

THE
VERINDON
ALLIANCE

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The Verindon Alliance

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CHAPTER ONE

Vashta lifted her flier towards the Verindonian sky.

She soared above the palace, the rest of the city of Matarsiss coming into view. She could see the extensive and lush palace grounds with their wild skyflower-filled pathways and dense copses of trees. Further on, there was the city centre with its low hexagonal buildings painted white to reflect the brilliant rainbow hues of their sky.

As she flew higher, she looked beyond the city streets to the farms in the lowlands—farms for meat, for wheat and the most important ones—sugar plants waving in the breeze. Behind them was the mountain range that shielded their people from their enemy—the Verindal.

Circling back to the palace, she looked down on its four spires, the tallest barely four spans from the ground. She wondered why her ancestors had aimed so low when they'd built it. The Verindal palace was much bigger, or so her tutors had told her, their faces flushed with indignation at any superiority shown by their enemies.

But what would Father say?

'Vashta, don't be jealous of the Verindal. And don't hate them. It will only cloud your judgement. I want you to be above that.'

'But everyone else hates them. And we're at war ... again! And have been for hundreds of years.' Possibly longer than that, but she had only misty memories from a history class where she'd spent most of her time asleep.

She knew her father too well to doubt the response. 'It's my desire that we would know peace. Please, try to think of how to help our people, not envy our enemy. The High Family of the Vendel must set the tone for our race.'

‘Tell Mestitha that,’ she hissed through her teeth, returning her attention to her flier and the enemy that shared the skies with her, although this ‘enemy’ was not a Verindal.

The flier coming towards her dipped and skittered to the side. That’s right, she was facing Anam. This wouldn’t take long. Not that she could take any skirmish for granted; even he could pull an occasional trick, although it was usually accidental.

The rattling around her honed her concentration. Considering how much she adored flying, she should be a little more respectful of the vehicle that housed her, but the engine’s put-put-puttering was so loud it drowned out everything else. The Verindal fliers were better. The images Erleph had shown her had made her sick with envy. They had plans to steal one but stealing a flier was a lot harder than swiping something that could be slipped into a pocket.

She glared at the gun mounted on her nose cone. Their weapons fired projectiles, rather than the lasers the Verindal had developed. And her gun was only loaded with rubber ones. Standard for a final combat assessment, but it felt like an indignity. But if she passed, she might get to lead a squadron into battle against Verindal fliers. What a challenge that would be! Far greater than facing ... who was it again?

Yes. Anam. *Pay attention, Vashta!*

He was practically begging her to fire on the flank he’d just exposed; his standard feint—get her to engage, then accelerate so he wasn’t there to receive her strikes. She didn’t know why he bothered with it.

Instead, she rolled before looping until she was behind him. He tried to find her, but she knew the time she’d spent out of his scopes would slow his response. And he wasn’t allowed to transform in this part of the training—to go into the Vendel safe state, which made them stronger, sharpened their reactions and helped them win a fight. With a laugh, she launched a volley of harmless projectiles that left a red mark where they struck.

Her communicator crackled to life, making her jump. ‘Her Highness, the Princess Vashta, has made the first strike.’

Erleph's voice was non-committal. Even after spending so many years studying under him, she still couldn't tell when he was pleased. Her father had laughed when she'd told him that. 'If you work it out, let me know. I never have.'

Anam turned, planning his own strike. *You may try.* If he made any points against her, she would leave this battle bitterly disappointed. He pointed his nose ahead of hers, counting on her trajectory to put her right in his path. Instead, she aimed at his flank, ready to release another volley of shots.

But although her weapon spluttered, no projectiles came out.

Her attack window was gone by then, so she slipped into the sky above Anam, trying her gun again in the air. There was noise but no projectiles pierced the sky.

Her weapon must have jammed. How could that be? She had checked and double-checked everything before she'd gone to receive her instructions from Erleph. She always ensured her flier was in perfect working order before taking to the skies.

Now what did she do? Have Erleph call off the assessment because she was no longer a combatant? She cringed at the thought of such a failure, especially in front of her family.

She gasped as Anam's flier swooped from above, releasing a volley of shots. One skimmed her nose. Damn it. He'd made a strike. That shouldn't be possible! She slipped under him and dived, spiralling down towards the ground, smirking at the thought of his frantic face. He would never attempt a manoeuvre like this.

Her radio crackled. 'Princess Vashta, disengage from that manoeuvre immediately!'

I can handle it.

But Erleph was adamant. 'Disengage *now!*'

She broke her descent and levelled off, again trying her weapon. Nothing. Not that it mattered, as her mentor's severe tone broke through the stuttering sound of her engine. 'Both fliers return to base *at once.*'

The base was one distance from the palace grounds. It was always being expanded, and new weapons and equipment appeared whenever they managed to steal some from Verindal lands.

The mastermind of these thefts strode towards her as she popped the cockpit and climbed out. ‘Your Highness, why did you execute an illegal manoeuvre?’ Grey wisps of Erleph’s hair flew in disarray as he reached her.

Vashta could feel her face paling. She’d forgotten about that. She shrugged it off. ‘It was a logical means to escape Anam’s attack.’

He was unmoved. ‘It’s unusual for you to be caught like that.’

That wasn’t her fault, although she wondered if he would see it that way. ‘My weapon wouldn’t fire.’

‘Then you should have reported its failure.’

That was the key reason she hadn’t. That one little word—failure. ‘I didn’t think of it.’

Erleph said nothing as Father arrived, his multicoloured cloak trailing behind him, his gait rushed. ‘Vashta, are you all right?’

‘Yes, I’m fine.’ She kicked the flier’s front tyre.

Pausing to bow, Erleph hauled his hefty form over to the faulty weapon where a team of shrugging maintenance personnel had gathered.

Anam chose that moment to hurry over. ‘Chief Prince Liffon,’ he said with a bow, before turning to the scarlet-flecked nose of Vashta’s flier. Anam’s grin stretched wide across his round face, his grey eyes triumphant. ‘I knew I got you!’

She fought back a snarl. ‘Barely.’

He pointed a long finger at the mark. ‘That’s more than barely.’

‘Oh? How many shots did you fire? I bet there are a lot more marks on your nose.’

He shot a look at Father and straightened his flight suit. ‘Only in the first strike.’

Erleph came back, his face foreboding. ‘Making sure all weaponry

and equipment onboard your flier is functioning is part of the assessment.’

