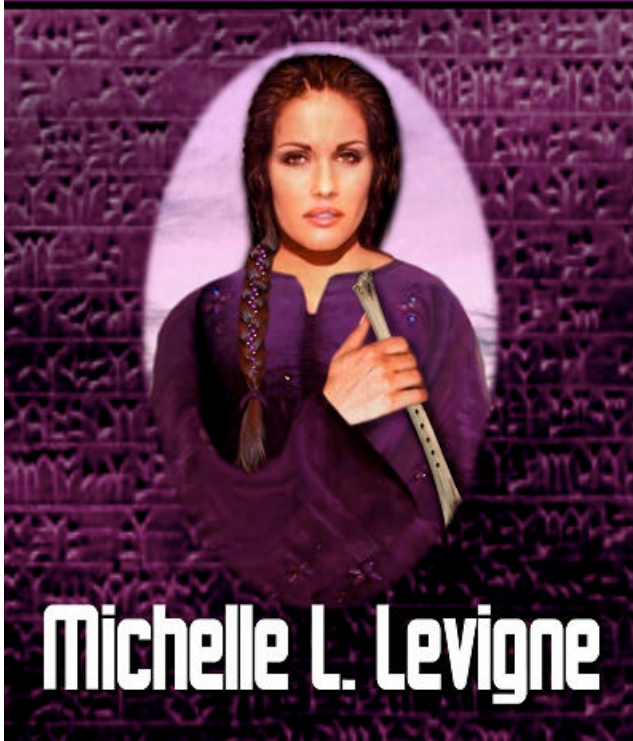


Song Weaver

Book III of The Bainevah Series



SONG WEAVER

“Let me help,” she whispered, drawn to the terror he fought to quell, the pain, the lethargy that visibly tugged on his eyelids. He had already lost too much blood. She knew that much, even if she knew very little about healing.

“Run.” His voice sounded like the shattered wood lying around him. “They’ll be back.”

“I can help,” she insisted, and pressed her hands over his bloody, trembling, cooling hand. A silent voice inside her laughed. What could she offer but a soothing song, to ease his spirit as he bled to death?

Music can be magic, and magic heals, another voice countered deep inside her soul. It was the same voice that demanded she keep her body and soul pure.

“You’re killing yourself, to help me. It was an ambush.” He shuddered and closed his eyes to fight the pain that stole his color. “They’ll kill you when they come back. Go.” He tried to smile. “I couldn’t stand it if I helped kill a pretty girl. Go home to your parents while you still can.”

Veerian bit her lip to keep from blurting that her parents had abandoned her at an oasis when she was a child. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and called up the cool tingling of power that always hovered at the back of her mind when she sang.

If she could drive away ravening beasts in the desert nights with her song, if she could calm drunken caravan drivers with her music, if she could ease pain with her flute, why couldn’t she help him with this wound?

ALSO BY MICHELLE L. LEVIGNE

The Bainevah Series, Book I: 10,000 Suns
The Bainevah Series, Book II: Fire Priestess
The Dreamer's Loom
Picture This

SONG WEAVER

BOOK III OF THE
BAINEVAH SERIES

BY

MICHELLE L. LEVIGNE

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

SONG WEAVER
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

Amber Quill Press, LLC
<http://www.amberquill.com>

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be transmitted or reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief excerpts used for the purposes of review.

Copyright © 2006 by Michelle L. Levigne
ISBN 1-59279-549-8
Cover Art © 2006 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHAPTER 1

The Reign of King Doni'Jazzan'Nebazz'Dayona
Thirty-second Year
Sixth Ascent Moon

Veerian curled her fingers around the bone flute, hidden under her threadbare cloak and tied to her belt to protect against street thieves. The flute was a talisman, the source of her courage, the root of the music that was her strength when she depended on no one but herself. She hummed for comfort, more heard in her soul than her ears. She couldn't hear herself in the noisy, dark, crowded tavern.

This was a bad idea. Coming to the seething tavern, with the owner already reeking of sour wine and a long, hot night ahead of him. Coming into the Dregs at all. She was only fifteen, and despite her ragged clothes and stick-thin figure, still visibly female and fair game for any man who had the steadiness to take what he wanted. She had no

SONG WEAVER

one to protect her, no one to be angry if she was hurt or even killed.

She came to this tavern to find a protector. If she took a job as a singer for the tavern, the owner would protect her, if only to protect his profits.

Veerian wished she could curl into a small ball and hum until she felt invisible, safe until morning. The trick had helped her often since her parents abandoned her. Her flute and talent for songs had kept her fed and clothed and convinced sympathetic merchant women to give her shelter.

So now she was in Bainevah, and most of the tales she had heard about the vast, sprawling city were true. The colors, the variety of people, the beauty, the many temples. The tales gave no clue to help a girl abandoned by the man she thought she loved, and unwilling to sell her body for food and shelter.

No clue to help her get enough money to buy better clothes, so she could play her flute in a better section of the city. To earn more money and someday get decent lodgings. So she could take better care of herself and perform in a better section of the city, and someday gain a rich patron. Someone who would ensure she would be taken care of when old age took her voice and the nimbleness left her fingers.

Veerian sighed, tired already at the thought of the long years of struggle that lay head of her. Yet it was the only workable plan. The only one that would give her dignity and inner peace. The plan silenced the sharp throb in her soul, like the voice of a deity, whenever she contemplated selling her body to fill her stomach.

“So, you want to sing for me.” The tavern owner came back to the long table that his cooks filled with cups and platters of food and the servers carried out to the paying customers. It stood between the main room of the tavern and the door into the kitchen and living quarters.

“You offered me a roof and bed, food and washing water, and two coppers every moon quarter, if I would sing for your guests from

SONG WEAVER

nooning to just after sunset,” Veerian said. She almost gave the words back to him with the same cadence and accent he had used. That trick had earned her some coppers and even silvers, but she doubted he would be amused.

“Yes. I did say that.” He looked her over. He had looked her over so many times while she performed on the street corner, she thought her threadbare clothes had grown thinner.

“Just music, for your guests. Nothing else.”

“No one out there touches you.” His broad, stubbled face split in a grin that revealed brown teeth.

Veerian’s gift for nuances and changes in expressions and postures caught something that made her shiver.

“No one touches me. Ever. I am no harlot.”

“Of course not. I don’t share my women with anyone.”

“I am not your woman.” She gripped the flute so tightly, she feared the ancient bone would crack in another moment.

“You’ll share my bed—that makes you my woman.” He laughed, tipping his head back as the humor shook his bulk.

“No.” Veerian turned and headed for the door.

It had felt leagues away when she stood there at the corner of the serving table, waiting for him to return. It felt weeks of walking away now. If she could just get her hand on the rope latch, she would be safe.

“Do as I say.” He caught hold of her arm and yanked hard. Her sleeve tore, so instead of stumbling backward into his arms, she twisted sideways, slamming into the wall with her shoulder.

Veerian bit back the cry of pain, yanked until the cloth tore free and kept going, heading for the door.

“Joras, stop her,” the tavern owner barked.

Veerian caught movement from the corner of her eye. She leaped for the door as one of the greasy young men who maintained the peace in the tavern lunged at her.

SONG WEAVER

The door opened a heartbeat before she got there. She slid between the two men stumbling through the door and out into the darkness of the alleys that served as streets in the Dregs.

“Guards! Ho, guards!” a young male voice cried.

For half a second, Veerian thought the tavern owner called behind her. He would claim she had stolen from him, or worse, she was an escaping slave. Who would believe her?

Then she read the pain, the fury in that voice and her sense of direction told her it came from far ahead. The reverberations of the voice off the walls around her gave her a momentary picture of blood, fallen weapons and dark shapes leaping out of the thick, fetid darkness.

A harp note sounded deep inside her soul and sent Veerian running toward that alarm cry. The denizens of the Dregs would flee that sound. That call for guards meant soldiers. She would be safer there, even in a battle between thieves and the city guards.

She almost resisted that musical command, but Veerian had survived this long by listening to that inner compulsion. She had believed for as long as she could remember that Mother Matrika spoke to her in music, guarding and guiding her. Even though it seemed like suicide, she obeyed.

The smell of blood and rotting garbage slammed into her senses as she turned down another, narrower alley. Veerian gasped as the ache in her bruised shoulder deepened. Metal-studded boots scraped on the rough cobblestones in the darkness ahead of her, around the many crooked turns of the rough streets. She heard the dull, heavy thuds of bodies slamming together and the crash-scream of wood breaking. Someone battered down a door. Someone else smashed boards against something hard. Metal clashed in discord and rang as weapons slammed into each other.

She turned two corners, her steps slowing as the darkness thickened, nearly as thick as the filthy air that clogged her lungs and

SONG WEAVER

filled her mouth with rot. Her flute slid in her sweaty grip. She hummed softly, so she could barely feel the vibrations in her lips, and kept going.

The sounds stopped. A last few running footsteps fled away. She turned another corner and saw weak moonlight and a faint spill of yellow lantern light in the distance. One length of alley, maybe twenty paces, lay between her and the next street.

A man groaned, nearly at her feet. Swallowing a scream, she stepped back, expecting to be grabbed and flung to the ground. Then she saw the man. He was no danger to her.

He was young, his golden hair clotted with blood, his eyes closed in pain. His face only had a shadow of beard, dirty, bruised, spattered with blood. He huddled with his back into a corner, clutching his sword with one hand, his other hand holding his belly together where someone had tried to eviscerate him. Two city guards lay in bloody, limp heaps nearby, and four thugs lay with them, mute evidence of a brutal battle.

His eyes opened and they were gray, nearly glowing in the dank, filthy shadows of the alley. He tried to sit up and blood spurted between his clutching fingers. With a muffled groan, he sank back against the wall. Then he saw her. Resolution and hatred flickered in his eyes.

He saw her as an enemy, come to finish the job the thugs had bungled, rob him and leave his corpse for the alley carrion-pickers to strip clean. Anger and pity battled in Veerian's chest, pushing her to act. Common sense said to run away. His battle wasn't hers, was it? If those thugs came back and found her here, they would hurt her, too.

Something changed when she looked in the young guard's eyes. She clutched her flute tighter, took a breath, licked her lips, and sent up a silent prayer for guidance to Mother Matrika.

"Let me help," she whispered, drawn to the terror he fought to quell, the pain, the lethargy that visibly tugged on his eyelids. He had

SONG WEAVER

already lost too much blood. She knew that much, even if she knew very little about healing.

“Run.” His voice sounded like the shattered wood lying around him. “They’ll be back.”

“I can help,” she insisted, and pressed her hands over his bloody, trembling, cooling hand. A silent voice inside her laughed. What could she offer but a soothing song, to ease his spirit as he bled to death?

Music can be magic, and magic heals, another voice countered deep inside her soul. It was the same voice that demanded she keep her body and soul pure.

“You’re killing yourself, to help me. It was an ambush.” He shuddered and closed his eyes to fight the pain that stole his color. “They’ll kill you when they come back. Go.” He tried to smile. “I couldn’t stand it if I helped kill a pretty girl. Go home to your parents while you still can.”

Veerian bit her lip to keep from blurting that her parents had abandoned her at an oasis when she was a child. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and called up the cool tingling of power that always hovered at the back of her mind when she sang.

If she could drive away ravening beasts in the desert nights with her song, if she could calm drunken caravan drivers with her music, if she could ease pain with her flute, why couldn’t she help him with this wound?

The very idea seemed more than reasonable, more than possible. What did either of them have to lose by her trying?

What would stop the flow of blood? A song commanding a river to flow backward, perhaps? She didn’t know where she had heard the song before. For all she knew, the river in the song was blood from a wound.

Back to the heart.

SONG WEAVER

Back to the source.

Back to the strength.

Spill not around me.

Spill not on the dry, uncaring ground.

Spill not from the bounds.

Tingling raced through her fingers as she sang two verses and the chorus, and played several trills, moving up the scales on her flute in between.

“What are you doing?” he whispered. His color hadn’t improved and he felt colder when she touched his hand.

Veerian shook her head and racked her brain for a song that would give him energy and warmth. She almost laughed as she tucked her flute into her belt and launched into a chorus about a fire burning in a cave of ice.

The young soldier dropped his sword to clutch at her hand and stared into her eyes. Dawning hope mixed with disbelief warred with the pain in his eyes. Veerian thought she would fall into those big gray eyes, with a thin emerald ring around the edge. Her heart raced a little faster, thudded a little louder. She raised her voice and sang through the song again, and nearly didn’t hear the thudding of soldiers’ feet approaching.

“Enough, child,” a kind, deep voice said. Warm hands pulled her bloody, sticky hands off the young soldier’s wounded belly.

Veerian looked up into the brown eyes and smiling face of a man dressed in green healer robes.

“Saved me,” the young soldier said. “She sang.”

“Yes, I can feel the power.” The healer signaled for the soldiers, who had already dragged the dead bodies out of the alley. “You are Rushtan, are you not?” The young guard nodded, then gasped at the effort. “Mallok, take this young lady to the temple. Tell Lady Mayar

SONG WEAVER

what has happened, and we will be there immediately.” He guided Veerian into the grasp of a soldier with gray hair and scars on his square face.

“Will he be all right?” Veerian asked, as Mallok led her away. She shivered, afraid for the first time since she pressed her hands to Rushtan’s bloody flesh.

“Yes, and you have made that possible.”

Veerian clung to that assurance as she scurried to keep up with her silent escort. His enormous, callused hand was warm and his grip gentle. She expected people to stare as they walked through more brightly lit sections of the city. She expected scorn, and people assuming she was a criminal under arrest. Hardly anyone looked at them. She toyed with the idea that all her made-up songs about becoming invisible had finally turned real, but Veerian knew that was ridiculous.

“Hungry?” Mallok rumbled, when they passed a tavern in a mud-brick building on the edge of the artisans’ district. The savory aromas of rich cooking floated out to tantalize them, along with the sounds of bright, welcoming laughter and music. His smile was kind.

Kindness came from tired old women who had nothing to fear, or from merchants who had just sold enough wares not to be tempted to kidnap her to sell as a slave. It didn’t come from soldiers, in her experience.

“Shouldn’t we keep going? Shouldn’t I be there when the others get to the Healers Temple?” she ventured.

He grinned and a low, rumbling chuckle warmed the night air. “You’re a healer, that’s for certain.” He headed for the tavern door when Veerian just shook her head. “Yes, you are. If Vandan says to take you to the temple and straight to Lady Mayar, then you’re something special. He said he felt power, didn’t he?”

“Yes.” Veerian agreed because it was safer to do so. “Who is Lady

SONG WEAVER

Mayar?"

Mallok gaped at her. Then a tavern server met them at the door and the soldier shook off his surprise to ask for food. Walking food, he called it. And water to wash with. He winked and nodded down at Veerian's blood-spattered hands.

Veerian soon learned that walking food was warm, flat bread folded around cheese and cold sliced meat, and small flasks filled with watered wine and pulped fruit. Mallok let go of her hand so she could wash face and hands with warm water and soap and a clean towel. He didn't make her take his hand again, and they ate as they walked. Veerian stayed with him, unwilling to risk fleeing and dropping more food than she had seen in nearly a moon quarter. The big soldier glanced down at her and grinned, nodding in satisfaction as she devoured the food. Neither spoke until they came out into the moonlit plaza surrounding the tall, stair-step structure of the Healers Temple.

"Now," he said, and paused to wipe his mouth. "Lady Mayar is High Priestess, and the healer in the alley is Vandan, her assistant. You have a gift, child, if Vandan says you're to go directly to Lady Mayar. You belong here."

"I do?" Veerian looked at the temple, shining in the moonlight, surrounded by the nearly empty plaza with its many fountains. She held her breath and half-closed her eyes so she could listen with her soul as she followed Mallok across the plaza. She imagined she heard a soft shimmering of music off the stones of the temple. It was a welcoming song, touched with moonlight, warmed by the heat still radiating off the pavement from the long day now ended. Veerian wondered if she had gone too long without food and rest, to imagine such things now.

CHAPTER 2

Mallok guided Veerian to a bench to sit and left her in the main entry hall of the temple. He winked at her and pressed his half-full flask of wine into her hand, then turned smartly on his heel and hurried down a long hallway that ended in a flight of stairs, going up. Moments later, a messenger runner in a white loincloth and sandals scampered down those steps and out of the temple. Veerian had seen others like him, running in all directions through the better part of the city.

The arrival of the soldiers and Vandan distracted her before she grew uneasy sitting in the bright light from tall oil lamps. She stood and took a few steps to join the men carrying Rushtan into the temple. Vandan turned, searching the entry hall, and saw her. He smiled and gestured for her to go back to the bench. She obeyed, not quite sure why, and let them hurry the wounded young guard away, into the recesses of the temple.

SONG WEAVER

* * *

“Child?” A heavysset, smiling woman in healer robes peered down at Veerian. “I’m so sorry. In all the fuss...” She sighed, but her eyes sparkled. “Well, we’ve quite neglected you.”

“Sorry?” Veerian sat up, realizing with a spurt of panic that she had fallen asleep, curled up on the bench. How long had she slept? Her sense of time was muzzy.

“Vandan asked that I take charge of you, and I never got the message until just now. Come.” She held out a hand. “Our Lady is still busy with young Rushtan, but she will want to speak with you immediately.” Her smile widened a little more when Veerian obediently put her hand into her grasp. “Well, Matrika has surprises for us when we least expect it, doesn’t she?”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered.

“Child, don’t you know what you are? No, of course not. Otherwise you would have been here years ago.” She shook her head as she led the girl across the entry hall and toward the same stairs Mallok had taken. “Now, first things first. I am Cyrula. I am in charge of the girls who live in the temple. You will live with us—unless your parents will object?”

“No parents,” Veerian said. She had long grown numb to the shame of that admission.

“Ah. Well. You saved young Rushtan’s life with your music.”

“I did?” She stumbled, but barely noticed. She hadn’t felt such gladness in years. Strange how a total stranger could become so important to her in just a few moments’ time.

Zorash had never been so important to her, and she thought she loved him until a few moons ago. How could she have loved a man who wanted to sell her virginity to the highest bidder?

“Yes, indeed. Untrained power. Vandan sensed it, from outside the Dregs.” She chuckled. “You need training, dear.”

SONG WEAVER

“Healing with music?”

“Oh, much more than that. Child, you’re a Song Weaver. You can touch minds and souls, as well as bodies.” Cyrula sighed as they reached the top of the stairs and turned to the right. “You belong here, among the healers. Thank the Mother you were there when Rushtan needed you, and so we could find you. Now, first you’ll need to wash and change and have you eaten?”

“Mallok fed me.”

“Ah, good. Mallok is a lovely man. Sensible of Vandan to entrust you to him. Not much on explanations, but a good man.” Her eyes sparkled with laughter, making Veerian wonder what Cyrula knew about the silent, scarred soldier. “Now, here we are. You won’t be able to soak long, because Lady Mayar will send for you soon. But she won’t keep you long. Then you’ll get a good night’s sleep, and start your lessons in the morning.”

“Lessons?” Veerian’s stomach twisted and she hung her head in shame. “Reading? I can’t read.”

“You will learn.”

“But—”

“Child.” Cyrula turned, taking her hand off the latch of the door she had been about to open. She cupped Veerian’s cheek, making the girl meet her eyes. Warmth and sympathy gleamed there. “Matrika sent you to us. The timing cannot be denied. She has a plan for you, a destiny to fulfill. Song Weavers are few and far between, and they are born for special duties. You have the ability to learn everything necessary to fulfill your duties for Matrika. Learning to read will be the easy part.”

Those words hung in Veerian’s mind as she hurried through a warm bath scented with apples, and dressed in the first new clothes she had ever worn. They were pale acolyte robes, no holes or worn spots or signs of mending. The cloth fell around her legs in heavy, luxurious folds. Her sandals felt strange on her feet. Veerian curled her toes

SONG WEAVER

against the straps and tried to sit still while Cyrula brushed out her long, thick, curly dark hair.

“Oh, what lovely hair,” the woman murmured, and patted Veerian’s shoulder. “We are going to have such fun, dressing it. I think we’ll let your hair hang long, braided with ribbons and jewels. Simple and elegant.”

Veerian burst into tears. Cyrula’s words shattered something hard and thick and cold inside her. Why did it affect her so deeply, that someone cared about how her hair should look?

She was still sniffing and drying her tears on Cyrula’s kerchief, wrapped in the big woman’s arms, when an acolyte knocked on the door and summoned her to Lady Mayar’s presence.

* * *

“You clumsy clod.”

Rushtan laughed as he turned to the doorway, but a jolt of pain from his healed belly stopped him with a gasp. His eyes watered, but he managed a grin for his half-brother, Prince Elzan.

“Cayeen doesn’t know whether to disown you or come rushing in, drag you back to the palace and harass you back to health.” The older, dark-haired prince settled down on the bench set against the wall of Rushtan’s sickroom.

“Just don’t let her see me until I’m on my feet again,” Rushtan said.

“I’m mightily impressed by the training they give you in the City Guard.”

“I wasn’t trained by the City Guard, you elitist swine.” That earned a snort of laughter from his brother. “I was the one doing the training, not the other way around.”

“I’ll wager you got your injury protecting his neck,” Elzan shot back. His crooked grin slid off his face. “Tell me the truth, how are you?”

“Feeling like an idiot.” Rushtan sighed as a thin, sharp-boned,

SONG WEAVER

dusky face floated through his memory.

“A lucky idiot.”

He nodded, and his hand twitched as he recalled the warmth, the gentleness, the tiny buzzing hum of magic at work when the girl touched his hand and sang. “We were ambushed.”

Elzan nodded, his mouth flattening into a grim line. Neither prince had to say anything more. Although Rushtan had renounced his claim to the throne so he could pursue the life of a soldier, he was still a target. There would always be those who would seek to destroy the princes, so the one they favored as the next king could inherit the throne with little or no competition. Anyone with the slightest trace of royal blood could someday have a claim to the throne, if enough people were removed from the line of succession. Rushtan had more claim to the onyx crown than any other prince except Elzan, for the simple reason that his mother was a Bainevan woman, and the other princes had foreign mothers.

“You were lucky that little healer was there,” Elzan said, breaking the silence that settled around them, ringing with implications and unpleasant thoughts.

“More than lucky. The Mother blessed me.” Rushtan offered a crooked grin. “Vandan said he felt her working her magic even before the alarm reached him and he headed into the Dregs.”

“Mother felt the girl’s presence when she was halfway across the plaza. She was still vibrating with the power she unleashed to heal you, and that’s not good.” His tone softened and a pensive look covered his face. “So much untrained power could be more dangerous than an enemy striking from the shadows.”

“How did someone with that much power end up in the Dregs?” Rushtan wondered aloud. He bit his lip to keep from saying: *How did someone so pretty end up in the Dregs?*

He didn’t even know her name, but he could ask Lady Mayar,

SONG WEAVER

because he knew the Healer High Priestess would take the waif under her care. Rushtan thought of the thin, hungry-looking girl with her dark, tangled hair and ragged clothes, and the amazing flute that produced the purest, sweetest tones he had ever heard. With her long, thin face, dusky skin and enormous eyes, she didn't need much to be a beauty. Rushtan could only imagine how she would look with bright clothes and jewels to adorn her.

More beautiful than her face was her voice, and even more beautiful than that was her courage. The first time he opened his eyes and saw her through his haze of pain, he had thought she had come to pick his bones before he was dead. Then he realized she was just an innocent child who stumbled into the wrong place at the wrong time.

Then, when he urged her to flee to save her life, she knelt, pressed her hand over his bloody, oozing wound, and offered her help. What kind of woman did that?

Someone extraordinary. Someone who deserved all the shelter and training and help Lady Mayar could give. She didn't deserve the trouble that could follow the friends of a prince who had renounced the throne to be a soldier.

Rushtan vowed then, if the girl needed a sponsor, if she needed help or a protector, he would do it. But he would do it from a distance, to protect her. Lady Mayar would agree. He knew she would do it for his mother's sake, if no one else. She had taken Rushtan and his sister under her care when their mother, Lady Concubine Coori had died, poisoned by a culprit still unidentified. Lady Mayar had been a mother to them, just as Rushtan knew she would be a mother to this new waif.

* * *

"I bring Rushtan's thanks," Healer High Priestess Mayar said. Her dark eyes glowed with warmth and interest as she and Veerian studied each other. They sat in her workroom in the temple. "He would be dead, if not for you. You have my thanks, also. His mother was a good

SONG WEAVER

friend and he is like a son to me.”

“Thank you, Lady,” Veerian murmured. She perched on the edge of the chair, torn between discomfort, unused to actually sitting on a chair instead of on the ground, and fear that she would be punished for taking privileges far above her station. Curiosity and the sleepy, comfortable feeling that came from Cyrula’s ministrations kept her there, waiting, eager to learn more.

“Do you know what you are?”

“Cyrula said...she was so busy giving me my bath and new clothes and dressing my hair...” Veerian tugged self-consciously on her braided hair, sweetly scented with the lemons and other concoctions Cyrula used to wash it and make it sleek, glossy and soft. The other priestess had insisted on weaving blue, green and gold ribbons into her hair, which seemed odd against her pale acolyte robes, but Veerian loved them.

“Ah, yes, our dear Cyrula. She was right, insisting on your physical comfort before we change your life so drastically. You are a Song Weaver. Do you know what that is?”

“Magic,” the girl whispered.

“A gift from Matrika. Through your songs, you have the ability, the responsibility, to look into minds and bodies to help healers.” Mayar nodded, clasped her hands on her desk and leaned forward, her dark eyes widening with the intensity of her words. “Have you ever sung or played songs that were not in your memories, yet seemed to suit your need?” She smiled when the girl just nodded. “That is part of your gift. Matrika equipped you to protect yourself, even when you had no idea what you did. Tell me of some of those times, will you?”

Veerian complied. She didn’t want to refuse the High Priestess anything. A soft, whispering song hung at the back of her mind, encouraging her to obey, to trust, to relax. Cyrula’s smiling, comforting presence helped, also. The words spilled from her lips as she told about

SONG WEAVER

times when she had been afraid, when she hid and whispered a song and her enemies went right past her. Or other times she was tired and bruised, sang herself to sleep and woke stronger in the morning. Times she had sung to ill or wounded people in the caravans that gave her safe passage from one oasis to another, and those people grew stronger.

“And when Rushtan was wounded?” Lady Mayar prompted, when the girl’s words slowed and finally halted.

“I tried to think of songs about...about rivers flowing backward, to stop the flow of blood. And other songs that would...I don’t know.” Veerian shrugged. “To help him.”

“Why didn’t you run? He told you to run. It certainly wasn’t safe for you. A wounded soldier couldn’t have protected you.”

“I don’t know, Lady.” She looked into the cup Cyrula kept filled with sweet, peach-flavored milk, for her to sip as she talked. How long had it been since she had tasted fresh milk or peaches? Veerian dragged her thoughts away from the luxuries that surrounded her. “I knew it needed doing, and that I must do it, and I did it. Though I don’t know how.”

“Well, that is what you shall learn,” Cyrula said with a nod for emphasis.

“If you agree to study with us,” Lady Mayar added. “Matrika wants only willing servants. We take no prisoners in the Healers Temple. The other demi-gods try to force unwilling service, to steal gifts and worship through threats and fear. That is the way of destruction for the demi-gods, by the law of the Unseen. If you are willing, you will be trained and you will have a place of great responsibility. We will be your family.” She got up from her chair, to kneel before Veerian and hold her hands. “What is wrong, child?” She smiled softly, sadly, and wiped a few tears from the girl’s cheeks.

“I have no family, Lady.”

“You do now,” Cyrula huffed. “I caught glimpses, child. That’s my

SONG WEAVER

gift, and you know nothing about protecting your thoughts—you must learn that, too. Your family abandoned you, and your survival is a sign of Matrika’s favor. She has called you to an important destiny. It is our destiny to prepare you.”

“Cyrula is right.” Lady Mayar stood, took the cup from Veerian’s hands, and helped the girl stand. “Will you stay with us and learn your gifts and destiny?”

“Yes, Lady,” Veerian whispered. She didn’t care that tears spilled slowly down her cheeks now. Something aching and hard deep inside began to soften and warm. Tears had always been useless before, and showed weakness to those who would devour her. Here, though, she sensed tears were a good thing.

There were many lessons to learn, she knew.

The days that followed were a whirlwind for Veerian. When she asked about Rushtan, she learned he had been sent to the barracks to finish healing. Then she forgot him in the flood of lessons and new experiences.

Inieri, a Song Weaver of great power and years, offered to take Veerian as her student before Lady Mayar could ask. Veerian felt the music vibrating silently in the air the first time she stepped into the woman’s teaching room and was so overwhelmed, she forgot to be afraid or to feel useless and worthless.

Veerian fought to master the intricacies of eating with spoons and prongs, instead of just her fingers and a knife. She hated shoes, but endured because the other acolytes wore them. She felt guilty over indulging in Cyrula’s pampering, but her hunger for love and acceptance was stronger than that sense of worthlessness.

The days and moon quarters and moons sped past as she learned to use pipes, drums, the harp and other instruments. She took training for her voice and learned to read, so she could search the archives and learn all the standard healing songs. She learned to write, ordinary

SONG WEAVER

writing as well as musical notation.

She learned that the songs she sang for Rushtan to heal him existed nowhere but in her mind. Her gift for creating songs to suit the need marked her as someone of great and growing potential, according to all her teachers.

Rushtan sent her gifts to thank her at the next solstice and equinox, but Veerian never had a chance to see him again. The few times she thought about him, she blamed her busy schedule and her new life, and the fact that she never went near that part of the city again. Why would a Song Weaver-in-training, ward of the Healer High Priestess, ever need to go near the Dregs?

CHAPTER 3

*The Reign of King Doni' Jazzan' Nebazz' Dayona
Thirty-Sixth Year
Sixth Ascent Moon*

*Come now, my love
To you I give
Sweet cinnamon,
Honey and cardamon.
You are the spice,
The sweet in my life.
My reason to be and live.*

Veerian opened her eyes and smiled at the crowds gathering around the raised platform in the central market on the richer side of Bainevah. Only four years ago, she had been forbidden to sing her songs on this

SONG WEAVER

very stage. Now the nobles and merchants begged to hear her voice and competed to have her present at their private moon bright festivals and the moon dark ceremonies.

Wouldn't Zorash be furious if he learned she earned more coin in one day from her songs—and gave it away—than he had gained from her singing in the eight moons they traveled together? They had parted company because he wanted her to become a harlot. Veerian had refused because of the compulsion not to give her body to anyone, to keep it pure. The certainty that Zorash would have kept most of the money she earned on her back was only a secondary reason for refusing.

Those days were behind her, and Veerian knew better than to gloat. Ill feelings and uncharitable thoughts stole her power to heal and help, and she lived for the privilege of seeing pain erased and sorrows eased by her songs.

Vandan, who had appointed himself her mentor, stepped up next to her and smiled. He enjoyed their days in the sunshine and open air as much as she did.

On either side of the platform, two soldiers assigned to the Healers Temple stood guard. There was always some crazed fool or brute who decided the revered Song Weaver should ease more than his pain and soul sorrows.

Tell me true, she sang.

Open your heart.

Swear to follow

And obey.

The Mother will

Give and heal and bless

If you abandon

All evil and hatred

SONG WEAVER

*And surrender your illness
To her care, today.*

The ritual song ended, signaling the Song Weaver had come to heal bodies and souls, to look into hearts and test those who would be betrothed or enter a business contract, and to sing a few songs to sweeten the hour. Vandan swore people came just to hear Veerian sing even more than they came to be healed. Her fame as a singer meant as little to her as sweets after a large meal. Healing and bringing joy to sad hearts was her feast.

Veerian lifted her dark green veil, which covered her from head to knees. A girl sitting in the front row, just on the verge of womanhood, sighed and smiled with delight. Veerian laughed and swept her a deep curtsy of thanks for that vote of approval. Today, she wore a long lavender dress with no belt and a shallow neck, and had amethysts and purple cords woven into her ebony, knee-length braid. She had no indulgences beyond pretty clothes, and it made her listeners happy, didn't it?

Vandan stepped down off the platform and walked through the crowd with his wax tablet and stylus, making a list of the people who needed help, and taking song requests. Veerian settled down with her harp and flute, and closed her eyes to pray and dedicate this morning's work to Mother Matrika.

After singing to aid Vandan in healing a woman with a badly burned arm, Veerian called two children up onto the platform. To rest from the first healing, she sang the children a silly song about lazy birds sleeping in a bowl, which a cook filled with milk before the birds got up the next morning. The crowd laughed and several merchants tossed coins onto the stage. Veerian thanked them with a low bow and sent one of her guards to give the coins to a beggar child standing in the archway to the market. The boy wore a familiar look of longing on his

SONG WEAVER

face.

Veerian knew exactly where she would be today, if someone hadn't thrown a few extra copper coins in her direction when she needed it most. Those bits of charity had helped her reach Bainevah after Zorash abandoned her, and had helped keep her spirit alive, which in many ways was far more important than sustaining the body.

Next, two merchants negotiating a contract asked her to verify each other's trustworthiness. She played a child's song on her flute, about a man who had to perform ten tasks to gain something he wanted, and by the time he was done with the tasks, he didn't need or want the frivolous object. While she played, the two men sang. Or rather, tried to sing. The crowd was kind enough not to laugh at the clashing voices, but Veerian saw several people plug their ears with their fingers.

She didn't smile, because she didn't like the images that came into her mind, revealed by the men's voices. Music created a door whereby Veerian could see people's thoughts, their fears and hopes and dreams.

"Well, Song Weaver?" the dry-voiced potter asked, when the song ended. "Should I sign a contract with him? He doesn't have the best reputation as a merchant."

"I had a few mishaps that were none of my fault," the gray-haired merchant said. Veerian respected him because he didn't whine. "That's why I agreed to pay you for your wares now, instead of making you wait to share the profits I bring back."

"Ordinarily," Veerian said, "that would be a most honorable action. I see no plan to deceive in your heart, though you do hope to find some new buyers, to hopefully make a larger profit than usual. But that is not cheating," she hurried to add, when the potter frowned. "You have a right to make a profit, and most especially when you take all the risk."

"Then I'll sign." The potter bowed to her, grinning broadly.

"I would not sign this contract with *you*." Veerian softened her voice, making the two men lean closer to her.

SONG WEAVER

She had learned that when she had to deliver bad news or condemnation, it was best to ensure as few people as possible heard her words. Some people still tried to blame her for the unpleasant results of their choices, and for the mockery from people who heard her pronouncements.

“You refused offers from other merchants,” she continued, “knowing this man was so desperate to re-establish himself he would take an unbalanced contract. This shipment of pottery was made by your apprentice, and is too thin and badly fired. You fear half the pots and bowls will shatter on the journey.”

“And I’d be left with dust and all my profits eaten up,” the merchant said, stunned. Fury put sparks in his eyes. “You tricked me into offering to take all the risk. You made me think nobody trusted me to carry their goods. You insisted on the Weaving to prove I could be trusted, but you didn’t think it would trip you up, did it?”

The potter opened his mouth to protest, but no sound came out. He looked at the merchant. He looked at Veerian. Something glittered in his eyes that made a chill run up Veerian’s back, despite the warmth of the summer day. She lifted her hand off her knee and the guard on the right stepped up behind her. The potter looked at the guard, swallowed, then offered a flat smile and backed off the platform, bowing.

“I’m sorry.” Veerian inclined her head when the merchant bowed to her.

“Why? You saved me hours of grief and a loss of maybe eighty denarii.”

“Yes, but people will think the contract was not signed because of some flaw in you,” Vandan said. “If I may, Weaver?”

Veerian nodded, glad to let her mentor handle this problem. She disliked this aspect of her talent, when revealing the truth and inner motivations of the people who came to her didn’t help them. He beckoned the merchant over to the other side of the platform, while

SONG WEAVER

Veerian turned to the next pair needing to have their hearts studied through song. Vandan's list said they wanted a Weaving to bless their betrothal.

Before the young, starry-eyed couple could step up onto the platform, Veerian heard the tramping of booted feet, the clatter of hooves and jangle of bronze chains. She stood, grateful for the platform that lifted her two heads above the crowd. The people turned to watch. Soldiers marched past the marketplace.

Veerian saw the flags for the Hosts of the Water and East gates, carried by proud young boys. Then the flags that signaled they marched in peace came into view, carried on either side of the commanders of the two Hosts. The commanders were young men, wearing their helmets and full dress armor. They rode black horses, meaning they were members of the royal family. A sapphire blue ram's head decorated the long blanket hanging off one horse. His rider was Prince Doni'Mayar, the king's firstborn. The prince beside him, however, had no emblem.

Veerian knew that meant the other royal soldier was Prince Doni'Coori. He had foresworn his claim to inherit the throne and had joined the military. He lived in the officer's quarters, rather than in the palace. She had heard enough disparaging and admiring talk about the prince when she attended festivals in noble houses, she decided to compose songs praising his courage. She had never met him, though she knew Lady Mayar thought highly of him. That was reason enough for Veerian to admire the young prince as well.

As if he heard her thinking of him, Prince Doni'Coori removed his helmet. He rode holding onto his horse's reins with one hand, the strap of his bronze, crested helmet hanging from the other. He laughed at something his brother said and shook his head, then looked upward to let the sunshine drench his face. He was blond, his short beard neatly trimmed, and the procession rode close enough to her platform in the

SONG WEAVER

marketplace square, Veerian could see his eyes were gray. She knew she would recognize him again, no matter how far into the future they met.

Then she realized she did recognize him.

Prince Doni'Coori was Rushtan, the soldier she had healed four years ago, in the Dregs.

Veerian felt something flip over in her belly, a strange mixture of feelings that left her lightheaded and strangely sad. She didn't like palace politics, but Lady Mayar had taught her enough to help her avoid trouble when she was a guest in noble houses. Veerian thought she understood why Rushtan hadn't come to see her. He walked a bridge of swords, a valuable ally or a deadly enemy for whichever prince someday inherited the throne. She had heard enough gossip to know Prince Rushtan didn't have many friends, because he avoided palace politics. Some said he only chose soldiers as friends because they could defend themselves.

Don't be a silly, feather-headed fool, Veerian silently scolded herself. She understood why Rushtan had avoided her. He had sent her gifts and Lady Mayar said he had been very concerned about her welfare when she first came to the Healers Temple. That more than repaid her for trying to heal him. Veerian considered that she owed Rushtan far more than he could ever owe her, because helping him had brought her to the life she held today.

No, she refused to feel sad that he was no longer in her life, because honestly, had he ever been in her life?

Veerian told herself she was grateful to know he was well. She yanked her thoughts back to the present moment and watched the procession go through the marketplace. They had both done each other a good turn, that cruel night in that filthy alley in the Dregs. They had saved each other's life.

SONG WEAVER

Bravely, bravely, she sang, pitching her voice to rise above the crowd.

*Ride forth and guard us
Carry our prayers with you
Know the Mother smiles on you
Know our hearts go with you
Bravely, bravely riding onward
Sword and shield
Spear and bow*

Prince Doni'Coori turned and smiled at her. Their eyes met. His mouth dropped open for two seconds, and in that moment, she knew he recognized her, too. Then his smile turned dazzling. He stood in his stirrups and bowed to her, pressing the hand holding his helmet to his chest.

Veerian almost forgot the rest of the song.

Fortunately, at that point, the crowd took up the song, cheering and waving. Children ran after the soldiers as they rode and marched past. A few brave little souls climbed up onto the supply wagons that trundled in the rear of the long column of the combined Hosts. The drivers laughed and helped them up to the front seats, to ride until they passed through the market square.

Veerian turned her head away before the princes had quite vanished from sight. She wanted to always remember them smiling and talking together and the people cheering. Prince Doni'Coori—she knew better than to continue to think of him as Rushtan, *her Rushtan*—carried a bow strapped across his saddle. Laughing at herself, she sang a song about an archer, to bring the people back to the business at hand.

Strange, how the image of an archer in silhouette, his features lost in bronze sunlight, lean and strong and graceful, stayed with her for

SONG WEAVER

hours afterward.

* * *

“So that’s the Song Weaver,” Rushtan murmured. The gates of Bainevah had closed behind them, but he glanced back as if he could see the slim woman with a voice like the stars.

“You’ve never seen her?” Elzan frowned and finally removed his fancy helmet.

“No. There’s always something to keep me busy in another quarter of Bainevah when she’s out healing.” Rushtan shook his head, amazed at the change in the ragged, dusty girl who had saved his life with her song. “I think her song has assured us safety for our journey.”

“Let’s hope she blessed us through our war games. I think the Host of the Water Gate doesn’t know which end of the arrows to point at the enemy or how to hold a spear.”

“At least they know how to ride,” Andorn, their co-commander for these desert war exercises said. He removed his helmet, too, and raked thick fingers through his sweaty, coarse black hair. As dark in hair and eye as Elzan, he was very distantly related to the royal family. Distant enough, Rushtan reflected, to be trusted and safe. He envied the young man, nephew of Commander General Asqual.

“A good horse makes up for a sorry rider,” Rushtan said.

The other two laughed, agreeing with him. Talk turned to the upcoming training exercises in the desert, but once they started across the river plain, their conversation turned back to the melodic send-off they received from Song Weaver Veerian.

“Mother says she’s like a treasure hidden inside an old ruin. As time goes on, she reveals even more wonders,” Elzan offered. “She’s had offers of marriage and even demands that she become mistress or personal singer for half the nobles in the Court. Some were quite upset, offended even, when Veerian refused them.”

“That shows her common sense,” Andorn said. “Did you hear how

SONG WEAVER

our Lady found her?" He shook his head and grimaced. "Some idiot recruit got himself sliced up down in the Dregs. He should have died, but she came out of nowhere and kept him from bleeding into the gutters before the healers and guards showed up."

"Not a recruit," Rushtan muttered. "It was the recruit that ran for help."

"I heard there were ten men in the patrol, tracking Drevan spies for the better part of two moons, and the guard that got hurt endangered everyone with him."

"That's what comes of keeping secrets," Elzan said with a sigh. He grinned crookedly when Andorn gave them a puzzled look. "Rushtan led a team of four in the Dregs, training a new recruit who thought because he had trained with his father's bodyguards, he could face anything and anyone. Two men died keeping the idiot boy alive."

"We think it was another assassination attempt, so we've kept it silent. Veerian was running away from a tavern keeper who demanded bed service and wouldn't take no for an answer. She didn't even know what she was doing when she helped me." Rushtan shook his head, feeling again the chill that had crept over him as his life spilled into the slimy layer of garbage lining the alley where he had collapsed.

Andorn glanced between the princes. "Why didn't that part of the story go around?"

"Mother didn't want to give the factions in Court something else to wrestle over," Elzan said. "There are still some who try to force Rushtan to return to Court and take up his claim. If they knew he almost died, it would give them weapons to start something very sticky."

"They could maneuver the king into forcing me to resign my commission and become just a prince again," Rushtan added. He stroked his beard, which no other prince could wear until he had made his life choice. "I enjoy not having to shave, thank you very much."

SONG WEAVER

His companions laughed. Too soon, though, the laughter died.

“Could they force the king?” Andorn asked.

“With the problems seeping through the country lately, even the king can become frightened and not think clearly. This spring was too dry and the Hidden City has been silent too long. If something goes wrong at solstice and the Sacred Marriage...” Elzan shook his head.

Rushtan was glad he wasn't a contender for the throne any longer. His life seemed so much easier.

Unfortunately, few would take that into consideration if an uprising came. Rushtan could bring half the army with him to support Elzan, if it came to a battle between the princes. That meant his brother's enemies needed to destroy him to prevent that. He wished he had been born to anyone but the king of Bainevah. If he were even a simple commander in the Host of the Ram, he could—

Rushtan laughed silently at himself for his totally unexpected thought. He could approach the Song Weaver, Veerian, and thank her properly for saving his life. He could court her and find out if her speaking voice was as sweet as her song, see her smile and decide if her eyes really were like starry night skies in summer.

CHAPTER 4

Veerian wanted to go home. The sun had risen high enough to scorch. The crowds were noisier than usual, the air dustier, and the men who would not take no for an answer were more insistent and rude than usual.

She couldn't go home. Not yet. The third betrothal couple for the day stood in front of her, holding hands. Both sets of parents stood behind them, everyone dressed in their best. The young man looked nervous, but too proud to retreat. The girl looked more smug than happy, and displayed no bridal nerves. The parents looked at the crowd and their children, but not at Veerian. It had all the feeling of a staged performance rather than a happy occasion.

In Veerian's experience, at least one parent wanted to make a loud social event of the occasion, or someone had second thoughts and had persuaded the others to find a Song Weaver for testing. No matter what the answer, she sensed something unpleasant would come to light by

SONG WEAVER

the time she finished.

Veerian wished she had never discovered her ability to see into the hearts and thoughts of people by making them sing with her. Her gift could help avert tragedy, misunderstandings and grief with well-placed advice, but the stupidity of those who ignored her words frustrated and wearied her.

She looked at the couple before her. Why couldn't they be sweethearts defying their parents to marry? Veerian could see if their love was true and able to stand against all opposition, or she could persuade them to listen to their parents and wait. Simple. Like fresh country air, instead of this thickness in the atmosphere like multiple layers of scent, or like three songs being played at the same time.

"Are you betrothed?" she asked, when the couple knelt on the edge of the platform before her.

"We will be by the end of the day." The young woman, Cerish, had a surprisingly firm voice for such a tiny, pale creature.

Nabon, the young man just nodded. He paid more attention to her than he did to Veerian. Several times during the ritual questions, his sweetheart had to nudge him to answer Veerian.

Either he was totally love-struck—which wasn't such a bad thing—or the girl had him under some kind of enchantment. She had either found someone to give her a vaunted love potion, or simply used the oldest magic of all and stole his common sense with sexual attraction.

What would happen when the potion or magic wore off, or she gained weight or lost her looks? That would be tragedy indeed, and they would both be trapped in a miserable union.

Finally, Veerian knew enough about the couple to pick a song for them to sing with her. As she half-expected, Nabon stumbled through the words, his voice off-key, while Cerish belted out the tune with supreme confidence. Interestingly, the girl tried to hurry the beat in the wrong places and slow it in others. She knew the tune and words for the

SONG WEAVER

latest love song in the marketplace, but Veerian doubted she had paid much attention to the sentiment behind it.

“Well, Song Weaver?” Cerish’s father asked. “Can they marry?”

“Certainly, they can marry.” Her voice snapped, partly because of her headache and partly in reaction to the impatience in his voice. As if *she* had wasted *their* time. She required no one to come to her for such testing. “The question,” she continued, “is whether it is wise. Why will your daughter bring her husband home with her, instead of going to the home he will provide?”

“I thought we settled that,” Nabon’s father said in a slow, tight voice.

“We did,” the other father hurried to say.

“Then why does Cerish plan to make the third floor of your home into her and Nabon’s quarters?” Veerian felt Vandan’s presence as the healer priest stepped up behind her, visibly offering her his support.

“I don’t want to live in your house.” Cerish didn’t even bother looking at her future father-by-law. “If we wait until Nabon builds our house, we won’t be married until next year. And I don’t want to live in the country. I want to stay in the city.”

Nabon closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Veerian hoped he would do something, say something, even if it was to argue. But he just stood there and endured.

“Do you love Nabon?” Veerian asked the bride, cutting off all four parents when they opened their mouths to argue, in perfect unity, like hungry birds in a nest.

“Of course she does,” Cerish’s mother said.

“I asked her. She’s the only one who can tell me.”

“Couldn’t you tell?” Nabon asked. He seemed to come fully awake for the first time. He stood a little straighter and looked at the girl. “When you listened to us sing, couldn’t you tell how she felt about me?”

SONG WEAVER

“Her thoughts were full of her new dress and the festival she wants to have.” Veerian chose not to mention the sizable bribe her parents had given Cerish to agree to the marriage, or the dawning realization that if she was careful, she could have sweethearts even after she married.

She had seen only adoration for the girl in young Nabon’s mind and heart. Enough adoration to blind him to the half-truths of the parents and the selfishness of the girl. From the style of dress, she guessed the boy came from wealthy merchants, while the girl’s family were artisans. She supposed both sets of parents agreed to this match because of the profit that would result.

Why did money always have to interfere with what should be a simple, sensible arrangement that would bring pleasure to both parties? Reminded of all the men who had tried to buy her affections, Veerian felt sick to her stomach.

She was more than grateful that her scribe friend, Sennacheron, thought more of her wishes, thoughts and feelings, and less about making her an ornament or a trophy to display in his home. Then again, her scholarly friend paid just slightly more attention to her than he did to his scrolls. Her search for ancient songs of healing and his research project for High Scholar Cho’Mat had brought them together often enough to develop a friendship that grew affectionate. However, Sennacheron was an exceptional man. Her relationship with him didn’t solve the problem of Nabon and Cerish. Veerian had long ago accepted the bitter fact that too often, offspring were property, to be traded by their families for wealth, position and influence.

