
Chapter 1

It seemed as if they had been marching forever.

And perhaps they had.

Her feet were cracked and bleeding, and she'd lost weight she couldn't afford to lose in the first place. She was barely able to find any kind of sustenance at all, between the unforgiving, barren landscape that yielded little beyond sand and heat and the fact that she was doing her best not to garner anyone's attention.

She was skin and bones, and she was surprised that she wasn't dead already. Each evening, she wished for that bliss, and she was left disappointed and disillusioned every time she awoke in the morning.

But an even greater miracle—if one could call it that—was the fact that she hadn't been touched. She'd been skirting around the camp followers, who were moving around the camp itself—on the rare occasions that the army actually stopped, doing her best to avoid contact with her fellow hangers on. She never spoke to anyone, she never asked for anything, and she never made eye contact with anyone or anything, doing the majority of her scavenging at night, when she could, when she was less likely to see or be seen. And she made damned good and sure that when she

took something, even when it was a big piece of food that set her stomach to loudly grumbling and cramping just looking at it, that it was something no one else wanted or would mark its absence in any way.

If she had any bit of luck in this life—which was a generous word to use, considering her meager existence—it was that, probably because of her malnourishment, she had yet to become a woman, despite the fact that she would estimate that she was nearly nineteen years old. Oh, there were subtle signs that her life was going to change radically at some point. Her breasts had finally begun to grow just a bit, and she was sporting stray hairs where she hadn't before—they were but the barest hints of what was going to happen to her. There was no overall growth, though—she wasn't eating enough for that. She was almost abnormally tiny—and now relatively frail, too—and it was likely that she would remain so, for the rest of her wretched existence.

However long—or preferably short—that ended up being.

Sometimes starvation could be a good thing. Because she was so small, she was easily overlooked, and anyone she encountered tended to assume that she was a child and thus much less of a threat.

That, combined with the fact that she only wore discarded clothes—rags, really—from men, hoping to blend in with them much more so than the women, was what had kept her alive to this point.

It was nearly dawn, and she knew she had to convince herself that she needed to get up and begin—join—the earnest hunt for food before it was all gone. She was far from the only straggler who was trying to survive living off the very little that was first cast off by the hungry warriors then picked over by their servants. The boys who tended the horses or maintained the armor would descend on it next, and, by the time it got to those of her ilk, there was very little left but bone and gristle, if that.

The commander had screwed up her usual schedule of scavenging at night—he had them on the move all night rather than

during the day. It was easier on the men, in general, rather than having to march in the unrelenting heat, and it also preserved a bit of the element of surprise, she imagined, although she couldn't be sure that was what he was thinking.

The female camp followers tended to huddle together while they combed the garbage piles and every other area they thought they could find food. But their ultimate goal was the exact opposite of hers—to be noticed by one of the more highly ranked soldiers, preferably an officer. That would lead to a much cushier life, even if they knew exactly how they would be expected to earn their position in his tent, where she would be able to eat his food—real food, the kind that no one else had eaten before them—and perhaps even find a comfortable place to sleep in his bed.

But she had no interest in trading her body for such simple comforts.

She had no illusions about who she was—what she was going to become at some point soon—and she had no interest in doing anything that might trigger what she considered would be her own personal Armageddon—even if she survived the resulting riot the knowledge of her mere presence would incite.

She had seen others—of her own very particular ilk—and how they had become slaves to their own needs and desires, which inevitably ended with them becoming slaves to some enormous, hulking, stupid, cruel Alpha, who rutted on them mindlessly until they were bred—over and over again.

Her own mother was one of those women—utterly under her Alpha's thumb, forced to have child after child, kept perpetually pregnant with no say whatsoever about it—or about anything else, for that matter. And she had long since vowed that she would kill herself before she would allow herself to be so degraded—to lose herself so completely, becoming meek and submissive and equally as idiotic as the man who forced himself on her.

There were small clumps of comfort women ringing the edge of the pile of detritus that had been cast away by their betters.

She avoided them, staying even further away from the perimeter, remaining ever watchful and vigilant while trying to identify something—anything—that was edible from the pile of bones, rags, bandages, contents of slop jars, discarded bodies of the sick or those unfortunate enough to fight against them that contained the occasional nugget of food—previously chewed or otherwise.

She was much too hungry to be fussy about that kind of thing—or anything else.

Whether it was the incessant hunger or bone deep weariness that drove her to do it, she wasn't sure. But that night, she wandered away from where everyone else was scrounging, further away than she'd ever been in the darkness, following the call of a stomach that was so painfully empty, she wasn't even sure that she would be able to keep anything she found down.

But then she spotted it—an almost uneaten apple that had somehow landed cleanly on the skin so that it wasn't covered in sand. Someone had eaten a ring around its flesh but hadn't bothered to eat the ends. It was an obscene waste of food, in her eyes, but probably not in the original eater's.