She could feel her pass mark slipping through her fingers like the wispy clouds lining their skies. He couldn’t fail her for a mechanical issue. ‘But I scored the first strike and landed more than Anam.’

‘Yes, you did.’ He looked weary. ‘We will therefore declare this a draw and reschedule the flight assessment for a later time.’

Was that better than failing or worse? ‘But I checked my weapon prior to launch. It was working perfectly.’

Erleph waved at the technicians. ‘Locate the fault in Princess Vashta’s weapon and make sure a detailed report is given to her.’ With that, he stalked away, nodding a bow at Father as he passed.

Anam’s fat lip popped out in a pout. ‘I should have passed. I did everything right.’

‘Except fly well.’

‘Vashta!’ Father scolded. ‘You’ll both have another chance to prove yourselves in a few weeks. Depart from Anam with respect for your rank and leave this for another day.’

She could tell when she’d pushed Father too far and felt she was balancing on the edge. She reached out and put a hand on her opponent’s shoulder. ‘Good work, Anam,’ she said. ‘I look forward to facing you again at a later date.’ *When the result will be different.*

He returned her farewell gesture. ‘Thank you, Your Highness. I look forward to facing you again as well.’ She could see the sweat pouring off his face. A sign of nerves? The realisation that next time he wouldn’t be so lucky?

She glared at his back as he walked towards the hangar.

Father frowned at her. ‘Don’t worry. I’m sure Erleph will pass you next time *if* you do as you’re told. No more illegal dives.’

But she had wanted to succeed. Her sisters were sure to be laughing. And her father! Why did he have to be there to watch her fail? ‘It’s not fair.’

‘I think it is,’ Father said. ‘Erleph could have banned you from flying for a few weeks. Then you would have missed the next assessment.’

It's a mercy he hasn't done that.' A shriek from behind made him turn his head. 'But your mother is about to make up for that.'

Mother came racing around the corner, the other pilots scrambling to get out of the way while bowing at the same time. Her rainbow-hued gown fanned out in the breeze as she lifted it to avoid the fine coating of mud on the side of the runway. 'Vashta! Were you trying to get yourself killed? Spiralling out of control towards the ground like that. I thought you'd never survive.'

'Mother, I was never out of control.' The very thought was ridiculous. She knew more about flying than anyone in her family. She'd read every report they'd made or stolen on flying techniques, flier construction and the use of weapons in aerial combat.

'But what you did wasn't safe.'

She sighed. 'It is when you know what you're doing.'

Her hands were on her hips. 'Then why didn't Erleph pass you?'

She could take a lecture from her father or Erleph but not from her mother, a woman who didn't know how to fly, fire a gun or throw an opponent. 'Because we didn't finish the assessment. How could I, when I couldn't shoot?'

She stormed away, ignoring her mother's angry retort. She didn't care that she'd been rude. She didn't care that she pushed a path through her fellow graduates as they turned away, pretending they hadn't heard Her Highness, Princess Vashta, scolding the Princess Consort Aliana.

She marched off the airfield, back into the hangar. She didn't want to go up to the change rooms, but she needed to change out of her flight suit. And that meant walking past the observation deck. But there was no help for it. She'd have to face them sooner or later.

She clumped up the metal stairs, not bothering to keep quiet. It may have been childish for a woman of eighteen, but she wanted to take her frustration out on something, and the stairs were annoying her by the simple fact that they were there. That she was there instead of wowing everyone with her combat skills and making Anam look like a fool.

She took a breath as the door to the observation deck slid open.

Sometimes looking at her sisters was like looking in a mirror.

Many of the courtiers couldn't tell them apart with so many of the same features, all inherited from their parents—long blonde hair, tall and statuesque, blue eyes, attitude ... although the minions that surrounded them would never say that last one in front of them. People had to dig further to find their differences. Most never got beyond the fawning stage.

At least the four of them were without their bond-partners. That made it slightly less humiliating.

Mestitha, her eldest sister, lolled on the plastic bench next to the observation window, taking a drink from the servant before her, dismissing him with a flick of her finger. The triumph in her expression stopped Vashta in the doorway.

Lara was sitting next to her but heaved herself off the bench with a resigned expression. Her hand supported her pregnant belly as disapproval settled on her face; an all-too-familiar look.

Meeka, the middle sister, was standing near the window, her face full of sympathy. At least Vashta knew it was genuine.

Illora was the sister she'd always felt closest to, given that only a year separated them. That had changed when she'd bonded to Brexin six months before. However, she was the first to reach her and gave her a hug. The affection on her face brought air back to Vashta's lungs. She didn't realise how much she'd craved Illora's attention while it had been on the man she loved.

'Don't worry, Vashta. It was just bad luck. You showed plenty of skill in what little time you had. Passing next time will be a formality.'

Meeka soon joined them. 'It's all right, darling. You did your best.'

Trust Meeka to miss the tragedy in everything. 'Thank you. I know it took you five times to pass your flight combat assessment.'

Heat passed through Meeka's usually mild expression, but she held her tongue.

Lara did not attempt to hug her. Vashta knew it was difficult, considering how pregnant she was, but that wasn't the real reason. She braced herself for the lecture.

'You've only got yourself to blame. You can't have checked your

weapon properly before you took off. How can you expect to be trusted at the controls of a vehicle like that unless you do all the checks? Piloting a flier is about more than just the adrenaline rush.'

'I'm aware of that.' *Don't you think I checked? Don't you think I checked again? Don't you think I would have done anything to win?* She wanted to scream it, but Lara's lecture trailed off.

She turned away before Mestitha could join the chorus of disapproval. Not that it would make any difference. The fury rose in her blood as she waited for the biting words she knew would come.

It was worse than she feared. 'It's okay, *little* sister. We understand that you didn't make it. Nobody's perfect, right? You can't be expected to do everything we can do. It's too much to ask of someone so young.'

Don't turn around. Don't turn around. But her body disobeyed her.

Falseness was written all over Mestitha's face. Sympathy barely masked delight and her words were a pale shadow of true support. She didn't know how to support anyone but herself. 'Thank you for your kind thoughts, sister. Of course, we know you failed to even qualify for a flight combat assessment.'

Mestitha's eyes hardened into glittering blue orbs. 'That's because I don't think it's necessary for someone in my position to acquire a skill like that.'

