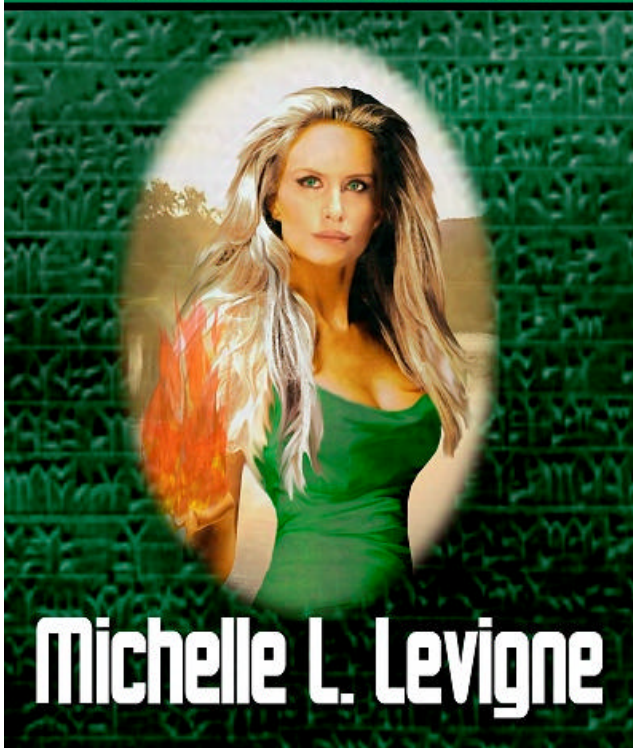


Fire Priestess

Book II of The Bainevah Series



FIRE PRIESTESS

...Naya wished someone would light a fire under Agrat. She imagined flames wreathing the bottom of his robe, balls of fire on the tassels at his hem and belt and the corners of his sleeves. The picture grew clear in her mind.

Agrat shrieked at the same moment Naya smelled smoke. Eshrell gasped. Naya turned and saw Agrat, paralyzed in the middle of the room. Fire licked at the hem of his robe and the decorative tassels bloomed like gold and scarlet flowers.

Naya snatched up a pitcher of watered wine and flung the contents at Agrat. Most of it doused his face and chest. The flames flickered, threatened to die, then burned white and hotter. Naya reached blindly for the milk and doused Agrat, aiming lower.

I did this!

Agrat looked exactly as she had imagined him. She pushed down the shrieking eunuch and stomped on the persistent flames with her sandal-shod feet while her mother called for help.

“Stop!” she finally shrieked, and focused all her frustration and amazement at the flames.

The flames vanished. Scorch marks, smoke, and the stink of burned cloth were all that remained to prove a fire had raged...

ALSO BY MICHELLE L. LEVIGNE

The Bainevah Series, Book I: 10,000 Suns
Picture This

FIRE PRIESTESS

BOOK II OF THE
BAINEVAH SERIES

BY

MICHELLE L. LEVIGNE

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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FIRE PRIESTESS
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“Impossible. Palabra de cobarde...”

***For those who dare—
to live and love, dream and try—
despite the odds against them.***

CHAPTER 1

Reign of King Doni'Jazzan'Nebazz'Dayona

Year 7

Third Ascent Moon

Naya sat for a long moment, eyes closed against an overwhelming weary dizziness. Where had that come from?

She took deep, slow breaths, and sent her healing sense through her body to check for some sudden illness. Taking ill shouldn't have been a surprise. Her entire way of life had changed in the last three moon quarters, moving from an active life of service in Matrika's temple and the Healers Temple to this sedentary, utterly frivolous life of a Sanctum Bride. With so much change and upheaval, her body had likely rebelled, all its inner balances undone. She only needed a bit of fresh air and sunshine, a chance to walk somewhere besides the Sanctum gardens.

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Thank the Mother, the Chief Warder had more common sense than all the Brides put together. He encouraged her to keep her mind and body active, instead of pampering herself and preening all day—and preen for whom? Only eunuchs and other girls would see her for the next two years. She needed something to do with herself while she waited for Matrika to use her.

Something to do. She had found something to do.

Naya stiffened, and moaned as her sore muscles complained. Her fingers felt scorched, as if she had spent an entire day weaving, moving the threads with reckless speed.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

She knelt in front of her wall loom, which her eunuch warder, Danzak, had assembled for her just last night. Her fingers were red and rough, her palms scraped by the passage of large quantities of threads. Naya tipped back her head and caught her breath.

Her mind said she had only begun to weave. It had taken her half the morning to set up the warp threads and tie all the weights. It was a long, narrow piece, intended as a decorative scarf for Anyiel, who was homesick and refused to ask to be released because it would shame her family.

Naya had prepared soft blue, green, and yellow, but those threads lay unused, tossed into the corner of her room. Scarlet, gold, black, and deep brown filled the weaving. Naya didn't even have that particular shade of brown in her thread basket.

Her eyes felt sticky, itchy dry, as if she had gone for hours without blinking. She rubbed them and struggled to her feet, moving backwards until she almost tripped over her bed.

From this distance, she could see the entire picture.

How had she woven so much? The angle of the light through her small, high window showed it was late afternoon. Yet she had woven a length taller than herself. A task she had anticipated taking at least four

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afternoons to complete.

“Blessed Three,” she whispered. Had Weaver Girl inhabited her body? Had Thread Woman made the threads dance their way into her weaving?

Daughter of the High Priest that she was, Naya knew such things were not impossible. She had entered the Sanctum in answer to dreams and portents that other priests had witnessed. If the Mother and her servants touched her mind, why not her body, as well? How else could she have woven so much, and such an image, without even knowing she did it?

The weaving showed the North Gate of Bainevah. Naya knew that gate well because she had stopped there so many times in the moons since Shazzur left on a mission for the king. North, in the direction her dear friend and teacher had gone. North, facing Bainevah’s cruelest enemy, Dreva. Flames flowed from Bainevah’s North Gate, doing battle with a wave of darkness that rose up in a solid wall, trying to drown the flame.

Naya shivered, feeling as if the darkness had tried to engulf her, drown her, rather than Bainevah.

How had this happened?

A shimmering chime filtered through the Sanctum, warning that the dinner hour approached. Naya leaped forward and picked up the small, sharp knife to cut her weaving free of the loom. No one must see this weaving. Not yet. Not even Danzak.

Something momentous had come through her. She had been chosen for some purpose. As the daughter of the High Priest, she knew caution was the first order of business. Hadn’t she heard her father and Shazzur discuss the histories of others who had been chosen for special service by Mother Matrika? Unwise haste and trusting in the wrong people had sometimes almost doomed the chosen ones before they began their journey.

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Naya worked to cut her weaving free, and wished she could find Shazzur to ask his advice. His spying and diplomatic mission for young King Nebazz could take more than a year. Could she wait that long to spill her thoughts and dreams into his waiting ears? And when he returned, she would have to resort to letters, until she was free of the Sanctum.

She laughed in frustration with herself, mocking her own cleverness, and shook her head. Two years of isolation in the Sanctum hadn't seemed that long when she walked through the doors. Shazzur's absence from Bainevah had seemed far longer.

"Mother Matrika, have you sent me here to protect me while I learn to use this gift you have given me?" she whispered.

"Naya?" Her closest friend, Mayar, knocked on the door. "Are you coming to dinner?"

Before Naya could think of a response, the older girl opened the door and came in. Mayar stopped short, her big, dark eyes wide when she saw the weaving. In an instant, understanding made her face somber. She hurried to close the door.

Naya relaxed. Yes, she could share this with Mayar. The nobly born girl held strong healing gifts. She had lost most of her family during the upheaval when half the royal siblings had tried to tear the kingdom from Crown Prince Nebazz's grasp and assassinated King Jazzan. Mayar knew what it was to be uncertain, to live in fear, and to feel Mother Matrika's hand on her life.

Mayar had sat with Naya just this morning, helping her decide what colors to weave into the scarf. She preferred weaving to other crafts the Brides practiced, and understood just how long it would take to make the image now on Naya's loom. Her strong healing gift let her sense the residue when a deity had been at work in a mortal's life.

"Oh, sister of my spirit," Mayar whispered, as her gaze traveled up and down the weaving. Then abruptly she laughed. "I'm an arrogant

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fool.”

“What?” Naya sat down hard on the end of her bed.

“I thought you came into the Sanctum to keep me company, and maybe act as my guard. I know Nebazz fears someone will try to keep me from becoming First Concubine when I leave here, but...who could harm me in the Sanctum? I see now, you came here for a purpose.” She settled down on the end of the bed and nodded at the weaving. “Matrika has put you here to train you in secret until it is time for you to act.”

“Do you think so?” Naya clutched the little knife and shivered.

“I know so. She will use you for great and wonderful things, when the proper time comes.”

CHAPTER 2

Reign of King Doni'Jazzan'Nebazz'Dayona

Year 8

Second Descent Moon

“I feel as if I have been in exile for years,” Shazzur muttered.

“You sound like an old man.” Beside him, Captain Asqual of the Host of the Ram burst out in rumbling chuckles. “Looking forward to a soft bed? Maybe some soft food before you lay down your tired old bones?”

They sat on restless horses at the highest point in the landscape, looking down on the rich river plains dominated by the sprawling walled city of Bainevah. The afternoon shadows spread out in long streaks that buried a portion of the city and the Loom River in darkness. Shazzur shivered, recalling visions of darkness trying to bury Bainevah. Hopefully, the work he and Asqual had done, nearly a year of spying

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and traveling, speaking privately with allies in King Nebazz's authority, would prevent that darkness from pouncing during his lifetime.

And the lifetimes of my children, and their children, Shazzur added in silent prayer. He smiled at that thought.

"Not that old," he said.

It wasn't the length of the trip that wearied him, but how long and how far he had been away from one particular person. Just the thought of Naya, how her blue-green eyes sparkled with mischief, the music in her voice when she argued history and prophecy or teased him, the golden light in her wheat-colored hair, made him feel fresher and more alert.

Was a year of absence enough to help them transition from teacher and student to man and woman, and someday, lovers? She was a woman grown, finished with her years of training. He had written to her, sealed letters enclosed in every courier packet he sent back to the king, sharing his heart and hopes for a future with her. She hadn't been able to respond, but he would know soon if she felt anything toward him.

He prayed his visions of bliss with Naya in his arms were portents, rather than fever dreams. He had nearly died at the start of his journey, brought down by an assassin's blade, and that had made him re-evaluate his life. He had discovered his intellect, knowledge, and the riches and honors the king heaped on him were useless unless he could share them—with Naya.

"Shadows are long enough, we might not make the North Gate by sunset." Asqual nudged his sturdy desert-bred horse and started down the slope.

"You actually look forward to sleeping in a barracks again, eating army cooking?" Shazzur teased. If his household servants weren't ready for him, High Priest Chizhedek might invite him for the evening

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meal.

Shazzur prayed Chizhedek knew about his letters to Naya, and would welcome him as if he were already his son-in-law.

“Lady Aunt Dayona would be horrified if I spent my first night back in Bainevah in the barracks,” his friend called over his shoulder, and laughed again.

Shazzur laughed with him. Asqual was distantly related to the Queen Mother, and she kept close watch on the careers and welfare of Asqual and his brother.

“Come with me,” Asqual said, when they were close enough to the gate to see the colors of the fruit the street vendors displayed inside the city walls. “Aunt admires you, and it will give Nebazz a chance to speak privately with us before we report to the Council.”

“Not tonight.” Shazzur gauged the shadows and knew he had time to get home, bathe, and reach Chizhedek’s house before the dinner hour. He had to see Naya tonight. He had dreamed of this moment for more than a year. “I have more important things to attend to.”

“What could be more important than our mission?” His friend studied him through narrowed eyes. “If you were a soldier, I’d say there’s a girl on your mind. And other parts of your body,” he added with a snicker and a grin. That grin widened when Shazzur flinched at his words. “It is a girl! Who? Do you need me to come as witness that you didn’t dally with every village girl who fluttered her eyelashes at you?” He thumped Shazzur on the back and roared laughter. “When’s the wedding?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if she’ll even have me.” A dropping sensation in his belly accompanied his words. For the first time in years, Shazzur felt totally inadequate to the challenge ahead of him.

“Three-quarters of the nobles have tried to throw their daughters at you since you became Nebazz’s right hand. What girl wouldn’t have you?” He winked. “If girls didn’t flock to me like they do, I’d be

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jealous.”

Shazzur snorted, and realized he felt much better for the teasing. With all the dangers, fears, and successes he and Asqual had shared during their long journey together, he hadn't shared this precious dream. It took more courage than he realized he had to speak her name.

“Naya.”

Asqual looked blank for a moment. Then his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. “High Priest Chizhedek's child?” He nodded slowly, and his grin returned. “Aye, and who else would be so perfect for you? You're two of a kind.”

“I hope her parents think so.”

“She's a priestess. She has the right to choose. All you have to worry about is winning her, not the rest of her family.” Asqual thumped him on the arm. “Well, what are you waiting for? The day won't last forever!” He dug his heels into his mount and surged forward toward the gate.

Shazzur laughed. It relieved him greatly that Asqual approved. After all, there was a gap between Shazzur at thirty-five and Naya at nineteen. His rank made him worthy, his wealth, his fame as a scholar and seer, and the king's support. But Shazzur knew all those things meant little if he couldn't win the heart of the woman he adored.

* * *

Shazzur flinched when he saw a slim form with long, wheat-colored braids run into the arms of a man right in front of the gates of High Priest Chizhedek's house. He stared, feeling his heart turn to stone and start to crack, until high giggles pierced the dissipating traffic on the wide street. He called himself a fool and hoped no one saw him wipe sweat from his brow.

Naya sometimes giggled, but never like that. Despite her mischievous side, she had a strong sense of dignity and would never act that way in public, much less in her father's gates. Still, Shazzur

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couldn't help stab of envy as he passed the happy couple, who stole kisses and scurried down the street, oblivious to everyone around them.

Would Naya greet him with a smile, an embrace inside the privacy of her parent's home? A kiss? Perhaps several? Shazzur had no idea. He had known Naya since she was a child of eight, had discussed history and prophecy with her, helped her with errands in the city, helped her with her studies, encouraged her to take her fledgling healing gifts to the Healers Temple and listened to her cry over the death of pets. Why, then, did he find it so hard to predict her reaction to the sight of him? Why did his mouth dry up like a beardless boy in his first infatuation at the thought of encountering Naya now?

Should he talk with Naya before approaching her parents? Should he approach Chizhedek first and inform him that he no longer saw the High Priest's daughter as a student and friend, but as a desirable woman? That was only fair, of course. Priestly tradition gave Naya the right to choose what she would do with her life. Her parents could not give her in marriage against her will. Shazzur knew if he asked any nobleman in the city for his daughter, his status in the King's Council and his friendship with King Nebazz would make the girl his, whether she wanted the marriage or not. He didn't want that—he wanted Naya only if she wanted to be his wife.

Tosha, the elderly servant woman who tended High Priest Chizhedek's door, recognized Shazzur and greeted him with a smile. He nearly kissed the wrinkled, dainty little woman, taking her warm welcome as a portent. Perhaps Naya had told her parents about his letters, his words of love, and they already planned the wedding feast?

Star Weaver High Priestess Eshrell met Shazzur before he had crossed the inner courtyard of the house. Her eyes sparkled with delight and she caught hold of both his hands and made him stand still so she could study his face. She was an image of her daughter in thirty years, still tall and straight, streaks of frost in her hair only visible at close

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range.

“Thank the Mother you are safely home. Come. Come sit in the garden. Chizhedek will be home in moments, and I was just going in to prepare a snack for him. You will eat dinner with us tonight?” She kept hold of one of Shazzur’s hands and led him down the long path of white sand, through a wall formed of fragrant flowering ivy climbing a lattice.

“I would be honored.”

“Naya will be delighted to know you’re back in the city.”

“I’m glad to know that.” His heart skipped a few beats. “Will she be home soon?” He thought it was a safer question than asking if she was in the house, and hoping she would come running into his arms.

“Oh. You don’t know—of course, how could you?” Eshrell sank down into one of the woven wooden chairs placed under the latticework canopy in the center of the garden. “Naya is in the Sanctum.”

Shazzur sat down slowly, praying his face showed nothing of his conflicting emotions. He knew it was an honor to serve in the Sanctum. Yet if Naya knew how he felt about her, why did she effectively put herself out of his reach for two years? Hadn’t her mother said she would be delighted to know he was home? He felt betrayed, even knowing he had no right to feel that way. He felt abandoned, again, without cause.

Worst yet, he felt a frightening, painful stab of jealousy. He imagined King Nebazz lying with Naya in the Sacred Marriage, and for a moment he hated his king, whom he had sworn to serve with his life. The man who counted him a true friend.

He imagined King Nebazz throwing Naya down on the bed of the ritual in the Chamber of Ten Thousand Suns. He imagined Naya screaming in pain and fear. But that was foolishness. Shazzur knew if Naya were chosen for the Sacred Marriage, Matrika would inhabit her

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body and it would be King Nebazz who would submit to whatever the goddess decreed. There would be no rape.

Still, Nebazz could charm Naya, seduce her, convince her to spend the entire day or night of the ritual in his arms. Everyone knew Nebazz planned to make Healer Priestess Lady Mayar his First Concubine, but that didn't mean the young king would stop at one concubine. Shazzur knew the king's weaknesses. Pretty women and the need to be admired were the most powerful and dangerous. He was charming, more charming than Shazzur could ever hope to be. If he wanted Naya as a concubine, he could persuade her.

Eshrell gave him the details and Shazzur heard, but the words didn't register. He managed to respond so she didn't look strangely at him, and was relieved when she got up to go into the house. She had mentioned wine and honey cakes, hadn't she? He couldn't remember.

Naya obviously hadn't shared his letters, his words of love, or her feelings toward him, with her parents.

"Shazzur." High Priest Chizhedek came through the archway into the garden. "Tosha said you were here." His clean-shaven face brightened and he reached out to clasp the younger man's shoulders. "Welcome home. We've made many prayers to Matrika for your safety and the success of your mission. When did you return?" He sank down into a chair opposite Shazzur.

"Perhaps an hour ago."

"I'm honored you came here so quickly." He beamed and settled back in the chair and sighed, visibly relaxing from his long day of service in the main temple. The scent of burned grain and flowers from the evening sacrifice clung to his gold-trimmed white robes. "Eshrell likely said she'd be back soon. But if I know her, she's knee-deep in preparing a feast. We have plenty of time to get kingdom business out of the way, and then we can enjoy our meal."

Chizhedek had a servant bring them watered, iced wine and the

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promised honey cakes. And the news Eshrell had taken over the kitchen. How he managed to laugh with Chizhedek, Shazzur didn't know. He was grateful when the High Priest kept him busy with questions about his trip, the outcome of several problems that had deeply concerned him, and messages sent by mutual friends.

Finally, Shazzur took what remained of his courage in his hands and put down his enameled copper cup on the green tile under his chair. His hands didn't shake as badly as he had feared, and he grinned at his own foolishness. He raked his fingers through his dark red hair, glad that he had kept it and his beard short for his yearlong mission. No one would recognize the tanned, shorthaired horse soldier for the King's Seer. No one expected the King's Seer to be anywhere but at the king's side, dressed in elaborate robes, his hair curled and his beard braided, perfumed and decorated and barely able to move for the weight of his ornaments.

"What disturbs you, friend?" Chizhedek's smile faded. "I see something in your eyes. A great weight on your shoulders."

"I am thirty-five years old. High time, according to the grandmothers in Court and Queen Mother Dayona, that I find myself a wife."

"You have been too busy helping King Nebazz learn the craft of kingship. Too busy with the heavy burdens Matrika put on your shoulders when you weren't quite a man grown." Chizhedek nodded and curved his hands over the ends of the armrests of his chair. "I heard of that assassin last spring. It's only by Matrika's grace you won't spend the rest of your life an invalid. Did your glimpse of death make you think of your mortality, and decide it was high time to provide yourself with heirs?"

"No." Shazzur shook his head. He almost wished he had braided his beard, so he could relieve some of his nerves by picking it apart. As it was, it was too short. "Before that even happened, I was distracted,

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thinking of someone I left behind. How can I speak wisdom to the king and the Council when I am blind to what has been before me all these years?"

"We do not see with our eyes or with common wisdom, when it comes to love. That is what has happened, isn't it?" The High Priest chuckled. "Have you come asking my advice? Or do you wish me to make sacrifices to ensure you success?"

"Not advice." Shazzur licked his lips. Took a deep breath. "I wish to speak to you of Naya." He saw pity on the High Priest's face and his breath caught in his lungs. Did Chizhedek know something? Did he already think Shazzur a bad choice for his only child and he wanted to discourage him gently?

"I brought gifts for Naya," Shazzur managed to say. "To express to her my heart. Will you give me permission to send them to her in the Sanctum? Will you give me permission to court her through letters, until she is free?"

Strange, how he hated formal Court language and rituals and posturing, and yet formality put the words in his mouth and saved him from stumbling.

"No." Chizhedek's pitying look hardened into something that made Shazzur ache.

"I love Naya."

"Yes, I can see that. You aren't a foolish boy, trapped in lust like a stallion in the spring. If Naya were anyone else, I would encourage you. I would speak to her and tell her what a fine husband you would make."

"If she were anyone else?" Shazzur clenched his fists inside the wide sleeves of his robe.

"She is the daughter of the High Priest. The first daughter born to the sacred line in ten generations. A daughter of the sacred line will unite with the king, carry his son, and restore the true worship. There will again be a High Priestess as Queen Mother. It has been

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prophesied,” Chizhedek finished, putting more emphasis on his words than Shazzur thought they deserved.

“Does Naya agree that she is the daughter of the prophecy?”

“She was directed to enter the Sanctum, through dreams and portents. Many priests saw them and agreed.”

“And if Nebazz does not ask her to become his concubine when the ritual is ended?”

“He will. She is beautiful and intelligent, a strong and bright spirit, pure of heart. How could he not be enchanted with her when the ritual ends?” Chizhedek’s dark eyes went cold. “Unless someone advises him not to consider her.” He stood. “I forbid you to speak to the king of my daughter and your wish to marry her, until after Naya has participated in the Sacred Marriage.”

“She may never participate. She might not be chosen before her service in the Sanctum ends.”

“If Naya is not chosen, then on the day she leaves the Sanctum, I will tell her that you wish to stand as suitor. Until then, you are forbidden to have any contact with her.”

“Not even to send her the gifts I brought her?” Shazzur knew he grasped at every excuse like a drowning man grasping at twigs. He didn’t care.

“She has had no word from you since you left on your mission. Why should she expect anything now?”

“I wrote to her, sent gifts with every courier packet I sent back to the king.”

“Yes, I know,” Chizhedek said quietly. “I intercepted them. When I realized that you intended to court my daughter...I did not read any others, but burned them.”

“You had no right!”

“I am High Priest of Matrika, and my daughter is chosen for holy service.” He stood tall and power flickered, golden sparks at his

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fingertips and shimmering along the outlines of his robe. “No man shall interfere, not even the seer who stands at the king’s right hand and who spoke the Prophecy.”

“But I love her.” Shazzur swallowed hard. Words begged to spill off his tongue, of his visions of Naya in his arms, heavy with their firstborn, standing in the temple in her father’s place.

He shuddered, wondering if his visions had not been true images of the future, but only his hopes. Naya could be her father’s heir, the first High Priestess of Matrika in centuries, or she could be his wife. But not both.

“Yes, I can see that,” Chizhedek whispered. Sorrow filled his eyes. “If she were anyone else, I would wish you both joy, and know that there is no better man to cherish and protect my daughter. But she is not someone else. She is the daughter of prophecy, and I am sworn to give all to Matrika’s service. Have no contact with her, unless the letters come through me first. When Naya is free of the Sanctum, then I will stand beside you when you speak your heart to her. But not before then.”

CHAPTER 3

Reign of King Doni'Jazzan'Nebazz'Dayona

Year 9

Summer Solstice

Naya let the sacred wine slip down her throat, thick and gritty with spices. The taste, potent and burning and sweet, swept through her head, making her dizzy. Fire hit her belly. She closed her eyes, fighting not to cough.

When she opened them, she stood in a place she had visited in waking dreams in her childhood.

A meadow stretched out before her to every side of the horizon. The air was heavy with the perfume of hundreds of flowering bushes. Every bush, every tree, every flower used for making dye. Why was that so important?

Dia appeared before her, and that question fled her mind.

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Not the Dia she remembered from childhood games of make-believe. Not a girl a little taller than her, with freckles and red-tinted golden hair flying free of her braids. This was a grown woman, as Naya was grown. Power glowed in her eyes, which had been green or gold depending on her make-believe friend's moods. Tears brimmed in Dia's eyes.

"I will come," Naya whispered, answering the pleading in her friend's gaze.

Dia smiled and held out her hands and stepped closer. Tapestry hemmed her skirts and the wide cuffs of her robe. She held a shuttle full of thread in one hand. Her fingers were reddened and roughened by constantly working the threads. Just as threads had scorched Naya's hands over the last two years, when visions painted themselves on her looms, using her body as the vehicle to create them.

The threads leaped off the shuttle, a rainbow of twisting, churning, constantly changing colors that enfolded Naya and wrapped around her. Dia and the meadow vanished.

"I will come to you, I swear!"

The smell of fresh dye overwhelmed Naya, and the clatter of a shuttle hitting the support bars of a loom. Then the humming of a spindle filled her ears before silence exploded around her.

She saw all Bainevah spread out below her. The lands surrounding her homeland became visible. She saw armies marching, crashing through walls as thin as parchment to invade other lands, dragging behind them a dark shadow that blotted out all light. The royal palace of Bainevah appeared before her. A door opened wide, allowing one tentacle of darkness to enter.

This was the reason she had been chosen for the Sacred Marriage. To give her body to Matrika, to speak to the king, and to receive visions of warning and guidance for her land.

"Speak to me, Mother. Speak through me. I sacrifice my mind and

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soul and body to your use,” Naya cried.

Images spun around her. Promises for the future. Warnings. Reflections of the visions she had woven while in the Sanctum. Hands of flame reached through the dizzying mass and she clasped them. Fire raced through her veins, but instead of pain, calm filled her. Flames flickered at the tips of her fingers. Her hair tumbled in a roaring wind, and some strands were flames rather than hair. Naya watched her hair turn white, burned free of all impurities like gold and silver in the furnace.

The flames in her fingertips subsided, but she felt them sizzling in her blood. Naya laughed, as exhilarated as if she had drowned her senses in wine, and yet strong and clear-headed.

“I will do what you send me to do,” she whispered, when she wanted to shout.

And then she fell. And fell. Until the world burst in around her and King Nebazz held her as tenderly as a nurse would hold a child who woke from nightmares. Naya shivered, despite the flames seething in her blood. She felt small and weak and knew everything had been nothing but a vision.

* * *

“Are you certain you feel well?” King Nebazz asked for at least the twentieth time.

Naya smiled. She could see why Mayar loved the king. He was a good man. Sometimes a little too cautious, careful about public opinion when he should simply strike out and do what he knew was right. Mayar had planned on becoming First Concubine since before she entered the Sanctum, just as she had known she would be a healer priestess from childhood. Mayar was always so sure of her life, while Naya always had questions, dreams that had little chance of being fulfilled.

Such as her hope that Shazzur would see her as anything but High

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Priest Chizhedek's daughter, and his student. Naya envied Mayar that she could be so sure of a man's heart.

"I am fine, Majesty. Still..." She shook her head, at a loss for words.

Or perhaps the problem was that there were too many words for what she felt, for what had happened to her. Was it possible that something of Matrika stayed inside Naya's soul? Looking out through her eyes? Speaking in whispers to her?

She felt only halfway returned to her body. Her mind still whirled with the myriad images that had come to her while she was a vessel for Bainevah's guiding deity. Sparks danced along her fingertips and flames flickered at the edges of her vision. She still heard whispers, promises and warnings and answers that had come in that moment when she stepped beyond the boundaries of the physical.

What did it all mean?

She sat now on the side of the massive bed of the ritual, with the dome of Ten Thousand Suns arching over her head. The air felt cool despite the dozens of lamps and the heat of the summer night. She held a cup of spiced wine. She was washed and dressed and almost steady again, and it wasn't even midnight. Shouldn't such a momentous occasion as the Sacred Marriage take longer?

"You feel small and unworthy?" King Nebazz chuckled. "You wonder why you were chosen, and if you will ever do anything of value ever again?"

"Exactly." She wished, with an ache deep inside, that she could speak with Shazzur. He had conferred with her by letter about the prophetic weavings she had created inside the Sanctum, but nothing more personal. Naya wished for more between them, but hadn't been sure how to tell him. She hoped, now that she was free of the Sanctum, they still had their easy friendship. She needed his counsel. Shazzur was her stability, the light that shone understanding on so many

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puzzling things.

Just as the king did for Mayar, she realized, and Mayar did for the king.

Was it possible she could have that sweetness with Shazzur, despite the long silence that had grown between them? He had sent her notes and small gifts at festivals, but everything had come through her parents. Naya had wondered what Shazzur would have written to her if there had been no intermediary.

“You are the Bride,” King Nebazz said, shattering her musing. “Matrika would not have chosen you for the Sanctum or for the Sacred Marriage, and she would not have chosen to use you as her vessel if you were not worthy.” He knelt in front of her and held her hands, curved around the goblet, giving extra emphasis to his words.

The king was so very wise, Naya decided, despite his youth and his eagerness to be liked and admired. She wondered if he was lonely, and if Mayar’s love would be enough for him.

Was it enough for her to have served as the Bride tonight? Would she be given nothing more to do to serve Bainevah and Mother Matrika? Naya didn’t want to think this was the end. At dawn, her virgin blood and the king’s seed would be offered on the fire in sacrifice. Rain would prove the blessing brought by King and Bride, and she would be free to live her own life again.

“Majesty.” Naya carefully put the cup of wine down on the floor. “What did the Mother say through me?”

“What did she show you, Priestess?” King Nebazz returned.

“War,” she whispered. “Dreva is like a deep wound full of poison, covered over by seemingly healthy flesh. Soon it will burst and spread death and sickness and darkness across the land. Not just Bainevah, but Chadrasheer and Mooltoc and all the tiny nations that look to us for leadership and protection. The sheep are safe while the shepherd is awake and whole. If he sickens and sleeps, all is lost.”

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“Yes. She told me darkness waits to leap on Bainevah like a shadow beast of legend, all claws and fangs and appetite, never satisfied.”

“Pay attention, King of Bainevah. To fail through ignorance is forgivable.” Naya shivered, hearing echoes of Matrika’s voice in her own. “To hear the warning and still fail is to destroy your soul. It is high treason against Mother Matrika, who guards Bainevah, and against the Unseen, who made all things.”

King Nebazz stood, pressed his fingertips to his forehead and bowed deeply from the waist. “I hear and obey, Priestess, voice of the Mother.” He straightened and visibly hesitated.

“Majesty?”

“There was more to your vision, I think. You mentioned looms. Piled high as the city walls. And flames.”

“Yes.” Naya shuddered as another image crashed down on her. “Looms, piled high and bound together with threads, creating a barrier. A prison. Priests in black robes—”

“The priests who serve the Three?”

“Perhaps.” She nodded, frowning, and stared at an empty spot in the air beyond her, trying to recapture the images. “They fought in front of the barrier. Priests in white robes fought among them. All confusion. Black and white fought black and white. Some tried to set fire to the wall of looms, and others tried to put the fire out.” She gasped, nearly standing. “I held a torch, Majesty. And I was the torch. I touched the pile and the flames spread. The priests, the black priests, tried to put the fire out with blood, but the fire just grew stronger, fiercer. Until the barrier vanished.”

“What was kept prisoner behind it?”

“I know not.” She swallowed hard, fighting a sob of terror. “Blood filled my eyes, Majesty, so I could see nothing.”

“Matrika speaks to warn us, so we can prepare.” Incredibly, he smiled. “Would the Mother warn us, if we had no chance to avert the

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disaster that hovers over our heads like a vulture?"

"You are wise, Majesty. Be careful you do not lose that wisdom," she whispered. "Do not repeat the foolishness of the past, when the Ram of Bainevah offered his flesh in friendship to the Bull and the Viper."

"I do swear I will listen and obey." He rested a hand on her shoulder. "You have done your duty, Priestess. You have served Matrika and Bainevah. Be proud." His smile widened and went crooked. "Be relieved and seek your reward and your rest."

Naya nodded, taking comfort in the weight and warmth of his hand on her shoulder. For a few moments, they were fellow-warriors. Not king and subject, or Bride and King, one the voice of Matrika and the other sent to hear and obey. Naya wished this night could guarantee happiness and safety for them all.

She laughed as one last fragment of vision splashed through her mind. "Be happy, Majesty. Do you love my sister of the spirit, Lady Mayar? Do you love her with all your heart?"

"She is my first love and my one joy." Nebazz's face glowed as he spoke the words.

"Then be happy, because she will give you a son." Now it was Naya's turn to be concerned, as the king dropped down heavily onto the nearby bench. "Majesty? Are you well?"

"Mayar told me, just yesterday, she is with child," he whispered. He was pale, stark contrast with his ebony beard and eyes, but joy kindled a fire in his eyes. "The law says I can only make the mother of my heir my queen. I swear to you, Lady, I will make Mayar my queen the day our son is born."

"If you truly love her, wait a few days, Majesty."

King Nebazz frowned, then understanding broke across his face and he laughed, tipping back his head. The sound became an exultant roar.

Naya laughed with him, until the king held out a hand to help her to

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her feet. She looked ahead to the wide, golden doors of the chamber. Naya had heard the king spent all night with Mayar, when she was the Bride, and she was relieved the king didn't expect her to spend the whole night with him.

He was handsome and young and strong, and so very careful in tending her after the Mother had left her body. Naya didn't doubt the king would give her pleasure. She simply didn't want to lie with a man who would not be there in her bed the next night, and the night after, or ten years in the future. Nebazz belonged to Mayar, no matter how many concubines other countries sent as diplomatic gifts.

"Who waits for you?" He picked up the ivory hammer to hit the silver gong and summon the priests to attend them.

Naya wished she could have pretended not to understand. She knew what he meant, all too clearly. She sighed and forced a soft smile of not caring onto her lips.

Why hadn't she sent a message to Shazzur to speak her heart? He would have had two years to think over her declaration of love—and two years to think of a kind way to refuse her, if he had no interest.

It would have been wonderful to walk into the courtyard of the sacrifice and know Shazzur would be waiting, to take her hand and stand by her side as her betrothed.

On the other hand, he might have refused to attend, even if he was King's Seer, simply to avoid confronting her. Shazzur was kind that way. If he couldn't love her, he would find a way to refuse her without making her feel the fool.

Naya shook her head, knowing her hesitation made the king wonder if she had truly recovered from the ritual.

"No one, Majesty."

"No one? But every Sanctum Bride has a betrothed to stand with her at the sacrifice. Why?" He appeared genuinely concerned, not just curious or even scandalized, as some of the Brides still waiting in the

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Sanctum had been. The nasty sand cats. “Certainly your parents were inundated with suitors?”

“Yes.” She shrugged and laughed a little. “None suited or appealed to me. My parents did not press me to choose.”

“That must have been difficult for them. I can imagine the criticism of their neighbors and the pressure from the nobles who likely asked for you.”

“No, Majesty.” She couldn’t repress a mischievous smirk. “Can you imagine anyone having the courage to criticize both High Priest Chizhedek and Star Weaver Priestess Eshrell?”

King Nebazz laughed, a short bark that rang off the domed ceiling. “I would be honored if you joined my concubines, Priestess. Mayar would welcome your presence.”

“Thank you, Majesty.” Naya wavered between wanting to burst out laughing and slapping him. She knew the king only meant to protect and honor her. “I must refuse. I vowed I would never marry unless it is the man who holds my heart.”

“Then why are you not betrothed?” He toyed with the hammer in his hand, but all his concentration focused on her.

“He doesn’t know I desire him.” She shrugged and gestured at the door. “When I am free”

“May Matrika bless your hunt, Priestess.” He raised his hand to strike the gong, then paused. “Do I know him?” The king laughed when she blushed and looked away. “I do know him. Who? Will he hate me, for being your partner in the ceremony?”

“He’s much too sensible for that.” A tiny gasp of laughter escaped her. Shazzur, jealous? “No, Majesty, I will not tell you. What if he doesn’t want me?”

“Then he is a fool, and I will allow no fools to stand by me and call me friend.” He cupped her cheek for a moment and gazed into her eyes, and Naya felt the gap widening between them. She was once again just

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a priestess, even if she was the High Priest's only daughter, and he was the king. "I command you, Priestess, to find this man who holds your heart, teach him to love you, make him your willing slave, and hold onto him until death separates you. A love that strong will surely reunite you in Matrika's lands of eternal morning."

"Yes, Majesty," she whispered, and tried not to sigh when the king stepped away. He whacked the gong and turned to bow deeply to her.

The doors opened before the reverberations died. The rows of waiting priests and priestesses parted. High Priest Chizhedek approached the door, simple white robes trimmed in gold, his bald head gleaming in the light of the scented oil lamps. He bowed to the king, then to Naya, his face impassive. Naya sighed quietly, wishing her father could be her father at this moment and not the High Priest of Mother Matrika. Was he proud of her, worried, relieved it was over?

Chizhedek went into the chamber and retrieved the golden box that held the cloth now stained with Naya's blood. She saw him hesitate when he took the box off its stand. So, it did affect him a little. She wondered what questions he would ask when she returned home.

If she had a betrothed waiting for her, she would go to his home in the evening after the ceremony and feasting.

If she had shown any courage, today she might know what Shazzur's kiss felt like, the strength of his arms around her, and the fire of desire she wanted to bring to his eyes.

Naya told herself to be happy that her parents would not force her to marry for political connections or to bring wealth into the family. She would resume the life she had known before the Sanctum. She would study and perhaps travel and explore. She would gladly spend quiet evenings with her parents and work in the Healers Temple and Matrika's temple and lose entire days in study in the Scribes Hall.

She would obey the king and hunt Shazzur's heart.

If she couldn't have Shazzur's heart, she would not marry. There

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was no other man in Bainevah who could tempt her to give up her freedom, to have his children and oversee his household or improve his status in Bainevah's multi-layered society of nobles, priests, scholars, artisans, and merchants.

Chizhedek bowed again to them both as he left the chamber. Naya exhaled in relief. Now she was free to leave. She bowed low to the king, her wheat-colored hair nearly touching the floor. The tiny gold and silver charms on her ceremonial robes chimed softly as she stood.

"Blessings on you, Vessel of the Mother," the king said. He caught hold of her hands and raised them to his lips.

"My daughter." Priestess Eshrell glided from the shadows beside the door. She nodded to the king, who bowed to her and moved down the hall with his escort of priests. Pride gleamed in Eshrell's sea-blue eyes, her cheeks were flushed and her lips twitched with the effort not to smile. "Come. Your bath awaits, and then you must rest until the ceremony." She held out one hand to Naya, and with the other gestured down the long, shadowy hallway in the opposite direction the king had gone.

"Mother." Naya's knees turned wobbly with relief. "Would it be wrong if I came home immediately after the ceremony?"

"And deprive your friends of their feast?" She clucked and shook her head, but her lips curved in a mischievous smile.

"They certainly won't starve—and they won't notice—if I never show up for the feast." She hooked her arm through her mother's and let her lead the way down the hall. A hot bath sounded glorious. Perhaps more tempting than kissing Shazzur.

"Tradition requires it," her mother said. Two silent rows of priestesses formed escort around them.

"Tradition requires a Sanctum Bride to go from the Sanctum to her new husband's home. As if they fear she'll be polluted or kidnapped in between. Have you ever wondered, Mother, how many babies are born

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exactly nine moons after the Sacred Marriage, and no one sure if the husband or the king is the father?"

"Most likely many, in the centuries since the Sanctum was created." Eshrell shook her head. "Yet another sign of how wicked choices and actions harm those many generations later."

"That shall soon change," Naya whispered, and heard a hollow echo in her voice. She blinked and found herself sitting on the floor, clutching her mother's robes. "What happened?"

"Matrika speaks," a white-haired, wrinkled little priestess whispered.

"Come. Enough visions and fear. You need to bathe and eat and sleep. Time enough to consider Matrika's words when the vessel has had time to recover," Eshrell added.

Her hands were gentle, her arm strong as she helped her daughter stand and continue down the long temple corridor to the room where Naya had spent the previous day in preparatory isolation. The priestesses were friends or fellow students in Matrika's temple, and therefore loyal. Naya knew she could be foolish and even cry after the strain of bearing Matrika's spirit and no one here would speak of it or humiliate her. She was more than grateful.

Her bath was deep and lemon slices floated on the steamy surface. Her mother brought her bread studded with apricots and dripping with butter, and milk flavored with raspberries. Naya relaxed and enjoyed the childhood treats. And the silence. Tomorrow, she would finally be free of the idle luxury of the Sanctum and the incessant giggling gossip.

She wondered if she had lost her tone, if she could climb five flights of stairs without collapsing, or shoot twenty arrows in a row without her arms aching, or ride a horse at breakneck speed with only a simple bridle for control. She wondered if her small healing powers had atrophied after two years of enforced idleness. The Sanctum had its own staff of healers, and while the Chief Warder had been sympathetic

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to her need to be active, most of his underlings had been horrified at Naya's unladylike pursuits.

In two years, her only outlet for her frustrations was to weave. She had woven nearly thirty visions into tapestries or small squares barely large enough for a pillow. Each one, she had examined and pondered, and then sent out of the Sanctum for her father to study and show to experts in visions and prophecy. Shazzur had written to her that several priests from the Hidden City had expressed interest in her gift and wished to test her.

That would be an adventure—to travel to the Hidden City, where the black-robed priests served the Three and tended the sacred looms. Weaver Girl wove images for Bainevah to study and understand Matrika's heart, and the priests were entrusted with bringing those weavings to the world.

Would she perhaps be asked to change her robes from white to black? Naya shuddered at the thought, remembering her vision during the Sacred Marriage, of black-robed priests fighting in front of burning looms.

No, she didn't want to serve in the Hidden City. It would be like another Sanctum. She wanted to get out into the world, to see her friends.

To see Shazzur, and make him see she was no longer a child with a child's adoration for her beloved teacher. She was a woman grown and she wanted him as a man. Her man, her lover, her husband.

Tomorrow, she would take back her life, and she would indeed hunt Shazzur's heart, as the king had said.

"Tomorrow, I will wear trousers and put my hair in a simple braid, and no jewelry or flowers or makeup or shoes," Naya declared.

Her words earned grins and a muffled chuckle or two from the priestesses attending her post-ritual cleansing. So, she had sympathy here, despite the eunuchs' insistence that the daughter of the High

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Priest should be more regal, demure, and retiring than frail Queen Mother Dayona.

“Was it so bad, my dear?” Eshrell asked. She gave a final brush to Naya’s long hair, then stood and nodded to the other priestesses. They quietly filed out of the room.

“Mother, I was a thing, a doll to be dressed, an empty pot to be filled with what they thought was important for a girl to know. As if all the lessons you and Father taught me, all the things you let me do and learn and be, were wrong!”

“It is considered a triumph to take a Sanctum bride as a wife. It is not so unusual for a nobleman to persuade a young man to renounce his betrothal, so his sweetheart can marry to a higher station.”

“Then he didn’t love her, or she didn’t love him. I won’t have a man who doesn’t love me—I don’t care how rich he is!”

“As the daughter of priests, you have the freedom to wait for love to strike.” Eshrell sat down on the end of the couch and regarded her daughter with shadowed eyes.

Naya suddenly felt like a foolish, spoiled brat. Her mother had kept her company in the vigil before the Sacred Marriage. It was far past midnight now, she had done without her usual midday nap, and Naya lay there, complaining.

“Mother, I’m sorry.”

“Hmm, yes, but you’re also right. Consider that these other girls have only a high status marriage to look forward to. The keepers of the Sanctum prepare the poor girls to walk and to talk, to sing, dance, dress and paint themselves as befits their future roles. Matrika knows, there’s little else to do for two years, and such activities keep the girls from boredom, so they don’t try to escape or sneak their sweethearts in. Many noble wives are nothing but decorations, or gifts exchanged for alliances—”

“Or broodmares,” Naya interrupted. “Matrika save me from that. I

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will never have a child unless I want him—or her.”

“You, my dear, will most likely be so passionately in love, you will long to give your husband a child.” Eshrell laughed at her daughter’s expression of open-mouthed shock.

“Yes, I suppose,” Naya sputtered.

She had fought not to torture herself, imagining what it would be like to lie in Shazzur’s arms. The thought of carrying Shazzur’s child inside her body made her feel dizzy. If every letter leaving the Sanctum hadn’t been scrutinized, she would have attempted to write to Shazzur of her dreams. Would he have written back in the same vein? If anyone suspected that she courted a man, her letters would have been forbidden. Perhaps this was all for the best. Not that she had to like any of it.

“I understand, Mother. I have talents. I have a vocation and a service. I have freedom and choices other girls don’t, and I shouldn’t scorn them.” She sighed and closed her eyes and felt more tension leave her body, like loosening a harness. “I am grateful to be free, to return to a normal life again.”

“My dear, you have been a vessel for Matrika. Her voice has gone through your lips—and you have spilled your blood for Bainevah. Life will never be ‘normal’ for you again.”

“Mother!” The cry of dismay caught in her throat. “Did you see this in the stars?”

“No, my dove.” Eshrell got up and held Naya’s face between her palms and kissed her forehead. “I see it in your face. Hush. Sleep, my dear. Morning comes soon enough.”

Morning. Naya sighed and closed her eyes and let her mother pull a blanket up over her. She felt chilled, despite the summer heat. In the morning would come the ceremony, the sacrifice of her virgin blood and the king’s seed—and validation that Matrika had indeed spoken through her and blessed Bainevah through her.

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What if the fire refused the cloth stained with her blood? What if the promised rain didn't come? Other Sanctum Brides and kings had lost their lives because their impure hearts and bodies profaned the ritual. What if Matrika changed her mind and did not speak to Bainevah in the morning?

CHAPTER 4

First Ascent Moon

The eunuch, Agrat, planned to be Chief Warder someday and acted as if the position were his already. Naya loathed him. She wished him in the coldest Netherhells when he banged through the doors an hour before sunrise and yanked the sheet off her. If he hadn't lost his manhood to a raider's knife when he was a beardless boy, she would have gelded him right that moment.

"Up, Naya-bride," he demanded in that squeaky-whiny voice that threatened to grow shriller as he grew fatter. "Will you shame the Sanctum?" He reached to grab a handful of her hair.

"Touch my daughter," Eshrell said, raising her gaze from the scroll she read, "and you shall be exiled from the Sanctum."

"Priestess." The eunuch dropped to his pudgy knees. Sweat beaded instantly on his shaved head.

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“Yes, that is what I am. Daughter, are you ready to rise and go to the sacrifice?”

“More than ready, Mother.” Naya glared at the eunuch, then turned her back on him to reach for her outer robe, decorated in blue and silver for the needed summer rains.

“Be quick,” Agrat huffed under his breath, so only Naya heard him. “Must I light a fire under your kettle to get you to the ceremony on time?”

Naya wished someone would light a fire under Agrat. She imagined flames wreathing the bottom of his robe, balls of fire on the tassels at his hem and belt and the corners of his sleeves. The picture grew clear in her mind.

Agrat shrieked at the same moment Naya smelled smoke. Eshrell gasped. Naya turned and saw Agrat, paralyzed in the middle of the room. Fire licked at the hem of his robe and the decorative tassels bloomed like gold and scarlet flowers.

Naya snatched up a pitcher of watered wine and flung the contents at Agrat. Most of it doused his face and chest. The flames flickered, threatened to die, then burned white and hotter. Naya reached blindly for the milk and doused Agrat, aiming lower.

I did this!

Agrat looked exactly as she had imagined him. She pushed down the shrieking eunuch and stomped on the persistent flames with her sandal-shod feet while her mother called for help.

“Stop!” she finally shrieked, and focused all her frustration and amazement at the flames.

The flames vanished. Scorch marks, smoke, and the stink of burned cloth were all that remained to prove a fire had raged.

“No time,” Eshrell muttered, as temple workers came running. She yanked on Agrat’s arm, hauled him to his feet, and shoved him into the arms of the first priests to stumble through the open door.

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“Isolate him. He speaks to no one until I return.”

“I did this.” Naya’s hands didn’t shake until she had tied the belt of her robe. She picked up her jewelry and dropped it.

“I warned you, life would never be the same once the Mother’s power moved through you.” Eshrell sighed, but smiled and bent to pick up the fallen jewelry. “You will need more lessons, and I suspect your other gifts will be stronger, now. Fire talent—that is a gift that does not run on either side of our families. It is definitely not inherited.”

“Why would it come to me?” Naya picked up the wreath of flowers for her unbound hair, anything to keep her hands busy and help her find some slice of inner balance.

“There is a reason. Matrika never sends gifts unless there is a need...or there will be a need.” Eshrell gestured at the couch.

Naya obediently sat and let her mother adorn her. She felt the curious regard of the priestesses who waited at the door to escort her. Time sped past. The sacrifice had to take place precisely at the moment the first rays of sun reached the courtyard of sacrifice.

“There,” her mother said. “Lovely.” She nodded approval and gestured for her daughter to stand. “There is no time to discuss this now. Tomorrow, when you’re home. Your father will be very proud,” she added as they strode arm-in-arm through the door. “Thank the Mother for that.”

“Did something upset Father?”

“Not really. He’s merely...disappointed.” Eshrell glanced over her shoulder at the escort of priestesses. She lowered her voice. “He hoped the king would spend all night with you, that you would win his heart.”

“Mother—” Naya didn’t know whether to be shocked or laugh. “He loves Mayar.”

“Hmm, yes. But the more powerful a man becomes, the more he has, the more he wants. King Nebazz is very young, and still lets some passions act as his counselors. Mayar has the strength to be Healer

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High Priestess. Think how much prestige the king would carry if two of his concubines were the most powerful priestesses in the land.”

Naya’s throat closed and she couldn’t speak. Did her father intend for her to be High Priestess, after him? Would there finally be a High Priestess to serve as Matrika’s voice, after centuries of near-silence? She quashed that dream immediately. It would never happen. If she became High Priestess of Mother Matrika, then the king would be *forced* to make her his queen. And that place belonged to Mayar, because she carried King Nebazz’s heir in her womb.

