

THE
CHANNELLER'S
COMPANION

PERFECT MATCH

I. T. LUCAS

The Channeler's Companion

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PERFECT MATCH

VAMPIRE'S CONSORT

KING'S CHOSEN

CAPTAIN'S CONQUEST

THE THIEF WHO LOVED ME

MY MERMAN PRINCE

THE DRAGON KING

MY WEREWOLF ROMEO

THE CHANNELER'S COMPANION

THE VALKYRIE & THE WITCH

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS ORIGINS

1: GODDESS'S CHOICE

2: GODDESS'S HOPE

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS

DARK STRANGER

1: DARK STRANGER THE DREAM

2: DARK STRANGER REVEALED

3: DARK STRANGER IMMORTAL

DARK ENEMY

4: DARK ENEMY TAKEN

5: DARK ENEMY CAPTIVE

6: DARK ENEMY REDEEMED

KRI & MICHAEL'S STORY

6.5: MY DARK AMAZON

DARK WARRIOR

- 7: DARK WARRIOR MINE
- 8: DARK WARRIOR'S PROMISE
- 9: DARK WARRIOR'S DESTINY
- 10: DARK WARRIOR'S LEGACY

DARK GUARDIAN

- 11: DARK GUARDIAN FOUND
- 12: DARK GUARDIAN CRAVED
- 13: DARK GUARDIAN'S MATE

DARK ANGEL

- 14: DARK ANGEL'S OBSESSION
- 15: DARK ANGEL'S SEDUCTION
- 16: DARK ANGEL'S SURRENDER

DARK OPERATIVE

- 17: DARK OPERATIVE: A SHADOW OF DEATH
- 18: DARK OPERATIVE: A GLIMMER OF HOPE
- 19: DARK OPERATIVE: THE DAWN OF LOVE

DARK SURVIVOR

- 20: DARK SURVIVOR AWAKENED
- 21: DARK SURVIVOR ECHOES OF LOVE
- 22: DARK SURVIVOR REUNITED

DARK WIDOW

- 23: DARK WIDOW'S SECRET
- 24: DARK WIDOW'S CURSE
- 25: DARK WIDOW'S BLESSING

DARK DREAM

- 26: DARK DREAM'S TEMPTATION
- 27: DARK DREAM'S UNRAVELING

28: DARK DREAM'S TRAP

DARK PRINCE

29: DARK PRINCE'S ENIGMA

30: DARK PRINCE'S DILEMMA

31: DARK PRINCE'S AGENDA

DARK QUEEN

32: DARK QUEEN'S QUEST

33: DARK QUEEN'S KNIGHT

34: DARK QUEEN'S ARMY

DARK SPY

35: DARK SPY CONSCRIPTED

36: DARK SPY'S MISSION

37: DARK SPY'S RESOLUTION

DARK OVERLORD

38: DARK OVERLORD NEW HORIZON

39: DARK OVERLORD'S WIFE

40: DARK OVERLORD'S CLAN

DARK CHOICES

41: DARK CHOICES THE QUANDARY

42: DARK CHOICES PARADIGM SHIFT

43: DARK CHOICES THE ACCORD

DARK SECRETS

44: DARK SECRETS RESURGENCE

45: DARK SECRETS UNVEILED

46: DARK SECRETS ABSOLVED

DARK HAVEN

47: DARK HAVEN ILLUSION

48: DARK HAVEN UNMASKED

49: DARK HAVEN FOUND

DARK POWER

50: DARK POWER UNTAMED

51: DARK POWER UNLEASHED

52: DARK POWER CONVERGENCE

DARK MEMORIES

53: DARK MEMORIES SUBMERGED

54: DARK MEMORIES EMERGE

55: DARK MEMORIES RESTORED

DARK HUNTER

56: DARK HUNTER'S QUERY

57: DARK HUNTER'S PREY

58: DARK HUNTER'S BOON

DARK GOD

59: DARK GOD'S AVATAR

60: DARK GOD'S REVIVISCENCE

61: DARK GOD DESTINIES CONVERGE

DARK WHISPERS

62: DARK WHISPERS FROM THE PAST

63: DARK WHISPERS FROM AFAR

64: DARK WHISPERS FROM BEYOND

DARK GAMBIT

65: DARK GAMBIT THE PAWN

66: DARK GAMBIT THE PLAY

67: DARK GAMBIT RELIANCE

DARK ALLIANCE

68: DARK ALLIANCE KINDRED SOULS

69: DARK ALLIANCE TURBULENT WATERS

70: [DARK ALLIANCE PERFECT STORM](#)

DARK HEALING

71: [DARK HEALING BLIND JUSTICE](#)

72: [DARK HEALING BLIND TRUST](#)

73: [DARK HEALING BLIND CURVE](#)

DARK ENCOUNTERS

74: [DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE CLOSE KIND](#)

75: [DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE UNEXPECTED KIND](#)

76: [DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE FATED KIND](#)

DARK VOYAGE

77: [Dark Voyage Matters of the Heart](#)

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS SERIES SETS

[BOOKS 1-3: DARK STRANGER TRILOGY](#)—INCLUDES A BONUS
SHORT STORY: **THE FATES TAKE A VACATION**

[BOOKS 4-6: DARK ENEMY TRILOGY](#) —INCLUDES A BONUS
SHORT STORY—**THE FATES' POST-WEDDING CELEBRATION**

[BOOKS 7-10: DARK WARRIOR TETRALOGY](#)

[BOOKS 11-13: DARK GUARDIAN TRILOGY](#)

[BOOKS 14-16: DARK ANGEL TRILOGY](#)

[BOOKS 17-19: DARK OPERATIVE TRILOGY](#)

[BOOKS 20-22: DARK SURVIVOR TRILOGY](#)

[BOOKS 23-25: DARK WIDOW TRILOGY](#)

[BOOKS 26-28: DARK DREAM TRILOGY](#)

[BOOKS 29-31: DARK PRINCE TRILOGY](#)

[BOOKS 32-34: DARK QUEEN TRILOGY](#)

[BOOKS 35-37: DARK SPY TRILOGY](#)

BOOKS 38-40: DARK OVERLORD TRILOGY

BOOKS 41-43: DARK CHOICES TRILOGY

BOOKS 44-46: DARK SECRETS TRILOGY

BOOKS 47-49: DARK HAVEN TRILOGY

BOOKS 50-52: DARK POWER TRILOGY

BOOKS 53-55: DARK MEMORIES TRILOGY

BOOKS 56-58: DARK HUNTER TRILOGY

BOOKS 59-61: DARK GOD TRILOGY

BOOKS 62-64: DARK WHISPERS TRILOGY

BOOKS 65-67: DARK GAMBIT TRILOGY

BOOKS 68-70: DARK ALLIANCE TRILOGY

BOOKS 71-73: DARK HEALING TRILOGY

MEGA SETS

INCLUDE CHARACTER LISTS

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS: BOOKS 1-6

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS: BOOKS 6.5-10

PERFECT MATCH BUNDLE 1

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Contents

1. [Erica](#)
2. [Erica](#)
3. [Erica](#)
4. [Erica](#)
5. [Rand](#)
6. [Erica](#)
7. [Erica](#)
8. [Rand](#)
9. [Rand](#)
10. [Rand](#)
11. [Erica](#)
12. [Erica](#)
13. [Moria](#)
14. [Rand](#)
15. [Moria](#)
16. [Moria](#)
17. [Rand](#)
18. [Moria](#)
19. [Rand](#)
20. [Moria](#)
21. [Rand](#)
22. [Moria](#)
23. [Rand](#)
24. [Moria](#)
25. [Rand](#)
26. [Moria](#)
27. [Rand](#)
28. [Moria](#)
29. [Rand](#)
30. [Moria](#)
31. [Rand](#)
32. [Moria](#)

33. [Moria](#)
34. [Rand](#)
35. [Rand](#)
36. [Moria](#)
37. [Moria](#)
38. [Moria](#)
39. [Moria](#)
40. [Rand](#)
41. [Moria](#)
42. [Moria](#)
43. [Moria](#)
44. [Rand](#)
45. [Moria](#)
46. [Rand](#)
47. [Moria](#)
48. [Rand](#)
49. [Rand](#)
50. [Moria](#)
51. [Rand](#)
52. [Moria](#)
53. [Rand](#)
54. [Rand](#)
55. [Moria](#)
56. [Rand](#)
57. [Moria](#)
58. [Erica](#)
59. [Erica](#)
60. [Rand](#)
61. [Rand](#)
62. [Erica](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[The Perfect Match Series](#)

[The Children of the Gods Series](#)

[FOR EXCLUSIVE PEEKS](#)

Erica



“Your five o’clock appointment is here, Doctor E.” Rosie’s smile and sing-song tone suggested that there was something interesting about the last interviewee of the day, but Erica didn’t have patience for the nurse’s shenanigans.

None of the previous eight candidates she’d interviewed that day had what she was looking for in a physician’s assistant, and Erica crossed her proverbial fingers for the ninth to be the winner. It wasn’t easy to find someone who had experience working with children and could also get along with the rest of the staff in her father’s pediatric medicine clinic.

Correction, it was her clinic now, and she needed to start thinking of herself as the head of the practice her father had spent his life building. He’d been forced into early retirement recently, and that had been a curveball that Erica and the rest of the staff were still reeling from.

“R. Walker, right?” She pretended not to notice Rosie’s hints.

The nurse’s smile turned into a grin. “The one and only.” She licked her lips and waggled her brows to make herself even more obvious.

So, R. Walker was a guy, probably also handsome and single, and Rosie had immediately put him on her running list of eligible bachelors that she wanted Erica to go out with.

The head nurse was on a mission to find her a husband, or at least a boyfriend, and she’d threatened more than once that she wouldn’t retire until Erica found someone to share her life with.

The silly woman didn't realize that was actually a strong incentive for Erica not to find anyone. She would be lost without the head nurse who had run her father's clinic since its inception. She needed Rosie to stay on for at least two more years.

Letting out a sigh, Erica waved her hand. "Please, let him in."

Still grinning like a fiend, Rosie threw the door wide open and gestured for R. Walker to come in.

"Hello," he said as he strode inside with a charming smile that softened the impact of his sheer physical presence and made Erica's pulse run even faster.

The guy was more handsome than any movie star she'd seen lately, and so tall that he probably needed to duck his head and turn sideways when walking through a standard door. Messy blond hair framed his sculpted face, and intelligent blue eyes smiled along with his sensuous lips.

If Erica had imagined her perfect man, it would have been R. Walker, but perhaps a little older.

From his application, she knew he was five years her junior, but he looked even younger.

Damn, I'm in so much trouble.

Pasting on her practiced professional smile, Erica rose to her feet and offered him her hand. "Good afternoon. I'm Doctor Jones, or Doctor E as everyone here calls me."

"I'm Rand." He took her hand in his enormous paw with surprising gentleness, but the effect was shocking, nonetheless. "Rand Walker." He let go of her hand almost as soon as he took it.

Had he felt it too?

That electrical current that had passed between them?

"Rand?" Erica's knees felt a little wobbly as she sat back down, but she kept her facial features schooled. "That's an unusual name." And it was also a safe topic to start the interview with.

The other questions circling in her head were along the lines of how did a PA look like a linebacker? Did he bench press ambulances in his free time?

Rand sat in the chair across from her desk, or rather squeezed into it, dwarfing it even though it was adult sized. “My parents are great fans of *The Wheel of Time*. Hence the name.” He smiled sheepishly. “That’s why I always put R. Walker on applications. I don’t want people to get the wrong idea about me.” He shifted, trying to get comfortable. “After all, we are in Los Angeles, and I have been accused of changing my name and trying to look like the character in the books.”

It never would have occurred to her that his impressive looks were anything but a gift, but it sounded as if they were also a hindrance. People in his age group had probably never read the books, but they were likely to have seen the television series, and R. Walker would have been a much better fit for the role than the actor who’d been chosen to play Rand al’Thor.

“That’s on them, Rand. I think it’s a beautiful name, and it fits you well.”

He grinned. “Are you a fan of the series?”

“I read the books years ago and then again when they announced the television show. Now I also watch the series. I love *The Wheel of Time*. But even if I didn’t, I would have thought that you looked like a Rand.”

“Which do you like better, the books or the television series?” Rand asked.

“I like them both. They are so different, though.” It was a topic she could talk about for hours, but it was a job interview, not a social call.

“I know.” Rand grimaced. “At first, I didn’t like their choice for Rand, but he grew on me.”

Erica nodded. “Yeah. He’s so young, but then Rand starts really young in the books, so the casting was appropriate.”

He smiled and leaned forward, suddenly much too close to her. “Who’s your favorite character?”

“Moiraine, of course.”

“That’s not at all obvious. All the leading female characters are awesome.” He leaned even closer. “Who is your favorite out of the male characters?” Rand’s eyes glimmered with mischief.

Well, mischief was the wrong word. Male interest was more like it, but Erica couldn’t play along.

Not if she intended to hire the guy.

“Lan al’Mandragoran,” she said. “I also love the actor they chose to play his role. He’s precisely like I imagined him when I read the books.”

Rand looked disappointed. Did he think she would say that his namesake was her favorite?

The truth was that he wasn’t. How could he be?

Rand al’Thor loved three women at once. Min was his best friend, Elayne was the one he admired, and Aviendha was the one who challenged him.

Erica could never be one of three to her man. She would be everything to him or nothing at all.

Erica



Two weeks later.

“It looks beautiful.” Erica scanned the clinic’s waiting room. “So festive. Thank you, Rosie. You’ve outdone yourself.”

“You’re welcome, Doctor E.” The head nurse pushed out her ample chest. “But it wasn’t just me. Everyone has pitched in.”

They had, but Rosie had organized everything with the same efficiency and attention to detail she put into everything—her friendly smile never wavering no matter what.

The refreshments table was stacked with healthy snacks and juice boxes for the kids while the parents could enjoy something with a little fizz.

“Snacks—check,” Rosie said while lifting one finger. “Toys and books—check. Hand sanitizer—check. Enough seating for all the parents—check.” She looked at Erica. “I think we’re ready.”

Erica squeezed Rosie’s hand. “Have we forgotten anything?”

“Only the hot new guy we’re supposed to introduce to the parents.” Rosie cocked her head with the halo of white curls to offer a crooked half-smile.

Erica hoped she wasn’t blushing, but just in case she was, she pulled her phone from her coat pocket so she could look down at the screen instead into the nurse’s knowing eyes. “Rand sent me a text to let me know that he’s stuck in traffic. There was a multi-car accident on the freeway. I just hope he arrives in

time for his formal introduction.” She pulled up the speech she’d prepared and showed it to Rosie. “I’ll start with explaining Dad’s unexpected retirement and the change of leadership, and if need be, I’ll ask you and the rest of the staff to entertain the parents with anecdotes from the past until Rand arrives.”

“Don’t worry, honey.” Rosie squeezed Erica’s shoulder. “You’re going to do great. The parents all know you and trust you with the health of their children. It’s not like you are a new face. You’ve been working here for over two years, and as for running the place, we’re a team. Always have been. When one of us stumbles, the others pick ‘em back up.”

“Thank you. What would I have done without you?”

The nurse patted her back. “You would have been fine without me.”

Erica wanted to share Rosie’s confidence, but she doubted she would have lasted more than two days without her. The head nurse took everything in stride, and she was indispensable. In fact, she could probably run the clinic herself, and the only reason she wouldn’t be allowed to was that she wasn’t a physician.

Rosie was the longest-serving staff member and had an encyclopedic knowledge of the young patients and their parents. She had been Erica’s father’s most trusted employee, and she and her family had been so intertwined with his that when Erica was a child, she’d thought that Rosie’s two daughters were her cousins. They had practically grown up together.

Erica counted her blessings that Rosie hadn’t taken the opportunity to retire when her father had, and she suspected she had passed on that only because Erica needed her support. But it wasn’t just Rosie who had made the transition smooth.

Her father had built up a practice with a cohesive team of capable people who cared about its success and believed in the good it was doing. The nurses, Rosie and Greg, had decades of experience working with children. Shelby managed the front desk, scheduling appointments and reminding parents to bring

their children in for vaccinations and checkups. Her grandchildren were patients, as her children had been before that. Bernadette, who did the cleaning, did an incredible job at keeping the place spotless, and on top of that, she was a great source of gossip regarding the entire medical center. She kept the team up to date on news and scandals alike.

Erica couldn't have asked for a better foundation as she stepped into her new role as the head of Cornerstone Pediatrics, a thriving practice with far too many patients for her to take care of on her own.

Hopefully, she hadn't made a mistake by hiring an inexperienced Physician Assistant fresh out of school.

Out of all the people she'd interviewed for the job, Rand Walker was the one who had reminded her the most of her father, in the sense that he'd been born to be a healthcare provider, and that's why she'd hired him.

It wasn't because he was a six-foot-four, blond, blue-eyed hunk of a man with a smile that could disarm the devil himself. If anything, his looks had worked against him, not for him. He would be a distraction, Erica had no doubt about that, but she also knew that the patients would love him.

Rand was empathic, loved children, and had the patience of a saint.

He was a great addition to the staff.

The problem was that for the past two weeks, he had also starred in every one of Erica's fantasies, but there was absolutely nothing she could do about turning those fantasies into reality, because Rand Walker was forbidden fruit.

Erica



As her patients and their families started to pour in, Erica squared her shoulders and smiled.

Time to get my game face on.

She circulated, greeting everyone enthusiastically and thanking them for coming.

The kids immediately gravitated toward the train set, dollhouse, and fish tank by the back wall, while the parents gathered around the wine and cheese table. Since many of her patients attended the same school, their parents shared garden parties and barbecues, and the conversations were easy and upbeat.

Waiting for the stragglers to arrive, Erica allowed a few minutes for her guests to catch up on the neighborhood gossip and exchange amusing anecdotes about their children.

When the buzz of conversation died down, she lifted her hand to get their attention.

“Thank you all so much for coming. Please, take your seats.”

Just then her phone vibrated in her pocket, but she ignored it, assuming it was Rand updating her on his expected time of arrival.

“First, I want to express my appreciation for your continued support as Cornerstone moves into a new phase after my father’s retirement.” She scanned the smiling faces of parents, and her anxiety lifted.

They seemed to like her and approve of her.

“Doctor Jones was the best!” someone said.

“I know.” Erica nodded. “And he’s a tough act to follow, but I’m going to do my best to make my father proud.”

She reiterated the office’s principles, the value that they placed on caring for the whole child and supporting parents at every stage. She then assured them that opening hours and home visits would not change.

As Erica was summing up, Rand slipped through the entrance doors, and her stupid heart skipped a beat. For a long moment, she stared at his slightly flushed, gorgeous face.

She found it physically impossible to tear her eyes away from that smile. His whole face beamed like sunlight, warming and perfect.

“Doctor E?” Rosie nudged her arm, forcing Erica’s brain to jolt back online.

She wondered how long she’d been standing there silently with her mouth open and drooling. “Yes, where was I.” She smiled apologetically. “I assure you that the high standards of care you’ve come to expect from Cornerstone Pediatrics will be maintained. I know that many of you are wondering how I will manage to provide you with the care you are accustomed to on my own. To address your concern, I would like to introduce the newest addition to our staff. My assistant, Rand Walker.”

She smiled and extended her hand to Rand, who was leaning against the wall at the other end of the room.

As people swiveled in their chairs to watch him make his way to her, Erica hoped her face wasn’t flushed.

I haven’t had a crush like this since my first year of med school.

“Hello.” Rand waved and smiled at the kids and then shifted his gaze to the parents.

“Mr. Walker has just graduated from Yale’s School of Medicine Physician Associate program at the top of his class, and before that, he worked for several years as a paramedic, so

he has a lot of hands-on experience. He's going to be helping me with your wonderful kiddos. We're really excited to have him on board." Erica gestured toward him. "Rand, will you please tell our guests a little about yourself?"

"Of course." He smiled at the audience.

Several people shifted in their seats, two of the moms started playing with their hair, and one shamelessly batted her eyelashes at him.

Back off, ladies. He's mine... well, my employee, but I will not allow my assistant to be sexually harassed by the mothers of my patients.

Listening to him introduce himself was like reading an ideal dating profile. He was just too good to be true.

How dare he volunteer at a horse rescue center every weekend?

The man was charm personified.

"My favorite show is *The Wheel of Time*, of course." He chuckled. "I like the books too. They're my parents' favorites, which is why they named me after the main character."

"Could have been worse," one of the guys said. "Be grateful they didn't name you Bilbo."

Rand's laugh started in his belly, natural, good-humored, and completely unforced, even though he had probably heard similar jibes throughout his life. "I think my mom would have pushed for Aragorn. Either way, I'm happy with Rand."

Totally perfect.

Erica swallowed an inward groan. *I'm so screwed.*

Erica



To Erica's relief, she felt comfortable in Rand's company, and it wasn't long before they fell into an easy rhythm while working together. Most of her patients had opted to keep her as their primary doctor, but incoming patients were more than happy to be seen by him, secure in the knowledge that Erica oversaw any treatment and regularly checked his charts. He helped the nurses with routine tasks like vaccinations, eye and hearing tests, and he was a natural when it came to dealing with babies. New moms swooned in his presence, and it was clear their dizziness wasn't caused by anemia or low blood sugar. He charmed them all and seemed to take everything in his stride. So, it surprised Erica when he asked for her help.

It was late afternoon on a Friday, and she was with her last patient of the week. Rand knocked on the treatment room door.

"Doctor E? I need your help with something."

"I'll be right there," she called before turning her attention back to her patient, a sixteen-year-old boy with a nasty case of ringworm. "Your mom can get this filled at the pharmacy." She handed him the prescription. "But it's important to step back from the wrestling team."

"I'm varsity this year!" he whined.

"I know, but it's spread through contact, and your coach won't let you compete with ringworm. Covering it isn't enough to prevent transmission," Erica said, firmly but not without

sympathy. “We’ll check it again in six weeks. In the meantime, keep training on your own and use the medication. Hopefully, you can step back in before the season ends. Okay?”

“Okay,” he murmured, looking glum.

She patted his shoulder. “You got this, Bryson. Let me know if you experience any side effects with that pill. We can try something else if you do.”

“Thanks, Doctor Jones.”

“You’re welcome.”

As Erica opened the door, she saw Rand pacing the corridor. He stopped when he caught her eye and gazed at her with an expression of pure relief. The moment Bryson left the treatment room, he bounded inside.

“Thank God.” Rand took a deep breath.

Uh-oh. “What’s wrong?” Erica asked.

“I don’t know the right song to calm Jamie.”

Jamie was an older patient with developmental delays who lived with his grandmother.

“Didn’t his grandma bring him? Charlene Khoury?”

“No. He’s with a different caregiver, and she doesn’t know the song either.” Rand looked distressed. “He refuses to let me get close until I sing the song, and I didn’t want to force anything. I’d have asked Rosie, but she’s gone for the day, and—”

“It’s okay.” Erica lifted a hand. “I’ve got this.”

She headed for the other treatment room and did a shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits knock on the door before entering. “Hi, Jamie,” Erica said as she stepped into the room. “It’s so nice to see you again.”

“Hi,” Jamie mumbled.

His caregiver, a young woman with bright purple hair, glanced at Erica anxiously.

“Are you here for your regular checkup?” Erica asked.

“Yeah.”

“Great! That’s the best bit, making sure you’re growing healthy and strong, don’t you agree?”

Jamie peered at her through long brown bangs. “Yeah... if I get the song.”

“That’s my favorite part of your visits.” Erica smiled at the boy. “Do you want me to start?”

“Yeah... Please.”

“Okay.” She cleared her throat theatrically before launching into a solo of ‘You Are My Sunshine.’ Halfway through the refrain, Jamie hummed along. After a few repetitions, he sat up straight and let Erica move closer.

Each new verse told Jamie what to expect. “We’re taking your blood pressure, it’s just your blood pressure,” as Erica wrapped the band around his arm and filled it with air. “Let’s see your eyes, your big brown eyes,” as the ophthalmoscope moved closer.

Soon the physical was completed.

“Great job, Jamie,” Erica said as she noted down a few numbers on his chart. “I think that deserves some stickers.”

He perked up. “Stickers?”

“At least two,” Erica confirmed. “Let’s go pick some out, okay?”

She was rewarded with huge smiles from Jamie and his purple-haired caregiver.

Two glow-in-the-dark stickers later, Jamie left the clinic humming happily, and Shelby flipped over the sign on the glass door to indicate that they were closed.

“Good job, folks!” Shelby said as she turned to look at Rand. “Are you okay? You look a little dazed.”

When Erica spun on her sneakers to face him, he stared at her with his jaw slack and his mouth slightly open.

What... was there something on her face?

Not drool...

Please, not drool...

Her cheeks getting warm, Erica wiped her mouth self-consciously.

Rand snapped his mouth shut. “No, I’m fine, really,” he said with a smile firmly in place, but averting his gaze to avoid hers. “I’m just impressed. You have a great singing voice, Doctor E.”

Afraid that if she looked at Rand he would read the longing in her eyes, the hopeless desire she’d spent the past weeks tamping down, Erica stared at a fascinating streak on the window and murmured, “You should hear my ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star’.”

“I would love to,” he said with such an earnest tone that Erica was forced to look at him.

Shelby stifled what sounded like a laugh.

“I mean... wow, five o’clock.” Rand rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “It’s time to get out of here.” He turned around and walked away.

As Erica gazed at the broad shoulders, trim waist, and high buttocks of his retreating form, nascent thoughts of asking him out for a friendly drink fizzled in her mind. “You did great work this week, and I hope you have a fun weekend,” she called after him.

“Thanks, you too,” he replied before disappearing into the break room to grab his things.

Erica pouted at Shelby, who had given up trying to disguise her laughter. “What?”

“Oh, honey.” Shelby put her hands on her hips. “Surely you don’t need me to say it.”

“Say what?”

Shelby stared at Erica for a long moment. “Oh, you’re serious. Huh. Well... don’t worry about it. You’ll figure it out.” She wiggled her hips playfully as she strode toward the break room.

Rand



Rand slammed the door to his condo behind him, threw his keys into a bowl, and covered his face with his hands.

“Holy crap.”

How could one woman be so incredibly sexy, highly intelligent, and endearingly cute at the same time?

Erica Jones was adorable from the tips of those stray blonde curls that escaped her otherwise neat bun, to her *My Little Pony* scrubs. She exuded innocence and childlike wonder.

He chuckled when he thought about her neon-green stethoscope and the way she pretended it was a ray gun, making “pew-pew” noises to entertain her little patients.

Cute, adorable, and impossibly hot.

Try as he might, Rand couldn’t stop thinking about the way her slender curves had looked in the fitted slacks and sleeveless silk blouse she’d worn at the reception. It had been the first time he had seen her in anything other than scrubs, and the attraction he’d felt before had turned into a full-blown obsession.

Hell, who was he kidding?

He’d been obsessed with her since the day of his interview, when her cherubic face creased into the warmest and most genuine smile he had ever seen.

From that night on, Erica Jones had starred in every one of his erotically charged dreams.

But it was complicated.

She was not the plaything of his fantasies or a figment of his imagination; she was an excellent physician, a child-whisperer, and trickiest of all—his boss.

The head nurse had been throwing hints the size of boulders his way, commenting on Erica having no life outside the clinic and not having gone on a date in months.

But Rosie wouldn't be the one to lose her job if Rand made the wrong move.

As far as Rand could determine from scouring the clinic's documents, there was no definitive no-dating-in-the-workplace policy at Cornerstone Pediatrics, but that was probably because such a situation hadn't arisen before. The staff had known each other for years, and there had been no reason to draft a document dealing with workplace relationships.

Grabbing last night's leftovers from the fridge, Rand heated them up in the microwave, turned on the television, and clicked on a well-loved episode of *The Wheel of Time*. Perhaps the ambient noise of the show would distract him or at least soften the buzz of his whirling thoughts.

He really liked Erica, but with all the student loan debt he was carrying, he couldn't afford to lose this job. She was fond of him, he was well aware of that, but there was a big difference between fondness and attraction, and Rand didn't know whether she liked him in the same way he liked her, and even if she did, they both knew that she was out of his league.

If he asked her out, she might show him the door, and even if she didn't, the working environment would become intolerable, and he would be forced to resign.

Still, he couldn't keep going like this. He had to know whether she reciprocated his feelings.

Damn, maybe he should just wait until he'd been there for a year. Then, if she wasn't interested and things became awkward, he could look for another job without leaving a big red flag on his résumé.

Fierce growls drew him out of his thoughts.

Trollocs were attacking Emond's Field, and as Rand watched the Winternight battle playing out and Moiraine defeating her enemies like an absolute badass, he realized that she reminded him of Erica even though on the surface they had nothing in common.

Erica might not be able to create fireballs and manipulate the weather like Moiraine did, but they were both healers, diplomats, and badasses who were dedicated to their chosen causes, facing seemingly impossible challenges with uncommon poise and grace.

Erica's sure hand and charm while dealing with her patients, their parents, and the staff was admirable and inspiring. She was the best doctor Rand had had the opportunity to work with. Neither his teachers nor the people he'd met during internships came close.

Other PAs would kill for the kind of job he had at Cornerstone, metaphorically speaking, of course.

He had to put aside his romantic feelings for Erica and focus on the work at least for a while. Once they were more comfortable with each other, things might change, and if he got really lucky, she would be the one to initiate.

Erica



The weight of the world crushed her, darkness swamped her, and tension as thick as glue mired her limbs. No matter how desperately she battled against it, she could not escape, and could barely breathe.

Everyone was counting on her, and everything depended on her. It was so exhausting, and there was no respite on the horizon.

No rest from the responsibility.

A hand reached through the darkness, and gentle fingers stroked her cheek, traced the curve of her ear, trailed down the arch of her neck, and smoothed over her shoulder and down her arm before resting on her hand. Everywhere they touched her, a tingly warmth spread.

“Let me help you.” A face materialized in the darkness. A handsome face. “Allow me to ease your burden.” The face sharpened—green eyes, auburn hair, and a tender smile that warmed her heart. “Give me the power to protect you, if only for a little while.” He gently held on to her hand, waiting for permission to pull her free.

Erica tightened her grip, but instead of a hand, she was clasping something soft, something made from fabric covering feathers.

Her eyes flew open, and she sat up in bed.

“Meow!” Her feline bedmate complained loudly about his sleep being interrupted.

“Oh shush, Mr. Whiskers,” she muttered and rested her forehead in her hands.

Her real-life problems had infiltrated her dreams, and her treacherous mind had produced a slightly altered Rand Walker, with green eyes and auburn hair, as the solution.

Not a big surprise.

He was doing a great job, and in the month since he'd joined her team, Rand had become essential to the smooth running of the office, someone all the young patients and their parents looked forward to seeing. He was friendly, gentle, funny, good-looking, and Erica was the only one who found it difficult to spend much time in his presence.

Why?

Because she wanted what she couldn't have.

Making a move on Rand had sexual harassment written all over it. The guy was too young, too handsome, and there was no way he was interested in an overworked older woman who clearly hadn't visited a beauty salon in two years.

He could do so much better than her.

As her alarm beeped, Erica sighed and grabbed her phone to shut it off. There was a new message from her mom. *Treatment is going well. We should be able to come home in another three weeks.*

Her parents were in Heidelberg, Germany, where Dad was receiving experimental treatments for the brain cancer that had forced his early retirement at the age of sixty-two. He loved being a physician and working with children, but standard chemo wasn't enough, and his energy levels were depleted. He couldn't handle the workload.

Stepping up to fill the void was natural for Erica. She'd been working with her father for over two years, and she loved it, but the weight of everyone's expectations lay heavy on her shoulders.

The constant battles with insurance companies, the mountain of bills to pay, the extra expenses related to her father's care—

there was a lot to deal with, perhaps too much for one person to manage.

But what choice did she have?

Her brother had a family and children to support. He had no time to shoulder more than a tiny fraction of the burden.

They all thought she could handle it, and most days she believed she could, but some days she was on the verge of breaking down. Still, she never let her mask slip.

The bright spot was Rand, and when Erica wasn't wallowing in her desperate infatuation with him, he made her feel better about everything.

A light in the darkness.

To forget her problems, all she needed was a whiff of his scent or to get lost in the depths of his blue eyes. He was also shouldering a big portion of the patient care, easing her load and giving her room to breathe.

Bottom line, Erica couldn't afford to lose Rand, which meant she couldn't allow her crush to send him running for the hills.

Rand would have to remain a fantasy—

Now, that was a thought.

Erica chuckled.

She could create an avatar based on Rand and book a session in Perfect Match Virtual Studios. Maybe change things up just a bit by giving him green eyes and auburn hair. Of course, it wouldn't really be him, just some random guy who the program matched her with, but perhaps the experience would be close enough to scratch her itch.

It wouldn't be the first time Erica had used the service. She'd already splurged on three virtual adventures, but she hadn't told anyone at the clinic about it, and definitely not her family. Even though it was the perfect solution for a busy professional who didn't have time to date in the real world, it was a little pathetic that the only dates she'd gone on recently had been virtual.

With her busy schedule, a session at Perfect Match Studios was her only way to get a romantic vacation. In the span of three hours, Erica could live weeks in the virtual world, having the time of her life with a perfect guy, or as perfect as the program could match her with.

She had been doubtful about the technology when she'd first heard about it, but after reading the glowing reviews and checking the studio's safety protocols, she'd decided to give it a try.

The reviews had barely scratched the surface of the experience, and the adventures she'd gone on were all fabulous. Her partners, though, hadn't been the perfect fit the service promised, and she hadn't requested to meet any of them in the real world.

It wasn't the program's fault, though. Erica had painted her ideal partner in very broad strokes because, before meeting Rand, she hadn't known precisely what she wanted. Given what the program had to work with, it had done a decent job pairing her with interesting, sexy men.

This time around, though, things would be different. Her ideal partner would be modeled on Rand, so the fit should be much better.

Still, the real guy on the other side of the virtual connection wouldn't be Rand or even close.

But wait, what if her virtual partner was Rand?

Anonymity was guaranteed, and Erica could create an avatar for herself that looked nothing like her. Rand wouldn't even have to know that he was matched with her.

Okay, calm down and think this through.

She couldn't just give him a Perfect Match gift certificate and say, "See ya there!" That would definitely count as workplace sexual harassment.

But what if she planned things so he won the gift card in an office draw? It could be a new, monthly tradition for her employees to choose one person as the employee of the month.

Everyone in the clinic loved Rand, and the staff would no doubt vote for him, and if she recruited Rosie as her co-conspirator, they could make sure that Rand got the certificate.

The certificate was not transferable, and the sessions cost a small fortune, so there was no way he would not use it. The trick would be to get matched with him.

With thousands of clients on the Perfect Match Virtual Studios database, it was a long shot, but Erica knew how to tip the odds in her favor.

Erica



Erica encountered her first stumbling block when she pored over the Perfect Match website and found nothing that resembled a *Wheel of Time* adventure. There were plenty of fantasy settings, but most of them were fairly generic.

“Be a werewolf prowling the streets of nineteenth-century London!”

“Be a vampire hunter chasing down the children of the night in medieval Transylvania!”

“Be a queen and rule your devoted subjects with the aid of a magical menagerie!”

“Be the king of a nation at war and lead your soldiers into battle against the beast-men of the Wastes!”

Some of them looked interesting, but Erica couldn't leave it to chance. Could she custom build the perfect scenario?

Her first step was calling Perfect Match to check if they could accommodate her idea. She'd always used their pre-made adventures before, but she knew that they also offered customization. The question was whether she could ask for something so specific, especially since there might be copyright issues with using a popular story.

Then again, the service offered several *Star Trek* style adventures, so they must have solved that problem or somehow worked around it.

“Absolutely no problem at all. We do that sort of thing all the time,” the assistant said cheerfully. “You’d be amazed at how many people want to visit Middle Earth or spend a day in Narnia. We can definitely set you up in The Unnamed Land.”

“That would be amazing,” Erica said.

“Of course! Are there any particular details you want to arrange in advance, or would you prefer to leave the specifics up to us? Will you be bringing along a partner for the adventure, or shall we provide a match?”

“Hmm. Well, that’s the thing...”

Would they think she was weird or a dangerous stalker if she asked them to add the option to their website for a week or so, just long enough to give Rand a chance to choose it? She had to try. Erica explained what she wanted, and the woman was quiet for a moment.

“I hope you realize that we can’t just put you together if you’re not a genuine match,” she said almost apologetically.

“I know. I’m just trying to tip the odds a little in my favor. To quote Thomas Jefferson, I’m a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work the more I have of it.”

The woman chuckled. “How true. I hope that you are right, and your guy will be enticed by the type of adventure and the avatar you create. Other than that, there is nothing more we can do to enhance your chances.”

“I totally understand.” Erica sighed. “If he doesn’t pick the same experience or our profiles don’t work together, then it is probably not meant to be.”

“The best I can do is add the concept to the list of our standard adventures, so that other people have the opportunity to choose it. That will make it easily available to your guy, but it might also entice other fans of those kinds of fantasy stories. You understand that we can’t make it exactly like the show or the books.”

“Of course. In the style of the story is good enough.”

“Just out of curiosity, and you don’t have to answer if you are not comfortable sharing. Which character do you want to be?”

Erica was silent for a moment while she considered. “Are you familiar with the character of Moiraine?”

“I watch the show, so yes. I’m familiar with all the characters.”

“I’d like to be like her. Someone powerful, but subject to things greater than herself. And I’d like his character to be either equally or more powerful.”

“You want him to be Rand?”

Erica stifled a chuckle. She hadn’t told the experience coordinator the name of the person she wished to partner with. Yeah, she wanted him to be Rand, the real one, not the one from the story.

“Perhaps a mix between Rand and Lan.”

The woman laughed. “I get it. Make sure to put as much detail as you can when you fill out the questionnaire. The more you put in, the more the artificial intelligence has to work with and the better your experience will be, with your guy or with someone else. Who knows? Maybe there is a better match for you out there?”

“I doubt it, but thank you so much for your advice.”

After ending the call, Erica resisted the urge to scream into a pillow to relieve the tension.

She prayed that her plan would turn out well and that their mutual attraction wasn’t a figment of her imagination.

The experience coordinator at Perfect Match was right. If Rand chose her *Wheel of Time* experience and she matched with him, fantastic. If it didn’t work out, she wouldn’t lose anything because he wasn’t the right guy for her after all.

They would both have an amazing experience with someone else and continue working together without any awkwardness or discomfort.

The idea that Rand might not want to use the Perfect Match gift certificate flitted across her mind, but Erica dismissed it quickly. Rand wouldn't turn down the opportunity to live out a fantasy like that.

He was making good money as a PA, but with the amount of student debt he carried, it would be a long time before he could afford to splurge on something as frivolous as a virtual adventure.

She just hoped he was as big a fan of *The Wheel of Time* as he seemed, and that he wouldn't decide to save the certificate for some future time.

In fact, she should add a stipulation that the gift card had to be redeemed within two weeks.

Rand



When the clinic closed Friday evening, Rand changed into the outfit he'd spent the entire week choosing and drove his red Prius past the sprawling suburbs to the outskirts of town where his GPS told him to turn right.

Erica had invited the staff to an office party which was not being held in the office, but at her home.

At the end of a paved driveway, he parked outside a large and beautiful modern villa beside a lake. He knew this area well. It was near the stables, and he regularly rode around the lake on weekends. He had admired this house from a distance and wondered what sort of person could afford to live here. Two of its walls were almost entirely glass, and it made him cringe to imagine the heating bill, but he couldn't deny that the view was spectacular. Was this where Erica lived?

As he rang the doorbell, Erica opened the door, wearing an emerald-green silk blouse and a pair of white linen pants.

She looked stunning.

"Rand!" She held the door open and ushered him inside. "I'm so glad you were able to make it."

"I wouldn't miss it. It's a new tradition, after all."

That was how Erica had described the event when she invited everyone on Monday. A new tradition to celebrate the team's hard work. She had hinted at a surprise, and he was intrigued to find out what it was. More importantly, it meant he would see her minus the scrubs, ubiquitous throughout the working week.

He would not have missed this for the world.

“Not entirely new,” Rosie said from further down the hall.

Rand followed Erica to the lounge area where the white-haired lead nurse sat on a massive and very comfortable looking sofa, holding a glass of white wine.

“Doctor Jones senior had monthly staff dinners like this, but they ended a few years ago when he first got the cancer diagnosis.” Rosie suddenly looked sheepish. “Oh, I’m sorry, Erica, I shouldn’t have said that.”

Erica shrugged. “Dad hasn’t made a secret of it.” She glanced at Rand, a smile widening her cupid’s-bow mouth. “This is my parents’ house. They’re abroad right now, so I stop by to water the plants and check on everything. When I mentioned the party, my mother suggested holding it here. She designed this place for entertaining. Did you have any trouble finding us?”

So, it wasn’t her home. Rand had wondered how a young doctor could afford a place like this.

“Not at all.” He smiled. “The rescue center is on the other side of the lake, so I’m well familiar with the area. It’s beautiful.”

He admired the bespoke architecture. The open-concept design of the ground floor was perfect for entertaining. There was a natural flow between the kitchen, dining, and lounge areas, and it would not have felt cramped even with fifty guests. The floor was hardwood, polished and immaculately clean. The sofas were covered with a comfortable, worn-in leather—high-end pieces that had seen a lifetime of love.

The dining table was laden with cardboard boxes. Shelby and Bernadette were busy taking containers out of them, and the smells were delicious.

“Thai food,” Shelby said with an appreciative sigh. “My favorite.”

“Next time, I’m cooking,” Bernadette insisted. “I’ll make an Italian spread that’ll knock your socks off.”

“Where’s Greg?” Rand asked, looking around for the other nurse.

“Oh, his youngest has the flu,” Erica said. “He decided to stay home. I sent food to his house instead, so he and his wife don’t have to worry about cooking for a day or so.”

“That’s...” *sweet*. “Really nice of you.”

You’re perfect.

Erica’s leadership style was something else. It was so far above and beyond the attitudes of bosses Rand had worked with before. She was incomparable.

While Shelby and Bernadette transferred the disposable takeout trays to chafing dishes, Erica gave him a guided tour of the house.

There were five large bedrooms upstairs, and they finished the tour in Erica’s childhood bedroom.

“It’s not very interesting,” she warned him. “My parents use it as a guest room for my brother’s kids now, mostly.”

Erica’s mother’s eye for design was apparent here too. The feminine and masculine elements blended seamlessly, and no child would feel out of place in the room. On top of the double bed was a comforter decorated with a galaxy scene. The lilac and gray walls were covered with shelves. Some held trophies and bric-a-brac, but most of them were filled with books. His eyes were immediately drawn to *The Wheel of Time* series on the shelf nearest the bed.

Erica smiled sheepishly. “I did mention that I’m a fan, right?”

“But your books are here, in your childhood room. Why didn’t you take them with you?” Rand teased.

“I have another complete set at my place.” Erica took one of the books off the shelf and smoothed her hand over the well-worn cover. “Plus, a third set in audio format, so *ha*, Mr. Rand Walker, you can’t shame me over my one true love.”

“I would never want to.” *Oops, was that too sincere?* “I mean, I get it. I have more than one copy of some of them myself.”

He was slowly replacing his paperbacks with hardcovers so they would last longer.

As the tension suddenly grew and the electrical current between them started to sizzle, Erica cleared her throat. “We should head back down. Dinner is probably ready.”

She looked uncomfortable.

“Yeah.” Rand slouched and slumped his shoulders, trying to make himself seem smaller.

He knew that his sheer size was intimidating, and he hated making people uncomfortable around him—Erica in particular.

She should never feel threatened by him, only protected.

Rand



Dinner was delicious and the company excellent. Rand already knew Rosie and Shelby fairly well, but he was pleasantly surprised to discover what a firecracker Bernadette could be. By the time they had finished eating, his sides ached from laughing so hard.

“—so I told him, fine! Eat this! And I slapped it down on his plate and walked away.” Bernadette leaned back with an air of satisfaction as Shelby and Erica howled. Rosie rolled her eyes. “And he never bothered me about cooking his mother’s pasta again, I can tell you that.”

“Last time it was making her lasagna,” Rosie drawled.

Bernadette shrugged. “Eh, lasagna, pasta, I make so much food for that ungrateful husband of mine that it’s hard to keep track.”

“Okay, okay.” Erica held up a hand as she caught her breath. “I actually had an agenda when I invited you all here tonight. Let’s get the business part out of the way.”

“Is the business... doing well?” Rand asked, suddenly terrified that the dinner might be a way to soften the blow of being let go.

“Oh, it’s doing very well,” Erica assured him. “Better than before you started. Don’t worry. Everyone’s jobs are safe.” She must have read the panic in his eyes. “I just wanted to say that in addition to these monthly dinners, I want to start a new tradition.” Her voice quavered as if she was nervous, and

Rand's chest tightened. "At each of these dinners, one of you will be named Employee of the Month."

"Does this privilege come with a better parking space?" Rosie asked. "Because my sciatica is killing me lately."

"Sorry, I'm not a miracle worker." Erica smiled apologetically. "But it does come with a gift certificate for a wonderful mini-vacation in the Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy Studios. A three-hour session in the real world translates to two weeks or more in the virtual one. That way I can send you off on a vacation without having you miss even one day of work."

Erica had said all of that so quickly and breathlessly that it took a moment for Rand to process what she'd said. When he understood, he immediately perked up.

Perfect Match reviews were all over the internet. He'd read about their incredibly realistic experiences and was intrigued. He was desperate to try it, but the price tag was more than what he lived on for an entire month, so it was prohibitive for most people.

"Is this a dating service?" Bernadette asked. "Because my Duncan might have a problem with that."

"Not at all." Erica shifted in her chair, looking uncomfortable. "Some use the services to get matched with a partner, but many use it just for the adventure aspect. You can try things that you never would have dared to do in real life, like skydiving, or spelunking, or joining a space mission. The possibilities are endless." She pulled an envelope from the purse that was hanging on her chair. "I honestly think all of you deserve this. Each one of you plays a vital role, and I couldn't run Cornerstone Pediatrics without any one of you. I originally planned on having you vote on who would get the certificate each month, but since our staff is small, I realized that it would make more sense to just rotate it between you." She looked at Rand. "You haven't been with us for long, but you are an amazing addition to our staff, and I hope you stay at Cornerstone for many years to come." She glanced at the other employees. "I hope you don't mind that I chose Rand to go first." She smiled. "After what he went through with the

Wong triplets today, I felt like I needed to give him an incentive to stay with us and not look for an easier job.”

As everyone laughed and clapped, Rand took the envelope.

“Thank you.” He peered inside. “It was so well worth it to get peed on, bitten, and puked on.” He pulled out the gift certificate to Perfect Match. “I’m really excited about this. I’ll set it up this weekend.” A thought occurred to him, and he turned to Erica. “Do I need to bring a partner with me, someone to share the experience with?”

“No.” Erica shook her head vigorously. “They can match you to someone in their database. They have a lot of great experiences on offer, so make sure you take your time and pick the one you like best.” She held his gaze while she spoke, and those gorgeous hazel eyes whispered to his soul.

Was there an extra layer of meaning to her statement or was that wishful thinking?

Rand



Rand had never been so excited to visit a website before. It was one thing to look around casually; it was another to scour the options, hoping to find a secret code from Erica, something she meant for him to find, something that might appeal to both of them on a different level.

Sure, the jungle adventure sounded fun, and he could totally go for the spy thing—oh, and they had a variation of the spy theme set in space. Holy crap! And space pirates. But his eyes were drawn again and again to the fantasy page.

Be a king, be a dragon—cool—be part of an undersea kingdom, be a hobbit—double-cool, maybe there was a Ranger variation there.

Be a... oh. Oh damn.

“A mystical and dangerous fantasy world perfect for fans of *The Wheel of Time* series. Take on the role of a magical adept, a fledgling power, a guardian, or create your own character to roam the land confronting darkness, danger, friendship, and love.” It went on from there, detailing the experience and painting vivid pictures in his mind.

Rand was sold. There was no way he was missing out on this one, even if he didn't have an inkling that it was the kind of fantasy Erica would choose.

The question was, who did he want to be, and who did he want to experience this with?

Erica was the obvious answer, but he couldn't ask her to partner with him. It would be too forward.

On the other hand, she'd seemed to be very familiar with the service, which meant that she'd used them before and was in the database. If he matched with her, they'd have a chance to get to know each other in a casual setting—if living out your dreams in an incredible fantasy world could be called casual.

Had she gotten another certificate for herself?

Was this what she'd been hinting at?

Rand's heart started pounding in his chest.

He knew without a shadow of a doubt that if Erica had gotten a certificate and was picking an experience, this would be the one she would choose.

The questionnaire was a beast, asking questions about things that Rand had never even thought about, let alone experienced, and he spent long hours answering everything as best he could while imagining what Erica would have chosen.

When it was time to describe his perfect partner, he painted Erica in minute detail, including everything except for her name and exact profession.

Once it was done and the acknowledgement screen loaded, his heart sank.

One to two weeks?

Waiting that long to find out whether he and Erica would be doing this together felt like a lifetime. How could he distract himself enough to function?

You're being pathetic.

Rand had done his part.

Erica, if she had really come up with this plan so she could partner with him, would have done hers.

Now all that remained to see was if she had and if they matched.

If fate played its hand and they did, it would give him the courage to ask her out properly. If not, he could try another approach. In the meantime, he could experience something he'd been dreaming about since childhood.

What would it feel like to be magical, produce miracles, and fight off hordes of monsters, wielding a long sword, his body brimming with power?

Would he be benevolent, maybe clueless at first, or would he come into the story as an all-powerful force in the world?

