

# Master, Apprentice

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## Prelude

He walked in to find her doubled up on the floor next to the cot she usually occupied when she was there. "I was wondering when you would arrive."

"Why? Do I owe you something that has slipped my mind?" her tones were full of the pain she felt, but were otherwise playful.

"Respect, caution, avoidance of betrayal, but I do not think you have forgotten any of that. No. What I want from you is information." The elderly man sat with eyes apparently unseeing the agony of the woman on the floor. She remained silent, clutching her abdomen.

She was half his age. Her hair was a deep red, quite different from his graying black. Her eyes, a bright – almost luminescent – blue, were a startling difference from his dark brown. After a pause he said, "Not going to offer?"

"What information do you want, Revenge? I'm not exactly in a good position to refuse, am I?" she sounded annoyed at the question, but said nothing more.

"First, you took this contract on Captain Tane after I advised you against said contract. Then, after studying, planning, and conspiring, you led him away from the trap that you laid for him. After that, you allowed yourself to be imprisoned. Upon escaping, you *made sure* they knew who you were. Why?" He watched her unblinking while he spoke. Something in her countenance changed at his questioning.

Through gritted teeth she said, "I have my reasons, just as you have for the things you do." *They are more similar than you know this time...*

"Do you know that the Counsel of Five has put out a contract on you?" Revenge sounded as though he were carrying on light conversation. She nodded. "Sylvia, do you realize what they intend to do to you should you be brought in alive – Yes, that is the preference. It has been paid, up front, and you are only worth half the price if you are dead upon arrival."

"I am aware of the situation. Would you *please* back off? I know Captain Tane is honorable, on the side of this war that *needs* to win, and that I should have listened to you in the first place when you told me that if anything I should be working to aid him, not selling my services to the highest bidder no matter the moral of the job. *I know!* But right now what I need is a dark, quiet place to spend the next few days while I finish this cycle and formulate a plan!" She sounded as though she would have very much liked to strike out at the man who still sat in the chair.

"Very well, Celka, I will have a meal prepared when you can eat again," he remarked calmly as he rose to leave.

"DON'T call me that! It was what Venom called me so as not to reveal my name. I expect you to call me by the name you gave me."

Revenge walked over to Sylvia, helped her onto the cot and said gently, "Something you did for yourself when you gave Tane the name *Sylvia*. How do you plan to keep that a secret?"

"I made a mistake, but the general is so apprehensive about letting me go that he has had most of the documents pertaining to me destroyed. You know how I feel about Venom. Is it such a difficult request that you not refer to me in the same manner he did?" Her voice, too, had lost its edge.

Within the week, she was gone again.

## Chapter 1

### The Contract

Captain Tane unrolled the parchment that had been handed to him by the messenger who had both arrived and departed that morning. He was a tall man, taller than most of the men in his company, but not by much. His sandy blonde hair was common for the people of this region, but his green eyes stood out a little. His father's had been hazel, like most of the Tane family who trained the horses at Chadwick manor. He had his mother's green eyes. He thought about his parents for a few moments, strengthening his resolve, before forcing himself to return to the matter at hand.

He was determined to find useful information in the general's vague note. He had much more to think about now than the war and the identity of the Counsel of Five...

This just didn't fit with the reports he had received from his men or what he had seen himself. She had been docile - almost subdued - when he sent her away. She seemed ... he wasn't sure. *Is this part of some plan of hers?* His experience was with his men, not women. He could read the emotions in the camp easily, but she remained a mystery. Ian was still in the village delivering the letters Captain Tane had managed to finish to the families of his fallen soldiers, so he could not be consulted with for a few hours.

Everything he had heard of the assassin known as Retribution said she would have killed him if she had gotten anywhere near him. It was common knowledge that she had accepted a contract on him, but no one really knew from whom or why. The spy he imprisoned was alone with him for hours - sobbing on his shoulder. *Wouldn't the assassin have fought to stay out of prison? My reports said that Sylvia had been 'more like a polite, gracious guest' than a prisoner until she started her menstrual cycle, then she had been in so much pain that she had to be carried the rest of the way.*

He re-read the scroll again.

