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THE FFERING

A PLEDGE NOVEL



KIMBERLY DERTING

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NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



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Being the last book in the Pledge trilogy, it was hard for me to say good-bye to these characters that I'd grown so attached to. In the acknowledgments for the first book I discussed how I came up with the idea for *The Pledge*, but I just want to (again) thank Marie Lucas, the woman who told me her stories of growing up in World War II Germany that eventually sparked the idea for Charlie's world. She will always and forever be the original Angelina.

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FART &

PROLOGUE

Unflinching, the executioner stood on the bloodstained floor facing the prison cells as he wielded an axe with a razor-sharp blade.

"What's the matter, darling? You're not having second thoughts, are you?" a woman's voice crooned amidst the barbaric scene—the cavernous surroundings, with bars and cells, and echoing all around them the desperate pleas of prisoners begging for their lives.

Niko straightened, shifting his gaze away from the executioner. He tried to shake off any last-minute qualms the beautiful but treacherous queen might be able to sense coming from him. Her gossamer green gown was inappropriate for the occasion, as if she'd dressed for a ball rather than a slaughter. But that was typical, he'd come to learn. She was as frivolous as she was deadly.

"Of course not. How could I possibly have any doubts? If we don't do this, we'll never be able to convince Queen Charlaina that we're to be taken seriously." He matched her expression, wicked smile for wicked smile, hoping she felt half the anticipation he did beating through his veins.

The sound of shackles and the rumble of an approaching scuffle made it clear that Xander was nearing them. Niko was a fool if he expected Xander to go down without a fight.

A part of Niko wanted to skulk back into the shadows. To hide where Xander wouldn't be able to see him, so Xander wouldn't know that it was he who'd betrayed him

After all, Charlie had sent the two of them to make peace with the Astonian queen. To find a way to come to agreeable terms with Queen Elena so that no one—on either side of the border—would come to harm.

Yet here he was, making his own bargains. Ones that would keep him safe forever. Ones that would, hopefully, bring him and Sabara back together again.

Even if it meant sacrificing those around him.

"Niko." Xander spat his name when he saw him standing at Elena's side. Her hand was draped possessively over his. "You . . . you traitor," he snarled, curling his lip. "And you." He turned his silver eyes on Elena then. "How could you let this . . . this coward convince you of anything? Are you so weak of will? Don't you see he's only using you?"

Niko stiffened, wondering just how much Xander knew about him. About his history—and how far back he and Sabara, the old Ludanian queen, really went. About how long he'd been alive.

But Xander continued as he thrashed against his chains and the guards on either side of him. "I trusted you. You said if my revolutionaries joined forces with you to overthrow Sabara, Ludania would have peace with Astonia. Have you no conscience?"

he shrieked at the queen with whom he'd come all this way to negotiate. "I thought we were friends."

Her grip tightened, and with it her resolve. She drew Niko along with her, forcing him out of the shadows, until they were standing face-to-face with Xander, watching him resist, like an animal caged. The guards shoved him to his knees and forced him to kneel before her. "I suppose that was your first mistake, then," she answered in a voice so devoid of emotion, it made Niko shudder inwardly. "Because I most certainly do not have *friends*." She gave a signal to the man in the executioner's mask—a black leather covering that exposed only his mouth and his unsympathetic eyes.

The two guards dragged Xander toward a small, round opening in the stone floor, a hole through which blood could easily drain away to the sewers. They, along with two others who'd appeared, pinned him to the ground while he continued to writhe and scream. They waited until he was too weary to fight any longer, until he had no other option but to accept this fate he'd been handed.

Then the executioner raised his blade.

Niko would have closed his eyes, if those of Elena hadn't been observing him as keenly as they were watching the scene unfolding before her. Unlike Niko, she had no interest in turning away. She seemed to relish the moment.

When the axe fell and the sharp crack of metal struck stone beneath, Niko felt the slightest jerk from beside him. But when he turned his gaze on her, he saw that she was frowning at the hem of her gown rather than at the grisly view at her feet.

"Will you look at that," she said, and clucked, craning her neck to get a better look, and ignoring everything else going on around her. "He got blood on my new dress."

She shook her head and turned her attention back to Niko. A smile replaced the frown. Her look spoke nothing of the horrors they'd witnessed or the defiling of her gown. Her entire demeanor shifted into something else as her hand slid from his wrist and moved up his arm to his chest, her fingertips finding their way along the ridges of his still tensed muscles. "Come, love. Let's go back to bed," she purred. "I need to get this mess off me. Besides, I have other things I'd like to show you."