“Why did you come here to be searched by the Song Weaver?” Vandan rested a hand on Veerian’s shoulder.

Cerish’s father scowled at the question. Did he realize his schemes were about to be exposed to the light of day?

Unfortunately, Veerian sensed it would do no good at all to reveal the truth. Cerish and Nabon would have been better off if they had gone

SONG WEAVER

into their wedding with a veil of illusions and happy dreams. The girl was silly enough to believe she wanted this match, and Nabon would only be confused when everything went awry. After today, they would likely start casting blame before the wedding even took place. Despite what she had already revealed, Veerian feared it would take place.

“Why, to make sure this young man was the very best choice for our dear daughter, of course.” Cerish’s mother smiled toothily and rested her hands on her daughter’s shoulders.

“He is a very good choice. He will take good care of her and listen to her fears and hurts. The question,” Veerian said, “is whether *she* is a good choice for *him*. Will she give him nothing but fears and tears, or will she listen to him and support him and comfort him when he is troubled and burdened?”

Both sets of parents gaped at her, as if she had spoken foolishness.

Vandan took over from that point, giving the prepared speech that healers and priests gave couples seeking to be betrothed. It spoke about partnership, working equally in a marriage, and unity on all levels of life: the spirit, the heart, the purse, the body. Veerian didn’t watch Nabon and Cerish. She didn’t want to see the glazed or bored looks in their eyes.

“It won’t do any good, will it?” she murmured, when the six had walked away.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why do they come here, then? Why do they ask me to speak what they don’t want to hear?” She picked up her flute and wiped it on her sleeve, polishing it before putting it in its soft, tooled leather case.

“They want your blessing.”

“I won’t bless what won’t work.”

“No, but they won’t remember the warnings you gave them. On the other hand, they won’t blame you when the marriage turns to misery in two or three years.”

SONG WEAVER

“Will it take that long?” Veerian met his gaze and grimaced.

She told herself to be grateful the last stragglers had wandered away while she spoke to the troublesome bridal party. She didn't think she could take any more requests for advice that would be ignored or for healing that would be destroyed in a few moon quarters by foolish choices and actions.

“Time to go home to your nest,” Vandan murmured. “Remember, you cannot be responsible for fools. You have done the work the Mother gave you to do. It is their own fault if they destroy their lives, not yours. A watchman who sounds the alarm is never held responsible if the soldiers roll over and go back to sleep and allow the city to be overrun.”

“Hmm, yes, but aren't the people responsible for allowing their soldiers to be sluggards?” she shot back.

Vandan laughed, his head tipped back. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her off the platform. Veerian welcomed the warmth of his arm around her, all the long walk to her home on the edge of the priestly and scholarly quarter.

His words stayed with her as she greeted her lone servant. Elini was an elderly, half-deaf woman who scolded Veerian constantly as if she were ten years old and coddled her as if she were sickly. Veerian thought through Vandan's words and the events of the day while she bathed and picked at her evening meal. She went up to sit in the garden on her flat roof, to catch a few breezes and continue thinking.

Why did she let fools like Cerish and Nabon and their parents frustrate her? She knew what the ugly side of the world was like, having scratched out a living between taverns and caravan routes. Everyone was the property of someone else. Children belonged to their parents. The poor fell into the hands of the rich and were used as pawns, game pieces in an enormous game of Draktan, or traded like sheaves of grain or pottery. Women were married to men they didn't

SONG WEAVER

want, and men took wives they didn't want, for the sake of prestige or power or profit, or because they simply couldn't find someone more pleasant. Priests lived for their temples, because they knew human hearts were unreliable, even in the throes of the deepest passion and devotion. Scholars and scribes lost themselves in their scrolls and dusty histories, trying to find logic and meaning in the world. Even poets and musicians found more joy and beauty in their music and poems than they did in people.

The only people in the world who were happy, Veerian had decided, were those who lived in stories. Whether histories or fables or misty legends, every man was a hero who used his strength for good, and every woman was beautiful and treasured.

In the real world, the only flattery a woman received was intended to trick her into an alliance that would make her someone's property.

"I want a hero," Veerian murmured to the warm, soft evening breeze. She always sat facing the tall conical top of the Healers Temple where it rose above all the other buildings on this side of the city. That was where her real life had truly begun. She never let herself forget.

Yet she had forgotten her hero, Rushtan, hadn't she? He had been a hero, more worried about her being ambushed by his enemies than he had been about his own death. The notes accompanying his gifts had been sweet, praising her voice and thanking her for the risk she had taken to help him.

She understood now why he hadn't come to see her and why Lady Mayar had been so slow to speak about him. Veerian understood enough about palace politics to know she didn't want to understand them. What must it have been like for one of the princes to nearly die in the Dregs? What sort of political turmoil had Rushtan's narrow escape caused in the palace? Had it been kept so utterly quiet to avoid that trouble? She could understand that.

Veerian smiled, remembering how Rushtan had bowed to her,

SONG WEAVER

looking so proud and strong and handsome on his royal black horse. In a way, he belonged to her. Those who saved lives had a claim on the lives they had saved. She had put him there on that horse today by keeping him alive four years ago in the Dregs. Perhaps she had contributed to the continued safety of Bainevah.

“Not bad for a useless bit of trash,” she muttered, and laughed at herself. Her parents and Zorash had called her that, when they were their most furious. Their words had been proven wrong, hadn’t they?

Until moonrise, Veerian studied her scrolls in her endless search for ancient songs of power. Sennacheron didn’t come to see her that evening, and she was neither surprised nor disappointed. He was handsome enough, in a dusty, thin way. He had a sharp wit and a hearty laugh and he remembered to bring her a trinket or flowers at holy feast days. That is, if he remembered to visit her or escort her to the festivals. Veerian knew she was particularly lucky to have such an admirer. Especially one with enough high rank that his attentions helped to drive away less pleasant and less powerful suitors.

Still, when it came time to climb down the stairs to go to bed, Veerian acknowledged that if Rushtan had been her admirer, she would have been highly disappointed if he didn’t come to see her. Every night. Every day.

Sennacheron made no references to the two of them sharing a life, and she didn’t mind. If Rushtan had kept her dangling for more than a year, how would she feel?

“Don’t even think about it,” Veerian scolded herself. Softly, so Elini wouldn’t hear. “He’s not part of your life. You’ll probably not see him again for four more years.”

* * *

First Descent Moon

Rushtan heard Elzan shout his name and looked up. Black fire filled

SONG WEAVER

his vision and half a heartbeat later, a heavy weight slammed into his shoulder and flung him to the ground. Teeth bit into his flesh and what felt like an iron spear pierced his shoulder. Fire and ice shot through his veins, tearing the breath from his lungs.

He heard voices, from far away. Hands yanked him upward out of the darkness and cold. Burning raced through his veins and tried to explode out of his head. He opened his eyes to see Elzan's dark, concerned, angry eyes staring into his.

Rushtan heard a voice arguing with his half-brother, when the older prince prepared to use his limited healing ability on the wound. He felt only confused when he realized that was his voice. He gritted his teeth, fighting not to collapse weeping when Andorn and the others braced him and cut the arrow and pulled the shaft out. He couldn't understand what was happening. He had taken arrows and far worse wounds before. Why did this one threaten to eat through him and tear his mind free of his body?

Then cool relief spread through his flesh. His blood thickened, no longer racing to spill out of his veins. He watched Elzan collapse into the supporting arms of their friends. It was all he could do not to weep in fury and terror for his brother.

This was all wrong. The arrows that melted into the hot desert sands, that had come from nowhere. The way the healing affected his older brother. All wrong. There was magic at work here. Rushtan could see that, even though he had no talent for magic. He didn't need talent. He had spent enough time with Lady Mayar in the Healers Temple, he had enough experience with magic to understand the feel of it.

"My brother, you are a fool," he whispered, when Elzan finally opened his eyes from the strain of the healing. "Thank the Mother."

* * *

Second Descent Moon

SONG WEAVER

Rushtan had to endure the routine examination by the healers assigned to the Hosts, when he returned to Bainevah. It amused him a little to sense some disgruntlement in the usually placid, white-haired woman who examined him. Did the healers think Elzan poached in their territory, to heal him out in the desert instead of waiting for one of them to arrive?

He should have notified someone when his head started to pound and tiny pieces of the day vanished into darkness. He knew it, but he couldn't make himself talk to anyone. Rushtan was tired of being watched with concern, tired of people asking him if he was all right, and most of all tired of endless speculation about the oddness of those black arrows, coming out of nowhere and melting into nothingness after one struck him.

When he went to bed that night, he felt an odd detachment, strangely intertwined with a thread of excitement. Word had come that Shazzur, King's Seer, returned to Bainevah and the soldiers escorting him and his daughter had been sighted half a day of riding away. Rushtan had no idea what that had to do with him. Lady Priestess Naya, Shazzur's wife, had been friends with his mother, but both women were dead now. If he had ever seen Shazzur's daughter before Fire Priestess Naya was murdered, she would have been just a little girl. Certainly not old enough to gain his attention. What did any of it matter?

Rushtan lay down, pressed his knuckles to his throbbing temples, and considered going to the barracks healer for a powder to help him sleep.

He blinked, and opened his eyes to find himself covered in sweat, his shoulder on fire, his body aching from multiple, inexplicable bruises, and tied to a bed.

"He is awake, Lady." A muscular man in dark robes edged in green stood at the foot of Rushtan's bed, watching him. His clothes marked

SONG WEAVER

him as a guard for the healers.

Rushtan didn't know the man, but he knew the look. The man had no healing gifts. His main purpose in the Healers Temple was to restrain the ill and injured who became violent through fever or madness.

Why did the man watch *him*?

Rushtan caught his breath and silently pleaded with Matrika that he hadn't lost his mind. He thought about his headache and cursed himself a dozen times over for not going to the healer about it sooner. Then Lady Mayar swept into the room, her dark eyes full of compassion and concern. She settled onto the stool next to Rushtan's bed, by his shoulder, and brushed the hair off his sweaty forehead, just as his mother used to do when he was ill. Rushtan nearly wept, thankful and grateful for Lady Mayar. She could have hated him, as the other concubines hated the royal siblings who weren't their own sons or daughters. Instead, Mayar had treated him as if he were her own flesh and blood, and not Elzan's rival for the throne of Bainevah.

"Do you know me?" she asked.

"Lady?" Rushtan tried to sit up, reminded painfully of the restraining ropes. "What happened? Why am I here? Yes, I know you." He glanced at the healer guard, still at the foot of his bed. "What's wrong with me?"

"What do you remember?" she countered. Lady Mayar's calm didn't change while Rushtan recounted the last few hours of his day. He knew better than to conceal his headache, the odd sensations he had noticed since returning from the war exercises in the desert.

"My shoulder hurts again," he said, when the silence after his recitation grew a little too long. "Does that have anything to do with what happened to me?"

"The enemy has tried to strike at us through you," she said, her voice soft, her eyes distant. "The arrow broke off in your wound,

SONG WEAVER

leaving a talisman, a bit of magic that took over your mind and body. You—but not you,” she said, gripping him by the elbow to emphasize her words, “attacked Shazzur’s daughter just two hours ago.”

“But—” Elzan swallowed hard and nodded. He knew better than to protest. Lady Mayar would never lie to him, and hadn’t she said it wasn’t actually him? “You found what made me do this, so you removed it?”

“And you hope you are free now?” She smiled sadly and stroked his cheek. “If only it were that simple. With evil magic, there is always something waiting, hiding, unwilling to let go of the ground where it has sunk its roots. No, my dear Rushtan. We must keep you here a few days, until we are sure you are free.”

“Until you’re sure I won’t try to kill Kena’Shazzur, you mean.” He sighed and nodded. He was a soldier. He was used to doing unpleasant things, wasn’t he? And yet, a few days of enforced rest in the Healers Temple wasn’t a dire punishment.

But he avoided the Healers Temple, to avoid running into Veerian and perhaps giving his enemies a weapon to use against him. Despite his situation, sweet warmth flooded his veins as he remembered how Veerian had looked into his eyes, held his hand and tried to save his life with powers she didn’t know she possessed.

A man could adore a woman like that, even without her thin, dark beauty. Her voice, singing that song of blessing when the two Hosts rode out two moons ago, had stirred more hunger for her. If her mouth was half as sweet as her voice, Rushtan knew he would be tempted to risk everything to be with her. But not her life. Not her safety.

“How long do you think I’ll be a prisoner here?” he asked, and tried to smile.

His attempt at humor didn’t fool Lady Mayar.

“Until we are sure.” She stroked his cheek once more, then stood and went to the table in the corner of the room, covered with healing

SONG WEAVER

supplies. She picked up a cup and brought it back over to him. “This will help you sleep. Without foul dreams,” she added softly.

Rushtan knew better than to protest that he feared no foul dreams. Lady Mayar and he both knew better.

* * *

The girl who accompanied Vandan into Rushtan’s room early the next morning wore pale green acolyte robes. With her dark red hair in a single braid and her big gray eyes, she looked oddly familiar, but Rushtan couldn’t place her.

He was in a good mood, and her somber regard disturbed him. Then again, maybe she had heard what he had done, and she was nervous about this assignment. Rushtan decided he could at least try to put her at ease. After all, Lady Mayar wouldn’t have had him released from the ropes that bound him to the bed if she hadn’t deemed him safe. At least, safe inside this room.

“Good morning, Vandan.” Rushtan sat up from the pillows and smiled at the girl. “Well, I’m a lucky man to have a pretty priestess tending me.”

The girl started to smile.

Rushtan blinked and found himself on the floor, held down by three healer guards. He ached where someone had slammed into him, his head throbbed, and a cold, dank feeling had rooted deep in his soul. He took a deep breath, wanting to roar his fury.

He knew what had happened.

Silently, he exhaled and forced his body to relax. He stayed limp while the guards put him down on the bed again and waited for Vandan to come back into the room. The senior healer priest regarded him somberly.

“Do you know who that was, Highness?”

“No. But obviously that magic that takes me over knows.” Rushtan nearly smiled at the roughness of his voice. Had he screamed while he

SONG WEAVER

was possessed by the evil magic?

“That was Kena’Shazzur.”

“Why does it want to destroy her? Why use me? How could it even know I’d ever get close to her?” he snarled.

It was either be angry, or weep.

“Lord Shazzur was Prince Doni’Mayar’s tutor. It would be expected that your brother would renew the acquaintance, and natural for Lord Shazzur’s daughter to accompany him on visits to the palace.”

“And natural to think I’d be somewhere near Elzan.” He nodded. The movement made his head throb. That ache moved down into his stomach, making him nauseous.

He felt worse when Lady Mayar came to visit him and they made a horrifying discovery. One moment Rushtan got to his feet to welcome her, to ask if she had a plan to free him from the lingering influence of the magic. The next, he was again on the floor, struggling against the guards.

“I have a theory,” Vandan said, when Rushtan was again deposited on his bed, bruised and aching but in his right mind. He brushed at the front of his pale brown tunic and trousers. “Green healer robes trigger the magic. Lady Kena’Shazzur was in green robes both last night and this morning, and our Lady was in green as well.” He glanced over his shoulder at the closed door of Rushtan’s room. “Perhaps it is not just Lady Kena’Shazzur, but all healers who are your target.”

“Meaning someone wants me to kill Lady Mayar?” Rushtan ground his teeth to keep from cursing.

“Meaning, until we have some understanding of this magic, you cannot be allowed to leave this room. I am sorry, Highness.”

“No more sorry than me,” he muttered.

CHAPTER 5

“Veerian.” Lady Mayar smiled warmly when the singer walked into her workroom that morning. “How are you? Do you feel up to a new challenge today?”

“Yes, Lady. Excuse my saying, but you look as if you’ve been facing a challenge all night.” Veerian smoothed her anonymous green healer robes and settled into the chair in front of her patroness’ worktable.

“Several nights. My son and his brother were attacked by magical means.” She paused, lost in thought for a few moments.

Veerian had a falling sensation in the pit of her stomach at the woman’s words. She imagined Rushtan lying bloody and pale on desert sands, until jackals picked his bones clean.

“Do you remember the young soldier whom you saved with your songs?” Lady Mayar began again.

“Prince Doni’Coori. Yes, Lady.” She offered a tight little smile and

SONG WEAVER

a shrug. “I saw him in the market several moons ago, riding out to war exercises. I understand why his identity and his injury were kept secret.” *Even from me*, she added silently.

“What a gift you are, my dear.” She shook her head, and a few lines of worry fled from between her brows. “Rushtan was injured. A talisman broke off in the wound, making him susceptible to enemy control. Two nights ago, he attacked Lord Shazzur’s daughter, outside this very temple.”

Veerian gripped the arms of her chair. She had rejoiced with Sennacheron when Lord Shazzur, First Advisor and King’s Seer, returned to Bainevah. The fall of the Three and the growing unrest along the borders of Bainevah was enough to worry any thinking person. Shazzur represented Bainevah’s hope. The thought of his daughter being attacked sickened Veerian.

“Is she all right?”

“Unharmd. Just a little frightened. We thought it prudent to put her in the Sanctum to protect her.” Lady Mayar sighed.

Veerian’s sympathy went out to the girl. The chances of being chosen as a Bride at solstice were low, but still, she didn’t like the idea of giving her virginity to the king. Not the actual act, Veerian admitted, but the man, old enough to be her father. Now, if she had to perform as Bride to Prince Elzan or Rushtan... She yanked her thoughts back to the present moment as Lady Mayar resumed speaking.

“My concern now is Rushtan. We removed the talisman, his wound is healing and he has no memory of the times the magic took over his mind.”

“Removing the grounding point for the spell hasn’t freed him?” she guessed.

“No. Shazzur’s daughter has an unusual gift. She looked at Rushtan and told us he has no shadow.”

“No shadow?” Veerian shivered. She had read enough healer texts

SONG WEAVER

and ancient histories to dislike the implications, even if she had no idea what the lack of shadow actually meant.

“We can’t let him leave, even though Rushtan has regained his right mind. He tried to attack me, and two members of the Host of the Ram who visited him yesterday. When the magic is at work, his eyes turn black.”

“His eyes are gray, Lady,” she whispered.

“Yes. This is a battle for the soul. You are most powerfully gifted as a Song Weaver. Will it trouble you to abandon your duties to focus on healing and freeing Rushtan?”

Veerian closed her eyes to think. She knew Lady Mayar didn’t ask this of her lightly, and she could not give a light answer, her decision made in haste. She had to think, long and hard.

Abandon her healing in the marketplace? Yet, there were other Song Weavers who could widen their circular path through the city and take care of those who required reading and soothing. Her studies were not rigidly scheduled. She had abandoned paths of research for moons at a time, following odd rumors and tales, and then returning to her main course of study. It wouldn’t harm her. Veerian knew a search for healing songs to battle this attack on the soul would be beneficial for everyone, in the long view, as well as fascinating.

Most important, an attack on a prince was no small thing. It couldn’t be an isolated incident. The consequences could be far-reaching. This could be the beginning of a battle that would affect everyone, every layer of society in Bainevah. She imagined an army of beggars and nobles, with no awareness of what they did, wreaking havoc without warning. Who could defend against an enemy who could use anyone and everyone?

“Tell me what you wish and need, Lady.” Veerian spread her arms, signaling her complete surrender to the task.

“Matrika bless you, my dear.” Mayar nodded and blinked extra

SONG WEAVER

moisture from her eyes. “After you change out of your robes—never wear healer green around Rushtan—Shilleth will take you to his quarters. His treatment, your manner of attack, will be completely up to you. And to Vandan. He wouldn’t let you do anything this vital without him to guard you.”

“Guard me, Lady?” Veerian’s shuddered. “Prince Rushtan wouldn’t attack me, would he?”

“We have no way of knowing. No, I think the greater danger to you is straining yourself in your zeal to conquer this, as you have conquered so many other challenges.”

Veerian nodded, reassured. Still, she felt a faint chill when the young novice healer led her to the lower levels of the temple, where injured prisoners and madmen were held secure during treatment. Rushtan had attacked Lady Mayar, High Priestess. He had attacked Shazzur’s daughter. Would he attack every woman he saw? Or only magically gifted women?

The thought of her handsome, heroic soldier attacking her made Veerian sad. There were some laws she held to, which kept her world and heart steady. The goodness and unchanging strength of heroes was one of them.

Veerian vowed to fight that evil with every gift and power and bit of strength within her.

* * *

When he first woke, Rushtan thought he had slipped backward in time to that nightmare ambush in the Dregs. The smells around him were the same—fiery healing ointments and watered wine, the bitter stink of his pain sweat that had soaked into his sheets. This time his shoulder burned instead of his gut. That and the location of his sickroom were the main difference.

The dull throbbing in his head where Elzan had smashed him against the pavement of the fountain plaza meant nothing to him,

SONG WEAVER

compared to the ache of emptiness and growing terror in his memory. Thank Matrika, Elzan had kept him from killing Shazzur's daughter.

"At least I'm not in chains," he muttered, and finally opened his eyes.

As he expected, Vandan sat at a small table by the door, studying scrolls. Just as he had been doing last night when Rushtan finally fell asleep. The man did not wear healer green robes, which seemed to awaken the enemy magic. A small flask hung from a fine chain around Vandan's neck, filled with a calming potion. Vandan also kept a long knife strapped to the leg of the table, if the potion failed to work.

All healers were trained to defend themselves, and Elzan made sure of that on a regular basis, because of his mother. Rushtan helped him bring in soldiers to train the healers every three moons, so he knew who was adequate and who could kill to protect their patients, if necessary. Vandan was among the latter. Rushtan was comforted by the knowledge that Vandan would and could kill him.

"There is no need for chains, Highness." Vandan didn't glance up from his studies. "How does your shoulder feel?"

"Burns."

"That is very good." Now he did glance up, and offered an apologetic smile. "If it were numb, I would worry."

"Didn't get all the poison out, you mean." Rushtan sat up and cautiously stretched.

He felt stiff from the slight fever that had plagued him. Bruised from that struggle with Elzan in the fountain plaza. His head still ached where the guard had clubbed him when he leaped on Lady Mayar. Even knowing he couldn't have prevented it, Rushtan still felt sick. He deserved a far worse beating for threatening Lady Mayar.

All in all, his body had fared far better than his sense of guilt and pride. All three together didn't ache as badly as his fury over what had been done to him.

SONG WEAVER

This luxurious little room was still a prison, despite the wide bed, the excellent food, the Draktan board waiting for Elzan's promised visit. The lack of windows, a guard inside his room and a guard outside the door made it a prison and labeled him as dangerous. Rushtan almost wished they'd chain him to a post out in the plaza and let the rabble torment him until he lost his mind. If the healer priests couldn't find a way to free him from the enslaving magic, madness might be a kinder fate.

Was having Vandan as his keeper a blessing, or cruelty? He didn't want friends to see him when the magic used his body like a puppet. He still cringed, remembering the wary expression in the eyes of Shazzur's daughter, and the blackness that had taken him down only a few seconds after looking at her.

The only thing worse was for Elzan or Cayeen to fear him, or to know he had succeeded in harming Lady Mayar.

No. Rushtan shook his head. There was one thing worse: for the Song Weaver to look at him with disgust.

A knock on the door startled him. Vandan stood, glanced at the door, then at him. The door opened just a crack and he heard the voice of the guard outside. Vandan nodded.

"Are you up to visitors, Highness?"

Rushtan wanted to wash and get the filthy taste out of his mouth, but he was presentable. He slid off the bed and yanked the blankets and his trousers into a semblance of neatness. Then he nodded to Vandan. The door swung open.

"Song Weaver." Rushtan bowed and said a silent prayer that she didn't know who he was. He wanted to stay simply Rushtan to her, the soldier who owed her his life.

"Highness." She dropped down into a graceful bow that was partly a dance. Her head tipped sideways, letting her long, night-colored braid brush the floor. "High Priestess Lady Mayar has sent me to see if

SONG WEAVER

together we can find a way out of this trap that has entangled you.”

“Then I’ll owe you my life twice over. And gladly,” he half-whispered after the briefest hesitation.

So, his hope had been dashed. She knew who he was. At least she didn’t look at him with loathing or pity or starry eyes. He was simply her patient, not a prince and not a monster.

That was good. He could live with that. A patient could be a friend, in time.

“Oh, no, Highness.” She smiled, as if using Court-formal language amused her. “You could never owe me your life. You are a soldier, and you protect Bainevah. I will try to heal you so that Bainevah may be safer. We are fellow-soldiers.”

“There would be ten times as many soldiers in the Hosts, if there were more soldiers like you.”

Veerian’s laughter reminded him of harps and raindrops on tiled roofs, and Rushtan dared to let himself hope. Really hope.

* * *

“Kena’Shazzur.” Rushtan pushed his bread around his plate and finally looked at Veerian for the first time since Shillith brought their meal. “Is she all right?”

“Kena—Oh, the seer’s daughter. Yes, she is fine.”

“Whoever did this to me, they didn’t send someone else after her, did they?”

“Oh.” Veerian nodded, finally understanding what had kept him so quiet.

She thought perhaps she had pushed him too hard, asking questions about the attack out in the desert and then what he remembered, what he had done, what he had thought and dreamed just before he went into the blackness and the enemy took over his body. After less than one day of forging a pattern to follow in their quest, she knew they would work together well.

SONG WEAVER

As long as she didn't let herself forget he was a prince, caught in a trap woven of magic, and she was only a former tavern singer who had come to heal him. As long as she tied up all her dreams of a hero and left them hidden in the darkest part of her mind while she was with him. As long as she remembered that men who wanted more than her friendship were dangerous.

"No, no one has come after her," she finally answered. "And no one will. She's safe inside the Sanctum, with magic woven into the walls to protect her."

"Oh. Good."

"Highness—"

"Please." He tried to smile. "You've had my blood on your hands. Can't we be friends? Can't you call me by name so I remember who I am? Or should I address you as Revered Song Weaver the entire time we're together?"

"Rushtan." Veerian's heart skipped a beat when a spark like laughter touched his eyes. "Kena'Shazzur is the target and you are only the weapon these evil men chose to use. You are not to blame. Consider that the sooner we find out who did this to you, the safer she will be."

"Ah." He nodded and bent his head over his plate. "Then perhaps we should concentrate on finding my intelligence, before we work on regaining my control."

Veerian's hand slipped on her cup. She fought not to laugh because she was unsure if he made a joke or not. A snort slipped out. Rushtan's head came up and he stared at her. Veerian's face felt uncomfortably hot. A moment later, she didn't care, because his face split in a wide grin and suddenly the mask of discomfort and reserve fell away and he was once again her young soldier from the filthy alley.

"That's better." He sat back in his chair. His shoulders slumped. She imagined a dozen harp-tight wires loosening throughout his body. "I thought for a while you saw me as a very interesting puzzle box to

SONG WEAVER

open and nothing more.”

“I was never good with puzzle boxes, High—Rushtan. I was thinking of asking you to sing something with me before I went home, but I wasn’t sure if you would be offended.”

“No, but your ears might be.” He pushed his plate away, then winced when the movement jarred his wounded shoulder.

“I have heard singing that would make the braying of donkeys and the rattling of chains sound like the songs of the bright spirits.” She deliberately made her voice sour. A *hmph* and a grin rewarded her. “Your sister, Princess Kena’Coori, has a marvelous singing voice. Surely you have a little talent, too.”

“Very little. For the King’s birthdays, when we were children, Cayeen always sang and I wisely limited myself to acrobatics with Elzan.”

“How sad.”

“What is? A man who knows his limits is wise.”

“Not that. I was just thinking, how sad to refer to your father as ‘the king,’ and not as ‘my father.’ There truly are some people who had sadder families than I did.”

“You? You’re a fable for sweetness, grace and wit. You didn’t spring from the source of the three rivers, and you learned your skills from someone. What were your parents like?”

“I hardly remember them. When I was very young, they simply left me behind one day. I remember them either arguing or coupling, but never talking or laughing together, like we have. The only time they ever smiled or cooperated was when they stole or cheated someone. I don’t even know if they were married.” She shrugged and turned in her chair to reach for her harp. “Lady Mayar has become my mother. And for that much confession, my friend, you must sing with me in payment.”

“I think you’re the one who’s paying the price,” Rushtan muttered.

SONG WEAVER

He barked a laugh when Veerian stuck her tongue out at him, but he didn't protest, either.

Veerian had no idea what song would reveal the hiding places in his soul where the enemy's magic had dug in its talons. This song was merely to gain a little insight into Rushtan the man, not the victim, the soldier, the prince.

To find the song that would reveal the darkness, without rousing it to attack her, and then uproot the enemy magic, would take longer than one day together. She and Rushtan needed to learn to drop the careful masks everyone wore in public. They had to be friends, and that was very different from friendly.

"Do you know this one?" She plucked out the tune on the higher strings, and laughed when Rushtan grimaced.

"Make me a eunuch, and maybe I could sing that high." He reached for the pitcher of watered wine sitting on the long table against the wall and refilled her cup before his own. Something warmed inside her at the simple gesture.

Veerian dropped the melody an octave. It was low for her, but she thought she could manage. The important thing was to get him to sing. She wouldn't perform in public for a long time, so why worry about protecting her voice for tomorrow's songs?

The thought of spending tomorrow and the day after and the day after that in Rushtan's company pleased her. She didn't feel any urgency to get back out to the markets and the common people who would never go to the Healers Temple for help. Had she deluded herself into thinking she was indispensable?

"What's so funny?" Rushtan asked, when her hands stilled on the strings and her lips curved up at the thought.

"I think the Mother has just taught me a lesson in arrogance." She explained the sudden revelation that she wasn't totally necessary for the welfare of the common people.

SONG WEAVER

“Hmm, but consider that you’re the only one who has any hope of solving my problem. That should make you proud enough to walk among the clouds. Although,” he drawled, “within a quarter, you might consider your confinement with me a punishment.”

“You might think the same,” she shot back, and was hard pressed not to laugh.

“No.” Rushtan raised his cup in salute to her. “I think I am being rewarded for every good thing I ever did, to have you as my healer and companion.”

Veerian bent her head over her harp, trying vainly to hide her blush. She wished she had worn her hair loose instead of bound back in her usual long braid, so it would hide her face.

* * *

“Where should I search?” Sennacheron asked, when Veerian explained her new work to him.

They had not seen each other for more than two moon quarters. He had gone to the scribe city of Tahnaph, to begin a massive search of the archives for scrolls to assist Lord Shazzur, on the same day Veerian received her commission to work with Rushtan. When he returned, they hadn’t had a chance to speak, despite Veerian’s trips to the Scribes Hall every day on her way to the Healers Temple. The archive keepers, Hajbaz and his three sons and granddaughter, had a new scroll every morning for her to study with Rushtan. On the way home each night, she left the scroll with the gatekeeper at the Scribes Hall with a note on how much help it had or had not been, and ideas for new topics to search. Whenever Sennacheron tried to visit her at home, she had either just left or hadn’t returned home yet. Today, he had waited for her outside the Healers Temple and now they walked to the Scribes Hall together in the close, dry heat of twilight.

“Search?” Veerian thanked him with a nod when he took the scroll from her, making it easier for her to fumble her braid up into a coronet

SONG WEAVER

on top of her head. Even that didn't help relieve the heat. She thought with longing of the cool, underground room where she spent her days with Rushtan.

"To help you." Sennacheron's long face brightened with that homely, crooked grin that always made Veerian feel safe. "I made such a good impression on Lord Shazzur, I'll be traveling for him until the weather turns foul. If it ever does," he added, glancing up at the cloudless sky.

The rains should have returned at the Sacred Marriage two moons ago, but the Bride had been impure, Mother Matrika had not come to speak with the king, and there had been no sacrifice of virgin blood and royal seed. Veerian wondered if the heat would continue until winter solstice, and there would be no rain or snow until then.

"I can add your quest to my research without any trouble. Do you want me to merely search the archives for healing songs, or for any other details?" he continued.

"Oh, Sen, you are a dear." Veerian indulged in a brief, sideways hug, one arm around him. Sennacheron's face glowed. "What would I do without you?"

"You might take longer on your own, and you might have to go through ten levels of the hierarchy, but I think you'd find the same things eventually." His bashful grin faded and that wistful light touched his eyes. "There isn't that much difference between us, you know. I've had years of training. You, on the other hand, are brilliant. Look how quickly you learned to read and write. You taught yourself to play all your instruments. You never had any formal training until Lady Mayar took you as her protégé. Imagine where you would be if you had trained since childhood."

"Yes," she murmured. "Just imagine." Veerian sighed and told herself yet again that mourning the past did her no good. "But see how the Mother blesses us? She brought you into my life as my dear friend.

SONG WEAVER

You will serve the kingdom by finding this information and helping this soldier. He is a close friend to Prince Doni'Mayar, and that makes him dear to my Lady, too."

She had been forbidden to reveal Rushtan's name to anyone, only that she helped a soldier caught in evil magic. Veerian wondered if it would grow easier or harder to keep the secret, as time went on.

At the Scribes Hall, Haneen met them with a scroll her grandfather thought might be useful. Sennacheron asked the scribe girl about some project she assisted in. She rolled her eyes expressively but said nothing. From Sennacheron's grin and muffled chuckle, he understood exactly what she meant. Veerian wished she could be part of something with a secret language, no need to speak to be understood.

Then she noticed the wistful look that dimmed her friend's eyes when the scribe girl scurried away, tucking a stylus through her topknot as she hurried back to her latest task. Haneen was pretty, clever, and born to the world of scholars. She preferred bare feet and trousers, eschewed jewelry and cosmetics, and had no patience with fools who made a pretense at scholarship.

In short, Haneen would make the perfect wife for Sennacheron. Veerian suspected her scholarly friend had at least started to notice the girl as something female and desirable.

"She's rather pretty, don't you think?" she said, when the two had gone back out through the gates of the Scribes Hall.

"Hmm? Oh, Haneen. Yes. I watched her grow up. Her father brought her to the archives from the day she could carry scrolls and untie them. I swear, she could read before she could walk." He chuckled and glanced back over his shoulder before they turned the corner and went down another street.

"Does she have a sweetheart?" Veerian silently scolded herself for teasing her friend.

"No time. No patience. Boys of Haneen's age aren't worth the time

SONG WEAVER

and effort. They're so busy turning into men, they can't think clearly." He snorted, then offered her a sideways glance. "Matchmaking?"

"No. Never." Veerian hooked her free arm through his, despite the warmth, the lack of breeze. "Elini will have something waiting for me, though I usually eat with Ru—with my patient. Are you hungry? There might be a breeze on the roof tonight, now that the sun is down."

"Hmm...no. Thank you. I have to leave early in the morning to go to Tiras. That's why I had to see you, after so long." He patted her hand, tucked in the crook of his arm. "Now, what should I seek for you?"

They had a list of topics by the time they reached Veerian's door. She wasn't disappointed to bid him good night. She wondered if that was because of Sennacheron's not-quite-conscious interest in Haneen, or because she was tired and couldn't talk to anyone about Rushtan.

Or, *because* of Rushtan?

"I will not be a fool and offer him my heart," she whispered to the warm, still night, when she had retreated to her rooftop. Veerian lay on her back on the mattress that cushioned the pebbled surface of the roof. She watched the stars, so unbearably clear in the cloudless sky.

She thanked Matrika she had awakened from the haze of grand, unrealistic dreams Zorash had spun around her before she made a life-destroying mistake. Despite his sweet words, Zorash had no interest in her as a woman, and that should have warned her. She hadn't made money fast enough to suit him. When Veerian refused to turn to whoring, he lost his temper and threatened physical violence. A caravan driver had rescued her. Zorash vanished in the night, with everything Veerian owned that she hadn't been wearing. Fortunately, she slept with her flute clutched in her hand to bless her dreams.

Then, she learned how much protection Zorash had been, despite taking a portion of everything she earned. Every man who spoke sweetly to her only wanted what pleasure or profit they could obtain,

SONG WEAVER

and turned cruel when she refused.

She found some bitter amusement in seeing a familiar face nowadays, and recognizing a respectable merchant who had come into the Dregs seeking a whore or dreampowders or other amusement frowned on by the upright, law-abiding folk of the city. These same men bowed to her, flattered her, begged her to grace a festival or feast at their home. Many men who tried to get her into their beds four years ago now asked her to sing a blessing on their daughters and sons or sing with their wives to find out the sex and future of the children they carried. None of them seemed to recognize her. If they did, they hid their surprise and shame well. Perhaps they felt no shame.

Men, in general, were not to be trusted. Especially when they looked only at her body. Sennacheron adored her mind and voice before everything else. The male healers who worked with her in the temple admired her skills, laughed and joked with her, and comforted her when a patient suffered or died. Most of them were wed to their duties, faithful to their wives, or eunuchs. Her closest friends among the healers were women.

Rushtan...Veerian wasn't sure yet where to put Rushtan in her experience with men. Could a handsome, wealthy nobleman be her friend and never see her as merely a body that existed to please him?

CHAPTER 6

Third Descent Moon

Veerian liked to watch Rushtan play Draktan. The way he studied each piece before playing it fascinated her. Often he seemed to choose the one that made the least sense, as if he wanted to lose. She learned as much about his orderly mind and sense of humor by playing against him, as she did when she made him sing with her.

“I heard it rained today,” he said, with his finger poised above a low rank piece.

Veerian caught her breath, seeing possibilities. If he moved that piece, he would force a much higher piece out of its path, thereby losing rank, and giving killing power to a nearly useless piece. That might let him win the game in perhaps four more moves. That was his strategy: to upset the patterns and balance. He paid no attention to the ranks and moves of her players, only manipulated his own.

SONG WEAVER

“For perhaps ten minutes,” she said, and rested her chin in her hand to study the board. Suddenly, all his ridiculous choices made perfect, almost frightening sense. He didn’t take silly chances. He took calculated risks and sacrificed without hesitating. He was also flexible enough to change his plans when they turned awry.

The best way to beat him was to ignore his moves altogether and simply attack whenever she had a chance. Reduce his numbers and keep him on the run. If she could.

“What’s wrong?” He reached across the board with its pieces of carved, semi-precious stones, and tucked several strands of hair behind her ear. When she wore it loose, the very weight of her hair eventually pulled it down over her face. Veerian wondered if he saw it as a ploy to hide her strategies from him...or if he liked the sight and movement of her unbound hair, as other men loudly and poetically claimed.

“Wrong?” she echoed. She held still, fighting the urge to sit back and out of his reach.

“You’re very quiet, suddenly.” He glanced at the board. “Do you want to halt for a time? Do something else?”

“Sing?” she offered. That earned a bark of laughter from him. “I think we should find some new amusement for you. You’re imagining things.”

“Put me out on the practice field with a barrel of arrows, my best bow and a dozen targets to shred, I’ll be fine.” He shook his head before she could respond. “I know. Too dangerous.”

In the last two moon quarters, Vandan had run a series of tests to see if the magic had a specific target. Various friends, officials and healer priests came into Rushtan’s prison room, with guards ready to halt him the moment his eyes turned black. The sight of healer robes or Host of the Ram uniforms no longer provoked him, but high-ranking insignias and familiar faces brought on the enemy magic. If someone whom he knew came into his room, but not in their familiar clothes or

SONG WEAVER

insignia, the magic actually delayed in acting. As if it were confused.

That frightened Vandan and Lady Mayar. The magic seemed to have intelligence, awareness, like a living thing, able to learn. It ignored soldiers and ordinary healers now. There was still some doubt as to whether Lady Kena'Shazzur had been the magic's target, or if it would have moved Rushtan to attack anyone in healer green that night. Until those answers were known, Rushtan couldn't leave the confines of the Healers Temple.

"I have an idea," Veerian said, thinking about the discussion she, Vandan and Lady Mayar had that morning. "Your sister wishes to visit you. Certainly she would be safe—"

"Not if the magic wants all members of the royal family dead. I still attacked Lady Mayar when she didn't wear healer green," he said, shaking his head.

"You didn't attack Prince Nedan." She grimaced, earning a sigh and a nod from him. Nedan was the most obsequious and useless of the royal sons. "He wears no uniform." She nodded, liking the idea the more she thought. "If your sister came in disguise, that would help narrow down what we do know.

"Or add more tangles to the threads."

* * *

Three nights after the moon fullness festivities ended, Prince Elzan escorted Princess Cayeen to the prison room to visit Rushtan. Cayeen came into the room wearing a slave's robes, with her silvery blonde hair hidden under a turban of rags. Elzan wore the simple kilt and vest of a scribe, with no adornment.

Vandan kept Veerian and Rushtan company when the royal siblings entered the room. She played her harp to help Rushtan relax. He lay on a pile of cushions, eyes closed, arms crossed under his head, looking the picture of relaxed contentment. Veerian hoped desperately that this night's test would give happy results for them all. She nodded greeting

SONG WEAVER

to the two newcomers and stopped playing. Rushtan opened one eye, saw his two visitors, and grinned. He sat up and held out his arms to his sister. Veerian tried not to watch them embrace. She ached to the point of sickness, wishing for family who would open their arms to her as Rushtan did for his sister.

“Prince Doni’Mayar, this is Veerian, the Song Weaver,” Vandan said, while brother and sister caught up on news.

“Ah, yes. Mother mentioned she would ask if you could help. Your talents reach into the mind.” Prince Elzan bowed to Veerian. “Forgive my impatience, but have you seen success yet?”

“We have just begun, Highness,” Veerian said, bowing.

“She’s been too busy slaughtering me with her totally unorthodox strategy,” Rushtan said. He gestured at the table, where a Draktan board waited, set up for four to play.

“Can’t handle the challenge?” Elzan pretended disdain for the game, but Veerian saw his interest and tried not to laugh.

“I’m good enough to challenge you. That means everyone else bores me. Until Veerian.” He settled into a chair at the table and spread his hands. “What are you waiting for?”

“Women against men?” Cayeen said as she sat down next to her brother.

Veerian laughed and sat down opposite the princess, leaving Elzan the last place, opposite Rushtan. Vandan bade them a good night and wished Veerian luck.

“You must be improving, if he leaves you alone for the evening.” Elzan stepped over to the table filled with refreshments, set up against the far wall.

Rushtan grunted and snatched up a Draktan marker carved from onyx. His knuckles turned white as he squeezed the game piece. Veerian’s breath caught in her throat and she prayed she was wrong, that he teased his brother and sister.

SONG WEAVER

“Rush?” Cayeen gasped and leaped to her feet. “Elzan!”

Elzan turned at the same time his brother jumped from his chair, kicking it out of his way. Rushtan’s eyes were as black as the Draktan piece. Veerian ran for the door, shouting for the guards and Vandan, who waited just on the other side. Elzan pushed Cayeen out of the way and Rushtan attacked him.

Guards burst through the door. Rushtan ignored them. Elzan ducked and went to his knees, rolling out of his brother’s reach. He snatched up the fallen chair and swung it hard, aiming for Rushtan’s head.

Veerian snatched up the rod Vandan left in the corner for her. She reached Rushtan first and thumped him hard against the back of his skull. It startled her how easy it was to swing with every bit of strength she had. Rushtan had begged her to make sure he did nothing to hurt his sister. Though it made her ache, Veerian refused to fail him.

Rushtan crumpled. Before his knees touched the floor, Veerian pulled the flask of calming potion from inside her sash and yanked the plug free. She grabbed a handful of his hair as he collapsed to the floor, flipped him over and poured the contents down his throat.

“You knew this was going to happen,” Elzan growled. He glared at Vandan as the senior healer came into the room.

“We needed to test our theory.” Vandan waved aside the guards, so only he and Veerian handled Rushtan. They sat the prince upright, so they could dose him again.

“What theory?” Cayeen demanded.

“You think you know who the target is,” Elzan guessed.

Vandan led them from the room while Veerian and two guards tended to Rushtan. He came back quickly, to Veerian’s relief.

Gradually, the blackness left Rushtan’s eyes. Veerian fought tears. She chose anger, to make her strong, to give her energy. Anger that her theory had been wrong. Anger that Rushtan remained a prisoner. Anger that this time, it took three times longer for the blackness and the

SONG WEAVER

madness to leave.

Rushtan went limp and his head thudded back against the tile floor. His eyes closed. Sweat gleamed all over his body, pasting his clothes to his flesh. Veerian muffled a soft moan and hurried to untie the ropes bound around him. The guard started forward, but Vandan stopped him with a look and a muttered negative.

“You’re sure?” he asked her.

“His eyes are gray again.” She rubbed her eye with the back of her hand, refusing to allow a single tear to escape.

She had done this to him. She had been the one to persuade the others that this would be a good test. She had thought, wrongly, that a disguise for Cayeen and Elzan would fool the magic that lived behind Rushtan’s eyes. She had brought the blankness on him and made him suffer.

“I didn’t,” Rushtan whispered. He looked up at Veerian, who knelt over him. She couldn’t answer, but the truth must have shown in her eyes. Rushtan moaned and closed his eyes and turned his head away.

Veerian slid her hands under his shoulders and prompted him to sit up. Rushtan sat up, but put his back to her.

“You did not,” she said, making her voice hard. She slid her arm around him, across his chest, and rested her chin on his shoulder. Rushtan flinched at her touch. “The magic did this. You fought it, but you have no magic in your blood, so how can you win? We must find a way to give you magic, to uproot this poisonous weed before it creates seeds to send throughout all of Bainevah.”

“How?” His voice cracked. He leaned back against her.

“I don’t know yet, but we will find a way. There must be something in the archives. The healers are checking through every scroll stored here, and my friend the scribe looks in every library and archives he visits. We will find the answer.”

“No, you won’t. There is no answer. It’s in my blood. In my soul.”

SONG WEAVER

He shrugged free of her and stood up. "Everyone." His voice became a whipcrack. "Get out."

There was no arguing with that cold, hard tone of voice. For just a heartbeat, he was the arrogant prince, used to being obeyed instantly.

The guards looked to Veerian. Vandan also waited for her judgment, and she shuddered, weighed down suddenly with a very real weight of responsibility. She nodded, and to her surprise, one guard opened the door and Vandan walked out. When he gestured for her to go out ahead of him, she shook her head.

Rushtan stayed standing with his back to the door. His shoulders hunched and his muscles strained with the tension rippling through the air, threatening to bring down the blocks of the walls. Veerian gestured for the guard to close the door. He opened his mouth to speak, and she hushed him, one finger pressed to her lips. Rushtan shuddered.

The guard refused to move. Veerian sighed and decided some trickery was in order. She walked to the door. At her nod, the guard stepped back to let her through. Just outside the door, she signaled for him to wait and stepped back inside, reaching for the table where her flute lay. The guard turned his back, assuming she would follow. Veerian waited until he had taken two steps, then turned and signaled Vandan to silence. She caught the handle of the door, kicked the guard in the back of one knee, and shoved the door closed as he stumbled out of the way.

Rushtan snarled a string of curses and dropped to his knees next to his bed. He slammed his fists into the mattress three times. When he raised his hand the fourth time, Veerian caught hold of his wrist. With a roar, he turned, flinging her across the room. She hit the wall, too stunned to make a sound. Terror wiped the rage from Rushtan's face. He crossed the room in one flying step and snatched her up. Cradling her close, her head on his shoulders, the silent tears streamed down.

"Shhh," Veerian said on a sigh. She reached up both arms and

SONG WEAVER

wrapped them around his neck. They slid to the floor together, leaning against the wall. “Shhh.”

He only resisted a moment before bowing his head and drenching her shoulder with his silent tears. His hands were as strong as she had always imagined, clutching at her back, threatening to tear her robes with the spasms that turned his fingers into claws.

Through it all, there was silence on the other side of the door. She didn’t know what Vandan did to keep the guard from bursting in, but Veerian was grateful. Rushtan needed to release the rage and pain in the only way allowed him. He was leery of his anger even more than they. Once, he had made a joke about giving in to temper and staying a madman, but Veerian had realized the next time they sang together that it was no joke. Rushtan feared his life being taken over by the evil magic.

He feared hurting those who were dear to him.

He feared being alone, being shunned, an outcast.

Tonight, he had proven he was a danger to the only family he had. Veerian had never belonged to or with anyone, until Lady Mayar brought her to the Healers Temple. She could still imagine how Rushtan felt, to believe he could never again see those dear to him because of the possibility he could kill them.

Shudders, half of anger and half of tearing pain, tore through him. Veerian kept silent, though she knew his hands, the tightness of his arms around her, would leave bruises. She endured it because she blamed herself for his pain.

“Shhh,” she whispered again, and kissed the top of his head. “You’re not alone. I’ll never leave you. I swear. If we have to go into exile and wander the world until we’re old and bent, until we find the answer and the cure, I will stay with you.” She had no idea if he heard her, but it comforted her to make the promise. Veerian knew she would go through with it, even if Rushtan never asked it.

