

ROSS HIGHTOWER & DEB HEIM

# Desulti

(An Epic Fantasy)

by

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DESULTI



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## Deals

Tove whirled to face a roiling sea of anger and disbelief. Retreating from the surging crowd, she crouched and raised her fists. Someone shoved her from behind, nearly throwing her to the floor. And then Brie appeared before her. The murtair's back was to Tove. She stood relaxed, arms loose at her sides, but the women in the crowd recoiled, uncertainty and fear wiping the anger from their expressions.

“Clear the room!” someone behind Tove shouted. Moments later, women wearing uniforms similar to the gendarmes Tove was familiar with from Richeleau appeared and herded the crowd toward the exit.

Tove straightened, breath coming in ragged pants, heart thumping. She forced herself to meet the glares that reappeared as the women receded from the murtair. Brie warned her. She shouldn't have been surprised, but the suddenness of the outburst, the intensity of the anger, shocked her.

As the gendarmes pushed the immense doors closed, the slice of the city and blue sky beyond narrowed, leaving the room lit only by the braziers and the feeble light filtering down from the windows. Tove's legs twitched before she controlled the impulse to flee, to squeeze through the gap of the closing doors and escape. But then the doors banged shut. The sound, echoing hollowly in the immense room, unlocked buried memories. Memories of other doors, of darkness and men whose

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icy indifference was far more terrifying than these women's anger. To keep the dark at bay, she focused on a brazier.

When Brie turned and stepped between Tove and the flame, Tove was in control again. The murtair hesitated, searching Tove's face, before brushing past her. Tove focused on the fire for a moment more, then turned to face the women of the Inner Council.

All three women were watching her, but each one's reaction was entirely different from the others. The shock that was her initial reaction still held Siofra frozen. She stared at Tove as if she couldn't decide if she really heard Tove say the words. Lyssa glared, fists clenched at her sides, anger and disgust vying for their place on her porcelain face. But it was Nessa's expression that was the most curious. The corners of her mouth quivered, as if she were fighting a smile. Their eyes met for a moment. Then Lyssa's angry retort, echoing in the nearly empty room, broke the spell.

"Is this a joke?!"

Then all three women were speaking at once.

The words spoken, Tove's part in the drama was over. She only needed to control her temper while the debate raged.

Elois watched, open-mouthed, as the women argued. When she noticed Tove looking at her, she grimaced and looked away. Brie waited impassively until the women ran out of steam. In the pause, Nessa said to Brie, "Explain yourself."

"It's true that Tove is *Alle'oss*," Brie said. Lyssa started to speak, but Nessa put a hand on her arm to forestall her. "We are all women, and we are Desulti because we suffered at the hands of Imperial men or because we seek opportunities the men of the Empire deny us." She turned her head and looked at Tove. "Few of us have suffered more than this young woman." She paused, allowing the women

on the dais to examine Tove, Brie's words undoubtedly bringing their attention to her mangled face. "Her induction into the Order is part of the deal I struck to settle Adelbart's debt."

"If you think we would accept this *l'oss* into the order for mere financial gain —"

"We agreed to hear the details of this deal," Siofra said in an even voice. "Let us listen to Brie's proposal before we dismiss the idea."

Lyssa turned a horrified expression on the other woman. "What could she possibly say that would induce us to accept this Brochen filth into the Order?"

Suddenly hot, despite the cool air, Tove opened her mouth before Elois's hand on her arm got her attention. She dropped her gaze and pinched her leg, letting the sharp pain distract her.

Motion in the corner of her eye drew her attention. While Lyssa and Siofra argued, Brie's hand, hanging by her thigh, was gesturing. Tove peeked up at the dais. Nessa watched Brie's hand intently. When her eyes found Tove's, Tove lifted her chin and forced herself to hold her gaze, willing the woman to see into her heart.

Long moments passed, then Nessa seemed to come to a decision. She gave Brie a small nod, then stood quietly, waiting for a pause in the argument. When it came, she said, "Let us retire to chambers to discuss this in private." Her voice wasn't loud, but the other women fell silent at once.

Her pale face blotchy with anger, Lyssa glared at Tove as she said, "I can't think of anything anyone can say that would justify this travesty."

"Nessa has asked to retire to chambers," Siofra said. "We must honor her request."

"Very well," Lyssa spat, and turned away. "Let's get this over with."

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As the three women filed out a door at the back of the dais, Nessa frowned at Brie and made several quick hand gestures.