He obeyed numbly, allowing the queen of Astonia to pull him along, back through the corridors and along the cobbled stones until they reached her opulent—if somewhat overdone—bedroom, where she dragged him back into her bed. He wondered if he'd ever be able to purge from his memory the image of what he'd just witnessed.

Or forget the sound of Xander's screams.

My lips stretched into a tight smile as I made my way to the front of the congregation of stone-faced officials who'd gathered in the crowded meeting room. Everyone stood when I entered, and I tried my best to appear calm, but my heart was racing as I looked out at all the intense expressions of the people watching me, judging me.

At any other time I might've explained my reaction away as nerves, but not today. Today I had something to prove.

I needed to show them that all the changes I'd been leading us toward, all we'd sacrificed, had been for the best. That today we would make progress.

That I hadn't made a colossal mistake in risking so much on one venture.

My gaze slid to the transmitter on the table in front of me, where it sat, still and silent. It was hard to imagine that something so bland-looking might possibly change everything.

I took my seat and waited apprehensively while everyone else in the room took theirs. Several moments ticked by, during which I could feel the weight of their misgivings searching me out, settling over me like a heavy blanket. I explored their faces, too, careful not to fix on any one for too long. I picked out certain features and tried to guess which region each council member might hail from, a game to kill time and distract my thoughts. A man with leathered skin might have been a farmer, or possibly a builder who'd spent many years laboring beneath a baking sun. I thought he might have been from the eastern region, where grains were plentiful. Another woman with perfectly coifed hair made me think of a large metropolitan area. From right here in the Capitol perhaps, or possibly from 3E, which had been recently renamed Charletown, now that cities were allowed to have names of their own. There was another man who had a distractingly bulbous nose, which had nothing at all to do with either region or occupation but caught my attention nonetheless. My cheeks heated when I realized he'd caught me staring for too long.

From outside, even through the closed windows, I could hear the people gathering on the streets below us, both allies and opponents, all awaiting word of the success, or failure, of our . . . experiment.

A thousand worries spun through my mind. A thousand reasons why everything could go wrong on the other end.

What if Aron hadn't made it to his destination? Or what if he had but work hadn't been completed on time?

Worse yet, what if those engineers and designers who'd said our project was impossible had been right after all? What if the lines were irreparable?

But if all that were true, if the lines were too faulty to fix, wouldn't we have learned as much before now? Wouldn't someone have told us so—at some point before I'd left

the palace to stand facing a hundred administrators from different districts and boroughs around the country awaiting our very first message?

Suddenly the walls of Capitol Hall felt too close, and the ceiling far too low. I was suffocating.

"Give it time," Max assured from beside me.

I turned to Brooklynn, who stood near the entrance in her crisp black uniform, searching the room for the slightest sign of trouble. I hoped in vain that she might offer me the same sort of encouragement Max had. A smile or a nod. Even one of her hallmark winks. But she never even glanced my way.

Nothing much had changed between us over the past months, since we'd returned from the summit at Vannova. Not since that fateful moment when I'd killed her father.

She still couldn't forgive me for what I'd done.

So I'd spent my time since then focused on Ludania instead, and what I could do to improve my country's future.

Which meant going back in time, it seemed.

Funny, how things worked. Sabara hadn't just stunted our country; she'd turned back the hands of time for us. There was a time when Ludania had been considered progressive in the eyes of the world. A leader in both technology and strategy.

Yet Sabara had managed to strip us of those advances when she'd taken the throne. Where Ludania had been making strides in the fields of medicine, manufacturing, transportation, and trade, Sabara had halted all that. She'd stopped production in everything but the basics, putting an embargo on all trade into and out of Ludania, demanding that her citizens learn to be self-sufficient.

Then she'd cut all manner of modern communication, even within the borders of our own country. Because with communication came power. And Sabara would never risk allowing anyone to be more powerful than herself.

And despite her efforts to maintain her own power by moving forward, jumping from body to body, Sabara feared change. The real Sabara—whose name wasn't Sabara at all—yearned to go back to another time, another era, when it was just her and Niko.

When they were together.

