

“Alexa was barely able to beat Iker,” Deron pointed out, his voice gentle. But however kindly he said it, it didn’t ease the pain of his words. I fought the urge to touch my scarred cheek again as the memories of that horrible day threatened to surge up. “What if there’s more than one black sorcerer this time?”

Something inside of me clenched when Damian’s gaze flickered down to my cheek, then back to my eyes. “Black sorcerers are not common,” he said after a pause. “I doubt they’ll have one with them.”

Deron shook his head. “I’m sorry, Sire, but it’s our duty to assume the worst. And then try to prepare for it. We can’t take risks with your life.”

At Deron’s words, my fingers tightened around the hilt of my sword. “I won’t let them hurt you,” I said before I could stop myself, my voice low. Damian tensed, his eyes widening slightly — a tiny crack in his veneer. I forced myself to tear my eyes away from the king, to stare at the floor instead, lest he see the emotions I’d spent the last month suppressing.

“We’ve kept the man waiting too long,” Deron said suddenly, before Damian could respond. “We need to bring him inside; we can discuss the details of what we should do in the morning.”

There was another long pause before Damian spoke. “Fine, but I would like you to come up with a solution that won’t slow down the building project.” Damian stood there for a moment longer, but when I wouldn’t meet his gaze again, he turned on his heel and stalked back into his room, slamming the door shut behind him.

I flinched but didn’t move, waiting for Deron’s orders.

“Stay here and finish out your shift. I’ll take care of the runner.” Deron turned away but then paused. “Alexa . . .” he spoke

hesitantly. “Are you . . . and the king . . .” He trailed off uncomfortably, and my stomach clenched. The last thing I needed — or wanted — was for Deron to try and talk to me about the situation with Damian. Now that everyone knew I was a girl, most of the other guards treated me differently — they seemed to think that I was suddenly weaker than I used to be, even though *I* hadn’t changed. I was still the same person — the same soldier — I’d always been. But no one else saw it that way, except for Rylan, who’d always known.

And Damian.

“You’d better not keep the runner waiting any longer,” I said curtly, standing up taller, with a glare that I hoped clearly conveyed my desire to drop the subject.

He gave me a searching look but nodded. “All right. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” He turned away again, and this time he didn’t stop.

When he was out of sight, I had to fight the urge to sag against the wall; my legs felt strangely weak and my heart wouldn’t stop racing. But instead, I stood up even straighter, throwing my shoulders back. I was a guard — this was my duty. I wouldn’t be the one found relaxing on the job, allowing something, or someone, to get past me. My life was devoted to protecting my king.

But the expression on Damian’s face wouldn’t leave me, the pain he was so adept at hiding from everyone — everyone but me. I, who knew him best and had hurt him the worst.

What if the person he needed protection from the most was *me*?