

"Donna Grant charms with an historical fantasy series sure to leave readers craving more!"
~ NYT bestselling author, Lara Adrian

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace, set against a backdrop of a dense, misty forest. The man, on the left, has a distinctive hairstyle with a braid running down the back of his head. The woman, on the right, has long, light-colored hair and is looking down with a soft expression. The overall atmosphere is ethereal and romantic, with soft lighting filtering through the trees.

REIGN

A KINDRED: THE FATED NOVEL

A large, ornate metal ring is positioned at the bottom of the cover. It features intricate designs, including a central circular motif and a snake-like head on the right side. The ring is set against a dark, textured background that appears to be a close-up of a forest floor or a similar natural setting.

DONNA GRANT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REIGN

KINDRED: THE FATED

BOOK THREE

DONNA GRANT®



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

REIGN

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Cover Design © 2023 by Charity Hendry

ISBN 978-1-958353-07-3

Available in ebook.

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Peek at SHADOW MAGIC

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*Fall*

Armir took a deep breath and looked into the dark depths of the cave. He had used it countless times, but it wasn't his home. It was a place to rest, to escape. It had also been the location he expected his life to end. Some of his darkest days had been spent within the cold stone walls. He had spent hours roaring his anger and bellowing his grief.

And then, just when he had lost all hope, he felt her magic.

Armir held out his hand as a ball of fire swirled in his palm. He shot it toward the ground. Sparks flared to life in what was left of the ash. He looked down at the flames jumping and dancing. He fought not to look over his shoulder where she lay unconscious. He had held her too tightly, stared too long as he carried her to the cave. But he had thought never to see her again.

He swallowed and checked the area once more. Then he walked through the cave to the entrance. He paused and looked out at the rain as it fell in sheets too thick to see more than a few feet. Armir unsheathed his dagger and cut his forearm. Blood welled and dripped onto the stone. The words of an ancient spell he'd never thought to utter fell from his lips as he walked across the entryway, trailing his blood with him.

When he reached the other side, he pulled out a strip of cloth and wrapped it around the wound. For better or worse, neither he nor Malene would be leaving the cave anytime soon. It was the right thing to do. He had a duty to their people

—to everyone—to figure out what had happened to her. Why, then, did it feel as if the weight of the world now rested on his shoulders?

He was weary. Tired of losing hope, tired of the guilt. Just...beat. He'd lived his life for the Varroki, to safeguard Blackglade. It had been the greatest of honors to be chosen to stand beside the Lady of the Varroki—and he had stood beside a few. Yet none had been like Malene.

Armir dropped his chin to his chest. The Varroki were a strong people, their magic unmatched. They had descendants of the Celts and Norse, merging the two cultures into one. Because of that, they had chosen to live in a hidden city. At one time, their numbers had been great, but strict rules and the war with the Coven had decimated their ranks to the point of extinction.

He turned and made his way back to the cavern. Malene was on her side, her long, flaxen hair spread around her. He almost hadn't recognized her in the breeches, leather, and chainmail covering her. He had taught her battle magic, but what he'd seen when he came upon her and Asa locked in combat was something else entirely. It had been merciless and brutal. *She* had been cold and ruthless. The opposite of the woman he knew.

Like all the Ladies chosen by destiny or fate, Malene had to be convinced to leave her family, life, and home for Blackglade. It was rare for a Lady to reign for more than five years. Many died within the first. But not Malene. There had been a few times he hadn't thought she would survive. He had believed her too fragile, too vulnerable. However, her inner strength surfaced when her back was to the wall. She hadn't just survived, she had *thrived*.

She had known nothing of magic when he found her. He had questioned why she had been chosen as Lady of the Varroki, but the longer he was around her, and the longer she ruled, the more he understood. She had fought the confines of her role, all the while worrying over the Varroki.

Finally, she stopped fighting her destiny and instead grasped it with both hands. He could still remember how her soft gray eyes had danced with excitement when he agreed to teach her to read. It had been her first order to him. Once she grasped it, she had been voracious, combing through every tome in Blackglade at least once.

That's how she'd discovered the decrees of celibacy for many positions within the Varroki—including his—that had long stood in their culture. She had overturned all of them in an effort to help grow their ranks once more. Yet years of being forbidden to touch a Lady couldn't be wiped away with a snap of the fingers. No matter how much he might want to reach for Malene, he hadn't.

He couldn't.

Armira didn't know when he had begun to love her. The emotion was just there one day, and there was no way to put it back into a box. Or ignore it. So, he had silently dreamed and yearned. And hoped.

Just when he was ready to tell her how he felt, they had gone into battle against the Coven. He should've told Malene about his feelings before they walked onto that battlefield. Instead, he had chosen to keep quiet and let her focus on the upcoming clash. It had turned out to be his greatest mistake because he lost Malene that day.

Being at Blackglade without her had been unbearable. He hadn't found a body, so he refused to believe she was dead and set out to find her, intending to comb the Earth. Every day that passed without uncovering a clue had eventually worn him down, hollowing him out and creating a hole in his heart.

Some days, he couldn't do anything but sit with his memories. Other days, he covered dozens of miles, stopping anyone he came across to ask if they had seen someone matching Malene's description. And all the while, a sense of dread had grown within him that she was gone. Lost to him forever.

Armira lowered himself to the ground and looked across the fire at the woman who had ensnared him utterly, completely.

He stared at her heart-shaped face with her high cheekbones and plump lips. He had looked into her large eyes so many times, captivated by their color and the wisdom staring back at him.

No one was supposed to touch the Lady of the Varroki. But he had. He could recount each time down to the last detail. Somehow, that made his yearning grow until she was all he could think about. He hadn't wanted her to go into battle because he had feared losing her. She reminded him she was the Lady, chosen to bear the magic of the blue radiance. He knew her power, her strength. It was why he hadn't believed her dead.

He'd been right. What he didn't understand was why she had been fighting Asa, someone who was a friend to them both. Worse, he'd learned that Malene now went by the name Dagny and had been living in Norway. Why hadn't she returned to Blackglade? Why had she been with the Vikings? Why go after Asa?

So many questions needed answers, and he wondered if she would give them to him. He'd envisioned this day many times. How he would find her, what he might say. He hadn't expected to need to use magic to knock her unconscious so she wouldn't harm Asa. Would the woman who opened her eyes be the Malene he knew? Would she recognize him? Would she smile? Reach for him?

He looked to the side as emotion choked him. He didn't know if it would be Malene or Dagny who greeted him, which was why he had ensured they couldn't leave the cave. Malene had enough power to end anyone she wanted. It had been her morality and integrity that had kept it in check. They weren't leaving the cave until he knew for sure that she was indeed herself. He couldn't take the chance that she would go after the Varroki or others.

No one knew where they were. No one would find them. They had enough supplies to last weeks. If he couldn't untangle the web by then...

Armir leaned back against a rock cushioned by a blanket. He closed his eyes, but there was no sleep for him. He hadn't slept more than a few hours a night since Malene's disappearance a year before. Perhaps he should've taken the time to rejoice in the Coven's defeat, but he'd been too distraught over Malene. He'd even ignored the Varroki's pleading that he remain and take over until he found a new Lady.

That was the last straw for him. *Malene* was the Lady of the Varroki. She was the one who would lead their people into a new age. Yet the Varroki were impatient. They wanted a Lady, and if Malene was gone, that meant he should do his duty and look for a new Lady—at least to them.

As far as he knew, that's what they thought he was doing. He hadn't been back to Blackglade, and he didn't intend to return without Malene. What was the point? He had once loved his position, but he couldn't imagine someone else living in her quarters, standing in her place, or leading their people.

Armir got to his feet and moved around the cavern. He'd been in the cave, brought low by misery and despair, when he felt her magic. He'd rushed out without hesitation. All he could think about was finding her. He had slowed only long enough to drink some water before running toward her once more.

He frowned as he recalled the sounds of battle as he neared. Armir had glimpsed Jarin and Helena, but he hadn't had time to speak to them. He rushed through a throng of Vikings to get into the Witch's Grove. His eyes locked on Malene leaning over Asa, who was screaming in agony. Armir had acted instantly. He had the advantage since Malene hadn't known he was there and took advantage of it. He knocked Malene away from Asa with his magic and wrapped his arms around her. When he looked down, he found her unconscious.

Jarin and Helena had filled him in on what had occurred, and then Armir had used magic to jump him and Malene to the cave. How much longer was he willing to wait for her to wake and grant him answers—assuming she would willingly do

anything? Maybe he should've tried to talk to Malene at the Witch's Grove instead of knocking her out.

"Wake up, Malene," he said.

Armira turned away with a shake of his head. He wasn't going to stand there watching her sleep. He wouldn't appreciate someone doing that to him. He rose and strode out of the cavern. He had explored the cave countless times—sometimes, in delirium; other times, in curiosity—and knew every inch of it.

Now, he stood surrounded by cold, gloomy stone just as lost and unsure of the future as he had been the day before.



Dagny kept her eyes closed as she listened to the sounds around her. The pop of the fire was closest, but she could discern dripping water farther away. She didn't hear anyone else breathing or talking. That didn't mean she was alone.

She sorted through her memories to find the last thing she remembered. It was Asa in the Witch's Grove. She'd gotten the upper hand with the witch and was about to force her to submit. Then, everything went black.

Where were Hosvir and the rest of his army? Had other witches come upon them? Is that who'd attacked her? Why hadn't they killed her, then?

Dagny cracked open one eye enough to see through the small slit. She spotted the fire, boulders, and a stone floor but nothing else. She opened her eye wider to get a better look. Just more of the same. Finally, she lifted both lids. She spotted the deep shadows beyond the fire and knew someone could be waiting and watching.

Pushing herself up with her hands, she winced and bit back a curse. Something had hit her. She didn't know if it had been magic or a person, but it had left her bruised. Dagny scanned the shadows in front of her before looking behind her. She was nearly butted up against a wall. At least she didn't have to worry about someone coming up from behind.

That didn't explain where she was or how she had gotten here, though. Dagny gingerly touched her right shoulder and arm and grimaced at the tenderness. She wasn't bleeding, and

nothing was broken, thankfully. Whatever had struck her had been hard. It wouldn't slow her if she had to escape, though.

She kept her gaze on the shadows and climbed to her feet. Her legs were steady, which was good. She glanced at the fire and spotted a waterskin off to the side. Had it been left for her, or did it belong to someone else? Not that it mattered. She could take care of whoever it was with her magic.

Dagny walked around the fire toward the shadows. They were a perfect place for someone to hide, and if anyone was there, she planned to force them out. With each step bringing her closer, she listened for movement. She heard nothing. Not even breathing. It didn't take her long to walk into the darkness. She tripped twice but caught herself each time. At least no one was there.

She turned and was halfway back to the fire when he appeared. One moment, the space was empty. The next, a man was there. But not just any man. Half of him stood in the glow of the fire, the other in shadow. He was tall and broad-shouldered. And for a second, she thought she knew him. As soon as that flitted through her mind, it was gone. She couldn't place his face, but something in her said she knew him.

Pale green eyes regarded her silently. He had a strong, defined visage with prominent cheekbones and a square jaw. His lips were wide, the bottom fuller than the top. Long, golden blond hair was pulled back in small braids and gathered in a queue at his nape, secured with strips of leather to fall down his back. The sides of his head were shaved, and she caught sight of what looked like tattoos there, though she couldn't see more from her angle. He wore plain leather breeches, a nondescript shirt, and a jerkin with boots. She caught sight of the handle of a dagger at his waist.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

He looked away, but not before she saw his disappointment. “A friend.”

“I doubt that.”

Instead of arguing, he turned his back to her and sat. Either he had no idea who she was, or he believed she wouldn't harm him. Dagny glanced at the cavern opening. She could leave. He couldn't stop her. But she was curious as to who this man was and why she felt a smidgeon of recognition.

She returned to where she had woken and spotted the blanket she had lain on. She chose to sit on a rock instead. He leaned on one hand with the opposite leg bent, his other arm resting on it. It was a casual pose, but she wasn't fooled. Their gazes clashed and held.

“Your name?” she pressed.

His expression was carefully schooled. “Armir.”

“Did you bring me to this place?”

He inclined his head. “I did.”

“Why?”

“For your safety.”

She chuckled. “I'm the last person who needs saving.”

“I disagree.”

“Well, Armir, I don't care what you think. I could end your life with a thought,” she threatened.

He didn't bat an eye. “I'm aware.”

“That usually terrifies most. If you're not bothered by it, then you must also have magic.”

“I do.”

Interesting. “That's rare, isn't it? Men with magic?”

“Not among my people.”

“And who are your people?”

“The same as yours.”

Dagny felt the twisting anxiety in her stomach that she got every time she tried to think about her past. “The closest thing I have to people are the Norsemen I came with. Where are they?”

“Dead.”

“Impossible,” she stated.

“I assure you, it’s not.”

She studied Armir. He held himself as confidently as any warrior. He was a man who knew battle, but if the way he dealt with her was any indication, he was also someone who appreciated diplomacy. He watched her with the intensity of a hawk after its prey. Well, he was in for a surprise because she was far from helpless.

“They’re dead,” he repeated.

That changed her plans slightly, but Dagny was nothing if not resourceful. “How many of the Vikings did you kill?”

“None. Rory, Asa, Jarin, and Helena took them out.”

“Hmm. I thought you were a warrior. I’m rarely mistaken.”

He flicked his hand. “I am. I would’ve happily joined my friends against the raiders, but I was otherwise occupied.”

Dagny’s gaze lowered to the ground for a moment as she thought about her injuries. “With me, you mean.”

“I do.”

“So, you’re the one who stopped me from forcing Asa to submit.”

Armir blew out a breath and sat upright. “Asa is your friend. You would never hurt her.”

“You have mistaken me for someone else.”

“I have not. You need only remember.”

“Ah. I see,” she said with a nod of her head. “Now, you’re going to tell me you knew me before.”

“I did.”

She wasn’t quite sure what she thought about meeting another who claimed to know her. Dagny had ignored Asa’s words, but she couldn’t be so cavalier with Armir. And that bothered her. What did he know that she didn’t? And did she wish to learn it? She wasn’t sure about that. “So?”

His brows snapped together. “So?”

“If you speak the truth—”

“I do,” he stated firmly over her.

She narrowed her eyes. “That was the past. I don’t remember it, and I don’t care to. I’ve moved on.”

“Have you now?”

“Aye. You should try it.”

“Then tell me about you.”

Dagny had expected him to argue his point longer. His shift took her aback. “What?”

“Tell me how you got to Norway. Tell me about your life there.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” He sighed when she didn’t reply. “We were friends.”

She almost asked him if they were more than that, but something held her back. Armir didn’t do anything she expected, and that threw her. She started to deliver the same lie she told others, then changed her mind at the last second. Maybe it was the way he watched her. Perhaps it was because he kept saying they were friends, but she decided on the truth. “I don’t know how I arrived in Norway. I woke half in the water, half on shore, soaking wet and freezing with no memory. I came across some farmers who took me in. I understood them from the beginning. It wasn’t until they said I spoke their language with an accent that I began to question things.”

“You recalled nothing of before?”

“Not even my name. They came up with Dagny, and I adopted it. A day or so later, I used magic. I did it to help them, but others soon came to ask for things. The Norse revere those like us. Word spread about me, and I was asked to go to certain villages and cities to help those in need. That’s how I met Hosvir.”

Armira didn't so much as twitch a muscle. "Were you lovers?"

Dagny chuckled. "He wanted to be."

"But the two of you decided to find Asa and force her to bear his children?"

"It would cement his power and leadership of the Norse since she is related to the First Witch."

"You never thought about what Asa might want?"

Dagny shrugged. "She should've been pleased and honored to be chosen for such a position."

"You were forcing her," Armira replied, his voice going hard.

"She was a means to an end. It wasn't as if she would have been harmed."

Armira snorted. "I beg to differ, and so does Asa."

"This has been entertaining, but I've had enough. You might have killed my friends, but that won't stop me," she said and got to her feet.

"From what?"

"I have magic. Which means I can gain power. Whether I help someone or take it myself, it'll be mine."

He quirked a blond brow. "The Coven tried that."

Something about the word made her frown, but it was gone in the next second. She shrugged and headed toward the entrance. "I'm not the Coven. I won't be stopped."

"I'm surprised you haven't asked how I knew you or where you came from. Surely, you want to know."

That stopped her in her tracks. She hadn't allowed herself to think about her past after the first few months when she could recall nothing. She figured there was a reason she couldn't remember it. But that was when she could only guess. Here was someone who claimed to know her and the past that was ever-elusive. Did she want to know? A part of her did.

Maybe knowing who she had been before would fill in some of the holes inside her.

Or...it could make things worse.

“I know all the details of your life,” Armir said.

She looked at him over her shoulder. He stared at the fire, not even bothering to look her way. “You think telling me will somehow bring back my memories?”

“It may. Does that frighten you?”

It did. She had come to accept who she was. It had been a painful time. The not knowing, the wondering. The speculating. She had claimed Dagny and everything she was. Why disrupt it? Why chance shaking up her life again?

“I can tell you why your palms glow blue when you do magic.”

It was the one thing no one could explain. As far as she knew, she was the only one who could do such a thing. Everyone thought that made her more powerful, and it did. But it also raised more questions.

Dagny pivoted and returned to the rock. She sat, never taking her eyes from Armir. “Then tell me, and I’ll decide if I believe you or not.”

“I have no reason to lie.”

“You have every reason,” she retorted.

Armir turned his head to the side, allowing her to see the intricate tattoos on the side of his head that wound to the back and onto the other side. She wanted a closer look. She learned the meaning of some of the runes with the Norse, but she had already known a few.

His green gaze slid back to hers. “Your name is Malene. You were born in a village in northern England near the Scottish border. I found you because of the blue radiance in your left hand.”

She fisted her hands at the mention of the glow. “Found me?”

“I come from a place where those like you are sought. When one dies, I go in search of another. You were chosen, and I found you.”

“For?”

He glanced at the ground. “An important role within my city. It was your destiny, and you willingly came with me.”

“I gave up my family and home for...you?” Was that why she thought she knew him?

“Not me, exactly. Another life.”

“And what is this role I had?”

His shoulders lifted as he drew in a deep breath. “You were Lady of the Varroki.”

“You say that as if I’m supposed to know what it means.”

“I hoped you would.”

She twisted her lips. “I don’t. Who are the Varroki?”

“A powerful group of witches and warlocks.”

Dagny smiled. Maybe that’s why she had come to Scotland. She wanted power, and the Varroki might just be where she needed to go. “Take me there. It might jar my memories.”

“That isn’t going to happen.”

She raised her brows at his statement. “You aren’t afraid of me, are you?”

“The only way you’ll ever see the city again is if you regain your memories.”

“A city can be found.”

“Not this one.”

That twisting in her stomach occurred once more. “You seem to be going to a lot of trouble for me. What happens if I never regain my memories of the past? If I’m never this Malene again?”

“Nothing.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“I’ve not harmed you.”

“That doesn’t mean you won’t try. Though I’d warn against it.”



The woman before him might look like Malene. She might have Malene's eyes, her voice...but that's where the similarities ended. The way Dagny held herself, the cadence of her speech, even the hard edge to her voice were completely different. Maybe he'd been wrong. Perhaps the woman he had known—and loved—was no more.

“Nothing to say to that?” she asked with a smirk.

It didn't matter if Malene was gone. Dagny had her power. She could never leave the cave. Those he brought to Blackglade to be Lady of the Varroki were young. They were confused about their magic and searching for answers. Within the walls of Blackglade, he could shape and mold them to be the leaders the city needed. While many died swiftly, none had ever been out in the world with that kind of power, wreaking havoc on the regular population. And he wouldn't let it start now.