'Of course, it's beneath the heir, isn't it? Why should she learn anything about battle strategy? She just needs to strut around on the front line and leave the commanding to the commanders.'

Her eldest sister's hand twitched, but Vashta knew she wouldn't strike, even though she wanted her to. She was itching to drop her to the ground with a well-timed leg sweep. It would be so easy ...

She struck with her words instead. 'In case you would like to learn how it's done, sister, come to this evening's hand-to-hand combat assessment. There's little doubt I'll defeat my opponent there. You've given me such stellar practice.'

She spun on her heel and marched into the change room before the snarl of fury had left Mestitha's lips.

The room was empty, so she stripped off her flight jumpsuit and

snatched up the elegant long dress that was her normal attire. She wracked her brains to recall her afternoon schedule. All her thoughts had been on the flight assessment and the hand-to-hand combat that night. Everything else was a haze of boredom. Resigned, she knew she'd have to check to make sure she didn't have an official engagement like a hospital visit with her mother or a school inspection; the usual mundane tasks offered to the fifth of five princesses.

Determined to avoid her sisters, she slipped down the service stairway. Whether their sympathy was genuine or manufactured, it was to be avoided at all costs.

As she walked along the corridor, she heard Anam's voice, quiet, but with the high-pitched squeal of nerves. 'How can you not be happy with that? She looked like a fool.'

Her back stiffened as she heard Mestitha's hissed response. 'You were supposed to beat her, idiot. You should have pummelled her flier with so many marks that Erleph had no choice but to fail her!'

Nerves cracked his voice again. 'Your sister is ... well, that's not always possible.'

'Why not?'

'Because ... because ... she's too good.'

Fire exploded in her sister's voice. 'She is not good. You'll beat her next time, but you'll need to do more than fix her weapon!'

Vashta felt an explosion building up inside her, but she couldn't interrupt them yet. Who knew what else she would discover? Her hand shook, desperate to thwack across Mestitha's face.

The sound of retreating footsteps sounded in the corridor. Damn it, she was too late. She turned the corner to pursue Mestitha, only to run straight into Anam. His face blanched at the sight of her. 'Vashta! Where did you come from?' He swallowed.

She couldn't stop the tremor of rage that tore through her. Did she take him apart then and there or do it publicly?

A forceful step sounded and Erleph appeared. He glanced between them. 'I think it's time that both of you retired and prepared for the hand-to-hand combat assessment this evening.'

Colour returned to Anam's face. 'Yes, Mentor Erleph. That's very wise.' He began to scamper off, calling over his shoulder. 'When do we find out who we're fighting?'

'You can find out now, Anam. Given that your session this morning was interrupted, I think it's only fair that you fight Vashta.'

She thought he was going to faint. 'Oh? I guess I'd better ...' He bolted down the corridor, no doubt to find Mestitha and plead for help.

Vashta looked at her mentor. The glint in his eyes told her he'd heard everything.

The evening's event was bound to be entertaining.

Vashta could see Anam's knees knocking as she entered the training room. He was dressed in a service jumpsuit like hers, the light bringing out its pinkish gold colour as he rotated his arms to warm up. The suit was a startling contrast to his face, which looked so white she expected him to pass out before Erleph called them to start.

The room was half a length squared; each wall covered by one-way glass. Vashta wondered who was observing her this time. Father? Illora? Would Mestitha come in the hope that she would witness her defeat?

If only she would.

The intercom crackled to life. 'Trainees, this is your hand-to-hand combat assessment. You will transform on my mark. Fighting will last as long as you are transformed. If you have not bested your opponent by the time you leave that state, victory will be awarded to whoever remains transformed for longest.'

So she had about ten mins to lay Anam flat on the ground. If she hadn't done it in two, she would be furious with herself.

The mark sounded and, in a flicker of concentration, she felt a grey haze descend over her vision. She watched the transformation on Anam's face as his bottom jaw extended, his skin became tougher and his eyes receded into his skull, their black sockets lit by a pinprick of red.

Even transformed he looked more terrified than terrifying.

Now that her abilities were enhanced, her transformed state

whispered his moves to her before he enacted them. She knew he'd receive information about her too, so it was down to who was the most effective and quickest at utilising it.

She expected the spark of thought that came just before he shoulder-charged her with all his enhanced strength. It was easy to side-step, sweeping his feet out from under him as he passed.

He scrambled to his feet, fear evident in his face and stance. He charged again, this time changing direction just before the moment of impact. Unfazed, she smashed her elbow into his face, and he fell back onto the mat-strewn floor.

There was no way he was getting up again. She leapt on him, straddling him and placing her forearm against his windpipe. He tried to buck her off, but even with his enhanced strength, he was no match for her.

‘Match to Vashta.’

She rose and came out of her transformed state, not even sparing a glance for Anam as he stood, his shoulders slumped. He grabbed her arm. ‘Vashta, please,’ he whispered. ‘She threatened me. Don't tell your father.’

She slapped his hand away and marched into the corridor. Did he think she would run crying to Father? He'd spent too much time with Mestitha.

Through the numerous doors to her left and right, she could hear grunts and the sound of bodies hitting floors as other trainees endured their assessments.

She reached for the sugar drink that had been left for her. Within the first two gulps, she felt her strength returning as it replenished her system, drained of sugar during the transformation. She turned to Erleph. ‘How did I do?’

His face was mirror-smooth. ‘You should have had him in one minspan, not two.’

She smirked. ‘Maybe I was feeling merciful.’

Erleph turned to glance at Anam as he slunk away, not even courageous enough to hear the words that pronounced his sound

defeat. ‘However, your technique was sound, your moves on the mark and your anticipation exemplary. You have passed this assessment.’

She gave him a coy glance. ‘With full marks?’

He did nothing more than raise an eyebrow. She would have pressed him had her father not entered the room with his two guards. With the thrill of victory in her veins, it was difficult to remember to bow. ‘Father.’

The look he gave her took her back to her childhood. Hiding under the table when guests were eating so she could put holes in their footwear. Escaping to the gardens to play fight when she was supposed to be taking deportment classes.

And forgetting protocol. ‘I mean, Your Great Highness.’

Father’s expression smoothed. ‘Princess Vashta, I came to see how your hand-to-hand combat assessment was progressing.’

‘I hope what you saw was ... acceptable.’