Humiliation prickling at the edges of her consciousness—but nowhere near enough to stop her from doing it—she literally fell on it, scooping the entire thing up in both hands and bringing it to her mouth, nearly swallowing it whole.

The taste was almost overwhelmingly blissful—tart and sweet at the same time. It obviously hadn't been on the pile for long, and the juice ran down her parched throat, the burst of clean, natural flavor nearly bringing tears to her eyes.

And as she spit out the seeds—carefully collecting them in a knotted rag for use later, if it became necessary—her eyes lit on another prize that she didn't recognize, lying in the midst of a small pile of debris. Still, it looked edible, and it was. This was sweeter than the last—not an apple, but red, with no tanginess whatsoever. It was in the same condition as the last; some wasteful person hadn't bothered to eat much of it. It seemed a little older and in not quite as good condition—there was a slight

layer of dirt—but she brushed it away and sank her teeth into it with gusto.

She was in no state to be a chooser.

It, too, was devoured in mere seconds, until there was nothing left but the stem.

Not much farther away, something long and thin and brightly colored—under the dirt—lay calling to her. Without so much as a thought, she launched herself at it, although there was no one else around she would have to fight off. The others had gone in an entirely different direction from her and she was quite alone—which should have alarmed her, but she was delighting entirely too much in her amazing discoveries to pay much attention.

This was hard but sweet, and she thoroughly enjoyed the act of viciously crunching it into oblivion.

Her eyes continued to light on small pieces of discarded food—another apple core, a half-chewed ear of corn, and the last thing her greedy stomach caused her to reach for, the best thing yet: an almost untouched leg of something.

Meat. Real meat, with one mouthful taken out of it, but otherwise pristine.

She hadn't had meat in so long, she barely remembered what it tasted like, not that she'd ever had it on a regular basis.

Looking around furtively to see if there was anyone else who had spotted the bounty she wanted for herself, her mind registered that there was no one around her at all.

She was in the clear.

It was hers, all hers!

Her arm shot out to grab it without so much as a thought, intent on cramming it into her mouth and debriding it of the meat in one glutinous movement, removing a perfectly clean bone to toss over her shoulder for some other poor cretin to descend upon before she searched for more of the cache of wonderful food she'd found.

And when a hand came out of nowhere, clamping tightly

around her wrist, she was so startled that she didn't gasp or scream. It all happened much too quickly.

First, he caught her hand, then he twisted her around so that her back was to his front, the other big hand finding its way to cover her mouth. It was such an enormous hand that he was very nearly smothering her, pressing her nose closed at the same time.

She twisted and turned and tried to get away—but trying to breathe first and foremost.

Before she could get away, though, everything around her began to get darker and darker, until she could no longer keep her eyes open, slumping—unconscious—in his arms.

He noticed that the little brat was no longer fighting him, which caused him to look down and realize why. Mach snorted a little at himself—sometimes he could be a bit overzealous in his pursuit, and it looked like this was one of those times.

His trap had worked nicely, as it always did, and now he had a young boy who could be pressed into service for very little investment on their end. He could be a stable boy, a servant, or be put to work doing things that required someone of smaller carriage. Sometimes the boys he got were sent into small caves or down holes where none of the rest of them would fit into in order to spy on the enemy or set booby traps in their way.

In return, he would be given the relative safety of living with the warriors, a warm, soft place to sleep with the horses or in the tent of whomever it was that he ended up serving, and would have access to much more and much better quality food than could be had in the trash heaps.

When he picked the boy up, Mach frowned. Damn, this one was small—little more than a bag of surprisingly delicate bones—perhaps he should throw the boy back and look for another. But he didn't have any more scraps at the moment, and he hated to waste the time and effort. He'd gotten one, and he wasn't much for letting any of them go.

He'd find a use for him somehow. He'd been hoping to find someone for their leader, who had lost his boy to the fever that

had swept through the ranks a few weeks ago. But there would be other opportunities to find just the right one, he was sure.

There was never a dearth of starving, desperate children hanging around who could be easily gotten for the price of a few scraps from his table.

Carrying the boy, limp in his arms, Mach shouldered his way through the flap in his tent, only to find that he had been graced by a visit from the commander.

Garron, Commander of the dreaded and feared Skorge—an impressively large, very well trained, extremely deadly organization of Alpha soldiers—turned when he entered.

"Out procuring, I see."

As much as he prided himself on being an Alpha himself, there was no denying that the commander's mere presence was more than enough to make him—everyone—feel downright submissive, through no overt means on his part, but due entirely to his size.