“Your threats don't scare me,” he replied.

Dagny chuckled. “Is that bravery or stupidity, I wonder? You say you know me.”

“I do.”

“Then you know what power I wield. You'd be a fool to stand in my way.”

She ran her gaze over him slowly. And damn if his body didn't respond to the heated look. He fought against his reaction. It was a losing battle. How could he refuse the

woman he loved? He could tell himself that Dagny wasn't Malene, but his eyes refused to accept that fact.

“Or,” Dagny said seductively, “you could join me. Think what we could accomplish.”

Need surged through Armir. Malene had occupied his dreams for years. In them, he had touched her, kissed her, held her in every way possible. It was just the two of them now. The outside world wouldn't intrude. Nothing could come between them. He could finally give in to his desires. Finally know what it was like to hold her that way in truth.

He was so fucked.

“The Varroki hunt and kill those like you,” he told her.

Her lips curved. “You said I was Lady of the Varroki.”

“You *were*.”

It was a lie, but she didn't know that. As long as she lived, she was still the Lady. But the longer she stayed away from the city, the more danger Blackglade and the Varroki were in. The Ladies kept the city hidden with their magic. Thankfully, the Coven was no more. Otherwise, he was sure Blackglade would've been found by now.

“Hmm.” She tilted her head to regard him. “If I'm so important to the Varroki, why did they only send one man to find me?”

Dagny had the same intelligence as Malene. He would have to be careful about how much he revealed. “Who said I was the only one?”

“You're the only one here.”

“I'm the only one you can see.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Point taken. Let me guess. The others are outside the cave, and if I attempt to leave, they'll stop me. Is that the plan?”

“Nay.”

“Then where are they?”

“They’re not needed.”

She threw back her head and laughed. It instantly transported Armir to Malene’s chamber in the tower at Blackglade, where they once sat sharing a meal. Malene had laughed at a joke Helena told, tossing her head back the same way she did now. The memory faded quickly. Malene slowly vanished, leaving only Dagny for him to look at.

“You think too highly of yourself,” she said with a shake of her head, though still grinning. “I admire that. Too bad it will lead to your death.”

“Perhaps you think too highly of *yourself*.”

She held up her hands. “The magic I possess gives me that confidence. If you had it, they would’ve made you ruler of Blackglade.”

“True.”

“Tell me why they want women. Why didn’t you or another man seize the throne?”

Armir leaned against a rock and crossed his ankles. He laced his fingers together and rested them on his stomach. “That isn’t the way things are done.”

“Then the Varroki are irresponsible and reckless. The strong should lead.”

“The strong are not always the best to govern.”

She quirked a brow, clearly disagreeing. “But young girls are? The fact is, you take us because you can shape us the way you want. I bet there are a ton of rules.”

“There are,” he admitted.

“How many of the Ladies balked at them?”

He released a breath. “Nearly all.”

“And how many changed things?”

“Only one.”

“You should’ve kept her, then.”

Armira stared into soft gray eyes, his gut churning with regret and longing. “She disappeared.”

“Makes you wonder why I did that, doesn’t it?”

“I may not know *how* it happened, but I know *why*.”

Dagny got to her feet once more. “I don’t care. The past is the past. It needs to stay that way.”

“What are you afraid of?”

Anger tightened her face. “You mistake my indifference for fear.”

“I don’t believe I do. You’re terrified of learning about Malene. Is it because you might actually remember something?”

“I’m leaving. If you try to follow me, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

Armira listened as she stalked from the cavern. He debated whether to go after her, but she would be back soon enough, demanding an explanation. After searching most of England, some of Wales, and nearly all of Scotland, he was done chasing Malene—or Dagny, rather.

He stared into the fire, thinking about their recent conversation. Dagny was fearful. He couldn’t imagine waking up in a foreign land with no memories of his past or knowledge of his name. She hadn’t just survived, she had thrived. But then again, that’s what Malene did. She had been bowed by being Lady of the Varroki, but it had never broken her as it had others. Memory loss certainly wouldn’t destroy her.

It just proved how remarkable and formidable she was. She had made friends while making a name for herself. All without coin, a name, or a home. Few could’ve done what she had. It made him want to find a way to return Malene’s memories. He’d scour the world to find the cure, but he couldn’t do that locked in a cave. And there was no way he could allow Dagny to leave with her current intentions. Could he change her way of thinking, though?

“What did you do?” Dagny demanded, her voice low and laced with fury.

Armira didn't bother looking in her direction. “Bound us inside the cave.”

“I'll find a way to get out.”

“Nay, you won't. In case you didn't notice, you can't use magic. And before you get angry, neither of us can.”

She moved to stand between him and the fire. Her eyes blazed with righteous anger. “It won't hold me for long.”

“It's an ancient spell from my people, only used in the direst of circumstances. A missing Lady of the Varroki with no memory is certainly that.” He glanced at her hands where she had them fisted at her sides. “You can fight all you want, but neither of us is leaving.”

Dagny shook her head. “I don't believe you. There's no way you would lock us in here permanently.”

“True. It was only intended to keep us here until you got your memories back, but if that doesn't happen, then the best place for you is here, where you can't hurt anyone.”

“A prison?” she bit out. “Because I have magic that others don't?”

“Because of what you would *do* with that magic.”

“You believe you get to decide my fate?”

Armira nodded once. “I'm responsible for the Lady of the Varroki.”

“You find us. You say whatever you need to in order to convince us to leave everything we know behind. I bet you even tell each of us that you're our friend, that you have our best interests at heart. The truth is, you only care about your city and your people.”

He hid his flinch at the cut of her words. Because they were true. Yet she was far from done. She shoved the proverbial blade into him and twisted.

“How many Ladies died on your watch? How many did you lie to in order to keep them there, doing whatever it is one of yours couldn’t? There’s a reason you need outsiders for the position. How many more like me need to die before someone says *enough*? I got free of you. And I’m going to make sure no other is pulled from their families to be a Varroki Lady again.”

Armir knew some of Malene was in Dagny’s words. She had longed to return home. Like all the others, Malene had begged to be released from her position. She was the one who’d changed their laws, and she would’ve eventually changed much more—including what had brought her to the city—had she had time.

“I wish you could,” he told her. “But it won’t happen. The spell is too powerful. Your magic is gone, as is mine.”

“You fear me that much?”

He got to his feet. “I fear the damage you’d do in your quest. I fear the innocent lives you’d take and the ensuing upheaval.”

“Change always involves such things.”

“You can’t honestly tell me that taking a life doesn’t affect you.”

Dagny lifted her chin. “I do whatever it takes to ensure my place. I don’t have the kind of magic I do for nothing. I was meant to reign. And I will.”

“Then you never should’ve left Norway.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “You really expect me to believe you’ll rot in here with me?”

“I will.”

“You would only do that out of guilt or...” Her lips curved into a smile. “Love.”

Armir didn’t deny it. She would’ve come to that conclusion eventually.

“Oh, I see,” Dagny said as her smile grew. “You fell in love with Malene. Then she left you.”

“Not by choice.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

She was right, he didn’t. But Malene had made plans with him, with the Varroki. She wouldn’t have left.

Unless she’d tricked him.

“And there’s the doubt,” Dagny said triumphantly as she dropped her arms to her sides and walked around the fire to sit on the rock once more. “You were so sure of things a moment ago.”

“Malene thought of the Varroki as her people,” he insisted.

Dagny nodded. “Sure, she did. How many times did you trick and deceive her so she’d take the position and remain there?”

“It was for my people.”

“That many? I don’t think you knew Malene as well as you thought.”

He turned his head to the side. They were talking about Malene as if she were another person, not the one sitting across from him with her thoughts gone or blocked...or whatever. “She understood.”

“She saw a way out and took it.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

His voice echoed in the cavern as he glared at Dagny, while she merely grinned victoriously. She had wanted to push him and succeeded.

“For all you know, she wiped her memories when she made her escape. I wouldn’t want to remember years forced to be something I didn’t want to be, in a place I didn’t like. I would’ve wiped you and Blackglade from my mind like that,” she said with a snap of her fingers.

Armir calmed his racing emotions. “Malene was strong of mind and spirit. It took her time, but she embraced her role as Lady. She loved the Varroki enough to see that change was

needed, and she implemented it. She considered herself one of us.”

“You’re either a trusting fool or an idiot. If she had wanted to leave, would you have let her?”

“There’s only one way a Lady can leave the position.”

“Death,” Dagny stated.

Armira swallowed and nodded.

“So, you held her captive. Like you’re holding me.”

“It wasn’t like that.” But even as he said the words, he knew they rang hollow.

Dagny’s scowl was fierce. “Did she tell you she loved you in return?”

“I never told her.”

“That’s why you came for me, isn’t it? You wanted to declare your feelings, hoping she would return to Blackglade and her position.”

Her words were like a blade twisting in his heart. Everything he had done had been for his people, and then for Malene. Had she lied to him? Had he misread her intentions? Had she really escaped and intentionally wiped her memories?

He wasn’t sure he could blame her if she had. While he might not have begun the practice of finding the young women with the blue radiance, he certainly hadn’t stopped it. He was as much to blame as the others for continuing the practice. The reason so many of the Ladies hadn’t lived long was because of their yearning for home and desire for a life of their own.

Malene had been compelled to remain in Blackglade. Now, he was forcing her into another situation. Armira tried to tell himself it was his only option, but that was far from the truth. Malene had gotten the freedom she wanted in Norway. She had become Dagny, whether by accident or design. Who was he to decide her fate?



It had been hours since Armir walked away. Dagny had been pleased to see him go, but once alone, she was left with her thoughts. And she didn't like where they led her. Armir's words replayed in her head on repeat, pressing her to consider another version than hers.

She hadn't been wrong about him being a warrior. But his attachment to Malene had been a surprise. So had the lengths he had gone to in order to secure the two of them in the cave. She wasn't used to anything holding her, but whatever spell he'd used wasn't just keeping her inside, it also prevented her from using magic. Ever since she'd awoken on the shore that cold, dark morning without any knowledge of herself, magic had been all that'd kept her from going mad.

It had been her comfort, her friend. From the moment she'd opened her eyes, it had been there, waiting for her, familiar and effortless. Her magic had been the only recognizable thing. She didn't know her face when she looked into a mirror. Her name, her past, and how she had gotten to Norway were answers she had never found, no matter how many times she searched her blank memories.

So what if she lied to Armir about when she realized she had magic? It was unnerving to be around someone who claimed to know her. Dagny tested the name he had called her. *Malene*. It felt foreign. Wrong, even. But was that because she had gotten used to Dagny? That name hadn't sounded right when she claimed it, either.

She had another secret, too. One she had never shared with anyone. She'd awoken from a dream on a few occasions with a name on her lips. But as soon as she was conscious, it slipped away like water through her fingers. Whose name was it? Hers? Armir's? Someone else's?

Dagny had taunted him earlier, but it had been nothing but words. She had no idea if Malene had intentionally left him or not. It made sense, though. Why else would Dagny end up in another country with no memories? Malene—*she*—had been forced to stay in a hidden city and rule. It sounded preposterous.

Why hadn't Malene—*she*—left? Why hadn't she put her foot down and refused? And why was Armir so sure that Malene hadn't run from him? The only way she would get answers was to ask. Though she wasn't sure she could believe Armir. It would be to his advantage to put himself in the best light, to earn her trust so she might return with him to Blackglade. That wouldn't happen. She wasn't going back, whether she had left on purpose or not. She chose freedom.

Her attention moved to the doorway as she thought about the haunted look that'd passed over Armir's face, his pale green gaze sliding away. She had wanted to hurt him, and she had. Why then did she feel so horrible?

Dagny grew tired of sitting and rose. She walked the cavern, her eyes repeatedly going to the entry. Where had Armir gone? Was there another exit he'd slipped out of? Nay. That wasn't the type of man he was. She snorted. How could she claim to know that? Armir was a stranger.

Or was he?

She paused by the entrance, her hand on the cool stone. Dagny hesitated a heartbeat before leaving the cavern. She looked to the left. The long, dark tunnel had led her straight to the cave entrance. She hadn't seen any other openings, but she hadn't looked either. She turned her head in the other direction. The tunnel was just as dark. She kept her hand on the wall as she stepped to the right. She walked slowly, easing her foot down each time so she didn't trip over anything.

It was slow going. The darkness quickly closed around her once she got away from the cavern. She thought about turning around, but she'd had enough of that space for the time being. Obviously, there was more of the cave structure to see. Otherwise, Armir wouldn't have walked away.

Dagny glanced over her shoulder. She could no longer see the cavern doorway or the glow of the fire. She swallowed as the cool air clung to her. She almost called out for Armir but stopped herself at the last minute. Instead, she put one foot in front of the other, just as she had when she'd pulled herself out of the water, shivering and alone.

She didn't know how long she walked before she saw the muted blue glow. Her feet came to a halt. That's when she heard the occasional drip. The tunnel had led her to an arched opening. Her mouth parted in surprise as she took in the blue light from the ceiling reflected on the dark pools of water.

Glow worms.

It was perhaps the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She walked farther into the space, utterly entranced. Her gaze swept from one side to the other until she spotted Armir sitting on the ground near the water's edge. He rolled something over and over in his hand. She remained silent and still. He didn't know she was there, and it allowed her time to study him.

He looked sad. Had her words cut him that deeply? If he truly had feelings for her, seeing Dagny, who didn't know him, must be very difficult. She wondered how much of what he had told her was true. She hadn't noted any deception when he emphatically declared that Malene wouldn't have left him.

It had taken Dagny a long time to come to terms with the fact that she could recall nothing from her past. Once she overcame that hurdle, she hadn't looked back. She had accepted things and embraced her life. The same way Armir had said Malene once did.

Now, he wanted her to return to a time when she hunted for any crumb of a past. The emptiness, the loneliness—the fear—had nearly killed her. She didn't know if someone had tried to harm her, if it had been an accident, or if she had done

it to herself. Surely, if *she* had wiped her memories, she would've left herself some clue. But there had been nothing. Or anyone to help her.

Just desolation and desperation.

Dagny felt herself sliding back into those chilly, murky emotions. She had fought hard to find a place among the Vikings, and now that had been stripped away, too. Once more, she was in a strange land with people she didn't know. How many more times would she have to face this?

She took a step toward Armir. Her foot hit a pebble, making it clack against others. Armir's head whipped around. She could only see a portion of his face, but she knew when his gaze found hers.

"I can leave if you'd rather be alone," she offered.

He turned his head away. "There's enough room for both of us."

Dagny walked in the opposite direction, skirting the water's edge to follow it deeper into the area. She found a place and sat. The intermittent drips of liquid were the only sounds that broke the silence. The pool was still, the glow peaceful. It was the perfect spot to sit with her thoughts. She glanced toward Armir, but he didn't look her way.

"You need to understand something," she said softly. "It's been over a year since I lost my memories. A year of not knowing who I might have been or why I was in Norway. I've come to accept that I will never know. I found a new me. A new life. I clawed my way out of the darkness that tried to claim me. I might have been Malene once. It might have even been an accident that I ended up in another country. I don't have those answers, and I don't care. I can't. Because if I stay in the past, I'll lose everything I've gained. Including who I am now."

There was a long silence before Armir asked, "What if you could be Malene and Dagny?"

She lifted her gaze to the ceiling. "Malene is gone. If those memories had a chance of returning, it would've happened by

now.”

“You may be right.”

“I’m sorry you lost her.”

He drew in a deep breath. “You were never mine to lose.”

Dagny almost corrected him but held her tongue. They sat for a long time without speaking. She wondered what had happened the last time Armir saw Malene. She came up with different theories, but none of them rang true. Yet there *was* someone who could tell her what happened—if she dared to ask. It would contradict everything she’d just said, but she had to know.

“Tell me,” she urged.

His head swiveled to her. “About?”

“The battle. What happened with Malene the last time you saw her?”

Armir looked away and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You wanted to tell me earlier. I’m asking now.”

“As you said, you don’t wish to stay in the past.”

He had her there. “I don’t, but I can’t stop thinking about it. Hearing it might not make a difference, just as my old name didn’t, but...”

“What if it does?”

“I don’t believe it will. Nothing else has. I think I just want to know if I did this to myself.”

“You mean you want to know if you left Blackglade.”

“*And me,*” went unsaid. She looked his way, their gazes meeting briefly over the expanse of water. “Aye.”

“The Coven had grown strong,” Armir said. “The group of witches wanted to be in power, to stop hiding who they were, *what* they were. They wanted to end the time of being hunted and killed. Many Varroki understood their desire, but the Coven went about it wrong. They killed indiscriminately, and

they searched for other witches, forcing them to choose death or joining the Coven. You, I mean Malene, refused to sit safely in Blackglade. I wanted to send more warriors after the Coven, but she had other ideas. We joined other witches and even Witch Hunters against the Coven and brought the battle to them.” He paused and shook his head. “It was a vicious clash in the snow. So many died. You never faltered. Sybbyl, the leader of the Coven, met you on the battlefield. She nearly got the upper hand, but you stopped her with your magic. I’m not even sure how you did it, but you put yourself and her in a giant sphere so no one could reach either of you.”

Dagny listened, trying to envision the battle—even hoping it would trigger some memories. But there was nothing.

“You stood over Sybbyl. You knocked away the weapons she tried to use as if they were nothing. Then you spread your arms, and the blue radiance intensified to such a degree that no one could see past the bright light. I tried to break through the bubble to get to you, but I couldn’t. The light continued getting brighter. It blinded me. And then...it was gone. *You* were gone.”



Armir thought the pain of watching Malene vanish had dulled. He didn't think it could cut as deeply as it had that day. But he was wrong. The anguish that swept through him was as piercing and unbearable as if it had just happened. He'd lost others before. Friends, and even family. But nothing had wrecked him like losing Malene.

Sorrow threatened to swallow him whole. He looked across the water and tightened his hand on the heart-shaped stone he had discovered in the cave. He'd believed it a sign that he would locate Malene. And he had. Only she wasn't the same woman.

Armir remembered then that he wasn't alone. Dagny waited for him to finish the story. He cleared his throat. "All that was left was burned snow where the sphere had been. The Coven was decimated, and our friends went back to their lives. I returned to Blackglade because it was what I was supposed to do. But I couldn't stay. I knew you were out there somewhere."

"You honestly believed Malene was still alive?"

He swung his head in her direction. "I believed you were alive, aye."

"This...bubble you spoke of that housed..." she paused and shrugged before finally saying, "Sybbyl and me. Vanished? It stands to reason that whatever magic I used killed both of us."

“Sybbyl wasn’t killed by that. We got her another way. Your magic was undeniably strong. You could do things no other Lady had ever mastered, much less attempted. You loved Blackglade. It was your home. You wouldn’t leave it.”

“Unless I didn’t have a choice.”

He wished they sat closer so he could see her eyes. Her voice might not be as severe as before, but she hadn’t accepted the truth. Or maybe he was the one who hadn’t acknowledged it. There was a good chance the magic had altered Malene. The woman he had fallen for might well and truly be out of his reach.

“If she...if I cared like you said, then I might have done whatever was needed to end the threat,” Dagny said.

“Aye. I believe you tried.”

“You said Malene’s magic didn’t kill Sybbyl. Do you know why?”

Armir shrugged. “I think she got in a spell before you could end her. Her body was gone, but her spirit moved into one of our friends. She fooled us, but not for long. We killed her spirit, too.”

“And the friend?”

“Survived.”

“And if Sybbyl’s spirit could endure, you believed Malene could, as well.”

