



# Chapter Fifty Five

## The Final Giant

The two Hyton bulls stood head-to-head at the fortress gate. Father against son.

The once great General Hyton looked sickly and weak, the veins in his neck stained black and his arms twitching. Riyan’s muscles were tense. The turmoil in his blood bond raged, the waves in his mind crashing into the rocky beach with the force of an entire sea.

I splayed my fingers and our bond lit up.

*“Riyan, Derrick let me go. I am free. Come back—”*

“My son,” General Hyton said, his voice lined with pride and admiration, “strong and unyielding—a true Hyton heir.”

Riyan’s grip on his axe loosened. The army rattled with cheers and exaltation.

Something rippled through Riyan's muscles, a different kind of magic, one that I had used to practice for years before acquiring the gift of sorcery.

General Hyton had moved all the pawns in place to take the crown. The only piece left was the one in front of him.

And the General knew *exactly* how to manipulate his best soldier.

"I had to hide the truth from you to keep you safe," his voice was smooth as honey with a break of false devastation carefully placed between words. The brass plates on his shoulders shook as his chest twitched. "My brother tried to kill you so many times. I had to be hard on you so no one else would suspect."

Riyan's shoulders sagged.

I threw out another command as I descended the stairs. "*Riyan, he is manipulating you! He is dying and just wants you to save him!*"

Riyan shook off my command. He was clinging to that hope of the family he always wanted. I could tell him that his father had attempted to coerce me into bearing his heir and snap him out of that fantasy...but I would devastate him.

I just had to keep trying to make him see sense.

My feet hit the grass. I picked up my skirt and threw out another command as I ran to the middle of the courtyard. "*Riyan, no! Brietta has the crown! She will heal Lycaster! Do not listen to him!*"

General Hyton's eyes glistened even though black lines crept toward his irises. Riyan's entire body went still as his father placed a twitching hand on his shoulder.

"I wanted *so badly* to be your father all those years and now I can be," General Hyton promised. "We can be a new House of Hyton, son. You and Serafina can start our family."

Riyan took another breath. Our bond tingled in my veins as he sent me a message. *“I don’t want him to die, Sera. I could have a second chance with my father. If you could just take the poison out—”*

“A new House of Hyton?” cried a voice from the sky.

I stopped just before I reached the gate and looked up. Derrick was at the top of the keep’s most southern tower, standing between the battlements with a small figure in his arms. Annalisa stood behind him, her hands gripping the back of his shirt so he would not fall.

The small body in his arms shifted and looked out—Astrid.

No one could ignore the last Bloodstone daughter as Derrick held her out for the entire army to see.

Astrid stretched out her hand.

“Ragnar!” she cried, her voice ringing like a small bell through the heavy air. “Ragnar!”

I turned. Riyan looked up at his mother with watering eyes. General Hyton’s body shook with tremors, but his face softened—like he just felt the caress of crimson ribbons against his skin again.

“You want a new House of Hyton?” Derrick roared. “A new, strong House of Hyton would not throw its daughters away.” He held Astrid up a little higher. “This is what you did for the power you seek! You manipulated a school girl, you tricked her into a pregnancy, and you abandoned her!”

My heart swelled. Derrick had backed General Hyton into a corner. The Barons and the army would not accept that their strong, ruthless General would ever let feelings for a seemingly broken woman soften him.

If General Hyton chose Astrid, the following that he had built on blood and supremacy would topple. Even though I knew the monster he was, how the craven push for supremacy had destroyed him, he still had a heart left.

So I held my breath and hoped that he finally chose her.

The General's trembling face turned to ice. He turned on his heel and faced the Barons.

"The mad Duke's last effort to secure his line is to use a mad woman. How fitting."

Astrid wilted in Derrick's arms as her hand curled back to her chest. Her weak sobs traveled through the air like blue butterflies.

Riyan's blood blazed as he turned from his crying mother to face his father.

The General chose poorly.

Even though I was a master of sorcery, I never abandoned my old talents. Like a serpent in the rocks, I still knew the best time to strike.

With a pounding yet heavy heart, I sent the message into Riyan's mind. "*He does not care about being a family. He tried to force me into a blood bond so I could bear him a new heir.*"

Vermillion rage surged through our bond. Riyan set his jaw and gave Derrick a knowing look. Derrick returned with a nod.

Riyan gripped his axe handle.

Derrick covered Astrid's eyes.

"Look at that pathetic sod on top of the tower," General Hyton shouted, "trying to sway you with the tears of a stupid—"

*Chop.*

I lifted my chin as I watched the black blood spill out of General Hyton's severed neck. The sky shimmered for a moment, revealing a white raven that only I could see. The raven descended to earth to take the son she loved to the other side.

Riyan's back muscles shook. Red waves churned and crashed in his mind. Slowly, Riyan's trembling arm raised as he held up the head of Ragnar Hyton, General of the Lycaster army, and the famed Little Diamond in front of the six Barons.

Riyan had slayed his final giant.

“Who is next?” Riyan roared. Even the mountain shook from the power of his fury. “Who dares to challenge the last Hyton heir—”

Riyan’s head snapped back. The tail of an arrow stuck out of his right eye.

And the diamond in my heart exploded.