



THE MAGIC
FOUND IN CHAOS

SHARON G. CLARK

The Magic Found In Chaos

by

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The Mission

Chapter One

THE MORNING FELT cool as the sun rose and the sounds of wildlife surrounding Zheirger Keep filled the silence heavy with dread. Chayboen's reason for the ride was dire.

No one had seen Gionne since last night, and there was no evidence she'd ever returned from her earlier scouting mission.

Kareina hadn't wanted to panic everyone immediately, but feared finding some sign of Gionne. She sent Melrick and a small group to check the cliff side of the Keep while Chayboen's group spread out every hundred feet in the forested area. They'd been methodically searching for an hour. Gionne shouldn't have been this far from the Keep without pairing up for the patrol. Even five years after their occupation of the Keep, Gionne would know the surrounding area wasn't entirely safe. Many from Kellshae feared the return of magic and didn't want to associate with those who had the ability. There were also those who feared love that didn't fit into a neat box of perceived normality.

Alarm had her body trembling and Chayboen realized she relayed the fear to her horse, Shadow. His own haunches rippled and tightened with each step, his snort brusque. Chayboen rubbed his neck. "Sorry, my friend. I know I won't be any use if I can't focus." Shadow tossed his head as if in agreement. "We both know the longer it takes to find her, the worse the outcome."

After a few feet, Shadow flung his ears back, whinnied, and rushed forward so fast he brushed against tree trunks. Trusting his instincts, Chayboen held on, her fear turning to panic. Shadow stopped so suddenly Chayboen had to clutch the saddle's pommel to avoid flying over his head. She jumped to the ground as Shadow gave a scream to alert the others.

The scene in front of her brought tears to Chayboen's eyes. She jerked a blanket from the saddlebags and, with unsteady steps, made her way to where Gionne's nearly naked and bloody body lay. At her head was the dead carcass of a female wolf, two arrows protruding from her flank, one from her stomach. Somewhere nearby was the overpowering smell of burning flesh. As Chayboen carefully placed the blanket over Gionne, she assessed the damage, only slightly relieved Gionne was breathing, shallow as it was. Someone brutalized Gionne. She had a hole in her arm, above her wrist. Her body was beaten to a pulpy mess, a "B" carved into her abdomen, and from the blood and fluids between her thighs, savagely raped.

“Sweet goddess, why?” Chayboen said, tears falling. Why must monsters in the guise of men unleash such cruelty on women? Aware of the expected reaction to defend once awake, Chayboen tried to bring Gionne from her unconscious state. “Gionne. Gionne, honey, I need you to wake up.” No response.

“Hellfire,” Tiilaen said, stopping her horse beside Shadow. “Please tell me she’s alive.” Chayboen noted the trembling of Tiilaen’s body. Tiilaen had been Gionne’s guardian when she and her wife, Stechyc, had come from Langlear Forest to assist Kareina against her twin brother and an angry god. Since the death of both, and Kareina starting the magic school at Zheirger Keep, Gionne followed Kareina as her mentor.

“Barely.” Chayboen heard the approach of the others. “Tiilaen, keep them away from here. Let’s maintain some of Gionne’s privacy. Have some of the patrol inspect ahead and look for strangers, or anyone else, who could have done this.”

“Do you want me to send for Stechyc?” Tiilaen’s voice cracked with the emotion she was trying to contain. She appeared to be fighting an internal battle to move closer, as if not doing so wouldn’t confirm the truth before her.

Chayboen glanced down at Gionne. “Have her and Mayliandra meet us at Kareina’s cottage. Don’t tell specifics, but impress on Stechyc the urgency of the matter. You might want to send Kareina directly to her cottage, too.” Chayboen placed a hand on Tiilaen’s shoulder. “You both need time to compose yourselves, for Gionne’s sake.”

“Done. I’ll be right back.” Tiilaen went to give direction to the others.

Much as Chayboen didn’t want Gionne to come fully awake in a panic on horseback, she couldn’t wait any longer to get Gionne away to safety.

Two things happened simultaneously. Ysannie appeared on the other side of Gionne, opposite Chayboen, and low growling joined the multiple pairs of eyes glistening from the timberland. Ysannie was the former golden goddess, her immortality taken by Zenti, the king of the twelve gods of Kellshae. She was also Chayboen’s lifemate. “How’d you—”

“The wolves told Yoshan,” Ysannie said. “I happened to overhear the wolves’ pain and their message. I’ll take her to Stechyc.”

“I’ve sent a message to have Stechyc go to Kareina’s cottage.

The fewer people who know of this, the better for Gionne.”

“I understand.” Ysannie focused on the wolves hidden in the trees for a moment before returning her attention to Chayboen. “I’ve explained to the pack that you’ll take proper care of their dead pack mate. I assume whoever did this, is responsible for the burned remains the wolves just told me about. Once we’re gone, I’ll have someone properly handle her burial, too. We’ll meet at the cottage.” In an instant, Ysannie and Gionne were gone.

Tiilaen carried a blanket with her when she re-joined Chayboen. They wrapped the wolf corpse and carried it to the horses, mounted, and rode away in silence. Chayboen noted, from the corner of her eye, the wolves followed, staying a safe distance away and never leaving the cover of the trees. The wolves moved into a semi-circle at the edge of woods surrounding the cottage.

Soft light bled around the curtains hanging in the window, giving the cottage a peaceful, welcoming appearance. Chayboen knew inside the building would be a flurry of activity. She dismounted, leaving Shadow to his own devices. Shadow may be an animal, but so in tuned to her emotions, he would understand the gravity of the situation and stay close in case she needed him again.

Inside, the cottage was as Chayboen suspected. Stechyc was working her healing magic on Gionne. Hovering in the background, prepared to perform any request asked, were Melrick and

Ysannie. Mayliandra was firmly folded in Kareina's arms. Melrick stood with his back turned, staring out the window. Chayboen closed the door behind Tiilaen. Kareina was lightly kissing the top of Mayliandra's ear and said in a voice hoarse with emotion, "It will be okay, Mayli, it has to be. Gionne has all of us to help her through this."

Shoulders trembling with emotion, Mayliandra tightened her hold on Kareina's waist. "I know, but it'll take Gionne a while to realize that too." Mayliandra sniffed, pulled a little away, and stared into Kareina's eyes. "This has to be hard for you. How are you holding up, my love?"

Chayboen knew Mayliandra was concerned the situation would bring back memories of when Kareina had suffered a similar fate as Gionne. By the order of Kareina's twin brother, eighteen-year-old Kareina was kidnapped, gang raped, and tortured by a nearby clan. She wasn't supposed to live through it, but her friend, Melrick, found and rescued her. Kareina understood first hand that living through the experience wasn't without emotional and physical consequences. Chayboen hoped Gionne's warrior spirit would help her cope faster than Kareina had learned to.

"Gionne is strong. She won't be alone, won't give up on herself." She hoped the simple words would bring comfort. Chayboen looked over to where Stechyc busily applied herbs, ointments, and worked her healing magic. "Why did the bastard have to mark her?" Chayboen winced at the pain lacing her words.

Mayliandra said, "It's what these monsters do." She gave Kareina an affection-filled look to comfort her wife. "Despite the intent, the markings don't always detract from the true beauty of the one wearing scars."

With a snort, Kareina said, "You're prejudiced because you've managed to get used to all mine. I'm surprised your stomach manages not to retch when close to me."

"I'm blinded by all the love you exude—"

Gionne's sudden scream pierced the cottage. All conversation and verbal comforting stopped.

"Calm down, you're safe," Stechyc said, as she and Ysannie tried to keep Gionne on the bed without using too much force. She must have realized where she was and why because Gionne curled into a fetal position and sobbed wretchedly. "Gionne you're safe," Stechyc repeated, draping a clean blanket over her.

After a while Gionne's weeping lessened and she cried out for Kareina. Without hesitation, Kareina rushed to her side and knelt next to the bed. As tears streamed down Kareina's face, Gionne met her gaze through the one eye not entirely closed by swelling. "Gionne, can you tell us who did this?"

Gionne started to nod, moaned, and winced in discomfort, the words garbled by the damage done to her face when she spoke. "Belzan." The room, quiet in deference to the situation, became more so.

Kareina gripped the bed frame so tight her flesh whitened. "Did you say Belzan?" That, Chayboen thought, explained the reason for the "B" carved into her lower abdomen. Kareina didn't even need to ask why he'd done this horrendous thing. They all knew the answer. Belzan had been banished from Clan Gradyln, stripped of his clan rights and position in the guard, because he'd beaten Gionne once before for attempting to stop his attack on Kareina's adopted daughter, Jahq.

"I've...message..." Gionne stopped speaking, her breathing ragged.

"You should get some rest first," Kareina said. "You need to heal."

“No, listen.” Gionne groaned and shifted slightly, her face closer to Kareina. Silent, Stechyc dabbed a water-dampened cloth against Gionne’s lips. With a heavy sigh, Gionne continued. “He’s bringing an army...wants to take the Keep.” Her eye squeezed shut, her face pinched in discomfort. “Kill you after he does—” She whimpered. “Does this to all the females you hold dear.”

Rage coursed through Chayboen, but she held it tight inside, not wanting to startle Gionne. The guilt for Kareina, however, wasn’t as easy to control, as she said, “I’m sorry, Gionne. I should have killed him the first time he hurt you.”

Mayliandra squatted beside them and squeezed Kareina’s shoulder. “You couldn’t have predicted this, Kareina.” Her gaze moved to Gionne. “Sweetie, we’re leaving to let you rest. Stechyc and Ysannie are going to help you with the pain, and stay with you until you’re better. Chayboen will be outside to make sure no one disturbs you.”

Gionne’s eyes darted to Kareina. “You’ll come back?”

Kareina nodded. “Nothing other than your rest will keep me away.” She stood, pulling Mayliandra with her. “Melrick will alert the warriors. I need to check on things.”

“Yoshan and—” Gionne hesitated. “Jahq?” Kareina nodded. “Good.” When Gionne’s eyes had closed, and her breathing became a little more regular, Chayboen, Kareina, Mayliandra, and a silent Melrick left the cottage.

Outside, Chayboen noted Melrick’s red eyes and tear-streaked face. Melrick had taken Gionne under his tutelage, much as he had when Kareina was a child, and Kareina had taken on the guise of her twin brother, Sher Karr. They’d grown close, each showing the respect and love they shared as more than tutor and student, much like uncle and niece.

“I’ll warn the older warriors of Belzan,” Melrick said, breaking the silence. “They won’t have forgotten him.”

“We need to keep all the woman and female children close to the Keep for protection, but without causing too much fear,” Mayliandra said.

Kareina nodded. “Melrick and I will take care of the Keep’s protection.”

Melrick said, “I’ll get started.” He left in the direction of the Keep, his posture more defeated than Chayboen had seen, if ever.

Kareina pulled Mayliandra close to her side in a one-armed hug. “Please check on the girls, make sure they’re safe.”

“Of course,” Mayliandra assured her. “Then we’ll bring foodstuffs back and check on Gionne. She needs the support of her family. Later, we’ll strategize.”

She pulled Mayliandra tighter to her, kissed the top of her head, and said, “I love when you take charge and keep me on task.”

Mayliandra stared up at Kareina, then glanced at Chayboen. “Kareina, this is going to be hard for you. Whatever you need from me, just ask. Gionne is as much our daughter as Yoshan and Jahq. We could do no less even if she weren’t.” She kissed Kareina’s chin. “But when we find Belzan, we’ll need to toss a coin for which of us kills him.”

Kareina snickered.

Chayboen clasped Kareina’s shoulder. “You’ll only get a chance if you’re at the head of the line. That’s where I plan to be.”

WHEN KAREINA AND Mayliandra left, Chayboen went back inside the cottage. Stechyc and Ysannie diligently labored over an unconscious Gionne. She hated to interrupt their concentration, but wanted to be more useful than as a door guard. “Is there anything I can do?”

Stechyc harrumphed. “Find this son of a bitch and allow me to assist in removing body parts one piece at a time. The damage is so severe, I don’t know if we can pull her through this. I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others, but saving her may be beyond our capabilities. If Gionne survives the night, the outlook may be more promising.” She picked up a damp cloth and dabbed at the perspiration at Gionne’s brow. “Until then, pray to—”

“Our goddess?” Chayboen said. She glanced at her wife to gauge her reaction to the conversation and noted Ysannie’s facial expressions. With her brow furrowed, her expression flickered from confused, to stunned, and settled on contemplative. “Love? What’s wrong?”

Biting on her lower lip, Ysannie glanced at Stechyc and settled on Chayboen, staring into her eyes. “I’ve just had the strangest vision. I don’t understand all that I saw, but I believe I get the gist of the matter.” Ysannie reached for a thin, sharp knife. She asked Stechyc, “Do you trust me?”

“Impeccably,” Stechyc said, her tone conveying the truth in the words.

“This is unorthodox,” Ysannie said, and then turned to Chayboen. “I don’t know why or how, but I believe this will work. Please don’t stop me, love.”

“What will work?” Chayboen asked, her gaze alternating between the knife and Ysannie’s eyes.

Ysannie ran the blade across her palm. “This,” Ysannie said, placing her bleeding palm over the open wound at Gionne’s stomach. As Ysannie and Gionne’s blood comingled, Ysannie said, “I may no longer have my immortality as a goddess, but I’m still a demi-god with a powerful magic. Something, a feeling inside as well as the vision, tells me my blood has a power in it that can assist with Gionne’s healing.”

Chayboen believed in her wife, believed there were mysteries about Ysannie they may never learn in their lifetime, but this action was almost too strange. “What if you’re wrong?”

Stechyc answered. “Her hand will be sore, and Gionne will die, because right now her prognosis is dim.”

“And, if this works, no one—especially Gionne—must ever know,” Ysannie said.

Chayboen nodded. “Too many would question the ramifications and dangers of a commoner like Gionne, one from the Valley of the Mist, having the blood of a goddess coursing through her system.” If people with magic were feared, how would the reaction be to learn someone other than Ysannie had the magic of a goddess swimming in their veins? “No one shall learn this from me.”

Chapter Two

SMELLS OF ROASTING meats and vegetables filled the air as Jahq and Fleuren walked the main road lined with vendors outside the Keep. In the last few years, every manner of people had come to live at or near Zheirger Keep. Anyone with magic was welcomed to come and learn how to control and use his or her skills for good. Most stayed, bringing their other family members, whether they exuded skills of magic or not. Because for some, no matter the gender of their mates, this was the one place they could love freely.

All the people around them buzzing like insects made Jahq's skin itch with anxiety. "I can't believe you've talked me into this," Jahq said to Fleuren. "Why couldn't we stay in the garden? It was always good enough for our visits together before today."

"Maybe because I worry about you," Fleuren said. "You need to get out more—and not just out of your room for family dinners. Look at the last three years, Jahq. You did all your lessons in your room. You've gone to none of the ceremonies and parties. Nevertheless, you're correct. You go to the garden at least once a day, no matter the weather."

Jahq smiled down at the small, dark-haired woman. Fleuren, her aunt by marriage to Uncle Melrick. Fleuren's kind heart and spirit bound her and Jahq together as best friends. "So why do I need to do this today?" Jahq asked.

Fleuren placed her right hand—the last two fingers and part of her palm missing after an encounter with an evil god five years ago—on her swollen belly and rubbed. Her expression grew serious. "You're doing me a favor. Melrick had an emergency to run off to, and your other family members weren't anywhere I could find. I wasn't ready to do this alone and didn't want a stranger nearby should something happen."

"W-what could happen?" Jahq asked. "Are you and the baby okay?"

"Yes," Fleuren assured. "But with only weeks left, I don't want to take chances. Just being an old worry-wart." With her left hand, Fleuren reached up and caressed Jahq's cheek, and Jahq covered Fleuren's hand with her own. Her aunt's tone grew serious. "It's been three years, Jahq. Let her go and move on. You deserve a life."

Jahq clenched her jaw and Fleuren must have taken it as a cue to remove her hand because it dropped to her side.

"I have a life, a happy one with all my family," Jahq said, stopping near an empty vendor stand at the end of the road. "And I know better than anyone how long it's been since Gionne broke up with me."

Fleuren snorted. "Broke up with you? Is that how you've justified her actions?"

"Please, Aunt Fleuren, keep your voice down." Jahq felt the blood drain from her face. "Only you and I know what happened that night. And it has nothing to do with why I don't like leaving my room."

"You should've told your mothers the truth long before now, Jahq. They have a right to know."

"No. This is up to me to deal with."

“But, you aren’t—”

“In my own way, I do manage.” Jahq sighed. “Besides, Papa Kareina would feel obligated to defend me. Mama Mayliandra has worked so hard to control Papa’s temper, and I won’t be the cause of Papa’s pain on my behalf. She’d move us all away.”

“To protect you, Jahq, since they both love you and Yoshan so much.”

“Yes, and I love them as if they were my blood parents. The Keep needs them both.”

“They’ll have to know eventually, Jahq. Wouldn’t the truth be best coming from you?”
Fleuren placed her hands on her lower back and gave a small stretch.

“Someday, maybe. Not now.” Jahq pointed to Fleuren’s belly. “Now we need to get what you came for and get you home for some rest.” Jahq put an arm through Fleuren’s and took some of her weight as they made their way to the vendor on the opposite side of the road.

They had managed a few steps when a small cart intercepted them. A teenage boy of about fourteen held the reins, a middle-aged woman beside him. In the back of the cart a man, probably the husband, sat with a boy around six years old, cradled in his arms, fast asleep.

The woman turned in their direction. “Can you tell us where—” She sucked in a breath and glared at Jahq and the tattoo on the side of her face.

The Iskarrian marking classified Jahq as an acceptably trained mate—in all manner of sex acts—for her fiancé and his male family members. This was expected for a woman of the proper lineage. No one seeing the marking saw a young girl forced to do these acts by Iskarr law imposed by their Caldier. They saw a willing student of such atrocities. She’d still be with Clan Iskarr if Papa Kareina hadn’t taken her into the family as her daughter.

“You’re one of those fancy, tattooed whores, aren’t you?” Without waiting for an answer, the stranger gave her attention to Fleuren, who now had clenched her fists and teeth. “You should keep the whore away from your child,” the woman said, pointing to Fleuren’s belly.

Fleuren’s face flushed bright red. “How dare—”

Jahq put a hand on Fleuren’s shoulder and squeezed. “It’s all right.” She glanced at the back of the cart, and the man there. “What brings you to Zheirger Keep?”

After a glance at his wife, he said, “Our son, Zhing, has been showing the signs of magic. We brought him here for schooling.”

“But if you have free reign to...to...carouse our boys—”

“Corley,” the man said, his voice forceful, but not loud enough to wake the child in his arms.

Corley glared at him, before giving her attention to Fleuren. “Does she work with the children? It’s a question any caring mother would ask.”

Fleuren nodded. “Yes, of course, an honest question.” Jahq noted the glint in her aunt’s eyes. She would have stopped her, but Fleuren held up a hand in her direction. “Jahq, please stay there and stay silent.” Her expression stated the unspoken, *no matter what*.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“No, she has no interaction with the children. In fact, she seldom leaves her room. We do have good people who teach the children. If you stay in town, you’ll be able to monitor Zhing’s progress daily. Drive to the Keep’s gate, and someone will get him registered for school.” Credits for telling the truth, Jahq thought. Maybe she misread her aunt’s mischievous intentions. “But you should know a lot of people have one form or another of magic here.”

Corley shook her head. “Of course, why else would we trust to leave our home? Zhing needs to learn and from people who know what he’s experiencing. My baby needs help. Do you have a magic ability?”

Fleuren bit her bottom lip as if deciding if she should answer. Jahq knew Fleuren was acting for this woman's benefit. Fleuren glanced at the teenager, the father, and then Corley. With a small flick of her fingers, Fleuren indicated Corley should lean down toward her. Uh-oh. Jahq bit her own lip to keep from snickering. After a moment, Corley sat up straight and searched around the cart, her gaze fluid. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead. She focused on Fleuren for a moment and then ordered her son to drive to the gate.

When Fleuren smiled up at her, Jahq gave Fleuren's shoulders a squeeze. "What wicked thing did you say to Corley?"

"Wicked? Why would you suggest such a thing?" Fleuren smiled at her. "I just thought she should know."

"Know what?"

"About the spirit attached to the family," Fleuren said with a look of sincerity. Jahq knew the genuineness in her expression to be a lie. "Or was it the cart? Oh well, at least Corley is aware."

Jahq laughed. "Was there a spirit?" The gift Fleuren possessed was the ability to see the souls or spirits of the dead. Five years ago, the evil god, T'Dar, used her to help him build an army from the dead—priests and warriors killed for his malicious purpose.

Fleuren shrugged. "I can't be sure. It could be a case of an unsettled stomach, gas, or the baby shifting."

"Aunt Fleuren, you are wicked. And I love every bit of you. Come on, let's finish the marketing and get you home." Jahq tugged gently on her aunt's arm, but Fleuren didn't budge. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Jahq. I know what happened with Corley is the main reason why you don't leave your family's suite. It's my fault. I subjected you to the horrid behavior you're trying to avoid. Why can't anyone look beyond the marking and see you as the wonderful and beautiful person you are? Why must they—"

"Hey, there's one positive outcome of the encounter." Jahq laughed when Fleuren flushed. "Well, yes, your bad behavior was amusing. No, I meant that this time groping wasn't involved."

"How did you ever keep your hands to yourself?"

"Oh, you are awful today." Jahq returned her aunt's teasing smile. Fleuren seemed to relax a bit and they continued the walk and finished shopping. As they drew close to the Keep's gate, Jahq spotted her parents, looking upset, as they rushed through the entrance. "Something bad has happened. Did you see their expressions?"

"If you need to go to them, I'll be fine. I saw Melrick headed toward the garrison a moment ago."

"No, no," Jahq said. "We're almost there. Whatever it is, we'll learn soon enough." Jahq hoped her tone reassured Fleuren because her stomach felt tied in knots. Her mothers had been visibly upset, which didn't usually happen at the same time, and Fleuren said Melrick had an emergency earlier. Were the incident's related?

Please, she prayed, don't let something bad happen to someone I love.

Chapter Three

FOR THE FIRST time since moving to the Keep, they were using the war room for its intended purpose. Kareina paced as Mayliandra, Ysannie, and Chayboen stared at her from their seats at the huge table. Stechyc and Tiilaen stood huddled by the door in a private conversation. Melrick had yet to arrive, needing to check on Fleuren first. It had been a long few days, mostly going about business as usual, while concentrating hours tending to Gionne.

Physically, Stechyc and another healer had mended Gionne almost completely. Emotionally, Gionne had a long way to go if near constant screams during sleep—sleep equaling bare minutes at a time—were any indication. Something Kareina was all too familiar with. Kareina wished she could have saved Gionne—saved every woman—from the hellish torture of rape. In a perfect world, maybe, but Kellshae was far from perfect.

When Melrick strode through the door, he, Stechyc and Tiilaen joined the others at the table. Kareina stopped pacing and clutched the back of the chair at the head of the table. “I never thought I’d have to prepare for war, but that is the main reason we’re here today. As we all know, Belzan has announced his intent to attack the Keep.”

Tiilaen asked, “You think this is a viable threat?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Kareina sat. “I wouldn’t have if it weren’t for information we’re receiving from villages and clans all over Kellshae. As some people are coming into their magic, the normal townspeople are forcing them out.”

“Or killing them,” Stechyc said, sadness in her tone.

Kareina nodded. “It’s only a matter of time before those refugees, rebels if you will, band together.”

Mayliandra frowned. “You’re afraid it will become a ‘them’ versus ‘us’ situation. Why would they do this? We’ve given all who want sanctuary, want to learn proper management of their magic, open welcome to Zheirger. Are their non-magicked families so unwilling to move to the Keep for safety sake?”

“Therein lays the trouble, Mayliandra,” Ysannie said. “The timing of all this is coincidental as we know, but not all see it that way. Some see new magic at the time the last of the gods vanished from Kellshae with the exile of T’Dar, as a gift from the gods for the deserving people, the superior people.”

Chayboen snickered. “Then they’re fools. No offense to the gods, love.”

“None taken,” Ysannie said with a grin and shake of her head. “So, with the rebels taking back their personal power, maybe orchestrating revolts, you believe Belzan will use the unrest as the catalyst to enlist the aid of the alleged normal men. Why warn us of his intent?”

Kareina said, “Belzan doesn’t believe we can win. Probably hopes to instill fear. Could be he hasn’t completely amassed his troops. I wouldn’t doubt he’s convinced these men the crux of the trouble stems from us, from Zheirger Keep.” And why wouldn’t they believe him? She’d pretended to be her twin brother in a man’s warrior trade, rather than sit at home waiting for a man to defend her. Moreover, Kareina thought wryly, she had chopped off Belzan’s hand for

beating Gionne near to death, and the intention of harming Jahq. Belzan would stop at nothing for revenge. “With all the unrest, I doubt it’s too daunting a task for him.”

“Well, war is inevitable with such diversities among people.” Mayliandra sat back in her chair. “What do we do about the message from Caldie Parrin?”

“What did I miss?” Melrick asked. He’d been quiet up to that point, preoccupied. Kareina assumed it was concern for Fleuren, closer to delivering their first child.

“We believe Kellshae has its first Oracle,” Stechyc said. “Kareina’s mother is concealing her in Gradyln.”

“Yes, and if she truly is able to see the divine,” Ysannie said as she looked at them in turn, “we’ll be able to best choose how we handle situations in the future. Kellshae may need to make difficult changes...maybe to our established heirarchy of clans.”

Tiilaen squirmed in her seat. “Okay. I handle a sword and don’t profess much knowledge above the ability to make grunting noises. What’s the difference between what this woman does, and what Chayboen sees in dreams?”

Ysannie said, “There’s a great deal in common. Chayboen, through dreams, sees insight into the future, but her visions are moral and spiritually related. As an Oracle, the visions are a divine communication with a purpose on a grand scale.”

“Then why would she be important to us?” Tiilaen asked. “It’s not like we’ll be getting anything else from the gods.”

“No, maybe not.” Ysannie shrugged. “If her power is equal or stronger than Chayboen’s, it could be useful.”

“I would think the important factor,” Mayliandra said, “would be, useful or not, in the wrong hands, this woman could come to harm. Especially if someone believed they could use her, and she couldn’t give them the answers they expect to hear.”

“So we need to send a team to Gradyln to bring her safely back.” Kareina glanced around the group. “We need qualified people. I have a group in mind, but would like to have your input. Any suggestions?”

“If she’s with Parrin, why not bring her through the portal?” Mayliandra asked.

Kareina and Ysannie flashed a glance at each other, too quick for the others to notice—Kareina hoped.

Ysannie said, “Between her magic and being completely blind, the vortex could suck her into oblivion. The trip to Zheirger will have to be done by road.”

Tiilaen glanced to Melrick. “With the Belzan threat, we need every able warrior. As to the erratic behavior of persons with magic, I’d rather none of our people were away from the Keep.”

Melrick scowled at Kareina. “Let’s not postpone this discussion too long, as preparations need to be made, Kareina. Just tell us your thoughts.”

“All right.” Kareina stood and turned her back to the group. “Chayboen, Gionne and,” she paused, “Jahq.” Kareina heard Mayliandra’s gasp above all other responses in the room.

“I understand Chayboen,” Melrick said. “She’ll know how best to handle the Oracle. Gionne needs to go.” Kareina turned to him. Melrick paused to swallow, his features scrunched in heartache. “She needs to get her confidence back.”

Kareina moved to stand behind him. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “And regain her sense of self, yes.”

“But why Jahq? She’s not even trained.” Mayliandra asked with confusion and hurt in her voice. Kareina knew she should’ve spoken with Mayliandra about her intent, but had hesitated,

uncertain the reaction she'd receive. From the instant they met, and subsequently married, Kareina had difficulty broaching any topic with the possibility to hurt Mayliandra.

"I can answer, Shei Mayliandra." Ysannie stood as she met Mayliandra's gaze. "I believe, with visions from Chayboen, Jahq's telekinetic powers could be of use for those involved. Jahq has mastered her skill in many areas."

Mayliandra smirked. "Yet has skills to master. Is that what you infer?" When Mayliandra turned her angry gaze on her, Kareina flinched. "You know the history between—"

"We are all aware of the rift, and none of us knows the true reason behind it," Stechyc said as she went to Mayliandra. "Gionne needs Jahq's strength. And I believe Jahq is more than capable of being of use to Chayboen and the others."

"Then it's agreed?" Kareina received a nod from them all, even Mayliandra after a long pause. "We need to prepare for their journey. With Belzan out there somewhere, we've lots of work still required. Let me know if you have questions, or need something from me." Those words summarily dismissed the group. They exited the room, leaving Mayliandra and Kareina alone. "Please understand, Mayli."

Sighing, Mayliandra faced her. "I do, Kareina, and I agree with your decision, truly. It's just...I don't know, it's hurtful you hadn't spoken to me about this first."

"I apologize, honey." Kareina, contrite, wanted Mayliandra to know how hard it was to leave her out of the decision. "I've agonized about this for days."

Mayliandra frowned. "You didn't tell me because you wanted it known I wasn't part of this, to keep Jahq or Gionne from being angry with me." Kareina was about to negate her conclusion, but Mayliandra swatted her arm. "Don't even try to lie, Kareina. We're together in all things, not just the happier ones."

Kareina pulled Mayliandra in for a fierce hug. "I love you, Mayli."

"And I love you," Mayliandra said, tightening her grip on Kareina's waist. They stayed in that position, not speaking, for a long time. Finally, Mayliandra moved away and sat down dismally. "If you break the news to Gionne, I'll talk to Jahq."

"I've been a terrible parent," Kareina said. She sat next to Mayliandra and clasped her hands. "It's been years and I haven't asked either of them about what happened to separate them so suddenly."

Mayliandra shrugged one shoulder. "Then we're both horrible because neither have I. Truly, I believed whatever happened would repair itself. As time went on, and they never asked to talk about it, I became accustomed to the habit of the way life had become. Gionne moved on and Jahq didn't oppose or complain."

Kareina worried her bottom lip for a moment. "Honey, do you believe the girls have forever fallen out of love?" Gionne had loved Jahq since Iskarr, before Kareina had claimed Jahq as her daughter. Jahq was more hesitant with her feelings, but their attraction became obvious. They were so good for each, so compatible, as perfect for each other as she and Mayliandra were—life mates.

"No, I don't. Which makes this charge more a make-or-break matter for either or both."

She nodded. "Yes, it'll make them see they should be together, or break the relationship for good."

Mayliandra smirked. "Fine, as long as they don't break each other's neck first."

Kareina snorted. "Of course, there's always that."

MAYLIANDRA KNOCKED SOUNDLY on the door to Jahq's room. She debated entering without invitation, as her daughter didn't seem intent on answering, yet wanted to give Jahq the chance to respond. The inner debate lasted little more than a heartbeat. Decision made, Mayliandra entered and saw Jahq staring out the window. The preoccupied stance seemed to be a favored one for Jahq these last years. Although she had yet to ask what happened to place a wedge between Jahq and Gionne, Mayliandra wondered if her concern now would appear insincere after so long.

"Mama," Jahq said in acknowledgment.

"I did knock." Mayliandra stood beside Jahq. Her daughter had the same closed expression she'd worn for years and Mayliandra doubted her visit would change the look for the better.

Jahq gave a half-hearted shrug. "I know you did. You don't need an invitation."

"You keep to yourself, Jahq, but I suspect you've heard what has been going on recently." Jahq nodded. "Belzan has threatened the Keep," Mayliandra said, feeling a need to say the words aloud.

Anger radiated off Jahq and Mayliandra was startled. "He's done more than threaten Zheirger, Mama." Jahq stared out the window, her hands clenched into fists so tight her skin whitened. "I saw you and Stechyc together. Gossip travels quickly, and I'm able to piece things together. Is she okay? Has she—"

"No, Gionne isn't worse." Mayliandra worried her bottom lip before answering. It pained her Jahq refused to call Gionne by name, not that she and Kareina didn't know who 'she' was when Jahq referred to Gionne, seldom as it was. "Physically, the healers have done all they can for her. The emotional damage will be a long time rebuilding, I fear."

Another nod before Jahq faced her. "The news isn't the reason you're here. From your hesitancy to broach the topic, I gather I'm not going to like what you have to impart."

"No, Jahq, the threat alone isn't the reason I've come to you. You know we must ready Zheirger Keep for Belzan's attack. We can spare few to leave the Keep right now. Your grandmother has harbored an Oracle by the name of Altaira. We'll have need of her magic power. We need to get her to the Keep."

"And there's a problem with the portal?" Jahq raised an eyebrow in question. "I assume your visit here means as much."

"Ysannie believes that due to the Oracle's particular magic and lack of physical sight, Altaira could be lost in the vortex of the transportation portal." Mayliandra moved to one of the rooms' chairs and sat. "She and another woman will need to cross Kellshae the old-fashioned way."

This brought a half-smile to Jahq's lips. "Old-fashioned? We've had the portal for less than five years."

Mayliandra feigned mortification. "Truly? Seems like forever since we traveled any other way than by our mages' portal." Leaving the window, Jahq sat on the edge of her bed, facing her, and Mayliandra continued. "I know you've taken your lessons in your room, so few know the extent of your telekinesis, or how well you've mastered the power."

"You believe it may be needed to bring the Oracle to Kellshae?"

"To bring you all back safely," Mayliandra said.

Jahq frowned. "So these two women and I are to travel from Gradyln, avoid Belzan's army, any other people intending harm, and arrive safely at Zheirger? This will be my first, possibly

my last, mission with the fate of two strangers in my hands. I've no experience or preparation for this." She sighed. "You do understand what is happening to people with new magic out there, Mama? They're being slaughtered."

"This is why you'll be accompanied by Chayboen." Mayliandra cleared her throat. "Gionne will head the mission." She watched the color drain from Jahq's face. What she was asking would be difficult no matter what, more so with the fracture between the two women. "No matter what happened, Jahq, I know you're adult enough to handle this without letting personal upsets interfere."

"Of course, I won't let my personal issues manipulate how I comport myself," Jahq said. Her tone was calm, but her eyes flashed in exasperation. "Please tell me you don't believe otherwise."

Mayliandra rose from her chair and knelt before Jahq. "No, I would never believe that of you. I know this will be hard, honey. I know you would've moved on with your life if you no longer cared for Gionne." She clasped Jahq's hands in her own. "The last five years can't have been easy for you. Papa and I, even Yoshan, love you very much. I've tried to do what's right as a parent."

Jahq snickered. "A parent barely a few years older I am. More of a sister, age-wise, than a mother should be."

"Yes," Mayliandra said. "But I do love you as my own blood, no matter."

"I know this, Mama. No one could honestly ask for better parents than you and Papa. And you, of all people, know I speak the truth."

"That would be easier to accept if you weren't so successful at hiding your emotions from me and from my gift." Mayliandra shook her head. "So you understand we've your best interest in our hearts. You need to get beyond this room—other than with Fleuren in the gardens—and reintegrate with people, with life."

"I guess, if you say so, Mama."

"Jahq—" Mayliandra stood. "We need you to do this. We also know how difficult this will be on many levels. But, unless there's a viable reason that you're avoiding Gionne, a reason to put the mission at risk, I can't believe anyone other than you is best to handle any possible surprises." She saw Jahq's raised eyebrow in doubt. "Yes, there are few others available, which narrowed the choice. In all honesty, Jahq, I have this feeling in my gut. A feeling all will fail if you don't join this mission."

"I didn't know you had a touch of the seer in you," Jahq said. Her tone was light, but Mayliandra heard a hint of sarcasm. "I owe you and Papa my life. The Keep and our family and friends have sustained me, leaving me to learn, allowing me privacy. There's nothing I would not do for any of you."

"Except share what has caused you such pain these last years." Mayliandra's sigh was heavy in sadness. "I've neglected you, Daughter."

"Mama, I may not care for the position I face, but I know I must do this task. As for the other matter, if I'd been ready to explain, I'd have done so."

"I just feel like I've—"

"No, Mama." Standing, Jahq pulled her into a tight hug. "Please don't say you've done anything wrong by me. This will work out for all of us. Trust me."

"Oh, honey, I do." Mayliandra leaned back from Jahq's embrace to meet her gaze and smiled. "This conversation has worked out better than I thought it might."

“Why? Because no arm twisting was involved or since I capitulated to your demands so readily?”

Mayliandra laughed. “Now that is a response your Papa would have given.”

“See, Mama. You both are right, and the best parents I could have.”

Chapter Four

“I UNDERSTAND THE reasoning for a small party, Kareina, truly.” Gionne strode back and forth in front of the large table in the Zheirger Keep war room. Her fists clenched so tight her blunt nails bit into the flesh of her palm. “What I don’t understand is why, of all missions, you’re putting Jahq on this one. She’s never done anything like this.” It wasn’t that she thought Jahq incapable of managing. Gionne wanted no other to watch her back—if things were different than they were.

Kareina shrugged. “I believe the original mission bringing us to the Keep was enough experience to handle the task, Gionne.” Kareina walked in front of Gionne and stopped. “I understand your—”

“You don’t understand anything.” As soon as the harsh words spew out of her mouth, Gionne cringed. “I’m sorry, Kareina.”

A gasp escaped Gionne when Kareina cautiously and carefully tugged her into a tight hug. “It’s okay, sweetie,” Kareina said. “You’ll get through this. We love you, and we’ll be there with you every step of the way.”

Tears escaped. She’d been doing a lot of crying lately. The one thing Gionne hadn’t been able to do a lot of was sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, images of Belzan had her too terrified to move, reminding her of pain and fear. The way the wolf was tortured. Sleeping never lasted more than a few moments before screaming herself awake, trembling, and drenched in cold sweat. Sleep, Gionne was learning, was overrated.

“Chayboen is also going, so you won’t have to deal with my daughter on your own.” Kareina sighed. “Mayliandra and I should have addressed the rift you two had long before now. Why neither of you wants to talk—”

“It isn’t your concern, either of you. But I do get that Jahq and I should have moved beyond what happened, rather than avoid the issue,” Gionne said. At least, Gionne had tried anyway. She’d sought comfort in the arms of other women. It never filled the hole in her heart, just satisfied the need. No one was Jahq.

“And each other,” Kareina added. “No matter, Jahq will be helpful for this. I understand from Ysannie, her skills are exemplary though few know she has them. You can both look beyond your disagreement?”

Gionne shrugged. “Guess so. Just because we’re in the same area, doesn’t mean we can’t give each other the silent treatment.” After all, they’d managed three years of doing so, both culpable with maintaining their distance, and not addressing the issue, which started the problem. Gionne took a lot of the blame since she never gave Jahq a chance to explain herself. After Gionne had calmed down from the hurt she believed her due, Jahq wouldn’t see her. If they happened to be in the garden at the same time, one of them would flee rather than acknowledge the other. Even though Gionne felt justified in her actions, she knew Jahq suffered most because she’d virtually locked herself away, avoiding everyone but immediate family. “Bet Jahq’s not real happy about not only being forced from her room but the Keep, as well.”

Kareina snickered good-naturedly. “Ah, this is why Mayliandra is breaking the news to her.” Kareina leaned against the side of the table, crossing her legs at the ankle. “In all fairness to you, Gionne, I have to ask an important question. Are you ready to leave the Keep? I don’t know what you’ll find out there, or be up against with all the changes in Kellshae. I suspect they won’t be pleasant, least of all for a group of young women.”

Was she ready for this mission? Between the lack of sleep, jumping at every unexpected noise, and startling every time someone got too close physically, Gionne wound close to snapping. She needed to get away, from the reminders, from the well-meaning attempts to support and comfort her. Crossing the countryside from Gradyln to Zheirger could be a welcomed change. A little unrest among the multitudes should keep her mind from focusing too keenly on her own issues. Right?

“Yes. I can—need—to do this, Kareina.” Gionne moved beside Kareina and mimicked her pose against the table. “If we run into any of this unrest, I promise to bang heads properly. Of course, I’ll leave some head banging to Chayboen.” She gave a snort. “And it may take great strength of will, but I promise not to include Jahq in that particular sport.”

“Ha, there’s my girl. Love your spirit.” Kareina gave a snort of her own. “I caution you, though. Underestimating strong women can be dangerous.”

Gionne raised an eyebrow at the warning. “Women, period, are trouble, and nothing I can’t handle.”

Kareina laughed. “When you return and tell your tales, I have a feeling I’ll remind you of that statement.”

Well meant as the teasing was, Gionne wondered if she should truly worry. Sweet goddess, was she possibly getting herself in too deep and too soon? Goddess willing, the trek would keep everyone too tired to be troublesome. Chayboen wouldn’t be an issue, and she and Jahq had ignored each other down to perfection. How much bother could the other two be?

HOPING TO RELEASE some of her aggravation at feeling helpless against all the recent events, Kareina stormed into the barn intending to saddle Starsinger for a ride, only to stop suddenly at the threshold. Her frustration turned to fury when she witnessed a young boy of about fourteen glaring down at Yoshan, his hand raised above his shoulder as if to strike her. Unable to curb her reactions, Kareina shot forward, grabbed the boy roughly by his raised wrist, and grasped him firmly by his ragged shirt as she slammed him into the barn wall. “What the—”

“Papa, no.” Yoshan tugged at her shirt. “Put him down.”

Without taking her eyes from the youth returning her glare, she said, “Yoshan, he raised his hand against you.”

“Taelyr does it all the time when he doesn’t like what I tell him. He’s never hit me.”

Kareina growled in Taelyr’s face. “That’s not helping his case, Yoshan.” Yoshan stormed over to stand in front of Kareina, crossed her arms over her chest and stomped a foot, the maneuver Yoshan had used since their first encounter in Iskarr. If the reaction still worked to get her way, which it usually did, why lose it just because you were twelve. “The three of us will talk about this if I let him go. Otherwise, next time I lay eyes on him, I toss him off the Keep wall. Understood?” Even as Yoshan answered for him, Kareina waited for Taelyr’s silent agreement. Taelyr glowered at her for another minute before lowering his gaze and giving a minute shrug.

Reluctant to give him too much space in case he did intend to run, Kareina released him, only taking a half step backward. To Taelyr, Kareina asked, “You want to explain yourself?”

Sliding into a pose almost mimicking Yoshan’s, Taelyr crossed his arms over his chest. “I would’na hit her. She’s okay. For a girl,” he clarified. “Sometimes she gets me mad. Gotta keep women in line, teach ‘em early. What my dad told me, anyway.”

Kareina didn’t doubt it. When was this particular cycle of bullshit going to end? “You’ve family here?” Taelyr shook his head. “Where are your parents?” This time, he gave a shrug. “Are they dead?” A shrug. She heaved a weary sigh. “Will you, at least, answer what Yoshan said to upset you?”

At that question, Taelyr’s entire demeanor changed. He tossed his head to indicate behind her, and Kareina studied the area. In front of one of the stalls, someone—probably Taelyr—had broken down crates to form a short gate. Behind that gate was a litter of three wolfhound puppies, all watching them with curious expressions, heads tilting from side to side as if trying to capture and follow their conversation. Kareina walked closer. An exhausted mother wolfhound lay in the far corner pressed tight against the wall, a fourth plumper puppy eagerly devouring from a teat, now that the rest of the clan was preoccupied. Taelyr pointed to the pup still feeding. “Yoshan wanted to yank him away, said he’s too fat. I told her the choice wasn’t up to her. We can’t mess with pack stuff. She said I didn’t know what I was talking about, ‘cause the momma would tell her.” Taelyr smirked. “Mama’s don’t know what’s best for the litter, even if they try sometimes.”

Yoshan joined them. “But the mama needs her rest, too.”

Kareina gave a slow nod. Learning Yoshan and Taelyr, technically on the same side, both wanting the best for the litter and mother, made Kareina relax a little. She squatted before the gate and rubbed the closest puppy behind the ear. She didn’t want to appear threatening to Taelyr. “We’ve rules here, Taelyr. No one in the Keep abuses another.”

“Yeah, I know,” Taelyr said, scuffing a worn boot across the floorboard under his feet. “I won’t hit her or anyone.” He paused. “Mostly not her.”

“That’s good to know.” Kareina stood.

“Well, what do you think, Papa?” Yoshan asked. “Which of us is right?”

“Oh, no you don’t, Poppet. You won’t make me take sides,” Kareina said.

Yoshan giggled and then feigned an expression of hurt. “But you’re supposed to take my side. Taelyr’s a boy.” She spoke the last word as if distasteful on her tongue.

“He’s doing what’s best for the pups, as are you.” Kareina glanced to Taelyr. His care and interest in the Wolfhounds appeared genuine. What she didn’t care for was the interest Yoshan seemed to have for Taelyr. Kareina hoped she worried needlessly, the relationship nothing more than two similar souls bonding over animals. Nagging at her was the tension her presence caused in Taelyr, who balled his hands into a fist when he didn’t see her watching him. She would be certain to learn all she could learn about this boy. A diversion Kareina could enjoy and she intended to put effort into. I may have ignored one daughter too long, Kareina thought. I won’t make the same mistake twice.

“How about it, Yoshan, want lunch? You’re welcomed to join us, Taelyr.”

Declining, Taelyr mentioned a need to finish chores. Yoshan agreed enthusiastically—probably believed she’d garner a change of sides from Kareina.

“Maybe another time then,” Kareina said.

“We need to talk, Papa, about a little loyalty on your daughters’ behalf.” As Yoshan impatiently yanked on Kareina’s arm, she said, “Now, Papa.”

TAELYR FOLLOWED THE departure of Yoshan and her Papa with his eyes, feeling a bit relieved when they were gone. He knew why Yoshan referred to Shei Kareina by the endearment, and he'd been disgusted the first few times. His uncle told him the story often enough to nauseate anyone. Part of him felt bad for giving the impression he didn't know if his parents lived. Taelyr's mother was dead, the result of one of his father's lessons in discipline. His father, Tombik, happened to be very much alive. At least last he'd seen him in the forest, when

He didn't want to think about that now. Wished he didn't have to do the things his father demanded of him. Someday it would all be different. He'd concentrate on his work. Enjoy the precious few moments he could be himself around Yoshan. Work with the animals.

Someday, it would all end.

When his father came to him, he'd expect Taelyr to complete his assignment within the Keep. He didn't want to do what was required of him. Taelyr had never gone against his father before, afraid not to now. The stakes were too high.

Taelyr dropped to the barn floor and stared into the stall. He liked Yoshan, more than a little afraid of Kareina, but understood Kareina's protecting her daughter. They were family and that's what some families did for one another, never expecting anything in return.

They weren't his family, though. He owed loyalty to his father. The vision of his mother's broken and bleeding body that last time she was alive flashed in his mind's eye. Taelyr cringed, his emotions so strong the puppies whined.

His mother deserved Tombik's loyalty, as his wife, hadn't she?

Was Taelyr any better a person than his mother? Would Tombik turn on Taelyr just as fiercely?

AS CHAYBOEN SHOVED the last of her supplies into her pack, Ysannie strode behind her, wrapping her tight around the waist as she placed a gentle kiss on her neck. "I'm going to miss you, love," Ysannie said. She teased the lobe of her ear with her teeth, pleased with the dancing of gooseflesh across Chayboen's skin. "I've something for you."

Chayboen quickly spun until nestled in Ysannie's embrace, a glint of amusement in her gaze. "So soon, my golden goddess? I've only put my clothes on—again—a few minutes ago."

"You're incorrigible." Ysannie kissed her, taking her time to savor the sweetness Chayboen's taste brought to her. "I'll live in agony until you return and I can have you over and over again until you can't lift..." Ysannie brushed her lips to Chayboen's clavicles, "...your..." a grazing of her lips to the top of Chayboen's cleavage, "...little finger."

"Who needs to lift a little finger?" Chayboen breathed. Ysannie felt Chayboen cup her left breast and she inhaled sharply at the pleasure coursing through her. Chayboen groaned and pulled away. "If you continue to touch me, Kareina will need to send a search party, because we'll be back in bed losing all track of time as we lose ourselves in each other."

Ysannie chuckled. "Too true, my darling, but I'll not regret it." She reached for the pack and handed it to Chayboen. "I've given thought to the visions you've shared with me. If what you dreamt happens, you may have need of me at a moment's notice." Ysannie reached for the silver

band in her pocket while she took Chayboen's left hand in hers and slipped it on Chayboen's ring finger. "When you return, I'll want this to be my official declaration of loving you forever. For this mission, this ring links us telepathically. Should something happen on the road too much for all of you, or your vision should be more than a possibility, twist to the left three times, and once to the right. I'll be there." She raised Chayboen's hand to her lips and softly kissed the knuckles. "Touch it to your lips, and I'll be able to privately communicate with you, anytime you need it, and no one but us will know."

"Thank you, my goddess," Chayboen said. "I'll keep it safe. I'll also look forward to the chance to speak with you. A fortnight from you is akin to a lifetime. And this may take longer." Chayboen slid Cerno into the scabbard strapped to her back. Her magic sword from the god Magan during the fight against the evil god T'Dar. The black steel was veined with a special virtually translucent teal colored marble found deep in the bowels of the Virtutis caves of Langlear. A special material which could detect and collect the magic and souls of those struck by the blade.

"I love you, Chayboen. Please stay safe." Ysannie wanted to kiss her lover again but knew prolonging good-byes wouldn't be wise. When she'd fallen in love with a mortal, Ysannie never imagined how attached her heart could become. If granted the return of her godhood for giving up Chayboen, Ysannie would adamantly refuse the offering. Had Ysannie known how glorious this feeling would be, she'd have become a demi-god or mortal long before.

"Beware that mountain," she said. "Your vision—"

"Not going to be an issue. I've outlined the route myself. We skirt a mountain, not climb one. In fact, I've put together a route to take us around most villages, avoiding as much interaction outside our group as possible." Shouldering her pack, Chayboen gave a quick kiss to Ysannie's lips and opened the door to their tower living quarters. "Be back as soon as we can."

"Chayboen," Ysannie said, halting her lover. "Be open-minded with Jahq."

"I'll be as patient as I can be with the pampered princess," Chayboen said with a smirk.

Ysannie frowned at her, knowing she should've had this conversation before their good-byes or other distractions. "Gionne was at fault. Jahq is the wounded party. Her reason's for taking to her room were to protect the feelings of her loved ones." Chayboen scowled at her, hoping to relay her seriousness. "Trust me. Watch Jahq and see—truly see how others react to her. Believe me, your actions could be the catalyst for her destruction or the hand that pulls her from the brink."

Chayboen shrugged. "I'm sorry, love. The only one I see hovering on the brink is Gionne."

"That's too bad." Ysannie turned away and whisked herself from the room, not waiting to hear if Chayboen responded. She hoped her abrupt departure would spark Chayboen to have a seed of doubt in her resolute opinion. If she didn't, Ysannie feared the symmetry in the Keep would be broken.

Chapter Five

GIONNE DIDN'T BELIEVE she'd ever get accustomed to the portal Stechyc used to hasten travel and get them to their various destinations, this time, the castle at Gradyln. As soon as the shimmering mist of magic dissipated, she took the last step to bring her into the tower chamber where Caldie Parrin stood waiting, her ever-present smile wide across her lips. "Blessings, Caldie Parrin," Gionne said once she'd stepped completely through. On this end, the portal was a huge gold-framed mirror, the glass currently rippling her reflection back at her.

As she moved aside for the others to follow, Parrin rushed her tiny four-foot-ten body to Gionne's side and gave her a tight squeeze around her middle. "I was so worried when—" She swallowed loudly, took a step back and caressed Gionne's cheek tenderly. "I'm pleased to see you, child."

"And I you, my lady," Gionne replied. From the Caldie's response, Kareina might have told her mother something about Belzan's attack. The thought made Gionne uncomfortable, but part of her welcomed the comfort only Parrin could bring. Luckily, no further conversation continued as the portal shifted and Jahq came through.

Jahq recovered quickly and rushed to Parrin's side. "Grandmother, it's so good to see you." She leaned forward and placed a kiss to Parrin's cheek before folding her into an embrace much like Parrin had given Gionne moments ago. Straightening, Jahq announced, "I'm to be included on this...adventure. Isn't that wonderful?" Her tone indicated the opposite to Gionne.

Parrin raised an eyebrow in response. "I would think it could be," she said, gently patting Jahq on the arm. "We'll talk about this later, in your room."

"Is Grandfather here?" Jahq asked with a glance toward the open doorway.

"No, he's been called away to one of the other holdings." Parrin raised a questioning eyebrow. Gionne knew the feelings for Caldier Hassan were still sensitive with Kareina and her new family. Even after changes in the last five years, Hassan often slipped and referred to Kareina as "son". Those loyal to Kareina had yet to warm to her husband, which included Gionne and Jahq.

"Maybe next time then," Jahq said. Gionne marveled at how diplomatic the response, and Mayliandra's influence evident.

"I'm a little concerned he chose to go, with all the unrest in Kellshae," Parrin said. "Few travel, and those merchant caravans are heavily guarded."

"Because of the opposing reactions to magic and magic wielders?" Gionne asked.

Parrin nodded. "The response of many is to harm, or kill, those with even a hint of magic. In retaliation, many with magic bring harm to villagers in acts to announce that the magic-born are a better class of people, superior to the non-magicked."

Chayboen stepped into the room and moved away from the portal, which no longer shimmered and now reflected the smooth likeness of the mirror it was. "Blessings, my lady," Chayboen said. "It's always comforting to see your caring smile. I wish our visit could be under better circumstances."

“As do I, Chayboen, as do I. Given a bit more time, maybe that will be the only reason we’ll need the portal, for friendly visits.” Parrin stared hard at Chayboen. “Other news?” Chayboen shook her head. “Then let’s get you to your rooms and we’ll talk further when we break our fast in the morning.” They used the portal in the late hours of the night to keep its presence a secret from those with the dislike of magic.

Gionne followed behind the others as they made their way from the tower. Down a level, Parrin pointed toward two rooms on her left. “Chayboen, Jahq, you’ll sleep here this eve. There’s a light repast waiting in case you’re hungry.” Chayboen nodded and entered the first room, softly closing the door behind her.

Jahq clasped Parrin’s hand. “Will you talk to me for a while?” she asked excitedly.

“In a moment, dear,” Parrin assured her, quickly tapping their clasped hands, then releasing them. “Let me get Gionne to her room, first. We’ve some plans to finalize before you all leave tomorrow. And then you’ll have my undivided attention.” Without even a glance toward Gionne, Jahq entered the room.

Gionne grimaced. “Please, go to her, Caldie. Just tell me which room is for me.” Why did Jahq’s response bother her? Hadn’t she told Kareina she’d have no problem with the silent treatment? Outright ignored should be as easy. Sweet goddess, the mission hasn’t even begun.

“She’ll be fine for a moment,” Parrin said, taking one of Gionne’s hands in hers and tugging her one door down the hall, and on the right. A sparse room with a good-sized bed, a sturdy chest at the beds base held a tray with food and wine, an oak clothing cabinet, and a mirror. Right now, anything would be comfortable to Gionne. After gazing around the room, Parrin turned to her with a wistful expression. “It’s Kareina’s room. After her alleged death at Youlren, it became her room as Karr. Anything feminine was removed for fear of alerting others of her truth.” Parrin pointed to the bed. “Sit a moment, please.” When she complied, Parrin sat next to her and placed a hand on her thigh. “You remind me a lot of my daughter.”

“The best compliment anyone can receive,” Gionne said. “And the room is wonderful. Thank you.”

Parrin tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Simple honesty, child, and every word felt from the heart. You’re probably tired of hearing this, but if you need to talk, I’m here.” Parrin gave a slow glance around the room. “Really should spruce it up, I should think. This chapter of the past needs permanent closing.”

Gionne didn’t want to discuss personal issues. “So, Caldie, tell me about the plans for tomorrow, and the guests you’ll be relieved of.”

“Not much to tell. Altaira is a beautiful and gifted Oracle. The other, Calpri, hasn’t magic but needs the safety of the Keep for reasons dealing with her sexuality, a woman who loves women. Everything else is set and ready for you.”

“Ah, okay.” Gionne extended her arms behind her and leaned back on her palms. She gave a wry grin. Parrin wanted this to be a personal moment. “Then your need to speak to me is more to check on my state of mind?”

“Do you blame me?”

“I suppose not,” Gionne said. “I’m fine, and there’s nothing to worry about. I won’t let —” Gionne swallowed hard. “I won’t let what has happened affect me, or those under my care. The matter is done.”

“So you can dismiss it as simply as that? Good for you.”

“See, nothing for you to worry about.” Gionne shrugged nonchalantly. She had a mission, and nothing would stop her from completing it. Gionne knew she could get through this; block

Belzan from her mind. Even as she made the mental decision, she felt the fresh flood of tears fill her eyes. How could she defend those in her care, when Gionne hadn't been able to protect herself? Her body trembled, and she sobbed those questions to Parrin.

"Oh, my sweet, precious child." Parrin rubbed a hand gently up and down the length of the Gionne's arm closest to her. "No one and no amount of magic can undo what horrendous action has been done. I hope, however, you know how many love you and are here to support you. I'm ready to listen if you'd like."

Gionne shook her head vehemently. "I...I can't. It's too—"

Parrin nodded. "Yes, too fresh. I understand." Parrin pulled Gionne into a hug that made her breath hitch, but Gionne relished the warmth, the safety she felt in the older woman's arms. "Gionne, it may not feel like it right now, but you'll move beyond this. I ask you to trust in yourself, trust us to be there for you when you need us. You're a strong and wonderful woman. You may not understand now, but what happened does not define you."

"Part of me knows you speak the truth, Caldie," Gionne said, burrowing her face into Parrin's shoulder. "It's just that—"Wracking sobs took over, and Parrin cradled Gionne in her arms.

"I know, child. I know. With time, it will all be but a bad memory."

It didn't seem possible to Gionne, but she took a small bit of solace in the knowledge Parrin may have said the same to Kareina, to get Kareina through the hard times, too. When able to regain a modicum of composure, Gionne extricated herself from the embrace. "I hope you're right. It's hard to believe right now." I don't know if I can go on, not with the constant nightmares, Gionne thought. How was she supposed to survive without sleep for a fortnight or more?

This, however, wasn't a thought Gionne believed she should share with Caldie Parrin.

Chapter Six

ZUENA'S HEART BEAT like a drum. Night had finally fallen, the moon but a bare slice against the black curtain of the sky, and a mist blanketed the small fishing village beside the Tülamic River. She rushed into an alley and squeezed between the discarded crates tossed there, pulling her satchel of herbs and the meager belongings she owned tight to her chest. So many things in her life had changed, starting with the death of her brother over five years ago, while protecting the life of Shei Mayliandra of Clan Bredwine. The Caldie of Gradyln had been more than generous and kind to her, but Zuena needed to handle life by herself. Responsibility was what Reese represented when still alive. Taking deep breaths, Zuena tried to still her hearts' beat to a more normal rhythm. No sooner had she accomplished this feat, she heard voices and then footsteps approaching. Two men, each carrying a torch, stood at the mouth of the alley. Their expressions were fierce and Zuena understood it wouldn't bode well for her if captured.

"The magic wielder should be here, Pell," a neatly dressed, lean, muscular man with cropped hair said. "The little weasel's been accurate before."

The second man, untidy and overweight, shrugged. "He could be right, Xyn. Maybe we need to check out the alleys. Isn't that usually where fugitives hide?"

Xyn snorted. "Could be right. Fools with magic aren't as smart as they think." With a humph, he said, "Let's get this over with."

Zuena's heart went back to its rapid rhythm with each forward step they took. She pressed further into the darkness of the alley, into the shadows cast by the crates. More difficult to do the closer they came with the torches. Her eyes darted to the back of the alley looking for any place she could slip into before they caught sight of her. There was none. Zuena knew it would be worse for her if they had to wrestle her from her hiding place and decided to give herself up to avoid a beating, or worse. Movement at the front of the alley caught the attention of Xyn and Pell. The footfalls in her direction stopped. She heard shuffling as they turned. "Hello there," a deep rumbling voice greeted. "Can I get your assistance?"

"What'd'ya need?" Pell asked. "We're a bit busy."

A seductively sweet voice spoke next. "Please, sir, we've lost our way." A woman stepped from the back of a large, brightly colored wagon and sauntered to her companion. She looked at him imploringly. "Maybe we can find men more helpful in one of the local establishments, Papa."

The man glanced down at his daughter and patted her hand. "You may be right, my dear. Let's go find someone else." They turned toward their brightly colored wagon.

Pell rushed forward. "No, no, no, ask your question."

The young woman turned and batted her eyes at the man. Zuena wondered if it made the woman's stomach churn having to flirt with the dumpier one. "Oh, thank you so much, sir." She spoke in soft whispers to Pell, nodding as if listening to his instructions. The father moved forward to converse with Xyn. He flung an arm across Xyn's shoulder, gently urging the man toward the wagon, too. Zuena felt her heart relax a little.

It only took a few moments before the young woman had both men laughing, their chests puffed out as if posing for inspection. Their business with Zuena appeared forgotten.

Zuena rubbed her eyes tiredly. After a long period of quiet, Zuena believed they'd all moved away. She hadn't heard the approach of the wagon so it would be possible not to hear it leave. Zuena prepared to sneak from her cover. She stopped in her tracks when a hand fell on her shoulder. Zuena gave a startled yelp. "Relax, child. I'm here to assist. I'm Trux." She gazed up at the man from the wagon. "Peoni, my oldest, sent those men away for a while. Let's get you to the wagon, before they decide to return."

Zuena followed Trux to his wagon. "Do you live here?" she asked.

"Heavens no, child," Trux said. "We're simple vagabonds traveling from village to village giving entertainment." Trux lifted Zuena to the driver's seat and drove the wagon to the outskirts of town and tended to the horses.

"Why are you helping me?" Zuena asked. At least, she hoped it his intent. For all she knew Trux could murder her and no one would know or care.

"Because it's the right thing to do," Trux said, then winked. "You're safe with us for as long as you need."

Trux motioned her inside the wagon. There were two females, his daughters, Peoni and Brukét, one son, Mok.

Had the situation this evening not been so disconcerting, Zuena might have laughed openly at the idea anyone would mistake her for part of this family. Everyone had thick, near-black hair, long noses, and olive skin. She was graced with curly, strawberry-blonde hair, her nose shorter and wider, and her milky-white skin was peppered with freckles.

After a quick meal, her first in three days, the children went outside, while Zuena remained with Trux. "Is this where you murder me?" Zuena asked, only partially in jest.

Trux laughed boisterously. "Heavens, no, Zuena. I know who—or rather what—you are. We're going to help. You see, men like those two in the alley killed my wife because of her magic. Although the rest of us have none, we can sense it. We sense it in you. Unless you've other plans," Trux said with a smile, "you're more than welcome to become part of our family."

"Aren't you even going to ask what my magic is?"

Trux asked, "Will you use it to harm my children?" She shook her head. "Then, you're allowed your privacy."