“Aye.”

He looked down at his open hand to the stone on his palm. He’d had time to tell Malene of his feelings, but he had been too much of a coward. He had feared she wouldn’t return his affections, and it would change their friendship. So, he kept silent.

And look what that had gotten him.

“I don’t believe there’s only one person for each of us,” Dagny said softly. “You’ll find love again.”

He wouldn't. There wasn't anyone like Malene. He'd had a few precious years with her. It wasn't nearly enough. "Sure."

"You blame yourself for what happened to her. You shouldn't."

"I was supposed to look out for you, to protect you."

"I don't need protecting. I don't now, and I didn't then."

She spoke the truth, but it didn't make it hurt any less. Armir looked at her once more. "You're right. You don't. Now, I have to protect everyone else from you."

"We don't have to be enemies. You cared for the person I once was."

"The Malene I knew gave up everything for others. She accepted that she might die when she encased herself and Sybbyl in that bubble. She would've died before harming anyone."

Dagny shoved her flaxen hair over her shoulder. "Change always means disruption. Once I'm in power, there will be peace. Having someone like you by my side would make that transition even shorter. You want to return to Blackglade. It's your home. And you want me there to rule it."

"You want to reign over more than our home."

"Have you been so engrossed in searching for me that you haven't seen the state of things? People are starving. Wars are being fought over land and titles. Witches are still being hunted and killed. I can unite everyone."

"You mean you can force them to see things your way."

"My way is peace."

Armir shook his head. "Your way leads to death."

"Death is already out there, claiming hundreds of lives every day. Think about what aligning different countries could mean. Think of the innocents killed in the grisly and needless wars that rage even now."

"And how many innocents would be slain by you or those who serve you?"

“Be realistic, Armir.”

“I am. It’s why we’re locked in here.”

She looked away, her frustration clear. “There isn’t enough food to sustain us. We’ll die.”

“I saw what the Coven did when they wanted to rule. I witnessed firsthand the violence and massacres, the deaths of innocents. Malene would never want any part of that.”

“I’m not Malene!” Dagny shouted. She got to her feet. “The sooner you accept that, the better.”

He watched her walk away. Armir turned back to the water. Whatever expectation his people had of Malene returning was lost. Just like his hope.

It would’ve been better had her magic taken her life instead of leaving her as she was. Malene had been strong but compassionate. She had been powerful but gentle. Dagny felt the potency of her magic and only thought of one thing to do with it—dominate. It was why the Varroki fought against the Coven and all those like it. If Dagny got free, Armir, Jarin, and other Varroki warriors would have to hunt her down to take her life.

Armir fingered the dagger at his waist. Starvation was a horrible way to go. He wouldn’t allow Dagny to suffer like that. He wouldn’t allow either of them to die that way. A grin formed. Dagny might take his life before that. She was a fighter. She’d proven that by finding him and asking questions.

For a few minutes, he had believed she was interested in her past. And maybe she was, but not for the reasons he wished. She wanted to live, and she wouldn’t stop trying to either sway him to release her or find a way out herself. Maybe that was why Dagny was alive. Malene hadn’t wanted to die. She had fought to live, but it had cost her not just her memories. It had also tossed her far away so he couldn’t find her. If he had located her sooner, maybe he could’ve gotten Malene back.

Honestly, it didn’t matter why she lived. Malene. Dagny. She was here and had the blue radiance in both hands. If only

she wasn't so focused on gaining power. If only...

Armir shook his head. She was right about one thing. He needed to accept Dagny. He had been mourning Malene for many months. He had found her. Hale and hearty. It was time he faced the fact that the love of his life was no more. She had changed into someone he didn't know or understand.

He had changed, as well. He was harder, more cynical. Armir hadn't believed that possible, but it was true. The bright light of his future had shuddered and faded when Malene had. He needed to bury that part of his heart once and for all.

"Armir."

He jerked around at the sound of Dagny's voice. She stood in the doorway, her body radiating tension. "What is it?"

"Someone is outside the cave."

Armir was on his feet in a second. He looked past her as he made his way to her. "What happened?"

"I heard something on my way back to the cavern. I went to investigate and saw him."

"No one can get in or out."

She turned to the side and motioned with her arm. "Go see for yourself if you think I'm lying."

Armir studied her for a moment before walking around her. He moved swiftly through the tunnel. He was at the entrance well before she made it. No one was there. He saw it was day, the clouds plentiful as they blocked out the sun.

"I didn't lie. He was here," Dagny said.

Armir glanced at her as she came up beside him. "Did he see you?" When she didn't answer right away, he swung his head to her. "Dagny?"

"Aye," she replied without meeting his gaze.

"Were words exchanged?"

"Maybe."

Armir returned his attention outside. The cave wasn't hidden, but it was difficult to get to. Dagny didn't know anyone in Scotland, and all the Vikings had been killed. Armir hadn't told anyone where he was going. Not even Jarin. If someone had come to help her, they would find their efforts futile.

“Did you know the man?”

This time, Dagny looked at him. “I did not.”

“Did you ask him for help?”

She shrugged. “Every spell has a counter.”

“Why tell me about him, then?”

Dagny looked away nervously. “Something about him was not quite right.”

Armir swung his gaze back to look out the cave entrance once more. “It doesn't matter. He can't get in.”

“And we can't get out. I know. You've mentioned that a time or two.”

He quirked his brow at her. “Did he say anything to you?”

“He smiled.”

That made Armir frown. “He smiled?”

“Aye. It was...disturbing.”

“Let's hope he doesn't return.”

Dagny smirked. “Afraid someone will break your spell?”

“Bringing attention to the cave is the last thing I want. People don't like what they can't understand. They find a cave they can't enter with a woman inside, they'll keep trying to find a way in.”

“Exactly. Which means I'll eventually get free.”

“And how many lives will it cost?”

Her brows snapped together. “What?”

“The spell is very old and very powerful. There have been accounts of people being killed trying to get through it.”

“You left that bit out,” she said tightly.

Armira took a step toward her. “Just as you left out a few things about our visitor.”

“You can’t blame me for seeing a way out and taking it. I thought you loved Malene. I didn’t think you’d want me dead.”

“It’s the last thing I want.”

“Your actions say otherwise.”

“I’m protecting others.”

She rolled her eyes and walked away as she said, “Tell yourself whatever makes you feel better. I know the truth.”

Armira looked outside the cave for a long moment. He didn’t see any footprints in the dirt. Had Dagny lied? He couldn’t be sure. Just in case, he would remain hidden near the entrance so he could see if anyone returned. If someone had been there, then he needed to keep Dagny away from the entrance. Maybe then the man would think he had imagined the entire episode. Unless he tried to enter the cave.

In all the times he had used the cave, Armira had never come across anyone. It was far from any villages or even cottages. It had been mere chance that he had found it the first time. Maybe that’s what’d happened this time. At least, that’s what he hoped.



Dagny drank deeply from the waterskin as she seethed. Every spell could be reversed. It was simply a matter of knowing the words. Getting it out of Armir would be difficult. The man was nothing if not stubborn. She had thought they could be friends, but that had been quickly squashed. Did he really think her such a monster? Couldn't he see that she wanted a better world to live in? Wasn't that worth the sacrifices needed to achieve it?

Apparently, not. Dagny was glad she wasn't Malene anymore. How had she ever gotten anything done? But that was the problem. She, as Malene, had been stuck in Blackglade. But she was far from the city now.

Dagny looked at the waterskin then out the doorway. Armir wouldn't leave the entrance for some time. He would want to make sure the visitor didn't return. Maybe she could find out just how far he planned to take their confinement. He certainly didn't seem like a man who wanted to die. He needed to look out for his precious Blackglade, after all.

She carried the waterskin to Armir. Dagny found him in the tunnel, hidden by shadows as he sat, just as she'd imagined. He glanced her way but returned his attention to the cave entrance.

"You believe me?" she asked.

He shrugged half-heartedly. "I figured you were tired of arguing."

“You’re here to see if the man returns.”

“If you were being honest.”

She tightened her fingers on the waterskin. “I was.” When he didn’t reply, she asked, “What do you intend to do if he does return?”

“Nothing.”

She leaned on the opposite side of the tunnel to watch him. “Nothing?”

“I don’t want him to know we’re here.”

“He already does.”

Pale green eyes slid to her. “And that may be the death of him.”

“Then reverse the spell. I’ll remain inside the cave. I know how the loss of innocent life disturbs you.”

Armir grunted. “We both know you’d be gone as soon as you got the chance.”

“As would you if someone locked you away to starve to death.”

“That wasn’t my intention,” he said in a low voice as he looked away.

She tossed the waterskin at his feet. “Whether you did or not doesn’t change the fact that it will happen. Am I so repugnant that you wish such a death for me?”

“Never.”

“What about you? Do you want to die?”

His chin dipped to his chest as he looked at the ground. “I do not.”

“Then let us out. Let me show you that I’m not the villain you think I am.”

Armir drew in a long breath and softly exhaled. “I... cannot.”

Well, she wouldn't sit around and wait to die. There had to be another way out of the cave. "It's too bad you chose a location so easily discovered."

"I didn't."

"To point out the obvious, you did. We were found."

"Maybe."

No one could infuriate her like Armir. "Is this how you treated Malene? Did you question everything she said and did?"

"I trusted her," he said, briefly meeting her gaze before looking out the cave entrance.

Dagny glanced outside. She wanted to feel the sun on her face, be drenched in the rain.

Armir sighed loudly. "I've used this cave multiple times. No one should've found us." He turned his incredible gaze on her, piercing her with a stare. "I know every inch of it. There isn't another way out. Just in case you were thinking there might be. I'm thorough."

"That's good to know." She pushed away from the wall and returned to the cavern.

Dagny sat by the fire. She was bored and irritated. And scared. The fire hadn't died out, which meant it was magical. Too bad their food stores weren't. Though she couldn't imagine days with Armir, much less years.

Her jailer could've set the spell with him on the outside. Why had he stayed? Why sentence himself to the same fate as her? Love. He'd sealed himself in with a woman who didn't recognize or know him, all for love. He must be regretting the decision now. He could no doubt reverse the spell when she wasn't around and slip away, but, somehow, she knew Armir wouldn't do that.

Dagny curled up on her side, using her arm as a pillow. She stifled a yawn as she continued to watch the fire. Her mind raced with thoughts as she tried to figure a way to freedom. Her eyes became heavy, and she closed them, only to

be startled awake by a sound. She remained still and strained her ears. Just as she convinced herself she hadn't heard anything, she picked up the scratching sound again.

She quietly got to her feet and moved toward the back of the cavern where the shadows were the thickest. It was so dark she couldn't see anything. She got on her hands and knees, feeling around in hopes of locating a piece of wood. She came up emptyhanded.

Dagny went to stand when she slipped on a rock. Her ankle rolled, and her leg buckled. She bit back a cry of pain as she fell onto a pile of stones. They jammed into her side. She rolled to get away and waited until the worst of the throbbing ebbed before opening her eyes. She put her hand out to push herself up, only to meet air.

Shock and fear rushed through her. Suddenly, the blue light from her hand shot out. Her lips spread into a wide smile. It soon dimmed when she tried to do magic, however. Armir's spell still prevented that, but at least she had light.

Dagny moved her hand around to see that it had fallen into a sizable opening near the wall. There were piles of stones around it, making it difficult to see or get to. If she hadn't slipped, she never would've found it. And if there was one opening, there would be others. She got her feet underneath her and peered into the hole. She didn't want to go any deeper. She had thought to go up, but this might be the only way.

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure Armir hadn't snuck up on her. Then she used the radiance to push away the shadows until she could inspect every inch. There was just the one opening. At least, in this area. She looked at her hand. If she extinguished the blue light, would she be able to get it back? There was only one way to find out.

Dagny dimmed and then doused the light. She tried to call it back. Before, it had only ever responded with her magic. She had believed it *was* her magic. But if it had responded to her once, it could again. As should the rest of her abilities. But right now, she needed light.

She focused on her hand, imagining the blue radiance shining through her palm. Again and again, she tried without success, but Dagny wouldn't give up. She couldn't. This was life or death. Blue light flared softly in her left hand. It traveled from her palm up to her wrist and then her forearm. She turned her right arm over and waited. A heartbeat later, the radiance blazed there, as well.

She spent the next half hour turning it off and on until she could do it at will. She would no longer be stuck in the dark. She had light, and that meant she could find another way out.

Dagny returned to the fire and ate. She took a waterskin and one of the bags filled with bread, cheese, and dried meat and set them near her. She wasn't going to search for a way out only to die because she hadn't thought to bring food. She slept. And she planned. Hours passed without any sign of Armir.

She peered out of the cavern, but she couldn't see him. She grabbed the bag of food and the waterskin and held them in front of her as she walked out of the cavern, heading to the glow worms. If Armir saw her, he'd think she was just moving about. She hid a smile as she put more distance between them.

When she thought she was far enough away, she called to the radiance. It sparked to life, lighting the area. She was shocked to find the tunnel widened where she was. After a quick check that she was alone, Dagny began searching for another opening. She moved deeper toward the glow worms as she continued her search. Then, she found it.

She slung the bag over her head and under one arm so she could shift it around to lay against her back. It took her a couple of tries to climb up to the opening—her feet kept slipping on the smooth rock. Eventually, she got it, but she was exhausted from the effort. She rested for a moment before moving through the opening that led up. The light was only enough to see a few feet all around her. That was why she didn't see until she reached a wall of rock that the opening led nowhere.

Backtracking proved a tad easier since the shaft angled downward. Soon, she was standing in the tunnel again. She began her search for another opening, but it didn't last long. She found a second one near the ground. She was moving some rocks when she heard that same scratching from the cavern.

Dagny paused, trying to determine where the sound was coming from. It seemed to be deeper in the wall of rock she was next to. Several minutes passed without any more noise, and she managed to tug rocks away from the opening. It was low and long. The only way she would fit would be to lay on her back and shimmy through with her feet first.

If she had to retrace her steps, it would be a lot harder to get out of this one than it had the last. The area behind the opening also appeared to slope downward. She wasn't sure why that bothered her, or why she hesitated.

Dagny sat back before searching for yet another cavity. Sometime later, she found a third hole. This one was too small for her to fit through. She returned to the second opening. Either she went in, or she searched the glow worm area with the water. The thought of getting stuck somewhere with water made her shiver in dread.

But what if there was another area?

She got to her feet and set out to explore. The tunnel led her straight to the cavern and the glow worms. She spent time walking along the water's edge, shocked at just how huge the area was. She found another tunnel at the back. Her light lit the area as she stepped into the passage. Within a few steps, it became so narrow, she had to shift her shoulders. Soon, she was shuffling her feet as she turned her body sideways. Fortunately, that didn't last long, and the tunnel widened again, only for the ceiling to drop so low she had to crouch as she walked. Then she was on her hands and knees, crawling.

The bag got stuck on some rocks a few times. Her knees and palms ached. The exertion had sweat dripping down her face and into her eyes. She went until she couldn't move another inch. Then, she rested with her back against the wall,

the area bathed in blue light. She dozed before suddenly coming awake.

Dagny listened to the quiet, but she didn't hear anything that could've woken her. After a drink of cool water, she tested her palms, wincing at the soreness there. But she got back on her hands and knees and started crawling once more.

The tunnel branched off a few times, but she decided to stay on the straight path. It was a good decision because, finally, she was able to stand again. She stretched her back and gave herself a few moments to just be still. She had a smile on her face when she started walking again, imagining Armir wondering where she had gone.



Armir rolled his head from side to side to stretch out the kink in his neck. His back ached—to say nothing of his arse. He climbed to his feet and released a weary sigh. Night had fallen, and with it came the light patter of rain. There had been no signs of anyone coming close to the cave. Dagny had lied. But what if she hadn't? What if a man *had* been there?

That was why Armir continued to keep watch. He bent to retrieve the waterskin and drank. His stomach growled. He could ask Dagny to bring him food, but she would most likely pretend not to hear him. Besides, he needed to walk and loosen some of his tightening muscles.

Armir entered the cavern, his gaze going immediately to the blanket, but Dagny wasn't there. He quickly scanned the area and relaxed when he didn't find her. He hadn't realized how he had tensed at the prospect of trading barbs with her once more. Armir noticed that one of the food bags was missing. She had probably stashed it somewhere in hopes of him starving before her.

The chuckle died on his lips. He didn't want either of them to die, but what choice did he have? So many Varroki had given their lives to end the Coven. As powerful as they had been, they were nothing compared to Dagny. He couldn't let her out. Even if he wished with all his heart that he could. If he did, any lives she took would be on Armir. The weight of that would be the end of him.

He tore off some bread and grabbed a piece of dried meat to take back to the tunnel. He paused outside the cavern and looked toward the glow worms. If she wanted her solitude, he would give it to her. They both needed to calm down before they spoke again. He hadn't completely given up on her, but the only way he could get through to Dagny was if she was receptive to it. At the moment, she had a wall up around herself. She wasn't letting anyone in.

He ate standing up. The hours stretched slowly before him, and the night was as quiet as the cave. He dozed for small stretches. Each time he opened his eyes, he half-expected someone to be standing at the entrance, but it remained empty. When dawn came, Armir was on his feet again. His body felt tighter than before. He wasn't as young as he used to be, and the small aches constantly reminded him of that.

Too many years of training for and fighting in wars. And what did he have to show for it? The Coven was disbanded, but for how long? For as long as there was life, there would be magic and those who wielded it. How long before the witches banded together again after being persecuted and killed?

He wished things could change, but they wouldn't. Time had proven that. There were small pockets of areas where witches and humans lived alongside each other peacefully, but those were rare. Humans feared anything different from them. Especially someone with more power. And they retaliated with violence. Never once did they stop and consider who was the more sadistic. If they did, they might see themselves. It wasn't witches hunting humans and killing them because they lacked magic.

Blackglade and those who occupied the city were spared such brutality. The Ladies kept the city safeguarded. As long as Malene...er, Dagny, was alive, no other would be blessed with the blue radiance. Which put the city in danger.

Armir ran a hand down his face. He had given everything he had to the city and his people, but it hadn't been enough. He'd done everything he could, followed every rule, ignored his needs and desires. Only to end up in his current predicament.

He could reverse the spell and summon Jarin and other warriors. They could stand against Dagny, but his heart wouldn't be in ending her life. He wasn't sure anyone else would be able to do it either. Malene was beloved—like no other Lady before her. The fact that she was alive yet changed was too much. He wouldn't—*couldn't*—put anyone else in the position he was in.

That left him with the option to keep talking to Dagny. Maybe something would get through to her. If he gave up now, he would doom them both. He owed it to Malene and their friendship to keep trying until the very end.

Armir headed toward the glow worms. His steps slowed as he neared. Something about the area calmed him. He stopped once inside and drew in a long, cleansing breath before slowly releasing it. His gaze moved from one side of the space to the other as he searched for Dagny. He walked to the edge of the pond and kneeled beside it.

His hands slid into the cold water, and then he splashed some on his face. He rubbed his eyes and sat back. He'd made enough noise that Dagny would've noticed him. As far as he could tell, there had been no movement. That meant there was only one other place for her to be.

Armir shook his head and got to his feet. He should've known Dagny would find the small cave. It was more of a hollow, really, barely big enough for him to lie down, but he could see how she would like a space that was all her own. He turned on his heel and made his way through the tunnel.

Halfway to the front cavern, he stopped. He put his hand on the wall before bending and peering into the grotto. His eyesight might be adjusted to the darkness, but it was nearly impossible to see in complete blackness.