*The spy you imprisoned by the name of Sylvia has been revealed to be the notorious assassin Retribution.*

*She has escaped.*

This just wasn't adding up. It had been nine weeks since she had left his camp as a prisoner with a guard consisting of four soldiers. He needed more details and would have to write to the general asking for them.

Captain Tane threw down his quill. There was so much noise coming from the dining room that he could not concentrate on the letter he was supposed to be writing. Why were his men not doing as they had been told and set up to spar and continue training outside? It sounded as though half of the camp had come back in and started to throw a party. He rose from the chair at the table he was using as a desk and walked out of the room.

Nothing could have prepared him for the scene before his eyes as he walked into the hall. There were around fifteen of his finest officers grouped around a table shouting and hooting at whatever was on the table in the center. When they parted slightly, he was able to see that the table was occupied by the same spy he had sent to prison two months prior and had just received news that morning was the assassin Retribution herself! There she sat laughing and giggling like the innocent she had portrayed herself as at her first appearance.

"What are you doing here?" he roared when he saw her. His men parted so that he might talk to her, but they had also loosened their weapons.

"Why Captain, how nice to see you again," she said in her silkiest tone.

"What are your intentions here!?"

"I assure you that my intentions are honorable, Captain." He caught the glint of silver that meant she was using the silver tongue that he had identified she possessed at their last meeting. When it came to the use or ability to resist the use of a silver tongue, knowledge that it was being used was everything. Without knowledge, there was no way to escape from the power it could exert over the mind. This time it would not work on him. He was aware of it.

"My definition of honor and yours are far from the same," he said through gritted teeth as he drew his blade – his men followed suit. He turned to them and asked, "What is the meaning of this?"

"We cannot allow you to harm the innocent this war is being fought to protect, Sir," was the reply from one of the nearest soldiers to him.

He looked closely at their faces and back at hers. There was something wrong. She had bewitched them! *There is no way I am giving her the satisfaction of watching my own men kill me or me turn on them! If she intends me to be dead today, she will have to do it herself!* "You, in my office, NOW!" He pointed at her with the sword that was still in his hand.

His men closed in around her and she spoke to them as she swung her bare feet off of the table. "It's okay, boys. I *want* to talk to the captain." They sheathed their weapons and sat back down.

He grabbed her by the arm and almost dragged her into the room he was using for an office. "Explain yourself!" he shouted at her when he had closed the door.

"What part would you have me explain?" She was looking up at him through long lashes, her head tilted ever so slightly down. The long locks of her golden hair were falling around her shoulders. He refused to allow himself to dwell on her appearance.

"How, exactly, did you escape prison and why have you returned?" he asked angrily. He leaned on the table as she began to speak.

"My guard brought the general to me telling him that I did not belong in a prison. The general visited me several times and decided that the guard had been correct: I did not belong as a prisoner of war and that even you could make a mistake. He told me not to return to you and ordered me escorted from the prison on nothing but his own judgment that I was only guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You can charm the deaf now?!"

"No. The first guard was deaf, but not blind and not mute. I was kind to him. He talked to the general about me and the general came to calm his concerns. I could charm the first to a point, but the general was even easier and convinced quickly. I was on my way in a week's time." She held her patient tones so well that Captain Tane had no idea she was irritated with him.

"Again I must ask you why you are here if the general told you to stay away from me. You would be dead already if you had not charmed my men into thinking this war was being fought just to protect you!" The evidence of his patience growing thin was all over his face and in his voice. The only thing keeping her alive was the fact that his men were still under her spell. He did not want any of them dead – and he didn't think he could break this. She would have to relinquish them.

"That is why I did that. I am here to save your armies once again."

"My armies do not need you to save them. Last time you led us away from victory, remember? That is when I found out you were a spy and threw you in prison." He said with such venom she did not know if even the fact that the men were still enchanted would spare her life this time.