Who would fight for him?

Who would fight against him?

Rand smiled. He was looking forward to finding out.

Erica



Erica heard back from Perfect Match after three days, which was quite shocking. She had never received a response from them so quickly, not even the first time when she'd chosen a generic fairy queen experience, and this time they had to generate a whole new scenario for her.

Was it all done by some super-efficient artificial intelligence? She didn't know much about computer programming, but there was no way humans could have done that so quickly.

If so, it was a little scary to think what AI could do.

She'd been dismissive of the warning issued by various so-called experts as nothing more than fearmongering, but after this demonstration of artificial intelligence's ability, she was ready to re-examine her stance on the issue.

Well, she still had to go through the adventure to see whether it was really something new or just one of the existing fantasy scenarios that had been modified by adding some trollocs and dark friends. She should wait to form her opinion until after the session.

The bigger question was whether Rand had applied and filled out the questionnaire, and if he had, whether he'd received a response as well.

Regrettably, he'd arranged to be off today to attend a PA conference, so there would be no opportunity for her to casually inquire over coffee or see him checking his phone and grinning or whooping.

With a sigh, Erica put her phone in her coat pocket and headed to the next examination room.

Seeing eight more patients that afternoon, talking with concerned parents, and bantering with the rest of her staff provided much needed distraction, and her excitement and anxiety didn't kick in until she got in her car.

The first thing she did as she entered her house was to plant her butt on the couch, open the email from Perfect Match on her phone, and log in to her account to see the details.

You've been matched! the perky header read. *Get ready for the adventure of a lifetime!* The email went on to describe the basics of the program she'd requested—which she knew all about since she'd designed the darn thing—as well as the disclaimer, a bit on managing expectations, and finally—*We're looking forward to seeing you at seven o'clock this Friday.*

Friday.

Seven o'clock.

Erica's hands trembled as she put down her phone. This was it, then. She'd cast her net and caught... well, someone, a person that she really hoped was Rand. But even if he wasn't, she refused to be disappointed.

Well, maybe a little disappointed, but she would have a good time regardless.

Traveling the Unnamed Lands, being someone with incredible powers, would be amazing.

When she arrived at the clinic Wednesday morning, Rand was there, but it turned out to be an incredibly busy day, and their only exchanges were work related. He was as pleasant as always, and there were no secret smiles or smirks, and by the end of the day, he hadn't shared anything about Perfect Match with the rest of the staff.

Otherwise, Rosie would have known and told her.

Not willing to wallow in disappointment, Erica stayed late to clear some of the paperwork off her desk.

Thursday flew by in much the same fashion, and by the end of the day on Friday, Erica's desk was clean of paperwork, and she was convinced that her plot had failed, and she hadn't been matched with Rand.

Shelby was startled when she glimpsed the empty desk. "You're not running off to Vegas or something, are you?" she asked.

"What? No! Why?"

"Because you're packing up your work like you're leaving us. The obvious reason is that you're off on some exotic weekend or a girls' trip somewhere, and you don't want to—oh. *Ooooooh.*" Shelby pressed a hand to her cheek. "I see."

Was she that obvious? Feeling her cheeks getting warm, Erica grabbed her water bottle, got up, and casually walked over to the water fountain. "See what?"

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Shelby followed her. "You've got something cooking at Perfect Match, don't you?"

Erica's cheeks caught fire. She hadn't told anyone about booking a session. They might have guessed that she'd used the service in the past because of the gift certificate she'd given Rand, but she'd never confirmed actually participating in a virtual adventure.

"You do!" Shelby pointed a finger at Erica's flushed cheeks. "This has something to do with that gift certificate you gave Rand, doesn't it? Did he ask you to join him?"

"Of course not." Erica looked around, then pulled Shelby into an alcove. "I don't know if he used it yet, and even if he did and then invited me to join him in a session, I would have declined. It would have been very unprofessional of me to accept."

Shelby chuckled. "Honey, you do know why our office doesn't have a no-dating-coworkers policy, don't you?" She stared over the rim of her glasses in what Erica felt was an unfairly judgmental manner. "Your mother and father met in this exact same office thirty-five years ago."

Erica shook her head. “That’s different. Mom was an interior decorator, and she was helping design the office. She wasn’t Dad’s employee. Rand works directly under me.”

“I bet he’d like to,” Shelby murmured.

“Shelby!”

“I’m just saying. Don’t overthink it, okay? Nobody at work thinks you’re going to take advantage of the man, especially not him. It’s good of you to be concerned, but I think your life would be a heck of a lot easier if you just asked Rand out. If he says no, fine; you move on and work together like the professionals you are. But if he says yes...”

The picture Shelby painted was tantalizing, but Erica just couldn’t. First of all, she didn’t feel comfortable initiating, and secondly, if Rand declined her offer, it would be impossible to work with him. Things would get too awkward.

“I’ll think about it,” she said to end the discussion.

“That’s all I ask.” Shelby patted Erica’s shoulder.

Erica



At ten minutes to seven, Erica arrived at the Perfect Match office and checked in at the front desk, expecting the receptionist to greet her in the professionally calm and composed manner she had used the other times.

“Oh, wow, Doctor Jones!” The young woman’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “Did you know you set an office record for how quickly you matched this time?”

Erica blinked. “Really?”

“Less than twenty percent of people get their match in a week or less, and nearly no one matches in three days.”

“I hope that means it’s going to go well.” Erica’s bottom lip trembled. Would she look like a pathetic loser if she steadied it with her front teeth?

“I hope so too! Here.” The woman handed over a clipboard full of forms. “Read and sign these, then your technician will escort you to your room.”

“Thanks.” Erica sat down and got to work. *Sign, sign...*

In the distance, a door opened, and a familiar voice said, “All set.”

Rand!

Erica looked up so fast that the nerve in the back of her neck twanged.

“Excellent!” a female voice said. “You’ll be in Room E. It’s just down here on the left.” There were a few footsteps, then

the sound of another door opening and closing.

That had never happened before. Erica had never seen the men she'd shared the adventures with entering or leaving the Perfect Match Studios. Rand must have arrived later than he'd been supposed to, or it hadn't been him.

Erica glanced at the receptionist. "Excuse me. Was that the person I'm adventuring with?"

The receptionist smiled briefly. "I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to reveal that information, Doctor Jones."

"Oh, of course."

Calm down, Erica.

That was easier said than done.

Holy crap! She was matched with Rand!

Erica's heart pounded in her rib cage and her hand trembled as she signed the rest of the papers and handed them over.

The receptionist eyed her with worry. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm just excited. I asked for this particular adventure, and it was created with my input. I'm anxious to experience it, and I hope it comes out as good as I imagined it."

It wasn't a lie. Just a half-truth.

"I understand." The receptionist smiled. "Everyone gets the jitters right before going in. It's just that you were so calm and collected the other times, and I wondered what was different about this one."

Rand. He made all the difference.

"I'm a little nervous," Erica admitted.

"I get it." The receptionist leaned forward. "This scenario is your baby. Your creation." She looked at Erica with appreciation. "It must be good to be included in the catalogue."

"I hope so."

It wasn't really Erica's baby. She had provided the framework, but someone else had to come up with all the details, either the

AI or a bunch of human programmers, so she couldn't take credit for the new scenario.

Nevertheless, she nodded and went back to her chair.

A minute later, a man with short brown hair and a body shaped like a refrigerator came to meet her.

"Doctor Jones, my name is Gary and I'll be your experience technician this evening. If you come with me, we'll get you ready."

The other times, Erica's techs had been female, so she assumed it was standard operating procedure to have female techs with female clients and male techs with male clients, but she didn't mind either way.

Medical school and practicing medicine had cured her from feeling shy about things like that.

"Thank you." She smiled at the guy and followed him to the private room where her adventure was going to take place.

Gary verified her information, covered her lower half with a light blanket, and hooked her to the IV. "I know that this is not your first time doing this, so I'll skip the long explanations, but because this is a custom experience, we've got to take extra care to ensure nothing becomes overwhelming or puts you or your match in any danger." He gave her a reassuring smile. "In a way, this is a beta run. You and your partner are going to be the first to try it."

"I understand."

Everything happening in the room was recorded for safekeeping in case of a lawsuit, but no one could look at those recordings without a court order, so clients' privacy and anonymity was preserved.

Still, Erica's verbal acknowledgment was as good as her signing her name on paper.

Gary smiled. "Excellent." He turned a lever and the drip started flowing. "Go ahead and relax," he said, his voice soothing and calm. "In just a few moments, you'll be

transported to a whole new world and will have an amazing time there.”

I certainly hope so.

“Thank you...” Erica murmured, her eyelids pulling downwards. She let them close. Rainbows of colors swirled across her vision until they merged into a single shade—a shimmering opalescent white that drowned out every other color.

Erica blinked...

Moria



“Thank you.” Moria adjusted her long sleeves, pushing the cuffs of her simple white overdress back to free her hands so she could study the seal securing the scroll properly.

The innkeeper bowed nearly in half. “It’s my pleasure to serve the Daoine Sídhé.”

Moria nodded and waited for the woman to leave the room before examining the scroll again.

The innkeeper had to walk quite a distance to deliver it, but she hadn’t done it out of the goodness of her heart or for coin. Gaining favor with the only Daoine Sídhé in the area, known for her healing abilities, was what she’d been after.

The thick parchment had been carefully rolled and secured with a wax seal bearing the symbol of the High Queen of the Daoine Sídhé.

It was a formal message, the kind that Moria hadn’t received in years.

The last one she’d gotten had been a decade ago when her last companion had died, and grief had sent her into seclusion.

In all honesty, Moria had hoped that they’d forgotten about her. As the last remaining one of her sisterhood, the idea of fading into obscurity had been comforting, but apparently she had been wrong.

She hadn’t been forgotten, merely kept on hold.

Breaking the seal, she unfurled the parchment. The ink was liquid gold, and the level of ostentation irritated Moria despite

how beautiful it made the elegant script look.

Sister Moria,

You are hereby recalled to the citadel to be given a task of the utmost importance to the Daoine Sídhé Sisterhood. It is a delicate matter that cannot be disclosed herein, but rest assured that you are the only one suited for this particular mission.

Now, that was interesting. The Daoine Sídhé weren't inclined toward flattery. A sister was either powerful or expendable.

Moria, as the last of what the Daoine Sídhé considered the weakest branch of the sisterhood, did not expect to be seen as anything more than expendable. Conventional wisdom maintained that the Pearl Sisters were too soft, and they had been written off generations ago and were used to being ignored.

That the High Queen was recalling her to the citadel was concerning.

The citadel was located in the heart of the Azure Hills, and despite the picturesque name, Moria had no wish to travel there.

If you do not respond in a timely manner, we shall assume that you have foresworn your solemn duties, and you will be stripped of your title.

And there was the threat. There was always a threat, occasionally implied but more often than not explicitly stated.

Moria couldn't remember a time when she'd felt at ease in the presence of another sister, when she hadn't needed to keep up her guard. It was one of the reasons she'd secluded herself after her companion died—a death she was certain one of her

sisters was responsible for. Without his protection, she was left vulnerable.

Pearl Sisters didn't have the brute strength of the Ruby Sect or the fortitude of the Diamond Sisterhood. The Pearls did things differently, and being different had cost them dearly.

We expect you within the next two weeks. Show your talisman to the gate guardians and you will be immediately delivered to our presence.

In love and faith,

Beryt, High Queen of the Daoine Sídh.

Moria leaned back in her velvet armchair and stared at the single candle which provided light for her sitting room.

She had no choice but to obey the summons. If she ignored it, she'd be stripped of her title and her powers.

A Daoine Sídh with no powers, however paltry, was nothing. She'd rather die than lose her powers.

But what could the High Queen possibly want from her?

She read the paragraph again: *you are the only one suited to this particular mission.*

What could they need from a Pearl that any one of the other sisters couldn't provide?

“Well, I suppose I'll find out when I arrive.”

Preparations for travel were minimal. Moria lived simply and didn't need much, but she was still a Pearl Daoine Sídh, and a figure dressed in white and riding a white stallion would be noticed. Fortunately, one of her sisterhood's talents was *trompe-l'œil*, a gentle glamour that convinced strangers to turn away by assuring them the view was far more interesting in a different direction.

Thanks to the glamour, Moria's four-day journey through dense pine forests and over shallow rivers was uneventful. She

rode by day, listening intently for shaders and wolves, and cast a spell at night to alert her to their presence while she hid and slept.

As the Azure Hills rose beyond the eastern point of the forest, Moria shuddered anxiously.

Those living inside the citadel were supposed to be her sisters, but there would be no warm welcoming home, nor a sense of relief upon the conclusion of her journey.

Her so-called sisters were a far greater threat to her than any shader or wolf could ever be.

Rand



The cuffs dug into Rand's wrists, their sharp edges deepening the wounds that never had time to heal thanks to his constant twisting and wrenching, always testing the strength of the chain, the wall bolts, the cuffs.

Resistance was at the heart of him. To give up would be to lose himself. His only option was to strain and pull against the yoke.

"Animal," women whispered as they studied him from behind the bars, looks of repulsion disfiguring their faces. But an animal would have been broken by now or at least subdued until an opportunity to escape presented itself.

Not him. His pride wouldn't allow it.

"Beast. Brute." They threw such insults at him every day, trying to wear him down, crush the last vestige of his humanity.

"How ridiculous that we should preserve a creature like this, keep it fed and watered. He should be put down. He's untrainable. Unteachable. Unusable."

The fact that he made them nervous was one of the few things keeping Rand sane. It would be so easy to give in, channel the power that coursed through his veins and lash out. That was what they wanted. They wanted him to use his power against them. It would allow them to feel justified, righteous even, when they killed him.

Rand knew he outclassed them—had known it from the moment he saw the fear in their eyes as they clapped the cuffs

on his wrists. The cuffs were forged from mystical alloys, a compound of metals and gemstones that he couldn't understand, destroy, or alter. They weakened him physically and psychologically, slowing his reactions, making it difficult to concentrate.

Unlike the sisters who spat insults into his cage, Rand did not need a conduit to access and use the True Power. However, his captors had found a way to force his power through a conduit—the damn cuffs.

The first time he had awoken in this damp, foul-smelling cell, he'd attempted to use his power. He'd been careful, building a mere fraction of energy, hoping no one would notice, but that it would be enough to break his bonds.

It had been only a smidgen, a mere hint of the potency he could muster at will, but it had acted as an alarm.

A Ruby Sister raced into the prison and blasted him so hard he was flung into the stone wall. The bruises remained, violet and saffron, and tender to the touch. He supposed he was lucky no bones had been broken.

“Try that again,” she'd hissed through clenched teeth. “Next time I'll rip your head from your shoulders.”

He hadn't doubted her word, and he would have sooner sipped the black waters of Acheron than agree to help her or any of the witches he had encountered there.

These women were either insane or had a bizarre and violent approach to courtship. Despite their obvious revulsion, fear, and frequent insults, the harridans believed he would eventually agree to become a companion to one of them.

Had they truly believed that stealing his freedom and subjecting him to torture and violent outbursts was an effective way to seduce him?

Dozens of sisters, perhaps every sister in the damned citadel, had stood outside his cage at some time or another and laid out their cases. Some spoke sweetly, others used intimidation, a few resorted to cool, impassive logic to win him over. During

the long weeks of his imprisonment, almost fifty women, each clad in the bejeweled robes of their sects, had come to see him.

Not one had touched his heart.

There wasn't even a tolerable option among them. None of their logical arguments or passionate entreaties worked. The hatred, pity, and ruthlessness he glimpsed in their eyes assured him the repulsion was mutual.

He was nothing but a powerful tool to them.

"Fuck all of you!" Rand had shouted when the High Queen herself had visited his cell.

"It is a great honor," she'd said, "for a low-born miscreant like yourself to be offered the chance to work alongside any of the Daoine Sídhe he pleases, myself included. I am willing to make you my companion. Should you agree, you will be under my protection and free to leave this cellar for a far more comfortable chamber."

"I'd rather die than work with you!"

"Then perhaps death is all you can look forward to," the High Queen had snapped before taking her leave.

Rand had wanted to yell, "Death would be a welcome change from seeing all your dour faces." But he'd held his tongue, because, truthfully, he didn't want to die.

He wanted to return home to Fairview where his family was probably awaiting news of him. He would welcome the drudgery of farm work, and help his family, friends and neighbors fight back the encroaching evil that threatened their land.

That was how the sisterhood had found him.

The first time Rand had used the True Power was in a battle against shaders that had left the wastelands and raided his village. He'd killed them all but lost his mother and some dear friends in the attack.

Then the sisterhood had arrived.

And now here he was, locked in a filthy cell, fed once a day and bathed once a week by a stern-faced witch's companion at least twice his size. Rand wished desperately for a way out that didn't include either binding himself to one of the sisters or dying.

If he didn't choose one of the damn sisters or find a way to escape soon, he might never see his father and sisters again.

Don't give up hope. Don't you dare give up hope.

It had become his mantra.

He needed to keep pretending to be nothing but a brute who could wield the True Power and give the best performance of his life convincing them that they were succeeding in breaking his spirit. When they believed they had tamed him, someone would make a mistake, and he would slip away.

It was a long shot, but he had to try. He could not give in to despair.

Just a little bit longer...

In the distance, Rand heard the prison's main door creak open.

Strange, it wasn't time to be fed.

Was a sister coming to gawk at him again, or to make another offer of companionship?

Or had they decided they were done with him?

Were these his final moments before execution?

The door to his cell opened and so did Rand's mouth, ready to spew vitriol at whichever arrogant wench disturbed his peace.

The woman who entered the cell wore a white silk cloak that shimmered even in the gloom of the dungeon. The hood covered all but her bow-shaped mouth, and the hem reached the floor. She clasped her hands in front of her in a gentle and unassuming position. No male companion escorted her, she was alone, and Rand couldn't sense anyone lurking nearby.

A few strands of dark-gold hair escaped the confines of her hood. Compared to the gaudy jewel-covered cloaks other sisters wore, this woman was dressed simply. Modestly was

the description that filled Rand's mind as he gazed at the warm, pink lips. But she was still one of them, that much was clear.

Instead of cursing at the presumptuous visitor, he asked, "Who are you?"

"My name is Moria Sídhé." Her melodious voice was almost too soft for him to hear. "Of the Pearl Sect."

"I didn't even know there was a Pearl Sect."

"Few do," Moria said. "I'm the only one left."

Her words struck a chord inside him. The way she said it, calm but resigned. She was one of a kind, like him.

An outcast.

Why this sudden rush of empathy toward the stranger?

He did not know her. She could be lying. He would be a fool to trust a Sídhé.

"What are you doing here, Moria of the Pearls?" he asked brusquely. "Did you come to gawk at the maniac your sisters chained to a wall?"

"No." She glided forward and pushed her hood back.

Rand's breath caught in his throat.

Her face was pale, almost the same shade as her cloak; a delicately rounded snow moon, whose shine pierced the darkness and kept monsters at bay. Her eyes might have been hazel, he couldn't say for sure, and radiated compassion, not pity.

Moria did not pity him. She empathized, and he knew she had also suffered at the sisters' hands. Try though he might, he could not stop himself from empathizing back.

"I'm here to ask a boon of you, Rand Thorin of Fairview," she said, her voice as clear as a mountain stream. "I beseech you to do me the great honor of joining me as my companion."

Rand couldn't help himself.

He laughed.

Moria



Moria waited calmly for the prisoner to regain control of himself. Her mission, the reason why she had been recalled to the citadel, was to convince a madman to be her companion. An hour earlier, she had entered the throne room of the great citadel.

“A male channeler has appeared,” the High Queen announced to Moria after a traditional greeting.

Moria’s eyes widened. “That hasn’t happened in over a hundred years.”

“Yes, and the last one was a complete disaster.” Sister Idra stood beside the High Queen’s dais, her proud head held high. The rubies that decorated her cloak winked like bloodshot eyes in the candlelight. “When he lost his mind, he killed two scores of us before we could put him down. And the one before that was even worse! Corrupted by the True Power, he opened a portal that’s been letting shaders into our world ever since.”

“Obviously, this channeler hasn’t acted the same way, or he wouldn’t still be alive,” Moria pointed out.

The other two women exchanged a look, then the High Queen sighed. “He hasn’t,” she admitted. “Not exactly. But his exposure to the True Power has been minimal so far. We found him almost immediately after he had first used it, and we have been suppressing it with lead and copper manacles ever since.”

Moria knew she shouldn’t frown but couldn’t help herself. “Why on earth have you done that?”

“It isn’t your place to question the actions of our queen!” Idra growled.

“The risk is too great,” the queen said, cutting short Idra’s tirade. “Have you not read the historical accounts? Some men wielded the True Power for years without ill effects, while others succumbed to the dark side of their ability in mere days. Those who lasted the longest were invariably companions to our sisters. The connection to someone who can maintain their sanity while using the True Power stabilizes them.”

“So, you want him to align himself to a sister, be her companion,” Moria said. It made sense in principle, but... “Companions are subject to their sister’s will.”

“Of course,” Idra said with a sneer. “Otherwise, what use would they be?”

You have no idea, you hag. “As a male channeler, if his power isn’t already greater than ours, it will be soon. How do you expect her to keep him...” *enslaved...* “in line?”

“That would be up to the sister he bonds with,” the queen said.

Moria stifled a laugh. “And you expect that sister to be me? Really, High Queen? I’m honored, but domination is not the way of the Pearl Sect.”

“Domination will not work here,” the High Queen said dryly. “As our sisters have discovered.”

Idra lowered her eyes and clenched her fists until the knuckles grew white.

“Nor will bribery, threats, or promises,” the High Queen continued. “Rand Thorin’s independent streak is a full fathom wide, and he has no reason to like us. I’m afraid we didn’t exactly endear ourselves to him. But we need his power.” She leaned forward. “The shaders are ranging farther and farther from the wastelands. They are bringing plagues. We do what we can to keep them at bay, but soon we will be overwhelmed. Seven villages have already fallen to sickness and decay. We cannot stop this blight by just reacting—we need a channeler who can use the True Power to root out the source.”

Moria shuddered. “You want him to cleanse the wastelands? Not even Evan Whytelaw could do that.”

Five hundred years ago, Evan had been the companion of a Pearl Sister—the last of Moria’s sect who rose to prominence within the Daoine Sídhé. Along with the most powerful sisters, this brave couple had attempted to cleanse the toxic stain of the wastelands, but Whytelaw eventually succumbed to the power he channeled, as they all seemed to do, and when the shadows were pushed back, he turned rogue, destroying more sisters than battalions of the shaders had managed to kill.

Still, Evan and his sister’s efforts had brought about three hundred years of relative peace.

Now, that respite was coming to an end.

“We only need him to buy us time until we find and train another male channeler from a younger and more impressionable age,” the High Queen said. “That should not take long, but we still need to get him to agree first.”

“Which I strongly doubt is going to happen,” Idra said. “He’s incredibly stubborn, arrogant, and has no sense of self preservation. Anyone else would have caved weeks ago.”

Moria smiled politely at her sister. “I take it that you were unsuccessful in convincing him to become your companion, so you believe that no one can.”

“I’m the most powerful sister in the Daoine Sídhé,” she boasted. “If anyone can keep him stabilized and, more importantly, under control, it’s me.”

“You are the third path, Moria,” the High Queen said, ignoring Idra’s bravado. “I will never forget my Pearl Sisters and their gentle ways of persuasion. I hope that you will succeed where strength, will, and logic have failed.”

Moria inclined her head. “I vow to do my best, Your Highness.”

“Good.”

With her head tilted downward, it was easy to survey the pitiful cell and see exactly how he’d been treated for the past

—the High Queen had said five weeks. Small wonder he was lashing out in anger; who wouldn't be after the sisterhood had gone out of its way to treat him like an animal?

Moria despised cruelty.

Beneath the bruises and filth was a noble creature. A miracle. Someone to cherish, not torture. A truly beautiful man. His unwashed hair was dark auburn, his defiant eyes flashed green like emeralds around flames, and the few patches of skin she glimpsed amidst the dirt were the light-brown shade of a kestrel.

Looking at the traumatized and wary man before her, Moria knew most of the trust-building tools in her arsenal would be worse than useless.

Rand had been abused, that much was clear.

Although it was only a few degrees above freezing in the dungeon, his chest was bare, and his pants so badly torn it was a miracle they covered his modesty. They had held him here for five weeks, and what might have once been a healthy physique was now wiry to the point of emaciation. He looked haggard, and it would take fresh air, good food, exercise, and sleep to fully restore the handsomeness beneath all the muck.

First, though, Rand would need a compelling reason to work with her at all, let alone trust her enough to become her companion. The cuffs he wore, so good at restraining his power, had heightened his paranoia, fear, and anger. Moria needed to do something drastic before she could expect him to give her a chance.

What surprised her, though, was how desperately she wanted that chance. Ever since her companion's death ten years ago, it had been easier to live alone in her tiny cottage, far from the citadel, where the intrigue and infighting of the sects could not reach her.

She'd spent her days studying the rhythms of the world and the people in it. Yet, looking at Rand, she felt strangely moved.

This wasn't fair. It wasn't right. And Moria couldn't understand why the High Queen couldn't see how counterproductive such inhumane treatment was to her goal. Treating Rand in this way wouldn't stop the shades bringing death and disease to humanity. If the High Queen was right, the world needed Rand Thorin.

It was up to Moria to make sure they got him.

Moria



When Rand finally stopped laughing, he sagged back into his restraints and took a calming breath. “Ah, you’re funny, sister,” he said. “Far more polite than most of the witches in this place, but no less hilarious. Why in the name of the True Power would I become your companion, huh?”

“Because you miss your family.” She took another step toward him. “You want to make sure they’re recovering after the loss of your mother.”

Rand leapt to his feet. “What do you know about my mother?” he snarled.

“I know that she died in the attack on your village.” Moria maintained her composure even though her heart was hammering. “But your father and sisters live. They must be desperate to hear from you, to know you’re all right.”

“Look around you, Moria Sídhé.” He smiled sardonically. “Does it look like I’m all right?”

“No,” she agreed. “And that won’t change unless you agree to work with one of us.”

“All any of you want is to use me as a weapon, like some sort of puppet with you pulling the strings.” He leaned in and met her gaze. “Understand me, sister. I. Won’t. Be. Your. Pawn.”

“I understand, truly,” Moria said. “A partnership requires give and take on both sides. I’m willing to give you a great deal, Rand.”

“I don’t believe you.”

It was a simple and devastating truth.

He didn’t believe her, and why should he?

She wore the robes of his tormentors. The only glimmer of hope was that he wanted to trust her—she could see it in his eyes.

Those cuffs combined with the energy he used to maintain his resistance had worn him down physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

All he needed was a reason to trust, and she hadn’t given him that yet. She was just another in a long line of people who had failed to keep their promises.

What could she offer except more lies, more deceit?

Moria needed to start simply. Very simply. To earn his trust, she would have to show that she was willing to take a leap of faith.

“I know,” she said. “And I understand. It is only right that I should prove my sincerity before I ask you for anything in return.” She turned around and called, “Goran!”

As Idra’s hulking companion—the largest of four—entered the cell from where he’d been lurking in the hallway, Moria saw the look of confusion on Rand’s face. His eyes and nostrils widened, he shook his head and pushed his spine against the wall.

Poor, poor boy. Had he imagined the two of them were alone? Had his senses been so dulled by the conduit that he had not felt Goran’s presence?

The man was a head and a half taller than Moria, and probably three times her weight. Despite Rand’s broad shoulders, Goran dwarfed the captive.

“What?” Goran asked, his tone verging on disrespect.

Moria ignored his rudeness.

Goran’s enormous physique contained little in the way of intelligence, and it wasn’t the first time she’d been insulted by

another sister's companion.

However, Rand sat straighter, eyes flitting between her and the insolent giant, as if it was a complete revelation to him that a sister might be treated as lesser by one of them.

"Fetch me a cot, several blankets, two pillows, and a store of candles," she said. "And some paper and ink."

"I have to check with..."

"Tell Idra you're doing it on my orders," Moria said.

"I don't take orders from you."

Moria whisked around and glared at Goran. Power filled her eyes. Rand couldn't see the change, but Idra's companion did. He was used to displays of power, but it was important to remind him that she was not a simple villager he could push around. "You will obey my commands while I'm a sister in this citadel," she said. "However, if Idra decides to countermand my orders, that is her right—one you do not share."

Goran's face fell as he realized he had two choices. Either obey Moria's orders or run to Idra and bleat like a whining child.

Rand scoffed behind her, an indication that he too had grasped the companion's dilemma.

"Yes, sister," Goran replied then turned and left the cell without inclining his head.

"I'm surprised he wasn't falling over himself to help you," Rand said once the sound of Goran's heavy footsteps faded. "All I've seen for the past month was menfolk bowing to the sisters, obeying them like castrated dogs, and cosseting every damn witch in the place."

"My situation is a little different," Moria said. She waited until the threat of power had faded from her eyes before she faced Rand again, wanting to present a gentle, almost humble, picture to the captive. "I'm not a member of a large or powerful sect."

He shook his head. "You are all powerful." He looked into her eyes. "Pretending otherwise isn't going to win me over."

"Oh, I am powerful," Moria agreed. "But I wasn't talking about the True Power, Rand. I'm perfectly competent at channeling that. I meant my sect, the Pearl Sisterhood, is neither large nor powerful. I am the last of the Pearl Sisters, and my sect has not mattered to the Daoine Sídhé for centuries. What I'm talking about is political power."

"You're just a bunch of religious zealots. I don't see how politics comes into it," he said.

The boy was intelligent, that much was obvious from simply looking into his eyes, but he was young and naive.

She chuckled. "Everything is political. I'm sure even farmers bring their personal grievances to their town's council, don't they?"

Rand frowned. "Well, yes..."

"And the council or mayor arbitrates between them, yes?"

"Yeah..."

"And sometimes the decisions are fair, while often the council or mayor decides on the side of the more popular, larger, stronger family. It's the same for us. Only here, the others loathe my sect. There was a pogrom against us, and the Pearl Sisters were eradicated years ago. That's why I'm the only one left."

It was a painful truth and normally something Moria would refuse to share with a stranger, but it was important that he saw they had at least one thing in common. Hopefully, allowing him to glimpse this vulnerability would do more good than harm.

Rand



Rand blinked. “What do you mean?”

Moria couldn't mean what he thought she did. Daoine Sídhe were a bunch of arrogant, overpowered bitches who went from village to village, seeking evidence of gloaming power, and neutering or slaughtering any man who could wield it, ripping apart families for fun. No matter what sect they belonged to, they indulged their supporters and were cruel to anyone who stood up to them.

They were all the same.

“I mean exactly what I said. I'm the only one left.” Her shoulders drooped, her eyes avoided his stare, and her white robe trailed around her feet like the petals of a wilting flower.

Moria lifted the hem and sat cross-legged on the flagstone floor.

The filthy piss- and rat-shit-covered floor.

Rand bit his lip to stop himself from begging her to get up before she ruined the fine white fabric, then wondered why he should care.

“The Pearl Sect was in a state of decline before I joined,” she continued. “There were twenty-two left. I was number twenty-three. The reason they hate us is the reason I joined. Pearls seek knowledge and understanding through careful study and empathy. We aren't warriors, we don't force our channels open to cultivate immense power, and we don't rely on dispassionate, logical forms of knowledge. Everything we embody is quiet, slow, and soft, like the oyster that makes the

pearl by taking the grit of life, shaping and molding it, giving it value. We seek knowledge through deep understanding. For thousands of years, we wrote texts that were essential reading to many of the Daoine Sídhé. They might not have admired us, but our methods were tolerated, and for a time, a few of our more powerful sisters were celebrated. Slow, meticulous work was acceptable in times of relative peace, but not as the number of shaders wandering the land grew. Peace was threatened, and a more direct approach was demanded.

“All sisters had a duty to fight, no one was exempt. Pearls joined the ranks, fought in the battles.” Her head bowed. “But we were not warriors. There were no heroic victories. We were seen as weak, worse than that, the other Daoine Sídhé branded us cowards. Our deaths were not glorious. We didn’t do our sisterhood proud. Our shame contaminated the citadel, until we were forgotten.” She shrugged.

A delicate hand brushed something from her cheek. Was she crying?

“I lasted longer than the rest because my companion was a warrior, one of the best I’ve ever seen. Pearl Sisters rarely take companions, and never more than one, and, well, I was fortunate to have him with me. He saved my life a dozen times and taught me how to use my powers offensively. For a time, we did well. In the end, though, we were outnumbered.” When she raised her chin, her eyes gleamed with the pain of the memory. “He fought as hard as he could while I mustered the power for a killing blow, but I wasn’t fast enough. He died protecting me. I killed every shader who surrounded us, but not quickly enough to save him.”

“What was his name?” Rand didn’t want to ask, he really didn’t—it felt like the question had been pulled out of him against his will.

“His name was Zariel. He was a warrior from the north, where there are many things other than shaders threatening the people who live there. He died, and I lived, though the Daoine Sídhé acted as though I was dead. I have not entered the citadel in decades. I have a duty to serve the High Queen, but as for the others, let’s just say the contempt is mutual.”

Things other than shaders?

What things?

This time Rand swallowed the question even though he was curious.

“So why are you still alive?” *Ouch, that was harsh.*

Moria didn't seem to feel its sting, or she brushed it off without reacting. “The surge tapered off after Zariel was killed. He might have survived if we'd gotten to higher ground, or if another sister had been there to help us, or anything, really. But we were sent out alone.”

“Is that normal?”

She sighed. “For Pearls, yes. We're regarded as expendable. Our peers avoided us long before they felt ashamed of us. They have social networks, friends, small talk, and intrigues. Our interest in the wider world outweighed any fascination with the microcosm of the sisterhood. They found it difficult to talk to us, and we to them. I felt my isolation more acutely when they were nearby, so I left the citadel and secluded myself near a village I had always loved. I've lived there ever since, until now.”

Rand didn't know what to say. He certainly wasn't going to thank her for being here, although her company was less onerous than any he'd endured so far. Luckily, any pressure to speak was relieved by the return of Goran, carrying the things Moria had requested.

“Ah, thank you. Set it up against this wall, please.”

The burly man set up the cot and blankets with brisk movements, threw two small, somewhat pathetic pillows onto the bundle, and added a fistful of tallow candles, then a sheaf of cheap paper, a quill and ink. He did this silently and left the cell without saying a single word.

Moria looked more cheerful now that she had something to sit on. There were no stains on her robe. Had she magicked them away?

So, she was petty and vain after all.

He opened his mouth to share this revelation but was cut off by a loud clang as the far door was thrown open. A few seconds later, his least favorite Daoine Sídhé marched into the cell, her face fierce with anger.

“The prisoner is forbidden from receiving such comforts!” she yelled, pointing at the cot and blankets. “How dare you try to overrule the orders of the High Queen? I’ve always suspected that Pearls weren’t loyal to the sisterhood, and now I know. I will—”

“Sister Idra.” Moria interrupted the woman’s tirade with calm grace, nevertheless halting her in her tracks. “I requested these for my own comfort, not Rand’s.”

Idra stared uncomprehendingly.

Rand stared too, certain he had heard correctly but not really believing her words. Surely... no... she didn’t plan to sleep here, did she?

“I will be staying in this cell until further notice. As I’m not a prisoner, I decided a few creature comforts would be perfectly acceptable. I do not believe my request is extravagant, but if you would like to take one of the pillows away, feel free.”

Extravagant? A cot, and blankets, two measly pillows. A traveler would expect better even at the cheapest inn! She hadn’t even asked for her own piss pot, a privacy screen, or a table to set her papers on.

What was her deal?

“What are you playing at?” Idra demanded, asking the question on Rand’s lips. “You won’t win anyone over by making yourself look like a fool!”

“I have no intention of looking foolish,” Moria replied. “And a civil tone would be more appropriate. I don’t answer to you. If the High Queen has questions, I will go to her and answer them, once I receive a written order, of course. Otherwise?” Moria rose to full height. “You’re neither the leader of my sect nor the sisterhood.” She pointed at the door. “Now go.”

“You!” As if unable to help herself, Idra raised her hands.

Rand felt the True Power surge inside of her, and despite himself, reached for his own abilities. If she tried to hurt Moria, he could get caught in the backlash. He would have to protect them both.

The power fizzled as it left Idra's hands. A thousand dying sparks bounced off the flagstones, barely lighting the room before she stormed out.

"Did you not remember, sister?" Moria called after her. "There are ancient protection charms in this dungeon to prevent sisters from lashing out at their own."

Idra reappeared in the doorway, her face flushed as she realized she'd embarrassed herself. "You won't have old rules and older spells to protect you forever, Moria! I'll see to that myself!"

When the door finally clanged shut, Moria released a loud sigh and sat down.

"She tried to attack you," Rand said. He'd seen it but couldn't quite believe it.

"Ruby Sisters are rather highly strung," Moria said, as though that could explain the blatant disrespect he'd just witnessed. "Idra more than most. I suppose we're old rivals. She still resents the fact that Zariel chose me over her."

Ah, jealousy. It was a powerful motive, but it still didn't seem enough to justify an attack on Moria in their own stronghold.

"Don't let it concern you," Moria said. "I can handle Idra and any other sister who tries to cause trouble. Now, I hope you don't mind, but I could really use a nap."

She grabbed one of the blankets and shook it. Before Rand could react, she threw it over his shoulders. It was a rough blanket made of coarse and itchy wool, but at that moment it felt like the softest cotton against his freezing skin.

"Toss it away if you hear one of them coming," she murmured, then returned to the cot.

She fluffed one of the paltry pillows and lay down. A few minutes later she was snoring gently, exhaustion overtaking

her.

Rand, warm for the first time in weeks, was more confused than ever.

Moria



“This is asinine!”

“Absurd!”

“Acting like an animal isn’t the way to tame an animal.”

One week after Moria had arrived in the Azure Hills, she stood at the center of the throne room. It was a circle, ninety feet in diameter, with arched walls that rose three hundred feet above their heads. The walls were decorated with the pennants of the sects: gold silk for the High Queen, ruby, sapphire, emerald, amethyst, rose quartz, aquamarine and topaz shades. The Diamond Sect was represented by the palest blue imaginable.

The only color missing was pearl.

It had been torn from its rod a decade earlier when the Pearl Sisterhood, thoroughly disgraced, had been consigned to a few pages of history texts and declared cowards or dead.

A gaggle of sisters clucked around her. Fierce in their condemnation of her methods, they had gathered before the High Queen in the center of the citadel.

They’d been arguing among themselves, and so far, no one had given her a chance to speak or defend herself against their accusations. She could have shouted over them, but there was no point. None of these women could make the final decision. That was the sole province of the High Queen herself, so Moria kept her shoulders square and her chin high, letting the others squabble while she maintained eye contact with the woman who would make, or break, Rand Thorin.

By the time the High Queen took charge of the conversation, Moria's skin was crawling with tension.

"Sister Moria," the queen said, her voice cutting through the din like a sword. "Your silence suggests you have nothing to say to defend yourself."

Moria bowed respectfully. "I have done nothing that needs to be defended."

"Ridiculous!" Idra threw up her hands. "She can't even see that her plan is a failure."

"It hasn't failed."

"And yet you haven't made a breakthrough with our guest yet," the High Queen said. "Why?"

You chain and abuse him for weeks, and you have the audacity to call him a guest?

Saying that out loud would have guaranteed a beating, or worse, the queen might have kicked her out of the citadel before she could do what must be done.

"I am making progress, High Queen," Moria said. "He's beginning to trust me. The fact that he sees me every day, living with him and enduring the same conditions, is enough to bring him around. We share our thoughts, although he's not the easiest man to converse with—" *and how could he be, given the differences in our status*—"—but he's gone from treating me like his enemy to considering me an acquaintance. That is modest progress, I admit, but it is more than any of the other sisters have managed."

"Acquaintance? How will that get us anywhere?" a Diamond Sister named Thelessa asked incredulously. "We must make him submit. Let me try again, High Queen. I'm sure I have found a way to bind him."

"Binding him against his will is going to make him lash out," Moria cautioned. "You know this, High Queen. You wouldn't have come to me with this problem if you hadn't felt that my way of dealing with it had merit. Let me assure you, I am the only option you have for binding Rand Thorin without breaking him. If you want to channel his connection to the

True Power and use him against the shaders, you must give me a little more time.”

The others argued. Raised voices created a solid wall of sound. The High Queen raised her hand to silence them. “One week. I will give you one more week,” she said. “Seven turns of the sun, Moria of the Pearls, to do this your way. After that, I will give him to your sisters so that they can try some more unorthodox methods to bind him.”

Moria inclined her head. Ice dripped down her spine. It wasn’t enough time, but it was all she had. “Thank you, High Queen.”

“Thank me when it works, daughter.” *Or expect a world of hurt.* The implied threat rang loud through the room.

Moria bowed before leaving the chamber. The long walk to the dungeon gave her plenty of time to think. Unfortunately, most of her thoughts were hopeless.

I need to find a way to assure him that I mean him no harm; otherwise, he’ll be destroyed by these fools.

After one week in Rand’s company, Moria was certain the world needed him, and not just for his power. He had empathy for the common man that most of her sisters lacked. Rand wouldn’t dismiss tales of shaders ravaging distant villages. He would investigate. He wasn’t the sort of man to hide in a tower, studying lore and increasing his own power. He would face the threat, using the power he had for the good of many.

Unlike her, he would not seclude himself in a little village to nurse old wounds while the world fell to pieces around him. He would fight beside anyone who needed him. In that respect, he was an example Moria would do well to follow, someone she could learn a lot from.

And she wanted more than anything an opportunity to study him, with his informed consent, of course. She was eager to learn how his strength and courage persisted despite his imprisonment and the lure of the True Power, which, if the ravings of other men who had been in his position were to be believed, would be constantly whispering promises of release

from his torment, despite the inked charm she had placed in what remained of his ruined pants.

If only he would let her touch his mind, she could learn all these things and more. If he was willing to join with her, he could wander through her psyche unfettered, and know that all her words were true, that she had no intention of dominating him.

They would be equals.

In the meantime, he needed something to protect him from the siren call of the shadows as well as her sisters and their companions. She had used the paper and ink to scribe an insignia, a charm that he could use to summon her. He'd scoffed when she insisted that he keep it close but had eventually acquiesced. It meant he could reach her wherever she might be, although he had not chosen to use it yet.

As she reached the bottom of the worn stone staircase, an idea formed in her mind. It began as a tiny seed, something she needed to nurture before it could grow.

It might fail, of course. He might refuse to try. But it was something. Just knowing that there might be a way to reach him, a way to breach his defenses without hurting him in any way, lightened her steps. It would be a temporary measure, but it would allow him to see for himself that she saw him as a person worthy of love and respect rather than a weapon for her to wield.

When Moria returned to the cell, she sat on her cot, absorbed in her new idea, a way of allowing Rand to know what she thought and how she felt about him. A way that would bypass the rules of propriety that existed between two people with very different statuses. She thought so intently about this idea that she didn't notice Rand was staring at her until he spoke.

"I guess it didn't go well. It looks like they tore you a new one."

"Oh!" Moria jolted, putting a hand on her chest to slow her suddenly racing heart. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...." *ignore you.*

“It’s all right.”

Now that was real progress—four days earlier he would have cursed her out for such a slight. Now, he studied her carefully, trying to understand what had happened, wanting to empathize.

“Seriously though, your face reminds me of how I felt every time I had to face my father after losing a sheep.”

Moria chuckled. “It’s not quite that dire, I assure you. I did get a scolding, but that’s hardly surprising. It’s easier for my sisters to shout at me than listen to me.”

“What did they shout about?”

Honesty, Moria reminded herself. “You,” she said. “They want to know why I haven’t bound you as my companion. They doubt I can do it, and they are fighting over who gets the next shot at you.”

Rand tensed, and the blanket fell from his shoulders. “I won’t let any of them bind me.”

“I know.” Moria collected the blanket from the floor and secured it around him once more. She patted his shoulder affectionately, before returning to her cot. His eyes followed her every move. “I told them that, but they’re very persistent.”

Rand grunted in acknowledgement. “If this is your way of convincing me to bond with you...”

“No.” Moria shook her head. “I won’t coerce you by telling you I’m the lesser of two evils, but I am getting nervous. I don’t want you to suffer anymore.”

“What do you want?”

“I propose a kind of meditation,” she said, warming to her subject now that she’d thought it out. “It requires both of us to participate and allows a surface-level melding of minds. It’s not a bond,” she emphasized. “Touch is needed for bonding, and this would be done with me several feet away from you. It’s temporary, but it would give you the chance to experience what I’m thinking and feeling. You’ll be able to look around in

my mind. It should help you decide whether or not you can trust me.”

“I’m not ready to trust you.”

“That’s why I’m suggesting the meditation.”

His eyes narrowed. “How do I know you won’t use this to try and control me?”

“I guess you can’t know that for sure until you’ve tried it,” Moria said. “But I need you to be honest with both of us right now, Rand. Do you really want me to give up and leave you to the other sisters, or do you want us to try and figure out a way forward, together? Because... and it hurts me to say this, you won’t be allowed to leave this place and remain completely independent.”

Rand sighed and looked down. “Okay. We’ll try the meditation, but it might not work. I’m not great at being patient or sitting still.”

Moria smiled. “I think you’re better at it than you realize. Let’s begin, shall we?”

Rand



Rand groaned as he stretched his neck from side to side, bursting air pockets nestled between his vertebrae with satisfying pops. After five days spent meditating with Moria, often for hours at a time, he had learned plenty, but it hammered home just how stiff he was from sitting in this dismal cell for...

He'd lost track of time.

How many weeks had he been their prisoner?

Hours and days blurred and congealed into an ugly tumor of time, surrounded by unchanging stone walls, and suffering interminable discomfort.

Moria was another constant, but he still wasn't entirely sure how he felt about her. He didn't hate her, even though her robe was a constant reminder of his oppression. He didn't fear her as she had never done anything to cause him harm. But since her small act of kindness when she gave him one of her blankets to protect him from the worst of the chill, she had not done anything else to lessen his torment.

He was still a prisoner, still forced to choose between servitude to their cause and death. But what could he expect?

A hated outsider herself, Moria was hardly in a position to remove his chains. Was it because she behaved more like a fellow prisoner than his jailer that he had gotten used to having her around?

Rand might go so far as to say he liked her, but liking, he reminded himself, didn't equal trust.

And that was what she wanted from him—his trust.

As much as he craved release from this prison, he wasn't sure he was ready to give her that.

He strained his ears, listening for sounds of her light footsteps, bolts sliding back, a door creaking open. Moria left the cell an hour earlier; or what felt like an hour.

If his cell had a window, he would have been able to measure the passing of time from the angle of light and shadows. The candle was a thumb-width shorter than when she left, which proved she had been absent for far longer than usual. He knew she had to report to the queen every day, but she ought to have returned by now.

Why hadn't she?

As worry gnawed at his gut, he got to his feet and paced three steps to the right, then three to the left.

That was as far as the chains allowed him to move.

Right, left, right, left.

Had something happened to her?

Had Idra made good on her threat?

Had his reluctance to bond with her or any of those awful witches led to her downfall?

Rand was no fool.

Even before the meditation confirmed it, he had known Moria to be the outsider she claimed to be. The other sisters he'd seen since her arrival treated her like dirt, and the glimpses he'd gleaned from her mind during their meditation sessions were tragically sad.

Moria had no friends in the citadel or outside of it, no sect, and no companion. She was alone in this world—a sister of the Daoine Sídhe but not welcome among them. She was a pariah, and that had to be hard for a woman filled with compassion and love.

Love?

He rolled a ball of spit around his mouth and expelled the malignant thought. He wasn't interested in love. All he wanted was freedom. He needed to get out of here before he lost his mind, but he suspected that for Moria some degree of love was intrinsically linked with trust, so deeply intertwined that one would be impossible without the other.

Is that what terrifies me, the idea that I might willingly bind myself to her, subsume my needs and desires to hers?

As the sound of a door opening down the corridor distracted Rand from his thoughts, he stopped pacing and stood straight, anxious for Moria to appear.

Her footsteps were slow, slower than usual, and when she finally entered the cell, tension raced through Rand's body. "What's wrong?"

She moved with the careful steps of a person in pain, but holding it in, dealing with it alone, the only way she knew how. "Nothing."

Rand was infuriated. "That's a lie," he snapped. "If you meant what you said about trusting each other, then don't lie to me now. You're walking like you've been rolled through a briar weed patch."

Moria sighed. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking when I answered. What I meant by 'nothing' is that my punishment was deserved. I brought it on myself. The pain is right, not wrong."

Icy dread doused the heat of Rand's anger. "What did they do to you?"

Moria sat down stiffly on the edge of the cot. Her forehead was beaded with sweat, and her eyes had a glazed quality as if she found it difficult to focus. "The High Queen is displeased with my progress. The end of the week is almost here, and I'm still failing. Which is not your fault," she added emphatically. "But she thought it best that I be reprimanded to remind me how important it is that I keep my word. Sister Idra administered the punishment."

"She beat you," he said, his lips feeling oddly numb.

Idra had hit him frequently, sometimes with an open hand, and sometimes with a riding whip. She'd avoided his face, but almost every other part of his body had been fair game. He suppressed a wince as he remembered how after she'd cracked him across his backside, he hadn't been able to sit properly for days.

"Not severely," Moria said. "Twelve strikes across my back and shoulders that I'm forbidden from healing. One for each day I failed to meet their expectations."

"That's *fucked*," Rand spat. "That's completely fucked. You see that, don't you?"

"She's the High Queen," Moria said. "She's not only our ruler, but also our teacher, our guide. Part of her guidance is to use corporal punishment to reinforce our lessons. It's no more than many children have faced."