A prophecy more than two centuries old said a daughter born of the sacred line would return Bainevah to true worship, serve as High Priestess and Matrika’s voice and lead the nation through darkness and war to light and peace.

“Father wants me to be the prophesied High Priestess, mother of the king’s heir, but it will not be through me,” Naya whispered.

Thunder rumbled softly in counterpoint to her words. No one else seemed to hear. On the morning of summer solstice, after the Sacred Marriage, surely someone would remark on the sound. She clutched at her mother’s arm and wished she had more time to think and remember all the images that had flooded her soul last night.

Stop acting and thinking like a child, she silently scolded herself. You are the daughter of two priests, born to service, trained to think clearly and to give your life gladly into Matrika’s service. What will be and what has been are part of her plan, and the will of the Unseen. Be proud. Be strong. Put on the armor of your spirit and march out to the battle that awaits you.

* * *

Doni’Hobad’Shazzur’Conia, the youngest man ever appointed to the King’s Council, the youngest man ever named King’s Seer, stood in the courtyard of the sacrifice and trembled in fear and anticipation. He called himself a fool a dozen times in an hour, and still he let himself

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hope.

Whenever he heard a suitor had sought permission to marry Naya, he had whispered a prayer to Matrika. A prayer that Chizhedek would refuse the man, change his mind about making Naya the fulfillment of prophecy and allow Shazzur to court her while she was still in the Sanctum. When the lots were drawn for the Sacred Marriage, Shazzur prayed Naya would not be chosen. Yesterday and last night, he had raged in the privacy of his bedroom, demanding, begging understanding from Matrika.

Naya was free now, but Shazzur dreaded looking into her eyes and seeing what the flow of Matrika's power through her body and soul had done to her. Would she still be the bright, quick, mischievous girl he had grown to love and then desire? Or would she be like a sword after a brutal battle, proven and found worthy, but with all her brightness pounded away?

The king had touched her in the night. Shazzur struggled with his jealousy. He imagined that last night, the king had indeed asked Naya to become his concubine.

It was only wise, after all. Diplomats had brought three new concubines and intended to present them to the king this morning during the festivities. What better way to refuse than to have the convenient excuse of too many concubines? The king was allowed seven. Naya would make five. Nebazz could refuse all three women, saying it wouldn't be fair to choose among them.

Still, he would have Naya, and Shazzur loathed the ugly feelings that churned inside him in reaction to the idea.

It didn't help to remember that King Nebazz at twenty-nine was closer in age to Naya than Shazzur at thirty-six.

Shazzur had always disdained men who married girls young enough to be their daughters. Fifteen years wasn't such a large gap, but it was large enough. He knew he was still strong, healthy, and active. His

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duties sometimes required that he travel far and rapidly, to serve the kingdom. The Scribes Hall taught proper care of the body to ensure peak functioning of the mind and he was always careful of his health. Still, if he had courted Naya, would she have rejected him as too old?

If the king asked Naya to be his concubine, Shazzur would never know that answer, and it made him ache. It made him feel old and foolish and useless.

“You are the greatest fool in all Bainevah,” he whispered, and smiled despite the pain deep in his chest.

He had always been a regular visitor to High Priest Chizhedek’s house. Through the years, he had often found Naya in her father’s study, reading scrolls or making quick, neat notations of her father’s words. Or simply sitting and listening, her big eyes wide and her little mouth pursed in serious, thinking lines. She was an apt student with a clear, logical mind, a sharp sense of humor and a quick wit.

Shazzur remembered the first time he ever heard Chizhedek laugh, responding to a tart remark Naya made about the self-importance of the priests who served the Three. Chizhedek’s face turned red and his shoulders shook. Then low, rumbling laughter flowed out. Shazzur remembered being impressed, and the sound of the High Priest’s laughter.

Naya had always been a child, with her long, straight hair the color of ripe wheat, loose and fluttering behind her like a flag in a strong wind. Always doing, seeing, and learning. Her big, brilliant eyes could shift from blue to green in an instant, depending on her mood, the light, the clothes she wore. But she had always been a child. A lovely, brilliant, lithe child. Someone young enough to spend hours talking with him in her parents’ garden without anyone suspecting anything more than scholarly talk.

Then she grew up in the space of a few moons and it took an extended absence from Bainevah to realize he wanted her as part of

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him, in every way possible.

Today, the silence Chizhedek imposed on him would end. If King Nebazz didn't take Naya to the palace as his concubine this evening.

What were his chances of that happening?

Shazzur glanced around the palace courtyard where the ceremony would begin momentarily. Nearly one-third of the Court had assembled, dressed in their finest, lightest Court costumes. Even in the chill and thin dew before sunrise, the summer morning felt too warm, the air just on the verge of stifling.

Shazzur sighed. What use were all his gifts and vaunted wisdom without Naya? His gift of visions, his prodigious memory and clear manner of speech had propelled him to the forefront of his fellows at the Scribes Hall. Chance or Matrika's will had put him in the front ranks when an assassin attacked the Crown Prince, and he had protected the boy's life. He had earned Nebazz's friendship, and his scholarly talents prompted King Jazzan to name him to the Crown Prince's Council.

Thinking back on those years of service made him feel tired. He had nothing but a rich home, the king's friendship and the respect of nobles, scribes, and ambassadors to show for all his hard work. No wife or children, and no close friends beyond a few scribes and priests and Captain Asqual. He had always been careful to stay free of the entanglements of Court. A bosom friend today would ask for favors tomorrow that he, in good conscience, couldn't bestow. It had always been safer to stay on the fringes, to know the respect and support of the High Priest and to know the king trusted him implicitly.

Until today.

Shazzur turned his attention back to the present time and place as King Nebazz arrived, with Lady Mayar at his side. They all but held hands in public. Shazzur wondered how long it would be until the healer priestess gave the king his heir. He knew Nebazz wanted to

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marry Mayar, not just to stop the gift of concubines, but because of the dangers that hid in the shadows of the Concubines Hall. The political infighting often took very real, physical form. Several of the previous king's concubines had poisoned their rivals and their rivals' sons to ensure their sons had a chance at being named Crown Prince.

Shazzur watched the young couple and he envied them. They were together. They adored each other.

There were dozens of sensible noble daughters who would gladly marry the King's Seer and protect his image in Court. Many daughters of scribes, scholars in their own right, would make pleasant life partners to share his passion for history and scholarship. If he merely wanted a wife to take care of his household, quite frankly, he would never marry. He had his very capable housekeeper to make sure he didn't wear dirty clothes or eat nothing but dry bread and half-rotten fruit, oblivious to everything but his studies.

He wanted a woman who enjoyed studies as keenly as he did. A woman who felt the thrill of the chase in investigating and tracking down miniscule bits of scattered facts, making them fit together like a shattered, priceless urn, and presenting a whole picture even the most obtuse courtier or unlearned peasant or slave could understand. And combined with that, he wanted a woman who made his body ache with hunger, even as energy vibrated through him like strummed harp strings.

That woman entered the courtyard for the sacrifice now. A woman who still glowed with a faint, golden-white corona from the presence of the Mother inhabiting her body.

Shazzur watched Naya. He noted how the torchlight glowed on her long, golden-brown hair, and his fingers ached to tangle in the smooth strands. He wanted to kiss her and learn if her mouth tasted as fresh and clean as her scent.

Shazzur felt the tiles paving the courtyard of the sacrifice rise and

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fall under him, as if the ground below them had turned to water. He braced himself to accept the coming vision. What would it be this time? An answer to a quandary facing the Court, the King's Council, the priests, the scribes? Another piece in the mystifying tangle of the great Prophecy? A glimpse of the future?

"Watch. Listen," a woman whispered from somewhere behind and above him. The sound of a loom being worked, the whisper of threads and shuttle and the clatter of warp weights, filled the air. Then silence. The courtyard around him rippled like water, and changed.

He stood in this same courtyard, but a stormy sky hovered close above the city, with massive black clouds ready to drop wagonloads of snow. Chizhedek stepped up to the altar, holding the golden box, still tall and thin and bald, but worn down by decades, wrinkled and thin. King Nebazz didn't stand at the altar. A young man who looked like him, beardless, meaning he was an undeclared prince, stood in the king's place. In Naya's place, a young woman stepped up to the altar, dressed in furs. The storm winds whipped fiery curls back from her face—Naya's face—and her eyes were as misty gray as the dawn in the rainy spring.

Was Naya's daughter destined to be a Sanctum Bride?

The image faded as Naya and the king resumed their proper places before him. Heat and a sultry stillness replaced the icy, whipping winds. Shazzur took a deep breath of the dry, hot air. Sweat beaded on his bare arms and collected between his silver enameled pectoral collar and his skin. He envied the priests with their bare chins and the scribes their shaven heads. If he had followed his father's footsteps, he would be a mere scribe and mightily cooler right this moment.

And he wouldn't be at this ceremony, watching Naya in all her sacred glory, wanting her and silently lashing himself for wasting time and opportunity.

Silence rang through the courtyard. Shazzur felt a chill in the sweat

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running down his back. Why hadn't the High Priest begun the chant to offer up the sacrifice? His gaze shifted to Chizhedek.

The High Priest met Shazzur's gaze. Anger burned in his deep, dark eyes. He shook his head and his lips flattened in pure, clear disapproval.

Shazzur bowed his head to the High Priest, acknowledging the silent message that had passed in a heartbeat.

The red-haired, gray-eyed girl with Naya's face filled his inner vision. Shazzur took hope from that vision. Naya would not go to the king.

Chizhedek began the chant, rolling out the sound in a rich wave that echoed off the walls of the courtyard. The words rang with echoes of Matrika's power. Under that, Shazzur thought he heard a new note of exultation. Chizhedek let his joy shine through, pride in the service his daughter had done for the land. Shazzur wondered how he would feel if it was his daughter who stood there, with her blood displayed to priests and nobles.

"Take this sacrifice!" Chizhedek shouted and flung down the oil-soaked cloth stained with Naya's blood.

Lightning flashed, one massive bolt that split the golden, purple and peach sky, like a sword slashing down to touch the ground. A cold slap of air yanked on the ornate robes of the Court. Rain fell in a solid wave while Shazzur's eyes were still dazzled by the lightning. Chizhedek let out a shout of triumph as the force of the rain thoroughly drowned the sacrificial fire. The day turned black with storm clouds. The sky had been empty and clear, only a few heartbeats before.

"Mother Matrika is pleased!" King Nebazz tipped his head back, letting the rain turn his painted face into a smeared mess. Laughing, he wiped his face on the sleeve of his open robe, then took it off and held it over Lady Mayar to shield her from the downpour.

Shazzur was grateful when the royal couple hurried away. He was

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now free to watch Chizhedek and Eshrell embrace their daughter, laughing, and then hurry out of the courtyard.

You're a fool, he told himself for the dozenth time that hour. If he had spoken sooner, he could have been part of that happy knot of family. He could have swept Naya up in his arms and kissed her for joy, with all the Court watching. He could have taken off his outer robe to shield her from the cold and rain. And tonight, he could have looked forward to taking Naya into his bed for the first time. He could have held her slim, golden body close while they listened to the sound of the rain she had brought to Bainevah.

* * *

Shazzur mouthed a silent curse on the arbiters of fashion who demanded the men of the Court should have braided, squared beards. He looked forward to the day he was too old to care about his appearance or for the critics to attack him, and through him, the king, for the slightest flaw in appearance or behavior. Someday, he would be a graybeard and could stay home after a chilling rain and enjoy a quiet day by the fire, studying scrolls or playing Draktan with Asqual.

Until that day, he would be at the beck and call of the king, with his freshly pressed summer robes in place, his beard braided and dark red hair carefully perfumed and curled, his arm bands and rings and pectoral collar in place, neither too simple nor too ostentatious.

He approached the king's chambers to confer with Nebazz before the feast. He nodded to the guards stationed every ten paces apart and strode down the long hallway in the royal family's side of the palace complex. If Nebazz felt generous in the aftermath of the success of the Sacred Marriage, perhaps now he would allow Shazzur to return to the Hidden City for several moons of study.

If the king hadn't asked Naya to become his concubine, Shazzur could make the trip across the desert and into the mountains a bridal trip. If she hadn't changed during her two years in the Sanctum, Naya

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would enjoy the excursion. Surely after producing so many weavings of prophetic worth, she had earned a place among the priesthood of the Three. Not that Shazzur wanted Naya to immure herself among those black-robed recluses. But he thought she would enjoy the journey, the wonder of seeing the Hidden City for the first time. He wanted to be there to see and enjoy all her reactions, answer her questions, show her his favorite places among the archives and the gardens and the vast, sparsely inhabited city.

When, Shazzur wondered, had he begun to look forward to things that weren't yet his, making plans for the lives of people whom he had no right to please?

Was this what happened to a man when he took his eyes off his straight path of duty and started to want more? Shazzur grinned at his foolishness, the quickening of his pulse, and decided he liked this change. Very much.

He prayed, quickly and silently, that his hopes would be answered, and more disappointment wouldn't slap him in the face before sunset.

The guard at the door of the king's quarters nodded to Shazzur, then rapped once on the ivory-inlaid ebony panel. He turned the latch, pulled the door open and gestured for Shazzur to enter. The king wasn't in the front room. Shazzur paused, about to call out to announce himself, when Nebazz came out of his study room. He smiled broadly.

"A most beautiful and welcome rain, is it not, my friend?" He picked up a goblet of wine from the refreshment table.

"The crops will be lush in the fall, Majesty. I'm sure the farmers are already in the outer temples and shrines, burning incense in thanks and praising you and the Bride."

"Hmm, yes." The king gestured at the table, indicating Shazzur should help himself, then took a seat on the pillow-strewn couch on the opposite wall. "Priestess Naya is most blessed, is she not? Talented, intelligent, marked for great service to Matrika."

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“Most certainly, Majesty.” Shazzur turned his back on the pitchers of wine. His stomach seemed to have dropped to his knees. Was the king about to tell him that Naya would become his concubine? The certainty gave Shazzur insight into why men became slaves to the temporary forgetfulness of wine.

“She is a good friend to my sweet Mayar. I wish to ensure Lady Naya’s happiness.”

Shazzur kept his face calm, as he had learned to do in hundreds of tense Council sessions, poised on the brink of exploding, like a vat of oil waiting for a torch.

“Have you consulted with Lady Mayar? I understand the two have been good friends since childhood. She would know better than anyone what would please Lady Naya.”

Shazzur wanted to baldly tell the king he had no right to take another beautiful, talented, intelligent woman for himself, but he knew better. His job was to help the king make his decisions by examining the question from all angles, never to decide for the king.

“I did. My love was surprised and had no suggestions for me.” Nebazz shook his head, relaxing into a rueful grin, and reminding Shazzur his monarch was only twenty-nine.

“Then I fail to understand how I could help, Majesty. My mother always cautioned me to ask the advice of a woman when dealing with women’s lives,” Shazzur said. “May I ask what you wish to do for Lady Naya?”

“She is in love, but will not reveal the name of the man she wants. He doesn’t know she loves him. I want you to find out who this fool is and slap some sense into him.” Nebazz barked laughter. “You’re surprised. Enough that you couldn’t hide it. Do you have such a low opinion of me, my friend?”

“I had thought you would ask Lady Naya to become your concubine.”

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“I did. She refused. She will take the man she loves, and no other.” The king nodded. “A wise woman. She deserves to have what she wants, and I intend to see she gets it.”

“Perhaps it would be better if no one interfered, Majesty. If he is so oblivious he can’t see the treasure held out to him....” Shazzur shrugged. He felt cold and empty inside, but managed to keep his face and voice serene.

“I want the entire world to be happy, my friend. I have had wonderful news.” The king saluted Shazzur with his cup. “Mayar is with child. Last night, Lady Naya told me the child will be a boy. My heir!”

“Congratulations, Majesty.”

“Yes, indeed, good news for Bainevah. I want every man to be as happy as I am. If Naya loves someone, then she should have the man she wants. Help make it so, my friend. I ask this as your friend, as well as your king.”

“If only it were that simple, Majesty.” Shazzur sighed and smiled and tried not to laugh.

This was the young prince he watched grow from a good-hearted boy to a good-hearted, yet sometimes hesitant king. It would be easy for Shazzur to tell King Nebazz what to do in every situation, but he had known for the good of Bainevah, the young king needed to think for himself. Even when he made mistakes, he was a better king than a puppet who let others do his thinking for him. Nebazz tried to think of the good of others, unlike most of his royal half-siblings.

“Why won’t she say who she wants?”

“She, like everyone else, fears rejection, Majesty,” Shazzur said, a little too quickly. “No Bride in nearly thirty years has left the Sanctum without a husband waiting to take her into his home. Naya refused every man who asked for her while in the Sanctum. Think of the shame if she approaches the man she wants, a man who did not court her, and

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he refuses her.”

“How many did she refuse?” the king asked with a softening of his frown.

“I believe...” Shazzur pretended to have to think about it, but the number, names, and faces came too easily to his mind. “Twenty-two. All refused by High Priest Chizhedek, after sending a message to his daughter in the Sanctum.”

“He asked her thoughts?”

“She must live with the man. Not her parents.”

“True.” Nebazz chuckled. “What is wrong with the man? Can it be he doesn’t know she wants him?”

“Perhaps, Majesty...” Shazzur swallowed a bitter chuckle aimed at himself. “Perhaps he has been oblivious for a very long time, and is afraid to confess his foolishness.”

“You speak as one who knows from personal experience.” He barked laughter and gestured with his wine cup at Shazzur. “Have you finally lost your heart to some pretty noble’s daughter, and you’re afraid to approach her father?”

“In all honesty, Majesty...” Shazzur sighed and sank down on the stool facing the king. To sit without asking permission was a grave breach of protocol, but the king had never cared. “I have trouble deciding how to express my heart to Lady Naya.”

Nebazz’s laughter echoed off the walls. “You want her? My good and loyal friend, why didn’t you say so before? I am sure High Priest Chizhedek would be delighted to have you as a son-in-law.”

“He would rather have you take Naya as your concubine and then your wife.”

“Ah. That explains those odd looks, as if he expected me to say something. Well, I did ask, and she refused me. It is no longer up to the High Priest, but his daughter. So I say, my friend, with all my blessings, pursue Lady Naya’s heart, win it from the oblivious fool who

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doesn't appreciate her, take her and marry her.”

“If only Naya were involved, it would be simple.”

“My friend, I was blind in matters of love, and then I was a fool. I put Mayar into a fury, wanting to spare her the uncertain status of a concubine, and the danger to her from my hidden enemies. She lectured me on the risks we must take for the sake of love, and how love makes unpleasant situations and duties into near joy. If you love Naya, win her heart.” He stood. “I'm sure someday, she'll lecture you on your hesitation today, and you will laugh together.”

“May it be so.”

CHAPTER 5

Naya wondered how she had survived two years in the Sanctum without battering some exceedingly empty heads against the walls. Hadn't they listened to anything the Chief Warder told them? By the time the servant girls cleared away the third course of the feast in the Sanctum, she had been asked multiple variations of the same questions. Was the king a skillful lover? Was he gentle? How could one of them get the king's attention so he would want her after the ritual ended?

No one believed her when she said Matrika had taken over her body. She had seen visions she could repeat to no one but the priests and the king, and Mother Matrika had spoken to the king with her voice. There had been no pleasure, no long hours of lovemaking, and certainly no seduction.

Did the other Brides think the Sanctum existed merely to provide the king with beautiful virgins to deflower twice a year? Did they think the spilling of virgin blood was more important than the visions and

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words of warning and advice given to the king and priests, to guide and guard Bainevah in the six moons to come?

We have fallen so far, Naya thought, and her stomach churned around the few delicacies she had eaten. *There will come a day when the most devout virgin will have no idea why she has come to the Sanctum, when she will doubt that the Mother will speak through her. When there will be no preparation. When fools like that arrogant Agrat will be in charge of the Sanctum and use it solely to advance his own position, rather than to serve Bainevah.* Her heart boomed hollowly in her ears, giving validity to her pained musing.

Through you. Through your blood, a voice whispered in a wind that whistled through the room, and yet didn't move a single lamp flame or gauzy drapery. *This will end. The true way will return. One High Priestess, and her son born to be the king. Speak the truth and urge the people back to my path before they trip over their own blindness and break their necks over their own stupidity.*

"I hear, Mother Matrika," Naya whispered. She picked up the delicate eating knife resting on her plate and pricked her thumb. She put her thumb to her lips and tasted a single drop of her blood. Sealed and witnessed in blood, she vowed to follow the command spoken into her soul.

A gong clashed, cutting through the chatter and songs and giggles of the Sanctum Brides.

"First Concubine Healer Priestess Lady Mayar," Chief Warder Zigthan announced. He beamed, his pudgy face bright with delight, and bowed low as Mayar entered the room.

Naya leaped from her seat and flew through the open square of the banquet tables to meet her one true friend. The two embraced, ebony hair tangling with golden, blue robes swirling around the crimson and gold of Mayar's festival robes.

The other Brides called out greetings. The girls sitting on either side

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of Naya's place of honor moved their chairs over, gladly making room for Mayar. She had always been popular, able to soothe ruffled feathers and make friends without resorting to empty flattery.

When the other Brides asked Mayar the same questions, she gave the same honest answers Naya had, and the Brides listened this time.

Perhaps that is the trick, Naya mused, as Mayar launched into an amusing tale of a mishap in Court where the pompous Drevan ambassador had embarrassed himself yet again. *I choose whether to let fools irritate me. If I do not let them harm me, they cannot. I choose how I will see the world, and how I will let it touch me. I can still speak honestly. I can still refuse to suffer fools—but I can be kind. I can make people laugh at themselves. Doesn't Father say my wit is worthy of the wisest sage and the most popular Song Weaver in the kingdom?*

"Sister of my spirit." Mayar leaned closer to Naya when a group of servant girls began a feasting song in honor of the Brides. "Nebazz told me what you said." She placed her hand on her still-flat belly. "What a wonderful gift you gave me. Especially in light of today's news."

"What? War?"

"Worse. Three ambassadors approached Nebazz after the ceremony and presented him with concubines, in honor of the grand blessing that came with today's rain."

"He loves you, my sister," Naya whispered. "In eight more moons, he will make you his wife and Queen of Bainevah, and your son will be the heir, Crown Prince from the day of his birth."

"And how long will he live, with six concubines hating him because he has stolen the throne from their sons? Nebazz can't refuse to sleep with the foreign concubines. It would be an insult to their homelands. They will battle to ensure one of their sons sits on the throne." Mayar shook her head. "I thought Nebazz would ask you to be his concubine."

Naya opened her mouth to say yes, the king had asked her. She stopped in time. No matter how she phrased them, her words would

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hurt Mayar, wouldn't they?

"If you were the fifth concubine, then Nebazz would only be allowed two more. He could have refused all three, to avoid insulting one of the ambassadors. And I know your son would be a true brother to my son, not a rival. I would be more sure of his safety and..." Mayar's mouth dropped open and a threat of tears touched her eyes. "Oh, my sister," she whispered. "Forgive me. In my fear, I thought nothing of you, your heart. You deserve a love as great and sweet as mine."

"No. You have a son to protect. You do the right thing, putting his welfare first."

"And what kind of spirit sister am I, to use you for my own comfort?" Mayar shook her head. "I want you to find great love, to live the life of adventures and travel and learning that you have always dreamed of. I want you to catch a man who will adore you as you deserve." Her lips curved in an attempt at a smile. "I will give Nebazz a daughter. Your son will marry my daughter."

"You do not want my daughter to marry your son?" Naya put on an affronted expression.

"I am sure of Nebazz's love, but I would never wish the life of a concubine on any woman. Most especially not on you or on your daughter."

* * *

Shazzur stepped into the antechamber to the King's Council room the next morning, intending to review the newest report from the Drevan border before the meeting. Chizhedek waited for him. Shazzur saw the banked coals of rage seething in the High Priest's eyes as he bowed in greeting.

"You advised the King to take no more concubines," the old man said in an icily quiet voice.

"Seven are all the law allows." Shazzur winced, knowing as soon as

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the words left his lips that they had been the wrong choice. Such a weak answer would only enflame Chizhedek, not calm him as he had intended.

Chizhedek stood. Shazzur imagined the lighting and fire of Matrika's wrath dancing on his fingertips. "You are an enemy to Bainevah, a traitor to the true worship of Matrika. He would have asked Naya before they left the Chamber of Ten Thousand Suns, if you had not counseled him otherwise."

"How will sacrificing your only child please Matrika?" he shot back. Shazzur knew that was also not the best thing to say, but part of him didn't care. He wanted to shock Chizhedek. "The words of Matrika clearly say a marriage must be of mind and body and heart to be a true blessing."

"The king cannot help but love Naya."

"He loves Mayar, and she carries his firstborn."

"There is no guarantee it will be a boy." Chizhedek waved his hand like brushing away a fly, as if the king's love for Mayar meant nothing.

"I had a vision of Naya's daughter standing at the sacrifice at winter solstice," Shazzur said. "Would you have her give her virginity to her own brother?"

Chizhedek's anger froze. For one long moment, thirty years of pain and anger covered him, making him a dry, bitter skeleton of a man. He shook his head.

"Yes, visions only show us the future that might be." Shazzur respected the High Priest too much to trample his hopes and dignity. "The position of High Priestess must be restored, before Bainevah sinks deeper into darkness. But forcing the hand of Fate and guiding the prophecies will neither serve nor please Matrika. Naya has served her country, her king, and Matrika well. Doesn't she deserve some happiness? You are blessed with a marriage of love. How can you deny that to your own child?"

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“Love.” Chizhedek snorted, but not in mockery. “Naya loves no one. She refused all suitors. I saw it as a sign.”

“Only a sign that she has yet to find the heart that beats for her.”

“And you think you can make her heart beat for you?” He practically hissed the words. “I will never give my daughter to you, King’s Seer though you might be.”

“Naya has the right to—”

“I forbid you to speak of love to my daughter until the day she dies. In my authority as High Priest, I call down Matrika’s curse.” Light flashed from his fingers, sealing the curse. “I will kill my daughter with my own hand before I allow you to take her into your arms, your home, your heart.”

Chizhedek stalked from the room in a swirl of white robes. Shazzur held his breath until the hissing slaps of the old priest’s sandals faded down the hall. He closed his eyes, exhaled loudly, and slumped against the wall.

“She is already in my heart,” he told the achingly silent room.

* * *

Naya knew it was foolish, but disappointment twisted her stomach when she walked into her room in her parents’ home and saw how empty it was. She had put everything into storage before she entered the Sanctum, so why did this hurt?

A sense of not belonging slapped her hard in the face, driving away the almost giddy sense of relief, freedom, and homecoming.

“It feels strange, doesn’t it?” Eshrell said from the doorway.

Naya turned, and smiled when she saw the wide basket her mother carried, full of wound shuttles of thread of every color. She glanced at the far end of the room, and found her tall loom waiting for her. It was empty, but it was uncovered and all her tools waited on the low table against the right-hand wall. She took a step closer and smiled to see someone had polished the bronze and ivory implements to a high gloss.

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The dozens of bronze warp weights lay in an orderly line below her loom, ready to be strung and to hold the threads straight and tight.

“I used to dream of my room, as if I could open a door through the night and come here,” Naya murmured. She felt pressure rise in her chest. It came out as a delighted burst of laughter. She skipped like a child across the room and swept the basket of prepared threads from her mother’s hand. “What should I make in celebration, Mother?”

“Make time to grow used to being home,” her mother advised with a chuckle. “Go see your friends. Run to the market, indulge yourself. But don’t eat too many sweets and don’t be late for dinner. The three of us haven’t eaten together in two years, and I doubt your father will allow anything to keep him late at the palace or the temple this night.” She held out a small, embroidered purse, with pretty clasps to attach it to a belt. It sagged with the weight of the coins inside.

“Come with me?” Naya begged as she took the purse and put it on her belt.

“I want our first meal together to be perfect. The only way to do that is to use my own two hands—instead of hovering and frightening the servants into burning the pheasant and the bread or spilling the wine.” She laughed and caught her daughter by the shoulders, to guide her from the room.

Naya laughed as she strolled down the familiar streets in the priestly section of the city. It struck her as strange and glorious to walk outside with the sun on her face and no veil over her head. She gloried in the feel of the breeze on her face and through her hair. She vowed she would never fall victim to fashions that demanded she paint her face or bind her hair in multiple ribbons and pins and scarves. If she could, she would find some place where she could go barefoot and wear trousers for the rest of her life.

Unfortunately, no one in Bainevah would let her forget she was the High Priest’s daughter and a former Sanctum Bride. Before she retired

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last night, six messages had come from wealthy or noble families, stating six admiring young men wished to meet her. Naya planned to send a particularly ugly, fat slave in her place when those ardent young men came to her father's home. Chizhedek might scold her for such a nasty trick, but only in public. He presented a fierce expression and blunt, no-nonsense manner to the world, but Naya knew he had the heart of a poet and a sense of humor that could enfold their home in laughter for hours.

"If I ever have a daughter," she muttered, as she entered the open plaza surrounding the Healers Temple, "I will encourage her not to become a Sanctum Bride." Her breath caught and the sunny plaza seemed to tilt to the left. "May there no longer be a need for the Sanctum when my child is grown."

Naya paused, expecting to fall off her feet. Ridiculous. If Mother Matrika spoke through her, there was nothing to fear.

Yet the thought of being a mother frightened her. Even more than the images that haunted her dreams of Shazzur laughing at her when she offered him her heart.

A figure in a green robe appeared at a side door of the temple. Naya laughed and darted across the hot pavement. How Mayar knew she was coming, she had no idea. Magic, or did Mayar simply know it would be one of her first errands once she returned home?

The rounded stair steps of the Healers Temple rose high over their heads as the two young women met. Naya welcomed the cooling shade after her dash in the heat. It shocked her to feel the aches in her legs. Two years of not being allowed to run, to explore, to climb, and simply walk for hours at a time had taken their toll. She didn't like that. Would she fall off a horse the first time she tried to ride?

"What's wrong?" Naya laughed as she settled into the common room where Mayar had brought her. She sipped at the watered wine her friend served, but the healer priestess only held her cup and studied her.

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Finally, Mayar sighed and shook her head.

“You’ve changed. Or rather, something changed you. Allow me?” Mayar held out a hand, palm up. Naya didn’t hesitate to give a hand into her grasp. When she did, her friend gasped.

“What?”

“Power. There has always been strength and hidden channels of potential, but now....” She chewed on her bottom lip a moment. “Well, I know my healing powers increased ten-fold after the Sacred Marriage. Why not you?”

“So I always had fire talent, but it wasn’t evident until now?”

“Tell me everything.” Mayar shook a finger in Naya’s face, but laughter belied her threat. She laughed louder when she heard of the fire in Agrat’s clothes. “He deserved it.”

“Maybe. But it was still rude.” Naya turned her half-full cup between her fingers, studying the play of light on the ripples in the wine. “It’s for a reason, isn’t it?”

“Most definitely. Mother Matrika has opened the floodgates. The doors she opened with her presence can never be closed. Be sure you only use her gifts to honor her, my sister. The demi-gods who oppose Bainevah will swallow you up like a ripe fig the moment you stray from her path.”

“This won’t be a fun visit, I suppose.” Naya sighed, but she felt a strange excitement growing in her belly, despite pretending to be disappointed. “Tests?”

“Indeed. Many tests.”

The Healers Temple educated everyone with divine gifts. No matter what temple priests served in, they began their lessons in the Healers Temple. Healer High Priest Hagath had tested Naya after her first moon flow, to see what gifts had come with womanhood. Naya had sensitivity to talent and power in others. Before the Sanctum, she gave one day every moon quarter to the Healers Temple, helping the priests

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test acolytes. She had met Mayar when the nobly born girl had come to verify her healing gift. The two became instant friends and Naya hid Mayar when rebel forces slaughtered her family in the upheaval after King Jazzan's death.

Hagath came to supervise Naya's testing. The ebony-skinned, white-haired man was blind, but possessed a sense of sight that made him the premier Healer High Priest in two centuries. He was a good friend of her parents, and Naya leaped to embrace him as soon as she saw him in the testing room.

"Child, you glow brighter than the sun," he said, laughing, when Naya had kissed him on both cheeks. He turned unerringly to Mayar. "Daughter, what do you see?"

"Flames on the ends of her hair and her fingertips when she exhales. I thought I only imagined it, my Father, that her eyes had changed color and her hair had lightened." Mayar wrinkled up her nose at Naya, whose mouth had dropped open.

For Hagath and Mayar to address each other as Father and Daughter meant Mayar was his closest assistant and would someday be Healer High Priestess.

Naya shivered and quickly reached to brace herself against a chair before her knees folded. She saw Mayar in the dark green robes of the High Priestess, weeping at Hagath's bedside. A boy of four years, with ebony eyes and hair, stood at her side. The boy Mayar carried in her womb?

"Propitious," she whispered. "A High Priestess will again be queen in Bainevah, yet not as anyone can foresee or plan."

"Oh—dear," Hagath said. He clasped Naya's shoulders and guided her to sit. "Child, you are blessed, but with a blessing that will sometimes feel like a curse. Daughter?" He reached behind himself for the cup Mayar brought over. Taking it, he held it to Naya's lips.

She choked on the bitter, revitalizing potion.

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“You mean I don’t have to enjoy this?” Naya’s crooked smile earned a few appreciative chuckles from the four other priests who had accompanied them to the testing room.

* * *

“The gift of seeing...that will manifest in many ways and inconvenient times,” Hagath said more than two hours later.

Naya and Mayar sat together on a low couch in his workroom, sharing a plate of honey cakes and dates. They faced him across the massive table where he created medicines.

“Eventually,” he continued, “you will learn to brace for the visions, and even how to bring them on. Yes, I can hear you thinking, ‘Why would I wish to do so?’ Daughter, enlighten her.”

“To guide the king and his counselors, to help in war and siege, to see into the root cause of an illness. Many reasons to request special guidance and insight from the Mother.” Mayar spoke slowly, studying the date poised between two fingers.

“She does not want us to sit and wait for orders, but to seek out work to do and to ask for insight,” Naya offered, remembering long-ago discussions with her father and many wise folk who visited their house.

Hagath taught as her father did, with questions, making his students search, use their minds and question all preconceived notions. He loathed teachers who demanded their students parrot all their lessons, never questioning, never learning to think for themselves. He encouraged debate.

Naya remembered many lively discussions with her father and scholars who visited the house. She especially missed debates with Shazzur. She had planned to waylay him today, somewhere, but her free time had been devoured with her testing. Well, she would just have to wait until tomorrow to begin her hunt.

“You would be wise to find a teacher gifted with visions,” Hagath

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continued. “Study in the archives, to learn the histories of visionaries of the past. Learn from their mistakes. I will ask Lord Shazzur to guide you in your new studies.”

Naya stifled an urge to giggle. It couldn’t be that easy, could it? How soon could she be totally alone with Shazzur, and begin her campaign for his heart?

Naya needed to learn to control her imagination and emotions. Just as she had set fire to Agrat’s robes, fueled by her irritation with the officious eunuch, her passions could cause problems. The cure was to practice creating flames by conscious desire, so they only came when she wanted. After a long, tiring hour of practice, she knew she had only taken the first step on a long journey.

“If my goal had been to batter my brain to a bruised pulp, I succeeded,” Naya said with a moan. The sun hovered at just the right angle to spear through her eyes into her aching brain. She and Mayar had retreated to the terrace gardens for some fresh air after her lessons.

“It will grow easier.” Mayar’s voice sounded rich with repressed laughter. She plucked a pungent sprig from the long rows of potted plants lining the terrace. “Breathe deeply.”

Naya nodded her thanks and crushed the dark green leaves and yellow stem before sniffing the aroma. Her eyes watered at the strength, but the throbbing at the base of her skull immediately softened. The two friends sat in silence and enjoyed the solitude and warmth of the sun.

“Lady?” A wide-eyed acolyte in white robes approached them.

“Eftar?” Mayar smiled at the boy, who visibly relaxed. “Am I needed?”

“No, Lady. A noble wishes to see Priestess Naya.”

“A noble? Why?” She and Naya followed the acolyte down the spiraling stairs to the central reception hall.

“He would not say,” Eftar mumbled. “But he brings gifts.”

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Naya groaned. She didn't need a vision to know what the visitor wanted. How had he found her here? Her parents wouldn't send anyone after her. Her many refusals from within the Sanctum obviously hadn't stopped the expected flood of suitors.

Jehash, son of Lord Jehan of the Water Gate, was tall and tanned, with gray eyes and sandy hair and a rakish scar across his left cheekbone. He wore the uniform of the Host of the Ram, the elite soldiers of Bainevah. His eyes widened and his lips curved in appreciation when Naya approached.

"Lord Jehash." Naya pressed her palms together and bowed her head to him. She watched his gaze drift over her from head to toe when he bowed to her, and wished she wore her priestly robes as protection.

"Lady Priestess Naya. I'm not a fancy speaker but a soldier." He picked up a small gilded chest sitting at his feet.

"Please do not waste time on this campaign." Naya bit her lip to muffle a giggle when he froze at her words. "You bring the traditional first gift to declare yourself a suitor. I cannot accept."

"But I understood you were not promised."

"Because I choose not to marry." *At least, not yet. Certainly not you,* she added silently. An image of Shazzur, laughing with her over Jehash, filled her mind.

"That's ridiculous—that's wrong—every girl wants to get married. Besides, you're a Sanctum Bride."

"I *was* a Sanctum Bride. I am the daughter of High Priest Chizhedek, and I choose not to marry."

"Who ever heard of a Sanctum Bride who didn't marry? It's unnatural."

"There is a difference between tradition and nature." Mayar stepped from the shadows to stand beside Naya. Jehash had the grace to nod, but he didn't seem pleased by her presence.

"People will think something is wrong with you if you don't have a

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husband. And soon!”

“So you are here to save the sister of my spirit from ridicule?” Mayar asked.

Naya almost didn’t recognize her. Mayar somehow stood taller and her voice echoed. Naya shivered, even as she felt envy and vowed she would learn that trick soon.

“Yes—no, Priestess.” His face reddened and he glanced around the hall. More than a dozen people had stopped or turned to look at the trio, drawn by his volume.

“Then why do you wish to marry me?” Naya took her cue from Mayar. “Does your father wish it to gain power or influence?”

Jehash opened and closed his mouth a few times, but couldn’t seem to find answers.

“I will not marry unless my heart is filled and my mind is well-matched.”

“What kind of marriage would that be?” Jehash scoffed. “Heart and mind don’t make a marriage—bloodlines and siring strong children are the reasons to marry.”

“What kind of marriage do your parents have? Do they work together, laugh together—or do they only see each other at feasts and in their bed?” she persisted.

“Don’t be ridiculous. My father has two concubines to take care of his—” He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

“I will settle for nothing less than my husband’s whole heart.”

“I wish you luck in finding a wife who will be happy with so very little from you.” Mayar gestured toward the door, effectively dismissing him.

“You’re a fool. A dreamer,” Jehash snarled. He snatched up the gilded chest and tucked it under his arm. “You’re lucky I came to ask for you.”

“You will be lucky if any woman ever smiles at you again.” Naya

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shuddered as the words slid through her lips with a hollow echo. “By equinox, you will be careless and wounded and scarred. You will waste your gold on harlots, and even they will be unable to smile for the hideous ruin of your face. Unless you are careful and learn to think.”

“Be warned, be gone!” Mayar commanded. A flick of her wrist brought two muscular, bare-chested priests to flank Jehash. Under their glares, he couldn’t spit the anger that boiled up in his eyes. He hurried to leave, and never looked back.

Naya shivered as the prophetic power receded like a wave. She bent over, arms around her queasy middle.

“Sister?” Mayar wrapped an arm around her.

“Is there something wrong with me?”

“Do you care what fools say about you?” Mayar shook her slightly. “If Mother Matrika has not directed you to take a husband, then perhaps she does not wish you to marry. For now.”

“For now,” Naya murmured. She felt better. But only a little. “How many Brides have left the Sanctum with no one waiting for them?”

“The Sanctum has existed for centuries. Two Brides every year, winter and summer solstice. That is a large number of women. Searching through all the records could take years.”

“I don’t have that much time,” Naya whispered.

She felt something akin to the hollow sensation just after Matrika had moved through her. But no prophecy came from her lips. Was it a warning, or an echo of the future? A hint that time would always be a problem for her?

“I think I’ve done too much thinking for today.” Naya took a step and her legs tried to fold. She laughed with Mayar and clung to her friend until she had regained her balance.

Naya’s questions increased as she walked home. Would Jehash tell anyone she had refused him? Could a young man intelligent enough to serve in the Host of the Ram be stupid enough to complain that a

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Sanctum Bride had refused him? Anyone who heard she had refused would think her particularly choosy. If no one else asked her, people would think no one wanted her.

“I hate being an adult,” she muttered as she stomped through the front door of her home.

Tosha, waiting at the door, laughed aloud. “What burdens have landed on your shoulders already?” She hugged Naya and had to press her shoulders to get her to bend, to kiss her forehead.

Naya told her while they retreated to the kitchens to find Eshrell and steal a few treats. The walk had driven away Naya’s headache, turned her pique to ironic amusement, and gave her appetite back. She needed something to help her last the afternoon until the evening meal.

CHAPTER 6

Eshrell shook her head and sighed when her daughter related her encounter with Jehash and her new doubts. No matter what Naya chose to do, someone would criticize. Eshrell filled a platter with cheese, dried fruit, and a cup of watered, new wine, and put it all on a tray while she thought.

“You need to decide,” she told her daughter, “what matters most to you. Freedom to follow your dreams? The good opinion of people who care more about clothes and jewelry than the welfare of their servants and herds? Or serving Matrika no matter what she asks of you?”

“Why can’t my dreams walk the same path as Matrika’s call?”

“Is that what you want?” her mother returned. “Or do you want Matrika to change her tapestry for Bainevah to suit your desires? You, no matter how well you have served, are only one thread. No matter how bright the color, you are still only one thread. You can live so everyone will notice you, or you can go where Matrika chooses to place

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you, to enhance the picture she weaves into her tapestry.” Eshrell chuckled when her daughter could only stare, at a loss for words.

“Is that what I am doing, Mother?” Naya took her platter and sank down into the wide window ledge where bread usually cooled. “Now that everyone in Bainevah knows my name and blesses me...I want more notice and acclaim?” She shuddered. “Matrika protect me from that.”

“Why?” her mother asked quickly.

“Why? Well, because—” She shook her head. “Because Father has always said that we cannot live on the mountaintops where the air is thin and cold. Yes, I have been lifted up by the holy eagles that carry messages for the Mother, but I cannot fly. I must return to where I can breathe and work.” Another sigh escaped her. “The question is, will people allow me to do so?”

“It is not up to them—it is ultimately up to you.” Eshrell smiled. “I have missed our talks.”

“Because I listen more than Father?” Naya wrinkled up her nose, glad to slip into the old ways of teasing.

“Because helping you understand always refreshes my own lessons. As long as we continue to learn, we are young in mind and heart. When we refuse to learn, we begin to die.” Eshrell made a shooping motion with one floury hand. “Go to your loom. It will help you think.”

“If I think of anything besides my loom, I will have nothing but a mess.” Naya stood, eager to get to work. Perhaps Matrika would speak through the weaving and give her guidance?

“True, but while you concentrate on the threads, your soul has freedom to explore. Silent prayers, spoken without words, are sometimes the purest.” She looked around her kitchen. “And I will have peace to get my own work done.”

Naya laughed as she scurried down the hallway and up the stairs to her room. She found new energy in the solitude of weaving, in the same

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way her mother found insight and soul's refreshment in cooking and gardening.

She had no clear idea of what she wanted to weave. When she set up the long, vertical warp threads, Naya decided to use thicker, undyed threads for the base of her weaving. There was something pleasing and restful in the natural variegation of colors, cream and silvery gray. It gave texture and a soft sheen to her tapestries.

Measuring, cutting, and attaching the threads soothed her. Sometimes she hummed and let her mind wander over dozens of things she had been unable to do while in the Sanctum.

Naya paused to eat a slice of dried peach and really look at her work so far. It surprised her to realize the preliminary work was finished so quickly. She glanced out the window, into the inner courtyard garden, and saw the shadows had started to lengthen. She had perhaps two hours until it was time to wash and join her parents for dinner. A soft, happy croon bubbled up in her throat as she reached for the basket of dyed threads. What sort of picture would she make? Should she even try?

Black so deep it glistened like the night sky appealed to her. And red, like pomegranate juice. Golden brown, like the sands at the edge of the desert to the north.

Naya chose colors without conscious thought. Memories spilled through her mind like grain pouring from a shattered storage pot. Her hands worked without her direction, never hesitating. Naya watched her fingers cut and splice threads, changing colors to a silent command.

"Naya?"

"Father." She turned with a laugh and saw Chizhedek standing in the doorway of her room. "You're home early."

"No. It's past sunset." He gestured for her to look out her window, but he stared at her loom. A growing frown pulled down his brow and pursed his lips.

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Naya exhaled, suddenly weary. She felt as if she had run for hours without stopping. Her arms ached. Her fingers felt cramped and sore, pricked dozens of times by her tools. Shadows filled the garden outside her window, so she could barely see the far wall and the last fading crimson and purple of sunset.

Light from the ceiling spilled down on her. Naya looked up at her three oil lamps. She couldn't remember lighting them. Perhaps she had commanded them to light with a mere thought.

"I thought you spent the morning at the Healers Temple," her father asked.

"I did. Hagath tested me. My gifts are much stronger, Father. More gifts than I thought I carried." She gestured at the tapestry. "Matrika has spoken through me again. I began this only four hours ago, and yet see."

"Blood and stone," Chizhedek muttered.

He crossed from the doorway and walked up to the loom. It stood taller than a man, so Naya had to stand on a stool to weave at the very top, and was wide enough to provide a sheet to cover a bed. Nearly three cubits of tapestry filled her loom.

A black ram filled most of the tapestry. He knelt, eyes closed, bleeding from wounds on his head and around his neck. A cobra reared up, hood open, and pressed its nose to the ram's nose. More snakes writhed through the sand behind the ram, sneaking past its guard to attack the flock of nanny goats and one black kid.

"Matrika warns us through you, yet again." Chizhedek spoke softly, gently, and caught her chin with two fingers. Sorrow and pride filled his big, deep-set eyes.

"What is wrong, Father?" She clenched her fists, feeling the thread burns on her fingertips.

"Each tapestry you wove while in the Sanctum was a warning, a command, a prophecy. Small things, perhaps only to prove Matrika

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does indeed speak through you. Scribes and seers argued for entire moons to decipher what your woven visions meant. One thing they all agreed on was that when you left the Sanctum, you should be taught to interpret the visions Matrika sends through your loom.” Chizhedek clasped her shoulders and turned her to face the tapestry. “What do you see, my child?”

“The Ram befriends the viper, and allows its kind to...” She gasped. “To attack his mates and his heir.” Naya shook her head. “The Prophecy, Father? The Ram shall break his horns and offer up his flesh to the Bull and to the Viper. No, I refuse to believe King Nebazz is the Ram of the Prophecy. It has already happened. It will not happen again.”

“Prophecy is always with us. Mortals are above all fallible, unable to learn no matter how they are punished.”

“King Nebazz will not turn against the Mother.”

“Until the fulfillment of the Prophecy has come, who can tell?” He continued to stare at the unfinished tapestry. “What else do you see?”

“I...I don’t know.” She held up her hands. They shook slightly. “The Mother’s power has left me for now. I see the picture, but it fades.”

“That is her mercy.” He slid his arm around her shoulder. “Come eat, and we will celebrate your homecoming.”

“Yes, Father.” Naya glanced back once as she let him lead her from the room. For half a heartbeat, the tapestry was whole. *The black ram struggled to his feet, bleeding all over her floor, and looked at her with pleading eyes. The sound of weaving echoed through her room, the whisper of threads, the clatter of the shuttle, the clanging of warp weights, all loud enough to make her wince.* Naya thought she heard threads snapping and cloth ripping when she turned her head and walked away.

Dinner was pleasant, but subdued. Chizhedek told Eshrell about the

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tapestry. Eshrell wore that pensive little frown, brows drawn together in concentration, that came when she had a particularly obscure star reading to interpret.

“What great disaster waits to fall on Bainevah, and why does Matrika only speak through you?” Chizhedek mused in the silence that fell over their table.

“Perhaps she doesn’t.” Eshrell paused in reaching for the platter of spicy rice. “Consider the precedents. Often, Matrika speaks to several, but they require a catalyst to make them remember, and one who acts as a key to unlock the secrets in their visions.”

“That is true.” He frowned, as if he didn’t like the possibility. “Why do the visions come through Naya’s weaving, rather than through the priests who serve the Three?”

“The priest of the Three are too slow and stingy,” Naya muttered. “Sometimes, I think they don’t want the rest of us to know what the sacred tapestries say. What would happen if the priests didn’t send us a tapestry until after the events it foretold had already come to pass?”

“They would be punished,” her father said after a moment of quiet contemplation.

“Perhaps this is their punishment, that their duties go to another,” Eshrell offered. “Not all our daughter’s visions are limited to weaving, however.”

“Hmm?” Chizhedek shook his head. “What’s this?”

“She has seen that Mayar carries a son, then predicted an ugly wound for arrogant Lord Jehash when he threatened her.”

“Threatened her?” Chizhedek’s contemplative frown turned to surprise and anger. “Who would dare threaten my daughter?”

“An idiot who thinks he can intimidate me into accepting him as a suitor.” Naya speared a second tiny honey-spiced hen with the serving prong and flipped it onto her plate. She wished she could spear Jehash in his arrogant behind.

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“A suitor. He dared to come here and speak to you without approaching your mother and I, first?”

“No. He dared follow me to the temple and interrupt my visit with Mayar. When I said I had no wish to marry, he told me people would talk.” She concentrated on tearing apart the meat with her eating tong and knife.

“Talk?” Chizhedek’s voice sounded cold. Naya took comfort from her father’s anger. “Talk about what?”

“They will say I am odd for not wanting to marry.” She shrugged and took a sip of her wine.

“You refused him. Good.” He chuckled, little more than a snort of sound. “There is no one in Bainevah worthy of you.”

“There speaks a true, doting father.” Eshrell smiled into her wine cup. That earned a few chuckles from Naya.

