



"FANTASY, ACTION,  
ROMANCE—  
EVERYTHING I LOVE!"

—JENNIFER ESTEP,  
*New York Times* bestselling author

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AMANDA  
BOUCHET

THE KINGMAKER CHRONICLES

HEART

ON FIRE

# HEART

❧ ON FIRE ❧

AMANDA  
BOUCHET



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## CHAPTER 1

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“DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?”

What normal person doesn't look up at *that*? Not that I'm entirely normal, but at least Griffin's question snaps me from unpleasant thoughts of giant metallic birds, Cyclopes, fire, and blood.

“I see...Piers?” And there's another person riding alongside Griffin's brother on a large gray horse. Nondescript traveling clothes flap on a tall, lean frame. There's an odd, lumpy hat. I frown. “Kaia?”

“Then I'm not hallucinating.” My husband does not sound happy, and seeing as he thinks everyone he loves should be protected by his own army and safe behind thick walls, finding his baby sister on the road to Tarva City disguised as a boy must come as an Olympian shock.

With a muttered oath, Griffin urges Brown Horse into a gallop. Squeezing his sides, I direct Panotii to follow, my newly healed ribs aching in mild protest at the increase in speed. Another day of rest would have done them good. Not heaving up my pregnant guts after breakfast every morning for the last few days might have helped, too.

We reach Piers and Kaia and rein in, four sets of hooves kicking up clumps of half-dried mud in the road. Kaia doesn't bother to dismount but launches herself directly into Griffin's arms, landing mostly across his lap. He grunts and grabs her, keeping her from slipping to the ground.

“What are you doing here?” he practically growls. “This is no place for you.”

She clings to him, crawling up his chest until his chin knocks her hat askew. A long ribbon of dark hair tumbles loose. Kaia gulps down a breath, but then her face crumples, and she lets out a huge sob.

My heart goes into painful overdrive. Did something happen at home?

“What’s wrong? Is everyone all right?” Griffin echoes my worries, anxiety sharpening his words. A deep crease forms between his eyebrows as he takes in his brother’s grim face.

Piers looks haggard. *And angry?*

“Is everyone all right?” Kaia repeats, her voice rising shrilly before breaking on a hiccup. Almost violently, she knocks her hat all the way off, getting it out of her face. “I thought you were going to die. Over and over. All of you.” She twists her fingers in the front of Griffin’s tunic, holding on tight. “Blood. Fire.” She turns and spears me with a bloodshot gaze. “Spiders.”

My stomach hollows so fast it leaves a gaping hole in my middle. She was at the Games? Fifteen-year-old, sheltered, innocent Kaia was at the Agon Games? How in the name of Zeus and his pet Pegasus did *that* happen?

“But then you didn’t. Die, I mean. You just kept going, no matter what. But Carver, I thought he did. He looked so...dead.” Sniffing, she wipes the back of her wrist under her nose. Her hand shakes. “And then the news spread that you’d taken over Tarva, but we couldn’t get to you. Your new guards didn’t know us and wouldn’t let us in. *They wouldn’t let us in!*”

Kaia balls up her fist and thumps it hard against Griffin’s chest. She hits him again, pouring her fear and frustration into her punch rather than into a new rush of tears—tears she seems to be only barely holding back.

I shift uncomfortably in my saddle. We did this to her. And it was my idea to compete in the Games to gain access to the previous Tarvan royals. Because of me, nearly everyone Kaia loves was almost massacred on more than one occasion. Worse, she obviously witnessed the most recent ones.

His jaw flexing, Griffin looks up from his sister's tearstained face. His somber gaze flicks to Piers. "Did you ask the guards to bring us a message?"

Piers nods, keeping his eyes trained solely on Griffin, as if I'm too unsavory to look at. "But so did about a hundred other people every hour, using all sorts of incentives. Saying they were family. Offering bribes." He makes no effort to disguise the bitterness in his voice. "Everyone wants a look at the glorious winners of the Agon Games—and the new Tarvan Alpha couple."

I glance at Griffin. He catches my quick look and frowns. The reason we're out alone, and in our dingiest old traveling gear, is because disguising ourselves and slipping away was the only way past the crowd chanting "*Elpis*" at our new front gate. The meaning behind the name we gave our team in the Agon Games has been spreading, reminding Thalyrians of the ancient and mostly forgotten spirit and personification of Hope: *Elpis*. And now, the indomitable idea of hope in a world full of ills appears to be contagious. It's expanding far and wide.

If people were so ready for change in Thalyria, it's hard to believe they waited for me to come along to do it. Or, more accurately, for Griffin to push me into doing something about it. No expectations at all seem to have turned into too much expectation overnight, and now all that growing excitement is camped out on our doorstep and serving as a loud and constant reminder that I have a lot to figure out—and soon.