At times, reading his face was almost as hard as reading Erleph’s. ‘It was quite interesting. However, I’m relieved you’re finished. You have another appointment. If you will excuse us, Erleph?’

Erleph bowed again as Vashta followed her father’s lean form, trying to work out what she’d done wrong. He didn’t seem annoyed—that was a mercy—but ‘appointment’ was usually a code word for ‘lecture’. Why was he so quiet and grave after what she’d just achieved?

‘Father?’ her voice was tentative.

‘Yes, my darling?’

‘Have I done something?’ It was best to assume the worst so she wouldn’t lose any privileges. ‘This isn’t about the flight combat assessment, is it?’

His voice rose in surprise. ‘No. And I must congratulate you. I was pleased to see your fight. I hadn’t realised how much your skill had grown under Erleph’s tutelage.’

She basked in his praise. ‘I was highly motivated.’ Should she tell her father about Mestitha? It was disgraceful that his heir had asked someone to sabotage her youngest sister’s flier. While it didn’t sound like she’d intended anything more than utter humiliation, intentionally

damaging a flier could prove fatal if you didn't know what you were doing, and Anam wasn't a technical genius.

But she couldn't do it. It seemed so petty. And Mestitha would deny it anyway.

They left the training sector and headed through a quiet corridor that led to the royal residence. Her father's double guard led the way, their standard uniforms gleaming in the light. They were the same hue as her jumpsuit but with sparkling red lining on the seams. That lining had always seemed bit much to her. Maybe Mother had suggested it.

Each carried a double-barrelled projectile gun. It seemed a trifle excessive if they were just escorting her from the assessment. 'What appointment do I have?'

She didn't know why he lowered his voice. 'We have guests.'

'Who?'

'A party of Verindal.'

Bizarrely, she scanned her surroundings for danger before chiding herself. Was there going to be an invasion in this corridor? 'How long have you known about it?'

'They approached us this morning.'

'Why?'

He looked thoughtful. 'I don't know. They say it's a security issue. However, if that was the case, I would have expected a military engagement, not a diplomatic one. But it's a significant visit. Their heir is amongst the party.'

The man who would one day sit on the Verindal throne. 'Why would they risk sending him? Are any other royals with him?'

'I believe his younger sister is with him.'

That made sense. Female Verindals of the upper classes could tell when people were lying. Their powers were greater the higher they were in the line of succession. 'Why not just send her with a security detail? Why risk the heir?'

'I've no idea. I look forward to finding out.'

'Why am I required?' She had seen a few Vendel before—prisoners of war and the like—but never a member of their high family.

‘Sir, we should hurry,’ said one of the guards.

Vashta was intrigued at the thought of being able to study Verindal royalty up close at an official visit. She rarely witnessed audiences unless she managed to slip into the back of the throne room unnoticed. Why was she allowed to attend this one? Her mind was dizzy with ideas, but one kept returning like carrion-birds circling a battlefield. It made her heart drop to her toes.

She needed a bond-partner. She knew the Verindal heir was single. Was Father planning ...?

Impossible. There was no record of any relationship between their two races. She knew her father wouldn’t mind peace with the Verindal, but she didn’t think he’d sell his youngest daughter as a prize for it.

Would he? Could such a thing unite two warring races?

And what about love?

Love was the most important thing in a Vendel bonding. Only a love match would have any hope of producing energy between the two partners—one of their strongest offensive capabilities. If she was to be sold as a bond-partner to this foreigner, not only would she feel like she was betraying her race, she would be forced into a loveless marriage. There would be no chance of her ever gaining the energy component of her skills.

Admittedly, she’d never been sure about it anyway—the idea of loving like that—as it would mean giving away every part of herself to a man. Though her sisters seemed to adore their bond-partners, the thought of bonding with anyone made her cringe.

By the time they’d reached the palace complex, she found it hard to look at Father. She didn’t spare a glance at the atrium, its deep blue ocean-like calmness disrupted by courtiers rushing to and fro.

No sooner did her father appear than several ran up to him, babbling about the visitors. ‘There are ten in the throne room, Your Great Highness. The rest—’

‘The rest?’ Father interjected.

‘Yes, the security detail they sent with them. Ten more. They are in the waiting room. They refused to stay any further away.’

'I don't blame them.' Her father seemed unruffled. 'And who is in the throne room?'

'The heir and his sister. Also a woman named Loora, who is, I believe, an advisor.'

'Can she also identify lies?'

'Yes, Your Great Highness. The rest don't seem to be of political significance. Five of them appear to be a specific guard for the heir himself.'

Father held out his arm to her. 'Shall we?'

Training for battle had never been as hard as walking into that throne room. Her father's throne was the only unoccupied chair, the large lukis stone at its head catching the light, brightening the room with its swirling cacophony of colours. Her mother's throne, right beside it, contained her tense form.

Three other chairs were occupied by the Verindal visitors. The remaining Verindal stood, taking in their surroundings, sure to have already catalogued all four arched entrances and on the lookout for a quick escape if one was required. She doubted they knew about the secret exit concealed by the drapery behind Father's throne.

Her father's own courtiers and council were gathered around, along with her four sisters and their bond-partners. Were they all there to say goodbye to her? But perhaps there was another reason. She could see that each sister had her fingers interlocked with her bond-partner. They were ready to produce energy should the gathering turn ugly.

She took her customary place on the dais behind Brexin, his hand linked with Illora's. As crowded as it was with all their family, she was left teetering on the edge. She nudged Brexin and he shuffled over to give her more room.

A courtier bent his head to Father, but she was too far away to hear what he said. Hoping to learn something, she turned her attention to their guests.

Although the three seated Verindal were unarmed, the other seven held long-barrelled sleek weapons. Laser tech, most likely. Her fingers itched to snatch one.

Not a wise thought in a room tensed for battle.

Father turned to the man Vashta assumed was the Verindal heir. 'My apologies for keeping you waiting.'

Before he could reply, one of the women leapt from her seat. She looked older than the heir, but her hair was still without a thread of grey, and cut short, unlike any woman in the Vendel court. Vashta assumed this was Lora. 'And may I ask, Vendel usurper, why you have kept a true prince of our planet waiting for such a long time?'

It was a loaded question, of course; Lora was trying to catch Father in a lie. But he seemed unbothered by her attitude. 'I wanted to fetch my youngest daughter before we began.'

Lora's gaze landed on her. 'To what purpose?'