"But you haven't done anything wrong!"

"I agree," Moria said.

Rand blinked, confused at the sudden change of direction.

"One of the many reasons I secluded myself from the Daoine Sídhe Sisterhood was their reliance on violence as a solution to every problem. I don't believe that's the right approach in most situations. It certainly isn't the right approach for you, but I don't have the influence to debate the matter, let alone talk them out of it. The only thing I can do is my best, and that means continuing to meditate with you and hope that we reach a state of understanding."

"Meditate with me now," Rand demanded.

Moria looked surprised, and he couldn't blame her. He'd been less than enthusiastic about the meditation, even after he'd learned how easy it was to connect with her.

Sitting still and focusing on their connection required a formidable level of discipline.

Each time he tried to focus, Rand felt an intense and almost uncontrollable need to move about, as if he feared he might become permanently rooted to the spot. Fighting the desire to

fidget and shuffle was as infuriating as being beaten, but he was willing to do so if it meant he could spare Moria from such vicious punishments.

“Rand,” she said gently. “Trust isn’t something that can be forced, and I don’t blame you for not wanting to bond with me.”

“But I do want it.”

Moria’s chin dropped, and her beautiful mouth hung open. She sat still, eyes wide, holding his gaze, as if searching for the truth behind his outburst.

Rand swallowed hard, refusing to take back his words.

Malicious whispers promised that he would regret this, but he crushed them. He hated seeing her in pain, hated everything about this awful citadel and the wolf-like Daoine Sídhé who stalked its halls.

Even the traumatized part of his mind that embraced pride and stubbornness as survival techniques, resisting any and all urges to bond, softened its stance.

Moria was right—he wasn’t getting out of the citadel unless it was as her companion. Seeing her shoulders and back bent with pain made him fear that, if they didn’t bond, Moria wouldn’t escape either.

She’d done nothing but try to help him, and the thought that she could be killed for that was bleak.

Cruel.

Unacceptable.

In many ways, he enjoyed being near her. Moria was kind, intelligent, and insightful, and she had a quiet strength that Rand admired.

She was also pleasing to the eye.

He felt ridiculous for even noticing her beauty, but he was a man, and he had eyes and desires that the sisters hadn’t beaten out of him yet.

Her long hair had a golden sheen even in the dingy light of the dungeon, and her eyes were a sparkling shade of hazel. Her figure was full and strong, and her face was as lovely as the pearls that represented her.

If she were not Daoine Sídhe, he would have tried to woo her the moment they'd met.

“Meditate with me,” Rand repeated, softer this time. “Let’s try.”

Moria smiled. “All right. Let’s try.”

They meditated all afternoon, ignoring the paltry dinner that was delivered to their cell.

Now that Rand wanted it to work, he enjoyed the hours he spent strolling through her memories, encountering and studying her hopes and fears.

None of what he met surprised him; she had been transparent about every aspect of her life. Some of the scenes delighted him: conversations with her long dead sisters about the value they placed on humanity; the villagers who came for healing and brought fruit and milk for their dinner table; the broad shoulders and gentle kisses of her first companion. Instead of the prickle of jealousy, he felt the warm embrace of deep love, welcoming the caresses and wallowing in the devotion and respect they felt for each other. The knowledge that they were equals, not mistress and servant, made him realize how beautiful such holistic love could be.

Moria



When Moria finally called it quits, it was only after her muscles froze, stiffened in a crucible of welts, bruises, and inactivity. Sitting still for six hours after such a thorough beating had taken its toll.

“Ooh,” she groaned, moving her head slowly from side to side. “I’m done in, I’m afraid. We’ll have to pick it up again in the morning, Rand.”

“We’ve made progress, though. Right?”

Moria nodded, then immediately regretted the additional strain it placed on her sore body. “We have.” She rubbed the back of her neck.

It was true—they were connecting more easily than ever now. Rand had probed beyond the simple thoughts and feelings that floated on the surface of her psyche and delved deeper.

At one point, he’d zeroed in on the knot of regret that Moria had never been able to exorcise and asked, “Is this about your companion?”

Moria had nodded, not quite ready to discuss that aspect of her relationship with Zariel, and he’d accepted her reluctance with grace.

Rand would make an incredible companion, she thought wistfully. She still wasn’t sure that they would be ready before the High Queen’s deadline, but no one could say it was from lack of trying.

Then again, the High Queen doesn't care about intentions, only results. That's why Sister Idra was given free rein with my punishment. We have tomorrow, perhaps the day after if we're lucky. Then, we will both be destined for something much worse.

Moria couldn't let that happen. It didn't matter what they did to her, but she wouldn't let them ruin Rand. She had to get him out of here. Stealing keys would be difficult but not impossible. Getting him out of the citadel would be harder, and after that, how would she hide him?

How could she keep him safe while she suffered the repercussions of her betrayal?

She had no illusions about how this would end. At least, he seemed more relaxed about having her presence in his mind, which was a surprising comfort.

If only it was enough.

"We should get some rest," she said, forcing herself to dip a spoon into the cold soup, frowning as solidifying scum clung to the utensil. "We still have tomorrow to work on this."

"Moria..."

She smiled. "Eat, Rand. You need to keep your strength up."

Falling asleep that night should have taken mere moments. Moria was exhausted, body and mind, but some strange, unnamable worry chained her to consciousness. She stared at Rand, lying with the spare pillow under his head, a blanket wrapped around his muscular frame to keep him warm. Watching him sleep, reminded her of how young he was—a mere twenty-two years. What a terrible torment, to drag him into this world. If only the True Power had chosen someone else, someone Moria hadn't learned to care so deeply for.

When she eventually fell asleep, Moria was cast into a fearful battle. She was with Zariel, on the outskirts of a burning village. Silver streaks provided an attractive contrast to his otherwise dark hair, evidence of decades spent by her side.

"The shaders are wreaking havoc on these people," she said to him. "We have to help them!"

“There are at least a dozen shaders in there.” Deep lines creased Zariel’s brow. “Idra should be here any moment—she promised to arrive before the alignment.”

Moria looked up. The two moons were almost perfectly aligned with the brightest star in the night sky. “She did say that, but...”

But how can we wait? Listen to the screams, listen to the suffering.

Zariel shook his head in despair. “Your soft heart will get you killed, Moria.”

“Surely we can hold them back until Idra and her companions arrive,” she entreated.

Finally, Zariel dismounted. “We go in on foot. Stay behind me. Let me take the brunt of it.”

“I will.” That was how they worked best in battle, Zariel leading with his two-sided axe and Moria channeling protections. Any offensive uses of the True Power came a distant second for her.

They charged into the town, Zariel speeding up as he saw the first shader ahead of them. The creature was a monstrous thing, nearly seven feet tall with limbs that looked like shadows but impacted like solid stone. It had no eyes, but a mouth full of sliver-thin, obsidian teeth that shone in the firelight as it threatened to bite a cowering and wounded woman in half.

Zariel’s enchanted axe sliced through the shader’s torso, bisecting the beast. The woman screamed in surprise and terror but managed to scramble to her feet and scamper away.

Zariel spotted his next target and attacked, while Moria channeled the True Power into a shield to keep the brutes at bay. She used it to slide victims out of the path of danger, to block any blows that would hurt Zariel, and to lift herself out of the line of attack when needed.

They worked smoothly together, sword and shield, but the shaders kept coming. Zariel killed five, then ten, then the full

dozen, but more spilled from houses and barns, converging on them at the center of the town square like a pack of wolves.

“There’s too many,” Zariel shouted. “We need to get out of here!”

“We can hold just a little longer.” If they didn’t, the townspeople would be slaughtered. “The sky is in alignment. Idra should arrive at any moment.”

Idra was a battle sister; surely, she and her companions would be able to turn the tide, convert defeat into victory.

“She’s not coming, Moria!”

No, she must! “She has to!”

“Moria!” Zariel grabbed her arm and spun her away in a swift pirouette from where she was standing.

For a moment, it felt like they were dancing—his arm around her waist, the two of them twirling to the beat of their hearts. Then a shader’s claw punched through Zariel’s chest. Moria stared in horror as blood and viscera flowed from her companion’s mortal wound, and the light in his eyes dimmed. He let go of her and drifted to the ground in slow motion, graceful as an autumn leaf.

Moria screamed. The True Power flowed through her voice, echoing her horror, grief, and inarticulate fury.

Every shader within a thousand feet trembled.

Fangs chattered as jaws vibrated, then torsos and limbs shook in a Saint Vitus dance. Moments later, an agitated gale rushed out of the village, and the shaders exploded as one, propelling shards of armored flesh and bones through the air before they dissolved into tiny embers of light, which burned out and fell to the ground as dust, coating it in a white sheet like unseasonable snow.

Moria’s power was drained perilously low.

Her grieving heart stopped beating for a moment, and she fell beside Zariel, wishing with all her soul that she too was dying. Oblivious to her sister’s arrival a few minutes later, Moria

wept, blind to anyone and anything else. “Zariel, Zariel, Zariel...”

A cold hand shook Moria awake, but all she saw was Zariel’s unseeing eyes as the light dimmed in their depths.

Rand



They had been through a lot over the past two weeks, but Rand had never seen Moria in the grips of a nightmare before.

This was no sedate horror, paining her mind but sparing her body.

She writhed on the cot, the faint glow of the True Power blanching her hands as she relived the trauma of the painful memory that her unconscious mind floated to the surface to torment her. Once she began screaming, she didn't stop, her voice gaining strength until one word became coherent.

It was a name.

Moria was screaming for her companion—Zariel.

Rand had always been warned not to wake a person from a nightmare, but he couldn't let her suffering continue. Straining against his bonds, he reached out until his fingers grazed her forearm.

Moria's eyes shot open, but she didn't see him. Evidently, his touch provided her no comfort, and the nightmare clung to her waking mind. As she cried the name of her companion over and over again, her unfocused eyes stared up until the rictus of the intense horror seeped from her features, and then she wept.

Rand's heart broke for her.

Biting back the pain that burned his torn wrists, and using all his leverage, he pulled Moria from her meagre cot to the cold stone floor, then into his arms. "It's all right," he said, cradling

her against his chest and stroking her hair. “It’s all right, you’re just dreaming. It’s only a dream.”

“He’s gone!” she wailed. “Zariel is gone!”

“I know. I’m so sorry.”

“I miss...” She cut the sentence short, sniffed wetly, and wiped her tear-stained face. “I’m sorry,” she said, quieter now. “I can’t remember the last time I dreamed so vividly.”

The worst of it seemed to be over, but Rand didn’t want to let her go. It felt callous to ask, but he had to know. “What did you see?”

“It was a battle. Of course,” she added wryly. “It’s always a battle. Our last one was in a village overrun by shaders, and Zariel and I fought them alone. We had to try and save the villagers, but we were overwhelmed. I lost him.”

She pulled away and looked Rand straight in the face. The physical distance, mere inches though it was, made his heart scream in protest. Then Moria did the last thing he dared to expect; she raised her hands to cup his cheeks. “I don’t imagine this will change anything, but I swear to you, if you and I were to bond, I would never leave you behind, never abandon you. I would stand beside you in this life, and I would support and aid you, no matter what you chose to do or where you wanted to go. I would love you with every part of my being and cherish every moment we spent together.”

Sitting in the dark cell with the cold flagstones still echoing the sounds of her sorrow, Rand believed. For the first time, he believed every word Moria said. It felt like a door had opened between them. It was just a crack, but enough for Rand to glimpse what lay beyond, the enticing potentiality of a life with her, and it was beautiful, something he desperately wanted, but couldn’t quite reach.

He gripped the door, trying to force it open wide enough to walk through. “Help me,” he said. “Please.” They were so close, but there was no time left, and his desire to be with her wouldn’t be enough to satisfy the other Daoine Sídhe.

Whatever Moria saw in his hungry gaze must have been enough to convince her. With a careful exertion of the True Power, she detached the cuff from his left wrist, fed her slender hand through the alloy circle, and clasped his hand. Feeling the gentle but insistent pressure of her grip, Rand felt his power rise. He willed the door open and gazed deeply into Moria's soul. She was dazzling, magnificent, full of wit, grace and beauty—soft and tender, yet stronger than even he'd suspected. He knew as he fell to his knees at that doorway that everything she had said about wanting to help him, wanting to share a life with him, wanting to follow his dreams, was true.

“What's this, then?”

It was as though a rubber band snapped back, and Rand hurtled away from the door, from the enchanting vista of a life shared, and found himself again in the dark, cold cell with the hard stone floor beneath him.

Moria and Rand turned toward the cell door, where Goran stood with his muscular arms crossed over his barrel chest and a scowl darkening his thick brow. “How dare you uncuff that bastard?” he yelled at Moria, before a cunning smile replaced his frown. “The moment I tell Idra, you're done.”

Moria pushed to her feet. “Scamper off and tell Idra, if you please.” She reached toward the cuff that encased Rand's right arm.

“Don't you dare take that off!” Goran barked. “You're not authorized to set him loose!”

Moria sighed but she pulled her fingers away, crossing her arms to reflect Goran's pose. “Inform Idra that I want to meet with her and the High Queen at once. Tell her it's very urgent.” She raised an imperious eyebrow at the agape companion. “Go on, then. Shoo.”

Goran scampered away as if his tail was on fire.

Rand chuckled.

It was amazing how a huge man like Goran could be turned into a sheepdog with one command from Moria.

Turning to him, she laid her hands on his shoulders and warmed him from head to toe with her power. As a contented purr rose from his chest, he leaned his head against her shoulder.

“They’ll come for me soon,” she said quietly. “Once I can demonstrate to them that we have a bond, they’ll let us go.”

“But our bond...” *Isn’t complete*, he wanted and yet didn’t want to say, unwilling to consider the possibility that he might remain a prisoner after glimpsing such delights.

“I think the way we’ve done this will please them more than a full bond would,” she said.

A door clanged, a sure sign that Idra was on her way. That was quick. Moria stroked her hands down Rand’s back.

“Thank you for trusting me,” she whispered a second before Idra reached the door.

“Get away from him!” the Ruby Sister shouted. “You dare to call a meeting with the High Queen while you cavort with this man? Come with me at once!” Idra stalked in, grabbed Moria’s shoulder and spun her around.

Rand clenched his fists to stop himself from lashing out at her for mistreating Moria.

“As for you,” she said, glancing at his one uncuffed hand like it was a personal affront to her, “if you so much as gather a hint of the True Power while we’re gone, my companions will strip your hide.” She smiled grimly. “And I’ll strip Moria’s again.”

Shaking with the force of will it took to contain his anger, Rand made himself nod.

“Oh, the animal does understand after all!” She looked like she wanted to say more, but turned away instead, dragging Moria with her.

Rand was stunned by how painful it was to watch his beloved being marched away. *If they kill her, I’ll burn this citadel to the ground.*

An hour. Rand would give them an hour.

After that, well, he wasn't sure he'd be able to contain the True Power for much longer.

Moria



The High Queen sat proudly on her throne, chin high and spine ramrod straight. Her fatigue was evident in the crinkles of her mouth and the deep lines around her eyes, yet her voice remained strong, unbending. “So. You managed to bond him.”

“Yes.”

The High Queen frowned. “Is that all you have to say?”

“Is something else required?” Moria asked.

“I demand further explanation, and I suggest that you start with that cuff and why it is on your wrist.”

“Ah.” Moria fingered the heavy bracelet. “Sharing the cuffs was the catalyst which allowed me to bond with him in the end. While they were both on his wrists, they served to dampen his ability, but when we shared the pair between us, they interlaced our powers. It isn’t the first time they’ve been used that way,” she added, because the last thing she needed was to seem even more rogue and less orthodox than she actually was.

“If that is true, your bond is contingent on the cuffs.” Idra’s eyes lit up with greed as she stared at the metal circle on Moria’s wrist. “I’m ready to take the burden of Rand Thorin off your hands.” She smirked. “Literally.”

Moria’s stomach dropped. “It doesn’t work like that,” she said, more meekly than was appropriate under the circumstances.

“Moments ago, you claimed it did. Are you a liar, then?” Idra taunted. “Do you dare to speak untruths to our High Queen?”

The High Queen sighed heavily. “Idra, just how much of a fool are you?”

For once, Moria wasn't the target of the High Queen's ire, and she felt a tickle of pleasure watching Idra's face turn as red as her cloak.

“The cuffs act as a channel between them, similar to how we all channel the True Power, but sharing them didn't create the bond; it merely enhanced it. Wearing it would do nothing for you except weaken you in front of a very dangerous man.”

“But—” Idra's jaw dropped. “You promised him to me!” she nearly shouted. “You said that I was meant to bond with him! Who else has the strength to keep a man like that in line? Certainly not Moria.”

“And yet she managed to do what you couldn't,” the High Queen said dryly. “She bonded with the most powerful male the Daoine Sídhé have seen in a hundred years, and she did it without breaking his mind or spirit. He belongs to her now.”

Idra shook her head. “Please, High Queen. Please, let me try again!”

“Idra.” The High Queen leaned forward. “I will say this one last time. Rand Thorin will not be yours. You had your chance, and you failed. Leave it be.” She sat back and sniffed derisively. “Now, get out of my sight.”

Moria had never seen her sister look so dejected.

After a moment of swaying on the spot and trying to decide between two unappealing courses of action, Idra finally smartened up, turned on her heel, and strode out of the throne room.

Moria watched her leave with a feeling of intense satisfaction but also puzzlement. Idra despised Rand, and although she obviously coveted his power, did she really want to bond with a man she couldn't stand?

“Idra is a fool, but she is powerful, and she hungers for more,” the queen said. “You must watch your back with her.”

The warning brought her attention back to the High Queen. Moria acknowledged her caution with a nod. “I know.”

“Do you?” The High Queen’s gaze was piercing. “Yes, I suppose you do. Especially after what happened last time.”

Memories of Zariel’s death twisted the blade in Moria’s heart, but she didn’t allow her pain to show on her face.

“I’ll keep her in the citadel for as long as possible, but like her or not, Idra and her companions are excellent fighters, and I can’t justify keeping them away from the battlefield for long, not with the growing threat from shaders. I may be able to distract her for a month at most before sending her back out into the world. I suggest you use that time wisely.”

“I understand, High Queen. Thank you.”

“Good.” Her eyes narrowed. “On to your assignment. Hordes of shaders are spreading rapidly across the land, but they are only a symptom of our real problem. The source of this evil is in the wastelands. Do you remember what we discussed when you arrived?”

“I do.”

“Then you know what I expect of you, and why time is of the essence. If winter falls before the flow of shaders is quelled, many more people will die. Eventually, the populace will believe we’ve abandoned them and turn against us, and we know where that can lead.”

Oh, Moria knew very well.

After Evan Whytelaw’s death, there was a backlash against the Daoine Sídh. Sisters were turned away from taverns, stoned out of villages, and some were even burned at the stake.

“I will do my utmost to prevent that, Your Highness.”

“Good.” The woman raised a hand to her brow and rubbed her temples, revealing in that unguarded movement the heavy toll of her 791 years on this earth. “Remove Rand Thorin from the dungeon and keep him in your chambers for the night.

Tomorrow morning, both of you must leave the citadel. I'll ensure you're supplied with adequate provisions for the journey ahead. Understood?"

"Yes, High Queen."

"Then go. And take my blessing with you, for whatever that's worth."

It wasn't worth much, but Moria bowed before she left the throne room.

The moment the doors closed behind her, she hurried her step, eager to get back to Rand and free him from that filthy cell.

Rand



The first thing Rand did when Moria brought him to her chambers was head straight for the bath. It felt wonderful to tear the rags from his legs. The fibers clung to the scabs of old and new wounds, which bled afresh as he peeled the pants away.

He planned to perform a ritual burning of the filthy garb, preferring to go naked than wear them again, but hoping instead to be given fresh clothes.

Sinking into the cold water drawn straight from the well, he didn't mind that his bath was chilled. He was desperate to feel clean again.

Every itch he'd ignored, every weeping sore and swollen bite mark throbbed. In his haste, he didn't even consider the impropriety of his nakedness until Moria's arm brushed against his as she leaned forward and dipped her hand into the water.

Moments later, steam rose from the water's surface.

"There," she said, not meeting his eyes. "That's better."

It felt divine. Rand let his head sink beneath the water, leaving only his bruised knees above the surface. He scratched his scalp to free the filth from his auburn curls while the heat relaxed his cramped muscles and massaged the aches from his body. He didn't raise his head above the water until his lungs burned in protest. Then he exploded through the ripples, gasping first, then laughing with the simple joy of it all.

“You’ll have to teach me how to do that,” he murmured, tilting his head back and resting it on the rim of the bath.

Water ran down the sides onto the stone floor, but he didn’t care. Someone else could clean it later—by the shadows, he’d clean it himself, but only when he grew tired of this extravagant liquid indulgence.

“I will, since you like it so well.” The amusement in Moria’s voice was as clear as a bell. “There’s soap in the dish on the stool beside you.”

Rand spent the next hour scrubbing and scouring, rinsing and pouring, and then scrubbing again until his flesh squeaked. His hair was a tangled mess in desperate need of a date with a brush, but it was clean too.

Eventually, he clambered out of the tub and wrapped himself in a large towel he found on the stool.

Staring at the filthy water, he chuckled. “Um. I’m sorry about that. You’re not going to want to get in there.”

It suddenly occurred to him that in his desperate desire to be clean, he’d acted selfishly. He should have offered Moria the first bath. She was nowhere near as filthy as he had been, and he would have felt honored to soak in water that had caressed her skin.

As she laughed, Rand felt it in his head as well as heard it with his ears. Their bond was strengthening, and her thoughts were slowly becoming clearer.

The manacle around his wrist seemed to gleam for a moment.

“It’s all right,” Moria said. “I’ll call for it to be refilled. It gives me far greater pleasure to see you comfortable at last than I would gain from a warm bath. Here.” She stepped into view, a pile of familiar-looking clothes in hand. “They’re yours, from before you were brought here. I had them cleaned for you. You can put them on now or later, whichever you prefer, but I’d like to heal you before you try to sleep.”

Sleep!

Tonight, he would sleep in a bed, a real bed, for the first time in...

“How long have I been here?” he asked quietly, his fingers gripping the cloth so tightly that part of him worried he would stretch the clothes out of shape or shred them with his unclipped fingernails.

“Almost two months,” Moria replied softly. “A long time.”

Far too long. His family would be worried about him.

Would she let him go home?

“What happens next?” he asked.

“That’s something we need to talk about,” Moria said. “Later. First, let me heal you. Then we can eat, and then you can sleep for a bit while I get clean.”

“What about you? You should sleep too.” He knew she hadn’t been sleeping well, especially not since the nightmare about the day her companion had died.

“I’ll sleep once we’re on the road.”

Rand looked at Moria and deliberately widened the door between them, strengthening their bond. He felt her quiet assurance that he had no reason to worry, that she would be fine, that she would take care of everything, even... ah.

He frowned. “We aren’t safe here?”

“I think recent history has already proven that.” Moria’s mouth trembled, a movement so slight that without the bond he wouldn’t have noticed it, and there were dark shadows beneath her eyes.

There was more she wasn’t telling him.

“Tell me. It’s better if I know what we’re facing.”

“The High Queen has given us her blessing to depart, but there are those here who, well, you know. Some of the sisters have taken a strong dislike to you. Some are jealous of your power, and others of what we have.”

They wanted what Moria had.

Him, his power to control and use as their own.

“They are jealous of our bond, of *you*, not me. They wanted me as their pet. To gain control of my power. Is it Idra?”

Moria nodded. “It isn’t only Idra. I’ll explain everything later, I promise. For now, please, sit with me.”

She led him to the edge of the bed. The mattress sank invitingly under Rand’s weight, but he held himself back from flopping onto it.

It was strange to realize that despite his youth and Moria’s beauty, his body craved sleep rather than exploring the depths of their bond.

When he yawned, Moria smiled. “Give me your hand.”

He did, but almost yanked it from her grip as a wave of intense heat crawled up his arm. “What?” His initial alarm subsided as he realized the itches, the aches, and every other pain, major and minor, that he’d endured for so long had vanished.

“There.” Moria patted his hand. “Let me get the food.” She stood up but sagged as if she was about to collapse.

Rand pulled her back down. After hitching the towel more firmly around his hips, he said, “Let me get it.”

He found a covered tray on a table beneath the window that, when opened, revealed two seeded rolls and a round of soft, fragrant cheese, two bowls of steaming soup, and a bright, delicious looking green salad that made him salivate. He carried the tray to the bed and set it down between them.

“Go ahead,” she said.

He fell on the food like a starving man.

By the shadows, he *was* a starving man. He’d eaten one small meal a day for weeks, when he was accustomed to four of them. He worked his way through half the tray, and when Moria indicated it was all right, ate everything she had left as well. By the end of the feast, his stomach was uncomfortably full, but he did not regret even one morsel.

“Better?” she asked, smiling again.

Rand winked, fearful that he would expel a loud burp the moment he opened his mouth.

“Good. In that case...” She waved her hand and the tray floated back to the table. A second wave extinguished the light in the corner. “Lie down,” she said softly. “And get some sleep. I’ll wake you soon enough. Tomorrow, we leave for Fairview.”

Rand’s heart jumped with delight. “Really? We’re going back home?”

“I think we ought to while we can,” she said cryptically.

Rand was too tired to ponder what she meant. It was enough that he could tell she was sincere.

Back home, back to Father and Kaia and Mila. It’s been so long, what must they think? I wonder if they believe I’m still alive.

“Sleep,” Moria said again. “Worrying can wait until later.”

“You sleep too,” Rand muttered, but he was already sliding back onto the bed, moaning with pleasure at how amazing the mattress felt under his body.

He might be healed of the worst of the injuries he’d sustained here, but his mind remembered how they felt, and right now, lying in this comfortable bed, pain free, was pure bliss.

Moria



“I ‘ll sleep once we’re on the road,” Moria assured Rand, but he didn’t hear her. He was already asleep.

She watched the tension leave his body, admiring the beauty of his face. Her eyes drifted from the relaxed lines of his soft lips and sculpted chin, moving down his body and following the ridges that his chest and sprawled limbs made beneath the quilt.

Arms and legs everywhere, he was stretched out like a starfish, or a young child who has no concept of the space filled by their extended arms and legs, but Rand was no child, far from it. Still, he seemed as happy as one, and all it had taken was a bath, good food, and a warm, soft place to sleep.

It seemed simple now, but getting him out of that dungeon had necessitated extreme measures. In the end, she had opened herself emotionally to him in such a way that he’d had no choice but to open himself to her. They might have left themselves vulnerable and raw. The pain of failure could have crushed them both and left the possibility of future love impossible for either of them. But it hadn’t failed. Against all odds, they had learned to trust one another. And the risk she had taken was nothing compared to the simple pleasure of watching the happy man sleep.

If Moria had wanted to share the bed with him, she would have had to maneuver his limbs like a piece of intricate origami while trying not to disturb his rest, but she needed a bath, and she needed to make plans, so just as she had told

Rand, sleep would wait until she was on the back of her trusted horse.

I'm glad I could do this for you, she thought, channeling comfort toward him. The bond between them was weakened by sleep, but he sighed, and a smile played across his lips.

Rest well, Rand.

Moria wouldn't allow herself rest until they were safely out of the citadel, and away from this pit of vipers masquerading as a place of solace and refuge for the Daoine Síde.

Gathering her cloak about her, she approached the windowsill to check the lines of True Power that she'd laid around the chamber, layers of traps that only the wariest sister would detect. As all of them hummed, Moria nodded to herself.

Pearls may look soft, but you don't even see us strike until you've already stepped into our—

A series of lines suddenly bent inward, compressing and tightening until they formed an impenetrable shield in front of her. Moria channeled enough power to sharpen her eyesight and stared into the darkness. Something pushed toward her. Caught in the web of her power, it stopped a mere foot from her face, at which point she reached out and delicately plucked it from the air.

A cross-bolt.

Hmm.

One of Idra's companions used a crossbow.

Was she bold enough to make an attempt on Moria's life here, where she was ostensibly under the protection of the High Queen?

Did she believe there would be no repercussions if she succeeded?

Was the High Queen less inclined to protect Moria than she'd believed?

Their last conversation suggested she had the queen's backing, so Idra must have acted of her own accord.

It didn't matter. Moria had stopped this attempt, and she would stop all other attempts to take Rand from her, by force or coercion.

Not that Rand would ever bend to one of his tormentors.

He'd rather die than surrender, but not on her watch.

Rand was hers, to care for and serve, to guide and protect. She would never let anyone harm him again. They would have to go through her first, and she was not as weak as they thought she was.

"Give it up." Moria's voice was a whisper, but she knew her sister was listening. "Rand wants nothing to do with you. He would rather bond to a heartless Sapphire or a fire-crazy Diamond than you. You are cold and cruel, which would normally work well for you in the citadel. Unfortunately, you're also clueless and vapid."

She felt the full force of Idra's animosity now.

Good. Pay attention to what I'm saying, not what I'm doing.

Slowly, like a vine extending a new tendril, Moria reached with her Power toward the bolt's point of origin. Once it found the shooter, it gently latched on to him. It was the equivalent of a tiny bell that would ring in Moria's mind whenever he got too close, an advantage she was sure to need over the next few weeks and months.

"If you were smart, you would have seen from the beginning that Rand is no simpleton to be whipped into obedience like those poor creatures you call companions," she continued. "He is a man with a great destiny. The potential of his power is incredible. Just think of what he can achieve with it." Moria imagined it now. "Think of the feats he can pull off, channeling in ways none of us can and ridding us of the shaders. Think on that and know that you will never be able to control him and claim his victories as your own."

Moria was not foolish. She knew she could not control Rand either. Hopefully, her gentle guidance would be enough. Anything too heavy-handed would cause him to fight back.

“Now.” She channeled the True Power into the bolt until it glowed. “Take this back, if you please.” She threw it into the air, and it sped back along the line it had taken to reach her. She felt Idra’s companion curse and leap to the side—

And the cupola in the distance burst into flames.

Well, she’d done it now. But by the shadows, if she was going to leave this hellhole, she might as well go out with flair, or as it may be, a literal fire.

Moria smiled and closed the window.

She kept the adjoining door open as she refilled the tub with clean warm water, got in, and rested her head against the rim, allowing herself a moment’s peace before her true work began.

Rand



They rode out of the citadel as the sun peered over the treetops. Moria's healing, combined with a bath and an amazing night's sleep, had energized Rand, and he'd bounced out of bed when he heard the dawn chorus. In contrast, Moria looked ill. The shadows beneath her eyes were a lurid violet, and her arms shook as she clambered into the saddle on her white stallion.

Her eyes shuttered the moment those marble and metal gates were behind them, trusting her steed to keep to the trail. Rand wondered whether Moria and her horse shared a similar bond to the one she'd established with him.

Craning his neck, he watched the citadel shrink in the distance.

Rand had never felt so relieved to leave a place behind. His spirits lifted as the gap between him and his jailers widened, and he prayed that he would never again have reason to enter those formidable marble walls.

It was a magnificent structure of austere beauty on the outside, but its interior housed a nest of vipers who were rotten to the core. If not for Moria freeing him, he would have either lost his mind or chosen death to end his suffering.

An hour later, when the Azure Hills finally obscured even the highest tower, Rand glanced at Moria. Her eyes were open again, but she seemed lost in her thoughts.

She was a natural rider, swaying gently atop the saddle as their horses followed the road.

With her simple grayish cream cloak of untreated wool, fellow travelers might assume she was the servant of a noble household, a well-to-do merchant, or a scholar. The only hint of her true identity was in the silk lining made briefly visible when a passing breeze ruffled the hem, a sleek, glistening fabric in the most beautiful shade of white. Her dress was pale purple—his mother would have probably called it lilac—and her sturdy shoes were a well-worn brown leather, not the silk slippers he'd seen the citadel's sisters prance around in, or the metal-studded boots their companions favored. Her tapered fingers bore no rings, and the only jewelry she wore was a pearl pendant at the end of a thin gold chain.

“Why don't you flaunt your status like the others?”

“Hmm?” Moria glanced at him with slightly startled eyes. “I'm sorry, what did you say?”

My love, you look exhausted. Did you get any sleep at all last night? I shouldn't have bothered you with such a petty question.

Moria smiled. “I'm not bothered.”

Her response reminded him of the connection between them, which allowed her access to his thoughts, and his cheeks burned fiercely.

Her smile widened. “Talking helps keep me alert, so please, ask me anything.”

“I was wondering why you don't advertise your status as a sister,” he said. “The Daoine Sídhé are revered in most towns and villages. You would never have to pay for food or lodging, and people would bring you gifts in exchange for blessings.” That was what the people of his village had done whenever a sister showed up, although he felt that many of them snubbed what they considered peasants' offerings.

“Oh, I still give blessings,” she said. “And it isn't hard for people to realize what I am if they pay attention. I suppose... To be completely honest, Rand, I haven't given it much thought before. Maybe it's because first impressions can be

misleading, and I prefer the benefit of careful study. Let me try and explain that better.”

They rode silently for half a mile while she took time to formulate her answer. Rand had dismissed his question as petty the moment he'd asked it, but Moria seemed to think it was worthy of a well-thought-out answer.

“I was never comfortable flaunting my access to the True Power,” Moria said as they passed a lush carpet of bluebells. “Even when I was first raised to the level of full Daoine Sídhé, I didn't feel the need to shout about it. My sect has always been more retiring than the others, less inclined to balance on pedestals. When you expect people to look up to you, it means you have further to fall, and I never really liked being the center of attention. That was one of the things Zariel did for me.” She smiled. “He deflected people's gaze.”

Rand shook his head. “I still don't understand. You're Daoine Sídhé, a channeler of the True Power. You have abilities beyond what most people can dream of. Why hide it?”

“How do you think that makes most people feel? Do you think they feel safer when they see me? Or do they feel afraid? How did you feel when you encountered my sisters before your own link to the True Power manifested?”

Rand pressed his lips together and looked away. He'd always felt awed, it was true, but also resentful and sometimes afraid. The sisters made him feel on edge, no matter whether they spoke cordially or not.

“Precisely,” Moria murmured. “I prefer to disguise my identity because I know that not everyone will welcome me. I'm not as good a fighter as many of my sisters, and I've seen Daoine Sídhé killed by those who feared them.” She lowered her voice. “And I've seen what they can do when assassination attempts fail. I don't want to court that kind of attention.”

Rand didn't probe any deeper, and he closed their bond as best he could. The manacle on his wrist mocked him in the morning sunlight, reminding him that as long as he wore it, she would hear his thoughts. What would happen if he took it off?

Would Moria let him?

She behaved as though she trusted him. Perhaps she wouldn't fight him if he tore it from his wrist. But if they were discovered without a bond, they would both be killed by her accursed sisters.

They rode for another few hours, following the road signs to a large town. As the threat of the citadel receded the farther they traveled, Rand relaxed enough to enjoy the gentle movements of the horse and the warm sunlight on his face.

The sound of thundering hooves broke the tranquil moment, and Rand tensed, sitting up straighter, but Moria's eyes were still closed. He pummeled their door with his thoughts, trying to get her to wake up, but she responded with an exhausted murmur—*don't worry*.

Exasperated, he leapt down from his steed, grabbed the reins of both bridles and led them into the woodland that skirted the road. Four riders raced past. He couldn't tell whether they had come from the citadel, the town they had passed, or somewhere else, but he stood there shaking, heart pounding an urgent rhythm, until the sound of hooves faded into the distance.

"Why did we stop?" Moria asked.

He wanted to growl at her, infect her with the terror he had felt, but he reined in those emotions. "I thought that we were being pursued, and I couldn't wake you. All I could think to do was hide us."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Too many sleepless nights. I'll try and stay awake until we reach the next town."

It took another hour to reach their destination, and true to her word, Moria stayed awake. She led the way, guiding him along Varion's cobbled streets and around the edge of a thriving market. When they reached a blacksmith's shop, she stopped outside and dismounted.

A young woman in a spark-scarred leather apron ran over to take the reins. "Welcome, Mistress," she said, inclining her head respectfully.

“Thank you, Cladia. Is your instructor here?”

The girl nodded toward the forge. “Workin’ on a suit of armor right now.”

“Does he have time to speak with me?”

“He’ll make time for you, Mistress.”

“Wonderful.” Moria looked up at Rand. “Please, come with me. We need to get you fitted out.”

“I’ve already got—” Rand stopped when he realized that he no longer had the long dagger and spear that his father had presented to him when he came of age. Both had been lost when Idra and her companions had set upon him.

He dismounted and followed, his gaze roaming around the forge as they walked along the outer edge of the sweltering chamber toward a massive anvil.

A man with shoulders like an ox was hammering a sheet of dark metal with powerful, ringing blows. He stopped when Moria came into view. “Ah. Back again, eh?”

Rand blinked. That wasn’t the welcome he’d expected.

Moria shrugged. “Indeed.”

The smith glanced at Rand. “Thought you were done with companions after what happened to our lad.”

“I thought so as well, but neither Rand nor I were given much of a choice.”

The smith looked like he wanted to spit but thought better of it. “I suppose you want him kitted out, eh?”

“If you have a moment.”

“It’ll take more than a moment.” The blacksmith motioned toward his apprentice, a large and sullen looking lad, and instructed him on what to do.

“With me,” the smith said and stomped toward the house as his apprentice took the hammer.

Every other step the man took produced a strangely insect-like click, and after a few moments Rand realized that one of the

smith's legs was made of mahogany and capped with a metal foot.

They entered a shop.

Weapons covered every wall, and at the back behind a wooden counter, a massive broadsword, almost as tall as Rand, had been set into the paneled wall.

What sort of a man could wield a weapon like that?

Moria glanced toward it. Rand felt rather than saw the weight of longing in her gaze. Did she know who it belonged to?

Had it... had it been the sword of her former companion?

"Arms out, lad," the blacksmith snapped, a pair of calipers in his hand. Rand obeyed, and the man took some quick measurements, then stared at him for a moment before saying, "You've no experience with a sword, I take it."

"No, none." A dagger, yes—knives were always useful on a farm. A spear as well, good for driving off predators. A spear with the right kind of hook could also be used to pull itinerant sheep back into the herd. But never a sword—that was a nobleman's weapon, and useless for farming and herding. "I've only ever used daggers and spears."

"You'll need to learn how to handle a sword if you mean to travel with this one." The smith jerked his head at Moria. "Get her to teach you."

Her? Teach him? Rand stared at Moria and had the pleasure of seeing her blush.

"Hmm, what else? No, don't tell me. Here it is," he said, lifting a long weapon from the right-hand wall. "A polearm. And you'll need a knife as well, aye?"

"Aye—I mean, yes," Rand said.

"Fair enough. I'll give you some things to try, and then..." The smith grinned. "Then you can test yourself against my granddaughter and see if you're good enough to own them. No one walks away with one of my weapons unless they can use it, except when they have a master on hand to teach them."

Moria



Rand sparred with Cladia, the blacksmith's granddaughter, testing his new weapons—a dagger made from a single piece of metal as long as his forearm, a spear with a brutal leaf-shaped blade and a shaft that bore iron studs, and an elegant broadsword that looked so natural in his hand it might have been made for him.

He held his own with the dagger and with the spear, immediately going on the offensive, and Cladia called the match early. But when they switched to swords, she bested him easily.

Rand needed instruction.

It was just as well that Moria had remembered to bring her own sword. She would never call herself a master swordsman, but her former companion had ensured she was at least proficient. Now she would pass on those hard-earned skills to a new companion.

It felt oddly right to do so, despite the many years when merely thinking about wielding a sword again made her feel sick.

“So?” Rand asked as they sat down to dinner that night. “I assume those people are old friends?”

Moria was surprised that he'd held off his questions until they checked into the inn. Then again, he'd had plenty to distract him.

“Very old friends,” Moria said. “Sorrall, the blacksmith, was Zariel's uncle. He raised him after Zariel's parents died. I've

known him for a long time.”

Rand plucked rolls from the breadbasket with alacrity. He was still so skinny from being starved in the dungeons, and he was gorging at every meal until his body caught up to his mind and remembered that he didn't have to fear starvation.

“That would explain the stuff,” he murmured.

Moria laughed. “Stuff? That's very eloquent, Rand.”

“You know what I mean. The familiarity. The disrespect.”

“It wasn't disrespect. They treat me like family, which I greatly appreciate. I don't want their attitude toward me to ever change.”

“Was that Zariel's sword on the back wall?” he asked.

Rand saw more than he let on.

She nodded. “It was.”

“Was he a giant?”

Moria laughed. “I suppose he was. Zariel was six feet eight inches tall. I looked like a child standing next to him.”

She couldn't remember the last time she'd talked about her companion without pain slicing through her heart, let alone laughed so freely.

As Rand grinned, sharing the joke, Moria felt their bond reopen for the first time since that morning and reveled in the feeling of contentment she sensed from him.

“Six-eight.” Rand shook his head. “That's incredible.” He straightened in his chair and squared his broad shoulders. “I thought that I was tall.”

“You are plenty tall.” She waved a dismissive hand. “Zariel was the only man I've ever seen use a sword that size. Still, I don't think it would have been his first choice if he hadn't spent most of his childhood training with swords.”

Rand sighed, a hint of melancholy tainting his contented expression from only moments ago. “I've got a lot to live up to as your companion.”

Moria leaned over the table and took his hand. “Don’t compare yourself to Zariel. You have powers that he couldn’t even dream of. Training with weapons is important, but when battling the shaders, channeling the True Power is much more useful than wielding a sword.”

“And you can teach me to do both?” His expression turned bitter for some reason, and the door between them slammed shut. “It will take me years to reach Zariel’s mastery with the sword, if ever, and learning to channel will probably be even more difficult. I’m of no use to you.”

“You’re strong, and smart, and you’ll excel at both in no time.”

Rand looked away. “I don’t know whether I’m strong or not. I never got a chance to practice before the Daoine Sídhé locked me up. Yeah, I protected what remained of my family, but people do miraculous things when the stakes are high enough. I might not be able to do anything like that again.” He pushed his fingers through his messy hair. “Perhaps you should let me go and find someone else. You nearly died with Zariel at your side, and I’m nowhere near the fighter he was.”

Moria didn’t know where the lack of confidence had suddenly come from. Was Rand afraid to let her down?

Or did he just miss his family and want to return to them?

She could understand that, but the sad truth was that once his power manifested, Rand could never go back to living his simple life.

“I can’t let you go. You will immediately get picked up by another sister.”

“It would be better than bonding yourself to a useless nobody like me, wouldn’t it?” He glared at the manacle around his wrist. “I hate this thing. I hate that it’s the only reason we’re...” He lifted a pair of angry eyes at her. “Get it off me.”

Moria took a deep breath. “I can’t take it off. It’s facilitating our bond, and if I remove it now, we might not stay bonded. You’d be fair game for any other sister, and I won’t let that happen.”

“Why the hell not?”

Rand’s mood had steadily declined since they left the smithy, and Moria was tired. He accused her of not caring when the problem was that she cared too much. He was drowning in feelings of worthlessness and lashing out at those closest to him like a petulant child.

Grow up!

But was it his fault?

He had seen her bond with Zariel, the love they had shared. After meeting the family that worshipped her previous companion, was it any surprise that Rand felt he could not live up to such expectations. Those weeks spent chained in a cell, insulted, beaten and spat on, had been designed to crush his spirit and rid him of any vestige of self-worth. It was inevitable that his broken pride would cling instead to churlishness and resentment. It had been a mistake to bring him to Varion.

She saw that now.

Frustrated and tired though she was, Moria needed to be patient. She and the sisterhood owed him that. It might take years to restore all that had been taken from him.

“Watch carefully.” She picked up a knife.

It was a wooden-handled serving utensil, blunted by years of use, but still sharp enough to cut her hand, which was what she did, carving a thin red line along her thumb.

Rand stared at her in shock for a second, then hissed as he realized that he felt the same pain. “What?” He stared at his thumb that now bore a similar cut. “How did you do that?”

“That’s part of what the manacles do.” Moria set the knife down. She didn’t enjoy pain and hated inflicting it on others, but at least Rand was listening to her now. “They don’t just blend our powers; they bond our bodies. If one of us is injured, the other will share the wound, halving the pain. Bonds like this were common when the Daoine Sídhe were more violently inclined.”

“You mean that they’re not violent now?” Rand glared at his thumb.

“They are, but in different ways. The companion system we use today has been refined. This older method is blunt, but there was no other way to get you out of there in time.” She inclined her head. “I’m sorry that I didn’t make this clearer earlier. I should have been more explicit in requesting your permission before I bonded us in this fashion. I just...” She sighed. “I was worried about you, Rand. About what they would do to you, and to me if we failed. Do you understand why I had to do it? Can you forgive me?”

As he shook his head, her heart sank, but then the door between them opened, and emotions surged through her—Rand’s sense of shame for having pushed her so hard, his distaste for the manacles tempered by gratitude now that he understood why she had used them, and beneath it all a burning desire to learn how to use and control the True Power.

“I should be the one asking you to forgive me,” he said. “I haven’t even thanked you for saving me, and...”

“You don’t need to thank me.” She took his hand and traced the wound with her fingertip to heal it. “Just work hard and take care of yourself, and I’ll do the same.”

Nodding, he looked into her eyes, and a new emotion trickled through their bond. A gentle heat. It was so different from anything Moria had felt in the last ten years that it took her a moment to realize what it was.

Rand felt affection for her. No, not just affection—desire.

Rand’s eyes widened, and the door between them closed again. “I’ll go and get something to clean your hand.” He rose from the table so hastily that he banged his knee against the top.

“You don’t have to bother, it’s—”

“I insist.” He rushed toward the stairs, heading to their room.

Moria pressed a hand to her chest.

He thought that she was beautiful. Desirable. Well. *That* might change things somewhat. It had been a very long time since

Moria had taken a lover, and never one that she had bonded with before they had become intimate.

It was the bond's fault. Rand's youth and inexperience played a role as well, but in either case, she couldn't take advantage of him. Still, she couldn't pretend that she didn't want him.

Perhaps she and Rand Thorin were destined for adventure in more ways than one.

Rand



They had their first channeling lesson that evening, in the privacy of their shared room.

Moria refused to let him bandage her cut. “That would be a waste of a good wound,” she said. “Healing is one of the Daoine Sídhe’s most valuable abilities, and the first thing a neophyte learns. By channeling the True Power, we can heal even grievous wounds, our own and others’. It’s about your intent and the amount of power you push toward the solution you desire. The stronger you are, the more miraculous the things you can do. A tiny cut like this, any channeler can fix.”

Rand frowned. “If that’s true, then why did you linger in pain after that bitch beat you back at the citadel?”

“I wasn’t allowed to heal myself, and we’re not talking about me. Focus.”

Rand wouldn’t let her evade his questions forever, but he took her point to heart. He did need to focus because otherwise he’d drift from the lesson to fantasize about stroking Moria’s milky skin while thinking about how beautiful she was.

Shifting position, he tamped down those wandering thoughts, not wishing to embarrass himself for the second time that night.

“Focus on what you want to happen,” she murmured.

He imagined parting her thighs.

No! She doesn’t mean that. I need to focus on healing her wound. That’s what I want to happen, not...

Rand scratched the tight curls behind his ear and concentrated. The door between them was wide open, allowing him to see her process, how she would heal the wound.

It's important to stay calm, be certain of your intention and strong in your mind as you handle the power, focus it carefully and accurately, bind it with your intention, then squeeze it from your hand with a gentle push while focusing only on wellness.

Wholeness.

All right, he could do that.

Rand might not be an expert channeler yet, but there had been plenty of occasions when he'd needed to hold many strands of thought together at once. Life as a shepherd and farmer was no simple matter, and he'd learned complicated skills before.

He could do this.

He cleared his mind, held Moria's hand in his own, and studied the cut.

No, don't let your feelings of inadequacy and guilt screw this up. Heal her. Heal her because she deserves to be whole. Heal her because you only ever want her to be healthy, perfect.

He felt the insistent warmth of the True Power roll upward from his feet and through his body. It was like drawing energy from the earth and being filled with incandescence. Its gleam was beautiful, seductive, and it was hard to look away, even when its terrible heat threatened to sear his eyeballs and burn him to a crisp.

"Take a little less," Moria advised him. "Narrow the channel."

Rand didn't want to ebb the flow—and the power resisted his reluctant efforts to do so. Its voice whispered in his ear, challenging him to take more, to be more, promising greatness, telling him he could—

"Rand. You're hurting me."

Seconds passed before his mind untangled her voice from the whispers and processed the meaning of her words. He reconnected with his body and realized he was gripping her

hand too tightly, that his fingers had become a vice, crushing her delicate bones.

He immediately released the pressure. “Shit, I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

He constricted the channel to slow the flow of light and felt its frenzy leave his body, and then...

Heal.

A second later, her cut was gone. Rand let go, feeling energized and ashamed at the same time.

Moria turned her hand over. Her eyes, when they met his, shone with pride. There was no reflection of his own conflicted feelings in their dazzling depths. “That was wonderful!” she said, smiling brightly. “You did so well! Not even a scratch left.”

“You basically told me this was the equivalent of child’s play, so I won’t get too big-headed over it,” Rand joked.

“Yes, but it’s an important step,” she said. *Especially for a man.* The corners of her mouth dipped, before rising again. Rand was relieved to discover that she too struggled to shield her thoughts from him.

She regained her usual poise and continued, “Channeling power in narrow streams like this is challenging work. Tomorrow, I’ll show you how to push larger quantities of it outward.”

“As a weapon?”

“Sometimes, yes.”

“So, what do I need a sword for?”

