

DARKNESS. TWO WORLDS.  
THREE LOVES.

  
Pantera Press

# ALLEGIANCE



WANDA WILTSHIRE

THE *BETROTHED* SERIES CONTINUES.

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Novels by Wanda Wiltshire

*Betrothed*

*Allegiance*

## PROLOGUE

Keeping to the shadows Antos sloped across the plains, need nagging beneath his skin like a thousand insect bites buried too deep for scratching. But sun was harder to come by lately, a lone guard or love-drunk betrothed pair enjoying the stars not as common as they once were. Stopping by a cluster of jagged rocks, Antos crouched low to wait, spindly knees hugging his chin. Down by the river two Fae guards laughed as they shot arrows into the night, their sun-rich bodies gleaming. The sight only inflamed Antos' craving. But he watched anyway, his saucer eyes intense as he dreamed of stealing their sun.

Out of the darkness two more Shadow Fae crept, squatting by Antos to wait with him. Soon a third joined him and not long after, a fourth. They were all strangers and not a word passed between them. But it didn't matter—they were bonded by sun-lust and five were enough. Gathering complete, they stood and made themselves ready, scrounging the ground for fist-sized rocks.

Satisfied with his collection, Antos took a slingshot from where it hung by his thigh and squinted as he pointed a daggered nail in the direction of the forest. Sunlamps were sprinkled amongst the dark and even from this distance they scorched his eyes. 'Forest,' he said. The others grunted their agreement and the five crept towards the trees, loaded slingshots aimed at a patch of lights high in the branches.

Suddenly a streak of red flashed across the sky, shooting sparks into the night and heading straight towards them. Shrieking, the

shadow creatures dropped to the ground, their rocks tumbling around them as they cowered beneath their arms. When he dared lift his face, Antos saw a being standing several metres away, watching them. He was spectacular. Tall and majestic, his pale skin glowed and enormous wings glittered.

Antos didn't know what the creature was—not Fae because he couldn't sense him, but not Shadow Fae either. In instant awe of him, Antos rose and leaving the others in a trembling heap went and knelt before him, forehead brushing the ground. When he looked up again, the being told him to rise and follow before turning in the direction of the Fae guards.

Antos hesitated only a moment, then shielding his eyes with his fingers, he swallowed his fear and did what he was told, hurrying to catch up to his new leader. Pain quickly closed in on him, every step towards the sunlamps becoming harder to bear. He groaned as he burned, hunching forward and gritting his teeth as tears slid down his face, turning to steam on his scorching skin. Just when he thought he couldn't possibly go any nearer, the Fae guards touched the sunstones inside the lamps and began absorbing the light into their bodies, obliterating the very thing protecting them from Antos' kind. Soon the only light cast was the soft golden gleam around the guards' bodies.

Antos' new ruler turned to him and holding a hand in the direction of one of the dreamy-eyed guards said, 'Feed.'

With wary steps, Antos closed the distance. Finding no resistance, he fell upon the guard, pushing him to the ground with a long moan. And for the first time in his life, Antos grunted with pleasure as he pierced a vein in the guard's neck and fed his addiction until he craved no longer.

## CHAPTER ONE

'I love you forever,' Leif whispered, eyes dreamy on mine. He sighed and bent close, his breath tickling warm across my throat, bringing excitement to my heart and shivers to my skin. A kaleidoscope of colours shifted and blurred beyond his shoulder—shades of green all mixed up with lavender patches, stars of sun and rainbow dabs.

I sighed and pulled him down. 'Show me then, Leif.'

He drew away, leaned on an elbow and smiled—a galaxy of stars twinkled in his eyes. 'Right here?' He picked up a handful of leaves and released them in a slow dance across my body, his smile growing as his heartbeat accelerated—a copy of mine.

'Please,' I begged, pride non-existent under the power he wielded over me. 'There's no one here to see.'

He touched a finger to my nose. 'Ah, but the forest is alive, my love ... Look there.' He pointed to a tiny bird singing in the branches far above us. 'And there.' A dragonfly flickered around a nearby flower, the sunlight sprinkling through the trees turning its wings to gold. 'And over by the river.' A little rabbit-like creature was quenching its thirst, oblivious to us two faeries twisted together on the forest floor.

I smiled and pinched his arm. 'Don't tease me, Leif.'

He bent to kiss me again, his mouth a hot whisper on mine. 'I can't help it, Marla, I adore it so.' But the teasing was over and he was parting my lips with his, sliding a hand up my thigh as his body pushed mine into the blanket of leaves. 'Are you sure, my love?'

‘Oh, *so* sure,’ I breathed, wrapping both arms tight around him, pulling him to me, the muscle in his back hard under my fingers.