Zuena had noticed Mok held his hand strangely when he left and knew this to be her opportunity. "I would like to give your family thanks for their assistance. Mok has an injury?" she asked. "If you call him back, I'd like to use my magic to help you." Trux called the boy back in. Once the door closed, Zuena asked, "Are you injured?"

"Oh it's just a minor thing," Mok said.

Trux shook his head at the boy's bravado. "The boy was whittling and sliced his thumb and palm. We've done what we could for him. All we can do now is wait for it to heal."

Zuena nodded and looked to Trux. "Will you trust me?" she asked. At his nod, she glanced to Mok. "Come closer, Mok, let's see." He shuffled closer and Zuena took off the wrapping around his hand. The wound was slightly inflamed. If she didn't tend the damage, it would become worse. "There's some infection." She moved her satchel onto her lap and pulled out the herbs she would need. Then she worked to clean and tend to the laceration, quietly chanting a few words as her fingers lightly traced around and over the broken skin.

Trux gleamed at her, his expression showed he was impressed and not afraid. "So," Trux said, "I see we've learned your magic without needing to ask."

Zuena blushed. "I would have told you if you had."

"I didn't wish you uncomfortable," Trux said. "If I showed you trust, I hoped to be paid in kind. I suspected you'd tell us in your own time. I must say I'm pleased."

"Pleased I'm not a murderess?" Zuena asked, smiling.

"Pleased you're a healer. I guess we'll learn sooner or later if you're a murderess, too."

Zuena laughed. "You trust me with the lives of you and your children. You can safely cross off murderer from any list. I would never harm them, or anyone."

Trux reached over and ruffled Mok's hair. "Welcome to the family, Zuena."

Brukét raced inside the wagon, her features nervous. "Papa, those men are coming back."

"Okay, you and Mok go back to Peoni. I'll be out in a moment." Trux turned to Zuena. "This is the part where you may not appreciate our assistance." He moved to the long, boxed seat on the far wall.

"I'll do whatever you ask," Zuena said, fear making her queasy.

Trux raised the seat and pointed inside. "This is lined with iron. It prevents you from using magic, but will also cover its presence from the witch hunters. The unfortunate side-affect is that iron makes magic users sick. There's no telling beforehand how you'll react. It's lined with Tueritium from the Valley of Mist, which is said to counteract the iron's negative affects." He gave a lopsided grin. "You're the first to test it, so let me know how it works for you."

Zuena wasn't about to argue, although being locked in a box didn't appeal in the least. She hesitated for only a moment, before concluding this man wouldn't subject her to the same fate that had befallen his wife. She prayed her reasoning sound. Zuena stepped inside. Fear wouldn't be the only thing to make her nauseous. She hoped that would be the worst of her own response.

No sooner had Trux lowered the lid than a loud banging rattled the door. Zuena realized she could hear everything, and hoped Trux was correct about the magic.

"Enter," Trux bellowed.

"We're looking for a woman." Zuena recognized the voice as Xyn's.

"Aren't we all," Trux said. "But trying to find one willing to take on three children isn't easy."

"Don't get smart," Pell said.

"Would you notice if I did, Pell?" Trux asked.

"This is a grave matter, Trux. We almost had the magic user in the alley, but you and your daughter distracted us. Was that intentional?"

"No, of course not, Xyn. As you see, we took your advice for camp." The wooden lid above Zuena's head squeaked as if under pressure. Zuena thought Trux might have sat on her hiding space. "But, I'm curious. How did you know there was a magic user—a woman you say—in the area? Are my children safe?" His voice took on the proper note of alarm.

"We have a magic wielder who sries for magic in return for our protection." Pell's tone was self-important. "A lot of villages are putting magic to use for the normal people."

"So you're enslaving them if they wish to stay alive." Trux didn't make it a question. "How noble of the normal folk."

"It's not like that," Xyn said. "They aren't slaves."

"I'm curious, Xyn. When you find this woman, what will happen to her?"

"You've seen her?" Pell asked.

"No, I haven't. As I said, I'm curious what would happen if I did see her or anyone with magic."

“You’d be doing your civic duty to the village if you tell us where she is,” Pell said. Zuena could picture his pompous smirk toward Trux. “Depends on her magic what happens to her. If we can use it, she must agree to follow certain rules. If not, we make sure she doesn’t hurt anyone—ever.” Zuena suspected the short answer was: be our slave, you live. Otherwise, you die.

“I’m certain civic duty would mean more, Pell, if this were my village.” Trux clapped his hands loudly, and Zuena started in her hiding place. “No matter, as I haven’t seen anyone but the two of you since arriving. Now, I’ve children to get to bed. Are we done?”

“Think about the safety of your children, Trux,” Xyn said. “You wouldn’t want them harmed by rampant magic, would you?”

“Every decision I make is with my children in mind. Have a good evening, gentlemen.” When the men left, Trux brought all his children into the wagon and helped Zuena from her hiding place.

“Are you okay?” Trux asked immediately.

Zuena did a mental inventory. “I do feel queasy, but nerves could explain a lot of that reaction. The headache is new.”

“Get a little sleep. We’ll leave in a couple hours.”

Chapter Seven

PARRIN KNOCKED LIGHTLY upon Jahq's closed door. She entered when the soft-spoken command from inside bid her to do so. Jahq stared out the window, a crease of concentration marring her forehead. Parrin moved to her granddaughters' side and slid an arm around her waist. "It's so good to see you. I wish it were under better circumstances."

"As do I, Grandmother. Is Gionne okay?" Jahq asked. "Did she ask you to keep me from leaving with them tomorrow?"

"Do you believe she would try?" Parrin didn't know the circumstances but knew something came between the two women, something they hadn't resolved in three years. It saddened her as she had always thought them perfect together. They had survived so much already.

Jahq shrugged. "Wouldn't be surprised."

"Gionne is going through quite a lot. It's a difficult time for her."

"I know, Grandmother." At Parrin's confused frown, Jahq said, "Gossip, mostly. Mama confirmed the matter, wanted me prepared for some of Gionne's moods. And other responses."

Parrin nodded. "Do you think your mothers' sent you on this mission to babysit Gionne?"

"No, I know they didn't." Jahq sighed and moved to sit in one of the two chairs at a small table in the room. Parrin took the chair opposite. "No matter the reason we aren't friends, so—"

"So you don't care for her any longer?"

Jahq's face flushed. "You know I do. I wasn't the one to—" Jahq sighed. "I understand Gionne better than anyone. I'm better prepared to handle the emotional turmoil I suspect she's going through. It's so hard and troubling."

"If being around Gionne distresses you, why are you here?"

"My mothers' didn't give me much of a choice, Grandmother. Seems I've avoided everything for far too long and need to reintegrate with the Keep and its people." Jahq gave a scowl.

"Maybe one person in particular?" Parrin asked.

"Gionne made her position quite clear three years ago." She bowed her head, ashamed by the sharpness of her words. "After what—" Jahq squeezed her eyes shut, drew in a deep breath. When she focused on Parrin again, she said, "Neither of us is happy with this mission, but I won't let it get in the way of doing what I can to succeed. We may not be the people we were, the friends we once were, but Gionne needs me now. I'll be here for her—whether she cares for that or not."

Parrin frowned. She didn't doubt Jahq would look beyond whatever argument they'd had, and work for the best of them all. "Do Kareina and Mayliandra know what caused the rift?"

"Not really, no."

"Could you—would you—explain it to me?" Parrin asked. "Sometimes, it's best to share and get it out in the open. I promise not to judge either of you."

"That's the crux of the matter. I don't know the answer."

"How can you not?" Parrin asked.

Jahq groaned. “On the night of my birthday, I planned to ask Gionne to marry me.” Tears clouded Jahq’s blue eyes. “Instead of Gionne, I received a note telling me she loved me too much to share me. She’d rather be without me altogether.” The tears flowed, dampening Jahq’s cheeks and shirt. “She never explained herself. Since our first moments together in Iskarr, Gionne is the only one I love—I mean loved. There has never been anyone in my heart or my bed, I swear. So, I had to gather Gionne wouldn’t be able to make love to me without thinking of those who came before her—even if the situations weren’t at my behest. She looks upon me and sees used goods, I fear.”

Parrin scowled. “All this time and neither of you have spoken of that night?” Jahq shook her head. Amazing. Both ignored the simple action of communication, which could have resolved so much. Kareina and Mayliandra may have hit on the perfect solution.

“None of this matters, Grandmother. Everyone believes I must be at fault, and hiding away in my room is my childish response. Gionne isn’t the only one to think poorly of me.”

“What do you mean?” A knot of apprehension clenched in Parrin’s stomach.

“Everyone who looks at me makes assumptions. These aren’t too far from Gionne’s issues with me, and her love was supposed to overlook them.” Jahq explained the most recent occurrence in the village with the woman named Corley. “I can’t stay in Zheirger Keep. Certainly can’t move to another village or clan. Eventually, my mother’s will find out what others are saying, and I don’t want them having to constantly defend and protect me.” Jahq gave a lopsided smile. “This mission is important to the Keep and many of her people. It’s important for Gionne and her state of mind. I only have one option left when this is over.”

“Jahq, no,” Parrin said, “You can’t think to—”

“No, not that, Grandmother.” Jahq stood and walked to the window. She was silent for so long, Parrin thought she’d need to prompt Jahq to continue. She didn’t expect Jahq’s response. “I’m going to explore the Void.”

Parrin felt the color drain from her face, dizzy from the shock. No one who had ever left for the Void returned. It was a death sentence. “Jahq—”

“No matter what’s there, Grandmother, those people in the Void, as there surely must be, won’t know the meaning of the tattoo. Maybe, I can find someone to see me for who I am.” Jahq faced her. “Please, promise to keep this between us.” Reluctantly, Parrin nodded. “I’ll tell Mama and Papa—when the time is right.”

Now wasn’t the time for an attempt to change Jahq’s mind. Parrin silently prayed Gionne and Jahq would resolve whatever had happened and put it behind them. “I hope you do. Otherwise, I’ll feel compelled to intervene.”

Jahq kissed her on the cheek. “I promise.”

“Okay.” Parrin didn’t know what else to say. “Well, you need sleep. The morning will come too soon.” She moved to the door. “Jahq?”

“Don’t worry,” Jahq said. She shrugged. “I won’t follow through on any rash decisions, not without telling you first, Grandmother. Promise.” Jahq grinned wickedly. “That should give you plenty to keep your mind busy for a while with needless worrying. Sweet dreams?”

Parrin wanted to say so much more, but this wasn’t the time. With a nod, she left Jahq to her rest. Starting tonight, she would do as Jahq had predicted. Parrin would worry for the Keep, her loved ones, and more important the fate of Jahq and Gionne. Dear, sweet, Jahq, what could she be thinking. The Void? Why? There had to be a very good reason to name the place “void.”

Chapter Eight

“SO, HOW ARE plans going so far?” Kareina asked of the assembled group in the war room. Stechyc was the first to answer. “Not that I want to use all of it, but I’ve stocked the healing wing with supplies and herbs for the wounded.” She sighed. “I’ve planned for worst-case, and pray nightly for best-case.”

Tiilaen reached over and squeezed her wife’s hand. “The same goes for the Keep warriors. We’ve overstocked, we hope, on defensive supplies. And to the joy of a few of the trainees, have promoted a few to regular units ahead of school schedules.”

Melrick sat forward in his seat. “Tiilaen has charge of getting the warriors under control, and those trainees ready to replenish the battlements as needed. Stechyc, Ysannie and I have instituted a test plan. Of course, if you don’t agree with it, we can easily discontinue.”

“I’m sure whatever the three of you have come up with will be for the best of the Keep,” Kareina said. She hoped it assured them of her trust in their abilities. “What are you suggesting?”

“Pair a warrior and a mage to work together when on the Keeps’ wall during battle. Just a few groupings,” he added. “We hope this will help the civilians to see the uniting of what has lately been considered two of three separate factions at Zheirger.”

“We’ve selected the eight people we feel most confident in. They’re older mages but still barely out of the schoolroom,” Stechyc said. “And a mix of ages with the warriors, three are young and one old as dirt.”

Melrick blanched. “I’m young enough to produce children. So don’t color me shriveled and dying just yet.”

Mayliandra smiled. “Hardly a defense, Melrick, as Fleuren is doing most the work.”

“Nevertheless,” Melrick said, his tone feigning hurt. “I’m not quite ready for my funeral pyre.”

Kareina chuckled at his comments. They’d been friends, almost like brother and sister, for so long she was finding this teasing hit a bit close to home for her. Although, she did admit some days had Kareina feeling near ancient, too. “And how do things fair with you, Mayliandra?” Her wife had taken on the task of the food stocks and caring for the smaller children whose families didn’t reside at Zheirger.

“We’ve been stocking up on food supplies. In anticipation of an overlong confinement, the cooks have been drying meats, baking hardtack and stashing quantities of other less perishable foods. I’ve set the children to learning spells for protection and shielding, hoping it will keep their minds from the actual battle while they can also feel useful to the adults.”

Kareina smiled at her wife, proud she’d thought of the children so thoroughly. “Excellent idea.” All appeared to be going well for preparations. Kareina hoped they were over-preparing for Belzan, none at the Keep wanting to place innocents in harm’s way. She glanced to Ysannie and Stechyc. “Our contingent to Gradyln arrived safely?”

“They have,” Stechyc said. “Parrin has provisions and horses readied for the morning. Tonight they’ve taken to their rooms for rest.” Kareina frowned, knowing Gionne still suffered from nightmares. “Your mother suggested I tell you she’s given Gionne your room.”

She relaxed a little. Due to the placement of the room, it would shield most of the sounds that might otherwise escape. “Good.” Kareina sighed. “If there’s nothing else, I believe we’re done here for today.” They stood to leave and Kareina realized there was one part of war planning she’d neglected. “My friends, a moment more, please. I never believed we’d have to be here like this. Know I couldn’t ask for a better lead command group. Not only have you met and surpassed my every expectation, but—” Kareina swallowed the lump of emotion building in her throat. “I love all of you, more than you can know.”

They all stared in stunned confusion. Kareina wondered if she’d said too much. Just when her nerves were about to make her apologize, Melrick clapped her on the back, saying, “Damn, Kareina, tell me you’re not getting all namby-pamby on me.”

“Yeah, you’re having one of those Mayliandra and Stechyc moments—all warm and icky,” Tiilaen said, when she and Stechyc came beside them. Stechyc responded with a light punch to her wife in the arm. “You know I’m right about that point,” Tiilaen said to her.

Mayliandra laughed. “And you warriors wouldn’t have us any other way. It’s one of the many things you love about us.”

Stechyc glanced to Mayliandra. “Our warriors are more emotional than we are. Pretending they aren’t emotional gives them something to grumble about afterward.”

“Operative word being love,” Ysannie said. “Besides, our mutual love is the bond holding Zheirger Keep and us together. And why our people trust us.”

“That’s a relief,” Kareina said. “If it’s going to take me being sappy too often to hold the Keep together, we might need to consider moving.”

The Odyssey

Chapter Nine

PARRIN WALKED BEHIND Jahq and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure you want to do this, Jahq?”

“Refuse and upset my mothers’? I think not, Grandmother.” Jahq pecked her cheek, as Parrin wrapped an arm around her waist. “This needs to be done. I don’t fear it, but wish you could do me one favor.”

“Gladly,” Parrin said. “Tell me it’s to forget your comment about leaving for the Void.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Then what is it?” She and Jahq, arms now linked, walked through the Great Hall and out the castle’s front door. Below, in the courtyard, three horses stood, saddled and carrying bags stuffed with provisions. A small, horse-drawn wagon waited for the journey to begin. Chayboen was assisting Altaira with the basic explanation of item locations on the wagon seat. Gionne did likewise a few feet away for Calpri, who would drive the wagon. The difference between the two sets of women was that Altaira listened intently to Chayboen as she gave her training. Calpri, on the other hand, seemed more focused on Gionne than her lesson, managing to touch Gionne more often than the simple teaching required. Parrin felt Jahq tense where their arms joined. “You could do me the favor of keeping Calpri here.” Jahq’s sharp tone wasn’t unexpected. “The dungeon wouldn’t be amiss. She’d be in a like company with the other slimy things crawling around.”

“Oh, Jahq,” Parrin said, shaking her head in mock sadness. “What have you against my damp dungeon?”

It took a moment for her remark to sink in. They both laughed. “Thank you for that, Grandmother.” Jahq scrunched up her nose. “This is going to be a long journey, isn’t it?”

From behind them, Parrin heard Olaf approach, saying, “You can handle it, little cousin. My money pouch is tossed in your corner.”

JAHQ SPUN AND launched herself into her cousin Olaf’s arms. “Olaf, I’ve missed you. How is Winnel?”

Olaf spun her in a tight circle and placed her back on the ground, puffing out his chest. “Working on growing my third son, and she’s doing wonderfully.”

“Serve you right if she gave you a girl this time,” Jahq said, punching him playfully in the arm. “Let her rest up between children will you? We’d like her to visit us more often.” Though Jahq spoke the truth, she knew it hadn’t always been that way for her Papa Kareina. Years ago, Olaf had shown interest in her Mama Mayliandra. When Kareina rescued Winnel, the spitting image of Mayliandra, from Clan Catreve and a nasty Caldier named Armin, Olaf took a decided interest in Winnel. Kareina, believing Olaf’s interest was because he couldn’t have Mayliandra, Kareina wasn’t able to welcome them to Zheirger with happiness. It took some time, and the clever machinations of Parrin, for Kareina to see Winnel for herself, and not as Mayliandra’s replacement.

“Ah, but I have a duty to my clan,” Olaf said.

“Not to populate Gradyln single-handedly, my boy.” Parrin mimicked Jahq’s punch, but to his opposite arm.

“Ouch.” Olaf laughed good-naturedly. “Hey, I’ve done more than make babies, Caldie.”

“Yes, yes. I know.”

“What else have you done besides work on your progeny band of warriors?” Jahq asked.

“Thought you’d never ask, little cousin.” Olaf turned to the castle’s entrance and gave a wave. “Ta da.”

Two women dressed in black leggings, black leather boots, and black tunics embroidered with the clan crest in crimson and silver, walked toward Olaf, each carrying a bundle of dark maroon cloth on their forearms. They gave Parrin a bow. “My liege,” they said simultaneously.

At Jahq’s questioning glance, Parrin said, “Olaf has instituted a special guard for the clan’s inner Keep—of only women.”

Jahq laughed, pleased with the idea. “Still all about surrounding yourself with the ladies, isn’t it, Olaf?”

“You wound me, Jahq. I came bearing gifts, too.” Olaf took the top layer of cloth from the guard and shook it out to reveal a cloak. “It was Caldie Parrin’s suggestion.”

Parrin took the cloak from him and placed it on Jahq’s shoulders. “With all the unrest, I thought it best you have the crest of Gradyln on the saddles.” Parrin adjusted the material, fastening the clasp at Jahq’s neck. When done, she pointed to the crest on the upper left, atop Jahq’s breast. “And on the cloaks I’ve had made for all of you. I hope this will help you make it across Kellshae with little or no interference. You can let it be known you’re traveling on my business.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Gionne said, joining them. She gave a slight bow to Parrin. “We do appreciate all you’ve done for us, Caldie.”

Olaf suddenly threw an arm across Gionne’s shoulder and tugged her into a quick hug. Jahq watched silently as Gionne’s face paled and her back stiffened. Rather than giving into the fear, which Jahq knew she must be experiencing, Gionne asked, “Are we sparring, Olaf?” She gave a gentle push to his chest. “Let a woman breath, will you?”

Olaf appraised Gionne from head to foot. “Except for the hair, not a bit is left of the gangly bag of bones you used to be. Damn, Gionne, do you have to fight lovers off now?”

Not knowing how painful his teasing was for Gionne, and probably not noticing the trembling of Gionne’s hand, Jahq decided to interject. “Why cousin, are you truly expecting her to tell trade secrets? Need pointers do you?”

Gionne's gaze darted to Jahq, her expression unreadable. "We're about ready to go. Will you be joining us?"

"Would you rather I didn't?" She and Gionne glared at each other for a heartbeat, each on the emotional defensive. Hearing Parrin clear her throat, Jahq acquiesced first, taking the bundle from one of the guards and shoving them into Gionne's chest. "Here, cloaks from Grandmother."

"Yes, I heard."

"Did you? I wasn't sure with you so preoccupied." Gionne frowned and Jahq pointedly gazed toward Calpri. "I'm sure we've got a moment or two for you to indulge Calpri in more fondling." Jahq hadn't meant to sound so waspish, but the effect on Gionne made it worth being childish.

Gionne snickered in her direction. "Let's go back to the silence between us, shall we?" "Definitely." Jahq took the bundle handed to her from the second guard. "I'll meet you at the horses." When Gionne moved away, Parrin placed a gentle hand on Jahq's arm. "Be patient with her, Granddaughter." Olaf stared at them as if they'd grown horns. "Did I miss something?" he asked, concerned.

"Yes," Parrin and Jahq said in unison. Olaf shook his head, muttering a curse about complicated women as he went back into the castle. Parrin walked Jahq down the stairs and handed her a leather-bound item. "This is what you requested. And, as much as I see your reasoning, I hope you've no reason to use it." Jahq nodded. This would be the mask she asked Parrin to have made for her, to hide the tattoo. Jahq shoved it into a pocket. Parrin loudly addressed the group. "I'll keep you all in my prayers. Blessings be to you. Be safe." Short of hearing range from the group, Parrin asked, "Are you certain you can do this, Jahq?"

"Of course, Grandmother." Jahq had a goal in mind, after all. "I need to complete this journey so I can get on with the other."

Parrin's grip tightened, almost painfully, on her arm. "Jahq, please reconsider."

"Reconsider what?" Gionne asked, snatching the folded cloak from Jahq.

Jahq caught Chayboen scowling at her from behind Gionne. If anyone took sides in the rift between them, Chayboen stood firmly behind Gionne. "None of your concern." Jahq modulated her tone to a bare whisper. "It's personal, and you gave up the right to my personal life years ago." The anguish in Gionne's haunted eyes was almost Jahq's undoing. No matter. Gionne had hurt her more than Jahq believed possible. Yet Jahq wanted to apologize, wanted to embrace Gionne and swear life would be all right.

But life was never going to be as Jahq had once hoped. Gionne had moved on, the common knowledge she'd taken a few women to her bed, never settling for one for any length of time. Until Belzan, Gionne was vibrant with life. She'd moved on, but Jahq hadn't been able to do the same.

It was time for Jahq to move on as well. But there was one flaw in Jahq's resolution. No matter the damage Gionne had done to her heart, Jahq would never stop loving Gionne—even if Jahq could never have her.

SO FAR, THE cool temperatures made travel easier to manage, despite spending most of the time on horseback, or resting on the hard packed ground for sleep. Jahq wondered whether she'd build a sufficient layer of calluses on her backside, as well as her hands, from holding the leather reins day after day before they reached Zheirger Keep. Near the end of the third day, Chayboen guarded the rear of the group, assuring no one snuck up behind. Gionne led. Calpri, who had

convinced Chayboen she needed riding experience, urged Jahq's horse as close to Gionne's as possible for the umpteenth time. She'd yet to incur Gionne's wrath, while making sporadic attempts to engage Gionne in conversation.

Jahq, seated alongside Altaira on the wagon bench, would laugh at Calpri's attempts if she weren't annoyed with the constant chatter. She'd demand Calpri shut up, but since Gionne made good on giving Jahq the silent treatment, Jahq hoped Gionne got frustrated with the other woman's prattling. It would serve Gionne right.

A quiet chuckle came from Altaira. "Calpri isn't aware how bothersome she can be. She has a kind heart. She's just oblivious how discordant her actions are on others." Jahq snorted. "Do you disbelieve because of your own interest in Gionne?" Altaira asked.

"I'm not interested in her. We ended a long time ago." Jahq didn't want to get into old history, not that it appeared others were of the same mind as her. "Have you known Calpri long?"

"Okay, we won't talk about you." Altaira smiled. "Know Calpri long? No. A close family friend, worried about my safety, brought me to Caldie Parrin. He believed people in our village involved in the unrest would harm me. This was eight days ago. Calpri arrived the day after I did and Caldie Parrin, knowing I needed a bit of assistance, asked her to be an aide to me. She is destined for your Keep, too."

"Worked out well for Calpri, didn't it?" If Parrin weren't a great judge of character, Jahq would find Calpri's arrival suspicious with the presence of Kellshae's first Oracle. Parrin had said Calpri didn't have magic, but in hiding because she was a lover of women. Yeah, she thought with bitterness, interested in—

"Are you all right, Jahq?" Altaira asked.

Now who couldn't let reminders of Gionne go? "Yes, just getting tired of travel," she lied. Insightful as Altaira was, Jahq hoped she chose to ignore the obvious and see past the lie. "Do you trust her?"

"Calpri?" Altaira tilted her head to the side as if listening to something only she could hear. "I don't sense malice in her. But that isn't my specialty."

Surprised when Altaira winked in her direction, Jahq laughed aloud. "Ah ha, Kellshae's Oracle has a sense of humor, I see. You could be dangerous."

Altaira's expression sobered. "A side effect of being different, I'm afraid, not able to see those around me with normal sight. You learn not to take anything too seriously. There's always a danger I'll slice tender feelings with my sharp tongue. Does that bother you?"

"No, of course not. It's good to know you aren't some insipid scatterbrain." Jahq glanced in Altaira's direction. The woman was beautiful. Her hair was nearly white, her eyes the milky color of blindness, and her mocha skin flawless. Her thin body was toned, but not too muscular and not skeletal. There was an air of old-world knowledge about Altaira though she wasn't more than a year or two older than Jahq. Did Altaira realize how striking she was? "It can't be easy for you, being young and beautiful, and not visually able to see how people respond to you."

"I can feel how people respond. Some things are best left in the dark, which is how I prefer it." Altaira's tone was sharp, bitter. "They either pity me or are disgusted."

"Or fear." Jahq felt awful that her compliment had shadowed the Oracle's mood, even as she commiserated with her. "Has there been no one to show you otherwise?"

Altaira gave a little sniff of disdain. "Certainly. There are Caldie Parrin and all of you. Olaf and his wife were pleasant, but a bit preoccupied with other things."

Jahq chuckled. "Please tell me it's finally a girl. I believe Winnel would be quite happy."

“Even if I knew, I’d never divulge. Upon my honor,” Altaira said with a hand to her heart. “Some things should be a surprise from the gods.”

“Yes, they should.” Jahq glanced at the riders ahead of them. “You’ve never been in love? No one has seen beyond your sight or lack of?” Altaira shook her head sadly. Jahq gave a snort. “And you’re labeled blind. What a horrible world this is.”

A warm hand covered hers over the reins. “Never paint the whole world with the same brush, Jahq. It will only muddy the image.”

Jahq shrugged, as the hand pulled away. “I know there’s goodness, too. That’s evident in my mothers’ and my sister, my grandmother. There are a few others, too, who have seen me and not what I represent.” Altaira gave a knowing smile. Though Jahq knew it might be damaging to their developing friendship, she asked, “Do you ever see your own future?” The silence was lengthy, and Jahq didn’t believe she’d answer. Jahq returned her attention to the road.

After a long pause, Altaira took a deep breath and said, “I haven’t shared personal visions before. Do I have your word you’ll not speak of or repeat what I tell you to anyone?”

“Upon my honor,” Jahq said in all seriousness, hoping her repeat of Altaira’s earlier actions would also add a bit of levity to the tension building in the Oracle from her question.

“I believe I’ve seen my own death.”

Jahq was unable to stifle her gasp. “Is it awful?”

Turning her face toward a sky she’d never see, Altaira said, “Could be. It’s dusk and I’m standing on the wall of a tower with a golden woman. I feel we are alone. A battle rages around and beneath us. There is a large ball of fire heading straight for me.”

“And it hits you?”

Altaira turned her face toward Jahq. “I assume so.”

“But you don’t know. Maybe Ysannie stops it.”

“The woman is the golden goddess Ysannie?” Altaira shook her head in astonishment. “I thought that was a figurative part of the sight. I interpreted her presence as standing for my demise being a judgment of the gods.”

“Ysannie is very real. She’s Chayboen’s life mate, you know.”

“I never—” Altaira grinned. “I’d heard rumors, of course, thought it wishful thinking on the part of mortals.” Jahq glanced to Altaira and smiled when she saw Altaira scrunch her nose.

“Guess not even an Oracle sees all.”

“Seems not,” Jahq said. She chuckled. “So maybe Ysannie stops the fireball in time.”

Altaira gave a sad shake of her head. “She’s too busy using magic to defend the Keep and doesn’t see it.”

Jahq hoped the vision, since a personal one, would prove figurative. She liked Altaira. Even if she didn’t, Jahq wouldn’t wish death by fire on anyone. “But you don’t know for certain, that you die, I mean.”

“It will happen, Jahq, as death is inevitable,” Altaira said. “It’s only the final outcome that is unclear.”

Shaking her head, Jahq said, “Which is a good thing, if your final moments are like a living torch.”

Altaira giggled. “Yes, I try not to expend too much thought on the matter.” Altaira covered Jahq’s hand again. “Which is why I must tell you, Jahq. You must not avoid the mountaintop. Take the passage upward. This you must do, to bring the coming darkness into light. You will see the Void, but not as you intended.”

“How’d you—”Jahq pulled too tight on the reins, and the horses stopped. “No one but Grandmother knows about my going to the Void.”

“My visions are real.” Altaira dropped her head. “I usually don’t share unless asked, but it’s important you know. You’re the catalyst for important events in Kellshae’s future. They will happen, with or without you. Any chance of survival is only possible if you don’t deviate from your path.”

Jahq was in shock. Any opportunity to respond delayed when Gionne pulled up beside the wagon. “Is everything okay?” Jahq nodded. “Then why did you stop?” Gionne’s tone slid from concern to annoyance.

“My apologies, Gionne, the fault is mine,” Altaira said. “I had an unsettling moment, and Jahq grew distressed for me.”

“Do we need to rest, Altaira?” Gionne asked, clearly anxious for the Oracle.

Altaira shook her head. “No, the vision didn’t complete. I’m fine now. Please, don’t let me detain us further.”

Gionne didn’t appear convinced. She glanced questioningly to Jahq, who tried to sit stone-faced and impassive. After a moment, Gionne said, “As long as you’re certain.”

Chapter Ten

THE HEARTH BURNED warm and bright in the inn's tavern. Three people occupied the modest establishment: two enjoying themselves thoroughly. The third knew better than to voice an emotion, let alone an opinion on current circumstances. She huddled against the stone hearth.

"Much as I'm enjoying this respite, we need to move on with our plans," Belzan said. They sat at a large table strewn with dirty plates with half eaten meals, utensils, and tankards. On the table's top, a map lay open with small daggers pinning the corners. Across from him sat his brother, Tombik, barely listening as he stared predatorily at the nearly broken woman leaning on the hearthstones. Tombik, like Belzan, was six-foot, with dark curly hair and equally dark eyes, broad through the chest and muscular from years of sword wielding. The one major difference was Tombik's cruelty made Belzan look kind—and no one would ever use the word kind to describe the former Gradyln warrior.

Tombik glared at his brother. "What's the hurry?"

Belzan sniggered. "We have a war to win, a country to subjugate."

"I'm not done conquering that hellion over there," Tombik said, tilting his head in the girl's direction. He pointed toward the trapdoor beside the bar, which led to a cellar for the caskets of wine and other liquors. They'd forced all the others in the inn's hamlet in there days ago, barring escape with a long iron bar and lock. "And there are more playthings waiting their turn."

Frustrated, Belzan stabbed a finger at the map between them. "Pay attention little brother. You can indulge yourself afterward." A loud sniff of displeasure but Tombik turned his attention to Belzan, who shook his head. "I've word our men are assembling as directed, at The Pool of Promise, or where it was once. Over half of the expected contingent is already waiting."

"Then why the hurry?" Tombik asked.

Belzan snarled at his brother. "You'd rather the men get bored and decide they would make a better leader?" He spread his arms wide, the iron hook that replaced his hand gleaming in the hearth's light. Tombik caught the flash and swallowed. "Because we can stay here, enjoy ourselves for the time being, and hope we benefit from Kareina's destruction even if we aren't ruling Kellshae."

"Yeah, I get it." Tombik took a swig of ale from the closest tankard. "Haven't heard from Taelyr, but not surprising considering he's inside the Keep. Thought Harksten would have contacted him and got back with us. You don't think he'll cross us do you? Be the fool who wants to rule instead of you?"

With barely controlled restraint, Belzan didn't correct Tombik's insinuation that he too was a fool. "He isn't strong enough to lead, and the men know it. We've done what we need within the clans. The remaining men will finish the dissension on their way to the Pool. We need to make certain all is ready in two fortnights to attack Zheirger. Besides, we need to monitor supplies and staples sent to my army. If not properly monitored, we could run out before the battle begins. Hungry men tend to revolt, and most of ours haven't a care for maintaining an allegiance to any but the leader supporting them."

“At least, it’ll be an easy victory. Winter’s not far coming, and I’d like to be warm inside the Keep, enjoying the spoils of war.” Tombik’s gaze traveled back to the wench on the floor. “And it can last as long as it wishes with morsels like her.” He shifted his body to face her, and Belzan realized he’d not get his brother’s attention again this night. “Come here, bitch,” Tombik ordered. Her pain-glazed eyes were slow to turn to him, her breathing labored. The last beating was too much for her. He nearly smirked when he saw a flash of defiance in her gaze, but it disappeared so quickly Belzan wasn’t certain it had truly been there. One could hope.

Belzan knew she wouldn’t last another round with his brother though he had to admit she was worth every scratch and gouge she gave defending herself. She’d been so beautiful when they arrived. Her bright smile, long blond hair, delicate features and small frame were tantalizing. Truth be told, Belzan was surprised she’d lasted this long. Too bad it did no good in preventing them both from taking her repeatedly the last three days. For a moment, he thought she’d ignore Tombik’s command, but she slowly crawled toward them, a smear of blood and other—some undefinable—fluids leaving a trail behind her. Unfortunately, her tortured progress wasn’t quick enough. Tombik rose from his chair so fast it clattered to the floor. He pulled her by her hair as she attempted to get her feet to hold her upright. She made noises of pain or protest—maybe both—but her battered face garbled the response. Tombik hauled her the rest of the way to her feet, and promptly slammed her onto the table, her back hitting so hard the newest cuts re-bled.

Tombik’s glazed eyes clouded in expectation of the sadistic torture he was about to conduct. He raised his eyes to Belzan, who leaned back in his chair to watch since he wouldn’t get Tombik’s attention until he finished with her. That second of inattention was a breath too long. The girl had grabbed a dagger in each hand, slammed one into Tombik’s shoulder, and shoved the other deep into her own neck.

“Hellfire, bitch,” Tombik yelled, slamming a fist into her face. It didn’t do any good, as the girl’s vacant eyes stared at the ceiling, her blood draining quickly from her newest wound. She was dead before he hit her. Tombik yanked the dagger from his shoulder, his nostrils flaring with each furious breath and tossed it onto the belly of the woman’s corpse. “Well, that’s one way to douse a party.” Tombik smirked at him, and Belzan shook his head. “Okay, brother, you’re right. It’s time to move on. Throw a patch on this scratch, get our stuff, and be gone.”

Belzan cleaned up and covered the wound, and they both tossed belongings into saddlebags—not all items originally theirs. “I’ll get the horses,” Belzan said.

“I’ll meet you out front.” Belzan hesitated. Tombik tossed his saddlebags to him. “Got to do a little tidying up. Go on, go on,” he said, waving his hands in a move along gesture.

When Belzan returned, Tombik waited outside the inn as he’d promised. His brother appeared to be in good spirits, so Belzan didn’t ask questions. As Tombik mounted, Belzan caught the flash of flames through the front window. He didn’t need to ask what Tombik had done, or why—or what would happen to the people in the cellar. Walking the horses away from the inn and back on the road, the sounds of panicked screaming chased for a moment before dying on the wind.

Chapter Eleven

DUSK APPROACHED QUICKLY, as the group traversed the road toward the cluster of mining towns. Because of the elevated hills and rocky terrain, an alternate road around the villages ahead wasn't available. The thought disturbed Jahq. Not only did this force them through unfamiliar populated areas, but it also limited chances at a speedy egress in the event of danger. Why she believed danger lay ahead, Jahq didn't know. She wasn't a seer; and, neither Chayboen nor Altaira had received any visions of warning to give Jahq this impression.

Jahq couldn't explain what had her worried, but the three magicked people were experiencing a building nausea. The results gave Jahq a feeling of doom.

"Would you like me to ride in the wagon?" Calpri asked, bringing the horse alongside the wagon.

"No, thank you. I've got it," Jahq said. Any other time she'd gladly have accepted the offer—it was her horse, after all. The longer they traveled, the sicker Jahq grew. No telling what could happen if she were on horseback. Jahq recognized Calpri's offer was for Altaira's benefit and not her own. This time, Jahq had no qualms about accepting Calpri's offer at face value.

"Would you like me to ask Gionne to stop, let you rest a little? Both of you look like you could use it."

"We're fine, Calpri," Jahq said.

Altaira placed a hand on Jahq's thigh, and Jahq realized her tone was harsher than she intended. "Yes, Calpri, we appreciate the offer and your concern, but would rather get away from this area as soon as possible."

"My apologies, Calpri, for snapping," Jahq said. She didn't care for Calpri but accepted the dislike may be her personal issue. Jahq had no claim on Gionne. Gionne was free to receive the attentions of anyone she chose, even a woman as plain as Calpri. A woman figuratively blind, since Calpri didn't appear to recognize that Altaira had feelings for her. "I'll let you know if we do need to stop."

The small concession, or maybe the apology, seemed to be what Calpri needed. She sat straighter in the saddle, and for a half a heartbeat, Jahq witnessed a softening of Calpri's features that had her looking a bit less plain. "Okay," Calpri said. "I'll ride close, though, in case you need me."

With that settled, Jahq focused on Gionne and Chayboen riding ahead. Chayboen sat listlessly in her saddle producing Gionne's frown of concern focused on her. They spoke in low tones, but Jahq surmised a similar conversation passed between them as she shared with Calpri. None of them willing to delay travel, as the group pushed through.

Jahq didn't know what to expect ahead but worried it wasn't going to be good for the group. She reached for the mask her grandmother had given her.

Altaira must have surmised what she was doing. "Is that necessary?" Altaira asked her. "That has to be uncomfortable."

Jahq gave a quick shrug. "Maybe not, but Kellshae hasn't been safe for me so far. I'm willing to suffer a little discomfort if it can delay the inevitable."

“Why did your parents send you knowing what could happen? What has obviously happened in the past?” Altaira asked. “Is that why they gave you the mask?”

“My grandmother had the mask made at my request. I haven’t told my mothers’ about the difficulty I’ve encountered with the tattoo. Since I’ve stayed in my rooms at the Keep, I didn’t think I’d need to do so.” Jahq finished donning the mask, giving one last tug to settle it into place. “My mothers have so much to worry about already, with Zheirger and its people. I didn’t want to add to their burden.”

“They’re your parents. Worrying about you is something they’ll do anyway.” Altaira was silent for a moment, and Jahq thought the discussion concluded, but Altaira’s hand returned to her thigh, Altaira’s cue to her serious intent. Jahq had long since learned the need to touch and helped Altaira connect where lack of sight could not. “They have a right to know. Have you any idea how angry they’ll be when they learn of your deception?”

“I’m not deceiving them, Altaira. I’m protecting them from over-worrying.”

Altaira didn’t appear convinced. “Maybe you’re saving them from worrying, yes. Have you considered you’ve traded the emotion for a horrible case of guilt?”

Any guilt incurred for her actions were entirely her own. “What a silly notion. I’m an adult.”

“Regardless. As parents, you’ll always be their child, their responsibility. You should have at least let them know all factors in their decisions regarding you. They were making choices for you without all the factors involved.” Altaira sniffed loudly. “For your sake, Jahq, I hope that mask works as you intend. I would not like to see harm come to you. Or harm come to any of us.”

“What do you know, Altaira?”

“Right now, nothing. I’m unable to feel or access my sight with this queasiness growing.” Altaira clutched her stomach as if to confirm her statement.

The Oracle’s words buzzed in Jahq’s head for quite some time. She’d only good intentions when keeping things from her mothers. Could she have been wrong, albeit for the right reasons?

IT WAS TOO quiet.

Gionne felt the hair on the back of her neck tingle as she led her group down the empty streets of the town they couldn’t avoid passing through because of the wagon. She knew people watched, felt their eyes from behind wherever they hid in their homes, some of those mere hovels, or the businesses lining both sides of the street. The only sound now was the steady clapping of horse hooves, wagon wheels on the hard-packed dirt road, and their own breathing. She wanted to hurry through this town and find a place to rest for the night, hoping whatever was affecting her magicked people would go away once they left this area.

Each of them wore the cloaks of Gradyln; and to Gionne’s dismay, Jahq wore the leather half-mask she’d received from Parrin. Gionne would have argued its use, but that would require speaking to Jahq, and they’d managed just fine these few days with their shared silent treatment of one another.

They approached the water well, in what Gionne assumed was the towns’ center and meeting place. Half a dozen men with loaded bows and other various sharp objects intended to do harm surrounded them. Gionne tugged her horse to a stop, forcing the others to do likewise.

One man stepped forward, his face twisted into a grimace of distaste. He was average height for a man, brown hair matching skin browned from hours in the sun. The eyes staring at her were

black orbs of cruelty. His build was probably muscular from manual work at one time, but his bulging gut spoke of someone who hadn't labored for quite a while. "Get down from your horses and the wagon. My name is Berk, and I speak for this town. State your business here."

Gionne mimicked his expression as she dismounted, not caring for the vulnerability to attack this created. "Traveling the road to the south." Standing beside her horse, Gionne heard Calpri dismounting as Jahq helped Altaira from the wagon.

"Why through our town?" Berk asked suspiciously.

"If we could've gone around, we would've, but the wagon didn't allow for that option." Gionne wanted to add, "If you didn't want visitors, you should've made a road on the outskirts of your town."

"You have magic users with you."

"Not your business if I do," Gionne said, trying to tamp down her rising temper. "I'm taking them to Zheirger Keep on behalf of Caldie Parrin of Gradyln."

"We don't allow magic in our town. Don't care if you're on the Caldie's business or not." Berk took a step toward the wagon, his gaze fixated on Jahq. The other men tightened the circle around them. Stopping mere feet away from Jahq and Altaira, Berk stabbed a finger at Jahq's face. "What are you hiding under that thing?"

The hair on Gionne's neck tightened at the nape. This wouldn't end well. "Leave the woman her privacy, Berk. Look," she said, arms stretched out to the sides of her body. "Just let us finish our travel through your town," Gionne pointed in the direction behind them. "Or we can go back the way we came. We don't want trouble, and we don't need anything from you. Let us be on our way."

Berk didn't respond to Gionne. With a too elated grin, he asked Jahq, "Is your face disgusting under there?" He licked his thick lips. "What the mask doesn't hide is nice enough. Take it off."

Gionne took a step in Berk's direction, only to stop when two notched bows rose in her direction, a sword tip pressed into her back. "Leave her alone. If you intended to scare us, it's working. We, helpless women, are afraid of you, Berk. Let us get on our horses and we will put as much distance between us and this sorry, ignorant town as the wagon can manage."

Berk spun around and glared at Gionne. "No, you're hiding more than her face. We've heard the stories, even in this sorry town, about what the magic wielders are doing to Kellshae. Not gonna happen here."

From the corner of Gionne's eye, she noticed movement behind the armed men. Wherever they'd concealed themselves, the rest of the town seemed to deem it safe enough to leave their hiding places for a better view of the proceedings. "You've no right to detain us," Gionne said, hoping get out of this town before the situation escalated.

With a self-satisfied smirk and a hand motion, gaze on someone behind Gionne, Berk said, "We'll see." The signal brought a sickly, skeletal youth of about fourteen years, with greasy blond hair, shuffling forward, stopping when inches in front of Berk. His skin was covered in old and new lesions over most his body if the bared flesh was any indication. Crashing a hand down on the boy's shoulder, Berk caused the youth to whimper and flinch. The boy's clothes were dirty and shabby enough as to hang on the boy's body like mere scraps of material. He didn't appear to have bathed for a long time, and Gionne wondered when he'd last consumed a decent meal. Dark smudges under his light blue eyes indicated he hadn't been sleeping well, if at all, for quite some time. "This here's Korvel. Guessin' if we still had the Priests of Tekelrah, he'd be among them. You see, Korvel can tell who has magic in them. That's why we keep him around."

“Won’t be much longer, the way you’re not caring for him,” Calpri grumbled.

“Shut up woman,” Berk said, flashing Calpri a glare. Berk focused his attention on Korvel. “Tell us which ones have the magic, boy.”

“Why can’t we just let them go?” Korvel asked in a feeble and raspy voice.

“Because I don’t believe they’ve innocent intentions.” Berk’s knuckles were white where the hand still rest on Korvel’s shoulder. From the grimace of pain on Korvel’s face, Berk was gripping with too much force. “On with it.”

As Gionne watched, Korvel squeezed his eyes tight, took a deep breath and raised his right hand, palm out. He opened his eyes, which had changed to an unfocused darker blue from moments before, and fixed attention on them one at a time. Whatever process Korvel performed, he concluded in only a little time. Korvel appeared ready to give his pronouncement but was interrupted.

A woman slipped out of the crowd and pushed through the armed men. “Berk, please, you must stop this. You’re overstepping your duties as our town’s leader. If they’re on business for the Caldie, you could bring the Gradyln liege’s wrath upon us all by detaining them.”

Distracted by the woman, Gionne missed the advancement of a man behind Jahq, until Jahq cried out. The man had flung a chain over Jahq’s head and wrapped it around her chest, pinning her arms to her sides. Berk released his hold on Korvel, pulled a small dagger from his belt and placed the tip beneath Jahq’s chin. “Damn you. Leave her alone,” Gionne cried out. She took a step forward but stopped when an arrow landed a breath away from her boot.

With a predacious grin, Berk moved closer to Jahq and pulled the leather mask from her face. Most of the crowd gasped in surprise, but Berk’s grin turned more menacing. “You’re Iskarrian nobility.” His body was now flush with Jahq’s. “Never thought the rumors true,” he said, gaze fixated on her tattoo. “I guess all we’ve heard is correct.” Berk then raked a lascivious gaze from Jahq’s face to her boots.

A woman tried to wedge herself between Jahq and Berk, stopped by one of the men from the crowd. He was an older man, about in his late sixties, lots of hair—all grey—both facial and atop his head, the beard ending about mid-chest. The hands holding the woman at bay gnarled and the skin thin and spotted. “Stop, Cellan. You’re doing no good.”

Cellan glared at the older man. “But Menar—”

“I know,” Menar said in a tired tone.

Gionne felt a rush of panic. If these two had doubts about Berk’s actions, it could not bode well for any of them, but especially Jahq. She glanced at Chayboen, hoping to signal the need to do something. Chayboen gave a barely noticeable shake of her head, her gaze indicating Altaira, now held firm against the wagon by Berk’s free hand to her throat. Anything she did could harm her companions. Clearly, Berk was mad. The confirmation glistened in his wild eyes. Gionne prayed she’d figure a way out of this before his madness escalated—before harm came to her companions.

“How many, Korvel?” he demanded, his gaze never leaving Jahq’s tattoo.

“Three. No, two.” Korvel trembled.

“Which is it?”

Korvel took a hesitant step back from Berk. “Two. The third isn’t magic but wields a magical device.”

Berk twisted his head in Korvel’s direction. “Continue boy, or do I need to beat the answers from you.”

“Them, the one’s you hold,” Korvel said, his voice quivering. “The blind one is a seer, the other holds kinetic magic.”

Barking a laugh, Berk released Altaira and stared into her sightless eyes. “Not a good seer if you didn’t see this coming. Guess you didn’t know we mine iron.” He turned his attention back to Jahq. “I knew there was something more to you behind your mask. Good thing we were prepared. The iron chain should keep you from doing anything foolish with your magic.” Motioning to someone in the back of the assembled people, he said, “Bring two cages.” Dropping the dagger slightly from Jahq’s throat, Berk yanked Jahq alongside him with a hand squeezing her throat, as he moved beside Korvel. The man behind Jahq freed the chain just enough he didn’t need to follow. “And the magical object?”

Korvel pointed to Chayboen. “Her sword.”

Luck was against them. Anything she or Chayboen tried could be detrimental to the others they were supposed to protect. Gionne prayed they could extricate themselves from this town before harm came to Jahq or Altaira because of magic, or the rest of them for general principle. Chayboen must also realize their predicament, because she gave a barely perceptible shrug for Gionne, allowing Menar to pull her sword from the scabbard at her back. Menar held the sword to his chest protectively in the twisted fingers of both hands. The teal of the virtutis marble not even giving a faint hint of what the blade could do.

“This isn’t right, Berk,” Cellan said. “We’re all going to suffer from your actions. These women were simply passing through. They never used magic to harm us.”

“This is preemptive, Cellan. Unless you, too, are a seer, you couldn’t know what they intended.” Berk then shoved Jahq to the ground, slamming a booted foot between her shoulders so her face hovered inches above the dirt. When men arrived carrying the cages, Berk hauled Jahq from the ground and tossed her into one, the chain loosely wrapped around her. Another man, a bit more gently, placed Altaira in the other cage. During this, men bound the hands of Gionne, Calpri, and Chayboen behind their backs. “Iron bars, so you can’t work your magic.” Berk leered at Jahq, and then said, “Until I decide what to do with you.”

Gionne wanted to beat Berk to within inches of his life. They hadn’t done anything to warrant this rash response. She understood many villages, maybe even this one, had trouble from magic wielders. She had explained they were passing straight through with no intention of using magic. Berk’s actions weren’t justified, and she wondered if he had a serious case of madness. Another matter worrying Gionne was Jahq’s inaction. Why hadn’t she put up at least a little resistance? Where was Jahq’s usual spunk? How sick were her magic users?

Spinning her gaze on Cellan and Menar, Gionne said, “Do something. You can’t allow this and not expect repercussions.”

Berk backhanded Gionne. “Do not presume to threaten us.”

Furious, Gionne quietly said, “Rest assured it wasn’t a threat, but a promise. It may not be by my hand, Berk. One way or another you’ll pay for this atrocity.”

A deranged glint lit his eyes. “Will it be before I get my pound of flesh?”

The coldness of his tone and his expression combined to make Gionne suddenly nauseous. Even her burning rage couldn’t thaw the cold fear that ran through her veins.

THE SHACK THE townsfolk had shoved Gionne, Chayboen, and Calpri into was dark, damp, and smelled like old sweat and urine. Gionne crawled toward the others, also sprawled on

the dirt floor, praying she wasn't moving through anything worse than dirt. "Are you both all right?" Chayboen and Calpri nodded. "We have—"

Sounds of strained grunting came from the entrance. A group of men carried the two cages, four men on each, holding Jahq and Altaira. The rest followed behind carrying torches, which made shadows dance queerly throughout the room. At least the entire village hadn't decided to squeeze into the small space, Gionne thought bitterly. Then Gionne got a look at a pale Altaira, and the sickly green coloring of Jahq. "What is wrong with them? What have you done?" she demanded, struggling to her feet and toward Jahq's cage. Jahq didn't look up, didn't acknowledge even hearing them.

"It's the iron," one of the men said. "It weakens the ones with magic and the stronger the magic, the quicker the sickness. Iron interweaved the hills so it'll be stronger. The effect will wear off, after a while, when released from the iron." He gave a shrug. "If Berk lets 'em go."

"He damn well better," Gionne said. That explained why Chayboen, Altaira, and Jahq had become ill on the travel.

Menar came into the shack. "You've done your duty," he said to the gathered men. "Leave the prisoners in peace for a little while at least." A couple of the men were more hesitant, but a few minutes later only Menar remained. He shook his head, and then directed his gaze on Gionne. "You're the one in charge?"

Gionne frowned in suspicion. "Yes. These women are my responsibility."

He gave a somber nod. "You realize your prospects are bleak in saving them all, don't you?"

"I leave with all or none. If it's the latter, recognize we won't die without taking many of you with us." Gionne shifted to stand between him and the cages. "Should that be the case, know one thing, Menar. Once Caldier Hassan learns what has happened here, to his granddaughter and her friends while on a mission for his wife, there will be no survivor's to remember this pitiful town. You're not only incurring the wrath of Clan Gradyln, but Zheirger Keep."

"I'd hate for that scenario to come to pass, young lady," Menar said. "However, we've little power over Berk."

"Because he's mad?" Gionne asked. "Or because you're all too afraid to stand up to him?"

Menar gave a tired shrug. "It could, and has, gone badly for anyone opposing him."

"Then you won't be the least bit surprised what your inaction brings down on those of your village."

"I'm here to ask you to reconsider punishing all of us, for anything that may happen to any of you, because of one man's actions." Menar glanced to each of them as if his sad expression could get him his way. He'd pointedly ignored gazing at Jahq, and Gionne realized Menar knew things weren't going to go well for her.

Gionne stepped forward and glared at him. "We're a family, the five of us. Consider the wrath of harming our family—even one of us."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Menar said. He sighed heavily.

"And I'm disappointed you can't appreciate my warning."

"You're in no position to make threats," Berk said from the entrance. He entered with two men following. One carried a pitcher and a mug, and the other held a sword. "Give it to all of them," Berk said to the man with the pitcher. As the man filled the mug and walked to Calpri, Berk said, "You'll all drink this or Torin will run you through with his blade."

Gionne noticed Torin didn't appear too keen on his duties though she suspected he'd fulfill them nonetheless. "What are you giving us?"

The man with the pitcher spoke. "Water with some iron to keep your magic from being used." He helped Calpri take a drink. "It'll just taste like bad water if you're normal."

"Enough with the chatter, Durk, get on with it." Berk glared at the man as he spoke.

"No need to be rude," Menar said shooting a nervous glance in Berk's direction.

Durk gave each of them their drink of tainted water. The results were instantaneous for Altaira and Jahq, and Gionne had to wonder if the result compounded since locked in the iron cages. Their skin paled considerably and beads of perspiration broke out on their flesh. Both clutched their stomachs as in severe agony. Chayboen also seemed affected, but managed to keep the symptoms from being apparent to the others.

Gionne felt helpless. "This is barbaric, Berk." She pulled ineffectually at her bound wrists, needing to reach out to Jahq, settling for leaning against the cage bars. "Jahq? Jahq?" Whether Jahq could hear her or not, she didn't respond. "Please, hold on," she whispered to Jahq. Furious, Gionne spun toward Berk. "All right. My friends are helpless and your torture a success. Release us and we'll leave your village immediately."

Berk responded with a sneer. He turned to Durk and Torin. "Take this one to my office," he said, pointing at Jahq.

"No," Gionne screamed. "Leave her alone. She's done nothing wrong."

"Berk—" Menar started ineffectually.

"Look how sick she is," Berk said. "She's our biggest threat. I'll need to interrogate her to see how big a danger."

From the glazed eyes and euphoric maniacal expression brightening his face, Gionne was very afraid for Jahq. "She means you no harm."

"I'll learn that soon enough, won't I?" Berk turned away from her, obviously not viewing her as a risk. Darting past Durk and Torin as they tugged an unresponsive Jahq from the cage, Gionne catapulted herself into Berk's back, slamming them both to the filthy dirt floor. "You stupid bitch." While Gionne tried to get her bearing, Berk had gained his footing, stood, and plowed a fist into her jaw. The force flung her backward, her head slamming into the bars before slumping to the floor, dizzy. Gionne fought against unconsciousness, as Calpri and Chayboen yelled her name.

The last Gionne heard before oblivion took her was Berk's taunt. "How are you gonna protect them now, bitch?"

Chapter Twelve

“WHAT, IN THE name of Bahalkar, are you doing?” Cellan grabbed her husband’s arm and yanked him away from Jahq, held suspended from the ceiling by two iron manacles from chains. Jahq was so weak, the iron bit into the skin, mangling the flesh at her wrists from the strain of her weight, her legs too weak to hold her upright. She could feel the odd tickling sensation as blood dripped down her arms. “This woman has done nothing to us, Berk.”

Jahq mumbled, “Never stops men.” Cellan’s entrance had come too late to stop Berk from his mission. She hoped whatever he’d forced her to drink would kill her. Too bad it wasn’t soon enough to avoid the sweating and grunting as he took his pleasure on her pain wracked body. Too bad the small burn-like lesions caused by the iron poisoning hadn’t turned him away. Too late for the Void as an escape from this, she thought. Jahq was tired of being chattel to men and their desires.

“It’s got magic,” Berk answered, not hearing or simply ignoring her. For most men, their wants outweighed all else, granted them all the reason required for whatever atrocities they conducted. “That makes it an abomination, not human.” Berk flashed Cellan a sneer, stabbing a finger toward Jahq’s tattoo. “It’s not like it hasn’t been trained to it.”

Tears streamed down Cellan’s face. “It? She’s a feeling and thinking woman. Barely more than a child herself to suffer or willingly wish this. Who has every right to bring the wrath of her family—a prominent one—down on us, because of what you have done. What has happened to you? You’re not the man I married, not the same father of our son. This is the lesson you wish to pass on to him?”

“I’d be showing him leaders deserve certain rights with their position. Look at all I’ve done for this village.” He stabbed a finger in the direction of a large wooden chest with three locks. The chest looked new. “No one in this town need suffer any longer, we never need to go hungry or without the finer things. I’ve made us prosper by selling what Kellshae needs. You’ve seen how important iron is to the normal people in our realm.” Berk glared at her with revulsion. “Not that I have a son any longer.”

“Raping this poor woman is not a right,” Cellan said. Her voice lowered with sadness. “And Korvel doesn’t deserve your contempt. He never asked to be cursed with magic.” Cellan glanced in the corner, and Jahq noticed the huddled figure stuffed into it as if he could meld with the wall. Beside him, Chayboen’s sword Cerno stood proudly, though silent and ignored. Shame filled her, but Jahq realized there was no way she could have prevented what Korvel had witnessed. Jahq was glad she hadn’t been aware of the child’s presence.

Jahq, hoping to include Cellan as an ally against her raving lunatic husband, said, “We could take your son to Zheirger Keep. He’ll learn to use his magic properly. Korvel would be welcomed with us.” Her stomach convulsed in another series of spasms, forcing her to twist painfully in her bindings. “Let us go and no one, especially my grandmother, will learn of this.”

Berk snorted. “There’s no way for them to learn of it now. If I kill you and your friends, the matter stops here.”

“Are you certain?” Jahq asked.

He hesitated a mere moment. “Certain enough.”

“That’s too bad,” Jahq said. No argument would satisfy this man. He’d done what he intended to her, and now he would kill her and the others, to hide his lack of sanity, his lack of power and control before his village. Berk walked to the far wall and pulled a lever, which liberated the chains enough for her to drop to the floor. Jahq couldn’t stop the groan from escaping as the blood rushed through her arms in excruciating agony. “We’re not done playing, huh?”

“Shut up.” Berk scowled. “And to answer your question, no, we’re not.” He yelled for his man outside, Torin. Torin rushed in, pointedly ignoring Jahq from her position on the floor and Cellan. She didn’t know if Torin was aware of Korvel’s presence. “Bring the rest of them to the town square, and have the archers ready.”

“For what?” Torin asked. He flinched at Berk’s immediate glare. “Yes, sir,” he said. Torin left to do Berk’s bidding.

“Get up,” Berk ordered though Jahq suspected he knew her too weak. Her head—heartbeat—pound so loudly in her ears, she barely heard his next words, though his actions confirmed what she gathered he’d told her. “If you won’t walk, I’ll drag you.”

No sooner spoken, Berk snatched up the chains and dragged her across the floor, out the door, and headed toward the well. The pain from the dragging and drugging were too much. Jahq passed out.

GIONNE’S BATTERED BODY was dumped roughly beside the town’s well. The resulting pain shrieked through every inch of her. From her position, Gionne couldn’t help but watch Berk drag an unconscious Jahq toward her. Torin and the others had kept Gionne’s hands bound behind her back. Two men led Chayboen, supporting a barely awake Altaira, to the well. Calpri walked beside Durk and appeared to be on a lover’s walk, not ready for slaughter by a lunatic. Following were villagers carrying torches or candle lanterns.

Guilt clutched her chest. She should have prevented this from happening. There was a time—

Gionne choked back a sob. She wasn’t that same person, the one who believed she could take on anything and protect everyone. Hadn’t Belzan proved she couldn’t even protect herself? It wasn’t as though Gionne hadn’t anticipated an early death as a warrior, after all, and doddering in old age wasn’t usually an achievable goal. She’d never expected to take so many people, whom Gionne cared about in varying degrees, with her when the time came.

As Berk gave one last drag on Jahq’s chains, Menar rushed over, tugged Jahq the last few feet, and propped her against the stone of the well’s frame. Able to gaze at Jahq unhindered, what she saw startled Gionne. There were fresh bruises and lacerations from the dragging and the rough treatment since arriving in the village. The grotesque additions were the red and pus-filled lesions covering most of her body. Jahq’s flesh was more damaged and raw where the iron shackles contacted her skin. Closing the small distance, Gionne scooted nearer. “Jahq?” She brought her face adjacent to Jahq’s ear, pressing her cheek to Jahq’s. “Come on, sweetheart,” Gionne whispered, “talk to me.”

There was a faint groan, and then Jahq breathed, “Not your sweetheart anymore.”

Despite herself, Gionne grinned. “There’s the Jahq I know. Are you okay?”

“Been better.” Another groan. “Can we go now?”

“I’m working on it,” Gionne told her. The problem was she hadn’t come up with any viable alternatives yet. “Hang in there.”

“Do my best.”

“Enough.” Berk was behind Gionne and now had a handful of her hair in his fist. He pulled her away from Jahq and kicked her, twice in the stomach, and then once in the kidneys. More pain wracked her body, and Gionne strained to remain conscious. Berk faced his gathered people. “I’ve interrogated these women and learned the truth about why they’re here. They want to rule over us.” There was murmuring throughout, a mix of shock and denial. Gionne knew Jahq would never have stated such a lie. “We must destroy them before they get a chance to achieve their goal.” He glared over to Jahq. “We should start with that one. Torin, strap her to the well.”

Torin broke from the crowd, a length of rope already in hand, and jerked an unresisting Jahq to unsteady feet and slammed her against one of the beams supporting the bucket pulley.

Berk smirked as he watched Torin secure Jahq. “Where’s your Caldie now?”

Gionne kicked out a foot, the contact ineffectual against Berk’s shin. He took a slight step back successfully stepping out of range of another attempt. She crawled to Jahq, trying to get close enough to use the well’s structure to get to stand. All she’d managed was to collapse at Jahq’s feet. She stared into the crowd. “Are you all just going to stand around and do nothing?” Most glanced away, unable to meet her gaze. “You know this is wrong.” Still, no one uttered a word, and no one made a move to stop Berk. What was worse, no one moved away either. As Gionne continued to scan the crowd, she noticed Altaira crying as Chayboen held her in a protective embrace, probably released from their bindings to support each other for the walk. She couldn’t see Calpri, Durk stood in anticipation of the activities with others from the village.