Although her glare was meant to intimidate, her words brought relief. It seemed the party was not expecting her presence, which would be necessary if she was being given as a bond-partner to the heir. At least, she hoped so.

Father stared her down. 'I wanted to ensure the whereabouts of every member of my family before these proceedings began.'

Lora watched him for so long it was as though she'd frozen. Finally, the woman turned to the younger one, who nodded. Vashta assumed they were confirming that he was telling the truth.

The heir glanced between the two women before standing. Vashta reminded herself, while looking him over, that no Verindal could ever be considered handsome. They were a dangerous, conniving race and couldn't be trusted.

But if he'd been a Vendel, she would have given him a second glance. Probably a third and fourth as well. He was tall and broad-shouldered with an intelligent expression that showed no sign of fear despite being in enemy territory. She had no doubt she could take him down if they were ever in a fight but felt she would almost regret his defeat.

The sister seemed less significant. She sat quietly; her brown braids draped over her shoulders. Her gown was all imaginable shades of pink and was even more splendid than Mother's. She watched everything with thoughtful eyes, probably scouting for lies. While she seemed to

be a thinker, Vashta doubted she was a fighter.

‘Sir, my apologies for our wariness, although I think you both understand and share it.’ The heir sent a smile in her direction.

Vashta felt the unaccustomed sensation of a blush. She fought it away. It wasn’t an appropriate response for a warrior.

Her father acknowledged the heir’s remark with the lift of a finger.

‘I am aware of the ongoing disputes between our two races ...’

‘Long-running battles, you mean,’ Illora said under her breath.

‘And I had hoped that there might be a peace between us. However, recent activity on the border of Andramadiss has been of particular concern.’

At the mention of Andramadiss, one of Father’s aides whispered to him. He turned back to the heir. ‘I fail to see why you’re concerned about Andramadiss. There has been no fighting there that I’m aware of.’

Loora leapt to her feet. ‘You lie! Your soldiers slaughtered a platoon of ours!’

Father’s face remained impassive, but Vashta knew his expressions well. He was searching his mind for a connection. If he found none, she was sure there was none to be made. ‘Nothing has been reported to me. As far as I know, there has been no disturbance at Andramadiss.’

The heir looked back and forth between his sister and Loora. His sister nodded, but the latter looked uncertain.

That was enough to confirm it was the truth. ‘Perhaps you are unaware, sir, of what your soldiers are doing in that area. I realise it has been at peace for some time but there is no doubt that we have suffered losses in that region.’

‘And I say again that, if it is so, it has not been reported to me.’ Father scowled. ‘I will investigate to see if what you say is true.’

Loora jumped up again. ‘How dare you accuse your true leader of lying!’

The heir held up his hand. ‘I can assure you it is. And I doubt our people would kill some of our own.’

Father’s lips lifted. ‘Then perhaps you don’t know them as well as you think.’

Loora stepped forward again, but the heir caught her eye and she sank back into her chair. 'Perhaps the truth is something else, then. The region is mountainous. Could it be hiding deserters or anyone who might want to see hostilities resumed in the area?'

Father considered that. 'It's possible, I suppose, although I can't imagine why.'

The heir leant forward. 'Sir, I don't seek animosity with you. As I said, I'd like to see peace between our two races once again. I have come here today because I want your permission to go through Andramadiss as extensively as possible without fear of provocation. Hopefully, I will be able to determine what caused the loss of the soldiers. Perhaps this would be of benefit to both sides and demonstrate our goodwill.'

It didn't take long to see that Father would agree. 'Very well. I will ensure that my people leave yours alone as long as none of our fortifies are touched.'

The heir seemed pleased. 'That's a reasonable request.' He looked at Vashta again. 'May I have permission to seek you out if we discover anything of note?'

'You may.'

'Then, with your permission, we shall return to our lands until we have news.' The heir bowed his head before signalling to his guards and companions to follow him. The guards went out backwards, weapons at the ready, until they were out of sight.

Once they were gone, Father turned to his aide. 'Ensure they return safely to their lands.'

'Your Great Highness, taking their heir as hostage would—'

'Be an unreasonable thing given that they came in peace and did us no harm.'

'That we could see,' Mother said, ruffling her skirts.

Father stroked his chin. 'Aliana, while I may not have their talent for lie detection, I pride myself on being a good reader of people.'

'You forget, my darling,' she replied, 'they are experts at lies, both identifying and telling them. There is no doubt in my mind that this weak story is a cover for their true intentions, probably to see how

heavily fortified the palace is.'

Father turned to Mestitha. 'What do you make of this?'

Vashta had been expecting this question. As heir to the throne, Mestitha was often asked her opinion on political disputes. Her reply was no surprise. 'I don't believe it, Father. They seek to ingratiate themselves in some way. Perhaps they see strategic usefulness in Andramadiss and want to explore it unhindered to that end. They are aggressors who should never be trusted.'

'I think they'd say the same about us,' said Vashta.

Her sister was so predictable. She straightened her back so she could glare down at her, even though she was only just taller. 'We are nothing like them!'

'Vashta, please.' Father turned back to her oldest sister. 'Although she does have a point, my dear. And you heard from the heir himself that he is pondering peace.'

'If that was true,' said Mother.

'Yes,' said Mestitha. 'And you know full well that while he may desire peace, his father does not. He has been the strongest aggressor for all his reign, and *he* sits on the Verindal throne.'

Father looked tired. He turned to the council members. 'Make arrangements to send extra troops to Andramadiss, although they're not to engage the enemy unless the enemy engages them first. In the meantime, I want a full investigation of the region to see if what they say is true.'

'Yes, Your Great Highness.'

As the courtiers left the throne room and her family went back to their duties, Vashta glanced at her father's weary face. While she loved the thrill of a battle, she couldn't bear the marks it left on her loved ones.

CHAPTER TWO

Brandonin ran his hand along the soft metallic coating on his seat.

Flexible metal that gave under his weight, like a cushion. It was one of the new innovations his people had developed, although this one wasn't available to the general public yet. His roller was the only one fitted with it.

His sister, Larinda, sat beside him, with Loora across from them. She ran a hand over her hair. 'Those people are so unnerving. I hope they let us return.'

Brandonin wished she'd kept her mouth shut as he noticed Larinda stiffen beside him. She turned to him, her brown eyes darting everywhere. 'Would they do that?'