I couldn't afford to look back. I'd decided that reestablishing those once-forbidden forms of communication was the key to our salvation. And that was where I'd decided to focus my first efforts toward reinstating Ludania as a world force.

There was a part of me, one I didn't dare give voice to, that clung to the desperate hope that maybe this resurrected form of communication might somehow restore peace between Ludania and Astonia. That Queen Elena might listen to reason, if only I could have the opportunity to reason with her, leader to leader.

I knew it was foolish, but I couldn't help myself. The idea of going to war, even on the heels of the assassination attempt the other queen had spearheaded, made my chest ache.

There would be too much loss. Too many lives on the line.

Always the fool, Sabara whispered within me. Technology isn't the solution. Communication, in the wrong hands, is a weapon in its own right.

I bit my lip, tasting blood as I struggled to keep Sabara's mounting objections at bay. Her caustic voice burned like acid in my own throat, her words trying to find their way to my lips.

She was wrong. Communication was the key.

My plan would be implemented in stages. We would start by reopening communication ports in the major cities first, starting with Charletown and 11South—a city that still struggled to find the right name for itself. Next the train depots would be outfitted, since it only made sense that word could spread most quickly from there. Eventually we'd have the entire country wired, in some form or another.

The venture would be expensive but, in my estimation, worth the cost.

Or so I hoped.

Even if it works, you'll only be giving those who plot against you the tools they need to destroy you.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pounded my fist on the conference table. *Shut up!* I shouted back at her from inside my head.

But she wasn't the one staring at me when I opened my eyes once more. It was the delegates from regions all across Ludania. And it was Max and Brook and Zafir, too.

I frowned, pretending it was nerves as I turned my attention back to the small, black receiver sitting on the tabletop in front of me. I swallowed a lump of worry as we all waited for something to happen, and I wondered if possibly we weren't using the device correctly. If maybe we were meant to do something on our end to make it work.

Every eye in the country was watching me on this one. I'd seen the articles in the periodicals. And even now I could hear the doubt trickling in from the streets outside.

I glanced at the woman seated beside me, the engineer in charge of the entire operation, asking her silently with my raised eyebrows the same question I'd asked her a hundred times already: Are you sure this will work?

The tightening of her painted red lips was all the response she offered me, the same terse answer she'd given me whenever I'd finally exceeded her capacity to be kind with my uncertainty. I'm positive. Your Majesty.

Still, I couldn't help myself, and my hand slipped from my lap and moved toward the device. I wasn't sure what I meant to do, since I wasn't certain how to work the thing myself. But my hand hovered there, my heart beating in my throat until it felt like I might choke. I could see my reflection staring back at me in the polished black surface, distorting my features and making me look the way I felt in that moment . . . like a caricature of a real queen.

Someone who had no idea what she was doing.

And for the millionth time I wondered if Sabara hadn't been right all along.

Inside me I could sense her satisfaction. Smug and filling me with self-doubt.

Stop it, I warned her, hating the ease with which the two of us could communicate. Hating that she could turn me against myself in that manner, make me question myself so easily. It will work. It has to.

I swallowed another wave of doubt, wondering if this doubt was real or if it was Sabara's doing, even as my mouth went bone dry. All around me the crowd grew restless. Chairs shifted and voices murmured, low and rumbling and skeptical.

My misgivings became tangible, like smoke, making it hard to breathe.

Then something happened that made all of us freeze, and caused a collective gasp.

Beneath my fingertips, which were still hovering expectantly, the receiver crackled to

life.

I'd been told what to expect: the thing would make a buzzing noise. That's how we'd know if someone was trying to send a message.

But when the sound arose, it was more like a hum. And it was the sweetest, most glorious hum I'd heard in all my years. One quick significant vibration followed immediately by silence.

I turned to Carolina—the engineer beside me—once more.

Now she was the one raising her eyebrows, as if she were startled by the turn of events. As if she'd never really expected this to work at all. "I...guess...we...push it," she said, and then nodded, trying to appear decisive as she indicated my hand, which was still poised above a button on the transmitter.

The buzz-hum sounded again, reminding us all that whoever was on the other end was still awaiting our response.

I grinned out at the delegates who'd gathered for this occasion, absorbing the moment and taking in their dubious expressions as I let my finger drop firmly and satisfyingly onto the button.

