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PART ONE

In this, the 628th year of our Unification, it is hereby recorded that Aretia has been burned by dragon in accordance with the Treaty ending the separatist movement. Those who fled, survived, and those who did not remain entombed in her ruins.

—PUBLIC NOTICE 628.85

TRANSCRIBED BY CERELLA NIELWART



CHAPTER ONE

Revolution tastes oddly . . . sweet.

I stare at my older brother across a scarred wooden table in the enormous, busy kitchen of the fortress of Aretia and chew the honeyed biscuit he put on my plate. Damn, that's good. Really good.

Maybe it's just that I haven't eaten in three days, since a not-so-mythological being stabbed me in the side with a poisoned blade that should have killed me. It *would* have killed me if it hadn't been for Brennan, who won't stop smiling as I chew.

This might go down as the most surreal experience of my life. Brennan is alive. Venin, dark wielders I'd thought only existed in fables, are real. Brennan is alive. Aretia still stands, even though it was scorched after the Tyrrish rebellion six years ago. Brennan is *alive*. I have a new, three-inch scar on my abdomen, but I didn't die. Brennan. Is. Alive.

"The biscuits are good, right?" he asks, snagging one from the platter between us. "Kind of remind me of the ones that cook used to make when we were stationed in Calldyr, remember?"

I stare and chew.

He's just so . . . him. And yet he looks different from what I remember. His brownish-red curls are cropped close to his skull instead of waving over his forehead, and there's no lingering softness in the angles of his face, which now has tiny lines at the edges of his eyes. But that smile? Those eyes? It's really him.

And his one condition being me eating something before he takes me to my dragons? It's the most Brennan move ever.

Not that Tairn ever waits for permission, which means—

"I, too, think you need to eat something." Tairn's low, arrogant voice fills my head.

"Yeah, yeah," I reply in kind, mentally reaching out for Andarna again as one of the kitchen workers hurries by, offering a quick smile to Brennan.

There's no response from Andarna, but I can feel the shimmering bond between us, though it's no longer golden like her scales. I can't quite get a mental picture, but my brain is still a little groggy. She's sleeping again, which isn't odd after she uses up all her energy to stop time, and after what happened in Resson, she probably needs to sleep for the next week or so.

"You've barely said a word, you know." Brennan tilts his head just like he used to when he was trying to solve a problem. "It's kind of creepy."

"Watching me eat is creepy," I counter after I swallow, my voice still a little hoarse.

"And?" He shrugs shamelessly, a dimple flashing in his cheek when he grins. It's the only boyish thing left about him. "A few days ago, I was pretty sure I'd never get to watch you do, well, *anything* again." He takes a huge bite. Guess his appetite is still the same, which is oddly comforting. "You're welcome, by the way, for the mending. Consider it a twenty-first-birthday present."

"Thank you." That's right. I slept right through my birthday. And I'm sure my lying in bed on the brink of death was more than enough drama for everyone in this castle, house, whatever it's called.

Xaden's cousin, Bodhi, strides into the kitchen, dressed in uniform, his arm in a sling and his cloud of black curls freshly trimmed.

"Lieutenant Colonel Aisereigh," Bodhi says, handing a folded missive to Brennan. "This just came in from Basgiath. The rider will be here until tonight if you want to reply." He offers me a smile, and I'm struck again at how closely he resembles a softer version of Xaden. With a nod to my brother, he turns and leaves.

Basgiath? Another rider here? How many are there? Exactly how big is this revolution?

Questions fire off in my head faster than I can find my tongue. "Wait. You're a lieutenant colonel? And who is Aisereigh?" I ask. Yeah, because *that* is the most important inquiry to make.

"I had to change my last name for obvious reasons." He glances at me and unfolds the missive, breaking a blue wax seal. "And you'd be amazed at how fast you get promoted when everyone above you continues to die," he says, then reads the letter and curses, shoving it into his pocket. "I have to go meet with the Assembly now, but finish your biscuits and I'll meet you in the hall in half an hour and take you to your dragons." All traces of the dimple, of the laughing older brother are gone, and in their place is a man I barely recognize, an officer I don't know. Brennan may as well be a stranger.