He opened his mouth before Loora could shoot off hers. 'Of course they wouldn't. We made an official visit arranged under a treaty. That treaty says that a delegation from each side can visit the other and leave in peace. It's been in place for well over a hundred years now and I've never heard of it being violated.'

'Not that it's been used often,' Loora remarked.

No, it hadn't. He'd wanted to use it numerous times to see if some sort of peace could be achieved, like the peace that had existed in the past. He knew his people were more tired of war than they were afraid of the Vendel.

And why were they afraid? The Vendel were so like them, they must have a common ancestor. While DNA meant they were officially considered different species, that term wasn't used often. There were more potent insults to slander them with. There was no doubt that Verindal and Vendel ate the same, drank the same, even loved the same.

Both races had the same variations in skin colour and tone, hair and eye colour, different heights, different weights. Ten fingers, ten toes. Every facet of their physical form was shared between them.

The place they diverged was in their special abilities. He knew how terrifying the Vendel were in battle when their faces became deformed and their skills super-human. 'Mutated' was the way many of his people spoke of it. And perhaps it was a kind of mutation, a variation between them on a cellular level. After all, in his race, royal females could detect lies, an ability that had never been documented among the Vendel.

So that seemed to be the sole difference between them; an insignificant one, in his mind. Away from the battlefield, away from the political sphere, they behaved and looked normal. More than normal, if the chief prince's daughters were anything to go by. He'd heard rumours of the five golden-haired beauties, but he hadn't thought much about them until he'd seen them for himself. It had made it almost impossible to concentrate on the reason for his visit.

It also made it hard to concentrate on swatting away Loorá's constant doubts. 'They must have learnt to hide their lies,' she said.

That earned a snort. 'I've never known you two to be wrong about lies before, not when you're backing each other up.'

'Nonetheless,' Loorá replied, 'they've obviously found a way to do it.'

It was hard not to lose his temper with her. 'I don't think so.'

'What's the alternative?' Loorá asked. 'That they were telling the truth?'

Brandonin turned to Larinda. 'What does your ability tell you?' He knew she was more reasonable.

And she was. The way she flicked a braid of her hair over her shoulder was a rebuke of the older woman. 'It tells me they were speaking the truth.'

'Impossible,' Loorá declared.

'Well, without any further evidence, that's the conclusion we must come to.'

There was ice in her tone. ‘You know what view the overlord will take.’

Yes, he knew all too well what his father would think. *A Vendel tell the truth? It’s more likely that the sky will lose all its colours!*

Brandonin loved his father but he was immovable when it came to anything positive about the Vendel. And any mention of that dreaded horror—peace—was met with unbending resistance. It didn’t help that most of their council did nothing more than nod whenever Father spoke.

He knew a number of them benefited financially from continued war so their failure to contradict him wasn’t just because they loved their ageing monarch. On the contrary, some had already approached him about continued support for their efforts after his ‘dear beloved father left them forever’, hoping his talk of peace was the whim of an idealistic young man.

Brandonin looked out the window at the buildings surrounding him. The Vendel didn’t build anything higher than a few spans but at least their buildings reflected their sky, just like the ones at home. He had only seen images of Matarsiss before, many taken from their fliers with brand-new long-range vision takers. The Vendel had no idea how much information they’d gained with their most recent tech.

As they pulled up at the final Vendel checkpoint, he watched the enemy guards as they tried to see him through the one-way glass. He wondered if curiosity motivated them or if they just wanted to know who to shoot on the front line.

Even when they were through the checkpoint and back in Verindal territory, no one in the roller relaxed. It wasn’t until they’d reached the borders of Intersiss that everyone sat back in their seats.

The palace’s beautiful spire was visible even from the city’s outskirts, reaching up into the sky in a gentle curve. Brandonin often marvelled at how the builders of the past had managed to create it without the benefit of modern technology.

The buildings in their streets were taller too, although none as high as the palace. They were bustling as usual, as his people went about their business, buying, selling, working, living. He watched as

several workers chatted on the side of the road, their colourful clothes flowing around them as they relaxed between shifts. He loved the splashes of colour that every Verindal wore.

At least the Vendel High Family also dressed that way, although there was something distinguished in the golden uniforms of their military and security personnel.

Loora sighed. 'It's nice to be back in civilisation.'

'The Vendel aren't primitive, Loora.' But he had to admit, it was easy to tell how much more advanced the Verindal were. Computers, image casters, vision takers, faster rollers, faster fliers, more sophisticated weaponry—these were all Verindal initiatives. His military division had even drawn up plans for a flier they hoped could reach the stars. What an achievement that would be! They had recently sent up capsules with tech in them so their scientists could find out more about what it was like beyond the sky. It intrigued him, especially since the meteor shower that had hit the mountains east of Intersiss the year before. He and Larinda had used one of the new long-range vision takers to watch it.

As they pulled up at the palace, Motronis, chief of the council, hurried up to him, his face tight. 'My Lord, Overlord Dransen wishes to see you.'

'I'll come at once.' *Best get this over with ...*

Upon re-entering the throne room, Brandonin was drawn to the similarities between it and the one he'd just visited. So much of it was almost identical, from the lukis-encrusted throne—several of the rare colour-laden gems sparkled on its armrests—to the plush and colourful décor. It spoke of a shared history that he knew should be revisited.

Father had a select group of his councillors with him, but they weren't the ones Brandonin had hoped to see. As Loora joined them, they turned to him, their gloomy pall throwing darkness over the room.

He bowed before his father and reached out to touch his left shoulder; the traditional greeting of their people. His father returned the gesture.

'My son.' The overlord gave him a thin-lipped smile, the expression pulling at the wrinkles on his face, although his faded brown eyes still

had all the strength he needed. 'I hope your visit was free from peril?'

He thought Father was hoping for a negative response, so Brandonin made his own smile broad. 'We were well-treated and respected.'

Father's pout was comical and his councillors muttered as they turned to Lora. She looked sceptical. 'I wouldn't call our treatment respectful.'

Larinda spoke up. 'Considering we have been at war for years I think their treatment of us was courteous.'

Father seized on this. 'So they were wary?'

'Just as we would be if they sent envoys to visit us,' Brandonin said. 'But we were heard in a fair manner.'

'However, there is concerning news,' said Lora. 'There's reason to believe that the Vendel have learnt how to lie to us.'