I sat there for a moment, waiting for something more to happen now that I'd done my part, but all I heard was the crackling of static. It was exactly like the static we used to hear when Sabara still ruled and the loudspeakers in the street would repeat daily recorded messages, reminding us to be diligent citizens, or to report our neighbors for suspected wrongdoings, or for immigrants to report to Capitol Hall to be registered.

I could feel the delegates' eyes fall upon me while I continued to stare at the box in front of me.

"IS ANYONE THERE?"

I jumped back. The voice that boomed through the speaker on the table was altogether too loud, and instinctively my hands flew up to my ears to muffle the sound. But just as quickly I lowered them, reveling in the fact that the voice had been so clear and vibrant from so far, far away.

Wonder and awe filled me all at once, and I heard a small giggle escape my lips. "Aron?" I asked through another bubble of laughter. "Is that you?"

But I knew it was him. He'd been gone for three weeks, and the only messages we'd received had been the ones he'd sent by courier, assuring us he'd be ready on time.

I'd been terrified to trust him . . . and now tears sprang to my eyes.

Within me Sabara withdrew, as her doubt was crushed by my hope.

"IS BROOK WITH YOU?" His voice was still painfully loud, but I hardly cared.

I looked out to where several of the delegates were standing now, unable to mask their amazement at the feat we'd accomplished—bringing dead technology back to life. I searched past them, trying to find Brooklynn among them, and saw that she was already shoving her way through the crowd. Anyone who'd been in her path parted without being asked to do so. One look at her in her black leather uniform, and it was clear she was formidable, even without knowing she was commander of the armed forces.

"I'm here," she called out to the box before she'd even reached the table. Static stretched between them as I stepped aside, making a place for her as she leaned forward, spreading her palms flat over the tabletop. "What do you want?" She was

shades quieter than Aron was, and far more reserved, but I knew—I could hear it in her voice—that she'd missed him.

Brook hadn't confided in me, so I didn't know exactly what had transpired between her and Aron in the months since our return from Vannova. But even without Brook to tell me her secrets, I hadn't missed the private exchanges, the looks and discreet brushes of their hands that had passed between them whenever they'd believed no one was watching.

Aron's voice squawked over the line from halfway across the country: "I JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT IF I DON'T MAKE IT BACK . . ." I could practically hear him grinning as he spoke, despite the distance that separated us. "THAT I LOVE YOU!"

Between any other couple it might have been a tender moment, that declaration of love. And maybe it was between them as well; it was impossible to know by trying to read Brooklynn's expression. Her face remained motionless. Impassive.

I lifted my hand to my mouth and pretended to cough to cover my smile.

"DID YOU HEAR ME? IS ANYONE THERE?" Aron's voice echoed when Brook—and everyone else in the room—stayed silent for too long.

The corner of Brooklynn's mouth quirked up. "You do realize this is a simple operation to establish communication, don't you? You're not a soldier who's gone off to war or anything?" Her smile grew then, becoming more mischievous than it had been before.

She caught my expression, recognized my feigned cough, and winked at me. I hated that I so badly craved her forgiveness, that I'd missed her so much, for so long, that her simple gesture made my heart soar.

"In fact," she added, "I'd venture to say you're more like a child with a new play toy, wouldn't you?"

There was a momentary silence from the other end, and then Aron's voice returned. "OUCH, BROOK. THAT REALLY STINGS."

"You'll be fine. Trust me," she answered, just as her finger moved toward the button.

"WAIT FOR ME—" Aron started to tell her. . . .

Right before she disconnected him . . . in front of the entire room full of witnesses. And then the applause started.



I couldn't stop grinning.

It had been years since a message had been able to travel from one end of our country to the other in an instant. And today we'd done just that. I'd spoken to Aron from inside the halls of the Capitol, while he'd stood in one of our southernmost cities. It seemed like something out of a far-imagined dream.

But it wasn't, and now I couldn't keep the excitement from my face.

We hit a bump in the road and I bounced unsteadily, my head colliding with Max's shoulder. His musky scent filled my nostrils as I leaned against him, sighing dreamily.

"Can you believe it?" I asked, turning to gaze up at him, and wishing I could say something more, but coming up empty every time I tried.

"You know why I can believe it, Charlie?" He pushed a wisp of hair from my cheek. "Because you're the most amazing person I've ever known. Because you're clever and iron-willed and selfless. You can do anything you set your mind to," he whispered. "You're going to take this country and turn it on its head."