Without waiting for me to respond, he scrapes his chair back and strides out of the kitchen.

Sipping my milk, I stare at the empty space my brother left across from me, chair still pulled out from the table as though he might return at any moment. I swallow the remaining biscuit stuck in the back of my throat and lift my chin, determined not to ever sit and wait on my brother to return again.

I push up from the table and head after him, out of the kitchen and down the long hall. He must have been in a hurry, because I can't see him anywhere.

The intricate carpet muffles my footsteps along the wide, high-arched hallway as I come to— *Whoa*. The sweeping, polished double staircases with their detailed banisters rise three—no, four—more floors above me.

I'd been too focused on my brother to pay attention earlier, but

now I blatantly gawk at the architecture of the enormous space. Each landing is slightly offset from the one below, as though the staircase climbs toward the very mountain this fortress is carved into. The morning light streams in from dozens of small windows that provide the only decoration on the five-story wall above the massive double doors of the fortress's entrance. They seem to form a pattern, but I'm too close to see the whole of it.

There's no perspective, which pretty much feels like a metaphor for my entire life right now.

Two guards watch every step I take but make no move to stop me when I pass by. At least that means I'm not a prisoner.

I continue to stride through the main hall of the house, eventually picking up the sound of voices from a room across the way, where one of two large, ornate doors is pitched open. As I approach, I immediately recognize Brennan's voice, and my chest tightens at the familiar timbre.

"That's not going to work." Brennan's deep voice echoes. "Next suggestion."

I make it through the massive foyer, ignoring what look to be two other wings off to the left and right. This place is astounding. Half palace, half home, but entirely a fortress. The thick stone walls are what saved it from its supposed demise six years ago. From what I've read, Riorson House has never been breached by any army, even during the three sieges that I know of.

Stone doesn't burn. That's what Xaden told me. The city—now reduced to a town—has been silently, covertly rebuilding for years right under General Melgren's nose. The relics, magical marks the children of the executed rebellion officers carry, somehow mask them from Melgren's signet when they're in groups of three or more. He can't see the outcome of any battle they're present for, so he's never been able to "see" them organizing to fight here.

There are certain aspects of Riorson House, from its defensible position carved into the mountainside to its cobblestone floors and steel-enforced double doors in the entryway, that remind me of Basgiath, the war college I've called home since my mother was stationed there as its commanding general. But that's where the similarities end. There's actual art on the walls here, not just busts of war

heroes displayed on stands, and I'm pretty sure that's an authentic Poromish tapestry hanging across the hall from where Bodhi and Imogen stand in the open doorway.

Imogen puts her finger to her lips, then motions at me to join in the empty place between her and Bodhi. I take it, noticing Imogen's half-shaved hair has been recently dyed a brighter pink while I've been resting. Clearly she's comfortable here. Bodhi, too. The only signs that either has been in a battle are the sling cradling Bodhi's fractured arm and a split in Imogen's lip.

"Someone has to state the obvious," an older man with an eyepatch and a hawkish nose says from the far end of a table that consumes the length of the two-story room. Tufts of thinning gray hair frame the deep lines in his lightly tanned, weathered skin, his jowls hanging down like a wildebeest. He leans back in his chair, placing a thick hand on his rounded belly.

The table could easily accommodate thirty people, but only five sit along one side, all dressed in rider black, perched slightly ahead of the door, at an angle where they'd have to turn fully to see us—which they don't. Brennan paces in front of the table but not at an angle he can easily spot us, either.

My heart lurches into my throat, and I realize it's going to take some time to get used to seeing Brennan alive. He's somehow exactly the same as I remember—and yet different. But here he is—living, breathing, currently glaring at a map of the Continent on the long wall, the map's size only rivaled by the one in the Battle Brief lecture hall at Basgiath.