“Say your good-bye’s,” Berk said as he made a hand motion and the archer’s stepped into a line before the crowd.

A blood-curdling scream filled the night.

CALPRI THANKED THE goddess for her plainness. She hadn’t been grateful for this reaction until scant minutes before now. Pretty people received recognition while most overlooked plain and homely people. She’d slipped away from the throngs of villagers who watched as Berk beat and ridiculed Gionne, and Jahq waited for her execution when he finished.

She sent another thank you to the goddess for making Durk such a chatterbox. Because of his attempts to woo her—another unexpected occurrence—Calpri knew where Cerno was held. He was so focused on Berk’s tormenting that he hadn’t noticed her slip away. She already moved their wagon and the horses. Retrieving the sword would be a bit more difficult. Then, she would need to keep them hidden while conceiving of a way to free her group and getting out of this horrible village.

A few people walked toward the spectacle in the village center, but none seemed too concerned with her. Calpri strolled in the direction of Berk’s office, hoping her apparent disinterest would make her as invisible as possible. She was at the building and stopped in the doorway. Inside was a desk littered with papers, one chair, a large chest, all lit by a single wall sconce behind the desk. Dangling from the ceiling was a large hook attached to a chain, which connected to a lever on the wall near the desk.

The room appeared empty when she entered but disabused of the notion when Calpri heard soft crying from the corner. Peering in that direction, Calpri saw Berk’s wife, and the sickly

magicked boy—Korvel—huddled together. Cellan did the crying, and Calpri believed it might be because the boy appeared sicklier than when they'd first arrived. She also noticed Cerno leaning against the wall close by them. Calpri stepped in that direction.

"Stop," Cellan said in a voice raspy from crying. "Don't come any closer."

Calpri held up her hands in as non-threatening a gesture as she could manage. "Cellan, I really need our sword. I don't wish to hurt either of you, but I need to protect my friends. I'll do what I must."

Korvel turned tired, pain-filled eyes to her. "What does it do?"

"I truly don't know," Calpri said. "I need to get Cerno to his owner."

"A sword with a name." He may have attempted to smile because his lips twitched. "I think I may know." Korvel shifted. "Help me up, Mother." Mother? Had Korvel's own father poisoned him? "Not yet. Please." He added the last as if an afterthought to gain her compliance.

"We don't have much time," Calpri said.

"I know." Korvel reached for Cerno but was too weak to do more than grasp it. "Mother, please carry Cerno." The twitch of his lips came again. Calpri wondered what this boy would have grown into had his father not suppressed his powers and tortured him to near death.

Calpri considered wrestling the sword from them. In their current state, she doubted either a match against her succeeding. "What do you intend?"

Cellan asked, "Korvel?"

"It has to be done." Korvel didn't say more. Cellan must have heard some unspoken words because her features flashed with agony and then blanked into an expression of detachment. She grasped Cerno firmly in her right hand, supporting Korvel around the waist with her left arm. Korvel looked to Calpri and then began the arduous trek to the door as he said, "I'll only have Father's attention for a moment. Suggest you think of a diversion to last longer if you wish to rescue your companions."

"And Cerno?" Calpri asked following close behind them.

Cellan answered her question. "I'll do my best to assure the sword's owner receives it."

"Not much time," Korvel said. "Better think of a diversion. We'll be in the square."

Calpri stopped, standing in her confusion for a moment, not knowing what to do next. From her peripheral, Calpri spotted the red coals from a blacksmith shop; and next to that structure, a building with clothing hanging in the window. She raced over to the forge, gathering a small shovel on the way. Calpri scooped up coal and then rushed toward the clothiers. The door opened easily. She held the shovel in one hand, ripping and tossing clothing and bolts of material into a pile, before dumping the coals on top. The resulting flash of flame was immediate. She returned to the forge, noting the mix of rushes and straw littering the floor. Calpri scooped more coals and chucked them across the flooring. A pile of recently forged weapons lay in a heap just inside the door. Calpri grabbed a small dagger. As the coal lit the debris, she hurried outside, intent on returning to where her companions were.

A blurring in the darkness gave Calpri pause, odd as it was in the night, a change in movement and something lighter flashed before it dimmed. She squinted at the buildings across the road. Reclining in a doorway was a figure in darkened clothing, barely visible. Noting her observation, the figure straightened, took a step forward into the night's faint light. From the build, Calpri surmised this was a man. What caught her attention turned out to be the smile exposing bright white teeth, flashing in response to the fire she'd set—if his glance in that direction and nod were proof. He didn't say a word to her but pulled something from a strange scabbard belted at his hip. Frozen in bewilderment, Calpri started when the man pointed the

strange thing at the structures nearest him. A stream of energy, similar to lightning, pierced the darkness and stuck the structures, immediately igniting them. As the flames grew, the man bowed and she noticed he was handsome, but even in the darkness, Calpri saw cold eyes. He stood and stepped back into the darkness. In a blink, Calpri realized him gone.

Calpri took a single step forward, before stopping suddenly when a scream pierced the night. Forgetting the oddness of the strange man, Calpri sped to where the town gathered.

GIONNE CRINGED AT the wailing mere feet from her, the howl slicing through her skull already lacerated with pain. Her focus intent on gaining her feet and placing herself in front of the bound Jahq, Gionne hadn't witnessed the approach of Korvel and Cellan. She assumed this prompted the scream, since staring at them now, Gionne realized what had caused the reaction. Korvel looked like a walking corpse. Unable to walk on his own, Cellan held him close to her side, each with a hand on the hilt of Cerno, the sword pointed at Berk. They weren't close enough to harm the crazed man.

Guess it's up to me, she thought.

Berk snickered. "Is this pathetic display supposed to frighten me?"

"No," Korvel said. "But bring resolution."

Cellan had tears streaming down her face. She glanced at the crowd, her gaze stopped on Durk. "Bring the black haired woman here."

"What do you intend, bitch?" Berk asked, glaring at Cellan. She didn't reply. Durk complied with Cellan's request, which irritated Berk, and soon Chayboen was closer to them, still holding Altaira, but Durk stopped at a distance from Cellan and the sword. "Both of you have wasted enough of our time. Archers," he said, "prepare your weapons."

Mumbling filtered through the crowd, yet no one left the area, all intent on the family, and less focused on the prisoners. Gionne caught sight of Calpri at the rear of the crowd. First she pointed behind her and mouthed fire; and then pointed off to the left and mouthed wagon. As imperceptible as possible, Gionne caught Chayboen's gaze, darted her gaze toward Calpri, and leaned her body closer to Jahq's, hoping to shield her from whatever craziness was about to transpire. When Chayboen returned her gaze to Gionne, she smiled at—what she hoped she'd interpreted as—Calpri's plan. Chayboen now directed her gaze to Cerno.

Korvel and Cellan, who stood directly behind Korvel, raised Cerno and spun it faster than Gionne thought the pair could.

Cerno easily pierced Korvel's emaciated body and slid smoothly through Cellan's chest. The teal Virtutis marble glowed as Cerno drank from the magic within Korvel. Before their bodies dropped to the ground, Calpri yelled, "Fire, fire." She then raced to Chayboen's side.

The gathered crowd turned in her direction. On cue, there were small boom noises just as huge tongues of flame consumed the structures. A moment of hesitation as people debated remaining for the drama unfolding or rescuing their belongings. When the archers raced off toward homes currently ravaged by flame, the others followed. Chayboen, her left hand clasping Altaira's, retrieved Cerno, scant seconds before Berk made his way to Korvel and Cellan and glared dumbly down on their bodies, with anger and surprise warring across his features. Rather than taking the opportunity to run the lunatic through, Chayboen and Altaira strode to the well. Calpri was there, slicing through Gionne's bindings, leaving Jahq's ropes to Cerno's sharp blade.

"Can you walk?" Chayboen asked her.

Gionne nodded. “Yeah, but Jahq will need our assistance.”

“I have her. You go with Calpri.” Chayboen transferred Altaira’s hand into Calpri’s. “We’ll be behind you,” Chayboen said, lifting Jahq. “Sorry, Princess,” Chayboen mumbled as she slung Jahq none too gently over her shoulder. The villagers seemed to have forgotten them. Berk stood unmoving over the corpses of his family. The group made it to where Calpri had hidden the wagon and the horses, who were pawing nervously at the ground as the scent of fire filled the air. “Calpri and Gionne, get on the horses. I’ve got the wagon.”

“What about—” Gionne didn’t finish. Chayboen had tossed Jahq, with only a modicum of gentleness into the back of the wagon, before lifting Altaira. Gionne heard Chayboen mutter, “Forgive me, Oracle.” Then she tossed Altaira in with Jahq. Gionne turned to her horse, glad to see Calpri already in the saddle. She mounted, grabbed the reins of Chayboen’s horse, and they raced out of the village, nearly crushing Berk in the process, with as much speed as possible.

None of them turned their attention backwards, afraid the action would jinx their newfound luck. Except for the clomping of hooves and the wheels upon the road, the companions were silent as they distanced themselves from the nightmare town.

CHAYBOEN BROUGHT THE wagon to a more sedate pace, now that they believed themselves far enough away. She doubted anyone had or would follow, seriously hoped the fire consumed everything and had turned the village to ash. The approach of dawn gave them a little more light to travel by, and Gionne used this widening to draw alongside the wagon. “Should we stop?” Chayboen asked, yielding to Gionne’s status as group leader. “Jahq didn’t look so good.”

Anguish crossed Gionne’s features. “She’s a trooper. I’d rather travel until midday and find a good place to camp. We’ll be better able to attend her then. Assess the health and damage of everyone.”

“Yes, you do resemble something dragged from Bahalkar,” Chayboen teased, referencing the plane for the souls of Kellshae’s evildoers. What she didn’t mention to Gionne was how some damage seemed more healed than it should be. Her bruised jaw had the yellow coloring of an older bruise, and the cut to the corner of her lip looked at least a week old. Was this a residual effect of Ysannie sharing her blood with Gionne? If so, how long would it last?

“Feel like it too,” Gionne said. She glanced at the tarp covering the wagon. “Unless you think we should check on her— them—now.”

Chayboen could see the uncertainty written on Gionne’s face. She worried about Jahq. Truth told, the possible—and probable— damage, beyond the iron poisoning, done to Jahq troubled Chayboen. Part of her wanted to contact Ysannie and ask her advice, part of her didn’t want to inflame the anxiety Gionne suffered. “Altaira will let me know. I believe they’re both resting right now, which is best for healing.” Gionne agreed though her pause alerted her reluctance. “As you stated, Jahq’s a trooper. We’re only a few hours from mid-day where we’ll have adequate distance from Berk. This is the correct decision.” Gionne nodded brusquely and urged her horse toward Calpri on the road ahead. With Gionne out of hearing range, Chayboen mumbled, “Sweet goddess let this be the right decision.”

They were close to finding a spot to stop for the day—an extended overnight would be welcomed—before Chayboen heard the sounds of movement from the back of the wagon. She felt a great relief wash through her. The longer Chayboen met with silence, the more she worried

about their recovery. Half a moment before she called out to them, Chayboen heard their hushed voices.

“Can you move?” Altaira asked.

“Barely,” Jahq replied. “Hellfire, I hope the damn poison wears off soon.”

“Shift closer, let me support you.”

“That’s not necessary,” Jahq said.

“Please, Jahq, I need to do this.” Chayboen heard them shuffling about. When next Chayboen heard Altaira speak, her voice reflected strain, as if she were crying, or about to cry. “I’m so sorry, Jahq. I should have—”

“Altaira, it wasn’t your fault. There isn’t any way you’d have received a vision, not with the iron all around us.” Jahq’s chuckle sounded bitter. “Besides, your visions are for moments we don’t know what’s going to happen. With men, we always know. Especially when men think my tattoo gives them a free warrant to take whatever they want.”

Chayboen felt the ice-cold rush of shame seep through her veins.

“Which is the reason you want to leave Kellshae, go into the Void.” Altaira sighed. “Too bad he wouldn’t let you keep the mask on.”

A tinge of panic entered Jahq’s voice. “Please remember that’s between us. I don’t want my mothers to know the results my marking creates, or to learn about Berk, no one needs to ever know.”

“I wish there was a way to have it removed. It’s not fair to you.”

“I also wish, but would want the mark of slave removed from my sister first.” A groan from Jahq, and then her voice became frightened. “You’d tell me, when your sight is back, if—”

“Sweet goddess, yes,” Altaira said. “Right now you need to rest. I wish I could take away your pain, Jahq. I hope when the poison runs through our systems we’ll be back to normal.” Altaira gave a chuckle. “Well as normal as we dreaded magic wielders can be.”

“You think it may have done permanent damage?”

Chayboen had wondered the same thoughts since given the tainted water. Would Ysannie love her less if she lost her meager powers? Would her wife love her less if she learned Chayboen had failed to look after Jahq, as Ysannie had asked of her?

“Maybe at some point, but Berk gave it to his son for a while, though maybe in lesser doses. It sickened him, yes, but he was powerful enough to use his gift. I think it may have dulled for the moment, but not destroyed it. You’re powerful, Jahq.”

“Keep that quiet, Altaira. I’d rather no one know the extent of my magic. It won’t come as a surprise if too many learn the truth. I get myself into enough trouble with the tattoo. Let’s not add another layer to hate me for.”

“Nobody could know you and hate you, Jahq.”

Jahq snorted at that remark. “A lot you know, Oracle.”

The back of the wagon was quiet for a while, and Chayboen hoped both women had returned to sleep. As for herself, Chayboen wondered if she’d ever be able to replace the guilt flooding through her.

Chapter Thirteen

THE NIGHT WAS chillier than the previous night. Gionne hadn't wanted to stray this far from the Keep, but finding the ripped and blood covered tunic, the blood still wet, had made her decision obvious. If a woman was wounded, she'd never survive the night with its multitude of predators. Gionne picked up her pace, pulled her sword free, hoping she wouldn't have to travel too far from home—and help.

An animal's howl, full of pain and rage, rent the air, and a woman's scream followed. Gionne had just made the clearing, spotted the wounded wolf before an arrow pierced her, just above the wrist, nearly causing her to drop her sword. On the ground was a bound and bloodied woman, barely conscious. Belzan stood over her. She knew there had to be someone else nearby as Belzan wasn't carrying a bow or quiver, but did have his sword in his good hand.

"Welcome to the party," Belzan said.

Gionne remained focused on Belzan as she reached down and broke the shaft of the extended arrow. She pulled a kerchief from her pocket and wrapped it around her wrist and over the wooden shaft embedded there. It would be painful to use her sword arm this way, but she could cause more damage if she removed it.

"I wanted to send a message to Zheirger Keep and Shei Kareina." Belzan spat the last words as if distasteful. Considering their history, Gionne wasn't surprised at his vehemence. "Glad you showed up, since you'll make a better messenger."

"Let her go, Belzan," Gionne said as she discreetly scanned for others.

"Not gonna happen." Belzan smirked. As if on cue, a flaming arrow whizzed past her and landed in the woman's chest. The woman immediately became ablaze and Gionne's only consolation was that the arrow had probably killed her before the agony of burning alive.

Gionne spun in the direction the arrow came from just as the lower limb of a bow slammed into the side of her head with enough force to knock her off balance.

Gionne regained her feet, shifting so she could keep both Belzan and this other man, who strongly resembled him, in view. Blood trickled down the side of her face, her head dizzy from the impact, and the pain from her wrist wound. She used her left hand to assist her damaged right and raised her blade in defense. She couldn't help the woman, but Gionne tried to maintain distance from the wounded wolf. "What's your message?"

Belzan tsked. "You're not ready for it yet. Tombik hasn't had any fun yet." He lunged simultaneously with Tombik, who had a short sword in lieu of the bow.

Gionne met and repelled every slash of sword directed at her from both men. Under normal circumstances, she'd be able to hold her own against multiple adversaries, but her injuries were making it difficult. She didn't want to quit, but wasn't a fool either. Gionne needed to get away and find help.

Carefully, she directed her steps closer to the tree line. Gionne knew she stood a better chance if she hid in the forest, hoping they weren't as familiar with the territory. She saw her opening, and twisted around, racing into the darkness. Gionne barely managed 100-feet when she

felt the sharp pain in the back of her right thigh. As she stumbled to the ground, Gionne saw another arrow protruding from her leg. She attempted to rise, but was encased in a thick net interspersed with tiny metal hooks. The hooks bit and buried in her flesh as she struggled to free herself. She'd located an exit, just as a large boot slammed into her stomach.

"Ah-ah, none of that," Tombik said.

Belzan sauntered over, grabbed the net above her head, and began dragging her back to the clearing. Each step dug the hooks in and ripped through her clothing and flesh. He dropped her about twenty-feet from the injured wolf. He turned to Tombik. "Drag that stench away. It's distracting."

Tombik walked out of Gionne's vision.

"Let's soften you up a bit," Belzan said, staring down at her. He promptly landed a multitude of kicks to various parts of her body.

"Hey, you're having all the fun," Tombik whined. Soon he straddled her prone form, and raised a fist. Before he landed the blow, Gionne kicked out and made contact with his groin. Dropping him to his knees. Tombik slammed the fist into her cheek. "Stupid bitch."

Belzan pushed him out of the way. "Let me take care of this. Move aside and wait for your whelp."

"Little shit's late already," Tombik said. He was clasping his manhood in his hands as he slowly walked away.

Pain radiated from nearly every inch of Gionne's body, but still she fought to free herself before she became too weak to do so.

Reaching into an opening, Belzan clutched a meaty handful of her hair. Gionne tried to ignore the pain, and focus on steadying her breathing for her next opportunity. Belzan tossed the net away from them.

Gionne used every ounce of strength she could muster, bent her fingers into claws and raked them over his face, and other areas of exposed flesh.

No matter how grievous her injuries, Gionne fought Belzan as if life depended on it—which it did—but quickly realized she couldn't last much longer.

The wolf, despite the two arrows protruding from her flank, crawled inch by inch toward the woman, a smeared trail of wolf blood in her wake.

From somewhere outside her view, she heard someone else approach.

Belzan cursed. "Taelyr. Get over here, boy." Belzan struggled with the clasp of Gionne's leather pants. With his hook, he wasn't able to release them. Gionne realized what he intended and struggled harder. The boy, Taelyr, stepped toward Belzan. "Take her damn pants down," Belzan ordered.

"What?"

A heavy calloused hand landed roughly on his neck. "You heard me. Now hurry, it's getting cold."

"No, I won't." Taelyr backed up a step—right into his father. "I won't help with—"

"You're weak, boy." Tombik slapped Taelyr hard across the cheek, once, twice, three times—until blood streamed from the corner of his mouth. Then Tombik pushed him to the ground. Tombik went to Gionne and yanked down her pants.

Gionne moaned, but hadn't the energy to resist. She wanted to die, right here and now, before what she knew would transpire, happened.

"Teach this bitch—" Tombik licked his lips excitedly.

Belzan raped Gionne, repeatedly, and roughly. She fought him, but no longer had the strength, but wasn't able to pass out. Belzan had plowed his fist into her face until she stopped struggling.

"Here's your message. I'm coming with an army. What you just enjoyed, is what I'll do to everyone Kareina loves," Belzan said into her ear. He laughed loudly, and then took his knife and carved a "B" into her stomach.

Tombik helped Belzan stand. After they'd shared a good laugh, Tombik loosed one more arrow into the chest of the wolf. "Come on, you sissy," Tombik said, waving Taelyr to them.

Tears streamed down her abused face as Gionne lay beside the corpse of the wolf. In the newly still night, Gionne was finally able to find the oblivion of unconsciousness.

GIONNE SHIVERED AS they continued along their journey, remembering last night's nightmare. After the incident at Berk's village, she was too afraid to sleep soundly, no matter how exhausted she was. If she gave into sleeping too deeply, they could all die. Or meet a more horrendous end. Gionne wished there were ways to avoid these villages. Sadly, the road-builders made that impossible without trespassing on private lands. "I should broach the topic with Caldie Parrin," she said in a whisper. "Give all the pompous lords of the Keeps something to do besides fight over land."

But exhaustion couldn't explain the strange current of energy tingling through her body. She felt as if her energy were seeping away a little at a time. Gionne was disabused of this as a reason when, on the roadway ahead, a faint shimmer covered the road and spread high into the air. Behind the barrier were three men. They stood silently watching them approach. She felt a wash of relief none bore weapons. The comfort was short-lived.

"Get down from your horses." The man in the middle was huge, both tall and bulked with so much muscle Gionne wondered if he could scratch his own back. He had dark tanned skin, brown hair, and ice-blue eyes, and the cruelest smile Gionne had seen since Belzan. She shuddered.

"We just need to drive through," Gionne said. "We've no wish to stop or cause harm to you or yours." Sweet goddess, don't let this be another magic-hating village.

"Lady, don't make me force you." As he spoke, the man to his left raised a palm skyward and a ball of energy—no, ice—floated. "Need I repeat myself? Get off your horses and out of the wagon."

"No, I can't do that," Gionne said, already dismounting, Calpri did likewise from the wagon seat. It appeared this village would be the opposite of the iron village. These people had magic. Great, she thought bitterly, non-magicked people would be tortured this time. "We've two women too sick to leave the wagon."

"No men?" The man with the ice snickered. He was scrawny, almost sickly looking, with greasy, muted blond hair and wild blue eyes. "What'd'ya think of that, Aaryen?"

The man in the center, Aaryen, glared at Iceman. "Shut up, Csingor." He gave a toss of his head to the third man who had barely achieved manhood. This man was attractive, with clear skin, nice cheekbones, and had kind blue eyes. Was there some connection to magic power and blue eyes? Gionne wondered, noting most people with magic had blue eyes.

“Go check, de’Wasim.” Before Gionne could blink, de’Wasim swished passed her and then was once again by Aaryen’s side, whispering in his ear. Aaryen nodded solemnly. He focused again on Gionne, his expression furious. “What have you done to them?”

“They’re our friends, we did nothing,” Gionne said. Since these people had magic, Gionne didn’t want to chance one was psychic. Honesty would be best—lies could come back to haunt them later. “Two days ago we were held as prisoners in a village of iron miners. They gave us water tainted with iron. I don’t know if anything else was in the water, but it appears to have only harmed them.”

“You’d better not be lying, woman,” Aaryen said. Guess none of these men is a truth-spotter, like Shei Mayliandra. He and de’Wasim were in whispered conversation for another moment, before de’Wasim disappeared up the road, the one they needed to use.

“Not much to look at, are you?” Csingor curled his lip as he glanced at Calpri. Then his gaze turned on Gionne. “You, on the other hand... Hey—” Csingor sputtered, rubbing the back of his head where Aaryen had walloped him with a large, thick hand.

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” Aaryen asked him, before focusing his attention back on Gionne. “More than likely, they’re destined for the pit.”

Csingor gave a laugh filled with menace. “Ooh, more fun there.”

Gionne suspected she’d regret her question. “What is the pit?”

“You’ll find out,” Csingor said. He licked his thin lips with a loud smacking noise. “Only way to avoid the pit is as a concubine.”

She felt nauseous. Calpri actually made a retching noise, before asking, “Those our only options?”

Aaryen grinned cruelly again. “The third option is death. I can take care of that right now.”

Calpri shook her head. “No, I’ll take my chances in the pit.”

“You don’t get to choose,” Csingor said. “That’s to be Draquez’ decision.”

“Who is he?” Gionne asked.

De’Wasim reappeared in time to answer her question. “You’re about to find out.” He looked toward Aaryen. “He wants you to bring them in. He’ll be waiting.”

As quick as de’Wasim’s movements, the shimmering wall across the road disappeared, and Aaryen said, “De’Wasim ride with the plain one on the wagon. You,” he pointed to Gionne. “Tie your horse to the back. We’ll walk in. Don’t attempt to escape.”

“Wouldn’t think of it, Aaryen.” Gionne couldn’t run and leave Jahq and Altaira to lunatics again. Apparently, she and Calpri weren’t any safer. Maybe, this time, explanations would be sufficient for their release. Deep down in her gut, she recognized the likelihood akin to waking and finding the last few weeks were a horrible nightmare.

With a shove between Csingor’s shoulder blades, Aaryen stepped beside her and indicated she should follow the shifty little man. De’Wasim maintained a healthy distance and pace behind them with the wagon.

After slightly less than a mile, they reached the village outskirts. At sighting their approach, the village activity changed. Young children playing kick-the-ball in the streets stopped and watched in fascination. Adults and older children also stopped what they were doing, but held a mixture of anger, fear and, for some, open curiosity.

“Welcome to Bahalkar,” Gionne muttered when they stopped in front of a large house with a half dozen steps leading to a porch landing. There stood a throne-like chair occupied by a smallish blond man. On his right was a woman who resembled him too much to be anything but

a sibling. De'Wasim and another man removed Jahq and Altaira from the back, standing them beside Gionne and Aaryen. Calpri moved beside Altaira.

Aaryen chuckled and bent close to her ear. "No, not Bahalkar, but you may think so when all is done." The small man stood and stepped forward imperiously, but remained silent. The woman joined him, as Aaryen whispered in Gionne's ear. "They're our leader and his sister, Draquez and Michi. He's somewhat unpredictable."

"Oh, joy," Gionne said in a bare whisper.

The large man must have an impressive hearing as his ability. Aaryen laughed and without glancing at her said, "Not hardly, at least not for you."

MICHI MOVED CLOSER to her brother, Draquez', side, clasped his elbow, and whispered in his ear, "Who is she?"

Draquez gave her an odd look, a mix of curiosity and antagonism. "Whoever do you mean?" He knew which of the women she referred to and was intentionally obtuse just to pester her. They shared the same interest in women, and Draquez would not want to lose a woman to Michi. Not that she ever seriously fought him for one; and, same gender relationships still weren't acceptable in Kellshae. Michi only had Draquez left in her life, their entire family slaughtered by magic-haters, and they needed one another. She wouldn't lose him over infatuation, not then. But

—
This woman was different.

This wasn't about attraction though there was certainly plenty of that. The dark-haired woman was gorgeous. Michi knew what the tattoo signified—who in Kellshae was ignorant after T'Dar's failure—but that didn't matter. It was the power radiating from her, even dampened by iron. Did this woman know she had so much magic coursing through her? Her power summoned Michi's own power like a siren call.

Staring into Michi's eyes, Draquez asked, "Why this one?" He would have sensed the power, too.

"I'm not sure, but she calls to my heart." Michi thought it might be her heart. This woman definitely drew her.

Clasping his hands behind his back, Draquez stood straighter. "She is a beauty, sister. We may have to fight for her. I feel her power. It would increase my own, and bring our plans closer to fruition."

Michi didn't want to fight him. She had always held back during their sparring, didn't want to undermine his pride. This matter could change all that. The woman was not meant for Draquez, Michi knew it soul deep. "It's not my wish to fight you. But for her, I would make an exception."

Draquez frowned. "You can't be—"

Michi met his stare defiantly. "Very."

After a long moment, Draquez shrugged. "Let's arrange to meet with the woman—privately." He smirked as he stared at the remaining women. "And have some fun, although only one seems worthy of the pit."

"I'm only interested in the one. I care little what you do with the others."

Michi turned to leave, but Draquez stopped her with a rough hand on her arm. "I haven't agreed to give her to you."

“Then I’ll win her from you. I can announce my challenge.” Michi turned and prepared to do so. Draquez released her, conceding for the moment at least. Michi said, “This is one matter you shouldn’t underestimate me—or the strength of my desire— brother.”

HIS SISTER’S ACTIONS surprised Draquez. When smaller children, they’d often fought over things, Michi always conceding to him in the end. After the death of their parents, two older siblings, and an old aunt, Michi let Draquez take the lead in all matters concerning them. He knew the fight had left her back with those deaths though she was vicious when he needed her to be. Maybe he needed her to be savage and ferocious now. Draquez considered pushing Michi with the new woman as the catalyst, but he feared the possibility he’d lose Michi entirely.

Maybe, if he gave Michi what she wanted, and then gave this woman reason to reject her, Draquez could win and keep his sister just the way he liked her—a dynamic and ruthless force under his control. Some would consider this a means to extort power over his sister, but his interest was in protecting her.

Draquez liked his reasoning as it suited his persona of a caring brother. He smiled as he descended the stairs to where Aaryen gathered the new captives. “What have we here, Aaryen?”

“They were traveling the road. Told by de’Wasim you wanted to see them before we let them pass through.”

“What makes you think I’ll release them so easily?” Draquez asked. He knew the question confused Aaryen. In the past, he released the magic sympathizers, but after Michi’s interest—and his own in the same woman—he couldn’t release them; at least, not until he got what he wanted, the woman and Michi’s compliance.

Aaryen shrugged. “The ordinary ones accept magic. It would be—”

Draquez glared menacingly at him. “Don’t presume, Aaryen.” When Aaryen frowned, he said to the beautiful auburn haired one, “Tell me why you’re here and why the two with magic are harmed.”

She raised her chin. “I’m taking these women to Zheirger Keep where they and their magic will be protected. We drank water in a previous village, tainted to affect those with magic. As an additional atrocity, the villagers locked them in iron chains and cages. That’s when the sluggishness and the lesions began.”

“A lot more than that occurred, I’m sure,” Draquez said. “Tell me your names.” Starting with herself, Gionne did so. He didn’t really care about anyone but the black haired magic user. Focusing on her would only bring questions from Aaryen and others. “I haven’t heard of such a magic wielder from Iskarr.”

“Jahq is now the legitimate daughter of Sher Karr, of Zheirger Keep, but formerly of Clan Gradyln. Jahq is no longer of the Iskarrian clan.” The woman’s anger was palpable. Did she too have feelings for Jahq other than as a protector? This could make for some fun, Draquez thought.

Draquez strode closer to Jahq, who met his gaze unwaveringly, despite being so unsteady on her feet. He visually scanned her from head to toe using his magic to probe and scrutinize her powers. What he found confirmed Jahq was indeed powerful, and Draquez had a sudden desire to see her in action. On the outside, the lesions covering her were too disgusting to prompt him to be close to her, let alone touch her. There was also the need to placate Michi. He knew of another matter to give attention to. “There’s been more than just the poisoning done to this one,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Gionne asked with panic and concern lacing her words. She took a step toward Jahq, but Aaryen promptly pulled her back toward himself. “Please, tell—”

“Silence.” Draquez smirked when he saw the flash of panic in Jahq’s gaze and knowing she’d intentionally kept the information from her protector. Wonderful, a possible means of leverage best saved for later. He glanced at Altaira, marked her defiance even in the milky white depths, and felt resistance to his magic’s prodding. Either her power was insignificant, or Altaira was able to shield her power. It would only be a matter of time before he broke her, too. Draquez didn’t like defiance directed at him. He turned to Aaryen, who appeared primed to speak and forcing himself to remain silent. “Take this one,” Draquez pointed offhandedly toward Jahq, “to Michi. The others go to the cells until I decide what I want to do with them. Questions?”

Aaryen settled his features into an emotionless mask, before he said, “As you wish.”

“Of course,” Draquez said. He spun around and strolled back to his chair. There was still a bit of show derivable, it seemed. Jahq clearly had a bit of a fight in her, as she struggled against the men dragging her from her companions. Gionne appeared ready to fight for Jahq’s release until de’Wasim pulled a dagger and aimed it at Gionne’s throat. The homely one, Calpri, carefully took Altaira’s arm and assisted her to their new destination. All of them acted precisely as he expected, giving Draquez the essential information about how the women would entertain him in the pit. None would survive, of course, but he appreciated a nice show.

Apparently, he could still be surprised. Aaryen paused in guiding the newcomers away and focused a contemplative stare at Draquez. Before Draquez could respond to the insolence, Aaryen went about his task.

Draquez frowned. He didn’t appreciate Aaryen acquiring a conscious. In fact, until a moment ago, Draquez wouldn’t have believed the man had one. Yes, he’d changed a long-standing rule of showing benignity to ordinary people who supported magic, but people created rules so they could be broken. He suspected he worried over nothing of import. His relationship with Aaryen went back many years, and he’d never negated or thwarted Draquez’ decisions before now. He mulled this over for a few moments and came to the simple conclusion for this action. Draquez barked a laugh. The pretty Gionne had caught Aaryen’s eye and he was attempting to impress her.

There now, Draquez thought with a sigh, matter solved. No one would be stupid enough to go against him or his power, power surely multiplied with Michi’s support. Draquez shook his head at the realization. “Go ahead, my friend,” he mumbled with amusement. “Posture all you need for the wench. Just remember your place when the time comes.”

JAHQ PUT UP as much a fight as she could when two men separated her from the others. She couldn’t protect them if she weren’t in sight of them. Her body hadn’t recovered from whatever poison and beating Berk had given her. Moments later, they deposited Jahq, in an undignified heap, on the floor of a sturdy one-room hut. The room was clean with a fireplace against one wall and a kettle suspended over the flame, a small table with two chairs were placed about two feet away. As the men stepped back, a curtain shifted to reveal a bed against the wall at the back, and a blonde woman of average height, who promptly glared at them while making her way to Jahq. Hadn’t she been beside the man on the dais? Yes, but hadn’t she left after a short verbal exchange? She was beautiful—and too similar to their captor for Jahq’s comfort.

“This is not how you treat a lady, you pathetic oafs. Get out.”

One of the men stammered, “But Michi, she’s meant to be a toy for you, right?” Jahq shuddered at the thought. The moment she got her strength—

“No, you idiots, she’s not.” Michi stood defiantly, and to Jahq’s surprise pointed a finger laced with flames at them. Both stumbled backward, nearly tripping over one another as they nearly flew out the hut’s front door. “Imbecilic, feeble-minded, simpletons the lot of them,” she said to their retreating backs. She slammed the door closed.

“You forgot dim-witted and moronic,” Jahq said, trying to stand on her weak legs. Michi twisted from the doorway with a flash of a smile.

Her features fell into an expression of distress. “Hellfire, wait, let me help you.” With unexpected tenderness, Michi raised one of Jahq’s arms and slung it over her shoulders, wrapped an arm around Jahq’s waist and carefully walked with her to one of the chairs. Pressed against Michi’s side felt unexpectedly comforting. She even felt an odd tingling course through her—probably resulting from their magic recognizing each other. Once seated, Jahq gratefully leaned on the tables’ top, careful not to dislodge the bowls and spoons. “Let me get you some water,” Michi said. Seconds later, Jahq stared cautiously at the offering. As if suspecting her hesitation, Michi said, “It’s safe. You’ve no reason to believe me, of course, but I’d never hurt you.” Her eyes seemed to relay her sincerity and Jahq so needed a drink of something, anything.

“Thank you.” Jahq drank thirstily from the large ceramic mug, the warm water a pleasant relief to her parched throat. “May I—”

“Yes, certainly.” Michi brought her another mug, returning to her knees in front of Jahq. “Not too fast, wouldn’t want you shocking your stomach and getting sick, which is why I warmed it some.”

Jahq did as suggested, taking her time finishing this mug, not speaking until she’d drained the last drop. Soft brown eyes, a mixture of concerned anxiety and affection, regarded her solemnly. She returned the gaze, curious what occupied Michi’s thoughts. The odd tingling started again and Jahq knew she needed to break Michi’s silent observation. “Am I to be your toy?” Jahq asked, repeating what the man had said of her.

Michi’s face flamed with embarrassment and anger. “Never that.” She clasped Jahq’s hands in hers. “I’m Michi. How would you like me to address you?”

That’s right, she’d left before Draquez learned their names. “Jahq.” She swallowed. “Please, tell me what’s to become of me and my companions. Are you going to hurt my friends, the ones without magic, like the other people did to us with power?”

Shaking her head and sending the long blonde tresses swinging, Michi squeezed Jahq’s hands. “I’ll protect you from whatever my brother has in mind for you. As for your companions, they accept magic, so should be all right.”

“Should be?” Jahq’s tone turned bitter. “So this village doesn’t offer safety either.”

“I’ll check on them after you eat and rest.” Michi released one of Jahq’s hands and ran it reverently across her cheek and jaw. Jahq forced herself not to lean into the caress; worried Michi deflected her true intent. “You need sleep.” Jahq frowned. Was this to be when they’d kill her? “No harm will come to you. I promise.”

Jahq wanted to believe her. Something in the way Michi touched her, looked at her, screamed for Jahq to trust her. She wished she had her mother’s gift for truth-spotting. Jahq had so many questions, but only one left her lips. “Why, Michi?”

“Why?”

Jahq nodded. “Why are you acting nice?” Michi’s brows furrowed in her confusion with the question and Jahq said, “Not that it’s an objectionable approach. You’d be the first woman to want to sleep with an Iskarrian whore, but not a too surprising turn of events.”

As if shoved, Michi tumbled backward onto her rump. The shock had crossed her features before fury replaced the emotion. Here it comes, the emotions giving the true answers I seek. “Don’t you ever refer to yourself like that,” Michi spat. She got to her feet and strode to the fireplace, resting a hand on the mantel above as she took deep breaths to calm herself. For a couple moments, Michi stared into the fire, but then bowed to pull the kettle forward, took a bowl from the table and filled it with the kettle’s contents. It looked like a thick stew and Jahq’s stomach responded with a growl at the sight. When Michi turned to her, Jahq noted her watery eyes—they appeared to be real tears—as she placed the bowl on the table near her elbow. “Eat, you need your strength. Then I’ll see to your sores and other needs. The pot is full, take as much as you like.” Michi headed for the door.

Jahq’s mind screamed the woman’s actions were a trick to gain confidence, but the hurt in Michi’s expression and in her posture seemed genuine. The touch on her face had felt sincere. When Michi began to pull open the door, Jahq concentrated until the door slammed shut. She tried again, and Jahq closed it again. Michi stood silent, not turning around, not questioning. “Please, Michi, stay,” Jahq whispered. “I’m sorry. I’m just—”

“I know.” Michi had inhaled two deep breaths before she turned around. Facing her, Michi said, “You’re not my toy, not my...my...”

“Whore?”

Michi winced. “You most definitely are not that.”

“What am I?”

She didn’t move from the door, but wouldn’t meet Jahq’s gaze, having returned to staring at the flames in the hearth. “From the moment I watched de’Wasim and Aaryen come to camp with you and the others, I felt something,” she pointed to her heart. “I realize I’m an ignorant fool, thinking you’d look at me with something other than the disgust and fear of a captive. That’s why I challenged my brother to a magic duel for you. I want you, yes. I want you not as a possession, but as maybe a companion, a friend certainly.” She gave a derisive laugh. “Pathetic, isn’t it? People aren’t lining up to offer their services in that regard, not with Draquez watching everyone who comes near me.”

Jahq understood. “Suppose he believes he knows who is best for you. And, women loving women is still a shame to be hidden.” Michi nodded. No one with as much humility as Michi, could be too horrible. Jahq’s stomach growled. “Please, Michi, come eat with me.” She extended a hand in invitation, prepared to stand and retrieve the woman.

Michi apparently reached the same conclusion. “Don’t get up,” she said, moving away from the door. She took the last bowl on the table, filled it, and sat in the chair opposite Jahq. “Please eat. You’ll need your strength when I take the iron out your body.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“My magic is fire,” Michi said. “I can use it to burn the remnants of the poison given to you.”

“Make certain you take care of the other matter—if she wants.” Jahq recognized the voice. Michi’s brother. He entered the hut imperiously, wagging a finger toward her midsection. Michi abruptly rose and positioned herself in front of Jahq, sufficiently blocking her from Draquez’ sight.

Jahq appreciated the protection, about to tell Michi as much, when his statement registered. “Sweet goddess, no.”

THE SCREAMS FROM the man currently tortured in the center of the cells gave Gionne a headache and kept her from sleep—the last a positive. Sitting on one of the two slabs of stone placed in the cell, her arms wrapped around knees pulled to her chest, Gionne glanced to Altaira and Calpri on the other, both with their eyes closed. She doubted they slept but hoped they would eventually manage. Another gut-wrenching scream filled the stone dungeon. Most unsettling about the screams was they weren't from physical torment, although the torturer started with those endeavors.

Strapped to a rack, the man writhed in agony. Behind him, leaning on the wall between two entryways, was a massive bald man with ebony skin shiny from sweat caused by the lack of ventilation or fresh air, she surmised. He conducted no exercise she could see, his arms barely crossed over his chest due to the excessive muscle in them. When their eyes met, his expression was one of wicked enjoyment. Gionne consciously had to halt the shudder. The intensity of her headache increased as he stared and Gionne realized he psychically tortured the man on the rack and attempted to get into her head, too. Gionne felt panic rise, not knowing how to shield from this attack.

She tightened her arms, dropped her head on top of her knees, and squeezed her eyes shut as images from the forest replayed in her mind: the dying wolf, the other man whose name she never learned and the boy. Belzan as he—

Just as quickly, the images stopped. Gionne looked toward the ebony man. His grinning lips quickly creased into a frown as his gaze shifted sideways. Aaryen entered from the doorway to the man's left, with Aaryen's anger evident as he glared menacingly at the man. He whispered harshly to him, which caused him to straighten and his dark skin take on a greenish hue before Aaryen made his way toward her.

"Guess I should thank you," Gionne said when he stopped at the bars of her cell.

He heaved a sigh. "I shouldn't have had to stop him in the first place. Hellfire, Gionne, you shouldn't even be in here. You accept magic and so you're guests—shouldn't be prisoners. I don't know what Draquez is doing, let alone thinking."

Gionne suspected. She prayed Chayboen would be able to save Jahq—apparently she was incapable of the feat. Gionne could possibly lose Kellshae's only Oracle in this same village. She couldn't fight against magic users and hope to win without other intervention or assistance. "What has happened to the friend you took from us?"

Aaryen leaned against the bars separating them. "She's with Michi. Csingor said Michi threatened the men delivering your friend due to their rough handling of her." Gionne scowled at him. He merely shrugged. "Michi isn't like her brother. Won't make you feel better, but Michi hasn't ever gone against Draquez. Rumor has it she challenged him for your friend. So, it would seem to me she's better off than the three of you." He frowned in thought. "Unless Michi can't help her with the poisoning, then she'll die from it." Earlier, a young man had come to Altaira, claiming to be a healer, and had used his magic to cleanse the residual iron from her. The cleansing had left Altaira weak and tired. Berk had poisoned Jahq the most and goddess knew what Berk had done—

Gionne squeezed her eyes shut, the rush of helplessness near to consuming her at her inability to protect her charges. How many times would she fail Jahq before one or both of them were dead? Gionne knew this wasn't all about Jahq, the others were just as important, but her

allegiance had begun with her, and she'd not lived up to her duty, then or now. If Aaryen were correct, another woman was taking over Gionne's duty to protect Jahq. "Could she win a challenge against Draquez?"

Aaryen's voice dropped conspiratorially as he said, "I believe so, but no one else suspects. Jahq, it seems, gave Michi a reason to do more than follow Draquez' bidding, whatever and whenever he commands."

"So we're to be used as leverage against Jahq? She, in turn, is to be used against Michi." Gionne dropped her feet to the floor and leaned forward on the stone slab.

"That would explain why you're in here," Aaryen said. "I was messing with you earlier about the pit. We let normal people who accept magic go on their way. Some have even stayed, to help us on our mission."

"Which is?" Gionne asked though she suspected the answer.

"To eradicate those who would kill us," Aaryen said matter-of-factly.

"So, you're no different than those who would kill all people with magic."

Aaryen stiffened. "Hey, we didn't ask for the magic, and it's not like we can wish it away."

"I know that." Gionne glanced at him. "Normals, as you call them, are afraid you'll control them in subservience. Magicked people believe normal people want them exterminated."

"Don't they? Isn't that why the Priests of Tekelrah first came into existence?" He put a hand on the bar and leaned forward until his face could go no farther. "Personally, I'd like to get along with the normals, work together."

Gionne snorted. "What happened to the scary man from the road?"

He shrugged. "It may be hard to believe but I don't like being a bully. I'm a great guy if I do say so myself. Maybe I hate seeing the fear when others learn of my power."

"Bet you have to continue saying so, you're scary when you do the mean grin thing. What is your power?" Gionne asked, truly curious. She almost wanted to thank him for distracting her from the noises around her.

"Reanimation."

This time, Gionne didn't stop the shudder. "I can see where you might have a problem with people not seeing you as scary. I've seen what someone with your kind of power can do."

Aaryen frowned. "How?"

"Surely you've heard the story of Sher Karr and T'Dar? I was there, for some of it anyway. T'Dar tried to use Fleuren's power to seize control of Kellshae." Gionne gave Aaryen a smirk. "Odd, that," she said. "Fleuren wasn't so crazy about her power either, but she's done a lot of good with it."

"I'd like to meet this woman."

"I'll personally introduce you—if I get out of here alive. I'd like you to come to Zheirger Keep with us." As she said the words, Gionne realized she meant them. "You'll see for yourself that magicked and normals can live in harmony. Well as much as any community can. But we're at least accepting of magic."

"I like you a lot, Gionne," Aaryen said. She was about to set him straight when he guffawed. "Not like that." His tone grew serious and his expression reflected understood pain. He seemed to recognize some memories weren't intended to resurface in so harsh a manner. "I don't know what Iziago reminded you of, but he won't do it again. I promise." Iziago must be the name of the man with the power to enter her mind.

"He's that afraid of you?" Gionne asked. "I'm not doubtful, exactly."

“I understand, Gionne.” Aaryen glanced at Iziago and then back to her. “Not me, but the thought of dying and still being alive scares him something awful.”

Gionne laughed softly. “Wouldn’t make my day, either.”

“I can get you some herbs to help you sleep. I don’t know what Draquez has planned, but he won’t do anything tonight. Not until your friend is well. And then I believe you’ll need to be rested.”

After the reminder Iziago provided, Gionne wanted to be able to wake herself up. “I appreciate the offer,” Gionne said, hoping Aaryen could tell she meant it. “I’ll be all right. You should go.”

“Trying to get rid of me?” Aaryen asked.

“There is that, of course.” Gionne scooted back and leaned her head against the wall behind her. “I don’t want your friend to get any ideas and toss your ugly mug around my head all night.”

Aaryen barked a laugh. “So much for thinking I had dashing good looks. As for the other matter, let me know if he tries. He needs to drop a peg or two, and I’d gladly be the one to make it happen. Good night.”

“Good night, Aaryen, and thank you.”

“What for?” he asked.

Gionne focused on his eyes. He seemed sincere, and something in her gut told her to trust him. Considering her current position, Gionne didn’t have much choice. She just hoped she was right in this matter. “For being friendly toward me, for one, and keeping the demons at bay for a little while.”

“That’s what friends do, Gionne.”

“Of course, there’s always that too,” Gionne said. He flashed her a smile, gave a wink, and left the dungeon. Iziago watched him closely and then glanced in her direction. Their gazes met and Gionne wondered if he’d take Aaryen’s threat seriously. His hastily broken eye contact answered the question. Guess it helps to have scary friends, she mused as the tug of sleep pulled on her. She let it.

Chapter Fourteen

MICHI DIDN'T WANT Draquez in her home, especially around Jahq. Maybe she'd feel better if his motives were honorable, but they weren't. Usually, Michi wouldn't care, but this matter was different—Jahq was different. She should have expected he'd not make anything easy for her, not even this once. Now he'd gone and upset Jahq. She'd intended to take care of the matter without alerting Jahq to the situation. Michi glared at him.

“Didn't she know?” Draquez asked. From the mischievous sparkle in his eyes, he knew the answer and didn't care.

When she gazed back at Jahq, Michi stared into blue eyes silvered by tears. Beneath lay an understanding, which Jahq apparently wanted Michi to see. Jahq had caught the cruelty and understood Michi had no part in it, or the pain it caused her. Michi dropped into a crouch before Jahq. “I'm sorry I didn't—”

Jahq placed a finger on her lips to silence the remainder of her apology. In a soft whisper, Jahq said, “I don't know how you can tell so soon, but please remove—” Jahq's voice caught in her throat and Michi nodded.

“Would you like to lie down?” Jahq's gaze flitted toward Draquez and she shook her head. Michi understood not wanting the vulnerability of the position. “This will hurt some.” Michi gently pushed Jahq until she leaned back in the chair. She tugged the shirt up and placed one hand on Jahq's stomach and the other on the flesh of Jahq's sternum. She hadn't done this bit of magic often and usually closed her eyes but, even though she didn't want to witness Jahq's pain, Michi refused to look away from the blue eyes staring back at her with trust.

Where her flesh contacted Jahq's, the skin pinked, then reddened, as Michi slowly poured her magic into Jahq, focusing on the bits of iron floating through her bloodstream. Michi faltered when Jahq would flinch, but she continued eradicating every trace of the poisonous iron, and the remnants of seed left behind by Jahq's rapist. The fire-healing process was a slow one if done correctly. Michi didn't want to actually boil Jahq's insides, and it took a physical toll on them both. By the time Michi finished, gradually drawing back her flame, both she and Jahq were drenched in sweat, Jahq's breathing was labored. She didn't pull her hands away when done, but carefully applied a little pressure to Jahq's stomach with the hand there. The muscles in Michi's legs burned from maintaining her crouch. She wanted to give Jahq a moment to compose herself before Michi moved away. “Almost done,” Michi said. Looking intently into the gaze that hadn't left hers, Michi silently attempted to convey she'd remain until Jahq was ready for release.

“Thank you,” Jahq said in a croak. It wasn't until Jahq gave her a weak smile that Michi shifted away and stood, her legs protesting the harsh treatment of squatting for so long.

“Great, can we move on to other matters now?” Draquez asked, plopping into Michi's chair. He scowled at the congealed contents of her bowl of stew and gave it the same grimace of distaste he had with the sores still marking Jahq's skin. Draquez liked everything pristine, his women pretty and unblemished. For a little while, it would work in their favor.

“What is so important it couldn’t wait until we’ve eaten?” Michi picked up her bowl and then Jahq’s bowl, dumping the contents onto the flames. “You’ve ruined one attempt,” she said, slamming the bowls onto the mantel. “Speak your peace so I can get Jahq fed, washed, and partaking in some much-needed sleep.”

“Not sure I care for this attitude on you, Sister.” When she said nothing, Draquez shrugged and scrutinized Jahq. “I suppose you’re correct, she looks horrible.” His attention returned to Michi. “As you’re so intent on our dear Jahq here getting better before we focus on the situation at hand—”

“What situation?” Jahq asked quietly.

“I protect this village and the people within it. Since I don’t know your intentions or those of your friends, I would need to question you all.”

Michi felt rage build within her. “You know damn well they hadn’t any intentions against us or harming our village. From the beginning, Draquez, you understood they wanted to travel through. You stopped them.” She recognized her brother had motives she’d never understand, but Michi had never been good at war games, even when Aaryen tried to explain in simple terms during their childhood.

Only a few years had passed since magic developed in the siblings and Aaryen. Michi noticed how quickly some had succumbed to the rush of control and dominance and ways magic benefited them while others—like her—only appreciated their magic when they could help someone with it. She didn’t have the same ambitions as Draquez. Michi wanted her privacy and peace.

Draquez rolled his eyes. “Yes, well, don’t you think you should make certain of their intentions, little one?” Neither she nor Jahq spoke. Draquez continued with an expression of benevolence on his face. “Proceed tonight with bringing Jahq back to health. Tomorrow—”

“I need three days minimum for Jahq to heal properly. The damage is extensive,” Michi said. “Fine. Four days from now, we’ll have a feast in honor of your guest, and discuss the future.” “What future, Draquez? Jahq and her people will move on and so shall we, they literally and us figuratively.”

“Don’t be ignorant, everyone has ulterior motives.” Michi caught the flash of anger in her brother. “What of you? Will you use this opportunity to break from me and follow her?” He stabbed a finger in Jahq’s direction.

Her inner voice screamed a resounding: yes if Jahq would have me. Michi never wanted to see the world from his negative viewpoint, and she didn’t wholly yet. Hard as it was for her, Michi could admit a numbness to the atrocities around her had left her desensitized to most of what Draquez did in the name of protecting those with magic. Instead, she replied, more calmly than she felt, “You get ahead of yourself. The only plans made were the plans I expressed a moment ago. Jahq needs to eat, to wash, get rest, and nothing more for this night, Draquez.”

“Fine, for tonight you can have it your way,” Draquez said as he rose from his chair. “Play at homesteading, Michi. Just remember when the sparkle of this novelty of attraction wears off, the only one left with you will be me. No one could or will love you as I do.” The remark hit hard and bitter, but Michi tried not to show how much it hurt. Draquez knew her well enough to suspect, and his next words proved as much. “You’re more an abomination than I, and after tonight, you’ll realize I’m the only one who will accept you as you are, deviation and all.” He flashed a glance at Jahq and returned Michi’s gaze with a smirk. “After tonight, you may regret your hasty decision to battle me for her.” Draquez slowly took his leave, closing the door too quietly behind him.

“I’m not his possession, you know. He can take me, as others before, but it’s only my body,” Jahq said quietly. “None of them will ever have my heart. That is mine alone to give.”

There was such pain-filled resignation in the words, Michi wanted to cry for what Jahq had and may yet endure at the hands of men. “Not that it’ll be an easy thing, but put that behind you for the moment. You really need to get your strength up.” Michi pulled the bowls from the mantel and filled them with fresh stew. She returned to her chair, sliding the bowl toward Jahq. She tilted her head in the direction of the hanging material by the bed. “I’d had a hot bath prepared, but all the delays have probably cooled the water considerably.” Michi stood. “I should have hot water—”

“No,” Jahq said firmly. “Sit down and eat. You also need your strength. No matter the waters temperature, so long as I get clean.”

Michi did as told. Jahq didn’t seem inclined to talk, but Michi didn’t know what else to do. After Draquez’ comments, she wanted to throw herself across the bed and weep for days. Michi considered apologizing for her brother’s insinuations but didn’t want to find confirmation in Jahq’s eyes. “Are you really the daughter of Sher Karr? Well, Shei Kareina I guess, although many still believe the stories to be tall tales and lies.” She hoped to relax Jahq with talk of family. Michi was also curious about the woman who replaced her brother on the fields of battle. “What’s she like, if the tales are true of course?”

A topic change worked because Jahq gave a wide smile and her blue eyes danced with merriment, her tone proud and happy. “They’re true. Papa is the gruffest softy you’ll ever meet.” Jahq ate between tales of first meeting her mothers, her addition of a sister, and the travels to Zheirger Keep. There were holes in the story, and Michi suspected the most unpleasant parts left out. During the tale, Michi managed to refill Jahq’s bowl twice more and managed a second helping for herself. Clearly, Jahq adored and loved her family.

“Why do you refer to Kareina as Papa?”

“Yoshan started that when Kareina was believed to be a man by the others. Most of us, with magic anyway, could tell it was an illusion. We women certainly understood the need to maintain the charade. Plus it now makes it easier for folks at the Keep to know which parent we refer to, not that it was all that difficult most times.”

“Your family sounds wonderful,” Michi said, wincing at her wistful tone. “We—you should get washed up.” Jumping to her feet, Michi tugged a bit more on the hanging cloth and yanked it to the side until a large metal tub was revealed. She dipped her fingers into the water. “Tepid but not too cold. Give me a moment.” Michi placed both hands in the water until the temperature warmed.

“Sounds magnificent,” Jahq said close to her ear. Michi started. “Sorry,” Jahq said, her expression contrite. “I’m looking forward to cleaning above all of your offerings.” Michi felt her heart drop. She knew Jahq probably referred to the three she’d told Draquez, but her head screamed Jahq’s agreement that any form of affection was not an option, as Draquez inferred. Suddenly, Jahq had hold of Michi’s shoulders, squeezing gently but reassuringly. “Would you assist me?”

Michi felt her cheeks flame. “Wha—”

“I truly am exhausted. Please.” Jahq had already removed her boots, and was now unfastening her shirt. “If you help, the sooner I can crawl into the bed clean and sleep like the dead.” Her fingers stilled. “I do get to share the bed?” she asked hopefully.

“Uh, yes, of course,” Michi replied. Anticipation warred with confusion. Was Jahq intentionally setting her off balance? Did she plan to attack her when Michi was unaware? “I could leave until you’re through?”

“No.” Jahq flinched. “Stay, I’d rather not be alone.”

Frowning, Michi asked, “Has your power not returned to you?” She didn’t want to leave Jahq but didn’t wish to make her uncomfortable either.

“Yes, it has, not that I’m in any shape to fend off attacks.” Jahq’s gaze shifted away from her own. “I feel safer with you here, but I don’t want you feeling forced to babysit me, either. If you’d rather leave, I’ll understand.”

“I can stay.” Was Jahq toying with her? She wondered, worried her attraction to Jahq and her magic made her an easy target for manipulation.

“May I ask a favor of you, Michi?” Here it was, the weedeling now that she showed a willingness for compliance. A naked Jahq stood before Michi and another burst of heat warmed her face. Jahq was beautiful, even with the healing lesions scabbing on her skin. At least, this time, she could enjoy the benefits while being used, Michi thought as she gaped at Jahq sinking into the bath water. “Is it possible to lock the door from anyone else barging in?” Startled she hadn’t considered that herself, Michi nodded and rushed to lock the door. She made certain to secure the single window and pull the meager curtains closed. “Thank you,” Jahq said, sighing and leaning her head against the lip of the tub. By the time she returned, Jahq’s eyes had closed.

“Um, Jahq, it isn’t safe to fall asleep,” Michi said, her gaze drawn to large breasts resting just at the water line, thin waist and hips begging to be held.

“I know,” Jahq said, eyes still shut. “This feels so wonderful, I want to enjoy it as long as possible.”

Michi picked up a washing cloth and focused on the strands of black hair floating atop the water. “Would you like me to clean your hair?” Jahq’s sensual moan caused heat to build in Michi’s nether regions. She squeezed her own eyes shut to dispel the reaction—not that it worked. “I’ll accept that as agreement.” Draping the cloth on the tub’s lip, she picked up a clay pot nestled between the wall and tub and kneeled at the end of the tub behind Jahq’s head. “Dunk, and then sit up,” she said. Jahq lowered herself until her head was completely submerged. When she popped back up, Michi poured a small amount of the liquid from the pot into her palm, rubbed her hands together, and then worked up a lather into Jahq’s hair.

“I could get used to this, Michi,” Jahq said.

“I wouldn’t complain.” Michi loved the feel of the soft strands beneath her fingertips. Was the naked flesh just as soft? Michi wondered. She shook her head to dispel the thought. “Let me go get a bucket of fresh water to rinse,” Michi said, standing.

“Not necessary, I’ll dunk again,” Jahq said, submerging again.

When Jahq came back up, Michi stared down at the water running down Jahq’s skin. She handed Jahq the washing cloth. “My way would’ve been cleaner,” she said.

Jahq took the cloth from her. “My way is more expedient. Soap?”

Michi handed her a small square. “It’s not scented I’m afraid. Not accustomed to frills.”

“It’s fine.” Jahq lathered the cloth and slowly cleaned her face and then her arms. The effort seemed to exhaust her.

“I could do this for you,” Michi said, pointing unnecessarily to the cloth to make her position clear.

Jahq raised an eyebrow inquisitively. “At least you’re polite and ask to touch.”

For a moment, Michi didn't understand. When she did, she took an awkward step away from the tub, nearly tripping over her own feet. "No, that's not—"

"Careful," Jahq said, reaching out a steadying hand. Michi righted herself and glanced back at the tub, careful to avoid Jahq's gaze. Noting her discomfort—obvious as it was—Jahq said, "Sorry. You're so tense I thought levity would relax you." Turning away from her, Jahq continued her bath. "It's not a topic I usually make light of, Michi, but I wanted to make you blush, not get you upset or frightened."

Michi exhaled as she slowly returned to the tub and took the washing cloth from Jahq. With as much detachment as she could muster, Michi washed the grime from Jahq, starting with her shoulders. The silence was heavy and weighing on them both. Michi couldn't take it and blurted, "I'm easily used." Jahq frowned at her. "Growing up, children knew they could dupe me into doing almost anything as long as they couched the request as me doing a good deed." Michi stopped speaking when she washed all but Jahq's intimate areas.

Gently, Jahq took the cloth from her. As Jahq finished cleaning herself, Michi retrieved a drying cloth and returned to find an unsteady Jahq trying to stand. Letting Jahq use her for support, Michi helped her from the tub, dried her skin, and walked her to the bed. Once Jahq sat on the edge, her body trembling from exertion, Michi draped a nightgown over her head, tugging it down over her. The material was clean, yet worn, the ties holding the six-inch opening closed over her ample chest a bit snugly. The nightgown was one of Michi's most used articles of clothing and sharing even this brought gladness to Michi's heart. "Why don't you lie down and go to sleep."

"Aren't you resting, too?" Jahq asked, leaning back onto the pillow. Michi picked up Jahq's legs, swung them up onto the mattress and covered her with the blanket.

"That's not wise, Jahq. Get some rest."

"Please, Michi. I promise not to taunt you anymore. It was cruel of me, even if I hadn't intended it to be so."

Jahq grasped for Michi's hand. She shifted to sit on the edge and gazed at the beautiful woman. Reflexively, Michi reached out and touched Jahq's tattoo with her fingertips. "I wish I could take this from you, stop people from responding to you as if a commodity rather than a human being."

"What do you feel when you gaze at it?"

Michi glanced into Jahq's blue eyes and immediately wished she hadn't. The heart-wrenching pain, though she tried to hide it, slammed into Michi's heart, making her want to sob for the emotions she felt for this woman, surprising her after knowing Jahq for a short time. "Disgust," Michi replied honestly. She realized Jahq misunderstood when she felt Jahq try to pull her hand free. Michi squeezed Jahq's hand harder. "Disgust that one person could do this to another without thought of consequences."

"The consequences weren't theirs to share," Jahq said with bitterness.

"No, apparently not," she said. "It doesn't make you any less beautiful, Jahq. If I could burn it away with my power and not mark your flesh, I would." Jahq scrutinized her through squinted eyes. "Would you not wish it taken if it could be done?"

"I know it cannot. Sometimes, I consider damaged flesh the lesser consequence," Jahq said. The words whispered so low Michi almost missed them. Then Jahq asked, "Your brother is the biggest culprit for using you, isn't he?"

Michi accepted the change in topic. The tattoo was the reason men thought they could use her body the way they did, and must be painful on so many levels. Michi gave a slow nod. "Still

makes him the clever one. He might believe I'm aware of his machinations, but I'm the one who allows it to go on, does as bids. By doing so, I've lost any respect he or others might garner for me."

"Would you leave with my friends and me, if I asked you?"

She didn't need to consider her response, Michi had already agreed in her mind when Draquez was here but wanted to understand Jahq's motive. "Would you, not your friends, wish me too?"

The corner of Jahq's lip raised so slightly Michi almost missed it. "Depends on you passing a test for me."

"What test?" Michi asked, her stomach clenching with the niggling fear Jahq might be using her no matter her verbal denials.