SONG WEAVER

Finally, when his breathing turned into longer, deeper gasps and the pressure of his arms began to ease, Veerian knew he had passed through to the other side of his agony. She stroked his hair and pressed her cheek against the side of his head. Rushtan stiffened, and she feared he would try to draw away. Quickly, she thought of a healing, soothing song and began to sing, soft and low, and drew her hands up and down his back.

“My mother used to sing that, when I was a little boy,” Rushtan said, after the second verse. His voice was a low rumble that sounded as if his throat had been the path for stampeding horses. “To put me to sleep.”

“Do you think you could sleep?”

“Forever.” A cracked sound escaped him that she took for an attempt at laughter.

It took a moment to remember that she had to get up and off him before Rushtan could stand. Veerian slid off his crossed legs, to the floor. Rushtan needed her help to stand, and they both had to lean against the wall and each other.

When she led him to his bed, she thought about him taking his clothes off to sleep, and grew flustered. How many naked people had she seen since becoming a healer? None of that had ever mattered, because she saw them through a healer’s eyes. Rushtan, however, she couldn’t put at a distance. He stayed irrevocably a handsome, vibrant man. His smile made her heart skip beats at the oddest times. The warmth of his skin scorched her when a casual touch should have meant nothing.

Rushtan lay down on his stomach and pressed his face into the three long pillows lying on the foot end of the bed. He didn’t pull the blankets out, and Veerian didn’t fuss over him. She sat on the edge of the bed, close enough to gently stroke his back, and began the soothing song all over again.

SONG WEAVER

Finally, a long, deep sigh escaped him and she felt the tension pour out of his flesh like water from a flask. Veerian closed her eyes and her shoulders slumped, but she kept stroking his back and singing. She didn't stop until the lantern by the door guttered, running low on oil. She lifted her hand. Rushtan didn't stir. She slid off the bed and stood. Still, no reaction.

She kept singing, softening her voice as she crossed the room, and finally stopped when she reached the door. When she opened it, Vandan stood in front of the guard, keeping the man from coming in. He smiled broadly when he saw Veerian, but she saw the lines of tension around his eyes.

Lady Mayar was still at the temple, in her workroom. Veerian wasn't surprised. Prince Elzan and Princess Cayeen must have reported directly to her as soon as they left their brother's prison. Veerian told her everything she had seen and thought, even what she felt. But she left out the kiss.

"Do you think it will come to that?" she said, after she had told Lady Mayar about her promise to stay with Rushtan and go wherever it took to find his cure.

"Mother Matrika has been strangely silent," her mentor said after many long moments of silence and thought. "We should have realized...my dearest friend was the Priestess Naya, wife of Lord Shazzur. Did you know that?"

"No, Lady." Veerian settled back in her chair. When the High Priestess had that introspective light in her eyes, it was wise to wait and listen.

"She was gifted with visions that manifested in weaving and studied in the Hidden City for a time. This was long before you were born," she added with a smile. "Naya met Thread Woman, Color Man and Weaver Girl, and they gave her a duty. They said they were being imprisoned by the undeserved worship directed toward them, which stole from

SONG WEAVER

Matrika's power and rightful due. They begged my spirit sister to spread the truth to the world, free them, and protect Bainevah from great disaster. Eventually, Naya was murdered for the message she carried."

"And now the Three have fallen, vanished. Matrika is silent, and evil steals into the very heart of our land. Into the royal family."

"Indeed. That does not mean Matrika is unable to help, or unwilling, but when the children will not listen, why should the Mother continue to speak? She will find willing servants and work through them, with signs and wonders that will shock and awaken the sleepers. There are still many who are faithful and obedient, and because of them, Matrika remains strong and Bainevah will not fall. But..."

"Treachery can still creep up on us, if we aren't careful." Veerian knew deep in her bones, where music always vibrated, that her words were dangerously true.

"We are healers, Veerian. We know that for every poison, there is an antidote. For every illness, a cure. You will find it. You will give Rushtan back to us. Do not despair that it takes so long. Your presence tonight was better medicine for him, I think, than anything a host of healers could have done."

"If only we could bring more minds into the search."

"Perhaps we can. Your friend, Sennacheron. Is he fully trustworthy? Can he be trusted with secrets?"

"Yes, Lady." Veerian guessed what Lady Mayar intended. "He will be honored. To trust him with such a dangerous secret will..." She laughed. "He will spend day and night in the search. It will become more dear to him than anything in the world."

More dear than me, she added silently, and felt some amusement that there was no envy, no resentment.

* * *

Rushtan dreamed of Veerian, her soft, slim arms wrapped around

SONG WEAVER

him, soothing his fury and despair. Her sweet scent lingered through his sleep.

He had fought not to snatch her into his arms and draw her down into the blankets with him. Not because of the guard on the other side of the door, ready to come bursting through at her first cry for help. He wanted to find comfort and cure in her kisses and the warmth of her body. He wanted to drown in the passion he knew he could find with her sweetness wrapped around him. The fear of the magic turning him against Veerian kept him still and aching. If the magic could turn him against his own brother and sister, it could make him kill his lover.

He wanted Veerian as his lover. He knew he could never leave it at one night and let her go. He would need her every night, in his arms, wrapped around him, her warmth driving away the cold eating away at his soul. He would become like a drunkard, needing to taste the wine of her lips constantly through the night.

How would she react if he dared to tell her he wanted her for his lover, when he had never even stolen a kiss? Rushtan knew she would never react with disgust or outrage. She was too kind, too gentle, too considerate of the pain she might give others.

He didn't want her pity. He wanted her to come to his arms only because she wanted him, woman to man. He didn't want to see her cringe away from him, or see the flicker of sorrow or fear in her eyes before she controlled herself.

It would kill him to even suspect that she came to him in fear, or because she felt obligated to try this, try anything, to find a cure.

Even if he could endure her pitying love for one night, he would only hurt himself. How could he enjoy Veerian one night and then let her go? She likely went home to a lover every night. Imagining the life of that lucky man was bearable as long as Rushtan didn't know the taste and feel of her.

* * *

SONG WEAVER

Sennacheron didn't return for half a moon, and Veerian watched Rushtan's spirit shrivel and blight a little more every day. She decided not to tell him of Lady Mayar's plan until Sennacheron returned and she approached him with the proposal. What if the scribe was too busy, or he didn't return? She couldn't take seeing Rushtan's hopes dashed again. The search for some cure tormented him, and he fought valiantly to hide his frustration by spending more hours on their research. She stayed late to work with him, and arrived earlier, knowing she was his only company. In the Scribes Hall, Hajbaz scoured the archives for anything that would help, the slightest obscure reference.

Veerian grudged the time other scholars and scribes spent on solving the problem of the Hidden City and the loss of the Three. She feared Rushtan's problem had been pushed aside for other concerns.

Then more men under magical control struck in the heart of the city—in the king's Council Chamber—attacking King Nebazz himself. Veerian mourned with Lady Mayar, who didn't weep or show any fear or strain until late that night, after the king was fully out of danger. It surprised her to realize Lady Mayar loved the king, and surprised her more to see Rushtan go pale and hear him curse when he learned of the attack. Why had she thought that he wouldn't love his father, just because Rushtan had disavowed his royal status, as if the king had cast him out?

The mystery of the mind-controlling magic had never fallen to minor consideration, Veerian knew then. She was chagrined and flattered when scribes, healers, Lord Shazzur and Prince Regent Elzan came to confer with her on what she and Rushtan had learned. Vandan had kept them informed, but they wanted to hear it directly from her, to ask her questions and propose theories they had been formulating all this time.

When Sennacheron returned from his latest foray to an outlying archive, Shazzur assigned him to help her. He personally entrusted

SONG WEAVER

Sennacheron with the identity of the prisoner-patient.

“Highness.” The scribe bowed low when he walked into Rushtan’s room the next morning. He nearly dropped the armful of scrolls he carried.

“Please.” Rushtan attempted a laugh and held out his arms for some of the scrolls. “No formality among co-workers.”

“Thank you, High—Prince Doni’—Sir,” Sennacheron finally managed to sputter.

That day, while the three talked and made notes and compared theories, no matter how outlandish, Veerian realized several disturbing things.

First, and worst, she felt jealous. Rushtan fell easily into friendship with Sennacheron. The first time the scribe made a wry comment and Rushtan laughed, Veerian didn’t like the dropping sensation in her belly. Rushtan made friends easily. He hadn’t been raised to hold himself above everyone, separate and superior. He had the good sense and the wit to realize the stupidity of insulting those who aided him.

She had, she realized, hoped that her easy friendship with the prince was something special, something unique, that he accepted her insight and wanted her company because of his regard for her—not because he needed help and was lonely.

Veerian didn’t like this side of herself. She also didn’t like the realization that she felt sorry for herself when it was Rushtan who suffered. He was lonely. Bitterly so. There were few who could come visit him without eventually becoming targets of the mind-controlling magic. By necessity, very few knew the identity of the man in the lower chambers of the temple. Rushtan’s fellow soldiers and most of the Court thought he had been sent on a mission for the king, simply to halt rumors. And that resulted in the prince being even more isolated.

Her last realization came when Sennacheron walked her home that night.

SONG WEAVER

“He wants you in his bed, you know,” he said, with less emotion than he had used all day, talking about the possible source of the magic.

“Prince—he’s a soldier.” Veerian shook her head, disturbed that she had almost spoken Rushtan’s name outside the temple. “Lust is a way to release the ill humors that come from all that discipline and killing.”

“He wants *you*,” Sennacheron insisted. “If it was nothing more than that, he probably would have asked for a slave girl to take care of him at night. Or has he? Do they discreetly slip her into his chamber after we’ve left?”

“I’d be told, if they did.” She didn’t like the sharp bite of something unhappy, deep inside. What was wrong with her that she didn’t like the idea of Rushtan finding some comfort and release with a concubine?

“Hmm. Have you offered? Are you taking care of all his needs, then?”

She stopped short and stared, her mouth dropping open. If not for the choking sensation that went down her throat and turned her belly into a hot knot, Veerian knew she would have spewed gutter curses. How dare Sennacheron make such a suggestion? Did he think she was the type of woman to lightly give herself to any man who looked at her with longing? She wondered now why Sennacheron had expressed no interest in sharing her bed. Had she deluded herself, and Sennacheron held no affection for her at all?

“Correct me,” she said, keeping her voice cool and even, “but have we ever slept together?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Then why would you accuse me of acting like a harlot?”

“You’re a healer, Veerian.” Sennacheron linked his arm through hers and started them walking again. “Your life is devoted to easing suffering and bringing healing. Since so little has helped, I thought you might have tried to ease his physical suffering with pleasure.”

“No. And if I thought a little bed pleasure would help him, I would

SONG WEAVER

have sent for one of the concubines assigned to the princes. Or a slave, if we couldn't trust a concubine to keep silent." She shook her head. "How could you think that of me? Haven't you heard me tell young girls, when they reach their first moon flow, to be careful? Haven't you heard me lecture them about disease, and about protecting their hearts as carefully as their bodies?"

"Yes." He squeezed her hand, resting in the crook of his arms. "This is different."

It isn't different, Veerian argued silently.

Sennacheron obviously approached the question with his usual logic, shunning all emotional overtones. She refused to tell him how his careless assumption hurt her. Veerian had vowed never to give her body except where she gave her heart. She saw the heartbreak and illness that came when a woman gave herself to any man who appealed to her, or who offered enough money. And she saw the peace, safety and devotion that existed between two people who lived only for each other. She knew from childhood what she wanted. She had avoided breaking that vow, despite years of hunger and desperation, when anyone would have forgiven her for turning to whoring to stay alive.

She especially disliked Sennacheron's lack of emotion about the subject. He showed no jealousy or possessiveness toward her. It didn't bother him that Rushtan wanted her.

If Sennacheron felt any love, any desire for her, wouldn't he have at least been a little jealous? She couldn't believe that his reasonable attitude would cancel out the jealousy of one man toward another when it came to the woman he loved.

Perhaps her relationship with Sennacheron was too reasonable, too safe? Perhaps she was foolish, but if Sennacheron didn't feel he had some sort of claim on her, then she wasn't sure she wanted him.

There had to be more to life than safety and security. Didn't she take a risk every time she opened her mind to the souls who came to

SONG WEAVER

her in the marketplace? Didn't she risk her own inner stability, every time she reached in and helped someone with a diseased mind or heart?

And didn't she come out stronger for every risk, every time she put aside her safety for the sake of another?

"What's so funny?" Sennacheron asked her, when a tiny snort of laughter escaped her.

"I'm just tired. Everything looks slightly wrong." She reached up and squeezed his hand.

Veerian knew, sadly, oddly amused, that she didn't need to break off her relationship with Sennacheron. If she didn't give him hints that she wanted to be closer, warmer, he would leave things just as they were.

She would leave things just as they were.

CHAPTER 7

Sixth Descent Moon

Winter solstice approached, and they made little progress toward finding a cure or an answer. Vandan and Lady Mayar reminded Veerian, Sennacheron and Rushtan that they had done the work of twenty scribes, simply weeding out all the useless scrolls, histories, tablets and fables. Veerian missed the quiet days when it was just her and Rushtan, able to talk about anything, free to sing or play Draktan when they needed a rest from their studies. Whenever she felt sorry for herself, she watched Rushtan and Sennacheron, hard at work, communicating in that strange, truncated language men seemed to use. She was glad she had brought a friend to Rushtan.

With Sennacheron's help, they took Rushtan outside once a moon quarter, surrounded by temple guards. Vandan and Sennacheron walked on either side of Rushtan, ready with the calming potion. They

SONG WEAVER

always went outside after midnight, staying on the highest terrace of the temple, with guards in the stairwells to prevent Rushtan from escaping if the enemy magic took control. It was a pitiful bit of freedom, but Veerian told herself to be grateful the captive prince had fresh air and exercise. He was pale from lack of sunshine and Veerian ached to allow him just one afternoon practicing with his beloved bow. Still, they learned to be happy in the few things Rushtan could have.

At the moon dark, with only two quarters before winter solstice and the Sacred Marriage, the weather turned heavy with snow. The winds blew so bitterly and fierce, Lady Mayar told Veerian to stay overnight in the temple. Sennacheron had left two hours before, to take an armload of scrolls back to the Scribes Hall and choose more.

Veerian thought Sennacheron would understand why she hadn't gone home, so it startled her when her normally calm, unflappable friend stomped into the anteroom to Rushtan's chamber the next morning. This early in the morning, there was only one guard on duty, having just taken the place of the man who had guarded the door all night. Sennacheron grabbed her by the arm and shook her.

"Why didn't you wait for me?" he growled.

"Didn't Elini tell—"

"She's useless. You should have sold her long ago." He gave her a shove, pushing her toward the hall doorway.

"Sold her?" Veerian forgot to fight in her shock. "You know she's not a slave. Sennacheron, how could you say such a thing?"

"Lady?" The guard took a step toward them.

Sennacheron growled and turned, backhanding the guard. Bones cracked loudly in the sudden quiet of the anteroom. The guard fell, stunned by the force of the blow. Blood streamed from his broken nose. Sennacheron's hand looked dented on the side.

Survival skills awoke and Veerian kicked at the broken hand. Sennacheron didn't flinch or grunt, but he snarled fury when he

SONG WEAVER

couldn't grab onto her robes as she leaped out of his reach. Veerian screamed, putting all her lungpower into the call for help. The anteroom echoed and Sennacheron staggered, the force of her voice a physical blow.

"Veerian!" Rushtan shouted. The heavy door panel thudded. "What's going on out there?" He cursed. The door rattled in its frame and the pins holding the heavy bar tight in place jumped and squeaked.

If she could open the door, Rushtan would protect her. Veerian knew better than to let Sennacheron get within arm's reach of her. She trusted her in-fighting skills, but a man who didn't react to a broken hand wouldn't feel if she crushed his privates with her knee.

She picked up the heavy wax slate where the guard noted everyone who visited Rushtan. She swung it hard, horizontally into Sennacheron's face. His nose snapped, blood gushed and the frame cut his cheek, laying it open to the bone. He paused to wipe blood out of his eyes. Veerian dashed past him and scrambled to lift the bar holding Rushtan's door closed.

The guard groaned and one hand twitched. Veerian thought of his sword. With it, she could hold off Sennacheron until somebody came to help. First, she had to free Rushtan. He would protect her. The bar slid up. She yanked on the latch.

"Rushtan! It's open!" She dashed away, feeling a warning chill up her back.

Sennacheron snarled, catching hold of her sleeve. The wool held a moment before it tore with a shrill scream. Veerian pivoted and looked straight into Sennacheron's eyes, and they were black. Solid black, like a night without stars or moon.

Black like Rushtan's eyes, when the magic took him.

Veerian stumbled free and lunged across the room, reaching for the sword. The door banged open and Rushtan staggered into the room. He turned, arms raised to shield his head and belly. Veerian saw him

SONG WEAVER

transform into a lethal creature, poised for battle. Sennacheron lunged at her. She slapped at him with the blade. He knocked it from her grip, ignoring the cuts on his hands. As he snatched at her, she kicked the sword to Rushtan.

With a hoarse shout, he leaped on Sennacheron. Without the sword. Veerian shrieked in fury, but the sound caught in her throat as she fell, torn from Sennacheron's grasp. She caught herself against the wall and turned, watching, stunned silent as Rushtan kicked and punched, lifted the bespelled scribe to his feet and threw him against the wall, caught him by the front of his robe and swung him around. Over and over, battering him, pounding until the blood flowed and she heard bones crack.

And still Sennacheron struggled to stand and swing his fists. Despite the damage Rushtan did, Sennacheron ignored him, keeping his black, magic-touched eyes focused on Veerian.

She shook herself free of the stunned paralysis. Veerian crept on hands and knees to the sword, then crouched next to the guard, who struggled to get to his feet, visibly dizzy. They clung to each other, watching Rushtan.

Vandan and five temple guards hurried in as Rushtan shoved Sennacheron across the anteroom. The scribe stumbled before he hit the wall. They leaped on Rushtan. Veerian screamed warning, to tell them Sennacheron was the danger.

Sennacheron staggered around them, reaching out bloody hands for her. Vandan turned, saw Sennacheron's black eyes and understood. He shouted and swung his thick wooden staff down so it cracked against the back of Sennacheron's head. The scribe crumpled with a horrible, muffled cracking sound.

"Veerian?" Rushtan gasped. He shoved free of the guards and reached for her. He was sweating, covered in blood and bruises, wearing nothing but torn, blood-streaked trousers.

SONG WEAVER

Silent, stunned, she gladly huddled in Rushtan's arms. He refused to let go of her until the guards had tied up Sennacheron, Vandan used the sedative potion on him, and the wounded guard had been taken care of. No one thought of putting Rushtan back into his room until they were alone with Vandan.

"I'm sorry, Highness," the healer said. "If I could have my way, you would be freed. But we both know—"

"The magic could turn me lethal at any time." Rushtan nodded. He rubbed at his filthy face, wincing when he touched bruises. "Two things, please, Vandan? A bath, breakfast, and take Veerian directly to Lady Mayar. Make sure she never has less than four guards. If the magic can touch Sennacheron to make him attack her, it can touch others."

"Hmm, yes, Highness. That had occurred to me. But consider this—the magic has limits, and its target does not change. Sennacheron attacked Veerian, when the magic has never moved you to attack her." Vandan offered them a wintry smile. "Like an arrow that cannot be re-aimed once it is loosed, the magic cannot be changed. The aim was broad when you were overcome, but could not be changed to include her."

"So I'm definitely safe, because if Rushtan hasn't attacked me in all this time, he won't?" Veerian guessed.

"No, it means you're in more danger than ever," Rushtan said. "Our enemies must think you're close to finding a cure for me, if they're sending people after you." He shook her a little before he shoved her into Vandan's arms. "If I thought it would help you to send you away, I would."

* * *

Lady Mayar agreed with Vandan and Rushtan's theories.

"Unfortunately, we can't guarantee you are safe even here," the High Priestess admitted. "Who knows what or who will be our enemy's

SONG WEAVER

next vessel and toy? A soldier, a healer, one of our patients. A man with black eyes attacked Lord Shazzur before General Asqual brought him back to us. Our enemy can predict what we will do next, and arrive there before we do.”

“The enemy could get directly to me,” Veerian offered. “Wouldn’t it be easier to send *me* in to kill Rushtan, or set him free to kill?”

“I disagree,” Vandan said. “They would have already done that, if they could. I think despite our failure in finding a way to break the magic, you hold some resistance to it.”

“And if your theory likening the magic to an arrow is correct,” Lady Mayar said, “the safest place for Veerian to be is with Prince Rushtan, at all times. He will protect her, as he ably demonstrated today.”

When four temple guards escorted Veerian home to pack for her extended stay in the temple, they found Elini lying in a pile of blown snow in the open doorway, her neck broken, most likely by Sennacheron. Judging by the peace on her face, she had died instantly. Veerian packed as quickly as she could, and made arrangements for the old woman’s funeral pyre. She didn’t cry until she returned to Rushtan’s rooms. Then she wept in his arms, through nausea and fury and terror, and back to a weary state of calm in body and soul.

Sennacheron didn’t wake, but died late that afternoon. Rushtan grew very quiet when word reached them. Despite Vandan’s assurance that the scribe had not died of the beating the prince had given him, it seemed Rushtan didn’t believe.

Veerian realized they had learned something new about their opponent. He destroyed weapons that had proven useless. That raised a new question. Sennacheron had been killed, so why hadn’t Rushtan died soon after being imprisoned?

“Maybe the magic itself grows, over time,” Rushtan offered, when Veerian brought up the subject. She was willing to discuss anything, just to bring him out of his sullen, withdrawn silence. “It was simple

SONG WEAVER

when it bit into me, but as time goes on, the other victims are more easily controlled. Those men who attacked the King—they killed themselves, didn't they?"

"An excellent point, Highness," Vandan said. "Forgive me if I hope you're wrong."

"Because that would mean the magic is almost perfected and will soon be used against more people. Yes, I see." Rushtan nodded. He allowed a rueful smile for a few seconds.

"We'll make a scholar of you yet," Veerian offered, trying to inject some humor into the heavy atmosphere.

"Thank you for your confidence in me," he responded, bowing with head and shoulders. "Elzan is the one who would make a fine scholar. He'd love to spend his life studying dusty old scrolls and gleaning hidden knowledge. If he wasn't my closest friend, I'd be jealous that he received so many talents."

"But he is to be the heir, is he not?" she asked. "Doesn't the Mother prepare us for great and important things?"

"Then the weight of the entire kingdom will rest on his shoulders ten times more heavily than it ever rested on our—on the king."

* * *

Solstice

Veerian, Rushtan and Vandan spent the day of the winter solstice and the Sacred Marriage in quiet study and prayers. When Vandan joined Veerian and Rushtan after breakfast, he informed them that the king had suffered a relapse from his assault earlier in the fall, and Elzan would take the king's place in the Sacred Marriage. Rushtan worried for his half-brother.

"It has to be a plot," he explained, his voice low as if they could be overheard talking. "For the king to be so deathly ill, right before solstice? He was poisoned. I'd wager my favorite bow on it."

SONG WEAVER

“Consider the implications,” Vandan said.

“Yes—if Elzan fails, if the Bride is impure like at summer solstice, it could be disaster for Bainevah.”

“Consider that the king was poisoned because our enemy could not defile or control the chosen Bride.”

“But they decided to hide the Bride’s name this time, to protect her,” Veerian said.

“Yes. But surely our enemy knew as soon as the name was chosen that his puppet had failed.” Vandan smiled, making Veerian suspect he knew the Bride’s name and was pleased.

Later in the day, Veerian went to speak with Lady Mayar. She wanted to discuss an ancient manuscript she had read, which gave her an idea for something new to try. Perhaps having musicians in the anteroom to play music through the night would affect Rushtan’s dreaming. The High Priestess wasn’t in her workroom, and when Veerian returned to the other two, Vandan apologized for not telling her sooner.

“The Bride has no mother, and requested Lady Mayar to stand in her mother’s place. The Lady spent the vigil last night with her, and now sits before the altar with High Priest Chizhedek.”

“It’s long past noon.” Rushtan frowned and glanced up from the Draktan board. “What’s taking so long? Usually the ritual is over and they’re out of the chamber long before this.”

Vandan grinned, shook his head, and said nothing. Veerian caught her breath when she realized what was going through his mind. She blushed, thinking of handsome Prince Elzan and whoever the Bride was, taking their pleasure in each other once their duty was finished. It was permitted, but always at the discretion of the Bride.

“If they haven’t left the chamber,” she suggested, her face growing hot, “then we should take it as a good sign.”

“Maybe we should be worried,” Rushtan said, still scowling. “For

SONG WEAVER

all we know, they're both dead. Either poisoned by our enemies or piles of ashes from the Mother's wrath."

"Where is your faith in Matrika?" Vandan scolded gently. "Prince Elzan is a good man, who lives for Bainevah. And as for the Bride..." He surprised them both by chuckling. "I see the hand of the Mother on her, protecting her. Matrika knows our enemies have tried enough times to strike Lady Kena'Shazzur, to either kill or control her. Each time, they fail, and Challen grows stronger. No, this day will prove the blessing and cure of Bainevah."

Rushtan's face paled in shock. "Shazzur's daughter?"

"She can't," Veerian said. She barely noticed when Rushtan gripped her hand. "A Bride must prepare for an entire year before her name can enter the lots to be drawn for the Sacred Marriage."

"Hmm, yes, that is true." Vandan's smile approached the maddening point. "And all the eunuchs in the Sanctum swear her name was not written down, yet every lot that was drawn had her name on it. The will of the Mother."

"Or trickery of our enemies," Rushtan said.

"It is our belief, our worship and obedience that give Matrika her strength to heal and protect Bainevah. When you choose not to believe, you steal a few grains from her strength, from the walls that surround our land. When you choose to believe, you put back twice as much. I prefer to protect, rather than attack Bainevah, Prince. What will you choose to do?"

"I will believe," Veerian said. She offered up a weak smile. "Though I must admit, it is very hard." Then something new occurred to her. "Challen? But I've met her many times in our Lady's workroom. She shouldn't have been working here at the temple if she's a Sanctum Bride."

"The king granted special dispensation. Challen is indispensable to her father as his assistant. She carried out research for him, despite the

SONG WEAVER

restrictions of the Sanctum.” Vandan leaned back in the chair and rested his crossed arms on his chest. “If Prince Elzan has any wits about him, he’ll spend this day winning her heart. It never hurts to have such a powerful woman supporting you, marked by the Mother and granddaughter of the High Priest.”

That gave Veerian much to think about during the remainder of the day, which dragged. More than ever, she wished Rushtan was free to go outside or into a practice arena and work off his frustrations with soldiering exercises.

Finally the afternoon ended and sunset approached. They didn’t hear the trumpets when the Bride and Prince Elzan emerged from the chamber and went to prepare for the sacrifice. Vandan had men stationed to bring them word when that happened. He smiled, stood and held out his hand to Veerian when the guard shouted the news through the door.

“We have just enough time to get to the courtyard of the sacrifice,” the priest said. “Lady Mayar has sent word that we are to be allowed to attend, if we wish. Will you go with me?”

“Rushtan—” Veerian wanted to go, partly for the wonder of seeing the sacrifice, partly to add her prayers to ensure it succeeded. Yet she didn’t want to leave Rushtan alone for the hour she would be gone.

“Go.” He offered up a stiff smile. “If I can’t be there for Elzan, you can take my prayers to him. If you can speak with him, tell him...” He shook his head. “No, don’t talk to him. Don’t remind him about me during his triumph. If he succeeded, if the sacrifice brings an end to the snow...Elzan has made himself Crown Prince today.”

“Indeed, and only a fool would stand against him now,” Vandan said.

“The king was a fool for not naming Elzan Crown Prince when he was born. He’s always been the best. The king has never loved anyone but Lady Mayar.”

SONG WEAVER

Veerian fought tears as she followed Vandan from the room. Yes, King Nebazz may have loved Lady Mayar, but he had left her a concubine and didn't make her his queen when she gave him his firstborn son. He sired sons and daughters on his other concubines after Elzan was born. Rushtan's mother, Lady Concubine Coori, had given the king two children, and Lady Mayar only had one. What did that say about the king's love? What did that say about the fallibility of any man's love?

* * *

Veerian was glad to huddle in the shelter of Vandan's arm around her. The wind twisted in every direction, shoving snow in her face despite the deep hood of the heavy, furred cloak she wore. No one pushed her and Vandan aside, despite the crowding of the courtyard as the members of the Court waited for the sacrifice. They both wore dark green cloaks with the mark of the Healers Temple embroidered on them.

Vandan spoke just loudly enough for Veerian to hear, and spent the waiting time pointing out the different members of the Court. Veerian had seen many of them when she sang at festivals and private celebrations for different noble households. It was different, though, to stand anonymously among them and not be expected to perform. She was relieved not to have to talk, to be polite and flattering. There was freedom in simply being a healer priestess, and ignored.

First Advisor King's Seer Lord Shazzur arrived. Veerian studied him, wondering how he could be so calm when his daughter was the Bride. If anything, Shazzur looked rather smug, like a bad little boy about to see a complicated scheme come to fruition. Of course, she could have been wrong, with the snow swirling everywhere and blinding her half the time.

The wind threatened to blow out the fire on the altar. Thick gobs of falling snow threatened to drown the flames. Even knowing oil trickled

SONG WEAVER

onto the flame to keep it alive, Veerian feared for High Priest Chizhedek. How would it reflect on him if the flame for the sacrifice died at the worst possible moment?

The Bride was his granddaughter, daughter of his only child. How did he feel, waiting for her to arrive? The fact that Prince Elzan and Lady Challen had both survived the Sacred Marriage to come to the sacrifice encouraged Veerian greatly. She could only imagine how those more closely involved in the ritual felt.

Then King Nebazz arrived, escorting Challen. Veerian shook her head, wondering how she could have been so oblivious. She and Challen had met many times, comfortable together from the beginning. Why had she never talked to the girl, just a year older than her, and learned about her background and family?

On impulse, Veerian yanked down her hood, baring her head to the wind. The movement caught Challen's attention. She glanced aside as the king led her to the altar. The gazes of the two young women met. Challen's eyes widened a little in recognition, then she smiled. Veerian lifted her hands slightly, as if saying prayers and inclined her head in salute. Challen grinned and nodded back. Then she took her place at the altar, with her back to Veerian and Vandan.

At that moment, Veerian knew everything was going to be all right.

She watched and listened and took in every detail, to report it to Rushtan. She memorized High Priest Chizhedek's words as he lifted his old, yet strong voice above the wind's howl to invoke Mother Matrika's blessing. Veerian held her breath as the blood-stained cloth fluttered down onto the altar. She gasped with everyone as the wind died and a thick, hot beam of sunlight broke through the black clouds to bathe the altar. The snow melted and the cloth burned in a single bright burst of flame. Veerian staggered back a step in the blast of warmth. She felt as if she had stepped into spring, heavy with the fresh smells of green growing things.

SONG WEAVER

She watched, her heart in her throat, as Shazzur embraced his daughter and the courtyard erupted in celebration. Vandan hugged her, turning her around twice before setting her down. Laughing, he took hold of her hand and they raced back together, like children, eager to tell Rushtan everything that had happened.

Veerian told the story straight through before the servants brought their feast to Rushtan's rooms. Then Vandan told his own version of the same events, seeing different things, adding comments and insights of his own while they ate. Rushtan laughed and lifted his cup in salute to his older brother so many times, Veerian couldn't decide if it was wine or relief that made him unsteady on his feet.

She stayed with Rushtan after Vandan went home, reluctant to leave him alone in the quiet and darkness as the glory of the evening faded. Veerian was still there, watching the weariness creep across his features and the exultation slowly drain away, when a guard burst into the room, followed by Lady Mayar.

"Matrika has given us a path to follow," the High Priestess announced, with tears in her eyes. She laughed and embraced Veerian, then opened her arms to Rushtan.

"Lady?" He stood slowly, disbelief and hope warring in his eyes. "Should you be here? I could strike you—"

"Our enemy is too busy recovering from yet another failure, to make you attack me." She laughed, a fierce, triumphant sound, and waved a hand to stop his protest. "Believe me, my son's dearest brother, a cure and your freedom are at hand." Tears made her eyes glisten as Rushtan stepped into her embrace.

Veerian turned her head away, as Rushtan cried, silently, and clung to Lady Mayar. His eyes never turned black the entire time the High Priestess stayed with them.

Only later, when dawn's light crept across Bainevah and the winter storms returned, did Veerian learn the whole story. Lady Mayar

SONG WEAVER

couldn't sleep any more than she could. The two crept down to the temple archives, accompanied by Mayar's eunuch guard, Jushta, to visit the most ancient sections. They obeyed a message Challen had received during the Sacred Marriage.

Somewhere in the old scrolls was a healing song that had not been used in centuries, that had been forgotten, that wasn't even considered a healing song. It would banish the enemy and destroy magic's hold on Rushtan's mind and soul. All the healer priests were to learn the song, to go throughout the city and sing it everywhere, to dispel the infiltration of enemy magic.

Veerian trembled when she heard that two Brides had been captured by the magic and had attacked the other Brides during the celebration feast in the Sanctum. One Bride was dead at her own hand, and the other writhed in madness. After Rushtan, that unfortunate girl would be the first freed by the healing song.

When Veerian and Lady Mayar found it.

When they found it, not *if*. Veerian vowed to believe and never give up, from this point on.

"What fools we are," Lady Mayar exclaimed. She wiped dust from her cheek and stepped back, raising her lantern to shed more light on the section of the archives she had uncovered.

By the rumbling of Veerian's stomach, the day had progressed past breakfast and neared noon.

Then she saw the box Lady Mayar had discovered. It had cracked wax seals holding the lid tight, silken cords knotted all around it and enough obscure magical symbols to confuse every scholar in the Scribes Hall. Veerian forgot her stomach and her dry mouth and bloodshot eyes. She stumbled over a wooden crate of scrolls, caught the hem of her dress, yanked it free so it tore up to her knees, and crossed to Lady Mayar's side.

"These scrolls were never translated. They deal with such obscure

SONG WEAVER

topics and foreign ways,” the priestess continued. She beckoned, and Veerian bent to help her lift the box and carry it out of the archives. It was heavy enough they had to stop twice before they reached the main room. Jushta returned from searching another section of the vast, dusty room, and took over at that point. Veerian scowled at his display of strength, but the big eunuch just grinned at her and led the way to Lady Mayar’s workroom.

“It just goes to show our arrogance,” the priestess said, when they had closed her door. She gestured for Jushta to put the box down on her worktable after she and Veerian pushed aside piles of scrolls and tablets. “We ignored these scrolls, and I’ll wager copies were never made for the archives”

“Lady, if these weren’t translated—” Veerian began.

“Then we could have searched the archives until we were all wrinkled and gray and never would have found the answer.” She sighed and searched her box of healing tools for one of her small knives. “Shall you do the honors? You’re the one who will sing the songs, of course.”

“Yes, Lady.” Veerian took the knife, but hesitated to cut the first old, dusty cord holding the box closed. “What if the language is so old no one can read them?”

Lady Mayar sat down. Her weary smile didn’t fade so much as it froze for a few heartbeats. She shook her head and closed her eyes and let out a long sigh that didn’t seem at all sad.

“Challen’s mother, Naya, was my dearest friend. She was slaughtered in front of the altar in the Mother’s temple, nearly sixteen years ago.”

“Yes, Lady, so you have told me,” Veerian whispered. She wondered what that had to do with the scrolls.

“And yet, Naya spent the night of the vigil with Challen and me, as real and solid as this table. I embraced my spirit sister, and we cried

SONG WEAVER

together. She brought messages from Matrika for us. If the time of destiny and purification has come on us, and wonders occur to show the Mother's love for us, we do wrong to doubt. Matrika told us where to find these scrolls, so we must trust she will provide a way to translate them as well."

"Yes, Lady." Veerian remembered what Vandan had said about the power of belief and disbelief. "There *will* be a translation, and Rushtan *will* be cured and set free." Then she picked up the knife and cut the first cord.

The wax seals and ropes were dry and half-rotted, so the lid came off easily, with a great cloud of dust. The scrolls were wrapped in multiple layers of silk and leather, with herbs to keep away chewing insects. Veerian smelled them, potent and bitter, and was encouraged. She reached into the box to lift out the scrolls, then hesitated.

"Perhaps we should have scribes handle something so ancient. Someone with the gift of preserving the materials."

"Yes, indeed. Very wise." Lady Mayar's excitement dimmed slightly. "Jushta—"

"I'll go to Cho'Mat directly," the eunuch said. He winked at Veerian before he turned and left the room.

"I don't know how I could have survived without Jushta, my guard and assistant and confidant. Thank the Mother, Challen had O'Klan to guard and guide her in the Sanctum."

"She shouldn't have been chosen, should she, Lady?"

"No, but Matrika was guiding all things. That idiot, Agrat, could have drawn lots until spring returned, and Challen's name still would have appeared in each one." She spread out her dirty hands and laughed. "We have time for washing and breakfast—no, make that lunch—before Cho'Mat comes."

"Won't he send someone? I can't imagine the Head Scribe taking on a task like this."

SONG WEAVER

“Cho’Mat will come for Elzan’s and my sake, even if the challenge itself wasn’t enough. And I know our dear Cho’Mat will relish this task. The harder the better.” She picked up the little mallet and tapped her silver gong to summon an acolyte.

“Rushtan. He’s been waiting all night,” Veerian said. She leaped to her feet. “Excuse me, Lady—”

“Yes. Go!” Lady Mayar’s laughter followed Veerian down the hall.

CHAPTER 8

First Ascent Moon

Challen and her massive eunuch guard, O’Klan, spent several hours on the scrolls the next day. They both laughed and admitted defeat; the language was beyond their experience. Veerian heard Shazzur’s daughter had agreed to be Prince Elzan’s First Concubine. He no longer had to share concubines with the other princes, now that he had been named Crown Prince. Rushtan had been delighted at the news and remarked that the choice was long overdue. He grew too quiet when he read the letter that accompanied the gifts Elzan sent to celebrate being chosen. Veerian suspected that it hurt more than he wished to admit, to be left out of the festivities.

She vowed they would celebrate Rushtan’s freedom with even more jubilation, and soon.

The first breakthrough in the translation came when Veerian

SONG WEAVER

realized the line of odd notations down one side of the scroll might not be decoration, but musical symbols. Her first impulse was to run to Rushtan to confer with him, but Cho'Mat didn't want the ancient scrolls to leave Lady Mayar's workroom.

"Noctor." She beckoned the young scribe over to her section of the scrolls, carefully held flat with padded strips of wood. "Could this be music?"

The scribe rubbed his hand idly over his stubbly brown head. All of them had been so involved in this effort, the scribes neglected their ritual head shaving. Noctor leaned down close, so his long nose almost touched the scroll. Then a grin stretched his flat lips.

"Harp music, Lady. My sister made me help her study, when I was younger. Definitely harp notations. But don't you play?"

"I do, but I was never taught to read the notations. I hear a song, reproduce it, and add my own embellishments, but—" She shrugged. "Can you find me someone to show me the chords? If I could take something down to show the prince, some progress, maybe he can think of something to add, to help."

Noctor remembered enough of his sister's harp lessons that he felt confident enough to play the harp for her. Veerian told the other three scribes in the room what they were about to do, so they wouldn't be disturbed, then ran to her room in the upper levels of the temple to fetch her small lap harp.

The harp was in tune, but Noctor's fingers weren't as agile as his mind. Veerian understood what chords he attempted, though, and after the third run-through of the melody, she took the harp, sat on the bench and played. It was an odd tune, leaping from one end of the harp to the other, chords modulating so they clashed with the ones just before them. The sound vibrated in her fingertips, breastbone, and behind her eyes. Veerian laughed at the buzzing sensation of well-being, and opened her eyes. Noctor laughed with her, and nodded approval. Two

SONG WEAVER

scribes made comments about the strange taste their ancestors had in music, then went back to their work at the other end of the long table.

The third scribe didn't laugh or smile. She stood very still and stared across the room at the harp. Veerian shivered and kept playing, relieved when the scribe woman blinked and twitched once, then walked out of the room. In the light that streamed out into the hallway, Veerian saw she had no shadow.

She gasped and stopped playing. The woman's shadow reappeared, just before she vanished down the hall.

Hadn't Lady Challen said that Rushtan, and the men who tried to kidnap her, had no shadows?

The music itself had magic.

Veerian could only imagine what it would do when combined with the proper words. *If* the words were ever found. Did the enemy know Challen had given them the clue to the scrolls? Had that scribe been infected, to stop them succeeding?

First, Veerian had to verify what she had seen. Challen was the only one with the gift of discerning shadows.

"Noctor, who was that who just left?"

"Zara." He grinned. "I only make noise, but you make music that touches the soul. Continue, please?"

"Maybe later. Do me a favor? Don't let Zara back in here, and tell Lady Mayar when she comes back..." What could she say that the High Priestess would understand, without alarming anyone else? Or *should* she alarm them? "Tell her I've gone to find Lady Challen, and we're going hunting shadows."

From the widening of Noctor's eyes, he understood the reference. Veerian didn't have the time to worry. She tried to remember how long Challen was working in the temple today, before she went to the Scribes Hall.

Veerian found Challen with Lady Mayar, the two teamed to hold up

SONG WEAVER

a healing haze around the leg of a blood-spattered boy. Challen gripped the unconscious boy's arm and Lady Mayar's shoulder, giving her energy so the High Priestess could close the gaping wounds.

Veerian came into the room and stepped close enough to see the ragged flesh and shattered bone. Her stomach twisted. It was embarrassing for a healer to react that way to a wound, but Veerian had never seen a wound so violent. Trying not to moan, she stumbled out of the room. The benches lining the long hallway had buckets under them. Veerian gladly collapsed onto the bench, but refused to need the bucket.

Lady Mayar came out of the room just a few moments after Veerian got her breath back. She sat down and slid an arm around the younger woman's shoulders, offering silent comfort.

"It's all right," she murmured. "Your gift is to heal the soul, not bloody wounds."

"Lady—" Veerian paused when Challen stepped out of the room to join them. The other woman seemed too young to be a vessel for so many prophecies and blessings. "Lady, I found music that lets me see where shadows are missing."

Noctor had Zara confined to a room, watched by two temple guards. When Challen stepped into the room with Veerian and Lady Mayar, she stopped short.

"She has no shadow," she confirmed.

Zara's eyes turned black the moment she looked at the First Concubine. Noctor swore and snapped an order, and the guards leaped on the scribe before she took more than two steps toward Challen. She went down, snarling. Lady Mayar beckoned and the three women left the room. Noctor joined them only moments later.

"She stopped as soon as you left," he reported.

"If it's any consolation, we've decided the black eyes mean magic is at work," Challen said. "She's not a traitor, just a victim."

SONG WEAVER

“She won’t be a victim much longer, I swear,” Veerian said.

Noctor and Veerian took turns explaining what they had done. The scribe hadn’t seen the lack of shadows when Veerian played, and he had been looking right at Zara.

“It is another of your gifts, then,” Lady Mayar said.

“It’s a sign, do you think?” Challen added.

“It needs another test,” Noctor said. “Perhaps if you played for the prince?”

He accompanied Veerian down to Rushtan’s chamber. Vandan was there, reporting on the latest minuscule progress. The healer priest grew grave when they explained what had happened with the song and Zara.

“It seemed to give the scribe discomfort,” he pointed out. “Who knows what it can do to Prince Rushtan, who has been under the magic’s influence for moons now?”

“I’m willing to risk it,” Rushtan said quickly. “If Veerian plays long enough, it might even free me.”

“I’m sure it needs the words to work properly,” Veerian said. Still, when Rushtan gave her a beseeching look, she sat, perched the harp on her lap and began to play.

She stopped after only the fifth chord transition, before any reaction showed on Rushtan’s face. His shadow had vanished on the second chord, and a black mist hovered all around him with thick, opaque black tendrils knotted around his heart and head, and circling his wrists like manacles.

Rushtan swore when Veerian described what she had seen. He paced away from her, swore again, and slammed his fist into the wall, so the decorative hangings jumped and fell.

“Don’t look at me,” he said, as he turned to face them again. He went down on one knee in front of Veerian and rested his fingers lightly on the frame of her harp. “Play, but don’t look at me. Don’t stop until Vandan thinks I’m in danger. Let’s see how deep a bite this

SONG WEAVER

poison has on me.”

Veerian knew it had to be done, but she hated to cause Rushtan pain. Hadn't he endured enough already? Still, she nodded that she understood, blinked away the hot damp that threatened to turn into tears, and raised her hands to the strings. Rushtan stood, kissed her forehead, and went to stand behind her.

She closed her eyes, offered up a silent prayer for strength, for Rushtan and herself, and that the simple playing of the tune would release him. With little pain.

No sound came from any of the three men during the first two rounds of the tune. Veerian kept her head bowed over the harp, so she couldn't see Noctor or Vandan. The first sign of alarm from them might stop her hands, and Rushtan had told her not to stop.

On the beginning of the third playing of the tune, Rushtan sighed. Veerian jumped, almost losing her placement on the strings. She nervously laughed at herself and kept playing. The sound of her voice vibrated strangely through the strings, affecting the tune. She glanced up. Neither Vandan nor Noctor showed any reaction. Was it all in her imagination, or a new depth of sensing, like Challen could see people lacked shadows?

Experimenting, Veerian hummed, harmonizing with the chords. She felt the vibrations moving through her chest, and at times she heard a second voice humming along with her. A woman's voice, when she was the only woman there.

“Something's happening,” Rushtan said.

His voice sounded strained, as if he had just run up all the steps of the Healers Temple, but didn't startle her. Veerian felt as if the music enclosed her, softening all impressions from the outside world. It protected her, she imagined. As she fed the tune, putting her soul into it as she did when healing, so the tune fed her.

Veerian didn't have the words that went with the tune, but what if

SONG WEAVER

she didn't really need specific words? What if the tune was the key? What if, like when she made people sing with her, the words were merely to focus the power from the Mother?

She hummed louder. Rushtan groaned. Noctor stepped forward, reaching out. Vandan stopped him. Veerian watched the two men and saw the frown the healer priest wore. He didn't look concerned so much as all his concentration focused on Rushtan. Veerian nodded, knowing her theory had been proven this far.

What song would work best? She added a counter-harmony that went with a little song about driving dark spirits out of a child who had been cursed by her parents' enemies.

"Stop—me," Rushtan groaned, as Veerian slid into the refrain asking protection from the Mother.

Veerian sang louder, while Noctor and Vandan stepped behind her. She heard the sounds of struggle, Rushtan's groans, then the thud of something hard slamming against the wall. Rushtan cursed, his voice twisted and harsh. On the second verse, he shouted, a howl that made chills race across Veerian's flesh. Then it abruptly shifted to a harsh, gargling sound.

"Stop!" Vandan shouted.

She pressed her hands flat against the strings, silencing the harp. Exhaustion swept down on her the moment the protective shield of the music vanished. Veerian closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around her harp, afraid she would drop it.

"Is he— No, he's all right," Noctor said.

Veerian turned around. Rushtan lay on his face on the floor, covered in sweat, his shirt torn by the struggle with Vandan and Noctor. Both men looked drained by the battle to restrain him.

"It didn't help, did it?" she asked. Her voice sounded pitiful and weak, in contrast to the power that had flowed through her while the music played.

SONG WEAVER

Perhaps the music played her?

“Helped,” Rushtan said. He started to lift his head. A ragged groan escaped him.

Veerian put down her harp with unsteady hands. Together, the three got Rushtan upright. He wouldn’t let them put him to bed. He slumped against the table when they got him into a chair.

“It tried to make me attack, but I didn’t fall into the darkness. I knew what was going on, I just couldn’t take full control of my body.” He managed a lopsided, weak grin. “Those words you used weren’t the right words, were they?”

Veerian shook her head and quickly explained what she had done, her thoughts behind the experiment.

“Well, that was a test worth taking,” Vandan said. “Worth the pain, Highness?”

“More than worth it.” Rushtan’s color looked better, which gave Veerian hope. “Go tell Lady Mayar. And get those scribes to finish translating.” He raked steadier hands through his sweaty hair. “I have moons of laziness to make up for, and only a few moons until I have to be out in the field with my Host. That’s a lot of training to do.”

“Highness...” Vandan glanced at Veerian. “Highness, have you forgotten all of Lady Challen’s message? She gave us the path to follow to find your cure, and she also gave you a mission.”

“Oh.” Veerian nodded, remembering. “We are to find her brother. But where do we start?”

“I have spoken with Lady Challen and Lord Shazzur,” Noctor said. “She always believed her brother was kidnapped, until now. Yet I find it interesting that the Seer has been most calm when the subject of young Asha was raised. He has always maintained his son is safe, waiting until the proper time to be brought home. Perhaps he has some clue to start you on your quest.”

“Our quest,” Rushtan said, nodding. He tipped his head to one side

SONG WEAVER

and studied Veerian. “You don’t mind setting off on a hunt without a map, in the middle of the winter?”