He was nearly seven feet tall, and his shoulders were very nearly half that wide, piled thick with muscle. He towered over everyone and everything, and although that made him more of a target than anyone fighting around him, he was never anywhere but front and center of his charging warriors. He was always first in the fight and last out of it, turning his hand to every possible chore, even now that he was—technically—king of all he surveyed, although he'd claimed no title but the one his soldiers had given him. Nothing was beneath him, and that only made the men who followed him just that much more loyal to him.

He even tended his own enormous charger—Azimov—but then, he had worked his way up through the ranks of the man he had eventually replaced—nearly always under suspicious circumstances that no one was willing to investigate in the least. So, he knew how to maintain and repair their precious vehicles, as well as the armor and weapons most of the warriors wore or used. He even knew how important it was that his men be well fed and

had done his own turn at doing what he called "KP"—making meals for the troops—although no one knew why.

Garron's eyes were everywhere at once, and what he couldn't see, his officers could, and he was adamant about being kept informed of everything that was going on, from the smallest infractions by the newest soldiers to the state of readiness their enemy maintained.

He'd created a successful nation-state of his own, but his feet were itchy, his arms aching to hold a broadsword so big and honed so sharp that would slice through the length of a man—even one of his size—like butter. Although he certainly supported their use of more advanced technologies, he preferred to fight the way he always had, rather than holding one of their machine guns or driving one of the tanks.

Although he wouldn't like to admit the possibility, the fact that he had so many irons in the fire meant that he needed an assistant, and—although he knew that many young men would be more than happy to volunteer for that spot—Garron liked to take in an orphaned boy and fashion him into a soldier, as his mentor, Pondius, had done for him.

Of course, he had eventually killed the older man without so much as a by your leave and had quickly moved to consolidate his power over his benefactor's army.

And as he did so, Garron knew that the older man never expected anything different from any boy he brought into his service.

Unlike some men, he had absolutely no interest in using his cabin boy in any other way. His boys were always safe from any kind of amorous advance from his quarter. As, surprisingly, were most women, even the rarest of the rare.

He'd met omegas before and never felt so much as a tingle. He was too focused on his goals, on what he wanted—what he intended—to achieve before he died, to allow himself to be distracted by what he considered to be the weaknesses of the flesh.

Not that he didn't have a high sex drive, he did. He just managed to ignore it except on a few unusual nights of the year, when he allowed himself free rein to indulge his tastes.

But those nights were very few and very far between.

He knew that made him an object of curiosity to his men—perhaps even pity to some, although they would never dare to show either of those opinions to him. But he didn't care in the least.

Garron intended to rule as much of the Known World as possible, and he was getting close to his goal. Zerk's enclave was one of the last—and, if he had to admit it, best run and defended—holdouts, and he knew it wasn't going to be easy to go up against his old arch nemesis.

But he was quite looking forward to it, too. Most of the other—smaller—villages that passed for cities nowadays weren't anywhere near as well guarded as he knew Zerk's would be, and his men were also known for being a well-disciplined, highly motivated, well trained group of lethal soldiers.

Luckily, his own force was at least as frighteningly skilled, utterly ruthless, and completely merciless.

It was going to be an incredibly good match, and he fully intended to win it.

"Have you found me my new cabin boy?"

Mach frowned for the shortest second, before he could wrangle his expression into something the other man would find more acceptable and would be less likely to get his throat slit.

"I haven't found just the right one yet, Sir. I want to find the perfect boy for you."

The commander didn't look at all convinced.

"Who's that you have there?" he asked casually.

"Oh, a very scrawny boy. I was thinking he might do well as a mole. He wouldn't be anywhere near tough enough for you."

"I'll be the judge of that, Mach. Let me see him."

"Well, he's unconscious, Sir. And he's really small. I wouldn't want you to be unhappy with him."

It was the other man's low, dominant, "Now," that she awoke to, but she remained loosely draped over the first man's arm—at least until the point at which she found herself planted on her feet, cheek being patted much less than gently in order to rouse her.

Keeping a painful hold on her wrist and repeatedly ordering that she stay still, Mach tried to arrange the boy to the best advantage, but she did her best to wiggle and squirm away from him every time he reached out to touch her.

Finally, he'd had enough, laying the back of his hand across her thin cheek so hard that it knocked her back against the wall of the tent, only to be carelessly tugged back into a standing position.

Before he got a chance to manhandle her again, the commander advanced on them, an enormous hand landing on a thin shoulder as he corralled her away from Mach and to his side.

"This one will do. Submit your fee through channels to be paid," he said curtly, ducking through the flap in the tent with his new boy in tow.

But the expression on the other man's face had Mach very worried, his stomach knotting painfully. How could he have known that the commander would balk at him trying to knock some sense into the boy?