After they were gone, Brie sagged. She took a deep breath and blew it out, then turned toward Tove and favored her with a rare smile. "You did well."

"What's next?" Tove asked.

"Nessa has agreed to take up your case. She only has one vote, but there is hope. Siofra hasn't dismissed your request out of hand."

"What do I do?"

"Nothing. I'll have someone take you to your room where you can wait," Brie said. She rested a hand on Tove's shoulder. "For Daga's sake, don't do anything. Stay in your room. Don't talk to anyone. No matter how long you have to wait."

Tove nodded. "Of course." Brie led her to the exit and pushed open a small wicket door embedded in one of the immense doors. The crowd, which spread out across the plaza, fell silent when Brie appeared. The other murtair Tove saw earlier stood at the top of the steps. She glanced back when they emerged, nodded to Brie, then resumed gazing across the plaza.

Brie signaled to a young Desulti and instructed her to arrange a room for Tove. "Stay out of sight," she said to Tove before entering the Great Hall.

Weak with relief, Tove looked out over the plaza. She thought of Alar and whispered *Oss 'stera's* battle cry, "*Otsuna*." She grinned in the face of the sea of hostility, imagining how proud Alar would be that she made it this far. The Desulti would learn to respect the *Alle 'oss*. She would make sure of it.

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The three women of the Inner Council were already seated when Brie entered the council room. Lyssa sat at the head of the council table, Nessa and

Siofra flanking her. Unlike the austere reception hall, intended to intimidate visitors, this room was intimate and comfortable, the lavish decor reflecting the Order's wealth. And it was blessedly warm from a fire in the hearth.

Brie took her position at the far end of the table, hands clasped behind her back. She stared at a spot above Lyssa's head and readied herself.

"Explain," Lyssa said.

Brie rehearsed this moment repeatedly as they made their way into the mountains. She let her gaze drop and took in the expectant faces. She would give her report to all three, but she was only speaking to one of them. Lyssa would never vote to allow a Brochen woman into the Order. The arguments she rehearsed were for Siofra.

Despite being born into privilege, Siofra was one of the most caste blind women Brie had ever known. She judged women by the value they brought to the Order, regardless of caste. Her vote wouldn't be biased by her prejudices. The question was whether she understood the turmoil Tove's entry into the Order would bring. She remained aloof during the events that roiled the Order in recent years. Was she truly oblivious, or did she simply want to keep her hands clean? Nessa and Brie were gambling that it was the former. They hoped Siofra, a creature of her ledgers, contracts, and the give and take of commerce, would be intrigued enough by the deal tied to Tove's presence that she would vote yes.

Brie gave her report, breezing past the complex details of her mission to recover Governor Adelbart's debt and emphasizing her poor assessment of the governor. He was not a worthy partner for the Desulti. She explained Elois's capture by Union mercenaries and the role Tove and Alar played in her rescue. She explained *Oss'stera's* ambush of an Imperial supply caravan, optimistically painting them as a force to be reckoned with. And only after establishing Alar,

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Tove and *Oss'stera* as worthy of the Desulti's respect, she explained the deals she struck with Alar and the governor, tying Tove's request for refuge to the deals.

Having finished her narrative, Brie stood motionless, face impassive despite her roiling emotions and racing heart. If they voted to deny Tove immediately, all her and Nessa's plans would fall to ruin. They would not get a second chance.

"Well, that is quite the story," Lyssa said. "I'm —"

"I suggest we take the issues one at a time," Siofra said, before Lyssa could gain momentum.

Brie had to clench her thighs as relief weakened her legs.

"First, there is the issue of this Alar," Siofra said over Lyssa's protests. "You say he can disappear and reappear at a distance in an instant?"

"That's correct," Brie said with a brisk nod. "He dispatched four Union mercenaries patrolling the different sides of the alure atop the fortress wall in Richeleau in less than a minute." After witnessing that feat, Brie told Alar secrets were the basis of relationships. But secrets were also the currency the Murtair dealt in and she would spend that currency now. She needed the Inner Council to respect Alar, *Oss'stera*, and, by extension, Tove.

"A *l'oss* killed four Union mercenaries?" Lyssa scoffed. "By himself?"

Having already related the relevant facts, Brie didn't bother answering.

Siofra asked Nessa, "Have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"Perhaps," Nessa said. "It was said long ago there were sisters of the Seidi called realm walkers who could enter the Otherworld and return. While they were in that realm, time seemed to stop in our realm. It would appear as if they crossed a distance in an instant. That sounds very much like what Brie described."

