

TRIBUTARY: Chapter Two

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What follows is an excerpt from TRIBUTARY, a potential book 4 in the River of Time Series. It's unedited, but you rabid River Tribe fans might want a further peek! Chapter One's posted on my site, so read that first if you haven't done so already...

I shivered as the chill of eventide settled in. Gabi, feeling ill, had gone off to bed, and I'd persuaded Mom to let me take a turn, watching over our charge, since she hadn't slept in days. *Alexandria*. A beautiful name for a beautiful girl. She was quintessentially Italian—olive skin, long, dark lashes, lovely cheekbones, strong, Roman nose. As pretty as she was, I just wished she'd wake and go home...And kill this new seed that promised to turn into a whole new crop of Forelli-hate.

Firenze didn't need much more of a push to come calling again. We'd been in an uneasy truce for more than a year now. But none of us truly believed it'd hold. And I just wasn't ready to take up my bow against anybody else. There'd been enough killing. So, so much killing last year...and the year before that...

Rodolfo stood at one end, like a silent, brooding archangel, foot propped on the stone wall behind him, chin in hand, half-dozing. Luca, seeing me shiver, picked up a wool blanket from a rack in the corner and wrapped it around me, leaving his hands on my shoulders in silent encouragement. A smile tugged at the corner of my lips and I reached up to lay my fingers over his for a moment. He'd backed off his pursuit for a time, letting me rest, settle, get used to life as part of Castello Forelli. Which had taken a while.

Gabi, Mom and Dad—they'd settled into life here in Medievalville like it was some exotic vacation destination. If it wasn't for the fact that I was crazy-wild to be a family again—and for cute Luca always nearby, ready to try and make me smile—I might've run into the Tuscan forest screaming, convinced I'd gone mental. Some days I could just live my life. Enjoy it even. Other days I'd pause and stare at half-dressed knights sparring, maids hauling up water from a well, smoke coming from the kitchen chimney, and try to get my modern brain and my ancient surroundings to match up. There was some serious sort of disconnect between the two.

For a while, Gabi worked hard at helping me along, aware that I'd sacrificed a lot to stay here, so she could stay here. But ever since she got married, all she really had time for was Marcello. *Marcello, Marcello, Marcello. Blah, blah, blah.* It was kind of nauseating, really.

And totally sweet.

And epically romantic.

So yeah...I was a little conflicted. I'd kinda gained my dad and lost my sis. Not to be the petulant sort...I know that sisters have close times and distant times...but I wasn't expecting the sis-permanently-left-me-for-a-guy feelings until I was in my twenties, you know?

"Lia," Luca said, edging up beside me.

I shook off my dream-like thoughts, my eyes focusing on our patient again. She was shifting, turning her head. I sensed Rodolfo move from the wall, instantly awaking from his doze. He'd been obsessed with this girl for a good two days, feeling the weight of responsibility he was bringing down on Castello Forelli with this latest fumble.

Alexandria blinked, closed her eyes, squeezed them shut and waved her head back and forth. Then her eyes, wide and brown and beautiful, blinked and opened, searching the ceiling of the room first, then, sensing us, roaming over our direction.

She gasped and scrambled to rise.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I cried. *Don't let her move around if she wakes*, Mom said, as she parted. *Sorry, Mom. Blew that one—*

"Aspetare! Facile!" Rodolfo urged, coming to her other side. *Wait. Easy, easy.*

But Alexandria was having none of it. She sat up, pulling her covers to her chest. Her long brown hair edged over her shoulder, making her look soft and ruffled and vulnerable, in spite of the consternation on her face. "Where am I?" she asked. "Who are you?"

"We are friends," I said in Italian, reaching out my hands in a manner that said, *it's okay, it's okay*. "You are safe. You were injured. On a hunt. There was a misunderstanding. But you are all right. Your father was here. You'll soon be home with him."

Her brow furrowed in confusion, her eyes shifting back and forth, as if trying to remember. "The boar," she said, catching the tail of a memory. "I was hunting..."

"And then you entered a clearing, where we were," Lord Greco said, helping her piece it together. He knelt beside her straw tick, keeping a respectful distance. "M'lady, I owe you a sincere apology. You had the spear—I blocked you—"

“And was unseated,” she mumbled. Her eyes met his. “I don’t remember anything beyond that moment.”

“No. You’ve hovered on the edge of death these past two—almost three—days.”

She studied him and then looked at the far wall, as if a window to her missing memories might open there. “Three days,” she whispered, clenching the blanket in her fist. She looked to me with urgency. “My father came?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding in encouragement. She was plainly scared and disoriented. “He’ll be back in five days. We convinced him to leave you here. My mother...she’s fairly adept in the healing arts.”

“It was difficult,” Rodolfo added with a tender, caring smile. “He was reluctant to leave you behind.”

Alexandria studied his face and then let a little smile soften her own. “He takes great care in watching over his family. A bit over-protective, really. I lost two brothers in the last battle,” she explained. “It’s only me and two youngest left.”

Rodolfo froze and visibly paled. I held my breath, as did Luca, beside me. Alexandria looked from one of us to the other, reading the tension immediately. Silence hung in the air. Then, “Where am I?” she asked again. “Who are you?”

“M’lady, you—”

“I am no high-born lady of the court,” she said in agitation. “I am Signora Alexandria Donatelli. Now, tell me who are you and where I am. *Exactly.*”

“Signora Donatelli,” Rodolfo began again. I admired his steady, calm tone in the face of what was to come. “Your hunt plainly led you across the border. You are in the care of Castello Forelli.”

She stared at him, hard. She struggled to swallow, as if her mouth was dry. “And you are...Lord Forelli?”

“I am Lord Rodolfo Greco,” he said, after a moment’s hesitation.

“Lord...*Greco*,” she repeated numbly.

His dark eyes searched hers. “Yes.”

“I lost my brothers the night Castello Paratore was taken,” she mumbled, her brow lowering in pain. “Because you turned your back on Firenze.”

Greco lowered her head, as if feeling the wave of her verbal blow. "I understand your pain. I'll leave you now, Signora." He rose, and stiffly walked to the door, quietly closing it behind him.

Luca and I shared a quick glance. This would undoubtedly send Rodolfo spiraling again. He wasn't much fun when he was depressed. Not that any of us were. But the whole traitor-to-Firenze-in-order-to-be-loyal-to-Marcello issue got him every time it came up. Big-time. And then that made Marcello grumpy, and in turn, Gabi...

So, yeah. It was bound to be a rough few days. Now that we knew she'd live, we'd all be counting the hours until Signore Donatelli came to collect his daughter.