Moria patted his cheek. “Because you never know what you will have to do to stay alive and protect the lives of others. Never rely on just one weapon. The more you have and the better you are at wielding them, the better your chances of survival.”

“That sounds like a quote.”

“Zariel said it to me a long time ago. He refused to bond with me until I undertook weapons training and showed a marked improvement.” Her gaze seemed unfocused as if she was staring at something in the distance. “He thought my sect was too passive and soft. In the end, of course, he was proven right.” She shook off her brief fugue and stood up. “I’m going to bathe while I can,” she said. “Would you care to join me?”

By the Power, would he ever. But Rand knew his feelings for her would become blatantly obvious the moment they were naked. “I’ll wait ‘til you finish,” he said instead.

Moria nodded, picked up one of her bags and headed out.

With a groan, Rand plopped down on the bed.

He was rock hard and had no idea how to deal with that problem without Moria knowing.

If he slammed the door shut again, would she come running back, asking if he was okay?

On the other hand, she was much older than he was and more experienced. And hadn’t he noticed the ghost of a smile on her lips when he’d told her he would wait? Surely it wouldn’t surprise her if she knew that... well... that he needed a moment to himself. Honestly, being upfront about that was probably the best way forward.

He imagined Moria sinking into the tub, breasts bobbing on the warm water, twisting those golden curls around her index finger as she enjoyed the show. *Stop it!*

Rand ignored the heat in his cheeks and pushed a single thought through the bond—*shutting the door for a while, I need a few moments alone*. In return, he received a short message—*very well*—and the sense that she was gently amused.

Good enough.

Alone in his own head, Rand pulled his trousers open and pushed his hand inside. The second he wrapped his fingers around himself, he moaned out loud.

It had been months since he'd touched himself like this. Over two damn months. When those horrible witches had locked him up, he stopped caring about anything except fighting them and surviving. It had been so long that now he felt on the verge of catching fire.

“Fuck, yes,” he panted, working his hand over his shaft, slick from his pre-cum. Smooth and tight. Rand closed his eyes to focus on the sensation, on the uncomplicated pleasure.

He felt a sense of pride about managing to heal Moria—remembering how gorgeous she had looked, smiling up at him from beneath those dense eyelashes, coy yet earnest—

“*Fuck!*” The force of his orgasm spattered his seed across his chest. Perhaps he should have been more careful, but... he shivered as pleasure rolled through him. His erection remained hard in his hand, as though he hadn't come at all.

Could he get another one in before she returned?

Moria



Moria was grateful to be alone in the bathing room. It wasn't that she was embarrassed by her own nudity or that of others—a body was a body, as far as she was concerned.

There were two reasons to embrace her solitude.

Since her companion had died, she'd grown used to being alone, and the effort required to spend every moment of the last two weeks in the company of others had drained her energy reserves more than she'd realized.

She would use this time to recharge.

The main reason, though, was Rand's effect on her. Moria knew she couldn't control the flush that made her flesh glow pink when she thought about him, and the water wasn't hot enough to be blamed for her bright color.

Rand was very good at closing the door between them when he was consciously working at it. Once he was distracted, though, and began to lose himself in thought, the seal became less than perfect.

And right now, Moria sensed what she would have seen if she were in the same room with him. Shutting her eyes, she squeezed her legs tightly together, waiting for the residual pleasure to wane. There, he'd done it, he'd found release. Now he would relax, perhaps even go to sleep, and she could meditate for a while in the tub.

Only, the pleasure wasn't ebbing. Instead, it had reached a steady plateau.

Was Rand still touching himself?

Was he going to go again?

Moria stared into space, her legs shifting restlessly as she felt Rand's pleasure rise. His strokes were slower this time, less of a relentless drive toward ecstasy and more of a leisurely build.

You can stop this. Shut the door on your side, block him out, and give him his privacy.

That would have been the right thing to do, but it had been so long since Moria had felt such desire, and her mind and body reveled in the reawakening, feeling fully alive for the first time since Zariel's death.

She knew that Rand wanted her and was probably thinking of her as he was pleasuring himself. All it would take to find out was to delve deeper into his mind.

Would she see herself starring in his fantasies?

"Oh," she groaned, her eyes falling closed for a moment.

Her nipples ached, and she brought her hands up and pinched them gently, then rolled them against her palms.

This wasn't a reflection of Rand's desire. The pleasure originated in her own mind, her own body, her own fantasies.

Did she want to share them with him?

No, she shouldn't rush him. He was in her thrall, her pupil, and if this was going to happen, he would need to make the first move.

It took some effort, but Moria eventually closed the door completely.

Without Rand's impending climax hiking up her desire, she wasn't as driven to chase her own release. It was heavenly to be fully in her own body and wallow in pleasure as it responded to her touch. Tilting her head back, Moria fondled her breast with one hand while the other traced the edges of her lower lips, pressing fingers into the depths of her slick heat.

It had been a while since she'd come like this, but she knew what she liked. Moria pinched her breast one last time, then moved her hand to the center of her desire, making quick, tight circles around it as she pumped her fingers relentlessly.

The connection between her and Rand tightly closed, Moria allowed herself to imagine him above her, her breasts pressed against his chest, his fingers exploring her feminine center.

A wolfish grin would spread over his handsome face as he withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his erection. Then their bodies would move together in the ancient dance of lust and procreation. Rand's eyes would be unfocused, his breath would exhale in moans of delight, while her ankles would meet behind his back, her hands clasping his broad shoulders as he surged into her.

As she climaxed, her mouth opened on a soundless scream and her body torqued up, splashing water around the tub.

Once the tremors subsided, Moria hummed with satisfaction. If she didn't think it would embarrass them both, she would have thanked Rand for the inspiration.

She ought to pleasure herself more often. After all, no one knew what tomorrow might bring and whether she would survive to live another day. It would be a shame to miss out on these simple joys of life in the name of some unwritten propriety.

And speaking of propriety, there was no rule against her and Rand fulfilling each other's fantasies. He might be young, but he was an adult, and if she wanted him in her bed, there was nothing to stop her other than her overbearing sense of responsibility and commitment.

Rand was her trainee, he was under her control, and therefore off limits.

Moria sighed and resisted the urge to dunk her head under the water. Why did she always have to be in charge and do the right thing?

She yearned to let someone else take control. She wanted someone who would take charge at least a little, and the

bedchamber was a good place to start, but the handful of the lovers she'd had throughout her life had been too awed by her ability to channel to assert any kind of dominance.

The divide between Daoine Sídhé and everyone else was simply too great, and Moria had given up hope of ever experiencing that sort of dynamic in a heterosexual relationship.

Regrettably, she was not interested in any of her sisters as friends, let alone lovers.

But Rand was no ordinary man.

Once he had control of his immense power, he would no longer feel cowed by hers.

But he wasn't there yet.

Moria got out of the bath and dried herself with a small, soft towel. She pulled a simple shift over her gently thrumming body, wrapped her cloak around her shoulders, and sauntered back to their room. She knocked on the door before entering.

"Come in."

Rand lay on his bed, bare-chested and looking very relaxed. He glanced at her and smiled, wide and guileless, making Moria's heart skip a beat for the second time that day.

"Did you have a nice bath?" he asked with perfect innocence.

Oh, if only you knew.

"I did." She laid her wet things out on the room's single chair. She could dry them with the True Power, but she preferred not to summon it in her relaxed state. It required focus and deliberation that she didn't possess at the moment. "I'm rather tired now."

"So am I." Rand rolled onto his stomach, still gazing at her. "Sleep well, Moria."

"Sleep well, Rand." She blew out the single candle and settled onto her own narrow bed.

Rand



“You know the area better than I do,” Moria said. “I trust you to choose the quickest and safest trails back to your village.”

While it was true, and smart on Moria’s part to rely on Rand to navigate, he was taken by surprise. He’d expected her to manage every decision during their travels, and he was very happy to be proven wrong.

Even though Moria was older, more experienced, and more knowledgeable than him in almost everything, she wasn’t hungry for power or acclaim like the other Daoine Sídhe, and she had no wish to command and control anyone just to assert her superiority. She treated him like an ally and a friend, taking his preferences into consideration.

The only rule she enforced diligently was training every morning before they broke camp and every evening before they went to sleep.

Mornings were for swordplay. Rand was confident using his weapons of choice, expert even, but he was startled at how easily Moria bested him with a sword. His was a double-edged broadsword, incomparable to the size of the beast her former companion had wielded, but still long. Hers was a single-edged saber, slender yet deadly. She parried his lunges, and her ripostes were as swift as a snake, never touching him but always letting him know she could.

Rand did his best, but it would take months, if not years, before he was anywhere close to her level.

“That’s all right,” she’d said with a shrug the first time he shared that opinion with her. “All skills take time to develop. I know it will be worth it in the end.”

Channeling the True Power came much more naturally. Moria was right—once he got used to feeling how it surged and ebbed inside him, like a raging river or a strong gale from the north, it was easier to direct its energy. Every time he used the True Power, he felt more and more comfortable.

He was born to do this.

He and Moria had been sparring using the True Power every night, and by the end of the first week it was clear that he was a far stronger channeler than her.

Rand consciously had to hold himself back for fear of harming Moria. She was well trained, blocking his energy well, darting past or around it, and using her own power to strike where he least expected it, but by the end of the first week he was winning every duel.

Moria didn’t begrudge his superiority. On the contrary, she celebrated his growing expertise. “I knew you could do it.” She brushed a loose lock of hair from her face. She’d worked up a sweat and seemed to glow in the fading light of the sun. “You’re truly gifted, Rand. I doubt there are many sisters who could stand against you in one-on-one combat at this point.”

“Not even Idra?” If Rand were ever to dream about taking down a Daoine Sídhe, it would be her.

“Not by herself, no. But that doesn’t mean you should provoke her. She has the advantage of fierce if stupid companions fighting by her side,” Moria cautioned.

Rand was glad that she didn’t try to hide the fact that she feared an attack from one of her own people. Not provoking Idra and not fighting defensively were two very different things, though, and he understood the intention in her words. He knew what they might face, had seen it in Goran and Idra’s glee when they discovered Moria had broken a rule.

Regrettably, it wasn’t only shaders they needed to fear.

“Idra has four of them, and each is specialized in a different form of combat: long range, swordplay, close fighting, and hand to hand. To prevail, you would need to master a wide channel of the True Power and send it across a significant distance. One companion could be standing toe to toe with you, another might be a quarter of a mile away with a crossbow, while Idra could be fifty miles distant.”

“How do I practice doing that?” Rand asked.

Moria sat down and opened her pack. “Start by knocking some apples out of that tree. We’ll have them with dinner. Make them fall without crushing or bruising them. If you can catch them as well, so much the better.”

It wasn’t the glamorous challenge Rand had hoped for, but he supposed it made sense, and he didn’t argue. “Okay.” He faced an apple tree that stood approximately fifty feet away, channeled the True Power, aimed and—

The apple exploded.

Rand flushed when Moria laughed. He hated being ridiculed, especially by her, and it didn’t matter how well meaning and gentle she was. Squaring his shoulders and clenching his jaw, Rand felt the desire to snap at her rise in his chest, but when he looked at her, the reproach died in his throat.

Her head was tossed back, exposing that long and elegant throat, and she held a hand against her chest while giggling helplessly.

A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. She was so beautiful—gorgeous. Quick on the heels of that thought, another filled his mind: *she’s mine*.

He hoped the door between them was sealed.

Given her giggling, Moria hadn’t caught a whiff of his unwarranted, possessive thoughts. “That was perhaps a bit too enthusiastic?” she said when she managed to catch her breath again.

“A bit,” Rand agreed with a half-smile. “I was picturing Idra’s face.”

“Try again, but this time think of the power less like a hammer delivering a blow, and more like a net surrounding the apple. That way you can pluck and catch it.”

Rand tried again. The next apple broke into pieces, but wasn't pulverized, so that was progress. It wasn't until his seventh attempt that it hit the ground intact. On his twelfth try, he managed to catch it as well.

“Three of them, please,” Moria said.

Rand channeled the True Power and caught two more with ease, then delivered them to her with a flourish.

“Perfect.” She took them gently and turned them over in her hands. “Not a single bruise. I'm impressed with how quickly you grasp things, Rand.”

That was a nice compliment, and much needed after his many failures that afternoon.

“I... thank you.”

That evening, after a simple dinner, they slept under the stars. Rand was used to weathering nights in the wild with his flock and hardly noticed the change in temperature as the moons rose.

Why was he trembling, then?

It was a while before he realized the shivers were coming from Moria, and his body was simply responding to her discomfort.

“You're cold,” he murmured, cracking open his eyes.

She was sleeping on the far side of their fire, now banked down to coals. Her cloak was pulled tightly around her body.

“It's not too bad,” she murmured through chattering teeth.

Judging from the violence of her shivers, it was bad enough.

“Why don't you channel power to warm yourself?”

“I did,” she said with a sigh. “But it wears off when I fall asleep, and I wake up again. It's all right, though. I'll—”

“Come here.” He didn't mean to sound so brusque.

They were both exhausted, and Rand didn't want either of them to lie awake all night suffering, when he could solve Moria's problem. He expected her to balk at the barked order, but she clambered to her feet and joined him.

"Lie beside me," he said, shifting onto his side so his chest would rest against her back. It was intimate, more so if he wrapped an arm around her like he desperately wanted to do. "I've got heat to spare. Relax, and let me take care of you for once."

"Thank you," she whispered and nestled into the shape of his body.

Within minutes, her breathing deepened and the bond between them faded as it did every time she fell asleep. She still trembled a little, so Rand slid his arm around her waist and curled closer to her.

To help her sleep... just to help her sleep, he cautioned the stirring part of his anatomy.

It wasn't long before she lay still, no longer troubled by the chill, and Rand let his own eyes close and tried to drift off to sleep, hoping he wouldn't embarrass himself with an inappropriate dream about the woman nestled in his arms.

Moria



After the first time sleeping in Rand's arms and feeling his warmth spread through her, Moria wanted to do so every night.

Sleeping side by side while on the road became a habit, and something Moria looked forward to. She was thankful for the chill after sunset and the way her body shivered, allowing them to pretend that their sleeping arrangements were a practical choice.

It wasn't only Rand's heat Moria craved, though his closeness comforted and excited her. It was a thrill they shared. Once supper and training were completed, they watched the flames eagerly. When the fire dwindled, neither of them added kindling, preferring to let it die and extend the time they could spend in each other's arms.

Rand was a natural leader, and the more decisions Moria ceded to him, the more his confidence soared.

Soon he was deciding when and where they would set up camp. The autonomy made him happy, and Moria was delighted to be relieved of such responsibilities. Having Rand take over the practical aspects of their journey gave her more time and energy to think up new ways to test his abilities and extend his powers.

Moria hadn't trained a student for over a century and rarely considered the basic processes of channeling. After centuries as a Daoine Sídhé, it came naturally to her, which made it harder to explain the whys and wherefores to a beginner.

Student and beginner—how much longer would such terms apply to Rand?

He was improving at such a rapid rate that many of the lessons she planned were too easy, and she was constantly improvising and thinking of new tasks to try. It wouldn't be long, she suspected, before he surpassed her learning, and the roles of teacher and student would be reversed.

After leaving Varion, they spent eleven nights on the road, sleeping under the stars, a canopy of trees or an outcrop of rock. The lure of a warm bath and soft bed enticed them into the small town of Draven.

Their horses too would be glad of a night in a stable with warm hay, plenty of water, and someone to brush the filth from their coats.

Draven was a small town with only a few hundred residents, most of whom tended the vast orchards that provided fruit to much of the continent. A night at the town's only inn would be costly, but Moria was more than happy to pay for it, along with some drinks and a hot meal.

As they paid the innkeeper for the room, Moria felt a hot tingle at the back of her mind followed by a disconcerting movement—a squirming sensation as if a maggot had burrowed through her skull, but it was a feeling she recognized and she knew the cause. It was the alarm she had set when she added a trace to Idra's crossbow-wielding companion.

The uncomfortable feeling warned her that he was close by.

Curse her. Can't she leave well enough alone?

Well, at least she had forewarning that a visit from Idra was imminent. She would be able to avoid a violent confrontation inside the inn, where people might get hurt, intercepting the sister before she arrived.

“Hmm.” Moria looked inside her bag. “I need to refresh a few of my personal items. Do you mind taking our things up to the room?”

“What sort of personal items?” Rand's eyes were alight with interest.

“The, ah, intimate kind,” Moria replied. She expected Rand to be put off by her insinuation that she was dealing with feminine issues, but she was wrong.

“I know how to make a good tea for cramps,” he offered instead. “I often made it for my sisters.”

Moria grinned despite herself. “You’re very kind, but I’ll be all right. This won’t take long.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder, squeezed gently, then ran his fingers down her arm before letting go. “I’ll make sure they draw you a hot bath.” Then he was climbing the stairs, leaving Moria staring after him with a breathless appreciation that she had no business feeling.

As she left the inn and strode along a dirt track toward a cluster of walnut trees, the squirming grew stronger, assuring her that she was heading in the right direction. When she entered the grove, Goran stepped out from behind a tree and grinned. Moria sent a trickle of power through the woodland, but she could not sense Idra’s presence.

Had the sister decided the task of stalking Rand was beneath her?

Instead, Moria found another of Idra’s companions—the archer.

“I believe you and your mistress were told not to interfere with me or Rand,” Moria said levelly. “What are you doing here?”

“Not interfering, Sister Moria. Merely checking on your progress.” Goran’s eyes narrowed as he glared defiantly at her. “A lot rides on your ability to tame the boy.”

“He’s not a boy, he’s a man, and a very powerful one.”

“And a very useless one, until he’s actually put to work.”

“He needs to practice his channeling,” Moria said sharply. “To throw him into conflict too soon would be disastrous.”

“To delay for too long would be equally disastrous.”

Moria put her hands on her hips. “A Daoine Sídhé spends between three and ten years in apprenticeship, learning to

channel under the supervision of a trusted master before she is allowed to venture into the world and call herself a sister. Rand has had less than two weeks of training so far.”

“Shaders don’t care about training. You can’t coddle him, not while people are dying.”

“And where are my sisters? Why are they not out there, saving people?” Moria challenged. “What are they doing to help?”

The only reason Moria was even bothering to have a conversation with the brute was because she knew Idra would be listening, and perhaps the High Queen and other sisters too. Goran’s bullying tone and the accusations of selfishness were clearly designed to rile her.

Idra wanted Moria to feel her time was running out.

In the dungeon, she’d taken a big risk. Was Idra pushing her to take another, hoping that this time Moria would make a grave error, a mistake that might cost Rand his life?

“My mistress is fighting,” Goran said. “She is the leader of the Ruby Sect.”

Moria arched an eyebrow. “Yet she sent her best fighters away from the battle to find me and, what, remind me that I need to ensure Rand can fight? I can assure you, that duty has not slipped my mind.”

“Good.” Goran took a step closer. “The shadows are bubbling over the edges of the wastelands faster than anyone expected. It won’t be long before raiding parties surround the Azure Hills, and there are a lot of people between here and there who will be unable to save themselves without assistance from the Daoine Sídh. Your boy needs to prove himself. You should be heading to the wastelands.”

His deliberate use of the word boy a second time made her seethe, but she refused to rise to the clumsy provocation, knowing Idra would find a way to use any outburst against her. She had no intention of taking Rand to the wastelands until after he’d returned home and seen his family. She considered telling Goran and Idra this but decided it would be pointless. Goran’s response wouldn’t change her mind, just as her

reasons for letting Rand see his family again before risking his life would be lost on Idra.

Moria drew herself up to her full height. “My plans will not be affected by you or any of Sister Idra’s companions. If she takes issue with my methods, she can bring her discontent to me personally. In the meantime, I will treat your warning with all the respect it deserves—none.”

He scowled. “You’re faithless and weak. I can’t believe the High Queen gave you the chance to bond with the strongest male channeler found in a century. He’s wasted with you.”

“Considering he would have died or gone mad if Idra had paired with him, I’m doing quite well by comparison. Now get out of my sight.”

For a moment, Moria wondered if this would be their final facedown. She half-expected Goran to attack her, forcing her to maim or kill him. The added difficulty being that he wasn’t alone—Idra’s sniper was out there, waiting to strike. She would have to take them both on at once, which was far from ideal, but if they forced her hand, she would. She would do anything to avoid leaving Rand in their merciless hands. She would protect him with her final breath.

After three excruciatingly long minutes of sullen silence, Goran inclined his head. His cloak swung around him like the black petals of a deadly flower, and he stalked away through the trees.

Moria felt the squirm fade to a warm itch as the double threat receded. After several long minutes, she felt nothing at all. Then she released her tension in one loud exhale and waited for her racing heart to slow.

Confrontations like this left a bad taste in her mouth. When she had bonded with Zariel, no one had pressured her like this, not even Idra. Zariel had been so intimidating that watching other companions attempt to upstage him had been hilarious. Rand was more powerful than Zariel, but also far more vulnerable. For now, at least, he needed Moria to shield him, to stand between him and those who resented their connection.

She had to make sure he wasn't taken advantage of and ruined and—

“Moria.”

She whirled around, eyes wide, True Power gathering between her hands.

Rand stood a few feet away, his handsome face solemn, his eyes dark. The bond between them was tightly shut, but he must have felt something to draw him out here. How much had he heard?

“Rand, I...”

“We need to talk.” His jaw worked for a moment like he was restraining himself from saying something he might regret. “Come back to the inn with me.”

“All right.” She hoped he would offer his hand, his arm, anything to let her know he wasn't angry, that he understood her reasons for lying to him. Instead, he walked away, expecting her to follow.

And follow she did.

I have to fix this breach of trust between us. If I don't, Rand will be vulnerable.

Rand



When Rand heard the threats lobbed between Goran and Moria, his heart almost stopped. It took all of his self-control not to let the bond burst open and channel enough power to knock that jackass off his feet.

The problem was that Moria would put herself between him and Idra's companions. Rand needed to get better and faster so she wouldn't have to deal with situations like that.

He wasn't afraid of hard work or pain, but the thought of Moria suffering because of him taking a wrong step was too awful to contemplate.

His heart would shatter.

I can't let that happen.

No more games with apples, no more teasing tendrils of True Power as they played at capturing and evading each other. It was time to stop fooling around, no matter how much he enjoyed it. He had to become the warrior Moria needed him to be.

Rand led the way to their room, opened the door, and gestured to the only chair. "Please, sit down." He knew he needed to remain standing for this next part.

She was his teacher, his mentor, and he owed her respect and deference, but he also had to make it clear that she had to stop coddling him, and he didn't know how to do that without taking a hard stand that might sound disrespectful to her.

Moria sat and gazed up at him, looking wary and nervous.

“When are you going to start treating me like an adult?” he blurted.

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that it is time to take off the kid gloves and put on the steel gauntlets! I’ve had enough of you giving me simple tricks to perform when I ought to be learning how to slay shaders!” His feet carried him from one side of the room to the other as he fought the urge to bury his face in his hands. “I heard what Goran said about my training, and how important it is to speed it up. You need to make them see that I’m learning quickly enough under your tutelage, or they’ll take you away from me.” Or the other way around, but at this point, the sisters would have to pry Moria from Rand’s dead hands.

“Rand, that’s precisely what you are learning,” she said. “I’m teaching you to slay shaders.”

She just wasn’t getting it. “How? By playing with apples?”

“The things I ask you to do, they all serve a purpose. Precise control is as important as blunt force and power.”

“You are the only one that thinks that. None of the Daoine Sídhé believes that control is more important than the amount of True Power I can channel.” And for once, he agreed with them. Killing shaders didn’t require delicacy. “If I’m destined to lose my mind, you should focus on getting as much use from me as possible before that happens, and that means getting me battle ready as soon as possible. You need to stop being kind and start being tough.”

“Do you want me to be like them? To bully you?” Moria leapt from the chair, eyes gleaming with anger.

Rand felt her fury through their bond; it coursed through her veins like magma. And he sensed the effort of will that was needed to hold it back. Even now, she was afraid of burning him, hurting him in any way.

“I will never treat you like that. None of the others know enough about the history of male channelers to understand anything beyond the surface, and their methods will only backfire. That’s the benefit and the curse of careful study. I

know more of our history than the High Queen herself because no one still alive cares enough to learn.” She let out a breath and then inhaled deeply in an effort to calm down.

“Yes, the last great and powerful channelers who were men lost their minds to the power,” she continued, “but that was during a time of tremendous upheaval when great feats of power were necessary in order to save our world. It isn’t widely noted in our histories, but several of the most powerful female channelers also lost their senses to the True Power and had to be put down.”

“I didn’t know that,” he admitted.

“Of course, you didn’t. The Daoine Sídhé make sure of that.”

“We know enough now to prevent that from happening again. Or at least I do, and I believe that you can survive what’s coming.” Moria stepped forward and took Rand’s hand. Her fingers, so small compared to his, were nevertheless powerful. “And not simply survive either. I believe you can thrive for many, many years to come. But you must be prepared in the right way, and that means focusing on more than blood and death and darkness. Your heart needs to be full of love, not hate. You must fight for the ones you love, not for ideals, and not even out of altruism.” She put her other hand over her heart. “Love will be the light that will guide you back home from the darkness. That’s how you will not lose yourself to the horrors of death and killing.”

“I...”

He wanted to argue, wanted to tell her she needed to toughen him up, but he believed her. The shaders represented hate and wanton destruction. The force which faced them should be the opposite. Counterintuitive though it may seem, there was deep wisdom in her words. He could protect the world far better by being part of it, by leaning into his own strengths, by caring for others rather than crushing his emotions and channeling the True Power without caring for anything or anyone else.

If he took the latter approach, he would be like Idra, and that was a prescription for disaster. He would hate himself so much

that he would welcome insanity as a way to distance himself from his own mind.

“Why do you think we are heading to your village first?” Moria asked. “We’re not making a detour to delay the inevitable, and it’s not about saying goodbye to your family and friends either.” Moria’s smile grew warmer. “It’s also not because I want a safe place for you to train.” She must have seen through their connection what his next guess would be. “I’m taking you home because you’ve been abused and traumatized for months, and you need to be somewhere safe and familiar—where you can center yourself and gain confidence in your abilities around people who love you and will motivate you to be your best. You need to remember what and who you are fighting for.”

“I don’t need to go home for that,” Rand said, or rather the words spewed from his lips before he could stop them.

It wasn’t something he’d planned on sharing, not yet, not while he was unsure of how she felt about him. Perhaps it would be good for her to know, though. At least then she might understand why he hated the way she put herself in harm’s way in order to protect him.

“I have more than my family to fight for now.” He rubbed her knuckles with his thumbs then met her eyes. He saw confusion and uncertainty in her gaze. “You don’t have to return my feelings. I just want you to know that.”

As Moria opened the door between them on her side of the bond, Rand felt her confusion, but behind that lay deep affection, intense protectiveness, and something he might identify as love if he were bold enough.

But her confusion was the wall he must breach first. That was what prevented him from pulling Moria into his arms and kissing her.

“It’s been so long since I had someone to care about,” she confessed. “Not since Zariel, really, and he was different. I loved him like an older brother or an uncle, not... not like...”

She pulled away and Rand let her. He knew she felt conflicted and didn't want to make it worse, but at the same time, he felt incredibly happy just looking at her.

I've known Moria for a month, and in that time, she's done more to protect me than even my father could have.

But the way he felt about her wasn't familial. He wanted her. More than he'd ever wanted anyone before. No one in his village, no one he'd ever met, could compare to her.

"It's just because I make you feel safe," she said.

Ah, she was reading him now too. Good, then he could answer back without feeling like he was being invasive. "I don't think that's true."

"But it is," she insisted. "You were abused by my—by those awful people. Then I arrived and treated you like a human being, and of course that affected how you felt, how you feel about me. But gratitude isn't a good reason to..." Her smile faltered. "As we spend more time together, you'll come to understand that there's nothing special about me other than my bond to you. And that's all right, I'm fine with—"

"That's not true."

"Rand..."

"It isn't," he said, taking her hands again. "It isn't, and I think you know that. I think you can tell that this has the potential to be so much more. It frightens you, and I understand why," he added. "It scares me too. But you're not the first person who's treated me kindly, and you're not the first woman I've been interested in like this. However, you're the only woman I want to be with from here on out, and I can tell that you feel things for me too."

"Rand, I..."

"But I'm not going to push."

"You—what?" She stared at him, completely flustered. "You're not?"

"No." He brought her hands to his lips, kissed them tenderly, then let them go. "I'm not. This isn't the time or place. We've

got so much left to do and there's so much to learn. I need to focus on that for now, and you need to feel free to correct and guide me without having to worry about hurting my feelings or offending me."

"But I—"

"Moria. I can wait." *I will wait. For you to be ready to accept my love, just like you waited for me to be ready to bond with you.* He touched her manacle. "We're linked together; you don't have to be afraid of losing me. We can take all the time we need."

"I don't know how much time that will be," she confessed.

"That's all right too. My feelings won't change."

Moria



They left the main road behind the next day, taking lesser-known trails on their route to Rand's village of Fairview. He was in an excellent mood now, following her instructions, using the True Power without argument, and setting up camp for them both each night.

He never had to work longer than an hour on any channeling task she gave him. He learned to use it to infiltrate the elements themselves—earth, air, water, and fire—and shape them into things he could use for protection. His connection to the True Power was solid and strong, and Moria wished she could admire it from a distance, but the truth was that the distance between her and Rand had shrunk to almost nothing.

She simply lacked the courage to take that final step.

Moria remembered the last time she'd felt so... so young, so unprepared for the world and the things it could bring to her. Falling in love was for women in the first flush of youth, captivated by local boys or passing soldiers. Centuries before, she had fallen in love with a sloe-eyed, handsome merchant who lived near her hometown. Now, she didn't even remember his name.

The Daoine Sídhé and their work had been her entire focus for as long as she could remember.

The giddy heights of romance weren't for women who had lived more years than any village elder. Physical signs of her age had been slowed by the True Power she channeled. Her outward appearance suggested she was in her late twenties.

But she was no longer the naïve maiden smitten with a beautiful youth, yearning for the comforts only romantic love and a handful of children could bring. Losing Zariel had convinced her that the life of an everyday woman wasn't for her. Yet here she was, in love and falling deeper every day with Rand Thorin.

Dangerous, challenging, and surprisingly sweet Rand Thorin.

It was irresponsible. She should view him as her student, derive her pleasure from his progress. But she craved his embrace, wanted to feel those warm lips against hers, fill her lungs with the scent of him.

Worst of all, she hadn't even tried to stop falling in love. She was powerless to do so.

Her heart's compass was set. Rand's emotions drifted through their bond on gossamer wings, bathing her in warmth and love and light, making her feel giddy. It was ludicrous. Ridiculous. Absurd. And beautiful.

It was a chance she didn't feel she deserved, but each day Moria grew more eager. It was tempting to take the risk and discover how it would feel to give in, allow herself to make love to Rand Thorin and receive physical love in return. It took greater and greater determination to close herself off at night, especially when he took himself off to the nearest creek to bathe and returned loose-limbed and relaxed with the air of a man who had enjoyed the pleasure of a firm grip and a wild imagination.

Whenever he so ventured, Rand was careful not to let his gaze linger on her for too long before departing, and he kept the door between them closed throughout his excursion.

Moria never felt any pressure from him, not even a teasing hint that she could join him if she wanted. Her frustration made her acknowledge an uncomfortable truth, that part of her yearned for a whispered invitation or a hungry glance because she knew that even the slightest pressure or encouragement from him would give her the excuse she needed. If only he could be a little more demanding, but he refused to push her like that.

He was behaving like a gentleman, which only made Moria want him more.

After experiencing the dungeon and how it felt to be forcibly coerced, he sought her explicit consent even for the smallest things, from their nightly cuddles to brushing her hair each morning. Moria would need to wait, as he had suggested, until he had faced the shaders, or she would have to find the courage to seduce him herself.

Luckily for her—or perhaps not—they reached Fairview before she made her move.

As they approached the mountains, she could tell that Rand was troubled by his thoughts.

“What is it?”

“I’m worried about my father,” he admitted.

“Was he ill when you were taken?”

“He had a broken leg when I was taken, but it’s probably fine by now. That’s not what worries me.”

Moria sensed through the bond that he didn’t want to talk about it, and she had no desire to urge him to share his thoughts with her. Whatever was bothering him would either amount to nothing or become clear when they arrived.

They rode in silence while his thoughts churned in his head.

Fairview was one of a string of mountain villages that clung to the western slopes of the Dragonback Range, facing down rain, snow, and driving winds to eke out a life tending the sturdy mountain sheep and hardy crops that fed them and formed the basis of their economy. Prized for their wool, rich milk, and surprisingly tender meat, these sheep were in high enough demand that it made life here worthwhile.

Some of the mountain villages had existed long before the last great battle against the shadows.

While Moria had never visited the mountains before, Zariel had, and he’d shared stories about these villages with her during their years together. He’d told her about homes carved out of the rock face, almost invisible until you walked their

streets, and yet spacious within. He had spoken warmly about the courage of the enormous mountain sheep, and how the rams and ewes would lock their horns and stand together, facing the fiercest storms as a single unbreakable line, sheltering their lambs and elders behind them. He'd described the fierce-eyed women and men weathered by the harsh elements, vicious rain, and baking sun, while they lived their simple yet interdependent lives. He'd entertained her with stories about their unshakeable sense of fairness, and their selfless support of their neighbors.

It was clear that Zariel had admired these people, but she suspected he shared those stories to remind her that not everyone was as self-serving and back-stabbing as the Daoine Sidhe.

Regrettably, Moria's first impression of life in a mountain village wasn't quite so poetic.

"Damn," she muttered as her horse stepped into a fresh pile of sheep dung on the only road into Fairview.

She couldn't blame the poor thing; the road, more of a trail really, was thick with feculence that was impossible to avoid. She would have to clean out his hooves later, which meant the smell would spread to her. Another cold bath was in her future, during which she would rue the fact that she had no one to scrub her back for her.

Whose fault is that?

She caught Rand's eye and noticed those alluringly sweet dimples in his cheeks before his smile was replaced with a neutral expression. *How much of that did he catch?*

"Sorry," Rand apologized. "It's lambing season, so everyone's been driving the sheep back to the closest pastures to help them along. I know it's not the nicest smell, but—"

"It's all right." Moria offered him a crooked smile then checked that the door between them was locked down. "It seems reasonable to expect that a village full of shepherds would have some sheep in it."

I just didn't think there would be quite this many.

“You get used to it,” he promised her, then clicked his heels against his mount again, eager to move on.

Naturally, this close to home he was excited and eager to see his family, his father and sisters.

Perhaps it would be best if Moria found her own accommodation for the night. The truth was that she was apprehensive about meeting his family. They would judge her, and most likely find her wanting.

She was associated with the people who’d kidnapped Rand. If they didn’t already know what had happened, they would find out soon once he told them about his ordeal.

Would she be seen as his savior?

Doubtful, especially since Rand still bore the shackle of his imprisonment around his wrist. She wouldn’t be surprised if they picked up clods of sheep shit and used it to drive her out of the village.

Moria hoped that wouldn’t happen and not only because she would refuse to use the True Power against Rand’s family even if only to vaporize the shit coming her way.

It would hurt Rand, and he’d already been hurt enough.

Moria



As they rounded a high cliff face and headed up another washed-out stretch of gravel, the village came into view ahead. Moria saw sloped roofs covered in moss and lichen stretched out like bird beaks before vanishing back into the curve of the mountain. Five, ten, twenty of them—Fairview was a good-sized place.

There was even what looked like a tavern, which would be useful if Rand's family didn't want her to stay in their home, and a—

“Rand!” A young woman with thick auburn hair that was tied back in a ponytail charged down the path toward them. If her white leather cap hadn't been fastened beneath her chin, she would have left it behind. Despite her heart-shaped face, her features were similar enough to Rand's to identify her as his sister. Probably Mila, the younger one.

“Blake said he saw you coming. I can't believe that you're home!”

Rand jumped down from his horse, widening his arms as his sister threw herself at him. He caught her, laughing as he spun her around.

The horse shied away, unsure about the noisy display, and Moria captured its reins before it could bolt.

“Look at you!” Rand held his sister at arm's length as he took her in. “Wearing a proper shepherd's cap and everything, aren't you? Which flock did Father give you?”

“The southern lot.” The girl made a face. “I asked for northern, but he said he’d take care of them himself, even with his leg the way it is. I told him I could handle them, but—”

“His leg hasn’t healed yet?”

“No.” Mila sighed and shook her head. “The healer told him to stay off it while the bone knitted back together, but of course he didn’t listen, and now he’s got a limp and it aches at night, but...” Her eyes trailed over to Moria, who met her gaze with a steadiness she didn’t really feel. “Who did you bring with you?”

“Right. Sorry. I should introduce you.” Rand laughed. “Mila’s my little sister, and this is Moria. She’s the Daoine Sídhé who got me out of the citadel. We’re—”

“The citadel? A Daoine Sídhé? And you brought one of them here?” Mila’s immediate outcry wasn’t unexpected, but Moria had hoped for better.

Doors and windows were flung open and scowling villagers emerged from their homes, women and old men.

Moria imagined them chasing her off the mountain with pitchforks.

They aren’t like that, Rand pushed the silent assurance toward her, but she felt she knew better than he did what people who had been faced with her kind might do.

“A Daoine Sídhé?” An ancient-looking man with a withered hand glared at her. “We don’t have anything for you here, woman. Leave.” He pointed at the trail leading out of the village.

“Wanted to do your part by bringing him back, aye? Good for you,” a broad-hipped woman said with mock cheer and a cold smile. “Consider your task done and get back down the mountain before nightfall, hmm? Would be sad for that fine horse to fall and break its leg on the trail.”

“Aye, get ye gone.”

“Get ye gone!”

“We don’t want you here!”

“Get out of Fairview and don’t come back!”

Sure enough, someone picked up a pile of sheep dung and hurled it her way. Moria reached out with her power to block it, but—

Rand had already acted, using his own power to create a shield around Moria. The air glimmered for a long moment before he dropped it. When he let go of his sister and stepped in front of Moria, he had the bearing of a warrior.

“Moria saved my life,” Rand announced, his voice loud and commanding. “She got me out of the citadel at great cost to herself, and she brought me back home. Without her, I’d be dead or insane. She’s a dear friend to me, and I expect you to welcome her.”

“Can’t tell me how to treat her, lad,” the old man snapped. “I’ll give any of those bitches the welcome they deserve, and no bowing or scraping they’ve done toward you will change my mind. I lost my son to the shaders, and none of her people came to set it right or offer us protection.”

“The only one who’s ever protected us is you,” the woman agreed. “You’ve obviously still got your powers, may the gods preserve you. You protected us once, and you can do it again. We don’t need her kind. Cut her loose and let her go back to her fancy citadel and her terrible friends.”

“You think it’s easy, using the True Power?” Rand shook with anger, and Moria felt him strain with the effort needed to keep himself from shouting. Clearly, this wasn’t the welcome home he’d envisioned. “During the last attack, we faced half a dozen shaders, and the effort of stopping them nearly killed me. Moria is training me, so I can build up my strength and find new ways to strike back. More to the point,” he added grimly, “she and I are bound together, so if you force her to leave, then I’ll be leaving as well.”

“She took you for a companion?” Mila’s voice was shrill. “Is that why you’re wearing that thing on your wrist? She forced you to—”

“She didn’t force anything! The Ruby Sisters kidnapped me then tried to force me to bond. When I refused, they were going to kill me. Moria gave me a way out. It was the only way I could leave.”

“And who told you it was the only way? She did, I expect. You can’t trust any of them, Rand.” Mila wrapped her arms around his middle and stared at Moria defiantly. “You can’t have him.”

A woman surrounded by filthy-faced children shouted. “Tell her to cut you loose! Loyalty to family comes first, Rand, you know that.”

“Moria is like family, and I won’t stand by and let you insult her.”

“Then you can both leave and—”

“Wait.” A new voice made everyone turn toward the back of the crowd.

A man with gray-streaked hair hobbled toward them, using his spear as a walking stick. He was sharp featured but handsome, and Moria knew she was looking at Rand’s father. The crowd parted to let him through. He didn’t stop to embrace his son, who stood wary and straight-backed. Instead, he stood beside Moria, who was still seated on her white stallion.

“Sister.” He nodded his head. “Do I hear right that you saved my son?”

Wanting to show the respect she felt was due, Moria gracefully dismounted. “You do,” she said calmly.

“And you had to bond with him to do that?”

“I’m afraid there was no other way.” She glanced at Rand. “It’s not how I would have chosen to become your son’s teacher, but I’m grateful to be in that position now.”

“Does your presence help keep him sane?”

Ah. Of course, that’s what he fears.

“I think he’ll stay sane regardless of my presence,” Moria said, keeping her eyes on Rand’s father and ignoring the shouts and

jeers from the people around them. “But he still has things to learn about how to wield the True Power. My only purpose is to help him on that path.” She felt a pang of hurt through the bond but forced herself to ignore it.

He looked at her for a long moment, then at his son. His expression softened as he took in Rand, who went from fiercely defensive to a little uncomfortable under his father’s gaze. “You helped bring him back to us,” he said. “For that alone, I would welcome you into my home. As his teacher, though, you are doubly welcome.”

“Graeme Thorin, you don’t mean to let that witch stay in your home!” the hard-faced woman cried. “She’s one of them! She’s no better than the Daoine Sídhé who took Rand from you in the first place.”

“I don’t believe that,” Graeme said simply. “Because my son is standing here in front of me, disrespecting me by not even saying hello, rather than locked in a dungeon somewhere being poked and prodded into doing tricks.”

“Sorry, Da.” Rand moved into his father’s arms, and the embrace between them was fierce enough that Moria heard the older man’s vertebrae creak.

After a moment of indecision, his sister threw herself into the hug. Gradually the crowd dispersed, but not without a few more choice complaints and curses at Moria. At least nothing else was thrown her way.

That was something to be grateful for.

Graeme finally pulled back and cupped his son’s face in his hands. “You’re a sight to gladden my heart.” He was crying, and Rand’s face was red from holding back his own tears. “How long can you stay?”

“Forever, of course,” Mila insisted. “Right?”

Rand glanced at Moria. “Let’s talk about it inside.”

She followed the reunited family, guiding both horses up the hill, hoping the village would have a warm and dry place where their steeds could shelter overnight. Oh, and she still

had to clean a hoof or two. At least it meant she could stay busy. Her place here was firmly on the outside, after all.

That had been made very clear.

Rand



Rand was overjoyed to be back in Fairview. He'd only been away for a few months, but it felt like an eternity had passed since he'd been taken away.

The village and its people were just like he remembered them, and yet different. Two stark differences stood out like broken teeth—his mother was no longer there, and the fact that he'd missed her sunset service would plague him for a long time. The second thing was that people were far less friendly than he'd expected.

He knew they had every reason to be wary of outsiders, but he hadn't believed for one moment that they might try to attack Moria. Especially after he spoke up on her behalf.

He was the offended party, so shouldn't they believe him when he said she was innocent?

All of them had lost people when the shaders attacked, but Rand was the one who'd been carted off by the Daoine Síde to be their whipping boy. He had risked his life and sanity to save these villagers, but they treated him like a naïve child whose word meant nothing. But it wasn't the sting to his pride he resented most.

It was their hatred of Moria.

Hearing their insults and witnessing their attack hurt him more than if they'd directed their venom at him. He could barely look at Mila, knowing that she had joined the fray.

Mila was still standoffish, even once they were back home. "You'd better not put her in with me," she announced before

stomping off to her room.

“Where is Kaia?” Rand asked his father.

“She married Jedrek a month ago,” he replied.

“Jedrek?”

Rand was stunned. Jedrek was the scion of Fairview’s wealthiest family—not wealthy compared to nobles in some cities, but within their village the family enjoyed affluence and privilege far beyond their closest rivals. They owned more flocks, had more connections, and worked their wool more efficiently than anyone else in Fairview.

Jedrek had never shied away from letting everyone know that he believed himself to be better than the rest of them, and Kaia had hated him for it.

“Why did she marry him?”

“He asked,” Graeme said, sitting down in his chair and setting his spear aside with a sigh. “Moria my dear, please take a seat. You’re welcome in our home.”

“Thank you,” Moria said, sitting in Kaia’s old chair despite the fact that Rand’s mother’s seat was larger and more comfortable.

She was more astute than Rand gave her credit for.

Just my teacher, hmm? He knew that her words had been meant for the ears of his family and the other villagers, but it still hurt.

He exchanged glances with her and then turned back to his father. “Jedrek asked Kaia half a dozen times before, and her answer was always no. What has changed?”

“What hasn’t?” His father shook his head. “You were gone, your mother dead, me injured. Kaia wanted to get out of this house, and Jedrek offered her the opportunity. Their wedding was lovely,” he added as he sipped from a tankard that had been sitting out on the dining table when they arrived. There was a plate of half-eaten food alongside it. “I’m sure she’ll come by to see you soon.”

“I hope so.” Kaia was closer to Rand in age, just a year younger instead of the seven years he had on Mila. They’d always understood each other well, and he wanted to see what she thought of Moria.

His father turned to her. “Rand, get our guest something to eat and drink. Sister, what do you prefer in the evenings, water or wine?”

“Water is fine for me, Master Thorin,” she said. “And please, call me Moria.”

“Then you’ll have to call me Graeme.”

Well, at least they were getting along.

His father had expected him to settle down with a wife from one of the mountain villages, a fine woman who would help him on the farm, produce healthy grandchildren, and cook hearty meals.

Moria had probably been right to keep the intricacies of their relationship a secret, but Rand desperately wanted to tell his father that he was in love with her and receive heartfelt congratulations in return.

When they’d reached the foot of the mountains, he had worried about his father’s reception. Graeme was a proud man and stubborn. A patriarch whose wife looked after the home and the children while he tended to the sheep. It seemed likely that he would struggle to understand Rand and Moria’s relationship. Rand had been tempted to warn her before they arrived, but maybe he had wanted to see how she would handle the old man without his forewarning. This thought in mind, Rand headed to the kitchen to look for food and fresh spring water.

“You’ve come a long way to our little village,” Graeme continued. “All the way from Hartford, eh?”

Moria straightened slightly, a sure sign of surprise. “How did you know?”

“The stitching on the hem of your cloak is an eastern pattern, but the wool is our breed, and the only town we trade with in

that region is Hartford, hence...” He shrugged, a smile on his face.

“Well reasoned, Graeme. I lived there for a very long time.”

Rand set a mug of clear water, a bowl of mutton stew, and a side-plate of flatbread in front of Moria, the same meal his father was eating.

Moria touched his wrist with her gentle fingers and whispered, “Thank you.”

Her touch inflamed him, bringing to the fore all the protective desire he’d felt outside.

No one will ever hurt you. I swear it, he said through the bond, and then closed it to add privately, *you’re mine.*

Since Moria and his father seemed to be getting along just fine, Rand decided it was okay to leave her alone with him for a few minutes. “I’ll go check on Mila.” He headed for the stairs.

“Just his teacher, hmm?” Graeme said, echoing Rand’s thoughts.

Rand firmly closed his ears to the rest of the conversation as he headed up the narrow, rickety staircase to the top of the house and his sister’s room.

Rand



Rand knocked on the closed door. “Mila?”
“Go away.”

Rand rolled his eyes. “Mila, let me in.”

“Go back to your witch and leave me alone!”

Hells with this. “Let me in, or I’m telling Da about the time you snuck out your bedroom window to meet Carsen in the southern field.”

There was a pause, then the scurry of feet. The door flew open, and Mila hauled Rand into the room, shutting the door behind him. She scowled. “You swore you’d never mention that again!”

“I won’t as long as you get yourself together and stop referring to our guest—the woman who also saved my life—as a witch.”

“I can’t believe you trust her.” Mila flounced onto her bed and crossed her legs. “What have the Daoine Sídhé ever done for anyone in this village? Nothing but extort wool from us and steal you away, that’s what!”

“Moria didn’t steal me. What has she done for this village apart from return your lost brother to his flock?”

“But she’s one of them,” Mila pointed out. “I think she’s taking advantage of your good nature to entrap and use you. That’s why they took you, isn’t it? It’s because you’re special.”

Rand sat beside his sister. “Moria is special too,” he said. “You saw the color of her cloak, right?”

“It was wool-colored, pale gray, I guess. So what?”

“Did you know she was Daoine Sídhé when you first saw her?”

“No.” Mila pouted. “But why does that matter?”

“Moria is the last of her sect. Every other sister like her in the Daoine Sídhé is dead now.”

Seemingly against her will, Mila tilted her chin and gazed up at him. Interest sparkled in her green eyes. “Did the other Daoine Sídhé murder them?” she whispered.

“Some of them. Others, they just didn’t help in time, much like they rarely help villages like ours unless there’s something in it for them.”

“Something like you.”

“I suppose,” Rand allowed.

“Then how did she end up with you, if none of her sisters like her?”

Rand told his sister the abridged story of how he’d been treated at the citadel, and how Moria’s arrival began a change for the better. He told her about the respect she’d shown him, how she was training him to wield a sword and the True Power, and how she listened and agreed when he said he wanted to return to Fairview. “I might have more raw power than she does, but I could never force her to do something she didn’t want to,” he said. “If she didn’t want to let me come back to you, I wouldn’t be here now. But she never fights me, Mila. Moria is always on my side. I hope you come to see that.”

“I would like to,” Mila said. “If she’s as good as you say she is, and she truly treats you well. I just, I guess it’s hard to look at her and not see the women who hauled you away after you saved our village.

“Rand, you, you were screaming when they stole you away, and everything was so chaotic. Ma was dead, and Da couldn’t

walk... it was awful.” Mila threw her arms around his shoulders and sobbed into his chest. “I missed you so much! I thought you were dead or worse.”