She heard the unspoken question: *with me?* Veerian shook her head, smiling. She ached, suddenly, with the longing to see him free and active, allowed to be the man he used to be.

* * *

Lady Mayar was most impressed with the results of their experiment. With three healer priests to help, she, Veerian and Challen went to visit the young Bride, Tamisra, to try the procedure on her. Veerian watched the girl this time as she played, then hummed, then sang. The blackness writhed around Tamisra, threatening to choke her, yanking on her limbs to make her move. It wrung shrieks from her throat and sent her into convulsions while the three healers held her down and kept her from attacking Veerian.

The girl wept brokenly when Veerian stopped playing and the battle ceased. She told them the same thing Rushtan had. The music left her conscious, able to see what the magic tried to do with her. The experience terrified her even more than waking from that battle in the Sanctum and learning she had attacked her friends.

When they left Tamisra’s chamber, Challen embraced Veerian, with tears in her eyes. The singer didn’t have to ask why. She understood all the turmoil in the other woman’s eyes, her thankfulness, hopes and awed respect all mixed together.

Strange, that a Bride, daughter of nobility, concubine to the Crown Prince, a healer and visionary, should be awed by the discarded daughter of vagabonds, a ragged remnant of the dishonored Nai’hash’vi. But then, Veerian reflected, would any of them be worth anything if they didn’t have the Mother’s power flowing through them, and surrender their lives to her use?

* * *

SONG WEAVER

The effort to translate the words of the scrolls and to find all the musical notations scribbled throughout them increased. Veerian literally had no place to do her work, because so many people were involved in the effort now. It irritated her to be slowly forced out of the team working on the scrolls. Yet she had to admit, she was useless when it came to translation. Even knowing she had provided the key did not ease her frustration.

She spent her days divided between Rushtan, teaching the tune to anyone in the Healers Temple who could play, and seeking an opportunity to speak with Lord Shazzur.

When that day came, Challen assigned two of her personal guards and Lady Mayar sent Jushta to escort Veerian to her meeting. This close to finding the cure, the enemy would be more desperate than ever to kill Veerian and stop her from singing.

Her journey to the palace complex, to Lord Shazzur's home on the edge of the plaza of the nobles, passed without incident. Veerian laughed at herself for feeling miffed, as if the enemy had decided she wasn't worth the effort today.

Soon, she promised herself. *Soon, we shall journey*. She refused to think too far ahead, though. Lady Mayar and Vandan spoke of escorts and plenty of supplies and maps. Challen and Rushtan spoke of a fast, solitary journey, conducted in secret. The thought of being completely alone with Rushtan, no guards, no one listening on the other side of the door, no roof over her head at night, both frightened and exhilarated her.

"Revered Song Weaver Veerian, welcome." Lord Shazzur stood up when Veerian walked into his workroom. He wore a simple loose robe, none of the jewelry and paint she had seen on other nobles when she visited the Court. He reminded her of her childhood dream of a loving grandfather. How could this be one of the most powerful and wise men in the kingdom?

SONG WEAVER

When his housekeeper had taken away Veerian's cloak, Shazzur offered her a chair at a table set with wine and cakes amid piles of scrolls and maps. He laughed warmly when Veerian expressed interest in the maps, especially.

"I believe your quest must focus on finding the Hidden City, and all else will fall into place," Shazzur said. "Very few remain who have actually been inside the Hidden City. I believe I am the only one alive who ever dared to explore all the canyons and caverns. The mind scribes, Hezek and Ashael—do you know them, Lady Veerian?"

"They helped train me when I first came to the temple."

"Ah, good. They helped me make these maps. Speak with them before you leave. They were good friends to my dear Naya. They were there when she received her duty from the Three. I think their perception of the Hidden City will be useful to you."

"But if the Hidden City was destroyed—"

"Not destroyed." His eyes sparkled like a mischievous boy with a secret. "Rearranged. I believe that those who explored the so-called ruins were misled, trapped in one of many illusions used to protect the Hidden City. Those same protective illusions have become traps for those *inside*, rather than shields against the outside world."

"So our journey will be to penetrate the illusions and break the Three and their priests free." Veerian thought it would be much harder than questing without clues, to find people she had never seen.

"Simplified, yes. But you will not be responsible for that quest. You are to find my son, Asha, and I believe you will find him near the Hidden City. Here, take this scroll." He picked it up by its leather case and handed it to her. "Since Naya was murdered, I have dreamed of her often. Now, Challen tells me they were not dreams, but visits granted by the Mother, to comfort us both. What I thought were dreams are memories of actual conversations. I have written down everything I remember, because there are clues to help guide you."

SONG WEAVER

“Thank you, sir.” She reverently cradled the scroll on her lap. “Tell me, does your son look like you?”

“I have no idea what Asha looks like. He wasn’t even two years old when Naya sent him away to safety.”

“Sent him? But Lady Challen maintains her brother was kidnapped.”

“Yes, and so everyone believed, in the chaos that followed my wife’s death. He had Naya’s white-gold hair and her eyes, blue like in a flame. But children’s hair and eyes change as they grow. He could look like me or his sister or even his grandfather, High Priest Chizhedek. It would be easier, I think, to seek the people who raised him.”

“Raised him.” Veerian knew she sounded like a half-wit, echoing Shazzur constantly, but she felt as if she lagged behind in a dance she had never seen before, much less practiced.

“I’m sorry.” Again, mischief sparkled in his eyes. “Challen is just as frustrated with me lately. Much of it isn’t my fault, really. A lonely man lost in grief doesn’t trust his dreams, no matter how comforting.”

“You know who raised your son?”

“I *suspect*. There is a difference. Let me backtrack in the story for a moment. When Naya served as Bride, she was gifted with many valuable talents. Among them, a gift for weaving visions into cloth.”

“She went to the Hidden City to study.”

“Exactly. And ran afoul of the priesthood, who refused to believe she had been chosen by the Three to dismantle the heretical worship that imprisoned them. When the Sacred Spindle above the altar fell and shattered, no one but Naya could touch or carry the pieces. At the same time, the Three gave her a small spindle. Only Naya was able to touch or carry it. Anyone who tried got their hands cut or burned, and couldn’t pick it up.

“Naya, Hezek, Ashael and I made two staunch friends during that strange time in the Hidden City. A priestly couple named Enku and

SONG WEAVER

Shanda. When the priesthood drove us from the Hidden City, these two came with us. Naya kept the spindle with her vision weavings in the Mother's temple. The spindle went missing the day she died. Naya took Asha with her to the temple that day, instead of leaving him with his nurse. And just hours before she was murdered, she told me that when the day came for her to die, as Matrika warned us she would, I was to take Challen and flee the city. No mention of our son, do you see? She knew, and she was prepared.

"When the six of us fled the Hidden City, I spoke a prophecy that the 'son of us all' would be part of the fulfillment of the great Prophecy. We vowed to stand with each other, to care for each other's children if we died in serving the Three. Enku and Shanda vanished the same day Naya died. If they had been murdered by the priesthood, I would have heard before I fled into exile."

"Enku and Shanda took the baby to safety, and they were able to carry the spindle because the burden had passed to them," Veerian guessed.

"Exactly." He clapped his hands three times. Veerian flushed at his praise. She felt exactly as she had when Lady Mayar taught her to read and write, and she succeeded in her lessons.

He handed her two small rolls of parchment, which had been sitting at his left hand. Veerian unrolled them to find drawings of a massive, smiling black man and a ginger-haired woman with dainty features.

"Enku and Shanda?" she guessed.

"As they looked sixteen years ago, by Hezek's and Ashael's memories. How they have aged, if they are dead or alive, if Asha is still with them—who but the Mother knows?"

Shazzur then told her in more detail of his and Naya's visit to the Hidden City. He opened up the maps and traced with his finger all the places he had explored, then compared his maps with those drawn by King Nebazz's soldiers, when they discovered last summer that the city

SONG WEAVER

and its inhabitants had vanished.

“Pardon me, sir, but these canyons look nothing alike—similar in some aspects, but not enough.” Veerian turned the maps in several different angles to make them match, to demonstrate.

“Exactly. I believe the Three and the Hidden City are still there. A veil of magic always surrounded the city, to keep out enemies. Anyone who entered had to pass tests. I believe that the gates into the city were placed far away from the city, and those who entered the mountains looking for the city never actually approached it.” He laughed when she gave him a confused look. “Like this.” He built a square with small scrolls, then laid another small scroll on the other side of the table. “This.” He tapped the single scroll. “This is the gate. People approach. Through magic, they travel through the gate to the city itself.” He walked his fingers up to the scroll gate, then lifted his hand and landed in the square of scrolls representing the city. “The gate no longer works, so those who go through the familiar landmark find a different landscape on the other side.”

“The magic guarding the city has become corrupt?” she guessed.

“Because of Naya’s murder, there has been almost no contact with the Hidden City and the priesthood. This could have happened years ago, for all we know.” He nodded, and his eyes unfocused for a moment. “It could have happened the day she died, but no one would have known. Contact was only attempted last summer when the drought came and the Sacred Marriage failed. All this time, all these years, the magic has been a prison for the priesthood and the Three, instead of a protection. Those seeking entrance can no longer be sensed and tested, and those inside cannot call out for help. Perhaps they don’t even realize they are trapped.”

“It’s like a gate, made to swing only one way, to control cattle,” Veerian offered. “But it is broken, so it won’t open at all, and it looks like part of the fence or wall.”

SONG WEAVER

“Perceptive.” He pressed his hands together and bowed his head, saluting her, making Veerian blush. “You are a gift from the Mother. May she bless you richly for the sacrifices you have made and will make. Be warned—I see a hard road ahead of you.”

“I’m sure Prince Rushtan can handle almost any emergency, and the weather is clearing, so—”

“No, not the physical road. I speak of when you find my son. He will be eighteen years old. A young man with dreams, perhaps sensing he is born to greatness, resentful of the circumstances Enku and Shanda adopted for his protection. Perhaps he has a sweetheart he won’t want to leave. Most definitely he has plans for his future. You will enter his life with news that will turn all he knows into chaos. You will bring him back to us, to a father and a sister he doesn’t remember. The parents who raised him have seemingly lied to him. How do you think he will feel and believe and act?”

“He will fight us.” A new thought struck her. “Does he have any powers which he could use against us?”

“I have not seen such in my dreams, but that means nothing. I suggest you use your gift of song to soothe and heal his heart on the journey.”

“If he makes the journey with us at all.”

“Willingly or not, my son must be brought back to Bainevah, to stand before the altar and receive the blessing from his grandfather, and to learn his heritage and destiny. This I do know and have seen.”

Veerian shivered, hearing a faint, hollow echo of the divine in the Seer’s voice.

“Very well.” She rolled up the drawings and added them to the pile of scrolls and maps Shazzur had given her. “We will go to the Hidden City and find a way into a place that no one has seen, a door that doesn’t exist in a wall that no one knows is there. After all we’ve been through this winter, that doesn’t sound so hard.”

SONG WEAVER

Shazzur laughed, a rolling, rich sound that warmed her on the chilly walk back to the Healers Temple.

* * *

Haneen met Veerian at the doors of the temple. Her face glowed with excitement despite her bloodshot eyes and the dark smears of weariness under them.

“They found the translation?” Her heart seemed to jolt dead in her chest, so she couldn’t breathe for a few seconds.

“Better. Just wait until you hear—you’ll shriek. And then you’ll laugh.” Haneen spun away, to lead her inside. Then she stopped short. “At least, I hope you’ll laugh.”

“I need to laugh.” She tucked her cloak under one arm, handed the basket of scrolls to Jushta, then caught hold of the girl’s hand. “Let’s go!”

Challen, Cho’Mat and Lady Mayar stood on one side of the long table, all wearing identical expressions of mixed amusement and disgust. Noctor and Hajbaz stood on the other side, holding open scrolls, which they compared to the ones on the table.

Lady Mayar gestured for Veerian to take her spot at the table, giving her a perfect view of the contents of the scrolls, which she thought she knew by heart by this time.

“What language? What dialect?” Veerian demanded, looking down at the familiar symbols that still meant nothing to her.

“Nai’hash’vi.” Hajbaz snorted with some amusement. Haneen giggled. He scowled at his granddaughter, the silent rebuke totally ruined by the laughter sparkling in his eyes.

“The Nai’hash’vi don’t have a written language. I ought to know.” Veerian swallowed hard, the words sticking in her throat. “I’m one.”

“Yes, and thank the Mother you are,” Challen said. “Before they fell into heresy and scattered to wander and dwindle, they were an entire nation of Song Weavers. Committing the sacred songs to

SONG WEAVER

symbols was anathema to them. But someone *did* create a written form of their words and music.”

“Unfortunately,” Noctor said, “the perverted genius who created the written language didn’t teach it to anyone.”

“Grandfather has been decoding it for years,” Haneen blurted.

“It’s a hobby of mine,” Hajbaz admitted. “To relax. When Haneen mentioned these scrolls looked like my pet project...well, I admit, I dismissed the notion. Until she became persistent.”

“What does it say?” Veerian asked. Her voice came out as a harsh whisper from a dry mouth. “Please, read it to me.”

She mouthed the words as Hajbaz translated. Veerian openly admitted she remembered little more than songs other Nai’hash’vi had sung when she was a toddler, before her wandering parents went in pursuit of wealth. Music was all that had kept her alive during those hard years. It was in her blood and bones.

To her disappointment, the words didn’t sound familiar, even as she translated them silently in her mind, back to Nai’hash’vi.

“Maybe,” Challen said slowly, “it doesn’t have to be this particular song, but something along the same lines, sung in Nai’hash’vi. Think about the effect you had on Rushtan when you simply played the tune from the scroll, and then how it increased when you added a healing song.”

“Why not just make up a new song to go with the tune?” Haneen suggested.

Several of those around the table opened their mouths to tell her it couldn’t be done that way. Veerian saw it in their eyes. Then everyone stopped as if the same thought caught them. They looked at each other, then one by one began to nod.

“It is in your blood,” Lady Mayar said. “I’ve seen you make up songs on the spot, to fit a need. Why not here?”

“Very small needs,” Veerian protested. “A frightened child who

SONG WEAVER

couldn't find her mother, a boy with a cut foot who wouldn't let the healer unwind the wrapping, a woman with a headache that came from certain foods. Nothing like this."

"Those were only practice times," Vandan said. "You are Nai'hash'vi, the greatest Song Weaver ever born—"

"I'm probably the only Nai'hash'vi left alive," she said, a sour taste in her mouth. She prayed her parents were dead, because she couldn't predict her actions if she encountered them again. Veerian suspected she would do and say things Lady Mayar would not approve.

"This could be the purpose you were born for, the reason you survived against all odds."

"This could be the reason why so many foul things happened to you," Challen offered. "The enemy senses you are important to the solving of many mysteries and problems. Healing and freeing Prince Rushtan and finding my brother could be just small parts of a large puzzle box. If you are stopped...perhaps none of it is resolved. You were born for this, I think."

"You hope." Veerian couldn't maintain her sour feeling. She looked at Challen and remembered all the things Shazzur had told her about his wife, the amazing things she had done, how she had come back from death. She nodded, sighed, feeling suddenly weary. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

CHAPTER 9

Second Ascent Moon

Veerian struggled over the song. She had never consciously composed a song before. Her little tunes had always been on-the-spot, blooming inside her to meet the moment's need. The fact that they fit the melody that hummed at the back of her head signified divine guidance more than any real talent.

Difficulty grew with the certainty that she needed to use words from the scroll and to speak in Nai'hash'vi. To use the common or even Court dialects of Bainevah would not work. Most definitely, she had to use the harp because of the harp notations in the scroll and the progression of chords Noctor had deciphered for her. If only she had the tune, the melody line, she thought she could tie it all together.

"Part of the problem," she told Rushtan at the end of her fourth extremely frustrating day, "is that I haven't spoken Nai'hash'vi since I

SONG WEAVER

was perhaps five years old.”

“And you have no way of knowing if your modern pronunciation matches what they used centuries ago when that scroll was written,” Rushtan said. “It could affect the magic. Maybe not much, but enough to make a difference.” He laughed when she stared and her mouth dropped open. “What? You didn’t think I knew anything about history?”

“No, not that. I just—I didn’t consider languages and archives your specialty.” Her face burned. Actually, she didn’t think Rushtan cared at all for reading or poetry, and his intense scholarship these past few moons had come purely from boredom. But she wasn’t about to insult him and admit it.

“I usually only studied enough to please the royal tutors. Elzan was the scribe among us. I think I picked up more from listening to him. And you know what I think? If just playing that tune and singing another song about casting out dark spirits could affect me, then maybe you don’t have to have everything totally accurate, down to the breathing patterns for that song.”

“So I should just relax and hope Mother Matrika blesses the effort?”

“She’s blessed us so far, hasn’t she?” He shrugged, as if their conversation had nothing at all to do with saving him from a life of imprisonment.

Veerian wanted to cry and laugh and slap him. She wanted to punch him and wrap herself around him and shriek at him.

She wanted to kiss him, strange as that seemed. The thought of Rushtan suffering because she failed hurt her, dug a little deeper into her soul every day. Yet here Rushtan was, urging her to enjoy the challenge, to take chances.

I could love such a man. I could spend the rest of my life with such a man.

Immediately, she pushed that thought aside. Veerian knew better

SONG WEAVER

than to hope for more from a nobleman than to be invited to share his bed. If she had refused to sell her body when she was starving, she certainly wouldn't accept the life of a concubine or temporary lover now, when she had safety, honor and a vocation of service to Matrika.

Not even to have a small claim on Rushtan.

The ballads lied, she knew. Princes never raised beggar maids from the gutter and made them princesses and queens. The Nai'hash'vi had once been revered Song Weavers, performing a divine service. They had fallen because of their pride and greed, reduced from a rich nation filled with song to a nomadic people who traded their talents for food and clothing, scattered vagabonds who discarded love and loyalty along the trail, with their elderly, their sick and helpless children.

Please, Matrika, she prayed deep in her spirit. Take this longing from me, before it sours the rest of my life.

Veerian knew someday she would marry someone compatible and comfortable, who shared her interests. Perhaps another healer. She had a duty to preserve her talents through her offspring. She would love her children, the first people who would ever truly belong to her. But she would never marry for love, because there was no man she could love.

Except Rushtan. And he was beyond her reach.

"What's wrong?" He still smiled. "You look like I just told you we had to walk barefoot from here to the Hidden City."

"And that's another thing to make the entire endeavor more difficult, if not impossible!" Veerian fought the impulse to sweep her arm across the table and clear off the wax tablets, her harp and the remains of their midday meal. "It's not enough that we have to find the right combination of music and words to free you, we need to be on the road as soon as the passes into the mountains are clear, seeking Asha and Enku and Shanda and a clue to what happened to the Three."

"Wars are won one battle at a time. Battles are won one skirmish at a time. Skirmishes are won one sword stroke, one arrow, one step at a

SONG WEAVER

time.” Rushtan caught hold of her hands. Warmth shot up her arms, jolting and soothing her at the same time. Veerian stared into his gray eyes, trapped and suspecting she never wanted to break free.

Would it be so bad to offer herself to him, to spend a few nights of pleasure in his arms, to see him smile at her and hear him call her name with hunger in his voice? She couldn’t keep him, couldn’t be part of his life, but couldn’t they enjoy something together?

“Veerian?” Rushtan released one hand and brushed strands of hair out of her face. “Are you all right?”

“I’m...I’m tired. That’s all.” She tugged her other hand free and wondered if that was the true problem.

Why did she have these thoughts? Why did she want things she knew would only hurt her? After all the misery she had seen in the world, the way men dominated women once they shared a bed, why did she want to step into such a bondage with her eyes wide open? Even if Rushtan gave her nothing but pleasure, pain would be all that remained when he was free to live his life again and he walked away from her.

“Go outside, get some fresh air.” He jerked his chin in the direction of the door. “No reason for you to be locked up with me. You’re not a prisoner.”

“I don’t abandon my friends.”

“Are we friends?”

She stood up so abruptly she kicked the table, nearly clearing it.

“Vee—no, don’t. That didn’t come out right.” Rushtan leaped to follow her as she stumbled for the door. He caught her by one hand and tugged hard enough to knock her off balance, so she fell against him. “You’ve been kinder to me than anyone I’ve ever known. It shocked me, I suppose. That you don’t see me as just a duty. A puzzle box to fix.” He wrapped his arms tight around her, holding her up when she would have pushed free. “I’m a person, not just a problem to you. Not someone you pity. I can’t stand pity.”

SONG WEAVER

“If all I felt was pity, I wouldn’t want to blacken your eyes right this moment,” she muttered.

Rushtan laughed. The sound vibrated through her, tickling and warming her, so she had to let her mouth relax into a smile. Slowly, she brought her arms up and wrapped them around him. He cupped his hand around the back of her head, until it rested on his shoulder. Veerian closed her eyes and relaxed, just for a moment, into the warmth of his arms tight around her.

“You will heal me and free me,” he whispered. His lips moved against her temple. “I know you will. And when you do, and I can go back to being a soldier and Elzan’s right-hand commander...I don’t want you walking out of my life.”

“That’s only wise.” She forced a light tone, when she thought her heart would rise up in her throat and smother her.

“How’s that?”

“I am a healer, and you are a soldier. You will need my help quite often, after sitting in the dark for too many moons. You’ve grown soft, Highness.” She shoved free of his arms, a smile on her face and laughter in her voice, though she paid in pain for the effort.

Rushtan laughed again, taking her words as the joke she intended. Veerian held onto that laughter when she returned to her room and curled up in her bed and tried to sleep.

Her dreams, when they finally came, were dark and twisted and impossible to decipher. She only knew when she woke in the morning that she hadn’t rested, and tears burned in her eyes and thickened her throat.

* * *

Veerian consulted with Lady Mayar, Cho’Mat, Inieri, Challen and Prince Elzan. They agreed Rushtan’s suggestion had some merit. It was the combination of the tune, the intent of the words, and the power in her divine gift that would produce the magic to free Rushtan. *If*

SONG WEAVER

anything would.

She didn't like that qualifier, but she had to live with it. Realism was the only thing that would save them from deadly mistakes.

The time had come. No more consulting and studying and second-guessing. Or third or fourth-guessing, either.

Eight Song Weavers stood around the edges of the blessing circle. High Priest Chizhedek drew in the enclosed courtyard of the Mother's temple. They all knew the song Veerian had woven together from disparate pieces of powerful, proven elements. If anything kept her from finishing the song, they would take it up, literally surrounding Rushtan and the enemy magic with holy, powerful sound. Behind them stood a solid wall of soldiers, to restrain Rushtan if he became violent. Vandan and Noctor stood behind Veerian. Rushtan sat on a pallet of blankets on the pavement. If he went into a fit during the struggle of magic, Veerian didn't want him battering himself bloody and bruised.

Elzan, Challen and Lady Mayar waited outside the courtyard. Veerian saw the sword the elder prince carried and remembered one of Rushtan's darkest days of despair, when he had declared he didn't want to continue living if he couldn't be freed of the magic's control. Had he sent a message to his half-brother, begging this one last favor? Veerian thought she could hate Rushtan for sending the request. What kind of a man was Elzan, to agree to kill his own brother and closest friend, just because this first attempt had failed?

She would lecture both men when this was over, Veerian decided. Lecture them until their ears burned. She didn't care that they were princes and she had been a ragged, filthy street singer only four years ago. There were some rules and truths that stood outside of rank and courtly manners.

"Very well." She sat on the padded bench, took a deep breath to calm her jumping nerves, and picked up her harp. She plucked the dominant notes of the first four chords, which she had chosen as the

SONG WEAVER

melody line, then played once through the tune from the scroll.

The darkness settled onto Rushtan's features like a layer of soot. The shadow that sprawled away from Rushtan in the early morning light turned from black to gray and then vanished. The magic surrounded them both, evidenced by the prickling of power in her fingertips. The enemy had awakened to do battle.

Shadow child, she sang in a half-whisper.

Begone

You are not wanted here.

Child of darkness,

Child of madness,

Child of death,

Begone.

You have no power here.

This is a good man

Given to the Mother,

Child of light and warmth and life.

This is a strong man,

A brave man,

A wise man,

Trained in warfare,

Trained to battle,

Born to fight your masters,

Born to fight evil.

He is life, and you are death.

Begone!

In the name of Matrika

In the name of life,

In the name of the Unseen

SONG WEAVER

*In the name of goodness,
Child of darkness,
Child of madness
Child of cold and death,
Begone.*

Rushtan dug his fingers into the matting and his muscles strained visibly. Veerian repeated the first refrain. She kept her eyes open, though she didn't want to see his pain, the sweat streaming from his flesh, the shudders that racked him.

The darkness grew thicker, until it obscured his features and he was a man-shaped shadow arching his back. Rushtan let out a harsh shriek like a hawk diving to the kill and collapsed backward onto the pallet.

"I can see it now," Noctor whispered.

Vandan rested his hands on Veerian's shoulders. His energy trickled into her like cool honeyed water on a scorching day. She blinked back sudden tears, nodded her thanks, and slid into the second repeat of the refrain.

Rushtan thrashed and cursed. Several times, the shadow began to withdraw. Then its arms reached out to choke him and throw him to the ground.

Veerian changed the tune, sliding into a song where a horde of dark spirits were cast out of a house that had been cursed, and the invaders imprisoned. Rushtan gagged and choked. Twisted words escaped his mouth, in a tongue she didn't recognize.

"It's trying to speak through him." Noctor knelt next to Veerian and rested his hand on her knee. "Don't let it speak. If it hasn't spoken through him yet—"

"It could be a last effort to influence us or even move on to a new victim and host." Vandan squeezed her shoulders once. "Another song, to hush the enemy."

SONG WEAVER

Veerian nodded and thought a quick prayer for strength and in thanks for her friends. She didn't quite understand, though their theories made sense. How long had she been singing? Her throat felt like sand and her back hurt from sitting still.

Silence, she sang, raising her voice in command.

You shall not speak

You shall not move

You shall not hold your prey

You shall fade away

You shall sleep forever

You shall rot like wood

You shall melt like snow

You shall not be.

You have no power here.

In the name of the Mother I bind you

In the name of the Unseen I cast you out

In the name of all that is good and bright,

In the name of fire and water and light.

I cast you out!

Rushtan bellowed like a bull and went limp, arms and legs spread. The darkness congealed as Veerian repeated the phrases. It left his fingers, hands and feet and trickled up his arms, baring the skin to the sunshine again. Then it retreated up his torso, finally abandoning his head so the only part of him wrapped in shadow was his chest.

“Keep going,” Rushtan said, his voice so soft she almost couldn't hear over the momentarily unsteady strumming of her harp. “It's weakening. Keep going. We're going to win.” He turned his head so their gazes met. Rushtan looked like he had been trampled by horses,

SONG WEAVER

but he smiled.

Veerian stood, clutched her harp tight and swung back into the song from the scroll. Tears streamed from her eyes faster than she could blink them away, but lightness bubbled up in her chest, combating the weakness. Vandan kept his hands on her shoulders, sharing his energy.

A crashing snap, like a stone pillar cracking, rocked the courtyard. Rushtan's body arched up, suspended by the darkness to hover off the ground for the space of five beats of the music. Then the malevolence shot up into the air like a black lightning bolt. Rushtan fell, hitting the pallet and rolling onto the pavement with a thud and a groan. He lay still.

Vandan took the harp before Veerian realized she had thrust it at him. She staggered the last ten steps and dropped to her knees. Suddenly, she feared to touch Rushtan.

"Challen." Lady Mayar gently shoved Veerian into Challen's grasp while she leaned over Rushtan.

"No, I can't—" Veerian began to protest.

"It's all right." Challen gestured and a stream of green-robed healers came running. "Rushtan has his shadow again. A dead man could have felt the quake when the magic fled."

"Ask me for anything," Elzan said. He appeared on Veerian's other side and helped Challen guide her into a palanquin, to lie down. "For my brother's sake, I'll try to give you anything you ask. The entire kingdom owes you an unpayable debt, for what you've done. We don't have to fear the enemy's magic, because of you and your song."

"Next time—" Veerian groaned as a wave of nausea and weakness swept through her. "No more solo performances. Always have teams of Song Weavers sing the song to do battle. It'll take less time and effort."

"We should have helped and thought of that for you," Challen said. She climbed into the palanquin and knelt over Veerian. A golden glow gathered around her hands. "Close your eyes and relax, and let me put

SONG WEAVER

back some of what you expended.”

“Is he going to be all right?” she whispered. She didn’t close her eyes until Challen nodded, then Veerian let the spinning darkness drag her down.

* * *

When Veerian woke more than a day later, she learned she had been called to stand before the King. Before the full Court. In morning Court, when everyone who thought they were someone came to meet and be seen and make alliances of one kind or another.

“I can’t,” she told Lady Mayar, when her patroness brought her the news with her breakfast, which was actually a late lunch.

“You’ve performed before everyone who will be there. This ceremony is to honor you.” The High Priestess smoothed her robe and clasped her hands in her lap. “This is the best way we know to protect you, child.”

“Protect me?” Veerian sat up, gaping. She had slept so long her brain was heavy and wouldn’t think straight.

“The enemy knows you have defeated his magic. Rushtan is now free, and Tamisra. All our healers know the song—or will, soon. Even the ones who can’t sing,” she added with a tiny smirk. “We must let our enemy know that you are not the only one who can perform the cure. And, we must prepare for another angle of attack, since this one has fallen to our defenses.”

That, Veerian understood all too clearly. Still, she tried to express the dread she felt.

“I won’t be performing. My music puts up a shield. They don’t see Veerian, the street singer, but the Song Weaver. Your Song Weaver,” she added softly.

“And proud I am that Vandan brought you to the temple, and I was able to nurture your gift. Finish eating. I want you to look at your robes for tomorrow, before we check on Rushtan.”

SONG WEAVER

“Check on Rushtan?” She leaped up from the chair and nearly dropped the hunk of steaming, fruit-laden bread she had just picked up. “What’s wrong with him?”

Panic shot through her. Had the enemy’s magic come back already? Or had he been so battered by the struggle of magics that he was ill? She silently cursed, furious that weakness let them take her away before she could be personally sure that Rushtan was all right.

“He was as exhausted by the battle as you.” Lady Mayar’s mild look held just a touch of amusement. Enough to irritate Veerian and wake her completely. “He is back in his quarters, and I am afraid...his men celebrated his return a little too joyously last night.”

That, Veerian also understood. It disappointed her, though she knew she should have expected it. Rushtan had been denied the company of his friends and companions for too long—half a year. His life had been sedentary and restricted and likely made it hard for him to shake off the effects when he did indulge.

Veerian decided to enjoy her bath and took her time trying on the formal robes Lady Mayar, Challen and Princess Cayeen had obtained for her. She was stunned to learn these weren’t borrowed robes, but gifts.

Elzan came to escort his mother and Veerian on horseback to the barracks of the Host of the Ram situated inside the double layers of city walls. Veerian listened to mother and son talk and had something new to think about. When King Nebazz named Elzan Crown Prince, he had also announced his intention to make his First Concubine his Queen at equinox. Elzan had arrangements to discuss with his mother, even though the ceremony was more than a moon away. Veerian sensed resentment in the Crown Prince over the topic, and it amused his mother. She knew better than to ask and intrude on what was definitely a personal, family matter.

The day had been heavy gray with rain since before dawn, but the

SONG WEAVER

clouds had begun to shred when Elzan arrived at the Healers Temple. Veerian watched the colors of sunset streak the sky and breathed deeply of the chill air. Spring approached and refused to be denied. She looked across the river that ran through the city at this point, and saw it streaked red and gold, as if with blood. The water ran high, thanks to all the rain, and was muddy from all the winter dirt and debris from runoff. Veerian thought of the snow melting in the mountains and wondered how passable they would be in another moon, and how soon she and Rushtan would reach the mountains. She hoped Shazzur was right, and the Hidden City hadn't been destroyed. Asha had to be somewhere near the Hidden City, a living key to a locked door.

Soldiers of the Host of the Ram Gate spilled out through the doors of the barracks. They marched out in dress uniform, to parade formation in the courtyard. Veerian watched, impressed, and looked for signs of those who had celebrated too hard the night before. She tugged her cloak closer around herself, resisting a wind off the river that tried to insinuate inside her clothes and enfold her in chills.

Trumpets blared. A double door swung open, revealing an inner courtyard. Officers in gleaming bronze armor—helmets, breastplates, greaves—rode out on matching gray horses. They wore white tunics and black trousers under their armor, and blue cloaks that flapped in the freshening wind. The horses pranced, in perfect step. Veerian clapped, delighted with the resplendent show. She saw grins brighten more than a few faces of the foot soldiers standing in rows before her.

The officers stopped their horses in perfect unity, ten paces before Lady Mayor, Elzan and Veerian. One dismounted and removed his helmet as he crossed the open space to meet them.

Veerian gasped softly, startled to recognize Rushtan. It gave her an ache deep inside to realize she hadn't recognized him in all his splendor. She knew then, she still carried the image of the young soldier in his bloody, torn clothes and leather armor, bleeding his life

SONG WEAVER

away. This resplendent, royal officer was a stranger.

Elzan dismounted and reached up to help Lady Mayar down from her horse. That left Rushtan to help Veerian. Her hand trembled and felt incredibly small in his grasp. She couldn't make herself look at him, as he led them across the courtyard. Her friend had vanished, swallowed up in the prince and officer.

The soldiers let out a resounding cheer, making Veerian flinch and gasp again. Rushtan laughed, and he became once more the friend she had known all these moons.

The remains of the afternoon passed into evening during a grand tour of the barracks, where everything was gleaming clean and wet from recent scrubbing. The common soldiers presented Veerian with a matching set of throwing knives, a dress uniform cloak, and a neck chain of silver with an ebony teardrop stone that was the emblem of the Host of the Ram. The officers presented her with a newly foaled colt, born of the Host's special breeding stock. Then, they hosted Veerian, Lady Mayar and Elzan at dinner.

Veerian found the officers weren't quite so imposing once they removed their gleaming bronze armor, cloaks and swords. Some were amazingly young. Most were the sons of soldiers who had entered the service early and worked their way up through the ranks. More than half were sons of nobles, and they proudly told her they received no special treatment or consideration because of their rank. Rushtan was quiet, so Veerian wondered if he still suffered from last night's celebration. Or perhaps he was as overwhelmed by all this as she, after moons of near-isolation.

Or perhaps Lady Mayar had told a harmless lie to trick Veerian into coming here, knowing she would balk if she had known the honor awaiting her.

All in all, Veerian found the evening more enjoyable than she would have thought. The soldiers greeted her as a fellow-warrior. They

SONG WEAVER

didn't scorn the making of music as some nobles and merchants did, believing that playing an instrument, fitting words to tunes was no work at all.

At the end of the evening, an escort of seven officers guided them back across the city to the Healers Temple, with Rushtan at their head. He took special care to introduce each one to Veerian and explain their specialties. Farrier, spy, healer, archer, swordsman. Each had some small magical gift, too, such as the ability to find water in the desert, call up flame at his fingertips or detect poison.

"They'll work closely with you, so you be sure to tell me if they overstep their bounds," Rushtan added.

"Work with me?" Veerian looked back and forth between him and officers.

"They're coming with us, on our hunt for Asha." That crooked grin she loved lit his face, but didn't take away the new, edgy darkness in his eyes. "Do you think I'd risk you traveling across the desert and through the mountains, at this time of the year, with only me for protection? We're going to be a mercenary band."

"It's going to take more than trousers and a cap to persuade people Veerian isn't a beautiful young woman," Lady Mayar said. "I suggest you find some other disguise for her."

"Challen could teach you a blurring technique," Elzan offered. "It worked on me, when we first met. People will look at you and know you're a woman, but not actually see enough to remember or recognize you." He rolled his eyes. "Frustrating, until I remembered how to break it."

"How many of our enemies have magic enough to break a blurring?" Veerian challenged.

"Good point," Rushtan said. "Whatever is most comfortable for you, and easiest to maintain."

She nodded. The arrangement made sense. She had thought they

SONG WEAVER

could travel more swiftly if it was just the two of them, but there were advantages to traveling as a mercenary band. People would leave them alone. More important, she wouldn't be totally alone with Rushtan. Company would occupy her thoughts and she wouldn't brood and make herself miserable. Yes, this would be a good situation.

When they reached the Healers Temple, Challen hurried across the wet pavement of the fountain plaza to meet them, with faithful O'klan a vast, dark, protective shadow behind her. Elzan spurred his horse to run ahead and leaped down to meet her almost before his horse stopped running. Lady Mayar and Veerian exchanged glances when her words made Elzan's expression turn to a thundercloud.

"Is something wrong?" Lady Mayar asked when they caught up with him and Challen. "We weren't gone long enough for a crisis to hit the temple."

"Oh, yes you were, Mother." Elzan looked like he wanted to spit. The angry sparks in his eyes turned to something Veerian couldn't read when he met her gaze. "There's no kind way to say this—"

"Some desert trash claiming to be your parents are here," Challen spat. "They've been trying to turn the temple upside down, demanding to be taken to your home, to be allowed into your rooms. Only a fool would leave them alone with anything valuable. And we have no fools at this temple, thank the Mother." She sighed, and her tense anger drained away in weariness. "I'm sorry, Veerian, if they are your parents. Sorry for you."

Veerian tried to smile. She felt as if all the storms of the past winter had filled her with ice. "Where are they now?"

"Vandan flattered them until they purred, then put them in the contemplation room. We have four guards outside the door, to keep them there."

"Well, my dear," Lady Mayar sighed, "we always feared this day would come. And at the worst possible time." She held out a hand.

SONG WEAVER

Elzan and Rushtan both jumped to help her dismount.

“Lady?” Porual, the healer of the band of soldiers, helped Veerian dismount. She thanked him with a distracted smile.

Her parents had come at last to Bainevah. She could guess what they wanted. She trembled, ice congealing around her heart and lungs and filling her brain, as she remembered that last night with her parents. The venomous words between them. Screams and the smell of blood in the night. The fear that had shattered her parents’ argument and had smothered her until she finally fell asleep.

And then, the horrible feeling of relief when she woke the next morning to find the tent, the camels, her parents, everything gone except the blanket around her, the clothes she slept in, and the flute she had clutched in her sleep.

CHAPTER 10

Rushtan stopped Veerian with a hand on her arm, just two steps from the closed door to the contemplation room. He handed her the box that held her neck chain with the emblem of the Host of the Ram. “They shed their blood and vowed themselves to your protection and asked High Priest Chizhedek to bless it.”

When she could only stare into his hard gray eyes, he lifted the lid, picked up the pendant by the long silver chain, and hung it around her neck. She supposed he thought she was frightened. Veerian wasn’t sure what she felt, with her mind and heart in a jumble. She knew she felt anger, annoyance that her pleasant evening had been torn out of her hands, forced to end on a sour note. These people had given her life, but she couldn’t call them her parents, because *parent* meant protection, nurture and safety. Lady Mayar was more her mother than the woman who birthed her. Her parents had sired her, tried to make a profit off her and then abandoned her when it was too inconvenient to

SONG WEAVER

keep her.

“You are not their property, no matter what laws they may invoke,” Lady Mayar said. “You have been claimed by the temple, devoted to the Mother’s service. They abandoned you to starve, to be abused and used by whoever found you. You owe them nothing.”

“If you had a husband,” Challen said, “he would have a greater claim. Even if they didn’t give permission for you to marry him. It would be an accomplished fact. Even a betrothed would have greater claim than these people. If they can prove they are your parents at all.”

“Love, your knowledge of law and precedent are wonderful—” Elzan began, with a frustrated groan in his voice.

“Marry me,” Rushtan said, stopping his brother cold.

Veerian laughed. The only alternatives were to cry or be angry, and she refused to face the two opportunists in the contemplation room with any sign of weakness.

“That is kind of you, but I would rather have your sword protecting me than to tie you into a marriage you don’t want.” She turned away quickly and shoved the door open, before Rushtan could react and before she could see the expression on his face.

* * *

“Not kindness,” Rushtan muttered.

“Marriage is not entered into lightly.” Lady Mayar grasped his arm to stop him from following for a moment. Elzan and Challen hurried to follow Veerian.

“It isn’t a light thing to protect—” He choked, not quite sure of the words he meant to say. “I owe her my freedom, my life, my soul. Would we be so badly matched?”

“No. But consider that Veerian would not want a marriage of pity, any more than she would want to be bound to whatever scheming brute her parents will try to sell her to.”

Rushtan let Lady Mayar restrain him as they entered the

SONG WEAVER

contemplation room, but he rested his hand on his sword and wore his sternest expression. He was glad for his dress uniform, the armor and sword worn to honor Veerian, hoping it would intimidate the intruders. But the moment he stepped into the room, he saw his threatening posture had been wasted. The two gray and stooped vagabonds didn't see him.

Song Weaver Inieri sat before the kneeling couple, her mouth open in song and her eyes closed in concentration. The sound poured out of her like liquid gold mixed with wine and moonlight. Two men stood behind her, playing flute and harp. They wore short swords at their waists.

Veerian's alleged parents knelt on the plain stone floor of the contemplation room, singing with Inieri. If the rasping drones they made could be called song. They swayed in time with the wordless chant and collided every few beats. The healers circling the perimeter of the room watched in silence, their faces grim, arms crossed over their chests.

Veerian went around the bench where Inieri sat and stooped to look in the faces of the couple. Rushtan clenched his fist tighter on his sword when dismay formed wrinkles around her mouth and eyes and she paled. He took a step forward. Lady Mayar tightened her grip on his arm and he obeyed the silent command.

After a few moments, Veerian stepped around behind Inieri and put her hands on her teacher's shoulders. She closed her eyes, opened her mouth and joined the song. Something cracked and melted in Rushtan's chest. The image of a child crying and hungry in the cold dark filled his head and heart.

The sounds escaping the two intruders grew louder. The woman broke from the song and let out a moan. The man shrieked and raised his hands to his head, holding it as if in pain. Their eyes opened and they looked at each other. Rushtan saw, just for a moment, a loathing

SONG WEAVER

and hardness in their expressions that rivaled the darkness of the magic that had imprisoned him.

Inieri stopped singing. The flute and harp stopped and Veerian fell silent. The elder Song Weaver stood. The masks of selfish brutality vanished from the two vagabonds. They clung to each other and made soft cries of distress. If he hadn't already seen their souls, Rushtan might have pitied them.

"My student, are these your parents?" Inieri never took her cool gaze from the couple before her.

"My little Veeri!" the woman moaned. She struggled up from her knees and flung her arms open wide.

Veerian took a step back and the two musicians drew their swords. It didn't look at all incongruous to see an instrument in one hand and a sword in the other. Rushtan was glad of it, and resentful. If anyone had the right to protect Veerian, he did.

"Mistress Teacher..." Veerian sighed, folded her hands and straightened her shoulders. "You saw what I saw. You sang the songs that opened their hearts. You ask if they are my parents. I must answer yes...and thankfully, no."

"Always she was this way." The man's creaking voice sounded as if someone had tried to hang him. Rushtan wished they had succeeded. "She was a cruel child, even so beautiful. She ran off with a scoundrel who promised to make her wealthy and famous, using the skill we taught her, the instruments we slaved to buy for her. Zorash, his name was."

Veerian startled and something heavy and cold hit the pit of Rushtan's stomach. Who was Zorash? What did he mean to Veerian?

"You lie," Inieri said, with the calm of a still pool. She sang a single note like a low harp string. It filled the room. The two intruders fell silent.

The note grew, until Rushtan felt it humming through the marrow

SONG WEAVER

of his bones, inside his skull. He turned to Lady Mayar, who only looked serene. He looked at Elzan and Challen, standing in a corner of the room by the door. Challen reached for his brother, so they braced each other. Then the room vanished.

No—that blackness was the inside of a tent. Rushtan caught the sour smell of dirty cloth, the fumes of smoke and greasy cooking caught in the material. His senses adjusted, the darkness lightened, and he saw a child curled up between two camel saddles, shivering. He heard angry, wheedling, arrogant voices. Cloth moved and a flap lifted and he stood outside the tent at dusk. Two men and a woman sat around a dung fire. By the sound and postures, they bargained for something.

“He was going to buy me,” Veerian said, startling him. Rushtan turned to see her standing outside the tent with him.

“Where are we?”

“The Oasis of Ek-Bathu. I’m the child in the tent. This is all our memories.” She gestured at the man and woman; younger, thinner, cleaner versions of the couple who knelt before Inieri.

The three came to an agreement. The buyer—a well-dressed, kindly looking merchant—shook their hands and got to his feet. He tossed a blue bag that clinked with coins to the man, and walked away. He called over his shoulder, sounding stern, but Rushtan didn’t recognize the language. The woman called out in sweet tones, bobbing her head and smiling. When the merchant vanished into the darkness, she snarled and muttered what were clearly curses. Rushtan didn’t understand her words, either.

“What—”

“He said if they lied, and I was neither virgin nor undamaged, he would take back double the price from their hides.”

“A procurer?” Horror made him sick. “You were just a child!”

“I think now, he was trying to protect me, to rescue me, not make a profit. If only I had known.” She turned away as she wiped a single

SONG WEAVER

tear from her cheek.

She vanished and Rushtan was again in the tent with the child. From outside came the sounds of an oasis at night: voices raised in song and talk and laughter. Rushtan smelled the spicy burned scent of meat roasted over an open fire. The child sat now by a gap in the threadbare tent wall, clutching a thin bone flute as if it could protect her. She was Veerian in miniature, despite her hair cropped short and her eyes too big in her thin face.

Lifting the flute to her lips, she played. Tears slid down her cheeks, glistening in stray streaks of moonlight. The tune, soft and low, soaked into Rushtan's flesh and bones and soul.

"This is where it started," Lady Mayar whispered in the darkness behind him. "She didn't understand what was about to happen, but she knew fear and sorrow and helplessness."

Rushtan nodded, choking on a need to weep fury for the sake of the child who expressed her terror in a simple tune. Out in the oasis, silence spread like a pool of oil. Soon, everyone heard and felt the low notes of the flute. Like oil, it required one spark to create a fire, and then an explosion.

"Stop!" Veerian cried. "It's bad enough I killed a man that night. Don't make me see it again."

The contemplation room surrounded them again. No one had shifted their positions. Inieri put an arm around Veerian's shoulders and guided her to sit on the bench.

"I do not judge you, my dear student," the Song Weaver whispered. "You needed to see this, to understand, to face the old pain and finally cleanse the wound so you can heal."

"It's not our fault," Veerian's father bleated. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"Anyone," Lady Mayar said in a glacial voice, "who would so terrify a child deserves worse than death."

SONG WEAVER

“That man didn’t take her, did he?” He turned to his wife, who shook her head and stared at Veerian. “We didn’t know the girl caused the riot. If we had—” He stopped with a jerk, as if someone had slammed his mouth shut.

“You would have killed her?” Rushtan said. His voice was soft, but the words thundered in the quiet of the room.

“Hear me.” Inieri raised one hand. “This is what happened. I saw it in your hearts and memories. An argument by the campfire turned to a battle. The merchant was killed. You fled because you feared his partners would want his money back. You thought the child was a curse, a punishment for your many evil deeds. When you heard tales of a new Song Weaver, your greedy soul recognized Veerian when you had no father’s heart to care. You asked questions. Your greed made you careless, so the charlatan Zorash found you and you found him, each thinking the other would lead you to Veerian. When he boasted that she would do whatever he asked because she had given her heart to him, you attacked with poison and lies and left him for dead.”

Rushtan watched Veerian, trying to decipher if she cared. Who was Zorash? Why had she never mentioned him, when sharing amusing tales of her life in the caravans? Why did it never occur to Rushtan that a large part of her life hadn’t been an amusing adventure?

Remembering the terrified child hiding in the shadows with no company or comfort but her flute, Rushtan suspected Veerian had lied about her past. How could he, a soldier, have swallowed all her stories without question? He should have known better.

“I did it to protect her, because I’m her father. I’ve waited for years to make up for the harm I did.” The scoundrel twisted his face into an ingratiating mask. It took sharp wits, Rushtan decided, to play the role of harmless and feeble so well.

“How could you want to repay me when you’ve thought me dead all this time?” Veerian asked. Her voice sounded thick with repressed

SONG WEAVER

tears, but her eyes were dry. She sat very still within the comforting curve of Inieri's arm. "How can you repay me for killing my mother?"

"I'm your mother," the woman snarled. "You ungrateful—"

"Silence." Inieri sang one crashing note, and the woman fell mute. Clutching her throat, she seemed to collapse in on herself.

"She raised you," the man protested, his voice turning to a whine. "She wiped your bottom and taught you to be useful."

"And taught me to beg and to steal," Veerian snapped. "When I failed, I was beaten. She only let me keep my flute because she couldn't play it and or sell it. You seduced my mother, broke her mind and heart, warping her gifts to use them for profit. You killed her when she couldn't make any more money for you—"

"She fell in the river and drowned!"