“Dagny?” he said. There was no answer or movement. He frowned and squatted down at the entrance. “I don't want to enter your space. Just let me know you're in there.”

Again, nothing.

Armir hated childish games. But two could play at this. He straightened and stalked to the cavern. There, he lifted one of the bags of food and wrapped his hand around a thick branch from a pile. He shoved it into the fire and waited for the flames to catch. Because the fire was magical, it would take weeks to burn down the wood instead of hours.

He strode back to the grotto, shoving the makeshift torch inside. His heart dropped to his feet when he found it empty. He slowly stood, his heart thumping with dread. The only thing that kept him from panicking was knowing that Dagny couldn't get out of the cave. She had hidden herself well, but he would find her.

Armir returned to the water. He searched the right side of the area first, keeping the branch high so it cast a wide arc of light. He looked into every cluster of shadows but found them all empty. He went as far as he could before he had to double back. A thorough search of the opposite side then began. But he found nothing. Alarm thrummed through him.

“Enough, Dagny. Come out!” he demanded.

His voice echoed through the area before fading, but there was no laughter or any other sign of her.

“Dagny!”

The trepidation he'd been fighting surged. Armir turned in a circle. He had explored the cave. He knew every crack and crevice. He must have missed something. He had no idea how long Dagny had been gone. She could be stuck somewhere. Or worse. And he had taken her magic so she couldn't get herself out of any bad situations.

Armir cursed himself as he helplessly looked around for a clue about where to begin looking. He started back to the doorway, walking too fast over a particularly slippery section of rock. His boot slid. He righted himself before he fell, but it threw him off balance. Armir tipped to the side, his shoulder slamming into a rock and knocking the fire from his hand.

He picked up the branch and straightened. As he did, he found himself looking into a tunnel he had forgotten about. He

had explored it until it became difficult for him to traverse, but Dagny was much smaller.

Armir went down onto his haunches and searched the area for any signs she had taken the tunnel. He didn't want to waste time hunting for her if she was somewhere else. Then he found a scuff mark on a rock about five feet into the passageway. The kind a boot heel would make.

He wasted no time returning to the cavern to gather the bag of food he had lifted earlier and two waterskins he stuffed inside. Then he ran back to the water and the tunnel. He licked his lips, remembering how tight it would become. But if Dagny was in there, he was going after her. There were too many sections of the cave that ended without a way out, as well as others that could result in her death if she didn't know the area.

"Hang on, Dagny," he whispered as he stared into the tunnel. "I'm coming."



Dagny found it harder and harder to put one foot in front of the other. It felt as if she had been walking for an eternity with no end in sight. She had hoped to find somewhere she could sit comfortably and rest. Maybe even somewhere to stretch out so she could get some sleep. That seemed an impossible wish, though. There was nothing but rock and more rock. It went up on either side of her, it rested beneath her feet in undulating waves, and it hung above her, soaring high overhead only to drop down and threaten to crush her.

She had climbed steep sections to the point where her leg muscles ached so severely they nearly gave out. Her arms were even worse. She used them when her legs couldn't hold her sufficiently, and she was at the point now where she couldn't climb anything if her life depended on it.

She fumbled with the opening of the bag in search of the waterskin. It fell from her numb fingers. Tears burned her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She had built a new life in Norway. She could find her way out of a cave.

Dagny bent to retrieve the water, and her knees buckled. She dropped to the ground like a stone and didn't have the wherewithal to even attempt to rise. After a moment, she moved her legs from beneath her to get more comfortable. She leaned back against the wall and let out a sigh. A yawn escaped. There were times—like now—when it felt as if the darkness and the stones were closing in on her. No matter how

bright her radiance shone, both were always there, waiting like monsters to strike when she least expected it.

The ever-present threat, along with the fear that she might never find a way out, took a toll on her mentally and physically. If she gave in, she was doomed. All she knew how to do was keep going. So, that's what she would do. Right after she took some time to rest.

Now that she was off her feet, it became impossible for her to keep her eyes open. She found the water and drank some, shocked at how little was left. She couldn't remember consuming that much of it, but apparently, she had. Dagny only took a sip before putting it away. It had to last for...well, until she found a way out.

There was plenty of food, however. That would at least keep her strength up. She ate some dried meat with her eyes closed. Twice, she fell asleep while chewing. She shook herself awake and finished eating, then gave in and let sleep claim her.

Armir gritted his teeth as he forced his body to the side. The rocks pressed against him, refusing to let him pass. He moved in small increments, trying to get through. He looked where he needed to go and frowned. He had thrown the bag and branch there so he could use both hands to help push and pull his body past the extremely narrow tunnel section. Both were far enough away that he had no choice but to get through.

"Ahh," he ground out as he heard his shirt rip.

A moment later, his flesh stung as the rock sliced his neck and just below the shoulder bone. But he kept pushing onward, uncaring how many scrapes and cuts he sustained. It became difficult to draw a full breath into his lungs. If he didn't get past this spot soon, he might never. Armir grabbed hold of the rock wall before him with one hand and behind him with the other. His palms were already cut and bleeding, making it difficult to get a good grip. His lips peeled back in a grimace,

and he gritted his teeth as he used all his strength. He heard more ripping, felt more stinging, but he ignored it and kept pushing and pulling. Finally, he was through.

He gave himself a moment and braced his hands on his knees, sucking in easy breaths now that he could. But there wasn't time to rest. He grabbed his items and kept moving. He walked as far as he could, and then he crawled. Twice, he had to lay flat and drag himself forward with his forearms to get through confined sections.

Sweat soaked him as he pushed himself hard to cover more ground quickly. Each time he came to a fork in the tunnel, he had to decide which way to go. Magic would've helped. Why hadn't he reversed the spell before going after Dagny? He'd been so worried about her that he hadn't thought about it, and now they were *both* paying for that oversight.

“Stay alive, Dagny,” he whispered and began to climb.

The ache in Dagny's neck pulled her from sleep. She grimaced as she realized she had slumped to the side. She straightened her head and her body, groaning at the pain. The throbbing only intensified. Every muscle in her neck and shoulders was so knotted she could hardly move.

She lifted her arm to wipe her hair out of her face and thought she saw something move out of the corner of her eye. Dagny stilled, her gaze darting around her. She scrutinized the area beside her but didn't see anything. Then, she looked down at her legs.

Spiders as large as her hand covered her. She shrieked and tried to swat them away, only to feel them crawling in her hair.

The scream turned Armir's blood to ice.

“Dagny? Hold on! I'm coming!” he shouted.

He forgot about being safe as he scrambled over rocks, scaled walls, and jumped down when climbing would've taken too long. Armir ignored the pain in his body as he banged and slipped against the stone. His only thought was to get to Dagny.

The last time he'd felt the frozen hand of fear was when Malene had fought Sybbyl—and look how that had turned out. He wouldn't fail her twice. He berated himself for leaving Dagny alone for so long. Of course, she would've looked for a way out. He would've done the same in her position.

He blinked against the stinging in his eyes as sweat dripped into them. He had to wipe the moisture and blood from his hands to better grip the rock after he slipped again. Armir managed to catch himself, but it had been a frightening moment. He hadn't heard another sound since the first scream, which made him fear the worst.

“Be alive,” he whispered. “Be alive.”

All the while, he hated himself for not reversing the spell.

His lungs burned, and his muscles cramped, but Armir never stopped moving. He was running through a narrow passage at full tilt when he spotted the faint blue glow of Dagny's radiance. Then, he saw her curled into a ball on the ground. He slid to a halt, breathing heavily. She wasn't moving.

Dagny knew without looking that Armir had found her. She had heard his approach as he barreled through the passage, yelling for her to hold on. She was too afraid to move to look at what she expected to be his furious expression—and because of the spiders. “Are they gone?”

“Bloody hell,” he murmured. “You're alive.”

“Are they gone?”

“Is what gone?” he asked after a brief hesitation.

She shuddered just thinking about the spiders crawling on her. “The spiders. Th-they...were all over me.”

“I don’t see any on you.”

“Are you sure? They were everywhere.”

“I can only see one side of you.”

She squeezed her eyes closed. It was debilitating to be so terrified of something. “Check my hair.”

“Sit up.”

“I can’t.”

Armir gently rested a hand on her arm. “I’ll help you.”

“There might be more.”

“If there are, I’ll take care of them.”

She moved her hand to his. His grip was firm and strong.

“Ready?”

Dagny was ready to be far from the spiders. “Aye.”

Armir didn’t give her a chance to change her mind. He pulled her into a sitting position. Dagny felt something fall onto her arm. She screeched and jerked away, but Armir had already flicked the spider away. Dagny watched it scurry off into the darkness. She shivered, imagining all those legs crawling on her.

“My hair,” she cried. “I can still feel them.”

His voice was calm, his hands gentle as he combed through her hair. It felt like forever before he sat back and said, “There are no more.”

“I can feel them.”

“It’s your brain playing tricks on you.”

She scratched her head, knowing she would feel an arachnid, but there was nothing, just as he said. It would take a long time before she didn’t imagine them on her.

“Did they bite you?” he asked.

Dagny shrugged and shook her head. “I don’t think so. I was unnerved at finding them on me. Are they venomous?”

“I’m not sure. We should check you.”

She hurriedly to got to her feet. “Not here. I can’t stay.”

“You have your magic.”

Dagny glanced at her hands before looking at him. “Sadly, nay. It’s just the light from the radiance. Otherwise, I would’ve wiped every spider from the cave.”

There was a ghost of a smile on his lips as he straightened. He held the fire above him. “We should get back.”

“I’m not going back.”

The look of concern faded from his face, replaced by one of determination. “You have no idea where this leads.”

“Neither do you.”

“That’s right, I don’t. I’ve explored everything I could. I didn’t come this far because I couldn’t fit.”

She frowned at that. “Then how did you get to me?” As soon as she said the words, she noticed the blood—both dried and fresh—on his face, hands, and arms. His shirt was torn in places, and there was blood on his neck.

“I had to get to you.”

Dagny felt unsettled that he would risk so much for her. The Vikings had coveted her magic, but she didn’t think any of them would’ve done what Armir had. “Are you hurt?”

“Nothing that can’t wait.”

She almost forced the issue, but she saw the exhaustion on his face. How long had he been trailing her? He needed rest. Unfortunately, she couldn’t stay with the spiders. It was silly since they were most likely everywhere, but they had blanketed her here. Armir would probably balk at them going forward, but there wasn’t anywhere for them to sit comfortably back the way they had come.

“Let’s go a little farther and see if we can find an opening,” she suggested.

Armir glanced behind him before flattening his lips and nodding.

Dagny led the way, her blue light mixing with the reddish glow of his torch. At least he wasn’t breathing rapidly anymore. Something touched her arm. She looked down to see a waterskin. Dagny gladly took it, but she didn’t drink as greedily as she wanted.

“Thank you,” she said, handing it back.

“You were willing to possibly die in here rather than stay with me.”

That wasn’t exactly how it was, but she could understand why he saw it that way. “I knew I’d die if I stayed. At least this way, I had a chance at freedom.”

“I don’t want you to die.”

“But you weren’t willing to let me go.”

There was a beat of silence before he said, “You gave me no choice.”

“I know you want me to be Malene, but I’m not.”

“I know that now.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. “Yet you still hold us here.”

“Two lives compared to hundreds or thousands. Aye.”

“Surely, you have more to live for than Malene?”

He made an indistinct sound. “I used to think so.”

“You would really hand over your life because my views don’t match yours?”

“If you had seen the things I have, you would understand.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” she pressed.

Leather creaked behind her. “Aye. I would give up my life to protect others.”

Because he thought her a threat. It was unnerving to have someone think so harshly of her and her vision of the future. Maybe she would feel differently if she had lived his life. Like Malene had. Malene never would've set her sights on the kind of future she wanted.

Who was Malene, anyway? A girl easily swayed by magic and a handsome face? Why hadn't she left Blackglade? Why hadn't she used her power while there to do...something? *Anything*.

"You said you and Malene were friends," Dagny said.

"Aye. I was your second in command, which kept us together for most of each day."

"And we never...?"

Armir was silent for a long moment. "It was forbidden for anyone to touch you."

"You never touched me?"

"I didn't say that."

She looked over her shoulder to find him grinning. "I didn't take you for a rule breaker," she said as she faced forward.

"I'm not. There were times you passed out after a vision. I had to carry you to your bed."

Dagny had fended off enough male interest to know what an unwanted touch felt like. But what about one that *was* wanted? She thought about when Armir had helped her sit up. She remembered his fingers as they searched through her hair. She cut her eyes to the side and caught a glimpse of his large hand as he held the branch.

"Though there were other times I found ways to touch you."

Her heart raced at his confession. To yearn for someone so deeply, he would do anything just to put himself near her. "What did sh—what did *I* do when that happened?"

"You never pulled away."

“And all this time when I was missing, you never found... someone else?”

“There’s only ever been you.”

Dagny halted. She slowly turned to find he had stopped several feet behind her. She searched his eyes, hoping to find the truth there. “It’s because I was something you couldn’t have. That’s why you wanted me.”

“I fell in love with you. Not your position, not your magic. *You*. Your fortitude and generosity, your devotion and decency.”

He was speaking of Malene, not her. He didn’t know her. She didn’t know him. Still, his words had an effect. She wished they didn’t, but there was no getting around it.

“My heart chose yours. No matter what world we live in, or how many times I have to search for you, my heart will always choose you.”

She shook her head. “You mean Malene.”

“I mean you.”

“I’m not her.”

He gave her a crooked smile. “Oh, but you are. She never gave up at Blackglade. You never gave up in Norway. And you never gave up here. You may not have her memories, but you are Malene, and Malene is you.”

She closed the distance between them, needing to be near him. It would be so much easier if she could hold on to the hate and anger, but it had slipped through her fingers like grains of sand, leaving curiosity and admiration. And even... yearning. Was it hers? Or was she feeling Armir’s emotions? “You continue to surprise me with the things you say.”

“I should’ve said all of that to you before.”

“I’ve been ready for a fight since the moment I woke. I’ve tried to hate you, and I succeeded a few times.” She looked into pale green eyes that watched her closely. “Then you tore yourself to bits coming to my aid. You won’t give up, will you?”

He shook his head. “We have that in common.”

Dagny laid her hand on his chest. The smooth leather of his jerkin pressed against her palm, but beneath it, she felt the firmness of his muscle and the strength within. He made no move to touch her, he simply stood there, watching. She had a feeling he had done that for a long time. “You weren’t able to touch me. Was I able to touch you?”

“Aye,” he replied in a soft voice.

“Did I?”

Armir never broke eye contact. “Aye.”

The way his voice broke, the desire that burned so brightly in his gaze, made her heart skip a beat. She could’ve had any Viking she wanted but refused them all. Dagny had never understood. Now, she did. Armir intrigued her. He stirred something deep and primal within her, something she had thought herself incapable of. She hadn’t been the issue. It had been the men around her, men she felt nothing for.

But she felt something now.

She slowly slid her hand up to Armir’s shoulder, careful not to go near any cuts. She lightly grazed her fingers up his neck, over the edge of his ear, and then along the tats on his head. She followed the curves and swirls, knowing each must have been painful. “I’ve wanted to do this since I first saw you.”

He was so close she could feel the warmth of his body. Her gaze dropped to his lips. Her heart tripped over itself when she thought about what it might feel like to have his mouth on hers. She had seen others kiss, had heard them making love. What would it be like to have that with Armir?

She was on the verge of pulling his head down for a kiss when she realized how his words had affected her, how much she *wanted* to kiss him. Dagny dropped her hand and took a step back.

“I wish I remembered you,” she told him. “I wish I knew if I had feelings for you. I wish I could give you everything you want. But I can’t.”

“I know.”



Armir kept his hands fisted at his sides until Dagny turned away. If he had touched her, he wouldn't have been able to stop. For just a moment, he had thought she might do more than run her hands over him. His scalp tingled where her fingers had stroked.

He released an unsteady breath, his cock hard and aching. Dagny could claim she wasn't Malene, but he caught glimpses of her. He'd seen Malene when Dagny gazed up at him, her body close. Malene had been there in the curious look, the parted lips, and the brief flash of yearning. Or maybe that's just what he wanted to see.

His heart craved Malene to such an extent that he physically ached for her. Her voice. Her smile. Her... everything.

He could be with her. It would be Dagny, not the Malene he'd known. All he had to do was ignore his principles and honor and forget about everyone at Blackglade who counted on him. He could be with Dagny and have her as his. It wouldn't be quite the same, but it would be close enough that it might diminish the pain that had been with him since Malene vanished.

Armir could tell himself that he still served Blackglade, but the truth wasn't that simple. He was, and always would be, a Varroki. But he couldn't go back to the city without Malene. And there would be no other Lady for as long as she lived.

That put the city in peril and his people in danger. What did that say about him that he'd even consider it?

His gaze followed Dagny as she continued walking. Being near her was agonizing, but being parted from his last link to Malene was unimaginable. Unthinkable. The longer he was with Dagny, and the more he got to know her, the more he saw Malene. And he couldn't end her life—no matter what.

Dagny paused and looked over her shoulder at him. "Are you coming?"

He had followed Malene, and he would follow Dagny—wherever she led. He didn't want to live without her. He didn't want to find someone else to love because there *was* no one else for him. There was only her, whether she went by Malene, Dagny, or some other name.

"Aye," he said and trailed behind her.

The only sound in the tunnel was their footsteps. She walked with her head held high and a determined gait. Nothing would stop her from escaping the cave. Not him, and certainly not an ancient spell. He didn't have any idea where they were or if the direction they were headed would lead to a way out. Their best bet was to backtrack so he could undo the spell and free her.

Maybe if he stayed with Dagny, he could prevent the mass casualties he feared. Perhaps even convince her to return to Blackglade eventually. If he could temper her, there might not be a need for the Varroki to come after her. Not that it would do any good. Malene, or Dagny, rather, could end them with a wave of her hand. He didn't want her *or* his people to die. He didn't want anyone to perish. But he wasn't sure he could prevent it.

He thought of Jarin, Lachlan, Brom, Braith, and Carac. He thought of Helena, Synne, Runa, Leoma, and Ravyn. He thought of his cousins in Blackglade, his uncle, his aunts. He thought of other friends who had no idea what his decision could mean for them and the rest of the world.

None of this should fall to him. He was only one man—who loved a woman. He wanted to be with the person he loved more than anything, but would he be able to contend with the fallout of his decision? Could he—*would* he—allow his friends to die?

“Armir.”

At the sound of Dagny’s breathy voice, he pulled himself from his thoughts and looked around her. He frowned when he saw a light ahead of them. He initially thought it came from her radiance until he saw an area of shadows between Dagny and the luminosity.

He stopped directly behind her. “I’ll take a look.”

Dagny turned to the side to allow him to pass. The front of their bodies brushed. He made the mistake of looking at her upturned face. It was all he had dreamed of for years. Having her there, within reach, was torture. Somehow, he forced himself to keep moving.

Armir inwardly shook himself as if that would release the hold she had on him. It was a bond that would never be broken. Not with memory loss. Not even with death. He would always find her.

His steps were slow and measured as he approached the light. He swung the branch from side to side, surprised to see that the tunnel expanded enough for three people to walk side by side. There was no other opening besides the misshapen one ahead of him. Armir held the fire far away from him and leaned to the other side to peer past the entrance.

Shock reverberated through him when he gazed at the wonder inside. It was beyond beautiful. He walked into the opening and stood there, absorbing the surreal world they had stumbled upon. The cavern was large, the ceiling soaring above them. Pools—some large, others small—took up nearly the entire area, while rocks of all sizes dotted the water. And all of it was lit from above and within.