Her parents exchanged amused and exasperated glances. Then Chizhedek shook his head and sighed, and become nothing but a weary, aging man. He reached across the narrow table and clasped Naya’s hand.

“You will be Queen of Bainevah someday. Only as priestess and queen and mother of the heir will you find your destiny.”

“No.” Naya shuddered. Everything inside her shouted denial. “Mayar carries a son and the king loves her. He will marry her when she gives birth to his son. She will be queen. Not me.”

“The day is coming when Bainevah must return to the true worship. The Sanctum must be abolished. King and High Priestess must come together, joining Bainevah and Mother Matrika. You will be High Priestess and Queen. It is meant to be.”

“I am not called to be High Priestess.”

“The king intended to ask for you as his concubine. I know it. But he was persuaded not to,” Chizhedek growled. “Matrika curse the interfering fool.”

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“I refused the king when he asked me, Father.” Suddenly, she couldn’t sit still. She leaped to her feet and took a step away from the table.

“If Matrika so commands—”

“Has she told you I am to be queen? If I am to be a seer, shouldn’t I see this, first of all?”

“Naya,” her mother began. Then Eshrell shook her head. “Chizhedek, your dream is a good one, but is it the best one for our daughter or for Bainevah?”

Silence wrapped around the family, a palpable thickness in the air, holding them still, watching each other. Naya sensed in that moment, if anyone said the wrong thing, they could shatter their home. She didn’t want that. Her refusal to accept anyone but the man she wanted seemed petty, a child’s fears compared to the loss of her close, loving, sharing family.

Why had she never treasured her parents and the nurturing home they had provided her until this moment?

“Please, Father,” she whispered, and went to her knees by his chair. “What Matrika commands, I will do. Even face death. Please don’t speak for her, when your pride in me and hunger to return Bainevah to the true worship prompts your dreams.”

Chizhedek smiled sadly and rested his hand on Naya’s head. “I think you have grown up more than any of us can guess. You are my treasure, Naya. The day you were born, I dreamed of the glory returning to Bainevah after centuries of darkness and shame. I saw a High Priestess sitting on the Ram Throne.”

“It could just as easily be my daughter as me.” The words slid off her tongue as if someone else spoke them. A sense of being outside her body washed over her.

“Your daughter.” Her father went too still. His eyes grew wider and he looked at her as if he had never seen her before. Then he sighed and

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stroked her hair. "I have missed you, my bright spirit. Never again go away so long."

"Don't worry, Father." Naya got up from her knees. She kissed him on both cheeks. "I will stay so close to home, someday you will beg me to go away."

"Hah! Don't tempt fate." He shook his finger in her face, then changed the gesture to wrap his arms around her and fold her close against his chest for a few warm moments. "I'm sorry, Naya. Today was a day of disappointments, and I should not have taken it out on you." He released her, and she sat down again.

Naya saw her mother nod and smile at Chizhedek. The two exchanged a look of wordless communication, so heavy with love and understanding, Naya felt as if she had been pushed from the room. Would she ever find that kind of oneness of mind?

"Dinner is growing cold," Eshrell said softly in the quiet. "Tell us, what did Hagath say when you told him about setting that fool Agrat on fire?"

"She set that pompous idiot on fire?" Chizhedek tipped his head back and roared laughter.

* * *

Naya spent the next morning in the Healers Temple, teamed with Mayar and her plump little friend, Cyrula. Her expanded talents helped her look inside their patients' bodies, so the other two healers could work more accurately and rapidly. After two years of idleness, the morning's exertions took more energy and concentration than she was accustomed to. Naya enjoyed the mental and physical challenge, but she was glad to finish her morning of work. Her legs felt shaky when she left the Healers Temple after the midday meal. She took her time strolling across the broad, open plaza filled with fountains, her new weaving rolled up under her arm, heading to the palace to begin the lessons Hagath had arranged for her with Shazzur.

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A secret smile twisted her lips when she admitted the thought of seeing Shazzur again made her weak and trembly, not her morning's exertions. Naya knew better than to simply take his hand and look into his eyes and tell him she had dreamed of him for two years. She understood that when it came to courtship and talk of love, men were more easily frightened away than the little birds among the pillars of the temple.

Naya took deep breaths and wished she had the energy to run. Two years ago, she could run from her parents' home to the Temple or to the Scribes Hall without losing her breath. Two years ago, she had been just another girl, a little better dressed than the dozens of others who served as fleet messengers throughout the city.

Now, however, it seemed everyone knew she was the Bride whose sacrifice had brought drenching rains to ensure abundant crops for this year. Wearing a veil would only make things worse. Naya nodded and smiled and tried to hurry past the people who bowed or called greetings to her. Most were utter strangers to her, and the knowledge that people knew her name and face frightened her. Like a warning from the future, of danger waiting to trip her.

She pushed those complaints out of her mind with a little effort. A great challenge awaited her. Today, she began her intensive studies with Shazzur and several priests and scribes either gifted with visions or experts in prophecy and visions.

"I would rather you didn't waste your time with them," Chizhedek had said that morning, before he departed to attend the king in morning Court.

"Waste?" She hadn't known whether to laugh or be aghast at her father's words.

"Your visions come on your loom. You might be better served to go to the Hidden City and learn from the priests of the Three. Perhaps even earn the right to speak directly with Weaver Girl."

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“Lord Shazzur has visited the Hidden City. I will ask him if I would be better off studying there.” She smiled as the idea sparked more ideas. It would be the kind of adventure she had always longed for, to travel across the desert, through the mountains, and explore the mysteries of the Hidden City.

Perhaps she could persuade Shazzur to act as her guide? Time alone with Shazzur would put the hunt firmly in her favor.

Chizhedek had only nodded. It occurred to Naya, on her walk to the palace, that her father hadn’t seemed at all pleased with the idea of asking Shazzur’s help. Why? Had something changed between Shazzur and her father to damage their friendship? What reason was there for Chizhedek to object to expanding her studies?

Maybe he feared she would fall in love with a scholar? She almost laughed aloud at that thought, but she reached the priestly entrance to the palace that moment. Any unexpected sound, such as laughter, might draw the attention of the guards standing just around the corner, where this hallway met another.

How did she know there were two guards there? Naya didn’t pause, but she slowed her steps. Perhaps it was another new gift? A form of seeing and foreseeing? She smiled, thinking of how she could have used such a gift when she was a child, playing hiding games in the passages under the temple with other children of the priests.

“Blessings of the Mother upon you,” she called, before she reached the intersection. Naya muffled a snort of laughter when she heard the distinctive, soft scraping of booted feet on the tiled floor and the clink-clatter of swords against buckles as gloved fists grasped the weapons.

“Ah, little Naya.” The soldier who peered around the corner grinned at her. “You should be a spy, you walk so quietly.”

“And risk her pretty neck and the wrath of High Priest Chizhedek?” Captain Asqual widened his eyes in mock horror. “Ready for your lesson?”

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Naya nodded. She wondered if everyone in the palace knew about her new gifts. Keeping secrets was almost impossible among the nobility and the courtiers. Everyone wanted power, and the best way to obtain it was either through advantageous marriages, flattery, money, or knowledge. Because of her parents' rank, she had always been aware of the struggle for influence and power. Becoming a Bride had made her a public figure. She wondered who would try to influence her to help them.

Naya vowed she would let nothing and no one entrap her. She would keep her eyes and heart firmly focused on serving Matrika, speaking the truth, and let no one and nothing distract her.

Of course, after she won Shazzur's attention and desire and his heart.

"Why are you on palace duty today?" she asked Asqual when the young soldier led her down the hall.

"I volunteered to guide you. After a morning spent in the Council, this is as much work as I can handle." He shook his head. His crooked grin seemed touched with weariness.

"Congratulations on joining the Council. It's only a matter of time until you're named Commander General."

"Is that the priestess speaking, or my friend?" A sparkle of mischief touched his eyes.

"Just friend."

"Ah. Good. I don't particularly relish a battlefield promotion. Much too messy. They don't last long." He sighed, his smile dimming. "Rumors say the Bull of Dreva grows restless."

"War?" she whispered. Naya clutched the tapestry rolled up under her arm.

A shadow suspiciously shaped like a bull filled one corner of the tapestry, and spatters of blood in the shape of cattle hoof prints marked the path from the cobra to the wounded ram. How clear was this

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message, and how easily could the message be warped to mean a dozen other things?

“Not if we can help it.” He winked and hurried ahead a few steps to open the next door for her.

Naya liked Asqual. He had been a suitor for Mayar before she was old enough to accept courting gifts. He had taken her refusal with good grace and didn’t argue with her like some other suitors did when she revealed that Prince Nebazz held her heart. Asqual had even supported her decision to serve in the Healers Temple.

Naya wondered if Asqual still loved Mayar, and if he would be hurt or happy for her when she announced she carried the king’s firstborn. She compared him to Jehash. Perhaps she had been hasty. It wasn’t the concept of a soldier as a husband that she disliked, so much as Jehash. That thought made her grin.

“What’s so funny?” Asqual asked, as he opened the fourth door in their journey. He barked laughter when she told him about Jehash, and her regret that she hadn’t set him on fire. “You should have. That arrogant snot thinks he’s the Mother’s gift to all women. You deserve better, little Naya.”

“I’m not so little now,” she said with a smile.

“Hmm. No. I wonder if I’ll be assigned to protect you now, until I’m finally allowed to go hunting those Drevan rats.”

“You’re too important for such a duty.”

“Not from what I’ve heard about you.” He winked, then pulled his shoulders back and assumed a stern expression.

They entered one of the many antechambers where petitioners waited to speak with the king or members of the Council. Naya heard her name in multiple whispers. How could so many people recognize her so quickly? Did a spy send word around the city, describing how she wore her hair today, and her clothes? She looked forward to the winter solstice, when another Bride would become the darling of the

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nation. This could become more than wearing and irritating.

“Have you started planning your wedding?” Asqual asked when they were momentarily alone again.

“I said, I turned down Jehash.” Naya bit her tongue against a few tart comments.

“Not him.” He slowed his brisk pace and frowned at her. “You’ve been home long enough. I thought...well, some men need more courage than others when they speak of love.” Mischief made his eyes sparkle.

“Who?” She felt her stomach twist in dread.

“I’m not about to say and risk my neck. I only wish I could see your face—and his—when he finally puts the words together.” He chuckled. “I hope you want him as much as he wants you. Going into the Sanctum was a nice touch. Nothing like waiting to make a man panic and swallow his pride.” He winked and squeezed Naya’s shoulder.

She started to ask who this suitor was, who obviously had Asqual’s approval. Then Naya bit her tongue again and shook her head. It didn’t matter. The only man she wanted was Shazzur. She didn’t want to know who Asqual’s friend was, because that would make saying no that much more unpleasant.

Asqual led her out into an enclosed garden, where a dozen cushioned chairs sat around a table laden with fruit, cheese, and pitchers glistening with condensation. Naya muffled a sigh of relief. She hadn’t taken time to eat before she left the Healers Temple.

“They’ll be here soon. Whenever Dreva moves, there’s always a sudden flux of interest in the archives and prophecies.” He stayed in the doorway and gestured for Naya to go in. A young soldier stepped from the shadows of the alcove opposite the door. “My brother, Alber. He’ll guard the door so no one intrudes.” He winked, earning a smile from Naya.

She hadn’t worried about being attacked in the private garden

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courtyard—perhaps she should have? Or was she being arrogant? No, she decided after a moment of thought. Alber was there to make sure no one intruded on Shazzur, King’s Seer. She could only speculate how much Shazzur needed to be left alone, free from the press of Court concerns. These lessons with her were probably a respite for him.

Naya found flat rounds of bread and made herself a simple lunch of cheese and apple slices, rolled up in the bread. The palace servants had provided a pitcher of cold water, flavored with crushed fruit. She blessed them and poured herself a cup.

Her head felt better with something in her stomach. Her walk from the Healers Temple had parched her. Naya poured another cup of water, then cleared off a corner of the table. She wanted to study her tapestry before anyone else arrived.

The enormity of what had been done through her struck her anew. Did some small portion of Mother Matrika remain in her, constantly touching her soul, guiding her? Would she grow used to it, so she took the sense of the Mother’s presence for granted?

“Let me always be aware. Let me always be humble. Let me serve well,” she prayed on a whisper.

Then, taking a deep breath, she grasped the bottom of the cloth and shook it out across the table. Naya marveled again at how much she had done in such a short time. Truly, the spirit of Weaver Girl had inhabited her body. She could find no flaw, not a single thread loose or out of place or broken.

The door opened behind her, a sigh on well-oiled hinges. Naya flinched, startled out of her thoughts. She turned and smiled at Shazzur and the five men who entered the garden.

She wished Shazzur had come alone. She had missed him, his smile, the mischief in his deep-set, gray eyes, his wit and the amazing depths of insight he displayed.

His summer Court kilt and sleeveless shirt were of rich weave and

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cut, produced by the palace weavers and tailors, but simple in color. Shazzur had always disliked ornamentation. Other than his signet ring and the pectoral collar that marked his position as King's Seer, he wore no jewelry. Naya smiled to see that he had succumbed to the braiding and oiling required for his beard, and his dark red hair had been carefully arranged per the current requirements of Court fashion. She knew he had only done it out of respect for the king. All Shazzur cared about was being clean and neat.

"Lady Naya." Shazzur's normally pensive expression brightened in a smile that made her heart skip a few beats. How would he smile if he knew she desired him, and if he returned her feelings? He bowed low, spreading his arms in blessing. "Thank you for meeting with us." His smile turned into a grin when Naya laughed. "Ah, yes, you're to be the student today. I find it odd, when you are the one who will likely teach us."

"Everyone learns," Cho'Mat, the newly appointed Chief Scribe said. He stepped around Shazzur, clasped his hands and bowed to Naya, then turned to the table. He filled a cup with water rather than wine as he continued speaking. "Though Priestess Naya is touched by the Mother, she has no training. She will teach us the Mother's words, and we will teach her to listen better and to understand the words she speaks. All will benefit." He winked at her over the rim of his cup, then tipped it back to drink deeply.

"Lady?" A clean-shaven scribe stepped up to the cloth. His brown-eyed gaze asked permission. She nodded and stepped aside, letting him lean over it and study the images.

CHAPTER 7

For nearly an hour, Naya answered questions and described what she had experienced while she worked on the weaving. None of the six men, experts in visions and prophecies, were astonished or even surprised by the miraculous speed with which she had produced the tapestry. They had been given all her weavings during the last two years to study and interpret. It amused her to realize they had been eager to meet her. What, she wondered, did they expect the first time they saw her?

“Is it the Prophecy awakening?” The young scribe, Pashur, had come to the meeting as Cho’Mat’s assistant, and because he had a gift for interpreting visions others had received.

Everyone turned to Shazzur. Naya frowned, wondering why they would think he had the answer. To her surprise, he didn’t answer immediately, but walked over to the end of the table and leaned over the cloth to study it.

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“The Ram breaks his horns and offers his flesh to the Bull and to the Viper,” he finally said. “Yes, there is a snake, but not the Viper. Although, I dare anyone to say a cobra is not as bad as a viper. The shadow of the Bull, as always, means danger and lies from Dreva.”

“What else does Dreva produce?” someone muttered.

“The Ram’s horns are not broken, and when the Ram breaks his horns, if this has not already happened in the past, he also gouges his eyes. The Ram’s eyes are closed, not gouged. We approach danger when Dreva offers friendship.” Shazzur ran his index finger lightly over the streaks of blood on the Ram’s neck. “This is propitious, considering the vows of friendship Dreva has made, with their gift of a concubine. Yet there are also new rumors of Drevan soldiers on the move. If we ignore this warning, the Prophecy could awaken.”

“And then there are those who believe that part of the Prophecy recalls the stupidity of the Ram in the past, and how it will be mended in the future,” Cho’Mat said.

“True.” Shazzur surprised Naya again by chuckling. How could he find something humorous in so serious a topic?

“Isn’t the Prophecy a glimpse of the destruction of the Three?” Naya’s head ached from answering questions. It was a relief to make others scramble for answers. “It speaks of colors and threads and weaving, all wrapped up in fire. And the death of a wise man, at the hand of the king.”

“Not the death, only the spilling of blood,” Cho’Mat hastened to say.

“I find it a paradox. How can a man stay pure, if he has attained so much wisdom the Ram would attack him?” Shazzur didn’t smile now. “Learning requires clear sight and the ability to look at fair and foul without emotion. It brings about a regrettable loss of innocence.”

The others muttered agreement. The discussion centered on the similarities between Naya’s weaving and the Prophecy for another

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twenty minutes or so, before they decided it was as Shazzur said—Naya’s woven vision was a warning to guide Bainevah from present danger, not the Prophecy.

“How can you know so much of the Prophecy to be so sure?” she asked.

“He spoke it,” Cho’Mat said. “When he took the poison meant for Prince Nebazz and hung between life and death for three days, the Mother spoke to him and through him. Every word spoken in his delirium was a prophecy that immediately came to pass, and when his fever broke, he opened his eyes and spoke the Prophecy. I was there. I attest to the truth and the hand of the Mother on him.”

Naya bit her lip and nodded. She had always been under the impression that the Prophecy was decades old, but she knew better than to say that. She had also heard about the young scribe who had seen the assassin hidden in the shadows when the Crown Prince came to the Scribes Hall. Naya had never connected that heroic boy with her wise, witty friend and teacher. She wondered if he carried a scar where the poison on the assassin’s blade had burned his flesh. He had risked being killed by the prince’s bodyguards when he leaped to block young Nebazz’s path, and the next moment kept the knife away from the boy.

“It is a high price we pay for honor and glory,” she finally said. “Is it too late to go back to an ordinary life?”

“Too late, indeed, even before we were born.” Shazzur smiled and bowed to her. A few of the others snorted or rolled their eyes in ironic agreement.

When Naya returned home, she wanted Shazzur to walk with her, but not to continue the discussions of the Prophecy. She longed to learn more about this friend who had revealed so many unplumbed depths this afternoon. When she invited Shazzur to join her and her parents for dinner, she thought he would accept. His eyes lit up for a moment, then he sighed and the light faded as he shook his head.

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“I regret that obligations keep me away.” He tried to smile. “We shall be seeing each other regularly. Too much of even pleasant company can become wearing, and I would never want you to...to regret spending time with me, Lady Priestess Naya.”

They were alone in the garden. Cho'Mat had taken the weaving away for continued study in the Scribes Hall, and the servants had removed all the food.

“Please, must you use all those fancy titles?” she asked with a sigh and a smile.

“I enjoy giving you the honor due you.” Shazzur bowed. Naya refrained from pointing out that honoring her seemed to put a gossamer veil between them. It didn't take the gift of prophecy to know that such a thin barrier would eventually grow thick and solid, until it became a stone wall between them.

She didn't want that, but she wasn't sure how to stop the process. Except to learn more about him, and hope he wanted to learn more about her.

“Why aren't you married?”

“What?” Shazzur stepped back, eyes wide, prompting laughter despite the burning blush of embarrassment seeping down from her forehead to her toes.

“There must be dozens of girls who want to marry you,” Naya hurried on. “Nobles and scribes and priestesses. Haven't you ever seen a girl you wanted to marry?”

“Oh, yes, I have.” His voice went rough, dropping nearly to a whisper. Naya shivered, sensing something that stirred in her belly with warmth and apprehension. “But the lady I adore is forbidden to me.”

“She's married? Promised?” Her voice cracked.

“She belongs to no one but herself. I am forbidden to speak my heart to her. Her father has higher plans for her, and has vowed he would rather she died than see her in my arms.” He shrugged and

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managed a thin smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"What will you do?" Naya tried to keep her voice even, but despair twisted through her.

"I am forbidden to speak my love, but I hope she will see how I feel and she will come to love me. Perhaps together we will find a way around the curse placed between us."

"That is so sad."

"I was a fool, not to speak when I could. Now, I must suffer and wait and trust to Matrika." He sighed and reached out, as if he would touch her cheek. Naya braced herself, wanting his touch, a caress, even knowing it wouldn't truly belong to her. "And you, my dear friend? Have you found love, the one soul you wish to bind to yours for eternity?"

"The one I want loves another," she whispered.

"I wish I could counsel you to forget him, but I know how hard that is."

"Yes. Very hard." Naya turned away, praying the burning in her eyes wasn't tears. "I must hurry home. Mother is expecting me. We have so much to catch up on."

"Blessings of the Mother on you, little Naya." Shazzur bowed to her.

* * *

Second Descent Moon

Shazzur's days shuttled between numb aching, trying to bury himself in his duties and research, and both living for and dreading his lessons every moon quarter with Naya. He longed to say yes when she invited him three more times to join her family for the evening meal, but he knew Chizhedek had no knowledge of his daughter's hospitality. Shazzur wondered what the High Priest had told her, if she ever asked about his absence from their home. He thought back to his regular visits

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to Chizhedek's household, in the years before Naya went into the Sanctum, and wondered if they had been mere dreams.

Naya watched him sometimes with such sadness in her eyes, he longed to take her into his arms and beg her to tell him what was wrong, so he could do something to help. He thought of her words about the one she loved, and the king's command to find the man and wake him to the treasure that waited for him—and he could do nothing. Shazzur didn't know whether to pity the fool or ask Asqual to send an assassin in the darkness, to rid him of the problem. Asqual had made the offer, when Shazzur told him of the king's command and Chizhedek's curse—and then offered to sidestep it all by speaking to Naya for him. Shazzur had said no, both because he knew Chizhedek would not accept that detour and because Naya wanted another. A fool who deserved to die for the misery he caused her.

Even if Chizhedek conceded that his hope of using Naya to restore the position of High Priestess was false, Shazzur knew he had no hope. Even if the High Priest himself told his daughter that Shazzur loved her. Naya wanted another. She had no idea how Shazzur felt, because every time they met, she asked innocent questions about the woman he loved. She offered advice on how to approach this mysterious woman with his feelings, without violating the ban. Shazzur almost could have laughed, because how could Naya know that she was this mysterious woman, and that Matrika's curse stood between their love?

He could have laughed, but for the pain. There was no hope for them until Chizhedek rescinded his command, but Shazzur still tormented himself with Naya's presence every moon quarter, from Moon Dark to Moon Bright and the New Moon celebration. He freely admitted he was a desperate fool who would take whatever scraps of joy he could find.

Naya's next lesson was a moon quarter away, and Shazzur ached in anticipation, even as each lesson made his enforced silence more

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painful. He knew better than to seek her out, or even visit Chizhedek's home as if nothing had changed.

Then Naya came to him, troubled with dreams. Two nights in a row, she dreamed of something dark and insidious trying to invade the city. The moon dark approached. Shazzur sensed that was no coincidence. Did the evil wait to invade at that time? While the Priesthood resisted the powers of darkness until the moon returned to illuminate the sky, did someone open a door to invite evil into the heart of the city?

Shazzur found it hard to concentrate on Naya's description of her dream when her face and hair held most of his attention. The Mother's power still rested on Naya, and the physical evidence surprised him. Her hair had lost its sandy tones. Gold dominated, lighter and brighter, as if a fire slowly burned away the dross. The green tint had faded from her eyes. Now, no matter her mood, her eyes were always blue, from the color of a flame to the pale tint after a storm. He missed the hint of the sea in her eyes.

The power of the Mother burned in and through her, affecting her flesh. Would it continue to burn until there was nothing left of Naya? That frightened Shazzur even more than when he had been poisoned in the Crown Prince's place.

"It's only a dream, and not even strong enough to inspire another weaving." Naya shrugged and sat down on the garden bench. Shazzur had met her there, to ensure witnesses. Chizhedek would hear about the meeting and would be angry, but the presence of witnesses would deflect some of his anger.

"But you dreamed it more than once," he pointed out. "A repetitive theme is a sign of divine communication. Even if it is not an image or specific words, it has struck deeply enough to stay with you on waking. We would be fools to expect the Mother to shout when a whisper can be just as effective."

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“Especially when the enemy is listening,” Naya added.

“Perhaps it is tied to your weaving.”

“A cobra, enchanting the Ram, while other snakes threaten his flock.” Naya jolted to her feet. “One black kid—the Ram’s heir. Mayar’s baby!”

“No one else knows she is pregnant,” he protested. “There has been no announcement. Not even to the Council.”

“You and I and the king and Mayar know. What one person whispers inside the palace, a dozen servants know within the hour.” Naya shuddered. Shazzur offered her his hand, and she gripped it as they ran from the garden.

Running was forbidden in the palace. Guards speared anyone caught running, assuming they either fled justice, the scene of a crime, or were about to attack. Shazzur slowed to a fast walk. Naya didn’t protest, but her grip on his hand tightened. Shazzur led the way. For once, he was grateful he had been part of the onerous task of redesigning all the outer chambers and hallways. He knew all the shortcuts, all the hidden passages, and how to reach key parts of the palace quickly. Speed was vital.

In the reception hall for the women’s quarters, Shazzur reluctantly slowed and tugged his hand free.

“Except in emergencies, only family, women, and eunuchs are permitted past this point,” he said, cutting off Naya’s protest. “I have no wish to become the latter.” He gestured at the archway into the main hallway. “Mayar’s rooms are at the far end, on the right. Queen Mother Dayona on the left. If you stumble in on her, you’ll have a pleasant visit, but you won’t leave for half a moon.”

Naya’s lopsided smile rewarded his attempt at humor. She only glanced back once as she hurried through the archway. When her green and gold robes vanished around a corner, Shazzur shouted for a guard and demanded Asqual’s presence. He could trust Asqual to be discreet

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and not cause a panic through the entire complex.

As a distant relative of the king, Asqual could go into the concubines' hall and rescue Naya.

* * *

Naya clenched her fist, to preserve the comforting warmth of Shazzur's hand. She had known about the prohibition on men in this part of the palace, but she had simply assumed the King's Seer was exempt. She ran down the long, wide hallway, even knowing haste could be useless at this point. The enemy could have struck already, or waited for the Moon Dark to come. Naya ignored the voice of reason. All that mattered was getting to Mayar and warning her.

A green door opened and Jushta, Mayar's eunuch guard stepped into the hall. He stopped short at the sight of Naya. She stopped, startled to see him in another concubine's room.

Jushta held out a hand, palm facing her, to stop her from coming any closer. "No, Priestess. Do not come in here. It is great sickness."

"Then Mayar shouldn't be in there, either."

Jushta rolled his eyes and flattened his lips into a line of displeasure; he shared her opinion, but couldn't make his mistress see reason.

"Listen to me." Naya fought the urge to grab hold of his tunic. "I've seen...something. A threat against the palace, the concubines." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Mayar's baby." That got Jushta's attention. He glanced over his shoulder into the other concubine's quarters. "Lord Shazzur agrees with me."

"My Lady." Jushta turned back into the suite, and gestured for Naya to stay in the hall.

"Who are you?" A skeletal man dressed in healer green raced down the hallway with two eunuch guards and three more healers trailing behind him. "I know you—Chizhedek's girl, yes?" He glanced at the door, hanging ajar.

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“Something is wrong.” Naya stepped aside to let him enter the room. He was the palace healer and brought his staff. She shivered, grateful the emergency wasn’t in Mayar’s suite.

“Very wrong.” Mayar came from the next room. Her face was pale with strain and her eyes had dark smears under them. Naya cried out and reached to support her friend. Jushta caught Mayar as her knees started to fold.

“What is it, Lady?” the healer demanded.

“Lady Embanna is dead. Poisoned. Kattah brought me before he went for you. There was...nothing I could do.” She leaned into Jushta’s support and hid her face in her hands.

“Sir, do you need us right now?” Naya didn’t wait for the priest’s answer, but helped Jushta lead Mayar out into the hallway.

Running footsteps caught her attention. She saw Asqual and two palace guards come running. Naya turned her back on them. Let them deal with Lady Concubine Embanna’s death. She had to take care of Mayar.

Jushta carried Mayar to her quarters, into a room with a long wall of windows, the pale green draperies swaying softly in the warm afternoon breeze. He settled her on a low couch and hurried to the refreshment table to pour a cup of wine.

“If Embanna was poisoned—” Naya held out her hand. She didn’t have a strong gift for detecting poison, but at least she had it. Naya closed her eyes when Jushta gave the cup into her hand, lifted it to her nose, and sniffed. She silently recited a healer’s prayer for insight and sensitivity. For good measure, she added an impromptu prayer of pleading. When she had determined as well as she could that the cup was safe, she gave it back to Jushta. Then she walked to the table to inspect all its contents.

By the time she finished, Mayar held her cup for herself. Jushta went to several jars sitting on multiple rows of shelves, putting a pinch

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from each into a mortar, then powdering the contents with a pestle before bringing the mortar to Mayar. She thanked him with a weary smile and sprinkled some of the contents into what remained of her cup. Naya guessed this was Mayar's workroom, where she made healing potions and studied when not at the Healers Temple.

"Poor Embanna," Mayar whispered, and took another sip. Then she shuddered.

"Who was she?" Naya asked. The first lesson of the Healers Temple was that the wounded needed to talk. Avoiding the subject of what had happened to them often compounded the damage. The spirit needed healing as much as the body.

"The concubine from Mooltoc. They gave her to Nebazz when he was named Crown Prince. She was ten years older than him. They hoped she would sway him to favor their politics, but Embanna was an idiot." Mayar closed her eyes, and a single tear slid down her cheek. "A dear, silly, sweet idiot."

"Who could have poisoned her? And why?"

"I can name five enemies, Lady," Jushta said. "And one reason."

"Five concubines and the throne," Naya whispered.

"Embanna thought she was pregnant," Mayar said. "Every time her moon flow was more than two days late, she believed she was pregnant." She covered her face with her hands and shuddered. Jushta took her cup to refill it with more wine and another pinch of the powder.

"She wasn't, was she?" Naya took the cup from the eunuch and sat down next to Mayar, holding it for her.

"Of course not. Growths in her womb blocked conception. I couldn't stop the growths from returning, so I never did anything to heal them, and I never told her of the problem—why hurt her? Why take away her hopes and dreams?" She rubbed at her eyes, smearing the kohl lines. "I liked her—and I think my silence helped to kill her."

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“Did the other women know she only imagined pregnancy?” Naya asked. When Jushta nodded, she shuddered. “Then one of the new concubines could be the murderer. There hasn’t been enough time for them to learn how things are done here.”

“That’s some comfort, but not much,” Jushta said.

“Mayar, have you told anyone about your son?” She dropped her voice to a whisper. Even in Mayar’s rooms, the walls could have ears.

“No one. Nebazz wants to wait until equinox.” Mayar took a deep breath and sat up straight. Color returned to her cheeks.

“You want to avoid stirring the waters with the new concubines, I think.” Naya nodded. “Wise.”

“Selfish. We want to pretend, as long as we can, that we are an ordinary couple and the entire nation isn’t watching for Nebazz’s firstborn son.” She sighed. “If I could, I would hide my pregnancy until the day my son is born.”

“Killing a child before his birth is easy, compared to murdering babies and toddlers,” Naya mused, thinking aloud. “The king can’t put aside his concubines the day he marries you. He can’t refuse to sleep with them, because it would insult their kingdoms. Your son could grow up with ten rivals for the throne, even if he is named Crown Prince the day he is born.”

A burst of fury drove away the core of ice inside Naya. “This is wrong! If we had held to the old ways, there would be no women sent from their homes as diplomatic gifts, as hostages. There would be no foreigners hoping a son of their blood claims Bainevah’s throne. There would only be the High Priestess, chosen by Matrika, and her son would be the next king. And to think I was so furious with my father.” She blinked hard, fighting tears.

“I don’t understand.”

“My father wanted the king to make me a concubine, so I would give him his heir. Then, when Father stepped down as High Priest, I

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would take his place and return the true worship to our land. No more Sanctum Brides, no more battling and scheming among concubines and foreigners. I told him no, that your son would be king. A true-born son of Bainevah will be king,” Naya added, her voice a hollow whisper.

“To sit on the throne, he must live to become a man,” Jushta said. “My Lady—”

“I know what you are about to say.” Mayar nodded. She sat tall and straight, and hardness touched her voice. “The other concubines will give Nebazz sons and daughters, and they will not give up a dream of the throne. My son must not be declared Crown Prince. He must grow up uncertain and undeclared, and earn the right to hold the throne. Palace politics will keep him alive, rather than kill him.” She nodded, resolution restoring her color. “Nebazz will be angry, when I refuse to marry him.”

“Mayar—”

“I won’t tell him. I won’t give him a chance to think up arguments. But I will prepare my arguments to win him over.” She tipped her head back, taking up an arrogant pose. “I’m First Concubine, after all. I know how to tie people into knots, so my worst enemies trip over themselves in an effort to please me.”

A knock at the main door startled all three. Jushta hurried to answer the door.

Naya vowed then, she would do all in her power to protect this tiny, unborn, future king of Bainevah.

“Lady? Will you talk with Captain Asqual?” Jushta asked, coming back to the doorway of the workroom.

Mayar walked on steady feet to her reception room. Naya admired her friend and knew she could never rally such poise. It wasn’t a difference between their upbringings, because the priestly ranks were nobility, as well. Priests played with power and political games, but not to the murderous levels that existed among the nobility and the

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denizens of the Court. Mayar could swim with the sea monsters because she had learned to look and sound like a sea monster for the sake of survival.

Asqual had obviously learned the same lessons about poise and hiding his emotions. He adhered to protocol as he questioned her, Jushta, and Naya, then asked for Embanna's eunuch to be brought to him to be questioned. The palace healer came in, and he and his staff confirmed Mayar's diagnosis.

"She was poisoned, I believe, because she proclaimed herself pregnant," Mayar said.

Her words spread an alert silence through the room.

"Poisoned?" Asqual said. "Are you sure?"

"Sir." An assistant priest hurried into the room. "The eunuch has collapsed. He went to be with his lady, then we heard him fall."

"Something in the air?" the healer priest muttered.

Mayar gasped, catching everyone's attention. "Did he relight her lamp? I extinguished it. The oil is scented and made me feel ill. The poison could be in the oil, and flame releases it to attack."

"Where did she get the oil?" Asqual asked, before Naya could speak the same question.

CHAPTER 8

Embanna's eunuch did not awaken to answer. When he went to sit by her body and guard her, he lit the lamp just as Mayar feared. Naya surmised he did it to please her departing spirit, because Embanna loved her scented oils.

"If he knew where she obtained the oil, it would be a clever way of ensuring no one learned the truth," she told Shazzur when she rejoined him.

"Someone knew Embanna well enough to know she would save the oil to enjoy all by herself." He sighed. "The lady has a reputation for being selfish with her little pleasures."

"She had been insisting for the last few days that she was pregnant," Naya added, lowering her voice.

"Mayar?"

"She's fine. She is rethinking the king's plan to make her queen the day their son is born."

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“Yes, especially with so many concubines hoping to birth the heir.” He nodded. “Come. Mayar is fine and well-protected. I must inform the king what has happened. You should be there, to tell what you saw and heard.”

“Do you think this was what my weaving meant?” Naya reluctantly let him lead her down more long hallways that turned the palace complex into a labyrinth.

“If so, one of the new concubines is the murderer. Invited into the heart of the palace, into the king’s bed. She could have begun to poison the king the first time she slept with him, but slowly, so she could not be blamed.”

“Has the king slept with all the new concubines yet?” Naya disliked asking. It was like asking Mayar what position the king preferred for making love—why did she need to know?

“Diplomacy requires it.” Shazzur looked around, seeing all the people moving through the wider reception and meeting halls of the palace as they passed through. He nodded toward a doorway leading outside. “This is a shorter way. It seems longer, but we will avoid people who might want to talk, and three places where guards might stop us.”

“You do know everything, don’t you?” Naya meant it as a joke. Shazzur smiled, but a flicker of anger touched his eyes.

“I do not know everything. I am not able to speak to all situations. Otherwise I would have long ago counseled Nebazz to only devote himself to one woman, she who will make the only good and right queen for Bainevah. Mark my words as prophecy, trouble and treachery will strike Bainevah through the sons of the foreign concubines.”

Shazzur’s stride lengthened and quickened, and he paid no attention to the yellow-gold and white glory of the tall flowers that lined the path on either side of them. Naya found the sweet perfume an irritation, cloying contrast to the sourness in her spirit and belly.

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“This concubine’s purpose isn’t to kill the king, but to make sure no son is born except through her. Mayar is in danger, no matter how long she waits to announce her pregnancy.”

Shazzur shook his head. “And after Mayar died, a clever woman would take advantage of the king in his grief, seduce him, and become pregnant.”

“Can women become pregnant at their choosing? I know healers can manipulate the rhythms of their own bodies, to draw strength in time of need, but...” She sighed and offered up a rueful smile, as they approached the doorway leading back inside. “I am still an ignorant child in many things.”

“Acknowledging the need to learn is the first, largest step in attaining wisdom. I wish the king would acknowledge his need to learn self-control and realize that he cannot separate his heart from his bed pleasures.”

“So you believe men have a duty to be loyal in marriage, just as much as women.” She nodded, pleased to know the king’s self-gratification irritated Shazzur.

“I believe Matrika established a right and true way for all people to live, no matter how high or low their rank. One man and one woman, united in mind, body and heart, sharing all thoughts and labor, raising their children in peace and unity. No one is exempt. My father taught me that the higher one stands in rank, the greater his responsibility to live by Matrika’s precepts. Most especially the king. King joined to Priestess, with one heir given from Matrika, to bless the land.”

“Yes. That is what my father believes, too.” Naya shivered and her knees folded. She clutched at Shazzur and he held her upright. She didn’t care who stared at them in the middle of the reception room outside the king’s quarters.

“What do you see?” Shazzur said.

Naya shook her head, unable to hear through the roaring in her ears.

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She kept her eyes open, but she knew even if she closed them she would still see the same scenes.

Shazzur wept, his face ravaged with grief, spattered with blood. His mouth opened in a wail of rage and loss she only heard with her soul.

Blood spattered the altar of Matrika's temple and a torn white priestess' robe, trampled by bloody footprints.

A small girl with red-gold curls huddled in her mother's clothes chest, weeping herself ill.

A king—not Nebazz, but a young man who looked much like him—climbed the steps before the altar to kneel before a red-haired priestess who wore white robes trimmed in gold. She put the onyx crown on the young king's head and knelt facing him. He caught up her hands and kissed them, palm and back. She smiled and then he kissed her lips as a lover, before a crowd that filled the temple to overflowing.

"That day will come," she whispered, as the image faded. "Your daughter." She rubbed her eyes and smiled up at Shazzur. "I saw a High Priestess with hair like yours." She knew it was too personal, but she raised a hand and touched Shazzur's vibrant, dark red hair. "She will crown the new king and he will claim her as his wife."

"My daughter." Shazzur's mouth twitched, resisting the smile he forced. "I am not married, and I cannot have the woman I adore. Unless Matrika forms my daughter out of sunshine and flowers..." He shrugged.

"Anything is possible, my Lord Seer." Her knees folded.

Shazzur scooped her up in his strong, lean arms and carried her through the crowds in the interlocking reception rooms.

"Make way for the King's Seer!" several men shouted in succession.

Naya landed in a chair in the outer reception room of the king's quarters. Shazzur knelt next to her, his hand cupping her cheek while he looked deeply into her eyes. Naya felt the gentle questing touch of

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his mind as he checked her physical condition. King Nebazz himself poured a cup of wine and handed it to her.

She choked on the first mouthful. The second hit an empty spot in her middle and pushed away the dizziness with warmth. The world stopped tilting around her. Naya realized the king held the cup, helping to steady it in her hand.

“Thank you, Majesty,” she sputtered. “I am fine now.”

“For the most part,” Shazzur said. Concern tightened his voice and put that warming spark in his eyes. That settled her more than the wine. “Will you be all right if we leave you alone for a short time?”

Naya nodded and raised the cup to her lips again. She watched them leave and felt as if a heavy weight had slid off her shoulders. She would be glad to sit quietly with no one watching her. Let Shazzur tell the king what had happened, what they suspected. She didn’t want to think, but the images of her disturbing vision circled through her mind.

Most definitely, she needed to hasten her training and learn to control these visions. They weren’t sent to torment, but to teach her, and others. Naya knew she had important work to do for Bainevah. Like the priestesses of old, she had been called to stand between the people and Matrika. She refused to fail.

All she asked was to regain her breath and balance.

And maybe, the assurance Shazzur would always be there to look after her, steady her, laugh with her, and carry her when she grew weak.

Naya took a large gulp of wine. It didn’t wash away the heat in her cheeks. She liked the feel of Shazzur’s arms around her, the clean smell of him, his strength, the sense of safety that enfolded her. Why did he have to love a woman he couldn’t have? Was it cruel to dream that he would give up hope, and then she could win his heart?

* * *

“If you aren’t more discrete, my friend, the gossips will have you

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and Priestess Naya as lovers before the Moon Dark,” the king said. The door of his workroom clicked closed in emphasis of his words. He smiled. “How goes the courtship?”

“There is no courtship.” Shazzur wished he had the right to slap the king for his ill-timed remarks. He had never been prone to fits of temper, but this day was three days too long for him.

Your daughter, Naya had said. A High Priestess with his hair. Did she remember the words she spoke? Had they been true vision or only a ghost of the future that might be?

“No courtship?” King Nebazz sat in a chair pulled out from the long table covered with scrolls and wax tablets. “Why not?”

“I think the death of a concubine has precedence over my love affairs, Majesty,” Shazzur snapped.

Quickly and simply, he explained, starting with Naya’s weaving and dreams, their conversation and conclusions and hurrying to check on Mayar. And their confusing discovery.

“Embanna?” The king shook his head. “Why would anyone want to kill her?”

“She claimed she was pregnant.”

“Impossible.”

“You knew?” Shazzur wondered if he had missed something along the way. Hadn’t Mayar and the court healer said Embanna didn’t know she couldn’t conceive?

“Of course I knew. Why do you think I call for her most of the time, when I can’t be with Mayar? I won’t risk a halfblood handing Bainevah to my enemies.”

Shazzur struggled for words for a moment.

“You think that little of me?” King Nebazz asked.

This was one of those moments when Shazzur sensed all social levels and barriers fell away. He truly felt he was a friend to the king, free to speak honestly with the younger man and not fear royal wrath or

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pride would twist his words awry. And he hoped his words had some effect.

“Not ‘little,’ Majesty, but your weakness for beautiful ladies is well-known. Compared to some of your ancestors, you show great restraint, never looking at another man’s wife or concubine, or pursuing virgins whom you have no intention of making your concubines. However, nations hope to sway your loyalties with the beauty reserved for your pleasure.” Shazzur shrugged.

“I’m still a spoiled youth who thinks with his manhood, rather than with the intelligence Matrika should have bestowed on me the day I was crowned.” The king nodded. “The only woman I want to grow old with is Mayar, but sometimes she isn’t enough. She understands.”

“Does she understand, Majesty, or does she simply accept what she can’t change?”

King Nebazz nodded, frowning, and looked away.

“Regarding Lady Embanna’s death.” Shazzur knew it was time to return the conversation to state matters, and leave his words to grow in the back of the king’s mind.

“Why hasn’t anyone come to tell me, yet?”

“They are still investigating. Naya and I thought it best to warn you, if the murderer thinks to strike again. We agreed, the murderer does not wish to destroy the entire royal family, only those who stand between her son and the throne.”

“Her son?” His face darkened and he stood up straight, shoulders thrown back in challenge. “You’re not accusing—”

“Never Lady Mayar. No, I refer to the concubine who hopes to conceive your heir, and put—as you said—a halfblood on the throne, to give Bainevah over to your enemies.”

“Another concubine. It makes too much sense. Thank the Mother I have not made a formal announcement of Mayar’s pregnancy.” He shuddered.

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Shazzur explained about the eunuch growing ill, the lamp full of scented oil in Embanna's suite, and Lady Mayar's assertion that the original concubines knew the woman was unable to conceive. That put all suspicion on the newest concubines.

"Did Priestess Naya grow ill from the poisoned oil, as well?" The king gestured toward the outer room, where Naya waited for them.

"No, Majesty. She suffered a vision." Shazzur frowned, recalling too vividly how Naya grew pale and shivered in his arms; how light she felt when he picked her up.

"You truly love her, don't you?"

"Majesty?"

He snorted. "For the wisest man in my kingdom, you show a remarkable lack of courage and insight. Tell her how you feel. Being gifted with visions doesn't mean she can see into your thoughts and feelings. A woman likes to be told she's beautiful and clever and you can't think of anything more important than spending your days basking in her presence."

"I can't, Majesty."

"Shall I speak to her for you?" he offered with a chuckle.

"Let me rephrase... It is not that I am unable, but I have been forbidden. High Priest Chizhedek has invoked his power to bar me from speaking love with his daughter."

"Why?" The king thumped the table next to him. "I can name two dozen nobles who would be delighted to have you for a son-by-law. I'm surprised they haven't offered their daughters to you many times before this."

"Some have approached me, Majesty, but...I have never felt any interest in the maidens offered for consideration."

"Until Priestess Naya." He grinned and nodded. "I understand completely. I couldn't stand Mayar when we were children. She was an irritation, a too-smart little girl with enormous eyes. She could run as

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fast as any boy and wasn't afraid of horses or snakes or scorpions. When she discovered her healing talent, she was impossible. Then one day I looked at her...and I knew the problem had been in me. She had been waiting for me to grow up and learn wisdom. The Mother blesses some of us with that rare insight, to recognize the one woman who will suit. Her, and no other."

"Then why do you indulge in your concubines, Majesty? No matter how careful you are, they will conceive and give birth to sons who will be rivals to Mayar's son."

Naya had seen a young man crowned as king, and Shazzur's daughter would act as High Priestess. Would that young king be Mayar's son?

Shazzur knew with a certainty like bedrock, Bainevah needed Mayar's son, and no other, as the next king. Anyone else would be a misfortune at best, and a disaster at worst.

"Can't a man have a few vices?" The king shrugged and wouldn't meet Shazzur's gaze.

Or did he look at the door to his balcony? Was he hiding something—or perhaps someone?

* * *

"Well, and who are you?" The woman paused, posing like an image from a fever dream in the door from the balcony.

From where she sat, Naya could see the balcony wrapped around the entire side of the palace, encompassing the king's quarters. She turned her gaze back to the woman.

Her alabaster complexion, white-gold, frothy cascade of hair and crystal-gray eyes proclaimed her Drevan. Common speculation said the Drevans didn't bleed red when they were injured in battle, but ice-melt. Naya guessed this woman was the new Drevan concubine, Anyecta.

A spurt of anger at the king warmed that last icy place deep inside. Mayar had endangered herself tending to Lady Embanna while the king

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dallied with this foreigner.

Men, Naya decided, weren't worth knowing until they were at least forty years old. Maybe older. Their bodies controlled their minds, instead of the other way around.

"You might as well give up right now." The Drevan woman floated into the room. Naya looked at her feet, wondering if she was one of the reputed wizards of the snowy Drevan mountains. But no, her feet touched the ground. Naya revised the mental image to slithering, rather than floating.

"Give up?" Naya answered with a tiny laugh. She hadn't even begun to fight.

"I'm occupying the king this afternoon. And tomorrow. And the day after," she added with a low, throaty chuckle. "You have a certain...grace," she admitted, with a slight curling of her pale rose lip. "It's not enough to enchant him. He's mine."

"Yes, that's what all the concubines say, when they are first permitted into his bed. It doesn't last long." Naya wondered where such words came from, even as she enjoyed verbally clawing this pale invader.

"You know from experience?" She drifted past Naya, her attention focused on the table of refreshments sitting against the far wall.

Her perfume dusted Naya's face, the scent an almost visible haze in the air. Naya's nose wrinkled in response, though it was neither heavy nor unpleasant. It struck her as familiar.

"Let me see clearly," Naya whispered, sending up her spirit in prayer.

The perfume grew stronger, making her eyes water. She watched Anyecta pick over the platters of honeycakes and sweets like a vulture, ready to pounce on half-rotted meat.

The room shifted sideways, though the chair didn't move under her. *Naya watched the Drevan pick up metal boxes and urns and sprinkle or*

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pour their contents into a wide, shallow bowl. Smoke rose from the bowl. Anyecta raised the bowl like a priest carried a grain offering to the altar. Naya followed her, though she still felt the chair under her bottom.

The Drevan concubine went outside, onto the balcony, but it was no longer the king's balcony. It reminded Naya of Mayar's balcony, but from a different angle, looking out over the concubines' gardens. Full night reigned in this vision.

The waning moon's light faded from the sky. A few stars tried to penetrate the ebony sky, but it was as if someone had spread the dome overhead with powdered onyx, absorbing all the light. The Drevan woman raised the bowl to the place where the moon died and darkness ruled and she spoke. A buzzing like angry hornets filled Naya's ears, so she made out no words.

She didn't need to hear. Her soul told her this was evil magic at work, calling down the power of darkness into the mixture smoking in the bowl. Naya held still, watching, allowing the vision to finish.

Anyecta returned to her worktable. She poured the mixture into different containers. Some, she spread on her wrists, rubbed behind her ears and between her breasts. Other portions went into a storage jar she sealed with wax. But the last portion went into a jar with a spout. She poured in other powders and filled the jar with oil.

This was the oil that had poisoned Embanna, and the hand that had mixed it. Naya guessed the perfume was pleasant, perhaps healing, even arousing. She imagined Embanna had expressed appreciation for the scent, and the Drevan gave some to her as a gift, with the poison hidden under the pleasing scent. Embanna's murderer would be nowhere near when the lamp burned and released the poison. Who would accuse her of poisoning Embanna, when she wore that scent herself?

“What are you staring at, you little peasant?” the Drevan woman

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drawled.

“I am Naya, Bride of the Solstice, healer priestess, fire priestess, and daughter of Chizhedek, High Priest of Mother Matrika.” Naya stood slowly and wrapped dignity around herself as she had seen her parents do when standing in judgment.

“That means nothing to me.” She sniffed and sauntered across the room back to the balcony.

“Yes, you worship Skataeroz, the Bull of Dreva.” Naya spread her hands, silently asking for strength to do what had to be done. She smiled when she heard the door on the far side of the room click and knew the king and Shazzur returned. “You are a fool not to worship Matrika, when you live under her sky, eat the food she provides, breathe the air she has made wholesome. You have broken all laws of hospitality.”

“I?” She smirked and swept around the doorpost, onto the balcony.