Jahq scooted to the other side of the bed and rolled onto her side. "Take your boots off, and get in bed. If you're good at cuddling, you can most certainly be my traveling companion." Michi chuckled and removed her boots. When she crawled under the covers, Michi lay on her back, hesitant to comply with the cuddle part of the request. She was afraid being this close to Jahq would cancel any attempts to appear platonic in her feelings. While she debated, Jahq rolled around and leaned over Michi. As if a dream, Jahq placed a gentle kiss to Michi's lips, lay her head on Michi's shoulder, and then flung an arm across Michi's stomach. Her heartbeat increased, and Michi had to fight the urge to pull Jahq in for more kisses. Against her throat, Jahq whispered, "No teasing, no lies, Michi. I want you to leave with me."

Michi's heart filled with warmth, knowing in that instant, she would love and protect Jahq against anyone—especially Draquez.

JAHQ HADN'T EXPECTED to feel the sudden attraction to Michi but she did. It had been so long since anyone who wasn't family treated her like a desirable person, but she knew this wasn't the only reason for her reaction to Michi. She fell for Gionne quickly. Look how that turned out, her inner voice reminded her. Jahq recognized Michi's interest from the moment she'd met her. She'd witnessed compassion, concern, and desire from her, and it felt good to be the recipient. Jahq realized, too late, she'd gone too far with teasing and flirtation during the bath. She truly did hope to make Michi blush; it brought out the softness in her expressive brown eyes.

As for her confession before sleep? Jahq meant it. Maybe it was time to move on—Gionne had—and, this time, the sentiments came from someone who appeared to understand the strain of expectations because of the Iskarrian marking.

Soon morning would be upon them and she'd have to face Draquez and the others, but, for now, Jahq wanted to simply stay in bed and continue listening to Michi's steady breathing beneath her ear. They'd broken the embrace sometime during the night, but their bodies remained touching. Jahq smiled, remembering the shocked expression on Michi's face when Jahq kissed her, the tensing of Michi's body as if she fought the impulse to run. No, Jahq didn't want to lose Michi, not until they'd had an opportunity to explore the possibilities their feelings were more than physical attraction. And, though she'd teased Michi about the cuddling, Jahq had to admit being held by and holding Michi felt good and allowed her to sleep better than she had in a very long time. And not just because of exhaustion.

Jahq felt the slight tensing of Michi's body announce she'd awakened. Before Michi had a chance to panic, Jahq said, "Thank you. You beside me helped induce sleep."

"I have to agree with the results, at least. You've been asleep for two days."

Jahq sat up. "My friends—"

"Aaryen and I had them moved to a quieter, private cell. I couldn't go against my brother completely. Though I didn't mind ruffling his feathers a little." After a long pause, Michi asked, "Are you feeling any better?"

Jahq realized she did. Her strength was returning, she could feel the magic within her, and the lesions and the scrapes from Berk dragging her body through the village were healing. Only the pink discoloration of restoring flesh remained. Other than being famished, Jahq was healed enough to face what may lay ahead. "Yes, thanks to you."

Michi pivoted onto her side and Jahq mimicked the action until they faced one another, close enough to feel the other breathe. Neither of them spoke for some time, but then Michi said, "I can make porridge to break your fast. But if you need meat with your meal, I'll need to go to Draquez' kitchen. Meat would be best for building your strength."

When she twisted away and began to lift the covers, Jahq caught hold of her arm and held on until Michi turned back to her. "I have all I need here. Porridge is wonderful. Let's not invite anyone else into our space before we need to do so, all right?" Jahq glanced to the curtained window and back to Michi. "It's early yet, so why not enjoy a little leisure time. Stay warm with me here in bed."

A small tremor ran down Michi's arm where Jahq's hand touched her. "I don't think I can, Jahq." Michi's voice cracked on her name.

"Why?" Jahq suspected the reasoning. She too found it difficult not to act on the allure of the attractive Michi. Gionne had always held her heart and still did, but Jahq recognized Michi had managed to caress her soul in a way she never thought possible.

Michi focused on her chin as if afraid to meet Jahq's gaze. "I'm afraid if I stay here, with you, I'll do something we could both regret. I don't want to use you or your body, but you captivate me. We haven't known—"

"Captivated to Jahq? Or does my marking represent the allure? Please, Michi, answer true." Jahq tried to harden her heart from the response Michi could give, in case she wasn't any different from men.

Tears filled Michi's eyes. "I wish I could erase every hurt done to you. Knowing the torment and misery you must have experienced, is breaking my own heart. I wish you could see into my heart and head." Michi caressed Jahq's cheek, biting on her lower lip. "I'm not a prize worthy of winning, and I've done things I'm ashamed to admit. I would tell you all, Jahq. Because I've never felt like I do for you with anyone. I doubt I ever will. Are we destined for one another? I don't know the answer. Do I want to try to be more than an acquaintance brought together on my brother's power-hungry ploy? Yes. I believe you are the one person destined to hold a place of even my love for Draquez."

Jahq felt the sob building and was powerless to stop it from escaping. "Then, please, Michi, make love to me before life and duties intrude on us."

"Gladly."

Returning to her previous position flush against Jahq, Michi kissed Jahq with slow, warm lips for what seemed like a lifetime, and yet probably only a heartbeat in actual time. She seductively nibbled Jahq's lips. Jahq gladly returned the kisses with small nips of her own. Michi sucked on her tongue, tender and slow, and then Michi's mouth nuzzled against her ears. A wave of heat

burned and Jahq shivered at the wonderful assault. Michi's hands were releasing the ties at the nightgown's front. Once opened, Michi's hands slid inside, gently rolling one nipple, then the other between her fingertips.

Jahq writhed slightly, but Michi's weight pinned her to the bed. Trying to gasp quietly, Jahq clung to Michi, concentrating on the sensations. Guilt consumed her, but it lasted only a moment. Why shouldn't she feel that way? For once, another human desired her for herself, and not as a sex slave. "Oh, Michi, what are you doing to me?" Jahq asked.

In reply, Michi's tongue gently entwined with Jahq's. "Real magic. From the moment I saw you, I wanted you."

"Because I'm an Iskarrian whore," Jahq said. She didn't want to push Michi away, not now, but Michi's defenses would be more vulnerable to truth telling.

"No," Michi all but shouted as she glared at Jahq. "Your spirit spoke to me. I felt you and the true you called to me. I hope you can accept me for who I am, maybe care for me, too?" The words were hesitant and the loneliness in the tone gave Jahq pause. "I won't continue." Michi shook her head. "I don't want to hurt you. This is the wrong way to bring you comfort. You're vulnerable and I'm not helping. We should stop now before more damage is done."

"Do you only wish to comfort me, Michi?" Jahq asked. "Are we correct there is more between us?"

"I feel the pain inside you, not just in your body, but in your power. Your magic screams with the damage done to you. I saw this the moment you were brought to us." She frowned. "Do your companions know of this?"

Jahq shook her head. "No. We're all battling inner demons, too busy to concern ourselves with our monsters. I want to continue."

"You don't have to return my affections. I understand." Michi gave her a wary expression. "Will you be my friend at least?"

Surprised at succumbing to Michi's charms so quickly, Jahq clasped Michi's hand and brought it to her lips, lightly kissing the knuckles. "I would like that," she said, "and more from you. Continue so we both can forget the demands of others. Please, Michi, I doubt your motives no longer."

With the words spoken, Michi slid over and completely covered Jahq, sliding her knee between Jahq's legs. She lifted Jahq's nightdress totally free, and kissed her stomach, then slipped her fingers underneath along the swells of Jahq's breasts. Jahq shuddered at the thrill of the tender touch. Michi squeezed and rubbed her breasts as if the most delicate objects she'd ever held. The warmth of Michi's skin felt sensual as she lightly massaged the nipples with her fingers, her hands wandering as if memorizing every piece of skin.

Michi leaned down and kissed Jahq's now sensitive nipples, first the right, then the left. Jahq jumped a tiny bit when Michi first licked her left nipple. She explored—sucking, kissing, and licking—for several minutes.

Jahq took in every sensation, lost in how wrong it should be—part of her still loved Gionne—and how right it felt to be touched by Michi. Maybe Michi was what she needed to move on, to know love from a woman who wouldn't judge her because of a tattoo. Jahq tugged at Michi's top, her eyes widened in hunger when she saw Michi's breasts for the first time. This woman was beautiful. She sat up, put her arms around Michi, and hungrily devoured a nipple. Michi arched her back, her breasts jutted forward so Jahq had better access.

Michi ran her hands down Jahq's back. Jahq responded by swiping her tongue on the undersides of Michi's breasts, marveling at how soft Michi's skin felt. Jahq leaned forward and

kissed each breast once, and then her stomach. She looked up at Michi expectantly, hovering near, but not too close.

Jahq was a little afraid of the emotions coursing through her, but wanted this—needed this. She wanted Michi. Jahq squeezed her eyes closed. Was she betraying herself into believing this was true, more than desire or need? She felt a soft moisture touch her belly button. Recognition brought a smile. Michi's lips were incredible.

Michi pushed her back onto the mattress and Jahq felt the cool air on her thighs as Michi dragged the blanket away, the covering replaced with soft hands on her thighs. They gently pushed outward, and it took all of Jahq's energy to move her legs apart. The hands stilled for a few moments and Jahq wondered if Michi gave her the opportunity to stop. Michi's hand gently rubbed her and Jahq focused on how wonderful it felt. Michi's touch was soft, yet firm. Jahq felt her need build, felt those warm fingers slow their rubbing, then slide down her thigh and around her knee.

Jahq, eyes still closed, concentrated on Michi's hand as it returned to her upper thigh, and then a wet silk firmness touched the skin right above her womanhood. Her body jumped. Michi's tongue explored her, first up, then down. When Michi flattened her tongue and it slid from the bottom of her nether lips to the top, Jahq almost screamed from the pleasure. A slight wave of light-headedness passed through Jahq. Michi began a rhythm of stroking her tongue up and down, and then sucked the bundle of nerves into her warm mouth. The pleasure in Jahq swelled beyond control. Her body twitched, her abdomen tightened, hands clenched in the sheets and her skin tingled. The pleasure of her orgasm deeper, softer, and more real than any other experience Jahq ever had. An experience she'd only expected to feel with Gionne. Only she was here with Michi, and Michi was the woman treating her as a special being of desire and passion.

Jahq forgot everything else and focused on the wonderful feelings coursing through her. The tingling, the pleasure, and mild twitching rolled through Jahq, as Michi continued the onslaught of her tongue. She stopped only when Jahq lay still for a few moments, too tired to speak.

Michi's soft brown eyes locked on Jahq's face. "Have I succeeded in comforting you?"

There wasn't sarcasm in the tone. Jahq realized Michi was concerned about her reaction. Jahq tugged at Michi until she lay against her. "You have more than succeeded, Michi." Jahq kissed her deeply, tasting herself on Michi's lips. "No one could have done better." She rubbed her hand down the length of Michi's back, the soft firmness of Michi's breasts pressed against her own. Jahq gently ran her fingers on the outside roundness.

A smile grew on Michi's lips as she clasped Jahq's hand in her own and brought it to her mouth. "You need to rest, get a few moments more of sleep," Michi said.

"I haven't—"

"No need," Michi said. "With the gods blessing, there'll be time for that later. I don't know what my brother plans for you, or your friends, today. You need to be in the prime constitution." Michi pulled the coverlet over them. "Besides, Jahq, loving you isn't tit-for-tat or score keeping."

Jahq knew her expression mirrored her shock at the statement. She also realized feelings for this woman could grow exponentially if Michi insisted on treating her like a precious human being. She kissed Michi again, hoping she conveyed all her positive feelings into the contact. Jahq could quickly fall in love with Michi.

As she and Michi fell asleep, Jahq wondered what Draquez would think about that realization.

Chapter Fifteen

MICHI HAD BEEN kind, tender and solicitous during the short incarceration Jahq and the others suffered in this village. She enjoyed the time she'd spent with Michi, so couldn't exactly refer to it as suffering, though Jahq felt guilty her accommodations were far better than those of her companions. At least the others were still alive, Jahq reasoned. Michi assured her Aaryen would and had looked after them.

They needed to move on, get back home. The problem was Jahq suspected the lull wasn't going to last. Draquez' invitation to this banquet made her more anxious than comforted. "I could show you the village before we have to meet with Draquez."

"So you've no idea what's to happen?" Jahq asked Michi.

"Honest, love, I'd warn you if I knew."

Love? The endearment brought joy to Jahq's heart, but a little discomfort too. She'd only heard the word from Gionne, a long time—Jahq knew she mustn't let her memories go there. Her feelings, probably written all over her face, caused Michi to stop lacing her shirt.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" Michi asked in a panicked tone.

Jahq stepped closer to her, gazing into brown eyes softening the nearer Jahq's proximity. Unexpectedly, Jahq's breath hitched, surprised this near-stranger cared for her so intently and in such a short time. "Yes, fine, just a lot occupying my mind." She lightly tapped away Michi's stilled hands and continued lacing the ties of Michi's shirt, noting the simple silver band suspended on a bit of twine around her neck. A gift from a previous lover? she wondered, though not her business. She asked anyway. "Tell me the significance of the ring?"

Then she reached her arms around Michi's waist and drew her closer. Jahq lightly kissed Michi's lips. She should give an endearment of her own, but couldn't bring herself to—yet. Maybe soon? Would Michi leave with her if she asked?

"It was my grandmother's wedding ring, and the only extravagance my grandfather bestowed upon her. Grandmother gave it to me when she passed away seven years ago." Michi placed a hand on top of it. "She had hopes it would be a talisman to finding someone special to give my affections and to share my life."

Feigning shock, Jahq breathed, "A talisman? Condoning magic before it resurfaced in Kellshae. What a rebellious woman, your grandmother."

Michi gave a smile that lit her face with delight. The woman was radiant when happy, more so than usual. "She would have cared for you as I do, Jahq, for your tender heart." Her expression saddened. "I don't think she'd be as pleased with my actions since getting magic. I've done many awful things for my brother since the normals killed our family."

"We all have done things we regret doing, Michi," Jahq said. She leaned forward and touched her forehead to Michi's. "I've witnessed nothing but kindness from you. This morning you were tender." Jahq caught the flush of color to Michi's face with the reminder. "We all have an evil side. It's what balances us— well usually."

“I guess,” said Michi, her voice breathy.

Keeping Michi locked in an embrace, Jahq drew her to the bed and undid the lacings, pulling the shirt over Michi’s head. Her startled expression was priceless and Jahq felt her own desire build. She nudged Michi onto the mattress and quickly removed the remainder of Michi’s clothing. Michi gasped in surprise. “Some of us have a wicked side, too.” Jahq quickly undressed, and joined Michi on the bed. For what she intended, Jahq could leave her clothes on, but the silky texture of Michi’s flesh against her flesh couldn’t be denied for either of them.

Michi’s eyes held a playful glint, the brown nearly black with desire. “If someone must be the victim of your more nefarious actions, please let me volunteer. To save the innocent, of course.”

Touching Michi almost overwhelmed her senses. Finally, Jahq touched and was touched in return with kindness and with a tender caring rather than greedy need to take, to control and overpower. Michi touched her with the warmth and affection she had expected to share with Gionne—

No, she chided herself, this was Michi’s time, and she deserved Jahq’s genuine and uninterrupted attention. Jahq ran her fingertips down the outside of Michi’s right arm, traveling up the inside, and down again along the side of her right torso. She repeated the action on Michi’s left, delighting in the quick gasps from Michi’s beautiful mouth, the raising of delicate gooseflesh. “I want to take my time, explore every nook and cranny that is you, Michi. I have no wish to anger your brother by being late to his dinner. As for your offer to show me the village, I’d rather be here with you.” She rubbed small circles on Michi’s abdomen with her palm.

Jahq’s gaze darted from Michi’s eyes to her full lips, giving in to the desire to kiss her thoroughly. Michi shifted toward her. Jahq closed the distance between them. Moving against her body, Jahq entwined her legs and arms with Michi’s. She seemed small and fragile, all naked and open like this. The feel of Michi’s hair, her skin, and her breasts was incredible. Jahq kissed Michi with a rough passion for mimicking the heat in her blood. “Everything about you is intoxicating.”

Reluctantly, Jahq dragged my mouth away but only to seek out one of Michi’s taut nipples. She loved the feel of the pebbled nipple in her mouth. Michi’s hands wound into Jahq’s hair, holding Jahq’s head and arching toward her. “Oh, sweet goddess, Jahq.”

Jahq’s body trembled when Michi whispered her name. She continued sucking the breast while reaching down. Michi’s legs shifted wider and she sighed as Jahq’s fingers found her soft, wet folds. Michi’s hips rose toward Jahq. Jahq slipped an index finger inside her warm velvet sheath, Michi’s muscles contracted as she undulated against Jahq’s hand.

Jahq’s womanhood clenched and dampened in response. She loved that she pleased Michi. Michi’s hands roamed over Jahq’s hair and shoulders as she rocked faster against Jahq’s hand. As fluids drenched Jahq’s finger, she wanted—needed—more. Jahq had to taste her.

Michi spread herself as Jahq moved between Michi’s legs and kissed her way down Michi’s abdomen, down to her bud. She smelled sweet, fragrant with the hint of spiciness from scented oil. Jahq inhaled as she flicked her tongue over Michi’s clit. Michi’s thighs trembled as Jahq’s mouth sealed on her nether lips. Jahq sucked and tongued, working her finger in and out of Michi. Michi trembled as she raised her head. “True magic,” Michi whispered.

Jahq watched Michi’s lashes flutter as their gazes locked, Michi’s lips slightly parted, her nipples hard, and her brown eyes stormy with need. Sharp desire and possessiveness surged through Jahq.

When Jahq's finger drove faster, Michi's eyes closed and the most beautiful smile Jahq had witnessed claimed Michi's lips just as her head dropped back on the pillows. Michi's back arched, and then her body tensed. Jahq sensed Michi about to come. Her hands now forced Jahq's head hard against her womanhood. She rocked, grinding into Jahq's face, against her probing finger. Jahq locked onto her hard bud, alternately flicking it with her tongue and sucking hard.

Flick, suckle, lick, suckle. Jahq moaned at the exquisite taste of her lover.

Before Michi cried out, Jahq felt her spasm, slow and rhythmic and then hard as she clamped down on Jahq's finger.

"Jahq," she moaned, squeezing Jahq's head with her thighs as she rode the orgasm. "Oh, Jahq, yes."

Jahq held Michi's gaze while working her finger in and out. Michi's hand found Jahq's nipple and rolled it between her thumb and forefinger. With the last spasm, Jahq sank onto her and fused her mouth with Michi's, both breathing hard. Breaking the kiss, Jahq smiled. "Are you all right?"

Michi's chest rumbled beneath her head with laughter. "Sweet goddess, yes," Michi panted. "Even though I have a distinct impression you attempted to kill me with pleasure."

"No better way to die," they said simultaneously, before bursting into laughter.

Chapter Sixteen

CHAYBOEN TOOK LITTLE comfort in the fact the approaching night wasn't portending cold. She'd have welcomed a fire last night, if for nothing else than fending off the loneliness and insecurity of not knowing what was happening to her companions after two days; and, doing so would've been risky. The vision she had of Jahq hadn't made sleep an easy thing, having upset her with its obscurity. Was guilt what had her receiving the vision?

Since leaving the others on the road, she'd made her way around two-thirds of the village, encountering the magic shield surrounding access to the village at every step. It dropped, of course, when they'd taken her friends, but Chayboen hadn't been able to pass beyond the barrier's location before it rose again.

One way or another, she'd get into the village for her companions, and she hoped tonight proved more productive in realizing her objective. Last night, she'd spent most of her time rehashing the events since leaving Gradyln. The conflict between people with magic and those without was bigger than any at Zheirger had suspected. Had they known the true condition of the unrest, would the task of retrieving the Oracle from Gradyln been set in motion or postponed? Would they have worked harder at finding an alternate means of doing so?

Of course, focusing on these questions now was irrelevant. They had to continue the journey, no way around it now. Chayboen prayed this was the last of the troublesome villages. She'd ditch the wagon and carry Altaira on her lap if it meant they'd avoid entering other villages. Troublesome was an understatement. Especially knowing what happened to—

Guilt consumed her, again. She was supposed to protect these women and failed miserably. Sweet goddess, how was she supposed to keep them safe? The silent inquiry brought on the image of Ysannie. She missed her beloved, missed holding her, kissing her. Chayboen missed the brightness that was an inherent part of the former goddess. Most of all, she missed their easy conversation with any topic.

Chayboen leaned against a nearby boulder and slid to the ground. Her gaze fixed on the shimmer of the magical shield as she touched the ring on her finger, twisted left three times, and once to the right. The response was almost immediate. Ysannie's image, from the top of her head to her shoulders, hovered in front of Chayboen's face, close enough to caress. "Are you all right, love?" Ysannie asked. "Do you need me there?"

"Fine, for the moment, yes. But you're not needed for more than comfort to weary eyes." Chayboen gazed upon her lover's features. How blessed was she to have this woman in her life? She wanted to tell her everything, and would eventually, but wanted a moment to visit. "You're so beautiful. I've missed you. I wish I could touch and hold you."

"And I you." Ysannie smiled. Her eyes appeared to glisten with emotion, but Chayboen knew it could be from the shield behind Ysannie's image. "Travel going well? We've not heard from you."

"We've had some difficulty," she replied honestly. "The unrest is worse than we believed."
"How so?"

“Most villages are like they were before the strengthening of magic upon the land. Some have either gone fully against or fully for magic users.” Chayboen shifted uncomfortably. She didn’t want to admit her inability to protect her charges, but the idea of lying to Ysannie was worse. “I’ve been separated from the others, and I believe something horrible—” She squeezed her eyes shut as her memory of the conversation between Altaira and Jahq replayed. A tear escaped and she swatted it away with her palm.

“Chayboen, love, tell me everything, please.”

She did. She explained what they had seen, what had happened in Berk’s village and the poisoning, what Berk had done to Jahq, and Berk’s own wife and son killing themselves to get away from the terror and torture at the hands of the villagers loyal to the lunatic. Chayboen told Ysannie of her and Gionne’s decision to separate so one of them would be free to save the others; explained the shield and the men found on the road. When done, Chayboen felt drained from the telling, and useless to interpret what dream vision she’d had last night. It was the first thing Ysannie questioned.

“Why do you believe something horrible will befall them?”

Although Ysannie asked the question calmly, Chayboen knew Ysannie was anxious for her response. She swallowed past the nervous lump in her throat. “I had a vision of Jahq holding a woman’s still form—I couldn’t see a face so I don’t know who—and sobbing in despair. The anguish was so vivid I could feel it in my soul.”

Ysannie’s voice grew solemn. “You’re getting closer to familiar territory, Chayboen. Should we prepare to initiate a portal to bring you all back?”

“No,” Chayboen said shaking her head. “Don’t think that’s necessary yet.”

“Can you approximate when this event may occur?”

“I feel it will be soon, but not anything specific.” Voices carried on the wind, and Chayboen realized others were in the area, drawing closer. She lowered her own voice and turned back to Ysannie’s image. “I need to go. I’ll get them away tonight if I have to hack a hole in this shield with Cerno and announce myself. Let the others know the actual state of the unrest. Travel should be limited out of Zheirger until this matter is resolved.” Chayboen shook her head. She couldn’t meet Ysannie’s eyes, even though they weren’t observing her in the here and now. “Tell Mayliandra and Kareina I’m sorry I failed their daughter.”

Chayboen didn’t wait to watch Ysannie’s image disappear, but quietly got to her feet and turned toward the voices. She made her way to the trees and huge, man-height boulders, noting the sounds originated about five hundred feet in the direction she’d just come from and parallel to the magic barrier.

“Stand aside you piece of filth,” demand one male voice.

“You have no business here,” came another. The words were hard to distinguish when their voices lowered.

As Chayboen closed in, she recognized the sounds and scents of seven individuals, all of them male. Sneaking closer, cautious to remain hidden within the gaps between rocks, Chayboen identified three men of magic, the same from the road yesterday, and five with no magic, dressed in the grey and black colors favored by mercenaries.

The bulky man of magic snickered at the mercenaries. “Aw, you should’ve been nicer, asshole. Now we need to make you pay for your disrespect.” A man stepped forward, probably the leader, his hand pulling his sword free. He didn’t get far before ice encased him from the elbow down to the full length of the scabbard. The skinny magicked man, who didn’t appear acquainted with soap, let alone water, in months, guffawed. The large man cuffed him on the

back of the head and said, “You could’ve let him pull the sword free. Learn some patience, Csingor.”

“Okay, Aaryen, I’m sorry.” Csingor’s words came from his mouth but didn’t hold any believability.

“Save your fight, boys. You’re about to get more than you probably want.” As the other men debated their next move, whether to attack or stand fast, the man named Aaryen turned to his silent companion and shrugged. The shield dropped. Addressing the men, he said, “Don’t fight us, boys, and you may enjoy living a few hours more.”

Chayboen watched them walk away from her, considering how fast she needed to be to sneak from her current spot and make it inside before the barrier returned. Aaryen glanced in her direction. She didn’t know if he could see her, but Chayboen suspected he knew she watched. He flashed a smug look before following the others.

She had no choice, not if she wished to find and release her companions.

Chayboen followed the direction the group of men traveled, doing her best to stay hidden from sight, concentrating on a position beyond the magic shield’s location. As she did, Chayboen wondered why Aaryen hadn’t alerted the others of her presence. She made her way to her target spot, and paused to contemplate her surroundings, certain Aaryen lay in wait to ambush her. Only the sounds of footfalls moving away, and then the static hiss as the shield rose again behind her, met her hearing.

The entrance of dusk was on her, the chill creeping across her skin, yet Chayboen waited for a quarter-hour before she ventured from her hiding place. Maybe Aaryen hadn’t been aware of her watching them after all. No. She didn’t believe that for a moment and refused to let her guard down. Chayboen would free her friends and escape tonight—or die trying.

Chayboen owed them all that at least.

Chapter Seventeen

THE DINING HALL Gionne and the others were walked into already disgorged a cacophony of voices straining to overcome surrounding voices. She squeezed shut her eyes and gave a silent prayer this—whatever was supposed to happen—would be quick. She wanted to join with Jahq and get away from here, find Chayboen and return to the Zheirger Keep.

A long table sat centered in the room, Draquez at the far end. On his right, Jahq sat stiffly beside the sister, Michi, who glared at her brother with undisguised antagonism. Iziago and a pale woman with red spiked hair sat on Draquez' left. Aaryen took a seat next to the woman, indicating Gionne should sit next to him. Csingor, with more gentleness than Gionne believed him capable, assisted Altaira into the chair beside her and nodded Calpri to take the next seat. After seating them, Csingor joined de'Wasim across the table. The room was large, with a door cut into each of the four walls, and a guard placed at each entrance, doors opened.

Gionne took the opportunity to study Jahq, to assure herself she was in better health. Jahq no longer showed signs of the poisoning she'd received; rather Jahq presented slightly flushed cheeks as she smiled at something Michi whispered to her. She was happy to see Jahq better, of course, but Gionne was also a little upset by the apparent closeness that seemed to have developed between the two women. Gionne knew she shouldn't care what liaison Jahq chose for her personal life, but she did. Even as she came to this conclusion, Gionne noted an abrupt look of pain, then fear flash across Jahq's features. Michi, seeing this, immediately glared at Iziago. He responded with a smirk until the fine hair on his left hand lit aflame.

"Hey, knock it off," Iziago demanded, slapping at his skin to smother the fire. "Just having a little fun."

"Thank you all for joining me," Draquez said, raising his hand to gain their attention.

"You gave them no choice. Are we finally going to learn your intentions?" Michi asked. Her tone was hostile, which her brother pointedly ignored, and no one else interfered or interrupted. Aaryen did chuckle. Michi added, "Had these women been hostile, I could see your reaction as justified. But they're magic users who deserve better from us."

Draquez glanced at her with pity. "Normals are with them, too. I need to be sure Jahq and Altaira weren't being coerced."

"If that were true," Gionne said, "Altaira wouldn't have been in the torture chamber at all, or a cell the last couple of nights."

"Torture—" Jahq looked to Michi with a mix of distress and sadness. "You lied to me?"

Michi appeared hurt by the question. "I didn't lie, they were safe." She reached to touch Jahq, but Jahq flinched away. Michi glared at Draquez and then to Iziago. "Aaryen was to keep them safe from his manipulation."

Aaryen cleared his throat, drawing Michi's attention. "I did as you wished, Michi, but—"

"I managed a little fun before your pup did his bidding," Iziago said. He gave Gionne a smirk and then winked. Gionne felt nauseous, her body trembling from the reminder of what he'd seen. "Can't wait to do it again."

“No, you won’t.” Michi leaned forward quickly as if ready to launch across the table. “I’ll burn you to—”

“Enough,” Draquez said loudly, slamming his hand on the table’s top. He flashed a look of displeasure toward Aaryen and then settled his gaze on Michi. “You have no right to order my men, Michi.”

Gionne felt Aaryen bristling beside her. She turned toward him. His voice spoke calmer than his body language implied. “Aren’t we best friends, Draquez, you, Michi, and me? If Michi asks a favor, I’m honor bound to help, especially if I agree with her.” He gave a playful shrug, but Gionne noted his thigh tensed when it touched hers. “Call me any name you wish, Iziago. I’m not the only one who is concerned with the liberties you take with your mind invasions.”

Michi nodded and Gionne assumed it meant accepting he’d done what he could on her behalf. Jahq had placed a hand on her back, and Michi quietly sat back in her chair. Draquez noticed this response too, if Gionne interpreted his piqued expression correctly. Gionne knew matters could’ve been worse if Aaryen hadn’t intervened when he did. She didn’t care who she should thank and relieved it hadn’t gone further. After witnessing the blubbery mess left of the man on the rack—Gionne shuddered, grateful when Draquez motioned a guard closer, whispering something into his ear.

Once the man left, Draquez browsed the faces of each person at the table. “We will eat and enjoy ourselves before we speak more on the status of Jahq and her companions.” He closed his eyes when he added, “Any blame laid for actions not conducted at my request will be addressed afterward.”

Having effectively silenced everyone, the room was quiet until a group of people bustled in with serving trays of food, miscellaneous tableware, and pitchers held tightly as they made their way around the room. A spatter of conversation broke a little at a time, but didn’t last long. Other than the sounds created by the kitchen staff, they consumed the meal lost to their own inner turmoil’s and deliberations.

Calpri assisted Altaira when needed; Jahq and Michi didn’t speak, but Gionne sensed an ease between them as if long-time friends; and Aaryen, commenting on the meal mostly, seemed intent on relaxing her. Not knowing what to expect, Gionne made certain she ate her fill, careful not to consume so much that it hindered her reflexes. She had a suspicion she’d need to be near peak performance before long.

Less than an hour later, the kitchen staff removed all evidence of their meal.

Draquez pushed his chair back from the table, the legs scraping loudly now that the servants had closed the doors as they departed and any sound would be contained. He leaned sideways to give the appearance of detachment, literally and figuratively, from the people in the room. Gionne had to resist the urge to roll her eyes when Draquez pressed his fingertips into a steeple and rest them on his pursed lips, mimicking a man in deep thought. It wasn’t until Csingor began to fidget that Draquez spoke.

“I’ve learned a few things about the dynamics of this group, and it’s disconcerting to me they keep secrets from each other. Considering this, I wonder what they would hide from us.”

“They’re entitled to some secrets, Draquez,” Michi said. “It’s human nature. You most certainly know things I’m unaware of, too. Leave them their privacy.”

Draquez’ expression contorted into a parody of a smile, clearly intended to show his disdain. Whether the derision was directed at Michi specifically or simply included her as being no different from every other person in the room, Gionne couldn’t begin to guess. “Even if a newfound relationship—yours, in this case—causes a normal to retaliate?” Michi didn’t speak,

but her expression showed her confusion. “I have a duty to my people to keep them safe, especially if you’re misguided.”

Michi’s voice, barely above a whisper, revealed anger toward her brother. “If you’ve something to say, do so. Do not use this meeting as a reason to punish people because you didn’t get what you coveted, or as an action to embarrass our guests.”

He feigned shock. “It never crossed my mind. I have, however, mercenaries on the side of normals. They intended to kill all with magic and happened upon our village—on the way to Zheirger Keep.” He glanced at Gionne. “As leader of this band, I believe Gionne should prove herself a magic supporter. Evaluating her warrior skills can’t hurt.”

Michi glared at him. “Then why even bring up—”

“Because their previous relationship could damage the foundation of trust needed.” His tone mimicked a teacher trying to explain something to a dimwitted student. “And be realistic Michi. What professed leader doesn’t even know when a woman in her charge, and who she’s had a past relationship with, was raped?”

Gionne couldn’t have been more surprised—and hurt—to learn this. She should have suspected. Although, in retrospect, Gionne had known subconsciously, yet knew having her suspicions confirmed would’ve been painful to them both. So neither she or Jahq had broached the issue.

When she raised questioning eyes to Jahq, Gionne received a steady gaze from Jahq as she mouthed, “You’re not at fault.” It did little to make Gionne feel better. In fact, she felt more horrible. Since Belzan—Gionne bit her bottom lip in hopes to halt the flow of tears demanding release. Of course, Jahq would only blame herself, wouldn’t she? That had been the purpose of the leather mask. She’d hoped no one would remove it and view the telling tattoo below. Take it as permission to use Jahq for their own will.

Was Draquez angry with Michi because Jahq saw and accepted what she never would from him? So, Gionne had to assume his embarrassment of her and Jahq would be part of his retribution, more against Michi than them. It also explained why Iziago had intruded upon Jahq’s mind. Jahq, recently recovering from poisoning and beating—and rape—might not have been able to raise or maintain her protective shields.

“I don’t understand what you intend to accomplish,” Michi said.

“Of course, you don’t, Michi. That’s why I need to look after you.” Draquez’s condescension was irritating.

“Okay, Draquez, bestow on us your wisdom,” Aaryen said. Apparently he was also annoyed with Draquez’s continuing theatrics. The sarcasm lacing his words went unnoticed by the intended target.

“Thank you, Aaryen,” Draquez said. “We’ve information,” he paused to smirk. “Straight from the source, which proves Gionne, the supposed friend of magic, turns her back at the first sign of trouble, as she did to a woman she professed to love. How can she be trusted to stand alongside us?”

“I’m sure you’ve misinterpreted your information,” Calpri said. Gionne had nearly forgotten there were others in the room since most hadn’t spoken a word. Altaira remained quiet, lost or focused inwardly. Please don’t let her be viewing a horrible end to this night, Gionne pleaded.

“See for yourself. Iziago, as you know, Gionne,” he said, raising an eyebrow, “can see your memories, bend them any way he sees fitting. As for his lovely companion, Ianthia, her magic is in illusion. Together they can create the most fun—and nearly living—images.”

“As I well know,” Gionne said, flashing Draquez a smirk of her own, “your buddy Iziago can twist memories as he sees fit. Anything you show us could be tainted for whatever need you deem best for your purposes.”

“Excuse me for being altruistic. The people in this village mean much to me. I would have us all learn of your true character.” Draquez waved a hand at Iziago, who was grinning with morbid glee.

Iziago nodded to Ianthia; his expression beamed self-satisfaction. He gloried in the discomfort his magical skill brought to its victims. Gionne knew she wasn’t going to enjoy what would happen next. Draquez’s smirking visage confirmed this.

The room was quiet as Iziago placed a hand on Ianthia’s shoulder, who in turn focused on the center of the cleared table. In a quick flash of light, a ball of mist appeared. It reminded Gionne of Stechyc’s scying ball. No, Gionne resolved, she wasn’t going to appreciate this magic show. She swallowed the lump in her throat as the images from her past played within the mist.

Gionne was hot and sweaty from sword practice, and wanted a proper cleaning before meeting with Jahq to celebrate her eighteenth birthday and journey into womanhood. She didn’t know what could be so important that Harksten had to send a runner to take her from the sparring field—on her free day. If he weren’t the senior instructor for the Lead Guard, Gionne might risk the punishment for telling him off about the inconvenience. This night, approved for months, meant a lot to her. She hoped it would mean much to Jahq, too.

As she halted in front of Harksten’s quarters, adjusting and brushing the dust off her clothes, Gionne stopped short at the sight she witnessed. About to knock on the door, Gionne noticed Jahq leaving Harksten’s quarters from the back door, her face flushed. Jahq seemed in a hurry and none too happy. Gionne was about to call out to her when Harksten opened the door. “So surprised to see you,” Harksten said.

“Hard to believe, considering,” Gionne said. “You’re the one who called me to this meeting.”

Harksten, maintaining an expression of surprise said, “Oh, yes, of course. Just finishing a...chat...with Jahq.” He made a clumsy attempt to right his clothing, brushing stray hair into place. “She’s requested your presence tonight. So, I agreed. She’s rather persuasive in her appeal for you to have the evening together.”

Fury consumed her. Gionne glared. “My evening’s been approved long before this moment. Jahq wouldn’t have needed to make such a request. Is there another reason Jahq felt the need to see you?”

“Oh, no, no,” Harksten said. “I’d actually forgotten, and scheduled you for duty this evening. Word must have got out.”

“How would Jahq have known?” Gionne asked.

“Her uncle may have mentioned something,” Harksten said. “Either way, you have your night off.” Gionne stared at him for a moment more before turning to leave.

She managed a few feet, before hearing Harksten mumble, “And Jahq gave me my day.”

What was that supposed to mean? she wondered. Gionne had nearly managed to push the incident away before she remembered the flushed face, the strange expression on Jahq’s face. She was confused until she recalled Harksten’s insinuation. Her heart broke. Gionne realized her love alone wasn’t enough for Jahq. Although they’d planned to mark Jahq’s eighteenth as their first night as lovers, the prospect wasn’t enough to keep Jahq from straying. Jahq had sought intimacy elsewhere—with a man.

“That doesn’t mean anything. Nor does it prove she’d turn her back on us, Draquez,” Michi said. “She had a moment of doubt. I’m sure once she and Jahq spoke next they cleared up the misunderstanding and had a wonderful evening.”

“Look at Jahq’s face, Michi,” Draquez said. “Does her expression affirm Gionne did as she should?” All eyes turned to Jahq, and Gionne could see the same pale skin and downcast eyes on her beautiful tattooed features. “Courtesy of Jahq, this is the result of Gionne’s lack of discussion.” Once again, Ianthia activated her image-ball.

Jahq’s excitement about tonight had her preoccupied so she never saw the exaggerated eye roll and a smirk from her Aunt Fleuren. She did hear the unseen emotion in the teasing of her words. “You’d think,” Fleuren said, “this a special occasion. Is there something your family should know?”

“As if you don’t already,” Jahq said. “It’s not every day a girl turns of age. You also know exactly what I intend with this evening.”

Fleuren grinned. “Are you animated about the whole evening, or specifically with after the dinner? A special dessert involved maybe?” Jahq flushed. “Or, is your excitement including this charming ring sitting so grandly on this table, flashing in the candlelight? Is the reason for the ring what has you walking in the clouds?”

The gentle ribbing lasted a few more moments. Then, Jahq broached a more serious topic, “You and Mama,” Jahq asked, “have taken care of Kez? She’s safe?”

Fleuren cringed. “As safe as she’s allowing us to keep her. Kez went to her family, her grandmother specifically, and told her what Harksten’s done. How she’s now with child. It seems the grandmother believes Kez at fault for enticing an honorable man.”

“What did her grandmother do?” Jahq asked.

“She kicked Kez out of her home.” Fleuren shook her head. “I’ve offered her room in the Keep, away from her family’s reach, and others. We’ll watch over her, keep her safe.” Fleuren turned to her. “What you did, though I understand—” Fleuren sniffed. “Maybe I would’ve done the same, but no matter, Jahq, it wasn’t safe. You could’ve come to great harm. If your mothers find out—”

“I won’t be telling them. You and Melrick are the only two who know.” Jahq snickered. “I just wish I’d done him more harm. When I had him pressed against the wall his look of surprise, outrage even, was exhilarating.”

Fleuren gasped. “Jahq, really, that’s not safe. You can’t let that kind of emotion take hold of you.”

Jahq smiled reassuringly. “No, no Aunt, I didn’t mean exhilarating in that respect.”

“Really?” Fleuren frowned. “How do you mean?”

“Knowing I finally had a bit of control,” Jahq said. “The magic is hardest when I lose control, become too angry. And trust me I was furious. I’m surprised, considering the fearful look on his face, he’s still breathing.” Jahq shrugged. “Luckily, I’d something much better to think about for this evening.”

“So,” Fleuren asked. “Do you have a special intent? An ulterior motive for this evening that has you demanding no one come close to your quarters until tomorrow afternoon?” Fleuren laughed. “Of course, whether your intention or not, your vocal demands for privacy this evening has the entire Keep speculating.”

Jahq smiled. She thought of all the ways she’d make tonight special for Gionne, how she wanted to spend the rest of their lives together. From the moment in Iskarr, there had always

been something special between them. At first, Jahq had been afraid, feeling no one would ever see Jahq for who she was. But Gionne had, making her feel alive, safe. She never treated Jahq as others did, as others still did when her mothers weren't around.

Jahq shook those thoughts away and glanced around the room. The dinner table was set, the candles lit, the ring ready, and Jahq wanted nothing more than Gionne, here, right now.

"Well, Aunt Fleuren, it's time for you to leave. Gionne should be here soon." Fleuren gave Jahq a long hug. As she prepared to go, a soft knock came to the door. Fleuren went to answer. On the threshold stood a young kitchen maid with an envelope clutched in her hand. Fleuren took it and closed the door. Jahq saw her name scrawled on the outside—in Gionne's hasty script—and her heartbeat paused. Silent, Fleuren hesitantly walked to her. Fleuren held out the paper, but Jahq was suddenly afraid to take it from her.

"Guess she's running late," Jahq said though the tremor in her tone spoke her fear. Why was she feeling something more than a delay had this envelope in her chambers, rather than Gionne?

"Would you like privacy?" Fleuren asked in a whisper.

Jahq shook her head. "No, stay, please." Legs trembling, Jahq moved to the table and collapsed into a chair.

Fleuren followed and crouched in front of her. "Would you—"

"I need to do this." Jahq, fingers trembling, broke the seal and opened the letter.

Jahq,

I hate things have transpired the way they have. I won't be there, with you, this evening. I won't be there, for your pleasure, ever again. I >can't and I refuse to share you. Too bad for me I don't and haven't meant more to you.

Good-bye,

Gionne

Twice, then a third time, Jahq read the letter, and still she didn't know what Gionne meant. What had she done? Gionne always had—would always—be the one to hold her heart. How could she imply otherwise? Did Gionne believe Jahq was playing with her feelings? What hurt most was Gionne couldn't even accuse Jahq to her face. The harder Jahq thought, the more realization took hold. Jahq was no more than used goods, unclean. Gionne, who professed her love, couldn't see beyond her past, beyond the fact that Jahq wasn't a virgin. Was she too unclean to Gionne? Obviously, she was.

Gionne saw Jahq in the same way everyone else did. The pain in that realization was more intense than any torture she'd endured.

Fleuren's expression reflected concern. "Jahq?"

Jahq handed the letter to her, "It's over."

As Fleuren read the letter, a tear fell from the corner of her left eye. "Oh, Jahq, I'm so sorry." Fleuren stood and put the letter on the table. "Do you know what she means with this?"

She couldn't make the words leave her mouth. Jahq shook her head. Her gaze took in all her preparations, stopping on the ring. Jahq picked it up and handed it to Fleuren. "Here. I won't need it any longer."

"No, Jahq," Fleuren said, trying to push the box back into her hand. "Give it a day or two. Then talk to Gionne, find out what happened."

"I don't—"

The door to her chambers swung open and a distraught Mayliandra entered in a tearful rush. “Fleuren, I’m glad you’re here. Jahq, I have bad news.”

Jahq started and got to her feet. Did her mother know? No, her mother’s news was different, and grave from her expression. “What is it?”

Mayliandra touched her shoulder. “Please, honey, sit down.”

“Just tell me, Mama.” Jahq’s frayed nerves couldn’t take much more. “Whatever it is will be the same sitting or standing.”

“As you wish,” Mayliandra said. “They just found her, at the foot of the tower.”

Jahq sat then, as did Fleuren in the chair next to hers. “Gionne?”

Mayliandra frowned and shook her head. “No, honey, not Gionne. Why would you—” Her mother heaved a sigh. “Kez. Kez jumped from the tower. She’s dead, Jahq.”

No, not that poor child. Of course she’d be dead, Jahq wanted to scream, after a fall from that height. But why? Jahq promised to take care of her, would have done all she needed to achieve that end. She already had Melrick take care of Harksten. One night, a night supposed to be so special, and she’d lost Kez and lost her heart, her Gionne. “Leave me.”

“Jahq, honey, tell me what you need. How can I help?” Mayliandra asked.

“Please, Mama. I need you and Aunt Fleuren to leave. Now.”

Mayliandra hesitated but Fleuren took her arm and led her to the door. On leaden feet, Jahq staggered to her bed, crumpling upon the coverlet. As tears coursed down her cheeks, dampening the material beneath her face, she heard her mother ask, “Why isn’t Gionne here?”

When she heard the door click shut, Jahq cried gut wrenching sobs.

Gionne never expected to feel such devastation that her breath could freeze in her lungs. What had she done? Jahq had suffered so much, and she’d added to the burdens. No wonder Jahq had isolated herself in the Keep. Harksten’s insinuation had prevented Gionne sharing her life with Jahq, had prevented her from learning about the child, Kez. No, Gionne had suffered doubts about their relationship, at least whether she was good enough for Jahq. Harksten’s innuendo was the perfect catalyst to escape the unknown and Gionne had readily taken it, latched on like a rabid dog.

Another shameful part at this moment, Michi embraced Jahq to comfort her, not Gionne. Could any amount of “I’m sorry” be enough?

“So you see, Michi, there’s no other option but to have Gionne prove herself.” Draquez sat back with a smug expression. He turned to Iziago, leaning back in his own chair, arms crossed over his chest. “Have you anything else to add, Iziago, to assist our cause in shedding light on the character of our guests?”

Again, Iziago placed a hand to Ianthia’s shoulder and the ball hovered over the table. An image of a forest appeared. Gionne recognized the spot just as the image vanished, followed by a loud crash, and Iziago bellowed in rage.

“You son of a bitch,” Jahq said. Michi held Jahq by her waist, her upper body, and one knee on the table as she tried to launch at Iziago. “I should kill—”

“Cease this,” Draquez ordered. He rose angrily to his feet, glaring at Jahq. “How dare you use magic without my permission?”

“How dare you invade her mind? There was no reason—”

Michi tugged on Jahq’s waist until Jahq stood on her feet, her back flush against Michi’s front. “Where was that place?” Michi asked.

Jahq swung her gaze at Gionne as she said, “The forest around Zheirger Keep.”

“It’s beautiful,” Michi said, her tone almost reverent. “I won’t ask what you didn’t want us to see. I can tell it hurts you.” She met Gionne’s gaze. “And her.”

“Yes,” Jahq said, eyes squeeze closed. “Also the business of no one else, unless Gionne so chooses.”

As Jahq spoke, Draquez rushed toward her and Michi with his hand raised toward Jahq. “Jahq,” Gionne said in warning, expecting the worst of his intentions. Her warning allowed Jahq the time needed to raise a shield to stop him short. He growled in frustration.

Gionne didn’t know what Draquez’s power was, but suspected he’d intended to use it on Jahq. “Are you done mind-raping your guests, Draquez? Can we move on to where you put me in the pit so you can laugh at my death?”

“Gionne.” Aaryen tossed her a warning scowl. “You don’t know what you’re saying. Don’t egg him on.”

“Oh, hellfire, Aaryen,” Gionne said, playfully shoving her shoulder into his. “He’s planned for it anyway and you know it.” She directed her gaze on Draquez. “Haven’t you?”

Draquez gave another growl and stomped back to his chair, dropping into it with a thud. Iziago returned to his place at the table. Calpri had moved to Altaira’s side and whispered in her ear. Michi appeared to have calmed Jahq.

Gionne leaned closer to Aaryen. “What’s his power?”

“He’s a leech.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Gionne rolled her eyes.

Aaryen snickered. “No. He can leech the magic power of others.”

“Wonderful.” Gionne put her hands on her hips. She thanked the goddess—and Jahq—Draquez hadn’t managed to reveal what Belzan had done in that forest. She was also thankful Draquez hadn’t sucked Jahq’s power. Only now she just wanted all this...this playing with them...over and done. “Well, Draquez? What’s it going to be?”

He initially said nothing, only waved a guard over to his side. Draquez looked at each of them in turn and then straightened in his chair. “Congratulations, Gionne. You and your ex-girlfriend get to play in the pit together.”

Gionne chuckled. “Oh, dandy.”

Chapter Eighteen

GIONNE DIDN'T KNOW what to expect from the pit, other than providing an entertaining demise of her and Jahq for the villagers to watch and cheer for. The dried blood spattered on the walls of stone surrounding her and mixed in with the granules of the sandy ground. The prospect of combat hadn't been so daunting, until Draquez announced Jahq would be fighting, too. Gionne stood in the center of the pit; torches lined every few feet along a short wall, as Aaryen and de'Wasim ushered in the mercenaries they were to fight to the death. Above the stone wall in front of Gionne were benches. The people were anxious for the thrill of death. Centered among the rows of seats was a covered area. Draquez sat on another large throne. Gionne wanted to snicker at his choice of seating. Off to the right, Michi escorted Jahq down a ramp toward her.

"Are you ready for this?" Jahq asked her.

Gionne shrugged. "Not like we have a choice."

Michi snorted her sarcasm. "Oh, you have a choice, but I wouldn't recommend it." Jahq raised an eyebrow in question. "Gionne's choice is to be handed over to Iziago."

"And what of me?" Jahq asked her.

Michi paled. "Draquez will take all your power and kill you."

"He can leech magic," Gionne explained. "He'd drain you of yours."

Aaryen made his way over to them, Gionne's sheathed sword in his fisted hand. He flashed her a wide smile and gave Gionne her sword. "Here you are, my friend," he said, as she cinched the weapon to her waist. "Give 'em hell."

"I intend to send them there," she said. What Gionne saw next had her glaring at Draquez in outrage. Csingor brought Altaira and Calpri into the pit. "What is this, Draquez? These women aren't warriors."

Draquez smirked at her, and then said to Aaryen, "Blindfold Jahq."

"No," Michi said, horror evident on her pained features. "Draquez? Why would you do this?"

Draquez said, "Because I can, little sister." He spread his arms to indicate everyone in the pit. "Gionne is tasked with protecting these women, and so she shall. As for Jahq, we wouldn't want her to have an unfair advantage over normals. Now if you'll join me, Michi, we can get this started."

Michi positioned herself protectively in front of Jahq and glared at Draquez. Gionne saw the swirl of flames on Michi's hands as she spoke. "Why? There's no reason for these women to be in the pit. This is personal, Draquez, so take your anger out on me—just me."

"Mighty full of yourself, aren't you? I'm looking out for the people of this village. Whose side are you on?"

"This isn't about—"

"Let it go, Michi. You'll not change his mind. We can win," Jahq said into Michi's ear, but loud enough for Gionne to hear. Jahq glanced at her, and Gionne understood she hoped for confirmation of her claim. She couldn't provide a guarantee, but didn't intend to let any of her

charges die without trying to protect them. Gionne hoped Chayboen was near and would intervene if and when necessary.

When Michi gently caressed Jahq's cheek and said, "Don't be gone too long from my side," Gionne felt the weight of loss in her chest. It shouldn't have happened. Gionne had let go of Jahq years ago. Hadn't she? She'd needlessly pushed Jahq away, not been able to protect her from Berk, and now Jahq would have to battle in the pit—without sight. The least she could do was push her emotions away, allow Jahq Michi's love and affections. Gionne supposed she'd face their display of feelings for the remainder of the trip to Zheirger Keep.

"Calm down and go to him." Jahq gave Michi a gentle push to her lower back.

Aaryen took Michi's place in front of Jahq. "I'm sorry," he said, raising the cloth he would bind her eyes with, and giving Gionne an apologetic look even as he gave a slight dip to his head. Gionne took it as a gesture for her to move closer to him. When she did, his voice dropped to barely a whisper. "Even with these odds, I believe you can defeat these thugs. They're mercenaries, so expect them to cheat but, from what I've witnessed, they're more bluster than skill."

"Thank you, my friend," Gionne said, using the guise of reaching for Jahq's arm to move closer to him.

"Confer with your friends for a moment," Aaryen said. "Draquez won't begin the battle until I leave the pit." He winked and took a step back from them.

Gionne gave a slight nod to acknowledge his declaration. She gently tugged Jahq toward Altaira and Calpri. "I'm sorry," she said to Jahq.

"For what?" Jahq asked.

"For everything." Gionne wished she'd taken the time to clear matters between them, and wondered if she'd get the opportunity now. "I never paid much attention to your gift, so I assume there's a reason Draquez had you blindfolded."

"I can't control my magic if I'm unable to focus on it with my sight. Iziago learned more than I'd hoped of me."

"But you can use your magic?" Gionne asked.

"Yes, but I could hurt one of you if it went astray."

"I think we need to take the chance."

"Wish I was as comfortable with the prospect," Jahq said. Gionne felt her shiver. "I feel so helpless without my sight. How does Altaira manage every day?"

"Carefully." Gionne cleared her throat. She wanted to say so much more and had a misconception to put right, but now wasn't the time. Instead, she hoped she'd convey some of her feelings when she said, "I've every faith in you to meet this challenge, Jahq." Jahq gave a wry grin. Not quite the response Gionne had hoped for, yet was enough for now.

They reached Calpri and Altaira. "Calpri, I need you three to stay close to one another, but I also need you to be Jahq's eyes. I'll keep all five men away from you for as long as I can. Be as specific about location as needed so Jahq's aware of where they are. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, of course, Gionne," Calpri said, clasping Altaira's hand. "But, how should we defend ourselves? You can't take them all on."

"Jahq is helping," Altaira said, "but her magic works best with vision. You're to do the seeing for her."

"Gionne, I think your friend is near the ramp. Draquez will begin soon," Jahq said, her head cocked to the side. Gionne assumed she used her ears to replace sight. "These men will probably attempt to surround us to limit our movement."

“I know you’ve watched Kareina sparring with the men, so I feel confident asking your opinion.” Gionne moved closer to Jahq, and whispered in her ear, “How do you think we should attack this?”

Jahq quirked a grin at her unintended pun and Gionne felt a little hope in her heart they might mend their friendship at least. “Draquez knows I have magic, but doesn’t know to what extent. I’d like to keep as much a secret until we need to use it. As long as I know where you are, and where Altaira and Calpri are positioned, I can assist without harm to you three.”

Gionne nodded. “You’ll be able to figure out where I am. I’m more concerned with our girls here.”

“Who need you safe more than me, Gionne. So don’t be foolish.” Jahq tilted her head again. “Alright ladies, stay close. We’re about to begin.”

No sooner were the words spoken than Draquez stood and addressed the crowd. “We have the honor of presenting a bit of entertainment for your pleasure. Who will win, I wonder? The normals,” he pointed to the five mercenaries, and then to Gionne’s group, “or a mix of the two?” Draquez shook his head slowly. “Yes, I’ve placed our magic users at a disadvantage. Both magicked woman on this side are blind, one by birth, and one by my direction. Who do you favor?”

The crowd of spectators erupted into a mix of yelled choices and mumbled conversations. Draquez returned to his chair, under Michi’s infuriated glare. Wild roars erupted as the mercenaries charged.

Sweet goddess, Gionne prayed, let us be victorious.

CALPRI PULLED ALTAIRA close to her side, partially to keep her safe, and partially so Jahq had a smaller area to concentrate on while diverting her magic for their protection. She didn’t know what to expect, so the screaming men rushing toward them made her startle, even as she felt a strangeness in the air around her. Although she didn’t see any changes, Calpri figured Jahq began whatever magical defensive was hers.

Jahq fumbled for and then grasped Calpri’s free hand in her left one. “Talk to me, Calpri.”

“There are five men, two have engaged Gionne. The other three are moving to circle us. They’re about in a position to rush us.”

“And Gionne?”

“Twenty-five feet to the left of us.”

“Okay. Don’t let go,” Jahq said before she brought her right hand to waist height and twirled her index finger pointing down at the ground. Surprisingly, to Calpri and to the men, two stumbled and the closest one fell roughly face-first into the dirt.

“Uh-oh, nicely done but you made them angry,” Calpri told Jahq, watching the men shift as they tried again to reach them. Jahq made the same motion with the same results. They tried another tactic. Two watched while one man raised his sword and charged forward.

“He’s coming straight for you.”

Jahq stretched her arm forward, palm out. The man flew back six feet and landed with a thump on his back. Each attempt the men made ended with the same result. It appeared they’d given up on the three of them as they turned their attention on Gionne.

“She’s down to one man,” Calpri said. “Our boys are going after her.”

“How close to her are they?”

“One is almost directly behind her, Jahq.” Calpri used her shoulder to nudge Jahq in the right direction. “One hundred feet ahead.”

This continued for another few minutes, the men changing who attacked them and who went after Gionne, who dwindled their numbers one by one. Calpri could tell Gionne was tiring, and from her proximity to Jahq, felt the frustration pouring off her body. Gionne was down to one man.

Before Calpri’s eyes, Gionne stumbled backward and breathed, “Belzan.”

“What did she say?” Jahq’s body stiffened. The spectators gave a collective gasp. “What’s going on?” Jahq asked in a fear-filled tone.

“I don’t know for certain. Gionne is really shaken and barely defending herself against the last man.”

“Hellfire,” Jahq said, her brows furrowed. “Can you see the large man from dinner, the mind-bender?”

Calpri raked her gaze around the pit, and then up into the seating area. “Yes, just behind Aaryen.”

“Wonderful,” Jahq said. She tilted her head in the direction of the two men. “Aaryen?” Jahq hollered in his direction. “Is Iziago with you?”

As Calpri glanced in his direction, she watched in surprise as Aaryen turned toward the man, scowled fiercely, and with the strength of an enraged lunatic Aaryen grabbed, raised, and then tossed Iziago into the pit. “He’s six feet in front of my position,” Aaryen stated.

“So much for playing fair,” Jahq said, ripping the blindfold off her head. She released Calpri’s hand. “Draquez is cheating. Look out for Altaira.”

“You’re not playing by the rules of the game, Jahq,” Draquez hollered from his platform.

Not surprising, Calpri thought, she didn’t like him anyway. “Altaira’s safe with me.” To prove her assertion, Calpri shuffled them to the side and picked up one of the fallen swords. Since Iziago was involved, Calpri understood the change to Gionne. He was messing with her mind. Calpri couldn’t begin to guess what he was ravaging, but from Gionne’s pale and pained expression, it wasn’t pleasant.

Jahq stomped toward Iziago, her hands stretched at her sides. Calpri saw another abandoned blade fly into the air. Jahq swiped her arm to her chest in one swift movement and the sword flew toward Iziago and impaled him below his ribs. As he screamed and tried to pull the blade free, Jahq clenched her hand and brought her fist down, up, down, up. The blade responded, pulling free and then stabbing him repeatedly.

Calpri couldn’t watch, seeing the blood was too much for her, no matter that Iziago was a horrible person—not that she believed this unjustified. She turned to Gionne to see she had regained her composure and dispatched the last man.

“It’s almost over,” she said to Altaira.

Altaira gave a shiver. “Don’t ever describe what happened here.”

Gionne made her way to Jahq, covering Jahq’s fist with her hand. Jahq, breathing heavily, nodded to Gionne. Iziago’s dead body lay bleeding in the sand.

A cry of pain filled the night. “No,” Jahq screamed as she raced toward Michi. Calpri tugged Altaira toward the ramp, praying they survived this horrible night.

THE NIGHT WASN'T going exactly as Draquez had planned, but he intended to make it more to his liking. Usually, he didn't allow Csingor anywhere near his covered podium but wanted the man's magic close if required. Michi had turned her back on him, literally and figuratively, as she watched the fight. She took what should have been his, and he was angry with her.

Draquez suspected she planned to leave with Jahq. Maybe if Jahq survived the pit, he'd bargain with her, using Michi as an incentive. He didn't want to bring harm to his own sister, but sometimes you needed sacrifices to rule the world. Since Gionne and her companions had appeared on his road, he'd lost control of Michi. He didn't care for the situation one wit.

Gionne had killed all but one man, and now she stumbled. Draquez understood who had intervened and he was glad for it. Apparently, Michi had figured it out, too.

"What are doing, Draquez? Call Iziago off," Michi demanded, spinning to glare at him. "Either you stop him or I will."

"You're not playing by the rules of the game, Jahq," Draquez said, watching her rip the blindfold off. Even though he still maintained the upper hand, Draquez realized he'd need to tip the tables in his direction. His sister's demands and interference were annoying, if not disrespectful. Reaching behind him, Draquez grabbed hold of Csingor's wrist, his grip dropping the slight man to his knees. Smiling down into his frightened eyes, Draquez said, "Gonna borrow a little power."

Csingor's features paled and shriveled. "You're taking too much."

"You won't miss it," Draquez said, releasing Csingor. He glowered at Michi, clutched her upper arm in one hand, his other raised above his head. "You've outlived your usefulness, sister." She frowned in confusion before it became an expression of pained understanding—right as he produced a spear of ice and slammed it down into her chest. The small flames fluttering in her palm fizzled.

Michi's cry of pain must have reached Jahq's ears. "No," Jahq bellowed. Then Draquez felt himself crashing into his chair with such force it toppled over and he rolled brutally into the wall.

Draquez hadn't fully regained his feet before Jahq dropped to her knees beside Michi, lifting Michi's head and tenderly laying it on her lap. Aaryen stood at Michi's feet and Gionne stood silently behind Jahq. Draquez watched them staring as Michi's life slowly drained, and he formulated his next move.

CHAYBOEN HADN'T HAD much time to get an understanding of the extent of trouble in this village before she heard the cheers and clash of steel. She followed the sounds, smart enough to realize her companions would be in the thick of things simply because of the way their luck had run so far. When she reached the arena referred to as the pit, Chayboen found the rowdiest group in attendance and used them to shield her from eyes recognizing she wasn't one of them.

Calpri and Altaira stood inside the pit, Jahq raced to a covered area where a blonde woman screamed out in pain, with Gionne close behind Jahq. She had to get over there. From the look on the face of the man thrown against the wall, Jahq was in trouble and unaware. The pit's spectators were so intent on the newest show that Chayboen was able to angle between gawking bodies, around the covered area, and behind the enraged man preparing to release a spear of ice.