“I thought so too, at first,” he confessed. “Moria saved my life, she truly did. I owe her a great deal.”

“You like her.” Mila’s voice was muffled by his shirt, but he could hear the mischief in it.

“Obviously I like her.”

“No, you *like-like* her!”

Rand did, but he wasn’t ready to pour his heart out to his little sister. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not ridiculous, you are!” Mila pulled away and punched his shoulder. “Only you would turn down gorgeous girls like Trinza Mersy and then fall in love with a Daoine Sídhé.”

Rand shuddered. Trinza was Kaia’s best friend, and she was the most beautiful girl in the village, but after a very brief tryst, he’d felt nothing more than a vague goodwill toward her, and even that was strained when she laughed and that high-pitched snort battered his eardrums.

“Don’t joke about that, it’s not funny.”

“I think it’s hilarious,” Mila said, pulling her leather cap off her head and shaking her hair out. “But I’m still not sharing my room with her.”

“You’re such a child.”

“You’re a child!”

“Both of you get down here for dinner!” their father called up the stairs.

They stared at each other and began to laugh. Rand let the door to his bond with Moria open, allowing her access to his amusement, his relief that his sister had calmed down, and the love he had for her and his family because he wanted her to feel all those things too. She deserved to be appreciated and sheltered here.

She sent back a sense of pleasure at being included, then called up, "I'm absolutely starving, Rand, are you sure you want to eat? I could definitely demolish your share."

"Don't even think about it!"

Rand and Mila trooped downstairs, Rand feeling lighter and more like himself than he had in a long time.

It was going to be all right.

After dinner, Moria excused herself to tend to the horses.

"Do you want help?" Rand asked.

"No, you should catch up with your family."

Once the door closed behind Moria and Mila went back to her room, Rand felt torn between wanting to check that Moria was okay and needing to uncover the reason behind his father's stern expression.

I'm fine, Moria assured him. *Stay there.*

"Get us a couple of tankards, lad," Graeme said.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Rand felt a chill creep down his spine.

Graeme held his tongue until the drinks were fetched and Rand seated himself by the fire.

"What are you thinking, lad? That woman will bring you nothing but misery. You need someone who will put your needs first, keep house, and give you the children you deserve."

"You want me to settle down with a village girl and look after your sheep?"

"I can think of worse ways to live. She's using you. She'll lead you to your death and leave your family destitute. Your loyalty is to us, not the Daoine Sídhé."

"Da, you have always tried to dictate my life, but this is what I want."

"You're too young to know what you want."

“I knew what I wanted when I was twelve years old,” Rand snapped. “But you forced me to look after the sheep instead.”

“Don’t test me, lad.”

“Think you can still slap me into shape, old man? Those years have long passed. I told you I wanted to learn from Grandma, and take over her role as healer when she retired, but no, that was women’s work, right? You’re so set in your ways, Da, that you can’t bear the thought of me not following in your footsteps. It’s no wonder Kaia couldn’t wait to get out of here. Sit down, Da. Rest your sore leg like the healer ordered. That pained swagger won’t intimidate me into staying. Did you share these insights of yours with Moria? Did you tell her how unhappy she would make me? Is that why she rushed away after dinner?”

“Wait. Listen.”

“No, you listen. Moria brought me here so I could reconnect with friends and family, remember what it is I’m fighting to protect, but all we’ve received is hostility and bigotry. Tomorrow, I expect you to apologize to the woman I love... yes love, Da. Don’t look so shocked. If you can’t do that, you’ll never see me again.”

Graeme sank back into his chair. He looked twice as old and half the size of the father Rand remembered so fondly.

Having said his piece, Rand felt a twinge of guilt.

He’d hated to speak to his father that way, but at a certain point in a man’s life, when he truly became an adult, a man’s father and mother had to take a backseat to the woman he chose to share his life with. She was first and foremost, and his duty was to always side with her over his father.

Rand went to look for Moria.

Moria



Moria had feared that Rand's return to Fairview would put a strain on their relationship or even smother the nascent embers of his desire for her. She hadn't expected him to shun her, but she'd fully anticipated the distance that being home would create between them.

She was sure that the deep feelings he claimed to have for her—feelings that she couldn't quite bring herself to embrace—would diminish when he was surrounded by his friends and family, the people he really loved. Back in familiar surroundings where he felt safe, he would realize that what he felt for her wasn't love but gratitude and relief. He would slowly untangle his emotions and begin to understand what they had together, then decide it was time to take a step back.

She'd told herself that she could deal with that, not ask for too much, and never for more than he could give. She was strong enough to tamp down the blossoming love in her breast and handle the sting of his rejection, despite the insistent urge she felt to make him hers.

The last thing she'd expected was for Rand to rush into the makeshift stable and grab her soiled hands.

He pulled her into a tight embrace. "Forget whatever my father said. You are everything to me, Moria," he whispered into her hair.

The strength fled from her limbs, and she slumped against him, listening to his racing heart. "Don't do or say anything

rash,” she murmured into his chest. “We have all the time in the world.”

The following morning at breakfast, Graeme apologized to her. “I was out of order last night. I reckon I was overwhelmed, having Rand back home after all this time. But the lad is all grown up and old enough to make his own decisions. It wasn’t my place.”

Moria did her best to accept the apology gracefully and without comment. It hadn’t been easy for a proud man like Graeme to admit that he’d been wrong. He also had been the only one in the village who had welcomed her right away, so he deserved her gratitude.

Sometimes the best thing was to just nod and say nothing.

Besides, she was very much aware that his apology was meant more for Rand’s ears than hers.

After that, things settled into a comfortable routine.

She and Rand concentrated on his training, and when they weren’t sparring or channeling, he was even more attentive to her needs than he had been on the road.

He pulled out her chair every time they sat down to a meal, and escorted her whenever she left his home, spending every available moment by her side. It was as if he was compensating for the frosty reception she’d received.

Graeme and Mila provided stimulating albeit overly polite company, and Kaia arrived on the second day of their stay. Moria found her to be an eloquent, lovely young woman, flush with the newness of her marriage but still engaged with her family. She asked Moria questions about the citadel, the Azure Hills, Varion and the other places they’d visited along the way, and Moria did her best to paint vivid pictures for Kaia.

“I wish I could travel so far,” Kaia said on the third day. They had been left alone for a few hours while Rand had reluctantly joined Mila and their father on the northern rise, and Kaia made them tea. “Fairview is nice enough, but I’ve never been beyond the base of the mountains. Jedrek has visited

Copperton, and he says that I'm welcome to accompany them when he and his father make their next trip in the fall."

"Copperton is bustling with activity." Moria lifted the teacup to her lips. "It might have started as a mining town, but it's become a cosmopolitan city in its own right. They hold wonderful musical performances there."

"Trinza plays the lute," Kaia said. "Her mother taught her. She's performing at the tavern tonight—you should come and listen. See how her style compares to the masters you've heard performing in the big city."

Moria shook her head. "I've met the owner of the tavern. I don't believe I'd be welcome there."

Kaia put her teacup down and put her hands in her lap. "Mistress Herow spoke too hastily, and she knows it. She wouldn't turn you away, especially if we go together. She's my husband's aunt-by-marriage. We could go tonight." She lifted a pair of hopeful eyes to Moria.

She had little interest in mingling with hostile people for the sake of a musical performance on an instrument she didn't really care for, played by the woman Rand's family had hoped he would marry. It seemed important to Kaia, though, and Moria didn't want to disappoint her. Rand's sisters were making an effort to befriend her, and it wouldn't do to repay their efforts with a refusal, no matter how politely phrased.

It will make Rand happy.

Somehow, his happiness had become the most important thing in her life.

Moria knew this idyll couldn't last. Idra and her companions were still out there, waiting for her to craft Rand into the perfect weapon to fight the encroaching shadows.

Not that they were wrong in how desperately Rand was needed, but he was thriving now that he was back in Fairview. His channeling had never come more easily, and he was learning new skills as quickly as she could teach them. Even his sword work was progressing, probably due in part to the

gentle heckling that Mila gave him every morning as she watched them work.

This place was good for him. Moria needed to give him as much time here as possible.

“It depends on how well your brother’s training goes tonight.” She smiled at Kaia. “That’s got to be our first priority.”

“You’ve been very diligent about training him,” Kaia said, her eyes narrowing just a bit. “Are you that worried for him?”

“I believe in being prepared,” Moria replied, skirting around the truth. “And so far, Rand has proven himself equal to every task I’ve given him, but it’s better to push now than look back and wonder whether I could have prepared him better.”

“But you’ll be there to help him, won’t you? No matter what happens? Because of your bond?”

Moria almost found herself explaining the true nature of the bond that she and Rand shared, then thought better of it. She trusted Kaia, but the shadows could be insidious. Better to limit the number of people who knew what the manacles they wore did for them.

“Of course, I will,” she said instead.

Moria



Rand came home half an hour later in high spirits. “The revelry flowers are blooming in the pastures,” he announced.

Kaia bounced to her feet. “Really? They’re a week early this year!”

“I know, I was surprised. Da and Mila are gathering some.” He grinned at Moria. “We use revelry flowers to make braids and bouquets. Whoever’s home is festooned with them will have good luck for a year. They only bloom for a few days, so it’s a bit of a race.”

“I have to tell Jedrek! We have to go to the pastures!” Kaia sprinted off without a second glance.

“I suppose there won’t be a performance at the tavern tonight after all,” Moria said with no small amount of relief.

Rand sat beside her and took her hand in his. “Are you disappointed?” he asked.

Hadn’t he felt her relief through the bond?

“Not at all. I’d rather go with you than Kaia, but I didn’t want to offend her by declining her invitation.”

He smiled at her, soft and pleased. The look made her heart skip a beat.

“I wish I could see them,” she said abruptly. “The flowers.”

“You’ll see basketfuls soon enough, but... here, come with me.” He stood up and led her toward the stairs.

Moria followed him to Mila's room where Rand opened a sloping window in the roof. Dust rained into the small space as the shutters clattered free, making Moria sneeze.

"I'll clean that in a moment," Rand promised. "Just—here, step up here. Good. Now here."

Out on the tall, sloped roof of the Thorin home, Moria channeled a dribble of the True Power to steady herself.

She wasn't fond of heights, but when Rand wrapped his arm around her waist to stabilize her further, she sighed with contented pleasure.

"There," he murmured into her ear, pointing toward the mountains on the left. "Do you see the patch of green up there? It's hard to make out behind the trees."

"I see it," she said.

"Look for places within it that sparkle like sun hitting glass."

"I... oh!" Oh, there was one—and another—and another!
"How beautiful!"

"They are," Rand agreed. "They come in every shade of the rainbow, but all of them glitter and gleam like gemstones. It's hard not to over-harvest them, but they come back every year."

"Magnificent."

"Yes," Rand said.

Moria glanced at him only to realize he was already staring at her. "Rand," she whispered.

"Moria." He stroked her cheek. "I want to kiss you."

"I..." She wanted it too, but she was afraid it might break her heart.

What good is a heart if I never use it?

"Yes. Please."

He leaned in, tilted her chin just right, and then his lips were on hers, sending a prickling wave of warmth through her body. The kiss was sweet, closed-mouthed and tender. Then he

opened the door of their bond, spreading it wide so that she could feel everything he did.

Heat. Burning need. Desperate, overwhelming love. Adoration, lust, envy. He wants me in his arms, opening wide to him. He wants me on my back, screaming his name. He wants to guide my mouth to his groin, wind his fingers through my golden hair and watch me suck his shaft. He wants to—

“Yes,” Moria breathed into the space between them. “I want that too. All of it.” She wanted it so much she felt dizzy. “I want you.”

“Show me,” he said, and now it was her turn to be vulnerable.

It terrified her, but she lowered her shields and dismantled her defenses until she was laid bare before him, more so than if she had removed every last stitch of clothing on her. She allowed him to see exactly how often she’d dreamt of being with him, loving him, giving herself to him. She showed him what she wanted and how she wanted it, and it was the bravest thing she’d ever done.

“Moria.” He kissed her again, hot and hard, then pulled back and showed her the hunger in his eyes. “We have to get off this roof right now.”

Her laugh was loud and hearty. “Yes,” she agreed. “We do.”

Moria



Rand had been embarrassed about having Moria sleep in his old room, but now he was thankful for it. The place was small and most of it was taken up by his bed, which was large enough for two.

Until today, they'd been sharing it very politely and modestly, but now...

"Fuck," Rand said, his teeth lightly nipping Moria's throat as he helped remove her cloak. "You have no idea how hard it's been to watch you strip down to your chemise every night without putting you on your back and eating you out until you cried."

How incredibly bold of him to say such a thing, and how titillating...

Had he done it before or only heard of it?

He was so young, and he'd lived in a village where everyone knew everyone else. How had he learned of naughty things like that?

Oh yes, he had seen it in her mind. It was one of her fantasies, one of the things she wanted him to do to her.

An ache of desire pulsed in Moria's groin. "You want to see me cry?"

"Only from pleasure," Rand assured her while undoing her dress with briskness but care.

He draped it over the single chair by the wall before kneeling down in front of her.

Moria gasped to see him like this, at her feet but still in command of the encounter. He slipped his hands beneath her chemise, drawing his fingertips slowly up her legs until he got to her underthings.

He rubbed his fingers against the outside of the cloth covering her sex. "You're soaking. I can feel it right through these."

"Yes." She closed her eyes and let her head fall back.

"Let's get this off you." He drew her underthings down her body, leaving her exposed beneath the translucent underdress. "Spread your legs."

Shuddering, she obeyed.

There was nothing hesitant or inexperienced in the way he touched her, the way he commanded her. If Moria didn't know better, she would have thought that Rand was at least as old as she and had bedded scores of courtesans to learn the art of pleasuring a woman.

He pushed the silk chemise up slowly and held it there with one hand while the other trailed across her lower lips. Moria gasped and shut her eyes as intense heat burned her skin. It was already too... it felt so... good, yet he'd barely... touched her.

"You're dripping. If I was in a rush, I could slide smoothly inside of you right now." Slowly, carefully, he pushed his middle finger inside of her. "But I'm not in a rush." He rubbed gentle circles against her clit with his thumb.

Trembling, Moria released a moan.

"You like that." Satisfaction dripped from Rand's voice, but she felt his growing excitement through their bond. "You smell wonderful. I want to taste you."

"Please," Moria whimpered. "I—I want that."

"You want me to taste you?"

"I want you to do whatever you want with me." It was easier to admit that than she'd expected. How could she lie right now, with Rand able to feel every part of her through the

bond? “I want you to have me in whatever way will give you the most pleasure.”

Take what you want, take me, make it good for me because you love me, please, please...

“Then keep your legs spread for me, and don’t be quiet.” He settled onto his knees. “There is no one home, and they won’t be back for long hours.”

He leaned in, and—

“Oh...” Moria keened as his lips brushed against her sex.

The soft touch was just a prelude, and then he was licking eagerly, drinking from her as if he’d found the nectar of the gods. He moved fast, driving his tongue into her center before pulling back to swirl it around the sweet spot at the apex of her thighs. He framed her entrance with his hands, holding her spread wide for him as he dove into her depths.

It should have felt awkward to be exposed like that, but—but it felt perfect.

“So good,” she whimpered. “Oh, oh, Rand...” An orgasm was building inside her, faster than it ever had before. “Rand, please, I’m going to—please, I can’t... stop.”

“Don’t stop it,” he said, pulling back far enough to catch her eye. “Don’t stop. Come for me, come right now.”

Being told what to do made it easier to let go.

The coil inside of Moria’s body tightened and contracted for one more second, and when it sprang free, pleasure spiraled outwards from her abdomen, overwhelming her body and mind.

Climaxing had never felt like this before. She had been with others before him, but never experienced such exquisite intimacy with anyone—man or woman.

The slow wiggle of his finger inside her caught her off guard.

“Relax,” Rand said, his voice rich with satisfaction. “Relax and let me in. Tell me how it feels.”

“Oh, it feels... It makes me feel full.”

It had been so long since she'd been with a man that her sheath must have contracted back to its virginal state.

“And now?” A second finger joined the first, making Moria's back arch above the mattress.

“It's... it's a lot,” she gasped. “My fingers are...”

“Tiny, delicate. You focus more on the outside, right?” Rand sounded hungry. “I thought I felt you that night when you bathed. I couldn't be sure because I was so involved with my own pleasure, but I sensed what you were doing. You focus up here, don't you?” He brushed her sensitive clit with his thumb, making her twitch. “While stroking these other beautiful parts?”

“Yes,” she said, followed quickly by, “Rand, oh gods, three?”

Three fingers entered her, slowly, but inexorably stretching her until they didn't feel so impossibly large.

Perhaps she wasn't as tight as a virgin after all.

Thank the gods for that.

Moria relaxed, but then Rand leaned in to suck on her clit while pumping his fingers in and out of her body, and she was as far from relaxed as it got. Moaning incoherently, she grabbed his hair and pulled his face against her as she convulsed.

This time, the aftermath was more languorous. Moria didn't even open her eyes as Rand hovered above her, pressing kiss after kiss to her mouth and letting her taste the sweetness and tanginess of her own juices.

Moria



When Moria opened her eyes, she saw the raw hunger in Rand's eyes and felt his need through their bond.

He was desperate for her, but he took nothing for granted and waited for her to invite him.

"I want you," she said.

More than anything.

He smiled. "I'm yours."

A tendril of the True Power escaped Rand, wrapping around Moria in a warm embrace and distracting her while he got rid of his clothing faster than humanly possible.

She had a scant moment to admire his beautifully muscled body before he was pressed against her and pushing into her welcoming heat.

Experience and age aside, Rand was a large man, and Moria was a petite woman, and as much as she was desperate for him and he was desperate for her, they couldn't rush it.

She felt his urgency through the bond, but he acted as if he had all the time in the world to let her get comfortable around him.

As he held still, it took a couple of seconds for her to realize that she felt not only the pressure of his shaft against the walls of her sheath but also the tight embrace of her sex against his flesh.

The manacles that joined them, that forced them to share their pains, wounds, and unguarded thoughts, also allowed them to

share each other's pleasure, and right now, the door to their bond was wide open.

As he pushed a little further inside, the feeling of being joined with him was so overwhelming that tears misted her eyes. Thankfully, the bond informed Rand as to why she was tearing up, and instead of feeling alarmed, he tenderly kissed the welling moisture away while surging all the way in.

The moment Rand was fully inside her, his pelvis pressed against her clit, Moria orgasmed again. With some effort, she separated the strands of his perception from hers, and tasted each in turn, wallowing in the intense ripples of pleasure that coursed through his body.

He was gritting his teeth, doing his best to hold back his own climax. "You feel so good," he said, finally meeting her hazy gaze.

When he mastered the urgency, Rand started to move, smoothly sliding his generous shaft back and forth so that she felt every curve and ridge of his length and the gentle insistence of his glans against her cervix.

As he cupped her breast and wrapped his lips around her nipple, pulling it into his mouth and suckling, a ribbon of intense pleasure connected her breast to her sex.

Groaning, she sank her fingernails into his shoulders, gripping him tight with every part of her, wanting to prolong every glorious second of their joining.

As if this was the sign he'd been waiting for, Rand started to move faster. Rearing up and supporting his weight with his arms, he lengthened his thrusts. One second, only the rounded tip of him pressed against her entrance, and the next, she was full of him.

He stared at her, eyes dark with desire and something more—love?

Please let it be love.

Yes, he loved her. She could feel it through their bond.

Reaching between their bodies, Moria squeezed her breast with one hand and thrummed her clit with the other. It took no longer than a couple of seconds before another powerful orgasm rocked her, and this time, Rand climaxed with her.

As the avalanche of their combined pleasure overwhelmed her senses, Moria screamed. Every muscle in her body tensed then relaxed so rapidly that she felt her consciousness escape the confines of her skull.

Floating above the bed, she watched Rand's back arch and his buttocks clench as he hovered above her, and she hovered above them both.

A brief moment later, her consciousness flooded back to her flesh, and she felt the buttery warmth between her thighs, saw Rand's face relax, and watched his mouth curve into a loving yet amazed grin.

Rand recovered from the high faster than she did, and when Moria finally came back to herself, he was lying beside her, covering her shoulder with butterfly kisses as he played with her hair.

She gazed at his hooded eyes and felt her heart swell with love.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," she replied, astonished that she felt no awkwardness, no shyness at all.

When his eyes roamed over her naked form, she did not turn away. She enjoyed his appreciative gaze, preening herself on his attention.

"I guess we both needed that," Rand said.

Moria chuckled.

"Did you and Zariel?"

It was bad timing to ask her about him now, but she could understand why Rand wanted to know.

"Zariel was very special to me, and I loved him, but our relationship was always more familial than intimate. I suppose

I was immature when we met. Life was very different in the Pearl Sect, and I was still naïve about the ways of the world. I'd lived more years than he had, but his had been filled with experience, while I'd been closeted. I suspect he saw a little girl, foolish, and a danger to herself. He treated me like a little sister, and I admired him like a big brother. It worked for us."

She knew it was hard to believe, and many of her sisters had assumed that she and Zariel had been lovers, but Rand didn't have to ponder whether she was telling him the truth. She'd left the bond wide open so he was privy to every emotion she felt.

"It's completely different with you." Moria couldn't resist stroking her hand over his face. He had a bit of stubble on his cheeks that caught her palm like tiny hooks, trying to capture her, keep her close. "Even when I first met you and you were full of anger and mistrust toward me, I felt the attraction. I refused to admit it even to myself, but it was there all along."

Rand laughed. "I was filthy and angry and crude; you couldn't have wanted me then."

"It wasn't sexual at first. It was more a sense of appreciation for who you were under the filth and the torn clothes, and it made me angry to see a good man being abused for no fault of his own. I felt an instant connection to you, and I knew that I wouldn't let anyone else have you. I was ready to fight Idra with everything I had to keep you." She smiled. "You were mine, and I would have fought the queen herself for you."

"I'm glad you didn't have to." He traced a lock of her hair down her neck, following the curve of it around her breast. "I'm glad it was you. I would have never submitted to the likes of Idra. I would have died first."

"I'm glad I was there too." Moria sighed. "Are you happy, Rand?"

His brow creased for a moment. "Of course, I am."

"Are you sure? I don't want this to be about our bond, you know. I would just... if it was just the bond, I think I would... Ugh, why can't I explain it better?"

She sounded like a babbling idiot because she was afraid to say the word love. She wanted it to be about love, not about the bond.

“It isn’t.” He sounded certain, but...

“How do you know?”

“I’ve never been bonded to anyone before, but I have been in love. Briefly.” He smiled at her. “This feels similar, but much, much deeper. It’s not the True Power that is pushing us into each other’s arms, Moria, I promise.”

“Who were you in love with? Trinza?”

“No, her name was Gail.” He curled closer to her body. “She was from a shepherd’s family, much like me. I grew up with her, didn’t even realize what I felt was love until it all came to a head on the day she gave me a bouquet of revelry flowers. It turned out Gail felt the same, only she recognized it for what it was sooner.” He sighed. “She died that winter, lost in a storm. Her body was never recovered.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He did his best version of a shrug while still lying down. “It’s been three years since she died. The pain is still there, and I suppose it will always linger, but I like to think that she would have encouraged me to move on. Frankly, I didn’t want to before you, though several ladies tried.”

“Including the beautiful and musical Trinza, from what your sister tells me,” Moria said.

Rand groaned and threw an arm over his face. “She needs to stop telling tales,” he muttered. “Yes, Trinza. But I don’t want to talk about her. Let’s talk about something else.” A devilish grin brightened his face. “Or better, let’s try something else.”

Rand



Rand couldn't get enough of Moria. It might have been embarrassing if he cared what others thought about him, but he didn't care if he looked like a fool in love.

"You're following her around like the ram chases the ewe!" Mila taunted him gleefully. "I never thought I'd see the day when you'd fall so hard for a girl!" He guessed she had been too young to notice his courtship with Gail. "And not just any girl, a Daoine Sídhé. How old is she anyway? Those witches live forever."

"What can I say?" Rand replied. "Moria is irresistible." He ignored all the other questions and insinuations.

The truth was that he had no clue how old Moria was, and he didn't care about that either. They were good together, and that was all that mattered.

"She does have a certain presence about her, doesn't she?" Kaia stirred a large pot on the stove.

Although her husband never deigned to join them for dinner, she visited frequently. The overbearing bastard, who Rand still couldn't believe his sister had married, probably thought he was too fancy to slum it with them. By Moria's third week in Fairview, Kaia was dining with them every other night, even preparing their meals, and they still hadn't made a trip to the tavern yet.

What could Rand say?

Moria and he had found much more interesting things to occupy them at home.

“Perhaps it’s because she’s so powerful,” Kaia continued. “Normal people don’t have the same air of arrogance about them.”

“Jedrek is arrogant. Moria is confident,” Rand corrected.

“Where is your confident Daoine Sídhé lover anyway?” Mila asked. “She hardly ever leaves the house.”

“She’s on the roof, measuring the stars.”

“Is she an astronomer too?” Kaia asked.

“Moria is good at all sorts of things.” Rand was learning that more and more every day.

She was particularly good at moving her tongue in a certain way when she was going down on him. He felt his cheeks grow warm, and quickly thought of something else. “You should see her in action.”

“I see her,” Mila pointed out. “You spar every morning and throw the True Power around every evening. She’s definitely better with a blade, but I think you could take her as a channeler.”

“I’ve learned a lot from her,” Rand admitted. “But I think she’s got hidden depths. I wouldn’t be surprised if there are some tricks up her sleeve that I’ve yet to discover.”

“Well, then.” Kaia ladled soup from the large pot she’d been stirring. “You should bring her to the Shearing Shed, so everyone else can meet her properly.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Trinza is over you, I promise. And I’ve talked so much about Moria at this point that everyone in town is ready to welcome her with open arms.” Kaia set two bowls on the table. “I think it’s only fair they get to meet the woman who’s changed you so much, don’t you?”

“Only as long as they behave,” Rand said. “I won’t have anyone offending her or mistreating her in any way.”

“No one will,” Kaia assured him. “They want to welcome her into the fold, Rand. Trust me. It will be lovely. Bring her

tomorrow night.” Kaia smiled as she set down more bowls on the table. “Jedrek will be there,” she cajoled. “You can finally say hello to him!”

Rand grimaced. “That’s not much of an incentive.”

Kaia pouted while Mila laughed so hard that she almost toppled off her chair.

Rand finally restored the peace by reaching out and giving the elder sister’s hand a squeeze. “I’ll ask Moria, I promise,” he said, then glanced at the table. “You’ve only laid out four bowls. Aren’t you eating with us?”

“Oh, no,” Kaia said. “Jedrek is waiting for me at home. I just wanted time to talk with you. It feels as though we’ve barely spoken since you returned, and never without her hovering nearby.” The last words were punctuated by a stare at her little sister, who started snickering again.

“I’ll make sure we get some time together before Moria and I have to leave,” he told her.

“Leave?” Mila exclaimed. “Why would you leave? You just got here; you don’t have to leave. We want you to stay!”

“I know you do.” Part of Rand wanted to stay there too.

Nothing calmed his soul as much as being back home again. But the more he channeled the True Power, the more Rand realized that the gift he’d been given was greater than himself. It would be criminal to hide in his village while the world grew darker and darker. He might be the only person who could make it stop, and he couldn’t hide from his responsibilities, or pass them to another.

That wasn’t how it worked.

He also couldn’t imagine keeping Moria in his village forever.

For all that she claimed to be insular, happy in her own small village so far away, Rand knew that she was destined for greater things. Besides, even if they were to settle somewhere together, it couldn’t be here. Fairview hadn’t greeted Moria with the respect she deserved, and no matter how they tried to make up for it now, he would never forgive that.

“Is it because of her?” Mila asked, hurt entering her voice.
“Because she hates it here?”

“She doesn’t hate it here.”

“But it is because of her?”

“No, it’s because of me!” Rand snapped, tired of having to justify himself to his family. “I’m not the same boy you knew. I’ve changed, and I can’t stay in Fairview. This power was given to me for a reason. Whether I like it or not, I am a weapon.”

Rand felt a wave of hopelessness rush through him.

It had been fun to pretend that the outside world didn’t exist and enjoy his time with Moria and his family. But the bigger problems were still there. He would either learn how to channel the power effectively and sparingly to protect villages like his own from the shaders or succumb to insanity.

Would he survive the battles he was destined to fight?

And if he did, would he ever feel comfortable with his place in the world again?

Would he ever feel content?

“Girls,” their father called from the doorway. “Leave your brother be. His decisions are his alone, and not ours to make.”

“But you told me you want him to stay!” Mila said, looking betrayed. “The flocks are too big for the two of us, and you can’t travel as far as you could last season to tend to them. You said you hoped that Rand would choose to live with us again, and help!”

“I did say that,” Graeme agreed, and Rand felt a heavy weight of shame in his chest. “But I’d never hold your brother hostage to my hopes, Mila. I wouldn’t do that to any of you.” He focused intently on Kaia for a moment until she flushed and looked away. “You’re all entitled to do what you want with your lives. And there are others who will be willing to help tend our flocks in exchange for a share of the wool and meat.” He stumbled into the room and sat down with a sigh. “Now, if that’s all, let’s get Moria down here so we can eat.”

Judging by the tense silence, it clearly wasn't all.

By the time they sat at the kitchen table, Kaia had gone to her house and Mila was vacillating between glaring at him and glaring at his bonded over every spoonful.

Moria and Graeme managed to keep the conversation going between them, speaking only of inconsequential things. The revelry blooms had already come and gone, but they'd provoked a lot of comparisons, which led to discussions of botany and floriculture. By the time they finished their dinner, Graeme was smiling even if Mila was still acting like a petulant child.

She flounced off without a word at the end of the meal. Rand sighed and got up to follow her, but his father held up a hand.

"Let her be," Graeme said. "I'll clean up. You'd better let Mistress Moria know what's happening tomorrow."

"How do you know about that?" Rand asked.

"Kaia, of course."

"What's happening tomorrow?" Moria asked, placing her spoon in her bowl.

"I'll tell you in private. Let's go to our room." He took her hand and led her away.

Once the door to the hallway was closed, Rand pulled Moria into his arms and buried his face in her neck.

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close but not suffocatingly so. Finally, she asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Just feeling the effects of my family's meddling tonight, that's all."

She pulled back far enough so that they could look into each other's eyes. "Tell me about it."

He sat them both down on the bed and related his conversation with his sisters to her, emphasizing the fact that she didn't have to accept Kaia's invitation. "No one will be offended if we don't show up."

"I daresay they would be," Moria teased.

“Fine, then I don’t care if they’re offended.”

“Rand. It’s all right.” She stroked the back of his hand. “It’s natural for them to want to know me better. I don’t mind, as long as you’re with me.”

“I won’t leave your side,” he promised.

“That’s all I need. Well.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “That, and perhaps a chance to repay the favor.” She licked her lips. “That generous gift you gave me earlier today. My body was so soaked with pleasure that I could barely balance on the roof.”

Rand grinned. “You want to suck my cock?” He would have used less crude language, but the expression always brought a delightful redness to Moria’s cheeks.

“Yes, please.”

He ran his fingers along her arm, up her graceful neck, and into her hair. Then he wound her golden braid around his fingers and tugged gently, enjoying the gentle moan it provoked. “Then kneel for me.”

Moria was on her knees a second later, and Rand proceeded to thank every god he knew the name of, and all the ones he didn’t, that this enchanting woman returned his love with such enthusiasm. The moment he felt her lips around his shaft, pleasure eclipsed all other thoughts.

Moria



Moria straightened her cloak and pulled at the collar of her dress as she walked arm in arm with Rand toward the tavern. The street was empty, but she heard music and laughter in the frosty air. It sounded like there was a large crowd.

I hate crowds.

She'd agreed to this, but she wished she hadn't. For Rand's sake, she needed to seek the villagers' acceptance. If she wanted him to be able to return to this village, either to visit his family or to make a home for them, the people needed to accept her and trust her.

She could do a lot of good for them, but somehow people never considered that when they didn't need her to heal someone they loved or to protect them when there was no one else to stand between them and the shaders. They only saw her power and feared it.

Fear bred resentment and even hatred.

Rand's family seemed to have changed their minds about her, but it didn't help assuage the uneasy feeling that had been steadily building in her chest for the past week.

Moria had expected the tension to subside once she and Rand had crossed the boundary between friends and lovers, and to a degree, the sexual tension had loosened its grip on her, but a more generalized anxiety had replaced it.

It was a feeling of wrongness, which was only increasing in potency with each passing day. Something wasn't right in

Fairview. Moria felt it seethe under the surface, but she couldn't identify what it was.

Perhaps tonight would shed some light on it.

They stood outside the tavern, Rand studying her curiously—probably wondering why she was holding the door between them tightly shut.

“It will be all right,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she agreed.

As Rand pushed the tavern door open and they stepped inside, the jovial sounds faded away, and a sea of curious faces stared at her. Some were vaguely familiar, but most were strangers.

Luckily, Rand was there to lead the way.

“No need to stop the music on our behalf,” he said amicably, tucking Moria's hand into his elbow as he led them across the floor. “We're just here for a drink with my sister and her husband.” He turned to a guy who seemed about his age. “Koran, you look well. How is your son?”

“Growing bigger every day,” the man replied after a momentary delay.

“Good, good. I'm sure he'll grow up to be a strong lad like his dad.” Rand turned to the bartender. “Fayren, could you bring two more pints to Jedrek's table?” He pointed to the back wall, where Kaia and a young man with straw-yellow hair and a broad, blunt face sat in silence.

“I can, Ran—sir.”

“Rand is fine,” he said.

They picked their way between tables, nodding at the villagers who stood frozen like statues on the straw-strewn dance floor.

Rand pulled out a chair for Moria first, and it was only after she was seated that he lowered himself into a chair that was positioned between her and the villagers.

Is he standing guard?

Does that mean he senses something is wrong too?

Gradually, people stopped staring and conversations picked up again, although the laughter seemed muted now. Moria focused on the couple in front of her. The Kaia she had become familiar with in the family home was absent. A completely different version perched on the chair beside her husband. Gone was her brightness and cheer. Now, she curled in on herself, meek and mild in the presence of a man who was clearly used to being the center of attention.

“‘Bout time you came to pay your respects,” Jedrek announced as he took a long pull from his tankard.

“You know where I live,” Rand replied. “You could have come to us just as easily.”

“I’m an important person in this town.” Jedrek looked down his nose at Rand. “My father and I have more than the rest of you people put together.”

What a lovely person. Moria bit her tongue so as not to say something scathing that would put the arrogant prick in his place.

“My sister is your wife.” Rand looked meaningfully at Kaia. “I believe that elevates her to your level.”

Jedrek laughed. “Women aren’t on the same level as men, Rand. Except for maybe this one.” He looked Moria up and down, blatantly staring at her chest.

Does he want to make his wife jealous or make her feel worthless? Or is his obvious lechery intended to provoke Rand?

“She looks like a proper little wifey, eh? Power and beauty. Guess she was worth being dragged out of here on your ass, huh?”

“I’m capable of speaking for myself, thank you,” Moria interjected before Rand could start shouting. “And I’m very fortunate to have bonded with Rand.”

“Bonding,” Jedrek leered. “Is that what they call it? Well, then, I’ve been bonding with Kaia every night since we married, and she still isn’t carrying a child. Why don’t you put your powers to some use and fix her, Daoine Sídhhe?”

“Jed, please,” Kaia murmured at last. “It’s only been two months. I don’t want to—”

“Don’t want to what, eh? Don’t want to carry my child?”

“Don’t want to spread our business around,” she said.

“Then you shouldn’t be so—”

Can I kill him? Moria opened the channel to Rand. Would Kaia be upset or thank me?

Moria



Before Rand had a chance to reply, the air of violence building at their table was broken by a beautiful young woman carrying three tankards of ale. “Rand, you scoundrel. Did you think you could hide from me back here?” She set two of them in front of Moria and Rand, then grabbed a chair for herself and slurped noisily from the third. “Ah, that’s better,” she said, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

Strands of auburn hair curled around her face, highlighting the rosiness of her cheeks and the brightness of her green eyes.

She cannot be another sister. Rand only has two. A cousin perhaps?

She was curvaceous, with gently rounded limbs and ample breasts, which she displayed to great effect in her low-cut gown.

Good. She’ll give Jedrek something else to stare at.

“Trinza.” Rand smiled, but Moria could see that his heart wasn’t in it. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see me, *hells*. You ought to have knocked on my door the moment you got back! I was worried sick about you.” She draped herself over Rand’s shoulder and laid an elegant but possessive hand on his chest. “Rand and I go way back, don’t we, darling.”

Moria bristled.

Rand shoved the hand away. "I'm seeing you now," he said, keeping his tone friendly. "You look very well. Are you performing tonight?"

Smiling, Trinza leaned and whispered something in Rand's ear.

Refusing to eavesdrop, Moria shut down the door on their channel, but whatever the woman said made Rand screw up his nose in disgust.

This one doesn't play a subtle game.

Leaning back, Trinza arched her body in a way that pushed up her breasts, making them even larger. "My father thinks music is a waste of time. I'm sure he only allows me to play at the tavern because he thinks it will help me snag a husband."

"As long as the husband isn't mine." Kaia's mutter was so quiet that Moria suspected she was the only one who heard her.

Tearing her gaze from Rand, she saw Jedrek panting like an overheated dog.

Trinza displayed her perfect teeth with a winning smile. "He's eager for someone to whisk me out of his house, but only if that someone has something to offer."

"You should play for a larger audience then," Rand said. "You grew up here and know who all the bachelors are. Why not accompany Jedrek and his father down the mountain and try your luck in Copperton?"

If looks could kill, the daggers Kaia directed towards her brother would have pierced his heart. For a sensitive and intelligent man, Rand could be very tactless.

Trinza pouted. "But that's so far away. I like it here, in Fairview. Don't you?"

Rand shifted closer to Moria. "Let me introduce my companion."

"Oh, no introduction is needed." Trinza's laugh sliced the air. Even Jedrek recoiled. She looked directly at Moria for the first time since sitting at their table. "Everyone has heard of the

Daoine Sídhé who returned you to your rightful home. What a generous woman you must be, bringing back such a prize!”

“She is,” Rand said before Moria could open her mouth.

Moria appreciated the support, but she preferred to speak for herself. “I would take Rand anywhere with me,” she said, lingering on the word ‘take,’ enjoying the way her mouth pursed around the K sound as if blowing a kiss.

She held Trinza’s gaze and enjoyed the way the woman’s pupils perceptibly shrank in response. Moria smiled briefly, keeping her lips closed, as she rolled the taste of Trinza’s discomfort over her tongue. So what if it was petty? The woman deserved to be taken down a peg or two. She obviously hadn’t been privy to the nature of Moria and Rand’s relationship before tonight, because it was visibly dawning on her now. Her arm withdrew from Rand’s shoulders and painted eyelids shuttered Trinza’s eyes as she tried to hide from the challenger’s stare.

Hammering the final nail into the coffin of Trinza’s hopes, Moria added, “Especially if it means coming to a place as lovely as Fairview and being welcomed into his family home.”

“Oh?” Goose pimples rose across Trinza’s cleavage.

The corners of her mouth twitched, her smile melted, and her shoulders rounded as she slouched forward.

But Trinza’s air of defeat didn’t last long.

Being a performer must have come in handy as she composed herself faster than should have been possible for a village girl. Her head rose again, the distance between her shoulders and chin elongated, and a rictus smile was plastered across her pretty face. “I’m delighted for you, Rand. I confess, I never thought you would settle for any woman outside your home village, much less one as venerable and experienced as a Daoine Sídhé. Moria must be decades older than you, or can the age difference be measured in centuries? Aren’t all Daoine Sídhé ancient?”

That was a low blow.

“Not all,” Moria said with a fake smile.

“Hmm. But you couldn’t give him a child, could you? Your womb is probably as barren as the rocky side of a mountain in winter.”

“That’s enough,” Rand snapped. “We came here to make introductions and polite conversation with my sister and her new husband. If you can’t handle that, then we’ll leave.” He stood, shaking off Trinza’s fresh grip on his arm.

Kaia stopped him. “Please,” she entreated, looking from Rand to Moria with a pained expression. “Please stay. Trinza missed you, that’s all. And she’s probably just processing the new information out loud.” She turned to her friend. “It’s not personal, is it? You aren’t trying to insult Moria, are you? You’re just a little slow when it comes to the interpersonal stuff and desperate to be the center of attention, right?”

Trinza flicked her hair back. “No, it’s not personal at all.” She stood up to face Rand. “In fact, allow me to play a special song for the two of you. A ballad of welcome, if you will. I…” She glanced at Moria. “I promise to explain my actions once I’m done.”

A chill ran its fingers down Moria’s spine as she tried to process those strange words.

Rand nodded and reluctantly sat back down.

As Trinza turned around and sauntered toward the stage, Rand faced Moria with eyes that were wide and pleading. “I’m so sorry,” he murmured. “I don’t know what’s gotten into her. And Jedrek has never been so crude before. If he wasn’t my sister’s husband, I’d break his nose.”

“Maybe the fact that he is your sister’s husband and treats her like that gives you the right to do it,” Moria replied just as softly.

“Maybe, but…” Rand stopped speaking.

Music filled the air, a melody full of longing, sweetness, and desire. Moria allowed herself to relax into the beauty of the music. It wasn’t until the third song that the abrupt change of tone jolted her out of her reverie. She glanced around and noticed that all was far from well. The people of the tavern,

who had been loud and boisterous and appreciative through every other song, were perfectly still as if statues had replaced their living bodies. Moria couldn't tell whether they were breathing. Even Rand seemed frozen, his eyes fixed on Trinza.

“Rand?”

He didn't respond.

Oh. Oh, no.

Moria



Moria used her powers of perception to discern what had changed. Narrowing her eyes, she stared at the musician on the stage and realized that the once yellow pine of the ovoid soundboard had darkened to ebony, and the waves of music floating from the strings were visible now, resembling wisps of dark smoke.

Trinza and her instrument were mere tools. The real player resided in the shadows of the wanton girl's heart.

It was not the first time Moria had encountered a human being in thrall to the shadows. When she was still an apprentice in her sect, she had accompanied her master to a small town, where they had been asked to investigate a claim that livestock had been lured away from grazing areas belonging to a neighboring village.

The town of Wenden lay fifty miles south of the wastelands. Its residents seemed normal at first. It was only once the Pearl Sisters started to uncover the mystery that the townsfolk changed, becoming distrusting and angry. After a few days, they'd cornered the Daoine Sídhé in an inn and set it on fire.

The murderous attempt was thwarted by the powerful channelers, but Moria had learned a valuable lesson: that the shadows did not limit themselves to sending out hordes of shaders into the land. People themselves could be infected with the taint of evil, and sometimes those people remained unaware until something drew it out of them.

The shadows had infiltrated Fairview.

Moria opened the door to her bond with Rand, ready to snap him out of it, but instead of a clear view into his thoughts and emotions, it was like peering at them through a gauze curtain. Everything was blurry and distorted, and she couldn't feel him the way she ought to. Pushing at it seemed to have no effect.

Her bond to him was blocked.

Well, she could still speak. "We—" A heavy hand over her mouth and the prick of a knife at her back kept Moria from saying anything more.

"There, there," Jedrek said in a falsely soothing tone. "Calm down, Mistress. No sense in upsetting anyone, hmm?"

"We have to get her out of here," another voice insisted.

Oh, Kaia.

Moria had hoped that she wasn't a part of this. But, of course, she was. Rand would be devastated. Moria turned her head far enough to study Rand's sister and was dismayed by the hatred she saw on her face.

"Let's take her out the back and slit her throat," Kaia said. "Quickly, before she manages to reach him."

Jedrek scoffed. "You give her too much credit. But the second I feel the True Power rise in you, Mistress, this knife will find its way into your heart. Understand?"

"Interesting. So, you can sense the True Power, can you?" she asked as Jedrek turned her about and pushed her toward the tavern's kitchen.

Ursa was in there, filling tankards and readying plates. She glared at Moria as they passed. "Not so high and mighty now, are you?" she said, a glut of dark satisfaction in her voice. "I told you it would be better for you to leave."

You did.

Moria's mind worked quickly, running through her options as they emerged into the cool night air. She could try to take on Jedrek herself and likely win, but she had no idea how many other people in this place were acolytes of the shadows. Plus,

there was Kaia, and Moria really didn't want to kill her. Perhaps she could reason with her.

"You don't want to hurt me," she said directly to Rand's sister.

"Oh, I think you'll discover that's exactly what I want," Kaia replied. The knife in her hand was cloaked in shadow, the evil evident now that it was unsheathed. "I want you to suffer for what your kind did to our village."

"That was the shaders."

"The battle was with the shaders, but the *terror* came from your sister!" she yelled. "She threatened my whole family, told us we'd never see my brother again! But she was wrong! He's too good for the likes of you."

"He won't thank you for killing me."

"Eventually he will," Kaia insisted.

"No." Moria shook her head. She was going to have to go with an option she found very distasteful, but the shock of it might be enough to reach Rand. "He won't, because if you kill me, you'll also kill him."

Jedrek cackled. "Nonsense! Do you think we're drunk or fools? Do you think we can't tell that you're just trying to save your own life?" The knife sliced through her cloak and into her skin. "I'll finish you here and now, and—"

"Cut my arm," Moria said quickly to Kaia. "Cut it, and you'll see the same mark appear on your brother. We share all our wounds."

"I... that's not possible."

"Try it and see." She pulled up her sleeve and held out a bare arm to Kaia.

Jedrek grabbed it first. "Let's not pussyfoot around, eh?" He wrapped an arm around her throat, and carved a line along her forearm, avoiding the artery, but pushing deep. He used a long and heavy skinning knife, which could have cut her straight to the bone had she not protected herself with a powerful charm the morning she set out for the citadel. He pushed harder,

gritting his teeth and straining his jaw. The wound bled but not profusely. The mark he left might have been a cat's scratch.

"Wha..." Kaia pushed between them before her husband could try again and carefully traced a line along the underside of Moria's arm. She used a quarter inch of her knife's tip but left no more than a surface scratch in Moria's flesh. "Wait! Don't kill her yet!" she yelled, racing back inside the tavern.

"Bossy bitch," Jedrek muttered. "Thinks she can tell me what to do? The shadows will have their way with or without her precious brother."

Moria tested the bond again. The gauze had lifted a little, but she couldn't trust that it would disappear in time for Rand to save her. She would need to jar him awake and take out whoever she could before he reached her, especially Kaia if she returned unaffected by her brother's wound.

She couldn't countenance the idea that Rand might have to kill his own sister.

Steeling herself, Moria stomped on Jedrek's foot. He howled with pain and loosened his hold on her neck. She spun around, grabbed his knife, and...thrust it into her own thigh.

The wound burned as evil spread from the blade, but their bond was active again. Rand panicked as he scoured the room, looking for her but only seeing his sister, who babbled as she pressed a cloth against his wounded thigh. "Fucking Daoine Sídhé!"

Moria leapt out of range of Jedrek's knife, channeling the True Power into a sledgehammer and thrusting it straight into his chest.

The fool's rib cage imploded. Blood burst from his mouth as he sailed backward, landing on his back twenty feet away. He didn't cry out, didn't move. Her blow had crushed his heart.

"No, no!" A scream from the back door.

Kaia pressed both her hands over her mouth. "Jed!"

Rand sprinted toward Moria, limping and hissing each time he landed on his right leg. Blood dripped from his fingers. He

wrapped his left arm around her and pushed her face against his chest with his bloodied right hand. “That son of a bitch. If he wasn’t dead already, I’d kill him myself!”

“Rand...”

“We’ll take Kaia home, then I’ll come back for Trinza—she’s part of this, probably the leader knowing Jedrek’s intellect, and we’ll—”

“Rand!” Moria shook her head. “It’s not just them.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“She means...” Trinza drawled as she strode out of the tavern, her lute still in her hand. “That your beloved sister is as deeply involved in this rescue attempt as any of us. We’ve seen what the Shadow King truly is—our savior.” Her narrow irises gleamed purple around the enormous discs of her pupils; their darkness so deep and intense it drew light from the stars themselves and held it hostage. “The shadows are to be welcomed, Rand, not fought. What has the True Power done other than oppress us? The tithes we give to the Daoine Sídh are protection money, but where were they when we needed protection? If you listen hard enough, you too can hear the truth. People like Moria do not care for the people they’re supposed to protect. They see us as cash cows, resources to exploit while they hoard all the power for themselves.”

She stepped closer, and the space behind her filled with the lurching bodies and blank stares of villagers as they filed out of the tavern. They were sleepwalkers, entranced or enchanted, moving but not experiencing their own reality. Some held weapons, others carried empty tankards in loose grips, which could become makeshift bludgeons with the right command.

And beyond them...

Every hair on Moria’s body rose as a shadow turned the corner of the tavern and stepped into view. It was at least twice as tall as the largest shadow Moria had ever seen. Its huge, shaggy body mirrored the color of Trinza’s eyes, and its forelimbs dragged across the ground as it lowered its head and gnashed long dagger-like teeth between slaver jaws.

Moria had seen shaders sever limbs with the strength of their bites before—this one could bite an entire person in half.

She opened her bond to Rand. *What do you want to do?* If they fled, they would leave all the people of Fairview in the shadow's grip. If they stayed...

If they stayed, they would have one hell of a fight ahead of them.

Rand



W*e fight.*

Rand wasn't willing to lose everyone he loved to the shader's maw. Focusing his energy on the enormous beast, he let Moria know he would take care of that one. She squeezed his hand in understanding, then raised her fist into the air, channeling an immense blast of the True Power upward.