“You called down darkness, to invade the palace.”

The hissing swish of draperies halted. That pale golden head peered back around the doorway. The Drevan no longer smiled. Naya heard the door from the other room creak, but no one emerged.

“That is a serious accusation to make.”

“Not so serious if you were in Dreva. You are a priestess of Skataeroz. Well-versed in magic, treading dark paths. But you were given to Bainevah. Your loyalties must be given to Matrika, who is mistress and mother of this land. You agreed to this when you agreed to come into the king’s house and share his bed. You made vows before the High Priest.”

“I follow a higher law.” She returned to the room. Ice glared from her eyes. She no longer glided but stalked like a creature of malice. Her hands clutched at the long necklace that hung down under her flowing gown.

“There is no higher law than truth. No higher law than to obey

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when you have given your word. Your Lord Skataeroz is a thief and liar and has no honor, if he commends you for breaking your vows.”

“You know nothing, little priestess.” Her voice turned into a harsh cackle. She flung out her arm.

Naya saw a glitter like ice. She dove for the floor as a long blade passed over her head. Anyecta snarled and leaped to snatch up the knife again. Naya grabbed at her enemy’s robes as she passed her.

The gossamer robes tore, but held long enough to trip her. She fell, slamming her chin into the hard front edge of the chair seat. Naya yanked harder, using the motion to pull herself to her feet. Black exploded inside her head. Naya gasped and blinked stars from her eyes. Somehow, she lay sprawled against the far wall and floor, like a rag doll. Shazzur and the king stormed into the room.

“In Matrika’s name!” Shazzur raised his empty hands. A decorative war club leaped off its rack behind Anyecta’s head and flew toward her.

She shrieked and ducked, but the end of the handle hit her shoulder, knocking her sprawling. She flung the knife at Shazzur. He went to his knees to avoid the blade—but a streak of blackness guided the blade, so it followed him like a hawk and stabbed deep into his shoulder.

“Shazzur!” Naya screamed, in concert with the king.

Nebazz caught up a chair and flung it, hard and spinning with all the skill of an athlete. The Drevan went down with a shriek like a diving hawk, but she didn’t stay down. She held out her hand. Darkness flashed. The blade leaped from Shazzur’s shoulder and back to her hand.

Fire roared in Naya’s mind. She envisioned flames higher than the ceiling, reaching through the roof, into the sky, and down through the very foundations of the palace. Lifting one shaking hand, she caught hold of all the power in air and sky and water, turned it to fire, and flung it at the Drevan woman.

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The blast of furnace-hot air flung the king across the room and knocked Shazzur off his knees. Naya felt life and moisture drain from her body. She felt as thin as parchment. Her eyes closed on the image of the Drevan concubine caught in a spasm of pain as her flesh incinerated. Naya felt the world falling away from her, into darkness. Through the gasping of her breath, the rattling of her heart against her ribs, she heard the clatter of charred bones hitting the scorched stone pavement of the king's reception room.

CHAPTER 9

“Next time,” Shazzur muttered, “fight for your life, first. Lecture your enemies on their sins when they can’t harm you.”

“I’ll teach her some self-defense skills,” Asqual said.

The two men walked on either side of a palanquin, carried by four palace guards whom Asqual trusted not to gossip. The curtains had a gap just wide enough to let them watch over Naya, who drifted in and out of consciousness. The two men had taken responsibility for bringing her to her parents’ home.

There was no good place to take care of her, with the palace in an uproar. Lady Mayar wanted to keep Naya in her rooms, to watch over her. The palace healer refused because the concubines’ quarters and the king’s quarters were overrun with mind scribes. Anyecta had left a trail thick with evil as well as poison. Now that someone knew what to look for, it became shamefully obvious. The only thing anyone agreed on was that all remains of her presence had to be documented and

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removed before someone else died. Home was the best place for Naya while she recovered, and would give her precious privacy.

Shazzur knew Naya would hold the curiosity of noble, scholar, and priest for many days to come. As he and the king would be, soon, when the mind scribes searched their memories to record that afternoon's events. No one had expected Anyecta to carry such magic. The Drevan ambassador had lied when he referred to her as a useless bit of fluff because she had no power in her blood. Anyecta was a Drevan priestess of some considerable power, sent to gain control of Bainevah's throne.

The first time she had regained consciousness, Naya told of her vision, watching Anyecta make her potion and call down darkness into it. Three priests went immediately to examine Anyecta's workroom. Where there was one instance of magic, there could be others, including traps for the curious and suspicious.

"Shazzur?" Naya whispered. Her eyes fluttered open again.

"I'm here." He caught hold of her hand, and silently scolded himself for letting go of her even for a moment.

Naya had clung to him every time she regained consciousness, and he had insisted on holding her even while the palace healer tended to his shoulder. Shazzur needed to feel Naya safe in his arms. He would have carried her all the way home, if his shoulder didn't throb like holy fire right this moment.

"You're safe now, little panther," Asqual said. "When you're on your feet, why don't you come down to the barracks, and I'll teach you some in-fighting, all right?"

"Bruises on my body as well as my mind? Lovely," she whispered. Her smile was thin on her pale face, but Shazzur thought it was the most beautiful thing he had seen in moons.

"Mind powers are all well and good," the soldier continued in his bluff, rough, charming way, "but it's always good to have a handful of weapons. You could someday face a priest with the mind power to turn

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a mountain upside down, but he's so busy doing that, he won't notice when you sneak up and strangle him with a dirty piece of rope."

Shazzur understood what he meant and approved. If Naya continued to follow her visions into the face of danger, she needed the ability to defend herself against all types of enemies. It would be good for his nerves, too, if he could be sure she wasn't totally helpless.

"Might not have any left." Her eyes fluttered open and stayed open this time.

"What? Mind powers? You have plenty, and to spare." He patted her shoulder, then met Shazzur's gaze, begging for confirmation. Shazzur looked away, unsure himself if Naya still had all her powers intact.

Lady Mayar had sent a messenger to the temple. Eshrell and Chizhedek were just coming down the street from one direction as Shazzur, Naya, Asqual, and the bearers reached the gates of their home from the other direction.

Naya wouldn't let her mother bundle her off to her room. She wanted to tell her part of the story, instead of making Shazzur and Asqual speak for her. Shazzur wondered if she sensed the animosity her father felt toward him. Chizhedek didn't show it, while his thoughts were full of concern and amazement. Shazzur didn't doubt that he would receive a lecture from the High Priest as soon as Naya and her mother left the room. A lecture, and another warning.

"I forgot all the discipline I have been trying to learn. There was no control," Naya said, after describing the conflagration she had conjured in her fury. She shuddered and shrank a little into the cushions of her chair.

"You showed remarkable control," Asqual countered. "I wasn't there when it happened, but I saw how little damage your fire did to the king's quarters. The column of fire was just wide enough to enclose Anyecta, reaching from ceiling to floor. Nothing else in the room was

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even scorched, much less burned.” He grinned, shaking his dark head in admiration. “If we had just ten of you with each Host, Bainevah’s enemies would kiss our feet and beg for peace and never again make arrogant demands.”

“No.” Shazzur wanted to slap Asqual hard enough to fling him against the wall. What had happened to his even temper? “Our enemies will simply send smiling spies, bearing gifts, to kill all our fire priestesses before they walk out with the army.”

“Hmm. Yes.” The captain shrugged. “It was a pleasant dream, but I wouldn’t put you in danger, little panther.”

“What will the Drevans be told?” Eshrell asked.

Silence rang through the room. Shazzur looked at Asqual, who looked back at him. They both shrugged at the same time.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance of keeping it quiet?” Naya said. “From what Mayar said, no one would believe us if we said Anyecta had a temper tantrum and ran away.”

“Subterfuge and deception are the tools of our enemies, not the tools Matrika has put into our hands,” Chizhedek said. “My dear, consider how very public a thing you did today. Within half an hour, likely everyone in the palace knew. Half the city knows by now. Even if the king had demanded silence the moment the bones hit the floor, he would only have delayed the inevitable. Ugly truth always makes itself known.”

Shazzur mentally kicked himself for ignoring that side of today’s events. That, he decided, was what came of emotional entanglements with beautiful women. All he cared about was ensuring Naya was all right, not the political and diplomatic ramifications of what she had done.

The only facts the Drevans would see were that Naya had come into the king’s quarters and interrupted his afternoon with his new concubine. She had insulted and argued with the concubine, a Drevan

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noblewoman, and killed her.

Would the Drevan ambassador continue to claim Anyecta had no powers, and was therefore a defenseless victim? Or would he instigate a religious war by claiming Naya destroyed a priestess of Skataeroz?

Drevans being Drevans, they would ignore the fact that Anyecta had killed two innocent people, brought forbidden magic into the palace, used that magic on the king, and had brought a weapon into the king's private chambers.

Then again, many would say Shazzur had brought a weapon into the king's private chambers—Naya.

"Rest, Lady," Shazzur said now. "You have served the Mother, your king, and Bainevah." He took her hand to raise her from her chair, led her to her mother, and pointed her at the door out of the room. "You must stay home and rest and have no visitors for several days. Our powers come from the Mother, but exercising them takes its toll from our bodies."

"A massive, killing headache, I don't doubt," Eshrell said. She nodded for emphasis and wrapped an arm around her daughter's waist. "Up to bed with you."

"She had better eat something before her stomach decides to revolt," Shazzur called after them, as they left the room. Naya groaned, but he hoped he heard a bit of laughter in the sound.

He wished he could sit by her bed and hold her hand, read to her or tell her stories, and use his healing powers to help her. Then, sighing silently, he straightened his shoulders and turned to face Chizhedek.

"My daughter enjoys her lessons with you," the High Priest said slowly. "She tells me everything you discuss." A small smile lightened the weight of concern on the old priest's lined face. "It is refreshing to find a young woman who does not hide anything. I am...glad she has nothing to hide. I thank you for your obedience, and your watchfulness."

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“You are first her father, and then High Priest of the Mother,” Shazzur returned.

He felt the weight of Asqual’s gaze and frown. Shazzur supposed it was amusing, this seemingly innocent talk, which fooled no one. Asqual would scold him yet again for giving up on Naya, once they left Chizhedek’s home.

Which should be soon. He was King’s Seer, and despite his concern for Naya, he had a duty to advise his king on how to handle the strange events of this afternoon.

* * *

Naya drifted in a weary haze, unable to sleep, too drained to move. She shuddered, seeing again the column of fire enveloping Anyecta. The Drevan concubine barely had time to blink before she was nothing but rattling, scorched bones.

Something pleasant. She had to concentrate on something pleasant, or her memories would follow her into her dreams.

Shazzur immediately filled her thoughts. She smiled, despite the throbbing in her temples and at the base of her skull. Shazzur had held her close, his arms tight, protecting her, holding her upright. She liked the warmth of him, the clean and spicy scent of his robes, the slow, short movements of his hand down her back and arms, checking her for injury. She liked the concern that made his eyes bright as he looked into her eyes and his mind probed hers, looking for damage. She muffled a giggle, remembering that startled, breathless moment when she thought he might kiss her.

His embrace made her feel safe, fragile, precious. That was a ridiculous sensation, after what she had just done. No one could carry so much power from the Mother and be fragile or helpless. No. Despite the very real danger from Dreva, Naya felt almost invulnerable. She felt as if she could rule the world. If she weren’t so weary.

If she ruled the world, what would she want? Naya couldn’t think of

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a thing beyond the sweetly scented cleansing candles, the gentle breeze, shadowy room, cool sheets, soft pillows, and silence. Not a thing, except she wished Shazzur had kissed her.

* * *

Lord Reynod, brother of Lady Concubine Coori, sent servants to the house that evening to ask permission to visit the High Priest. Naya frowned when her mother told her the news. Reynod had just ascended at the death of his father. Naya had heard he was restrained and respectful and had an impressive library. What would bring him to speak with Chizhedek at home? Why couldn't he address her father at the temple?

Lord Reynod had no wife, yet. Chizhedek hadn't been pleased by the request, meaning he suspected it was a courting call, just as Naya did. Though she had made her feelings clear, her father still hoped she would become a royal concubine.

Two concubines had died that day, which meant the king only had five. Seven were permitted by law. He couldn't in all decency seek another concubine for three moons, when the proper time of mourning ended. Still, two concubines were dead. Noblemen and diplomats were likely already maneuvering to have maidens to offer King Nebazz the very moment the mourning ended.

"He won't offer me to the king, will he?" she whispered, when her mother was about to leave her room.

Eshrell sighed, closed her eyes, shook her head. "Your father loves you, Naya."

"Yes, but he is High Priest, too."

"If Mayar didn't carry the heir already, and if she didn't love the king, would you willingly become a concubine?" her mother countered.

Naya shuddered. "If there is no love, I would rather die than give my body to a man. Even to serve Matrika and return the true worship."

"Ah. So that is the way of it." To her surprise, a crooked smile lit

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her mother's face.

“What?” Naya wondered what she had missed.

“Is there someone, perhaps, you would consider?”

“No,” she lied. Naya lay down, pressing her palms against her temples, rubbing to relieve the renewed pressure. Not to save her life would Naya admit those daydreams of kissing Shazzur. It wasn't dignified. It was wrong to want even that much from a man who wanted someone else.

* * *

Captain Asqual visited early the next morning, before the thin summer dew had left the garden outside Naya's window. She heard him talking to her parents and crept down the stairs to curl up in a chair where the cool morning breeze touched her face, and listened.

The Drevan ambassador had demanded the immediate execution of Lady Mayar, Naya, and Shazzur, for conspiring to murder Lady Embanna and lay the guilt on Lady Anyecta. He accused them of murdering the “innocent” concubine in the king's chambers, using forbidden magic when she proved herself guiltless.

The blustering, self-righteous man fell silent when Nebazz demanded to know how he knew magic was forbidden in the king's chambers. He had no answer when they produced the knife Anyecta had stabbed Shazzur with, which still bore the mark of the Bull of Dreva. Priests and scribes knowledgeable in foreign magic testified that it was a temple knife, wrapped in magic to keep unconsecrated, non-magical hands from using it.

He stalked out of the meeting when several ambassadors testified that he had referred to Anyecta as lacking in magic, a disgrace to her noble bloodline.

“Just because he's been proven a liar doesn't mean a pile of camel dung,” Asqual growled. “He came roaring into the palace, demanding justice before that Drevan witch's bones had been removed from the

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king's quarters. I say, and others agree with me," he added with a nod of emphasis, "he was in contact with her and knew what she was doing every moment. He's probably a priest of the Bull himself, using magic to spy. Shazzur and Cho'Mat are searching for a precedent, to demand all ambassadors be searched for magical tools and talents before they're allowed into the city."

"That would be wise," Chizhedek said, nodding.

"You're here to warn me, aren't you?" Naya whispered.

"You are the most vulnerable, Lady." Asqual met their gazes in turn. Hard determination replaced the apology in his voice. "No one would dare attack Lord Shazzur, with so many witnesses and soldiers always around him. Lady Mayar will not leave the palace without guards. You, however, have only a few servants. To surround you with guards would only make you more visible."

"The thing to do, then, is disappear," Chizhedek said.

"I don't have that talent." Naya tried to laugh. It made her chest ache, as if she had spent a moon quarter coughing.

"The Drevans will want you, especially," Asqual said, shaking his head. "You are a Bride who blessed the land. You possess powers, gifted from the Mother. To destroy you would be a double victory for our enemies, not just for revenge, but to take an important tool out of Matrika's hands."

"It is not in her tapestry for me to die just yet," she whispered. New energy flowed through her, granted by the tiny taste of divine foresight and assurance.

"Just yet?" her father echoed. Naya heard the indignation in his tones.

She wondered which was stronger—the pride of a father, or the protectiveness of the High Priest for anyone touched and chosen and changed by the Mother.

This need for revenge was typical of the Drevans. No matter how

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they lied and violated all laws of hospitality and diplomacy, they painted themselves as the victims when their schemes failed and they were punished. They always demanded twice as much justice as they would ever grant anyone else.

“You shall disappear, Naya. Captain Asqual,” Chizhedek continued, “I must ask a great thing of you.”

“Ask, Holy Sir.” Asqual raised his hand in pledge.

“You are to escort two priests of the Three back to the Hidden City soon, and take two mind scribes to serve there. You will take with you a young priestess to serve as a healer during their term of service.”

Naya wanted to refuse. She had promised to be with Mayar when her son was born. She had no way of knowing when it would be safe for her to return to Bainevah. However, there were other considerations that made it wise to accept the plan.

“I had hoped to go to the Hidden City, because of my weaving,” she said.

“The Hidden City is inviolable. Those who approach with evil intent will be lost in the canyon maze surrounding it,” Asqual said. “Consider it done. My life for yours, Priestess.”

Naya nodded, accepting Asqual’s protection and leadership. She only hoped it wouldn’t come to his life for hers.

* * *

Lord Reydon arrived only an hour after Asqual had left to begin preparations for the journey. Naya wished she had an excuse to hide in her room. She had met Lady Coori on several visits with Mayar, and the other concubine was a delightful, kind lady. Naya had heard Reydon was as pleasant as his sister. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings or make an enemy of him by refusing his suit.

Reydon was almost homely. Naya tried not to stare when she came into the garden where her guest waited. She bowed her head to welcome the noble and decided Coori had received the lion’s share of

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good looks in their family.

He had the same golden hair and big, glistening gray eyes as his younger sister, but they hid under shaggy eyebrows. Wide cheekbones did little to disguise the exaggerated length and width of his nose. He looked as if a child had modeled his face in clay, pulled the nose and then slammed the half-dried sculpture to the ground square on its chin.

Reydon's eyes widened when he saw her, and a smile softened his too-wide mouth. Jehash's smile had made Naya feel like a fig about to be devoured. Reydon made her feel desirable, but not in a filthy, sweaty fashion.

"Thank you, Holy Sir, Starweaver, Bride," Reydon said. His voice held music, like a deep stream flowing over short cliffs. That more than made up for his face. "Please forgive the bad timing of my visit." His glance strayed again to Naya and brightened. Her face warmed. What was it about him that affected her as handsome men couldn't?

"What do you mean by bad timing?" Eshrell asked, with an answering smile.

"After the yesterday's distress, I am sure you don't want to be disturbed by outsiders, but I wished to thank you, Priestess, for finding the murderer before she killed other concubines. My sister in particular."

"Yes. Lady Coori." Naya silently laughed at herself for feeling a niggle of disappointment. "I always enjoy meeting her. She is a good friend to my spirit sister, Lady Mayar."

"Thank you for protecting her." He bowed again. "I would like permission to stand as a suitor."

"You do know four nobles have been denied in the last moon?" Chizhedek asked after a pause.

Naya held perfectly still. Four? She had refused Jehash. That meant three others had approached her father and he had refused because he still hoped the king would make her a concubine. Naya wavered

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between relief, amusement, and indignation. Wasn't it her final choice? And yet, she was grateful her father had saved her the nuisance of saying no.

"May I ask why you ask for me, when you have never seen my face until now?" she asked, before Reydon could answer her father's question.

"But I have seen you, Lady. When you have been at the palace and I have been visiting my sister."

"Just now, you looked at me as if you had never seen me before."

"I resolved to be a suitor after Coori vowed your spirit is like your face. If I offended you, I'm sorry."

Naya wondered if he would always be so polite, or if he would relax and learn to argue, tease, and laugh with her. She knew she would consider him, if she didn't want Shazzur.

"You didn't."

"I think none of you realize Priestess Naya has changed," Reydon added, glancing from her parents to her. "Your hair is paler, your eyes are a brighter blue, and your skin is like white gold."

"You should pursue fame as a Song Weaver." Chizhedek's smile softened what could have been taken as mockery. "I do believe he's right. Strange, not to have noticed."

"That is because we see her every day," Eshrell said. "The change is gradual." She stood and stepped over to Chizhedek's chair, and rested her hand on his shoulder. "You do hold our daughter in high regard, do you not, Lord Reydon? Not just because of her status or the gifts from the Mother."

"Yes, Lady Priestess." Reydon bowed his head a moment.

"It would not be fair to give you permission," Naya said. She had almost said "hope," but that seemed too strong. "My duties require me to devote many moons, perhaps years, to learning discipline and the duties that come with the Mother's gifts. I have thought of going into

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seclusion, perhaps living in the temple for a season, until I can be sure...until I can be sure that I will not repeat what I did to Lady Anyecta.”

She hated that momentary flicker of fear in Reydon’s eyes. She disliked lying, as if she had broken a trust. Naya glanced at her father and was relieved to see his nod of approval.

“Lady, forgive my bluntness,” Reydon said after a discernable pause. “The Drevan witch deserved to die. You acted in fear for your own life, and for the king’s safety. Even untrained, you were able to strike like a warrior. Will you allow me to return, when your training is complete?”

“If you promise not to wait for me,” Naya said. “If you see a maiden who brightens your heart, pursue her. She is the one the Mother has chosen for you.”

“Do you speak from a wounded heart?” he asked softly.

Naya shook her head and bit her lip to keep from laughing. Wounds only came in battle, and she had only begun to fight for Shazzur.

Soon after, Reydon made his farewells. Naya stayed seated, eyes closed, enjoying the cool breezes of the garden while her parents walked with Reydon to the gates. Eshrell came back alone after Chizhedek departed for the temple.

“That was very well done,” her mother said, after settling down on a bench facing Naya.

“I wish I never needed to do that again!”

“You might need to do it constantly. Unscrupulous men will try to make you their wife, simply to control your gifts.”

“But that is for the Mother to decide, not mere men. Even if he is my husband.”

“You understand that, my dearest. Many do not.”

* * *

Naya dyed her hair that evening. She thought about Reydon’s

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words, that her hair and eyes and skin had changed. She thought of a refiner's fire, slowly burning the dross out of gold, all impurities and darkness destroyed. Was that being done to her? She washed the dark brown dye from her fingers and wondered if the dye would slowly burn off her hair as she traveled to the Hidden City.

Did it really matter? If she escaped undetected from Bainevah, her disguise wouldn't be needed.

She smiled and hummed a nameless tune as she walked out into the garden to let her hair dry. Naya decided she liked this particular shade of reddish brown. Damp, it was too dark for her eyes, but it would lighten as it dried. She laughed, remembering games with cosmetics when she had been perhaps ten and wanted to look like a grown woman. Those innocent days felt like a lifetime ago.

A pebble clattered and bounced somewhere beyond the fig trees along the back wall of the garden. An alley ran between her parents' house and the house that faced the next street. Sometimes boys raced down the alleys, lay in ambush in the shadows, and threw rotten fruit at each other. Naya hoped a miniature war wasn't about to start, so late in the day.

Something scraped. Nesting birds squawked and fluttered and leaves rustled in the fig trees. Naya shook her head and walked toward the trees, determined to save the last few figs from greedy, always-hungry boys. How many times had her mother gone to pick a treat for Chizhedek, who loved figs, and found all the ripe ones gone, when they had been there not an hour before?

"Girl."

The thick voice had guttural accents. A heavy-set man dropped over the wall. Naya stumbled backwards and turned to run. Another man slid over the side wall, leaped forward, and caught hold of her arm.

"Where is the fire priestess?" the first man demanded.

For a moment, Naya had no idea who he meant. Her? Why did they

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want her? Then she grinned, realizing that her disguise and the evening shadows did indeed protect her.

“Fire priestess?” she echoed.

“We found the house’s idiot.” The second man gave Naya a shove, so she stumbled and fell against the closest tree.

“You’re the idiot,” she whispered. *Matrika, help me protect my parents. But please don’t let me set the trees on fire!*

Despite their head coverings, Naya knew they were Drevans by their smell. Didn’t Drevans believe in bathing every day? Their land was covered with snow and ice more than one-third of the year, but was that any reason to fear water and cleanliness?

The two muttered in their own tongue, probably calling her worse things than idiot. Then the first reached for her.

She narrowed her eyes and thought of fire licking up around the hem of his head covering. Then she turned to the second man and lit the end of the cord that held his head cloth in place. Sweet smoke wreathed their heads before either one took two more steps. The second man batted his hands at the smoke, then his mouth dropped open and he stared at her. His partner cursed. Naya darted away while they slapped at the flames wreathing their heads.

She would let Asqual teach her some self-defense. Setting fires gave her headaches. It would be more satisfying to bruise them and see some blood, she decided. Naya raced for the house and laughed breathlessly. Setting fires every time she faced danger would help her enemies track her.

Tosha ran screaming out the front gates of the house, bringing city guards running. Maas and Teblim, the gardener and his brother, ran to subdue the two smoking, cursing intruders who didn’t have the sense to run. The city guards appeared when the would-be kidnappers started to resist the brothers.

“You are going into seclusion in the temple tomorrow,” Chizhedek

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said loudly, as the guards led the prisoners away. He wrapped an arm tight around Naya and glared at the two men. “Does my daughter need to testify against them?”

“No, Holy Sir,” the first guard said. He gestured for his companions to take the bound men while he bowed respectfully to Chizhedek. Awe touched his eyes when he looked at Naya. “I will take your words now to the judge.”

Naya knew Chizhedek named the temple for the benefit of the gossips among the guards. Tomorrow, she would sneak away and hide until the caravan left for the Hidden City. More than adventure, lessons, and answers waited for her with that caravan. More than the Hidden City waited across the desert. Freedom and safety. Perhaps her life, in many ways.

Eshrell joined them before the guard finished getting Naya’s story. She had helped Maas and Teblim check the garden to ensure no sparks had started small fires. At this time of the year, fires were too easily started, even without the help of a young woman who lit fires with a thought.

Her mother listened and held Naya’s hand and made no sound, revealed nothing of her thoughts, until the guards had all left. Then she hugged Naya, and the tightness of her arms spoke her concern eloquently.

“We shall have to dye your hair another color,” was all she said.

“Bleach might be more appropriate,” Chizhedek countered. “Reydon was right. When Naya returns, her hair shall be white as roses, because of the Mother’s power flowing through her.”

CHAPTER 10

“If I could, I would banish all Drevans from Bainevah. From within the city walls, first, and then from within the boundaries of our land,” King Nebazz said.

All around him, the members of the King’s Council murmured agreement. Not one person disagreed, in words or expression. Shazzur knew that show of unity meant nothing. For every person outraged over the kidnapping attempt, someone else thought the story a lie or was outraged the attempt had failed. Shazzur knew better than to think everyone in Bainevah loved and blessed Naya for her part in the Sacred Marriage.

Someone had helped the Drevans find High Priest Chizhedek’s house. Someone had given them the bitter liquid that the guards had found when they searched the intruders, intended to make Naya sleep when they captured her. Someone knew she needed to focus, needed time to think, to bring her powers into play.

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In short, there was a traitor in the temples, perhaps several.

Shazzur glanced at Chizhedek, who had refrained from speaking when the Captain of the City Guards brought his report before the King. He admired the High Priest for his self-control, his poise. If it were his daughter—his lover, his wife—he could not have waited for others to demand justice.

Should he approach the man and explain his theories? For all he knew, Chizhedek had started his own investigation. Shazzur wanted to help, but would the High Priest take the offer as an attempt to ingratiate himself? He supposed it would be better to ask Cho'Mat to speak his theories, and leave someone else to hunt for the traitors.

“We have yet to hear what the kidnappers have to say in their defense.” Princess Lur’s low, gravelly voice cut through the murmurs circling the squared horseshoe of the Council table.

She and Nebazz’s remaining half-siblings sat on the Council. Shazzur respected the princess, fifteen years older than Nebazz. Her rank prohibited her from serving as a priestess or scribe, but she had a reputation as a clear thinker and the greatest historian in the country. Her value to the throne had given her the power to refuse when six allied kings asked for her as a bride. Where would Bainevah be without her?

“They claim they were lost and approached the front gate to ask directions. They claim Priestess Naya invited them into the house and then ripped her dress and screamed that they had attacked her. Then she set them on fire,” the captain said. His mouth twisted as if he wanted to spit, to avert the ill omen of the lies he repeated.

“My daughter’s dress was not torn, and she did not scream,” Chizhedek said with admirable calm. He finally raised his gaze from his interlaced fingers and looked directly at the King. “Tosha, who attends the door, screamed. Two soldiers will testify they found the places where these men climbed over the back wall of my garden.

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Scraps of cloth matching their torn clothes were found on the brambles outside the wall. How do they explain this?"

"They can't, Holy Sir." The captain grinned tightly.

Shazzur noted those who were amused at this exchange and those who were not, and marked the latter for watching. Naya's enemies were his enemies.

When the meeting ended, the guilt of the Drevans was established without doubt. The Drevan ambassador could either claim he knew nothing of these men, or bluster and lay all the blame on Naya's doorstep. Shazzur wished he could be alone with the two men for just ten minutes. He wouldn't kill them, but it would be satisfying to bloody his knuckles on their faces.

"She's safe," King Nebazz murmured, when the door closed and he and Shazzur were alone in the Council chamber.

"Thank you, Majesty." Shazzur spared him a weary smile.

"This has been trying for you, my friend." He settled back into his wide, high-backed chair. "Before the solstice, you mentioned to me you wished to return to the Hidden City and resume your studies. You still believe many unknown prophecies and histories are stored there?"

"And necessary for the future of Bainevah." He slid out of his light robe, allowing the cool air coming through the grillwork in the ceiling to touch his bare, sweating arms.

"This is not a task you would trust to anyone else, is it?"

"I would know better what was useful and what was not. It is pride, Majesty, but my memory is far more agile than many others who might be considered for the task."

"Not pride. Truth." Nebazz chuckled. "This will be a pleasure trip for you, I think. Others would see it as a chore. You loathe all this political game playing. You are a man of honesty, who values speed and justice over soothing the hurt pride of those who will try to slice our throats the next time we disagree." He sighed, but his smile didn't

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fade overmuch.

“Centuries ago, my ancestor was a simple warrior who felt sorry for a cluster of villages with no one to protect them. His son inherited the duty, and offered his protection to other villages. His grandson forced more distant villages to accept him as their chieftain. And here I am today, suffering for their pity and their arrogance. I cannot walk away. The innocent will suffer the most, and everyone of my blood would be dead before the next full moon. Walk away from all this while you can, my friend. While honor, respect, and your wits still protect you.”

“I cannot, Majesty.” Shazzur bowed low, his chest heavy with sympathy and admiration for his king. “My honor ties me to you, who calls me friend.”

“Then escape for a short time. I give you two moons for your search, and two moons to travel.” He waved toward the door. “Go. Make your arrangements and leave the city quietly, so no one stops you.”

Shazzur knew, despite the king’s command, leaving would be neither easy nor quick. One emergency after another cropped up, so he didn’t leave Bainevah until more than a moon later. In all that time, he had no word of where Naya had gone when she vanished. He could only comfort himself with the knowledge that she was safe.

If only he had been allowed to bid her safe journeying.

* * *

Third Descent Moon

Naya hated camels. It seemed to take her forever to grow used to the swaying, the smell, the groaning of the beasts.

That discomfort and distaste didn’t affect the glorious, flying sensation that came every time she looked ahead across the desert, and looked back and saw more desert. This was the adventure she had dreamed of for years.

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She made friends quickly with her traveling companions. Besides the soldiers serving Asqual, there were two priests of the Three and two mind scribes. The mind scribes were cousins, three years younger than Naya, named Ashael and Hezek.

Enku and Shanda, the priests, were husband and wife. Enku was a mountain of a man with ebony skin and a voice that rumbled through the ground when he laughed, which was often. Shanda was little more than a bird of a woman, with coppery hair and freckles and blue eyes that sparkled with excitement when she laughed or spoke about things she enjoyed.

They warned Naya that entrance to the Hidden City was never easy, and some people were turned away despite their talents or endorsements from nobles, priests, or the throne. All who wanted to enter the Hidden City had to pass tests of mind and heart, different for each person.

“The three of you could stand close enough to touch, but you would each experience a different test at the same time,” Shanda warned.

What she learned of the Hidden City disappointed Naya. She had thought it would be a city of scribes, studying the images woven by Weaver Girl, transcribing their findings into scrolls to send throughout the kingdom. Instead, the scribes spent most of their time copying ancient documents, to preserve them, and the priests spent their time tending the sheep, flax, and cotton, producing thread and dyes and building looms. Very few were permitted into the inner recesses of the city and fewer earned the right to approach Thread Woman, Color Man, and Weaver Girl. The few who used the looms did so after years of purification and study, proving themselves worthy.

“Even you, with your prophetic weaving, must study a long time,” Enku warned. “The danger to your life will probably end before you graduate from serving in the dye house.”

He described the city to her. Barely one-tenth of the buildings were

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in use. Some gardens, chambers and meeting halls hadn't been seen by mortal eyes in decades. Enku laughed at the irony that some priests spent their lives digging underground chambers to store the scrolls and wax tablets that the scribes continually produced.

"I think the library is larger than the entire city, and it keeps growing," he said, shaking his head.

"Shazzur says the collecting of knowledge will never end, but for it to sit unused, hoarded and dusty, is to destroy wisdom," Naya whispered. She wished Shazzur were there. He would find some humorous remark, some pithy insight to counteract the disappointment she felt.

She remembered her childhood dream-friend, Dia, and their plans to storm the walls of the Hidden City and explore all its treasures and secrets. Naya wasn't surprised when she dreamed often of Dia on the journey. Dia insisted she and Naya would explore the city and discover things that would change the world.

Sometimes Naya looked forward to her dreams just to escape the sobering reality that awaited her at the end of the long, winding journey. There was no such thing as going in a straight line from the capital to the mountains enclosing the Hidden City. Asqual's meandering trail, from village to oasis to caravan stop, was designed to confuse anyone who might suspect they were more than merchants.

One detail about the Hidden City fascinated Naya. On their fourth night of the journey, as they set out across the cooling sands, Shanda told Naya about the Sacred Spindle. A simple spindle of wood, as long as a man's arm, polished by years of use, hung above the altar at the very center of the city. Legend said it was the spindle Thread Woman used to spin the threads that let the Three tangle Maquaos Shadowmaker and keep him from destroying Matrika's temple. The spindle hung in mid-air, with no threads coming down from the ceiling or from the side walls, and no pedestal to hold it up. People who had

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tried to climb up on top of the altar to touch the spindle and take it down had lost fingers to the sharp edges. Those who tried to lift the spindle resorted to levers and other devices and declared it heavier than all the pillars of the temple combined.

“There’s a story that threatens the spindle will shatter if the priesthood is unfaithful,” Shanda said. “It’s not recorded anywhere, our superiors deny the story exists, but the lower levels of priests preserve it. As a warning. Some say it was prophecy, and portions of it have been lost through the years. Some say there are rooms in the Hidden City where the prophecy is written on the walls with golden threads. A warning and a promise. When the priesthood fails...some say the service of the Three will be shattered and all will change.”

Naya shivered, considering what kind of disaster could come from the shattering of something so sharp and heavy. She imagined the pieces flying, shredding anything they touched.

What would Shazzur say about that story? Naya wished she could ask him. She thought about him often, when the journey under the waning and then waxing moon grew tedious.

Their company rode disguised as merchants, carrying pottery, dried dates and figs, spices and healing oils and pastes. Naya pretended to be Asqual’s sister, with the two mind scribes as their cousins, and Enku and Shanda as itinerant healer priests. Their band joined and parted from four caravans in the first six days of their journey. It amused Naya when they stopped and sold merchandise at every small town and oasis along the way. She enjoyed wearing the tough, heavy trousers and loose shirts of a traveling merchant woman, wore her hair tied back in a simple knot, and reveled in arguing with customers over the quality and price of the merchandise. Especially when the weather cooled enough to let them travel by day and stop at villages at dusk and rest at night like normal people.

Ashael and Hezek enjoyed the journey even more. The first time

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Naya saw them saunter into their camp after an evening of bartering and exploring, she could only stand and stare. One moment, two ragged old men tottered along the outskirts of the camp, and she expected Asqual to shoo away the beggars before they turned into a nuisance, or worse, thieves. The next moment, the crooked figures ran their fingers through their tangled hair, dropped their rags, and reappeared as Ashael and Hezek.

“It’s part of being a mind scribe, I suppose,” Ashael said, when Naya confronted him about his talent for disguise.

“We’re able to go into people’s minds. We see the world through their eyes, so to speak. We know how it feels to be in their bodies, if we stay long enough and dig deeply enough.” The gray-eyed, skinny young man nodded for emphasis. Naya saw a shadow of a not-so-pleasant memory in his eyes. “Sometimes it’s too easy. Their minds are cluttered and weak. They think they are alone in the world, so they don’t guard themselves. No discipline. Other times, a tightly ordered mind is hard to penetrate, even if the man or woman wants us to help them find and remember something.”

“I should think it would be the opposite. Like trying to find a particular bauble in a messy room, instead of in an ordered one where you know where the jewelry chest is,” she said.

“But you have to know how the owner arranges things,” Asqual said. The four had settled down by the campfire, where they drank mint tea and relaxed, watching the stars in the clear, almost-touchable sky. Enku and Shanda were busy plying their trade as healers, selling healing powders and giving instructions to the village ill.

“What is it like?” Naya asked. “Do you fall into the person you’re visiting, and lose all sense of yourself? Or do you feel like you stand on the edge of a garden, watching the people inside walking and talking together?”

Both scribes went very still. They stared at her and their eyes

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unfocused. Naya felt a tingling soft warmth behind her eyes, as if a candle had been lit and placed inside her head.

Can you hear me, Lady? Hezek didn't move his lips.

Naya leaped to her feet, startled. She nearly tripped over the camel saddle that served as her backrest.

"She heard you." Ashael rolled his eyes as if exasperated, but grinned cheekily at her.

"What's going on here?" Asqual demanded.

"She made us suspicious, the way she asked the question," Hezek said. "Do you have dreams where you fall into people's minds, or you float around them, watching their lives and hearing their thoughts?"

"Yes." Naya sank back down to sit again. "Could I be a mind scribe?"

"Why not?" Asqual said. "The Mother has rested so much else on your shoulders, why not this to help protect you?"

"Wouldn't have helped against the Drevans," Hezek said. "They have nothing to see inside their heads."

That earned grins from the other three, and the small bite of humor helped Naya relax. The cousins kept her and Asqual entertained for another hour, telling tales of their escapades, before they departed to sleep. Naya was grateful that not every story was funny, and not every story was terrifying. She was glad to know that such an ability had a light side and a heavy, dark side of danger and pain. It gave her much to think about when she retreated into her blankets.

Hezek and Ashael reached into the haze of Naya's sleeping mind. She felt only curiosity and amusement at the realization that she knew what happened. The entirely novel sensation didn't startle her. She held onto their hands, which certainly seemed solid enough, and let them lead the way. They flew through a sky impossibly thick with stars and came to rest on a plateau as flat as a table, the stone smooth as finely polished wood, and strangely soft under their feet.

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“You can come here on your own, now,” Hezek said when the three settled down cross-legged and facing each other.

“This isn’t a dream. How do I know that?”

“You can feel that you have power here, and you’re aware that your body is asleep in your blankets. That destroys the illusions that dreams hold over us. Nothing can happen in this place that you won’t be able to stop, and eventually change.”

“Then I am a mind scribe?”

“A very strong one,” Ashael assured her. “We can be a team. I give Hezek my strength, and he gathers the images and explores the minds. I am the artistic one—and a fast writer, as well,” he added with a grin. “I record what he observes.”

“What will I do?”

Naya decided not to mention that her handwriting lacked much in the way of elegance or even neatness. She hadn’t particularly enjoyed drawing, even as a child. The images in her mind were better left to words, rather than lines of ink on parchment.

“Your voice is clear and strong. You are strong. Make an image, put it in the air there.” He pointed.

An image? Naya thought immediately of Shazzur, how much he would enjoy this adventure. His eyes, then his smile appeared where Ashael pointed, then his dark red hair, tousled as it had been that last day they were together. His robes, the smooth muscles of his bare arms, and his long-fingered hands. Naya thought she could smell his particular pleasant scent of clean linen and male spice.

“How did you—” Ashael laughed.

“Something new in this world,” Hezek added, nodding.

“What?” Naya fought down a flicker of irritation that was part fear. What had she done?

Shazzur’s image moved. He looked at her, looked at the two scribes, then tipped his head back and his eyes moved as he looked at

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all the starry expanse above them. He grinned, then his hearty, booming laugh echoed across the plateau.

“I shouldn’t be able to do that, should I?” Naya guessed.

“I have no idea,” Ashael said. He stood and slowly backed away when the image of Shazzur took three slow steps toward them. “If it can touch us, I don’t want to know.”

“What happens if it does?” Naya asked.

“We’re not in the dreamrealm,” Hezek said. He stood and reached down to help her stand. “This is an in-between place, where we can teach you the rules. Or rather, the rules we’ve learned by making mistakes.” He offered her a rueful smile, but his gaze stayed fixed on the image. “In the dreamrealm, things seem solid. If you’re in someone else’s dream, you sometimes don’t have control, but you can avoid harm if things turn sour. Here...we’ve never met anyone else here, once our teachers taught us to make and find it.”

“Maybe we should leave.” Naya let Hezek lift her to her feet, but she stayed focused on Shazzur.

She made the image and gave it enough life to do the unexpected. Would it do what she wanted? If she concentrated hard enough, could she make it go away? Could it act as the real man would?

Her face warmed, remembering a few dreams where Shazzur had kissed her. Was this more or less than a dream?

“Go back where you came from, friend,” she whispered, and willed the place where Shazzur’s image stood to go empty. A throb of loneliness made her catch her breath when he vanished.

“She’s very strong,” Hezek said. “I think soon she’ll be teaching us.”

“Please don’t talk about me as if I were in another room.” Naya wished she had tried to see if Shazzur’s image was solid.

It occurred to her that even if he was beyond her reach when she was awake, he was all hers in her dreams. She could kiss him and tell

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him her heart, and perhaps he would even speak sweet words and pledge his love.

“She sounds like a teacher.” Ashael grinned at her. “Come. We’ll make one of our favorite places, to show you how you can travel and affect dreams.”

The plateau changed to a lush jungle clearing with a silent waterfall in the distance. Naya inhaled—and smelled nothing. She couldn’t feel the mist drifting through the air from the pounding waterfall, or smell the glistening fruits hanging from the vines and glossy green leafy branches. Perhaps the fault wasn’t with her—she saw a gourd, four pomegranates, figs and raspberries clustered together like grapes, all hanging from the same vine. She suspected for all their scholarly acumen, Ashael and Hezek didn’t care much about details.

“What do you think?” Hezek said. He gestured grandly, like a charlatan magician. Light sparkled and cushioned benches rose up from the leaf-strewn jungle floor. He sat and gestured for the other two to do the same.

“Lovely.” Naya turned around, looking in all directions before sitting. She wondered if she could create smells and tastes. She missed the sounds of birds and the wind in the leaves. When she created her own dreaming place, she would try to give it smells and sounds so it felt real.

That night began a routine for the remainder of their journey. Her new playmates taught Naya how to put herself to sleep when she chose. Soon, she could step from her sleeping mind into the dreamrealm before Ashael or Hezek arrived.

Naya created worlds to share with her friends, and learned it was harder to open her imaginary landscapes to others, than to enter theirs. She soon had wonderful smells and sounds, in multiple layers to delight and astonish. The two scribes could hear most of the sounds in her worlds, but could never smell. They freely admitted they didn’t know if

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the lack was in them, or Naya needed to gain finer control over her creation.

During the day, she practiced the true work of a mind scribe—talking to other mind scribes and learning to see into other minds. Asqual took it good-naturedly, allowing them to spy into his thoughts. Naya was the first to realize that he had some talent for blocking, when he grew tired of their games or when movement on the horizon caught his attention and concern. When she told him what she had discovered, Ashael and Hezek were more excited than Asqual about his glimmer of talent.

“What am I to do with the ability, eh?” he asked with a grin.

“Train,” Ashael responded immediately. “Do you know how valuable you’d be, if you could send orders straight into the minds of your men? No need to depend on us to pass the word to someone half a league away, and worry that we won’t understand or we’ll twist the orders around and get your men injured or killed. Or send them retreating when they should have charged forward and won the day.”

Asqual’s grin faded then and he nodded. His eyes glimmered as he visibly considered the possibilities. From that day forward, he made a conscious effort to block all three when they tried to touch his thoughts.

Naya wished she hadn’t encouraged him to practice, when they reached the tunnel through the mountains protecting the Hidden City. She wanted to look into his thoughts to see clearly what they were going to do as they rode into the ebony darkness. It swallowed up the lights of their torches and all sound and even the touch of the weak breeze against her face.

What now? Her mind voice sounded muffled. No echo, no sense that it had gone anywhere. Or else it went on and on and never echoed back to her. How large, how deep, was this tunnel?

No one answered. Naya trusted Asqual and his soldiers knew what they were doing, and the ropes connecting their horses wouldn’t

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dissolve in the darkness that soaked into her skin, to leave her lost in this nowhere place forever.

Could she make a fire big enough, strong enough, to fight the darkness? But fires needed air to live. She didn't breathe, so how could a fire live?

Are you there? she called to the cousins.

Wherever here is, Hezek responded, with more than the usual irony in his tone.

I thought we'd been separated. Are we still in the tunnel? Are we out of our bodies? Maybe dead?

No, you are not dead, a new voice responded.

Naya thought she heard repressed laughter in the dry, ancient male voice. That irritated her. Instinct said they were at the mercy of that voice.

What do we need to do to get out? Ashael asked.

Where do you want to go? Yes, laughter pushed at the edges of that voice, making it rich.

To the Hidden City, Naya said. *We are to serve there. Please, are you the gatekeeper?*

There are no gates here. Why are there three of you? We are only to have two new mind scribes.

Is that why we're stuck here in nothing, because the numbers aren't right? Hezek demanded.

I am not here as a mind scribe, Naya said. She felt the cousins' irritation pushing away their fear. She suspected if they let anger rule their mouths and thoughts, they would never get past this test. *I didn't even know I carried the gift until we had already begun the journey.*

Not know your talents and powers? Mockery ruled that voice now. *You are a woman grown. Is the training in the temples of Bainevah so lacking, that you don't know what you can do? Why would they send you here, if you have no training? We are not here for training, but for*

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service.

And I have come to serve, she shot back. I have been gifted with visions and signs in my weaving. Power takes over my body and mind, so I accomplish in hours what would take days. I have come to serve and to study the scrolls of prophecy stored in the home of the Three.

That still does not explain why you are a mind scribe without training, the voice persisted.

She was the Bride at the last Sacred Marriage, Ashael said. The gifts awakened by Matrika's presence are still unfolding.

She has already been used by Matrika to save the life of the king and to catch a murderer, Hezek added. She is here to be safe from Bainevah's enemies. Not to be mocked.

Hezek, be careful, Naya said.

Your friends are very protective of you, little Bride, the old man said, and laughed. The echoes made her think of wet, slimy walls, lost in the darkness.

Echoes? She caught her breath—and realized she could indeed breathe again, and hear.

Do you think that a little bit of temper would bar you from the Hidden City?

We have no idea what to expect, she said. She felt the camel move under her. The darkness had texture. She could see again, even if it was only pitch blackness.

Why do you always expect the enemy, when you are in unfamiliar territory?

It's better to be pleasantly surprised than to be disappointed, she shot back.

True. The blackness around her turned to charcoal and then softened to twilight gray. Suddenly, the sound of his laughter wasn't so repulsive, either.

"What did you see?" Asqual asked.

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Naya looked to her right. Ashael and Hezek stared back at her, wide-eyed. How long had they been caught in the blackness? Days? Seconds?

“What do you mean?” she asked. And realized a second later that Enku and Shanda were no longer among them. When had the two priests left their band?

“This is my eighth trip here. We always get tested. Those without the gift are supposed to feel nothing. For us, it’s a blink of an eye, a beat of the heart, and we’re through. Because we don’t plan on staying.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. Naya looked back and saw a solid wall of black that absorbed all light, framed in the curve of the tunnel like a piece of cloth stretched tight. “People who enter without a mind scribe to vouch for them are tested. If they came in innocently, they get turned around and sent on their way. Those who didn’t come innocently...never leave.”

“You have some talent,” Naya said.

“Not enough to get more than a feeling of something watching and waiting to pounce. Like an enormous black spider, ready to suck me dry.” He shuddered in mock fear—which Naya suspected wasn’t quite false enough. “I always envied the ones who said they saw and felt nothing.”

“I envy them right now,” Hezek said. “Well, we passed the test. Let’s get going. I’m all for a real bed tonight—not that it hasn’t been a lovely adventure, camping under the stars, sand in our food, riding camels, what have you.”

“You passed the first test,” Asqual said. He gestured down the tunnel, where the light grew stronger and a glimpse of blue sky showed in a gap in the rock. “The next one awaits.”

“Cousin, tell me again why we agreed to this duty?” Ashael said under his breath.

“We were stupid and we let them trick us,” Hezek said.

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Asqual laughed. He winked at Naya. She hoped she could be as optimistic about the rest of the test.

CHAPTER 11

All around them, sheer rock walls reached to the sky. Though the sun overhead was bright and the sky blue, without a single cloud to mar the expanse, their caravan walked in shadows. Naya wondered if they still walked the tunnel and the sunshine was only an illusion. She certainly felt chilled.

“We were warned, but we weren’t warned,” Hezek grumbled, when Naya voiced her theory.

“Maybe in order to serve Matrika, and the Three, we have to be prepared for the unexpected. What good is a test if we’re ready for it?” Ashael tugged on his camel’s reins until the uncharacteristically silent beast slowed to a halt. He slid to the ground and strode across the sandy floor of the passage to touch the nearest wall. “Feels solid enough, but what good does that do us?”

Very good, that familiar voice said. The first step toward wisdom and alertness is to question and never be satisfied too soon. However—

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the old man chuckled, and Naya found the sound a little more friendly—*this time the walls are real.*

“Can we be sure?” Naya called. “How do we know you are trustworthy, and this isn’t just another part of the test?”

The soldiers ignored the one-sided exchange. Asqual frowned, but accepted what they were doing. Naya wished she could be amused at the image of herself arguing with someone only three of their company could hear.

Very good. Who has had the training of you?

“As a mind scribe, these two.” She gestured at the cousins. “In matters of thinking and scholarship, my father was my first teacher, and he still teaches me.”

Even when you think you are beyond teaching?

“That’s when we need teaching the most,” Hezek remarked sourly. He and his cousin exchanged glances. “I doubt we’re going to impress anyone today. Or for the next moon. Sorry, Commander Asqual. We’re not getting inside any time soon. I hope you brought enough food.”