Purple light shone from the walls to reflect in the water, while a blue so light it was almost white came from above,

hanging like stars. A thick section of blue-white light curled from the ceiling all the way to the ground, emitting a bright beam. The water itself glowed a soft turquoise at the center and a deep bluish-purple at the edges near the walls.

“What is this place?” Dagny asked from beside him.

He shrugged. “I didn’t know anything like this could even exist.”

“Is it safe?”

“It appears empty.”

She made a sound in the back of her throat. “The tunnel appeared empty when I sat. We know how that turned out.”

There was a smile on her face when he looked at her. His lips curved in response. “There’s only one way to find out.”

“I hope the water isn’t freezing because I want a swim.”

Armir tried not to think of her naked, her skin glistening, but it was a losing battle.

“I also need to see to your wounds.”

He should tell her he was fine, but he wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to have her hands on him once more. The problem was whether he could keep his from her. He’d confessed his love for Malene, his desire, and now that it was out in the open, there was no bottling it up.

Dagny met his gaze once more. “Shall we?”

They walked into the cavern together and paused at the water’s edge. It lapped gently at the rocks, which meant that it flowed somewhere.

“It’s so clear, I can see straight to the bottom,” Dagny whispered.

He moved to the side and jumped onto a large section of rock. He studied the water for a long time but only saw some small fish. When he looked behind him for Dagny, she had walked around the pools into the more shadowed sections. Armir returned to the shore and walked in the opposite direction until he met her at the far end of the cavern.

“This place is enormous,” Dagny said as she looked back across it. “What is making this light?”

Armir shook his head. “I have no idea. I didn’t see any worms like in the other area. I also didn’t see anything that would suggest a predator around.”

She shrugged. “Me either. I guess there’s nothing to do but get in then.”

He followed her when she walked to a smooth portion of the shore. He remained standing, his gaze searching for anything that could be dangerous as she sat and removed her boots. Her chainmail followed—the clink of it falling to the ground was loud in the silence.

Armir could see her moving out of the corner of his eye. It took everything he had not to look. Somehow, he held himself in check until he heard a splash. He turned his head then, searching for her. His breath locked in his lungs when he saw her naked body outlined by the glow in the water. She moved her arms out and around as she swam deeper.

He tried to swallow, but all the moisture was gone from his mouth. He couldn’t look away, could only drink in the sight of her bare back, arse, and legs. Her long, flaxen hair floated behind her. Then she turned and treaded water as she looked at him. His knees went weak when he caught sight of her pink-tipped breasts.

“The water’s nice. Join me, Armir.”

He knew it was a mistake, but every fiber of his being wanted nothing more. “I should stay in case there’s danger.”

“It’s not what you want.”

“I’m used to not getting what I want.”

“Perhaps it’s time for that to change.”

Armir looked away from her. “I’ll stay.”

“If I had my memories back, would you be in the water with me?”

He closed his eyes.

“That’s what I thought,” she said. Water swished. “Pretend I’m Malene.”

It was all too easy for him to do just that, which wasn’t fair to either of them.

“Or...you could accept me for who I am now.”

He opened his eyes and swiveled his head to her. “That might doom us both.”

“Right now, I don’t care.”

“And later?”

“I’ll worry about it when, and if, that happens.” She moved her arms back and forth, her gaze never leaving his face.

Armir’s iron control cracked. This was what he wanted—time with Malene. Her eyes watched him, it was her voice that spoke to him. It would be her body he held, her lips he tasted. She might go by a different name, but inside, she was the woman he had fallen in love with. He reached for the top fastener of his jerkin.



By the flare of surprise on Armir's face, Dagny's invitation wasn't something Malene would've ever issued. It just proved once again that she wasn't the woman from before. She wanted Armir, and she couldn't think of a reason not to give in to those desires.

Dagny had had the opportunity to share her body with others, but none had ever held any appeal. Not until Armir. He was handsome and rugged, and while she had been around attractive men, there was something different about Armir. She had tried to ignore it, but there was no disregarding him.

Or the need that grew the longer she was with him.

She held her breath, waiting to see if he would remove his clothes and join her in the water. There had been raw, unadulterated hunger in his eyes. Perhaps it was wrong of her to use his love for Malene to get what she wanted, but Dagny was past caring.

Everything had changed when he came barreling into the tunnel after her, bruised, cut, and bloodied. The Vikings had been attentive, but they wanted her power. Armir didn't care about that. He cared about *her*. She hadn't thought such things mattered, but then she hadn't met Armir, hadn't felt his large hands, gentle and caring, as they searched through her hair for spiders.

Dagny's thoughts ceased as Armir loosened the fastenings of his jerkin one by one. The thick leather dropped to the ground. His shirt followed, allowing her an unobstructed view

of his magnificent chest. Each muscle was honed to perfection, sculpting the thick sinew of his shoulders, arms, chest, and abdomen.

His gaze never left hers as he bent and removed his boots, tossing them aside carelessly. Next, he deftly untied the strings holding the dagger at his waist. This, he set down. Then he straightened. She wanted to swim to him, but she continued to tread water instead, letting him come to her.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. The longer he stood there, the more she wanted him. What was it he possessed that others didn't? It wasn't his love for Malene. No, it was something deeper, stronger. Something that went beyond words.

He reached for the waist of his breeches. Her mouth went dry when he pushed them down his legs and stepped out of them. Her gaze lowered to his cock that jutted outward. She lingered there, knowing that she would have him inside her soon. He walked into the water with sure strides. His green eyes were intense, fierce. They burned with a hunger she recognized. It made her stomach quiver in anticipation and her blood heat in eagerness to know him.

The warm water swirled around them as their bodies glided closer. Armir was tall enough that he could touch the bottom. He held out his hand. Dagny accepted it, and he tugged her to him. She clasped a hand on his shoulder and the other on his arm. Her breath left her in a rush when he rested a hand on her hip before sliding it around to her back. He didn't press her against his body. She realized he was giving her one last chance to back away. As if that would happen. Dagny closed the distance between them until their bodies touched. The heat of him sent a rush of longing straight to her center.

“Are you sure?” he whispered.

In answer, she pressed her lips against his. A heartbeat later, his hands tightened on her, as if the last of his control had snapped. His mouth moved beneath hers, soft and seeking. Then his tongue slid between her lips to tangle with hers. It unraveled something inside her, opening a part of her she

hadn't known was there. The taste of him was as bright as the sun, as all-consuming as a rainstorm.

As everlasting as the stars.

The yearning burgeoned, spreading until she ached with it. His strength, the fervor in his touch as he moved his hands over her body, spurred her need until there was nothing but the two of them and their wild and wicked passion.

Their kisses became longer, hungrier, until they clawed at each other to get closer—ever closer. He gripped her arse and ground his arousal against her. The throbbing in her sex made her entire body tremble. She tore her mouth from his as she moaned at the incredible sensation.

He gently, reverently stroked her cheek. Their gazes clashed. She tentatively ran a finger over his lips, amazed that they could bring her such pleasure. Dagny wanted more of Armir's kisses, his touch. His cock. She wrapped her legs around his waist. A low moan rumbled in his chest as desire flared in his eyes.

She leaned in for another kiss. He captured her lips, and she melted against him. Dagny felt his hunger, his need, as their kiss deepened. She rocked against him, causing Armir to groan in response. His fingers dug into her hips as he gripped her firmly. His arousal rubbed against her center, making her throb, her need tightening low in her belly.

He was going up in flames. Armir had spent many nights thinking and dreaming of Malene. He had eased his desires while imagining all the ways he would bring her pleasure. But having her in his arms far exceeded any of his dreams.

She held nothing back. He could kiss her for eternity and still not get enough. The taste of her was burned into him forever. Or maybe it always had been. That was how he'd found her. There was a bond between them, something that went deeper than friendship or any link they had as Lady and warrior.

His hands moved over the curves of her luscious body. He couldn't stop touching her, learning her. His balls tightened when the tip of his cock brushed against her sex. He wanted inside her, to feel her wet heat. He may never have had sex, but that didn't mean he didn't know what to do.

Armir kept a hand on her back as he moved his other between them and cupped a breast, gently massaging it. She paused in her movements and moaned. He moved to her turgid nipple and gently rolled it between his fingers.

She ended the kiss and dropped her head back, letting out a soft cry of pleasure. He bent and wrapped his lips around her other nipple to tease it with his tongue. Her cries grew louder, her breathing more ragged. Her hips moved against him as she sought release. And he would give her that as many times as she wanted.

His hand slid down her body to her center as he continued to tease her nipple with his mouth. The moment his fingers met the swollen, tender flesh of her sex, her nails sank into his skin. He found the swollen nub and began swirling his finger around it while watching her. The surprise that swept over her face, followed by the pleasure, propelled him on. He continued until her body shook as she teetered on the edge of release.

Then he gently slid a finger inside her. His cock jumped in excitement when he felt her wet heat. He clenched his teeth, desperate not to spill his seed yet. He stroked her, thrusting in and out. She stiffened, a soft cry falling from her lips as the walls of her sex convulsed around his digit. His gaze jerked to her face to watch the pleasure sweeping through her.

Her body continued to shudder until the last of the orgasm faded. She reached for him, wrapping her arms around him as she rested her head on his shoulder. Armir closed his eyes and basked in the moment as he held her firmly against him.

Whatever happened, whatever she did, and whatever he had to do, he would at least have this. It was worth the endless months of grief.

It was worth years of silently loving her.

Now she understood why people had sex. It was...incredible. Even now, her body tingled from the ecstasy she'd found at his hands. And if she had her way, she would experience it many more times.

It took great effort to raise her head. His thick length rested between them, a reminder that he had yet to find release. It would replace his fingers where they had been. She swallowed heavily at the thought of it. She looked into his pale green eyes and wondered how Malene hadn't dragged him to her bed years ago.

She kissed him, a long, seductive one filled with longing and unquenchable need. She'd had a taste of him and ultimate bliss, after all. His hands splayed on her back as he pressed her against his chest, flattening her breasts. Her nipples hardened at the contact with his skin and from the lapping water.

His kisses could make her forget everything and everyone. There was nothing but the two of them and their passion. His kisses seduced, mesmerized. Consumed. No. *He* consumed her.

Somehow, she ended the kiss and framed his face between her hands. Words rose in her throat, ones she feared to say aloud. Instead, she traced her hands down his corded neck to his wide shoulders and over his muscular chest. His breathing hitched when she skimmed a hand down his stomach. Before she reached his arousal, his fingers closed around her arm.

"I want this," she whispered. "And I know you do, too."

"More than you can possibly know."

"Then why wait?"

Pain flashed in his eyes.

She didn't know if it was because of his need or the fact that she wasn't Malene. But she wanted him too desperately to care. She tugged her arm free and continued downward until she brushed his length. Their gazes tangled when she wrapped

her fingers around him. Dagny bit her lip as she moved her hand up and down. He was incredibly hard, his flesh thickening even more in her palm.

“I can stop,” she said.

He shook his head. “Don’t.”

She couldn’t believe the power she wielded just by stroking him. Armir’s breathing was ragged, his face pinched as he fought against his growing desire. The sight of him excited her beyond measure. Her body throbbed with renewed hunger. She removed her hand and began rubbing herself along his cock.

He groaned and spun her around. She gasped at the movement, but it quickly turned into a moan when he pressed her back against a smooth rock. He shifted, his fingers grazing her sex. Then his arousal was there, slowly pushing inside her before retreating, only to move deeper.

A vein protruded in his temple as he took his time and let her body loosen for him. She gripped his shoulders tightly as he inched his way inside her. She gritted her teeth when he met the resistance that proved she was a virgin.

Armir paused and held her gaze. She gave him a nod, letting him know to continue. He withdrew and slowly slid back inside her, except this time, his finger swirled around her clit. They continued like that for several moments. Her body throbbed, eager for more. She could feel the climax growing. There was a brief moment of pain when he pushed through her hymen. With one final thrust, he seated himself and let out a low moan, his eyes sliding shut. But that wasn’t enough for her. She rotated her hips, only to gasp at the pleasure that shot through her.

Armir’s eyes snapped open. He put one hand on her hip and the other on the boulder beside her head. Then he began to move. She was soon lost in the exquisite sensations of his cock sliding in and out of her. His finger had felt good, but this was so much better. He stroked places inside her she hadn’t known were there. He pumped his hips faster, thrusting hard and

deep. She was lost, the pleasure so intense that she knew she would never be the same again.

Armir was lost. Utterly enraptured. The bliss, the ecstasy, was almost too much. He wasn't sure how much more he could stand, but he never wanted it to end. He was edging closer to release. There was no holding it back. He looked at Dagny to find her eyes open and locked on his face.

She let out a cry as her body pulsed around his. He shouted as the orgasm claimed him. He continued to thrust until she no longer moved. Then he buried himself deep. They clung to each other, lost in the pleasure.



Dagny lay beside Armir, her head on his chest. After cleaning them both, he had somehow managed to get them out of the water. She had barely been able to lift her head, much less walk. They had been lying together with their limbs intertwined ever since.

His silence made her worry that he regretted their coupling. Dagny sat up and swiveled her head to him. His pale green eyes watched her. His face was devoid of emotion, which made it difficult to deduce what he might be thinking.

“I was supposed to see to your injuries,” she said.

His hand came to rest on her arm. He didn’t hold her in place. If she tried to leave, she knew he would let her. But she understood what he was saying with the action.

“They’re minor wounds.”

Dagny slid her gaze to the cut on his upper arm. “Not all of them.”

“Tend to it later.”

“Is that your way of asking me to lie down?”

He was silent for a heartbeat before nodding. “Aye. Please,” he added when she hesitated.

She returned to her position. She rested her hand on his stomach as her gaze moved to the water. Memories of what they had done, the passion they had found, flooded her mind. “I don’t regret it,” she stated.

“Neither do I.”

“You’re quiet.”

His chest expanded as he took in a deep breath and then released it. “I’m reliving it in my head.”

That sent a thrill through her. “It’s all I can think about.”

“Did I hurt you? For your first time?”

She grinned at the worry in his voice. “Only a little, and it passed quickly.” That smile died as she wondered how many others he had been with. “Ho...how many...have you...?”

“None.”

Dagny lifted onto her elbow to look at him. “That was your first time?”

“Aye.”

“But...why? You had plenty of time to find others.”

He twisted his lips. “There were offers.”

She lifted her brows to prod him when he didn’t say more.

“They weren’t you,” he said softly as he skimmed the backs of his fingers down her cheek.

Dagny didn’t remind him that she wasn’t Malene. Did it even matter anymore? She liked Armir, probably more than she’d first thought. Or wanted to. She returned to her position on his chest and looked out across the cavern. “What happens now?”

“We go back so I can reverse the spell.”

It was what she wanted. Why, then, did it make her a little sad? “Why would you do that? You know what I plan. It goes against your beliefs.”

“I sealed us in this cave in hopes I could somehow make your memories return. It was...folly on my part to believe I held such sway.”

“You have done more than you know,” she told him. So much more.

He tucked his free arm beneath his head. “You were right. I can’t condemn you to death for something you’ve not yet done.”

“You would rather come after me later?”

“I don’t plan on that either.”

Her heart sank. Was he giving up on her? On his love? Or...did he intend to join her? Could she do that to him? It would cause the Varroki to hunt *him*. And that just seemed wrong. “What do you plan?”

“I love you. It doesn’t matter if you feel the same or if you never have such feelings for me. I’ve stood at your side for years, and I will continue to do so for as long as you want me.”

“Even if it puts you at odds with your people?”

He tightened his arm around her. “Aye.”

Tears pricked her eyes. His words should make her happy, but they caused a great wave of sadness instead. Armir was a warrior. He didn’t deserve to be hunted simply because he had fallen in love with Malene and saw her face each time he looked at Dagny. He wanted to believe she *was* Malene, and he was willing to throw everything away to do it. She couldn’t let that happen.

Dagny wanted him, which was why she wouldn’t let him stay. Because he might want her now, but eventually, he would come to regret everything. Including her. He had spent his life in service to his people. He couldn’t turn that off. Not really. He was a good man who deserved so much more than what she offered.

“Rest,” Armir said. “We could both use it before we start back.”

She was in no hurry to leave the cavern, but they couldn’t remain forever. The thought appealed to her, though. She couldn’t do magic thanks to the spell, and that had somehow changed her mind about the future she envisioned. Of course, once he reversed what he’d done, her magic would return, and with it...

Her thoughts trailed off. She *could* change her mind. She didn't have to conquer anyone. If Armir could be believed, Malene had been content living in Blackglade. Dagny wouldn't be Lady of the Varroki, but could she find happiness living a simple life with Armir? Here, she could. Out in the world? She couldn't say.

It became difficult to keep her eyes open. She couldn't remember the last time she had slept. Her body was sated and content. Soon, she drifted off to sleep. It seemed only a moment later before her eyes snapped open when she heard a scratching sound.

"I hear it," Armir whispered.

They quietly sat up and tried to determine which direction it was coming from, but the echoes in the cavern made it impossible.

"I heard it before," she said when he handed over her clothes.

He frowned and shook his head. "I haven't, and I've stayed in the cave for long periods." He cocked his head. "It stopped."

It was concerning that he had never heard it. They dressed quickly. Dagny caught sight of the deep gash on his neck. It was the worst of his injuries. She knew she should've seen to it earlier. Now, they didn't have time. She shoved her still-damp hair away from her face and looped the strap of one of the food bags over her head and under one arm.

"It's probably nothing," she said, keeping her voice low.

Armir's face was tight. "I don't have a good feeling."

They picked their way along the water's edge near the wall to get back to the entrance. Dagny's foot slipped on a rock, and she lost her balance, causing her foot to plunk into the water. She stilled, as did Armir. They looked at each other and waited to see if they heard any more scratching. After a few moments, they continued on.

All too soon, they were headed out of the cavern. Dagny paused and looked back, lost in thought about her and Armir

and the magical place they had stumbled upon.

“Dagny.”

She turned away from the cavern and hurried after Armir. He had the lit branch above his head again. She called to her radiance. Blue light shot from her hands and up her arms. The two of them didn't rush, but they didn't take their time either. Armir's steps were determined but careful. They walked for hours before he halted.

“We'll rest,” he said.

Since they were once more in the narrow tunnel, there was barely room to turn around. They sat, and she kept a watchful eye out for any spiders. They both pulled food from their bags and ate. She should be more alert, but she kept turning inside herself, thinking about her and Armir. She couldn't stop thinking about him, about *them*. About what there could be.

“Where was the scratching?”

Dagny lifted her gaze to see Armir frowning at her. “What?”

“Is everything all right? I've asked you three times where you heard the sound.”

“I was, uh...thinking.” She shook her head. “I first heard it where I slept in the front cavern. It was at the back.”

His brow furrowed deeper. “That didn't concern you?”

“I don't spend a lot of time in caves. It could've been common for all I knew. Besides, I was trying to escape you. I didn't want to bring anything to your attention.”

He chuckled, his lips softening as he glanced away. “Did you hear it anywhere else?”

“The tunnel leading to the glow worms.”

“Like it was following you?”

She hadn't thought that then, but now that he said it...it made her uneasy. “I assumed it was more than one creature.”

They both looked up into the darkness above them where their light didn't penetrate.

"The quicker we get back, the sooner I can reverse the spell," he said. "At least we got a few hours of rest."

"It seemed like only a heartbeat."

"You were asleep almost instantly," he said with a grin.

That made her smile. "Someone did a good job of relaxing me."

They shared a look. Words weren't needed. The passion was still there between them, the embers banked but never dead.