"As soon as I was out of that prison, I was contacted. Some of my peers thought that I had misunderstood the instructions I had been given that day. Some of them thought that I was just showing the fact I was a stupid female and should not have been entrusted with that mission or any other. But my employers were not so misled. They knew that I took you away from the fighting on purpose and are after blood."

"Wait a minute. You are going to have to explain yourself in a little more detail." His voice had a margin of curiosity in it now, and just a shade less animosity.

"You were walking into a trap that would have wiped out your entire army and you would have been the last and slowest to die. I had been tracking and spying on you for months and had set it up. That night I was to prove you were not as honorable as everyone thinks and then you would lead the men into the trap that would kill them. You would be sent back to your people broken, barely alive, and doubted. The rumors would start that you knew it was a trap and tried to abandon your men. It would eventually drive you to your death, but first it would kill your spirit and military success." She could tell by the look on his face that he was starting to believe her and that he was getting angrier. She dropped her gaze to her hands for fear her eyes would give her heart away, "I could not carry out that mission, so I led your men to believe that I was a girlfriend you had left behind when you went to war who could not take it anymore and must see you. Told them it would be most unkind to interrupt us and went into the tent. When I didn't come out until the next morning, they were free to draw their own conclusions."

"You let the men believe that I slept with you that night while you led me to think you were sent from a village in distress and cried for hours?!"

"It was the only thing I could think of that would get you and your army out of there in time. If they thought for a second the mission was not going as planned, they would have marched on your camp in the night when you thought they were still leagues away and you were unprepared." *Is that a note of pleading? Why is she telling me this now? How can I believe this is true? I trusted her before and it led to ... Was that the disaster I had thought it to be?*

"And you expect me to just believe you now that your intentions are honorable and let you have the run of the camp?"

"No. I expect you to follow me into battle." She looked straight into his eyes when she said it and he nearly fell off the desk he was leaning against. How could anyone be that audacious?

"How do I know you are not using your charms to convince me that you are not deceiving me yet again?" he countered.

"There is no way to show you without a doubt, but if I could do anything to gain your trust it would be this" and she pulled a glowing blue dagger from its hidden sheath and handed it to him. He immediately knew it to be Veritás, Retribution's enchanted blade. She then put her hand over his and placed her other on the blade. As quickly as lightning, she had sliced her hand and said, "I bind myself to you for the duration of this contract. I will give my life to save yours and to avenge it if I cannot prevent your demise."

"That is the first part of the binding of an apprentice to the master. I have not agreed to let you live, let alone train you in anything!"

"That is also an Oath of Truth."

"What significance is that supposed to have?"

"The blade was a gift to me, enchanted by the same wizard who enhanced my voice. If I break my Oath, it will pierce my heart."

"And if I refuse to take you on?"

"Then I am bound to follow and do all I can from the shadows." She said, but her voice was not as strong as it had been until now and she hoped he did not call her bluff. If he refused at this point, they all might be dead by morning.

"And what is this 'contract' you spoke of?"

"Let me stay on as your new apprentice and I will lead you to victory against your enemy without ever letting on that you are being guided to their weaknesses."

"What's in it for you?"

"I told you my life is in danger. They know I am out of prison and think that I am trying to return to fulfill my contract to spare myself from the fate they have in store. They don't know what I have learned in that place or that I can look the part of a soldier. To be the apprentice you took on last week when they saw me as myself after that would be a perfect cover. As long as you are alive, my life will also be safe. But we must move quickly. We need to move camp this night, before day break."

"You told my men that I took on an apprentice and you want me to move the whole camp by morning?!" He barely believed he had heard correctly.

"You will find that your men are already moving and yes, I did let them believe you had taken an apprentice. There is one other thing. You need not tell anyone who I really am."

"Like I would. They would think I have lost my mind and start to question my leadership, but why do you say that?"

