and leathered, as if he were a man accustomed to a life of hard labor. As if he'd spent years working in the fields rather than inside the walls of a butcher's shop. She watched as he rubbed his grizzled beard, graying in places it surely hadn't been before.

It was his eyes, though, that held her attention as he noticed her standing there—they were as sharp and focused as ever, and filled with spite. She'd always hated that physical similarity between them: the dark brown of their eyes.

He wiped his hands on his stained apron, and Brook was reminded why she'd never been bothered by the sight of blood. She'd grown up with it.

"I need a minute," he grumbled in English to the older man behind the counter with him.

"I'm almost off work," the man responded in a firm voice, as if he was accustomed to having this conversation. "Five minutes. And then I leave, whether you're finished or not."

Brook watched as her father's face drained of all color. She could tell that he wanted to scream, that his rage was bubbling so close to the surface that even she was cringing inside as she waited for the explosion that was surely coming. But when he answered, his words were quiet. Controlled. "It's *my* store, Anson. Do I need to remind you again? *You* work for *me*." The muscle at his jaw flexed, jumping spastically. "*I* make the rules here."

Anson just shook his head, as if the notion was absurd. “But I shouldn’t have to remind you that I have rights now.” And then he repeated, “Five minutes.”

Her father untied his apron and threw it on the floor as he stormed into the backroom, leaving Brook to either wait or follow.

She was comfortable with neither, but she was already here, and they had only five minutes. She might as well get this over with.

Casting an apologetic look at the older man, she slipped behind the counter and went through the doorway that led to the chilled room where her father was holding a cleaver and slicing—pointlessly—into the remains of a carcass that had clearly already been carved, its usable meat already packaged.

“Can you believe him? Six months ago he was mopping blood off the floors and discarding entrails. He wasn’t even permitted to speak to me. Now I have to pay him a wage he doesn’t deserve and allow him to interact with my customers. Now, he thinks *he* can tell *me* what to do.” He hacked into a section of rib cage and pieces of bone and flesh sprayed outward. “This is your fault. You and your queen!”

Brooklynn walked toward the familiar carving-block work surface and ran her fingertip over a section in which she’d carved her name when she was just a girl, back when she still made all of her B’s backward. The wood had been new then, shiny and polished, yet her father hadn’t chastised her for marring it. He’d simply marveled at her handiwork, boasting that his daughter might have a future as a woodworker or an artist.

He’d never imagined she’d become a soldier.

Or that she’d turn against him.

“You need to tell them to back off. What you’re doing is foolish,” she insisted, ignoring his complaints about the New Equality. “All you can hope to accomplish is to get yourselves killed.” She glanced up to watch his reaction.

His face twisted into a sneer. “*Is that what your queen tells you? That we can’t gain enough power to overthrow her?*” He took a step closer, still clutching the bloodstained cleaver in his fist, and Brook recognized that both his language—the all-too-familiar guttural intonations of Parshon—and his stance were meant to intimidate her. “*If I recall correctly, we wouldn’t be the first to challenge a queen . . . and win.*”