He dragged his hand over his face, wondering if he would ever see the money he'd been promised. He wasn't at all sure that he had enough guts to ask for it—definitely not from him, but he wondered if the quartermaster might not take kindly to his request, either, if the commander poisoned his mind against him.

Meanwhile, things for her had gone from bad to worse. Her incessant hunger had caused her to be lured away from the relative safety of her fellow scavengers, her cheek was sore, and her ear was ringing, and now she was being force marched in front of the largest man she had ever seen in her life.

He was so much taller than she was that it hurt her neck to

look up at him, and she only did so once. His expression was as foreboding as the rest of him, and all of that combined had her nearly shaking herself to death right in front of him.

He hadn't taken his hand off her shoulder, using it to guide her somewhere she was quite sure she didn't want to go.

They ended up at a tent that was only slightly larger than the others but was no more ornate in the least. It could have been any soldier's tent, consciously not marking it as the Supreme Commander's.

It wasn't much more opulent inside, really—certainly not what she expected from a commander's tent. The bed was the biggest part of it, but then it would have to be larger than normal to accommodate him. There was a good-sized table and chairs to one side, as well as another smaller table that obviously served as a desk.

It was almost disturbingly sparse. There were no trophies, no historical trinkets or curiosities from the Before Time, nothing that revealed much of anything about him, beyond a set of shelves on which there were more books than she had ever seen in her life.

"What's your name, boy?" he asked, turning to address her once they were inside the tent together.

She opened her mouth to speak but couldn't.

"C'mon, c'mon, boy. As long as you obey me and behave, there's no reason for you to be afraid of me."

She tried again, fear robbing her of her mind.

"O!" she started to tell him her real name, then her sense of self-preservation came to the fore and she thought that it would probably go better for her if he continued to think that she was a boy for as long as was possible. "Olly." Her tone was as low and soft as she could make it. It helped that her throat was parched again and everything came out hoarsely, to say nothing of the fact that fear was constricting every muscle she owned.

"Olly, you may call me 'Commander' or 'Sir'."

"Yes, Sir," she replied.

She thought she detected the hint of a smile on his face, but she figured she had imagined it. The big brute didn't look as if he smiled much, if at all.

"Very good. You are to be my cabin boy. You'll help me dress, fetch and carry, look after my uniforms and clothes, keep the tent clean, empty my chamber pot, and do anything else that I ask you to do. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir."

"In return, you will have a small stipend, as well as my protection. You will sleep here, on this pallet at the foot of my bed, and you will eat whatever remains on my plate when I am done eating."

She didn't know what a "stipend" was, but he was listing it with the other positives, so it must be something good, she was barely able to reason. "Yes, Sir."

"How long has it been since you had a good meal?"

That answer depended on whether or not she should consider the food that caused her to end up here a good meal, but she had just enough brain cells that weren't terrified into uselessness to answer, "A while."

To her surprise, he nodded as if he understood starvation personally—which hardly seemed likely—then produced a platter heaped with food that had barely been touched and put it down on the table. "Have a seat. Eat your fill, but don't stuff yourself. Sometimes a stomach that's been empty for a while will become violently upset at the idea of being full, and I have no interest in smelling vomit this evening."

She didn't have to be told twice. Ollyah dove into the meal with both hands, only to have the food abruptly smacked out of them. She nearly dove onto the floor to cram every last, precious morsel she could find there into her mouth, but she was kept in her seat with ridiculous ease. One hand was placed in her lap—where there was a scrap of material that was softer than anything she'd ever encountered—and the other given something metal with a round bowl on the end.

"It's a spoon. Use it to eat instead of your hands. If I see you use your hands again, I'll punish you."

She did not want to know what that might entail, so she ate—however awkwardly at first—with the spoon he had given her. It was ambrosia, every mouthful of it. She had to swallow down the small moans of pleasure that bubbled up in her throat that would definitely have made him suspicious of her gender.

A small glass of something appeared near the plate, and she sucked it down. It was refilled by his own hand, but he held the glass there when she reached for it.

"Slowly, boy. This isn't water. It's mead, and if you're not used to it, and especially on an empty stomach, you could find yourself getting drunk, which would also result in a punishment."

Olly wondered if there was anything that *wouldn't* result in a punishment, but she wisely kept that question to herself.

Garron pattered around, watching the boy eat and getting some small things done about the place. He preferred strict order to any kind of chaos—he got enough of that as a small boy, and then again when he was in the midst of battle—and liked things around him to be just so. There was a place for everything, his father had used to say, and everything in its place. That was something he would make sure his cabin boy knew.

Long before she was full, he took the plate away from her. "You can have more later, if that stays down."

Suppressing the urge to dive at the platter as her eyes were glued to him putting it away from her, on his desk, Olly replied, "Yes, Sir," gratified to see that the giant looked satisfied at that—at least for the moment.