"But they were Seidi *sisters*," Siofra said. "There were no male realm walkers?"

“Not that I’ve heard,” Nessa said. “But it was long ago. Perhaps the accounts of male realm walkers have been lost.” She chuckled. “Or suppressed. You know how jealous the witches in the Seidi are of their glory.”

“We should deal with him,” Lyssa said. “At the very least, he should not be allowed to breed. If this man is indeed a realm walker, we would not want this ability to proliferate among the *l’oss*. They would become quite unmanageable.”

That brought the conversation to a halt as each woman considered the implications.

Finally, Nessa said, “What kind of man is Alar?”

“He is a true believer in his cause; freeing the *Alle’oss* from the Empire,” Brie said. “He is a visionary, but also pragmatic, willing to listen to reason. I believe he is a man of his word.” She paused, then said, “We can work with him.”

Lyssa scowled and was about to speak when Siofra cut her off again. “Before we decide what to do about Alar, let’s take up the issue of this plan to repay the governor’s debt. It seems a good deal to me. There is a passionate demand for *Alle’oss* pigments far beyond the Empire’s borders. And it says much about Alar that he offered to pay Adelbart’s debt from *their* share. Very pragmatic. It supports Brie’s judgment of his character.” Her eyes cut to Lyssa. “But I’m even more intrigued by this black market arrangement between the *Alle’oss* and the governor.”

“How do we benefit from that?” Lyssa asked.

“I’m not sure,” Siofra said. “Yet. However, having a conduit out of Argren free of Imperial regulations and taxes... It shows unexpected foresight for an *Alle’oss* to include this in the bargain. This Alar is ambitious. It might behoove us to seek a relationship with him. We will have to determine the details of this

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arrangement with the citizens of the Ishien River Valley, of course. The demon is always in the details. But I vote we pursue this opportunity.”

“I agree,” Nessa said, before Lyssa could comment. “And that settles the question of what to do about the realm walker.”

“Correct,” Siofra said. “We watch him, determine if Brie’s evaluation is correct. For now.”

Lyssa didn’t look entirely convinced, but even she could see the value of the deal. And she was impatient to move on to what she considered the critical issue.

“Before we get to the last issue,” Nessa said. “I believe Brie is to be commended for how she handled a complex situation.”

Lyssa’s lips pursed, but before she could speak, Siofra said, “Agreed.”

“She brought a *l’oss* into the Great Hall to request sanctuary,” Lyssa spat. “Whatever good she has done is eclipsed by that affront.” She focused on Brie. “What could you possibly be thinking, bringing this woman here?”

“Her admittance into the Order is part and parcel to the deal,” Brie said. “Alar required *Alle’oss* representation in the Order.” That wasn’t entirely a lie. It *was* the reason he gave, but though she only knew Alar for a brief time, he struck her as a man with unusual foresight. She didn’t know what he had in mind, but she was sure his plans benefited from Tove’s presence in the Order.

Brie stared straight ahead as the women debated, but her attention was on Siofra. It was clear she was wavering. Nessa skillfully intervened whenever she seemed to lean toward Lyssa’s point of view, but if she decided to vote with Lyssa right now, there was little Brie, or Nessa could do. An hour later, when the three women finally ran out of words, Brie held her breath.

“It’s clear we will not be able to decide tonight,” Nessa said. “I suggest we sleep on it. We’ll reconvene in the morning to vote.”

Siofra looked from Nessa to Brie, a thoughtful expression on her face. “I suppose that is wise.”

“What could possibly happen tonight to change our minds?” Lyssa asked.

“Perhaps a night’s sleep will cool tempers,” Nessa said. “And I would like to speak to this young woman.”

Lyssa sniffed and rose abruptly. “Do what you want. We can meet tomorrow morning to vote, but I will not debate the issue any longer. If you want to debate, I’ll call the Ruling Council. You can try to convince them.”

After Lyssa exited the room, Siofra studied Brie. “I’m sure you and Nessa have much to discuss, but I would like to see you in my chambers when you finish here.”

“Of course,” Brie said.

Siofra nodded to Nessa, rose, and glided from the room.

When the door closed, Brie sagged, let her chin drop to her chest and wiped her hand across the stubble on her scalp.

“That went about as well as could be expected,” Nessa said. Brie looked up. “Are you sure about this woman?”

“Yes,” Brie said. “She’s everything we discussed.” She better be.

