

QADIR

Chapter One

The Kingdom of Aquina, 1279

“Did everyone in Aquina wake this morning with a desire to visit the palace?” Dianthe Galonis snapped the reins and urged their horse and wagon into an aching slow walk behind half a dozen others entering the palace gates. “Why is it that when you are late, everything conspires to slow you down further?” she grumbled. With the promise of snow in the clouds, she would be lucky to reach old Mared’s cottage before nightfall and had no wish to try to find shelter in the woods where thieves waited.

Her mother chuckled from the padded seat beside her and pulled the shawl tighter around her thin shoulders. There was a chill in the salty sea air today that seemed to sneak beneath their layers of clothes. “People are still excited to catch glimpses of the king and his new queen.”

Dianthe heard the wistfulness in her voice and felt a pang of sadness for her mother. She had lost her sight nearly a decade ago, and while she had adapted, she would never again see the splendor of Aquina’s palace, sitting on a hill overlooking the city with the sea at its back. She’d never be able to see the royal couple, or the love that shone in their eyes, the way Dianthe could.

In that regard, the wagons full of spectators made sense. The king and queen’s love story was like a fairytale. Everyone thought the king had been killed, until her best friend, Shyla, found him on the streets and helped him regain all that he’d lost. He’d fallen in love with her and changed the law, allowing him to take her as his wife.

Dianthe wanted a love like that for herself. Preferably with less fanfare which only seemed to slow everyone else down, if these wagons were any indication. She bit back a groan of frustration and glowered at the dark clouds above.

Damn her foolishness. It was her own fault for leaving late. Last night, one of her shop girls fell ill, and Dianthe had stayed late to close the culinary store she owned with her mother. Then she packed the wagon with the goods Mared required. The wizard was too old to travel

down the mountain on his own. Dianthe now delivered the supplies to him though the journey was dangerous. Last night, she'd rushed through the preparations and must not have locked the gate properly, because this morning, a crate of vegetables and a barrel of ale had been stolen. She'd had to buy more. Then, as she secured a blanket over the goods, a piece caught on an exposed nail in the side of the wagon and ripped a wide swath in the fabric, and all the while the clouds grew fat and dark, promising miserable travel.

"All will be as the goddesses will." Her mother patted her arm with a frail hand, her skin so thin it was almost translucent.

Dianthe's heart squeezed. The healers could do nothing more for her mother. The sickness worked through her body and sapped her strength. She's travel through a hundred snowy days if the goddesses would only make her mother well. But it was not to be, and somehow, she had to accept that. Her mother could no longer remain at home unattended while Dianthe journeyed up the mountain to Mared's. Shyla had lived with them for several years and treated Dianthe's mother as her own. She volunteered to entertain Mother at the palace on the condition that Dianthe take a guard on the journey.

"You shall have a lovely time with Shyla while I am gone," she said. "And tomorrow I will tell you all about Mared's new spells."

"I would like that, but do be careful, darling. I sense the snowfall will be worse than expected."

"Not to worry, Mother. I shall be careful," she replied, feigning more confidence than she felt. If only she could sense the weather as her mother could, she would use the power to hold off the snow.

Magic abounded in Aquina. Everyone had at least a small ability, and it was believed that the magic came from the water that they drank. Dianthe's power to calm the emotions of others seemed far less useful than weather forecasting.

The wagon creaked along until they finally passed through the gates to the palace. It loomed above them with high towers and open balconies with large columns. Marble pathways threaded with gold wound through the large courtyard and a stone fountain bubbled, water droplets spraying in the cool wind. In the distance, she could hear the waves crashing against the rocks far below, the sound soothing her frayed nerves.

She slowed the horse to a halt near the palace entrance and handed the reins to a guard that rushed to greet them. Movement upon the steps caught Dianthe's eye and she froze.

For six months, she hadn't seen or heard from the Captain of the Guard, and now, when she least expected it—least *wanted* it—he fixated on her from the top step.

Her stomach gave a traitorous swoop as she took in his tall form and the green tunic that clung to his thickly muscled arms crossed over his wide chest. An intimidating sword hung at his hip, barely concealed by his black cloak. Dark brown hair brushed his shoulders, while a few strands blew in the breeze. He was taller than most and the air of confidence he wore was almost tangible as the corner of his lip tipped up in a small smile. He strode toward them.