At any rate, we went out the back.

Piers finally looks at me, his expression going from hard to harder. As if reading my mind, he says, “Elpis. How fitting.”

*So why the irony?* I narrow my eyes on the one member of Griffin’s family—*my* family—that I just can’t seem to like. “You’re the only one with something against hope.”

“I’m the only one with something against leading my family and friends into bloodbaths!” Piers snaps.

“We’re not dead!” I snap back.

“Where’s Cassandra?”

The blood drains from my face so fast it leaves my head numb and my hearing dull.

Piers’s eyes turn as chilling as winter frost. “They told me she went to fight alongside you in the Games, but then I saw Jocasta, *my sister*, in that terror pit of an arena instead.”

I open my mouth to respond, although I don’t know what to say. Still, it’s my responsibility, just like Cassandra was. But before I can form the awkward words scraping at my tongue, Griffin steps in, his voice even and strong.

“Cassandra left our rooms at night to do unsanctioned reconnaissance. She made that decision herself, and it cost her her life before the Games even started. It wasn’t Cat’s fault.”

Piers pales, his face turning the same shade as the knuckles on the fists clenching his reins. He looks sick, and in that moment, I realize he still hoped, maybe even believed, that Cassandra was alive. She could simply have been somewhere in Castle Tarva with us, off limits, protected behind high walls and slightly overzealous guards.

But she’s not. She never saw either of our victories—winning the brutal Agon Games or the successful takeover of Tarva—and it *was* my fault. Partially, at least. My plan to enter the tournament brought her to Kitros. To the arena.

She came because she believed in Griffin and me, to fight for us, for a new Thalyria, and she was the first casualty on our side since I joined this cause.

Slowly, Piers looks away from Griffin. His dark-gray eyes land on me and spark like flint on steel.

The heavy dose of guilt weighing on my chest makes it hard to breathe. "I'm sorry. She was very nice."

The moment I say it, I want to shove the weak platitude back down my throat. Two bright spots appear high on Piers's pale cheeks, and I think he wants to shove my words back down my throat, too, along with his fist. I can hardly blame him.

The muscles in Piers's face twitch, and I think he's just barely holding back the colossal tongue-lashing he wants to give me. Clearly struggling for control, he still urges his horse forward until he's uncomfortably close. When he finally speaks, his voice is so tense and low that it vibrates like the first ominous tremors before a volcano belches up destruction from below.

"Let me get this clear, *Cat*. You stole my second-in-command when I wasn't there to stop it, got her killed, and then replaced a solid, seasoned warrior on your team with my completely untrained sister?"

I swallow. *Gods, I'd hate me, too.* "Jocasta handled herself well in the ring."

"She should never have been in the ring!"

"She wouldn't have been if Cassandra had stayed put!"  
*Damn it! I want to take that back, too.*

Piers's nostrils flare. "You're blaming a dead woman for putting my sister's life in danger?"

"Your sister volunteered," I answer through gritted teeth. "We needed six people in order to compete. She was courageous and strong."

“She’d be dead if Carver hadn’t intervened in the final round. For days, we thought he’d died saving her.”

Painful memories filled with heartache and fear hit me like a series of hard punches to the gut, nearly winding me. It was so close. If Selena wasn’t frighteningly powerful and a healer beyond compare, we could never have brought Carver back from the brink of death.

Piers drops his reins and balls both his hands into fists, grinding them hard against his thighs. His hands are big and strong, but they don’t scare me. Sometimes, I wish he’d go ahead and hit me. Then I could show him just how unfriendly I can be.

“I could have lost three siblings because of your impossible, insane scheme,” he bites out.

My eyebrows fly up. “Impossible? It worked! As the victors, we got an audience with the Tarvan royals. In their own home.” Ours now, hard won, but without a long and bloody war and with only a handful of lives lost. I’ll only regret two casualties: Cassandra and Appoline, the seer princess who protected my unborn child and me at the cost of her own life.

“I’d think my brother was dead right now if I hadn’t finally heard otherwise from news at the castle gate!” Piers seethes.

I’m truly sorry for his loss, and his worry, but indignation starts to seethe back. Doesn’t he realize what we’ve accomplished? How many lives we’ve saved? What we’ve gained?

“We sent a message home.” Griffin’s too-even tone means to tread carefully. He’s still holding Kaia on his lap, and his fingers flex with tension against her back. “If you’d been where you were supposed to be—*both* of you—you would have known we were all right. And

Cassandra made her own choices. So did Jocasta. So did Carver, for that matter.”

“And you sanctioned it! Every part of it. Cat says jump, and you all march blindly to your deaths!”