“And you’ve told her nothing?”

“No. She’s pristine.”

“Let us hope you are correct about her,” Nessa said, as she rose. “We will not get a second chance. Make sure she stays out of sight tonight. Lyssa would never stoop to meet her, but we don’t want Siofra talking to her. Bring her to my quarters after first bell.”



## Tove in the Dark

Word of what happened in the Great Hall spread. The intense anger that erupted when she requested sanctuary ebbed, but as Tove looked out across the plaza, she saw a lot of hostility. The woman Brie instructed to lead her to her room descended the stairs. Before following, Tove glanced at the murtair keeping watch.

The black-clad woman appeared completely indifferent to the drama unfolding around her. She stood at ease, thumbs hooked in her belt, gazing out over the crowd. Tove wasn't fooled. Though her posture appeared relaxed, her stillness belied a coiled readiness. As Tove set off after her guide, the murtair's eyes followed her progress. Tove doubted she was there to protect anyone in the crowd from Tove. She was there to ensure nothing happened to her.

Tove forced her chin up, focused on her chaperone's swaying black curls and ignored the whispered insults thrown her way. No one accosted her. They moved aside, clearing a path, but she felt their disapproval.

They crossed the plaza, leaving the crowd behind as they entered a narrow lane beside a plain, one-story stone building. Halfway to the other end, the woman led her inside into a long hall that extended the length of the building. Boarded-up windows along one side left the hall illuminated only by sunlight entering the door through which they entered. The woman opened one of the doors on the opposite wall and stepped aside.

Tove peered into the dark room. Like the windows in the hall, the window on the opposite wall was boarded up.

“There’s a lamp on the table beside the bed,” the woman said.

Tove swallowed and nodded.

“There’s a privy through that door.”

“What is this place?” Tove asked, looking at the row of closed doors in the hall.

“One of the original dormitories. It’s slated for refurbishment. No one lives here now.”

Tove stood in the doorway, unable to force herself into the confined space. She glanced at the woman, whose expression revealed impatience. To give herself time, she asked, “What’s your name?”

The woman looked as if she wouldn’t answer at first, but then she said, “Gwynna.” She looked down the hall past Tove. A handful of women had followed them into the hall and were watching quietly from a distance. “Is it true you requested sanctuary?” she whispered.

Tove nodded absently, gazing into the dark room.

“They’ll never let you in.”

“Why?” Tove asked.

“Why... because you’re *l’oss*,” Gwynna said, as if Tove was stupid. She shook her head. “Even if they let you in, they’ll make your life miserable. Why would you volunteer for that?”

“They?” Tove asked, her eyes flicking up to Gwynna’s black hair.

Gwynna’s cheeks reddened. Her eyes went to the women at the far end of the hall, but she didn’t answer.

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“*They* are women,” Tove said, returning her gaze to the prison cell. “*They* offer refuge to women abused by Imperial men.” She took a deep breath, let it sigh out, and wiped her palms on her shirt. “Thank you, Gwynna.” She gathered herself, sucked in a breath, and stepped across the threshold.

She was halfway across the room when she looked over her shoulder, heart thudding, and said, “Wait until I light —”

A sullen expression on her face, Gwynna pulled the door shut, leaving Tove in the pitch black room.

Hot, prickly sweat sprung up on Tove’s skin. “This is not —” she said through gritted teeth. “I’m safe here.” But she was not safe from her memories. Terror, agony, rough stones slick with blood, the stench of fear. And screams. Hers, others. She lost the ability to discern the difference in the dark.

She dropped to her knees, swallowing a scream. Despite the utter silence in the room, she clamped her hands over her ears against the screams echoing hollowly in her mind. The walls closed in, becoming the coffin-like cell they threw her in each time they finished with her.

Light! With a force of will, she scrambled across the floor until she collided with the table on which she saw the lamp. The lamp teetered and almost fell before she caught it. She lifted the glass chimney with shaking hands and set it rattling on the tabletop. With one finger on the small strike plate beside the wick, she felt for the flint.

The small stone slipped through sweat slicked fingers and fell to the floor. “Nooo!” In a panic, she felt on the floor for the small stone, her breath coming in low grunts. She couldn’t find it.