A large man following Gionne situated himself in front of the angry man. "Draquez, don't
—"

“You’re right, Aaryen, you’ll do better.” Draquez dug fingers into Aaryen’s shoulders, causing him to grit his teeth. Distracted, Chayboen slid Cerno from the sheath and rammed it into Draquez’ back. As the teal veins of marble within the sword pulsed, drawing the magic from the man, Chayboen held tight to the hilt so the Draquez couldn’t pull free. All the while, the heartbreaking cries of Jahq surrounded those under the canopy. Not until Draquez fell dead, subsequently releasing Aaryen, did Chayboen remove Cerno.

Aaryen stepped back on unsteady legs, moving to Gionne, who looked down at Jahq with anguish clear on her expression.

“Get a healer,” Aaryen yelled.

“Please Michi, don’t leave me.” Jahq’s words were barely distinguishable over her heart-wrenching sobs. “I want to share my home with you, share my family. You could help me torment my sister when she pesters and pranks me.”

A dark trail of blood dripped from Michi’s lips down her jaw. “Wanted that too...” Weakly, Michi reached for the leather cord at her neck. “Take this for me and keep safe.”

“No, it’s yours to care for.” Chayboen realized Jahq couldn’t accept it. Accepting would acknowledge Michi wasn’t going to live.

With a new rush of tears, Michi whispered, “I know you don’t feel... Please take this to remember me.”

“I won’t ever forget you, love. Keep it. Let me prove your grandmother’s wish for you.” Jahq leaned down, bringing her lips to Michi’s forehead. “Don’t let me live without you. I love you, Michi.”

Michi ran the back of her bloodied, trembling fingers down Jahq’s cheek and across her jaw. She gave a trembling smile. “I know, honey. So, please, take the ring. Think pleasant thoughts when you look at it and remember me. Please.”

Jahq’s unsteady fingers removed the ring from around Michi’s neck, and hastily placed it around her own. “There. I can give it back when you’re better.” Her pleading gaze rose to Chayboen’s own, but there was nothing she could do to assist. They both knew Michi was correct—she was dying. Even if the healer arrived, it could do no good.

“Good-bye, Jahq.” Michi gave a final, shuddering breath. Jahq pulled Michi firmly against her chest, dropped her head to rest on the top of Michi’s head, and wept.

“Aaryen, do something,” Gionne said.

He turned a tormented gaze on Gionne. “I can’t. Draquez drained all my power somehow.”

“Cerno drained you,” Chayboen said. “You were in his grasp when I slew him. My blade doesn’t distinguish good magic from bad. It only knows to extract magic for containment.”

Biting her lower lip, Gionne said, “I’m sorry, my friend. To lose Michi and Draquez is sad enough. But to lose your power, too?”

“The only one I regret is Michi,” he said. “We lost Draquez long ago.”

“And your magic?” Chayboen asked.

Quirking one side of his lips, Aaryen said, “Bringing back the dead may be a positive gift to some, but I thought it a creepy talent.”

Chayboen nodded. “Since you still breathe, and I don’t know the full extent of Cerno’s ability, it’s possible your power could return. It might not be lost altogether.”

“Either way, it’s of little import at the moment,” Aaryen said.

Despite the emotional gravity of the situation, Chayboen feared the crowd’s reaction now their leader lay dead. “Gionne, we have to leave here.” She nodded her head in Jahq’s direction.

Aaryen motioned for a younger man to his side. “Take Altaira and Calpri to their wagon, de’Wasim. Get their horses ready, and supplies loaded. They’ll need a speedy departure.” When de’Wasim did as bid, Aaryen said to Gionne, “Much as I understand Jahq’s suffering, we need to get all of you away.”

Gionne shuddered, her gaze riveted to Jahq cradling Michi. “You’re right. Can I get you to carry her?” she asked Aaryen. “I don’t think she’s in any condition to fight you.” He nodded.

Chayboen crouched behind Jahq, placed her hands on Jahq’s shoulders. “Jahq. Michi’s gone. We aren’t safe, and I suspect she wouldn’t want you to die here, too.” No response. “We’re going to take you to the wagon.”

“I can’t leave her like this,” Jahq mumbled. No sooner had she spoken, Michi’s body burst into a bright blue flame, forcing them to scramble backward. Aaryen stepped forward, bent, and lifted Jahq into his arms, mindful of the burning corpse.

The crowd showed signs of distress, realizing their leader and his sister were dead. As a few surged forward, Chayboen unsheathed Cerno. Aaryen said to the mob, “Step back or suffer my magic.” She quirked an eyebrow, surprised, since they both knew him powerless to fulfill the threat. The menace worked as the crowd parted to allow them through.

Not far from the arena was the edge of the city—their original destination—and the wagon, Calpri and Altaira already on the driver’s bench, and de’Wasim holding the reins of the horses. Aaryen gently placed Jahq in the back of the wagon. Chayboen eyed him cautiously, not as easy to trust him as Gionne did.

Gionne took the reins of her horse from de’Wasim and addressed Aaryen. “Come with us to Zheirger Keep, both of you. There’s nothing left here for you.”

“An enticing offer,” Aaryen said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction they’d come from. “With de’Wasim’s assistance, we’ll settle things here.”

Gionne dipped her head, disappointed by the response, Chayboen realized. “I understand.”

“Hope you keep the offer open. If those mercenaries are correct, you’re due for quite the battle. We, de’Wasim and I, look forward to a fight worthy of dying for.”

“We can use good men,” Chayboen said. Even with all the magic users at the Keep, most were children—it was a school, after all—any willing warriors well versed in their craft would be welcomed.

Aaryen smiled at her. Then he pointed to the back of the wagon. “She gonna be okay?”

Gionne shrugged. “I hope so.”

“Me too.” Aaryen shook Gionne’s hand and then offered it to Chayboen. “Good luck.”

Handing the reins of Jahq’s horse to Chayboen, de’Wasim said, “When she’s ready, tell Jahq she was impressive in the pit. Even in so short a time, Michi was proud of her, cared for her a lot. Jahq made her happy and Michi hadn’t been happy for a long time.”

Chayboen saw Gionne blinking rapidly, trying not to cry. Swinging up into the saddle, Chayboen nodded at de’Wasim. “We’ll tell her.” Once Gionne got on her horse, Chayboen smiled at Aaryen and de’Wasim in turn. “We hope you take Gionne’s invitation seriously. Zheirger Keep can use warriors willing to fight for magic and the good and simple life.” She gave a teasing glance toward Gionne, hoping to lighten her mood. “And if you already get along with Gionne, all the better. She’s difficult to win over.”

Chayboen waved to Calpri to take to the road, leaving as both men laughed. Chayboen felt deflated, knowing they’d lost more than they’d gained in yet another village. How was she ever going to look Kareina in the eye, having failed Jahq yet again? How many more horrors were to be visited on them before they reached Zheirger Keep?

Chapter Nineteen

GIONNE KNEW SHE'D never make it to Zheirger Keep if she didn't get some useful sleep soon—more than the small snatches she managed before nightmares woke her screaming and drenched in sweat. She'd been concerned about waking the others, wondering if she should make her bedding farther from the campsite, but no one seemed aware of her issue—yet. Gionne assumed Chayboen might have done something to her magically, though she couldn't imagine what, to muffle or hide the outcries, when she did manage a few moments of sleep. Gionne had kept the terror at bay—until Iziago and his mind raping.

After Draquez' village, Gionne suspected Jahq could be the reason instead. She'd thank her, but Gionne still hurt from Jahq's reaction to Michi's death, felt helpless to comfort the withdrawn Jahq. Gionne had moved on with other women after the fateful night years back, had believed Jahq involved with others as well, never considering the truth as she moved on. However, the tormented cries, which had issued from Jahq when Michi died, nearly broke Gionne's own heart.

Nearly as painful was the realization she still loved Jahq. Learning the reason she'd turned away from Jahq had in fact been a misunderstanding, didn't help Gionne feel better about herself. She should never have sent the letter. She should've confronted Jahq and cleared the mistake before her feelings—and Jahq's—had plunged to such depths. Gionne had let her own inadequacies influence Harksten's words.

Her heart hurt knowing she'd come to her realization too late and learned the depth of her love hadn't changed toward Jahq. Had she lied to herself the entire time, or had seeing Jahq's feelings transferred to another made her jealous? Was jealousy the real emotion she felt toward Jahq? Gionne shook her head roughly. She was too tired and thinking unclearly. This mission, despite the horrors and troubles they'd encountered, gave Gionne too much time to think—to overthink.

Gionne needed to clear the matter with Jahq, but Jahq's pain was too fresh and raw. Now wasn't the time to settle matters without being a despicable cad. Jahq hurt. Gionne refused to add to the pain. After Michi, Gionne had no hope of rekindling the love she had for Jahq, shared with Jahq—the love that should've been enough to overcome everything, but Gionne hadn't let it.

Not that Jahq—or any woman—would want her now. Not after Bel—

“My cooking isn't so bad, is it?” Calpri asked her, half teasing.

“No, it's fine,” Gionne said. She, Chayboen, and Jahq were sitting on the ground, Altaira and Calpri sat on a fallen tree trunk, all surrounding a small fire. They had traveled long enough to reach an uninhabited area between the clans of Catreve and Iskarr. Gionne would be happy if she didn't see another human being—other than her companions—until they reached Zheirger. She knew it an impossibility.

“Hard to believe with the expression on your face,” Calpri said.

Altaira reached over and tapped her palm on Calpri's thigh. "Gionne's probably thinking on the traveling we've yet to do, considering routes and strategies. Leave her be." Altaira slanted her head to the side. "How are we doing with distance, Gionne?"

Chayboen answered, "We've made just over the halfway mark. Unless we run into any more trouble—" She cleared her throat, leaving the sentence unfinished. Gionne glanced toward Jahq to gauge her reaction, but Jahq didn't appear to be listening.

"It would be nice to avoid villages like the last couple." Calpri covered her mouth. "I didn't mean to imply you kept visions from us. I understand the iron hindered magic from all of you."

"I took no offense, Calpri."

"Not to put you on the spot," Calpri said, "but have you seen anything to warn us of trouble ahead?"

"Altaira has," Chayboen said. "I had a previous warning, too."

"The mountain?" Jahq asked. Gionne watched Jahq roll the ring hanging at her neck between her index finger and thumb.

Nodding, Chayboen explained, "I had the vision to beware the mountain and shared the warning with Ysannie before we left Zheirger. After hearing Altaira's vision, it seems we can't ignore learning or seeing something on the mountain. We've had two similar visions both expressing we be cautious."

"How long before we get to this mountain?" Calpri asked.

Gionne entered the conversation. "Barring any unplanned issues, we should be there in little over a week."

Calpri beamed. "More time to get to know one another better. You've all spoken well of Zheirger, so nothing to fear there."

Chayboen snorted. "We know one another well enough. I'm looking forward to holding my wife." Gionne noticed distress in her gaze as it drifted to Jahq. "Gonna practice with maintaining silence," Chayboen mumbled. "I need to check on the horses." She rushed from the campsite.

"I need a walk," Gionne said. "Have to check the perimeter. We're far enough into this forest for people and animals to hide. Don't want any surprises."

"Oh, I'll go with you," Calpri said, jumping to her feet. Had she moved any quicker, Calpri would have knocked Altaira from her seat.

"It might not be safe," Gionne said, wanting to discourage her.

"I'd love to stretch my legs, Gionne." Calpri paused. "I promise not to be a bother."

"It wouldn't be advisable with Chayboen gone."

"Jahq is more than capable of attending to Altaira for a few moments," Calpri said.

"I'm not a helpless infant," Altaira whispered harshly. Calpri didn't seem to hear the comment, her focus on Gionne, and waiting for the answer she wanted.

Gionne wanted to balk. She wasn't in the mood to entertain the chipper Calpri, a woman whose flirtations Gionne managed to ignore.

"We'll be fine," Jahq said getting to her feet.

No other excuses came to mind, and further refusal would only succeed in hurting Calpri's feelings. She didn't want to hurt her. Hadn't she hurt enough women already? It wasn't like she disliked Calpri, only Gionne didn't care for her the way Calpri hoped she would. Why was this matter feeling like a lose-lose situation? No, Gionne thought, I need to focus on the positive. What harm could come from a short walk in the woods with Calpri?

Maybe the simple distraction was exactly what Gionne needed.

CALPRI FELT A rush of excitement when Gionne agreed to let her accompany. Something bothered the young warrior, had been for quite some time, but Calpri didn't want to press, afraid of what the answers to any questions might be. Thinking harder, Calpri remembered one of Draquez' men had done something with her memories. Maybe it would help Gionne to relax if Calpri could reassure her on her task.

"You're doing a fine job of getting us to the Keep," Calpri said, realizing she needed to fill the silence, not caring for the emptiness of quiet. Gionne only nodded in response. "When we return, will my duties be such that I'll be able to see you?" she asked.

Gionne shrugged noncommittally. "I don't make those decisions."

Smiling slyly, Calpri asked, "But you could maintain contact if you wanted to, couldn't you?"

Stopping suddenly beside an enormous tree, Gionne faced her. "What are you asking? I thought you wanted to walk, not talk."

Calpri raised a hand to Gionne's cheek and caressed Gionne's smooth skin, moving closer until nearly flush with Gionne. She felt the instant Gionne's body stiffened. In panic? Had she misread her, seeing in Gionne what she wanted to see? "I'd like to spend time with you, get to know you in every way." There. Couldn't be plainer than that, could she?

"I'm not worth the time," Gionne snapped, her eyes overflowing with pain.

Calpri circled Gionne's waist with her arms, leaning forward and placing a kiss on Gionne's neck. "I disagree." She ran a hand up Gionne's tense back, interspersing kisses along her jawline. "Let me get to know you bet—" Before she could comprehend what was happening, Gionne shoved her against the rough bark of a tree, grasping her wrists and raising them above her head. Startled, Calpri could only gasp. Gionne held both wrists with one hand, the other yanked her dress up, snaking a hand to the inside of her thigh.

Calpri's breath fluttered when Gionne's fingers touched her. Her pulse pounded hard and loud in her ears. Long fingers threaded into the curls, before deliberately venturing farther, stroking through her sensitive folds. Part of Calpri's inner voice knew she should ask Gionne to stop, but she'd wanted this very moment since Gradyln. All Calpri could do was experience the exquisite touch of Gionne's hand stroking her, even if a little rougher than she expected from the sensitive young warrior.

"Open for me." Gionne pressed against Calpri's side as she huskily whispered the demand.

She wanted to submit completely, Gionne's touch felt deliciously wonderful. Calpri didn't want this to stop.

Ever obedient, Calpri granted Gionne the requested access by quickly shuffling her feet apart. Fingers teased and caressed. Calpri thought she'd melt into a puddle of liquid right here at the base of the tree. A whimper warbled in her throat at the warm feeling flooding through her. Gionne pressed impossibly closer, and Calpri could barely distinguish where her flesh stopped and Gionne's began. Calpri clenched her hands into fists. She didn't want to be tempted to touch Gionne and shatter this delicious moment. The long fingers on her womanhood flattened and massaged the rigid little bud at the apex of her drenched folds. Her stomach tightened and she arched her back slightly. Calpri's thighs trembled.

"Feel good?" Gionne asked.

"Yes, sweet goddess, yes."

Gionne pressed against her lips hungrily, and Calpri's desire spiraled.

"Is this how you want to know me?"

Calpri heard Gionne speaking, but the pounding in her ears muffled her words. She couldn't think past the incredible sensation building to a fevered pitch between her legs when Gionne buried a finger deep inside. Gionne started sliding in then out, in, and then out. Each thrust increased in speed. Calpri gasped at the wondrous sensations consuming her. Unexpected was the wet warmth where their cheeks met, but Calpri couldn't concentrate on that impression either.

Abruptly, the sensations burst and vibrated through every part of her being, racing with intensity from Calpri's head and downward to her toes. She became aware of the sound of her uncontrolled moans, and finally, the scream with her explosive orgasm.

"Oh, Jahq." Well, that was unexpected, Calpri thought, although not surprising as it should be, and definitely awkward. Coldness immediately followed when Gionne's hands fell away, and she took a step back. "I'm sorry," Gionne said. Gionne was crying, explaining the dampness on her cheek earlier. "I didn't mean to—I hope I didn't hurt you. Please forgive me."

Stunned, Calpri only stared in confusion. Before she had an opportunity to focus and question, Gionne raced off into the darkness.

Righting her dress, Calpri considered whether she should follow Gionne and ask what had happened. Before she could, Chayboen rushed to her side. "Where is she?" she demanded. Calpri pointed in the direction Gionne had gone. "Have you any idea what you've done? This could set her back so soon after Iziago."

Calpri had no idea why Chayboen was so furious. They were both adults, and Calpri certainly wasn't going to complain about what she and Gionne shared, especially since no sharing was involved. Gionne left too quickly. But, why was Gionne crying? "I don't understand," she said, confusion niggling at her. Should she know the answers?

"Of course, you don't." Chayboen glared at her. "Can you find the camp on your own?"

"Yes, I think so," she said.

"Great, then go." Chayboen raced off in the direction Gionne had taken.

Chapter Twenty

JAHQ HAD ALMOST finished cleaning up from the evening meal when Chayboen suddenly bolted from camp after learning Gionne went for a walk with Calpri. By the time she'd put everything away, Calpri had entered camp all flushed—and without Gionne or Chayboen. Jahq wanted to ask what happened on their walk, but a bit of jealousy reared its head, making her certain she didn't want an answer from Calpri.

The emotion was irrational since Gionne didn't want to renew their friendship, let alone a more intense affair. Not that Jahq should consider doing so either, especially after learning their relationship ended due to the damaging words by a third party. The knowledge of the truth had made Jahq feel hurt, more so, Jahq felt dirty. How strong could Gionne's feeling be if that was all it took to dismiss their bond?

Most unsettling of all were her conflicted feelings for Michi. Yes, they'd made love. Yes, Jahq told a dying woman she loved her, and she had strong feelings, which could probably have turned into love over time. Did she love Michi as she once had loved Gionne? She didn't believe so, but that love hadn't been enough, had it? Michi had told her she understood Jahq's dilemma, understood when she acknowledged Gionne held her heart, and Michi had been willing to caress it for however long she was allowed. Michi's loss had devastated her, partially because her burgeoning feelings were reciprocated, met with tenderness and understanding. Whereas Michi needed to care for someone, Jahq had needed care, and yet those weren't reasons to base a lasting relationship, but it was a beginning. Had it been any different when Gionne and Jahq had met? Gionne needs to be protective of someone, and Jahq had needed protection.

Sweet goddess. Why was she having these doubts? Gionne didn't want anything to do with her. Draquez murdered the woman who did love Jahq. There would be no more nights of warm, sweet lovemaking with Michi. Jahq was doomed to a life without emotional reciprocation.

After a few more minutes without either Chayboen or Gionne returning, Jahq seriously worried. Since leaving Zheirger Keep, Gionne had been different from her usual strong, cheerful self. Jahq observed Chayboen keeping an overly watchful eye on Gionne.

Her stomach clenched in the hurt of distrust separating her and Gionne for the last few years. Jahq sighed at the loss of not only the love she'd thought they shared but of the friendship as well. If Chayboen were worried about Gionne's state of mind, maybe she should worry as well. If only Gionne had trusted her enough—but the closeness once shared would never be again. Her only steadfast ally had been her Aunt Fleuren, without whom she'd never know the truth of what happened to Gionne.

The pain in that recognition was why Jahq wouldn't stay at Zheirger Keep, or live in Gradyln once this mission was finished.

Noting Calpri in quiet conversation with Altaira, Jahq decided to go search for the two missing woman. After all, Jahq reasoned, she and Gionne had been friends—once. This mission depended on the strength of the women working together for a common goal. Jahq had a new goal. Whereas she and Gionne would never be lovers, they could, at least, rekindle their

friendship. Right? Although a small doubt reared its ugly head. Do you want a friend who views you as too sullied?

Taking the same path as Chayboen, Jahq quietly made her way through the forest, hoping not to draw any unwanted attention to herself, especially from whatever non-human occupant was possibly concealed in the thicker foliage. She had about given up the search to return to camp when Jahq heard muffled voices. Quietly, cautious not to announce her presence with a carelessly placed foot, Jahq made her way behind a thick bush close to the women talking. Beneath the moonlight, Chayboen had a comforting arm around a crying Gionne. Jahq's heart broke at the torment beneath the tearful sobs. Staining her hearing, Jahq tried to make out the conversation, while silently vowing to make Calpri pay if she was the one responsible for Gionne's present condition.

"You've done nothing wrong," Chayboen said as she pulled Gionne's head to her shoulder. "Calpri is a big girl and can take care of herself. It can't have been easy for you, sweetie, given she's been throwing herself at you since breakfast at Gradyln."

"But I just snapped, lost all control." Gionne cried a moment more. "I wanted to feel—" She gulped and sniffed loudly. "There was no gentleness. I could've hurt her."

Chayboen rubbed a hand up and down Gionne's back. "Trust me, you didn't. Calpri looked quite, uh, sated." Jahq couldn't see Gionne's face, but she noted the sudden slump in her shoulders. "Gionne," Chayboen said quieter, "it's going to take time for you to heal physically and emotionally. Having Iziago stir those images up can't have helped the process of mending."

Gionne jumped up and began to pace, scrubbing roughly at her face in frustration. "I keep seeing his face, laughing, taunting. I feel each blow, every cut of his knife. I can't sleep without the nightmares. And now, now I'm—"

"Don't." This time, Chayboen jumped to her own feet and grasped Gionne by the shoulders until they faced each other. "You aren't going to turn into him if that's what you think. He's an animal. You could never be that."

Jahq already knew who the "him" was, and she wanted to kill Belzan, but knew the line for doing so was lengthy. How could Gionne ever believe she'd become like him? From Chayboen's comment, Jahq felt a sharp spasm of hurt realizing what had transpired between Calpri and Gionne. Gionne was the one to push Jahq away and find comfort with others—often. Their love hadn't had the level of trust Jahq thought it had. Maybe what Gionne felt for her was only childhood infatuation. Was this payback for Michi? For finding happiness and security, even for a couple days, in the arms and bed of a woman who could look beyond her tattoo and what it indicated? But of all the women in Kellshae why Calpri? That was hard to understand, and why Jahq was going to make Calpri pay for causing the emotional pain, however unintentional, to Gionne.

"I can't do this," Gionne was telling Chayboen. "I should never have been given this task. Never should've had these charges placed in my hands. I'm going to fail you all. I already have."

Chayboen shook her head sadly. "If I believed that foolishness, I wouldn't have allowed it to happen, certainly wouldn't have joined this undertaking."

Gionne angrily swiped at fresh tears. "You're here to babysit me. You get to watch me on Kareina's behalf."

"That's not true. I have faith in you to keep the Oracle safe, and get us home. I trust you."

"Great, Chayboen, that makes one of us," Gionne said with a smirk, "because even I don't trust me."

“Look, Gionne, you need sleep. You’re worn too thin because you’re hardly eating and not sleeping. Come back to camp and get rest. We’ll stay as long as you need. Please allow this, Gionne, I’m worried about you.”

Jahq watched Gionne bite her bottom lip until it bled. Then, she took a deep, ragged breath. “I’m fine, Chayboen. Thank you. Please, go back to the others before they panic.”

“What are you going to do?” Chayboen asked with concern.

“I can’t go back like this. I’m a mess. I’ll return before long.” Gionne walked farther away from Chayboen and, unknowingly, from Jahq.

Jahq stared after her until she could no longer see Gionne and then backed away from behind the bush where she hid. She’d barely moved before a hand clamped tightly over her mouth and she was bodily pulled backward against a solid mass. Panic took hold until she heard Chayboen’s voice in her ear.

“What are you doing here?”

“I...I was worried about Gionne.”

“How much could you hear?”

Unbidden, tears rolled down Jahq’s cheeks. This whole mission had been one fiasco after another. Jahq’s emotions were tottering as precariously as Gionne’s. “Enough. Will she be okay out there alone?”

Chayboen spun her around until they faced each other. Chayboen was angry, with her or the situation, Jahq couldn’t be certain. She instinctively knew Chayboen debated whether to answer. Chayboen yanked her by the arm, tugging her in the direction of the path leading to the camp.

Jerking free, Jahq glared at her. “Unless you want Gionne finding us arguing, I suggest you talk to me.” She could see the inner battle warring across Chayboen’s face. “I know I’ve disappointed you, others, even my mothers for not helping with the school. Truly, I care more than you can know for Gionne. Gods, fate, whatever it may be, I’m standing here for a reason. Have I not suffered enough punishments for whatever ill you wish me, Chayboen? Forget answering, because I don’t care what you think of me.” Jahq gave a heavy sigh. “Gionne’s purposely killing herself because of what Belzan did to her, isn’t she? Iziago churned those nightmares to the forefront.”

Hesitantly, Chayboen nodded. “I believe so, yes.”

Jahq shook her head. “I was surprised Belzan let her live.”

“Barely,” Chayboen whispered hoarsely. “He didn’t understand the power of our healers. And I don’t think he expected she’d survive longer than needed to pass on his message.”

“About his intentions for the Keep?”

Chayboen crossed her arms. “Your mothers are handling it.”

Anger consumed her at the figurative pat on the head. “I know you believe I’m useless to this mission.”

“I don’t, not really, but I need you focused on us. If I didn’t think Gionne would find it suspicious, I’d ask you to be a bit more helpful and kinder to her. As it is, I need you to help me look after her.” Chayboen sighed heavily. “As you’ve noticed, yes, Gionne is slowly killing herself.”

Jahq nodded and started toward camp again. Asking her to look after Gionne was as close as Chayboen would get to friendliness toward her. Jahq would take whatever truce she could get, needing a reason to keep her own pain at bay. On the outskirts of the camp, Jahq stopped and tugged at Chayboen’s arm until she halted, too. “I promise to do whatever I can for Gionne, but I don’t have to like Calpri, do I?”

Chayboen laughed. “That request never crossed my mind.”

“Good, because especially after tonight, I want to choke her more than ever,” she said, “and I’ll enjoy every minute of it.”

“Jealous?” Chayboen asked. “You’ve had years for your chance.”

“Does everyone believe me at fault—”Jahq couldn’t stop her scowl. “Of course you do. What works for everyone, must be the truth. Well, if you’d have been with us, you’d know I wasn’t the reason Gionne and I aren’t together.”

“Jahq, I don’t wish to downplay the atrocities done to you. You’ve your own misfortunes—horrors, truly—on this journey. Maybe you should let yourself heal before worrying too much about Gionne. It could be it’s too late for you both to have more than a working alliance,” she said, before walking into camp.

Stunned, Jahq stared after her. “Sweet goddess, I hope you’re wrong, but feel you aren’t.”

AN HOUR PASSED before Gionne silently entered the campsite, nodding to Chayboen standing guard. The others had fallen asleep soon after Jahq returned. Jahq, who feigned sleeping, watched as Gionne walked passed her to get to her own bedroll. Although Gionne appeared more in control of herself again, she looked even more miserable since leaving Gradyln.

Jahq should try to get some rest, her turn at guard duty less than two hours away, but she’d been anxious during Gionne’s absence. Knowing what tormented Gionne did little to make Jahq feel better. Jahq’s heart and head were at war in her body. She wanted to help but knew she hadn’t any right to make a decision concerning Gionne on her own. The other part of Jahq hurt from what Gionne did to her.

Observing Gionne now, Jahq couldn’t ignore helping her through this rough patch. On previous nights, after leaving Draquez’ village, Jahq had used her magic to muffle Gionne’s screams, but each passing night, Gionne’s stress had those nightmare’s growing more intense.

Gionne trudged to her bedroll. She’d placed it against a tree and as far from the camp without leaving its protection. Gionne had let her head fall back against the tree’s trunk and closed her eyes. From the tension in her body, Gionne wasn’t sleeping. Finally, exhaustion had overtaken her. Jahq relaxed believing Gionne asleep.

Gionne’s eyelids flickered, her lips taunt in what Jahq assumed was remembered pain. Jahq knew another nightmare had taken hold. She glanced around the camp to see the others fast asleep. Steeling herself against what could turn into an ugly confrontation, and without making a sound, Jahq made her way toward the dozing Gionne. She maneuvered herself until she was flush beside her. Jahq risked Gionne awakening angry and chanced that, with her exhaustion, Gionne’s self-conscious would welcome this chance at assistance.

With tenderness, Jahq gathered Gionne onto her shoulder. For a few seconds, Jahq closed her eyes, relishing the warmth she’d once craved. Luck stayed with her. Gionne hadn’t responded, hadn’t pulled away. As Jahq held her, she sensed when the nightmare fully took over. Gionne’s body grew stiff, her breathing erratic. Jahq erected a protective bubble to contain the cries she knew were about to be let loose from Gionne.

It started slowly. Gionne tossed her head as if reliving forceful blows. Her body twitched. Small cries escaped her lips. Jahq held her, absorbing each shudder, glad her gift didn’t include mind-sight. Jahq didn’t want to see that night, it was enough she knew the possibilities, which

shattered Gionne's body and self-confidence. Jahq held tight, absorbing the cries and the trembling, while holding and offering her strength and warmth, willing it to seep into Gionne. Jahq breathed deeply. How could this have happened? Why Gionne? Not that it was something that should happen to any woman.

Jahq didn't know how long she held Gionne, relieved Gionne hadn't screamed herself awake. She hoped Gionne's body and heart still recognized Jahq intended only the best. Gionne's body fell into a steadier rhythm of sleep. Jahq glanced toward camp. She'd have to drop the shield soon and return to her own bedroll, her time for guard duty would soon be here. Reluctant to let Gionne go, Jahq hesitated to drop the shield, waiting until the last possible moment. Jahq glanced up to see Chayboen staring directly at her. She didn't see accusation, as expected. Instead, Chayboen shook her head.

Jahq had control of the shields she erected, so was able to keep sound in, to keep items from getting in and out of the shield, or to allow sound and items to enter. Chayboen stood close enough to whisper. "Stay as long as you can. Let her rest. I'll take your watch." Jahq didn't see censure in Chayboen's expression. To Jahq's surprise, she saw approval.

She was going to be tired in the morning, but happy to hold Gionne through the remainder of the night. They both needed a little physical contact for comfort even if Gionne was unaware she gave and received. As Gionne's breathing changed, and dawn approached, Jahq gently released Gionne and dropped the warding. At her own bedroll, Jahq dropped immediately to sleep. All too soon, the rest of the camp awakened.

Although tired, Jahq rose pleased with herself, if slightly prideful. She'd managed to assist Gionne in a restive sleep for the first time since leaving Gradyln. More important, Jahq held Gionne and remembered what had been, what she'd missed. Probably for the last time before she left for the Void.

Chapter Twenty-one

THE GROUP CONTINUED their journey. Altaira suggested Jahq ride in the wagon with her, thereby giving Calpri the use of Jahq's horse. Chayboen kept lead of the wagon. As was habit thus far, Gionne took a position at the rear.

The group remained silent for nearly an hour. Jahq was concerned Gionne hadn't participated at all. In fact, she remained oddly quiet. She felt great relief when they stopped for a cold lunch, milling around the wagon while the horse's chomped grass nearby. Gionne remained distanced from the group, not sharing in the conversation at the wagon.

Knowing she'd probably suffer Gionne's anger, Jahq made her way beside Gionne. All she received in acknowledgment was a slightly raised eyebrow. Jahq forged ahead. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine," Gionne's simple response.

"I hope, after the last fortnight, the rest of the travel will be uneventful."

"Or that we'll run into better luck?" Gionne said.

"There is that." Jahq felt relieved to see a quick grin from Gionne. "Are you concerned about something specific?" Gionne shrugged. This close to Gionne reminded Jahq of the feel of Gionne in her arms last night. It bolstered Jahq's courage a little. "Gionne, one of the things we had in the past was we communicated well together. We still have days of the journey ahead. The least we can do is be civil."

"I haven't been uncivil," Gionne said.

"No, just uncommunicative."

Gionne shook her head. "I don't know if I can. I can't totally forget what we had together. Learning I was at fault, and why you weren't willing to accept my apology makes the wedge between us stronger when it should be the other way around. I can't exchange our past relationship for a tolerable friendship. Did we even know each other?"

"So you wish to continue where we barely tolerate sharing the same air?" Jahq asked.

Even with a night's sleep, Gionne looked exhausted and haunted. She rubbed tiredly at her eyes before glancing directly into Jahq's. "I'm not saying I don't want more, Jahq. I'm saying I don't know if I can, knowing we shared happier times, more than liked each other. We can't ever have what we lost."

Jahq understood, but wanted more than the silence between them. "I agree we can never have the past back. All I'm saying is let me assist you. Talk to me. Ask my opinion and I'll ask yours. If you need my help, I'll give it. I need you to want my help, Gionne. We were young, maybe too young, and we had the strangeness with T'Dar and my parents. Perhaps we need to start from scratch."

"I'll do what I can," Gionne said. "I'm sorry, Jahq. I can't give you promises."

Laughter erupted ahead of them, and Jahq glanced in that direction for a moment. Then, she quickly reached over and squeezed Gionne's forearm. A jolt ran through her fingers. Was her body also hoping to rekindle something with Gionne? Did Gionne feel the rebirth of connection? "I don't need promises. What I need is for us to try."

When Gionne nodded her acceptance, Jahq gave her a quick wink, before returning to the wagon. She realized she might have made a big mistake, opening herself for more hurt, but was reluctant to lose Gionne completely.

Chapter Twenty-two

“NO, REINFORCE THAT wall. I want those gaps sealed,” Tiilaen said. “Let’s not make entry easy for these bastards.” She watched as the group mending the wall complied. They’d put many reinforcements into place to assure the security of the Keep. On the far corner of the wall walkway stood two mages and two warrior trainees, facing the chasm. The intent of their training was to teach them to work together.

Her wife, Stechyc, showed the mages how to release power the moment the warriors released their arrows, so the magic infused the projectile and gave more momentum and distance. They weren’t able to achieve much more in the last couple of days. Stechyc explained her optimism for better results with time but, for Tiilaen, time was of the essence and the goal might be unachievable.

They’d strengthened and stocked the garrisons and food storage, new shiploads of cargo arrived from Gradyln merchants regularly, and the healing supplies were ready for the wounded. No matter the preparations, Tiilaen was troubled that most of those defending the Keep were mere children. Not that Belzan cared about age.

Tiilaen shivered. One thing she and Kareina had in common, other than being warriors from two different lands, was guilt over what Belzan had done to Gionne. If she hadn’t come to Kellshae to assist Kareina, Gionne would be safely living in the Valley of Mist. Of course, then Gionne wouldn’t have met and fallen in love with Jahq, not that that worked out very well. On a positive note, Kareina’s influence had helped Gionne grow into the amazing woman she was today. When the coming battle was concluded, Tiilaen thought, she would convince Kareina to talk Gionne into returning to the Valley.

“What has you so morose my love?” Stechyc said from behind her. Stechyc’s warm arms wrapped around her waist and squeezed.

Tiilaen leaned into her wife. “Probably the same as you’re thinking, after working on the wall.”

“Yes, it saddens me too. I should be giving lessons in healing, not in how to best aim an arrow. It saddens me we cannot be left in peace, to be ourselves without someone punishing us for our individuality.”

“Someday. Someday what we do will make a greater difference.” Tiilaen turned in her wife’s arms. “At least, if this must come to pass, we’re giving these children, these men, and women under our care, a chance. Whether we survive or not, we’ll have fought for our freedom, defending our loved ones.”

“Spoken like my beautiful warrior wife,” Stechyc said.

“So you’re pleased with me?” Tiilaen asked.

“I’m always pleased with you.”

Tiilaen waggled her eyebrows. “Do I need to show you how pleased I am with you?”

Stechyc playfully slapped her shoulder. “You are incorrigible. It’s the middle of the day, and we both have much to do.”

“I don’t know, Tiilaen,” Kareina said from behind Tiilaen. She made her way to their side, Mayliandra holding her hand. “I like her idea.”

Mayliandra shoved her shoulder into Kareina’s chest. “That’s because you two think alike. Not that it’s a bad idea. But your timing’s a little concerning.”

Kareina laughed aloud. “It concerns because you agree with us. It’s been a while since we’ve had one of our tavern quickies,” Kareina said lowering her voice so as not to be overheard by anyone other than Tiilaen and Stechyc.

Tiilaen pointed to the guard shack. “I can recommend a place.”

“How could you?” Stechyc asked, in feigned indignation. “That’s our spot.”

Tiilaen placed a quick kiss on her wife’s lips. “You just gave away the trade secrets. I taught you better than that.”

After a few moments of discussing how the training mage-warrior pact went, Kareina grew serious as she focused on Tiilaen. “Honestly, tell me how you gauge our chances of success?”

“The Keep walls are solid. We have supplies. We have the best healers in all of Kellshae. The people of Zheirger have the strongest hearts in all the land.” Tiilaen shook her head. “But hopeful hearts won’t defeat the enemy alone. We need hardened warriors. Unfortunately, they’ll be the ones we’re fighting.”

Kareina’s expression grew sad, and Tiilaen anticipated what would come next. She tried to forestall it. “No, Kareina, don’t go to that place. We all had an opportunity to destroy Belzan. We tried to do the humane thing and simply banish him from Gradyln. Anything that happens to the Keep is entirely his fault.”

“All true my friend, but I angered him most with more than banishment. I’m the one who took his hand.”

“You were justified in doing so,” Mayliandra said. “He’d beaten poor Gionne and attempted to rape our daughter. He threatened to do the same to me. Still you showed compassion, gave him an opportunity to change his ways and make amends. This time, I have no intention of letting him win, let alone live.”

Tiilaen stared at Mayliandra with exaggerated awe. “When did sweet Shei Mayliandra become so bloodthirsty?”

“Hanging out with you warriors, most likely, and still I don’t get invited to the fun.” Mayliandra smirked.

“Becoming a little bloodthirsty is the least the non-warrior women of Zheirger can do to keep the innocent children safe,” Stechyc said.

“Maybe we should include the men of the Keep?” Kareina asked playfully.

“Well,” Stechyc said, “I guess we should.”

Tiilaen and Kareina gave each other the nod. Simultaneously they said, “If we must.”

Tiilaen, pleased to share a bit of levity, broached the topic they’d all ignored recently. “Is there news of Gionne and her party?”

Kareina paled at the question. “Ysannie only says they all live, and progress is going well. It’s what she doesn’t say that’s concerning me.”

“You don’t think they’re in trouble, do you?” Stechyc asked.

Mayliandra wrapped an arm around Kareina’s waist. “One thing never expected was the people’s reactions to magic. Ysannie, as well as other magicked folk, noticed an infusion of power from within the earth. We can’t explain it.”

Stechyc asked, “Is Ysannie trying to isolate a possible location or reason for this?”

“Yes, but her attention is focused on those with the magic. From what she can gather, a lot of people would rather kill those with magic than find a workable use for it.” Mayliandra shook her head.

Tiilaen asked, “Can she tell if the unrest is because of Belzan rioting people in his bid for an army?”

“She hasn’t said as much, but it seems a logical assumption. Yet we all know how quickly frightened people can be controlled by fear.”

Kareina rubbed tiredly at her eyes. “And I let our children go out into that madness.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mayliandra said.

“It is. We should have just let them use the portal and be done with it,” Kareina said. “But I thought this would be best for Gionne, to reassert her confidence.”

“Ysannie and I were also in agreement with the plan,” Stechyc said quietly. “We couldn’t have known so much unrest would be out there.”

“I thought the Oracle couldn’t use the portal.” Tiilaen turned to Stechyc. “You knew about the plan?”

“Yes,” Stechyc said. “And, despite the changes in the people, I stand by it. I don’t believe the portal was safe for the Oracle to use. Our options were limited.”

“Surprised as I am by this information,” Mayliandra said, “I have to believe they can handle this and overcome anything they encounter.” She gazed at Kareina, who still had a strained look etched on her features. “They may be our children by parentage and as relatives, but they’re women who can handle anything together. They’ve the strength to do so.”

“I couldn’t have spoken the sentiment any better,” Stechyc said, beaming a smile to Mayliandra.

Tiilaen recognized Kareina didn’t appear entirely convinced she wasn’t guilty of sending Gionne and Jahq into needless danger. With an exaggerated shake of her head, Tiilaen said, “I know what truly bothers Kareina.” Three sets of eyes stared at her expectantly. “Kareina’s pissed she’s missing all the banging of heads and clashing of steel instead of pushing paperwork and such.”

Kareina brightened a bit, and asked, “Is it time for lunch?”

Tiilaen slapped Kareina on the back. “Way to keep us grounded Kareina, always focusing on the important and the steadfast.”

“You mean her stomach don’t you?” Mayliandra asked.

“Same-same, isn’t it?” Tiilaen said. “Kareina’s empty stomach is the one steady occurrence in Zheirger—better than a timepiece.”

Chapter Twenty-three

NIGHT WAS FALLING and they needed to set up camp. Gionne didn't know if she should be glad to hear laughter or more concerned the sound led to possible danger. As she approached, Gionne prepared to pull her sword. The closer she advanced, the more she recognized the laughter belonged to a young woman brushing down her horse.

"Oh, hello," she said. "I'm Zuena."

Gionne stared. The woman was beautiful, with wavy strawberry-blonde hair and milky white skin with a trace of freckles. She cautiously extended a hand. "Gionne."

"Care to join me at my fire?" Zuena asked.

Gionne shook her head. "No, I should get back to my own companions, now I know you are well."

"Your companions are welcome to join me," Zuena said. She grinned mischievously at Gionne. "You look like you could use a little relaxation."

Gionne bristled at the comment. "Why are you out here alone?" she asked, suspicious of the circumstances.

"I've only been on my own for a short time." Zuena moved away from the horse and closer to the fire. "I've been traveling with a family. I'm scouting, much as you are now. Trux saw your approach. The crest of Clan Gradyln is recognizable, and means safety."

"How do you know we didn't steal from the real owners of the crest?"

"True, you could have." Zuena looked behind her. "Trux and his family are camped behind me. The family is waiting for those very signs."

It seemed too suspicious. "Why didn't they just stay with you until we arrived?"

Zuena barked a laugh. "They're a bit...flamboyant and they know it. We don't wish to overwhelm you and your friends." Gionne was still uncertain, and Zuena appeared to recognize the fact. "Please, join me at my fire. Now you know about the others, and can keep vigilant guard. I understand you can't simply take my word."

After a moment of hesitation, Gionne agreed. If this were a trap, they were aware of it, and could easily use Zuena as a bargaining chip.

Gionne returned to her group, explained the situation, and brought them where Zuena camped. After another short scouting of the area, Gionne and Chayboen felt more comfortable. Jahq and Zuena prepared a pot of stew by combining ingredients from both camps, so no one group suffered too big a loss to provisions. Zuena shared stories of her time with Trux and the family's gypsy lifestyle.

Gionne wondered about the reasoning behind uprooting a young family to a nomadic life. She realized one possibility when she noted the way Chayboen's sword softly glowed within the sheath when nearby Zuena. The girl had magic. Maybe Trux's wife did too. Having suffered at the hands of both normal and magic, Gionne wanted an understanding of which side this woman sat on. Many with magic had been coerced into harming others with magic.

Before she did anything, Gionne intended to get Chayboen's opinion. After pulling Chayboen aside, Gionne dove straight to the point. "Zuena has magic doesn't she?"

"You noticed?" Chayboen asked.

"Wasn't like I can sense it," Gionne said. "But I did notice how Cerno reacted whenever she got close, the teal veining in your sword glows. Your sword senses magic does it not?"

"Yes, it does. So what do you intend to do with the knowledge?" Chayboen asked, scrutinizing Zuena as if seeing her for the first time.

"That's why I initiated this conversation. Do we ask, or do we ignore it because it's only a meeting for the night?"

"Do you think she intends harm? I don't get that feeling," Chayboen said.

"Neither do I, but I get the impression from Trux there's more to their wandering than simply for fun. Maybe if they know we share magic we can find a common bond, and you and I can relax our vigilance a bit. I'd feel better knowing they might not feel threatened by us if they knew. Also," Gionne said, "we can gauge reaction to the topic of magic. I'd rather confirm one way or another."

After a lull in the conversation, Gionne asked, "What is the nature of your magic, Zuena?"

The stunned silence was immediate. Zuena paled. "How do you know I have magic?"

Zuena took a wobbly step forward in Gionne's direction. "Please bring no harm, as I mean none."

"That's not my intent," Gionne said. "We also have magic in our group. It's my wish to make you more comfortable, not to bring you fear. We've seen what happens to people with magic at the hands of those frightened by it." She tipped her head in Chayboen's direction. "But if we spend much more time with you, by dark fall you'll notice Cerno's reaction—to you. Rather than let you run in fear from it, we want acceptance. Accept we'll not harm you because of it."

Zuena frowned. "Who is Cerno?"

Chayboen remained slightly out of reach of the others. She removed Cerno from its sheath. "Jahq, join me a moment?" Chayboen asked. When Jahq complied, Chayboen held Cerno to the side and slowly shifted it closer to Jahq. The teal veining of the *Virtutis* marble within Cerno began to pulse and glow.

"By the gods," Zuena exclaimed.

Chayboen grinned. "Exactly so," she said. "My sword, Cerno, was a gift from the God Magan."

Zuena said, "This is why I'm making my way to Zheirger Keep. And because I'd like to give thanks to Sher Karr and Shei Mayliandra for all they did for my brother five years ago, fighting T'Dar.—"

"You always have a safe haven in Zheirger Keep. Whether you've magic or not, and those who protect the ones who do are always welcome," Jahq said.

Gionne noticed Jahq didn't correct the misconception about her "papa".

"Just be prepared for a few surprises when we get there," Jahq said, her smile indicating a secret.

Gionne noticed the grin on Jahq's face. She loved—no, too strong a word—liked seeing these moments when Jahq was truly happy. She wished she hadn't been part of wiping it away from her for so long. "What are your comments, Jahq?" Gionne asked.

Jahq stared at her for just a moment. "I'm speculating welcoming her on the mission to Zheirger. Zuena has great skills at cooking." Jahq flashed an open smile. Was it warning Gionne

of impending teasing? Gionne felt comforted by their slow return to friendship. “She could replace you at cooking duty.”

“Are you saying my skills are limited?” Gionne asked, hand to her chest in shock.

“I’d never admit such a thing,” Jahq said. “At least not to your face.” Gionne, stunned for only a moment, laughed. The others realized the playful teasing, and joined in with the laughter.

ALTAIRA KNEW THE moment Jahq approached her. The woman had a distinctive and calming energy pattern easy to decipher from the others. She was delighted Jahq held a calming energy even when she wasn’t anywhere near calm. Also, Altaira was aware the reason for the outward countenance mirrored her own. They were different enough that most people couldn’t look beyond their afflictions to see the truth of the person beneath; they had to bury their pain deep.

“And how goes your day?” Altaira asked. She’d moved away from the others, suddenly feeling a need for distance, too many voices, and impressions surrounding her with the addition to Trux and family.

Jahq sat beside her. “It goes well, Oracle.”

“Your voice says otherwise.” She felt Jahq tense. “We’ll not speak of it, then.” Shifting, Altaira positioned her face so it focused on Jahq. She didn’t need to do it to speak, but the simple action made others feel more comfortable. Altaira brought up a different topic, also uncomfortable for Jahq. “It must be difficult. To have people look at you and yet not see the real you. What happened in Berk’s village must disturb you.”

“You get used to it,” Jahq said.

“I doubt that. It’s still an unkind thing.” Altaira reached for Jahq’s hand and gave a quick squeeze. “You have a strong will and a kind heart.” Altaira added a little levity, “Unless it’s toward Calpri.”

“Yes, she’s the bane of my existence it feels like.” Jahq shrugged. “One, I fear, I’ll need to get used to since she’ll live at Zheirger.”

Altaira chuckled. “Yes, but I don’t see you making her your best friend.”

“No,” Jahq said, “neither do I.” Jahq cleared her throat nervously. “I know this is personal, so you don’t need to answer. Does seeing future events disturb you?”

“No, not physically,” Altaira said.

“Mentally?”

Altaira gave this some thought. Her gift didn’t truly cause physical or mental harm to her, but it did concern her there were people who sought her as a weapon of power to hold over others. “I guess,” she said, “it’s more disturbing how others would use me.”

“You aren’t afraid of how we’ll use your power, are you? We don’t intend to rule the world,” Jahq said. “We offer you a sanctuary, and not because you’re an Oracle. We offer because you’re a human in need.”

“Yes, I do understand the intent and feel more comfortable after my time with Caldie Parrin. But what of you, Jahq?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you fear how some would use your power?”

“Most people don’t know I have a little magic.”

“A little? Are you downplaying, or do you not know the extent?” Altaira asked.

“I know it’s more than some, yet not more than others. As you’re aware, few people, male or female, can see anything beyond my tattoo. No one wants to know my favorite color, whether I like to read or stare at the stars, or anything else personal.” It was subtle, but Altaira felt the slight shifting of Jahq’s energy. She might not have caught it if they weren’t sitting so close. The more Jahq spoke, the threads of distress in her energy grew. Jahq hid her pain well, but her energy couldn’t hide. “Strangers make assumptions. The women gaze at me with disgust, men like a conquest.” Her voice lowered. “Even friends can’t forget what is behind the marking. For a few days Michi—”

Altaira realized the last the part injured Jahq the most. The pain too fresh for Jahq. Rather than address the matter, Altaira pushed on. “Is that why you intend to explore the Void?”

“Only my grandmother knows my intent. And you.” Jahq sighed. “There’s no place else I know that is unaware of the meaning of the mark. I thought as long as I—doesn’t matter.”

“You thought if someone loved you for you, it wouldn’t matter how other people treated you.” This time, Altaira reached for Jahq’s hand and held it. “You believed you had that—once. I’m sorry it didn’t work out. And you didn’t get a true chance to test Michi’s resolve. Now you have neither woman and are more alone than before because you know what you miss.” Altaira decided to share her own confidence. “I understand caring for someone, and being invisible to them.”

Jahq voice held surprise when she said, “Can’t imagine you’d be invisible to anyone, Altaira, you’re beautiful.”

“Stands to reason there must be something wrong with me. Other than you, I’m the only one Calpri hasn’t flirted with.”

“Well, that explains it.” Jahq gave a little snort. “We’re speaking of Miss Flighty-with-her-attentions.”

Altaira experienced a little discomfort. “So you believe I—”

“I’m sorry. Please don’t think I make fun of your declaration.” Altaira startled when Jahq pulled her into a tight hug. She gave a derisive laugh. “Maybe speaking before thinking should be the real reason I needed to maintain my privacy at Zheirger.”

“It’s silly, I know. You’re not too far off about her character. I know Calpri has her faults, Jahq, and I can’t explain why, but I care for her.”

“And you shouldn’t have to explain. When we care with our heart, the choice of who is usually out of our control.” Jahq pulled away. “I’ll keep your confidence, Altaira, but I’m the last person to offer advice. I hope you weren’t hoping for that from me.”

“Sweet goddess, no.” Altaira frowned, realizing how the reply must sound to Jahq. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Chuckling, Jahq said, “I didn’t take it that way, either. We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?”

“I believe we manage to get along just fine.”

“There’s our solution, then,” Altaira said, slapping her hands on her knees.

“How so?” Jahq asked. Her laughing tone tinged with suspicion.

Altaira beamed her brightest smile. “If our current love lives don’t work out, we can run away to the Void together.”

Chapter Twenty-four

ONLY A KNOTHEAD—and many would agree with Kareina’s personal assessment—would have refused assistance with carrying all the packages precariously perched in her arms. Kareina had wanted some time alone, and this task was the only way to achieve the objective. Kareina walked into the empty space between two buildings, placed her burdens on the ground, closed her eyes, and leaned tiredly against one building.

“...walking around pretty as you please, and with a pregnant woman,” a woman’s voice said from inside the building. “A whore, no less, and allowed to be around innocent children. I worry about my poor boys.”

“The aberrant behavior we’ve had to put up with to help our children learn to control the taint of nasty magic,” said another voice, this one male.

The hair on the back of Kareina’s neck stood up, and her temper boiled. Some woman spoke ill of Jahq, the only person to fit the mistaken identification. Someone new to the Keep and who didn’t know her daughter at all, or the comments wouldn’t have left her mouth.

Where had Jahq and Fleuren met her? Jahq didn’t usually leave the Zheirger family suites. Kareina snorted. Why would she, this being the reception Jahq received when she did? As for the aberrant behavior, it could only refer to same-sex couples, one of the main draws for people without magic to come to the Keep. It was common knowledge, so why settle in here if you didn’t agree? Because of the Keep’s location so close to the Valley of Mist, the property didn’t need to follow Kellshae laws. The boundary lines stopped short of the Keep.

Well, these folks were about to learn a lesson.

Stepping out to the road, Kareina caught the attention of two Keep guards, both female and young, and waved them over. “What are your names?”

The shorter woman said, “Mari, Commander Kareina.” She had short brown hair, a figure most would refer to as hefty, pockmarked skin, which didn’t deter her natural cuteness, on a tanned face.

The other woman stood at average height, stick-thin, with large brown eyes framed by black hair hanging loose. “Reisi.”

“Where are you two headed?” Kareina asked.

Mari answered. “We’re off shift, Commander. We were going to mess, and then the barracks.”

“I need you two to follow me,” Kareina said. “I’ll make the time up to you, and explain to your Unit Chief, I promise.”

“Yes, Shei,” they said simultaneously.

Temper still flaring, she corrected, “Kareina, not Shei, Kareina.” Both nodded, not responding to her outburst. “Come inside with me.” Kareina entered the shop with the voices she’d heard from the alley. Luckily, there were only two people inside, one man and one woman, just as indicated from outside.

“Welcome,” the man said when they entered. “How can I—”

“Due to complaints, this establishment is closed until the matter can be investigated,” Kareina said. “Please close the doors from conducting business.”

“But—”

“This is a Keep Guard issue.” Kareina pointed to the woman. There was nothing remarkable about her, frumpy clothing covering a frumpier figure, and thin brown hair. Unremarkable people tended to raise ruckuses to get attention. Seemed this was one of those instances. “What is your name?”

The woman frowned, but said, “Corley. What is this about?”

Kareina didn’t reply. “Where are you billeted?”

“You have no right—”

“Ma’am, discontinue your interruptions, and we’ll get through this quicker. And, I have every right as Lead Commander of the Guard.”

“You’re Shei Kareina?”

“Yes.” Unlike a moment ago, sometimes it worked best to rely on her rank.

Corley gave her directions, and Kareina turned to the two guards. “One of you need post yourself outside and make certain this business remains closed. I’ll need one of you to follow me.” As they exchanged glances, silently arranging who would do which, Kareina scowled at Corley. “Are you a resident with the Keep or a visitor?”

Raising her head in indignation, Corley said, “My two sons, husband and I are recently arrived, and shall stay until my youngest son, Zhing, learns to control his newly developed magic.”

“Are you and your husband employed?”

“Jarl, my husband, works at the garrison doing construction and repair. My job is to take care of my family.”

Corley’s haughty tone made Kareina snarl, “So is mine.”

YOSHAN RUSHED INTO the barn, spotted Taelyr, and grabbed his hand. “Come on, Taelyr. I’ve a surprise for you.”

“For me? What are you talking about woman?” Taelyr asked.

She was glad he hadn’t pulled away from her hand. Yoshan always got a thrill when he referred to her as ‘woman’ even though she knew he might not mean it. “You’ll learn in a moment,” she said. “It’s a surprise.” Yoshan held onto his hand, leading him from the barn.

She rushed him down the street, and out toward the forest. Leaving the Keep proper would get her a scolding, but her objective was worth the punishment. Yoshan had wanted to do this for some time but didn’t know if Taelyr was ready, not entirely sure he was now, but Yoshan wanted to share this with someone, and Taelyr appreciated the animals as much as she did.

It took a good quarter-hour to get where they were going. Yoshan had planned this for a while, had already set up before returning for Taelyr. She’d prepared a small picnic feast to share. After all, there was a method to her actions.

Taelyr frowned. “What is this? And why is it in the middle of the forest?” He crossed his arms over his chest. “We could’ve eaten in the barn, with the new pups.”

“No, this is a special occasion,” Yoshan said. “First we eat.” She smirked. “Can’t you try to be civilized for just a moment? We’re growing up, you know, and it doesn’t hurt to act like it sometimes.”

Taelyr snickered. “Yeah, yeah, so I’m told.” Despite his complaining, Taelyr sat on the corner of the blanket she set out and peered anxiously into the small wicker basket. “So, woman,” he said, “are you going to feed me or what?”

Yoshan couldn’t contain her excitement. Smile wide, she unloaded items from the basket. She handed him one of the sandwiches, placed another beside her, took out a waterskin, and then glanced at him slyly. Yoshan then took a bottle of ale from the basket. Glancing at him sheepishly, Yoshan said, “Since you’re a man, I thought you might prefer this.”

Taelyr glanced at her in surprise. “Yoshan, I appreciate the gesture, but won’t your papa be mad?”

“Are you going to tell?” Yoshan asked.

“No, I don’t think that wise.” Yoshan’s heart skipped at the smile he presented her. They ate in silence for a while. Yoshan didn’t mind, she enjoyed spending time with him. His face relaxed more than she’d ever seen. Yoshan wondered if Taelyr would ever look on her as Mama and Papa gazed at each other.

“So, tell me,” Taelyr said, “what’s this big surprise?”

“I’ll show you soon. The surprise hasn’t arrived yet,” Yoshan said.

Taelyr gazed at her, perplexed. “Is the surprise bringing itself? Or are we expecting visitors?” His eyes flicked to the bottle he’d half consumed. “Will I need to hide this?”

Yoshan giggled. “No, Taelyr, these visitors won’t care.” Although she gave the matter more thought, and added, “Unless it’s an issue.”

“An issue?”

Yoshan remembered her youth, some of the things men did under the influence of drink. She remembered the raiders of years ago, and how they’d used drinking as a game for harming women and children. Hurting women like her sister, Jahq. Yoshan had seldom asked questions of Taelyr, believing his heart good. She felt she’d learn everything needed to know over time. Yoshan also knew a war came, and time could be precious. She peered into Taelyr’s eyes. At first, he grudgingly met her gaze, but seemed to realize the importance for her, and didn’t turn away. “Yoshan,” Taelyr said with concern.

Yoshan shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I was wondering Taelyr, do you enjoy drinking?”

Taelyr’s face flushed. “Promise you won’t tell?”

“I promise.”

“Well Yoshan,” Taelyr admitted, “where I appreciate you wanting to make this great for me, I don’t like the taste of ale.”

“But you drank it?” Yoshan stared in disbelief. Taelyr cared about her feelings? Did he like her the way she liked him? Then, as the humor of the situation hit, they both laughed. “Thank you.”

Moments later, a sound came from the forest. Taelyr glanced nervously, but Yoshan stared expectantly. “They’re here.”

“Who?” Taelyr asked.

Yoshan grinned. “Not who, what.” A rustling sound and motion came from the forest as a pack of nine wolves moved forward. The wolf in front, Yoshan knew, was the Alpha. She stood indicating Taelyr should do the same. “Greetings Braxis.” Yoshan heard Taelyr’s sharp intake of breath beside her. “Blessings to you and yours.”

Braxis slowly moved forward, eyes intent on Taelyr. Then, unexpectedly, he growled in Taelyr’s direction, and Yoshan felt the hair on her arms tingle. Something was wrong. Wrong enough that Braxis closed their mental connection. Others from the pack began to surround them.

Yoshan didn't know what was happening. She focused on Braxis. "Why?" Yoshan pushed the mental barrier, incessant for him to respond. "What have we done?"

Speaking in her mind, his words, and the anger within came through. *He's one of them.* Braxis growled again, louder. *One who killed my mate.*

Confused, Yoshan stared at Taelyr. Taelyr had an affinity with animals, but Yoshan knew he couldn't hear them in his head. "What's going on?" Taelyr asked.

She didn't want to accuse, so asked, "Have you met wolves before?"

Taelyr stiffened. "Sort'a."

"What manner would that be?" Yoshan asked. "Have you any idea why Braxis is angry with you?"

"Yoshan, you gotta understand." Taelyr dropped back to the blanket, his gaze flicking between her and Braxis. "I couldn't do anything, they'd hurt me too, maybe killed me."

"Who would have?"

"My father." Taelyr's face paled. "My uncle—Belzan." Yoshan stared in disbelief. She glared at him because certainly she must have misunderstood. "I would've stopped it if I could, Yoshan."

"Tell me," Yoshan said, a pain building in her heart, where moments ago it was light. "Make me understand." Braxis moved closer, only holding back in deference to her, she knew. Braxis would get his revenge eventually. "Please, Taelyr," Yoshan said. "Tell Braxis, explain to me, what happened." Yoshan wanted Taelyr to be innocent of the heinous crime. She wanted to believe the safety she felt with Taelyr justified. Wanted to believe her faith in him—in his love of animals—wasn't misplaced.

Taelyr pulled his knees to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, and stared blankly at Braxis. "I had no choice," Taelyr said. "They called for me. I couldn't ignore them."

Hardening her heart and voice, Yoshan said, "Explain yourself, Taelyr. Or I'll let Braxis and his pack mates kill you."

Taelyr heaved a sigh. Then began his tale.

Although the night had chilled, it was beautiful and serene. Taelyr wished he could actually enjoy it. But duty called and he knew better than to go against his father, Tombik. Taelyr heard the pain-filled howl up ahead, seconds before his father's voice.

"Where the hell have you been?" Tombik stared at his son.

Taelyr knew some response was required. "It's not so easy getting out of the Keep. I have duties, a job requiring my presence until chores are done."

Tombik glared at him. "Didn't want you to miss all the fun." Part of Taelyr wanted to know what his father meant, another part afraid to find out. Taelyr followed Tombik toward the earlier sound of the howl. What they found made Taelyr's stomach churn. Disgusted, he knew there was nothing he could do. Vomiting in front of his father wasn't even an option, though his stomach threatened to do just that.

Belzan stood a few feet away. Clutched in his good hand, the beaten body of what was probably a beautiful girl, her auburn hair matted with her own red blood. No matter how grievous her injuries, the woman fought Belzan as if life depended on it—which it did. The instant she passed out, Belzan dropped her to the ground. The wolf, despite the two arrows protruding from her flank, crawled inch by inch toward the woman, a smeared trail of wolf blood in her wake.

For a moment, Taelyr thought of his mother. No matter how many times Tombik beat her into the ground she fought him, her meager resistance meant to prove herself more than Tombik ever gave her credit for being.

Belzan cursed, and Taelyr shook off memories of his mother. “Get over here, boy.” Belzan struggled with the clasp of the woman’s leather pants. Hesitant, Taelyr stepped toward his uncle. “Take her damn pants down.”

Appalled, Taelyr stared at the unconscious, battered woman. “What?”

A heavy calloused hand landed roughly on his neck. “You heard me. Now hurry, it’s getting cold.”

“No, I won’t.” Taelyr backed up a step—right into his father. “I won’t help with—”

“You’re weak, boy.” Tombik slapped Taelyr hard across the cheek, once, twice, three times—until stars filled Taelyr’s vision and blood streamed from the corner of his mouth. Then Tombik pushed him to the ground. Tombik went to the woman and yanked down her pants. She moaned, but didn’t wake.

