

STEINER had sworn his oath of fealty, kneeling and seizing Garnet's hand with enthusiasm, and she had tried not to flinch under the tightness of his grasp before he performed the remaining motions and eventually clanked away, flustered. Now it was Beatrix's turn, and Garnet couldn't suppress the small smile of relief that formed on her approach. The general of the Alexandrian army carried herself as she knew she should, striding briskly towards the dais in a way that reminded Garnet of the admiration she had always felt for her mother's top military commander – her commander, now. An unexpected, but ultimately unsurprising, thrill of anticipation pulsed through her at the thought.

Beatrix approached the throne, bowed low, and began to speak the words of the oath, her one good eye fixed on Garnet's throughout. Garnet let the steady stream of speech wash over her, keeping her own gaze centred on Beatrix's soft hair. She knew why her mother had always surrounded herself with women: Brahne's preferences were common knowledge across the continent, the subject of much gossip and many a raised eyebrow, but never discussed openly. As Beatrix murmured her vow, Garnet felt that she understood her mother more than ever before. Steiner had been an eager puppy as he took his oath, stumbling over his words in his effort to please his new queen and his nervousness about the ceremony's concluding acts, but Beatrix was the picture of grace, calm and dignified – and her hair, thought Garnet, her

hair was so soft.

“My queen,” Beatrix concluded, and reached for Garnet’s hand to bring the ceremony to a close.

Garnet let her take it, but the touch of Beatrix’s warm skin unsettled her: it was somehow too familiar, too close to how she had imagined it. To what she had imagined, and perhaps even longed for, not just over the last few minutes, but, Garnet now realised, for some time before that as well. Maybe since Beatrix had defected to their side, all those months ago. Maybe longer, since the time that Beatrix was a teenage knight causing all sorts of stirs in the castle by her rapid ascendance through the ranks of the army, and Garnet was a mere child, noting the impression that Beatrix was making on the court, and falling quite happily under that same spell herself.

“Let’s stop this,” Garnet said, and Beatrix’s eye narrowed in confusion as she held Garnet’s hand, suspended in the space between them.

Garnet clarified. She’d meant to say something similar to Steiner earlier, for different reasons, but he’d been so eager to fulfil his duty, and she’d thought it best just to let it happen. “We don’t need to keep these traditions,” she said. “I’m trying to take the opportunity to modernise things.”

“You didn’t say that to Steiner,” Beatrix replied.

“He’s old-fashioned,” said Garnet. “I knew he wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Then,” said Beatrix, “surely you cannot deny me the same privilege you allowed him.”

“It would be different, coming from you,” said Garnet.

Beatrix said nothing, but jerked her uncovered eyebrow questioningly, and Garnet searched for a way to explain herself.

“From you,” she began, “it would ... it would fool me, perhaps, into thinking it meant something.”

“And you would wish to avoid that?”

Garnet tried to understand Beatrix’s question, tried to determine which way it leant and what precise inclination it hinted at, but she failed. “I would hate to have to disabuse myself of a false hope,” she admitted.

“Then I will let you judge for yourself whether that hope is false,” said Beatrix, and she bowed her head to begin the rest of the ceremony.

*The first kiss, on the hand: the protector vows to bear weapons on her liege’s behalf, and to take up arms against any who would challenge her authority.*

Beatrix pressed her lips, just briefly, to the back of Garnet’s hand, and Garnet felt their touch, solid and confident and practised, and the brief imprint of warmth they left before Beatrix gently let go and drew closer to her.

*The second kiss, on the cheek: the protector vows to defend her liege, to cover those areas where she may be weak, both physically and spiritually.*

Garnet felt Beatrix's lips touch her a second time; square in the middle of her right cheek. The bandanna covering Beatrix's missing eye brushed against Garnet's forehead, and she caught a scent of spices, the sweet tang of citrus, a little rosemary; her eyes closed as she drank it in.

"It is not mere duty that has me do this," said Beatrix quietly.

*The third kiss, on the lips: the protector acknowledges that she and her liege are of one mind, one soul, and that she has no goals now beyond what her liege desires.*

Beatrix's mouth met Garnet's, and she felt her general's lips now in so much more detail: their softness, pressed against her mouth, somehow the exact fit for it; her sweet breath blowing in against Garnet's tongue; and the curl of Beatrix's fingers on Garnet's shoulder. The kiss lingered, more than a purely ceremonial one had any right to, and Garnet knew, now.

"I hope that makes things clear," said Beatrix, once it was over, her face a little flushed, and Garnet nodded, and placed her hand over Beatrix's on her own shoulder, and although the ceremony had finished, neither of them moved.