"There are many other spies among your men and I don't know them all. If I told you the ones I do know, they would know what I'm doing immediately and they would change their strategy. Right now they think they are toying with me by letting me believe I can win back their favor until they can catch me."

"I will go along with your plan for now, but if you show the slightest sign that this is fraudulent, I will put that dagger through your heart myself. Release my men before you morph into a man and meet me outside for practice in one hour."

As she rose to leave, she looked back at the man whose world she had rocked with the news she had delivered and felt saddened by the sight of such a strong person brought to a position like this. "You might find comfort in the

knowledge that Ian is more faithful to you than to his wife." He looked up sharply. She was still looking at him and said softly, "I know. We tried."

"Ian would sooner castrate himself than step out on his wife. How did you test that?"

She smiled. "I promised him I would never give away the details," she replied and stepped silently out of the room.

## Chapter 2

### Victor

In exactly an hour, the captain was on the field talking to some of the men who had gathered around to see the sparring match when a young man wearing studded leather armor walked up, saluted him, and said, "Victor Sill Young reporting as ordered, Sir." The other soldiers walked off the field instantly assuming that Victor was the apprentice the captain had taken and whispering to each other that this young boy must have exceptional skill for the captain to take him after ten years of not taking an apprentice at all.

The captain looked closely at this boy. Close enough that their noses were almost touching then asked in a low voice, "Sylvia?" The soldier only gave a slight smile in return. Then, so that everyone could hear, "Choose your weapon from the rack."

Victor walked over to the rack and chose a sword heavier than was good for his size and longer than he could handle well. He then walked back to the captain and stood, sword into the ground, hands on the pommel, facing the captain. The captain sized him up, took a step backward and said, "Engage".

The match went quickly, but longer than most master/apprentice first matches go. Victor was to anyone who knew what they were looking for deliberately missing strikes and blocks - even with a weapon chosen to be clumsy. Once, he tripped himself and landed face first in a mud puddle. When it was over, the captain took Victor back to his room to patch him up as was the captain's tradition. He always tended the medical needs of his apprentices personally.

When they arrived at the room where the captain would mend Victor's wounds, he rounded on him. "I can understand why you were making wide strikes and fouling up your blocks, but why did you throw your face into the mud?"

"For someone who was paying so much attention, I am surprised you did not notice that I was not breaking a sweat. Someone else might not have been so unobservant."

The captain said nothing in reply, just nodded and tended the small, superficial scraps Victor had received during the match making sure to put on more bandages than necessary to make it appear that he had been hurt worse than he had.

The men talked amongst themselves about how well Victor seemed to do and what the captain's former apprentices were rumored to be now. The captain had only ever taken on two apprentices. The first was before his troops remembered and the other was already in his service when he was assigned to these troops. They were both said to be military leaders equal to the captain. Only Ian among the troops had ever seen the captain's first match against one of his apprentices before.

Ian waited a respectful amount of time, then followed to the captain's room. Victor was bandaged and the two of them were talking. The door was slightly ajar, so Ian stepped in. "Why do you deliberately allow yourself to be wounded?" He was talking to Victor.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard what I said," replied Ian accusingly. "Why do you allow yourself to be wounded? And why do you make such bogus moves with a weapon you know is not suited to you?" He was eyeing Victor suspiciously as he spoke and did not change his gaze until the captain broke in.

"You have caught us, Ian, but don't blow our cover. Victor has had extensive training," the captain said sounding like a kid caught in the cookie jar. Ian looked from the captain back to Victor.

"Yes, Ian, I have been trained and did that for the benefit of the men. For reasons of mutual benefit that cannot now be disclosed, I cannot join your army but need to run with it for the time being." Victor said it with ultimate calm and the captain could tell he added a little boost with that silver tongue. *Thank God, Captain thought, I couldn't bear to lie to Ian but couldn't risk him saying anything either. I thought we were caught already!*

Ian looking rather confused and somewhat concerned turned back at the captain and said, "I just have one more question. Does he outrank you?"

