

Allegiance

By Cayla Kluver

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Prologue

The hall was empty except for a cloaked figure who stood motionless upon a black marble dais. He waited, watching the doors at the far end with eyes as bright as emeralds and as harrowing as livid clouds on the horizon. Red hair that glowed like the embers of a dying fire shrouded his features. The rest of his powerful form was rendered nearly invisible by the shadows, for even the light from the torches lining the walls seemed reluctant to approach him.

The doors opened, swinging inward to reveal the silhouettes of the young man he had summoned and the two guards who flanked him. The guards had been ordered to bring the youth to this place, for he could no longer be trusted on his own.

Ignoring his escorts, the seventeen-year-old entered, walking tall and unafraid. He was completely defenseless, bearing no weapons, yet there was no hesitation in his stride. Without a sign of deference he stopped before the dais, glaring up at the formidable figure, but the man ignored this insolence and spoke instead to the guards.

“You are dismissed,” he said, voice deep and menacing. “Leave us.”

The guards hurriedly obeyed, and he focused his attention on his troublesome charge.

“I trust you have rested well?” he inquired, feigning cordiality.

“Well enough.”

The man gave a slight nod, irritation etching lines in his otherwise smooth face.

“Now that you have returned to us, Narian, and have been given time to recover your strength, your training must recommence. Your foolish action in running away has already driven us to wage war with Hytanica. I must prepare you for the time when you will join that effort. You will be the one to bring Hytanica to ruin.”

“I will not lead troops against my homeland,” Narian declared.

Sighing, the man, who was the master of this hall, moved to his left and descended the stairs from the dais to the floor.

“I feared you might say that,” he lamented, coming to stand before the young man, towering over him by several inches. “Have you forgotten to whom you owe your allegiance? The Hytanicans are enemies of Cokyri. They are *your* enemies.”

“The *enemy* treated me well,” Narian countered, clenching his jaw.

The man began to walk slowly around the boy he had helped to raise, examining him, looking for a weakness. As he moved, he spoke, his voice chilling in its civility.

“A Cokyrian in need of punishment was brought before me today. He writhed in agony for hours under the torment of my hand, pleading for mercy, until I drew my sword and cut off his head. It rolled to the very spot where you stand. *He* was a thief, Narian. To show me disrespect is a far worse offense. Can you imagine what *your* punishment will be?”

“I am not afraid of torture or of death. You have seen to that with your training. Do with me what you will.”

“Such brave words from one who is so very vulnerable,” the Overlord taunted, coming to a stop in front of his charge. “You are about to learn that there are many types of torture, one in

particular that you are not prepared to endure.”

Narian tensed, bracing himself for whatever pain he was about to suffer, but the warlord merely stared at him, a cruel smirk curling the corners of his lips.

“I believe this will provide the proper incentive to obey.” The Overlord turned toward a door behind and to the left of the dais. “Bring in the prisoner,” he called, raising his voice but slightly, for the malice within gave it great resonance.

Narian paled as the door was flung open and a young woman whose face he knew well was dragged into the hall. A single guard accompanied her, grasping the manacles that bound her hands before her.

The Overlord strode to the girl and seized her by her tangled hair. She whimpered as he hauled her across the floor toward Narian, and a tear slid down her cheek.

“Don’t hurt her,” Narian said, shaking his head slowly in disbelief, and for the first time, there was a slight tremor in his voice. “Please, don’t hurt her.”

“Really, Narian,” the Overlord sneered. “Begging doesn’t become you.”

Releasing his hold upon the young woman’s hair, he hit her with great force across the face. She collapsed to the floor, sobbing, hand to her mouth where blood had begun to trickle.

“No!” Narian shouted. “I said don’t hurt her!” His eyes flicked between his master and the girl while his mind raced, for this was something he had not anticipated. “We can come to terms,” he more coolly continued, his emotions now tightly contained and his voice steady. “Just don’t do her harm.”

“Terms?” the Overlord thundered. “You would gamble with her life?”

“No, I would gamble with your victory. If she is injured or killed, then nothing on hell or earth will persuade me to do your bidding.” Narian paused, expecting a reprisal, then continued

when none was forthcoming. “My demands are simple. Give me your assurance that she will not be harmed, and guarantee that the Hytanican people will not be needlessly slaughtered.”

After a moment’s contemplation, the Overlord nodded. “Though I do not view you as in a position to negotiate, I will accept these *terms* in exchange for your willing submission to my authority.” He glanced at the prisoner, then motioned to the guard to retrieve her. “I knew you would once again come to see things as I do.”

The guard scurried to where the girl lay sobbing and attempted to pull her to her feet, but she cried out and jerked from his grasp. She reached toward Narian and tried to move in his direction, weeping and whispering his name in pleas for help, but he could only shake his head in silent apology. At a pointed glance from his commander, the guard grabbed the prisoner by her upper arms and pulled her roughly away. The Overlord then considered his charge once more.

“There are a number of offenses for which you should be punished — insolence, disobedience, flight — but I am willing to overlook those things. I fear, however, that you have forgotten the extent of my power, so for that reason alone, a reminder is in order.”

The Overlord stretched out his arm toward Narian, his words hanging ominously in the air, and the young man fell onto his hands and knees, convulsing in pain. Although he struggled not to scream, his efforts in the end were futile, and his cries of agony continued until the warlord relented, lowering his hand.

“I have missed the sound of your shrieks,” the Overlord jeered. “Just remember when we resume your training that this is what you, as well as the girl, will suffer if you fail to accomplish the task that I have set before you.”