"Maybe when Xander and Niko return, we can open a line of communication with Astonia," I said, exhaling.

Just saying Niko's name made Sabara stir within me. And as always, I had to concentrate to quell her. To stop her from surfacing all the way.

"Charlie . . . "

I frowned at the caution I heard in Max's tone, my eyes searching his.

Max scrutinized me, and I watched as his expression changed from warning to worry to something softer. "I just don't want you to get your hopes up. It's already been too long since we've heard from Xander, or any of them, for that matter. We've no idea if he's even made progress. It was a long shot to begin with. Elena's not to be trusted, not after the stunt she pulled with Sebastian."

Max was right. I should never have let Xander convince me to send him in the first place. I should've denied his request and come up with another plan. There was no excuse for putting him in harm's way. But hearing my former stable master's name made me bristle all over again. Sebastian had turned out to be both a spy and a murderer, enlisted by the queen of Astonia, who we'd later discovered had been working in tandem with Brooklynn's traitorous father to assassinate me.

I'd never so much as suspected the stable master in my employ, someone who'd taught me everything I knew about horses. Who'd taught me to appreciate them, even if he hadn't broken me of my discomfort around them.

"I know," I said, shrugging and trying not to let my disappointment show. I knew I was being fanciful, entertaining such notions, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to start anew. For Ludania to live in amity with our neighbors.

I let my palm drift over the exquisite fabric of Max's suit. I wondered if I'd ever tire of the feel of fine fabrics, if I'd ever grow accustomed to that aspect of my new life. Wools woven so tightly, they could feel like silk; silks so delicate, they were sometimes transparent; and velvets, creamy fleeces, and luxurious cottons that were weightless against my skin.

His fingers, however, ignored my clothing altogether. They slipped beneath the hem of my skirt and traced a path to the back of my knee, making my pulse quicken and my breath catch. His hand moved higher, finding its way up the back of my thigh as the rhythm of our hearts beat dissonantly. He leaned in close, until our lips nearly touched and our breath fused.

Fire flared in the pit of my belly as my fingers clamped into a ball and I clutched his jacket, clinging to him for balance. My head swam in dazzling confusion. He didn't kiss me right away. He just stared at me, his eyes devouring me, and the hunger in his eyes was nearly enough to undo me completely. He willed me, with that steel gaze as firm as the fingers that stroked the flesh beneath my skirt, cupping my skin, making me quiver and ache, to close that minute distance between us.

"I . . . I . . . " Breathlessly I held on, not sure what more I could say.

And then, from the front seat, Zafir cleared his throat, and even though I knew he

couldn't see us, facing forward the way he was, I was sure he'd sensed our restlessness. Our impropriety. Zafir always seemed to know what we were up to.

"We're arriving at the palace," he said, his voice insinuating none of the censure that his simple throat-clearing had.

I glanced at Max, and hoped he could tell from my expression that this wasn't finished.

He didn't release me right away. His hand stayed where it was, hidden beneath the folds of my skirt, and he gave me one more distinct squeeze, letting me know, in no uncertain terms, that it most definitely was not.

MAX

Max had grown accustomed to watching Charlie sleep. It was his favorite pastime.

Well, one of them, anyway, he thought as he grinned at her still form in the shadows of her bedchamber.

She had no idea the way her skin sparked in her sleep. The way her dreams made it glimmer and glow and sometimes blaze, like a torch that set the room aflame.

She also had no way of knowing the way those illuminations affected him.

Even now, seeing the barest of sparks swirling far beneath the surface, almost invisible as she delved into the deepest recesses of sleep, he wanted to climb back into bed beside her. To feel that warmth. To curl against her and guard that fire so it would never go out.

That was his greatest fear. That Charlie would burn out. That this was all too much, this responsibility—the pressure put on her by those around her and the pressure she put on herself. She expected perfection. She expected to make grand, sweeping changes.

And she expected them to be immediate.

She didn't understand that change—the kind of change she intended—wasn't just about intention and resources. They would take time.

But Charlie was impatient.

She wanted to see her country in a better place, and Max admired her for that. But it was taking a toll on her. She was putting too much of herself into it, working too hard. She couldn't keep up this pace indefinitely.

Already she'd managed to abolish the work camps—abhorrent places where unwanted and neglected children had once been carted, only to then be victimized by wardens who'd tortured and abused them. She'd begun efforts to get those from the Scablands who'd served their time and no longer belonged there—and those who'd never belonged there in the first place, like Avonlea—integrated back into society. Those who still remained in the Scablands were being trained to work the resources in the wasteland regions—mining for ore and ranching.