"No. I am still the ranking officer here, Ian," came the captain's reply as he tried to hold in his laughter. Ian smiled weakly and left. He had no idea what his captain was doing, but trusted him and his thoughts returned to getting the camp mobile.

When Ian was out of earshot, the captain turned to Victor and said sternly, "Now it is my turn to ask questions. With skill like that, the team I sent to escort you to prison would have been easy work for you. Why did you allow yourself to be imprisoned?"

"If I had simply killed your men, you would have put the entire army on alert, making it nearly impossible for me to get into your camp. And you would have killed me on sight because I would not have been able to entrance the men. If I had gotten past all of that, I would have been hard pressed to convince you that I am your ally. It was much easier and safer to go to prison and be released so I could come back." She barely looked at him while she spoke. She was putting her boots back on and lacing them up. When she was finished, she met his eyes and said rather more seriously, "For being such a skilled strategist, I thought you would have seen that a leagues away."

"My strategies are for honest battles, fighting, and war, not backstabbing and deceit and not dealing with a disgruntled female." He could tell as soon as he had said it that if it weren't for the need of disguise, she would have challenged him then and there. He had been given reason to believe that her speed and agility would allow her to take him apart even with the detriment of the bandages and was grateful she could not right then. "I mean no offence." He added quickly.

"Well," came the very cool reply, "you had better learn how to deal with a deceitful, backstabbing, strategy using enemy or not even my help will win you this war and we will both die long and painful deaths." The stare he was being given made him wonder how many of her attributes had been enhanced by that wizard. "Did you have another question?" The tone was now airy and she removed her piercing stare to look over the bandages.

"This guise is quite complete, is that also magically enhanced or exclusively your work?"

Victor looked up from checking the bandages and smiled. For the first time, the captain could see that Victor was indeed Sylvia in a man's disguise. "You mean where have I hidden my more feminine attributes?" it was definitely her voice that answered. "Looks can be very deceiving, my good captain." Her voice was as smooth as silk. He found himself wanting to pull off the disguise and find out for himself...then he realized what he was thinking and announced that they must ready themselves for departure.

"I have one question first," she said looking at him. It made him wonder what she was planning now. "The great black stallion tied apart from the other horses, why is it that I have seen no one ride it and your men seem afraid to go near him?"

He was relieved at the change of subject, "He grudgingly allows people near him to feed him. Any who try to saddle him end up in need of medical care."

She smiled. "I can ride him."

"I thought you came to me because you wanted to remain alive," the captain laughed.

"Assign him to me as your apprentice's first task. I can and will ride him." Her unyielding confidence made him give in. It would be no great loss if she got herself killed because she was stubborn. Besides, he was insanely curious.

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That evening, everything was packed and the camp was moving. The captain had ordered them to be as quiet as possible, so they carried few torches and set up camp a few miles away in the dark. No one knew why they had had to move to so close a location so quietly all of a sudden. As the tent was set up and the captain's cot put into it, a pallet was laid on the ground next to the cot for Victor. "What are you doing?" the captain asked as Victor had just finished.

"Is it not the custom for the apprentice to sleep at the side of the master when they are in the field?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't mind breaking the rules in this instance."

"Would that not look suspicious? Besides, this is the safest place to be *and* I will sleep with my clothes on."

"I should hope you would!" came the sharp reply, but the look on his face made it clear that he was relieved to hear that she would be keeping up the guise even at night. He left to check on the camp before anything else could be said.

He had circled the camp three times before Ian caught up and interrupted him. "What's on your mind captain?"

The captain jumped and had his hand on his sword hilt before he realized who had spoken. "What? Nothing."

"Captain, you have been around the camp three times and yet have not seen the fact that everything is ahead of schedule. The men are settling down for the evening meal already."

"I just needed some air."

Ian only looked at him. He knew the captain better than anyone and could tell something wasn't right. "Your new apprentice." It was more a statement than a question, but he wanted confirmation of his suspicions.