Tiny pinpricks of light floated to the ground like a snowstorm of brightness and clarity. The light resembled the glare of an equatorial noon, leaving no dark places, no shadows in which evil could hide. When the petals of light landed on the shader, he hissed and batted his fur.

"Okay, witch," Trinza growled, raising the lute to her shoulder. "Let's see how you deal with this!"

As she played, the people of Fairview shambled forward, readying their makeshift weapons.

Rand hesitated. *Should I help you with them first?*

"Go," Moria said. "You need to kill the shader."

Rand obeyed.

Drawing on every bit of training Moria had given him, he launched himself into the air, while channeling a protection barrier to shield himself so that when the shader struck, Rand wouldn't be cut in two.

He leapt over the incoming crowd and landed behind the shader, who immediately spun to face him.

Good. I've diverted the shader's attention away from the villagers.

The monstrosity was a living incarnation of the shadows.

With an earsplitting roar, it swiped at Rand with rapier claws that gleamed with blacklight along the outer edge of the boulder-sized paw. Sparks flew as it hit Rand's shield of True Power, but having forgotten to attach himself to the ground, Rand was hurled by the impact along with his shield to the side, tumbling through the air until his spine hit a wall.

Damn it.

Moria had taught him better than that—grounding was essential when channeling the True Power. He dismissed Moria's concern, blushing as he insisted that he was fine, painfully aware that the consequences of his own stupidity had drawn her focus away from battle, leaving her exposed.

Rand picked himself up and attached his feet to the ground with channels of power, ensuring that no one could move him against his will. Drawing his sword, he lengthened the blade with the True Power, and the moment the shader was within striking distance, he sliced with deadly precision.

The beast roared, clutching its abdomen, and black blood gleamed as it oozed through the fur, but the injury didn't even slow it down.

Instead, it used shadow-power to extend its own needle-like claws and attacked with such ferocity that Rand was forced to back away and shield himself from the blows at the same time.

This was very different from the last time he'd defeated shaders. That had been an effort of pure will colored with rage, and not the precise movements he'd learned from Moria.

Was it possible that in certain situations, his old method was more effective than the new skills he'd acquired?

It will either work, or I'll be shredded.

Rand inhaled deeply, dropped his sword, brought up both hands, and channeled the True Power through himself. He

pushed all the energy into his hands, channeling it until his palms burned, his hair stood on end, and his eyes glowed.

When the sphere molded from concentrated power reached the dimensions of a large ram, he thrust it into the shader's torso, ripping open fur and flesh, replacing its internal organs with pure light.

It screamed in pain, a terrible noise that shook the air and silenced all other sounds. The scream ended when it finally exploded, bursting into a thousand pieces that floated in the air and then disintegrated.

Moria's storm of lights was fading, but there was illumination enough for Rand to see the tormented faces of those people who had brought death to the village.

Traitors to the True Power.

He grinned, fierce and terrible, and stepped toward the closest one, Trinza, her fingers still plucking the strings of her lute. She played faster, her movements frenetic with fear, but it wouldn't save her. Her call to the shadows was a child's plaintive cry, while Rand was the gods' executioner, a divine missive sent to restore order to this chaos.

He touched her instrument with the True Power, and it burst apart, just like the shader had. Splinters of wood were buried into the cheek, throat and arm of the woman holding it. Screaming, she dropped the remnants and pressed her hands to her neck, as though that would save her.

Nothing would save her.

Rand!

He brushed off the distant voice and reached for the woman in front of him.

"Curse you to every level of hell, Rand Thorin!" the woman shrieked. "You're meant to be one of us! We brought the shadows here for you! To save you! We could do so many things, all you have to do is—"

He was tired of hearing her shrill voice, so he sealed her mouth with the True Power, then cut off her head for good

measure. It fell to the ground with a dull thud. Another woman screamed.

Ah yes, the other acolyte. He would have to deal with her too. It would be his pleasure to kill her.

Rand weaved through the crowd like a shark following the scent of blood; most of the men and women who staggered out of his way were regaining their senses now that the music had stopped. There she was, screaming uselessly, unable to draw on her petty connection to the shadows to save herself. Rand visualized grabbing her by the throat and squeezing until she could scream no longer.

“Rand!” A woman darted in front of him and stood there, blocking his route. He suspected he knew her, perhaps they had fought side by side in a battle from their distant past.

She seemed familiar in a vague yet nagging way. She was... yes, he remembered now, she was another wielder of the True Power, like him.

“Join me, sister.” His voice sounded strange, cold and deep—sepulchral. It carried the authority of one who expected to be obeyed.

No. She reached out and grabbed both his hands, draining the power from them, squeezing hard enough to bruise his knuckles.

It hurt.

Why was she hurting him?

Come back to yourself.

“Come back to me, love,” she whispered.

Moria. She was Moria, the woman he loved.

Rand blinked in confusion, the overwhelming sense of righteousness fading as reality reasserted itself. “What...”

“You were lost,” she said gently, loosening her grip. “But you’re back now.” *Back with me.*

“Yes, I—look out!” He pulled Moria toward him and threw his hand out at the same time, sending a pulse of the True Power

into the arm that descended toward Moria's back.

The arm broke, and a knife tumbled from the fist attached to it. Kaia screamed in pain and collapsed onto her knees.

Oh, gods! He had almost killed his sister.

And she had tried to kill Moria.

"How could you?" Kaia shrieked, clutching her broken arm to her chest as she slithered toward her husband's corpse. "You were meant to be our savior, Rand! You were supposed to protect us! Why did you side with... with them after the way they treated you?" Corpulent tears streamed down her crimson face as she sobbed in disbelief.

Gone was the winsome young woman he'd been so excited to introduce to Moria. All that remained was this groveling shell, filled with shadows and darkness.

He barely recognized her.

"They dragged you away in chains! They don't love you like we do! They don't want you like we do!" She reached her husband's body and rolled over to face it, wailing. "She killed Jed! He was going to give me a child—a child for the Shadow King! An offering that the shadows could use to create a living god!"

A living god?

"Shaders aren't living gods, Kaia." Moria's voice was soft, full of compassion and something else—regret, sadness. She was sad for him, knowing that soon he would comprehend the enormity of his loss. "They're an abomination, the ultimate corruption of a pure soul into the beast you summoned tonight."

Wait. Was that thing I killed a child?

"It stopped being a child long ago," Moria murmured, sensing his distress. "But that's how many of them start. Child sacrifice is what gave the shadows a foothold in our world. Children are so trusting." She shook her head.

"You're wrong. The Shadow King would have taken my child and rewarded me with wealth and beauty," Kaia muttered, lost

in her delusion. “Jed would have had eyes for no one else, and Trinza would have bowed before me. You and I would have ruled them all, Rand. Everyone would have been ours to command.”

“The shadows don’t care about you,” Moria said. “The whispers you hear are nothing but lies. You can come back from it, though. You’re not too far gone. Let me heal you.” She knelt and extended her hand toward Kaia. “Let me—let us—help you come back.”

His sister shot Moria a poisonous look, then pushed the hair from her eyes and gazed up at him. The swirling madness he glimpsed in her stare seared his heart.

“I will never let either of you seduce me with your filthy power,” she said, sneering.

Her good arm moved faster than Rand could track and pulled a small knife from a hidden sheath at Jed’s waist. Her hand trembled as she lifted it. Rand pulled Moria away from the danger, then watched in horror as his sister slit her own throat.

“No!” Rand pitched forward, jerking the knife away and dragging his sister into his arms. “No, Kaia! Moria, can we heal her?”

“I’m so sorry, Rand. You saw her eyes.” Moria rested her hand on his shoulder. “The shadows have colonized every cell in her body. Even if we could stop the bleeding, with the shadows holding dominion over her, she will reject the True Power and any attempt to heal her.”

He couldn’t bear to look at Moria’s face, afraid to see the sympathy in her eyes. He stared at his sister as blood gushed from the gill she’d carved into her neck. Her wide eyes looked terrified. The certainty she’d felt moments ago had abandoned her, and she clutched his arm with both hands, her mouth flapping open and closed, trying vainly to speak.

To apologize or to curse me?

As the river of blood slowed to a trickle, she went limp in his arms. He bore witness as life left her eyes.

No!

How could this have happened? How did everything go so wrong? He looked helplessly at Moria, begging her to fix this or tell him he was mistaken, and that this stricken creature was not his sister.

“I’m so sorry,” she said instead, her helplessness mixing with his through their bond. “There’s nothing we could have done for her.”

Moria



R and lifted his sister's body and cradled her in his arms. "Fuck!" he yelled, shouting at the top of his lungs, head tipped back like a wolf howling at the moon.

"Rand?"

He glared at Moria.

He had closed the door between them, slamming it shut as he bent over Kaia's limp body and wept.

Even if he hadn't blocked their connection, Moria wasn't sure she would have had the strength to rifle through his despair in search of the meaning behind that cold look.

"Fuck," he whispered as he stomped off in the direction of his family home.

Moria should have seen this coming. Not this exactly; there was no way she could have foreseen the enchanted lute or the somnambulist villagers, but she should have known something terrible might await them in Fairview.

She had been naïve when she assumed the shadows were oblivious to the source of the power that had bested the shaders who had invaded this village. Idra might have reached Fairview first, but the shadows' influence would have followed close behind and polluted those minds that anger and resentment had left vulnerable.

She hoped that didn't mean... Graeme and Mila too...

Please gods no.

Moria hurried behind Rand, hoping to catch his mournful silhouette in the distance, but only confused villagers could be seen wandering the narrow streets. As she strode along dirt- and fecal-encrusted paths, her mind threw its toxic accusations.

She had been careless and negligent.

What she'd intended to be a life-affirming, soul-warming visit had turned into a nightmare, and Rand might never recover from this.

Moria knew it wasn't healthy to wallow in guilt, but it was hard not to. She should have done more, done better. Sensed that the angry mob which met them on their arrival was only the surface of the bubbling cesspit of hatred that had infected Rand's town. She had been blind, perhaps willfully so, expecting her sojourn to the tavern to end in some petty humiliation, but not a massacre.

How could the shadows have gained such a hold on Fairview without her realizing it? Why didn't she sense what was happening before it was too late? She should have recognized her anxiety for what it was and torn down the mountain on horseback with Rand beside her.

If they had left sooner, or if they hadn't arrived at all, Kaia would still be alive.

Yes, but she would still be beholden to the shadows. You might have delayed the confrontation, but you wouldn't have prevented it.

Still, her guilt dug its claws in deeper.

This is your fault. You sequestered yourself. Hid from your sisters and humanity like some precious jewel too valuable for use, when you should have been visiting these remote villages and facing the people who live here. A little more courage might have saved both you and Rand such heartbreak.

And what terrible heartbreak it was.

Moria peered through a window and saw Kaia's body laid across the table. Rand was standing with his hands clasped in front of him, trying in vain to hold back his tears, while Mila

and Graeme bent over the corpse and wept. Without a direct connection to Rand, Moria risked channeling a ribbon of her awareness into his sister and father, just to be certain.

To her immense relief, she found no dark taint lurking in their minds or hearts.

Respecting the family's privacy and letting them mourn without her presence, Moria returned to the tavern and tended to those villagers still living, helping those who had been controlled by Trinza's siren song to recover and process what had happened.

She spotted Ursa, trying to sneak away. The sour-faced woman must have sat out the battle in her kitchen. Perhaps Moria could pry the truth from those thin, frown-wrinkled lips?

It was a simple matter to cast a hook and reel Ursa in with the True Power, dragging her cursing and spitting to her knees in the middle of the street.

Almost the entire town was there, intrigued despite their horror.

"We had to choose!" Ursa howled, looking at the people around her through slitted eyes. "Between two devils, the one who would take power from us, and another who promised to share it and make us strong! Is it any wonder we chose to be strong, rather than throw ourselves on the mercy of the Daoine Sídhe?" Her mouth foamed at the edges, a froth of fervor and insanity. "You and your sisters are a blight on this world! The shadows promise us a future of hope, free from subsistence and subservience! We will never bow to you, never! The shadows will free us from your tyranny."

"They will consume you," Moria said sadly. "They already have." Black spots swirled through the whites of Ursa's eyes, a clear indicator of the shadows' taint. "It's too late for you. You're already rotting. Soon, you'll be nothing but a walking corpse."

"Lies! Lies!"

"Mistress." A man Moria vaguely recognized stepped forward and doffed his cap. She remembered him now. He had tried to

throw dung at her the day she arrived.

“What should we do with her?” he asked.

“She was part of an attempt to murder and enslave your neighbors,” Moria replied. “What would you normally do with such a person?”

“Cage ‘em,” the man answered. “Leave them out as a warning to others. But... maybe, in this case we shouldn’t let her keep spewin’ that poison.”

“Gather your elders,” Moria said. “Make a decree of punishment. If you need my help to carry it out, I will provide it. In the meantime, it may be best to lock her in her own cellar. Do not let anyone within hearing range of her. She’ll try to poison your minds.”

“So says the poisoner.” Spittle flew from Ursa’s mouth as she cackled. “Casting your accusations at the feet of the righteous! You will die. You’ll all die for this. The Shadow King is rising, and he will set me free. Then I will see you suffer like the pigs you a—”

Moria had heard quite enough. She channeled an invisible gag around Ursa’s face. None of the villagers could bear to look at that rabid mouth or those contorted lips now frozen in a spiteful sneer, so they stepped back and stared at their feet.

Moria had to remind them of their duty. “Lock her away.”

Two men rose to do so, but once they had disappeared inside the tavern, another came forward.

“She’s not all wrong, you know!” The speaker was a young man with a long scar across his left cheek. He trembled when he caught her stare but didn’t back down. “The Daoine Sídhe have done very little for any of these mountain villages in the last twenty years,” he said. “I have no affection for the shadows, but I can’t claim your people are much better. What do you intend to do about that, sister?”

“If things go the way I hope,” Moria said, “then very soon the shadows will be destroyed completely or beaten back for another three hundred years.”

It was their only choice.

All other avenues were denied to them now. The only way forward was to proceed with Rand to the wastelands and wage war against the shadows' heart. If she and Rand managed to destroy it, the world would be safe again, and villages like Fairview wouldn't have to rely on her capricious sisters for protection.

It was their only hope. Moria didn't want things like this to ever happen again. Her heart hurt for these people, and she could only imagine how badly Rand's ached.

They had to stop the shadows at their source.

But a thousand Daoine Sídhe couldn't destroy it before, and we're fewer now. The last to come close was Rand's predecessor, and merely pushing back the tide of darkness cost him his life.

They had to try, though. No matter what, they had to try.

Moria didn't return to Rand's home until the dawn's rays crested the mountain's ridge.

When she entered the house, the first person she saw was Graeme, sitting alone by the fireplace in his sitting room. He looked up as she entered, but all she saw in the half-light was the glitter of tears in his eyes.

"You look tired," he said.

"So do you."

He shrugged. "Come sit with me for a moment."

Moria stepped quietly across the flagstone floor and sat on a stool next to him. The warmth from the coals felt delicious, making her realize that her fingers were frozen like icicles.

"I'm heartsick more than anything." Graeme gazed into the low flames. "For such a thing to happen, right under my nose. Kaia... I never would have expected this of her. She had her flaws, her moments of unhappiness or discontent, but she has never... she wasn't cruel. She wasn't interested in causing pain. She just wanted to love everyone and be loved in return."

“I don’t doubt it.” Moria sighed. “She was an intelligent and engaging woman, and I could see the love she had for her family, but the shadows worm their way into people’s hearts and minds in mysterious ways.” Her words offered no balm for his wounds, but she couldn’t come up with anything better to say. “The shadow takes advantage when we least expect it, and once it’s dug its claws into us, it’s almost impossible to get it out.”

“I suppose so, if she preferred killing herself to...” Graeme’s voice trailed off for a moment. “Her siblings are digging her grave right now. She’ll rest beside her mother. She might be a heretic, but I won’t have her burned. She belongs with her family.”

Moria nodded. “I agree.”

“It’s as good as I can give her.” He looked at Moria again. “And once she’s buried, sister, you should take Rand and run.”

Moria saw in his eyes that he understood the way things were. “I know,” she said, her heart straining like a tender bruise. “We will. Don’t worry, I’ll look after him for as long as I draw breath.”

“You’ll need to do better than that.” He held her gaze. “Look after yourself first so you can look after him. Rand told us what happened out there, how he was lost to his own power until you drew him out of it. He’s honed to be a weapon, my lad, for all that I hoped he would live out his days as a shepherd. He will fight well for you for as long as you’re around to fight for. Do you understand what I’m telling you, Moria?”

She brushed away her tears. “I do. I’ll do everything in my power to stay alive.”

Otherwise, Rand might truly go mad, and then...

Then the world would be lost.

Rand



Rand's palms burned with new calluses from his rapid shoveling. The night of torment had left its mark on him, and by the end of Kaia's small and unremarkable burial, he could scarcely stand upright.

Channeling the True Power had felt incredible in the moment, but its aftermath left a hollow, burned-out sensation in his chest—or was that grief?

He wanted to open the door and share the feeling with Moria, let the love he knew she felt for him wash through and cleanse him like a river, but... it would be unfair to cause her more suffering. This place, his home, had already been so unfair to her, he could not bear to make it worse.

Rand shed no tears as his father recited the final blessing. Mila was a mess, her eyes swollen and her nose red from sobbing, fingers clenched as if she was fighting the urge to throw herself on top of the grave and burrow through the dirt that they'd so painstakingly shoveled on top of it. His father somehow managed to look composed as tears rolled down his weathered cheeks. Even Moria cried; the fact that she did so silently, probably not wanting to attract attention, made the rise and fall of her shoulders even more painful to see.

Yet Rand...

All he saw when he remembered his sister was a blade—the knife she'd tried to stab into Moria's back—the blade she'd used to kill herself.

That was what the shadows had reduced her to in his mind—a killer.

Moria took him aside when the funeral was over. They sat together on the long, flat rock his mother had used when she brought her mending outside on sunny afternoons.

“I spoke to the townspeople,” she murmured, her arm wrapped around his shoulder, supporting his weight as if she expected him to collapse. “Ursa will be dealt with by the council of elders, and I’m sure the verdict will be death. She’s too far gone to save, I’m afraid.”

Rand nodded but didn’t speak. His mouth felt as dry as dust.

“I promised your father we would leave today,” she continued. “He’s afraid of what the villagers might do to you... to us. But we both need to rest first. We’ll head north. It’s best that we avoid towns and villages from now on. The shadows might have laid other traps for us. We should...” She paused, then rephrased, “I suggest that we head for the source of the curse that affected Kaia and the others.”

“You want to go to the wastelands.”

“I do.” She winced. “I know it’s a daunting prospect, especially since you’ve only started your training, but—”

“I agree. We need to stop the rot from spreading any further.” He stood up.

Moria quickly followed. “Rand?”

“We should leave now. I don’t need sleep, and you can rest on the way. I don’t... we need to stop this. I need to stop it.” The knowledge that this was the right thing to do, the only thing they could do to save their world, felt like a burning coal lodged in the cavity his heart used to fill. “It’s what I’m here for, right? Why one of you had to bond with me? What any man who can channel the True Power is meant to do. Our sole purpose, the reason we exist at all, is to destroy the shadows or be infected by them, and I refuse to be a tool of the thing that killed my sister. I will be the one to end it.”

“Rand, please. Don’t believe for one second that this is your only purpose. There are many things you can dedicate your

life to, and once this is over, you will do many great things, or small ones if that will make you happier. I'll make sure of that." Moria took his hand.

Rand shook his head. "Perhaps, if I don't go mad or die, we'll talk about it later. Right now, nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of my mission." He glanced at his sister's grave, uncomfortably fresh beside his mother's. "I couldn't live with my guilt if I let her death be for nothing. Both of their deaths."

"I understand, but—"

"Then you understand what we must do." His smile was crooked and his eyes cold as he gently detached himself from her grip. "At least, this is what I've got to do. I won't make you come with me. I doubt I'll come back from this, and it would be a shame for you to risk your life needlessly. I appreciate everything you've done for me, given me, but it's better that I continue alone."

"Don't you dare tell me to leave you." Moria grabbed his hand and gripped it hard. "I would never do that, never. You need me, and you can't do this without me. But even if you could, I wouldn't let you face it alone because I love you."

"That's just the bond speaking."

"You are not thinking clearly. We are connected, and if you die, I will die too, but that's not why I will follow you to the ends of the earth. The love I feel for you illuminates my life. You bring me so much joy, Rand, and I won't let you push me away out of a misguided attempt to save me. There's no salvation to be had for me if I'm not by your side."

Rand knew that he didn't deserve Moria but pushing her away was too hard a prospect to contemplate.

He would try again to convince her to leave when they reached the wastelands. She was wrong about them being forever connected.

They had never formalized their bond.

Since the day they made love, they'd had dozens of opportunities to do so, but they had continued to rely on the

cuffs. Neither of them had suggested establishing a true bond, the permanent kind, and now he understood why.

Once the cuffs were removed, their lives would no longer depend on one another, and if he died in battle, Moria would live. She would mourn him, but she would go on.

But if they established a true bond, the kind she'd had with Zariel, she might not recover from losing a second companion.

And if she died, he wouldn't outlive her by more than a day regardless of the bond.

Moria



Before they said their goodbyes and rode out of Fairview, Moria knelt before the fire and healed Graeme's leg. She was tired, but healing came naturally to her. Not only was it the best way to repay the old man's kindness, but it also assuaged Rand's guilt for leaving his father and Mila to deal with the sheep alone.

They ate a hearty lunch and left that afternoon.

Rather than following the gravel track that led down to the valley and the major roads, Rand guided them to a narrow lane which ran along the side of the mountain. The pace he set was faster than Moria's horse could manage while she slept, and after the second near tumble, he relented and slowed down.

She understood that he was desperate to put as much distance as possible between them and the disaster they'd left behind, but they were both exhausted, physically and mentally, and rushing would do neither of them any good.

Moria wished there was more she could do for Rand.

She wanted to reassure him that his sister's death wasn't his fault. The shadows were insidious and took whatever path best suited their purpose, including infiltrating a community.

After waking up from a short sleep, she shared tales of the times she'd encountered such things before, from the rural town of Wenden where the infected townsfolk had tried to burn her and her master alive, to the long-dead city of Goremouth where the citizens turned on each other. The

shadows still clung to the stones of Goremouth, centuries after its people tore each other apart.

No one had dared enter that city in fifty years, knowing that to do so would cost them their sanity. The shadows exploited even the smallest slight, then widened it until a man or woman was poisoned with hate. While most of the shadows' attacks were obvious—the hulking shadows storming through defenseless towns—they could be subtle too.

Sometimes, they started with something as simple as a girl who'd been shunned by the man she thought she loved.

Moria had been exhausted long before they made camp that night, and she didn't expect to get much rest on the rocky ledge barely wide enough to hold the two of them and their mounts.

There was no water for bathing, although a trickling creek provided enough for them to drink and cook with. Rand made a fire from lichen and dry moss that burned slowly and produced a powerful soporific fragrance. He set up the rest of their camp with ruthless efficiency, but when it was done, he couldn't rest. His twitching and anxious limbs were far too full of adrenaline to let him sit still, let alone lie down and sleep.

Moria tried to open the door of their bond, but he had it locked firmly. "Rand," she tried. "Won't you please open up to me?"

"Not right now."

She sighed. "How can I help you if you won't let me know how you feel?"

"What makes you think I want your help?"

Moria pulled back from the sting of his words. She knew Rand was angrier at himself than at her, but it hurt to be on the receiving end of his ire.

He ran a hand through his hair and sprang back to his feet. "I'm sorry. I need to... I'm going to scout the trail ahead. I'll be back in an hour." He turned and left before she could call him back and beg him to reconsider.

Moria sighed. It wasn't a surprise that he was beating himself up over this, but she'd hoped it would be easier on him now that they were heading to the wastelands, and he could focus on the final confrontation rather than wallow in regret.

She realized now how ridiculous that hope had been.

Rand's childhood home had been irreparably altered. His family had been sundered once again, this time by the loss of his sister.

To kill herself like that in front of him... of course he wanted to try to outrun such a horrific sight.

A distant bird cried out in the twilight, a low hoot that seemed out of place in the mountain. Dread unfurled in Moria's gut. Could she not be allowed a moment's peace? There was enough on her mind already, without being confronted by something—or in this case, someone—she really didn't have the energy or patience to deal with.

Nevertheless, he was here, and if she didn't speak to him now, Rand might have to face him later, and he wasn't in any mood to do that.

Moria pushed herself to her feet, groaning with the effort. Her entire body ached, as did her bruised heart. She forced herself to step away from the fire's warm glow, patted her whickering stallion on the nose as she passed, and headed out, following the trail they'd taken until their makeshift campsite disappeared from view.

"We didn't expect you to leave Fairview so quickly."

"Goran." Moria held back the anger she felt, silencing the sharp side of her tongue.

The large man stepped out from the shadow of a pine tree. For such a hulking brute, he could be amazingly quiet.

"What are you doing here?"

"Making sure you're all right, of course." His words were pure poison.

"You would rather see me drop dead," she said, abandoning any control of her tongue because he didn't deserve any

courtesy. “Were you there, in Fairview?”

“Not in it.”

“No, of course not. Not with how the villagers feel about Idrá and the Daoine Sídhé. But you were close.”

He nodded. “Close enough to get a feel for the place and sense the shadows that had overtaken it. Strange, that such tremendous power could build up without either of you noticing. Is it possible that your chosen one isn’t as good as he thinks?”

“He’s better,” Moria said. “The infiltration was subtle, and battle was only waged after all hope of recovery for the afflicted was lost.”

“Yes. To lose his sister...” Goran shook his head. “Tragic. Not a good sign for the strength of his bloodline, either, if she was led astray so easily.”

“It works in strange and dangerous ways, and she had no training against it.”

There was no one there to give it to her.

“Why didn’t you lend your assistance during the fight?”

“We needed some indication that you’d supplied enough of the necessary training to make him useful. You’ve been working on channeling the True Power into instruments, rather than solely through himself.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged.

“And yet, he still lost control of himself after killing that shader.” Goran made a noise of derision. “Not a good sign for the future. He took out half a dozen of them the first time around—”

“Half a dozen who were less than half the size of this one,” Moria pointed out. “And his first use of the True Power carried no awareness of risk, no awareness at all. Now he knows what is at stake, and how to focus. The first time is the most perilous, even when you’re not Rand Thorin, but he used raw power then, and didn’t have time to be afraid.”

Goran leaned in closer. “It’s part of your job to teach him not to be afraid.” His breath washed over her in a foul wave—apparently watching them didn’t leave time for cleaning his filthy teeth. “We don’t have any use for a male channeler who is afraid. His fate is to give his life and save the world, not cling to the idea that there may be another path for him.”

“But there is another path for him,” Moria insisted.

“Idra doesn’t agree.”

“Idra isn’t here. She sent you to do her dirty work instead,” Moria scoffed. “You may be six and a half feet tall, yet you contort yourself into the shape and demeanor of a lapdog when it comes to her.”

“I—”

“She will never want you,” Moria said. These were things she’d never thought she’d say out loud, but she’d reached the limit of her patience. “Idra will never want you the way you want her. She won’t reach for you in bed or look to you to satisfy her lust. All Idra lusts after is power, and the occasional soft young man to satisfy her sadistic urges. You’re nothing but a tool in her eyes.”

As Goran growled and reached for her, Moria caught his hand between her own before it could connect with her throat.

You would offer violence to me, a Sister of the Pearl Sect of the Daoine Sídh? You don’t know who you’re dealing with.

Perhaps, it was time that she showed him.

Moria focused her control of the True Power, channeling it like the edge of a skinning knife, flensing the skin from his hand. It peeled away in tissue-paper-thin layers.

He conceded defeat long before she reached the muscle, retracting his arm as wet eyes stared at her in disbelief. Moria didn’t need to hold his hand to continue flaying it.

“Stop,” he begged, gripping his wrist hard as he glimpsed an exposed layer of muscle. “Stop!”

Moria didn’t stop until she reached bone. Goran didn’t scream, an impressive display of willpower, but he did bite through his

bottom lip, and blood seeped down his chin and dripped onto the fingers which gripped his afflicted limb. Moria felt no pity for him.

“Pearls are soft until we are given reason to be hard,” she said. “Test me again, and I’ll ruin the other one. Touch me again, and I’ll do the same thing, only lower.” She flicked her gaze over his groin.

The second she retracted her power, Goran turned and fled.

Moria watched him leave, then placed her hand above her heart. The bond was still closed, and she was glad that Rand hadn’t witnessed how awful she could be.

If necessary, he would learn that later, but hopefully, never.

Rand



Rand realized that he couldn't avoid talking to Moria forever, but with the maelstrom of emotions he was fighting to keep under control, he was afraid of what he would say and how it would sound.

He couldn't sit still either.

By their third night on the trail, every muscle in his body burned and throbbed, especially his neck and shoulders, which carried the bulk of his tension.

For the past two nights, Moria had done exactly what he needed her to do. She could see how difficult things were for him and respected him enough to let him deal with his grief and anger in his own way. It was as if she could read his thoughts even while the bond was sealed, but he supposed that was how empathy worked. However, on the third night of shared silence, Rand decided that they needed to talk even if he wasn't ready.

Continuing to ignore his mistakes as they marched toward a greater threat would get them both killed.

"We should talk," he said after they finished their evening meal.

"We should." Moria rinsed out the pot and set it aside to dry against a nearby rock. "Where would you like to begin?"

She sounded so formal, but perhaps that was a good way to approach this kind of talk. Formality was a great antidote to volatility.

Rand took in a long breath and released it slowly. “I lost control.”

Moria looked a little surprised. “When did that happen?”

“It started with the shader. I couldn’t defeat him with the methods you taught me. He was too strong. I dropped the sword.” His words came faster now that he had committed to his confession. “Maybe I could have used the sword to kill him; perhaps I was too impatient. I dropped it and channeled the True Power straight through myself into him, filling his body with brightness until it tore him to pieces. But when I was done, I wasn’t in control. I wasn’t in control of myself, my thoughts... I became part of it, part of the power. I was the sword and something greater than myself was channeling the True Power through me until I... until I... I would have killed her and not even known I had done anything wrong.”

“But you didn’t,” she said.

“Only because you pulled me back from the brink!”

Moria smiled. “What did you think our bond was for, Rand?”

That stalled him. “It... we...” he stammered.

“You’re not a companion, Rand. You’re a channeler, a Daoine Sídhé. If you were a woman, there would be no need to bond with you because we can’t use the True Power in the same way you do. We don’t fill ourselves with it. We have to use a conduit. The way men access the power is different.”

“Recklessly,” he muttered.

“Powerfully,” she said. “Intuitively, and with such great depth, but that is why it can overwhelm your senses and leave you vulnerable. That’s why everyone in the citadel wanted to bond with you. We know the risks and what can happen when a male Daoine Sídhé channels without a bond.”

This didn’t make sense. “Are you telling me that...? I mean, I know that I’m destined for madness if I do it my way. That’s what happened to all the other male channelers.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s your fate.”

Was she lying to herself? It sounded naïvely optimistic.

“I think it is.”

Moria’s face grew stern. “If you had bonded with someone who wanted to use you like a weapon, then yes, that might be your fate. They would use their bond with you just enough to keep you serviceable, but when you teetered on the edge, they would let you fall right over it and kill you before you could turn on them.”

She rounded the fire pit and sat beside him, leaning her shoulder against his. “I won’t let that happen to you. I want you to thrive and live a long and happy life. I want to love you and be loved by you.”

“I don’t deserve your love,” Rand said miserably. “If you saw what I was thinking in those moments.” He clutched her hand. “I’m a monster.”

“You deserve love.” She squeezed his hand affectionately. “I’m not perfect, Rand. Far from it. I’ve done plenty of things that weren’t good. I’ve hurt people, neglected my duties, allowed my Pearl Sisters to be whittled down to nothing until I was all that remained. If I let myself dwell on all the ways I’ve messed up over the years, I wouldn’t be able to get through a single day.”

“It’s not the same.”

Rand was pretty sure that as powerful as she was, Moria wasn’t a threat to all of humanity.

“You’re wrong. We are the same,” she said. “We’re bonded. That means we share our triumphs, failures, and everything in between.” She sighed. “Let’s talk about your perceived lack of control. Yes, the way you naturally channel the True Power is very dangerous, but you also have an innate ability, talent, and strength that I’ve never seen before. And that’s exactly what’s needed for us to have a chance against the shadows. Rand, you were made for this purpose; you have a gift—a dangerous one with many pitfalls, but I swear that I won’t let you fall. All you have to do is feel me, remember me, let me in, and I’ll be there to support you every step of the way. I will be the control you lack. I’ll bring you back every time.”

Rand forced himself to meet her gaze as he cracked open the door between them, just an inch or two.

Love poured through the bond, quenching his parched soul.

Adoration, acceptance, desire—she felt so much for him, and it was exactly what he needed after closing himself off.

He pulled her into his arms, and she straddled his lap, holding him tightly between her thighs. They embraced until their shared emotions settled. There was a moment of peace and tranquility before desire bubbled to the surface.

Rand



“How do you want me?” Moria whispered in his ear.

The options were dizzying, but Rand was too impatient to do anything elaborate. He had gotten used to enjoying their amazing and beautiful sexual exploits while they were in Fairview. Three days without that had left him as tightly wound as a crossbow’s trigger.

“Like this,” he said, kissing her plush lips before licking his way into her mouth.

It took some awkward fumbling, but he managed to open his trousers and push her skirts and underthings aside enough to gain access.

Brushing his fingers along the velvety skin that curtained her sex, he felt her eagerness... how wet she was. It sent a delightful shiver down his spine.

“Oh...” Moria gasped, clinging to his neck.

Rand grinned. “You like being teased, don’t you?” He brushed the slick folds without entering her. Four soft strokes, and Moria was quivering in his lap. “You do like being teased.”

“I—I do, very much... but...”

“Yeah?” Rand reached down, gripped his shaft and positioned it at her entrance.

Moria tried to push down and impale herself on him, but Rand shook his head. “Not yet. Rise onto your knees and hold yourself up.” He rubbed the head of his erection against her clit and the external parts of her sex. Her juices soaked him,

and though he badly wanted to be inside her, he continued teasing, stroking, rubbing, lingering, but not penetrating, not yet.

Moria's thighs trembled. She shut her eyes and chewed on her lower lip.

Was that a groan of frustration or pleasure? Rand focused on their bond and felt how much she loved this—yes, it was frustrating, but she enjoyed being played with, teased, forced to wait, subservient to his whims.

He could work with that. “Lower yourself onto me, love,” he said. “Slowly, take only the head.”

Moria obeyed, dropping her hips only an inch and spreading her thighs wider to open herself. She encompassed the mushroom head but no more, and then she rose again and pivoted her pelvis, rubbing her labial lips against his tip, before dropping again.

She never took him deeper than he allowed.

Only the head.

Up—down—up.

Bliss.

“Halfway now,” he said huskily, clenching his fist around the lower half of his shaft to guide her.

She rose and fell faster now while moaning with delight.

It felt incredible.

His brain couldn't find the right words to describe how good she felt around him. If this hadn't made her feel good, he would have tipped her onto her back and plunged all the way inside, but her pleasure was intense, the slow pace, the opening and closing, the widening and contracting, the teasing, all of it made her feel powerful and at his mercy at the same time. The overriding thought he heard through their bond was that she was making this special for him, that he was teaching her to be the perfect lover for him, and she was.

“Can you climax like this?” Rand asked. He lifted his thumb so that every time she fell, it pressed against her clit. “Come like this. I know you can. Come, do it for me, on me, let me feel it.”

“Oh, oh, I—I—wait—”

Seconds later, ecstasy streamed through the bond as Moria reached climax. Her sex tightened and pulsed around him as she orgasmed.

Rand couldn't hold back any longer. He removed his hand and pulled her the rest of the way down his shaft. Moria groaned, hoarse, a quiet scream as her pleasure crested again. Rand churned his hips against her, closing his eyes as her grip overwhelmed his self-control.

He climaxed with a roar, filling her with pulse after pulse and giving her everything—body and soul.

It took them a while to recover, sitting with arms locked around each other, as he slowly shrank inside her.

Finally, Moria grinned with satisfaction. “That was fun.”

“It was,” he agreed. “I love seeing you let go like that.”

“I love letting go.” She glanced down and sighed. “Although I'm afraid we've made a mess of ourselves.”

“That we did.” He chuckled. “Lie down and rest while I get us some water for cleaning up.”

Moria



Ten days later they descended the mountains, arriving in a valley that would lead them to the wastelands. They traveled faster now, making much better time. They still had some distance to go, but if they maintained this pace, they could arrive at their destination within a week.

Moria wasn't sure how she felt about that.

It was necessary. Not only because the Daoine Sidhe demanded it from them, but because it was their best chance at stopping the destruction and depravation the shadows were wreaking on who-knew-how-many towns, villages and cities.

Its taint in Fairview had been massive, but things could be much worse in other places.

It meant an end to their peace, though, and Moria resented that.

Admittedly, their peace was an illusion, but the past few days had been special—better even than their first joining.

They were ravenous, unable to keep their hands off each other. Every morning they awoke wrapped in each other's arms, and two times out of three they let their natural inclination toward closeness turn into a soft, gentle coupling, often spooned together or with Moria on her back beneath Rand, holding him in her arms as he moved inside of her.

Evenings were different.

After practicing Rand's channeling and learning to make room for Moria inside of himself while he did so—their minds and

emotions were heated and tangled. It was then that they had their more adventurous encounters. Moria on her hands and knees, legs spread wide as Rand mounted her, then Rand licking her clean of his spend. Rand fucking her with his fingers until she came. He'd orgasmed in her mouth, come between her breasts, and made her ride him until her trembling legs could barely hold her weight. It had been dirty. It had been decadent. It had been everything Moria never knew she wanted until Rand showed her what she had been missing.

Now that she'd had a taste, she wanted more. A week wasn't nearly enough time to learn all the things he could show her.

The student had become the teacher.

As they journeyed closer to the shadows' heart, they encountered crazed humans and shaders daily. Such threats would only increase as they marched toward the battlefield. They needed to stay sharp, which sadly meant they couldn't lose themselves in each other the way they wanted to.

"Keep thinking things like that, and I'll have you anyway," Rand warned.

"I hope you will," she said. "But perhaps not until this evening, when we can set alarms up around our campsite."

"That's for me to decide."

Yes, it is. And she felt quite smug thinking about that.

"Tell me more about that epic battle." Rand cast her a sidelong glance. "I know the shadow tunneled into the world, and the Daoine Sídhe fought it with the help of Evan Whytelaw, but I know little else."

"Hmm, there's a lot of debate about what happened at that battle," Moria said. "No one knows for certain how the shadows gathered in the wastelands. Some believe they tunneled up from the deepest layer of hell, while others believe that the evil fell here from a distant star. We don't know whether it's a force of nature, something to restore the balance when people learned to channel the True Power, or whether it was brought here by something unnatural. Some claim that our distant ancestors developed a weapon so powerful that, when

they used it, it ripped a hole in the fabric of time and allowed things that had once existed, or might exist in the future, to exist in the present. Another theory claims that the damage caused by the weapon wasn't temporal at all. Instead, it punched through the membrane that separates parallel universes, and the evil bled from another reality into ours. Still others say that a dark ritual, possibly involving child sacrifice, twisted the True Power until it broke into two, shadows and light; they claim that's why the True Power is the only thing that can cancel it out—a kind of synergy.

“Whatever the truth is, there's no doubt that the battle was necessary for the future of all mankind,” she said. “The Daoine Sídhé were far more numerous then, and Whytelaw was at the height of his abilities. Shadows saturated the land at a rapid pace, killing thousands of people as they grew in strength and influence. Whytelaw led the Daoine Sídhé into the fight, and the sisters set up a perimeter around the afflicted area to keep the shadows inside, while Whytelaw himself fought his way to the center of the infestation.

“Those who survived the conflict describe an incredibly bright light, pure True Power, that extended out to each and every sister, cleansing everything within its radius. It was so strong it blinded some, and more than one Daoine Sídhé died in the blast. The shadows were diminished, almost eradicated, but instead of focusing on finishing the job, the sisters had to deal with Whytelaw.”

“His madness,” Rand said.

“Yes. It is said that he was utterly insane, so full of the True Power that it glowed through his skin. Unable to recognize the sisters who came to his aid, he struck them down. He killed over two hundred before he was finally defeated—more Daoine Sídhé than the shadows had killed in five generations.”

“Moria...”

“But that's not going to happen to you,” she said doggedly. “I won't let it.”

“Moria, I need to know who will put me down if it does?”

“It won’t come to that.” To think otherwise was impossible. “We are connected. We’re a team, and whatever the ultimate outcome of this battle, anything that happens to one of us will happen to both of us.” She held up her manacled wrist. “These guarantee that.”

Rand’s eyes narrowed and he glared at the cuff. “We need to remove them.”

Moria panicked. “We can’t.”

“Why not? There’s nothing preventing us from establishing a traditional bond. Wasn’t this always supposed to be a temporary measure? Well, I accept you now. I want to bond with you in a way that doesn’t risk killing you if I’m obliterated. You’ve outlived companions before, and you can do so again.” Rand spoke faster as he warmed to his subject. “It would give us more freedom, and I would rest easier knowing that even if the worst happened, you would be all right instead of doomed to whatever fate lay in store for me.”

“We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because a full bonding will take more time than we have.”

“Okay, well we’re bonded in the human sense already. I would never do anything to hurt you. Just take off the cuffs, and we’ll do this my way.”

Moria took a deep breath. It was time to come clean. “We can’t do that either because the Daoine Sídhé are watching us.”

“They were, I remember, but they stopped after your last confrontation, right?”

She shook her head. “No, that’s just the last time I told you about.”

Rand’s smile fell. He stared at her as if she were a stranger. He was silent for minutes, which Moria’s anxiety stretched into the length of years. Finally, he said, “Tell me.”

Moria told him about her last meeting with Goran, how he said he and Idra and her other companions had witnessed what

happened in Fairview. How cold and callous they had been, willing to sacrifice the villagers' lives just to test whether Rand was ready to face the shadows. She admitted to her act of cruelty, describing what she had done to Goran's hand, how she felt no guilt, believing he deserved that and worse, but warning Rand that Goran and Idra would undoubtedly hold a grudge. "Removing the cuffs now will allow them to exact the cruelest revenge. She will take you from me and force you to submit to her or kill us both.

"There may be others too. Just because I haven't sensed them, doesn't mean they aren't watching us. There may be more of them than we could handle on our own."

Rand trembled. At first Moria believed it was from fear, then she saw the ferocity in his eyes and jaw and realized he was angry.

"Sadists," he hissed. "Watching my people die, my sister die, and doing nothing to help. Your people have forgotten what it means to be human."

"I'm so sorry." Moria hurried to his side and took his hands. "I know. Idra and too many of the others are terrible, but there are good Daoine Sídhé, people who take their roles as protectors of humanity seriously and are working to save people instead of inspiring fear in them."

"Then why didn't I see any of them at the citadel?" he demanded.

"Because the only ones who live at the citadel are the ones for whom power has become more important than the work itself. Why else would they be in that pit of vipers?"

"I don't know." The ferocity drained out of him almost as fast as it had appeared. Rand looked exhausted, empty except for despair. "I don't know how to deal with people like that. I used to hope such people didn't exist. I mean, even Jedrek, for all his many faults, cared about his mother and father. Even now, knowing that such selfishness exists, I still find myself looking for the best in people rather than acknowledging the worst."

“I understand, and I do too. We’ll get through this, and then...”

Rand shook his head. “It’s better not to think about what comes later. Let’s just concentrate on getting through this.”

Moria tried to hold back her tears, but sadness overwhelmed her. This beautiful man expected to die in the coming battle, but he was willing to face it anyway because it was the right thing to do. The only thing he seemed to fear was that it might destroy her too. He was right not to make plans for a future that they might not have, but Moria did not want to give up hope.

Clinging to the idea of a Happy Ever After was the only thing that kept her going.

Rand



Their fates were uncertain, and they did not know what would happen after they faced the shadows, but the sky promised rain in their near future. The closer they came to the wastelands, the heavier and darker the clouds appeared. The sun struggled to penetrate their dense cover, creating a perpetual twilight. Damp mist rose from the ground each morning, and thick fog snaked around them each evening. On the second day, frequent rain squalls battered their cheeks and blasted through their cloaks until they felt soaked to their bones. The feeble fires they made after setting up camp had to be continuously fed and did little to brighten their mood.

Moria channeled the True Power to dry them before they slept, but only on those nights when they found shelter, and never while they were traveling. Otherwise, she would have to channel nonstop. She told Rand more than once that it was important to conserve their strength even if it meant enduring the cruel elements.

“Once we enter the wastelands, we will be surrounded by shadows,” she said somberly while sipping tea.

Rand watched her carefully. He’d discovered that Moria had been giving him the lion’s share of their food. Her gaunt cheeks and the blackish purple circles beneath her eyes worried him. From now on, he would monitor their food portions himself, making sure that she ate enough.

Most likely he looked tired and unhealthy too, but without access to a mirror he had no way of knowing. Certainly, his energy levels were running low, and it wasn’t only fear of

hurting Moria in her fragile state that ensured their lovemaking was gentle and slow.

Now, they reached for each other only because it gave them comfort and warmth.

“Channeling the True Power will take far more effort, so we need to work quickly and not linger. If we stay there for more than a day, our disadvantage will be compounded.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because the shadows will work against us,” she said. “Sapping our will and sending more of its monsters to face us. We’ll quickly lose strength. So, we need to locate the nexus of its power as soon as possible.”

“How?”

“Whytelaw’s monument. After he died, the Daoine Sídhé raised an obelisk a thousand feet tall, marking the spot where he fell after pushing back the shadows. That’s where it rose again when it made its inevitable return. It’s where we’re likely to face the worst concentration of the shadows’ power.”

Rand made a face. “Wonderful.”

Moria coughed. She’d been doing that a lot. “I know, but at least it’s a start.”

“And how am I supposed to cleanse this concentration?”

“By opening yourself fully to the True Power while staying grounded to the earth—literally. You need to keep both feet on the ground and project your awareness down toward its core,” Moria said. “Let the earth guide you. No one knows exactly how the shadows are coming into the world, but whatever the route is, when we find it, we must close it. Only then can we focus on obliterating the shadows that have already manifested in the wastelands. Otherwise, it will just regenerate.”

“Oh.” Close the route then cleanse the wastelands. The task sounded bigger than one or two people could manage alone. “It sounds impossible.”

“It’s not impossible,” Moria assured him. “Evan Whytelaw channeled the True Power against a much more mature and

pervasive incarnation. Thanks to his efforts, we enjoyed peace for nearly five centuries,” she said. “I’m sure that between the two of us, we can take on this infestation.” Moria’s enthusiasm and confidence brightened her face. Her skin shone healthily, making Rand believe she could be right.

“I trust you,” he said, rewarding her with the first smile he had produced in at least twenty-four hours.

“You should.” She looked up at him through thick eyelashes. “You know that I only want what’s best for you.”

Desire rose in him, and his shaft bobbed eagerly. His grin widened, and he was filled with heat for the first time in what felt like ages. A feeling he had feared was lost after the hardships they had faced.

“Do you think,” Rand murmured as he pulled her closer, feeling the same heat from her body despite their wet clothes, “that Idra and her cockroaches are watching us right now?” He ran his hands down her arms, then up her sides, pausing to caress her breasts.

“I—I don’t—know—”

“I bet they are.” Rand nuzzled her neck, unbuttoned the top of her dress, and made a trail of kisses that led to her cleavage. “Do they bed each other?”

“I... I think Idra sometimes takes them to her be—bed, but—”

“Sometimes, hmm? Whenever she’s in the mood to hurt him?” Rand’s tongue traced a line from her breast to her collarbone. “What would they think if they saw me worshiping you right now? Shall we give them a show?”

“Oh, you don’t—you can’t mean that you want to—”

“I want you to lie on your cloak and lift your skirts for me, yes.” Hunger gnawed his belly at the prospect of pushing his face between her thighs and feasting on her sex. “I want to nestle between your legs and eat you out. I want you to scream my name as you come. I want Idra and her idiots to see how much I love being with you, inside you, in every sense of the word. I want them to know what it’s like to see something beautiful and know they will never be able to touch it.”

A flush of heat highlighted Moria's cheeks, belying any pretense that she didn't want the same thing. Her chest rose and fell. "That sounds like a decent plan to me." Her voice sounded hoarse.

"I'm glad you approve." Rand smiled and flipped her onto her back before she could take another breath.

He undressed her quickly, channeling enough True Power to shield them against any incursions.

It was incredible how quickly he had become addicted to the taste of her. As wonderful as her mouth felt around his shaft, there was something extra special about bringing pleasure to the person he loved. She tasted sweet and light, and when she came, it was with a cry that made his member pulse eagerly. Rand freed himself from his trousers, curled her legs over his shoulders, and sank his cock deep into her body. She came again with a tightening of her muscles that left both of them breathless.

"I'll never get enough of you," he said, pulling back and then thrusting inside her again.

Moria keened, her body teetering on the edge of a third orgasm that promised to be the strongest one yet.

"I'll never give you up for anything or anyone. You're everything: light, life, and love. You're my heart and soul." His words were a form of worship—a prayer to his goddess.

There were tears in her eyes, but their bond assured him they were tears of joy, not sadness.

"You feel it, don't you? You feel how much I love you." He knew she did, but he still wanted her to say it.