Lurching to her feet, she stumbled blindly toward the door, arms extended in front of her. Her hand was on the latch when Brie’s admonishment penetrated her

*panic. For Daga's sake, don't do anything. Stay in your room. Don't talk to anyone. No matter how long you have to wait.*

Did she come all this way, just to throw Alar's trust away in the first hours? She remembered the hope she felt when she learned there was an order of women. Women like her. Women who escaped abuse, who rejected men's right to rule their lives. Women with the strength and power to walk unafraid wherever they wished. Despite the hostility she encountered since she arrived, she wasn't willing to give up that hope. She couldn't face that. Still, with the pressure of the dark pressing in on all sides, she opened the door a crack. Voices. The women who followed her and Gwynna. She couldn't let them see her like this. Easing the door shut, she sank to the floor, crawled into a corner, pressed her hands to her ears, and wept.

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Siofra's assistant rose and led Brie into her mistress's inner office. "Siofra's waiting in her chambers," the woman said over her shoulder as she led Brie across the immense office to a door behind the desk. She knocked once. When a voice answered from within, she opened the door and stepped back.

Of the members of the Desulti Inner Council, Siofra enjoyed the fruits of the Order's great wealth the most. Unlike Lyssa, who clung to Imperial tastes despite being a Desulti since she was twelve, Siofra's rooms reflected the exotic and far-flung cultures the Order dealt with. Both women's quarters were in stark contrast to Nessa's austere rooms.

Siofra stood at a large window, gazing toward the snowcapped mountains north of the city. Brie stopped in the center of the room and waited beside a settee imported from Tsada. Siofra told her once the elegant images of snow cranes on the lush fabric were hand-painted. In Brie's opinion, if you were going to spend so

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much on a small couch, it should at least be more comfortable than the stone bench in her quarters. She kept that thought to herself.

“Have a glass of wine, Brie,” Siofra said, without turning around.

Brie glanced at an elaborately carved table beside the settee where a wine chiller contained an open bottle of white wine. A glass had already been poured for her. She hesitated, then picked it up by its delicate stem with fingers hardened by callouses.

“It’s *Alle ’oss*,” Siofra said, still talking to the window. “The wine. Really quite wonderful. Delicate, fruity, surprisingly complex. Nothing like heavy Imperial whites.”

Brie looked down at the pale yellow liquid. She wasn’t a drinker. Murtair couldn’t afford to indulge in anything that affected their discipline. She took an experimental sip and decided she would have to take Siofra’s word for the wine’s qualities.

“Of course, its quality owes much to Argren. The mountains, the soil, the climate,” Siofra said. She turned to face Brie, a half-empty glass in her hand. She had changed into an elaborately embroidered silk house coat. “But I believe it’s more than that.”

When she didn’t continue, Brie felt obligated to ask, “What do you think it is?”

“The *Alle ’oss*,” she said with a small shrug. “They have the souls of artists. In many things. Wine.” She lifted the glass to eye level and gazed at the swirling liquid. “Food. Music. Art...” She looked past the glass at Brie. “Like the new school artists. The men and women who produced the paintings you allowed to slip through your grasp.” When Brie didn’t respond, Siofra sipped her wine and said.

“Though, I suppose a murtair couldn’t be expected to appreciate the significance of such exquisite art.”

“It was a complicated situation,” Brie said.

“Yes, I gathered that.”

Brie glanced down at the wine in her hand, placed it on the table and clasped her hands behind her back. She knew exactly how significant the art she *allowed* the *Alle’oss* to keep was.

Siofra looked at the glass Brie discarded. “Still, this deal with the *Alle’oss* has potential, and perhaps in the long run, it will be better for the Order. If we are forced to choose.”

Brie noted the slight emphasis on the word forced.

“Come join me,” Siofra said. She turned toward the window and waited for Brie to step up beside her.

“I understand your decision on the art. As you said, it was a complex situation, and you made a choice.” She shrugged one shoulder and sipped her wine. “What I don’t understand is why you and Nessa are so interested in the *Alle’oss* woman.”

This was what Brie was waiting for. She and Nessa discussed what Brie should say. She prepared to launch into her explanation, but the other woman interrupted her.

“Oh, I know you said it was part of the deal,” she said, a distant note in her voice, as if she were deep in thought.

Brie almost bulled ahead, but the doubt behind Siofra’s words gave her pause. “You don’t believe me?”

Siofra cupped the elbow of the arm holding the wine in one hand, tapped her lips with the rim of the glass, and gazed out the window. “Oh, I believe this Alar

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may have asked for this condition. But there is something else going on here. Nessa was too interested in prolonging the discussion. Despite the risks this woman presents. I don't like it when I don't understand something."