And standing in front of that map, one arm leaning against a massive chair as he stares down the table at its occupants, is Xaden.

He looks good, even with bruises marring the tawny-brown skin under his eyes from lack of sleep. The high slopes of his cheeks, the dark eyes that usually soften whenever they meet mine, the scar that bisects his brow and ends beneath his eye, the swirling, shimmering relic that ends at his jaw, and the carved lines of the mouth I know as well as my own all add up to make him physically fucking perfect to me, and that's just his face. His body? Somehow even better, and the way he uses it when he has me in his arms—

Nope. I shake my head and cut off my thoughts right there. Xaden may be gorgeous, and powerful, and terrifyingly lethal—which shouldn't be the turn-on it is—but I can't trust him to tell me the truth about . . . well, anything. Which really *hurts*, considering how pathetically in love with him I am.

"And what is the obvious thing you need to state, Major Ferris?" Xaden asks, his tone completely, utterly bored.

"It's an Assembly meeting," Bodhi whispers to me. "Only a quorum of five is required to call a vote, since all seven are almost never here at one time, and four votes carry a motion."

I file that information away. "Are we allowed to listen?"

"Meetings are open to whoever wants to attend," Imogen replies just as quietly.

"And we're attending . . . in the hallway?" I ask.

"Yes," Imogen answers with no other explanation.

"Returning is the only option," Hawk Nose continues. "Not doing so risks everything we're building here. Search patrols will come, and we don't have enough riders—"

"It's a little hard to recruit while trying to stay undetectable," a petite woman with glossy black hair like a raven counters, the amber skin at the corners of her eyes crinkling as she glares down the table at the older man.

"Let's not get off topic, Trissa," Brennan says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Our father's nose. Their resemblance is uncanny.

"No point increasing our numbers without a working forge to arm them with weapons." Hawk Nose's voice rises above the others. "We're still short a luminary, if you haven't noticed."

"And where are we in negotiations with Viscount Tecarus for his?" a large man asks in a calm, rumbling voice, his ebony hand tugging at his thick silver beard.

Viscount Tecarus? That isn't a noble family in any Navarrian records. We don't even have viscounts in our aristocracy.

"Still working on a diplomatic solution," Brennan answers.

"There's no solution. Tecarus isn't over the insult you delivered last summer." An older woman built like a battle-ax locks her gaze on Xaden, her blond hair brushing just past her square alabaster chin.

"I told you, the viscount was never going to give it to us in the first place," Xaden replies. "The man only *collects* things. He does not *trade* them."

"Well, he's definitely not going to *trade* with us now," she retorts, her gaze narrowing. "Especially if you won't even contemplate his latest offer."

"He can fuck right off with his *offer*." Xaden's voice is calm, but his eyes have a hard edge that dares anyone at the table to disagree. As if showing these people they aren't worth his time, he steps around the arm of the massive chair facing them and settles into it, stretching his long legs and resting his arms on the velvet armrests—like he doesn't have a care in the world.

The quiet that falls on the room is telling. Xaden commands as much respect from the Assembly of this revolution as he does at Basgiath. I don't recognize any of the other riders besides Brennan, but I'd bet Xaden is the most powerful in the room, given their silence.

"*For now*," Tairn reminds me with the arrogance only a hundred years of being one of the most formidable battle dragons on the Continent can provide. "*Instruct the humans to bring you up to the valley once the politics are finished.*"

"There had better be a solution. If we can't supply the drifts with enough weaponry to really fight in the next year, the tide will shift too far to ever hope of holding the venin advance at bay," Silver Beard notes. "This all will have been for nothing."

My stomach pitches. A year? We're *that* close to losing a war I knew nothing about a few days ago?

"As I said, I'm working on a diplomatic solution for the luminary"—Brennan's tone sharpens—"and we're so wildly off topic I'm not sure this is the same meeting."