“Teach this bitch—”

Taelyr, horrified, blocked out the sounds, trying not to focus, but unable to look away as Belzan raped the woman, repeatedly, and roughly. At one point, she awoke to fight, but Belzan plowed his fist into her face until she stopped. Belzan said something into her ear, laughed loud, then took his knife and carved a ‘B’ into her stomach.

Tombik helped Belzan stand. After they’d shared a good laugh, Tombik loosed one more arrow into the chest of the wolf. “Come on, you sissy,” Tombik said, waving Taelyr to them.

As usual, Taelyr did as told. He glanced back into the clearing. The woman lay beside the corpse of the wolf. In the stillness of the night, Taelyr could hear the labored gasping of the woman’s breathing. Taelyr knew he’d never rid himself of the sight and sound of this scene for as long as he lived.

YOSHAN WATCHED AS Taelyr’s gaze refocused, first on Braxis, and then on her. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?” Yoshan wanted him to have a plausible excuse. She felt her tears, pain for Gionne, wishing she hadn’t learned this about someone she cared for so much. Yoshan wanted nothing more than to go to her mothers. She numbly placed the remainder of their meal into the basket. When she stood, Yoshan mentally asked Braxis, “Will you take your revenge on him?”

Do you believe his story?

“Yes. I don’t like he did nothing during or after, didn’t tell anyone sooner, but I believe he’s truly afraid of the men.” Yoshan flashed a glance in Taelyr’s direction. “He didn’t kill your mate.”

I know. Braxis puffed, shook himself. *He is safe, my friend. But know that if I don’t soon find those responsible, I will take my revenge on him.*

“I understand.” Yoshan picked up the basket and watched as Braxis and his pack returned to the forest. Ignoring Taelyr, Yoshan began her trek to the Keep, her recent excitement severely damaged.

“Yoshan?” Taelyr was beside her.

“Don’t.” Yoshan wanted to hurt him, felt hurt by him. He should have said something, to someone, to anyone, but he had kept this horrific thing to himself. He knew Gionne was

important to her—still he said nothing. Whether she knew Gionne or not, Yohan would have suffered anything to try to help someone being hurt so cruelly. Father or not, Taelyr didn't really try.

“I'm sorry.” Taelyr put a hand on her shoulder, but Yohan shook it off.

She stopped walking and glared at him with disgust. “I thought I knew you, Taelyr, but I don't. We're no longer friends.” Yohan continued back to the Keep, aware Taelyr stood, alone, on the path.

Chapter Twenty-five

MAYLIANDRA STARTLED WHEN the suite door slammed open. She turned around to see a red-faced Kareina fuming— more than usual—which meant someone hurt or intended to harm a person Kareina loved. Kareina’s dark hair had grown longer, still tied back with a leather strip, and Mayliandra found her striking. Kareina had put on a couple of pounds since settling here. Mayliandra assumed it due to the required family dinners she’d instituted, and the slightly added weight seemed to soften Kareina’s appearance, even now when Kareina was furious. She moved to her wife and gathered Kareina in her embrace. “Calm down love and tell me what happened.”

“Happened? I’m not finished yet, so nothing has happened,” Kareina snapped, pulling out of Mayliandra’s arms. “I’m waiting on Ysannie to join me.”

With a teasing smile, Mayliandra said, “All right, love. What prompted what you haven’t finished?” Mayliandra hoped a lighter tone, as inducement would get the tale out of her wife. In the last five years, Kareina had learned to share her feelings, not keeping them bottled up and festering, but it took some time to achieve that end. Lucky for her, Mayliandra had enough patience for them both.

Rather than answer her question, Kareina asked one. “Do you know why Jahq kept to her rooms?”

Mayliandra had always assumed it was because Gionne had turned her affections away. Jahq loved Gionne so much so she would think nothing of isolating herself to save Gionne from any awkwardness an unexpected meeting may cause. She had also assumed her daughter would open up when ready. Mayliandra frowned. Jahq never had reached that point. Changes to the Keep and all the people seeking sanctuary had her and Kareina so busy, they’d not thought to bring it up. “What have you learned?” When Mayliandra saw Kareina’s eyes glisten with unshed tears, her heartbeat increased in alarm, afraid of what she’d hear. “Kareina, please.”

Before Kareina answered her, there was a knock on the door, and Kareina opened it to Ysannie. “Ready?” Kareina asked.

“Yes,” Ysannie said. “Are you certain you want to do this?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Ysannie shrugged. “Probably, yes, if I had children I would.” She gave a wicked smile. “As godmother to your daughters, I can do no less than assist.”

Mayliandra stomped a foot. “Will one of you tell me what is going on?”

“Come along, and you can see firsthand,” Kareina said. “This way you can scold me properly later with facts you witness yourself.”

“I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?” Mayliandra asked.

Without answering, Kareina and Ysannie left the room and Mayliandra had to hustle to stay up with them. A knot of dread filled her stomach when she realized they were going to Kareina’s cottage. The cottage, intended for Kareina to have privacy away from all the manic expectations

on her time, was quickly losing its allure and charm. Mayliandra hadn't returned since the morning Chayboen found Gionne.

As they drew closer, Mayliandra noted the young guard at the door. Kareina stopped in front of her. "We'll only need you for a few moments longer, Reisi." At her nod, Kareina, Ysannie, and Mayliandra entered. Kareina moved forward into the room while she and Ysannie remained by the door waiting for their cue.

The inside was one room, small, with a table and chair set in the middle, a bed to the left of the door, and fireplace, which was the source of light, against the right wall. Sitting at the table to the left was a homely middle-aged woman, who appeared to vacillate between fear and annoyance with the situation. The door closed and prompted the woman to stand. "This is outrageous. At least, tell me why I'm being held hostage."

"You're here because of your careless, insulting, and heartless words. You have the choice, Corley, to be banned from Zheirger Keep, or accept punishment as deemed fit for the crime—deemed by me." Kareina crossed her arms over her chest when Corley stared at her in confusion.

"For my benefit, Kareina, could you be more specific in explaining her transgression?" Mayliandra asked. She stepped forward and placed her hand on Kareina's lower back, rubbing the area in tight, small circles. Kareina uncrossed her arms, relaxing a little.

Kareina's gaze never left Corley as she said, "Corley has been all over Zheirger complaining about Jahq. I've also learned from Fleuren she insulted Jahq publicly." Pain filled Mayliandra at the knowledge, and she gasped.

"You have an Iskarrian whore traipsing around innocent children," Corley said. "Any decent parent would be concerned."

Mayliandra could feel the tensing of Kareina's body, noted her hands fisting until the knuckles were white. With more calm than she felt herself, she said, "Zheirger Keep is a place of sanctuary, as well as assisting those whose magic has been freed."

"And her decent parents are also concerned." Kareina glared. "Jahq is our daughter."

This time, Corley gasped. "Well..." She appeared to gather herself. "I am, after all, entitled to my opinion. You can't punish me for that."

"I can and will." Kareina leaned on the table separating her and Corley. "Which is it, Corley, banishment, or punishment?"

"My family and I aren't leaving until—"

"Punishment it is." Kareina straightened. "You'll be confined, alone, to this cottage for the length of one cycle of the moon. All foodstuffs furnished for you. There's a latrine in the back."

"This is absurd." Corley flushed with anger.

"Perhaps," Mayliandra said. She understood Ysannie's presence now. "Your opinions should have remained private."

Corley seemed undeterred to vent. "What of the shopkeeper?"

Kareina snickered. "He had the same options as you. He's currently packing to relocate."

"Maybe you should use the time to consider your words and actions," Ysannie said from the door.

"Why punishment me for so long?" Corley asked as her bluster diminished.

Understanding dawning for her, and knowing Kareina would tell Jahq's tale, Mayliandra gently wrapped her arms around Kareina's toned waist to offer physical support, as well as an emotional one. "Because of actions like yours, and unwarranted expectations from some, Jahq has stayed to her room, mostly alone, for three years. Seldom does she leave the family suite. If it

hadn't been for an extenuating circumstance, Jahq wouldn't have been available for your harshness.”

“Let me tell you about the women you call Iskarrian whores.” Kareina glared at Corley. “Female children of the nobility were taken to a building where they were chained to a bed. They were forced to perform various sexual acts—men called it teaching. Some teachings involved heinous and painful acts for their future fiancés, depending on the husband’s perversions, of course. For each act that these girls master, tattoos were given to reflect the achievement. These girls are assaulted for years, so they could properly perform and not disgrace their own families—pride is important to the nobility, you know.”

Kareina’s breath caught, and Mayliandra realized Kareina remembered some of what she’d done for her own father’s pride. “Iskarrian girls are expected to welcome not only their future husbands, but any male in the family who may not have a wife of their own, or wives aren’t available to them.” Mayliandra noted tears gathering in Kareina’s eyes, felt her own slipping down her cheeks. “Want to know how we found our daughter?”

Corley appeared confused. “But you’re Gradyln, not Iskarrian. How—”

“She may not be blood, but Jahq is our daughter in every other sense of the word.” Mayliandra shook with emotions the topic brought on. She reached out a hand to the table for support. She tugged Kareina’s body closer, feeling the trembling from the emotions the memories were invoking in her.

Kareina shook her head, her eyes clouded as she continued. “Jahq was chained spread-eagled to a bed, she’d been beaten, and men gambled to see who would assault her next. She was nothing to them but property to be used for their whim.” As she spoke, Kareina’s tone grew louder, taking on a dangerous edge.

Mayliandra worried Kareina would lash out at Corley with this reminder of Jahq’s torture, so like Kareina’s own because of her twin brother’s wrath and impulse. “My love?” She needed Kareina to focus on her.

After a moment, Kareina swiped at the tears spilling from smoke-blue eyes and nodded. “I’m all right, Mayli.”

Giving her attention to Corley, Mayliandra said, “During your incarceration, Corley, you should think about what these girls—our daughter—endured before you ever spill the word whore. Know something else. My wife’s punishment is far better than you’d have received from me. Had I known what had happened before Kareina directed this action for your crime, it would’ve been worse.” She paused. “I would’ve had your tongue cut out.”

Corley paled, sliding into the chair behind her.

No further words were necessary. Kareina, Ysannie, and Mayliandra silently left the cottage and joined Reisi. If the young guard had heard what went on inside, she didn’t show it, her expression remained blank. Once Ysannie set the ward to contain Corley, they all turned and headed for the Keep.

In the silence, not even the soft sounds of weeping from the cottage filled the night.

MAYLIANDRA SAT AT the window, staring out at a beautiful day though the site didn’t register to her gaze. For the hundredth time, she wondered why Jahq had never come to either parent about how the people associated with the Keep treated her. More than that, how could she

not have seen it for herself? She squeezed her eyes shut. Please, she prayed, don't let me learn someone had harmed Jahq with more than words.

Knowing Fleuren had been present at the Corley incident, Mayliandra wanted to demand answers from her. Two things held her back from taking that route. First being Fleuren would staunchly keep Jahq's council if asked to do so by her daughter. Second, Mayliandra was afraid to hear she was more horrible a mother than she felt at this moment.

The catalyst for Jahq's self-incarceration seemed to be the night of Jahq's birthday, three years ago. She'd planned a private night with Gionne but had been troubled about her earlier interaction with Harksten, senior trainer for the guards. Mayliandra thought hard, trying to remember that night with Jahq.

"I'm glad you aren't angry I'm not spending the evening with you, Papa and brat," Jahq said, as Mayliandra gave the final strokes of the brush through Jahq's hair. The room had a soft, romantic glow from only a couple lamps lit in far recesses of the walls. A small table set for an intimate dinner for two. Jahq wore a new gown, rather than dressed as most the warriors, common attire at the Keep. "After what happened this afternoon, I need the quiet and calm only Gionne gives me."

"You care for her a lot?" Mayliandra asked.

Jahq's face flushed. "Yes, as you do Mama. Someday, I'd—" Jahq didn't finish the sentence. The implied words didn't need voicing aloud. Mayliandra could have been blind and still felt the energy between the two girls when in the same vicinity. "Tonight would be perfect if not for Harksten making me so angry this afternoon."

"I understand you went to see him. But why do so before you told your Uncle Melrick about the problem?" Mayliandra had learned long ago Jahq's impulsiveness when defending someone didn't always have her thinking smart before reacting rashly. "What if something had gone wrong?"

"Oh, Mama," Jahq said, "you worry too much." She sighed. "I didn't accomplish anything, though. He's not going to do anything about Kez." Her lip curled into a snarl. "He's done more than enough damage."

Mayliandra gave a sigh of her own. "Not surprising, honey, as his kind seldom own up to their responsibilities or to the consequences of their actions. Now we're aware of the trouble, and will assist in any way we can."

"Why is it always the women, and children in Kez's case, who suffer because of men?"

If only Mayliandra had an answer. It hit too close to home, because of Kareina and Jahq's similar experiences, making her heart ache. Mayliandra placed the brush on the dressing table. "I wish I had a good answer for you, Jahq."

Jahq turned to face Mayliandra. "She's just a child, Mama. Just because she's from a poor family doesn't mean she deserved the way he used her. Kez is barely old enough to take care of herself, let alone defend herself from someone the size of Harksten. It's not fair to take her innocence like that, leave her with child, and then turn his back and become annoyed by her persistence that he does right."

The damage was done. All anyone could do was be there to assist Kez. "You've told Melrick what happened. The discipline is his to deliver, and I've no doubt it will be swift and deserving." Mayliandra leaned down and kissed Jahq's forehead. "Now stop this. You have a wonderful evening planned with a woman almost as beautiful as you are. Focus on that, honey." She raised an eyebrow. "Is there something more about tonight than the obvious Papa and I should be aware of?"

A sparkle glinted in Jahq's eyes as quickly as her face flushed. Yes, guess there is.

"No, of course not, Mama. But if there were, you and Papa would be the next to know of it, I promise."

Jahq never spoke about that night. Since young Kez had thrown herself off the tower wall in the early hours of the night, Mayliandra had assumed that not getting a chance to help the girl had caused Jahq to withdraw. As Mayliandra continued to stare out at a day she didn't see, she wondered how many other factors contributed—or replaced—Jahq's reasons to hide away.

"What kind of mother doesn't find out before three years have gone?"

An awful one, the voice in her head responded.

Chapter Twenty-six

GIONNE'S GAZE FOLLOWED Jahq as she made her way to her sleeping area. No matter what had happened in the past, Gionne realized for the millionth time she should never have pushed Jahq away. She sorely missed the connection they'd once shared. They'd been more than simply friends, destined to be together, as Mayliandra and Kareina were bound, or Tiilaen and Stechyc, even as Chayboen and the goddess, Ysannie. Because of her anger, Gionne had made a fatal mistake. She'd taken their love and thrown it into the abyss, all because Gionne allowed feelings to take control over common sense. Gionne accepted what she'd done the night of Jahq's birthday, the night they both intended to become lovers and move beyond the realm of friendship.

The night Gionne let Harksten's foul words ruin any chance of their future when Gionne's reaction forged the massive wall still separating her and Jahq.

Gionne stood outside Jahq's door. There was no one else in the corridor. She should've attempted this last night, the night before, and the night before that.

She hadn't.

Four days had elapsed, and still Gionne had yet to explain the reason for the note, her nonappearance at a night supposed to mean so much to them. Taking a deep breath, Gionne knocked twice on the door. No sounds from within, but Gionne was told Jahq hadn't left her rooms for nearly a week, so she knocked again, louder this time. After many moments, the door opened slightly to reveal Fleuren. In a voice nervous with anticipation, Gionne said, "I'd like to speak to Jahq."

Anger flashed in Fleuren's eyes, as she said, "She doesn't wish to speak to you."

"Please, Fleuren, I need to explain."

"Oh, I think you've explained yourself quite well in your letter. You've nothing more to say, Gionne. I certainly won't be part of you hurting her further." Fleuren attempted to close the door, but Gionne was quicker, putting the toe of her boot between the door and the molding. She stopped just shy of pushing the door open with her shoulder. "Jahq has to know I'm wrong."

"Of course, she knows you're wrong. She just doesn't know why you did it. Those things you said—" Fleuren sighed wearily. "Just go. You've done enough."

Reluctantly, Gionne did go, for a little while anyway. She attempted to talk to Jahq on many more occasions, each with the same result. Fleuren didn't always answer the door, but Gionne was rebuffed just the same.

She tried a different tact. Jahq wouldn't see her in person so Gionne would send her apology in a letter, although written communication was what got her into this position in the first place. She wrote a heartfelt letter and sent it with the chambermaid to Jahq's room.

The letter returned unopened to her quarters.

Gionne attempted to shove the letter beneath the door, only to have the unopened letter returned to her room, once again.

For over a month, Gionne received the same conclusion. Gionne understood—their relationship was indeed over. She would never speak her apologies, no reconciliation, no return to the life and the love she once had with Jahq. With a heavy heart, Gionne realized she'd pushed Jahq too far. She'd severed all her chances.

Gionne also noted her actions had changed the way Jahq related with everyone. The outgoing, happy woman avoided all interaction.

She hadn't given up completely, though. Often, Gionne would be waiting in the garden's, hidden from view, just to hear Jahq laugh, to look upon the features that made Gionne's heart stop, and blood burn. As usual, Fleuren accompanied Jahq, both sitting on a stone bench amidst the flowers.

"Are you certain I can't talk you into a walk in the market?" she heard Fleuren ask.

"There's nothing I need that I can't obtain within the Keep."

Fleuren's voice grew harsh when she asked, "Is it because of her? Afraid you'll run into Gionne?"

Jahq's face flushed a bright red. From her hiding place, Gionne could also see the tensing in Jahq's jaw as she stood to leave. Fleuren stopped her with a hand on her arm. "You agreed we'd never speak that name aloud. And, I don't fear her."

"I'm sorry, Jahq. She's trying to make amends, you know."

"It's over. She should've confronted me, and we could've had emotions to work with. She destroyed those emotions with what she wrote. No one will ever be able to do that to me again. No one. Ever."

Back in her quarters a short time later, Gionne collected the always-returned-unopened letter and tossed it into the nearest brazier. "That's it then," she said, "I'm a free woman."

So why do I feel chained to the heartache of my own making?

Gionne rubbed tiredly at her face. For so long she thought herself immune to the powerful hold Jahq had over her heart, her body. The truth was Gionne never had, would never, get over her first love. Liaisons with other women were short-lived because Gionne measured them all by the standards of Jahq. Even the torment of knowing Jahq had cared deeply for Michi couldn't eclipse the last ember of hope in her heart, hope they could move passed this, and return to where they once had been.

The trouble was, Gionne knew, they would never claim what they once had together. Something was better than nothing at all, right? Hard as it would be, Gionne understood she needed to try, try to get even a shadow of their friendship back. As the firelight flickered across Jahq's resting form and highlighted the blue in her black hair and the delicate beauty of her features, Gionne grasped Jahq hadn't been the only one in isolation. Gionne hadn't really lived since that fateful day three years ago.

Past and Present Collide

Chapter Twenty-seven

THE DAY WAS bright and clear, but Jahq felt dark and moody. They were closer to the lands of Iskarr. Jahq had considered hiding in the wagon until they passed the village of Iskaducit. She wondered how her childhood home fared with Humkyte in control, but didn't look forward to running into her ex-fiancé, even by accident. However, their path traveled right by it, and they were in need of provisions. Going around would add too much time, and no one wanted further delays. Other travelers on the road had hinted at bands of men heading toward battle. Jahq could only assume they went to Zheirger to fight with Belzan.

The main town of Iskarr, where the Keep resided, was different from what Jahq remembered. The streets and the buildings were the same, the layout the same, yet the shrines once peppering the land were visibly missing. Good riddance, Jahq thought. They represented a scourge forever burned in her brain.

Closer to town, Gionne brought her horse alongside Jahq's. "Are you all right?" she asked. Jahq nodded. The reminders of this town were more than what her Iskarrian heritage brought to her, more than bad memories because here she'd met Gionne for the first time. How could so much have happened in only five years?

A uniformed warrior stood in the street, waiting for their attention. "We haven't even stopped and already there's trouble," Jahq said quietly to Gionne.

Jahq and Gionne slowed their horses and indicated that Calpri and Chayboen should do the same with the wagon. The man came forward. When he stood a few feet from them, hand on the pommel of his sword, he stared them down, and said, "State your business."

The uniform he wore was none Jahq had seen before, and she wondered if it was Humkyte's doing. "We've only come for provisions. We're just passing through," Jahq said, hoping her tension didn't come through in her voice.

The warrior seemed to take in Jahq's appearance before he raised an eyebrow and then scowled. "You're one of them," he said in surprise. "I thought you all left with him."

Jahq suspected who the 'him' was, but asked, "Who do you mean?"

"Humkyte, of course."

"Isn't he the new Caldier of Iskarr?"

The man shook his head. “No. We didn’t care for the way things were, and he refused to listen to his people. Before his father died, the old man promoted another in his place. Iskarr is now under the ruling of Caldier Maxim.”

Jahq nodded. Maxim was a good man. “Is he the one who instituted the military?” Jahq asked, pointing to his uniform.

“And many other changes,” he said. “I’m Grammel. Let me take you to call upon Maxim. I’m sure he’ll be pleased to know one of the girls has done well.”

“Are we able to get provisions?” Gionne asked.

“Yes, of course, the market’s up ahead. That much hasn’t changed,” Grammel said. He turned back to Jahq. “Would you like me to take you to Maxim?”

“Yes, I would like that,” Jahq said. She turned to Gionne. “Would you go with me?”

“Of course.” Gionne went to tell Chayboen about the change in plans. Chayboen would take the others to stop stock the wagon while she and Jahq went to the castle. Grammel road just ahead of them, leaving them to their privacy. Jahq sensed Gionne staring at her. She tried to ignore her but couldn’t.

“Just ask, Gionne,” Jahq said.

“I hadn’t intended to ask anything,” Gionne said. “I’m attempting to assess if you’re okay with this decision. I want you to be okay, Jahq. A lot has happened on this mission, and I can’t change the past, but I still care enough to worry about you.”

“I’m fine,” Jahq said. “I’m curious about the changes here and worried about the fate of the others who left with Humkyte, if they’d even willing done so.” Jahq sighed. “But I’m fine. You can stop worrying, for me at least.”

Gionne nodded, accepting the statement.

“Hopefully,” Jahq said, “we can make this quick. Because, though I hate to admit it aloud, this place gives me the willies. I’m now part of a wonderful family because of this place, but that is the only positive—except for leaving— Iskarr holds for me.”

Gionne simply responded, “I understand.”

Grammel brought them to the stairs of Iskarr castle and suggested they wait outside for his return. Both women dismounted. As Grammel rushed up the stairs, and into the doors, they waited. It didn’t take long.

In less than a few moments, Grammel returned with Caldier Maxim. “Jahq, so good to see you,” Maxim said. “What brings you back to Clan Iskarr?”

Jahq smiled and returned his steady gaze. Jahq knew most of Iskarr was aware Sher Karr of Gradyln had adopted her during the time of the Raiders. “I’m traveling on a mission for my grandmother,” Jahq said, not that she owed him an explanation. She knew pleasantries were necessary to avoid any social problems, and they needed none of those before they completed the purchase of their supplies.

“Nothing serious I hope,” Maxim said.

“No, I have a relative who lost her home, and I’m to make sure she gets safely to Zheirger Keep. With the unrest in Kellshae, it’s safer to bring friends there.”

Maxim nodded understanding. “But, where are your men?” he asked.

It took the sheer force of will for Jahq not to roll her eyes. “There’s much unrest these days, and no one wished to waste good men from the defenses on a silly women’s errand.”

“But surely—”

Jahq decided to change the subject lest she lose her temper completely. Maxim had always been nice enough but still believed women helpless without men. “I noticed you’ve instituted warriors. Has there been trouble?”

Maxim shook his head. “Not really. Why tempt fate? It’s true there’s much unrest with magic and those opposed to it. After the horrible atrocities by the Raiders, I felt it best if even the farming and trade communities have protection.” Jahq noticed Maxim’s gaze continued to flick to Gionne. He’d be blind not to notice her own sword, nor miss her manner of dress. Seems changes didn’t include women in leathers or men’s clothing in Iskarr. Or women in the ranks of warriors.

“Wise idea,” Jahq said. “You’ve come quite a long way, and it couldn’t have been easy to take over with Humkyte around.” She glanced to Grammel. “Although, you mentioned he left?”

“You haven’t heard?” Grammel asked. “Humkyte took the remaining girls like you—our tattooed nobility—and left over four years ago. None of us knows where he and the others have gone.”

“We doubt he’s gone too far,” Maxim said. “The rumors are too close to home to be false. Only someone from Iskarr would be familiar with our trading schedules to steal directly from the supply shipments.”

Grammel glanced from Jahq to Gionne before returning a stern look to Jahq. “Maybe you should consider hiring mercenaries to guard you on your journey to Zheirger Keep.”

Jahq shook her head. “I have Gionne and Chayboen. I’m sure we’re fine. We haven’t much farther to go. I trust Gionne and the other warrior to protect us.”

“But what if—”

“I appreciate your concern, Caldier,” Jahq said. “We’re fine.”

“If you insist,” Maxim said. “Can I interest you and your friends in an evening meal and warm beds for the night? Maybe you can tell me how things are in the other clans. We only get rumor here. It would be nice to hear stories first hand.”

Jahq looked to Gionne for a response. She knew the ultimate responsibility lay with her for their safety. Gionne gave a nod, and Jahq smiled at Maxim. “We’d be honored to accept your hospitality, Caldier Maxim.”

Gionne gazed to Grammel. “Let us return to our friends and make certain their shopping has concluded, and explain the change of plans,” she said. “I don’t expect they’ll refuse. May we return within the hour?” Gionne asked Maxim.

“Splendid,” Maxim said. “I’ll alert the staff to have rooms ready for you.”

“There are five total in their party unless others were in the wagon,” Grammel told Maxim.

“There are six of us, all women,” Gionne said.

“Very well.” Grammel and Maxim shared a nod at the number. “I’ll escort their return myself.

“Within the hour,” Maxim said. “I look forward to it, Jahq.”

As Maxim walked away, Gionne raised a quizzical eyebrow making Grammel chuckle. “Wouldn’t be doing my job,” he said to Gionne, “if I hadn’t made note of all in your party.”

“Keep up the good work,” Gionne said. “It’s appreciated, having assistance from a capable protector. I can take an evening’s rest.”

Grammel clapped her on the back. “Why do I doubt you’d seriously put your duties onto someone else, even for the evening?”

Gionne grinned. Jahq was surprised to see the change it brought to her tired features. “You’re a warrior who knows his trade. You tend to look for those traits in others.”

“Never truer words, Gionne,” Grammel said. “Let’s get your friends, so we can take turns playing guard.”

CALPRI ENJOYED WHEN the group stopped for the evening, the feeling of a family the best she’d ever experienced. She couldn’t find that jubilant feeling, not tonight. Tonight she wallowed in self-loathing. She understood it was a situation of her own making, but it didn’t make her feel any better. On a positive note, having the comfort of sleeping indoors and a meal prepared by others, and eating at a table would be a welcomed change she was glad Jahq hadn’t passed up. When given the choice of rooms, she had offered to share with Altaira, not for altruistic reasons, but because Calpri had spent too much time on her own, and the company of others made her feel accepted. She didn’t know Zuena well enough, and didn’t want to leave Altaira with a stranger.

“Are you well, Calpri?” Altaira asked.

“Yes, of course,” she said, her voice bland to her own ears.

“Why do I doubt you’re speaking the truth?” Altaira said.

“I couldn’t hazard a guess,” Calpri said, shrugging. “Please, tell me this isn’t some seer or Oracle premonition.”

Altaira chuckled. “Hardly. Your state of mind is blazingly clear in the tension of your body and the timbre of your words.”

“Not much gets by you does it?”

“You’re wrong, Calpri. Much gets by me. There are many things I don’t understand, some of those I don’t care about, and many I wish I did understand.”

“I doubt you could help with this,” Calpri said with a heavy sigh.

“Why don’t you try me,” Altaira said.

Calpri stared at her for a long moment. They’d spent enough time together for Calpri to know Altaira would sense her stare if not see it. “I’m not sure I can. This is an issue of my fundamental being. I have longings I can’t explain—and they are getting me into trouble.”

Altaira sniffed. “You may be correct about getting you in trouble if you continue speaking in riddles. Could you be a little more straightforward?”

“It’s not that I don’t—” Calpri wondered why she didn’t feel comfortable speaking to Altaira on the subject. Altaira was a woman, with feelings and emotions the same as anyone else. Still, Calpri hesitated. How do you broach the topic of being fickle? Because that was exactly how Calpri felt.

First, she had thrown herself at Gionne, and though Gionne had made her feel exquisite pleasure, it was a little disconcerting to have Gionne whisper Jahq’s name before she ran off. Although not entirely responsible for Gionne’s reaction, it was hurtful nonetheless.

Calpri tried on numerous occasions to engage Zuena in an intimate conversation with no luck. The healer’s attentions were friendly, but not in that manner. From the glances Zuena gave the other women, Calpri knew they were of the same heart on the matter. Now, she sat beside Altaira, wondering if there was a way to bring up the topic without appearing the fool.

It was best not bringing any of this to light, especially not to Altaira; blind and beautiful—painfully so to Calpri’s eyes. Altaira, whose attainability was more difficult than either Zuena or Gionne. Calpri hadn’t been able to keep their interest. Besides, Calpri chided herself, a nobody

doesn't flirt with someone as important as an Oracle. Did they? Had anyone ever shown Altaira any affection?

"You're tensing again," Altaira said, her tone gentle. "Need I make a promise not to betray your confidence?"

"I doubt you would," Calpri said.

"Then tell me what troubles you," Altaira said.

"I wonder," Calpri said, forging ahead before changing her mind. "What am I doing wrong?"

"With what?" Altaira asked.

Calpri shrugged. Altaira couldn't see it, but she'd sense the movement nonetheless. "I'm a silly child. I've used traveling to Zheirger as if it were my private mating field."

"I see," Altaira said. Her tone sounded serious, but Calpri caught the tug at the corner of her mouth. Altaira teased her.

"Yes, you do. I've spent enough time with you on the wagon to know you're aware of more than many sighted people." The very reason Calpri did and didn't want to have this particular conversation with Altaira. The Oracle would see what was in her heart. "I'm just wondering," Calpri said. "Am I being fair to myself or to other women with my actions? Or am I giving a disservice to all involved?"

"You mean the part about you being fickle?" Altaira asked.

"As you well know, I've made a fool of myself on this trip. I'm aware of the problem with initiating Gionne's affections, though can only speculate on the reason. Zuena isn't interested at all in me. Yet, knowing this hasn't stopped me from trying."

Altaira nodded. "There's a positive in all of this." She paused, visually unable to see Calpri frown. "You haven't attempted to woo Jahq."

Calpri snorted. "I said I was fickle not foolish. Why, do you wonder, have I made these attempts?"

"Because you're human, Calpri," Altaira said. "You want the love of another, the affections another can bring us. We don't always make proper judgments when our heart's compulsion is stronger than our head's common sense. Someday, and probably soon," Altaira said, "you'll find the one person you're intended for. A woman who brings a smile just with the memory of a certain expression, or some inconsequential thing she's done. It's not necessary to berate yourself, as long as no one, including yourself, is intentionally harmed in the process."

Calpri shook her head. "I wish it were that easy."

"Why isn't it?"

"Because we still have the journey to go, and I may have caused rifts that shouldn't be among us."

"If that were the case Calpri, they would've left you behind. Have you considered, unreciprocated feelings aside, it's a positive thing to know someone looks upon them lovingly? Isn't it, in itself, beneficial?"

"Now you're just trying to be kind."

"Then consider this," Altaira said. "Maybe, you're so focused on finding someone to share your heart you're overlooking the very prize you seek."

Calpri considered what Altaira said. Another thought niggled in the back of her mind that maybe Altaira said something more prophetic than the obvious. "So I'm trying too hard, am I?" Calpri asked. "Perhaps I should sit back and enjoy the journey."

Altaira smiled broadly and patted Calpri's thigh. "Yes, my dear, you should definitely enjoy the journey. Besides, you need to rest up. After saving us at the magic-hating village, I feel you're a welcome warrior in any battle awaiting us at Zheirger."

"I honestly want to do my part, assistance welcomed or not," Calpri smirked.

"May I make a suggestion?" Altaira asked.

Calpri nodded before adding, "Yes, of course."

"At Zheirger, I suggest forgoing the part where you set everything on fire."

They both laughed. "Yes, I probably shouldn't upset Shei Kareina. I hear she's more formidable than her daughter, and Jahq scares the skirt off me." Calpri gave Altaira another in-depth glance. The seer may be blind, but her insights were remarkable. Calpri realized if nothing else gained on this trip, she'd always appreciate her friendship with Altaira.

At least, she hoped they were friends.

JAHQ TOOK IN the banquet laid out in the room Grammel escorted them to for their meal with Caldier Maxim. Two other people sat at the table on either side of Maxim, one older woman, and one younger. From the resemblance they shared, Jahq believed them to be mother and child—the small flame of her station under the former Caldier, Jurquette, tattooed on the younger woman's cheek.

"Ah, Shei Jahq," Maxim said, standing and waving them into the room. "Please sit." He motioned to the woman on his right, "This is my wife, Ellona and my daughter, Cannau."

She flinched at the use of the title of Shei. "It's simply Jahq. Titles were for my parents. These are my companions." Jahq introduced them as they took seats at the table. "We appreciate your hospitality."

No sooner had they taken their places, than the servants came around with the offerings for their meal. Unsure what they should or shouldn't share with the Caldier and his family, the unspoken consensus limited topics of conversation to pleasantries about Iskarr and the rumors heard throughout Kellshae. Until the last course.

"Aren't you afraid?" Cannau asked, her gaze pinning Jahq as if daring her to look away.

"What should I be afraid of?" Jahq asked. She suspected she knew what Cannau meant.

"Cannau, don't," Ellona said, her tone curt in warning.

"I'm afraid every day," Cannau said, ignoring her mother. "Women, and some men, look at me with disgust. Most men see the tattoo and assume I'd willingly open my legs for them." Cannau snorted. "Because, of course, it was my decision and not a directive from our Iskarrian sovereign to submit to his atrocity of a ruling. This reaction is from our own people, fellow Iskarrians. As such, not many look upon me as a wife. I'll only be worthy of being a mistress, or whore." Maxim's face turned red, Ellona gasped. "How can you travel anywhere in Kellshae and not meet the same humiliation and contempt?"

Maxim cleared his throat. "I'm sure the matter isn't as dire as you perceive it, my dear."

"Quite the contrary, Caldier," Gionne said. Jahq hadn't an answer anyway. "Cannau perceives correctly." Gionne stared at Jahq with intense sadness. "Whereas I've recently witnessed the merit of hiding away to stay safe, you're only punishing yourself, Cannau. People see what they wish, not always what is true, and we cannot control the actions of others." Gionne turned to Cannau. "As for Jahq, her heart eclipsed her fear." Jahq concentrated on not allowing

her surprise to reflect on her features. Was Gionne learning to understand the difficulties the tattoo presented?

“How do you mean?” Cannau asked.

“We’re all aware of the resurgence of magic in Kellshae, and the factions killing or enslaving those with magic. Yet, ignoring the dangers to herself, Jahq embarked on this mission to bring Altaira and Calpri safely to Zheirger Keep and bring news of the mercenary activities to her parents.”

Ellona fixed her attention on Jahq. “Does Sher Karr make these demands of you?”

“I thought your father was dead,” Cannau said. “Though I will always be grateful for his freeing Iskarr.”

Jahq shook her head. “No, no pressure from either parent. And Papa is quite alive.” She knew not all territories in Kellshae knew Sher Karr was, in fact, Shei Kareina; or, believed Karr, male warrior of Gradyln, killed at the Pool of Promise. Jahq had no intention of changing an opinion or clarifying beliefs to soothe wounded feelings. At least in Zheirger, a woman could find and explore her potential.

Maxim said, “I’m glad you’ve done so well, but you should seriously consider hiring a man to protect you. Cannau speaks true. There are more dangers in the world than a speedy death, especially for a woman.” He shook his head. “Call me old-fashioned, but it’s disheartening to see women parading in public wearing men’s clothing.”

I’d like to call you something stronger than old-fashioned, Jahq thought. Archaic or primitive came to mind. Instead, she said, “It saddens many of us to resort to the necessity, but we need to make concessions for the greater good.” Some women, like Aunt Fleuren, were comfortable in skirts. Women like Gionne, Papa, and even she found pants by far the best garb for comfort.

Jahq thought it best to end the evening while they were cordial and would’ve excused their group, but Calpri had stood suddenly and knelt on the side of Altaira, holding one hand. Everyone in the room grew silent: Maxim and family in frightened surprise; her group realizing Altaira was in the throes of a vision.

Altaira’s milky gaze darkened to a dusky grey. The hand not held by Calpri clutched the table edge so tight her fingers whitened. “To the mountains...through the blackness of men...the coming darkness nestled in the Void.” She tilted her head studying something only Altaira could see. “Answers come...fight the Void or die.” Altaira’s eyes returned to their milky color, her body slumping, only Calpri’s extended arm against her chest kept Altaira from sliding to the floor.

The tension in the room grew to suffocating. None of them spoke or moved and Jahq decided this would be the best opportunity to escape to their rooms. She stood. “Caldier Maxim, we thank you for your hospitality. I believe it best if my companions and I retire.”

Caldier Maxim cleared his throat. “If you head to the mountain, you’ll need to pass the Xarkin Forest. You won’t be able to take horses or wagon.”

“How far before we need to lose them?” Gionne asked.

“Just less than four leagues,” Maxim said. “There’s a farm on the outskirts and you can make arrangements for a driver to meet you on the other side at a designated location.”

“Very well,” Jahq said. The others stood and joined her. “Goddess be with you all.”

When they got to their rooms, Jahq turned to Calpri. “Could you please share with Gionne tonight? I don’t suspect any danger, but news of the Oracle could bring unwarranted attention.” It was more a statement than a request, and Calpri’s nod confirmed she understood as much.

“Wouldn’t it best to have a warrior look over her tonight?” Gionne asked, her tone implying a note of hurt.

“If my magic isn’t sufficient, we’ll need your skills to settle any attack.” Jahq didn’t want to mention her discomfort with Gionne’s newfound understanding of matters. She wanted peace to think. Jahq’s emotions were in enough turmoil.

The darkness from the Void Altaira spoke of would be a far easier battle than dealing with Gionne on a personal level.

Chapter Twenty-eight

THE WAGON AND horses were left at the location Maxim told them about. Only essentials were loaded into backpacks. Less than a fortnight remained before they'd arrive at the Keep. Gionne looked forward to getting home—and handing over her burdens. She flinched at her use of the word. Troublesome on occasion, yes, but hardly burdens. There had been moments on this journey Gionne had enjoyed, moments when things were as before. Comfortable.

It reminded her of better times. Times like five years ago when she first met Jahq. Originally Jahq teased her about her gangly body, but always with a soft touch to her arm as if to dispel possible hurt. Good times, when they lay curled before the fire in Jahq's room at Zheirger reading books from the massive library. A time with family, laughter and—

She shouldn't let her mind wander, past or present. The hair on the back of Gionne's neck prickled. Someone was following them. They continued on and for over an hour, Gionne sensed hostile people following.

Chayboen's gaze darted in and around them. "Where's Zuena?" Chayboen mouthed silently. As Gionne peered into the growing darkness of the forest around them, the silence was broken.

From the side of the road, well within the forest, Gionne heard the sound of a misplaced foot on dry tinder. Gionne drew her sword, noting Chayboen also pulled Cerno free and prepared for the inevitable attack.

Gionne and Chayboen slipped into defensive positions. A dozen shabbily clothed men jumped out of the forest. Gionne's group was surrounded—and outnumbered.

Calpri latched onto Altaira's arm more tightly, tugging her until they stood protectively behind Chayboen's position. Jahq moved behind Gionne's. The men didn't appear to be starving despite the worn condition of their clothing. Had it only been Chayboen and herself, Gionne wouldn't have hesitated to engage the men, but Gionne had three women to consider. Four if she could figure out where Zuena had gone. Striking first might not be the smartest course of action.

"We mean only to be on our way toward home," Gionne said to the group in general. "We've nothing of value if you intend to rob us." She didn't expect honesty to turn the men away but thought it worth a try. Again, she considered the success of engaging them in combat, but several had swords, and four of them had longbows, arrows braced and trained on them. Could Jahq use her magic barrier? Even as she thought of it, Gionne felt the change in the air around them as Jahq erected a barrier.

"I disagree," came a voice from the back, still in shadow. As the men shifted, Gionne heard a sharp intake of breath from Jahq. A heavy-set, middle-aged man with grey hair so thin his scalp was visible even in the waning light, stepped forward. He held a club clutched in one meaty hand—from his other fist hung the limp form of Zuena. Gionne noted the plants peaking from the top of Zuena's backpack, the fresh soil on her hands. Zuena must have paused to pick fresh herbs and such for meals or medicinal use when she was discovered. "The return of Jahq is valuable indeed."

“Faas,” Jahq whispered behind Gionne. She moved closer when Gionne tensed to retrieve Zuena.

“You know him?” Gionne asked, not taking her eyes from him.

Jahq’s voice trembled when she answered. “He was Humkyte’s manservant.”

“Still am,” Faas said. “Bringing you back into the fold will earn me needed compensation.” He leered at each woman in turn. “This is quite the bounty indeed. Turn around and follow the road to the left.”

“I don’t—” He successfully silenced Gionne when he raised the club and aimed it at Zuena’s head.

“Gionne,” Jahq whispered from close behind her. Gionne sensed when the shield dropped.

Gionne knew Jahq didn’t want to face Humkyte again, or the negative intent any of these men planned for them. She also understood Jahq’s plea in the whispering of her name. A glance to Chayboen garnered a barely perceptible shake of the head. An evaluation of their position, the men and weapons surrounding them, and the position of Zuena, Gionne knew Chayboen confirmed it was too risky.

Gionne didn’t believe going with these men was a good idea. She also recognized Jahq’s skill, good as it was, couldn’t protect all of them without sacrificing Zuena, or any one of them if somehow separated. Gionne couldn’t do that. Her gut churned as she slid her sword back in the scabbard. When she shifted toward Jahq, Gionne saw the fear radiating there. Gionne prayed she’d figure a way for them all to escape unharmed, and soon. The notion of failing to protect—Her stomach threatened to revolt. Sweet goddess, allow me to be able to protect them.

When Chayboen returned Cerno to its scabbard, two of the men took their weapons from them. “Not that I don’t trust you.” Faas snorted. “Who am I kidding? Of course, I don’t trust you.” He dropped Zuena at his feet. “Pick her up and get moving.”

Chayboen and Gionne both took an arm, carefully lifting Zuena between them, and marched forward as the banished Iskarrians formed a circle around the group. The men continued to ogle the women. Altaira was the only one who didn’t have to see the looks, but she suspected the Oracle felt the rake of eyes in leering perusal.

She didn’t have to touch Jahq to know, no matter how hard she tried to hide the trembling, she was frightened. Faas wasn’t hiding his lascivious gaping as his gaze seldom stopped the vulgar scrutiny of Jahq’s body. Gionne was proud of Jahq for walking as if on a leisurely stroll, rather than the dangerous march into the unknown. Calpri wasn’t managing as well as Altaira and Jahq, tears visibly pouring down her cheeks.

After what seemed like hours, but probably was less than a quarter-hour, Gionne realized they were nearer to the mountains, which meant closer to home. A rock face on the right appeared as the trees lining the road began to thin out. Her nose picked up the scent of fire before she noticed the orange-colored glow ahead. From a tree in the middle of the road hung a—

Her stride faltered. Zuena moaned at the unexpected jarring, Chayboen followed her gaze and paused, causing Calpri, Altaira, and Jahq to focus also. The only one of them to react with more than a horrified gasp was Jahq.

Balling a fist, Jahq slammed it into Faas’ jaw. “You sick sons of bitches haven’t changed. I’ll kill you all for this.” Faas, one hand rubbing his jaw, slammed his club into Jahq’s abdomen, forcing her to her knees.

Gionne stared at the naked corpse of a woman barely eighteen years old. Her body had been beaten, whipped, and covered in dried blood that indicated various manners of sexual abuse. Gionne released Zuena, dropped to her knees and retched. Jahq regained her feet and rushed to

her. Stomach back under control, Gionne stared into Jahq's eyes, and whispered, "We'll kill them together."

A SHUDDER RAN through Jahq as they were escorted closer to a well-lit area and saw the bloody, bruised and naked body of a woman hanging from a thick pole. To say rage filled Jahq was an understatement, and it grew with each step beyond the corpse. The guard following her continued to poke his weapon into her lower back when Jahq's step faltered or slowed. About to spin around and reprimand him, she hesitated as Faas led them into the clearing. Jahq's heart stopped and her blood chilled in her veins. Sitting at the far end of the clearing, elevated on a dais, was Humkyte.

Faas pushed Jahq once more in the back. Jahq stared unbelieving and full of rage at Humkyte. Obviously, being reduced to poverty level hadn't taught him anything.

"I see you made it," Humkyte said. "I heard rumors of you visiting the area. I didn't believe it of course. Love when I'm proved wrong," he said.

Jahq knew he hated to be proven wrong. "Why, Humkyte? Why'd you do this?" Jahq asked. All she could see was the bloodied torn body hanging from the tree. "What's with the gruesome exhibition?"

"You know full well I've been exiled. I've had to take matters into my own hands." A myriad of expressions crossed Humkyte's face and ranged from startled, angered, and then satisfaction. "I finally have you back. You shall pay for getting me exiled."

"Something you deserved, though I had no part," Jahq said. "I only recently learned the truth of your situation. I always supposed you were living your dream as Caldier. Can't say I'm sorry to hear the truth of the situation."

"I did nothing more than my duty," he said. "You, on the other hand, have shirked yours, and still have the gall to return to the fold."

"I'm not returning—"

"I intend to get my due before I kill you." He glanced at the others behind her, then to Faas, who'd put all the weapons he'd confiscated from them in the tent behind Humkyte. "Thank you for bringing her. Ah, and for more playthings."

"I only serve to please, my lord," Faas said. "What will you have me do with her?"

"Now that we've lost one of our young ladies, we'll definitely have to make use with what the forest offers us." Humkyte stepped down from his dais, sauntering toward Jahq as if he were still a grand Lord.

Because Zuena had yet to regain consciousness, Jahq hesitated to start anything that could further harm her or the others. "What are your intentions Humkyte?"

"As I've said, I have lost my entertainment." He pointed absently toward the dead woman. "No one goes against me. She refused my attentions, so I punished her."

"How came she to be here?" Jahq asked. "Do you even know or remember her name?"

"How? Very simple, and you know my tastes, and how I like a bit of a fight in a woman."

Jahq automatically touched the white outline of her tattoo. "Yes, I know." She cringed. "I never remembered you so cruel, but I seem to have underestimated your perversity."

"Well," Humkyte said, "You'll find out soon enough, as you'll suffer the same fate." He crossed his arms over his puny chest. "You're mine by Iskarr law, to do with as I please. When I'm finished with you, my men will have a chance to partake of your goods."

From behind Jahq, Gionne cursed, and exclaimed, “You wicked son of a—”

“Enough,” he said. “I will have you, Jahq, in the best possible condition for my entertainment. So, you shall rest.” Jahq suspected he’d been drinking heavily. If one matter was common knowledge in Iskarr, it was that even slightly inebriated, Humkyte was non-productive in the sex department. Intoxication also made him tire easily, so he was seldom able to keep up torture for any length of time.

“As you can see we have it perfect here. The men, as is right and proper, are in charge. The women do our bidding and are available when we need them. And they all answer to me,” Humkyte said.

“So you became a little tyrant after all.” Jahq sneered. “Do they all agree to your rules willingly? Or, are they too frightened to go against you?”

“They know a proper ruler, something you never understood, and the proper caste system. But, if the arrogant Sher Karr still cared for you, why are you here, unprotected? Did your new father get to enjoy the benefits of your training?”

Gionne gave a mumbled oath. Jahq wasn’t about to correct him on her Papa Kareina. She also knew Humkyte was taunting them into doing something reckless, and Gionne was angry enough to respond. “Guess it really doesn’t matter, does it, Humkyte?”

Humkyte waltzed from the dais and stood before her, his nasty, sweaty hand roughly grabbing her chin. “You’ve made me an embarrassment. I don’t care how high and mighty you believe yourself, you’ve reduced me to nothing, taken my title. For that alone you will pay.”

Jahq twisted her chin out of his grip. “No, Humkyte, I will make you pay for what you have done to so many innocents, and especially for simply thinking about your disgusting intentions toward my friends.”

“I seriously doubt it,” Humkyte said.

Jahq glanced at the men and women around them, all under the command of Humkyte. The people looked near starved. The eyes of the women were heavily bruised and sunken from lack of sleep, vacant with lost hope. The men hadn’t suffered as much since they still had the prospect of belittling and destroying anything left of promise in these women.

Humkyte turned to Gionne and the others. “So many lovely faces, so much retribution to take out on each of you.” He glanced to Faas. “Faas and his men need a reward. Since you’ve brought friends...well.”

“No,” Jahq said sternly. “No one touches them tonight.”

“I don’t believe you’re in a position for demands, Jahq.”

“Then we have a problem. If you want me alive and breathing, no one touches any of them.”

“Oh, Jahq,” Humkyte bellowed. “You’d never take your own life.”

Jahq glared at him. “Are you truly willing to take the chance? Willing to bet one of these warriors couldn’t assist to save us from you, and then kill herself?”

Humkyte considered that for a long time before he turned to Faas. “Take them back into the cages and lock them away. We’ll let them get their rest before the fun begins.” He looked to each of the others behind her. “You all have a reprieve. Once I’ve had her,” he said, jabbing a finger in her direction, “you’re all fair game.”

Roughly, Faas and two other guards led them toward the looming mountain and into a cave. In one gated cell, they placed Chayboen, Altaira, Zuena, and Calpri. Seeing Chayboen as a threat, their guard shackled her to the far wall. Calpri shifted closer to where the men unceremoniously dropped Zuena to the floor and huddled near her with Altaira at her side. Pulling a ring of keys from a hook at his belt, Faas locked the gate.

Faas and one guard took Gionne and Jahq to an identical cell, mere feet away, and at an angle so Jahq couldn't see the others. Her stomach clenched in fear. Faas pointed to Gionne and snarled at the guard with him, "Chain that one." As the guard did, Faas leered at Jahq. "I've always wanted you, and now—"

Jahq noted Gionne fought the guard shackling her. Also making it difficult to fight her imprisonment was watching every step Faas made toward Jahq. They both recognized the intent written on Faas' features.

"You stupid bastard," Gionne said. "Humkyte wants Jahq unharmed."

Faas gave a bitter chortle, never taking his gaze from Jahq, "Then I guess I have to do it my way." Jahq suspected his intent. He turned to the guard near Gionne. "Leave us, close the gate, and go watch so that no one enters the cave. Tell Pelton he can go back to camp. Disregard anything you hear. And don't expect my departure any time soon. I'll be here for a long while."

She could attempt to keep Faas from her by placing a shield between them, but didn't have sight of the others, couldn't protect them if they weren't in her sightline. Jahq didn't know how they would suffer for her actions. At least Faas was the only one they would need to deal with this evening. Maybe, if she confused him enough using her magic as a distraction, he'd tire of her. Jahq didn't want this to happen and wouldn't make it easy for him.

Faas reached for her and Jahq mentally pushed his hand away, taking a small step backward. He frowned and she put up a shield, allowing him close, but not able to make physical contact. Scowling in frustration, Faas made three more attempts to touch her, each fended off without Jahq appearing to do more than flinch with each near touch.

Then her plan backfired. Faas stormed over to the still struggling Gionne and slammed a fist into her left cheek. Jahq screamed as a dazed Gionne dropped to one knee, blood dripping from her mouth. He glared down at Gionne, but his words were meant for Jahq.

"Humkyte wants you in pristine condition, Jahq. He cares little for your friends." He slammed his boot into Gionne's stomach before Jahq erected a shield around Gionne. Fury blazed in his eyes, as he swung toward her again. "I don't know which of you is doing this, but can you protect all your companions? We can start with the blind—"

"No, wait." Jahq wanted to vomit. She couldn't let Altaira or any of them be harmed because of her. "Promise none of you will harm the others if I stop resisting you, Faas."

"I give you my word," Faas said flashing a wicked grin.

"I'm serious about this. If I comply, and you still harm them, I will find a way to make Humkyte suffer for it."

"Big words," he said. "We'd kill you if you did."

"Why would that threat matter to me, once Humkyte is dead?" Jahq clenched her hands until the short nails bit into the flesh of her palm. "Who will lead you then? Who will you follow like the little lap dog you are, asshole?"

Faas stared, gauging her sincerity, probably. Jahq gave a silent prayer of relief. "I won't mark you, but I will get something from you." He stepped closer. Jahq stiffened and moved away. She felt the rough contours of the cave walls against her back. Faas ran his thick, meaty hands from her shoulder to her breast, tightly cupping the full, rounded mound. He squeezed hard, forcing Jahq to bite her tongue to halt her moan of pain. "Yes," he whispered brusquely in her ear, "I've wanted this for quite some time. I always wished I were part of Humkyte's lineage, rather than his manservant. Guess wishes can come true."

Jahq felt the tears of helplessness fall from her eyes. "Shut up, and get it over with."

His lips landed on hers in a bruising, wet kiss. She did nothing to assist him, feeling his hands as they roamed hungrily over her body. Part of her hoped he'd leave marks, something to worry him for the rest of the night, burdened by the imaginings of his punishment at Humkyte's command.

Chapter Twenty-nine

TAELYR SLID TO the floor, pressed his back as far against the wall as he could manage. Wrapping his arms tight around his bent knees, he dropped his head and willed the tears not to fall. Obviously, his will wasn't strong enough because tears fell anyway. Tombik gave Taelyr his final orders. It wouldn't be long now before Belzan's army struck. Months ago, this knowledge wouldn't have concerned him, but that time seemed so very long ago.

After the incident in the forest with Yoshan and Braxis, Taelyr knew what needed to be done. He needed to explain himself. He needed to warn the Keep of what Tombik and Belzan had in mind. But Taelyr was so afraid.

He thought of the look in Yoshan's eyes, learning Taelyr knew about the clearing and her warrior friend. How he'd done nothing. Taelyr sniffed noisily. The time for inactivity was gone. Taelyr cared for Yoshan, and he missed the time they'd spent together. He wanted her respect and the expression of happiness in her eyes when she looked at him, not the disillusionment.

Taelyr's body trembled. He didn't want to be the boy who did nothing. Taelyr intended to make sure Yoshan never looked upon him like that again.

"Please hurry," Taelyr said. He'd sent one of the stable hands for Shei Kareina, but the longer it took the harder it was to maintain his resolve. Should he run? He'd have a home, if you could call it that, with his uncle and his father. But did Taelyr want to live that way? Or did he want to stand on his own two feet, being and thinking like a man? Just as his resolve nearly crumbled completely, the barn door crashed open.

Taelyr expected Kareina to be alone. He was surprised, even mortified, that Yoshan stood beside her Papa. "What did you need, Taelyr?" Kareina asked. Her hand was clenched on her sword hilt. She could run him through—should run him through—but Kareina wouldn't. Well-known as Kareina's temper was, she always gave an opportunity to defend oneself.

"I need to tell you the truth." Taelyr glanced at Yoshan, but she refused to meet his gaze. "I know," Taelyr said, "a part of Belzan and Tombik's plan." Taelyr gulped. "I'm supposed to help make it happen."

Kareina raised an eyebrow. "In what form is this help to come?"

"I know the secret passage," Taelyr said. "I'm supposed to have it opened when the battle begins, so their men can enter the Keep and fight you from inside."

"How are you aware of this?"

Taelyr shrugged. "Boys get bored. We tend to look in places we shouldn't be. I also know about 'em from things I heard from Harksten about the location of other passages within the Keep.

Kareina frowned. "You know Harksten?"

"He joined Belzan's warriors a year after Commander Melrick banished him from the Keep. He's been feeding information to my father."

"And why are you telling me now?" Kareina asked.

Taelyr stared at Yoshan silently begging her to look at him. “Because I’ve lost something very important to me,” Taelyr said. “Something I may never get back, but I at least want to deserve a better opinion.” Taelyr started to move toward Yoshan. Kareina stopped him with a strong hand on his shoulder. He looked at her, hoping she could see the truth in his eyes. “I won’t harm her, Shei Kareina. I just want to say one thing,” Taelyr said. “Then you can throw me in the dungeons and forget me. But she needs to know.”

Yoshan raised her eyes to him. “What is it you wish me to know?”

“I know you told your mothers by now,” Taelyr said. He looked to Kareina and back to Yoshan. “And I don’t blame you for being angry. Or any other feelings. You probably want to hurt me.” His tone took on a pleading quality, but he wanted Yoshan to understand. “Sorry I never told you, or anyone, about that night in the forest. I don’t know where Belzan and Tombik are at the moment. They contact me when they’re nearby with things they want me to do. Since I’m left messages with the meeting times, I know there’s another person aware of their presence near the Keep. But I don’t know who it is. I’ve never helped them hurt anyone.”

“But you never stopped them either,” Yoshan said.

“No, and I deserve to be punished,” Taelyr said. “I didn’t intend to do harm on women. I wanted to live my life alone. Without relying on or being accountable for anyone—until I met you.” He stared at Yoshan and hoped she saw the truth in his eyes. “My mother was hurt by Tombik. She always cared for me, but I believed she’d abandoned me. If she loved me, why didn’t she fight back harder? I don’t want to be Tombik and I don’t want to be Uncle Belzan. Please, Yoshan, if you can’t forgive me, at least trust me. Belzan will attack and soon.”

Kareina crossed her arms over her chest. “All right, Taelyr, tell me what you know.”

It would probably take a while to mend this rift with Yoshan. Taelyr decided not to press any further. Taelyr gained some hope when Yoshan didn’t leave the barn. After a deep breath, he explained Belzan and Tombik’s plan for Zheirger Keep.

Chapter Thirty

GIONNE FELT BURNING pain in her wrists from the metal shackles biting into her flesh. Her face throbbed from his punches, breathing labored from the bruising pain in her stomach from booted kicks. She had to stop this. Gionne didn't know how in her current state, but Jahq could stop him. Why was Jahq not using her power more? Was she afraid for them?

"Get away from her," Gionne snarled at Faas' back. "You heard your ruler, he expects her in pristine condition. If you violate her, you'll have Humkyte to deal with. And I swear, when I'm released, I'll kill you for this." Gionne threw curses at Faas. She wondered if Faas even heard her through his lust-fueled intent.

Faas spun around and stalked toward her. Gionne stood, hoping he'd get close enough for her to break his pathetic neck. Instead, as she turned to gaze at Jahq, Faas took the opportunity to ram his fist in her jaw again. Her head spun. He kicked her squarely in the chest. Gionne again fell to her knees gasping greedily for air. Faas gave three sharp kicks to her lower back, two more to her right hip. She felt disappointed in herself as the edges of her vision darkened as unconsciousness nearly claimed her. Why did she taunt him? She needed to be alert—conscious — to be of any use.

Faas's disgusting laughter echoed through the cave. His words were loud in Gionne's ears. "I can't wait to get the full benefits when Humkyte finally hands you over. I'll enjoy each and every one of you."

Gionne's breathing labored in her bruised chest, she snarled, "I'll kill you before you get a chance, remember?"

Faas snorted. "I seriously doubt it. Nevertheless, you're right. I need to make sure a mark isn't left." He moved back to where he'd left Jahq, who hadn't budged. Faas grabbed Jahq's throat in one hand, his other gripped one of Jahq's hands and pushed it into his pants. "Do it," he demanded of Jahq. "Don't think of doing anything to hurt me because, Humkyte or not, I'll have this moment, and don't care if your friends suffer for you, should you not be able to follow orders."

Jahq didn't fight him. Panic consumed Gionne. She had to get away, had to save Jahq. Gionne screamed when he buried Jahq's hand in his pants, heard the disgusting slap of skin on skin as Jahq assisted Faas in his release. Just when Gionne thought Faas would release Jahq, he pushed her to her knees, and freed himself fully from his pants. No, her mind raged, I can't let this happen!

With blinding rage, Gionne jerked her hands from the shackles, ignoring the burning pain as skin flayed and tore and blood streamed. She launched herself at Faas.

Eyes wide, Jahq flung herself to the left as Gionne and Faas slammed into the rock wall. Unrestrained, and Faas taken by surprise, Gionne threw the first punch ruthlessly into his jaw. Faas staggered backward. Footing regained, Faas dove for Gionne. Smart and quick, despite her injuries, Gionne avoided his heavy swings.

“Not so tough without your club are you, asshole? It’s about time you fight someone who has every ability and intention of fighting back,” Gionne said.

Faas was no competition for Gionne. He managed to get a few hits to land and drew blood from her, but not enough. In her blinding rage, Gionne was ruthless and merciless. When Faas lay in a bloodied heap, Gionne aimed one last kick at his groin. “I don’t know what Lady Jahq has in mind, if you’ll live or not,” Gionne said, “but you’ll not be abusing another woman for quite some time.”

Hands just above her knees, Gionne leaned against the wall taking short breaths so not to aggravate her damaged ribs and organs. Gionne straightened once her breathing was under control.

“Why?” Gionne asked staring questioningly at Jahq. Jahq didn’t seem inclined to answer. “You could have stopped him, why didn’t you?”

Without turning to Gionne, Jahq mumbled, “Does it matter? He intended to get what he did with or without my consent. I couldn’t protect all of you. Would you rather Faas take our pretty, Altaira? No? How about poor, still unconscious, Zuena?” Jahq sighed heavily. “Besides, Gionne, what does it matter? Why the hellfire should you care?”

“Because I—” She stopped. Gionne wanted to say the words, but couldn’t. Ever since Harksten, she’d felt betrayed by Jahq. Knowing the truth only made Gionne feel inadequate in her feelings, undeserving to have them reciprocated. “Because I do care, Jahq, even if you can’t give me the same courtesy.”

Jahq spun to her then, her face red with rage. “What is it you think I’ve done?”

Gionne flushed. “Do you really think we should get into this right now?”

“Why not?” Jahq asked. “Everyone knows I’ve done you a disservice. Just ask Chayboen. Somehow I’ve hurt the mighty Gionne. And you’ve never had the courtesy to tell me what I supposedly did to you. It took a crazy mind-reader to show me what you should have said years ago.”

Gionne slid to the floor glaring up at Jahq. “Fine. Let’s air this now, shall we?” She swallowed against the pain building in her throat. “We had a special night planned, but not special enough for you, or so I thought, believing I came second, to a man.”