Surprised by Siofra's admission, Brie studied her. She didn't know the Order's Chief Financial Officer well beyond their official interactions. She only knew what Nessa told her. But, gazing at the woman's thoughtful expression, Brie realized Nessa was wrong about Siofra. She wasn't oblivious to the implications of Tove's entrance into the Order. She knew perfectly well what it meant, and she sensed their conspiracy. It was all Brie could do to hide her astonishment. Siofra was intrigued.

"Admitting this woman will change the Order forever," Siofra said quietly. Almost as if she were speaking to herself. "But of course, you and Nessa know that. So, what are you trying to achieve?" She turned from the window and studied Brie's face.

This was the moment. Brie knew her limitations. Unlike Nessa, she was a warrior, not a politician. She learned from hard experience what Siofra could glean from the smallest slip of the tongue. She needed to play on Siofra's curiosity without giving anything away. Allowing her lips to twist, she dipped her head, then let her eyes flick to the side. Her lips parted, but then she pressed her mouth closed and pulled an impassive mask over her face. If she were anyone else, Siofra might dismiss it as nervous fidgeting. But Brie was Murtair. It was as close to admitting she had something to hide as if she spoke the words.

After long moments, something like irritation flickered across Siofra's face, and she broke their gaze.

Was it enough? "Can I ask which way you will vote?" Brie asked.

“No. You may not.” Siofra sipped her wine and said, “You may see yourself out.”

Without another word, Brie turned and left Siofra gazing at mountains turned purple by the setting sun.

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Brie found Tove huddled in a corner in the dark. In a flash, she saw her and Nessa’s plans falling to ruin. Fueled by adrenaline, she thrust her lamp at Gwynna, crossed the small room, and jerked Tove roughly to her feet. “Why are you sitting on the floor, weeping in the dark?” Though the tears dried, the tracks on Tove’s face were evidence of their passing.

Tove pointed toward the table beside the bed. “I... the flint fell.”

Brie glanced at Gwynna standing in the doorway, then put her face close to Tove’s and murmured, “You need to pull yourself together.” She gave Tove a shake. “Look at me!”

Tove startled, focused on Brie’s face and fought free of the murtair’s grip. “I just need... I need to get outside.” She pushed past Brie and made for the door.

Brie caught her and pulled her to a stop before she slipped past Gwynna. She pinched Tove’s chin between two fingers made iron by callouses and peered into her eyes. Tove jerked her head free.

“Wash her face,” Brie said and shoved Tove toward Gwynna.

Gwynna took Tove’s arm and led her down the now deserted hall to a room that contained the baths. Brie’s mind raced, searching for a way out. What was she thinking, hitching her and Nessa’s plans to this damaged woman? But it was too late. It was either Tove or they would have to abandon everything.

When Gwynna returned with Tove in tow, Brie got Tove’s attention and pointed into the dark room. “Whatever that was,” she growled. “You need to hide it

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where no one will see it. Do you understand?” When Tove nodded absently, Brie glared at Gwynna.

“I understand,” Gwynna said, nodding vigorously.

Brie dabbed at the moisture on Tove’s face with her sleeve.

Tove stepped back and pushed Brie’s arm away from her face. “I got it,” she said. “I just... *Zhot ti* in Kartok... small spaces... the dark.” She started panting, and a hand came up to press her scar.

Brie slapped her. Not hard enough to leave a mark, but enough to get Tove’s attention. She tapped Tove hard on the chest with two stiff fingers. “You’re here because I saw something in you. That’s what everyone else must see from now on.”

“I said, I got it!” Tove said, a scowl chasing the lost puppy expression from her face.

Brie studied her. “That’s more like it.”

“Am I in?” Tove asked, rubbing her chest.

“They haven’t voted yet. They’ll decide tomorrow. We’re going to meet Nessa. Make sure she sees the woman I saw in Richeleau and not whatever that was.”

“What woman? What did you see? Tell me what I need to say. What I need to do.”

A surge of the same compassion Brie felt for this young woman in Richeleau stopped her retort. She and Tove shared the prison cell together, knowing they would likely be dead before the following morning. It was Tove’s steadfast refusal to give into despair that convinced Brie the young woman was the one she was looking for. Her voice softened when she said, “Just be yourself, Tove.” She

hesitated, wanting to say more, to offer some encouragement that meant something. Instead, she said, “Let’s go,” turned and walked down the hall.

Find out what happens next!

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