"I vote we take Basgiath's luminary," Battle-Ax suggests. "If we're that close to losing this war, there's no other option."

Xaden shoots Brennan a look that I can't decipher, and I breathe deeply as it hits me—he probably knows my own brother better than I do.

And he kept him from me. Of all the secrets he hid, that's the one I can't quite swallow.

"And what would you have done with the knowledge had he shared it?" Tairn asks.

"Stop bringing logic into an emotional argument." I fold my arms across my chest. It's my heart that won't fully let my head forgive Xaden.

"We've been over that," Brennan says with finality. "If we take Basgiath's forging device, Navarre can't replenish their stores at the outposts. Countless civilians will die if those wards fall. Do any of you want to be responsible for that?"

Silence reigns.

"Then we agree," Hawk Nose says. "Until we can supply the drifts, the cadets *have* to return."

Oh.

"They're talking about us," I whisper. That's why we're standing out of their direct sight.

Bodhi nods.

"You're uncharacteristically quiet, Suri," Brennan notes, glancing at the wide-shouldered brunette with olive skin and a single streak of silver in her hair, her nose twitching like a fox, sitting next to him.

"I say we send all but the two." Her nonchalance skates a chill down my spine as she drums her bony fingers on the table, a giant emerald ring catching the light. "Six cadets can lie as well as eight."

Eight.

Xaden, Garrick, Bodhi, Imogen, three marked ones I'd never gotten a chance to know before we were thrown into battle, and . . . me.

Nausea rises like a tide. The War Games. We're supposed to be finishing the last competition of the year between the wings of the Riders Quadrant at Basgiath, and instead, we entered deadly battle with an enemy I'd thought were only folklore last week, and now we're . . . well, we're here, in a city that isn't supposed to exist.

But not all of us.

My throat tightens, and I blink back the burn in my eyes. Soleil and Liam didn't survive.

Liam. Blond hair and sky-blue eyes fill my memory, and pain erupts behind my ribs. His boisterous laugh. His quick smile. His loyalty and kindness. It's all gone. *He's gone.*

All because he promised Xaden he'd guard me.

"None of the eight are expendable, Suri." Silver Beard leans on the back two legs of his chair and examines the map behind Xaden.

"What do you propose, Felix?" Suri counters. "Running our own war college with all our spare time? Most of them haven't finished their education. They're of no use to us yet."

"As if any of you has a say in if we return," Xaden interrupts, earning everyone's attention. "We will take the advice of the Assembly, but it will be taken as only that—*advice.*"

"We cannot afford to risk your life—" Suri argues.

"My life is equal to any of theirs." Xaden gestures toward us.

Brennan's gaze meets mine, then widens.

Each head in the room turns toward us, and I fight the instinct to retreat as almost every set of eyes narrows on me.

Who do they see? Liliith's daughter? Or Brennan's sister?

I lift my chin because I'm both . . . and I feel like neither.

"Not every life," Suri says as she looks straight at me. *Ouch.* "How could you have stood there and let her overhear the conversation of the Assembly?"

"If you didn't want her to hear, you should have closed the door," Bodhi responds, stepping into the room.

"She cannot be trusted!" Anger might color her cheeks, but that's fear in Suri's eyes.

"Xaden has already taken responsibility for her." Imogen sidesteps, moving slightly closer to me. "As brutal of a custom as it may be."

My gaze whips to meet Xaden's. What the hell is she talking about?

"I still don't understand that particular decision," Hawk Nose adds.

"Decision was simple. She's worth a dozen of me," Xaden says, and my breath catches at the intensity in his eyes. If I didn't know better, I'd think he means it. "And I'm not talking about her signet. I would have told her everything discussed here anyway, so an open door is a moot point."

A spark of hope flares to life in my chest. Maybe he really is done keeping secrets.

"She's General Sorrengail's daughter," Battle-Ax points out, frustration clear in her voice.