Griffin’s face darkens with anger. I can tell he’s barely holding on to his temper, and his tolerance far exceeds mine. Personally, I feel like my head is a geyser, and steam is about to explode from my ears. I understand that Piers is protective and angry, and he has every right to be, but this is about a lot more than losing his second-in-command, or even Jocasta competing in the Games. He’s never liked me. At first, it was because I didn’t support Griffin’s ambitions, or fall blindly into his arms. Now it’s because I do? And because I have? I’ve become an integral part—no, *the lynchpin*—of Griffin’s grand design for Thalyria, but that’s still not good enough. Or maybe it’s too much.

*Gods! I can’t win with Piers!*

Kaia pushes up from Griffin’s chest, straightening as she wipes her lingering tears away. Her face is splotched with red. “But they’re not dead.” She bites her lower lip hard enough to turn it white. Glancing down, she quietly adds, “Except for Cassandra.”

Piers flinches. So do I. Then his eyes blaze with anger so fierce I feel it like a physical blow. “You turned my sister into a murderer.”

Rage rises up in me, lifting my chin a notch. “She turned herself into a warrior. You should be proud.”

“You should be ashamed,” Piers shoots back. “Making innocent people fight your war.”

*My war?* I open my mouth to argue, because really, how can I not respond to *that*? But Griffin has apparently heard enough.

“You’re talking to my wife and your Alpha,” he says.

“The Queen of two realms. Jocasta showed great bravery. And Cassandra wasn’t forced into anything. She came by choice, and we lost *one* life instead of thousands. As the person actively recruiting our army for us, you should see the bigger picture, and you should definitely respect your friend’s sacrifice.”

“As the person recruiting your army, I feel useless. You don’t even need it,” Piers spits out, glaring at me as if I’ve single-handedly undermined his life’s work.

“We do,” Griffin counters. “There’s no taking Fisa without a huge fighting force.”

“Fisa.” Piers huffs a bitter laugh. “So this is all about Cat and her mother? You’ll drag all of Thalyria into a war to settle your wife’s family squabble? To feed her need for power?”

My jaw drops. Acid coats his every word, and Piers makes everything about me, when I never initiated any of this. Without Griffin, and apparently a few meddling Gods to push me along, I’d still be telling fortunes at the circus, occasionally filling in for the acrobats, lying about my past, ignoring my future, and living as far away from my cruel tyrant of a mother as humanly possible.

“This has nothing to do with a family squabble or anyone’s need for power,” Griffin answers harshly. “And you know it.”

Piers doesn’t meet Griffin’s eyes. Instead, he and I glare daggers at each other. I have a lot to say, but I somehow keep my mouth shut. I don’t want to make things worse.

Kaia slides to the ground between Griffin and me. I back Panotii up a few steps to give her more room. There’s the added benefit of putting some distance between Piers and myself without looking like I’m backing down. Because I’m not.

“Why are you out here alone?” Kaia looks around, as

if half expecting the rest of Beta Team to come galloping down the road.

*Alpha Team?*

*Nope. I'll never get used to that.*

“Where’s everyone else?” she asks.

“Back at the castle,” Griffin answers. “They’re fine. Cat’s friend Selena told us to go see what was on the West Road.”

Griffin and I exchange a look. Apparently, we found it.

“We’re on the West Road,” Kaia says, brightening. “Piers finally gave up. We were leaving for Sinta City, but I convinced him to turn around and try again. I had this... feeling.” She wrinkles her nose, scrunching together the few sun-induced freckles she must have picked up over the last couple of weeks.

*A feeling? Like the sight? Or a nudge from a God?*

With Griffin’s immunity to harmful magic, Carver’s incredible skill with a sword, and Kaia’s “feeling,” I have to wonder if this family is as Hoi Polloi as I’ve always believed. Sometimes magic is a sort of intuition, and their instincts are usually spot-on.

I dismount next to Kaia, feeling stiff and heavy and kind of out of breath, even though I wasn’t really moving. All that seems to be a permanent condition at the moment. It started a few days ago, along with the copious vomiting.

“You did the right thing,” I tell her. “You should always listen to your gut.” I loop my arm around Kaia’s waist and squeeze, attempting a casual display of affection. It goes well, I think.

Joining us on the ground, Griffin plants his hands on his hips and gives Kaia a stern look from under lowered brows. She immediately starts shifting from foot to foot. I squeeze her again in encouragement and then drop my arm, stepping back.

“And what, exactly, are *you* doing here?” Griffin demands, his eyes narrowing on his sister. “And why in the name of the *Gods* were you at the Agon Games?”

Griffin is nearly old enough to be Kaia’s father and just as authoritative. She moves closer to me and hangs her head, duly intimidated and apparently mute.