"Caught, as usual, Ian. He brought news to me I did not want to hear. We are facing a great danger and I am concerned if we are ready." *It's true*, he told himself, *I am concerned about the danger we are facing*.

"Captain, the men are loyal to you. They would follow you to their deaths if it came to that. You are a great warrior and we all believe you can defeat any enemy we face." Ian put his hand on the shoulder of his friend, "Get some rest, you look terrible."

The captain smiled and turned back toward his tent. If only Ian knew who would be sleeping on the ground next to his cot that night he would have understood why his captain looked so bad.

Upon his return to his tent, he was greeted with a set table and poured wine. He did not even ask why it had been done because the reply would be the same as for the pallet on the ground. He did not think he could stand to be told again of the customs. They ate and Victor cleaned up without another word. Then they both lay down. The captain, knowing who lay a few feet away and thinking of everything that had transpired that day, did not sleep well. Instead he lay there wondering why she was there, if she was sincere, and what they were going to do to fight an enemy they obviously did not know.

When he awoke the next day, Victor was setting the breakfast table. He had hoped that somehow it had all been an incredibly bad dream.

"Good morning, Sir. Are you ready for your breakfast?"

"How did you know I was awake? You have your back to me and I had not moved or made a sound," said the captain as he rose and washed his face and hands.

"Your breathing pattern changed," said Victor flatly as he continued to set the table. "Here comes Ian with the morning reports."

"I suppose you can hear his breathing, too?"

"No. His footsteps. He is anxious about something." Just as Victor had finished saying it, Ian walked in and announced that he had the morning reports.

He waited for Victor to leave and only continued when the captain told him that Victor was learning military strategy. The inn they had been at the day before had been ambushed during the night, but no one had been hurt. The enemy had searched every room demanding to know the whereabouts of the captain and his men. When they found no evidence of them and the innkeeper told them they had paid the tab and left, the soldiers stalked off without another word. Scouts reported seeing trackers around dawn.

"What time is it now?" demanded the captain as he jumped up from where he had started eating his meal knocking over his cup in the process.

"About an hour past dawn," Ian said.

"Strike camp as fast as the men can move. Have them keep out only what provisions can be eaten while we are moving. Post guards at the rear and sides of the camp while everyone else is taking it down and change guards every half hour. I will be helping to pack my own tent." Ian ran from the tent to start giving out the captain's orders while the captain himself turned to start on his own things only to find that Victor had half the contents of the tent into traveling bags already. Not

taking the time to be surprised, he started grabbing things and handing them to Victor.

"Move them to the river, make it look like you crossed it, then backtrack walking in the water about two miles and come out on this side. They will not expect a move like that from you so you will be able to regroup and find them on your own terms," it was barely more than a whisper, but the captain caught every word and made a mental note to commend her if it worked.

The men did exactly what they were told without question. Within an hour, the camp looked as if it had been abandoned at least a day prior. Sylvia was again impressed with the efficiency and loyalty of the captain's troops. That had been the reason she had looked further into this captain - what kind of man could inspire his troops like that?

It took all morning to get to the river and find a place to cross, but less than half the men had to march up the other bank and back down it to make it look like the whole army had trudged over the muddy bank, they then proceeded to quietly make their way up the river being careful to stay away from the shore so they would not leave any trail. The captain and his apprentice took point to make sure there was no one at the river so they would not be seen.

Everyone now knew why the captain had chosen this lad as his new apprentice even after such a long time – he was fearless, quiet, and an excellent scout. The going was slow, though, and the men were ready to set up camp and dry themselves off by the time they left the river. The captain ordered only a few small fires lit so that they would have a better chance of going unnoticed. Their clothes were slung over the tops of their tents so the hot summer night air would dry them while they slept. All the clothes except the apprentices. He retired early with the captain's permission and fell asleep wearing them.

Sylvia took great care to stuff Victor's clothes and pull a blanket over where his head should be before slipping out the back of the tent. She was wearing black leather and had a black cloth pulled over her face. She silently dodged the soldiers on her way out of the camp and made her way back along the river. It took almost no time at all for her to find what she was looking for: the opposing troops.