"You stood on the bank and refused to hold out a branch to pull her out of the water. You killed her by doing nothing. Because she wasn't pretty any more. Because she saw you for the liar and thief and filth you are."

"I'm your father! You owe me! It's your duty. We have blood ties. The laws and the bonds of justice demand it." He stood up, tottering and roaring like an old bull, red-faced and spitting.

"And you shall have it." Elzan stalked from the corner where he had stood as witness with Challen.

"I don't need more empty promises from another useless priest," he snarled, and pointed a gnarled finger at Veerian. "She's my daughter, my blood, and she'll respect me and welcome me and take care of me in my old age, like I deserve."

"You shall have everything you deserve," Elzan said. "You have the word of Doni'Nebazz'Elzor'Mayar."

Rushtan would have laughed. The moment the old scoundrel realized he faced the Crown Prince of Bainevah was almost comical. He paled and dropped to his knees and crept forward, groveling. He

SONG WEAVER

would have kissed Elzan's feet if two guards hadn't stomped into the room at Elzan's signal and stepped between them. Rushtan would have laughed, but for the razor sharp ice in his brother's voice and his deathly calm face.

"Take him to the palace," Elzan said. "Have him wait in the antechamber of the Council. Such a matter of justice and a daughter's duty to her father must be attended to tonight."

"What about me?" Veerian's stepmother wailed. "Don't I get something for raising another woman's child? For teaching her to sing so pretty she earned the favor of the prince?" Three missing teeth and the greed in her beady eyes ruined her simpering smile.

"Indeed you do." Inieri stood and beckoned. The woman stepped closer, ignoring her husband's order to stay kneeling. Inieri slapped the woman hard enough to rock her back on her heels. "That is for soiling the proud name of Song Weaver," she whispered. "That is for weaving nets of deceit, playing on the fears and suffering of those around you, so they cannot trust a true Song Weaver."

"I never—"

"I have looked into your heart, your thoughts, your memories. You planned to trick Veerian, to fatten yourselves on her wealth, to sell her into a marriage that would make her less than a slave. You planned to shame her and destroy her fame if she didn't do as you demanded."

"You can't prove it," Veerian's father sputtered.

Rushtan recognized the fury of a cornered animal, half-mad with pain and terror. He took another step forward, intent on protecting Veerian. This time, Lady Mayar didn't stop him.

"The girl was always willful, selfish, and a liar. What's to prove she didn't get you to lie for her? You'd lie, wouldn't you, to keep her here, instead of working to support her parents as the law requires?"

"I will testify also," Lady Mayar said. "I was drawn into the vision. I saw how you treated the child, how you sold her and abandoned her in

SONG WEAVER

fear of your own profit. I saw your plans to use her again, and how you attacked your rival.”

“The word of another healer priest.” The woman spat, missing Lady Mayar’s feet by a handspan. A healer priestess leaped forward and backhanded her, so she hit the floor and slid.

“That healer is my mother.” Elzan’s calm tone chilled Rushtan. “She is Healer High Priestess, First Concubine, and soon to be crowned Queen of Bainevah. I suggest you apologize for your stupidity and for desecrating the Healers Temple.”

The two did so, trembling. Rushtan watched Veerian. She stood still and poised, taking shelter in her teacher’s presence. She watched the two dregs of people with a tiny, puzzled frown. Rushtan understood the loathing that came near fascination in horrifying situations.

Finally, they were gone, led from the room so only Inieri, Lady Mayar, Rushtan and Challen remained with Veerian. Elzan escorted the two intruders. Rushtan suspected his brother didn’t trust them to be quiet.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Elzan will take good care of them. They’ll never bother you again—and probably never even realize he’s taken the sting from their tails.”

“Until it’s too late.” Veerian sat down abruptly. “Why do I have the feeling Prince Elzan’s hospitality will be a harder punishment than anything I could think of?”

“Because my son was raised to defend an entire nation,” Lady Mayar said. She sat next to her and gently framed the younger woman’s face in her hands. A soft golden glow rose from her hands, and Veerian’s color improved.

“But I’m only one person.”

“In protecting you, Elzan does protect the nation,” Challen said. “I’m sorry, but I think the sooner you leave the city on your quest, the better off you’ll be.”

SONG WEAVER

“Why?”

“You’re innocent,” Rushtan hurried to say, “but the world you lived in...there could be others who think they have a claim, and might follow in their trail to try to profit off you.”

“Zorash,” she whispered, and closed her eyes.

Rushtan refused to ask. It was enough to know Veerian wouldn’t welcome the man’s presence. He didn’t want to know all the details of why.

* * *

“There is a light inside you.” Chizhedek nodded in satisfaction. He sat in his judgment chair, set before the altar of Matrika, eyes closed, his hands resting on Rushtan’s head.

Kneeling before him, the prince fought not to tremble. He knew he was free of the evil magic. Challen and Lady Mayar both vouched for him, and those who had witnessed the battle in the courtyard stood outside the temple to support him. Veerian held her harp, ready to sing again if Chizhedek declared a single grain of darkness clung to Rushtan’s soul.

King Nebazz, Lord Shazzur and all the Lords of the Gates stood in a semi-circle before the altar, to witness Chizhedek’s judgment. Rushtan still shivered, deep inside where no one would ever see. No one but Veerian, perhaps. Just hours ago, Lady Mayar brought him to the King’s Council Chamber. Before the most important people in the kingdom, King Nebazz embraced him, with tears in his eyes and called him “my loyal son, who makes me proud,” for the first time in Rushtan’s memory.

It was as Elzan had told him. So many things had changed now that Shazzur had returned and the firstborn prince had finally been named Crown Prince. Rushtan had no real hopes that the king would be a true father to him. Still, it meant much to him to realize King Nebazz had been concerned for him, had demanded daily progress reports on his

SONG WEAVER

treatment and the battle for his soul. It mattered much to him, with the king here as witness, for Chizhedek to declare him free and clean and ready to ride out in service to the throne.

Ready to ride out with Veerian at his side and begin the quest for Shazzur's lost son, Asha.

There was something significant in kneeling here before Matrika's altar, where Chizhedek's daughter, Shazzur's wife, Asha and Challen's mother, had died. The quest had begun here, years ago, with Priestess Naya's blood spattered across the altar. The priests of the Three had killed her, and those priests were to blame for this latest crisis. Their magic, their heresy, had to be broken before the Three could be restored. Before Bainevah could be truly safe, healed of the sickness and wound that was in many ways self-inflicted. And for that to happen, Asha had to be found and returned to his family.

"It is a lamp," Chizhedek continued, after only a slight pause. He nodded, his smile widening, and opened his eyes. His gaze met Rushtan's. "This light protects your heart from shadows, just as you must protect Song Weaver Veerian. Because of what she has done, because of the weapon she has found, the enemy wishes to destroy her." He raised his head, meeting the eyes of everyone in the room.

"Every Song Weaver and healer must learn the song, every soldier who can sing must learn it, to drive this particular malevolence from our city, from our borders. You and your company," he continued, focusing on Veerian, "must leave the city immediately. This quest cannot delay any longer. Flee before the enemy strikes again."

The fire left his eyes and he smiled sadly. "Bring my grandson home, bring him before Matrika's altar, complete the circle, fill the last gap in the defense. The war will continue until the end of time and the Unseen brings all things to an end. We will serve until that time as we are directed. Finish this small battle, and earn us a little rest, a little peace. Go, and make it soon."

SONG WEAVER

* * *

Veerian brought out the bone flute from her trunks, where she had thought to store her memories and shadows from her former life. Inieri's song vision had raised questions about her gift and the strength of her talent. If there was some power in the flute itself, she would be a fool not to take it and use it for defense. Some good had come from that bitter encounter with her parents. It was a relief to know that the woman who had given birth to her had not been evil, only weak and foolish. Her mother had made the mistake of loving and trusting a man who had destroyed her. It was no crime to love, Veerian knew. A mistake to love unwisely, but not a crime. She vowed again not to make that mistake.

Another lesson from the unwanted reunion would now help her. Veerian decided to travel as a minor Song Weaver and healer. When she journeyed with a band of mercenaries, no one would think twice to see a healer with such men.

Rushtan dyed his hair and beard a rich, reddish brown as part of his disguise. Veerian laughed the first time she saw him, because his eyebrows and lashes were still golden.

They rode out through the city gates at dawn, nine days after the battle of song and magic. They headed south instead of north, in case anyone saw them and wondered who they were and where they were going.

* * *

Porual, the army healer, appointed himself Veerian's riding partner and guardian when she didn't ride beside Rushtan at the head of their small caravan. He played the flute, but only for his own entertainment. He had no magic whatsoever, and healed using salves, potions, bandages, needles and splints. Veerian liked him because he talked about his wife and five daughters when they weren't practicing their

SONG WEAVER

flutes or discussing recipes for salves, poultices and washes.

She slowly got to know the others in their mercenary band, learning who was a flirt, who was curious about her role in healing Rushtan, who stayed faithful to sweethearts and wives, and who didn't. She also learned Rushtan had their total respect and loyalty.

When they stopped to make camp the first night, she learned the men wanted to pamper and shield her. She had to argue to get them to let her help with gathering firewood and cooking. Rushtan was no help, merely watching with that bemused smile on his face and his eyes hooded so she could never tell what he really felt or thought.

After supper, Rushtan had her tell them everything she learned from Shazzur. The success of their mission depended on her memories and their planning. So that was all they discussed at night. Every night. While they rode all day, Rushtan's men thought over what she told them, and every evening they discussed new theories and strategies, or some odd story or event someone had remembered, which might help in the quest.

They were astonished and crudely vocal when she told them Shazzur believed the Hidden City was still there. It only took two days of thinking and theorizing around the fire for the men to agree.

"If there were layers of tests, the illusion of walking through walls, and tunnels everywhere under the city," Chandan said the second night, "it would be easy to misdirect people. Like a maze that you can change every time people turn their backs. With magic—" He shuddered in mock fear, earning grins from his companions. "You could swear you're standing in the same place, but be in another land in the blink of an eye."

"So they changed the paths of the magic to make intruders think they reached the ruins when they just went in circles," Porual said. "The boy and the spindle have to be the key, then."

"I agree," Rushtan said. "The Three knew this was going to happen,

SONG WEAVER

but the only person they could get to listen to them was Lady Naya. They prepared her, gave her the duty of warning Bainevah, and gave her the spindle. They destroyed the Sacred Spindle in their temple to take its power out of the hands of their enemies.”

“Out of the hands of their priests,” Chandan said. “It’s bad when those who are supposed to serve you, so you can serve the Mother, become your jailers and enemies.”

“It’s doubly bad when they honestly believe they’re doing the right thing while they hurt you,” Veerian added, remembering what Shazzur had told her about the priesthood’s obstinacy and how they had driven Naya, Shazzur and their friends from the Hidden City with charges of heresy.

“Maybe,” Beeri offered on another night, “the searchers just didn’t pass any of the tests. What if the priesthood changed the tests? How would you know if you were being tested, and if you had passed or failed, if the testers won’t talk to you?”

“So how do we know when we’re close to the Hidden City at all?” Rushtan mused.

“Asha.” Veerian remembered the look in Shazzur’s eyes and the warm, aching sound of his voice when he talked about his son, whom he hadn’t seen since he was in diapers. What was it like to lose someone and love him, and not know how he had grown up? What was it like to love someone and fear he wouldn’t love you when you were reunited? “Lady Challen’s brother is the key. We’re to find him, and he will find the Hidden City. Remember, Lord Shazzur believes two former priests of the Three were given the care of the boy. They would know how to get past the illusions and tests, and they probably told the boy the way in. There have to be entrances that aren’t affected by the magic.”

“Like tunnels under a city, instead of having to face the soldiers on the wall and at the gates.” He nodded, his eyes unfocused as he thought

SONG WEAVER

about her words.

“Find the boy. But no one knows what he looks like,” Porual said.

Veerian pulled out her sketches of the priestly couple, Enku and Shanda, and passed them around. There couldn't be many couples like these two, especially living in the scattered mountain villages around the Hidden City. The only real difficulty was if Enku and Shanda had died in the intervening years. Then she would have to concentrate on finding a boy who might look like Challen, might look like Shazzur, might have white-gold hair and flame-blue eyes, if he was touched by the same magic that had burned through his mother before his birth.

* * *

On the sixth day of travel, they reached the royal garrison at the leading edge of the mountain range between Bainevah proper and the expanse of broken land, canyons and mountains that hid the Hidden City. Everywhere else, spring danced through the land, bringing green growth and warmth and sunshine. Here in the foothills, winter held on with icy claws. Despite her three layers of cloaks, the outer one oiled to repel water, Veerian was soaked to the skin and ice crusted in her veins. She was delighted when Rushtan announced they would stay in the garrison.

Veerian smiled into the sleet slapping her face so hard she thought it drew blood. The thought of a real bed, a real roof and a door, and the chance of a hot bath made her able to smile. She didn't even mind that Rushtan slowed their pace so they reached the garrison after full dark. This far from any villages and regular caravan routes, it didn't matter if someone realized their guise of a mercenary band was subterfuge, but it would be better for them if they dropped their masks as little as possible.

The walls of the garrison presented a smooth line above the jagged heads of the mountains as their band rode up the valley. The wind slammed down from the peaks as if determined to keep them in the

SONG WEAVER

lowlands. Veerian bowed her head and concentrated on keeping directly behind Rushtan's horse, watching his mount's tail. Every once in a while, she braced against the icy slash of the wind and sleet to raise her head and look. In her glimpses, a spot of light turned into a window, and the towers of the garrison grew wider and emerged gradually from the blackness of the stormy night. Finally, the trail changed from mud to a thick layer of gravel. She breathed a sigh of relief and lifted her head when Rushtan called a halt.

"We shouldn't have any trouble looking like a disreputable band," he said, raising his voice to be heard through the howling of the wind and hiss of the sleet. He looked around, meeting everyone's gaze, Veerian's last of all. "Jehoakaz is their commander. Even if he is an old friend, just remember what type of commander Asqual would pick for a place like this, and act accordingly."

"What type?" Veerian asked.

Rushtan glared at her for a moment, as if he couldn't believe she would ask such a ridiculous question. She could have been intimidated, furious with him, or flattered that he expected her to understand. She chose to be flattered, because it meant Rushtan and the others accepted her as one of them, a co-worker. Then Rushtan grinned and wiped sleet off his raw, reddened face.

"A stickler for regulations with enough lung power and iron in his blood to slam and bellow his way through the worst weather possible. With a mouth that could strip rust from an old sword and a fist hard enough to beat common sense and obedience into the rawest drunken recruit. He won't welcome a band of mercenaries into his garrison, but he also won't leave us outside to suffer the storm's wrath. He knows his duty to king and countrymen. Doesn't mean he has to like it or pretend to like it. But once he recognizes me..." His grin widened.

"Feast!" Chandan roared, which set the others laughing.

"Problem," Porual growled a moment later. "How many women do

SONG WEAVER

you think there are in that garrison?"

"Not nearly enough," someone said.

With the swirling of the wind and a rumble of thunder in the distance, Veerian had no idea who had spoken. Something hard and heavy settled into her stomach when everyone in the band turned suddenly somber gazes on her.

"She belongs to me," Rushtan said, in a voice like a sword blade. "Your commander. Then, if that isn't enough to stop the brutes who think below their belts, she's our healer. And if that doesn't work—"

"I'm very good with throwing knives and kicking where it'll do the most good," Veerian said. That earned a few snorts and cold grins from the band, which encouraged her.

"Better yet, you'll entertain them." Rushtan held up his hand to stop her protest. "You brought your bone flute, didn't you? Play that tune from the night your father sold you."

Veerian thought she had been cold up until this point, but the implacable look in Rushtan's eyes, the unfeeling tone he used when he gave the order, filled her blood with such cold she thought she might never thaw.

And yet...something took wing inside her. Rushtan wanted men destroyed who dared to threaten or use her. Maybe she was a fool to be glad, to treasure the depths of his concern, but she had never allowed herself to be a fool before. It was high time, and Rushtan was worthy of the sacrifice.

What did it matter how she felt, since he would never know?

She wasn't so great a fool, after all, that she would tell him.

Rushtan must have seen something in her eyes that satisfied him. He nodded and turned his horse, dug his heels into its sodden, ice-crusted sides, and led the way up the garrison road again. Veerian tugged her hood further down around her face, hunched her shoulders and thought of all the tunes she had created in her head and heart

SONG WEAVER

during the lonely years of struggling to survive. Which ones could she use for protection? Which had come from the pain deep in her soul, and which had been gifts from Matrika, to heal and strengthen and warm her when she needed it most? Music had always been her refuge, her meat and wine and bread when she had nothing else.

If merely creating the tune in her mind had helped her, what would happen if she made the song real, audible, and turned it against those who might harm her?

Veerian pondered such things so hard and deeply, she was startled when her horse stopped. She raised her head and nearly laughed aloud to see the closed gates of the garrison only a few steps away from her horse's nose. Strangely, she felt warm for the first time since she crawled out of her blankets that morning. Perhaps there was some magic in her blood, after all.

"I'm a citizen of Bainevah!" Rushtan bellowed, when the watchman in the tower to the right of the gate challenged his request for admittance. "Why do I pay my shragging taxes if I don't get some help out here in the hind end of nowhere?"

Yuakam and Chandan added a string of curses to Rushtan's continued, coarse insistence that they had a right to come in without answering any questions. Veerian wondered what had happened to good manners. Wouldn't the gate guards have let them inside sooner if they had simply pounded on the door and asked?

As soon as that thought came to her, she understood. Only people who wanted to fade into the night and pass through without being remarked upon used good manners, out here in the borderlands. And any soldier worthy of serving Bainevah would immediately become suspicious at the use of good manners. The louder Rushtan and his men were, the better their chances of being ignored and shoved out of the way. And housed in an unforgiving quarter of the garrison, where no one would see them.

SONG WEAVER

“Speak to your commander?” Rushtan kicked the gate hard enough to make it echo. Veerian winced, thinking he had to have broken at least one bone in his foot. “What makes you think I want to talk to some ink-stained clerk too weak to come out in the storm and see me for himself? I have better things to do.” He reached over and hauled Veerian down from her horse so quickly, she clutched at him to keep from falling. “You see this?” He yanked her hood back, revealing her face and the tangled mass of her hair, which glistened with ice and rain in the torchlight. “You think I’m going to leave this alone for ten minutes with these idiots? They’re dying for a fight, and if they can’t have a fight, they want a woman. Well, she’s mine!” He emphasized that with another fist against the door and a string of curses.

“You’ve made that clear enough,” a bored tenor voice rang out. The lungpower in that deceptively gentle tone made Veerian lift her head to see the new form that had joined the man-shaped shadows in the tower window. “Bring your woman with you, then, but you’re still coming to see the commander.”

He stepped back into the shelter of the tower. A moment later, a command rang out, echoed by three other voices. The gate rattled and thudded on the other side.

“That,” Rushtan said, voice pitched so only those close to him could hear, “was Jehoakaz.” He bared his teeth in a fierce grin. “Hood up, my sweet lady, and pretend to be witless and silly for the first time in your life.” He tugged up her hood before she could get her numb hands to move.

The gate swung open, spilling light out into the stormy darkness. Veerian let Rushtan lead her with a hand clutching her elbow, down an aisle formed of soldiers, each with a torch raised aloft in one hand, and the other hand resting on a sheathed sword. She could almost hear the commander, with his bored voice, warning the brutes entering his garrison to watch their step.

SONG WEAVER

In short order, a low-rank officer built like a small mountain led Rushtan's men away, to their quarters—over the stable, he informed them with a toothy, nasty grin. Another man beckoned for Rushtan and Veerian to follow him.

The commander's quarters and those of his right and left-hand commanders were close to the main gate. Veerian was grateful, because walking became a hardship as her legs gradually lost their frosty numbness. Fortunately, Rushtan slid his arm around her shoulders when she leaned against him.

“Not much longer,” he whispered. “Don't be angry at us for our games.”

Games? She shook her head, but knew he couldn't see the movement, lost within the darkness of her hood. Veerian wondered what else she would learn about Rushtan before the night was over. She had already been surprised, but not shocked, by the language that spilled from his lips. Why had she thought that simply because he was a prince, he had lived a sheltered life of refined language? He was a soldier. She had first met him in the Dregs. It was a given he would know the worst of the filth and cruelty the world had to offer.

She said a silent prayer of thanks that Rushtan had chosen to devote his life to fighting that darkness.

CHAPTER 11

Commander Jehoakaz was a larger man than his voice and outline at the top of the tower had indicated. He sat behind a long table in the front room of his quarters, elbows on the table, studying a wax tablet. Piles of scrolls lay on either side of him. A half-eaten bowl of some stew sat on a smaller table behind him. From the lack of aroma in the room, Veerian guessed the man's meal had been interrupted hours ago. She felt a flicker of pity for him, until he raised his head and scowled at the visitors and the guard who had escorted them to his quarters. The soldier saluted and retreated in silence. Jehoakaz didn't offer them seats.

Rushtan still had his arm around Veerian's shoulders. He shifted his hand to tug her hood back. It slid down, off her shoulders. Jehoakaz's bloodshot brown eyes widened. Something twisted in the pit of her stomach and she felt the weight of his gaze travel down her body. It didn't matter that she was smothered in cloaks, it still felt like the days

SONG WEAVER

when she wore rags so threadbare men could almost see through them when she sang in taverns.

“My woman is a Song Weaver trained by Inieri herself, and a healer,” Rushtan said, still using his false, rough voice. “Show her some respect, man.”

Jehoakaz’s gaze flicked to Rushtan. His mouth opened, and Veerian could see some scalding remark in his expression, just waiting to spill out. The commander’s mouth snapped shut. He glanced at Veerian again, then back to Rushtan. He stood, bracing his arms on the table. Standing, he was nearly as tall as Rushtan, with well-defined muscles.

Rushtan turned Veerian and guided her into a chair in those few heartbeats of silence. He winked at her when his back was turned to the commander, and untied her outer cloak. She nodded thanks, decided to trust him—what else could she do, if he had walked them into a tight spot?—and made herself more comfortable. At least she could be dry for a little while until the commander threw them out of his quarters.

“Dyed?” Jehoakaz said, his voice softer than his harsh tenor bellow from the tower. He gestured Rushtan into the other seat in front of the table and slouched down into his own chair. “With that disguise—very good, by the way.”

“Good enough to get us thrown into prison for a day or two?” Rushtan asked with a grin.

“Things aren’t that bad out here yet.” He shook his head. That scowl warmed and a decade dropped off his square, weather-roughened face. “If you’re in disguise, with your elite troublemakers at your tail, I think you’re on special business for the king.”

“For the kingdom. For King’s Seer Lord Shazzur and the First Concubine to the Heir.” A bark of laughter escaped him when the other man sat up straight at that news. “The couriers are slow out here, aren’t they? Didn’t you hear Elzan was finally named Crown Prince?”

“No. And high time, too. How many scheming fathers threw their

SONG WEAVER

daughters at him the day he was confirmed?”

“None. Yet. They’re a little intimidated by the First Concubine.” Rushtan gestured at the half-collapsed skin of wine sitting next to Jehoakaz’s neglected bowl of stew.

The commander swore, slapped his forehead and leaped up from his chair. He stomped to the door and opened it just enough to bellow an order for food for the three of them, slammed it, then came back and poured wine for all three.

“Forgive me, Lady,” he said, managing a shallow bow as he handed the pottery cup of wine to Veerian. “It’s not often a man expects a scoundrel he can batter into submission and gets the man who saved his life a dozen times over. It knocks him out of the saddle on his head, so to speak.”

“I know the feeling, when it comes to Prince Rushtan,” Veerian answered with a smile. She smothered a chuckle when the commander colored bright red and looked away. What sort of man was this, with nice manners under all the roughness, and yet unbalanced by a meaningless smile?

How long had it been since any of these men had seen a woman? That thought took away her amusement quickly enough.

While they ate, Rushtan related the events of the solstice past. Jehoakaz shook his head and swore softly when the story came to where magic caused two Brides to turn murderous. He grinned and raised his cup in toast to Challen when Rushtan explained who she was and what it meant for her to be First Concubine. His grin faded when the story backtracked and Rushtan related the long struggle against the magic that had resided inside him.

“It’s a knot tied twenty different ways,” Jehoakaz said, nodding, when the tale ended and he knew of their quest. “My aunt, who raised me, was a healer. I nearly grew up in the Healers Temple, and I remember Lady Priestess Naya. It galled me to hear her son had been

SONG WEAVER

stolen. And to think that all these years, he's been safe, the key to bring back the Three."

"If you remember Lady Naya," Veerian said, "you have a better chance of recognizing her son than we would."

"Maybe. But come with you? That would destroy all the work of your tricky disguise."

"You can look disreputable without trying," Rushtan growled, grinning at his old friend.

"That I can, but things are uneasy up here right now. If prophecies come to life and our enemies prepare to march against Bainevah, then these mountains are the door they'll try to force open. It's hard to patrol every pass and keep track of all the merchants and herders and bandits. We welcome winter, when no one moves. It's spring and the season for war that steals our sleep and wears us down to bone and sinew. If you can persuade your royal brother to send me three times as many men—but you can't. Not when you're searching for Doni'Shazzur and the Hidden City."

"Unusual troop movements and too much activity would make our enemies more suspicious than ever," Rushtan explained for Veerian.

She was grateful that he explained, but as the evening wore on, there were too many unsaid things they agreed on that left her behind.

* * *

Morning brought an entirely new world to Veerian's eyes. She stood in the window of the loft over the stables and surveyed the activity in the garrison courtyard below her. Paving stones saved everyone from wading up to their knees in mud. Soldiers chopped wood, others tended the stables and pens of pigs, chickens and cows, while others drilled. She watched the night watch stand down and the morning watch take their places. Despite the chill in the air, she saw doors and shutters open everywhere, and half-dressed soldiers enjoying the sunshine and fresh air while they did laundry, mended saddles,

SONG WEAVER

cooked and ate or did dozens of ordinary, everyday, necessary chores.

And there was no sign of a woman anywhere.

Jehoakaz had moved their party to better quarters with actual walls and doors, and used her presence as an excuse. He made it known he didn't want the visitors to use their healer's honor as an excuse to pitch into a few soldiers. He also made it known he didn't want his men disturbed by hearing "that woman" servicing her master and his companions. Veerian knew he said it only to help their disguise, but the implication that she would sleep with more than one man irked her.

Still, she was grateful for the storage room Rushtan assigned her, which gave her complete privacy as well as a door with a bar she could drop down into brackets. Rushtan didn't like the insinuations, and his reaction to his friend's words made her want to laugh, and put a tight ache in her belly. He gave Veerian an extra knife to put next to her pillow, along with the throwing knives tucked into her sleeves, belt and boots.

It occurred to her now to wonder if Commander Jehoakaz hadn't been warning Rushtan more than his own men.

A soft tap on the barred door behind her startled Veerian out of her contemplation of the courtyard below. She wrapped her lightest cloak tighter around herself and went to lift the bar.

"Don't ever do that again," Rushtan said. He kept his voice low and stomped into the small room with a tray of breakfast.

Behind him, the loft where their party had slept looked neat and orderly. Pallets stacked against the wall, bags and packs lined up against another wall or hanging from pegs, straw swept off the floor. The other men sat on benches, talking softly, examining their weapons as they ate. Veerian couldn't get a good idea of their spirits because Rushtan slammed the door, shutting them out.

"How do you know I wasn't a soldier come to rape you?" he demanded. He slapped the tray down on the wobbly bench under the

SONG WEAVER

window.

“Nobody could get past you, much less the rest of your men.”

“Poison makes it easy. Fast poison, to make us sleep before the pain hits. You wouldn’t hear a thing, until the door broke down and they were on you.”

“All right.” She took a few deep breaths to calm herself. Why did his anger, his words, make her feel giddy and furious at the same time? She should have felt afraid at the very least, but not glad and humiliated. “I’ll never open a door until I know you’re alive and safe.”

Rushtan opened his mouth, most likely to snarl and shred that response. He closed his eyes instead and took a step back to lean against the wall. With a sigh, he rubbed his face with both palms. “Sorry. Someone just asked how much you charged, as if I were your procurer. Maybe we didn’t get all that magic out of my blood after all. It makes me want to kill.”

“No, we did. You...glow, deep inside, like someone lit a lantern in your soul. It will keep the dark away.” She resisted the need to cup his cheek and smooth the tangled, red-dyed curls off his forehead.

“How did you sleep?”

“Without Mohak’s snores echoing in my ears? Divinely.” That won a grin from him and smoothed some wrinkles off his forehead, and gave her much to think about.

They stayed in the garrison two days, waiting for the muddy passes to dry, and for small streams to subside and turn into paths again. Veerian sang with the soldiers who requested healing, and worked with Porual to treat much the same ailments she had faced in the city. With a constant escort of Rushtan’s men, if not Rushtan himself, the worst she faced from even the most lustful, crude soldier was a plea for a kiss. She couldn’t stop them raking her from head to foot with their hungry gazes, but she knew how to ignore that kind of assault.

Mid-morning of the second day, Veerian went to the kitchen to

SONG WEAVER

fetch two buckets of hot water the head cook had promised her. She planned to bar the door of her room and enjoy a hot bath, as much as she could manage with no tub to sit in, and no scented bathing oil. Ho'an had her guard duty, and teased her about "useless cleanliness" while he carried the second bucket for her back to their quarters. Halfway there, a shout echoed across the garrison and a pillar of smoke gushed into the sky. Ho'an handed her the bucket.

"I'll bar the door," she promised, before he could remind her. Veerian watched him run with other soldiers toward the fire. It looked like it came from the granary. Or was that where they stored lamp oil and charcoal?

She knew better than to stand there, gaping. Just because most of Jehoakaz's soldiers were semi-respectful didn't mean all were. Veerian shivered deep inside, remembering the days of caravans and taverns, when sudden fires or a horse running wild had never been accidental. She slopped some of her steaming water on the stairs as she hurried up to the loft.

All was quiet in the long, empty room. When she reached her closet room, she put the buckets on the floor to check for her knives, just to reassure herself, before she closed the door.

The door closed by itself. Veerian turned, whipping out a knife. A fist slammed down on her wrist. She gasped and fought her suddenly numb fingers to hold onto the handle. She stared up into the face of the tallest, most beautiful soldier she had yet to see in the garrison. His sculptured mouth opened in a vicious grin as he backhanded her so she stumbled backward, tipping over one bucket. Veerian's survival instincts woke screaming. She rolled, narrowly avoiding his hand. His arms moved with the speed of snakes, reaching for her. She kicked, turning the movement into a somersault and landed on her feet by the far wall.

"Strip." He gestured at her pallet bed.

SONG WEAVER

Veerian responded with a string of marketplace curses in four languages. Her mouth tasted of stable filth just from using the words. The handsome soldier gaped at her in shock, just long enough for her to draw another knife and fling it at him. He ducked and it snagged the shoulder of his tunic. He snarled and reached for her. She screamed, venting all her fury and defiance, wishing him dead and rotten.

He froze until the echo of her voice faded. She took a deep breath to scream again, half-stunned by what had happened. Had she imagined it? Shaking his head like a man waking from a dream, he lunged at her.

Veerian blasted him with harsh song as his upraised fist swung down toward her face. He froze again.

The vibrations of her voice had a hollow echo that she had only heard when High Priest Chizhedek spoke in Matrika's power. Veerian staggered backward, knowing her lungs wouldn't hold the note forever. She reached blindly behind herself for the latch of the door. Her fingers caught on the bar just as her air ran out.

"Filthy whore," the man snarled. He staggered toward her and pressed his hands to his ears as if they pained him.

Veerian let loose again, wishing with all her heart she could hold people with Ineri's power. She had never been able to do this before. Just as her teacher had prophesied, she was growing stronger, growing in magic.

She tried to extend the sound as long as possible while she struggled to lift the bar. The brute had jammed it down. She almost lost the note as she heaved upward with all her strength. The door shuddered in its frame before she had the bar lifted. Through the banging of her heart in her ears, she heard shouts and feet pounding on the stairs coming up to the loft.

Veerian shoved the bar up the last finger's width, out of the brackets that held it. The door slammed open. She staggered backward, hitting the wall with her head. Her scream of power died. Cursing, the

SONG WEAVER

soldier reached for her as she slid down the wall, stunned and gasping for breath.

Rushtan caught him in the gut with a fist and flung him across the room. Snarling like an enraged wolf, he followed the man, battering him with both fists, one after the other, driving him until he staggered and slumped to his knees.

“Veerian?” He turned, looking for her.

“No!” She whipped the empty bucket at the man, who leaped up from his knees the moment Rushtan turned his head.

The soldier ducked low, avoiding the bucket and Rushtan’s arms. He hurtled forward, catching Veerian around the waist to slam them both against the wall. She tried to scream, but his head in her gut drove the breath from her body. The soldier grabbed her by the hair with one hand and hauled her to her feet, putting her between him and Rushtan.

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t paralyze him with her voice, but she still had a knife tucked into her sleeve. Veerian slumped, letting all her weight drag on him. Fear made him yank her upright, pulling them both off balance. She flipped the knife in her grip and drove the blade up so close to her side she slashed her long tunic just before she caught him in the ribs. He bellowed and shoved her away and the hot copper smell of blood flooded the room.

Rushtan cursed and shouted her name and dove at the man, pummeling him again, driving him toward the window. Veerian sank down to her knees, finally getting her breath back. With a cry like a terrified child, the soldier fell out the window. He landed with a sodden thump.

“That fall won’t kill him. Chandan!” Rushtan shouted. He yanked the door wide open and caught up Veerian around the waist with one arm, to half-carry her into the main room with him. “Chandan, make sure he doesn’t get away.” Then he shoved Veerian down onto the nearest bench and caught her face between his hands. “Are you all

SONG WEAVER

right?”

“Until this moment.” Fury was far safer than dissolving into tears with so many witnesses. She caught hold of his wrists and tugged his arms down. “I’m black and blue, thanks to you.”

“Thanks to—” Rushtan choked and stood up, to tower over her. “You didn’t invite him up here, did you?”

The sudden silence in the room seemed to suck all the air out. Veerian stood slowly. She wanted to look into his eyes. Maybe spit into them. She clenched her fists. Dozens of angry words burned on her tongue. Bitter, harsh days flooded up from her memory, choking her. Even when she was totally innocent, someone had always been ready to accuse her of some crime.

But why was Rushtan like them?

Nothing she could say would convince him, and she couldn’t stand here in silence, glaring up at him. Not with the noise down in the courtyard, directly below her window. Their band wouldn’t have much more time alone before soldiers poured in, demanding to know what had happened to their fellow. If only she could paralyze them all...

Veerian took a deep breath and let out a deafening scream. She held the note, calling up all her fury. Energy poured through her and she heard the hollow reverberation that meant she had touched on the magic hidden in her talent.

“What was that?” Ho’an asked in a hushed voice, when she let the sound die and they were all able to move again. Most of the men looked at each other, very carefully not looking at her.

“That is why that pile of stable filth didn’t rape me, and why I could have held him off if you hadn’t burst in on me. As long as I could breathe and sing, he couldn’t move.”

“Like Inieri.” Rushtan nodded. The fire had left his eyes, but that wariness that made his face a neutral mask hurt her far worse. “Why didn’t you tell me you could do this?”

SONG WEAVER

“I didn’t know I could.” Bruises awoke across her body, draining all her strength. Veerian slumped down onto the bench. “He was waiting for me. Is it arrogant to think he set the fire just to distract all of you?”

“Not arrogant at all,” Jehoakaz said from the edge of the loft where it met the stairs. He was smeared with smoke, drenched from the waist down and had a nasty burn mark on his bared arm. He leaned on his good arm against the wall. “We’ve had...incidents like this before, usually fires right under our noses. Mostly in the surrounding towns. This time, we caught one of the men who set it. You caught their leader.”

“Slavery or just gang rape?” Rushtan asked.

“Since half the women who vanish during these fires never reappear...both, probably.” He finally took the last step up into the loft and came over to stand next to Rushtan, towering over her. “You’ve helped us solve a serious problem, a blot on our honor. I wish I had some other way of repaying you.”

“But you don’t think only two men were involved,” Veerian guessed, “and you can’t vouch for my safety if we stay on.”

“She’s a seer as well as strong and brave and beautiful.” A grim smile brightened his face a little.

“We can vouch for the Song Weaver’s safety,” Porual said. The others in their band nodded agreement. Several clutched weapons, as if daring Jehoakaz to doubt them.

“The success of our mission depends on staying unremarked,” Rushtan said. “Veerian, if we ride out—”

“I can sit a horse,” she hurried to assure him. Warmth touched her face. “I was angry when I said you hurt me.” The need to cry pressed hot against the backs of her eyes. She stood. “I think I still have one bucket of hot water, and if this is going to be my last real bath...” She hurried back to her room, trying to hide the trembling in her legs.

“If you’re not going to claim her, I want her,” Jehoakaz muttered,

SONG WEAVER

just loudly enough Veerian could hear as she pushed her door closed. “A woman like that doesn’t come along but once in a generation.”

Veerian held her breath and resorted to washing her face until the pressure of tearful laughter in her head eased and her torn clothes were dripping wet almost to her waist.

* * *

Rushtan welcomed the chance to bellow and curse and stomp. He took his frustrations out on the soldiers assigned to help them pack and vacate the loft rooms. Jehoakaz purposely gave the duty to his most troublesome soldiers, knowing Rushtan needed to badger someone. That didn’t help. Rushtan’s hot, unsettled fury grew instead of easing.

Perhaps the one he was most upset with was himself. He was angry with Veerian because she was angry with him. Yes, she could have saved herself in another moment if he hadn’t knocked her to the ground and interrupted her song. It angered him that she didn’t appreciate the cold terror that drove him across the courtyard at the sound of her scream. Angered him when she didn’t faint into his arms and shower him with grateful kisses.

Veerian wasn’t that type of woman. He knew that, and it made him alternately furious and ashamed to want her to be.

The long and short of it was, he wanted to hold her and ensure himself she was all right. Touch her skin, inhale the perfume of her hair, drown the fire in his belly by making her scream with passion for him. Claim her completely as his, in the flesh, not just for the sake of their disguise. After today, he doubted she would ever invite him to share her blankets.

Veerian just might be better off with Jehoakaz. His friend had certainly expressed the truth clearly enough. Veerian was a rare woman and deserved better care, protection and adoration. When would he have the chance to give it to her? Certainly not until they returned to Bainevah, and then, what sort of life could he offer her, as a soldier’s

SONG WEAVER

wife?

Rushtan stopped short, so one of the scurrying toadies ran into his back. He cursed and turned, backhanding the hapless fool so he fell and slid backward.

Wife? When had that word even entered his thoughts, much less his vocabulary?

He wanted a few nights with Veerian, to pleasure her and repay a small part of the debt he owed her. He wanted to satisfy his burning curiosity about the taste and feel of her. That was all.

Besides, Veerian was a Song Weaver. Free to rule her own life. Free to take lovers and refuse or accept marriage offers as she chose and not as her superiors or parents dictated. It infuriated him to think of how many men she might have welcomed to her bed, and then sent away with a kiss and a smile and a refusal of tomorrow. He would just be one more. That thought hurt, but not as much as the thought of never tasting her sweetness, never seeing the fire of passion enflame her eyes, just for him.

Why couldn't he have her? A few nights, a quarter, maybe an entire moon?

He wasn't fool enough to want forever with her.

* * *

Jehoakaz presented Veerian with a hosta hawk, just before their band mounted up to ride out of the garrison. He laughed when she tipped her head back and studied the gray-blue raptor sitting on its scarred perch.

"Not exactly an appropriate love token, is it?" he said.

"Commander, I didn't know you felt so strongly." She fluttered her eyelashes at him, and could have sworn she heard Rushtan growl. That was ridiculous.

"This might be more appropriate." The commander held out a ring of onyx with a streak of silver spiraling through it. He bit the thumb of

SONG WEAVER

his gauntlet and yanked it off to reveal his bare hand, with a matching ring on his smallest finger.

Veerian nodded and closed her hand tight around the ring. The silent hum of magic power residing in the ring came through her flesh. She slid the ring onto her thumb, then put her riding gloves on and held out her hand. She pictured in her thoughts what she wanted. The hosta hawk leaped from its perch, backwinged a few times, and settled daintily onto her forearm.

“Bound by magic.” She nodded and turned her arm, until she found the black and silver beads braided into the jesses on the hawk’s legs. “Messenger?”

“Oh, sweet lady, stay here and marry me and save me from madness. I’m surrounded by idiots. None of them would have figured that out with just a glance.” He laughed, then his gaze flicked to Rushtan. The laughter died in his throat.

“If you’re trying to win my support so you can get a transfer to a better post,” Rushtan said, “you might have it. I’ll let you know by the end of the summer.”

“Will you be out here on your search that long?”

“Only the Mother knows,” Veerian said. She wriggled her fingers, feeling for the ring under her glove. “What sort of commands do I use to send it back to you?”

“Use the beaded straps to bind the message packet to the bird, then throw it up into the air. Until then, it will always stay with you, no matter how many times you send it out to hunt.”

“Will it hunt for us?” Chandan asked.

That earned laughter from their band. His appetite had already become a threadbare joke among them.

* * *

Third Ascent Moon

SONG WEAVER

Anku, the blacksmith for the village of Larch Haven, met their party at the inn when they arrived six days later. He signaled for them to wait, one scorched, grimy hand raised, then stepped over to the watering trough in front of the stables and dunked himself to his waist. He bellowed, and Veerian thought she could almost see steam rising from his flesh as the black grime and muddy sweat streamed off him. A stable boy ran up with a tattered towel and the tall, broad-shouldered young blacksmith scrubbed himself, drying chest and arms and face as he walked back to meet them.

“Sorry.” He grinned, midnight blue eyes bright with humor. “My mother runs the inn, and she’s ill. How can I serve you?”

“Rooms. As many as you can spare us,” Rushtan added, with a glance over his shoulder at his men. “We’ve been crowded together too long in small spaces. And a separate room for my lady. I have business to conduct and I don’t want her sleep disturbed.”

It was a legitimate excuse and he had used it in the three villages since they had left the garrison behind, but it still made Veerian shift uncomfortably in her saddle. Their appearance of mercenary captain and his woman protected her and preserved her modesty. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling that Rushtan’s good manners were a subtle rejection of her.

Which was ridiculous. Why would she want to share a room with a smelly man, much less a bed?

“He doesn’t want *his* sleep disturbed,” Veerian countered. “I’m a minor song weaver and healer, and if people come to me in the middle of the night for help, he doesn’t like being awakened. If he can be awakened.” She wrinkled up her nose at him, pretending it was a long argument. The members of the band snickered and made comments, enjoying the charade more than she and Rushtan did. “May I be of help to your mother?”

“Thank you, but she’s on the mend. She’s just tired.” He turned and

SONG WEAVER

shouted for the stable boy and the serving maid from the inn. After introducing himself, he led them into the inn, promising hot water as soon as they reached their rooms, with dinner served at sunset.

Veerian settled into her room and wished she could stretch out on the thick blankets spread over her pallet and stay there. For several moon quarters, at least. Living in the saddle, staying in a different inn every other night and camping on the nights between, had lost its glamour. Rushtan and his men made sure she had fresh water and as much privacy as a mercenary camp could provide, but sometimes that was impossible. On the nights when they camped with other groups, out in the open, she had to lie next to Rushtan. He was always very careful not to touch her beyond resting an arm across her, and always outside of their blankets.

Yes, Rushtan was a smelly man, but who wouldn't be after four days in the saddle and only enough water among them for drinking? Veerian knew she didn't smell like a spring flower, either. At least Rushtan didn't grope her in the night, while she slept, and didn't demand more overt signs of affection when strangers were around.

"You're a fool," she scolded her dusty face in the basin of steaming water. Then she peeled out of her clothes and proceeded to wash and enjoy every second of it.

* * *

"This is where Asqual's maps end." Rushtan spread a stained, battered oxhide map on the two tables pushed together to serve their band. The map had been new at the beginning of their journey, taken from the latest information the army and Lord Shazzur could obtain. His men had taken an obscure delight in abusing the map so it appeared to be years old.

He frowned at the blank land beyond Larch Haven. Mountains had been scribbled in, but lacked any indication of trails or rivers or canyons. This village sat only a day's travel south of the tunnel where

SONG WEAVER

visitors to the Hidden City went in, and vanished. Their escorts came out another tunnel two days' journey to the east. No one could ever find that exit when they backtracked, as if the landscape swallowed up trail and trees and streams that could have served as landmarks.

Somewhere in the uncharted landscape lay the Hidden City. Was anyone trapped inside it? Had the Three escaped, or were they prisoners still? Had their priesthood become prisoners as well, in a brutal sort of justice?

What if the priesthood had called up the magic barrier? That could mean no welcome for those who came to free them.

"Where do we go from here, then?" Veerian pinched the edge of the map and tweaked it around so she could see it better.

"That's why we're here. I followed up on that image you caught from that hedge-healer back in Hohass. Our host is a multi-talented young man." He laughed, one short bark, when her hopeful smile died a heartbeat later. "What did you think I was going to say?"

"That you had found the priest, Enku." She shrugged and dabbed her crust of bread into the last bit of stew in her bowl.

"We both have the same objective. It's sixteen years now since Lord Shazzur's son vanished. It's been less than a year since the Hidden City was discovered to be missing. Which one do you think might be closer to the surface?"

"How can something vanish when no one can find it in the first place unless they're wanted there?" she shot back. Her words earned chuckles from several of the others.

"Point." Rushtan shrugged, then felt movement behind him and turned. Brown-haired Anku came into the small, private room, carrying a wide tray with a jug of steaming cider and fruit rolls. "I hear you're an explorer when business is slow," he said after the young man finished refilling their cups.

"When I'm not needed here," Anku agreed with a grin. He scooped

SONG WEAVER

up the bowls in his big, callused hands and slid them onto his tray. “Business comes in pulses, for the inn and for my work. I don’t like to sit idle.”

“Can we pay you to guide us?”

“There?” He leaned between Ho’an and Chandan and peered at the map. “You want to find the Hidden City, too?”

“Too?” Rushtan felt ice move through his gut. It was a battle not to let it fill his voice. He didn’t want to frighten away this useful ally. Or was he a potential problem? Best to keep problems where they could be watched—and squashed.

“There have been people trying to find the Hidden City since the Three first came here, Mother says.” Anku shrugged. “People simply want to do what they’re told is impossible or forbidden.”

“Can you guide us?”

“I don’t know where it is.” His smile went crooked, as if he thought they were crazy or would be angry with him.

Rushtan didn’t blame him. Anku might have a reputation as a skilled tracker and explorer, and muscles to make any commander of the City Guard salivate to recruit him, but that didn’t mean he was anything special. True, according to the people Rushtan talked to, whenever Anku led in winter rescues everyone was found, but he was little more than a big, strong boy.

“Nobody knows where it is,” Veerian said. “Do you know where other people have looked, so we don’t waste time there?” She smiled and fluttered her lashes at him. “We’d be so grateful.”

Rushtan watched the young man blush and back up a step. He knew it was only harmless flirtation on Veerian’s part, and Anku certainly couldn’t take it seriously. Still, it irritated him.

“I can give you some of my maps.” He finished filling the tray with their dirty bowls and took a step toward the door. “Would you come back when you’re done exploring, and show me what you found? To

SONG WEAVER

fill in the rest of the empty spaces,” he added.

“Why can’t you come with us?” Porual asked.

“Mother needs me, and I have plows and tools to sharpen and repair for spring planting. I can’t leave my neighbors when they need me.” Anku didn’t speak with any impatience or awkwardness, but Rushtan got the distinct impression their host was surprised they didn’t know that as a matter of course.

He wondered if perhaps the simpler life wasn’t a better choice. Maybe he would find a village like this, when he retired from the Host and left the city. If he succeeded in and survived this hunt for the Hidden City and young Asha.

CHAPTER 12

Veerian stopped to listen to a young woman sing nonsense songs to a group of children in the street. When she told the woman she was pregnant, and to be very careful of her health, suddenly everyone on the street watched her.

It turned out that the young woman was the daughter of the headman and wife of a rich merchant who made his headquarters in Larch Haven. She had lost four children already, almost before she knew she was pregnant. Veerian sang with her and told her what to do to protect her baby and her health. Through the singing, she knew what foods would make the young mother's body react badly and reject the baby. Then she told her to stay in bed until the baby was born.

Suddenly, everyone with a minor illness for half a day's journey in every direction wanted Veerian's help. Rushtan welcomed the information on terrain and the local people that Veerian picked up through singing with her patients. Every bit of memory of old stories

SONG WEAVER

and warnings about the terrain would ultimately help them in their search. However, he did mind the admiring and lustful looks too many men gave Veerian.

