

DELETED SCENE #4

ALLARA TALKS WITH CHRIS'S SISTERS

(Prior to Chapter 39, in which Allara follows Chris to the battle in Ballion, she originally had a conversation with Chris's sisters Tielle Ordas and Sirra Bowen.)

ESTA SWIPED ALLARA'S nightgown from the mirror-plated dressing screen. "You're incorrigible! You know full well you're supposed to stay here where it's safe. Or have you forgotten you are still *concussed*?"

"I can't stay abed forever. It's been almost a week since I hit my head."

After two days of sleeping for hours and lounging around the palace doing nothing, the nausea had lessened. That was what mattered. She could deal with the residual headaches.

She snugged the laces at the front of her linen tunic and pushed back the wide filmy sleeves to check the derringer holster on her forearm. She'd risen early and dressed in breeches and boots before Esta and the maids had even entered with her breakfast.

Esta threw the nightgown at the long padded bench in the room's center and stood with her hands on her hips. "A good half of that week was spent riding at breakneck speed and doing who knows what else to aggravate the injury." Her face flushed to match the color of her rouged cheekbones. "This is Captain Quinnon's idea, isn't it?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Oh, I saw him stalking about, getting the skycar ready to depart. If it wasn't his idea, he'd be as upset as I am, and no doubt you'd

listen to *him*. Why does he want you to go running off to Réon Couteau of all places? Although I must say, better someplace civilized than the battlefield at Ballion.”

Allara fetched a red suede coat from the chair next to the door. “I need to see the Garowai. I need his wisdom. And I need to go now, while I can still move freely about the country.”

“Freely, my foot. You’re likely to get yourself stoned to death on the way out of the city.”

Allara had spent the last few days pretending away her fear, but now it extended a cold finger. “Perhaps.” She opened the door into the bedroom and looked back. “I have to take my chances.”

“Of course. As always.” Esta bent to retrieve the nightgown and picked vigorously at a piece of lint. She puckered her lip and refused to meet Allara’s gaze.

Allara’s heart went out to the woman. Esta had been a mother to her in so many ways, despite her shortcomings. She didn’t understand and would probably never understand. But that didn’t mean she loved Allara the less.

Allara tried to find words of reassurance. “I’ll be fine.”

Esta plucked harder. “Well, we’ll see.” She cleared her throat and turned to the wall of windows behind her. “The kitchen notified me they still have some Koraudian snow oranges. I’ll see some are saved for you, if you manage to return in one piece.”

“Thank you, Esta.”

She only raised a shoulder, and Allara left it at that. She’d never been graceful with goodbyes, and she wouldn’t do Esta the dishonor of hiding behind formalities. She hooked her weapons belt over her arm and shut the door behind her.

Servants and courtiers nodded as she passed, but she hurried on by. She couldn’t risk the questions and the condemnation she would find there. This morning it was taking all her strength just to walk out of her quarters. She descended a flight to the second floor.

The doorman swept open the doors to the skycar parapet and admitted her to the chaos of Guardsmen and horses preparing to load up. Instead of the royal car, an unmarked train, full of out-of-uniform Guardsmen and their mounts, hung on the cable next to the wall. Quinnon stood at the far end, overseeing.

Esta was right about the excursion being as much his idea as Al-lara's. The night before, he had stopped her on the stairs on her way up after dinner and suggested they leave for Réon Couteau in the morning before heading on to Ballion in a few days, as they'd originally planned. Réon Couteau was a hotspot of pro-Nateros sentiments, but if everyone thought she was still in Glen Arden, she would theoretically be safer there. "And perhaps the Garowai will come up for a palaver." Quinnon's good eye narrowed when he said it.

That was the only reason she had agreed to go. Safety was becoming a relative thing. If she clung to the idea of safety, she'd never go anywhere again. But she did need the Garowai's wisdom right now. Even Quinnon must be getting desperate if he wanted her to talk with the Garowai. He'd never had much use for the Garowai in the past. So she'd agreed.

He saw her and approached. "You think you can handle this?" He took her coat off her arm and held it up for her to put on.

She shrugged into it, transferring her weapons belt from one hand to the other so she could access the sleeves. "I'll be fine. A twelve-hour sky-car ride, with only a stop in Thyra Junction, is just one more day of doing nothing. That's the same thing I'd be doing if I were here 'healing.'"