They had taken the bait laid out for them and the last few were just then crossing the river. She snuck a ways down the river without crossing it to find out where they were headed, then turned and made her way back to camp without so much as disturbing the animals along the way keeping mostly to the trees for speed.

When she returned to camp, she found them on high alert and it was difficult for her to get in without their knowledge. If it had not been for the cover of night without fires, she doubted she could have made it. The captain was in his tent studying his maps with his back to the rear of the tent. Sylvia slid under the edge and stood listening for a moment to see if anyone had noticed her. When she was satisfied she had not been seen she spoke.

"Good news. It seems our little stunt worked."

The captain jumped. "I was wondering when you would be back," he said as he turned to face her, "Where are they now?" One glance and he turned back to his maps. She was definitely Sylvia right now and that outfit didn't hide her curves.

She walked over behind him and leaned over his shoulder to point to the map. "Here. They are setting up camp for the night. We have bought enough time to come up with a strategy and put it into action but only if we move quickly. They will not be fooled for long."

Before he could ask what they would least expect from this position, they heard Ian say hello to the guard outside the tent. The captain looked up at Ian and glanced over his shoulder to find himself alone with Ian, his second in command. *How the devil does she do that?* "What is it Ian?"

"The woman spy you had arrested and sent to prison two months ago has been seen in the village we just left."

"Does anyone know how she escaped?"

"No."

"Do not engage her. Report to me every time she is seen – if she is seen – but tell the men to keep their distance from her. She has a silver tongue and we would be killing ourselves and each other if she is permitted to speak within hearing distance. You should be aware that she is the assassin Retribution. I have had word from the prison she escaped from and have not, until now, had the opportunity to tell you."

"Yes, Sir." Ian looked only as though his suspicions had been confirmed and left the tent.

As soon as he was gone, Sylvia was back. Smiling. The captain didn't need to ask. It was obvious that it was all part of her plan. "Now, Captain, because you seem to be shy about it, keep your back to me for a minute or two and I will turn back into Victor."

He was shocked at the amount of modesty she did *not* possess and kept his face buried in the map attempting not to think of what was going to happen behind him. He knew he would hear the sounds of her moving around and his imagination started to take him toward what she would look like without the leather suit. He shook his head trying to clear it. He looked hard at the map attempting to come up with a strategy – any strategy – and realized that he couldn't concentrate knowing what she was going to be doing.

"I am going to go for a walk while you do that," he said with his back still to her.

"You can't. I'm finished."

The captain spun around half expecting her to be without any clothes and found Victor behind him straightening up the pallet so he could lie down. His jaw dropped. "H-How did you do that? I didn't hear a sound!"

"In my trade, if you make a sound, you're dead. Get some sleep. We will have an early morning and a long day on top of which you hardly slept last night."

"It is almost as if you don't sleep at all. How did you know that?"

"Sleep is a rare luxury that I take advantage of when I can get it. You have bags under your eyes that I have seen many times." With that, Victor lay down and closed his eyes.

The captain took his advice and went to bed, too. Against his better judgment, he was beginning to trust her and slept better that night. He had seen her get through his camp and into his tent with the men on high alert. If she wanted to kill him, he would already be dead. This thought was disconcerting, but at the same time it was reassuring. He was probably safer now than he had been in months because at least now he knew where she was most of the time. And, at least for the moment, she was on his side.

Victor woke the captain at dawn. "Now I'm sure you don't sleep," he said groggily as he sat up and looked around.

"We need to talk about our next move and implement it before they realize they are on the wrong trail," he replied and moved so the captain saw that a meal

had been set up next to his maps. When he walked over to the maps, he saw that they had been drawn on and looked angrily up at Victor.

"They needed revisions. Your maps are old."

Through gritted teeth he said, "What makes you think you are qualified to revise my maps?"

"You are using maps that I slipped into your bags eight months ago. Have you not once wondered why things were somewhat off?"