“Doubt of your abilities is like a wound from a poisoned blade,” that ancient voice said. A skeletal, sand-colored, tall old man stood in the passageway before them. He bowed his shaven head and spread his arms, so the wide sleeves of his black robe looked like wings. “Welcome to the Hidden City.”

“Sir,” Hezek said. He slid down from his camel and hurried to return the man’s bow. “May we ask your name, or do we need to work to earn that, too?”

“I’m sure ‘that frustrating old man’ will be more suitable, but my name is Esarhod.” He waited until Naya had slid down from her camel and bowed to him. He ignored Asqual and his men, and Naya suspected she would envy them soon.

“This isn’t the end of the test. We’ve advanced far enough to warrant the right to see him.” She watched Esarhod for his reaction.

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“But we still have a long way to go.”

“Of course.” Esarhod allowed a thin smile and looked her over from head to foot. “So, you are Chizhedek’s child. You are much like him. You have been taught that failing the Mother is the thing you should fear most. What do you truly fear?”

Naya wanted to close her eyes, simply to escape that penetrating stare. “If I do not fear failing Mother Matrika, then I have grown arrogant, complacent. Too much assurance is what I should fear most, because that will inevitably lead to failure.”

“Too smart.” He winked at her, and suddenly Naya no longer felt threatened.

She wondered if that was another test, and decided she didn’t care. She couldn’t let herself second-guess everything, or she would drive herself mad within hours.

It was no relief when Esarhod turned his questions on the cousins. Naya paid attention, wondering when the examination would return to her. She caught herself silently grumbling that the soldiers didn’t have to prove themselves worthy.

That was the difference between them. She, Ashael, and Hezek wanted to stay—the soldiers wanted to finish their errand and return home.

“Come.” Esarhod turned sharply, his robe billowing out around him. He stalked down the passage that stretched out before them in twists and turns and deep shadows.

Naya glanced at Ashael, then Hezek. They snatched up the reins of their camels and followed Esarhod on foot.

Three turns of the passage brought them to another archway into darkness. Esarhod gestured for them to go ahead of him.

Do you trust him? Hezek asked.

We’re mind scribes, Ashael said. *If we can see into other minds, can’t we reach to see what waits for us?*

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Separately? Naya asked.

“A cord of three strands is stronger than three threads standing alone,” Esarhod said. Something slammed into Naya’s back so she lost her grip on the camel and stumbled forward.

Darkness swallowed her. She felt Ashael and Hezek stagger in after her. Concentrating, she called up a flame to hover in mid-air above her outstretched hand. With no fuel or receptacle, the flame sputtered out, but she saw something in the darkness besides Ashael and Hezek. Naya called up the flame again.

“I see it!” Ashael took a step, and the light died, plunging them back into darkness.

He grunted. Naya heard stumbling footsteps and then the clatter of wood rolling across a rough stone floor.

“I have something. Feels like wood. More light.” He sounded smugly triumphant. Naya grinned into the darkness.

She called up another flame. Ashael knelt on the cave floor perhaps ten steps away from her. Naya took two steps toward him and he got to his feet before the light went out.

“I found some wood, too,” Hezek said. “One more flash, and I think we can all reach each other.”

He was right. Naya’s head hurt from the effort, but she grinned and ignored the throbbing when her next flame caught on the long, knotted stick Ashael held out. Then Hezek’s wood caught. They found more wood for her to make into a torch.

“Now what?” Hezek turned around and held up his torch.

The light became more than their three torches could produce. Naya swallowed hard and turned around, dismayed to see that what they thought was a cave was actually a round, domed room. Men and women in black robes sat in chairs carved from stone, on a platform that ringed the room two man-heights above the stone floor. The stone floor turned to polished tiles. The domed ceiling glistened with ribs of

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gold set with geometric designs of ebony, silver, and rubies.

Their three rough wood torches turned into oil lamps, and the smoke they gave off smelled of incense. Naya carefully put down her lamp, and the others followed suit. She had striven to keep herself clean and neat, but right this moment, she felt wrinkled, grubby, dusty, and sweaty. Like a child who had played in the streets in her festival clothes and had no time to change before the king came to visit.

“So this is the fire priestess,” a silvery-voiced woman said from behind Naya. “Gifts are never given by Matrika unless there will soon be a need. Are you ready to serve?”

“I’m ready to learn. Whether I am ever ready to serve is up to the Mother,” Naya replied.

“For such a small one, she has big teeth,” a man said. His voice was rich and rolling, like someone who laughed often.

Naya decided she didn’t like him.

“You think quickly and you work well together,” Esarhod said, coming through the solid stone wall into the room.

Illusion, you think? Hezek asked. His mental voice sounded soft, as if he tried to whisper. Naya doubted they could communicate anything privately here.

“You are most welcome, Ashael and Hezek. You aren’t arrogant, but neither are you fawning fools who don’t know how to think for yourselves. A refreshing change,” the woman said. The room turned, bringing the speaker into their view.

Definitely illusion, Ashael said.

Does she mean it’s refreshing that we’re not arrogant, or refreshing that we’re not brainless fools? Hezek met Naya’s glance, and winked.

“Fawning fools, I said.” The woman smiled. She was ivory and creamy white, like fresh roses, all but her eyes, which were a pale blue tending toward violet. Her long hair hung in two thick braids past her waist, crystalline white in stark contrast to the night sky black of her

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robes.

Reydon's words returned to Naya, and a dropping sensation in the pit of her stomach, as she realized this woman's appearance was a taste of her own future.

"Yes, you are being purified," the woman said, as if Naya had spoken to her. "Enough." She clapped her hands. "I say the testing is over."

So there were supposed to be more levels after this, Ashael said. Thank the Mother we're free of that. I'm hot and dirty and starving.

"Your entire stay here shall be testing, young scribes," Esarhod said. "You two will come with me. Fire priestess, you are to go with Hanrah." He nodded to the woman.

"What is to become of Commander Asqual and his men?" she asked, when the cousins followed Esarhod through the solid wall.

"They are well. You are no longer their concern, and they are no longer yours," Hanrah said.

"Friends are always a concern," Naya retorted.

Perhaps that wasn't the right attitude to take, but she didn't care. She would not allow the mysticism and elitism of the priesthood to discourage her. Chizhedek didn't tolerate it among the priests who served under him in Bainevah, and Hagath didn't allow his healers to consider themselves superior. Naya had no authority here, but she could still choose how others would affect her.

"Hmm. True. But there are some things more important than friendship. Or even more important than blood ties. Serving the Three, for example."

"The Three serve the Mother, and the Mother serves the Unseen," Naya said. "If one service is blasphemy against the others, how shall we then choose?"

Hanrah's eyes widened. She tipped her head to one side to consider Naya. Then her lips curved slightly in a smile that didn't comfort the

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younger woman at all.

“You shall do very well. But then, I expected no less of the daughter of the High Priest. Tell me, in the choice between the Mother’s will and what your father says is right, how shall you choose?”

Naya opened her mouth to answer, then she caught the subtle ways those words could be interpreted. She nodded, realizing this was just another phase of the testing. Perhaps all of life was testing, especially for those who served Matrika?

“Do the Mother’s words come through others, or directly to me, in my heart, in the ancient words of wisdom? Do my father’s words come to me directly from his lips, or from others? Each situation is different. There is no one answer that can cover them all.”

“True.” Hanrah nodded and gestured at a doorway that appeared in the wall of the domed room. “Come, priestess. Let us see how well you weave and what the Mother chooses to show us through the threads of your life.”

* * *

They can probably hear everything we’re saying. Ashael didn’t sound worried, only tired.

Seven days, almost a full moon quarter, had passed since the three had arrived at the Hidden City. Naya’s days sped by in blurs highlighted by moments of delight. Her first visit to the dye rooms, with hundreds of shades of color to use. The library, with thousands of scrolls, wax tablets, and metal plates inscribed with important events and prophecies. The sentinel towers, rising above the canyons of the Hidden City, revealing the landscape in all its severe beauty for hundreds of leagues in all directions.

She spent her days alone and Naya welcomed the solitude and freedom to think and learn and experiment. She paid for that freedom, however, with rigorous questioning each evening. Hanrah studied the

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weavings Naya had brought with her and questioned everything, down to the very thickness of the threads and the hues of the dyes she chose. Everything Naya read, she had to recount to the priestess, and her thoughts about those records and prophecies and theological debates. Everything happened and existed for a reason, and she was required to think and explore and learn so she could discern that reason.

Ashael and Hezek spent their days exploring the collected memories of the mind scribes. They recorded what they saw, to compare with the actual records, and then copied written records, so nothing would be lost. Ten copies were made of every scroll, tablet, and plate and carried off in scattered directions, for hiding and safekeeping. The chore never ended because scrolls were brought back in for more copying, to replace deteriorating records.

Naya's back ached from sitting, and her fingers were dry and raw from the threads, while the two cousins had headaches from reaching into other minds and their fingers had cramps and were constantly stained with ink.

Tonight was the first time they had the strength to meet in their thoughts. Meeting in the dreamrealm was beyond them, so they communicated simply by voices in each other's minds.

I don't care if they can hear us or not, Naya responded. Were you planning on saying something no one else should hear?

No. Not unless Hezek decides to start courting you.

Who has the energy? Hezek chimed in.

The three friends laughed. Their humor gave Naya a little energy. She hoped the cousins were only teasing. She didn't want to have their friendship ruined with courting silliness.

As the days flew by, the three grew used to their tasks and routines and found time to meet, usually for meals or to study together. The cousins taught Naya the trick of disguises, with clothes and cosmetics, changing her posture and walk and voice. She found it great fun.

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Since neither Hanrah nor Esarhod disapproved, Naya, Ashael, and Hezek continued in their games. For all they knew, their keepers approved.

* * *

Fourth Descent Moon

As Naya proved her skills, she earned the right to work by herself in the dye room. She worked late in the dye room, less than a moon before the first snows, the night Dia became flesh.

Long wads of flax and wool hung from racks, dripping out the first batch of dye with solid, heavy plops. Narrow bundles of triple-dyed, spun threads dripped in rapid, tiny spatters. Naya listened to the sounds, point and counterpoint as she scrubbed the dye from her hands and smoothed in protective cream. The humid, acrid fumes of the dye vats created a haze in the dim, torchlit air. She rather liked the closed-in feeling, the warmth and the solitude.

She turned away from the table with its pots of creams and bleaches, and saw the girl standing behind her.

“Hello.” She smiled, startled at the striking resemblance to her childhood friend.

The girl couldn’t be an acolyte. Her dress was simple but finely made; pale green with a dark blue and gold abstract design woven into the hem. Acolytes wore gray roughspun, because all the messy work they did ruined finer clothes.

“Do you like being alone?” the girl asked.

She had a long face, with a wide mouth made for smiling and freckles across her nose. Her hip-length, perfectly straight hair was pale gold with a reddish cast and glowed in the dim light. She wore it parted down the middle, held back with a cloth band that matched the border of her dress.

“It’s the only time I’m able to think.” Naya wondered how long the

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girl had been watching her.

“Ah. I think they’d be happier if we never thought.” Her pleasant expression turned somber. “I need to ask a mighty favor of you, Naya. I tremble to do it, but I know I must. Matrika formed you for this task.”

“I don’t understand.” She shivered, wondering how this stranger knew her name. The only answer opened a world of possibilities.

“You’re not like the others. You want to learn, and you care about serving Matrika. The others are too busy proving how important they are, to think about anyone but themselves. They certainly don’t think about us.”

“Us?”

“My family. Would you like to meet them?” She held out her hand, beckoning. “You asked about them when we played together, but I never told you much.”

“Dia.” Naya went to her knees, breathless.

“Yes, my dear, only friend. I’m real. You believed in me when you were a child, and it let me reach beyond my prison and taste a little life again. You’ve given me a precious gift, and I sorrow to ask so much of you.”

“Your name isn’t really Dia, is it?”

“It really is, but only you and my family have used my name for so long.” Dia held out her hand. “Come. Please?”

“We’re going to explore the Hidden City, just like you promised when we were children?” Naya concentrated on that idea to put strength back in her body.

“That, and much more. You do trust me, don’t you?”

When Naya nodded, Dia’s face brightened and she laughed. The sound created a tickling warmth that moved through Naya’s chest and into her belly, and soothed the strain aches in her back and arms. She gave her hand into Dia’s grasp and they ran, fleeing the dye house as if priests chased them.

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They went through a door Naya had never seen before and down a shadowy passageway into a warm, golden light. Naya couldn't find it in herself to question any of this.

"Graia?" Dia called as they emerged from the light into a wide room.

"You've brought her. Thank Matrika she has come at long last." The woman who spoke had a creaky, whispery voice.

Naya looked around the room, seeking the source of the voice. Oil lamps hung from arching wooden rafters, spilling golden and silver light in puddles across a room larger than the reception hall of the Healers Temple. The oil was scented, refreshing like healing herbs. Low couches full of pillows sat around a central fire pit. Apple wood filled the air with sweet smoke. A pot of cinnamon tea steamed on one side, and a covered cauldron of stew gave out a spicy, beef-and-vegetables aroma.

This looked like the center of the family's household, a comfortable, welcoming spot. Naya imagined sitting around that fire pit with her parents, and homesickness slapped her so hard, she had to bite a knuckle to keep from bursting out in tears.

"She's a good girl," the ancient voice whispered. "Offer her something to drink."

Something sparkled in the opposite corner. Through the layers of shadows and light, Naya saw a tall chair. The sparkle came from a large spindle as it twirled and fell, twisting and forming thread. A flick of the wrist brought it flying back up to the hand of a tiny, white-haired woman. Her clear, luminous green eyes were visible even from so far across the room.

Dia led Naya to the couches. While her hostess ladled from the pot of tea, Naya looked around more. Eight looms, one for each day of the moon quarter, with projects in various stages, sat in a cluster near the lady. Along the wall by the door Naya had come through, six wide

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cauldrons sat on tripods over empty fire pits. Clay jars lined the shelves behind the cauldrons, and bundles of dried herbs and flowers hung from the ceiling. This house held the three stages of clothmaking—thread, color, and weaving.

“Here.” Dia pressed a pottery cup into Naya’s hands. She laughed, the sound warming, when Naya hesitated, feeling lost. “It’s all right. Follow the thought to where it leads you,” she whispered, and guided the cup to Naya’s lips.

Naya let the warm, spicy liquid roll over her tongue. It burned down her throat and spread fire through her belly and then into her blood.

“She’s strong. The Lady is gracious,” the old woman murmured. She settled on the couch next to Naya.

Graia was tiny and white-haired, but her ivory-colored skin had a clarity and softness many young women would have envied. She took Naya’s hand in a strong grip. Her fingers were long, muscular, warm, and steady. She wore silver-gray robes like mist, with a fine texture only the rich could afford.

“This is your home?” Naya looked between old woman and young. Dia nodded and Graia merely smiled. “It’s large enough to be a temple.”

“Every home should be a temple, dedicated to purity of heart and purpose and protection,” Graia said, nodding.

“You make the threads.” Naya waited for the elderly woman to nod. “You weave?” She wasn’t surprised when Dia bowed her head. “Does your father make the dyes and choose the colors?”

“Anrach listens for the voice of the Mother and makes colors with the materials she gives to him,” Graia corrected.

“This place cannot be where I think it is.” Naya studied the tea remaining in her cup. “I have seen the Hidden City, from the highest watchtower. The doors we went through and the passage we walked do not exist in the Hidden City.”

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“Perhaps.” Graia nodded to her granddaughter. Her full, pale lips smiled wider and those emerald eyes gleamed.

“Are you the Three?” Naya said.

“We are two,” Dia said.

“Child.” Graia’s tone scolded, but merriment danced in her eyes.

“Why have you brought me here?” Naya whispered.

“Because you are my friend.” Dia settled on a pillow at Naya’s feet. “I think you are the one we have been waiting for.”

“Me?” Naya bit her tongue to keep from asking, “why me?” or “can’t you find someone else?” “Aren’t any of your priests...” She wasn’t quite sure what to say without being insulting.

“They don’t listen,” Graia said. “Those who don’t fear us have decided that what they *want* to believe is more true than what we have tried to tell them for decades on decades.”

“We stopped talking to them,” Dia added. “We asked Mother Matrika for someone to help us, to take our warnings to Bainevah and find a way out of our prison.”

“Your prison?” She looked around the vast room once again. She could believe it had once been a temple.

“We created it through our own pride,” a man said.

A gust of wind that smelled of mountain meadows swirled through the room, disturbing hair and clothes, stirring flames from the coals, making the warp weights tinkle in clashing chords. Then the shadows beyond the fire congealed and turned into a man. He was dark-haired, dark-eyed, wearing the leather boots and leggings of the herders who chased their goats among the steep ravines, brambles, and scorpions. His tunic was long, of heavy cloth, but finely embroidered with figures of people plucking shells from the sea bed to make expensive purple dye. The pictures seemed to move. Naya tore her gaze away.

His cloak hung from one shoulder and a bulging leather satchel from the other. He put it down on the floor behind a couch. Then he

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dropped his cloak across the couch and raked a long-fingered hand through his thick, tangled curls. Dia had his face, softened by youth, and he had his mother's mouth and the shape of her hands.

"How am I to serve you?" Naya asked. She struggled to get to her feet, feeling awkward and unschooled.

"Do not serve us," Anrach said with a sigh. He sat and Dia hurried to fill a bowl with stew for him. Steaming, fragrant bread full of herbs came from a basket sitting a few steps from the fire. "We are prisoners because we are so highly revered."

"The power that Matrika gains from adoration, from true worship and obedience." Dia sighed and dropped down on the couch next to her father. Anger flattened her lips. "The priests should aid us, not worship us. We are only a higher level of priests, not demi-gods. We accepted worship that didn't belong to us, and that worship isolated us. Our priests no longer listen to us. We cannot control or use the power that belongs to Matrika, to protect and bless Bainevah. It gathers around us, like a wall. A prison wall."

"The walls grow thicker and our home smaller every generation. We once had an entire world, something like the dreamrealm you and your friends explore." Graia smiled, a twinkle of mischief in her eyes, when her words startled Naya. "Now, we are limited to this house, the mountainside and forest where Anrach gathers his materials, and the fields where we gather the wool and flax for my thread. When they are lost to us, when this house shrinks even more, what shall we do?"

"When the power that belongs to Matrika does not go to her, it warps. Enemies among the demi-gods can use it against her," Anrach said, his voice a low rumble. "We must destroy this prison before her enemies learn to use us against her. Before the demi-gods finally punish us for stealing her worship."

"But you are not taking it," Naya protested.

"Not now. But we did, once." Graia shook her head. "We foolishly

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welcomed the adoration. We thought we were too important to tend to our own daily needs. We once had a lovely, simple home. Then, we put ourselves into a temple. And that is where we must live.” She gestured around.

Naya’s face warmed, recalling how she had admired the spacious house. “What do you want me to do? How do you know I can help you?” She set down her empty cup. “It can’t be so simple as to destroy the prison with fire. Can it?”

“If only.” Anrach grinned, and Naya glimpsed the hearty peasant he had been centuries ago, before power refined him. “The walls must be toppled from outside. Either by an enemy or by those who worship truth and Matrika more than us.”

“What can I do?”

“Speak the truth. Reveal us as foolish, arrogant, and unworthy. A beating from those who love us is better than gifts from enemies,” Dia said. “Better that we should become mortal and die, than to become weapons against Matrika.”

CHAPTER 12

For the next three moon quarters, Dia came for Naya every other night. Sometimes they sat in the temple-turned-home, talking and theorizing. Naya learned of the life Graia, Anrach, and Dia lived before the attack from Maquaos Shadowmaker that changed their lives. She walked with Dia and Anrach on the mountainside of the dreamrealm. It saddened her that no animals roamed there as they once did. She pitied the family who had repented of their folly decades ago, and yet still paid the price. It angered Naya that the priests of the Three had so much power. Whenever Chizhedek found priests under him who spoke devotion to Matrika, yet ignored her teachings, he stripped them of their duties and authority. According to Graia, everyone who had ever suggested that worshiping the Three was sacrilege had been ostracized and punished by the priesthood.

Naya knew the family warned her with those stories. After several visits, she understood they would not be angry if she turned her back on

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them out of fear.

“I will not give up this duty you give me,” she said, on the night of her tenth visit. “Even if Hanrah and the others try to kill me, I must do this. You have been punished enough—”

“Who but the Unseen can say what is enough?” Anrach said with a crooked smile and a snort of wry laughter.

“Matrika believes it is enough, or she wouldn’t have given me such gifts and wouldn’t have sent me to you.” Naya shook her head. “I will do this. I swear it. My life, and the lives of my children after me, I dedicate to this task.”

A wind roared through the house, nearly smothering the fire. The clay pots rattled against each other on the shelves, the warp weights chimed and the tile floor rippled under her. Naya heard the hollow echo in her words seconds after they left her lips.

“So spoken. So witnessed. So sealed,” Graia whispered.

“It is time, Grandmother,” Dia said.

“Indeed, it is.” The old woman nodded, tears in her eyes, and smiled. “The priests will have a sign given to them, and refuse to accept it. In the morning, dear child, you will wake with a tool and a weapon and a burden. Only you will be able to bear it. No one will be able to take it from you. And if you do not accomplish your task in your lifetime, then your child will bear it after you. But no one else.”

Naya knew better than to say she didn’t understand, or to ask for explanation. That would come in time.

* * *

Naya woke the next morning with her hand curled around a spindle of golden wood, sparkling as if dusted with diamonds, small enough to fit in her cupped hands. The sharp end of the spindle made it a weapon. How could it be a burden?

After she dressed, she tucked the spindle into her belt pouch that usually held her noon meal, a wax tablet for taking notes, and other bits

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and pieces she might need. A nimbus gathered around the spindle, lighting the inside of the pouch and she smiled to see it. A tiny part of her had doubted her visits with the family had been anything more than wonderful dreams. This spindle was proof that solidified her vows. Perhaps that made it a tool and weapon, even more than the obvious?

Ashael and Hezek reached the refectory before Naya. They waved her over to join them at their table, but didn't call. A thick silence filled the wide room, despite the unusual number of people there at that time of the morning. She wondered about that as she chose her breakfast from the platters of fruit, meat, and bread laid out on two long tables in the center of the room.

Everywhere she looked, black robes hunched over tables and heads leaned close together as priests conferred. Naya couldn't make out expressions, but the general atmosphere was of great concern. She quickly filled a bowl with hot, sweet-spiced mash, another with fruit, and hurried to join her friends. She saw Shanda and Enku sitting in a corner, but she hesitated to approach them. They were friends, but Naya sensed the higher levels of the priesthood frowned on that friendship.

“What happened?” she whispered when she took her seat.

“We wish we knew. We're afraid to talk aloud, but when we try to talk,” Ashael tapped his forehead, “someone glares as if we tried to eavesdrop.”

“Did you?” she asked, and couldn't repress a grin.

Hezek choked on a mouthful of mash. He clamped both hands over his mouth to keep from spraying. Ashael was better at putting on an innocent mask. Hezek turned redder when Naya cocked a cynical eyebrow at the protestations of innocence. Finally, Ashael rolled his eyes, grinned, and nodded.

“If they can hear us mind-speak, maybe they're so sensitive it sounds like we're shouting?” she offered.

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“Whatever happened, it had the early risers frantic.” Ashael gestured around the room at the knots of priests, gathered in groups of four or five.

“Did you hear anything?” Hezek added.

“Everything seemed quiet enough when I got up.” Naya shrugged and applied herself to her food.

She wondered what it was like for Dia to be considered divine. Did she have a sweetheart before her family earned immortality by battling a demi-god? Had she lost him through the passage of time, or had the boy been frightened away? Naya imagined Dia sneaking away to steal kisses or dance during festivals.

“You slept late,” Hezek said, breaking the thoughtful silence filling the hall. “Working late again?”

“Something like that.” Naya thought of the spindle in her belt pouch. What better way to start fulfilling her vow than here, with friends? “Imagine a place like the dreamrealm, but real, separate from this world. Beyond time. Where you don’t grow old or sick. Where all your needs are provided.”

“If we can make places for ourselves in the dreamrealm, what’s to stop the demi-gods from making better places?” Ashael’s mouth dropped open and his eyes widened. “Did you—did you figure out how to go there?”

“No.” She almost laughed when both cousins gave her disappointed looks. “I’ve been taken there.”

“Taken.” Hezek put his cup down with a thud loud enough to make several nearby priests turn to scowl at them.

The three hunched over their table, putting their heads closer together. Naya pressed a finger to her lips for silence, then reached into her pouch and brought out the spindle.

The light streaming through the high windows glistened on the sparkling wood. A cool breeze swirled through the room, tugged on her

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braid, tumbled a few crumbs on the table, and hummed against the curved edges, like wind across harp strings.

“Who gave that to you?” Ashael asked. He reached out one shaking finger to stroke a flat edge of the spiral.

“Guess.”

“May I?” Hezek’s hand shook slightly as he held it out.

Naya reached across the table to hand the spindle to him.

“Where did you get that?” Hanrah’s usually melodic voice clattered against the walls. She raced toward them, sleeves flapping like vulture wings. Priests sprang from their tables and gathered in her wake like detritus in a windstorm.

Naya stood, cradling the spindle in both hands, grateful when the cousins took up positions on either side of her. They kept the table between them and the oncoming horde of priests. Naya wished they had chosen a table by a door.

“Where did you get that?” Hanrah pressed one hand over her heart. She was paler than usual, with two bright spots of color as if deathly frightened.

“It was given to me in the night,” Naya answered truthfully.

“Such is not for you to handle.” She held out both hands. “Give it to me before any more damage is done to the temple.”

Naya hesitated. This was Graia’s gift, to aid in fulfilling her vow. Years of obedience in the temple were too strong, however. She held out the spindle and slid it into Hanrah’s hands, reaching over the table.

The woman screamed and yanked her hands away. The spindle fell. Naya cried out, frightened by the thin streaks of blood on Hanrah’s fingers. The spindle hit the table with a reverberating crash, then the shriek of wood splintering. The table collapsed, split down the middle. Plates flew, splattering the surrounding priests with food. Floor tiles cracked, and pieces flew in every direction. Nothing hit Naya, though her two friends dove to avoid the flying detritus. She stood still, staring

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at the spindle, which now sat half-buried in the floor.

“To each is given a burden,” Naya whispered. Everyone flinched as the hollow resonance in her voice echoed through the room. “It is wrong to take up a burden that is not yours. It is wrong to forbid another to carry the burden given by Matrika. Interfere, and you will trip over that burden and be broken by it. Persist, and it will fall on you and shatter you and scatter you like common dust in the wind.”

* * *

Naya carried the spindle to the innermost temple, with an escort of silent, grim-faced priests. Then she understood.

The sacred spindle no longer hung above the altar, as Enku had described it to her moons ago. Golden, jagged pieces lay scattered across the floor around the shattered altar. Naya imagined the sound the spindle made when it fell, shattering across the painted tile floor.

“When did this happen?” she asked, and tightened her grip on the small spindle in her hands.

“In the night. No one knows when,” Hanrah said.

Only a handful of priests followed them inside to the altar. The rest stayed outside the barrier of tall pillars resembling the braces and sidebars of a loom. They watched Naya, their eyes and too-quiet faces unreadable.

Who broke the spindle? Enemies, or Graia?

Naya’s lips curved into a smile. Strange, how she could only think of the family as Dia, Graia, and Anrach—not as the Three. Her duty was to convince Bainevah they were not divine.

“No one heard the crash?” It felt strange, yet right, to ask questions like an official investigating a crime.

“Everyone heard it, but no one...” Hanrah sighed and closed her eyes, her ageless look giving way to weariness. She had likely been awake since before dawn. “No one thought the sound came from here. This place is inviolate. We have enclosed this place with walls formed

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from our devotion and will.”

“It was done from inside,” Naya whispered. She opened her hands, raising them so everyone could see the spindle glowing softly on her joined palms. “Thread Woman shattered the spindle, because it was hers to shatter. She gave this to me as proof that I speak her words. The Three wish to return to the days when they were only servants in the temple. When time had a beginning and an ending. Do you know, even immortals dream of never-ending sleep?”

“Who are you to speak that way?” a priest standing behind Naya growled.

“A Bride who blessed all of Bainevah because Matrika approved of her,” Hanrah answered, speaking just as softly as Naya had. “Weave for us. Show us your dream.”

“It was no dream.” Naya cradled the spindle close against her breasts, as if it were a child.

Dia wanted to have children. She had confided that to Naya only a few nights ago. Because she was unable to have children, in her anger she had cursed the inhabitants of the Hidden City so no one there could have children either. Dia had warned Naya that the longer she stayed in the Hidden City, the harder it would be for her to have children once she left. Naya had laughed quietly at that. Why did it matter? She would never marry if she couldn’t capture Shazzur’s heart. The only children she would ever want were his.

“Not a dream.” Naya stroked one thin curving edge. Some gasped or muttered when she didn’t cut her finger.

“Then tell us where this spindle came from.” Impatience crept into Hanrah’s voice. Humility didn’t last long with her.

“I have been ordered to tell you who gave it to me, and what duty they placed on me.” She slipped the spindle into her belt pouch. “Could we sit? This may take a while.”

They returned to the refectory. More priests joined them, but not

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Ashael and Hezek. Naya called to them with her mind. As mind scribes, it was their duty to record and remember.

Draw them for me, she begged, and recalled the sounds, colors, and faces of the isolated, suffering family.

Then Naya began at the dye vats and told the priests all the events of the first night she saw Dia in the flesh. She didn't describe the house and belongings of the family, only their faces, voices, and words. Their words were far more important, and what the priests needed to hear.

Naya ended with Graia's words and waking to find the spindle on her pillow. She reached for the cup someone had filled for her at the beginning and drank half of it in three swallows. Then she folded her hands on her lap and waited.

Silence enfolded her. Naya thought of the silent, invisible walls that enclosed Dia's family. Was that what death was like? Silence and isolation, shrinking until nothing was left but thought, and even that compressed until it could go nowhere? She shuddered and reached for her cup again.

"Heresy," a man said, so softly, no one reacted to the single word that broke the silence.

"She only reports what she saw," Hanrah said.

"Then she was deceived," a woman said.

"A false vision? Inside the Hidden City?" Shanda said. She and Enku had taken seats next to Naya.

"No false vision can come past our defenses. The dream must be true," Enku said, nodding.

"Not a dream," Naya said.

"If someone can shatter the holy spindle and attack the heart of the temple to the Three, they can deceive an untrained priestess," the first man retorted.

Untrained? Hezek squawked, making Naya jump in her seat. *I'll show them untrained! You have a stronger voice and show clearer*

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images than most of those dead-heads we have to See.

Peace, Cousin, Ashael said. They think they're experts on reality.

That's all the thinking they do.

You won't make things any easier for me if anyone hears you, Naya said.

It's the truth, Ashael continued. Anyone looking into your memories can tell it was real. I've Seen into people who were tricked with illusions, with drugs or false visions. I can tell the difference, even if they can't.

You'll vouch for me? She blinked back tears at the sudden relief that slashed her, both painful and freeing.

"Such messages have come in the past," Enku said.

"Yes, and the Three retreat more from us each time some fool believes those lies. They used to speak with every priest who came to serve," Esarhod snarled. "They used to walk among us. Now we only see Weaver Girl when she brings a tapestry. Always pictures of doom. She warns us not to listen to those who would destroy the worship of the Three."

"She begs for the worship to end, so they can be set free," Naya retorted.

"Child." Hanrah held out placating hands. "Please, trust us. Don't destroy yourself by holding faith with this vision. It is false. We have had experience with such trickery. Read the records of what has happened when others claimed the Three spoke to them, advocating the destruction of their worship."

"Excellent idea," Mahanor said from his seat far to Naya's left. "Have her study the records, so she can learn from the tragedies of others without suffering the same herself."

Naya bit her tongue to keep from protesting. She had come to the Hidden City to study, hadn't she? A little solitude might be good for her soul.

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She would use that time to find weapons for this battle the Three had sent her to fight. Esarhod was partially right. Every time the Three sent someone to advocate their release, the situation grew worse, but it did so *because* the messenger was labeled a heretic and punished.

The other priests accepted Mahanor's suggestion eagerly. Naya imagined they hoped such a task would silence her. She vowed, whatever they threw at her, she would turn into a weapon against them.

"Now, as to the new spindle," Esarhod began, when that matter had been settled. "It must replace the broken one. We are the only worthy guardians of gifts from the Three."

"If the new spindle is from the Three at all," someone muttered from the edge of the crowd.

"One step at a time. Let the temple be cleared. Then let us see if it will accept the new spindle," Hanrah said. "Does anyone know how the first spindle was hung?"

"Who will clean the shrine?" Mahanor turned to look directly at Naya. "If she can lift the new spindle, then she is the one to clean away the wreckage of the old one."

It makes sense, Hezek offered, before Naya could even protest in the privacy of her mind. *You're the only one who can touch the blessed, dangerous thing.*

Naya was too tired to retort. She chose to retreat from the discussion before someone decided everything was her fault.

* * *

"Oh." Enku stopped in the gap between the pillars that guarded the altar. "You already have help."

"What little we're able to give her," Ashael said with a shrug. He and Hezek swept the pavement around the shrine and tried to repair the tiles after Naya removed the shattered remains of the spindle.

Just as only Naya could carry the smaller spindle, only she could move the pieces of the broken one. The curved lengths of the spindle

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were as smooth and light as well-seasoned, fine-grained wood when she held them. If she dropped them, they cracked the pavement.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Shanda asked, stepping up next to her husband.

Naya was grateful she had made friends with them on the journey here. Otherwise, she would have lumped all the priests of the Three into one unpleasant bundle. She had watched them laughing and talking together, still delighted with each other after twenty years of marriage. She envied them. Would she ever find someone whom she matched so well? Her heart always gave the same answer to that question—Shazzur. Perhaps, as she had vowed to fight an impossible fight for Dia and her family’s freedom, she should fight for Shazzur’s heart.

Naya bent to pick up the last long piece and cradled it in her arms. “I wish I could have seen this hanging above the altar. How was it hung? I can’t imagine.”

“The Three hung it on invisible threads.” Enku gestured at the open expanse above the altar.

“The wind and rain never come in here,” Shanda added, “so there must be a roof even if we can’t see it.”

“Just like you couldn’t see the threads the spindle hung on.” Naya nodded. It made sense. Graia was mistress of threads.

“Don’t let the spindle leave your possession,” Enku said. “As long as you hold it, you can use it as protection.”

Naya opened her mouth to protest, stunned by the thought of any priest of Bainevah threatening her. Then she thought better of it. The priests refused to listen to the Three, yet denounced as heretics anyone who spoke messages sent by the Three. What made her think they would abide by the standards of honesty and honor her father demanded as High Priest?

Bainevah, the central temple and her parents were far away. Had she depended on her parents’ status to protect her all her life? Had she

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been a fool?

“It seems wrong to carry it with me like a...a bauble or a toy,” she murmured.

“If Thread Woman gave it to you, what makes you think anyone else should have it?” Hezek offered, his voice pitched soft, almost hesitant.

* * *

Fifth Descent Moon

Being consigned to solitary studies and research in the deepest bowels of the archives was meant as punishment. Naya didn't care. The records of the words and actions of supposed heretics fascinated her. She read until her eyes were dry and bloodshot and her head ached. She brought jars of water and packets of food with her to the archives, so she wouldn't lose time going to meals. Only Hezek, Ashael, Shanda, and Enku noticed that she didn't come to the refectory. No one else came looking for her. She appreciated the quiet. The alternative was to be badgered from morning to nightfall to recant. Hezek and Ashael called to her, mind-to-mind on a regular basis, to make sure she was all right, but she saw no one else, spoke to no one else.

Dia came every night in her dreams, to encourage her.

After two moon quarters, Esarhod and Mahanor visited the archives. They weren't happy when Naya reported the histories supported the message given to her. Every time the priests silenced someone who spoke what they considered heresy, the Three withdrew a little more. Naya told them what Dia had told her—the Three had not withdrawn, but rather their prison had grown thicker.

The two men told her to continue her studies, because she had not reached the correct conclusion.

* * *

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“Lord Shazzur? Would you permit us to disturb you?”

“It’s no disturbance at all.” Shazzur sat back in his chair and tried not to smile too widely at the two priests in the doorway of the study given over to his use.

After more than a moon as a pampered guest in the Hidden City, he had grown heartily tired of privilege. Shazzur had nothing to do all day but indulge in historical study. He rarely left the comfortable apartments set aside for the king’s family and friends. The priests competed for the opportunity to serve him, seeking out obscure scrolls and references, fetching his meals, anything that would make his stay comfortable.

He was heartily bored and wished someone would say no to him, so he could be sure he hadn’t gone to some obscure realm of torture where he was never allowed to do anything but think.

“What can I do to assist you?” he asked.

“Assist. Yes.” Mahanor stepped forward. “As King’s Seer, you are the highest authority in visions and prophecies. A novice claims to have been visited by the Three, with a message that is pure heresy. No matter how we try to enlighten her, she insists the delusion is the truth and that we are wrong.”

“You want me to speak with her and tear holes in the fabric of her delusion.” Shazzur nodded. He had been asked several times to handle just such a problem. The worst part of the task was crushing the joy of the one who had dreamed the false dream or saw the false sign. He hated that.

“Would it be too great an imposition? Surely someone with your wisdom and stature would impress her and make her see the truth.” Esarhod bowed. He had a nervous habit of sticking his hands into his sleeves that irritated Shazzur.

“Why won’t she listen to you, her teachers and superiors?”

“Ah, that is part of the problem. She was sent here to study. She is

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arrogant, thinking she needs to learn nothing, because her parents are priests.” Mahanor snorted. “Surely the King’s Seer will command respect.”

“How old is this novice?” Shazzur stood.

“Little more than a child.” Esarhod sniffed. “Will you require an escort?”

“I believe I can protect myself against a child throwing temper tantrums.” Shazzur doubted the novice in question would do any such thing. Several trips to the Hidden City had taught him distrust for these two leaders of the priests. His dislike of them grew when they smiled at his response. What did they have against the girl, to try to turn him against her?

Shazzur learned which archives the girl had been immured in and headed down into the tunnels. He used a childhood trick, creating a light to float ahead of him instead of a lamp and walked down stairs and through tunnels. And down more stairs, until he thought he had walked halfway across the Hidden City, underground. His conjured light faded when other light lay ahead. He caught a glimpse of movement, color against the grays and blacks and shadows.

“Please, Dia,” a slightly hoarse female voice said from the spot of light up ahead. “I could use some company.”

A long, gusting sigh made Shazzur smile. He understood the weariness and exasperation riding on that sound. Then his smile faded as the voice struck him as familiar.

“Oh, don’t be such a ninny,” she continued. “You’ve been given a duty—follow it. Who would you rather have pleased with you? A bunch of priests who haven’t seen the real world in decades, or the Three?”

“The Three, of course,” Shazzur called. “Unless, of course, their words contradict what the Mother has told us.”

Silence. No scurrying feet, no scrolls tumbling. He imagined the

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novice frozen, shocked at the intrusion. He approached the doorway, the hall lit now only by the light streaming from her lamps.

“Who are you?” She didn’t wait for him to respond. “It’s only fair to warn you, I can defend myself. Fire isn’t wise in a place like this—but half these wretched scrolls are no longer legible, anyway, so what does it matter?”

Shazzur halted when his chest—and groin—tightened in recognition. It couldn’t be, yet if Naya were truly there ahead of him, everything suddenly made sense.

No wonder King Nebazz had been so frustrated with him when he let so many concerns delay his departure for an entire moon. It wasn’t an easy matter to simply walk away from his duties as First Adviser and King’s Seer. Shazzur had to arrange for people to organize and decipher the information that came to him each day, to divert petitioners to other members of the Council or to priests and scribes who could help them. He had to arrange for his household to be provided for while he was gone.

If no one else in Bainevah knew where Naya had been sent for protection, King Nebazz would know. Shazzur grinned, feeling a warm surge of gratitude for the young king’s support.

Shazzur now understood the frustration of these priests. They couldn’t argue Naya out of her beliefs. Hadn’t she been trained to debate by her own father, Shazzur, and scribes who gathered in her parents’ home? Naya had a sure grounding in the faith and philosophy of Bainevah, simply by hearing such things discussed all her life. She didn’t need to study.

Naya, as a Bride and a recipient of visions, would not be fooled by a false vision. What was simple certainty and loyalty in her, Esarhod and his friends saw as arrogant stubbornness.

“I was asked to examine your claims about your vision,” Shazzur said.

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“You’ve already decided against me, then.” Naya stepped into the doorway, framed by the flickering light behind her.

Shazzur nearly stopped again. Her hair gleamed like the purest white gold. Her features had grown thinner, more refined. Her movements looked smoother, more flowing. The flame of Matrika lived inside and purified her. For how long? Until she was eaten hollow and there was nothing left but the power?

“How do you know I have decided against you?” he countered.

“You say I had a vision. I say I did speak to the Three.”

He spread his arms in a gesture of conciliation, and grinned. “Forgive me, little Naya.”

She gasped and darted backwards from the doorway, so he could no longer see her. Shazzur ran to catch up with her, spurred by a burst of unreasonable panic.

Naya stood with her back against the wall, the broken shaft of a scroll bar raised in her hand as a weapon. Smoke rose off the splintered end, ready to burst into flame.

Her mouth dropped open when he stepped into the light. The wood dropped from her hand and the smoke vanished. Naya laughed, her face brightening in the most beautiful smile Shazzur had ever seen—all for him. Naya spread her arms and ran to him.

An ache like a knife’s thrust shot through his body when Naya flung her arms around him. Shazzur knew he was wrong to indulge, but he folded her close in his arms and breathed deeply of her sweet scent, like sunshine on apple trees at harvest. Her warmth soaked through his robes and he let himself dream of holding Naya in the dark, quiet watches of the night. Watching over her, glorying in the beauty of her spirit and body, entrusted to his care for however long they both lived.

CHAPTER 13

Shazzur forced himself to smile and release Naya. Not by one small gesture would he disobey Chizhedek's prohibition. She must never know how he hungered for her, body and soul.

"What are you doing here?"

"You mean, here in the Hidden City, or here in the archives, facing a stubborn, heretical novice?"

Naya groaned and rolled her eyes and took his hand to lead him across the room. She had made a comfortable little nest for her studies, with a few scavenged chairs and rugs and two wobbly tables to spread out her scrolls and wax tablets, parchment scraps and inkpots. She even had two skins of wine, a loaf of bread, a bowl of raisins, and a jar of oil to refill her lamps.

"I am here," Shazzur said, as they sat, "to continue my studies. These archives contain volumes that have vanished elsewhere in the world. What's wrong?" he hurried to ask, when Naya's smile flattened.

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Did she blink against tears?

“I thought...” Naya shook her head. “I thought you had come to take me home. Silly, isn’t it, hoping such an important man would be sent to fetch me?”

“Not silly at all. I would be honored to fetch the Bride who blessed Bainevah, trusted with visions, the first fire priestess given from the Mother in generations.”

“Flatterer.” The sparkle returned to her eyes.

“Truth is often flattering.” He looked around the room. “They sent me here to talk sense into you. I should talk sense into them, with unkind words.”

“No. You’ve judged them wrong and me right, without hearing what I have to say. That isn’t like you.”

Shazzur had to admit she was right. Did he let his shared past with Naya or his infatuation color his judgment?

“Very well then, Priestess, tell me what happened and what you saw and heard.” He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms and scowled. Naya’s laughter made his heart skip. He clenched his hands into fists to keep from reaching for her.

Soon, his fists relaxed and he forgot everything but the wonder of what Naya revealed to him. He marveled at her face-to-face encounters with the immortal Three and her childhood friendship with Weaver Girl. They were a normal family. Prisoners. Shazzur’s heart told him Naya spoke the truth, and that truth proved theories he had considered for years.

The power that came from obedience and worship made the demigods strong. The guardians of each land could not simply give their people laws and rituals and then walk away, to do what they pleased. They needed to tend the nations the Unseen had put into their care, just like shepherds and farmers tended their flocks and fields. What nourishment came from crops that died of drought or were choked by

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weeds, or sheep that starved or were stolen? Foreign armies often overran the lands of neglectful demi-gods. The people were forced to serve other deities, because theirs had lost power.

“Bainevah’s enemies among the demi-gods profit from this,” Shazzur said, when Naya paused after repeating Graia’s words about her weapon and tool. “The Three are repentant, yet the wall doesn’t fall. Someone keeps it strong and solid.”

“The priesthood keeps it that way,” Naya said. “Whenever someone tells them they’re wrong, that person is labeled a heretic and the prayers, the chants, the worship grow more intense. They are so sure they are right, even if Dia, Graia, and Anrach appeared in front of them, they wouldn’t listen!”

“The Three can’t come, because power comes from belief. The priests believe the Three will not appear, will not speak openly, so, the Three do not. Belief prevents them.”

“And they appeared to me because I believe otherwise.” She shook her head, frowning. “What amazes me is that I have proof in my hands and they won’t accept it. They’re probably still arguing over whether it’s a trap or a blessing.” She reached into the pouch on her belt and brought out a spindle.

Shazzur stared, remembering how the shattering of the temple’s spindle had awakened him from dreams of Naya. His mind spun through implications as she related how she had found the spindle on her pillow, how it cut Hanrah’s hands and dented floors with its weight.

“The Three ensured no one can take away this sign of their trust in you.”

“Then you do believe me,” she whispered.

“I believed first because I know your wisdom, honesty, and the clarity of your vision. Now that you have told me all the details...I could not doubt. The problem now is to convince others of the truth.”

“They think day is night and night is day, and when you point at the

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sun they say it is the moon.” She let the spindle rest on her lap and rubbed at her temples. Shazzur could only imagine the ache from the conundrum plaguing her.

The spindle rolled down her lap. Shazzur lunged to reach for it as it went over her knees. Naya cried out warning.

Silence snapped through the shadowy room. Shazzur stared at the spindle resting lightly in his hands. The spirals glimmered like pure gold. It felt warm, comforting, and not one drop of blood escaped his fingers.

“Are you meant to share this burden?” Naya whispered. “Or has my guardianship ended?”

“Or only those who believe are able to touch it. Can anyone here help us test the theory?” Shazzur carefully climbed back to his feet, holding out the spindle. He imagined the precious object falling from his hands and shattering on the floor.

That evening, Naya introduced him to Ashael and Hezek, and the priestly couple, Shanda and Enku. The cousins touched the spindle without harm, but couldn’t pick it up. Shanda said the spindle burned her fingers when she touched it, but it didn’t cut her. Enku managed to slide his fingers under it and tip it out of Naya’s hands before it grew too heavy.

“They believe.” Naya frowned over the puzzle. “Perhaps they can help, but cannot carry the burden given to us.”

Shazzur smiled, unreasonably proud that she considered him her partner. Now, the question was how to go about fulfilling her mission.

The six of them sat up late that night, discussing the information Naya had found in the archives. Shazzur understood the priesthood’s mindset that blocked belief, no matter how much evidence Naya offered. The priesthood simply couldn’t throw aside the dogma pounded into them since the first day of their novitiate. He admired their tenacity, even as he despaired.

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“We must leave the Hidden City,” he declared, after hours of talking. “Only when we find those who will listen and believe will the current change.”

“Father will believe me, and Hagath, and they will influence the priesthood in the capital,” Naya said, nodding.

“What about the Drevans?” Ashael asked. “We can’t take Naya home if those lizards are still crying out for her blood.”

“The Drevan ambassador went home in disgrace,” Shazzur was happy to tell them. “Lady Anyecta offered her potions to a large number of nobles. High Priest Hagath tested them and found many touched with magic or slow poison, or both. The Drevans in the city are silent, waiting for the outrage to fade. They won’t raise an outcry against you if you return home.”

“They’ll try for vengeance in the future,” Enku said. “Naya destroyed a powerful priestess, full of magic. They don’t take such insults lightly.”

“I don’t like how you think,” Hezek grumbled. He offered a crooked smile. “I’d still like to go home as soon as possible. Naya, could you just...I don’t know, live quietly for a few moons, until we’re sure you’re safe?”

“We?” Naya laughed, tears threatening in her eyes. “When did we become a partnership?”

“Friends do not abandon their friends.” Shazzur rested his hand on hers. He caught his breath, stirred deeply when Naya turned her hand under his, so their palms met and she twined her fingers with his.

“Indeed, we do not,” Enku said. “Ask us, Priestess Naya, and we will leave with you.”

“You should leave,” she whispered, and her smile faded. “Do you want children? Dia said no child will be born here until her family is set free. I was warned that if I did not leave by solstice....” Naya shook her head. “I didn’t care about having children until I was told that I might

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never be able to.”

Shazzur remembered his vision of Naya’s daughter standing as a Bride at the altar of the Sacred Marriage. If that child was never born, would Matrika’s enemies triumph?

* * *

Shazzur gave his verdict to Hanrah, Mahanor, and Esarhod and returned quickly. The ruling trio of priests asked few questions. That worried Naya. The six allies went to the refectory to eat. It was late and the food was cold, but Naya didn’t care because she and her friends ate in near-privacy. The food tasted better in peace and quiet than a hot, abundant meal would have under stares, glares, and whispers. They returned to her nest in the archives to wait for a response from Esarhod and his cohorts.

Naya heard a shuttle clatter against the sides of a loom. She raised her hand, signaling the other five to silence. Shazzur raised his head, frowning, and she knew he heard the sound. The other four just looked at her, then glanced around. Naya smelled the fresh, green herbal scent of the mountains that clung to Anrach’s clothes. She felt a cool breeze, yet not a single lamp flame moved.

Light spilled from a doorway that appeared in a blank wall to Naya’s right. Shazzur stood and put himself between her and the light.

He protected her. Naya nearly laughed, flustered by the sweet, confusing pleasure she felt at that realization. Why would Shazzur protect her from her friends?

“What is it?” Enku asked. He looked to the left of the opening.

The light touched no one but Shazzur. That meant no one could see the light but her and Shazzur. She stood and took hold of his hand as she stepped around him. His hand tightened around her fingers, warm and strong, and that pleased her, too.

“Come.” Dia stepped from the light.

“Weaver Girl. Ask, and we will obey.” Shazzur bowed.