He suppressed a groan as shock clouded Father's face and the other councillors bent their heads together in foreboding consultation. 'There's no reason to believe that.'

Lora glared in his direction. She didn't have the nerve to look him in the eye. 'There is every reason. We all know they were responsible for the trouble at Andramadiss, but they claim they did nothing!'

The rumble of conversation echoed around the room.

'And it appeared to you as truth?' Father glanced at Larinda, who nodded. 'That's concerning. How could they develop such a talent?'

'Some say that their technical prowess has increased over the past few years,' said Motronis, one of Father's closest confidants. 'They may have found a way to block our gift.'

Time to rein them in. 'Or perhaps they were telling the truth.'

Everyone looked at him, amazed, except Larinda. She gazed at him calmly, always his support. 'Isn't it at least something we should consider? What if another force destroyed those stationed at Andramadiss?'

Father's frown furrowed his brow. 'How could that be? The intel we received ... Motronis, what did it say?'

Motronis mimicked the overlord's expression. 'That a platoon had

been slaughtered by the Vendel, my Lord.'

'They mentioned the Vendel specifically?' Brandonin asked.

'Why wouldn't they?'

'Did they mention them or not?'

The old man seemed perplexed. 'I'm sure they did.'

'Does it matter?' said Loora. 'We know it had to be them.'

'Yes, it matters. What if we blame the Vendel and miss danger coming from somewhere else?'

Loora spread her hands wide. 'There *is* nowhere else.'

Again, Larinda came to his defence. 'Weren't there rumours of rebels in the north? Deserters? Those who choose to live away from society? Andramadiss is mountainous. That would provide ample surroundings for those who wish to hide from the world.'

'To what purpose?' Father said. 'There are no lukis mines or anything valuable in that region.'

'Perhaps seclusion is all they desire,' his sister replied. 'Perhaps they felt our presence threatened it.'

The mutterings between the council members faded away as Father gazed up at him. 'Brandonin, I can see by your face you have a course of action in mind.'

'I do. I propose going to Andramadiss.' The chorus of disapproval made him raise his hands, seeking silence. 'I will, of course, take the necessary precautions and security details with me, but I feel that this case requires review at close range. Father, would you allow me to do so?'

It had been a long time since his father had given him that look—one both disapproving and proud in equal measure. He wondered which emotion would triumph.

His father was old but not unreasonable. He could not fail to acknowledge that there could be more to this than Vendel trickery. And if there was another significant danger, he would want to know. 'Very well. But please take the utmost care. You are the future of this planet, my son. Don't take unnecessary risks. Use your wisdom to sense danger and remove yourself from it.'

Brandonin felt like blocking his ears to drown out the councillors'

objections but his father waved them away. 'Enough of this for now. We will convene again tomorrow at the council meeting and discuss the full details of the heir's visit. Motronis, make sure you have a complete and accurate transcript of what we know about the events at Andramadiss by that time and Loora, contact the base there and let them know that they will soon host ...' Father turned to him again. 'No, we won't tell them yet, not about Brandonin. Try and think of another excuse. The fewer who know he is attending the better.'

They left the room in a clamour of noise that gradually died away. Loora lingered behind as if to say something but must have thought the better of it, for she turned and hurried after the others.

Once they were out of sight, Father slumped in his throne. 'Those people can be exhausting.'

Brandonin knew it was no use pointing out that many of them mirrored their overlord's feelings.

Larinda patted her father's hand. 'They have served you well and I'm sure they will do so for some time yet.'

He squeezed her fingers before looking at his son once more. 'Are you sure this is a wise idea?'

Brandonin tried to hide his desperation to go. He knew something wasn't right and he felt sure he could find it. 'I don't think there's much choice.'

'Yes, yes. If you say so. You don't have to tell me that you'll be the one who's impartial. I know that too well.' He chuckled. 'Always longing for the truth. Always longing for more information. Always longing for peace.'

Then the look of the leader he had been entered his eyes. 'But remember this, son, although I don't want the Vendel found at fault if they are not, nor do I want them excused simply because you wish to see peace come to this planet. If you are to go, you will find out the truth, not your version of it.'

Brandonin bowed his head. 'I will be thorough, Father. I will do whatever I can to find out who's responsible and bring them to justice. I seek that as much as I do peace.'

The frosty mountain air rubbed his face raw as he clambered up the path behind his guide.

At least, they'd called it a path. He was doing his best to discern anything that looked like marks of passage. All he saw was dark grass which sometimes squelched under his boots and at other times sunk him in mud almost up to his knees.

His five-pronged guard had insisted on following him up the mountain; hardly surprising, given they were entering the area where the slaughter had occurred. He could hear their muttered curses as they fought with the ground. At least their scarlet tunics made them easy to spot against the snow.

He used a tree branch to pull himself up, resisting the urge to ask how much further it was. The squat, wrinkled Verindal who was leading them said little and didn't stumble, even though he never once looked at the ground in front of him. He wasn't clothed to combat the cold of that altitude either.

Finally, he grunted and turned back to them. 'Here.'

The trees thinned to reveal a plateau with several large buildings. Barracks for the men stationed there, he'd been told.

As they emerged from the forest, a man stepped forward to greet them and bowed, his winter officer's uniform creating a bright slash against the snowy backdrop. 'My Lord the Heir?'

Brandonin nodded. 'Yes. You are?'

'Platoon Leader Erdrison, my Lord. My platoon was sent to take over this outpost once the fate of the other was discovered. Please come this way.'

Erdrison insisted they take food and drink before they saw the site of the disaster. Brandonin accepted it, as he knew the man was making sure they had what they needed to withstand the cold. It wasn't long before he was led out of the barracks and further up the mountain. Ten members of the platoon accompanied him and Erdrison, with Brandonin's own guard bringing up the rear. The wiry guide led the way.

'This is it,' the platoon leader said.

‘It’ was another plateau, this one with a few stunted trees. The cold had made the air thick with swirling white, so it was difficult to see much. ‘Why did the platoon come this far up the mountain?’ It seemed too remote to be of use to the Vendel as an entry point into Verindal lands.

‘They used it as a training area. It helped them adapt to the worst conditions.’

‘How much do we know about what happened?’

Erdrison shook his head. ‘We don’t know where the Vendel came from and we don’t know what weapons they were using. It must have been something new because the marks on the bodies ...’

‘What were they like?’