He did not answer. There had been a few times when things had seemed like they were not quite where they should have been, but he had marked it off as human error because the maps had just been purchased. Forests had grown, villages had been established and rivers had changed their course ever so slightly because his maps were 20 years old. He had not bothered to check the maps in his own territory because he knew it better than anyone, but he was on the border of his knowledge now and had no choice but to consult the new maps. Why with all the skill she seemed to possess did she need him?

They talked for an hour before settling on what they would do and Victor went out to wake the camp while the captain started packing. They had believed they would be making base out of the inn for quite a while and had not efficiently stocked for a long time away from a town, so a small group of men were sent with a wagon in civilian clothes ahead to the next town. It was closer than the one they just left. They were told to only buy enough to last a small group for a month. They would be sending several groups to different towns to do the same along the way and they would do some hunting. It would slow them down some, but it was necessary.

For three days they would follow the river south. The enemy went away from the river, but would come back to it and follow it to the city of Bohen. They would wait there and cut them off before they entered the city. With any luck, they would have a devastating effect on the enemy forces before they knew what was happening. The problem was they had to leave as little a trail as possible so that the trackers they knew would be out there wouldn't find it.

Victor was assigned to be a cook so that he would learn humility. That night, everyone was astounded at how good the food came out. He had made a stew from God only knew what, but everyone liked it and there was enough for everyone to have second helpings. He used several pots to accomplish this, but no one complained about having to wait until the next one finished heating.

"Hey, Vic," one of the soldiers said as he was coming around for his second helping, "where did you learn to cook like that?"

"I was an orphan and ran away from the home very early. It was learn to cook or go hungry. I like food that has some taste." After that even the other cooks would ask him to help out once in a while, but he was not assigned to cook alone anymore because it was not teaching humility. He wrote down some of his recipes for the cooks to follow.

The three-day march to the city of Bohen was long and tiring. They rose before the sun each morning and did not set up their tents at night. They rolled out their blankets on the ground itself without the light of fires. The last thing they wanted was to draw attention to themselves.

When they finally reached the city, they camped in the forest nearby. They sent a couple wagons into the city for supplies with the men again dressed in civilian's clothes. If they were inquired of, they were to say they were headed towards the mountains to mine for gold. The mountains were at least three weeks

away to the east. The camp itself was well hidden and well guarded. The army had nothing to do but wait for their enemies to approach. In the mean time, the captain and Victor held more training sessions and poured over the corrected maps.

They were looking at one of the maps of the area they were now in when Ian came into the tent. "She has been seen again, Captain."

"Where this time?" he asked as he looked up at Ian.

"In the city of Bohem. Either she is following us or going ahead of us." Ian looked very concerned about the sighting.

"Pardon me, but who has been seen and why does it bother Ian so?" asked Victor.

"She is a spy that I had imprisoned under General Stone. He is not known for being kind to prisoners of war. She is a natural silver tongue who has had her charming ability enhanced by a wizard and since she escaped from prison, we have no idea what else she can do. I ordered her fed by a deaf," he said to Victor. Then he turned back to Ian, "Again, thank you for the update. With the skill we know she has and the rumors that fly about her, she is letting herself be seen for some reason unknown to us. If we are not wary we may fall into her traps again."

Ian nodded to the captain and turned to go. He stopped, though, when he heard Victor's next question.

"How could a woman be so dangerous?"

"If I may, Captain, I would answer this one." At a nod from the captain, Ian continued. "She is beautiful. So much so that it puts you off your guard. Once you have seen her, you get closer to her and she speaks to you. Her words are like honey and you cannot help but believe them. She could tell you anything and you would take it for the truth. She has even had this army under her devilish spell. And worst of all, she is against us."

"I see. She sounds very dangerous," Victor said contemplatively, "thank you." Then he bowed to both of them. Ian left.

"Don't you think that that was overkill?" he said to Victor while trying to keep a straight face.

Victor gave no answer, only smiled in return.

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