She believed that everyone could be useful. Everyone had a place in Ludanian society, even those who'd committed crimes.

Max believed she was amazing. And fiery. And beautiful.

Yet he knew she'd been damaged by the attempts on her life—and by the fact that she'd had to kill to save herself and Angelina—despite her best efforts to hide her pain.

He crept closer, kneeling on the carpet beside her bed and sweeping a curtain of her hair from her face. He watched as her eyelids fluttered.

"I love you, Charlaina di Heyse," he whispered, saying the words as silently as his voice would allow. "I'd follow you to the ends of the world and back if you'd let me." And he meant it. From the moment he'd met her, he'd belonged to her.

Silently he got to his feet, not wanting to disturb her, and not wanting to give anyone reason to gossip about his being there in the morning.

Just as he was turning to go, her hand shot out to stop him. "You don't have to follow me anywhere." Her voice was rough with sleep. "You just have to stay." And when he hesitated, her fingers tugged at him. "I insist. You can't deny a queen, you know."

Max grinned when he saw she was already pulling the blankets back for him. And then he bowed low. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty! Your Majes—"

I almost hadn't heard the boy's voice above the clash of steel, but when I finally heard his shouts, I whirled in time to see him come crashing through the trees.

His sudden presence in the clearing startled me. We were normally alone, Zafir and I. We'd never been caught training before. No one but the two of us knew that I'd given up learning to ride horses altogether and had focused solely on learning the ins and outs of battle. I was determined to learn to fight.

More so since I'd first discovered that my country—and I, in particular—had come under threat from Queen Elena.

The boy's round face was red and blotchy, and sweat beaded along the edges of his hairline. I could see that he was panting, and his eyes widened as he caught sight of me standing there, dressed in full battle armor, wielding my sword against my own guard.

I dropped my blade, ignoring the moisture that trickled down my spine. "What is it, Gabriel?"

He glanced at me, uncertain, and then he looked to Zafir, mutely assessing the unusual situation. "It's just that . . . well, I was sent to tell you . . . there's someone coming." He clutched and unclutched his stubby fingers in front of him as he spoke.

I turned to Zafir. "Xander?" I breathed. And then to the boy. "Are they back? Are Xander and Niko here?"

This time I couldn't subdue her, and Sabara's hopes became my own. *Niko*, she whispered, his name filling every part of me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block her out.

"I—I don't know, Your Majesty." My question made Gabriel shift even more, made him fidget and stammer. "I—I was only told to fetch you."

I barely heard his last words as I was already running toward the palace. I'd dropped my sword—a cardinal sin, I knew—and left it lying in the grassy field, unsheathed, and I'd left myself unarmed. Something no real warrior would ever do.

For now at least I was not a real warrior. I was a queen, awaiting word of one of my chief advisers.

Waiting for my friend to come home.

I saw horses tied up in the courtyard and knew immediately by the banners that flapped in the breeze that they were from Astonia. I'd have recognized Queen Elena's red flag, with its crimson laurel border, anywhere. Sebastian had used that same emblem to wipe his brow one too many times, all while pretending to serve me. All while reporting back to his true queen and preparing to slit my throat.

Traitors sometimes presented themselves in the most trustworthy forms, and Sebastian had seemed about as honest and loyal as they came. Which was why I'd never suspected him. Why I'd let him get so close to me and my family.

And why I'd never trust anyone in that way again.

"They must be inside already," I called to Zafir, not waiting for a response as I raced past the horses, practically stumbling over my own feet in an effort to reach the entrance.

For two months we'd been waiting for word from Xander. It had been two months since he and Niko had taken a small party of soldiers and gone to try to reason with Elena, to try to get to the bottom of her betrayal and see if there was any way to forge a tentative peace between our two nations.

From where I stood, it seemed an impossible task, but I'd let him go because he'd been certain there had been some sort of mistake. That the Queen Elena who'd helped him when he'd fought against his grandmother would never betray him—would never betray us—in this manner. He'd been convinced she couldn't possibly have been behind the plot to have me assassinated.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary.

I slowed when I entered the main hall, the sound of my heavy boots still echoing off the walls around me. I stopped short when I realized that everyone in the room had turned to watch me.