He laughed softly, a deep enchanting sound that filled the air with a shimmering splash of golden glitter. I reached up and waved my hand through the sparkles, watched them whirl around my fingers, impossible to catch. Leif’s next words, hot and shivery next to my ear, drew my attention back. ‘Well then, let it be now, beloved, for I can resist you no longer.’ He grasped my thigh and brought it firm around his hip. A feeling burst to life inside of me, lighting me up—anticipation, excitement, my overwhelming love for him? I didn’t know. But I did know this couldn’t happen quickly enough. He’d finally relented and I wanted to be one with him before he changed his mind.

‘Hurry, Leif,’ I begged, pressing close. But in that same moment darkness descended, heavy and thick and bleak, stealing the colour from around us. Leif let go of my leg and turned his face to the sky. He sat up, pulling me with him and we held each other as the remaining lavender sky vanished into a mass of heaving grey. Within seconds a great clap of thunder issued from above, heralding a fierce wind through the branches from which birds and animals began to flee. Vast bolts of lightning shot from the swirling clouds, igniting the forest in every direction, the flames leaping from one tree to the next.

Leif leapt to his feet, reaching for me. But before I could even take his hand, he was falling, in slow motion, over and over again, while everything else remained frozen around us. He crashed beside me, a bare foot planted in his chest and a look of utter confusion on his face. I looked up to see King Telophy looming enormous, a dagger flashing red with flames hanging loose in one hand.

‘Do. Not. Move,’ the king warned his son in a voice cold as death. Then he turned his attention to me. ‘Did I not explain the consequences should you choose to remain in Faera, Marla?’

Fear turned me to stone as the memory of my last meeting with Leif's father rushed back to me. How had I forgotten? But I couldn't speak—my voice was locked inside.

The king bent and grabbed Leif's arm, wrenching him to his feet. 'Your betrothed's lack of care for you is your death sentence, my son.'

Leif cast a glance in my direction, his brows drawn in question. *What does he speak of, Marla?*

Though I tried with all my strength, I couldn't respond, not even from my mind to his. I couldn't remember how. I looked at him with pleading eyes. But he only watched me, confused.

'She did not tell you of my warning?' King Telophy paused for a moment, shaking his head before returning his attention to me. 'I could not have made my instructions more clear, Marla. Remain in Faera and Leif and his mother die. Remain in Faera and I take you as mine—wife, lover and mother to the replacement prince.' The ice in his eyes leached into my veins, freezing my body all the way to my bones. I wrapped my arms around myself. King Telophy sneered, then looked back to Leif. 'Your betrothed was fore and fairly warned.'

'Marla is mine,' Leif said, but his voice held no strength and he was shrinking before my eyes.

'Marla *was* yours,' King Telophy corrected. 'And I sincerely hope you have not despoiled her for me.'

I watched the meaning of his father's words register on Leif's face, the way his beautiful features filled with rage in response. And as my prince lunged for King Telophy—who seemed to have grown to more than double his size—I watched the king lift his hand and plunge the dagger into his son's heart, twisting quickly before wrenching it out again.

Leif's expression changed to surprised horror, his eyes glazing over. I screamed as he groaned and collapsed to the forest floor,



blood spilling from his chest, drenching the leaves around him. I fell onto my betrothed, sobbing, desperately trying to plug the wound with my hand. But his blood pulsed through my fingers, slowing a little more with each beat, taking my own heart with it. I felt one final throb behind my ribs as Leif's broken heart beat one last time before giving up entirely, freeing mine to find its own rhythm.

My wails filled the air as King Telophy wrenched me from Leif's body and gathered me, bloody and sobbing, into his arms before taking to the sky. A great, dark weight descended, pulling me down, dragging at my limbs. 'Kill me,' I cried. 'I can't live without him.'

King Telophy said nothing, just continued to soar through the awful sky.

'Please, I want to die!' There was something horribly familiar about this consuming sorrow.

The king reached up and ran his fingers down my cheek. 'Hush,' he crooned. 'Everything will be all right.'

'Leif is gone!' I sobbed.

'Sweetheart, I promise, everything will be okay.'

The king sounded so caring, so unlike himself, but familiar at the same time. And then the world began to shift, to come apart, like a puzzle breaking up. Light pierced the grey, splitting the sky, and then King Telophy was no longer with me and I was no longer flying through the stormy Faeran sky. I wasn't in Faera at all. I was at home, in my bed, and I was waking. Leif was alive, safe somewhere—but he'd never be mine again. The great pit of despair I'd lived in since returning to the human world swallowed me up once more.