He nodded to the unmarked train. "We won't get through the intersections as fast, but I figure we've got our best chance of getting out of here if it's not ruddy obvious who we are. Before we go, you've got some visitors." He gestured over his shoulder to where two women waited at the end of the parapet. "I brought 'em up here so you could talk to them in private without wasting any more time than we have to."

She gave him a questioning look.

"His sisters." He sounded vaguely disapproving.

"Ah." She walked the length of the parapet, staying under the eaves to avoid the spitting rain.

The two women, one dark and one fair, dropped curtsies and saluted as she neared. She inclined her head in return.

The younger of the two, a pretty girl with delicate features and a sharp chin, spoke first. "Thank you for seeing us, my lady. We didn't mean to interrupt you."

Allara managed a smile. "Your name is Sirra, isn't it?"

"Yes." She gestured to the woman who stood just beyond her. "And you remember my sister, Tielle Ordas?"

Allara nodded to the other sister. Two young girls, both fair-haired, clung to Tielle's skirts and stared at Allara with the special awe female children always seemed to reserve for princesses. She knelt and offered a hand to each. "How do you do?"

Shyly, the girls each squeezed her fingertips and, when their mother's hands tightened on their shoulders, dropped curtsies of their own.

Allara rose. "I'm afraid I can't offer you hospitality at the moment. As you can see, I'm about to depart, although I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention that to anyone."

The iron in Tielle's face didn't bend. "Aye. I don't blame you. And we won't take much of your time, my lady. We've only come to find out what we can about what's happening to our brother. And what *will* happen to him."

"What do you mean?"

She took a breath, out of nerves or maybe even fear, but her eyes didn't waver from Allara's. "He's changed."

Sirra stirred beside her taller sister and frowned. "He's not that different. He is still brave and he is still honorable. He's still the same person."

Tielle shook her head. "I look in his eyes, and I see a stranger. Sometimes he slips and calls me Lisa."

"It's a pretty name," Allara said.

"But it is not my name. And he is not my brother." She spat the words, then leaned back, as if trying to contain herself.

Sirra's expression entreated. "We're lucky to still have him at all. We know that. He could have never found his way back to us. He could be dead himself, in this time when so many are dying. We just need to know the truth. Will he come back? I mean, will he ever be the way he used to be?"

Allara hesitated. As a Searcher, she rarely thought of the families of the Gifted. The vast majority of them probably never saw their children again. No one had ever located Harrison's family, although perhaps that had been for the best. Might not a clean cut and the

slow realization of a loved one's death be easier than having that person returned to you completely different?

She couldn't tell these women what they wanted to hear. "I'm sorry. Once a Gifted crosses over, there is no going back. He is now as he will always be."

She could not make herself share their sorrow. Whatever he had been before, however similar, however essentially the *same*, he would not have been the man she knew now. He would have been as much a stranger to her as he was now to his own family. And, whatever the ramifications, she had to admit she did not want to go back to the time when she hadn't known him. The realization rose inside her and stunned her with its certainty.

Tielle seemed to catch a sense of her thoughts. She raised her chin. "What will happen to Talan when this is all over?"

"After the crisis of the war has passed, he'll be free to live his own life. We'll know more about what that life will be once we've discovered his gift."

Sirra's eyes widened. "You don't know his gift?"

"It's a difficult thing to quantify. Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes not. Historians and philosophers still theorize about some of the Gifted."

Behind her, Quinnon barked orders as the last of the horses loaded up.

"I'm afraid I haven't much more time. I am sorry I'm not able to tell you what you want to hear." And as far as it went, she meant it.

One of Tielle's little girls hugged her mother's waist, her cheek against Tielle's stomach, and stared at Allara. "Is he going to die in the war?"

Everyone stiffened, and Tielle drew the girl closer.

An image of Chris's body flung back, skewered on a pike, limbs flopping, flashed through Allara's mind. Instinctively, she reached out to find his presence, even though he was too far away for her to feel more than a whisper of it. She knelt to the girls' level. "No, he won't die. I won't let him." She held their gazes, one after the other, until they nodded at her. Then she stood and faced Tielle and Sirra. "I won't. That's my job, and that's my promise."