On the third day, a rich man with ten guards rode into Larch Haven. Rushtan loathed him at first glance, from his shaven head and leopard skin cape, to the gold rings on his fingers and gold buckles on his sandals. Chandan sneered and gave Rushtan a tiny nod when he heard the man's name was Homaan, meaning he had heard something about him. Chandan didn't like the man and that was warning enough.

Their band gathered around as Veerian came down the stairs in the inn to attend to this latest request for her skills. She paused, picking up her companions' tension. She didn't make polite talk or invite Homaan to the back room for privacy, as she had done with many visitors.

"Shows how smart our lady is," Chandan muttered, leaning close to Rushtan.

He grunted and debated the best method for extracting this rich, arrogant fool from the inn without destroying the building and the livelihood of Anku's mother.

"What is your complaint?" Veerian asked.

Homaan settled on a bench and held out a hand, beckoning for her to sit with him. She stayed standing.

"What sort of Song Weaver are you, that you need to ask?" His rich, burnt syrup voice made Rushtan grind his teeth.

He had run into men with such attitudes in Court. They all deserved a good whipping and a few moons forced to live in the Dregs.

"The sort of Song Weaver who deserves politeness," Anku said from the kitchen doorway. He crossed his arms and leaned against the frame as if prepared to stay there a long while. He ignored the four guards who had followed their master into the inn.

Rushtan considered Anku's muscles and the harm to Homaan if the only blacksmith for five days in any direction refused to shoe his

SONG WEAVER

horses, sharpen his swords or fix his plows. He liked this young man very much for not threatening or swaggering.

“Allow me some dignity,” Homaan said. “I have no wish to speak my problems where the entire village can hear.”

“I don’t know your complaint simply by looking at you,” Veerian said. She tucked her flute into her belt, meaning she wouldn’t play for the man. “You must sing for me.” Her face grew still, her tone cool and unfeeling. Rushtan repressed a grin, delighted that Veerian was irritated with this pompous fool.

“Alone.” He gestured for Rushtan and the rest of their band to leave.

“Do you go anywhere without your guards?”

“Of course not.” He laughed, but ice congealed in his voice.

“Neither do I go anywhere without someone to protect my person and power.” She held out her hand to Rushtan and he crossed the room to stand beside her. “My master would be a fool to leave me where someone could hurt or try to steal me. And he is no fool.”

“What do you require of my woman?” Rushtan caught hold of Veerian’s hand and pressed a kiss on palm and back. His stomach twisted in pure greedy pleasure when the lovely gesture brought a blush to her cheeks. If only she could be his, day and night, in truth and not subterfuge.

“Health. Long life. You will sell her to me.” Homaan spoke with the confidence of one who always got what he wanted.

“No.” Rushtan smiled and kept his hand open and away from the pommel of his sword.

“I want her.”

“That’s more than clear,” Veerian snapped, “but I don’t want you. Do you know what an angry Song Weaver can do to your mind and your body? Don’t presume to force me or threaten me.”

“But you are only a minor Song Weaver.” He clapped his hands

SONG WEAVER

four times, and the other six bodyguards burst into the inn.

Rushtan stepped in front of Veerian. His men leaped up from their lounging positions. In moments, the ten bodyguards were either unconscious or lying on the floor with a mercenary sitting on them or holding them at sword's point. Several bled. Chandan's man gasped and his eyes watered and he cradled his broken arm close to his chest. Anku had barely taken two steps away from the door where he had leaned.

"You'll pay for that," Homaan snarled. "I hold the garrison commander in the palm of my hand! He'll hunt you down like the vermin you are."

"Does Commander Jehoakaz know you own him?" Veerian asked in a tone like honey-coated knife blades.

"Who?" he snarled. He held out his hand. "Submit to me now, and I won't have your master gelded."

"No, you won't." She pressed her hand on Rushtan's arm and tried to shove him aside.

He didn't move. He had to bite his lip against a grin when she snorted and stepped around him.

"That's a wise move." Homaan chuckled. "Come to me."

Veerian opened her mouth and sang. Four pure, high, penetrating notes rang out before Rushtan realized she sang in another language. From the chill racing up his back, he guessed she sang in Nai'hash'vi. The notes vibrated in his bones and made his muscles quiver. Anger flamed in her eyes and she curled her lips in distaste and visibly focused all her power, her anger, at the arrogant fool who still smirked in triumph.

The crockery on the table buzzed. The light coming through the doorway and windows blurred, and rainbows quivered along the edges of the beams of golden white.

Homaan's eyes widened and his smile faded into an "o" of stunned

SONG WEAVER

surprise.

Veerian sang, words that sounded harsh despite the pure ringing clarity of her voice. She kept time with her steps and stalked across the room to face Homaan. At a slight flick of her wrist, the rich man stood. Sweat poured down his face, soaking his clothes, and filled the room with a stink like a midden. The guards on the floor slowly got to their feet. They glanced at Homaan, then turned to Rushtan, very careful not to look at Veerian. As one man, they lay down their weapons and fled the room. Anku crept forward, small steps, like an uncertain child. In that moment, he seemed very young.

“Forgive me,” Homaan squeaked, as Veerian’s song stopped with an abruptness that worried Rushtan.

He reached for her. She smiled and leaned into his arm and he wrapped it tight around her. She felt as thin as mist and that frightened him more than the fury and power she had exhibited just a moment before.

“For a full year, you will not lie or threaten. Every time you try to harm another, whether it be cheating at business or keeping something that someone lost or slapping a servant for making a mistake, you shall feel their loss and pain and shame. Only doing good deeds will bring you comfort. Only giving pleasure to others will give you pleasure,” Veerian whispered. Her smile went crooked and her dusky skin took on a grayish tinge. “Do you think me harsh? Go to Bainevah and speak to my teachers, Queen Mayar, High Priestess of the Healers Temple, and Inieri, Chief of all Song Weavers. Only they have the right to judge me and to release you from my song.”

“I only wanted—” Homaan choked and shuddered and sank back to sit on the bench.

“You wanted to own me, take your pleasure in my pain and humiliation, learn all the limits of my talent and rent me to anyone who had enough gold to pay. You thought to use me as a weapon, to

SONG WEAVER

threaten others with powers and strength you didn't believe I possessed." She leaned heavily into Rushtan's support, and he tightened his grip to hold her up. "You were wrong."

"He'll send his men after us. Ten times as many." Porual's voice showed he didn't care either way.

"I don't think he'll have any guards or servants left when he gets home," Ho'an said with a nasty grin. "Did you see their faces when they ran?"

"They ran?" Homaan turned, shivering, and looked around the inn room. He whimpered when he saw he was alone.

"Song Weavers are revered almost as highly as the Three and priests in these parts," Anku said. "Everyone loves Lady Veerian for what she's done already. They'd never think she'd be so harsh unless you did something truly awful. And your reputation speaks against you, Lord Homaan." He nodded toward the stairs. "I think the lady is ready to fold."

Rushtan agreed. He swept Veerian up in his arms and carried her upstairs while the rest of the band set Homaan on his horse and on his way home. Rushtan doubted the man had enough wits to guide the horse in the right direction.

"I'm going to pay for this," Veerian whispered.

She smiled in weary triumph as Rushtan settled her in her bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. He thought she was asleep, but she smiled a little wider and sighed when he kissed her forehead.

"You are the greatest treasure and mightiest weapon of Bainevah," he whispered. Rushtan forced himself to go to the door. If he lingered another moment, he knew he would lie down next to her and hold her until her strength returned, and that wouldn't do either of them any good.

Anku waited, wiping tables and setting up for the noon flux of customers when Rushtan returned downstairs. No one else had come

SONG WEAVER

back inside. The young blacksmith glanced at him, no curiosity or fear on his wide-boned, tanned face. Those blue eyes blazed with something like satisfaction.

“She gelded him for a time,” he said, when Rushtan sat down at the table closest to the kitchen door.

“How do you know?” He smothered a snort. Homaan certainly deserved that, after the way he had looked at Veerian.

“She sang the words. No pleasure, no begetting, no easing, no hunger, no—” He stopped, mouth comically hanging open for a few heartbeats. “That’s odd.”

“What is? Besides you understanding Nai’hash’vi?”

“Is that the language? You see, that’s what’s so odd. I don’t understand the words, but I still knew what she sang.” Anku shrugged and tossed the scrub rag into the bucket. “Mother says I have a gift for music. I only know it helps me with the iron if I sing as I hammer.”

“Now I truly wish you were coming with us.” Rushtan held up his hand to stop the expected protest. “I know. Your duty and honor are more important than our quest. But when we return in a few moons, promise me you’ll sing with my lady.”

“It’ll be an honor and a joy.” He held up his hand, palm forward, making his words a pledge.

Their band left early the next morning, before the inn’s fires had settled down into coals suitable for cooking. Rushtan knew the glee over Homaan’s punishment would soon shift to fear of Veerian’s power. He didn’t want her to be hurt by that.

* * *

Fourth Ascent Moon

Veerian wondered how Anku managed to help his mother run the inn and become such a skilled blacksmith, when he had obviously spent moons at a time exploring the valleys, plateaus and canyons that

SONG WEAVER

stretched beyond the horizon. Anku's years of exploring saved them moons of fruitless search. Still, that didn't help in finding some sign of the Hidden City. She sang herself hoarse, in Bainevah and Nai'hash'vi, songs about sight, finding lost things and tumbling walls. Either the songs were useless, or the magic barriers constantly retreated beyond the sound of her voice.

Equinox came and went, and they passed the night in quiet contemplation. A hosta hawk came from Jehoakaz three moon quarters later, with the news that Lord Shazzur was dead, Prince Elzan injured, and First Concubine Lady Challen had taken her father's place as adviser to the king. Rushtan swore when Veerian read the message aloud.

"She can't be concubine to Elzan anymore, if she's an adviser," he explained. "Elzan is probably furious. He didn't deserve that. Neither of them did."

Veerian agreed, remembering the tenderness and affection she witnessed, between Challen and the prince. She didn't quite understand why Challen's rise in position negated her role as First Concubine. It was inconvenient and bad timing, according to Jehoakaz's message. Ambassador Anbis of Dreva had declared that prophecy had chosen Challen to marry the Priest-King of Dreva. Because she had served as priestess when she was a Bride, and Mother Matrika had inhabited her as Skataeroz of Dreva inhabited the Priest-King, this marriage would unite the two countries.

Challen had not refused, and from what little Veerian knew of politics, her friend had been unable to refuse outright without instigating a war. However, Queen Mayar and the king had decreed that Challen could neither accept nor deny any such proposal until the time of mourning for her father had ended. That gave them until solstice to find a solution.

"Why can't she be First Concubine as well as First Advisor?"

SONG WEAVER

Veerian said for what felt like the eighth time. They had discussed the danger in refusing Dreva and giving their most dangerous enemy what it wanted. Politics made her head ache.

“Dignity.” Rushtan snorted, showing what he thought of that problem. “A concubine, even First Concubine—even a priestess—doesn’t have the rights, prestige and power of a wife. I was only a few years old when Queen Mayar became Healer High Priestess. The priesthood wanted to remove her from the palace. Nobles wanting their daughters to become a concubine pressed for it. Because of the dignity of the High Priestess, of course. Elzan’s presence as firstborn and Heir Presumptive made it possible for her to stay First Concubine and become High Priestess as well. Too bad Challen isn’t pregnant with Elzan’s child. I know he’d marry her and make her Princess Consort and Mother of the Heir—”

“Heir to the Heir,” Porual interrupted with a grin.

“Heir to the Heir, immediately.” He sighed. “This is one of those times I’m glad I haven’t tangled my life with someone. Marriage and children are too much of a complication.”

“Nothing but problems,” Ho’an added with a little more gusto than Veerian thought appropriate. The relief in Rushtan’s voice certainly stung her ears. “Not that having a woman in your bed and your life isn’t sweet,” he hurried to add. “Gives a man a reason to live through a battle.” He sighed. “Just too many things can go wrong, when there’s someone else to think about.”

“Soldiers have no right to take wives and children,” Porual added. “Love my wife and our girls. Kills me to say good-bye. They grow up too fast while you’re gone. You trust your woman with your life, but you can’t trust everyone else not to try to steal her every time she’s alone.”

“Would you quit?” Veerian smiled bitterly when some of the men sitting around the campfire jumped. Had they forgotten she was there?

SONG WEAVER

Or, more likely, forgotten she was a woman?

“Quit my Enisheba or the Host?” The army healer’s eyes went wide. “I suppose I could...but I’m a soldier more than I’m a healer priest.”

“You have to be a soldier to be a healer in places like the Dregs.”

“True.” He started to nod, then caught himself and shook his head instead. “The army is my life—and so are my wife and daughters. It’s probably easier for you others.”

“We take care of our needs with harlots, or we batter our enemies to a bloody pulp, instead,” Chandan added with a gruff chuckle. The others echoed him.

Veerian told herself to be grateful none of them had ever approached her to ease their needs. Did that mean they didn’t see her as a harlot, they feared her, or they didn’t see her as a woman at all? She shook her head and silently scolded herself not to think along that route any longer.

When she finally slept, her dreams were tinged with tears and heartache. Despite knowing a chasm lay between them—prince and tavern singer—she had begun to hope. His words showed that even if she was the daughter of the highest noble in the land, Rushtan would never ask for her. A wife, family and home were nothing but problems, complications and burdens.

* * *

Summer Solstice

The night of solstice, Rushtan took first watch. He walked the perimeter of the camp, just outside the flicker of firelight. Tomorrow they would return to Larch Haven. They would have rooms again, meaning he wouldn’t be able to watch Veerian sleep. That was both blessing and torture. He wouldn’t wonder what dreams made her smile, or ache to drive away the nightmares that brought little whimpers to her

SONG WEAVER

lips.

As he watched her sleep, he dreamed of lying next to her in the darkness and hearing her whisper his name in her dreams. He tortured himself with dreams of holding her close, waiting for her to give him what she had given to other ardent admirers.

Rushtan refused to beg. He wanted her to offer. He wouldn't take her here, out under the starry sky with all his men as witnesses. He needed a closed door and thick walls, and those were waiting at Anku's inn. Tomorrow night.

He tortured himself, imagining Veerian refusing him.

He wouldn't beg. Wouldn't even ask. But he would tell her he wanted her. How could she not know he wanted her?

Veerian screamed, sitting up in her blankets on the opposite side of the camp. Sleeping men erupted from their blankets. The men around the fire flew to her. Porual reached her first. She clung to him, shuddering, and Rushtan could have cheerfully killed the healer for that.

Then Veerian saw him and croaked, "Challen—Queen Mayar—"

Rushtan snatched her from Porual and clutched her close. It took all his self-control not to shake her and demand an explanation. Someone brought a wineskin and he held it up to squirt some into her mouth. Most of it ran down the front of her shirt, but enough got into her mouth to do some good. She swallowed and coughed and let go of him with one hand to rub at her face.

"I saw it all," she whispered in a shredded voice. "I was in the palace, in my dreams. Skataeroz came into Bainevah—"

"The demi-gods can't go to other lands," Ho'an objected. "The Unseen has laws, to keep them from attacking each other."

"They can't unless their worship dies. Or they're invited," Rushtan said. His stomach filled with ice in dread anticipation of the story Veerian would tell.

SONG WEAVER

“Prince Anath.” She convulsed, her throat working as if she would be sick. “The king killed him, called him traitor. Anath invited the Priest-King. Skataeroz lives in his body—all the time, not just on holy days.”

Rushtan understood now why she was so rending sick. It was a hard enough concept to see a priest glowing with the power of Matrika as she spoke through him, or to know Mother Matrika inhabited the Bride during the Sacred Marriage. Elzan had told him how drained and weak Challen had been when it happened to her. He couldn’t imagine the torment, the exhaustion that filled someone when a demi-god *lived* in his body. What happened to the displaced soul?

“He came to force Lady Challen—he insisted she had to marry him, that it was prophecy, to unite Dreva and Bainevah. He came to kill Elzan and take over Bainevah by raping Challen, who is High Priest Chizhedek’s heir. But Challen was with Prince Elzan—they’ve been sleeping together in secret.” She stopped and gulped and caught her breath. “She’s pregnant.”

“But the king took her away from the prince,” someone protested out of the darkness.

“Idiot.” Rushtan couldn’t be sure if he addressed the speaker or his brother. What did Elzan think he was doing, defying the king’s orders, breaking Challen’s period of mourning, defying a demi-god, to sleep with the woman he loved?

But filling Challen with his child would certainly protect her from the demands of Ambassador Anbis and the Priest-King and Dreva, wouldn’t it? Rushtan thought a silent prayer of thanks that Challen had become pregnant in the few short moons since the Drevans made their demand. Solstice ended her mourning. Why hadn’t the Drevans waited until morning to make their demand? Why attack in the middle of the night?

Elzan had taken great risks to protect Challen. Rushtan’s arms

SONG WEAVER

tightened around Veerian, catching a glimmer of what motivated his brother.

“Lady Challen hosted Matrika, just as she did at winter solstice,” Veerian continued. “And Matrika overpowered the Priest-King and Skataeroz. They’re all safe—but the realm of the demi-gods shook tonight.”

“Deep magic,” Ho’an muttered. “We’ll feel the echoes of it for moons to come, I don’t doubt. Matrika was merciful to let you see, so we’d get a fair warning.”

“Not what I would call mercy,” Veerian grumbled. Rushtan helped her take some more wine.

He let go of her reluctantly to wrap her in her blankets. She leaned against him for several hours, while their band discussed the ramifications of her vision. Sometimes questions made her remember a few details, which she related to them. Most of the time, she leaned against Rushtan and he gloried in the knowledge that she found comfort in his presence.

* * *

Anku ran to meet them as their party rode down the central street of Larch Haven. Unseasonal rain turned the hard-packed dirt road slick, and he slid as he reached them and tried to stop. He snatched at the bridle of Rushtan’s horse. Veerian’s chest tightened in sympathy, seeing the fear in his wide eyes.

“Thank Matrika you’re back. Our healer is away. Please—Mother—”

Rushtan leaped from the saddle and reached up to help Veerian down in a heartbeat. He half-carried her for the first four steps as they ran to the inn. Anku took them through the main room, through the kitchen, to a separate building out back, shielded from view by a line of tall, thin, leafy trees. Rushtan let Veerian step ahead of him, following Anku up the stairs, to a wide, airy room. A small woman sat in a chair

SONG WEAVER

by the window. Her ivory-hued, parchment-thin skin stretched tight over delicate bones. She turned to them as they came to a stop, smiled, and spoke without opening her eyes.

“Song Weaver. Naya told me you would come. It’s my sin I didn’t have my son—Naya’s son—bring you to me when you were first here.”

“Mother?” Anku dropped to his knees next to her chair.

“Lady Naya spoke to you?” Rushtan said, his voice catching.

“Priestess Shanda.” Veerian went to her knees next to the chair.

“Priestess? Mother, what’s going on?” Anku demanded.

“You are Doni’Shazzur’Asha’Naya, son of First Advisor King’s Seer Lord Shazzur and Fire Priestess Naya, daughter of High Priest Chizhedek. Your sister, Lady Challen, is the next High Priestess to the Mother,” Rushtan said. He held out his hands, palms up, in a salute of greeting between equals.

“Challen?” The young blacksmith went pale. He took one step back, slowly shaking his head. “I thought that was all a game. A story. Make-believe.”

“Could we attend to that later?” Veerian took hold of Shanda’s hand. The woman looked fevered, sweat beading her forehead, but her hand was cold. “It is more important to heal the sick than to worry about prophecies and missions and what’s been happening in the capital in the last four moons.”

“Please. What’s wrong with her?” Anku knelt on the other side of the chair.

“Sing with me, and we will learn.” She turned to Rushtan. “Would you bring my harp?”

She studied the withered little woman while they waited for Rushtan to return. Veerian suspected that even if she had met Shanda when they first came to Larch Haven, she wouldn’t have recognized her. The ginger-colored hair had faded, the curls had lost their bounce, and long, tangled skeins of scars twisted her face and extended down

SONG WEAVER

into the blankets and robe wrapped around her. She guessed the lingering effects of the damage that had scarred Shanda had sapped her strength for years.

“How long have you suffered?” She took the woman’s hand more firmly in her grasp and stroked it, practicing the calming technique Lady Mayar had taught her.

“Let me save you time, and me some breath.” Shanda managed a thin smile and settled back more firmly in her chair. “Enku and I returned to these mountains twelve years ago, fleeing the priests of the Three. They knew we had the spindle and we had Naya’s son. They wanted him to salvage their power. Something wonderful and terrible happened the day they killed Naya. Enku suspected that the Three were set free. At the very least, the priesthood’s power had crumbled. The Hidden City was no longer hidden, the last time we saw it, and that is likely the most horrible thing that could have happened to them. But they kept trying to hide it again, to regain control over the Three. They needed Asha, my Anku, for that.” She opened her amber eyes and met Veerian’s gaze. “The city is hidden again and disaster has struck Bainevah, hasn’t it? Despite everything we did, despite Naya’s warnings...” A single tear trickled down her cheek.

“We are here to find the Hidden City and bring Asha home to Bainevah.” Veerian pitched her voice to be soft and soothing. She smiled her thanks when Rushtan returned and handed her harp to her. “Lady Challen has served Matrika well, and now it is Asha’s turn to fulfill his destiny. Where is Priest Enku?”

“We thought the safest place to hide was in the shadow of our enemies, so we came back to these hills. We were wrong. They caught up with us. One of them pulled Asha from my arms. He was holding the spindle. It was the only way we could move it,” she said, her smile a little brighter. “Only he could touch it, could lift it. That’s why they wanted him, you know. They hurt me and my boy saw the blood

SONG WEAVER

and...there is nothing so fierce as the fury of a child. He brought the mountainside down on us all.”

“No!” Anku leaped to his feet.

No, Veerian reminded herself, *his name is Asha*. She had to use that name from now on.

Asha leaped to his feet. “You’re telling me *I* killed Father?”

“No, Enku killed himself. The same power that brought down the mountain held it off of us. Wherever we went, the rocks and water and fire turned aside, as if an invisible wall surrounded us. We ran to safety, and we were safe as long as we stayed with our boy.” A spasm of pain twisted her face. “Then Enku went back to make sure our enemies couldn’t follow us. When he left the safety of the magic that enfolded us, he was caught in a landslide and...taken from us.”

“And you went to help him,” Rushtan guessed.

“I was harmed, but my boy came after me.” A tiny snort of laughter shook her shoulders. “He was furious with me for leaving him alone, even for the few seconds it took to get caught in a rain of shards of rock.” She ran one trembling, skeletal hand down the scars marring the side of her face.

“You have done a great and good thing, Priestess Shanda, who served the Three more faithfully than all those who stayed in the Hidden City,” Veerian pronounced. She lightly stroked her fingertips across her harp strings, bringing a shimmer of sound into the room. “Listen and hear what has happened in the years of your exile, and I will bring you ease and healing, as much as I am able.”

Gazing into the woman’s eyes, she sang. First, just simple children’s songs about lost princes and servants of the demi-gods living in disguise. Then about lost treasures and magic that changed the true appearance of things. Then she sang healing songs, to soften the scars and put strength and health back into twisted bones and warmth into chilled flesh.

SONG WEAVER

Rushtan knelt next to her and put an arm around her shoulders, to hold her upright. She welcomed the warmth of him, driving away the weakness and chill that she felt when she merged spirits with Shanda and felt her suffering. Asha held his mother's hand. He watched Veerian, and the confused, resentful scowl slowly melted away as her songs drew him in. Without her urging, mother and son sang snatches of the songs with her. Veerian felt their spirits moving through the air, like tightly wound flags loosening to wave in the breeze. She became one with that breeze, moving them.

Striking a chord that bordered on dissonance, she sang in Nai'hash'vi, and drew them all, including Rushtan, into the weaving of her song. She played minor chords and sang simple phrases, telling them of the return of Shazzur and Challen from exile, and the coming of the magic that stole shadows and a man's volition, so he became a puppet for the enemy. She sang of solstice, the Sacred Marriage and the blessing Challen and Elzan brought to Bainevah. She sang of the things she had learned in the messages carried by the hosta hawk, and her shattering vision at summer solstice.

"Show me, tell me, sing to me," she commanded, six times, singing louder, transitioning the key until her harp played all major chords. Asha and Shanda opened their mouths. Sound emerged, not words, but enough to put images into her mind that showed her how it had been for them all these years.

Shanda had become a cook at this inn, when it was much smaller and rougher. Asha ran errands and worked in the stable until he became friends with the blacksmith and apprenticed with him. Shanda's cooking made the inn popular and she became a partner. Merchant caravans changed their routes to come there. Larch Haven grew prosperous, the inn expanded, and Shanda took over the inn three years ago. Her presence and Asha's had blessed the village.

Veerian showed them how they had helped everyone around them,

SONG WEAVER

bringing blessings on Larch Haven because its people had helped the two chosen servants of Mother Matrika.

“Chosen servants?” Asha asked, breaking into the fading notes of the harp. “Chosen for what?”

“Mother Matrika alone knows. But we can guess,” Rushtan added. “Queen Mayar told me how Lady Naya died, drugged and locked in a chest and drowned by the Drevans. Your father’s love for her was so strong, he demanded the right to give his life in trade for hers. Matrika gave them a chance to be together and love for a while, if they gave their children back to her at birth, dedicated to her service. Your sister has served Bainevah at the risk of her life and happiness. Now it’s your turn, Doni’ Shazzur.”

“I’m Anku, son of Enku,” the young man nearly growled.

“Be sensible,” Shanda said with an exasperated sigh. She laughed when her son turned to her and his mouth dropped open.

Most of the scars had faded. Shanda’s color was better, including a little ginger in her formerly dull hair. The pain that twisted her body had softened, letting her sit straighter. Her hands didn’t look like twigs covered with parchment and her voice had strength and life to it.

“You look nothing like Enku or me. Only a fool would believe you came from my body,” the old priestess continued. “The curse on the Hidden City made it impossible for us to have children. Naya gave us a great gift when she entrusted you to our care. It’s time to give you back to your family.”

“Lord Shazzur told me you are the key to restore the Hidden City and destroy once and for all the false worship of the Three. The mission your mother gave her life to fulfill.” Veerian wanted to slap the young man for being so stubborn. She actually envied him, having two sets of parents who loved him, while her own parents had been scoundrel and victim, abuser and abused, and only claimed her for the sake of profit.

“We need you,” Rushtan added. “I can command you to aid us, but

SONG WEAVER

Matrika prefers her servants be willing, rather than turn them into mindless husks and slaves.”

“Command me?” Asha sneered. “You have no authority.”

“I am Prince Doni’Coori, commander of archers in the Host of the Ram, right-hand commander to Crown Prince Doni’Nebazz, who has married your sister. You and I are uncles to the child she carries. That makes us distant kin, if my royal rank means nothing to you.”

Veerian shivered, listening to Rushtan. It was as if he had pulled a heavy cloak out of thin air and wrapped it around himself, changing his voice and stance and even the expression on his face. He was fully royal, fully military, displaying his right and power to command young Asha to work with them. She found she missed the mercenary commander.

“Very distant kin.” Asha shook his head and settled down on the arm of Shanda’s chair. “I do owe you for healing Mother. But how can I find the Hidden City? It’s impossible.”

“Do you still have the spindle?” Veerian asked. His head snapped around and his mouth set in grim lines as he stared at her. “The spindle was given to your mother—your birth mother,” she conceded, with a nod to Shanda, “by the Three. Maybe they saw ahead to this day and sent the key to their freedom out of the Hidden City, before the walls came down completely.”

“Supposing you’re right, we have to *find* the Hidden City, first.”

“You have a reputation,” Rushtan said. “You can go anywhere in these mountains. You find people in storms and avalanches and floods when others have given them up for lost. You sing away the dark spirits that plague other travelers. No danger ever befalls you. Perhaps that is a gift from the spindle. Maybe that ability is our clue as well. How do you do it? Do you know?”

“I...” Asha frowned, but he didn’t look quite as angry as before. Veerian suspected all this intrigued him. “I carry a picture in my head,

SONG WEAVER

like all my maps all drawn together, in colors. I can see the rivers and the different types of trees, and when there are floods I can feel the water changing direction to go with the land.”

“Is there any place where the picture is empty?”

Asha’s eyes widened and the last of the angry flush left his face. He nodded slowly.

“Why is it empty?” Veerian asked. “Do you go in there and can’t remember what you see?”

“It...something moves my steps away. I get cold. Inside.” For a moment, he looked very young and vulnerable. Veerian remembered with a shock that he was only eighteen. She had seen him all this time as a mature, capable, experienced man. A warrior. He was only a boy who had grown up before his time with the heavy weight of responsibility.

“You have been formed for this, born for this, chosen since before your birth,” she whispered. “You have been kept alive and safe for this special duty, and all Bainevah will bless you.”

“That doesn’t guarantee I’ll live through this, does it?” Asha asked with a sharp bark of laughter.

“Mother Matrika doesn’t guarantee anything,” Rushtan said. “But I can speak from personal experience that if you’re willing to trust her and do what’s necessary, she takes care of her servants. Maybe my sole purpose in life is to find you. Veerian survived a cruel childhood and discovered her power as a Song Weaver, maybe just to find you, and work with you to release the Hidden City and the Three. Maybe none of us are supposed to live once our jobs are done. Are you going to let that stop you?”

“Who’s going to take care of my mother if I die doing this?”

“I’ve lived longer than anyone intended,” Shanda said with a dry chuckle. “Don’t use me as an excuse, boy.” She held up a thin hand that no longer shook, and he clasped it. “Enku and I should have died when

SONG WEAVER

we left the Hidden City, cast out with your mother as heretics. We didn't die. I was glad to live here and take care of the inn and watch you grow up. It's been a gift I never thought to have, to be a mother. But I'll admit, I'm heartily tired of cooking and cleaning and living out here where it takes moons for news to reach us and the new songs to trickle out our way. I want to live in Bainevah again and be served for a change. I want to feel the city pulse around me like a giant heartbeat. I want to stand before Matrika's altar and know that I have done all she gave me to do when she formed me in my mother's womb," she added on a whisper, with a smile.

"All right, then we'll go to Bainevah." Asha slid off the arm of the chair and gestured at the door, as if they would leave that very moment. A grin cracked his face when Rushtan opened his mouth to protest. "After we find the Hidden City, of course."

CHAPTER 13

“Tell me about my sister?” Asha asked, when Larch Haven had vanished below the horizon behind them.

Rushtan knew he should be grateful the young man didn’t ride in sulky silence with them, but it irritated him that Asha had claimed *his* spot next to Veerian. And it irritated him that he was irritated.

He knew he shouldn’t be petty. Still, he didn’t like the way Veerian’s expression lit when Asha brought out a flute, a small traveling harp and triple-headed drum and tied them to the saddle of his horse. Rushtan wished he had some musical talent beyond humming and clapping on the beat. He didn’t like it that Asha had so much in common with Veerian.

Didn’t it irritate her, just a little, to have such a large change in their comfortable routine? Didn’t the others in their band resent the intruder? Maybe they were all relieved to have their mission nearly completed. Maybe he was the only one who didn’t look forward to returning to the

SONG WEAVER

city and their old lives.

The others had lives, sweethearts and families to return to. He had his sister, Cayeen and the half-brothers who had survived the upheaval in the wake of Anath's betrayal. Rushtan did look forward to hearing all the details of that particular battle against Skataeroz. But when he really thought about it, he preferred staying out here. He liked this life their band had made with Veerian, traveling and exploring, never staying one place more than two nights in a row.

Why? He didn't let himself think too long on that question, because he sensed he wouldn't like everything he learned about himself.

Did Asha have to grin like that at Veerian? What had she just said to him? Why did she chatter like that, eyes glowing, laughter and then wistfulness in her voice? It was almost like a dam had broken and moons' worth of words flowed out in a sparkling river. Didn't she feel free to talk with Rushtan?

"Is something wrong?" Veerian asked him when they stopped to make camp that night.

"Wrong?" He bit his tongue to keep from asking if she was tired of talking with Asha. Other sarcastic remarks waited to spill out. He was tired enough to want to let them loose, but not so tired he didn't know they were unworthy and cruel.

His head ached from the pressure of wanting to fight with her—why would he want to fight with Veerian?—and his shame at feeling like a sulky, spoiled brat.

"You've been scowling most of the day. Do you have a headache? Should I sing for you?"

"No. Don't take the risk."

"What risk? Are we being followed?" She glanced in several directions and stepped a little closer to him.

"Could be," Chandan said, coming past them with an armful of wood for the cooking fire. "The horses aren't happy. There's enough

SONG WEAVER

forest through here, and the passes are narrow enough, we could have a spy following us and we wouldn't know until he tried to sneak into the camp." He grinned, baring his teeth. "Then he'd wish he had stayed home."

"Priests of the Three?" She shivered, though the evening was pleasantly warm.

"If they know we're looking for the Hidden City, it's likely."

"Asha could be in more danger than ever." She turned, looking through the camp for the young man.

"He's safe." Rushtan snatched at her arm when she turned to leave his side. "Don't smother him."

"Smother?" She started to laugh, but her gaze touched his face and the sound died in her throat. "Rushtan, what's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing. We just shouldn't be careless, that's all. We have the tool, the guide, and hopefully the magic we need to break down the walls and find the Hidden City. Now isn't the time to relax and get arrogant."

"Not that. I know we've been in danger since we left Bainevah." She shook her head. "I'm talking about you."

"Me?" He snorted. "Nothing wrong with me. I'm just relieved to have this job over with. Or almost."

"I'm certain you're delighted to head back to Bainevah and the palace and your life of honor. It's almost a year since the magic attacked you. Yes, I imagine you're impatient to put all this behind you." She yanked hard, trying to tug her arm free.

"Now it's my turn to ask—what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She pasted on a tight, false smile. "I just didn't realize until this moment that you didn't like this life. You're a wonderful actor."

"I like this life." Something leaped inside him, contrasting sharply with the sick sense that Veerian was angry with him.

SONG WEAVER

“That’s what I thought. Until you said how much you wanted to finish our task. When I return to the temple, we might see each other once in a while, at festivals. You don’t have to feel compelled to acknowledge my presence.”

“Acknowledge your presence?” His sharp bark of uncertain laughter cut short. A heavy feeling hit him in the stomach. “You’re going to spend most of your time with the boy when we get back, aren’t you?”

“The boy? You mean Asha? He’s a grown man.”

“He’s eighteen. He wouldn’t even be finished with his training if he was in the army.”

“He’ll probably go to the Scribes Hall and follow in his father’s footsteps. Who knows?” Veerian yanked hard, and this time freed herself. “He might become a Song Weaver. Maybe I should start his lessons on the journey back. Then you won’t have to waste time on either of us, will you?”

“Waste time?” He reached for her, but she skipped backward out of his reach. “You’ve spent too much time on him already.”

“It’s not like you were looking for me.”

“Looking for you?” He shook his head. “You didn’t even know I was anywhere near you.”

“I thought you would be relieved to get rid of me. I’m only now realizing what a burden I’ve been. It must gall you to have a helpless woman with you.”

“Helpless?” He barely muffled a sharp *hah!* Veerian was the most un-helpless woman he had ever met. Her song alone could cripple a man, if she so chose. “You don’t need anyone.”

“That should be a relief to you, shouldn’t it?”

“I don’t—I want—I like riding with you. I like talking with you. What’s wrong with you all of a sudden?”

“Me?” A loud sigh gusted out through her pursed lips. “Nothing is

SONG WEAVER

wrong with me. What are we arguing for?"

"Are we arguing? You're making silly accusations about me."

"And you're jealous of Asha for no reason."

"Jealous? Why? Of what?"

In that moment, he knew he had made a major error. The angry sparkles in Veerian's eyes died. She inhaled sharply and hurried away, shoulders hunched. Rushtan watched her, feeling more helpless than when he woke in the temple and realized what had happened to him.

"Do they teach you how to be rude, in the palace?" Asha asked from directly behind him.

Rushtan turned around, barely stopping himself from raising his clenched fist. Knocking the young man flat on his back and breaking a few of his teeth or his nose wouldn't help their cause. Though, he admitted, it would make him feel much better.

"You *are* jealous," the young blacksmith continued. "She's being my friend, that's all. You know, she told me she was worried about hurting your feelings, since she usually rides with you. Porual said they usually have to trick you to leave her alone, so they can talk with her once in a while. I don't think Veerian should have worried."

"You have a lot of gall, speaking that way to—" Rushtan swallowed the rest of his words. He sounded like his more arrogant brothers at that moment, and he hated it.

"Speaking that way to my superior? You yourself said that I'm brother to the next queen, son of a nobleman on the King's Council, son of a priestess, grandson of the High Priest. That sets me about as high in Bainevah's ranks as I can get without being a prince. Right now, that doesn't look like a step up." With a sneer and a clumsy bow, he walked away.

Rushtan turned slowly. He knew the rest of the band watched him, stealing surreptitious glances while they set up camp.

That was totally stupid. He stomped away, into the thickening

SONG WEAVER

shadows. Rushtan had his own share of work to do, to set up camp. He didn't want to be near anyone, to see anyone or have anyone looking at him, until he got his head clear.

Maybe some residue of that magic remained in his blood? Or was it something simpler, more insidious, and far older than a mere magic spell?

No. The only way he could clean up the mess he had just made was to stop looking for someone or something to blame. He had fumed all day, fed his irritation, and then spilled the whole bitter mess on Veerian. He had hurt her. It was no one's fault but his own.

* * *

"He's a prince. He doesn't think like the rest of us. He's used to having things a certain way, and it...bothered him to have things changed, that's all."

Veerian had talked herself into ignoring the aching confusion Rushtan had set reverberating through her. When Asha met her on her return from her short walk, she was able to spill the words so convincingly, she even managed to persuade herself a little more.

Still, it disappointed her that Rushtan could be as fallible as everyone else. She thought him different from other soldiers and nobles.

This was all for the best, she knew. Better that the walls of rank start reweaving now, before they returned to Bainevah. Then it wouldn't hurt so deeply when their lives drifted apart. She wouldn't have to worry about controlling her expression when she saw him in public or at Court functions.

"He's worse than Homaan ever was," Asha grumbled.

"Surely not that bad." She settled down on the log someone had dragged over in front of the central fire, and watched the flames dance.

Tonight was Ho'an's turn to cook. She had seen him leave the line of horses from time to time during their day's ride, catching rabbits and

SONG WEAVER

small birds. Veerian looked forward to the roasted, dripping, spicy meat that was the big man's specialty. No cooking could start until the flames had burned down to seething coals, and that granted her some privacy in front of the fire, to speak with Asha without being overheard. She couldn't take it if Rushtan heard her making excuses for him. She didn't want him to scowl at her again, didn't want to hear the anger in his voice. It hurt too much.

"Are all nobles that way? They think they can have what they want, exactly as they want it, and the rest of us have to bow and serve them whether we like it or not?"

"You're a noble," Veerian pointed out. She laughed at the momentary flash of disgust on his face. The brief explosion of sound felt like a flicker of pain, as if her body had forgotten how to laugh and didn't like the effort.

"I'll never treat anyone that way," he growled.

"Challen doesn't. She prefers doing for herself. She only accepts servants because she has so much to do. You'll like her."

"Hope so," he muttered. "Can you teach me to do what you did to Homaan?"

"Let's hope Lady Veerian never needs to do that again," Rushtan said. "She doesn't deserve such insults and abuse."

Veerian froze. She kept her gaze focused on the fire, though she couldn't have described it if someone asked. She ached at the weariness in Rushtan's voice; the same note she had heard when the frustrations of his imprisonment had become so great, she thought he might break down weeping. Or kill himself.

Rushtan stepped into her line of sight, so close his sword and thigh filled her field of vision. He reached down a hand in front of her face. It held a palmful of gallberries, bright green and purple clusters, freed of their thorny, transparent globes. Veerian's mouth watered just thinking about the eye-stinging bitterness mixed with cloying sweetness from

SONG WEAVER

the same stem.

“Everybody deserves something sweet after something bitter,” Rushtan said. “If you want to kick me in the knee while I’m here, warn me so I don’t drop them. It took me half an hour to get all the covering cleaned away.”

A tiny snort of laughter escaped her. Veerian finally raised her head and met his gaze. Uneasiness dulled his eyes when he tried to smile, reminding her of a beggar boy she had known many years ago. The boy had been kicked by a nobleman’s horse, but he smiled and kept begging, ignoring the pain while blood dripped down his leg.

Maybe *she* had hurt *him*?

“Please, Veerian. Take them before I get a cramp?”

“You, my lord prince, are ridiculous.” She sighed. Her hands shook slightly as she cupped them to accept the berries.

“That’s a compliment he doesn’t deserve,” Chandan called from the other side of the camp. He met Veerian’s gaze and winked. Another snort of laughter escaped her, taking with it a tight aching under her ribs. Suddenly, she could breathe.

Asha didn’t seem impressed by the byplay. He watched Rushtan walk over to where Ho’an squatted and cleaned his catch, in preparation for cooking. When Veerian offered him a berry, he shook his head.

“It’s not time for anything sweet. Not yet.” He stood up and strode out of the camp, into the gathering shadows. Veerian watched him and sighed.

“We’ve totally destroyed his life,” she whispered.

“Can’t leave him behind when we go home.” Porual stepped around the log and sat down where Asha had been a moment before. “Prince Elzan was pretty specific that we had to bring his lady’s brother back with us. Seems like he didn’t care about the Hidden City as much as he did about doing that for her.”

SONG WEAVER

“Family is important. I suppose.” She popped a berry in her mouth, gasped at the first spurt of bitterness that made her eyes water, then sighed in bliss as the syrupy sweet juice followed.

“Family is all we have when you take away all the decorations and problems—like rank and jobs and houses.” The army healer shrugged. “Can’t take anything into the Eternal Fields except your family. Which can be good and bad,” he added with a crooked grin.

Veerian laughed, mostly because she knew he expected it. She ate another berry, thinking about the time and effort Rushtan had spent on finding the treat for her. Had he gone specifically hunting the gallberries, or had they been a lucky find? He did have a touch of the poet in him, she admitted. Sweetness after the bitter. It was nice to know he had made the effort to apologize with more than words, and that their argument had bothered him as much as it did her.

No, wait a moment. He hadn’t really apologized, had he? She knew he was sorry, just from his actions, but it amused her in a sad sort of way to realize she wanted the words, too.

Maybe Rushtan didn’t know how to say the words. Maybe princes weren’t allowed to ever admit they were wrong.

It really was for the best if their lives drifted apart when they returned to Bainevah. She knew that. So why did it make her ache, and raise tears that couldn’t be fully blamed on gallberries?

* * *

Their band found a place that hadn’t been on Asha’s maps, entered through an opening in the high canyon walls they didn’t see until Asha and Veerian sang together. Even then, they sang so softly, Rushtan didn’t hear them until the moaning wind through the rocky crags above them died down. When he asked them what they were singing, both looked comically startled. When they paused, the gap in the rocky face before them vanished, seemingly solid rock again.

Rushtan didn’t like this rocky, gray expanse, winding through

SONG WEAVER

ravines and up onto plateaus. It was as if the ground writhed underneath them. As if the landscape constantly changed around them.

As if someone or something subtly urged them to stay away, by making it as unpleasant as possible.

Asha stared at the near-invisible gap in the rock and admitted in a strangely quiet voice that he had never seen that gap. His next words sent a coil of uneasiness through Rushtan's gut, when he admitted he had come to this place often, uneasy and yet compelled, and he had stood in front of this place a hundred times, with a song rising up in his throat until he thought he would choke on it.

Veerian and Asha led the band through the gap in the rock and kept singing until everyone emerged out the other side. Almost as if, Rushtan decided, they were afraid it would close up again with some of them trapped inside.

"I've never been able to sing here before," Asha said. "Veerian is why I can, now."

"It's not me," Veerian whispered. She pointed to Asha's hands.

Chandan swore, and a few others muttered curses. Rushtan stared at the gleaming, golden wooden spindle that Asha twisted between his hands. They all knew he had brought it, but he had never before taken it out of its sheepskin-lined leather bag.

"The spindle released the song. It's the key, just as Lord Shazzur told me," Veerian explained.

They rode for the rest of the day, winding through narrow, curving passages and up onto plateaus, and down again without any sensation of actually climbing or descending.

* * *

"See that?" Asha pointed at a gray, misty expanse in the valley below them.

Rushtan nodded. He bit back a "Morning mist, so what?" comment, because he knew his lingering irritation would come out in his voice.

SONG WEAVER

Besides, he suspected it was more than mist.

“I’ve seen this from a distance.” Asha stared at the silvery gray as if compelled or fascinated. “That high peak behind us, on the other side of the gap. I’ve climbed up there a hundred times and sat there and stared down into this...this maze of rock. And I could never really see anything except for this pocket of mist. It goes on for hundreds of leagues, I think.”

“Why didn’t you put it on the maps you gave us?” Ho’an asked.

Rushtan nodded, thankful he asked the question. He tried to avoid saying anything that Veerian might construe as ridiculous jealousy toward Asha.

“I couldn’t remember.” He shook his head, a rueful smile twisting his lips. “You don’t believe me, I know, but it’s the truth. When I leave here, I forget. And when I come back, I remember that I’ve been here, and I remember that I wanted to write it down, draw a map, make some record, but I never do it. I’ve even tried to draw maps while I’m here, but I always lose the maps. I’ve even burned a few in my campfire on my way home.”

“I believe you,” Veerian whispered. “It’s the magic that protects this place. You’re able to get through instead of being driven away, but you’re not totally immune to the magic, so it makes you forget.”

“We don’t dare leave this place until the walls have come down,” Rushtan said. “If we walk out and we forget, we might never make it back here.”

“Not with the spindle as the key,” Asha said, and patted the spindle, in its bag, hanging from his belt.

“Can you guarantee the priesthood’s magic won’t make you leave it behind somewhere?” he countered.

It made him feel a little better to see the boy nod, eyes dark and somber, not irritated or insulted. Maybe he wasn’t an arrogant young pup after all, but someone tumbled from familiar surroundings into a

SONG WEAVER

heroic, prophetic role he didn't want.

They rode all day, up and down through the strangely undulating landscape. The horses didn't strain, didn't act as if they went up and down hills and slopes, but walked flat ground. Rushtan suspected he had been duped by what his eyes saw, and the land was actually flat. For all he knew, nothing lay between them and the misty nothingness—no trees, no hills, no ravines and stone pillars. Perhaps this was all another part of the magical barrier to keep people away.

He grew more determined than ever to see the last barrier created by the black-robed priests toppled. Rushtan had grown up visiting the Healers Temple, seeing the good that was done with the powers granted by Mother Matrika. This magic that warped the world was a waste, an abomination.

Just before the sun began to descend in a wavering, watery sky, they reached the leading edge of the blot of misty nothingness. One moment they rode on solid ground, the next, a gap stretched out before them. No hole, no empty space, no expanse of sky—simply eye-aching nothing. Their horses balked and refused to go forward. Rushtan had learned long ago to trust the instincts of animals. They didn't think and often couldn't be fooled by things that tricked people.

"Let's make camp," he said, and swung down from the saddle.

"Are you sure?" Veerian tipped her head back, looking up and up. Rushtan looked where she did, and understood why that uneasy frown twisted her face.

The nothingness rose up in a wall, blocking the sky, so even the colors from the setting sun didn't penetrate. The light warped, like water going around a rock in a stream. He shuddered, imagining that nothingness falling on them, absorbing them, without sound or even the sensation of being crushed or devoured.

They backed away from the nothingness, into the shelter of a small rise in the landscape. If Rushtan's theory was correct, the lump of

SONG WEAVER

ground wasn't really there, but just something else warped by the barrier ahead of them. Their band set up camp with unusual quiet. They made a cold dinner because there was no wood for a fire. Porual and Ho'an had charge of the oil and lamps, and Rushtan was strangely glad of the smudges of scented smoke that kept away insects. The holy herbs might just keep them safe from vindictive magic, too.

Veerian and Asha talked quietly. Rushtan heard snatches of songs as they prepared for the first assault on the barrier. Asha brought out the spindle and slowly spun it through his fingers as they talked and hummed, trying out tunes and words. Every time the spindle sparked, reacting to the magic in the words Veerian sang, they made note of it.

Finally, when the moon hung directly over their heads, Veerian curled up in her blankets to try to sleep. Asha walked to the edge of the glow from the lamps and stared off into the darkness. He faced the barrier. Rushtan felt a kinship with the young man. How many times had he stood in the darkness, waiting for morning and battle to come? He got up from his place by the fire and walked over to join him. Asha just looked at him, didn't smile or frown, nodded acceptance of his presence and went back to contemplating the darkness and the nothingness beyond it.