"Yes," she panted. "Yes, yes, I—I do."

"Good. Always remember that feeling and know it is true." He thrust faster, quickening his pace as his own climax sprinted toward him. "Whatever happens tomorrow, I love you, I fucking love you. Moria. Moria!" Rand came with a groan, filling her with his seed.

After taking a second to catch his breath, he reached down between them and rubbed her clit with his fingers, while his erection was still hard inside of her.

It didn't take long before Moria came again, this time with a sigh instead of a scream.

"Perfect," he told her. "You're perfect." Sliding out, he planned to get a cloth to clean them, but she pulled him into her arms before he had a chance to move.

"Tidying up can wait." She smiled. "Lie here with me."

The door between them was wide open, and Rand reveled in the affection directed toward him, as warm as sunlight on a spring day, filling every part of him. He grinned and rotated onto his side, pulling her with him. He hooked his arm around Moria and kissed her again before closing his eyes. As exhaustion pulled him toward sleep, he allowed the shield to drop.

Tomorrow would be a dangerous day, but Rand felt like he had done everything he could to prepare for it. Now it came down to how much he could withstand, and for how long.

As long as it takes.

Moria



The next morning, Moria and Rand arrived at the wastelands' border.

There was no fence or wall to demarcate a line. Instead, it was marked by desolation. There were no living plants, no animals, insects, or birds, and no running water as far as they could see or hear.

It was like stepping onto an alien world, and the idea that this was a parallel universe crossed Moria's mind.

"We need to leave the horses behind." Holding the reins, Rand gazed at Whytelaw's monument, which was visible from where they stood. "The shadows will sap energy from the animals as quickly as they do from any living thing." He stroked his gelding's nose. "We'll tie their limbs so they can't wander too far, but at least they'll have a chance if we don't return."

After that was done, they said their goodbyes to their mounts, Rand took Moria's hand, and they stepped over the border into the wastelands. The moment she placed a foot inside the shadows' domain, Moria felt it lap at the edges of her power—an insistent malevolence trying to pry open her connection to the True Power in order to sever it.

As the door between them filled with probing darkness, she turned to Rand. "Do you feel it too?"

He nodded.

"We need to maintain our connection to the True Power and leave the bond between us wide open. That's the only way

we'll survive this." She squeezed his hand. "Don't close it off for any reason, not even to spare me pain. The moment you do, the shadows will use that advantage to cut us off from each other."

"The shadows will try to corrupt our power." Rand's eyes were haunted. "They will twist it until it destroys us."

"It will be a race," Moria said. "To see who can do the most damage first. Be prepared to run, my love."

She meant it literally as well as figuratively. They needed to be fast to outrun the shadows' destructive power, which would blast them full force as soon as they crossed the border.

As they sprinted toward the obelisk, Moria cursed under her breath, regretting not having the foresight to wear pants. For the final battle, she had put on her Pearl Sisterhood pristine-white regalia, and her skirt tangled around her legs, slowing her down.

Pumping her arms and stretching her legs, she somehow managed to keep pace with Rand, whose strides were nearly twice as long as hers, but the burning pain in her lungs was almost intolerable. At least it provided distraction from the relentless scratching at the edges of her connection to the True Power, which was the greater concern.

The shadows were circling her, looking for a way in.

Not a chance.

The obelisk loomed on the horizon, appearing to grow as they got closer, but after a punishing hour, they had to pause to regain their breath and take a drink of water.

Moria was exhausted but knew she could keep going. Rand, however, seemed in trouble.

"It's talking to me," he muttered through clenched teeth.

"Talking to you?" Moria hadn't heard any whispers, just the constant pressure like a finger probing her connection to Rand and the True Power, but Kaia and Ursa both had said the shadows had spoken to them, and they had given in to their lure.

She had to protect Rand against the shadows. “What’s it saying?”

“It wants me to let it in. It’s using your voice, Moria. I need—I have to block it out somehow.”

So that was their strategy. They were pushing Rand to sever his connection to her.

“Focus on me,” she said. “Focus on nothing but me. You’re holding my hand. I’m touching your chest. I’m right in front of you. Just listen to me, and—”

Something wrapped around her ankle and tugged.

Moria was torn away from Rand’s hand and lifted high into the air. *What the—* Before she could fight back, before she could even begin to channel the True Power, she saw Rand below her, light blazing in his eyes, obscuring his pupils.

He stretched his arm toward her and, with a bright and vicious smile, clenched his fist.

Something crunched, and whatever was holding Moria let go. Rand’s power caught her before she fell two feet. She floated to the ground as easily as a leaf caught in a gentle breeze.

A hundred feet away was a mangled, tentacled creature unlike anything she’d seen before, even in the old parchments she had studied. Its entire body had been crushed.

“I didn’t sense it at all,” she marveled.

“It was buried just below the surface.” Rand’s smile was smug. “But I got it.”

“You certainly did.” She could have said more. Perhaps she should have gently reminded him to be careful with his power, but something else distracted her. “Shaders are coming. Not just one—many.”

She’d felt the tainted energy a moment before they became visible.

The creatures loped in four-limbed gaits that rapidly ate up the distance between them and their prey.

“We’d better get going. Can you run?” Rand asked, grabbing her hand.

As Rand’s energy bled through their bond, making her sprint faster, Moria had never felt so light-footed.

They finally reached the obelisk. Its white marble had been stained black around the base by ancient blood. The first row of shaders was less than a hundred feet away, their maws wide open, slavering as they thirsted for the fight.

Moria channeled the True Power, readying herself for battle, but then—

The earth opened with a deafening crack beneath the shaders’ feet. Monsters toppled forward and into the crevasse. It must have been deep because none of the beasts crawled back up. A few tried to vault across to the other side, but Rand widened the breach as the earth screamed in agony.

“I won’t let them touch you.” Sweat was pouring down Rand’s forehead despite the cool air.

He was channeling a powerful current of the True Power, but he wasn’t mindful of the thread connecting them, and it was growing weak.

She was losing him.

Moria understood the shadows’ strategy.

“Rand, stop! Forget the shaders, they’re just a distraction. Use your power to cleanse the land, not break it, and keep our connection.”

“I have to protect you.” His eyes were wild with the power coursing through him.

“I can protect myself.” She lifted her hands to his face and cupped it, forcing him to meet her gaze. The light in his eyes steadied as he focused on her. “You can save all of us. Reach down; reach deep down into the earth. Extend your connection to the True Power until you find a place beyond the shadows, then bring it back up until you sense its source.”

Nodding, Rand took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

As he channeled downward, Moria helped, guiding him past voids and null spaces, expanding their search until they felt something that pulsed with dark power. It was like staring into a malevolent void—the true heart of the darkness. It menaced them with tendrils that snapped at their channels, attempting to break them apart.

Moria would be damned before she allowed it.

“We need to drown it with the True Power,” she whispered. “Smother it, cut it out like a tumor. It’s hungry, and it’s vicious, but you can destroy it, Rand. You can rid the world of its taint.”

He nodded as he honed in on the evil.

Moria turned her attention to the surface. Shaders tried to leap across the gorge Rand had created. Sooner or later, one of them might make it, but she was ready for them.

The True Power glowed within her hands.

She would defend Rand.

Rand



Cut out the shadow's heart.
Smother it, drown it, purge it.

But the shadow was fluid, constantly moving and shifting. As soon as Rand grabbed and destroyed a part of it, another part flowed in a different direction, evading destruction.

His technique was flawed. Instead of rapidly blasting the shadow to destroy sections of it, he had to find a way to corral it and destroy it with one massive channel of the True Power.

But how? He was getting tired. He needed help. He needed Moria.

She was at his side the moment he reached through their bond.

“Yes, I understand. Here, like this.” She wove and knotted the True Power into a vast net and showed him how to tighten the strands so that it would be unbreakable once he cast it. “Make another one like this and throw it!”

Rand made his net and cast it into the shadows, tightening his grip so the evil couldn't wriggle free. As he reinforced the net with the pure light of the True Power, the shadow screamed and moaned, then wilted and withered, until finally there was nothing left.

Of that one.

There was more evil, and its minions were relentlessly lashing at him, trying to save their master.

Rand had destroyed over half of the source with his first cast, but it had cost him almost all his energy, and he didn't have enough reserves to deal with what remained of the shadow.

"Focus on your grounding," Moria urged. "Reach deeper into the earth to the source of the True Power and you will have endless power at your command. You can do this, Rand!"

Reach deep... reach deep.

Ignoring the violent lashings of the frenzied shadows, he projected his consciousness deeper into the earth. The pressure was intense, the heat was almost unbearable, and then he saw it. There... finally.

Finally, there was the Light of the True Power. There was the source of everything he, Moria and all of the Daoine Sídhé had ever channeled. It was beautiful—pure white light. Rand reached for it and invited it inside.

Fire and heat; light and glory! The True Power filled him, burning away everything that he no longer needed, every pathetic human weakness, leaving only might and strength.

What was humanity in the face of a battle between dark and light?

Two opposing elements, two great cosmic forces that had been at war since the beginning of time.

Burn! He thrust the light at the darkness; it flowed through him like a waterfall, unchecked, laughing as the shadows wriggled and writhed.

The darkness hunted desperately for any cracks it could exploit, any route it could use to escape, any gap in the ocean of light for it to hide within, a place it could deposit even a fraction of itself so that it could survive and fight another day, or rather another night.

No more.

There will be no other day.

There is only now.

Day eternal!

No more night!

No more shadow!

“Burn!” Rand demanded. And it did.

The source was destroyed, but remnants remained on the surface. Rand opened his eyes to search for them, then realized he did not need to see—he could sense their energy, violent but pathetic, like cornered rats trying to gnaw their way to freedom.

Burn, he commanded, and the creatures burned.

Rand sent light along every tendril that connected the shadows to the world, burning out the darkness that had settled into the hearts of fools across the land. A hundred people died instantly, the infection too deep for them to survive the purge. A thousand more cried out in pain, collapsing, and quivering as the shadows’ hold vanished, leaving raw wounds in their minds as it was eradicated.

No more shadows. They had all been washed away. Rand exulted in his triumph over the darkness as he rose into the air. He ignored whatever fear he felt—the whole concept seemed utterly foreign to him now.

He had remade the world for the light.

Now he could remake it in his image, bring a new era of prosperity to people. He would give them light, drench them with it until it flowed in them as brightly as it flowed in him.

He would—

A sudden pain in his hand grabbed his attention.

He was wounded.

Bleeding.

But why? He banished the wound and gathered his power again, readying himself to spread the light to all mankind.

Another wound appeared on his chest. Another on his cheek. One on his thigh; one on his calf... none of them were life-threatening, but all of them were inconvenient and... strange. Where were they coming from? Rand dimmed the light so his

eyes could see more than its brilliance and looked down. Far below him at the base of the obelisk was a tiny person in white. She stabbed herself in the foot as she—she—

MORIA!

Rand tumbled out of the sky.

He bounced as he hit the ground and stumbled to Moria's side. His connection to her had been dwarfed by the luminescence of the True Power, but now that he had pushed that away, he felt her again. Her desperation. Her pain. And her longing—oh, how she longed for him.

Rand



“Moria,” he breathed, healing each of the wounds she’d used to reach him in his brightest and most dangerous hour.

The pain was gone, but bloodstains dappled her pearly white cloak, reminding him that despite his best intentions, Rand had been pulled so deep into the True Power that he’d nearly lost himself.

“There you are,” she said, cupping his cheeks with her hands. Her eyes were full of tears, but she smiled brightly. “I knew you would come back to me.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

Something inside of him broke at the thought that he could have been her end. If he had let the light use him as its portal to the world and abandoned everything except the need to use that great power, he would have lost her.

He would have killed her.

Rand fell to his knees, squeezing his eyes to try to shut out the images that flooded his brain.

Moria bleeding out from self-inflicted wounds as she tried to capture his attention.

Moria, a burned-out husk after he had forced the True Power through her beyond her capacity to modulate it, unable to do anything except smolder.

Moria dying after he promised to look after her.

He was a worthless, irresponsible, arrogant fool.

“No,” she said firmly, wrapping her arms around him and covering them both with her cloak. “You’re not worthless. You’ve done so well, Rand. You saved the world and you don’t even know...”

“I could have killed you...”

“You didn’t. You felt me.”

“You had to hurt yourself to reach me!” He stared at her incredulously. “You could have bled out and died. I was too weak. I couldn’t channel the True Power and keep our connection at the same time.”

“You were grappling with powers so extreme that every part of you had to focus on keeping yourself alive,” Moria said. “You might not realize the enormity of the battle you faced and what it took from you, the cost you paid to save the world, but I did.” She stroked his hair. “And it wasn’t just your soul that was on the line. It took a toll on your body as well. The True Power burned away your beautiful auburn locks. Your hair is white now, my love.”

“It is?”

“Yes. Your eyebrows, lashes, and even your irises are lighter, and your skin, oh...” She picked up his hand and traced a faint pink line. It looked like a river with tributaries and offshoots that flowed down his arm into his hand. “Channeling that much power has marked you.”

Rand looked at his other hand and saw the same thing. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. No one else has ever survived after channeling so much. But you did, Rand. Don’t you see how special that makes you?”

“I wouldn’t have survived without you,” he murmured. “You saved me.”

“It’s the least I could do after you saved the world,” she quipped, then leaned in and kissed him.

Sensations zinged from his sensitive lips and along the newly carved channels in his flesh. It was as though he had never kissed a woman before.

Moria pulled back. "Is it too much?"

"No." She would never be too much for him. "But we should go slowly. I feel strange."

"I understand." She pressed her lips to his forehead, then stood up.

He let her help him to his feet. Rocking with a sudden spell of dizziness, he leaned on her shoulder for support.

"Come and look at the changes in the land," she said.

That this had been a place where evil things had occurred was still evident. Nothing had grown here before, and nothing had had time to begin growing now, but the ancient waterways that had been plugged up and rerouted centuries ago were flowing once more. The stream they walked beside looked clear, and the sky above was no longer full of dark clouds. It was bright blue. Hints of pink and gold reflected on the wispy bellies of the few white clouds which remained, evidence of the coming dusk.

"Did we really do it?" Rand marveled. "Did we really clear out all of the shadows?"

"I searched as deep as I could reach and found nothing left," Moria said. "What does it feel like to you?"

"When I was doing it, burning the shadows away, I was certain that I got it all," Rand said. "Even the parts of it that had taken root in people... oh, no." He turned frantically to Moria. "I killed people! When I ripped the shadows out of them, they died."

"No," she said sternly. "You didn't kill them. The shadows did."

"But I—"

"If the shadows' evil was rooted so deeply in them that its removal caused their deaths, then they were already lost. They were instruments, acolytes of the shadows. They were people

like Trinza, like..." She didn't say his sister's name; she didn't need to. They both knew that if Kaia hadn't killed herself, she wouldn't have survived the purge.

"I injured others."

"You freed them," Moria insisted. "You freed them from a future of bondage and oppression, bound to a power that only wanted to use them to spread fear, pain, and evil across the world." She cupped his cheeks and held his gaze. "I know it's hard to accept, but everything you did today was necessary. I swear to you, there was no other way. You exceeded every hope I had for you, and the fact that you survived; that you're here with me—alive..." Tears filled her eyes. "I hoped we might walk away from this, but I knew we might not. Rand, you're the strongest, the most incredible and beautiful man I have ever met and my love for you knows no bounds."

Moria pulled him into an embrace and Rand clung to her even though it made his body shake. The thrill of her closeness, the enticing scent of her skin, the softness of her breasts as they pressed against him, filled him with light and warmth.

Even though he was depleted and barely able to stand, he throbbed with desire, love, admiration, tension, and pressure. The burn of it threatened to overwhelm him in the most delightful way.

"You are a marvel," she said. "Greater than the Daoine Sídhe could have dreamed. You've exceeded everyone we have ever known or read about in your ability to channel the True Power."

"I would prefer never to touch that power again," Rand admitted.

"You don't have to. It's over. You saved us all, and you never have to do anything you don't want to again." She smiled at him. Rand found the strength to smile back. "And I'll be with you every step of the way."

Moria released him from her grip, took his hand, and together they faced the edge of the wastelands, beyond the chasm he'd

created that was now filled with water that sparkled in the light of the setting sun.

They had fled shadows, fought an otherworldly tendrilled thing that attacked Moria from beneath the blasted earth, and destroyed the shadows in a single day. It amazed him to realize how much they had achieved.

Two months ago, Rand was still in the citadel, chained up in that miserable cell. Now, he was with a woman he adored, and he'd been able to save her, despite the odds that had been stacked against them. And she had saved him in return.

“Has it only been one day?” he whispered.

Moria



The return to their campsite required a detour around the water-filled chasm, and night fell long before they got there.

The sky was completely dark except for a sprinkling of stars—there were no moons to light their way, and they had to rely on the glow from Moria’s channeling to find the remnants of their fire and their makeshift beds.

Rand had been so exhausted that it had taken a lot of cajoling to keep him moving, and eventually he’d closed the bond between them to stop her from fussing in his mind.

She could not imagine how profound his fatigue was.

His skin seemed papery, his fingers frail where they gripped hers. His time channeling the True Power had drained him of more than just his earthly colors—it had completely drained him of energy and spirit.

Moria didn’t know how to replenish those and could only hope they would return with time and rest.

She was afraid to attempt healing him with the True Power. Given everything he’d been through, she had no idea whether a dose of her power would help or hurt him more. He’d been burned by it, and his body might react badly to her channeling. She couldn’t blame him for never wanting to feel its effects again, not when wielding it had been so hard on him.

Leaving him to rest, she ran down their horses, who, fortunately, hadn’t wandered too far. She rebuilt the fire, laid

out their bedrolls, and put together the most nourishing meal she could from what was left of their supplies.

Rand did his best to eat it, but he was practically unconscious by then. It was probably for her benefit that he gingerly raised a spoon to his mouth to eat one, two, three bites.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I’m about to fall asleep.”

“It’s fine.” Moria put the bowl down. “It’s what your body needs. Sleep. I’ll look after you.”

Rand smiled weakly. “I know you will.” He crawled into his bedroll, pulled the blanket over himself, and in less than a minute he was sleeping so deeply that Moria checked his chest to make sure he was still breathing.

Don’t scare me like that.

She watched him for a long time, cataloguing the changes, admiring his new, wonderful, and terrifying beauty. Before, Rand had looked like other men, albeit more handsome than most.

Now, no one would be able to look at him without knowing he had been touched by the True Power. He would attract attention wherever he went. Given how people felt about the Daoine Sídhé, that meant he was as likely to be treated as a pariah and an outcast as to be welcomed into a town or village.

Moria could disguise her identity. Rand couldn’t.

He would never be able to remove the scars that marked him.

“It doesn’t matter,” she murmured into the velvety night.

A distant owl hooted, a reminder that the world was bigger than the problems that faced them. The encroaching shadows had been dealt with. Everything else would be much easier to handle.

“I will take you home with me,” she said, conjuring a vision of the cottage she’d left behind. It had been too large for one woman. “It will be perfect for the two of us. We’ll get a flock of sheep and tend to them, and we’ll plant a garden full of flowers. Even if we can’t grow revelry flowers, I’ll find blooms in every color imaginable and grow them for you.

We'll live together quietly, and the townspeople will welcome us and keep our secrets, and the Daoine Sídhé will never bother us again."

Rand didn't respond, but his lips curved in a smile, and she wondered whether he'd heard her or was dreaming a pleasant dream.

"I'll have you," she told his sleeping body. "To have and to hold. I'll keep you with me forevermore, and even if we have to move on, even if it's us against the world, we'll do it together."

Thus comforted by her own words, Moria put away the food, banked the fire, and finally crawled into her own bedroll, exhaustion hitting her so quickly that she barely heard the hoot of that owl in the distance as it sang its lullaby.

Rand



Before falling asleep, Rand had hoped he'd be too exhausted to dream, but dream he did. He didn't have a body in his dream. He was pure spirit, connected to everything and everyone in the world. He darted from flower to flower like a honeybee, soared through the air as an eagle and a dust mote, and dived into the depths of the ocean where the only light was the brilliance of the True Power.

Aware of this being a dream, he also knew that this was a moment of inflection.

He was being shown a new way of being, given a choice that few, if any, had been given before.

Look, the True Power whispered. *Look at everything you could do. Look at all the things you could be.* He could be everything and anything all at once. He could leave the sorrow and pain of his human life behind, pass beyond any thought of weakness.

It was tempting, so tempting, but...

Moria. I can't leave her.

You can. More possibilities flashed before his eyes, a mandala of emotions, experiences, and delights. *Will her love not pale over time? Will you not regret staying in a body that's been changed so thoroughly? Channeling will be hard for you now—you gave everything to eradicate the shadows, but nobody will thank you for it.*

Rand saw faces twisted in pity, anger, disgust; some were filled with rage when they realized it was Rand who had stolen

their access to the dark power, severed their link with its promises and temptations.

You could be free of all that.

But he didn't want to be free, not if that meant being free of Moria too.

"No," he said firmly. A final farewell without any regret followed his rejection of the power's offer. What did he care for channeling the True Power after this?

What did he care for any of that?

Rand had never needed power or wanted it. His broken body would grow strong again. Even if it didn't, Moria would be there with him.

She had risked everything for him. He couldn't bear to leave her. He would never leave her.

So be it. The True Power receded from his dream, and with it went his feelings of lightness and ease. He was back in a body that ached from overuse. It felt as though he'd aged twenty years in a single day. But he was back, and that was fine...

Except he couldn't breathe.

As Rand's eyes shot open, he clutched his throat. It took a moment for him to realize that he wasn't choking—it was Moria.

The sun had just risen over the horizon, but there was enough light to see Goran's hulking form, one hand clamped around her throat, the other wrapped in bandages.

"The savior awakens," cooed a honeyed, hateful voice.

Idra stood to the left of him, staring down with an air of satisfaction. A man about ten paces away pointed a crossbow at him, while yet another stood a few paces back with his hand on the sword at his belt.

"Well done," Idra continued, slow clapping with barely concealed glee. "I think everyone on the entire continent felt the aftershock when you conquered the shadows, Rand Thorin. Not only conquering them but obliterating them entirely!"

Truly, a magnificent feat.” She made a gesture and the pressure on his throat—Moria’s throat—eased. She gasped and shuddered as she drew in a full breath.

“I wondered, you know,” Idra went on, circling him as she studied his bedraggled appearance. “I wondered at the High Queen’s wisdom in allowing Moria to take you. I thought she had finally given in to senility. Now, I see that she was killing two birds with one stone. The Pearl Sect was never a good fit for the Daoine Sídhé. It should have been phased out ages ago. Male channelers should never have been treated as anything more than beasts of burden. And now.” She grinned. “Look at you. So weak. You probably couldn’t channel well enough to bat a leaf from the sky.” Idra laughed. “The greatest male channeler the world has ever seen, laid low by his own gifts and his reliance on a Pearl. Just as Whytelaw’s Pearl was pulverized in the wake of a similar disaster when she became redundant. It’s truly fitting.”

She touched his hair before Rand could pull out of her reach.

He wanted to fight, tried to channel, but she was right. He was too weak to make the connection. Everything in his body cried out for sleep, but how could he rest when Moria was terrified?

He looked at his love, desperate to tell her that it was all right, that he would save her, but he knew the words would be a lie.

“I would just as soon kill both of you right now and be done with you forever, but the Sapphires want to take you apart and study you. I suppose I can’t blame them. After all, you’re probably the last of your kind. Now that the shadows are gone, the Daoine Sídhé can become what we were always meant to be—rulers of this land.”

“You will never rule this land,” Moria spat at her. “The High Queen knows the price of that temptation. Giving in to pride will only offer the shadows a new avenue to return.”

“We shall see,” Idra said tartly. “Either way, you won’t be around to complain about it. But first...” She gestured to Goran, who smiled. “Get the manacle off her, then break her neck.”

“No!” Rand screamed. He reached for his connection to the True Power, desperate to help Moria, but he was too late to stop Goran from smashing the seam of Moria’s manacle against a rock hard enough to break it. Rand expected their bond to dissolve right then and there.

But it didn’t.

Goran’s hand rose to grip Moria’s head. She looked at Rand and smiled as her eyes began to glow.

Moria



The True Power flowed through Moria like a raging waterfall, banishing all doubt and fear, leaving nothing but grace and confidence behind. Her bond to Rand remained. The manacles they shared might have been necessary once, but after what they'd been through, everything they'd shared, they were no longer needed. Moria and Rand belonged to each other, entwined in ways someone like Idra could never understand.

Moria, through their bond, had delved deep into the earth at Rand's side when he used the True Power to defeat the shadows, and her own ability had been magnified. While he had burned out, she had grown from a candle to an inferno, a crackling flame that she controlled as deftly as she wielded a sword.

That flame was going to save them now.

It was simple to use the True Power defensively, and she didn't need much to slow time so she could free her body from Goran's clumsy grasp.

She witnessed the change in his broad face when he finally understood; she felt a frisson of pity before she grabbed her sword and cut off his head.

Before he hit the ground, she moved on to the next, slowing Idra's companions with the True Power enough to kill them with her mundane weapon. She wouldn't make the mistake of channeling too much because she didn't have to. Moria knew her blade could deal the fatal blows.

None of Idra's companions could stand against her.

By the time she reached Idra, the Ruby Sister held glowing hands in front of her, channeling with all her might, trying to hold back Moria's power.

"You can't match me strength for strength, no matter what boost you got from this broken husk of a man of yours," Idra said through gritted teeth. "I've always been stronger than you. I will always be stronger than you!"

"You may be right," Moria agreed. For all her newfound power, there were those among the Daoine Sídhé who were stronger. Idra might well be one of them. "But that doesn't matter."

"Of course, it matters! Power is everything!"

"It's light years away from everything," Moria said. "Your power is nothing compared to love."

"Love?" Idra scoffed, flecks of spittle flying from her lips. "Love is for fools. Love is nothing compared to might!"

Idra opened her mouth to say more but choked on blood as a blade appeared through the center of her chest. Her hands faltered and dropped as her channel to the True Power was interrupted. She poured healing energy into her wound, but Rand kept his sword inside of her, giving her no chance to save her own life. Blood gushed from her mouth, and she turned with dumbstruck eyes to stare at Rand as she slowly fell to the ground, still impaled.

"Love can be very sneaky," Moria said evenly.

She watched life leave Idra's body. The Ruby Sister fought hard, but eventually her energy faded, and with a final shudder she died, surrounded by three of her companions whose company she had never learned to value.

"All those sword lessons," Rand said. "But in the end, I only had to run her through."

"But, darling, you ran her through very elegantly." A smile spread across Moria's face.

It felt crass to be so happy when surrounded by chaos and death, but she couldn't help it. Idra was the last problem that had haunted her mind, and now she was gone too.

"You're absolutely perfect." Rand grinned back at her.

As he held out his arms, Moria dropped her sword and rushed into them.

"Did you know that our bond would last when he broke the manacle?" Rand asked.

"I hoped it would." Moria wrapped her arms around his neck. "But I didn't know. Either way, I knew they would want to keep you alive and that you would fight until your last breath. I just wanted you to be safe until you regained your strength."

Rand's arms tightened around her.

"Does it bother you?" he asked after a moment. "That I'm weaker now? That I might not be able to channel again? Idra wasn't wrong about that. I feel exhausted, and all I've done is wake up and take one step forward with a sword in my hand."

"It doesn't bother me at all." Moria smiled. "And before you jump to conclusions, my darling, remember that it hasn't even been twelve hours since you saved the world. You need time to recover."

She pulled back and gave him a sweet, tender kiss.

He didn't flinch this time.

"See, you're already improving. But even if you weren't, I would be here full of love for you."

Rand Thorin, her impossible love, the man who saved the world despite the personal cost, grinned at Moria. "I believe you."

She glanced around their camp. "I think it's high time we moved somewhere less foul. Either a scavenger will take care of the bodies, or one of my sisters will find them and know that we're to be left alone from here on out."

If they didn't realize that and tried to test them again, Moria would send them to join Idra. No one would mess with her or

Rand again. They were lovers, partners, and everything else.

They had each other, and together, that was enough to take on the world. Moria lifted her face to his, pressed a kiss to his mouth, and...

Erica



Erica woke up.

It took her a moment to realize who she was, or rather who she wasn't. It took an even longer moment to realize where she was.

She wasn't Moria, she couldn't channel the True Power, and this wasn't the wastelands. But Rand was Rand. Not the channeler, but a physician assistant with the heart of a warrior.

She hadn't been too bad either. In fact, she'd been quite the badass.

But the adventure was far from the pleasant experience she'd had the other times. It had been heart-wrenching, terrifying, and exhausting.

The romance, though, and the sex...

God, the sex.

Gary—she thought that was the technician's name—smiled at her. "Welcome back, Doctor Jones."

"How long..."

"The usual. Three hours."

"I need..." She needed to check on Rand.

When she tried to sit up, Gary stopped her with a shake of his head. "Don't rush it. Let your heart rate return to normal first." He grinned. "Your adventure must have ended with a bang. Not that I was privy to what was going on, but given your

heart rate and blood pressure, you were either in a fight for your life or having the time of your life.”

“Both,” she forced a smile.

“Drink this first, rest a for a little bit, and then I’ll let you go. Doctor’s orders.” Gary winked.

Erica didn’t have the energy to argue.

That was one hell of an adventure. She had never felt this shaken and depleted after a Perfect Match experience. The other times she’d felt relaxed, even revitalized, but never emotionally devastated.

It was the first time that she had wished she hadn’t woken up from the experience.

Emptying the plastic beaker, she scrambled off the recliner with trembling legs.

Gary looked worried. “Do you need to rest.”

“I’m fine.” She reached for a wall to stabilize herself.

“Please. You can’t leave yet.” Gary rushed after her.

“You can’t stop me.” Erica stumbled out the door and looked left toward the room Rand Walker had entered before everything between them had changed.

It was hard to believe that it had been only three hours ago.

As the door opened and he emerged from the room, his ashen face and unsteady gait pierced her guilty heart.

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Erica rushed toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist before propriety could make her reconsider.

“I’m so sorry.” She clung to him.

He peered at her and offered a dazed but feeble smile. Then his eyes brightened and widened as if he finally recognized who was holding him captive. “Wow,” he said. “Who knew that an experience based on a fantasy series in which everyone sacrifices everything they love would be so traumatic?”

Was he laughing? She hoped so.

Laughter is the best medicine.

Erica returned his smile with a hesitant one of her own. “I bet you wish you’d chosen the fairy queen adventure.”

“Or the space pirate. But why are you sorry? We both chose to participate in this one, and we both suffered through it. Maybe we should complain that it was too close to the source material and not a sanitized romantic romp?”

“I designed the bloody thing, Rand,” Erica admitted. “I set it all up. The employee of the month, *The Wheel of Time* style adventure, all of it. It was a dumb idea. I know.” She lifted a hand when he opened his mouth. “But what choice did I have? I couldn’t just ask you out. I’m your boss.”

He bent forward and laughed so hard it became a wheeze. “Oh my God, Erica. You’re too much.”

Her smile fell.

“No, no. I didn’t mean it like that. Let me try again.” He took in a steady breath. “I’ve wanted to ask you out on a date since the interview, but I thought that you were too good for a slob like me with a low-income background and saddled with debt. I was afraid that if I admitted how I felt about you, you’d feel uncomfortable, and I would have to leave the practice, and I really like it there and I need the job. You’re the most amazing woman I have ever met, and I’m head over heels in love with you. I’d battle the shadows and bury an imaginary sister a thousand times over if it meant I could ask you out to dinner.”

Had Rand just said that he was in love with her?

Erica’s heart swelled with love for this amazing man who’d battled the shadows and had been ready to sacrifice his life to save the world. To save her.

“Well, I am hungry,” she said, instead of the torrent of love words coursing through her mind.

“Great. Do you fancy Thai?”

Erica



Too shaken to drive, they took a taxi to the nearest Thai restaurant.

They lucked out, and the place was amazing. After demolishing a delicious double serving of Pad Thai, Erica felt much better, and the color had returned to Rand's face.

"It isn't normally like that, you know," she said. "The other times I used the service I woke up with a relaxed body and a smile on my face. Our adventure was amazing, but it wasn't supposed to be so heart-wrenching or last that long. I didn't want to torment you. I wanted us to have good time together."

"I had a great time, but from now on, I would like to limit our dates to the real world.

"Dates?" She grinned. "You mean that I haven't scared you away?"

"If we learned anything from the past four months—or more accurately three hours—it's that both of us are fearless."

She chuckled. "Before, we were afraid of expressing our feelings toward one another. This experience has changed us."

Nodding, Rand stretched his arm across the table and squeezed her fingers. "Can you ride—horses, I mean? I know Moria was a horsewoman. What about Erica?"

"I rode horses when I was a girl."

"Awesome. I'll set it up." He chuckled. "I might need to hide in a dark room this weekend, but we could go riding next Saturday if you are up to it."

“I would love that. Umm, Rand. How do you think we should behave at work? I mean this is all so new.”

“However you want to behave, you’re the boss.”

Erica chewed her lip. “Yeah, that’s what worries me.”

“Okay. I get it. Your parents have a huge, expensive house, and I bet that your apartment is lovely too. You run the clinic, and a lot of people rely on you. I don’t want to change any of the good aspects of your life, Erica, but I’d love to be a part of it. If it doesn’t work out, we’re both adults and we are both professionals.” He smiled sadly. “But if Perfect Match is the only place where you feel comfortable with me, I will understand. Don’t worry about hurting my feelings either. I have plenty of experience in accepting rejection and defeat,” Rand said.

“Defeat? What do you mean?”

Rand was her fearless warrior. She couldn’t imagine him defeated for more than a second. He would get up and keep fighting until his last breath.

“I wanted to be a doctor. A pediatrician like you, but the training was too long and expensive. As it is, I can barely afford the student debt I have from undergrad and PA school, and I drive a car that belongs in the junkyard. Still, I love what I do, especially since it led me to you. Whether or not we work out as a couple, you’re an amazing boss, and I want to keep working with you. I don’t want you to feel sorry for me, Erica. Please, I couldn’t bear it. You already know that I love you, but want you to also know that I admire you as a doctor and as a friend. If we become more than friends, that would be amazing, but either way, I’d happy with what we have now, if that is all you are ready for.”

Erica fought the urge to clamber over the table and kiss him.

A waitress approached and asked whether they wanted dessert. What Erica really wanted was to take Rand home with her and ravish him for the rest of the weekend, but instead she nodded and said, “Yes, please.”

After a taxi returned them to the parking lot of Perfect Match Studios, they shared a long kiss before getting into their separate cars.

As Rand drove away, Erica felt as though she was being stretched thin and a part of her was traveling in his car, toward his home, his bed. When she dragged herself into her apartment, the first thing she wanted to do was to call him and check that he was okay. But he'd made it clear he needed some time to recover from their experience, and truthfully, she needed to rest as well.

It felt as though they were apart for the first time in months.

Erica missed Rand's smell, his warmth, and the comfort she felt in his arms. She drank a glass of wine and crawled into her bed.

At least there, she could dream of him.

They had been together, they had brought each other to climax more times than she could count, they had slept in each other's arms, and fought side by side, but now, they would have to start over again—get to know each other in the real world.

It made her head reel and her heart ache.

Why did it hurt like this? She ought to feel better, not worse. That was what Erica told herself as she put her phone on silent, knowing she could be reached by pager in an emergency.

She had given her heart away in what was essentially a dream. Would Rand feel the same after he'd had time to reflect on the experience, or would he look at her and see only the painful memories he and Moria had shared, the trials they had faced?

Those same questions circled in Erica's head the entire weekend.

Was she really in love with Rand the physician's assistant or only with Rand the god-like channeler of the True Power?

Were the two Rands the same person?

And was it a masochistic streak in her psyche that made her want to return to the edge of the wastelands, take him to her

cottage, purchase those sheep, plant that garden, and continue where they'd left off?

Or was it a yearning for something wonderful that had been forged out of all the suffering and pain?

A mystical bond that could not be duplicated outside of the experience.

That level of vulnerability was neither safe nor possible in the real world. As Moria, she'd been open and honest. She'd expressed her feelings and given in to her desires, and Rand had responded just as she'd hoped he would.

But...

But he hadn't known it was her. She had designed the scenario with this exact outcome in mind and given him the means to enjoy it without obtaining his informed consent. She had the advantage when it came to information, just as she had an unfair advantage over him when it came to a potential relationship.

Her position at the clinic was secure whatever happened, but if they dated and he broke her heart, or simply annoyed her, she could find a way to fire him—and he knew that too.

Erica groaned and buried her head in her pillow. Darn it, this experience was supposed to help her figure things out, not confuse her even more. She needed to consider things objectively.

What were the facts?

Fact one—she'd set up an experience with Rand that had progressed into the most thrilling Perfect Match encounter she'd ever had.

Fact two—their power imbalance in real life had been reflected in the experience, and they'd found a way around it.

Fact three—going in, Rand hadn't known that he was about to share an experience with Erica.

Fact four—it was up to Erica to decide whether or not to move things forward between them, and she had to admit that she was afraid, regardless of her earlier bravado.

She'd had such an incredible time in the experience. Being Moria was everything she'd dreamed of—power, responsibility, and sexiness all rolled into a package that the man of her dreams had adored.

The sex, holy hell, the sex had been amazing. What wouldn't she give for Rand to put her on her hands and knees here in the real world or slide his shaft between her lips? She wanted to feel his hands on her, his mouth licking her, his—

And now she was turned on again.

Was it the same for him? Was he touching himself and wondering if she was remembering how he felt inside of her?

Erica rolled over and stared at her phone. She knew she had messages—probably from Shelby asking how things had gone—but she couldn't bring herself to look at them right now.

Shelby would encourage her to ask Rand out for real. When she discovered he'd asked Erica to go riding next weekend, she would start planning their wedding, with Rosie's help, of course.

But what if Rand decided that a date with Erica was not worth risking his career for?

Would she be able to look him in the eye after that?

God, what had she gotten herself into?

She needed to do something about it.

Tomorrow, she would take Rand aside and talk to him. She'd tell him that it was okay if he'd decided they were better suited as colleagues and friends than as lovers.

But she would also tell him that if he wanted to give their real-life relationship a try, she wanted that too. She would tell him that she was sorry for not being honest with him from the start, and that it was entirely his choice from here on out.

If Rand said that he wasn't interested, which would break her heart, she would respect that decision and would do everything to ensure that he was comfortable at work. And if he decided to leave, which would be all her fault, she would give him a

great severance package and write him the best letter of recommendation ever.

At which point her life would officially go down the toilet, and not just because she'd have to find and train another physician's assistant during one of their busiest seasons.

Maybe it will work out.

The fanciful side of her brain teased her with possibilities.

Maybe he'll want me as much as I want him! Maybe I'm worrying for nothing!

"I never worry for nothing," Erica's practical side snapped back.

And now she was arguing with herself, out loud. So adult! Clearly, her father had made a fantastic choice when he handed his practice to her.

Erica sighed and ran her hands over her face. She'd wasted an entire weekend doing nothing but stewing, and tomorrow was another day. She needed to be ready for it.

A nice hot bath, a glass of wine, and a good book. That's what I need. What happens tomorrow is for tomorrow. Tonight, is just for me.

Not *The Wheel of Time* series, though. Her heart was far too fragile to relive that right now.

On Monday, she would wake up early and spend hours ensuring her appearance was perfect.

Erica imagined Rand striding into her office, lifting her up, and making love to her right there on her desk, but that scenario belonged to the fantasy world just as much as channeling the True Power did.

Rand



*She isn't picking up.
Damn it, why won't she pick up?*

Rand threw his phone on the couch and groaned.

He'd been calling Erica all weekend, and all his calls had gone to voicemail.

He could have paged her, she would have answered that because it was reserved for emergencies, but that would have spelled desperation, and she would have been mad at him for using the number for a nonemergency.

He tried to convince himself that it wasn't because she was embarrassed about admitting to having planned their shared experience.

Or maybe what he'd said about the difference in their status had registered and she'd decided that dating him wouldn't be a good idea?

Maybe she was sick?

Perhaps she had flown to Germany to see her father?

Maybe she'd been in a car accident on her way home?

He'd held off for five long hours before calling all the hospitals in the area to make sure that she hadn't been admitted to any of the ERs.

Regrettably, tragically, Rand had to accept that Erica had decided that there would be no further dates in their future.

There would be no horse riding, no dancing, no dining. Nada, zilch.

Is it because I said I was traumatized by the experience?

She planned it all and I downright insulted her by refusing to have anything to do with Perfect Match ever again.

What an idiot!

I must have sounded so ungrateful.

A bloody rude idiot!

Just answer the damn phone and give me the chance to explain.

After recovering from the realization that it had all been a virtual fantasy, and the exhaustion that had clung to him for long hours after he had woken up, Rand had come to the conclusion that contrary to his initial reaction, the adventure had been amazing.

He and Moria—*I mean Erica*—had learned things about each other that no quantity of dates could reveal. Their bond had allowed him access to her thoughts, and what wonderful thoughts they were. Her passion, her love of people and especially him, her intelligence and empathy—she really was as perfect as she seemed.

Despite the pain he'd experienced during the adventure, and despite how broken his body had been at the end of it, and how frustrated he had been at his weakness, Rand would return there with her in a heartbeat. Back to Perfect Match, back to Moria and the cottage she'd spoken of, with the sheep and the flowers and all that.

He would do anything as long as they did it together.

And the sex—wow!

Rand had read the disclaimers when he'd signed on for the experience; he knew that having sex with someone in Perfect Match wasn't the same as the experience in the real world. It was all fantasy.

If by some miracle she gave him another chance, he shouldn't assume that Erica wanted the same things Moria had wanted. They would have to rediscover their sexual preferences in the real world.

Still, one thing gave him hope.

As he had staggered out of the experience room, Erica had rushed to him and held him as if she loved him. She hadn't done that out of guilt.

Later, at the Thai restaurant, she had seemed genuinely excited to go on another date with him, which was why he couldn't understand why she was ghosting him.

Maybe he was overthinking everything.

Her phone could be switched off. She probably needed to rest too, and he'd told her that he planned to stay in a dark room to recover that weekend.

When Rand had come out of the experience, he'd felt exhausted, but now that he had spent time processing everything, he felt transformed by it in a positive way.

Being Rand Thorin had allowed him to live out childhood dreams and adult fantasies. Channeling that power, handling it, controlling it, and those moments of drama between the fictional family, the cruelty of the sisters, the training, the intensity of the lovemaking.

The pain felt distant now, but the love, the lust, the glee, and the playfulness they had shared had been incredible.

Phenomenal.

And it all lived in his head as memories of something real.

Very real.

It had taken him a few hours to recover from the adrenaline hangover, and by that time it was too late to call Erica. He tried calling her on Saturday morning at eleven, and again an hour later. She hadn't picked up any of his eight, or was it ten, calls on Saturday. He'd only tried once on Sunday, afraid to seem too pushy.

Nothing. He hadn't left any messages, not wanting to say something that could offend or upset her.

He had to talk to her face to face as soon as possible.

He needed to know if there was any hope of a romantic relationship between them. If there wasn't, he would try to build a wall around his heart.

It's too late for that.

Rand had the sinking feeling that if she turned him away, it would take a long time before he would be ready to look for love again. Erica was the kindest, strongest woman he knew, and he couldn't picture a future without her.

He made a plan.

It might not be the best plan, but it was the only one that seemed feasible, so he went with it.

Rand



Monday morning, Rand got out of bed at five a.m., having barely slept a wink. He took care over his appearance, tried and failed to eat breakfast, poured two cups of coffee in to-go mugs, dressed in his work clothes, and headed to the office.

The clinic didn't open until seven-thirty, but he knew Erica would be the first person to arrive.

She always was.

He arrived as the first hints of gold touched the horizon. It reminded him of his last morning with Moria in the experience, the drama and the triumph, watching her gain independence from the Daoine Sídh.

That was what Erica deserved too—to feel powerful, protected, and loved.

Despite his less than stellar financial situation, Rand knew he could offer her that.

He expected a long wait, pacing outside, practicing what he was planning to say before Erica showed up.

To his surprise, headlights entered the parking lot only minutes later.

He recognized Erica's Subaru.

She's here. Oh my God, she's here.

Okay, this was good. It would give them plenty of time to talk and work everything out.

Soon he would know, one way or another, what was happening between them. Rand felt sick to his stomach, a churn that made him glad he hadn't eaten breakfast.

It was clear that she'd spotted him the moment she got out of her car. She looked stunned, then grim, like she was about to face down a specter.

Rand's heart sank, but he firmed his shoulders. Even if this was the end, he was going to confront it head-on.

As Erica stopped about five feet away from him, they stared at each other for a long moment before—

“I should—” she said.

“Let me just—” he began.

Rand shook his head. This was all muddled. They were speaking over each other. “Please let me go first,” he pleaded. Erica paused and nodded.

Okay. This is it. He took a deep breath. “I know I seemed out of it when we left Perfect Match,” he started.

Her face was pale, and her hands trembled. Was she scared?

“But I want you to know that it was amazing. I thought about it all weekend.”

“So did I,” she confessed, looking guilty.

“Yes, but I think, no, I am sure, that Moria and Rand Thorin's love, while intense and amazing, won't hold a candle to Erica and Rand Walker's. The real reason I spent the weekend thinking about it wasn't because I enjoyed being Rand Thorin. It's not because of Moria either—I mean, it *is*, but only because she was you.”

Erica looked confused.

God, I'm making a muddle of this.

“I love you,” Rand blurted out. “I did before the experience. I've been falling in love with you for weeks and going to Perfect Match with you was amazing, but that's not the reason I feel this way. And I'm very aware that it's not right for me to want to be with you when you're my boss, and if you tell me

to leave, I will. If you tell me to stay but want our relationship to remain professional and nothing more, I'll do that too. I just need you to know that I love you, and if you are willing to give me a chance, I think I could make you happy. I would do everything in my power to bring you joy every day for the rest of our lives."

"Rand..." She sounded conflicted.

He'd gone too far. Why had he talked about forever?

"I'm not promising that everything will be perfect. I don't expect you to be perfect. I just... I can't imagine not being in love with you. Everything that happened in the experience was a reflection of my feelings for you. Except for the insults when we met." He shook his head. "I have never, ever thought..." Lost for words, he shook his head. "You've done it before. Did any of your other experiences ever come close to that one?"

"No," she said softly. "They haven't. It was..." She shivered. "It felt transformative. I know we're not supposed to read too much into what goes on in an experience, but—"

"Read into it all you want," Rand said. He knew he was acting recklessly, but he had to make it clear that he was serious. He had to make sure she knew that he was all-in. "I want—Erica, please, give us a chance. I'll sign whatever disclaimer you need. I'll promise to be professional at work, and I won't go faster than you're comfortable with, but can we try?" He risked a hopeful smile. "If you don't fancy riding, we can go anywhere, do anything. I want to take you on a date that doesn't involve setting up a tent and building a fire."

"Oh, I don't know." She smiled back. "There's something very sexy about a man who can build a fire."

"Okay, I'll build you one right now. Let me go cut down that bush."

She laughed. "Just..." She took a deep breath and nodded firmly. "Yes. Let's do it... not chop down a bush, silly. Let's give us a chance. But we need to keep it separate from work," she added in an apologetic tone.

“Yes, absolutely.” Rand caught her hand and pulled her closer. “Can I kiss you?” he murmured, his gaze darting between her eyes and her lips.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He leaned in and it was sweet. So sweet. Soft. Familiar, like those hours he’d spent kissing Moria.

Erica whimpered, the sound rolling over her tongue and into his mouth, and it was all Rand could do not to hustle them over to his car, lay her down on the back seat, and take things to the next level.

No. Their first time wasn’t going to be in a car. For fuck’s sake, he could do better than that. “Let me cook for you tonight,” he said when their kiss ended. “Come to my place. I’ll make something you’ll love.”

“I... I’d like that very much,” Erica said.

“Good.” Rand glanced at the watch on his wrist. “We’ve still got some time before anyone else shows up. We could go inside and start getting ready for work, or...” He grinned. “We could make out for a while longer.”

Erica blushed. “Option B, please!”

Option B led to some slightly heavier petting than he’d anticipated, but no one at the office noticed when they finally got in.

Rand was so happy he could barely contain himself. They were doing this. He was getting his chance, and he was going to grab it with both hands and make sure it didn’t slip away, that Erica didn’t slip away.

I love you, and I will show you my love every chance I get, just not in front of the clinic staff.

Erica



As it turned out, keeping their relationship secret from the people in the office lasted all of two weeks. Frankly, Erica was surprised that it had taken that long. She had never been the most subtle person when it came to expressing her love, and Rand was so enthusiastic that she didn't want to be subtle. She wanted to tell everyone. Shout from the rooftops that she had a lover, a boyfriend, a man who wanted to be her partner and heart and home.

She had never felt as appreciated as she did when she was with Rand.

He was a caring person, she knew that already from how he behaved with patients and colleagues, but every day revealed something new and wonderful about him. Whether it was putting a sticky note with a heart on it on the side of her coffee mug, or making a batch of muffins after she'd said she was in the mood for them.

It's the honeymoon phase, a little voice inside her head whispered, the one that made her doubt everything from her worth as a doctor to her worth as a woman.

He'll fall off that pedestal eventually, they all do. He'll stop appreciating you and start taking you for granted. It's only a matter of time.

For the first time in her life, Erica refused to let that toxic self-doubt spoil her enjoyment. The best way to ensure Rand kept appreciating her was to appreciate him right back.

And she did.