I opened my eyes. Jack stood beside my bed. He smiled and picked up my hand from where it hung over the side of my bed. When he spoke, his eyes remained locked to mine, but his words were all for my mother. 'She needs more sun.' His voice was subdued, like he was visiting a dying patient.

Mum stood beside him, clutching her hands together and looking ten years older. 'She barely gets up, just lies there and stares at nothing all day. She won't speak, hardly eats.'

'What did the doctor say?'

Mum drew a breath and heaved it out again before she answered. 'He wants to give her a few more days. If she doesn't pick up, he's going to admit her to hospital and try the antidepressants.'

Jack frowned and ran a hand through his hair. 'It's been three weeks, what's he waiting for?'

'He's worried she'll be allergic to them, and in the state she's in ...' Mum let the rest of her sentence slip away as she wiped at her eyes.

'What are the chances?'

'I can't imagine she won't be allergic to them. She's allergic to every bloody thing else.'

Jack laid his hand on Mum's shoulder. 'Take a break, Karen, I'll stay with her.'

She covered his hand with hers. 'Thanks, Jack.'

My friend gave her half a smile.

Mum left us alone, closing the door behind her. Jack sat on the edge of my bed and returned his attention to me. There were creases in his forehead I'd never seen before.

'Bad dream?'

I nodded.

He stroked my cheek with the backs of his fingers and a moment later said, 'Want a cuddle?'

I nodded again. He pulled the quilt back and climbed into bed beside me, gathering me into his arms. It felt nice, like I had company in my darkness. ‘You’re so cold,’ he whispered.

I snuggled close and his arms tightened around me.

‘Talk to me,’ he said. I tried to form a word, but couldn’t. He sighed, and touched his lips to the top of my head.

I closed my eyes and pushed my face into him. His breath on my hair felt good, comforting, and the warmth from his body seemed to permeate my bones. If only it could reach my heart.

‘Have you opened his letter yet?’

I shook my head against his chest.

‘You have to open it, Marla.’

I shook my head again. I couldn’t open it. Whatever was in the letter Leif’s mother had thrust into my hands the day she’d brought me back from Faera could only hurt me more. I couldn’t face it.

Jack sat up. ‘I’m opening the letter. There’s nothing that could make this situation worse.’

I opened my mouth to tell him not to do it. But it was like my voice box no longer functioned. The words were trapped within my mind and he was already climbing out of bed.

Jack knew Leif’s letter was in my jewel box and didn’t bother asking for the key. He just hunted around the dressing table until he found it hanging from a hook at the edge of the mirror. He retrieved the letter and climbed back into bed, pulling me into his arms again. Then, capturing my chin in his fingers, he lifted my face to his. ‘Ready?’

I buried my head into him.

His arms became loose as he freed his hands. I heard the crinkling and unfolding of paper. The dread inside me grew worse before easing again when I smelt a fragrance like Leif combined with the Faeran forest.

‘I’m going to read it now,’ Jack warned. His arms tightened around me once more, bracing me to him. I clung on tight and squeezed my eyelids closed. And then he read the letter.

*Marla,*

*I trust you. I know you decided to leave because you felt there was no other way. I also know you will experience unendurable torment because of it. My wish is to release you from this suffering. And so, as your betrothed, I relinquish all ties with you.*

*Be happy, my love,*

*Yours, Leif*

As Jack spoke the name of my betrothed, a great wave of serenity washed through me. The weights that had been holding me prisoner lifted from my soul and the dark cloak of despair I’d worn since I returned from Faera rose and evaporated. I could feel Jack—still holding me in the protection of his arms—watching me. I looked up and, for the first time since I left Leif, felt my lips curve into a smile. I was me again, the old me, the me that existed before Leif came into my life, the me that had been close to Jack for years. And suddenly that closeness was full of brand new meaning.

‘I’m me again,’ I whispered.

He smiled and all the tension lining his face left. He bent to kiss my forehead. It was a friendly kiss, tender and brotherly. But I was shocked to find I wanted more—and when he came away from me, I lifted my head and pressed my lips to his. Startled, he pulled away, his eyebrows shooting up before pulling together in confusion. And then his smile returned, wider now, and he came back and kissed me—long and slow and intimate.

‘Where did that come from?’ he murmured when we parted. He touched my lips with his fingers. ‘Not that I’m complaining.’

I had no idea where it had come from. The only thing I knew was he no longer felt like a friend. 'I don't know ... It was nice though, wasn't it?'

We watched each other. A smile played around the corners of his mouth. I knew my expression mirrored his. 'Want to do it again?' he asked.

We closed the space between us and kissed some more.

'I could get used to this, Marla,' he said, when we came apart to breathe.

'I'm used to it already, Jack.'

His lips descended on mine once more.

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