“Well, that’s just fine.” Jahq sighed heavily. “Yes, we had a misunderstanding, but knowing the truth makes this worse.”

“Why, Jahq?” Gionne asked. “Why would you never see me? Why didn’t you let me explain?”

“Explain what? Explain why you, who professed to love me, treated me more like a whore than Faas just did, or Berk, like Humkyte will. My mothers’, Uncle Melrick and Aunt Fleuren are the only ones who have never seen or treated—”

Shock consumed her, and Gionne didn’t have a response. One thing was clear. Men didn’t need a reason to do anything when their sole intent revolved around harming women. She needed to explain. “Jahq, I never thought of you as—”

“Regardless,” Jahq said. “It’s done. We’re done. Even if I—” Jahq turned away from her and moved to the cave’s corner. “Get some rest, Gionne.”

“Jahq please—”

“Enough. You and your friends,” Jahq glared in the direction where the others were, “can believe all you want of me. You, Gionne, the way you treated me, hurt more than I believed anything could. Rest,” Jahq said. “We’ll figure this situation out tomorrow.”

Gionne stared down at an unconscious Faas. No, this wasn't the best time to resolve this—if a resolution were possible. "I'll put him in the other cell and bring them in here."

Jahq nodded. "I'll help," she said and took the keys from Faas' belt and followed her.

Gionne dragged Faas by his feet, taking one pain filled step at a time, and dropped him as soon as Jahq opened the gate. As Jahq released Chayboen, Gionne went to the others. "How is everyone?" Calpri and Altaira, huddle on the ground in front of the cot, got to their feet and assisted a groggy looking Zuena to hers. "How are you, Zuena?"

"Sore." Zuena glanced toward Faas. "Is he alive?" Gionne nodded. "Could you help me over there?" Gionne gave a questioning stare, but did as asked. "I'm going to use his energy," Zuena said as she knelt unsteadily beside Faas. She put her hand on the bare flesh of his face, and closed her eyes, as she explained, "I need his energy to assist in my healing. I won't drain enough to hurt him, but he should remain unconscious until morning."

Gionne nodded. "Great. That will be a help." She followed Jahq's movements as she returned, alone and silent, to the other cell.

Chayboen came along to Gionne's side, rubbing at her wrists. "You look like shit."

"Thanks, I endeavor to look my best just for you."

"I appreciate the effort." Chayboen smiled. "I'll take the others over and have a look around. We should probably get some rest before we attempt to break out of here."

"Okay. Zuena and I shall be along shortly," Gionne said. As she waited, Gionne's thoughts churned through what Jahq had said. Gionne had never meant to hurt Jahq. Never knew Jahq felt that way. As Gionne thought back to the farewell letter sent that night, she realized Jahq spoke the truth. Closing her eyes, the vision of Faas with Jahq haunted her. The only consolation to these new worries was that memories of Belzan wouldn't haunt Gionne tonight.

Tired, Gionne prayed when this mission ended, she'd be able to fix the past injuries to Jahq. She only hoped Jahq would forgive her enough to want the same. Gionne was so tired and discouraged of ever doing the right thing, of deserving another's care. Maybe forgiveness wasn't what she needed. Maybe she should simply quit trying.

AS A HAND covered her mouth, Jahq realized she'd fallen asleep despite her best efforts to stay awake. She opened her eyes, prepared to protect herself, and realized Gionne hovered above her.

"It's me," Gionne whispered. "I think it's time to get out of here."

Jahq scanned her cage, realizing the others waited for her as they took stock of each others condition. Zuena seemed much improved. "How are you doing?" Jahq asked. Gionne appeared to still be in some pain. She wondered if Zuena had pushed her limits, with her own injuries present.

Gionne scooted closer to her, her voice low so the other's couldn't hear. "I've had a bit of time to think, and need to speak my piece before we go." Jahq was about to speak, but Gionne placed her hand on Jahq's mouth. "Just listen, please." Gionne swallowed. "I never thought poorly of you in the way you believe. You can hate me for as long as we live, and probably will when I finish. But you've treated yourself as badly as the rest of us." Jahq frowned, her anger building. "I've seen glimpses of your power, and it's more than you let on, isn't it?" Jahq nodded. "Yet, you won't use it to defend yourself."

Jahq pulled Gionne's hand away. "Others could be harmed if I fought," Jahq whispered harshly.

"You don't think we're hurt knowing what is happening and unable to stop it?" Gionne growled. "If you ask the women behind me, I bet they'd agree with me that any retribution against us from you defending yourself against these assaults would be worth it." Gionne sighed heavily. "But I think a part of you believes you somehow deserve to be treated as you are, and not just because of the tattoos, although the negative self-appraisal may have started there. Fight, Jahq, and let us worry about subsequent reprisal." Gionne's eyes watered. "You may believe me and others treat you like a whore, but the reality of it is, you treat yourself more like a whore than we do."

The anger Jahq felt chilled with the last words. Could Gionne be correct? She may have been too sick from iron poisoning to fight Berk, but she could have fought Faas. After all, Faas had told his men to wait outside and ignore anything they heard inside. Could she have stopped Faas from beating Gionne? Maybe it was time for her to put a stop to the brutality because of her markings, because she was a woman.

Enough.

It was time Jahq took control of her own destiny, her own body. She'd start with Humkyte and Faas. Vengeance would begin now.

Gionne must have sensed the change to her mood. "That's my girl. Let's go rattle Humkyte's cage a little.

"What they'd planned for the day is about to drastically change," Jahq snarled. "I've had enough, and Humkyte is about to pay on behalf of everyone on my bad side."

Jahq stormed to the cave entrance, trying not to notice Gionne's haunted gaze following her progress, a hint of defeat written on her face. It was obvious to Jahq that Gionne had slept little. Between her beating and exhaustion, Gionne appeared ready to collapse. Jahq wanted to apologize for the harshness of her words the prior evening, not because she didn't believe them, but because of the emotional damage it caused. She should thank Gionne for helping her to see reason, but wasn't ready to acknowledge how much Gionne had helped her.

Jahq was tired herself. Tired of being used, tired of being seen as someone—something—less than human. She believed deep in her soul Gionne had never meant to hurt her so badly, thinking of her as a whore. But Gionne should have spoken to her initially, never put hurt words to paper. She'd said enough last night, but they both had left the conversation too long. The matter wasn't finished, not by a long shot. But it had to be tabled for now.

In the cool morning dampness, Jahq peered out the cave mouth to see the central fire almost burned down, the guards from last night apparently gave up their posts. Men, passed out in drunken exhaustion, lay in various places and positions around the fire pit. No movement came from the small tent erected behind the dais. Humkyte's tent was where Jahq would begin to release her frustration.

"What's the plan?" Gionne asked.

"I'm about to make these men sorry for getting on my last nerve." As the others joined them at the cave entrance, Jahq glanced at each in turn. Chayboen didn't meet her gaze. Altaira and Calpri stood silently in the rear, waiting for word of how to proceed. Zuena, conscious and healed, mimicked Jahq in her readied stance. Once they all huddled close, Jahq explained the plan.

Chayboen and Gionne moved behind Humkyte's tent. Zuena stayed at Jahq's side. Calpri was to hide with Altaira outside of camp. Once in place, Jahq called, "Come on out you slimy dog. I have a little gift for you, Humkyte."

Humkyte, fully expecting himself in charge of the situation after delegating duties to Faas, exited his tent with his ghastly swagger. Then the truth of the situation coalesced in his vision. Not that he seemed concerned. "What the—"

Jahq took another step closer. The things she wanted to do to him, to people like him... All for the lives of innocent women and children they destroyed, for all men like Humkyte, Belzan, Berk, and Faas had done.

"I've decided," Jahq said. "You'll have to work for your release. I believe you're due a taste of your own medicine."

Some of his bluster left him, Jahq noticed. Still Humkyte took a step toward her with his hands on hips. "What do you plan to do, bitch?" He browsed the area, assessing the situation, and Jahq knew what he'd find. His men were awaking from their drunken state. Those who hadn't done so were forcefully awakened by those closest to them. The women—prisoners all at least to Jahq's mind—hovered in a group.

Humkyte watched her with annoyed patience. "You have a puny bunch of girls. Of course, my men took you all captive once already. Bring on your best, whore."

"I intend to, Humkyte," Jahq said. "Your domain is about to fail. Again." Eyes blazing, Jahq mentally shoved him backward. The telekinetic power increased in her rising fury, yet Jahq held it in check. "All of you," she said, pointing to the men. "Move into the cave."

From her peripheral vision, Jahq saw one man coming at her with a raised sword. Gionne tensed, but Jahq had told them not to interfere unless she requested assistance. She saw Chayboen return from retrieving their weapons, and she and Gionne put them on. Jahq allowed the sword-wielding man to get within a matter of inches before psychically picking him up and slamming him to the hard packed ground. He gave a pained groan. Believing her otherwise distracted, Humkyte rushed forward. She did the same to him.

"I will not repeat myself," Jahq said, her voice raising in her anger. "This is the last time I request nicely, Humkyte. Either you go to the cave with all your little minions following, or I kill each of you where you stand. If you go to the cave, you'll live."

Jahq expected they wouldn't give in easily, but she had hoped they might. She held her ground, patiently waiting while three men engaged Chayboen and Gionne and were dispatched without difficulty.

"Aw, come on, grow a pair." Zuena pouted. Chayboen shook a finger at Zuena, but not until after her grin. Humkyte's men appeared reluctant to continue even a half-hearted fight. None seemed to harbor any will to engage. Maybe Humkyte's tyranny had sucked the fight out of them. The women all scattered into the forest's depths.

All the men were rounded up and crammed into the cage that held them last night. Chayboen locked the cage's gate and handed the key to Jahq.

"What are you going to do?" Chayboen asked.

Gionne strode from the cage where they'd left Faas, she stood to the side of Jahq, not meeting her gaze. Gionne no longer appeared to maintain a wish to talk. It seemed, Jahq thought dismally, they were back to the silent treatment.

Chayboen said, "You don't appear to be finished."

Jahq squeezed her eyes closed. She focused on the magic around her, the energy coursing through her, through the mountain, and knew what must be done. “Everyone, please go outside.” All but Chayboen and Gionne complied.

“Are you sure you don’t want to share?” Chayboen asked.

Gionne watched her with her haunted eyes. Jahq gave a wicked grin, or at least she hoped the look came across that way. Humkyte’s men were strangely silent. Humkyte moved close to the bars, his hands clenched tight upon the metal.

“Stupid bitch, what do you think you’re doing? I’ll get out of here. When next I see you, you’re dead.”

“Fine words, Humkyte. Unfortunately, I’ve plans to staunch a war. Then, I propose to take a hike through the Void.” Beside her, Jahq heard Gionne’s loud gasp. She said nothing. “It will be quite some time,” she paused, “if ever again you’ll have an opportunity to gaze your miserable eyes upon me.” Jahq then asked Gionne and Chayboen to wait for her at the cave’s entrance. Jahq dropped the keys at her feet.

“I leave you the keys to the cage,” Jahq said. “Good luck releasing yourself. If you’re able, you’ll live. If you can’t, you’ll surely die. I suggest you use this time to think and reflect upon all you’ve done. All the women whose lives you’ve ruined, the horrors you’ve brought upon so many.” Jahq remembered the woman hanging from the tree outside the camp. “For all those women you’ve killed.”

Humkyte snorted.

“So be it.”

Pulling all the magical energy she could draw from around her, Jahq brought the cave walls tumbling before the entrance. Once it was obliterated, Jahq turned away.

The other’s stared but said nothing, probably frightened of her, of what she could do. Jahq didn’t care. Humkyte was disgusting, but he was small and pathetic. She’d provided him a chance to survive and to save the other men. Whether Humkyte chose it or not, Jahq didn’t care. She didn’t intend to set sight on Humkyte again.

Jahq turned to her small band. “As you know, the safest passage for us is up through the mountain.” Jahq didn’t know what she would find, but from the magic pulsing through her, Jahq worried it might be more than she could handle.

Chapter Thirty-one

AS THE WOMEN moved toward the mountain entrance, a figure in black stepped out of the shadows. Once he stood in the clearing alone, the man pulled his laser sidearm from his hip holster and made his way to where the one called Jahq sealed the cave with the men. Normally he wouldn't interfere, but the situation was changing in this world—controversial orders had come from his command—and he planned to be ready to make the most of the arising situation.

He wasn't the only one, either. A group of them had reached a conclusion on what should happen in Kellshae and Languard, and their superiors never need know. This pathetic group of miscreants wasn't necessary to those plans. Actually, most the people here weren't necessary, but every ruler would need followers, people to do as bid—and this would be his new world.

In his new world, he didn't need pathetic men who prayed on weaker people and couldn't protect themselves or defend themselves without preying on woman and children. Oh, women and children had their places, but he needed men to be warriors who didn't need to resort to such low means, at least not for every instance of conflict. Some of the women, like two or three of Jahq's group, would be perfect in his new regime—if they would comply to his superiority and demands. But that was a matter for another time.

Right now he needed to do what he came for, now the groups had gone off where each needed to go. He stopped in front of the cave, the weak sounds of voices shouting from behind the fallen rock and debris barely heard. He pulled the trigger and the laser stream melded the rock together, making an impenetrable barrier the men would never escape from, even if they did manage to get out of the cages.

Once finished, he turned away and strode to where he'd hidden his hover-disk. Things were going nicely. Just a few more adjustments and this planet would be theirs, his and his brothers-at-arms, for the taking.

THEY ALL FOLLOWED Altaira a short distance away from the collapsed cave entrance before she stopped and raised her sightless gaze to the sky. "It's here." Jahq heard Altaira's earlier premonition repeat in her head.

You must bring the darkness to light.

She still didn't know what that meant, not certain she wanted to understand. Sometimes you had to leave things alone. Jahq stepped closer, felt the strangeness of the rock and realized magic was involved. Problem with this magic was the strangeness—a sickness—different from any magic Jahq had encountered before.

Altaira shifted aside to allow Jahq room, and whispered, "I don't want to go inside, either. But I believe it's important we do so."

"This is the darkness you told me about?" Jahq asked. At Altaira's slow nod, Jahq took a steadying breath and stepped forward. She didn't know what to expect, but the slow slide of the

mountain wall creating an opening wasn't one of them. When an opening three feet wide by eight feet tall appeared, Jahq moved forward, but Gionne stepped in front of her. "Let me go first, please."

Jahq nodded.

Gionne took the lead as they entered the cave.

The interior was dark, but a red glow from below illuminated enough to make out their surroundings. The stone steps led down to the strange red glow at the bottom. The entrance was about ten feet wide and not more than six feet above their heads. Carefully, they all followed Gionne in their dissent.

Jahq noticed the walls were smooth and shiny, but not from the same stone as the mountain. When Jahq reached out a hand, it was cool to her touch, much as any cave would be.

Thirty steps later, they reached the bottom, where they found what appeared to be another strange doorway. This one had a strange box at the top that showed an "L" in red. On either side of this box about two feet away were strange rectangular shapes.

Jahq tentatively placed her palm on the doorway. "It feels cold, like steel, but not like any steel I know." On the left side of the door was a small circle of a dimmer red with an arrow pointing up.

"What is this place?" Chayboen asked.

"I don't know." Calpri said. "Does calling it creepy count as an answer?" At the top of the stairway, the light from outside was suddenly cut off, and a clanking sound echoed in the space surrounding them. "Sweet goddess," Calpri squeaked. "Tell me that wasn't my fault because of a bad joke." The rectangular shapes flashed, sputtered, then remained lit.

There was nothing to show a means—no doorknobs—to open the door in front of them. Jahq stood before it, as she did outside, and nothing happened. Could opening the door, Jahq wondered, be as simple as pushing the arrow? If it were, she'd have to be the one to test the theory. With her pointer finger trembling, Jahq touched the area of the circle. Nothing happened. Then a disembodied female voice spoke. It sounded like it came from everywhere, as the steel door slid to the side with a slight groan. "Please enter the elevator."

All of them stiffened.

The voice repeated, "Please enter the elevator."

The square chamber, a small gap on the ground separating the outside from the inside, filled with light. The bottom half of this inner cubicle had a strange cloth-like material covering the floor. From the middle of the ceiling was a mirrored material, reflecting six expressions varying from confusion to fear. Hesitantly, Jahq entered. When nothing happened to her, Jahq waved the others inside.

"What is your destination?" the voice asked.

Jahq shrugged. The question repeated so Jahq said, "The top?" The door immediately slid shut. The floor beneath them began to vibrate. Jahq noticed on the side of the wall by the door another series of circles with numbers. She wondered if she should have selected something else. These circles lit up apparently alerting how far they propelled upward. Only a minute passed before the box slowed, then stopped. The doors slid open.

This time, Gionne was the first to exit. Sword drawn, Gionne advanced with deliberate stealth. As they each exited the moving box, the light began to fill section by section to show a massive open area, also made of the strange, shiny, mock stone. Centered in the room was a strange chair with a large, black, square with multiple white colored glass lights blinking in an undecipherable pattern.

“By the goddess,” Chayboen said. “What in hellfire is this?”

A question no one expected would be answered. Until another disembodied voice spoke, this one male. “Step forward. Step forward.” As the voice spoke, a six-by-six-inch square, just above midway on the box, lit with the face of an elderly man. “Who has come for treatment?”

Gionne stood protectively before the group and addressed the face. “Who are you?”

The face responded with, “What is the nature of your business?”

“We have no business,” Gionne said. “We’re trying to get out to the other side of mountain. Do you know the way?”

“If you have been brought here, there is an agreement. One of you must accept treatment.”

“What kind of treatment?” Gionne asked. She took a tentative step forward and reached out to touch the face with the tips of her fingers. “It’s cold to the touch,” Gionne said. “I don’t feel flesh.”

With a snort the face said, “That is rather rude. You don’t see me freely touching you.”

Chayboen stepped forward. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Why are you here, if not for treatment?”

“We told you. We need the exit,” Gionne said.

“What is this place?” Jahq asked.

The face stared directly at Gionne. “One of you must accept treatment. Then you’re entitled to ask questions.”

Against her better judgment, her inner voice screaming, “don’t do it,” Jahq moved closer to the box. “Sir, we are new here. Please explain the meaning of treatment.”

“My purpose is to gather emotional data. Before leaving this room,” the face looked at each of them in turn, “one must supply me with an emotional memory. All of you volunteering to provide would also be acceptable.”

Gionne growled. “And how in hellfire are we to do that?”

The face smirked. “Sit in the chair. I will conduct the extraction.”

“All we have to do is sit in the chair?” Jahq asked. “Nothing more?”

“The procedure is simple,” the face said to Jahq. “I do the work.”

So many questions raced through Jahq’s mind. She blurted a few in rapid succession. “Who are you? Where are we? Why do you need this emotion memory?”

“Has hearing loss or comprehension become a problem since last I was activated?” the face asked, exasperation in its tone. “I collect data.”

“How does sitting in the chair accomplish this?” Jahq asked. “Where does the memory go?”

The box-face made beeping and whirring sounds. “It goes into the processor. Really,” the face said, “if you don’t know the basics why are you here?”

“Strange accident,” Calpri said.

“What are you specifically?” Gionne asked.

The box-face gave an expression of distaste. “I am called POE, Processor of Emotion. My creators thought the acronym cute. The original intent of my programming is to gather data from humans, their emotional experiences and compile the results for effects on future performance.”

“Whose performance were you intended to gather?” Chayboen asked.

“My specialty is military. I’ve even gathered data on many of the scientists. I’ve compiled data on the effects of their work as it relates to their decision-making.”

Jahq shook her head. Programming? Scientists? How was any of this possible? The more the box spoke, the more confused she became, and suspected the others were as well. “Much as I’d love this to make sense, I don’t see how it can.” To her companions, she said, “I feel the energy

here, but it is not the same as magic's energy. It's different," she paused, shrugged. "I don't know exactly how, just different."

"I don't think any of us should chance it." Gionne's gaze darted around the room in apprehension. "We need to look for another way out."

"I don't think we'll find one," Altaira said.

"We have to give it a try," Zuena said. "That...thing...can't be safe."

"Can't we just go back the way we came?" Calpri asked.

"The doors won't open any longer," POE said. "But try, if you must. I've nothing but time."

Ignoring POE, they spread out into the vast space, looking for an exit. Calpri tried to reactivate the moving box with the L and the numbers. All they seem to find in their exploration was layers of dust on the stone floor. No more lights or strange boxes for doorways, no other way out. This confused Jahq. Would they exit the mountain in the same box they'd come up in? Was the box—the female voice called it an elevator—locked until POE received the memory he requested? After wasted moments, they all gathered back at the box and the frightening chair.

Jahq sighed wearily. "One of us needs to sit in the chair."

Chayboen growled. "And who do you suggest that person be?"

"Myself, of course," Jahq said.

"Why you?" Gionne asked. A myriad of emotions flashed across her face and Jahq fought the urge to touch and comfort her. Damn it, why had that response returned?

"I'm the most logical," Jahq said.

Gionne scowled. "How do you figure?"

"Be reasonable, Gionne. I'm the most expendable. Chayboen has her goddess. The Keep needs Altaira, who needs Calpri. Zuena has healing gifts necessary to the Keep and her extended family." She glanced at Zuena. "I don't think Trux will appreciate anything happening to her, blood-born or not. You're an important warrior, Gionne. Thus, I'm the one who'll sit in the chair."

"But you don't know what's going to happen," Gionne said, her voice trembled.

Jahq gave a wan smile. "I know what won't happen if I don't. We won't get out of this room." She moved closer to Gionne, her voice a whisper. "And, as we don't know what type of emotional memory this strange contraption will take, you of all people will not sit here."

"But Jahq—"

"No, Gionne," Jahq said quietly. "Your emotions are too new and too painful. I can't subject you of all people to this device."

Tension marred Gionne's features. She hissed, "You aren't expendable."

"My loss won't be as heavily felt."

"We'll find another way," Gionne said. "There has to be another way."

Jahq reached into the space between them and squeezed Gionne's hand, hoping she would accept Jahq's reassurance. "We don't have time to find another way. I don't feel anything untoward will happen, Gionne. Although I don't wish to air my memories for all to see, we both know I'm the best suited for this. The longer we delay, the longer it takes us to get home."

When it appeared Gionne would continue to argue, Jahq climbed into the chair. She no sooner sat down when straps darted out from the strange device at her wrists, ankles, and waist. The chair reclined and another device shot from either side of the headrest, latching on to Jahq's forehead and clamping it secure to the chair.

"The extraction will begin," the face said. As POE looked on, the box around him made more whining noise. "Starting interface." At that, a thin needle inserted itself into Jahq's temple. She

gave an alarmed screech. The sharp pain lessened by the surprise of it. “Interface complete.” POE addressed Jahq. “Subject needs to relax.”

“Easy for you to say,” Jahq said through gritted teeth. “You’re not the one being tortured.” Although the word was a little harsh for what was happening. She’d been tortured and this was nothing in comparison—so far. Jahq needed the others, especially Gionne, to remain calm. Jahq did her best to follow POE’s request and relax.

She tried not think of anything in particular. Jahq could feel a strange sensation from her temple, as if the needle knew exactly what it searched for. Just when her heartbeat quickened, Jahq realized POE had selected a memory. Jahq heard gasps from the others as, various shades of light appeared on the walls.

Jahq barely controlled her temper. The closer she stormed to Harksten, the more difficult it became, watching him open the back door to his quarters even after she’d called out, “I’d like to have a word with you Harksten.”

Harksten sneered. “Have no time for you, and I don’t care whose daughter you are.” He stepped inside.

Before the door closed, Jahq pushed through. As with most rooms in the barracks, even those of senior warriors, the area was small. Harksten had nearly every part of the space littered with filthy clothes, the smells of old sweat and dirt permeated the air.

“This is between you and me. My parents have nothing to do with it.”

“Then speak your piece and leave,” Harksten said. “Got better things to do than deal with the rantings of an irate woman.”

Jahq shook her head. “You don’t know irate yet. We need to talk about Kez.”

“I have nothing to say.” He stood belligerent before her, arms crossed, his light brown hair coated with dust from the practice field. Harksten was a plain looking man, everything about him average, from height and build to the dull brown of his eyes. Jahq puzzled what it was about him Kez found so remarkable, other than a young girl’s infatuation. She couldn’t imagine it was anything about him as a person. Maybe Harksten surpassed average on the sparring fields.

“Fine. Don’t say anything,” Jahq said, “but you will do something. You’ve defiled a child and impregnated her. It is your duty as Senior Trainer of Zheirger Lead Guard and as a human being.”

Harksten gave a bitter laugh. “If ridiculous words are to sway me, they aren’t working. The child got what she wanted—the attentions of a grown man for a night or two.”

“Grow men would know better,” Jahq spat. “And, we agree Kez is a child?”

“Age has no significance when a female throws herself at a man. I repeat, she got what she wanted,” he snorted, uncrossing his arms. “Maybe a little more than she intended, but she’ll remember our time together every time she looks upon her brat. Kez got the best of the bargain, believe me.”

Fueled by his unconcern for a helpless girl and the general despicableness being male afforded some, Jahq released her temper. She closed the distance between them and slapped him hard across the face. Harksten responded by pushing her backward. With pure instinct, Jahq used her kinetic ability to lift him off his feet and throw him into a chair, which subsequently toppled over with a loud crash.

Jahq might have apologized for her rash action if Harksten hadn’t pulled himself to his feet and rushed her. She blocked him by raising a personal shield of energy before he landed any physical blow. Gauging his fury, she responded with an equal amount of her own. This time,

Jahq's power raised Harksten from his flooring, slammed him into a wall, and her invisible power constricted his throat.

"Kez will not suffer alone. You're a rapist and insufferable beyond imagining. I'll have your ranking for this."

Harksten managed to get enough air into his lungs to spit out, "And, I'll make you pay for this indignity. Damned magic wielders should all be locked up, killed even."

Jahq ignored the taunt, though she wondered if anyone knew his true feelings about the majority of Zheirger's occupants, or if the comment was merely a product of rage against her. "You should be happy to support your own offspring." She loosened her mental clamp at his throat, but didn't free the rest of him.

"There's no way to know it's mine, and I refuse to acknowledge it. How do I know the little tart hasn't slept with others?"

"Because I've said so should be enough. All will know the defiler is you." Jahq concentrated, pulling him away from the wall just enough for him to feel free before she smashed him into it again. "You can spout whatever rationalization makes you feel good, Harksten, but you'll honor the codes of Zheirger's guard. Either accept the responsibility for your actions, or I'll have you thrown from the Keep."

Even in light of his current—and probably uncomfortable—position, Harksten refused to acknowledge himself defeated. "I'm important to the Keep and Commander Melrick. You can't get all high-and-mighty and so easily be rid of me."

Jahq shook her head sadly. "That's where you're wrong. Melrick has honor. Nothing can justify what you've done. If you do not own up like a man, you'll be relieved in disgrace." Jahq drew back on her magic, and Harksten fell, the thud from his dropped weight vibrating through the flooring, as she headed for the door. She could hear him gulping for air. Jahq couldn't feel sorry for him—or his kind.

"This isn't over, bitch," Harksten yelled. "I won't be the only one who pays for what you've just done. You had no right to disrespect me bodily."

Jahq wheeled around and glared. "Disrespect bodily? What do you think you've done to a fourteen-year-old child? Do what you must, Harksten. I've had worse at the hands of men such as yourself. You'd be surprised what I can survive."

"Don't be too sure you've seen the worst of it," Harksten mumbled.

Jahq, flushed from anger, and upset with herself for losing control of her magic, stormed out Harksten's door.

The images on the surrounding walls dimmed and blinked out, the room went back to its original state. The needle drew away from her temple, the chair rose to its original position, and the restraints retracted. POE's voice said, "Successful extraction. File saved. The subject is free to leave the chair."

Jahq didn't waste any time getting to her feet. Her legs were wobbly. Zuena wrapped a supporting arm around her waist, taking some of Jahq's weight onto her smaller frame.

"That's an experience I'd rather not repeat," Jahq said. A weak attempt at levity if the sullen faces gaping at her were any indication. She noticed the tears forming in the corner of Gionne's eyes. Jahq wanted to seek comfort in Gionne's arms, but wasn't ready to comfort Gionne, her emotional state too raw, too sensitive. One thought comforted Jahq. Gionne's tears showed that their original spark of love still existed.

Chayboen stood before POE. "Can you show us the exit now?"

“Are you sure no other would like to leave your memories for our further data?” POE asked. “It’s been a while since I’ve had subjects with which to review.” After a pause, he asked, “None are interested?”

“Not in the least,” Calpri said with disgust.

POE’s expression reflected hurt. “Are you sure?”

“Oh, we’re sure,” Chayboen said. “The exit. Now.”

POE’s image sighed. “As you wish. Accessing external exit.” The far back wall made a groaning sound, and then a gap in the smooth stone appeared. It opened about two-feet in diameter, eight feet in height. On the other side was a blue sky for as far as the eye could see.

None of them wasted time as they all made their way through the opening.

Chapter Thirty-two

JAHQ SUCKED IN a lungful of fresh air. It felt good to be out in the sunlight once again. The strangeness of what they'd seen affected them all, none able to figure out what they'd just witnessed. Jahq didn't want an explanation, just to be able to forget the experience—the bizarre foreignness hard to comprehend.

“At least it's still a good day,” Calpri said.

Altaira chuckled. “Leave it to you to look on the good side.”

A flush came to Calpri's face. “Is that what you really see?” Calpri asked.

“Why would I not?” Altaira asked.

Calpri shrugged. “I don't know? Because, maybe, I've been such a pain on this trip.”

Altaira smiled. “You're young. You're learning.”

Jahq listened to the exchange, and would've spoken, but was disturbed by the new shadows haunting Gionne's face. Jahq knew she had been just as culpable as Gionne for the discord in their relationship, but Gionne was learning things, fresh, and in front of others. Neither should've let so much time pass. They should've spoken long before now.

Although Jahq mostly forgave Gionne, she'd never forget the pain those actions caused for her. Jahq had never stopped loving Gionne, which was why avoiding her had seemed the best action. Jahq would never love another the same, even Michi held a different place in her heart. She may have originally interpreted Gionne's actions as a low opinion of Jahq. Problem was that it didn't lessen the love she felt, and would always feel, for Gionne. But this would be best left for deciphering on her journey into the Void. They had to get back to the Keep.

Up this high, walking on a small path wrapping around the mountain, the wind was steady and harsh. They hadn't planned for this height, their clothes barely keeping out the frigid air. The sun beamed warm if barely making a difference upon their exposed flesh. They walked single file to take the path winding close to the rock face, the cliff edge mere feet away.

They'd descended a mere couple of yards when Chayboen, at the front, called back to them, “Stop a moment.” She motioned for Gionne to join her. Jahq looked on with steady confusion. Then she noticed the direction Chayboen's nod indicated. As Jahq turned to follow the line of vision, she saw a band of men— belonging to Belzan?—making their way up a path perpendicular to their own.

Jahq caught sight of one man with a crossbow pointed at her, seconds before she felt the burning pain as his released bolt passed through her thigh. Pain radiated from her leg and through her body. Jahq fell to her knees and cried out, hearing Gionne's panicked shout, moments before Gionne dropped to her side.

“Are you all right?” Gionne asked.

Jahq smirked through the pain. “You're joking, right?”

Gionne gave a nervous chuckle. “Silly question I guess, huh?”

“Damn.” Jahq gritted her teeth. “Maybe there'd be fewer warriors,” Jahq said, “if you all knew how painful wounds like this can be.”

“We have a good idea.” Gionne smiled. “That’s why we try to be better than the other man. You’re supposed to inflict pain, not receive it.”

“I’ll try to remember for next time.”

Gionne gave a hesitant grin. “Try to do that.”

“How is it?” Chayboen asked. Gionne had taken her field knife and ripped the fabric around the wound. The bolt had gone straight through. Pulling her pack off her back, Gionne retrieved the field aid kit, waving off Zuena’s offer to heal.

Healing her would drain strength from Zuena, Jahq knew. Gionne pulled items and placed them around her. Chayboen took the opportunity to wipe ointment into the damaged flesh, as Gionne folded wads of cloth placing them on either side of the thigh wound before binding it.

“Ladies?” Calpri stood behind them. “Should I be concerned those men are getting closer?”

Chayboen shook her head. “We’ve time.”

“Okay,” Calpri said, “I’ll take your word for it.”

Gionne no sooner bound the wound and assisted Jahq to her feet when the mountain vibrated. “Rockslide,” Jahq hissed. Chayboen ordered Calpri to look after Altaira, as Gionne wrapped her arms around Jahq and shoved her against the rock wall. Chayboen had once again moved to the front, staring intently at the path, apparently watching the progress of the men. The vibrations within the rock seemed to intensify. Chips of rock and boulder fell around them. Jahq did her best to erect a small shield around them, though her injury caused her concentration to falter.

Before she’d fully erected the shield, a lengthy stream of rock battered Gionne, one, in particular, hitting Gionne in the forehead. Jahq screamed as Gionne was ripped from her arms. Another steady stream of rock fell, the vibrations emanating from the mountain intensified, thrusting Gionne toward the cliff edge.

Refocusing her concentration, Jahq attempted to maintain the shielding for the others, while keeping them in her peripheral. She encircled Gionne with a separate sphere, the shielding keeping the avalanche of rock from beating down on Gionne’s broken body. The loss of blood and pain affected her concentration and Jahq started to lose consciousness. Despite her attempts to prevent it, Gionne went over the side.

Jahq released an anguished cry. She focused on the sphere she’d created, even if she couldn’t see it, pulling at it as if a rope were attached to it. She hauled with all her mental energy, hoping she could save Gionne.

Jahq could see the men coming closer on the opposite cliff face. She had to save Gionne. She continued to concentrate until Gionne’s face appeared, just over the cliff’s edge. Jahq stared into those haunted eyes and witnessed the moment Gionne gave up.

Jahq’s heart shattered into when she heard the faint words from Gionne’s lips. “Please,” Gionne begged. “Just let me go.”

On a harsh intake of breath, Jahq pierced Gionne with a glare. “I can’t let you go, Gionne. I love you.”

As Jahq struggled to keep Gionne aloft, she felt an immense sense of relief when Chayboen rushed to Gionne’s side. Ever so slightly, so strafe rock and debris did not harm Gionne, Jahq let Gionne’s limp form fall at the cliff’s edge.

The rockslide and vibrations ceased. Calpri joined Chayboen, careful to tug Gionne toward Jahq. Knowing Gionne was safe, Jahq released the last of her shielding and dropped to her knees. She let out a yelp as pain from shot through her thigh. Vision just about dark, Jahq looked to Chayboen, and asked, “Please tell me she’s alive.”

Chayboen nodded. “Yes, Jahq, she is.”

“Thank the goddess,” Jahq said, as unconsciousness overtook her.

ONCE SHE HAD Gionne and Jahq pulled to safety, Chayboen gave a quick assessment of the situation. Jahq had passed out. Gionne, bruised from multiple rock hits to her body was also unconscious. With Altaira’s blindness, only Calpri and Zuena would be able to assist her. They had to get off the mountain. Those men would soon find a path to link their walkway to the one Chayboen stood on. Calpri did the one thing she did most of the trip. She took up a position beside Altaira and waited for direction.

Zuena knelt beside Jahq. “What do you need me to do?”

“We can’t stay here. And I need you strong so leave Jahq and Gionne to me.” Another rockslide could start, those men could catch and overtake them, and Chayboen needed to get these two to safety—to Zheirger. Although the rockslide stopped, Chayboen was reluctant to stay in the open. “I know a way to get Gionne and Jahq to safety, but—”

“You worry about us.” Zuena made it a statement. “Don’t. You concentrate on these two. Calpri,” she said, “I need you to get Altaira back up to the cave opening we just left. Wait for me.”

“What you plan to do?” Calpri asked.

Glancing from Calpri to Chayboen, lips pursed, Zuena furrowed her brow. “If I can get Altaira and Calpri to the bottom, we should be able to meet up with my family. They’ll make certain we get to Zheirger.” She focused on Chayboen. “Call whoever you need to, Chayboen.”

“The plan is to get some serious magical help.”

Calpri stared dumbfounded, but Altaira understood. “How long should we wait for you in the cave?” Altaira asked.

“Only a few moments,” Zuena said. “Is that enough time?” she asked Chayboen.

Chayboen nodded, relieved to have Zuena’s assistance. “It shouldn’t be long. As soon as I have these two to safety, I’ll come back, and the four of us will continue.”

Zuena nodded. “Take the time you need. Will you be able to find us if we leave the mountain?”

“Yes.” Chayboen clapped Zuena on the shoulder. “Thank you. I don’t know if the rock slide took those men. They could still be a threat.”

“We’ll be fine,” Zuena said, “but if you delay much longer, they might not.”

“Okay. I promise to return as soon as I can.” When they carefully moved forward, Chayboen closed her eyes and twisted the ring on her finger. Although it seemed an eternity, Chayboen waited mere seconds. With the gentle shimmer or air, a flash of golden light, Ysannie physically appeared beside her. Chayboen had never been so happy to see someone in her whole life.

Ysannie knelt between Jahq and Gionne, let her hand hover over each. Chayboen knew she assessed the damage. When done, Ysannie encased them in a golden capsule of energy. “What happened?”

Chayboen shrugged negligently, though far from how she felt. “It could be the long trip, the rockslide, or Jahq catching an arrow with her leg. Of course, there was the strangeness in the cave which didn’t help the situation.”

“I don’t understand. What strangeness?” Ysannie asked.

“If I knew what it was, honey, I wouldn’t necessarily refer to it as strange. There was this...thing...nothing like I’ve ever seen. It was beyond magic,” Chayboen said.

Ysannie raised her eyebrows. “Beyond how?”

“You’d have to see it. I could never explain it. If I hadn’t witnessed it with my own eyes, I’d believe I had a bizarre nightmare. I’ve got the others waiting where we came out, but it’s gone now.”

Ysannie still looked up the path, confused, and quickly made her way toward the cave where Calpri, Zuena, and Altaira waited. Ysannie placed her hand on the rock behind them, closed her eyes, and stood for a few moments. Then the golden skin of her face paled. Hurriedly, Ysannie rejoined Chayboen.

“What is it?” Chayboen asked. Ysannie’s reaction wasn’t one she’d seen before, and Chayboen worried.

For a moment, Ysannie didn’t answer. There was a hint of fear in the eyes meeting Chayboen’s. “It’s something I never thought I’d feel again. It’s something very old, but I feel its memory in my bones. It’s not good. That much I know.”

“What should we do?” Chayboen asked.

“The time is coming closer,” Ysannie said. “But for what I don’t know. I’ll take these two back and return for you and the others. I’ll get you all back to the Keep. Just wait for me, okay?”

“What about Altaira? She can’t go through the portal.”

“I’ll take you all back,” Ysannie said, stronger this time.

“I see,” Chayboen said.

Ysannie stood, glancing down at Chayboen. “I’ll explain when I can, promise.”

Chayboen was hurt. She never believed there would be secrets between them. But Jahq and Gionne needed to get to the Keep, and there wasn’t time to discuss this now. In a tone heavy with sarcasm, Chayboen said, “Oh, I can’t wait.”

“Love,” Ysannie said, taking a step forward.

Chayboen stepped backward, out of reach. Appearing reluctant to leave, Ysannie tried again to move closer. “Go.

Hurry.” Chayboen turned around, not watching Ysannie’s departure, and rushed to the others. Chayboen prepared to wait, crestfallen Ysannie had held back important information from her.

Battle For the Keep

Chapter Thirty-three

“GENTLY, PLEASE, ON the bed at the end,” Stechyc told Ysannie, pointing down the long row of beds in the ward. Ysannie did as told, placing Gionne with as much care as she could.

“Will she be okay?” Jahq asked. “Please tell me she’ll be all right.” She’d been surprised when Ysannie transported them to the ward, having awakened as soon as her bubble vanished, and Ysannie picked up Gionne’s unconscious body.

Stechyc stared at her for a moment, surveying from her head to feet. “Jahq, I need you to let one of the mages take care of your leg.”

“No, not until I know if she’s all right,” Jahq said.

“Jahq I—”

“Fine, fine,” Jahq said, shifting to the head of the bed. Jahq worried Gionne hadn’t opened her eyes. She knew there was major damage from the rock slide, and if anyone could heal her Stechyc could. But she hated the pale face, the bruising visible on her exposed skin, questioning what horrible damage lay beneath. As Stechyc did her job, assessing the damage, Jahq’s panic grew. “Why isn’t she awake?”

Stechyc began a slow chant. When she was done, she sent one of her assistants for more ointments, more bandages to bind wounds Jahq didn’t know were there. The healing mages worked diligently, tirelessly, but Jahq became tired of not knowing.

“Is she going to be okay?” Jahq asked.

“I’m doing what I can, Jahq. This takes time.” Stechyc gave a weary sigh. “I need you to get your leg looked at. As soon as I know something I’ll tell you.”

“But what—” Jahq didn’t get a chance to finish. Ysannie put a hand on her shoulder and zapped her to the other side of the room. “I just want to be there for her,” Jahq snapped.

“I know,” Ysannie said. “But her healing will be long, and you’re no good to her if you’re bleeding over Stechyc’s floor.” Ysannie waved one of the younger healers to them. “Please see to this. Once it’s dressed, and only after it’s dressed, can you let her up from this bed.”

It didn’t take long for the young healer to slather ointment on the wound, re-cleaning, re-dressing and speaking the words the healers often did. Jahq had barely paid attention to the young healer. Her gaze hardly left the sight of Gionne in the bed.

“Please,” she prayed, “please be okay. Even if I never see you again, I want to know you’re alive and well.” Although, technically, Ysannie was the last of the gods in Kellshae, Jahq hoped some deity out there would listen and be there for Gionne.

Long minutes passed before Stechyc slowed her pace with Gionne. Jahq, about to leave her bed, heard her name called by Mayliandra and Kareina. After these many weeks from home, Jahq realized she’d missed her parents terribly. “Mama, Papa,” Jahq said, opening her arms.

“Are you all right?” Mayliandra asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. I have a war wound,” she said teasingly to her Papa. Then tears fell from her eyes. “Gionne was hurt badly, and I couldn’t prevent it. I don’t think she wants to live.”

Kareina and Mayliandra shared a look. Jahq knew it because the same situation happened to them. Five years ago, Kareina emotionally and physically tired, not knowing Mayliandra loved her, had given up. She’d lost herself in her mind. It took Mayliandra needing to enter Kareina’s mind, risking the possibility the both would be trapped, leaving their physical bodies to die on this plane. Kareina came back.

Maybe she needed to do that for Gionne. She started to get up from the bed, but Mayliandra pushed her back down. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I need to ask her, to ask Stechyc if what you did for Papa I can do for Gionne.”

“It’s not the same, Jahq,” Stechyc said, joining them. “Though the situation seems similar, they’re far apart. All we can do is wait and hope we’ve done enough to bring her back.”

STECHYC WAS LEAVING Jahq and Mayliandra to their privacy when Melrick rushed into the room with Fleuren cradled in his arms. “Get away, child, and let me do this,” Melrick ordered one of the healing students.

“What’s going—” Stechyc rushed to the bed. “Oh, my, Fleuren. Couldn’t wait until the battle was over, huh?”

Flushed and sweaty, Fleuren grinned. “I’m not the impatient one.” She placed her hand on her swollen belly. “Tried to talk him out of this, but he didn’t hear any of it.

Stechyc smiled. “Melrick is usually so patient. Guess a baby will do that.”

Fleuren groaned exaggeratedly. “I spoke of the baby.”

“Oh, I see.” She glanced at her student. “Zhing, would you please get some clean linen.”

Usually, children his age were too small to be in the healing ward, or anywhere else in the Keep. But they’d agreed it was best to manage the little ones fear of impending battle with busy work. Stechyc didn’t need the supplies quite yet but felt it best to get the boy out of a tense Melrick’s way. She had another student who could assist with the delivery, but Stechyc currently used her to monitor Gionne.

Stechyc removed unnecessary personnel from the ward, dividers placed to afford privacy. She did what she could to make Fleuren comfortable. Once assured they were ready when the baby was, Stechyc said to Melrick. “Are you sure you want to be here for this?” she asked. Melrick nodded, though his pale skin belied his acceptance. “Okay then, here we go.”

“Is it normal for her to be in so much pain?” Melrick asked.

“Usually, yes,” Stechyc said. “Each delivery is different. We’ll make Fleuren as comfortable as possible. However, this is an experience best handled as naturally as possible and shouldn’t be dulled with too many poultices and herbs. I’ll give her only what she needs.”

Melrick blanched. “Couldn’t you do more?”

Weakly, Fleuren slapped at him. “Don’t upset the healer trying her best to deliver your child.”

“I just wish—”

A contraction came. Fleuren gave a pain-filled groan and squeezed Melrick’s hand in a hurtful grip if the further paling of his face any indication. Stechyc knew this could take hours, and only hoped Belzan and his horrible men would hold off the attack until the delivery was completed.

SOME HOURS LATER, interspersed with checking on Gionne, Stechyc helped deliver a beautiful and noisy baby boy. “So what will you name him?” she asked, glancing between Fleuren and Melrick.

Melrick’s expression beamed. “Our boy shall be Pallav, for he is the new leaf on our tree of life.” Fleuren squeezed his hand, lovingly this time. Stechyc was happy to see the joy they shared.

Fresh tears slid down Fleuren’s face, and Stechyc knew they weren’t tears of pain any longer. These held joy for her husband and for her new son. “I say we get everyone cleaned up so we can leave you to your new son.” Stechyc looked at Melrick. “Is there anything I can get you before I go?”

Melrick shook his head. “I have all I need right here. Thank you.”

“Assisting you both is always a pleasure. Now I have Pallav to add to my growing family.”

No longer needed, Stechyc left them. She was still concerned about Gionne. The last thing Stechyc wanted was to bring one life into the world just to watch another slip away.

A loud explosion rumbled through the room. Stechyc shook her head. “At least I got one wish. You waited until Pallav was delivered.”

Chapter Thirty-four

TIILAEN FELT THE concern, nearly eclipsed by her exhaustion, radiating from her wife. She'd been in the infirmary most the day, hardly leaving Gionne's side. Tiilaen knew Kareina had to forcefully remove Jahq. She made her way to where Stechyc stared down at Gionne from the end of the bed. Gently, she wrapped her arms around Stechyc and placed a kiss to her throat. "You need rest, love."

Stechyc's smile dimmed in her tiredness, but she leaned into Tiilaen with a small sigh. "Not until she regains consciousness. I don't want her to wake alone." She turned into Tiilaen's arms, placing her head on Tiilaen's shoulder and returned the hug. "The Keep has a new addition."

"Mm, yes. Melrick proclaimed the arrival in every nook of the Keep, so even the spiders are aware." Tiilaen squeezed her wife closer. "How's Gionne doing?"

"We've taken care of most of the damage. Time will heal the bruises and strains once she's up and moving. Only Gionne can heal the rest."

"Is it like what happened to Kareina?" she asked.

Shaking her head, Stechyc said, "Jahq asked the same, offered to go try to bring her back."

"I knew she still cared for Gionne, but wish I could fathom what happened between them in the first place. Wish one of them had trusted us enough to share."

"I think all will become clear soon." Stechyc pulled away from Tiilaen's arms. "Any news from the scouts, preferably good news?"

Tiilaen groaned. "Seems the Pool of Promise is home to thousands of the miscreants just waiting word to attack, but there's no sign of Belzan. Guess they and we are waiting on him before he attacks."

"So it truly is inevitable." Stechyc turned to the bed and Gionne. "How long, do you think?"

Taking Stechyc's hand in hers, Tiilaen walked them to the chair close to Gionne's bed. She sat, pulling Stechyc onto her lap and cradling her. "Less than a fortnight I suspect."

They were silent for a long while, content simply holding each other. Her voice low, Stechyc asked, "Be honest with me?"

"Always love."

"How do you estimate our chances?"

Tiilaen placed a kiss to the top of Stechyc's head. She sighed. "Zheirger Keep has some of the best warriors from two lands. That's honesty and only a hint of conceit," she clarified, hoping to lighten her next words. "But we both know this is a little more than a school and safe haven for magicked children. Children, my love. And we're to fight a multitude of angry and hateful men who believe wholeheartedly in our extermination."

"Or worse," Stechyc mumbled.

Tiilaen gave a nod. Worse indeed. She'd broached the matter with Kareina and Ysannie, and they'd reached an agreement. They would fight with everything they had. What they wouldn't do, however, is allow Belzan and his men access to the women and children should Zheirger Keep fall. Wards were in place to prevent the possible eventuality. Should the Keep fall into

Belzan's hands, the wards would activate and there would be nothing left alive for leagues in and around Zheirger Keep. Only the three of them knew, so no one would learn of this possible outcome. She prayed it never came to that conclusion.

They accomplished good things here and none of them wished to see it end. None of them had a death wish. Above all, Tiilaen had no wish to end her time with Stechyc. With a squeeze of her arms, bending her head close to Stechyc's and nuzzling her cheek, Tiilaen said, "You know I love you, my beautiful healer mage wife, right?"

Stechyc wrapped herself more firmly around Tiilaen, tilted her head, and placed a tender kiss to Tiilaen's lips. "And I love you, my strong and gorgeous warrior wife." Tiilaen kissed her with more passion than they should probably exhibit in the open like this. Who knew how long they had? Tiilaen planned to take advantage of every moment. Stechyc would never doubt her love—even if they only had another fortnight together.

CORLEY HATED HER imposed isolation, despised the Shei, who had locked her away—at first. Oh, certainly she'd spent days pacing the floors, thinking of ways to punish Kareina for this punishment, even as she accepted the meals and visits of Reisi.

Her anger knew no bounds.

Tonight, she was tired of expending the energy with no one to witness her bouts of anger. Corley was haunted by the pained expression of Shei Mayliandra as she'd explained what her daughter, and so many other girls had suffered in Iskarr. What struck her most was these were female children of noble families. This tragic occurrence usually befell the poor, those who couldn't buy their way out of deplorable circumstances, who people looked upon as less than significant. Much as she expected the possibility they'd lied to her, it still narrowed down to one fact. The very people whose job it was to protect and nurture perpetrated the heinous deed on defenseless children.

Moreover, she'd assisted in perpetuating the pain the young woman she'd publicly insulted had lived with for her few young years of life. Corley professed concern about the protection of the children, but who had been there for Jahq?

No one.

Not until Kareina removed Jahq and the others from those circumstances. The leaders of the Keep had to be good for the children, why else would she have felt comfortable enough to bring her own children here otherwise? She entrusted these people enough to bring Zhing. Corley accepted she owed Jahq, and a couple others, an apology.

Corley sat at the table, waiting for her evening visit from Reisi, now the sun was setting on another day. Surprisingly, noise from behind the cottage announced someone's approach. She carefully stood and started in toward the back when the front door opened and Reisi entered. Corley put a finger to her lips to signal Reisi to silence as she waved the young warrior closer and blew out the lamp. The magic would keep them hidden, but Corley didn't want to take unnecessary chances.

Whoever approached mustn't believe stealth important as feet stomped on dry leaves and twigs and created enough noise to startle the small wildlife. She had learned from Reisi, at the beginning, the wards around the cottage would keep anyone from entering as it gave the structure a ruined appearance of fallen roof and broken walls, too unsafe for entry.

The voices became clear to them. Carefully, Corley and Reisi peeked out the window. She could make out two men, nearly identical in their height and build.

“Why are we stopping here? Let’s meet the others and get this started Belzan.”

“You become presumptuous, little brother. We’ll begin when I feel the time is best to achieve our goal.”

“Again I ask why we’re here now.”

“I would see what our opponents are doing to ready for us.” Belzan’s voice indicated he’d moved closer to the cottage. “Then we’ll join the men and march upon the Keep.”

The second man gave a harsh laugh. “Bout damn time. The sooner we take the Keep the sooner I can return to some fun.”

“Try to extend your games a bit. If you go through wenches as you did in the last village, your fun won’t last through the coming winter. Then what will you do?”

“I’m sure I can find a few to last longer than the last one.”

“Look for some who are more submissive and less willing to take their own life to avoid your...affections, Tombik.”

Tombik sniffed. “Where’s the fun then?” The sound of a fist hitting the structure echoed in the cottage, causing Corley to startle. “Where in Bahalkar is that miserable runt?”

“Hey, careful or you’ll bring what’s left of this building crashing upon our heads,” Belzan warned. “Be patient. He hasn’t let us down yet. Besides, he can tell us little else about what goes on behind the walls. We merely wanted an update. We’ll give him a little while more and then return to the Pool of Promise. I’m ready to end the wait and get settle in the Keep.”

“Yeah, yeah, with Jahq and Mayliandra chained to your bed,” Tombik said in a singsong tone. “If they knew what you intended, they would be the wenches slitting their own throats.”

The sound of a scuffle and flesh meeting flesh were heard before Belzan snarled, “They will be mine. I’m owed after that bitch took my hand.”

“You don’t have to explain it to me, brother. Just wondering when you plan on telling the girls this news.”

“Shut up.” More movement sounded. “Let’s go. You’ve taken any enjoyment from my mood. There’s nothing more to learn from your brat, anyway.”

When the noise of retreating footsteps were no longer heard, Corley turned to Reisi. “You need to let Kareina know what we heard tonight. The battle is close.”

Reisi nodded. “I’ll come back for you, get the wards dropped.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Corley said. She meant it but worried how she’d fair if she remained behind the wards and no one lived to free her. “Warn them.” Reisi nodded again and rushed from the cottage. Corley returned to her chair at the table.

Only one concern to focus on until her release. Would Kareina believe she’d truly learned her lesson?

KAREINA IGNORED JAHQ’S glare. She deserved it after all.

“You need to clean up and get some rest, Jahq.”

“What I need is to be with Gionne.”

Shaking her head, Kareina moved into Jahq’s room, grabbed the chair by the table, and placed it in front of the door before she dropped onto it with a sigh. “Let’s talk. After, I’ll bring you back and you can spell Stechyc for a while.”

Jahq squinted suspiciously at her. “Talk about what?”

Kareina shrugged. “Anything you want. The mission, what happened, what we should have spoken about three years ago.”

“Papa, no, please.” Jahq shook her head sadly and plopped onto the edge of the bed.

“Was it so bad, honey? Do you fear some response from me, from your mother, which holds your tongue?” Kareina leaned forward, placing her elbows on her legs, above the knees. “I know you still love Gionne, no matter your estrangement. Were you staying in your room for your sake, or for hers? Why are you afraid to speak of it?”

Jahq’s lower lip began to quiver as she blinked back tears. She lowered her head. “Why does it matter, Papa?”

“Because your mother and I are worried about you, honey, and wish to help you. Largely because we feel we’ve failed you as parents.”

Her head snapped up, her confused gaze meeting Kareina’s. “You haven’t.”

“Of course we have. We know about the woman, Corley, and the words she said to you. How many others were there? My task as your parent is to protect you, and I’ve failed miserably in our own Keep. I can only imagine what other responsibilities I’ve failed on your behalf.”

Kareina knew some answers already, having been briefed by Chayboen after Ysannie returned with the others. She would never forgive herself for sending Jahq on this mission; never mend the damage created because she believed it not worth the risk of Altaira tempting the portal. Kareina stood and paced. She wanted to apologize, and would, but didn’t want Jahq distracted from the current conversation. She stopped, unsheathed her sword, dropped to her knees, and offered the sword hilt to Jahq. Tears fell from both their eyes.

“I’ve failed to protect you, can’t undo the damage done to you on a task I commanded. But you can have some peace I’ll not fail you again. Run me through, Jahq, it’s the only way I’ll not fail you ever again.”

Pushing the sword aside, Jahq dropped to her own knees in front of Kareina and clasped her in a trembling hug. “Papa, no, you’ve done nothing wrong. I need you and Mama. Please don’t ask this of me.”

Kareina held Jahq tight against her. “I am so, so sorry, Jahq. If I had known—”

“There was no way any of us could have known, Papa. A war is coming and you’ve so much pressure. I’m just one of many you have to keep safe, so much responsibility—”

“You’re my first concern, with Mama and Yoshan. And your trouble with Gionne came before any pending war, so I shirked my duties as your parent and failed you long ago.” Kareina pulled back and looked onto Jahq’s tear stained face. “Failed you enough, Jahq, you didn’t feel comfortable coming to me with whatever upset you.”

Shaking her head, Jahq returned to the bed, pulling Kareina with her. She sighed heavily before saying, “I’ll give you the short of it, Papa.” She took a deep breath. “Yes, I love Gionne, and yes, I was angry with her, too. I had believed she couldn’t love me, touch me, without thinking of those—”

“Ah, I see.” Kareina had also been where Jahq is now. She couldn’t believe Mayliandra could love her after her time when captured by Clan Youlren. “But you know differently?”

Jahq nodded. “I’ve learned she thought I slept with Harksten, maybe others, for favors. To Gionne I will always be a whore.”

“I can’t believe Gionne would think that, Jahq, though I doubt you speak the truth. Can you tell how you know this? Did she say this to you?”

Jahq began her recounting, beginning with Harksten and Kez, and ending with Iziago's vision of Gionne's memories. Kareina wondered if maybe both had failed to understand the other's point of view. "Knowing each other's side, have you taken the time to speak of it, clear the matter?"

"No," Jahq whispered. "Everyone, including Gionne, looks at me and my tattoo and sees a whore. The one person who saw beyond the marking was killed by her own brother."

Kareina nodded again. Chayboen had shared all this in her report. She suspected Gionne hadn't truly seen Jahq as a whore, but due to her own insecurities latched upon and responded to the first situation to avoid those perceived failings. Kareina could be wrong about this, but felt she understood Gionne enough to guess what her mind saw as a reasonable escape. "Neither of you has spoken of this to the other, opened your hearts to pain you expect to feel, so let the wounds fester. Let me ask you, Jahq. Do you love her?"

"Yes, even as she thinks so little of me."

"You explained this Iziago showed you her memories, and your own were played out for all to see. But couldn't they be misinterpreted?"

"If so, why didn't Gionne state it then, defend herself?" Jahq wiped angrily at her drying tears.

Placing a finger on Jahq's jaw, Kareina turned Jahq's face toward her until they latched gazes. "I don't wish to hurt you, honey, or to presume I understand Gionne's meaning. I do know a little more on both sides of a situation."

Kareina took a deep breath, hoping to control her own rising emotions. She had hidden behind a male guise, never believed anyone would see into her heart, never believed love could or would come to her. Mayliandra saw beyond the scars, beyond the tortures of the past, and beyond Kareina's insecurities. Kareina knew it was possible. She also suspected, in Jahq's case, the situation was a reversal of her own.

"We agree Gionne should've responded differently, but why did she react the way she did?" She ran a thumb across Jahq's tattoo. "Maybe, whether experience by your agreement or not, Gionne feels unequal to the task of properly providing you gratification during your shared intimacy? Maybe she worried you'd find her attempt infantile, and you wouldn't love her the same."

Jahq frowned. "But those are ridiculous reasons. I'd never view Gionne in such a manner. How could she believe that?"

"Because cocky as our dear Gionne came to us, she exhibited insecurity not just awkwardness, wanting to please those she cared for. I know with certainty, Gionne fell in love with you from the moment she laid eyes on you in Iskarr." Kareina dropped her hand from Jahq's face and clasped Jahq's hands. "Gionne lives to rescue and protect. I can guarantee that if she feels unable to protect, it's a personal failing. Worrying she'd fail you in an intimate way? Well—"

With a sharp inhale of breath, her hand covering her mouth, Jahq said, "Oh, Papa. After Belzan, Gionne must've doubted her capability to protect us for the whole travel from Gradyln."

Kareina shrugged. "I'm not saying this is what happened, Jahq. What I'm saying is it's something to consider."

"I will. Thank you." Jahq leaned in and squeezed Kareina in a fierce hug.

"Remember one thing for me, Jahq." At her nod, Kareina said, "Understanding a matter doesn't always fix the matter." A knock sounded on Jahq's door. Kareina walked over and opened the door to a young guard. "Reisi? Is everything all right?"

Reisi gave a nervous glance in Jahq's direction. "Something happened at Corley's."

"Is she hurt?"

"No, she's fine. We need to bring Corley to the Keep. There were intruders outside the cottage." Reisi squared her shoulders. "Belzan is prepared to attack quite soon."

"Bring the others to the War Room." Reisi nodded and left. Kareina bit her bottom lip and turned to Jahq, who joined her at the door. "Go, Papa, protect the Keep." Before Kareina could balk and explain Jahq needed her and took priority, Jahq placed a gentle hand on Kareina's arm and asked, "May I check on Gionne while you're updating the others?"

"Of course." Kareina kissed Jahq's forehead. "Be prepared, honey. Not everything is fixable. This matter may be an example." Jahq nodded and Kareina followed Reisi.

Chapter Thirty-five

YSANNIE HADN'T LEFT the tower's balcony the last two nights and the strain began to take a toll. Her body fatigued from using so much magic in a constant attempt to keep aware of the invading army's activities. The exhaustion compounded by the fact she and Chayboen hadn't had a chance to talk since Chayboen's return from the Gradyln mission. She knew Chayboen was angry with herself at misreading Jahq. What Ysannie hadn't expected was Chayboen distancing herself while dealing with her feelings. They were life mates. They were supposed to deal with these situations together.

The night quickly darkened, the wind picking up and causing the torches on the tower wall to flicker in their sconces. Ysannie knew Belzan's army would begin their nightly assault soon. She knew tonight's assault was meant to be a distraction. The Keep was ready. More than ready thanks to information received by Taelyr.

When this battle was over, Ysannie would be sure to seal up those hidden tunnels with magic. She didn't want to close them off completely, as they might need the use of them in the future. History proved there was always someone waiting to take what was yours. Since the people of Zheirger were unwanted anomalies, they would always have to defend themselves.

As long as she still had breath, Ysannie would protect Zheirger Keep and its inhabitants with everything she had—until death.

"Your tension is a living thing, Ysannie," Altaira said from behind her. Ysannie glanced in her direction, noting the milky eyes focused on her. Ysannie wondered, not for the first time, how much of what the Oracle saw was due to divination, and how much the woman's own intuition? "We're all on treacherous ground, goddess. It's what resides in our hearts that keep us on the proper path."

Ysannie gave a wry grin though she knew Altaira couldn't see it. "Is that a vision of the future, or my current love life you speak of?"

"Sometimes I'm not certain." Altaira shrugged. "Do you wish to know what I see?"

"No, I don't think so," Ysannie said, returning her attention to the darkening night. "Nothing personal anyway." She knew what was in her own heart. She loved Chayboen beyond all things. Only Chayboen was cognizant of what her own heart held.

"The mountain still troubles you," Altaira said. A statement, not a question.

Ysannie shook her head and sighed. She was weary from replaying in her head and heart emotions—as if lost memories—the mountain had invoked in her.