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Gasps rose from the other four. Naya gave her free hand to Dia, and Shazzur did the same.

Watch, if you can, she called to Ashael and Hezek as the light swallowed her up.

The home of the Three, Naya saw immediately, was smaller. The ceiling no longer vanished in the shadows. Lamplight bounced off it now. Only seven looms stood in the spot where Dia had worked eight before.

“It’s my fault.” Naya trembled and Shazzur wrapped an arm around her. She clung to him. “Forgive me. I failed you.”

“Nonsense,” Graia said with her sweet-harsh laugh. “You have done what we asked.”

“The priests make our prison stronger and smaller,” Dia said. “You must leave before our priests imprison you to keep you quiet. They will not kill you, but they will try to break your spirit and heart. Flee.”

“Seer.” Graia beckoned to Shazzur. “We put the life of this priestess into your hands.”

“I would guard her above my own life even without asking.” Shazzur went to one knee before the old woman and took the hand she held out to him.

“I see your heart,” Thread Woman said with a knowing chuckle. “I see far ahead for you. Hold fast, even through the bitterness of death.”

Shazzur went still, his eyes wide and stunned. Naya wondered what communication passed between him and Graia.

“The priests believe we know so very little of the real world, we must be protected from ourselves.” Anrach emerged from the shadows.

“It is our own fault, Father,” Dia said.

“True.” He sighed. “Naya, you are the only friend my daughter has known in decades. We depend on you, our only hope. Yet I shudder at the price you might be forced to pay.”

“If Matrika gave me life for this duty, I have no right to turn away

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from it.” Naya bowed her head to him.

“To help us, you must leave and be free,” Graia said. “You are witness to this, Seer.”

“I am a witness,” Shazzur agreed, and bowed once more. The floor tilted. He clutched at Naya and they stumbled backwards, to fall at the feet of the four who had been left behind.

“We thought you’d never come back,” Hezek said.

“Didn’t you see what happened?” Naya asked.

“I saw...something. I’m not sure.”

“We have a larger problem,” Enku said. “You are to go to Hanrah. Her messenger was just here, and he wasn’t happy to find us allied with you.”

* * *

Hanrah, Mahanor, and Esarhod waited in the empty council chamber. Naya wondered if anyone else in the entire city knew of this meeting, besides Hezek, Ashael, Shanda, and Enku. Were they enough witnesses to make the priesthood hesitate in killing or imprisoning her and Shazzur? Shazzur had ordered the others to prepare to leave immediately, despite the late hour.

“Priestess Naya has spoken only the truth,” Shazzur said when they walked into the long meeting room. The three priests sat in high chairs like thrones.

“Of course.” Hanrah inclined her head. “We never doubted that she told us exactly what she saw. What we doubt is the source of the vision.”

“The Three did indeed call Naya to the realm where the demi-gods live. I have spoken with them.”

“Those two mind scribes are wonderful actors,” Esarhod said, turning to Mahanor. “It’s amazing the deceptions they are able to achieve with a few borrowed robes, cosmetics, and improper use of their mind powers. They must be punished.”

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Ready? Naya called to her friends. She showed them what had just been said.

Hezek responded with an image of Ashael scurrying around their room, throwing belongings into baskets and bags. Then he looked out the window and showed Shanda and Enku in the open plaza, waiting with horses and pack mules, dressed for travel.

“There is no one so blind as they who refuse to see when the fire burns brightly and hot over their very heads,” Shazzur said. “Shall you stay and be destroyed? So be it—you bring your own destruction on your heads.”

“That is enough!” Mahanor snarled, and stood slowly, spreading his arms as if he could gather all the powers in air and ground and water to do his bidding. Naya braced herself, envisioning a shield of flame encasing her and Shazzur. She knew she could do it, because she had the need.

“It has gone far beyond enough,” Shazzur returned. “You came to me, asking my help in determining whether this priestess had been deceived, if she deliberately supported heresy. It was a fair request, but I realized it was unbalanced.”

“Unbalanced?” Hanrah laughed, a bitter sound.

“You never considered the possibility that you were wrong.” Shazzur’s quiet voice penetrated more deeply than a shout. “You never asked for truth, only proof of deception. The source of the lies and blindness is in you, not the daughter of the High Priest, Bride of the summer solstice, fire priestess, and vision weaver.”

“Enough!” Hanrah stood. “You are a member of the King’s Council, trained in argument and in tying minds into knots, with no one the better and no problems solved. You support this heretic in her poisonous activities. We cannot allow that.”

“You cannot keep us here.”

“You cannot stay here! We cast you out.” Mahanor’s shout rolled

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over Shazzur's quiet voice like cattle over a rose garden. "May you find justice and your destiny in the desert."

"They want us to die." Naya and Shazzur hurried down the long corridor and outside. The Hidden City felt oddly deserted.

"They'll get nothing they want today, I promise you," he returned.

Shazzur wouldn't let her go to her room alone to gather her belongings, though it wasted precious time. Naya was grateful, though she could protect herself with her fire talent. She welcomed Shazzur's presence. His height and wide shoulders made her cozy room feel small. He didn't wait for directions but gathered up baskets and bags and tossed in her clothes, her lap loom, her flute, her rolls of parchment.

He didn't go to his own quarters, but led her to the plaza. Naya found the other four mounted and ready to ride. Two strangers stepped forward and took her baskets from Shazzur.

"My servants," he explained. "I told them to pack and be ready to leave when I made my report."

"Leave it to a seer." Enku sounded exasperated, but Naya saw excitement in his eyes.

"Should we be afraid?" Ashael said.

"No, they are the ones who should fear." Shazzur's voice softened and took on a hollow echo. "We flee before their anger tonight, but soon they will flee. They have told us never to return, but a day will come when they will beg our forgiveness. They will be destroyed by those yet to be born. Our son shall lead the way. The son of us all will open the door, bind the shadows and bring light into the darkness. The loom, the colors, the threads will all be lost, and the Flame will come before that day dawns."

Shazzur slid to his knees. He might have measured his length in the cold, dusty stone lane if Naya hadn't caught his shoulders and held him upright.

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Later, as they rode through the growing darkness of the desert beyond the Hidden City, they talked about his prophecy. The night wind howled around them, making them raise their voices. During a lull, the sound bounced off the cold sand and the hills rising hard and sharp far ahead of them, as if they were coated with ice.

Naya tasted a storm in the wind and wondered how long it would be before they were lost, frozen, dying. Had Hanrah, Mahanor, and Esarhod known the storm was coming? Had they sent her and her friends out into the desert instead of imprisoning them, to keep their hands free of blood?

“Son of us all?” Shazzur frowned, looking ahead into the darkness beyond the bobbing specks of light he had conjured to surround their company and let the horses find their footing. “Four men and two women, producing one son? Stranger things have happened under the Mother’s hand. Why not this?”

“Adoption,” Naya offered. “Mayar is my sister of the spirit—why not a child all of us raise together, somehow?”

“Adoption. Yes.” Enku and Shanda traded glances. “If we are unable to have children, we will have to adopt. My friends, we are a company branded by false accusations. We will be drawn close together in the Mother’s service, through the many years ahead of us. If anything should happen to any of us, I vow I will stand with the children who are left behind.”

Naya shivered as the oaths went around their group. Not from the chill, though the wind howled and moaned before the oncoming storm. She shivered from a sense that something momentous and prophetic had happened here.

“I don’t care if I never go back,” she murmured. “I will die before I willingly see the Hidden City again. Dia, my friend, I do swear I will spend my life spreading the truth and working to set you free.”

The clatter of a loom came to her as the wind’s howl turned to a

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scream. Naya listened, and when Shazzur grabbed at her arm, she realized she had guided her horse away from the main group.

“Can’t you hear it?” she shouted above the storm’s fury. She reached with her mind for Ashael and Hezek and showed them what she heard.

“There are cliffs and dead riverbeds over that way,” Enku called, gesturing in the same direction. “Perhaps shelter, until the storm passes.”

Shazzur gestured for Enku to lead. He watched Naya as they rode. She suspected he waited for another bit of guidance.

None came, however, before they found shelter in a rocky outcropping that had been undermined by water, creating an overhang at a bend in a dead riverbed. Naya nearly laughed aloud in relief when she saw the sandy expanse, untouched by snow or sleet.

Her fire talent ignited the deadfall piled against the base of their shelter. Soon they were settled in, with the horses radiating smelly, damp warmth on either side of them and the fire in front of them.

She sighed and curled up with her damp saddle as a backrest and smiled. So, Hanrah and Esarhod thought she and her companions could be wiped away so easily, did they? Mother Matrika had never promised her loyal followers would have an easy or pleasant journey, but she had always promised their needs would be met and justice would come. Naya thought of the canyons that held the Hidden City, and how easily a storm could bring floods to wipe them all away. Too bad the archives would suffer for the sins of the people.

“What’s so funny?” Shazzur murmured, leaning close and pitching his voice so only she could hear.

Naya doubted anyone would have heard if he had spoken in a normal voice. They were all drowsy, nodding over their cold dinners of bread, cheese, and dried fruit.

“Funny? I was thinking that when the Hidden City is destroyed, I

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will mourn the archives the most.”

“Even those aren’t irreplaceable. Those pedants made sure everything was copied. Multiple times.”

“True. But who knows where they are hidden?” She looked at the cousins, who swayed drunkenly and fought to stay awake. They had volunteered to keep watch first, so the others could sleep. Naya suspected they would fall asleep before her.

“I think, at this point, it would be better to leave that concern in Matrika’s hands.”

Naya nodded. She flinched, then sighed when Shazzur’s long, gentle hands rested on her shoulders and began squeezing. Warmth spilled through her body with the massage and her aches began to ease. There was magic in Shazzur’s touch. True, he was First Advisor, King’s Seer, but...

She blinked, and looked around.

Full daylight. Melting snow lay in drifts all around their shelter. Dripping snow created musical little plinking sounds. Four sleepers curled up around the remains of the fire played different tunes, counterpoint in snores and whistles. Shazzur’s servants lay among the baggage, making their own countermelody.

Shazzur stood with his back to her, leaning against the side of their shelter, watching the long slope down to the trail heading south. Naya wanted to feel angry that he had made her sleep. She hadn’t been able to do her share of sentry duty, and she suspected he had done the same to the others, too. Did she admire him for that, or did he exasperate her? Naya wasn’t sure. She sat for a while, knees drawn up to her shoulders, huddled in the warmth of her blankets, and watched him. What about Shazzur made her feel safe and so sure that nothing could go wrong?

“Riders!” Shazzur turned and his gaze went directly to her. He nodded, then went to shake and nudge the others awake. “We have company,” he said. “Be ready.”

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Riders? Naya flung aside her blanket and reached for her cloak that had hung up to dry all night. No one rode through the desert at this time of the year—no one but outcasts, bandits, and soldiers.

“Get ready to flee,” Shazzur ordered. His servants hurried to obey while the others still struggled to their feet. Naya walked to where he had stood sentry.

A long, bumpy line moved against the horizon, black against the glisten of standing water and bright sunshine. The storm last night had been fierce and extreme, but the snow it left wouldn’t last past noontime. Naya thought of the force of melt water, unable to soak into the ground. She had dreamed of floods in narrow stone passages. Had she dreamed of the Hidden City, or this place? A warning, or just her overtired imagination?

She turned her gaze back to the riders, now close enough to distinguish details. A flag snapped in the wind until the black ram against the golden background became clear. Naya laughed and ran out to meet them. Shazzur snarled her name and ran after her. He stopped short when he saw the flag, then leaped forward to catch up with her. He passed her the moment she recognized Asqual’s square, dark face under his gleaming bronze helmet.

* * *

It took less than half an hour to mount up and move out. Naya and Shazzur rode in the lead, with Asqual in the middle. The sun felt positively hot, until a breeze wrapped them with chill damp. Shazzur asked what had brought the soldiers out here at this time of year.

“You can thank Lady Mayor.” Asqual laughed. “She dreamed Naya needed her. She insisted I was to come bring you home.”

“Then the danger from the Drevans has passed?” Naya asked.

“The danger of falling out of favor with Lady Mayor is far more potent.” Asqual laughed. “Everyone jumps to please her. If she wants her spirit sister with her in the last moons of her pregnancy, the entire

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Host of the Ram will stand guard.”

“Oh.” Naya bowed her head, but not before Shazzur saw her blush. “I completely forgot about the baby. How is she?”

“Healthy and happy and strong. The king is likely to drive the entire Court mad with his worry for her, and coddling her as if she were made of flowers and mist.” He grinned, snickering.

Shazzur discussed the situation privately with Asqual that night. The Drevan ambassadorial party had said nothing for moons about Anyecta’s death or Naya’s part in it, and that worried Shazzur. From Asqual’s grim look, that bothered him, too.

Naya insisted on continuing the self-defense lessons Asqual had started on her journey to the Hidden City. Shazzur approved wholeheartedly, though he cringed every time the big soldier made the slim girl fly through the air, lunged at her with a wooden knife, or swung at her with a staff. Naya, however, proved she was a natural acrobat and adept at in-fighting.

Shazzur joined in the lessons, sometimes siding with Naya against Asqual and two or three of his men, sometimes changing sides and attacking Naya from behind. It was hard to keep his mind on the lesson when his arms closed around her lithe form.

Shazzur learned with painful clarity and speed that despite the softness of Naya’s slim form, she was strong and fast. He had bruises from jabs in the gut and from falling on his bottom more than a dozen times in one night.

CHAPTER 14

“My friend.” King Nebazz smiled widely and gestured for Shazzur to take a seat in the Council chamber. They had both arrived early for that morning’s meeting. “You are most welcome back to Bainevah. We have all missed your wisdom, insight, and humor in our daily work.”

“Even my enemies?” Shazzur asked. He barely waited for the king to gesture for him to sit before dropped hard into the chair to the king’s right.

“You have few enemies, and those few are fools.” The king’s smile faded. “I heard just a small part of the reasons for leaving the Hidden City. Is Priestess Naya in even more danger, now that she has made enemies of the Three’s priests?”

“Not yet. High Priest Chizhedek confers with his people on the best way to counteract lies spread against his daughter.” Shazzur bared his teeth in a strained, fierce smile. “I dare any of those black-robed fools to stand against the combined wisdom and authority of the Healers

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Temple, the Scribes Hall, and the Mother's High Priest."

"You dare anyone to try to harm the woman you love."

"Forbidden love, Majesty." He fought not to grit his teeth.

"You are not forbidden to love or to earn her love—only to speak your love to her. That is an obstacle, though. Women need to be told. They know men say one thing and do another. Why are women so much more true in their love? Why do we trust them more easily than they trust us?"

"Does Lady Mayar trouble you, Majesty?" Shazzur had yet to see Lady Mayar with a protruding belly and pale with discomfort, as Asqual reported. It was hard to imagine Mayar in anything less than perfect grace and health.

"Not her. Not my love." The king's face relaxed in a warm smile. "No. The other concubines. They are jealous, as if they think they have a right to hold my heart just because I sleep with them once or twice in a moon."

"Every woman is made to love one man, Majesty, and every man is made to love just one woman. Your concubines know they were given to you as political ploys, but they still hope to hold your heart."

"They want the throne. Mayar wants me. Just me." He sighed. "Sometimes, I think you have the simpler, happier life, even with High Priest Chizhedek standing against you."

"You didn't help my pain by sending me to the Hidden City."

"The welfare of a former Bride is of high importance to Bainevah, and to the throne." King Nebazz's eyes glittered with mischief. "Did it help?"

"I didn't even know she was there until the priests asked me to help them condemn a novice who spoke heresy." Shazzur nearly growled, torn between wanting to either slap the mischievous hope from the king's face or thank him.

"Heresy? That word foretells trouble. Tell me everything."

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Shazzur gladly shifted from personal matters to something that could endanger the entire kingdom. He finished presenting the bare bones of the situation in the Hidden City before the rest of the King's Council joined them.

* * *

Naya couldn't help staring at Mayar, so happy, so healthy, so light on her feet despite the bulge of the baby in her belly. She looked comfortable and full of life, despite the pauses she took every time she sat down or stood up, to press at her back or catch her breath. Naya was struck speechless when Mayar guided her hand to rest on the bottom curve of her belly and wait for a soft thump from the little life inside.

They sat in Mayar's workroom in the Healer's Temple to talk and catch up on all that had happened in the moons since Naya had gone to the Hidden City. Storm winds raged around them, doubly furious, as if to make up for the unseasonably fair weather that had surrounded the city until Naya returned.

Mayar laughed. "I'm almost to the point where I can't wait. There's something...potent, almost frightening, to feel my son moving inside me. I hope you will be blessed with such a wonder someday, sister of my spirit."

"As the Mother wills," Naya murmured. She pressed her hands against her flat belly, trying to imagine a child growing inside her. It made her ache. She thought of those few moments when she had melted under the warm, deft touch of Shazzur's hands as he massaged the aches from her shoulders and helped her sleep. What would it be like to surrender to his caresses, to allow him to take his pleasure with her body?

What if he had been her partner in the Sacred Marriage, instead of the king? Would she have stayed until dawn?

"We are part of the Mother, when we surrender our bodies to help create new life," Mayar murmured. "I am glad you are with me, Naya. I

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want you beside me when my son is born. In case..." She shook her head and pressed her wine-colored lips tightly together, as if holding back words.

"In case some idiot tries to harm your son?" Naya guessed. "I will create a wall of fire around us from the moment you go into labor, if that is what it will take."

"A wall of fire won't be enough. Nebazz hasn't come to my bed since my belly began to show. I've told him he won't harm me or the baby, but...men can be such fools. Even kings."

"They are only men, after all," she murmured. The two shared a grin.

"I fear my son will soon have rivals. Coori has been with Nebazz quite often. I'm not worried she will steal his heart. I think any child of hers would be a good friend and ally to my son. No, but the other concubines frighten me."

"When you are queen of Bainevah—" Naya began.

"What protection will that be? For me, or for my son? If I could go away for twenty years, until he is grown and safe and able to defend himself...my sister, I wish you carried a son, to stand with mine. Then I would not worry for him."

Naya focused on cheering up Mayar. She refused to allow her friend to brood about dangers in the far distant future.

But what if Mayar's child was a girl, and Naya's vision of the boy in her friend's arms was of the far future?

Her questions spun through her thoughts while she worked in the Healers Temple, and when she went home that night. Her parents had more questions about her stay in the Hidden City. Naya disliked adding more burdens to her father's shoulders, but Chizhedek was High Priest of the Mother. He had to know what she had seen and heard and what opposition stood against the message she had been given.

Chizhedek agreed with her interpretation of the events. He showed

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no anger toward the priesthood in either face or voice, but Naya knew it was there. She wondered how much was a father's anger on behalf of his daughter, and how much was the wrath of the High Priest.

That night, she dreamed of the Three, torn from each other, separated in darkness, and all the grand buildings of the Hidden City shattered into fragments and dust. She woke kneeling before her loom. A cloth nearly as long as her torso hung before her. Naya sank back, resting on her elbows, and studied the picture she had woven in her vision trance.

The canyons of the Hidden City were filled nearly to the heights with a strange mixture of fire and water. Three stars—the Three?—were caught in a stream of fire, pushed apart down different arms of the canyons. The red of the fire was the brightest color, but for the silvery thread used for the stars. Everything else was black, brown and dark gray. Gloom and mud, blood and storm. Naya clenched her aching fists, feeling the burned soreness in her fingertips, the stiffness in her hands and arms and back. The weaving was only one-third completed. How much more would she weave tonight, in her sleep?

* * *

Sixth Descent Moon

The Drevans returned to the city, followed by a storm that lasted four days. Shazzur went to the palace gates to greet the ambassador and his scribes, assistants, and priests. He spoke the ritual words of welcome, when he wanted to send them out into the growing darkness at noonday, back to their Priest-King. He could not do that. The peace accords and the letters of friendship from the Priest-King prevented that.

Shazzur's visions of disaster tempted him to shove aside the concerns of diplomacy. His dreams had shown him the Drevans coming into the city carrying flowering branches to signify peace, but the

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branches splintered and swords emerged. He couldn't prevent the Drevans from coming into the city, if only to take shelter from the storm that chased after them.

He could, however, alert Asqual and ask the commanders of the Hosts of each gate to put double the usual number of men on duty, simply to watch the Drevans. And then he waited.

On the third day of the storm, Naya came to him with a long weaving that still trailed the warp threads. Her face was pale, with dark smears of sleeplessness under her eyes, and her fingers bled, ravaged by the speed of the weaving she had done. The vision-weaving she left with him showed a sword poised over Bainevah, dripping snow, coming from the north. The sword cleaved a ring of fire, and blood dripped from the flames.

That last part frightened Shazzur the most, even as he calmed at this visible proof that his visions of war were correct. He showed the weaving to the King's Council and three-quarters of them agreed to begin preparations against the coming of war, even though winter solstice and the worst of the winter storms had yet to come.

The remainder of the Council reluctantly agreed when Princess Lur pointed at the ring of fire, the sword and the drop of blood, and asked if that signified a threat to Priestess Naya. When Shazzur admitted he believed that was so, the fury that swept the Council chamber brought everyone into accord.

And still, he could do nothing to drive the Drevans out of the city.

In the moon quarters that followed, Shazzur grew frustrated in his attempts to keep spies on the Drevans, to predict where and when they would strike at Naya. He sometimes allowed his weariness to drive him into daydreams, of the life that he and Naya could have right this moment if he had dared to face the curse Chizhedek had pronounced.

What good would it have done him, though? Naya loved another. Yet, if she wanted him, why didn't she pursue him? Shazzur found it

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hard to imagine her playing shy and afraid to approach anyone. Who was the idiot, that he couldn't see she wanted him? Shazzur knew if he were free, he would have responded to the laughter in her eyes and stolen kisses, at the very least. Their journey back to Bainevah from the Hidden City had been torture to him. During the clear weather, she asked him about the nameless woman he loved and nearly tore his heart in pieces when she asked if it would not be wiser to let the dream go and accept another love waiting for him.

"If you loved someone you could not have, would you give up so easily and take what was within reach, just to avoid pain?" he had countered without thinking.

Naya had gone white and blinked fast against tears. When Shazzur stumbled through an apology, she waved it away and forced a brave smile.

He hadn't been able to resist offering her shelter when the next storm hit. Naya had huddled against him for warmth during every storm that made them halt and seek shelter. He had wanted to open his cloak and enfold her in his arms, protect and warm her and grow drunk on her scent. He hadn't dared.

He would have dared, if he thought he had a chance of winning her heart. Shazzur liked to believe he would have dared Chizhedek's curse and married Naya on that return trip to Bainevah—and not returned to the city at all. They could have become adventurers, paying their way with their healing talents or working as scribes. It would have been a good life.

And he wouldn't have had to worry that every time a messenger came to him, he brought news that the Drevans had struck at Naya.

* * *

Winter Solstice

On the night of the solstice, the nation celebrated the Sacred

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Marriage and made betrothals while the people anticipated the turning point of winter.

Naya went to the palace to keep Mayar company and to escape her constant guards. She understood the necessity and hated every moment of it. Queen Mother Dayona joined them in Mayar's quarters and the three women had a merry evening, talking, laughing, and singing songs, with Mayar and Dayona taking turns on a harp and Naya playing her flute. Naya had always admired Dayona. The frail, silver-haired woman walked with a limp. Palace legend claimed another concubine had broken her leg. Dayona had stopped the woman's son from bludgeoning Nebazz, who was little more than a toddler at the time. Age had aggravated her bad leg. In cold weather it was painful enough she needed to lean on a servant's arm to walk. That didn't dull her sense of humor or dampen her enjoyment of life. The Queen Mother made it known that Mayar was her favorite of the concubines and she regarded the younger woman as a daughter.

There were no servants in Mayar's apartments that night. She set them free to enjoy the celebration. Jushta remained, but he left the women alone to enjoy themselves. When someone thumped on Mayar's door, Naya went to answer it. The trumpets had blown less than an hour ago according to the water clock, announcing that the king and the Bride had gone into the chamber. King Nebazz couldn't have returned from the temple already, so who could it be?

Naya slid back the bar on the door and pushed down on the latch. It clicked—then a loud bang slammed against the other side, shoving the panel against her. She stumbled backwards.

"Jushta!" she screamed, and flung all her weight against the door to hold it closed.

More weight slammed the panel into her, sending a sharp pain through her shoulder. Naya tumbled backwards, nearly banging her head against the low table in the middle of Mayar's reception room. Six

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men poured through the open door and surrounded her. Naya saw dirty boots, stained with mud and water and wear before two sets of hands hauled her to her feet.

“What do we have here? The murderer herself,” a sneering male voice announced.

Naya saw pale blue eyes, white-gold hair, a face that looked vaguely familiar. Then the accent struck a chord of recognition. Drevan. She had heard Ambassador Braxis was blood-kin to Anyecta.

“Leave,” Jushta bellowed from the doorway of Mayar’s study room. He leaped, bringing a knife in each hand from the folds of his robe.

The two Drevans holding Naya let go. She turned, cocking her elbows as Asqual had taught her, and slammed one in the gut. She ignored the man as he bent over, and did a turn-kick into the back of the other man, hitting him just above his kidneys. Jushta took Braxis, slashing his robes and the arms he raised to protect his face and chest. Blood splattered.

That left three intruders unoccupied, and the door to the next room was unguarded. Naya snatched up a stool and smashed it down on the skull of the first man she hit, then pivoted and kicked the second in the face before slamming it down on his head, too. She saw the door open as she turned to help Jushta against Braxis, who had brought out a long scimitar. Its edge was dull, green-tinted, and she knew it had to be poisoned.

“Mayar!” she screamed. “Drevans!”

She flung the stool against Braxis’s back. One leg caught him in the hip, distracting him enough to let Jushta stab at his sword hand. The ambassador howled and dropped the sword.

The Drevans darted through the doorway into the room where Mayar and Dayona lounged around a brazier. Naya raced after them. Fury sent heat through her blood and she cursed aloud as that reminded her. She wasn’t helpless by any means, was she?

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The three Drevans leaped on Mayar and Dayona. The old woman shrieked like a hunting hawk and snatched up her walking staff. She managed to tangle it in the legs of one man. The second man punched her hard enough to knock her from her couch and into the table beside her.

Mayar screamed, struggling against the man who held her, both arms wrapped around her from behind. He twisted her sideways, pivoting her legs up in the air.

Naya focused all her fury on the man who struck Dayona.

Flames swirled around him, spiraling up his body from his boots, engulfing his dark trousers and tunic, turning his hair into a crown of crimson and gold. He shrieked and ran blindly, straight into Jushta, who felled him with a solid swing with a short bench.

“You can’t kill me without killing her,” the man holding Mayar snarled. He swung her around, turning her so she provided almost full cover for his body.

“My power isn’t like a knife or an arrow,” Naya whispered and imagined flames climbing up his back.

The first man regained his feet and dragged Dayona to her feet by her hair. He held a long knife to her throat. Blood streamed down her face from her nose. Sweating, wide-eyed with terror, his mouth open in a silent shout, he looked back and forth between the two women.

“Mother!” Mayar screamed. She jabbed her captor with her elbow, just a heartbeat before he screamed and released her. Mayar ignored him, tumbling forward, arms outstretched for Queen Dayona.

The third man let go of Dayona’s hair. She crumpled to the floor. He went to his knees and drove the knife into the old woman’s chest.

Naya howled and flung all her force of will at the man. A whirlwind of fire engulfed him, lifting him up into the air and flinging him against the wall. He screamed once, his limbs spasmed, then he crumpled to the floor like a rag doll.

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Four members of the palace guard slammed through the doorway as Naya went to her knees and lost her supper.

* * *

Jushta hadn't killed Braxis, and only two men died. The three remaining underlings had nothing to say. They weren't the merchants and student healers they had claimed to be when they entered the city nearly five moons ago. Naya shuddered when she realized that two of them had followed her around the Healers Temple and knew her routine.

Braxis put all the blame on the women who resisted his attack. He had come for justice, he claimed, to punish Mayar for her part in the death of Lady Anyecta. Until King Nebazz gave Dreva the justice they demanded, the Drevans would hold the woman who carried his child. Braxis spat when confronted with the death of Queen Mother Dayona and called her a hag who had outlived her usefulness.

Naya knew she hadn't been the only target, but she wondered if Mayar and Queen Dayona might have been left alone if the Drevans had been able to take her before solstice.

Was it her fault? If she hadn't listened to those strange dreams last fall, if she hadn't visited Mayar and found Embanna dead and then fought Anyecta, would the Drevans have attacked the royal family? Queen Mother Dayona was dead, despite all Naya had done. What could she have done differently? Why hadn't she thought to set all six intruders on fire the moment they knocked her off her feet? Why was it so easy to ignite the robes of an officious, self-important eunuch, when she couldn't seem to use her power to defend the helpless and innocent?

What was wrong with her?

Why hadn't she been warned with a dream?

"Mother Matrika gives us common sense and two eyes and two ears and a brain," Shazzur said when she blurted her questions and doubts to

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him.

It was early morning and Naya had yet to leave the palace. She and Mayar had slept in one of the empty concubine suites while the palace guards and officials took care of the dead bodies. Shazzur came to speak with them and make sure no one bothered them. Naya was tired and her stomach and head hurt and she had tied herself into a knot of guilt. At the back of her mind, she knew part of her depression came from simple exhaustion and strain, but she couldn't seem to pull herself out of the darkness with common sense. She had turned to Shazzur because he was a friend. She could always trust him to tell her the truth and even more important, to tell her when she was wrong or being silly.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Naya grumbled.

“Why should she spend her time warning us about every hole in the road, every pot poised to fall on our heads, and every rotten pomegranate? She has given us senses to observe the world and brains to think and remember and evaluate. The guards watching the Drevans should have realized they were plotting trouble. Why should Mother Matrika warn us when we already suspect our enemies' plans, and we are more than able to defend ourselves?”

“I didn't do enough!”

“You saved Mayar's life and her child. I knew Dayona well, and I think she died the way she wanted—fighting. Resisting evil. Protecting her unborn grandson and the woman her son loves.” Shazzur cupped her chin with his big, warm hand and made her look him in the eye. “She would be the first to tell you to stop blaming yourself. She would be the first to give a warrior's cry in your honor.”

“I don't feel like a warrior,” Naya whispered. Tears filled her eyes. She hated the thought of Shazzur seeing her cry, but she couldn't seem to stop the hot pressure inside her head or the damp spilling down her face.

Naya refused to believe she had been a heroine of any kind, yet

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something knotted and jagged inside her softened and loosened. When she burst into tears at last, Shazzur held her. She clutched at his robes and wished he could hold her for the rest of her life.

* * *

First Ascent Moon

Ashael and Hezek came to see Naya in the Healers Temple three days later, to report to her on Braxis's interrogation. They had claimed the right to be among the priests and scribes assembled to search the Drevan's mind. Braxis resisted them until he crumbled into madness, babbling about the disaster hovering over Bainevah and how he would repeatedly rape Naya and Mayar when his master came to free him.

"Unfortunately, he is insane." Ashael glanced around Mayar's workroom, which the priestess had made available to them for private talk. "I don't know if forcing our way in caused the madness, or something died inside him long ago."

"So you won't be able to learn who helped him break into the palace and told him how to find Mayar's rooms." Naya sighed. Somehow, she wasn't surprised by that bad news. Had she dreamed it, and not remembered those details?

"It gets worse." Hezek shook his head and took a tighter grip on the arms of his chair. "War."

"He wasn't totally babbling, when he said his master would attack?" Naya guessed.

"We helped the High Priest force Braxis's scrying bowl to work and make contact with the Priest-King," Hezek said. "It felt like all the winter storms were inside my head and my gut. I don't ever want to do that again."

"What about the war?" she pressed.

"The Priest-King demands reparation for the damage done to his people. He wants all the imprisoned Drevans released."

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“That means someone else is already reporting to him through another scrying bowl,” Ashael said. “No messenger could reach Dreva’s mountains so quickly in the middle of winter. The arrests just started yesterday.”

“The Priest-King wants you punished for killing Anyecta. Suddenly, she’s a priestess of the purest blood, chosen as his holy bride. I thought Drevans loathed concubines. Why did they give her to our king as a concubine if she was so special and powerful?” Hezek sighed and rubbed at his eyes.

The experience seemed to have aged him and his cousin. Naya was grateful they hadn’t called her while it was happening, to show it to her.

“It just proves Anyecta was indeed here to destroy the royal family and put a Drevan on the throne,” Naya said. “I assume King Nebazz refused his demand?”

“And declared war on Dreva before the Priest-King could finish swearing and declare war on us.” Ashael grinned and nodded. “It turns out Shazzur has been dreaming of war from the north. Asqual began preparing the armies nearly two moons ago.”

“In the middle of the winter?”

“Our enemies are prepared—why shouldn’t we be?”

“We came to tell you what happened, so you can be warned,” Hezek continued. “And, to ask for your help.”

She looked back and forth between the cousins. A prickle of excitement raced up her back. “With what?”

“Spying. It’s dangerous—but we’d be in disguise, and if Drevans sneak into the city to take you, you won’t be here.”

“That wasn’t what she needed to hear,” Ashael growled, and jabbed his cousin with his elbow.

“Spying? With you?” Naya’s thoughts raced.

Wasn’t this the kind of adventure she had dreamed about as a child? Fooling the enemy and helping Bainevah’s armies would let her make

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recompense for the trouble her actions had caused. Shazzur, the King's Council, and most priests in Bainevah assured her she was innocent, but Naya knew blame did rest at her feet.

Shazzur would ride out to make preparations along the Dreva/Bainevah border. He would advise the generals and coordinate the mind scribes and seers who would peer into enemy territory and protect Bainevah's soldiers with their magic.

He would be there. She would prove herself and win his heart away from the woman who put such a sad smile in his eyes.

"Do your masters know you want me to be involved?" Then she laughed. "Are we running away without a plan or someone to report to? What about supplies? Where are we going?"

"That's why we need you." Hezek stood and held out a hand to her. Ashael did the same a heartbeat later. "You'll do all the thinking and keep us out of trouble."

CHAPTER 15

Third Ascent Moon

Winter still lay heavy on Bainevah and Naya was glad. She needed time to prepare and train with the spies, and take more self-defense lessons from a reluctant Asqual. More important, she had promised Mayar to be with her when she gave birth, and Naya refused to break her word. Not even to protect her own life or to protect Bainevah from Drevan attacks.

Doni'Nebazz'Elzor'Mayar, firstborn of King Nebazz, was born at dawn of the full moon before equinox. Mayar refused to scream during the day and a half of labor, but she nearly broke Naya's fingers from clutching her hands during the worst of the pains. She tore three sets of straps tied to the birthing bed. Hagath didn't deliver the boy, but he supervised and offered up prayers and left the honor to Naya and Cyrula. Once the boy was cleaned and anointed with salt and oil and

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his cord cut, Naya took him to his father.

King Nebazz had the worst of it, from what Naya could see. Court protocol and the press of kingdom business made it impossible for him to sit with Mayar, hold her hands and watch her sweat, struggle and bleed. Naya went to the Council chamber every hour, according to the level of the water clock, to report on Mayar's condition, and she saw the king's effort to resist his worry. If he could have sat with Mayar and held her hand like any ordinary man, he would have been fine. The not knowing, the waiting aged him.

"My son," he whispered, hoarse from hours of strain. "You saw this at the Sacred Marriage, and I was a fool to doubt. Remind me in the future, my friend." He held the fragile bundle of his newborn son in shaking arms and turned to Shazzur, who had stayed at his side during the entire ordeal. "Remind me never to doubt Priestess Naya when she speaks a message from Mother Matrika."

"Yes, Majesty." Shazzur bowed to them both. "I have never doubted her, and never will."

His smile seemed strained, most peculiar, and his eyes held an emotion Naya had never seen before. Like the wonder in the king's eyes as he looked at his sleeping son, yet muted. Touched with pain.

If Shazzur's wife had just given birth, Naya knew, he would be torn between the baby and her welfare. He would have been at her side all those hours, and nothing short of death could have torn him away.

The boy whimpered and King Nebazz flinched as if stabbed. Naya smothered a chuckle and held out her arms. The king gave his son back to her, his face twisted between regret and relief.

"When can I see Mayar?" he asked. "Surely you would have told me if she wasn't all right?"

"She is tired and torn, Majesty. Your son is large and strong and..." She sighed and wished she held her own son in her arms. "And most beautiful. Forgive me, but she needs her son more than you do right

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now.”

“Yes, of course.” The king laughed and bowed as she left the room, going down the hallway only used by the royal family. Before the door closed behind her, Naya heard the door to the anteroom bang open, and Nebazz shouted the news to the dozens of waiting nobles and courtiers. Cheers rose up in response.

* * *

Shazzur shuddered, caught between fury and terror. That didn’t stop him from reading the scroll again as he entered the inner rooms of Matrika’s temple.

“What has happened?” Chizhedek bolted upright from his worktable and dropped the stylus he had been using to write on a wax tablet. “Has Dreva attacked?”

“Worse.” Shazzur put the scroll down on the table in front of him, turned so he could read it. “A list, holy sir, of the spies who are to go into the mountains and prepare the way for the Hosts of the Water and Memory gates.” He kept his thumb pressed against the edge of the scroll to mark the most important name on that list.

Chizhedek’s eyes widened and he went still. He dropped down into his chair again. When he picked up the scroll, Shazzur let go. The old priest shuddered and closed his eyes. He went pale, then a few heartbeats later, red patches of fury heated his cheeks.

“Stupid, arrogant child,” he muttered. His gaze met Shazzur’s. The angry color faded and he shook his head. “You’re too upset over this to have had any part in it. She thought of this herself. You know why she’s doing it, don’t you?”

“No. If I did, I’d know how to talk her out of it.”

“She blames herself for this war. I’ve seen it in her eyes. She blames herself for Queen Dayona’s death and for the attack on Lady Mayar.”

“And for the coming war? Does she want to be sacrificed to the

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Drevans?" Shazzur growled. "She acted as Matrika's servant, her voice to us, our eyes into the realm of the demi-gods. Blaming her for this, for playing her part in the battle between the demi-gods is like blaming a pot because it held oil that started a fire, or blaming a knife because it was used to slit a throat instead of carve wood."

"Tell her that." Chizhedek's mouth curved up on one side and the fire diminished in his eyes. "Thank you for warning me. I likely wouldn't have known until the day she rode out."

"You can still stop her."

"Sometimes I wonder if I can stop my daughter from doing anything," he murmured. "She certainly won't do what I ask of her." The old priest snorted. "Have you tried to talk to her about this?"

"I don't have the right to ask her to abandon her plans." The words tasted bitter in Shazzur's mouth. He nearly laughed, the sound catching in his throat, when Chizhedek sat up and stared at him a long moment. "I am only her friend."

He shook his head. "Do you think if you told her you loved her, she would listen?"

"It would do no good." Shazzur turned to the door.

"Why not?"

"Naya loves a man she can't have. She told the king so, when he asked her to be his concubine. If she won't stay home for this man—"

"Perhaps she goes to war to be with him," Chizhedek said.

"Just like I go to war to be away from her?" Shazzur snorted, wishing he could be more amused by the irony.

* * *

To say Chizhedek was not pleased with Naya's decision to serve as a spy was to speak lightly of a matter that rankled when she was awake, and created twisted dreams on the nights when she needed sleep the most.

He called her a fool, bent on suicidal repentance and demanded she

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think and stop letting her heart rule. He questioned her true dedication to Matrika's service. He laughed when she countered that the spies would need a healer.

When the king requested Naya speak privately with him, she thought he had joined the battle against her decision. His words shocked her.

"Priestess, it is nearly ten moons since you were the Bride, and you are not married. Have you heard the rumors saying Matrika has turned against Bainevah because you scorn marriage?"

Naya opened her mouth to speak, but her mind was as blank as a washed slate. She glanced around the courtyard where the king had asked her to meet him. The guards stayed in the doorway, too far away to hear. There was no one else in the courtyard. Naya found that freeing. No witnesses if she snarled at the king for supporting the nobles who wanted to make her a trophy and a showpiece. She had turned down four more marriage proposals in the last moon. Between her bodyguards, the threats from the Drevans, and her unwanted suitors, Naya *needed* to flee to the mountains and serve as a spy. Even if she only saw Shazzur once every moon, it would be worth the risk.

"I do not scorn marriage, Majesty. I scorn marrying for the sake of power. I vowed in the Chamber of Ten Thousand Suns that I would only marry where I loved. You stood as my witness." Naya thought she had struck the right path when the king flinched and didn't meet her gaze.

"Will you confront the man you want? Settle the question. Perhaps he doesn't know you want him."

"He wants someone else, Majesty. I would scorn him if he turned his heart to me, simply because I am available and his lady is not."

"You're both fools." King Nebazz raised his hand, stopping her from responding. "I ask you again, Lady, since you cannot have the man you want, will you become my concubine?"

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Naya gaped for a long moment. The utter misery in the king's eyes gave her some idea where to send her thoughts. Why would the king want her as a concubine, when he would soon marry Mayar? Rumors said three more concubines were pregnant, and Lady Coori hid her pregnancy until she was too fat to hide it any longer. Why would he want another concubine and more sons who would have no hope of inheriting? Hadn't he learned anything from the uprising caused by his many half-siblings, squabbling over the throne and rejecting King Jazzan's choice of heir?

Naya counted the days since Elzan's birth. Two moon quarters now, and nothing had been done to prepare for the marriage of the king and the mother of his heir.

"Majesty." Naya didn't care if her voice rang against the walls of the courtyard. "You are not going to marry my spirit sister, are you? What crime has Mayar committed, that you refuse to marry her? Has someone made you doubt Elzan is your son? You vowed to me, on the day of the Sacred Marriage, you would make her your queen. Why are you waiting? Why do you want to hurt her, by taking another concubine to be her rival?"

"Hurt her?" King Nebazz shook his head. "Not I—she—" He sighed and bowed his head, hiding his face in his hands.

The silence felt thick and heavy. Naya waited, clenching her fists. The longing to blacken the king's eye melted into an urge to put an arm around him and let him cry on her shoulder. Was this a new gift, the ability to sense another's hurt and turmoil? She prayed not, because it made her want to flee.

"Majesty, why are you doing this?" Naya took a step closer. The king just shook his head. She wondered if he was ashamed to admit to a petty argument with Mayar. She sat, taking the bench facing him. "Majesty, why will you not marry her?"

"I want to marry her—she refused me. Repeatedly. You are her

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friend, can you talk reason to her?"

"I will try, but if she will not marry for love of you...." Naya thought back to discussions she had with Mayar during her pregnancy. "She refuses so she can protect your son."

"Protect him?" The king's voice cracked.

"Consider, Majesty. If the Drevans can so easily poison your concubine, your enemies can also kill an infant or even a small boy. Marrying Mayar confers the title of heir on Elzan. He will become a target. If he is only one of several sons, then he is safe."

"Why didn't she tell me so?" He rolled his eyes and a groan made his voice crack.

"I think she did, Majesty, but you were too angry to hear her. She is more than your one love. She is a mother now. How was your own mother in protecting you?"

"Ah. I should have remembered. She leaped to defend me from one of my half-brothers, seven years older than me. His cow of a mother broke her leg, and I swear she felt no pain until she was sure I was safe." King Nebazz nodded. "You are wise, Priestess. And a good friend."

That night, Naya brought out her weaving of the destruction of the Hidden City, to study by moonlight. She sometimes dreamed of this scene, watching it happen, listening to the cries of the doomed. She could never hear Dia, Graia, or Anrach call out for help. Did they escape their captors or die with the Hidden City? Had it happened, or was the destruction still to come? Naya sensed she would know if Dia died or broke free.

She tried to travel in her dreams to visit her childhood friend, but the way was blocked. She feared that was a sign the priests had strengthened their prison walls.

Matrika, she knew, had never promised success to her loyal followers. Only blessings and peace for those who obeyed.

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* * *

The day before she was to leave Bainevah with the first team of spies, Naya went to the palace to visit Mayar and say good-bye. She found her sitting on her balcony, nursing Elzan, enjoying the warmth and the sunshine. Naya wanted to ask if she knew what the king had asked her, but the words seemed to catch in her throat.

“Are you ever returning to the temple?” Naya asked instead, and sat on the edge of the balcony, with her back to the concubines’ gardens.

“What else is there for me to do?” Mayar smiled and tipped her head to watch her son feed. “I am not going to be queen for a long, long time. I refused Nebazz, you know.”

“Yes, I heard.”

“You’re the only one who has. He was angry enough to allow the gossips say he had decided not to marry me. Then, after we talked . . .” She glanced at Naya. “Thank you, for talking reason to him.”

Naya nodded, wondering exactly what the king had told Mayar about the circumstances of their conversation.

“After we talked, he announced that we had both decided to wait, to make sure that the best prince was named as heir, not simply based on being firstborn. Some think he has found fault with me and I think perhaps that is better in the long view.”

“Why?”

“What will the people think of their king, if they knew the mother of his firstborn refused to marry him?”

“Ah.” Naya decided she hated politics and Court gossip.

“This will put fear into the other concubines,” Mayar added with a soft chuckle. “If such a small thing could displace his favorite and put his firstborn into question, what sort of transgression on their part will have them totally cast out?”

“You’re a cruel, clever woman, First Concubine.” Naya bowed to her, nearly toppling off the balcony railing. The two women laughed,

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causing a little whimper of protest from Elzan.

* * *

Asqual commanded the spies. Naya thought at first he would protect her so closely, she wouldn't be allowed to do anything. When he didn't try to talk her out of her decision, her relief had a giddy feel. Asqual would be there to help if she made mistakes. She knew she would. The only question was how severe those mistakes would be, and if she could use her gifts granted by Matrika to save herself and her teammates.

Asqual coddled no one. From the day they left the city, he made those under his command find their own food and water. Naya appreciated this, knowing the ability to provide for herself might save her life. Asqual's method of training and hardening his people was harsh, however. Naya had never thought herself squeamish, but the first time she had to skin and gut a hyrax she killed with her slingshot, she almost vomited. She grew used to the mess and learned to do it quickly and with as little loss of meat as possible. The need for speed required the spies carry as few supplies as possible.

Even though it was still spring, their assigned territory of Bayitia, in the mountains, was hot and dry, as if Skataeroz refused to send rain because it touched the borders of Bainevah. Naya wondered about a deity who harmed his own people to deprive his enemies.

The spies learned how to depend on each other's gifts to accomplish their tasks quickly and efficiently. Naya had a good head for heights and an agility to make monkeys jealous. She delighted in testing her limits and took pride in her speed and silence and her ability to find hand and footholds when she climbed sheer rock faces. She felt sorry for Hezek, who sometimes grew dizzy just looking up at mountain peaks. She was relieved for him, when he earned the posting closest to camp, to receive images from other mind scribes, draw maps, and transcribe messages.

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Asqual put Naya in charge of the women spies. She led the first team to infiltrate the border villages for study. They had to learn the manner of speech and dress of the locals, how they walked and talked and ate, argued, spat and stole and how they reacted to authority of any kind, in case they were caught by an official. She then passed on that knowledge, so the other spies could use it when they approached other villages.

At the first moon dark, Asqual withdrew the team half a day's journey into the mountains. With war imminent, no one was quite sure what sort of power the Drevans would or could exercise at that turning point of the moon's phases. Asqual wanted all his spies together, ready to defend each other with magic and prayers, as well as swords, spears, and torches. Whatever it took.

Naya agreed with his precautions. She also welcomed a chance to relax and talk with her friends with her voice instead of her mind. She wanted to take a proper bath, because the villagers she met all seemed to have an aversion to water. She needed to re-dye her hair. The power inside her continued to burn the color from her hair and eyes. She and Asqual discussed the possibility of having her portray old women, to take advantage of her white hair. The problem was, few women lived past their thirties in the mountains.

* * *

Fifth Ascent Moon

Two days before the moon dark, her second moon in the mountains, Asqual surprised Naya by coming to fetch her. On horseback. When in Dreva, he usually portrayed a woodcutter, on foot and armed with several enormous hatchets.

"We're withdrawing everyone," he told her, when he was close enough he didn't need to shout. He held out his hand and she swung up into the rude saddle, little more than a blanket with straps, tied onto the

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horse's back. "Lileri was doing a general eagle-eye and noticed some new souls gathering at the edges of the dreamrealm."

"Drevan priests know to look for us?" Naya guessed.

"Are you sure you aren't reading my mind?"

"You're too well shielded—which reminds me, if you're ever caught, they'll know you don't belong here if you have a mind shield." She wrapped her arms around his waist and tightened her legs around the horse's body. "I can ride as fast as you need."

"Good girl." He patted her hand once, then clucked to the horse.

Withdrawing didn't mean going home, but finding a new infiltration point. Naya let her hair go white and wore straps under her rags, to make her stoop. Posing as an old woman with a weak voice and ugly spots on her face, she infiltrated a command post where Drevan soldiers gathered, their numbers increasing every day.

Naya washed dishes and clothes and did general drudge work. Her appearance made her nearly invisible and protected her from assault. Her slow movements made her irritating to the soldiers and their officers, and more than one took a swing at her with a fist, or lashed at her with the end of a bow or a fistful of arrows. Naya couldn't quite repress her temper, and set the arrows' feathers smoldering to render them useless.

Her slowness and the irritation she caused kept the soldiers from being suspicious when they saw her in places where she didn't belong. She was simply that silly, slow old wash woman, going from one place to another and getting in the way.

Naya used her fire talent to ruin bowstrings and arrows and char the leather grips on swords. She destroyed maps and the messages inside the pouches of couriers as they rode past her. She found some amusement in petty little tricks that made the war harder for the Drevans. And like the other spies in other towns, command posts and forts along the borders of Dreva, she transferred vital information about

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troop movements, supplies, and the general mood of the population.

When Asqual sent a message ordering Naya return to the base camp, she didn't wonder why or worry until she asked Hezek the reason and Asqual refused to tell him.

Her friend showed her an image of Asqual frowning and pacing in front of the mind scribes' tent. *A message came in by hosta hawk. That's all I know. It's serious, if they risk a hosta this close to Dreva.*

Naya thanked him. She tried not to think about the emergencies that would justify using the magically guided birds.

Ashael met her after half a day of creeping, constantly watching over her back, in terror of being caught. They slept in turns during the day and moved only at night during the two-day journey back to the central scouting camp. Asqual rode out to meet her when they finally had the camp in sight. His face was creased in grim lines. He held out his hand to help her up onto the horse behind him. Naya remembered the last time he had come for her. What emergency interfered with her work now?