With the meal finished, they were on their feet and moving again. Dagny didn't mind that Armir took the lead, but she looked behind her often—just to be sure nothing was coming up behind them. They hadn't heard the scratching again, but the more she considered what it might be, the more uneasy she became. It had sounded like claws on rock. That meant a decent-sized animal, not an insect or an arachnid.

Armir kept them moving at a steady pace. The only time they paused was when they came to spots they had to squeeze through. She didn't know how he did it. It made her skin crawl just thinking about getting stuck. Yet he had torn through all of it to get to her when he heard her scream. He hadn't thought about whether he could. He just had. Simple as that.

Going back was the same, except they weren't in a hurry. He could take his time trying to figure ways through without cutting himself again. Though, usually, that was exactly what happened.

"You'll be in shreds by the time we get to the entrance," Dagny said.

Armir shrugged off her words. "I'm fine."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run off."

"I shouldn't have kept you prisoner."

"You had a good reason."

He glanced back at her and shook his head. “Nay, I didn’t.”

She grabbed his free hand and waited for him to look at her. He stopped and met her gaze. She gave him a soft smile. He returned it and squeezed her hand.

They kept going. When he offered to stop and rest, she pushed him onward. They had to be close to the glow worms. But hours went by without reaching the water. She tripped and crashed into Armir’s back, her body so tired she could barely lift her feet.

“It’s time we rest.”

She didn’t argue this time. Her eyes burned, and she longed for sleep, but there was no way she would make that mistake again. She plopped down and rested a shoulder against the tunnel wall. Armir managed to turn himself to face her. He handed her a waterskin since hers was empty. Dagny ended up taking more than she should.

They took some time to eat again. She didn’t even bother trying to keep her eyes open as she ate. When Armir asked if she was ready to continue, she agreed. Not because she was rested but because she wanted out.

After a short while, the tunnel widened. Dagny smiled. The glow worms had to be close now. She paused and shut her eyes for a moment. It felt so good that she had to bite her tongue to keep the groan from escaping when she opened them again. Armir was much farther ahead of her than before. She hurried after him, and got the strap of her bag caught on a protruding rock in her haste.

It yanked her around. She yelped as she hit the wall and bounced away into what she thought was another tunnel. Her arms windmilled when she felt the ground behind her giving way to nothing. She tried to use magic, only to remember she couldn’t.

“Dagny!”

She saw a flash of panic on Armir’s face before he dropped the branch and raced toward her as she tumbled backward. He caught her wrist and yanked hard. She went

flying forward toward the opposite wall. Dagny turned in midair so that her back hit the rocks instead of her face. She dropped to the ground, dazed. Their gazes met.

He shook his head, a smile forming. "I'd rather not find out how far that drop is."

She looked past him into the darkness. It was an opening, one of many she assumed led somewhere. She needed to be more careful.

A loud crack broke the silence. Dagny's heart dropped to her feet. "Armir," she called as she reached out a hand to him.

But it was too late. The ground crumbled beneath his feet.

"Armir!" she screamed and raced toward the edge.

Dagny lay on her stomach, holding her arm out to shed light. She looked over the side and found him dangling by one hand, pain etched on his face.

"I've got you," she said as she shimmied more of her body over the edge until she could reach him. "Give me your hand."



Despite finding something to grab, Armir's fingers were slipping. He looked into Dagny's eyes. "Go. Before you fall."

"I'm not leaving you. Now, give me your hand," she ordered.

He tried to lift his left arm that currently hung by his side, but he'd dislocated it in the fall. "Dagny, go. Please."

"Give me your hand."

She was already leaning over too far. Armir wasn't sure if he had the strength to pull himself up, and if he took hold of her, he could very well pull her over with him. He dangled in the dark, each second excruciating. Then, he heard the scratching.

Dagny's head jerked up. She thrust her hands outward so the radiance broke the darkness. She scanned the area behind him before shaking her head. "I can't see anything."

It was close, though. Whatever was scoring at the rock hadn't given up on locating them. And something was tracking them. He could fall and force Dagny to go it alone. He had no idea if he'd drop two feet or two hundred, but he didn't want to take that chance. Yet his bruised body might not be good for much in a fight if he pulled himself up, either. If only he'd reversed the damn spell.

"Armir," Dagny said, holding out her hand to him once more.

He gritted his teeth and swung up his injured arm. Pain shot from his shoulder outward. Sweat broke out on his skin. Somehow, Dagny managed to grab him and began to pull. He tried to find some footing, but there was nothing but air around him. Agonizing seconds passed before Armir managed to haul himself onto solid ground with Dagny's help.

Her arms wrapped around him, pulling him the final few inches. He tried to hold himself up, but his injured shoulder gave way, and he collapsed on top of Dagny. Afraid to crush her, he immediately rolled onto his back. Everything hurt. He didn't think there was a place on his body that hadn't banged into the rocks during the fall. His eyes burned, and he smelled blood. His blood.

"Easy," Dagny said when he tried to rise. She leaned over him, a hand on his chest to keep him still.

Armir stared into her soft gray eyes and allowed himself a moment to rest. But it was only a second. They had to move, and with his injuries, he would already slow them down.

"We have to get going," he told her.

She tentatively touched his face. "I need to see to your wounds."

"No time," he said when the scratching sounded again.

"We make time. Your..."

He nodded when she trailed off. He could well imagine how he looked because he knew how he felt. "I know."

"I'm sorry. I should've been paying more attention."

He put a hand over hers. "This is on me. I pushed us too hard."

"We can debate whose fault it is as we walk."

Armir bent his leg and jerked from the throbbing pain in his knee. How would he climb with his bruised knee and dislocated shoulder? And there were probably other injuries on top of those that he didn't realize yet.

“If you tell me to go without you one more time, I will hit you,” Dagny stated.

He grinned, seeing and hearing Malene in her words. “Then we’d best get a move on.”

Relief softened her features. Dagny got to her feet and held out a hand to help him up. Armir kept his left arm against his body to limit movement and aid with the pain. He grabbed her with his right hand as he sat up.

At that moment, an explosion of rock came from the darkness. He used his arm to shield his face, even as debris smashed into him. He heard Dagny cry out. Armir tried to pull her to him, but her hand was wrenched from his.

He waited until the stones stopped falling. Armir coughed from the dust that hung in the air as he sat up in search of Dagny. He could see the faint blue glow of her radiance, but she wasn’t moving. “Dagny?”

When she didn’t answer, he started to panic. Armir shoved aside rocks that had fallen around him so he could get to her. The boulders had snuffed out his fire, leaving the area in near complete darkness except for the blue radiance. He forgot about his pain as he forced his body to move to get to Dagny.

His already hurt knee banged against a rock. White flashes dotted his vision as he tried to ride the wave of pain. He kept moving. Dagny’s life depended on it. He tried to get to his feet, but his legs wouldn’t hold him. He couldn’t crawl because of his dislocated shoulder. Armir wanted to howl with fury, but he kept his focus on Dagny.

He paused when his hand met leather. He felt along it and realized it was her leg. Armir worked with one arm to clear the rocks as fast as he could. He rolled a rather large stone away from her, realizing it had barely missed crushing her. She was on her side and, thankfully, still breathing.

“Dagny,” he called softly. “Dagny, wake up.”

She didn’t stir. They couldn’t stay, though. The tunnel was unstable. More rocks would likely fall. He was trying to find a way to carry her when he saw shadows jumping in the light on

the wall beside him. Armir looked down to see Dagny's eyes open and on him. He shook his head and squeezed her arm, hoping she understood to extinguish the radiance. The blue light faded, and he whipped his head around to find a woman and two men standing there.

"I knew I'd find you," the female said.

Armir looked between the two burly men before shifting his attention to the woman. "Who are you?"

"Surely, it hasn't been so long that you don't recognize me."

Her tone was light, but her face was tight with rage. Armir felt Dagny's fingers tighten around his. She was awake now, at least. But could they get past the trio? He had no idea if she was hurt or how bad it might be. And neither of them had magic.

"You don't," the woman stated.

Armir studied her, noting the brown hair, simple but clean gown, and Scottish accent. With the way she looked as if she wanted to flay his skin from his body with her bare hands, there could only be one of two explanations—either she was Coven, or she was close to someone he had brought to Blackglade as a Lady. He was sure he'd find out soon enough.

She sneered at him as if the very sight of him made her want to retch. "Do you convince so many women to leave everything they know with the promise of doing great deeds that you can't remember me? How many of those women do you return to their families dead just a year later? You refused to give me answers before, but you're going to pay now. No more will die because of you."

Armir could tell her that someone else would take his place, but he didn't bother. She was too wrapped up in her misery and indignation to hear it. Nor would it do him any good.

"Say my name," she demanded.

Armir leaned back against the wall to ease his aching leg. The three hadn't come to chat. They intended to kill him. "I

can't."

"Can't? Or won't?"

"Can't."

She snorted and took a step toward him. "Do you have any idea how many years I've searched for you? It wasn't until I enlisted the help of a witch and these two," she hitched a thumb at each of the men, "that I finally caught my quarry," she said. "Word reached me last year that you had been seen on this mountain. We found the cave and began tunneling through it. It was Angus who spotted you coming up the mountain carrying someone a few days ago and came to make sure you were here. I see you're still up to your old deeds. Have you convinced her to be your Lady?"

"You have no idea what you've stepped into."

"I busted through a wall of rock to get to you. I know exactly what I'm doing." A satisfied smile spread over her face. "Take him."

The two men were on Armir in a flash. They were strong. They were also shrouded in magic to give them extra power, but his spell was weakening that. It didn't do much good with the injuries he had sustained. But he didn't go down easily. The fact they were so far from the spell at the entrance meant that it didn't affect them as strongly as it should. It was the only rationalization for how they got in.

Armir punched, kicked, and elbowed, but they managed to subdue him with his arms behind his back. The strips of leather they tied around his wrists were coated in magic that would strengthen as soon as they left the mountain. They hauled Armir to his feet and shoved him toward the woman.

"Enjoy what little time you have left, warlock. It's going to be over soon," she said.

Armir wasn't concerned about himself. His thoughts were on Dagny and what the trio might do to her. Hopefully, she would stay where she was. If they were lucky, the trio would think her dead and leave her alone.

"Let him go."

Armir closed his eyes when he heard Dagny's voice. He looked over his shoulder to find her on her feet with blood trailing down the side of her face from a cut at her hairline. Dagny's attention was on the woman.

"Whatever he's told you is a lie," the woman said.

Dagny's gaze didn't waver. "I'm not going to tell you again."

"And what will you do?"

"You really don't want to find out."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "I was going to free you, allow you to go home, but I see Armir has already corrupted you. So, we'll leave you here to rot."

Armir tried to get to Dagny, but one of the men yanked on his dislocated arm. The pain was enough to stop him in his tracks. He heard Dagny shout his name. Armir fought against passing out. He couldn't lose consciousness.

He caught Dagny's gaze. He shouted the words to reverse the spell, but they put a gag in his mouth before he could finish. She was strong. She would find a way out of the cave.

"It's time you pay for your sins, Armir," the woman said.

His eyes widened when a third man emerged from the shadows beside Dagny. He slammed a fist into her jaw. She crumpled to the ground, unmoving. Armir didn't take his eyes from her as they hauled him out of the mountain, walking on a narrow slab of rock. Soon, Dagny was swallowed by darkness. He tripped, and instead of helping him to his feet, the two men simply dragged him.

Armir managed to get his good foot beneath him to stand, but they were soon dragging him again. He forced them to haul his entire weight through the darkness. Then he saw sunlight ahead. All too soon, they were out of the cave.

His magic was instantly restored, but the bindings holding him were stronger.

"No use fighting your fate," the woman said, a smile on her lips.

Armir winced as she said the same words he'd spoken to every woman he convinced to come to Blackglade to become Lady of the Varroki.



The throbbing in her head was the first thing that greeted Dagny when she opened her eyes. Her stomach roiled violently when she sat up. She fought against nausea as she called to her radiance. Blue light flooded the area around her. Her gaze landed on rocks strewn all about her, but no Armir. Those people had taken him.

And left her to die.

Dagny used the wall to help her climb to her feet. She swayed and had to tighten her hold so she didn't fall. She hesitantly touched the top of her forehead and winced when she found a cut. Her fingers came away smeared with blood. She had been dazed when she woke to Armir's voice. At first, she'd thought she was hallucinating the people, but she soon learned they were very real. And had come for Armir.

She carefully stepped over the larger stones to where the woman had stood—where Armir had fallen. There was nothing but air. Dagny moved her foot around and found where the floor ended. How had the group gotten into the mountain? She remembered the woman mentioning a witch. She had also mentioned something about tunneling. That must have been the scraping sounds she and Armir had heard.

Dagny wanted to follow them, but she had no way of knowing where they had gone. They'd made sure of that. She worked her jaw, remembering the vicious hit she hadn't seen coming until it was too late. The brute hadn't broken her jaw but moving it would be difficult for a few days.

She did know one way out. The way she had come. The words Armir had shouted were a spell. Had he enough time to tell her all of it? There was only one way to find out. Dagny found her bag of food and the last waterskin. She settled the sack across her body and started walking.

Every step brought her closer to the entrance and escape so she could find Armir. That kept her going when she was too tired to lift her legs or when climbing became so difficult she didn't think she would make it. She had thought getting into the tunnel had been hard. But getting back out was proving nearly impossible without better upper body strength. Still, she didn't give up. Armir hadn't given up on her. She wouldn't give up on him.

Dagny rested often but never for too long. Sometimes, she feared she wouldn't be able to get back up, but she did because she didn't have a choice. Armir's life was on the line.

She soon found herself crawling through the low tunnel. Her mind kept replaying scenes of Armir's bloodied face and body from his fall. He was badly injured. Probably much more than he let on. The woman wanted to kill him for taking someone she cared about. In some ways, Dagny could understand her pain. She might not remember what he'd said to persuade her to become the Lady, but whatever he said got everyone to come to Blackglade with him.

In the end, though, the choice was theirs. Not Armir's. Not the family's. Each woman's. Malene had made that choice. So had all the rest. Was it Armir's fault that his job was to find those women and bring them to Blackglade? Was it his fault they died? Well, all but Malene. Maybe Armir was to blame. Maybe it was someone else. The woman didn't seem to care. She wanted justice, and she planned to get it by shedding Armir's blood.

Dagny sighed when she was finally able to stand again. It wasn't easygoing, though. She had to shift to the side to get through the constricted passage. She blinked, pulling herself from her thoughts as she realized where she was. She moved faster to work her way through until she finally came out beneath the light of the glow worms.

Tears burned her eyes. Dagny gave herself a moment to take a drink from the waterskin before running through the tunnel toward the entrance. She tried to go through, hoping the spell was broken, but something halted her in her tracks like before.

Dagny removed the bag and set it aside as she tried to remember the words Armir had shouted. She said them aloud, but she still couldn't get out. She tried again. And then a third time. Still nothing. She slammed her hands against the barrier and threw back her head to scream her frustration.

She dropped to her knees as tears blurred her vision. Dagny sat back on her haunches. She could give in and have a good cry, or she could find a way out. If she was as powerful as she claimed to be, then she could do it, spell or not.

Dagny climbed to her feet once more. She wiped away a lone tear that escaped and looked down at her glowing hands and forearms. She closed her eyes and imagined the feeling of the magic she had taken for granted. It flowed with the radiance. It was there. She just had to tap into it.

She felt a spark of something, but almost as quickly as it rose, it was gone. She kept trying, kept seeking. Her thoughts drifted to Armir and their time together in the lighted cavern. Fear would then take her and shutter any magic she had gained. It took effort to push that aside. When she did, her mind went to the group who had busted through the mountain to take Armir. Anger burned brightly in her chest.

That fury ignited something dark within her—something worse than the fear. There had to be a middle ground. Her magic was there, just out of reach. She needed it to free herself, to find Armir, and stop those people from hurting him.

“Take a good look because I’m going to take Armir and all the Varroki as mine.”

The words came from nowhere, a memory she didn't recognize, but it flooded her with a multitude of emotions—dread, panic...and wrath. Yet there was something else there, a thing that outshone the rest. Love.

Love for the Varroki.

Love for Armir.

Dagny threw out her arms, enveloping herself in a blue sphere. She recognized it. She had been in one before while fighting...

“Sybbyl,” she said aloud.

She could do nothing as the memory of that day engulfed her.

“He’ll be my lover. We’ll have children,” Sybbyl stated with a sneer. “Each member of the Coven will have their choice of a Varroki warlock. We’ll become one. After I kill all the Varroki women and children.”

Malene shook her head. “That’s never going to happen.”

“You aren’t strong enough to defeat me.” Sybbyl climbed to her feet. “Everyone told you that you have the power, but we both know you don’t.”

“I have more than enough.”

Malene expanded her magic to end the witch, but Sybbyl was just as quick to shout a spell. There was a blinding light, and then...nothing.

“Until I woke in Norway.”

The doorway holding back her past had been torn away, flooding her with memories of her family, the first time she saw Blackglade, Armir, and all the rest. They wiped away the emptiness she hadn’t quite been able to fill as Dagny. She was whole again. She knew who she was. She knew *what* she was.

And she knew who she loved.

Malene looked at the blocked entrance. She pulled her arms back against her and then shoved her hands outward, breaking through Armir’s spell. She removed the bubble and dimmed her radiance. Just as she was about to walk out, she spotted dark spots on the rock.

She bent for a closer look. It was blood. Armir’s blood. That was perhaps why the words for the spell hadn’t worked.

She hadn't added blood to it. Not that it mattered now. She had gotten out. But she could use his blood. She held her hand above the dark splotches and let magic flow from her palm. She closed her eyes and thought about Armir. His blood was a connection to him, and it gave her the direction of his location.

Malene straightened and stalked from the cave. He was to the east, and that would take her over mountains. She hesitated for only a moment. She couldn't give in to the exhaustion. Armir's life depended on her reaching him in time. She shoved aside the pains in her body and the weariness she felt and headed east.

The Vikings had trained her to travel over vast land areas stealthily and swiftly. It had honed her body and muscles. Armir had taught her battle magic, but the Norse had imparted their skills for the battlefield. She almost felt sorry for anyone who got in her way.

Almost.

Malene pushed herself hard. When she slipped, she quickly got back up. When she tripped, she steadied herself and chose a better route. There would be time to rest and heal, to eat and drink, later. After. Because there would be an after. She hadn't found her way back to Scotland and uncovered her memories after over a year, only to lose Armir again.

He loved her. He had always loved her. Just as she had always loved him. They had been such fools to keep that from each other. The barriers between them were gone. They had shared their bodies and opened their hearts. Nothing would prevent them from being together.

Darkness fell quickly, and with it came a light rain. It made seeing that much more difficult. That didn't slow her, though. She thought about using her radiance, but she needed to keep her eyes adjusted to the night. Thankfully, there was a full moon that bathed the Earth in its light. Malene reached the crest of a mountain. She startled a herd of red deer that scattered at the sight of her. She hastily scanned the slope headed down. Rocks protruded from the ground that could do a lot of damage if she hit them.

She stared at the glen. Every once in a while, she hit an area free of large rocks. She slid down on her arse to cover more ground before popping back up to jump over boulders. It gave her legs a little rest before she sprinted to a stream that cut through the glen.

Malene knelt beside the water and drank as the rain finally stopped. She paused to catch her breath and used the time to make sure she was still headed the right way. It would be easier with Armir's blood, but she already had a direction. She just had to focus her magic on him. A smile pulled at her lips when she located him. He wasn't far now.

Her legs pumped as she started up the steep incline of the mountain between her and her love. Her lungs burned, and her muscles screamed, but she didn't stop. Eventually, she had to slow as the pitch became too steep for her to do more than pull herself up with her hands.