She thanked him for cooking wonderful meals and cleaned the dishes. She stayed over at his place more and more, addicted to his fun and loving presence. He made space for her in his closet, and she made space in her heart until she could finally admit that loving Rand wasn't something to be afraid of. And she told him, every day. Each evening they spent together ended with mind-blowing sex.

Sex in the real world was different from sex in the experience. Erica had expected it wouldn't be as perfect and that things wouldn't just magically happen, but what surprised her was how amazing the sex they had was anyway. It didn't matter that they had to pause for condoms, or that the sheets got messy and needed laundering. One time she'd scratched his back hard enough to draw blood, and on several occasions, especially in the beginning, he had climaxed before she'd barely gotten going.

It was fun and loving and so pleasurable that it filled her up to the brim with smiles.

Erica had no complaints.

This morning had started that way.

They were both early birds, which was nice because she didn't have to worry about disrupting her partner's sleep when she got up. Rand was already awake. From there they shared a shower, which had turned into her on her knees with Rand's shaft in her mouth beneath the spray of water, and him gazing at her as she took as much of his length as possible down her throat. He came with a groan, then hurried her out of the shower and back to bed, where he settled between her thighs and licked and nibbled until she came with a scream.

Being with a younger man had its advantages. His recovery period was very short. Erica had barely stopped trembling from her first orgasm when Rand slid inside of her, hard and thick. It took longer for him to come the second time, allowing Erica to orgasm twice while he squeezed her nipples and whispered dirty things in her ear.

"God, God, yes," he chanted when he finally came inside of her.

She snuggled against him, one arm draped over his chest while he caught his breath. Then she stroked her fingers up and down his torso, drawing circles around his areolae until the alarm went off.

Crazy good. It was crazy good, the way she felt with Rand.

Erica delighted in the lingering sensations, that warm dampness, even as she tried to tamp down her desire during work hours, still a little uncomfortable letting everyone in the office know about her private life—especially when that private life involved one of her employees.

Her parents hadn't had a chance to meet and interrogate Rand yet, but it was all good. Her father's treatment was going so well that he and her mother extended their stay in Germany to enjoy an actual vacation, visiting medieval towns and castles, taking lots of cheesy pictures, and drinking (in her mother's case at least) a lot of wine.

Erica was happy for them.

She was happy, period.

But of course, her staff noticed.

Rosie was happy to give Erica knowing smiles and hum tunes of love songs, but Shelby had all the tact of a bulldog.

“So.” Shelby leaned one generous hip against the door of Erica's office. It was Rand's day off, and a month had passed since their experience at Perfect Match. “It went well, I see.”

“Hmm?” Erica glanced up from her paperwork. “What went well?”

“Getting together with our dear Mr. Walker.”

Blood drained from Erica's brain into her cheeks. She felt the heat of her blush. “What do you mean?”

Had Rand talked? He'd promised her to keep their relationship from the staff.

“Honey.” Shelby waved a dismissive hand. “You haven't mentioned the experience, which isn't unusual. You never talk about it, which is fine, it is your business. Rand hasn't said a

word either, even though we have all pestered him about it. He simply smiles and changes the subject. But both of you look like you are hiding a secret, and you look like a woman who has been getting thoroughly pleased every night. I wasn't born yesterday. I can read between the lines." Her expression was soft, not sly or judgmental. "I figured that the two of you are together."

"We are..." Erica croaked, her throat too dry to speak. In the end, she just nodded.

"Well, good!"

Good? "Really?"

"I thought we had this chat already, but I guess it didn't take the first time," Shelby muttered. "Erica, nobody will judge you for finding love with someone you happen to work with. You're not going to take advantage of Rand because that's not the sort of person you are. And he looks at you as if you are the sun and the moon and all the stars in the sky." Shelby's eyes twinkled. "You worried about what would happen if things didn't work out, but they are working out just great. Be honest, honey." She leaned closer. "He's a total prince, isn't he?"

"He is," Erica admitted, and it felt great to talk about it. "He's amazing. I've never been with a man who was so good to me before."

"That doesn't speak well of the people you've dated before, but I'm glad Rand is hitting a high note for you."

"So high," Erica said dreamily as she remembered their lovemaking that morning. "He's just... he's amazing. He's incredibly kind, he always asks how I am and checks in with me. He does things for me just because he wants to, and..." She bit her lower lip for a second. "He's very... umm... he makes me feel good."

"Bedroom skills—check." Shelby grinned. "That's wonderful, honey. It's what you deserve."

"I want to believe that."

“Then believe it! You are worthy of every ounce of love and attention that young man lavishes on you. And speaking of...” Shelby held out her hand for a fist bump. “Five years younger doesn’t hurt, does it?”

Erica laughed as she remembered that Shelby was almost a decade older than her husband. Solidarity fist bump. “It doesn’t,” she said. “It’s still early, and I don’t want to rush things, but I really feel like he could be...” She couldn’t even say it out loud.

Luckily, Shelby had no such qualms. “When it’s right, it’s right. Peter and I dated for two years before we got engaged, but I knew after the second date that I wanted to marry him. My first husband, on the other hand, I dated for five years, and I still wasn’t sure I actually wanted to marry him even on our wedding day. It just seemed like the thing we were supposed to do.” She sighed. “As long as you two are honest with each other, and with yourselves, it’ll be fine.”

It’ll be fine.

For the first time since Erica had admitted her attraction to Rand, she really believed that it would all work out fine. She could balance her love and her work life without it all falling apart.

She was with a man who entranced and intrigued her, and she could turn it into something more without fearing that it would all come crashing down.

Maybe she really could have it all.

Epilogue



O *ne year later*

“I promise, this won’t hurt a bit,” Rand assured Jamie as he pulled out his stethoscope.

“Mm.” Jamie didn’t look convinced.

His grandmother rubbed her temple. “I don’t suppose you know the song?” she asked, sounding exhausted. “The one Doctor Jones always sings to him?”

“Actually...” Rand had been getting a lot of practice singing that song lately—well, a variation of it. “I think I can do that. Jamie, do you want the song?”

“Mm!” Rand wasn’t sure how a single syllable could sound so different from one use to the next, but Jamie managed to communicate his wishes perfectly.

“Okay, then.” He cleared his throat and began his physical examination to the tune of ‘You Are My Sunshine.’ “Open your mouth...let’s open your mouth.” He examined Jamie’s throat, ears, and eyes, listened to his lungs and heartbeat, and took his blood pressure without a single tear or cringe from the seventeen-year-old boy. “Very good!” he said at the end. “You did such an excellent job, Jamie!”

“Thank you.”

Rand glanced at the boy's grandmother and saw a look of shock on her face. "That's the first thing he's said all week," she told Rand.

"That sort of effort definitely deserves two stickers," Rand said.

Jamie beamed.

An hour and two more patients later, Rand was ready to head back home. His hands itched at the thought of finally getting to lie beside Erica and hold their baby girl.

Erica's parents helped during the day, but Rand knew she preferred it when he was there.

He did too.

As of next week, her father would be covering a few days at the clinic so that he could spend more time with his wife and new daughter.

"Wait!" Bernadette met him at the door with a covered casserole dish. "I promised Erica my famous shepherd's pie for dinner tonight." She handed him the hefty dish. "This'll keep you two fed for a while."

"We won't need to cook for a week," Rand said. "Thank you so much."

"It's no problem, honey! Give your wife and sweet baby a kiss from me."

Rand smiled. "I will."

He set the dish down on the passenger seat, got into his car, and began the drive back to their new home. They'd contemplated moving into Erica's place, but she thought it would be nice for them to pick a new home together, and Rand had agreed. The two-bedroom starter house wasn't much, but it had a decent garden and a play set.

Marriage. A baby. A home together.

Rand was still amazed at how quickly it had all coalesced. It might have seemed fast to some people—it had definitely

seemed fast to Erica's parents, not to mention his own—but Rand couldn't have been happier.

He adored his wife and their brand-new baby girl, little Elayne. Things couldn't be better.

Well. They would be even better once he got home.

The drive to their new house was shorter than his old commute, and fifteen minutes later, Rand walked through the front door with the casserole dish weighing down one arm, and his briefcase in the other.

"Hello," he said softly—he'd learned it was better not to make a loud announcement when the baby might be sleeping.

"Hey, babe."

Living room.

Rand popped the food in the refrigerator, then headed for the living room where Erica and two-week-old Elayne were resting. Erica was reclined on the couch, still firmly in the recovery zone after a difficult labor, and Elayne was in a bassinet beside her, sleeping with her arms stretched above her head. Erica smiled at Rand as he entered the room, and his heart melted.

Smoothing her golden hair back from her face, he kissed her softly. "How was your day?"

"Good," she said quietly. "Mom helped with the laundry, and Elayne was sleepy all day, which probably means she'll be up all night."

"Of course." Their baby hadn't established her circadian rhythms yet, that was for sure. "Don't worry, I'll get up with her."

"You're so good to me," Erica purred.

Rand leaned in for another kiss, then another, and another. Their affection might have turned into something more if Elayne hadn't woken up and started to cry.

Erica reached down, but Rand got to her first. "Aww, sweetheart," he cooed, picking their infant up and holding her

against his chest. “What’s wrong, huh? Are you hungry for Mommy?”

“She drained me dry not fifteen minutes ago,” Erica said. “I’m betting it’s something else.”

“Is it? Or maybe she just missed Daddy.” Rand nuzzled their baby’s head, and Elayne paused her crying for a moment. “Aw, yeah, you missed Da—” Her smell warned Rand that it was something other than missing him that made her cry. “Yep, okay. Got it. Time for a change.”

“What a good daddy.” Erica stretched as she rose from the couch. “I’m going to have a shower, and then we can—did Bernadette give you the shepherd’s pie?”

“She did.”

“Awesome, my favorite.” She leaned in and kissed Rand’s cheek. “Not as good as you, though.”

“I’m glad I rank higher than dinner,” he said, keeping it light. “I’ll serve it as soon as Elayne is clean.”

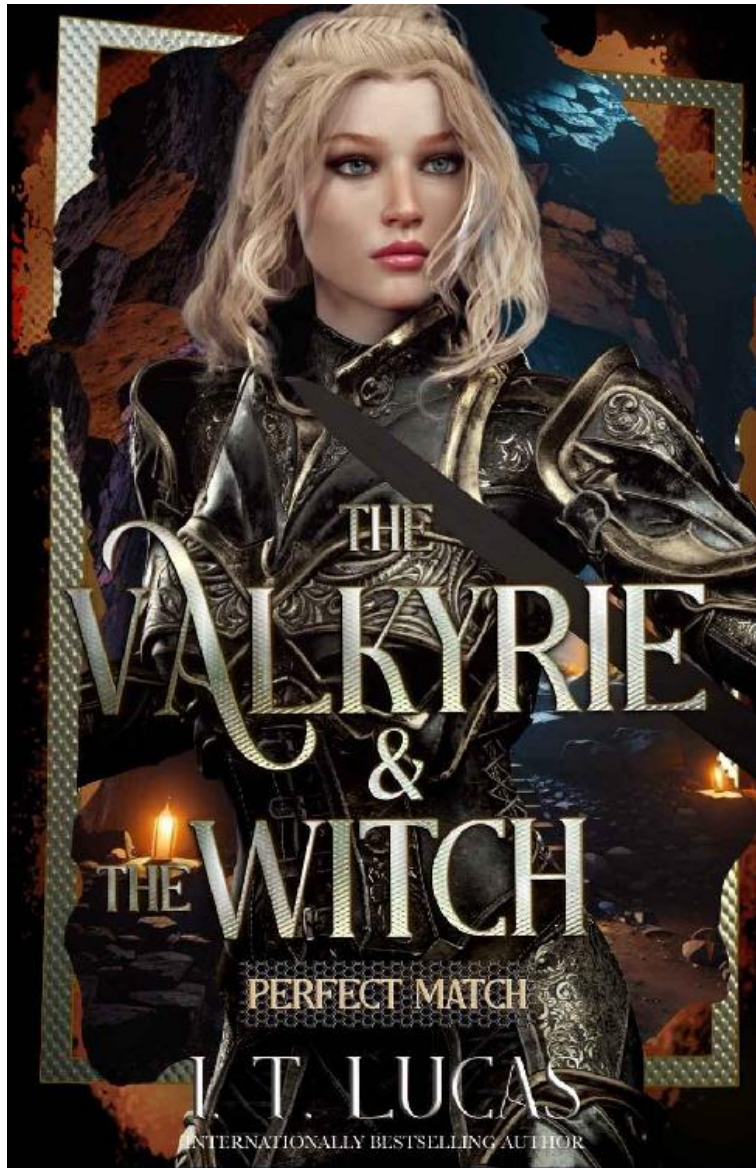
“Thank you, babe.”

“Of course.” *Anything for you.*

Anything at all.

Ready for the next Perfect Match?

THE VALKYRIE & THE WITCH



After breaking up with my boyfriend, I vow never to date a physician again and avoid workplace romances like the plague. Seeking an escape from bad memories and hospital politics, I apply for a job at the Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy Studios, where I hope to explore fantastical scenarios and beta-test new experiences.

I have no intention of entering a new relationship anytime soon, but it is difficult to ignore Kayden, a fellow trainee who's good-looking and charming but regrettably has aspirations of becoming a physician.

Hoping never to get paired with him to beta test an experience, I choose the Valkyrie adventure. It seems like a safe bet to avoid a guy like him, who would never select an experience where the female is the kick-ass heroine and the man only gets a supporting role. However, the algorithm has other plans in store for us. It seems to think that we are a perfect match.

TO READ THE PREVIEW CHAPTERS,

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Dear reader,

Thank you for reading the Perfect Match series. As an independent author, I rely on your support to spread the word. If you enjoyed the story, I would be grateful if you could post a brief review on Amazon.

Love & happy reading,

Isabell

PERFECT MATCH SERIES

VAMPIRE'S CONSORT

When Gabriel's company is ready to start beta testing, he invites his old crush to inspect its medical safety protocol.

Curious about the revolutionary technology of the *Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy-Fulfillment studios*, Brenna agrees.

Neither expects to end up partnering for its first fully immersive test run.

KING'S CHOSEN

When Lisa's nutty friends get her a gift certificate to *Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy Studios*, she has no intentions of using it. But since the only way to get a refund is if no partner can be found for her, she makes sure to request a fantasy so girly and over the top that no sane guy will pick it up.

Except, someone does.

Warning: This fantasy contains a hot, domineering crown prince, sweet insta-love, steamy love scenes painted with light shades of gray, a wedding, and a HEA in both the virtual and real worlds.

Intended for mature audience.

CAPTAIN'S CONQUEST

Working as a Starbucks barista, Alicia fends off flirting all day long, but none of the guys are as charming and sexy as Gregg. His frequent visits are the highlight of her day, but since he's never asked her out, she assumes he's taken. Besides, between a day job and a budding music career, she has no time to start a new relationship.

That is until Gregg makes her an offer she can't refuse—a gift certificate to the virtual fantasy fulfillment service everyone is talking about. As a huge Star Trek fan, Alicia has a perfect match in mind—the captain of the Starship Enterprise.

THE THIEF WHO LOVED ME

When Marian splurges on a Perfect Match Virtual adventure as a world infamous jewel thief, she expects high-wire fun with a hot partner who she will never have to see again in real life.

A virtual encounter seems like the perfect answer to Marcus's string of dating disasters. No strings attached, no drama, and definitely no love. As a die-hard James Bond fan, he chooses as his avatar a dashing MI6 operative, and to complement his adventure, a dangerously seductive partner.

Neither expects to find their forever Perfect Match.

MY MERMAN PRINCE

The beautiful architect working late on the twelfth floor of my building thinks that I'm just the maintenance guy. She's also under the impression that I'm not interested.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

I want her like I've never wanted a woman before, but I don't play where I work.

I don't need the complications.

When she tells me about living out her mermaid fantasy with a stranger in a Perfect Match virtual adventure, I decide to do everything possible to ensure that the stranger is me.

THE DRAGON KING

To save his beloved kingdom from a devastating war, the Crown Prince of Trieste makes a deal with a witch that costs him half of his humanity and dooms him to an eternity of loneliness.

Now king, he's a fearsome cobalt-winged dragon by day and a short-tempered monarch by night. Not many are brave enough to serve in the palace of the brooding and volatile ruler, but Charlotte ignores the rumors and accepts a scribe position in court.

As the young scribe reawakens Bruce's frozen heart, all that stands in the way of their happiness is the witch's bargain. Outsmarting the evil hag will take cunning and courage, and Charlotte is just the right woman for the job.

MY WEREWOLF ROMEO

The father of my star student is a big-shot screenwriter and the patron of the drama department who thinks he can dictate what production I should put on. The principal makes it very clear that I need to cooperate with the opinionated ass hat or walk away from my dream job at the exclusive private high school.

It doesn't help matters that the guy is single, hot, charming, creative, and seems to like me despite my thinly-veiled hostility.

When he invites me to a custom-tailored Perfect Match virtual adventure to prove that his screenplay is perfect for my production, I accept, intending to have fun while proving that messing with the classics is a foolish idea.

I don't expect to be wowed by his werewolf adaptation of Red Riding Hood mesh-up with Romeo and Juliet, and I certainly don't expect to fall in love with the virtual fantasy's leading man.

THE CHANNELER'S COMPANION

A treat for fans of *The Wheel of Time*.

When Erika hires Rand to assist in her pediatric clinic, she does so despite his good looks and irresistible charm, not because of them.

He's empathic, adores children, and has the patience of a saint.

He's also all she can think about, but he's off limits.

What's a doctor to do to scratch that irresistible itch without risking workplace complications?

A shared adventure in the Perfect Match Virtual Studios seems like the solution, but instead of letting the algorithm choose a partner for her, Erika can try to influence it to select the one she wants. Awarding Rand a gift certificate to the service will get him into their database, but unless Erika can tip the odds in her favor, getting paired with him is a long shot.

Hopefully, a virtual adventure based on her and Rand's favorite series will do the trick.

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THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS ORIGINS

1: GODDESS'S CHOICE

When gods and immortals still ruled the ancient world, one young goddess risked everything for love.

2: GODDESS'S HOPE

Hungry for power and infatuated with the beautiful Areana, Navuh plots his father's demise. After all, by getting rid of the insane god he would be doing the world a favor. Except, when gods and immortals conspire against each other, humanity pays the price.

But things are not what they seem, and prophecies should not to be trusted...

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS

1: DARK STRANGER THE DREAM

Syssi's paranormal foresight lands her a job at Dr. Amanda Dokani's neuroscience lab, but it fails to predict the thrilling yet terrifying turn her life will take. Syssi has no clue that her boss is an immortal who'll drag her into a secret, millennia-old battle over humanity's future. Nor does she realize that the professor's imposing brother is the mysterious stranger who's been starring in her dreams.

Since the dawn of human civilization, two warring factions of immortals—the descendants of the gods of old—have been secretly shaping its destiny. Leading the clandestine battle from his luxurious Los Angeles high-rise, Kian is surrounded by his clan, yet alone. Descending from a single goddess, clan members are forbidden to each other. And as the only other immortals are their hated enemies, Kian and his kin have been long resigned to a lonely existence of fleeting trysts with human partners. That is, until his sister makes a game-changing discovery—a mortal seeress who she believes is a dormant carrier of their genes. Ever the realist, Kian is skeptical and refuses Amanda's plea to attempt Syssi's activation. But when his enemies learn of the Dormant's existence, he's forced to rush her to the safety of his keep. Inexorably drawn to Syssi, Kian wrestles with his conscience as he is tempted to explore her budding interest in the darker shades of sensuality.

2: DARK STRANGER REVEALED

While sheltered in the clan's stronghold, Syssi is unaware that Kian and Amanda are not human, and neither are the supposedly religious fanatics that are after her. She feels a powerful connection to Kian, and as he introduces her to a world of pleasure she never dared imagine, his dominant sexuality is a revelation. Considering that she's completely out of her element, Syssi feels comfortable and safe letting go with him. That is, until she begins to suspect that all is not as it seems. Piecing the puzzle together, she draws a scary, yet wrong conclusion...

3: DARK STRANGER IMMORTAL

When Kian confesses his true nature, Syssi is not as much shocked by the revelation as she is wounded by what she perceives as his callous plans for her.

If she doesn't turn, he'll be forced to erase her memories and let her go. His family's safety demands secrecy – no one in the mortal world is allowed to know that immortals exist.

Resigned to the cruel reality that even if she stays on to never again leave the keep, she'll get old while Kian won't, Syssi is determined to enjoy what little time she has with him, one day at a time.

Can Kian let go of the mortal woman he loves? Will Syssi turn? And if she does, will she survive the dangerous transition?

4: DARK ENEMY TAKEN

Dalhu can't believe his luck when he stumbles upon the beautiful immortal professor. Presented with a once in a lifetime opportunity to grab an immortal female for himself, he kidnaps her and runs. If he ever gets caught, either by her people or his, his life is forfeit. But for a chance of a loving mate and a family of his own, Dalhu is prepared to do everything in his power to win Amanda's heart, and that includes leaving the Doom brotherhood and his old life behind.

Amanda soon discovers that there is more to the handsome Doomer than his dark past and a hulking, sexy body. But succumbing to her enemy's seduction, or worse, developing feelings for a ruthless killer is out of the question. No man is worth life on the run, not even the one and only immortal male she could claim as her own...

Her clan and her research must come first...

5: DARK ENEMY CAPTIVE

When the rescue team returns with Amanda and the chained Dalhu to the keep, Amanda is not as thrilled to be back as she thought she'd be. Between Kian's contempt for her and Dalhu's imprisonment, Amanda's budding relationship with Dalhu seems doomed. Things start to look up when Annani offers her help, and together with Syssi they resolve to find a way for Amanda to be with Dalhu. But will she still want him when she realizes that he is responsible for her nephew's murder? Could she? Will she take the easy way out and choose Andrew instead?

6: DARK ENEMY REDEEMED

Amanda suspects that something fishy is going on onboard the Anna. But when her investigation of the peculiar all-female Russian crew fails to uncover anything other than more speculation, she decides it's time to stop playing detective and face her real problem—a man she shouldn't want but can't live without.

6.5: MY DARK AMAZON

When Michael and Kri fight off a gang of humans, Michael gets stabbed. The injury to his immortal body recovers fast, but the one to his ego takes longer, putting a strain on his relationship with Kri.

7: DARK WARRIOR MINE

When Andrew is forced to retire from active duty, he believes that all he has to look forward to is a boring desk job. His glory days in special ops are over. But as it turns out, his thrill ride has just begun. Andrew discovers not only that immortals exist and have been manipulating global affairs since antiquity, but that he and his sister are rare possessors of the immortal genes.

Problem is, Andrew might be too old to attempt the activation process. His sister, who is fourteen years his junior, barely made it through the transition, so the odds of him coming out of it alive, let alone immortal, are slim.

But fate may force his hand.

Helping a friend find his long-lost daughter, Andrew finds a woman who's worth taking the risk for. Nathalie might be a Dormant, but the only way to find out for sure requires fangs and venom.

8: DARK WARRIOR'S PROMISE

Andrew and Nathalie's love flourishes, but the secrets they keep from each other taint their relationship with doubts and suspicions. In the meantime, Sebastian and his men are getting bolder, and the storm that's brewing will shift the balance of power in the millennia-old conflict between Annani's clan and its enemies.

9: DARK WARRIOR'S DESTINY

The new ghost in Nathalie's head remembers who he was in life, providing Andrew and her with indisputable proof that he is real and not a figment of her imagination.

Convinced that she is a Dormant, Andrew decides to go forward with his transition immediately after the rescue mission at the Doomers' HQ.

Fearing for his life, Nathalie pleads with him to reconsider. She'd rather spend the rest of her mortal days with Andrew than risk what they have for the fickle promise of immortality.

While the clan gets ready for battle, Carol gets help from an unlikely ally. Sebastian's second-in-command can no longer ignore the torment she suffers at the hands of his commander and offers to help her, but only if she agrees to his terms.

10: DARK WARRIOR'S LEGACY

Andrew's acclimation to his post-transition body isn't easy. His senses are sharper, he's bigger, stronger, and hungrier. Nathalie fears that the changes in the man she loves are more than physical. Measuring up to this new version of him is going to be a challenge.

Carol and Robert are disillusioned with each other. They are not destined mates, and love is not on the horizon. When Robert's three months are up, he might be left with nothing to show for his sacrifice.

Lana contacts Anandur with disturbing news; the yacht and its human cargo are in Mexico. Kian must find a way to apprehend Alex and rescue the women on board without causing an international incident.

11: DARK GUARDIAN FOUND

What would you do if you stopped aging?

Eva runs. The ex-DEA agent doesn't know what caused her strange mutation, only that if discovered, she'll be dissected like a lab rat. What Eva doesn't know, though, is that she's a descendant of the gods, and that she is not alone. The man who rocked her world in one life-changing encounter over thirty years ago is an immortal as well.

To keep his people's existence secret, Bhathian was forced to turn his back on the only woman who ever captured his heart, but he's never forgotten and never stopped looking for her.

12: DARK GUARDIAN CRAVED

Cautious after a lifetime of disappointments, Eva is mistrustful of Bhathian's professed feelings of love. She accepts him as a lover and a confidant but not as a life partner.

Jackson suspects that Tessa is his true love mate, but unless she overcomes her fears, he might never find out.

Carol gets an offer she can't refuse—a chance to prove that there is more to her than meets the eye. Robert believes she's about to commit a deadly mistake, but when he tries to dissuade her, she tells him to leave.

13: DARK GUARDIAN'S MATE

Prepare for the heart-warming culmination of Eva and Bhatian's story!

14: DARK ANGEL'S OBSESSION

The cold and stoic warrior is an enigma even to those closest to him. His secrets are about to unravel...

15: DARK ANGEL'S SEDUCTION

Brundar is fighting a losing battle. Calypso is slowly chipping away his icy armor from the outside, while his need for her is melting it from the inside.

He can't allow it to happen. Calypso is a human with none of the Dormant indicators. There is no way he can keep her for more than a few weeks.

16: DARK ANGEL'S SURRENDER

Get ready for the heart pounding conclusion to Brundar and Calypso's story.

Callie still couldn't wrap her head around it, nor could she summon even a smidgen of sorrow or regret. After all, she had some memories with him that weren't horrible. She should've felt something. But there was nothing, not even shock. Not even horror at what had transpired over the last couple of hours.

Maybe it was a typical response for survivors—feeling euphoric for the simple reason that they were alive. Especially when that survival was nothing short of miraculous.

Brundar's cold hand closed around hers, reminding her that they weren't out of the woods yet. Her injuries were superficial, and the most she had to worry about was some scarring. But, despite his and Anandur's reassurances, Brundar might never walk again.

If he ended up crippled because of her, she would never forgive herself for getting him involved in her crap.

"Are you okay, sweetling? Are you in pain?" Brundar asked.

Her injuries were nothing compared to his, and yet he was concerned about her. God, she loved this man. The thing was, if she told him that, he would run off, or crawl away as was the case.

Hey, maybe this was the perfect opportunity to spring it on him.

17: DARK OPERATIVE: A SHADOW OF DEATH

As a brilliant strategist and the only human entrusted with the secret of immortals' existence, Turner is both an asset and a liability to the clan. His request to attempt transition into immortality as an alternative to cancer treatments cannot be denied without risking the clan's exposure. On the other hand, approving it means risking his premature death. In both scenarios, the clan will lose a valuable ally.

When the decision is left to the clan's physician, Turner makes plans to manipulate her by taking advantage of her interest in him.

Will Bridget fall for the cold, calculated operative? Or will Turner fall into his own trap?

18: DARK OPERATIVE: A GLIMMER OF HOPE

As Turner and Bridget's relationship deepens, living together seems like the right move, but to make it work both need to make concessions.

Bridget is realistic and keeps her expectations low. Turner could never be the true love mate she yearns for, but he is as good as she's going to get. Other than his

emotional limitations, he's perfect in every way.

Turner's hard shell is starting to show cracks. He wants immortality, he wants to be part of the clan, and he wants Bridget, but he doesn't want to cause her pain.

His options are either abandon his quest for immortality and give Bridget his few remaining decades, or abandon Bridget by going for the transition and most likely dying. His rational mind dictates that he chooses the former, but his gut pulls him toward the latter. Which one is he going to trust?

19: DARK OPERATIVE: THE DAWN OF LOVE

Get ready for the exciting finale of Bridget and Turner's story!

20: DARK SURVIVOR AWAKENED

This was a strange new world she had awakened to.

Her memory loss must have been catastrophic because almost nothing was familiar. The language was foreign to her, with only a few words bearing some similarity to the language she thought in. Still, a full moon cycle had passed since her awakening, and little by little she was gaining basic understanding of it—only a few words and phrases, but she was learning more each day.

A week or so ago, a little girl on the street had tugged on her mother's sleeve and pointed at her. "Look, Mama, Wonder Woman!"

The mother smiled apologetically, saying something in the language these people spoke, then scurried away with the child looking behind her shoulder and grinning.

When it happened again with another child on the same day, it was settled.

Wonder Woman must have been the name of someone important in this strange world she had awoken to, and since both times it had been said with a smile it must have been a good one.

Wonder had a nice ring to it.

She just wished she knew what it meant.

21: DARK SURVIVOR ECHOES OF LOVE

Wonder's journey continues in *Dark Survivor Echoes of Love*.

22: DARK SURVIVOR REUNITED

The exciting finale of Wonder and Anandur's story.

23: DARK WIDOW'S SECRET

Vivian and her daughter share a powerful telepathic connection, so when Ella can't be reached by conventional or psychic means, her mother fears the worst.

Help arrives from an unexpected source when Vivian gets a call from the young doctor she met at a psychic convention. Turns out Julian belongs to a private organization specializing in retrieving missing girls.

As Julian's clan mobilizes its considerable resources to rescue the daughter, Magnus is charged with keeping the gorgeous young mother safe.

Worry for Ella and the secrets Vivian and Magnus keep from each other should be enough to prevent the sparks of attraction from kindling a blaze of desire. Except, these pesky sparks have a mind of their own.

24: DARK WIDOW'S CURSE

A simple rescue operation turns into mission impossible when the Russian mafia gets involved. Bad things are supposed to come in threes, but in Vivian's case, it seems like there is no limit to bad luck. Her family and everyone who gets close to her is affected by her curse.

Will Magnus and his people prove her wrong?

25: DARK WIDOW'S BLESSING

The thrilling finale of the Dark Widow trilogy!

26: DARK DREAM'S TEMPTATION

Julian has known Ella is the one for him from the moment he saw her picture, but when he finally frees her from captivity, she seems indifferent to him. Could he have been mistaken?

Ella's rescue should've ended that chapter in her life, but it seems like the road back to normalcy has just begun and it's full of obstacles. Between the pitying looks she gets and her mother's attempts to get her into therapy, Ella feels like she's typecast as a victim, when nothing could be further from the truth. She's a tough survivor, and she's going to prove it.

Strangely, the only one who seems to understand is Logan, who keeps popping up in her dreams. But then, he's a figment of her imagination—or is he?

27: DARK DREAM'S UNRAVELING

While trying to figure out a way around Logan's silencing compulsion, Ella concocts an ambitious plan. What if instead of trying to keep him out of her dreams, she could pretend to like him and lure him into a trap?

Catching Navuh's son would be a major boon for the clan, as well as for Ella. She will have her revenge, turning the tables on another scumbag out to get her.

28: DARK DREAM'S TRAP

The trap is set, but who is the hunter and who is the prey? Find out in this heart-pounding conclusion to the *Dark Dream* trilogy.

29: DARK PRINCE'S ENIGMA

As the son of the most dangerous male on the planet, Lokan lives by three rules:

Don't trust a soul.

Don't show emotions.

And don't get attached.

Will one extraordinary woman make him break all three?

30: DARK PRINCE'S DILEMMA

Will Kian decide that the benefits of trusting Lokan outweigh the risks?

Will Lokan betray his father and brothers for the greater good of his people?

Are Carol and Lokan true-love mates, or is one of them playing the other?

So many questions, the path ahead is anything but clear.

31: DARK PRINCE'S AGENDA

While Turner and Kian work out the details of Areana's rescue plan, Carol and Lokan's tumultuous relationship hits another snag. Is it a sign of things to come?

32 : DARK QUEEN'S QUEST

A former beauty queen, a retired undercover agent, and a successful model, Mey is not the typical damsel in distress. But when her sister drops off the radar and then someone starts following her around, she panics.

Following a vague clue that Kalugal might be in New York, Kian sends a team headed by Yamanu to search for him.

As Mey and Yamanu's paths cross, he offers her his help and protection, but will that be all?

33: DARK QUEEN'S KNIGHT

As the only member of his clan with a godlike power over human minds, Yamanu has been shielding his people for centuries, but that power comes at a steep price.

When Mey enters his life, he's faced with the most difficult choice.

The safety of his clan or a future with his fated mate.

34: DARK QUEEN'S ARMY

As Mey anxiously waits for her transition to begin and for Yamanu to test whether his godlike powers are gone, the clan sets out to solve two mysteries:

Where is Jin, and is she there voluntarily?

Where is Kalugal, and what is he up to?

35: DARK SPY CONSCRIPTED

Jin possesses a unique paranormal ability. Just by touching someone, she can insert a mental hook into their psyche and tie a string of her consciousness to it, creating a tether. That doesn't make her a spy, though, not unless her talent is discovered by those seeking to exploit it.

36: DARK SPY'S MISSION

Jin's first spying mission is supposed to be easy. Walk into the club, touch Kalugal to tether her consciousness to him, and walk out.

Except, they should have known better.

37: DARK SPY'S RESOLUTION

The best-laid plans often go awry...

38: DARK OVERLORD NEW HORIZON

Jacki has two talents that set her apart from the rest of the human race.

She has unpredictable glimpses of other people's futures, and she is immune to mind manipulation.

Unfortunately, both talents are pretty useless for finding a job other than the one she had in the government's paranormal division.

It seemed like a sweet deal, until she found out that the director planned on producing super babies by compelling the recruits into pairing up. When an opportunity to escape the program presented itself, she took it, only to find out that humans are not at the top of the food chain.

Immortals are real, and at the very top of the hierarchy is Kalugal, the most powerful, arrogant, and sexiest male she has ever met.

With one look, he sets her blood on fire, but Jacki is not a fool. A man like him will never think of her as anything more than a tasty snack, while she will never settle for anything less than his heart.

39: DARK OVERLORD'S WIFE

Jacki is still clinging to her all-or-nothing policy, but Kalugal is chipping away at her resistance. Perhaps it's time to ease up on her convictions. A little less than all is still much better than nothing, and a couple of decades with a demigod is probably worth more than a lifetime with a mere mortal.

40: DARK OVERLORD'S CLAN

As Jacki and Kalugal prepare to celebrate their union, Kian takes every precaution to safeguard his people. Except, Kalugal and his men are not his only potential adversaries, and compulsion is not the only power he should fear.

41: DARK CHOICES THE QUANDARY

When Rufsur and Edna meet, the attraction is as unexpected as it is undeniable. Except, she's the clan's judge and councilwoman, and he's Kalugal's second-in-command. Will loyalty and duty to their people keep them apart?

42: DARK CHOICES PARADIGM SHIFT

Edna and Rufsur are miserable without each other, and their two-week separation seems like an eternity. Long-distance relationships are difficult, but for immortal couples they are impossible. Unless one of them is willing to leave everything behind for the other, things are just going to get worse. Except, the cost of compromise is far greater than giving up their comfortable lives and hard-earned positions. The future of their people is on the line.

43: DARK CHOICES THE ACCORD

The winds of change blowing over the village demand hard choices. For better or worse, Kian's decisions will alter the trajectory of the clan's future, and he is not ready to take the plunge. But as Edna and Rufsur's plight gains widespread support, his resistance slowly begins to erode.

44: DARK SECRETS RESURGENCE

On a sabbatical from his Stanford teaching position, Professor David Levinson finally has time to write the sci-fi novel he's been thinking about for years.

The phenomena of past life memories and near-death experiences are too controversial to include in his formal psychiatric research, while fiction is the perfect outlet for his esoteric ideas.

Hoping that a change of pace will provide the inspiration he needs, David accepts a friend's invitation to an old Scottish castle.

45: DARK SECRETS UNVEILED

When Professor David Levinson accepts a friend's invitation to an old Scottish castle, what he finds there is more fantastical than his most outlandish theories. The castle is home to a clan of immortals, their leader is a stunning demigoddess, and even more shockingly, it might be precisely where he belongs.

Except, the clan founder is hiding a secret that might cast a dark shadow on David's relationship with her daughter.

Nevertheless, when offered a chance at immortality, he agrees to undergo the dangerous induction process.

Will David survive his transition into immortality? And if he does, will his relationship with Sari survive the unveiling of her mother's secret?

46: DARK SECRETS ABSOLVED

Absolution.

David had given and received it.

The few short hours since he'd emerged from the coma had felt incredible. He'd finally been free of the guilt and pain, and for the first time since Jonah's death, he had felt truly happy and optimistic about the future.

He'd survived the transition into immortality, had been accepted into the clan, and was about to marry the best woman on the face of the planet, his true love mate, his salvation, his everything.

What could have possibly gone wrong?

Just about everything.

47: DARK HAVEN ILLUSION

Welcome to Safe Haven, where not everything is what it seems.

On a quest to process personal pain, Anastasia joins the Safe Haven Spiritual Retreat.

Through meditation, self-reflection, and hard work, she hopes to make peace with the voices in her head.

This is where she belongs.

Except, membership comes with a hefty price, doubts are sacrilege, and leaving is not as easy as walking out the front gate.

Is living in utopia worth the sacrifice?

Anastasia believes so until the arrival of a new acolyte changes everything.

Apparently, the gods of old were not a myth, their immortal descendants share the planet with humans, and she might be a carrier of their genes.

48: DARK HAVEN UNMASKED

As Anastasia leaves Safe Haven for a week-long romantic vacation with Leon, she hopes to explore her newly discovered passionate side, their budding relationship, and perhaps also solve the mystery of the voices in her head. What she discovers exceeds her wildest expectations.

In the meantime, Eleanor and Peter hope to solve another mystery. Who is Emmett Haderech, and what is he up to?

49: DARK HAVEN FOUND

Anastasia is growing suspicious, and Leon is running out of excuses.

Risking death for a chance at immortality should've been her choice to make. Will she ever forgive him for taking it away from her?

50: DARK POWER UNTAMED

Attending a charity gala as the clan's figurehead, Onegus is ready for the pesky socialites he'll have a hard time keeping away. Instead, he encounters an intriguing beauty who won't give him the time of day.

Bad things happen when Cassandra gets all worked up, and given her fiery temper, the destructive power is difficult to tame. When she meets a gorgeous, cocky billionaire at a charity event, things just might start blowing up again.

51: DARK POWER UNLEASHED

Cassandra's power is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and destructive. If she doesn't learn to harness it, people might get hurt.

Onegus's self-control is legendary. Even his fangs and venom glands obey his commands.

They say that opposites attract, and perhaps it's true, but are they any good for each other?

52: DARK POWER CONVERGENCE

The threads of fate converge, mysteries unfold, and the clan's future is forever altered in the least expected way.

53: DARK MEMORIES SUBMERGED

Geraldine's memories are spotty at best, and many of them are pure fiction. While her family attempts to solve the puzzle with far too many pieces missing, she's forced to confront a past life that she can't remember, a present that's more fantastic than her wildest made-up stories, and a future that might be better than her most heartfelt fantasies. But as more clues are uncovered, the picture starting to emerge is beyond anything she or her family could have ever imagined.

54: DARK MEMORIES EMERGE

The more clues emerge about Geraldine's past, the more questions arise.

Did she really have a twin sister who drowned?

Who is the mysterious benefactor in her hazy recollections?

Did he have anything to do with her becoming immortal?

Thankfully, she doesn't have to find the answers alone.

Cassandra and Onegus are there for her, and so is Shai, the immortal who sets her body on fire.

As they work together to solve the mystery, the four of them stumble upon a millennia-old secret that could tip the balance of power between the clan and its enemies.

55: DARK MEMORIES RESTORED

As the past collides with the present, a new future emerges.

56: DARK HUNTER'S QUERY

For most of his five centuries of existence, Orion has walked the earth alone, searching for answers.

Why is he immortal?

Where did his powers come from?

Is he the only one of his kind?

When fate puts Orion face to face with the god who sired him, he learns the secret behind his immortality and that he might not be the only one.

As the goddess's eldest daughter and a mother of thirteen, Alena deserves the title of Clan Mother just as much as Annani, but she's not interested in honorifics. Being her mother's companion and keeping the mischievous goddess out of trouble is a rewarding, full-time job. Lately, though, Alena's love for her mother and the clan's gratitude is not enough.

She craves adventure, excitement, and perhaps a true-love mate of her own.

When Alena and Orion meet, sparks fly, but they both resist the pull. Alena could never bring herself to trust the powerful compeller, and Orion could never allow himself to fall in love again.

57: DARK HUNTER'S PREY

When Alena and Orion join Kalugal and Jacki on a romantic vacation to the enchanting Lake Lugu in China, they anticipate a couple of visits to Kalugal's archeological dig, some sightseeing, and a lot of lovemaking.

Their excursion takes an unexpected turn when Jacki's vision sends them on a perilous hunt for the elusive Kra-ell.

As things progress from bad to worse, Alena beseeches the Fates to keep everyone in their group alive. She can't fathom losing any of them, but most of all, Orion.

For over two thousand years, she walked the earth alone, but after mere days with him at her side, she can't imagine life without him.

58: DARK HUNTER'S BOON

As Orion and Alena's relationship blooms and solidifies, the two investigative teams combine their recent discoveries to piece together more of the Kra-ell mystery.

Attacking the puzzle from another angle, Eleanor works on gaining access to Echelon's powerful AI spy network.

Together, they are getting dangerously close to finding the elusive Kra-ell.

59: DARK GOD'S AVATAR

Unaware of the time bomb ticking inside her, Mia had lived the perfect life until it all came to a screeching halt, but despite the difficulties she faces, she doggedly pursues her dreams.

Once known as the god of knowledge and wisdom, Toven has grown cold and indifferent. Disillusioned with humanity, he travels the world and pens novels about the love he can no longer feel.

Seeking to escape his ever-present ennui, Toven gives a cutting-edge virtual experience a try. When his avatar meets Mia's, their sizzling virtual romance unexpectedly turns into something deeper and more meaningful.

Will it endure in the real world?

60: DARK GOD'S REVIVISCENCE

Toven might have failed in his attempts to improve humanity's condition, but he isn't going to fail to improve Mia's life, making it the best it can be despite her fragile health, and he can do that not as a god, but as a man who possesses the means, the smarts, and the determination to do it.

No effort is enough to repay Mia for reviving his deadened heart and making him excited for the next day, but the flip side of his reviviscence is the fear of losing its catalyst.

Given Mia's condition, Toven doesn't dare to over excite her. His venom is a powerful aphrodisiac, euphoric, and an all-around health booster, but it's also extremely potent. It might kill her instead of making her better.

61: DARK GOD DESTINIES CONVERGE

Destinies converge, and secrets are revealed in part three of Mia and Toven's story.

62: DARK WHISPERS FROM THE PAST

A brilliant scientist and programmer, William lives for his work, but when he recruits a young bioinformatician to help him decipher the gods' genetic blueprints, he finds himself smitten with more than just her brain.

A Ph.D at nineteen, Kaia is considered a prodigy and expects a bright future in academia. But when William invites her to join his secret research team, she accepts for reasons that have nothing to do with her career objectives. William's promise to look into her best friend's disappearance is an offer she just can't refuse.

63: DARK WHISPERS FROM AFAR

William knows that his budding relationship with the nineteen-year-old Kaia will be frowned upon, but he's unprepared for her family's vehement opposition.

Family means everything to Kaia, so when she finds herself in the impossible position of having to choose between them and William, she resorts to unconventional means to resolve the conflict.

64: DARK WHISPERS FROM BEYOND

The sacrifices Kaia and her family have to make for a chance of gaining immortality might tear them apart, and success is not guaranteed.

Is the dubious promise of eternal life worth the risk of losing everything?

65: DARK GAMBIT THE PAWN

Temporarily assigned to supervise a team of bioinformaticians, Marcel expects to spend a couple of weeks in the peaceful retreat of Safe Haven, enjoying Oregon Coast's cool weather and rugged beauty.

Things quickly turn chaotic when the retreat's director receives an email with an encoded message about a potential new threat to the clan.

While those in charge of security debate what to do next, Safe Haven's first ever paranormal retreat is about to begin, and one of the attendees is a mysterious woman who makes Marcel's heart beat faster whenever she's near.

Is the beautiful mortal his one true love?

Or is she the harbinger of more bad news?

66: DARK GAMBIT THE PLAY

To get to Safe Haven's inner circle, the Kra-ell leader sacrifices a pawn. He does not expect her to reach the final rank and promote to a queen.

67: DARK GAMBIT RELIANCE

Marcel takes a big risk by telling Sofia his greatest sin. Can he trust her to keep it a secret? Or maybe it's time to confess his crime and submit to whatever punishment Edna deems appropriate?

Three miserable centuries of living with guilt and remorse are long enough.

Once the dust settles on the Kra-ell crisis, he will gather the courage to put himself at the court's mercy.

68: DARK ALLIANCE KINDRED SOULS

A daring operation half a world away devolves into a full-scale crisis that escalates rapidly, requiring the clan's full might and technological wizardry to manage and survive.

Hardened by duty and tragedy, Jade is driven by a burning desire for revenge. When Phinas saves her second-in-command, Jade's gratitude quickly becomes something more.

69: **DARK ALLIANCE TURBULENT WATERS**

When a dangerous foe turns the tables on the clan, complicating the Kra-ell rescue operation in unforeseeable ways, Kian and his crew bet all on a brilliant misdirection.

On board the Aurora, Phinas and Jade brace for battle while enjoying a few stolen moments of passion.

Drawn to the woman he sees behind the aloof leader, Phinas realizes that what has started as a calculated political move has evolved into a deepening sense of companionship.

Jade finds reprieve in Phinas's arms, but duty and tradition make it difficult for her to accept that what she feels for him is more than just gratitude and desire.

After all, the Kra-ell don't believe in love.

70: **DARK ALLIANCE PERFECT STORM**

After two decades in captivity, Jade is finally free, her quest for revenge within grasp, but danger still looms large. A storm is brewing on the horizon, gathering momentum and threatening to obliterate Jade's tenuous hold on hope for a better future.

71: **DARK HEALING BLIND JUSTICE**

The sanctuary is Vanessa's life project. The monumental task of rehabilitating the traumatized victims of trafficking doesn't leave much time for personal life, let alone dating or finding her one and only.

When Kian asks her to help the Kra-ell, she's torn between her duty to the sanctuary and a group of emotionally wounded aliens who no other psychologist can treat.

She's the only immortal with the necessary training to get it done.

The Kra-ell culture and the purebloods' nearly androgynous alien looks shouldn't appeal to her, and yet, she finds one of them disturbingly attractive.

Is it the dangerous vibe he emits?

Does it speak to her on a subconscious level?

Or is it her need to put the broken pieces of him back together?

And why is he interested in her?

She cannot offer him a fight for dominance like a Kra-ell female would, but some strange and unfamiliar part of her wishes she could.

72: **DARK HEALING BLIND TRUST**

Riddled with guilt over the crimes he was forced to commit, Mo-red is ready to stand trial and accept the death sentence he believes he deserves, but when the clan's alluring psychologist offers a new perspective on his past and hope for a better future, he resolves to fight for his life.

73: **DARK HEALING BLIND CURVE**

Kian is still reeling from the shocking revelations about the twins when a new threat manifests, eclipsing everything he's had to deal with up until now. In light of

the new developments, Igor, the other Kra-ell prisoners, and the pending trial are no longer at the forefront of his mind, but the opposite is true for Vanessa. As her relationship with Mo-red solidifies, she is determined to save the male she loves, even if it means breaking him free and living on the run.

74: DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE CLOSE KIND

Convinced that her family is hiding a terrible secret from her, Gabi decides to pay them a surprise visit.

Something is very fishy about the stories her brothers have been telling her lately. Her niece, a nineteen-year-old prodigy with a Ph.D. in bioinformatics, has gotten engaged to a much older guy she met while working on some top-secret project, and if Gabi's older, overprotective brother's approval of the engagement wasn't suspicious enough, he also uprooted his family and moved to be closer to the couple.

What Gabi discovers when she gets to L.A. is wilder than anything she could have imagined. Her entire family possesses godly genes, her brothers and her niece have already turned immortal, and she could transition as soon as she finds an immortal male to induce her. Finding a suitable candidate in a village full of handsome immortals shouldn't be a problem, but Gabi's thoughts keep wandering to the gorgeous guy she met on her flight over.

Could Uriel be a lost descendant of the gods?

He certainly looks like them, but that doesn't mean that he's a good guy or that he's even immortal. He could be a descendant of a different god—a member of an enemy faction of immortals who seek to eradicate her family's adoptive clan, or what is more likely, he's just an extraordinarily good-looking human.

75: DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE UNEXPECTED KIND

Who is Uriel?

Is he a lost descendant of the gods or just a gorgeous and charming human who has rocked Gabi's world?

76: DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE FATED KIND

As Aru and his team embark on a perilous mission, their past and present converge in a meeting that holds the key to their fate.

77: DARK VOYAGE MATTERS OF THE HEART

As Annani and Syssi set out to unravel the mysteries of Syssi's visions about the gods' home world, the long-awaited wedding cruise sets sail with Aru, Gabi, and Aru's teammates on board.

While the gods find themselves surrounded by immortal clan ladies eager for their affections, they soon discover that destiny has a different plan for them.

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