On my way back to the palace, I'd managed to strip out of my heaviest outerwear, leaving not just my sword unattended but also my breastplate and the bulk of my armor. But I hadn't been able to wiggle out of everything, and now I stood before an audience of gaping stares, not just from the travelers who'd already been awaiting me, but also from those who knew me best, including Max and Claude, and Brook, Eden, and Avonlea. Even my parents were there, anxious for word of Xander and Niko.

I was suddenly aware of how I must have looked wearing a carapace of chain mail, even one so delicate that it was practically feather light. From their vantage point it looked as if I were wearing nothing more than long underwear and military-grade boots, the kind Brook's soldiers wore.

I avoided making eye contact with any one of them, knowing I'd have to answer for my appearance—and my actions—eventually. But for now I leveled my stare on the visitors, noting that neither Xander nor Niko was among them.

My heart sank, even as my voice found purchase. "You've come from Astonia?" I inquired as firmly as I could manage after running all that way. "You have news from your queen?"

There were four of them—messengers, one and all. My only real thought was that it was an odd number, because messengers didn't typically travel in packs.

"Yes, Your Majesty," one of the men answered, stepping forward. He bowed, as was customary in Ludania. The other three followed suit, but they were tense, bending stiffly at their waists. Then the man in front reached behind him, and one of the others carefully handed him a box the size of one of my father's bread loaves. I vaguely wondered what kind of gift Elena thought might assuage me at this point. I had no intention of being bought into submission.

He held the package out to me in both hands, his eyes never leaving it, and never

truly meeting mine.

My gaze slid over it. There was nothing remarkable about it, the box. A carton like any other. But there was something about the way the messenger held it that made my stomach tighten ever so slightly. Or maybe it was Eden, my sister's guard, that I sensed, her curiosity charging the air around us.

I reached for the box, but I hesitated, my fingertips running over the coarse papery surface as I considered what might be inside. I tried to gain the messenger's attention, to find his eyes, but they remained where they were, fixed on the package. The other three remained where they were too, still entirely too rigid, positioned behind him.

I scanned the room now, looking to Max, whose intense gaze was directed to Zafir, and I could practically hear Max willing the guard to move closer to me, even though I could already feel Zafir's breath at the back of my neck. Brook's scowl was equally severe, although she refused to meet my eyes for too long.

Deep within me Sabara's voice whispered up from the chasm of darkness where she preferred to dwell. Don't trust them, she warned. Be cautious, Charlaina.

I wasn't sure how much more cautious I could be, but the box beneath my fingertips beckoned me, and a roomful of people waited to see what was inside.

Taking the box from his grasp, I held my breath as I lifted the lid.

From inside, crisp purple flowers tumbled free, spilling onto the toes of my boots. Their fruity scent was so overpowering that I was startled by it.

I glanced questioningly at the messenger, but his face remained impassive.

When I looked into the box full of brittle blossoms once more, I noticed there was something hidden there, just beneath the layer of withered blooms. Something that made my throat squeeze and my stomach lurch, despite the fact that I couldn't quite see past the layers of crumpled petals.

Zafir had noticed it too, and he snatched the box from my hands without asking my permission. He dropped to his knees as he reached inside, thrusting the flowers aside, until I heard his breath catch. I didn't wait for him to give me the go-ahead. I peered over his shoulder to see what it was that he was looking at.

I wished I hadn't.

I gasped and stumbled, falling backward and blinking too hard. I wished I'd never seen what I had, because I couldn't take it back. I couldn't undo what my eyes had just witnessed. I wasn't sure whether it was tears or fury that clouded my vision. My throat felt like it was closing, and all I could see, even when I closed my eyes, was what was in the box. All I could imagine—maybe forever all I would ever imagine—was that hand . . . the severed hand that Queen Elena had sent to me.

It wasn't until Max was there, pulling me back to my feet, that I recalled I wasn't alone. And then I looked up into his face and remembered something else. It wasn't just me who would be damaged by the dismembered limb.

If Max saw it . . . then he'd know who it belonged to. . . .

It was the scars that had given it away. Even as decayed as the hand was, I had glimpsed the intricate lacework of pale scars tracing the withered skin that outlined the knuckles. Scars I would've recognized anywhere.

Scars belonging to Xander.

I clung to Max, searching his eyes and trying to make my lips move. I struggled to