Asqual refused to speak until she had washed and changed her clothes and they were an hour away from the camp. They rode royal black horses, taken from the king's stables. That worried Naya. Why would the king send for her, and honor her with the finest horses in the entire kingdom?

"I'm sorry, Priestess," Asqual said. "Your mother—Lady Priestess Star Weaver Eshrell—"

"I know my mother's name and her titles," Naya snapped.

Then she saw it in his eyes. Sorrow. For her. A moan escaped her, and that was the last sound she could make until they rode through the North Gate of Bainevah.

Eshrell had fallen ill four days before, quickly and mysteriously. She suffered painful cramps and sweating, coming on her so suddenly her students took her to the Healers Temple, despite her wish to go

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home.

Mayar could only determine it was poison, but not what kind. By the end of the day, every gifted healer in the temple had come to hold Eshrell's hand and focus their power to cleanse her blood and fight the poison. But they needed to know what it was, to know the best defense. No one could identify it.

Chizhedek sent for Naya that evening. If no other healer priest in Bainevah could help Eshrell, surely his daughter, a Bride, a fire priestess, carried enough power from Matrika to heal her mother.

Naya choked when Asqual told her that part of the tale, but still couldn't make a sound. She only listened and wept silently and urged her horse to go faster. When they rode through the gates of Bainevah after five days of torturous, hurried travel, they went straight to the Healers Temple.

Chizhedek waited on the bench placed at the bottom of the steps leading up to the temple's main doors. Naya knew then that her mother was either dead or cured. Her father wouldn't leave Eshrell alone for any other reason. She wept, and the sobs finally escaped her tightly close throat.

"Sir?" Asqual asked, as their horses clattered to a halt. He leaped down and reached up to help Naya dismount.

Chizhedek shook his head. Tears made his face glisten. Dark smears under his eyes and hollows in his cheeks showed how he had suffered the last few days. He held out his arms and Naya ran to him. She cried until she couldn't breathe, until she grew faint and her empty stomach tried to turn inside out. She clung to her father in aching regret.

* * *

Eshrell died while Naya was still two days away from Bainevah. Because of the heat, it was impossible to preserve her body to wait for Naya's return. On the day of Eshrell's funeral pyre, with nearly every

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priest in the city attending, someone attacked Naya's weaving hung in Matrika's temple, which predicted the destruction of the Hidden City. It was shredded, then soaked in oil and set on fire, inside the temple.

"We already suspected the priests of the Three," Mayar explained, when she related the long course of healing magic, potions, and every other attempt made to save Eshrell's life. "A gift of honey-glazed fruit was left with your parents, for you. Whoever brought it didn't know you had left the city. We found poison in the glaze on the fruit. Your friend Shanda identified it only yesterday as coming from a bawgas plant, which grows in only two places in Bainevah."

"One being the canyons of the Hidden City," Naya murmured. Her throat ached as if someone had tried to strangle her.

"Yes, but that wasn't conclusive proof, since bawgas likes cold and dark, and its main home is in Dreva. The Drevans don't have much liking for you."

"If they knew what I'd been doing the last moon, they'd have even less reason to like me."

"We suspected the Drevans, until the weaving was shredded. Your parents have been quite active in sharing your message from the Three. The poison could have been left in the hope that your whole family would eat it and die."

Naya nodded, but said nothing. The reasons for the murder meant little to her. All that mattered was that her mother had died, and no matter who had sent the poison, Naya knew it was her fault. Eshrell had died of poison meant for her daughter, because of the vows Naya had made to the Three.

* * *

Sixth Ascent Moon

"You can't go back."

"Shazzur. My friend." Naya managed a limp approximation of a

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smile. All her skills of deception had fled. She couldn't go back to her spying work in that condition. How could she persuade enemies she was harmless, if she couldn't persuade her friends she had begun to heal from the death of her mother?

Most likely because she hadn't begun to heal and never would.

"You're going back to the border to spy, aren't you?" Shazzur sat down hard on the bench in the courtyard of the barracks that housed the Host of the Ram. He wore the trousers, high boots and sleeveless, open leather vest of a horse soldier.

Those details sunk through Naya's hazy thoughts. Had he come back from the border, from supervising the preparations for war, just to speak with her? She immediately pushed the thought away the moment it became clear. Shazzur was her good friend, but such a drastic action implied his feelings were much deeper.

"What?" He forced a smile when she continued to stare at him. He tugged on his short-trimmed beard. "Do I have spots on my face? Have I suddenly turned another color?"

"I've never seen you without..." She stroked down from her chin, filling in the elaborate braiding of Shazzur's missing beard. His hair was short-trimmed, too, and looked sweaty as if he had recently removed a helmet.

Her heart raced and her breath grew short. Shazzur looked like a man ten years his junior, tanned and muscled and fit. He was made for an active life, on horseback, facing rigorous challenges—not the life he faced in the Court, bowing to dictates of fashion, weighed down with robes and protocol.

Naya toyed with the idea of begging him to let her ride with him. She would be his spy and healer and send messages to every mind scribe in the army. All she wanted was to be with him, to see his face every morning, to bid him dream blessings every night.

If he needed a woman, to ease the strain of his duties, would she

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share herself without asking for his heart in return? Naya honestly didn't know, but she wouldn't face that question if she didn't go with him. Should she go? Should she ask?

"I prefer it this way," Shazzur said with a crooked grin. "Disappointed?"

"No. I—I prefer you this way, too," she admitted, and suddenly felt as tongue-tied as she had the first time she attended Court with her parents, when she was barely ten.

"I belong out there, serving and protecting Bainevah." Shazzur cupped her cheek, forcing her to look him in the eye. Naya's heart stuttered and she could hardly breathe. Tingles raced through her body at the touch. "You shouldn't risk yourself that way, little Naya. You shouldn't be here, but in the temple, using your gifts." He gestured around the barracks courtyard.

Naya had come here to exercise with Asqual and practice her self-defense moves and archery. She was to meet with Hagath that evening to learn what plants could be made into poisons, in case she needed to kill someone—or herself—while in enemy territory. Naya looked at Shazzur, grim with concern for her, and knew she couldn't tell him about that particular lesson.

"My gifts are as a mind scribe. In the war, this is how I can best serve," she finally said.

"Is it really serving, or are you running away?" He wiped the sweat off his face with the back of his hand and then wiped his wet hand onto his trousers.

"Running away? How can I be running away, when I am facing as much danger as any soldier in Bainevah?" She stood and reached for her bow and the quiver full of arrows, intending to return to her archery practice.

Shazzur caught hold of her arm and yanked her back down onto the bench. He stood, towering over her.

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“You want to die? Are you punishing yourself for your mother’s death? Can’t you see that your enemies win if you destroy yourself? Naya, I can feel your pain. It spills out of you like killing heat from a furnace.” He rested his hands on her shoulders, holding her still and coming so close she felt the warmth of his breath on her face. “I won’t let you do that.”

“You’re wrong,” she whispered.

“Am I? Naya, my—my precious friend.” Shazzur closed his eyes. She sensed he had been about to say something entirely different. “If you don’t care about your own life, think about your father. He loves you. Those murdering fools have taken away the love of his life—don’t kill him by getting yourself killed. He adores you.”

“Does he?” Naya wished she could smile, but something ached and swelled inside her, making her throat hurt, pressing hot and wet at the backs of her eyes.

“You are his daughter, and he would curse the entire world and spill every drop of blood in his body to protect you.”

Naya knew her father loved her, yes, but that love wasn’t strong enough to stand against Chizhedek’s holy zeal. When she refused to become the king’s concubine, she had rebelled against the High Priest as well as her father and his plans.

“My dear...my dear friend.” Shazzur sank down on the bench next to her. “My family is dead, did you know that? My mother had some fire talent, but nothing even close to what you carry. My father was destined to lead the Scribes Hall.”

“What happened to them?”

“Murdered.” He gazed across the courtyard and Naya knew he didn’t see the racks of clothes drying in the sun, or the piles of mended gear. He had stepped into the past.

“Who?”

“They were on a pilgrimage, of sorts. Visiting the small, dusty,

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insignificant towns mentioned in the ancient histories. Bandits came out of nowhere. Mother never used her fire talent for anything but lighting lamps and cooking fires. She never would have thought to use the flames for defense. I honestly believe she had no temper to speak of—Father had enough temper for both of them.” He tried to chuckle, but the sound caught in his throat. “Two small boys survived the attack, and they told us the bandits simply swept through the camp, killed everyone, took what they wanted and left. My parents died holding onto each other. I refused to separate them for their funeral pyres.” He shook his head and blinked rapidly, tearing himself away from the past as well as visibly fighting tears.

“So you see why I cannot let you harm your father by risking yourself. And if you won’t listen to me, at least don’t sneak out of the city in silence, like you did last time. I kissed my parents when they left on their journey, and we only had kind words between us, but I still ache for all the things unsaid, all the gifts I never gave them. All the flowers I didn’t bring my mother, the philosophical discussions I didn’t share with my father. Chizhedek is an old man. What if he dies before you return?”

“What if I am captured and killed, you mean?” Naya nodded and looked deeply into his eyes.

Something cold warmed inside her. Something tight-twisted and sharp-edged began to loosen and soften.

Shazzur sorrowed for her. He cared enough to face her down, when it seemed everyone else was content to let her go her way. When she asked for silence and solitude, her friends gave it. Everyone but Shazzur. What effort must it have taken him to track her down?

He cared deeply for her. Was there any chance she could ever win his love?

“I won’t let you die,” he said. Something in his gray eyes held her attention, drew her in, melted the brittle cold mass inside, like frozen

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wax that would shatter if it was struck. Something in his eyes called to her. Something about Shazzur offered comfort, like a heavy sheepskin coat wrapped around her to block out the fiercest winter winds.

“Daughter?”

Shazzur didn’t move at the sound of Chizhedek’s voice, but Naya flinched and leaped to her feet. She turned and stared, breathless, and saw her father in the doorway of the courtyard.

“You sent for me?” Chizhedek said. He frowned a little deeper, then turned his gaze away from Shazzur to watch Naya.

Why did she feel suddenly certain that her father was upset with Shazzur for some reason? That made no sense—the two admired each other, had worked together often for the king. Had Shazzur done something to make her father angry?

“No, I didn’t,” she said.

“Then you don’t want to see me.” Her father didn’t move, but Naya could have sworn his shoulders slumped.

“No—I mean—Father, Shazzur sent for you in my name.” Naya clenched her fists. Part of her wanted to race across the pavement, fling herself into Chizhedek’s arms and beg him to make everything better. She wanted the last few moons to be nothing but a horrible, dark dream. She wanted to wake up and go to the kitchen to find Eshrell chatting with the servants. She wanted to beg her mother to abandon her duties and spend the day gathering flowers by the Loom River or sit in their garden, making music, telling stories and simply being together.

“Shazzur sent for me. Ah.” Chizhedek nodded. “Then you don’t need me.”

Naya’s throat closed. A world of pain hid behind the calm, emotionless words.

“In the name of the Mother, talk to each other!” Shazzur roared. He stood, grabbed Naya by the elbow and half-dragged her across the courtyard. He shoved her toward Chizhedek and stomped through the

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doorway, leaving father and daughter alone together.

Naya would have fallen if her father hadn't caught her by her arms. When he tried to set her back on her feet, she grabbed hold of the sleeves of his white robe.

"Father—Please don't be angry with me any more." Her voice cracked.

"Naya." Chizhedek groaned and gathered her close, enfolding her in the long sleeves of his light summer robe. "My little falcon, I am not angry with you. Did you think I blamed you? Your mother would laugh and call us both idiots." A sob shook him. He tightened his arms around her and rested his cheek against her forehead.

"I'm sorry, Father. I love you. Never doubt that I love you." Then the tears came.

* * *

Naya didn't get a chance to see Shazzur before she rode out with Asqual, accompanied by five troops of horse soldiers going to meet the advancing line of the Drevan forces. She knew better than to risk the tender, wounded peace with her father by asking if he held a grudge against Shazzur. Naya wondered if Shazzur didn't visit her because of Chizhedek.

It hurt her to a surprising depth, to realize there was a rift between her father and the seer.

CHAPTER 16

One crisis after another came up in Council or in the Court and delayed Shazzur's return to the battle lines. He counted every day that passed since Naya returned to the mountains and her duties as a spy, and it gnawed at him that he couldn't ride with her and look out for her. His dreams no longer showed him Drevan army tactics, but Naya caught as a spy and executed in numerous grisly ways.

The first delay came with the discovery of evidence that two of the king's half-brothers, members of his own Council, had helped Braxis infiltrate the palace to attack Lady Mayar, Queen Mother Dayona, and Naya.

Then, a sudden surge of interest in the Prophecy had the Court and most scribes and priests buzzing with interest. The most popular rumor reported by Shazzur's sources in the streets was that a true interpretation of the Prophecy had been found, but King Nebazz kept it hidden because it revealed crimes he had committed or was about to

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commit.

Using those same sources, Shazzur sent his own rumors out into the streets and the secret lines of communication that undergirded Bainevah society. He added to the rumors as he had done before, turning the tide of public opinion to keep down unrest and force enemies of the throne to reveal themselves.

He didn't learn about one especially popular interpretation of the Prophecy until four men in stolen uniforms attacked him.

Shazzur had worked late in the palace, creating maps from the latest reports, so the Council members without military training could understand what the army was doing. He found pleasure in knowing Naya had sent some of the information. Every report he had read that evening dealt with progress.

The Hosts and their royal commanders converged on Dreva, settling in for a siege. Asqual's spies and saboteurs had done a masterful job of disrupting Dreva's chain of communications and diverting or destroying supplies before they could reach the soldiers on the front lines.

Shazzur left the palace and walked alone in the dark and quiet, across the plaza that separated the palace from the courtiers' homes. His thoughts were far to the north in the mountains of Dreva, settled on Naya and her friends, harassing the Drevans. He almost didn't hear the boot scraping on the pavement behind him.

He conjured up the blurring Naya's friends had taught him on the journey from the Hidden City. In the shadows of the thin crescent moon, with clouds in the sky, he became nearly invisible. Shazzur turned, dropped to his knees and felt the breeze from a sword pass over his head.

"Guards!" He grasped his staff in both hands and swung up, aiming between the legs of his attacker.

Then the other three men attacked. Shazzur heard the hue and cry

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respond to his shout. He recognized the uniforms, but from their street style of fighting, he knew his attackers weren't true soldiers. He swung his staff in short, tight passes and heard Asqual bellow instructions in his memory. He rained blows on faces, arms and hands, knocking weapons aside and cracking heads open.

Only one sword strike got past his defenses, and that was a lucky blow, hitting him just above the knee and glancing off with just a shallow slice. Shazzur ignored the burning wet sensation and slammed his staff into the face of his attacker. The man went down, spewing blood and teeth. Then the palace guards fell on them.

* * *

"The Prophecy is becoming more trouble than it's worth," Shazzur said under his breath.

"Indeed." Chizhedek sounded amused. That would have been welcome, any other time. Shazzur ached for a return to the days of friendship and unity between himself and the High Priest. He missed being able to talk openly about anything and everything with the man who had been his mentor. Chizhedek had been there for him when his parents died. Shazzur had considered Eshrell an older sister. This rift between him and Chizhedek had to be healed. The High Priest's good humor, he suspected now, was partly at his expense.

Shazzur glanced up from the scroll holding the report written by the captain of the palace guard. The four men had come after him because of a new interpretation of the Prophecy. "The young ram will spill the pure blood of the wise," some now insisted, meant the king would kill one of his advisors. Shazzur was the favored sacrifice.

The men who had sent the four hired knives believed the only way to avert the Prophecy, to prevent the downfall of Bainevah, was for Shazzur to die before the king could kill him.

"Why do I see the dirty handprints of the priests of the Three in this?" he finally said.

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“Because the only other choice is the Drevans, and they are too busy right now, to plot against you,” Chizhedek said.

“No, not against me. It’s a plot to hurt the king. Kill one of his advisers, throw the Council into turmoil, send too many valuable minds chasing down rumors and looking for the guilty, and you effectively hobble the entire kingdom. We can’t afford this. Not while Dreva is still a threat.”

“Then, my friend, we need to hide you,” King Nebazz said from the doorway. How long he had been there, listening to them discuss the attack, Shazzur had no idea.

“I have too much work to do to run away,” Shazzur snapped. The king only smiled at his bad temper.

“Not run away. Tell me, where is the best place to hide a man that many people want dead?”

“In the middle of a battle,” Chizhedek said.

“You have suffered here too long, when your mind and heart are with the armies.” Nebazz gestured northward. “Go. As soon as you can. No one will expect you to leave. Certainly not without days wasted discussing the attack. Before your enemies in Court can turn around, you’ll be out of their reach. Let us deal with the fools here who want to take you from my service.” He nodded to Chizhedek, who bowed his head in agreement.

* * *

First Descent Moon

“Do you have a younger sister?” The pot-bellied, grizzled quartermaster looked Naya up and down, his upper lip curling with distaste. His fingers were stained with ground-in dirt, black under the nails, his knuckles knotted and scarred. He smelled like rancid oil. Manure clung to his boots.

“Oh, yes sir!” Naya giggled, imitating Dashti, a Bride who had

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made her want to pull the girl's hair out by its roots. She batted her eyelashes and pulled her mouth wide in a grin that revealed the four teeth she kept coated with brown wax. "There are seventeen of us, but I'm the prettiest."

"Not that desperate." He dropped the armload of soiled officer uniforms in front of her, turned and stomped away.

No woman would be desperate enough for you, either. Not even if you had a knife to her throat. Naya didn't let the thought show in her eyes. Sighing, she picked up the dirty clothes, put them in her overflowing basket, and headed down to the river.

Her disguise had worked wonderfully for the past two moon quarters, but she knew her time here posing as a washerwoman for the soldiers camped at the Bocladi River shallows neared its end. New officers would arrive tomorrow, and one might be smart enough to really look at the drudges who served the camp. So far, no one found it strange that a woman who spent all day washing clothes always had dirt on her face, her hair was always greasy and her body always smelled just a few breaths short of a midden. Someone would wonder, and question, and then not even a blurring spell would protect her.

"Drevans," she said with a snort. "Always so sure of how they want the world to be, they can't see what's right under their noses."

No one had noticed her chosen spot for washing and drying clothes lay next to a large clump of trees that sheltered the officers' tents. Water had wonderful carrying properties, day or night. Even when the wind blew, Naya heard every word said during the long strategy sessions. When the officers didn't discuss the reports brought in three times a day by courier, she slipped into the tents at night and read through the scrolls, sending the words directly to Hezek and Ashael.

Naya dumped her basket of clothes out onto the pebbles sloping down into the river shallows and hiked up her skirts to her knees before kneeling. She knew her father would be horrified to see her performing

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such a menial task, let alone washing the filthy linen of enemy soldiers. The daughter of the High Priest of the Mother, a Bride, fire priestess and healer, deserved better treatment. Naya could almost hear her father saying it, heartily offended on her behalf. Then, she could see in her mind's eye, he would slowly smile and laugh with her at the stupidity of the Drevans.

Eshrell, safe in Matrika's lands of rest, would laugh, too. Naya wondered if her mother could see her and watch over her, right that moment.

She took her pouch of cleansing ashes, a skin of sour wine, and a special powder of irritants Hagath had created for her, and mixed them in a depression in the sandstone riverbank. The mixture removed stains and made clothes smell fresh and look like new. However, clothes washed in it soon rotted.

Those with prolonged exposure to the mixture developed itching rashes. Naya took the antidote daily. Horse soldiers who couldn't sit on their horses were useless. She enjoyed imagining the soldiers' discomfort, but her nasty tricks meant she would have to leave this prime spying position eventually.

She grinned as she rubbed the mixture into the pile of clothes. Anticipating the discomfort, fury, and embarrassment of these arrogant soldiers made up for long hours in cold river water, her shriveled hands, and aching back. Anticipation would have to be her only reward, though.

Anticipation, and a long, hot bath and bread that wasn't moldy and dry—and three nights in a row in a real bed—would be wonderful.

Hedonist, Hezek scolded. *I can hear you thinking of luxury from halfway across the mountains.*

You shouldn't be eavesdropping, Naya returned.

Actually, I wasn't. I'm so eager to get back to camp, I thought the chances were good you'd be thinking about it, too.

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Have I ever thanked you for showing me what it would be like to have a brother?

Flatterer. Orders are to find an excuse to leave. The arrival of new officers with new battle plans is the best time for a raid.

Tonight? Naya glanced up at the sun, falling from noon zenith. How far could she get on foot once she finished her work? Better yet, why not go by water? It flowed in the direction she wanted to go. She showed her plan to Hezek.

Don't. We set up a net across the river to catch anyone who tries to escape us that way. You don't want to be caught by some idiots who will only see a pretty girl and not care what side of the war she's on.

Then it's on foot, is it? Naya decided to only partially rinse the clothes, as a farewell gift for the Drevans.

Maybe not. I'll ask Asqual for someone to meet you halfway on horseback.

The Mother bless you with twenty sons!

Laughing, Hezek withdrew from the communication and Naya bent back to her work with double the speed.

* * *

Naya walked away from the Drevan camp, shaking her head yet again at the blindness of her enemies. Did they trust so much in their Priest-King, the embodiment of Skataeroz, they had forgotten how to think for themselves? In anticipation of the new officers' arrival they drove away all the drudges, the farmers selling produce, and the whores. And in such a hurry, no one searched them. Naya knew the whores stole anything they could slip inside their dresses. The farmers stole twice as much in the way of provisions as they actually sold to the soldiers. She had seen bridles, saddle blankets, and other gear leave the camp under piles of laundry in other washerwomen's baskets. Someone would have stolen horses if they could have found a way.

The Drevans, being Drevans, would have suspected any one but

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her, because she took nothing when she walked away from the camp. The things Naya had stolen, she sent away immediately, invisibly, silently. The fruit of her labors had brought about tonight's raid. And she was proud.

She followed the curves of the river, downstream, ambling when she wanted to pick up her feet and run. One suspicious soul among the Drevans might watch how people acted as they left the camp. Or someone would decide he needed a uniform washed—bring back the woman who smelled as if she slept in rotten onions. It wouldn't do for the messenger to see her running.

It was a nice night for a walk, the air just starting to turn crisp. Naya hoped her next disguise would let her wear more than rags. Maybe she could have an indoor position, in the fall. Would the mountains get rain in the fall?

A longing to see her father filled her, when Naya thought of spending the winter in the mountains instead of at home. She silently vowed she would find a way to go home for the winter, even if it meant sneaking into Dreva's capital and burning down the Priest-King's temple. That settled, Naya let herself enjoy the quiet evening, the gurgle of the river flowing over pebbles, the hawk circling in the sky. Three horsemen topped a ridge in the landscape to her right.

Running would only attract their attention. She kept walking and looked for a likely spot to hide. This stretch of the river had few trees or even decent bushes. Naya kept walking and contemplated jumping into the river. The shallows wouldn't last much longer. Not far ahead, the river widened and deepened, then hit rapids that churned the river white and narrowed before going over falls taller than the Healers Temple.

Naya? Please tell me that's you ahead of us.

Hezek? Where did you get those horses? She nearly laughed aloud, hearing her friend's voice in her head. *I thought Asqual would only*

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send one rider after me. Ashael, please tell me you're not with him?

All right, I won't, Ashael responded. He did want to send only one after you, but the volunteer didn't make him happy. I think we're all here to look out for each other.

What is that supposed to mean? Naya couldn't imagine what rider would come to fetch her, whom Asqual didn't want to send.

Then the three riders came close enough for her to make out details of their features.

Ashael and Hezek had let their hair grow as part of their disguise and took childish delight in braiding and oiling their beards and hair, to mimic the style of the mountain villagers. Naya always laughed when she saw them. Her smile froze on her lips and the chuckle caught in her throat and choked her when she saw the third man.

He wore the high boots and leather-reinforced trousers of a courier who spent days on horseback. His thick riding vest hung open, baring his muscled, tanned chest to the evening breeze. Shazzur smiled down at her from high on the back of his royal black horse, looking a little dusty, a little weary, a little defiant. And a little overwhelming, Naya realized.

It stole her breath to see him here, handsome, strong, vitally alive—and in love with someone he couldn't have. She had to remember that. Did she still have the courage to try to win his heart? And just how did she set about doing that? She certainly wasn't in any condition right now to seduce anyone.

Shazzur held out a hand and stuck out his foot for her to use to boost into the saddle behind him. Naya hesitated. She wanted, needed to wrap her arms around him. Riding behind him would let her pretend for a few sweet hours that she had the right to hold him and savor the warmth of his flesh, the smooth strength of his muscles. Could she torture herself like that?

Naya clasped his hand and prayed hers didn't stream with nervous

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sweat. She put her bare foot on his booted foot and jumped up, to vault into the saddle. She gasped when she wrapped her arms around his waist and felt his warm, bare skin and the hard muscles of his abdomen under her hands.

“I hope you aren’t ticklish,” she muttered, and felt her face heating in a blush. That was a totally ridiculous thing to say—why had she said it?

“If I am, you’ll be the first to know,” Shazzur patted her hands, now firmly clasped together at his waist. “Ready? Asqual wants us behind the lines before he sends his first wave against the camp, but he won’t wait for us.”

“Always ready.” Naya smothered a groan. Why had she said that stupid thing, and why did her mind immediately put lascivious connotations to it?

She knew why. She wanted Shazzur to wrap his arms around her, too.

* * *

The raid went perfectly, as if the Drevans obeyed every wish and command of the five captains who directed the invading Bainevan soldiers. Naya enjoyed the salutes and compliments of the officers, who credited her with much of their success. Their praise grew embarrassing after the second day, however. She noticed that Shazzur didn’t like it when handsome young soldiers bowed to her and watched her move around the camp. His face grew too still, a blank page of composure. His eyes glittered with very real displeasure when some officers kissed her hand or stood close to her, or offered her their seats when she walked into the tent for strategy discussions.

Naya liked his displeasure, though she scolded herself for it. Shazzur was only being protective. It wasn’t as if he had any interest in her as a woman. He wanted someone else.

No, Shazzur was only being protective of her. Perhaps her father

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had asked him to keep her out of trouble.

She told herself repeatedly to put aside her purely physical interest in Shazzur before she embarrassed both of them and destroyed their solid, strong, pleasing friendship. And that was why she couldn't go to him and speak her heart, her hunger for his touch, no matter how deliciously hot her dreams became. She didn't want to lose him as her friend, her confidant, the one who dared to push her into doing what was good for her and could argue with her and study with her. If only he would try to kiss her, she thought their friendship would be perfect.

"None of that," she scolded herself for the final time, six days after the successful raid on the Drevan camp.

Six days of luxury, wearing her own clothes and sleeping on a camp bed and eating as much wholesome, hot, delicious food as she wanted—and bathing every morning. Six days of studying maps and conferring with other scouts and spies. Six days of listening to Asqual and the other commanders of the three Hosts plan their next step in invading Dreva by penetrating at Bayitia. Naya studied every chart of every village and waterway so many times, she thought she could draw a map of Dreva with her eyes closed. It was time to leave the camp and take another assignment.

Time to get away from Shazzur, she admitted, but only in the quiet watches of the night, when she knew no one but Matrika could hear her thinking.

* * *

Asqual tried to leave Naya out of the next meeting to announce three new, strategic assignments against the town of Gomordon. If that river trading town fell, all of Bayitia would be theirs in rapid succession, like a child's blocks falling in a row. Naya wondered if Shazzur's presence prompted Asqual to try to leave her out of dangerous plans. She decided to say nothing to reveal her suspicions and irritation. She simply sat down in her accustomed spot in the tent,

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folded her hands, and looked expectantly at Asqual, waiting for him to begin.

Naya listened to all three assignments, then quietly reached across the table and took the scroll describing the mission for a solitary spy.

“No.” Asqual reached to take it back. Naya called up a flicker of fire on the end of his fingertips. Enough to feel the heat, but not enough to burn. It made him hesitate long enough she could take a firm grip on the scroll.

“Yes.” She tapped the scroll into her palm. “But it needs changes.” She looked around the tent, at the other four women and six men spies. At Ashael, Hezek, and the other mind scribes, who stayed on the perimeter, transferring vital information. “The supply warehouses are in the heart of the city. Instead of breaking in, why not simply set fire to them?”

“We thought of that.” Draynoc was Left-hand Commander of the Host of the Merchants Gate. “The problem is sneaking jars of oil and other supplies...” He trailed off and she knew the moment he realized what she meant, when he grinned and shook his head.

“I’ll still need soldiers to surround the town, but only to keep the Drevans from escaping down the river when the fire takes the whole town. And to help me get out of there,” Naya added, her grin turning crooked.

Asqual played opponent, as he always did to help them predict everything that could go wrong and plan against it. Naya suspected he had other motives for trying to dissuade her. The only problem that remained, after talking and planning until past nightfall, was that no one knew what was in the largest warehouse. It had to be important, to be so heavily guarded and an inconvenient distance from the river docks. That meant Bainevah needed to destroy it. She still gnawed on the question when she left the command tent.

“Naya.” Shazzur surprised her, coming out of the darkness to stop

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her with a hand on her arm.

She hadn't seen him for two days, though she knew he was still in the camp. He had been busy, rising before dawn and working in the command tent until past midnight—she knew, because she lay awake many nights watching for him to go to his own tent.

She had hoped that tonight, she could sleep long and without dreams. Certainly without dreams of Shazzur proclaiming his love for her, taking her into his arms and stealing her breath with his kisses.

“My Lord Seer.” She smiled and executed a bow from the shoulders. And laughed when he scowled. “I’m only teasing, Shazzur. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want you to take that assignment to Gomordon.”

“I must. I am best suited.”

“Yes, I agree with that, but—” He sighed and shook his head. “I don’t want you there. I have dreams...”

“So do I, but I am learning that not all dreams come true.” Naya wondered, if she asked him, would Shazzur kiss her, hold her, make her feel cherished and desired? “Do you dream of my death? Capture?”

“I don’t want you to continue to risk yourself. You are too precious—too valuable to Bainevah.”

She sighed, wishing he had stopped at precious, so she could pretend she was precious to him, alone.

“I could say the same to you. I could urge you return to the king’s side. Shazzur, don’t you realize how valuable you are? How can you risk yourself like this? If the Drevans learned you were here, they’d overrun us, trying to capture or kill you. Your disguise as a horse soldier is fine for the average person, but you are too striking, too well known and...you can’t hide from your enemies, even if you change your face. I couldn’t stand knowing you were hurt.”

“Now you flatter me,” he said, his voice softening. Shazzur took hold of her hand.

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Naya caught her breath as something hot and sharp with power leaped between them at the simple touch. She looked into his eyes and saw pain and hunger. The same hunger she had seen in her own mirror after a restless night torn by dreams of him.

For a moment, she dared hope she was the lady Shazzur wanted, but could not have. But why would Shazzur keep silent? Who could make him keep silent?

He led her out of the pathway through the camp, and she looked back to see two men walking past with a lantern to light their way, heading for the picket lines. It was likely time for the sentries to change. She sighed when Shazzur released her hand. They stood in the darkness between two tents, as private a place as they would ever have to talk. No one would see them unless they looked directly at them. Privacy was one thing Naya missed even more than hot baths.

“Little Naya, don’t you think I can take care of myself? Don’t you know the children in Dreva are frightened into obedience with stories of Shazzur the King’s Seer, with a long black beard and lightning leaping from his eyes, knives in his fingertips and fire bursting from his mouth? Hmm, no.” He shook his head. “Fire is your talent, not mine.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“I am needed here. Just as much as you believe you are needed. Why would my enemies, who have barely seen me from a distance, in full Court robes, recognize me with my beard trimmed and my hair short and dressed as a horse soldier?”

“You could be killed by an arrow shot at random. Or bitten by a poisonous snake. Bainevah can’t afford to lose you.” Naya snarled, mostly at herself, when her voice cracked and she felt hot damp in her eyes. She refused to cry.

“Thank you. Your concern is precious to me.”

“Not precious enough for you to use some common sense.” She let out a deep sigh and decided to give up. Why waste her time arguing

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with him? Now she knew how Asqual felt when she wouldn't relinquish her assignment in Gomordon. Naya turned to walk away, and Shazzur caught hold of her arm to turn her back to face him.

"What's wrong?"

"You can ask that, after what we've just said?" Naya understood now why some women resorted to simply slapping a man and walking away. There was no other response that could express the exasperation and hurt twisting in her chest. He obviously hadn't listened to a word she said.

"Naya, if you insist on risking yourself, how can you ask me to retreat to a safe corner and hide?" His smile turned crooked and touched with sadness.

"It's not the same thing."

"Your gifts are too precious to be stolen from Bainevah by your death."

"I'm one of dozens of mind scribes and spies. I'm one of hundreds of healer priests. I am not irreplaceable."

"And you think I am?" Shazzur shook his head. He shifted his grip to her shoulders, as if he thought she would run away.

Naya wished she could, but the warmth of Shazzur's hands burned her bare arms and the gentle strength of his grip sent a tingling through her body. She stood close enough to him, his warm scent filled her head.

"Yes, you are," she whispered.

"Naya—"

"I will leave only if you do. I'm only here because you are, you know."

Shazzur opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He stared at her. Naya fought the urge to giggle. This was not a time for giggling.

"I'm leaving at dawn." She pressed the fingertips of one hand

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against his lips when he started to speak. “Hush. I don’t want my last memory of you to be an argument.”

Shazzur kissed her fingers. Naya snatched them back. They tingled as if burned, but it was a pleasant tingle that raced straight to her head. Before Shazzur could open his mouth to speak, she went up on her toes and kissed him.

Just a quick touch of her lips to his. The short, scratchy-soft curls of his beard tickled her chin. She felt her breasts brush against his bare chest and the sensation made her giddy-hollow inside. Naya tried to take a step back, to break free of his grip on her shoulders.

Kissing Shazzur had been the most foolish thing she had ever done and she had to flee. Now. Before she saw the look of disgust on his face.

“Naya,” he moaned, and released her shoulders.

Before she could move, Shazzur wrapped his arms around her, drawing her up tight against his chest. Tight against his entire body, from chest to knees. He tipped his head to one side and she barely realized what he was doing in time to close her eyes. Then Shazzur’s mouth pressed warm and soft against hers.

Naya couldn’t breathe. She didn’t need to. She felt as if she had consumed an entire pitcher of winter wine without stopping. Shazzur’s arms held her tight, lifting her so her toes barely touched the ground. His lips parted, moving against hers. She tasted the honeyed wine he preferred, and a warm spiciness that could only be Shazzur. Naya lifted her head, pressing closer, deepening the kiss, and slid her arms up to wrap around his shoulders.

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Shazzur wanted her. No man could kiss like that unless he wanted the woman in his arms. She nearly went breathless when she felt the evidence pressing against her belly. An aching warmth burst into life deep inside. Naya moaned, imagining Shazzur touching her bare skin.

“Naya.” Shazzur’s words tickled, buzzing against her lips.

“Please.” It was all she could do not to cry out in dismay when Shazzur tipped his head back, and then loosened his arms around her. Naya settled back to the ground on her own two feet, and he stepped away.

“Yours is the most precious life in the world to me,” he said. “Don’t ever doubt that, no matter what anyone says, no matter what I can’t say or do. Don’t ever doubt me, Naya.”

“I won’t.” She wrapped her arms tightly around herself. The sounds of the camp intruded suddenly. She shivered, feeling as if they had been caught naked by the entire camp, yet she knew no one had seen

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them, standing here in the dark. No one but Matrika. “Shazzur—do you love me?”

He stopped again, speechless. Naya wondered if someday she would be able to look back on this moment and laugh. She wanted to cry and scream and knock him to the ground and kiss him until they both couldn’t breathe. Laughter was no part of it.

“I am forbidden to speak,” Shazzur whispered.

Naya staggered back two steps. She had thought her hope was desperation, perhaps the insanity Asqual accused her of when she took the mission to Gomordon.

“Who forbade you? The king? I don’t care. Show me how you feel. I’ll speak love enough for both of us.”

“Naya,” he groaned and wrapped her close in his arms again. “If I call down the curse on myself by speaking, will you agree to go home, to safety, and wait for me?”

“I can’t. No one else can do my work.” She choked on a sob when she felt his arms stiffen around her. Naya thought the air around them turned as cold as winter. “If I ask you to go to safety, would you?”

Shazzur said nothing. She stayed there, safe in his arms, reveling in the discovery of the last few moments, and prayed it wasn’t another bittersweet dream. She sighed when Shazzur released her, sliding his hands onto her shoulders again. He looked long into her eyes, then leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“When you return—”

“We will have much to talk about. Let the curse rest on me, if that is the only way we can be together. My love.” Her lips tingled as she spoke the word, at last.

“You told the king there was a man who didn’t know of your love, and you would not marry if you could not have him.”

“You told me you had a lady whom you adored, and you were forbidden to speak your love to her. I envied her.”

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“No need for envy,” he whispered. “Never.” A dry chuckle shook his shoulders. “Have we both been fools?”

“You are an adorable fool, my love.” Naya went up on her toes again, and at the last moment kissed the end of his nose instead of his lips.

Shazzur laughed, and let her go when she stepped out of his grasp. Naya hurried to her tent, holding tight in her memory the sound of his laughter, the taste and warmth of his kiss.

She dreamed of Dia that night, in the few hours of sleep she had before riding out with her escort. Her childhood friend laughed with tears in her eyes and hugged her. Dia said nothing, but Naya knew her friend was happy for her.

“I promise, I will free you, even if it takes my life, my blood spilled out, to horrify all of Bainevah and turn them against the priesthood who imprison you. I swear it.”

* * *

The taste and feel of Shazzur’s kiss, the unspoken words she saw in his eyes, haunted Naya during the long ride to the river city of Gomordon. Her dreams of Shazzur came to her in the daylight, distracting her dangerously after she left the soldiers and walked to the town alone. Naya knew she had to focus everything she had on her assignment. The destruction of the mysterious warehouse and her very life depended on total concentration and alertness. Still, until she walked through the town gates, couldn’t she indulge in sweet memories and dreams of the future?

Before she left at dawn, Naya cut her long, silky straight hair off in a ragged line at her shoulders. She wore a black robe slightly too short, a black shawl, black veil, and went barefoot. She was used to going barefoot on other missions, but that had been in open country. Here in this filthy Drevan town, the only open land belonged to the rich and was kept behind high fences. The common people had to make do with

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packed dirt or the rough stones paving the streets. The detritus of thousands going through the town, the carts cutting ruts in dirt and stone, the filth and the heat of the sun on all that stone hurt Naya's feet. She tasted dust when she breathed and drank and ate. It was everywhere.

The dust tasted of death. Naya shivered, wondering what foul magic the Drevans had created now. Her dreams, in stolen moments safe from discovery, led her to the warehouse in the center of the town and its mysterious contents. Her target lay in the middle of a maze of buildings and makeshift barracks. It stood four stories tall, and everything touched by its shadow turned black. Like death.

Naya played the part of a wandering madwoman. She wandered in circles through the town, and after four days everyone knew she was there. Those who feared the dark spirits more than they feared Skataeroz tossed her coins or gave her a crust of bread. On the whole, everyone left her alone. Naya wandered through the town, humming and singing snatches of songs under her breath. Whenever someone came close enough to touch, she used her healing gift to study their bodies, then shouted their latest illness or their current physical problem at the top of her lungs. That ensured she was left alone.

No one paid attention to her as she wandered around the docks area. Perhaps someone prayed she would fall into the water. She hummed a few notes of a particularly filthy drinking song she had heard Asqual's horse soldiers sing. If her father ever heard the words to that song, Naya knew Chizhedek would faint. That prompted a chuckle, and broke the song.

She forced a few giggles, turned sharply to the left and skipped a few steps, then settled down into her slow, aimless shuffle and hum. Playing at madness was exhausting.

Finally, her wandering steps took her past the ajar warehouse door. She saw only darkness inside, but she knew better than to stop and look

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today. Better to wait until she had been there a few days and the soldiers standing guard every twenty paces ignored her completely.

The door hung open enough, however, to let a breath of air pass through. The smell of death and dust came to her nose. Sour and dry, smelling of old blood that had collected in pools and rotted before it dried. Naya took another breath and her healer's senses brought her images of suffering, of broken bodies and whips and chains, knives that drew blood so it drained from living bodies and clubs that broke bones and smashed skulls.

Her throat closed. Naya fought to continue her mindless humming, when she wanted to wail in mourning. She stiffened her legs when her knees tried to fold. She shuffled when every instinct told her to run.

What is it? She opened her mind and sent every detail of the smell and her impressions to Hezek.

His response, the thoughts and theories of the priests in camp, was a long time coming. *They have no idea.*

Naya put the warehouse behind her and let the shaking infiltrate her body. She found a sheltered doorway and huddled there, arms wrapped around her legs, knees drawn up to her chin, rocking slowly in silence. Her thoughts raced, trying to identify the source of the smell filling the warehouse. She knew it was something horrid and dangerous. This was a weapon, not mere supplies for Dreva's soldiers.

She had to find out before the Drevans used it. She couldn't simply cast all the force of her fire talent at the warehouse and hope fire wouldn't release whatever evil hid inside. She had to find out what it was, so the others could devise a way to fight it properly.

* * *

"No one knows." Shazzur slammed his fist down on the table in the command tent.

It was little more than boards across two supports. The boards bounced under the impact, moving the markers for troop movements on

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the map that covered the table. Three cups bounced and one toppled over. Fortunately, it held nothing.

“That doesn’t do us any good. That doesn’t do Naya any good,” he continued.

“We know that,” Asqual growled. He looked around the table’s perimeter at the other commanders and the three senior priests who studied the information relayed from Naya, through Hezek and two other mind scribes.

The priests were the best possible source for information on Drevan magic. Knowledge was sparse, at best, and mostly conjecture. Skataeroz’s priests didn’t welcome observers when they were at work.

When this report reached the King’s Council, someone would demand that spies be sent to infiltrate Dreva’s temples and learn all the aspects of their dark magic. It was easy to make such demands, when the speakers didn’t have to risk their lives or send sons, daughters or students to face capture, torture or death. Or sacrifice, in those same unspeakable magic rituals.

Even if spies did go into Dreva, that did them little good now. Naya was in Gomordon, in the heart of Bayitia, a day of riding away, alone, unsure what lay in the warehouse she intended to set on fire. Her healer’s gift identified blood and pain and that worried Shazzur. It smacked of death magic.

That much magic needed a keeper, a priest of sufficient sensitivity and strength to control it. A priest of that caliber would hear Naya call for help and would feel her use her fire talent when she attacked the warehouse. Such a priest could wait where she least expected, and capture her.

The Drevans hated Naya. Shazzur didn’t want to think what they would do to her if they recognized her.

The key was to make sure she wasn’t captured. She couldn’t stay in Gomordon one day longer than necessary.

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“If we don’t know, then we should abandon the mission,” Shazzur said. “Naya is too valuable to risk.”

“I agree,” Asqual said. A rueful grin cracked the strained, seamed mask of his face. “Not even to totally annihilate Dreva would I sacrifice her. Worrying about her has given me gray hairs and pains in my stomach, and steals my sleep. If I didn’t like her, I’d still protect her as if she were a princess. Mayar would flay me with a look if I let her spirit sister come to harm,” he added, lowering his voice and glancing around as if he feared being overheard.

His comment relaxed the officers and priests gathered around the table. A few even smiled.

“The question,” a priest said, “is how to bring her home.”

“Call her,” a captain said with a shrug.

Shazzur clenched his fists, determined not to slam the table yet again. He glared at the soldier, who seemed far too young to hold his rank. The priests shook their heads. Asqual fixed him with a look that usually had members of the Host of the Ram shaking in their boots.

“We can’t call her.” Asqual spoke slowly and distinctly. “We sign her death warrant if we call her and an enemy priest hears. She has the strength and skill to call to one specific mind and have no one else hear. That’s why she goes in and leaves the listening to other mind scribes.”

“If someone doesn’t respond by tonight,” Shazzur said, “she’ll know something’s wrong.”

“Then that’s good.” The young captain didn’t look quite so certain of that as he sounded.

“She’ll try to find more information before she leaves. She thinks, she uses her imagination, she doesn’t let anything frighten her,” Asqual said. “That is why Lady Naya is the best. And why the Drevans will utterly destroy her, down to her soul, if they catch her.”

* * *

Naya walked along the river on the opposite shore from the

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warehouse, keeping to shadows, watching movement around the building. Hezek hadn't had a message when she contacted him. Naya knew better than to expect new orders or information so quickly. But every hour she waited felt like forever. For the first time since she put on a disguise and walked into enemy territory, she felt alone. Helpless. Unsure of her abilities.

She hesitated to contact Hezek, though she still felt confident only the one she called could hear her. The unknown had entered the mission, and Naya didn't like this feeling of walking in the dark on slippery ground. She needed more information. She suspected only she could obtain it.

She would wait until evening, when traffic was thick and people headed home for their meals. The cloudy sky promised rain and she could use that to hide her movements. She would find a place to hide and shelter, where she could sit still and concentrate. If Hezek didn't have an answer for her, she would have to go into the warehouse and investigate.

She didn't want to go in. The stink of pain itched against her healer sensitivity. Something cruel and utterly evil had created that smell. Naya hummed louder, trying to stifle images that crept into her mind, of men with bull horns laughing as they watched children suffer and die lingering deaths.

The Drevans were arrogant, cold folk, just like their cold, cruel mountains, but surely parents were the same everywhere, unwilling to let their children suffer?

A single raindrop hit her nose and Naya yelped, startled out of her thoughts. She tipped her head back and looked at the sky. Another raindrop hit her cheek. She sighed and closed her eyes and raised her hands in silent thanks for the interruption. How many times had Asqual lectured her on the need to focus on the world around her if she wanted to stay alive?

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Naya heard the low groaning of a horn, announcing another barge prepared to cross the river. With the rain pattering sending everyone seeking shelter, she knew the barge would be crowded. Naya needed to be lost in a crowd right now. She would wait until she got to the other side to contact Hezek.

The people on the barge were too busy trying to stay dry, to shield their baskets and bags and everything else they carried, to notice one small, black-garbed woman huddled against the railing. Naya crouched low, hiding in the thickening shadows, and watched the rain hit the water. She listened to the chanting of the men who lined the sides of the barge and moved it across the river by pushing with poles as thick as their arms. She welcomed this moment of invisibility and held still, gathering her strength. The warehouse full of mystery and death waited ahead of her, rising higher against the sky with each shove of the poles off the river bottom.

Naya stayed huddled on the bottom of the barge until everyone else had disembarked. The men stowing their poles in the racks on shore ignored her. They were in too much of a hurry to get to shelter. Naya pulled her shawl up over her black veils to try to keep dry. She was just another small shadow moving through the rain. If anyone noticed, they would merely think the madwoman sought shelter, and they would be mostly right.

Hezek? Brother, are you listening? Naya leaned back into a recessed doorway. The rain wet her toes, but the rest of her was dry, a pleasure even if the doorway was dirty, hard, and cold.

No news. The captain is worried, her friend admitted.

So am I. I'm close enough to spit at the warehouse, and it makes me feel like bugs are crawling through my hair. Naya shuddered. *Big, slimy, biting ones.*

The captain doesn't like it. Anything Drevan is a trap, he says. Can you meet us at the third bend in the river at—

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Hezek? Naya opened her eyes and sat up straight. She drew her legs in, suddenly chilled to the bone in a way that had nothing to do with the rain. *Hezek, answer me!*

I'm here. Ashael called me. Asqual wants you out of there. He said I was to wait until you contacted me, because they don't want anybody overhearing. They don't know what's in the warehouse, but they don't want you anywhere near it.

Thank you so very kindly. Naya tipped her head back and studied the black shadow of the warehouse rising high above her. Despite the rain washing the air clean, the smell of dust and death and rotten blood grew stronger.

Maybe it wasn't a smell at all, but a sense of evil, of magic, of something that only those with powers could find.

When do I meet you at the river? she asked, after only a moment of hesitation.

You get there, and we'll get there as fast as we can. Be careful, Sister.

Then her sense of Hezek was gone. Naya shivered again.

The smell of dust and death and blood grew stronger when she stepped out into the downpour. Naya pulled her shawl tighter around herself. The layers that had once kept her dry now soaked up the rain and held the cold and wet against her skin. She tried to take comfort in the knowledge that no one would be moving around in this torrent.

She slipped on something slick and icy cold, hidden in the darkness between the buildings. Naya lost her balance and fell against the warehouse. She hissed and yanked her hand away. It burned, yet felt like ice cold enough to blister skin. She cradled her hand against her wet clothes and picked up her pace.

What was inside that building, to make the wood poisonous?

"Halt!" a man roared, just ahead of her.

Naya raised her head and saw the warehouse doors hung wide open.

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A man in a gleaming black and red officer's uniform, all leather and painted brass, stood in the shelter of the doorway. Soldiers moved to block her path. Naya heard the clatter and splash of big booted feet hurrying through the rain, coming from behind her and turned to see more soldiers blocking the alley.

She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and rocked, forward and back, heels to toes to heels. Naya's mouth was drier than the desert, despite the rain that could have drowned her.

"So you're the madwoman, are you?" the officer said, as she and the soldiers stared at each other in drenched silence. "In Dreva, it is a mark of those touched by Skataeroz, those possessed by magic. I think you have proven it true."

Madness? I'll believe it, she thought, and rocked faster. Anyone who encounters your Priest-King would go insane. Especially the women.

She swallowed a groan, wishing she hadn't had that particular thought.

"Bring her," he snapped.

The soldiers leaped to grab her. Naya didn't think about the proper response for a madwoman. Survival instinct made her jump. Two sets of hands caught hold of her arms and dragged her into the doorway, out of the rain. The officer was icy pale like all Drevans of noble blood. He yanked the shawl and veils off her head and one side of his mouth curved up in a vicious, triumphant smile. Did her white hair confirm his theory?

"You touched the building, just now." The officer caught Naya's arm in a painful grip and twisted it, to reveal the red weal on the back of her hand, down her wrist and the outside of her arm. Where she had brushed against the building. "You have great power. Magic in your blood. Commoners wouldn't have felt anything. Why are you here, woman?"