Sweat trickled down her back and between her breasts. It fell into her eyes. She bit back a curse as her nail bent backward and then snapped when her hand slipped from its hold. Malene wiped her hand on her pants and reached for the rock again, even as she felt the warm trickle of blood from her finger.

She peeled back her lips, her teeth gritted as she drew herself up and over the ledge. The moment her body was clear, she rolled onto her back and glanced at the sky. Then she was on her hands and knees before regaining her feet to keep going.

When she finally crested the mountain, she found herself staring down at a small encampment ringed with torches. An area to the right held horses. People crowded together in the center of the area, their shouts and cheers telling her that someone was fighting. And she knew exactly who it was.

Malene didn't see guards on the mountainside. No doubt they believed they were hidden. They certainly didn't expect her since they had left her inside the cave, and likely thought she was dead. She carefully picked her way down, keeping low and darting between boulders. All the while, she surveyed

the crowd. There were close to thirty people by her count. That included women and a few children. Most were men, though. Somewhere in the mix was a witch.

About halfway down, Malene spotted the woman who had busted into the cave and taken Armir. She stood to the left, a smile on her face as the crowd jeered. And then Malene caught sight of Armir. Anger simmered when she saw that he was still bound with the magical ties. He faced a huge mountain of a man who punched him so hard Malene could hear it from where she was. Armir went down hard, but he somehow got back up. He hit the ground over and over. He lumbered to his feet, though it was taking him longer to get up each time.

Malene straightened from her hiding place and walked toward the crowd. Enough was enough.



One of Armir's eyes was swollen shut. He was sure his nose was broken, and his jaw was on the verge. Every breath was excruciating, telling him at least one rib was broken, too. He hit the ground on his dislocated shoulder and ground his teeth together when pain blinded him. He rolled over, but not quickly enough to dodge his opponent's toe slamming into his already aching midsection.

Armir grunted and rolled faster. There was no time to think about the pain. It was either move or die, and he couldn't die yet. He still had to get to Dagny. If only he could get the damn bindings loose.

He managed to get to his knees, only to see a boot coming at his face. Armir leaned back, the foot missing him by a breath. He rammed his good shoulder into his attacker's leg as he surged upward, knocking the brute to the ground. The man landed with a groan. Armir stood, breathing heavily as his opponent angrily pushed to his feet. Armir had gotten in some decent hits despite already being injured and having his hands tied. They wanted him dead, but he wouldn't go down easily.

Armir widened his stance, waiting for the next attack, when a murmur went through the crowd. His gaze darted to the people turning to look at someone before he returned it to his foe. When the big man rushed him, Armir waited until the last second and then spun to the side. But his adversary was quick and extended a thick fist, hitting Armir in the face. It

was a glancing blow but still enough to make Armir see stars and lose his balance.

Armir fell backward, his head slamming against the ground. He was dazed and slow to move. He expected another hit and braced for it, but none came. Armir opened his eyes to find everyone looking at someone. He turned his head to see what had caused the commotion when he saw the unmistakable blue glow of radiance. Shock ran through him as he pushed himself into a sitting position.

He greedily soaked in the sight of Dagny. She strode with purpose and determination, parting the crowd without uttering a word. She didn't stop until she reached the area he had been fighting in. Her gaze briefly landed on him. She said nothing to him, but she didn't need to. Her actions said it all. She had freed herself from the cave and tracked him here.

Dagny's gaze swung to the woman who had captured Armir. "Release him."

"That isn't going to happen," the leader replied.

"I won't ask again."

"You didn't ask the first time."

Dagny scanned the faces around her as she turned in a slow circle. She halted when she faced the female once more. "Who do you seek revenge for?"

"My sister."

"You believe Armir convinced her to leave you."

The woman snorted as she took a step forward, her anger cutting deep lines into her face. "I know he did."

"He did not," Dagny said.

Armir tucked his legs against him in an attempt to get to his feet, wincing at the pain. He had sent out a message to Jarin when he was free of the cave, but he didn't know if the warrior had gotten it. He must have if Dagny was free. Though Armir wasn't sure how Jarin had found the cave so quickly. Armir glanced into the darkness. Were the Varroki out there, waiting to strike?

The leader shot Dagny a flat look. “You have the same blue light my sister did. He warped your mind, too.”

“Armir did no such thing. He explained what this means,” Dagny said and lifted her arms to show the radiance. “He offered me a place where I could learn about the magic I’d been gifted. He told me it would be difficult. He warned me I’d hate it at times. Reminded me I was leaving my family and everything I knew to live in a strange place. He even warned that few lived for long. He never *persuaded* me to do anything. I made the decision to go with him. Just as your sister did.”

Armir stared in disbelief at Dagny as her words froze him in place. There was only one way she could know any of that, and that was if her memories had returned. His Malene had come back.

“So?” the leader stated coolly.

Malene quirked an eyebrow. “Is that how you really want to do this?”

“I’m not scared of you. We have our own witch.”

Instead of replying, Malene walked to Armir and glared at the man he had been fighting. His foe dropped his gaze and moved back three steps. Armir finally got to his feet just as her eyes swiveled to him. There was so much Armir wanted to say, but he didn’t dare utter a word. Now wasn’t the time.

He remembered teaching her battle magic and thinking she would never fit on a battlefield. How wrong he had been. She was a different kind of warrior before. But now, she had a toughness about her that hadn’t been there previously, a kind of grit that no one could miss. As much as he hated to admit it, she had come into her own in a way that never would’ve happened had she not spent time with the Vikings.

Malene reached behind him. He felt the ties loosen before they plopped to the ground. She gave him a nod, which he returned. Then, she faced his opponent. “Only a coward would be involved in an unfair fight.”

The man’s lips lifted in a sneer.

Armir shook out his right arm before balling his hand into a fist. He jerked his chin to his foe. “What are you waiting for?” Armir goaded.

The man rushed him and threw a right hook followed by a left jab. Armir ducked the first and spun away from the second. He landed a single punch that knocked his enemy out cold. Armir’s gaze was on the woman as her man hit the ground.

“If you kill us, more will hunt you,” the leader announced. “That, I promise.”

Malene let her radiance grow brighter. “I could’ve taken all your lives when I stood atop the mountain looking down at you. If I wanted you dead, you’d be dead.”

A tall woman with a long, black braid moved away from the crowd and walked to Malene. She stopped a few paces away and dropped to her knees, her head bowed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was you that Jean wanted retribution against.”

“Get up,” Jean demanded of the witch.

The witch looked back at Jean as she gained her feet but then moved to stand on Malene’s other side. “You have no idea who this is.”

“I don’t care.”

“You should,” Armir warned.

But Jean was clearly past listening. Her grief had too strong a hold on her. Armir didn’t like her tactics, but he understood why she had pursued him. They had wanted answers—answers he hadn’t been able to give. There was no way he would tell Jean that her sister hadn’t been strong enough to withstand what it took to be a Lady. That wasn’t something anyone needed to learn.

Malene stared at Jean. “You got your revenge.”

“Hardly. Armir still breathes,” Jean replied icily.

Malene lifted a hand. Blue light shot from her palm to Jean, wrapping around the leader and lifting her to hover over

the ground. “You wanted to find Armir. You did. You wanted to punish him. You did. Be thankful I’m allowing you to live.”

Jean’s face flashed with fear, but it quickly turned to rage as she fought against the magical hold. “I don’t answer to you.”

“Everyone suffers loss. I’m sorry about your sister, but that doesn’t give you the right to take another’s life.”

“I won’t ever stop. You’ll have to kill me.”

Armir took a step toward Malene. He waited until she looked his way before he said, “Let her go.”

“After what she did to you? After what she intended to do?” Malene asked in surprise.

Armir swung his head to Jean. Hatred shot from her eyes. She missed her sister and wanted someone to blame for her death. He was Jean’s target because she knew him. It wouldn’t matter how many years passed. Jean would hold onto that ire. She was already bitter, and soon, she would find herself alone. “Aye,” Armir murmured.

Malene returned Jean to the ground. A moment later, Malene’s radiance dimmed, then vanished. Armir swayed. He didn’t know how much longer he could stand. Now that he wasn’t fighting for his life, every injury was making itself known. And there were many. They needed to get away from the group before he let the pain take him. He wasn’t the only one who needed tending to. Dried blood still streaked Malene’s face.

She met his gaze and walked to him. He didn’t reach for her, nor her for him. But he wanted to. It would have to wait until they were safely away. Or at least out of sight of the current crowd.

“Why?” Jean demanded as she walked to them. “Why let me live? You have magic. You could kill us, and none would be the wiser.”

Armir glanced at the witch who had helped Jean. “Just because we have the ability doesn’t mean we will. There are those who would, but that isn’t who we are.”

Malene nodded slowly. Then she spoke to Jean. “You know about magic when others don’t. You accept it because of your sister. You willingly worked with a witch—as did all of these people. Acceptance is what we need. It shouldn’t matter if someone has magic or not. There are good people, and there are bad.”

“And you’re good?” Jean asked.

There was still a hint of anger in her voice. Armir didn’t expect her to let go of everything all at once. He wasn’t sure she could ever truly release her hostility. It had been part of her for too long. But Malene was right. If these people could accept magic, it was one of a thousand steps needed for change.

Armir’s legs trembled. He forced his muscles to hold him just a little longer. “We are.”

He saw the glint of the blade in the firelight too late. But it wasn’t directed at him. Jean had gotten close enough to lunge at Malene. Armir stepped in front of her as he swatted Jean’s arm away. The dagger sliced across his abdomen. He jerked back, and his legs crumpled. Armir dropped to the earth. Arms gently wrapped around him.

“I’ve got you,” Malene said.

He covered the gash with his hand as blood seeped through his fingers. There was a shout as Jean was hurled backward by tendrils of deep orange magic. Armir spotted the witch binding the leader. The crowd let out a startled cry. He feared they would attempt a second attack. He needed to get on his feet.

“Armir, look,” Malene whispered.

He pulled his gaze away from Jean to see Varroki warriors. They stood midway up the mountain, each with a torch in their hand as they surrounded the glen. Armir tried to smile, but he was fast losing energy.

Malene gently touched his face. “Rest. All will be well. I’m back. I remember everything.”

He tried to look at her, but his one good eye was blurry. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she whispered, holding him against her chest. “Sleep, love.”

He felt her magic wash over him, and he was powerless to resist it or her.



The fire crackled, sending sparks into the night. Malene hoped she'd made the right decision to grant Jean her life. Even if she continued to hunt for Armir, the woman wouldn't get the upper hand with him again. Word was spreading about Jean so no other witches would unwittingly help her against the Varroki.

Malene hadn't wanted to release Armir, but she had stepped aside when the warriors came for him. They made a litter and carried him away on their shoulders. Jarin had stayed by her side as she followed behind Armir. Malene had much to apologize for, and her first stop after Armir was Helena.

It would take some time for her to come to terms with her life as Malene and Dagny. She had been two different people with distinct likes and dislikes that contradicted each other. It frightened her how wiping her memory had altered her. Would her memories have ever returned if she hadn't made it back to Scotland?

Malene's gaze lowered to Armir on the other side of the fire. He hadn't woken since she'd used magic to make him sleep. His injuries were severe. She still couldn't fathom how he had stayed on his feet, much less fought. Her wounds, minor compared to his, had also been healed, but it had taken hours to convince Jarin to take the Varroki and return to Blackglade. She and Armir needed time alone outside the city. She had chosen to do that in the forest. As beautiful as the

lighted cavern was, Malene didn't think she would ever set foot in another cave again.

She took a deep breath and slowly released it as she looked up through the branches to the night sky above. Clouds moved swiftly, briefly blocking out the moon. She loved how it lit the clouds from behind. She smiled up at the sky. It had seen everything. Every decision, every mistake, and every move she made. She was proud of some. But many she wasn't. She supposed most people were like that, but it didn't help her cope with what she had done. Soon, she would have to face it all. She wanted to believe she was strong enough, but she wasn't sure about that.

Her gaze lowered to Armir. This time, his eyes were open and locked on her. A thrill shot through her. It always did when she found him looking at her. Neither spoke for a full minute. Then he slowly sat up and stared across the fire.

She swallowed nervously. "How do you feel?"

"Better. Rested. You?"

"Better."

He raised a blond brow. "Did you sleep?"

"I did. With Jarin and his entire company surrounding us."

Armir's mouth softened into a grin as he chuckled. "That sounds like him." He looked around them. "Where are they now?"

"I sent them home."

His gaze snapped back to her. The way he studied her made Malene feel as if he could see her every thought. He'd had that ability since the first time she saw him. Armir had been quiet, reserved. Which sometimes made it difficult to determine where she stood with him. For a long time, she wasn't even sure he liked her. Not once had she ever imagined that he *loved* her.

"What happened to Jean?" Armir asked.

"You wished for her to live, so she lives. Unless she comes for you again."

Armira shook his head and glanced away. “Everything she said was true.”

“It certainly was not.”

“My job was to find those with the radiance and bring them to Blackglade. My predecessors kidnapped Ladies. I thought there was a better way. So, I set out to persuade and manipulate. I believed that was better. I honestly thought the Ladies would live longer if they made the decision. Except, they didn’t. I just made them—*you*—believe you chose this life.”

Malene curled her hands together in her lap. She wanted to go to him, to touch him and offer comfort. That had never been something they did, and she wasn’t sure it was now—even after they had shared their bodies. “You can’t take all the blame.”

“I can. I do. Jean had every reason to seek revenge.”

“You didn’t abduct us. That says a lot about the man you are.”

“I didn’t let any of you leave, either.”

She swallowed and briefly looked at the fire. “We had to remain for the same reason you had to bring us back. The Lady of the Varroki keeps the city hidden and safe.”

Silence fell between them. Malene tried not to fidget. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been this nervous. During the hours she had waited for Armira to wake, she had gone over in her head what she wanted to say. But now that it was time, she couldn’t get the words out.

“You can say it,” Armira said. “I’ve been expecting it.”

She tilted her head. “Excuse me?”

“You have something to tell me. I’m not upset. It was a chance I took.”

Malene grew more confused as he spoke. “What are you talking about?”

“You regret what happened in the light cavern now that your memories have returned.”

“That’s n—”

“I understand. I don’t hold anything against you for not returning my feelings.”

She held up a hand to stop him when he opened his mouth to continue. “That couldn’t be further from the truth. I’ve loved you for years. Why do you think I changed the laws? It was for us. Though I had difficulty telling you because...what if you didn’t feel the same?”

“Seems both of us had that problem.” His brows snapped together. “So...you love me?”

Malene smiled and nodded. “More than you can possibly know.”

“Then what do you have to tell me?”

Her grin slipped. “I don’t think I can return to Blackglade.”

“Then we won’t.”

“I’ve been gone for over a year. A Lady is supposed to remain within the walls to keep the city hidden.”

Armira shrugged. “You remained for years, casting aside everything you wanted for people who weren’t yours. You struggled against the restraints placed upon you, the ones deposited on every Lady. It’s no wonder they died. They—*you*—were caged.”

“In a manner,” she said, glad he could admit such things. He never would’ve done that before. It seemed she wasn’t the only one who had changed.

“In every way.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “We had you. You were there every step of the way. You offered guidance and solace. You tempered my rash decisions and often had to remind me of my duties. But you also let me grow. You taught me to read. You showed me there was a way to be Lady and yet be...me. If

they had asked, you would've done the same to any before me. The fact is, you didn't have a life or friends because you were always with me."

"I had you. That's all I wanted."

Malene rose and walked around the fire to Armir. He turned to face her when she sat. She took his hands in hers and looked into his eyes. "I'm the person I am because you were beside me. I want a life with you, Armir."

"And we will have it."

"What about Blackglade? We can't turn our backs on the Varroki."

His thumbs moved back and forth over the backs of her hands. "Why don't you wish to return?"

"I fear we'll both slip back into the roles we had before and let our love die."

"That won't happen. I won't let it."

She lowered her gaze to their hands. "What if we don't have a choice?"

"The choice is ours. We return and let it be known that we're together. It's that simple."

It sounded so straightforward, but the Varroki were slow to accept change. She couldn't lose what she had with Armir. It would kill her.

"Trust me. I want you. I want this," he said, tightening his fingers around hers.

Malene lifted her gaze to him. "What about children?"

"We can have as many as you want."

"And if I don't want to live in the tower?"

"We'll live wherever you'd like. I love you. I let my insecurities and fear stop me from doing anything about that before. Then, I lost you. I won't let that happen again."

"You really think we can do this?"

“I’ve had a year to think about all the things I’d do or say differently. I have that chance now. I say we seize this opportunity.”

She smiled, nodding as her eyes welled with tears. Armir framed her face in his hands and lowered his mouth to hers. His lips moved slowly, sensually over hers. Then he pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms tightly around her. They sat in the embrace for a long time, simply being in the moment.

Malene was the one to break contact as she leaned away to look into his eyes. “There are more changes I’d like to make.”

“Good. I have some, too.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you?”

“Aye,” he said with a crooked grin. “Does that surprise you?”

“Not at all.”

He jerked his chin to her. “Tell me one.”

“I don’t want to reign over the Varroki alone. I want them to recognize you. It was you for many years, showing each of us Ladies what we needed to do. The Varroki need to understand that.”

Armir shrugged. “I don’t care if they do or not. I never wanted power.”

“We come as a package. Simple as that.”

“We may need to take that one a bit slower.”

She rolled her eyes because she knew he was right. “What’s one of yours?”

“With the changes in law removing celibacy from all positions, our population will eventually expand.”

“That’s the hope.” Malene smiled.

He nodded. “Aye. And while that’s all well and good, we should plan for such an event. Not everyone will want to live within Blackglade’s walls. We should create a village near the

city. They'll be our link to the outside world as well as an advance warning should anything come for us."

"That's a great idea. They'll be Varroki and know the importance of keeping our city hidden and secret, but it would also give them the opportunity to live among humans who don't have magic." She frowned. "Though you know that those without magic would find their way to the village sooner or later."

"It's unavoidable. We'd need to put precautions in place. We've trusted outsiders with our existence before."

"Someone would eventually turn on us."

Armira frowned. "Sadly, that is the way of things. Just as there will be another witch who seeks to wipe out those without magic as Sybbyl did. We can't stop that from starting, but we can prepare and know what steps we need to take to squash it."

"I love this idea. We have years to find a location and begin setting up the village. It's brilliant. You're brilliant."

"Does that mean you want to return to the city?" he asked hopefully.

She would have anyway because she couldn't leave it defenseless, but she'd needed to know where they stood. And now, she did. "I do. I'm excited about the prospects for the future of the Varroki, but I'm ecstatic about us."

He gave her a sexy smile before kissing her. Flames of desire sparked and ignited. There were no words as they stripped each other of their clothes and then came together, flesh to flesh. She sighed in contentment when Armira thrust inside her. All thought faded as they lost themselves in the love and passion that was uniquely theirs.



Armir could smell the sea air. Home. He and Malene had finally reached the city gates. They had taken their time over the last week walking to Blackglade, even though they took a chance leaving the city without its Lady for even longer.

It had been Malene's idea, and Armir hadn't wanted to concede at first. In the end, he was glad he had. She was right. They had needed their time together. Alone. They had been able to be themselves without anyone watching or judging. No rules, no restraints. They had talked about everything, as well as spent hours simply holding each other in silence.

He had seen her unabashedly free, which was a sight to behold. Malene smiled and laughed more than he had ever witnessed. She teased and joked. She opened her heart and told him her deepest desires and dreams, and he did the same with her. And they had made love often.