Dianthe scowled. It was terribly unfair how attractive Qadir was, and worse that he could also be kind. Even now, he went to the opposite side of the wagon and nudged a guard out of the way so that he might help her mother descend and get her bearings. His large, strong hands were gentle on the older woman's waist as he lifted her out and offered a smile that she could no longer see.

“Welcome to the palace, Mistress Galonis,” he said as he steadied her mother and put her cane into her hand.

“Captain Qadir! Thank you for your assistance. We have missed you about the house these last months.”

Was that a blush on her mother's cheeks? Dianthe groaned and allowed another guard to help her down. Qadir could make the goddesses giggle like maidens when he used that husky, charming voice. Thank heavens she wouldn't have to spend a moment longer in his company than required.

She stomped around the wagon to join them and took her mother's satchel from the loaded wagon.

“Mother, perhaps the Captain can escort you inside while I wait for the guard that's going to join me for the trip.”

Qadir turned toward her, his eyes sparking, heating like molten chocolate when they slid slowly over her frame. A scar bisected his left eyebrow and stubble covered his square jaw, giving him a roguish look. When their eyes met, a zing of pleasure shot straight to her core and her thighs clenched. That slight lift of his lips, as if he knew the effect he had on her and reveled

in it, set her teeth on edge. She would not fall for his charms again. No matter how attractive he was or how her body responded with liquid heat to his very nearness.

Dianthe tilted her chin up and folded her arms across her chest.

He chuckled, the sound dark and delicious as it rolled over her. “I fear I am unable to accompany you, Mistress Galonis,” he said to her mother. “The guard is unavailable to escort your daughter to old Mared’s cottage, so I will go in his stead.”

Her mother patted his arm and smiled, her rheumy gaze distant. “I’m certain she wouldn’t mind. She hasn’t stopped speaking of you.”

“No!” Dianthe said at the same time, then cringed when she realized what her mother had just imparted. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“Indeed? She speaks of me often?” He looked amused.

“Your name never crosses my lips,” she ground out.

“Dianthe,” her mother chided at the obvious lie which only made her blush harder. “I know you were upset, but perhaps you can talk to the captain now. You were so happy the weeks you spent together.”

“Mother, stop. I...” She pressed her lips together hard. Could the ground open and swallow her? That seemed a better alternative to standing here with Qadir looking far too delighted with the conversation. No doubt he enjoyed seeing her squirm.

“You cannot be my escort,” she snapped. “There must be someone else who can go. *Anyone* else.” She would take the gardener up the mountain before she agreed to Qadir’s company. Didn’t he understand? He’d already hurt her once. She’d spent weeks wondering where he’d gone, worrying for him, and craving his sweet kisses. Until it was clear he didn’t plan to return to her. Why make it worse when at the end of their journey, he would simply walk away from her again and never look back?

“Afraid to travel with me, lovely? Afraid of what my happen in my care?” Qadir asked softly.

She shivered as goosebumps slid over her skin. Once, she’d wanted to explore these feelings, when his eyes promised passion and she foolishly believed that he cared for her. No longer. “Afraid you would leave me on the trail the moment you found another amusement,” she muttered.

“Dianthe.” He reached for her and she instinctively backed up a step.

Qadir scowled.

“You know you would find no braver man to escort you, darling,” her mother said. “The Captain is the fiercest fighter in the kingdom. Even the king has acknowledged that.”

The muscles in his jaw worked and his hands clenched. “I would never leave your side if your safety was in question,” he growled.

Dianthe sensed she’d offended him. She felt a tug of guilt in her heart for it. He was honorable, strong, and his duty came before everything else in his life, including relationships. She knew that. It was unkind to insinuate otherwise. In the few weeks they’d courted, he’d shown her often that he lived to protect others. If only he could have protected her heart. Or explained why he left without a word.

She nodded, staring at his chest. She couldn’t bear to look in his eyes. “Duty and protection before all else. I know.”

His shoulders sank. “Dianthe...”



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