Morning came with agonizing slowness, gray and heavy, and yet too soon for Rushtan's comfort. There was more to defeating this magic than simply singing it open, keyed by the spindle in Asha's hands. Yet he couldn't think of what that more might be. Like a rope pulled so tight that it whipped and stung like a snake when it was released, this magic would backlash at them. He sat up all night thinking, trying to remember, wishing he could ask Elzan or Challen for advice. But he couldn't, not without delaying for moons of travel. And he still believed, if they left this hidden place, they would never find the way back.

Veerian and Asha both declined breakfast. They washed and drank

SONG WEAVER

some of the restorative brew Shanda had sent with them, then sang a few songs softly to each other, like soldiers exercised to warm up their muscles before battle.

“Don’t take chances. Foolish chances,” Rushtan amended, when Veerian and Asha stood up and turned as one person toward the barrier. “There’s time. How long has the Hidden City been hidden? Centuries. A day or two more won’t matter.”

“If it doesn’t fall within the first day,” Veerian murmured, with a sad little smile, “I don’t think it ever will. Some magic, when it grows old, becomes partly alive. It learns. If we don’t topple it, who’s to say it won’t learn from our efforts and defeat us the next time we try?”

Rushtan thought of how Elzan jokingly complained that Challen knew far too much. He understood what his brother felt and meant now. Yet he had to admire Veerian for knowing so much about magic that she knew the inherent difficulties and traps.

“I’d come with you if my voice was any good,” he offered.

“If you stay close enough to watch us,” Asha said, “that might be enough. Mother always says the more people intercede with Matrika and the Unseen on the behalf of someone, the more power is directed to the healing or the effort. She always led in prayers and sacrifices when I went out on winter rescues.”

“Then we’ll stay on our knees the whole time you’re gone,” Chandan said. “Does it weaken anything to kneel on blankets, or do we have to kneel on bare ground?”

Veerian grinned and Asha managed a snort of laughter. Rushtan felt a little better as they turned and walked the short distance from their camp to the leading edge of the nothingness.

The first song was a duet of flutes. The barrier did nothing. Rushtan wasn’t quite sure what he thought would happen. Then Asha continued playing and Veerian sang a child’s song about opening a door. They sang a duet about falling walls after that, with Asha thumping out a

SONG WEAVER

complicated beat on his drums. Then they sang another duet, with Asha humming the countermelody while Veerian sang in Nai'hash'vi.

The barrier rippled, taking on colors so it was momentarily visible. Rushtan stood slowly and flinched as whispering hummed through the air. He realized the others had been muttering prayers while he watched. Their prayers grew louder and the rainbow reappeared and spread, like a watery oil patch on a pond.

Veerian shouted something in Nai'hash'vi that made the hairs on Rushtan's arms stand up.

Asha raised his hands with the spindle hovering in mid-air between them. It spun and shot off sparks. The sparks arched upward into a stream that shot straight into the faded rainbow wall of magic. The colors thickened and grew stronger.

Chandan swore. Rushtan took a step forward, reaching for Veerian, to pull her away. The prayers behind him shattered into shouts of warning and exclamations of surprise.

For a single heartbeat that seemed to last an eternity, a massive, sprawling city of white, black and gold towers and domes and step gardens stretched out to the horizon before them. Asha lowered one hand and Veerian grasped it. The two singers looked once at each other, nodded, and stepped forward with the spindle spinning in the air above their heads.

"Veerian! No!" Rushtan shouted. He grasped his sword and leaped to race after her.

The city, the rainbows, the spindle and the singers vanished.

* * *

Veerian staggered, feeling as if the entire Hidden City had slapped her off her feet. She clung to Asha. His blacksmith muscles gave her an illusion of solidity as the world spun and rippled and melted around them. The song caught in her throat, and died.

Colors melted to black and ice crept into her veins.

SONG WEAVER

* * *

Two moon quarters passed. Rushtan ran his men ragged, taking measurements, writing reports, surveying every bit of land that emerged from the nothingness that had swallowed Veerian and Asha. Little by little, the landscape changed, flattening just as he had theorized. The soldiers surrounded the city, pacing around the nothingness as long as they had light to see by, waiting for something—or someone—to emerge.

Sometimes, at sunrise and sunset, the Hidden City flickered into view, wavering as if seen from underwater. At the hottest, brightest part of the day, shimmers of rainbows floated in midair, giving ghostly outlines to the towers and rooftops and walls. Each dawn, the soldiers spread out to check the markers they pounded into the ground the day before and see how much land had emerged. Sometimes it was only a finger's width, sometimes as much as a long stride, but land did emerge.

Veerian and Asha never appeared, though Rushtan strained his eyes searching for them, until blood vessels burst and he thought he would go blind. Sometimes he dreamed of them, their voices caught in that one last note they sang before they vanished.

As if they were still caught in that moment.

* * *

Veerian staggered, feeling as if the entire Hidden City had slapped her off her feet. She clung to Asha. His blacksmith muscles gave her an illusion of solidity as the world spun and rippled and melted around them. The song caught in her throat, and died.

Colors melted to black and ice crept into her veins.

"Keep singing!" Asha gasped. He thumped an uneven rhythm on the drum tied to his belt.

Veerian could barely get enough air, but terror helped her push

SONG WEAVER

past that minor obstacle. One note emerged—shaky. Another note. Three more. A bit of warmth crept into her blood, and air into her lungs. Asha held her up with one arm and thumped his drum with his free hand. Veerian closed her eyes and sang, ignoring all the rest of the world. She had no idea when this would all end, or if it ever would.

“Forward,” she gasped between one song and another. Standing on the outside of the city would do them no good. They would walk into the heart of the city until they found something or someone or the thickness and haziness in the air vanished. Perhaps they had to sing until they found the Three.

* * *

Second Descent Moon

Rushtan sent the hosta hawk to Jehoakaz with news of what had happened, and a message to send to Elzan. He wore the ring Veerian had left behind when she stripped off everything that might interfere with her magic. He studied the ring whenever he had an idle moment—and there were too many of those.

He vowed to shower her with jewels when she returned. He would kiss her in front of all his men and hold her close and refuse to release her until she promised never to leave him again.

He would put a marriage bracelet on her wrist and refuse to take no for an answer. No matter what it took, Rushtan vowed he would never let Veerian leave his side, ever again. He had been a fool to hope for nothing more than a few nights of pleasure. He wanted her heart and soul. He wanted all of her. He wanted forever.

Why hadn't he told her that before she vanished?

* * *

“Forward,” she gasped between one song and another. Standing on the outside of the city would do them no good. They would walk into

SONG WEAVER

the heart of the city until they found something or someone or the thickness and haziness in the air vanished. Perhaps they had to sing until they found the Three.

Veerian's song almost faltered when she thought of the priesthood. They wouldn't be happy to see their magical wall leveled. She didn't want to imagine how they would react, what they would do, if they found her and Asha.

The best defense was to convince the enemy she was twice as strong as them, and in a foul mood. Veerian sang louder and shifted to a song about enemies lying crushed under the wall they built to oppress the innocent.

Rainbows returned to the air, swirling around her. The chill faded, and a feeling like the first warm morning of spring enfolded them. Asha hooked her arm through his and brought out his flute. He needed both hands to play it. The flute was more suited to happy, triumphant songs, rather than military assault.

The spindle continued to hover above their heads, turning under its own power and spitting sparks, interspersed with the occasional burst of gold shading to silver to violet.

CHAPTER 14

Third Descent Moon

Rushtan sent Yuakam and Mohak out through the passage. They tied themselves together with a rope, and Ho'an and Beeri held the other end, staying firmly anchored inside the plain that held the slowly emerging Hidden City. Terror and fury sliced through the men waiting inside when the rope suddenly went slack. Rushtan felt paralyzed, unable to think of what to tell his men to do next. He waited, strangling on the need to bellow curses and knowing it wouldn't do a lick of good.

Then Yuakam and Mohak sauntered down the passageway through the rock, grinning, a cocky tilt to their heads.

"The magic's dead," Mohak reported before Rushtan could swear at him. "The gap through the rock is as clear as day."

"We can go for help, bring back half the Scribes Hall and half the Song Weavers in Bainevah if we have to," Yuakam added, that grin

SONG WEAVER

dropping off his face. “Send us. Let us do something for your lady.”

Rushtan nearly staggered backward as the possibilities swept through his mind. Relief was uppermost. If his men could leave and return, then he could send for help. Surely there had to be someone out there who understood what was happening. Someone could come here and probe the nothingness with their magic talents and tell him Veerian was still there, still alive.

* * *

The spindle continued to hover above their heads, turning under its own power and spitting sparks, interspersed with the occasional burst of gold shading to silver to violet.

Veerian realized she had forgotten to sing. She tore her gaze from the spindle and belted out the first song that came to mind—a child’s song, used in a game of hide and hunt.

How long they sang, she could never tell. She lost count of the songs and how many repetitions of each they went through. Yet after a time, the colors grew stronger, deeper, more distinct, and the light sputtered by the spindle grew bright enough to blind. She covered her eyes and continued to sing, and launched into the umpteenth rendition of a healer’s song, commanding that all hidden things be revealed so that healing and health and wholeness could begin.

The sky shattered above them, cracks streaking down the silvery gray, rainbow-streaked dome like an eggshell falling to pieces. Blinding yellow light poured down on them.

* * *

Third Ascent Moon

“Very nice.” Elzan crossed his arms and looked around the interior of the cave Rushtan had appropriated as his quarters. “I didn’t know you put so much store by luxuries.” His grin grew crooked with

SONG WEAVER

malicious humor, and he nudged a pile of dresses in vibrant colors, sitting on a thick rug more suited to the entertainment room of a noble woman's house.

"Those are for Veerian." Rushtan's hands trembled, holding the scroll with the colored drawing of Elzan's son, Hobad, only a moon old at the time the drawing was made. His nephew.

Would he ever see a child with his and Veerian's features?

"You're not giving her any choice in the matter, are you?" His brother finally stepped around the pile of newly arrived supplies ordered from Bainevah and sat down on one of the camp stools set up in front of the brazier full of coals.

"It's more like I don't have any choice. I can't live without her. Sometimes, watching the city appear and disappear, I think I can see her and Asha, just a few steps away from me, inside the magic walls. I know she's there. And with the city appearing a little longer every day...it'll happen soon."

Rushtan let the scroll roll up again and handed it to his brother. He didn't doubt that drawing of the boy was his brother's most prized possession. How Elzan could bear to be away from his wife and son, he didn't know. It awed him to realize how important his concerns were to his brother.

"I know how you feel. Those moons I was separated from Challen would have killed me, if we didn't have any hope."

"It helped a little, don't you think, that you climbed across the palace roofs nearly every night to be in her bed?" Rushtan couldn't resist adding, teasing. The brothers exchanged grins. His faded too soon. "We're meant for each other. Matrika made us to be partners in all things, not just this search for Asha. How is Challen? If she could be here, helping to retrieve her brother—"

"You know what frustrates me?" Elzan nudged the edge of the brazier with the metal toe of his boot. "I inherited Shazzur's power of

SONG WEAVER

visions, but Challen...well, sometimes I think her parents still visit her and she has information she either won't share or isn't allowed to share. She's not worried. She kissed me good-bye and made me promise I'd be home before Hobad started crawling." He snorted, a grin brightening his face. "She mentioned something about planning a wedding feast. I thought she was talking about Haneen and Mynoch, but maybe she knows something about you and Veerian."

"Pray the Mother it is so," Rushtan muttered.

* * *

Fourth Ascent Moon

The sky shattered, cracks streaking down the silvery gray, rainbow-streaked dome like an eggshell falling to pieces. Blinding yellow light poured down.

The spindle hummed suddenly, starting low and rising in pitch as its speed increased. Veerian shaded her eyes, trying to watch without having her eyes burned from her head. Soon, the spindle was nothing but a blur.

With a deafening crack and crash, the spindle vanished.

Wind screamed down around them, knocking them off their feet. Snow and sleet coated them in icy wet. Veerian and Asha clung together and stumbled forward a dozen steps, then were knocked down. They got to their feet, were knocked down by the wind. Tried again. Until finally they couldn't do anything but stand against the brutal wind. Veerian inhaled a mouthful of ice and her knees folded as coughing tore out her lungs. Asha crumpled next to her.

"Veerian?" Rushtan appeared from the white swirling depths of the blizzard. He slung his heavy cloak off his shoulders and wrapped it around her before catching her up in his arms.

"Asha—" Another fit of coughing caught her.

"He's fine." He turned so she could see the soldiers tending to the

SONG WEAVER

prone young man.

Asha looked gray and worn, like a corpse left underwater for a moon quarter. Veerian shuddered and knew she had to look just as bad, if not worse.

“Did we do it?”

“Do it?” Rushtan’s mouth dropped open, then he tipped back his head and laughed. “Look what you did!”

He turned her, raising her in his arms so her head rested on his shoulder and she could partially sit up and see. The Hidden City spread out all around her, towers and plazas and long vistas down wide streets. Buildings on top of buildings. She and Asha had collapsed halfway up a wide, gradual staircase that ran through the entire city, going from the canyon floor to the highest plateau. She could see everything. All the angles and shapes and colors that had been hidden mist, the tiny glimpses she had up until now, all made solid and bright—and rapidly being buried in snow. Veerian stared, fighting to keep her eyes open, and drank in this sure sign of success.

“How long were we singing?” She felt a chill that had nothing to do with the snow collecting on her bared head, when Rushtan didn’t answer right away. “Rushtan?”

“How long do you think you sang?” He tipped his head so his cheek pressed against her forehead. It was a lover’s gesture of tender concern, and made it hard for her to think and answer.

“I don’t know. Five or six hours?”

“Try nine moons. It’s gone around the year and past spring equinox.”

Veerian stared at the snowy world around her. She didn’t want to believe, yet there was the proof. What had happened? Why had it seemed only a few hours to her, and yet moons to everyone else?

Rushtan stumbled. He staggered back a step, his arms tightening painfully around her.

SONG WEAVER

“What’s wrong?”

“More quakes.”

“More?” She tried to sit up, but that seemed to throw him off balance as he hurried through the swirling, blinding snow, cradling her close. He went down the stairs. She felt the jolt every five steps as he went down another level. She was grateful, sensing that being as close to the ground as possible during a quake was the safest place.

Veerian closed her eyes and clung to Rushtan. She felt the shuddering of the ground through his body, felt him stagger several times, completely off balance. He never fell, though she felt the impact when he stumbled against a wall.

Then abruptly they were out in the open, no more walls breaking the wind and blocking the biting slap of the snow in their faces. The wind tore more fiercely at them, as if furious they had escaped the city. The ground no longer shuddered. Rushtan ran faster, bent over. Veerian almost shouted for him to put her down. He had sacrificed his cloak to her, and had nothing. He had to be freezing.

The snow and wind vanished, replaced by darkness. Rushtan turned her in his arms and put her down, setting her on her feet. For a few racing heartbeats, her legs didn’t want to hold her up. She clung to him, feeling the weight of ice and snow slide off the cloak, off his soaking wet clothes.

“You’re safe now,” Rushtan said, his voice hoarse. He slid the cloak off her and wrapped his arms tighter around her. Veerian opened her mouth to protest the ice and wet of his clothes pressed hard against her.

Rushtan kissed her.

Heat sliced through her body, erupting in a soft sigh as she yielded to the pressure of his mouth against hers. Veerian let him guide her arms up around his neck. Warmth and delightful tremors skimmed through her body as his hands stroked down her back, pressing her

SONG WEAVER

tighter against him.

“Don’t you ever do something so stupid ever again,” Rushtan growled, his words vibrating against her lips. Before the words sorted out in her head, he kissed her again.

She didn’t care what he said—she liked this. She squeaked, startled, when his tongue slid between her lips, invading her mouth. Colliding waves of fire and ice tore through her body, down to her belly, setting up a tidal wave that turned into a swirling fire. She moaned and pressed tighter against him. Her body wanted something, needed something, but she had no idea what it was or how to get it.

“Do you know how worried I’ve been?” he whispered, raising his head and leaving her lips aching from emptiness.

“Couldn’t—help it. No control.” Veerian managed to open her eyes. There was a dim, reddish light in this dark, sheltered place. It outlined Rushtan’s features, showing he smiled despite the harshness of his voice.

Rushtan sneezed, barely turning his head in time.

“You’re frozen and wet.” Veerian reluctantly released him and stepped back. He caught hold of her arm, stopping her from stepping into the brazier sitting on the floor.

He tossed charcoal and some sticks onto the glowing coals in the brazier, instantly getting flames. The light revealed they were in a small cave. Thick blankets hung on the walls and ceiling, relieving some of the damp, helping to hold in the heat from the brazier. Rushtan tossed her a towel, some blankets, a robe, before picking up a pile of clothes. He gestured for her to turn around, and peeled off his drenched clothes before she started to move. Veerian’s face burned as she turned her back to him.

“I’m not looking,” he said, a touch of laughter in his voice. “Get out of those wet clothes before you catch lung fever. I won’t lose you after waiting nine moons on the doorstep of the land of nothing.”

SONG WEAVER

Veerian peeled out of her wet clothes, briskly rubbing herself dry with the towel, then wrapped up in the robe. She wrapped the blankets around herself and settled down on a cushion to one side of the brazier. It was hard to do while she tried not to look at Rushtan.

“Hungry?” Rushtan laughed aloud this time when she nodded and moaned. Her stomach growled audibly, adding its own answer. “Veerian, it’s all right.” He settled down on the cushion next to her, picked up a basket and handed it to her.

The basket held dried apples and figs, bread and cheese and a pot of honey. Her hands shook so much, she nearly cut herself on the little knife for the long, thin loaf of bread. Rushtan took over for her. He gave her some pieces of apple before cutting bread and spreading it with honey and putting that on her lap. Veerian applied herself to eating while he explained what had happened.

After she and Asha vanished into the nothingness that surrounded the Hidden City, Rushtan and his men waited and explored, catching glimpses of the two of them at sunrise and sunset. The magic barrier grew thin or weakened at those times. It took days of constant measuring and comparing, but they soon knew the nothingness shrank, gradually. Not nearly fast enough to promise the end of the magic before their supplies ran out. They used her hosta hawk to send reports to Jehoakaz, and he reported to Bainevah and straight to Elzan. Reinforcements came, men from each Host to stand guard, scribes and scholars and priests to study the magic and prepare for the day the barriers fell.

“We could see the city from time to time. We could almost track the progress of your magic by the glimpses of towers and streets we got. The strangest thing some of us have ever seen.” Rushtan shook his head, a distant expression in his eyes for a few heartbeats. He sighed and shook his head, and that crooked, rueful smile she adored lit his face again. “The most we ever saw of you and Asha were black figures

SONG WEAVER

that we couldn't even be sure were you. That had us worried."

"I'm sorry." She reached out to squeeze his hand. Rushtan caught hold of her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed each of her fingertips. Veerian yanked her hand away, her face burning and a new, warm quivering started up deep inside her belly. Rushtan's eyes glowed, part in teasing, part in a satisfaction that made her feel nervous.

"Then," he continued, his words slow at first, "about two quarters ago, we started getting quakes. And killer snowstorms. Fortunately, most of us here long-term already had quarters in these caves. From the signs, I'd guess the storm that chased us in here will last at least two days."

"Days?" Veerian dropped her piece of cheese. She blushed when Rushtan picked it up and put it back into her hand.

"Elzan says it's a reaction to the warping of the foundations of the world. The bad weather, I mean."

"Elzan says? Your brother—the Crown Prince is here?"

"Of course. He won't let Challen travel, and she's anxious to have her brother home safe and sound, so he's here to supervise. He has something of a prophetic gift now, and he thought there was a chance he could walk through the walls and get to you." His grin turned nasty bright. "It didn't work. He was held outside here just as completely as the rest of us."

"So it's all over. The Hidden City has been rediscovered." She felt disappointed, and knew she was being ridiculous. She should feel relieved it was all over and her life could go back to normal. Wasn't it dramatic enough, to be caught up inside the dome of the magic, yanked outside of the river of time, and then land again in a blizzard studded with quakes?

"Rediscovered for a short time, anyway. It's likely buried under snow by now. If Elzan is right, we'll be feeling the reverberations of that shattered magic for moons." Rushtan took the last piece of bread

SONG WEAVER

out of her hand. “You’re almost transparent, you look so tired. Sleep, Veerian.”

“Too cold to sleep.” She let him pick her up and carry her to a bed of blankets and cushions on the other side of the brazier.

“Will you—” Rushtan’s voice cracked. His face was hidden in the shadows cast by the glowing coals in the brazier. “Will you let me hold you?”

“I’d like that,” she whispered.

* * *

Veerian woke first. She felt warm and comfortable, surrounded by soft blankets and furs, and a weight she didn’t quite understand, but which made her feel safe. She snuggled down into her nest, smiling drowsily as she heard the dying howl of the storm, so far away the air didn’t move around her. The winds and snow and ice couldn’t reach her here.

Slowly, the events of the last few days came back to her waking mind. Last few days? They seemed only a few days to her, but if Rushtan was right, she had lost three quarters of a year from her life.

Rushtan. Veerian nearly sat up as she realized the weight draped across her was Rushtan’s arm. The comforting warmth against her back was Rushtan’s chest.

He still slept, worn out from nine moons of waiting. Veerian caught her breath, stunned at the very idea of someone waiting so long to make sure she was safe.

Maybe Rushtan did care about her as more than a friend and fellow warrior. Why else would he have kissed her and scolded her not to frighten him? Veerian smiled, reliving those kisses.

Now she understood a little better why women tied their lives to men. It was more than the friendship, security and social standing. If Rushtan could make her seethe like hot oil in her belly with just a kiss, what would caresses do to her? What would happen if she shared her

SONG WEAVER

body with him?

Did he want her body?

Of course he did. Men wanted her body, and he was a healthy, strong, normal man.

A very handsome man.

So why hadn't he tried to share her blankets before?

Veerian scooted out from under Rushtan's arm, needing to get up and move, do something, anything to keep from following that thought. She found a copper cauldron full of water, sitting near the brazier to warm. A bath would certainly distract her and keep her thoughts out of dangerous territory.

After nine moons, she needed a bath. She found a lamp full of oil and lit it with a twist of straw held to the brazier's coals until it flamed. With that light, she explored the cave a little more and found another pot of water, with ice crusting the surface, clean clothes, soap, and a niche where she could stand to wash and have a little privacy. Her entire body warmed at the thought of Rushtan waking and seeing her naked.

Yes, she admitted, she wanted him to look at her with that hunger she had seen in other men's eyes. Perhaps the magic had damaged her mind and her common sense?

When other men stared at her, greedy and ready to drool, Veerian felt alternately disgusted, filthy or frightened. Rushtan could never make her feel that way. Was it because he was the first man who had ever kissed her without hurting her to get her into his arms? Was it because she knew his spirit, his laughter, his pain before he claimed her mouth and held her close?

Veerian scrubbed hard with the tepid water and the soap paste, until her skin glowed and her blood raced through her flesh. She rinsed with the cold water and gasped, then laughed softly. Perhaps she had been somewhere near death for the last nine moons, but she certainly felt

SONG WEAVER

alive now. Holding her breath, she bent over the pot and dipped her head into the icy water to wash her hair. That wrung a louder gasp from her.

“Veerian?” Blankets rustled. “Veerian!” Rushtan sounded caught between anger and fear.

Afraid, for her? She liked that mental image.

“Here.” She stuck her hand out of the niche and waved.

“What are you—” Rushtan jolted around the bend in the cave and stumbled to a stop. His eyes went wide and his lips parted and he just stared.

Veerian knew her dripping hair covered her breasts, and she crouched down enough that she wasn’t entirely exposed. Yet she was naked, and Rushtan knew that, and that startled look in his eyes changed to hunger.

“I needed a bath,” she offered. Her leg muscles decided to cramp. What would he do if she stood up, revealing more naked skin to him?

“Bath.” His voice caught in his throat. He tried to smile. “Didn’t I warn you not to frighten me like that again? You’re never allowed out of my sight, understand?”

“Never?” She liked the trembling that slid down through her, making her bones vibrate and stirring that warmth deep in her belly. “Are you going to kiss me again?” she nearly whispered, before she quite realized that thought had formed in her mind.

“Whenever I can.” His gaze slid over her, and she knew her crouched position, the shadows and her dripping hair didn’t hide anything from him. “Maybe—maybe you should get dressed.”

He turned and stepped back out of sight. Veerian waited until she heard the crackling of flames in the brazier and saw more light reflected against the blankets lining the cave walls. She smiled and bit her lip to keep from taunting him and calling him a coward.

Four years ago—no, five years now, if a man had caught her naked,

SONG WEAVER

he would have attacked her and no one would have helped. Veerian knew the priests of the Healers Temple respected her. That respect protected her outside the temple. Even today, knowing she was the revered Song Weaver, most men would take advantage of her naked state to attack. They would take it as an invitation, and even if she fought and screamed, they would firmly believe she wanted to be raped. Men were simply that way, as she had learned in her childhood.

Yet Rushtan looked at her, and though he wanted her—she could almost see the steam rising from his flesh—he restrained himself.

Did he want her to *offer* herself to him? That concept occupied her while she dried herself and got dressed. The borrowed shirt and trousers hung loosely on her frame and she felt like a little girl dressing up in her brother's clothes. Veerian continued rubbing at her hair as she stepped out into the stronger light and settled down in front of the brazier.

"Feel better?" Rushtan didn't glance up, but spread soft cheese on slices of bread and divided up honeycakes, dried apricots and strips of smoked beef between two platters.

"Much." Veerian watched him, hoping she didn't imagine the momentary trembling in his hands. "So...what else has happened in the world while we were gone?"

"Gone? That's a way of putting it." He handed her one platter and finally looked up to meet her gaze. His crooked smile made her heart skip a beat. "I have clothes for you...somewhere around here."

"Clothes for me?"

"When we realized it was going to be a long wait, I sent for supplies. I swore no one else would look after you but me. Now where did I put them?"

"Later," Veerian said. She caught his arm to keep him seated, when he started to rise. "News and food, first."

Rushtan prepared for her to stay here, with him? What did that

SONG WEAVER

mean? It warmed her that he was determined to take care of her, rather than bring in servants to attend to her needs, but what did all of that ultimately mean?

“I’m an uncle, now.” He laughed when she gave him a puzzled look. “Challen gave birth at solstice. Just as she predicted, according to Elzan.”

“That’s right.” Veerian felt a strange jolt inside at this further proof that she had indeed missed moons of life. She wondered how long that would continue until it no longer bothered her. “A boy or a girl?”

“Oh, a boy, of course. Just as Challen said.”

Rushtan talked through most of their meal, giving her more details of the strange events she had witnessed at solstice through her dreams. Dreva was now a subject kingdom of Bainevah, its deity a prisoner, having violated the laws of the Unseen to attack Matrika’s servants within the borders of Matrika’s sovereign territory. He filled in the moons of life that had gone on without her, telling her about the upheavals throughout the nobility in the wake of Anath’s treachery.

“But have you seen the boy?” she interrupted, when his story had brought them back around to the last few days. “Your nephew—you have gone to see him, haven’t you?”

“No. I couldn’t leave here. I swore I’d be here when you broke free of the magic.” Rushtan shrugged and managed a flicker of a smile. Veerian caught the wistful look in his eyes before he bowed his head over the last scrap of bread on his platter.

“What’s his name? I’m sure it’s much larger than he is.”

“Hah! Doni’Elzor’Hobad’Challa.” His smile returned. “Ashael the scribe drew a picture for me, since Elzan treats his like one of the sacred treasures. My royal brother assures me the boy has grown tremendously just in the moon he’s been gone.” He stood and rummaged through a square basket until he found a parchment roll.

“Why Hobad?”

SONG WEAVER

“For Challen’s grandfather, Lord Shazzur’s father. Scribe Hobad was quite well known in the scholarly circles for his theories and breakthroughs in interpreting ancient scrolls. High Priest Chizhedek suggested it.” Rushtan held out the scroll with a proud grin.

Veerian’s hands trembled a little as she unrolled the scroll, and she didn’t know why.

The sketch was a very lifelike image of a round, red-haired baby with big eyes and a laughing mouth. She couldn’t see anything remarkable in the child to set him apart from everyone else, though he was the designated heir to the throne of Bainevah. She made the requisite polite noises about how pretty and healthy the boy looked.

“Do you think you’ll ever have children of your own?” slipped out as she handed the scroll back to Rushtan.

“My own?” Again, he looked away. Again, that wistful look in his eyes.

“Oh, that’s right. You did say you would never have children, because it wasn’t fair to them, to leave them alone. You’re a soldier for life. No time for wife and children.” She forced a smile and struggled to her feet. She had to move, had to occupy her thoughts before they drifted into dangerous territory.

“Veerian.” Rushtan caught hold of her hand, tugging her down into his lap by accident.

At least, she hoped it was by accident.

Then his mouth closed over hers and she prayed he had done it totally on purpose.

She opened her mouth, eager for the warmth, the taste of him. His fingers dug into her back, pressing her close as he settled her more securely, reclining in his lap. His teeth pressed against her lips, then the sweet invasion stole her breath. She whimpered and struggled to slide her arms up around his neck.

“Too long.” Rushtan raked her damp curls out of her face. “You

SONG WEAVER

made me wait too long.”

“Wait?” She blinked, confused.

“I’ve wanted you in my arms since you walked into my prison.” He tangled his hand in her hair, holding her head still while he pressed more hard, searching kisses against her mouth, down her neck, then up again, nipping and stroking deep into her mouth, until she couldn’t breathe for all the strange, delicious turmoil churning through her body.

Veerian moaned protest when he slowed and stopped and lifted his head. She struggled to open her eyes, needing to see his expression, to know if he was thoroughly disgusted or—

“You’re never leaving me again, Veerian,” he whispered. “What’s a man going to do for nine moons, but dream about you and curse the time I wasted, and imagine you right here in my arms?”

“You dreamed—about me?” She knew her wide smile likely looked ridiculous, but she didn’t care.

“I dream about you. I ache for you. I deserve some reward, don’t you think, for not ravishing you in your sleep?”

“Ravish—” She choked.

“Shhh. Don’t be afraid.” He drew her close against him, cradling her head on his shoulder, stroking down her back, soothing her like a frightened child.

But Veerian knew frightened was the last thing she felt.

“Please don’t be afraid of me,” he whispered.

“I’m not.” She pushed back from him, so she could see his face, and Rushtan resisted only for a moment. Veerian tried to think of a song, a fable, to tell her what to do in this moment. Her mind stayed frustratingly blank, as she and Rushtan looked into each other’s eyes and the moment stretched out in waiting silence that rang like a harp string on the verge of breaking.

Maybe speaking was the wrong thing to do. Veerian raised one trembling hand and touched his eyelids, closing his eyes. Then she

SONG WEAVER

curved her hand around his head, tangling her fingers in his thick golden hair, and brought him down closer to her. Rushtan flinched as her lips brushed against his. He sighed and his arms tightened around her again.

For a long while, though not long enough, there was nothing in the world but their two bodies clasped tight together and the warmth and spicy taste of his mouth as he taught her the intricacies of kissing. Veerian devoted every scrap of thought and feeling to learning everything he had to teach her. He stole her breath and breathed his life into her. She soaked up the heat of his body, the strength of his arms. This was the place where her life returned, she realized. After nine moons of living in nothingness, fighting to free the Hidden City from magic, she had died. Rushtan's kisses, his embrace gave her life back to her.

CHAPTER 15

A soft moan of protest escaped her when she felt Rushtan shift her in his arms. She fell for a moment, slowly, gently, caught in his arms. A sigh, half in surprise, escaped her when she felt the blankets under her back. He caught her hip and tipped her onto her side so they lay pressed against each other, shoulders to knees. The warmth of him soothed and yet made her heart double its pace.

“Veerian?” he whispered, and she heard the question in his voice, felt it in the momentary stillness of his hands.

She answered him with more kisses, one hand sliding up blindly to cup his bearded cheek. His hands stroked down her back, curving around her bottom to bring her up tight against him. She let him lift one leg enough to drape it over his hip, and felt the hardness straining against his clothes, pressing against her belly.

Rushtan was going to make love to her. She knew it and accepted it in that moment. The compulsion to run, the fear and sickness that came

SONG WEAVER

when other men insisted that she yield to them, didn't fill her now. Veerian knew she had been waiting for him all her life, had dreamed of him. The knowledge that they would be here, together, in this place at this time, had helped her stand firm against Zorash's demands and the tavern keepers and camel drivers and brutes who had wanted her in their beds.

Soon, every sense became a tangle. His hands skimmed over her breasts and hips, gentle yet scorching, like the faintest lick of flames against her skin. Her borrowed clothes created a barrier that denied her the texture of his skin, the warmth of his mouth. When he slipped his hands under her clothes, she gladly helped him peel aside the last impediment. Her shirt and borrowed pants vanished into the darkness beyond the ruddy glow of the coals in the brazier.

Veerian pressed herself tight against Rushtan and wrapped her legs around him. She returned his kisses with lips that ached and burned and the hard demands of his mouth only made her want more. Rushtan's hands slid hot and hard over her bare flesh, scorching her and she laughed with a euphoria that could never come from wine. She couldn't get enough of the weight and heat of him, the spice of his mouth, the deft caresses that left every particle of her skin tingling and aching for more.

Something coiled deep inside her, tightening, making her arch her back and whimper with wordless pleas. She didn't understand what happened inside her own body, and that frightened and angered her in turn.

"Shh," Rushtan whispered. He kissed his way down her neck, between her breasts, while he lightly kneaded one with his fingertips. "It's all right." He took her nipple between his teeth, tugging gently before suckling. The tightness whipped through her body, bringing tears. She wove her fingers into his hair and yanked, guiding his mouth to her other nipple. That helped, but only a little.

SONG WEAVER

“Rushtan—please. I’m dying!”

“You like this?” He laughed when she whimpered assent, and continued his kissing and nipping and caressing, moving down to her belly. Her legs were limp as wilted flowers as he lifted and parted her legs and settled between them. “No one ever pleased you this way?”

“No—one.”

“No one else will. Not like I will. Remember that.” His fingertips stroked between the damp curls, startling a shriek from her. “You’re mine, Veerian. You can’t ever leave me.”

“Never. Rushtan—please!” She arched her back, bringing her hips up to press against him. She ached for something she had never known before, giddy with a fear that this needling would tear her to pieces.

“Mine. Forever.”

Veerian shrieked as he slid into her, scorching her from the inside, tearing like a sword thrust.

The tightness in her belly snapped, like a ship’s mooring ropes breaking free in a storm. Rushtan gripped her hips hard and withdrew, slammed his hips into her again, deeper. She opened her mouth to scream as tremors raged through her body and his mouth took hers prisoner. His breath was hot, and his moans vibrated in her chest. He writhed against her, crushing her into the blankets. Her body responded despite the brief pain, shuddering under him, lifting her to the sky. Something inside her shattered, setting her free to fly, even as her body vibrated with dying echoes of the sweet aching need.

A gasp escaped her when Rushtan released her mouth. He trailed kisses down her neck and gripped her thighs, pressing her legs tighter around him. The sensation of falling made her dizzy so she had to open her eyes. Rushtan gazed down at her, his face red and glistening with sweat and twisted in the most fatuous smile she had ever seen. A tiny speck of cold appeared in the slick heat still churning through her belly.

“Mine,” he whispered. “I don’t care who had you before, you’re

SONG WEAVER

mine now. No one will ever love you like I do.”

“Had me?” Chill moved through the sweet, hot oil that had replaced her blood and bones, and cleared her head.

“I don’t care who they were, I’ll make you forget them,” he muttered as he captured her mouth for more kisses.

Veerian choked and twisted her head aside, so his lips landed on her ear. Rushtan thought he was just one of many? He thought she was a harlot? How many men did he think had used her before he took his share? Swallowing a sob, she evaded his mouth again and brought her heavy arms up to shove him off her.

“No. Shh.” Rushtan wrapped his arms tighter around her and turned them so they lay on their sides again. He was still inside her, and the feeling made her want to vomit.

“Let me go!” She fought tears as she wedged her arms down between them and pushed. Rushtan grunted and rolled onto his back. Tears gushed as she scrambled out of his reach. She snatched up a blanket that had been displaced by their laughing struggles. It smelled of him. It was like wrapping his arms around her as she covered her naked, aching body. Veerian ignored that and swallowed her sobs. She had learned long ago never to let her tormenters know they had hurt and frightened her.

Rushtan cursed. Repeatedly. Fury scalded the air. She wiped the tears from her eyes and turned back to him, expecting him to leap on her, throw her to the ground and begin again. He didn’t look at her, but at himself. In the light of the single lamp and the red glow from the brazier, the smears of blood on his belly and thighs—her blood—looked black.

“You’re a virgin.” His voice sounded dead, heavy with loathing.

“I was.” Veerian pressed at her eyes to fight the tears. They never helped, never healed, never made her strong.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

SONG WEAVER

“Why did you assume I was a whore?” She stood, fighting the ache in her cramping legs, the tearing sensation radiating out from deep in her belly.

“Not a whore.” He wouldn’t look at her. That told her more than a day’s worth of denials. She snatched up their scattered clothes and darted back into the niche to dress.

“You don’t care who had me before—isn’t that what you just said?” She hiccupped, the pressure from captive sobs stealing her breath. “I’m no one’s property. I never was. I’ll never be your property.”

“That’s not what I said,” he growled through clenched teeth. He swore again, making her flinch. “Why did you let me—if you’d stayed pure so long—why now, here? Why me?”

Silence. A flood of angry and hurting words pressed at the back of her throat, so she thought she would vomit. She finished dressing and wrapped the blankets around herself again. She stumbled over her discarded boots when she stepped out of the niche, and bent to put them on. She found her cloak, her flute, her discarded, dirty clothes, and bundled them all up together. She would leave nothing of herself here when she escaped.

Rushtan had put on his trousers, but nothing else. He sat by the brazier, opposite the tangled, abandoned blankets.

“I’m not a whore,” she said.

“I know.”

“You know that now, but you’ve been thinking otherwise. Since the day we met? Since the day I saved your life in the Dregs? Did gratitude keep you from demanding I share your bed?”

“I’d never force you. I think too highly of you.”

“Not highly enough.” She took a deep breath, fighting for calm. It felt as if he’d torn out the center of her being, not just her virginity.

“Believe me, I’d never have hurt you.” Rushtan didn’t raise his head from contemplating the coals. “If I had known you were a

SONG WEAVER

virgin—”

“You never would have looked at me?”

“Stop putting words in my mouth!”

“Don’t worry. There’s no one to punish you. No father or promised husband to demand justice.”

“You’re going to marry me.”

“Weren’t you listening?” Her voice cracked with fury, but fear crawled chill up Veerian’s back. She wanted him to rage, to curse as he had just a short time ago. This quiet and control frightened her. “There’s no one to care about my honor.” A gasp of bitter laughter escaped her. “If I have any. Does all of Bainevah think I’m a tavern whore?”

“You’re not. You’re going to be my wife.”

“No.” She stepped around him, aiming for the cave mouth.

The storm had slowed since Rushtan brought her here more than a day ago. She saw the walls of the Hidden City were within bowshot reach of the cave.

“Yes.” He stood and reached for her, blocking her path.

“You don’t want a wife and children. I don’t want you marrying me just because you feel guilty. Do you? Don’t be.”

“I didn’t rape you.” He caught hold of her arm when she tried to slide past him. At her glare, he dropped his hand.

“Is it supposed to hurt, to feel like a sword stabbing into my heart? I wouldn’t know, since you’re the first!” She choked. “And the last.”

“I thought you had lovers. Who wouldn’t want you?”

“A whore will take anyone with enough coins, after all.”

“Not a whore!” Fury twisted his face and he raised his hand, making her flinch, positive he would strike her. Rushtan’s face went white. “Lovers. Admirers. Men who showered you with gifts.” He curved his hand, as if he would caress her cheek. She twisted away from him. “I wanted you so badly, I thought everyone did, and why

SONG WEAVER

should you be alone? Why shouldn't you take pleasure and give brightness to a man's life?"

"I'm not that way. I...perhaps Matrika spoke in my soul, telling me to wait." She laughed, startled by the brittle sound. "What was I waiting for? No woman should have to endure—" She tried to turn away, but Rushtan caught hold of her wrist.

"I didn't rape you. I didn't force you. Please," he whispered.

"No, you didn't." Despite the bitterness in her mouth, she had to admit that much. "I let you. I actually wanted you. I thought we could be lovers. I thought we could be something to each other. I can't believe I was so—so stupid!"

"Why did you let me?"

"I was stupid! Didn't you just hear me?" She twisted free and backed out of the cave mouth, watching him, half-afraid he would chase her.

"I hurt you. I'm sorry." Rushtan held out his hands to her but didn't come after her. "Next time will be better."

"Next time?" She almost could have laughed again, but for the aching that washed through her body and nearly drove her to her knees. "There will never be a next time."

And then she ran.

* * *

"You, my brother, are an idiot."

Elzan didn't scowl or curse as he came back into his tent. That was the first good thing Rushtan had seen or heard since Veerian stumbled out into the falling night.

"But she's all right? She's safe?"

"And pretending nothing happened. Vandan guessed something went wrong. He's discreet," he hurried to add when Rushtan groaned. "Be grateful Mother sent him to look after her, rather than some who think she hung the stars in the bowl of the sky." Elzan sat at the table in

SONG WEAVER

his tent, where Rushtan had waited—on his orders, on pain of death—for the last two hours. He filled two cups from a wineskin and shoved one across the table to his half-brother. “Why didn’t you ask her to marry you *before* you slept with her? That was the plan, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was.” Rushtan winced, hearing again Veerian say he thought a wife and children were nothing but a burden.

What made her words hurt was that he had indeed felt that way, moons ago. Before he started on the journey with her. Before he lost her to nine moons of magic. Rushtan had used that time to think. There was precious little else he could do, while setting up guard posts and bringing in priests and scribes to study the city. He had kept busy, but his nights were silent and lonely and he had thought long and hard and deep.

Yesterday, his plan had been simple. He would escort Veerian away from the expected chaos of the sudden reappearance of the Hidden City. He would kiss her senseless, making up for nine moons of loneliness and fear. He would tell her that she had taught him he was wrong. Elzan had assured him that admitting to being wrong always softened a woman’s heart. Then, he would ask her to marry him. As soon as she said yes, he would carry her off to his bed. He had spent moons making his cave quarters as luxurious as possible, to ensure privacy and comfort for Veerian when he claimed her as his own.

“I deserve to have my filthy tongue cut out of my mouth,” he snarled, and slammed his fist down on the table, so it made the two wine cups jump.

“What did you say to her?”

“Everything wrong.” Rushtan took a deep breath. Elzan was a married man. He had to have a better understanding of women now. At least, he hoped so. “She was a virgin.”

“Every woman is, at the beginning.” Elzan’s mouth twitched but he didn’t smile or laugh. “The first time isn’t pleasant for women, unless

SONG WEAVER

you're very careful."

"I...I thought she was experienced. I thought she was begging me to hurry. She didn't know what was happening to her own body, much less how she made me feel."

"Ah." His brother shook his head and looked away. "Did you admit you thought she was experienced?"

"It was like I talked with both my boots in my mouth, trying to explain to her. She's so beautiful, so perfect, strong, clever...I thought she had dozens of men begging to be her lovers. How was I supposed to know she would wait?" He groaned when more of Veerian's words rose to the top of his memory. "She swore she'll never marry now. There's nothing she wants from a man to make her marry."

"When we get home, I'll ask Challen to speak with her. They like each other," Elzan offered.

"Wait until we're home? That long?" Rushtan had imagined the long trip back to Bainevah, lying beside Veerian under the stars every night.

He thought of the house Elzan had found for him, which Challen and Lady Mayar had promised to furnish to suit his bride when they returned to the city. He didn't want to go into that house until he could carry Veerian over the threshold.

"Then talk to her yourself. Get on your knees, if you have to."

"This isn't funny, brother." Rushtan resented Elzan's status as Crown Prince. What he wouldn't give to have the freedom to get into a bloody, bruising wrestling match with his brother. He wanted Elzan to pound him until he couldn't stand up straight, as punishment for what he had done to Veerian.

How could such a perfect moment turn so horribly, bitterly wrong? He had seen the passion drain from her face. He hadn't been gentle, carried along by the fire in his blood and his own needs. To all intents and purposes, he had raped Veerian, even though she had willingly

SONG WEAVER

come into his arms.

“No, it isn’t funny. Mother told me something interesting, but I held back from telling you because I thought everything would turn out...” Elzan shrugged and sighed. “Would have turned out better. A Song Weaver’s magic is tied into her purity. That’s part of what caused the downfall of the Nai’hash’vi, according to Cho’Mat and Hajbaz. They grew proud and lost their purity of soul and turned their talents to greed.”

“Purity.” Rushtan had thought he couldn’t feel worse. Now he knew he was wrong, and he did. His skin still burned where Veerian’s blood had smeared on him.

“Not just virginity, obviously. But according to the legends Cho’Mat unearthed, there was a small sect of Nai’hash’vi who set out to reverse the destruction of their race. They devised a magic that has been passed down from mother to child, a song that comes out of their deepest memories, sung at a child’s birth, compelling her or him to purity of body and heart until each one finds their chosen mate. Then, they give all.”

“Including making love with a man after refusing everyone else,” he groaned, and slouched in his seat. He remembered being so certain Veerian had taken and discarded lovers as easily as a child discarded toys.

“Inieri is sure that Veerian’s Nai’hash’vi mother sang the song at Veerian’s birth. She thought Veerian was safe.”

“So did Veerian.”

“You know what all this means, don’t you?” Elzan’s grin made Rushtan wish regicide wasn’t a crime.

“I’m an idiot, and she’d be better off still trapped inside the magic that hid the Hidden City.”

“It means she loves you. She wouldn’t have given herself to you otherwise.”

SONG WEAVER

“*Loved*. Past tense. You didn’t see her face, hear her words, before she ran away.”

“Love doesn’t die that easily. Get down on your knees in the mud, and admit in front of everyone that you were wrong. Make a complete fool of yourself in front of your men. Remind her that you love her.” Elzan groaned when Rushtan flinched and couldn’t meet his eyes. “You never said you loved her before you took her to bed, did you?”

“I did, but not so she’d believe me.” He closed his eyes and wished he could slip down through the gaps in the ram skins carpeting the tent.

“Brother, you’re an idiot and a coward, and you may just be jeopardizing her life.”

“Her life?” Rushtan jerked to his feet. “Why?”

“Giving her purity to you shares her power with you, and it releases her power. You thought she was strong before today? The compulsion put on a Song Weaver at birth keeps her from abusing her power. Now the compulsion is completed and all her potential has been released. It’s like practicing with a wooden sword, and suddenly finding a blade with a razor’s edge and the power of the demi-gods. She could destroy herself if her heart’s badly enough broken. She could destroy you, if she’s furious enough, and not even realize what she’s doing until it’s too late.”

“I don’t care about me. I deserve it. Where is she?”

“In Vandan’s tent, holding court with the scribes and Father’s advisors. They’ve been dancing on coals, trying to find a way to break in on you two so they can hear her version of what happened. Fortunately, they’re so intent on learning from her, no one noticed her tears or congratulated her on her betrothal.”

“Good.” Rushtan reached for his cloak, then changed his mind. If humiliation and discomfort would win Veerian’s forgiveness, he’d gladly suffer. He turned to the door.

“What are you going to do?”

SONG WEAVER

“Apologize. In the snow and mud. Buck naked, if that’s what it takes to convince her I’m sorry.”

“It’s a start.” Elzan raised his cup in a salute.

“Thanks for your advice.”

“Glad to help. Challen would skin me alive if I didn’t help patch things between you two. She likes Veerian.”

“How did you get so wise in women’s hearts?” Rushtan paused with his hand on the tie for the door flap. “Don’t tell me you and Challen fought and were idiots, too?”

“No.” Elzan’s smile turned grim. Old pain flickered in his eyes. “No, I learned most of this from watching our father. There’s so much I didn’t see, growing up. Things I didn’t see because I was so angry with him. I swore when I was just a boy that I would never treat the woman I loved as he treated my mother. As he treated your mother. He’s a great and good and wise king, but as a man he has many flaws. Don’t follow in his footsteps, my brother.”

Rushtan nodded, feeling slightly dizzy with the insight that suddenly burst into his head. He yanked on the tie for the door flap and stepped outside.

Torches barely flickered in the darkness, outlining the square of tents that formed the Bainevan camp. More lights flared inside the walls of the Hidden City, showing over the walls and through the gates, revealing explorers who searched for the priesthood and signs of the Three. Little wind blew, and what air that did move was far warmer than the snow sitting in glistening, melting clumps on the muddy, churned ground. The sky was clear and black and blazing with stars.

Rushtan shook his head, remembering how snow had torn down through the sky yesterday, as if the very fabric of reality had shredded. Nine moons of struggle, which Veerian had experienced as only a few hours of singing. He couldn’t quite grasp the power, the warping of reality that must have been involved. He didn’t want to. He had to find

SONG WEAVER

Veerian and convince her he did love her, that he was sorry, that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Nine moons of waiting did change a man when he had time to think long and hard and figure out what really mattered to him. Now, all he had to do was convince her that he had changed.