"There it is."

He turned his head to Malene when he realized she had stopped walking. Armir reached for her hand. She eagerly took his and met his gaze. "Nothing will change between us. You're the Lady."

"That doesn't mean they'll accept this."

"Then we'll show them why they should."

Malene's gaze slid back to the large gates heavily spelled by generations of Varroki magic that shut Blackglade away

from the rest of the world. “How long do you think our city will remain hidden?”

“Forever, so long as there is a Lady within its walls.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been home.”

He smiled at her mention of Blackglade as *home*. Armir looked around at the beautiful but harsh landscape. The Varroki, neither Celtic nor Norse but a commanding and powerful combination of both, had carved a place for themselves in a remote, stormy, and feral part of Scotland.

“The Varroki are waiting for you,” he said.

Malene shook her head. “They’re waiting for *us*.”

“Then let’s go home.”

Armir didn’t release her hand, nor did she try to tug hers free when they drew closer to the city’s entrance. He knew their people had spotted them well before they reached the stronghold. It was a precaution for anyone who might stumble upon Blackglade.

The gates creaked open before they fully reached them. As the huge doors swung wide, they found a contingent of warriors waiting, with Jarin at the head. The warlock had a wide grin on his face as he approached them.

“It’s about damn time,” Jarin said as he greeted Malene and then Armir.

Malene glanced around him. “That was my doing.”

“I don’t blame you. Helena and I will do the same once you two are settled.”

Armir slapped Jarin on the shoulder. “There’s no need to wait. You and Helena should go.”

“I agree. Take the time. Be together,” Malene replied.

Jarin looked between the two of them before nodding. “Word spread quickly once you two were spotted. I tried to contain it, but it was like corralling wind.”

Armira picked up the sounds of drums and shouts from within the city. The Varroki were celebrating.

“You won’t need to explain anything,” Jarin continued, his gaze on Malene. “I’ve told our people what happened to you. They know you didn’t abandon them.”

Malene bowed her head in thanks. “You’ve done well taking Armira’s place.”

“It was only out of necessity,” Jarin replied.

Armira and Malene had already discussed giving Jarin more of Armira’s responsibilities so Armira could take on other duties. “Let’s talk once you and Helena return.”

“Of course. Are you ready to go inside?”

Malene met Armira’s gaze, her lips curved into an easy smile. “Aye. Our people await.”

Jarin stepped aside to let them pass. As Armira and Malene reached the company of warriors, they shifted to line the first part of the road leading from the gates. Malene kept her chin lifted, her gaze moving about the city. Armira did the same. He had missed the cottage homes and larger structures used for shops and meeting rooms. Dragon head carvings from the Norse and knotwork from the Celts adorned every building.

Two cultures had unified to create a powerful and influential group of witches and warlocks. They had taken the first steps to something amazing. Malene and Armira were simply following their path, albeit in a different way.

As they walked to the center of the city in the middle of the valley, more and more Varroki rushed out to see them, their cries of joy deafening. A small girl ran to Malene with a bundle of wildflowers. Armira watched as Malene squatted down to speak to the child before accepting the flowers. The girl blushed from whatever Malene had said before running back to her mother.

At the center of the city, a huge fire roared with dancers moving in time to the drums in a joyous celebration. He and Malene watched until the drumbeats ceased. Malene handed

him the flowers before walking slowly around the blaze, looking at the Varroki.

“I might have lost my memories for the last year, but they’ve returned. Thanks to Armir,” she said.

A loud cheer went up. Armir grinned but never took his eyes off her.

“He found me. We’ve returned home, and while the Coven has been destroyed, our work is far from done. There will always be those who use magic for evil. And we will be there to stop them.”

Another cheer rose, this one even longer. Malene was a natural leader. He knew their people would flourish and thrive under her rule.

Malene halted and held out her hand to him. Armir made his way to her and took her hand in his. She gave him a wink before facing the crowd once more. “There were many laws put in place, and there were reasons for that at the time. But things have changed. The world has changed. Just because we keep ourselves hidden doesn’t mean we can’t move with the times. Before the battle with the Coven, I reversed old laws for all positions that demanded celibacy. The world counts on us, and we can’t die out. If we continue the way things were, we would do exactly that.” She paused and looked at him, her fingers tightening on his. Her head swung back to the crowd. “I love Blackglade. I love every Varroki. And I love Armir. He governed the city between Ladies and when each of us was learning our role. There’s no one better to stand by my side from this day forward.”

There was a moment of silence as her words sank in before the clapping and shouts of joy thundered around them again, led by none other than Jarin and Helena.

“You’re stuck with me now,” Malene said as she leaned close.

Armir grinned as he looked down at her. “More like you’re stuck with me.”

“There’s something else you should know.”

“Oh?”

She brought his hand to her stomach and looked at him expectantly, the sound of cheers rising even more.

Armir’s heart skipped a beat. “Are you...?”

“*We’re* going to have a child.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply before he whispered, “I love you.”

EPILOGUE



Six years later...

Armir stood atop the tower with Jarin as the sun sank into the horizon. True to his word, Armir had built a home for Malene. It was near the tower because, while she had wanted a house, she still spent a significant portion of each day in the main building.

He looked at the pillars at the edges of the tower. They were no longer straight. Malene's magic had curved them inward some time ago. It was a reminder to anyone who might forget just how powerful she was. Though, he would never forget.

Armir's gaze moved outward to the rocky cliffs and vast water in the distance. Behind him was the valley that made up the city. He had never thought he could love anything more than Blackglade, and then he met Malene. She had changed everything for him.

"There's a storm approaching," Jarin said from beside him.

Armir grunted. "It's going to be a fierce one."

"Your other two children were born during storms."

Armir looked at his friend and scowled. "Malene has a few weeks before this baby is due to arrive."

"I'm sure you're right."

Armir's frown deepened as he recalled Malene's wince when she got out of bed that morning. She had brushed off his

concern. He turned on his heel and stalked to the stairs, Jarin right behind him. Armir reached the uppermost floor of the tower and threw open the door. His eyes scanned the circular room until he found Malene bent over with her arms braced on the table, sweat lining her face, and Helena rubbing her lower back.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Armir demanded as he hurried to her.

Malene fisted her hands as a contraction hit. When she was finally able to lift her head, she gave him a weak smile. “I was about to send for you.”

Armir flattened his lips when he thought how he’d gone about his day not knowing his wife was in labor.

“I’m fine. I have been through this before, remember,” Malene reminded him.

He was about to respond when another contraction hit. Armir forgot about talking as he helped Malene to the bed once it passed. He stayed near her as Helena fell into her role as midwife. It had been four years since their second son was born, and in that time, Malene had suffered two miscarriages that had brought her low. Armir wiped her forehead with a damp cloth as she squeezed his hand and bore down.

“That’s it,” Helena told Malene. “I can see the crown of the head.”

Malene grinned before she was caught up in another contraction. Armir never felt more useless than when his children were born. He offered Malene what support he could, but there was no way for him to take away the pain.

“One more big one. Push hard,” Helena urged.

Malene bared her teeth and pushed. Suddenly, she sagged. Armir caught her against him. He jerked his head to Helena to see her wide smile as a tiny wail filled the room. Armir’s throat clogged with emotion as he looked at Malene, who had tears coursing down her cheeks. Helena cut the umbilical cord before wrapping the baby in a blanket and handing the bundle to Malene.

Armir stared down at the puckered red face as tiny fists flailed about. Malene moved aside the blanket to see the sex of their child.

“A girl,” Malene whispered before turning her head to Armir.

He kissed her, both of them crying tears of joy. “She’s beautiful. You’re beautiful.”

Malene laughed through her tears. “She is stunning, isn’t she?”

Armir leaned his head against Malene’s as they stared at the small bundle. Suddenly, a soft blue glow could be seen from the baby’s left hand.

“Do you see that?” Malene asked in a shocked whisper.

Armir nodded. “Aye.”

He gently took his daughter’s fist and slowly opened it to reveal the blue radiance.

“What does this mean?”

“It means that our daughter will inherit your role when you’re gone. The first Lady of the Varroki to be born within Blackglade.”

Malene looked up at him. “Things have changed for the Varroki.”

“Aye, love. And it was all because of you.”

She shook her head before kissing their daughter’s forehead. “It was *us*. And there’s more to do.”

“There always is.”

“Then we can’t stop now.”

He chuckled as he rested his cheek against her head. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

THE END

Thank you for reading REIGN. I hope you enjoyed the story as much as I loved writing it. If you want more witch stories than try my Sisters of Magic series beginning with SHADOW MAGIC.

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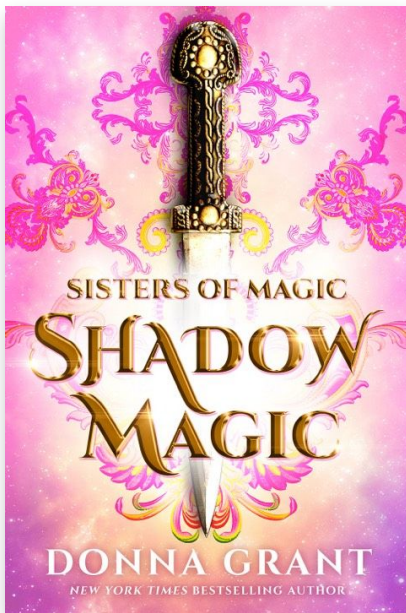
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EXCERPT OF THE FIRST
SISTERS OF MAGIC BOOK

SHADOW MAGIC



Magic. Long has it been debated on whether it truly exists. Yet, exist it does, and in the most noble of women.

With a past soaked in sin and darkness slowly closing in around him to claim his soul, Droган only wants to live his life in solitude. Years in the king's service and his numerous deeds directed by the crown have left Droган with horrendous nightmares and immeasurable guilt...

Serena is a witch, cursed and forever alone. She accepts her future. Until she meets Droган. With Droган a passion deep and unyielding awakens inside her. She is willing to sacrifice herself for his love, but can he put his past to rest and embrace the future?

Keep reading for a peek of SHADOW MAGIC...



Hawthorne Castle
Central England, 1127

Jealousy, if left unbridled, could turn a good soul as black as Satan.

And so it was the first time Serena of Hawthorne saw Lord Droган of Wolfglynn with the beautiful woman on his arm. The jealousy was instant and sharper than any needle that could pierce her skin. Serena shouldn't have noticed.

She was a *bana-bhuidseach*, a witch, cursed and forever alone. Because of what she was, men rarely caught her attention. Except for Droган.

Her sure-footed gait faltered and then stopped as the crowd in the great hall parted to allow her a view of Droган for a heartbeat. In that moment, his image became etched in her memory for all time.

People teemed around her, but her gaze locked on Lord Droган of Wolfglynn. What she saw made her break into a sweat, and her soul stirred for the first time.

Dark, auburn hair, with a slight curl at the ends, fell thick and straight to his broad shoulders. He had a high forehead with gently arching brows over eyes of a rich golden brown. His nose was straight and aristocratic, his mouth wide and full.

He wore a brown leather jerkin over a deep green tunic that did nothing to conceal the rippled muscles in his arms and

chest. Her gaze moved lower to his thick legs in tight leather. Boots, worn but well cared for, encased his feet and calves.

Serena caught a glimpse of something shiny at the top of his left boot, suggesting a hidden dirk. The broadsword and dagger strapped to his waist let all know he was a warrior.

She lifted her gaze to find Drogan staring at her. For the briefest of moments, Serena found herself starting toward him. Then someone bumped into her. It was all she needed to break away. She turned her back on Drogan, and on the longing in her heart.

Duty called.

Drogon stood frozen as he scanned the throng for another glimpse of the elusive beauty who had captured his attention. The longer he looked and didn't see her, the more irritated he became.

There had been something about her that was...different from any woman he had been around before, and he had been around plenty.

"Drogon, who are you looking for?" Penelope asked in her usual high-pitched voice.

He almost groaned, but spotted several young ladies looking his way. "No one. I think those women are trying to gain your attention," he said and hurried away.

Penelope was his cousin and, although she had a comely face, her constant whining and complaining would try the patience of a saint. And he was far from being a saint. He hadn't wanted to bring her, but had seen no way out of it.

A loud commotion stirred the massive crowd. People parted as Gerard and his wife, Maris, entered the great hall. Drogon chuckled to see his friend with such a silly grin on his face. But then, Gerard had much to be pleased about. He had found the woman of his heart and now had a beautiful baby daughter.

Aye, Gerard had much to be happy about.

Drogan cast aside his doubts and fears as his friend walked toward him. He clasped Gerard's arm as they greeted each other. It was nice to know Gerard hadn't let his warrior body go to mush, which meant he still trained as hard as he used to.

"I didn't know if you would come," Gerard said as he smoothed his dark hair from his face.

A laugh escaped Drogan. "I would never miss this, old friend. You should have known that."

"Aye," Gerard said with a huge smile. "But as lord of my own domain, I know how burdensome it is to get away, even for a day. How long can you stay?"

"As long as needed."

Gerard seemed to relax. "Good. Aye, very good."

Something in his tone unsettled Drogan as his smile slipped. "Is something amiss?"

"Not at all," Gerard assured him. "It is just that now that we have little Jocelyn, I worry over much. I fear I won't be able to protect her."

Drogan released a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. His ever-present companion, the darkness that threatened to drown him in its depths, stirred and roared to life. It took every ounce of control for Drogan to ignore it. "I'm sure all fathers feel the way you do."

"It is my greatest wish that you learn very soon."

He laughed with Gerard, but inside Drogan knew it would never be. Too many things had been done, too many memories haunted him, especially one...

"Dark are your thoughts."

The soft, melodic voice shook him to his core. He turned his head to see the elusive beauty glide past him. He could have sworn she had spoken, yet she hadn't looked at him.

Drogan followed her with his gaze. "Who is that?"

“Who?” Gerard asked.

Before Drogan could explain, Maris beckoned them. He trailed Gerard to his wife and infant daughter, though his gaze lingered on the spot where the lady had been a moment ago.

“Drogan, I’m so glad you came,” Maris said as she took his hand in greeting.

He looked to his friend’s wife with a welcoming smile. Maris wasn’t a great beauty, but her light brown hair, gray eyes, and heart-shaped face had turned Gerard’s head quick enough.

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the king.”

Maris gave him a bright smile and led him to the cradle. “This is stunning. You have much talent in those hands of yours, Drogan of Wolfglynn. Too bad they are used for wielding a sword.”

“Don’t chastise me, my lady. A man must do what he can to survive these times.”

Her bright eyes clouded. “Don’t remind me.”

Drogan hated that he had brought up something so dreadful. He hadn’t meant to. Was he becoming as uncouth as his mother always said he would? Had being a knight for the crown done that to him?

A bell rang loud and clear in the great hall. It took only one toll for the masses to quiet. While he stood beside Maris, Drogan took the time to scan the crowd for the woman. She was here. He knew it.

“What lady has you looking for her? Penelope?” Maris asked.

“Heavens, no,” Drogan said. “I left her with a pack of other young women where I hope she stays.”

“It was kind of you to bring her.”

Drogan shrugged. “I know how it is to be cooped up somewhere you have no wish to be.”

“How long until her father returns for her?”

“I’m not sure that he will.”

“Oh.”

Drogan heard the sadness in Maris’ voice. She would know how Penelope felt since the same thing happened to her.

He listened as Gerard talked of the loyalty of his people and the blessings God had given him in Maris and Jocelyn. There was no mention of the hell they had walked through or the sins that stained their souls, nor would there be. Drogan doubted even Maris knew everything. Some things were better left secret for the safety of all involved.

“And we are fortunate enough,” Gerard said, “to have someone living within our borders who will add her blessing to my daughter.”

Drogan glanced at Gerard, unsure what he meant. He knew Gerard was religious, but shouldn’t a priest perform the blessing instead of a nun?

Drogan heard the gasps of awe and turned to find none other than the mysterious beauty coming toward him. Her steps were unhurried and graceful, as if she floated on air. There was an ethereal glow about her that made him want to reach out and touch her to see if she was real.

The first thing he noticed was her hair. Her head was unadorned, and hair as black as midnight hung to her waist in soft waves. But when she met his gaze and he saw the dark blue of her eyes, he was entranced.

Large, expressive eyes dominated her face. High cheekbones and plump pink lips pulled up in a half-smile, which suggested she knew something others did not, and only added to her delicate loveliness.

He could do little more than stare as she stepped on the dais and walked past him to look into the cradle. His feet moved of their own accord and took him closer to her.

“It is a beautiful cradle, my lord,” she said to Gerard.

He smiled. “It was a gift from Lord Drogan of Wolfglynn.” He faced Drogan. “Drogan, this is Lady Serena.”

Her attention shifted to Drogan. “Please tell your woodworker that he crafted an excellent piece, my lord.”

“You already have.”

Her eyes widened a fraction. “You did this?”

He nodded once.

She moved back to the cradle and ran her hands over the intricately carved wood. “It is magnificent, my lord. You have a special gift.”

He gave her a smile, but wasn’t able to say more as she turned to stand beside Maris. Drogan inhaled and caught a whiff of lilac. Instinctively, he knew it came from Serena.

Serena. The name suited her. It was just as commanding, elegant, and beautiful as she was.

“So, she’s caught your fancy,” Gerard whispered as he moved closer.

Drogan shrugged.

“She isn’t like other women.” The warning in Gerard’s words wasn’t hard to miss.

“How so?”

“That will be for her to share.”

Drogan nodded and shifted his gaze to Serena. She stood next to Maris as they each looked at the sleeping infant. The people in the great hall shuffled about and whispered as they waited.

Serena raised her hands and tilted her head back as she closed her eyes. Drogan saw her lips moving, but couldn’t make out the words no matter how hard he strained. Yet, upon looking at Gerard and Maris, they seemed content in what Serena said over the infant.

It was over as quickly as it began. Serena stepped away from the cradle, and the villagers of Hawthorne began to come forward to offer their gifts to the new daughter of their lord.

When Drogan next looked up, Serena had once again disappeared. He began to walk away when Maris took his arm and led him to a chair beside Gerard's. She pushed him into the chair before smiling at her husband as he accepted the gifts.

"You are wasting your time with Serena," Maris said.

Drogan fought the urge to roll his eyes. "What makes you think I'm even interested?"

"You mean besides the fact you have barely taken your eyes off her?" Maris sighed and sat in Gerard's chair. "I want you to be happy, Drogan. Find a wife and make a family at Wolfglynn, but you will find none of those things with Serena."

"I don't want those things," he said. "They are for some, but not me. You should know that."

"Gerard overcame his nightmares, at least enough to accept me in his life. There is no reason you cannot do the same."

Drogan looked into her gray eyes. "Gerard is lucky to have you."

She laughed and cocked her head to the side. "Ah, but you are trying to change the subject." Her smile vanished. "I warn you we will not see Serena hurt. She is special to us, to Hawthorne."

"What is she?" he had to ask.

A slow smile spread across Maris' face. "Something extraordinary."

"So I am not good enough for her," he teased.

"Not so. If I didn't know her like I do, I would try very hard to match the two of you together."

Drogan laughed. "I'm glad for your happiness, Maris, but, as I said, it isn't for everyone." He stood then. "Now, I'm going to find Penelope and make sure she isn't causing a spectacle."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Donna Grant® has been praised for her “totally addictive” and “unique and sensual” stories.

She’s written more than one hundred novels spanning multiple genres of romance including the bestselling *Dragon Kings*® series that features a thrilling combination of Druids, Fae, and immortal Highlanders who are dark, dangerous, and irresistible. She lives in Texas with her dog and a cat.

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