“She followed me,” Piers says tightly, dismounting as well. “I don’t know how she got out of Castle Sinta—dressed like that and with a horse—and I only realized she was on my trail when I was nearly to Kitros.”

*Resourceful girl.* I nudge her arm, smiling a little. And good for her for not giving Piers her secrets.

With a quick flash of a grin, Kaia smiles back, her head still ducked.

If Piers could kill me with the evil eye alone, he would. Griffin doesn’t look happy, either, but I don’t know if it’s because of my nudge and smile, or because Kaia spent time on the road alone.

“I didn’t have time to take her back,” Piers says in grudging explanation, “so I took her with me.”

“To the bloody Agon Games? What were you thinking!” Griffin explodes.

“I didn’t know what they’d be like!”

I snort, and Piers has the good sense to try again.

“I didn’t know they’d be quite like *that*. It was more horrible and violent than I ever imagined.”

I stare at him in disbelief, the fear and pain still fresh in my mind and muscles. *Horrible and violent* doesn’t even begin to describe it.

Piers swings his gaze back to me again. “And then there was your victory visit to Castle Tarva. That worked out well for you, didn’t it?”

There’s a snide undercurrent in Piers’s words again,

as if confronting dangerous enemy royals and taking over Tarva were just to satisfy some little whim of mine.

I cross my arms, mainly to keep from reaching out and smacking him. “Would you rather it hadn’t worked out, and we’d all died?”

His jaw clenches hard, a muscle bouncing out on one side. “That’s not what I said.”

“Just what you implied.”

He shakes his head, his features tightening in anger once again. “There were other, less dangerous ways to go about it.”

“Like what? Throwing nameless, faceless soldiers at Galen Tarva instead of ourselves? He would have opened up a chasm in the ground that swallowed them whole, which is exactly what he tried to do to me in his own throne room. Who’s expendable, then? Anyone you don’t know?” I glare at Piers, disgusted now. “That’s leadership for you.”

“Cat...” Griffin’s voice holds a hint of warning, urging me to back down. I understand. Soldiers have an important role, and I shouldn’t forget it. Griffin knows what armies can do. He’s led them.

“Leadership is making wise decisions based on rational thought,” Piers snaps.

“Leadership is actually *leading*, not using others as a shield while you shout orders and hop around in the back.”

Piers’s eyes widen in obvious shock. *Ha!*

Griffin grips my arm above my elbow, squeezing lightly. “Piers fought alongside me. Alongside *us*.” By us, he means Carver, Kato, and Flynn. My friends. My team. “And there was no hopping around in the back.”

His censorious tone rankles, but I guess I did just shoot my mouth off about something I wasn’t there for and didn’t really know about.

Frowning slightly, I extract my arm from Griffin's hold. "I know Piers rides out on patrol. I know he can fight." And that's as much of an apology as he'll get.

"How do you plan to hold on to Tarva?" Piers asks. "Taking over a realm isn't the same thing as keeping it."

*If you ask me, we've already done the hard part.*

"The army you're building might come in useful." *There. Another concession.*

I hear the sarcasm that creeps into my voice, though. So does Griffin. He looks at me sharply, probably disapproving of my hostility.

I almost roll my eyes. If Piers weren't his brother, Griffin would have knocked him senseless by now for speaking to me the way he has.

For Griffin's sake, I attempt a more neutral tone. "Honestly? I don't think it'll be much of an issue if all the Tarvans cheering at the castle gate are any indication. Then again, their last Alpha was a mass-murdering megalomaniac, so it's hard to do worse."

Piers laughs a little—dryly. Does he think I'm worse? *Please.* Galen Tarva leveled an entire neighborhood in his own backyard just to send a message to my mother. He scared her enough that she offered up my unique skills—and me—just to keep him off her back. And when one psychotic monster is frightened of the other... Well, that's saying something.

Piers breathes deeply, the long inhale making his chest expand. His slate-colored eyes meet mine. "Can I speak with you for a moment? Alone."

Wariness tingles up my spine and then sweeps down my arms, making my knife hand twitch. I glance at Griffin. His brow furrows, but he nods, not seeming overly worried about Piers's request. I have no idea what Piers could have

to say to me that he can't say in front of Griffin and Kaia. Their presence hasn't exactly been holding him back.

"All right." My reluctant agreement comes with a quick and automatic inventory of any magic I could use to defend myself—none. The magic I absorbed during the Agon Games was lost to injuries and exhaustion afterward, and Piers already knows I can detect lies and turn invisible, so popping out of sight won't even surprise him.

There are always physical weapons. I've got my knives, and a sword, but I doubt Griffin would appreciate my taking a blade to his brother, no matter how annoying Piers might get. Betrayal and backstabbing just aren't done. Not in his family, anyway.