* * *

“We have found something, Lady.” The mud-spattered scribe bowed low, his face lost in the shadows of the doorway of Vandan’s tent. “We think it is written in Nai’hash’vi. Will you come?”

“Lady Veerian has had a long day.” Vandan gestured for the scribe to go away. “Tomorrow will be plenty of time.”

“No.” Veerian stood up. She barely remembered in time and braced herself when the ache inside throbbed at the sudden movement. It escaped her why any woman would want to surrender her virginity to a man. Would it hurt like this forever?

The aching in her body would be welcome if it could drive away the aching in her heart. Sitting here with these healers, scholars and scribes who had become her friends, it was hard to dissemble and pretend nothing had happened. She had thought she fled to shelter and comfort when she saw Vandan walking outside, just moments after she ran from Rushtan’s cave. Now she knew she had simply walked into more pain. It would be relief to go with a complete stranger. Maybe wrapping her mind around a new puzzle would help numb the ache until the wound sealed and a callus built up on her soul.

“I’d like to see it.” She glanced around at the young and old faces, male and female, eyes bright with eagerness to know all the details. She had already told the story of her journey inside the magic three times. “Perhaps I will remember more after a good night’s sleep. Vandan, will there be a place for me here? I don’t suppose anyone set up a tent for me?” she added with a forced chuckle.

“We thought perhaps you would shelter with the prince,” Haneen

SONG WEAVER

said. Prince Mynoch, who wore a scholar's robe, nudged his sweetheart. She blushed. "With Prince Elzan, I mean."

"Prince Elzan is here?" Her heart skipped a beat. Relief or dreading anticipation, she couldn't decide. How had she forgotten that Rushtan had told her the Crown Prince had come to take charge of this entire expedition?

She had forgotten, she knew, because his kisses and caresses had driven so many thoughts from her mind. Women who took lovers were the ultimate fools, Veerian knew.

"Charged by our Lady and by Princess Challen to watch out for you." Vandan's smile brought tears to Veerian's eyes.

He knew what had happened to her, she realized. He didn't condemn and he didn't pity. He was simply there to help, to comfort, to be her friend.

"If you will wait another hour, I will be free to go with you," he continued.

"No. Don't worry about it. I just want to go to see it tonight, and we can start fresh in the morning. A walk before sleep will do me good." She gestured to the scribe, who still waited in the doorway of the tent, letting cool, damp air into the stuffy tent. "When I get back—"

"You can stay with me," Haneen said. "There's plenty of room in my tent."

Prince Mynoch sighed and rolled his eyes, which drew chuckles from a few people and brought another blush to Haneen's face. Veerian thanked the scribe girl, picked up her cloak, and followed the old scribe out into the darkness.

"Tell me about the markings," she said, when they had left the camp behind and the outer wall of the Hidden City towered high above them.

She shivered as she stepped into the shadow. A song requesting light in a time of danger hovered on her lips. She couldn't understand

SONG WEAVER

the compulsion to sing it. Veerian blamed the long, painful day she had endured.

“On a wall, lines of gold, framed with diamond dust. Most definitely ancient, perhaps even older than the founding of the city. Even after hundreds of years, it still sparkles. There is treasure in this city worth the taking.”

Veerian shuddered. The scribe’s voice had turned smooth, slick with greed. Scholarly greed? Or something else? They woke echoes from her past, from days of heartache.

She had adored Zorash, not realizing the web of lies he spun around her day and night, how he used her music for his profit. He made her think she was weak and his charitable heart compelled him to protect her. That must have been how it was when her scoundrel father seduced her foolish mother, Veerian decided. Just like her mother, she had been a fool, thinking she loved Zorash, and someday if she did enough, earned enough, he would love her. Just as she had been a fool to offer her heart and her purity to Rushtan.

She almost turned to go back as they stepped through a doorway and started down a flight of stairs, going directly to the catacombs under the city.

Zorash had thought her useless, a badly made pot that didn’t hold the treasure he sought. Rushtan thought she was a whore, sleeping with men for the gifts they could give her. What had she been thinking, letting him take his pleasure with her? She knew his heart was bound up in the army and he saw a wife and children as a burden, nothing more. Had she really thought that after letting him make love to her, he would change his mind and heart in a single night and bind himself to her forever?

“No,” she murmured, as the scribe led her around another corner and the ground sloped downward again. “Not love. Just his pleasure and my foolishness.”

SONG WEAVER

“What did you say, Lady?” The scribe held a single oil lamp, lighting the way ahead of them, but held so far away from his body she couldn’t see his face.

His voice had entirely lost its quaver and creak. He straightened his hunched posture with a jerk and stood nearly a hand taller than her. Veerian stopped short, feeling dizzy as she tried to yank her thoughts away from her litany of misery to this present moment. This present danger.

“This way, Lady.” He gestured down another passage, through a door that hung open. Judging by the ridge of dust on the floor, this door had been closed until just recently.

“No.” She took a step backward. “Who are you? Why the disguise?”

“I wondered how long it would take you to recognize me.” His satisfied chuckle flowed over her like a brook over pebbles.

No, she corrected a moment later. His voice sounded like coins tossed about in a bag.

“I don’t recognize you.” She took another step backward. All was darkness behind her, and the passageway divided. She couldn’t remember which one they had come through.

Idiot! Twice in one day, she raged silently.

“Hmm, yes.” The scribe rubbed his bald head. “You’d recognize me better with my hair. And my beard. Do you know how long I’ve searched for you, Veerian, darling? Thanks to your filthy father, I was delayed for almost a year, and then you vanished from Bainevah.”

“Zorash,” she whispered.

The years had not been kind to him. His angular features were skeletal now, instead of sculptured like a hero carved from stone. The shaved head of a scribe had certainly confused her. But how could she not have recognized his enormous gray-blue eyes, the color so changeable with his moods? His voice was painfully familiar.

SONG WEAVER

“It’s been years,” she continued. “You said you never wanted to see me again, so why should I expect you?” She tried to remember the defense moves Ho’an had taught her. Kick the lamp from his hand? Did she have the strength and speed to run before he caught her?

“Hmm. True. That was my error. I truly am sorry for the pain I caused you, darling.” Zorash tipped his head to one side, studying her head to foot.

His charming, disarming smile had lost most of its potency. Or was it her who had changed so much?

“Whatever you want from me, you can’t have it.”

The last thing Zorash had wanted from her was her virginity, to sell to the highest bidder. He had promised her that she would enjoy it. He knew how to combine the juices of various exotic plants to either give her world-shaking pleasure, or make sure she didn’t remember anything that happened, whatever her choice. Veerian had chosen to stay pure, took back the pieces of her broken heart and refused to listen to him.

She had played her flute to drown out his angry scolding outside the tent, giving vent to the anger and hurt in her soul. Somewhere behind that protective wall of sound, Zorash had ceased threatening her and went away.

Had she sent him away? She nearly laughed when she realized that she could have been showing her power then, too, just as she had the night her father and stepmother sold her. Could she send him away now?

She reached for the flute tucked into her belt. Zorash snarled and backhanded her, flattening her against the wall. Her head smacked hard and she saw stars.

“No music, darling, unless it’s the music I command.” He snatched the flute from her fumbling hands and tossed it across the passage, then hauled her to her feet while she was still dazed. “I’m glad I didn’t find

SONG WEAVER

you right away. I learned so many useful things while I walked the halls of the Healers Temple and the Scribes Hall. I really must thank you for refusing to let me sell your virginity.” He laughed, as if she had told a wonderful joke, when she gasped at his words.

“It’s not for sale,” she managed to say, before he slammed his fist into her diaphragm and she doubled over, the breath driven from her body.

Zorash slung her over his shoulder. She couldn’t see, her eyes filled with gray haze. Through the panicked thudding of her heart in her ears, she heard his footsteps echo, heard the creaking groan of a massive door. She felt Zorash’s muscles bunch with strain. He closed the door behind them. She finally managed to draw a breath. The haze filling her vision receded. Then she heard the click-thud of a heavy bar falling into place.

Zorash had barred them in. If she managed to get away from him, she would be delayed by lifting the bar. And then, she didn’t know the way out of this warren he had led her into.

Stupid! Stupid! Never ever trust a man again, she scolded herself, and concentrated on getting her breath back. She needed to stand on her own, to breathe, before she could fight.

So Zorash thought he had made her helpless by taking her flute, did he?

A few moons ago—no, she corrected herself, a year ago—she would have agreed with him. The soldier who had tried to force himself on her in the garrison and Homaan had both taught her the power of her voice, whether she used words or not. Zorash didn’t know the lessons she had learned.

Why did he want her virginity? Did he think he could force her to stay with him? Veerian fought not to flinch and let Zorash know she was fully conscious, when a new, horrid thought came to her. What if there was magic tied up with her virginity? Had she squandered it on

SONG WEAVER

Rushtan?

Worse—had she given all her power to Rushtan? Did Zorash think he could steal her Song Weaver magic by raping her?

“Remember my lovely little potions, darling?” Zorash patted her behind. “We’re going to be so happy together. You’ll want me when I take you, and you’ll be so happy in my bed, you’ll do everything I tell you to do. And with the power we’ll unlock, when you give yourself to me, we’ll rule this entire abandoned wreck of a city.”

“Abandoned?” she croaked.

“There’s no one here.” He caressed her bottom. She barely kept from flinching. She had to fool him into thinking she was helpless. “They’ve been searching since you reappeared. Even through the storm. Three-quarters of the city is underground. Not a soul. The entire city has been abandoned for decades.”

So Lord Shazzur had been right. The Hidden City had fallen, the priesthood either destroyed or seriously injured, on the day Priestess Naya had died, her blood splattered across the altar. Veerian wondered if there was any triumph in knowing that. Where were the Three, if their priesthood and their prison had been destroyed?

“Here we are, your bridal chamber.” Zorash put her down with a thump. Veerian fell backward into a pile of cushions that smelled of mildew. A cloud of dust rose into the air. She coughed and gasped and smelled scented oil, warm spiced wine, and roasted meat. Through watering eyes, she looked around. Her heart sank.

Zorash had indeed created a bridal chamber, with hangings on the walls and gilded furniture, piles of food and pitchers of wine and two braziers glowing with coals. The one bare wall glittered with figures written in lines of gold. She stared, recognizing the heretical Nai’hash’vi script that had been Hajbaz’s pet project for so many years.

“I didn’t lie.” Zorash knelt on the pile of musty cushions and blankets. “I learned, dealing with all those scribes and healers and Song

SONG WEAVER

Weavers, to always have a touch of truth in everything you say. It sweetens the necessary lies.” He stroked tangled hair out of her face. “Feeling better?”

Veerian ignored him to concentrate on the wall writing. She stayed seated to let him think she was still dazed.

“You’ll feel much better, soon.” He caressed her cheek, down her neck, in a gentle touch so much like Rushtan’s, it brought tears to her eyes. “You would have given me your body long ago, wouldn’t you?”

She decided not to answer, then a moment later changed her mind. Why not use the lesson he had just taught her, and mix in enough truth to deceive him?

“I thought I loved you.”

“You’ll love me again.” He cupped her other cheek and turned her head so she had to look at him. “You have always been mine, Veerian. You will always be mine.”

Rushtan had said that, too. She turned her head away. Zorash took a handful of hair, yanked her head around and slammed his mouth down against hers. She clamped her teeth tight shut. He bit her lip, hard, until she cried out, then insinuated his tongue like a snake into her mouth. He tasted of rot and dead things. Rushtan had been spice, and gentleness made his passion sweet.

Zorash clutched at her breast, squeezing hard. Veerian bit down hard on his tongue. He screamed and slammed her back down into the rough bed, raising more dust. She scrambled backward while he wiped blood from his mouth and stalked across the room. She got to her feet and looked around for anything to use as a weapon. Zorash picked up a cup brimming with a strange, silvery liquid and turned back to her.

“You leave this room either my bride and willing partner, or you leave it dead.” Zorash’s tone was still soothing and charming, almost cheerful. He raised the cup. “Your choice. Death, or luxury and pleasure and riches? I’m a most skilled lover. You won’t mind losing

SONG WEAVER

your virginity. You won't even feel it, thanks to this." He raised the cup, for emphasis.

"I felt it, and I minded." She forced laughter when Zorash frowned, clearly not wanting to understand what she had said. "I'm not a virgin, Zorash. You'll not steal my power."

He snarled and raised the cup, ready to throw it to the ground like a spoiled child. Then he thought better of it. He pulled a long, jeweled blade from inside his robes. It had a spindle inscribed on it, meaning it had been a priest's. Veerian hoped it would turn against him soon.

"Where is your lover, then? Don't tell me you threw it away for the sake of a meal? A roof over your head? Baubles? What happened to all your high standards?" he taunted. He took a step closer and held out the cup. "Drink. We can still be partners."

Veerian sang one long, piercing note that climbed with each beat of her heart until the stone walls and ceiling rang and dust rained down on them. The cup shattered.

Zorash jerked backward, eyes wide in shock. Then he cursed and lunged. Veerian screamed—no time to catch her breath and choose a note. He froze for a heartbeat. She gulped a breath and screamed again. He stumbled. Pain flickered across his face.

Fury and thousands of remembered slights and taunts and disappointments surged through her mind. Veerian shrieked in a stream of staccato bursts that gave her tiny gulps of air and made Zorash stagger, then hit the floor, thrashing. He twitched as if pummeled and dropped his knife. Blood trickled from his ears and nose. His eyes were dark with bloodshot burst vessels. He arched up, gaining his knees, then slowly folded backward, as boneless as a doll made of rags.

Veerian staggered backward against the gold-engraved wall, her knees weak, her throat on fire, her ears ringing from the bursts of sound she had created. She watched Zorash, half-afraid he would rouse and half-afraid he wouldn't.

CHAPTER 16

Common sense finally woke. Veerian staggered forward and snatched up Zorash's fallen knife. She doubted she could use it if he came after her, but he wouldn't know that. She supported herself, one shoulder sliding along the wall as she searched for the hallway and the barred door. Her shirt was soon dark and gritty with accumulated dust and grime, but she didn't care.

Every sound seemed to come from far away, so she ignored the thudding. Then, when she finally reached the barred door and leaned against it, it jumped against her hands. She frowned and pressed harder, trying to understand. After a few thuds, she realized the door moved in rhythm with the thuds.

"Hello?" She winced, her throat on fire, and tried again, louder. "Is someone there?"

"Veerian?" That sounded like Asha. "I've found her!"

"Veerian!" Rushtan swore and the door leaped, straining the hinges

SONG WEAVER

and the brackets holding the bar. “Are you all right?”

“Fine.” Her knees folded. She barely caught herself in time to keep from smashing her face against the door. “I think I killed him. I hope I killed him.”

Silence. Panic made her heart thump a little faster and cleared her head. Had they abandoned her?

“Who?” Rushtan asked. His voice sounded softer, but closer, as if he tried to speak through the gap between door and frame.

“Zorash.”

Rushtan swore and the door rattled again. “Did he lock the door?”

“No. There’s a bar across it.”

Silence for ten heartbeats. She counted.

“Veerian, can you lift the bar?”

“Oh.” Her face warmed. She reached up with shaking hands. The bar weighed more than the entire building, but she managed to lever up one end. The other slid down and hit the floor with a thud and rattle that hurt her ears. The door burst open, knocking her off her knees. Almost before she hit the floor, Rushtan gathered her up and cradled her close. She burst into tears, frightened by how light and hollow she felt.

“Shh, sweetheart. It’s all right. I won’t let him hurt you.” Rushtan pressed a kiss against her forehead.

He wouldn’t put her down, even when she insisted she had to be there when they found Zorash. Veerian told her rescuers everything that had happened—Asha, Rushtan, Vandan and all the members of their band of false mercenaries. Amazingly, she nearly reached the end of her tale when they walked into the room Zorash had prepared for her rape.

Streaks of blood in the dust of the floor marked the path Zorash had crawled, back to his worktable. He whimpered and rocked on his knees, holding his head with one hand, and fumbled through a wooden box

SONG WEAVER

filled with bottles and bags, like a traveling healer's supply box.

"Stop him," Rushtan ordered. His voice hurt her ears and vibrated in her bones. "What's he doing?"

"Potions. Poison. Maybe heal himself," she whispered. Her eyes refused to stay open. From a great distance, she heard Zorash's weak protests, the scuffle of feet, the clatter of wood and breaking bottles as the soldiers upended the box. The smell of crushed herbs and spilled wine made her gag. Rushtan barked orders to have Zorash bound and taken away under guard, then hurried from the room with her still cradled tight in his arms.

"Where are you taking her?" Vandan asked.

"Our quarters." Rushtan's impatient tone implied, *Of course.*

No. Veerian tried to climb back out of the black well she slid down into. She managed a moan.

"I should see to her. She worked song magic, to defend herself. I'm afraid she's done more harm than good."

It was almost a relief to hear Vandan's theory. At least she had some excuse, some understanding of what happened to her.

"They can tend her in our quarters," Rushtan said. "Veerian stays with me."

"No." Veerian managed to open one eye. Dawn hung above the high canyon walls surrounding the Hidden City. The soft light danced off melt water everywhere, dazzling her. The dazzle turned into spikes that dug through her eyes and into her brain, down into her belly. "No!" The pain gave her strength and volume.

"Shh, sweetheart." Rushtan lifted her a little against his arm so he could kiss her forehead. His beard scratched her face, as if it were all raw flesh. She gasped and tried to twist away. "Veerian, love, hold still. We're almost home." A rough chuckle escaped him. "Such a home as I can give you right now."

"No!" She managed to unwind her arm from the cloak he had

SONG WEAVER

tucked around her, and reached for Vandan. “With you, Vandan. Please!”

“Highness...she seems most distraught.” The healer priest caught hold of Veerian’s hand. The contact acted like a cork removed from a barrel, and agony spilled out of her body.

Panic took its place.

Veerian thrashed and repeated “No,” every time Rushtan insisted he would take care of her. She didn’t care how her voice rose and broke and how many people came running at her shrill cries. She refused to let Rushtan take her back to the cave.

Finally, Vandan prevailed. Veerian wept with relief as Rushtan stepped into the healer priest’s tent and put her down on the first cot. She yanked her hand free when he tried to hold it. He stayed with her, though, until Vandan asked him to leave.

“I’ll be right outside,” he said as he bent to kiss Veerian’s cheek. She couldn’t bring her hands up enough to stop him, but she did turn her head so he kissed her ear instead. Rushtan sighed. “Veerian, we need to talk.”

“Later, Highness.” Vandan gestured toward the door flap.

The tears came, silently, as the flap fell closed and she heard Rushtan’s footsteps fading. Vandan took hold of her hands. He couldn’t heal her, but his gift let him read the talents and strengths of others.

“Well, that proves our Lady’s theory,” he murmured, after a long, comforting silence, in which Veerian had started to drift.

“Theory?” she whispered. Her voice caught and creaked from the tears that simply fell with no sobs, no shaking, as if her eyes were connected to the river and would never stop streaming.

“She thought your talents would change drastically, after being caught up in the magic of the Hidden City...and other events.” He cleared his throat and rested his warm, gentle hand on her forehead. “You are far stronger than you think. However, using your expanded

SONG WEAVER

gifts so strenuously, so soon, well, it plays havoc with the body.”

“I didn’t kill him?” Veerian latched onto that thought, rather than face the ideas his words tumbled through her mind.

“No, but I think he’ll wish he had died. Tell me again what you did, in more detail.”

Veerian complied, answering his questions about her thoughts, her feelings, the sensations in her body. Two healers, priests she didn’t know, came into the tent and worked in tandem to purge the poisons from her system. She was grateful, finding it easier to talk in front of strangers rather than someone who knew her. She trusted Vandan not to think she had become some horrible monster, so easily destroying a man. When he asked, she told him all she could remember of her years with Zorash, so naïvely helping him deceive people for the sake of gold.

“Justice, when it is long delayed, is often far heavier than even a judge would require,” was all he would say.

He glanced at the two healers, who had stepped back and waited until Veerian finished speaking. They had set up a spell, to pull her into healing sleep and hold her there until her body was mended. All it required now was the key. They nodded and stepped forward to clasp her hands.

“Sleep now,” Vandan said, as a hazy sensation filtered through her blood, into her brain, making her sigh in relief. “In the morning, or perhaps in several mornings, we must decide what you will do.”

“What is there to decide? We’re going back to Bainevah with Asha. We’ve done what we set out to do.” She yawned, welcoming the heavy, drowsy feeling moving through her body, pressing her into the deliciously soft blankets, slowing her thoughts.

“Ah, but the Hidden City is completely deserted. We must discern what happened to the priesthood, and learn if the Three were set free, or their prison made worse. A large team is staying here. Prince Elzan

SONG WEAVER

thought perhaps you would want to stay here and see this search through to the end.”

“Do I have to?” she whispered.

“The choice is yours. You are in very high favor with the throne.” Vandan smiled and patted her hands after folding them across her waist.

“Is Rushtan staying?”

“I believe so.”

“Good.” She smiled and closed her eyes and slid slowly down a warm, dizzy spiral into enveloping blackness.

She knew what she would do, what she needed to do to let her heart heal, and how to do it.

* * *

Veerian slept for three days. When she woke, the world had changed. The camp had been dismantled and the small army of priests, scribes and scholars had taken up quarters within the Hidden City. She wondered in the hazy muddle of her waking mind if the place would have to be renamed, now that it had been brought out of hiding, its magic protection destroyed.

The snow that had greeted and nearly smothered her when she and Asha emerged from the spell had completely melted. The ground was dry, the air warm, and flowers grew everywhere she looked. Veerian distinctly remembered this entire valley area being a maze of rubble and scorched rock. Now it was smooth, like the best meadow for farming or raising and racing horses, and stretched out for dozens of leagues in every direction, with the Hidden City in the exact center like a pea in the middle of a platter. Everything was green and brilliant with life, and birds sang. She remembered how silent everything had been on the journey to this place.

Asha found her, when she escaped the healers and tottered away to a sheltered spot to sit and simply look at the city and try to wake her

SONG WEAVER

mind completely. He wore rich clothes and looked like a nobleman, not a blacksmith. Veerian felt a flicker of disappointment that the clothes seemed to suit him. He sat on the grassy ground next to her and waited, and she appreciated that bit of understanding.

“Are you staying to work, or going to Bainevah?” she asked without looking at him.

“Going. The prince says I owe it to Challen, at least. He wants me to give it a chance, get to know my sister. He thinks I’d make a good adviser on the King’s Council, simply because I see things differently from everyone else.”

“He’s right.”

“I’m not made for that sort of life, deciding how people should live, having everybody run to give me anything I want.”

“You think that’s all there is to it?” Her face hurt when she smiled, as if the muscles had forgotten how. “You won’t be deciding, so much as arguing with the other nobles to stop them from hurting the simple folk. And you’ll definitely earn every bit of service you get. I thought it would be a life of pure luxury, to spend my days making music, studying music. I work harder in a few hours of healing and song than a potter or weaver or farmer does in an entire day.”

“Hmm. I suppose so.” He nodded. From the corner of her eye, she watched him study the city’s walls as she had been doing. “I’m a rich man. Lord Shazzur—I still can’t think of anyone as my father but Enku—he left me a house and fields and an enormous library. I’m interested in the library, and it’ll be nice to have a house and someone to clean it for me. I need a place and people to take care of Mother. They sent her to Bainevah as soon as they decided we weren’t coming back any time soon. She’s in the palace, Queen Mayar insisted, but I need to look after her myself.”

“Then you have to go to Bainevah to see her.”

“That’s true.” He grunted and leaned forward, chin in his hand,

SONG WEAVER

elbow on his knee, and continued staring at the city. “What are you going to do?”

“Go.”

“Rushtan is staying for a while.”

“Good.”

“I thought you were in love with him.”

“So did I. We all make mistakes.”

“He’s in love with you.”

“We all make mistakes.” Her voice caught.

“Veerian—”

“Do you know where Prince Elzan is right now?” She stood and brushed out her skirts. “He made a promise to me, and it’s time to collect on it.”

Asha, because of his sister, had immediate access to the Crown Prince. Soon, Veerian walked into the room in the gatehouse, where the prince had established an office and all those searching the city came to report. She didn’t think of it until too late, but fortunately Rushtan wasn’t there with his brother.

“Is something wrong, Highness?” she asked, when Elzan glanced over her shoulder and frowned, after gesturing for her to take a seat. She looked at Asha. Her friend shook his head and shrugged, meaning he didn’t understand, either.

“I wondered where Rushtan was, that’s all.” Prince Elzan settled down into the heavy chair behind his worktable. Both were carved with symbols of the Three. “The way he’s been hovering over you since you returned, I thought he’d turn into your shadow.” He grinned at her, black eyes sparkling.

“I haven’t seen Prince Rushtan since I escaped Zorash. He’s obviously busy.” She licked her lips and plunged on. “I wish to ask a large favor, Highness. Please, keep him busy until I have left. Asha tells me the caravan heading to Bainevah leaves tomorrow morning. I

SONG WEAVER

would like to join it.”

“Don’t you think you should wait to talk to my brother before you make a decision like that?”

“Prince Rushtan has no claim on my life. Our mission has been completed, we have found Lady Challen’s brother and brought back the Hidden City. Now, I would like to return to my home and my duties in the Healers Temple.”

Elzan nodded slowly. Veerian hated the understanding she saw in his eyes. She felt sick at the suspicion that he knew what had happened between her and Rushtan. Every detail. Had he also thought she was a loose woman who granted her favors to whichever admirer gave her the most presents?

“Rushtan and his men were sure you’d want to stay and unravel the secrets in the Hidden City. They’ve put together rather elaborate quarters for you. You should see the treasures they’ve unearthed already and put aside for you to examine before even the scribes get to them. If you wanted, you could stay here and rule the entire city with the respect you’ve earned from everyone.” Elzan nodded. “You’ve earned that much and more from me and my family. For Challen’s sake alone, I’ll try to get you anything you want, to make your stay here more comfortable.”

“I don’t want to stay. The sooner I put this place behind me, the happier I’ll be.”

“He’ll want to go with you.”

“When the magic binding your brother was shattered, Highness, you promised me anything I would ask of you. I’m asking for that gift now. Let me go, as quickly as possible. Keep him here, stop him from following me.”

She stood, afraid that if she stayed there much longer, she would burst into tears. Her plan had created an aching emptiness inside, but Veerian had no idea how to salve the pain and fill the void. She only

SONG WEAVER

knew she had to flee, had to avoid seeing Rushtan's face, hearing his voice, and most definitely she had to keep him from taking her into his arms again.

"I'll keep him here, but I can only hold him for so long. He'll follow you."

"Tell him, please, that I never want to see him again. I don't want to embarrass him, but I will ask for guards if he approaches me."

"My brother loves you," Elzan said so softly, she almost didn't hear. But she heard the words like knife thrusts in her chest and head.

"No, Highness. He feels guilt and lust, nothing more. He is a prince, and I am little more than a tavern singer."

"That's not true." He shook his head, his mouth twisted in a sad smile. Prince Elzan didn't stop her when she bowed and then turned to flee the room.

* * *

Vandan let Veerian stay in his tent and lied for her when Chandan and Porual came looking for her. She blinked back tears, late that night, when she realized that she had been waiting for Rushtan to come looking for her, and he didn't. She didn't cry herself to sleep, but it was a struggle not to.

She managed to sleep, but so lightly that she heard when the caravan guards and drivers began assembling. She was awake and washed and dressed when Vandan came to wake her. He was dressed for travel, and she felt some of the hard, cold knot inside soften in pure relief. The journey wouldn't be so cold and lonely and silent, if she had her first friend and mentor at her side.

Asha tried to keep her company, but he was like a child ten years younger, wanting to learn and see and do everything. The soldiers leading the caravan took turns telling him anything he wanted to know about the military and life in the palace. They gave him lessons in swordplay and promised to give him lessons in driving a war chariot,

SONG WEAVER

when they reached Bainevah.

Vandan spent most of the journey riding at Veerian's side. He brought her up to date on the events in the Healers Temple, and changes in the lives of her many friends among the healer priests. But no matter how many questions she wracked her brains to think of, eventually she had no more. Then Vandan asked her questions about their ordeal inside the magic that had imprisoned the Hidden City. She relived those strange hours, and with Asha's help tried to recall all the songs, the sequence they sang, and how many repetitions they made. They were still two days away from Bainevah when that topic wore thin, too.

"Forgive me, because I know it's a tender subject..." Vandan waited, watching, until Veerian finally looked him in the eye.

Their camels plodded along, making them drowsy between the swaying of their gait and the growing heat, but it wasn't enough to put her entirely to sleep.

"Ask," she finally said. She offered up a weary smile, to assure him she wouldn't be angry.

Sometimes it made her tired, to realize how careful everyone was not to hurt her feelings, not to frighten or sadden her. Veerian remembered her hysterical fit after Zorash's attack. Vandan assured her it was totally understandable, after all she had gone through, but she wondered if it had made everyone think her spirit had turned fragile. And possibly her mind, too.

"I am worried at this break between you and Prince Rushtan."

"Break? We were friendly by choice, partners by necessity. The need has ended. There was nothing between us."

"He believes there is much between you."

"He is wrong. If anything, it was a mere infatuation. After all, I was the only woman available for moons!" she added with a laugh that almost rang true.

SONG WEAVER

“But it was my understanding that he planned to marry you.”

“He had no right to say that, after I refused him.” Veerian’s face flamed. She hunched her shoulders and turned her head away.

“When did you refuse him? After your return? You were under great strain, Lady. Your body was weak and you were ill. He should have brought you to me immediately, but I can understand his need to take care of you. No, you were in no condition to make decisions about the rest of your life. He should have realized that, and waited until you were yourself again before he asked you to be his wife.”

“Are you saying...he told you he planned to marry me *before* I returned?” A shudder worked through her body, shredding her memories of that painful, sensuous, wonderful interlude in Rushtan’s bed.

“I came with the first group to arrive, after you and young Asha disappeared, so I was among the leadership from the beginning. He asked me to stand with you as your father, at the marriage ceremony. I helped him make the arrangements for the home he bought for you.”

“He bought a home—but I have a home of my own.” She shook her head, positive she wasn’t hearing any of this properly.

“Not a home fitting for the wife of a prince.” Vandan’s smile widened. “I know where it is, one of the best homes in the plaza of the nobles, with a large garden inside its courtyard.”

“Rushtan lives in the barracks with his Host.”

“His position has changed. I served as scribe when Prince Elzan made the decree. Prince Rushtan has changed his duties. He will be a trainer for the Host of the Ram, rather than commander of the archers. He will also sit on the Crown Prince’s Council. It’s a drastic change, certainly not the path he had marked for his life. But, love does that to a man.” He shrugged, his smile warming and growing fond.

“He doesn’t love me.” The words tasted odd on her lips. Was that what a lie tasted like? But how could she be sure it was a lie? Veerian

SONG WEAVER

wondered if she still hadn't fully recovered from the nine moons lost from her life.

"Hmm, then he's gone to a great deal of trouble simply to make sure he will be good with children."

"Children?" Her neck ached from turning so quickly to stare at him.

"He's been talking with the fathers among the soldiers and healers. It's rather amusing, how he wants to know everything necessary to be a good father."

"Rushtan doesn't want children. He doesn't want a wife. They're a burden. A soldier has to choose between his career or his family." Veerian sighed, and tasted the tears ready to burst out in her voice. "He said he wanted children?"

"Nine moons is a long time to leave a man alone with his dreams. It gives him time to think things through, so he's certain of exactly what he wants."

"He didn't tell me..." She knuckled her eyes, refusing to cry again. "Did I give him a chance? No, of course not. I thought I knew everything. I thought I knew him."

"Everything has happened too quickly. You haven't had time to think. He'll understand. He loves you."

"He never said he loved me," she whispered.

"Ah, now, Lady, what are the lyrics to that song you enjoyed teasing Shehoaz and his friends with just a few years ago?" He hummed a tune. Despite herself, Veerian half-sang the words.

*Men rarely say what they think,
Men never say what they feel.
Brute muscles squeeze their brains,
And keep their hearts from the light.
Men rarely say what they think,
Men never say what they feel.*

SONG WEAVER

*And so the Mother made women,
To think and feel for them,
To organize the world for them,
And keep them out of trouble day and night.*

Her head ached from the struggle not to burst into tears again, but she won the battle.

CHAPTER 17

Veerian went straight to the Healers Temple when the caravan reached Bainevah, despite Vandan's insistence that she was expected at the palace, despite Asha's visible need to have her with him when he met his sister for the first time. She wanted nothing more than to sleep for an entire moon quarter and bury herself in her old routine. She wept a little, wishing that she could go to her home, but it had been closed up since Sennacheron killed Elini. She thought of the grand house Vandan said Rushtan had bought for her, as his wife. Did she want to see it?

Asha came to see her only two days after arriving in Bainevah. According to Queen Mayar, the reunion of brother and sister had been stiff and awkward, and Asha made no effort to bridge the gap. Veerian wasn't surprised when the young man walked into her workroom in clothes more suited to a blacksmith than the grandson of the High Priest. She wasn't surprised when he asked her to consider going back to the Hidden City with him, to dig out the secrets of the Three.

SONG WEAVER

“No. This is my place. And you might try a little harder and a little longer before you give up on your family, who love you so much. It’s a wonderful life waiting for you, if you’ll just try it.” She took a deep breath to calm the angry, panicked thudding of her heart. Her voice set the strings of her harp vibrating, so she thought she heard chiding voices in the sound.

“It isn’t my place.” For a young man of nineteen, he pouted like a four-year-old.

“You were born here. Our Lady says your mother brought you to the Healers Temple often. The Mother has a claim on your life that you cannot deny.”

“I can serve her in other ways. I just don’t want to do it here.” He jabbed his thumb downward, designating the entire city.

“What about Shanda? She deserves the ease and shelter you’re able to give her as a nobleman. Do you want her to go back to the mountains and wear herself out running an inn? Do you want to spend the rest of your life hammering away at hot iron? Use some common sense! Don’t waste the chances given you.”

“You’re a fine one to scold me about what I want in my life!” Asha leaped to his feet and stomped out of the room.

His words echoed through her mind, and in the strings of her harp, for what felt like hours afterward.

Challen came to see her that afternoon. Her duties on the King’s Council and with High Priest Chizhedek only let her serve in the Healers Temple every three days. She brought baby Hobad with her, and Veerian was surprised when her friend came into her workroom. She expected to be summoned to Queen Mayar’s workroom, and to see the High Priestess cuddling her grandson.

“I’m rather hurt you haven’t come to see your nephew yet,” Challen said, once her assistants left and the door closed, leaving the two women and the sleeping baby in privacy. She wrinkled up her nose at

SONG WEAVER

Veerian, turning the words into teasing and her irritated tone into mock anger.

“He’s adorable.” Veerian leaned forward out of her chair, to get a better look at the boy cuddled on his mother’s lap. “But he’s not my nephew.”

“Mother adores you like a daughter, and you have earned a place among us because of all you did for Rushtan. You brought my brother back to me, and I’m grateful, no matter how much of a nasty child he’s been.” She sniffed and shook her head, dismissing that complaint before Veerian could ask. “I thought we’d be planning your wedding to Rushtan by now. If that doesn’t make you Aunt Veerian to my son, I don’t know what does.”

Tears gushed like a geyser. Veerian ended up sitting on the bench under her window, cuddling Hobad and enfolded in Challen’s arms. Haltingly, choking on her tears, she told her friend the whole sordid story.

“Rushtan loves you. I know he does. Elzan was sure of it, just from Rushtan tearing out his hair for worrying about you.” Challen rubbed her back and rocked her, as if they were mother and child. That brought on an entirely different kind of pain and longing for tears. Veerian felt a fresh surge of hatred for her father, who had seduced and then destroyed her mother, depriving her of the advice and comfort she needed right that moment.

“But if he thinks I don’t love him—what do I do?”

“Do you love him?”

“I don’t know. How much of what I feel comes from all we went through together? How much of it is adoration for the handsome prince and soldier, and how much for the man?”

“That’s the problem with being a woman—we think too deeply. Men listen to their gut. And, unfortunately, what’s just underneath.” Challen’s eyes twinkled and a snort of teary laughter escaped Veerian.

SONG WEAVER

“Imagine how Rushtan has felt, loving you, terrified for you, totally helpless to find and rescue you. And, unfortunately, thinking that if he ever earned your love, he’d be just one of dozens. That you wouldn’t consider him anything special, while you had become the center of his world.”

“I never had a lover. I never had anyone I wanted to make love to me.” Veerian took a deep breath. “Until Rushtan.”

“Then tell him. Write him a song, if that’s easier than facing him.” Challen slid her restless baby out of Veerian’s arms as the boy burst out in a hearty roar. She rolled her eyes, deftly slid her robe open and put Hobad to her breast. The sound died immediately. “Men. No matter how young or old they are, they’re all on the surface, their needs and fears and passions. Women, on the other hand, go too deep. That’s why men and women need each other, to give depth to one and excavate the other.”

Veerian watched the nursing baby and ached deep inside. It reminded her of the seething, churning sensation that had turned her world upside down when she lay in Rushtan’s arms. And it reminded her of the pain as he ripped into her body. She knew childbirth hurt; likely it hurt a hundred times worse than losing her virginity. Yet she looked at little Hobad with his rusty curls and his eyes tightly closed, his cheeks working like a bellows as he nursed, and she wanted one just like him.

Her moon flow came just before she returned to Bainevah, so she knew she didn’t carry Rushtan’s child. Suddenly, what had been a relief now ached like disappointment.

“If you want to have a man’s child, does that mean you love him?” she whispered.

* * *

*To His Royal Highness, Council Member Prince Doni’Nebazz’
Rushta’Coori, Commander in the Host of the Ram.*

SONG WEAVER

Veerian of the Healers Temple, child of the Nai'hash'vi, Song Weaver and student of Inieri, greets you.

Our travels together, questing for the brother of the Princess Consort and to break the imprisoning magic around the Hidden City, ended badly. I beg your indulgence and understanding of the distress that struck my body and spirit at that time. My thoughts were tangled and muddy. I saw as enemies those who stood, and who still stand, closest to my heart. I heard words which you did not speak, and placed on your shoulders the blame for the crimes of others.

You are not as other men, and I wronged you in believing that you think and act and take as other men. I beg your forgiveness, and hope that someday, you will again think kindly of me and we may again return to the topic and activity that consumed us in our last private time together.

Veerian dropped her ebony pen and pressed her hands against her scorching cheeks. Even here in the privacy of her room in the Healers Temple, she couldn't think about making love to Rushtan without writhing inwardly. How could she want something to the point of pain, so her whole body burned, and fear it so terribly, both at the same time? If anyone could see the images in her mind, could touch her memories of lying naked in Rushtan's arms, relive the sensations that flooded her, they would call her a wicked, decadent woman.

And yet, was it wrong to feel such things if she married the man who inspired them? If she loved him?

She studied the letter she wrote, and considered scratching out the last line. Maybe even tearing up the letter and starting over. What would Rushtan think when he read that?

SONG WEAVER

“He will know I do not hate him,” she whispered, and laughed shakily when her cheeks warmed again. “He will know I enjoyed most of our lovemaking.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “And he will know what to do to ensure the bitterness does not cloud the sweet. Next time.” She nearly choked on the last two words. Would there be a next time, in Rushtan’s arms, sharing his bed?

Challen had assured her that the first time was painful, but if the lovers worked to give each other pleasure, it was never worth the tears Veerian had shed.

“That still doesn’t excuse Rushtan for thinking those things about you,” her friend had added. “Both of you need to forgive each other.”

Would Rushtan forgive her? That was the largest question Veerian had ever faced in her life, and it filled her with fear she had never known.

So she wrote to him.

I took unfair advantage in using the favor granted me by your royal brother, and would not listen when he asked me to speak with you and reconsider my anger. For that also, I ask forgiveness.

Veerian nearly knocked over the stand holding her cake of ink and pens, when she reached for another sheet of parchment. She had nearly forgotten to write a letter to Prince Elzan, rescinding the favor she had asked of him. If Rushtan wanted to come back to the city to speak with her, she wanted the Crown Prince to understand he was no longer to stop him.

Finally, Veerian signed and sealed the letters. She put them into Commander Andorn’s hands, the morning he left to lead a supply caravan to the Hidden City. He swore on his family’s honor, he would ensure the letters reached Rushtan and Elzan. Veerian wondered if

SONG WEAVER

Rushtan had told him about their argument, but she saw neither mockery nor anger nor even pity in his eyes, just the concern of a friend. She told herself it didn't matter. She would stand against anyone's judgment of her, if Rushtan would kiss her once more.

Not until the caravan was two days away did she realize something.

Veerian didn't tell Rushtan she loved him, because she still wasn't sure. Perhaps, she speculated, she couldn't give him her heart because she didn't know if she had one to give.

* * *

Sixth Ascent Moon

A moon quarter before solstice, Veerian heard Rushtan had returned to Bainevah. She spent half the day bathing and preparing for his visit.

He never came to the Healers Temple. Not on the first day, which Veerian honestly didn't expect. She excused his absence, blaming his weariness from the journey and the long report he likely had to make to the King's Council on the work being done in the Hidden City.

Rushtan didn't come to see her on the second day after returning.

Elzan came to see his mother on the third day after their party returned to Bainevah, and Veerian never realized it until she went to speak with the High Priestess and saw the Crown Prince leaving the temple.

Challen bubbled with delight at having her husband home, when she came to work in the Healers Temple the fourth day after the return. When she learned Rushtan hadn't been to see Veerian, she was too honestly surprised to be dissembling. She promised she would speak to Elzan and even demand Rushtan come see her, to find out why he hadn't been to see Veerian.

Queen Mayar said nothing about either prince's return, and Veerian was too ashamed to ask. A heavy sensation settled into her stomach and pressed against her skull, making her want to weep at the oddest times.

SONG WEAVER

On the seventh day since the return from the Hidden City, neither Princess Consort nor Queen came to work in the temple. Veerian excused it with the proximity of summer solstice and the Sacred Marriage, only a day away.

The Sanctum had been abolished, the Brides sent home to their families with rich dowries from the king's treasury. Challen had taken up the ancient role of High Priestess, as mother to the Heir and voice of Mother Matrika. At winter solstice, she had given birth to Hobad. All Bainevah was caught up in the preparations for this first solstice celebrated in the ancient way, in the true and restored worship. Challen and Prince Elzan were the center and focal point of the feast and sacred ceremony. Veerian knew it was ridiculous to feel abandoned, because the royal family had more important things to attend to.

Friends did invite her to their solstice feasts, but Veerian declined. She couldn't decide if she wanted to be alone or lose herself in a crowd. She didn't want people watching her, perhaps talking about her foolishness. She definitely didn't want to face another handful of young nobles, caught up in the high spirits of the celebration, declaiming bad poetry in her honor and demanding she marry one or two or a dozen of them.

Veerian nearly snapped at Vandan when he stopped her on her way to her rooms after supper, and reminded her they were to go sing in the marketplace in the morning. She bit her tongue and merely nodded acquiescence. Perhaps being surrounded by people who needed her, and who didn't know the mess she had made of her life, would raise her spirits.

* * *

A commotion started on the edges of the crowd, in the third hour of Veerian's time in the marketplace. She ignored it and continued singing over the badly burned little girl who sat on her lap. The child had witnessed the murder of her shopkeeper parents and nearly died in the

SONG WEAVER

fire that destroyed their shop and home. The city judges needed her to identify the men who had broken into the shop, because they were sure these men had terrorized other shopkeepers. Just one sure witness, validated by healer priests and mind scribes, would bring an avalanche of punishment down on these men.

First, Veerian had to ease the torment in the child's soul and body. Then the walls around her mind and heart would fall and the authorities could bring on their justice.

Veerian wept for the child, holding her as she had learned to do from Challen. She had never realized until then how much healing lay in simply being held, perhaps because no one had held her when she was a child. She found comfort in it, even as she gave comfort. When the little girl started to sing the simple song with her, Veerian wept in relief and gladness. She sorrowed as she anticipated letting the warm little body leave her arms.

She wiped her tears and accepted the cup of restorative potion Vandan handed her, when the child's aunt and grandparents led her away, escorted by soldiers assigned to the city judges. Then Veerian realized that the usually talkative, laughing crowd had fallen unusually silent. A warning chill raced up her back.

"Veerian, are you ready for the next one?" Vandan bent over her and took the empty cup from her hands.

"Of course." She forced a smile and opened her eyes.

Over Vandan's shoulder, she saw soldiers, their armor gleaming, the officers decorated with gold, silver and precious stones. The black ram banner for the Host of the Ram waved from a tall pole. Almost against her will, she turned to look for their leader. She found him, standing directly behind Vandan. She wondered that she hadn't felt the weight of his regard, the chill of his shadow falling across her body.

Rushtan took off his helmet when their gazes finally met, and locked. His face was grave, thinner than when she had last seen him,

SONG WEAVER

tanned by days working under the open sky.

“This soldier wants to be tested for his betrothal,” Vandan said.

Veerian’s heart lurched. Her entire body went stiff, all her muscles locking, but she still managed to turn her head and look for the woman who should have been standing at Rushtan’s side.

“Where is the bride?” Her voice sounded like a frog’s croak.

“You tell me,” Rushtan said. “Sing and test me. Look into my soul and tell me if I’m good enough for her.” He nodded to her, a crooked smile catching one corner of his mouth. It only served to make him look grimmer. “Please?”

“Highness—” She closed her eyes and shook her head, rendered speechless by the need to cry. She felt the platform tremble under her, felt Rushtan brush against her knee, then he took hold of her hand. She gasped and opened her eyes and found him kneeling in front of her chair, so close he only needed to lean forward a very little distance to kiss her.

She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to scoop her up in his arms as he had that day when the magic collapsed. She wanted to feel his hands on her body and surrender every bit of herself to his passion.

“Sing and read my heart,” he said, and pressed her hand against the hard bronze plate covering his chest.

“I know your heart, but I never showed you mine.” She managed to swallow the enormous lump that crushed her voice. He sparkled like sunlit diamonds, until she blinked and felt the hot tears trickle down her cheeks.

“Then sing so we can show each other,” he whispered.

“No.” She covered his lips with her other hand when he started to protest. “The song we will sing for each other is private. For lovers.” Her heart lurched when his eyes went bright, fiery hot at her words. “Between husband and wife.”

He kissed her fingertips, then caught her hand and pressed it against

SONG WEAVER

his chest with the other one. “Elzan told me I was an idiot. I should have told you I loved you from the beginning.”

“I wouldn’t have heard. But I’m listening now.”

“Lady, can I assume you are done for today?” Vandan asked.

Her face burned and she glanced from side to side. Sure enough, they were surrounded—Porual, Beeri, Yuakam, Chandan and the others in their band stood with their backs to her and Rushtan. Veerian didn’t doubt the crowd was still there, straining their ears to hear, trying to peer through the thick wall of cloaks and armor.

“For many days to come.” Rushtan stood, drawing Veerian to her feet. “Marry me, Veerian. Come home with me tonight. Let this solstice bring blessing on the rest of our lives and on our children and their children after them.” He gathered her close against him and bowed his head, poised on the edge of a kiss that she knew would burn through her entire body. She ached for it, but when his lips were close enough she felt his breath on her face, she interposed her hand between them.

“Tell me, Highness, just how many children were you planning on having?”

Rushtan jerked his head back and stared at her, his confusion comical enough to make her laugh, even with the remains of tears in her eyes.

“Enough for our own army. Enough to fill an entire temple of Song Weavers.” He shook his head, then swept her up in his arms so quickly she cried out and clutched at him. “I don’t care, just as long as you’re mine and you’re happy.” The wall of soldiers parted and he carried her off the platform, across the marketplace to the horses waiting for them.

“Wait.” She hadn’t told him she loved him, and that was more important than anything else she could think of.

“There’s no time.” He swung her up into the saddle and leaped up behind her. “Elzan, Challen and the king and queen are waiting at the temple. Chizhedek himself is ready to marry us.”

SONG WEAVER

“You were that sure of me?” She let him wrap an arm around her and draw her back against him. He guided the horse with one hand on the reins.

“Sure of *my* heart. Praying for yours.”

“You have it. Forever and always, in this life and in the Mother’s bright lands.”

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.

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

THE GOLD STANDARD IN PUBLISHING

QUALITY BOOKS
IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SUSPENSE/THRILLER

SCIENCE FICTION

PARANORMAL

ROMANCE

MYSTERY

EROTICA

HORROR

WESTERN

FANTASY

MAINSTREAM

HISTORICAL

YOUNG ADULT

NON-FICTION

BUY DIRECT AND SAVE
<http://www.amberquill.com>