Altaira may have already foreseen these. Was she bringing it up now so Ysannie might better focus on those possible memories? "It all felt familiar though I don't know why. When you returned and spoke of the happenings, the sights witnessed within the mountain, again I felt the familiarity, but couldn't explain why it would be so. Because I won't speak of it, air the matter with Chayboen, she feels I'm distancing myself and pushing her away." Ysannie looked toward the chasm on the Keep's west wall. "Deep in my soul I know I'm connected somehow to the

coming darkness you've predicted. The very thought frightens me, Oracle. I want to be part of Zheirger's growth, their protection, not the gloom which brings our downfall."

"I think you confuse the two, goddess. Being connected doesn't mean you are its reason for coming or won't still fight against whatever the Void releases." Altaira took a tentative step forward and placed one hand on the tower wall as a positioning focal point and her other on Ysannie's back. "I believe you dwell too much on the negative. You'll do what is right for Kellshae and the people of Zheirger you hold so dear."

A burst of wind blew Altaira's hair behind her, and Ysannie was reminded just how young the Oracle was for such insights. She also caught the sadness seeming to seep from Altaira—a hint of resignation. Resigned to what, Ysannie couldn't guess. "Is there something you wish to speak of? I want to assist in any way I can. Has it something to do with Calpri?"

Altaira smiled and shook her head. "Calpri is only a danger to herself. She has a large heart but hasn't learned how to properly focus her energy. Time will tame her and her coquettish ways."

Ysannie felt the rush of emotion flowing from Altaira at the mere mention of Calpri. "You're in love with her."

The flickering yellow torchlight couldn't completely hide the sudden flush to Altaira's mocha skinned face. Before Ysannie could comment on it, Altaira stiffened, tilted her head to the right and said in a flat tone, "It won't matter much longer. Tonight's assault is about to begin."

From the open flatland on the road to the Keep's main entry, a catapult sat in the center. A ball of incendiary fire soared toward the Keep. Ysannie focused on the fireball and directed it toward the chasm. Below, the call of the soldiers on the wall rose, and the night filled with sounds of orders from both sides. She took Altaira by the elbow and tugged her toward the tower wall.

"You'll be safer back here," she told the Oracle. "Should the manner of assault, or anything else you divine of the enemy's attack change, just yell for my attention." Altaira nodded, and Ysannie returned to the balcony's barrier.

There were more fireballs that night, most absorbed by the magical shield of protection from the people who could sustain it, although one or two needed her assistance in eliminating the fire into smoke. Ysannie knew this to be the distraction Belzan needed to get his people to the tunnels.

As the night progressed, a darker smudge against the night sky caught Ysannie's attention. When she first noted the appearance, Ysannie believed it a trick of the light on her vision from the intrusion of the bright fire and then the plunge back into darkness. The smudge shifted, drew closer to her position on the tower wall, and she could see—unbelievably—a man dressed completely in black hovered in the sky on some strange semi-circular device. Mouth agape in shocked confusion, Ysannie stood unmoving as the man turned toward her, his blond hair and flash of white teeth the only break in the blackness. Unable to explain how she knew, Ysannie realized this figure, this warrior, was connected to the mountain—connected to the Void.

Her comprehension must have shown in her expression because the man's smile fairly beamed light before laughter spewed from his mouth. He waved in her direction before his device slowly moved backward further into the night.

So focused on this oddity, Ysannie wasn't aware of the fireball that had made it through the barrier and her own attention until she heard Altaira scream.

CALPRI'S HEART POUNDED painfully as she ran up the tower stairs, her skirts held up and out of the way in her trembling fingers. She didn't know why the sudden fear for Altaira consumed her, the driving need to get to the tower before time ran out. Her legs felt spongy, ready to give out and collapse when she finally reached the top. She raced down the short hall passing the open door of Ysannie's tower room and burst through the open door to the balcony. What she saw nearly froze her with fear.

In front of Calpri, Ysannie stood staring at the black smudge against the night—the man from the iron village. To her left Calpri beheld an unaware Altaira in direct line of an errant ball of fire. Luckily, mind-numbing terror gave her the last burst of strength her legs needed to act. Hurling herself into Altaira, the fire brushing her back before slamming into the stone and smoldering where it landed. Calpri and Altaira slid brutally across the rough stones, Altaira's surprised scream deafening in Calpri's ear. Their momentum brought them to an agonizing smack against the balcony's barrier, Calpri draped over Altaira's shaking form.

Her back ached with a burning sensation, but her fear for Altaira's condition took precedence. "Are you all right?" she asked, shifting and running her hand over Altaira's body in short jerky movements, searching for recognizable damage. Tears dripped freely from Altaira's eyes and Calpri began to grow alarmed. "What hurts, Oracle? Talk to me."

Rather than speak, Altaira raised trembling hands and grasped Calpri by the sides of her face, before pulling her down and devouring her lips. Her discomfort forgotten in the fierce ravaging of her mouth by a woman Calpri believed too far above her to consider this a possibility. "I love you, Calpri." The words made Calpri's breathing stop. "I don't want to die without ever saying the words to you."

"But—"

"No, it's what has been in my heart since we were first introduced." Altaira shifted, her milky eyes shifting to just behind Calpri.

A brush of air, and then a gentle press of fingertips upon her skin, apparently exposed when the fireball hit her, cooled her inflamed skin. "Are you both okay?" Ysannie asked from above them.

Calpri closed her eyes to mentally evaluating her condition. Other than sore from abraded flesh from the slide across the stone, Calpri was alive and that is what mattered. She opened her eyes to Altaira's face. Altaira was alive—and loved her. "We're fine." She rose to her feet, bring Altaira with her and faced the golden goddess. "Thank you, for whatever you did to my back."

Ysannie grinned, glanced at Altaira, and winked in Calpri's direction. "The fire clipped you enough to wound you, Calpri. I did what I could, but you should both be seen by a healer."

"Yes, Calpri," Altaira said, "there could be damage we're not aware of."

"You both should go," Ysannie said. When Altaira appeared poised to argue she added, "I don't believe Belzan's plans are going to alter in any way, Oracle. You need to make certain Calpri gets to the infirmary."

Altaira nodded after a pause. "As you wish, goddess."

Ysannie kissed Altaira's forehead and did the same to Calpri's. "Thank you. Be safe."

"We'll come back," Calpri said. "Once we're seen to and if the healer allows, that is."

"No, you're now charged with seeing after the Oracle."

Calpri grinned. She would gladly meet this charge without debate. Carefully, expecting Altaira's flesh was as sore and tender as her own, placed her arm around the Oracle's waist. She pulled her closer and nodded to Ysannie as she walked them to the tower doorway.

They'd gone as far as the bottom of the tower stairway before Altaira stopped and plopped on the lowest step. "Oracle?" Calpri asked, her voice a mere whisper in her distress.

Fresh tears fell from Altaira's eyes; her milky gaze...well, distant, if possible. "Don't call me that, Calpri. I can't handle it coming from you. I want so much more between us." Altaira fumbled for her hand. Calpri placed it in her reach and let herself be drawn to Altaira's side. Altaira nearly threw herself against Calpri's chest, her head resting in the space between her shoulder and throat. "It wasn't from the fear."

Calpri was a bit confused. "What wasn't?"

"My declaration of love." A hand came up and caressed the side of her cheek. Calpri could feel the trembling still present. "I understand you don't feel for me as you did for Gionne or for Zuena. I'd hoped you could, given time. I'd hoped you wouldn't feel so much like my nursemaid. I wish I weren't such a burden."

Wrapping Altaira in her arms, Calpri felt as if her heart would burst again, this time with pure joy. The beautiful Oracle had feelings for her and wanted them returned. Of course, Calpri could return them. Altaira would be any woman's dream. Altaira could have anyone, so why would she settle for someone without magic, someone as plain as Calpri? She realized her foolish crushes, her rash inexperience to find affection wherever she could, made her appear fickle. If Altaira were honest about her affections, Calpri had wasted time pursuing women she knew she could never have in the end. Yet, she'd believed Altaira unattainable too, more so than the others, which is why she'd never tried. "I've nothing to offer you. I'm not of import."

"Why do women get such foolish notions into their heads?" Altaira asked into Calpri's throat. The brush of her warm breath raised Calpri's flesh into goosebumps. Her bodies response to such a simple action from this woman nearly had her pooling into a puddle of mush at Altaira's feet. "You're important to me. Returning my feelings is all the offering I would expect of anyone." Altaira gave a derisive chuckle. "It's not as if you're getting any bargain, Calpri. While I can deal with a great many things on my own, I require occasional assistance, especially in unfamiliar surroundings. I can understand a possible partnership strained with my requiring a nursemaid. A fact made apparent on the journey from Gradyln. I would've been lost without your assistance."

Calpri kissed the top of Altaira's head. How could she have viewed herself as helpless during the journey? "You required little assistance, love. Truth be told, most the times you found me at your side was to share comfort during uncomfortable circumstances."

"So, do you think you could develop feelings for me?" Altaira asked, her body tensing in Calpri's embrace.

"I developed feelings a long time ago," Calpri told her. "What I have to get used to is being worthy of you." From the hitch in Altaira's breath, Calpri assumed Altaira would argue the last statement. To forestall it, Calpri gave Altaira a firm squeeze. "Let's go to the infirmary to appease Ysannie, so we can return to my room and talk."

As Calpri pulled Altaira to her feet, she noticed a wicked little grin lift the corner of her Oracle's lip. "I guess we could talk too."

For the first time, Calpri was pleased Altaira couldn't see the heat from the blush the remark caused burning across her face, but she couldn't halt the moan it elicited. "We've barely scraped

the surface of what is Altaira, I see. Am I correct in believing you're more dangerous than any have suspected?"

"I'm only a risk to your misguided notions of what an Oracle should resemble." Altaira tucked her arm into Calpri's. "And, when we win this battle, I may be a little threatening to any chances of sleep in the following few days."

Calpri tucked Altaira into her side as she steered her down the hall. "Gosh, that's going to be some talk." Altaira swatted her stomach and Calpri responded with a laugh. She hadn't expected Altaira to be so playful. With a full heart and an elation she never believed could consume her blood, Calpri felt she'd come home literally and figuratively. Silently she thanked the goddess and vowed always to be deserving of Altaira's love.

Chapter Thirty-six

TAELYR WAVED KAREINA closer to the hidden wall in the dungeons of the Keep. Voice pitched low, she said, “This is the only one you told them about?” Taelyr knew of two other hidden entrances, and already told Kareina of them.

“Yes,” Taelyr said. “This is the only one Harksten knew of. He knew the entrance of others but hadn’t the time to fully explore them for use before banishment. I told Belzan the other tunnels closed ‘cause of rockslide damage.”

Kareina nodded. “That’s good to know. Tonight we wait.” Kareina squatted, making herself comfortable on the dirt floor. She leaned her back against the rock. In the tunnel behind them, the other warriors followed suit. So Taelyr did, too. “How are you holding up?” Kareina asked.

Taelyr recoiled at the idea of telling the truth but grasped Kareina wasn’t like Belzan or Tombik. She wouldn’t see his response as weakness, but more as a sign of on his strength. “I’m scared to death,” Taelyr said.

“That makes two of us. I have the skills, I’m good at what I do, but no one intends to take a life and enjoy it.”

Taelyr snorted. “Then you don’t know Belzan and Tombik very well.”

Sadness in her tone, Kareina said, “Unfortunately, yes I do. I understand men like him too well.” She nudged him gently in the shoulder. “But they don’t count.”

Confused, Taelyr looked at her, although she couldn’t see him, and said, “I don’t understand?”

“They don’t count,” Kareina said, “because they’re crazy. And I’m about to remove a little crazy from Kellshae.” She flinched. “Sorry, Taelyr, that’s no way to speak about your kin.”

Taelyr shook his head, understanding crazy was the only way Tombik and Belzan could get away with what they had in life. “No insult taken.”

As they waited, Taelyr thought of Yoshan. They still hadn’t spoken since the night he admitted his part in Belzan’s plan. He hoped, if he survived this battle for the secret chamber, Yoshan would forgive him. He never believed, in all his fifteen years, he’d miss the company of a girl. He smiled to himself. A girl as annoying and pushy as Yoshan.

In the hopes of a surprise, Kareina had her warriors extinguish any torches. They sat in darkness, waiting for the first sounds Tombik and his team had entered the passage. Waiting in the dark was nerve-racking. Taelyr realized, should he die in this cave tonight, he could make peace with Kareina. He shifted slightly and whispered in Kareina’s direction. “Do you think Yoshan could ever forgive me? Do you forgive my part in all this?”

He couldn’t see her expression, but knew when Kareina turned toward him. “I can’t answer for her, Taelyr. But know this, no matter how we hurt those we love—”

Taelyr felt the heat on his face. “I never said I loved her.”

Kareina chuckled. “No, not in words. And I know she cares very much for you. It takes time Taelyr. Our women get angry, they sulk and then forgive us so we can move on. If it were true affection, Yoshan will come around if meant to be. What you did was wrong. What you are doing now can help in righting that wrong.”

“I won’t fail you again,” Taelyr said.

Kareina chucked him in the arm again. “You had best not. Hurt my little girl, and nothing Belzan or Tombik could do to you would be near as bad as what I will. Besides,” Kareina added, “you can’t be all bad. Yoshan tells me Starsinger actually likes you.”

“I don’t think the puppies hate me,” Taelyr added.

“No,” Kareina said. “I have it on good authority the animals trust you. That’s one of the best recommendations. I haven’t heard complaints about your work ethics at all.”

They sat in silence for a few moments more, before the soft thud of approaching footfalls sounded. There were no torches to light the way, and Kareina stood but hadn’t drawn her sword yet. Taelyr also stood. It must be the warrior sent to monitor the opening. When he heard the hushed voices of Kareina and another woman, Taelyr knew the time had come.

“What news have you, Tiilaen?” Kareina whispered.

“They’re almost here,” Tiilaen said.

So they waited. Taelyr’s body tensed. He heard the commotion long before he saw the light from the torches. At the forefront, Taelyr saw Tombik. They caught sight of the other at about the same moment. Tombik glared. “What the hell, you little weasel? How dare you turn on your father?”

With more bravado than he felt Taelyr said, “You’re not my father. My father died the night my mother was beaten to death.”

With the growl, Tombik raised his sword and rushed forward, his burning gaze intent on Taelyr. Taelyr removed his own weapon, hoping to do his part. Before he had a chance to meet his father’s attack, Kareina stepped in front of him. “I’ve got this my friend. You watch my back.” Taelyr did just that, watching to make sure no one in his father’s unit attacked from behind. Taelyr surveyed the fighting around him. Sneak attacks wouldn’t be an option. Despite the sheer meanness of Tombik’s people, men intent on destroying magic and women warriors. They were intent on destroying anything that went against their manly pride. True warriors outnumbered this enemy. Women and men, warriors’, intent on protecting their loved ones, keeping them safe, not about control and ruling over. Kareina had given them all an advantage, switching out the longer swords for shorter ones, easier to wield in the tight confines.

Tiilaen was a wonder to watch. Taelyr saw her meet the swinging blades of two men simultaneously as a third attempted to corner her. Barely breaking a sweat, Taelyr watched her glide across the dirt, her blade stopping those of Belzan men. She easily dispatched the men, one at a time, until all three were dead at her feet. The other warriors, recently sitting behind them, had engaged the others, and were similarly cutting down their enemy. All that stood now was Kareina and Tombik. Taelyr realized, without the distraction and limited space of the others, Tombik advanced more angrily. Kareina, however, was more cautious of the dead as she stepped over them, not trotting on them as if they were nothing of import, as Tombik did. The more Taelyr watched the disrespect Tombik showed, to living or dead, he wondered if he ever respected his father. No, he thought, respect and his father were never in the same category.

“Surrender,” Kareina said to Tombik.

He growled. “Never, bitch. We’ll have this keep, and then we’ll have all your women.” He swung another blow to Kareina’s head. She easily deflected it, but Tombik pushed her close to Taelyr. And as was her nature, Taelyr realized Kareina would protect him at all costs. He didn’t want to be the reason harm came to Kareina. Knew he’d never explain it to Yoshan. Instead, he shifted making enough noise to alert Kareina to his change in position as he made his way toward Tiilaen.

“I have no intention of giving up my keep,” Kareina said in a casual tone. “I especially have no intention of letting a sniveling worm like you anywhere near my women. I already feel sleazy being this close, knowing my other warriors have to share the same air with slime.”

Taelyr was concerned the taunting would only antagonize Tombik. Then he became aware the taunting caused Tombik to make mistakes. At that moment, Taelyr wondered what kind of strength it would take to be a warrior. Could he do it? Then a question came unbidden. If Yoshan forgave him, would she disapprove of his abandoning the animals to become a warrior like her papa?

Breathing heavy, Tombik swung his blade erratically at Kareina. Taelyr felt pride in her as he watched Kareina, in her skill, in the fact the angrier Tombik became, the more studious Kareina. Although part of Taelyr didn't know how he would truly react to his father's death, this was no longer his father. This was a madman intent on harm and pain to others. It didn't take long before Kareina, taking one of the many openings provided, shoved her blade deep into Tombik's chest.

Tombik fell, an ever-present derogatory curse aimed at Kareina taking the last of his breath.

Tiilaen joined Kareina and the other warriors as they glanced around at the dead. Taelyr stayed still, not wanting to get in the way. As he glanced at the dead men, not even mildly surprised, he thought of the waste of life. Men willing to kill to maintain their way of life, wrong as it was—at least in his new viewpoint—without thought to the lives left behind.

Kareina joined Taelyr. “How are you holding up?” she asked.

Taelyr should probably be more bothered this woman just took his father's life, but he wasn't. His father didn't stand for right. Tombik stood for brute strength, a man's control over what he believed to be his. Taelyr didn't wish to live that way. He only hoped he could be a better man than his father. “I guess I'm okay,” Taelyr said. “I feel a little ashamed,” he answered honestly.

“Ashamed of what?” Kareina asked.

“Ashamed I don't feel more from his death. Wondering, will I grow to be better than him?” Taelyr gazed upon the understanding in Kareina's eyes. “Wondering, will anyone look upon me the way Yoshan looks up to you. The way I'd like to be more like you.” He felt embarrassment color his face as he glanced at Tiilaen. “A little like her, too.”

Kareina laughed and slapped a hand on his shoulder. “Well, my boy,” Kareina said. “If you were too much like me, Yoshan may have to look elsewhere for a husband.”

Once again Kareina caused a deep flush of embarrassment.

“You realize I'm only fifteen,” he said. “I got a ways to being anyone's husband.”

“There you're wrong,” Kareina said. “It's going to take a few years to train you correctly. You've a lot to learn.”

“I understand, Shei Kareina,” Taelyr said. “I'll study as hard as I can.”

Tiilaen walked up to Taelyr's left side. “I think you misunderstood, Taelyr. I think Kareina means she's to train you how to get past Mayliandra. Then, of course, you'll need to deal with the uncles, the aunts, and the rest of the Keep population. Yoshan's very important to us. Have to make sure she has the right spouse to keep in line.”

Taelyr knew she spoke the truth. He also realized they were teasing him. “Hey,” he said. “What makes you think I need to be kept in line?”

Kareina barked a laugh. “Because they're still training me.”

Taelyr followed Kareina and Tiilaen, the other warriors followed behind. They left through the opening Tombik and his men had entered. “What now?” he asked.

“Now, my young friend,” Kareina said. “We find the others, dispatch them, and go get a meal and share in a few tankards of ale.”

Taelyr groaned. “I’m in trouble,” he said. Kareina and Tiilaen stared at him in confusion. He shrugged. “I hate ale.”

Chapter Thirty-seven

JAHQ HADN'T WANTED to move so far away from the safety of the outer Keep, but Gionne believed she spotted Belzan. Neither she nor Gionne would be able to positively move forward to mend their life or relationship if they didn't confront him. Gionne, an amazing warrior under normal circumstances, hadn't been ready to leave the infirmary, still weak and bruised, and Jahq worried for her health. Jahq couldn't keep her there once the battle began, and she couldn't fault Gionne's reasoning of every able body needed to fight.

So, from the Keep's outer wall, when Gionne gasped she'd seen Belzan—probably skulking away, she thought—Jahq could only respond to Gionne's silent plea to track him down. The lightening of the sky let them know dawn would break soon, and Belzan's fighters would change to another tactic of attack. With the warrior's and the mages busy at their business, Jahq followed Gionne to an area behind the barracks. Gionne walked toward a steel door inserted into the wall, numerous bolts secured every few inches for added security, a sentry standing before it with a mace clasped in both hands.

"What's your business, Gionne?" the guard asked.

Gionne jutted her chin in the direction of the door. "We need out, Dagget. We're to do a bit of reconnaissance to assess the situation."

Dagget's eyes grew wide. "Sure you wanna do that? It's not safe."

"I take full responsibility, rest assured."

Jahq knew Dagget didn't want to comply, but would defer to orders. Neither she nor Gionne had to worry about danger to others as they had on the mission, but she didn't want to leave the Keep without someone being aware. "Next guard you see or your relief, after we leave, send to tell Shei Kareina or Shei Mayliandra we left. This won't come back on you then."

He glanced between them with a scowl, before moving to the bolts. "Knock with your hilt when you want back in. two long, three short, and one long. No one will open without the code."

Both agreed, rushing out the moment the door was slightly ajar. Gionne scanned the area around them, while Jahq searched for evidence of Belzan's progress, starting in the area they'd watched him escape earlier. Jahq wondered if Belzan felt secure in his victory, or lay a path for them to follow, as his tracks were simple to find. She hadn't believed Belzan knew they had seen them and followed, but anything was possible. After their reunion with Humkyte, Jahq had no intention of letting him slip away unscathed.

They had walked about a quarter league, no sight of another of Belzan's men anywhere, and Jahq began to worry this a trap. She hoped the lack of anyone else proved to be more a matter of Belzan's forces realizing this battle more than they bargained for against magic and children. The easy target not so easy to overcome.

From beside her, Jahq realized Gionne had slowed, peering into the trees intently. Gionne seemed to be holding her own, but closer scrutiny from Jahq had her noticing the paling of skin, a fine sheen of perspiration across her brow.

“Are you all right?” she asked, stopping to better gauge Gionne’s health. Gionne seemed to consider her response.

“I’m afraid,” Gionne said.

“As am I,” Jahq assured.

“We can’t let him control us by living in fear, anymore,” Gionne said in barely a whisper. “I can’t keep the nightmares at bay, knowing he could return in future.”

Jahq moved closer, placing her hands on Gionne’s shoulders. “That’s not going to happen. This will end today, one way or another.”

Gionne gave a little snort. “Preferably with us the victors.”

“That’s my hope, anyway,” Jahq said. “Then we can move beyond all this.”

“Beyond each other?” Gionne asked, her expression grief stricken. “Have I messed up that badly, Jahq?”

“We’ve much to talk about, Gionne.” Jahq raised a hand to Gionne’s cheek and she leaned into the caress, causing Jahq to feel a splurge of hope rush through her. “The past can’t be recreated, honey, but we can use it as a foundation for the—our— future.”

A second of relief crossed Gionne’s expression. “Good,” she said with a nod. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too. I miss the ease we had together. Let’s agree to talk through all misunderstandings in the future—should we rebuild our friendship.” Jahq gave Gionne a long hug. The feel of Gionne in her arms, against her, gave Jahq a sense of hope when she realized they both trembled at the contact. She couldn’t be certain Gionne’s response to their contact wasn’t from fear, but she hadn’t pulled away. For Jahq, it was like truly coming home.

“WELL, WELL, IF it isn’t two of my favorite bitches.”

Jahq spun around and saw Belzan rushing toward them. On instinct, she placed a shield between him and them. It didn’t stop him from pressing himself against it in an attempt to reach them. Gionne was physically shaking. Jahq reached out a hand and held hers trying to convey all the support possible in the grip. “We’ve come to stop you, asshole.”

“Neither of you is capable,” Belzan guffawed. “Let me tell you,” he said brazenly rubbing his hands against the shield mimicking touching them, “what’s going to happen. I’m going to find a way through this, and pleasure myself with you Jahq, as I’ve wanted for five years. Only now I won’t be so nice about it.” His gaze focused on Gionne. “Then, I’ll fuck you again. This time it’ll be slow so I can take my time with inflicting pain, revel in your screams. When I’m done with the both of you, I’ll start on the rest of your family. I will win everything in this.”

“You’ll win nothing,” Jahq said.

“How do you figure?” Belzan shot a look of disgust toward Gionne. “She’s shaking so bad she’s about to wet herself.” He moved away from the shield never taking his eyes from Jahq and Gionne. Belzan breathed deeply through his nose. “Can smell the fear, and it’s intoxicating. That’s the problem with women warriors. During peacetime, you’re all brave and full of yourselves. Things get bad and you turn worse than sniveling children do. I’ve every intention of punishing all the whiny children in Zheirger.”

“Your reign of cruelty and fear ends here,” Gionne said. “We’ve every intention of dispatching you permanently.”

“How do you intend to do that?” Belzan asked. “You can’t even face me outside a protective bubble.” Jahq, about to respond, noticed Belzan’s attention directed behind them. The satisfied

smirk crossing Belzan's face startled her. His next remark placed Jahq at ease. "Bought time, boy. Now the fun can begin the way it should happen." Belzan's face dropped when he realized Taelyr was with Yoshan.

Jahq wondered how they'd managed to leave the Keep, but appreciated how their appearance disturbed Belzan. "What's the matter?" Jahq asked in feigned surprise. "Did you think yourself capable of controlling a good man?" From the surprised expression on Taelyr's face, he hadn't expected her to refer to him as a man.

Taelyr's hand absently rubbed across the hilt of his sword. Jahq knew this must be hard for him. She was proud he would stand up to men like his father and Belzan. "What you've done to women, like Gionne, or men like you and my father did to my mother, is disgusting. You crossed the line when you killed the wolf," Taelyr said, his voice only slightly faltering.

Had the situation been less dire, Jahq would've snorted at Taelyr's response about the turning point for him being the animal. She consoled her pride by acknowledging his youth. Spending any more time with Yoshan should change his priorities—Jahq hoped.

"Bitches, all of them." Belzan chortled. "The world is well rid of them, especially those who don't know their place." Belzan's raked gaze down Gionne's body made even Jahq feel dirty. She shifted between Belzan and Gionne, as he ogled Gionne with contempt. "What does she think about my mark? Every time you play at your perversions, Gionne, is Jahq reminded I also had my fill of you, as she fills you?" Belzan laughed at his own joke. "Does it turn you on?" he asked, directing his glance to Jahq.

With a concerted effort, Jahq reigned in her temper. The task wasn't easy after hearing the pained, soft whimper that choked passed Gionne's lips. If Jahq lost it now, none of them would have any modicum of resolution where Belzan was concerned. "The more you speak, the more painful your death will be. You realize this, yes?"

Snorting, Belzan pulled his sword from its scabbard. "Enough reminiscing, I'm about to take my just rewards—a man's due. Just so you know," he glared at Jahq. "I've a layer of iron on my blade."

Jahq barked a harsh laugh. In a flash, she dropped the shield as Gionne released a bolt into his right thigh. His step faltered, but he regained his footing quickly and took another forward. Gionne released another into his left leg.

Down on both knees and bleeding, Belzan growled dangerously.

Though it wasn't necessary to access her power, Jahq raised a hand and flicked a finger at Belzan, flinging him backward and against the base of a thick tree and onto his behind. Belzan snarled in outrage. Gionne promptly fired two more arrows, pinning him firmly by the shoulders against the tree's bark. His sword useless beside him.

Regaining some of her spirits, Gionne asked, "How's that iron working for you now?"

"Don't think I'll forget this," Belzan said, snarling his indignation. Knowing the attempt must be painful, Jahq watched him slide inch by inch on the shafts, letting him get halfway free before she slammed him backward again. Blood flowed freely and pooled around him.

An enraged roar sounded from the right, and Harksten ran into the clearing. Jahq concentrated on Belzan's fallen sword. When Harksten was close enough to see her expression, Jahq smiled menacingly. "You are also through." Focusing, Jahq magicked the sword into Harksten's chest with enough force to reverse his motion, slamming him backward. She glanced at him and smirked. "This is what happens when you don't play nice with woman. We're not too happy with you giving up Zheirger secrets, either." He glared at her, hate bleeding from his eyes as blood from his wound. Moments later, Harksten was dead. Though glad they'd never have to

worry about him again, Jahq felt a little deflated he hadn't suffered as Kez had, as they had because of his machinations.

Jahq stepped toward Belzan. "Time for the finishing touch to you." She glanced to Yoshan. While Gionne lay unconscious in the infirmary, Jahq and Yoshan had talked, sharing ideas of retribution. Now was their chance to make those ideas a reality. "Are they ready?"

"They are very ready, sister," Yoshan said. As if on cue, glowing eyes from within the surrounding forest grew larger as the wolves made their presence known.

Shaking her head, Jahq said, "Much as we'd each like the chance to personally tear you limb from limb, we aren't the only ones with a vendetta. As you see, Yoshan's friends didn't take kindly to you killing the leaders mate. Therefore, we've arranged a tit-for-tat. One that'll make all parties receive some justice as their due, however miniscule.

"You better make it final." Belzan roared. "Soon as I get loose I'll make you suffer for many months."

"You can try," Jahq said. "Don't think you'll be up for it." Jahq glanced again to Yoshan. "You might want to turn around for this one, sister. It won't be decent."

"I'm not as young as you think I am," Yoshan said indignantly.

"As you wish." Jahq returned to Gionne. Caressing Gionne's face, her voice low, Jahq asked, "Are you ready for this final one?"

We can stop if you aren't. My anger is deep, granted, but yours is deeper and more painful."

Gionne gave a slow shake of her head. "I don't ever want him to have a chance to do what he...to harm anyone ever again. Especially to people I love. Nothing has taught him the error of his ways. This time it has to be final."

Jahq placed a quick kiss to Gionne's cheek. "Then final it shall be."

"WHAT GOES ON here?" Kareina's voice asked from behind them. As she moved closer, Jahq feared the disappointment her mother might feel at the excess of their punishment. But Kareina's gaze locked on Belzan. "Belzan, how goes your coup?" Kareina smirked when he growled and spit a glob of blood in her direction. "Always a sore loser." She turned her gaze on her daughters. "Is everyone okay?"

"We're fine, Papa," Yoshan said, her voice shaky.

"Taelyr?"

"I'm fine, Shei Kareina."

"Good, good." Kareina moved close, placing a gentle hand on Gionne's shoulder. "And you, my dear? Are you holding up all right?" Gionne gave a slight nod. Kareina responded with a reaffirming squeeze and a wink in Jahq's direction. "Then I suggest you finish up here. Mayliandra is expecting us for dinner, and you know how your mother is, dinner being about family time."

"We're almost through, Papa," Jahq said. "We won't be but a few more minutes.

"I'll hold you to it." She turned toward the Keep. Over her shoulder, Kareina said, "I've no intention of suffering your mother's wrath on my own, girls."

"Coward," Yoshan teased.

"I heard that, Poppet." Just before Kareina was out of sight, they heard, "Don't think I'll forget it either."

When Jahq glanced back at Belzan, she noticed the loss of blood had weakened him, leaving him almost unconscious. She didn't want him to get off that easily. "Wake up, asshole. We'll not have you dying yet. You'll miss the fun we've planned for you." Jahq tugged a dagger from her waist and strode to Belzan, still weak but alive. Quickly, more before he could spit again than because she thought he could escape, Jahq sliced the material of his breeches at his groin area.

Not all the fight had drained from Belzan, as he said, "Knew you were interested."

"Yuck, not hardly," Jahq said. "I'm simply making it easier for the wolves to fulfill their part of the bargain."

"What bargain?"

"We see the destruction of your greatest weapon," Jahq said, slamming the dagger into his manhood. She paused until his scream died down. "The wolves get the rest of you. I just hope they don't get sick from your putrid flesh."

"What do you intend—"

Jahq gave a slight nod to Yoshan, who telepathically spoke to the wolves. As the wolves closed ranks toward Belzan, Jahq and the others headed toward the Keep and supper.

Belzan's screams of rage and pain suffused the night, as they walked steadily away, none acknowledging they heard a sound.

Conflict and Resolution

Chapter Thirty-eight

GIONNE FELT UNEASY and uncomfortable, even as she lay propped in a sitting position by multiple pillows in Jahq's bed. After all she had done, Jahq should have turned her back on Gionne, certainly didn't have to invite her into her bedroom. In fact, it wouldn't have surprised anyone if Jahq had insisted Gionne return to the barracks or the infirmary. Jahq hadn't.

Belzan's revolt had died with him, Tombik, and Harksten. With their deaths, his entire legion of men had ceased hostilities and disappeared.

Jahq closed the distance between them, sat on the side of the bed leaning forward and devouring her mouth in heated warmth. After a moment, she pulled back with such a tender expression, Gionne wanted to cry out for the pain it brought her heart—why doesn't Jahq hate me? Instead, Jahq asked, "What has you thinking so hard?"

"I'm confused," Gionne said. She wanted only honesty between them. Too much had been lost because of insecurities and lesser truths. Or ignoring the topic all together. "Why am I here?" With Belzan gone, and the Keep safely back to normal—at least as normal as Zheirger could be with unpracticed magic wielders—Gionne had to face up to her past actions. She owed so much to Jahq, including her devotion and unconditional love. How could she have been so blind? Even if Jahq had forgiven her, put the past behind them, Gionne knew she would need to spend every moment proving her love, her fierce adoration of Jahq.

With a frown, Jahq said, "Now I'm the one confused. I'm sorry, I thought—"As quickly as she sat a moment ago, Jahq jumped off the bed and turned away. Her voice trembled when she said, "I'll leave you to rest."

"No," Gionne said, panicking. She reached for Jahq too quickly, stopped short as pain had her gasping for air strangled in her throat from the pain of her ribs. Her excursion to the wall and into the forest after Belzan had taken a toll on her healing process. "Please don't leave." Jahq turned back toward her, concern written across her features, her hands balled into fists as if fighting her need to move. "I want to be here, truly, to be with you always. It's just I don't deserve to be here. I've done you such a disservice all these years. We both know our separation was my fault."

"I'd thought we moved beyond that, Gionne." The pain was clouding Jahq's gaze.

“Yes, but you should make me suffer. I was so wrong. How can you forget the horrible way I’ve treated you. Treated you as everyone else had or does? And I had professed my love for you. Then, not to support you during—”

“Shush,” Jahq said, a finger gently placed on her lips. “Let us bury the past, start anew.”

Gionne gave a small nod. “I don’t deserve you, you know. But, please, know this. I love you with all my heart. I always have, although I’ve attempted all manner of ways to ignore those feelings for you.”

“We could consecrate new beginnings,” Jahq suggested. Her tongue darted out and skimmed across Gionne’s lower lip.

Instant desire shot through Gionne, forcing her skin to crinkle into gooseflesh and her stomach performed a dizzying flip-flop. She hadn’t felt that since the first time she and Jahq had kissed, years ago when they’d first arrived at Zheirger Keep. Jahq’s tongue entered her mouth slowly and smoothly, caressing Gionne’s lips. Her hands trailed from Gionne’s shoulders to the naked skin of her neck and, when Gionne opened her eyes, she saw the raw desire in those dark blue eyes.

Jahq locked her gaze on Gionne’s and languidly, with the back of her hand, she traced a line from Gionne’s neck, over her breast, until her fingertips rested at Gionne’s waist. Gionne leaned back onto the pillows, her eyes never leaving Jahq’s face. Jahq stood quickly, removed her clothing and crawled towards her on all fours until she straddled Gionne.

Gionne stiffened, noting the ring that hung at Jahq’s neck. Michi’s. “Maybe we shouldn’t do this.”

“Guess we should’ve addressed this before now. I’d be foolish to deny Michi meant something to me, Gionne. She found a way into my heart, and was there when I needed someone. I can’t say I’ll forget her, and I did make her a promise to remember. But Michi knew she didn’t have all my love in that way.”

She started to climb off Gionne, and Gionne held Jahq’s hips firmly. “No, wait.”

Jahq paused and said, “I understand if my memories, or wearing the ring are uncomfortable for you.”

Gionne took a deep breath to settle her thoughts. “I admit it’s presence is a bit disconcerting in our bed. Michi helped you, was there for you, when we—I—wasn’t and I’m grateful to her. Her affections and her assistance kept you alive.” Gionne turned away, unable to meet Jahq’s eyes. “I admit I’m a little jealous. Granted my actions created the circumstances, but it’s difficult to reconcile—”

“Shh. Thank you, for speaking your heart.” Jahq clutched the ring, squeezing her eyes closed. Inhaling a deep breath, she opened her eyes, removed the ring, and placed it on the table beside the bed. “Better?”

Gionne nodded. “It’s not for always, Jahq. It’s important to keep her memory alive. Just—”

“Just not during intimate times,” Jahq finished for her. “I understand. I love you, Gionne.”

Jahq leaned forward and kissed Gionne again and this time, with Jahq’s body, pressed firmly against hers, Gionne could feel the heat between her legs. Jahq’s fingers stroked her nipples. “Now we’ve cleared the air, we should resume.” Jahq covered the nipple with her mouth, her tongue softly licking and nibbling until Gionne feared she might explode from the pleasure. Gionne could feel wetness trickle down between her legs. Jahq directed attention to Gionne’s other nipple, gently tonguing it.

Gionne was ready to beg Jahq to take her when Jahq’s knee caused friction on her pelvis. Gionne impatiently pushed herself up to increase the pressure. “Please,” Gionne begged. Jahq

ignored her plea, instead trailing a slow line of wet kisses over Gionne's stomach and then, she buried the tip of her tongue into the center of Gionne's bellybutton. Gionne stiffened, reminded of the scar left by Belzan, worried how Jahq would react. But if she were distracted by it, Jahq gave no impression. Jahq's tongue continued the onslaught.

"Please," Gionne pleaded once again. Jahq shot her a sultry smile. She planted moist kisses across Gionne's inner thighs, each one a bit closer to where desire built to a fiery need. The first touch of Jahq's mouth on her lower lips sent a jolt of energy through Gionne's body. All her nerves tingled and screamed for release. Gionne understood prolonging her partner's pleasure for hours, but at this particular moment felt more like a battle of endurance.

"Feeling a little better?" Jahq asked as she fixed blue eyes with unmistakable passion on Gionne.

"Love me now, please." Gionne couldn't wait anymore.

"Do you trust me?" Jahq asked, pausing her ministrations to Gionne's thighs.

Gionne nodded vigorously. "Always. I'll never doubt you again."

Jahq shifted, bending to reach something on the floor. When she next rose, Jahq held a long swatch of material, which she wrapped around Gionne's wrists, before securing them to the bedpost behind her. Jahq gave a playful kiss to the tip of Gionne's nose.

Gionne gripped her hands firmly around the soft material. She imagined her knuckles were white with frustration as she fisted them. Gionne knew from the feel, she could escape if she tried. Understood this to be a test of trust. Jahq locked eyes with Gionne one more time, lowered her head and licked the outer lips of her womanhood up and down. Gionne let out a loud sigh of relief and the hints of arousal blanketing her voice and she felt lightheaded.

Jahq dug her tongue deep into the folds of Gionne's nether lips, avoiding contact with her clit. She probed in and out, licked the flowing wetness while one hand stroked the sensitive area beneath Gionne's belly button. The other hand spread her with two fingers, but not entering. After a few minutes more of exquisitely excruciating bliss, Jahq let her tongue wander to Gionne's clit, gently plunging with short swipes, soon attacking with licks and sucking bringing Gionne near the verge of release. As if sensing Gionne's plight, Jahq withdrew and shifted position. Gionne felt Jahq's fingers at the rim of her nether lips, ready to enter. The first stroke tentative, one finger testing. The next more forceful and deeper until Jahq thrust in steady rhythm with two fingers. Each thrust coaxed a louder groan from Gionne's throat. When Jahq flicked her tongue over her clit a few more times Gionne felt pressure building inside, a unique blend of heat and tingling spreading through muscles and blood, through every fiber of her body. Gionne felt miniature muscle contractions, which soon convulsed and made the walls of her womanhood clench around Jahq's fingers, wanting to keep them there forever.

"Sweet goddess," Gionne murmured as Jahq carefully slid her fingers out of her. "You have a special magic, Jahq. Thank you."

Jahq grinned and lay flush against her. "Magic which only works for you."

When she reached up to untie Gionne's hands, Gionne stopped her.

"No, don't, not yet." Gionne leaned to the side and kissed Jahq's cheekbones, stared into her blue eyes and saw the intense emotion there. She gave a tender kiss to Jahq's lips. Soon, their tongues intertwined, darting in and out of each other's' mouth. Jahq squirmed against her, her soft skin covered with a slick layer of sweat as it slithered languorously against hers. Jahq wanted her—needed her—and Gionne allowed herself to enjoy the tinge of power Jahq's naked desire awoke in her. "Okay, release me now, and lay atop me."

"But your—"

“Healed enough, just tender. Please, Jahq, no excuses,” Gionne said. Jahq did, but Gionne had changed her mind. As soon as Jahq lay carefully against her, Gionne flipped her to her back. “This has been too long coming.” Gionne savored Jahq’s nipples with her tongue until the hard buds pierced her lips. Jahq’s hands were in her hair, on her neck, everywhere, until they had nothing to hold on to anymore, as Gionne made her way down Jahq’s exquisite body. Gionne buried her head between Jahq’s legs. The smell of pure desire rising from Jahq sent a pang of ardor up Gionne’s spine. She inhaled deeply. Gionne wanted to extend this moment, make Jahq wait, but beyond patience. She dipped the tip of her tongue between Jahq’s nether lips and stroked her way up, encircling her clit with one swift flick.

“Aah, sweet goddess,” Jahq moaned. “Please, my heart, don’t make me wait.” Any restraint Gionne may have prided herself before escaped her. Anything Jahq asked would always be her command.

Gionne sucked Jahq’s clit between her lips and let her tongue swirl around it in her mouth. Without letting her tongue lose touch with Jahq’s flesh, Gionne carefully slid to her knees. Slowly, she pushed one finger into the heat of Jahq’s womanhood. Gionne wanted to continue licking her simultaneously but watching Jahq’s face while she entered her won the need to tease. She lifted her head and found Jahq’s eyes. An ecstatic expression took hold of Jahq’s face while her eyes pleaded. Gionne explored the inside of Jahq while gazing into her eyes. Soon Gionne felt the wetness dripping down her own thighs. She slowly added a finger inside, coaxing a low approving growl from Jahq’s throat, as she spread Jahq’s nether lips apart with each thrust.

Jahq gripped the hand Gionne used to steady herself on the bed and dug her nails deep into its flesh. Gionne studied her own hand with growing desire as she inserted a third finger inside of Jahq, then locked eyes with her again.

“Harder,” Jahq muttered. Gionne buried her fingers deep inside Jahq every time she entered, reveling in the sticky warmth of it and the quick succession of sighs escaping Jahq’s mouth.

Gionne lowered her head to resume stimulation with her mouth. “No. Look at me, please.”

Gionne bore her gaze into Jahq’s. Whatever magic it wrought worked because Jahq started shaking all over, her muscles contracting and retracting rapidly. She clamped the walls of her womanhood around Gionne’s fingers and flung her head back, her breasts bounced to the rhythm of Gionne’s thrusts. The pure joy of giving this woman intense pleasure engulfed Gionne.

“So good,” Jahq moaned. “So delicious and wonderfully good.” When their eyes met again, Gionne detected a small tear glistening against the corner of Jahq’s eyes. Gionne, prepared to apologize, stopped by Jahq’s words. “I love you, Gionne. Please keep me.”

“Always. I love you, too, Jahq. With all my heart.” Gionne sank into the soft mattress of the bed and let her eyes fall shut. Jahq’s smell clung to every inch of her and the entire room filled with the lush scent of satisfaction. This is how it should have been three years ago. She bit her bottom lip to staunch those thoughts. Now was not the time for recriminations. They were together and that was what mattered—the only thing to matter. As they fell asleep, Gionne pulled Jahq closer until they were spooning, and pledged her love into Jahq’s ear. “You’re mine forever, my dearest love.”

Chapter Thirty-nine

“ARE YOU SURE about this, honey?” Gionne asked, staring at Jahq. The morning was brisk, the sunrise only minutes ago. Beside them stood a patiently waiting Zuena. Jahq had explained her decision to go to the Void. Gionne didn’t wish to hold Jahq back from any decision she felt was in her best interest, but relieved when Jahq agreed to start their journey with time in Languard first. As for Zuena, Stechyc had suggested she spend time under the tutelage of Leenatte. Convincing the rest of Jahq’s family hadn’t proved difficult, but hadn’t been an easy matter either.

Jahq ran her fingers up and down Gionne’s arms. “As long as you spend the rest of our lives looking at me as you are this moment, I won’t care how others see or react to me.”

“I won’t let anyone hurt you because of your markings again. I pledge to do my best to protect you from other harm with my life.” Gionne had explained her feelings of inadequacy to protect as due a warrior, as due a lover, during their long hours of lovemaking and reacquainting themselves. Each agreed they had much to re-learn about the other, but Gionne relished the agreement to do that very thing. “I love you,” she said, pressing her lips to Jahq’s for a slow kiss.

“Yuck, quit,” Yoshan whined, walking beside Taelyr as he brought their horses. “Save it for the road.” Yoshan turned to Zuena. “Good thing you’re a healer, ‘cause you’ll be sick most the trip if they keep this up.”

Zuena laughed and chucked Yoshan in the arm with a fist. “Remember this moment when someone is demanding the same of you.”

Yoshan rolled her eyes. “Don’t think so.” But her glance darted toward Taelyr and she blushed.

“Certain you won’t change your minds?” Kareina strode with a teary-eyed Mayliandra held close to her side with an arm around her waist. “Now I’m aware of the matter—” Gionne recognized the pain of guilt in Kareina’s eyes.

“No, Papa,” Jahq said. “This isn’t because of anything you have or haven’t done. Our leaving is best for me and Gionne. It’s not like we’re leaving your lives forever.”

“Darn, the idea of being an only child has appeal,” Yoshan teased. Kareina and Mayliandra both slapped Yoshan playfully on her shoulders.

Mayliandra’s expression grew serious. “Much as we wish you’d stay,” Mayliandra glanced to Zuena and said, “you included, and much as this departure saddens us, we also understand and support the decision.”

“Leenatte will assist us in keeping in touch,” Gionne assured them. Movement from behind the group caught Gionne’s attention and she flashed a smile at Jahq. “Your great-nephew has come to see you off, too.” Approaching them were Melrick and Fleuren, carrying their new son in her arms.

Before long, Altaira, Calpri, Tiilaen, and Stechyc joined them. Tears were shed, hugs given, and last minute advice and well wishes passed. As the rising sun warmed the morning, Kareina growled orders for all to go return inside; and, her intent to follow them to the magic bridge

linking Zheirger to the Valley of Mist. Little was spoken until they reached the bridge, and Kareina turned a worried glance to Jahq. “You’re certain about this?” Jahq nodded, surprising Gionne when she grasped for and clutched her hand tight in her own. “I’m aware of Altaira’s vision of the darkness coming.” Kareina glanced at Zuena. “You being the light in the darkness. I admit I don’t understand, but know I’m here for you, will be wherever you need me to be, if the situation should come to pass.”

“We understand, Papa, and will willingly accept your support,” Jahq said.

“And your sword arm, Kareina,” Gionne added, hoping to lighten the mood darkened by their departure.

“Let’s hope the time is long in coming,” Zuena said.

“Agreed.” Kareina gave a heavy sigh. “Okay, I can’t prolong this any longer.” Kareina extended her arm, and Gionne clasped it in the formal warrior handshake. “Blessed be to you.”

“Blessed be, Kareina,” Gionne repeated. “Thank you, for everything.”

“Be sure to take care of yourself while taking care of my daughter,” Kareina said. Gionne nodded. Kareina focused on Jahq with open arms.

With a tearful hiccup, Jahq fell into Kareina’s embrace. “I love you, Papa. Thank you and Mama for being the best parents anyone could hope for.”

Unshed tears glistened in Kareina’s smoke-blue eyes as she squeezed Jahq closer to her. “I’m so sorry—”

“There’s nothing to apologize for, Papa.” Jahq gave a watery chuckle as she met Gionne’s gaze, not leaving the comfort of Kareina’s embrace. “This day was bound to happen. It’s Gionne’s job to take care of me now.”

Kareina grinned, darting a glance in her direction. “Love makes you stronger than we think possible. I’m certain she’s up to the task.”

“How could she not be?” Jahq asked, stepping away from Kareina. “She had the best teacher in you.”

“Okay, enough.” Kareina cupped Jahq’s face. “Be safe, and take care of one another. Safe journey.” As if the beasts of Bahalkar chased, Kareina turned and headed back toward Zheirger.

“Here we go,” Gionne said. “Off for another adventure.”

“Let’s hope this one tamer.” Jahq and Zuena climbed onto their horses. Gionne did too after one last look behind her. She realized Zuena turned solemn. “You all right?”

Zuena shrugged. “I’m not a seer, but you ever get the feeling everything’s about to change, and can’t tell if it’s for good or bad?” Gionne nodded. “That’s what I’m feeling.”

“You want to turn around?” Gionne asked.

“No, I feel this is something I have to do.”

“Well, at least we’ll be together for whatever happens,” Jahq said.

Gionne chuckled. “So, I ask you, is it for good or for bad?”

Jahq reached across Gionne’s horse’s head and squeezed her hand tenderly. “It is what it is. Everything is best tackled together.”

“Together it is,” Gionne said. With a gentle squeeze of her knees, Gionne urged her horse onto the magic bridge. “Blessed be to the strength of friends and family, to the power of love.”

YSANNIE STOOD ON the tower’s balcony, her thoughts jumbled. She should apologize to Chayboen for not warning her about the deception involving Altaira, realized it was the crux of

Chayboen's anger with her. She and Kareina had believed their way the best course of action, and never intended to display Ysannie's distrust of Chayboen. No one at Zheirger Keep could have known the full extent of the troubles in Kellshae because of the growing magic and the growing descent among those fearing magic users. Thankfully, matters had worked out for those involved, even if not without emotional consequences, which time would need to heal.

What Ysannie couldn't let go was the frightful feeling the worst hadn't come, that the mountain hid secrets she should remember—secrets they should fear. Since bringing them off the mountain, Ysannie had been haunted by images she couldn't explain, images the brought on fear she couldn't explain. There was only way to stop it. And the results could further pound a wedge between her and Chayboen. She only wished—

"Should have known you'd be here," Chayboen said, coming to stand beside her. "Nice morning."

Ysannie nodded. "Yes, it is. Have they left?"

Pain flashed across Chayboen's features for an instant. Most wouldn't have notice, but Ysannie was aware of every nuance of her lover. "Yes." She sighed. "I couldn't say good-bye."

"Why not?" she asked, though Ysannie knew the answer. Chayboen still blamed herself for what happened with Berk in the iron mine village. "Because some of us have failed them, especially Jahq. I hope they journey to a better life. A safer life. Jahq and Gionne are due a bit of happiness, no matter how fleeting."

"I agree." Ysannie turned to face Chayboen. "What of you? Are you still angry with me?"

Chayboen shook her head. "I've given the matter much thought, and realize no one was at fault. The gods had set the pieces into motion." Chayboen blushed. "Well, figurative gods, I guess I should add. No offense, goddess."

"None taken," Ysannie said, smiling. The teasing mood didn't last long. There was something she must do, and Chayboen might not understand. Could interpret it as another betrayal of trust. She took Chayboen's hands, pulled her into an embrace.

"Bad news?" Chayboen asked, stiffening slightly.

Ysannie took a deep steadying breath. "I've got to go back. See what is haunting me about the mountain."

"I could get a pack ready for travel," Chayboen said. Her tone indicated she knew it wasn't an option. "But you probably need to do this on your own. I understand."

"Do you really?"

Snorting, Chayboen said, "No, but I need to believe I've put your concerns to rest this won't distance us. I love you, my golden goddess. Nothing will change that." Chayboen kissed her, long and fiercely, until both pulled away gasping for air. "I ask one promise before you go."

"Ask it," Ysannie said.

"Promise you'll return to me."

Ysannie drew Chayboen into a tight hug, whispering in her ear. "With my dying breath, I will return to you."

Chayboen groaned. "Let's hope it's not the case. I prefer you quite alive and breathing."

"As you wish." Chayboen pulled away. "Right now, we've much to make up for with your absence. Shall we?"

"Just try to stop me." Chayboen tugged on Ysannie, dragging her into the tower. "Hope you can keep up."

Ysannie beamed a smile at the woman who held her heart. "I love a challenge. And I love you more."

Chapter Forty

STANDING IN THE empty room, as the lone candle flicked shadows against the darkness not breached by the flame, Kareina reassessed the pros and cons of what she was about to do. She hadn't told anyone her destination or her intention. It would be morally wrong to murder someone coldly, but her intentions weren't to kill. For Kareina, this was more personal. The matter demanded punishment. She'd never be able to hold her head in self-respect if she let this matter go without justice. If her soul was forfeit, so be it.

Patting her pocket one last time to assure the device was safe Kareina activated the portal and stepped through.

The moon wasn't big enough to provide much light, but Kareina could make out every structure. Even if the charred embers of barely recognizable houses hadn't signified the fire that had gutted them, the stench of burned wood and fabric would have spoken of the damage here.

Glancing around, Kareina realized no one walked the streets this night, no watch, no sounds of life going about the usual familial activities. If she hadn't seen the yellow flick of candlelight through a worn curtain, Kareina would've expected the town to be completely deserted. Then, her self-appointed mission would be a bust—not to mention an utter waste of her fury.

"Follow the flicker it is," Kareina mumbled. The structure was more of a shack, she noticed, drawing toward the door outside. She drew her sword, kicked the door inward, and stalked inside. If she expected a defensive attack, Kareina was mistaken. Inside the hovel, a filthy, disheveled, heavy-set man sat in a large chair positioned between two cages. Kareina felt her fury build. These must be the cages used to hold Jahq and Altaira. A table was pushed up against one, dirty plates filled with half-consumed food, some days and possibly weeks old, littered the top. Resting on top of the cage to the right was a large cask the man was currently filling the tankard in his hand from.

"Here to kill me?" the man slurred.

"Who are you?" Kareina asked.

"What? An assassin with a specific target? Or just a discriminate killer?"

"Your name?"

The man took a long pull on his tankard. "Don't see why that's important. Just get it over with and kill me. I won't stop you."

Kareina wrinkled her nose. "As if you could."

He took another drink, shifted in his chair, the stench of him nearly overpowering in the confines of the small area. "Ya'know what the worst part of magic returning is? Women dressing and acting like men." He swiped his gaze from head to boots, and then he smirked. "Though from the look of you, you could pass as a man better than some born to the gender."

Whether he was Berk or not, Kareina took another step closer. "Well, Berk, we've business." He didn't deny the name, just squinted at her. "I've come to right a wrong."

"Who'd I piss off now?" he asked. She'd hoped he would engage her, but appeared content to sit and wallow.

“I’m here on behalf of my daughter,” Kareina said, sheathing her sword, and pulling the small vial of red liquid from her pocket. With her free hand, Kareina pulled Berk forward and slammed the vial into his fleshy neck. He barked a noise in surprise, then growled as the liquid seeped into his skin. “You should have left Jahq alone.”

Berk’s eyes widened in surprise before thinning in fury. “What did you do? Poison?” He tipped his head to indicate the keg. “It’ll just work quicker than that would.”

Kareina stepped back from him as Berk plopped back in his chair, still not showing any indication of defending himself. “No, not kill you. But your attack against my daughters’ magic —” Kareina grit her teeth and inhaled through her nose before continuing. “Against her body. If used a potion to accompany any memories you have of what you did to her, to others, and to anyone in the future.”

“What in hellfire are you talking about, bitch?” Berk took a slurping gulp from his tankard.

“Magic. The vial held a magic brew. It contains a bonus, too.” Kareina moved toward the doorway. She didn’t know how the liquid worked, but it had Ysannie’s blood in the mix.

Ysannie assured Kareina the liquid would do as they’d spelled it. “Every time you think of raping, having sex, sex you’ve had, the magic will send a jolt of searing pain through you. Starting with your shriveled member and move through the rest of you.”

Berk sniffed. “What’s my bonus?”

“The magic makes you unable to die for the next two years, no matter by what means your intended death takes. Your body will survive death, which could be broken and mutilated by your attempts at suicide or another’s hand.” His face paled and Kareina felt a bit of disappointment he hadn’t any fight in him, hadn’t attacked her and demanded she release him from this. Maybe he didn’t believe her. No matter, she’d done what she could to take some action against the man’s actions on Jahq.

He sneered. “Worth it to remember such a sweet piece of flesh.”

Kareina clenched her hands at her side. Anything more than what she’d done would be too brutal and useless, even for her. “Did I mention it also happens when you get your morning hard-on?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

She smiled at him. “Jahq calls me Papa. Some have called me Shei Kareina. Others know me as Sher Karr.” Berk paled. “You can think of me as justice.”

STANDING AT THE lower entrance into the mountain, Ysannie took a deep breath. This was familiar, yet somehow meant nothing. The mountain—or forgotten occupants within—must have somehow anticipated her arrival. A portion of the mountain wall slowly slid open, revealing a stairway going down into the dark depths. Ysannie noted a small red glow at the bottom.

She entered.

Her body appeared to know what she must do. At the bottom of the stairs, Ysannie automatically pressed the button and entered the elevator. The doors closed, and began the ascent. She waited. Not understanding why, Ysannie recognized that the elevator would deposit her at the level she was supposed to stop. Heart inexplicably hammering in her chest, Ysannie inhaled another deep, steady breath as the doors slid open.

Ysannie stood transfixed to the spot at what appeared before her. Not recognizing anything, yet knowing she’d been here before. Many times. The doors opened to a large room filled with

cables, stasis chambers, and other myriad equipment. Leaning against the far wall was a man dressed in black military uniform. Inside the stasis chambers were her fellow gods—those who were supposed to have moved on.

A petite, dark-haired woman in a collared white tunic—no, a lab coat—stepped forward with a broad grin. How do I know that? How do I recognize the chambers, the equipment? Ysannie wondered. Panic churned in her gut, and Ysannie walked backward until she was flush against the back-mirrored wall.

The woman held out a small hand. “Welcome back, Ysannie. We’ve missed you.”

About the Author

Sharon lives in beautiful Colorado. She enjoys finding new trails to hike and playing mahjong, although not simultaneously as she's awkward enough under normal circumstances, and the magic of quiet time. Most of all, she likes to read, and is thankful for her electronic reader—or else it would be obvious how many books she owns.

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Chaos Beneath the Moonbeams

The age of magic has been over for nearly three centuries; finalized with the War of Harmony. Even the gods willingly melt into forgetfulness, letting mortal life grow as it would, for good or bad. Not all the gods had agreed unanimously. So, when a mortal man decides to release a banished god for his own purposes, nothing will ever be the same.

Kareina of Clan Gradyln has posed as her twin brother Karr (with the aid of minor forbidden magic) for over a decade, since Karr's disappearance and Kareina's kidnapping and torture. Even Caldier Hassid, her father, forgets her true gender. So, when Hassid agrees to a betrothal between Karr and Mayliandra, it's up to Kareina to figure a way out of it. Meanwhile, someone has brought the old god T'Dar from the depths of Bahalkar to bring back the old ways of chaos.

Mayliandra of Clan Bredwine, about to be given to the fierce Sher Karr, doesn't know if she should be happy for the opportunity to leave her home, where she's nothing but a servant; or, petrified her future husband will learn her secret. Although Mayliandra intends to do her duty to her clan, she can't help wishing Karr were his dead sister, Kareina.

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A Majestic Affair

A decade ago, Tiara Summers was forced to leave her home with her alcoholic mother, and contact was lost with her father and friends. Tiara built a profitable construction business in Colorado Springs and, if not exactly happy, is comfortable with her life. Then she receives a letter from her father asking for help with a horse, which means returning to Silver Waters, Colorado with all the old memories of kisses and running away...and Jayce.

Jayce Mansfield trains horses for a living. Her focus is specializing the equines for stunts in the movies. Then Tiara returns, though her father is AWOL, and Jayce sees promise in a second chance. Hopes for the happily-ever-after she'd envisioned for them are reanimated, until Jayce realizes the sweet, caring teenager that left ten years ago has turned into a bitter woman.

When a little gangster in a purple limousine comes demanding Tiara give over her father's horse, situations and emotions only become more complicated, compelling Tiara to run again. Can Jayce get Tiara to realize she belongs in Silver Waters, that they belong together?

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Into the Mist

Lieutenant Kasey Houston has snuck off the USS Console, to join the Marines in their fight against the Japanese soldiers, in May of 1945. She is a psychiatric nurse, and when the Marines of her unit are all killed, she attempts to take out the enemy. However, a strange gray mist is in the cave, and the enemy soldier releases a grenade that buries her in rubble.

Captain Andrea Knight is locating the occupants of an exploded building. She comes upon a woman without identification and in WWII era uniform. Andrea after learning Kasey is from the past procures documentation to establish Kasey as a Military Advisor to the Militia.

Andrea and Kasey are to meet with the officials and militia, who want them to be a bodyguard for the Ambassador of the United Church. His mission: to explain the severity of the threat of the terrorist gangs and Bad Billy. The United Presidents refuse to believe the threat bad. The Ambassador tries to explain he's capable of stopping Billy by using powers they both possess.

Bad Billy requests a rendezvous and stipulates that Andrea come alone. Kasey pleads with Andrea to ignore the message, and is shocked to learn later that Andrea has gone anyway. Meanwhile, Andrea realizes how much she loves Kasey although she is afraid to admit it. Can she avoid her worst fear that Kasey could be returned to her own time before an opportunity ever presents itself to act on her feelings?

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Tears Don't Become Me

GW (Georgia Wilhelmina) DIAMOND, Private Investigator, dealt in missing children cases—only. It didn't alter her own traumatic childhood experience, but she could try to keep other children from the same horrors. She'd left her past and her name behind her. Or so she thought. This case was putting her in contact with people she had managed to keep a distant and barely civil relationship with for fifteen years. Now the buried past was returning to haunt her. When Sheriff Matthews of Elk Grove, Missouri, asked her to take a case involving a teenaged runaway girl, she believed it would be no different from any other. Until Matthews explained she had to take a cop as partner or no deal. A cop who just happened to be the missing girl's aunt...

ERIN DUNBAR, received the call concerning her niece from an old partner, Frank Matthews. It should have been from her sister, but their estrangement, compounded by her having moved to Detroit, kept that from happening. Now she would have to work with a PI. One had nearly killed her and Frank years ago; she expected this one would be no different. Matters were only made worse by discovering it was a "she" PI—a Looney-tune one who gave new and literal meaning to: "Hands Off." For the sake of her niece, Erin would put up with just about anything, until...

GW seemed to be strangely affected by this case and Erin, to her chagrin and amazement, was strangely affected by her. If Erin could solve GW's past, give her hope, could they have a hope of finding her niece?

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