‘Some of them seemed to have been taken down by lasers, and although I haven’t seen every kind of laser we’ve developed, I’d never seen injuries like that. And no sign that the Vendel possess such a weapon. Others had been disembowelled. Our surgeon examined them and said that those soldiers were still alive at the time.’ A slight twitch in the man’s eyelid was the only sign of emotion.

Brandonin peered through the snow. ‘What’s at the end of this plateau?’

‘Nothing, my Lord. It ends in a cliff. We have no idea how the Vendel got up here. There’s no path down that side. Even the locals,’ he nodded at the guide, ‘can’t go that way.’

Brandonin pondered that. ‘How did they manage to take the whole platoon unawares?’

Erdrison found that easier to answer. ‘Their transformed state would enable them to be more effective in these conditions.’

Yes, that was true. The famous Vendel safe state that every one of his soldiers feared even as they mocked it. ‘But you know they can’t stay in that state for long without sugar to replenish them.’

‘Long enough to slaughter them.’

‘Yes, but why the disembowelment? And why do it while those soldiers were still alive?’

One of the platoon spat. ‘They are savages, my Lord.’

‘But it’s not consistent with their usual tactics.’

‘Perhaps it was their way of throwing us off their trail,’ said Erdrison. ‘A deception to confuse us.’

He felt that there was more to it than that. His guards shuffled around, leaving increasing impressions in the snow. ‘We’d better get back.’

The platoon leader and his force looked relieved. ‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘Did your surgeon leave detailed notes on his autopsies?’

‘Yes, my Lord, complete with images. I have them prepared for you.’

‘Good. I’ll want our medics to see the full report.’ He looked around as they returned. ‘I’ll also talk to the overlord about whether we need to maintain a base that’s so remote. Have there been any confirmed reports of Vendel trying to enter our lands by this route?’

‘No, my Lord.’

So it was a waste of resources put in place by his father. ‘I think there are more important areas to guard. I’ll see what we can do.’

While the younger platoon members seemed relieved at his words, their leader’s face remained impassive. ‘Thank you for your interest, my Lord. We will serve you wherever you see fit to place us.’

He knew that. He also knew he wasn’t going to let these men and women end their lives needlessly.

It was clear there was some danger in the Andramadiss Mountains, even if it wasn’t the Vendel who’d attacked. Should they stay there to combat it? The trouble was, the other platoon had stood no chance. Why should a new one be any different? It was imperative that they discovered more about how these soldiers had died and who or what had killed them.

Ivanna held the images up to the light. ‘They made a mess, didn’t they?’

Were all scientists the same? Brandonin had already seen the images of the bodies a number of times and felt nauseated every time he did. However, every time any medical or scientific personnel saw

them, they were either enraptured or made light-hearted remarks.

They weren't just a mess, those bodies. There were organs all over the place. That was another reason he was following this up instead of his father. As far as the overlord was concerned, the Vendel had decided to have fun carving up some of their victims.

At least he'd seen a shudder come from one or two of the junior staffers who stood at their workbenches, testing samples, making notes on a variety of different experiments that Ivanna was running. She was always working on something. His father supplied her with all the new tech they developed. Her lab was sleek, clean and full of every piece of equipment a senior scientist could desire.

Ivanna coughed a little as she sat down and examined the autopsy files again, her petite frame bending over them as she crossed and recrossed her legs. She seemed lost in a world of her own, one filled with dismembered corpses. He waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Eventually, he had to interrupt. 'Ivanna?'

She started, rose and bowed. 'My apologies, my Lord, I'd forgotten what I was doing.' She looked lost as she glanced shamefacedly at him and back to the report.

'Does it tell you anything about what killed these soldiers?'

'It's interesting that they were killed in different ways, and so quickly, too. The culprit is fast, that's for sure. A fast mover and a fast learner, I would say.'

'What makes you think that?'

'Assuming the results of these autopsies are accurate—and I have no reason to doubt that, as I'm familiar with Altranin's work—the soldiers who were killed by laser died first. Although you can see from the shooting patterns,' she pointed them out as Brandonin tried to look at them through half-closed eyes, 'that whoever it was didn't know where to hit at first. They were shooting randomly. I would expect Vendel, even more so when transformed, to have been far cleaner in their killing.'

'However, by the final victim,' she held up another image, 'the

enemy was already well aware of where it needed to aim in order to kill.’

She turned to the worst images. ‘In the disembowelled soldiers, the enemy targeted all the vital organs. According to the report, the first victims—the ones killed by lasers—were killed on the mountain peak, the second another two lengths or so further down. Now, what does that tell you?’

‘That the assailant followed them.’

Her face brightened, reminding him of his tutors when he gave the right answer. ‘Yes, and learning quickly as it, or they, followed.’

Something ominous was building here. ‘What were they learning?’

She held up the image. ‘About us. With the final victims, they knew where the vital organs were situated and, from what I can tell, they wanted to see them while they were still in action, so to speak. But that’s not the most disturbing part.’

It wasn’t? ‘Then what is?’

She dropped the image back on her desk. ‘Like I said, fast at everything. Fast learner. Also fast mover. The time of death between the first victim and the last appears to be a period of no more than ten minspans.’

That couldn’t be right. ‘So in ten minspans it killed a group, then followed the others and autopsied them while they were still alive?’

The look on her face was so academic. Didn’t she realise what this meant? Not if her unflustered tone was anything to go by. ‘It means that you’re dealing with a creature that’s incredibly fast and I’d say there’s more than one of them. How many, I don’t know. And it looks like they’ve worked out the most effective ways to kill us.’

Brandonin took a deep breath. He knew panicking would be useless. But there was one final thing he needed to know. ‘In your professional opinion, is there any animal or creature on Verindon that could have done this?’

She shook her head. ‘I’ve never seen anything like this before. No creature on this planet kills like this, and certainly none that could survive in the Andramadiss Mountains. And where do the lasers come

in? Or the autopsies?’

‘Could it have been the Vendel?’

She looked over the notes again. ‘I suppose they could have developed a laser and used it. We also know they’re fast, but why perform the autopsies? What did they have to gain by that? They already know our biology; it’s more or less the same as theirs. And if it were the Vendel, their aim would be to kill quickly. I can’t see a reason for it. No, I’d be surprised if they were the culprits.’

‘Which means ...’ Not that he needed her to say it.

‘Whatever it is, it’s stalking us. And I have no idea what it might be.’