"Come, my love, and sing to me of cinnamon, saffron, honey, and

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wine,” Naya crooned from a dry, tight throat. “Give to me of love’s sweet spices, I am yours and you will be mine.”

She hummed and tipped her head to one side and resumed rocking, despite the grip on her wrist. Just beyond him, she saw a few spots lit by oil lamps. Words in a language she didn’t know were scrawled on the stone floor. Dark bundles hung, dripping, from the support beams, two stories high. Enormous brass cauldrons sat directly under the bundles. Naya’s gorge rose, almost choking off the song in her throat as her imagination told her what those bundles and cauldrons were for.

Dark magic. Blood magic. Death and torture and the ravaging of innocents. Everything she had ever heard about the Drevans, all the stories whispered by novices trying to frighten each other in the night in the temple dormitories were true.

“Silence!” The officer swung with the speed of a snake.

Naya tried to rock out of his way, but the full force of the blow hit her on the side of the face. She tasted blood. Stinging fire spread through her cheekbone. She feared he had broken it. She fell backwards. Rough hands grabbed her, shook her, flung her against the wall of the warehouse. She cried out as more icy fire sliced through her body. The officer laughed as she spun around. She saw a blur of movement, then pain cracked the back of her head and darkness swallowed her whole.

* * *

Dia came to Naya in the darkness that wrapped icy tendrils around her arms and legs and held her so she couldn’t move, could hardly breathe. The immortal girl wept silently, drifting ever closer, glowing softly, reaching out hands to push aside the blackness. It oozed back like oil.

“Silence,” she whispered, and her voice echoed strangely, shattering and bouncing off a thousand surfaces. “Tell them nothing. Show them nothing. Do nothing. Make them believe you are nothing.

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That is the only way to be safe."

"Safe," Naya gasped. She hadn't meant to speak. Hadn't her friend just warned her?

"Tell them nothing. Be nothing. Hide. Don't even think, or they will hear the very thoughts in your head and you will betray yourself. Oh, my friend, my sister, do not fail!"

Naya tried to reach for Dia, but the darkness stung and pulled on her arms until she cried out in pain. Dia vanished in a cloud of golden, hazy tears and the darkness flowed back into the place where she had been.

Bitterness filled Naya's mouth. She gagged and spat. Heat and pain slammed against her face. Hands reached from the darkness, holding her mouth closed, pinching her nostrils so she was forced to swallow what filled her mouth.

The darkness receded as the bitterness spread warmth through her body. The icy stinging faded and she found she could move her arms. The hands tangled in her hair and yanked hard, to force her head up.

"Who are you?" Dia didn't appear from the darkness.

No. Naya knew she couldn't speak. Was Dia testing her?

"I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

That *didn't* sound like Dia.

Naya blinked, trying to see the lighter blur in the darkness surrounding her. She took a deep breath. The stink of blood and dust filled her head. She moaned and tried to twist free of the hot hands holding her wrists. She shook her head and the roots of her hair hurt where a cruel fist held her. The blur of color resolved into a face. A pale, man's face. High, wide cheekbones, a full mouth set in hard lines, and pale blue eyes snapping with fiery rage.

Fire. Naya knew what she could do. This was a place of evil and death. Even if she died here—but she didn't want to die!—she would destroy this place and the evil magic stored here.

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“Awake at last,” the Drevan officer said. “You have more magic than anyone can guess. You resist our drugs and our mind scribes. Will it take pain to make you talk? Must I spill half your blood to hear what I want to know?” He stroked up her cheek with the tip of his finger. “Such a pity to damage such a lovely body. A beautiful woman has no right to risk her beauty, when it can give pleasure to others. Shall I punish you for that, also?”

You have no right to punish me for anything. Naya didn’t say the words aloud. Dia had warned her, hadn’t she?

“You’re not a virgin. Pity. The blood of virgins has almost as much power as the blood of infants and children.” He nodded, pleased, and Naya wondered if her face had betrayed her. “You have powerful, disciplined magic. We can’t tear it loose, to divine what it is. Therefore, you must be a priestess. My master will be pleased to know we’ve taken a priestess from our enemies. What will convince you to forswear Matrika and ally yourself with the Bull of Dreva, hmm?”

Naya closed her eyes and the Drevan laughed. Did he think he had frightened her? No, his arrogance and the images his words created in her mind only sickened her. Naya tried to block the sound of his voice. She listened to the thuds of her heart, the rasps of her breath, the throbs of pain in her imprisoned arms. Soldiers’ hands held her upright in the hard chair.

What should she set fire to first? She hadn’t seen any oil or wine or charcoal. Those things caught fire nicely and burned hot. The support beams with their grisly burdens were wooden. Naya focused her thoughts on the central beam and willed it to burst into flames. When she thought she heard a faint crackling, she moved her thoughts to the beams on either side.

Someone shouted. The hands released her. Stinging slaps knocked her breathless and tumbled her to the filthy stone floor. More hands grabbed her and shook her. The mouth of a jug slammed into her lips.

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Filthy hands forced her mouth open and more bitter liquid spilled into her mouth. She tried to twist free, to spit out the drug. The cruel hands battered her face, punched her in the belly, slammed her down into the chair again. Naya turned her mind away from the abuse battering her body and concentrated on the support beams.

Two more beams burst into flame. Vaguely, she heard shouting, the sounds of fists pounding into her flesh. The clay lip of the jug scraped against her teeth. She choked, and those cruel hands pinched her nose closed, stroked her throat and wouldn't let her breathe until she swallowed.

Bitter, cleansing smoke filled the air. Naya opened her eyes. Flames covered the ceiling. Dark shapes writhed among the flames, brutal faces that snarled, enormous mouths filled with rows upon rows of teeth.

Someone dragged her from the warehouse. Naya laughed to see dawn had come. Smoke gushed into the air and churned on the damp wind. It was a beautiful fire. A fire worth dying for. She giggled as the sky spun around her. She turned her gaze to the soldiers who flung her to the wet paving stones and laughed to see their bodies elongate and then turn squat and fat. Their faces churned, twisting, taking on extra eyes and noses.

They dragged her, but they hadn't stopped her from setting a fire. A beautiful, glorious, defiant fire. Her last fire. Naya sighed and blissfully sank into thick darkness.

CHAPTER 18

“They drugged her,” Hezek said. “That’s the only thing that could block me from her. When Ashael gets here, maybe we can combine and break through the barrier.”

“No.” Shazzur hated saying the words. “They heard her call you. That’s how they found her. I won’t lead them to us. She would be angry if we took that risk for her sake.”

He stood with Hezek and the riders Asqual had sent with him, on a hill across the river from the town where Naya was a prisoner. Two days had passed since Hezek and the escort soldiers went to the river to wait for Naya, and she never appeared. The captain had listened to the news that filtered out of the town, careful not to risk anyone else’s life. When Shazzur and his soldiers arrived, they sent three men into the city in stolen Drevan uniforms to learn what news they could.

Naya was in the warehouse. That was all anyone knew. The townspeople either knew nothing about the soldiers and priests using

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the warehouse, or they were terrified into silence.

Now, the warehouse burned. It gave off a thick black smoke that billowed up in enormous gusts with a poisonous green sheen. Was Naya in there? Shazzur prayed not. Hezek said she was drugged. If she was caught in that fire, Shazzur prayed she wouldn't wake before she died.

No. He refused to believe Naya was there. She had started that fire. She was too valuable a prisoner for the Drevans to leave in the fire to die.

Naya had done a valiant thing, starting that fire. It meant she could still strike back. Unfortunately, now Shazzur had no idea where they might have moved her.

"Captain." He turned to the man who led the escort. The last few days had aged him and Shazzur felt some gratitude that everyone worried about Naya. No one could possibly worry about her as much as he did, however. "Send the men back in, to find out what happened."

* * *

Naya dreamed she rode a small boat down a river in the middle of the night.

A leaky boat. The water soaked into her clothes. Why would that detail be in her dream?

She frowned. That slight movement made her head ache.

Was it a dream? The sense of being wet grew stronger, more palpable. She tried to lift her hand. Ripples moved against her arm. Cold ripples.

Naya tried to sit up. The top of her head banged against something hard. The reverberation sent waves of nauseated pain through her head, her stomach, and shot spasms through her limbs. She gasped and choked on water.

Mixed with the water, she tasted blood. Naya turned her head with caution. She raised her hand. Every muscle screamed, wrists and

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fingers, forearm, to her shoulder. She gritted her teeth to fight the pain, and that hurt, too. Had the Drevans beaten her into a bloody lump?

By dint of rapid, tiny breaths to fight the pain and refusing to give in, Naya managed to lift her wet hand to her face. The cold and wet felt good on her hot skin. Drenched and cold, she hadn't realized she was feverish. She touched her face, her eyes—her eyes were open.

If she couldn't see, either she was blind or—

It hurt to move, but she felt above her head for the ceiling she banged her head on. She ran her hands down the wooden wall behind her. She found the corner of the room within arm's reach, followed the next wall, and it turned immediately.

“Stupid,” she scolded. Her voice cracked. She wasn't in a room, but in a massive wooden chest. Judging from the water now up to her breasts, a sinking chest.

Giggles escaped her tightly clenched jaw. Naya feebly batted at the ceiling. Had they dropped her in the river? Why?

Why was she laughing? Shouldn't she be afraid? Naya couldn't make herself care. She closed her aching eyes.

She sputtered, feeling the water lapping her bottom lip. The water had risen.

Drugs. The Drevans had drugged her. Naya remembered sinking into darkness after she set the warehouse on fire. Her captors had beaten her, then forced her to swallow that vile-tasting potion. The drifting sensation was cool and dark and soothing.

“No!” Naya sat up, banged her head on the lid, coughed, choking on the foul taste of the river water. She tipped her head sideways to breathe. The water had risen to her nose.

What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she focus?

“I'm going to die,” she whispered. Her voice sounded flat, cramped by the water filling the trunk. How long until she couldn't hold her nose in the air to breathe?

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Stupid. You're a fire priestess. Burn your way out.

The Drevans had drugged her to keep her from focusing, using her talents to free herself. She would drown. Water, the antithesis of fire.

She squeezed her eyes tight shut and tried to focus on the lid of the chest. It was rough and smelled of grain. She wondered if they had taken it from some hapless merchant who moaned right this moment about his spoiled merchandise.

Stop it! Naya screamed at herself. She couldn't even spare the breath to speak aloud. *Focus. Concentrate. Set the lid on fire. Fire. Mother Matrika, let me make fire. One last time!*

Mother. Cold water tickled her nostrils. Naya thought of her mother. Would Eshrell be waiting when she stepped over the boundary between life and Matrika's lands? Would she smile and hold out her arms and welcome her daughter? Or would she be disappointed? Would she scold Naya for not doing better? Would Eshrell be angry she hadn't gone home to Chizhedek as she had promised?

Naya screamed, bubbles leaping through the water to pop helplessly against the rough wood. She hammered at the lid and thought of fires. Ovens filled with flames, burning down to coals to bake bread. Torch flames. Bonfires. Solstice fires, taking the sacrifice cloth up to the skies for Matrika's approval. She coughed and inhaled more water and struggled, banging on the lid, trying to force her mind to conjure up just one, small flame.

Her ears full of water, Naya heard the gurgling as the last mouthfuls of air escaped the trunk. Full of water now, it turned, sinking sideways in the water. Something thudded against the side. A branch or a rock, perhaps?

Mother?

* * *

Shazzur stared at the tendril of dying smoke, coming from the middle of the river. Even as he blinked against the harsh rays of the sun

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peering over the horizon to slice straight into his eyes, the smoke vanished. The angle of the sunlight hit the water just right to show something lay in the water.

Fire meant Naya.

Shouting at his horse, Shazzur dug his heels in hard and yanked on the reins, turning the beast straight down the steep riverbank. He smelled the bitter scent of burned, wet wood, followed the smell straight toward the dark square lying just under the surface of the water.

It was a chest, bound closed with ropes. Shazzur grabbed hold of two ropes and turned his horse back toward the bank.

He had dreamed of Naya, he remembered now. How long ago had it been? Moons? Years? He had dreamed of Naya bound with ropes wrapped around her, as ropes bound this wooden chest. She lay on the bottom of a river, peacefully sleeping.

What good were such dreams if he couldn't remember them until it was too late?

The weight of the chest nearly yanked his arm from its socket. Shazzur kept his grip on the rope and slid down out of the saddle. He slapped his horse, urging it up the steep slope of the bank, and dragged the chest through the water. When the front end scraped on the pebbly bank, Shazzur got behind it and pushed until he could be sure it wouldn't drift away. Then he slashed at the ropes. The chest lay on its side, the hinge on the bottom. When the third length of rope broke, the lid fell open. Water gushed out.

Naya slid out with the force of the water, pale and bruised, her eyes closed. She lay too still.

Trembling, Shazzur gathered her up in his arms. He pressed his ear to her chest, but heard nothing. He held his fingers against her lips, and felt no breath.

He kissed her and her lips were cold. He buried his face in her wet hair and a moan shattered his chest, rising to the sky until it turned into

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a howl of despairing rage.

The other searchers came running. He ignored their shouts, Ashael's wail, Hezek's curses. He fought them when they tried to take Naya from his arms. He cursed them until they let him walk away from the river, cradling her, putting Gomordon and its raging fires behind him.

The only thing he could do for her now was to ensure she did not face Matrika cold and wet. He vowed the fire filling Gomordon, spilling through the city like a living thing, would not be Naya's last fire.

* * *

Naya heard her father weeping. She saw him kneeling in front of Eshrell's funeral pyre, alone, watching the flames leap to the sky. The sound of a man weeping was the most dreadful sound she had ever heard.

No, wait. She hadn't seen Chizhedek mourn at her mother's funeral pyre. Naya had understood why her father hadn't waited for her; the body had to be burned, Eshrell's spirit released into Mother Matrika's hands. Chizhedek only waited until she came home before the ceremony of burying the urn filled with Eshrell's ashes. Still, the bitterness of not being there had been a barrier between father and daughter until Shazzur tricked them into talking.

Shazzur.

Naya stared, realizing that wasn't her father kneeling at the funeral pyre, it was Shazzur.

Shazzur knelt in front of a pile of wood and brush in the middle of a forest clearing, his back to her, sobbing as if the sound would shred his lungs. He was soaking wet, his clothes muddy. Ashael, Hezek, and the escort soldiers stood behind him in a half circle. Ashael and Hezek held torches. Tears streamed down their faces. Rage radiated from them in a nearly visible glow. Naya stepped around Shazzur, trying to see what

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he held, certain it was very important.

“Don’t cry,” she whispered.

“Naya.” His voice shattered on her name. “My Naya. My heart was always yours and I could never tell you. I curse your father for denying our love. I curse him for calling death down on you, to prevent my words.”

“No,” Naya said. She reached for Shazzur, to touch him, beg him to look at her and see she was all right. She knew what he held cradled in his arms, what that pile of wood was for.

She couldn’t move. She didn’t have a body.

“Please!” she shouted, as the forest clearing shifted around her, tilting and turning transparent. “Please? This is wrong! We were— Listen to him. I can’t stand hearing him cry. He shouldn’t have to hurt like this. Please!” Naya wanted to cry, but she felt nothing. No heaviness in her chest, no pressure in her head, no hot tears filling her eyes. “Please, this is wrong. We were going to talk when I came back. He kissed me. He loved me. I love him. We could have been happy. Please?” she whispered.

“Weren’t you already happy?” A rich, warm voice, perfumed with all the most delicate scents in the world, surrounded Naya.

“Mother Matrika.” Naya felt her aching for Shazzur slide away, soothed by the presence of the deity she served. But she didn’t want to let go of the hurting. She didn’t want to let go of Shazzur. “Please, we didn’t have enough time.”

“Time means limits, and it always ends.”

“Why couldn’t we have found our love before this? We wasted so much time.”

“Shazzur knew he loved you when you stood at the sacrifice fire as the Bride.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?” Naya tried to turn back, tried to make the forest clearing solid again. “Why didn’t I say I loved him?”

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“Do you love him?”

“Yes.” She laughed at the certainty that surged through her. Strange, how easy it was to be sure, to see clearly, now that she had stepped free of her body. She understood so much. The body had made everything so complicated, so muddled and hazy and hard to grasp. “It’s not over, is it? This is just the beginning. I wish I could tell Shazzur I’m all right. I wish I could tell him I love him, a thousand more times. Please, can’t you let me go back, just to say good-bye?”

“If you could go back, would you stay?”

Naya couldn’t answer. A thousand images flashed through her mind, all the things she wanted to do and experience. She thought of her father, how he would grieve when he heard that she had died at the hands of the Drevans. She thought of Shazzur, and instantly heard him weeping again.

If she could go back, would she stay? She thought of riding home to Bainevah with Shazzur, of marrying him and spending her days and nights at his side. Carrying his children, gladly enduring labor to see the joy on his face when he held each child for the first time. Of growing old with him. Serving in the palace with him, healing and advising and watching their beloved kingdom prosper.

“Death is not easily cheated, my priestess, my servant.” Warmth wrapped around Naya, like an embrace made of the sweetest perfume, all the scents she loved best in the world; ripening apples and baking bread, dew-covered roses and the air in the forest after a heavy rain. “If I send you back, the second death will be harder, heavier, and will cause even more pain. For you and for those you love. Yet a willing sacrifice, no matter how cruel, will open many locked doors and shatter unbreakable barriers. You must decide if the price is equal to the gain.”

“Matrika!” Shazzur’s shattered voice rose to the sky. “I call on you. I beg you!”

Abruptly, Naya stood again in the forest. Shazzur sat back on his

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heels, and now she could see he did indeed clutch her pale, limp body in his arms. She watched, wishing she could weep, as he set her body down on the mossy ground before the pyre. Why didn't he put her on the wood? He stood, went to his horse and retrieved the cloak hanging from the saddle. He wrapped it around her and stretched her out on the ground, arranged as if sleeping.

Then Shazzur drew his sword and knelt several steps away, facing her.

“Matrika, I call on you. I beg you. I offer my life in exchange.”

The men gathered around Shazzur shouted. The captain and Hezek leaped forward to stop him. Shazzur raised one hand and a golden haze leaped up like a wall around him, Naya's empty body and the pyre. The men bounced off it like a blob of tree gum off a wall. Shazzur ignored their cries and raised the sword with both hands, to rest the tip of the curved blade against his chest. “Take my life, Mother Matrika. Take my life and give life back to Naya in exchange. As my blood spills on her, let life fill her again. I beg you. I call on you. Mother Matrika, hear my plea!”

“No,” Naya whispered.

“He has the right to ask and have his plea granted,” Matrika said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “He has been a faithful servant, sacrificing so much for the good of the land. He has the right to ask this much, and more of me.”

“Bainevah needs him too much. You can't let him do that. Not for me.”

“He will grieve for you again, my priestess, my servant. Would you put him through such suffering a second time?”

“When? How long will I have to tell him I love him?”

“Ask him if he is willing to endure this again.”

“Ask him?”

Shazzur dropped the sword and leaped to his feet, shaking. He

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turned and stared. All the color left his face and he held out his hand to Naya. The men gathered around the barrier cried out, some in terror, others in disbelief. Ashael and Hezek shouted her name and tried to leap through Shazzur's barrier.

"They can see me? I'm really there now?"

"Naya?" Shazzur turned to her body wrapped in his cloak. Then he turned back to her, the essence of her.

"Choose, Seer," Matrika said. "If I give this woman back to you, to share love and life and children and to serve me, will you give her back to me willingly when I call for her?"

"Yes, willingly." Shazzur reached for Naya's hand. She drifted out of his reach as if thistledown on the breeze.

"Priestess, will you give me your children before they are born? Will you willingly die in my service? Will you spend your life and sacrifice your life speaking the message you were given? Will you spill your blood to purify my people and open doors and shatter walls to release the prisoners?"

"I have already died in your service!" Naya laughed, the sound strained. She raised her arms to the sky and saw she wore a robe of hundreds of shifting, shimmering shades of white, gold, blue, purple, and green. Her hair hung almost to her feet, glowing white like flame.

"You will die again, brutally. Your death will stun the kingdom and the spilling of your blood will begin the healing. Do you willingly offer yourself to suffer in my service?"

"Take me," Shazzur said. "Take my life. However long or short our time together is, let me pay the price."

"The price is obedience, Seer." Matrika's voice warmed, vibrating with laughter, rich and pure like an indulgent mother offering delights to her children. "Everything else is dust and meaningless."

The warmth in the air tightened around Naya, like an embrace, then released her. Shazzur dropped to his knees, reaching for her, his face

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crumpling into sorrow. She knew he could no longer see her.

“Yes, I will pay the price,” Naya whispered, as Shazzur got to his feet and staggered back to her dead body. “I will give my children to you before they are born and I will speak the words you give me, and I will gladly shed my blood to bring healing. Only, don’t let Shazzur suffer. Not for me.”

“Where there is pure love, there will always be suffering, because the world is cruel and evil tries to destroy all that is pure and good and light. But his suffering will be sweet and there will be no regret.”

Naya watched Shazzur bend and pick up her body, then stand, cradling her close to his chest, just as she had dreamed of him holding her. He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her closed eyes, then her lips. When he raised his head again, his face glistened with tears.

“Ask him,” Matrika whispered. “You have only a little while to say what needs to be said. He must make his own choice. Are you willing to take the chance that he will choose no?”

Warmth and darkness enfolded her like a cocoon. Naya opened her eyes and realized it was Shazzur’s cloak wrapping around her. Her body ached and was heavy and wet and cold. She smiled, luxuriating in the feel of Shazzur’s arms tight around her.

“Naya?” His voice shattered and he stared down at her.

“Please, Shazzur, kiss me?”

Naya drank in the warmth of his lips, the racing flutter of his pulse in his mouth, the spicy sweet taste of him, as if Shazzur was a goblet of the finest wine. The kiss ended too soon, leaving her breathless. She laughed, gasping, when Shazzur raised his head and stared down at her.

“You’re really here. Alive.”

“Only for a little while.” The words hurt to say, and she hated the pain that flickered in his eyes. “Shazzur...I do love you. Tell me I didn’t dream, and you love me.”

“I love you, Naya. Let me spend the rest of my life proving my love

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is real.” He went to his knees in the grass and cradled her tight close against him.

The barrier he had created faded into the cool forest shadows, but the men gathered around didn’t take one step closer. All was silent, so Naya heard Shazzur’s heart beating in perfect time with her own.

“Can you let me go again, when Matrika calls me? You will be alone for many years.” Naya whispered words that came from outside her. “Can you pay the price of loneliness and regrets, to have me live again for a short while?”

“When you die, I will die with you.”

“No. You’ll be needed here.” She slid one arm free to wrap around his neck and draw his head down for another kiss. Naya saw again the vision of Shazzur’s daughter, wearing the robes of the High Priestess. Her daughter, to fulfill Chizhedek’s dream?

“Do you accept, Seer?” Matrika asked. “Will you pay the price of obedience?”

“Yes. Gladly. All my life is yours, Mother Matrika,” Shazzur said, staring down into Naya’s eyes. “Do with me what you will, and I will obey gladly for Naya’s sake.”

“Then I give you to each other. She is your reward for patient, faithful service. Priestess, this man’s heart is your spoils of war, because you are a most valiant warrior. Remember every day the price and the gift of your love. You will be separated for a time, and then you will be together when the fulfillment of prophecy begins.”

Naya laughed, wriggling inside the confines of the cloak. Warmth spread through her body, washing away the aches, the bruises, the heavy, sodden feel of her body. Shazzur freed her from the cloak and put her on her feet. She flung her arms around him, to kiss him with everything she had within herself.

* * *

“There is some assurance in this,” Shazzur said.

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“How?” Naya smiled, resting her head back against his shoulder. She sat in front of him in the saddle, luxuriating in the feel of Shazzur’s arms around her. If the other riders thought she was still weak and shaken from her ordeal, all the better for her. They all watched her with awe, even Ashael and Hezek, who had already gone through so much strangeness with her. Naya hoped that would soon wear off.

She knew Matrika had allowed them to witness her death and return to life for a reason. Her capture and death would enflame Bainevah. Her restored life would terrify Dreva. The war would be over soon.

“Matrika has given us a duty to fulfill. Nothing and no one can interfere,” Shazzur said.

Naya nodded, but didn’t completely agree. If her duty was to turn Bainevah back to the true worship, and her death would bring about healing, then logic told her she would die at the hands of the priests of the Three. She comforted herself with the memory of Matrika’s bargain. Naya and Shazzur were to give their children—plural—to Matrika’s service before they were born. She would have several years with Shazzur, and she would give him at least two children. She would not complain about the things she would not have, only rejoice in what treasures had been given to her.

“We will be happy in the time we are allowed to have,” she whispered.

“And when you are taken, I will go with you.”

“No. If our children are still young, they will need you.”

“Children.” Shazzur stiffened. She laughed, feeling the tension racing through the muscles of his chest. “We will have children?”

“Only if we are married, of course. I love you with my whole life, Shazzur, but I will only sleep with the man who I claim as my husband.”

“Well, if you insist.” He laughed when she scowled at him and slapped the arm he tightened around her waist. “My Naya, I wanted to

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marry you the day you left the Sanctum.”

“Who cursed you to keep you from speaking?” Then she knew, and called herself a fool for not realizing. That explained the inexplicable coolness and restraint between Shazzur and her father, starting just after the Sacred Marriage. “Why would my father—I know he wanted me to be a concubine. I know he intended to bring about the prophecy of the daughter of the sacred line, but that’s not me. I told him so.” She sighed and couldn’t decide if she wanted to laugh or cry or scream.

Shazzur looked back over his shoulder. Naya leaned out to see what he looked at, nearly overbalancing, and saw most of their escort watched them. She caught smiles on a few faces and didn’t know whether to be amused or irritated that their companions knew exactly what was going on.

“Your father loves you very much, Naya. The only person I think he ever loved more than you was your mother.”

“That’s the way it should be.”

“He wanted you to be queen of Bainevah. He was furious, and accused me of talking the king out of asking you to become his concubine, simply because I wanted you.”

“But I refused the king before we left the chamber.”

“Hmm, yes, and told him you loved a man and if you could not have him, you would never marry. The king told me, and that discouraged me even more than your father’s curse.”

“And you told me you adored a woman and had been forbidden to speak your love to her. I was too proud to humble myself and simply tell you how I felt. We’re idiots, aren’t we?”

“Thank Matrika, she loves idiots and rescues us from ourselves.”

They laughed. Naya loved the feel of Shazzur’s laughter rumbling through her body. She vowed they would laugh together for many long years. Enough to make up for all the years of separation that lay ahead of them.

CHAPTER 19

Naya looked around the tree-filled plateau where their party had made camp. All was silent, with Gomordon half a day of riding behind them. She suspected she could sing and shout so her voice rang off the sky and no one in these mountains would hear her.

That was what they needed, she decided. Some singing and celebration, not the stunned quiet that had surrounded them since she climbed onto the horse in front of Shazzur. Her friends watched her, awed by what had happened to her. She told herself to be grateful Ashael and Hezek didn't show the fear she saw in the eyes of some soldiers. Only Shazzur smiled at her. He stayed by her side, kept his arm around her when he could, fetched her dinner for her, wouldn't let her do a thing for herself. He acted like a new husband.

That put a new thought in her head and gave her some ideas. Naya looked down at herself, dressed in Shazzur's spare clothes, and she laughed.

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“What, love?” Shazzur murmured as he came back to the fire. He handed her a wooden cup of wine and settled down next to her.

“I had different clothes in mind when we married.” She snuggled close against him. Naya knew she would never grow tired of the sweet warmth of his arm around her. “But these will do nicely.” She tugged on the shirt, pinned together at the neck so it wouldn’t gape and reveal her breasts to all and sundry.

“Wedding clothes.” He nodded, eyes thoughtful. “We will have the largest, loudest, most lavish feast Bainevah has ever seen. If your father and I don’t batter each other, arguing over the details. Of course, if I know the king and Lady Mayar, they’ll take over completely.”

“I don’t want to wait for that marriage fest.” She stood, and laughed when his mouth dropped open. “My friends!” Naya raised her cup. Every eye in the camp turned to her. “I’m disappointed in you. This is my wedding feast, and there are no songs, no dancing, no laughter.”

“Wedding?” Ashael looked around. “I don’t—”

“Wedding!” Hezek reached for his saddlebags for his ever-present flute. “Yes, of course. Matrika gave you and Shazzur to each other. How much more married can you be?”

“We are, aren’t we?” Shazzur slowly got to his feet. He towered over her by a head, and Naya was glad. She wanted to feel small and protected, sheltered by him. “My friends, you are our witnesses. Matrika gave me to Naya, fire priestess and Bride and visionary. I vow myself to her service, to her protection, to give her joy, all my life.”

“You are our witnesses,” Naya said, raising her voice. She choked when Shazzur took the cup from her hand, handed it to Ashael, and lifted both her hands to his lips to kiss, palm and back in pledge and blessing. “I take this man as my prize, my delight, my love, my husband, my soul. For all my life. Both here and in Matrika’s lands of rest.” Her voice broke on the last few words.

Cheers rose up as Shazzur gathered her into his arms and kissed her

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deeply, stealing her breath. She welcomed the heat of him, the strength of his hands, the spice of his mouth. In his possessive passion, she felt the thread of fear and sorrow, looking forward to the day they would be parted. She ached for him, and found it gave depth and texture to this sweet moment.

The evening deepened to night and songs drove away the last restraint and awe that separated Naya from her friends. There was only Hezek's flute and sticks rapped against stones for music, but it was enough. The soldiers sang, most of their songs ridiculous and filthy as only soldiers could sing, defying death and horror with raucous life. Naya thought she had never laughed so much, even when some songs made heat churn through her belly.

A cheer rose up from their friends when Shazzur raised her to her feet and led her out of the circle of firelight. Naya stumbled and felt her face burn when he snatched up an armful of blankets.

"We have no tent," she murmured. She could feel the gazes of every man piercing her back.

Really, was this any different than if Shazzur led her out of the banquet room at their wedding feast? Naya tried to tell herself this was much better. Only a handful of soldiers knew she walked out into the darkness to make love to Shazzur. If they were home, a hundred friends and nobles would share the moment. Perhaps more. Shazzur, being King's Seer, deserved a feast that would take in the entire Court, half the temples, and all the Scribes Hall.

Yet it was different. She felt nervous, and she hadn't thought she would feel that way today, of all days. She tightened her grip on Shazzur's hand and followed him through the darkness, into the sparse shelter of the trees. She was grateful for that barrier between them and their friends. Soon, they were lost among the dark shadows of the trees and couldn't see the camp or hear the voices of the others, still singing their ribald songs.

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“I don’t know how much time we have left, Shazzur,” she whispered, because that was all she could manage, “but I do know it’s limited. I don’t want to waste a single moment left to us.”

“Naya—” He tugged on her hand, stopping her. When she turned to him, he pulled her into his arms.

All the sorrows and fears of the day vanished, wiped away in the needing, hungry demand of his mouth on hers. Naya felt bruised and exhilarated. She clutched at him, gladly surrendering to the claims he made with every movement of his lips. She moaned, giving gladly, tasting the wine of his mouth and knowing he drank just as deeply from her.

Eventually, she felt rough hardness against her back and tugged one hand free to feel behind herself. She laugh and the sound vibrated in Shazzur’s mouth and he released her lips for a moment. He had backed her against a tree. He laughed, the triumphant rumble of a predator, grasped her hips, and settled her more firmly against the tree. He leaned against her, wringing a gasp from her as she felt the hard evidence of his desire through his clothes, pressing against her belly.

“Make me your wife,” Naya whispered.

Shazzur leaned back, enough for her to see his face in one streak of moonlight penetrating the leaves above them. She saw his hunger for her. It sent a thrill through her belly that was half fear, half painful needing. Slowly, Shazzur drew her away from the tree. He watched her face, his eyes filled with fire and his face deathly still, as if this were the most important thing in all the world. When he lifted her off her feet, Naya couldn’t be sure. She was lost in his eyes.

Shazzur carried her back a few steps, to where he had dropped the blankets, and set her down on them. Naya gasped, feeling a sharpness under her rump. He sat back instantly, releasing her. She reached under the blankets and drew out several stones. He laughed.

“My love, I want you. Tonight and for all nights.” Shazzur cupped

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her chin in his palm, gently stroking her cheek with his fingertips. “You deserve a soft bed and a feast to celebrate our joining, perfume and jewels and...” He glanced around the tiny clearing in the forest, with the moon shining down silver soft on them.

“Privacy?” She laughed with him. “Where, in all this war, will we have more privacy than now? I don’t want to waste a single night that we have together, because they will end.”

“Your father—”

“I didn’t come back from the dead for my father. I came back for you. Only for love would Matrika change the laws of death and life. Our love. Make love to me, Shazzur.”

“Your father,” he repeated, “will insist on the feast, and the king will declare a celebration across the entire land for us. He thought I was a fool not to defy your father’s curse. And I was.” He drew her up onto her knees so she faced him and enfolded her in his arms.

They melted together, knees to shoulders, mouths gently exploring, then growing stronger, harder, more demanding, breathing for each other. She heard his heart thundering in his veins, felt the racing of his blood under her fingertips as she caressed him, and knew he felt the same in her.

Their fingers fumbled and frustration made strange punctuation to the sweet, drunken exhilaration streaming through her body as their clothes resisted their first efforts to remove them. Finally, when she thought they would have to tear their clothes off each other, Shazzur loosened the last stubborn knot holding her shirt closed. It fell open and he slid it off her shoulders. Then he paused to stare, a slow smile making his face glow. It was a matter of moments to unfasten the belt holding up her trousers and push them down to her knees. Weakness and Shazzur’s warm, strong hands guided her down to lie on her back among the blankets. If there were more stones under her, Naya didn’t feel them.

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Shazzur yanked his vest off, then his boots and untied his trousers as he stretched out next to her. They laughed together as they shared the task of untying her borrowed sandals and slid her trousers down and off her legs. Finally they were both naked, bathed in moonlight. Shazzur's mouth worked as if he would speak or laugh, at a loss for words, for the first time since she knew him.

Then he laughed and leaned over her, braced on his arms.

"This is the moment when the poets would put glorious words in my mouth," he whispered. "I should vow that if we died tomorrow, tonight would be more than enough for me. But I won't lie to you. Naya, my love. My life. One night, one year, one lifetime. Never enough."

"If we had a thousand years, it will never be enough."

"Never enough," he vowed, voice cracking harsh, and leaned down to claim her mouth.

His mouth never left hers as he stretched out alongside her and their legs intertwined and his caresses grew hungry, desperate, almost bruising. Naya gladly wrapped herself around him and welcomed him deep inside. She cried out in breathless, shocked delight when it seemed her soul leaped from her body. But she stayed solidly on the ground, secure under the weight of Shazzur's warm, strong body. She held him tight and gloried in the shudders that wracked his body and the groans he muffled against her flesh.

* * *

The moon had descended to touch the tops of the trees. Naya didn't want to get up, didn't want to leave the warmth of Shazzur's arms. Morning would come too quickly, and there was so much to say, so much wasted time to make up for.

"What did my father say, to keep you silent?" she asked.

Shazzur stared at her a moment, as if he couldn't understand what she had said. Then he sighed and drew her closer against his chest. "He

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called down the Mother's curses, commanding that I not speak my love for you until you had died."

"My father is a prophet, it seems." In the sweet lethargy filling her, more potent than winter wine and sweeter than honey, she couldn't be angry at her father's interference.

"Some prophecies are better left unspoken." He stroked damp hair out of her face. "He loves you, Naya. Never doubt that. He wanted great things for you."

"I think we should leave some miracles and wonders for our children to perform." She laughed when his eyes widened and he went perfectly still. Naya reached up to curve her hand around his neck and bring him close enough to kiss. "I want many children, my love."

Shazzur laughed and the sound hummed between their lips as he kissed her. The first of many kisses.

They didn't rejoin their companions until the sun was fully above the horizon.

* * *

Second Descent Moon

The destruction of the warehouse filled with blood magic paralyzed the Drevan forward momentum. The news of Naya's torture, death, and return ignited a fire in the Bainevan army. The Hosts competed to see who could take the most towns, villages, and prisoners in the shortest amount of time. The common soldiers doubled their efforts and ferocity in battle and her name was their battle cry. Gomordon fell in a day. The entire territory of Bayitia, which had come under siege, fell in ten days.

When Naya tried to return to her spying duties, the Host of the Ram refused to permit it. They competed for the honor of being her bodyguards. She complained to Shazzur in the privacy of their tent that it was hard enough to go anywhere without being recognized. The Host of the Ram made it impossible.

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Shazzur laughed, then kissed her, then picked her up and carried her to their bed. “Do you think I would let you go anywhere without me?” he said. “We have spent too much time apart, my wife, and I will never let you leave my sight until we are safely home.”

“Is that a threat?” Naya tried to look disgruntled, but Shazzur only growled and stole her breath with kisses and caresses hotter than any fire she could ever conjure.

The truth was, Naya didn’t want to leave Shazzur for more than a few minutes at a time. Every morning she woke in his arms and said a prayer of thanks that she was still with him. Every night she curled up against him and thanked Matrika for the day behind them.

The interference from Drevan priests ended abruptly when Naya destroyed the warehouse. No one sensed unfriendly listeners when they spoke mind-to-mind, and the priests of Skataeroz seemed to vanish from the landscape of the mind.

* * *

Third Descent Moon

Asqual and his co-commanders brought the combined Hosts of Bainevah through the last mountain barrier around the capital city of Dreva during the first moon of fall rains. They halted within sight of Dreva’s walls, and settled in to wait.

Emissaries of the Priest-King arrived with the next dawn, with gifts for King Nebazz, gold to ransom the captured towns and sacrifices to acknowledge Dreva had been in the wrong. Shazzur, as First Advisor, oversaw the peace negotiations. He refused to take Naya within three days of the city. The Drevan emissaries complied without a protest, and traveled to Shazzur.

Naya attended every meeting, dressed in white priestly robes trimmed in red. Flames appeared from thin air all around her as long as the Drevans were within the camp. The emissaries shuddered in Naya’s

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presence. Terrifying the Drevans into compliance and politeness only amused her for the first day. She said nothing, leaving all the talking to Shazzur and Asqual.

“I should include you in the King’s Council from now on,” Shazzur told her in the privacy of their tent the night the Drevans left. “One look from you, an eyebrow raised in doubt, and you’ll have the Lords of the Gates babbling the truth and tripping over each other in their haste to cooperate.”

“Threaten them with my presence if you must,” Naya said, laughing. “I will even join you once or twice, but I have more important duties to claim my time, once we return home.”

Shazzur said nothing, only took her into his arms and drowned her with long, slow, sweet kisses. She saw his awareness of her meaning in his eyes. Sometimes, Naya regretted reminding him their time was limited, but she never wanted to take for granted the treasure of each day allowed them.

She would give Shazzur children, and treasure them, knowing they would be a comfort to their father when she was gone. She would heal and weave prophetic visions to warn Bainevah. She would urge the people to turn from the false worship of the Three and serve only Mother Matrika—and she would eventually die for it.

But for now, she would give herself to Shazzur and savor each touch and kiss and sunrise with gratitude. She would not ruin the sweetness of now by tasting the bitterness that waited in the future.

* * *

Fourth Descent Moon

Naya rode beside Shazzur on a royal black horse in the grand triumphal procession, when they returned to Bainevah. Chizhedek stood with King Nebazz in the palace gates, and she trembled when she saw her father’s calm face. What fury toward Shazzur did he hide under

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his priestly poise? Naya decided in that moment to confront her father. Right here in front of half of Bainevah, if she had to. If she did not bring peace between her father and husband that very day, there might never be peace between the two she loved most.

She and Shazzur stayed mounted while King Nebazz made proclamations, establishing a time of feasting and celebration throughout the city and kingdom. Then Chizhedek pronounced a blessing on the Hosts which had returned in triumph, with so few losses to their ranks. Finally, the gates of the palace closed, shutting Naya, Shazzur, and the commanders of the Hosts in and the rest of Bainevah out. Shazzur dismounted and reached up to help Naya down. Before her feet could touch the ground, Chizhedek enfolded her in his arms and wept.

Naya hadn't expected that. Shazzur stepped back, leaving her with her father. She clung to Chizhedek, and it struck her for the first time that her father was growing old. His dearest wish had been for her to serve as his heir, the first High Priestess in centuries. Naya wept, suddenly torn with grief that she had failed him, though it had never been her destiny.

"No, my child. No tears." Chizhedek drew back and wiped her face with his voluminous sleeve, as he had done when she was a child. "This is a day for rejoicing."

"Then why do you cry, Father?" she retorted, and sniffled.

That earned a crooked, brief grin from him. "My dear, my little bird—my hawk, dressed as a sparrow—forgive me."

"Father—"

"I brought this on you. I cursed you to die." His hands clutched her shoulders so Naya couldn't have broken away if she tried. "I said I would rather you die than join yourself to a man who loved you. It is my fault."

"It was the Drevans who killed Naya," Shazzur said. "It was

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Matrika who gave her life back to her, because her vow and her duty have yet to be fulfilled. You are High Priest of Matrika, but forgive me, not every word you speak is prophecy.”

Chizhedek’s mouth dropped open and his head snapped back and he stared at Shazzur so long, Naya feared her father had been taken in a paralytic fit.

Then a snort escaped the old priest, his eyes closed, he nodded, and a crackling chuckle escaped him. “Forgive me, my child, but my pride in you made me want great things for you.”

“Yes, and I have done great things, Father. When I died, I only had two regrets.” Naya caught movement from the corner of her eye and saw King Nebazz walking away, herding the nobles and commanders and priests ahead of him. She was grateful. “I wept knowing I would break my promise to come home to you. And I wept because I loved Shazzur and we had no chance to be together.”

“My fault. Perhaps if I had let Shazzur speak his love, you would have stayed here, and safe.”

“Don’t be too certain,” Shazzur said. “The Drevans wanted to punish Naya—and what makes you think I can control her?”

Naya snorted, and the sound turned into sweet laughter that gathered up Shazzur, then Chizhedek. The laughter took on a taste of tears when her father gently released her and guided her into Shazzur’s arms.

“You could have been queen,” Chizhedek whispered.

“Your granddaughter could be queen,” Shazzur said.

Chizhedek startled and looked back and forth between them with such hope on his face, Naya’s chest ached with more laughter. There was a time, she realized, when she thought she would never laugh again.

“I swore I would give my children to Matrika before they were born. Father, I will face a second death, harder than the first, but my

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children, your grandchildren will remain. I need you to help raise my children when I am gone.”

“When you are gone?” His hope crumbled into the same tearing pain Naya had seen on his face when Eshrell had died.

“We don’t know the day or the hour, only that Matrika commanded us to cherish each moment,” Shazzur said.

* * *

Reign of King Doni’Jazzan’Nebazz’Dayona
Year 21

Naya dreamed of Dia, standing in a dark, echoing, empty place. Tears streamed down her face and she raised her hands over her head to shield herself. The sound of stones rumbling against stones, falling in an avalanche of deafening proportion shattered the dream and woke Naya.

Whispers and memories of dreams stayed with Naya through the morning. She worked in the Healers Temple and brought both her children with her instead of leaving them with their nurse. Five-year-old Challen wanted to do everything her mother did. Going to the Healers Temple was a treat, and she adored helping tend her baby brother, Asha. Naya felt as if an intense, golden light shone down on everything around her.

At noon, Naya and Mayar took the children to the palace, where Shazzur had spent the morning tutoring Prince Elzan. They all ate the noon meal together, and Elzan proudly rattled off the bits of history he had learned that morning. He doted on Challen, sitting next to her and giving her sweets under the table before she had finished her bread and cheese.

Mayar was delighted with how well the two of them got along. Naya imagined Mayar raising Challen as her own daughter. She knew that was wrong. Mayar would become Challen’s guardian only if

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Shazzur died, and Naya refused to believe that would happen.

When Naya went to spend the afternoon at Matrika's temple, she left Challen with Mayar. Shazzur walked her to the temple and carried Asha for her.

"You must flee," she whispered. "When I am gone, you cannot stay here. Take Challen and flee."

Shazzur didn't protest, didn't question. They both knew better.

Naya served alone before the altar that afternoon. The day was rainy cold with the first of the fall storms and few people came to worship. She sat before the quiet altar and watched the flames in the sacred lamps paint strange images on the white walls of the inner room.

She wasn't surprised when an acolyte brought her the news that her weaving of the destruction of the Hidden City had been attacked. It hung in the largest anteroom to the King's Council, yet someone doused it with oil and set it on fire, and there were no witnesses.

Fear and magic could blind people. The priests of the Three had grown adept at both in the years since Naya had received her mission from the Three. Her return from death had influenced Bainevah to listen and renounce the worship of the Three. The Hidden City had grown insular and secretive as the shrines to the Three were abandoned by worshippers. Most black-robed priests had retreated to the Hidden City. Naya wondered if anyone had thought about them, until now.

So, it begins.

She thanked the girl and sent her back to the healer priest on duty in the palace.

Enku and Shanda came to her before she could send for them. Guided by dreams after Asha's birth, Naya had made arrangements with them that even Shazzur didn't know about.

"They finally found their courage," the big, ebony-skinned priest said. "They never would have dared violate one of your weavings even two years ago."

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“Is it time?” Shanda said. Her voice wavered and her eyes glistened with tears, but she didn’t weep.

“Come.” Naya led them to the rooms behind the altar, where little white-blond Asha slept. She picked up her son, kissed him, and put him into Shanda’s arms. “My son is now yours. Just as Shazzur prophesied all those years ago. The son of us all.”

“But—” Shanda swallowed and shook her head. The years had brought silver to her ginger-colored hair, but she still had the strength and resolve that prompted her to leave the Hidden City in the name of truth. She cuddled the sleeping boy close. “My life for his.”

From a locked chest, Naya brought out Graia’s spindle. She tucked it into Asha’s blankets. As she expected, Shanda felt no difference in the weight.

“My burden now passes to you, and someday it will be his,” she whispered.

“Shazzur?” Enku asked, a thousand questions in the word.

“He is ready—we both are ready—as ready as anyone can be.” She blinked hard and fast, determined not to weep. After all, it would be over soon. “The spindle will guide you through your dreams, telling you when to move and where to go. Only leave now. Vanish. Flee to the eastern hills. Shazzur will...Shazzur will go west. Doesn’t the old song say that strength comes in the forge of the desert?” Naya smiled, glimpsing a vision of years of waiting and preparation. Shazzur and their daughter would be safe. “When the time comes, you will know. Tell our son all you know, and his destiny will come for him.”

“But what about you?” Enku asked. He wrapped his arm around his little wife, who hid her teary face in the baby’s blankets.

“I am in Matrika’s hands.” Naya led them to a door hidden in the pattern of the cut stone blocks of the wall. She embraced Enku, Shanda, kissed Asha’s nose, then pressed on the pivot hidden in the wall. The heavy panel swung open, revealing a dark passage. In silence, her

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friends vanished into the darkness with her son.

Naya knelt and prayed, offering up this day and its results and the far-reaching consequences to Matrika. She waited until her mind's eye showed that her friends had left the temple far behind. She imagined Challen, playing in Lady Mayar's rooms at the palace, perhaps coaxing Elzan into playing catch or reading to her. She sent her thoughts to Shazzur, busy in the King's Council. She wrote a note to her father, leaving her love to him. She wrote her last letter to Shazzur, telling him of the visions that had come so quietly in the stillness of the afternoon. She told him what to do, to preserve his life and Challen's.

Then, composed and strangely light inside, she left the inner chambers and went back to the altar.

The altar chamber was empty, but she heard footsteps and muted voices outside. Naya knelt and stretched her arms wide, and called up flame on the empty altar. There would be no sacrifice today, as the people understood it. No wine or sheaves of wheat or barley; no honeycakes or late flowers or delicacies given in thanks.

Today, blood would be offered on the altar.

A door opened behind her, and in the light of the lamps in the outer chamber, Naya saw the shadow of a single man enter the room. He raised his hand, and she saw the silhouette of a sword.

Shazzur would mourn. He would want to die with her, as he had begged to die that morning by the river. A lifetime together wouldn't have been enough. Challen's most important task now was to give her father something to live for. Someday, Shazzur would remember the time they had together had only been borrowed, a gift they never should have had.

The shadow of the sword swung up high. Naya heard the far-distant rumbling of massive stones as a wall of magic, hatred, fear, and pride began to crumble. The desecration committed by the black-robed priests this day would shatter their power. Her blood would buy

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freedom for Dia, Graia, and Anrach.

“When the fulfillment of the Prophecy begins,” she whispered, “we will be together again.”

MICHELLE L. LEVIGNE

Michelle Levigne got her first taste of fantasy fiction with the *Cat in the Hat* books, and graduated to “harder stuff” with a graphic novel version of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* in a Sunday School paper in elementary school. She has a BA in theater/English and an MA in Communications, focusing on film and writing, along with the 2-year correspondence course from the Institute for Children’s Literature. She was heavily involved in fandom for several years and has more than 40 short stories to her credit in various fan magazines and universes, including *Star Trek*, *The Phoenix*, *Stingray*, *Highlander*, *Starman*, *V*, and *Beauty & the Beast* (live action TV show). Her first professional sale was in conjunction with winning first place in the quarterly Writers of the Future Contest. “Relay” was published in Volume VII. Since then, she has published ten SF/Fantasy and Contemporary romance novels through various electronic publishers, with several books pending future publication. Most of these books are in the SF universe called The Commonwealth. *The Bainevah Series* is her second foray into historical/fantasy/romantic fiction.

***Don't miss The Bainevah Series, Book I: 10,000 Suns,
by Michelle L. Levigne,
available from Amber Quill Press, LLC***

Dream Realm Award Finalist—Best Speculative Fiction Romance!

Challen expected to be nothing but a footnote in history, lost in the shadows of her talented, powerful parents. Her father was King's Seer and the voice of a prophecy that had troubled the kingdom of Bainevah for decades. Her mother was a fire priestess, daughter of the High Priest of Matrika—who died for speaking the truth. Challen was more than happy to be her father's assistant, take care of his home, run his errands and carry out his research. She didn't want to marry, unless it was a great love like her parents knew.

She didn't count on men without shadows attacking her, or a prince disguised as a scholar, or demi-gods who used people as tokens in a game of strategy—or the fact that she had been woven into the Prophecy long before her birth...

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